

The Secret Chapter 1

Prologue

England, 1181

They became friends before they were old enough to understand they were supposed to hate each other.

The two little girls met at the annual summer festival held on the border between Scotland and England. It was Lady Judith Hampton's first experience attending the Scottish games, her first real outing away from her isolated home in the west of England as well, and she was so overwhelmed by the sheer adventure of it all, she could barely keep her eyes closed during her mandatory afternoon naps. There was so much to see and do, and for a curious four-year-old, a good deal of mischief to get into, too.

Frances Catherine Kirkcaldy had already gotten herself into mischief. Her papa had given her a good swat on her backside to make her sorry she'd misbehaved, then carried her over his shoulder like a sack of feed all the way across the wide field. He made her sit on a smooth-topped rock, far away from the singing and the dancing, and ordered her to stay put until he was good and ready to come back and fetch her. She would use the quiet time alone, he commanded, to contemplate her sins.

Since Frances Catherine didn't have the faintest idea what the word "contemplate" meant, she decided she didn't have to obey that order. It was just as well, for her mind was already completely full, worrying about the fat, stinging bee buzzing circles around her head.

Judith had seen the father punish his daughter. She felt sorry for the funny-looking, freckle-faced little girl. She knew she surely would have cried if her uncle Herbert had smacked her bottom, but the redheaded girl hadn't even grimaced when her papa smacked her.

She decided to talk to the girl. She waited until her father had quit wagging his finger at his daughter and had strutted back across the field, then picked up the hem of her skirt and ran the long way around to sneak up on the rock from behind.

"My papa never would have smacked me," Judith boasted by way of introduction.

Frances Catherine didn't turn her head to see who was talking to her. She didn't dare take her gaze away from the bee now lingering on the rock next to her left knee.

Judith wasn't daunted by her silence. "My papa's dead," she announced. "Since before I was even borned."

"Then how would you be knowing if he would smack you or not?"

Judith lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I just know he wouldn't," she answered. "You talk funny, like you've got something trapped in your throat. Do you?"

"No," Frances Catherine answered. "You talk funny, too."

"Why won't you look at me?"

"I can't."

"Why can't you?" Judith asked. She twisted the hem of her pink gown into a wrinkle while she waited for an answer.

"I have to watch the bee," Frances Catherine answered. "It wants to sting me. I have to be ready to swat it away."

Judith leaned closer. She spotted the bee flittering around the girl's left foot. "Why don't you swat it away now?" she asked in a whisper.

"I'm afraid to," Frances Catherine answered. "I might miss. Then it would get me for certain."

Judith frowned over that dilemma a long minute. "Do you want me to swat it for you?"

"Would you want to?"

"Maybe I would," she answered. "What's your name?" she asked then, stalling for time while she gathered her courage to go after the bee.

"Frances Catherine. What's yours?"

"Judith. How come you have two full names? I've never heard of anyone having more than one."

"Everybody always asks me that," Frances Catherine said. She let out a dramatic sigh. "Frances was my mama's name. She died birthing me. Catherine's my grandmama's name, and she died just the same way. They couldn't be buried in the sacred ground 'cause the Church said they weren't clean. Papa's hoping I'll start in behaving and then I'll get to Heaven, and when God hears my two names, he'll remember Mama and Grandma."

"Why did the Church say they weren't clean?"

"'Cause they were birthing when they died," Frances Catherine explained. "Don't you know anything, girl?"

"I know some things."

"I know just about everything," Frances Catherine boasted. "Leastways, papa says I surely think I do. I even know how babies get into the mamas' stomachs. Want to hear?"

"Oh, yes."

"Once they get married, the papa spits into his goblet of wine and then he makes the mama take a big drink. As soon as she swallows, she's got a baby in her stomach."

Judith made a grimace over that thrillingly disgusting information. She was going to beg her friend to tell her more when Frances Catherine suddenly let out a loud whimper. Judith leaned closer. Then she let out a whimper, too. The bee had settled on the tip of her friend's shoe. The longer Judith stared at it, the bigger it seemed to grow.

The talk about birthing was immediately put aside. "Are you going to swat it away?" Frances Catherine asked.

"I'm getting ready to."

"Are you afraid?"

"No," Judith lied. "I'm not afraid of anything. I didn't think you were, either."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because you didn't cry when your papa smacked you," Judith explained.

"That's because he didn't smack me hard," Frances Catherine explained. "Papa never does. It pains him more than me, too. Leastways, that's what Gavin and Kevin say. Papa's got his hands full with me, they say, and ruining me good for some pitiful man I got to marry when I'm all grown up because papa pampers me."

"Who are Gavin and Kevin?"

"Half my brothers," Frances Catherine explained. "Papa's their papa, too, but they had a different mama. She died."

"Did she die birthing them?"

"No."

"Then why'd she die?"

"She just got tuckered out," Frances Catherine explained. "Papa told me so. I'm closing my eyes real tight now if you want to swat the bee."

Because Judith was so determined to impress her new friend, she didn't think about the consequences any longer. She reached out to slap the bee, but as soon as she felt

the flutter of its wings against the palm of her hand, it tickled her so, she instinctively closed her fingers.

Then she started wailing. Frances Catherine bounded off the rock to help the only way she knew how. She started wailing, too.

Judith ran around and around the rock, screaming so vigorously she could barely catch her breath. Her friend chased after her, screaming just as fiercely, though in sympathy and fear rather than in pain.

Frances Catherine's papa came running across the field. He caught hold of his daughter first, and when she'd stammered out her problem, he chased down Judith.

In a matter of minutes the two little girls had been properly soothed. The stinger had been removed from the palm of Judith's hand and cool wet mud applied. Her friend's papa gently mopped away her tears with the edge of his woolen plaid. He sat on the punishment rock now, with his daughter cuddled up on one side of his lap and Judith cuddled up on the other.

She'd never had anyone make such a fuss over her before. Judith turned quite shy because of all the attention she was getting. She didn't turn away from the comfort, though, and in fact edged a little closer to get even more.

"You two are a sorry pair," the papa announced when they'd quit their hiccuping and could hear him. "Screaming louder than the trumpets sounding the caber toss, you were, and running in circles like hens with your heads cut off."

Judith didn't know if the papa was angry or not. His voice had been gruff, but he wasn't frowning. Frances Catherine giggled. Judith decided her friend's papa must have been jesting after all.

"It was paining her considerably, Papa," Frances Catherine announced.

"I'm certain it did pain her," he agreed. He turned his gaze to Judith and caught her staring up at him. "You're a brave little lass to help my daughter," he praised. "But if there be a next time, try not to catch the bee. All right?"

Judith solemnly nodded.

He patted her arm. "You're a pretty little thing," he remarked. "What's your name, child?"

"Her name's Judith, Papa, and she's my friend. Can she have her supper with us?"

"Well now, that depends on her parents," her father replied.

"Her papa's dead," Frances Catherine announced. "Isn't that pitiful, Papa?"

"It surely is," he agreed. The corners of his eyes crinkled up, but he didn't smile. "She's got the prettiest blue eyes I've ever seen, though."

"Don't I have the prettiest eyes you've ever seen, too, Papa?"

"Aye, you do, Frances Catherine. You've got the prettiest brown eyes I've ever seen. You surely do."

Frances Catherine was so pleased with her father's praise, she scrunched up her shoulders and giggled again.

"Her papa died before she was even borned," Frances Catherine told him then. She'd only just remembered that information and was certain her papa would want to hear it.

He nodded, then said, "Now daughter, I want you to keep real quiet while I talk to your friend."

"Yes, Papa."

He turned his attention back to Judith. He found it a little unnerving, the way she was intently staring up at him. She was such a serious little thing, too serious for someone of her young age.

"How old are you, Judith?"

She held up four fingers.

"Papa, do you see? She's just my age."

"No, Frances Catherine, she isn't just your age. Judith's four in years and you're already five. Remember?"

"I remember, Papa."

He smiled at his daughter, then once again tried to talk to Judith. "You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

"She's not afraid of anything. She told me so."

"Hush, daughter. I want to hear your friend speak a word or two. Judith, is your mama here?"

She shook her head. She started twisting a lock of her white-blond hair around and around her finger in a nervous gesture, yet kept her gaze fully directed on the papa. The man's face was covered with red whiskers, and when he spoke, the bristles wiggled. She wished she could touch the beard to find out what it felt like.

"Judith? Is your mama here?" the papa repeated.

"No, Mama stays with Uncle Tekel. They don't know I'm here. It's going to be a secret, and if I tell, I won't ever be able to come back to the festival. Aunt Millicent told me so."

Once she started talking, she wanted to tell everything she knew. "Uncle Tekel says he's just like my papa, but he's only mama's brother and I never sit on his lap. I wouldn't want to if I could, but I can't so it doesn't matter, does it?"

Frances Catherine's father was having difficulty following the explanation, but his daughter wasn't having any trouble at all. She was filled with curiosity, too. "Why can't you if you wanted to?" she asked.

"He got his legs broke."

Frances Catherine let out a gasp. "Papa, isn't that pitiful?"

Her father let out a long sigh. The conversation was getting away from him. "Aye, it surely is," he agreed. "Now, Judith, if your mother's at home, how did you get here?"

"With Mama's sister," Judith answered. "I used to live with Aunt Millicent and Uncle Herbert all the time, but Mama won't let me anymore."

"Cause why?" Frances Catherine asked.

"Cause Mama heard me call Uncle Herbert 'Papa.' She was so fuming mad, she gave me a smack on the top of my head. Then Uncle Tekel told me I had to live with him and Mama for half the year long so I'd know who I belonged to, and my aunt Millicent and uncle Herbert would just have to do without me. That's what Tekel said. Mama didn't want me to go away even half the year, but Tekel hadn't started his after-supper drinking yet, so she knew he would remember what he told her. He always remembers when he isn't drunk. Mama was fuming mad again."

"Was your mama fuming mad because she was going to miss you half the year?" Frances Catherine asked.

"No," Judith whispered. "Mama says I'm a bother."

"Then why didn't she want you to go?"

"She doesn't like Uncle Herbert," Judith answered. "That's why she was being contrary."

"Why doesn't she like him?" Frances Catherine wanted to know.

"Cause he's related to the damn Scots," Judith answered, repeating what she'd heard time and time again. "Mama says I shouldn't even want to talk to the damn Scots."

"Papa, am I damn Scots?"

"You most certainly are not."

"Am I?" Judith asked, her worry obvious in her voice.

"You're English, Judith," her friend's papa patiently explained.

"Am I damn English?"

Her friend's papa was clearly exasperated. "Nobody's damn anything," he announced. He started to say more, then suddenly burst into laughter. His big belly jiggled with his amusement. "I'd best remember not to say anything in front of you two little tarts I don't want repeated."

"Cause why, Papa?"

"Never you mind," he answered.

He stood up, holding his daughter in one arm and Judith in the other. Both little girls let out squeals of delight when he pretended he was going to drop them.

"We'd best find your aunt and uncle before they start in worrying, Judith. Point me the way to your tent, lass."

Judith immediately became frightened inside. She couldn't remember where the tent was located. Since she didn't know her colors yet, she couldn't even give Frances Catherine's papa a description.

She tried not to cry. She bowed her head and whispered, "I don't remember."

She tensed in anticipation of his anger. She thought he'd shout at her for being ignorant, the way her uncle Tekel always did whenever he was drunk and pricked about something she'd inadvertently done that displeased him.

Frances Catherine's papa didn't get angry, though. She peeked up to look at him and caught his smile. Her anxiety completely vanished when he told her to quit her fretting. He'd find her relatives soon enough, he promised.

"Will they miss you if you don't come back?" Frances Catherine asked.

Judith nodded. "Uncle Herbert and Aunt Millicent would cry," she told her new friend. "Sometimes I wish they were my mama and papa. I do."

"Cause why?"

Judith lifted her shoulders in a shrug. She didn't know how to explain why.

"Well now, there's nothing wrong with wishing," Frances Catherine's papa said.

Judith was so happy to have his approval, she put her head down on his shoulder. His warm plaid felt rough against her cheek. He smelled so nice, too, like the outdoors.

She thought he was the most wonderful papa in the whole world. Since he wasn't looking down at her now, she decided to appease her curiosity. She reached up to touch his beard. The bristles tickled and she let out a giggle over that notice.

"Papa, do you like my new friend?" Frances Catherine asked when they were halfway across the field.

"I surely do."

"Can I keep her?"

"For the love of... No, you can't keep her. She isn't a puppy. You can be her friend, though," he hastily added before his daughter could argue with him.

"Forever, papa?"

She'd asked her father that question, but Judith answered her. "Forever," she shyly whispered.

Frances Catherine reached across her father's chest to take hold of Judith's hand. "Forever," she pledged.

And so it began.

From that moment on, the two little girls became inseparable. The festival lasted three full weeks, with various clans coming and going, and the championship games were always scheduled on the last Sunday of the month.

Judith and Frances Catherine were oblivious to the competition, however. They were too busy telling each other all their secrets.

It was a perfect friendship. Frances Catherine had finally found someone who wanted to listen to what she had to say, and Judith had finally found someone who wanted to talk to her.

The two of them were a trial of patience for their relatives, however. Frances Catherine started using the word "damn" in every other sentence, and Judith was using the word "pitiful" just as often. One afternoon, while they were supposed to be napping, they cut each other's hair. When Aunt Millicent got a good look at the lopsided mess they'd made, she started in screeching and didn't let up until she'd slapped white caps on their heads to hide the sight. She was furious with Uncle Herbert, too, because he was supposed to be keeping his eye on the girls, and instead of being the least contrite over the catastrophe, he was laughing like a loon. She ordered her husband to take the imps across the field and set them on the punishment rock to think about their shameful behavior.

The girls did do a lot of thinking, but it wasn't about their behavior. Frances Catherine had come up with the wonderful idea that Judith should also have two full names so

they'd be just alike. It took them a long while to settle on the name, Elizabeth, but once it was decided, Judith became Judith Elizabeth, and refused to answer anyone's summons unless they used both her names when they called to her.

A full year passed, and yet when they were reunited, it was as though they had only been apart an hour or two. Frances Catherine couldn't wait to get Judith alone, because she'd found another amazing fact about birthings. A woman didn't have to be married to have a baby after all. She knew that for certain because one of the Kirkcaldy women had grown a baby in her stomach and she wasn't wed. Some of the old women in the clan had thrown stones at the poor lass, too, Frances Catherine whispered, and her papa had made them stop.

"Did they throw stones at the man who spit in his drink?" Judith wanted to know.

Frances Catherine shook her head. "The woman wouldn't tell who'd done it," she replied.

The lesson was easy to understand, Frances Catherine continued. It had been proven that if a fully grown woman drank out of any man's goblet of wine, she would surely get a baby in her stomach.

She made Judith promise she would never do such a thing. Judith made Frances Catherine give her the same promise.

The growing years blurred together in Judith's memory, and the awareness of the hatred that existed between the Scots and the English was slow to penetrate her mind. She guessed she'd always known her mother and her uncle Tekel despised the Scots, but she believed it was because they didn't know any better.

Ignorance often bred contempt, didn't it? At least that's what Uncle Herbert said. She believed everything he told her. He was such a kind, loving man, and when Judith suggested that Tekel and her mother had never spent any time with a Scottish family and that was why they didn't realize what fine, good-hearted people they were, her uncle Herbert kissed her on her forehead and told her perhaps that was true.

Judith could tell from the sadness in his eyes that he was only agreeing with her to please her, and to protect her, too, from her mother's unreasonable prejudice.

When she was eleven years old and on her way to the festival, she found out the true reason her mother hated the Scots. She was married to one.

Chapter 1

Scotland, 1200

Iain Maitland was a mean son of a bitch when he was riled.

He was riled now. The black mood came over him the minute his brother Patrick told him about the promise he'd given his sweet wife, Frances Catherine.

If Patrick had wanted to surprise his brother, he'd certainly accomplished that goal. His explanation had rendered Iain speechless.

The condition didn't last long. Anger quickly took over. In truth, the ridiculous promise his brother had given his wife wasn't nearly as infuriating to Iain as the fact that Patrick had called the council together to render their official opinion on the matter. Iain would have stopped his brother from involving the elders in what he considered to be a private, family matter, but he'd been away from the holding at the time, hunting down the Maclean bastards who'd waylaid three unseasoned Maitland warriors, and when he'd returned home, weary but victorious, the deed had already been done.

Leave it to Patrick to take a simple issue and complicate the hell out of it. It was apparent he hadn't considered any of the ramifications of his rash behavior. Iain, as the newly appointed laird over the clan, would now be expected to put his duties to his immediate family aside, his loyalty, too, and act solely as the council's advisor. He wasn't about to meet those expectations, of course. He would stand beside his brother no matter how much opposition came from the elders. He wouldn't allow Patrick to be punished, either. And if need be, he was fully prepared to fight.

Iain didn't share his decision with his brother for the simple reason that he wanted Patrick to suffer the uncertainty awhile longer. If the ordeal proved painful enough, perhaps Patrick would finally learn to use a little restraint.

The council of five had already gathered in the great hall to hear Patrick's petition when Iain finished his duties and made his way up the hill. Patrick was waiting in the center of the courtyard. He looked ready to go into battle. His legs were braced apart, his hands were in fists at his sides, and the scowl on his face was as fierce as the thunderstorm brewing overhead.

Iain wasn't at all impressed with his brother's bluster. He shoved Patrick out of his path when he tried to block his way, and continued on toward the steps to the keep. "Iain," Patrick called out. "I ask you now, for I would know your position before we go inside. Do you stand beside me on this issue or against me?"

Iain stopped, then slowly turned around to look at his brother. The expression on his face showed his anger. His voice was deceptively mild, however, when he spoke. "And I would know, Patrick, if you deliberately try to provoke me by asking such a question?"

Patrick immediately relaxed his stance. "I meant no insult, but you're new as laird and still to be tested in such a personal way by our council. I hadn't realized until just now the awkward position I've put you in."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No," Patrick answered with a grin. He walked over to his brother. "I know you didn't want me to involve the council, especially now when you're battling to get them interested in forming an alliance with the Dunbars against the Macleans, but Frances Catherine was determined to gain their blessing. She wants her friend to be welcomed here."

Iain didn't remark on that explanation.

Patrick pressed on. "I also realize you don't understand my reasons for giving my wife such a promise, but someday, when you've met the right woman, all of this will make perfectly good sense to you."

Iain shook his head in exasperation. "Honest to God, Patrick, I'll never understand. There isn't any such thing as the right woman. One's just as good as another."

Patrick laughed. "I used to believe that, too, until I met Frances Catherine."

"You're talking like a woman," Iain said.

Patrick wasn't insulted by his brother's comment. He knew Iain couldn't understand the love he felt for his wife, but God willing, one day he would find someone to give his heart to. When that day arrived, he was going to thoroughly enjoy reminding Iain of this callous attitude.

"Duncan indicated they might want to question my wife," Patrick said then, turning the topic back to his main concern. "Do you think the elder was jesting with me?"

Iain didn't turn around when he gave his answer. "None of the council members ever jest, Patrick. You know that as well as I."

"Damn it, I'm responsible for this."

"Aye, you are."

Patrick ignored his brother's quick agreement. "I won't let the council intimidate Frances Catherine."

Iain let out a sigh. "I won't, either," he promised.

Patrick was so startled by that agreement, he lost his frown. "They think they'll be able to get me to change my mind," he said. "You'd better understand that nothing any of them do will make a difference. I've given Frances Catherine my word, and I mean to keep it. God's truth, Iain, I'd walk through the fires of Hell for my wife."

Iain turned and smiled at his brother. "A simple walk into the great hall will suffice for now," he drawled out. "Let's get it done."

Patrick nodded, then hurried ahead of his brother to open one of the double doors.

"A word of advice, Patrick," Iain said. "Leave your anger outside these doors. If they see how rattled you are, they'll go for your throat. Simply state your reasons in a calm voice. Let logic guide your thoughts, not emotion."

"And then?"

"I'll do the rest."

The door closed on that promise.

Ten minutes later the council sent a messenger to fetch Frances Catherine. Young Sean was given the duty. He found Patrick's wife sitting by the fire in her cottage and immediately explained she was to come to the keep and wait outside the doors for her husband to escort her inside.

Frances Catherine's heart started pounding. Patrick had told her there was a possibility she would be called before the council, but she hadn't believed him. It was unheard of for a woman to speak her mind directly to the council or the laird in any official capacity. And she wasn't consoled in the least by the fact that the new laird was her husband's older brother. No, that relationship didn't signify anything at all.

Her mind raced from one frightening thought to another, and in no time she'd worked herself into a fine state of agitation. The council obviously thought she was daft. Yes, she decided. By now Patrick had told them all about the promise he'd given her, and that was the reason she was being called to the great hall to give her own explanation. They wanted to make certain she really had lost her mind before damning her to isolation for the remainder of her days.

Her only hope rested in the hands of the laird. Frances Catherine didn't know Iain Maitland well. She doubted she'd exchanged more than fifty words with the warrior in the two years she'd been married to his younger brother, but Patrick had assured her Iain was an honorable man. He would see the fairness in her request.

She was going to have to get past the council first. Since it was an official meeting, four of the elders wouldn't speak directly to her. They would give their questions to their own leader, Graham, and he alone would have to suffer the indignity of conversing with her. She was a woman, after all, and an outsider, for she had been born and raised on the border and not the glorious Highlands. Frances Catherine was actually relieved that Graham would be the only one to question her, since she found him to be the least frightening of the elders. The old warrior was a soft-spoken man who was greatly admired by his clan. He'd been their laird for over fifteen years and

had retired from that position of power just three months past. Graham wouldn't terrify her, at least not deliberately, but he'd use every other bit of trickery he possessed to get her to release Patrick from his promise.

She made a quick sign of the cross, and then prayed her way up the steep hill to the keep. She reminded herself she could get through this ordeal. No matter what, she wouldn't back down. Patrick Maitland had given her his promise the day before she agreed to marry him, and by God, he was going to see it carried through.

A precious life depended upon it.

Frances Catherine reached the top step of the keep and stood there waiting. Several women passed by the courtyard, curious at the sight of a woman lingering on the laird's doorstep. Frances Catherine didn't invite conversation. She kept her face averted, praying all the while that no one would call out to her. She didn't want the women in the clan to know what was going on until it was finished. They would surely start in making trouble then, but it would be too late to matter.

She didn't think she could bear the wait much longer. Agnes Kerry, the old biddy with her nose always up in the air because her pretty daughter was surely going to become the laird's bride, had already made two circles around the courtyard in an attempt to find out what was going on, and a few of her cohorts were also edging closer now.

Frances Catherine straightened the pleats of her plaid over her swollen stomach, noticed how her hands were shaking, and immediately tried to stop the telling show of fear. She let out a loud sigh. She wasn't usually feeling so timid and unsure of herself, but since she'd found out she was carrying, her behavior had undergone a dramatic change. She was terribly emotional now and cried over the most inconsequential things. Feeling big, awkward, and as fat as a well-fed mare didn't help her disposition, either. She was almost seven months into her confinement, and the weight of the babe slowed her movements considerably. Her thoughts weren't affected, though. They rushed through her mind like a whirlwind as she tried to guess what questions Graham would ask.

The door finally squeaked open and Patrick stepped outside. She was so relieved to see him, she almost burst into tears. He was frowning, but as soon as he saw how pale and worried she looked, he forced a smile. He took hold of her hand, gave it a little squeeze, and then winked at her. The unusual show of affection during daylight hours felt as soothing to her as one of his nightly back rubs.

"Oh, Patrick," she blurted out. "I'm so sorry to be putting you through this embarrassment."

"Does that mean you won't hold me to my promise?" he asked her in that deep rich voice she loved so much.

"No."

Her bluntness made him laugh. "I didn't think so."

She wasn't in the mood to be teased. She only wanted to concentrate on the ordeal ahead of her. "Is he inside yet?" she asked in a bare whisper.

Patrick knew who she was talking about, of course. Frances Catherine had a most unreasonable fear of his brother. He thought it might be because Iain was laird over the entire clan. The number of warriors alone reached well over three hundred. His powerful position would make him unapproachable to a woman, Patrick supposed.

"Please answer me," she pleaded.

"Yes, love, Iain's inside."

"Then he knows about the promise?" It was a foolish question to ask. She realized that fact almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth. "Oh heavens, of course he knows. Is he angry with us?"

"Sweetheart, everything's going to be all right," he promised. He tried to pull her through the open doorway. She resisted the gentle tug.

"But the council, Patrick," she rushed out. "How did they react to your explanation?"

"They're still sputtering."

"Oh, God." She went completely rigid on him.

He realized he shouldn't have been so honest with her. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "It's all going to work out," he whispered in a soothing voice. "You'll see. If I have to walk to England to fetch your friend, I'll do it. You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes, I trust you. I wouldn't have married you if I didn't trust you completely. Oh, Patrick, you do understand how important this is to me?"

He kissed the top of her forehead before answering. "Yes, I know. Will you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"When your friend comes here, you'll laugh again?"

She smiled. "I promise," she whispered. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. They stood holding on to each other a long minute. He was trying to give her time to regain her composure. She was trying to remember the correct words to use when she was asked to give her reasons to the council.

A woman hurrying past with a basketful of laundry paused to smile over the loving couple.

Patrick and Frances Catherine did make a handsome pair. He was as dark as she was fair. Both were tall, though Patrick reached a full six feet in height, and the top of his wife's head barely reached his chin. It was only when Patrick stood next to his older brother that he appeared small, for the laird was several inches taller. Patrick was certainly every bit as wide through the shoulders, though, and had the same shade of black-brown hair. His eyes were a darker shade of gray than Iain's were, and he didn't have nearly the number of battle scars to mar his handsome profile.

Frances Catherine was as slight as her husband was muscular. She had pretty brown eyes that Patrick swore sparkled gold when she laughed. Her hair was her treasure, though. It was waist length, deep auburn in color, with nary a bit of curl to take away from the glorious shine.

Patrick had been drawn first to her appearance, for he was a man with a lusty appetite and she was a fair prize for the taking, but it was her wonderful wit that had snared him. She continually enchanted him. She had such a dramatic way of looking at life, and there was such a burning passion inside her to experience each new adventure. She never gave anything half measure, including the way she loved and pampered him.

Patrick felt her shiver in his arms and decided it was high time they went inside and get the ordeal finished so she could quit fretting. "Come inside now, love. They're waiting for us."

She took a deep breath, pulled away from him, and walked inside. He hurried forward to walk by her side.

They'd reached the steps leading down into the great hall when she suddenly leaned into her husband's side and whispered, "Your cousin Steven said that when Iain gets angry, his scowl can make a person's heart stop beating. We really must try not to make him angry, Patrick. All right?"

Because she sounded so serious and so worried, Patrick didn't laugh, but he couldn't quite contain his exasperation. "Frances Catherine, we really are going to have to do something about this unreasonable fear of yours. My brother—"

She grabbed hold of his arm. "We'll do something about it later," she rushed out. "Just promise me now."

"All right," he agreed with a sigh. "We won't make Iain angry."

She immediately relaxed her grip on his arm. Patrick had to shake his head over her behavior. He decided that just as soon as she was feeling better, he would find a way

to help her get over this fear. He wouldn't wait to have a talk with Steven, however. No, he was going to take his cousin aside at the first possible opportunity and demand he quit telling the women such outrageous stories.

Iain was an easy subject for the exaggerated tales. He rarely spoke to any of the women, except on those rare occasions when as laird he was forced to give specific instructions, and his hard manner was often mistaken for anger. Steven knew most of the women were frightened of Iain, and he found it vastly amusing to stir up that fear every now and again.

His brother was unknowingly frightening Frances Catherine now. He stood alone in front of the hearth, facing them, with his arms folded across his massive chest. The stance was casual, the look in his piercing gray eyes anything but. The frown he wore made the fire in the grate behind him seem cold in comparison.

Frances Catherine had just started down the steps when she looked across the room and caught Iain's frown. She promptly lost her footing. Patrick reached out to grab her just in the nick of time.

Iain noticed her fear. He assumed she was afraid of the council. He turned to his left, where the elders were seated, and motioned for Graham to begin. The sooner the inevitable fight was over, the sooner his sister-in-law could calm her fears.

The elders were all staring at her. In size, the five men resembled stair steps. The oldest, Vincent, was also the shortest. He sat at the opposite end of the line from Graham, their spokesman. Duncan, Gelfrid, and Owen took up the spaces in between.

Various amounts of gray streaked through the hair of each elder, and they had enough scars amongst them to cover the stone walls of the keep. Frances Catherine concentrated on Graham. The leader had deep lines around the corners of his eyes, and she wanted to believe he'd laughed those lines there over the years. That thought made it easier to imagine he would be understanding about her problem.

"Your husband has just shared an astonishing story with us, Frances Catherine," Graham began. " 'Tis the truth we're hard pressed to believe it."

The leader nodded to emphasize the last of his remarks, then paused. She wasn't certain if she was supposed to speak now or wait. She looked up at Patrick, received his encouraging nod, and then said, "My husband would only speak the truth."

The four other council members frowned in unison. Graham smiled. In a gentle tone of voice he asked, "Will you give us your reasons for demanding this promise be kept?"

Frances Catherine reacted as though Graham had shouted at her. She knew he'd used the word "demand" as a deliberate insult. "I'm a woman and would never demand

anything from my husband. I would only ask, and now I ask that Patrick's word be honored."

"Very well," Graham conceded, his voice still smooth. "You don't demand, you ask. Now I would like for you to explain to this council your reasons for making such an outrageous request."

Frances Catherine stiffened. Outrageous indeed. She took a deep, calming breath. "Before I would agree to marry Patrick, I asked him to promise me that he would bring my dearest friend, Lady Judith Elizabeth, to me if and when I found I was expecting a child. My confinement is nearly over now. Patrick agreed to this request, and we would both like it carried out as soon as possible."

The look on Graham's face indicated he wasn't at all happy with her explanation. He cleared his throat and said, "Lady Judith Elizabeth is English, but that doesn't matter to you?"

"Nay, my lord, it doesn't matter at all."

"Do you believe that keeping this promise is more important than the disruption she'll cause? You would deliberately upset our lives, lass?"

Frances Catherine shook her head. "I would not deliberately do such a thing."

Graham looked relieved. She guessed he believed he now had a way to manipulate her into dropping the matter. His next remarks confirmed that suspicion.

"I'm pleased to hear this, Frances Catherine." He paused to nod to his four companions. "I never believed for one minute our lass would cause such an uproar. Now she'll forget this nonsense—"

She didn't dare let him finish. "Lady Judith Elizabeth won't cause any disruption."

Graham's shoulders slumped. Changing Frances Catherine's mind wasn't turning out to be such an easy task after all. He was frowning when he turned back to her. "Now lass, the English have never been welcomed here," he announced. "This woman would have to share her meals with us—"

A fist slammed down on the tabletop. The warrior named Gelfrid was responsible for that show of temper. Gelfrid stared up at Graham and said in a low, raspy voice, "Patrick's woman shames the Maitland name by asking this."

Tears filled Frances Catherine's eyes. She could feel herself beginning to panic inside. She couldn't think of a logical argument to give in response to Gelfrid's statement.

Patrick moved to stand in front of his wife. His voice shook with anger when he spoke to the council member. "Gelfrid, you may show me your displeasure, but you will not raise your voice in front of my wife."

Frances Catherine peeked around her husband to see Gelfrid's reaction to that command. The elder nodded. Then Graham waved his hand for silence.

Vincent, the eldest of the group, ignored the signal. "I've never heard tell of a woman having two full names before Frances Catherine came to us. I thought it was an oddity the border people shared. Now I'm hearing about another woman having two full names. What do you make of it, Graham?"

The leader let out a sigh. Vincent's mind tended to stray every now and again. It was an irritant everyone put up with. "I don't know what to make of it," Graham replied. "But that isn't the issue now."

He turned his attention back to Frances Catherine. "I ask you again if you would willingly disrupt our lives," he repeated.

Before giving her answer, she moved to stand next to Patrick rather than behind him, so she wouldn't appear to be a coward. "I don't know why you would think Lady Judith Elizabeth would cause any disruption. She's a kind, gentle woman."

Graham closed his eyes. There was a thread of amusement in his voice when he finally spoke again. "Frances Catherine, we don't particularly like the English. Surely you've noticed that in the years you've been with us."

"She was raised on the border," Gelfrid reminded his leader. The warrior scratched his whiskered jaw. "She might not know any better."

Graham agreed with a nod. A sudden sparkle came into his eyes. He turned to his companions, leaned down and spoke to them in a low voice. When he'd finished, the others were nodding agreement.

Frances Catherine felt sick. From the victorious look on Graham's face, she could only conclude he'd found a way to deny her request before asking the laird's counsel.

Patrick had obviously come to the same conclusion. His face turned dark with anger. Then he took another step forward. She grabbed hold of his hand. She knew her husband fully intended to keep his promise to her, but she didn't want him sanctioned by the elders. The punishment would be harsh, even for a man as proud and fit as Patrick was, and the humiliation would be unbearable for him.

She squeezed his hand. "You'll decide that because I cannot possibly know better, it therefore becomes your duty to know what's best for me. Isn't that right?"

Graham was surprised by her cleverness in knowing what was in his mind. He was about to answer her challenge when Patrick spoke up. "No, Graham would not decide he knows what's best for you. That would be an insult to me, wife."

The leader of the council stared at Patrick a long minute. In a forceful voice he commanded, "You will abide by the decision of this council, Patrick."

"A Maitland has given his word. It must be honored."

Iain's booming voice filled the hall. Everyone turned to look at him. Iain kept his gaze centered on the leader of the council. "Don't try to confuse this issue," he ordered. "Patrick gave his woman a promise and it must be carried out."

No one said a word for several minutes. Then Gelfrid stood up. The palms of his hands rested on the tabletop when he leaned forward to glare at Iain. "You are advisor here, nothing more."

Iain shrugged. "I'm your laird," he countered. "By your vote," he added. "And I now advise you to honor my brother's word. Only the English break their pledges, Gelfrid, not the Scots."

Gelfrid reluctantly nodded. "You speak the truth," he admitted.

One down and four to go, Iain thought to himself. Damn, he hated having to use diplomacy to get his way. He much preferred a battle with fists than with words. He hated gaining anyone's permission for his or his brother's actions, either. With an effort, he controlled his frustration and focused on the matter at hand. He turned his attention back to Graham. "Have you become an old man, Graham, to be so concerned about something as insignificant as this? Are you afraid of one English woman?"

"Of course not," Graham muttered, his outrage over the mere possibility apparent in his expression. "I'm afraid of no woman."

Iain grinned. "I'm relieved to hear this," he replied. "For a minute, I did begin to wonder."

His cunning wasn't lost on the leader of the oligarchy. Graham smiled. "You dangled your clever bait and my arrogance reached for it." Iain didn't remark on that truth. Graham's smile was still in evidence when he turned his attention back to Frances Catherine. "We are still confused by this request and would appreciate it if you would tell us why you want this woman here."

"Have her tell you why they both have two names," Vincent interjected.

Graham ignored the elder's request. "Will you explain your reasons, lass?"

"I was given my mother's name, Frances, and my grandmother's name, Catherine, because—"

Graham cut her off with an impatient wave of his hand. He continued to smile so she wouldn't think he was overly irritated with her. "No, no, lass, I'm not wanting to hear

how you came by two names now. I'm wanting to hear your reasons for wanting this English woman here."

She could feel herself blushing over the misunderstanding. "Lady Judith Elizabeth is my friend. I would like her to be by my side when my time comes to deliver this baby. She has already given me her word that she'll come to me."

"Friend and English? How can this be?" Gelfrid asked. He rubbed his jaw while he worried over that contradiction.

Frances Catherine knew the elder wasn't deliberately baiting her. He looked genuinely puzzled. She didn't believe anything she could say would make the elder understand. In truth, she didn't believe Patrick truly understood the bond she had formed with Judith so many years ago, and her husband wasn't nearly as set in his ways as Graham and the other elders were. Still, she knew she was going to have to try to explain.

"We met at the annual festival on the border," she began. "Judith was only four years and I just five. We didn't understand we were... different from each other."

Graham let out a sigh. "But once you did understand?"

Frances Catherine smiled. "It didn't matter."

Graham shook his head. "'Tis the truth, I still don't understand this friendship," he confessed. "But our laird was correct when he reminded us that we do not break our pledges. Your friend will be welcomed here, Frances Catherine."

She was so overcome with joy, she sagged against her husband's side. She dared a quick look at the other council members then. Vincent, Gelfrid, and Duncan were smiling, but Owen, the elder she'd believed had slept through the questioning, was now shaking his head at her.

Iain noticed that action. "You don't agree with this decision, Owen?"

The elder kept his gaze on Frances Catherine while he answered. "I'm in agreement, but I think we should give the lass fair warning. She shouldn't be getting her hopes up for naught. I stand with you, Iain, for I too know from my own experiences that the English can't keep their pledges. They follow their king's habits, of course. That scoundrel changes his mind every other minute. This English woman with two names might have given Patrick's wife her promise, but she won't be keeping it."

Iain nodded agreement. He'd wondered how long it would take for the council to come to that same conclusion. The elders were all looking much more cheerful now. Frances Catherine continued to smile, however. She didn't seem to be at all worried that her friend might not keep her promise. Iain felt a tremendous responsibility to protect each and every member of his clan. Yet he knew he couldn't protect his sister-in-law from the harsh realities of life. She would have to suffer this disappointment

alone, but once the lesson was learned, she would surely realize she could only count on her own family.

"Iain, who will you send on this errand?" Graham asked.

"I should go," Patrick announced.

Iain shook his head. "Your place is with your wife now. Her time draws near. I'll go."

"But you're laird," Graham argued. "It's beneath your station—"

Iain wouldn't let him continue. "This is a family matter, Graham. Since Patrick can't leave his wife, I must see to this duty. My mind's set," he added with a frown, to discourage further argument.

Patrick smiled. "I've never met my wife's friend, Iain, but I can well imagine that when she sees you, she'll have second thoughts about coming here."

"Oh, Judith Elizabeth will be pleased to have Iain's escort," Frances Catherine blurted out. She turned to smile at her laird. "She won't be at all afraid of you. I'm certain. I thank you, too, for offering to go on this journey. Judith will feel safe with you."

Iain raised an eyebrow over that last remark. Then he let out a long sigh. "Frances Catherine, I'm just as certain she won't willingly come up here. Do you want me to force her?"

Because she was staring at Iain, she didn't see Patrick give his brother a quick nod. "No, no, you mustn't force her. She'll want to come to me."

Both Patrick and Iain gave up trying to caution her against getting her hopes up. Graham politely excused Frances Catherine from the meeting. Patrick took hold of her hand and started for the doors.

She was in a hurry to get outside so she could hug her husband and tell him how pleased she was to be married to him. He'd been so... magnificent when he'd stood up for her. She'd never doubted that he would, of course, but she still wanted to give him the praise she thought he'd want to hear. Husbands needed their wife's compliments every now and again, didn't they?

She had almost reached the top step to the entrance when she heard the name Maclean mentioned by Graham. She stopped to listen. Patrick tried to tug her along, and so she kicked off her shoe and motioned for him to fetch it for her. She didn't care if he thought she was clumsy. She was too curious to hear what the discussion was about. Graham had sounded so angry.

The council wasn't paying her any attention. Duncan had the floor. "I'm against any kind of an alliance with the Dunbars. We don't need them," he added in a near shout.

"And if the Dunbars form an alliance with the Macleans?" Iain asked, his voice shaking with fury. "Get your head out of the past, Duncan. Consider the ramifications."

Vincent spoke up next. "Why must it be the Dunbars? They're as slick as wet salmon and as sneaky as the English. I can't abide the thought. Nay, I can't."

Iain tried to hold on to his patience. "The Dunbar land sits between the Macleans and us, I would remind you. If we don't align ourselves with them, they could very well turn to the bastard Macleans for protection. We can't allow that. It's simply a choice between bad or worse."

Frances Catherine wasn't able to hear any more of the discussion. Patrick had put her shoe back on her foot and was once again nudging her along.

She forgot all about praising her husband. The minute the doors closed behind them, she turned to Patrick. "Why do the Maitlands hate the Macleans?"

"The feud goes way back," he answered. "Before my time."

"Could it ever be mended?"

Patrick shrugged. "Why do the Macleans interest you?"

She couldn't tell him, of course. She'd be breaking her promise to Judith if she did, and she would never betray that confidence. There was also the telling fact that Patrick would have heart palpitations if he ever found out Judith's father was Laird Maclean. Aye, there was that consideration as well.

"I know the Maitlands are feuding with the Dunbars, the Macphersons too, but I hadn't heard about the Macleans. That is why I was curious. Why don't we get along with any of the other clans?"

Patrick laughed. "There are a few we call friends," he told her.

She decided to change the topic around to the praise she wanted to give him. Patrick walked her back to their home, and after giving her a long kiss in farewell, he turned to go back to the courtyard.

"Patrick, you do realize my loyalty belongs to you, don't you?" his wife asked.

He turned back to her. "Of course."

"I've always considered your feelings, haven't I?"

"Yes."

"Therefore, if I knew something that would upset you, it would be better for me to keep silent, wouldn't it?"

"No."

"If I told, it would mean breaking a promise to someone else. I couldn't do that."

Patrick walked back to stand directly in front of his wife. "What are you trying not to tell me?"

She shook her head. "I don't want Iain to force Judith," she blurted out, hoping to turn his attention away from the talk about old promises. "If she can't come here, he mustn't use force."

She nagged Patrick into giving his word. He reluctantly agreed, just to please her, but he had no intention of keeping his pledge. He wasn't about to let the Englishwoman break his wife's heart. Lying to Frances Catherine didn't sit well, though, and Patrick frowned over it all the way back up the hill.

As soon as Iain came outside, his brother called out to him. "We have to talk, Iain."

"Hell, Patrick, if you're going to tell me about another promise you've given your wife, I'll warn you now, I'm not in the mood to hear it."

Patrick laughed. He waited until his brother reached his side, then said, "I want to talk to you about my wife's friend. I don't care what it takes, Iain. Drag her here if you have to, all right? I won't have my wife disappointed. She has enough to worry about with the baby coming."

Iain started walking toward the stables. His hands were clasped behind his back, his head bowed in thought. Patrick walked by his side.

"You are aware, aren't you, that if I force this woman, I could very well start a war with her family, and perhaps, if the king decides to take an interest, a war with England?"

Patrick glanced over to see what his brother thought about that remote possibility. Iain was smiling. Patrick shook his head. "John won't involve himself in this unless he can gain something from it. Her family's going to be the problem. They certainly won't just let her leave on such a journey."

"It could get messy," Iain remarked.

"Will that matter?"

"No."

Patrick let out a sigh. "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow, at first light. I'll talk to Frances Catherine tonight. I want to know as much as possible about this woman's family."

"There is something Frances Catherine isn't telling me," Patrick said, his voice halting, "She asked me about the feud with the Macleans..."

He didn't go on. Iain was looking at him as though he thought he'd lost his mind. "And you didn't demand she explain whatever the hell it is she's keeping from you?"

"It isn't that simple," Patrick explained. "You have to be... delicate with a wife. In time she'll tell me what she's worrying about. I'll have to be patient. Besides, I'm probably jumping to conclusions. My wife's worrying about everything these days."

The look on Iain's face made Patrick sorry he'd mentioned Frances Catherine's odd behavior.

"I would thank you for going on this journey, but you'd only be insulted."

"This isn't a duty I embrace," Iain admitted. "It will take seven or eight days to reach the holding, and that means at least eight back with a complaining woman on my hands. Hell, I'd rather take on a legion of Macleans single-handedly than suffer this task."

Iain's bleak tone of voice made Patrick want to laugh. He didn't dare, of course, for his brother would only bloody his face if he so much as cracked a smile.

The two brothers walked along in silence for several more minutes, each caught up in his own thoughts.

Patrick suddenly stopped. "You can't force this woman. If she doesn't want to come here, then leave her be."

"Then why the hell am I bothering to go at all?"

"My wife could be right," Patrick rushed out. "Lady Judith Elizabeth might willingly come here."

Iain gave his brother a hard glare. "Willingly? You're out of your mind if you believe that. She's English." He paused to let out a weary sigh. "She won't willingly come here."