

TRUSTING HER HIGHLAND
LAIRD



BRANDY GOLDEN



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PROLOGUE



CASTLE MCKENNA OF THE MACALISTER CLAN IN SCOTLAND'S HIGHLANDS, THE 1760S

“*I*’ve returned to claim my inheritance, Leenie,” Morgan MacAlister stated flatly, his vivid green gaze studying Eileen’s face and body as if he didn’t recognize her.

And in truth, she knew she was very different from the twelve-year-old he’d left behind eight years ago when their half-brother, Canton, had cheated him out of his inheritance. His use of her nickname from childhood softened her somewhat.

“I can see that ye’ve been treated badly whilst I was gone, and I’m sorry for that, but I intend to have what’s mine,” Morgan said.

Defeating Canton and taking back their home had been Eileen’s goal for the past four years, and she’d finally been successful. Revenge against all the men in her life, including her brother, had been a powerful motivator, and she’d been sated with the sweet taste of victory.

What she hadn’t planned on was Morgan returning just when she’d defeated Canton to reclaim his inheritance himself. Nor had

she planned on him bringing back Gallagher Glencairn, the rightful heir to the clan she now led.

She panned the beautiful rose garden they were standing in, the one their mother had loved, and her gaze finally came back to rest on Morgan. They were within the soft-colored, outer yellow walls of Castle McKenna where they had grown up. She'd been so hurt when Morgan had left her behind and at the mercy of Canton. And he hadn't been there for her when Canton had sold her to Donald Glencairn, the Laird of Castle McCrae, in return for gold to fill Castle McKenna's coffers.

As her gaze traveled up and down the changes in his physique, she realized that although Morgan had left a bitter and disillusioned young boy, he'd returned a powerful man, fully capable of leading the MacAlister clan.

Eileen sighed. Canton had manipulated them both, and she wasn't the only one who'd been hurt. It was time to let go of the bitterness she harbored against Morgan and make things right. After all, she was a mother now, and she had her son to think of. Morgan and his new wife, Kat, were his family too, and she wanted Soren to know them both.

"I'll give ye back control of Castle McKenna, Morgan, if Canton has left anything worth claiming," she agreed wearily. "'Tis yere inheritance after all. I can try to help ye if the coffers are empty again. Canton has spent through them twice over now."

Morgan flashed her a gentle smile, some of the tension seeming to leave his strong muscled frame. "I don't need yere money, Leenie. I have plenty of my own to take care of things."

The garden door slid open and they both turned. Kat ushered Gallagher Glencairn through it. Eileen watched the approaching man warily, not liking the way he was looking at her. She couldn't say what it was that made her uncomfortable...unless it was the appraising look in his silvery eyes. Or perhaps it was the square jaw that bespoke of a stubbornness to equal her own. There was a

determined air about him, and his lips were set in a grim line as if he had a bone to pick with her.

She lifted her chin in defiance, her back stiffening as he neared. She'd seen Jamie and Dungally dragging him off to the study earlier, and they must have given him the bad news that he was no longer his father's heir. Apparently, his dispossession of the title and lands of the Glencairn legacy wasn't sitting well with him. Not that she could blame him. It was too late though, Castle McCrae and the Glencairn clan was hers now, her and Soren's'.

Gallagher stopped in front of them, his avid gaze never leaving her. She stood there proudly, growing angry. He inspected her from the feet up, his attention lingering at the curve of her breasts then finally resting on her flushed face.

"Do I pass yere inspection then?" she mocked scornfully, somewhat unnerved by his sensual appraisal.

"Aye, ye're quite beautiful, lass. No wonder my father wanted to wed ye. He always had an eye for a buxom wench." His own eyes were contemptuous, as if she'd seduced Donald Glencairn.

"Yere father was a bastard," Eileen snapped back at him. "How dare ye insinuate I had anything to do with this farce of a marriage? I thank the Gods that he's been dead these past four years. He was a despicable excuse for a man."

"I'll not pretend a mock sorrow. I had no use for my father myself," Gallagher responded grimly. "The real problem is how to get my inheritance back."

"That's not possible. Donald made his decree before the clan leaders and the village. It canna be broken." She almost felt sorry for him, but not quite. He was Donald Glencairn's' own son after all.

"There's always a way."

He stepped forward and reached out to bring the knuckles of his hand along the side of her chin, and she drew her breath in quickly.

Flinching, she stepped back. "Don't touch me!"

His hand dropped. "I was just going to tell ye there is a way. Dungally MacMillan, as clan leader, has made a decree himself."

"And what might that be," Eileen asked, suspicious, her heart beating faster. Her jawline tingled where he'd touched her and she hated the feeling. She didn't want to react to him, nor to any man. And what the devil was Dungally up to?

"Ye can marry me."

Eileen's face surely paled. She couldn't have heard him right. "M...marry?" she whispered, fearful.

"Aye, marry me," he replied, watching her closely.

Morgan looked thoughtful. "Now that's an interesting proposal, Gallagher. I don't believe Dungally, even as clan leader, has the power to go over the law of the land. Besides, isn't it a bit improper, considering the child?"

"It...it would be indecent," Eileen stammered in agreement. Her face flushed, then grew cold again, her eyes stormed darker than before. "Even if I wanted to get married again, which I don't, I can't marry my dead husband's son. Being married to a Glencairn was hellish enough the first time."

"I knew my father, lass, so I can appreciate yere feelings. However, I am not my father." He turned to Morgan. "Would ye leave us to discuss this ourselves? I will fill ye in later regarding the legalities."

"Aye," Morgan agreed with a slight frown. "As long as everything is legal, I'll leave ye to it."

"I have no intention of discussing this, now or any other time. I will not marry ye." Eileen stepped around him with the intent of leaving.

He reached out and grasped her arm.

Quick as a wink her right hand came up of its own accord and she slapped him across the face. "Take yere hand off me," she said, trying to jerk loose.

Gallagher held her easily while she squirmed to pull free. When

she couldn't, she screamed in frustration and attempted to slap him again.

"Stand still and I'll release ye," he said calmly, stopping her swing and holding both arms as she struggled wildly.

"Gallagher," Morgan began and started back towards them, concern for Eileen in his green eyes.

Gallagher stopped him with a look. "I won't hurt her, Morg," he assured him, reverting to the casual use of his friend's name.

The two men studied each other.

Morgan finally nodded and stepped back. "I'll just be inside if ye need me, Leenie."

Gallagher's warm hands on her arms created strange sensations, and Eileen didn't like it at all. Why was his mere touch having this effect on her? She stopped struggling and was rewarded with her release. She quickly folded her arms beneath her breasts again, her chest heaving with exertion. She stared at him, defiant, hating him for the reaction he'd incited in her unwilling body.

"Don't ever hit me again, lass." His gaze bored into her eyes with a deadly warning.

"Or what?" She eyed him, contemptuous. "Ye'll hit me back?"

Gallagher's brow curled upward. "Nay, I don't hit women. But ye won't like the consequences, I can guarantee that."

"Keep yere hands off me and I won't have to," she replied derisively.

The door to the garden closed, making them both aware that Morgan had left, leaving them alone. Suddenly, Eileen felt trapped and at a distinct disadvantage. Although she knew Morgan was within earshot if she chose to call to him, she couldn't help the feeling of abandonment once again. Shaking it off, she backed up until she was well away from Gallagher's physical aura and felt like she could breathe normally again.

"I've been giving it some thought, and I have a proposition for ye to think about." He folded his bare brawny arms across his wide chest as he spoke.

“Go on,” Eileen ordered disdainfully, although she had no intention of agreeing to any outlandish offer. Not even for Dungally MacMillan, who had treated her like the father she still mourned the loss of, or Jamie McCann, who had been her staunch friend, would she accept it.

“We’ll have a marriage in name only and for the period of one year. After that, I’ll set ye free with all ye need to live on and see to it that the child is well taken care of. What do ye say?”

Eileen was astounded at Gallagher’s words. “And just why should I agree to this peculiar scheme? I’ve got it all now, and my son’s future is assured. He will have everything his father had to offer him. Donald Glencairn owed me that, so why should I turn it all over to you and retire on a stipend? It’s a ridiculous offer, and the answer is no.” She glared at him, daring him to refute her.

“Two reasons. One, the child is not my fathers.”

Eileen felt horrified and sick at heart beneath his disapproving scrutiny. “Dungally told ye about Soren?” she asked, disbelieving.

“Aye. He said ye were forced against yere will and that my father decided to take the babe as his own.” A brief flash of sympathy played across his face but was instantly gone.

“Something like that,” she agreed and then laughed bitterly, knowing it was Donald who had forced someone to breed with her. He was certainly no hero, taking Soren on as if she’d actually been raped. The old man had planned it.

“And two, the clan is unhappy with a woman leading it. They want me back, and I intend to have my rightful place back as well. Dungally and Jamie have insisted we be married to put things right.”

“As far as the clan is concerned, Soren *is* Donald’s son, and I don’t have to marry ye. No one knows any differently,” she declared.

“Nevertheless, ye *will* marry me.” He stared down into her rebellious face, imposing his will upon her own, and Eileen felt helpless suddenly.

"But...it's against the law to intermarry. The king himself has decreed it." She watched him carefully, his regal bearing lazily sensual as he studied her, gauging her reactions. A pull tugged at her senses in spite of herself. He was a handsome brute.

"We are not related by blood, lass," Gallagher replied. "And knowing I'd be back one day, Jamie took it upon himself to request an exception from the king's own lips, should it prove a viable situation. He has the paperwork with the king's seal on it authorizing our marriage."

Eileen was stunned. She'd been outmaneuvered and she hadn't even seen it coming. Curse Jamie and Dungally for not telling her, and damn them for their well-meaning machinations.

"Nay! I won't do it," she yelled furiously. Despair filled her heart as she saw her well-ordered, hard-won world crumbling about her. "They can't make me marry ye, they have no right!"

He moved in closer. "If ye refuse to wed me, then ye leave me no choice but to come against ye in war. I'll win, but it will cost many lives, some of whom will be our friends. They will have no choice but to support ye, even if they don't approve of yere position, and some will die for that loyalty. Do ye want that on yere conscience?" His gaze locked with hers. "I have no wish to do that, but ye leave me little choice. Jamie McCann is my cousin, and Dungally is the clan leader, and they want me back. But they will not support me if I declare the child an illegal heir. Also, because of the great respect I have for yere brother, I have no desire to shame his sister. So war would be my only recourse." His head dove down and he looked her straight in the eye, his expression fierce as he made his declaration. "Make no mistake, I was born to rule the Glencairn clan, and rule it I will, with or without ye."

"I can't believe yere own conscience would allow ye to wage war," she whispered painfully, her face undoubtedly deathly white at his words. There was no denying he meant every one of them.

"I'll do what I have to do," he replied with a grimace. "If ye agree to marry me and we find that we suit one another after the year is

up, we'll make it a real marriage. Soren will be my heir and have his place amongst our children."

Eileen could have sworn regret and kindness lingered in that silvery gaze, hiding somewhere behind determination. If she had, his next words destroyed it.

"But if ye make me come against ye in war, when I defeat ye, I'll turn ye out with a mere pittance and no inheritance for the child either."

"Ye are a bastard then, just like yere father," she hissed, swinging in reaction to land a vicious slap across his face once again. She put all her pent-up frustration and fury into that slap and immense satisfaction coursed through her at the immediate red handprint that blazed across his lean jaw.

Her satisfaction was short-lived as his eyes tapered to slits. He grabbed her arm and whirled her around. His long arm was a steel band around her middle, and he pulled her against him and quickly divested her of her armor, sword, and belt. Then he dragged her, angry and kicking at his thick calves, over to a stone bench inside the shaded arbor.

"I said, don't touch me," she yelled, fearful. What was he going to do to her? Would he rape her? She'd been caught off guard, not expecting any requital, and that had cost her.

It was a shock of a different kind when she unexpectedly found herself face down over his hard, muscled thighs. She fought desperately, suddenly aware of where this was going. "What are ye doing? Let me up!"

"I warned ye never to hit me again," he snapped, his voice harsh. "Ye have brought this on yerself." He quickly unbuttoned her riding skirts and slid them down with the thin pantaloons in one deft swipe. His hand roamed over the silky contours of her buttocks, and Eileen trembled at his touch.

"Ye're not going to spank me like a child! I won't allow it..." Her words were cut off--a hard slap exploded against her bare backside, sounding like a pistol shot in the enclosed garden walls. "Ye

bastard," she yelled again and tried to tuck her bottom in, expecting another one. It came, just as merciless as the first, and then another and another. "Let me up," she demanded, the sharp chastisement echoing in her ears and searing into her unwilling flesh.

"And this is for calling me a bastard. I had a father, however lacking he might have been."

Gallagher landed several more painful slaps on her wiggling cheeks before he finally pulled her upright.

Eileen scrambled away from him, her eyes surely spitting sparks of resentment and fury. "I'll have yere head for this," she snapped, holding tears at bay as she quickly adjusted her clothing. Her chest was heaving with the exertion of fighting, and she shook her small fist impotently at him.

"I think not," he replied, watching her, cautious. "And if ye hit me again, I'll blister that pretty arse until ye can't sit for a week. Is that clear?"

She glowered at him, scornful, refusing to answer and ignoring the desire to clutch her bottom and rub the sting away. No one had ever dared to treat her in this humiliating fashion, not even Donald.

Morg had spanked her once. She'd only been ten at the time and had deserved it for throwing rocks at him. But that had been a long time ago, and she wasn't a child anymore. "I hate ye," she said, sullen, her bottom lip trembling. "How dare ye treat me like a child?"

"You'll find I dare quite a lot," he replied, mocking. "Now are ye going to marry me or not?" He got up and walked within a few feet of her, yet not touching her.

She shrank away from his virile male stature, and his eyes narrowed.

"Ye don't leave me any choice, do ye?" she asked cynically. Once again, men were organizing her life. God bones, how she resented it. She couldn't allow Soren to suffer on her account though.

In spite of her wish to remain single, she was under a tremen-

dous amount of pressure to marry, especially from Dungally and Jamie. Gallagher was right, the clan wanted a man in charge. Although she hated it, she'd seen kindness in his steel gaze, and her instincts told her he was probably a man of his word. If he was truly like his evil father, he wouldn't give her any options, he would just take everything from her and Soren. Instead, he was giving her some negotiating rights, especially regarding the marriage bed, and Soren's future would be secure. She could do worse.

Proudly, Eileen lifted her head, the sunlight gleaming on the golden strands of her hair lying on her chest. "Aye, I'll marry ye, but we keep to the agreement we set. Twill be negotiable after one year, and ye have no husbandly rights." Her eyes filled with unshed tears, but she held her ground.

"Agreed," he replied with a slight bow of his dark head. "However, if ye do change yere mind, I'll be willing to oblige." He smiled then, a lazy, sensual smile that did flipping things to her stomach. She backed away as if he'd actually touched her.

"That'll be a cold day in Hell," she snapped, hating her reaction to him.

She turned and walked out, stiffly, leaving him to watch her go. She might have a sore arse, but at least she'd gotten the last word and a better deal than Canton had brokered for her first marriage.

CHAPTER 1



NINE MONTHS LATER...

The snowflakes melted against the warmth of the window pane, sparkling in the morning sun as they twisted and swirled in little rivulets down the glass. It was going to be a beautiful day, just the sort of day to find the perfect fir tree and other decorations for the castle once her chores for the morning were finished.

Winter in Scotland's highlands was often cold and dreary, and the holidays, especially Hogmanay, were a welcome respite fraught with good cheer and revelry. Hogmanay, also known as Candle Night or New Year's Eve, was the main focus of the winter solstice, even more so than Christmas, and Eileen was especially looking forward to it this year. She knew from her history that the Christmas holiday had been banned in Scotland about one hundred and fifty years before, soon after the Protestant Reformation. Though the ban had only officially lasted for about fifteen years, Christmas had never regained its footing as the foremost recognized holiday.

As she worked on her chore list, she pondered the gender of the sun and moon. The sun, she decided, must be female because of its brightness and warmth, and the moon must be male because night time, to her, was dark and brooding.

And sinful.

Eileen shivered with delight at the mental images of the sinful things she and Gallagher had done under the moon's embrace last night.

Reining in her lusty thoughts, she forced her mind back to the one dark spot in her life these days, the rooms of her deceased first husband, Laird Donald Glencairn. The rooms had remained untouched since the day of his death four years ago. That had been the day her infant son, Soren, was presented to the clans as Donald's only heir to the Glencairn titles and lands. As the lady of the castle, she'd immediately had the room locked, although not out of grief.

What Donald had forced Eileen to endure in their brief one-year marriage still lingered deep in her memories, ever painful and haunting. She needed the closure of finally putting that part of her life behind her. The cleansing of that room would be the symbolic cleansing of her heart and mind of any remaining dregs of the evil that was the old laird of Glencairn.

Eileen had firmly made up her mind that her first holiday with her new husband, Gallagher Glencairn, was going to be free and clear of his father's influence. They were going to start new traditions and create memories of their own that had nothing to do with the ugly past, and one of the most precious would be welcoming Morgan and Kat MacAlister, her brother and sister-in-law, as the first visitors over their threshold for Hogmanay.

Donald had hated Hogmanay and the superstitious rituals surrounding it. He hadn't been fond of Christmas either. He'd refused to celebrate the one winter solstice they'd spent together, and the last three holiday seasons had found her preoccupied with seeking revenge on Canton.

Canton MacAlister, her despicable half-brother, had known Donald was terminally ill when he'd sold her to him. Yet even if Canton had known Donald would force someone else to breed with her for a child, because Donald himself couldn't produce an heir, she doubted it would have mattered to him. All he'd been interested in was gold. He'd been in the act of trying to sell her again after kidnapping her away from Gallagher when fate had finally caught up with him and he'd been killed. Unfortunately, Jaime McCann, her good friend, had been killed that same day. That sad shadow crossed her mind and she chased it away.

Now it was time for little four-year-old Soren to know what the holidays were supposed to be like. They had much to celebrate and be thankful for. Since Eileen was now six months pregnant, it was decided that Morgan and Kat would visit her and Gallagher during this holiday season, and hopefully next year they would be able to visit Castle McKenna in return. She could hardly wait.

Watching the snowfall was a pleasant and mind-numbing pastime, but Eileen was procrastinating to avoid the job before her, although she told herself she was just gathering strength. Her outward gaze was focused on the snowflakes throwing themselves futilely against the sun-warmed glass, but her thoughts were still pulled back into the past. There had been chatter amongst the staff of how Donald had humiliated the young female servants in his rooms, forcing them to disrobe to feed him his meals. There had been other disturbing rumors as well.

Eileen believed every word of the whispered tales because he'd done the same things to her, right up until she'd finally gotten pregnant. After that, the babe had been his first priority, and he hadn't wanted her tripping or falling down the long stairways to his room. He'd still found ways to humiliate and demean her though, both as a woman and as his wife.

The old laird had been a demented and vengeful man with one goal in his miserable life--to replace his rightful son, Gallagher,

with a new heir to his kingdom, no matter what the cost. He'd almost succeeded.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, she pushed away from her desk and made her way on quiet, slippered feet to the third floor to stand before the last door at the end of the left hallway. The room was well away from the second floor where family was usually housed, but Donald had wanted it that way. Behind his back, the servants had cursed him for being so hard to care for during his illness. He'd been asked to move to a more accessible bedroom, but he wouldn't hear of it. He'd said he expected them to earn the fair wage he was giving them. Eileen grimaced. There'd been nothing fair about the old laird.

She shivered as relentless memories once again trod across the canvas of her mind, never failing to create fear and revulsion. The truth was, she dreaded what she might find in these rooms of debauchery and pain. Some said he'd had a room attached to his bedroom, like a nursery, except this room was used to torture captured enemies, and he'd liked to watch. The servants had whispered of the screams that used to come from that room, and some who went in there never came out.

She shivered in disgust and trepidation. She'd never been past his bedroom--thank God for small mercies. And at least he hadn't physically tortured her except for the breeding bed. That had been heartbreaking and extremely painful, especially her wedding night.

Eileen shuddered at the memory. Her virginal body had been forced to accept her new husband, and he'd ruthlessly taken her maidenhead with little preparation. With nothing but blackness all around her and his weight over her, she'd been cowering and terrified. And then when she'd finally realized it wasn't even her husband, but someone forced to breed with her for a child, it had been the ultimate in degradation and humiliation. The only saving grace to her tormented mind, which hadn't come until nine months ago, had been finding out that Soren's father had been her one loyal friend in Castle McCrae, Jamie McCann.

At least Jamie had professed to love her as he'd admitted to the shame of what he'd done before he'd died. He'd done it because he'd known Donald had a total stranger planned for the heinous act. He'd also known Donald would have had the man killed and discarded when it was finished. Knowing Soren's true father had possessed a distinguished lineage and a kind heart had helped to ease some of her mental anguish.

"Ye don't have to do this, ye know," came the low, rumbling tones of Gallagher's deep voice sweeping into her ear as his strong arms folded gently around her. The embrace of his arms had become a safe place this last year, and she immediately snuggled in, relishing his strength.

"I can easily have the servants clear out and burn everything in those rooms," he said.

Eileen turned in his embrace, her breath catching, as always, at his closeness. Thank God Soren had not belonged to Donald or she would never have been able to marry Gallagher. She smiled at the memory of the marriage contract they had forged between them when he'd threatened to wage war against her. If she'd had to marry someone, she'd reasoned, at least this man had kind eyes. The marriage, however, had turned out to be a godsend because they'd fallen in love. Now they were expecting their first child in March of the new year.

"Nay, 'tis something I have to do," she replied, firm, looking up into the silvery gaze that caught hers. She reached up and placed her palm against his freshly-shaven cheek, loving the feel of his warm skin.

"I'm not so sure it's a good idea," he replied, cautious, turning his head to nibble her soft fingers.

Eileen abruptly pushed back out of his arms, her head at a quizzical angle as she lifted the key ring off her belt. "And why is that?" she asked quietly, a determined tilt to her chin.



GALLAGHER KNEW THAT LOOK. It had landed her across his lap getting her wee bottom spanked on more than one occasion, but that hadn't stopped her. When the lass made up her mind, it was made up, and damn the consequences. He sighed in defeat. "I see ye are determined to do this, so I'll go in with ye. But ye may be sorry ye didn't just let me take care of it."

Eileen slid her soft arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. "I know ye want to protect me, but I really need to do this."

"So ye say," he replied.

Gallagher had only been sixteen when his mother had died and he'd subsequently left home, but he'd known then that his father had strange secrets. Since Eileen had told him of her plans, he'd been thinking of what they might find in the rooms. He strongly suspected Donald Glencairn might have been a man of unusual appetites. Eileen had never spoken much of the things his father had forced on her, but he knew her scars went deep.

He kissed the crown of her head, thanking God Jamie had paved the way for him to marry Eileen before he'd ever come back. The beautiful woman he now held in his arms was everything to him. He wanted to protect her from anything that could hurt her, especially his father's reach from the grave. He hoped God was holding Donald accountable for the things he'd done in life because no one had been able to do that on this mortal coil.

"I'll unlock the door." She slipped out of his arms and slid the key into the heavy lock.

"Let me go in first," Gallagher insisted, pushing his way in front of her and moving her behind him. Instinctively he rested his hand on the knife attached to his hip, and his body tensed into fighting mode. For some unknown reason, the hair prickled on the back of his neck as he pushed the door slowly open. A distinct giggle sounded behind him and he stopped and turned around. He furrowed his brow to a scowl when she snorted beneath her hand as if to stop herself from guffawing out loud.

"Ye find this funny?" he asked, perplexed as to the cause of her sudden merriment.

"Aye," she responded, her eyes suddenly twinkling. "This room has been locked for four years and ye act as if the Ghillie Dhu himself is right behind the door, waiting to jump on ye."

He grabbed her arm and spun her around to land a loud and heavy spank against her backside. "I'm thinking 'tis yere wee bottom that needs a good skelpin,'" he replied silkily, landing another meaty slap, causing her to jump.

She jumped and giggled again, her face turning pink as she dodged his hand.

"Making fun of yere husband when he's trying to protect ye is certainly deserving of a good one."

"Stop, stop," she squealed, jerking out of his grasp and backing against the wall to protect the attack zone. "I'm not making fun, ye just looked so serious and...and...deadly." She broke into a peal of laughter and Gallagher finally rolled his eyes in defeat and kissed her. She was breathless when he released her.

"Remind me to give ye a good, over-my knee spanking as soon as possible," he growled in her ear. "Ye have need of it to be sure."

Her arms held tight around his neck as she breathed into his mouth. "I should only be so lucky. Ye haven't touched me like that since ye found out I was with child and ye know it."

"I..I don't want to hurt ye," he admitted, stepping back. "The babe is precious and ye shouldn't be handled roughly, even if ye do deserve it." He scowled down at her, folding his arms across his wide chest. "Just remember, I'm keeping count of yere unruly tongue, and when the time is right, I'll be making ye pay for yere foolishness."

Eileen rubbed her hands across her swollen belly. "Aye, I'm sure ye will," she replied with a smirking grin. "Now, shall we slay the Ghillie Dhu or are we going to stand here in the hallway all day?"

"That vicious fairy better stay in the woods," he replied dryly.

“But I’m betting there are dust fairies as big as ye are inside these rooms. Four years is a long time.”

The hinges creaked in protest as he pushed the big wooden door open.



PEEKING FROM BENEATH HIS ARM, Eileen stared in awe and trepidation at the dust that had collected on everything. The stale air hit her full in the face and she wrinkled her nose and stepped into the room, coughing. The dank odor of stonework and the cloying scent of musty linens and unwashed tapestries filled her sensitive nostrils. Even though the huge four-poster bed was made of cedar, it didn’t freshen the air anymore in the closed-up room.

She shivered in the semi-darkness, the light barely able to fight its way through a slit in the middle of the long draperies on the windows. Dust particles floated their way along the beam of light, leaving eerie dancing spots along the unmade bed.

Gallagher strode to the window, and like a conquering hero, yanked the heavy draperies aside, allowing the room to receive its first full rays of light in four years. Dust flew from the folds in the material setting them both to sneezing and coughing.

“This place is a mess,” he wheezed.

They both looked around with a critical eye. There were platters of rotted and dried food remains, leaving only the bones and crinkled skins of whatever animal had been served for repast. Tureens for soup sat empty, their contents evaporated long ago. Apple cores and other seed fruits lay shriveled inside their glass bowls. Plates were corroded and stained with unconsumed food-stuffs, no longer recognizable. A carafe of wine sat on the table, still sealed, out of place because it had been impervious to the decay of everything else around it.

“Look at that,” Eileen exclaimed, her eyes wide and watering. She pointed up where great spider webs draped from the top of the

bedposts to the ceilings and down to the damask of the chairs, catching and holding the dust. Clothes were strewn around the room in mass disarray, some of them women's. It looked as if a wild party had been in progress and then had just stopped, leaving everything frozen in a macabre tableau behind a sealed door.

"Ye're not cleaning this yerself," Gallagher barked through gritted teeth, snapping his gaze to hers.

When she opened her mouth he was in front of her in a flash.

"And don't argue with me or I swear I'll take ye to our rooms, bend ye over the bed, and use my belt on your stubborn backside. Is that clear?"

"I've no desire to actually clean it, Gallagher," she assured him quietly, the ghostly aspect of the room bringing on a shiver. "I just want to go through things to see if there is anything of value that might be needed elsewhere in the kingdom." She rubbed the backs of her arms. Even in her long sleeves, the damp chill seemed to creep into her bones. "Could ye make a fire, please? It's deathly cold in here."

Apparently mollified that she wasn't planning on cleaning after all, Gallagher readily made a fire while she slowly walked around to eventually stand in front of the door to the adjoining room. She shivered again. She'd always been cold in this room when Donald had summoned her to tend to him. And even after she'd left, it had taken a roaring fire and a warm blanket to return warmth to her body and mind.

So many ugly memories.

Finally, she placed her hand on the heavy, ornate door handle, her fingers trembling. What would she find in this room? All the things she'd heard came rushing into her mind. Her heart raced madly, and her breath dried in her throat. Images of racks and torture implements flashed through her head as she pictured gruesome body parts lying around and skeletal remains staring up at her. She took a deep breath and scolded herself. Of course there wouldn't be any body parts lying around, for heaven's sake. This

was the eighteenth century after all. Men were more civilized these days, weren't they? A small part of her argued against that thought. Not all men were more civilized. She started when a large, warm hand laid itself on top of her cold one.

"Let me go in first, Leenie," Gallagher said firmly, removing her hand and gently pushing her back.

"He was my husband," she gasped, although she was more than happy to let him precede her.

"And he was my father if ye want to argue territorial rights," he mocked, his eyes glinting with determination. "Ye're a hard lass to protect, ye know that? Ye keep rushing headlong into things that could hurt ye, and ye have more stubbornness and pride than the Lord should have dished out to ye."

She nodded, her long, wheat-colored locks falling gently around her face. "Aye, 'tis so. But then I'm used to taking care of myself, so it's hard to let go." She smiled faintly up at him, acknowledging the truth of his words.

"Ye don't have to anymore. I'm here, and ye can trust me in all things," he replied, tender, brushing the back of his hand against the softness of her cheek.

"I...I do trust ye, Gallagher," she replied, her voice hesitant.

"I believe ye *want* to trust me," he corrected gently, "but ye aren't there yet, not completely."

His observation stung and she lifted her chin. "That's nonsense, of course I trust ye." Her voice grew stronger, and the fierce warrior Eileen, the woman who had waged a war of vengeance against her half-brother, rose to the occasion. Her eyes flashed with a challenge. "Name one time I haven't trusted ye after we decided to stay together. Just one," she demanded.

He hesitated for a moment, then his body relaxed and he grinned. "Is that why ye use the chamber pot behind a curtain in our room?" he teased, changing tactics.

Caught off guard, Eileen flushed. A flash of understanding told her he was changing the subject because he could probably name a

dozen times she'd doubted him. Instead, he chose humor to defuse the situation. Her purple eyes flashed and she drew herself up to the chamber pot challenge in true regal bearing.

"That is not an issue of trust, but one of decency and privacy. And I'll remind ye to be a gentleman and not refer to such things," she finished delicately, clicking her tongue at him.

He laughed and bowed slightly, then swept his palm towards the door. "I'm guessing ye're ready for this then?" he mocked, watching her closely.

She took a deep breath and gave a firm nod. "As ready as I'll ever be." Her voice shook, but she held on to her resolve as Gallagher once again led the way into the room she'd never seen, yet had featured in so many of her nightmares.

Much to her astonishment, the room was nothing like she'd imagined. Yes, there were cobwebs and dust everywhere, but other than that the room was well-maintained. There were no body parts lying around rotting, no blood stains splattered on the walls. There was nothing but an unusual assortment of furniture. There was no stench to the room other than the usual closed-up air and dank stonework odors, but even that was minimal with the sun shining brightly through the open tapestries. Her body sagged, and she sighed with relief. In fact, it looked more like a room to entertain visitors than a torture chamber. Her curious gaze was drawn to the painting of a naked woman with her back to the room, hanging over the fireplace. Although it had her blushing, she supposed it was a man's taste, after all. Somewhat puzzled she turned to Gallagher only to note his red face and his attempts to smother what seemed suspiciously like laughter.

"I must say, those padded benches don't look very comfortable if this is supposed to be a room for company," she remarked, narrowing her eyes at his amusement. She walked over to a sofa covered in a rich red damask, layered in dust. She patted the cushion and wiped away some of the dust as she tested the firmness. "This appears to be much more comfortable."

It was when she turned back to Gallagher that she saw the wall lined with all sizes of butter-churning paddles, horse-whips, crops, canes, and other things she didn't recognize. She harrumphed. "If that was his idea of art, he had very strange taste."

Gallagher choked back a laugh. "Very strange indeed, lass."

A small table near one of the benches held a basket with some sort of dried vegetables in it like old roots. "What manner of food is this?" she asked, puzzled yet again. She leaned over to sniff. "It smells like ginger," she remarked. "Old and faint, to be sure, but still ginger. Why would that be in here? It's a spice to be used in the kitchen."

"I believe it might have other uses," Gallagher replied helpfully, his eyes beaming with mirth. "Perhaps I'll have reason to show ye one day."

She lifted her eyebrow at his curious comment. "You mean medicinal uses?"

"Quite possibly, among other things."

Intrigued by the jewel-inlaid trunk near the fireplace, she ignored his vague reply. It wasn't until she opened the trunk and saw an assortment of ropes, handcuffs, ribbons, and other things that she suddenly understood. She turned to Gallagher, her face suffusing with blood. "God's bones! He was a perverted man, wasn't he?"

"I take it from your reaction that ye've never been in this room before?" he asked, suppressing a grin that kept tickling his dimples.

Eileen shook her head. "No, but I've heard rumors from the servants. I was expecting something awful, like a torture chamber," she whispered, her purplish eyes huge. "The servants said they'd heard screaming coming from the room, and some who had gone in never come back out."

"The screaming could be attributed to the ginger root, but not disappearing people," he remarked, sauntering to the fireplace.

Eileen's forehead screwed up in wrinkles. "How the devil does ginger root make someone scream?"

He turned back for a moment, his eyes twinkling. "When it's lodged up one's arse and that arse is being spanked with a paddle, belt, or any of those other implements hanging on the wall, I believe the tendency is to scream," he explained. "'Tis pleasure or punishment, depending on the receiver."

Her mouth agape in astonishment, Eileen was at a loss for words. How did one get ginger root lodged up their arse?

"I'm guessing this corridor leads to other parts of the castle where people could come and go without being seen," Gallagher went on, pushing the panel in as the opposite side swung out, causing the scrape marks he'd noted near the fireplace.

Eileen was still trying to process the ginger root when he turned back around.

"This, my sweet, is a pleasure room. I don't even want to know what sorts of desires my father indulged in during his stronger years, but this is certainly a room designed for pleasure." He held up some handcuffs he'd taken from the chest and what looked like a blindfold.

Eileen shrank back from it, shuddering. He didn't seem to notice as he inspected the fur lining with his curious fingers. Then he looked up at her with a devilish smile.

"And of course, for pain, but not the kind ye have been imagining. If ye heard things yereself during yere marriage then perhaps he still enjoyed watching, even if he couldn't participate."

Most likely his father had wanted Eileen for himself and, except for the breeding bed, he hadn't wanted another man to touch her. Jealousy clawed at his breast, and he was fiercely glad that Donald had never been able to bed her.

Eileen's hands flew to her red cheeks, her heart beating a rapid tattoo. "Oh, that's disgusting," she snapped.

"Well, I intend to have this room thoroughly cleaned," he announced. "Then perhaps we shall try out some of these things if ye're willing."

Eileen's mouth dropped open again and she stared at him,

confused. Was this it? Was this where Gallagher reverted to being like his father? She'd thought he was completely different. Had she been mistaken? Her slender frame shuddered. "But...I thought ye were nothing like your father," she threw back at him, her eyes wide with her disappointment and revulsion.

Seeming to realize how stressed she was, he crossed the room and took her hands in his, his thumbs circling the soft skin. "I am nothing like my father," he growled, his eyes fierce. "However, I am like all men in that I like to pleasure a woman and be pleased by her. The things in this room are meant to be used to enjoy one another in different ways." His eyes softened then, his lips ghosting a coaxing kiss across her mouth. Then he rested his forehead against hers. "It will be fun to experiment, won't it? I know ye've certainly enjoyed some of the experiments we've done so far." The steel silver of his eyes promised sensual enjoyment as his eyelids fell to half-mast. "I know I love to experiment with ye," he whispered hoarsely. His mouth moved to the side of her neck, nibbling on the soft skin, and she gasped.