

The Highland Bride

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Chapter One

"It will be fine." Eva leaned forward to run a hand between her mount's ears, and down its neck as she spoke. "Everything will be just fine. Those rumors about the MacAdies and Mac-Nachtons having a lust for blood are just so much nonsense. Really," she assured the beast. "And even if they were true... Well, the MacAdie laird would hardly pay Jonathan all those coins to marry me, merely to bring me to Scotland and drain me of my lifeblood. Surely, there are cheaper ways for him to feed."

The mare snorted as she took the last few steps necessary to gain the hill they had been traversing. It was questionable whether the sound was a comment on her rider's words, or simply indicated her relief that the hill was behind her, but Eva suspected it was the latter. Her words -with their hint that she might actually believe the rumors about the MacAdie clan—hardly deserved comment. Eva was almost embarrassed that she had dared voice them. Even if only to her mount. Not that she had anyone else to talk to.

Her gaze slid over the men riding with her; two in front, two behind, and one on either side. Six men in all and every last one stoic, grim-faced, and unapproachable. She made a face at the backs of the pair riding before her, knowing it was childish and rude, but they were rude, taciturn men. Scots all. Not one of them had said a word to her that wasn't merely an order or instruction since leaving Caxton keep. Not that there had been much opportunity to speak. Their party had been riding nearly nonstop for two days now; traveling up hills then down again, sticking to the wooded areas and rarely moving at less than a trot. It had been a very long two days for Eva who had managed well at first, but had dozed off in her saddle several times today, and each time she had, it was only to awaken later to find herself seated before Ewan on his horse. Obviously in charge of this trip, he had apparently managed to ease her from her own horse to his without waking her, then had cradled her in his arms like a child while she napped.

Eva had been embarrassed the three times she had awoken to find herself so, but once aware that she was awake and alert, the Scot had merely stopped long enough to shift her back to her own mount and continued on. It was difficult to sleep on a rocking horse. Eva was sure those naps had only been short ones and that while exhaustion had allowed her to drift off into sleep, once she'd gained an hour or so of much needed rest, she hadn't been able to stay asleep. She was exhausted and in desperate need of a good eight hours of uninterrupted rest, something she feared that she wasn't likely to get soon.

Which was a terrible shame in her mind as her exhaustion was making it difficult to keep her usually positive perspective on things. Instead of thinking of this as a grand adventure as she probably would have were she not so tired, Eva found herself feeling lonely and frightened. She had left everything she knew and loved behind, and was heading toward a life in a foreign land amongst complete strangers, with nothing but the clothes on her back and the small satchel hanging from her saddle. The satchel contained another threadbare gown, a small painted picture of her mother, her father's small blade, and little else. It was all Eva possessed in this world.

Not that she minded her lack of possessions, Eva was used to that, but did wish she'd been able to bring Mavis with her. The little kitchen maid, who was sometimes pressed into service as Eva's lady's maid, was the only friend that she had. Eva had been closer to the girl than to her own brother. Mavis was the only person she would really miss. But Jonathan had refused to release the girl, and she doubted that these men would have welcomed another burden besides herself on this journey.

Eva grimaced at the thought of being seen as a burden by these men. She didn't care for the designation much, but her brother had made no bones about the fact that a burden was all she had been to him since her parents' deaths when she was nine. Despite all of her efforts to stay out of his way, her directing the servants for him, and even pitching in and helping them when necessary in an attempt to make up for what little food she ate... All of it had been for naught. Jonathan had found her presence unbearable to the point that when he was unable to find her a husband, rather than allow her to live out her days at Caxton, he had been preparing to send her to a nunnery. Then these men had arrived with an offer to bride her.

Eva shook her head at the way her life path had changed so abruptly. Two days ago she had awoken with the glum realization that this was the last full day she would spend in her childhood home. The very next morning, she was to be sent to the abbey to join her next older sister as a bride of God. Something Eva didn't really think she was suited to. She had always thought of nuns as serene and graceful brides of the lord. And even Eva had to admit that she was anything but serene. As for graceful, it was not a word that had ever been used to describe her.

But that had been two days ago. By midmorning of that day, her future had been put into question when Mavis had sought her out in the gardens to inform her that six Scots had arrived and were bartering with Jonathan for her hand in marriage. Eva had—at first—been sure the girl was wrong about this. Her brother had told her repeatedly that he had nothing to offer as her dowry, so there was nothing over which to barter. But, as it turned out, they weren't bartering over what Jonathan would pay to be rid of her, rather what the Scots would pay to have her.

Eva had still been reeling in shock from that news when Mavis had informed her that they were MacAdies. Never having paid much heed to gossip, Eva hadn't understood the relevance behind this news. Mavis had recognized this at once from her blank expression and had taken an unseemly delight in telling the tale of the nightwalking, blood-lusting vampires the MacAdies were claimed to be, adding a horrified "Oh, 'tis too awful m'lady. *You*, married to one of those monsters!"

Eva had shushed the girl, telling her it was all stuff and nonsense, but the maid's words had plagued her ever since. *It was* nonsense, of course. Wasn't it?

"Of course, it is," she assured herself stoutly for probably the hundredth time in two days. After all, hadn't Ewan and the five MacAdie men with him arrived at Caxton at mid-morning? In clear daylight? According to the rumors Mavis had repeated, they shouldn't have been able to manage such a feat were they vampires who would perish at the touch of the sun's light.

Of course, when she'd said as much to Mavis, the girl had explained that Cook had said that the MacAdies weren't all vampires. That the laird had married a MacNachton woman who was one and some of the people of MacAdie had followed suit. Their offspring were half-breeds, but that there were still mortal men among them, a necessity to accomplish what the soulless bloodlusters could not. These men, she had announced, were obviously the mortal helpers, servants to the vampire, sent to collect her for their laird who was a son of the MacAdie laird and his soulless bride and therefore, unable to travel in daylight.

Eva had been less impressed with this news. Her only response had been a snort of disbelief which hadn't been as convincing as she would have liked. The maid had managed to plant the seed of doubt in her mind with her tales.

"It's silly, really, Millie," Eva assured her mare. "There is no such thing as vampire. Tis a myth. Like sirens of the sea."

"She's talkin' to herself again."

Ewan managed to restrain the sigh that wanted to slip from his lips at Domhall's words. He had rather hoped that the men wouldn't notice that Lady Eva was again talking to herself. An unlikely feat when he and Domhall rode behind the woman with a perfect view every time she took the trouble to start mumbling away.

The lass had been doing so since they'd ridden out of the gates of Caxton keep that first afternoon on the long journey from Caxton on the northern coast of England, to MacAdie in northern Scotland. And the men had been pointing it out in worried tones ever since. It was obvious that they worried that their new lady was mad.

"The MacAdie willnae be pleased to find hisself landed with a mad wife," Domhall commented.

Ewan sighed at these words.

"Nay, he willnae be pleased," Keddy agreed. He'd been riding on the woman's left, but now dropped back to join the conversation. "And nae doubt he'll be blamin' us fer it."

"Nay," Donaidh protested, dropping back from his position on their new lady's right to join the conversation as well. "He'll no blame us."

"Aye. He will," Keddy insisted. "He'll think we drove her mad with tales of what to expect."

"He kens none of us would do that," Ewan said calmly. "Besides, she isnae mad."

"Oh. Aye," Domhall agreed. "And every sane woman talks to herself, then?"

"Sane Scots, nay," Ewan allowed. "But a Scot, she isnae, is she? 'Sides, who's to say she be talking to herself? Mayhap she's merely soothing her mount."

"Soothing her mount, is she? From sun up to sun down?" Domhall snorted at the very idea and Ewan had to grimace. The argument hadn't sounded very convincing even as he'd spoken it, but the closer they got to MacAdie the more he began to fret on the situation. As Connall's first, it was his place to look out for his laird's best interests. And it didn't seem to him that having the men arrive thinking the lass mad—and spreading that rumor to everyone else—was a good thing for Connall. He thought it might be a good idea to nip that tale in the bud ere they arrived, but suspected he could talk to the men until he was blue in the face, unfortunately, so long as the lass continued to talk to herself, his talking wasn't going to do a great load of good. It was time to have a word with the lass himself and see if he couldn't sort out whether she was insane or not. If she wasn't, all well and good. If she was... well, Connall had a problem. But the least Ewan could do was see if he could keep her from talking to herself and putting that worry into the men's minds.

Digging his heels into the sides of his mount, he urged his horse to a trot that sent him out in front of the

men and to his new lady's side. The woman glanced at him with surprise, then offered a tentative smile and Ewan really wished she wouldn't. There was little enough to cause good cheer in this hard life, especially after two days in the saddle, and he was sure the men would see her constant smiling as another bad sign. He scowled to discourage it and was satisfied when it wilted away and her lips turned down. Ewan then began to search his mind for an inoffensive way to broach the subject of whether she were mad or not.

"Are you mad?"

Eva blinked at that abrupt question. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yer talking to yerself, lass. Are ye mad?"

Eva stared at the man who—by her estimation—had seen at least forty summers. She could hardly believe he'd had the temerity to ask such a question of her, or the question itself, really. It had never occurred to her that they might think her mad because of such a small thing.

"I wasn't talking to myself," she said finally.

"Nay?" It was a polite sound of disbelief. She supposed he had a right to it, since he must have seen her talking.

"Nay. I was talking to Millie," Eva explained, aware that the other three men had moved up to listen to the conversation. The two who had been riding in front were also slowing and falling closer. She offered each of them a smile now, feeling sure it was important she not leave them thinking her mad.

"Millie?" There was open worry on Ewan's face and he glanced around as if expecting to see some unknown woman pop up out of nowhere.

"My horse," Eva explained patiently.

"Ah." He relaxed at once, tossing a triumphant smile to the men around them. They looked less impressed.

"And would ye be expecting the horse to answer ye?" One of them asked, drawing a frown from Ewan.

"Keddy," he said the name in warning tones.

Determined to remain unruffled, Eva merely smiled at the red-haired young man with the freckled face and shook her head. "Nay, do not be silly. Horses cannot speak."

That seemed to be the right thing to say, Ewan had relaxed again and the other men were nodding solemnly in agreement.

"Nevertheless that does not mean she cannot listen," Eva added.

"Ah." The larger, dark-haired man who usually rode on her right gave a considering nod. "That's true enough, Keddy," he pointed out to the redhead.

Eva offered him a smile for supporting her, and tried to recall what his name was. She thought Ewan had called him Donaidh when giving orders.

"Why would you be talking to her, though?" The man who usually rode behind her on Ewan's right asked. Eva thought he was called Domhall.

"Other than one trip to your court, she's never been off Caxton land," Eva said solemnly. "I fear she finds all of this just a bit unsettling, so I talk to her to soothe her."

Millie—as well as Eva herself—had only been off Caxton land once, during the trip to the Scottish court where Jonathan had attempted to find a man who would take her without a dowry. He had claimed to have chosen the Scottish court over their English one for two reasons; first, it was closer and less of a troublesome journey to make. The second reason had been that, thanks to King James's present efforts to encourage Anglo-Scottish marriages in an effort to further firm the truce the two countries were presently enjoying, her brother had thought it might be easier to marry her off there despite her lack of dowry. He'd been wrong. Whether the intended husband was English or Scottish, Eva wasn't pretty enough, or accomplished enough to be desirable without a dowry. Not that she minded. God had given her a fine mind and that would serve her well, long after age had stolen whatever looks she had been given.

Aware of the silence that had fallen among the men, Eva glanced about. The Scots were once again riding in formation. Satisfied that she wasn't talking to herself, and therefore perhaps wasn't mad, it would appear that they were now simply going to fall back into their usual surly travel silence. This was a disappointment to Eva who had found it quite pleasant to speak to these men, to anyone really.

Eva was as unaccustomed to long lengths of silence as she was to long journeys. There had always been someone to talk to at Caxton; the maids, the blacksmith, the stable master, the children, the priest... Any one of them would have taken the trouble to speak to her had she stopped by to see them, yet these men had ridden at her side for two days in silence. It had made a long, wearying and monotonous journey even longer, more wearying, and more monotonous, and frankly, Eva was tired and cranky enough not to be too appreciative at the moment. In fact, she was beginning to grow irritated with the man responsible for this journey; her husband, Connall MacAdie.

She muttered the name with a sigh. It was her considered opinion that by sending his men to collect her like a cow he wished purchased, her husband was showing her very little in the way of care and concern. Eva supposed this meant she could expect to be considered of little more value at MacAdie than she had been at Caxton. Had it been so much to hope that she might have gained a husband who valued her at least a little? It seemed Connall MacAdie wasn't likely to.

"M'lady?"

Eva glanced at the man on her left distractedly. Keddy, the redhead with an unfortunate blanket of freckles on his face, had urged his mount closer again to address her. "Aye?"

"Why are you talking to your horse about our laird?"

"Was I?" Eva asked, taken aback at the realization that she must have been muttering her displeasure with her new husband aloud.

"Aye," Keddy assured her, then glanced to the man riding on her other side. "Was she no', Donaidh?"

"Aye." The large, dark-haired man urged his own mount closer again so that Eva was sandwiched between the two of them on Millie's back. "And ye werenae soundin' too pleased with him. Are ye no pleased to be the MacAdie's bride?"

Eva considered lying to avoid offending these men, but lying wasn't in her nature. "I would be more pleased had he bothered to collect me himself, rather than having you collect me like a new cow for the fields," she admitted bluntly.

"Ah." Ewan and Domhall had moved up again so that the four of them were crowding her once more. It was Ewan who decided to address this matter now, "Yer English, so ye wouldnae be understanding but Connall wouldnae send the six of us to collect a cow. He'd send one man, and it wouldnae be any o' us."

"Aye," the other men nodded their agreement.

"So I should be flattered that he could not be bothered to come fetch me himself, but sent the six of you?" Eva asked dryly.

"Aye." Ewan nodded.

"O'course," Keddy agreed. "After all, he couldnae collect ye himsel', so sent us in his stead. *Six* of us in his stead. It shows how important ye are. He even sent Ewan."

The way he said it made it sound like it was a huge honor, an opinion that was verified for Eva when Domhall added, "Aye, and Ewan is his first."

The way he said that suggested it was an important position to hold. Eva was less interested in that, however, than why the man couldn't collect her himself, so asked, "Why could he not collect me himself?"

"Well... That'd be difficult to explain, lass," Ewan began slowly even as Keddy said, "It's his condition."

"Condition?" she asked with a combination of concern and interest.

"Aye, his condition," Ewan muttered, but he was glaring at Keddy for interfering.

"What condition, pray tell?"

Ewan's scowl became even more fierce on Keddy at this question, then he finally glanced at her and said, "Tis best to ask him that."

Eva frowned at that unsatisfactory statement, but couldn't think of a way to force a proper answer out of him. Giving up on it, she glanced at these men, her men now, she supposed. They had gone quiet again and Eva didn't wish to return to the solemn silence that had marked most of this trip so far, so sought her mind for something to draw them into conversation again and keep them talking. She'd like to get to know them. She'd like to get to know someone. Eva was very aware that she was completely and utterly alone and deep in a foreign land that was now to be her home.

She recalled dreaming of marrying and moving to her own home, and how wonderful that would be, but the reality was something else entirely, scary where she hadn't considered it might be. Why had she never considered that it would be so scary and lonely?

"Tis a lovely day, is it not?" she asked desperately as the men began to ease their mounts away,

obviously preparing to return to their usual positions with their usual silence.

Her comment stopped the move away from her, but the silence continued for another moment as the men glanced at each other. Eva bit her lip as she realized that it wasn't a lovely day at all. It was late summer, but the sky was overcast and the air had a nip to it. It was too late to retract the statement, however. Aware that her face was flushing with a blush of embarrassment, she raised her chin a bit and stared straight ahead ignoring their rudeness in gawking at her as they were.

"Er... A lovely day?" Ewan queried finally.

"Well, 'tis not raining," she pointed out defensively. It could be worse after all, she told herself.

"That's true enough," Donaidh allowed judicially and Eva relaxed a little, but then silence fell again. She supposed that was all that her comment on the weather deserved, and decided she'd have to come up with something more interesting to discuss. Eva contemplated her options, but nothing was really coming to mind. Politics were out of the question. These were Scots. She was English. Dear God, they were practically enemies by birth alone, and surely wouldn't agree on anything political.

Oddly enough, it was Ewan who prolonged the conversation by announcing, "Tis no far to MacAdie now."

Eva felt herself stiffen at this news. Much as she would be grateful to get off her horse, she was suddenly anxious at the idea of coming face-to-face with her husband.

"Will my husband be there when we arrive?" she asked, wondering how awful she looked after traveling for two days without stop, and suspecting she must look as travel worn and weary as she felt. It was surely no way to first meet your new husband.

"If we arrive after dark, he'll be there, but if we arrive while it's still light out, he may still be... about his business," Ewan concluded after a hesitation. "He didna ken how long it'd take to negotiate the marriage, or if we'd even succeed, ye understand," he said, excusing the man.

"Nay. Of course not," Eva agreed absently, but her mind was on what he had said. If they arrived before dark he might not yet be there, which would give her the opportunity to at least change into her other gown and possibly tidy herself a bit, if not to take a bath and make herself properly presentable for this man she was to spend the rest of her life with. First impressions were very important, at least her mother had always said it was so. "And do you think we shall arrive ere dark, or after?"

Ewan considered the matter, then decided, "We should be arriving near to when the sun sets."

Eva felt her shoulders sag with disappointment at those words, but quickly forced them back up. "Near to" meant they might yet arrive before her husband, which meant she might at least have a couple of minutes to try to repair herself before meeting him. More if he should happen to be later than expected. That was better than nothing.

Eva stared down at the castle below and swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. The keep crouched at the base of the surrounding hills, shadows falling across it like a cloak. It looked a dark and gloomy place. In comparison, Caxton Hall seemed a sunny abode, at least in her memory. To her mind, the gloomy structure below went a long way toward explaining the attitude of the men she rode with. Who could be happy and full of good cheer while abiding in such a dismal place?

"The sun is setting."

Eva stirred herself to glance at her companions at that comment from Donaidh. The man's words had sounded concerned to her. That concern was echoed in the expression of every man around her, she saw and wondered briefly if they worried that their lord would be displeased with their late arrival. Eva wasn't too pleased with it herself, as she'd really rather hoped to have at least a few minutes to clean up and prepare herself before meeting her husband. But she was guessing that the man would be about by now, or at least would be ere they managed to make their way down the rather steep hill they had crested and to the castle.

"Stay close," Ewan ordered the men and Eva was surprised to hear the sudden tension in his voice. She was even more surprised when he gestured to Donaidh and the large man suddenly lifted her off her mount and onto his own, settling her before him as the other men now closed ranks, surrounding them on all sides.

Eva didn't struggle or protest, but she did crane her neck to try to peer back down at the castle again. She was sure that just before Ewan had blocked her view by urging his mount out before the horse she now sat on, she had glimpsed dark figures moving in the deepening black valley below. All she'd had was a quick glimpse, but Eva thought she'd seen a couple of darker shadows moving away from the castle. No matter how she craned her neck, however, she couldn't now see past the mounted men surrounding her.

The ride down into the valley seemed to take forever to Eva. It probably wasn't that long a ride, but the tension in the men around her was infectious, and that and the fact that she couldn't see a single blasted thing past the backs of her surrounding guards made it seem unending. Her vision was so obscured that it wasn't until the starlight overhead was suddenly blocked out entirely and she glanced up to see that they were riding under the parapet and through the castle gates, that she knew they had arrived.

The moment they were past the gates, sound exploded around them. It was as if someone had removed a muffling cape from her head, still, Eva could see nothing and she wished she could. The bailey here sounded as busy as Caxton bailey would be during the busiest mid-afternoon hours, yet it was nighttime and should have been much quieter.

At first distracted by the noise, it took Eva a moment to realize that the men surrounding her had now relaxed. The difference was notable. Eva felt herself relax in response, but didn't give up attempting to see her surroundings—as impossible as that was at the moment with the men still riding clustered close around the horse she and Donaidh were astride. Eva was able to catch a flash of color here and there in the light of torches that were spread liberally about. There must have been hundreds of them to emit such light, she guessed and thought it a dreadful waste. Such resources would have been carefully preserved at Caxton, but then her childhood home was a poor hold. Eva supposed her new home was in much better shape. The fact that the MacAdie had not only taken her without dower, but had actually paid one for her, should have told her that, she supposed, and wondered if she should tell her husband that he needn't have bothered buying her. Jonathan had been willing to give her away, at least he had been before the Scots had made mention of offering a dower for her.

Nay, she decided. Perhaps the fact that he'd had to purchase her would give her some small value in his eyes.

A barked order from Ewan brought the party to a halt, while a second bark had the men dismounting. This would have been Eva's opportunity to get her first glimpse of her new home, were it not for the fact that Donaidh lifted her down from the saddle even as the other men shifted and stepped down themselves. The man was quick to follow her to the ground and Eva found herself once more surrounded. Now she stood in a forest of bodies, both men and horses, and once again, she couldn't see a thing. It was becoming damned annoying.

"Ewan."

Eva glanced around sharply at that call, the ring of authority in it and the way the men around her suddenly stiffened to attention told her that it was most likely their laird, her husband. Biting her lip, she quickly tried to brush the wrinkles and dust out of her gown with one hand, while attempting to push the stiff wind-ratted mass that was her hair into some semblance of order as she listened to the men talk and awaited the introduction that surely would come.

"M'laird," she heard Ewan's baritone greeting.

"Any trouble?"

"Nay. We rode through the night as ye ordered, rested on the edge of Caxton land, collected her and rode through the night on the way back. The trip was without incident, m'laird."

"Good. Magaidh—Oh, there ye are. The lass'll be exhausted, could ye—"

"Aye, I shall see to 'er," a woman's voice assured him.

"Thank ye. Ye men see to yer horses, then report to me."

Eva stilled at that order and the sudden shifting of men around her as they moved to collect the reins of their horses to lead them away. They took Millie with them as well, leaving Eva standing alone to stare after them with bewilderment. For a moment, she felt rather like a lost child abandoned at market, then she gathered her wits enough to glance sharply around in search of the man who was her husband. The only person still standing near her was a woman; a beautiful, dark-haired creature with a welcoming smile.

"Eva?"

"Aye," she acknowledged uncertainly.

"I am Magaidh. I'll take ye to yer room and see ye taken care of." She held a hand out and clasped Eva's in welcome, then drew it through her arm and began walking her to the castle door.

"My husband?" Eva asked in a small voice as they entered the building. It was finally sinking in that after all her worry about her appearance on first meeting him, the man hadn't even troubled himself to look on her. He'd ordered this woman to tend to her, then had wandered off without even a greeting.

"Connall has business to attend to. 'Sides, he was aware that ye'd be exhausted and would want little more than hot food, a warm bath, and a soft bed to rest in. He'll greet ye proper in the morning once

ye've recovered from yer journey," the woman assured her with a pat of her hand, then called several soft orders in a language that sounded like so much jargon to her untrained ear. Gaelic, Eva supposed as she was led up the stairs.

"Ye must be exhausted. A bath'll reinvigorate ye ere ye eat, will it not."

Despite the couching of the words, it wasn't a question, the woman was informing her that she would be bathing before dining. Eva merely nodded. She hadn't a clue who Magaidh was, but she was dressed in a fine silk gown and had a definite air of authority about her. All in all, Eva supposed the other woman fit the image of a fine Lady of the Castle, more than she did herself.

"Are you the MacAdie's sister?" she hazarded the guess as they had ascended the stairs and started along the hall.

"Mother," the woman corrected with a smile, her eyebrows rising when Eva abruptly stopped walking and gaped at her in horror.

"Dear God, I've been married off to a boy," Eva breathed and the woman laughed.

"Nay."

"But I must be! You are not old enough to have a child more than ten."

"Connall is well past ten, lass."

"But—" Eva paused as realization claimed her. Of course, this woman was MacAdie's stepmother, that was the obvious explanation. The voice she had heard in the bailey, the one she had assumed was her husband's, had held the strength and timber of a man of at least thirty, and a man used to carrying responsibility.

"Here we are." Magaidh opened a door and led her into a large bedchamber. Eva gaped at the room. To a girl used to bare walls and sometimes even bare floors, the grandeur that met her eyes here was rather dazzling. This room was at least four times the size of the tiny bedchamber she had occupied at Caxton, and, these walls were not bare. Fine tapestries lined each wall, fresh smelling rushes carpeted the floor and a cheery fire burned gaily in a huge fireplace making it obvious that they were not stingy with their wood here, as they were at Caxton.

Eva moved to the bed and ran her fingers lightly over the fine silk material that hung around it. It was pulled back now, but would be lovely when drawn around the bed to block out the cold and draft, she thought with a sigh of pleasure. "Tis lovely."

"I'm glad ye like it."

Eva turned to smile shyly at the woman, then glanced to the door she had forgotten to close as servants began filing through it. Two men came first, bearing a huge tub which they set near the fire. Several women followed with pail after pail of steaming water. These were poured into the tub, along with a small jar of sweet smelling flowers and herbs. Once this was done, all but one servant left.

"Glynis will help ye with yer bath," Magaidh announced moving toward the door as she spoke. "I'll have yer meal sent up once ye've finished."

"Thank you," Eva said with a sincerity she couldn't possibly express properly.

Magaidh glanced back with a smile that seemed to warm her from the inside out. "Yer more than welcome, child. Yer home now."

Eva shook her head as the door closed behind the lovely woman. Imagine someone so young calling her child, she thought with weary amusement, then turned to smile at the girl who was to act as her maid. About her own height, but a bit plumper and with shiny red hair and freckles that would rival Keddy's, the girl smiled at her widely in return.

"Shall I help ye to undress, m'lady?" Glynis asked.

Eva almost demurred, as she wasn't really used to help. While it was true that Mavis had been pressed into acting as her lady's maid a time or two, it was mostly to fuss over Eva's hair. She generally dressed and undressed herself. However, Eva found that her energy appeared to have drained away and she was suddenly so exhausted that undressing seemed a terrible effort. The assistance would be welcome.

"Yes, please," Eva murmured as she approached the girl and the tub she stood beside.

* * *

"Where is she?"

Magaidh MacAdie glanced up as Connall crossed the great hall to the trestle table where she sat. "She's sleepin' o' course. The poor lass was exhausted after such a strenuous journey. She bathed, ate, and fell right to sleep." Her gaze slid to Ewan as he too sat down. "Could ye no have stopped fer at least four or five hours last night to give the girl a rest? Tis obvious she's no used to sech long journeys."

"I ordered him to ride straight through," Connall excused the man as they settled at the table. A servant immediately rushed forward with ale. Connall nodded his thanks, but didn't touch his drink.

"Well, I hope 'twas fer a good purpose. The lass has a sorry case o' saddle sores from the journey."

"Better saddle sores than dead," Connall said. "With the trouble we've been having of late, it seemed a sensible precaution."

Magaidh's mouth tightened at the reminder of the recent difficulties that had arisen around the MacNachtons and MacAdies. The rumors had started again, some of their people had been killed, and there had been two attempts on Connall's life, though they weren't sure if these attacks were connected to the rumors. Pushing these grim thoughts away, she merely said, "Well, I had Glynis put some salve on the sores. She'll recover soon enough."

Connall grunted at this news, then glanced at Ewan. "Did she whinge about being sore?"

The man shook his head. "Nay. Said nary a word o' complaint. No about the length of the journey or ought else."

Connall's gaze narrowed on the other man. Ewan was so obviously pleased to be able to offer this news, he was left to wonder what the man *wasn't* saying. "Were there any problems at all?"

The man shifted uncomfortably, leading Connall to believe he'd been right. There *was* something. "Ewan,"

he said in warning tones.

"No a problem really," the man finally said. "There was a tense bit though when the men thought her mad."

"What?" Magaidh looked shocked. "Well, 'tis nonsense. She's a perfectly lovely lass."

"Aye. She is. I mean she isna mad," Ewan said quickly. "It's jest she was talking to her horse fer a bit and the men mistook it fer her talking to hersel' and began to fret that she was—"

"Talking to her horse?" Connall interrupted.

"Er... Aye. It seems the mare isna used to long journeys outside o' Caxton, and she was soothing the beast. A lot," he added, feeling he should mention that. If there was something wrong with the lass, her husband should be prepared.

Connall considered this information, but merely nodded. It didn't seem a problem to him if the lass wanted to soothe her mare. He was rather fond of his own mount.

The three of them fell silent and Connall finally turned his attention to the drink the servant had set before him. The ale was tepid and bitter, just the way he liked it. An hour ago he wouldn't have enjoyed it nearly as much as he did now, though he'd had another thirst needing attention. One he fought as often as he could, but had to give in to eventually to live.

"Ye should've at least greeted the girl."

Connall glanced at his mother. She was giving him that reproving look he hated so much. It always managed to bring guilt to the fore in him, as it did now. "I thought she'd prefer to rest and recover from her journey first."

"Aye, but surely a hello wouldn't have harmed?"

Connall shrugged uncomfortably and concentrated on his drink. He hadn't intended avoiding his new bride in the way he had. It had been a spur of the moment decision. He'd come out of the keep on being told the men were back, expecting to greet her, but on arriving and finding her not in evidence—though he'd spied the skirt of her dress between the legs of his milling men—he'd been content to leave the meeting until later. Actually, he'd felt relief on avoiding the meeting as he'd walked away.

Connall was finding this business of marriage rather dismaying. He agreed with his cousin, Cathal, that it was necessary, but that didn't mean he had to like it. In truth, he had put the actual doing of the deed off these last months while Cathal had gone out and found himself a bride back in the spring. Connall supposed he had been waiting to see how that turned out before bothering about it himself. In the end, it had turned out surprisingly well. His cousin's bride, Bridget, suited Cathal perfectly and the pair were now enjoying wedded bliss. If Connall's own marriage went half as well, he'd be content.

That thought brought Eva Caxton to mind. Theirs was not a great love match, but he had met and liked the girl when he'd spoken to her, though not so much that he had decided to marry her then. In fact, when he had finally decided that it was time to stop putting off his duty and to get married, he had at first found himself stumped as to who to marry. He could hardly count on his Nightriders to stumble upon a lass in distress and carry her home to him to wed as had happened with Cathal and Bridget. As for contracting a marriage in the usual way, that had seemed an unlikely event for him to manage. His clan

did not enjoy a good reputation just at present what with the rumors about their ancestry and such coming back into question. Connall had almost thought he'd set himself an impossible task, then he had recalled his enforced visit to court.

His presence had been demanded there to stamp out the rumors about him and his people. Now that the English had signed the treaty of Picquigny with France and were keeping up their truce with Scotland, it seemed that good King James had a desire to see peace in his own small part of the world. He'd demanded Connall and his cousin Cathal's presence at court to help silence the rumors around their clans. Cathal had managed to avoid the task, but Connall had made the journey... and a hellish one it had been too. It was while he was there that he had met and spoken to Eva Caxton. He had passed only a few moments in her company, but she had stuck in his mind, and Connall had asked about her, only to learn that her brother had brought her to court to try to find her a husband.

Normally, this would not have been a problem for such a lovely young girl, but the brother was said to be a greedy miser who hoarded the gold he'd been left by his wealthy parents and claimed poverty to all who would listen. He was trying to palm her off without a dower, and had been failing miserably at the task since everyone at court knew that his smoke screen about poverty was just so much nonsense.

Eva Caxton had left court the day before Connall had, and without a marriage offer. Deciding that if she were still available, she would do as well as anyone else, Connall had counted on her brother's greed to aid in the endeavor and had sent Ewan and five men with gold to barter for her. He had fully expected that—so long as she was still available—Ewan would be bringing him back a bride. And he had, of course, though Ewan had claimed it was a close thing. Jonathan Caxton had been all set to shuffle the girl off to an abbey the very day after Ewan and the men had arrived. Had Connall hesitated about the decision just one more day, she would have been beyond his reach and he would have been left to find another family desperate—or greedy-enough to sell him a daughter of the house.

Connall wasn't sure whether he should be glad the task was done or not. He supposed it at least meant one problem was taken care of. Now he just had to get the woman with child and—

"We should hold a proper wedding now she's here."

Connall's thoughts died abruptly at that suggestion from his mother. "What? Why? Ewan stood in fer me at the proxy wedding. Tis all legal. Or will be once we consummate it."

"Aye, but surely 'twouldn't hurt to hold a small ceremony here to make it all official—"

"The proxy wedding was official," Connall interrupted.

"Aye, but ye were nae there fer it."

"So?"

Magaidh sighed. "Do ye feel married, son?"

Connall paused to consider the matter. In truth, he didn't feel any different than he had the day before, or the day before that and he had to wonder with some irritation, just what being married was supposed to feel like.

"Ye see." Magaidh didn't bother to hide her satisfaction. "Ye doona, do ye?"

Connall scowled, unwilling to admit anything of the sort. Another wedding was nothing but a waste to his mind, but his mother was determined to argue the case.

"It'd be better fer both o' ye. I doubt the proxy wedding was anything more than a couple o' words spoken by the priest and contracts signed." Magaidh raised an eyebrow at Ewan as she suggested that, satisfaction suffusing her face when he gave a brief nod of agreement. "I doubt Eva feels any more married than ye. And it will give our people the chance to see her and see that yer married as well."

Connall closed his mouth on the protest he had been about to launch as Magaidh's last words caught his attention. It wouldn't be a bad thing for their people to witness the event, and he really should be sure she was recognized by one and all as his bride... and under his protection.

"Ewan, we need a priest," he announced firmly.

"I shall see to it, m'laird." The man was on his feet at once and moving toward the door to the keep.

"Jest send someone fer him," Connall instructed. "Then rest. Ye've had a long journey."

"Aye, m'laird." The door closed behind him with a thud.

Chapter Three

Eva awoke at once. There was no slow stirring to wakefulness, no abrupt jerking awake, she simply rolled onto her back, opened her eyes and felt alert and awake. Pleasantly so. Remaining where she lay for a moment, she let her eyes drift around the large luxurious room where she had slept. It was much more welcoming than her own room had ever been.

But she supposed this was her room now. At least, she hoped so. It looked like it might belong to the laird of a wealthy clan. That thought reminded her that she was married now. It was an odd thought. Eva didn't feel married, though she wasn't sure what being married should feel like. She felt no different than she had every day of her life for some time now. Well, perhaps that wasn't true. She did feel a bit odd. She was in a strange place, with strange people around her. And now had a husband who would share her life and her bed.

That last thought made her glance abruptly to the right side of the bed. It was empty. For one moment she had considered that her husband may have joined her after she had fallen asleep. But it would appear not. Eva was mostly relieved about this, but felt a touch of concern too. Why hadn't her husband joined her last night in what was most likely his own bed? He hadn't bothered to greet her on her arrival yesterday either. This seemed odd to her.

Eva hadn't really contemplated the welcome she'd expected on arriving at MacAdie, but had she taken the time and trouble to, she certainly wouldn't have expected it to be what had happened. Her husband had neither greeted her on her arrival, nor even come to see her as she ate her meal after her bath. Now, it appeared, he hadn't joined her in his own bed... Unless he had and had already risen to greet the day.

That thought made her glance toward the fur covered window. How late in the morning was it? Perhaps she had slept through his arrival and leave taking. Perhaps he *had* slept here. Where else would he sleep?

Pushing the furs aside, Eva slid her feet to the floor, giving a delicate shudder at the cool straw underfoot. Despite it being summer, the night had been cool and even now there was still a nip to the morning air, but the furs piled on the bed had kept her warm and snug. Leaving them reluctantly behind, she scampered quickly to the window and drew the fur aside enough to see out into the bailey below. A wave of warm air struck her face and she saw that the sun was high in the sky. By her guess it must be mid-morning and guilt nagged her at once. She'd slept quite late. This was hardly the way to impress her new husband.

Eva let the fur fall back into place, then just as quickly pulled it aside once more. It was warmer outside than it was in the room at the moment. The furs had kept the warmer air out this morning, just as effectively as they had kept the worst of the cold air out last night. Finding a bit of cloth lying on the stone ledge of the window, Eva tied the fur back, glanced briefly down into the busy bustling bailey again, then turned back to the now sunlit room.

She would dress and go below to break her fast and finally meet her husband, she decided, then immediately began to consider what to wear. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of choice in the matter; there was the faded blue gown she'd worn for the journey here, or the threadbare grey gown she'd brought in her satchel.

Eva grimaced to herself as she glanced around in search of her satchel. The grey gown would be wrinkled, but it would be fresh in comparison to the dust covered blue one. She was trying to recall where she had set her satchel on entering the room the night before when a soft tapping sounded at the door. Giving up on the bag for now, Eva scampered back to bed and climbed in, then dragged the furs up to her neck and held them there as she called, "Enter."

The door opened at once and the servant girl who had helped her with her bath the night before poked her head inside. Spotting her sitting up in bed, Glynis smiled widely. "Yer oop."

The redhead slid into the room and nearly danced to the bed, waving a bundle of rose colored cloth in hand. "Lady Magaidh said to bring this oop to ye."

"Oh," Eva breathed out the word as the girl shifted the material and held it up for her to see. It was a gown, and quite the finest one Eva had ever seen. Tossing the bedclothes aside again, she crawled to the edge of the bed and reached out to brush the tips of her fingers gently over the soft cloth. "It's lovely. Are you sure 'tis for me?"

"Aye." The maid looked as excited as if the gown were for herself. "Last night, I took yer two gowns below. I was plannin' to wash the one and hang the other to let the wrinkles out, but when Lady Magaidh saw them, she said "They simply wouldna do." Glynis grinned. "And she fetched this one fer ye. She said 'twas more befitting the Lady MacAdie. And she said 'tis yours now. Ye'll look lovely in it, m'lady."

"Oh." Eva breathed again, then blinked her eyes in alarm. Tears had filled them at the kindness. Embarrassed, she dashed them quickly away, then scrambled off the bed to claim the gown. Glynis grinned as she held it against herself and turned in a circle. Eva thought it was the most beautiful gown she'd ever seen. Certainly it was the most beautiful gown she'd ever owned. "Is it really mine?"

"Aye. Lady Magaidh said so. And she said we'd be havin' to see to a whole new wardrobe fer ye. One that befits the bride of the MacAdie."

"For me?" Eva asked with amazement. A whole wardrobe. How many gowns was that? She'd never

had more than two at a time, sometimes only the one.

"Come, m'lady. I'll fix yer hair and help ye to dress." Glynis beamed widely. "I'm to be yer lady's maid." Her smile faltered briefly and she added an uncertain, "If ye think I'll do, that is. Lady Magaidh will assign anoother girl if yer no pleased—"

"I'm well pleased with you as my maid, Glynis," she assured her quickly and was relieved when the other girl began to smile again, but she had meant what she'd said; Eva felt sure that the two of them would get on just fine. Glynis had been very sweet and kind with her last night as she'd helped Eva with her bath and preparing for bed. Eva was certain that she had made the right decision several minutes later when Glynis finished working on her hair and presented a small mirror for her to see how she looked. The young maid had worked miracles. The little redhead had managed to make Eva look beautiful and that was not a word she had ever thought she'd use to describe herself, but she felt beautiful at that moment as she peered at herself in the small mirror.

Glynis had collected every last strand of Eva's golden runaway tresses and put them up on top of her head, then dressed it with ribbons of matching rose that Magaidh had apparently sent with the gown. Eva felt like a princess.

"Tis all right, is it not, m'lady?"

Recognizing the anxiety in the girl's voice, Eva forced herself to stop staring at her reflected image and turned to give the maid an impulsive hug.

"Tis more than all right, Glynis," she assured her as she stepped back. "You've worked miracles. Thank you."

Flushing with pleasure at the compliment, Glynis took the mirror Eva handed back. "Yer mair than welcome, m'lady. Tis jest glad I am that yer pleased."

"More than pleased," Eva assured her, standing and brushing her hands down the soft cloth of the gown she wore. "Do you think Cook could find me something to eat? I know 'tis late in the day, but—"

"Oh aye, Cook has a lovely repast all set fer ye," Glynis interrupted to assure her. "Lady Magaidh warned her as ye'd probably sleep late after yer long journey, so she served normal breakfast fer everyone else, and made a special one fer ye. I was jest coming to check on ye when Ewan informed her ye were up, so she's like to have it all ready fer ye by now."

"Ewan informed her?" Eva blinked in surprise. "How did he know I was up?"

"He saw ye in the window, m'lady," she explained, then seeing Eva's embarrassment, added a reassuring smile. "Ye should go below and see what Cook fixed fer ye ere it gets cold."

"Aye." Eva shrugged away her mild embarrassment at being spotted in the window in the borrowed nightdress and turned toward the door. It was doubtful the man had seen much but her small figure from wherever he'd been in the bailey when she peered out, she assured herself, then paused at the door when she realized that Glynis wasn't following her. "Are you not coming?"

The maid shook her head as she bent to pick up Eva's nightdress. "I'll jest be puttin' things away first, m'lady. Ye go on. If ye need me, just send one o' the maids to fetch me."

Eva hesitated, oddly reluctant to leave the girl's company behind. She had only known the maid a day, yet felt like she was the only friend she had in the world.

"Go on," the maid urged. "Ye have to eat. Cook will be sore if ye pass up her meal after she worked so hard at it and all."

"Aye." Eva forced herself to open the door and step out, then pulled the door reluctantly closed, wishing all the while that Glynis were coming with her. She felt oddly uncertain and small all of a sudden. The only other time Eva had felt this way was when she'd had to venture out alone at court in search of her brother. It was such a large castle, and full of so many strangers, all dressed in their finery and peering down their noses at her faded and outdated gowns with disdain. It was the only time in her life that Eva had found herself concerned with her appearance. Usually, she didn't mind that her gowns were worn and old and not at the height of fashion, but after two days of being sneered at, and laughed at behind hands, all she'd wanted was to go home where she was accepted as she was. Unable to do that, she'd instead borne the rude behavior when necessary, then run and hid herself away as often as she could get away with it.

Reminding herself that she was no longer wearing a threadbare, outdated gown and that she looked every bit the lady of the castle, Eva forced her shoulders straight and headed along the hall. She heard the murmur of voices rising from the great hall before she quite reached the stairs. It sounded like two people talking, a man and a woman. Eva forced herself to take a deep breath and continue. Finally, she would meet her husband, she told herself and wasn't surprised that her heart picked up speed and began to race a bit. The racing stopped the moment she started down the stairs and chanced a glance at the occupants of the room below and saw that it was Ewan and Magaidh seated at the trestle table, not a strange man who might be her husband.

Eva tried to ignore the relief that coursed through her, but her feet moved a little quicker down the stairs now that she knew the dreaded meeting wasn't at hand. Really, she reprimanded herself silently, she should look forward to meeting the man, not dread it so.

"Good morn—oh!" She paused and blinked at the woman seated with Ewan at the table. Eva had thought it was Magaidh, but while she had the same dark good looks and similar facial features, this woman was older, closer in age to Ewan, she thought.

"This is Ailie, m'lady," Ewan stood to introduce them, drawing Eva out of her startled silence.

"Short for Aileen," the woman added as she too now stood and moved around the table to offer Eva a welcoming hug. "Welcome to MacAdie."

Eva smiled as Aileen stepped back. "Thank you," she murmured, but her gaze moved questioningly to Ewan. She hadn't a clue who the woman was. She knew so little about her new home.

"Ailie's me wife," Ewan said with some pride, then added, "And yer husband's sister."

Eva's eyes shot back to the woman with surprise. Aileen MacAdie looked older than Magaidh yet she was Connall MacAdie's sister, while Magaidh had claimed to be his mother. Last night Eva had explained away the other woman's youthful appearance to herself by deciding that Magaidh must be a stepmother. That explanation, she realized now, would work just as well to explain the age difference between the two women. Magaidh was obviously stepmother to Aileen as well. Eva supposed that meant that her husband was probably of an age with Ewan and Aileen, older than herself by a good twenty years. Not what she had expected, but not so bad, she reassured herself. At least he was not in his

dotage. And really, what had she expected? A handsome and wealthy young man willing to buy her to bride when he would be so much of a catch on the marriage market? No, of course not.

"Are ye feelin' recovered from the journey?" Ewan asked, and Eva suddenly realized they were all still standing while she had pondered the matter. She was being rude. Moving forward at once, she settled at the table even as Ailie and Ewan did and offered the couple a smile.

"Yes, thank you. Much recovered," she said with a wry smile, knowing that she had probably slept much longer than he. Eva doubted if he had gone to bed as early as herself yesterday and he obviously hadn't slept as late. "And you?"

"Aye." He glanced over his shoulder toward a door and opened his mouth, but before Ewan could call out whatever order he had planned to, the door opened and several servants bustled in. Relaxing, he turned back and grinned at her. "Cook's made something special to welcome ye to MacAdie and we've been waiting all morning to see what 'tis."

"Oh, I'm sorry to have made you wait," Eva murmured, watching with curiosity as the maids began to set platters on the table. Red hair seemed to be a common trait amongst the MacAdies. Several of the servants had the same carrotty red hair and freckles as Glynis.

"Doona fret," Ailie laughed. "Ewan's teasing ye. We didna expect ye to rise even as early as ye have. The trip here must've been exhausting fer ye. I doubt that I could have managed it as well as Ewan claims ye did."

Eva smiled at that compliment, but her attention was quickly caught again by the food being laid out before them. The most wonderful smells were coming from the platters and Eva suddenly felt starved. Her stomach was reacting as if she hadn't eaten since leaving Caxton, yet Ewan had given her oatcakes on the journey and she had eaten a full repast the night before of cheese and bread and meat.

"Hmmm," Ewan murmured as the servants finally finished arranging the food and moved off. "I see bannocks and crowdie... and berries of course. Oh look, she made black buns and Atholl Brose too. Mmmm." He grinned at Eva. "And she made enough for us all."

"Course I did!"

That snapped comment made Eva glance over her shoulder at the robust woman now approaching the table.

"Think I didn't know you'd be sniffing around the table, Ewan MacAdie? Yer a man ruled by yer appetites like every MacAdie around and before ye." She sniffed at the man, then turned to Eva, her expression turning into a welcoming smile. "Hello, m'lady. I'm Effie, cook here and this is me welcome to MacAdie fer ye. I'm hoping ye live a long and happy life with us."

"Thank you, Effie." She smiled at the cook. "This all looks lovely."

The woman smiled and nodded and glanced over the table. "I usually serve jest the bannocks and crowdie—or some other cheese—to break fast, and fruit too if ye've a taste," the woman informed her.

Eva glanced at the dishes the woman had gestured to as she spoke. The bannocks were simple oatcakes, the crowdie appeared to be a white cheese rolled in oats. The fruit on the table was all berries; raspberries, strawberries, tayberries, and brambles.

"But this morning I made the black buns and Atholl Brose special fer ye, as Ewan pointed out," she added heavily, then explained, "The black bun is a rich fruit cake with raisins, currants, and fine-chopped peel and such in it. Atholl Brose is a lovely pudding of oatmeal, honey, cream, and whiskey. I hope ye'll be enjoying them both."

"I'm sure I will," Eva assured her and wasn't just being polite. Her mouth was watering from the smells around her. The black buns and pudding and indeed the bannocks were all obviously freshly made. She flushed with embarrassment as her stomach growled, but Effie merely laughed and began to dish food into the trencher before Eva.

"Here ye are then, lassie. No need to wait. Yer stomach's wantin' filling."

Eva could have hugged the woman when the cook piled more food on the trencher in front of her than she ever would have dared to put on it herself. Guilty as she had always been made to feel for being a burden to her brother, Eva had always ate sparingly, and had always felt hungry for it. But Effie had no such qualms to restrain her and heaped the food on until Eva wanted to moan with pleasure.

"There we are then, and I'll be expectin' ye tae eat all of that so's ye don't insult me cookin'. We need to put some meat on those fine bones of yers," she announced. "Now, I'm back to the kitchens. I've lots to do ere the nooning repast."

"Thank you," Eva called after her, then turned back to survey her trencher with anticipation. Where to start?

It was a question that repeated itself in her head some time later as Eva tried to decide what to do next. She had enjoyed a lovely discussion with Ailie and Ewan while eating the fine fare the cook, Effie, had presented for her. Eva had eaten every last bite of her meal, and was now almost sorry she had. Her stomach felt ready to explode. Reprimanding herself never to be so greedy again, she'd stayed at table talking to Ailie and Ewan about desultory subjects until her discomfort eased.

Eva had learned that, not only did she now have Ailie and Ewan as her new brother and sister-in-law, she also had two nieces and a nephew. She had rather hoped that they would be sweet young children she could spoil and rock on her knee, but Ailie had quickly corrected her in that. The couple's children were grown, with the son the oldest, having seen twenty-five years. One of the daughters had a daughter of her own. That child was young enough to spoil and rock on her knee at least, Eva supposed, and readjusted her idea of the woman's age in her mind. She had thought Ewan had seen forty summers and Ailie must be close behind. Now she suspected they were a touch older than that and had just aged well. Either that or Ewan had married Ailie right out of the cradle. That made Eva wonder just how old her husband was. Was Ailie the older of the two? Or was her husband close to fifty summers?

It wasn't unusual for girls to be married to older men, and a husband twenty years the bride's senior could be common, but thirty years or more was a bit much. Unwilling to think about that, Eva had tried to steer the conversation toward her husband and where he might be, but Ailie and Ewan had seemed resistant to her attempts. All Ewan had said about her husband was that he was away for the day, but should return around supper. Despite that, Eva had found her eyes darting to the keep door every time it had opened to admit someone, some part of her hoping and at the same time dreading, that he would change his plans and suddenly appear to welcome her as his sister, his mother, and even his cook already had. But it never happened. It seemed her husband wasn't troubled about making her feel welcome.

Eva found that a bit alarming. His willingness to pay a dower to claim her was at odds with the way he

was now seeming to ignore her very presence. She tried to reassure herself that he was the laird here, and therefore busy and she could hardly expect him to bring everything to a halt for her. But Eva still found herself a bit disappointed. She was also a bit concerned. Perhaps he had seen the party arrive and caught a glimpse of her where she had not been able to see anyone else. He could have been on the wall as they rode in and rushed down to greet them. If that were the case, perhaps he had been disappointed in her looks and suddenly sorry about the bargain he had made..

That was an alarming thought. While Eva had been a tad distressed by suddenly finding herself bought to bride and dragged off to the wilds of Scotland, now that she was here, it wasn't so bad. Everyone, bar her husband, had been very kind and welcoming and Eva was starting to see that life here might be pleasant, she could even be happy. Besides, being sent home in shame, rejected by the man who had saved her from the abbey, was a consequence too horrifying to contemplate.

It seemed to Eva that it was in her best interests to prove her worth to her husband. Certainly she wasn't the prettiest girl in England—or Scotland for that matter—so her value had to be proven in more concrete ways. She had to prove her usefulness, Eva had decided. The fact that proving her usefulness had never secured her spot at Caxton was not one she allowed herself to ponder. It was too disheartening.

Instead, once Ailie had excused herself to go visit with her daughter, and Ewan had removed himself to oversee the keep as first while her husband was away, Eva had sat at the trestle table as the servants cleared things away and tried to think what she could do.

Inspiration had struck just as the last of the things were cleared away and Eva popped up from her seat with excitement. She needed to find Glynis; she would need help with this endeavor.

Connall found Ewan waiting for him when he stepped out of the secret room where he slept during the daylight hours. That in itself was a bad sign as Ewan would usually have been at the trestle table enjoying his supper at this hour. The fact that he wasn't suggested there was a problem.

"What's happened?" he asked abruptly as he let the stone door slide closed behind him. "Has there been another attack?"

"Nay," Ewan assured him quickly. "Nay, nothing so serious."

"Then why are ye here?"

"Weell, there is a matter I wished tae speak with ye about. Just a small matter really," he added when Connall began to frown.

"A small matter that has ye waitin' at the passage fer me to rise?" he asked doubtfully.

"Weell." Ewan hesitated, then said, "Tis about yer wife."

Connall's eyebrows rose in surprise, then lowered with displeasure. "Has something happened to the lass?"

"Nay." Ewan frowned. "Nought has happened to her."

"Then what is it, mon?" Connall was becoming impatient.

"She... er... Tisn't what's happened to her, 'tis what she's done, Connall," he said finally.

"Well, spit it oot, maun. What has she done?"

Chapter Four

"*Shewhat* ?"

Ewan winced at that roar and all his own worry and anger at Eva's actions that day washed away under sudden pity for her. Connall wasn't happy and he knew from experience that the man could be unpleasant when angry. Where he had been outraged himself earlier and upset on Aileen's behalf, Ewan suddenly found himself trying to minimize the matter. "Weell noo, Connall, her intentions were good. She just didnae understand the damage she could do. Anywhere else, her efforts to brighten the great hall wouldnae ha'e been a problem."

Connall waved his excuses away. "Is Aileen all right?"

"Aye." Ewan shifted, some of his earlier upset returning at the reminder of how Aileen could have been harmed by Eva's efforts. "Aye. She saw what Eva was doing from the stairs and sent a servant to fetch me while she went back to our room."

"Hmm." Connall looked a little less upset, but was still displeased. "Where's me wife now?"

"She was sat at table still when I came tae meet ye," Ewan answered, following Connall as he headed for the stairs.

"If a servant fetched ye, why'd ye no tell her to put them back up?"

"I did try to tell her that removing the furs from the windows and arrow slits in the great hall wasn't a good idea, but she was sure ye'd be pleased, and insisted on yer seeing it first and making the final decision," he said with remembered vexation. Ewan wasn't used to such flouting of his authority. As first, he was in charge when Connall wasn't available and everyone listened to him. Except Eva, it would seem.

Connall grunted and started down the stairs, but Ewan paused at the top of them, suddenly reluctant to be a witness to the upbraiding his new mistress was about to get, and was now almost sorry that he hadn't found a milder way of telling Connall instead of blurting it all out in high dudgeon as he had. In excusing the lass' behavior to her husband he had managed to get past his own anger enough to see that she hadn't really done anything so awful. In any other keep, her attempts to brighten the great hall would have been perfectly normal and perhaps even appreciated. Here it was not, but they could hardly expect her to know that.

After a hesitation, Ewan turned toward the chamber he shared with his wife and went that way instead.

"Is Connall verra angry?" Aileen asked as he entered.

"I thought ye'd still be at table," Ewan muttered as he closed the door.

"I didn't wish to embarrass Eva further by witnessing her upset when Connall reacts to the great hall with anger rather than the pleasure she had hoped for," Aileen said quietly. "She was only trying to make a place for herself and fit in."

"Aye." Ewan sighed as he sank into the chair opposite hers by the fire. "I wish ye'd pointed that out to me before I went to speak to Connall."

Aileen smiled at her husband. "I knew ye'd see that for yersel' eventually, but wouldnae listen while ye were in such a temper. There's no talking to ye when ye're in a temper, my love. Much like Connall."

Ewan scowled at the comment. He could agree that Connall had a temper, yet here was his wife claiming he had one too, and he supposed, if he were to be honest, he would admit that he did.

"I hope he isnae too hard on her."

"Aye," Ewan agreed, but knew that he had rather wound up the man with his own upset, greeting him with it the moment he arose as he had. Sighing, he heaved himself to his feet. "I'd best go be sure he doesnae overdo it."

Aileen smiled and stood to kiss him on the cheek. "Remind him she was only tryin' to find a way to please her new husband."

"Aye." Ewan brushed her cheek with the back of one hand, marveling that he loved her as much today, if not more, than he had when he'd tackled Connall and asked to have her for his wife thirty years ago, then he turned and left the room.

The great hall was nearly empty when Ewan started down the stairs. This was unusual, on a normal night the tables would still be filled with people talking loudly as they finished their meals. It seemed Aileen wasn't the only one who had made a discreet withdrawal, he thought as he spotted Eva's lone figure at the table. She appeared a very small and lonely figure to him. Connall was crossing the great hall and just approaching her now.

Ewan started down the stairs, only then noting the men standing by the fire watching their laird approach his new bride. It was Donaidh, Geordan, Domhall, Ragnall, and Keddy, all the men who had ridden with him to collect her, and he descended the stairs to join them. He would watch from there and intervene only if necessary.

Eva picked nervously at the joint of chicken in her trencher. She had worked hard this afternoon and was exhausted and should have been starving too, but found herself attacked by a case of nerves instead as her gaze slid unhappily around the empty tables. She was beginning to get the feeling that her brilliant plan of that morning wasn't perhaps as brilliant as she'd thought. The reaction to her removing the furs from the windows and arrow slits to allow some proper sunlight in to brighten the place had not gone over well with anyone so far. Not even Glynis, and Eva had rather counted on the maid's support and encouragement, but instead the girl had tried to dissuade her. Unfortunately, Eva could be bullish when she had an idea, and—positive that her husband would like and appreciate her efforts—she had insisted on marching ahead with her plans.

Grimacing, she tugged the sleeve of her gown up and turned her arm over to examine the bruised and swollen forearm. Eva supposed that—had Glynis been at least a little more encouraging—she would have attempted to enlist the aid of a couple of male servants to aid in the endeavor, but fearing more resistance, she'd opted to do the chore herself, and had nearly managed to kill herself into the bargain.

Grimacing, she tugged the sleeve of her gown up and turned her arm over to examine her forearm. She'd nearly tumbled from the small ancient and rickety balcony that ran the length of the row of arrow slits when Ewan had come stomping into the great hall demanding to know what in God's name she thought she was doing. She'd stopped her fall by catching her arm on the rail, but then had been so irritated at the unnecessary accident—the man hadn't needed to startle her so with his bellowing and stomping about—that she had refused to undo all the work she had done and had insisted on waiting for Connall's pronouncement on the matter.

Now she was beginning to wish she had simply put the furs back up and forgotten the entire thing. The reaction of every last servant and soldier in the castle had not been encouraging. They had filed in for their meal this evening, all going quiet as they had spied the last rays of sunlight stabbing through the now uncovered windows, then had sat whispering amongst themselves until the last rays had died. Moments later, they had risen as one and hurriedly filed out.

Now Eva sat alone at table, wondering if her husband would bother to make an appearance. The man had been absent all day, "about his business" as Ewan had claimed and had yet to show himself. Eva had hoped to have a word with Aileen before she saw Connall, or at least before Connall saw her changes. She had been hoping for a bit of encouragement she supposed, some reassurance that Connall would indeed approve of the changes and appreciate her efforts. Unfortunately, her new sister-in-law hadn't come down since that morning and Eva was starting to fear that wasn't a good sign at all.

"Wife."

If she was slow to respond to that address, it was quite simply because it took a moment for Eva's distracted mind to recognize that she was the one being addressed. Not that she'd forgotten that she was married now and had a husband, but she hadn't considered that this meant that she was now a wife.

"Wife."

Eva turned slowly, her eyes moving with trepidation to the speaker, then she blinked in surprise. She had worried about her husband; who he might be, what he might look like, how old he must be and so on, but the man standing before her was nothing like she'd expected. She'd decided after meeting Aileen that he must be older, at least having seen forty-five to fifty summers, and she had worried about other things, such as what if he was unattractive to her? What if he had gone to fat at his advanced age or had bushels of unattractive grey facial hair? But this man was nothing like she'd expected; his hair was a midnight black as Aileen's was and he had the same deep brown eyes, but there the similarities ended. This man was no more than twenty-five or thirty years old and he was strong and well built with a flat stomach and wide shoulders. There was another fact, however, that was more surprising to Eva.

"We have met, my lord," she blurted.

Connall MacAdie seemed to be thrown off track by her words, and the grim, stern set to his features faltered briefly. He hesitated, then nodded. "Aye. At court."

"You spoke to me in the gardens," Eva remembered, smiling at the memory. She had fled there after dinner to escape the whispers and laughter about her plain, outdated dress. This man—Connall MacAdie she realized now, though she hadn't known his name at the time—had come across her out there. "You were very kind to me."

Her words seemed to make the man uncomfortable, and Eva supposed that men—warriors like the MacAdie laird was reputed to be—were discomfited to admit to a softer side. After a hesitation, he

settled on the trestle table bench beside her and seemed to pause to gather himself. Eva smiled at him brightly, relief and pleasure glowing on her face as she awaited whatever he was gathering himself to say. She was so glad—grateful even—that he was the man who had bartered for her. That fact was washing all her worries and fears away, for surely his kindness in the gardens was a sign that he would be equally kind in marriage. And he was handsome too. Eva was suddenly positive that she was the luckiest girl in the world at that moment.

"Ye—" he began, but paused as he glanced up and caught her expression. His gaze narrowed. "Why are ye lookin' at me like that?"

"Like what, my lord?" she asked with a beaming smile.

"Yer all smiling and happy looking."

"*I am* happy," she admitted. "I never knew your name you see, we did not introduce ourselves in the gardens, so I had no idea that you were the MacAdie, the lord I was married to and I was ever so worried that we might not suit. But now I know 'tis you..." She smiled brilliantly. "I just know everything will be all right."

Connall looked taken aback at her words, and Eva knew she was embarrassing him, but just had to tell him, "I worried that you would be old or fat and I would not find you attractive, but you are ever so handsome. Any girl would be pleased to claim you as husband. And ere I got here I worried that you might be mean or bad tempered, but you were so kind in the gardens at court, distracting me from my worries and embarrassment... Well, I just know I needn't worry about your being cruel. My sweet mama in heaven must have sent you to me to save me from the abbey. I am ever so lucky."

Connall simply stared at her, a blank look on his face. Eva waited a moment, but when he continued to stare at her as if at a loss, she cleared her throat and glanced around in search of something to talk about until he regained himself. And of course, her gaze landed on the now-uncovered windows and arrow slits. "I hope you do not mind," she began tentatively, then paused to clear her throat before nervously admitting, "In fact, I was hoping you would be pleased, but I—Well, I am new here of course, and wanted to do something to please you, something to prove my value, perhaps and... Well, I noticed that it was so dark and dreary in here with all the windows and arrow slits covered, so I set about removing the furs to allow some sunlight in during the day. It is night now, so you cannot see, but it is ever so much brighter without them." Eva glanced at him, pleased to see that the blank expression was slipping from his face. She was a little less pleased, however, to notice the grimness that now descended in its place. Alarm coursed through her. "Do you not like it?"

"Hmm." He seemed to be battling within himself over something, then he cleared his throat. "Tis no that I doona like it," he said slowly, though Eva was pretty sure that was an out-and-out lie since his expression rather said he didn't like it at all. "But the furs shall all have to be rehung tonight."

"You do not like it," she realized with disappointment. "I felt sure—Tis so much brighter with them down during the day."

"Do ye no think that had I wanted the furs down, I'd have ordered it done meself long ago?"

Eva blinked at that comment. In truth, that hadn't occurred to her, but it should have, she supposed. Her gaze slid to the windows again. Really, it was so much brighter without the furs during the day... which he hadn't seen, she reminded herself, and said, "Perhaps if you saw them during the daylight, tomorrow morn, mayhap? If you still did not like it then, I could—"

"I'll no see it," he said firmly. "The furs shall be returned at once."

"But—"

"And in future, ye'll check with meself or Ewan ere making any further changes." He stood abruptly then, signifying that the subject was now closed. "I've things to do and ye'll no doubt be abed ere I return, so I'll bid ye good night and wish ye good sleep."

Eva stared after him in amazement as Connall MacAdie marched to the keep doors and out. He hadn't even stopped to eat, and what had he meant that he would see her on the morrow? Was he not going to come to her bed to consummate their marriage that night? She had wondered if he had joined her in the chamber last night and she had merely slept through his arrival and departure, but now she realized that this was not the case. He had not slept alongside her, forgoing consummating the wedding to allow her some much needed rest after her long journey, he obviously had not joined her, and had no intention of doing so tonight either.

Eva was distracted from these distressing thoughts by the arrival of Ewan and the other men who had brought her here. Connall's brother-in-law avoided her gaze as he settled on the trestle table bench at her side. The other men followed suit as they found their own places on either side of them, then there was much throat clearing and uncomfortable shifting as Donaidh, Keddy, Geordan, Domhall, and Ragnall avoided meeting her eyes as well.

"Was he verra upset?"

Eva glanced to her left as Keddy finally asked that question. The redhead was finally meeting her gaze, though Eva almost wished he hadn't. The pity in his eyes made her stiffen her spine and force a smile as her pride exerted itself.

"Nay, not very. At least he did not yell or anything, but he did not care for the change," she admitted and bit her lip to keep it from trembling in distress at this magnificent failure of her attempts to please her husband.

"Well, it's no that he didnae like it, lass. He didnae e'en see it if ye'll recall," Geordan pointed out judiciously.

"Aye," Keddy agreed. "And ne'er would neither."

Eva glanced at the redhead with a frown. "Why would he not see it? Perhaps he missed it today, but surely tomorrow or the next day he would be around long enough to enjoy—"

"Nay." Keddy shook his head. "Cannae stand the sun, can he? No without it makin' him sick. He'd ne'er see it."

"What?" Eva frowned at this news, then glanced at Ewan who was glaring furiously at the young man.

Sighing, her husband's first turned to her, cleared his throat, then said, "I should've explained this to ye when I approached ye about it earlier, but ye were rather busy and I was so upset I wasnae thinking straight. Aileen and Connall cannae stand the sun. Their skin is fragile and the sun damages it," he explained slowly, sounding rather labored in the endeavor.

"You mean they react to the sun?" Eva asked, trying to make sense of his words.

That suggestion seemed to make Ewan brighten. "Aye, that's it. They've a sort of reaction to the sun. It makes them fair sick. Connall's is so bad he avoids it altogether, or the best he can, and Aileen... well," his expression softened. "She can take more sunlight, but no straight on and no fer too long."

"I see," Eva said slowly, thinking to herself that this was perhaps where some of the vile rumors about this family came from. If they could not go out in sunlight because of a negative reaction... This situation wasn't totally alien to Eva. There had been a girl in the village at Caxton who'd had a similar ailment, only she didn't get sick, but broke out in spots whenever she stayed out in the sun too long. If Connall's family suffered a similar ailment and because of this avoided the sun, well, that would explain why they were rarely seen in daylight. She shook her head to herself at this thought. People could be ever so cruel about things they didn't understand.

Eva grimaced as she realized the extent of the gaffe she had made. She'd thought to bring some cheer to the keep, but instead had threatened the health of its inhabitants, and most likely not just her husband and his sister. If this trait was common to their family... well, most clans were interrelated weren't they? Cousins and such?

Her gaze slid to Ewan. "You obviously have no negative reaction to the sun?"

"Nay," he admitted. "I'm originally of the MacDonald clan. I became a MacAdie when I married Aileen."

Eva nodded, then glanced at the other men in question.

"I'm a MacAdie," Donaidh announced. "I'm son to Aileen and Ewan, but the sun doesnae bother me."

"Then you are nephew to me!" Eva exclaimed, then frowned. "Why did no one tell me ere this?"

Ewan and Donaidh glanced at each other, then the father shrugged and said, "It's no important."

The son nodded, "Aye, and ye didnae ask, did ye?"

She clucked a sound of annoyance, then blinked at the realization that her new nephew was of an age with herself.

"I'm a MacAdie," Keddy said, distracting her from her thoughts. "But while I try to avoid the worst of the sun, it doesnae affect me like it does Connall and Aileen. I jest get more freckles." He grinned at her.

"Tis the same with me," Ragnall announced, flashing a freckled smile at her.

"Domhall and I are brothers; MacLarens by birth," Geordan informed her. "My ma moved us here when our da died and she married a MacAdie. We were jest wee lads then."

"I see," Eva said on a sigh, then glanced at Ewan again. "Is this why Aileen did not come down for supper?"

Ewan nodded solemnly.

"Oh dear," Eva sighed. "I am ever so sorry. You must apologize to her for me. I did not realize—I did not know or I never would have—" Pausing in her explanations, she stood abruptly. "Glynis!"

"What're ye doin', lass?" Ewan asked with a frown as he gained his feet beside her.

"I will rectify the matter at once." Eva announced firmly, then addressed the maid as she came running up, "Please fetch back the furs for the windows, Glynis. I must return them at once." She gave them all a reproving look as she added, "Had someone troubled themselves to tell me of this sun reaction business, I never would have removed them in the first place."

"We should've told ye," Keddy said sorrowfully as Glynis rushed to the corner where the furs were stacked.

"Aye," Ewan agreed. "That being the case, we'd be pleased to rehang the furs fer ye."

"Nay. I took them down and I shall put them back up," Eva said firmly, moving to meet Glynis halfway as the girl came rushing back. "And I shall apologize to Aileen myself as well." She shook her head as she took the furs. "As Connall said, had he wanted the furs down he should have ordered it done long ago. Obviously I do not yet know how things are done around here, but I should learn ere I start trying to change things."

"It'd be no trouble at all fer the men and meself to re-hang the furs, Lady Eva." Ewan was following her, and his men following him, as she marched to the rickety wooden staircase that led up to the landing along the row of arrow slits.

"Nay. I can manage it." Eva assured him. "But, perhaps one of you would be good enough to take my husband a drink and some food. I fear he was so upset he left without eating." She frowned over that as she started up the stairs, craning her neck in an effort to see over the stack of furs, and taking wide steps in an effort to avoid stepping on her gown and tripping herself up. "On second thought, you no doubt have enough to do, and I should probably be the one to take the food to him, as it is my fault he was too distressed to eat. Perhaps that and an apology will help him regain his appetite."

"I'm really thinkin' ye should let one o' the men—" Eva heard Ewan begin his suggestion again, but it ended on a gasp of horror as she—despite her great care—stepped on the hem of her gown, tangled her feet in it and stumbled back down the half dozen stairs she had mounted. Her cry of alarm was echoed by Glynis and the men on the ground.

Chapter Five

"There!" Magaidh smiled at Eva as she pulled the linens and furs up to cover her in the bed. "Ye jest rest noo, lass. Ye'll feel better come the morn."

Eva sighed miserably. The woman had been incredibly kind. Indeed, they all had. Ewan had performed a quick examination of her right there at the bottom of the stairs she'd fallen down, with the men worriedly overlooking the enterprise. Once assured that she wasn't too horribly injured, he had carried her up the stairs with the men and Glynis trailing.

Magaidh had met them in the hall on her way down and changed direction, accompanying them to the room Eva had been given. After sending the men away to tend to the furs, the other woman had ordered

Glynis off in search of a special salve for her bruises and some sort of herbal drink to soothe her, then had helped her to undress. Once Glynis had returned with the salve, Connall's stepmother had rubbed it gently into Eva's scrapes and bruises herself, before urging her to drink the not unpleasant potion she'd sent for. Now she had tucked her up in bed.

"Have you a bad reaction to sunlight as well?" Eva asked suddenly. She wasn't tired and really didn't wish to be alone.

Magaidh hesitated, then nodded.

Eva sighed unhappily. "I suppose that is why you haven't been downstairs all day either? Because I took the furs off the windows and let the sun in? I am sorry, Magaidh. I didn't realize."

"Tis all right, child. Ye couldnae ken."

"Nay, but I should have asked if there was a reason for the furs. I shall ask in future ere trying to change anything," she assured her.

"I'm sure ye shall." Magaidh smiled but Eva didn't feel any better.

"I've angered my husband."

"Nay. Well, mayhap a little, but he'll recover. He's a man, men doona like change. All of this is change fer him too," she pointed out.

Eva couldn't hide her disgruntled expression at those words, or repress the mutter, "Not much change, except that he is avoiding his own room now that I am in it."

Magaidh's eyebrows rose at her words, but a small smile lifted her lips at Eva's suddenly embarrassed expression. She supposed the herbs must be kicking in and loosening her tongue that she should have made such an embarrassing admission.

Magaidh settled on the edge of the bed. "I suppose, being a man, that me son has no bothered to explain about the wedding?"

Eva blinked at that question. "Wedding?"

"We thought 'twould be good fer ye to be married again, properly, now that ye're here and both together. It'll be a chance for the clan to witness the event and to meet ye."

"Oh." Biting her lip, Eva considered that this put a different picture on things. It was possible her husband would wait until after this second wedding to bed her, which was very thoughtful. But then she had known from their brief conversation in the gardens that he was kind. "That would be nice. And no, he had not mentioned it."

Magaidh made a tsking sound and brushed at the skirt of her gown. "Men can be such a trial at times, do ye no think?"

A giggle slipped from Eva's mouth at these words, though she couldn't for the life of her think why she found them funny. It must be the potion, she assured herself. She was absolutely positive it must be the potion that made her ask, "He is not sorry then that he chose to marry me?"

Magaidh smiled gently at her distressed words and brushed a strand of golden hair behind Eva's ear. "Nay. O' course not, lass. What is there fer him to be sorry fer? Ye're a lovely bride. And ye're already making an effort to fit in. Nay, I'm sure he's no sorry."

"Oh," Eva sighed. She was starting to feel a little sleepy now, but had questions to ask. Like what had happened to Connall and Aileen's mother? Or did they indeed have the same mother? Or was the age difference between them because they had different mothers? And how long had Magaidh been married to Connall's father, who must surely have been quite a lot older than she, but instead she asked, "When is this wedding to be?"

"Soon as the priest arrives. Connall sent a man to fetch him back and Effie is doing her best to prepare for a large feast after the wedding. We're thinkin' to hold it on the chapel steps rather than inside so that all can witness it."

Eva nodded at this news, then frowned. "But Aileen and Connall and yourself and who knows how many others have those reactions to the sun. How—?"

"We'll hold it directly after sunset," Magaidh assured her. "By torchlight. It'll be lovely."

"Oh. Aye. Of course." Eva smiled slightly, her mind filling with imaginings of a bailey full of people, the soft light of torchlight and she and Connall and a priest...

"We'll have to sew a new dress fer ye. Something lovely. I be thinkin' the priest won't be long in coming so we'd best set to work on it right away. Perhaps Aileen and yerself could pick out the cloth during the day tomorrow and then we can set to work tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night. Will you not help choose the material?" Eva asked. She rather liked this woman.

"I'll not be available during the day."

"You won't?" Eva frowned.

"I often visit the MacNachtons," Magaidh said vaguely. "They're me clan ye understand."

"Aye," Eva said the word on a yawn. The herbal potion had definitely kicked in.

"There. Yer tired now. I should let ye rest." Magaidh stood and headed for the door. "Sleep well, wee Eva."

"*Shewhat*?" Connall roared as he dismounted. He was just returning from a raid with some of the men, one of their special raids in search of sustenance. Connall avoided feasting on these raids as often as possible, but accompanied the men to be sure they returned alive and well. It was getting dangerous for them in the area and he insisted that they travel further afield in search of fresh victims. The only way to ensure that they did, and that none gave in to their hunger and stopped closer to home, was to accompany them himself.

The last thing he'd expected on returning was more trouble with his wife and the news that she had injured herself alarmed him more than he would have expected.

"She was trying to replace the furs to fix her mistake," Ewan was quick to explain. "But her hands were full of the furs, ye see, and she couldnae hold her skirts out o' the way, then her feet got tangled up in it and she tumbled down the stairs. It was only six steps," he added swiftly in an effort to reassure Connall. "She twisted an ankle and suffered a few more bruises, but is fine other than that."

"A few*more* bruises?" The MacAdie was scowling.

"Aye, well when she stumbled backward on the landing this afternoon, she scraped her arm up a bit and—"

"Why was this no' mentioned to me earlier?" Connall barked. "Ye didnae mention this when I woke this evening."

"I didna ken, did I?" Ewan excused himself. "I saw her stumble a bit, but she caught herself on the railing and assured me all was well, then when I was checking her for scrapes and bruises after her fall this night, I saw her arm and she told me that 'twas from earlier." He grimaced. "It looked fair sore. I'm surprised she wasn't complaining over it, and I'm thinkin' she'll be fair banged up on the morrow from this night's accident as well. She ga'e her ankle a fine wrenching in the fall, and scraped one leg badly too."

Connall scowled at this news. "Why did one of the men no replace the furs? What was she doing attemptin' it herself?"

"I did try to convince her to let the men do it, but she insisted that she'd taken them down and should be the one to put them back. She's English," he said with a shrug as if that explained all.

Shaking his head, Connall tossed the reins of his mount to one of the lads who had come running up from the stables, then marched past his first into the keep.

"She's sleeping," Magaidh announced as he marched past where she sat at the trestle table talking to Aileen.

Connall ignored this and marched upstairs. Asleep or not, he would see her and see how much damage she had taken. She was his wife. It was his place to look after her.

Glynis was seated by the dying fire in the room, watching over her lady as she sewed a small tear in a rose gown that lay across her lap. The maid glanced up with surprise at their entrance, relaxing when her master nodded that she should remain where she was and he crossed the room to stand by the bed.

"She's snoring."

Connall glanced around in surprise at that shocked hiss from Ewan. He hadn't realized the man had followed him, but he had, and his first wasn't the only one Connall saw as Danaidh, Geordan, Domhall, Ragnall, and Keddy spread out in the room. Magaidh and Aileen had also trailed them up and now tossed repressing glances at the men.

"The herbal potion I gave her is most likely to blame," Magaidh said firmly. "Twould put her in a deep sleep."

Connall grunted at this and turned to glance at his wife. She had faint bruising on one cheek and he frowned as he reached down to run a finger lightly over it.

"Her face slammed into the rail on the way down," Keddy whispered and shook his head. "But that ain't near as bad as her leg and ankle."

Connall immediately tugged the linens and furs gently aside to peer at her leg. She was wearing a white cotton sleeping gown and was sweet looking in slumber. He didn't have to lift the gown out of the way, it was twisted high around her thighs, almost indecently high, he decided and turned a scowl on the men gaping down at her. All but Keddy caught his look and immediately turned away, but it took an elbow in the ribs from Geordan to get Keddy's attention. Noting Connall's scowl, Keddy too dropped his gaze.

Relaxing a little, Connall turned back to his wee bride and frowned at the shape of her legs; the ankle of one was swollen and bruised, and the calf and upper leg of the other was scraped and bruised. Recalling Ewan's comment about her arm, he lifted his gaze to it now, noting the tender looking scrape and bruising there as well.

Easing the blankets carefully back into place, Connall turned and waited for the men and Magaidh to move out of the room ahead of him, then gestured Glynis out of the room as well and followed.

"She didna cry, ye say?" Connall asked with interest as he closed the door behind himself.

"She shed no a tear, m'laird," Ewan reaffirmed.

Connall glanced at his mother and the maid. "No even once the men were out of sight?"

"Nay," Magaidh assured him, the word reinforced by Glynis's, "Nay m'laird."

He merely nodded, but he was thinking most women would have wept copious tears and whinged unendingly. This was looking hopeful. Perhaps she would be a fine bride.

"She's no to carry anything while walking the stairs," he instructed them all, but was addressing the maid. "And should she wish to do anything strenuous or dangerous, ensure that one o' the men are called to do it fer her. She is lady here and shouldn't be performing physical labor."

"Aye, m'laird." Glynis bobbed.

Connall nodded, satisfied that he had handled the matter in the best possible way to ensure the woman wouldn't hurt herself again. His mistake had been in forgetting her background. Most ladies would never have considered removing or replacing furs themselves; they would have directed servants in the doing, but Eva came from Caxton, where she had been valued so little her brother had tried to palm her off without a dower. No doubt he had made her feel a burden in other ways. She was probably trying to make herself valuable, he considered and he wouldn't have that. As her husband it was his place to ensure that she understood her value. He'd begin to work on that on the morrow.

"I really doonae think the laird will be pleased with this, m'lady," Glynis protested for at least the hundredth time as she trailed Eva across the bailey.

"Nonsense, Glynis," she said firmly for at least the same number of times. "There is no reason at all that my husband, Connall," she tested the name on her tongue. "There is no reason that Connall should be upset by my tending to the injured and unwell. Ladies all over England perform this task. Tis much more

acceptable than removing and re-hanging furs," she assured the maid. Glynis had told her about Connall's edicts since her accident. Apparently he had informed her the night before that "his wife" was not to carry anything while ascending or descending stairs, then had approached her again this morning just ere sunrise to order her to keep Eva from doing anything that was not the expressed sphere of the lady of the manor to perform.

The maid had obviously taken these orders to heart. Glynis had recounted them to Eva the moment she'd arrived at her bedchamber to find her awake, and had re-peated them every five minutes since then; while she had helped Eva to dress, then as she had taken her arm to assist her to limp below to the great hall, and even while Eva had sat to break her fast. It had gotten worse since Eva had announced her plans for the day, however, and the girl was growing positively strident now as they approached the stables.

Eva had come up with her plans for the day as she'd lain in bed enjoying that early morning, fuzzy, just-woken-up feeling.

Having decided that changing anything at MacAdie was not a good idea until she had a better understanding of her new home, Eva had learned her lesson. MacAdie keep was run just as its lord and master wished; there was nothing really for her to improve at the moment. She would have to find another way to prove her worth and that she could be an asset here.

After considering the tasks that were usually the province of the lady of the castle, Eva had decided that—for now at least—tending to the ill and showing her healing powers was her best bet. Certainly, the servants didn't need directing, and even had they, she hadn't a clue what she should be directing them to do. MacAdie keep had been running along well enough long before she showed up, so tending to the ailing it would be, Eva had decided.

Then, of course, she had moved to get out of bed and barely managed to bite back a startled cry when pain had shot through her. But Eva wasn't the sort to give in to aches and pains. Besides, she was hoping that the activity would distract her from the pain and perhaps loosen up those aches.

She had thought it was all a simple, perfectly sensible plan. Of course, that was before she had asked Glynis to take her around to anyone she knew was ailing, and the girl had said 'ailing?' in a blank voice, then shook her head. "We're a pretty healthy lot here, m'lady. In truth I cannae think o' anyone unwell at the moment."

Eva had not believed the redhead at first, but when Ewan had assured her it was so, she'd had no choice but to take it as truth, then she'd considered the matter and decided it was probably for the best anyway. She hadn't been allowed to bring any of her medicinals with her here, so had nothing to treat anyone with anyway, which had led to her new plan of what to do this day. She would visit the surrounding woods and clearings to see if she could find anything useful to treat the more common ailments such as an infection. Glynis hadn't liked this idea at all and had glanced around for support, but Ewan had left the table by then which Eva could only think was her good fortune. She was rather certain the first would have disliked the idea at least as much as Glynis, if not more and might have scotched the plan. As it was, however, with him gone, Glynis had been on her own and had tried to dissuade her by suggesting that a servant be sent to search the area for what she wanted. Eva had patiently pointed out that no one but she would know what she was looking for. Though Glynis had still protested, Eva had ignored her and gone about doing as she pleased with her usual stubbornness, sure she knew best.

"Still, m'lady. Perhaps ye should be askin' him ere ye—"

"Glynis," Eva interrupted patiently. "Do I take the time to ask my husband ere I do every little thing, I shall never get anything done. Besides, he never seems to be about to ask anything of," she pointed out and grimaced at the irritation in her own voice. She had seen little enough of her husband since arriving at MacAdie, and though she was trying not to let it bother her, it did seem to her that he was showing her less attention than she might expect from a new groom.

"But yer leg is painin' ye," Glynis pointed out, apparently deciding an alternate argument was necessary. "Ye should be restin' it, m'lady, else it will surely swell more."

Eva made a face at that suggestion. The girl was absolutely right about that, of course. In fact, it felt as if her ankle swelled a little more with every step she took, but Eva was determined not to give in to it and continued grimly forward, much relieved to see that they had reached the stables. "I shall be able to rest my leg on horseback, Glynis."

"Oh," the girl drew the word out in a worried sound that made Eva roll her eyes. "I'm really thinkin' that the laird isnae gonna like this. He'll thrash me fer lettin' ye ride oot o' the keep alone, he will."

"I will not be alone, Glynis. I will have you with me," Eva pointed out.

"Aye, m'lady, but that's jest as guid as alone if yer attacked. At least let us ask one o' the men to accompany us?" she begged.

Eva felt guilt besiege her at the girl's panicked state. She herself knew that Connall would not be pleased about their riding out alone, but suspected that if she asked Ewan to send a man with them, he would put paid to the plan altogether. Assuring herself that all would be fine and the trip would be without incident, she said almost apologetically, "We are not going far, Glynis. I promise, I—Oh hello." Eva paused as her attention was turned by the sight of a beautiful dog lying near the entrance to the stables. "Who are you?"

"That's Angus's dog, m'lady," Glynis informed her unhappily. "He's paralyzed and no verra friendly."

"Poor thing," Eva cooed, smiling when the dog wagged his tail. "He looks friendly enough to me. He's just wanting some attention, poor creature."

"Nay, he—" Glynis broke off with a cry of alarm as Eva held a hand out for the dog to sniff and the tail wagging, calm looking animal suddenly turned into a snarling, snapping beast who decided to take a chunk out of that hand.

Connall spotted Ewan waiting for him the moment the stone door to the secret chamber started to slide open, and knew at once that this could not be a good thing. The man had been his first since the year after he had married Aileen some thirty years ago, and in all that time, Ewan had only been awaiting Connall's rising a handful of times. Now he was waiting for the second time in two days... in the two days since his new bride had arrived and Connall immediately began to see a pattern.

"What has she done?" he asked abruptly as the door slid closed behind him. "She hasnae taken the furs down again has she?"

"Nay."

To Connall's mind, Ewan was looking a little put upon and as if he was happy that his laird was awake to take over the responsibility of his wayward wife. "What then?"

His brother-in-law didn't bother to sugarcoat it, he just said, "She's been bitten."

"Bitten?" Connall echoed with amazement. "By what?"

"By Wolfy."

"What?" Connall exclaimed with disbelief. "Wolfy? The mutt from the stables? But he's paralyzed at the back end, he can't but drag himself around a bit and that not far."

"Aye. Weell, she decided to befriend him, didnae she?" Ewan said dryly, then shrugged and added, "He wasnae feelin' verra friendly."

"Dear God." Connall rubbed his forehead with exasperation. "How bad is it?"

Ewan wrinkled his nose. "It bled badly and looked a fair mess, but Aileen says there'll be no permanent damage."

Connall sighed his relief at this news, started to turn away, then paused to ask warily, "Is there anythin' else I should ken?"

"The priest has arrived," Ewan announced cheerfully and Connall felt some of the stiffness leave his shoulders. This was good news at least, he thought, turning to move toward the stairs now.

"Good, I might yet get the woman wedded and bedded and hopefully with child ere she gets hersel' killed," Connall muttered as he began to jog lightly down the stairs.

"She does appear to be prone to accidents." There was a touch of amusement in Ewan's voice as he followed on his heels.

Connall snorted at what to him seemed something of an understatement. "Tis obvious the lass cannae be left to her own devices. I want ye men to keep an eye on her when I'm no about."

"I suspected ye might," Ewan said dryly as they reached the great hall and started toward where Connall could see his wife seated at the trestle table. His footsteps slowed however as he overheard what the priest was saying. He was trying to scare her with the tales that had grown up around his people, Connall realized with disgust. The man was trying to convince her to flee the keep and escape to safety with him. He heard Ewan growl next to him in outrage at what the holy man was saying, but raised a hand to silence him. His own first instinct was to storm forward, drag the good priest up by his pious collar and toss him from the castle, but he wished to see how his wife handled the situation first. Then he would decide whether to let the man perform the ceremony before he tossed him out, or merely toss him out and fetch another priest.

Chapter Six

"Fie, Father!" Eva glared at Father MacLure, hardly able to believe what he had said. First he had spewed all the same nonsense tales that Mavis had told her back at Caxton, then he had suggested the two of them slip away to the stables and flee at the first opportunity. He was suggesting she flee from her

husband and her home! She was in such a dudgeon that she added, "Shame on you for listening and *carrying such* tales, surely there are words against such behavior in the Bible?"

The priest flushed at her reproof and squirmed briefly, then straightened his shoulders and said, "Are ye sayin' then that the tales are no true?"

Eva was irritated by his persistence in the matter. "I was told the tales ere coming here, all that nonsense about the MacAdies being nightwalking, soulless blood feeders. Yet six of them rode for two days, in full sunlight to bring me here, as I am sure it was with you. Did you not travel during the day?"

"Aye, we traveled in daylight," the priest admitted. "But there was only one man sent to bring me back."

"Really? Only the one?" Eva asked with interest and had to smile. When she had complained to Ewan and the men that Connall had sent them to fetch her like a cow he wished to purchase, they had told her that the fact that he had sent six of them, as well as whom he had sent, showed her importance to him. They had said he would only send one man for a cow, and that the one man would not be any of them. Eva knew not who had brought the priest, but as Ewan, Donaidh, Ragnall, Domhall, Keddy, and Geordan had all been about the keep the last couple of days, she knew it was not one of them. It seemed the priest was not as important to Connall as she herself was. In fact, he apparently was no more important than a cow, she thought with amusement, but didn't think it was a good idea to share this news with the overblown man.

"Were they all MacAdies?" Father MacLure asked, drawing Eva's attention back from her thoughts.

She knew what he was getting at. Mavis had claimed that the MacAdies had non-vampires among them, servants who did their bidding, and after the kindnesses she had been shown by these people, she would not listen to this nonsense. "All who live within these walls are MacAdies, Father, including myself now," she said firmly, then added, "As for this nightwalker business, 'tis all nonsense based on the fact that Connall and his sister suffer a negative reaction to the sun. We had a girl like that in our village and it is grateful I am, that no one thought to claim her a soulless, nightwalking blood feeder."

"A reaction to the sun?" the priest asked.

"Aye."

"Hmm." He appeared to consider that, then asked, "But what o' the claim that they doonae age?"

Eva snorted. "Well that is certainly stuff and nonsense, just look at Aileen. Would you say she is not aging?"

The priest's gaze slid along the table to the older woman, still beautiful despite her age, but he shook his head. "Well, aye, *she* is, but 'tis said that Connall MacAdie has barely aged since reaching adulthood over thirty years ago."

Eva stared at him blankly. Connall had reached adulthood over thirty years ago? That would make him... fifty-five or sixty, depending on what the father considered adulthood and what "over thirty years ago" meant. Nay, that was impossible. There was no way that her Connall was fifty-five or sixty years old, Eva told herself, as an image of his handsome young face came to mind. Dark hair, deep brown eyes, healthy *young* skin. Nay, Connall had not reached adulthood thirty years ago... Perhaps his father had, but Connall would barely have been born. That thought made her pause and eased the panic that had been building inside her. Of course! A smile of relief curving her lips, she glanced at the priest and

said, "Father, my brother's name is Jonathan."

Her comment obviously startled the man, and Father MacLure looked confused for a minute, then said, politely, "Well... That's a fine name."

"Aye," Eva agreed pleasantly. "And so was my father called Jonathan, my brother was named after him, you understand... As I am sure Connall was named after his own father," she added firmly. "There are simple explanations for everything. Tis just that—as you said yourself earlier—the MacAdies socialize so rarely with others—probably because of these ridiculous rumors—that it merely adds to the superstitious claims." Eva sighed over this, thinking with some vexation that she would have to change that, then added, "Besides, while I have been here only a short time, I have seen no sign of the vampirism that is claimed. And, really, would soulless nightwalkers send for you to perform a marriage that has already been performed once?" she asked. "It was my husband's idea to hold a second, proper wedding, not mine."

"Well..." Father MacLure hesitated. It seemed to her that he really didn't want to believe that these people were just that, people. It was almost as if the idea of their being monsters was too exciting a possibility to let go of. Eva was becoming terribly impatient with the man when his gaze drifted behind her and he suddenly froze.

Eva sighed inwardly. It didn't take a wizard to tell who was standing behind her, as the priest had suddenly gone as pale as death and was now rising slowly from the bench, either in polite greeting, or preparing to flee. Still, she glanced over her shoulder to see who it actually was.

Aye, it was her husband, and he had obviously overheard a good portion of their discussion, at least enough to make him look like thunder. Eva had never seen anyone look quite so cold and furious at the same time, and had to admit that he was really an intimidating sight. Were she the one he was glaring at, she might have been frightened. Fortunately, he was glaring at Father MacLure, not herself, and really, in her heart, she didn't blame him. It was rude to accept your host's hospitality, sit at his table, dine on his food and drink his wine, then attack him behind his back, and she supposed he deserved what he was getting. But at that moment, Connall MacAdie looked as if thrashing him would be his choice and Eva couldn't condone that while she had the wedding to attend to.

Nevertheless, her husband did not thrash the man or even verbally lash him as she half expected, but merely growled, "Sit."

Father MacLure sat at once, apparently intelligent enough not to answer the man just now. Eva felt herself begin to relax as her husband swung one leg over the bench between herself and the priest, forcing the priest to scoot away to make room for him. Ewan followed suit, forcing himself between Connall and the priest so that the holy man now sat far enough away that he could cause little trouble. Eva glanced at her husband sharply as he suddenly grasped her injured hand and began to unwrap her dressing.

"Tis fine, my lord," she assured him, though he hadn't asked how it was, and didn't bother to acknowledge her words either, she noted with irritation. Eva didn't trouble to explain that it was an animal bite; Ewan had no doubt already explained that. Her gaze moved over her husband's head to his first and she gave Ewan a reproving look for tat-tling on her so, but the man merely grinned back, unrepentant.

"Kill the dog," Connall snapped, drawing Eva's attention to the fact that her bandage was undone and the ragged wound revealed.

"Nay!" she cried as Ewan stood to do his laird's bidding. Her gaze shot back to her husband whose fingers had tightened as they clasped the wrist of her injured hand. "You cannot kill the dog, 'twas my fault. I tried to pet him."

"He is a danger. He could bite someone else."

"He is paralyzed in the back legs and a danger only to those foolish enough to approach him such as myself. Surely everyone here knows better than that? Please, my lord," she begged, her conscience grasped by the idea of the paralyzed beast being killed because of her own stupidity and stubbornness. After all, *Glynishad* told her the dog wasn't friendly.

"He is bad-tempered," Connall pointed out.

"Well, and I should be bad-tempered too were I paralyzed in the back... er... from the waist down," she substituted. "Please, my lord, 'twas my own fault and really 'tis not as bad as it looks. Aileen assured me there is no permanent damage," she said.

Connall stared at her for several minutes, his eyes locked on her face for so long she almost felt the need to squirm under his piercing gaze. But she did not drop her eyes. She needed to win this argument and save the dog, else suffer endless guilt because of its death. Her conscience could not bear it were the dog destroyed because of her thoughtlessness.

After what seemed a very long time, though it was probably only a matter of a moment or so, Connall released her gaze and began to rewrap her wound.

"Ewan."

"Aye?" The man waited, appearing as curious to know what Connall had decided as she was.

"The weddin' will be held on the steps in an hour. Make sure everyone knows and attends, and inform Cook I expect a proper feast afterward."

"Effie's been cooking since ye sent fer Father MacLure," Ewan informed him. "And I warned her the moment he arrived. Tis why supper has been put off, she was sure ye'd wish the wedding to take place at once with a feast to follow. The rest o' the clan knew ye'd wish it so too, and they're all jest waitin' to hear when the wedding'll be. I'll go tell them now to be ready in an hour."

Connall nodded and his first moved off to do his bidding, pausing briefly at his wife's side before leaving the keep. Finished with her bandages, her husband now stood. "Ye should prepare yersel'."

He was gone before Eva could offer her gratitude that he had spared the beast in the stables, and just as suddenly, Aileen was there, offering her a smile. "We should see ye dressed, lass."

"Oh." Eva stared at her with alarm. Magaidh had said something the night before about choosing cloth today to sew a gown for the wedding, but Aileen had been missing from the table when Eva had come down to breakfast and then after the incident in the stables, Eva had simply forgotten all about the dress. Not that it mattered, even had they chosen the cloth, they could not have sewn a gown in the hour before the wedding. She had nothing to wear.

"How fortunate I had several servants sewing today."

Eva glanced over her shoulder as Magaidh spoke those words. The woman was approaching, a wide smile on her face and a gown of a silky, deep green fabric in her arms.

"I ken I suggested choosing cloth today, but on going below after leavin' ye last night I learned that Connall expected the priest to arrive by supper this evening and I decided I'd best make some arrangements in case he should come. Should he not, ye could choose a different cloth and design if ye liked, but if he did, at least ye'd no be completely unprepared." She shifted the gown to hold it up before her. "I hope 'tis to yer liking. I thought that the green would bring out the green o' yer eyes."

"Tis lovely," Eva assured her, tears welling in her eyes at the woman's thoughtfulness. How could people be saying such vile things about these MacAdies? They were so kind to her. Her husband was arranging a second wedding to ensure she felt properly married. Magaidh had supplied her with a new wardrobe—Glynis had appeared with several more gowns that morn, including the dark blue one she now wore, claiming that Magaidh had sent them—and now, the woman had made sure she would have a special gown to wear for her wedding. Eva felt cared for for perhaps the first time in her life, at least, for the first time since her parents' deaths when she was young. It made her heart ache with something she could not describe. It was perhaps a bit of gratitude, but she was not sure what the rest of it was, but it hurt. In a good way, but it hurt just the same.

"Ah, lass," Magaidh said kindly, apparently understanding what she was feeling by the tears in her eyes. "We are treating ye only as ye deserve to be treated. Now come, we shall make ye ready."

"She looks beautiful."

Connall grunted at that comment from Ewan, but he couldn't take his eyes off the lass. His bride. Magaidh and Aileen had turned her into a fairy princess. The gown she wore was long and flowing and the color of the forest by daylight, something he had so rarely seen that it was as precious to him as gold was to misers. Rather than cover her long golden hair with a hat or veil, they had merely left it down, weaving flowers and ribbons into it so that it lay in long glossy waves that trailed over her shoulders and shone in the torchlight with fiery glints. She looked both young and beautiful.

Connall felt his chest expand with pride. He had chosen well.

Eva tried to maintain her smile and hide the nervousness she felt as she moved through the parting crowd to the church steps. The wedding had yet to actually begin, and was already different from the proxy wedding, which had been a rushed affair held in the Caxton chapel in broad daylight. Her brother had hustled her and the six Scots there the moment the last of the negotiations were made, introducing Ewan along the way as her husband's proxy. The priest had mumbled a few words with only her brother, Mavis, and the five Scots accompanying Ewan to witness it, and it had been done.

This time, Eva was bathed and perfumed and garbed in the finest dress she had ever seen, one she was sure surpassed even the fine fashions she had witnessed at court, then she was led down the stairs and across the bailey, walking a path made by the parting of the clan members and lit by the torches that many of them held. That torchlight added a moody and rather beautiful air to the event, perhaps it could even have been called romantic, and Eva was glad that her husband had thought to hold a proper wedding for her. She truly felt as if she were being married this time, where she hadn't at the first wedding. On top of that, her mind was not beset with chaos and confusion, thanks to the horror stories Mavis had told. They no longer loomed like a cloud in her mind, but were a dim memory, overlapped by the kindnesses these people had shown her; Glynis with her help and friendship, Effie with her warm

welcome, Ewan and the men with their caring and concern both times she'd been injured, Aileen with her sweetness and aid, and Magaidh with her generosity and care. Even her husband had shown her kindness in allowing the dog to live because she asked it, as well as in what she supposed he considered to be a kindness in not bedding her, before this wedding. Aside from that, despite his constant absence, she had learned a lot about her husband these last few days. Eva had not asked questions about him, knowing that would make his people uncomfortable, but she had looked, listened, and learned a great deal despite that.

Connall MacAdie was a well-respected clan chief. He had earned his people's trust and was even liked by them. Eva had heard several examples of his fairness in judgment and skill in battle just by listening to those around her and it was becoming obvious that he was considered a fair and just man. He definitely wasn't feared as an abusive lord would be and Eva was relatively certain that he would be a good husband.

Aye, this wedding was much different from her first. This time Eva did not experience trepidation for the future. She was sure all would be well.

"All will be well."

It was only when Ewan leaned forward and murmured "What will be well?" that Connall realized that he had spoken the reassurance to himself aloud.

"Everything," he answered vaguely, ignoring the curious look his brother-in-law cast him.

"Should the MacNachton no be here?"

Connall sighed at this question, knowing it was one he couldn't ignore. "Aye. Mayhap, but I didna think o' that until I was dressing fer the weddin'," he admitted, then shrugged. "But I hadnae really intended on this wedding originally; it was Magaidh who suggested it and I only agreed when she pointed out that it would allow all to know and recognize their lady."

"Hmm." Ewan nodded, then said, "Tis a much nicer weddin' than the one in England."

Connall raised an eyebrow at this comment and the man shrugged.

"Twas a rushed, businesslike affair. Caxton acted as if he feared I would change me mind on yer behalf and insisted on it being held at once. He rushed us oot to the chapel ere the ink had dried on the paper. It was rather unseemly to me and 'twas obvious Lady Eva was upset and embarrassed, but as ye'd said to get it done and get back quick as possible, I didnae argue." He shook his head at the memory. "I was dusty from travel, without e'en the opportunity to pat me plaid down, and she wore a faded grey gown she'd obviously donned that morn to work around the castle, but we stood before the priest as he mumbled a few incomprehensible words in Latin, then 'twas done." His gaze slid to Eva. "This should please her much more."

Connall followed his gaze to his wife. She looked lovely and—while she was not exactly smiling, there was a peaceful look on her face, an acceptance and perhaps even a quiet pleasure that suggested to him that perhaps Ewan was right and Eva was pleased. He hadn't considered whether or not she would be pleased when he'd agreed to his mother's suggestion, but was now glad if she was. Connall had spent little enough time with the woman up to now, but he was kept abreast of her daily activities and had

listened carefully to what his people did and did not say when giving their reports. They all seemed to accept her with relative ease, no one saying anything to suggest otherwise. All were impressed with how she had handled herself so far, and even her effort with the furs was seen as merely a misguided attempt to make a place for herself. The only criticism anyone could find was that she seemed somewhat clumsy by nature, but even then they admired what they considered to be her courage and strength in the face of adversity. She wasn't what they considered to be the typical whingeing Englishwoman they had expected, and that seemed to impress them more than anything else.

Aye, all would be well... So long as she took the news he had to impart to her without horror or hysterics. Connall grimaced to himself at that thought. He would have to tell her of his origins eventually and wasn't looking forward to the task because he wasn't sure how she would take it, or even how he was to approach the subject. But she would have to be told. Connall felt sure it would be better to explain it himself in calm, reasonable tones than to have her find out on her own and perhaps flee in terror. He would give her a little more time to adjust before he did though, Connall decided and was relieved to have the excuse to put it off.

Eva finally reached the chapel steps and mounted them to join Connall, Ewan, and the priest. Connall gave her a slight nod, then made an effort at a smile, though he felt so tense—a sensation he wasn't at all used to—that he suspected it looked more like a grimace. Giving up on the effort, he urged her around on the top step so that they stood side by side, facing Father MacLure, then he gave a start of surprise when he felt Eva slip her small, uninjured hand into his and squeeze it gently. Connall immediately felt the tension slip from his shoulders at that trusting action. Aye, all would be well.

Eva was quite sure that the wedding at Caxton had not taken nearly as long as this one was and was positive it was because Father MacLure was overfond of the sound of his own voice. Unfortunately, the man did not have a very expressive speaking voice and his monotonous diatribe encouraged her mind to wander. Eva had caught herself wandering several times now and each time had forced her thoughts back to the ceremony and what he was saying, but eventually she gave in and let her thoughts drift. Her mind wandered first to wondering what Cook had managed to prepare for the feast that was to follow the ceremony. She knew that Effie had been working for days on the repast and had no doubt that she would have come up with something special. Whatever it was, there was no doubt it would be tasty, the woman had yet to serve anything that wasn't absolutely delicious.

From that subject, Eva's mind naturally wandered to what would follow the feast... the bedding. The very thought of it made her start to tense up again.

Despite the fact that her parents had both died when she was barely nine, and she'd had no mother to educate her in these matters, Eva was not ignorant on the subject of men and women. Mavis had seen to that. The girl spent most of her time working in the kitchens when not pressed into service as her lady's maid, so it was in the kitchen with the rest of the servants that she slept, though she occasionally had slept in the great hall if Cook was in a mood. Sleeping there with all the rest of the servants, Mavis had seen—and eagerly recounted to Eva—much of what went on between a man and woman—at least among the servant class.

The maid had described it as a sort of wrestling match that ended when the man took his pillock, "rather like a large boiled sausage," she had described it, and stuck it up between the woman's legs. Eva had never fancied the idea of having a boiled sausage shoved up between her legs and found her feet shifting together to press her thighs more tightly closed as she stood before the mumbling priest. Then her gaze dropped to the side of its own accord, to peer at the point where her husband's boiled sausage would

be.

Although he normally wore his plaid, or had since she'd arrived, today Connall had chosen to wear the outfit she had seen him in at court for their wedding; a fine dark blue doublet and white hose. Eva was flattered that he had troubled himself to dress up for the occasion, but it meant that his figure was now rather on view and her eyes widened in alarm at the size of the bulge visible beneath the hose. Mavis had said that the bigger the bulge, the bigger the boiled sausage, and her husband appeared quite huge to her. Not that she had ever before seen a man's sausage or troubled to notice the size of their bulge, but Connall's bulge looked rather large to her anxious eyes.

Eva squeezed her thighs a little tighter closed as she tried to imagine him wrestling her to the bed and assaulting her with his sausage.

"Eva?"

She jerked her gaze guiltily up to his eyes, thinking she had been caught rudely staring at his sausage, but the expectant expression on his face and the way he nodded toward the priest, who was also eyeing her expectantly, made her realize she had missed something.

"Do you?" Father MacLure prompted at last and Eva understood and stammered "I do." When the good father nodded and began to speak again, she couldn't stop her eyes from sliding down and to the side to look her husband over again.

As she stared at the bulge that she was almost positive was growing under her gaze, Eva briefly considered if it would not have been wiser to have said "nay" rather than "I do," then immediately began to remonstrate with herself. Did she wish to go to the abbey and be a nun? For that's what would have happened had she said nay to the vows. And really, everything else here was so nice and pleasant; she no longer left the table hungry because she ate as little as possible to keep from angering her brother, she no longer worked herself to the point of exhaustion in an effort to be as little of a burden as possible, and the people here were all so nice to her. Surely she could manage to forbear the sausage stuffing?

Eva grimaced at her own choice of words. Sausage stuffing? It made her sound like a fowl being prepared for supper.

"You may kiss the bride."

Eva glanced up with surprise at those words. Was the ceremony finally over? The priest's words and the fact that Connall was turning her toward him as his face lowered to hers, seemed a good indication that it was. Eva squeezed her eyes closed and waited for his kiss, wondering what it would be like, then opened them with surprise when his lips rubbed gently and sweetly over her own. She rather liked it... and found herself arching up on her tiptoe to press her own mouth more firmly against his, but he was already straightening again.

Embarrassed at her own response to her husband, Eva took a step back to put some space between them as the crowd in the bailey began to cheer. It was only as she set her foot down in midair that she recalled she was standing on stairs. In the next moment, she found herself tumbling down the church steps to the accompaniment of several alarmed and startled shouts and shrieks.

Eva put her sewing down with a little sigh, then raised her face to the sunlight and closed her eyes. It was very peaceful here in the gardens and she was glad Glynis had insisted that she come out and sit on a fur in the sun to sew. The maid had proven herself to be a treasure and without her cheerful chatter and care, Eva didn't think she could have maintained her wits this last week since the wedding.

A pained expression flickered across her face at the thought of her wedding day. The ceremony had been beautiful, and the feast splendid, Effie had—as expected—outdone herself. Unfortunately, Eva only knew this from what others had told her, she herself hadn't been in attendance at the wedding feast, she'd been unconscious in bed having several new scrapes and bruises—gained from her tumble down the chapel steps—tended to by Magaidh and Aileen.

Heaving a sigh, Eva opened her eyes again and glanced down at the dress that lay on her lap. Her gaze automatically moved from there to consider each of her injuries to date. Her hand was much healed from the dog bite and a scab was all that was left, so she'd taken the bandages off the day before yesterday to allow it to dry and heal. Her arms were a patchwork of varying shades of bruises, from a dull blue to yellow, though the scrapes there were healed.

Her legs looked much the same, she knew, but at least her ankle, which she had wrenched again in the fall, was almost as good as new again, twingeing only when she forgot it and turned too quickly. Eva knew she'd been lucky that she hadn't broken anything in that fall, but the injuries she'd had were enough in her mind, as they had seen her wedding night put off yet again. To Eva, it was rather like putting off a tooth-pulling, the anticipation was an agony to suffer. She would rather have the deed done.

That would happen soon enough, she supposed. There had been no further accidents since the wedding to hamper her recovery, and physically she was almost back to normal. Otherwise, however, she was a mess. Eva felt as if she had ruined everything. Oh, everyone here was still as kind to her as could be, but they now treated her either like fragile glass... or an idiot. She was not allowed to lift anything above the weight of a thimble, and was not allowed to carry anything at all when she walked. These were her husband's orders. He had also ordered that two men were to accompany her at all times to ensure that the orders were carried out. Eva felt the usual indignation rise up in her at the thought that she had watchers... like the veriest of children who could not be trusted to play without setting themselves in danger's way.

Her resentful gaze shifted to her present watchers and away again; Donaidh and Geordan were relaxing against the garden wall, talking idly. They would remain there so long as she remained where she was sitting, but if Eva shifted the dress from her lap and start to rise, they would be on either side of her, taking an arm to help her up lest she stumble and fall and hurt herself again.

Aye, she was now the village idiot.

Her gaze slid back to the dress she had been working on. A confection in blues, it was another of the new gowns for her fine new wardrobe. Magaidh and Connall had insisted she should have several, and half a dozen maids had been set to the task of creating them. Eva was helping, or supposed to be helping, by hemming the skirt of the gown across her lap, but she wasn't really in the mood for sewing this afternoon. Instead, she thought she might prefer a good cry, but of course, that was impossible with Donaidh and Geordan hovering nearby.

Eva heaved another sigh as her gaze wandered to the two men who were acting as her guards today.

They would remain with her until the sun set and her husband arrived for his supper. She had learned a lot more about the workings of the castle during the past week. The men were not always discreet when she was about and she often overheard their conversations, enough to know that her husband was not off attending to business during the day as she had first been told, but that he was resting away from the sun. His sun reaction made it so that he avoided attending to clan business during the day and left that in Ewan's capable hands. Connall took over the chore from the moment the sun set until it rose again in the morning.

Eva had at first thought that Ewan must then have the heavier burden when it came to running the keep, but had since come to the conclusion that this was not so. It seemed Connall and his sister weren't the only MacAdies troubled with a negative reaction to the sun. By her estimate, at least half the people here were and they too rested during the day, coming out at night to accomplish what most would do during the day in any other castle, which meant MacAdie was as busy, if not busier at night than it was during the day.

Eva had also learned that her husband led raiding parties at night, though she had endeavored to ignore this information and had stopped listening to that particular conversation once she'd understood what the men were talking about. Such things as night raids on neighbors were frowned on by the English, though she knew 'twas common enough in Scotland. Not approving of her husband's activities, Eva simply didn't wish to know about them, so closed off her attention when the men spoke about such things, but she had learned enough to know that Connall was kept busy from dusk till dawn.

Well, not the entire time, she supposed. The men stopped watching her when Connall made his appearance, because he took over the task himself. The man who had been absent for the first several days after her arrival, had taken to spending time with Eva now that they were wed. He joined her to sit at the trestle table for supper, though he often got distracted with the reports the men were giving and didn't eat as much as she felt he should. Sometimes there was business that needed tending to right away; if it was something that took him out of the keep, he would set two men to guard her until he could return. If it was simply a meeting he needed to have, he would suggest she sit by the fire and he would join her there shortly. Either way, he always joined her for a couple of hours at night, often to play chess with her.

Eva had hoped to redeem herself with her abilities in chess. Her father had taught her the game when she was quite young and she had played it with her older sister, Lynette, until Lynny, who had been as dowerless as herself, had been sent off to the abbey. While she had not played in the two years since Lynette became a bride of God, Eva had managed to retain her skill and had even beaten her husband a time or two. However, while he claimed to be impressed by her intellect, nothing had seemed to change his mind about her ability to look after herself without guards to watch over her.

The sun went behind a cloud and Eva stirred where she sat. It was getting late, the sun was following its downward path and would set soon. She supposed she should go inside, put the dress away, and prepare for supper.

"If we're finished, I think I'll go to see my wife," Ewan announced.

Connall nodded and glanced toward the great hall fire as the other man stood and departed. Eva was curled up in a chair before the roaring blaze, sewing as she waited for him to finish his meeting with Ewan and join her as had become his habit since the wedding. Connall had found his gaze wandering to her several times as he had listened to Ewan's report and had noticed that Eva drew herself a little tighter into a ball each time the keep door opened. It was wet and blustery tonight, with a chill that he hadn't really

noticed until he'd noted Eva's shrinking from it. He wasn't bothered much by cold, but it seemed as if his wife was.

Standing as she paused in her sewing to chafe some warmth into her arms, Connall moved to her chair and held out his hand. "Come, we'll play chess in our room tonight. T will be warmer there by the fire without the breeze blowing in ever' few minutes."

Eva smiled her relief at his suggestion and took his hand to rise, commenting, "Tis growing cool at night."

"Aye. Summer is coming to a close, the nights grow longer, the days shorter, and the air chill," Connall said as he gestured one of the houseboys over to collect the chess game. He himself took the gown from her hands, freeing her to hold her skirt up as they mounted the stairs. He didn't miss the exasperated little sigh she gave at his thoughtfulness, but ignored it, knowing she was feeling that they all thought her incompetent. Connall didn't bother to explain that it was just a precaution until she was on her feet again and knew her new home well enough that—even should she be distracted—she would not thoughtlessly go tumbling down a set of stairs or bang into something. With a little time here, Eva would get to know everyone and all the nooks and crannies of the house so that she would be in less danger.

At least from common accidents, Connall thought, with a frown. There had been another attempt on his life the night before last. It was the third attempt in the last year since the trouble had started. Connall had been riding with the men on the way to a raid when an arrow had sailed through the darkness, narrowly missing him but hitting the man riding next to him. It had been a flesh wound in the arm and quickly healed, but the incident was bothersome for two reasons: One was that the attacker had made the attempt in the open, at night, when Connall was surrounded by his Nightriders who had, as one would expect, immediately spread out and begun to search the woods. The fellow had been extremely lucky and escaped capture. Extremely lucky, as most of the men with him had a nocturnal predator's night vision, which was what bothered Connall: If the attacker knew anything about them and had still attacked under such risky circumstances, then he was obviously growing desperate, and desperate men were unpredictable.

The other reason the incident worried Connall was that someone else had been injured. This time it had been just a flesh wound and had healed quickly as was the wont of their sort, but what if he had been riding with Eva? What if she had been the one to take the arrow meant for him? And what if it had struck her heart rather than her arm?

That didn't bear thinking about, Connall decided, and admitted to himself that he had become a tad attached to the woman in the last week or so. He found he enjoyed their evenings by the fire. Eva was intelligent and amusing and as charming as she was lovely, and the matter-of-fact way she spoke of what he considered to be an atrocious childhood after her parents' death, touched him in a way that the tale of her brother's cold and uncaring behavior would not have affected him had she told it with a self-pitying attitude. But that wasn't her attitude. Eva appeared to be philosophical about it, and accepted it as her lot in life, even considering herself lucky. It could have been worse, she said, with a simple shrug, and he could not but admire that. . . And admire her.

His gaze slid to her as she led the way up the hall to her chamber, and dropped down to her behind and the way the cloth of her gown covering it moved with each step. Connall had put off consummating the marriage after the injuries from her fall, but he was thinking that she appeared well healed now, well enough perhaps to become his wife in deed as well as law.

Glynis had already tended to the fire, Eva saw as they entered the room, and it had obviously been burning for a while, for the chamber was notably warmer than the great hall. The girl seemed always to be thinking ahead and looking after such details. It was wonderful having her assistance. Eva hadn't realized what she had been missing in not having a lady's maid all these years, but truly appreciated the many small things the girl did and made a mental note to thank her in the morning.

She found herself oddly nervous as she led the way to the chairs by the fire. Eva had played chess with her husband many times the last week, but this time somehow seemed different. For one thing, her chamber was much smaller than the great hall, and Eva was very aware that it was her sleeping chamber, as well as terribly conscious of the large bed at the other end of it, and the fact that they had yet to consummate the marriage. She knew that Connall had been considerate in letting her heal after her last accident on the steps after the wedding, but while she appreciated it, it left her in a constant state of anxiety as to exactly when he would decide she was healed enough to approach her. In truth, Eva had been growing increasingly anxious with each passing day, until tonight, the anxiety was like a band around her stomach, tightening with every step she took.

Oh, this is awful, she decided, and thought that perhaps she should turn and tell him to get the business over with. Stopping by the chairs, Eva turned to face him, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it abruptly as she caught sight of the houseboy carrying the chess game. She'd completely forgotten about the lad. Completely. Biting her lip, she dropped into the nearest chair and sat silent as one of the chests that held her new gowns was dragged between the two chairs and the game was set out on it.

Connall thanked the lad for his aid, then asked him to have Cook send someone up with wine for both of them.

Once the boy had left, Eva cleared her throat and eyed her husband. "My lord, I appreciate your kindness since arriving; first with holding a proper wedding once I arrived, then in... er... postponing the... er... consummation of the wedding until I had recovered," she stammered, aware that she was blushing furiously. She hadn't really considered how distressing this conversation would be before starting it, but now that she was well into it, there was nothing to do but finish it.

Clearing her throat, she straightened her shoulders and marshalled on, "But really, my lord, 'tis a nerve-wracking situation and I would... well... If we could get it over?"

Connall stared at her blankly, clearly taken completely by surprise at this outburst, then he frowned and echoed, "Get it over?"

"Aye... well..." She forced a smile and began wringing her hands together as she explained, "Tis rather like knowing that someday soon, though you are not sure when exactly, you will have to approach the blacksmith about knocking a rotten tooth out."

"Knockin' a rotten tooth..." Connall was staring at her with disbelief, though she didn't understand why. Nor did she understand why, when he finally spoke, he sounded somewhat upset. "Me lady wife, I realize ye havenae—What on earth makes ye think—" *Knockin' out a rotten tooth?*"

Eva bit her lip, unsure what she should say to improve the situation. He seemed rather offended by the comparison. "Well, I have never—I mean, from what I have been told, it does not sound like something to look forward to, my lord."

"What ha'e ye been told?" He sounded as if he were forcing patience.

Eva considered whether she had the courage to repeat Mavis's description and was quite sure she didn't. It was one thing to be told that by another woman, it was quite another to repeat it to the man with the boiled sausage he intended to use on you. She shook her head helplessly, but Connall apparently wasn't in the mood to humor her.

"What'd that useless brother o' yers tell ye?"

"Oh, it was not Jonathan," she assured him quickly. "It was my maid, Mavis... Well, she was not truly my maid. She worked in the kitchens, but did occasionally act as lady's maid to me... Well, once or twice. She traveled to court with us because Jonathan said I needed a lady's maid there," Eva explained lamely, then fell silent, aware she'd been babbling.

"I see, and what did this Mavis tell ye about what goes on between a husband and wife?"

Connall was sounding a little less angry now, she noted with relief. Still, it was difficult to imagine telling him so she said instead, "Well she was describing what went on between the servants, not necessarily between husband and wife, if you see what I mean?"

"Stop stalling," he said quietly. "A wife shouldnae fear telling her husband ought."

Eva sighed at these words, it was becoming obvious that he wasn't going to let this pass and she was going to have to repeat what Mavis had said. She was beginning to wish that she had never opened her mouth, but had simply awaited his pleasure in silent suspense. Unfortunately, she hadn't done so. Deciding that there was nothing for it, she gathered her courage and blurted, "She said it appeared that the man and woman wrestled a bit and then he stuck his boiled sausage up between her legs."

Connall made an odd sound, somewhere between a cough and snort, then turned his head abruptly away so that she could not see his expression. Eva was not certain at first if he were angry or shocked, but then she noted the way his shoulders were shaking and suspected the man was actually laughing at her. Indignation quickly rose up in her, but before she could say anything, there was a knock at the door. Eva glared at her husband as he glanced around, then stood and headed for the door.

"Yer flouncin'!" Connall crowed with amusement. "Damn me, I'd ha'e sworn ye were no a flouncer, but yer flouncin'!"

Realizing that she was indeed flouncing, Eva tried to correct her step, but was simply too agitated to manage it. Giving up the attempt as she reached the door, Eva wrenched it open, then quickly replaced the scowl on her face with a forced smile when she spied a wide-eyed Glynis standing in the hall, bearing a tray with a bottle of wine and wineglasses on it.

"Thank you, Glynis." She reached to take the tray from her. "And thank you for lighting the fire."

"Oh but—" the maid tried to snatch the tray back, no doubt recalling her laird's order that his wife was to carry nothing, but Eva was in a sorry mood and stepped back out of reach, then pushed the door closed with her foot. She whirled back toward the room then and almost crashed the tray into her husband.

"I shall take that. No need to risk an accident," he said mildly as he relieved her of the tray and carried it to where the chess game was set up.

Eva no longer felt like playing chess, if she ever had, and she definitely did not feel like finally living up to

her wifely duties, not that she ever had felt that either. All she really wanted at that point was to be left alone to lick her wounded pride, so, she stayed where she was by the door, glaring at her husband's back as he set the tray down and set about pouring wine for both of them. She continued to glare at him as Connall then lifted both glasses and carried them back to where she stood. An arched eyebrow was his only response to her irritated glare, then he handed her a glass, took a sip of his own and said, "Mavis got it wrong, lass."

Eva narrowed her eyes. "She did?"

"Aye. Drink yer wine."

Eva automatically took a sip, then asked, "What did she get wrong?"

"Well, there is much she left out, or perhaps was simply unable to see in a dark great hall at night with who knows how much distance between her and the people in question."

"What did she leave out?" Eva asked. "Well, for one thing, she left out the kissing." "Kissing?" Eva's interest was definitely engaged now. She still recalled that brief brush of lips after the ceremony and the way her mouth had tingled.

"Yes. Like our wedding kiss, only more."

"More?" she echoed with interest. "More what?"

"Drink yer wine," he instructed instead of answering.

Eva took an impatient gulp, then repeated, "More what?"

"Tis difficult to describe," he said, then raised one eyebrow again. "Perhaps I should show you?"

Chapter Eight

Eva stared at her husband uncertainly as she considered what to say to his question "*Perhaps I should show you?*" What she wanted to say was, Yes. Eva had enjoyed his kiss at the end of the wedding ceremony and would not mind experiencing that pleasure again. Then too, she really was curious about the "more." She gave the smallest of nods and raised her face to his, her eyes squeezing shut as she did. Almost immediately, she felt his lips move gently over hers as they had at the wedding, a soft, sweet caress of his mouth across the delicate skin of her own. Eva almost found herself sighing at the touch it was so pleasant. Then it changed a little, becoming a little firmer and she moved eagerly forward, happy for the increased pressure and the warmth it sent rushing through her. This time she couldn't hold back her sigh, and her lips parted slightly beneath his. Connall immediately tilted his head more to the side and opened his own mouth to catch the sigh, then she felt his tongue slip out of his mouth and into hers.

Eva's eyes popped open with surprise, then closed again. She had seen couples kissing like this before, servants she had come across unexpectedly at Caxton, catching them out in brief embraces. It had seemed an odd and hungry kiss, not really all that pleasant, but she found it was quite pleasant indeed, and *it was* a hungry kiss, or at least it made her hunger, though she wasn't quite sure for what.

Her mouth instinctively opened further under the onslaught and when Eva felt his tongue glide over her own, she heard a moan pierce the air around them and knew it came from herself, but didn't much mind. It didn't seem to bother Connall and so long as it didn't stop his kissing, Eva didn't care. She could be embarrassed later, but for now, she thought she could be quite happy to have him go on kissing her forever.

Several moments passed, or perhaps only one—she was having difficulty keeping hold of her thoughts, let alone time—then she heard the sound of splashing water. Eva wasn't sure where it was coming from until she felt Connall take the wine away from her, leaving that hand free. Her other thought was caught up in the material of his plaid, clutching it as if it were her only hold on sanity in a world gone mad. Now she allowed the other to tangle itself there as well, so that she could hold him close to her lest he decide to end the kiss.

"There is more," Connall told her as he eased the kiss.

"More?" Eva echoed. She was vaguely disappointed as he retracted his tongue from her mouth, but was also distracted by the way his lips were nibbling along her chin toward her ear.

"Hmmm. Other kinds of kisses." He reached her ear and did things there that made her gasp in surprise and shift up onto the tips of her toes.

No one had ever—she hadn't even considered—dear God, had someone set her skirt on fire? It felt as though her lower regions were being consumed by heat. . . and she liked it, Eva decided, moaning and arching and tugging at the cloth of his plaid as his mouth moved on to her throat now, his tongue whipping her into a frenzy. Mavis had managed to leave this part out. And fie on the maid for doing so, she thought vaguely; Eva was quite sure this was the best bit of the whole thing.

The thud of the wineglasses hitting the floor made her start, but then Connall distracted her with his hands, catching them at her waist, then running them up her back and back down. He didn't stop at her waist this time, however, but continued down until he was cupping her buttocks. A shocking caress indeed, but she liked it. She liked the way he pressed his lower body into hers too, and the hardness that she felt.

Connall left one hand there, holding her firmly against him, then lifted his lips from the collarbone he had been teasing with his tongue, and covered her mouth with his own. This kiss was even more passionate and hungry than the other had been and Eva felt herself melt into him, as a warm liquid sensation pooled in her lower belly and slid down to where he moved against her. Dear God, the kissing was heavenly. It was amazing, exciting, overwhelming, and—where had the top of her gown gone, she wondered vaguely. Somehow it was now pooled around her waist, exposing her naked flesh to the room at large, not that Connall could see her, with his mouth on hers, she assured herself but—

"Oh," she murmured the word into his mouth and bucked against him in surprised reaction as one calloused hand cupped, then closed over one of her exposed breasts.

Connall caught the soft word in his mouth and filled hers more fully with his tongue. The action prevented any possibility of protest as he gently kneaded and squeezed the breast, then began to torment its nipple, catching it between thumb and forefinger and rolling it gently before lightly pinching it.

Eva had the wildest urge to push the man to the floor and rub her naked chest over him. Instead, she began to kiss him back in earnest, becoming a partner in the activity instead of a quiescent recipient. She

thrust her tongue into his mouth, rubbing it across his, then withdrew it to suck on his tongue instead. Eva didn't know if she was doing this well, she was merely following instinct, but it felt so good she didn't much care, either.

The pressure of the bed against the back of her knees several minutes later was when Eva realized that Connall had been moving them both across the room to the bed. The feeling of fur against her backside was when she first noticed that her gown was no longer around her waist, but was gone altogether, as were her undergarments. She wasn't wearing anything at all, not a stitch, not—

"Oh." This time the sound came from much deeper in her throat, as Connall broke their kisses again and ducked his head straight down to claim the nipple he had been so effectively caressing. If she had thought his touch there exciting and stirring, his lips closing over the tender and already excited flesh was earth-shaking.

Eva tossed her head and arched against him, unashamedly rubbing her lower body against the hardness she could feel between his legs. His boiled sausage might not sound attractive, but it felt good pressing against her. At least with the plaid as a barrier it did, she thought, then she stiffened and let her eyes shoot open as she felt him slip one hand between their bodies and dip between her legs. The cool, calloused skin of his fingers smoothed lightly across her heated flesh and Eva reacted as if it were a brand, her entire body leaping in his arms, her legs closing instinctively to trap his hand even as she pushed herself against him.

She was of two minds at that point: She was so sensitive that the touch seemed almost unbearable, yet she didn't want to stop. Her body reacted to her confusion, squirming to get away from his touch one moment, then arching into it the next. Connall resolved the issue for her by trapping her legs with his own, then forcing them further apart and holding her in place as he touched her.

Eva tossed her head on the fur, small unintelligible mewls coming from her throat, intermittently peppered with "Oh nos," which were immediately followed by "Yes, please." In truth, she didn't know what she wanted, whether it was for him to stop, not stop, or perhaps just for him to make the need go away and stop driving her mad with his caresses. Then he added a new touch to his repertoire and Eva felt something alien push into her, stretching her even as he continued to caress her. Eva groaned at the sensation, some part of her mind sensate enough to know that it wasn't his boiled sausage because she could feel that pressed against the top of one thigh. All she could think of was that it was *a finger* sliding in and out of her.

Eva went still for the briefest of moments as the very alien nature of the caress struck her, but he was still touching her where she was most sensitive and her body began to quiver in confusion and need, then move of its own accord into his touch. Eva began to moan again, the sound growing more intense with each stroke. Her body was now suffering a tightening sensation that became more intense by the moment and was concentrated where it was receiving his attentions.

Just when she felt sure she would shatter under the building pressure, the tension suddenly snapped, and Eva cried out and dug her nails into Connall's shoulders. Her body arched and bucked beneath the furor, then she cried out again as pain followed the pleasure, wiping out everything before it and shocking her into stillness. It was no longer his hand between her legs—he had replaced it with his boiled sausage.

"Tis the only time 'twill hurt." Connall panted those words near her ear and Eva finally realized his presence on top of her. Odd as it may be, for a moment she had been so startled by and concentrated on the pain that she had almost forgotten him altogether.

"Tis because yer pure."

Eva was still panting and out of breath, so merely nodded to let him know she had heard and understood him.

"The pain should go away soon. It doesnae last."

Eva nodded again. In truth the pain was already receding, leaving her body limp and pulsing beneath him in a rather pleasant way.

"Is it leaving?" Connall asked and Eva couldn't help but notice that he sounded desperately hopeful.

Eva nodded again.

"Och, thank the good Lord," he muttered against her forehead, then pressed a kiss there, before turning his lips to her mouth and kissing her there again as well.

Despite the shock she had just received, the passion she'd thought now dead, stirred lazily within her under his kiss. It stirred again when he eased his boiled sausage out of her, then just as slowly and gently eased it back in. Eva felt a sudden need to arch and stretch beneath him, then instinctively wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him tighter against her when he next stroked back into her body. She wanted to hold him there and rub against him, but he wouldn't be held and withdrew yet again. This time, when he moved back, it was more a thrust than a slide, his body almost slamming into hers.

Eva gasped at the sensations that were shooting through her. The pain was not completely gone, there was a touch of tenderness, but the pleasure was returning and building back up to its earlier levels so quickly it was difficult to believe they had ever been sated the once. It was also overwhelming the minor discomfort that grew less with each passing moment. Eva scraped her nails up his back, clutching him close and moaning as he continued his actions and drove them both to the place where she had felt sure she would simply shatter and die the first time.

She was not alone when she reached it again, even as the tension snapped in her and her body began to quiver and shake beneath his. Eva heard Connall gasp something in Gaelic in her ear, then thrust one final time before stiffening and crying out himself.

This time when she lay, limp and pulsing, Connall lay atop her, panting and limp as well. Whether he was having the same pulsing sensation as she was, she didn't know, and she was too exhausted to ask. So much so, that if it weren't for the fact that breathing became easier, she wouldn't have noticed when Connall moved off her to lay at her side. Eva stirred when he turned her in his arms and curved her into his body so that her bottom pressed against the shrinking sausage that had shown her so much pleasure. But when he then pulled the furs up to cover them both and just lay there with one arm curled around her, holding her against him, Eva allowed herself to drift off to sleep.

It was some time later when she awoke to slow caresses and sweet kisses and Connall proved to her that the pain really did occur only the first time. Then she slept again until he stirred her once more. This time the fact that he was dressed, made it obvious that he had left the room and was returning and she helped him to strip before he joined her.

It was near dawn when they collapsed exhausted, side by side, and dawn's grey light was creeping around the edge of the furs at the window. Eva was just drifting off to sleep when she felt Connall stir. At first, she simply thought he was shifting in the bed to a more comfortable position, and allowed herself to

doze again, but the soft click of the door closing a moment later made her sit up in bed, suddenly wide awake.

Where the devil was he going? He had slept somewhere else since her arrival, just where exactly she wasn't sure, but surely he would sleep with her now that they had consummated the marriage? Wouldn't he?

After a hesitation, Eva got up, took the new dark blue robe that had been made for her and drew it on as she moved across the room. The flames had died in the fireplace long ago, her room was as dark as a tomb except for the stray of grey light which crept in around the furs at the window, but there wasn't enough light to be seen from the hall, she was sure. Eva didn't hesitate to ease the door open and peer out into the hall, blinking as the torchlight there assaulted her eyes. There were several torches to light the way, but only one at the top of the stairs was lit. However, it was enough light for her to make out the dark shape of her husband walking down the hall to the opposite end.

The man hadn't even bothered to put on his plaid again, but strode down the hall naked as the day he was born, his pale skin gleaming in the torchlight.

She saw him stop at the end of the hall, touch two places, then the stone wall that faced the hall at that end of it suddenly slid open and Eva gasped as her husband stepped inside and it began to close again. She was about to call out and hurry after him when a dark shape suddenly separated itself from the top of the stairs and moved after her husband. Eva snapped her mouth closed and waited.

She had no idea who it was, but their stealthy movements didn't make her think that they belonged there. The figure moved to the far end of the hall and she saw him run his hands over the stones as if in search of the places her husband had pushed. Eva watched tensely until, after several moments of fruitless searching, the dark shape apparently gave up the search and began to move back up the hall. She immediately eased her chamber door closed to a sliver, lest she be seen, and simply watched the person, hoping that she'd be able to tell who it was when they passed the torchlight at the top of the stairs.

Eva was sorely disappointed when the figure passed through the light and she saw that he was wearing a dark hooded cape, the hood pulled so far forward that it shadowed his face. All she could see was the tip of his nose as he reached the stairs, then he turned and moved silently down them.

Eva slid from her room and crept to the top of the stairs to watch the figure disappear into the shadowed great hall below, then glanced up the hall to the wall through which her husband had disappeared. After the smallest of hesitations, she followed her husband and the stranger's path and moved to the wall to run her hands over it as had the man before her. She used her right hand to press the two stones she felt sure she had seen Connall touch with his right hand, but nothing happened. Eva pressed them again, a little harder. Still nothing. Irritated, she slapped the wall in front of her with her left hand, then gasped as the stone wall suddenly slid open.

After a hesitation, she pushed it further open and stared into gaping darkness. Eva couldn't see a thing and was filled with sudden trepidation, then she forced her shoulders up. A husband should sleep with his wife, and if he wouldn't, then a wife should sleep with her husband. At least that's how it seemed to her. After all, Aileen slept at night with her husband, spending the days locked inside because of her reaction to the sun, but awake so that she could be up while her husband was awake. Eva understood that Connall slept the day away, leaving Ewan to run the castle while he rested, then running it himself at night, but then, shouldn't she too keep the same hours? And shouldn't they sleep together?

Besides, she was terribly curious as to why the man slept in this dark hidden room. Ewan had said that

his reaction to sunlight was worse than his sister's, so she could only presume that even the hint of light that crept around the furs was unbearable to him. That being the case, she could sleep in total darkness too.

Sleep in it, perhaps, she thought a moment later, but she couldn't seem to force herself to step into it. Grimacing, she hesitated, then hurried back up the hall, pausing at the top of the stairs to be sure no one was coming up them and might see the open door. The room she'd found was obviously a secret and she didn't wish to reveal it to anyone. Assured that the stairwell, like the hall, was presently empty, she hurried on to her room, paused to glance back once more, then rushed inside, snatched up the nearest candle and hurried back out, relieved to find the hall still empty.

Eva moved to the torch at the top of the stairs, lit her small candle by it, then sheltered it with one hand as she moved back to the entrance to the hidden room. Somehow, the tiny light from the candle seemed to make the darkness beyond the entrance even more frightening. Eva didn't hesitate however, but stepped through into the room beyond. Not a room, she realized, but a narrow hall that ran straightforward.

Grimacing, she hesitated, then glanced back along the proper upper hall, supposing she couldn't leave the entrance open like this, though she wished she could. Sighing with resignation, Eva eased the door closed, trying not to wince when she heard a click as it locked in place. She moved the candle over the stone panel, frowning when she didn't see a handle of any sort to unlock it. Eva supposed there was some secret to opening it from this side as well and almost panicked, but then recalled that her husband was in here with her somewhere and he could let her out if necessary.

If he was still in here.

She frowned at that sudden thought, but knew that it was at least possible that he had stepped out of the room while she had stepped into her own. Eva rolled her eyes at that thought. Surely he wouldn't have left the door open, were that the case? In fact, he should have been quite upset and rushing about with distress that someone had opened it, if he had found it open. Nay, he was here. Somewhere.

She turned back and tried to peer up the dark passage, but her small candlelight didn't seem to reach far at all and she couldn't even tell how far it went. Finally forcing herself to leave the door, Eva started forward, holding her candle out before her at full arm's length in an effort to see as far ahead as possible. It was a plain dark stone hall, no torches in sconces to see by, no rushes on the floor, and then suddenly she saw a door on her left. A plain wooden door with a handle. She peered at it uncertainly, then glanced along the continuing hall with a frown.

Eva supposed she had expected the hall to end at one room and not continue on. After a hesitation, she decided to continue along the hall, just to see what else there was to see, at least that's what she told herself. She wasn't willing to admit that she suddenly felt anxious about confronting her husband. Leaving the first door, Eva moved on, crossing another good distance before coming to the end of the hall and another door.

Oh, now here was a fine quandary. Which door should she try first? She could have spent a good deal of time debating that issue and avoiding the actual doing, but a sudden mumbling came to her softly through the door where she now stood. Eva stilled and leaned toward the door as the sound came again, a nonsensical sleepy mumble, but in it she was able to recognize her husband's voice.

Reaching for the handle, Eva opened the door and stepped inside, preparing to be berated should her husband be annoyed with her. There was no berating, however, only silence and darkness as thick as

that in the hall.

Eva pursed her lips, then left the door open and eased further into the room until the edge of the candlelight touched the side of a bed, and began to move across it as she continued forward. When it fell on her husband's face, he scowled in his sleep and mumbled a complaint, then rolled onto his side away from the light.

Eva immediately pulled the candle back, lest she wake him. Letting him sleep seemed a smart thing at that point, men could be so grumpy on first waking. Moving back to the door, she eased it silently closed, then shielded the candle with her hand to prevent it reaching too far and accidentally waking her husband as she moved back to the bed.

Connall was sprawled on his side in the middle of the bed, leaving just a sliver of bed for her to claim should she wish to and Eva debated the matter. Turn and make her way back up that long dark hall to the door she didn't know how to open? Or crawl into that sliver of space and sleep with her husband where she belonged?

She'd stay, Eva decided and set the candle on the chest beside the bed. When she straightened, thoughtlessly removing the hand she had been shielding the light with, candlelight immediately splashed over Connall and he began to grumble in his sleep again. Eva instinctively bent to blow the candle out in response, then sighed as she was plunged into complete blackness.

Ah well, she didn't need light to undress and the bed was right beside her, she reassured herself, then tried not to imagine what kind of creepy crawlies might now be moving about in the darkness. Rats and spiders came to mind, but she forced them away. Still, her movements were perhaps a little quicker than necessary as she tugged her robe off and felt around for the linens and furs to crawl beneath them. Eva slowed to a more cautious speed once her feet were off the floor and safely tucked under the bedding, then eased herself down to lay on her side next to her husband on the sliver of bed he had left free.

Connall mumbled when she cuddled up against his back and slid one arm around his waist, but he didn't wake up. Eva wasn't really tired at this point and lay wide awake for a long time wishing there was firelight or candlelight to at least see something, even if it was only darker shadows in the darkness, but eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Someone was blowing in his ear.

Connall lay still as sleep left him, unwilling to give away the fact that he was now awake. It was only a moment later that he realized that whoever it was wasn't blowing in his ear, but breathing in his ear, and the same someone was pressed up against his back with an arm around his waist, he realized.

Confusion assaulted him and for a moment Connall thought perhaps he hadn't left his bride's bed and come to his usual sleeping spot as he'd thought he had, perhaps he'd dreamt that, but then he realized that this room was too dark to be the chamber where his wife slept. He was definitely in his own room, the one he had occupied since childhood, but someone was with him.

His mother, sister, and Ewan were the only ones who knew about this room, but Connall seriously doubted any of them would be snuggled up against him like this. At least, he sincerely hoped not. The warm body curled around his own was having an effect on him that it would just be wrong to have for any of those three individuals.

"Eva?" he asked hopefully.

"Mmmm." The body behind him shifted and stretched, then curled even closer, tops of thighs pressing against his arse and the backs of his legs.

Connall squeezed his eyes closed as the semi-erection he had awoken with sprang into a full one. Dear God, he hoped it was his wife, perhaps his mother or sister had informed her of his room as a surprise. Deciding it was time to find out, Connall eased closer to the edge of the bed and the candle he usually kept there. He managed to light it, then lifted it in the air and glanced over his shoulder, a small breath of relief slipping from his lips at the sight of his wife curled up behind him. Setting the candle back on the chest, Connall eased onto his back in the bed, then on his side facing her and reached out to run one finger lightly along her cheek. He was torn between waking her up to ask how she had got there, and waking her up by making love to her. The way she murmured sleepily and turned her face into his touch reminded him of her sweet responses to his lovemaking the night before and made up his mind. He would find out how she'd got there soon enough. First things first.

Eva moaned and shifted as she became conscious of the hands moving caressingly over her body.

"Connall," she murmured the name sleepily as her eyes swept open. Candlelight spilled across the bed, gleaming on his dark hair as he bent his head over her to capture one nipple in his warm wet mouth.

"Oh," Eva moaned and arched into the caress. It was a heavenly way to wake up, one she had awoken to the night before and would be pleased to awaken to again and again she decided as Connall slid a leg between both of hers, allowing it to rub against the center of her. She thought it was a terrible shame that girls were not told what to expect once they were married. Had she known that this had awaited her here in Scotland, she would have been urging the men to ride faster.

Connall's mouth left her breast and Eva moaned in disappointment, then gasped in surprise, her stomach muscles jumping as his lips trailed a path across it. He had said last night that there was more to kissing, but she had never expected all the places that could be kissed, or how delightful those kisses could be. Eva would never have imagined that her husband would wish to kiss her stomach, delve his tongue into her belly button, draw his tongue along her pelvic bone, or—

"Ah!" She gasped with surprise, her eyes flying open as he suddenly urged her thighs apart and lowered his head between them. Suddenly assaulted by modesty and not a little embarrassment, Eva tried to squeeze her legs closed, but he pushed them further open instead and seemed to settle into the endeavor of kissing her there. Dear God, and she had thought his earlier kisses exciting!

Eva squeezed her eyes closed and clutched at the bed linens to ground herself as she was assaulted by pleasure such as she had never experienced. Her body was suddenly moving of its own accord, shifting, stretching, arching, and even bucking beneath his ministrations and she was vaguely aware that she was gasping and moaning and making little mewling sounds. It wasn't long before she felt sure that if he didn't stop soon, she would surely die from the pleasure. Oddly enough, she thought she might very well die if he did stop as well. Then, suddenly she couldn't stand it anymore and wanted to feel him inside her as he had been last night. Without thinking, she caught at his hair, tugging at it, trying to urge him up to slide into her, but Connall ignored her actions and continued with what he was doing, driving her mad with his

tongue as he lashed the very center of her.

"Oh, no, no, no, please," she moaned. Then her body suddenly went stiff and Eva nearly shot upward off the bed as he slid a finger into her as well and her body reacted like the string of a bow suddenly released as it jerked in spasm. She was trembling and shaking with release as he finally straightened and sat up on his knees between her legs. Eva sat up at once and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. Her breath came in sobs as she clung to him and Connall ran a hand soothingly down her back before catching her under her bottom and lifting her into his lap, guiding himself into her as he did.

Eva moaned, her head dropping back as she felt him push into her body, the action sending her into confusion, the lassitude that had claimed her was leaving, replaced by a returning excitement. He truly would kill her, she thought vaguely as he urged her legs around his waist, caught her under the thighs and began to raise and lower her on top of him.

Eva managed to survive the encounter, barely. Long moments later as she lay in an exhausted heap on her husband's chest where she had ended up, she listened to his heart beat and smiled vaguely to herself. Nightwalking, soulless, blood-lusters? The man had a heartbeat and everyone knew that vampires had no life in them; it was said that was why they craved the lifeblood of the living.

"Eva?"

She lifted her head and turned it so that her chin rested on his chest as she peered at him in question. "Aye?"

"How is it ye came to be here?"

"Oh." She flushed guiltily, then cleared her throat and said evasively, "I am your wife. This is where I belong. Husbands and wives sleep together."

"Do they?" he asked with vague amusement.

"Aye," she answered, then added, "Well, my parents did."

"Hmmm." Lifting a hand, he toyed with a strand of hair and teased, "Tis probably why they had so many children."

Eva smiled slightly, but didn't comment on that. Her parents had had ten children in all; one had been born dead, one had died within days of birth, but eight had survived. Jonathan was the oldest, but there had been another male who survived into adulthood before being taken by an infection after being wounded in battle. Eva also had five older sisters, all surviving; three of them had been married ere her parents had died, Jonathan had managed to supply a small dower for another, but Lynette, the next oldest to Eva, had been forced to become a nun when it transpired that there was no dower for her and no one would have her without one, much as Eva had almost been forced to do. Eva had told Connall about her family and her life in general over the last week as they had played chess. It was only now that she realized he had told her very little in return. She hadn't even known where he slept.

"I can see why you like it in here," she said now, as the candle at the bedside sputtered, and a glance showed that it had burned down to a stub and was threatening to gutter out. That would leave them in total darkness again. "It was so quiet and dark, I slept like the dead."

Connall's lips quirked at her comment, but he merely pointed out, "Ye havenae told me hoo ye came to

be here. Did someone tell ye about this room?"

"Nay," Eva bit her lip briefly before admitting, "I awoke as you left the room. I could not understand why you would leave me to sleep elsewhere after... Well, now that we are properly married. I got up and hurried to the door and saw you come through the entrance at the end of the hall."

"And ye figured oot hoo to open it by watching me?" he said.

"Aye. Well, partly. I saw the two stones you pressed with your right hand, but the one in the middle was just luck. When I pressed the first two and it didn't work, I got frustrated and thumped the wall, it was pure luck that I hit the right stone there. I was startled as could be when it suddenly opened." She lowered her head, and ran one finger nervously back and forth on his chest, then glanced up from under her eyebrows and asked a touch anxiously, "Are you angry with me?"

Connell shook his head. "Nay. I'd ha'e been tellin' ye about this room eventually, but 'tis obvious I'll ha'e to be mair careful in future. I didnae e'en think to look around as I went. Anyone might ha'e seen me."

His words reminded her of the man in the cape, and Eva said solemnly, "Someone did."

Connell's eyes narrowed and a frown knit his brow as Eva told him about the caped figure who had followed him up the hall and tried—but failed—to open the secret entrance. They were both silent for a moment when she finished, then Eva asked curiously, "Why do you sleep in here? Is it to avoid the sun?"

"Aye," he said gruffly, then eased her off his chest and swung his feet off the bed as he sat up. "The candle'll be goin' out soon, we'd best shift ourselves ere we're left in the dark."

"I brought a candle with me as well," Eva said as she tugged the sheets up to cover herself and sat up in bed.

Connell glanced at the candle, but didn't light it, instead he set to work on his plaid. Eva watched him silently, one hand absently pushing her hair away from her face. It felt like a rat's nest to her and she wondered what time it was and if she might have a bath.

"Up now," he ordered. "Yer best to eat, 'tis night and ye havena eaten since this hour yester eve."

Eva blinked in surprise at this news, finding it hard to believe that she had been abed for nearly twenty-four hours. Well, her bed and this bed. Though they hadn't done much sleeping in her bed as she recalled. Forcing herself to let go of the linen sheet, she leaned forward from the bed to snatch up her robe where she'd left it lying on the hard stone floor. Eva frowned over the fact that there were no rushes on this floor. It must be cold on his bare feet, she thought with concern. Then her gaze shifted around the room.

With the one sputtering candle, it was no easier to see than it had been the night before, but then it didn't look as if there was much to see anyway. The room was as barren and cold as her chamber at Caxton had been.

"I understand you sleeping here to avoid sunlight coming in," she murmured as her gaze slid along the wall. She didn't see any sign of a covered window, but that didn't mean there wasn't one, it was hard to tell in this light. "But why is the room kept secret?"

When Connall didn't answer right away, she asked, "It is secret, is it not? I should not tell anyone of it?"

That made him pause and glance at her. "Aye. Tis secret. Tell no one."

Eva nodded. "Why do you sleep in a secret room?"

Connell sighed, hands on his hips, and considered his wife. What to tell her? How much to say? Was she ready to hear the full truth? Or should he leave that for a little longer and stick to partial truths? It was early yet to tell her the full truth, he decided. Half truths would have to do for now. "Me mother had these rooms built when I was but a child. Twas to keep me safe from the sun, but 'twas also as a precaution."

"A precaution?" she queried as she tugged her robe on.

"Ye've heard the rumors about our clan," he said slowly. When she nodded, he continued, "Well, people tend to fear what they doonae understand, and usually they try to destroy what they fear. These rooms are a safeguard against sech a thing."

Eva nodded her understanding. "Do you think that man last night is someone who fears you?"

Connell hesitated, then simply said, "There have been three attempts on me life in the last little while."

He saw her eyes widen with dismay and quickly changed the subject. "Come. Ye should eat... and... er... have a bath," he added, a small smile curving his lips. Her hair was a riotous mass on her head and he was sure no amount of brushing would remove the tangles caused by their love making. She would have to wash her hair to get them out, Connall thought as he blew the bedside candle out, and took her hand in the darkness to lead the way to the door. The tangles came from her tendency to roll and rub her head from side to side on the bed as he pleased her, he knew. In future, he might have to hold her head in place as he pleased her to save her lovely hair.

"Connell?"

He paused at the door at that whisper. "Aye?"

"I cannot see a thing."

"I'll lead the way. Trust me," he said with a squeeze of her hand.

"I do," she murmured and fell silent, following obediently behind him as he led her up the long dark hall to the entrance to the secret section of castle, and he believed it to be true. She did trust him, with a purity and innocence that touched him. She trusted him to keep her safe and happy, and he would, he decided.

Recalling the incident with the arrow the other night, he found his hand tightening around his wife's wee hand. The very fact that he had married her, might place Eva in danger. He didn't like to think what might have happened had the caped figure spotted her watching him last night.

He pondered the situation as he showed her the secret to opening the door from the inside, having to show her by touch since it was black as pitch in there. She would need to know how to open it from both sides as he had decided she would be sleeping in there with him from now on. The incident with the intruder was troublesome. It meant that either someone had gained the castle, managing to slip past

everyone here, or the person was one of his own people. He didn't want to believe it, but the second option seemed most likely. A member of his own clan might wish him dead. But either way, he intended on seeing his wife safe.

Connall tossed his reins to the stable boy, and headed for the castle, his heart sinking at the sight of Ewan waiting for him. The man looked sleepy and disheveled, as if he'd fallen asleep while waiting for him and been awoken with the news that he had returned. The fact that he was waiting was what worried Connall, his first only waited when there was something to report. The last two times it had been an accident his wife had suffered, Connall suspected this would be number three.

"Well?" he asked as he reached the other man. "What's she done now? Tripped, stumbled, scalded herself? What?"

"Nothing like that, Eva's fine," his brother-in-law assured him quickly and Connall felt himself relax, only to stiffen again when the man added, "I think. Tis what she's doin' I'm worryin' about. She slipped away from Keddy and Domhall and they couldnae find her, then I spied her, but she was too quick fer me. I wasnae sure she should be in there, but I couldnae get in to question her and I'm not sure what she's doin', but she was cartin' all that stuff about and Glynis says that half the things from her bedchamber are missing and I suspect she's taken them all in there with her. Then I worried that the men would see, so I relieved them and took to waiting fer her to come out meself, but I think she'd made anoother trip while I was talkin' to the men and she hasnae come out since, and I can't find yer mother to fetch her oot to ask her what she's about, so I thought I'd best stick around till ye returned and—"

"Ewan," Connall interrupted with amazement. "Yer babbling."

The older man looked alarmed at this pronouncement, then complained, "It's yer wife, Connall! She'll be the death o' me, I'm sure. Between the scares with her accidents and—sweet Jesus! Me heart stopped when she tripped up on the stairs in the keep, then again when she tumbled down the chapel steps, and then there's her shenanigans tonight. I'm sure I've aged ten years since she arrived and I'm an old man to begin with."

"All right, old friend," Connall put a soothing hand on the irate man's shoulder. "Breathe. Jest breathe and calm down, then tell me what the devil yer talking about."

Ewan sighed and closed his eyes briefly, when he opened them again he said simply, "Eva."

"Aye." Connall nodded encouragingly. "She slipped away from the men ye had watchin' her?"

"Aye."

"And they came to ye and so ye started to help them look fer her?"

"Aye." Ewan grimaced. "We looked everywhere. I was starting to think she'd either fallen down the well or been kidnapped, and wonderin' how the devil I was to tell ye that, when I decided to check her bedchamber one more time."

"And ye found her there, but she got away," Connall guessed, recalling the man babbling about her being too quick for him.

"Nay. I spied her walking past the top of the stairs as I went up them. She was bustling along with a great armful of stuff, and I jest knew she'd trip o'er her gown or something and there'd be hell to pay, so I hurried up the stairs, but by the time I got there the hall was empty, wasnae it? I checked the rooms, but they were empty too and the only thing I could think is that she'd gone into the passage to the night rooms."

"Ah." Connall nodded with understanding. The rest of what the man had said made sense now. Ewan suspected Eva was in the passage, but wasn't sure she should be, and while he was one of the few people who knew about it, even he didn't know how to open it, there had never been a need. Which is what he had meant by not being able to "get in to question her." Connall considered the rest of what he'd said. His wife had been carting great loads of stuff and—according to Glynis—half the things from the bedchamber were missing.

A sigh from his first, made Connall glance his way to note his weary expression. It was well past the time the man would usually be in bed. It was only a couple of hours till dawn when he normally would be rising. Putting the matter of what his wife was up to to the side for a moment, Connall thumped one hand on his brother-in-law's shoulder. "Yer weary."

"I'm old," Ewan sighed.

"Nay, yer no an old man yet, friend," he assured him. "Yer just tired right now. Doonae fret about Eva, I'll tend to her. As fer Mother, she rode with us tonight, that's why ye couldnae find her," he explained. "But come and I'll show ye how to open the passage. Had I shown ye ere this, ye'd ha'e gone to bed long ago. Come."

Connall led the other man through the great hall and up the stairs to the end of the hall. He showed him twice how to open the passage, then had him practice it twice to be sure he had it before wishing him good night and watching him move off down the hall to the room he shared with Aileen. His sister's reaction to the sun was a lesser version of his own and she could sleep in a normal chamber so long as she kept furs up on the windows. He, however, like Magaidh, needed the secured dark of a windowless stone room. Not that he couldn't bear sunlight altogether, his reaction wasn't as bad as some of their people's, but it burned him and made him sick. It had made the trip to court almost unbearable.

A soft click from the other end of the dark hallway drew his attention from his thoughts and Connall peered up the dark expanse, but there was no one in the hall. Deciding it must have been Ewan going into his and Aileen's room, Connall turned back to the passage door and stepped through, then closed it behind him.

Chapter Ten

Connall found Eva in his night room, muttering to herself as she attempted to start a fire in the fireplace. Distracted as she was, she didn't hear him enter, and he took a moment to peer around the room before making his presence known. His gaze swept over the changes she'd made with amazement; two walls now sported huge tapestries he recognized from the other chamber, the bed was littered with cushions and furs, and there were also several more candles in here now, all of them lit at the moment. Eva had also brought the two chairs from the other room and set them before the fireplace with the chest from the other room between them—he couldn't imagine how she had dragged that here on her own without being

discovered.

Shaking his head, he started forward, then glanced down with surprise as he stepped on rushes. These too must have come from the other chamber and he had to wonder what the other room must look like now with half its rushes and furnishings missing. About as strange as this room now appeared to him, he supposed and glanced around again.

It seemed his wife had moved in. Connall had never considered that she might when he'd arranged to marry her. His own parents had slept in separate rooms with his mother in her room here in the passage and his father in the chamber Eva had been occupying. Obviously they had spent some time together in either room or Aileen and himself would not have been born, but for as long as he could recall, the two had actually done the sleeping part separately. But then they had slept at different times as well. His father, being human, had slept at night as was the custom, while his mother—to avoid the sun—had slept in here during the day as he did himself.

Connall supposed he had expected things to go much the same for him. He would spend some time with his wife in the early evening after arising, then perhaps visit her room in the dark hours before dawn, then sleep in here during the day while she was up and about. It seemed that his wife had other plans.

He peered around the changes again and shook his head. Connall felt rather invaded. The room was cozy and inviting, nothing at all like the sterile room he had slept in for the last almost sixty years. He was suddenly feeling... well... married.

"Oh, God's toes, you are a stubborn, stupid blasted..."

Connall found himself smiling as Eva growled and slapped at the bit of wood she was trying to light, as if punishing it for being difficult and he thought with amusement that perhaps being married wouldn't be so bad. The woman had a tendency to make him smile, something he wasn't used to, but found he rather liked. He had found himself smiling often while playing chess with her at night, Eva was witty and amusing and... well... really rather adorable at the moment, disheveled from her work as she was.

Pushing the door closed, he crossed the room and dropped to his haunches beside her. "Givin' ye trouble is it, me lady wife?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, dropping back onto her heels with surprise at what to her must seem a sudden appearance. "You are back."

"Aye," he agreed, smiling at her.

She smiled back, then her eyes widened in alarm and she began fussing with her clothes and pushing at her hair in an apparent effort to make herself more presentable. She gave up the attempt almost at once and sighed as she forlornly admitted, "I wanted to clean myself up some and make myself more presentable ere you returned."

"Ye look fine to me," he assured her as he took over the task of lighting the fire.

"And the room?" Eva asked hopefully as she watched him do in minutes what she had spent nearly an hour now trying to accomplish. He made it look so easy, she thought with vague irritation.

"The room." He sat back on his heels beside her and peered around. "Tis... well, it looks more comfortable," he said at last.

Eva pursed her lips, trying to decide if that meant he liked it or not, then gasped with surprise when he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

"Tis time fer bed," he announced firmly.

"But I am not tired, my lord," Eva protested. "I napped this evening."

"Did you now?" He peered at her with surprise.

"Aye." She grimaced, embarrassed to admit it. "It took a long time for me to drop off to sleep when I came in here last night. In fact, I would not be surprised if I had lain awake most of the day and dropped off just shortly before you woke me again."

He arched an eyebrow as he paused at the side of the bed. "If ye were takin' a nap tonight, when did ye do all this?"

"Right after eating supper," she explained. "When you headed out with the men. It did not take long, the rooms aren't far apart and I really haven't done much, but it wearied me a bit and I fell asleep for a while." She grimaced, then admitted, "A long while. I only woke up just ere you arrived. The candle I had left lit was guttering, so I lit more and then tried to light the fire."

"Hmm. Then ye willnae be tired."

Eva gave a squeal of surprise as he dropped her on the bed.

"And 'tis good I came back early enough to take the time to tire ye oot," he announced, reaching for the buckle of his belt.

"Husband?" Eva ran her hand over the arm across her chest and tilted her head in an effort to see his face. He had made love to her with as much passion and vigor as she could have wished, then they had talked softly for a while, but he had grown silent these last few moments and Eva suspected he was asleep. She wished she could join him in that state, but despite the energetic session he had just treated her to, she wasn't tired. If anything, she felt rather invigorated.

Positive he slept, she lifted his arm and eased out from under him, moving slowly and cautiously in an effort not to wake him. Once out from under it, Eva set his arm on the bed and pulled her robe on. She wanted to go to the old chamber and order a bath, she should probably check in with Glynis as well, the girl might be wondering where she was and perhaps even be worried. But, while Eva wasn't sure what time it was, she didn't think it was much past dawn. The castle inhabitants who slept nights would be sitting down to break their fast, Glynis among them, and Effie would be busy as could be in the kitchens. She thought it might be best to wait a bit before bothering them with a request for a bath.

Eva glanced around the room, debating what to do until then and her gaze landed on the dark blue gown she'd been wearing that day. It was one of the new ones, though it hardly looked like it at the moment, dusty and wrinkled as it was from her first working, then sleeping in it earlier. There was also a tear in one of the sleeves. Eva had caught it on something while moving things about earlier, though she would be hard-pressed to say when it had occurred exactly. She had only noticed the tear on rising from her nap before Connall had returned to the room.

Fortunately, the tear was along a seam and would be easily repaired and that seemed the perfect chore to keep her busy until it would be more convenient for her to take her bath. Bending, she collected the gown and moved to the chairs by the fire, then lay the gown across one of the chairs, and paused to place a couple of logs on the fire, before turning back to remove the untouched chess game and wine from the chest. Once those were out of the way, Eva opened it to search out the needle and thread she had placed inside after hemming the last of the gowns that were being made for her.

She had the lid up and was on her knees with her head buried in the chest when Eva heard the chamber door open. Her first thought was that it would be Glynis, and that the girl must be done breaking her fast. Perhaps it was later than she had thought and she could eschew the sewing for now and go take a bath. Eva had started to straighten to see if she was right, when she recalled that she wasn't in her chamber anymore. She was in the secret chamber... and Glynis didn't know about this room.

Eva froze, the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly standing on end. According to Connall, the only people who knew about this room, besides himself, were his mother, sister, and Ewan. And herself now, of course. She couldn't imagine any of them just walking into the room without knocking. Moving cautiously, she eased back on her haunches behind the chest, knowing it hid her from view at least from the door. Unfortunately, it also blocked her view of all but the top of the door as it was slowly, stealthily she couldn't help thinking, eased closed.

She waited silently, holding her breath as she listened to see if someone had just looked into the room or actually entered. After a moment that seemed to last an eon, the stirring of the rushes told her that someone had entered. Now, she *had* to look.

Moving carefully, Eva eased up slightly until she could just see over the top of the chest, then quickly ducked back down. Dear Lord, it was the man in the cape, or at least it was a man in a cape, she couldn't be sure, of course, if it was the same man she had seen the other morning, but thought it was a good bet that it was. He had obviously succeeded at figuring out the secret to opening the door, she realized.

Eva's gaze slid anxiously to the bed and she willed Connall to wake up and deal with the situation, but, of course, he didn't. And really, even if he woke up now, he would surely be so sleep-befuddled that he might be slow to react to whatever the fellow had in mind and end up hurt... or dead. Connall had said that there had been three attempts on his life in recent times and Eva very much feared that this was going to be attempt number four, and she was the only person presently conscious and capable of dealing with the intruder.

Now, she just had to figure out how, Eva thought with vexation. And quickly. The man had started moving toward the bed, reaching beneath his cape as he went. She didn't doubt for a minute that he was reaching for a weapon and Eva now glanced around for the nearest possible weapon she might use.

The wine, the chess game, a needle and thread... One of the chairs? Nay, it was well built and sturdy and she didn't think she could raise it and run across the room carrying it. Her best asset at this point was the element of surprise, and stumbling clumsily across the room with a chair—

Eva's thoughts died as her eyes landed on the fire. The fresh logs she had thrown on it were already alight and burning merrily, but she hadn't placed one of them very well and while one end was buried in the flames, the other was sticking out over the hearth. Eva did not even think, one moment she was staring at the log as the idea formed and in the next she was reaching out for the log and launching to her feet in one fluid movement.

Her timing was close, she saw as she turned toward the bed. The intruder had pulled a sword from his waist and was even now lifting it over his head in preparation for what appeared to be a straight downward hacking movement. It looked to her as if he intended to cut off Connall's head. Afraid he would bring it down before she could cross the room and stop him, Eva let loose a shriek as she charged forward, swinging the log.

It was a scream that woke Connall, an animal sound of fear and fury that startled him awake and sent his eyes flying open. The first thing he saw was the sword descending toward him and he instinctively raised an arm in self-defense and rolled to the side at the same time. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of his attacker being attacked as Eva swung a burning log into his stomach. The action wasn't enough to stop the downward impetus of the sword, but did bring the man around slightly so that the weapon was jerked lower along Connall's body and turned at an angle. He felt the bite of the metal into his side as he finished the roll and tumbled from the bed.

Grunting at the pain singeing through him, Connall grabbed for the wound. He didn't need to feel the blood pouring over his fingers to know his wound was deep and bleeding copiously, the air was suddenly rich with the scent of his own blood. Connall cursed but had little time to worry about it other than that at the moment. The image of Eva's pale face as she had run forward to try to save him was etched in his mind and he was very aware that she was on the other side of the bed at that moment with the intruder. His little Eva, small, blonde, and English, was battling alone for both their lives. He had to help her.

Letting go of the wound, he grabbed the edge of the bed and dragged himself up into a sitting position. His eyes immediately moved to the spot where his wife and the intruder should have been battling, but the spot was empty. All he could see was the open door and the dark hallway beyond.

"Connall!" Eva was suddenly at his side. It seemed he hadn't seen her at first because she'd been moving around the bed to him. "You're bleeding."

"Tis fine. It isna verra deep," he lied as she pressed her free hand to it.

Her gaze met his, then slid to the burning log she still held. After the briefest of hesitations and a glance toward the door, Eva stood and managed to retrieve the sheet out of the tangle the bedclothes had become, then shoved it at him. "Hold this on it, tightly. I shall be right back."

Connall instinctively pressed the cloth to his side as he watched her hurry around the bed again, toward the door. Afraid she was going to go for help and worried that she might meet up with their intruder again if she did so, Connall opened his mouth to call out to her, then closed it again when—rather than run through it—she skidded to a halt at the door and slammed it shut. Still carrying the log, his wife then ran to the chairs and began to drag one across the floor, apparently to bar it lest the intruder return. He found a small smile curving his lips at this action. He had done well in choosing Eva to bride. She had the courage to risk herself to save him, and the sense to prepare against a possible second attack. She was a damned fine woman.

Only when she had the chair levered against the door to prevent it opening, did Eva give up her makeshift weapon. Running to the fireplace, she tossed it back onto its brothers, then hurried back to his side.

"Let me see the wound," she insisted, dropping to her knees beside him. She was tugging at his hand

even as she spoke the order and Connall was feeling weak enough that he let her do as she wished. The wound was terribly deep and his blood loss, plus the reparations his body was having to make, were weakening him.

"There's so much blood!"

He could hear the fear in her voice, but could do little to soothe her. Connall was suffering a good deal of fear at the moment as well, but not for himself. "Eva, ye ha'e to go."

"What?" She glanced up at his face with confusion. "Nay, Connall. I must stop the bleeding."

"Nay. Go!" He tried to push her away, but it was a rather weak push, one she simply rebounded from and ignored. Connall scowled. He didn't care for feeling weak like this "Eva, I am orderin' ye to go."

"Well, you can order all you bloody like, my lord husband, but I will not leave your side until I get the bleeding stopped," she snapped and Connall gaped at her, unable to believe his sweet, witty, lovely little bride had spoken to him so. Were wives not supposed to obey their husbands? He was sure he recalled that in the wedding ceremony.

"Come, we must get you on the bed."

Eva was on her feet now and pulling at him, he realized, and bloody hell if she wasn't somehow managing to lever him upward. Deciding he might get rid of her quicker if he aided in this endeavor, Connall did his best to help get himself on the bed, but if he had hoped she might then run for help, he had been sadly mistaken.

Once she had him there, she did rush off, but only to collect several candles from around the room. She lit them at the fire, then set them on the bedside tables, putting more light on the situation, then bent to examine his wound. He saw the surprise that widened her eyes.

"Tis not as bad as it first appeared. Tis just a flesh wound," she informed him with some relief, then confusion crossed her brow. "But there was so much blood."

"Eva," Connall growled, fighting instincts that were quickly consuming him. The wound had been deep when she'd first looked and had been deeper still when it had first happened, but his body was healing itself; knitting together and repairing the damage. The bleeding would soon stop altogether, the wound would fully close, and within hours there wouldn't even be a scar to show for the blow. This was all thanks to his bloodline, his Pictish ancestry on his mother's side. It held many such wonderful gifts for its possessor; a prolonged life, resistance to illness and—handy as it was in this instance—quick healing. But these miraculous gifts came at a cost and he didn't want Eva to pay the price.

"Eva, ye ha'e to *gonow* !"

"You must be a bleeder," she commented as if he hadn't spoken, not that he had spoken very vehemently, Connall needed to replenish himself, he needed blood, a need that was growing unbearably strong.

"Tis not very deep, but it still must be closed." Without waiting for his comment on this, she hurried away again and he watched helplessly as she ran to the chest by the fire and dug around inside. Eva was back within moments, bearing needle and thread, but when she bent to peer at his wound again, she paused, blinked, then leaned nearer for a closer look before muttering, "I would swear the wound has grown

smaller still."

Shaking her head at the ridiculousness of that observation, she began to thread her needle.

"Do no' waste yer thread," Connall said wearily.

Eva glanced up, then grew still as she peered at his face. "You look different."

He said nothing, knowing that his face would appear leaner to her, his eyes perhaps taking on more of a yellow tinge in the brown depths.

"You are very pale, but..." She was obviously trying to puzzle it out, but didn't understand and was growing frightened and confused.

"Aye, nae doubt I am pale. I lost a fair amount o' blood," Connall said, wishing he could ease this for her.

"Aye." She nodded slowly and tried to smile, but was having difficulty with it and he knew she could see the hunger in him. "You need food and rest to rebuild it."

"I need blood."

Eva stared at him silently, then her eyes moved back to his wound as if drawn there by some unseen force. He could tell by her expression that it was continuing to heal, growing smaller by the moment.

"You heal much more quickly than we do," she said finally.

Her voice was bleak and Connall winced at the knowledge in it. We. She had finally admitted to what was staring her in the face; the supposed reaction to the sun, the rumors, his wound healing so quickly... The fact that Aileen aged had probably confused her, but she was seeing it now. *'You heal more quickly than we.'* We. He was not one of her kind, at least not wholly. He was different. Connall always had been, and should be used to it by now, but somehow it hurt hearing Eva say it.

Her face was expressionless when she turned it back to him to ask, "Are you soulless?"

Connall knew that she was making a decision in her mind, one vital to their future. He had feared this moment, but felt hope in the fact that she hadn't simply turned away in horror.

"Aye. I'm no a dead, soulless creature as the rumors proclaim," he answered solemnly. "I'm jest different."

"But you cannot go out in sunlight. That is true?" she queried.

"I can, but it makes me ill and increases me need fer blood."

Eva nodded slowly. "Do you kill those you...?"

"Feed on," he supplied, then grimaced over the question before saying firmly, "There's no mair need to kill those we feed on than there is to kill the cow who supplies the milk."

For some reason that comment brought a wry smile to her lips, then she sighed and he thought he heard

her mutter, "So I will be the cow after all."

Connall was puzzling over that comment, when she sank to sit on the side of the bed and extended her arm toward him. "Go ahead, my lord. Take what you need."

He stared at her helplessly. Take what you need? He needed her and he needed her blood, but he couldn't do it, not like this. Connall could imagine sinking his teeth into her wrist and her watching him, shuddering with distaste and thinking him an animal. He didn't want her to see him that way. He never wanted her to see him that way.

Taking her hand, he drew it to his lips and ran them lightly across the sensitive skin there even as he grit his teeth against the knowledge that the blood he so yearned for was pulsing below the thin surface of her flesh. Eva trembled under the caress and Connall felt relief that her knowledge did not now make him so repulsive to her that she could not bear or respond to his touch. He continued to move his lips along her arm, nibbling a trail to the crook of her arm, further relieved when Eva released a soft moan.

He lifted his head then and caught one hand behind her head to draw her down for a kiss. Eva came willingly, kissing him with the passion he was used to and Connall immediately began to tug at the neckline of her gown until one breast popped free and he could close his hand over it. Eva began to kiss him more frantically as he caressed her, pressing into his touch, and though he knew he was rushing it, Connall couldn't stop himself from finding the hem of her skirt and sliding his hand beneath, to run along the inside of her leg until he found the center of her.

Eva gasped into his mouth, caught at his hand to still it and tugged free of the kiss to protest, "But you are hurt."

"Aye, so ye'll ha'e to help me, love."

"Help?" She looked uncertain.

"Aye."

Eva had eased her hold on his hand without thinking and he took advantage of this and started to caress her again even as he claimed her mouth once more. Connall thrust his tongue into her mouth to prevent any further protest, even as he thrust a finger into her, and was pleased when she gasped and her body arched in response. His control slipping, Connall struggled with his instincts for another moment before breaking the kiss and letting his lips trail to her ear where he growled, "Take yer gown off."

Eva hesitated, then stood to do as he asked and Connall took that opportunity to sit up and ease his way further up the bed until he could sit with his back braced. His wound was completely healed now, with no sign that it had ever existed and he caught her staring at where it had been when he finished settling himself. Reaching out, he took her hand and tugged lightly, pulling her forward. "Come. Sit on me lap and kiss me again."

She surprised him by moving without hesitation, but he realized as she straddled him that she was trembling, her body already in a heightened state of excitement as was his own. It took only a moment for him to understand why, it was the blood rush after battle, some said it was a result of excess energy after a fight, others said it was a need to reaffirm life after a brush with death. Connall didn't care what it was, but it was powerful and would aid him here, eliminating the necessity to go slowly.

Eva was straddling him, but still upright on her knees and Connall took advantage of the position to

reach between her legs and caress her again with one hand as he tugged her head down for a kiss with the other. Her passion grew quickly and his along with it, her little moans and mewls of pleasure stoking his own desires, but his were twofold and demanding and Connall soon could not wait any longer. Easing his hand from between her legs, he caught her hips and urged her down, groaning into her mouth as she closed over him like a warm, wet glove, squeezing his flesh and making it grow harder still.

Eva felt some of her anxiety slip away from her as her husband groaned into her mouth. This was all new to her and slightly uncomfortable in that she was the one in control and feared doing it wrong. That sound of pleasure from Connall, however, eased her fears somewhat and Eva began to emulate his movements when he was in control and quickly raised herself back up, easing herself almost off him before letting herself slide back down his length again. The action elicited another groan, encouraging her further, but soon her own pleasure made her forget any anxiety and she began to move in the way that felt most pleasurable to her, her breath beginning to come in pants as the now familiar tension began to build.

When Connall's hand slid between their bodies again to touch her, the tension increased tenfold and she began to move more urgently, then Connall broke their kiss, his mouth moving to her neck and nibbling a trail there. Eva let her head drop backward, her breath coming fast and hard. She was a hair's breadth away from finding that sweet release he always gave her and cried his name in a desperate plea, then her eyes shot open as she felt his teeth slide into her neck even as his body slammed into hers. There was the briefest second of pain from his bite, then pleasure exploded inside of her and Eva screamed his name as her body began to shudder and pulse with release.

Chapter Eleven

"The lass saved yer life," Magaidh said solemnly,

"Aye." Connall stared down into his ale as he considered that Eva had saved him twice; first by fending off the attacker, then by replenishing some of the blood he had lost. Had she not been there and offered herself up to him as she had, Connall wasn't at all sure he'd have survived until the sun had set and it was safe for him to seek out sustenance elsewhere.

Connall ran a hand through his hair with agitation. He had spent his whole life knowing he was stronger and faster than most of those around him, certainly stronger and faster than all mortals. In truth, he supposed he had always considered himself somewhat superior because of this, but last night he had been the weaker one, his life dependent on a mortal, and a female at that. It had been a humbling experience.

"She's lucky she wasnae injured," Aileen murmured, then frowned. "Eva's all right, is she no? She wasnae injured so that she hasnae come down yet?"

"Nay, she's fine," he said and hoped it was true. Connall hadn't intended to take much blood, just enough to see him through until night fell and he could head out on a hunt, but in the excitement of the moment, with the hunger roaring in his ears and his body buried deep in hers as ecstasy rolled over them both, he'd taken more than he'd intended. Connall had only stopped when she'd gone limp in his arms, and could still recall the pallor of her skin as he'd lifted his head to peer down at her. Eva had lain limp

and pale in his arms, and so very still. Connall had felt a fear like he had never before known clutch at him. It was only then, as he'd cradled her in his arms and pressed her head to his chest that he'd realized how much he'd grown to care for the woman. She had been trying since arriving to make a place for herself at MacAdie, but somehow had crept into his heart and made a home for herself there as well. He loved Eva and that knowledge had kept him awake to watch over her until his physical state alone had forced him to sleep.

Connall had awoken at sunset to find her curled up against him. She'd still looked awfully pale to him, but not nearly as much as she had the night before, and when he'd brushed a hand lightly over her cheek and she had murmured his name sleepily, relief had flooded him along with the knowledge that she was recovering. He'd decided to leave her to rest for a bit while he tended to his need to feed, and had dressed and left the night room.

Aware that he was too weak to defend himself properly should he be attacked ere he could feed again, Connall had been relieved to find Ewan, Donaidh, Geordan, Keddy, Dom-hall, and Ragnall still seated at the trestle table in the great hall. As the six men he trusted most at MacAdie, he'd enlisted their company for the ride. By the time they had returned half an hour ago, he had recounted the full details of the attack from that morning.

Connall had gone upstairs to check on Eva the moment they had arrived. Finding her still sleeping, he'd decided he'd have to wake her soon and make her eat, rest was good for restoring her, but food was just as important. He'd come below to order Effie to prepare a meal for the lass, then had come to sit at the trestle table to wait for it to be ready and found Ewan telling the women about the intruder and the attack that morning.

"So, you think he must have returned again last night and figured out how to open the door?" Magaidh asked now, drawing Connall back to the conversation at hand.

"Aye. Or he may have been in the hall, or watching from one of the rooms while I showed Ewan how to open it," he murmured, recalling how he had heard the click of a door closing. At the time, he'd explained it away as it being Ewan, but Aileen and Ewan's room was at the far end of the hall and he thought now that this had sounded closer to hand and suspected it had been the intruder closing the door of whatever room he had been watching from. There were a couple of empty bedchambers at the moment, rooms he hoped to fill with their bairns.

"We shall have to put a guard on the chamber entrance," Magaidh murmured, looking troubled.

"Aye. I've already arranged it," Connall assured her, aware that she slept in the night rooms too and would worry about that as well. He had decided to put a guard on the chamber while out with the men. More than that, he had decided that there should be two guards with Eva at all times while she was up, then two on the chamber while they slept. He'd left it to Ewan to sort out who did what.

"M'laird?"

Connall glanced around to find Glynis standing at his shoulder, holding a tray with food, and stood abruptly to take it from her, then paused. Eva had given him a great gift that morning, she'd given him his life and he wished to give her something in return, but wasn't sure what she might like. She asked for nothing and accepted the smallest things as great gifts.

"Glynis?"

"Aye?" The maid glanced at him expectantly.

"I'm thinkin' to gi'e me wife something, a treat to please her. Do ye ken anything she might like?"

The maid looked doubtful for a moment and Connall felt disappointment claim him that she might have no more idea than himself, then she murmured, "The only thing she's ever mentioned to me that she might like, m'laird, is to see the water."

"The water?" Magaidh asked with interest and the girl nodded.

"Aye. She grew up on the ocean, and has said a time or two that she's missin' it, so I mentioned that we had a loch nearby and she said she'd like to see it someday."

"She mentioned that to me once as well," Aileen murmured. "Said her favorite thing in the world was to slip away and sneak a swim once in a while when chores were done, and she missed doin' that here."

Connall frowned at this news. "Is there nothin' else she's e'er mentioned, wantin' or likin'?"

"Nay, m'laird," Glynis said apologetically. "She's no the sort to ask fer things, I think."

Connall sighed at this comment, knowing it was true, then nodded and turned to carry the tray upstairs.

A gentle hand running over her shoulders brought Eva slowly awake to find herself lying on her stomach in bed. Moaning a protest at being awoken, she rolled slowly onto her back and blinked at her husband, wondering why she felt so tired. Her eyes felt gritty and her mind sluggish, she was unusually cold and felt weak too.

"How do ye feel?" Connall brushed the hair back from her face, his smile not hiding the concern in his eyes.

"Tired," Eva admitted, then realizing it sounded almost a whine, grimaced at herself and forced a smile. "Could you not sleep?"

"Tis night," he informed her, then added, "I brought ye something tae eat. Ye need to rebuild yer strength."

He helped her to sit up in bed and Eva found her gaze shifting around the room. A fire was burning cheerfully in the hearth and every candle she had brought from the other chamber was now lit so that the room was as bright as day-light. Once he had her seated upright with cushions behind her to prop her up, Connall turned to the table to collect a tray he had set there. Eva's nose began to twitch as she finally noted the mouthwatering smells filling the room and was suddenly starving. She peered eagerly at the food as he set the tray on her lap, wine, bread and cheese and some sort of stew, chicken she thought, and she made a face as her stomach rumbled. Eva was hard-pressed not to attack the food she was so starved, and even after she had eaten every last crumb of food he had brought her, she seemed still to be hungry. That fact made her ponder when she had last eaten.

Eva recalled having supper the night before, then coming up to make this room more comfortable, then falling asleep for a bit. She had awoken from her nap shortly before Connall returned and they had... Oh, yes. She smiled faintly to herself as she recalled his efforts "to tire her out." Not that it had worked,

he had fallen off to sleep at once and she had planned to sew—

Eva stiffened as the memories of the rest of the night spun into her head. The intruder... hitting him with the burning log... Connall's wound and the way it had healed.

"Dear Lord, you *are* a vampire," Eva gasped, then covered her mouth to keep the wayward thing from spouting any other unwanted revelations.

Connall stiffened, his eyes shooting to her face. He had the oddest expression on his face, she noted. He looked... scared? Nay, apprehensive was a better description, and Eva had to wonder why he was looking so apprehensive when he was the soulless—

Nay, not soulless, she reminded herself, recalling their conversation from the night before. He was not dead, nor soulless, he had assured her and he did not kill those he bit. Connall had described himself as just different and while Eva thought that was something of an understatement, she reassured herself with that information, now. He was just different, still her husband, the kind, sweet, gentle man who had treated her as if she had value, and shown her such consideration, as well as taught her passion. Nothing else had changed, she reminded herself as her head began to spin. He was the clan chief of the MacAdie, and her husband. And really, as flaws went, vampirism was much more pleasant to deal with than his being a wife beater or some such thing. Wasn't it?

"Dear Lord," Eva breathed, shaking her head at her own thoughts, then she glanced to Connall again. He was uncharacteristically silent, his attention focused on her with an intensity that made her nervous. Her husband hadn't said a word since she'd blurted that he was a vampire and it was making her uncomfortable enough to start searching her mind for a way to make him leave.

"If you have things to do, you need not trouble yourself to wait here for me to finish eating. I can manage well enough on my own," she murmured at last, though the food was all gone.

"Tis no trouble to be with ye," he said with a frown and there was sudden anger on his face. "Yer no a burden to me, Eva, ye ne'er ha'e been and ne'er will be. Dear God, ye saved me life this morn, woman, no once, but twice. Ha'e ye no realized yer worth yet?"

"I—" Eva shook her head helplessly, confused by the tears suddenly pooling in her eyes. His vehemence was as surprising to her as the words themselves. She *had* saved his life that morning. She'd driven the intruder off with the log, then... well all right, the feeding bit wasn't that impressive. Anyone would have done in that instance, but she *had* fended off the intruder.

"Ye've courage and beauty and intelligence and are a worthy wife. E'en a king would ha'e pride in claimin' ye to wife. I have felt nothing but pride in claimin' ye meself."

"Despite my bein' accident prone?" she teased with a wry twist of the lips.

"Yer accidents are a result o' tryin' too hard to earn a place here," he said quietly. "But 'tis only because you doonae realize ye already ha'e a place here. Yer the Lady MacAdie. My wife."

Eva swallowed, her gaze dropping from his at those words. They made her heart ache for some reason.

"Why do ye look away? Do ye hate me now?"

Eva glanced back up with surprise. "What?"

"Now that ye know what I am?" he explained. "Will ye be wantin' an annulment? Beggin' to be set free? Wid ye rather a mortal man to husband? Should I take ye back to Caxton?"

Eva stared at him in horror, fear clutching at her heart at the very idea of what he suggested. Leave here? Leave the only place that had felt like a true home since her parents died? Leave these people who had been so kind? Leave Magaidh and Aileen and Glynis, and Effie and Ewan and the men? The very idea was horrifying, but not as wrenching as the idea of leaving him. The hours of talk and games and passion she had shared with him whirled in her mind. Moments when he had held her and gentled the hair away from her face, just cradling her to him and making her feel as if she belonged right there, in his arms. To lose that, never to enjoy it again. . . . The very thought made her heart ache and Eva suddenly realized that her feelings for her husband went beyond gratitude or caring, or even the dutiful love a wife was supposed to have for a husband, but then she had known that morning when his life was threatened, she admitted to herself. It was the only thing that had given her the courage to charge the intruder rather than cower where she hid, it was what had made her keep her head and try to tend to him when she had realized how badly he was wounded and needed her. It was the only thing that had kept her from panicking or dropping in a dead faint when she had finally admitted to herself what she had been refusing to recognize all along and acknowledged that her husband was indeed a vampire. Eva had come to love her husband, and that love would allow her to accept much about him. . . . including his being a vampire.

"Nay," she said finally. "I would not have the marriage annulled. You are my husband."

Connall looked torn for a minute, then said, "Why will ye keep it so when ye ken what I am?"

"I. . ." She peered at him helplessly, not quite having the courage to reveal her feelings.

"If 'tis out of duty, I'll no ha'e it. I'll no ha'e ye stayin' with me out o' duty and silently hatin' me fer what I am."

"I do not hate you, I—" She stopped short, fear crowding around her, then Eva saw the look on his face, the hope there and the fear. It was the fear that did it for her. Eva had spent the better part of her life feeling unwanted, and she would never see anyone suffer that, she would not have Connall doubting, even for a moment, that he was wanted, cared for, loved. Drawing on some of the courage that had carried her through the attack that morning, she blurted, "I love you."

One moment she was sat in bed, facing him, and the next Eva was enveloped in his arms as he babbled the Gaelic at her between peppering her face with kisses. The assault stopped just as abruptly as it had started when Connall caught her face between his hands and stared at her intensely for several moments as if memorizing her features. Eva stared back, wondering what would come next.

"Do ye really love me, Eva?" he asked at last.

"Aye," she said solemnly. "I love you, Connall MacAdie. With all my heart."

"And I love you, Eva MacAdie," he said, his voice husky, and before Eva could quite react to that, he kissed her. This kiss was different from any that they had shared before, it was deep, with the current of passion in it, yet tender and gentle and slow with a caring that nearly made her weep. When he eased, then finally broke that kiss, he then pressed his lips to the tip of her nose, each eye, and finally her forehead. To Eva, it felt almost like a blessing given by the pope and in a way it was, Connall was blessing her with his love.

"Right!"

Eva blinked. Connall had suddenly released her and bounded to his feet. "Ye'd best get dressed, wife. We're goin' out," he said with a grin.

"Out?" Eva stared at him blankly, feeling as though she had lost the thread of what was happening somewhere. "Out where, my lord husband?"

"Tis a surprise." He strode around the bed toward the door. "Ye'd best dress. Tis a nice night, one o' the last warm ones I think ere summer turns to fall, but ye'll be ridin,' so dress appropriately. I'll send Glynis up tae help ye."

"Glynis?" Eva asked with surprise. "But I thought these rooms were secret. How—"

"They're a secret no more," he said with a shrug. "No sense in keepin' 'em secret from our allies, when the enemy already kens where they are."

"Oh," Eva breathed, then raised her eyebrows when on reaching the door to the room, her husband suddenly swung around and strode back. Reaching the edge of the bed, he caught her chin, tipped her face up and kissed her again, this kiss quickly passionate and just as quickly ended.

"I'll see ye soon," he murmured, smiling at her dazed expression, then he straightened to stride away again. This time when he reached the door, he did not pause again but actually left.

"Where are we going?" Eva asked.

"Ye'll see," was all Ewan said, but she could hear the amusement in his voice. She had asked where they were going at least ten times since leaving the keep.

Eva had gone down to the great hall after Glynis had helped her dress to find her husband absent and Ewan waiting for her, claiming he had instructions to take her to Connall. She hadn't hesitated to go with him, not even when she had stepped out of the keep to find two horses waiting for them, nor when he had led her out of the safety of the bailey, across the clearing that surrounded the castle wall, and into the deep, dark woods beyond.

Not that they seemed as dark as they first had, Eva supposed, her gaze moving over the trees they rode past. It had seemed terribly dark and rather spooky to her at first, but her eyes had quickly adjusted, and it no longer seemed quite so spooky as it had at first. In fact, it was almost pretty with the moonlight dappling a leaf here and a trunk there.

Nay, she had not hesitated to go with him, but Eva had asked where they were going, and would continue to do so, she decided. Her curiosity was positively killing her. But before she could ask the question again, they had broken into a clearing.

"Oh," Eva murmured as they both slowed to a halt and she took in their surroundings. The clearing was on the edge of a lake that was calm and serene and glinted with the moonlight's reflection. "Tis lovely."

"Connall'll be glad ye think so." Ewan turned his horse back the way they'd come. "Tell him I'll return as he asked."

"Oh, but where is Connall?" Eva turned in her saddle to ask, but if the man heard her, he didn't answer.

"Here."

Eva jumped nervously in her saddle and swivelled quickly back to stare at the man now approaching from the water's edge.

"Did ye think he'd jest leave ye here on yer own?" he asked with amusement.

Eva smiled back a tad wryly and shook her head. Connall had set guards on her to keep her from any more accidents. No, she supposed she hadn't believed he would have Ewan leave her alone in a clearing in the middle of the woods. "Nay."

"Nay," he agreed, and reached up to lift her off her horse, then pressed a kiss on her as he set her on her feet. It was a long, slow kiss that left them both breathless and Connall leaned his forehead against hers for a minute to catch his breath when it ended, then murmured, "Hello."

"Hello," she answered, her own voice husky.

Connall smiled at her ready response, then kissed the tip of her nose and took her hand to lead her to the water's edge, saying, "Glynis said ye were pinin' fer yer ocean. We're a wee bit away from the ocean here, but I thought ye might like the loch."

"Oh." She peered at the water, and to his face in the moonlight, her heart melting. This trip was in the way of a gift to her, he was trying to make sure she was happy. "Tis lovely, Connall. Thank you for bringing me here."

"Yer welcome." He squeezed her hand, then suggested, "We could take a swim if ye've a mind."

She grinned, more than tempted by the idea. The entire time that Glynis had been helping her dress, Eva had been fussing over the fact that she hadn't the time to bathe before going below because her husband was waiting for her. A swim in a moonlit lake with her husband sounded a lovely alternative. "Yes, please."

Connall chuckled at her expression and immediately began to undress. Finding herself a tad shy about being nude here where anyone might see, Eva was slower to start, but once Connall went charging off to splash his way into the water, she quickly removed the rest of her clothes and hurried to follow, feeling better once she was immersed in water and therefore had regained some modesty.

"Shy with me, wife?" Connall teased, moving closer to her in the water.

Eva splashed at him and scoffed, "Nay, some of us just have a bit of common decency."

He chuckled in patent disbelief, then tilted his head and peered at her curiously. "Why ha'e ye no asked questions?"

"Questions?" she echoed.

"About the way I am, and how I came to be this way. And why Aileen isnae."

Eva was silent for a moment. Those questions and many more had been tangling their way through her mind ever since she'd learned he was indeed a vampire, but she hadn't known how to approach the subject, not that there had re-ally been a chance to until now. But, since he had brought the matter up... "How did you come to be this way?"

"I was born this way," he answered promptly. "It comes from me mother's side. Magaidh is a MacNachton, we're Pictish from early times."

"And she is one too then?"

"Aye. She's a full-blood. I am only a half-blood. My father was mortal."

"And Aileen?"

"She's half-blood too, like me."

"How old are you?" Eva asked curiously. Father MacLure had said he had reached adulthood more than thirty years ago, but—

"Six years older than Aileen." Connall's answer brought her thoughts to an end and Eva stared at him. Dear God, he was old. He looked damned fine for someone of such an advanced age. And that meant that Magaidh was older still, she realized, thinking of the beautiful woman who looked more like Aileen's daughter than the other way around.

"If Aileen is a half-blood too, why does she look so much older than you?"

Connall grimaced. "We ha'e found it acts different in each o' us. Some age, some don't, some cannae stand sun, some can..." He shrugged. "None of us understands how it works, but we do ken that the more 'tis diluted, the weaker the effect and so Cathal decided we had to continue to weaken the blood."

"Because of the trouble?" Eva asked, knowing that Cathal was his cousin, the MacNachton.

"Aye."

"And so you married me," she said quietly.

"Aye, and 'twas the best demned decision I've made in me life," he said stoutly, moving closer in the water to take her in his arms.

"I am glad you did," Eva murmured, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as their bodies drifted together.

"So am I," he murmured, pressing a quick kiss to her lips that appeared as if it might turn into a long one, but Connall ended it abruptly and raised his head. "Someone's comin,' a lone rider."

"I do not hear anything." Eva glanced around with a frown.

"Our hearing is better," he said simply, taking her arm to usher her out of the water. "Ye doonae ha'e time to dress, jest grab yer gown and go behind that bush. There's an entrance to a cave there where ye can hide."

"But—"

"Go," Connall ordered, giving her a shove toward the bush he'd pointed to. "And doonae come out until I say so. No matter what. Do ye understand?"

"Aye, but—"

"No, buts. Go." He pressed another kiss to her forehead and shoved her toward the bush, then turned to collect his plaid and his sword.

Chapter Twelve

There was an entrance to a cave directly behind the large bush as Connall had said, but Eva had never cared much for dark places and couldn't bring herself to go in. Instead, she crouched behind the bush and struggled to turn her gown right side out again as she watched her husband in the clearing. In her rush to get undressed and into the safety of the water, she'd left the gown in a terrible tangle, half inside out and half not, and she was having trouble untangling it with her attention on her husband as Connall grabbed his plaid as if to don it, then suddenly tossed it aside and hurried to the horses instead. Grabbing Millie's reins, he led the mare quickly around the bush to Eva's side. She gave up on the dress and straightened at once.

"I told ye to get inside."

"Aye, but—"

"Take yer mount in there and wait."

Connall turned away the moment that order was given, not bothering to explain it. Eva supposed that if there was trouble, he wanted to be sure that whoever was coming didn't guess that someone else might be present, and Millie would have been a dead giveaway of that fact. Taking the mare's reins, Eva led the animal into the cave a short way, then quickly hurried back out to see that Connall now didn't have time to dress, and stood naked in the center of the clearing, with nothing but the sword in his hand. Despite his being naked, he was a fearsome sight standing tense, feet slightly apart, body half-crouched as if ready to spring into action. She thought he looked magnificent, like a wild animal, then she heard a horse ride into the clearing.

Eva couldn't see who it was at first, but knew from Connall's reaction that all would be well. Her husband relaxed at once and straightened, then smiled and lowered his sword as he started forward. "Ye could ha'e shouted a warning so I kened it was you."

"Where's the fun in that? 'Sides, I didnae ken if ye were here or no. Ye might ha'e been elsewhere."

Eva relaxed and blew a breath of relief out at the sound of Donaidh's voice. Shaking her head, she began to concentrate on her gown again, managing to get it untangled and pull it over her head as the men talked.

"Nay. I'm here. What's happened?"

"Happened?" Donaidh echoed.

"Aye. Well, ye must ha'e come looking fer me fer a reason. Has somethin' happened at MacAdie?"

"Nay. I jest wanted to talk to ye about these attacks," Donaidh answered.

"Ah, weell, let me dress first."

Eva pulled her gown over her head, then began to tug it down as she glanced out into the clearing where Connall had turned to walk back to his plaid. She saw him bend to set his sword on the ground, then snatch his plaid up and straighten with it and had started to glance down to what she was doing again when he suddenly stiffened, his back arching and the plaid slipping from his hands as an arrow suddenly appeared in his back.

Eva was so stunned at the sudden appearance of that arrow, that she didn't even gasp in surprise, she simply stood there, her hands curling in the material of her skirt and gaped as her husband slowly turned to face where she presumed Donaidh sat astride his mount. The moment he did, another arrow slammed into his chest and Connall stumbled back several steps under the impact.

"If ye go fer the sword, I'll hit ye again, but I'd rather no jest yet."

Eva managed to shake off some of her shock as Donaidh's voice reached her and immediately began trying to think what to do. She had no weapon, she had only her horse, but she had to stop Donaidh. She needed a weapon, or a plan, or both and began to look at what she had available near to hand.

"Ye were the intruder."

Eva paused in her search to glance toward her husband, his voice had been a harsh gasp and she saw that his face was wreathed in pain. It would seem that vampires might be stronger and faster, but they still felt pain.

"Aye." She heard the creak of leather from the clearing and presumed Donaidh was dismounting.

"Why?"

"Why?" Donaidh echoed as he stepped into view, approaching where Connall stood, swaying on his feet, both arrows protruding from him like fence posts out of the ground. The younger man didn't look particularly angry or in any way emotional at all, really. She found it appalling that someone who had just shot his uncle could look so unaffected. "I'd think that'd be obvious. I've spent my whole life as yer only heir."

"Ye want to be chieftain." Connall looked as if he'd been struck between the eyes by that realization.

"Aye, I want to lead the clan and always kened I would eventually, until ye decided to marry," he said with disgust. "And no jest that, but to marry with the express purpose o' havin' bairns. I coudnae ha'e that."

Connall stared at his nephew, perhaps it was the pain wracking his body, or the weakness brought on by the blood he was losing, but he was finding it difficult to follow the lad's logic. "Donaidh, I've lived sixty years and didnae plan to die any time soon, what difference would a bairn make? What difference does a

bairn make when I wasnae like to die and leave the clan to either him or you?"

"Well, I widgeon ha'e seen to the dyin' part eventually, with or without a bairn," his nephew said with a shrug and Connall could hardly believe this was the boy he had rocked to sleep as a babe.

"What were ye waiting fer then?" he asked bitterly.

"Mother and Father to die. I thought it only fair to let ye live a normal length o' life, at least a mortal one. I've always been fond o' ye, Uncle Connall. I planned to wait until they'd reached the end of their lives, then yer life would ha'e been at an end as weell. I could be patient until then."

"Ah, such affection." Connall's mouth twisted bitterly. "So long as yer parents were alive, I was safe... until Cathal convinced me 'twas time to marry."

"Aye, ye came back to MacAdie and talked about it at supper, I sat there listenin' to ye sayin' ye were to marry a mortal, weaken the blood further, breed babies. Ye made it obvious 'twas all a load o' bother to ye, but ye felt ye should do it."

"Aye, 'twas a bother to me at the time," Connall agreed. He had found it bothersome then, but that had quickly changed once Eva was here. She'd crept into his heart, making him love her, and now he could think of nothing more blissful than a lifetime with her, but Donaidh had no intention of allowing that. "Twas a bother to me, but a threat to ye."

"Aye." Anger suffused his face briefly. "Ye put all me plans under threat with that decision, but I wasnae sure what to do. Twas possible ye'd breed a daywalker like me ma, one who would age and die like a mortal and perhaps I could wait that long, but then he might breed too and that one might breed another mortal who would die thirty to fifty years later and so on. It could be endless. Or ye might breed another who widgeon age like us and then I'd be right back where I was."

"And ye couldnae allow that."

"Nay." He raised his sword and held it upright between them as he turned it this way and that, as if examining the blade's workmanship. "So I decided 'twas time to kill ye."

"Ye were clumsy enough about it," Connall said, his eyes fixed on the man's blade. He wished he could snatch it away from the little beggar and teach him a thing or two, but the boy wasn't close enough yet. He would have to wait for a more opportune moment and hoped he wasn't so weak by then from blood loss that he couldn't do what he had to, to survive. He also hoped that Eva stayed put where she was. If he failed to save himself, he'd not have her die with him. She may even now be carrying that bairn Donaidh so loathed the idea of. His bairn.

"Ye doonae think I was trying to kill ye with the arrows, do ye?" Donaidh scoffed. "I ken better than that that they wouldnae ha'e killed ye."

Connall's gaze slid from the sword to his nephew's face and he saw the amusement there. The brat knew he was hoping to take the sword and was amused. "Aye. Ye do."

He had been attacked three times besides that morning when Donaidh had apparently grown desperate enough to try a direct attack in his own room. But the first attack had been an arrow shot at him on the way to this very loch. He'd been hit in the chest then too. Fortunately, some of the men had been returning from MacNachton where he'd sent them with a message for Cathal. They'd come upon him

directly after he took the arrow in the chest and had done a quick search while he removed the arrow, then on finding nothing, they'd ridden with him to hunt to replace the blood lost. An arrow had been used in the third attempt too, the night one of his men was hit in his place.

"My plan was to weaken ye with the arrow as I have this time," Donaidh explained. "Yer bein' immortal, I knew I'd most like ha'e to cut yer head off to kill ye, that meant hand-to-hand and face-to-face, but once ye knew 'twas me, I coudnae afford to fail. If I weakened ye first, fortune would be more like to favor me. But Sean and Rabbie showed up ere I could approach to finish ye off."

"Ah," Connall nodded wearily, then glanced at him with confusion. "But the second time I took the arrow, ye were ridin' with me."

"Aye." His nephew gave a laugh. "Twasn't me. Twas a local farmer out poachin' in the night. He hit ye by accident. I found him when ye had us spread out to search the area. The man was scared silly, he was. Thought sure he was a dead man, but I jest let him go and told him 'twould be our secret. I found it handy fer ye to think 'twas another attack, especially since I was riding with ye at the time so ye coudnae think 'twas me. I knew ye were thinkin' 'twas connected to the trouble we've had o' late, but I feared if ye ever considered another source was possible—as yer only heir—ye may turn yer suspicions toward me. I hoped that the happy accident would lead yer suspicions away if ye did."

"And the fire in the crofter's cottage?" Connall asked, that had been the second attempt, the one between the two arrow hits and just before the men had left to collect his bride.

"That was just chance. I saw ye riding, followed ye to the cottage and saw ye go in. I kenned Willie was no there, he'd gone to see his ailing sister at MacNachton. It seemed a chance to end it. I crept up to the door, saw ye had yer back to me, hit ye o'er the head with the hilt o' me sword, blocked the door and set the place afire. I didnae stick around to watch or I wouldnae ha'e been so shocked when Father came riding back with ye on his horse."

Ewan had come looking for him with a message from Magaidh. She had just returned from MacNachton and knew Willie was there, and that he had gone in search of the man. His first, Donaidh's father, had arrived to find the cottage on fire and risked himself to unblock the door as Connall had regained consciousness. His horse was missing by then, frightened by fire, as most horses were, and it had headed back to the keep. Connall had ridden back with Ewan on the older man's mount.

"Ye didnae try again after returning with Eva," Connall commented.

"I was bidin' me time, I kenned I mustn't miss on the next attempt, it had to be simple and needed to be well thought out, and, so long as ye werenae yet sleeping with yer wife, I had time."

Connall nodded. "Then I consummated the marriage." .

"Aye." Donaidh grimaced. "Glynis came back with the news. She said her lady looked so upset when she took up the wine, that she feared the two of ye were fightin' so she stuck around to listen and be sure all was well. She's verra fond of our Eva is Glynis. She said that if ye were fightin' ere she arrived, it stopped with the arrival o' the wine and Eva was finally truly Lady MacAdie. I knew my time had run out."

"So ye waited for me to return to the chamber and tried to follow."

He looked irritated. "I felt sure I had seen which stones ye'd pressed. Course, I didnae see the stone in

the middle that ye pressed with yer other hand... until ye showed Father."

Connall didn't comment on this verification that the click of a door closing had been someone else. He was more interested in other things. "What if Eva is already with child?"

"That would be a shame," Donaidh said with what seemed true regret. "I like Eva. She's a sweet lass; pretty and clever and funny and a soft bundle in a man's arms."

Connall felt his teeth grind together at this comment and Donaidh assured him. "She hasnae been unfaithful to ye, Uncle. I held her in my arms on the ride down the hill and into the bailey when we brought her back. She was soft and smelled sweet. I might marry her mesel'. Twould probably please the people, but only if she isnae carryin' yer bairn already."

"I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth, Donaidh MacAdie."

Donaidh turned a shocked face toward the bush Eva had just stepped around and Connall silently cursed his wife's blasted courage. The woman had just signed both their death warrants. He watched with a combination of pride, anger, and a sense of defeat as she marched forward, toward what he thought surely would be her death. But what a glorious sight she was, all fire and fury as she marched forward, fists on hips and spitting mad.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, the church says coveting your neighbor's wife is bad, coveting your uncle's wife can only be but worse. And murder is most definitely frowned on, you have heard the saying an eye for an eye." She had reached a stunned Donaidh by then, and when Eva suddenly punched her fist upward toward his face, Connall saw the branch she clutched and was now driving toward his eye. For one, heart stopping moment, he thought she would succeed to strike him, but at the last possible moment, Donaidh jerked his head to the side so that the branch merely grazed the side of his head. He grabbed her upper arm and used it to swing her around until he had her locked with her back to his chest, one arm held in his hand, the other barred by his own arm across it.

"Uncle!"

Connall had shaken off his shock at Eva's sudden appearance at the same moment as Donaidh had and immediately started forward to grab his sword. He even had his hand on it and was straightening again when Donaidh called out so harshly. Now he glanced up reluctantly, to see that Donaidh had the edge of his sword pressed across his wife's stomach.

"Put it down or I'll slice 'er in half."

Connall's gaze shifted to Eva and his heart wrenched at the apology there and wished he could offer an apology of his own. He never should have brought her here, not until he had sorted out the business of who was behind the attacks. This was all his fault. His hand tightened briefly around the sword, then he let it fall, hoping against hope that some miracle would save them, or at least save Eva.

Donaidh relaxed and glanced down at the petite blonde in his arms. "Aunt," he greeted her dryly. "I hadnae realized ye were here and, in truth, really wish ye werenae."

"And I really wish you were not," Eva snapped, her fingers tightening around the stakelike bit of branch she still held in her left hand. All she had been able to find in her bush were some stones and branches. With panic for her husband's well-being urging her to hurry, she'd used the stones to cut a bit of a point on two of the sturdier looking branches, taking them inside the cave to do so without making noise that

might draw Donaidh's attention. Her efforts had been crude and hurried, but she had decided well enough would have to do and had marched out with her hands on hips to hide the fact that she carried a stake in each hand.

Eva hadn't really been sure what to do even as she charged out, but the eyes had seemed a natural target to her. These men were strong, but strength was of little use if you could not see your target. Unfortunately, these men were quick too and the first strike had failed, but now she clutched her fingers around the second stake in her hand and tried to decide what to do. It seemed she had little choice, however. With his arm around her chest as it was, her upper arm was trapped. Eva had movement only in her lower arm, and not enough to aim properly or put much strength behind the blow. She could only hope that what little damage she did would be enough to give Connall time to grab his sword again.

Taking a deep breath, she swung her hand out, then back down, sinking the stake into his upper thigh with some satisfaction. It didn't go in far by her estimation, but far enough to make the man roar in pain and release her. Eva started to stumble away from him, aware that Connall was going for his sword again as she had hoped, but was suddenly caught back by a grip in her hair, and jerked around.

"Bitch!" Donaidh roared, and raised his sword. He was going to cleave her right there, she realized and shot her hands out to claw at his face, hoping to get his eyes, but clawing at anything she could reach.

Donaidh immediately shoved her away and Eva's feet tangled in her gown and sent her stumbling to fall on her back before him. She pushed herself up onto her elbows in time to see him raise his sword again. He was going to kill her right there and then. A roar from Connall made her glance around to see that he had his sword in hand once more and was stumbling forward, but she knew he would never make it in time. Then a soft "Unhn" from Donaidh made her glance back to her would-be killer and she saw that he had paused, sword raised above his head, back arched, expression stunned.

Eva stared at him, waiting for him to bring his sword down and wondering why he already hadn't, then he slowly began to turn away from her. The first thing she saw was the wound in his back, then she spotted Ewan behind him, already swinging his bloodied sword at his son's throat.

Eva closed her eyes, unable to watch father killing son, but opened them again at the soft thud of something heavy hitting the ground next to her, only to close them quickly again at the sight of Donaidh's decapitated body.

Arms scooping her off the ground made her open her eyes again, however, and she stared solemnly at the grief on Ewan's grim face as he carried her to where Connall's plaid still lay.

"I am sorry," she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes for his loss.

"Ye've nothing to apologize fer. I heard it all. I am the one sorry." He set her on the ground next to Connall's plaid, then turned as his laird joined them. The two men stared at each other silently, then Ewan grimaced. "Ye'd best get those out ere ye lose any more blood."

Connall grasped the arrow in his chest and pulled it free with one vicious tug and an accompanying roar of pain. Aye, they definitely felt pain, Eva decided with a wince of sympathy. He was unable to reach the arrow in his back, however, and Eva was grateful when Ewan did it for him. It would have been an unpleasant and difficult task for her to perform.

"What will ye tell Aileen?" Connall finally asked as he settled on the ground next to Eva to allow his wounds the chance to close.

"The truth." Ewan said simply. He looked old and tired and seemed to have aged twenty years in the past few moments.

"I should ha'e been the one to kill him," Connall fretted. "Ye should ha'e let me do it."

Ewan shook his head. "I brought him into the world, I failed him somehow so he turned out that way, 'twas only right I took his life back." He ran a hand wearily through his hair, and said, "I doonae ken where we went wrong. How he—"

"Ye didnae go wrong, Ewan. Ye and Aileen were the best o' parents," Connall interrupted, then added helplessly, "Mayhap he was jest a bad seed."

"Aye. Mayhap." Ewan was silent for a moment, then shook his head and turned away. "I'll take him home to Aileen."

He moved with the stooped shoulders of a beaten man as he walked to his son's side, then he forced his shoulders straight and bent to grab Donaidh by the arms and pull him into a sitting position. Connall was immediately on his feet, despite the fact that his wounds had not fully closed. He quickly joined his brother-in-law and his first and, between the two of them, they managed to shift the man to his horse and lay him over the mount's back.

"I should ha'e done it for him," Connall repeated a moment later as Eva stood to join him and they watched the other man ride away, leading the horse with his son's body behind him.

"You could not have, Connall," she said quietly. "He had to do it himself."

"A man shouldnae ha'e to kill his own son," he said grimly.

"Neither should an uncle have to kill his nephew, but Donaidh needed killing and forced it on the two of you."

"Aye, mayhap." Connall was silent for a minute, staring off into the trees where his brother-in-law had now disappeared from view, then he scowled at Eva. "Doonae think I've fergotten ye disobeyin' me and puttin' yersel' at risk in a misguided attempt to save me."

She blinked in surprise at the sudden turn his anger had taken, then felt some anger of her own coming up to meet it. "Well, 'doonae'you think I've 'fergotten' you dared to give me such an order and expected me to watch you die like some hapless good-for-nothing twit."

Connall's anger immediately gave way under amazement at her words. "Did you say doonae? Are ye makin fun o' me speech, wife?" he asked with dismay.

"Would I do that?" she drawled.

His amazement slowly transformed, his tension easing and a small smile claiming his lips for the briefest of moments, then Connall sobered and drew her into his arms with a sigh. "Only you could make me smile at a time like this, Eva. Yer a cheeky lass."

"And yer a stubborn ass," Eva said a tad irritably, not having quite given up her anger. "Ordering me to stand by helplessly and what? Watch ye die? Not in this lifetime, my lord. Or any other, I should hope. I

am your wife, your partner, your mate. I shall guard your back, your front, and your top to bottom to the best of my sad abilities so long as there is air in my lungs and strength in my body. Do not ever expect me simply to—"

Connall brought her rant to an end, simply by closing his mouth over hers. He kissed her with all the passion and hunger he felt for her, then eased the kiss slowly before gently easing away to kiss first the tip of her nose, her closed eyelids, then her forehead. "I love ye, Eva MacAdie."

Eva sighed against his chin, kissed him there, then added solemnly, "And I love you Connall MacAdie. And I will do till the day I die."

His arms tightened around her briefly, then he released her and took her hand to lead her to his horse. "Hmmm, I've been wantin' to talk to ye about that."

"About the day I die?" she asked as he mounted his horse, then before he could answer, said, "What about my mare, Millie?" Eva had left her mount in the entrance to the cave when she'd entered the clearing.

"I'll send someone fer her." Connall lifted her up onto the horse before him and Eva smiled then closed her hands over his as he wrapped them around her waist and pulled her back against his chest.

"Now, as I was saying," he murmured, arranging the reins, then urging his mount forward. "I agree with the need to marry a mortal to weaken the blood we carry, but once the bairns are born..."

Eva rested in her husband's arms and listened to his plans for the future with interest and thought she could stay like this forever... and she just might.