

Ransom Chapter 1

Prologue

England, in the reign of King Richard I

Bad things always happen during the night.

In the dark hours of the night Gillian's mother died struggling to bring a new life into the world, and a young, unthinking servant, wishing to be the first to impart the sorrowful news, awakened the two little girls to tell them their dear mama was dead. Two nights later, they were once again shaken awake to hear that their infant brother, Ranulf, named in honor of their father, had also passed on. His frail body hadn't been able to take the strain of being born a full two months early.

Gillian was afraid of the dark. She waited until the servant had left her bedroom, then slid down from the big bed on her stomach to the cold stone floor. Barefoot, she ran to the forbidden passage, a secret hallway that led to her sister's chamber and also to the steep steps that ended in the tunnels below the kitchens. She barely squeezed behind the chest her papa had placed in front of the narrow door in the wall to discourage his daughters from going back and forth. He had warned over and over again that it was a secret, for the love of God, only to be used under the most dire of circumstances, and certainly not for play. Why, even his loyal servants didn't know about the passageways built into three of the bedchambers, and he was determined to keep it that way. He was also extremely concerned that his daughters would fall down the steps and break their pretty little necks, and he often threatened to paddle their backsides if he ever caught them there. It was dangerous, and it was forbidden.

But on that terrible night of loss and sorrow, Gillian didn't care if she got into trouble. She was scared, and whenever she got scared, she ran to her older sister, Christen, for comfort. Managing to get the door open only a crack, Gillian cried out for Christen and waited for her to come. Her sister reached in, latched onto Gillian's hand and pulled her through, then helped her climb up into her bed. The little girls clung to each other under the thick blankets and cried while their papa's tormented screams of anguish and desolation echoed throughout the halls. They could hear him shouting their mama's name over and over and over again. Death had entered their peaceful home and filled it with grief.

The family wasn't given time to heal, for the monsters of the night weren't through preying on them. It was in the dead of night that the infidels invaded their home and Gillian's family was destroyed.

Papa woke her up when he came rushing into her chamber carrying Christen in his arms. His faithful soldiers William—Gillian's favorite because he gave her honeyed

treats when her papa wasn't watching—and Lawrence and Tom and Spencer followed behind him. Their expressions were grim. Gillian sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands as her father handed Christen to Lawrence and hurried to her. He placed the glowing candle on the chest next to her bed, then sat down beside her and with a trembling hand gently brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Her father looked terribly sad, and Gillian thought she knew the reason why.

"Did Mama die again, Papa?" she asked worriedly.

"For the love of... no, Gillian," he answered, his voice weary.

"Did she come back home, then?"

"Ah, my sweet lamb, we've been over this again and again. Your mama isn't ever going to come home. The dead can't come back. She's in heaven now. Try to understand."

"Yes, Papa," she whispered.

She heard the faint echo of shouts coming from the floor below and then noticed that her father was wearing his chain mail.

"Are you going to battle now, for the love of God, Papa?"

"Yes," he answered. "But first I must get you and your sister to safety."

He reached for the clothes Gillian's maid, Liese, had laid out for tomorrow and hastily dressed his daughter. William moved forward and knelt on one knee to put Gillian's shoes on her.

Her papa had never dressed her before, and she didn't know what to make of it. "Papa, I got to take my sleeping gown off before I put my clothes on, and I got to let Liese brush my hair."

"We won't worry about your hair tonight."

"Papa, is it dark outside?" she asked as he slipped the bliaut over her head.

"Yes, Gillian, it's dark."

"Do I got to go outside in the dark?"

He could hear the fear in her voice and tried to calm her. "There will be torches to light the way and you won't be alone."

"Are you going with Christen and me?"

Her sister answered. "No, Gillian," she shouted from across the room. "'Cause Papa has to stay here and fight the battle, for the love of God," she said, repeating her father's often used expression. "Don't you, Papa?"

Lawrence told Christen to hush. "We don't want anyone to know you're leaving," he explained in a whisper. "Can you be real quiet now?"

Christen eagerly nodded. "I can," she whispered back. "I can be awful quiet when I got to, and when I..."

Lawrence put his hand over her mouth. "Hush, golden girl."

William lifted Gillian into his arms and carried her out of the chamber and down the dark hallway to her father's room. Spencer and Tom guided the way, carrying bright candles to light the corridor. Giant shadows danced along the stone walls keeping pace with them, the only sound the hard clicking of their boots against the cobbled floor. Gillian became fearful and put her arms around the soldier's neck, then tucked her head under his chin.

"I don't like the shadows," she whimpered.

"They won't harm you," he soothed.

"I want my mama, William."

"I know you do, honey bear."

His silly nickname for her always made her smile, and she suddenly wasn't afraid any longer. She saw her papa rush past her to lead the way into his chamber, and she would have called out to him, but William put his finger to his lips, reminding her that she was to be quiet.

As soon as they were all inside the bedroom, Tom and Spencer began to slide a low chest along the wall so that they could open the secret door. The rusty hinges groaned and squealed like an angry boar whose mouth was being pried open.

Lawrence and William had to put the little girls down in order to soak and light the torches. The second their backs were turned, both Christen and Gillian ran to their father who was down on his knees leaning over another chest at the foot of the bed and sorting through his belongings. They flanked his sides and stretched up on tiptoes, their hands on the rim of the chest so they too could peer inside.

"What are you looking for, Papa?" Christen asked.

"This," he answered as he lifted the sparkling jeweled box.

"It's awful pretty, Papa," Christen said. "Can I have it?"

"Can I have it too?" Gillian chimed in.

"No," he answered. "The box belongs, to Prince John, and I mean to see that he gets it back."

Still down on his knees, their father turned toward Christen and grabbed her arm, pulling her close as she tried to wiggle away.

"You're hurting me, Papa."

"I'm sorry, love," he said, immediately lessening his grip. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but I do need you to pay attention to what I'm going to tell you. Can you do that, Christen?"

"Yes, Papa, I can pay attention."

"That's good," he praised. "I want you to take this box with you when you leave. Lawrence will protect you from harm and take you to a safe place far away from here, and he'll help you hide this evil treasure until the time is right and I can come for you and take the box to Prince John. You mustn't tell anyone about this treasure, Christen."

Gillian ran around her father to stand next to Christen. "Can she tell me, Papa?"

Her father ignored her question and waited for Christen to answer.

"I won't tell," she promised.

"I won't tell no one neither." Gillian vehemently nodded to prove she meant what she said.

Their father continued to ignore his younger daughter for the moment because he was intent on making Christen understand the importance of what he was telling her. "No one must ever know you have the box, child. Now watch what I'm doing," he ordered. "I'm going to wrap the box in this tunic."

"So no one will see it?" Christen asked.

"That's right," he whispered. "So no one will see it."

"But I already seen it, Papa," Gillian blurted out.

"I know you did," he agreed. He looked up at Lawrence then. "She's too young... I'm asking too much of her. Dear God, how can I let my babies go?"

Lawrence stepped forward. "I'm going to protect Christen with my life, and I'll make certain no one sees the box."

William also rushed to offer his pledge. "No harm will come to Lady Gillian," he vowed. "I give you my word, Baron Ranulf. My life to keep her safe."

The vehemence in his voice was a comfort to the baron and he nodded to let both soldiers know that his trust in them was absolute.

Gillian tugged on her father's elbow to get his attention. She wasn't about to be left out. When her papa wrapped the pretty box in one of his tunics and gave it to Christen, Gillian clasped her hands together in anticipation, for she assumed that since her sister had been given a present, she would be getting one too. Even though Christen was the firstborn and three years older than Gillian, their father had never shown favoritism for one over the other.

It was difficult for her to be patient, but Gillian tried. She watched as her father pulled Christen into his arms and kissed her forehead and hugged her tight. "Don't forget your papa," he whispered. "Don't forget me."

He reached for Gillian next. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him soundly on his whiskered cheek.

"Papa, don't you have a pretty box for me?"

"No, my sweet. You're going to go with William now. Take hold of his hand—"

"But Papa, I got to have a box too. Don't you have one for me to carry?"

"The box isn't a present, Gillian."

"But, Papa—"

"I love you," he said, blinking back the tears as he fiercely clasped her against the cold chain mail of his hauberk. "God keep you safe."

"You're squishing me, Papa. Can I have a turn holding the box? Please, Papa?"

Ector, her father's chief reeve, barged into the room. His shout so startled Christen she dropped the treasure. The box rolled out of the tunic onto the floor and clattered across the stones. In the firelight from the flaming torches, the rubies and sapphires and emeralds imbedded in the case came to life, glistening and twinkling brightly like sparkling stars that had fallen from the sky.

Ector stopped short, startled by the dazzling beauty that tumbled before him.

"What is it, Ector?" her father said.

Intent on giving his baron the urgent message from Bryant, the baron's commander in arms, Ector seemed barely to be paying attention to what he was doing as he scooped up the box and handed it to Lawrence. His focus returned to his leader. "Milord, Bryant bade me to come and tell you that young Alford the Red and his soldiers have breached the inner bailey."

"Was Baron Alford seen?" William blurted out the question. "Or does he continue to hide from us?"

Ector glanced back at the soldier. "I don't know," he confessed before turning to the baron once again. "Bryant also bade me tell you that your men are calling for you, milord."

"I shall go at once," the baron announced as he gained his feet. He motioned for Ector to leave the chamber, then followed him, pausing in the doorway to gaze upon his beautiful daughters one last time. Christen, with her golden curls and cherub cheeks, and little Gillian, with her mother's brilliant green eyes and pale skin, looked in jeopardy of bursting into tears.

"Go now, and God keep you safe," the baron ordered harshly.

And then he was gone. The soldiers hurried to the passage. Tom went ahead to unlatch the door at the end of the tunnel and make certain the area hadn't been breached by the enemy. Lawrence held Christen's hand and led the way into the dark corridor with his fiery torch. Gillian was right behind her sister, clinging to William's hand. Spencer followed them, then reached through the opening to drag the chest back before he closed the door.

"Papa didn't tell me he had a secret door," Gillian whispered to Christen.

"He didn't tell me neither," her sister whispered back. "Maybe he forgot."

Gillian tugged on William's hand to get his attention. "Me and Christen got a secret door too, but it's in our bedrooms. We can't tell nobody about it though 'cause it's a secret. Papa says he'll paddle us good if we tell. Did you know it was a secret, William?" The soldier didn't answer her, but she wasn't deterred by his silence. "You know where our passage goes? Papa says when we come out of our tunnel, we can see the fish in his pond. Is that where we're going?"

"No," William answered. "This tunnel will take us underneath the wine cellar. We're getting close to the steps now, and I want you to be real quiet."

Gillian kept a worried eye on the shadows following her along the wall. She moved closer to William and then turned her attention to her sister. Christen was clasping the jeweled box against her chest, but an edge of the tunic was dangling down below her elbow, and Gillian couldn't resist reaching for it.

"I got to have a turn holding the box. Papa said."

Christen was outraged. "No, he didn't say," she cried. She twisted toward Lawrence so Gillian couldn't get near the box, and then tattled on her. "Lawrence, Gillian told a lie. Papa said I was supposed to have the box, not her."

Gillian was determined. "But I got to have a turn," she told her sister as she once again tried to grab hold of the tunic. She pulled back when she thought she heard a sound behind her. She turned to look. The stairway was pitch-black, and she couldn't

see anything, but she was certain that there were monsters lurking in the shadows waiting to grab her, maybe even a fiery dragon. Frightened, she held tight to the soldier's hand and squeezed up against his side.

"I don't like it here," she cried. "Carry me, William."

Just as the soldier bent down to lift her up with his free arm, one of the shadows against the wall leapt out at her. Gillian screamed in terror, stumbled, and fell into Christen.

Her sister shouted, "No, it's mine," and swung toward Gillian as the shadow barreled into William. The blow struck William behind his knees and threw him into Lawrence. The steps were slick with moisture dripping down from the walls, and the men were too close to the edge to brace themselves. They plunged headfirst into the black hole with the girls. Sparks from the torches flew about them as the fiery balls cascaded down the stairs ahead of them.

William desperately tried to enfold the child as their bodies plummeted down the jagged steps, but he couldn't shield her completely, and Gillian's chin struck the sharp stone.

Stunned by the blow, she slowly sat up and looked about her. Blood poured onto her gown, and when she saw the blood on her hands, she began to scream. Her sister lay beside her, facedown on the floor, not making a sound.

"Christen, help me," Gillian sobbed. "Wake up. I don't like it here. Wake up."

William struggled to his feet with the hysterical child and, holding her tight against his chest, ran through the tunnel. "Hush, child, hush," he whispered over and over again.

Lawrence followed with Christen. Blood trickled down from the cut high on her forehead.

"Lawrence, you and Tom take Christen on to the creek. Spencer and I will meet you there," William shouted.

"Come with us now," Lawrence urged over Gillian's screams.

"The child's in a bad way. She needs stitches," William called back. "Go now. We'll catch up with you. God's speed," he added as he rushed ahead.

"Christen," Gillian screamed. "Christen, don't leave me."

When they neared the door, William cupped his hand over Gillian's mouth and pleaded with her to be quiet. He and Spencer took her to the tanner's cottage on the edge of the outer bailey so that Maude, the tanner's wife, could sew the injury. The underside of Gillian's chin was completely flayed open.

Both soldiers held the child down while Maude worked on her. The battle raged dangerously close, and the noise became so deafening they had to shout to be heard.

"Finish with the child," William ordered the woman. "We must get her to safety before it's too late. Hurry," he shouted as he rushed outside to stand guard.

Maude tied a knot in the string, then clipped the threads. As quickly as she could manage, she wrapped a thick bandage around Gillian's neck and chin.

Spencer lifted the little girl and followed William outside. The enemy had set fire to the thatched roofs of several of the huts with their flaming arrows, and in the bright light, the three ran toward the hill where their mounts waited.

They were halfway up the incline when a troop of soldiers came swarming over the crest. More of the enemy cut off their retreat at the bottom. Escape was impossible, but the two valiant men still held steadfast to their duty. With Gillian on the ground between them, their legs the only barrier shielding her from the attack, they stood with their backs to each other, raised their swords high, and rendered their final battle cry. The two noble soldiers died as they had lived, with honor and courage protecting the innocent.

One of Alford's commanders, recognizing the child, carried her back to the great hall. Liese, Gillian's maid, spotted her when she came inside with the soldier and boldly broke away from the group of servants huddled together in the corner under the watchful eye of the enemy's guard. She pleaded with the soldier to let her take over the care of the little girl. Fortunately, the commander considered Gillian a nuisance and was happy to be rid of her. He ordered Liese to take Gillian upstairs and then ran back outside to join in the fight.

Gillian appeared to be in a stupor. Liese grabbed her and raced up the stairs and across the balcony toward the child's room to get away from the massacre. Panic seized her as she reached for the door latch. She was clawing at it and silently crying when a sudden crash made her jump. She turned just as the heavy oak doors leading to the great hall burst open and soldiers poured inside with their bloody battle axes raised and their swords drawn. Crazy with power, they swung their weapons against the weak and the defenseless. The unarmed men and women held their hands up as shields in a pitiful attempt to ward off the enemy's razor sharp swords. It was a needless slaughter. Horrified, Liese fell to her knees, closed her eyes, and covered her ears so she wouldn't see or hear her friends' desperate pleas for mercy.

Gillian stood passively next to Liese, but when she saw her father being dragged inside, she ran to the banister rail and knelt down. "Papa," she whispered, and then she saw a man in a gold cape raise his sword over her father. "Papa!" she screamed.

Those were the last words she spoke. From that moment, Gillian retreated into a world of numb silence.

Two weeks later, the young man who had seized control of her father's holding, Baron Alford the Red of Lockmiere, called her before him to decide what was to be done with her, and without speaking a single word, she let him know what was in her mind and her heart.

Liese held Gillian's hand and walked into the great hall to meet the monster who had killed the child's father. Alford, barely old enough to be called a man, was an evil, power-hungry demon, and Liese was no fool. She knew that with the snap of his fingers or a wave of his hand, he could order both their deaths.

Gillian jerked away from Liese just inside the entrance and walked forward alone. She stopped when she reached the long table where Alford and his young companions dined. Without a hint of expression on her face, and with her hands hanging limply at her sides, she stood motionless, staring vacantly at the baron.

He had a pheasant leg in one hand and a wedge of black bread in the other. Specks of grease and meat clung to the red scraggy stubble on his chin. He ignored the child for several minutes while he devoured his food, and after he had tossed the bones over his shoulder, he turned to her.

"How old are you, Gillian?" Alford waited a full minute before trying again. "I asked you a question," he muttered, trying to control his rising temper.

"She cannot be more than four years old," one of his friends volunteered.

"I'd wager she's past five," his cohort suggested. "She's small, but she could even be six."

Alford raised his hand for silence while his eyes continued to bore into the little girl. "It's a simple question. Answer me, and while you're at it, tell me what you think I should do with you. My father's confessor believes you can't speak because the Devil has taken possession of your soul. He pleads the right to force the demon out, using very unpleasant methods. Would you like me to tell you exactly what he would do?" he asked. "No, I don't suppose you would," he added with a smirk. "Torture will be necessary, of course, for it's the only way to get the demons out, or so I'm told. Would you like to be strapped down to a table for hour upon hour while my confessor works on you? I have the power to order it done. Now answer my questions and be quick about it. Tell me your age," he demanded in a snarl.

Silence was her response. Chilling silence. Alford could see that his threats didn't faze her. He thought she might be too simpleminded to understand. She was her father's daughter after all, and what a naive, stupid fool he had been to believe that Alford was his friend.

"Perhaps she isn't answering you because she doesn't know how old she is," his friend suggested. "Get on with the important matter," he urged. "Ask her about the box."

Alford nodded agreement. "Now, Gillian," he began, his tone as sour as vinegar, "your father stole a very valuable box from Prince John, and I mean to get it back for him. There were pretty jewels on the top and sides of the case. If you saw it, you would remember it," he added. "Did you or your sister see this treasure? Answer me," he ordered, his voice shrill with his frustration. "Did you see your father hide the box? Did you?"

She didn't give any indication that she had heard a word he'd said. She simply continued to look at him. The young baron let out a sigh of vexation, then decided to stare her into timidity.

In the space of an indrawn breath, the child's expression changed from indifference to loathing. The hatred burning bright in her eyes quickly unnerved him and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up and the gooseflesh rise up on his forearms. It was unholy for a child of such tender years to show such intensity.

She frightened him. Infuriated by his own bizarre reaction to the girl who was little more than a baby, Alford resorted to cruelty once again. "You're a sickly looking child, aren't you, with your pale skin and drab brown hair? Your sister was the pretty one, wasn't she? Tell me, Gillian, were you jealous of her? Is that why you pushed her down the stairs? The woman who sewed you up told me you and Christen both went down the stairs, and one of the soldiers who was with you told the woman you pushed your sister. Christen's dead, you know, and it's all your fault." He leaned forward and pointed a long, bony finger in her face. "You're going to live with that black sin for the rest of your life, however short that might be. I've decided to send you to the end of the earth," he added offhandedly. "To the bitter, cold north of England where you will live with the heathens until the day comes that I have need for you again. Now get you out of my sight. You make my flesh crawl."

Trembling with fear, Liese stepped forward. "Milord, may I accompany the child north to look after her?"

Alford turned his attention to the maid cowering near the entrance and openly cringed at the sight of her scarred face. "One witch to look after another?" he scoffed. "I don't care if you go or stay. Do what you will, but get her but of here now so that my friends and I will not have to suffer her fetid stare a moment longer."

Hearing the tremor in his own voice sent Alford into a rage.

He picked up a heavy wooden bowl from the table and hurled it at the child. It sailed past her head, narrowly missing her. Gillian neither flinched nor blinked. She simply continued to stand where she was, her green eyes glistening with hatred.

Was she looking at his soul? The thought sent a shiver down Alford's spine.

"Out," he screamed. "Get her out of here."

Liese dashed forward to get Gillian, and then ran out of the hall.

As soon as they were safely outside, she hugged the little girl to her bosom and whispered, "It's over now and soon we will leave this foul place and never look back. You'll never have to see your father's murderer again, and I'll never have to look upon my husband, Ector. The two of us will make a new life together, and God willing, we'll find some peace and joy."

Liese was determined to get away before Baron Alford changed his mind. Permission to leave Dunhanshire liberated her, for it meant she could leave Ector behind as well. Her husband had gone over the edge of sanity during the attack on the castle and was too befuddled to go anywhere. After witnessing the slaughter of most of the soldiers and the household staff and narrowly escaping with his own life intact, his mind had snapped and he had turned as crazy as a rabid fox, roaming the hills of Dunhanshire during the days with his dirty knapsack filled with the rocks and clumps of dirt he called his treasures. Each night he made his bed in the southeast corner of the stables, where he was left alone to stew in his own nightmares. His eyes had a glassy, faraway look to them, and he constantly alternated between muttering to himself about how he was going to be a rich man, as rich as King Richard himself, and shouting obscenities because it was taking him so long to get his due. Even the infidels and their leader, Alford, who now claimed Dunhanshire for themselves in the absent king's name, were superstitious enough to give Ector a wide path. As long as the demented man left them alone, they ignored him. Some of the younger soldiers, it was observed, dropped to their knees and made the sign of the cross whenever Ector passed by. The holy ritual was a talisman to ward off the possibility of catching the crazy loon's affliction. They didn't dare kill him, for they firmly believed that the demons controlling Ector's mind would leap into them and take control of their thoughts and actions.

Liese felt that God had granted her a dispensation from her marriage vows. In the seven years that they had lived as man and wife, Ector had never shown her as much as an ounce of affection or spoken a kind word to her. He believed that it was his duty as a husband to beat her into submission and humility so that she would be assured a place in heaven, and he took on his sacred responsibility with a gleeful vengeance. A hard, angry man who as a child had been coddled and shamefully spoiled by doting parents, Ector presumed that he could have anything he wanted. He was convinced that he should live the life of leisure, and he let greed control his every thought. Just three months before Gillian's father was killed, Ector had been promoted to the coveted position of chief reeve because of his clever way with figures. He then had access to the vast amount of money collected in rents from the tenants and knew exactly how much the baron was worth. Avarice took hold of his heart, and with it

came a bitterness as rancid as bile because he hadn't been rewarded with what he believed was his share.

Ector was also a coward. During the attack, Liese witnessed her husband grab hold of Gerta, the household cook and Liese's dear friend, and use her as a shield against the arrows hailing down on them in the courtyard. When Gerta was killed, Ector had dragged her body over his and had pretended to be dead.

The shame was unspeakable, and Liese could no longer look at her husband without hatred. She knew she was in jeopardy of losing her own soul, for to despise another of God's creatures the way she despised Ector was surely sinful. She thanked God for giving her a second chance to redeem herself.

Concerned that Ector might take to the notion of following her, Liese, on the day she and Gillian were scheduled to leave, took the child with her to the stables to say good-bye. Clutching the little girl's hand in her own, she marched into the stall where her husband now made his home. She spotted his dung-and-blood-spattered knapsack hanging on the peg in the corner and turned her nose up in disgust. It smelled as foul as the man pacing about in front of her.

When she called out to him, he flinched, then ran to grab his knapsack and hide it behind his back. His eyes darted back and forth as he crouched down almost to his knees.

"You old fool," she muttered. "No one's going to steal your knapsack. I'm here to tell you I'm leaving Dunhanshire with Lady Gillian and I'll not ever see you again, praise the Lord. Do you hear what I'm saying to you? Stop your mumbling and look at me. I don't want you coming after me. Do you understand?"

Ector let out a low snicker. Gillian squeezed closer to Liese and grabbed hold of her skirt. The woman immediately set about soothing her. "Don't you let him scare you," she whispered. "I won't let him do you any harm," she added before turning her attention and her repulsion to her husband again.

"I'm meaning what I say, Ector. Don't you dare try to follow me. I don't ever want to look upon you again. As far as I'm concerned, you're dead and buried."

He didn't appear to be paying any attention to her. "I'm getting my reward soon now... it's all going to be mine... a king's ransom," he boasted with a raucous snort. "Just like I deserve... his kingdom for a ransom. It's going to be mine... all mine..."

Liese tilted Gillian's head up so she would look at her. "Remember this moment, child. This is what cowardice does to a man."

Liese never looked back. Baron Alford refused to order his soldiers to escort the pair north. It amused him to think that the two witches would have to walk. The young

brothers Hathaway came to their rescue, however. Waldo and Henry, tenants to the northwest, used their plowing horses and their cart to take them the distance. Both men were heavily armed, for there was also the threat of marauders lurking in the countryside waiting to pounce upon unsuspecting travelers.

Fortunately, the trip was uneventful, and they were both welcomed into the household of the reclusive Baron Morgan Chapman. The baron was Gillian's uncle by marriage, and though he was in good standing with the realm, he was considered an outsider and was therefore only infrequently invited to court. There was Highland blood running through his veins, and that made him untrustworthy and somewhat tainted.

He was also somewhat of a fright to look upon, for he was well over six feet two inches tall, had frizzy black hair, and wore what seemed to be a permanent scowl. Alford sent Gillian to this distant relative as punishment, but her exile to the end of England proved to be her salvation. Though her uncle was outwardly gruff and unapproachable, beneath the exterior beat the heart of a saint. He was a gentle, loving man who took one look at his pitiful little niece and knew that they were kindred spirits. He told Liese he wouldn't allow a child to disrupt his peaceful life, but immediately contradicted himself by devoting his full time to the duty of helping Gillian heal. He loved her as a father and made it his mission to get her to speak again. Morgan wanted to hear the child laugh, but worried that his hopes were too high.

Liese also made it her duty to help Gillian recover from the tragedy that had befallen her family. After months and months of patient coaxing and comforting without any results, the lady's maid was close to despair. She slept in the chamber with the little girl so she could soothe her and quiet her when the nightmares sent Gillian into fits of screaming.

Bits and pieces of that horrific night when her father died were firmly locked inside the child's mind. Because of her tender years, it was difficult for her to separate truth from imagination, but she did remember fighting over the sparkling jeweled box and trying to grab it out of her sister's hands so she could have a turn holding it, then plunging down the stone steps that led to the tunnels underneath the castle. The jagged scar under her chin was proof she hadn't imagined it. She remembered Christen screaming. She also remembered the blood. In her hazy, confused memories, both she and Christen were covered in it. The nightmares that haunted her during the dark hours of the night were always the same. Faceless monsters with red glowing eyes and long, whiplike tails were chasing her and Christen down a dark tunnel, but in those terrifying dreams, she never killed her sister. The monsters did.

It was on one such night during a terrible thunderstorm that Gillian finally spoke. Liese awakened her from her nightmare, and then, as was her ritual, wrapped her in one of her uncle's soft Scottish plaid blankets and carried her across the room to sit by the fire.

The heavysset woman cuddled the little girl in her arms and crooned to her. "It ain't right the way you carry on, Gillian. You don't say a word during the day and then you howl like a lone wolf all night long. Is it because you've got the pain all stored up inside you and you need to get it out? Is that the way of it, my little angel? Talk to me, child. Tell me what's in your heart."

Liese didn't expect an answer and very nearly dropped the little girl on her head when she heard her whisper.

"What did you say?" she asked, a bit more sharply than she intended.

"I didn't mean to kill Christen. I didn't mean to."

Liese burst into tears. "Oh, Gillian, you didn't kill Christen. I've told you so over and over again. I heard what Baron Alford said to you. Don't you remember that, as soon as I carried you outside, I told you he was lying. Why won't you believe me? Baron Alford was just being cruel to you."

"She's dead."

"No, she isn't dead."

Gillian looked up at Liese to see from her expression if she was telling the truth or not. She desperately wanted, and needed, to believe her.

"Christen's alive," Liese insisted with a nod. "You listen to me. No matter how terrible the truth might be, I will never, ever lie to you."

"I remember the blood."

"In your nightmares?"

Gillian nodded. "I pushed Christen down the steps. Papa was holding my hand, but then he let go. Ector was there too."

"You've got it all mixed up inside your head. Neither your father nor Ector was there."

Gillian put her head down on Liese's shoulder. "Ector's daft."

"Aye, he is that," she agreed.

"Were you in the tunnel with me?" she asked.

"No, but I know what happened. While Maude was sewing you back together, one of the soldiers who was in the tunnel with you told her. You and your sister were awakened and carried to your father's chamber."

"William carried me."

"Yes."

"It was dark outside."

Liese felt Gillian shiver and hugged her. "Yes, it was the middle of the night, and Alford and his soldiers had already breached the inner walls."

"I remember the wall opened in Papa's room."

"The secret passage led to the steps down to the tunnel. There were four soldiers with your father, four men he trusted with your welfare. You know them, Gillian. Tom was there, and Spencer and Lawrence and William. Spencer's the one who told Maude what happened. They led the way down the secret corridor and carried torches to light the way."

"I'm not supposed to tell about my secret door."

Liese smiled. "I know you have one in your bedroom too," she said.

"How did you know? Did Christen tell you?"

"No, she didn't tell," she replied. "I would put you to bed in your room every night, but most mornings you were sleeping in Christen's room. I guessed there was a passageway because I know you don't like going into dark places, and the hallway outside your bedroom door was very dark. You had to have found another way."

"Are you going to paddle me for telling?"

"Oh, heaven's no, Gillian. I'll never strike you."

"Papa would never paddle me neither, but he always said he would. He was just fooling me, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Did Papa hold my hand?"

"No, he didn't go with you into the passage. It wouldn't have been honorable for him to run away from the battle, and your father was an honorable man. He stayed with his soldiers."

"I pushed Christen down the steps and there was blood on her. She didn't cry. I killed her."

Liese sighed. "I know you're too young to understand, but I still want you to try. Christen did fall down the steps and so did you. Spencer told Maude he thought William lost his footing and slid into Lawrence. The stone floor was slippery, but William insisted someone had pushed him from behind."

"Maybe I pushed him," she worried out loud.

"You're too little to make a grown man lose his balance. You don't have the strength."

"But maybe..."

"You aren't responsible," Liese insisted. "It's a miracle none of you was killed. You needed stitches, however, and so Spencer and William took you to Maude. William stood guard outside the cottage until the battle came too close. Maude said he was desperate to get you to safety, but unfortunately, by the time she was done sewing you back together, Baron Alford's soldiers had surrounded the yard, and escape was no longer possible. You were captured and taken back to the castle."

"Did Christen get captured?"

"No, she was taken away before the tunnel was discovered."

"Where's Christen now?"

"I don't know," Liese admitted. "But perhaps your Uncle Morgan can tell you. He might know. Tomorrow you must go and ask him. He loves you like a daughter, Gillian, and I know he'll help you find your sister. I'm sure she misses you too."

"Maybe she's lost."

"No, she isn't lost."

"But if she's lost, she'll be scared."

"Child, she isn't lost. She's somewhere safe from Baron Alford's clutches. Do you believe me now? In your heart, do you believe your sister is alive?"

Gillian nodded. She began to twine Liese's hair around her finger. "I believe you," she whispered with a yawn. "When will Papa come and take me home?"

Liese's eyes filled with tears again. "Ah, love, your papa can't come for you. He's dead. Alford killed him."

"He put a knife in Papa's belly."

"Dear God, you saw it happen?"

"Papa didn't cry."

"Oh, my poor angel..."

"Maybe Maude can sew Papa up, and then he can come and take me home."

"No, he can't come for you. He's dead, and the dead can't come back to life."

Gillian let go of Liese's hair and closed her eyes. "Is Papa in heaven with Mama?"

"He surely is."

"I want to go to heaven too."

"It isn't your time to go. You have a long life to live first, Gillian, then you can go to heaven."

She squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn't cry. "Papa got dead in the night."

"Yes, he did."

A long while passed in silence before Gillian spoke again. In a tiny whisper she said, "Bad things happen during the night."

Chapter One

Scotland, fourteen years later

The fate of the entire MacPherson clan rested in the hands of Laird Ramsey Sinclair. With the recent birth of Alan Doyle and the peaceful passing of Walter Flanders, there were exactly nine hundred and twenty-two MacPhersons, and the vast majority of those proud men and women desperately wanted and needed Ramsey's protection.

The MacPhersons were in a bad way. Their laird, a sad-eyed, mean-tempered old man named Lochlan, had died the year before, and by his own hand, God forgive him. His clansmen had been stunned and appalled by their laird's cowardly act and still could not talk openly about it. None of the younger men had successfully challenged for the right to lead the clan; though, in truth, most didn't want to fill Lochlan's shoes because they believed he had tainted the position by killing himself. He had to have been mad, they reasoned, because a sane man would never commit such a sin, knowing that he would spend eternity burning in hell for giving God such an insult.

The two elders who had stepped forward to temporarily lead the MacPherson clan, Brisbane Andrews and Otis MacPherson, were old and worn-out from more than twenty years of off-and-on fighting with the land-hungry clans to the east, south, and west of their holding. The fighting had intensified tenfold after the death of their laird, for their enemies knew their vulnerability with the lack of leadership. Desperate times called for cunning measures, however, and so Brisbane and Otis, with their clan's approval, decided to approach Laird Ramsey Sinclair during the annual spring festival. The social opportunity seemed the ideal time to present their petition, as it was an unspoken rule that all the clans leave their animosity at home and join together as one family for two full weeks of competition and goodwill. It was a time when old friendships were renewed, harmless grudges were stirred up, and most important, marriage contracts were sealed. Fathers of young daughters spent most of their days frantically trying to protect their offspring from unwanted suitors while at the same time trying to make the best possible match. Most of the men found it a thoroughly invigorating time.

Because the Sinclair land bordered the MacPherson holding on the southern edge, Ramsey assumed that the MacPherson leaders wanted to talk to him about a possible

alliance, but as it turned out, the old men wanted much more. They were after a union—a marriage, so to speak—between the two clans and were willing to give up their name and become Sinclairs if the laird would give them his solemn word that every MacPherson would be treated as though he had been born a Sinclair. They wanted equality for every one of their nine hundred and twenty-two clansmen.

Ramsey Sinclair's tent was the size of a large cottage and spacious enough to accommodate the gathering. There was a small round table in the center with four chairs and several mats strewn around the ground for sleeping. Ramsey's commander in arms,

Gideon, and two other seasoned Sinclair warriors, Anthony and Faudron, his trusted leaders, were present. Michael Sinclair, Ramsey's younger brother, fidgeted in the shadows while he waited for permission to rejoin the festivities. The child had already been rebuked for interrupting the meeting and kept his head bowed in embarrassment and shame.

Brisbane Andrews, a cantankerous old man with a piercing gaze and raspy voice, stepped forward to explain why the MacPhersons sought a merger.

"We have young soldiers, but they are poorly trained and cannot defend our women and children against our aggressors. We need your strength to keep the predators at bay so that we may live a peaceful life."

Otis MacPherson, a legend in the Highlands because of his remarkable though highly embellished feats as a young man, sat down in the chair Ramsey offered, clasped his hands on his knobby knees, and nodded toward Michael. "Perhaps, Laird, it would be best if you would listen to your brother's request and allow him to be on his way before we continue this discussion. Children often repeat secrets by accident, and I wouldn't like anyone to know about this... merger... until you have either accepted or denied us."

Ramsey agreed and turned to his brother. "What is it you want, Michael?"

The boy was still terribly timid around his older brother, for he barely knew him, having seen him only a couple of times in his short life. Ramsey had been living at the Maitland holding as an emissary after his mandatory years of training to become a fit warrior and had returned to his Sinclair home when their father had called for him on his deathbed. The brothers were nearly strangers to one another, but Ramsey, though somewhat inept at dealing with children, was determined to rectify that situation as soon as possible.

"I want to go fishing with my new friend," Michael stammered, his head still bowed low, "if it's all right with you, Laird."

"Look at me when you ask your question," Ramsey instructed.

Michael quickly did as he was ordered and repeated his request, adding the word "please" this time.

Ramsey could see the fear in his brother's eyes and wondered how long it was going to take for the boy to get used to having him around. The child still mourned their father, and Ramsey knew that Michael felt as though he had been abandoned. The boy didn't remember his mother—she had passed away when he was just a year old—but he had been extremely close to their father and still had not recovered from his death. Ramsey hoped that with time and patience Michael would learn to trust him and perhaps even remember how to smile again.

"You won't go near the falls, and you'll be back in this tent before sunset," he ordered quietly.

"I'll be back before sunset," Michael promised. "Can I leave now?"

"Yes," Ramsey answered, then watched in exasperation as his brother tripped over his own feet and knocked a chair over in his haste to join his friend.

"Michael," he called as his brother was rushing out the entrance, "haven't you forgotten something?"

The child looked puzzled until Ramsey nodded to the visitors. Michael immediately ran to the two men, bowed to his waist, and blurted out, "May I take your leave?"

Otis and Brisbane gave their permission, smiling as they watched the child bolt outside.

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"The boy resembles you, Laird," Brisbane commented. " 'Tis the truth he's your very image, for I well remember you as a lad. God willing, Michael will also grow into a fine warrior. A leader of men.

"Yes," Otis agreed, "with proper guidance, he could become a great leader, yet I couldn't help but notice that the child fears his brother. Why is that, Laird?"

Ramsey wasn't offended by the question, as the old man spoke the truth and was simply making an observation. "I'm a stranger to the boy, but in time he'll learn to trust me."

"And trust that you won't leave him?" Otis asked.

"Yes," he answered, realizing how perceptive the old man was.

"I remember when your father decided to marry again," Brisbane remarked. "I thought Alisdair was too old and set in his ways to take another wife. Your mother had been dead over ten years, but he fooled me, and he seemed very content. Did you ever meet Glynnis, his second wife?"

"I attended their wedding," he said. "Because she was so much younger than my father, he was certain he would die first and he wanted to be sure she was well provided for," he explained.

"And he asked this of you?" Otis inquired, smiling.

"I am his son," Ramsey responded. "I would do whatever he asked."

Otis turned to his friend. "Laird Sinclair would never turn his back on anyone in need."

Ramsey had wasted enough time talking about personal matters and turned the discussion back to the primary subject. "You have said you want my protection, but could you not achieve this with a simple alliance?"

"Your soldiers would have to patrol our borders night and day," Otis said. "And in time they would grow weary of the duty, but if you owned the land..."

"Yes," Brisbane eagerly agreed. "If the Sinclairs owned the land, you would protect it at all cost. We have—" He suddenly stopped, for he was so stunned by the fact that Ramsey had moved forward to pour wine into their empty goblets, he lost his train of thought. "You are laird... yet you serve us as though you are our squire. Do you not know the power you hold?"

Ramsey smiled over their bewilderment. "I know that you are guests in my tent," he answered, "and my elders. It is therefore my duty to see to your comfort."

The men were honored by his words. "You have your father's heart," Otis praised. "It is good to see Alisdair lives on in his son." The laird accepted the compliment with a nod and then gently led the men back to the topic he most wanted to discuss. "You were saying that I would protect your land at all costs if I owned it?"

"Aye," Otis agreed. "And we have much to offer in return for this union. Our land is rich with resources. Our lakes are glutted with fat fish, our soil is rich for planting, and our hills are filled with sheep."

"Which is why we are being constantly attacked on all our borders by the Campbells and the Hamiltons and the Boswells. They all want our land, our water and our women, but the rest of us can go to hell."

Ramsey didn't show any outward reaction to the passionate speech. He began to pace about the tent with his head bowed and his hands clasped behind his back.

"With your permission, Laird, I would ask a few questions," Gideon requested.

"As you wish," Ramsey told his commander. Gideon turned to Otis. "How many soldiers do you count among the MacPhersons?"

"Nearly two hundred," he answered. "But as Brisbane explained, they have not been properly trained."

"And there are one hundred more of an age to begin training," Otis interjected. "You could make them invincible, Laird," he said. "As invincible as Laird Brodick Buchanan's Spartans. Aye, it's possible, for they already have the minds and hearts of warriors."

"You call Brodick's soldiers Spartans?" Gideon asked, smiling. "We do, for that is what they are," Otis replied. "Haven't you heard the stories about the Spartans of times past from your fathers and grandfathers as we have?"

Gideon nodded. "Most of the stories have been exaggerated."

"Nay, most are true," Otis replied. "The stories were written down by the holy monks and retold countless times. They were a barbaric tribe," he added with a frown. "Sinfully proud but extremely brave. It was said they would rather die by the blade than lose an argument. 'Tis my opinion they were a stubborn lot."

"We wouldn't want our soldiers to be as ruthless as the Buchanan warriors," Brisbane hastily interjected.

Ramsey laughed. "Aye, Brodick's soldiers are ruthless." His smile faded as he added, "Know this, gentlemen. Though we are often at odds, I count Brodick as one of my closest friends. He is like a brother to me. However, I will not take exception to what you have said about him, for I know Brodick would be pleased to know that you think him ruthless."

"The man rules with passion," Otis said.

"Yes, he does," Ramsey agreed. "But he is also fair to a fault."

"You were both trained by Iain Maitland, weren't you?" Brisbane asked.

"We were.

"Laird Maitland rules his clan with wisdom."

Ramsey concurred. "I also count Iain as my friend and brother."

Otis smiled. "Brodick rules with passion, Iain with wisdom, and you, Laird Ramsey, rule with an iron hand of justice. We all know you to be a compassionate man. Show us your mercy now," he pleaded.

"How can you know what kind of leader I am?" he asked. "You call me compassionate, but I've only been laird for six months and I've yet to be tested."

"Look at your commanders," Brisbane said with a nod. "Gideon and Anthony and Faudron led and controlled the Sinclair clan when your father was ill, and after he

died and you became laird, you didn't do what others in your position would have done."

"And what would they have done?"

"Replace the commanders with men you know would be loyal to you."

"We are loyal to our laird," Gideon blustered. "You dare to suggest otherwise?"

"Nay," Brisbane countered. "I'm merely saying that other lairds would be less... confident... and would rid themselves of any competitors. That is all. Laird, you showed compassion by allowing them to stay in their important positions."

Ramsey didn't agree or disagree with the old man's judgment. "As I just mentioned, I've been laird for a very short time, and there are problems I must solve within the Sinclair clan. I'm not certain that now is the time to—"

"We can't wait any longer, Laird. The Boswells have declared war and there's talk that they'll align themselves with the Hamiltons. If that happens, the MacPhersons will all be destroyed."

"Would your soldiers willingly pledge themselves to Ramsey?" Gideon asked.

"Aye, they would," Otis insisted.

"All of them?" the Sinclair commander persisted. "There are no dissenters?"

Otis and Brisbane glanced at one another before Otis answered. "There are but a few against this union. Before we came to you with our proposal, we put it to a vote four months ago. Everyone, man and woman, was included."

"You let your women vote?" Gideon asked, incredulous.

Otis smiled. "Aye, we did, for we wanted it to be fair, and our women will also be affected by the union. We wouldn't have thought to include them if Meggan MacPherson, granddaughter of our past laird, hadn't insisted on it."

"She is a most outspoken woman," Brisbane added, though the glint in his eye indicated he didn't see that as a flaw.

"If you voted four months ago, why are you just now making this request to Ramsey?" Gideon asked.

"We've actually voted twice now," Otis explained. "Four months ago we put the vote to the clan and then allowed a period for everyone to consider the matter again. The first vote went in favor of the union, but by a smaller margin."

"We didn't want it to be said that we rushed such an important issue," Brisbane added. "So we gave them time to consider all the ramifications. Then we voted again."

"Yes," Otis said. "Many who were at first against the union changed their minds and voted in favor."

"We shouldn't have waited so long to come to you, Laird, because now our situation has become critical."

"What was the result of the second vote?" Ramsey asked. "How many of your soldiers are still against the union?"

"Sixty-two are still against, and all of them are young, very young," Otis said.

"Pride has colored their judgment," Brisbane volunteered.

"They're led by a stubborn-headed rebel named Proster, but all the others were in favor of the union, and the majority rules."

"Will the dissenters go along with the decision?" Ramsey asked.

"Yes, but grudgingly," Otis admitted. "If Proster can be won over, the others will come with him. There is a simple way to gain their loyalty... a very simple way."

"And what might that be?"

"Marry Meggan MacPherson," Brisbane blurted out. "And unite us by marriage."

"Men have married for far less than what we offer you," Otis interjected.

"And if I choose not to marry Meggan?"

"I would still plead with you if that is what it will take to get your agreement to let our clan unite with yours. Marriage to a MacPherson would only make the union stronger. My clan... my children... need your protection. Just two weeks ago, David and Lucy Douglas were murdered, and their only sin was that they ventured too close to the border. They were newly wed."

"We cannot lose any more of our good people, and if you do not take us in, one by one we will be hunted down. What will happen to our children?" Brisbane asked. "We have boys your brother's age," he added in an attempt to sway the laird.

Ramsey couldn't turn his back on their cry for help. He knew the lengths the Boswells would go to in order to claim more land. None of their soldiers would think twice about killing a child.

"The Boswells are jackals," he muttered.

Gideon knew his laird well and had already guessed what his answer was going to be. "Ramsey, will you put this matter to our clan before you give these men your decision?"

"I will not," he answered. "The matter isn't open for discussion."

Gideon held his frustration. "But will you think about this before you decide?"

Knowing his commander was trying to caution him to wait and was wanting a private discussion before any commitment was made, Ramsey gave Gideon a brisk nod before addressing the MacPhersons again.

"Gentlemen, you will have my answer in three hours' time. Does that suit you?"

Otis nodded as he stood. "With your permission, we will return then to hear your answer."

Brisbane latched onto his friend's arm. "You've forgotten to tell him about the competition," he whispered loudly.

"What competition?" Gideon asked.

Otis visibly colored. "We thought... to save our soldiers' pride, that you would agree to compete in a series of games. We can't possibly win, but it would be easier to give up our name and take the Sinclair name if we were soundly beaten in games of strength."

Gideon stepped forward. "And if you should win?"

"But we wouldn't," Otis insisted.

"But if you did?"

"Then the Sinclairs give up their name. You would still rule as laird, Ramsey, but you would become a MacPherson, and the man who bested you would become your first in command."

Gideon was outraged, but Ramsey had the opposite reaction. So absurd was the request, he felt like laughing. He forced himself to maintain his stern expression as he said, "I have a commander and am well pleased with him."

"But, Laird, we thought only—" Otis began.

Ramsey cut him off. "My commander stands before you, gentlemen, and you insult him mightily with your proposal."

"What if you were to put the question to your clan?" Brisbane asked. "The games have only just started and there are still two full weeks. You could compete at the end of the games."

"Then I, like you, would want every man and woman to have a say, and since most are not attending the festival, I assure you it would take months before everyone had voted. We would have to wait until next year to compete."

"But we cannot wait that long for a decision," Otis said.

"I will be completely honest with you and tell you I wouldn't give the matter to my clan to decide anyway. The mere suggestion is obscene. The Sinclair name is sacred. However, since you say you wish only to save your soldiers' pride, if I decide on this union, then I will also suggest they compete for positions within my ranks under my commander. Those MacPherson soldiers who show strength and courage against my soldiers will be personally trained by Gideon."

Otis nodded. "We'll return then in three hours to hear your answer," he said.

"God guide you in making this momentous decision," Brisbane added as he followed his friend outside.

Ramsey laughed softly. "We've just been led down a crooked path," he remarked. "Otis believes the MacPherson soldiers could beat us and then he would have it all. Our protection and his name."

Gideon wasn't amused. "They come to you with hat in hand, begging, but then they have the audacity to put conditions on you at the same time. They are outrageous."

"What say you, Anthony?" he asked Gideon's second in command.

"I'm against this union," the yellow-haired soldier muttered. "Any man who would willingly give up his name disgusts me."

"I feel the same," Faudron interjected, his hawk-like face red with anger. "Brisbane and Otis are despicable."

"Nay, they're simply cunning old men who want the best for their clan. I've known for some time now that they were going to come to me, and I've had time to contemplate the matter. Tell me, Gideon, are you in favor of such a union?"

"I know you are," he replied. "Your heart is too soft, Laird. It's a troubling flaw, that. I see the problems involved in such a union."

"So do I," Ramsey said. "But Otis is right; they have much to offer in return. More important is their cry for help, Gideon. Can you turn your back on them?"

His commander shook his head. "Nay, the Boswells would slaughter them. However, I'm most concerned about Proster and the other dissenters."

"They've had time to come to terms with this union," Ramsey reminded him. "You heard what Otis said. They first voted four months ago. Besides, we'll keep a close eye on them."

"Your mind's made up, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'll welcome them into our clan."

"There'll be problems with our soldiers..." Ramsey slapped Gideon's shoulder. "Then we'll deal with them," he said. "Don't look so bleak. Let's put the matter aside for now and join the festivities. Iain and Judith Maitland have been here since yesterday afternoon and I've still not spoken to them. Let's hunt them down."

"There is one more pressing matter you must attend to first." he said.

Ramsey dismissed Anthony and Faudron and then said to Gideon, "I can see from your grin the matter isn't serious."

"To your faithful soldier, Dunstan Forbes, the matter is very serious. You might as well sit down, Laird, for Dunstan has requested permission to marry Bridgid KirkConnell."

Ramsey was suddenly weary. "How many does this make now?"

Gideon laughed. "Including me, I count seven proposals in all, but Douglas swears there have been eight."

Ramsey sat down and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Does Bridgid know about this latest suitor?"

"Not yet," he answered. "But I have taken the liberty of sending for her. She's waiting outside, and you will at last meet the thorn in your side." After making the comment, he burst into laughter.

Ramsey shook his head. "Do you know, Gideon, all this time I believed that when I challenged you for the position of laird, I beat you fairly."

Gideon instantly sobered. "But you did beat me fairly."

"Are you certain you didn't let me win just so you wouldn't have to deal with Bridgid KirkConnell?"

Gideon laughed again. "Perhaps," he said. "I'll admit I like being in her presence, for she's a beautiful woman and a true delight to observe. She has a spirit few other women possess. She's quite... passionate... but alas, she's also as stubborn as a Buchanan. I'm glad now she turned me down, for I have no wish to marry such a difficult woman."

"How is it that I have had to deny three proposals on this woman's behalf while I have been laird but I have yet to meet her?"

"She sent her refusals from her uncle's home in Carnwath. I specifically remember telling you that I had given her permission to help her aunt with the new bairn. They, too, are here at the festival."

"If you told me, I've forgotten," he said. "I do remember her rejections though. She always sent back the same message."

"I've a feeling she'll say those very words today and Dunstan will join the rapidly growing ranks of the brokenhearted."

"My father is to blame for this nuisance duty I'm now saddled with because he was the one who gave his promise to Bridgid's father that she could choose her husband. It's unthinkable to me that she alone will decide her future."

"You don't have a choice in the matter," Gideon said. "You must honor your father's word. Bridgid's father was a noble warrior, and he was on his deathbed when he forged this promise. I wonder if he knew how stubborn his daughter was going to be."

Ramsey stood and then suggested Gideon call Bridgid inside. "And stop grinning," he ordered. "This is an important matter to Dunstan, and we shall treat it as such. Who knows? She may say yes to his proposal."

"Aye, and it might rain pigs this afternoon," Gideon drawled as he folded back the flap of the tent. He hesitated, turned back to his laird, and in a soft voice asked, "Have you ever had your head turned by a lady?"

The question exasperated Ramsey. "No, I haven't."

"Then I'd brace myself if I were you. I swear your head's going to spin."

A moment later, Gideon's prediction almost came true, as Bridgid KirkConnell walked into the tent and literally knocked the wind out of her laird. She was an astonishingly pretty young lady, with fair skin, sparkling eyes, and sinfully curly, long honey-colored hair that floated beyond her shoulders. Her gentle curves were in all the right places, and Ramsey was surprised that there had been only eight proposals.

She made a curtsy, smiled ever so sweetly up at him, and said, "Good day to you, Laird Ramsey."

He bowed. "So we meet at last, Bridgid KirkConnell. I've had to break the hearts of several suitors on your behalf without benefit of knowing why those good men were so anxious to wed such an obstinate woman. Now I understand the reason my soldiers are so persistent."

Her smile vanished. "But we have met before."

He shook his head. "I assure you that if I had met you, I would not have forgotten."

"But it's true, we did meet," she insisted. "And I remember our encounter as though it had taken place just yesterday. You had come home for your cousin's wedding. While my parents were attending the celebration, I decided to go swimming in the lake beyond the glen. You fished me out."

He clasped his hands behind his back and tried to concentrate on what she was telling him. Gideon hadn't exaggerated. She was an extraordinary woman.

"And why did I fish you out?"

"I was drowning."

"Didn't you know how to swim, lass?" Gideon asked.

"Much to my surprise, I didn't."

She smiled again, and Ramsey's heartbeat began to race. He was stunned by his own reaction to the woman, for he couldn't seem to get past the fact that she was so damned pretty. It wasn't like him to behave like this—he wasn't a boy and he had certainly been in the presence of comely women before. It was her smile, he decided then. It was really quite infectious.

He wondered if Gideon was experiencing a similar response to the lass, and just as soon as he could find the discipline to stop gawking at her, he'd look at his commander.

"If you didn't know how to swim, why did you go in the lake?" Gideon asked, trying to make sense out of such an illogical act.

She shrugged. "Swimming didn't look difficult, and I was sure I could figure it out, but alas, I was mistaken."

"You were a bold lass," Gideon commented.

"Nay, I was stupid."

"You were young," Ramsey offered.

"You must have turned your parents' hair white," Gideon said.

"I was accused of doing just that on several occasions," she replied before turning her attention to Ramsey again. "I understand why you don't remember. I've changed in my appearance and it has been a long while. I'm grown up now, but I'm not obstinate, Laird. Truly I'm not."

"You should have married by now," Ramsey said. "And it would seem to me that you are being difficult. All of the men who have proposed marriage are fine and worthy soldiers."

"Yes, I'm certain they are good men," she agreed.

Ramsey took a step toward her. She took a step back, for she knew what was coming and wanted to be close to the opening of the tent so she could make a quick exit.

Ramsey noticed her glancing over her shoulder and thought she might be judging the distance to freedom. He maintained his serious demeanor, but it was difficult. Her panic made him want to laugh. Was marriage that repulsive to her?

"Now another soldier has stepped forward to ask for your hand in marriage," he said. "His name is Dunstan. Do you know him?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

"He's a good man, Bridgid, and he would certainly treat you well."

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what?" he countered.

"Why does he want to marry me? Did he give you a reason?"

Since Ramsey hadn't spoken to Dunstan personally, he turned to Gideon. "Did he give you a reason?"

The commander nodded. "He wants you."

Ramsey could tell from the hesitation in Gideon's voice that he wasn't telling her the full story. "Give her his exact words," he ordered.

Gideon's face colored. "Surely the lass doesn't wish to hear every word, Laird."

"I think she does," Ramsey countered. "And Dunstan expects us to speak for him."

The commander scowled to cover his embarrassment. "Very well then. Bridgid KirkConnell, Dunstan swears his love for you. He treasures your beauty and worships the very ground you... float upon... As God is my witness, those were his very words."

Ramsey smiled, but Bridgid wasn't the least bit amused. Insulted by the declaration, she tried to hide her feelings, knowing that her laird wouldn't understand. How could he? He was a man and, therefore, couldn't possibly know what was in her heart.

"How can this be?" she asked. "I have not even met this man, yet he declares his love for me?"

"Dunstan is a good man," Gideon told her. "And I believe he means what he says."

"He's clearly infatuated with you," Ramsey added. "Would you like time to consider his proposal? Perhaps if you were to sit down with him and discuss this matter—"

"No," she blurted out. "I don't want to sit down with him, and I don't need time to consider his proposal. I would like to give my answer now. Would you please tell Dunstan that I thank him for his proposal, but..."

"But what?" Gideon asked.

"I won't have him".

Those were the identical words she had used to deny eight other men.

"Why not?" Ramsey demanded, his irritation obvious.

"I don't love him."

"What does love have to do with a marriage proposal? You could learn to love this man."

"I will love the man I marry or I won't marry at all." After making her vehement statement, she took another step back.

"How do I reason with such an absurd belief?" Ramsey asked Gideon.

"I don't know," he replied. "Where could she have gotten such notions?"

Their rudeness in openly discussing her as though she weren't even there angered and frustrated her, but she tried to control her temper because Ramsey was her laird and she should respect his position.

"You won't change your mind about Dunstan?" Ramsey asked.

She shook her head. "I won't have him," she repeated.

"Ah, Bridgid, you are a stubborn lass to be sure."

Being criticized a third time stung her pride, and she found it impossible to keep silent any longer.

"I have been in your presence less than ten minutes, but in that short while you have called me obstinate, difficult, and stubborn. If you are through insulting me, I would like to join my aunt and uncle."

Ramsey was astonished by her burst of anger. She was the first woman ever to speak to him in such a tone. Her behavior bordered on insolence, yet he couldn't fault her because he had said those very words to her, and they were insulting.

"You will not speak to your laird with such disrespect," Gideon commanded. "Your father would turn in his grave if he could hear you now."

She lowered her head, but Ramsey saw the tears in her eyes. "Let's leave her father out of this," he said.

"But, Laird, at the very least she should apologize."

"Why? I insulted her, though not deliberately, and for that I apologize."

Her head snapped up. "You apologize to me?"

"Yes."

Her smile was radiant. "Then I must tell you I'm sorry for being so contrary." She bowed, then turned and ran outside.

Gideon frowned after her. "She's a difficult woman," he remarked. "I pity the man who does marry her, for he will have a fine battle on his hands."

Ramsey laughed. "But what an invigorating battle it would be."

Gideon was surprised by the comment. "And would you be interested in pursuing a—"

A shout stopped his question and he turned to the entrance just as a young soldier came running inside the tent. He was Emmet MacPherson's son, Alan, and he looked as though he had just seen the ghost of his father.

"Laird, come quickly. There's been a terrible accident... terrible... at the falls," he stammered, panting for breath. "Your brother... oh, God, your little brother..."

Ramsey was already running outside when Alan's next words hit him.

"Michael's dead."

