

The Secret Novel Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Frances Catherine let out a low gasp. Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she burst into laughter and threw herself into Judith's arms. She remembered how she had been so certain and so full of authority when she'd told Judith a woman could only get pregnant if she drank out of a man's goblet.

She all but swallowed Judith up when she hugged her. The two women were laughing and crying at the same time, and to the crowd gathered around them, they appeared to have lost their senses.

The tension and the worry eased out of Patrick's shoulders. He turned to look at Iain and slowly nodded. His brother nodded back.

The journey had been well worth the trouble, Patrick decided. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited for his wife to remember her manners. The joy in her expression more than made up for her inattention. And Lord, how he had missed the sound of her laughter. A part of him wanted to take this Englishwoman into his own arms and hug her just as fiercely as his wife was doing, to let her know how much he appreciated her loyalty.

He had to wait another five minutes or so before his wife remembered he was there. The two women were talking at the same time, asking and answering their own questions. They created a whirlwind of happy chaos.

Iain was just as pleased as Patrick with the reunion. He was a bit surprised, too, for until this very minute he hadn't realized that women could actually be trusted friends with each other. The strength of the bond between Judith and Frances Catherine was unique. It intrigued him. He remembered Judith had told him they'd become friends before they were old enough to understand they were supposed to be enemies, and he found he admired the two of them all the more for continuing to give each other loyalty even after they had learned the lessons of distrust... and hate.

Judith remembered her audience before Frances Catherine did. "We have so much to catch up on," she said. "But now I must thank Iain and the others for bringing me to you."

Frances Catherine grabbed hold of her hand. "First, I must introduce you to my husband," she said. She turned to smile up at Patrick. "This is Judith."

Patrick's smile was a replica of Iain's. "I gathered as much," he told his wife. "I'm pleased to meet you, Judith."

She would have made a nice curtsy if Frances Catherine had let go of her hand. She smiled instead. "And I'm pleased to be here, Patrick. Thank you for inviting me."

Her attention turned to Iain. He'd taken the reins of his mount and started toward the stables. She tugged her hand away from Frances Catherine, promised to come right back, and then hurried after her escort. "Iain, please wait," she called out. "I wanted to say thank-you."

He didn't stop, but he did look back over his shoulder. He gave her an abrupt nod and continued on. She said thank-you to Alex, Gowrie, and Brodick as they filed past her. They reacted in the very same manner. They were abrupt, distant.

Judith told herself she shouldn't have expected anything more. They'd done their duty and were finally rid of her. She held on to her smile and turned around. As she was passing a group of women, she heard one whisper, "Dear God, I'm thinking she's English, but that can't be, can it?" If Judith's clothing hadn't given her away, she knew her accent certainly had.

She continued to walk toward Frances Catherine, but smiled at the women gawking at her. "Aye, I am English."

One woman's mouth actually dropped open. Judith suppressed the urge to laugh, because she felt it would be terribly rude to show amusement over someone else's obvious distress.

When she reached her friend, she said, "Everyone seems quite thrilled to have my company."

Frances Catherine laughed. Patrick reacted in just the opposite way. He evidently thought she'd been serious when she made that remark. "Judith, I don't believe thrilled is the proper word. Actually, I would wager they're..."

He looked at his wife for help in softening the truth. Frances Catherine didn't give him any assistance, however. She couldn't quit laughing.

Judith smiled up at Patrick. "Would 'appalled' be a better word?"

"Nay," Frances Catherine said. "Outraged, disgusted, or perhaps—"

"Enough," Patrick interrupted with a low growl. The sparkle in his eyes indicated he wasn't really angry.

"Then you were jesting with me when you suggested—"

Judith nodded. "Yes, I was jesting. I know I'm not welcome here. Iain warned me."

Before Patrick could comment on that remark, an elderly warrior called out to him. He bowed to Frances Catherine and Judith, then walked over to the cluster of men

standing near the steps to the keep. Frances Catherine linked her arm through Judith's and started walking down the slope.

"You'll be staying with Patrick and me," she explained. "It might be a little cramped but I want you close by."

"Is there more than one room in this cottage?"

"No. Patrick wants to add another after the baby's born."

Patrick came down the hill to join them. The frown on his face made Judith believe he'd already had to defend her presence to the warriors.

"Is it going to be difficult for you, Patrick, because you invited me to come here?"

He didn't give her a direct answer. "They'll become accustomed to having you around."

They reached the cottage. It was the first along the pathway. Flowers bordered the front of their home, some pink, others red, and the stone had been thoroughly whitewashed until it was pristine clean.

There was a wide square window on each side of the door. The interior was just as inviting as the exterior. A stone hearth took up the center of one wall. A large bed covered with a beautiful multicolored quilt was positioned against the opposite wall, and a round table surrounded by six stools took up the rest of the space. The washstand was near the door.

"We'll bring a cot inside before nightfall," Frances Catherine promised.

Patrick nodded agreement, but he didn't look very happy about the arrangement. Nay, he looked resigned.

It was a delicate topic, but one that needed to be settled as soon as possible. Judith went over to the table and sat down. "Patrick, please don't leave yet," she called out when he started back out the doorway. "I would like to talk to you about this sleeping arrangement."

He turned, leaned against the door, folded his arms across his chest and waited for her to explain. He thought she was going to suggest that he find someplace else to stay while she was there, and he was already preparing himself for his wife's disappointment when he told Judith no. Although it wasn't possible to be physically intimate with Frances Catherine now, he still enjoyed holding her close during the night, and by God, he wasn't going to give that up.

Unless Frances Catherine got all teary-eyed on him again, Patrick admitted. He'd give up anything just to ease her distress.

Judith was taken aback by the intense frown Patrick was giving her. Frances Catherine's husband was turning out to be as gruff-natured as Iain was. She still liked him, of course, and all because she could tell from the way he watched his wife that he loved her.

She folded her hands together. "I don't feel it's appropriate for me to stay with you. You both should have your privacy each night," she added in a rush when Frances Catherine looked like she was going to argue. "Please don't take offense," she said. "But I think a husband and wife should have time alone. Isn't there someplace I could stay that's close by?"

Frances Catherine was vehemently shaking her head when Patrick spoke up. "The cottage two down is empty. It's smaller than ours, but I'm certain it would do."

"Patrick, I want her to stay with us."

"She just explained she doesn't want to, love. Let her have her way."

Judith was embarrassed. "It isn't that I don't want to stay—"

"There, do you see? She does want to—"

"Frances Catherine, I'm going to win this argument," Judith announced. She nodded to her friend when she made that prediction.

"Why?"

"Because it's my turn," she explained. "You may win the next argument."

"Lord, you're stubborn. All right. You may stay in Elmont's cottage. I'll help you make it comfortable."

"You will not," Patrick interjected. "You're going to rest, wife. I'll see to your friend's comfort."

Patrick was looking much happier now. Judith guessed he was relieved she was going to be sleeping somewhere else. He even smiled at her. She smiled back. "I do assume Elmont isn't living there anymore and won't mind."

"He's dead," Patrick told her. "He isn't going to mind at all."

Frances Catherine shook her head at her husband. He winked at her, then left the cottage. "My husband didn't mean to sound so callous, but Elmont was very old when he died, and his passing was peaceful. Patrick was just making a little jest. I think he's taken with you, Judith."

"You love him very much, don't you, Frances Catherine?"

"Oh, yes," her friend answered. She sat down at the table and spent a good hour talking about her husband. She told Judith how they'd met, how he relentlessly pursued her, and finished by mentioning just a hundred or two of his special qualities.

The only thing the man wasn't capable of was walking on water... yet. Judith made that comment when her friend paused for breath.

Frances Catherine laughed. "I'm so happy you're here."

"You don't have hurt feelings because I want to sleep somewhere else?"

"No, of course not. Besides, you'll be close enough to hear me shout if there's need. I must be careful not to exclude Patrick. My husband does get his feelings hurt quite easily if he thinks I'm not paying him enough attention."

Judith tried not to laugh. Patrick was such a big brute of a man. The idea that he could have injured feelings was vastly amusing, and terribly sweet.

"He looks like his brother."

"Perhaps just a little," Frances Catherine agreed. "Patrick's much more handsome, though."

Judith was of the opinion that it was really just the opposite. Iain was much better-looking than Patrick was. Love really must color one's perception, she decided.

"Patrick's incredibly gentle and loving."

"So is Iain," Judith remarked before she could stop herself.

Her friend immediately latched on to that comment. "And how would you know if Iain's loving or not?"

"He kissed me." She'd whispered that confession, felt herself blush, and immediately lowered her gaze. "Twice."

Frances Catherine was stunned. "Did you kiss him back... twice?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Judith shook her head. "No, you don't see," she argued. "We were attracted to each other. I'm not at all certain why, but it doesn't really matter. The attraction's over now. Really," she added when she saw her friend's reaction.

Frances Catherine didn't believe her. She was shaking her head. "I know why he was attracted to you," she said.

"Why?"

Frances Catherine rolled her eyes heavenward. "Honest to God, you don't have a bit of vanity inside you. Don't you ever see yourself in the looking glass? You're beautiful, Judith." She paused to let out a dramatic sigh. "No one's ever taken the time to tell you that."

"That's not true," Judith argued. "Millicent and Herbert gave me plenty of compliments. They let me know how much they loved me."

"Yes," Frances Catherine agreed. "But the one you most needed acceptance from turned her back on you."

"Don't start in, Frances Catherine," Judith warned. "Mother can't help the way she is."

Frances Catherine snorted. "Is Tekel still roaring drunk every night?"

Judith nodded. "He's drinking during the day now, too," she said.

"What do you suppose would have happened to you if you hadn't had your aunt Millicent and uncle Herbert protecting you when you were so young and vulnerable? I think about such things now that I'm expecting my own child."

Judith didn't know what to say to those remarks. Her silence told her friend to ease up.

"Did you have difficulty leaving?" Frances Catherine asked. "I worried because I knew you would probably be at Tekel's holding. You always have to stay with him for six months at a time, and I couldn't remember exactly when you would move back. I've been fretting over it."

"I was with Tekel but I didn't have any trouble leaving," Judith replied. "Mother had already left for London and the king's court."

"And Tekel?"

"He was sotted when I told him where I was going. I'm not certain he even remembered the next morning. Millicent and Herbert will tell him again if there's need."

She didn't want to talk about her family any longer. There was such sadness in Frances Catherine's eyes, and Judith was determined to find out the reason.

"Are you feeling well? When is the baby due to arrive?"

"I feel fat," Frances Catherine answered. "And I'm guessing I have about eight or nine more weeks before it's time."

Judith took hold of her friend's hand. "Tell me what's wrong."

She didn't have to explain that gentle order. Her friend understood what she was asking. "If it weren't for Patrick, I would hate it here."

The vehemence in Frances Catherine's voice told Judith she wasn't exaggerating her misery. "Do you miss your father and your brothers?"

"Oh, yes," she answered. "All the time."

"Then ask Patrick to go and fetch them for a nice long visitation."

Frances Catherine shook her head. "I can't ask for anything more," she whispered. "We had to go to the council to get permission for you to come here."

With Judith's prodding, she explained all about the council's power. She told Judith how Iain had interfered when the oligarchy was getting ready to deny her request, and how frightened she'd been during the entire ordeal.

"I don't understand why you would have to go through the council to get permission," Judith remarked. "Even though I'm English, I still don't see the need to have their approval."

"Most of the Maitlands have good reason to dislike the English," Frances Catherine explained. "They've lost family and friends in battles against the English. They hate your King John, too."

Judith lifted her shoulders in a shrug. " 'Tis the truth most of the barons in England dislike the king." She resisted the urge to make the sign of the cross so she wouldn't burn in purgatory for defaming her overlord. "He's self-serving and has made some terrible mistakes, at least that's what Uncle Herbert tells me."

"Did you know your king was pledged to marry a Scot and then changed his mind?"

"I hadn't heard, but I'm not surprised. Frances Catherine, what did you mean when you said you couldn't ask Patrick for anything more? Why can't he fetch your father?"

"The Maitlands don't like outsiders," she answered. "They don't like me either."

She sounded like a child when she blurted out that remark. Judith thought that perhaps her delicate condition was the reason for her emotional turmoil. "I'm just as certain everyone likes you."

"I'm not making this up in my mind," she argued. "The women think I'm spoiled and accustomed to having my own way."

"How do you know that?"

"One of the midwives told me so." Tears started down Frances Catherine's cheeks. She wiped them away with the backs of her hands. "I'm so scared inside. I've been scared for you, too. I knew it was selfish of me to ask you to come here."

"I gave you my word years ago that I would come," Judith reminded her. "I would have been hurt if you hadn't sent for me. Don't talk such nonsense."

"But the promise I made you give me... that was before I knew I'd end up here," she stammered out. "These people are so... cold. I worried they might offend you."

Judith smiled. How like her friend to be so concerned about her well-being. "Frances Catherine, have you always felt like this or did you begin to hate it here after you found out you were expecting?"

Her friend had to consider the question a long minute. "I was happy at first, but it soon became clear to me I didn't fit in. I feel like an outsider. I've been married for over three years now and they still don't consider me a Maitland."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps because I was raised on the border," she answered. "At least that might be part of their reasoning. Patrick was supposed to marry someone else. He hadn't offered for her, but it was assumed he would. Then he met me."

"Have you discussed your unhappiness with Patrick?"

"I did mention it a few times," she said. "My unhappiness was very upsetting. My husband can't make the women like me. I don't want to die here. I wish Patrick would take me back to Papa before the birthing and stay with me until it's over."

"You aren't going to die." Judith nearly shouted that denial. "After all the trouble and embarrassment I've gone through, you damn well better not die."

Frances Catherine was comforted by the anger in her friend's voice. "Tell me about the trouble you've gone through," she demanded, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

"I've spoken to at least fifty midwives in the past two years, and I swear I've memorized every single word they've told me. Millicent was as determined as I was, of course, and she had servants scour the countryside looking for these women. I don't know what I would have done without her assistance."

"Millicent's a dear woman."

"Aye, she is," Judith agreed. "She sends you her love, of course."

Frances Catherine nodded. "Tell me what you learned from all of these midwives."

"To be completely honest with you, at first I heard so many conflicting opinions, I almost lost heart. One would tell me the chamber had to be as hot as purgatory during the laboring, and another would be vehemently in favor of just the opposite. Aye, it was frustrating, Frances Catherine. Then a miracle came about. One morning a midwife named Maude marched into the keep, acting very like she owned the place. She was old, terribly fragile-looking, with stooped shoulders and gnarled hands. She was a sight, all right. I'll confess I had immediate misgivings about her knowledge. I quickly realized how foolish that conclusion was. Frances Catherine, she is the dearest

of women. She was full of insight, too, and told me that most of her opinions were based on just plain sense. She's been a midwife for ages and ages, but her methods are really quite modern. She's kept up with all the changes and says she's always interested in hearing about the newest techniques. She's a dedicated midwife. If she hadn't been so old and fragile, I would have begged her to come here with me. The journey would have been too much for her."

"The women would never have allowed her interference," Frances Catherine said. "You don't understand, Judith."

"Then help me understand. Have you spoken to the midwives here about your fears?"

"Good Lord, no," Frances Catherine answered in a rush. "If I told her I was frightened, she'd only make it worse. Her name's Agnes, and I don't want her near me when my time comes. She and another woman named Helen are the only two midwives here. They're both very high- and mighty-acting. Agnes's daughter, Cecilia, is supposed to marry Iain when he gets around to asking, and I think that's the reason Agnes always has her nose in the air. She thinks she's going to become the laird's mother-in-law."

Judith's heart felt as though it had just dropped to the bottom of her stomach. She turned her gaze to the tabletop so Frances Catherine wouldn't notice how upset she was by this news.

Her friend didn't notice. She continued right along with her explanation. "The marriage isn't certain in anyone's mind but Agnes's, and Patrick doesn't believe Iain has any intention of offering for Cecilia."

"Then why does Agnes believe he will?"

"Her daughter is a beautiful woman. 'Tis the truth she's probably the prettiest woman in the whole clan. It's a shallow reason, but Agnes thinks that because her daughter is so appealing, Iain will eventually want her. Cecilia's dim-witted and can't hold a thought longer than a flea."

Judith shook her head. "Shame on you for saying such cruel things about this woman." She tried to sound as though she meant what she had just said, but ruined the effect completely by bursting into laughter. "A flea, Frances Catherine?"

Her friend nodded. Then she started laughing. "Oh, Judith, I'm so happy you're here."

"I'm just as happy to be here."

"What are we going to do?"

Frances Catherine's change in mood happened so quickly, Judith was quite astonished. She had been laughing just a moment before and was now looking like she was going to cry again.

Maude had told Judith that expectant mothers were prone to emotional outbursts. She had also said that a calm, peaceful frame of mind was imperative for an uncomplicated delivery. Whenever the mother became upset, she was to be soothed as much as possible.

Judith followed that dictate now. She patted Frances Catherine's hand and smiled at her. She tried to act confident. "Do about what? Everything's going to be fine, Frances Catherine."

"Agnes won't let you assist me when my laboring starts. And I won't have that vile woman near me. So what are we going to do?"

"You mentioned another midwife named Helen? What about her?"

"Agnes taught her everything she knows," Frances Catherine replied. "I don't believe I want her near me, either."

"There have to be more midwives here," Judith said. "From the number of cottages and the crowd I spotted when I arrived, I guessed there were nearly five hundred men and women living here."

"I'd guess twice that number," Frances Catherine estimated. "You didn't see all the cottages along the back side of the mountain. Only the warriors are counted, and their number swells to over six hundred at the very least."

"Then there have to be other midwives here," Judith said again.

Frances Catherine shook her head. "Agnes runs things," she explained. "And because I'm the laird's sister-in-law, she will insist on delivering the babe. If there are other midwives, they keep quiet about it. They wouldn't want to get Agnes riled."

"I see."

Judith suddenly felt sick. Panic was beginning to take hold inside. Dear heavens, she wasn't qualified to take on this duty alone. Yes, she had gathered information about the latest birthing methods, but she'd never been allowed to witness an actual delivery, and she felt completely inadequate overseeing Frances Catherine's care.

Why wasn't anything ever easy? Judith had pictured herself mopping her friend's brow during the pains, holding her hand, too, and occasionally whispering "There, there," while the experienced midwife took care of the more necessary duties.

Tears were once again streaming down Frances Catherine's face. Judith let out a little sigh. "Only one thing is certain," she announced. "You're going to have this baby. I'm

here to help you, and surely between the two of us, we can solve any problem, no matter how impossible it seems."

Her matter-of-fact tone of voice soothed Frances Catherine. "Yes," she agreed.

"Is it possible to win Agnes over or do we give up on her?"

"We give up," Frances Catherine answered. "She won't change her ways. She's cruel-hearted, Judith. Every chance she gets, she makes horrid remarks about the pain I'm going to have to endure. She likes to tell stories about other difficult birthings, too."

"You mustn't listen to her," Judith said. Her voice shook with anger. She had never heard of anything so appalling. Agnes did sound cruel-hearted. Judith shook her head while she thought about this bleak situation.

"I know what you're doing," her friend whispered.

"You're trying to understand Agnes, aren't you? Once you come up with a reason for her behavior, you'll set out to change it. It won't matter to me," she added. "I don't care if she turns into an angel. She isn't coming near me."

"No, I'm not trying to understand her. I already know why she acts the way she does. She's after power, Frances Catherine. She uses fear and a woman's vulnerability to get what she wants. She feeds on their weakness. Maude told me there are women like her. Nothing I can do will change her attitude, either. Don't you worry. I won't let her near you. I promise."

Frances Catherine nodded. "I don't feel so alone any longer," she confessed. "Whenever I try to talk to Patrick about the birthing, he gets very upset. He's afraid for me, and I always end up comforting him."

"He loves you," Judith said. "That's why he's worried."

"I can't imagine why he loves me. I've been so difficult lately. I cry all the time."

"There isn't anything wrong with that."

Frances Catherine smiled. Judith had always been her champion. She felt very fortunate to have her for her friend. "I've talked long enough about my problems. Now I want to talk about yours. Are you going to try to see your father while you're here?"

Judith shrugged. "It has become a little more complicated. First, I didn't realize how large these Highlands are," she said. "And second, I heard the Macleans were feuding with the Maitlands."

"How did you find that out?"

Judith explained about the discussion she'd had with Isabelle's mother. Frances Catherine was frowning when she finished.

"What she told you is true. The Macleans are enemies."

"My father might be dead."

"He isn't."

"How do you know?"

"I asked Patrick to tell me what the Maclean laird was like, pretending only mild curiosity, of course, and he said he was an old man who had ruled his clan for many years."

"What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing else," Frances Catherine said. "I didn't want to prod him. He'd ask me why I was so interested in the Macleans if I asked too many questions. I gave you my promise never to tell anyone who your father was, and since I made that promise before I married Patrick, I can't tell him. Besides, he'd have heart palpitations. Judith, no one must ever know, not while you're here. It would be dangerous for you."

"Iain would protect me."

"He doesn't know about Maclean," she argued. "I don't know what he would do if he found out."

"I think he would still protect me."

"Lord, you sound certain."

Judith smiled. "I am certain," she said. "But it doesn't matter, does it? Iain's never going to find out. I'm not even sure I want to meet my father. I had hoped to see him from a distance, though."

"And what would that accomplish?"

"My curiosity would be appeased."

"You should talk to him," Frances Catherine insisted. "You don't know if he banished your mother or not. You need to find out the truth. You certainly can't believe your mother's story, not after all the lies you've been told."

"I know for certain he never came to England to get us," Judith argued. Her hand instinctively went to her bosom. Her father's ring was nestled between her breasts on the gold chain, hidden beneath her gown. She should have left the ring at home, but she hadn't been able to do that. She couldn't understand why. Lord, it was a confusion.

She let her hand drop back to the tabletop. "Promise me that if a way doesn't present itself, you'll let this go. All right?"

Frances Catherine agreed just to placate her friend. She could tell this was a painful discussion for Judith. She decided to change the subject, and began to reminisce about some of their adventures at the festivals.

In no time at all, both women were laughing.

Patrick could hear the sound of his wife's laughter outside. He smiled in reaction. Her friend was already helping. Brodick walked by Patrick's side. He also smiled. "Frances Catherine is pleased to have Judith here," he remarked.

"Aye, she is," Patrick replied.

He was still smiling when he walked into the cottage. His wife remembered her manners this time. She immediately stood up and walked over to her husband. Judith also stood up. She folded her hands together and called her greeting to both warriors.

Brodick carried three of her satchels inside. Patrick carried two. The men dropped the baggage on the bed. "Exactly how long are you planning to stay, lass?" Patrick asked.

He sounded worried. Judith couldn't resist teasing him. "Just a year or two," she answered. He tried not to blanch. She laughed. "I was jesting," she told him then.

"Brodick, you must stay for supper," Frances Catherine said. "Judith, don't jest with Patrick. You've made the color drain from his face."

Both women thought that fact was vastly amusing. They were still laughing when Alex and Gowrie appeared in the opened doorway. The two warriors looked a little sheepish. Frances Catherine immediately invited them to supper too.

Patrick seemed surprised to have visitors. Judith helped her friend finish the preparations for the meal. Frances Catherine had made a thick lamb stew and had baked round loaves of rich, black bread.

The men crowded around the table. Judith and Frances Catherine served them before squeezing in next to Patrick to eat.

Neither Judith nor Frances Catherine had much of an appetite. They talked to each other all through the supper. Alex did more staring at Judith than eating, Patrick noticed, and when he realized Gowrie hadn't touched his food, either, the reason for their spontaneous visit became clear.

They were both taken with Judith. Patrick had to restrain himself from laughing. The ladies were oblivious to the men. They excused themselves from the table and went over to the bed. Judith gave her friend all the presents she'd made, then blushed with pleasure over Frances Catherine's joy. All but one of the gifts were for the baby, but Judith had also made her friend a beautiful white nightgown with pink and blue roses embroidered along the neckline. It had taken Judith a full month to finish the garment.

The work had been worth the effort, for Frances Catherine thought the gown was exquisite.

Since the women weren't paying the men any attention, the men didn't find it necessary to hide their interest. Their gazes were centered on Judith. Patrick noticed that whenever she smiled, so did the soldiers. Brodick's interest surprised Patrick the most because he was usually quite good at keeping his emotions under tight rein.

"What are you grinning about?" Brodick suddenly asked him.

"You," Patrick answered.

Before Brodick could take exception to that honest reply, Judith called out, "Brodick, I've forgotten to take the sweet biscuits over to Isabelle."

"I'll see she gets them," Brodick said.

Judith shook her head. "I want to meet her," she explained. She stood up and walked over to the table. "I have messages to give her from her mother."

"I'll be happy to show you the way," Alex volunteered.

"I'll do it," Gowrie announced in a much firmer voice.

Brodick shook his head. "Isabelle is my sister-in-law," he snapped. "I'll show Judith the way."

Iain had opened the door, and stood there listening to the argument. He was having difficulty believing what he was hearing... and seeing. His warriors were acting like lovesick squires while they argued over who would escort Judith.

She didn't have a clue as to their real motives, however. Judith looked confused by all the attention she was getting.

Alex drew Iain's notice. He planted his hands on the tabletop and leaned forward to glare at Brodick. "Isabella's cottage is close to my uncle's and I was going to stop by there anyway. Therefore, I'll see to this chore of showing Judith the way."

Patrick did laugh then. Everyone seemed to notice Iain at the same moment. Judith's reaction was the most telling to Patrick's way of thinking. The joy in her expression was more than evident.

Iain looked irritated. He barely spared Judith a glance before turning his full attention to his brother. "Now do you understand my reasons?"

Patrick nodded.

Judith and Frances Catherine shared a look. "What reasons, Laird Iain?" Frances Catherine asked.

"Laird Iain?" Judith repeated before Iain could answer the question. "Why don't you just call him Iain?"

Frances Catherine folded her hands together in her lap. "Because he's our laird," she explained.

"He's still your brother," Judith countered. "You shouldn't have to be so formal with him."

Her friend nodded. She looked up at Iain and forced a smile. The warrior was intimidating to her and it took a great deal of effort to stare into his eyes. The man took up the entrance. He ducked under the door overhang, and once he was fully inside, leaned against the corner of the wall and folded his arms across his chest, his stance casual.

"Iain," Frances Catherine began again, grimacing inside over the shiver in her voice. "What reasons do you mean?"

Iain realized his sister-in-law was actually afraid of him. He was quite astonished by that revelation. He forced a mild voice in an effort to ease her fear when he answered her. "Patrick asked that Judith be allowed to stay in the vacant cottage. I've denied his request. Your husband understands my reasons."

Frances Catherine immediately nodded. She wasn't about to argue with her laird. Besides, the arrangement suited her just fine. She wanted Judith to stay with her and Patrick.

"Your guests are leaving now," Iain told his brother.

Alex, Gowrie, and Brodick immediately filed out of the cottage. Iain moved out of their way, then resumed his place near the door. He'd said something to the warriors as they walked past, but his voice was so low, neither Judith nor Frances Catherine could overhear. Patrick heard, though, and his sudden smile indicated he was amused by his brother's remarks.

"Iain, may I please speak to you in private for just a moment?" Judith asked.

"No."

Judith wasn't daunted. There was more than one way to flay a fish. "Patrick?"

"Yes, Judith?"

"I have need to speak to your laird in private. Would you arrange it please?"

Patrick looked as though she'd lost her senses. Judith let out a sigh. She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "I'm following the chain of command around here. I'm supposed to ask you and you're supposed to ask the laird."

Patrick didn't dare look at Iain. He knew his brother was already riled. The look in his eyes when he'd seen Alex, Gowrie, and Brodick gawking at Judith was one

Patrick had never seen before. If he didn't know better, he would think his brother was actually jealous.

"Iain—" Patrick began.

"No." Iain snapped that denial.

"Lord, you're difficult," Judith muttered.

Frances Catherine let out a sound somewhere between a snort and a gasp. She was still sitting on the side of the bed. She reached up to touch Judith's arm. "You really shouldn't criticize Laird Iain," she whispered.

"Why not?" Judith whispered back.

"Because Ramsey says Iain's a mean son of a bitch when he gets riled," Frances Catherine replied.

Judith burst into laughter. She turned around to look at Iain again, and immediately knew he'd heard Frances Catherine's remark. He wasn't angry, though. Nay, the sparkle in his eyes indicated just the opposite. Patrick looked quite appalled by his wife's loudly whispered comment.

"For the love of God, Frances Catherine—" Patrick began.

"It was a compliment Ramsey was giving," his wife replied. "Besides, you weren't suppose to hear it."

"Who is Ramsey?" Judith asked.

"An incredibly handsome devil," Frances Catherine replied. "Patrick, don't frown at me. Ramsey is handsome. You'll easily recognize him, Judith," she added with a glance in her friend's direction. "He's always surrounded by a crowd of young ladies. He hates the attention, but what can he do? You'll like him, too."

"No, she won't."

Iain made that prediction. He took a step forward. "You'll stay away from him, Judith. Do you understand me?"

She nodded. She didn't care for his surly tone of voice one bit, but she decided not to take issue with him now.

"How do we keep Ramsey away from her?" Patrick wanted to know.

Iain didn't answer him. Judith remembered the chore she wanted to complete before night was full upon them, and picked up Margaret's satchel filled with the sweet biscuits.

"Patrick, would you please ask Iain to show me the way to Isabelle's cottage? I must give her this gift from her mother and relay messages."

"Judith, the man's standing right in front of you. Why don't you ask him?" Frances Catherine asked.

"It's this chain-of-command thing," Judith answered with a wave of her hand. "I have to follow it."

"Come here, Judith."

His voice was soft, chilling. She forced a serene smile and walked over to him. "Yes, Iain?"

"Do you deliberately try to provoke me?"

He waited for her denial. An apology, too. He didn't get either.

"Yes, I do believe I am trying to deliberately provoke you."

The look of astonishment on his face was slowly replaced with a fierce frown. He took a step closer to her. She didn't back away. God's truth, she took a step closer to him.

They were just a breath away from touching. She had to tilt her head all the way back to meet his stare. "In all fairness, I think I should point out the fact that you actually provoked me first."

The woman was a temptress. Iain was having difficulty following her explanation. His concentration was centered on her mouth. His own lack of discipline was more appalling to him than her impudent behavior.

He couldn't stay away from her. The woman hadn't even settled in his brother's cottage and he was already looking in on her.

Judith really wished he'd say something to her. His expression didn't give her a hint of what he was thinking. She was suddenly feeling very nervous. She told herself it was only because Iain was such a big man, he seemed to swallow up all the space around him. Standing so close to him didn't ease her discomfort, either.

"I did ask you to please give me a private moment of your time, and you were most abrupt in your denial. Yes, you did provoke me first."

Iain couldn't make up his mind if he wanted to strangle the woman or kiss her. Then she smiled up at him, a sweet, innocent smile that made him want to laugh. He knew he could never touch her in anger, never ever raise a hand against her.

She knew it, too.

She wished she knew what he was thinking. She never should have started this baiting game, either. It was dangerous to tease a mountain wolf, and in her mind Iain, for all his gentle ways, could be even more dangerous than a wild animal. The power radiating from him was nearly overwhelming to her.

She turned her gaze to the floor. "I'm most grateful for all you've done for me, Iain, and I apologize to you if you believe I was trying to rile your temper."

She thought she'd sounded properly contrite. When she glanced up to see his expression, she was surprised to find him smiling.

"You were trying to rile my temper, Judith."

"Yes, I was," she admitted. "But I'm still sorry."

She realized, then, she was clutching the satchel in her arms. Before Iain realized her intent, she skirted her way around him and walked out the doorway.

"She'll knock on every door along the path until someone tells her where Isabelle lives." Frances Catherine made that prediction. "Patrick, would you please go and—"

"I'll go," Iain muttered.

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He didn't wait for an argument. His sigh was as loud as the slam of the door when he pulled it closed behind him.

He caught up with Judith just as she was starting down the hill. He didn't say a word to her, but took hold of her arm to force her to stop.

"I made a promise to Margaret, Iain, and I'm going to see it carried through."

Her bluster wasn't needed. Iain was already nodding agreement. "You're going the wrong way. Winslow's cottage is on the other side of the courtyard."

He took her satchel from her and started walking back up the second hill. Judith walked by his side. Their arms brushed against each others, but neither moved apart.

"Iain, now that we're alone—"

His laughter stopped her question. "Why are you amused?"

"We aren't alone," he answered. "I would wager at least twenty of my clan are watching us."

She looked around but didn't see a single person. "You're certain?"

"Yes," he answered in a clipped voice.

"Why are they watching?"

"Curiosity."

"Iain, why are you angry with me? I've already apologized for trying to provoke your temper."

She sounded upset to him. He let out a sigh. He wasn't about to explain his reasons for being angry. Hell, her nearness was damn disturbing to his peace of mind. He wanted to touch her. He wasn't about to admit that, either.

"I'm not angry with you. You place too much importance upon yourself if you believe I would feel anything other than duty to my brother when I watch out for you."

He might as well have struck her. She didn't know what to say in response to his cruel piece of honesty. She realized he was right. She had placed too much importance upon herself to think he would be concerned about her. A puny attraction was one thing; caring was quite another.

Tears filled her eyes. Thankfully, the fading sunlight hid her expression from him. She kept her head bowed and deliberately edged away from his side until there was enough room for two horses between them.

Iain felt lower than a snake's belly. He damned himself for sounding so harsh, even as he wished to God she wasn't so tenderhearted.

He started to apologize, then immediately discarded the idea. Not only was he sure he'd muck that up, too, but also, warriors didn't apologize. Women did.

"Judith..."

She didn't answer him.

That quickly, he gave up trying. He had never told anyone, man or woman, he was sorry for his actions, and by God he wasn't about to start now.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

He couldn't believe he said the words until he'd muttered them. He had to shake his head over his own inexplicable behavior.

Judith didn't acknowledge his apology, and he was thankful for that consideration. She must have guessed from the strangled sound of his voice how difficult it had been for him.

But Judith didn't believe he meant one word of his apology. There wasn't anything for her to forgive anyway, she told herself. He had hurt her feelings, yes, but he had been telling her exactly how he felt.

Iain was acutely relieved when they reached their destination. Yet he hesitated at the threshold. Both he and Judith could hear Isabella weeping. They heard Winslow's voice as well, and though the words weren't clear, his soothing tone of voice certainly was.

Judith thought they should come back in the morning, but before she could suggest as much, Iain had already knocked on the door.

Winslow opened it. The look of irritation on his face indicated he wasn't happy with the interruption. As soon as he saw Iain, however, his surly look vanished.

Brodick's brother didn't look at all like him, save for the color of his eyes. They were the same intense shade of blue. He was shorter than Brodick, and not nearly as handsome. His hair was a darker blond, unruly with curls, too.

Iain explained his reasons for the visitation, and when he'd finished, Winslow shrugged, then opened the door wide to invite them inside.

The cottage was similar to Patrick's in size, but was filled with clutter of clothes strewn about, and forgotten treachers stacked on top of each other on the table.

Isabelle wasn't much of a housekeeper. The pretty woman was in bed, propped up by a mound of pillows behind her. Her eyes were swollen from crying.

Judith thought she was ill. Her brown hair hung limp around her shoulders and her complexion was as pale as the moon.

"I don't wish to disturb you," Judith began. She took the satchel from Iain and was about to put it on the table when she realized there wasn't room. Since the two stools were also covered with clothing, she settled on placing the satchel on the floor. "Your mother sent a gift for you, Isabelle, messages too, but I'll be happy to come back when you're feeling better."

"She isn't ill," Winslow remarked.

"Then why is she in bed?" Judith asked.

Winslow looked surprised by that question. She thought it was because she'd been impudent asking.

"She's going to have my son any time now," Winslow explained.

Judith turned back to Isabelle. She saw the tears in her eyes. "Are you in labor now?"

Isabelle vehemently shook her head. Judith frowned. "Then why are you in bed?" she asked again, trying to understand.

Winslow couldn't understand why the Englishwoman was asking such foolish questions. He forced a patient voice. "She's in bed so she can conserve her strength."

The midwife Judith put such faith in would have had palpitations over that twisted bit of logic. She smiled at Isabelle before turning to look at her husband again.

"Then why doesn't a warrior conserve his strength before going into battle?"

Winslow raised an eyebrow. Iain smiled. "A warrior must always train for battle," Winslow answered. "He becomes weak and ineffective if he doesn't constantly train. Don't the English follow this dictate?"

Judith shrugged. Her attention had already moved on, for she'd just spotted the birthing stool in the corner near the door. She immediately walked over to get a better look at the contraption.

Winslow noticed her interest and was reminded of a duty he needed to complete. "Iain, would you help me get this outside? It's upsetting to Isabelle," he said in a low whisper. "I'll take it back down to Agnes's home in the morning."

Judith was intrigued by both the design and the craftsmanship. The birthing stool was actually a horseshoe-shaped chair. The circular back was tall, sturdy-looking. The seat of the stool was only a narrow ledge fashioned to support the woman's thighs. Both the wooden handles and the sides were inlaid with gold, and the craftsman had used a clever hand to draw angels along the sides.

She tried to hide her curiosity. "Would you like to see what your mother sent to you, Isabelle?" she asked.

"Yes, please."

Judith carried the satchel over to the bed. She stood by the side, smiling over Isabelle's pleasure.

"Both your mother and your father are feeling well," she said. "Margaret wanted me to tell you your cousin Rebecca is marrying a Stuart in the fall."

Isabelle mopped at the corners of her eyes with a linen square. She made a grimace, clutched the covers with both hands and then let out a low sigh. Beads of perspiration appeared on her brow. Judith picked up the linen cloth she'd dropped, leaned over the bed and mopped the sweat away.

"You aren't feeling well, are you?" she whispered.

Isabelle shook her head. "I ate too much of Winslow's supper," she whispered back. "It was terrible but I was very hungry. I wish he'd let me out of bed. Why are you here?"

The question, asked so casually, caught Judith by surprise. "To give you your mother's gifts and tell you the news from home."

"No, I mean to ask you why you're here in the Highlands," she explained.

"My friend, Frances Catherine, asked me to come," Judith replied. "Why are you whispering?"

The pretty woman smiled. Then Winslow inadvertently ruined her budding good mood.

Iain had opened the door, and Winslow was carrying the birthing chair outside. Isabelle immediately got teary-eyed again. She waited until Iain had pulled the door closed and then said, "Frances Catherine's afraid, too, isn't she?"

"Isabelle, every woman becomes a little frightened before the birthing. Does the chair upset you?"

Isabelle nodded. "I won't use it."

She was getting as worked up as Frances Catherine had been when she talked about the birthing. Judith barely knew Isabelle, but she still felt terribly sorry for her. Her fear was so apparent.

"The chair isn't used for torture," Judith said. "Maude says the birthing mothers are happy to have such comfort. You're fortunate to have one here."

"Comfort?"

"Yes," Judith replied. "She says the chair is made in such a way that the woman's back and legs are nicely supported."

"Who is this Maude?"

"A midwife I know," Judith answered.

"What else did she say?" Isabelle asked. She quit twisting the top of the quilt.

"Maude stayed with me for a good six weeks," Judith explained. "She gave me a great deal of advice for Frances Catherine."

The clutter in the cottage was driving Judith to distraction, and while she repeated some of the midwife's suggestions, she folded the clothing and put the garments in a neat stack on the foot of the bed.

"You should be up and about," Judith said as she turned to tackle the mess on the table. "Fresh air and long walks are just as important as a peaceful mind."

"Winslow worries I'll fall," Isabelle said.

"Then ask him to walk with you," Judith suggested. "Being cooped up inside all day long would make me daft, Isabelle."

The sound of Isabelle's laughter filled the cottage. "It's making me daft too," she admitted. She pulled back the covers and swung her legs over the side.

"Are you a midwife in England?"

"Good heavens, no," Judith answered. "I'm not even married. I just made it my purpose to get as much information as possible from experienced midwives so I could help Frances Catherine."

"Do you mean to say that in England an unmarried woman can openly discuss this intimate topic?"

Isabelle sounded stunned. Judith laughed. "Nay, it isn't discussed at all, and my mother would be most unhappy if she knew what I was learning."

"Would she punish you?"

"Yes."

"You took quite a risk for your friend."

"She would do the same for me," Judith answered.

Isabelle stared at Judith a long minute, then slowly nodded. "I don't understand such friendship between women, but I envy the trust you have in Frances Catherine. You put yourself at risk for her and tell me she would do the same for you. Yes, I do envy such loyalty."

"Didn't you have friends when you were growing up?"

"Only relatives about," Isabelle answered. "And my mother, of course. She was sometimes like a friend to me, when I was older and more of a help to her."

Isabelle stood up and reached for her plaid. The top of her head only reached Judith's chin, and her middle seemed to be twice the size of Frances Catherine's.

"Do you have friends here?"

"Winslow is my dearest friend," Isabelle answered. "The women here are kind to me, but we're all kept busy with our chores and there really isn't time to socialize."

Judith watched in amazement as the woman deftly wrapped the long narrow strip of material around and around herself. When she was finished, she was wearing a plaid from shoulders to ankles, with perfectly even pleats that widened over her swollen belly.

"You're very easy to talk to," Isabelle remarked in a shy whisper. "Frances Catherine must be happy to have your company. She needs someone besides Patrick to talk to," she added. "I think she's had a difficult time making her place here."

"Why do you suppose that is?" Judith asked.

"Some of the older women think she's uppity," Isabelle said.

"Why?"

"She keeps to herself," Isabelle explained. "I think she's homesick for her family."

"Are you homesick for your family?"

"At times I am," Isabelle admitted. "But Winslow's aunts have been most kind to me. Would you tell me what other suggestions this midwife had? Does she believe in using the birthing hook?" Isabelle turned to straighten the covers on the bed, but not before Judith saw the fear in her eyes.

"How would you know about such a thing?"

"Agnes showed it to me."

"Good God," Judith whispered before she could stop herself. She took a deep breath to rid herself of her anger. She wasn't there to cause trouble, and knew it wouldn't be at all appropriate to criticize the methods the midwives used here. "Maude doesn't believe in using the birthing hook," she said. She kept her voice even, almost pleasant. "She says it's barbaric."

Isabelle didn't show any reaction to that explanation. She continued to ask Judith questions. Every now and again she'd bite on her lower lip and sweat would break out on her brow. Judith thought the discussion was upsetting her.

Winslow and Iain still hadn't come back inside. When Judith made that mention to Isabelle, she laughed again. "My husband is probably enjoying the peace outside. I've been difficult to get along with lately."

Judith laughed. "It must be a common affliction, Isabelle. Frances Catherine said the exact same thing to me not an hour ago."

"Is she afraid of Agnes?"

"Are you?"

"Yes."

Judith let out a weary sigh. God's truth, she was beginning to be afraid of the woman, too. Agnes sounded like a monster. Did she have no compassion in her heart?

"How much time do you have before your laboring begins?"

She wouldn't look at Judith when she answered. "A week or two."

"Tomorrow we will talk about this again. Would you come to Frances Catherine's home? Perhaps the three of us can find a way to solve this worry about Agnes."

Isabelle, I'm completely without experience. I've never even seen a birthing, but I do know that the more information we have, the less chance fear has to catch hold. Isn't that true?"

"You would help me?"

"Of course," Judith answered. "Why don't we go outside now? The fresh air will do you good."

Isabelle was in full agreement. Judith was just reaching for the door when Winslow opened it. He nodded to Judith, then turned to frown at his wife.

"Why are you out of bed?"

"I have need for some fresh air," she answered. "Have you taken the birthing chair back to Agnes yet?"

He shook his head. "I will in the morning."

"Please bring it back inside," she requested. "It will be a comfort for me to have it near."

She smiled at Judith when she gave her husband that explanation. Winslow looked confused. "But you didn't want to look at it," he reminded her. "You said—"

"I've changed my mind," Isabelle interrupted. "I've remembered my manners as well. Good evening, Laird Iain," she called out.

Judith had already walked outside and now stood next to Iain. She refused to look at him. She bowed to Isabelle and Winslow and then started walking back to Frances Catherine's cottage.

Iain caught up with her at the crest. "Winslow and Isabelle both want you to know they're thankful for bringing Margaret's gifts. You cleaned their cottage, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It needed cleaning." Her words were clipped, cold.

Iain clasped his hands behind his back and continued to walk by her side. "Judith, don't make this more difficult than it already is," he said in a harsh whisper.

She was walking so fast she was almost running. "I don't mean to make anything difficult," she replied. "I'll stay away from you and you'll stay away from me. I'm already over this insignificant, puny, inconsequential attraction. I don't even remember kissing you."

They had reached the cluster of trees in front of the courtyard leading to Frances Catherine's cottage when she told him that outrageous lie.

"The hell you have forgotten," he muttered. He grabbed hold of her shoulders and forced her to turn around. Then he took hold of her chin and pushed her face up.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Reminding you."

His mouth came down on hers then, sealing off any protest she might have wanted to make. And Lord, how he kissed her. His mouth was hot, hungry, and his tongue thrust inside with gentle insistence. She went weak in her knees. She didn't fall down, though. She sagged against him; he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her up against him. His mouth slanted over hers again and again, and God help him, he couldn't seem to get enough of her. She returned his kiss with equal passion, perhaps even more, and the last coherent thought she had before his kiss completely robbed her of the ability to think at all was that Iain certainly knew how to rid her of her anger.

Patrick opened the door and let out a snort of laughter at the sight before him. Iain ignored his brother, and Judith was oblivious to everything but the man holding her so tenderly in his arms.

He finally pulled back and looked down with arrogant pleasure at the beautiful woman in his arms. Her mouth was swollen, rosy as well, and her eyes were still misty with passion. He suddenly wanted to kiss her again.

"Go inside now, Judith, while I still have enough discipline to let you."

She didn't understand what he meant by that remark. She didn't understand his frown either. "If you dislike kissing me so much, why do you continue to do so?"

She looked thoroughly disgruntled. He laughed.

She took exception to that reaction. "You may let go of me now," she ordered.

"I already have."

Judith realized she was still clinging to him, and immediately pulled away. She patted her hair back over her shoulder and turned to walk inside. Spotting Patrick lounging against the open doorway, she felt her face heat to a full blush.

"You mustn't make anything out of what you've just seen," she announced. "Iain and I don't even like each other."

"You could have fooled me," Patrick drawled out.

It would be impolite for her to kick her host, she supposed, and so she gave him a frown instead as she walked past him.

Patrick wasn't finished teasing her yet. "Aye, it seemed to me you two were liking each other a whole lot, Judith."

Iain had turned to go back up the hill. He heard Patrick's remark and immediately turned back. "Let it go, Patrick."

"Wait up," Patrick called out. "I've something to discuss with you," he added as he hurriedly pulled the door closed behind him.

Judith was thankful for the privacy. Frances Catherine was already sound asleep. She was even more thankful for that blessing. Her friend would have plied her with questions if she'd been awake and seen Iain kissing her, and Judith simply wasn't up to answering.

Patrick had placed a tall screen at an angle in the corner of the room behind the table and chairs. There was a narrow bed with a pretty forest-green quilt on top. Her satchels were neatly stacked against one wall next to a narrow chest. A white porcelain pitcher and matching bowl were on top of the chest next to the wooden vase filled with fresh wildflowers.

Frances Catherine had had a hand in arranging the make-do bedchamber. Patrick never would have thought to add flowers. He wouldn't have unpacked her brush and looking glass, either, and both were within easy reach on the corner of the stool on the other side of the bed.

Judith smiled over her friend's thoughtfulness. She didn't realize her hands were still shaking until she tried to undo the latches at the top of her gown. Iain's kiss had done that, she realized, and dear God, what was she going to do about him? From what Frances Catherine had told her about the hatred between the Maitlands and the Macleans, Judith doubted Iain would have touched her if he'd known she was his enemy's daughter.

She remembered she'd told her friend Iain would protect her. Now she felt a desperate need to protect herself from him. She didn't want to love him. Oh, it was all so impossible for her to sort out. She wanted to weep, but she knew crying wouldn't solve any of her problems.

She was too exhausted from the long day and the journey here to think the matter through logically. Problems were always easier to solve in the morning light anyway, weren't they?

Sleep eluded her for a good long while, however. When she was finally able to push the worry about her growing attraction for Iain aside, her mind immediately turned to the worry about Frances Catherine.

Judith kept seeing the look of fear in Isabelle's eyes when she mentioned the midwife's name, and after Judith finally drifted off to sleep, she was locked in a nightmare about birthing hooks and screams.

She was awakened in the dead of the night. When she opened her eyes, she found Iain kneeling on one knee at her side. She reached up, touched the side of his face with her fingertips, and then closed her eyes again. She thought she was having an incredibly realistic dream.

Iain wouldn't quit prodding her. The next time she opened her eyes, she noticed that Patrick was also in the little room. He stood behind Iain. Frances Catherine stood by her husband's side.

Judith turned her attention back to Iain. "Are you taking me home now?"

The question didn't make any sense, but then neither did his presence.

"Winslow asked me to come and get you," Iain explained.

She slowly sat up. "Why?" she asked. She slumped against him and closed her eyes again.

"Judith, try to wake up," Iain commanded in a much stronger voice.

"She's exhausted." Frances Catherine stated the obvious.

Judith shook her head. She pulled the covers up to her chin and held them there. "Iain, this isn't proper," she whispered. "What does Winslow want?"

He stood up before explaining. "Isabelle asks that you come to her. She just started her laboring. Winslow said you have plenty of time. The pains aren't strong yet."

Judith was suddenly wide awake. "Are the midwives there yet?"

Iain shook his head. "She doesn't want them to know."

"She wants you, Judith," Frances Catherine explained.

"I'm not a midwife."

Iain's smile was gentle. "It appears you are now."