

## Ransom Novel Chapter 7 To 10

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### Chapter Seven

Brodick shook Gillian awake when they reached their destination.

She pulled herself from her slumber and rubbed the stiffness in her neck. It took some effort, but she finally forced her eyes to focus, and for a brief moment she thought she was still dreaming. Where was she? What was this place? Lush green hills surrounded her. A narrow stream gently meandered down the slope and in the center of the green valley sat a gray stone cottage with a thatched roof. The yard on either side was ablaze with wild-flowers of every color in the rainbow, their perfumed scent floating around her. Birch trees flanked the clear-water stream that flowed on the west side of the cottage, and to the east was a broad meadow blanketed in a thick carpet of grass. A flock of sheep, ready for shearing, clustered together at the far end of the field, bleating at one another like gossiping women, while a rather regal-looking guard dog sat on his haunches with his head held high, eyes ever watchful as he surveyed his charges. Smoke gently curled up into the cloudless blue sky from the cottage chimney. A faint breeze touched Gillian's cheek. This was a paradise.

A shout shook her from her musings. A tall, thin-faced man stood on the front step of the cottage and was smiling and calling to the approaching soldiers. As she watched the men disappear through the doorway, everything that had happened in the last few days flooded back to her memory.

Dylan had Alec on his shoulders and was bending down to go inside. Brodick had already dismounted but was waiting to assist Gillian. When at last she turned to him, he reached for her and she slid into his arms. For a fleeting moment their eyes met, and she studied the face of this man she hardly knew and yet trusted with her life. His piercing eyes made her think he knew all her secrets. She tried to shake herself out of such foolish thoughts. He was just a man, nothing more—and he needed to shave. His cheeks and jaw were covered with golden brown whiskers, and she had the insane urge to find out what it would feel like to run her fingers down the side of his face.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"The same reason you're staring at me, lass."

From the sparkle in his eyes, she guessed he had a bit of the Devil in him and she simply wasn't up to the task of being clever or flirtatious. She wasn't even sure she knew how.

She pushed his hands away from her waist and stepped back. "Why have we stopped here? And who was that man in the doorway? Alec shouldn't have gone inside until I—"

He cut her off. "This is the last time I'm going to tell you that Alec is safe with Dylan. He would be highly insulted to know you don't trust him."

"But I don't trust him," she whispered so the other soldiers wouldn't overhear. "I don't know him."

"You don't know me either," he pointed out. "But you've decided to trust me, and you therefore have to believe that what I tell you is true. My soldiers will protect Alec with their lives." The briskness in his voice indicated he was finished discussing the subject.

"I'm too weary to argue."

"Then don't. It's pointless to argue with a Buchanan," he added. "You can't possibly win, lass. We Buchanans never lose."

She thought he might be jesting, but she couldn't be absolutely sure, and so she didn't laugh. Either he had a very strange sense of humor or he was sinfully arrogant.

"Come along. We're wasting time," he said as he caught hold of her hand and started up the stone path.

"Are we going to spend the night here?"

He didn't bother to turn around when he answered. "No, we'll move on after Annie tends to your arm."

"I don't want to be a bother."

"She'll be honored to serve you."

"Why?"

"She thinks you're my bride," he explained.

"Why would she think that? I only told the lie to one MacDonald soldier."

He laughed. "News travels fast, and everyone knows the MacDonalds can't keep secrets."

"Oh, dear, I've caused you considerable trouble, haven't I?"

"No," he answered.

When they reached the doorway, he stepped back to let her go inside first. She moved close to him and asked in a whisper, "Do you trust these people?"

He shrugged. "As much as I trust anyone who isn't a Buchanan," he answered. "Kevin Drummond's sister is married to one of my soldiers, so he's considered kin of a sort. Anything you say in front of them will be held in confidence."

Dylan introduced her to the couple. Annie Drummond stood near the hearth and bowed low to Gillian. She was about her age and was heavy with child. Kevin Drummond also bowed and welcomed her into his home. Both of them, Gillian thought, appeared to be extremely nervous.

Their cottage was small and smelled of freshly baked bread. An oblong table took up a good deal of space in the center of the room and from the number of chairs, six in all, Gillian assumed the Drummonds were used to entertaining visitors. It was a home, warm and comfortable and inviting, the kind of place Gillian dreamed of when she allowed herself to fantasize about falling in love and having a family. Such a foolish notion, she thought to herself. Her life was consumed with worry now, and there wasn't room for such yearnings.

"It's a privilege to have you in our home," Kevin told her, but his eyes, she noticed, were fully directed on Brodick.

After formally greeting the laird, Annie suggested Gillian take a seat at the table and let her have a look at her injury. She pulled a chair out on the opposite side and waited for Gillian to get comfortable. Then she spread a cloth on the tabletop while Gillian pushed up her sleeve and unwrapped the bandage.

"I would appreciate any medicine you have," she said. "It isn't a serious injury, but I believe it's become a bit inflamed."

Gillian didn't think her arm looked all that bad, but Annie visibly blanched when she saw it.

"Ah, lass, you must be in terrible pain."

Brodick and his men moved forward to look at the injury. Alec ran to Gillian and pressed against her. He looked scared.

"How in heaven's name did this happen?" Dylan asked.

"I cut myself."

"It's got to be opened and drained," Annie whispered. "Laird, you're going to have to stay with us a couple of days at the least while I tend to this. She's a lady," she added, "and I must therefore use the slow method of curing her."

"No, I cannot stay that long," Gillian protested.

"If she were a man? What would you do then?" Brodick asked.

Thinking he'd asked the question out of simple curiosity, Annie replied, "I'd open the skin and drain the infection, but then I would pour mother's fire on the open wound, and though the special brew has cured everything I've ever used it on, it causes terrible pain."

"I've seen warriors shout during Annie's treatment with her mother's fire," Kevin said.

Brodick waited for Gillian to decide which method would be used.

She believed the Drummonds were exaggerating the treatment, but it really didn't matter. She couldn't afford to lose so much time just to avoid a little pain. Brodick seemed to be reading her mind.

"Do these warriors you've treated with this mother's fire of yours stay for days or do they leave?" he asked.

"Oh, they leave once I've put the healing salve on the wounds," Annie answered.

"The ones who can stand leave," Kevin interjected.

Brodick caught Gillian's barely perceptible nod and then said, "You will use this warrior's treatment on Gillian, and she will not make a sound while you're tending her. She's a Buchanan." He added the last as though that explained everything.

"I will not utter a sound, Laird?" she asked, her voice laced with amusement over his galling arrogance.

He was serious when he answered. "Nay, you will not."

She had a sudden urge to start screaming like a wild woman before Annie even touched her just to irritate the pompous man, but she didn't give in to the desire because the kind woman and little Alec would both become upset. When she was alone with Brodick, however, she was going to remind him that she wasn't a Buchanan, and she might also add that she was going to thank God for that fact, because the Buchanans were a little too full of themselves. She had noticed that when Brodick announced that she wouldn't make a sound, every one of his soldiers had nodded.

Oh, yes, she certainly wanted to scream all right.

Annie had turned as pale as milk after Brodick chose the treatment to be used. She leaned against her husband and whispered into his ear. Because she spoke so rapidly, Gillian only caught a word or two, but it was quite enough for her to figure out that Annie was asking Kevin for permission to give Gillian a sleeping draft.

Kevin put the request to Brodick while Annie rushed about the cottage gathering her supplies. Before Brodick could answer, Gillian spoke up. "I don't wish to be drugged."

I appreciate your concerns, but I must insist on remaining clearheaded so that we may continue on our journey."

Brodick nodded, but Gillian wasn't certain if he was agreeing with Kevin's request or with her denial. "I mean what I say," she pressed. "I don't want to be drugged."

Alec demanded her attention then by tugging on her sleeve. As she leaned down to him, out of the corner of her eye she saw Annie sprinkle brown powder into a goblet and then add wine.

"What is it?" she asked Alec.

"Are you gonna tell on me?" he whispered.

"About the cuts on my arm?" He bumped her chin when he nodded. "No, I'm not going to tell, and I want you to stop worrying that I will."

"All right," he said. "I'm hungry."

"We'll get you something to eat in a little while."

"With your permission, Laird, I would like to toast you and your bride," Kevin announced as he carried a tray of goblets to the table.

"Oh, but I'm not—" Gillian began.

Brodick interrupted her. "You have my permission."

She frowned at him, puzzled as to why he hadn't corrected Kevin's misconception, but decided to wait until later to ask him to explain.

Kevin put Gillian's drink in front of her. He then placed the other goblets a good distance away, no doubt so that the drugged wine wouldn't get mixed up with the others. The toast was but a clever ploy, and though she knew Kevin's intentions were good-hearted, it still rankled her that he had ignored her wishes. After the toast was given, she would have to take a drink, for otherwise she would be considered rude. That left her only one choice.

"May I call your other soldiers inside to share this toast?" Kevin asked.

In answer Brodick went to the door and whistled. The sound echoed through the cottage. Less than a minute later, the rest of his soldiers filed inside to take a goblet. Gillian helped by handing one to each man.

When everyone held a drink, Kevin stepped forward and raised his goblet high.

"To a long happy life filled with love and laughter and healthy sons and daughters."

"Here, here," Aaron agreed.

Everyone waited until Gillian had taken a drink before they downed their wine. Brodick nodded to Annie, pulled out a chair, and straddled it to face Gillian. He motioned for her to put her arm out again, and then put his hand down on top of hers.

She didn't have to ask him why he was holding on to her. He was making sure she didn't pull away during Annie's treatment.

Dylan came around the table and placed one hand on her shoulder. "Robert, take the boy outside," he ordered.

Alec frantically clutched Gillian's arm. "I want to stay with you," he whispered anxiously.

"Then put your request to Dylan," she instructed. "And perhaps he will reconsider, but be polite when you ask him, Alec."

The boy hesitantly looked up at the soldier, craning his neck back as far as it would go. "Can I stay... please?"

"Milady?" Dylan asked.

"I would be happy for his company."

"Then you may stay inside for a little while, Alec, but you mustn't interfere. Can you promise me that you won't?"

Alec nodded. "I promise," he said, then leaned into Gillian.

Annie stood beside her, watching her closely. She was ready to begin, yet continued to wait. "Are you feeling a bit sleepy, milady?" she inquired casually.

"Not overly," she replied.

Annie glanced at the laird. "Perhaps I should wait another minute or two."

Gillian looked up at the men surrounding her and noticed that Annie's husband was yawning every other minute, but then the soldier named Robert also yawned, and she couldn't decide which one was actually getting drowsy. Then Kevin began to sway.

"Annie, would you please ask your husband to sit down?"

Kevin heard her request and, blinking furiously, tried to make sense of it. "Why would I want to be sitting down, lass?" he asked.

"So you won't have so far to fall."

No one understood her suggestion until Kevin suddenly pitched forward. Fortunately, one of Brodick's soldiers was quick on his feet and caught him before his head struck the edge of the table.

"Ah, lass, you switched goblets, didn't you?" a soldier asked.

"She drugged Kevin?" another soldier asked, grinning.

Gillian could feel her face burning and concentrated intently on the tabletop while she tried to think of a proper apology to give Kevin's wife.

Startled by such trickery, Annie turned to the laird. Brodick shook his head as though in disappointment, but there was a definite sparkle in his eyes and voice when he said, "It seems Kevin drugged himself. Toss him on the bed, Aaron, and let's get this done. Annie, we need to be on our way."

She nodded, and with trembling hand she put her knife to Gillian's arm. Brodick tightened his hold on Gillian's wrist just before she felt the first prick of the blade cutting through her tender skin. At first Gillian let him know she thought he was overreacting, yet once Annie began to probe the wounds, she was glad for his anchor. The need to flinch was instinctive, but Brodick's grip wouldn't allow any movement at all.

The treatment wasn't nearly as awful as she had anticipated. Her arm had been throbbing from the pressure of the infection swelling beneath the surface of her inflamed skin, but once the wounds were opened, she felt immediate relief.

Alec squeezed under her right arm and clung to her. Frightened, he whispered, "Does it hurt bad?"

"No," she answered quietly.

When he saw how calm she was, the tension eased out of him. Curious, he asked, "Does it hurt as bad as when that man punched you in the face?"

"Hush, Alec."

"But does it?" he pestered.

She sighed. "No."

Annie had been cleaning the wounds with clean strips of cloth, but paused when Alec asked the question. "Someone struck you, milady?" she asked. The sweet woman looked so appalled, Gillian immediately tried to reassure her.

"It was nothing, really," she insisted. "Please don't concern yourself."

"This man... who was he?" Annie asked.

The room grew deadly quiet while everyone waited to hear her response. She shook her head. "It isn't important."

"Oh, but it is important," Dylan said to a chorus of grumbled agreements.

"He was an Englishman," Alec blurted out.

Nodding to indicate she didn't doubt the child's statement, Annie picked up another cloth and resumed her task of cleaning the wounds. Gillian winced from the discomfort, unaware that she was now gripping Brodick's hand.

"I knew he had to be English," Annie grumbled. "I don't know of any Highlander who would raise his hand against a woman. Nay, I don't."

Several soldiers nodded their agreement. Desperate to change the subject, Gillian latched onto the first thought that came into her mind. "It's a fine day today, isn't it? The sun is bright and the wind is mild—"

Alec interrupted her. "The man was drunk, terrible drunk."

"Alec, no one wants to hear the particulars—"

"Ah, but we do want to hear," Brodick drawled out, his mild voice belying what he was truly feeling. He tried to be patient, but his need to hear the full story from start to finish was driving him to distraction. What kind of a madman would prey on such a gentle lady and a little boy? Alec had already painted a dark picture of the horror he'd survived and had let them all see a glimmer of the courage Gillian had shown. Aye, he wanted all the details, and he decided that he would hear the full tale before nightfall.

"He was drunk, wasn't he, Gillian?" Alec pestered.

She didn't answer him, but the boy wasn't deterred. Since she hadn't actually forbidden him to talk about the beating, he decided to tell everything he knew.

"Uncle Brodick, you know what?"

"No, what?"

"The man, he hit her with his fist and knocked her clear off her feet to the ground, and then you know what he did? He kicked her and kicked her and kicked her. I got real scared, and I tried to make him stop, but he wouldn't."

"How did you try to make him stop?" Dylan asked.

Alec lifted his shoulders. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe I cried."

"Annie, are you almost finished?" Gillian asked.

"Just about," the woman answered.

"And then you know what? I threw myself on top of Gillian, but she pushed me away, and then you know what she did? She rolled on top of me and put her hands on my head so I wouldn't get kicked none."

"What happened then, Alec?" Liam asked.

"She patted me and told me to hush 'cause she said it was going to be all right. She wouldn't let nobody hurt me. She didn't neither," he added. "I never once got kicked."

Gillian wanted to put her hand over Alec's mouth. The men looked horrified by what the child was telling them, but their gazes were locked on her. She felt ashamed and embarrassed by what had happened.

"Was it just one Englishman who touched Lady Gillian?" Robert asked. "Or were there others?"

"Another man hit her," Alec said.

"Alec, I wish you wouldn't—" Gillian began.

"But he did hit you, don't you remember? The man kicked you, and then the other man hit you. How come you don't remember?"

She bowed her head. "I remember, Alec. I just don't want to talk about it."

The boy turned to Brodick. "You know what she did after he hit her? She smiled just to make him mad."

Annie gathered up her cloths and put them aside on one of the stools, then spread a thick towel under Gillian's arm. "Laird, I'm finished cleaning out the infection."

Brodick nodded. "The boy's hungry. He would appreciate a piece of your bread if that isn't too much trouble."

"Maybe with honey on it," Alec suggested.

Annie smiled. "Of course with honey."

"You must eat it outside," Brodick ordered. "Robert will go with you and see you don't get into mischief."

"But, Uncle Brodick, I want to stay with Gillian. She needs me, and she might get lonely."

"I'll keep her company," he promised. "Robert?"

The soldier moved forward. Alec saw him coming around the table and pressed closer to Gillian. She leaned down and whispered, "I'll call out to you if I need you."

She had to promise on her mother's heart before Alec was convinced that she wouldn't disappear if he left her for a few minutes. Then he snatched the bread from Annie's hand and ran out the doorway, forgetting in his haste to thank her properly.

"He'll remember his manners later and then thank you," Gillian said. "I appreciate your patience with him. He's just a little boy and he's been through a very difficult time."

"But you got him through it unharmed." Dylan made the comment from behind her and once again put his hands on her shoulders. She wasn't sure if he was offering her praise and comfort or making sure she didn't try to escape.

Annie appeared a moment later with an oblong pan of foul-smelling brew she'd heated over the fire. She held the pan with a thick rag she'd wound around the iron handle and tested the warmth of the liquid with the tip of her finger.

"It isn't too hot, milady, but it's going to hurt something fierce. If you need to scream..."

"She will not make a sound." Brodick repeated the comment in a firm, no nonsense voice.

The arrogant man sounded as though he were stating a fact, and she couldn't help but be a little perturbed with his highhanded manners. She should be the one to decide if she were going to be brave or not. Why did he think it was his decision to make?

Annie continued to hover, looking frightened and unsure. Gillian glanced up. "Why is your treatment called mother's fire?"

She asked the question a scant second before Brodick nodded to the woman and she poured the liquid over Gillian's open wounds. The pain was instantaneous, horrific, consuming. Her arm felt as though it had been flayed and then dipped in lye. Her skin was on fire, the flames shooting down to her bone. Her response was just as instantaneous. Her stomach lurched, her head spun, and her vision blurred. She would have leapt out of the chair if Dylan and Brodick hadn't been holding her down. Dear God, the excruciating agony wouldn't let up. After the first spasm of wrenching pain, her skin began to throb and pulsate, and her arm felt as though hot embers were embedded in her wounds. Arching her back against Dylan, she took deep, gasping breaths, squeezed her eyes shut to hold her tears back, clenched her jaw tight so she wouldn't scream out loud, and gripped Brodick's hand with all her might.

Had he shown her a glimmer of sympathy, she would have broken down and sobbed like a baby, but when she looked at him for help and saw his calm, dispassionate expression, she was able to regain her control.

Realizing she was pressing against Dylan, she forced herself to sit forward in the chair. But she couldn't stop squeezing Brodick's hand, though God knows she tried. Just when she was certain she couldn't take another second of the torture, it began to ease.

"The worst is over, lass," Annie whispered in a voice that sounded as though she, too, wanted to have a good cry. "Now I'm going to put some soothing salve on your skin and wrap it up tight in a nice bandage. Is the pain easing yet?"

Gillian tried, but she found it impossible to speak just yet, and so she stiffly nodded. She stared beyond Brodick's shoulder, focusing on a splinter of wood in the far wall, and prayed she wouldn't pass out.

Annie worked quickly, and within minutes Gillian's arm was covered in a thick white ointment and then wrapped from elbow to wrist. It was awkward work, for Gillian still refused to let go of Brodick's hand. Now that the pain was bearable, she realized he was rubbing her palm with his thumb. His countenance hadn't changed, but the little caress had a powerful effect. She felt as though he had taken her into his arms and was holding her.

After Annie tied the ends of the bandage at her wrist, Gillian took one last calming breath and finally pulled her hand away from Brodick's.

"There, it's done," Annie whispered. "You'll be as fit as ever tomorrow. Please try not to get the injury wet for a couple of days."

Gillian nodded again. Her voice was hoarse when she thanked the woman for her help.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment," she began as she slowly stood up. Dylan took hold of her elbow and helped her. She sagged against him, slowly righted herself, and then inclined her head to Annie before she left the cottage. The soldiers bowed as she passed them.

Gillian was certain they watched her from the doorway, and so she didn't give in to the urge to run to the cover of the trees. Alec was skipping barefoot in the stream while Robert stood guard. Fortunately, the child didn't notice her when she hurried in the opposite direction or hear her when the first sob escaped.

Liam frowned with concern as he watched her leave, then turned back to Annie. "Is there any of that mother's fire left?"

"Aye, a few drops," she answered.

Liam went to the table, pulled out his dirk, and made a small cut above his wrist. All of his friends knew what he was going to do, and none of them was the least bit surprised, for Liam was known as the doubting Thomas of the group and also the most curious.

Wanting to know exactly what the liquid felt like against a raw cut, he put his arm out over the cloth Annie had left on the table and ordered, "Pour some of the liquid on this nick. I would know how it feels."

If Annie thought the request was insane, she was smart enough not to remark on it. She felt as though she were in a cave with a family of bears. The men were the most ferocious warriors in the Highlands. Easily insulted and quick to react, they made

frightening enemies. Yet at the same time, they were the best of allies. Annie counted herself fortunate to be related to the Buchanans, because that meant she and her husband would never be preyed upon by other more civilized clans.

She stepped forward to do as he ordered. "Your cut is paltry compared to milady's," she remarked. "So the sting won't be near as bad."

After making the comment, she tipped the pan and let the liquid pour into the cut. Liam didn't react. His curiosity assuaged, he nodded to Annie and then turned and strode outside. Brodick and the others followed. Surrounding him, they patiently waited for him to give his report. Aaron smiled when Liam finally spoke because his voice sounded very like the croak of a drowning frog.

"It hurt like a son of a bitch," he whispered. "I don't know how the lass stood it."

Robert joined them, carrying Alec like a sack of wheat over his shoulder. The child squealed with delight until he noticed that Gillian wasn't there. A look of stark terror crossed his face as he scrambled to the ground and screamed Gillian's name at the top of his lungs. Robert clapped his hand over the boy's mouth to quiet him.

"She's just beyond the trees, Alec. She'll be right back. Calm yourself."

Tears poured down the child's face as he ran to his uncle. Brodick picked him up and roughly patted his back. "I forgot how very young you are, lad," he said gruffly. "Gillian didn't leave you."

Ashamed that he had panicked, Alec hid his face in the crook of Brodick's neck. "I thought maybe she did," he admitted.

"Since you've known her, has she ever left you?"

"No... but sometimes... I get scared," he whispered. "I didn't used to, but now I do."

"It's all right," Brodick said, and with a sigh he added, "You're safe now. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"That's what Gillian said," he remembered. "She's not gonna let anyone hurt me, not ever." He lifted his head and stared into Brodick's eyes. "You got to take care of her too 'cause she's just a puny lady."

Brodick laughed. "I haven't noticed anything puny about her."

"But she is. She cries sometimes when she thinks I'm sleeping. I told her she needed you. I don't want nobody to hurt her any more."

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt her," he assured the child. "Now stop worrying and go with Robert to fetch his horse. We'll leave as soon as Gillian returns from her walk."

Gillian didn't return to the clearing for another ten minutes, and it was evident from her red eyes that she'd been crying. Brodick waited by his stallion while she said her thank-you to Annie, and when she hurried over to him, he lifted her up into the saddle, then swung up behind, her. She was so exhausted from her ordeal, she collapsed against him.

Brodick was suddenly overwhelmed with the need to protect and comfort her. He tried to be gentle as he settled her on his lap, then wrapped his arm around her and held her close. Within minutes she was sound asleep. He nudged his mount forward and gently settled Gillian in the crook of his arm, her long curls brushing his thigh. She had the most angelic face, and with the back of his hand he brushed her cheek tenderly. He finally gave in to the desire that had been plaguing him since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. He leaned down and kissed her soft lips, smiling when she wrinkled her nose and sighed.

His mind kept telling him to be reasonable. She was English, and God only knew, he couldn't abide anyone or anything English. He had learned his lesson well on his one foray into that hateful country when he was young and foolish. He'd wanted to find a bride as fitting as Iain Maitland's wife, Judith, but the quest had been futile, for Iain had found the only treasure England had to offer.

Or so Brodick had believed until he met Gillian. Now he wasn't so certain.

"You're a courageous lass," he whispered. And with a nod, he added, "I'll give you that."

But no more.

Chapter Eight

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Alec's needs came first. As impatient as Brodick was to get some answers, he decided to wait until after the boy had been fed to question Gillian. It was late, well past sunset, and the moon shone brightly. The woman and the child were tired. They made camp at the base of Carnith Ridge in a narrow, secluded tract of land buffered on three sides by towering pines. The clearing eased down to the grassy bank of Beech Lake, a clear, stone-bottomed basin filled with speckled trout.

Aaron placed a plaid on the ground near the small campfire Liam had built after noticing Gillian was shivering. She thanked him with a smile that caused the soldier to blush like a little boy.

Gillian sat with her legs tucked under her on the edge of the woolen cloth while Alec sprawled like a lazy Roman statesman beside her. Brodick thought his angel looked as though she had just been to battle. Her complexion was gray; her lips were pinched, and her eyes were bright with fever, yet she didn't utter a word of complaint. She didn't want any of the food Robert offered, but she made certain that Alec filled his

seemingly hollow stomach. He wanted to gulp his food down and would have done just that if she hadn't given him only small portions at a time. In a whisper, she kept reminding him to eat slowly so he wouldn't get sick again and she showed amazing endurance by listening to his nonstop chatter without losing her patience.

The little boy was in good cheer until she suggested he bathe. He scrambled to his feet and ran to his uncle shouting, "I don't need a bath."

Gillian was the only one who wasn't surprised by the child's outburst. "You'll feel better after," she promised.

Alec vehemently shook his head. "No, I won't," he shouted. "You can't make me."

"Alec, you will not speak to the lady in such a tone," Brodick ordered. "And stop hiding behind me. A Maitland doesn't cower."

From the boy's puzzled expression Brodick surmised he didn't know what the word "cower" meant, but he must have guessed it wasn't good because he immediately stepped out to stand next to his uncle. His shoulder pressed against Brodick's thigh.

"I don't want to have a bath," he muttered.

"Why not?"

He pointed to Gillian. "She'll make me use her soap, and then I'll..."

"You'll what?" Brodick prodded.

"I'll smell like a girl."

"I doubt that, Alec."

"I went to considerable trouble borrowing this soap," she called out.

"You stole it."

"No, Alec, I borrowed it," she corrected before glancing at Brodick. "The soap has rose petals in it, and Alec seems to think that because I use it..."

The child finished her explanation for her. "It makes me smell like a girl," he insisted as he took a step back and warily watched her out of the corner of his eye.

Robert came up behind Alec, hooked his arm around him, and carried him to the lake. Liam asked her for the soap and then followed.

Gillian heard Robert promise Alec that although they would surely smell like roses after they had bathed, the sweet scent would in no way turn them into females.

Alec was laughing a minute later, and the crisis, it seemed, was over. She decided to stand up and stretch her legs and had made it to her knees when Aaron and Stephen

rushed forward to offer their assistance. Without asking, they each grabbed an elbow and pulled her up.

"Thank you, gentlemen."

"You may call me Stephen," the dark skinned soldier said.

"I doubt you have all our names straight in your mind," Aaron remarked.

"I know most of you. Robert took Alec to the lake, Liam went with him, and I know you're Aaron, but I don't know the other names yet."

"My name's Fingal," a redheaded soldier announced as he pressed forward.

"I'm Ossian," another called out as he, too, moved close. He was tall and so thick through the shoulders his neck disappeared.

Gillian suddenly felt as though she were enclosed by a six-foot male wall. The men were all staring down at her as if they considered her an oddity that had dropped from the sky to land at their feet. Had they never encountered a woman from England before? And why were they acting so peculiar now? She'd been in their company a full day, and that was surely time enough for them to get past their curiosity.

She stepped to the left so she could see between two soldiers and spotted Brodick leaning against a tree with his arms folded across his chest. He, too, was watching her, but unlike his soldiers, he wasn't smiling. She tilted her head ever so slightly toward the men pressing into her, fully expecting Brodick to catch her subtle hint and order his soldiers to give her breathing room. He didn't seem inclined to come to her assistance, however.

"You didn't eat much supper, milady," Ossian said. "Are you feeling poorly?"

"I'm feeling quite well, thank you," she replied.

"You don't have to be brave in front of us," Stephen commented.

"But you see, sir..."

"Please call me Stephen." Before she could agree, he added, "I meant what I said. You don't have to be brave in front of us."

Yet another soldier joined the wall. He was going to be the easiest to remember, because he had a scar that crossed the left side of his face and the most handsome brown eyes.

"My name's Keith," he reminded her. "And you may always speak freely in front of us. We're your laird's guard."

"But he isn't my laird."

Dylan joined the conversation in time to hear her comment. He noticed none of the men contradicted her, but they were all grinning like idiots.

"Milady, Annie Drummond gave Liam a pouch of medicine powder. You're to take half tonight, mixed with water, and the rest tomorrow night."

Liam had returned from the lake and thrust a cup of liquid into her hand. "I tasted it, milady," he said. "It's bitter, so you might want to gulp it down quick. It smells vile too."

She studied his blue eyes for several seconds and then asked suspiciously, "Are you thinking to drug me to sleep, Liam?"

He laughed. "Nay, milady, we learned our lesson with Kevin Drummond. The potion will help rid you of your fever."

She decided to believe him and drank the liquid as quickly as she could. The urge to gag was overpowering, but taking deep, gasping breaths helped. Blanching, she said, "The cure is worse than the illness."

"Does your arm hurt?" Stephen asked.

"No," she answered. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I would like to sit on that boulder next to your laird so that I may speak to him."

Fingal and Ossian moved out of her way so she could get past them, while Keith grabbed the plaid from the ground and hurried ahead to put the woolen cloth on the flat surface of the rock for her to sit on.

She thanked him for his consideration as she took her seat.

"Is there anything else we may do for you, milady?" Fingal asked.

"No, thank you," she replied. "You have all been very kind and gracious to me," she added.

"You need not thank us for doing our duty, milady," Ossian told her.

"Please call me Gillian."

He appeared scandalized by her suggestion. "I cannot, milady."

"No, he cannot," Brodick announced as he walked over to stand in front of her. "Leave us now," he ordered quietly. ,

One by one the soldiers bowed to Gillian before heading to the lake. She watched them until they disappeared from view, all the while gathering her thoughts because she knew the time had come for her to give a detailed explanation of what had transpired. Lord, reliving the past was exhausting to even think about.

Straightening her shoulders, she folded her hands in her lap and waited for Brodick to tell her to begin. Dylan remained by her side with his arms folded across his chest.

"How did you and Alec end up together?" Brodick asked.

"I'm not certain where to start."

"At the beginning," he ordered.

She nodded. "The obsession started a long time ago."

"Obsession?" Dylan asked.

"Let her explain without interruption," Brodick suggested. "Then we will both ask questions."

"I have a sister," Gillian said. "Her name is Christen, and when we were little girls, our home was invaded and our father was killed."

The rising wind whistled through the pine trees, the sound eerily melancholy, Gillian gripped her hands as she described the black night in vivid detail, though in truth she wasn't certain if she actually remembered what had happened or if Liese had given her the memory. The story of Arianna's treasure and the king's obsession to find the man who had murdered his love intrigued Brodick, but he didn't bother her now with questions. He merely nodded when she hesitated, urging her to continue.

"If the baron finds the treasure before anyone else, he will receive a great reward. He's motivated purely by greed," she explained. "Still, I don't think he knew for certain that Christen was given the box when she left England or he surely would have intensified his search for her."

Brodick interrupted her concentration when he lifted her plaid and wrapped it around her shoulders. "You're shivering," he said gruffly.

Surprised by his thoughtfulness, she stammered her thank-you.

"Continue," he ordered, shrugging off the gratitude as inconsequential.

"The baron has learned that Christen does indeed hide in the Highlands."

"And where did he get this information?"

"From the Highlander who came to him with a proposal. Remember," she hastily added, "over the years the baron has sent inquiries to all the clans, but none responded until about a month ago, when the Highlander arrived. He told the baron he knew where Christen was and that he could give the baron the information he needed if in return he would do something for him."

"And what did this Highlander want done?" Brodick asked.

"He wanted Laird Ramsey's brother taken from the festival to draw Ramsey out so he could kill him. He wants both of them dead."

Dylan couldn't keep silent. "But the Maitland boy was taken."

"Yes, they stole the wrong child."

Their questions began, one following another until her head throbbed. The sound of Alec's laughter carried from the lake. The soldiers were keeping him occupied, she knew, so he wouldn't interfere with Brodick's inquisition.

"Where do you fit in this puzzle, Gillian?" Brodick asked.

"I was told to find my sister and the treasure and bring both back to the baron before our fall festival begins."

"And if you fail?"

"My Uncle Morgan will be killed." Her voice broke on a sob that took her by complete surprise. Exhaustion was making her emotional, she decided, and she willed herself to calm down. "He is the dearest man. He took me into his home and raised me as his daughter. I love him and I will protect him at all cost."

"The baron isn't related to you?"

"No, he isn't. Are you almost finished questioning me? I would like to get Alec settled for the night. It's late."

"I'm almost finished," he replied. "Give me the name of this Highlander who made the pact with the baron."

"I cannot give you the name, for I never heard it."

"Are you telling me the truth? Surely the baron or one of his friends said the man's name," he said, his frustration palpable in the sudden stillness.

"Why would I lie? To protect a traitor?"

"But you did see him, didn't you?" Brodick pressed. "Alec told me you saw the Highlander from the hill."

"Yes."

"And you would recognize him if you saw him again?" Dylan asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Alec and I were well hidden on a knoll with a path just below. I saw him clearly as he rode toward me. He isn't the only traitor involved, though," she added. "Alec said there were two... maybe three... who took him from the festival." So weary now she could barely hold her head up, she whispered, "You do know why the Highlander was returning to Dunhanshire, don't you?"

"To inform the baron he'd taken the wrong boy," Dylan answered. "And then Alec would have been killed. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"Milady, why were you beaten? Did the bastard give you a reason?" Dylan asked.

"A man who strikes a woman is a coward, Dylan, and cowards don't need reasons to justify their actions." Brodick's voice radiated anger.

Gillian pulled the plaid close. "Our first attempt to escape failed, and the baron wanted to punish Alec and me."

"The boy said you threw yourself on top of him to protect him," Dylan said. "It was a brave act, milady."

She disagreed. "I wasn't brave; I was terrified they would kill him. I don't think I've ever been so scared. I had just heard the Highlander was on his way, and I knew why, and I was in such a panic to get Alec away before—" She stopped suddenly and took a deep breath. "So many things could have gone wrong. They could have separated us or hidden Alec away from me, and every time I think what could have happened, I become terrified all over again. Brave? I think not."

Brodick and Dylan shared a look before Brodick continued. "Who specifically inflicted the punishment? Was it the baron or one of his soldiers?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Answer me."

"The baron."

"Alec said that another man struck you. Is that true?" Brodick's voice was low and frightfully menacing.

"I don't remember."

"Yes, you do," he snapped. "Tell me."

Startled by his curt tone, she stiffened her spine. "As a matter of fact, one of his friends struck me. I don't understand why you need to know about it, though. It's over and done with."

"Nay, lass," he said softly. "It's only just begun."

## Chapter Nine

Beneath the steely exterior of a warrior beat the heart of a true gentleman. The revelation was both surprising and amusing, for though Brodick obviously wanted to be solicitous, it quickly became apparent he didn't have the faintest idea how. When

he finally called a halt to the questioning, she hastily stood up before he could change his mind. She turned to leave, but her feet got tangled up in the plaid, and she stumbled forward into his arms instead. He grabbed her by her shoulders to steady her, which was a very thoughtful thing to do, of course, but he didn't stop there. Once he had her, he decided to keep her. As though he had every right to do so, he threw his arm around her shoulders, his staggering weight all but knocking her to the ground, and hauled her up against him. She tried to delicately shrug him away, but that didn't work, and so she looked up at him to tell him to let go. He was waiting for her, and, Lord, the impact of those dark penetrating eyes, filled with such compassion and tenderness, made her heart quicken and her knees tremble.

Did he have any idea of the effect he had on her? The warmth of his skin made her wish she could snuggle closer to him. His heat felt better than ten blankets piled on top of her. And his voice, too, so rich and gruff, was wonderfully sensual. Why, even the way he walked, with such unbridled arrogance, as though he believed he owned the world, his hips moving with easy grace, and those muscular thighs of his...

She blocked the unseemly thought. She shouldn't be noticing such things. 'Twas the truth she'd never known any man like him, though, or felt this kind of reaction. All she wanted to do was put her head down on his shoulder for a few minutes and close her eyes. When she was with him, she didn't feel so vulnerable and unsure of herself. Brodick seemed to be the kind of man who wasn't afraid of anything. Did he think he was invincible? And did thinking it make it true? Where had his arrogance and confidence come from, she wondered, and, oh, how she wished she could borrow a little of both.

Exhaustion was surely taking its toll. She glanced up at him and smiled. Odd that she'd known him for less than a full day, yet she felt as though she'd been with him for years. They walked to the lake leaning into one another like old friends, comfortable with the closeness and the silence, but also like lovers, she imagined, who were breathless in anticipation for what might come.

Aye, his effect on her was quite strange. He made her believe she wasn't alone. Would he help her slay the monsters? No, she immediately decided. She couldn't, and wouldn't, involve him in her battles. She understood her responsibility. She would fight the dragon alone, and if she failed...

"Are you cold, Gillian?"

"No."

"You're shivering."

"I was thinking about my uncle. I worry about him."

"Is he worth your worry?"

"Oh, yes, he is."

He leaned close to her ear. "Can you do anything about your uncle tonight?"

"No," she answered, trying to ignore the caress of his warm sweet breath against her sensitive skin.

"Then let it go for now. Worrying won't help him."

"That's easier said than accomplished."

"Perhaps," he allowed.

Alec ran past them, dragging a stick behind him. The child was barefoot and bare-chested and obviously having a fine time. His laughter echoed through the trees.

"He's too excited to sleep."

"He'll sleep soundly," he predicted.

He didn't let go of her until they reached the water's edge. Then he asked, "Can you manage on your own or do you need help?"

"I can manage, thank you."

"Don't get your arm wet," he reminded her as he started back to camp.

"Wait."

He turned back to her. "Yes?"

"You..."

She suddenly stopped. Wondering why she hesitated, he took a step toward her. She bowed her head and folded her hands together as though in prayer. She looked terribly vulnerable now... and sweet... he thought.

"Yes?" he repeated.

"You make me feel safe. I thank you for that."

He didn't know how to respond. He finally managed a quick nod, then walked away.

Even though Gillian could tell she'd startled him, she was still glad she'd told him how she felt. She knew she could have been more eloquent, but it was too late now to start over.

Her arm still hurt, though not nearly as much as it had earlier in the day, and she was hopeful her fever would ease soon. By morning she would either be as right as rain or dead, and at the moment she had trouble deciding which would be better. Fatigue was pressing down on her like a vise. Perhaps a bath would make her feel better, she

decided. The water didn't look deep near the bank, the stone bottom appeared smooth, and she would be careful, of course, not to get her bandage wet.

She got trapped in her tunic when she tried to pull it over her head, then she bumped her arm. It was all suddenly too much, and she burst into tears and collapsed.

But before she could fall to the ground, she felt strong arms lifting her up to her feet. She couldn't see; the tunic was pressed against her face, yet she knew Brodick had come to her rescue.

"Are you wanting this off or on?" he asked gruffly.

She nodded. It wasn't a proper answer, and so he made the decision for her and pulled the tunic over her head. Tossing it on the grass, he tilted her chin up, saw the tears, and wrapped his arms around her. "You can cry all you want. No one's here to bother you."

She wiped the tears away with his plaid. "You're here," she whispered, sounding pitiful.

His chin dropped to the top of her head, and he continued to hold her until she grew calm. Allowing her to pull back, he asked, "Better now?"

"Yes, thank you."

She couldn't believe what she did then. Before she could stop herself, she leaned up on tiptoes, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him on the mouth. Her lips brushed over his for the barest of seconds, but it was still a kiss, and when she came to her senses and dared to pull away and look at him, he had the most curious expression on his face.

Brodick knew she regretted her spontaneity, but as he stared into her brilliant green eyes, he also knew, with a certainty that shook him to the core, that his life had just been irrevocably changed by this mere slip of a woman.

Dazed by her own boldness, she slowly stepped back. "I don't know what came over me," she whispered.

"When this is over..."

"Yes, Brodick?"

He shook his head, unwilling for the moment to say another word, and then turned abruptly and walked away.

What had he been about to say? She longed to go after him and demand that he explain, and then immediately changed her mind. When Brodick wanted her to know what he was thinking, he would tell her. Besides, she was pretty certain she knew

exactly what it was. Soon she would return to England and it was therefore foolish to become attached.

Why in God's name had she kissed him? Was she out of her mind or just plain stupid? She didn't need a complication like this now, not with all the trouble she was in. She thought about going after him then to explain that she really hadn't meant to kiss him—it had just happened—a spontaneous act nurtured by his kindness and her curiosity. Perhaps she should just pretend it hadn't happened, she thought as she touched her mouth with her fingertips and let out a long sigh of regret.

A bath, she decided, was out of the question, for in her bemused state, she would probably drown. She washed as thoroughly as she could, then took her time dressing as she summoned the courage to go back to camp and face Brodick.

All of the Buchanans were sitting together on the far side of the clearing, talking to one another until they spotted her coming toward them. The sudden silence unnerved her and she didn't dare look at Brodick for fear she'd blush and cause the other soldiers to wonder why. She kept her head down while she prepared her bed on the opposite side of the clearing, but she could feel all of them watching her. Alec was drawing circles in the dirt with his stick.

"Are you ready for bed, Alec?" she called out.

"I'm gonna sleep with the men. All right?"

"Yes," she answered. "Good night, then."

She lay down on her side facing the woods, her back to the soldiers, fully convinced she wouldn't get a moment's rest with an audience observing her every move, but exhaustion won out and she was asleep minutes later.

So that they wouldn't disturb her, the men continued their conversation in low whispers. Brodick couldn't stop watching her, worrying about foolish matters such as whether she had enough blankets. The wind had picked up and heavy rain clouds moved in, covering the moonlight. The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance, and the air became thick and heavy.

The darker it got, the more agitated Alec became. Robert doused the fire, and the camp became nearly pitch-black. Grabbing his blanket, the child scrambled to his feet and blurted out, "I've got to sleep with Gillian."

"Why?" Brodick asked, wondering if the boy would admit he was afraid of the dark.

"Cause she gets scared in the night." Without waiting for permission, he dragged his blanket across the clearing and placed it next to Gillian. Carefully putting his stick within grabbing distance, he yawned and then curled up against her back.

Brodict watched him struggle to keep his eyes open, then heard him whisper, "Uncle?"

"What is it, Alec?"

"You won't leave... will you?"

"No, I won't leave. Go to sleep."

Gillian was awakened from a deep sleep during the night by a howling scream like the sound of a tortured animal. She was very familiar with the unearthly sound. Alec was trapped in another nightmare. She quickly rolled to her side and took the little boy into her arms to soothe him.

"Hush," she whispered as she stroked his brow. "It's all right now. You're safe."

The screams turned to whimpers, and his terror abated. She continued to stroke him until she felt him relax and heard his breathing calm.

The heart-stopping howling started all over again an hour later, and she repeated the ritual a second time. During the predawn hour, she awakened yet again, but this time for an altogether different reason. She was on her back with her left arm stretched wide. It was pinned down and throbbing painfully. She turned her head and saw that Alec was using her bandage as a pillow. Ever so slowly, so as not to disturb him, she eased her arm out from under him. She was bringing her hand down to her side when she noticed something resting on her stomach. It was a hand; it was heavy, and it didn't belong to her. Stupefied, she squinted at it for several seconds while she tried to clear her mind, and then she slowly followed the path from the hand up the muscular arm to the broad shoulder. She blinked. Good Lord, she was sleeping with Brodict. She slowly sat up and looked around her and realized she was in the center of a cocoon. Surrounding her in a circle were all of Brodict's soldiers. She couldn't comprehend how they had gotten there, or how she had ended up in Brodict's arms. She tried to think about it, but she was so sleepy she couldn't keep her eyes open long enough to make sense out of anything, and so she lay back down, put her head on Brodict's shoulder, her hand on his chest, and went back to sleep.

For the first time in a long, long time, she felt protected. Blessedly, her nightmares left her alone.

## Chapter Ten

Brodict shook her awake an hour after dawn. The poor lass looked all wrung out and he hated to interrupt her sleep, for she'd had precious little of it but time was wasting away, and they had a hard ride through hostile territory ahead of them.

"We have to get going, Gillian."

"I'll only be a minute," she promised as she hurried to the lake with her satchel tucked under her arm. She washed quickly, then brushed her hair and dug through her bag for a ribbon. Because of the bandage, her left hand was useless and she couldn't get her hair braided. After trying unsuccessfully to bind it behind her neck with the ribbon, she gave up.

They were waiting for her when she returned to camp. Liam took her satchel and tossed it to Robert.

"You must eat, milady," Liam said as he thrust what looked like a fried triangle of mush into her hand.

"I'm not hungry, Liam, but I thank you..."

He wouldn't take the food back. "You must eat, milady," he insisted.

She didn't want to be difficult, and so she forced herself to swallow the bland-tasting food.

"Liam, would you please tie my hair back with this ribbon? I can't seem to..." Her voice trailed away when she saw his appalled expression. "It wouldn't be proper?" she asked.

"Nay, milady, it wouldn't. Your laird should be the only man to touch your hair."

Her laird indeed. How could she argue with such an absurd idea? The Buchanans, she'd already learned, were an obstinate lot, and when they got a notion into their hard heads, nothing could prod it loose.

They were also good and honorable men who were now protecting Alec and her, and nothing any of them did would cause her to lose her patience.

"All right then," she agreed.

Brodick was leading his horse toward her when she ran to him and asked his assistance. He also looked startled, but he did accept the ribbon. She turned around, swung her hair over her shoulder, and lifted it up with one hand. He pushed her hand away, pulled on her hair as though he were grooming his horse's tail, and roughly tied the ribbon into a hard knot.

The man was as delicate as a bull. She thought he might have pulled her hair on purpose because she'd asked him to do a woman's chore, but she held her smile and thanked him profusely.

"Will we reach Laird Ramsey Sinclair's holding before nightfall?"

"No," he answered curtly. He grabbed her by her waist and lifted her onto his stallion's back, then swung up behind her and took the reins. "We're going to the Maitlands'."

She bumped his chin when she turned to him. "We must go to Ramsey first and warn him of the danger to him and his brother before we take Alec home."

"No."

"Yes."

He was astonished that she had the gumption to contradict him. No woman had ever dared argue with him before, and he wasn't quite certain how to proceed. Didn't she realize his position of power?

"You're English," he said. "And I will therefore make certain allowances for you. I realize you don't understand you shouldn't argue with me, and so I'll explain it to you. Don't argue with me."

Incredulous, she said, "That's it? 'Don't argue with me' is your explanation as to why I shouldn't argue with you?"

"Are you trying to irritate me?"

"No, of course not."

Presuming she now understood he wasn't going to waste valuable time debating his decisions with her, he turned to call out to Dylan, but she regained his full attention when she put her hand on his chest. Her voice was low, insistent. "I must warn Laird Sinclair."

He tilted his head ever so slightly as he studied her. "Do you know him?" he asked softly. "Have you seen Ramsey?"

She couldn't understand why he had suddenly become so tense and irritable. His behavior was most puzzling, but she decided not to remark on it now because she was more interested in making him be reasonable.

"No, I've never met the man, but I know a good deal about him."

He raised an eyebrow. "Tell me what you know."

Ignoring his gruff tone, she answered, "I know he rules the Sinclair clan and that he's their new laird. Isn't that true?"

"It is," he answered.

Her fingertips were slowly trailing a path down his chest, her touch damned distracting. He wondered if she realized what she was doing or if it was a deliberate ploy to gain his cooperation. Did the woman actually believe that a kind word and a

gentle caress would sway him? It was laughable, really. Anyone who knew him well understood that once he had made up his mind, he never changed it.

"And I have made certain assumptions about him," she continued. "A man doesn't become laird unless he's a very fit warrior. I imagine he's... almost... as strong as you are."

The tension eased out of him. "Almost," he arrogantly allowed.

She didn't smile, but the urge was nearly overwhelming. "I also know that Ramsey has a brother as young as Alec. He's a child, and it's therefore your duty, and mine, to watch out for him. Every child should be protected from harm, and Michael's no exception."

Her argument was sound. Brodick had thought first to get her and Alec to Iain Maitland, with whom they would be safe, and then go to Ramsey to warn him.

He reevaluated his decision now. "Your primary concern is for the boy, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I'll send Dylan and two others to warn Ramsey, but the rest of us will go to the Maitlands'. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, thank you."

He grabbed her hand to get her to stop stroking him and said, "In future, you will not argue with me."

It wasn't a request but a statement of fact, and Gillian decided to let him think she agreed. "As you wish."

After receiving his instructions, Dylan left with Ossian and Fingal to go to the Sinclair holding. Alec rode with Robert, and Liam took the lead as they continued toward their destination. When they stopped to rest the horses at the nooning hour, Keith and Stephen split from the group. The soldiers caught up with the procession again an hour later, looking as smug as could be, and leading a feisty gray mare.

Gillian took to the animal right away. She was pleased they had borrowed the horse until she found out they didn't plan to ever give her back. Appalled, she refused to ride the horse unless they promised her that when they reached the Maitlands', they would return the mare to her rightful owner, but the soldiers were as stubborn as their laird and wouldn't agree to any such thing. Keith tried to be clever by changing the subject while Stephen tried to convince her that the man who owned the horse felt honored because a Buchanan had chosen his mare to steal.

"Do you want us to insult the man?" Stephen asked.

"No, of course I don't, but—"

"It would shame him," Keith told her.

"If you think I'm going to believe—"

"It's time to go." Brodick gave the order as he lifted her onto the mare. His hand rested on her thigh. "You do know how to ride, don't you?"

She began to push his hand away, but he merely tightened his grip while he patiently waited for her to answer his question.

She decided to give him a dose of his own arrogance. "Better than you, Laird."

He shook his head at her and tried to ignore the sweet smile she gave him with her outrageous boast. "I don't like arrogant women."

"Then you aren't going to like me at all," she replied cheerfully. "I'm horribly arrogant. Just ask my uncle Morgan. He tells me it's my greatest flaw."

"No, arrogance isn't your greatest flaw."

Before she realized what he was going to do, his hand cupped the back of her neck and he roughly pulled her toward him. He'd moved so quickly, she didn't even have time to blink, and she was still smiling at him when his mouth settled possessively on hers.

He kissed the breath right out of her. The heat of his mouth against hers sent a jolt of excitement surging through her body. The kiss was exhilarating, and then it got better. His tongue stroked hers, and the pleasure was so intense, she was certain it had to be a sin, but she couldn't make herself care. All she wanted to do was kiss him back as passionately as he was kissing her.

She wanted to get closer to him, to throw her arms around his neck, hold him close, and never let go. She tried to do just that, and when he ended the kiss, she very nearly toppled to the ground. Fortunately, he wasn't as addlebrained as she was—'twas a fact he didn't look at all affected by the searing kiss—and he was able to catch her before she disgraced herself.

She could hear Alec making gagging sounds of disgust in between his giggles, but didn't turn to look at any of the soldiers, knowing that her face was burning with embarrassment.

"You mustn't ever kiss me again, Brodick," she whispered hoarsely.

He laughed as he swung up onto his mount and took the lead. She nudged her horse into a trot to catch up with him.

"I mean it," she whispered.

He acted as though he hadn't heard her, and she decided to let the matter go.

They rode hard that day, stopping only once more to rest the horses and let Alec stretch his legs. Gillian stayed behind Brodick as they rode through rough, untamed, but breathtakingly beautiful land.

When they stopped for the night, she went to the nearby stream and washed, all the while thinking about the comment Brodick had made but hadn't explained, and the longer she thought about it the more curious she became. He'd told her that arrogance wasn't her greatest flaw, indicating he believed there was another more serious imperfection.

She was dying to ask him to explain himself, but determined not to, and though it was frustrating, she was able to control her curiosity for a while. She and Alec were so worn out from the long day, they went to bed directly after supper. Both of them slept like the dead, and if Alec had nightmares, she didn't remember soothing him. She awakened a little before dawn and found herself cuddled in Brodick's strong arms again. Content, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

So that Alec could catch up on his sleep, they got a late start the following day and didn't stop until the middle of the afternoon. Alec was more relaxed now, but he still wouldn't let her out of his sight. She had to order him to sit with Keith when she needed a few minutes of privacy, and as soon as she returned, he ran to her and latched onto her hand.

The poor innocent looked relieved to see her again.

"I'm not going to disappear on you, Alec."

"Uncle Brodick says we're close to my home now."

"Does this valley look familiar to you?"

"No," he admitted. Then he tugged on her hand. "Gillian?" he whispered.

She leaned down. "Yes?" she asked, wondering what he was worrying about now.

"Can I ride with you?"

"Don't you like riding with Robert?"

"He won't let me talk, not even when it's safe."

"You can ride with me."

"But you got to ask Uncle Brodick."

"I will," she agreed. "Finish eating, and I'll go ask right now."

Brodick was walking back from the forest and appeared to be preoccupied when she approached him.

"Brodick, how much farther is it to Alec's home?"

"A couple of hours."

"Would it be all right if Alec rode with me for a little while?"

"He'll ride with Robert."

"But Robert won't talk to him."

Exasperated, he said, "My soldier has more important matters on his mind."

"The child doesn't understand that."

With a sigh, he said, "All right. He can ride with you. We're on safe land now."

He started toward his horse, then stopped. "Do all boys his age talk as much as he does?"

"I don't know. Alec's the first child I've ever been around."

"You're good with him," he said abruptly. "You have a kind heart, Gillian."

She watched him walk away. The sun seemed to be following him. Beams of light shone down on his head and shoulders as he crossed the glen, and in the golden glow, her bronzed warrior looked as though he'd been sculpted by God in the archangel Michael's image so that he, too, could fight the demons roaming the world. It was at that moment that she became aware of him in a way she never had before. Now she reacted as a woman, and she was consumed with a yearning so intense tears came into her eyes. Annie and Kevin

Drummond's charming home suddenly came into her mind. She pictured their pretty little cottage, but in her fantasy, Kevin wasn't standing in the doorway, Brodick was, and he was beckoning her.

Daydreams were dangerous because they made her wish for things she could never have.

"Milady, is something wrong?" Liam asked.

At the sound of his voice she jumped. "No, nothing's wrong."

Before he could question her further, she picked up her skirts and hurried to her horse. She couldn't get a proper grip with her left hand, and after trying twice without success, she gave up and called Brodick for assistance.

He nudged his mount close, leaned down, and all but tossed her onto her mare's back. Robert lifted Alec into her lap and went to fetch his horse.

"Brodick?" she whispered so the others wouldn't overhear.

"Yes?"

"You told me that arrogance wasn't my greatest flaw. You had another imperfection in mind?"

He'd wondered how long it would take her to get around to asking him that question and had to force himself not to laugh. "You have many flaws," he announced. He swore he saw a spark of fire ignite in her emerald eyes as she straightened her shoulders. The lass had a temper, and he found that flaw quite pleasing. "But there was one flaw that made all the other imperfections pale in comparison."

"Was?" she asked. "I don't have this flaw any longer?"

"No, you don't."

"Pray tell," she muttered in exasperation, "what was this terrible flaw?"

He grinned. "You used to be English."

