

PROLOGUE



SCOTLAND, 1760S

"*N*ay! I will not marry the old Laird of Glencairn. I refuse!" Eileen MacAlister was pale and trembling, unable to believe Canton would actually do this to her. "He must be sixty years old!"

"Ye will," replied her half-brother. His cold blue eyes seemed to slice her to ribbons, and indeed, Eileen felt cut to the heart. "Ye are eighteen, and it's time ye were wed. The oath has already been sworn between me and the laird. The wedding will take place in three days. Prepare yourself."

"B-but he is such an old man! Why would ye do this to me?" She spread her hands, helplessly pleading what she knew was a lost cause.

"Take heart," he sneered, the moustache on his cruel lips lifting on one side. "The laird is ill, and no one knows how long he will last. When he croaks, ye will be a rich woman." His eyes gleamed with avarice. His ebony hair was pulled straight back from a low forehead, creating an almost brutish look that Eileen despised. He

studied her without compassion, and she realized he was feeling no remorse for what he was doing. They'd been arguing for the last half hour, and she was no closer to changing his mind than when they'd started.

"I'll never forgive ye for doing this to me, Canton," she choked out. "I'll see ye in Hell before then."

"Now you're really hurting my feelings," he mocked. "It's your duty to marry well, and I've seen that you will. Ye should be thanking me, instead of cursing me."

Her deep purple eyes flashed at him, and her fists scrunched up in balls. "If Morg were here, he would not make me do this!"

It was the wrong thing to say. Canton's face went red with rage and he struck out with a long arm, slashing her across the face with the back of his hand. "Ye will not mention my cowardly half-brother in this house; I've already told ye that."

Eileen gasped and put her hand to her reddened cheek, realizing she was only driving him more insane with the mention of Morg. He was wildly jealous of her full-blooded brother, even though he'd been gone for several years now. Canton and their greedy Uncle Roger had cheated Morg out of his inheritance, and he'd left her behind when he'd left Scotland. With a sob, she turned and ran across the stone floor of the main hall and up the broad staircase to her room. Once inside, she threw herself on the beautifully embroidered coverlet in a fit of weeping.

"Where are ye, Morg?" she groaned, wishing helplessly, once again, that he'd taken her with him. But he'd left alone, angry because she'd saved his life and made him look small in the eyes of the clansman. He'd left like a whipped cur, not even considering her feelings. Shaking off her clutching hands and ignoring her pleading tears, he'd strode out, vowing to return someday and claim his rightful place. That had been four years ago.

Eileen beat her small fists furiously against the coverlet, kicking her feet up and down in the soft leather shoes. Finally, when she could cry no more, she wearily got up and flipped her long wheat

colored braid behind her head so she could dab some cool water from the bedside pitcher on her hot face.

Depressed, she walked to the window and stared out across the moors where the fog was beginning to roll in. She shivered and ran her hands up and down the backs of her slender arms. As she stood there in the deepening twilight, she made another vow.

"I swear on our mother's grave, Morgan MacAlister, if ye don't save me from this fate, I'll never forgive ye...not even with the last breath I take." Her eyes burned with impotent fury and anguish, and she was determined to shed no more tears. She began to plan—she would get away. She would go and find Morg and then Canton would not be able force this upon her.

In spite of her plans, however, her wedding night came three days later, and she faced the ailing and aging man who had become her husband. Eileen shuddered with the knowledge that, soon, his gnarled old hands would be upon her young tender flesh, demanding his husbandly rights.

Bravely, she faced him, determined not to let him daunt her as his eyes swept from the tip of her bare toes to the top of head, lingering on each curve of her naked form, inspecting her as one might inspect a prize horse or cow.

When his dark eyes finally fastened on hers, she saw no lust there, only hatred. She lifted her chin bravely, not understanding his antipathy but determined that he would not break her spirit whilst he claimed her flesh. He stared at her for so long that she started visibly when he finally spoke.

"Ye appear to be in fine physical health, although your hips are fairly slender for birthing. For your sake, let's hope your brother has not cheated me with my purchase."

"Purchase?"

"Aye, ye didn't think I was in love with ye? I agreed to marry ye so I could have an heir. Gallagher will pay for leaving me!"

The old man's eyes gleamed maniacally, and Eileen shrank back, not understanding what he was talking about. She knew

Gallagher was his only son, the one whose mother had died a few years ago.

He shook his fist at her, suddenly, his anger flaring up. "Are ye stupid, wench? I married ye with the agreement of gold to refill the coffers of Castle McKenna, and 'twas a pretty price I paid. If ye can't produce a child to take my place, I will have been robbed!"

Anger and resentment surged through her then, her lip curling in scorn as she drew herself up. "'Twould be a shame, wouldn't it? Mayhap you should have given more thought to your age affecting reproduction than my lack of ability," she mocked.

She seethed with the knowledge that Canton had sold her.

Sold her!

If she could defeat both their purposes, it would give her great satisfaction.

"Aye, it would, indeed, However, I intend to remedy that. Get to the bed." He pointed a knotted and trembling finger towards the bed and Eileen's heart sank. Apparently, he was going to try, whether he could be sure of success or not. She hesitated, glancing from the bed to the door.

"Don't bother to run, there are guards outside in the hall and they would just bring ye back. There's nowhere to run, so do as ye are told!" He pointed to the bed again, and Eileen reluctantly went to the huge blocked bed and sat down on it.

"Turn the coverlet back and lie down on the sheets...on your back. Ye had best be a virgin, lass. I paid extra for that."

Burning with humiliation and shock, she did as she was bid and then lay down on the crisp sheets and sank back against the pillows. When he reached up and doused the flickering lights, the room was cast into total darkness. Although it was summer and the evening light lingered longer than normal, the heavy brocade draperies had still been pulled across the windows, blocking out the tiniest sliver of moonlight.

She heard the door open, and a slice of lantern light shone through, then it was quickly closed. She had little time to puzzle

over that occurrence before she heard the sound of clothes being shed and metal clanking on the stone floor. She shivered in fear and dread as she heard muffled footsteps coming towards the bed. Her heart beat a rapid tattoo, her breath coming faster.

Eileen had never been with a man before and she was frightened, terrified, suddenly. The darkness was closing in on her and she felt like she was suffocating. Suddenly, she was pressed down onto the bed, his body lying partially on top of hers and a calloused hand painfully squeezing her breast. She cried out in pain and fear as his rough palm slid down her body, his breath coming faster against her face. She turned her head to the side, not wanting him to kiss her. She felt his probing fingers parting her thighs and she desperately willed herself to be stoic. His fingers left her for a moment, and when they returned, a thick, creamy substance was applied to her feminine center, the fingers then slipping inside her.

Eileen tried to close her thighs against the intrusion, but his heavy leg was between hers and she couldn't stop his invasion. She had never felt so helpless and terrified.

Please let this be over!

She prayed silently as the tears trickled from beneath her dark lashes. This wasn't the way she'd always envisioned her wedding night, and she mourned the loss of something she would never have, the gentle, loving introduction to the loss of innocence.

She gasped when he moved over her, forcing his lower body between her soft thighs. She felt something hard and realized it must be his male shaft probing the entrance to her womanly center. She panicked and began to fight, trying to scratch his face with her fingernails.

"Lie still," he whispered hoarsely. "Just lie still, lass, and it will all be over in a minute." With a harsh thrust, he rammed into her, breaking past the virginal barrier and rushing on, not even giving her time to adjust to the thickness of him. A strangled scream escaped her lips and she moaned in pain.

True to his word, it was less than a minute and it was over, his

heavy weight lifted from her. He left her sobbing and hurting, unable to close her trembling legs as he gathered his belongings and left the room.

Eileen was so distraught that she didn't even notice the soft lighting returning to the room until she felt a hand on her thigh. Opening her eyes, she turned her head slowly to meet his harsh gaze before it moved down her body, a satisfied grunt escaping his lips at the sight of the blood spots beneath her.

"At least I know ye were a virgin," he said gruffly, his eyes conveying no sympathy. "Now, let's hope ye can conceive."

He turned his back to her and limped slowly towards the door, and it was then that Eileen realized it hadn't been her husband who had taken her maidenhead. That man had been too heavy. Her own husband had grossly abused her.

"Ye are a bastard," she hissed through pain twisted lips.

His dark eyes were cold as he looked back at her. "Aye, lass... among other things. Ye would do well to remember that."

"I shall write to the king. I will tell Canton what ye have done," she shrieked wildly. "Ye canna get away with this!"

"Go ahead," he replied, a cruel smile twisting his lips. "No one will believe ye, lass. It's my word against yours."

After he left, Eileen pulled the heavy damask quilt over her head and turned to her side. Her body ached down there in her female parts and her mind was filled with the pain of betrayal. Hot tears soaked her pillow as she sobbed impotently. "Someday, I will get even," she vowed to herself. "One day, I shall make them all pay."

One year later, the Laird of the clan Glencairn, the fierce Donald Glencairn, held his three-month-old son above the castle parapet in his trembling hands and made a declaration to the clansmen.

"This is my son...Soren Glencairn...my one and only heir to all that is mine. I disown and disinherit Gallagher Glencairn and pronounce him an outcast of Castle McCrae and Glencairn lands."

When he began a fit of coughing, Jamie McCann, his nephew,

came forward and took the baby to hand him back to his mother. Eileen accepted her son into her arms and gently shushed him as she looked out over the crowd. Her face was as white as death and her deep purple eyes burned with unshed tears, yet she lifted her chin defiantly. She would get even with Canton and the laird one day. She *would* have revenge for the humiliation and degradation she had been put through. Foiling their plans would bring her great joy and satisfaction, and best all...no man would ever use her again.

As Jamie slowly walked the frail and wheezing man back inside, Eileen followed, her face a frozen mask.

The old laird stopped and turned, his dark eyes first going to the babe in her arms and then they lifted slowly to her face. The gleam of stubbornness and revenge lent an extra glow about his paper frail face, a maniacal satisfaction of having had the last word. "Ye will not leave this castle. If ye do, the babe will be kept from ye."

"Ye are a bastard," hissed Eileen, her fury recklessly spilling over. Even as the old man neared death, he still held her in his grasp.

"So ye have said, many times over," he cackled sardonically. "In spite of that, ye have had the best of everything I could give ye this last year. I've not treated ye too unkindly, have I?"

Eileen studied him closely, looking for signs of duplicity. Cold wrath burned inside her, yet she realized he meant what he said. Women were just possessions to be moved about and used as needed; their feelings didn't mean anything. They were pawns in men's masculine endeavors, and they should accept their dictates without question.

"Looking for absolution, are ye?" she scoffed, refusing to give him a trickle of credit. "Especially now that death is upon ye?"

"Nay, lass," he replied flatly. "Just the assurance that what I have decreed will be carried out. Jamie will see to it that the babe stays here to be raised to his inheritance and status in life. Ye are free to go. if ye wish; I'm done with ye."

Eileen trembled with the force of her frustrated rage but knew there was little she could do. There was nowhere to go, no place to

hide, and her son did deserve his honors. At least, the old curmudgeon owed her that.

"Oh, I'll stay, ye can rest assured of that. My son will have what is due him. It's the least he deserves for the manner in which ye brought him into this world, without his own father to know him."

"Be silent!" The laird shook with anger, and he reached out to backhand Eileen but collapsed into a fit of coughing, his face turning mottled.

Jamie sent her a warning glance, but Eileen was beyond caring a whit.

"At least, ye have no control over what I do once ye are gone," she mocked, feeling no pity for him whatsoever. "I'll raise *my* son to hate ye, to be a curse on your name, and I will rule the Glencairn clan, myself." She hugged her son fiercely to her breast. "Not only that, but I'll wage war on my half-brother and relieve him of Castle McKenna and rule the MacAlister clan, as well. Morgan MacAlister will rue the day he left me defenseless."

The laird gargled with fury, trying to get his breath. He fell to his knees, despite Jamie trying to hold him up, and then, unexpectedly, he went limp. The raspy breath halted abruptly, leaving only a macabre silence in the room.

Jamie knelt down beside the old man and put his hand on his throat, then looked quietly up at Eileen. "He's dead."

Soren chose that moment to erupt in furious baby screams, and Eileen's numbed heart echoed his sentiments. She knelt down on the other side of the fallen laird, her eyes burning into Jamie's concerned blue ones. "I'm glad he's dead. I'll never forgive him for what he's done to me. Him, nor Canton, either one. And now I want to know everything you know, Jamie. And I mean...*everything!*"