

## The Secret Novel Chapter 4

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### Chapter 4

She couldn't wait to be rid of him. Judith knew she wasn't thinking like a reasonable person now. The long, endless journey had worn her out so thoroughly, her mind had turned to mush. She was admittedly overreacting to Iain's harsh words. She couldn't seem to sort anything out because her feelings kept getting in her way. She was still feeling the sting of his rejection, she supposed.

"Judith, come and meet Cameron," Alex called out.

Everyone turned to look at her. She hurried over to stand in front of their host. She made a quick curtsy and forced a smile. It was a difficult undertaking, for Cameron was staring at her as though she'd just turned into a demon... or worse. The expression on his face didn't leave any doubt as to what he was thinking. He was apparently appalled by her very existence.

Oh Lord, she really didn't have the strength to endure this nonsense. She let out a little sigh, then said, "Good eve to you, sir."

"She's English."

Cameron roared that statement of fact with such force, the veins in his forehead stood out. Judith had spoken in perfect Gaelic, but she hadn't been able to conceal the English accent. Her clothes were another clue as to her heritage, of course. While she well understood the shameful distrust that existed between the Scots and the English, Cameron's hostility was so unreasonable and so filled with loathing, he frightened her. She instinctively took a step back in an attempt to protect herself from his wrath.

She bumped into Iain. She tried to move to his side, but he waylaid that intent when he put his hands on her shoulders. He tightened his hold and pulled her back until she was pressed against him,

Iain didn't say a word for a long minute. Alex walked over to stand next to his laird. Then Gowrie strolled over to stand on the opposite side. Brodick was the last to move. He stared at Iain, waiting for permission, and when his laird finally took his gaze off Cameron and turned to give him a nod, Brodick walked over to stand directly in front of Judith.

She was literally pressed between the two warriors. She tried to peek around Brodick's back, but Iain tightened his hold so she couldn't move at all.

"We've already noticed she's English, Cameron," Brodick announced in a low yet forceful voice. "Now I would like you to notice that Lady Judith is under our protection. We're taking her home with us."

The elderly man seemed to shake himself out of his stupor. "Yes, of course," he stammered out. "It was just a surprise, you see, hearing her... voice and all."

Cameron didn't like the look in Laird Maitland's eyes. He decided he had better smooth over this breach of manners as quickly as possible. He took a step to his left so that he could look directly at the Englishwoman when he made his apology.

Brodick moved with him, effectively blocking his intent. "Are we all welcome here?"

"Of course you are," Cameron replied. His fingers threaded through his stock of white hair in a nervous gesture, and he fervently hoped the laird didn't notice how his hand was shaking. He'd really made a muck of this greeting. The last thing he wanted to do was offend such a powerful, ruthless man... and if he had offended Iain, he knew it probably would be the very last thing he'd ever do on this sweet earth.

Cameron resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to make the sign of the cross. He couldn't hold Iain's hard stare long, and turned his full attention to Brodick. He cleared his throat, then said, "Since the day your brother married my only daughter, you and every other member of the Maitland clan are welcome here. Laird Maitland's woman, too, of course," he hastily added. He half turned, then bellowed to his wife, "Margaret, put the supper on the table for our guests."

Judith had wondered why Iain hadn't spoken up, but as soon as Cameron mentioned that Brodick's brother was married to his daughter, she understood why Iain had given him the duty of sorting out the awkward situation.

Cameron beckoned everyone inside. Judith reached out and grabbed hold of the back of Brodick's plaid. He immediately turned around. "Thank you for speaking up for me," she whispered.

"You needn't thank me, Judith." His voice was gruff with embarrassment.

"Yes, I must," she argued. "Brodick, will you please explain to your relative that I'm not Iain's woman. He seems to misunderstand."

Brodick stared at her a long minute without saying a word, then glanced up to look at Iain.

Why was he being so hesitant? "I'm only asking that you set the man straight," she said.

"No."

"No?" she asked. "Why in heaven's name not?"

Brodick didn't actually smile, but the corners of his eyes crinkled together in what she decided was amusement. "Because you are Iain's woman," he drawled out.

She shook her head. "Where did you get that ridiculous notion? I'm only a guest—"

She quit trying to explain when Brodick turned and walked inside the cottage. She watched the obstinate man leave. Alex and Gowrie followed. Those two were openly grinning.

Judith stayed where she was. Iain finally let go of her shoulders and gave her a little prod:

She didn't budge. He moved to stand beside her. His head was bent down toward hers. "You may come inside now."

"Why didn't you say something when Cameron called me your woman?"

He shrugged. "I didn't feel like it."

He wasn't telling her the truth, of course. Cameron had been wrong; Judith wasn't his woman, but he had liked the sound of it too much to take exception. Lord, he was weary to be thinking such foolish thoughts. "Come inside," Iain ordered again, his voice a bit more gruff than he'd intended.

She shook her head and turned her gaze to the ground.

"What's this?" he demanded. He forced her face up with the back of his hand under her chin.

"I don't wish to go inside."

She'd sounded downright pitiful. He tried not to smile. "Why not?" he asked.

She shrugged. He gently squeezed her jaw. She knew he wouldn't let up on her until she'd given him a proper answer. "I just don't want to go where I'm not wanted," she whispered. His smile was filled with tenderness. She suddenly felt like crying. Her eyes were already getting misty. "I'm overly exhausted this evening," she excused.

"But that isn't the reason you wish to stay out here, is it?"

"I just explained... I was humiliated," she blurted out. "I know I shouldn't take his dislike personally. All the Highlanders hate the English, and most of the English hate the Scots, even the border Scots... and I hate all the hatred. It's... ignorant, Iain."

He nodded agreement. Some of the bluster went out of her. It was difficult to stay outraged when he wasn't arguing with her. "Did he frighten you?"

"His anger did," she admitted. "It was most unreasonable. Or am I overreacting again? I'm too weary to know."

She was exhausted. He hadn't paid enough attention, or he certainly would have noticed the dark smudges under her eyes before now. She had taken hold of his hand when she'd admitted she'd felt humiliated, and she still hadn't let go.

Yes, Judith looked tired, defeated too, and utterly beautiful to him.

She suddenly straightened her shoulders. "You must go inside. I'll be happy to wait out here."

He smiled as he pulled his hand away from hers. "But I'd be happier if you went inside with me," he announced.

He was through discussing the topic. He threw his arm around her shoulders, gave her a little squeeze, and then dragged her along with him toward the doorway.

"You said you might be overreacting once again," he remarked as he hauled her along. He was deliberately ignoring the fact that she was acting like a stiff board. The woman had a stubborn streak in her nature. That flaw amused him. No other woman had ever appeared to be disgruntled with him, but Judith was quite different from all the women he'd known in the past. She was glaring at him every other minute, or so it seemed. He found her reactions refreshingly honest. She didn't have to try to impress him, and she sure as hell didn't have it in her nature to cower away from him, either. Odd, but her uninhibited behavior freed him. He didn't have to act the laird over a submissive subject with Judith. The fact that she was an outsider seemed to break the bindings of traditions pressed upon him as leader of his clan.

Iain had to force himself back to the question nagging him. "When was the first time you overreacted?" he asked.

"When you kissed me."

They'd reached the opening when she whispered that admission. He came to a dead stop and grabbed hold of her. "I don't understand," he said. "How did you overreact?"

She could feel her face heating up. She shrugged his arm away from her shoulder. "You were obviously angry with me... after, and that made me angry, too. I shouldn't have cared," she added with a firm nod.

She didn't wait to gain his reaction to her outburst of honesty. She hurried inside. The older woman she'd noticed standing in the shadows came forward to greet her. Her smile seemed genuine to Judith, and some of the tension went out of her shoulders when she smiled back.

Margaret was a pretty woman. The creases edged in her brow and around the corners of her mouth didn't take away from her appeal. She had lovely green-colored eyes with flecks of gold in them, and thick brown hair streaked through with strands of gray. She'd fashioned a braid at the nape of her neck. Although the woman was a good

foot taller than Judith, she wasn't at all intimidating. Kindness radiated from the woman.

"Thank you for allowing me to come into your home," Judith said after she'd completed a curtsy.

Margaret wiped her hands on the white apron she wore around her middle before returning the curtsy. "If you'll take your seat at the table, I'll finish getting our supper ready."

Judith didn't want to sit with the men. Iain had already joined the group, and Cameron was leaning across the table pouring him a gobletful of wine. Judith's stomach immediately tightened. She took a quick breath to calm herself. A single cup of wine wasn't going to turn Iain mean... was it? This reaction was absolutely ridiculous, she told herself. And uncontrollable. Her stomach was aching as though she'd swallowed fire. Iain wasn't at all like Tekel. He wouldn't turn ugly. He wouldn't.

Iain happened to glance up. He took one look at Judith and knew something was terribly wrong. The color had left her face. She looked as though she was in a panic about something. He was about to get up from the table to find out what was troubling her when he realized she was staring at the jug of wine.

What in God's name had gotten into her?

"Judith? Did you wish to drink some—"

She vehemently shook her head. "Wouldn't water be more... refreshing after such a long day's journey?"

He leaned back. What they drank seemed damned important to her. He didn't have the faintest idea why, and he guessed that didn't really matter. She was obviously upset. If the woman wanted them to drink water, then they would drink water.

"Yes," he agreed. "Water would be more refreshing."

Her shoulders slumped with relief.

Brodick noticed her reaction too. "We'll be getting up early, Cameron," he said, though his gaze was locked on Judith. "We won't drink wine until we're home."

Margaret had heard the conversation, too. She hurried over to the table with a pitcherful of fresh spring water. Judith carried over more goblets.

"Sit yourself down and rest," Margaret told her.

"I would rather help you," Judith replied.

Margaret nodded. "Fetch that stool and sit by the hearth. You can stir the stew while I see to cutting the bread."

Judith was relieved. The men were in discussion now, and from the frowns they wore, she assumed it was an important topic. She didn't want to interrupt. More importantly, she didn't want to sit next to Cameron, and the only empty stool was at the end of the table, on Cameron's left.

Judith carried the stool from against the wall over to the hearth to follow Margaret's instructions. She noticed that the woman kept giving her covert glances. She obviously wanted to speak to her, but must have been concerned about her husband's reaction. She kept glancing over to the table to see if Cameron was paying them any attention.

"We rarely get company," Margaret whispered.

Judith nodded. She watched Margaret peek over at her husband again, then turn back to her.

"I'm curious as to why you're wanting to go to the Maitlands' home," she whispered next.

Judith smiled. "My friend married a Maitland and requested that I come for the birthing of her first child," she answered, keeping her voice as whisper-soft as Margaret's had been when she asked her question.

"How did you ever meet?" Margaret wanted to know.

"At the festival on the border."

Margaret nodded. "We have the same festivals in the Highlands, though it comes in the fall and not the spring."

"Have you ever attended?"

"When Isabelle still lived with us we went," Margaret answered. "Cameron's been too busy to go since," she added with a shrug. "I always had a fine time."

"I understand Isabelle's married to Brodick's brother," Judith said. "Was it a recent wedding?"

"No, over four years ago now," Margaret answered.

The sadness in Margaret's voice was most evident. Judith quit stirring the meaty stew and leaned back from the fire so she could give Margaret her full attention. Odd, but although they were virtual strangers, she felt the urge to comfort the woman. She seemed to be terribly lonely, and Judith well understood that feeling.

"Haven't you had time to go and visit your daughter?"

"Not once have I seen my Isabelle since she wed," Margaret answered. "The Maitlands stay to themselves. They don't take to outsiders."

Judith couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But you're certainly not an outsider," she protested.

"Isabelle belongs to Winslow now. It wouldn't be proper to ask that she come to visit us, and it wouldn't be proper either to ask to go to her."

Judith shook her head. She'd never heard of anything so preposterous. "Does she send messages to you?"

"Who would bring them?"

A long minute passed in silence. "I would," Judith whispered.

Margaret looked over at her husband, then turned her gaze back to Judith. "You would do that for me?"

"Of course."

"I'm worrying it wouldn't be proper," Margaret said.

"Of course it would be proper," Judith argued. "It wouldn't be difficult, either, Margaret. If you have any messages you'd like me to give Isabelle, I promise I'll find her and give them to her. Then, on my way back to England, I'll give you her messages. Perhaps there will even be an invitation to visit," she added.

"We're going outside to see about the horses, wife," Cameron announced in a booming voice. "Shouldn't take us any time at all. Supper almost ready?"

"Aye, Cameron," Margaret answered. "It will be on the table when you come back inside."

The men left the cottage. Cameron shut the door behind them. "Your husband sounded angry," Judith remarked.

"Oh, no, he's not angry," Margaret rushed out. "He's a little nervous, though. It's quite an honor to have the Maitland laird in our home. Cameron will be boasting about this for a good month or two."

Margaret set the treachers on the table, then added another jug of water. The bread was sliced into wedges. Judith helped her ladle the stew into a large wooden bowl and put it in the center of the long table.

"Perhaps, during our supper, you could ask Brodick how Isabelle is doing," Judith suggested.

Margaret looked appalled. "It would be an insult for me to ask," she explained. "If I ask if she's happy, then I'm suggesting Winslow isn't making her happy. Do you see how complicated it is?"

It wasn't complicated, it was ridiculous in Judith's estimation. She could feel herself getting angry on Margaret's behalf. The Maitlands were being cruel-hearted with such an attitude. Didn't any of them have any compassion for relatives like mothers and fathers?

She didn't know what she would do if someone told her she could never see her aunt Millicent and uncle Herbert again. She got all misty-eyed just thinking about it.

"If you were to ask..." Margaret smiled at Judith while she waited for her to catch on.

Judith nodded. "Brodict might think that because I'm English, I don't know any better."

"Yes."

"I'll be happy to ask, Margaret," she promised. "Are all the clans in the Highlands like the Maitlands? Do they all isolate themselves from outsiders?"

"The Dunbars and the Macleans do," Margaret answered. "When they aren't fighting with each other, they stay to themselves," she explained. "The Dunbar holding sits between the Maitlands and the Macleans, and Cameron tells me they're constantly fighting over land rights. None of them attend the festivals, but all the other clans do. Are all the English like you?"

Judith tried to concentrate on what Margaret was asking. It was a difficult task, for she was still reeling from the woman's casual remark that the Macleans were the Maitlands' enemies.

"Milady?" Margaret asked. "Are you feeling ill?"

"Oh, I'm feeling very well," Judith replied. "You asked me if I was like all the other English, didn't you?"

"I did," Margaret replied, frowning over the notice that her guest's complexion had turned so pale.



"I don't know if I'm like the others or not," Judith answered. " 'Tis a fact I've led a rather sheltered life. Margaret, how in heaven's name do the men ever find mates if they never mingle with the other clans?"

"Oh, they have their ways," Margaret answered. "Winslow came here to barter for a speckled mare. He met Isabelle and took to her right away. I was set against the union because I knew I'd never see my daughter again, but Cameron wasn't going to listen to me. Besides, you don't say no to a Maitland, leastways I've never heard of anyone trying, and Isabelle had her heart set on marrying Winslow."

"Does Winslow look like Brodick?"

"Aye, he does. He's much more quiet, though."

Judith burst into laughter. "Then he must be dead," she remarked. "Brodick rarely speaks a word."

Margaret couldn't stop herself from chuckling. "They're a strange breed, the Maitlands are, but in their defense I'll tell you that if ever Cameron came under attack or needed any true assistance, he would only have to send word to Laird Iain."

"Before the marriage, every now and again a couple of our sheep would disappear. The thievery stopped as soon as word went out that our Isabelle married a member of the Maitland clan. Cameron's gained new respectability, too. Of course, his initial reaction to meeting you might have changed that status."

"Do you mean his surprise to find out I was English?"

"Aye, he was surprised all right."

The two women looked at each other and suddenly burst into laughter just as the men returned to the cottage. Iain was the first to walk inside. He nodded to

Margaret, then paused to give Judith a frown. She guessed he didn't think her amusement was proper behavior. That possibility made her laugh all the more.

"Go and take your place at the table," Margaret instructed.

"Aren't you joining us?"

"I'll serve first, then I'll join you."

Whether she realized it or not, she'd just given Judith an excuse not to sit next to Cameron. The men had all taken their same positions. Judith picked up the stool near the hearth and carried it over to the other side of the table. Then she nudged her way between Iain and Brodick.

If the warriors were surprised by her boldness, they didn't let on. Brodick even moved over so she wouldn't be crowded.

They ate in silence. Judith waited until the men had finished before bringing up the topic of Isabella's welfare.

She decided to ease into the discussion. "Margaret, this was a fine stew."

"Thank you," Margaret replied with a faint blush.

Judith turned to Brodick. "Do you see your brother very often?"

The warrior glanced down at her, then shrugged.

"Do you see his wife, Isabelle?" she prodded.

He shrugged again. She nudged him under the table with her foot. He raised an eyebrow over that boldness. "Did you just kick me?"

So much for trying to be subtle, Judith thought. "Yes, I did kick you."

"Why?"

Iain asked that question. She turned to smile at him. "I didn't want Brodick to shrug at me again. I want him to talk about Isabelle."

"But you don't even know the woman," Iain reminded her.

"I wish to learn about her," Judith argued.

Iain looked like he thought she'd lost her mind. She let out a sigh. Then she started drumming her fingertips on the tabletop.

"Tell me about Isabelle, please," she asked Brodick again.

He ignored her.

She let out a sigh. "Brodick, would you please step outside with me for just a minute? I wish to say something terribly important to you in private."

"No."

She couldn't restrain herself. She kicked him again. Then she turned to Iain. She missed Brodick's quick grin. "Iain, please order Brodick to step outside with me."

"No."

She drummed her fingertips on the tabletop again while she considered her next ploy. She looked up, caught Margaret's pitiful expression, and determined then and there that even if she looked the fool, she would get her way.

"All right then," she announced. "I'll just have to talk to Brodick tomorrow on our journey. I'll ride with you," she added with an innocent smile. "I'll probably talk from sunup to sundown, too, Brodick, so you'd better get your rest tonight."

That threat carried substance. Brodick shoved himself away from the table and stood up. The scowl on his face was scorching. He made it apparent to everyone at the table that he was angry.

Judith wasn't angry. She was furious. God's truth, she couldn't wait to get the insensitive clod outside. She forced a smile and even managed a curtsy to her host before turning and walking out the doorway. She kept right on smiling, too, when she turned and pulled the door closed behind her.

In her haste to blister Brodick, she forgot about the two windows on either side of the door.

Margaret and Gowrie were seated with their backs to the door, but Iain and Alex had a clear view of the grassy area outside the windows.

Needless to say, everyone's curiosity was caught. Gowrie half turned on his stool to see what was going on.

Iain kept his attention centered on Brodick. The warrior faced him. He stood with his legs braced apart and his hands clasped behind his back. He wasn't trying to hide his irritation from Judith, either. Brodick had a fierce temper. Iain knew the warrior wouldn't touch Judith, no matter how angry she made him, but he could hurt her with a few cruel remarks.

Iain waited to see if he needed to intervene. The last thing he needed tonight was a weeping woman on his hands, and Brodick was almost as good at intimidating tactics as he was.

A sudden smile caught him by surprise. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Neither could Alex. "Will you look at that?" he whispered.

"I'm looking," Gowrie announced. "I'm just not believing. Is that our Brodick backing away?" He snorted with amusement. "I've never seen that particular expression on his face before. What do you think she's saying to him?"

She was giving the warrior hell, Iain decided. Judith's hands were settled on her hips, and when she'd started toward her adversary, she didn't stop. Brodick was literally backing away from her. He looked... astonished, too.

Her voice was muffled by the wind and the distance, but Iain knew she wasn't whispering. Nay, she was shouting, all right, and every now and then Brodick actually flinched.

Iain turned to look at Margaret. Her hands covered her mouth, and when she realized he was watching her, she immediately turned her gaze to the tabletop. She wasn't quick enough. He caught the look of worry in her eyes and knew that she was somehow involved.

The door opened. Judith forced a smile and hurried back to the table. She sat down, folded her hands in her lap, and let out a sigh. Brodick took his time following. When he was once again settled on his stool, the attention turned to him. Judith felt it safe enough to nod to Margaret. She winked, too.

Iain caught that action. His curiosity intensified.

Brodick cleared his throat. "Isabelle and Winslow have a cottage almost this size." He'd muttered that comment.

"Well now, that's fine to hear," Cameron replied.

Brodick nodded. He acted terribly uncomfortable. "She's due to have her baby any time now."

Margaret let out a happy gasp. Tears filled her eyes. She reached out and took hold of her husband's hand. "We're going to have a grandchild," she whispered.

Cameron nodded. His eyes, Judith noticed, were getting misty, too. He turned his attention to his goblet.

Iain finally understood what Judith's game had been. She'd thrown a tantrum, embarrassed herself, too, and all because she wanted to help Margaret find out how her daughter was doing. Judith was such a gentlewoman. It had never dawned on him to think Isabelle's parents might want news about their daughter, but an outsider had seen the obvious and had set out to help.

"Were there any specific questions you would like to ask about your daughter?" Brodick asked.

Margaret didn't just have one question. She had hundreds. Alex and Gowrie even answered a few of them.

Judith couldn't have been more pleased. It did chafe to know that the only reason Brodick was cooperating was because she had threatened to ride with him. The thought of having to touch her was more repulsive than talk about private family matters. Still, what did her feelings matter? The look of joy on Margaret's face was adequate compensation for Brodick's surly attitude.

The cottage was wonderfully warm, almost toasty. Judith tried to pay attention to the conversation, but exhaustion made that a difficult task. She noticed Cameron had tried to refill Brodick's goblet with more water, but the pitcher was empty.

Judith put the stool she'd been sitting on back against the wall near the hearth and carried another pitcher of water over to the table. Cameron nodded his thanks to her.

Lord, she was weary. The men swallowed up the space she'd occupied, and her back was aching too much to sit there anyway. She went over to the stool by the hearth, sat down and rested her shoulders against the cool stone wall. She closed her eyes and was sound asleep less than a minute later.

Iain couldn't take his gaze off her. She was so lovely. Her face looked angelic. He stared at her a long, long while, until he realized she was slumping herself off the stool.

He nodded to Brodick to continue the story he was telling, then went over to stand next to Judith. He leaned against the wall, folded his arms across his chest in a relaxed stance and listened to the tale Brodick was telling about Winslow and Isabelle. Margaret and Cameron were hanging on his every word. They both smiled when Brodick made mention that Isabelle was generous to a fault.

Judith lost her balance. She would have pitched forward if Iain hadn't reached down to steady her. He pushed her back against the wall, then nudged her head toward him. The side of her face rested against the lower portion of his thigh.

A good hour passed before Iain called a halt to the conversation. "We'll leave at first light, Cameron. We've still two full days ahead of us before we reach home."

"Your woman can have our bed," Cameron suggested. His voice started out loud, but then he turned and saw that Judith was sleeping, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"She'll sleep outside with us," Iain replied. He softened his denial. "Judith wouldn't want you to give up your bed for her."

Neither Margaret nor Cameron argued over the laird's decision. Iain leaned down, transferred Judith into his arms, then stood up.

"The lass is dead to the world," Alex remarked with a grin.

"Would you like extra blankets? The wind's biting tonight," Margaret warned.

Gowrie opened the door for Iain. "We have everything we need."

Iain carried Judith through the opening, then suddenly stopped. He turned around.

"Thank you for the supper, Margaret. It was a fine meal."

The compliment sounded awkward to him, but Margaret looked pleased. Her blush was as bright as the fire in the hearth. Cameron acted as though he'd been given the praise, too. His chest swelled until it was in jeopardy of bursting.

Iain continued on toward the trees across from the barn. The foliage would give them protection against the wind, privacy too. He held Judith while Alex fixed a shelter for her, then knelt down and placed her on the plaid Gowrie had spread inside the small fur-lined tent.

"I promised the lass she would have a warm bed inside tonight," Alex remarked.

Iain shook his head. "She stays with us," he announced.

No one argued over that statement. The men turned and walked away just as Iain was covering Judith with a second plaid. She never opened her eyes. The back of his hand deliberately brushed against her cheek.

"What am I going to do about you?" he whispered.

He hadn't expected an answer and didn't get one. Judith snuggled under the blankets and let out a little moan.

He was reluctant to leave her. He forced himself to stand up, and grabbed one of the plaids Alex offered him on his way over to the nearest tree. He scratched his shoulders against the bark, sat down, leaned back and closed his eyes.

A sound he'd never heard before awakened him in the dead of the night. The other men heard it, too.

"What in God's name is that noise?" Brodick muttered.

Judith was making all the racket. She was wide awake, miserable too. She thought she was in jeopardy of freezing to death. She couldn't quit shivering. Her teeth were chattering, and that was the sound the men were hearing.



"I didn't mean to wake you, Brodick," she called out. Her voice literally trembled with each word. "I was moaning over the cold."

"You're really cold, lass?" Alex asked. The surprise in his voice was evident.

"I just said that I was," she answered.

"Come here," Iain commanded, sounding a bit surly.

Judith responded in kind. "No."

He smiled in the darkness. "Then I'll have to come to you."

"You stay away from me, Iain Maitland," she commanded. "And if you think to order me to quit being cold, I'm warning you now—it won't work."

He walked over to stand in front of the tent. She could only see the tips of his boots until he tore the furs away. He destroyed the cocoon in seconds.

"That helped," she muttered. She sat up so she could glare at him.

Iain pushed her back and stretched out on the ground beside her. He rested on his side, giving her the heat from his back.

Brodick suddenly appeared on her other side. He stretched out on his side with his back toward her. Judith instinctively wiggled closer to Iain. Brodick followed her, until his back was pressed against hers.

She was certainly warm enough now. The heat radiating from the giant warriors was amazing.

It felt wonderful.

"She feels like a block of ice," Brodick remarked.

Judith started laughing. The sound made both Iain and Brodick smile.

"Brodick?"

"What is it?"

He sounded mean again. She didn't let that bother her. She was finally catching on to his ways, and knew the bluster was all for show. Underneath that gruff exterior beat a kind heart. "Thank you."

"What for?"

"For taking the time to talk about Isabelle."

The warrior grunted. She laughed again.

"Judith?"

She snuggled closer to Iain's back before answering him. "Yes, Iain?"

"Quit wiggling and go to sleep."

She felt like obeying him. She fell asleep almost immediately.

A long while passed before Brodick spoke again. He wanted to be certain Judith really was asleep and wouldn't hear what he was going to say. "Each time she's given a choice, she turns to you."

"How's that, Brodick?"

"She's glued to your back now, not mine. She prefers riding with you, too. Didn't you notice the pitiful expression on her face when you made her ride with Alex today? She looked damn forlorn."

Iain smiled. "I noticed," he admitted. "But if she prefers me, it's only because I'm Patrick's brother."

"There's a hell of a lot more to it than that."

Iain didn't respond to that comment.

Several minutes passed before Brodick spoke again. "Let me know, Iain."

"Let you know what?"

"If you're going to keep her or not."

"And if I'm not?"

"Then I am."