



THE WARLORD'S WOMAN

by
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Chapter 1

Blackness pervaded the area around them, aiding in their quest for the elusive Scottish princess. She should be riding along the main road any moment now, ripe for his taking. He took a deep breath, his anxiety turning to slow anger. Damn the Scots for taking so long!

Alexander's heart beat with an unusual ferocity as the moment drew near, his upper lip beading with sweat. This was not something he wanted to do at all. The Scots were dangerous people, never to be trusted with anyone or anything. He grimaced. Once he did as his grandfather the King bid him, the convent would be the only place for his faceless Scottish bride.

"Where do you think they are on the road?"

"I know not," he growled, irritated by the sweat rolling down his back. "She should be here soon." His legs cramped from hunching behind the thick brush but he had no choice. Detection was the last thing he wanted, at least tonight.

Alexander looked up through the canopy of trees, gauging the moon. The orb was practically non-existent since it was new. That was the reason for their choice of tonight. She would be least likely to see them coming.

Longworth, his friend for longer than he could remember, pushed out of his position and brushed his cowl back, exposing strands of blond hair. "I am weary of this, Alexander. I think it is apparent she knew we were going to be here and took another route."

"Nay, she did not," he hissed, all the while keeping his expert eyes trained on the worn path, waiting for any sign of the illustrious Princess Catherine of Scotland. "My spies tell me she knows nothing and will be here," he snapped and grabbed Longworth's gauntlet covered wrist, pulling downward with a vicious yank. "So I suggest that you sit down and stop with your womanly belly aching." His voice dropped several tones as his irritation grew. He wanted this over with as quickly as possible and to be on their way to Kent before the bastard King of Scotland knew his precious granddaughter had been kidnapped by the most notorious man in all of Britain.

Longworth muttered curses under his breath but Alexander ignored them. They were of no consequence now. His main objective was still out there, somewhere....

Through the wild calls of the night, faint creaks of carriage wheels sounded in the distance, making his ears prick up.

She was coming.

Alexander crouched lower, signaling his men to flatten themselves deeper into the

dense undergrowth. His breathing deepened as the steady beat of his heart increased. Ever since he had undertaken what his grandfather had asked, he had dreamed of what his faceless bride would look like. Now came the decisive moment. Would she be as beautiful as he had imagined or as ugly as a plow horse as most Scots were?

He gritted his teeth against the growing fury inside of him, his heart nearly pounding out of control. The last thing he wanted to do was take a Scottish woman into his bed, let alone their future Queen. If anyone else other than his grandfather had put him to this task, he would have turned it down before the man could finish his words.

Alexander flexed his fingers as the creaking grew louder, the stiff squeak of his leather gloves rising through the air, his anxiety rising. She would be rounding the bend any moment with a garrison of troops to see her safely on her way to Edinburgh. His lips thinned into a half smirk. If his information were correct, he certainly had more than enough men to overtake her party without much of a struggle. Good. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt the girl, although she was of the hated Scottish blood. He merely wanted to be on English soil before the Scots discovered her capture.

Her wooden carriage emerged from around the corner, led by four magnificent chestnut stallions. The oak body, stamped with the crest and motto of the Scottish royal family, lurched drunkenly between the suspended axles above the wheels. He could see nothing inside of the carriage but he knew she was there just the same, almost as if some inner conscience confirmed it for him.

Her assigned garrison rode behind, led by a small half-armored knight with his head hooded by a large cowl. Alexander looked to the small cavalier, noting the size and girth. How could this woman assign this small man to head her party? He smirked. More than likely, she was completely inept when it came to military tactics.

The princess' party moved forward, the groan of the wheels mingling with the clop of hooves on the dry earth. She was slowly coming in range of his grip.

Alexander raised his hand, signaling his men to get ready. Behind him, he could hear the creak of leather saddles soft and mellow as the men mounted, their tones much fainter than Princess Catherine's party.

He nudged Longworth, gesturing that he wanted to battle the tiny knight personally. Longworth nodded. His lips spread further into a smile, tilting his head in agreement.

Together, they turned their attention to the road ahead. Princess Catherine was in range within a few feet, her dark carriage moving slowly. The men of the garrison were dressed in half armor while the foot soldiers really had no protection.

He mentally counted the lines, noting there were only a hundred to his three hundred. This battle would not take long, he surmised silently.

Without warning, they watched as the small knight, apparently the leader, moved to the head of the carriage, halting its progress. The rest of the party followed in kind to his upraised hand. He cocked his head as though he listened to the sounds of the forest.

Perfect. Now they were in range of his hand. With a swift wave of his arm, they mounted their horses in a fury, the animals' breath dancing in the chilly night air. Alexander pulled his cowl further forward, hiding his features. He did not want the girl to recognize him until the last possible moment.

They melted out of the darkness of the forest as if they were creatures of the night. Alexander's heart pounded out of control as he halted his horse in front of the small knight's steed. The rest of his men surrounded the remaining party, holding all of them at blade point.

"Halt," Alexander commanded, his sword drawn and pointed at the chest of the head of the garrison.

The tiny knight said nothing as he sat straight in his saddle, not questioning why Alexander surrounded his party.

"What is the meaning of this?" questioned a husky female voice from inside the rickety carriage, echoing through the hostile air.

Alexander's hardened stare went to the carriage door and watched as a nutmeg hued head poked out of the open window. She turned to look at him, the fear written on her ugly features. "Are you Princess Catherine of Scotland?" he demanded, his vision of her crushed. He had half expected her to be beautiful but she was nothing of the sort. Even his horse appeared prettier than she did.

Her plain eyes widened and grew rounder with the each passing moment. "Aye, that I am. Who are you and what are you doing?"

His anger flared. "I have come to claim you," he announced as he shifted in his saddle, his battle practiced gaze watching every move of her company. Should any of them make a false move, he would have no choice but to cut them down.

Her white hands flexed hard on the windowsill. He smelled her fear, even from the distance. "Who are you and what do you intend to claim me for?"

"Marriage."

"Marriage?" she laughed nervously. "Marriage to whom?"

Alexander thrust his chest out slightly to show his true power. "To me."

Her mouth curled into a startled 'o' and closed, the slight lips pulled into a taut line. "Who are you?"

"The Butcher of the Isles, woman."

Catherine's head slumped as the reality of his identity sank in, her dark braids thumping lightly against the wood of the carriage. "I knew this would happen and I hoped to avoid it by going to Edinburgh but you were too swift for me," she announced in a defeat-laden voice and looked to her lead man. "Give him your sword. We must surrender."

The knight held his gloved hands out in question but she nodded. He returned the gesture with a small tilt of his head, withdrawing the sword. Catherine looked to him, her eyes turning watery with fear. "His sword is yours."

Alexander warily dismounted and closed the distance between the lead man's horse and his, all the while his stare remained on the cavalier. This could be a ruse. "Give that to me," he snarled, holding his hand out.

The man nodded, turning the hilt around for him to grasp it. Just as he was about to lay a hand on the hilt, Alexander felt the hard leather heel of the man's boot smash against his lower jaw, driving him to the ground. Pain radiated up from the area, firing his fury. "Destroy them all except for the princess!" he ordered, drawing his sword and rising from the dusty floor of the forest. "You belong to me bastard!" he shouted, pointing his blade at the offensive knight. With that, the young man turned his horse around and attempted to flee but the horse stumbled and fell, spilling the youth loose on the ground.

Alexander sensed his opportunity. That boy was going to pay for what he did.

He charged after the youth, closing in with swift strides. His quarry stayed in sight weaving in and out of the trees. Alexander kept close at his heels, almost like a dog giving chase. Once the boy was in range, he launched himself on the youth, bringing him to the ground. Underneath his hands, the boy felt lithe and slender, almost like a woman would. Small growls echoed from the knight's throat, mingling with the horrific battle sounds a few yards away.

Alexander straddled the youth, holding the boy's back. "You will pay for that little injury, boy."

With that, he ripped the cowl back and was awestruck by what he saw, his jaw falling slack. Golden hair, pulled into a tight braid, flowed down the head and disappeared beneath the edge of the cloak.

He quickly moved to the side and rolled the boy over, only it was not a boy. It was a most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Deep emerald eyes, filled with fear, stared at him, fanned by a long set of blonde lashes. High cheekbones etched her face, making a perfect setting for an expertly sculpted nose. Full, luscious lips rested underneath, trembling slightly and beading with slight moisture. "Well, well, what do we have here?" he remarked in a low tone as lust nipped at his loins while his gaze traveled up and down her luscious body. From the way her armor rode away from her chest, he sensed her breasts were large and no doubt creamy, an attribute that never escaped his attention.

"None of your concern," she asserted, trying to push past him and rise. He refused to let her, instead capturing both slender wrists above her head. She was far too beautiful not to look at.

"Aye, it is my concern when I capture such a beautiful woman." She intrigued him, from her soft breath to the aura of womanhood surrounding her. Since he would rid himself of Catherine once she bore his child, perhaps this one could warm his bed very well.

"Let me go," she snapped, her jaw clenched tight.

"No," he informed her as his fingers touched the hard shelf of her jaw, traveling

upwards to caress her magnificent hair. "You are a most beautiful woman, vixen. What is your name?"

Her features softened as a smile spread across her lips. "'Tis a name I am sure you will not forget quickly."

Blood pulsed to his midsection at the sound of her voice, making the leather of his braes tighter. "What it is it?"

"This." She drove her knee hard into his groin. Explosions of pain erupted, making him lose the grip on her wrists. She pushed past him, bypassing his outstretched hand. Biting through the pain, he leapt to his feet and took off after her. His stride was slow because of his injury but his anger, mingled with the unrequited lust, energized him nonetheless. The girl had hurt him twice and he was damned sure he was going to punish her thoroughly, but not before he tasted a little of her succulent fruit.

Alexander rounded a tree and discovered her in the arms of one of his men, quivering and shaking. Her flight from him was over. "What shall we do with her, my lord?"

He stopped before her, crossing his thick arms over his chest. They would do nothing with her. She was his. "That is up to me, now, is it not?"

Chapter 2

Catherine shook in the hands of the Duke of Kent's man, her mind whirling. Why had he chosen to kidnap her and marry her?

She felt trapped in this legion of tall men, their mighty statures dwarfing her completely. What was she to do? Her gaze darted about, flicking to the lifeless bodies that lay strewn about like cordwood. The men assigned to protect her were no more.

"We have the princess, my lord," echoed one of the men to her left. Taran emerged through the thicket of soldiers looking no worse for the wear, carried between the arms of two of the large men. Regret filled her terror-stricken body. She should not have had Taran play her but she needed a decoy in case something of this nature happened.

"What do you want done with her?" questioned the very tall man with an overabundance of light blonde hair as he gestured toward her.

The Duke stepped forward, his dark, mysterious eyes narrowed to slits. "I have not decided yet," he mused. "As for the princess," he said a deep tone, pointing to Taran, "Be certain that she is unharmed. We will be leaving for the chapel where I will wed her before the night is through."

"No, wait, my lady...!" Taran cried, her thin wails an echo through the dense forest.

She cringed as the beat of her heart picked up in intensity. Taran had just given her identity away without meaning to.

The Duke's stare turned to her, his scowl turning to something far more dangerous than his sword. "What is the meaning of this?"

She turned away, his heated stare and intense emotion too much for her to bear. "Nothing," she answered in a low tone as the fear stormed along her veins. This hulking beast meant to marry her and there was no one here to stop him.

He stalked over to her and jerked her away from her captor, holding her close to him. "So you are the princess and she is your maidservant. Ah, now I see the ruse," he said huskily as his fingers tilted her head up high. "So my little wife has a rebellious streak in her. I will have to take great pains never to extinguish that flame."

Her heart pounded out of control while the tremors of newfound emotion scuttled through her body. "You will do nothing of the sort. I will marry no man until I decide to do so."

"I think not, dear lady. You see, you have no decision in the matter. If you resist me, I will have no qualms about giving your maidservant to my men for sport. Tell me, is

that what you wish for her?"

Catherine looked back at Taran whose eyes filled with abject panic, her breathing shallow. Taran had always been a friend to her as well as a servant. Her death was something she could avoid. Her spine stiffened. She was not about to allow this hulking beast to intimidate her. "Why do you wish to marry me?"

His thick arms crossed over his chest. "I have no desire to wed you. I am only doing so on the orders of my king," he answered cruelly, pulling her in front of him and holding her arms behind her back. "You see, I hate every Scot, including you. If it had not been for the Scots, my land would not have been pillaged nor my betrothed killed."

"That had nothing to do with me," she snapped, refusing to look at him. She was not about to ask forgiveness for the ruthlessness of her people.

"It has to do with your people, little one."

"Why marry me if you hate me so viciously then?" she commented sourly. The last thing she wanted was to wed a man who hated her.

"My king ordered me to wed you and produce an heir within a year," he growled, his gloved fingers picking up the stray strands of her blonde hair. "Since the king is my grandfather and I am his loyal subject, I intend to do as he has bid."

The thought of giving this man a child filled her with a terror she had never experienced before. She could not see his features well but she knew him to be big, especially from the way he had landed on her initially. He was rough and would more than likely to ravish her once they were alone. Still, it was but a small price to pay for Taran's life. "If you promise to spare the life of my servant," she snarled as she wrested herself from his grip, turning to stare at him, "I will marry you. It will be under duress, however, for I want nothing to do with you."

His hand snaked out and gripped her upper arm hard, pulling her against the hard line of his armored chest. "It may not be as bad as you think, my dear," he said seductively as his stare blazed a hot trail over her body. "Perhaps you will come to enjoy what I have to offer."

Catherine shook her head, holding her head defiantly as pulses of fear raced up and down her. "I have my doubts," she retorted sharply. "I am only doing this to save my maidservant's life, nothing more."

The Duke locked a thick arm around her waist. He tilted her head up, forcing her to gaze deep into his eyes. "You will share my bed, little Catherine, and bear me a son in the coming year," he said, his voice dropping several octaves. "You may come to enjoy what I have planned for you." The masculine timbre, mingled with the maleness of him, made her feel a little lightheaded as the blood pounded through her veins. "Even though you think me to be cruel, you may find I can be tame as well."

She tried to pull away, only to find that his strong arm would not budge. "Since doubt clouds my mind, I intend to keep my chamber door locked."

"When I want to come in, no lock can keep me out," he growled as he let her go

and thrust her toward his men. "Enough talk," he said angrily, "I want to get to the chapel and be in Kent before sunrise. If there are any garrisons following you, I do not want them to witness the ceremony."

* * * *

Very little light streamed down from the heavens above, the night deeper than usual. Stars twinkled in the night sky, reminding one of diamonds against a black cloth. Trees, black and mysterious, sprang up from the earth and dotted the sky. Low levels of scrub undergrowth, a little lighter in color, protected the bases of the trees as if to save them from invaders.

Catherine looked all around her and listened to the sounds of the night in order to calm her erratic heart. This man frightened her to no end and why should he not? He was Duke Alexander of Kent, son of Queen Isabeau of Castile and Prince Consort Kendrick whose father was Edward the Longshanks of England. His reputation was as bloody as his grandfather's had been, earning him the reputation as the Butcher of the Isles. According to legend, Alexander had cut every Scot down in his path, some for just merely crossing it. Now he was going to wed her purely on his king's orders. What sort of a man would do such a thing? Surely he had a will of his own.

Her thoughts flicked back to Taran and the Duke's threats. Would he harm Taran as he had promised to do if she did not marry him? Her eyes moistened at the thought, the tears threatening to flow. Taran meant more to her than anything else. If that was what it would take to keep her friend alive, so be it. She could make marriage so awful that he would have no choice but to send her home or to a nearby convent. Her lips curved into a tight smile. Perhaps with a little coercion, the Duke would love to get rid of her.

Each bump and dip in the road ate into her backside, her back aching from not sitting straight in her saddle. The Duke allowed her to ride her horse but he had tied her hands, taking her reins in his gloved hand during their ride, forcing her to lean forward to hang on to the cantle. The ropes binding her wrists were crude, their rough coarseness working their way into her skin each time she tried to free herself. Pain erupted from her hand but she bit her lip against it. She was not about to show weakness and allow the bastard Duke to prey upon it.

Ahead in the distance, she could see a tiny speck growing larger with each step. It was not very big, perhaps an eighth of the size of a normal castle. High curtain walls protected the tiny fortress, decorated with battlements and arrow slits though it looked as though it would hardly need it. This must be the chapel the Duke had mentioned, she thought to herself.

Lights danced, as if someone held them, swinging them back and forth in signal. "Good," the Duke stated in an irritated voice, "the priests are awaiting our arrival."

Cheers went up around the men. What was all the fuss about? They acted as if something other than this dreaded marriage awaited them on the other side. "Why are your men happy to see the abbey?"

"You will see."

* * * *

"Please, my lady, understand what is at stake here. You can heal the wounds of both lands by marrying the Duke of Kent," the old priest pleaded, his hands shaking as he spoke.

"No, I will not marry him, Father. He is a brute and I will not subject myself to cruelty at his hands," she stated firmly, her worried stare going back and forth between him and the Duke. Why could the brute not understand she did not want him?

"You have no choice, Catherine," the Duke answered slowly as his thick arms crossed over his chest, indicating his irritation at the delay was growing.

She whirled about, adding as much ice as she could in her stare. "I have a choice, my lord, for I am a free woman. I will simply not wed you...."

"Catherine."

The moment she heard her name, she whirled about to find her brother, Duncan, standing behind her. He was perhaps the only other man besides her late father that meant the world to her.

Familiar fiery hair streamed down his broad shoulders, those damned eyes of his still as blue. "Duncan? Is that you?"

He nodded and held his arms out wide for an embrace. "Aye, tis' me, sweet sister."

She launched herself into arms, holding on tightly. Her brother had been missing for many years, exiled because of a transgression against their grandfather, King James of Scotland. "Where have you been? What has happened to you?" She stepped from the warmth of his arms, staring at the great changes. Bright crimson hair covered his chin and upper lip, smartly cut. His sapphire hued tunic covered his much larger body, highlighting the deep azure of his eyes. The last time she had seen him, he had been a bawdy youth exiled into a foreign country because of the crime. That boy had long since disappeared. In his stead was the man standing before her.

He pulled away from her, staring at her hard. "I have been living in England all this time, enjoying court life, as you should be."

Catherine stepped back, her heart falling as she realized why Duncan was here. The King had sent him as well to assure her willingness to marry the Duke of Kent! "Oh, Duncan, I know the reason behind why you are here," she said, her jaw slack at his betrayal. "How could you do this to me?"

Duncan reached out and grabbed her hand under the watchful eye of the Duke.

She watched the Duke's demeanor change from slight amusement to anger, almost as if he were furious over the way Duncan had touched her. Why did he not understand she did not belong to him? "I had no choice, Catherine. If I wanted to go home, this was perhaps the best way to do it. The King promised me title and income if I could help guide the Duke to you and convince you to marry him."

"You did have a choice, Duncan," she insisted. "You could have refused."

He shook his fiery head sadly. "No, I could not, Catherine. I was indebted to the King for taking me in when no one else would. He provided everything I needed in exchange for information about you. You see, he had been watching you quite closely for these last few years. The Duke," Duncan remarked as his gaze flicked nervously to the Duke before returning to her face, "had been chosen many years ago for you only neither you nor our grandfather knew it. When the time was right, the King gave me the task to find out if His Majesty would send you to Edinburgh for safekeeping. I did and now that is why you are here."

His reasons for what he did were very clear. He had chosen money and power as well as comfort over her happiness and welfare. Her own flesh and blood had sold her into slavery. "Oh, Duncan, you were my brother...."

"I still am. Nothing has changed."

"No, Duncan. Everything has changed," she said in a slow tone as she stepped away from her once beloved brother. "No brother would do this to his sister for any reason, if he really loved her."

"Enough," snarled the Duke, stepping in between them. "I am tired of all this talking. I wish to wed her and get back to England before the bastard King finds out she is gone."

Duncan's face darkened. "Do not call His Majesty...."

The Duke, delighted in his baiting of Duncan, returning the hardened glare. "If you cared for him so much, why did you kill one of his advisors?"

"It was a matter of honor," Duncan confessed, his anger evident in his voice. "Nothing more."

The Duke's eyebrows furrowed. "You are no longer needed here," he growled and waved a dismissive hand. "Be gone with you."

"I am not leaving here until I know that my sister is going to be taken care of."

"She will want for nothing, rest assured."

She watched Duncan's face turn a deeper crimson, his mounting fury becoming harder and harder to contain. "You tricked me," he said, slowly realizing that the Duke had duped him. "You promised much and will deliver nothing now that you have my sister in your evil clutches."

The Duke's lips spread into a devilish smile. "Did your mother not teach you to never trust the enemy?" He flicked his hand in the direction of two burly men. "Take him away and make sure that he never gets within five feet of my wife."

"You will pay for this, bastard!" Duncan screamed as they dragged him away. "I will see your head on a pike!"

The Duke turned on his heel and glared at her. "Get ready. I will wed you in an hour." With that, he left her, taking the priest and any remaining men with him. She sank down onto a nearby stool, her chest aching from the unshed tears. How was she going to get out of this?

Sharp creaks filled the air as the door opened. Someone pushed Taran through and shut it, locking it quickly.

Taran ran to her arms, the large tears streaming down her face. "Catherine! Are you all right?" she cried as she pulled away. "Did that brute hurt you?"

"Not yet," Catherine answered with a solemn tone, "but by the looks of him, he will later."

"Oh, Catherine, I am so sorry! I wished that our men could have bested them but it was not to be," Taran lamented, her tears rolling faster. "What are we going to do?"

"I do not know," she sighed, tucking her hands in her lap to keep them from trembling. "If only Duncan had been on my side..."

Taran's mud colored brows lifted in surprise. "Duncan was here?"

Catherine pushed herself from the stool and walked around the chamber, her hands rubbing her arms nervously. "Aye, he was here. And he was the one who told the bastard Longshanks where I would be tonight." Taran's jaw nearly fell to the floor. "That is correct, Taran. My brother, the exile, literally handed me over to the monster so that I could bear the next heir to both thrones."

"What are you going to do?"

She threw her hands up. "I have no choice. If I do not marry the Duke, then he will take your life. If I do, then he will make my life sheer misery until I give him a child so there is no right choice."

"How do you feel about marrying the Duke?"

Catherine halted and spun around on her heel, facing Taran. "I loathe the idea, Taran. I wish he had been some old wizened man that I could easily hate but he is not. He is perhaps the most handsome man I have ever seen and it makes me wonder what my nights will be like spent in his arms," she confessed, the air suddenly becoming stifling. "Oddly, he frightens me yet he excites me at the same time. Is this a proper emotion?" she questioned more for herself than for Taran. It was the truth. The Duke was very tall and muscular. Midnight colored hair streamed down his broad shoulders in loose curls, framing his aristocratic face. Dark eyes, deep and mysterious, glared at her the entire time she fought with her brother. For some reason, it sent chills up and down her spine, making her very aware of him as a man and not a brutal killer.

"Perhaps he will be gentle," Tara offered, putting a strong hand on her shoulder.

"I doubt that," Catherine sighed. No, a man of that size would be anything but gentle.

"Well, what do you wish to do?"

"I have no choice, Taran. I must wed the Butcher or else all is lost."

"But...."

"I see you have come to your senses," issued a strong male voice. Both turned to see the Duke looming behind them. Somehow, he had entered the room soundlessly, surprising them both. "Bringing your brother here was well worth the effort."

Familiar shivers coursed up and down her spine, making the area between her legs ache strangely. "My brother had nothing to do with my decision," she snapped. "I am marrying you to protect my servant and people, nothing more." She poked him in the chest with her index finger to emphasize her words, noting how hard the muscle was as the pain soared up her digit.

"A most wise decision," he said dangerously low, his gaze flicking down to her finger digging into his chest. "I would be careful of your actions, dear lady. They could put you in situations you would rather not be in," he ordered in a low tone conveying a subtle warning not lost on her.

"I do not care what you do to me but know this--I will never bear your children."

The Duke looked to Taran and jerked his head sideways. "Leave us."

Taran bowed her head to both, escaping the chamber and leaving her alone with the brute.

Catherine took several paces back, holding her chin defiantly high. "You can beat me and starve me but you will never win what you want." Inside, she was crumbling to pieces from fright but outwardly, she remained staunch. The last thing she wanted was for this brute to know how much her belly twisted in fear.

Soft laughter escaped his lips. "What would that be, my little one?"

"My heart."

The Duke reached out his hand and drew her to him, holding her tightly around waist. "I do not think it will be as hard as all that, Catherine," he said seductively, almost whispering her name. "I think after a few nights with me, you will find I can be a most gentle man."

She trembled in his arms, the aura of his maleness surrounding her, making her drowsy with his sensuality. "I ... do ... not think I will, my lord," she stammered, her heartbeat entirely beyond her control now.

The Duke's finger tilted her head up. His fingers drew her chin, holding it softly while his thumb brushed across her lips. "When we are in private, you may call me by my given name."

"What name is that?"

"Alexander," he said, his voice so low it was almost a husky whisper.

She tried to turn away from him but he was too intense, too virile for her to handle. She was not used to unwavering leering from any man, especially from him. "Please, stop," she demanded, trying to push out of his grasp.

"No," he murmured huskily, drawing her closer to him. "You are a beautiful woman, Catherine and should be touched often, especially by a man who knows how." His lips brushed against hers, light feathery strokes. His tongue teased her lip line, moistening every inch until he came to the taut line in the middle. She wanted to resist him, tried to resist but it was futile. His magnetism and sexual dominance was too much for her.

Catherine's lips parted, allowing him access. As he explored her mouth, she felt the pressure of his arms around her, holding on tightly. Slowly they released their hold, moving up and down her ribs until they came to rest on her backside, cupping her buttocks gently and lifting her from the floor. His desire was evident as a hardened bulge pressed at the apex of her thighs, her body moistening in response. What was happening to her?

She drowned in the emotions swirling through her body, her better sense trying to crawl to the forefront of her mind. The more she tried to break away, the more she wanted him, his touch and caress. Her body was on fire, a flame she could not control.

Just as she delved deeper, Alexander pulled away from her. "You taste as sweet as I imagined," he stated, letting her slip through his hands to the floor where she landed on her feet. "I know I will enjoy tonight."

"I ... I ... I do not know if I will," she stammered and walked away from him on weak knees, gathering the last bit of her strength.

"You will," he laughed softly. "I have a way with women."

She whirled about, his confident air striking at her very nerves. "Your arrogance revolts me, my lord. Suppose I am sickened by the sight of you and prefer not to come near you. What will you do then?" She knew that it was an empty threat. If nothing else, the thought of touching his magnificent body excited her, especially after his kiss.

"You are not sickened by the sight of me, Catherine," he mused, "or else you would have resisted my advances much harder."

She chewed on her bottom lip, mulling over his words. He was right. She would have fought him a little harder had she not found him so attractive and compelling. "You think too highly of yourself, my lord."

"I only speak the truth," he told her, his eyes pulsing with a strange light. "I expect you to do the same."

"I never lie--"

The swift knock at the door cut off her words. "Enter," Alexander growled, keeping his gaze firmly on her.

A young novice around the age of thirteen years old entered. "The chapel is prepared for your wedding, my lord. Do you wish to have heated water for your bath?"

"Aye," he answered, his gaze never leaving her. "I want one brought up for Princess Catherine as well."

The youth nodded. "Aye, my lord. It will be done now." With that, the boy left

them alone, tactfully leaving the heavy oak door open.

Alexander brushed his fingers lightly against her cheek. "There is a wedding gown packed in the trunk engraved with the crest of the King," he offered, pointing to the lonely chest in the corner. "I will send your maidservant back to you and she will prepare you for our wedding."

"But..."

"Ask no more questions, Catherine. You have no choice in the matter."

With that, Alexander exited as silently as he had come, his cloak riding the wind of his stride as well as his hair. He left an aura of manliness, a mixture of musk and leather, a heady combination.

Tears threatened her eyes again but she held them back. Her brother might have sold her into a form of slavery but that did not mean that she could not try to escape. After all, she was a princess, destined to be Queen of Scotland one day. Her father had always taught her to be strong and resilient.

She slumped into the chair next to the hearth, listening to the sounds of a wooden tub bumping along the hallway toward her chamber. Weary sighs escaped her. She may have to submit to him for now but it certainly would not last long.

Chapter 3

Novices had turned the chapel into a wonderland of white, from the flowers to the candles. Incense burned in the holders, sending a wild sort of woodsy smell to the air. Though the atmosphere was serene and solemn, Alexander felt his agitation grow out of control. Though she mirrored his dreams, he had not anticipated the fire brewing in her. What other woman would nearly break his jaw and try to maim his manhood?

He pondered on the possibilities. Would she exude as much passion in bed as she did now? Her scent was exotic, a heady mixture of wildflowers and the crisp clean smell of female skin, waiting to be touched....

"I see you are thinking of your new bride," Longworth jested, poking him in the ribs.

"I would hardly be a man if I did not," he answered slowly as he jerked from his dream, keeping his eyes trained on the door she would come through. "She is exceptionally beautiful."

"But smaller than I expected," Longworth lamented ruefully. "Are you sure you will not hurt her tonight? Perhaps if you...."

"Nay, Longworth. She will be all right," he said harshly. Conversation was not what he wanted so he dismissed his friend and stood in front of the cross, his head bowed with his hands firmly on the hilt of his sword. Silently, he prayed to God, asking him to take care of Riana's soul and carry her away on the wings of eagles. In addition, he asked God to condemn the souls of the Scots to hell for their actions.

Before he could finish his prayers, the telltale door creaked open. Alexander turned sharply. What he saw made his breath hitch in his chest.

Catherine stood at the back of the little chapel, dressed in white. Her gown accentuated every inch, hugging every rise and valley of her form as if it were part of her flesh. The tops of her milky white breasts peeked out over the edge of the low cut neckline, inviting his kiss. He licked his lips out of habit as his gaze traveled up to her face, his breeches tightening. Catherine's eyes glistened a bright green, the emotion within the round orbs hard to read. Youthful, porcelain flesh graced her cheekbones, sweeping down to her perfect chin. The most beautiful feature there was her lips. Plump and moist, as soft as rose petals. He remembered tasting those lips, plowing their essence ... his leather breeches tightened uncomfortably as he tried to quell the rising tide. This was not the place for it.

Besides, why was he so attracted to her? He was only to do this on the orders of his King, nothing more. Attraction or love did not factor into this marriage at all.

Still, this woman affected him much more than any other in his life, angering him unbelievably. After Riana's death, he had vowed never to love another and make sure the Scots paid for their crimes. In the years since, he had been able to keep both vows but Catherine's presence threatened that precious constant.

He drew a deep breath, tightening his jaw muscles. He could not allow himself to fall in love with her. Lust, on the other hand, was an allowable emotion. "Longworth, bring Catherine here," he snarled to his friend. "I want this over as quickly as possible."

"In that much of a hurry, Alexander?" Longworth chuckled.

"Get her. I do not want any garrison lagging behind to witness the ceremony."

* * * *

The party crunched through the undergrowth as they wound their way back to Kent. Trees shadowed their journey as they wove paths through them, the night creatures scampering around the forest floor. Crunches of dead leaves and twigs split the silence of the moonless night, making everything seem very ominous. The night was chill.

Alexander kept Catherine on his horse while her maidservant rode on Longworth's steed. From the gleam in Longworth's eyes, he knew he would not be the only one obtaining pleasure tonight.

Catherine's head lolled against his chest, barely coming near his chin. She had said little since the ceremony, merely following his orders. He liked that in a woman but sometimes he yearned for a little rebellion. With Catherine, there definitely would be no shortage of that.

"Are you all right, my dear?" he asked, his voice cutting through the darkness.

"Aye, that I am," she replied in a soft voice, sending slivers of delight up his spine. Never before had he anticipated taking a woman into his bed. Normally, he took them where he found them or as the need arose. It had never been anything like this.

"We will find a nice meadow for the night and perhaps arrive in Kent early on the morrow."

She shivered at his words, but it was not from cold though the air was chilly. Perhaps the idea of sharing her body with him excited her as well. "Are you cold?" he questioned, trying to make a little light conversation to ease her uneasiness.

"Nay, Alex ... my lord," she quickly corrected. "Your cloak keeps me very warm."

"That cloak will not be warming you later," he whispered into her ear as his free hand slipped around her waist, his thumb near the curve of her breast. Heat from her gown seeped through his fingers, signaling his manhood to spring back into action. "I will."

"So you have told me," she said icily.

"Perhaps it will take the coldness out of your veins," he retorted sourly. He expected her to melt and swoon like other women had at his seductive promises but she

did not. What was wrong with her?

"If you think me to dissolve at your promises, you are mistaken. I was forced into this marriage, just as you have been," she said coldly. "So do not pretend to behave as though you look forward to our wedding night."

His anger rose out of control. Did she think he was going to behave like a greedy pig and take her against her will? Nay he was not. He had other ways of persuading women to get them to do what he wanted. "I do look forward to tonight," he hissed low so that no one else could hear him. "I think a few minutes in my arms would do you well."

"You think highly of yourself, my lord. Desire and passion are unknown to me."

"After tonight they will not be."

* * * *

Catherine shuddered at his words, her body trembling beneath his enormous cloak. She was frightened but not of him. It was of herself. The feelings he evoked were ones she should not feel at all. He had kidnapped her and married her with the sole of intention of getting her with child to satisfy his king's wishes. She felt the draw to him, much like the moth to the flame. The taste of knowledge he had given her made her want more, much more than she should. She should resist him at all costs. After all, the legendary Butcher of the Isles had killed more of her people than plague or war ever had, or so the rumors always said.

She tried to think and come up with some sort of plan for the coming days but it was nearly impossible. His musky scent, mingled with the leather, sent wild swirls of newfound emotion brimming through her, confusing her to no end. This man had captured her and forced her to marry him yet she found him attractive. What was wrong with her?

The heat from his hand at her ribs was more than enough to send her senses spinning. His thumb came close to her nipple several times, causing her to gasp softly. Sensing her fright, he turned it into to a game, letting her get to know his hands before pulling away.

Just as he began to start again, he halted at the edge of a verdant meadow surrounded by trees. Black and mysterious, they jutted up from the ebony ground toward the darker sky. Gentle breezes swept in the little valley, making the tall grass wave. Wildflowers grew in patches, their colors hard to discern from the lack of light. If it were during the day and under different circumstances, she might have enjoyed its beauty. "We will stop here for the night. Longworth," he growled, turning to the very man who held her shoulders during the ceremony to keep her from escaping. "Make sure my tent is set up. I am going to speak to my wife for a bit."

"Aye, Alexander. Do not make it too long because the sooner we rest and move

on, the sooner we will be in England.”

Alexander shot his friend a warning look. “It will only be for a few moments.”

With that, Alexander kicked his horse in the flanks and directed it through a thicket of trees to another small clearing out of earshot of the others. He halted in the middle, holding her tightly against him. “You think I am going to ravish you, do you not?” he said, breaking the uneasy silence between them.

“No,” she said, her body shaking. “You are a man who gets what he wants no matter what it takes to get it.”

He chuckled slightly. “Aye, that I am, and you are the devil in disguise.”

She whirled her head, glaring at him hard. “I am no demon,” she snapped. “I am merely a captive....”

Alexander laughed harder, his blue-black curls shaking in response. “I am not calling you a demon, my dear. ‘Tis just that you have deceived me more than once, not to mention hurting me along the way.”

Catherine said nothing as the fear, mingled with anger, soared through her veins. Did he mean to gain retribution for what she had done to him? “If you expect for me to ask for forgiveness, you are sadly mistaken.”

His soft, leather gloved hand stroked her cheek, brushing under the shelf of her jaw. She shuddered at the gentle touch. “Nay, I do not, though I will have to punish you for it.”

“I am sure you will take quite a delight in it,” she replied bitterly, turning her head to keep from looking at him.

Alexander snapped it back, his eyes blazing with a mixture of desire and anger.

“Nay, I will not, but when you learn who is master then I will not have to punish you so.”

Without warning, her fear breached the wall of her calm, flowing over it like a river. Tears, hot and prickly, fell from her eyes and dripped down her face. “Please, Alexander, you do not want this marriage and neither do I. Allow me return to Edinburgh. If you do, I promise you Scottish titles and an income from my crown....”

“No,” he answered harshly. “The King gave you to me and I have no intention of letting you go.”

Her sobs deepened. She had no say in anything, no country and no hope of escape. Suddenly, she felt Alexander’s strong arms around her, pulling her toward him. His free hand stroked her hair while the other held her tightly.

“Wh ... what ... are you doing, Alexander?” she questioned softly through the plethora of tears, her head against his chest.

“Holding you, my dear. What else would I be doing?”

Catherine pushed back and stared into those deep blue eyes. “Why?”

“Because you need comfort right now. I would hardly be a man if I did not comfort my wife when she needs me to.”

“But I thought since....”

"I was the Butcher of the Isles that I could not be compassionate," he finished in a strong tone. "I have never been vile toward women and I will not start with my wife."

"All the tales said...."

"They are wrong," he said brusquely. "There are two sides to me, Catherine. If you obey me, then I can be very gentle. If not, then I can be a very cruel master indeed."

Her heart pounded as she stared into his eyes, their luster revealing something else in them. An emotion she could not quite put a name to but it was not love or desire. Fondness perhaps?

Before she could ponder on it further, Alexander's head dipped toward hers, the heat undeniable. Catherine felt his lips sweep across hers, soft and feathery. His tongue danced on the outer edges then on the line between begging for entry. She grew hot, almost feverish from his drugging kiss. Out of instinct, she opened her lips allowing him access. Alexander explored the cavernous region of her mouth, engaging her tongue in play. She was clumsy and knew it but she gave it all that she had, begging for more of him.

His palm slipped to her breast, kneading gently, his thumb caressing the ripe nipple through her gown. Instantly it hardened under his touch, sending spirals of delight up her body. She arched under him, begging for more. Her better sense tried to claw its way to the forefront of her thought pattern but she pushed it back, wanting more of his touch.

Just as she delved deeper into the kiss, Alexander pulled away. "I want to taste you, Catherine," he murmured, "All of you." His breath was labored, short and raspy.

"I ... I..."

He silenced her with this finger. "No more protests, Catherine. Tonight you belong to me."

* * * *

"Are you all right, Catherine?" Taran asked nervously, her thick fingers unbraiding the golden strands.

"I am," she said, her hands trembling as they toyed with the ribbons of her dressing gown. "'Tis just the Duke frightens me."

"How?"

"It has nothing to do with his size. It is more of how he makes me feel," she confessed. "I cannot allow my heart into this matter because I know that once he has his son, I will be tossed aside for another. I refuse to be used as any man's toy."

Taran tied off the braid with a piece of string. "So what will you do?"

"Not stay in this marriage. No matter how long it takes nor matter how hard I have to try, I will escape from him and not bear him any children."

Her friend laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Whatever you decide to do, I

am with you, Catherine. Shall we find out if you are ripe for conceiving a child?"

Catherine nodded. Taran had always possessed a gift of laying her hand a woman's belly and knowing instantly if the woman was ripe. She had never failed yet.

She lay down, allowing Taran full access to her belly. Taran felt here and there, her face contorting. It was not a good sign. "I am afraid tonight is your best night for a child, Catherine. If only it had been a fortnight from now, this would not be a factor."

Catherine paled. "I cannot conceive his child, Taran. Is there nothing I can do to stop it?"

"There are ways, Catherine, none of which you would be able to use. The only thing we could have done was to seed your womb but since we do not have the time, there is nothing."

She slumped a little lower, her mind a whirling dervish. If they only had time to find the perfect stone and boil it, it would have protected her womb from his seed but that was not to be. "There must be something you can do, Taran," she said, her voice quivering. She did not want to become a mother, at least not the mother of Alexander's child.

"Nay, there is nothing I can do," Taran replied sadly. "Perhaps if you...."

Before Taran could finish, Alexander appeared at the opening of the tent. "Leave us," he said roughly.

"If you should have need of me, call my name. I will be here."

Taran rose on unsteady legs and walked out of the tent, but not before bowing her head to Alexander.

He came inside once she was gone, holding a roll in his large, tanned hand. "We must have forgotten to sign these missives before we left the chapel."

"What are they for?"

"They state to your king, my king and the Holy Seal that we were wed within the church and that lawfully you are my wife."

His thunderous voice echoed through the thick air of the tent, making her heart pound. "One of them is going to Scotland?" She gulped hard. The last thing she wanted was her grandfather to find out about her marriage before she had a chance to escape it.

"Aye. That way he knows that you truly belong to me."

Her anger brewed to a higher flame, making her cheeks hot. Sometimes Alexander could be so kind and compassionate while others he was overbearing and boorish. Would there ever be a middle ground? "I belong to no man, Alexander. I am your wife by way of force, nothing more. As for these missives," she stated, pointing to the thick, yellow roll in his hand, "I refuse sign them."

"Yes, you will sign them." His tone was much harsher than before, the rising tide of his fury becoming more evident.

One blonde brow rose as a scowl crept across her face, the air becoming thicker. "I suppose if I do not sign them, you will?"

Alexander crossed the tent angrily and caught her upper arm in one tight grip. "If I must, aye. Why not make this easy on yourself and do as you are instructed?"

"Because I am no man's pawn. However, if it will save the life of my servant and my people, I will do what is necessary," she said through clenched teeth as she ripped the roll from his hand. "Do you have ink?"

Alexander's lips pulled into a seductive grin. "I knew you would make the right decision, my dear."

"I do not think I have, my lord. You will find that out soon enough."

* * * *

With the papers signed, Catherine lay back down, waiting for Alexander to return, mentally preparing herself for what was ahead. How was she going to feel afterwards? Would it hurt as badly as the servant girls had always said?

She rolled over to her side. Why did he have to be so damned handsome? This would have been so much easier if Alexander had not looked like an angel from heaven. It wreaked havoc on her senses being around him, drawing her close.

Catherine punched at the small pillow, trying to make herself comfortable. Alexander would come in any moment and demand his husbandly rights. She would resist, despite the part of her wanting to surrender to him totally.

"Catherine."

Alexander's voice drifted through the tent, whispering her name and encouraging the telltale trembling to begin again.

"Yes," she answered, pulling the covers up to her chin.

His tanned hands parted the edges, making the opening wide enough for him. He emerged through it, standing in her line of vision. Her breath caught hard in her chest. With the bare moonlight behind him, the silvery light danced on his black curls. His splayed legs bespoke of the strength in them while his thick arms crossed over his chest. "You look so beautiful lying there. I hated to disturb you."

The honesty in his voice sent her mind spinning. "Mu ... much thanks, my lord."

"Alexander."

"Alexander then," she corrected icily, pulling the covers around her.

He sank down next to her, pulling his clothed body tight next to her. "How are you feeling, Catherine?"

"Well, Alexander." The nearness of him tempted her to take him into her arms and demand that he fulfill her physically and emotionally but she restrained herself. She was not a careless woman about to fall in bed with any man. This is your husband, her mind told her.

His warm hand stroked her shoulder, peeling away part of her gown and exposing her shoulder. Alexander's lips kissed the bare flesh, burning it to the bone. Shivers of

delight raced up and down her spine, making her heart beat faster than it ever had. What was he doing to her? She felt the velvet of his tongue as it danced over her flesh, making her sigh deeply as her skin came alive.

"You taste so good, Catherine," he murmured as his hungry lips sought out the skin of her neck, his fingers swiping aside reams of golden hair. "Better than I could have ever dreamed."

"You dreamed of me?" she asked dreamily as she drowned in the sensations he created.

"Aye, I have. From the first moment I knew you to be my bride, I never stopped dreaming of how you looked," he confessed as he nibbled on her lower earlobe.

Through the emotions, she felt her anger rise but quickly quelled it. Now was not the best time to voice her thoughts. From now on, she had to pick and choose her battles, making sure they were ones she could win. "Am I all that you hoped I would be?" she murmured through the drugging heat of his kiss.

"You are, little one," he whispered huskily as he rolled her gently over to her back. "Am I all you thought me to be?"

No, she thought to herself, you are not the maniacal butcher your legend says you are. "Nay, you are much kinder," she whispered slowly.

His lips took possession of hers as if to give an answer. He kissed her hardened lips with gentle persuasion until she could no longer stand it. Out of instinct, her mouth and allowed him access to the hungry void. Back and forth, their tongues played, dancing to a tune only they could hear. Through the fog of desire, Catherine was only dimly aware of his hand unfastening the ties of her dressing gown. Once it was open, Alexander's hand slipped beneath the filmy material and cupped her left breast, his thumb caressing her nipple until it hardened. Cries of ecstasy hung at the back of her throat, ready to spring forward at the first opportunity.

Alexander moved from her mouth to her exposed breast. His hungry tongue danced around the light brown circle before traveling to the ripe button, nipping lightly with his teeth. Once he took that, she could not help but to cry out at the sensations he evoked. Her breathing labored as her heart thundered out of control. Why could she not stop? This was sheer madness!

He pulled away from her and leaned back on his haunches, ripping the tunic from his well muscled shoulders. "Touch me, Catherine," he demanded, pulling her into a sitting position.

"No," she begged, trying to get away from him. "Please do not make me do this."

His black brows furrowed. "How old are you, Catherine?"

"Almost twenty."

"Then you are quite old enough to become a woman. Give me your hands."

As if she were merely an object to do his bidding, Catherine obeyed, slowly realizing that she was glad she did. His belly, comprised of rippled muscles, quivered

under her touch as she ran her hands over them. Alexander's chest was hard as she traced the lines of strength, from his sculpted shoulders down to his nipples, making him tremble a little. He threw his head back as he took a dive into the pool of passion. "You do not know what you do to me, Catherine," he murmured. "Now remove my braes."

She shuddered as her hands stopped at his leather-clad waist. What lay underneath those bits of leather was power and might, something that could bring her pleasure beyond all that she knew. "I do not know if I can," she murmured as she continued to trace every plane of his body.

Alexander's face relaxed, becoming more compassionate. "Aye, you can. Let me show you something." He grabbed her wrist and laid it on his hard manhood under his braes. Life pulsed through his member, strong and steady.

Catherine pulled her hand away sharply, her heart pounding inside of her ears. "Please ... I...", she stammered, unable to finish a sentence. He was powerful and large, something she was not sure she could handle.

His lips spread into a wide, sensual grin. "Let me help you," he said, taking her fingers and showing her how to undo his braes.

Catherine untied the leather fastenings, drawing the material slowly down over his taut hips. The leather was tight and slightly unforgiving but she got them down.

Alexander's ebony colored private hair emerged first, fragrant and masculine. Next came his manhood, large and pulsing, bobbing along with his movements. "You can touch me, Catherine. It does not bite."

"I ... I ... have never seen a naked man before," she confessed, all the while staring at his nude perfection.

He chuckled slightly. "Being a virgin, I would hardly think you to ever see a naked man before much less spend your first night in his arms."

She looked up again for his approval and he nodded. Gingerly, she touched the tip already glistening with moisture. The salty tang of his essence hung in the air, becoming more defined by the moment. Her fingers trailed all up and down his silken shaft, making him moan while he held onto her shoulders.

More of the moisture appeared on the head of his appendage, making the apex between her legs to grow moist with anticipation. Suddenly, the overwhelming desire to kiss it became too much. She laid her lips on it, feeling its strange texture under lips. Why was it different? Did it not function the same as the skin on the rest of his body?

Without warning, he pushed her back. "I cannot let you keep this up, Catherine. I must have you now or else I will burst."

"But I thought you liked it."

"Aye, I do like it, mayhap a little too much but wasting my seed is not what I had in mind for tonight."

"What sorts of things did you have in mind besides coupling?"

Alexander leaned forward, pushing so that she was down among the furs again. "I

think it best that I show you.” With a quick flick of his legs, his braes joined the rest of his clothes on the floor. “That is much better.”

“What are you going to do now?” For some odd reason, she needed to know every move he would make. Perhaps she wanted to steel herself to whatever punishments came from his hands.

“You will see, little one,” he said as he cupped her chin in his hands, his mouth descending on hers again.

What made her virgin body decide to do that? Her curiosity or perhaps the knowledge that she was about to become a woman facilitated it. Whatever it was, he secretly thanked it. No matter what woman he had ever taken to bed in his entire life, they had never pleased him in that matter, not even practiced harlots. They merely wanted themselves pleased or just laid there like a lump and let him do all the work.

Catherine was different, besides being a virgin. She sought to please him first, her body awakening under his tutelage. Perhaps in the coming days, he could teach her a lot more....

Her body exploded under his touch, turning to molten fire. Alexander’s hands, filled with magic of their own, sparked something new inside of her.

Out of excitement, she wound her hands around Alexander’s neck as he gently laid her back against the fur skins on the floor. His hands started at her neck before traveling downward. Alexander captured her breasts in both hands, squeezing them together gently to he could take both of the rich buttons in his mouth in order to tease them equally. His velvety tongue lapped at both, nipping slightly before swirling around their bases, heightening her senses. Is this what all the servant girls gossiped about around the castle?

“You are so beautiful,” he confessed softly as he released her hot breasts and blazed a trail of molten kisses down her belly. Each spot burned with the heat of his kiss, adding fuel to the already out of control desire. “I want to taste every inch of you.”

Catherine swam in the pool of ecstasy, little gasps and moans escaping her lips. She barely noticed Alexander at the line of her private hair. His tongue traveled around her mound and slipped to the void where her legs met her hips, parting them as if they were made of water. She knew she should stop him but her body betrayed her, allowing him to reach her base desires and stoke the all-consuming flame.

He could not help but taste her essence. She was so sweet and innocent, her scent enticing him as he moved. Parting her lips, his tongue traced the outlines of the wet cleft, searching for the tiny nub of pleasure. He found it quickly and made love to it with his tongue languorously, the cries from her mouth rising higher. She was so close.

Catherine was only dimly aware of what Alexander was doing. The only thing she noticed was how much pleasure came forth from what he did, her senses spinning out of control.

Then, without warning, a great wall of headiness overwhelmed her and she

shuddered. Alexander stopped and looked up, his blue eyes shining. "Are you all right, Catherine?"

"A ... ye ... that I am," she stammered, her heart pounding ferociously. "What happened to me?"

"Something that will happen a lot if I have any say about it," he whispered low, kissing the inside of her thigh before moving up.

The feel of his body covering hers deepened her ecstasy, the tip of his shaft nudging her already swollen lips. "You will not regret this, Catherine," he promised, his fingers twining with hers as he ground his hips against her. "I will prove to you that I am not the evil butcher you think me to be." She felt his free hand slip between her legs. His fingers sought out her moist void and slipped inside, touching her most intimately as he stroked her, the juices flowing much faster than before, her hips rising and begging for more.

"I have already seen the evidence of your ruthlessness," she confessed as the sweat broke out over her body, covering it in a wet sheen. "But I have also seen your kindness."

"If you just obey me, then you will see more of it," Alexander whispered as he maneuvered himself a little better between her legs. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. He waited for a moment for one plea for him to stop but it did not come. Instead she wound her arms around his neck and stared at him with a lust-laden glare. "Aye, I am ready for you to make me a woman," she said breathlessly as she stared into the dark depths of his eyes.

With that, he imprisoned her lips within his and plunged into her slowly. She gasped at the pain shooting up from between her legs. She ignored it, choosing instead to offer herself up to his large organ, begging for more of him.

Alexander took it as an invitation so his thrusts became harder, more wanton. Bliss filled his body, a feeling he had never known before. With other women, he got the act over as quickly as possible, making the woman leave immediately after. Catherine was all together different. He wanted to make love to her all night long, her essence and passion like a heady drug overwhelming his senses. Not even with Riana had he felt this way.

Gasps and cries of ecstasy escaped her throat, mingling with Alexander's moans. She wanted more of him, as much as she could handle. Her emotions swirled in one intoxicating eddy, consuming her senses. Suddenly, she felt the warming rush as her emotions peaked with abject cries of desire escaping her throat. Alexander followed suit almost immediately, his body shuddering and collapsing on top of hers, limp but well sated. "Forgive me if I have hurt you, Catherine," he apologized in a gasping breath, "I did not mean to."

"You did not hurt me, Alexander," she replied, her own breath labored. "I never knew it could feel that way." She tried to put as much sincerity in her voice as possible

despite the fact her privates burned and throbbed hard. The last thing she needed was Alexander laughing at her discomfort.

He pulled back, staring at her intently, scrutinizing her features. "You lie, Catherine. You are in pain."

She rolled to her side, pulling her legs together tightly. "A little," she murmured through her silent sobs. "There is no need to concern you with it."

His black brows furrowed. "I will worry about it. You are my wife after all and I could not let you be in discomfort."

Surprise stormed through her veins at his words. "There is nothing you can do about it, Alexander. It will pass."

"Aye, there is something I can do about it," he remarked as he picked up his braes and put them back on.

Catherine leaned up on her elbow and pulled up the furs to modestly cover her nakedness, staring at him as he pulled his braes up. "Where are you going?"

"I need to get something from my saddle."

"What are you getting?"

His full lips spread into a wide sensual grin. "You will see."

Chapter 4

Dawn arose, waking Catherine. She blinked hard, trying to break the sleep from her eyes. Was it all a dream? Nay, she could not have wed the most notorious man of all the Isles!

Soft snores emitted from her right and she looked over. Alexander lay on his belly, his hands splayed out on either side of his head. Blue-black curls, wild and free, danced on his bronze shoulders. Underneath those silky strands lay the hardened planes of his back muscles, glaring at her as if to tempt her to touch him again. ...

Deep weary sighs escaped Catherine's throat. So last night had not been a dream at all. She had wed the Butcher of the Isles, sold into marriage by her brother looking for title and income. Pity had replaced the love she once held for Duncan because he was not going to get the promised reward. The Duke and King had duped him. Part of her wondered where he was while the other part told her to forget him. After all, if it were not for Duncan, she would not be laying next to the Duke of Kent as his forced wife.

Catherine blinked hard several more times and ran a quick hand and through the tousled mess of her hair. She had to get out of this somehow.

Alexander mumbled slightly and turned his head toward the wall of the tent, going back to sleep. He had been kind the night before, after their first time. From his saddle, he had brought a special cream he had used on cuts. He had been tender in spreading it on her afflicted areas, making sure the cream took away any pain. It had worked. Today she felt nothing except the longing for Alexander's arms as well as the dull throb between her legs. She smiled. He was right. She would come to enjoy the time in his arms but that was only if she stayed. If she wanted out and to remain childless, she needed to leave now, despite the fact her body wanted to remain with him.

Catherine looked around and spied her gown lying over a small coffer. Without Taran's help, it might be impossible to lace but she was going to attempt it.

She slipped out from beneath the furs and moved quietly toward her white gown. With speed born of sheer anxiety, she slipped it over her head and managed to get some of the lacings but not all, her heart pounding. She pushed her feet into her shoes near the gown, casting a nervous look to Alexander. He remained sleeping, moving only slightly. Good. The longer he slept, the more distance she could put between them.

Catherine emerged into the dim twilight of the morning, the sleepy world bathed in a sullen blue. Trees seemed less ominous than the night before, almost welcoming when graced with morning light. Fingers of pink, orange and yellow dotted the sky, chasing away the light. The sun would be up very soon and she needed to be gone.

Now came the larger question. Which way was she to go? She had no idea where she was, let alone how to venture to Edinburgh.

Her gaze swept through the throng of sleeping bodies, searching for Taran. All she could see were men with no sign of another female. She stepped gingerly past them all, holding her gown high so as not to rustle the grass as she moved.

Heavy dew soaked her slippers through, making her feet feel wet and slippery inside of the leather but she pressed on. The sooner she was away from Alexander, the better off she would be.

Catherine carefully looked at all the men, searching for Taran but there was no sign. Had they killed her while she enjoyed the comfort of Alexander's arms? Nay, they could not have! If they had....

Something hard hit her between her shoulder blades, falling with a plop to her feet. What was that? She bent down and picked up the offending object, keeping a hold on her gown all the while. It was a rock! Small and black, the rock came from behind her, possibly thrown by someone. Taran!

She whirled about to see her friend's smiling face. Taran stood behind an old oak tree, beckoning her to follow. Her heart leapt for joy. Taran had not been hurt at all! Without reservation, Catherine followed and joined Taran at the tree. Neither of them spoke, merely looking at each other then to the camp. Taran mouthed the words 'Where do we go?'

Catherine shrugged and motioned that they needed to leave. Taran tilted her head in agreement. Anywhere had to be better than here.

* * * *

Hot sun beat down, turning the cool morning into a tortuous day. Grass burned under her feet, the blades feeling like sharp needles sticking into her feet. With the heat, Catherine took the hem of her gown and tucked it into her girdle, exposing her legs to mid calf. It was entirely too hot to have it on.

"Where do you think we are going, Catherine?" Taran asked quietly though it had been almost an hour since they left Alexander's camp.

"I do not know but my father told me that if we find running water, follow it."

"Why?"

"Because it will lead us to where people reside. When we get there, we can ask where we are and take the right road to Edinburgh."

They walked for a few more minutes in silence until Taran stopped her. "Wait," she said softly. "I think I hear running water."

Catherine cocked her head. Deep in the distance, she could hear the soft sound of trickling water running over rock. "You are right!" she cried, grabbing Taran's hand. "We must find it!"

The thought of moisture coating her body was a most welcome notion. Unmercifully the sun burned her skin where it touched. Cool water would be just the thing to soothe it.

She and Taran kept the resonance focused in their minds. The quicker they found it, the better their chances were at getting back to Scotland.

Catherine wove her way through the dense thickets of trees. Prickly branches tore at her cheeks as well as her hands as she moved them aside but she ignored them. Her freedom was just a short distance away.

As she pushed through the last of the trees, Catherine saw a most beloved sight. There was a stream running through the forest. Water slipped over polished stones, the rocks flanking either side of the little river. On the other side was a vast expanse of nothing, just a flat plain full of sweet green grass for them to cross. Where would it lead?

Without hesitation, Catherine scrambled down the mud-laden bank, urging Taran to follow. "Come with me! Here is the water I spoke about!"

"I am coming!" Taran shouted, holding onto a thick tree trunk, her heavy body swaying.

Before Taran released herself from the tree, Catherine was already at the edge of the water, tasting the cool moisture from her cupped hands. Besides being hungry, she was thirsty. "This water is wonderful, Taran! You should taste it!"

Taran gasped for breath beside her and knelt down to taste as well. "This is wonderful!"

"What did I tell you?" Catherine commented as she sat back on her haunches. "Hopefully, it will not take us that long to get to Edinburgh."

Taran splashed her face and sat back as well. "What are you going to do, Catherine?"

She turned sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I told you that last night you were at your ripest and you bed the Duke. It is quite possible that you carry his child now."

Through the din of her happiness at escaping, the harrowing thought came through. What would she do if she did carry his child? "I do not wish to think about it, Taran. If luck is with me, I carry no child."

Taran sighed. "Oh, Catherine, what are we to do?"

Her spine stiffened as she cast her gaze out to the wide expanse of uninhabited land before her. "Go back to Scotland and inform the King of what has happened. He will beseech the Pope to annul my marriage since it was done of out forced will and not willingly."

"Do you realize," Taran insisted, "that if you are with child and have it, your marriage cannot be annulled?"

"I know that, Taran," she answered glumly. "I will convince the Pope that the child was not conceived in love, merely lust. On that condition, I am assured that he will

grant me the annulment.” Catherine sank a little lower, her heart beating twice as fast as normal. If she were indeed with child, then she would be stuck being the warlord’s woman. “Tell me, is there nothing I can do to empty my womb?”

“If we had some pennyroyal, I could brew some tea that would help your womb in ridding itself of any possible child.”

“Does it grow here?” Her belly knotted at the possibility but the hope was dismal. It was a plant that did not grow in great abundance.

Taran shrugged. “I know not, Catherine. It is very hard to find. If I started to look now, it may take days to find. If we wait until we reach Edinburgh, you will be too far along for it to work.” Taran’s eyebrows knitted in concern. “Tell me, was the Duke that horrible last night?”

Catherine sat silent for a moment and let a weary sigh escape her lips. “Nay, he was most kind, Taran. He was very gentle for a man of his size.”

“Were you terribly hurt?”

She shook her head. “I hurt afterwards but he used a balm to keep me from feeling the pain.”

“It sounds as though he cares for you, Catherine.”

“Nay, he does not,” she lamented. “He is only doing this on the orders of his king, nothing more.”

Taran pushed up from her place, rubbing her wet hands together before smoothing her gown out. “It does not appear that way to me,” she confessed and looked warily around her. “If you will excuse me, I need to find somewhere to relieve myself.”

“Do not go too far away in case the Duke has already discovered our departure.”

* * * *

Alexander listened through the thick brush separating him from Catherine as he crept up silently, his heart pounding. She could not be more wrong. At first, he did as his king had ordered but from the moment she gave her body to him, he knew something magical had happened. He hungered for her, as much as he tried to stop himself. His heart was something he’d guarded. Riana was the only woman who had possessed it and when she died, he had buried it with her. He had thought Riana was the perfect woman, trained to be the wife of nobility since birth. Catherine was different. She was rebellious and strong yet filled with enough compassion to make man’s head spin. Put together with a delectable body and beautiful face, it was an irresistible combination.

It had been a shock to wake up and not find her next to him. He was furious, but he had expected nothing less from her. She possessed a fire like no other woman he had ever known, yearning to be free.

His fury still burned within, not only at her departure but at himself. He was doing exactly what he had vowed not long ago to do. Once he had her back at the castle,

something would have to change.

“Shall we go and get them now?” Longworth whispered next to him.

“Wait,” he whispered. “When I give the signal.”

“I swear, I will tan the hide of that maidservant of hers if it is the last thing I do.”

Longworth commented, his eyes narrowing to slits as he stared through the foliage.

His anger burned bright on the outside, while the inside laughed to no end.

“Catherine will be getting much the same for what she has done. The sooner she learns who her master is, the better off she will be.”

* * * *

Catherine splashed some water on her bosom, cooling the burned flesh a little. It felt icy and comforting. “Do you suppose they have discovered that we are gone, Taran?” she yelled, hoping Taran would hear her from wherever she was relieving herself.

Taran said nothing.

She looked up. She was alone in this place, the water babbling through the brook as the only sound with her. Looking to her left, the only thing greeting her was the dense copse of trees following the line of the stream. To the right, the same thing was in her line of vision. Where was Taran?

“Taran, where are you? I demand that you answer me right now!”

Catherine looked around, her fright growing more real by the moment. Where was her friend?

“Searching for someone?”

The husky male voice came from behind her, all too familiar and frightening at the same time. Shakily, she turned to see Alexander standing there, leaning against a tree casually with his arms crossed over his chest. “W ... what ... are you doing here?” Her heart pounded out of control. What was he going to do to her now?

One evil black brow cocked upwards. “I might ask you the same thing,” he growled and stood up. “Why did you run away?”

“I ... I ... wanted to, Alexander,” she confessed. “Edinburgh is where I belong, not with you.”

“That remains to be seen,” he snarled as he moved down the embankment with ease. “Come with me.” His hand held her upper arm in a vice.

“Let go of me!” she demanded but Alexander was too strong. He pulled her hard against him, his free hand stroking her hair. “I do not desire to be with you.”

“Things would go much easier if you do as you are bid,” he stated in a low tone conveying a subtle warning to her. “I do not like having to chase my woman all over the countryside.”

“I am not your woman,” she corrected, her anger rising. “I belong to no one save myself.”

"Aye, you belong to me." He picked up her left hand and curled her fingers so she could see the ring. "This makes you my woman."

"Do you see this ring?" She ripped her hand from his grasp and tore the ring off, throwing it in his face. Catherine showed her naked hand, shaking it in his direction. "Now that it is off my finger, your ownership of me has ceased."

Alexander's face turned into a vicious scowl, his nostrils flaring. He bent down and retrieved the ring. Picking up her left hand, he jammed the silver band on, drawing blood from her knuckle as he did so. "With or without the ring, you still belong to me," he stated as he stepped forward, towering over her by almost two feet. "If I ever see you take that off again, I will not be responsible for my actions."

"Nor can I be responsible for mine if you continue to treat me in this manner, Alexander," she warned. "If need be, I can be as ruthless as you."

His expression darkened. "I see," he said dangerously slow. "Once we return to Kent, I see that I will have to punish you."

Terror screamed along her veins but she refused to show it. "Just how do you intend to punish me?"

He leaned down so he was almost nose to nose with her. "You will soon find out my dear."

* * * *

King James lay in his ornate bed made of fine Scottish oak, timbered from the other side of the Moors and brought here on the backs of the villagers. He had slept many good nights here, his wife conceiving all of their children in the bed. They were also born in this bed, with only one surviving for more than a few days. He sighed wearily. His son, Malcolm, had passed into the great beyond along with his wife, Henriette, both victims of a great fever sweeping through Scotland. Out of their union came Catherine and Duncan, heirs to his throne. Unfortunately, Duncan, taken by greed and anger, had killed one of his closest advisors in an argument concerning the honor of the advisor's wife. The act had disappointed him terribly, the knowledge that Duncan could never hold the Scottish crown feeling like thorns in his heart. With Duncan's action, that only left Catherine to ascend the throne.

His old fists curled at his sides. What did Duncan have to prove by killing the minister of justice? Since Duncan was of royal blood, execution was out of the question for the crime. The only thing suitable was exile so he had banished Duncan forever despite the shattering of his old heart.

James rolled over onto his side, tucking his hand under his pillow. Thankfully, Catherine was on her way to Edinburgh for safekeeping and away from the prying eyes of the court. He sensed a sinister presence within the court. Someone might possibly be relaying messages to King Edward of England about the comings and goings of the

Scottish court. Several times, he sent messengers to different parts of Scotland to the barons in order to gain their allegiance. Those messages never made it to the intended barons. Some unknown force had always intercepted them.

Part of him suspected Duncan after his exile but he refused to believe it. Why would Duncan turn on his own family and jeopardize his sister's life?

Hollow knocks at the door took his attention. "Come in," he growled as he pulled the covers up a bit higher to stave off the mild chill he felt. In his younger days, this would not have bothered him.

Cyril, his valet, entered the room with a rolled parchment in his stubby hand. His face was ashen, paler than it normally was. "There be a message fer ya, Sire."

"Where is it from?"

"One of da novices from da abbey brung it. He says it's important." Cyril's hands shook uncontrollably as he held the telltale words. The news could not be good.

"Hand it to me, man and stop all this nonsense!" James demanded, holding his withered fingers out.

"Forgive me, your Majesty," Cyril mumbled as he handed over the parchment.

James' old heart pounded well out of rhythm, his mind spinning out of control while his fingers itched to crumple the fibers in his palm. This had to be about Catherine. He just knew it.

Sweat beaded his forehead as he opened the roll.

On this day, sixteenth of September in thirteen ought five, Alexander, House of Plantagenet and son of the Queen and Prince Consort of Castile, took as his bride, Catherine, daughter of Malcolm and Henriette of Scotland. They were wed within the laws of Holy Roman Catholic Church, bound together for all eternity. What God has joined, not let man put asunder.

Coniuro strictum esu Christus,
Sacerdos Damiano

He lay back in his bed, his eyes transfixed on the canopied ceiling. Catherine was the bride of the Butcher! She had been wed a day before so that meant that someone had relayed her departure to the King of England's ear. But who could do such a thing? Catherine was an innocent girl, much too young to be used like a pawn!

"What is it you wish me to do, my lord?"

He wet his dry, cracked lips and coughed hard, as though his lungs were about to burst. Cyril brought over the phlegm bucket quickly and he spat the offending material into it. Once the coughing fit passed, he allowed Cyril to prop the pillows up so that he would be more comfortable. "First, I want you to gather all the nobles together. Tell them we are to meet at Stirling Castle in less than a fortnight."

"Will that be all, my lord?"

James leaned his head back, knocking it a little against the headboard. Why did he deserve this? First, his only male heir cannot hold the throne while his other forcibly wed

the most notorious man of all the Isles. What was he to do?

That only left his small niece, Margaret, who at eight, would be the youngest Queen of Scotland. Margaret, named 'the Maid of Norway', had never set foot in Scotland. He wanted someone who knew the land, loved it as he had and its people. Catherine was the monarch he wanted to succeed him, not a little child who knew nothing of her homeland.

He jerked his head up. "No. There is one more thing you must do for me."

"What is that?"

"Bring Duncan to me."

Chapter 5

The sun slanted slightly as they pressed on. Catherine rode on Alexander's horse while Taran rode on the beast of the blond-haired bastard. From the look in Taran's eyes, the stranger called Longworth had molested her and possibly raped her when Catherine was not looking. Once she had Taran alone she would find out the truth and make the bastards pay for what they had done.

"How much longer do we have to go?" Catherine asked, the sound of her voice breaking the hostile silence growing between them.

"Not much longer," he snapped, holding her tightly against him. Alexander had not said anything from the moment he put her on his horse. The only time they had stopped was when she needed to stretch her legs.

His anger radiated from him, making her fear climb to new heights. What sort of punishment did he have waiting for her back at his castle? Whipping? Beating? Starvation? Her mind conjured all kinds of odd punishments, making each one worse than the last. Would she survive all that he had to hand out?

"Look ahead, there is your new home." Alexander gestured to the bend winding around the copse of trees. They came around the half circle. The image revealed to her was the most beautiful she had ever seen. High curtain walls climbed toward the sky, topped with battlements and arrow slits, enabling the master of the keep to prevent any sieges.

The main body of the castle towered over the battlements, reaching high toward the sky. Square windows glared at her, unwelcome and ghastly. No light came from any of them, as if no one resided there.

Distantly, she could hear the murmur of voices, presumably peasants gathering in the bailey in order to sell their goods to the master or to any passersby living in the area. In her castle, the bailey was alive with all kinds of people, most of which had depended on her grandfather for safety against English raiders.

"This is your home?" she asked quietly. Hopefully, this would break his icy demeanor.

"Aye, and yours too," he responded in a snappy tone. From his words, he was still very angry with her.

So be it. Let the overbearing brute be angry.

She looked to Taran. Her friend had a wild look to her deep brown eyes, a mixture of fear as well as excitement. Alexander's man had taken her surely, if she were not mistaken. Blinking hard, she tried to swallow the lump forming in her throat. If only she

had sent Taran to her grandfather's castle instead of bringing her along! Oh what she would not give to take back her decision.

"Is there something amiss, my dear?"

"No, my lord," she replied, quickly wiping her eyes. "Nothing is wrong."

"Good. Keep it that way."

* * * *

The hall of Henstrige castle was very high, held by bare rafters jutting out of the stacked stone. To the left was the main dining hall. It held a large table, big enough to seat at least two dozen people comfortably. Tapestries covered the naked rock of the room, depicting scenes from around Kent. Forgetting Alexander was behind her, Catherine walked into the room to the one piece of embroidery that caught her eye. It showed a young man with hair like Alexander's and a woman with corn colored hair much like her own. At the woman's feet sat a small child with midnight colored hair, playing with a small animal of some sort. The woman's eyes were an emerald green, matching her gown. The man's hand rested on her shoulder while his free hand rested on the hilt of an ornate sword. Both of them seemed familiar yet she did not know who they were.

"They are my mother and father if you wish to know," Alexander offered in a low tone. "That child is me."

She gasped slightly. From that small child was this hulking beast of a man, her forced husband. The changes were staggering. "Is she the notorious Queen of Castile?"

"Aye. My mother waged battle against my father and won, capturing him. She arranged his ransom and met my uncle Edmund on the field. He tricked her and captured her, turning her over to my father. Eventually they fell in love and created me. I was in her belly the day they wed," he snapped as he strode past her.

Catherine tilted her head at Queen Isabeau's image. She had defeated an entire English army. That was a feat in itself for a woman to accomplish--despite the fact the English had captured her while ransoming the Prince Consort. "I assume they are still happy," she glumly. From the look of things, Queen Isabeau seemed happy from her tapestry.

"Aye, they are or I would not have twelve brothers and sisters," Alexander answered in a sharp tone. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Her panic started to take over, making her shiver. Whatever he had in mind was not good.

"To my chamber," he replied brusquely as he manacled her wrist in a tight grip.

"For what reason? So that you can torture me?"

He looked at her sardonically. "I would like to show you where you will be living, my dear, though the punishment I had in mind would not be entirely unpleasant."

Her brow rose. "I doubt that somehow," she quipped sharply and started to walk away. "I have no desire to see your chamber now or any other time."

Alexander manacled her wrist hard, drawing her back toward him. "The fire within you intrigues me, Catherine, but it can also anger me as well. I would take great care not to stoke the beast of fury within me if I were you."

"You are not me, Alexander," she snapped, trying to pry herself from his strong grip. "The same could be said for you."

Refusing to speak further, Alexander swept down and gathered her up, throwing her over his shoulder. She kicked but it did no good. Alexander kept her legs to the side to avoid any more blows. Her fists beat his broad back but with his leather armor jacket over his tunic, he could feel nothing.

Her temples pounded. What was going to happen now?

* * * *

Alexander set her on her feet inside his chamber after carefully locking the door. "Now you will not get away from me," he proffered in a low tone as he stalked toward her. "Now turn around."

"No!" she screamed and ran from his reach, her gaze searching his chamber for something to use against him. There was nothing, not even so much as a dagger with which to maim him.

With two long strides, he was on her, his hands on her upper arms. "Take your punishment."

"Get away from me, you brute," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I refuse to submit to your desires."

"Aye you will," he promised as he pushed her arms behind her, holding them in one strong fist. "After you get used to my charms, resistance will be futile."

Catherine tilted her head high. "I will never want your arms."

Muscles bunched at the corner of his jaw. "Aye, you will, but now I fear that I must punish you."

"For what? What atrocious crime have I committed against you?"

"Trying to escape. That in itself is crime enough."

"Perhaps to you but not to me," she warned, "so that means I will try to leave here as soon as possible, any way possible."

His black brow rose sardonically. "You will not, little Catherine. If I have to watch you night and day, you will never leave Kent."

"We shall see," she said, her voice steady and strong.

Alexander watched her for a moment, scrutinizing the determination on her face, his own expression changing. "I see I have a determined little minx on my hands. Perhaps I will have to use pleasurable punishment in order to keep you here."

Before she could answer, Alexander pushed her face down on the bed, holding her arms behind her. His free hand unlaced the bindings of her gown, exposing her back. Letting one arm free, he slipped her arm out and followed suit with the other. Try as she might, she could not fight him because he was as fast as lightning. Once one arm was out of the sleeve of her gown, he automatically had it restrained.

"Let go of me!" she demanded, her cries muffled by the coverlet.

"Not until I have a little 'taming' session with you," he answered in a seductive tone as he ripped strips of her bodice fabric off. He tied the end of one to her wrist and bound the other end to the bedstead. Sounds of parting fabric filled the room as he ripped another strip off. He fashioned it to her other wrist and tied that to the free post.

"Stop this, Alexander!" she demanded but he ignored her, continuing to rip bits of fabric and tying her ankles to the edge of the bed.

She tensed against her bonds but it was of no use. They were too tight. Tears pricked at her eyes but she held them back. The last thing he would ever see is her crying and begging for his forgiveness.

"Nay, I will not stop until you are properly punished, Catherine," he offered. "This gown covers up entirely too much of you."

Catherine turned her head to the side, trying to ignore his deep male scent on the pillows. Unfortunately, its heady scent permeated the air around her nose, enticing her heart to find a new rhythm. Her blood pounded her temples as she waited for his next move. "What are you going to do to me?"

"The question is what will I not do to you," he murmured in a deep husky tone. "By the time I am finished, Catherine, my arms will be all that you will hunger for."

Desire pulsed up her veins at the thought of him buried deep inside of her, pleasuring her core. No, her mind cried, do not remember! It was too late. Her memory played back those golden moments, her flesh reliving those pleasurable moments. "Do as you will, Alexander," she stated, her voice quivering. "Do not expect me to aid you."

"You will, my dear. Of that I have no doubt," he said in a confident tone as he leaned down to her ear, his breath warm and inviting. "All it takes is one touch," he stated, his fingers brushing the side of her cheek, making her shiver. "Or a kiss." His lips touched her cheek and blazed a trail of hot kisses down her neck. "Tell me, do you find me repulsive?"

Catherine swallowed the lump forming in her throat. "Aye, I do."

He chuckled slightly at her response. "I think not, but there is one definite way to prove it."

"How?"

Alexander said nothing, merely placing his dagger between her skin and gown fabric. Gently, so not to cut her, he sheared the fabric down the middle. "You have a truly beautiful body, Catherine," he said in a tone resembling awe. "It complements your magnificent face."

She continued to look away from him, trying to defend herself against his sexual magnetism. "You may find me beautiful but I do not find you the least bit attractive." The game she played was going against her because his prowess was so strong. Catherine took a deep breath. She was naked to his touch, ready to do his bidding. The core between her legs swelled with anticipation while her body created the necessary juices for him. Why could she not control her bodily functions?

His soft laughter filled the air. "I think not, Catherine," he murmured as his hand trailed down her back toward the divot above her backside. "I think you find me very attractive." She felt his weight take the bed down slightly as he sat next to her, his fingers continuing their path on her flaming body.

"There is nothing that proves that I do."

"Aye, there is."

His hand moved in a circle around the divot before diving toward her buttocks. He cupped each cheek in his hand, his thumb caressing the flesh. "So beautiful," he whispered as his hand cupped the other. "Almost like an angel of God."

She said nothing as he explored her, the pounding of her heart becoming wilder. He seemed to sense her anticipation so he elongated his torture by running his fingers up and down the division of her buttock cheeks, his fingers threatening penetration.

Soft sighs escaped her throat at his movement, the emotions tumbling and swirling like an eddy inside of her. When would he touch her and make her feel fulfilled?

As if to answer her wanton thoughts, Alexander's hand slipped between her legs and found her moist core. Deftly he inserted two fingers, allowing his thumb to toy with her nub while he moved in and out of her slick crevice. "It seems that you say one thing and your body says another, little Catherine. Which one am I to believe?" His tone dropped further, husky and masculine, making her unable to resist.

Unable to answer, she drowned in the sweet sensations created by his movements. Her mind swirled, unable to think of anything but the tingling sensations riding up her thighs. "Oh, Alexander," she murmured into the pillow.

"I see my magic is working," he remarked as he rose from the bed, withdrawing his hand.

Her hips continued to writhe for a moment as the sensation still burned in her loins. "Why did you stop, Alexander?" She could hear the faint rustle of clothing behind her. The headiness surrounding her did not allow her to move and see what he was doing.

He said nothing as he continued to undress. Excitement coursed throughout her veins at the prospect that Alexander would fulfill her now, before she would go mad.

Suddenly, she felt the restraints on her ankles loosen. "What is happening, Alexander?"

"You will see," he said provocatively as he urged her up on her knees.

Once she obeyed, she felt his member slip inside of her, his hands gripping her hips. His thrusts were easy as first, enticing her ecstasy to rise high, her cries of pure

pleasure resonating.

Her body was tight but he was easy on the tender flesh. When he started to play his game with her, he found himself growing harder, the need to be inside of her overwhelming. It was like a heady potion that he needed more and more often. As much as he tried, he could not resist her charms. She emitted them without even knowing it, her fiery spirit never dying down. Aye, he had met his match in a woman, something he had longed for his entire life. Riana was beautiful, but she was not Catherine. There had never been any rebellious streak and wild nature in Riana. With Catherine, that was all he had dreamed about.

Alexander's strokes became more urgent and passionate, as if he wanted their lovemaking to last forever. It felt different in this position, and she much more alive as more pleasure soared through her privates and thrummed throughout the rest of her body. Gasps and moans continued to circle around them, the familiar headiness rising through her like a tidal wave. As it approached, her hips rocked with each thrust, her internal muscles capturing him in a vise-like grip. The familiar warm wall of euphoria crashed over her with Alexander following suit. She felt him shudder then withdraw, their bodies sweaty but well sated.

He fell next to her and she collapsed as well. "Are ... you ... all ... right, Catherine?" Alexander gasped, his smooth chest rising and falling quickly.

"Very ... all ... right," she answered, her own breathing irregular.

Alexander drew her into the safety of his arms after cutting her bonds. "Forgive me for having to punish you like that, my dear, but it was necessary."

"That is one punishment I do not mind...." She stopped. Those words should have stayed in her head and not been spoken. Her emotion was the one thing she wanted to keep to herself.

Alexander raised himself up on one elbow and stared at her, the lust rising high in the depths of his dark eyes. "Oh, so you do not mind the punishment? Perhaps I will have to punish you a lot harder this time...." His lips closed over hers, taking her to paradise through the magic of his hands. Without hesitation, Catherine gave herself over to his ministrations for the rest of the day with wanton abandon but without regret.

* * * *

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, there is no possible way we can go into England and get the Princess from the Duke of Kent. Even if we had all of our men mobilized, the English still outnumber as well as outmatch us," offered Robert the Bruce. "Even then, would she still be fit to rule?"

James whirled around, glaring at the younger man. "What do you mean?"

Robert tugged on the beard covering his chin, his eyes taking on a pensive look. "By the time we reach her, she will have been under the Duke's influence far too long.

Once on the throne, that bastard Edward could still rule through Catherine.”

“Aye, I second that, your Majesty,” countered Angus McDowell, Earl of Argyll in his thick Scottish brogue. “If we bring your great niece, the Maid of Norway here, we can get her adjusted to court life and get her ready to rule Scotland.”

James dismissed the notion with a simple wave of his hand. “She is only a child. I will not have a child rule my throne.”

“Aye, but she can be trained to rule Scotland as you would instead of being influenced by England,” Angus offered, his fingers nervously toying with the heavy hasp on his tartaan. “I will have no Englishman ruling Scotland.”

“You will not have if we bring Catherine back.”

“Your Majesty, may I bring up a point?” Willem de Foys held his hand up, his youthful eyes shining.

James directed his stare at the youth, his anger blazing. “What is it, boy?”

Willem cleared his throat and pulled at the neck of his tunic. “Well ... what if ... since the Princess is wed to the Butcher of the Isles, would it not stand to reason when she comes back, she may be with child?”

Slight murmurs rumbled through the table of advisors, their heads nodding in total agreement. It was a possibility he had considered but he had pushed it out of his mind. He did not even want to think about that. “If she is, the child will be born in secrecy then will be sent to the remotest part of England and raised as a peasant. It will never know of its parentage. Now,” he turned to each advisor, staring at them hard. “Any more hideous questions?”

“No, sire,” answered Robert as he stood up, his trim body encased in a dark tunic. “If it is your wish that we retrieve the princess no matter what condition she is in, then we will do it.”

James looked to the rest of the nobles searching for any dissention. “Anyone want to back out of my aid now? I want it known now that any noble that does not help bring the Princess back to Scotland will have no title to speak of nor any income from my crown. Everything you have right now will be worthless and forfeit to me.”

One by one, they stood up, giving their silent consents. “Good,” James said triumphantly. “All of you are the best Scotland has to offer and I trust you with my very life. However,” he remarked as he moved around the table, “there is one person who I want to send with you on this little journey.”

Robert turned to him with a stunned expression on his face. “Who would that be?”

“High Prince Duncan.”

Several nobles put their hands on the gilded handles of their swords. “Why that scalawag! I should run him through,” snarled the Duke of Galway.

“You will do nothing of the sort, Galway. I do not want my grandson hurt despite what he has done,” he ordered, his fingers rubbing his tired temple. Lately, his chest pains

and head had been bothering him more than usual, the medicines prescribed by the physician no longer working. "I will tend to his punishment myself."

"Aye, I will leave the boy alone but why do we need him? We can surely find Kent!"

"But you do not know the exact roads to Henstrige Castle. From what Duncan has told me, if you do not know the way there, you will never find it." He sat down, his thin withered legs bothering him greatly. It seemed today that everything bothered him.

"I will do as you bid, my lord, but I will take no orders from a cowardly whelp," the Duke of Galway announced, pounding on his thick chest in response.

He looked up, his vision beginning to fog slightly. "No, Galway. The only man you will be taking orders from is the Bruce. I trust him as I would any man."

"It is quite an honor, sire, to do this," Robert exclaimed then bowed low, his hand on the gilded hilt of his giant claymore. "I will not let you down."

The foginess crept in further, making his mind swim. "Gather your men because there is not much time left."

"What do you mean, sire?"

He could hear the excited voices around him but he was unable to communicate. His vision fogged to the point where he could barely make out shapes. The pounding in his head softened a little but the pain soaring through his left arm was almost unbearable. He could hear a voice call for the physician and felt his body lifted out of his chair but he could do nothing.

"James," called a sweet voice.

He looked to his left and saw someone he had not seen in many years. His beautiful wife Eleanor stood there in her wedding gown with a crown of flowers in her fiery hair. The gown accentuated her generous curves and ample bosom, a body he had loved to explore until her death.

"Eleanor, what are you doing here?"

"It is time to come home, James."

"I am home, my love."

"There is another place for you, my dearest love, where we can be together for all eternity. You will have a new body that will not fail you."

His eyes widened. "But I cannot move."

"You can now."

At her words, he pushed away and felt his feet slam to the floor. He looked down. His favorite pair of boots covered his feet. He reached down to touch them and realized that his hands were the ones of his youth. "What has happened to me?" he demanded as a quizzical brow rose.

"Look in the silver platter on the table," Eleanor instructed, sweeping her hand in its direction. He strode to the table and peered into the platter. In it, he saw the man of his youth, long golden hair with a matching beard. "I am young again," he exclaimed, his

fingers touching at the silky hair of his beard.

Eleanor hooked her arm through his and pulled him gently away. "Come with me, my love, our children are waiting."

* * * *

Duncan shivered underneath the blankets at the Bruce's manor, his body aching from the beating he had taken once the Duke's men had dragged him from Catherine's presence. He had never expected such treatment. His only hope was of getting what was promised. It was not to be.

He touched his cheek gingerly and felt the scabbing wound where the Duke's men had burned his cheek with a hot blade. It had started to heal but the pain was immense, making him wince. This was not part of the bargain.

"Duncan."

At the sound of the voice, he turned to see Robert the Bruce standing before him, hand on the hilt of his claymore. "'Tis over, my friend."

He was bewildered. "What is over?"

"Your grandfather left us today, leaving the crown open for any contender," he snarled and spit into the pot sitting in the corner by the enormous fireplace. "He had mentioned the Maid of Norway as his possible heir but with Catherine still out there, the council has decided to bring Catherine home and crown her Queen of Scotland."

"Why are you telling me all this? There is nothing I can do for you. Catherine would rather run me through than to look at me," he commented morosely. He expected nothing different. After all, he had delivered her to a butcher with no regard to her feelings. By now, he'd most likely had severely beaten her or worse--killed her.

Robert simply ignored him and paced around the chamber, his hands behind his back. "You can help us, Duncan, but before I tell you how, I must think about this dilemma. First, I think we must crown her Queen in absentia. Second, I will engage William Wallace and his army into this. They are the best warriors known...."

"But why Wallace? He is nothing but a rebel," he interjected as he struggled to sit up. "He will do nothing but hand the crown over to Balliol and make Scotland nothing more than an extension of England." It was a known fact that John Balliol was a weak man and easily controllable, a fact that Edward of England knew all too well. If the crown were available for the taking, Edward would surely endorse Balliol.

"I have spoken to Wallace at length. He has agreed to switch his allegiance from Balliol to me," Robert offered, his pacing picking up in speed. "He is a good, honest man who I need on my side if I wish to bring your sister back."

Duncan leaned back on his pillows, the pain becoming increasingly worse. "You still have not answered my question."

Robert's auburn brow rose. "What question is that?"

“How am I to help you?”

The Bruce's soft laughter filled the room, bouncing off the cold stone walls. “Why you are going to lead us there, my friend.”

Chapter 6

Taran brushed her hair with a gentle hand, humming old Scottish lullaby in a soft tone. Catherine sat there quietly and listened, pondering on the events of the last few days. Alexander, despite his horrific reputation as a vicious warlord, had been extraordinarily gentle with her when he took her into his bed. He could be overbearing and boorish but there was a wild animal magnetism attracting her to him, almost like a moth to the flame.

"Taran, now that we are alone, I must ask you something."

"What is that, Catherine?" she answered in a weary voice.

"Did the Duke's man hurt you in any way?"

Taran's ministrations stopped. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, I know he took you into his bed as well. Did he ravish you?"

Taran sniffed slightly. "Aye, but he was most gentle afterwards and he loved me slowly again."

Catherine whirled about, taking Taran's hands into her own. "I swear by all that is holy and by the blood of my ancestors, I will kill that bastard for what he has done to you."

Her servant's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Nay, do not worry your beautiful head about it, Catherine. From his actions, Lord Longworth seems to fancy me despite my plain appearance."

"But against your will? That he must pay for what he has done!" she cried. Justice must be handed out!

Taran shook her mud colored head. "No, Catherine. For the first time in my life, I am quite content because a man wants me. He may want me for the moment and that is fine with me. Until he tires of me, I shall bask in the glow of his arms."

Catherine slumped a little in her chair. Taran was being won over by their magic, as was she. The longing in her heart to return to Scotland not as fastidious as before.

"Very well, Taran, if that is your wish. I suppose--"

Loud bangs erupted through the room, cutting her words. She looked and saw a very weary Alexander coming into the room. "Leave us," he growled to Taran and staggered to the bed, his face pale underneath the frame of onyx hair.

"I was just finishing, my lord." Taran turned to her. "If you need anything, send for me."

Catherine patted her hand warmly. "I will, my friend."

With that Taran left the room and deftly closed the door behind her. Catherine

looked to the bed and saw Alexander stretched out to his full length, his clothes intact. "Is there something amiss, Alexander?"

"I do not feel well, Catherine, so leave me be," he growled and closed his eyes, throwing his arm over his eyes to block out any and all light.

She quickly rose from her chair as her compassion gripped her in a tight hold. "Let me see if you have a fever." Catherine closed the distance quickly and laid a hand on his ashen forehead. "You are burning up, Alexander. I will send for the physician."

"I said leave me alone, Catherine!" he snapped and rolled over to his side.

"I will not, Alexander. You are ill and need to be nursed back to wellness. Come, let me remove those clothes."

He said nothing as she drew off his boots and laid them aside. Even his feet felt as though they were on fire. Next came his tunic and breeches. His skin felt hot and dry, not a good sign. "Are you satisfied now, Catherine? Will you not leave me alone?"

She shook her head and brushed his ink colored curls from his shoulder. "No, I will not leave you alone because I will tend to you myself." She brushed a kiss across his cheek. "I will return soon with the physician and I think together, we can get you well again."

"Why will you not do as I command?" he questioned wearily as if he grew tired of her gentle ministrations.

"When you bend your will to mine, then I will obey yours."

* * * *

Catherine returned with the physician only to find Alexander unconscious. Quickly, she ran to his side, laying a few fingers against his neck. Blood pulsed through his veins, signaling he still lived. A deep sigh of relief escaped her lips. She had worried about him from the moment she left the chamber until she returned. What sort of illness took his strength? Was it fatal?

"Is the Duke coughing or complaining he cannot breathe?" the physician, a wraith of a man with long stringy white hair, inquired.

"No, he did not," she offered. "What is wrong with him?"

"I know not until I examine him, my lady," he stated as he rifled through the pouch he had brought with him.

Catherine watched helplessly as the man laid his head against Alexander's chest, listening for the sound of his breathing. Despite the way he had treated her and forced her to marry him, she hated seeing anyone in pain, especially Alexander. Through all of his brutish, overbearing demeanor, she sensed a lot of pain in his past, making him the man he was today. If she was inclined to stay with him, she might have probed a little deeper in order to understand him better so they could start again on better terms.

Fleeting thoughts of escape to Edinburgh filled her mind. His illness would

provide a perfect opportunity for her flight but she resisted. He needed someone to take care of him and get him well again.

The old man lifted his head. "Thank goodness his lungs sound clear. We may have caught the illness early."

"What does that mean exactly?"

His aged eyes narrowed as the creases at the corners deepened. "That means I will not have to bleed him. The only thing he needs now is a potion that I will mix for you as well as rest and food. Make sure that you keep his skin cool. His fever more than likely will break in a day or two."

"Much thanks," she stated as a breath of relief escaped her throat. "Is there any type of food he should avoid?"

The white head shook. "Nay. Give him what his belly will tolerate. He should eat a lot of meat, cooked as little as possible as well as wine."

"Aye," she answered in a solemn tone.

She followed the man to the door, only to run into Taran. "Forgive me, my lady," she apologized as she stepped aside to let the elderly man pass. "I must speak to you."

Catherine laid a finger to her lips and stepped out of the chamber, closing the door carefully behind her. "What is wrong, Taran?"

"There is nothing wrong with me," she answered. "What is wrong with the Duke?"

"Fever has gripped him and the physician does not know its origin. He gave me a potion to give to Alexander to make him well."

Confusion slipped over her tanned features. "It sounds as if you mean to stay and nurse him back health."

Catherine's fists bunched at her sides. "I intend to, Taran. Despite the fact I wish to leave him, I cannot leave him in this state. No one would care for him."

"He owns a castle full of servants, Catherine. They would care for him. Let us leave," Taran begged in a hushed whisper. "We have the perfect opportunity."

Catherine's brow rose. "Are you in that much of a hurry to leave Alexander's man?"

Taran blushed, her dark skin brightening to a deep pink. "Nay, I am not, Catherine. 'Tis the fact that you belong in Scotland, not here. Wherever you go, I will follow."

She gave Taran a sisterly pat on her arm. "I am grateful that you feel that way, Taran, but I have made my decision. I will stay and tend to Alexander until he is well again."

Surprise crawled across Taran's face. "This is our perfect opportunity and you wish to let it pass us by?"

Catherine nodded, her mind whirling with thoughts. Was she making the right decision? "Aye, I do, Taran. Alexander needs me now and I will not desert him. Besides,

other opportunities will present themselves when the time is right."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Aye, I am, my friend," she said, her heart pounding. What if she was wrong and this was their only time to escape? "When Alexander is well, we will find a way and leave."

Taran nodded her head quickly. "As you wish, Catherine. If you need any help in tending to him, please call on me and I will help."

"Much thanks, Taran," she said, backing against the door and opening it. "I will never forget your kindness."

"Nor will I forget yours," Taran murmured and turned, walking down the hallway, her soft footfalls echoing throughout the cold stone hallway.

Catherine pulled the door shut again, leaning against it. She tucked her left arm under her right, her fingers dandling on her chin. Was this the right decision for her? With Alexander unable to chase them all over England, she could get to Scotland and be safely in Edinburgh, beyond Alexander's reach. Was that something she wanted?

Emotions roiled beneath her exterior, as violent and turbulent as storms at sea. She had wanted to leave yet something pulled at her stay. There was a light in Alexander's eyes, full of emotion and pain. There was something in him that could be saved from his ruthless reputation and possibly make him into a much better man. He had shown her that he could be compassionate and warm as well as loving. Would it be worth staying to find out what sort of man lay beneath that exterior of stone?

* * * *

With the physician and Taran gone, she uncorked the potion he had mixed for Alexander. Distasteful odors crept out of the neck, assailing her nostrils. It made her want to retch but she held back. Whatever this vile potion was, she hoped it would cure Alexander quickly.

She walked over to the bed and picked up a goblet. "Alexander," she called softly as she poured the assigned amount. He mumbled a few inane words before drifting away. "Alexander," she called again, this time touching his beautifully bronzed shoulder.

"Leave me be, woman," he snarled, brushing her hand away so he could go back to sleep.

Catherine remained undaunted. "No, I will not. You are sick and you need someone to take care of you. Now sit up a little."

"No!" he growled. "Leave me be!"

She leaned back, scrutinizing him. His large, muscle bound body remained neatly tucked under the covers, his midnight colored hair streaming out over the pillow. It seemed to her that it was time to turn the tables on him.

"I said sit up, Alexander. I do not make a habit of asking twice."

His eyes flew up at her command and he slowly turned his head. "What did you say?"

"It is time that you do as I bid now since you are ill. Now sit up."

Confusion spread over his face like a wildfire. "What are you doing?"

Her lips spread into a taut smile, her fear rising. Would he beat her with the strength he still had? So far, when he was well, he had not laid a hand on her. Why should he start now? "It is time that you knew who your master was, Alexander. So, while you are sick, I will be your master and you will do everything I say. Am I understood?"

His deep, dark eyes widened with surprise. "Aye, mistress," he said in a slightly mocking tone but she ignored it. She was full of power now, her fear fading like the rain after a summer storm. "What would you like me to do first?"

She held the cup to his lips and pinched his nose so he did not have smell the awful stench. "Drink this."

"Why are you holding my nose?"

"It smells like rot but if I hold your nose, it will not be so bad. Drink it quickly."

He did as she instructed. "Is there anything else, mistress?" he remarked coyly as his fingers trailed up her arm.

Catherine shook her head. The last thing she wanted was to make him even sicker through lovemaking. "No, Alexander, there will time enough for that later but for now, I want you to rest. Are you hungry?"

He shook his head, the blue-black curls moving in response. "No, Catherine, I am not," he said rather sadly. "All I want to do is sleep." His response reminded her of a child. If he could not get what he wanted, he would not do what she wanted.

"Very well then," she commented as she rose from the bed. "That potion will help you sleep as well as help your body heal from the illness. In the meantime, I will have to bathe you and bring your fever down."

Alexander seemed to relax with this notion, his eyes fluttering slightly. "That would be wonderful," he said slowly as the potion snaked its way through his veins.

"Good. Now go to sleep," she ordered softly.

With that, Alexander drifted off to sleep again, his breathing gentle and smooth. She brushed the hair from his feverish forehead, her fingers gracing his stubble filled cheek. Though it was a perfect opportunity to escape, she could not bear to leave him in this state. He needed her to take care of him and see that he regained his strength.

* * * *

Fog rolled in Henstrige, as thick as a blanket. He could not see or hear anything except the soft murmurs of his men as they rode behind him. If the Scots had so much as harmed a hair on Riana's head, he would slaughter them were they stood.

The path he knew so well seemed unusually long, the bend taking forever to come

around. Once he was clear of the copse of black trees, he could see his home very clearly. It looked as he had left it, quiet and serene. Except for one thing. Death hung in the air like an unwanted thief waiting for another victim. His heart pounded while the blood hammered in his temples. No, the Scots were not here, he told himself over and over again. It is just a dream.

He urged his horse forward, trying to keep as calm as possible despite the stench of death filling the air. Perhaps someone's animal had died or they had cooked rotted meat. Aye, that was it.

His better sense told him that it was nothing like he thought. It was worse. Out of panic, he kicked his horse in the unarmored flanks, making the beast run forward with abject abandon.

At the drawbridge, he realized his worst fear. Bodies of the peasants lay all around the bailey, their families crying and lamenting over their corpses. His mouth dried up as a lump formed in his throat. Was Riana still alive?

With that, he pushed his horse into a hurried gallop toward the door and ripped it open. Calling her name several times and receiving no answer, he ran up the stairs to their chamber, kicking the door open. Riana was nowhere to be found.

Anger raged inside of him as he stormed through the castle, calling her name and looking for her, his sword drawn.

Finally, he entered the dining hall, the only place he had not looked. What he saw turned his blood cold. Riana was there, hanging from the wall above the fireplace, gutted like a fish. Her amethyst colored eyes held no life, appearing glassy....

"Riana!" he shouted, his body shivering as he stared at her gruesome corpse.

"What is the matter, Alexander?" echoed a sweet, familiar voice.

"Riana?" he questioned, his heart beat slowing. It was a dream. Only a dream.

Cool hands touched his forehead, reassuring him of their validity. "Oh Riana, I am overjoyed that you were not hurt...."

"'Tis Catherine, Alexander," she answered gently, her fingers brushing against his arm.

Slowly, he opened his eyes to see Catherine standing above him with worry stamped on her features. "Aye, it was a dream," he murmured, holding back any emotions. The brutality of Riana's death was something he would not share with anyone, not even Catherine.

She held a cool cloth to his forehead, wiping away some of his heat. "Aye, you were dreaming of your beloved," she murmured softly, her face gentle and full of passion. "I regret that she had to die, Alexander."

His eyes widened in surprise. "How do you know about her?"

"Servants have a penchant for gossip," she offered as she wiped down his arms. "I heard what happened and I was immediately sickened with the tale. For a brief moment, I was ashamed of my Scottish heritage."

"'Tis over now," he said gruffly as he turned away. His eyes moistened slightly at the thought of Riana and he did not want Catherine to think him weak and womanish.

"There is no use in thinking of the past."

Her fingers touched his shoulder. "You still grieve, Alexander, so do not hide it from me. If someone I loved was taken away from me in such a cruel manner, I too would hate the people who brought about the destruction."

"I grieve not...."

"Aye, you still do, Alexander, and that shows how much you loved her and why you hate my people."

He looked at her blinking hard. "I do not hate you...."

"You hate what my blood represents and I understand why. I know it has nothing to do with me as a woman but me as a Scottish woman." Her hand covered his reassuringly. "I do not hate you for feeling this way, Alexander."

Such compassion filled her eyes that he could not help but feel warm inside. He had always expected her to completely hate him for the rest of their lives but she did not. Somehow, in her words, she had forgiven him for what he had done to her. "Catherine...." he whispered softly in the dim light of the room, the air heady with her scent.

"Alexander...." she returned and leaned forward. Her lips, succulent and moist, pressed against his softly at first, her teeth grazing his bottom lip. Unable to resist her, he crushed her to him, capturing her face in both hands, never wanting to let go. He explored her mouth infinitely, tasting her sweetness. Their kiss deepened at Catherine's invitation, his arms wrapping around her tightly.

Suddenly, Catherine pulled away. "You are not well, Alexander, and we should not be doing this," she whispered as she bent and retrieved her previously forgotten cloth, wiping his arms again. "Once you are better...."

"I am certainly not that weak...." he said in a hushed tone as his eyes began to close.

Her light feather of laughter echoed through the room. "Aye, you are, Alexander, so I do not think you will be able to sustain yourself," she answered coolly and laid the cloth aside. "I do wish to extend my regrets again to your love and what happened to her. If it will ease the burden of her death, I do have one thing I wish to share with you."

His brow lifted. "What is that?" Excitement grew quickly. Was she going to share her love with him?

She adjusted the folds of her crimson gown, smoothing them out before returning her gaze to him, her emerald orbs swimming with emotion. "It was Laird McLeish of the rebel McLeish clan. You may remember him--he is the man who claims to be sired by your father."

"How do you know this?"

"My servants gossip among themselves. One in particular claims her daughter shares the Laird's bed on occasion. From what the woman said, her daughter claims the

Laird likes to boast and related his gruesome stories to his prospective bedmates in order to arouse himself," Catherine confessed as she wet the cloth again, her eyes moist. "He related to this young woman the gruesome details of your beloved's death."

He lay there silently as the news sank in. Air hung in his chest, making it hard to breathe. Finally, the missing piece of the puzzle lay before him. Riana would at last get her revenge.

Catherine's eyes misted over as tears threatened to fall. "Remember that not all Scots are as bloodthirsty as McLeish. Some of us can be quite gentle and tame."

For a moment, he could do nothing but stare at her as a new understanding filled him. She was right. Not all Scots were bloodthirsty. Catherine proved that with each movement she made, from taking care of him to providing him with the name of his rival. His brows furrowed downward, his mouth curling into a scowl. Robert, Laird McLeish had been nothing but trouble since the day of his birth. Rumors had circulated around Kent and Castile, proclaiming that his father, Kendrick, had sired the Laird. It was simply not true. His mother, Isabeau, had told him all about it when the Laird tried attacking Kent when he was a much younger man. With his mother's army, his father was able to prevent a siege, sending Laird McLeish back to Scotland with his tail between his legs. So, in retribution for his defeat, Robert had schemed and waited for his mother and father to return to Castile before he attacked once more. The price for it was Riana's life. "Where is Laird McLeish now?"

Catherine shrugged then dipped the warm cloth in the cool water. "I know not," she replied as she replaced the cool cloth on his head. "Some say he is still in Scotland while others say he is hiding in France. No one knows for sure. I do know one thing about him."

"What is that?"

"He wants me and will do anything to have me."

* * * *

Robert pushed the fiery strands out of his face in frustration, his fury rising. He had attacked Edinburgh in the hopes of catching Catherine just as she entered the city. He waited and waited, finally realizing that she was not coming. She was at least a week overdue.

"My lord, this missive has just been intercepted," stated an underling.

"Give it to me," he snapped, extending a gloved hand out.

The man laid it in his hand and he ripped it open, glaring at the contents. So the little harlot went and married the bastard Butcher of the Isles!

Wicked laughter erupted from his throat. If she wanted pain and suffering, she should have come to him. He snapped his fingers, encouraging the messenger to stand at attention. "Where was this taken?"

“On the road outside of Edinburgh, my lord. From what your spy gathered, it was intended for the rebel Wallace.”

He looked down at the parchment, staring at the signature. One was of the Bruce and the other of Duncan. Hatred curled at the pit of his belly like a snake, waiting to strike at any given moment. Duncan had returned from exile, only to join with the Bruce as well as Wallace. He would gladly take care of those two rebels once he had Catherine in one hand and the throne in the other. She would witness the death of all of them, including Duncan in the square. After that, no one would ever challenge him for the throne.

“Is there any other news?”

“No, my lord,” his valet repeated quietly, his somber head shaking.

“Take this to one of my men and have him dress in the Bruce’s livery and take this message to Wallace. I want everything to move as they had planned it. When I overtake them, I want it to be a surprise.”

The messenger dipped his head and left the room quietly, leaving him with his errant thoughts for company.

Hatred boiled like a kettle inside of him, forcing him from his chair. He paced wildly, his hands pushing through the thick locks of auburn hair. Alexander had again stolen what was his. He snorted slightly. He knew who his true father was. A dead wizard accused of trying to poison the Queen of Castile. His mother, Gardana, had made that fact known on her deathbed, shortly before she succumbed to the severe beating administered by the reigning Laird McLeish.

Robert smiled wide, the corners of his lips pulling tight. The unfortunate previous Laird McLeish suffered a terrible fall a few days after Gardana’s death, thus making him a most powerful man. Along with a powerful man, came a powerful woman. What better woman to be his wife than Catherine? Alexander did not deserve her at all, especially since Alexander’s mother had taken Kendrick away from his mother.

I will avenge your death, Mother, he vowed silently. All those party to your downfall will pay with their very life.

* * * *

Days passed slowly, merging into night with a steady beat. Catherine sat by Alexander’s side, night and day, nursing him and nourishing him as best she could. Sometimes he would fight her while other times, he would sleep like a child when she lay next to him. Whatever sickness ailed him, the grip it possessed was strong.

Night abounded outside, the calls of the night creatures billowing through the serene countryside. Mildly chilled air drifted through the open window, removing the heat of the day. Catherine sat in a chair by the fire, watching Alexander sleep, his body twitching slightly. Today, he did not eat much and slept quite a great deal. Endlessly, she

sponged off his fever filled body, hoping to break the grip but it did nothing. The only thing she could do now was wait.

Catherine rose from her seat and strode over to the bed. She had not checked on him in the last hour and perhaps it was time. Laying a hand against his forehead, she felt pure wetness there, not from her cloth or any other means. Keeping her excitement down, she felt the rest of his body. It was as damp as his forehead. His fever had broken!

She brushed her fingers against his semi-bearded cheek. "Alexander, wake up."

He murmured a little and opened his eyes. "Is it night already?"

Catherine tilted her head in a slight nod. "Aye, that it is. Your fever has broken," she informed him as she wet the cloth and began to sponge him off again. "I dare say the worst of the illness is over."

"Aye," he mumbled. "I am hungry. Is it time for a meal?"

That was a good sign in itself. "I will go down to the kitchen and get the cook to fix you some broth and bread."

"I need meat, not broth woman," he snapped angrily. Good, his temperament was returning as well.

"You will get your meat when I see you can hold the broth down," she ordered.

"You are still sick so I am still the master. Now if you are good...."

"Stop treating me like a child," Alexander growled. "I want something much heartier than what you want to give me."

His response made her want to smile but she held back. "Then stop acting as if you were one."

Alexander's face took on another emotion, his eyes sparkling like a tiger ready to pounce. "Come here woman," he ordered as he gripped her wrists and pulled her near.

"No, Alexander," she snapped, pulling her wrists free. "You barely have enough strength to eat let alone make love." Fear gripped her as the thought of his child residing in her womb arose. What would she do? The previous times she had known the pleasure of his arms, it was beyond her control. This time, it was not.

His brows furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because you are weak," she stammered as she pulled the covers up to his neck. "I refuse to weaken you further." If he knew that she was the weak one, he could turn it to his advantage and have her before she could stop it.

"Very well then," he sighed as he took her hand, slipping it under the covers. "Are you sure that you do not want to?" His member pulsed with life, rock hard and ready for her if she wanted it.

Catherine tried to withdraw her hand but his free one held it where it was. Her face heated with fire, her cheeks probably turning ten shades of red. "What are you doing?"

"Let me show you something."

Chapter 7

Alexander's strength gradually returned with each passing day, much to her joy. Though she was attracted to him and loved the pleasure of his arms, she was still his captive bride and held against her will. For that, she could never forgive him.

Catherine could have left easily while he was ill but she felt the tugging of her heart, telling her that he needed her to stay during his illness. Now that he was almost completely well, she started planning her escape route.

Through Taran, she found out about a few peasants who could provide transportation to the Abbey of St. Agatha. Her old mentor, Sister Margaret, would most assuredly see that she had safe passage back to Scotland.

Then, as if Fate smiled upon her, Alexander had received a message from the London requesting his presence at court. Apparently, his grandfather wanted a full report of what was going on.

"I will be leaving for London later this morn, my pet," he stated playfully as he chucked her under the chin at the morning meal.

Catherine almost could not contain her surprise. "How long will you be gone?" Her body was tired from the rigorous lovemaking from the night before, Alexander having made up for lost time during his illness.

"Not long, my dear," he replied with a sensual tone, his voice warming her body like the finest wine, encouraging her heart to beat faster.

"Then I shall be happily waiting here."

Alexander's face relaxed slightly as a modicum of calm washed over him. "Good. If I thought you had a notion to run away, I would not leave you."

Her smile emerged, necessary to keep his guard low. "I have decided I belong here in Kent and not anywhere else, Alexander. You have truly shown me how much I am wanted." Part of it was the truth. She would have liked to remain here but under the circumstances, she could not. Scotland needed her more than Alexander did. Her grandfather was not bound to live long and the only other heir was the Maid of Norway who had never set a foot in her native soil. No, she must be the one when the time came to unite all the clans under one crown.

"Very well, then, Catherine," he murmured as he pulled her to her feet. "Shall we discuss this in our chamber?"

* * * *

Alexander left as the sun sank low in the horizon, taking a small garrison with him to London. She feigned a crying fit, forcing Alexander to forbid her coming downstairs and see him off.

Once he was out of her chamber, she searched like mad for her escape clothing. She and Taran had labored over them for weeks, making them in the dead of night. They had gotten most of the work done during Alexander's illness, hiding them away when Alexander woke up.

Catherine reached up under the unused fireplace and pulled out the discreet bundle. In it were a cloak, dagger, tunic and braes. She had no boots but compromised on an old pair of shoes that would work nicely. Before laying it all out, she carefully locked the door and went to the window.

Below her window, Alexander sat on his horse in the spacious cobblestone courtyard, waiting for the rest of his men assigned to go with him. Midnight colored hair streamed down his shoulders in gentle curls, his upper torso covered in half-armor. Few shields covered his lower torso as if he did not expect to encounter any thieves or any other sort of riff-raff on the road.

Her throat curled around the hard lump in it, the pumping of her blood beating hard in her temple. Part of her did not want him to leave. She came to enjoy the company of his arms as well as the pleasure from his fingers. He had taught her many things in the last few weeks and much to her dismay, she had grown to love them. When he first captured her, she saw nothing but the vicious warlord who would cut down any Scot crossing his path. Now she saw something completely different. Alexander could be kind when the need arose but he could also be vicious when necessary. He had never once raised a hand to her or had even attempted to. All he need do was use his deep voice and it instilled fear in her. During his illness, he confessed what happened to make him the man he was, making her understand him a little more. She did not like what he had done but she understood why. If that had happened to her, she would stop at nothing for vengeance.

For some reason, she wanted to look at him once last time, as if to imprint his image on her memory forever.

Then, as if to answer her silent prayer, Alexander looked up. Even from the distance, she felt his strong sexual magnetism, the area between her legs throbbing. They had enjoyed each other before his departure, making her want more of him. Then, he had to dress and leave. She had felt abandoned by him, as if she meant nothing to him at all and that the King was more important.

Get your thoughts straight! Her mind screamed. You do not belong here so do not pine for a man who does not love you!

Alexander's hand waved and she returned it with a kiss. Then he made a surprise gesture. He acted as though he caught the kiss in his hand and tucked it safely in his hauberk. Surprise filled her. How odd for a man to act like a fanciful boy.

With that, he kicked his horse in the unarmored flanks and urged it into a soft gallop. Thunderous hooves stormed over the cobblestones, exiting the drawbridge with a hurried rumble. Hollow thuds resounded around the bailey as they left Henstrige, the villagers waving goodbye.

Catherine laid her chin in her cupped palms, watching them move over the countryside, the banner of Kent dappling in the breeze. How long Alexander would be gone she did not know but one thing she did know. She would not be here when he returned.

* * * *

Catherine and Taran huddled near the corner of the curtain wall where they were certain no one would see them. Short black, velvet tunics covered them, accompanied by matching braes. They had secretly dyed their shoes to match the rest of the clothing.

"Ten of the clock and all is well!" shouted the crier.

"What time will they be here, Taran?" she asked impatiently, her fingers tugging at the edges of her cloak so the cowl completely covered her face.

"Now," Taran answered, her head moving around. "I do not understand--"

Wild calls of the whippoorwill cut her words. "That is for us!" Taran squealed quietly as she stepped beyond the confines of the curtain wall.

"Good. The longer I stay here, the longer I run the risk of carrying his child," she muttered glumly as she followed Taran down the grassy knoll. The possibility that she already did hinged on the fabric of her mind but she kept it at bay, preferring to keep Scotland in her sights.

Pale streams of light fell from the moon, turning the world a silvery blue. Trees looked dark and ominous, forming a vast copse of forest for them to hide in. Deer came out and foraged for food along with wild cats and rabbits. She listened intently to their night calls, brought to her by the slight wind sweeping through.

Scents of wildflowers assailed her nostrils, unlike the heather at home. It was a mixture of wild roses, honeysuckle and jasmine, making for one exciting night. "Have you the gold?" she whispered carefully to Taran.

"Aye, I have it," Taran answered, her hand patting the bulging side of her girdle.

"Good," she stated in a slightly quivering voice. "I do not want our throats to be cut because we did not pay."

Just as they reached the line of trees, two figures bearing horses emerged. In the night, she could see the horses they brought came from fine stock, more than likely plundered from some nobleman's stable.

"Aye, h're ye are, my ladies," stated the older of the two men. His white hair hung on either side of his face, glowing in the pale light. He reminded her of the banshee, only larger and male.

"Are these horses good?" she inquired, slowly going over to them so as not to spook them. Her hands drifted over each animal, inspecting the flesh for any imperfections. There were none.

"Aye, me lady," he cackled in a thick Welsh accent. "De be da finest ye will find."

"I can believe that," she concurred then turned to Taran. "Give him the gold."

"But...."

"Give him the gold and we shall be on our way."

Reluctantly, Taran removed the leather pouch from her girdle and handed it over. The old man snatched it from her hand and opened it, hurriedly counting with his counterpart looking over his shoulder. "This be more that we ask."

"Because you have brought me such good animals, I gave you more," she answered smartly as she walked over to the paler of the two horses and mounted it. The gentle mare did not seem to mind having a human on its bare back.

He tipped his hat to her. "Aye, my lady. If I can ever be of service to ye, jest call me name." With that, the old man and his accomplice melted back into the forest.

"Wherever did you find them?" That question had burned on her mind ever since Taran came to her with the plan of escape.

"Through one of the other servants. From what I understand, the Duke has made use of those men before."

Now her curiosity piqued. "How so?"

Taran shrugged her thick shoulders. "I know not and the servant would not tell me."

Catherine gripped a handful of the light mare's mane and directed the animal toward the forest. "The abbey of St. Agatha is not far from here if I do remember. We should be there before morning."

"Do you think they will welcome us?"

Her lips spread into a full smile. "How could they not?"

* * * *

Alexander trudged through the thick forest, his men behind him. He could hear the crunch of dead leaves and twigs but ignored them. Catherine occupied his mind and nothing would take her away from it.

Through the canopy of dark trees, moonlight filtered down and showered the earth with a silvery light. Dense vegetation grew at the base of the trees, making the forest seem darker and more ominous. Overhead, the calls of the owl rebounded as the animal searched the night for mice to feed on. Wolves bayed at the moon, looking for mates as well on this night.

Alexander drove the forest enchantment from his mind, leaving room only for

Catherine. He found it utterly strange that he could think of nothing but her. The way she moved, her breath, the way her breasts rose when she was in ecstasy....

He had to stop. He hardened quickly at thought of her, a notion that never happened to him before, even with Riana.

Try as he might, Riana's image grew harder and harder to remember lately, only to be replaced with Catherine's beautiful face. Had his heart started to heal? Was that the reason for it?

No, it could not be. He buried his heart so long with Riana that he knew nothing else but vengeance. With Catherine, she showed him that there was still caring and compassion in a cold, unfeeling world. No woman had ever taken care of him in that manner, save his mother and it felt wonderful that someone other than her cared whether he lived or died.

Was he in love with her? Alexander searched deep into his soul, trying to find the answer. No, he was not in love with her, of that much he was sure. Yet something else grew inside of him, feelings he never knew existed. It ran deeper than caring or fondness but it was not quite as deep as love.

"Where do you want to rest, Alexander?" Longworth questioned in a tired voice, his gloved hand going to his mouth to stifle a yawn.

They approached a verdant meadow, a lush green carpet of grass. Small rabbits scampered in and out of the tall reeds in an effort to avoid the trembling ground. "This will do for tonight. Tomorrow, I wish to be in London and speak to my grandfather. I do not want to leave Catherine alone for too long."

"Why not?"

"If I am not mistaken, my little bride will be trying to escape as we speak," he stated nonchalantly as he urged his horse into the field.

"How can you be so calm about this, Alexander?" Longworth's bushy blond brows rose in question.

"There is no possible way she can escape the watchful eyes of my servants."

* * * *

Duncan paced the chamber afforded him by the Bruce, his hard leather heels striking the cold stone in rapid pace. Why could they not invade Kent now and bring Catherine out of it? Why must he constantly rely on Robert's judgment?

He snarled, wincing as the pain in his face flared up. If he caught a hold of that bastard Duke, there would be no end to the torment he would rain upon the man.

His fingers danced against the palm of his hand behind his back, a nervous habit he had picked up in his exile. What he would not give....

Sharp creaks filled the air as the door opened. He stopped in his tracks to find Robert the Bruce standing there. "The message I sent to Wallace was intercepted and now

he will be walking into a trap.”

His brows furrowed. “How do you know?”

Robert flopped down into a chair next to the table, his fingers massaging his temples. “Because the original messenger made it back to me. The man who had beat him left him for dead in the forest.”

He crossed his arms. Something was odd about all of this. “How do you know that it got through to Wallace? How do you know it was not destroyed?”

Robert shot him a cold stare, his auburn brows knitting together. “Because it was the Laird McLeish who intercepted it. If he can destroy Wallace, then he will come after both of us next.”

“But how do you know it was McLeish?”

“Because the man who beat my messenger bore the brand of McLeish.”

Now it made perfect sense. If he, Wallace and the Bruce were dead, that would leave Catherine’s hand for the first man to take it. He cringed. Laird McLeish had been to his grandfather’s court several times when he was younger, always leering suggestively at Catherine. Once the Laird McLeish had approached the King about marriage to Catherine but nothing had materialized. Catherine did not want to marry him and the King did not fancy having Catherine’s husband always plotting to take the throne for himself. “What shall we do?”

Robert’s expression darkened as he leaned forward, his large hands pounding against the table. “I have already sent a second messenger along a different route to let Wallace know that it is a trap to come here. Instead, we shall meet him at Bannockburn and aid his cause against England. After it is all over, we will plan our attack against Kent.”

Relief swept through him. There was still a way around the problem. “When are we to meet?”

“In four days,” Robert offered, his fingers casually tugging at the hair on his chin. “That will give me time to gather the barons and their armies together to help Wallace in his fight.”

Duncan’s fingers slipped to the gilded handle of his claymore. “You do not know how badly I want to defeat those bastards....”

Robert’s upraised hand cut him off. “Do not forget--you handed your sister over to them on a silver platter after they promised you riches,” he reminded, his posture changing slightly. “If it were not for you, Catherine would be in Edinburgh where she belonged.”

“No doubt wed to you, Bruce,” he interjected sourly. “I know you have harbored designs on her from the moment she passed into womanhood.”

The Bruce’s face changed from friendliness to abject fury, his cheeks reddening. “I would not spew such vicious lies if I were you, Duncan. Who is the outlaw--you or me?”

Rage built up inside of him to the point of nearly drawing his sword and killing Robert where he sat. "I will show you the way to Kent and free my sister of that murderous bastard. Once she is safely crowned Queen, you and I will have a tournament."

A deep scowl crossed Robert's face as he leaned forward, his hand going to his own sword. "You can count on that, my friend."

* * * *

Though the moon was full, it gave no real light to their journey. Full trees blocked out any hint of light, making everything a little more arduous than it should have been.

"Where is the abbey?" Taran wailed as they moved forward. "I am growing weary of this."

Catherine pulled her horse to a stop and turned, giving Taran a hard glare. "Please do not burden me with your bellyaching! We will be at the abbey soon, Taran, so you must keep quiet!" Her nerves were raw, mostly from fear eating at them, the thought that Alexander returned early for some unknown reason. Why, he could be looking for her at this very moment!

"Forgive me, Catherine," she mumbled. "I am weary of riding, 'tis all."

"I know, Taran, but we only have a little longer to go," Catherine remarked in an assured tone.

Familiar trees surrounded them, curving gently along a worn path. The moon was much lower now, casting the world into a darkened pall, hiding them well. Tall scrub growth kept the sound of their movements to a minimum, the stark rustles light.

Catherine kept her eyes trained ahead, searching for any other objects of familiarity. Suddenly, the rock where she had carved her name came into view. She urged her horse over to it and dismounted quickly. Her gloved hands swept over the polished stone, searching for her name. She found nothing. Surely, this was the rock! It had the same formation as the one she had used but there was nothing there. Her heart sank. Were they lost?

Nay they were not. It simply had to be here. Taking one last chance, she removed her glove and searched with her naked fingertips. Then, as if a ghost from her past, the slim indents emerged. She felt a 'C' then the 'A' followed by the rest of the letters. Her heart soared to new heights. They were on the right road!

Catherine mounted her horse with lightning speed and went back on the path. "Come with me!" she cried, motioning to Taran. "We are almost there!"

* * * *

Margaret lay in the hard wooden cot, murmuring her vespers. Since an illness had robbed her of the use of her legs, she stayed mostly in bed until she was needed for

special masses and the arrival of the Pope. Her sisters had constructed a litter for her, allowing her to roam around the abbey when she needed to.

Her thoughts swayed between her prayers and the well being of her own sister. Ah, Isabeau, Queen of Castile. Since Isabeau's marriage to Kendrick, she had not seen Isabeau so happy. With the birth of their thirteen children, Isabeau had remained sleek and svelte as she had in her younger days, with an eternal smile upon her face.

The thought of having children crossed her mind now and then but she nudged those unhappy thoughts away. She was the bride of Christ, devoted only to him. Besides, if she ever felt pangs of motherhood, she would simply write to Isabeau and have her bring the children for a visit. Almost every time, Isabeau would have a newborn for her to fuss over. It had helped rid her of her mothering instincts.

It was always a little sad seeing Isabeau leave but she knew that Castile could not be without its monarch for very long. She took comfort in the fact that Kendrick always kept an eye on Isabeau, especially if she had an infant in her arms or was with child. Nothing had ever escaped his attention.

She pulled her attention back where it belonged. "Our Father, who art in heaven..." she began and slowed a bit now that age had caught up with her.

Just as she was halfway through, a soft knock drew her attention. "Enter," she bade, kissing her rosary and laying it to the side.

Sister Camellia entered softly, her veil covered head bowed. "Mother, I am sorry to disturb you but there is a young woman at the gate who wishes to see you."

Her graying brows wrinkled. "A young woman to see me?"

Camellia nodded. "Aye, Mother. A young woman by the name of Catherine."

Margaret's heart felt as though it seized in her chest at that name. "What does she want of me?" Her voice was shaky as the excitement of seeing Catherine again after all these years soared through her veins like a wildfire out of control.

"She said that she must speak to you about an urgent matter."

Margaret lay quietly for a moment, composing her thoughts. From what she had heard, Catherine had married her nephew, the Duke of Kent, but according to gossip, he kidnapped her by the orders of his King. How could Isabeau let her son act in such a manner? Alexander's name embodied terror in anyone who had heard it, especially those of Scottish blood....

"Mother Margaret? Is it really you?"

Her head turned sharply at the familiar female voice while her dry lips curved into a generous smile. In the doorway stood Catherine, her golden hair flowing down her shoulders in a pale curtain. Black wool covered her, cut in the style of men's clothing. Another girl was with her, a servant perhaps.

"Come here, my darling Catherine!" she cried, holding her arms out. Catherine ran into them without hesitation, folding herself within the deeply familiar embrace.

"Oh, Mother, you would not believe what has happened to me," Catherine

confessed, her body shaking. "Everything is as horrible as it could possibly be!"

She pushed Catherine away slightly and cupped the girl's chin in her worn fingers. "I know," she offered. "I have heard what the Duke has done to you."

Catherine swiped away a few errant tears with the edge of her sleeve. "He kidnapped me and forced me to marry him all on the orders of his King. Now he wants me to give him a son so Longshanks can control both thrones."

The sobs coming from the distraught girl were almost too much for her to bear. She folded Catherine back into her arms, her hands stroking the golden mane of hair in a reassuring motion. "You will stay here until I can decide what is to be done."

Catherine looked up, her emerald eyes shining. "But what if the Duke comes here looking for me? I will not have him hurt you or have any of the dear sisters here be harmed."

She held Catherine's damp face in her hands. "If the Duke does come, I will deal with him."

"How can you? He is a very large man...."

Her gnarled finger went to Catherine's lips. "I have my ways."

* * * *

Grey, cloudy skies pervaded the area of Bannockburn. Men, dressed in the surcoats of the King, stood silent and waiting as the air swept around the quiet valley below. Alexander cast only sidelong glances at his grandfather who sat proudly on his horse overlooking the field.

"A good day for battle, is it not, Alexander?" his grandfather questioned, the aged blue eyes searching the crowd. The old man scented blood and hungered for it, like a starving dog sitting down to its first meal.

"Aye, that it is, your Majesty," he answered solemnly. His gaze swept over the ragged bands of Scottish men, their tattered kilts blowing in the wind. In their hands were the only weapons afforded them--scythes and daggers not to mention hoes and battleaxes. Against the much better equipped English army, they did not stand a chance. Before Catherine had entered his life, he would have loved nothing better than the defeat of the Scottish, but now, it all seemed utterly different.

"What is wrong, Alexander? Does something vex you?"

He looked sideways at his king, his leather clad fingers holding tightly onto his reins. "No, my lord. Nothing vexes me," he answered in a tight tone, the slamming of his heart inside his chest becoming too much. He did not want to voice his worries about Catherine lest his grandfather think him to be going 'soft'. It was more for Catherine's safety than his own.

The King's thin lips spread into a wide, knowing smile. "Ah, I know, you are worried about the Queen you are wed to."

Alexander turned sharply, the heat of his surprise spreading across his face. "Of what do you speak, my lord? What do you mean Catherine is a Queen?"

His grandfather's features contorted to a mixture of glee and utter happiness. "That bastard James died a short time ago. The Scots crowned Catherine as Queen of Scotland in absentia. Surely, you knew."

The hard beat of his heart picked up in pace as the fear entered it. If Catherine was the Scottish Queen now, he should be back at his castle, guarding her with his very life. The remaining Scots would more than likely plunder his castle in his absence and take her back. "Nay, I did not," he snapped sharply through clenched teeth, his hands tightening on the reins of his horse. "With this information, perhaps I should return to Henstrige should any of them gather a notion to kidnap her and take her back to Scotland."

"Have you enough men?"

"More than enough," he replied as he pulled back. "If you will grant me pardon, I will return to my castle."

"Good man. You should guard her," his grandfather replied. "Woe be to the Scots that try to take her from you."

His brows furrowed deep. "I keep what I own no matter who tries to take it from me."

Alexander felt the heat from his grandfather's stare bore through him and he cared not. If the old man knew his true feelings, the king would demand that he send Catherine back to Scotland or worse, to a nunnery after she bore his son. He would not have that. Catherine meant far too much to him.

"Where are you going, Alexander?" Longworth questioned as they galloped out of the valley, the screams of death echoing behind them.

"Henstrige," he snapped as they moved up the steep hill with their party. "I have a suspicion that Catherine is not there."

"How do you know this? I know you jested about it before but do you believe your own words?"

Alexander pulled his horse to a stop and turned toward Longworth, the anger mixed with fear rising. "With all that is in me, Longworth. Catherine is like a caged bird. Once she finds her freedom, she will take it no matter what the consequences."

Longworth's face twisted into a mask of concern. "What are you going to do to her when you bring her back?"

"Put shackles on her that she will never be able to remove."

Chapter 8

Four days had passed since her arrival at St Agatha's, her mind no clearer than it was when she left Henstrige. The only thing she could think about was Alexander. For a man with such a terrible reputation, he could be a gentle lover as well as compassionate, drawing her deeper into his sexual aura. No man had ever made her respond in that way or encouraged her body to react the way it did just from the sound of his voice.

Unfortunately, those qualities did not nullify the fact he had kidnapped her with the sole intention of marrying her and forcing her to have his child.

"Are you all right, Catherine?" Taran asked quietly in the deep dark of the cold stone room, her voice breaking the uneasy silence.

"No," she confessed as she turned over on the uncomfortable bed, the rustling of the woolen covers filling the air. "I am anxious to be on my way back to Scotland." Deep hums of the locusts outside the window normally lulled her to sleep but tonight they only aggravated her tormented mind.

"Aye, I am as well," Taran confessed with a regretful voice, "though I will miss the comfort of Lord Longworth's arms."

Her brow rose curiously. "After what he did to you? I did not think ravishment to be a prelude to love."

Taran sniffed slightly as she slipped her hand under her pillow. "He really did not ravish me as badly as you think. He was most persuasive. After the first time, he showed me his slow hand and made me want him all the more."

Just like Alexander, she thought. Why did he have to be so damned handsome as well as experienced with women? She could have hated him more if he had taken her against her will instead of seducing her body as well as her senses, tempting her to give into him willingly.

"Do you not feel the same way about the Duke?"

Taran's question hit her, making her suck her breath in as if someone had hit her in the belly. Aye, she did but that did not matter. Her only objective now was to return to Scotland and to the people who needed her so badly. "I do not know," she answered in an exasperated voice. "Sometimes I do want him then I feel I should not after what he has done to me."

"Are you sure you want to return to Scotland?" Taran questioned softly.

Catherine lay quiet for a moment, her mind mulling it over carefully. She did want to return to Scotland and her duty as its heir to the crown but a tiny part of her wanted to remain Alexander's Duchess. "I have no choice in the matter, Taran," she announced in a

sullen tone. "Scotland needs me now and as its heir to the throne, my needs must come secondary."

"But...."

"No buts, Taran," she corrected softly. "Now get to sleep. In the morning I will ask Mother to give us food and water so that we may continue on our journey."

"As you wish," Taran answered in a weary voice. Squeals of wood echoed through the room as Taran shifted, indicating she was doing as Catherine bade.

With Taran going to sleep, she was completely alone with her own wild thoughts for company.

Her mind drifted back to the moment she had first beheld Alexander. In the deep, moonless dark, he had seemed like an avenging angel, dark and mysterious. Then in the chapel, she was able to drink in his deep beauty. He had seemed less threatening and more handsome, with his azure eyes and aristocratic features.

The image shifted to the moment when he had removed the top of her gown. He had knelt before her, his chest bare, begging her to touch him. Hardened planes of muscle came to life under her fingertips ... steady throbs of desire echoed between her legs, making her body create the necessary juices for him though he was not here.

She slammed her face into the pillow. This simply could not be. Scotland needed its monarch no matter how much she wanted Alexander.

* * * *

Dawn broke over the bank of mountains with tiny pink fingers stretching out over the deep azure sky. Hazy mist surrounded the mountain tops, shrouding their secrets. Dense copses of forest lay ahead of him with a slim path winding through their veritable green trees.

Alexander pressed on, ignoring the complaints of his men as well as Longworth's. Once they reached Henstrige, they could harbor all the rest they wanted. Until then, they had better keep their thoughts to themselves.

"I am grateful Henstrige is only a half a morning's ride from here," Longworth commented, his gloved hand raking through his errant blond locks. "I do not think my poor manhood could take much more punishment."

"You bellyache too much, Longworth," Alexander replied, his words sounding like ice. "You should have been a woman."

"Nay," Longworth disagreed, "for I would not have been able to enjoy the fruits of women if I were."

"I am in no mood for talk, Longworth," he growled as he kicked his weary horse in the unarmored flanks. "All I want to do is return to Henstrige and make certain that Catherine is indeed there."

Longworth issued a mock salute. "Aye, my lord."

The act was very whimsical, so much so that it made him smile slightly. Even when he was in the worst of moods, Longworth could sometimes get him to smile.

* * * *

Early morning light streamed down on the golden stone of Henstrige. The high walls topped with battlements filled with sentries, all watching for any possible threat. Inside the drum towers some of the archers stood watch, ready to fire through the arrow slits if any enemy tried to lay siege to his castle.

As Alexander approached his castle, his heart sank a little. Catherine was not here. He could feel the lack of her presence without the confirmation of his eyes.

She was gone.

His anger flared and boiled inside of him like a threatening storm, always brewing and ready to explode. She had no right to leave him as she did. Catherine was his woman and he kept what he owned.

They crossed the open drawbridge with quick speed, the horses' hooves sounding like distant thunder on the ancient wooden boards. Inside the bailey, all activity ceased with all of the villagers staring at him with fear behind their eyes, their bowing to him strained and frightened.

He scowled. They all knew Catherine was gone and did nothing about it. Once he had her back, he would have to punish them all.

Alexander pushed his horse to a full gallop and leapt from his horse at the castle door. He stormed inside. "Catherine?" he shouted in the cavernous foyer. "I demand you come to me!"

There was no answer.

"Catherine," he continued to shout. "If I have to drag you down here, there will be a heavy price to pay!"

He felt a sharp tug on his armor jacket and he spun around to see the cook standing before him, wringing her hands. "She is gone, my lord."

"Where did she go?" he demanded, his hands grabbing her upper arms in a tight grip

"I-know--not, my lord," the old woman stammered, her face communicating the pain he produced.

"Who let her go? Why did no one stop her?"

"No one knew until the next morn, my lord. She must have left in the night," the cook confessed as he released her, the withered hands rubbing her spindly arms. "A message did arrive a day later bearing your name."

"Where is it?" His heart turned over, nearly halting in his chest. Bands of thieves must have her and demand some sort of ransom. Aye, that was it. If any man has touched her, he thought violently to himself, he will feel my sword through his gullet.

“H--h--ere my lord,” the woman cackled as she extracted a message from her apron. “I kept it so it would not be misplaced.”

Alexander ripped it from her weathered fingers and stared at the strange but familiar handwriting. His lips spread into a wide smile. He knew exactly where it was from and from whom. “When I bring Catherine back, I expect everyone to keep a watch on her every move. If she escapes again, I will not be responsible for my actions. Am I understood?”

The woman nodded. “Aye, my lord.”

“Tell the rest of the servants. If anyone has any other information that may be useful to me, I will gladly pay for it.”

She tilted her head. “Aye, my lord.”

He left a stunned Longworth in his wake and stormed to his war council room. Built by his grandfather, the room had everything necessary for planning a strategic battle. Detailed maps as well as tiny figures to place into position lay waiting for someone to put them to use. Shields, used by the men of his father's family, hung proudly on the walls, offset by tapestries his mother had made.

Alexander slumped into his chair and hurriedly opened the missive.

My dear nephew,

Catherine is here in my safekeeping. What have you done to her? She is absolutely terrified of you. I knew you had kidnapped her and forced her to marry you. Did you ravish her? I certainly hope not because this girl is special but not because she is a Queen. Dare I say it but I think Catherine is in love with you. Whenever your name is mentioned, her eyes take on a special sort of glow. I have not seen that since your mother married your father.

In reference to her terror, I do not really think it is of you but of her feelings for you. She is unsure of what she feels because she has never known a man quite like you. You have inherited that quality from your father. I must admit that when I had first met Prince Kendrick, I felt that instant attraction. For a while, I was jealous of your mother but I realized that I would never do anything to hurt Isabeau's feelings. Besides, I had my own ethereal husband to keep me happy.

You were but a babe in arms at the time but I tell you this for a reason. Catherine can and will fall in love with you, more easily than you think. Just give it time and be patient with her, especially in her condition.

Yours in Christ,

Mother Margaret.

Alexander let the message fall from his fingers and allowed it land on the floor in a heap near his booted foot. Was Catherine truly in love with him? When he first kidnapped Catherine, her love was the furthest thing from his mind. Now, it was all he could think of. Her passion and understanding as well as fierce nature intrigued him to no end, tantalizing his senses like never before. He craved her like no other woman and the

moments away from her were like torments of agony.

He looked down at the message, his gaze drawn to one line in particular. Just give it time and be patient with her, especially in her condition.

What did his aunt mean by 'especially in her condition'? His heart slammed in his chest. Nay, it could not be! Was Catherine with child already? Nay, it could not be possible! They had only been wed--the days ticked off in his head, adding up to almost a month they had been together.

He leaned back as sheer happiness surged through him like a bolt of lightning. It was quite possible Catherine was ripe on their wedding night and she most likely conceived the child then.

Laughter erupted from him and rang through the high, rafter filled ceiling. He was going to be a father! His mirth was louder this time at the prospect. The Butcher of the Isles was going to be a father!

Sharp, hollow echoes sounded from the end of the room. He looked to see Longworth standing there with a puzzled look on his face. "What is wrong, Alexander?"

"Come, my friend," he gestured with his hand to the empty chair near him. "I have some news for you."

"I take it you have found your beloved bride," he commented sourly as he slumped into an opposite chair. "When shall we get her and that little maidservant of hers?"

His brow rose. "Her servant is gone as well?"

Longworth nodded angrily. "Aye, she is. When I get her back...." He laughed harder this time, making Longworth more puzzled than before. "You are truly mad, Alexander. You laugh over your bride escaping and taking her servant with her. Most men would be severely angry over something of this nature."

His laughter slowed. "Here, read this," he offered as he kicked the message over to Longworth with one booted foot. "I think you will like this."

Longworth's eyes shifted as he read the message, a slow maniacal grin spreading across his lips. "Aye, now I see. Your little bride is within reach."

"Aye, she is."

"But how do we know she is still there? Perhaps she has already left."

"I know my aunt," Alexander commented as he stretched out, crossing one booted ankle over the other while his hands intertwined behind his head to form a slight cradle for it. "She will not let Catherine leave unless it is with me."

Longworth gazed at it again. "What does the good nun mean by 'especially in her condition'?"

"I know not," he lied. "Perhaps she fell from her horse." The last thing he wanted was for everyone to know Catherine was with child. His aunt could be mistaken and mayhap it meant something else. He needed to hear it from Catherine's lips before he announced it to the rest of his people.

Longworth laid the paper down. "So when do you want to get her back?"

Alexander's gaze flicked to the paper and back to his friend. "I will write a message to my aunt and enlist her help in this matter. I am sure she will be more than glad to do it, especially since the convent receives a yearly stipend from me."

"I take it Catherine does not know that your aunt was once the beautiful Princess Margaret of Castile?"

He shook his head. "It is very unlikely."

Confusion slipped over Longworth's features. "How so?" he questioned mildly.

"When my aunt took her vows, she renounced everything and demanded to be stricken from the family line."

"It almost sounds as if she had never existed," Longworth commented solemnly.

Alexander nodded. "She died to her old life and was reborn into her new one."

"Now I see. No one speaks of the former princess. Catherine would have no way of knowing the good nun was blood to you."

"Aye," Alexander replied good-naturedly. "I will keep it that way as long as I can."

* * * *

Morning arrived in its usual rush with the birds welcoming it with their song. Catherine lay in the small uncomfortable cot, her mind an unending wheel of emotion. Why could things not be easier for her? She harbored feelings for Alexander, emotions she knew to be wrong. He was her enemy, one that she had taken into her bed...

"Catherine, are you awake?" Taran mumbled from the cot in the opposite corner.

She looked to her friend. "Aye, I am." She yawned. Sleep had eluded her for the last few days, her mind an unsleeping beast tormenting her endlessly. Why could she not arrive to some sort of conclusion?

Taran leaned up on one elbow, the sleepiness still filling her warm brown eyes. "When did you want to leave?"

"Today. By now, Alexander has probably returned to find me absent and will begin his hunt for me." Tears threatened her eyes but she refused to shed them. Alexander would not cage her again.

Her friend sat up and brushed the wild strands of mud colored hair out of her eyes. "How soon?"

"After the morning meal, I suppose," she replied sullenly as she turned in the bed. Catherine sat up only to find out her world spun. Everything whirled in a mad dervish, pushing past her vision with lightning speed. "Help me, Taran!" she cried. "I am going toretch!"

Taran leapt out of bed and was by her side in an instant. Catherine scrambled out of her cot despite the whirling madness and barely made it the bucket in the corner before

her belly started discharging.

Her stomach clenched with each wave, forcing everything out. The sudden onset of nausea only confirmed her suspicions. She was with child.

"Please, God, no!" she cried and sank to her knees, her hands cradling her head. Alexander had given her the one permanent shackle to him that she did not want.

"I am so sorry, Catherine," Taran mumbled at her side. "I was afraid of this."

"If only we could have seeded my womb or found some pennyroyal," she lamented loudly. "I would not be carrying his child."

"What is done is done," Taran reassured her. "What we must do now is get to Scotland and under the protection of your grandfather."

"How can I return carrying the child of the Butcher of the Isles? My people will not accept me at all and treat me like a harlot," she wailed, her sobs becoming louder.

"You can, Catherine," Taran said. "We will go back to Scotland and never tell anyone who the child's father is."

Catherine clutched her belly hard, waiting for the wave of nausea to pass. "That will not work, Taran. My grandfather must know by now that Alexander had forced me to marry him. The possibility of me conceiving Alexander's child would have crossed his mind as well."

"But he will...."

She looked at Taran hard. "He would never understand, Taran. My grandfather is a shrewd man and would look at me as a whore."

"Your grandfather is not as cold and uncaring as you...."

Her fear rose and formed a lump in her throat, making it hard for her to swallow. "I have known him a lot longer and far deeper than you, Taran. He would not think twice about putting me into seclusion until the child's birth and having the infant spirited away when I least expected it."

"But...."

"No buts, Taran. We will return to Scotland as planned. I will have the child there but I will hide it away from the world. That way, I can save the child from Alexander's fate."

"What fate is that?"

"To be a bloodthirsty warlord."

* * * *

"I must go, Mother," Catherine begged of the nun, her fingers digging into the elderly flesh encased in coarse dark wool. "I have spent far too much time here as it is."

Mother Margaret's hand patted hers in a friendly gesture. "No, Catherine, you cannot mean to leave now. We have so much to talk about."

Her instincts kicked up. Every time she spoke about leaving, Mother Margaret

cajoled her into staying. She usually caved to the old nun's demands but not today. If she did not leave before the day was out, she never would. "We have already said what we have needed to say, Mother," she stated in a flat tone. "Taran and I will be leaving here after the morning meal."

"No, you will not," the kindly nun stated in an unfamiliar stern tone. "If you must leave, then you will do it after evening vespers."

She shook her head. "I cannot, Mother. The forest is full of thieves all too happy to pounce on two innocent women."

Mother cupped her cheek. "You came here dressed like men and that is how you should leave. No one will be the wiser."

Catherine sat back in her chair, her hands limp in her lap. Mother was holding her here for some reason and she could not figure out why. It could not be Alexander because Mother only knew him by reputation. No, there must be another alternate reason the elderly nun kept her here. "Really, Mother, I must go now...."

"I wish to speak no more about it, Catherine," Mother Margaret stated coldly as she pulled the covers up to her chin. "I am tired and wish to sleep." With that, Mother Margaret closed her eyes.

She paled, her heart thumping heavily in her chest. Something was definitely not right about all of this. Mother kept her here for some reason but she did not know what it was.

As fear and panic took over, she left the older woman's chamber quickly. The time had definitely come for her to leave.

* * * *

The sun sank below the clouds, allowing the blanket of night to take over. Wisps of clouds drifted across the mostly clear sky and allowed the remainder of the sun to peek through now and then. Calls of the dawning night floated around her, making her fear rise high.

"Are we going on the right path, Catherine?" Terror registered in Taran's voice, making it quiver.

"Aye, that we are, Taran. If we follow it this way, it will lead us back to Scotland. From there, we can find our way to Edinburgh," she answered calmly as she kept her gaze straight ahead. No matter what happened, she needed to remain calm.

Just as they reached the inner portion of the forest, Catherine halted. Behind them, she heard noises resembling a party of horses. Had someone followed them?

Taran halted beside her. "Wh--what is it, Catherine?"

"I wanted my horse to rest for a moment," Catherine replied firmly, her gaze sweeping the forest. So far, she had seen nothing to indicate someone was nearby.

"I--I--I heard it too."

She turned. "Heard what?"

"Sounds resembling a large gathering of horses."

She dismissed Taran's notion with a wave of her hand. "It is nothing, Taran. More than likely, a large pack of wolves has found a carcass to feast on, nothing more."

Sighs of relief escaped her friend's mouth. "Well, if that is all it is...."

Taran's words halted the moment the black figures melted out of the forest. Large crows covered their heads and hid their faces. Most of them rode ebony colored horses, big beasts looking as though they had descended from the legendary Clydesdales.

Catherine's heart pounded out of control as she looked around. Not only did the mysterious horsemen stand in front of her but they were behind her as well, closing their ranks slowly, as if to tease.

"Ca--Ca--Catherine--what do we do?" Taran screamed, her hands holding tightly onto the pommel of her saddle.

Before she could answer, the lead rider pushed his horse forward and extended his arm, wagging his fingers in her direction.

Fear slowed her heart and formed a lump in her throat. The mysterious stranger wanted her.

Chapter 9

Catherine hesitated as her panic climbed to new heights. If only Alexander was here, he would take care of the rabble without a backward glance. "What do you want?"

The man pointed to her again and motioned her to come forward. She shook her head but the stranger was more insistent with his gestures.

She looked to Taran. Her friend's hands shook as they held onto the reins. "What are we to do, Catherine?" Taran muttered in a low voice.

"Nothing," she replied, her stare going to each and every man, hoping there was a tiny break in between the horses. There was none. If only she had her sword. ... "We will find out what they want then hopefully, they will go away."

"I do ... not ... think so," Taran stuttered, the evident fear rising high in her voice. "I think they mean to ravish us!"

Catherine said nothing as she continued to watch the mysterious men surrounding her and Taran. None of them so much as made a move, the exception being their apparent leader. "What is it you want?" she yelled at them.

They remained silent. Suddenly, their leader bolted forward and grabbed her from her horse while another man swiped Taran from hers. "Taran!" she screamed as the other man galloped away with Taran.

The stranger who grabbed her kept her over the pommel of his saddle, the hardened horn digging into her belly. "I demand that you put me down!" she ordered the stranger but he kept riding on, past his men. "I cannot ride like this in my condition!"

His hand stayed firm on her back, holding her steady until he reached a clearing a little beyond where they had been. He halted and let her down easy before dismounting himself. Once she was free, Catherine tried to run from the stranger but he was too quick for her. His gloved hands gripped her shoulders and pushed her hard against a nearby tree.

"Wh--who ... are you?" she quivered, her breath hitching in and out.

Instead of answering her, his lips descended on her neck. "Do not accost me in this fashion!" she screamed.

The stranger continued on with his endeavor, ignoring her pleas. With no other recourse left for her, Catherine drew her arm back and smashed the man beside the head as hard as she could.

With a swift intake of breath as the pain must have shattered his head, the stranger pulled away, his face hidden beneath a large cowl. His hands went to his hips in an angry expression.

"If ... if ... you let me go and let me return to my husband, he will pay you

handsomely.”

Her captor stepped back and crossed his arms over his broad chest as if to say he was interested in what she had to say, the gesture all too familiar.

“H--he ... is the Duke of Kent and will pay you handsomely for my safe and unblemished return.”

Instead of saying anything, the stranger laid a hand against her abdomen and she quickly brushed it away. “Aye, I am carrying my husband’s child so he will pay you doubly for our safe return.”

He stood before her, silent as the grave. Before she could impose any further questions, he pushed her roughly against the tree and started kissing her neck again. “Alexander!” she screamed.

With that, the stranger stepped and pushed his cowl back. Yards of familiar midnight hued locks tumbled down his shoulders. “You called for me?” Alexander beamed, his sensual lips spreading into a wild grin.

Anger surged through her like never before. How dare he scare her in such a manner! “Why do you insist on terrorizing me?” she screamed as she stalked away, her hands curled into fists at her sides. “I have done nothing to you.”

“When I returned and found you gone,” Alexander confessed, “I had a suspicion that you might be here.”

She whirled about, her anger mixed with fear. “What have you done to the good sisters at the Abbey? Are they all right or have your men ravished them?”

“Nothing,” he replied casually as he closed the distance between them. “As I have told you before, you may think me to be ruthless but I am not vile toward women, especially holy ones.” His brow lifted. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Are you with child?”

Tears moistened her eyes and she moved away from him, turning her back. “Aye, it is true,” she confessed glumly. “I must have conceived the child on our wedding night.”

She felt his gloved hands grip tightly onto her shoulders, spinning her around. “You know this for certain?” he questioned, his eyes full of happiness. She nodded. “You do not know how happy you have made me, Catherine,” he confessed, his voice full of glee. “I am truly a lucky man.”

Catherine pulled away, her brows furrowing. “What do you mean, Alexander? I am only with child on orders of your king, nothing more. Once the child is born, you will send me to some unknown convent to live my days while your grandfather manipulates you and our child. I will not allow that to happen.”

His hands gripped her upper arms in a tight hold. “What are you saying, Catherine?” Alexander’s scowl deepened, his expression taking on the look of a wolf about to strike. “Do you mean to destroy the child within you?”

“If I must to keep it from your evil grandfather’s clutches, I will.” It was a lie but

she needed to make Alexander understand that she was not a pawn in his grandfather's game.

His face contorted into a mixture of anger and pain, the grip on her becoming stronger. "I swear by all that is holy, you will do nothing to that child in your belly. If you should, I will put another one there. Do you understand me?"

She ripped herself from him. "I understand what you are saying but I refuse to be a pawn in any man's game," she replied tartly as she stalked away from him, the quick snaps of branches breaking under her feet splitting the still night air.

Without warning, she felt his hands descend onto her shoulders and pull her back to him, his sexual aura washing over her like a wall of water and making her knees weak. "You are so full of fire, Catherine," he murmured as he cupped her face in his hands. "I know you will not destroy the child within."

"That is how little you know me, Alexander," she threatened. "I can do just about anything if I am pushed to the limit."

"Ah, that precious limit I know all too well," he whispered huskily as his naked hand slipped down the front of her tight braes, finding her nub waiting for him. "And I remember how sweet it is when you surrender."

Emotions shot from her privates and soared around her body as her hips rocked with each motion. She reveled in the feeling of his fingers sliding in and out of her, making her core slicker with each moment. "You do not play fair, Alexander," she moaned. "You will use anything to gain advantage over me."

"You are correct my dear," he replied in a hoarse whisper. "Just as you use what you possess to bewitch me."

Cool air swirled around her bottom half as Alexander pushed her braes down to her feet. Rough bark scraping against her naked backside enhanced what he was doing, her senses climbing higher

He pushed her against the tree and held her with his weight. "Put your legs around my waist," he commanded as his fingers freed themselves of the tangle of her private hair. "I want you now, Catherine."

"Just because you can..."

His scented finger went to her lips. "Do as I command."

Dreamily, she did as he ordered, anticipating what would surely come next. Her womanly muscles quivered as his thick, hard shaft slid into her wet core. Slowly, he started pumping, making her think he was going to retreat but he did not. His strokes hardened, born out of a need of urgency. Moans of ecstasy escaped her throat and mingled with the calls of the night. Her heart nearly pounded out of her chest while a thin sheen of sweat built up on her forehead, her fingers digging into the hard muscles of his shoulders. Each gasp from him was like music to her ears, enhancing her own sensuality. She never knew coupling with a man could make her feel this way, at least until Alexander showed her.

He never knew it could be like this. Inside of this woman, he felt so complete and whole again, a feeling he thought he would never have again. She was the perfect complement to him, accommodating him in every way. From the way she looked at him while they were making love or twining her hands in his hair when she was asleep, she felt so right. Sometimes, he found it hard to believe his salvation lay in the hands of a Scottish princess. No, Queen, he corrected himself.

Catherine could not help but drown in the tranquil waters of desire, her body consumed with its power. Alexander was a skilled and talented lover, not to mention incredibly handsome. Each time his thrust took her to new heights, the hardness of his manhood never ceasing to amaze her.

His fingers toyed with her nub, rolling the tiny ball between his fingertips until it swelled with pleasure again. She could feel the climatic feeling build, much like the winds of a sea storm, her hips bucking against him as she begged for more of him to fill her up. When he sensed she was close, he slowed his ministrations. He wanted them to heighten together.

Without warning, he started to shudder and increased his strokes. Alexander thrust inside of her with fevered abandon, hard and hungry, until that familiar wall of heady sensation washed over her, making her cry out his name. His moans mingled with hers and rang throughout the forest.

"Alexander?" cried his friend Longworth through the thick copse of trees.

Small chuckles escaped Alexander's mouth in gasps as he halted mid-stroke. "Leave it to Longworth to interrupt a most perfect moment."

"Oh, Jesu, I wish he would not come near," she whispered, her body cringing. "I do not want him to see me like this."

"It will be all right, my dear. My cloak covers both of us so he will see nothing," he reassured her, his voice warm and soothing.

"There you are, Alexander!" Longworth exclaimed as he cut his way through the trees.

Alexander's head whipped around. "What do you want?" he snapped.

From the look on Longworth's face, he must have known what they had just done. "Oh, forgive me, Alexander. It seems that I have caught you in the middle of something."

"Aye, you have. Now what is it you want?"

She sensed his irritation as he continued to hold her against the tree with his erection still buried deep within her, threatening to escape.

"Do you mind if the rest of us return to Henstrige? There are some important matters I must attend to," he answered cheerfully as a devilish smile spread across his bearded face.

"Aye, you may...," Alexander trailed off as her inner muscles clamped down and held him inside of her, making him a willing captive. His eyes closed for a moment as if he had to compose his thoughts, his attention completely diverted. "Do as you wish,

Longworth. Catherine and I have much to discuss.”

“As you command, my lord,” Longworth mocked as he strode away from them, whistling some inane tune.

Alexander turned his attention to her. “I see my little vixen has learned a few tricks of her own,” he remarked slowly as he moved inside of her moist cavern with careful strokes.

“You would not believe what sort of tricks I know,” she murmured as she closed her eyes against the ream of emotions that rippled through her. “Some of them you might come to enjoy.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

* * * *

It was past dawn when they rode back to Henstrige. Brilliant fingers of pink decorated the sky, stretching as far as the eye could see. Majestic mountains jutted from the earth, their snow-covered tops clear this day.

Birds chirped the morning greeting, their song a merry tune. Catherine could not help but revel in the beauty reigning over the English countryside. “There is much beauty in your land, Alexander,” she commented idly as they passed the dew filled trees as well as the low-lying shrubs.

“Aye, there is,” he agreed as they rounded the bend that would lead them to Henstrige. “Perhaps we will spend the day in my chamber....”

His words stopped as Henstrige came into view.

“What is the matter, Alexander?” She sensed irritation emanating from him, as if something was at his castle he did not expect.

“My mother is here,” he announced, his hands tightening on the reins.

“How do you know?”

“Look at the turret. That is her flag flying instead of mine. If my mother is here, then that means my father is, too.”

She slid her hand over his. “Why do you fear your parents, Alexander? From what I saw on the tapestries, they could not be evil people.”

“No, they are not but my mother consistently scolds me about the way I live and that I should take a wife,” he said miserably as he kicked the horse into the meaty flanks.

“You have fulfilled her wishes then,” she commented as they moved forward at a slow pace toward the elegant castle.

“She must know how I have fulfilled them. You see, she and my grandfather never saw eye to eye on things. After all, it was my grandfather who took her kingdom away from her only to give it back as a present on my father’s coronation day.”

“She is your mother, Alexander. No matter what you do, she will love you,” Catherine said lightly, hoping to assuage his mood. There was no telling what he could do

when he was angry.

“That is not what I am worried about.”

“Then what vexes you?”

“You will find out.”

* * * *

Catherine shivered with anticipation as Alexander led the way through foyer toward the audience chamber. He stood at the door, his fists balled at his sides. Anger rambled through him, making him shake. Surely, his own parents could not be that bad? Thankfully, he had allowed her to bathe and dress before meeting his parents.

He took a deep breath and held it in his chest, as if to gather his strength. Harsh air escaped his lungs as he pushed open the giant oak doors. Beyond the open orifice lay a large chamber, much larger than the one at her castle. At the end was a raised dais with two thrones on it. Sitting in those thrones was a man who was an older version of Alexander while the woman was more like herself. Alexander's mother was blonde, fair and delicate, reminding her of the legendary faeries of the Moors.

Alexander stalked in and knelt before them. “Your Majesties,” he said sourly.

His mother's smile brightened the room. “My dear son, you know we do not use formalities between us,” she said, rising from her throne and holding her hands out to him. “Please, embrace me.”

He rose from the floor and took his tiny mother into his gigantic arms, dwarfing her completely. “I suppose you would like to know why your father and I are here,” she said as she reluctantly pushed away and adjusted the shining circle of gold on her head.

“Aye. Some notice of a visit would have been most appreciated,” he growled harshly.

“I would hold that sour tongue in your head, Alexander,” his father stated in an even harsher tone, his long fingers gripping the armrests hard. “I will not have you speak to your mother like that. Now ask her forgiveness.”

Alexander turned to his mother and bowed his head. “Forgive me, Mother. I will not speak to you in that tone again.”

His mother touched his face lovingly. “Even after all these years you have not changed, my son,” she commented and held her hand out toward his father. “Your father and I have come to speak to you.”

“What is it you wish to know?” he said grimly.

Catherine watched the entire scene with awe. For a man who was a vicious warlord, his parent's presence certainly humbled him.

The woman turned in her direction, holding her hands out. “You must be Catherine,” she said, gesturing for Catherine to come forward.

Catherine stepped forward and gathered the folds of her black gown, curtsying

before the Queen. "Your Majesty, it is a great honor to meet you."

"There is no need for one Queen to bow to another," she said quickly, urging Catherine from the floor.

Confusion swept through her as alarm rose throughout her body. "You must forgive me, your Majesty. I am nothing more than a humble princess," she corrected gently. The Queen must be mistaken. Her grandfather was still very much alive.

Queen Isabeau's golden brows wrinkled in dismay, her mouth curling downwards. "Surely you know?"

"I still do not know of what you speak, your Majesty," she replied, her heart slamming against her chest. Her grandfather was alive, was he not?

Queen Isabeau folded her within generous arms, holding her tightly. "Your grandfather died a short time ago and you were crowned Queen of Scotland in absentia." The Queen pulled away quickly, her warm eyes filling with liquid. "No one has told you, have they?" she said and cast a hard glance to Alexander. "I suppose you knew."

Alexander remained silent, his head held high and proud. "Aye, I did," he snarled, his anger evidently growing.

"Then why did not tell her, my son? It was her right to know."

"It was my concern, Mother," he snapped as he stepped away from their throng. "Not yours."

Before he could completely escape, his father, Kendrick, grabbed a hold of his arm and halted his retreat. "As I told you before, I will not tolerate you speaking to your mother in that manner. You will ask her forgiveness again or else I will be forced to treat as I did when you were a child."

Alexander's eyes turned a deadly black as a fearsome rage filled him. "I am no longer a child, Father, and very good with a sword. If you wish to fight me, then it will be your right. However, since you are in MY castle, it would be best if you obeyed MY rules."

With that, Alexander turned and stormed off, his boot heels ringing throughout the large room.

Prince Kendrick turned to her, his eyes much warmer than Alexander's. "You must forgive Alexander. He is filled with a rage that neither I nor his mother could ever make go away. I am partly to blame for it I suppose."

"Now Kendrick," Isabeau chided, her tiny hand taking his large one. "You are not to blame. I could have said no to Alexander's presentation at the English court and not have caved into your father's demand that he be raised there."

Catherine looked to Prince Kendrick. Despite the minute threads of gray at his temples, he was merely an older version of Alexander. "If you do not mind me asking, what has filled with him so much rage? Surely it could not be because he spent too much time at court."

Kendrick bent down and kissed Isabeau on the cheek. "I will leave it to you, my

love, to explain things to her. Meanwhile, I will try and find our surly son and see to it he obtains a better mood.”

“Go to him, dearest, and see to it that he does not hurt himself this time,” Isabeau commented softly and took Catherine by the arm. “His wife and I have much to talk about.”

* * * *

Alexander pushed his horse hard as he tore across the countryside. His heart pounded as well as his head, his rage building to a new crescendo. How dare his parents just appear at his castle and decide to take over! What were they thinking? Did they think him to be a child they still commanded?

“Alexander! Halt!”

He heard his father’s voice boom over his shoulder but he ignored it. His father was the last man he wanted to see right now.

“I said halt!”

Against his better judgment, he pulled his horse to a stop and turned around, waiting for his father to catch up.

Kendrick’s gigantic ebony horse pulled up alongside of his. “Why did you not halt when I first hailed you?”

“I want to be alone, Father. Why can you not understand me?” he snapped, pulling his horse up a short distance away from his father’s steed. His troubles were his own and he would never share them with anyone.

“Because I do not want you to hurt yourself again, that is why.”

“I have no intention of hurting myself,” he answered bitterly. “So you may leave now.”

“No, I will not, Alexander. There are too many demons inside of you to fight alone. I wish to help you get rid of them,” his father offered.

“Why do you wish to help me now? All this time you spent in Castile with Mother, not knowing what was going on in England,” he stated sourly. “Go back to Castile where you belong.”

Father pulled closer and grabbed the reins of his horse. “What did I do to deserve this hatred, Alexander? I had sent for you many times and my father told me you refused to come. Since you were my son, I could have forced you to come to Castile but I assumed you wanted to stay in England so I held back. I cannot tell you how many nights your mother cried in my arms because you refused to come back to Castile.”

His brows tightened. “I do not believe you. The King would not hold something like this back from me.”

“Aye, he would if he had found a use for you, Alexander,” Father said slowly, the warm gaze slipping from his face and turning to rage as the realization sank in. “He must

have been grooming you from the beginning for all of this. That is why he refused to let you come back to Castile.”

Alexander let his gaze trail to the verdant meadow ahead, his mind swirling in a confused mix. His parents had wanted him all along but his grandfather had kept that fact hidden from him. Since they had never sent for him, he had grown to hate them for never wanting him and making him endure all kinds of unspeakable things. “That is why I have felt nothing for you and Mother. I thought you had abandoned me.”

His father’s warm hand lay on his shoulder. “We would never have abandoned you, my son. I would have died a thousand deaths before I would ever do that. You are our special son since you were our first child. You hold a special place in both of our hearts because of that.”

“You do not know how long I have felt this rage,” he confessed, his fingers relaxing slightly on the reins. “Especially after all I was forced to endure.”

He listened to Father swallow hard and take a deep breath. “What sort of things, Alexander?”

Alexander jerked out from under his father’s touch. He never wanted to feel another man touching him, even his own father. “Things I have no desire to discuss.”

Kendrick’s face paled as his head dipped in shame, his hand returning to Alexander’s shoulder. “Was there a Scottish laird at the English court by the name of Angus McFadden?” He nodded slowly as the gruesome images tried to rise. “Dear lord in heaven, had I known he would be there, I would never have allowed you to go, Alexander.”

He drew a deep breath and looked away, suppressing all of those hated memories. “It is done and over with, Father. Grandfather knew what was happening and he did nothing. Perhaps he let it happen in order to increase my hatred of the Scots or perhaps he knew it could create the necessary rage against you later,” he said slowly. His fury abated slightly as the confession slipped from his lips. The burden he had felt on his soul lessened.

For the first time in his life, he could see the sign of tears in his father’s eyes. “If only I could have stopped that bastard from hurting you,” he said through a strained voice. “You would not be the man you are today.”

“I bear no ill will against you, Father, because you had no idea what was happening to me,” he stated in a harsh voice. He heard the shame and regret in his father’s voice, the tones quite sincere. What would have happened had he remained in Castile with them? Would things have been different?

“Oh, my dear son, you will have your revenge. This I swear,” Father vowed. “My father will pay for what he has done and so will Laird McFadden.”

He looked up, a smile spreading across his lips. “Laird McFadden has already been dealt with, Father. He was the first Scot I killed.”

Kendrick’s grip on his shoulder strengthened. “Good. May they all die.”

"You forget my bride is a Scot," he corrected as he turned the horse around toward the castle and urged it into a trot. "I will defend her with all that I have in me."

"I know you captured her and married her on the orders of my father but do you love her?"

His father's question hit him like a stone in his gullet. "I ... I ... I do not know, Father. I care for her deeply but I do not rightly call it love."

"Does it feel different than it did with Riana?"

He pondered on that question as they turned the horses around and started back to the castle. His father remained quiet, not demanding an answer quickly because he had none to offer. What was the right response?

Dry twigs crunched under the horse's hooves as they rode back to the castle, his mind mulling the question. Aye, Riana was all together different. His love for her did not run as deep as his feelings for Catherine. It was almost as if fate meant them to be together. "Aye, it does."

Deep rumbles of laughter emanated from his father's throat. "I felt the same way about your mother but you were already in her belly when I realized it."

He sighed softly. "Then your history with mother is repeating itself."

Kendrick's hand on his shoulder stopped them both. "What do you mean? Is the girl with child as well?" He nodded. His father let out a loud yell. "I cannot believe this! I am going to be a grandfather and a father again all in the same year!"

Alexander rolled his eyes as the thought of another brother or sister hit him. "Mother is not going to have another child again, is she?"

"Aye, that she is, but I dare say this will be our last. It seems that she has her hands full with the thirteen children we already have plus the one in her belly," Kendrick said with a hearty grin. "It does not bother me, though. There is always room in the castle for more."

Through their conversation, Alexander almost felt relieved. He had held those secrets for so long that he had thought he would go mad with them festering inside of him like a gangrenous wound. Now that their burden was gone, he felt different. Somehow, the sky was a little bluer and the grass a little greener. Perhaps the veil of hatred covering his eyes lifted a little bit, making him see everything differently.

"You know you will need to lose your reputation, Alexander," Kendrick commented softly as they moved over the path in the tall reeds. "Your child would not want to have a warlord for a father."

"Fear not, Father. I began to lose that reputation the moment I captured Catherine."

Chapter 10

For the first time in what seemed like years, Alexander slept a deep, untroubled sleep not filled with images of the Laird McFadden and all the awful things he incurred. In their place were sweet pictures of Catherine sitting in a field with one child in her arms and others playing in the swaying wildflowers. He could see the entire scene from the high turret, his heart light. Never would his children ever fall under the influence of his grandfather or stray out of his sight for one moment....

At the thought of Catherine, he immediately reached for her. His hand searched her side, only to come up empty and wet. What was happening?

He jerked away and held his hand up. In the dim light, he could see the substance on his hand was dark and smelled coppery, the scent of spilled blood. Dear God, in heaven she was bleeding!

"Catherine," he cried and leapt out of bed, searching the chamber for her. "Where are you?"

Tiny whimpers came from the corner and he followed them until he found Catherine huddled in a ball near the cold hearth. "Catherine, what is the matter?" he questioned immediately as he took her sobbing form into his arms.

"I ... I ... I ... do not know," she cried. "My belly hurt and I got up because I thought I must use the necessary but instead I was bleeding...." Her lament trailed off as he gathered her into his arms, the white of her gown turning crimson.

"Let me put you back to bed and I will get my mother and the midwife as well as your servant," he murmured as she put her arms about him sleepily, her tears wetting his neck.

"I did not do this, Alexander," she confessed. "I wanted the child." Her body kept cringing in his hands as the pain rippled through her belly.

Sincerity rang true in her voice, making his heart lighten. As he had picked her up, vain thoughts that she had committed this atrocity on purpose soared through him though part of him knew it not to be true. Catherine was a woman who would never harm an innocent. "I know you did not, Catherine. Perhaps it was our time in the forest that is causing you to give birth early," he said gently as he laid her on his side of the bed. "Now let me get you the aid you need." With that, he brushed a swift kiss across her forehead and pulled on a pair of breeches. His heart stayed in his throat as he exited the chamber, the anger piling inside of him.

His child was lost. Since Catherine knew he had married her for that purpose, it would be very hard persuading her that he wanted her for herself and not the children she

could provide him.

* * * *

It felt like an eternity since Alexander's departure as pain soared through her. Muscles in her belly convulsed, ripping her in half. It was a sign. She knew it now. There was no reason to stay in Henstrige.

Tears moistened her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she clutched her belly. Alexander was kind and wonderful, much less the tyrant he had been when he had captured her. Even his parents softened his mood somehow.

"Catherine?" Queen Isabeau called softly as she entered the room, trailed by Taran and the midwife. "What is the matter my dear?"

"I ... have ... lost ... my child, your Majesty," she said through the thicket of tears. "Please help me with the pain for I cannot stand it much longer."

The Queen sat at her side and picked up her hand, patting it gently. "There are no formalities between us, Catherine. Since you are married to my son, I would love for you to call me Mother."

"Aye, your Maj ... Mother," she replied, her gasps rising high as the pain increased.

Suddenly, Isabeau looked up, making her look as well. Alexander hovered in the doorway, his father standing over his shoulder. Fear and worry stamped itself on his elegant features. "Will she be all right, Mother?"

Isabeau stood up quickly and pushed both of them from the room. "Kendrick, keep our son company while I tend to his wife. This is no place for men." With that, she closed the door and listened for the sound of their footsteps. Dull echoes filled the room, fading away like distant thunder.

"What shall we need?" Isabeau questioned the midwife.

"Hot water and plenty of linen as well as some pennyroyal," the old woman murmured as she pried Catherine's legs apart. "She is bleeding quite badly."

As those words echoed from the learned woman's lips, new terror rippled through her. Was she going to die? "Please ... help ... me," she begged as the pain worsened.

Isabeau brushed her head with a loving hand. "I will, my darling girl. After today, this will all be nothing more than a dim memory."

* * * *

"Stop that infernal pacing, Alexander," his father ordered as he pared an apple in his hand. "You are wearing on me."

They were in the sumptuous dining hall with the roaring fires as well as the breezy coolness from outside. Servants hurried to get the midday meal ready that he had no heart

to eat, the hours since his arrival in the hall passing with infinite slowness. Was Catherine going to survive the ordeal? She had bled badly with no sign of stopping.

"I cannot, Father," he confessed as the pain and worry stormed through his veins. "I am too worried about Catherine to sit still. She could be dying in our chamber...."

Father shook his head. "She is in the best hands possible."

He spun around, the heat of his anxiety ringing in his face. "What if she dies? What am I to do then?"

Father's deep laughter rumbled through the hall. "Nothing will happen to her when she's in my Izzy's hands."

His brow arched. "Izzy?"

"Your mother," Father said lazily as he discarded the apple core on the table and reached for another one. "That is my favorite name for her."

"I have never heard that before."

"That is because that is what I call her in private, my boy," Father replied. "There is a lot that you children do not know about us."

Alexander's curiosity piqued though his mind had not left Catherine. "What do you mean?"

"Do you really wish to know?" He nodded. "Well, you know I captured your mother, much the same way you did Catherine but what you do not know is that she seduced me after I was captured."

For years, he had always heard about his father capturing his mother but this was one part of the story he had never heard. "Mother seduced you?" He sipped on a goblet of warm ale in order to calm his frayed nerves but it was no use. His belly remained curled in a tight knot that nothing could remove.

Father's lips spread into a wide grin. "Well, as you know, your mother led her army against me and your uncle Edmund. You see, your uncle Edmund was always jealous of me because I had gained the King's favor while he had not. So, I suggested that he take Castile and give it to the King as a show of strength."

"Did you not meet Mother at a feast?"

His father nodded. "Aye, that I did and I took liberties that I should not have. For that, she slapped me."

The anxiety abated slightly as he listened intently to what his father said. "What sort of liberties?"

Before his father could answer, his mother appeared at the bottom of the stairs, her face ashen. His heart dropped, nearly stopping in his chest. Catherine was dead. That could be the only thing explaining her expression.

"Alexander," she said softly as she drifted over to him.

"She is dead, is she not?" he demanded harshly as the blood turned cold in his veins. No, he told himself, her constitution was too strong.

His mother's lips pulled into a taut smile. "Nay, she is very much alive though she

has lost quite a bit of blood. The midwife is brewing her a potion of pennyroyal to help staunch the flow," she announced, laying her hand on his bare shoulder. "Now sit down."

Swift sighs of relief escaped his lips. "Oh, Jesu, she is alive," he said loudly as the beat of his heart resumed. "When may I see her?"

"Your mother told you to sit down, Alexander," Father thundered from his place at the table.

The relief slipped away, giving rise to his anger. "Do not address me as a child, Father. I am a grown man and will do as I please," he growled through clenched teeth.

Father rose slowly from his chair, the same dark orbs turning deadly. "Oh, you still think you can best me, son? I have taught you everything you know but not everything I know...."

Mother stepped between them, holding them apart. Her hand felt cool and calming against his bare flesh just as it always had when he and Father were at odds. "Must I take you both to the woodshed?" Father flashed her an interested look. Later, she mouthed and turned to him. "Now sit down."

Alexander remained stock still, refusing to budge.

"Do as...." his father started but stopped when his mother's voice interjected.

"Kendrick," she chided, her voice soft and low, causing his heart to thump uneasily. "Leave Alexander to me. If you must do something, go and check the troops and make sure they are ready for battle."

"Aye, they are ready for battle," he grumbled unpleasantly as he stood away from the chair. "If you need me...."

"You will be in our chamber, will you not?" His mother's tones, smooth and warm, seemed to smooth his father's wrinkled brow.

"That I will be," he said mildly as he lifted her chin up and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "Do not tarry long."

"I will not, Kendrick," she replied as she laid a loving hand on his cheek. "I need to speak to Alexander for a bit."

His father's eyes flicked to him, the intentions quite clear. "Do not upset your mother in any way," he ordered, his hand slipping to the mound under his mother's gown.

Alexander slid into the chair and crossed his arms as he stretched out slightly, his aggravation mounting. "I will do nothing of the sort, Father."

"Good."

With that, Father marched away, a soft whistle echoing from his lips as he mounted the stairs, his footfalls heavy.

Once they died away, his mother turned to him and took the chair across from him. "Alexander, why have you done this?"

His brow rose. "What do you mean?"

"Followed your grandfather's orders and kidnapped the girl? Forcing her to marry you...."

Alexander leapt to his feet, his hands running through the wild black strands. "I did as I was ordered, nothing more." Though his father knew of the atrocities he had faced in London, he wanted to spare his mother all of the gory details in her condition.

"Your father and I raised you better than that, Alexander."

He spun around, his eyes wide. "You had me until I was five years old. That is hardly raising me to manhood."

Mother's glorious green eyes turned watery as the pain of his words sank in. "You do not know how much I wanted you to remain in Castile. I begged your father to refuse the King but he would not. Every day that you were gone was a dark day for me."

"You had all the other children...."

Her warm, soft hand graced his. "But they were not you."

His heart slowed at her words, the disbelief rising in him like a tide. "How could you have missed me with all the others?"

Mother rose slowly from her chair because of her growing belly and took his hand. "Walk with me, Alexander."

* * * *

Tepid, morning sun bathed the world in its warm glow. Verdant grass swayed in the wildflower perfumed breeze brushing across his bare chest, reminding him of Catherine's soft touch.

"Do you want to know why I brought you out here, Alexander?" Mother questioned softly, breaking into the plethora of thoughts beguiling his head. They were just outside beyond the confines of the castle, walking on the well-beaten path around the dense copse of trees.

"Aye," he answered in a solemn tone.

"Just a short distance into the forest is where I fainted. When I woke up, I knew you were growing inside of me," she said dreamily as they walked. "Your father made me promise long before that if I should conceive a child, I would marry him."

His ire rose further. "I do not know what that has to do with me, Mother."

"It has plenty to do with you, Alexander. You see, you were part of the reason I married your father."

"What was the other part?"

"I was in love with him and I tried to deny it but true love can never be denied."

He halted as the confusion mingled with his anger and frustration. "Just tell me what you are trying to say?"

"If you want to have a child with the girl, do it out of love and not duty, my son," Mother sighed wearily. "Your grandfather is the master player in this game of pawns. He has manipulated all of us more than we care to be."

Alexander said nothing as his mother confirmed feelings he had possessed for a

long time. Pieces of the mysterious puzzle of his life were slowly coming together to form a very clear picture for him, one of deceit and lies formulated by the one man he had trusted implicitly. "I will, Mother. You can be rest assured of that," he said quietly as he folded his mother into his arms.

She looked up into his face, her lips forming a warm and generous smile. "You were my first child, born out of my love for your father," Mother whispered as her hand brushed against his cheek. "I never stopped loving you, even when I heard all those terrible tales about you. You are still my son and the greatest gift I could have ever given your father." Her glorious eyes filled with tears. "I love you."

He hardened his embrace. "I love you too, Mother."

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, the confirmation of her love freed him from the restraints of hurt and shame. You will pay for this, Grandfather, he vowed silently. No matter how long it takes.

* * * *

Cramps, hard and unrelenting, passed her belly in waves and made her draw her knees up. Why did she lose the child? Was it something she willed herself to do?

Catherine trembled with each spasm and sob, her fingers curling together. Alexander must hate her by now and more than likely had already made arrangements for her at the nearest abbey. After all, he had married her in order get an heir.

She covered her face with her hands, her cheeks wet with tears. He did not love her, therefore making her nothing more than a receptacle for his maleness and seed. This existence was not the life she saw for herself in her youth. She always imagined ruling Scotland with her true love at her side, their children playing at their feet. Sadly, that was a dream that would never come true.

Suddenly, she felt Alexander's side of the bed press down and felt his warm, inviting body slide next to her, the soft leather of his braes caressing her skin. His arms went around her, pulling her close. "Are you still pained?" he questioned softly, his fingers tenderly pulling at the loose strands of her hair.

"I suppose this means I will be going to the nearby convent," she stated in an icy tone.

Alexander's tanned fingers cradled her chin gently and pulled her face toward him. "What makes you imagine that?"

She turned away, tucking her hands under her head, the tears falling like rain from her eyes. "I have overheard the servants say once I have fulfilled my duty, the nunnery would be my next destination."

Exasperated sighs escaped him. "Do not believe such foolishness, Catherine. It is untrue."

"Somehow I do not believe your words," she answered, her voice taking on a

much colder tone this time. She wished she could be kinder but she could not. Despite the fact she had seen his kindness, she still did not trust him or his motives.

"What must I do to make you trust me?" Hurt and humiliation bled through his voice, stabbing her in the heart. Why could she not trust his words, at least a little?

"Send me back to Scotland where I belong and annul this sham of a marriage," she confessed, the tears still falling from her eyes.

"Never," he snapped back and rose from the bed, slamming his feet into his boots. "Kent is where you belong and it is where you will stay. Anything else is out of the question."

With that, he stormed out of the room, the dying echoes of his footfalls pounding in her head.

Catherine wiped away the stray tears and slammed her fist into the pillow. She wanted to be able to trust him but the circumstances of her stay in Kent hampered that. All of her life, she dreamed of being wed to a man she truly loved but Alexander had taken all of that away from her.

She rolled to her back and looked at the cold stone ceiling, her fists balling at her sides. Under any other circumstances, she would have fallen for Alexander's dark charm very easily but not now. There was too much animosity between them.

An indignant scream rose in her throat but she quelled it. Why must things be so entirely difficult?

* * * *

Alexander stormed into the dining hall expecting to find some solitude for his raging mind but instead he found Longworth sitting before the fire with a customary goblet in his hand.

"Why are you still awake, Longworth?" he snarled as he threw himself into a chair, the soft material tickling the naked skin of his back.

"Just enjoying the warmth of the fire," Longworth answered slowly and took a deep drink of his wine. "'Tis far too icy in my chamber."

His brows knitted in confusion. "I thought Catherine's servant warmed your bed."

"Aye, that is why 'tis icy in there," Longworth said with a slight laugh. "Since Catherine's loss of your child, she refuses my advances."

"Women," he replied with a snort, "you try to woo them and yet they do not trust your motives."

Longworth's laughter rang through the rafters. "'Tis not my motives, they do not trust, 'tis yours," he said with mirth. "And for as long as I have known you, I do not trust your motives either."

He shot Longworth a murderous look. "This is not a jesting matter, my friend, because as you have already stated, Catherine's little wench does not want your touch

either."

His friend lifted his cup. "Touché, my friend," he mocked and placed a hand against his chest. "You have stabbed me in the heart."

Alexander had no choice except to laugh this time. "You always somehow manage to make me forget my troubles for a short time."

"I know," Longworth said proudly, his fingernail rubbing against the velvet of his tunic. "I am a well rounded knight."

* * * *

He continued to listen to the banter between the Duke and his friend, memorizing every spoken word carefully, making sure to hide himself deep in the shadows. If he were discovered, there was no telling what the Duke would do to him.

Suddenly, the conversation switched to the glories of the old days, from their conquests on the field to the ones between the sheets. The conversation grew dull and boring, the Duke mentioning nothing of Queen Catherine at all. Damn! The King would surely hang him for barely any news!

Just as he was about to leave his position, the Queen's name came up and he listened carefully to the two men speaking. The Queen apparently had been with child but now that child was lost. From what the Duke said, he was upset and vowed no matter what, the Queen would have his children but this time it would out of love, not duty.

He smiled widely. The King would pay handsomely for that bit of information.

Chapter 11

"So how would you rid Scotland of this rebel Wallace?" he thundered through the cold feeling room, his girlish son looking at him through frightened eyes.

"Pay handsomely for his capture...."

The back of his hand against the little whelp's cheek cut off the weak voice and sent his womanish son to the floor. "Nay, that is wrong!" he shouted and bent down to the boy so that he was almost nose to nose with him. "What you will do is make it known to the people that anyone harboring him will pay with their lives," he announced and stood up, adjusting his ankle length purple tunic so that not a fiber was out of place. "What I have ordered is that every village destroyed and their livestock killed. I will make it known that the attacks will continue until Wallace is given to us. Let them blame him for their misery." He looked to Phillip, his mouth grimacing. How could he have had one great son and two womanish ones? Oh, if only Kendrick could have inherited his throne! What a great kingdom England would have been! His thoughts quickly turned to his beloved Mathilda, her life taken by fever over seven years ago. Unfortunately, she was not the only life taken with the fever. Edmund had contracted it as well, following her several days later to the grave, leaving his wife childless. Those losses had made Phillip the only heir to the throne. "Now rise and act like the future king that you will be instead of a weak fool," he snarled, jerking Phillip roughly to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shadowy figure emerge, dressed all in black from head to toe wielding a broadsword rushing out of a darkened corner of the room. Despite his age, he managed to swerve out of the assassin's way. The man rushed past Phillip and crashed into the gray wall, his sword glittering in the morning sunlight.

Edward pulled his sword out of its jeweled scabbard and engaged with the stranger, his own tall frame towering the other man's. Round and round, they danced, the sound of metal grinding against metal rising through the air. As they moved, he was able to steal glances at Phillip. His son's mouth was spread in a wide smile, his fists balled in the air while he quietly chanted some innate phrase. Was his own son cheering his own death?

Guards rushed into the chamber, their blades drawn. "Please step back, sire, and we shall take care of the rabble!" called the captain.

"Nay!" he shouted back as he fended off the intruder with his exceptional battle skills. "I want to show this whelp that is my son how to battle an enemy!"

His soldiers stepped back, allowing him ample room. The stranger fought hard, indicating that he had youth as well as agility on his side. The only thing he lacked was

skill.

The man in black moved toward the scarred wooden table, haplessly bumping a hip against the edge, making his cowl fall down.

Phillip's glee filled eyes switched from him to the stranger before falling back to him. The luminosity in them dimmed, as if Phillip knew this was the end of his lover.

Locks of long blond hair covered the face slightly but there was no mistaking those piercing blue eyes at all. It was Phillip's paramour, Marcus de Brutin.

"What is the meaning of this, Phillip?" he said in a low breathy menacing moan, his lungs feeling as though they were drowning in fluid. "Do you mean to gain the throne by having your little bedmate destroy me?"

Phillip swallowed hard as he moved to stand in front of Marcus. "No, Father, we were merely testing your skill...." he blabbered as spittle wet his upper lip.

"Liar!" he shouted, his hands wiping away the sweat beading his brow. "You were doing nothing of the sort!" Edward looked to his guards. "Take that young pup down to the square and execute him."

"No, Father! I will not allow you to kill Marcus!" Phillip shouted as his arms swept behind and grasped Marcus in order to protect the youth.

Edward stepped forward and jerked Phillip away, leaving Marcus to fend for himself. He spun the boy around and held him tightly, making him watch the guards take Marcus away. "I want you to witness my wrath."

The guards bound Marcus' slender wrists in thick, rusty manacles and dragged him from the room, the boy never uttering a word.

Once they were gone, Edward walked Phillip to the window and forced him to look out onto the square. Constructed of cobblestones, the bailey was large with people of all classes milling about. Most of them had small stalls from which they hawked their goods, the smell of roasting meat rising through the air. The bleats of sheep as well as goats peppered the air above the wild chatter of voices and the dull clods of hoof-beats.

"Please do not do this, Father. I beg of you," Phillip pleaded, his voice weak and unyielding.

"You must become a man someday, Phillip," he warned with a snarl. "Today is that day."

He watched with a delightful glee as Marcus was marched out the square, his head held high. The day was warm with the sun peeking through the clouds, the soft wind sweeping through. It was the sort of time for celebration, not for death.

Marcus' dark cowl lagged down his slender back as he walked toward the waiting block, the guards half dragging him toward it. Crowds had begun to gather around them, not really understanding what was happening. That was until they looked toward the beheading block, the sides stained dark with the blood of its other unfortunate victims. Suddenly, cheers went up around the crowds as the stones started flying as well as rotten vegetables and meat.

Several well thrown stones hit Marcus squarely in the head but the boy never flinched, only keeping his eyes straight on the block.

"How can you be so cold and cruel, Father?" Phillip questioned softly, his body trembling beneath the dark blue velvet.

"I am a King, my son, and I do not have the luxury of compassion. The only thing the people understand is power and might, a thing that must be shown to them consistently lest they forget. Now, keep your eyes on the square."

Phillip's trembling increased at the sound of his icy words but he cared not. His son needed to know what it was like being a monarch and how to rule a kingdom with an iron fist instead of a velvet glove.

In the square, the crowd pressed inward, held back by a wide circle of guards, all of them lunging forward to glimpse the execution. Were they all as bloodthirsty as he was?

His captain pushed Marcus into a kneeling position before the block and pulled the black material away from his slender, white neck. Taking a handful of that beautiful blond hair, the captain hacked at Marcus' locks until the youth was nearly bald and threw the hair into the crowd for remembrance sake.

He raised his arm in the window, waiting for his captain to look up. Phillip trembled harder in his grip, the unshed tears rattling him no end.

Suddenly, his captain looked up to him. With a smile on his face, he lowered his arm.

"Noooooooooooooooo!" Phillip cried as the executioner took his place next to Marcus and tried to look away.

"Look boy," he snarled as he pushed Phillip's head toward the square, forcing the ignorant sot to witness the execution of his lover. "See what happens when one does not bend to my will."

With that, the executioner, dressed in his familiar black hood and clothing, raised his axe. Marcus turned his head slightly and smiled at Phillip just before the axe descended, severing his head from his shoulders.

Phillip's hands clenched the windowsill hard as he pushed forward, the tears streaming down his face. "MARCUS!" he screamed into the crowd but no one paid him any mind. They pushed forward, ripping at Marcus's clothing and closing in on his dead form.

Edward stepped back, his arms folding over his wide chest as his lips spread into a satisfied smile. Now that Phillip has seen the extent of his wrath, perhaps the boy would be better equipped to handle the duties of a king. "When you are king, my son, you must trust no one, even those closest to you."

Phillip whirled around, his tunic winding around his ankles, the flesh of his face reddened from anger. "If this is what it means to be king, then I do not wish to be one at all!"

Edward's gaze flicked to Phillip's left hand, noting the way his wrist moved. His instinct told him that the boy had a dagger and had no qualms about using it.

He looked back to his son. "If you wish to use that dagger, use it now for it will be your only chance," he snarled menacing and low. His son was too womanish to take his opportunity.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. The boy lunged forward with the ornately jeweled dagger, aiming it at his chest. Swiftly, he stepped aside, allowing his pitiful son to fall to the floor, the dagger skittering a few feet away from Phillip's hand. "This was your only opportunity, Phillip," he warned as he stormed toward the door, "and you wasted it. Such a pity. You could have been a powerful king."

"If it means being as vile as you, then I refuse to be king."

Edward laughed, the mirth coming from deep within him. "My blood flows through your veins, my son and it has already tainted you. In time, you will be as ruthless as I."

With that, he left Phillip's presence, his heart light. Now that Marcus, the bothersome fool, was out of his son's life, perhaps Phillip would do his duty by his wife. His bearded lips pulled into a wide smile. Isabella of France was a beautiful but neglected woman, at least by his son. Time after time, he had told Phillip to do his duty and produce an heir but it was to no avail. His lusty heart widened. Perhaps he would have to pay a visit to Isabella and relieve her of her loneliness....

* * * *

Catherine wandered around the bustling bailey, her hands behind her back with Taran at her side. Vast clouds overhead hid the sun from the earth, making the day dark and gray, adding to her gloominess. Smells of freshly roasting meat as well as the squawks of ducks and chickens for sale rose through the air. All around her were the hollow sounds of shod horses moving over the cobblestones, delivering necessary goods to the hawkers. Normally, all of this would have enthralled her, but today nothing could bring her out of her doldrums.

She said nothing as she walked, her mind awash with all sorts of thoughts. What was she going to do about Alexander? The more she tried to stay away from him, the more irritated he grew, merely grunting a few responses her way when she spoke to him in passing. After all, she was here only as a vessel for his seed, was she not?

"What are you thinking of, Catherine?" Taran questioned next to her, breaking her from the swarm of thought enveloping her head.

"Nothing," she answered quietly and continued walking through the thick crowd around the stalls. Low murmurings rumbled through the throng of people as she passed, most of them looking at her strangely, as if she did not belong here. They were right. She did not belong here.

Taran's strong hand on her shoulder stopped her, spinning her around to face her friend's concerned stare. "That is a lie, Catherine. We have known each other far too long to lie. Now what troubles you?"

Tears threatened to fall but she held them back. "'Tis Alexander," she confessed in a quiet tone, her hands clasping in front of her. "I know not what to do."

"Why does Alexander vex you, Catherine? Any fool with eyes can see he cares for you."

Catherine's hands balled at her sides, the anger beginning to roll through her like a storm. "I am a trophy to him, nothing more. Once he has what he wants, he will be ready to turn me over to the nearest convent."

"'Tis not true, Catherine," Taran replied, slipping a warm, comforting arm around her shoulder. "Longworth told me that Alexander cares for you far more deeply than you know."

"I do not believe you, Taran. Alexander only wants me for one thing...."

Before she could finish, a young servant girl from the castle came running in their direction, her brown braids flying behind her.

"What 'tis it?" Taran demanded as the girl stopped in front of her.

"'Tis ... the ... Queen," the girl gasped as she doubled over to catch her breath. "She is giving birth and the midwife needs your hands."

"We will be there in a moment," Taran said and turned to her. "You are coming with me."

"Nay, Taran...."

"I will not take no for an answer."

* * * *

Catherine stepped into Queen Isabeau's chamber, not knowing what to expect. She thought Alexander's mother would be screaming at the top of her lungs from the pain but she was not. The Queen merely laid in the ornate tester bed with the Prince at her side, holding her hand, a most unusual sight. All around them, servants bustled quickly, getting the necessary instruments and linen ready for the birth. "Wh ... what... do you want ... me ... to ... do?" she stuttered in amazement as Taran followed the midwife around, aiding the woman in her endeavors. She had never attended a birth before.

"Just hold her Majesty's hand and wipe her brow when necessary," Taran instructed as she followed the midwife's directions.

Nervously, Catherine sat down in the nearby chair and held the Queen's hand. "Are you in much pain, your Ma ... Mother?"

"Nay, not too much," Isabeau said, gritting her teeth as her belly tensed up. "After so many babies, it gets easier." Her breath exhaled easily from her lungs as if this was just part of her every day life.

"Aye, it does," Prince Kendrick chimed in, his hands gripping his wife's tenderly. "Every child we have is like a blessing from heaven."

The look that passed between them was pure love, the expression unmistakable. For a moment, she had wanted to cry because the vision was so perfectly beautiful, her mind constructing a picture of her and Alexander gazing at each other that way. Unfortunately, it would never be that way for them because there was no love between them, only lust.

"You cry, Catherine. Why?" Isabeau's soft voice broke through her daydream.

"You and the Prince seem so happy...."

"He is your father now, Catherine, just as he is Alexander's so please call him Father just as you called me Mother," she stated through gritted teeth, her belly tensing once again as the strong labor pains took over. Her gown was soaked, her skin taking on a high sheen from the laboring. "Aye, we are happy, my dear but it took a bit of struggle to be that way."

"If it had not been for your stubbornness, my dear," Kendrick interjected playfully as he swiped her damp hair from her forehead, "you would have realized that you loved me sooner."

She watched as Isabeau's grip tightened on Kendrick's hand, making him wince. "We will discuss that later when I am healed, my dear," she concluded and turned to Catherine. "I am glad that my son has taken you as his bride."

"Why do you say so, your M--Mother?" Catherine questioned as she looked away, the tears forming in her eyes. After all, she was nothing to Isabeau's son.

"Because he needs a woman like you that does not bend to his every whim and demand. Aye, he is like me and can be most stubborn when the mood takes him...."

"Aye, I can vouch for that...." The sudden grip of Isabeau's hand on Kendrick's cut his words, making him suck in a strong breath because of the pain. "I think I will stay out of your conversation now lest I suffer a broken hand."

Isabeau rolled her beautiful emerald eyes. "Now that we will not be interrupted for a few...." she gasped as the pain arrived again, causing her belly to harden before it loosened again, "moments. There are things I must tell you about Alexander."

Her blonde brows shot up. "What things?"

Suddenly, Isabeau's face turned bright red, her breath hitching in and out. "What 'tis the matter with the Queen?" Catherine demanded of the midwives.

"My lord, you must leave for this is going to be a difficult birth," one of the midwives said, her hands shaking as she peered between Isabeau's legs.

"No!" he thundered. "I will not leave my wife."

A sudden rush of strength and resolve soared through Catherine, causing her to rise from her seat. "Father, you must go," she said gently and touched him on his broad shoulder, urging him to rise. "I will let nothing happen to Mother."

"No, I will not...." he protested, his gaze never leaving Isabeau.

"Go, my love," Isabeau gasped, her breathing labored. "I will be fine."

Reluctantly, Kendrick let go of Isabeau's hand and let Catherine guide him out of the room. She closed the door behind her and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Go to the chapel and pray, Father. I will come and get you once this is over."

Kendrick's large hands, so much like Alexander's, covered her own and gripped hard. "Take care of my Izzy and the child, I beg of you," he murmured, the moisture in his eyes building.

"I will do no less than she did for me in my time of need, Father," she offered and kissed his hand. "You can be sure of that."

* * * *

Dawn rose quickly, bringing the bright morning sun up over the horizon. Catherine awoke from her sleep in the chair next to Isabeau's bed. She blinked hard and stretched the kinks from her back. Was it morning already?

She looked over at Isabeau, the damp golden hair clinging to her forehead. Next to her nestled an infant girl who slept as soundly as her mother. When had she fallen asleep? The last thing she remembered was a small bit of light coming out over the misty shrouded mountains before sitting down in the chair.

Isabeau's birthing experience had been long and weary. The Queen had lost a lot of blood but the midwife was able to staunch the flow and save the Queen's life as well as the babe's. She smiled. She was glad she was able to keep her promise to Alexander's father.

Catherine stood up quickly and smoothed out the wrinkles in her gown, adjusting the stray strands from her braid at the same time. She had promised to bring Prince Kendrick into the chamber once it was all over and somehow she had fallen asleep instead.

She exited the chamber with quiet feet, the other midwives as well as Taran sleeping on the floor on pallets. The last thing she wanted to do was wake them. Besides, she wanted to give the glorious news to Prince Kendrick herself.

* * * *

The chapel was lit with half tapers, the bright beams of sunlight streaming through the windows. Dust motes danced on the rays, swirling around in circles. Incense burned, filling the chamber with a musky odor. She looked to her right and saw the figure of Prince Kendrick kneeling before the stone altar, his eyes transfixed on the carved crucifix sitting on top. Next to him, was another figure of the same height and build, the head covered with the same glorious black hair. It was Alexander!

Her heart skipped a beat as she stepped in, a lump rising in her throat. What was

she to say to Alexander?

Prince Kendrick, hearing her soft footsteps, turned his head to her. His black brows drew up as anguish filled his face. He leapt to his feet and stormed over to her, the fear masking his face. "Does my Izzy live?" he demanded as his strong hands gripped her shoulders.

"Aye, Father, she lives and has given you a fine daughter," she said as the tears of happiness rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, Jesu, be praised. I have a fine daughter!" he shouted as he pushed past her and left the chapel, his footsteps light.

Alexander remained quiet and remote, his relenting stare on the altar. "So my mother lives and I have a new sister," he said woodenly, refusing to look at her. "May God be praised."

"I ... I ... did not know you prayed," she said awkwardly in an effort to break the wall of silence.

"I do a lot of things you do not care to know about," he snapped as he crossed himself and rose to his feet. "I had hoped you would care enough one day to find out."

Catherine crossed the room with her short steps, closing the distance between them. "Please, Alexander, you must understand me. First, you kidnap me on the orders of your king for the sole purpose of providing an heir for both thrones. Once my purpose was fulfilled, I would have been sent to a nunnery...."

"'Tis you who understands nothing, Catherine!" he snarled as he turned to look at her, his brilliant blue eyes flashing a torrid anger, much like summer lightning. "Can you not see that I care for you? Are you that blind?"

Her ire rose at his words. "Think of this, Alexander. Suppose, I had done the same to you. Would you love and trust me so easily?"

Alexander's face twisted into a mask of confusion. "I ... I...."

"Just as I thought," she retorted sharply. "You can tell me your answer when you find your tongue."

With that, Catherine spun on her heel and left him bewildered in her wake, her heart pounding as the tears started to flow. Why could he not understand that he had ripped her heart in two? One half wanted to remain protected while the other wanted to love him for all that was in her. What half would win out?

* * * *

Catherine entered Isabeau's chamber amid the squeals of the ancient door, her cheeks wet with tears. The room was empty of all evidence of the birth, including servants and the midwives. More than likely, Taran was in Longworth's chamber, resting after such a long ordeal.

Isabeau looked up weakly, her lips spreading into a warm smile. "Come in,

Catherine and meet your new little sister," she said invitingly.

"Aye, we have already met," Catherine replied as she swept her gown aside and sat in the chair next to the bed.

Kendrick was sitting on the bed next to Isabeau, his arms full of his newest daughter. "Please, come and sit with us, Catherine. After all, I owe you and the other women my greatest of thanks," he murmured as he stared down at the tiny black haired child in his arms, his giant fingers gripped in her small ones. "Without all of you, my Izzy and my child would not be here."

Catherine blushed as she wiped away the rest of her tears. "'Tis God who needs to be praised, not me," she said glumly.

Isabeau's eyes narrowed. "Has my son said something again to upset you, Catherine?"

Unable to hold back her feelings anymore, Catherine's tears ran down her face like a raging river. "Nay, he has said nothing to me," she confessed and buried her face in her hands once the tears started rolling again. "He wishes for me to trust him but I cannot, not after what has happened. Why can he not understand that?"

Isabeau reached out her hand and slipped it around Catherine's. "You are right, Catherine. Trust has to be earned and it will take time. Especially after what he had done to you but first, there are some things you must understand about him."

Catherine looked up, her face hot and swollen with tears. "What things?" she sniffed.

Isabeau looked to Kendrick for a moment as if to draw strength from him and turned back, drawing a deep breath. "Part of the reason he is the way he is because he had been taken away from me when he was so little. You see, his grandfather demanded that he should be raised at court. I should have objected harder but you know that Kendrick's father can be most forceful."

"Why was he raised at the English court instead of the Castilian one?" She questioned as her tears slowly abated, her cheeks slightly moist. "I do not understand the King's reasoning."

"You will in a moment," Isabeau answered, her eyes growing watery. "During his stay at court, my son was forced to endure unspeakable things, making him hard and cruel. Things no child should have to go through." Isabeau gripped Kendrick's arm for support. "I only found out about those evil things recently. Had I known this would happen, I would have brought him back to my court and risked war with the English king."

Her tears returned as she slipped a hand over Isabeau's. "You could not have known, Mother."

"The truth is, I should have known!" Isabeau's free fist clenched into a tight ball, the pressure so hard that her knuckles turned white. "I am his mother and I vowed to protect him from all things and I could not," she wailed. "His grandfather subjected him

to all sorts of unspeakable acts, all in readiness for now. If only I had insisted that he be brought back to Castile despite what the letters said...." she lamented, her tears falling.

Kendrick's free arm swept around his wife and drew her sobbing form close, his other arm securely around the baby. "My father had forged letters from Alexander saying that my son would rather stay in England than return to Castile," Kendrick offered as he picked up the remaining thread of the story. "He wanted Alexander to stay in his court so that he could mold my son into something he had wanted me to be a long time ago. Since he could not have me the way he wanted me, he took my son and turned him into a butcher," he said, swallowing hard. "Alexander and I never saw eye to eye, especially after he had reached manhood. All we ever did was quarrel when we were together but now that you are part of his life, he seems far happier than he has ever been and less hateful and ruthless." Kendrick kissed Isabeau's head and smoothed down her curly blonde hair. "You complete Alexander, Catherine, making him far different, than even when he was with Riana."

She swallowed hard. "Ah, the beloved Riana."

"King Edward never approved of Riana or any woman that could possibly melt Alexander's heart. Upon seeing Alexander growing soft under Riana's influence, he had ordered her murdered and made it look as though the Scots had committed the atrocity," Kendrick confessed as Isabeau's sobs quieted down.

Catherine finally saw the entire picture as the story played itself out. "So King Edward fostered that hatred Alexander had for the Scots and cajoled him into his master plan. By having Alexander marry me and produce an heir, he could control both thrones," she concluded. "Alexander is nothing more than a puppet to his grandfather, is he not?"

"As I have told Alexander, we are pieces in the King's game of pawns and are manipulated far more than we care to be," Isabeau said quietly as she snuggled deeper into the crook of Kendrick's arm. "All Alexander wants for you is to trust him. He cares for you deeply and will do nothing to hurt you, Catherine."

She stared at the floor, blinking hard as her mind twisted with the threads of Alexander's life. The reason he did what he did was that his mind had been so convoluted that he could not even think for himself. He did only as instructed, nothing more. "I see things more clearly now and you have helped me to understand Alexander more," she said, her hands trembling in her lap. "How did you learn of all of this?"

"Alexander told us," Kendrick offered, his arm shaking the baby a little to get her to go back to sleep. "We knew about Riana because I employ spies at my father's castle. I did not find out about who was behind her murder until a short time ago. Unfortunately, it was too late for her but it is not too late for you."

Her eyes widened as the fear soared through her veins like a raging fire. "What do you mean?"

"You are in grave danger, Catherine. If my father finds Alexander growing soft again, he may send assassins for you. Fear not, though. Alexander and I have come up

with plan to keep you safe."

Without warning, the only solution to keep her safe became very clear. Instead of sharing it, she chose to keep it close to her heart. "Much thanks, Father and Mother," she said quietly as she rose from her chair. "I must go and find Alexander."

"Yes, go to him, child. He needs your love more than ever now," Isabeau whispered softly as her eyelids fluttered against her creamy cheeks.

"So do I," she murmured gently to herself as she left Isabeau and Kendrick to their new child. Though she had left Alexander bewildered in the chapel, she had a fair idea of where he would be now. She smiled. A special visit from her would do him well.

Chapter 12

The glossy black coat of his horse glistened each time he brushed it, the strength of his stroke conveying his anger. Why could Catherine not trust him? He was not the same man who captured her and forced her to marry him. In the short time Catherine had been in his life, he had seen the error of his decision and regretted every single moment. Time and time again, he had tried to show her that he had changed....

"Alexander."

He whirled around to see Catherine standing behind him, her blond hair framing her face angelically. Delicate red velvet clung to her womanly curves, inciting the lust residing within him. "Catherine," he murmured, almost a breathy whisper. This was the first time she had sought out his company.

She stepped forward, her delicate arms behind her back, the sound of her feet brushing through the hay with a soft swish. Her sweet perfume assailed his nostrils, masking the dank manure smell of the stable. Instantly he hardened, forcing him to turn away from her. "What is it that you wish, dear wife?"

"To speak to you, Alexander," she cooed, laying a soft hand on his shoulder.

"About what?" he said tersely as he continued to brush the sleek black animal, his fingers curled tightly around the brush.

"You," she said softly as she urged him to turn around with a gentle nudge. "Why did you not tell me?"

His brow rose quizzically. "Tell you what?"

"About your past," she answered in a smooth tone, her hand sweeping across his cheek, the skin tightening under her touch. "Your mother and father have informed me about it...."

"They should not have told you," he replied in a strangled tone. "They should have left that to me."

"But you did not, Alexander," Catherine murmured as she continued to touch him, inciting the beast of lust to rise. "You chose to hide it from me. The only thing it did was reinforce the idea that I was only a vessel to you."

He let out a weary sigh, his mind whirling. "You are far more than a vessel to me, Catherine. You are a woman that I can spend the rest of my life with, to hold when our children are born and lay next to in the cold earth once our lives are over...."

Catherine's fingertip against his lip silenced his words. "As are you to me, Alexander. Though I do not forgive you for what you have done to me, I understand the reasoning for it. Your grandfather manipulates everyone within his reach, including us."

Her confession of understanding struck his soul, harder than a flaming boulder against a stone wall. "What are you telling me, Catherine?"

"I want to get to know the man under that hard exterior, Alexander," Catherine whispered softly as she wound her arms around his neck, pulling him gently toward her. "Shall we get to know each other a little better?"

"Are you certain this is what you wish, Catherine?"

"With all my heart. Even though I do not trust your motives, I am willing to try and learn to do so, though I may need your help with that," she murmured sensuously as her succulent lips brushed against his. "Will you aid me in my endeavor?"

"Mostly readily woman," he replied as he pulled her tight into his arms. "When I am through, you will trust me implicitly."

* * * *

"Scotland is within my grasp," Edward announced to the table full of his council, the slant of the gray morning sun filling the room. "It will not be long now before it belongs completely to me."

"What is the news of the Queen?" inquired Robert Wessex, the young but arrogant Duke of Weston. "Has she conceived a child yet?"

Just as he was about to answer, a hard spasm of coughing overtook him. His once majestic frame shook, the force of the coughing seemingly having come from deep within his soul. A faithful servant held a battered pewter bowl under his mouth, allowing him to get rid of the annoying phlegm. Once the storm of hacking had passed, Edward sat up and adjusted his purple tunic, wiping the spittle from his mouth on a proffered cloth. "The Queen was with child," he said as he handed the stained material to a waiting servant. "She has, however, miscarried the infant."

"Does that not foul your plans, your Majesty?" inquired Roger of Wellesley, Lord Lattimore. "If the Queen is not with child...."

He slammed a hard fist on the scarred table, the pain radiating up his arm as the thrum of his slam reverberated through the wood. "She will be before the year is out! With any amount of luck, it will be a son that can be placed on the Scottish throne and under my control"

"But if it is a girl...."

He cut off Roger's words again by striking the table once more, harder than he had before. "It will be a son!" he shouted, his words echoing through the war chamber. "Alexander is of my blood and will produce nothing but sons for my use."

All of the ancient heads nodded. All except one. "I do not wish to dampen your plans, my lord, but I have heard rumors that the ruthless Butcher of the Isles has grown a heart."

Edward glared at Roger, his eyes narrowing. "That ... is ... a lie," he growled,

pronouncing each word hard.

"No, my lord," Roger interjected, his hairy hands twisting in anxiety. "One of my servants has a daughter who lives in Kent and has reported that the Duke has fallen in love with the Queen and will let nothing happen to her."

He leaned back, his fingers pulling on his white, neatly trimmed beard. "I know my own blood as well as I know myself. He would never betray me like this."

"Aye, he has, my lord. The servants are all seeing how much the Queen stills his moods and makes him much happier than he has ever been in his life."

Edward continued to stare, contemplating Roger's words. If it was true and Alexander was growing soft again because of a woman, he would have to rid Alexander of her. He needed Alexander's ruthlessness as well as his savagery in order to make his dream real.

His bearded lips spread into a contemplative smile. It seemed that Catherine would have to follow in Riana's footsteps. Only this time, he would have to blame the Celts for it. Leaning forward, he stared murderously at Roger. "If you are lying to me, Roger, I will not hesitate in executing you," he remarked as he grabbed Roger's hand and squeezed hard.

Roger winced and tried to remove his hand but to no avail. "Please, my lord, I beg of you! Let go for you are hurting me!"

He leaned closer. "This is nothing compared to what I have in mind for you if I find out that you lie."

Roger's eyes grew watery. "I do not lie, my lord! I swear by all the ancestors who have come before me!" Edward twisted Roger's wrist and elicited a quick snap of bone, alerting him to the fact he had broken Roger's arm. Letting out a long howl, Roger continued to beg. "You have broken my wrist, my lord! Please let me go!"

Edward threw Roger's arm away from him and sat back, glaring at the rest of the council members. "Does anyone else wish to lie?"

Cries of 'Nay!' echoed around the table, filling the room with the sounds.

Edward looked at each and every council member, sizing each one up. He knew their strengths as well as their weaknesses so it stood to good reason they would not lie to him. "Good," he snapped as his spine stiffened with resolution. "Perhaps it would be time to find out for myself if Alexander has grown a heart."

"How will you do that, your Majesty?"

"Leave it to me."

* * * *

Days passed with an amazing speed, her time spent mostly in Alexander's company despite the fact his parents were still in residence. Catherine gained a deeper insight into Alexander's personality while he learned not to treat her like a possession.

During this tranquil time, Catherine found herself falling completely and madly in love with Alexander. Underneath his rough exterior yearned a man who wanted nothing more than complete and unconditional love. He showed her compassion while she gave him the love he craved so desperately.

Unfortunately, thoughts of her displaced Scotland crept into her mind. How was her beloved country dealing with the loss of her leadership? From Queen Isabeau, she had learned that she had been crowned in Scotland in absentia. Other than that bit of news, she had heard nothing. Not even rumbles in England about Scotland and its lost monarch. Was Edward waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike?

A soft knock brought her back to reality, jerking her out of her thoughts. "Enter," she said softly so as not to wake Alexander who was still asleep.

"There is a message, my lady," confessed a gentle voice from the other side of the door. "It has just arrived for you."

Gathering the edges of her dressing gown together, Catherine padded quietly over to the door and opened it, stepping behind the confines and drawing it closed behind her. "Where did it come from?"

The servant girl shook her head. "I know not, my lady. The only spoken message with it is that you must read it immediately."

Her servant thrust the parchment toward her and she accepted it with trembling fingers. "Much thanks," she mumbled and opened the door, stepping back into the room as quietly as she had left it. The girl curtsied and exited the hallway with the soft swish of leather clad feet.

Catherine's heart pounded, the thrumming steady in her ears. Where had this come from? Nervously, she turned it over in her hands to look at the seal.

Her blood pooled in her feet.

It was Duncan's stamp.

Her hand went to her mouth as she half-stumbled over toward the roaring fireplace and sank into the deeply padded chair. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. Was Duncan dead? Despite her anger with him, ill will was not something she wished for him.

Slight murmurs emanated from the bed followed but the gentle rustle of material. Catherine looked over quickly to see Alexander turn over to his belly, her breath holding in her chest. This missive was not something she wanted him to see.

Once she had him settled, she turned her attention back to her letter. Was she ready to read the contents? Aye, she was. With quick fingers, she broke the seal and let the slivers of red wax rain on the floor. Upon opening it, spiky but familiar script greeted her.

Dearest sister,

There are no words that can convey my sorrow at what I have done. The English have duped me of everything they had promised. Now I have nothing left. Please,

Catherine, let me redeem myself. I want to bring you home so you can wed Robert and take the crown that is rightfully yours. Do not think this to be another trap because it is not. Robert has agreed to wed you and become your protectorate no matter what condition you would be in upon your return. Think not only of Scotland but yourself. The clans need to be united under one crown and with Robert by your side, this can be achieved. Robert is strong not only in military tactics as well as money and army but his influence with the clans is even stronger.

Please consider what I have said and agree to meet me in a month so that I can bring you home.

Your loving brother,

Duncan

Catherine's blood turned cold as she read the words again, her tears falling to the pale yellow parchment. Duncan was alive and for that she was grateful but his bargaining for her hand was not something she would stand for a second time. "No," she said in a whispery tone, her hands curling the edges of the paper.

Alexander, once deep in sleep, jerked out of it and turned over at the sound of her voice. "Catherine? What 'tis the matter?" he said sleepily

"Nothing," she sniffed as she stood up, the parchment still clutched in her trembling fingers.

Alexander's gaze flicked to her hand. "What is that you are holding?"

"'Tis my concern, Alexander," she remarked as she rolled it up. "Not yours."

"It is if it upsets you so," he said, his tone becoming deeper and indicating his rising anger. "Bring it to me."

"No."

"Catherine, I do not ask twice."

With a quick flick of her wrist, Catherine threw it onto the fire. If Alexander read it, the message would certainly sign Duncan's death warrant. "If you can get it from the fire before it turns to ashes, then you are most welcome to read it," she said as she sank back down into the chair and covered her face with her hands. Her body trembled as the sobs racked her, the emotions inside riding along as though they were composed of waves. Why could Duncan not leave her alone?

Alexander rose from the bed and walked toward her, his naked body a testament to perfection. "You should not have done that, Catherine. When I say...."

"Please, Alexander, I do not wish to hear your 'I am the Master' tome again. All I want is to be left alone."

His face contorted into a mask of confusion as he knelt on the floor next to her. "Forgive me, Catherine, I sometimes forget that I am no longer an overbearing tyrant. What did the letter say?"

"Duncan is dead," she lied as sobs racked her body. "A fever took him and he was buried in Scone shortly after our wedding."

"My poor dear," he said softly as he rose and swept her into his arms. "Come back to bed and sleep."

Catherine buried her face into the warm crook of his neck and let the tears flow. Duncan may have well been dead as far as she was concerned. The only real question remaining now was Scotland. She was deeply in love with Alexander but she also held a fierce love for Scotland. Whom should she choose?

* * * *

"I thought I would find you here."

Alexander looked up, tearing his gaze away from Riana's ornate casket as it rested against the back of the altar in the chapel, carefully fastened in the niche created for it. "I did not know you were looking for me."

Longworth chuckled slightly as he stepped inside of the sacred chapel. "I spoke to Catherine this morning and she said you seemed barely yourself as of late. Since this is the only place you go when you are that way, I decided to come."

Alexander crossed himself and stood up from the prie dieu, turning around quickly. "I came to be alone, Longworth. If there is nothing pressing that you wish to speak to me about...."

"Aye, there is something pressing, my friend. It's Catherine."

His heart fell to his feet. "What about her?" The only thoughts swirling in his mind were that she would soon be demanding to be returned to Scotland. He could not let her go.

"She seems to think you have been upset with her these last few days. You barely talk to her and only grunt your responses. What is vexing you, my friend?" The concern in Longworth's voice was touching but this was definitely something he had to deal with on his own.

"Nothing, Longworth. Now if you will remove yourself from this chapel, I would be most agreeable," he snapped, silently wishing that his friend would leave.

"Nay, Alexander. I refuse to sit back and let you push Catherine away from you," Longworth announced as he sank down into one of the pews. "If you do, then it will be your undoing. Is that what you wish?"

Alexander blinked hard as his heart thumped uneasily in his chest. "Nay, it is not, Longworth. I do not care to discuss it further."

"So be it," Longworth announced as he rose from the pew and brushed the stray locks of blond hair from his eyes. "Before I take my leave, I want to say something to you. I do not care if it infuriates you, but I will say it anyway. Forgive yourself for Riana's death. She already has."

Alexander crossed his arms as the anger thrummed through him. How dare Longworth presume to know what his thoughts were. "If you must know, I already have

asked for her forgiveness a long time ago, Longworth."

Longworth's blue gaze remained steady and clear, his face serene. "No, you have not, Alexander. I have known you far too long to know that you have not come to terms with her death. As for Catherine, I know you fear the same for her and that you will not be able to protect her either if the Scots invade."

His friend was overstepping his bounds this time. "I will protect her until the moment the last breath leaves my body, Longworth. Nothing will happen to her."

"Do you not hear yourself, Alexander? The fear is in your voice. Part of you wishes to wrap Catherine around your heart while the other keeps her at a distance. Why not let her in completely?"

"You speak of things you should not, Longworth," he snapped as the fury inside of him blazed even higher. "You think you know me best but you do not. You know nothing of me at all."

Longworth's brows knitted in question. "Then answer me one question."

"What is that?"

"If you do not fear for her, why did you not tell her that she had been crowned Queen of Scotland in absentia?"

Alexander turned away quickly as his breathing picked up, the fury spilling over inside. Aye, he had not told Catherine because he had feared she would find some way to return to her beloved Scotland, taking the new found light out of his life forever. As for Riana, he had never sought the forgiveness he had confessed to Longworth. In these many years, he could not bring himself to do it. Before Catherine had entered his life, he had prayed that death would release him from the shackles of that guilt and remorse. Now, with Catherine, he had a reason to keep on living. "Leave me now, Longworth. I wish to speak no more."

He heard Longworth getting up, the soft sounds of his boots scraping against the stone floor. "Think about what I have said, Alexander. Before you can embrace Catherine to you, you must ask for Riana's forgiveness. Until then, you can do nothing."

With Longworth's words hanging in the air as well as the dense echoes of his footsteps, Alexander concentrated on Riana's casket. Made of good sturdy English oak, the coffin rested on a stone slab nestled in the wall behind the altar. Pale tapers filled the room with a golden, ambient light that cast dancing shadows. Relics decorated the knave, glaring at him with accusatory stares.

Alexander genuflected before the altar and entered the sacred area. If a priest had been there, he would have been most appalled but Alexander did not care. This was his chapel and he would do with it as he pleased.

Stepping up to the wall, Alexander laid a hand on Riana's casket. It was cold, the chill seeming to emanate from within. Dim memories rose in his mind of that day he had found her, the blood oozing from the slit in her throat. Riana had meant so much to him. When he had buried her, he had interred his heart as well. That was, until Catherine

entered his life. She had brought back the joy he had not experienced in some time.

He looked up to the cross hanging above the niche. The guilt he felt about Catherine hung around his neck like a stone. Why did he feel this way? Riana would have wanted his life to continue though hers had ended. She would not have expected him to become a monk.

Alexander let out a deep sigh as his fingers caressed the inlaid jewels in the cold wood, the facets indenting his flesh. Riana would not want him to feel guilty about living. That much he knew. She had loved him beyond all reason and wanted him to be nothing but happy.

He knelt down and laid his head against the cold wood, the anger slipping away from him like a running river. Longworth was right. The guilt of Riana's death was something he could not carry around any longer. If he wanted Catherine's pure love as well as Riana's forgiveness, he was going to have to ask for it.

Chapter 13

"So what is in it for me?" Robert McLeish's bearded lips curled in abject disgust at the proposition of having to sit here and listen to the English drivel. He had come hoping to hear something that would intrigue him but so far, he had not. Idly, he played with a dagger on the wooden table, listening with detached interest. With any amount of hope, this would not take too long. He had so many men to kill and so little time to do it.

"Everything, my boy," King Edward said with a wide smile as he paced around the room, the echoes of his constant footfalls filling his war room. "First, you will take my weak grandson out of the way. Next, you will take his bride in hand and take control of Scotland," he announced, his voice very low with a deliberate tone. "Once that is accomplished, then you will pledge your allegiance to me and consult me in all matters involving Scotland."

Robert sank deeper into the hard chair, the fire crackling in the hearth mingling with the hostile ambiance. This proposition certainly had probabilities. "Why have you chosen to grace me with this dubious honor, my lord? Surely, you do not want your own flesh and blood dead."

The king was silent for a moment, his steps halting. He looked up to the gray stoned ceiling as if to summon strength before turning to him. "Alexander was very important to me once. He had grown soft with his first woman so I had to take her away from him and blame the Scots, thus making him even more ruthless than before. By having him take the Queen of the hated Scots, I thought I had assured myself that there was no danger in his falling for the girl," he confessed. Turning completely around, Robert noticed the king's hand gripped the delicately ornate handle of his sword so hard that his flesh turned white. "I was never more wrong. That little whore somehow melted his heart and I no longer have the man I need."

His eyes widened as the blood pounded in his temples. Finally, the chance to destroy Alexander, just as he had promised his mother so long ago, emerged like a ghost from a dream. He could almost smell Alexander's blood on his fingers. ... "So the little whore will belong to me?"

The king nodded his gray, wizened head, the gold of his crown glinting in the afternoon sun. "Completely and without question, just as long as you pledge your allegiance to me."

He sat there for a few more minutes, contemplating what the King was offering him. This was the chance to gain his revenge on Alexander, the man he had loathed for as long as he could remember. If it had not been for Alexander's mother, his own mother

would still be alive this very moment. "Of course," he replied with a bland smile as he rose. "I would do nothing less for a king who has granted me what I wished."

"Good, my boy," the king clapped on the back with a malicious chuckle. "You will be richly rewarded for giving me what I wish. Now that my heart is clear, there are some other pressing matters I must attend to. You are given your leave."

"Aye, sire," Robert replied as he bowed, the knot tightening in his belly. The last thing he wanted to do was swear allegiance to this pathetic king but he had to, in order to gain the only thing he wanted in the world.

As he strode down the empty hall past the rich tapestries, one thought and one thought only occupied his mind. Alexander had better enjoy the coming days for he had not long enough to live.

* * * *

Catherine worked hard on the embroidery in her lap, her mind wandering through the maze of thought. What was happening in Scotland? She had heard the rumbling lately about the struggle for her crown, the pain spearing her heart. What was she to do? She wanted to return to Scotland yet she wanted to remain here, with Alexander. The constant pain in his eyes troubled her to no end and she wanted to make it all disappear but she knew she could not. Taran had informed her that Alexander had still not forgiven himself for the death of his beloved, carrying that guilt shackled to him like a heavy link chain. Was there any way to remove it?

"Does something trouble you, Catherine?" Queen Isabeau asked, her brilliant green eyes crinkling around the edges.

"No, Mother, there is nothing. I am just thinking aimlessly," she answered, casting a look to Taran. Her friend kept her dark head bent over her own sewing, saying nothing.

The corner of Isabeau's mouth drew up in question as her brows knitted together. "I think something troubles you, my dear but if you do not wish to discuss it, then so be it," Isabeau paused. "Where is Alexander?"

"He went riding with Father early this morning. They had said something about hunting for a good part of the day," she answered idly as she pushed the needle through the stubborn material. "Alexander promised to be back before the evening meal."

Isabeau opened her mouth to say something else when a thunderous sound rumbled outside the door. All three women stared at each other before flinging their work to the floor and rushing over to the window.

In the distance, a great plume of dust rose in the air and blanked out the nearby copse of trees. Unlike a fire, the cloud was pale and moved toward the castle with a raging pace, much faster than a fire would. "What is happening?" Taran questioned, her voice quivering with fear.

"I ... know ... not," Catherine answered slowly as she continued to watch the swirl as well as the sound, move closer. Her heart pounded out of control, the fear leeching into every fiber of her being.

"There is only one way to find out, my dear girls, and that is to meet them at the gate," Isabeau said sternly as she pulled herself as well as the others away from the window.

Catherine followed Taran and Isabeau as they fled the chamber, the thick swishes of their gowns filling the air as they descended the staircase. Her breath felt as though it would not leave her chest, the tightness becoming unbearable. Were they under attack?

* * * *

The hollow clops of the horses hooves as they thundered through the open drawbridge and into the cobblestone bailey peppered the air, adding to the intense ambiance. Alexander and his father rode ahead of the hunting party, their horses nearly lathered in sweat.

"McLeish's army is amassing north of here and is planning to attack us," Alexander shouted as he pulled his horse to halt and dismounted quickly, throwing the reins to a waiting squire. "We must prepare for war!"

His father dismounted just as quickly and strode over to Isabeau, taking her into a strong embrace. "Alexander and I will gather the men and assemble them for battle. I want you to take the women into one of the chambers and lock yourselves in."

Worry etched itself into Isabeau's face. "What if they lay siege?"

Kendrick bent and kissed his wife's forehead. "His army is not large enough to do so, my dear. If he tries, he will not succeed."

Alexander's arms swept around Catherine, pulling her into a protective embrace. "Nothing will happen to you, my love," he whispered into her ear. "Not while there is a breath left in my body."

She leaned against him, feeling the warmth of his body against hers. "Aye, my love, I know that."

Alexander pulled away and spun her around, cupping her chin in his hands. "You do not know how much I have wanted to hear you say those words, Catherine," he confessed as he drew her back into his arms. "Now, go with my mother and the rest of the women and do as my father commands."

Catherine swept her lips over Alexander's, tasting his essence with light feathery kisses. "I will on one condition."

"What is that?" he asked, his voice low and full of sensual emotion.

"Let me tell you how to defeat Laird McLeish."

* * * *

The morning sun over the white, misty mountains was a good sign to say the least. From his vantage on the ridge, Robert could make out Henstrige Castle deep in the distance, nestled beyond the edge of the emerald-colored forest. Battlements rose high on the curtain walls, the enemy army assembling for war. Metal glinted in the morning sun, casting bright beams of light against the trees.

"Do you wish us to strike now, my lord?" questioned his lesser captain.

"Soon," he said savagely, his gloved finger brushing across his lip. "They know we are coming but do not know when. If we use the cover of darkness, we will completely take them by surprise."

"It looks as though they are poised already and will be, my lord," the captain pointed out. "I do not think we can take them by the element of surprise."

His fury mounted within him, bubbling over the cauldron. "Just exactly how would you take them?" The leather of his gloves creaked as he gripped tightly onto the pommel, the reins still tightly clasped between his fingers.

"I say we should attack now and be done with it."

Robert leaned back in his saddle and stared at the edifice in front of him, the thoughts swirling in his mind like a pool of hungry eels. His captain was right. If they struck now, it was completely out of the bounds of good military tactics and least expected. Despite his preparations, Alexander would never be able to defeat him. "Take the men and divide them, one to each side of the forest. When Alexander and his men come out, we can surround them and complete my revenge."

"Aye, my lord," the captain answered as he pulled his horse back and rode in the direction of the garrisons.

Robert continued to stare at Henstrige, its bright flag flying high about the drum tower's slate roof, the colors of Kent flowing nicely. His lips spread into a wide smile. Once Alexander was gone, this would be a perfect place to stash Catherine with jailers and no one would be the wiser.

* * * *

"It was quick thinking of you, my lord, to take down the Queen's flag and replace it with the one of Kent," Longworth commented at his side. "The bastard knows not that you are here with your army."

"I want to save my son and his wife as well as my own, Longworth, and this is the best possible way to do it," Kendrick commented. He continued to watch the rogue Laird with a wary eye from the confines of the forest. His hands gripped the ornate handle of his sword, his fingers tightening hard. "Have the men dug the trenches and covered them?"

"All is in readiness, my lord," Longworth answered as he shoved the remaining

blond strands underneath his forest green cloak. "When shall we give the signal?"

"Alexander is waiting for it on the north side of the castle. Have the messenger go to that side of the forest and wait for his signal. When all is right, we shall begin."

"As you wish, your Majesty," Longworth said as he urged his horse back out of the dense growth of trees hiding their current position.

Kendrick stayed buried beneath the canopy of foliage, pulling his dark cowl down further over his eyes. McLeish was not going to get away with this, not as long as there was a breath left in his body. Suddenly, his mind returned to the past, to the moment Gardana told him that she was with his child. How evil she had been, scheming with the wizard Halden to poison Isabeau so that he would welcome her back into his bed.

His anger mounted, stoked by the rogue's insolence. Apparently, Robert had inherited his mother's wicked ways. Kendrick's fist pounded angrily against the hardened leather of his saddle. He would not suffer Gardana's evil to live any longer.

* * * *

"Alexander."

Catherine's sweet voice halted his hurried progression down the hallway. He whirled about to see her emerge from the dim shadows of stone, her arms extended to toward him. Eagerly, he enfolded her, holding her tightly. "Why are you not in your chamber with my mother and the other women?" he whispered softly against her head.

"I wanted to see you again," she answered, her voice low as she tightened her grip around his waist. "I also wanted to tell you that I love you, Alexander." She gazed up at him with the most innocent of stares, the depth of her emerald eyes shining with truth.

"I love you too, Catherine," he confessed as his gloved finger slipped under her chin, tilting it higher. "I have from the first moment I saw you."

Without answering, Catherine wound her hand against the back of his neck. Gently she pulled him toward her, her lips parted so slightly so that her warm breath exuded, exciting him beyond anything he had ever known. Tenderly, she kissed him, first peppering his mouth with light, feathery kisses. He waited for her until the need became too strong. Passionately, he returned her kiss with fervor, his tongue searching her mouth and feeling the velvety softness. Catherine's arms wound around his waist as she delved deeper, her body curving into his.

Without warning, his better sense swam to the surface. If he wanted to defeat McLeish, he had better get Catherine to where she would be safe. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss. "You must go with the other women, Catherine," he urged her gently as his embrace tightened, his soul wanting to never let go. "You will not be safe otherwise."

"Whatever you ask, my dear," she said and looked up at him again, those magnificent eyes boring through his soul. "But I will only do so if you make me a promise."

His brow lifted. "What is that?"

"Come back to me."

* * * *

Clouds gathered high in the sky, blocking out the sun and casting a gray pall on the day. Wild winds swept through the field, bringing with it the salty sting of the sea. Where was McLeish?

Alexander sat poised on his horse, his hand gripping the gilded hilt of his ornate sword, his gaze trained out to the open meadow. Waves of tall grasses rippled as well as the last of the summer flowers, their decaying petals riding away on the gusts.

"We are ready, my lord," stated his captain at his side.

"Good. When I give the signal...."

The beat of his heart picked up with the sounds of bagpipes in the distance. McLeish was not far away now.

He waited patiently as the sound drew nearer, the sweat breaking out on his brow. Now was the time of truth.

Then, without warning, a strong line of foot soldiers descended the lush green hills led by McLeish. His fiery red hair stood out against the black of his surcoat, his head topped by a shining circle of gold. Apparently, he fancied himself the King of Scotland already according to some gossip circulating around Kent.

Alexander's rage mounted, his fist pounding against the pommel of his saddle. His grandfather now conspired against him, just as his father had warned him, sending McLeish to 'eliminate' him. Once this was over, he was going to have to pay a visit to his grandfather in London and take care of the old man, freeing England from his evil clutches. Hopefully, his uncle Phillip would be a much better king.

McLeish's small force halted at the base of the hill, as if waiting to see what he would do.

"Do you wish us to advance, my lord?" his captain asked over his right shoulder.

"Aye, we will," he said, casting his stare out into the hills. "Is my father ready with his legion?"

"Aye."

Alexander raised his arm and gave the signal, digging his heels into the unarmored flanks of his horse. Let the battle begin.

* * * *

Edward lay in his bed, his chest filled with more phlegm than he could ever rid himself of. Coldness crept into his bones and no amount of wool on top of him would stop it. He shivered uncontrollably, his breath coming in short gasps. He had been

confined to his bed for the last several days, unable to move or use the necessary without help. What was happening to him? He used to be so robust....

"How are you feeling, today, Father?" Phillip asked in a low menacing voice.

He could hear Phillip's footsteps circling around him, like predator to prey. "You will never be king, Phillip. You do not have the stomach for it."

"Aye, that I have, Father," Phillip mocked as he moved toward the bed, his footsteps slow. "I can be an even more ruthless man than you were."

"I am not dead yet. My bed it still warm."

"It has been cold for many years, Father," Phillip warned as he pulled one of the pillows out from under his head. "When I am king, I will take on your name and be known as Edward II. I plan on restoring the kingdom to richness, something you could not do."

His eyes widened as Phillip fluffed the pillow between his hands, the vision in them cloudy. "What are you going to do, you whelp? Smother me?"

Phillip's dark eyes blazed with an inner heat, stoked by some hidden emotions. "Precisely, Father. I am going to show you exactly how ruthless I can be. I hope you can finally be proud of the man I have become."

Phillip slammed the pillow over his face and held it there, blocking all the air from getting to his lungs. Frantically, he clawed at Phillip's arms in an effort to remove the offensive object. His head felt as though it was going to burst, the sudden dizziness becoming more than he could handle. The clouded vision deepened into swirling patterns behind his eyelids, his lungs feeling as though they were on fire. Air, he must have air!

Howling blackness came to claim him and he refused to go, knowing that more unpleasantness awaited him. No, he was not going to leave this earth until he was ready....

* * * *

Catherine and Isabeau remained at one window while the others vied for a spot at the others. Catherine's heart leapt into her throat as she watched the two sides collide in a flurry of armor, swords and weapons of destruction. She had wanted to call out his name but her better sense prevented her from doing so. Any distraction to Alexander could cost his life.

Down below, the groans and screams arose, mingled with the sounds of metal clashing. Catherine watched helplessly as Alexander urged his horse straight into the thick of it, his sword slashing left and right, dark sprays of blood flying everywhere. Her hand went to her mouth as Alexander's horse collapsed and he fell into the crowd still slashing.

Catherine pulled herself away from it all, leaning against the wall and sinking down until she was on the floor, burying her head in her hands. "God in heaven, let him live," she begged in a hushed whisper. "He simply must live."

Isabeau sank down next to her in elegant blue velvet. "He will, Catherine. He has his father with him and if I know my husband, he will not let anyone harm a hair on his son's head."

She looked up into Isabeau's reassuring eyes. "I hope Alexander will make use of the information that I have given him," she said in a solemn tone as she clasped Isabeau's hands tightly. "If McLeish does not use his normal battle tactics then Alexander will surely die."

Isabeau smoothed down the wild tendrils of her hair. "He will prevail, Catherine, just as he has many times before."

Taran took the empty spot next to her. "Aye, he will, Catherine," she remarked enthusiastically as she wrapped her arms around Catherine. "He will...." Taran's words trailed off as she pulled back and stared, blinking hard. "You are with child, Catherine."

Her eyes grew round as her mouth opened wide in surprise. "Nay, it cannot be!" The thoughts had crossed her mind with the absence of her course but she pushed them away, preferring to focus on Alexander instead.

"Aye, it is, Catherine. I can sense it. When was your last course?"

Catherine lowered her head, her mind spinning wildly. When was her last course? Since they had been able to reconcile their feelings toward each other, Catherine had never been happier. The days flew by without incident, making her understand and know Alexander a little deeper, bringing about her love in a rich fashion. Unfortunately, she had not kept track of her time. "Two months perhaps," she confessed and turned to Taran. "Is the babe all right?"

"You know I cannot see that, Catherine, but I can tell you that this child will see the light of day," Taran foretold as she looked to Isabeau. "It seems that you will become a grandmother in the spring, your Majesty."

Tears flooded Isabeau's eyes. "'Tis most wonderful, Catherine!" she exclaimed and wrapped Catherine in warm embrace. "Alexander will be so pleased!"

Catherine leaned her head against the warm, azure velvet of Isabeau's shoulder. "He must live," she sobbed as her emotions poured out from her soul. "He simply must."

* * * *

Beyond the clatter of swords, Alexander could not hear anything. Slashes of silver clotted his line of vision, making it incredibly hard to discern anything. Right and left, he slashed his way through the throng of armed men, their blood spraying all over him. The hot coppery, smell rose in the air, ruining the once serene day.

Exhaustion crept in but he knew had to hold the line. Father would be arriving any moment with reinforcements that would allow him to destroy McLeish.

Suddenly, he found himself away from the throng of battle, the crowd having moved aside a little in the fighting. Angrily he searched through the crowd as his chest

heaved, his gore filled hair slapping against his cheeks. Where was McLeish?

"I suppose you are searching for me, you bastard," snarled a hideous voice behind him.

Alexander turned to see McLeish standing behind him. Fiery red hair swirled around his face, unblemished and silky. The surcoat of the McLeish clan stood out proudly on his chest, pristine and clear. He frowned. Apparently, McLeish had saved all his energy for this one last battle. "I do not search for filth," he snapped back as he tossed his sword from one hand to the other, taunting McLeish.

McLeish let out a snarl of wicked laughter. "You really are a witty creature, Kent, but I do not have the time to toy with you today. I am here to claim what is mine."

"And what exactly do I have that belongs to you?"

"You have Catherine," McLeish answered as he slowly started moving to the right. "She belongs to me."

"If you have not heard, McLeish," Alexander replied as he moved in time. "She is my wife."

"Not when I get through with you," McLeish mocked savagely. "Catherine will be mine and any brats of yours harboring in her belly will be dealt with just as their father will be in a few moments."

"You live in a dream land, McLeish, just as your mother did before you," he remarked. The moment those words assailed McLeish's ears, he saw the rogue cringe for a moment.

"The only dream my mother had was taken away from her when that whore of a mother of yours entered my father's life." McLeish's sword was poised and ready for battle, the end of it completely clean.

Alexander let chuckles of riotous laughter escape his throat. "Your father? Ha! The wizard who tried to poison my mother was your real father despite what your mother told you."

Rage colored McLeish's cheeks a deep crimson, almost matching the color of his hair. "Prepare to die, bastard!"

McLeish's sword rained down, met with his own blade. Sparks flew as the clang of steel against steel rained through the air. Around and around they danced the circle of death, their blades clashing together. Alternately, they slashed at each other with Alexander inflicting stinging blows of his own. "Have you had enough, my friend?" He taunted as he jabbed at McLeish.

"Not nearly enough," McLeish gasped, his chest heaving. "I will only be done when your blood stains the ground."

"Pray to whatever God in hell for you will join him today," Alexander warned, his steps keeping in time with McLeish's.

Blood clung to McLeish's face in thick clots but they were not from Alexander. It was from McLeish himself. "The devil will be welcoming you today, Kent, not I. The

only thing I will be meeting today is your bride in my bed."

That last verbal jab was enough to spur him on even faster. Vengeance as well as fury filled him, pushing to him to limits he did not know existed. Using his best sword skills, Alexander wielded his blade against McLeish harder, succeeding in wounding the man fatally in the belly.

McLeish's eyes grew wide as his bloody hands clasped the sword piercing his gullet, his breathing becoming suddenly shallow. "You bastard," he snarled as blood flew from his lips. "You will never be rid of me."

"Aye, I will after today," Alexander snapped as he raised a booted foot and kicked McLeish from the end of his sword. "Meet your maker in hell."

McLeish slumped to his knees, the soft swish of the damp ground rising through the air. "You have not heard the last of me." With that, McLeish fell back against the ground, rolling to his side before falling on his belly.

Alexander's better instinct told him to sever McLeish's head but he declined to heed the warning. McLeish was dead. Cutting his head off would not make it any more permanent.

"Alexander!"

Father's voice split the hostile air. He looked up to see his father's army sweep down on the enemy and corral them together, like sheep to the slaughter. Good. Once the rabble was gone, he would no longer have to worry.

Then, without warning, the look on Father's face went from one of happiness to one of sheer terror. "Alexander! Look out behind you!"

Just as Alexander turned to see what Father was speaking about, he felt the hot blade of McLeish's dagger sink deep into his side, in between the joints of his armor plates. "If I am going to hell, today I will be taking you with me," McLeish snarled, the blood from his lips spraying Alexander's face.

Before he could offer retort, Father issued another command. "Move your head, Alexander!"

With that, Alexander lowered his head just in time to feel Father's blade slice across the air on top of his head and through the gristle of McLeish's throat. A sickening crunch followed a hollow thud as McLeish's head hit the ground and rolled away, his body falling in time.

Alexander looked down at the dagger still plunged within his gut, his eyes blinking hard. There was no pain, only cold steel. Warm wetness seeped from the wound, raining on his boots. Would he live to see Catherine for the last time?

His world began to sway and he started to collapse and would have had it not been for Father's strong arms about him. "Alexander? Can you hear me?" Father's voice was strong and reassuring, reminding him a little of when he was a child and still resided in Castile.

"Ay--aye ... Father," he gasped as Father's hands tore away the armor and jacket.

He could hear Father tearing off his gloves to probe the edges of the wound. "Oh, Jesu, what has that bastard done to my son?" Father's tone carried with it concern and grief. Was he going to die?

Before he could say anymore, a howling blackness came to claim him, carrying him to whatever nightmares resided in that haunting void.

Chapter 14

"The edges are clean and not as deep as I had expected them to be," the physician announced, his hand applying a mixture of ground pearl and goat's fat to the wound. "His mail and armor jacket saved his life."

"May God be praised," Catherine said, her mind staying completely on Alexander. She caressed his damp forehead, brushing the strands of ebony colored hair from his eyes. "He will live."

"Aye, that he will," the physician remarked as he stroked his long white beard. "From what I have heard from the Queen, he has much to live for."

Catherine felt her face heat up as the details of her secret slipped out. Kendrick looked to her before glancing at Isabeau who smiled widely. "What is the meaning of this? Is there something...?" he trailed off as his face changed, the sudden realization of what was happening filtered in. "Is it true?" Catherine nodded. "When?"

"In the spring, Father."

Without ceremony, Kendrick walked around the bed and clasped her in a warm embrace. "That is most wonderful news, Catherine. I could have never asked for a better wife for my son as well as the mother of my grandchildren," he said and released her, his hands gripping her shoulders. "I wish with all my heart that my mother had lived to see Alexander's children. She would have been so happy."

"She would have, Kendrick," Isabeau interrupted, placing a hand on Kendrick's velvet clad arm. "Come, let us leave Catherine to Alexander."

"Aye," Kendrick concurred. Catherine watched with pride as they walked to the other side of Alexander's bed. Isabeau touched his head first, smoothing his curly onyx hair down, her eyes filling with tears. Catherine's own eyes followed suit, the scene endearing. She could feel the love of Alexander's parents for him.

Bending from her waist, she kissed his forehead gently. "I love you, my son," she said softly. "I praise God every day that you were born." With that, she stepped away and allowed Kendrick access to their son.

Kendrick knelt down next to the bed and laid a hand on Alexander's naked shoulder. "I love you, Alexander, and have from the moment I knew you to be growing in your mother's womb. Nothing will ever change that. Get well, my son, for we have many things to catch up on." With that, Kendrick placed a soft kiss on Alexander's forehead and stood up. She could see the unshed tears in Kendrick's eyes. He truly loved Alexander the way a father should.

Placing a gentle hand on Isabeau's shoulder, Kendrick guided her out of the room.

Catherine watched them disappear from her sight, her heart swelling with pride. This was where she belonged. No where else.

Scotland had been the land of her birth and her heritage. Once she had thought to be the perfect Queen, uniting the clans under one crown just as her grandfather attempted to do so many times before. Now, her dreams had changed. The only thing she had wanted out of her life was to be Alexander's wife and their child's mother. Nothing else mattered for her, not even her beloved Scotland.

Catherine looked down at Alexander's sleeping form. From the tyrant he had been to the gentle man he was now, it had certainly been a long transformation. The more time she had invested in Alexander, she knew that she would never leave his side.

Wiping away the stray tears from her eyes, Catherine knew what her decision regarding her crown was to be. Rising from her chair, Catherine walked over to the bell pull and summoned a servant. She knew what she had to do now.

* * * *

"Are you sure this is what you wish, your Majesty?" Longworth questioned as she paced in front of him, her hands behind her back fiddling with end of her braid.

"Aye, that is what I wish, Longworth. The sooner this business is taken care of, the better. When Alexander awakens, I want him to know that I may be the Queen of Scotland but I would rather be known as the Duchess of Kent," she confessed honestly.

"What is it you wish me to do?" Longworth questioned, his blond brow rising while his hand stroked his beard thoughtfully.

Just as she was about to answer, Taran entered the room, bearing a tray of sweetmeats. "Before I go any further, Longworth, what are your intentions with my servant?"

Longworth's ruggedly handsome face paled. "What do you mean?"

Catherine stopped and stood in front of him, her arms folded regally. "What I mean is do you intend to make an honest woman of her or do you plan on keeping her as your bed-warmer?"

Longworth's blue eyed stare darted from her to Taran before returning to her. "I have the most honorable intentions, I assure you," he explained. "'Tis just that I have not found the appropriate time to ask her to become my bride."

There was a loud clatter, splitting the air as the tray fell to the floor, the contents spilling everywhere. Taran's hands covered her surprised mouth as her eyes grew wide. "Do you mean you wish to wed me, my lord?"

Longworth's bearded mouth drew wide. "Aye, that I do, my dear. I have been waiting for the right time to ask you and find out if there is someone I need to speak to for your hand."

"You may have her hand, Longworth, so long as Taran is agreeable," Catherine

announced happily. "There is no one left alive in her family and since I am her mistress, I will assume the responsibility of her father."

Longworth leapt up from his chair and grasped her hand, tickling her knuckles with his hairy kiss. "Your Majesty is most gracious," he said, releasing her with a flourish as he turned to Taran. "We will wed once all of the threats on Kent have been taken care of as well as Alexander's recovery."

Taran circled her in a strong embrace. "Much thanks, Catherine," she said, holding on tightly.

"You deserve happiness," Catherine replied as the tears flowed again. "Your service to me has been most invaluable and I will never forget. However, there are things at hand we must discuss," she replied as she pulled away. "When all of this is done, you will have the most magnificent wedding feast imaginable, I promise." She turned to Longworth. "Will you please bring the Queen and Prince of Castile to the war room? I have something I must propose to them."

"Aye, your Majesty," Longworth stated and brushed a kiss across Taran's forehead before leaving, his footfalls a dim echo.

"What are you going to do, Catherine?" Taran asked as she bent down and started picking up the fallen sweetmeats from the cold stone floor.

Catherine walked to the window and stared out to the open fields on the eastern part of the castle. Beautiful rays of sunshine rained down on the earth, a far cry from the carnage of yesterday. Golden wheat waved as the wind swept through the valley, the tops waving in the breeze. Gulls swooped through the sky, followed by larger birds of prey, their calls drowning out the deep, distant sound of the sea. "I am going to give up my crown, Taran," she sighed, placing her hands on the cold stone sill. "I no longer belong in Scotland."

"Are you sure that is what you wish, Catherine?" The surprise in Taran's voice was not lost on her. Taran knew how much she longed for Scotland so with this turn of events, the poor girl did not know what to think.

"Aye, 'tis, Taran. I have wanted this for a long time and my stubborn heart refused to realize it, at least in the beginning," she confessed. Idly she watched the hawks circle a dense copse of trees, as if they were waiting for anything to move. "Now Kent is the only place I want to be."

Taran's hand on her shoulder was warm and reassuring. "I know of what you speak, Catherine. When we first came here and I started sharing Longworth's bed, I too longed for nothing but Scotland. Now, with him wanting to marry me, it has all changed for me as well."

"I would dare say that not only have I found my happiness but you have found yours as well," Catherine sighed, laying her head against her hands. She had a plan in mind that more than likely Alexander's parents would not agree with but they would have to. Their son's life would eventually depend on it as well as the future of Alexander's

child.

* * * *

"Catherine, you cannot be serious! 'Tis too dangerous, especially in your condition!" Isabeau cried. "If it must be done, we can send an emissary to do it."

Catherine shook head. "No, Mother. Since I am the Queen, I must be the one to surrender my crown, not an emissary."

"But..." Kendrick started.

Catherine raised her hand to halt his words. "There is something I must tell you both and please do not be angry with me."

"What is it?" Isabeau's face took on a mask of concern, her blonde brows furrowing.

Catherine rose from her chair and stood behind it, her hands gripping the ornate back hard. "I had received a missive from brother several weeks ago stating that I must return to Scotland and marry the Bruce in order to unite the clans under one crown."

"Catherine! How could you...?" Isabeau exclaimed as she started to rise out of her seat.

She took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Please, hear me, Mother. You see, from the moment that letter arrived, I have thought even harder about Scotland. What it stated was correct. Scotland would be better united under one crown with one exception."

Isabeau's stare turned icy. "What exception is that?"

"That it would be ruled better without me. My brother pleaded with me to leave Kent and return to Scotland where I would marry the Bruce and rule Scotland with him by my side." She looked at Isabeau and noticed the skeptical look on the older woman's face. "If that letter had arrived perhaps several days after I had been brought to Kent, I might have accepted the proposal but after coming to know Alexander as I do now, I cannot."

Isabeau's face softened. "You have certainly made the right choice my dear but before we help you with what you wish to do, I must ask you one thing."

"What is that, Mother?"

"Is this what you truly want?"

Without hesitation, Catherine provided her answer. "With all my heart."

* * * *

Robert the Bruce sat alone at his table in the great hall, the lonely Duncan sitting at his side. "What do you suppose she will do, my friend?"

Robert leaned back, his fingers supporting his bearded chin. "With her by my side, John Balliol will not even contest the throne anymore. She knows what she must do

to keep Scotland safe from English hands."

Duncan frowned. "I know my sister, Bruce, and once she has fallen in love, that is it. If she has fallen for the Butcher of the Isles, the crown will be up for the next man to take."

"No one will take it," Robert snarled as he leapt from his chair and roamed the room like a cat about to spring, his hands going through his hair wildly. "That crown belongs to me since I am the most legitimate heir aside from the Queen. If anyone, especially Balliol, tries to take it from me, he will have a blade in his gullet."

"No one will, Bruce, so I suggest we calm ourselves and continue on with our lives until my sister decides to answer my message," Duncan said, his fingers rolling a lucid grape across the scarred wooden table.

Anger as well as anxiety roiled within in him, a deadly mix of emotion. Stalking over to Duncan's chair, he pulled the impudent dog from his position. "How dare you tell me to calm myself? Do you not realize what is at stake here? Scotland's entire future depends on our obtaining the crown!"

Duncan's face turned as red as his hair from the pressure he applied to his neck. "Enough Bruce!" he gasped as the color turned from crimson to a deep purple. "I understand your words!"

With that, Robert released Duncan, allowing his body to fall to the floor and into a heap. "Good. Now that we understand each other, you will never question my motives again. Understood?"

Duncan nodded, his hand rubbing his throat. "Of course, Robert," he snapped as he got up from the floor. "All is clear."

"That is what I wish to hear," he muttered as he clapped Duncan on the back in a friendly fashion. "Now take your seat."

Duncan flopped down in his chair again, his hands rubbing the girth of his neck. "I do not understand why you tried to kill me, Robert. I have done nothing."

"That is precisely why Scotland is in shambles at this point, Duncan. If you had not killed your grandfather's ambassador, you would not have had to go into hiding and leave Scotland in Catherine's hands." He was still angry at Duncan but that was subsiding slightly. His main concern now was the fact that they had heard nothing from Catherine for several weeks. Did she get Duncan's message?

"I was challenged to that battle," Duncan explained. "I had to in order to save his wife's honor."

"Or your spot in her bed," Robert huffed as he sank back into his seat. "I care not for that now. What concerns me the most is that Catherine never got your message."

"My herald said he handed it to her servant so more than likely she has received it."

Robert leaned his head against the carved backrest, the sharp points of the raised relief digging into the skin of his scalp. Catherine had to have been given that missive.

Their very lives depended on it. "I pray to God that she has and heeds your words, Duncan."

Hard knocks at the door drew their attention away. Together, they stared at the door, waiting for the man to come through. Hard groans split the still air, the hinges of the door not wanting to work. On the other side stood a messenger dressed in the livery of Kent, the brilliant gold threadwork crisscrossing the white field. Robert held his breath. The answer he waited for must lie in the sack of that man.

"Enter!" he exclaimed, his hand waving in the messenger's direction. "Do you bring news of Kent?"

The young man nodded. "I bear you a message from the Duchess of Kent."

"Give that to me!" he demanded and held his hand out for the parchment.

"Aye, my lord," the page said as he closed the distance quickly, laying the yellow roll in Robert's open palm.

"Let me see that!" Duncan's eager hand reached out to snatch the roll but Robert was too quick for him, managing to keep it beyond Duncan's reach.

"Nay, Duncan. I will read it first," he announced as he broke the seal, allowing a shower of red wax to hit the floor.

Catherine's smooth, well-scripted handwriting glared out at him from the page. Robert,

I want you to know that I have received Duncan's previous message and I have had time to think over matters. Here is my proposal. In a week, I wish to meet at a field not far from here and discuss the terms of the surrender of my crown. As Queen, I must do what is best for my people and in their interest, I think they need a king that will be able to do all the things I cannot do. As for myself, I no longer think of myself as Queen of Scotland but rather the Duchess of Kent. That is all I wish to be known as now. My heart is here, not in Scotland where it should be if I were to be an effective ruler. Henceforth, I designate you my heir, Robert. You are a strong man and would undoubtedly be the strongest king Scotland has seen in an age. Please do not think badly of me. I must follow my heart, no matter where it leads me.

In two days, another messenger will arrive with the location of the surrender. We will meet there at sun-up where I will give you my crown without malice and regret.

Your humble servant,

Catherine, Duchess of Kent.

Duncan's voice pierced his veil of thought "What does my sister say?"

Robert's heart filled with an unabashed excitement. "She will not be returning to Scotland."

Duncan pounded his fist against the table, the hollow thud resounding through the hall. "I knew it! We will have to take her back by force and get the Church to annul that facade of a marriage of hers!"

Robert drew his hands together slowly, crunching the dry, brittle parchment

between them. "You do not understand, Duncan. She is turning her crown over to me in a week hence. She prefers to stay in Kent and be known as a Duchess rather than a Queen."

Duncan's blue eyes widened in surprise. "Surely you do not mean she wants to stay with that heathen?"

He nodded, his mind whirling on the news. With Queen's designation and her crown in his hand, all contenders for it would quickly slip away like thieves in the night. "Aye, that is what it means, my boy. Her heart does not belong to Scotland anymore."

Duncan said nothing and sulked in his seat, preferring to stare out the window to conversation.

It was just as well. He had his own thoughts he had to contend to as well as many other things such as what to do about Wallace and his rebel army as well as the rest of the nobles. After all, it would not do to have his new kingdom in chaos, would it?

* * * *

Days passed quickly as Alexander healed a little better each day. He awoke on the third day and remained conscious only for a bit. During this time, she finalized her plans with Longworth to meet the Bruce for the surrender of her crown. Part of her wanted to tell Alexander exactly what she was doing but she knew he would be taken completely by surprise at her sacrifice.

Finally the time arrived. She was sitting next to Alexander and wiping his forehead when Isabeau entered the room. "'Tis time, my dear," she said softly as she entered the room amid gentle swishes of velvet across the floor. "I will sit with Alexander."

Catherine brushed the cloth through his hair one last time. "Please take care of him until I come back," she pleaded as she reluctantly arose from her seat next to the bed.

"Only if you promise to take care of his child growing in your belly," Isabeau said with a gentle smile as she removed the wet cloth from Catherine's hand.

She brushed a quick kiss across Isabeau's cheek. "Much thanks for all you are doing for me, Mother."

"I am in great debt to you, child," Isabeau answered as she lowered herself to the chair amid a plume of purple velvet.

"What ever for?"

Isabeau wiped Alexander's forehead and he stirred for a moment before going back to sleep. "You have given my son back to me, Catherine, and for that, I am ever grateful," she confessed, her loving gaze locked onto Alexander's sleeping form.

Fighting the lump in her throat and not knowing what to say next, Catherine left the room, dabbing her eyes with the corner of her sleeve. She had never felt as though she was anyone special so Isabeau's words had a deep impact on her. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she truly belonged somewhere.

* * * *

Clouds blocked out the sun, turning the sky to a light gray blanket. Soft winds pervaded the valley, lifting her hair from the back of her neck, reminding her of Alexander's touch and caress. Instinctively, her hand went to her belly. What I do now is for all of us, she told the growing child. I hope you will understand what I am doing someday.

"Are you ready, Catherine?" Prince Kendrick's voice broke through the logjam of her thoughts, making her turn to face him. His ebony hair, streaked with gray, streamed down his strong shoulders and danced in the wind as well. The deep blue of his eyes still brimmed with life though the depths of the lines around them increased. Even for a man his age, he was very handsome, giving her a glimpse of what Alexander would look like when he reached his father's age.

"I have never been more ready in my life, Father," she said as the tears emerged again. "I know that in my heart, this is what I wish to do."

Kendrick's gloved hand covered hers warmly. "Then that is what I will help you do, my dear. Now remember, Longworth and I will be not far behind you should you need us though I doubt that you will if this Bruce is half the chivalrous man that he is purported."

"He is most honorable, Father, and would do nothing to harm me. Without my surrender and blessing, he would have to fight the others for it. Robert is not a man to engage in a fight he may not win." Catherine reassured him with the tame pressure of her free hand over his.

Kendrick leaned up in his saddle and looked to Longworth who sat ahead of the large garrison that would accompany them to the appointed place. "Are you in readiness?"

Longworth nodded. "Of course, sire."

"Let us proceed then."

With a swift kick in the horse's flanks, Catherine started down the hill toward the field where her life would change forever, a far cry from where the first change came about. At least, this time, she surrendered without regret.

* * * *

The field was barren except for a few tents as well as fires glowing. The smell of roasting meat rose through the air, making her belly clamor for food despite the fact that she had eaten at least two quails along with a large host of vegetables and bread before she had left.

Horses milled around, munching the last of the summer grass in the last stages of turning brown before the winter swept in like an avenging angel. Men, in various states of

dress, were scattered around the makeshift camp with ale mugs in their hands.

She halted at the edge of the clearing. Lumps of fear curled in the pit of her belly, lying in wait as if they were a snake ready to strike. Would Robert be chivalrous and not kidnap her back to a place she did not clearly want to be?

Taking her hand, she adjusted the golden crown above her head, a gift from Isabeau. Once the task was complete, she smoothed down the folds of her dress, making her composed. After all, she wanted Robert to know that this decision was not made under duress. It was made out of love.

Just as she was about to speak, she saw a bearded man emerge from one of the tents, an ale mug in his hand. He was about to take a drink when he spotted her. Quickly dropping it, he fell to ground on his knees. "Hail to the Queen!"

The rest of the men looked to her and followed suit, their heads bowed. She rode in the circle of grass, followed by a small sliver of men while Kendrick and Longworth waited not far behind in case she needed them.

She strode in a slow gait past them all until she reached the one man in particular she wanted. "Rise, Robert," she commanded.

"This is an honor, your Majesty," Robert replied as he rose from the ground, adjusting his leather tunic.

"Please help me down from my horse," she ordered and held her arms out. "So that we can discuss matters at hand."

He nodded and bowed to her again before coming to her side and helping her to dismount. "You do not know what this means to Scotland, your Majesty."

"And you do not know what a relief it is to my heart to have this burden lifted from my shoulders," she stated in a relieved tone as she walked by his side toward the tent. Behind her back, Catherine signaled for one of her men to follow her inside. Though she trusted Robert, one could never be too sure.

"There is no need to bring one of your men into the council, my lady. I will do you no harm."

"One thing I have learned from my husband is that you never venture into anything alone," she replied as she swept inside the tent. It was large enough to accommodate a harem, the sides constructed of a tightly woven fabric. The floor, covered in bright rugs made of dyed wool and animal skins, felt easy on her slippered feet. In the middle was a small table with only two chairs and a candle between them. "I assume you have brought the necessary papers?"

Robert nodded, his bright brown beard glowing with the golden light of the candle. "Of course, your Majesty."

Catherine went to the chair and stood by it. Graciously, Robert pulled it out for her and she sat down, her heart pounding beyond control. What she was going to do now would affect Scotland for all eternity. "M--may I have a spot of water?"

"Aye, your Majesty, but would you not prefer ale?"

"No, my lord. Not in my present condition."

Robert's eyes grew round and wide, his mouth becoming an 'o' of surprise.

"Surely you do not mean...?"

She nodded. "Aye, I am with child, Laird Bruce so that is why this is the utmost of importance. I want to raise this child with the Duke of Kent and not alone in Scotland."

"Are you certain that you wish to surrender your crown so easily?"

Catherine reached up and removed the crown from her head, laying it on the table in front of her and pushing it toward Robert. "Does this give you the answer you seek?"

Chapter 15

Hazy dreams clouded his mind and he tried to claw his way to the light peering through at the end of the tunnel. The last few days had melded one moment to the next, time passing as quickly as a summer breeze. How long had he been asleep? Catherine's face was always there, before him though a bit shrouded as he drifted in and out of consciousness. "Catherine?" he whispered softly.

"No, my son, 'tis not Catherine," Mother said softly as she wiped his brow with one hand and gripped his hands with the other. "She is not here."

"Wh--where is she?"

Mother said nothing and sighed the way she always did when there was news she did not want to tell him. "I do not know, my son."

"She went back to Scotland," he said in a hoarse whisper, his soul breaking apart. "How long ago did she leave?"

"Less than half a day," was her reply as she continued to sponge him off.

Alexander said nothing as he lay there, his heart shattering to pieces. So Catherine had been a deceptive little tart all along, making him think she cared for him and would do anything for him.

Part of him wanted to weep while the other part of him felt the uncontrollable fire of rage despite the wound in his side. That was nothing compared to the wound in his heart. "Leave me, Mother. I wish to be alone."

"No, Alexander. You are still too ill to be alone."

"I SAID LEAVE ME!" he shouted in a low menacing tone.

"How dare you speak to me in this fashion! You may be a grown man, Alexander but you are still my son no matter how old you get."

The sting of her slap across his cheek told him that he had pushed his mother to her limit. "Forgive me, Mother. I should not have spoken to you...."

Mother leaned her forehead against his, her hot tears falling on his face. "'Tis I who should be forgiven, Alexander. I would rather cut off my right hand than to strike you like that."

"All is forgiven, Mother. I would like to be alone in my grief."

"But Alexander...."

"Your mother knows what is best for you, Alexander," cooed a soft female voice from the doorway.

He looked up to see Catherine standing there, dressed in a plain, crimson gown, the neckline cut low to expose her abundant breasts. Her warm smile was wide, her

creamy hands clasped together in front of her.

Mother cast a glance to Catherine, her own lips spreading in a gentle smile. "I see my relief is here so I must attend to your father. He must be hungry."

With that, Mother left the room, her green eyes full of mirth. Apparently, Mother had played some part of Catherine's plan. What that role was, he was not sure.

Alexander held his trembling hand out to Catherine. "I thought you had left me."

She glided toward the bed, holding her hands out to him. "I did but it was only for a short while."

"Where did you go?"

Catherine slid onto the bed next to him and drew him into the circle of her soft arms, his head in the crook. "I did something today which I hope you are very proud of."

His fevered brows knitted together. "What do you mean?"

Catherine wiped the traces of tears from her eyes. "I turned over my crown to Robert the Bruce, making him King Robert I of Scotland. I am no longer its Queen."

Alexander was stunned, his heart racing. "Why?"

Her soft fingers brushed against his warm temple, making his skin tingle.

"Because there is nothing more I want to be than your Duchess. Scotland holds no magic for me, as it once did. The only thing that holds enchantment is Kent and being with you."

Catherine's confession made his heart soar to the greatest of heights. She loved him so much that she gave up her own crown and country just to be his wife. "I love you, Catherine." His own eyes brimmed with emotion but he held the tears back. It would not be seemly for him to cry.

"I love you too, Alexander, and have for a long time though I was a stubborn fool refusing to realize it," she announced as she scooted a little further down on the bed. "I have one other surprise for you, Alexander."

His brow lifted again. Two surprises in one day? What could top her first great gift? "What is that?"

Without saying a word, Catherine captured his hand and guided it down to her belly. "Your surprise is in there."

Alexander blinked hard as he stared at her belly, hardly believing his ears. "Are you certain?" His heart pounded with a new ferocity, threatening to burst out of his chest at any moment.

"Aye, I am. The child will arrive sometime in the spring," she exclaimed, her voice rising as her fingers caressed his cheek. "Are you pleased?"

A grin erupted. "You do not know how happy you have made me, Catherine. When I think back to the moment I captured you, I had no idea that my salvation would lay in the arms of a Scottish woman."

"Nor did I have any idea my salvation would lay in the arms of a vicious warlord who has since become tame."

He laughed lightly. "If you do not mind, let me show you what it is like to be this

warlord's woman."

Epilogue

"Is she not beautiful?" Alexander exclaimed as he held the tiny bundle in his arms.

"Aye, that she is, my love, though I dare say she takes after you," Catherine jested as she watched her husband hold their daughter.

Alexander cast her a hard look, his brow rising. "How so?"

"She can be very demanding, especially if she is not fed on time," Catherine offered with a smile. "She is also very loud."

"As her mother can be at times," he mocked as he caressed the chestnut colored hair on her head. "Have you decided a name for her, Catherine?"

She laid down her sewing and stared hard at Alexander. For the last week, they had discussed many names and had settled on none. Why was this so difficult? "Not yet, my dear."

Alexander's mouth spread into a wide smile as he rocked the baby back and forth. "I have a name if you would be agreeable."

"What is that?"

"Margaret Mathilda."

Catherine pondered on that name for a moment. "Why that name?"

"Margaret for my aunt Margaret who stopped you at the abbey that night you ran away. Mathilda is for my grandmother who did not live to see her great granddaughter."

Catherine sat back in her chair, her hands tenting themselves over her newly flat belly. "That sounds like a fine name to me, Alexander," she announced as she rose from her chair and closed the distance between them. "When she grows old enough, we will tell her where her name came from."

Alexander placed a tender kiss on her lips. "Much thanks for giving me something to live for, my love."

The End