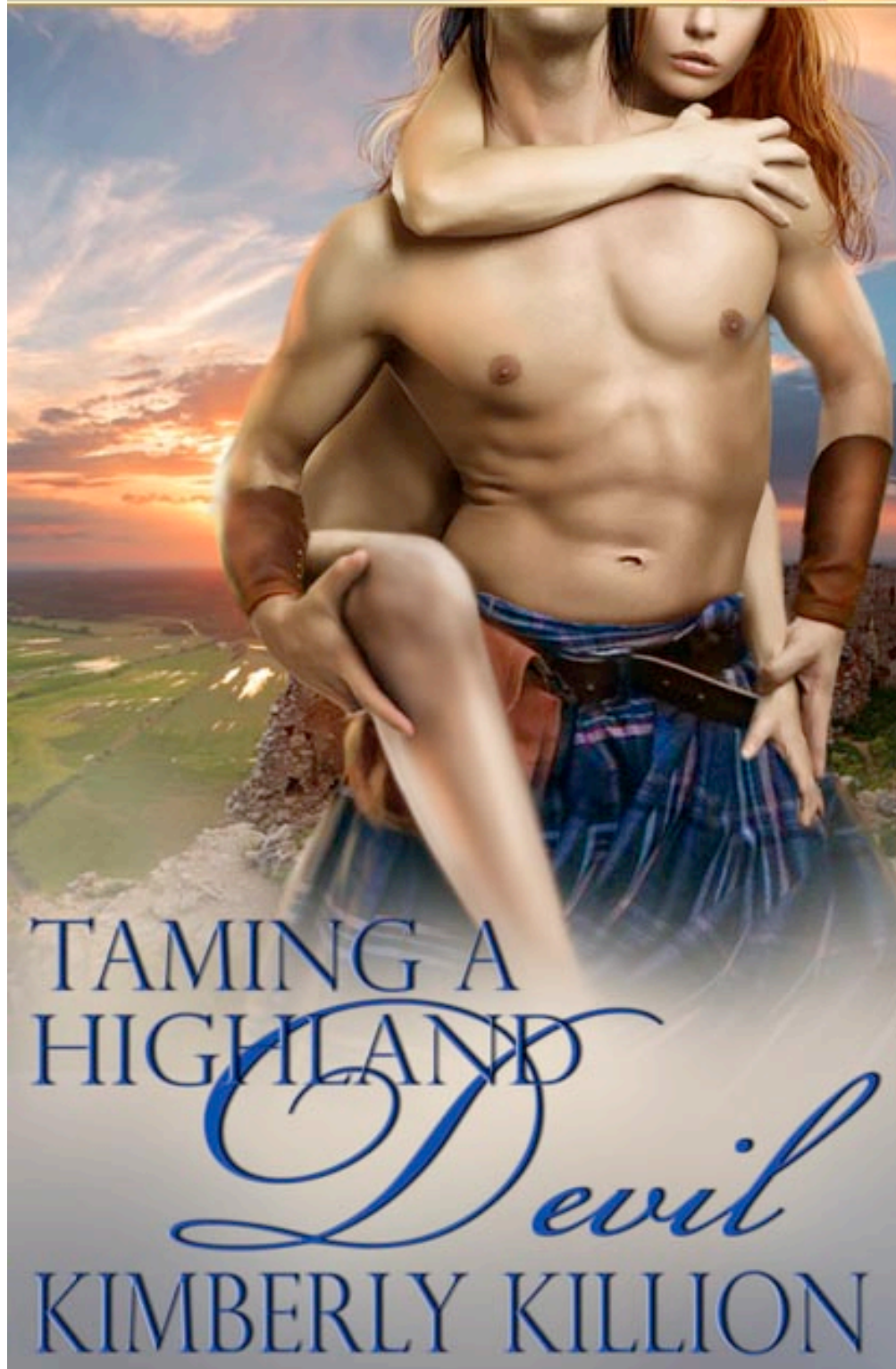


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



Taming a Highland Devil

Kimberly Killion

Laird Magnus Sutherland loves women. His prowess in the bedchamber has earned him the name Devil of Dunrobin, but no woman has ever stirred his heart. Magnus needs to provide his clan with an heir, which is the only reason he agrees to marry the neighboring chieftain's sister. When his betrothed arrives, he discovers the chieftain has *two* sisters. If Magnus must bind himself to one woman, he intends to discover which is best suited to be his wife, for he wants more than a body to plant his seed. He wants a mate for life.

There are three reasons Lady Effie Reay refuses to vie for Laird Sutherland's affections...

For one, she is thirty-two and would surely lose a competition to her beautiful, younger sister. Secondly, Laird Sutherland is a well-reputed rake, and she holds no desire to wed another faithless man. And thirdly, the sight of him makes her tingle, shiver and ache.

Will Effie be successful in thwarting Magnus' advances, or will her body succumb to a temptation that can only lead to heartbreak?

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Taming a Highland Devil

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TAMING A HIGHLAND DEVIL

Kimberly Killion

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to Gerard Butler for being my inspiration.

Chapter One

Scottish Highlands, Dunrobin Castle 1487, January

Laird Magnus Sutherland loved women. Tall women, petite women, thin and thick women. He loved the svelte texture of their skin and the way they purred when he pleased them.

Blondes, brunettes, raven-haired beauties all appealed to him, but he was partial to redheads—as was the case this night. The maid impaled on his cock had wide hips and enough flesh on her backside to fill his palms as he guided her up and down the length of him. He wet her nipple with the tip of his tongue then blew on it just to feel her shiver. “Do ye know what’s better than having a willing woman in my bed?”

“Having two?” A second redhead drew up beside him and pulled his hand to her wet cunny. She sucked air between her full lips when he dipped two fingers inside her silken flesh.

“Aye,” he agreed wholeheartedly and filled her mouth with his tongue. It thrilled and delighted him to feel them quiver at his touch, to hear them whimper and moan. S’t truth, he oftentimes gained more satisfaction in bringing them to climax than finding his own release.

Women were such innocent creatures, so unaffected by politics and war, which was the other reason he kept company with so many of them. They made him forget the battles, the bloodshed...the guilt.

The single candle he’d left burning outside the bed drapes provided him with enough light to perform. Unfortunately, the darkness prevented him from seeing the details in their expressions. He wished he could see the ecstasy lining their faces, but hiding his scars was essential in keeping his bedmates aroused.

Since he knew neither of their names, he'd decided to call the one riding him Heather, for she smelled like a field of flowers. And the minx grinding her pelvis against his hand, he'd named Honey as that's what she'd tasted like when he'd suckled her to orgasm.

"'Tis my turn." Honey nipped his earlobe and ran her small hands over his hairless chest.

"Nay, please," Heather whined in protest as he laid her atop the silk coverlet. "I'm nearly there."

She didn't lie. He'd felt her muscles clenching his cock, as well as the shivers racking her body. However, Honey gave him little choice in the matter when the brazen wench sprawled out atop Heather, face to face, tit to tit and clit to clit.

"Fear not my wicked lovelies." He stepped off the bed, grinning. "I'll not disappoint either of ye." He repositioned them at the edge of the bed and admired the twin pair of pink swollen nocks glistening in the light of that single candle flame. He then pleased them in unison, giving one his fingers and the other his thumb until his own clawing need demanded he take them.

Lifting Heather's knees provided him the perfect angle to drive his manhood deep inside one, only to pull out and thrust into the other. They were hot, slick, tight and demanding.

"Faster."

"Harder."

Determined to satisfy, he ignored the burning in his bollocks and set a rhythm that might kill the average man, but Magnus was far from average. He'd built up his stamina over the years which had earned him the name Devil of Dunrobin. 'Twas not a name his mother was proud of, but in the twenty-seven winters since his birth, he'd not once received complaint from the maidens.

"Oh, aye, m'laird! Aye!" When Heather once again reached that shattering edge of bliss, he pulled Honey off the bed by her hips and bent her over, setting her mouth in

alignment with Heather's ripe clit. He didn't have to tell them what to do. Need controlled them now. They would do anything to find release. He thrust deep and fast into Honey's silky canal as she tongued Heather to climax. Soon, both women trembled, screamed, then withered, sated and satisfied.

Magnus, however, was still raging hard and eager to be rewarded for his services. He dove back into the bed, propped himself against the bolster and laced his fingers behind his head. "Now finish me."

They pleased him with their mouths, curling their tongues around his cock head, licking the throbbing shaft, forcing the length of him deep into their throats one at a time. 'Twas good to be laird, he decided as he shot his seed into their awaiting mouths. He was the king of Dunrobin Castle and Chieftain of Clan Sutherland. No one owned him. No one told him what to do.

A fierce pounding shook the door in its frame. "Maggie!"

No one, except his mother.

Magnus blew an audible breath and rolled his eyes when the maids launched out of his bed in search of their garments. He'd dismissed his warriors from the training field hours earlier. His uncle was abed. The keep was secure with the night watchmen in position on the wall. There was naught that required his attention that couldn't wait 'til morn.

"Maggie!" Mam screeched again and beat on the door. "Quit friggin' the bluidy maids and get your arse out here at once!"

Grumbling, he snatched his *plaid* off the back of a chair, draped it over his person, then ripped open the door in a fury. "What is it?"

Red-faced, Mam tossed her silver-streaked brown braid over her shoulder, punched her fists onto her hips and glared at him with irate dark eyes. "The Mackay has arrived, and he's brought your betrothed."

* * * * *

They were perfect for one another, Effie decided as Laird Sutherland entered the Great Hall. Four of his kinsmen trailed him, all braw and thickly built, but none possessed the chieftain's dominating presence. Hair, black as a raven's eye, lay disheveled about his shoulders with a braid falling from each temple to mark his status. A sea-green and pale blue *plaide*, perfectly pleated, draped over a clean *léine* shirt, but what impressed her most was the arsenal he wore on his person—a basketsword hung from his hip, two daggers sheathed at his waist and the black handle of a *sgian dubh* poked out the top of deerskin boots.

He was a good match for Effie's younger half sister, as well as Clan Mackay. Their union would make their clans a fearsome beast to behold. Clan Sutherland was known for their prowess in battle. They were powerful enough to protect themselves as well as Effie's clan. The truth of the matter was, Clan Mackay needed Clan Sutherland more than Clan Sutherland needed the Mackays. And her brother knew it, which is one of the reasons Ian had traded their sister for an alliance after Da died.

The other reason was simple—Ian was as eager as Effie to see Vanna wed. Effie had taken over Vanna's tutelage after Da ousted Vanna's mam from the clan four years past. At nineteen, Vanna knew her letters and could manage a household, but Effie feared her sister might be a wee bit loose with her legs. Given Laird Sutherland's lascivious reputation, Effie suspected he might find such a quality agreeable, so long as the girl took care not to spread her legs for his kinsmen.

'Twas a mistake Vanna's mam had made.

Effie shook the thought out of her mind. Vanna was not to blame for Besse's transgressions.

"Think ye the chieftain will like me?" Vanna swished long black hair over her shoulder and fiddled with the brooch pinning the heavy wool of her *arisaid*.

"The man agreed to the union in writing six months past. It matters naught if he likes ye." The worry stitching Vanna's thin black brows together made Effie wince. She would do well to remember Vanna was the daughter Da had coddled throughout her

adolescence, unlike Effie who'd had two bairns in the nursery by nineteen. "I suspect ye will have Laird Sutherland feeding ye roasted almonds before dawn." Effie gave her sister's cold fingers a reassuring squeeze then stepped into her brother's shadow where she belonged.

"Laird Mackay, welcome to Dunrobin." The chieftains embraced in a fierce hug, smacking one another heartily on the back. "Ye must forgive my tardiness, but in my defense, ye are more than two months early. I didn't expect ye and your retinue until the first thaw." Laird Sutherland glanced down a line of Mackay warriors, all huddled in furs with melted snow beading their beards. He made a gesture toward one of his housecarls. Moments later, the fire burning in the hearth roared to life.

"A wee bit o' snow cannot contain the young and impatient." Ian's cracked lips split into a wide smile beneath his thick copper-colored beard.

A wee bit o' snow? Effie contained a snort. They'd traveled four days through a bleating blizzard, risking their horses' health, as well as their own, because of Vanna's impatience. Effie feared her toes would never thaw inside her worn leather brogues.

While the chieftains introduced their kinsmen, Effie peeked around her brother's shoulder to study Laird Sutherland more closely. The man was as braw as they came. Black stubble shadowed his jaw but didn't hide the strong angles of his chin and cheekbones. Silver-blue eyes the color of shallow seawater glittered beneath thick black brows. His nose, slender and straight, directed her gaze to sharply-defined lips.

Simply put, the man was...well, he was certainly easy to look upon.

Effie decided her sister had been blessed with good fortune, until Laird Sutherland turned toward his seneschal. A scar trailed a sinister red line from in front of his ear, down his thick neck and into his *léine* shirt.

Vanna sucked in air, her spine straightened.

Effie wanted to scold her. The girl slept peacefully night after night beneath the blanket of protection the Mackay warriors provided. War was essential to the security

of their borders. No one knew this better than Effie. She had her own scars, though none marred her skin.

"Wake the servants and warm ale for our guests," Laird Sutherland issued the order to no one in particular for his attention was now on Vanna. He added instructions to prepare their accommodations, then set himself before his betrothed.

"If this is your sister, then ye did her no justice in your missives." Laird Sutherland eyed Vanna from tit to toe and awaited introductions.

Ian angled himself toward Vanna. "May I present Lady Vanna Mackay."

Vanna's smile could weaken any man's resolve, and she knew it. She glossed her full lips, batted her curled black lashes and dipped low as Effie had taught her. "'Tis a pleasure to finally meet ye, m'laird."

His bow was deep, reverent, but his eyes darkened with lust. 'Twas how men looked at Vanna. She possessed uncommon, exotic beauty, unlike Effie, who resembled every other green-eyed lass in the Highlands with unruly copper-colored curls and pale skin. The one physical attribute Effie had to her favor was her firm, round breasts. Not that anyone ever noticed them.

Laird Sutherland noticed. His gaze flitted over Effie's person then lingered long seconds on her breasts.

Her heart skidded, but she quickly pulled the seams of her mantle tighter around her bosom and tucked herself farther behind Ian.

"And who, pray tell, is this bonnie creature?"

Ian had to follow Laird Sutherland's eyes before he replied, "This is Euphema Reay—"

"Effie, m'laird," she corrected quickly and stepped forward beside Vanna to curtsy. As she stood upright, she glared at Ian. At four years her junior, Ian had the bitter disposition of a man twice his age. "I am my brother's *other* sister."

Laird Sutherland's brows perked up, his head tilted, then his eyes shifted back to Ian. "I was not aware ye had two sisters."

Ian scratched his beard. "I saw no point in mentioning it during our negotiations."

Laird Sutherland's gaze swept over her like a gust of heat before he met her eyes. "Are ye married, lass?"

"I'm widowed, m'laird." She hated those words. Had hated them for two years.

"And past her years." Ian's callousness spiked her temper.

"I just turned two and thirty. I'm hardly dead."

"Do ye still bleed?" Silence hummed in the wake of Laird Sutherland's inquiry. The fire cracked in the hearth, raising the short hairs at her nape.

She considered herself keen, but it wasn't until he asked his blatant question that she fully understood the path of the conversation. She held no desire to take another husband, much less take a husband from her sister. Staring wide-eyed at the rushes scattered about the floor, she felt almost ashamed when she answered, "Aye."

Effie swore she heard Vanna's teeth grind as Ian attempted to remedy the situation. "Forgive me, but ye agreed to marry Vanna in exchange for an alliance."

"We'll have our alliance." He locked eyes with Ian. "But I'll remind ye that I agreed to a union with your sister." Laird Sutherland's attention shifted between Vanna and Effie. "I'll need a fortnight to decide which one is best suited to be my wife."

Chapter Two

"Are ye completely wowf?" Mam scolded Magnus the following evening, arms whipping this way and that, nearly striking one of the two housecarls removing the wooden bathing tub from his solar. "Ye have insulted the Mackay and his sisters and put the clan in jeopardy of losing this alliance."

"Mayhap I dinnae want the alliance. Ian Mackay's quest to avenge his father's death will only result in another battle with Clan Ross, and ye well know it." Magnus sat in a high-back chair beside the hearth and drummed his fingertips atop the arm. His mother was going to be the death of him. If she hadn't given him life, he would be sorely tempted to banish her from the clan. "We will reap no reward from this alliance."

"The reward is an heir. And 'tis obvious the younger Mackay is more suited for breeding."

"Breeding?" Ack! The woman was callous. 'Twas no wonder Da had kept so many mistresses. Magnus stood and fidgeted with the clasps of a green damask robe. "We are talking about the future Lady of Dunrobin, not bluidy livestock."

"Providing the clan with an heir is the sole duty of the laird's wife."

"What about managing the household and being my advisor?" he argued, thinking he wanted more in a wife than a body to plant his seed.

Mam snorted. "Ye have a council and a head steward for such tasks. What ye are looking for does not exist. There are two types of women in this world—women who warm a man's bed and women who do everything else. At the present, ye need the former." She punched her hips with her fists. "Ye owe the clan a legitimate male heir."

"Then mayhap I should bed them both and marry the first to get with child." His response was as cold as Mam's presence, but her comment infuriated him. She'd never hidden the fact she blamed him for the death of his nephew.

"Do not mock me, Maggie."

He gave Mam his back and added peat to the fire, igniting a flame to match the anger roiling inside him. He knew he had to marry, but he wanted a damned choice. "Clan Sutherland will have its heir within the year."

"You'll need more than one heir. I gave your father four strong boys and the bluidy wars took three of them from me."

Magnus needed no reminder. He wore his brothers' scars on his person and was tortured by their memory every time he looked upon his reflection.

"How many bairns can the elder Mackay give ye before she can no longer produce?"

"I suspect a half-dozen or more if I shackle her to the bed and get her with child every year 'til her womb is auld and withered." The sarcasm in his voice didn't deter Mam in the least.

"Marry the younger, more fertile Mackay. If she is not to your liking, then ye can take a mistress. No woman will expect a man of your status to be faithful. 'Tis the way of things."

Magnus cocked his head over his shoulder to give Mam a questioning look. "Ye knew Da was unfaithful?"

She rolled her dark eyes. "Of course. And I was happy to send your father's mistresses to his solar." Her demeanor seemed to soften with this statement. The wrinkles at her eyes smoothed. Her brow became less furrowed. "Not every woman enjoys her conjugal duties."

The direction of their conversation soured his stomach twofold. For one, he no longer wished to hear the grim tales of his sire's marriage bed, and for another, he refused to take a wife who didn't enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. He crossed his solar and kissed Mam's forehead, feeling a great deal more sympathy for her than he ever had before.

“Dinnae look at me like I’m a leper. Think ye there is another reason men and women of nobility retain separate sleeping quarters?” She crossed her arms, refusing his compassion. “I’m not alone in my thinking.”

“’Tis enough. Ye’ve spoken your peace.” He guided her toward the door. “I’ll heed your advice as I make my decision.”

“Verra well,” Mam conceded with an audible exhale. “Sleep well, son.”

Once he was free of Mam and her opinions, he sent for the younger Mackay and nursed a goblet of gooseberry wine while he awaited her arrival. He considered himself a good judge of character, especially when it came to women, but he wasn’t choosing a maid for the evening. He was choosing a mate for life.

Of course, he wanted someone to share his bed with ardent enthusiasm, but he also wanted his wife to possess other qualities—intelligence, tolerance, devotion. S’t ruth, he wanted a woman who could help him carry the burdens his brothers had left him. Not that his blood kin were burdens, there were just so damned many of them. Unfortunately, the legitimate bairns were all lasses. He wanted sons as much as Mam did, but he also wanted to be around long enough to watch them grow.

Ian Mackay had already urged Magnus to schedule a meeting with the leaders of their warbands. The man was bloodthirsty and eager to avenge his father, but Magnus intended to avoid a war with Clan Ross at all costs.

A knock at the door pulled him out of his musings.

“Enter,” he commanded and set his goblet atop the side table.

When Lady Vanna stepped inside his chamber and closed the door, his body responded to her beauty like a flame to a charred wick. She was stunning with silken black hair, lush lips and flawless skin, and he had nary a doubt the body hidden beneath her pale yellow robe would be tight and firm with her youth.

His bollocks tingled with expectancy. His cock swelled to stone. He squirmed in the chair and wished he’d gratified himself while he’d awaited her audience. If the lass

turned out to be a virgin, he'd already decided he wouldn't take her maidenhood lest he marry her.

"Ye sent for me, m'laird." She reached for the ties binding her robe. "Would ye like me in the bed?"

"Patience, little bit." Magnus smiled and gestured toward the cushioned hassock in front of him. He welcomed her eagerness, but he would know her mind before he explored her body.

She floated gracefully across his solar then settled atop a round footstool and crossed her hands atop her knees. Her fine-boned frame and long, slender neck added to the perfection of her pose. Everything about her demeanor was measured, practiced, refined, down to the arc in her wrists.

He suspected she'd been taught submission, but the boldness of her gaze as she held his stare told him she resisted such obedience. Still and all, she held her tongue and awaited his instruction. 'Twas good she knew her place, yet didn't fear him.

"Tell me, Lady Vanna, do ye know your letters?"

Her chin raised a half inch. "I'm well-read. I also have a mind for numbers. And I speak four different languages."

"Ye were schooled abroad?" He handed her a goblet of watered wine, hoping to loosen her rigid stance as well as her tongue.

"Nay." She didn't elaborate, nor did she accept his offering.

"Then your father hired tutors?"

One of her eyes narrowed, be it ever so slight. "My sister took charge of my studies when my mother...left."

"Then your sister is educated as well?"

"She is."

"Tell me about her."

"She is strict and overprotective." Quick to criticize, Lady Vanna rushed on with animated features—wide doe eyes, enunciated words, sharp hand movements. "Effie smiles very little and laughs even less."

"Mayhap responsibility has stolen her merriment." He knew the weight of that burden all too well. "Does she have bairns to care for as well?"

Lady Vanna's small nostrils widened, her lips thinned into a straight line and a spark of indignation flickered in her brown eyes. Her mask of indifference crumbled, revealing her obvious displeasure in his defense of her sister. "If ye are interested in learning about Effie, I wonder why ye sent for me instead of her?"

The lass had been in his company for mere minutes, and already he'd found the temper he suspected she tried—without success—to hide. He didn't favor her with a quick response. Instead, he settled into the chair and took two long sips of wine while he watched her fidget. "I sent for ye because I thought it fair ye have the first opportunity to prove why ye are better suited to be my wife."

The shift in her façade came instantly. Her pink tongue darted out to gloss her lips. Her eyelids lowered to half closed. Oh, he knew this face. 'Twas seduction.

"I possess the blood of two noble sires." She stood and stepped between his spread knees as she untied the laces binding her robe. "I'm in the bloom of my youth." She opened the seams of silk to reveal small, pert breasts, but she wasted no time teasing him with subtle glimpses before she discarded her robe over her shoulders. Standing naked before him without a morsel of timidity, she ran her palms over narrow hips then plucked at the tips of her tawny nipples. "And I'm confident I can match your sexual appetite while striving to give ye an heir."

Magnus' cock no longer cared about knowing her mind. His bollocks concurred, but one question needed answering before he allowed himself to accept what she so willingly offered. "Are ye still a maid, lass?"

She hesitated.

"Dinnae lie." His gaze lowered to the small triangle of black curls decorating her womanhood. "I will know."

"I am not, m'laird." She settled on her knees and easily found his cock beneath his robe. When she wrapped her hand around the shaft, his fingertips dug into the wooden arms of the chair. "Given your reputation, I wanted to be experienced when I came to your bed."

The words to argue her justification sat on his tongue, but he swallowed them the moment her plush lips spread over the head of his cock. She took half his length into her hot mouth without effort. Tongue whipping, she bobbed rhythmically up and down his sensitive pole like an experienced whore.

She watched him as she pleased him, alternating her speed based on the volume of his moans. Sweat beaded over his scalp and gathered around his neck as she tugged and sucked at him with the most exquisite pressure. Then she angled her head and thrust downward, shoving his cock head into her throat. Her bottom teeth scraped the thick vein at the root of him, her nose buried in his groin, the sides of her throat constricted around him like a serpent squeezing its prey.

Tantalizing zings of pleasure shot through his erection and coiled thick and heady in his sac. He groaned and wove his fingers into the masses of black silk tickling his thighs. His mind yelled, *Pull her off!* But his mind no longer led his actions.

When he thrust upward, she stretched her mouth wider, enveloped the base of his shaft with her tongue and allowed him to pump in earnest.

Oh, she would make him a good wife, a passionate wife, a willful lover.

His head fell back. His eyelids slid shut. A prisoner of his body's lust, he could do naught to stop her when she slithered up his body and crawled into the chair with him. Knees wedged into the cushion beside his hips, she positioned his cock at her entrance, then sank atop him.

"Faugh!" He'd been dangerously close to spilling his seed into her delicate mouth, and now that she'd wrapped her hot woman's flesh around his throbbing member, he

feared he would come prematurely. She bounced up and down, grinding her velvety nock against him, torturing him anew.

"I daresay I suit ye well, m'laird," she whispered in his ear, then nipped his lobe and opened the seams of his robe, exposing the jagged lines crisscrossing his chest. A short pause interrupted the rhythm of her movements. She turned her head and closed her eyes.

Her reaction to his scars angered him, stole his passion, but his body sought finality.

She reached for the back of the chair and slammed her bottom hard atop him over and over, creating a scorching friction. "Come with me. Seek your release."

The pleasure overwhelmed him. The pain insisted he give her what she wanted. He gripped her hips as pulsing sensations thrummed through his cock. His heart thundered. His throat dried. His resolve shattered when her muscles tightened and cinched and seized him until he came inside her.

He growled, grunted and shook with each burst of seed he sprayed against the wall of her womb.

He couldn't say how long he sat waiting for the tingles to subside and the spots to dissipate, but when he opened his eyes, he stared into the face of a seemingly satisfied woman. Albeit, she hadn't broken a sweat. She wasn't the least bit flushed. And he couldn't say for certain whether or not she'd enjoyed an orgasm.

Yet, the grin pulling at the corners of lips he'd yet to taste was one of victory.

"We will be verra good together, m'laird," she announced with confidence before she eased off his spent member and reached for her robe.

Chapter Three

Effie's mind drifted as she methodically dipped a candle in and out of the wax. While she congratulated herself on successfully denying Laird Sutherland's summons for three days, she knew 'twas unlikely she could hide from the man the remainder of her time at Dunrobin.

However, there were a multitude of reasons why she needed to try. For one, Ian had instructed her to avoid the man at all costs. For two, Laird Sutherland was well-reputed for his skill with women, which made him a lecher in Effie's opinion, and she held no desire to be wed to another faithless man. And thirdly, the sight of him alone made her tingle and shiver and ache. Just thinking about him made her swell like a bleating doe in heat.

Oh, it had been far too long since she'd been touched by a man, which was exactly why she needed to keep a distance from Laird Sutherland. If he came within two steps of her, she would likely let him have his way with her. She squirmed on the bench seat and forced her attention back to the Chandler's chatter.

"That'll be the last one this day, m'lady." The elderly gaunt woman used a poker to spread the dying coals in the hearth and glanced at the pegged walls striped with candles. "I'll be returning to my cot-house after the embers cool a bit more. Ye are welcome to join me for sup, if it pleases ye."

Effie smiled at the Chandler, deciding the woman was more agreeable than the weaver had been the day before and accepted the offer. "Thank ye, Sylvie. That would please me verra much."

Sylvie continued to fill the silence with talk of kin, cats and candles, the same as she'd done for the past several hours. She was alone in the world, her bairns all grown and gone, her grandchildren, too. Effie knew all too well what it felt like to be alone and

welcomed the prospect of providing her company for the remainder of the eve. Not to mention, Effie held no desire to return to the keep where she would be forced to listen to Vanna boast about how big the laird's cock was. Jealousy ground its big toe into Effie's gut, making the supportive smiles she offered her sister more difficult to wear.

Mayhap it was Vanna's confident bragging that made Effie want to vie for Laird Sutherland's affections. Or mayhap there was a deeper seed she'd been nurturing for years—a seed Besse had planted.

The door whipped opened and with it came a great gust of icy air. But it was not the spitting snowflakes that raised gooseflesh on her arms.

Laird Sutherland bent low to clear the doorframe when he entered, and his intimidating scowl sent Sylvie into a tizzy.

"M'laird." The Chandler bowed as deeply as her old bones would allow. "We were just—"

"Leave us," he cut Sylvie off sharply, and Effie might have thought him a tyrant for being harsh had he not wrapped his own fur around Sylvie's shoulders before sending her out into the cold. He closed the door and turned his scowl on Effie. "I sent for ye two days past, and ye did not come. I sent for ye again yestereve, and ye ignored my request again. I would know why?"

Her heart beat wildly in her chest. Still, she held fast to a face of indifference. "I have no intention of being a pawn in your game, m'laird." She stood and hung the twin candles on the last open peg then willed her hands to stop shaking before turning back. "Furthermore, ye have been betrothed to my sister for six months. My presence here shouldn't have changed the agreement ye made with my brother."

The fury fell away from his stiff posture. He scratched the nape of his neck. "I dinnae understand. I would think ye would relish the opportunity to position yourself as my wife."

The tiniest of chuckles escaped her throat. "Ye are more vain than I had given ye credit."

His brows angled sharply and his scowl returned. "Ye are bold to insult me."

"Might I speak frankly, m'laird?"

He nodded a single time, widened his stance and crossed his thick arms over his chest.

She drew a breath, but the words wouldn't come. How did she explain to him that she wasn't the type of woman who exuded rapture? She'd been a good wife to Gavin, but their marriage bed had lacked a certain...creativity. Not once had she screamed herself hoarse or broken the bed frame. He'd mount her, spend himself inside her and that was verra much the end of things.

"I'm waiting." Laird Sutherland drummed his fingers on his arm.

"I cannot compete with Vanna in the bedchamber, and I'll not subject myself to ridicule, knowing I will lose."

"Ye wound me, m'lady." He clutched his chest dramatically. "Your opinion of me is tainted by my reputation."

"It is," she admitted without hesitation.

"Ye should know I sent for ye so I might know ye better."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "What is it ye would like to know?"

Laird Sutherland leaned against the trestle table and rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Have ye bairns?"

"I did. Leena died in infancy. Ann-Elise lost her life to a fever when she was just eight winters. And Bretton died in a border raid alongside his father." Salty tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. Her children had been the light of her existence, but now they were gone and she was alone.

"It must pain ye deeply to have outlived them." His demeanor softened.

"It does." She swallowed her sorrow.

"Does the prospect of filling your arms with more bairns not appeal to ye?"

Anger straightened her spine instantly. "My children cannot be replaced with new ones." She snatched her mantle off a peg in the wall and wrapped it around her shoulders. "I've lived my life, m'laird. 'Tis Vanna's turn now."

Laird Sutherland stepped in her path, blocking her escape. His size might have intimidated her if she hadn't fallen under the spell of his scent. Wood-spice and man floated into her nose and held her in place long enough for him to touch her. He traced the line of her jaw with a tenderness that made her heart ache.

"Ye speak as though ye are kissing the grave." He held her cheek. His gaze dropped to her lips. "When I look at ye, I dinnae see a woman finished with life. I see a woman waiting to embrace it."

Quivers racked her body. Zings of lust coiled low in her belly. Oh, she wanted to succumb to the man. She wanted to taste his lips and feel the weight of him pressed against her. But it would be a fleeting affair. In the end he would choose Vanna, and Effie would live in shame the remainder of her life knowing she'd bedded her sister's husband.

She pulled away from him and tied her mantle at her neck. "Forgive me, m'laird, but I suspect what ye see is a woman, and this is all."

"I would wager I see more than ye do." The line between their gazes burned hot and heavy until Effie looked away. She was strong enough to crush this attraction, but feared her desire for companionship weakened her. He made her want for something she couldn't have, something she'd yearned for since the day the wars took her husband and son.

"If ye do not wish to be my wife, then I will accept it as final."

"'Tis my wish for ye to marry my sister." Why did those words feel like a lie?

"Verra well then." Laird Sutherland pivoted on his heel. "I will escort ye back to the keep."

"Thank ye for the offer, but I accepted an invitation to dine with Sylvie." Effie flipped the hood of her mantle over her head when he opened the door. A harsh wind coiled around her as she stepped onto a snow-covered path. "Good eve, m'laird."

He bowed, turned away from her and strode toward the keep. Shards of ice sliced her exposed skin, but she was accustomed to its bitter sting. What caught her unguarded was the cold numbing her insides while she watched the man disappear inside a swirl of snowflakes.

She hoped Vanna might one day appreciate what Effie had done for her this night, but doubted the girl would ever know the depth of her sacrifice. But that's exactly what it was. She was sacrificing the chance at a new start. She was giving up the prospect of having a home, a husband and a family.

Envy sank its claws in deep while she dined with Sylvie. It didn't help that the woman sang Laird Sutherland's praises throughout the whole of their meal. Jealousy shifted to resentment by the time she returned to Dunrobin Castle, and as she walked the richly decorated halls toward the guest solar, she felt herself being pulled toward Vanna's chamber. Effie wanted her sister to know what she'd done for her. In short, Effie wanted Vanna's gratitude.

Effie raised her knuckles to Vanna's door, then paused when she heard a deep throaty chuckle mixed with Vanna's girlish giggle.

"Why did ye tie a bow around your cock?" Vanna's silky voice was easy to recognize.

"'Tis a wedding gift," a male voice responded.

Embarrassment scorched Effie's cheeks as images of Vanna and Laird Sutherland filled her head. For the briefest of moments she felt betrayed, but those feelings were reminiscent of another time. She cursed her own foolishness and tried to push away the emotions squeezing her heart. The man didn't belong to her. She had no right to feel this way.

Laird Sutherland was not Gavin, and Vanna was not Besse.

She rushed back down the curved stairwell and nearly collided with Laird Sutherland carrying an elderly man. She jerked to a sudden stop. If he was here, then who in the bleating hell was in the guest solar with Vanna?

* * * * *

Magnus nearly dropped Uncle Frazier when Lady Reay came barreling down the stairwell.

"Laird Sutherland." She pushed a half-dozen red curls away from her eyes and stared at him with wide green eyes. "I thought..." She looked up the stairwell, then back. "Well, I..."

"What is it, lass?" Magnus asked impatiently, perplexed by her behavior.

She opened her mouth then closed it, then opened it again. "I...I was on my way to the kitchen. Sylvie's broth was a wee bit watered down, but dinnae tell her I said as much."

"Ye dinnae need my permission to go to the kitchen, m'lady." He stepped up, but she continued to block his path.

"Mayhap ye could join me." She smoothed the front of her kirtle then flattened her hand over her stomach.

Was she blind? Did she not notice the man growing heavier in his arms? "I would like that, but I need to see my uncle to bed first."

"Of course. I'll assist ye." She looked at Uncle Frazier and dipped a hurried curtsy. "I do not believe we've been introduced. I'm Effie." She raised her skirt and started back up the stairs. "Ye must be Laird Sutherland's uncle. Sylvie talks very highly of ye. She said ye taught the laird how to wield a sword. I suspect he was an apt pupil..."

Magnus exchanged a look with his uncle as that's all the more he could do since Lady Reay barely paused for air. She continued to blather as they walked side by side toward his uncle's chamber. Every few steps she checked over her shoulder, but for what, he did not know. The woman was as fidgety as a whore in the confessional.

"Is someone following ye, m'lady?"

"Nay." She stopped wringing her hands long enough to open the door to his uncle's chamber, then much to Magnus' surprise, she pulled back the coverlet and waited for him to set the crippled man in his bed. She acted as if she assisted him with his uncle every night, and for the first time in a long time, Uncle Frazier didn't hide his face in shame.

"Ye are the elder Mackay, aye?" Uncle Frazier raised his arms while she tucked the bedding around him.

"I am the wiser Mackay." When she winked at his uncle a small ache pressed against Magnus' chest.

It was a rarity to find a smile curving Uncle Frazier's lips, so consumed by pride as he was, but Lady Reay managed to squeeze one out of him with little effort. He'd lost the use of his legs years past and was at Magnus' mercy, which made the man surly at best. However, something about Lady Reay's nonchalance softened his uncle's resolve. Before Magnus knew it, they were discussing ways to protect their borders from Clan Ross.

"Perhaps Clan Sutherland can align with Clan Ross." Based on Lady Reay's suggestions, Magnus knew she didn't share her brother's desire for war. She wanted peace, the same as he.

"The strife between our clans goes back generations." Uncle Frazier covered his mouth to unsuccessfully hide a yawn.

"Forgive my chatter." Lady Reay rose from the edge of the bed. "I am keeping ye from your rest."

"Ye are welcome to pull my ear anytime. In fact, I'd like the council to hear your ideas. Mayhap we could break our fast together on the morrow."

"I would like that verra much." Lady Reay clasped her hands in front of her and raised her chin. She possessed the demeanor of a queen—elegant, strong and intelligent.

'Twas a shame she was so thick in the skull, for she was a woman he would have proudly called wife.

Uncle Frazier found Magnus standing at the foot of the bed. "She's the one, Maggie. I care not what my sister thinks."

Unfortunately, Lady Reay didn't want to be *the one*. Magnus sighed and cupped her elbow. "Come, m'lady. I happen to know where the larderer hides the peach sauce." He waited for her to step into the corridor before bidding his uncle good night. "Sleep well, Uncle."

"Your mother wishes for ye to marry Vanna?" Lady Reay asked as they descended the stairwell.

"My mother is a cold, callous woman who believes the sole duty of the laird's wife is to provide the clan with a male heir."

"Are ye of a different opinion?"

"I am." He didn't elaborate. What purpose would it serve? Lady Reay had already expressed her wishes.

Magnus escorted her to a kitchen smelling of spices and yeast, then proceeded to serve her an oatcake drizzled with peach sauce. "Lainie and Laura would have my head if they knew I was sharing their preserves."

Lady Reay unexpectedly frowned at him as he slid into the bench beside her. "Are they your mistresses?"

"Nay." He wished she didn't think him such a whoremonger. "They are my five-year-old nieces."

"Oh." Lady Reay's thin brows rose. "I should like to hear more about them."

"They are completely unruly, but clever, like Eoghan was." Guilt always accompanied thoughts of his brother.

"He died," she guessed.

Magnus nodded, but gained comfort in knowing her sympathetic look was one of understanding.

"Ann-Elise was my smart one. She could talk before she could walk." Lady Reay's green eyes shone with unshed tears and caused a pinch in his chest.

"Lainie was the same." Magnus attempted to save her from her memories and soon found himself entertaining her with stories of his kinfolk. He shared the good memories, the tales of how he and his brothers had made Mam want to throw herself off a cliff. Those were the memories that made him smile. Why had he buried them so deep?

"When Ann-Elise was naught but four winters, I found her tied to a tree." Lady Reay chuckled beneath her breath and touched his forearm. "My son was using her as bait to trap a dragon."

They exchanged stories about their kin until he could no longer focus on the conversation. The more comfortable she became, the closer she got, making breathing a struggle. The base notes of berries and clover had followed her back from the chandlers and made him twitch every time she leaned into him. He tripped over his words as he watched her chew, mesmerized by the glossy sheen coating her full lips.

Soon, all he could think about was kissing her.

He blew a frustrated breath and forced his eyes away, then busied himself by tidying up. His desire for her was strong, that much he admitted. And the fact she'd refused his attention made him want her all the more. However, he'd also come to respect her, and that was precisely the reason he needed to quell this attraction. He'd been wrong to think he could choose one of them without hurting the other. And the last thing he wanted to do was hurt the woman before him.

He needed to accept her decision as final and focus on the woman he would soon take to wife. "If ye will excuse me, I do believe I'll pay a visit to my betrothed before I retire."

* * * * *

Nay! Effie jumped to her feet. She felt her eyes widen and her heart whack her ribs. There was a part of her that wanted to let him discover her sister's betrayal, but responsibility prevented her from allowing such an event to take place. She'd failed to rear Vanna properly and felt compelled to protect her. "What if I asked ye not to?"

Laird Sutherland gave her a sidelong glance. "I would need to know why."

She could lie. She could tell him Vanna was indisposed. "Mayhap I've changed my mind about vying for your affections." The words came out before she'd thought them through.

He stepped close, curled her hair behind her ear, then cradled her head in his palm. "Nothing would please me more."

Her skin tingled beneath his fingertips. Her pulse fluttered around a knot in her throat. He was going to kiss her, and the anticipation was nearly more than she could bear. The silver flecks in his blue irises glittered as he leaned down and caressed her lips with his mouth. He did it again, eyes closed this time, and the sweet tenderness of his kiss made her want to weep. When he swept her mouth with his tongue, she responded with a startled catch of her breath.

He pulled back. "Have ye changed your mind again?"

"Nay," she answered quickly.

"Do ye fear me?"

"I fear the wanting of ye." She coiled her fingers into his thick black mane and lowered his head back to hers. His lips were soft, yet firm, his tongue wild and demanding. A hint of mint hid beneath the flavor of peaches—a delicious blend that caused her mouth to water. But what made her lightheaded was the undeniable heat of him. Sparks flickered in her belly and tingles rose up her thighs. When those two sensations met, the result was a fierce ache burning in her sex.

His arms circled her, gently at first, then his muscles flexed, sharpened to hewn-cut stone. Without breaking the connection between their mouths, he sat her atop a chopping block, stepped between her spread knees and slid his mouth down her neck.

She sucked in air, her eyes blinked open, searching, while vibrations hummed throughout her entire body. Her breasts ached, her nipples hardened to rock-hard pebbles and her mons swelled between her legs. Her arousal took control of her, made her willing, wanton and afraid.

"I have never desired a woman more than I desire ye right now," he whispered against her skin and brushed his lips along her collarbone.

"'Tis the same for me," she admitted and tightened her knees around his hips. While she had intended to protect her sister's transgression, Effie now wanted to give in to her desires. Mayhap she was being selfish, but she wanted him. And she wanted him now.

Laird Sutherland untied the laces of her undertunic and pressed a kiss over her heart. He lingered there, mending the wounds that had pained her for so long, filling the emptiness inside her with silent promises, with hope. Tears stung her eyes so powerful were the emotions he stirred in her. She wanted to hold on to the feeling. She wanted to hold on to him. Not for a night. Not for a sennight. For forever.

She released the pin binding his *plaid* at his shoulder and suckled the leathered skin of his neck. He tasted of salt and sweat and man, and the combination sent her head spinning.

When she kissed the scar on his throat, he seized her hands and drifted away. "Ye dinnae have to do that."

Anger puckered her brow. She snapped her hands out of his hold and glared at him. "Ye asked me if I feared ye, and the truth is, I do. I fear trusting ye. I fear what will happen to my heart if I offer it to ye. But I'm no coward." She poked him. "As terrifying as the prospect is to me, I let ye in. I allowed ye to touch my heart. I allowed ye to kiss *my* scars."

He snorted and kept his eyes guarded. "Ye have no scars. Your skin is flawless."

"Ye are wrong. My scars are here." She pressed his hand against her heart. "Think ye because I'm a woman I've not suffered the repercussions of war? My enemy's blade cut a hole in my chest and left my arms empty." She wished she didn't feel so alone. She wished she had someone left to care for. Memories of her family filled her mind's eye and pushed tears over her lids. She swiped them away, not wanting to cry.

When Laird Sutherland raised his gaze back to her, she saw the promise in his eyes before he verbalized it. "I could fill that hole. I could fill your arms and heal your scars."

Oh, she wanted that. She nigh ached for it to the very core of her being, but she also wanted to feel needed. "And I yours, if ye will let me." She peeled apart the seams of his undertunic to expose a multitude of pink lines crisscrossing his chest. He'd been stabbed, sliced, his skin grated. She reached out and traced a jagged red line that wrapped around his ribs, hoping he'd let her in.

Tendons stood out in his neck. His hands fisted beside her knees. "I took a mace to the side at Strathfleet trying to save my uncle."

She touched a white line running parallel to his ribs. "And this one?"

The knot in his throat bobbed. His lashes lowered. "When I was fourteen winters, I carried my father's targe to the boundaries of our land where we thought reivers had been stealing our livestock. We were attacked by a band of Ross warriors. Da demanded I go back, but I wanted to fight." Laird Sutherland shook his head in remembrance. "I told him I wanted to know what it felt like to have blood on my sword. Da cut me with my own blade and said, 'Now ye know what it feels like.' He sent me back with instructions to look after Mam and my younger brother, Eoghan, then promised me he would return."

"Did he?"

"Nay." Pain deepened his voice as his mind seemed to drift farther into the past. "Da and my eldest brother died which left Sionn in charge. He ruled for three years before he too died fighting against our enemies. I inherited the chieftainship after that,

and with my uncle's guidance, we thrived for years in peace until the Battle of Bloody Bay. The day we set out for the coast, I foolishly promised Eoghan's wife I would bring him home safe."

Laird Sutherland didn't have to tell her his brother never came home. She knew.

"Jocelyn lost the boy she was carrying when I told her I had broken my promise."

What Effie saw marring his skin were medallions of honor, reminders of victories and losses, but she also saw a man in pain. Vanna was too superficial to see the person behind the scars. She would never be able to heal him the way Effie could. "If I was your wife, would ye make me such promises?"

He shook his head and kissed her fingers. "I am a warrior. I must fight to protect my kin, but while I'm here, I vow to cherish ye like no other."

When she leaned in to kiss the puckered white line slashed over his shoulder, he trembled and held her close. She lay her cheek against his chest and listened to his racing heartbeat. Was she strong enough to survive a marriage to this man? Would the worry drive her mad?

She was so tired of war.

For long moments, they remained tangled in a silent embrace, then a great weight seemed to leave his body. He pulled back, rearranged his garments and set her on the floor. "Come."

Though wary of his sudden intensity, she took his proffered hand. "Where are we going?"

"I've made my decision." He led her out of the kitchen. "I'm taking ye to my solar and claiming ye for my own."

Chapter Four

"Laird Sutherland!" Effie squealed, stunned by his announcement.

"Call me Magnus." He squeezed her hand tighter and half dragged her down a darkened corridor.

"I'm not certain ye've thought this through."

"I've made a great number of decisions in my life—some good, some bad—but never have I been more confident than I am about this one."

Was this really happening? Excitement whirled inside her as she raced to keep up with his strides. Ian would have his alliance, and Vanna could easily secure another match. Effie found herself justifying reasons she could accept his decision. "M'laird—"

"Save your breath. I'll not allow ye to dissuade me." He entered his solar with confidence and pulled her inside.

Effie was momentarily mesmerized by the magnificence of his solar. A fire burned in the hearth, speckling the chamber with light. Mounted over the mantle was a targe engraved with the words, *Without Fear*. But what made her heart skitter was the enormity of a mahogany bed. Black damask silk formed a canopy overtop a mattress three times the size of the one she'd shared with her husband for sixteen years. She swallowed hard and might have fretted more had she not been distracted by the thud of boots to her right.

She turned to find Laird Sutherland standing atop a fur rug in front of the fire. He was naked—gloriously naked. Broad sinewy shoulders, rock-hard chest, long lean corded thighs. He was the prime of his species, but what made Effie gawk in wonder was the erection jutting outward from his furry, taut sac. He was big. Verra big.

Her body responded to his physique like firestorm. Heat engulfed her lower belly. Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, but no words came out.

This was really happening!

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this." The merriment in his tone bordered on wicked. He stepped toward her.

She stepped back, fearful. Gavin had been the only man she'd ever been with, and she hadn't been able to hold his interests. What if she didn't please Laird Sutherland? 'Twas doubtful the Devil of Dunrobin would be content to have her on her back.

"Ye look terrified." He wrapped his arms around her and leaned into her ear. "It will fit. I vow it."

She smiled against his chest, thinking him arrogant. "'Tis not the size of your cock that concerns me."

"Then what is it?"

"I fear I will disappoint ye," she admitted.

"'Tis impossible." He raised her chin. "I'm already half in love with ye." When he covered her mouth with his, determination slammed the door on her timidity.

She wanted the other half, and was willing to do anything to have it. She suckled his tongue and toyed with his beaded nipples, attempting to be creative.

He responded with a deep moan and suckled her earlobe. "I'm going to taste every inch of ye before I claim ye. And then," he flushed her body to his, squeezed her backside and pressed his hard cock against her belly, "I'm going to do it again."

His muscles flexed beneath her hands just before he filled his fists with her garments and pulled her kirtle and undertunic over her head.

Embarrassment inflamed her skin, but she refused to cower. She raised her chin unashamed and allowed him to look his fill.

"My God, ye have beautiful breasts."

"I know." Effie's lips curved at the corners. Emboldened by his compliment, she cupped her breasts and ran her thumbs over her nipples. They tingled and throbbed, stood erect, awaiting his attention.

His brows arched wickedly in the middle. "Ah, I found your fault. Ye are vain," he teased, then molded his mouth around her nipple and sucked hard. He drew on it over and over, nipping, biting, making her moan with pleasure, then he moved to pay equal attention to her other breast.

As he bathed her skin in kisses, his long, slender fingers stroked her belly, her hips, her backside, causing ropes of ecstasy to whip through her body. Warmth flooded her, tightened her insides, dampened her thighs. Never had she known such arousal. 'Twas unbearable, yet exquisite.

Her nether lips swelled. Her clit grew painfully erect. Then he was there, between her thighs, dancing over the wet curls, massaging the place that needed him the most. He slid his index finger through the folds of her soaked slit then dipped inside.

She cried out, clung to his shoulders. Her eyes snapped open to meet his—dark blue, fierce, savage, hot. He kissed his way down her body, the curve of her belly, her hipbones, the fronts of her thighs, until he settled on his knees in front of her. His mouth hovered over her mound, his hot breath teasing her, making her insane, then the tip of his nose brushed her clit, causing her to jerk.

"I can smell your desire for me. 'Tis like a bouquet of burning flowers." His husky voice deepened and the scruff of his unshaven jaw scratched her thighs.

"Please, Magnus," she begged, using his given name, and liked the way it tickled her tongue so she whispered it again, "Magnus."

"Tell me what ye want."

The rogue knew what she wanted, but he taunted her with his fingers until she said the words. "I want your mouth on me."

A slow, wicked grin lifted his lips just before he lowered her onto the fur rug with such speed it made her dizzy. He removed her boots and stockings, then spread her thighs wide and drew his tongue over the full length of her slit.

She bucked, clutched the sides of his head and pulled him closer until he plunged his tongue deep inside her. Holding her breath, she relished every rasp, every delicious

flutter. He licked her greedily, exploring her folds, searching for the hidden places that made her respond the most.

When he circled her anus with his tongue, she tightened and gasped for much needed air, but he showed her no mercy. He pumped two fingers in and out of her and snuck his pinkie into the forbidden ring of her rectum.

She was mindless now, her body controlled her actions. Perspiration rolled over her neck, gathered behind her knees. She was either going to melt or combust. She quivered, quaked, her knees shook, but it still wasn't enough. "I need ye."

"Not yet." He spread her sex wide with his thumbs and pulled back the thin layer of flesh covering her clit. He blew on it, flicked it with the tip of his tongue, then sucked it between his lips. The gentle scrape of his teeth was maddening, and just when she was certain she would lose consciousness, he released a rumbling growl that sent explosions of rapture ripping through her core.

She screamed and thrust her pelvis upward as her muscles contracted, flittered, throbbed, then a powerful climax flooded her woman's core with hot liquid. Her chest burned. Her heart raced painfully as ripple after delicious ripple echoed throughout her entire being.

"Oh bleating Christ!" *That* had never happened before.

Confused and concerned, she looked down the length of her body and caught his all-knowing smile as he lapped up her juices like a lazy cat.

"'Twas your first climax?" He must have read her expression.

She could lie and save herself a great deal of embarrassment, but he looked positively pleased with himself. She opted to say nothing at all.

"Few women are capable of ejaculation. It pleases me verra much to know ye are one of the few." He crawled up her body and shared the flavor with her. 'Twas musky, tangy...erotic.

She didn't shy away from him, but his comment made her feel like his pupil. She'd been submissive the whole of her life. She'd been a dutiful wife, a complaisant daughter and a subservient sister. If truth be told, she was exhausted with the task of biting her tongue. She wanted to speak her mind, express her opinions openly without fear of contempt. And there was that voice inside her she wanted to crush—the voice that had always blamed her for driving Gavin into another woman's bed. She could be passionate, bold...daring.

"Do let me know when ye've recovered." Laird Sutherland—Magnus—she corrected mentally, supported himself overtop her and nibbled on her breasts.

"Ye are a verra wicked man." She wiggled her way out from underneath him.

"'Tis true." His bluster made her smile. "And 'twill take a verra wicked woman to satisfy me."

She settled between his legs and wrapped her fingers around his cock. "I can be wicked."

Chapter Five

Magnus had known the joys of love play with many women, but never had he felt such a strong emotional connection with any of them. True, Lady Reay made his body burn, but she also made him yearn for something greater than the pleasures of the flesh. She made him yearn for love.

Part of him wanted to wait until they'd spoken their vows to consummate their marriage, but all thoughts of chivalry fled him when she looked up at him with those glittery emerald eyes and swiped the bead of semen off the top of his cock.

His heart thundered in his chest, waiting for her little pink tongue to sneak out and do it again. Tendons whelped in his arms as he attempted to caress her coppery locks with a gentleness he no longer possessed. She kissed his bollocks with her silky full lips, then trailed her tongue along the thick vein swelling the underside of his cock. She tortured him with quick licks, the barely-there flutter of her tongue, the cool and hot sensations of her breath.

"Aye, ye are wicked indeed." He spread his legs a little wider and thrust upward, begging her without words to take him into her sweet mouth.

"Tell me what ye want."

The vixen stole his game! He laughed on the inside and felt a sense of pride at the same time as she continued to toy with him. Oh, he enjoyed this woman. He suspected she lacked his experience, yet she exuded confidence. Albeit, she seemed to grow impatient waiting for his response. "I want your mouth on my cock."

An impish grin tugged at her lips as both her slender brows popped up, one higher than the other. "Like this?" The temptress pressed a chaste kiss against the flat of his cock. "Or like this?" She gripped him with both hands and then finally curved her hot mouth over top of him.

"Oh, aye. Like that. Like that," he breathed as his sensitive flesh brushed against the roof of her mouth. Needle-sharp pings of pleasure stabbed his bollocks. A groan rumbled in his chest, calling the beast inside him. He wrapped his fingers around her skull and pushed. "More."

Eyes wide on him, she cupped his sac, curled her tongue around the base of his shaft and swallowed his cock. She bobbed in earnest, drawing her cheeks inward, sucking hard along the length of him.

"Oh Christ!" He pulled her hair, attempting to control the rhythm, but Lady Reay was proving to be an aggressive lover, which definitely wasn't something he'd expected or been prepared for.

When she moaned her own pleasure around him, he shivered at the sensations. Hot flaming bolts darted through his cock as his seed spiraled its way out of his bollocks. He couldn't control it. He was going to come.

"'Tis enough," he growled in warning and tried to pull her off, but she held onto the root of him and refused to let go.

White bursts of light speckled his vision, forcing his eyes shut. He stiffened, went completely still, and then roared as his seed burst against the back of her throat. "Bluidy faugh, woman!"

He felt her smile as she milked him dry, then the lusty wench sat back on her heels and daintily wiped the corners of her mouth. "It seems ye've spent yourself prematurely, m'laird." Her haughty expression only added to her appeal. "I confess I'm a wee bit disappointed."

His chuckle sounded evil even to him. She wanted to play, did she?

"Ye are a minx." He snatched her off the floor, tossed her over his shoulder and smacked her hard on her curvaceous rump. "Ye will regret provoking the Devil of Dunrobin."

She squealed as he carried her across the solar then tossed her atop the mattress. No woman had ever left his bed disappointed, and he damn sure wasn't going to start with his wife.

His wife, he repeated mentally. Those two little words warmed his insides and made him almost giddy. The anticipation of claiming her pumped blood into his flaccid member as he dipped a taper into the fire then proceeded to light every wick in the solar—two wall sconces, a six-tier candelabrum and a wide pillar candle on the bedside table.

"What are ye doing?" She knelt upright, and much to his disappointment, she covered her favors with the bed curtain. Before this night was over, he intended to relieve her of her timidity completely.

"I've hidden in the shadows for too long." He blew the taper out and returned it to the mantle. "When I satisfy your every pleasure—and I will—I want to see the look on your face when ye thank me."

"Oh." Her thin russet-colored brows slid up her forehead and he caught a glimpse of fear flash through her green eyes just before he disappeared into an antechamber.

He returned with two silk scarves. "Lie down and put your hands over your head."

Her gaze dropped to the blue scarves twisted in his hands. "What are your intentions, m'laird?"

"I'm going to bind ye."

* * * * *

Effie pressed the bed curtains tighter against her breasts and glanced at the door. 'Twas doubtful she could outrun him. "I can assure ye, there's no need to bind me."

"Ah, but there is." When he pressed his mouth to hers, all her apprehensions fled in an instant. Silk brushed over her wrists as he guided her down to lie diagonally on the mattress. Oh, he thought himself sneaky, but she knew his tantalizing kisses were only a means to distract her.

His plan succeeded.

He bound her wrists with one scarf and used the second to tie her to the bedpost before he freed her from the heat of his mouth. "Test your restraints."

She pulled on the bindings. They were tight. Damn tight. While this sort of love play was certainly creative, it left her feeling vulnerable. A combination of fear and excitement made her pulse gallop.

He straddled her hips and slid his calloused hands down her arms. "Did your husband ever hurt ye?"

"Gavin never struck me." *But he broke my heart.*

"Did ye trust him?" Laird Sutherland drew his fingertips between her breasts, leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

'Twas difficult to focus on his words with his fingers playing over her skin. "Why are ye asking me these questions?"

"Because I want to know if ye trust me." His words were soft, gentle, but what he wanted, she was not yet prepared to give. She'd known him all of three days.

The rise and fall of her breasts grew increasingly more erratic. The air thinned, forcing her to breathe through her mouth. "Trust is earned, m'laird."

"Then I shall earn it." Beginning at her neck, he trailed his tongue over the curve of her breasts, her belly, her hips. With every hot kiss he placed upon her skin, her consternation faded a little more. Arousal pushed the fear out of her veins as he continued downward to the inside of her knees, her calves, her ankles. "I will release ye from your binds whenever ye wish. Ye have to do naught more than ask."

She should ask now. She should end this play while she had the opportunity. "Do ye intend to hurt me?"

"I will never hurt ye." He kissed the arch of her foot then worked his way back upward and straddled her thighs. "Do ye believe me?"

She nodded, convinced of one thing. The man was no beast.

“’Tis progress.” He grinned as he retrieved a vial of oil from the bedside table and poured a generous amount into his palm.

The scents of pine and icy mint sharpened in her nose as he massaged the silky substance into her breasts and belly. The aroma soothed her, but the cool oil tingled on her hot skin and stimulated her nerve endings.

“I’ll make ye a good husband.” He began toying with her nipples—gently at first, then his fingers became more aggressive. He plucked at the knobs of flesh until they thrust obscenely upright. “I’ll never seek my pleasure before yours.”

“Magnus...” she whispered, ready for him to claim her, ready for him to make her his wife. Her eyes fell shut, her grip around her binds tightened. She whimpered and squirmed beneath him as an aching arousal began to throb inside her. “I need ye.”

“Not yet.” He positioned himself between her legs and massaged the hard lips of her sex, stroking the frilly folds, sliding his fingers up and down the full length of her wet slit.

Fire and ice played havoc inside her. The craving became unbearable. Perspiration beaded on her forehead then trickled over her temples. She parted her legs farther, an unspoken plea for more, which he fulfilled when he delved two fingers inside her. She could do little more than moan as he worked his thick deft fingers in and out of her, reaching deep inside her to touch that hidden nub threatening to explode. Her entire being remained focused on that center of her, that magic place that fluttered around his teasing fingers.

His thumb circled her clit, rolled it, pressed on it, only to drift back, leaving her hanging on the threshold of bliss. He worked her into a frenzy, teasing her, tormenting her, pulling her to the edge of climax, then pushing her back. A sly finger slipped inside the ring of her anus. She writhed at the sensation, but flexed her pelvis, desperate for more. Every touch, every caress drove her a little closer to insanity.

Then fire sprinkled over her belly.

She cried out. Her eyes snapped open to find him holding a candle over her navel. Before she could open her mouth to protest, he tilted the pillar again. Hot wax spilled over the rim and filled the whorl of her navel in a maelstrom of scalding heat.

Her sex clamped hard around his fingers as pleasure and pain tore through her in waves. Her muscles quivered, seized, then contracted, only to repeat over and over.

"Dinnae come. Hold on to that edge and wait for me."

She wanted to obey him, but her orgasm sat so thick and full and heavy in her body. Ripples began to wash through her. She couldn't control it. "I cannot."

"Ye can."

Sharp daggers of desire ripped through her body. Icy air hissed over her teeth. Her pelvis shot up, forcing his fingers deeper inside her, but he jerked them out, stealing her climax, making her crazed with lust.

"Wait for me." He set his cock at her opening and positioned the candle overtop her breasts.

"Nay!" Her heart punched her ribs, waiting, fearful, expectant...

He pushed the head of his cock inside her and tipped the candle on its side. Fiery wax dripped over her nipples, between her breasts and down her belly in a rain of burning heat. Her entire body lurched at the pain, then shuddered with pleasure as he filled her canal with his thick erection.

She screamed, overwhelmed with sensations. Her body burned inside and out as he thrust a little deeper, pushed a little harder, stretching her sheath inch by inch until, at last, he was buried to the hilt inside her.

Her chest hurt, her throat burned. She was surely going to die.

He returned the candle to the bedside table then leaned into her ear. "Now ye may come."

Her orgasm broke through her like the tide crashing against the rocky crag—fierce and violent. She surrendered to the clawing need and melted as wave after glorious wave of blissful release flowed through her womb. “Oh, Magnus!”

He kissed her while she rode to the peak of the summit. She’d never experienced anything quite so intense, so heavenly, so utterly divine. She felt weightless now, like she was falling, like she was floating.

“Ye are beautiful.” He rocked back and forth with deliberate slowness and kissed her cheeks one at a time.

She felt beautiful and free and treasured. “Thank ye. Thank ye...” she repeated, still lost in this world of ecstasy.

When the initial surge finally faded, she opened her eyes just enough to see the smile lift his handsome face. “’Twas my pleasure.”

He continued a steady rhythm in and out of her until his moans turned to grunts. His pace quickened, grew fervent, carnal. Soon, he raised her hips off the bed and impaled her a final time with a guttural roar. Hot bursts of semen filled her belly, heating her womb, making her pine for life, for family...for him.

“I’m so grateful ye changed your mind.” He hovered over top her for long moments, eyes boring into hers. The current of emotions passing between them touched her deeper than any physical caress. She could trust this man. She could let him into her heart.

She could love him.

Her arms ached, wanting to touch him, wanting to hold him. “Release me.”

He untied the knots, then easily gathered the chunks of wax off her oiled skin and returned them back to the mouth of the pillar.

“Ye might have warned me about the wax,” she scolded him with little effect.

"I might have." He grinned and rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. As they lay in a tangle of slick limbs, she rested her cheek on his chest and waited for her misgivings to return.

But they didn't.

Everything about this felt right—the way their bodies curved together, the way their hearts beat in unison. 'Twas all so...perfect.

He caressed her hair. "Why did ye change your mind?"

She rose up and stared at him, searching for an answer. She could hardly tell him she'd been protecting Vanna. Not that it mattered now. He'd made his decision. He'd chosen Effie. Vanna was sure to be angry at first, but Effie vowed to find her sister a suitable husband. Whether she intended to be faithful to that husband would be up to her.

"Effie?" He coaxed her for a response.

Effie offered him a reason he would likely believe. "I wanted to know if I was still desirable."

He pulled her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips over her palm. "Did your husband no longer find ye desirable?"

She didn't want to answer his question. She didn't want the warmth of their union tainted by the memory of Gavin's infidelity.

"Effie?" The man was damned impatient.

She attempted to separate herself from him, but he held fast to her hips. "I dinnae want secrets between us."

Effie only stared at him.

"Was your husband auld when ye wed? Was he good to ye? Did he pamper ye with gifts?"

"Why do ye want to know all of this?"

"Because I'm competing with his memory."

Effie blew a breath and settled back atop him. "I was verra young when we wed, barely fifteen winters. Gavin was my father's seneschal, and I was given to him as a gift for his loyalty. He was twelve years my senior, but we were a good match," she admitted, remembering a time when she'd been proud to be Gavin's wife.

"Did ye love him?"

"I loved him verra much." Unshed tears burned her eyes, sorrow tightened her throat. "I was faithful to him. Then he strayed from our marriage bed while I was carrying Leena." A memory flashed through her mind's eye—Besse, blonde and beautiful, lay over a barrel in the armory, her skirts balled atop her back while Gavin took her from behind. "I blamed myself for not holding his attention. I was sick with guilt and jealousy and anger. 'Tis why Leena came early."

Effie suspected the day she held Leena's small lifeless body was the day vengeance took hold of her heart. "I blamed him for our daughter's death and he begged for my forgiveness." A tear slipped over her nose as the memories filled her head. "I will always regret not giving it to him."

"Because of the babe?"

"Aye, and because of what I did after that."

"Go on," he prodded her when she held silent.

"Gavin begged me not to tell my father, but at the time, I felt betrayed and wanted to see him pay. I wanted to see them both pay."

"The woman too?"

Effie nodded against his chest. "The woman's name was Besse. She was my father's second wife, Vanna's mother. Da ousted her from the clan and sent Gavin to the border after I exposed their affair." Her tears came fast and hard. They rolled over her nose and dripped onto his chest. The guilt had never felt so raw. "My son went with him and they both died in a raid."

"Ye are not to blame for their death." He hugged her tight.

Her bitterness killed them. Her inability to forgive was the reason she no longer had bairns to hold. She sobbed against his chest until the emotions dried themselves out.

Magnus rolled her to her side and wiped her cheeks. "I need to know if ye changed your mind because ye hold your sister responsible for her mother's transgressions?"

Effie shook her head, but even she could admit there was a morsel of truth to his statement. Though Vanna bore no resemblance to Besse, she was a constant reminder of how much Effie had lost. "I'm here because I no longer wish to be alone. I want a husband and a family. I want to start anew."

Magnus pulled her mouth to his and kissed her with a passion that made her believe he could give her what she wanted. He made love to her until dawn slipped its lighted fingers between the furs covering the window slits, then he tucked her into the curve of his body and allowed her to dream of the life he promised her.

A thunderous pounding on the door jarred her awake hours later. "Maggie! 'Tis bluidy noontide!"

Who in the bleating hell is that? Exhausted, Effie reached behind her to wake Magnus, but the bed was empty.

* * * * *

Effie bolted out of warm covers and tottered on unsteady legs. Her aching body protested her attempts to dress while the woman on the other side of the door continued to shout demands at the top of her lungs.

Effie pushed wild red locks from her face and tried to control a temper that was quickly rising. She was ready to cut the woman's tongue out by the time Effie ripped the door open. "What in God's name is all the fuss about?"

Magnus' mother stood on the other side cloaked in a blue and green *arisaid*. Her dark eyes rounded instantly. "Lady Reay!"

Oh bleating hell. Effie's gut fell to her toes.

If Satan's wife had a name, Effie suspected it might be Lady Katherine Sutherland. After all, this was the woman who'd spawned the Devil of Dunrobin. The stories Sylvie had told Effie made her more than wary, especially since Lady Katherine hadn't troubled herself to speak more than two words to Effie since her arrival. She didn't know whether to bow or throw herself out the nearest window.

Lady Katherine covered her nose with the scrap of linen clutched in her bony hand, no doubt repulsed by the scents of lovemaking wafting out of the solar. Her gaze flitted over Effie's shoulder toward the unmade bed. "Where is my son?"

"He's not here," Effie stated the obvious, feeling very small in this woman's presence.

Accusing black eyes swept over Effie's disheveled attire from her mussed hair to her bare toes. "I will send a maid to assist ye with your morning ablutions. When ye are presentable, I wish to speak to ye in the chapel." She spun on her heel and disappeared into the corridor.

Effie fell against the door as she shut it and emptied her lungs in a long exhale. She knew she would have demons to face. At least she would face this particular demon in God's house. With any luck, Magnus would return before she had to face the devil.

He did not.

As Effie entered the dank chapel, she vowed to tie him to the rafters and beat him with a switch upon his return. Of course, he would likely enjoy such a punishment.

Shaking her head, she pushed the wicked thoughts from her mind, smoothed the pleats of her borrowed kirtle and positioned herself next to Lady Katherine in the front pew. "Ye wished to speak to me, m'lady."

"I want ye to leave." Lady Katherine's façade was as cold as the air seeping into the chapel.

"I have no intention of leaving." Effie drew a breath of courage. "I'm going to marry your son. He has chosen me to be his wife."

Lady Katherine's eyes remained fixed on the stone crucifix hanging over the altar. "He will hurt ye. He will not be faithful to ye, and will most likely die before he can teach his sons to wield a sword."

Foreboding coiled around Effie's spine. The woman managed to collect all of Effie's fears in a single sentence. She was cruel and callous and heartless. The indignation that heated Effie's blood came as a surprise. What right did this woman have to speak to her with such malice? "Are ye predicting my future, or retelling your past?"

Lady Katherine's chin snapped over her shoulder. "Do not begin to think ye know anything about me or my past."

Effie had lived long enough to know a number of people who thrived on sharing their misery. Lady Katherine was one of them. "Mayhap ye should enlighten me."

"I have dedicated my life to serving this clan. I bore four sons to an unfaithful husband and I've buried three of the four."

"It seems we have more in common than ye think, Lady Katherine." Effie shared her hardships with the woman, hoping to gain her empathy, but she wouldn't bend.

"Ye have suffered a great deal which is all the more reason why ye should leave and protect yourself from future afflictions." Lady Katherine's lips pursed. She was mulish and bitter. In truth, Effie pitied her.

"I wish ye felt differently and can only hope time will lessen your animosity toward me."

"At your age, time is not something ye have an abundance of. Ye jeopardize the livelihood of my people because ye fancy yourself smitten with my son. You're a selfish, foolish girl." Her insults pushed Effie over the edge.

"Nay, I am a woman who is wise enough to know I have no wish to end up alone like ye."

A vein pulsed in Lady Katherine's temple, her jaw pinched tight. She stood and looked down her nose at Effie. "Ye have been duly warned, Lady Reay. Ye tell your brother we will not fight his war until Clan Sutherland has a male issue."

Effie's face puckered. "What war?"

"The war against Clan Ross." Lady Katherine raised her skirt and strode out of the chapel.

* * * * *

Magnus dismounted his destrier and landed in a snowdrift that reached his thighs. He was freezing, exhausted and on the verge of deciding this had been a fool's quest. Moonlight glittered off a blanket of snow and lighted the way to the kirk. He should have been back to Dunrobin by now, but the two-day ride to Saint Duthac had taken six.

He sighed, now regretting not telling anyone where he was going, but he'd wanted to surprise Effie. With a gloved fist, he banged on the doors and decided it would be worth the trek. It would please Effie to be married by a priest in the church.

"But I would wager she is cursing me now." He patted the neck of his trusted stallion and thought of the night he'd spent making love to Effie. While those memories had kept him warm on his journey, they hadn't filled his belly.

A small iron plate slid open on the peephole, then shut, just before the arched doors opened inward with a whoosh.

"Laird Sutherland!" Father O'Rourke protected his nose and mouth from the harsh wind and urged Magnus inside. "What are ye doing traveling in weather like this?"

"I need a priest." Magnus removed his gloves and blew hot air into his cold hands.

"Are ye dying, laddie?" Father O'Rourke held his lantern high and inspected Magnus for wounds.

"I'm not dying, Father. I'm getting married."

"Come." Robes flowing, Father O'Rourke led Magnus to the rectory and instructed a young boy to tend his horse. Magnus peeled away his outer layers and accepted a bowl of warm barley from an elder matron while Father O'Rourke lowered himself into a high-back chair beside the hearth. He scratched his white beard and gave Magnus a disapproving look. "Is the girl with child?"

"I hope so," Magnus answered honestly. He held no desire to lie to a priest. There were enough sins on his soul.

"Why the urgency? Why would ye risk so much to fetch me in this weather?"

"I have my reasons." Magnus warmed his hands by the fire. "For one, I wish to have our union blessed to legitimize a male issue, should my new wife be fortunate enough to give me one. For another, it has been well over a year since your last visit to Dunrobin and we've a great number of bairns who are awaiting baptism. And lastly, my kinsmen are in need of confessions, for I fear we may be faced with another war soon." As much as Magnus hated the thought of going up against Clan Ross, he feared there was no other way to appease Ian Mackay.

The auld priest fidgeted with the rosary hanging from his belt. "Who is she, the girl?"

"Ian Mackay's eldest sister, Euphema Reay."

"Effie?" Father O'Rourke leaned forward in his chair, his bushy white brows furrowed above his pale eyes.

"Aye." Magnus nodded and smiled as pride warmed his chest. "Ye know her?"

"I buried her kin, each and all. Forgive me for saying so, but isn't Effie a wee bit beyond her years?"

"Nay, she is not." Magnus' scowl must have been fierce for the priest eased out of his chair and moved to stand behind a pine desk.

"Effie is afflicted by her past. She has many ghosts chasing her."

"Think ye I dinnae know this?"

"Do ye?" Father O'Rourke's disdainful look was one Magnus had seen many times before on Mam.

He blew a frustrated breath. "I dinnae just bed her if that's what you're insinuating."

"'Tis exactly what I'm insinuating." The man no longer looked afraid. His desire to protect Effie gave him a sizable pair of bollocks. "I dinnae wish to see her hurt, again."

"Nor do I." Magnus crossed his arms and awaited the priest's next words.

Father O'Rourke angled his head and twisted his lips this way and that. He contemplated long moments before he finally responded, "Verra well, then. We will travel to Dunrobin at first thaw."

Magnus stepped forward and leaned over the desk, intentionally trying to intimidate the man. "Forgive me, Father, but I am not willing to wait so long. We leave on the morrow. And dinnae think I won't tie ye to my steed, because I will."

Chapter Six

"Lady Reay! Lady Reay!" Lainie and Laura raced through the kitchen holding their plaid skirts off the flour-dusted floor. "Come quickly. Uncle Maggie is back!"

Oh thank heaven! Effie's entire being sank with relief. She threw the dough she'd been kneading onto the work table, wiped her hands on her apron and rushed out of the kitchen behind Magnus' nieces. Now that she knew he was safe, relief shifted to anger. He'd abandoned her for fourteen bleating days and she had no idea where he'd gone. No one knew where he'd gone. Not even Lady Katherine.

Years of insecurity had her fretting from dawn to dusk. She'd tried not to let her worries consume her, tried not to assume he'd left to prepare for Ian's war, but each night, after she'd made love to him in her dreams, she awoke to the horror that he might never return. That terror had been so familiar, she'd almost taken Lady Katherine's advice and returned home. Effie didn't know if she could bear the upset of losing her heart to another warrior, but feared the deed was already done.

It hadn't helped that she'd suffered her monthly courses. Knowing she'd failed to conceive an heir hadn't gone unnoticed by Lady Katherine's maids, which gained her no favor with Magnus' mam. The woman remained cold and aloof toward Effie, but flaunted her approval of Vanna before the Sutherland kinswomen. The two had become thick as thieves, planning, plotting, preparing for the future. They'd toured the grounds together and were already making arrangements to renovate the lady's solar in the west wing. Sylvie and Jocelyn had been Effie's only confidants, and for that she was grateful.

Thunderous footsteps filled the stairwell as Magnus' kin rushed to the Great Hall. The hum of excitement buzzed in Effie's ears as she half walked, half jogged through the maze of corridors.

Then a thick brawny arm reached between the blue velvet curtains of an antechamber and snatched her off her feet. Darkness blinded her. Panic stole a beat of her heart, but she quickly recognized Magnus' scent and the strength of his arms now coiled around her.

"I missed ye fiercely, Effie." His mouth came down hard on hers and matched the intensity of his embrace.

For a brief moment she succumbed to the power that was him and only him. She surrendered to his kiss, his touch, his demanding hands, then she cupped his jaw and found the thick beard that had grown in his absence. Her temper surged out of the trenches of desire. She pushed him back. "I know about Ian's war."

His heavy breathing filled her ears and warmed her face. When he continued to hold silent, she became further incensed. If he thought for one moment she would stand idly by while he played the martyr, then he didn't know her at all. "I demand to know where ye've been."

"I went to fetch a priest." He flattened her against the wall then feverishly untied the laces of her undertunic. "I intend to be faithful to ye, but I suspect ye would not believe such an avowal lest I speak the words before God and His clergyman." He lowered her bodice to her waist. "This pleases ye, aye?"

"Aye." She smiled, flattered by his intentions. It did please her. She parted her lips to tell him so just as his hot mouth formed over her nipple. Strings of arousal pulled taut from behind her breast to her sex. "Magnus!" She scolded him even as she pulled him closer. He massaged one breast while he drew the nipple of the other repeatedly between his lips.

Her eyes rolled beneath her closed lids. Her body warmed, tingled, tightened. Oh, that felt good. *He* felt good.

The clicking of booted heels sounded just outside the antechamber.

"Everyone is waiting for ye in the Great Hall," she whispered and squirmed against him.

"Let them wait." He snaked his hand under her kirtle and swiped his fingers through her damp curls. "I want ye."

She wanted him as well, and nearly gave in to the ferocity of his invading fingers, but she was still a mite bit miffed at him for leaving without telling her. She clamped her thighs together, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and yanked him off her breast. "I'm angry with ye for leaving me without telling me your plans. If I am to be your woman, ye cannae just do as ye wish when ye wish it. Ye were gone fourteen days. Where did ye go to get this priest? England?"

The growl vibrating in his throat should have been a warning, but she only pulled his hair harder, waiting on an answer.

"The weather lengthened my journey to Saint Duthac," Magnus responded in a raw graveled tone as his hands settled on her hips beneath her skirt.

"Saint Duthac? Ye fetched Father O'Rourke?" She loosened her hold. Father O'Rourke had been her rock when Gavin and Bretton died.

"Aye." A rustle of clothing followed his reply.

"Oh, this pleases me verra much. Did Father O'Rourke tell ye he helped deliver Ann-Elise, and that—"

"Effie," Magnus whispered against her ear, cupped her bottom, and raised her off the floor, forcing her to wrap her legs around his waist. "Stop talking." And with this command he palmed the globes of her backside, spread her sex wide with his fingertips and set her atop his cock.

She sucked in a breath, the cool air hissed over her teeth as he plunged inside her. Exquisite ripples cascaded over her body, tickling her, dousing her with agonizing pleasure.

His muscles became rigid. His veins whelped beneath her fingertips as he rocked into her again. "I thought of naught but ye while I was away." He then delved inside her, hard and deep, until she felt his sac pressed against her folds. Effie squeezed her arms and legs around him and submitted to her base desires. The need tearing through

her rushed through her veins like a coiling inferno. Wanting more, she met his next thrust with one of her own.

Heat. Pain. Ecstasy.

She opened her mouth to cry out, but he swallowed her scream and held her hips with rigid fingers while he continued the maddening rhythm, in, out, in, out. The slide of his cock was tormenting, yet magnificent. Every inward stroke brought her pleasure.

He was fierce, savage, exquisite. And he was hers.

She captured his tongue, drew on it, wanting to match his intensity. The head of his manhood tapped that sensitive place inside her, making her burn, making her ache. Pulsing shudders echoed throughout her entire body. She became disoriented, lost in the darkness. Voices hummed in the corridor, but she no longer cared if they were caught.

She'd kept her liaison with Magnus from Vanna and Ian, but soon everyone would know he'd chosen her. Soon they would wed in the chapel before God, and she would have a purpose again. She would have a companion, a lover and a friend.

"Come with me, Effie." He moaned against her neck. "Reach beneath your skirt and rub your cunny."

Her hand inched between their locked bodies and stroked the swollen nubbin of flesh while he pistoned in and out of her. Her climax rose to her fingertips. The muscles inside her flexed, squeezing his cock, making him growl, then he pressed her back against the wall and slammed into her a final time.

"Oh bluidy fuck!" he cried out in a deep throaty whisper.

She shattered at the peak of a stinging orgasm.

Like two hot waves crashing into one another, they came in unison, both bodies quivering in uncontrollable bliss. Tiny pulsing sensations spread over her skin, reaching out to every nerve ending. Snapping stars burst behind her closed lids. She bit back a whimper, clung to his neck and prayed his seed took root this time.

Magnus held her while the deluge of their release doused the inferno inside them, then kissed her with a gentleness that brought tears to her eyes. Her breathing had no chance to regulate as emotions burned beneath her breast. She wanted to tell him how deeply she cared for him, but 'twas too soon for such words.

Silence echoed between them for long moments before his head fell into the curve of her neck. He drew an audible breath of air. "Would ye think me a coward if I said I wanted no part in Ian's war?"

"Nay." Effie kissed the side of his head and stroked his hair. She didn't want him going to war, not even to avenge her sire.

"My reasons are selfish." He lowered her to the floor and righted her garments while he gathered his words. "A month past I would have proudly sacrificed my life to protect my clan like my father and my brothers. But I've come to realize I have a reason to live."

"And what reason is that?"

"Ye." He held the side of her neck and caressed her skittering pulse with his thumb. "Ye make me want to live. Ye make me want to be a better man. Ye've bewitched me body and soul, and I fear I'm more than half in—"

"Where the hell is he?" Lady Katherine's shrill voice cut off his words, but Effie knew what he intended to say.

He was in love with her. Her heart sang. Her toes curled. Her spirit rejoiced while Lady Katherine continued to rant outside the curtain.

"Bluidy faugh!" Magnus cursed beneath his breath and battled his *plaide*.

"He was here only moments ago, m'lady." A maid's footsteps whispered through the rushes outside the antechamber.

"I swear the man behaves like a child. He is..." Lady Katherine's grumbling became inaudible as she stomped in the direction of the Great Hall.

Magnus let his forehead fall against Effie's. "My mam can be..."

"Overzealous," Effie supplied. Not even Lady Katherine could sour Effie's mood. Her giddiness made her feel intoxicated, which is most likely the reason she didn't protest when Magnus pulled her into the corridor.

"Come. I'm eager to announce our union."

Effie's lips quivered trying to contain her smile as she walked beside him. When they entered the Great Hall, a swarm of his kin separated them, each eager to welcome him home.

Sylvie pulled up beside Effie. "Ye look like a woman with a secret."

"Aye, but 'twill not be a secret for much longer." Effie squeezed Sylvie's hand, grateful to have a confidant among Magnus' people. "Will ye stay beside me until Laird Sutherland makes his announcement?"

"Of course." Sylvie folded Effie's hand over her forearm as they watched Magnus work his way through the masses. He stepped onto a raised platform and raised his hands to quiet his kin just as Ian approached the dais.

"Laird Sutherland, welcome back." Ian pulled Vanna to his side. "Ye cannae begin to know how worried we all were for your well-being, especially Vanna."

Effie's sister poised herself in front of the dais and looked up at Magnus, but he paid her no attention. His eyes were on Effie, making the flutter in her belly feel like the eye of a hurricane. She held fast to Sylvie's arm as Magnus explained his absence.

"I went to fetch a priest for my wedding." Magnus' lips lifted slightly at the corners. His eyes sparkled like blue gemstones. "Father O'Rourke will administer the ceremony."

Effie returned his smile and nibbled on her bottom lip, waiting.

"Splendid," Ian replied. "Then ye will be thrilled when ye hear Vanna's news."

"What news?" Magnus' gaze lowered to Vanna. His smile fell when she flattened her hand over her belly.

She angled her chin over her shoulder and smirked at Effie, then announced, "I am with child."

Nay! Effie's heart punched her ribs. Her entire body jerked. The floor seemed to disappear beneath her feet. She swayed, dizzy, nauseated.

"M'lady." Sylvie held Effie upright while shock seized her limbs.

She covered her mouth to hold back the bile rising in her throat and raced out of the Great Hall.

* * * * *

Magnus swayed atop the dais. Regret numbed his body as he stared at the now vacant space beside Sylvie. Had he sent for Effie first, this never would have come to fruition.

Bluidy faugh! 'Twas too late for regrets now.

"This is tremendous news!" Mam wrapped Vanna in a hug and gave Magnus a victorious look.

His hands fisted at his sides. He would like naught more than to take his fury out on Mam, but this was his doing. A coppery taste sat on his tongue. He'd promised Effie he would never hurt her, and it made him physically ill to know he'd broken that promise.

Beaming from ear to ear, Laird Mackay leapt up onto the dais and clapped Magnus on the back. "Soon our clans will be united by blood, my brother."

Magnus snapped. His nostrils flared. His eyes narrowed on Ian. "An alliance does not make us brothers."

"Mayhap not, but a union with my sister does."

Magnus growled like some feral beast and strode toward the double doors where Effie had fled only moments before.

Eoghan's wife stepped into his path. The shadows that always sat beneath Jocelyn's eyes only added to the sneer twisting her face. "Mayhap 'tis time ye quit making promises ye cannot keep."

His eyes pinched shut. His head shook as guilt filled the hollows of his being. There was naught he could say that he hadn't said a hundred times before. If it was within his power to bring Eoghan back, he would. "Jocelyn, I wish I could change what happened to —"

"I know." Jocelyn cupped his cheek. 'Twas the first time she'd showed him any compassion since Eoghan died. She turned sideways, giving him access to the door. "Make things right with Effie. I do not wish to see her hurt."

"Nor do I." He kissed Jocelyn's knuckles, gaining strength from what he hoped was her forgiveness, and stepped out of the Great Hall into the snow-covered courtyard. Effie's footsteps led to the pigeon house he'd built last spring. When he entered the beehive-shaped structure, the pigeons warbled and fluttered, but quickly settled in their nesting nooks.

Light streamed into the doocot from the hole in the roof and poured over Effie's flame-red hair. With her back facing him, she reached out and stroked one of the pigeon's silky feathers. The bird cooed against her gentle caress. "After Ann-Elise died, Gavin built a doocot next to the stable. I spent a great deal of time there, mourning her death. She loved birds." Effie's voice cracked over her words and caused a fearsome ache in Magnus' chest.

He didn't know why she was telling him this, but suspected 'twas because she was mourning a different kind of loss. "Forgive me, Effie."

Her spine straightened. She drew her sleeve over her face. "I will be returning home come the morrow."

"Nay." The thought of losing her pained him more than any wound. He closed the distance between them and touched her shoulder.

She spun away from him as if he were infected with the foulest of diseases. Dampness shone over her cheeks. A red hue surrounded her deep green irises. "I cannot stay and watch ye marry her."

"I dinnae want to marry her." He reached for her again, and again she twirled out of his reach. The pigeons' warble grew in volume, responding to her agitation.

"It matters naught what ye want. Vanna is carrying your child." Fat tears rolled over her cheeks, breaking his heart.

"I cannae live without ye." His words were selfish.

Effie stopped circling him, stepped forward and slapped him hard. "Damn ye!" She fisted her hands and pummeled his chest, cursing him, until she collapsed against his chest in a fit of sobs.

He embraced her and stroked her hair, wanting to tell her he loved her, but knew such a profession could do naught but hurt her more. His face burned with pent-up emotions, fearing this would be the last time he would ever hold her. She was right. It didn't matter what he wanted. It didn't matter that he loved her. He was honor-bound to marry her sister.

A thick knot formed in his throat as he realized his presence here caused her more misery than comfort. He set her back and lifted her chin. "I hope someday ye will forgive me for hurting ye."

His heart wept as he pressed his lips to hers a final time. He memorized the silky tenderness of her kiss, the desperate grasp of her fingers in his *plaid*, but it was the salt of her tears that would forever haunt him. Cursing himself, he pivoted on his heel and left. Her cries echoed out the top of the doocot and filled him with self-destructive afflictions.

Mam would have her heir.

Ian Mackay would have his alliance.

And Magnus prepared to face the next chapter of his life – war.

Chapter Seven

Effie was no stranger to grief, but losing Magnus to Vanna combined the suffering of death with the jagged edges of envy. 'Twas as if she'd swallowed a dozen thistles. Everything stung—her eyes, her throat, her heart.

"Think ye can wait another day to travel, m'lady?" Sylvie stuffed an undertunic into Effie's satchel and awaited her answer with hope-filled eyes.

Effie shook her head and wrapped her *arisaid* around her shoulders. She couldn't stay another night at Dunrobin. 'Twas enough she was leaving her heart behind. "My brother has already sent his seneschal to ready the horses."

"Then at least promise me ye will visit."

"Ye know I cannot make such a promise." Keeping her eyes downcast, Effie gathered the last of her belongings then embraced Sylvie in a long hug. "Thank ye for being my friend."

Sylvie's frail body convulsed with upset, causing a fresh rush of tears to roll over Effie's cheeks. She hated that she'd befriended this woman. She hated that she'd allowed herself to think she could have called Dunrobin home. But mostly, she hated that she'd been naïve enough to believe she could have been Magnus' wife.

Sylvie released her, sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Mayhap I'll come visit ye then. After the first thaw."

"I would like that verra much." Effie drew a jagged breath, hooked arms with Sylvie and stepped into the darkened corridor. A pitch-pine torch glowing in the stairwell cast a shadow over a figure looming outside Vanna's door.

Magnus.

For the briefest of moments Effie's muscles locked, then the figure stood upright and rushed toward them.

Lady Jocelyn's face came into view—pale, wide-eyed, frantic. "Lady Reay, I must speak to ye at once."

Uncertain if her nerves could survive another upset, Effie clung to Sylvie for support. "What is it?"

"'Tis something I've suspected since shortly after your arrival, but I was hesitant to say anything," the woman replied in hushed tones then paused to glance over her shoulder. "Because I care for Laird Sutherland's well-being, I had the maids report to me the comings and goings of both ye and your sister."

This didn't surprise Effie. S'truth, she would have done the same. "Go on."

"Your sister has been ill every morn since your arrival."

"She is with child," Effie responded through clenched teeth.

Jocelyn gave Effie a patronizing look. "Lady Reay, we both know the illness that burdens a woman in the early months of childbearing does not come so quickly."

"What are ye insinuating?"

"I'm suggesting that your sister was with child before she came to Dunrobin. I suspect your brother knew, which is why he risked life and limb to travel two months sooner than planned."

Effie focused on the sliver of yellow light lining the bottom of Vanna's door. Jocelyn was speculating. Vanna would have told Effie. Wouldn't she? If Vanna was carrying another man's child, then...

'Twas impossible not to let her hopes soar at the possibilities.

"Lady Reay," Jocelyn prompted Effie when she failed to respond. "The child your sister is carrying does not belong to Laird Sutherland."

A fierce pounding knocked between her ears. A pounding she quickly realized was her heart. She shook her head, trying to sort through the deluge of thoughts now racing through her mind.

"If ye deny the possibilities, then ye are a fool." Jocelyn grabbed Effie's elbows and shook her. "Laird Sutherland loves ye and —"

"Please, cease!" Effie jerked out of Jocelyn's hold, desperate to protect her heart. "None of this changes Vanna's condition. Her child will need a namesake." Effie pushed past Jocelyn, needing to process all that she'd said, but the adamant woman followed her.

"Then mayhap she should marry the man who sired her child. Whoever he is, he's in the guest solar with your sister now."

Effie stopped. Her heart beat so wildly she grew lightheaded. If what Jocelyn said was true, Effie could have Magnus, but she would have to name Vanna a whore to get him.

Jocelyn laid a sympathetic hand on Effie's forearm. "I know what 'tis like to be torn from the one ye love. If ye care for Magnus at all, then dinnae walk away. Dinnae let her win."

Effie stared at Jocelyn. The scared coward inside her urged her to leave and never look back, but the woman who'd won the love of a Highland warrior demanded she expose the truth.

She nodded, inhaled a breath of strength and took the steps that put her in front of Vanna's door. Muffled groans hummed through Effie's ears and called upon her maternal instincts. 'Twas past time Vanna took responsibility for her actions. Effie no longer cared that her sister was of noble blood. It didn't matter if the father was a lowly peasant. The man would have to answer to her, as well as Ian.

Effie flung the door open without knocking and the sight before her nearly sent her into a swoon.

Vanna lay naked on her back in a pile of disheveled covers, while Ian thrust wildly between her spread legs.

"Oh my God in heaven!" The musky scent of sex attacked Effie's senses. She covered her mouth with both hands to hold back the vomit stinging the back of her throat. Shock didn't begin to describe the emotions rushing through her mind and body. She was mortified, disgusted, enraged.

"Effie!" Ian lurched off Vanna and quickly draped his undertunic over his head. "I thought ye left."

Vanna shrieked and covered herself with the bedding.

"Mary, Margaret and Moses," Sylvie whispered in the background. "'Tis incest."

Hands fisted, nails digging into her palms, Effie turned her full fury on her brother. "This is beyond repulsive. She is your sister!"

Ian shook his head, held his hands out, palms up. "We both know Da dinnae sire her."

'Twas true Effie had questioned Vanna's parentage. After all, Besse had been nothing more than an unpaid whore.

"Look at her, Effie." Ian rushed on. "Besse was fair and blonde. Da shared our red coloring."

"This is your justification?" Effie was sickened by his argument. It didn't matter if Vanna wasn't his blood kin, he'd been a brother to her for all of her nineteen years. "How long have ye—?" She couldn't say the words. 'Twas blasphemous.

"Since Da died." Ian blew a heavy breath and lowered his pale lashes. Shame pulled his face downward. "Vanna comforted me. We comforted each other."

Da's death had affected Ian in ways Effie couldn't comprehend, but this—this was monstrous. She held no sympathy for him or Vanna for that matter. "In *comforting* one another, did ye get her with child? Is that why we were forced to travel in the dead of

winter to Dunrobin, so ye could trick Laird Sutherland into claiming your bastard child?"

Ian glared at her. His nostrils widened, but he held his tongue. His silence was as much an admittance of guilt as any words he might have spoken.

"If the child she carries is yours, then ye will act accordingly and marry her."

"Nay!" Vanna sat up taller in the bed. Her slender brows wrinkled with upset. "I am marrying Laird Sutherland."

Effie snorted. The girl was delusional if she thought for one moment Effie would let her sink her claws back into Magnus.

"I cannae marry her," Ian protested. "I will be a disgrace to my clan."

"Ye will be a disgrace to your clan either way." If Ian thought she would keep this secret, he was sorely mistaken.

"Damn ye, Effie!" Ian raked his fingers through his copper-colored hair. "We will lose the alliance."

The web Ian wove ran a jagged path, but the alliance was far from lost. Beneath the horror of this transgression lay a victory for Effie.

I'm eager to announce our union. It was Magnus' words as well as his image in her mind that empowered her to stand up to Ian. "My marriage to Laird Sutherland will secure the alliance and protect our borders, but there will be no war, Ian. Our families have seen enough bloodshed."

Ian said nothing more, but Effie knew this battle was far from over. He wouldn't rest until he'd avenged Da's death.

For now, Effie wanted rid of them. "Take Vanna and go home. I dinnae wish to see either of ye until spring."

With her head held high, she raised her skirts and exited the guest solar with Jocelyn and Sylvie at her sides. They followed her like the queen's minions down the stairwell and through the main corridor toward the Great Hall.

Jocelyn was the first to break the silence. "What do ye intend to do now, m'lady?"

Effie smiled at both of them. "I'm going to find my betrothed."

Chapter Eight

Rage filled Magnus with such venom, he was certain he would choke on it. He'd never hated himself more than he did this day. The Devil of Dunrobin had finally paid for his lecherous ways and there was naught he could do but wallow in his suffering—and fight.

A morning sun warmed the top of his head as he circled one of his warriors inside the training ring. The side of Magnus' face stung and his ribs felt bruised and broken, but he didn't look half as bad as his other kinsmen standing outside the stone boundary. With bloodied noses and colored eyes, they cheered on his current opponent.

Gunner slowly stood upright and drew his sleeve over his bloody mouth. The man stood a head taller than Magnus and was twice as wide, but he was no match for Magnus this day. None of his warriors had been.

"Where's your fight, warrior?" Magnus taunted, welcoming the fray. "Come at me, ye bluidy ox."

Gunner snarled, raised his broadsword and charged Magnus like the bull he was. Gunner brought his blade down on Magnus, but he blocked the strike. The clash of steel shrieked through his ears, but didn't deafen the memory of Effie's cries.

Blood rushed through his veins, his head, his heart. Sweat chilled his skin, but his fury remained thick and unyielding like a disease he would never be rid of. He widened his stance and thrust the tip of his sword, but stopped a hairsbreadth short of Gunner's chest when the dunderheid failed to block.

The man lurched back, fell flat onto his backside and dropped his weapon like all those before him. His surrender only provoked Magnus' temper.

"Ye will die if ye cannae wield your sword, man. Stand up and face me."

"Cease!" The order came from the distance, but was loud, demanding and female.

His men separated, forming an aisle, and out of the masses of hulk and muscle appeared the woman who'd forever changed his world. Her presence both weakened his knees and turned his nerves to taut strings of iron. He was cautious, yet a part of him dared to hope she was not completely lost to him.

Effie pushed her wild red locks from her face, then stepped inside the training ring and narrowed her eyes on Gunner. "Bring me your weapon, warrior."

The man obeyed quickly, setting his sword in Effie's palm.

She then turned furious green eyes on Magnus. "Is this how ye behave when ye dinnae get your way?"

Magnus couldn't begin to know her intentions, but he answered her nonetheless. "I have suffered a great loss."

"And this gives ye the right to treat your kinsmen like your enemy?" She circled him, dragging the tip of the sword through the dirt.

"We are training." Confused, Magnus shook his head. "Why have ye come here, Effie?"

"It seems I've come to save your kinsmen from your wicked temper." Effie made a sweeping gesture toward the keep. "Ye are dismissed. All of ye."

Uncle Frazier chuckled and motioned for Magnus' seneschal to assist him. "Ye heard the woman. We are dismissed."

Magnus' brows popped up. "Ye are not dismissed until I say ye are dismissed."

"Go!" Effie hollered at his men, which sent them scurrying like scolded bairns. She then rest the broadsword atop her shoulder and shot Magnus a look he'd not yet seen her wear. She cocked her head and arced one brow high above her eye. "If ye are intent on dying, then I shall behead ye here and now and be done with it."

Magnus blinked at her, completely perplexed by her audacity. Then he saw it—a slight twinkle in her eyes. The corner of her lips rose into a half-smirk, but his foul

mood prevented him from sharing her merriment. "Ye willnae behead me. I'm the father of your sister's unborn child."

"The child is not yours, Magnus." A smile lifted her lips briefly, but quickly vanished when she added, "'Tis Ian's." She proceeded to tell him the whole sordid tale, which only further incensed him. He'd been a fool for falling victim to Ian's scheme. Not only was he repulsed by their debauchery, he felt nigh ill knowing he'd lain with Effie's sister.

"So ye see, m'laird, 'tis up to me to secure the alliance between our clans."

"What are ye saying?" Hope quivered in his gut.

"I intend to take ye to husband." Her words sang through his ears like an angel's hymn.

His heart rejoiced. His limbs trembled. He wanted naught more than to wrap his arms around her and kiss the color from her lips.

"But first, I need to know if ye are worthy of the position." She paused briefly in thought, then pointed the tip of her blade at his chest and demanded, "Get on your knees, warrior."

She was toying with him now, but he knelt before her, eager to appease.

"Ye will be faithful to me 'til death." As she walked a full circle around him, she brushed her fingertips across the nape of his neck.

That slight touch streaked a tingle up his spine, but he wanted more. He wanted the charge of lightning she evoked in him.

When he failed to respond, she grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head back. "Vow it!"

"Aye, I vow it. I want no other."

"Ye will respect me as your equal." She stepped in front of him and waited for his avowal.

"Aye, I will." Desperate to touch her, Magnus reached for her legs, but she flattened the bottom of her boot against his chest and pushed him onto his back.

She then stood overtop him, straddling his hips. "Ye will not go to war for any reason other than to protect the clan." She tossed her weapon, then fell atop him. "And ye will love me with your whole heart from this day onward."

"I will. I do. I love ye, Effie." Magnus clutched her skull and kissed her with a passion that inflamed his entire being.

When he attempted to roll her onto her back, she jerked away from his mouth and added, "And if ye break your vows, I will castrate ye and feed your bollocks to the swine."

Magnus laughed at her threat, grabbed the front of her bodice and wrenched her back to his mouth. He relished her sweet taste, the softness of her body, the wild excitement of her hands as they found their way inside his *plaid*.

She plucked at his nipples and nibbled on the skin beneath his ear. "'Tis a foolish man who laughs in the face of danger."

"Think ye I am afraid of ye?" His hands curved over the backs of her warm thighs.

"If ye knew what I had planned, ye would be afraid. Verra afraid." Her eyes widened with mischief. She ground her pelvis against his growing erection and bent low to nip his chest.

His fingertips dug into her soft flesh as his body hardened beneath her. "Do tell."

"Tonight, I intend to bind *ye* to the bed."

About the Author

Multi-published, award-winning author Kimberly Killion was nominated for the romance industry's highest award of distinction, the RITA® Award. Kimberly is best known for her ability to transport the reader back in time. She pens emotionally charged – albeit sinfully naughty – love scenes and creates strong alpha males who are only as wicked as the women they're determined to seduce.

An active member of RWA, PASIC and NINC, Kimberly also teaches graphic design in the Midwest and lives with one husband, two children, three cats and four dozen chickens.

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