

PROLOGUE

Scottish Highlands, May 5th, 1605--A warhorse, eighteen hands at the withers, black as the encroaching night, plunges through the mist thickening along the moor. Slivers of moonlight cut across the rocky trail. The stallion's muscles ripple and flex as he climbs from rolling moorland into the craggy hills.

Tethered to his back, is a man, his master, barely conscious. The man hunches in the saddle; his bloody hands grip the animal's mane. The horse's flesh rips and bleeds beneath cords of hemp as the man slides from side to side.

Sweat foams on the animal's chest and around his mouth where the bit clicks against his teeth. He sniffs, nostrils flaring. The acrid smell of blood rakes the horse's nerves. Boney, finger-like clouds reach across the night sky and shadows dance in the recesses of the woods. The stallion shies. He knows this is an unfortunate night.

When the fog begins to lift a gentle drizzle trickles out of the sky to cool the

horse's sweaty hide. He sniffs again. With the familiar scent of pine mixed with the musty odor of fresh-turned field dirt the stallion senses he is nearing home.

He stops along a ridge above a familiar rippling loch. The threads of fog melt away, revealing the masonry of a thick outer wall. Like a great pale dragon, a sixty-foot high barrier guards an immense castle. The stallion limps down a steep path to a natural land bridge, where he crosses the loch. He sees conical-topped towers, spires, and turrets, tiled with slate and clay. Clouds of mist wash over the towers with their pointed peaks looking as if they were hung from the heavens.

The stallion paws the ground in front of the gate. He shifts under the dead weight of his master. The portcullis, with its solid oak timbers and sturdy steel bars, stands secured against outsiders. The horse stamps again. The bloody and beaten body sags in the saddle.

CHAPTER ONE

Gilbert MacIntosh, Castle Cairn's constable, paced the sentry walk that night atop the outer wall. As he looked out over the loch, mist rose like filament off the water. With so much fog, he thought, a wee fairy could jump through a window, steal a child, and no one would know the better. He shuddered. If only his wife and her pesky mother would stop talking about the wretched little imps. Those two women told stories to tease him, but he knew enough to understand that occurrences like these thick mists portend more than a change in the weather.

A knot had formed in Gilbert's stomach when he had come on watch. He often took the bleak hours between midnight and dawn. As constable he was in charge of the gunners, men-at-arms, armourers, and porters, and could have sent anyone up to keep a look-out. But Gilbert's keen sensitivity to all things amorphous and mystical compelled him to do the job. Now that same knot leapt to his throat as he heard hooves scraping

across the packed earthen bridge. A beast snorted and stamped. Gilbert crossed himself. "Mother Mary, `tis probably a devil or a witch," he whispered. Gilbert leaned through the crenel of the battlement, squinting to see. Through the mist he could make out a shape in front of the gatehouse, but fog rolled in again. He would have to go outside for a closer look. He swore, then crossed himself once more.

Gilbert whistled, motioning to a thin fellow in his twenties. He trotted over. "I can hardly see ya for the fog, Gil."

Gilbert put a beefy hand on Sean's shoulder. "Look over there, lad." He pointed with a thick index finger in the direction of the gate. "I'm going to see to that animal. I want ya to keep a keen eye on me while I do it."

"Animal? I see nothing, Gilbert. Are ya sure you're not imaginin' things? It's been a long watch."

Gilbert frowned. "Aye, Sean. It's been a long watch, but I just saw the beast. And I heard `im. Now, look steady and make sure I don't get snatched up by a witch."

"Well, I'll watch ya, but I'd wager it'd take a pretty large witch to snatch up the likes of you." Sean laughed. Gilbert did not. Sean cleared his throat. "All right, man, I'll keep a close watch on ya."

For the third time that morning Gilbert crossed himself. He made his way down an outer stairwell. When he stepped off the last stone, he hesitated, then with the caution of a seasoned soldier, moved toward the dark figure pawing the ground. The stallion sensed his presence, turned his broad head, and snorted.

"I believe I know ya," Gilbert whispered. He inched forward, squinting through the thick strands of mist. "I'm not a gamblin' man, but I'd wager you're that fine beast the

master rides." He moved closer. "Ahhh, `tis you, Jacob. Here now. Calm down a bit. Let me get a better look at ya."

He reached out and stroked Jacob's velvety nose. "There now, boy."

Saliva edged the horse's mouth as he champed down on the bit. Sweat glistened along his chest and mud caked his front legs.

Gilbert moved his palm along the animal's muscular neck, then patted his shoulder. The fog swirled away from his movements. Without warning, tiny hairs pricked up along the guard's spine. A body lay slumped on the beast's back. Gilbert's heart hammered in his chest.

He took a deep breath and clicked his tongue. He spoke in soothing Gaelic, "Oigeach mor cunbhalach." The stallion responded to the familiar language. Gilbert lifted a lock of the thick dark hair from the rider's face. It was as he had feared. This person, this man, was his master, the Lord of Cairn, Duncan Gordon. "Ahh, lad. Why did we let you go alone?"

Blood ran from Duncan's nose and mouth, making its way across ghostly pale skin. A troubling blue color stained his lips. Gilbert gripped the reins as he shouted. "Open the gates!" Jacob jerked his head. His agitation rose. Gilbert twisted the reins tight. "Open the gates," he bellowed, "Open the gates."

Sean stood above on the sentry walk, trying to get a good look at Gilbert and the horse by the gatehouse. The fog thinned. Sean recognized Jacob. He joined in the shouting. "Open the gates. `Tis the master's horse." More guards peered over the wall. Two sturdy men raised the portcullis and swung back the gates.

Sean's brother Robert ran up along side him. "What do ya see, Sean?"

"'Tis Duncan's horse, Jacob."

Gilbert led the horse into the courtyard, barking out orders. "Angus, fetch Molly!" A young stable boy darted off in the direction of the main keep. Two men ran forward carrying torches. As light illuminated the scene, Gilbert winced. On the horse's stomach deep fleshy wounds seeped a clear liquid mixed with blood. A rope bound Duncan to the animal, and he too showed the same pulpy gashes along his wrists and ankles.

Sean dashed down from the outer wall, skipping two and three steps at a time. He pushed his way through the gathering crowd, stopping next to Gilbert. "Dear God," he whispered. "I knew something like this would happen."

"Sean." Gilbert slipped a sharp bone-handled dirk from his leather belt. "Take the reins." With the sharp little knife he sawed on each piece of hemp until it popped. Sean held the frightened animal. The horse's belly and sides wept blood. Shredded flesh zig-zagged Duncan's back where the ropes had bound his body.

Angus returned, breathless. "Molly's comin' as fast as she can."

"Thank ya, lad." Gilbert cut the final cord that lashed the slumping form to the saddle. They lowered Duncan onto the wet courtyard stones. Somewhere in the distance a rooster crowed. A washer-woman threw out a bucket full of water. She stopped, considered the commotion, then from curiosity moved in to see what had everyone abuzz. Torches flickered and hissed in the intermittent rainfall.

Gilbert knelt next to his young master who looked white as the lilies that grew in the garden, except where deep blue and purple bruises splotched his skin. He placed his warm hand against Duncan's cool forehead. Gilbert looked up at Angus. The older man's brow furrowed, his voice solemn, "Angus, lad, we'll need someone to fetch the elders."

"I'll see to it, sir." Angus dashed away to rouse Cairn's best riders. With luck they would reach the neighboring clans and summon the chieftains by mid-morning.

Silence fell around Duncan's still form. Seldom had anyone attempted to best him in a fight. His reputation for strength and plain toughness had not been invented. Everyone knew he could take on the worst that Scotland had to offer, but now, here he lay, broken and beaten.

The crowd gathered. Molly, a robust woman in her fifty-fifth year and steward of Cairn, rushed out of the keep and into the muddy courtyard. A familiar pain gripped her. She'd grown used to patching him up after fights and youthful skirmishes. But now, at eighteen he was a man, a leader, in the eyes of his clan. Molly pushed her way through the wall of onlookers and bent down next to Duncan.

She leaned over his body, placing her ear to his chest. She heard a faint but continuous thump. She cried, "Duncan? Duncan, my boy, can you hear me?" Molly looked around. She tried to remain calm but her tone sounded urgent. "Gilbert, let's get him upstairs!"

Gilbert motioned to Sean and Robert who stood rooted in a trance. Molly shouted, "Robert, Sean! Now! Gilbert, lift him."

"Quickly, lads." Gilbert ordered. "Let's get him to his room."

The three men hoisted Duncan by his arms and legs. They quickly enlisted the help of three more bystanders. Mud sloshed across their leather boots as they trudged through the courtyard. Several wolfhounds ran alongside them, whining as they sniffed the scent of their master's blood.

They carried Duncan toward the high arched stone entrance with Molly leading the way, shouting out instructions. They moved through the wide doors and up the winding stone staircase. Molly rushed ahead of them passing woven tapestries and rows of family portraits, almost tripping over a cat. "Shoo, Mary," she shouted. The sleek tabby moved out of the way with deliberate ease. When they finally reached the lord's solar, they eased Duncan through the doorway.

Molly pulled back the heavy down covers on the massive four-post bed. Gilbert and the rest of the men lay Duncan flat on his back.

"Sean, lift his shoulders. I'll remove his waistcoat and shirt. Be careful with him," Molly chided. "Where's Anne?" She looked around for one of her young chambermaids. "Gilbert, fetch Anne and Nell. Tell them I'll need extra blankets and pillows in here." She removed the rest of his clothing. "That's good. Now get rid of these soiled things."

Sean passed the blood-stained clothes to Benjamin Fraser, Duncan's estate manager. He had heard the commotion and had just entered the room. Benjamin stood holding the plaid and the once white shirt, but said nothing. He had worked for Duncan's father, George, and this looked to be one of those unsavory situations that had become all too familiar. This son of the dawn, this Black Devil, as everyone called him, was even more complicated than the rest of his family.

Molly began to examine the bruises and cuts covering Duncan's body. She pressed on his stomach. There was some swelling. She believed a few of his ribs were broken. She opened each eyelid, looking into his pupils. The whites were bloody-red.

Duncan's men stood whispering to one another, speculating. Who would be foolish or bold enough to attack him? Who could be so powerful to come into Gordon territory unafraid?

Molly looked up from her task. "Gilbert, where on earth is Anne?"

"I've looked in the cellar and the baker's pantry, Mol. And she's not in the kitchen."

"Go and look again. Don't come back until you find her. Tell her to bring hot water, linen strips, and my herbs. She knows where my bag is, and tell her to be quick about it."

Gilbert snorted, and left once more to look for Anne. Before long he returned with Anne in tow. Soon servants began to rush back and forth, bringing blankets, pans of warm water, fresh dressings, and fragrant bags of herbs. Molly continued to clean and check every cut and bump. A lengthy gash ran down one side of Duncan's cheekbone. Anne, a quiet young woman, thin as a blade of grass, bathed Duncan, removing clotted blood from his face and body. His thick dark hair was matted and sticky, and Anne took great care to wash it.

Molly pressed lightly on the puffy ridge of Duncan's nose, noting the break. She opened his mouth to see if his teeth were still intact. Only one in the back had been chipped, otherwise he still had a good straight set. But he had bitten into his tongue and blood seeped from his mouth. At the top of his brow another cut oozed. With a clean strip of linen and a poultice of comfrey and willow, Molly bandaged the area.

She wiped blood from his ears. With less certainty than she would have liked, Molly decided it had come from the cut on his scalp. His face had swollen, but no bones,

other than his nose, were broken. She would stitch the cut along his brow and the one along his cheekbone. These were all things she could fix. Eventually the wounds would be barely-noticeable scars. Tears came to her eyes and a soft cry escaped her.

Anne gently touched Molly's shoulder. "Sit down now. Let Nell and me finish with him."

"No Anne. 'Tis best I stay busy." Molly wiped her eyes. "I'll be fine." She patted Anne's hand, looking around at the confused faces. "Please, all of you go about your tasks. I'll see to Duncan. If there's any change, I'll send Ann to tell you."

Gilbert grumbled but Sean took him by the arm and led him from the room. Robert followed. Benjamin left last, but before he walked out the door he stopped and looked back at the man lying on the bed. "Molly, Gilbert sent for the elders. I'll come back when they arrive, but if you need me to sit with him, come fetch me sooner. Don't over tire yourself."

"Thank ya, Ben. I'll call if need be."

Benjamin closed the door quietly behind him. He understood the danger associated with the power-seeking gentry. He had been in the service of the Gordons for many years and witnessed murders and manipulations hidden behind the guise of clan politics. Benjamin remembered one such circumstance where Duncan's father was commissioned by King James to ferret out witches and sorcerers. The king believed the Earl of Moray, as well as his long time enemy, the Earl of Bothwell were responsible for conjuring up a storm while he and his new bride, Anne of Denmark, sailed home from honeymooning in Scandinavia. The king took such things as witchcraft and Satanism seriously, even going so far as to write a tract entitled *Daemonologie*. When the elder

Gordon, a fierce fighter and royalist, slayed the handsome and much loved Bonnie Earl o'Moray, many believed George had done so to gain the king's favor. Benjamin walked down the long corridor a hand pressed against the ache at the top of his stomach. He couldn't help but wonder if old grudges were coming back to haunt the Gordons.

Back in Duncan's room the sound of Anne tearing bandages punctuated the silence. Molly stared at Duncan as he lay still as death on his bed. Was it only four days ago that he had been on his way to Blair Atholl to meet his cousin, Malcolm, and their long-time friend, Alasdair MacColla. They were to negotiate a peace treaty with Colin Campbell. For generations the Gordon clan had fought the Campbells over border boundaries, charters, and personal grudges. Now as she looked down on Duncan's battered body, a premonition visited her. These wounds were only the beginning of suffering, not just for the lad before her, but for the entire clan.