

TRACY L. RANSON



THE  
CONQUEROR

# The Conqueror

By Tracy L. Ranson

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## Dedication

To all the troops fighting in Iraq. May you all come home safely.

## Chapter 1

Black shadows fell across the land as he neared the ridge, inky fingers bathing the world in a dull glow. Tall grasses, emerald colored in the daylight, waved in the breeze with a silvery pall over their tips.

Kieran of Stratford halted his horse on the ridge, the swish of his men moving through the brush behind him the only sound. Fury stormed through his veins. How could his brother do this to him?

He laid hand against his chest, over where he had hidden the mysterious two-year-old message in his hauberk. According to it, everything he had owned was gone. His land, his money, and people. Worst of all was his forgotten fiancée. Poor Odette. He had left her in the hands of his brother who took her life without any form of regard. The letter stated that she died in childbirth, but he knew better. He had witnessed many of Hugh's tirades on hapless servants, always managing to stop it before it went too far. This time he could not.

Regret mingled with anger, making for a confusing mix of emotion. He should have stayed and found her the husband she deserved instead of taking her for himself. They were not meant to be. Constance was the only woman who fired his blood and made his heart sing. Once this entire situation was resolved, he would keep his promise to her father as well as to himself.

Kieran's hand slipped to the gilded handle of his sword. He gripped tightly. By all that was holy, he would avenge Odette's death no matter how long it took and protect Constance from harm. He owed them both that much.

His hold tightened. He had left Odette to fight alongside King Richard, fulfilling his duty as a loyal subject to the king. She protested, begging him to stay. Perhaps when Hugh learned of his impending departure, he began to pressure Odette....

He shook his head. No, he could not think of the possibilities. To do so was to encourage madness. The best course of action for him was to avenge her death as if she had been his wife.

Kieran looked up, narrowing his eyes. In the distance, he caught the glow of many torches. So, Hugh had heard of his return. Good. It would make his retribution all that more sweet.

\* \* \* \*

He moved his men through the lush, open meadow, leading the way. On one side lay the dark mountains with their mysterious tops shrouded in a ghostly mist. Darkened vegetation lay at the base, reflecting quietly in the mirror like a lake. Normally, he would have found this enticing, but it only irritated him now. This all belonged to him, not Hugh!

Sounds of the sea crashing against the rocks echoed through the air, mingling with the salty tang in the air. Memories of his childhood flooded his mind, beautiful thoughts that reminded him of his mother and father in much happier times. Those images, along with ones of Constance, kept him alive in the Holy Land. Hugh was not going to rip those from him.

Brilliant reams of pale moonlight showered down on the earth, adding to the eerie ambiance. Among this wondrous beauty lay his castle. Polished stones, quarried from all over England, gleams with a dull gray shine. Built in a 'H' shape, high curtain walls protected the castle. Battlements glared down at him, as if to dare him to try and breach the wall. Over them, Kieran heard hisses and bubbles as cauldrons boiled with pitch, ready for throwing on any hapless victims as they tried to penetrate the fortress.

He halted, staring at the family banner. The rampant lion emblazoned cloth flew high above the slate roof of the drum tower, proud and strong. His lips pulled into a sneer as the rage shot through him, harder than before.

His gaze flicked to the closed drawbridge as the movement on the battlements increased. Torches migrated from area to area, indicating that they were more than ready for him.

“Open up for the Baron of Stratford!” he shouted to the gatehouse. Nothing greeted him but silence.

“Open up, I say!”

An elderly head poked out, staring at him. “I cannot, milord under the pain of death.”

Before he could say more, a wraith of a man appeared on the battlements. Swathed in sallow wool, the figure moved closer to the edge. Straggly light brown hair framed the gaunt face, making the identity unmistakable. It was Hugh.

“Open up the drawbridge, Hugh! I have returned from the Holy Land....”

Hugh held up a skeletal hand, cutting off his words. “Be gone with you. I have no business with the dead.”

Kieran felt the heat of his anger rise in his cheeks as he fought to control his emotions. “I am not dead, brother and have returned to claim what is mine.”

Evil laughter echoed through Hugh’s thin lips. “What is yours?” he laughed harder. “What is yours? If was so precious to you, why did you choose to leave it?”

“It was my solemn duty as a knight...,” he shouted to Hugh.

“Enough of your lies, Kieran. You love nothing but yourself and glory. If you had not, then your precious Odette would still be alive and not cold in her grave with our child by her side.”

Kieran felt his heart shatter despite the anger that filled it. So, what the letter said was true! He had let poor Odette fend for herself against the monster that was his brother. She was so small and frail, unable to really take care of herself. He shook his head. No, he would not allow his feelings of regret to enter now. Once he had Stratford back, he would make sure Hugh paid dearly for what he did. “I will avenge her death, Hugh. Make no mistake. What things are righted again, you will know what real pain means.”

Hugh’s unearthly mirth echoed through the stillness. “When things are righted? Ha! They are the way they should be,” Hugh said, crossing his spindly arms over his chest. “I should have been Baron all along since I was the eldest but no, Father went and designated you as his heir. Well, no more. As far as I am concerned, dear brother, you are no longer alive.”

“You will live to regret those words!” he shouted up to his petulant brother.

“We shall see who lives to regret, Kieran. After all, it was not I that left my fiancée to sit and pine in England while I fought for power and glory.”

Pain stabbed at him again. No. Now was not the right time. “Father did not choose you because this is how you would have ruled Stratford. He knew that I would be fair and just!”

Hugh leaned against the battlements, his hands gripping the stone. >From where Kieran sat, he could see the thin face twist into a hideous grimace. “Fair and just? I think not. Now be gone with you,” he shouted, moving his hand in a dismissive wave, “or else I will have all of you killed.”

Kieran’s gaze flicked the thick curtain walls of the castle, mentally calculating Hugh’s strength. He counted more than three hundred, far more than he possessed.

“Do you think we can best them, milord?” questioned the soldier to his left.

“No,” he answered quietly, his stare still on the forces nestled within the battlements. “We do not have enough by half and I refuse to endanger you all.” He looked up. “So be it, Hugh! I will leave for now but rest assured I will return!”

“Oh, I am counting the moments, dear brother!” Hugh taunted as he gestured to the archers to point their arrows downward. “Are you going to leave quietly or shall I have my men make you leave another way?”

## Chapter 2

Night fell all around them, not lending kindness or light to their task. Dark, silvery clouds drifted over the pale moon, harboring the precious light. Everything around them radiated a ghostly gray with nothing moving as the wind refused to blow. Deep, earthy smells of burning wood filled the air, indicating they were within a short distance of their destination. Through the dark thicket of trees, an edifice, as large as Stratford itself blanked out the dense forest behind it. Kieran knew it to be the Abbey of St. Stephen because there was no mistaking the path woven through the grove. He had spent too much time on it as a boy.

Above them, the moon broke free from the constraint of silver clouds, bathing the world in a wonderfully pale glow. The abbey loomed before them, pallid and white. A wall, perhaps taller than a man, surrounded the fortress with a wrought iron gate in the front. The Church constructed it to house only two hundred monks, it housed much more than that. Candles glistened in the windows, indicating vespers rose at the twilight hour.

A voice echoed from Kieran’s right. “Why have we come here, milord?”

Kieran pointed to the impregnable fortress with a gloved finger, his heart pounding in anxiety. “We are in need of shelter, man, and I know we can receive that here.” His eyes darted around the monastery

ground, searching for any signs of life. There were none.

“What is this place?” asked the man nearest his elbow.

Kieran’s horse bucked under him slightly, his saddle creaking slightly. He settled the anxious beast with a slight nudge on the neck. “The Abbey of St. Stephen. My old tutor, Father Cesare, is the abbot here. I know he will be more than happy to afford us food and shelter.”

Father Cesare.

He had not seen the ancient priest since he was a young man. Even then, the monk seemed older than he was. How would the priest react to his return?

Kieran drew a deep breath, urging his horse forward, his heart in his throat. Would the Church afford him an army to take what belonged to him already? It was very rare the Church lent their army out, even to those who had fought valiantly for her. If nothing else, he will shelter and feed us, he thought silently.

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Father Cesare knelt before the altar, his nostrils filling with the scent of the incense, woodsy and earth toned. He had felt most comfortable here, communing with God in his own solitude.

He looked up. The knave, filled with precious relics such as a bone from St. Andrew and the hair of St. Agnes as well as a bit of Joseph of Aramathea’s robe, gave the aura of contented calm. Candles, pale yellow in color, stood strong in their scones and gave off such an ethereal luminescence. Strong Italian marble that composed the altar, dark and mysterious, stood before him covered in a white cloth. His chalice, centered in the middle, remained covered with its customary cloth. He bowed his head. This was the only place he truly felt safe.

Dark oak, weathered with age, constructed the pews, adding to the safety and security of the chapel. This place as almost totally impregnable if it had not been for the many windows that welcomed God’s light in.

Father Cesare let out a long sigh. He could not concentrate on his prayers than he could anything else. The only thing on his mind was his favorite pupil.

Kieran of Stratford.

Kieran had been the brightest among those he taught, albeit Kieran was the most ferine of them all. Despite his wild ways, Kieran still held a special regard in his heart. The last he heard, Kieran fought at the side of King Richard in the Holy Land. Every night since he had heard the news, he offered up a special prayer for Kieran's safety. Perhaps in the Lord's wisdom, He would find the way to bring Kieran home unharmed. He smiled. Why did he think of Kieran now after all this time? Perhaps you wish him the very best, he told himself. He is like a son to you. Father Cesare leaned back on his black wool clad haunches. Aye it was true. Kieran was like his son. Still, it would be nice to have him back in England....

Splashes of brown cut into his line of vision, breaking the aura of his thoughts. He turned sharply to see a young novice running up the center aisle. What was wrong with that boy?

With slippery sandals on his feet, the boy slid most of the way up genuflecting before the altar. The novice knelt next to him, his head bowed while his chest heaved.

Father Cesare shot the boy a disapproving look. "What is the meaning of this? You do not desecrate this vestibule with your impudence!" His fingers itched to slap sense into the boy but his better sense took hold. He never slapped a novice before and he was not about to start now.

"Father, there is a man here to see you," gasped the young man. His slender hand went to his nose where fluid ran quickly. Father Cesare grimaced. He hated when they refused to use kerchiefs.

He drew a deep breath and resumed his kneeling position, focusing his attention on a statue of the Virgin Mary. "Tell them to go away for I am in the middle of prayer and do not wish to be disturbed." His fingers resumed their work on the ring of rosary beads between his pudgy fingers while his lips moved in fervent prayer. He did not need this interruption. Enough distraction filled his head.

"Father, 'tis Lord Kieran of Stratford here to see you."

That name sent shivers of excitement through his ancient spine, causing him to sit back.

Kieran!

Kieran was home by God's good graces! Ah, his fervent prayers had gone unheeded after all! His trembling fingers dropped wooden beads to the floor where the thin chain parted. Solid balls of rosewood scattered over the spacious chapel. Many of them disappeared into the crevices never to be seen again. "Are you sure?"

The novice nodded his golden head, sweat rolling down the youthful face. "Aye, Father. He is waiting at the main gate."



Father Cesare felt his body swoon slightly, his heart rejoicing.

Kieran was home!

Thank you, Lord, for Kieran's safe return! He prayed silently, his fingers clicking nervously.

The novice steadied him. "Are you all right, Father?"

His hands clapped together with all the glee of a child with a new toy. "Yes, yes! Now tell me what he said!"

"All that Milord said was that he needed to see you and you only for there is an urgent matter at hand."

He sat his large flanks while cries of rejoice coursed throughout his body. Oh, my dear boy, how I have missed you and your antics, he thought amusedly. A smile crossed his face before he remembered the novice next to him. The grin quickly disappeared. He always kept their emotions under control.

Father Cesare cleared his throat then turned to his newest pupil. "Show the Baron to my chamber and tell him I will join him in a few minutes. I must finish my vespers." He returned to his former position, continuing with his prayers in spite of the loss of his beads. The novice bowed leaving him to his thoughts.

When the sound of the footsteps died away, his heart began to pound even harder. Every night his prayer for Kieran went straight to God with his only wish that his best and brightest student to survive the necessary horror of the Crusade. Through divine power, God granted his wish. Despite the glee, he felt a little remorseful. Odette was gone, having died two years ago. How was Kieran going to deal with that as well as Hugh taking everything he owned?

Tears filmed his eyes. He had given Odette as well as her child the Last Rites, noting quietly the bruises around her face. She did not die naturally, of that he was sure. He became even more sure when Hugh cut off the allotted money after her death. To make things even worse, he had heard stories of torture and killing at Hugh's hands as well as his soldiers running amok all over the countryside, raping and pillaging. Since that time, he had prayed fervently for Kieran's return so that a sense of order and decency would return to Stratford.

Now Kieran was back.

Thank you, My Lord, for our deliverance, he prayed, for without him, Stratford is headed for much darker days. For moment he bent his balding head in prayer, stout hands clasped together.

With all his prayers in place, Father Cesare rose and crossed himself then genuflected before the altar.

Odd silence seemed to thicken around him though the news of the day lightened his heart. I will feel better once I have seen him, he thought. Father Cesare hurried to his chamber. There was no time to waste.

\* \* \* \*

Father Cesare entered his sparse chamber expecting the boy he had tutored many years before.

That was not to be. In the place of the boy stood a man.

Kieran loomed over him, taller than most men with a heavily muscled body, a silent testimony to his rigorous knight's training. Silver chain mail strained as it wrapped his thick arms, indicating he had grown much. Over his armor, Kieran wore the cross-emblazoned tunic of the Crusade. Dark colored curls streamed over his shoulders, just as unruly as they were when he was a rebellious youth.

"Kieran," he stammered as he blinked hard, noting there were no blemishes or scars from the war. "Can this really be?"

Kieran nodded, his face a solemn mask. "Aye, that is its, Father. I am alive and well."

He rushed over, touching Kieran on the arm as if to confirm that the boy was no figment of his imagination. "But why are you here? Should you not be on the road to Stratford?"

Anger flashed through Kieran's burnished cheeks. "Hugh has taken everything," he stated through gritted teeth, "including Odette. I have come here seeking your aid."

He was genuinely confused. "Aid for what?"

"To get Stratford back."

An eternity seemed to click by before Father Cesare answered. "How am I to help you, Kieran?"

He felt the frustration grow, thrumming through his limbs like a wildfire. "You must beseech the Pope for the use of the Church's army." That was the only answer at this point. After all, he had fought for her in the Holy Land.

Father Cesare moved with a kind of graceless ease behind the weathered table, seating his bulk behind it. He stared at his pudgy hands then looked up with regret crossing his face in reams. "Ask me anything else but this I cannot do."

His anger was almost beyond his control. “Why not?”

“Because Hugh is not a direct threat to the Church itself. If he were, then I would ask his Holiness but since this is a personal matter, I cannot,” Father Cesare answered in an almost too calm tone.

Kieran stalked around the room, his fury mounting. “Do you mean to tell me that all the blood I have shed for the Church has meant nothing? Have my sacrifices purchased nothing?” His shouts rebounded from the walls and flowed out to the hallway where a small echo bubbled from the stairwell as he pounded his fist against the table. How dare the Church deny him this? Odette was dead because of their quest so that was the least they could do!

Father Cesare’s old eyes narrowed, the creases around them deepening. “Lower your voice, Kieran and remember to whom you are talking.”

“Nay, I will not keep my voice down! I have sacrificed....”

“And it will not go unnoticed,” Father Cesare replied in a mounting tone, cutting off his words.

“Perhaps there is another way around this.”

Finally, the good priest was making sense. “Ah, I knew you would agree....”

“I never said I agreed to write to the Pope,” Father Cesare stated as he studied his meaty hands again.

What was going on? Why was his old mentor acting so strangely? “First you talk of not helping me one moment then helping me the next! Please make up your mind and decide which you will do!” This was enough to make his head swim in confusion.

Father Cesare leaned back. “You are so blind, Kieran and do not have the good sense to know it.”

Kieran slumped into the chair across from the priest. Loud groans emanated from the chair as he sat down. He cared not. The priest calling him blind was something utterly foreign to him. “What are you saying, priest?” His brow lifted. What was the man up to?

“There is someone whose army is more vast than the Church’s and is much closer than you think.”

Kieran leaned back as the realization of what Father Cesare said came through. He was speaking of Constance. He relaxed his head back, casting his gaze to the ceiling. She was the sweet essence of his dreams, long before he made the promise to the Duke of Ravenwood. He would not count how many days he awoke bathed in sweat and aroused after dreaming of her arms....

His head snapped up. He had thought of this before but pushed the notion out of his head. She would have assumed he was doing it all for her army and nothing else. He thought perhaps he would have

time to court her properly but without the help of the Church, that would be impossible. “You speak of Constance, do you not?” Father Cesare’s head nodded. “I want her to help me but with our past, more than likely she will laugh at me.”

“Because of your childhood?”

“Aye,” he said solemnly, glaring down at the holy man. “I made a promise to her father to marry her and I will but she will have to come to me willingly or not at all.”

“You saw the Duke?”

“Aye, that I did. I held him as he was dying and he made me promise to take care of Constance and marry her,” he stated, pacing uneasily around the room. “I have dreamed of her so many nights in the Holy Land. Her image was the first thing I saw in the morning and the last thing before I went to sleep.” His fists bunched at his sides. “I want her as my bride, Father. Not for her army or for Ravenwood or whatever else she can give me. I just want her.” He sighed heavily. The last time he had seen Constance was at the top of her stairs after the death of her hawk. He had wanted to kiss her at that moment but what did he do instead? He taunted her mercilessly about her pet and her weight. Closing his eyes, he could still remember that pain in her beautiful green eyes, a memory that he would carry with him the rest of his life.

Father Cesare’s eyes widened. “I see,” he said slowly, “so I see you are finally admitting that you are intrigued with her.”

Kieran tilted his head in a slight nod. “More than that. I am in love with her.”

Father’s eyes narrowed as the elderly gaze swept over his face. “I can see you are sincere about this, Kieran. I do not want her hurt in anyway....”

“She will not be,” he said patting the hilt of his sword protectively. “Anyone who does will find a sword through his gullet.” Anger shot through his veins at the thought of another man touching Constance. That would simply not happen. She belonged to him and always had. Nothing had changed about that.

“Good. Good. I am glad to see you are so strong about this.”

“I am determined that nothing will stand in the way of my marriage to Constance.”

Father’s expression dropped a little. “You have not seen her in many years, have you?”

“No.”

“Are you still willing to marry her despite what she looks like?”

He read the solemnity of the good priest’s face, but he was undaunted. He was not going to deny himself again. “Of course, Father. It does not matter what she looks like. It is her heart that I am concerned with, not her appearance.”

The older man’s thick lips spread into a knowing smile. “I am glad to know this before I help you.”

“You are going to help me?”

Father nodded his pink, balding head. “Without a doubt, my son. From the moment I saw your papers where you had scrawled ‘Constance, Baroness of Stratford’ over and over, I knew that you would someday claim her hand.”

“I thought I had hidden those from you,” Kieran mused, “but apparently that nose of yours managed to ferret them out.”

“You never hid anything well, Kieran,” he leaned forward, his face a composed mask of seriousness. “I knew from that moment on, you would be the husband for Constance despite your treatment of her.”

“Deep down inside, I always loved her but was too embarrassed to show it. Now that I am a grown man, I am proud to have her as a wife, no matter how she has changed.”

“Good,” said Father Cesare as he rose stiffly from the chair amidst the popping and creaking of his joints. “I will go and see about the evening meal but before I go, I have one question for you.”

“What is that?”

Father Cesare stared up at him with liquid brown eyes full of question. “There are two things that need conquering.”

His black brow rose. “Such as?”

“Stratford and Constance’s heart. Tell me, which one will you acquire first?”

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Kieran read and reread the letter with scrutinizing eyes. Every word seemed to convey his feelings with perfect ease, soft and gentle. His heart thumped uneasily in his chest. Would Constance read this letter and respond in the way he hoped or perhaps relegate the parchment in the fire unread? Nay, she must

not for his very life depended on it as well as the peasants who lived on his land. Somehow he must make her understand the gravity of the situation because he was not about to let her down as he had done Odette.

His hand ran through his wild hair with a frustrated swipe, allowing the unruly tendrils to fall back into the same position. Glancing over the parchment once more, an idea struck. Should he appeal to her compassion, bringing up her tending of peasants? Nay, he thought mildly, I must appeal to her now before it's too late. Time was running out.

He handed the parchment to Father Cesare with exuberant fingers. "Please look over this for me Father and tell me if the message is satisfactory." This was the eighth revision he had written. The seven previous parchments echoed his bullishness from childhood. He hoped this one did not ring with the same mentality.

Father Cesare's ancient eyes scanned the parchment, searching for imperfections in diction and tone. The old man found none. Kieran smiled broadly. That was one lesson that Father Cesare had made sure he knew. Father thrust the parchment in his direction and he accepted the paper from the priest's withered fingers.

Father Cesare beamed. "'Tis well written, Kieran. I see you have remembered your lessons. The script is a little sloppy but with a few lessons...."

He chuckled slightly, cutting off Father Cesare's words. "I remember your instructions, Father and I usually ended up with reddened skin on the backs of my hands so I think not. May I have a cube of wax so that I might seal it?"

Father Cesare handed him the bright red brick of tallow. He held it over the flame, watching the orange-yellow flame lick up the cube. The wax turned a liquid red, dripping over the flame to signal its readiness.

Just as he was about to remove his signet ring for embossing, the older man's hand clamped onto his meaty forearm and offered the Church's sign. "Here, use my ring. She will be less likely to consign anything to the flames if it has my seal on it."

With a smile, Kieran took it from the priest's pudgy fingers and embossed the wax. The sticky substance bubbled around the ring, forming a hardened insignia. He grinned like a contented cat after a bowl of milk. Constance would dare not destroy anything with the Church stamp.

He turned to his former teacher, the corners of his lips spreading wide. "Do you think she will grant me

the audience I seek or merely laugh at the prospect?" His heart banged in his throat. The thought of Constance's touch on the same paper as him fired his blood. Was her touch as soft as he remembered or had it grown rough over the years? I hope so, he told himself, for I will touch her until the end of time.

A roughened hand, accustomed to prayer and hard work, clamped down hard on his armored shoulder, rattling the shoulder plates slightly. "That I do not know, my son but I think given time, her heart will soften towards you." There was certain sincerity in the older man's voice, almost reassuring. For a moment, Kieran believed the man's words.

He leapt from his place and clapped the old priest heartily on the back. "Is there someone you trust to take this to her? I do not want this task jeopardized by incompetence." This was an important mission. His very existence depended on Constance's reception of this message. If anyone thwarted this task, they would answer to him in the most unpleasant manner.

Father nodded. "Aye, I have several young novices that I think could accomplish it quite well. Sit down and I will have a meal brought to you while the novice is on his way. We can talk then and recount times past."

The thought of food made his belly rumbled loudly. "That is wonderful, Father. I am extremely hungry and those apple tarts Father Marcus used to make for me when I was child sound most pleasant. Is he still baking?" Apple tarts. Many times as a child, he would sneak into the kitchen and steal the tarts as they cooled on the sills of the open windows. Father Marcus used to catch him almost every single time and whipped him for it. Those tarts were so good that the punishment was almost worth it. His lips twitched into a grin. He truly missed that part of his childhood.

Father Cesare joined in his mirth, the lines around his sparkling doe colored eyes crinkling. "Aye, he is, my son so I will ask him to make extra for you as well as your men. Now, Kieran, I must ask you something before I go any further."

His brow furrowed. "What is that, Father?"

Concern filled the smoky eyes of the priest. "If Constance does agree to see you, what will you do to convince her that she must help you?"

Kieran wished the old man had not asked him that. He had mulled the question over in his mind many times during the conversation, each time coming up with another solution. One was to beg her mercy while another was to take over castle and marry her by force so that she was finally his. The latter was something he would never do though. He wanted Constance to come to his bed willingly or not at all.

Perhaps if I should seduce her, he thought briefly, maybe once I have her, she will be most agreeable.

Nay, that was not the way either. If Constance found out what he did, she would hate him for the rest of her life. That was something he could not live with either. Perhaps the best way was to plead for her mercy. "I will beg for her mercy and appeal to her sense of compassion. I know she will help me once I appeal to her sense of duty."

The look on Father Cesare's face deepened. "The reason I ask is that I know how important Stratford is to you. I wanted to be sure that you do not do something foolish like seduce her to get what you want," the elderly man warned.

He understood the man's feelings. Constance was a delicate flower needing protection from the cruelties of the world and she would be, with him as her self appointed protector. Even if the Duke of Ravenwood had not asked him to take care of her, he still would have. "Nay, Father, for I have more honor than that. I will just petition her and see what happens from there. If she decides not to help me, then I will then ask the Church once again but I do not think that will be necessary. I have a feeling that the Duchess of Ravenwood will see beyond my past foolishness and aid me," he stated confidently. Kieran sat down and leaned back in the chair, lacing his hands behind his head. All that mattered now was convincing Constance to give him what he so desperately needed. He stared at the man through half-closed eyes, awaiting more of the priest's wise words.

Father's hands disappeared into the cavernous, bell shaped sleeves of his earth toned habit. "Remember to keep your best intentions in mind, Kieran. That is how one can be easily led astray. Well, now we have that out of the way, I will send for the novice. After that, we eat."

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Constance worked hard at her sewing, thankfully only stabbing herself with the needle only a handful of times. Her former governess would not be pleased.

Stiff stabs of pain worked its way up her back and thrummed through her arms as well as her shoulders. She winced then stopped for moment and stretched, her eyes raising to the dying light.

Gleams of sweet sunshine beyond her window began to fade, plunging her room into dimmed light. Shadows grew long, the approaching depths of darkness chasing it away.



Where was Kieran now?

I hope he is far away from here with his tail between his legs, she thought viciously, for I have no time for his foolish lies. Suddenly she felt the needle move, piercing the skin of her finger, drawing her from the well of her thoughts. Why did she do that?

Her finger went to her mouth, to prevent the soiling of her gown. Lovely, she thought, if this continues, my fingers will be nothing but bleeding digits.

Just as she removed her finger, Mary glided through the open door with a message in between her brown fingers and a worried expression. "Milady, I am sorry to bother you but this man says he has a message for you from the Church and 'tis urgent that you issue a reply."

She gestured Mary over with a quick wave of her hand. "Bring the parchment over here, Mary so that I might read what Father Cesare wishes from me this time," she sighed. It seemed that the kindly priest needed something from her, be it money or cloth. She had never refused him.

Mary closed the distance between them with quick steps and handed her the roll. Her eyes flicked beyond Mary's shoulder, spying a brown robed young man hovering behind her. From the looks of him, he had just entered the Abbey of St. Stephen. He looked entirely too young to become a priest.

She turned her attention to the parchment and the seal closing it. It seemed sloppy and hastily made, less care given to it than the other times she had received a note. Father Cesare was usually more careful than this....

"Much thanks," she murmured, mulling over the contents. She sighed deeply, breaking open the seal with nervous fingers. Bits of red wax fell to the floor, scattering like dust in the wind. Her nimble fingers unrolled the paper, scanning the script trailing across the page

My dearest Constance,

I have returned from the Holy Land no worse for the wear. As you may know, my lands were confiscated along with my departed Odette. I know you are most compassionate and merciful so I ask for an audience with you. I have no army with which to wage war on my evil brother so I must find one that can do that for me. The only army large enough to do so is yours. What I ask from you, dearest Constance, is that you at least hear my request before you throw me from your gate. I am prepared to compensate you well if you aid me once I have gained all that is mine. Please forgive my beastliness as a child and do not begrudge me this one favor. Your return will be tenfold.

Until we meet again, Godspeed and many prayers to you, Constance.

Kieran, the true Baron of Stratford.

Kieran was back and at the Abbey! It was as she had feared!

Her heart banged in her throat at the thought and she sank a little in her chair, a thin sheet of moisture breaking out on her forehead. Trembling hands gripped the armrests with unequaled tension. She hoped he would find refuge elsewhere but he did not. I should have known Father Cesare would have taken him in, she thought maliciously.

What made him think she would help him after all these years?

She did not easily forget the brutality and pain of her childhood, at least. From the tone of his letter, Kieran did not remember.

Her memory drifted back to the episode on the stairs when she had told him that she would never give him help if he ever truly needed her. Now came the test to see if her words held true. Holding the parchment to her chest tightly, Constance closed her eyes as the words of her response formed in her mind.

As soon as they entered the field of her thought, Constance's eyes flew open and flicked over the young novice. "Are you to wait for a reply?"

The boy shifted his hands, hiding them in the bell-like sleeves of his habit. "Aye, Milady."

Constance tilted her head in a nod. "Mary, take this young man down to the dining hall and see that he is properly fed. As he is eating, I will gather a reply to take back with him." She rose from her tapestry and moved behind her desk. Mary bowed then left with the mildly handsome novice whose eyes danced in delight at the prospect of food.

Once she was seated, Constance stared down at the offensive parchment before her, its edges torn and unraveling.

How was she to reply to this?

Since that hated day on the stairs, she wanted revenge on Kieran any way possible. Now she had the opportunity, she was not sure she wanted it. Perhaps he is right, she pondered, and mayhap I should not hold this against him now.

Aye, this is so hard!

On one hand, she had the revenge she searched for yet on the other, a man from her past asked for her

aid now.

What was she to do?

She was no longer the pudgy, shrinking violet she was before. She was, after all, the Duchess of Ravenwood and had to set an example for her people. Then, as if in a forgotten dream, a plan formulated in her mind. Kieran always had an eye for beautiful women. If Constance convinced him that Mary was she, he would leave, never to return. That way, his confounded letters begging for reconsideration would not besiege her. Aye, that is what I will do, she vowed, for I will make it so that he never returns. With a smile on her face, she began to write.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran paced the floor of Father Cesare's chamber relentlessly. His boot heels banged a steady rhythm on the stones, echoing throughout the chamber.

What was Constance up to? Was she considering what he asked for?

He halted for a moment and closed his eyes to see her image. She sat behind a heavily ornate desk, working on a parchment. Hopefully, the answer would be the one he wanted. Her steady fingers moved deftly across the page, the words pouring from her fingertips. Aye, her answer is yes, he thought to himself, for she is truly a compassionate woman. Slowly the dream faded, his mind trying to hang onto any remnants of it. His image of Constance retreated quickly, much like the sea at low tide.

Kieran opened his eyes and picked up his pace, his heart hammering in his chest. How long was it going to take? That damned novice should have been here by now.

Gentle breezes wafted into the open window, caressing his broad, bare chest softly. Kieran halted in his tracks and turned to the open window. Dark blue fabric of sky greeted him, cloudless and perfect with the twinkling gems of stars. The pale orb of the moon glowed with an ethereal aura, bathing the world in a silvery gray. Trees shimmered with the dusky light, standing straight and tall like soldiers at attention. To his left resided the mountains with their tops shrouded in the mysterious mist that only rose in the night. With all this regal beauty before him, Kieran still thought of nothing but Constance.

He exhaled hard in an effort to control his emotions, leaning against the sill, resting his arms on it. Did she still have those dazzling green eyes that made him breathless when they were children? Did her

hair remain the golden color the way it had been when she was young? The thought of running his hands through those yards of pale strands....

Sharp, clear knocks at the door pierced the hazy cloud of dreams encircling his head, causing him to jolt unexpectedly. "Enter," he snarled.

Loud groans of metal scraping against metal split the air as the door opened to reveal another youthful novice on the other side. In his slender hands, he bore a tray heaped with food. "The abbot thought you might a little hungry after your journey here, milord. His instructions are to eat everything and leave nothing." The boy set the tray down on the small unsteady table in the corner of the room. Father Cesare has certainly not forgotten my appetite, Kieran smiled to himself as he moved toward the table.

Kieran seated himself before the luscious meal. Unfortunately, the table and chairs in his room were made for the much smaller men residing in this stone edifice. He pulled himself closer but only managed to scrape his knees on the splintered underside. Swearing softly, Kieran immediately regretted his words when he saw the novice wince. "Aye, that I am. Has any news arrived from the Duchess?"

The novice shook his dark head. "Nay, milord. Phillipe has not arrived as of yet," he answered as he removed various items from the tray, including a goblet of summer wine. The smell of the bountiful liquid assailed his nostrils, causing his stomach to clamor for the savory morsels. Among the tasty tidbits were slabs of spiced meat along with summer vegetables and sweet fruit. The much hungered for apple tarts swam in a small bowl with a light sauce. He stared at the feast with the eyes of a predator about to strike the prey.

He slipped a slice of the spiced meat in his mouth. "Inform me upon his arrival. I do not care what time of the day or night."

"Aye milord," the boy replied then bowed before him, carefully tucking his hands into his bell shapes sleeves. With that, he spun on his heel and left, abandoning Kieran to his own errant thoughts for company.

He dug into the large meal whole-heartedly, pushing his worries to the back of his mind. His stomach never had such good food in the last few years. In the Holy Land, the food was not to his liking. It was highly spiced and hard to eat. After a while he had merely given up on having real food again. Thankfully, he never had to experience the atrocities of the Holy Land again.

Little by little, the pile of food dwindled down, silencing his stomach. The only thing not quieted was his mind. And that remained totally on Constance and what her answer would be.

\* \* \* \*

The young novice, Albert, entered the silent chamber, holding his breath. His sandal covered feet shuffled softly across the polished stones so as not to wake the Baron abruptly. He was not sure what the Baron would do to him if he did.

Albert lit the candles furthest from the bed where he could hear soft snores that indicated that the Baron was in a deep sleep. Good. His movements were undetected.

Once the tallow glowed with a new life, Albert turned to observe the oddest scene. The cot the Baron slept on was much too short for someone of his stature so he had pulled a chair to the end of the bed to rest his feet on. Albert a smile behind his hand, laughing softly. How did the Baron manage to sleep like that?

He moved quietly toward the bed, his eyes drawn to the remnants of the food he had brought before. Apple cores piled high upon the tray along with bones and the skins of the other fruits. The full goblet was empty, lying upon its delicate side like a fallen soldier. For moment, he was hesitant about waking the Baron, but he had ordered to be awakened when the message from the Duchess had arrived.

He shook the Baron's naked shoulder gently, urging him from a deep sleep. "Milord, the message you have been waiting for has arrived." Before the he could understand what was happening, the Baron's arm went around his throat and he felt the distinct cold steel point of a sword at his throat.

The strong arm around his neck tightened, the cold sword point still poised to thrust at his throat. "State your business and leave me or I will kill you."

"Yo ... your ... message," he stammered, "... has ... arrived." His hands clawed frantically at the arm cutting off vital air to his lungs. Black haze started to cover his eyes. Was he going to die?

Those words pierced the cloud of sleep surrounding the Baron's head. The arm released and he thankfully fell to the floor where he twitched, gasping for air.

The Baron sat up quickly, running a hand through his wild hair. "Forgive me, boy," he apologized with genuine concern, "'Tis just that I do not like people awaking me. When did this message arrive?"

"Phillipe...just now," he gasped, rising from the floor once the air had returned to his body.

"Where is the message?" The Baron demanded of him.

He still struggled for breath but managed to pull the message from the sleeve of his cowl. With trembling fingers, he handed the sacred roll to the Baron.

Kieran leapt over to the burning candles, winding the sheet modestly around his naked body. His heart pounded. What would her answer be? Had she hardened her heart against him over the years?

He looked down. On the edge of the scroll was the wax seal of Ravenwood, the stag and raven clearly visible. Kieran drew a deep breath in order to calm his raging anticipation. There was only one way to find the answers to his questions.

With impatient fingers, he broke the seal, unrolling the paper with anxious fingers to read the words scribed across the page.

Lord Kieran,

I have read your message and have considered what you ask me to do. My decision is that I will grant you the audience that you seek but on one condition. The arrangement will be on my terms and my terms only. If you do not adhere to my conditions then there will be no meeting between us. I suppose you have been wondering if I have grown a woman's heart in these past years or if I have matured into a young woman. I assure you I have but I am not the foolish woman you think me to be. I only grant you this audience so that you may plead your case before me. If I decide to help you then I am anxious to see what I can expect in payment. As for our past, I have long since left that behind along with all my childhood dreams and toys. 'Twill have no bearing on my decision whether or not I will help you, I can assure you. I will be waiting to meet with you two nights hence from when you receive this message. I will send a guard to fetch you. Come unarmed with no other escort than my guard. If I find that you have the men you have brought with you from the Crusade at your side, you will be most assuredly turned away under threat of death if you ever try to return. Do not be late for I will be waiting to hear your case.

Constance, Duchess of Ravenwood

Kieran read the message several time more, letting the power of her words sink in. She had grown most shrewd in the years past. When she was a child, she would have done anything for him without another thought or at least he thought she would have. He knew of her secret feelings for him. His feelings for her were not secret, at least anymore. Perhaps he would have to play upon those emotions....

“Is there to be a reply, Milord?” inquired the anxiety ridden novice at his side, ripping him from his thought.

He shook his head. “Nay for the Duchess has agreed to see me.” His eyes scanned the message again, feeling the tingles of desire race through his veins. Ah, Constance touched this parchment, he thought bemusedly, and I will touch her soon.

His manhood reacted slightly and he was grateful he was covered. He most certainly did not want the novice to see him in such condition. Kieran turned his body away slightly to hide his emotion even better. “You may leave now, boy. I wish to be alone.” His fingers still clutched the parchment causing his blood to quicken.

“Would you like me to take the tray, milord?”

His lips pulled into a grateful smile. “Aye. Awaken me when dawn arrives. I wish to bathe in the spring running not far from here.”

The youth nodded. “Yes, milord.” The boy removed the remnants of the earlier feast, stacking it all neatly in a pile. Amazingly none of it fell. He gathered it in his hands and exited. Soft swishes of the boy’s sandals on the stones heralded his departure, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Kieran closed the door then laid back down into the bed, winding the sheet tighter around his body. He watched the shadows dance in the corners, created by the golden glow of the tapers hung neatly in their sconces. His mind drifted.

What was Constance doing now?

Was she in bed and did she dream of him?

He had most certainly dreamt of her. Constance’s image was the only one that helped him through the toughest battles of the war, giving him a reason to return. Thoughts of returning to England and marrying her had spurred him on no end. In truth, I owe my existence to her, he thought idly, for she kept me alive. Aye, she would make the finest wife a man could want.

Deep, heavy silence closed in like a heavy fur blanket as sleep came to claim his body once more. He did not want to give in but unfortunately, he had no choice.

His mind slipped back in the dream of before, imagining her soft fingers around the quill then the image changed. He began to wonder what her naked body would feel like in his arms, her naked flesh against his. If she does not agree to help me, then I shall have to be most persuasive, he thought to

himself. More images flooded his mind causing his body reacted quickly. With a smile upon his lips and exhaustion in his flesh, Kieran fell back into the depths of those dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Constance lay in the middle of her large bed, staring at the ornate ceiling and listening closely to the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

Why did Kieran have to come back and ask for her help?

Plenty of other people who would be willing to help him so why should he not go and ask them? He had been nothing but a mean bully to her during her childhood so why would he ask her help now knowing that she might not give it?

Weary sighs escaped her lips. Her mind had no answer.

Without warning, a new fear emerged. What would he do if she did not agree to help him? Would he ravish her then force her to marry him or hold her hostage until she gave in? Nay, he would do no such thing for there is honor in him, her mind told her.

Her brow furrowed in anger. If he was so honorable then why did he act so beastly to her as a child?

Then, like a forgotten memory, those words she spoke so long ago invaded her mind like an unwanted presence that refused to leave. If you ever come to me seeking aid, do not be surprised if I refuse you.

Constance drew a slender arm across her eyes in an effort to get the words to leave but they would not. She regretted those words the moment they escaped her lips because that must have been an open invitation for later.

What was she to do?

Was she to forget the way he treated her when they were children and lend him the army belonging to her out of the kindness of her heart?

Never! If he wanted the use of her army, then he must pay like anyone else. I will not fall to his charms again. I am no longer a child, she thought viciously, the time for retribution has come.

Constance turned over to her side in the hope the chaos in her mind would settle. It would not. 'Tis seemed sleep was one luxury she could not afford tonight.



Her eyes drew out the open window to observe the first vestiges of morning. Greedy pink fingers of dawn stretched out into the twilight sky, indicating the rising sun was vastly approaching. Blessed sleep was even further from her reach.

### Chapter 3

The greatly anticipated night of the meeting arrived. Kieran prowled his chamber restlessly, his heart beating out of control while the blood hammered at his temples. Steady sounds of his boot heels clanging against the stones of the floor pierced the uneasy air, causing knots of fear to creep into his belly.

What did Constance look like after all these years? Would she afford him the help he needed or would she simply turn a cold shoulder to him?

He smirked at the last thought. If she did turn him away, he had no one to blame but himself.

Silently, Kieran wished to take away all the pain he inflicted as a child. What he would not give to take it all away! Do you want to take away the pain because you are sorry or because you wish to use her army?

That question plagued his mind infrequently. Normally, he dismissed it. Now came the time to answer it.

I want to take it away because I love her. Perhaps I always have, he answered the voice.

The use of her forces was secondary to what he really wanted. I care not what she looks like, he thought proudly, for I want her as my wife and no other.

Moments ticked by as his anxiety grew, with no sign of the escort. Surely, they would have told him the moment the man arrived. He stalked to the window, casting his gaze onto the darkened countryside and watching with narrowed eyes. Everything seemed ethereal, bathed in the silvery pall of the moon as it emerged from the blanket of gray clouds. Gentle breezes wafted through, peppered with the scent of wildflowers and honey. Kieran smiled. Even as children, Constance always smelled sweet, much

like this natural fragrance. Perhaps she still did.

Kieran looked up as a bit of bright shimmer caught his attention. In the distance, he noticed a rider bolting toward the abbey. The shine was from a sword sheath as it pounded against the bare flanks of a horse. Could it be the heralded escort sent for him?

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat in the ornate chair next to the roaring fireplace wrapped in several layers of bedcovers in an effort to stave off the cold chills that invaded his body. Holding a goblet to his lips, Hugh's mind filled with vicious thoughts. Why was he the sickly one instead of Kieran? Why did Kieran deserve to be normal and not him?

He should be the one who is healthy instead of Kieran. Without a doubt, he was the strong one. Why he could....

Soft, slender fingers on the nape of his neck drew him from the hazy cloud of daydreams. "Are you warm enough, milord?" cooed the sweet female voice behind him, her silky fingers trailing down his skeletal face.

He threw the woman's hand from his body. "Nay for this cold seems to take the heat from my body and disperse it to where God only knows." Why could she just not go away and let him be?

"I can think of a way that will warm you up, milord," Margaret purred low into the confines of his ear, "It would be a most pleasant way. Perhaps in the way you like." She came to stand before him then knelt at his side, her coarse gown spilling out around her. Her dark head rested on his bony hand while her eyes gazed at him with longing.

Hugh took another deep drink of his wine, his head feeling lighter and lighter with each sip. "Go away. I want you not. I have told you that when I want you I will send for you."

"Please do not send me away, milord. I fear I am with child," Margaret confessed in a strained voice as she stroked the skeletal limb under her cheek softly.

He sat there for a moment and let her words sink in. So this one sought to trap him also like so many before her! Little does she know twill not work, he thought mildly to himself, raising his goblet to his thin lips. Now that he was a widower, he had his sights set on the Duchess of Ravenwood with her

large estate. She was young and easily manipulated by the right man. A smile curled the corners of his thin lips. He was that man.

Hugh turned his head toward her, the warmth in his face heating from his anger. "That is your mistake, woman. Pick any man from the village and twill be likely that he will be the brat's father, " he slurred as the spiced wine coursed through his veins, swimming the venomous pool of his mind. No matter what, his bed would always be open for Constance.

Margaret leapt from her position, standing before him with tears streaming down her face, her feral black eyes stamped with both hurt and shame. Midnight hued braids hung limply against the coarse, dark wool of her gown, making her appeal to him even less. Angry hands shook at her sides. "Why do you not want me? Is the reason that I am just a servant?" Her arms flailed about her in frustration, tearing at the tendrils of her hair.

His lips curled in a lazy fashion. This girl had no idea that he did not care. "Aye, 'tis true, Margaret. I have my eyes set on another. One that would be a far superior Baroness than you could ever hope to be." He saw the utter hurt carve deeper in her eyes but so what? She was nothing to him or 'his' brat that grew in her belly.

She raised her hand to strike him. "So that is it! I am good enough to share your bed but not your life!"

Hugh laughed deeply, glaring at her with poisonous eyes as he dared her to strike him. "Aye, you are finally right about something, Margaret. You are not good enough to be the Baroness of Stratford for there is only one woman who is."

Deep crimson flares of anger colored Margaret's pale cheeks, her body resonating with fury. "Who is this woman that is good enough to be the Baroness rather than me?"

Hugh tipped his goblet to her. "Why, Margaret, you should know. The only suitable woman is the Duchess of Ravenwood. She possesses attributes you obviously lack."

Margaret's shoulders stiffened as though he had struck her. "Why do you wish to marry her? 'Tis said she is to marry your brother, the real Baron of Stratford!"

He felt the insult hurled at him and sucked in a breath. How dare the impudent little wench say such a thing! Leaping from his chair and throwing the blankets to the side, Hugh gripped Margaret tightly by the upper shoulders, sending his goblet and its contents crashing on the stones. "What did you say?"

Her bottom lip quivered, indicating the rising fear. "'Tis rumored she will marry Milord Kieran in a month hence then he will bring her army here to recapture what you have stolen!"

That was all he needed to push him over the edge. His hand struck her full across the mouth. Blood flew from the corner, splattering all over his ivory colored blanket. Fright as well as anger flowed in her eyes, two of his favorite emotions. "Make no, mistake woman. I will marry the Duchess and there is nothing you can do about it."

Her eyes grew wide. Suddenly her demeanor changed, as though she miraculously found some hidden inner strength. Margaret's shoulders solidified, showing her newfound boldness. "Would you like me to tell everyone how your first wife 'fell' accidentally down the main stairs and how the bruises came to be on her body?"

Her words flowed over him like a tidal wave. It was something he did not expect. He knew he should have disposed of Margaret the moment she saw him push Odette down the stairs and viciously kick her as she lay dying on the floor. "You have more sense than that Margaret. Do you know what I would do to you if you decide to do what you threaten?"

Her body stiffened completely. "I am not afraid of you," she sniffed.

His snide smile turned into an evil smirk as he walked toward her with the stride of a cat pouncing on prey. She shrank slightly then lowered herself into a chair. He stood before her. "You should be afraid, Margaret, very afraid. If you decide to tell what you know, then I will rain a most unpleasant punishment upon you. Do you wish to find out what that punishment will be?" His hands wrapped around her throat, tightening little by little. Fear in those black eyes became more pronounced, exciting him beyond all reality.

"P... please ... let ... me ... go," she gasped, her hands clawing frantically at his bony hands.

"Will you give away my secret or will you be a good girl and keep your mouth shut?" Margaret nodded her head, her fingers trying to pry his hands away from her throat. With a loud bout of laughter, Hugh released her. "Good. I know you would see things my way," he snarled, pulling back so that he could stare into those obsidian pools. "Fetch me some more wine for my goblet is empty. Perhaps if you are very good, you may service me tonight."

Margaret jumped from the chair, rubbing her bruised throat. "Nay, fetch that vile liquid yourself! I service you no longer!" she whispered hoarsely, storming out of the room with a tear stained face.

Hugh watched her disappear and shrugged his shoulders. The woman knew her place in his life. Did she think she would be something more? The only room for her was in his bed on cold nights. Why did she think the threat of his child in her belly would force him to marry her? Nay, there is only one

woman who will have my child in her belly and that is Constance, he thought fiendishly.

The cold crept ever closer. Sinking back into his chair, Hugh drew the covers around him tighter.

Precious heat seeped from his bones, dispersing into the cold air of his chamber. He shivered slightly.

Would he never be warm again?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran stalked the length of the reception room, ignoring the heavy feel of his armor. It was but trifle compared to the weight on his mind. Dear God in heaven, since I have laid my life in danger for you, I beg You encourage her to be merciful in her decision, he prayed, I can not live without the girl.

He slumped into a nearby chair that groaned under his weight, his nervous fingers massaging his temple as they always did when he was frustrated. Oh why could he not be before Constance now?

Dull knocks from the door drew his attention away from his fears. "Enter if it is important," he snarled impatiently as he stared at the oak barrier. The sooner he was on his way, the better he would feel.

His stare remained centered on the door in the vain hope that it was the escort. The door opened. Loud metal trills ricocheted around the room, splitting the ominous silence. On the other side stood the young novice that usually brought his meals for him.

The novice bowed "Milord, your escort has arrived and wishes to get on his way. Oh, he brought this message along with him." The boy withdrew a parchment from his sleeve, quickly handing it to him.

Kieran ripped the message from the boy's hands and moved toward the tallow candles burning brightest. He unrolled the paper, letting his eyes consume the familiar script trailing across the page.

Lord Kieran,

The escort I have sent you does not tongue and therefore can not speak. His face is horribly burned so he wears a leather mask to protect the delicate skin. As for the cloak, his hair was lost also so if he does not remove the mask, please do not pry him to do so. He is a very vital part of my army but is very aware of his injuries. He will bring you here and guide you home once our meeting is over. If you must have answers to your questions, he will write them out for you as best he can. His body was burned also making it difficult for him to hold anything steady in his hands. Remember my conditions and I

will grant the audience that you seek.

Constance

Kieran read the note once more before tucking the fragile material inside of his hauberk where it would be safe. He smiled widely at the novice. "Thank you for bringing this to me, boy. Tell the escort I will be there in a few moments."

The novice swept into a low bow then left. Alone with his thoughts, Kieran stared blankly at the wall. Oh why did this have to be so hard! Never in his life had he been so nervous to meet with a woman, let alone one he had known since childhood. He drew in a deep breath to calm his jangled nerves.

In the quiet of the chamber, he walked over to the window. As he gazed up to the darkening night sky, Kieran prayed over the strong throbbing of his heart. Please God, let her wisdom shine through so that I regain what I have lost, he begged.

He drew a deep breath and turned to face the door. It was time to go down and meet the escort.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran descended the stairs to meet this mysterious escort, stopping halfway down, staring hard. This was his escort? Short of stature, the man was smaller and slighter than any other knight he had ever known. How could a man such as this become a soldier? Kieran chuckled softly to himself. Aye, he must be Celt, he thought idly as he continued his descent of the stairs.

He halted in front of the man and gave him a once over. Heavy wool covered the man's slim shoulders, a dark hood covering his head. His hands remained hidden with heavy leather gloves, his face shadowed with a strange leather mask. Why was this man still in Constance's service if he was so badly injured?

"Are you my escort?" He demanded of the knight with reverted impatience. Since the man could not verbally answer him, the knight merely nodded his head.

Kieran's arms crossed over his chest, his brows knitted with impatience as well as anxiety. "Then let us ride for I wish to see the Duchess as soon as possible." The blood in his temples pounded. Would she truly be all he thought?

The soldier nodded in agreement, sweeping his slim arm, gesturing for Kieran to walk ahead. He went to step past the maimed man when a slight odor caused him to stop. Faint traces of wild honeysuckle permeated the air, almost too subtle for him to detect. He drew in the sweet perfume. Where did it come from?

He stepped closer to the man and inhaled the air surrounding the knight's form. Aye, the aura around the man contained the scent. What fellow in his right mind would smell like a woman?

If he was a man, that is.

His lips curled into a smile at the thought. Suppose the man that stood next to him was a woman?

Constance perhaps? Nay, she would not be so bold as to do something of this nature, he told himself boldly. Still, the headiness was unmistakable. Pushing past the knight, Kieran's smile became broader as he stepped up his pace toward the open door.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran rode next to the silent equestrian warrior, his curiosity abounding as to who this strange knight was. How could a man survive having his tongue cut out and horrible burns over most of his body? Several times, he was tempted to start a conversation but he remembered the knight had no tongue with which to speak.

Bright beams of moonlight showered the earth, casting palls of silvery light, bathing the countryside in a soft white. Animals scampered about in search of food while the bay of the wolves could be heard above all else.

Silence swelled over them, broken only by the leaves and twigs crunching under the horses' hooves. Kieran hated the tranquillity. Too many questions abounded his mind about Constance. Unfortunately, this man could not answer any of them. Even if he had a tongue, he most probably was under strict instructions not to discuss anything. 'Twas just as well. When Constance saw him, he was going to make damn sure it would not be the last time she saw him.

\* \* \* \*

The small knight urged Kieran into the large foyer of Ravenwood Castle then disappeared through a door before he had a chance to say anything. Left alone in the foyer, Kieran's gaze darted about on the different objects decorating the high stone walls. He had remembered most of them from his childhood but some were recent. Heads of animals hung next to the many tapestries nestled in between the large windows extending from the very top to almost the center. Aye, this would be a most welcome home, Kieran thought idly as his head circled around.

Suddenly, a soft but husky voice split the hazy cloud of thought surrounding his head. "Lord Kieran. I see you have made the journey well. I see you are no more the worse for the wear. Tell me, were you injured?"

He whirled around, his body facing the direction of the voice, his gut twisting into a knot. It came from the top of the darkened stairs like a sweet melody. "Thank you for your concern, but let us discuss my injuries another time, Milady so that we can get down to the task at hand," he said in a low, composed voice, desperately trying to keep his anxiety at bay.

"Of course, Milord Kieran, of course. Now let me see. You ask to use my army to regain Stratford and all it holds from your brother. Am I correct?"

His heart thumped uneasily. "Aye," he gulped.

Weary sighs drifted down from the shadowy recesses of the stairs. "Very well then. Tell me what I can expect in repayment for my services." From the icy tone in her voice, she had grown most shrewd through the years. Perhaps I can put some warmth in it, he thought to himself.

"But you have not heard my case yet," he conjectured. Had she already made up her mind?

"I have heard more than I need to. Tell me what I might expect and then we shall discuss it further." Rings of cold indifference bled through her voice. Has she grown truly hardened over the years as well?

He stood there in the foyer with arms crossed over his chest, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the dark expanse at the top of the stairs.

Why did she hide herself in the shadows like that?

Come out so that I can confirm my dream of you, his mind wished. His gaze continued to search the shadows for any sign of her. There was none. Only chilly words floating out of the depths of darkness in response to his questions validated her existence.



“Why are you hiding yourself Constance? Come out into the light so I might see the face behind the voice,” he suggested in what he hoped sounded like a friendly tone. His heart beat an unsteady rhythm as he waited. The thought of seeing Constance for the first time in many years crossed his mind like a raging river. Then, as if in a dream, she emerged from her place among the shadows.

Kieran’s heart nearly halted in his chest. He did not expect her like this. Her once glorious golden hair hung in mud colored braids on either side of her head. The pale, rich creamy skin he remembered was now a nut-brown hue, as if she had lived her entire life outdoors. Her body had not changed. The claret imbued gown did nothing for her except giving her appearance of a large love apple. It makes no difference, he told himself, for what is on the inside has not changed. He swallowed hard in an effort to hide his shock, remembering the promise he had made to the Duke as the older man lay dying on the battlefield in the Holy Land. By all that was sacred, he would protect her until the end of time.

He brushed the surprised from his face and smiled broadly. “Now I can put the voice with the face. The years have been kind to you, Constance,” he confessed. He filled his voice with as much awe and respect as he could with the vain hope it would melt the ice cage around her heart. His anxious gaze flicked over her figure then returned to rest on her face.

She waved a dismissive hand. “Do not lie, Kieran. You treated me horribly when I was a child and now you come to me to ask for my help. What kind of a woman do you take me to be?” Her words challenged him from the top of the stairs. The independence he remembered exuded through her voice, strangely exciting him. Would she be as cold to him once she was in his arms and under his spell? Would she melt like the snow after the spring thaw?

He stepped forward and placed a daring foot at the bottom of the stairs. “A most beautiful and kind one, I assure you. I know that I was beastly to you when we were children, Constance, and I cannot change the past though I would if I could. You must remember I was an empty headed boy who knew nothing of life then. I was not the man I am now.”

For a moment he thought tears would track their way down her pudgy cheeks but the wall that held those rebellious tears stood strong and true. “That may be, Kieran but give me one good reason why I should lend you my army,” she demanded as her hands clasped together in front of her.

“Because you care for me,” he responded softly. His words echoed up the stairs to her. For a moment, he saw flickers of desire cross her face and his heart lightened. Was it possible that he had penetrated the icy wall surrounding her heart?

Fat hands flew to her hips, her body swaying with laughter. “I care for you! Bah! That idea is

preposterous, Kieran! I may have cared for you once but I care not for you now. If I lend you my army, I will be doing so for the compensation that I agree on.”

“Well, if you cared for me then you will help me now,” he murmured softly, pouring as much sensuality into his voice as was humanely possible.

She remained there as still as a statue, stiff and unaffected, her eyes giving him a cold stare. “The only thing I care for is the compensation. What shall it be?”

He stood there for a moment, calculating the cool, distant woman standing before him. So far, nothing he did seemed to make any difference to the ice maiden persona Constance had become. He had nothing to offer her in return, save his name.

Kieran drew a deep breath and rested his hand on his bent knee, gazing at her hard. “At this moment, I have nothing to offer you except the promise of compensation and my name. I will take your hand in marriage and make you richer with the combination of both our estates making you as land rich as the King.”

Her mouth became a taut line at his words, pursing at the corners. Nervously she moistened her lips, her eyebrows lifting in amazement. Could it be that he got through to her the gravity of the situation? “So if I marry you,” she recounted in a harsh voice, “I will become a richer woman than I am now. I must say that intrigues me but Lord Kieran, I am not a marrying woman. Do you have nothing else to offer me?”

What else did he have for her? Perhaps the promise of payment would dissuade her, he thought briefly. Alas, that would not do it either.

He stared at her for a moment. He was doomed before he even started. “I have nothing else to offer you except my name, Constance. Please understand that I need your help but I do not want you to think that I would marry you because of that. I want to marry you for yourself, not for what you can give me.”

Constance remained unmoving. “What are you trying to say, Kieran? That you love me? I think not! The only person you love in this foyer is yourself. There is no room in your heart to love anyone else.”

Kieran winced. He deserved that and anything else she had to dish out. “Please, Constance, I do love you and I want to take care of you. I have thought of nothing but you all those years in the Holy Land. Your image is what kept me alive and fighting so that I could get back to you.”

Her face pursed into a nasty scowl. “You just can not help yourself, Kieran. One lie after another spews from your mouth. It will not work this time. Come, I have grown weary of this conversation and I wish

to retire. Come back tomorrow night and you will have your answer.” Constance moved back into the safety of the shadows with her jaw tightening and her mouth curving in a frown. Her bulk slipped neatly into the darkness, away from his view.

Anger filled his body. “Why can you not give me an answer now, Constance?”

“Because my head throbs. I can not make any large decision such as yours without a bit of rest to think the decision through. Come again tomorrow night and you will have your answer.” Those words floated down to him, causing his ire to rise even more. Why did she not give him the answer he needed now?

He placed the other booted foot on the bottom of the stair, his hand resting on the balustrade. Dark, angry eyes remained locked on the gloom filling the hallway, fury rising from the depths of his soul. If she was not going to come to him, then he was going to her. “Why can you not tell me now!”

The sharp point of a sword slipped between the armor joints on his back. Kieran turned to find the offensive weapon clenched between the leather-clad hands of the maimed soldier. He snarled and returned his gaze turned to the duskiness at the top of the stairs. Should he attempt to run to Constance’s chamber and force her to hear his case again?

Before his mind could make an ardent decision, a keen sting in his back made him howl in pain. “Ouch! Poke me with your sword once more, knight and you will know what it feels like to have your neck sliced open.”

With hard reluctance, he stepped away from the stairs. He was in no mood kill anyone tonight, especially a soldier under Constance’s command. If there were a sure way to keep her from giving him the aid he sought, that would be it.

With his hands clenched to his sides, Kieran marched silently out into the starry night, mounting his horse with forceful aplomb. His head pounded with his frustration as fury coursed relentlessly throughout his body. Why could she not look past their childhood? He certainly had. Hell, he wanted to marry her even if he were not in this situation!

His escort ambled out of a small door on the side of the foyer and carefully locked it behind him. The soldier pushed the door slightly, assuring its security. Without further ceremony, the man moved to mount his horse. The hem of the escort’s cloak graced the ground as he walked, a deep rich fabric riding the wind of his stride. Quick steps comprised the man’s gait. Kieran watched the soldier’s actions, his mind still marveling on the small width and breadth of the man that brought him here. What

capacity did he serve to Constance? Had he served under her father?

The cavalier mounted his horse quickly; gesturing with leather clad hand for Kieran to move ahead.

Nodding, Kieran urged his horse on letting the animal set the pace for their journey back to the abbey.

\* \* \* \*

He stalked into the abbey and into his chamber. Father Cesare hot on his heels, murmuring questions about the meeting. He ignored them, intent on going to his chamber. Tonight had not gone well and he was in no mood to dissect the entire evening with the kindly priest.

Kieran burst through the door, his lips muttering breathy curses, followed by his old tutor. Why could no one leave him alone?

He tore the gloves from his hands and threw them to the corner of the room where they landed like soldiers that had fallen in battle. Why could Constance have not treated him better?

Kieran turned to find Father Cesare, used to his fits of rage, simply settle in a chair opposite him with a bemused grin on his fleshy face. His fat hands disappeared into the large brown sleeves of his cowl, his gray eyebrows lifting in question. Elderly blue eyes flicked to the gloves on the floor, his head shaking in disappointment. The priest drew a breath and sighed. Picking up the discarded items, Father Cesare casually tossed them on the table near Kieran. "I see your sloppy habits have not changed. The audience did not go well, I take it."

He gritted his teeth, hands furling in anger. "Nay, for that woman has grown a heart of stone! If only she would just listen to what I have to say instead of asking for compensation for the use of her troops! Does she not understand how grave this matter is?" Fear mingled with anger stormed along his veins. With Constance unwed and his brother a widower, there was a strong chance that Hugh would try to overthrow Constance, taking her as his bride. That was something he would never allow to happen. He had made that mistake once. Never again.

His irritated voice among the rafters then dropped to a low tone as he muttered more curses. He paced the chamber with a furious stride, his hair and cloak riding his the furious wind of his movements. Boot heels clanged heavily against the stone floor, adding to the hostile environment. Why did she have to act so cold towards him? Could she not see that he had changed?

Father Cesare's eyes followed his every movement until the elderly man could take no more. "Kieran, stop that bloody pacing for it annoys me when I am trying to talk to you! Now what exactly did she say?"

Kieran stopped and stared at the old man. Father Cesare's pudgy fingers idly toyed with the fingers of his gloves on the table. This aggravated him even more. He grasped the gloves and threw them to the far corner of the chamber so they would not divert Father Cesare's attention again. "Maybe now you will keep your mind on the task at hand," he snarled, "She said she wanted to discuss compensation first! I told her I had nothing except my name and she refused the only possession I have!"

Father Cesare gazed at him with startled eyes, the crinkles around them becoming deeper with fury. "I suggest you never speak to me like again or else you will find yourself with no where to go."

He understood the priest's meaning. "Forgive me, Father, but there is a lot more at stake than just getting Stratford back," he stated in a flat tone, hiding his frustration.

Father Cesare leaned back in his chair, extending out his short legs. "I see. Well, what did you expect, Kieran? Because of that foolish pride of yours in your youth, you may have lost the only woman meant for you."

His eyes widened in disbelief. Was Father Cesare saying all was lost? Throwing his hands up in disgust, he sank back into his chair, glaring at his mentor. "Are you saying that I should give up?"

The bald head shook. "Nay, I am not. What you must do here is look at the situation from her point of view. Suppose she had treated you as badly as you treated her then suddenly turned up years later to ask for your help. Would you give it so easily?"

Kieran looked away, ashamed of himself. Father was right. He had not thought about her feelings at all. Suppose the situation reversed itself and she was the one who begged for aid.

What would he do?

I would give it gladly, he assumed but another voice rose to counteract his own. No, you would not. The memories she harbors, you would harbor also. Perhaps he should try to approach her differently.

His mouth tugged into a slow smile. "I see what you mean. I have been so absorbed in my own feelings that I have forgotten about hers." Dark fury that raged within began to abate slightly, allowing his vision to clear so he might see the situation with a new perception.

Father Cesare chuckled slightly. "That is good my boy. Tell me, what does she look like?"

He let out a resigned sigh. “Not what I envisioned. That beautiful gold hair has turned the color of mud along with her creamy skin. It was almost as if she spent most of her time outdoors. It was certainly not what I expected.”

The chuckle turned to full-blown laughter, a ring of surprise echoing through. “Ah, that is part of what angers you, my son.”

He stared at the old priest as the corners of his mouth turned into a frown. There was something about the situation that was not quite right. First, his maimed escort arrived, a waft of sweet perfume hovering around his person. Conveniently, the soldier could not talk.

Why would a man of such little use be in Constance’s employ?

Even stranger still was Father Cesare surprise at his description of Constance. Father Cesare must be Constance’s confessor so he would surely know her appearance. Suddenly the answers shone through the misty haze of his mind. Aye, the pieces were coming together nicely. Perhaps I will keep I what I know to myself and expose Constance’s ruse at the right time, he thought fiendishly.

Kieran snorted his reply. “Aye. I expected her to have grown beautiful over time but time has been most cruel to her.”

“Does this affect your desire to marry her?”

He shook his head. “Nothing has dimmed my affection for her, including her appearance.”

Father stiffly rose from his seat, pushing the chair under the table. He gazed at Kieran through wise eyes. “That is good,” he said in a quiet tone, “Time is cruel to most women but not to all. Take heart for Constance may change yet. Come, the hour draws late and I must retire before Vespers and Mass in the morning.”

Sounds of shuffling feet echoed throughout the chamber as the abbot moved toward the door. Halting, Father Cesare bowed his head to Kieran, the pink flesh of his head appearing shiny from the luminescent glow of the tallow in the wall sconces.

Before the man could make a total exit, Kieran laid a hand on his wool covered arm. “What do you mean, Father?” he demanded.

Questions in his mind grew in number, swimming through his head as a school of fish around prey. There was a conspiracy brewing around Constance and he was definitely going to find out what it was, even if it was the last thing he would ever do.

The priest patted his hand in a fatherly gesture. "You will see in time, my son. Now 'tis time to rest for I grow weary at this late hour. Oh, before I forget, did she give you an answer?"

He tilted his head in a nod. "I am to return at the same time tomorrow night for my answer." The thought of his return bothered him no end. What kind of game was she playing?

Kieran released Father Cesare from his iron grip. "Then tonight you shall rest my son for tomorrow is a most important day for you." Father Cesare's thick lips curved into a knowing smile almost devilish in nature. The priest blessed him, leaving him alone with only his errant thoughts for company. Still, there was something about his smile....

He strode to the open window with a slow, methodical gait, resting his elbows on the sill. The palms of his hands supported his chin as he gazed out into the dark, starry night. All hope rode high with the fact that Constance wished to see again. I hope that is a good sign, he sighed. Pensive eyes searched the heavens, noting the wide expanse of ultramarine sky. Was Constance gazing at the same sky as he was?

\* \* \* \*

Constance slipped into her chamber through the secret passageway her ancestors built long ago, as a way for their lovers to be able to come and go at will. The moment she was inside, she stripped the armor from her as well as the hot, leather mask. Metal clanged against the cold stones as each piece dropped in a quick succession. When she was down to her chain mail, she flung the hated mask to the floor. Suddenly, a small noise originated from within her chamber, halting her movements. Had Kieran come back to ravish her?

"Who is it? Who is there?" Her anxiety ravaged voice called, grasping the ornate handle of her sword. The solid gold felt cold against the soft flesh of her hand, causing her grip to tighten.

"'Tis, I, milady. 'Tis Mary." Came the husky whisper from the depths of the darkness. Her hand moved away from the unnecessary weapon

Constance breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness. Help me finish undressing."

Thankfully, she would not have to wear the heavy costume much longer.

Mary stepped from the shadows, dressed in her own coarse gown. "Aye, Milady."

Together their fingers worked quickly to remove the leftover armor. With her flesh free, Constance felt

the grime covering her flesh, her mouth twisting in disgust. She definitely needed a bath.

She wrapped herself in a silken robe, feeling the soft warmth against her skin. “Now that task is done,” she sighed. “Is my bath ready?”

Mary nodded. “Aye, Milady. Do you wish to wash your hair?”

Constance pulled the thick blonde braid from around her back and felt the delicate strands for any sign of filth. There was a little. Surely, she could have Mary wash it in the morning. After the travails of tonight, she was exhausted. The quicker she bathed the better. “Nay for I will have you wash it in the morning. Is the water too cold?”

Mary tested the water with her elbow and shook her nutmeg colored head. “’Tis still fairly warm. Would you like me to go to the kitchen and boil more water?”

Constance waved a dismissive hand. “Nay, I will bathe with the water as is. I wish to go to bed,” she stated then gave Mary a quick embrace, “I want to congratulate you on a stunning performance, Mary. I could not have done a better job myself.”

“I did only as you instructed,” Mary confessed, drawing the robe from around Constance’s shoulders and draping it across the settee, “so it was you who played the part. I hope I was not too harsh on the Baron.”

She slipped beneath the serene surface of the warm water, letting its calming effects on her errant nerves work. “Nay, you were not.”

“Are you certain?” Mary questioned again.

Constance leaned against the polished wood. She felt more triumphant tonight than she ever had, yet something still nagged at her to give him what asked for and not play games. “Nay, ‘twas perfect. Tomorrow night you must repeat your performance when Kieran returns for his answer,” she replied and took the lathered cloth from Mary’s outstretched hand. Ah, the water truly felt good as it swirled around her tired bones.

“What answer will you give him, Milady?”

Constance sank deeper into the tub. “I know not, Mary,” she replied stonily. What answer was she going to give him?

Her mind drifted back to her arrival at the abbey. Kieran had walked down the steps in his familiar manner, halting midway. His eyes had bored through her body, as if he knew her secret already.



She had felt her insides turn to molten iron.

Raven hued tresses graced each side of his ruggedly handsome face. His massive shoulders filled the broad armor covering his body while his legs bespoke of strength. She shivered slightly when he continued his descent, moving toward her.

Though she was supposed to keep her head down so her eyes would not give away her identity, Constance had turned her head in such a way that he could not see her eyes. What she saw nearly made her heart stop. Kieran had changed much in the years, growing more handsome with the passage of time. His eyes had remained as blue as always though war wearied them. A fine, aquiline nose rested between the twin orbs while a firm, sensual mouth resided beneath it. Her heart fluttered slightly at the sight of his lips, briefly wondering what pleasure they held within. Stop, her mind cried, or else you will drive yourself to madness!

Slowly, the images began to fade. Unfortunately, new ones emerged to take their place. In the new dream, Kieran held her in his arms, whispering sweet promises in her ear, his expert tongue flicking at the delicate skin.... Nay she must not think of such things! Kieran was a bully, not above seducing her to get what he wanted. 'Twas best that she never saw him again. Aye, because if I were left alone with him, her mind told her, I would not be responsible for what I might do.

\* \* \* \*

Constance lay between the cool sheets--her skin flushed slightly from the bath. Questions plagued her mind, driving the sleep away from her.

What answer was she to give him?

She could not help him because of all the terrible things from their past. On the other hand, she was a grown woman not prone to such childish games. Oh, why must this be so hard! 'Twould have been easier if Kieran returned horribly scarred. She could easily turn him away then. Now that he was very extraordinarily handsome.... Do not let this get in the way of his retribution! Aye, she must keep things in perspective and not let her womanly desires come into play.

She turned over to her right side in the vain hope her mind would quiet. Tragically, it was not to be. Thoughts and questions roiled in her mind like the turbulent sea.

Would it ever stop so that she could sleep?

She pushed the stray tendrils from her loosened braid out of her face with a weary swipe. Silently she begged for sleep but it went unheard.

## Chapter 4

Constance awoke sharp chirps of the morning birds welcoming the newborn sun with their song. Sadly, her mind was not any clearer about the important decision she needed to make than it was the previous night.

Should she help Kieran despite all the things he did to her as children or deny him the help he needs to gain his possessions back?

Her stare trailed to the stone ceiling while her fingers laced behind her head.

What was she to do?

Confusion plagued her totally. She was intrigued with his presence but distrusted his motives. Was he the sort of rake that would seduce her to get what he wanted? Nay, for he has seen Mary and undoubtedly has not the desire to do so, she surmised. Mary was a sweet woman but she was on the rather plain, homely side. That bit of unattractiveness would be the one factor sure to drive Kieran away.

Sharp shrills outside her window drew her attention. Instinctively her head drew to the open window, sending flashes of pain through her neck and into her head where it exploded with maximum ferocity. From the way she was forced to hang her head last night, she was not surprised.

Constance massaged the knots from the muscles with a tired hand until the skin felt supple again. Unfortunately she would have to repeat her performance tonight but one way or another, it would be the last time she would ever endure this pain.

With a yawn, she sat up, stretched, then pulled the bell by her bed. Mary should be awake to bring her the morning meal.

Ah, the morning. T will be very long if I do not make my decision soon, she sighed. Her arms went out and pulled harder this time, her muscles screaming in agony. Flares of ache coursed through her body. She ignored their warnings. After tonight, the pain would be non-existent and her life would continue as if Kieran had never returned.

\* \* \* \*

Her day dragged by, her confusion an ever present decoy. She tried to reason each answer to Kieran's question. On one hand he was mean to her as a child and played all sorts of tricks on her that included the murder of her favorite pet hawk. On the other, he seemed to have matured through the years. He showed a side of himself she did not think existed.

She frowned. What were the right answers?

Cautiously, Constance weighed each option carefully, going through the possible outcomes in her mind. Oh, what was she to do? Out of the fog of her mind, the voice she always counted on echoed through. Forget the past, Constance. He already has. You must make your decision based on the man before you and not the boy he left behind. Oh, dear Lord in heaven, why must this decision fall to her?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran descended the abbey steps, appearing as handsome as ever. Tendrils of his blue-black hair floated around his face, streaming behind him. His cloak, edged in silver embroidery, dappled in the same breeze. Midnight hued eyes narrowed to slits, searching the foyer for her presence. Dark orbs halted on her, causing her heart to skip a beat.

Why did he effect her this badly?

She wanted to hate him, needed to hate him but for some strange reason that hate evaporated slightly each time she saw him.

Her heart banged an unsteady rhythm as Kieran strolled toward her in his strong, masculine gait. He halted before her, placing his leather-clad hands on his hips, tossing the silky strands hair out of his

face with a quick, casual flick of his head. His sensuous lips curled into a seductive smile. "Is the Duchess anxious to see me?"

Aye, I am anxious to see him, her mind answered. Since she could not speak, she merely shrugged hoping that would give him the answer he wanted.

He stepped ahead of her. "Then let us not keep her waiting," Kieran stated in a stern tone then brushed past her. Once he was clear of her path, she drew a silent breath, joining him under the bright night.

\* \* \* \*

Wild calls of the night abounded in him the dim shadows of the forest as they pressed on. Reams of light filtered through the dense foliage of the standing timber when it was not hidden by the passing clouds and bathed the world in an eerie light. Trees lined their path, tall, dark and mysterious, having been there from the beginning of time. On either side, he could hear the voracious movement of the creatures that used the night as their venue to find food. Twigs and branches snapped under the horses' hooves, adding to his tension, each sound grating on his nerves, making them raw. It seemed like an eternity before they reached Ravenwood.

Deep aromas of earth, mingled with the scent of the wild beds of flowers growing somewhere close. He inhaled deeply. It meant to entice him, almost seduce him before her got there, reminding him of her. His breeches tightened. The fragrance worked.

Kieran's escort rode next to him in a silent cloud, only the occasional creak of the sweat soaked saddle piercing the air reminding him the knight was still there. He cast a sideways glance at the hushed man. The cavalier's form seemed uncannily familiar.

Who could it be?

Could it be Constance?

All the signs point to her as the mysterious guide, his mind wondered, but can I be sure 'tis her?

He cast his gaze forward and noticed something he had not expected on this road. Two men had melted out of the forest and stood in their path, blocking their passage. One was tall with a long scraggly beard the color of the darkest pitch with rags clinging to his scrawny body. The other was slightly shorter with corn colored hair, an unhealthy gash gracing his cheek. Stealthily, they walked toward the horses.

Before Kieran and his escort could pull back, they grasped the beasts by the reins.

“Can you spare some gold for some poor beggars?” inquired the shorter of the two men.

Kieran felt his horse buck slightly. He quieted the animal down with a simple caress on the neck while his other hands closed around the hilt of his broadsword. “I suggest you men move along. We have no money and even if we did, it would not be lining your pockets!”

He waved his arm in a dismissive fashion. It did not have the effect he hoped. They merely stood there, gazing at him through murderous eyes. It was clear there would be a battle tonight. Only these men did not know whom they accosted.

“Give us money or we will kill you!” demanded the taller of the two scraggly beggars.

“Nay, twill be you who will die if you do not clear the road!” His grip tightened on his sword. He no qualms about killing them if they did not move along. Nothing would stand in his way to see Constance tonight.

“Then we shall have to kill you both!” Suddenly both of the thieves charged forward, and tore him from his horse before he could draw his weapon. The shorter man clasped his hands behind his back, keeping him from his sword. Open-handed blows pummeled his face, his head recoiling with each strike. Bright red flares of pain exploded in his head. Slowly he felt as though the world slipped silently away.

“Take that you self righteous bastard!” shouted the taller man. A raised hand was poised to strike when all of a sudden the stranger fell forward in a dead heap on top of him. Blood poured from the wound on his back, dribbling down his sides in a thick river.

Stunned, Kieran looked up, blinking away the haze from his eyes. The silent escort stood behind the lifeless the man, his sword drawn. Blood clung to the shiny blade in great black clumps, dripping methodically on the ground. His partner stepped forward with his sword pointed at the shorter man. Kieran felt the grips on his wrists lighten up, enabling him to whirl around and draw his own sword as the intention of running the thief through consumed him. Between the two of them, the swindler had no chance. The remaining brigand’s eyes grew wide at the sight of the two blades drawn, the moonlight dancing on the metal, giving the blades an ethereal glow. Without another word, the pickpocket scrambled on through the forest, half running and half-falling while he made his escape.

Kieran turned to thank his silent escort but no one was there. The knight had already mounted his horse, his sword clean and re-sheathed at his side. He was already urging his beast through the opening

of the forest

“Halt,” Kieran ordered roughly as he rose from the damp ground, brushing the tacky leaves that clung to his cloak. The man ignored his order, soundlessly meandering through the thicket. Overhead, the moon shined brightly, casting a deep gray light on the path. Kieran shuddered involuntarily, his anger mounting at all the impediments. It was certainly going to be a long night.

\* \* \* \*

They moved silently on through the black night. The only sound breaking that wall of silence was the occasional whinny of the horses, the animals’ breath dancing on the cool night air. He followed closely behind the knight, his eyes cast forward as they forged on. Slowly, a clearing emerged. Inside the meadow abounded some of the most beautiful wildflowers he ever saw. Delicate petals, brightened by the light of the white orb in the sky, waved softly in the breeze. Suddenly an idea formed. Perhaps these would soften the hardened stone of Constance’s heart, he thought.

Kieran pulled his horse to a stop. “Stop man. I wish to cut these flowers for the Duchess.”

He halted his horse and dismounted quickly. Taking the dagger from his boot, Kieran swathed through the gentle stems as though they were made of butter. Dainty perfumes of the flowers assailed his nostrils and he inhaled in earnest. If this does not do the trick, he thought mildly, then nothing would.

Kieran held up the brilliantly colored flowers in large gloved hand, rotating them so the man could see. “Do you think the Duchess will like these flowers?” The knight merely shook his head in agreement, turning his horse back onto the path leading to Ravenwood.

He stared at the eerily, quiet cavalier. The man was certainly strange. He shrugged his shoulders. His opinion of the people in Constance’s employ did not count but in the future, it most certainly would.

He cast his gaze to the flowers. Brilliant colors of red, yellow and gold stared at him, the stems strong and sturdy in his gloved hand. Aye, these would be perfect. Mounting his horse carefully, Kieran rejoined his trailblazer.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran entered the dim foyer, ushered in by the knight. Their boot heels banged in tandem against the stone floor, piercing the thin veil of quiet, keeping in time with his hammering heart. Would Constance finally give him what he so desperately needed?

His escort gestured for him to halt and wait at the bottom of the stairs. Then the knight disappeared into a side door leaving him alone with his thoughts. Clouds of question circled his head.

What was Constance going to say?

All too quickly, he remembered the flowers in his hand. He raised the bunch to his nose, inhaling the deep autumn scent clinging to the tender petals. Constance would love these

“I see you have returned, Milord Baron,” echoed the familiar, soft voice at the top of the stairs.

Kieran smiled broadly. “Aye, that I have dear lady. I have brought you these in thanksgiving for your help.” His outstretched arm offered the posies to her. Velvety petals fell the floor, landing at his feet as if to shower his path with raw sweetness.

“They are truly lovely Milord. Give them to my man and he will see they are well taken care of,” she ordered from the shadowy recesses of the stairs. The maimed man appeared, gliding down the stairs. Without ceremony, he plucked the flowers from Kieran’s hand and disappeared down another dark hallway.

He tilted his head toward the unnerving darkness. “With all of those pleasantries out of the way, shall get down to the matter at hand?” he suggested calmly though his fingers itched to touch her face to see if it were really her.

“Aye, that we shall,” she said in a soft but husky tone as she drifted out of the safety of the shadows. Constance’s pudgy fingers trailed softly along the stone railing of the stairs. Blue velvet clung tightly to her body this time, accentuating every curve. Her mud colored braids still hung limply on either side of her fleshy face. The low neckline did nothing for her flat bosom. Kieran’s mouth curved in a frown. It seemed like every time they met, Constance made herself seem as unattractive as possible. Did she not realize it did not matter to him? He would have her as his wife not matter what the cost. Suddenly she stopped in mid-stair with a petulant look on her face.

“Come down here, Duchess so we may converse face to face,” he ordered as his arms crossed over his chest in annoyance. Why must she constantly toy with him?

Defiance rippled through her face as she shook her head. “Nay. I wish to stay here.

“Come down here Duchess or I will come up and we can discuss this in your chamber. Which do you prefer?” he snarled lightly. He tired of this game as the ache deepened to see if her eyes were the same vibrant green as he remembered or if this woman before him was an impostor.

“It seems that I have no choice in the matter. Come, follow me to my war room where we can converse in peace.” She gestured with a meaty arm for him to go through the door to the left of the foyer. He felt the surprise cross his face. This was something he did not expect nor dream she would do. Slowly, a snide smile curved his lips. Aye, he would find out if this were really the woman of his dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Constance entered the foyer, expecting to see Kieran before the stairs with Mary at the top. Nothing greeted her was the abounding silence.

Where could they have gone?

Her mind raced with terror. If Kieran gazed into Mary’s eyes, he would expose her ruse.

What was she to do?

She walked stealthily around the foyer, listening for their telltale voices. Her heart banged in her throat with cold blood coursing through her veins like an untamed ice laden river. Creeping past the different rooms, she hoped the sound would filter out to her. Finally, voices echoed from the door of the war room, Kieran’s voice strong and steady. His words flowed from the room, permeating the wood against which she laid her ear to listen properly. Suddenly the discussion turned and she felt her heart stop. ‘Tis time to save faithful Mary, she told herself. She drew a deep breath then opened the unforgiving door to the war room.

\* \* \* \*

“What is your decision then, Duchess?” he demanded, his gaze resting on the dimly lit form of the Duchess at the other end of the table. Her hands folded neatly on the ornately carved top while her nervous fingers toying idly with the lace at the end of her sleeves. From Constance’s movements, he gathered her patience was about to run out



She sighed wearily. "I have considered this matter greatly. After our meeting last night, I have weighed all the existing options. The only thing of value you possess your name. That, however, is not compensation enough."

Her cold words wafted over to him. How dare she say his name was not enough? Aye, I will make her pay for that remark but I will make her hunger for the pleasure of my arms first, his mind vowed.

He wiped all emotion from his face. "Then what is your answer, dear lady?" He was not about to let her see his building fury, at least not yet.

She cast him a hardened look. "My answer is nay. I can not help you, Lord Kieran. There is too much history between us and if I help you, 'twas if the things you have done to me were not wrong."

Kieran was stunned. "Why are you denying me aid?" His voice rose in pitch as the anger roiled inside the turbulent sea of his soul. After all this, she was still going to deny him?

"'Tis simple. For what you have done to me in the past is unforgivable."

"Constance, I thought you said that our past would have no bearing on your decision!"

"I know, Lord Kieran but I have changed my mind. Our history is what brought me to my decision. When I wrote you previously I thought I could keep the past from interfering but I could not. Therefore my decision is nay." Her iciness was almost more than he could take. He kept his end of the conversation as casual as possible but she refuse to call him anything but Lord Kieran.

He leapt from his chair, stalking over to where the unyielding Duchess sat. His eyes glowered down her when a noise at the door distracted his attention. His head turned. Through the door came her trusted servant and his escort with a sword drawn. Out of instinct, Kieran's hand went to the hilt of his broadsword.

His gaze returned to Constance. "You must help me Constance. What can I do to make you understand I was a foolish boy then and not the man I am now?" Her face was unmoved by his reaction.

Constance shook her head sadly. "Nothing. Now leave me and never darken my doorway with your presence again," she murmured. Her arms gripped the side armrests of the ornately carved chair tightly and from the color of her knuckles, anger roiled inside of her as well.

"Nay, I will not for I must have your support!" he shouted as his fury got the best of him. His large hands landed upon her shoulders and jerked her unmercifully to her frightened feet. Somehow, he must make her understand the importance of the situation!

His rage grew to an even higher height when he felt the tip of the other man's sword pressing between his jointed armor plates.

Her eyes grew wide with terror as her hands pushed against his shoulders. "I will not help you in any way shape or form, Lord Kieran. Now go. Tonight you will not have my escort back to the abbey. It will be best if you never come here again."

He was not about to give up. His eyes scanned her face, noticing the many changes that had taken place over the years. The one change that he hoped would happen did not.

Her heart had remained as hard as a stone.

Kieran stared deep into her eyes when a sudden realization hit him

Her eyes were gray with flecks of gold around the outer edges. Constance's eyes were brilliant emerald pools that he could happily drown in.

This is not Constance, he thought with relief; this is just a decoy so I would grow tired of this game and leave. Little does she know I will not give up! Then an idea struck with full force.

His lips pulled into a slow, half smile. "All right, Constance. But, before I go, let me give you something to remember me by." With one long finger, he tilted her face up, taking full possession of her lips. Her inexperienced slivers of flesh remained unmoved so he dared not go any farther. When I kiss Constance like this, I will never stop.

He broke the kiss and drew back, noticing the flicker of terror in her eyes. Perhaps he should not have done this. The poor impostor must be terrified of him.

"Leave me, Lord Kieran," she uttered in a strangled rasp. The tip of the soldier's sword dug a little deeper, urging him away. Kieran stepped back from her and allowed Constance's servant to propel him from the room. His lips curled into a wide grin. Constance was certainly going to great lengths to drive him away. Little did she realize, he was going nowhere.

The mysterious warrior kept a hard pressure on the tip of the sword but he ignored the pain as he was ushered through the high ceiling foyer toward the door, his smile widening. Constance had to be the one holding the sword otherwise why was he hustled out of the room so quickly?

Constance's man rudely pushed him outside to where his horse awaited. Kieran turned to say something but only caught a glimpse of the heavy oak door falling into place, the click of the lock piercing the night air around him. Aye, my escort was Constance, he affirmed proudly, and I will

expose her ruse when the opportunity arises. With a smile on his face, he mounted his horse and headed toward the abbey. He and Father Cesare had much to discuss this night.

\* \* \* \*

Freshly bathed and in a silken dressing gown, Constance lay in her bed while Mary tucked away the hated leather mask and telltale armor. Her plan for revenge was coming together quite nicely despite the pangs of regret tearing at her soul. She frowned. Why could she not do this without remorse? A snort escaped her lips. Kieran had certainly done it enough in his life.

She turned to look at Mary. "Another excellent performance, Mary, I must say. Tell me, how did it feel when he kissed you?"

Were Kieran's lips as soft as they appeared? Were they as experienced as she had imagined so many times before? Now and then, she caught herself thinking about what it would be like to be wrapped in those massive arms of his, feeling his heat and passion as it burst through him....

"To be honest, Milady," Mary offered, breaking through her thoughts, "I nearly gave him a yea for aid. Thank goodness you arrived when you did or otherwise your army would be at his disposal," Mary sighed as she went about her appointed task.

Constance rubbed her eyes and snickered softly. "'Tis true. Kieran always had a certain charm about him and if I know him as I think I do, he will use that gift to his every advantage."

Mary dumped the dirty water from the basin to the bucket near the door, setting the dish down on the table with a gentle clink. "Do you think we will be seeing milord again?"

Constance shook her head slightly. "Nay. I think he had the message now. With you as my decoy, he will know his charms will not work."

She snuggled deeper into the bed, surrounding herself with warmth. Tonight was the last night. There would be no more talk or meetings or anything with Kieran begging for her aid or at least she hoped there would not be. .

Mary sank her hefty body into the chair, her hands becoming lost in the voluminous folds of her woolen gown. "I am not so sure, Milady for I nearly melted in his arms tonight," she sighed uneasily. Constance stretched then pulled the covers further up to her neck. "Keep your resolve, Mary for if he

asks for one more audience, I will grant it but after that, I will refuse him.”. Whatever else happens, Mary must not fail or otherwise she might be stuck in a most precarious situation from which she might not be able to extract herself.

Mary’s eyes widened. “Why Milady? If you are set on giving him a nay answer, then why torture him so?”

“Because I wish to make him suffer as he had made me suffer so long ago,” she answered in a stiff voice. Hot tears pricked the inside of her eyelids. She was not this cold, unfeeling monster that she presented to Kieran. It took all the strength she possessed to keep from giving him everything he needed. Each time he had stood at the bottom of her stairs, she had watched from the shadows, her heart breaking. There was no immaturity of his youth left in his voice. From the way he had spoken and his body movements, Kieran was sincere in his words and intentions. Still, part of her did not trust him for even a moment. Her fists clenched at her sides. Why could she not do the right thing?

“Why are you crying, Milady?”

Her confused fists pounded the pillows. “One part of me wants to help him but the other part refuses to help, Mary. I still do not trust him or his motives. What shall I do?”

Mary placed her hands on her large thighs and pushed herself to a standing position. “That is your decision and your decision alone, Milady,” she murmured then turned to the bathing items, “Perhaps you should listen to your heart and let it tell you what to do. “ She picked up the empty basin and left the chamber, the mild swish of her feet across the stones breaking the dreaded silence.

Constance lay there for a few moments and stared at the ceiling with her hands behind her head. The answer was within her grasp yet she had to reach out and take it. She had to help Kieran. That was all there was to it. She frowned. There was only one problem now.

How was she going to get past her wounded heart?

Soft, muffled sounds in the corner of her chamber drew her attention away from her thoughts. Did a rat sneak in here? With some of the best rat catchers in all of England in her castle, surely they could keep them out of her bedchamber.

Her hand clutched the embroidered throat of her dressing gown while her keen eyes searched out the culprit in the heavy blackness of the dark. A rat would most certainly be hard to see. Perhaps she could catch a glimpse if it were indeed a rodent.

“Who is there?” she called out into the darkness.

There was no answer.

She waited for another moment to see if the sound would present itself. It did not. My mind is toying with me, she thought then lay down again. Her eyelids fluttered for a few moments then closed in an effort to delve into the welcome warm depths of sleep. Just before she could do so, a hand slipped itself around her mouth, stifling a scream. Another turned her over roughly onto her back. Her eyes flew wide open in shock. A young man, dressed in dark garb, lay himself on top of her. His dark eyes glittered with rising lust, the intentions of what he wanted to do becoming quite clear. For one maddening moment, she thought it to be Kieran who had returned to get her with child so she would have marry him but it was not. This man was alien to her.

His thick tongue licked his dirty lips. "Do not scream, dear lady. I will slit your throat much quicker if you do. Will you not scream if I removed my hand?"

Hesitantly she nodded yes. Slowly the hand, reeking of manure, slipped from her mouth.

"Wh ... who are you?" Her eyes searched for some familiarity with the man. She found none.

His mouth spread into a wolfish grin. "That does not matter, Milady. I was sent here to kill you but I hate to see a perfect body go to waste before I have had a chance to sport with it first." His eyes traveled up and down her form. Liquid black pools came to rest on her breasts. "'Tis such a lovely pair of breasts. I never had a noblewoman's nipple between me lips but there is a first time for everything." He muttered, his hands roughly cupping her rounded globes.

"Nay, get away from me!" she screamed as the violation of her haven brought out the resilient woman within her. With both her hands on his shoulders, she threw the man's unsuspecting form to the floor where he landed with a thud.

"Ouch! You will pay for that you bitch!" he snarled from his spot as he rose slowly and advanced towards the bed in a menacing gait.

Constance scrambled from her bed to find her sword. Frantically she ran from corner to corner to no avail. The man stalked her relentlessly, like a predator ready to pounce on its prey, his footsteps piercing the calm the enveloping the chamber.

"Stay away from me, you bastard! Guards!" she screamed as her feet moved her from place to place, the coldness of the stones seeping through her skin and into the bones of her feet, causing pain to flare up her ankles.

"Come here, you little vixen!" Her aggressor hissed as he continued to stalk her. Before she could do

anything about it, he trapped her behind the table in the corner where there was no place for her to go. She backed away until she felt the cold stones under her hands, jagged points digging into her back. His greedy hands outstretched as if to capture any part of her that he could. Nay, she would die before this perpetrator touched her!

With that, her door burst open allowing her guards to pour through the opening. Torches lit up the room, guiding them to the assailant. One expert movement had the man to the ground and shackled.

Her captain laid a hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture, his hand warm and secure. “Are you hurt, Milady?”

Constance’s breath came in ragged rasps as she struggled for each one. “Nay ... I ... am not,” she gasped then cast an angry stare at the would be assailant, “Take this man down to the dungeon and I will decide what to do with him tomorrow.” Her heart pounded against the inside of her ribcage, throbbing unmercifully and causing a light sheen of perspiration to break out on her forehead. Would she ever feel safe again?

The captain kicked the-would be murderer the pulled the man to his feet. “Aye. Come along you and you will find out what happens to criminals here at Ravenwood.” Dragging his heels, the prisoner apparently did not want to go to the dungeon. She frowned. He should have thought about that before he attacked her.

She watched as the guards remove the unwanted presence. The third soldier carefully closed the door tightly behind him after checking the confines of her chamber for more assailants. Her breath remained ragged for a moment when the reality of what the man was about to do to her set in.

Would he have killed her had he the chance?

Why did he want to kill her?

As far as she knew, she had no enemies that wished to do her harm except...Nay, she could not even think about the possibility!

With her chamber carefully searched and a guard posted safely outside of her door, Constance slid between the sheets again. Her heart resumed to its natural rhythm, after a few deep breaths.

Unfortunately, that did not stop the memories from clouding her mind and preventing sleep. The thought of someone attempting to kill her was almost too much for her to bear. Why would a person do such a thing? Did they not know that the event of her death would cause all she owned to revert to the Crown?

She yawned slightly, her eyes still staring into the hollow darkness. Sleep would not be kind to her tonight.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran sat in the chair stripped to his waist, letting the cool night air blow across his broad chest. Thin slicks of moisture slowly evaporated, his thoughts dwelling on the events of tonight.

Why did Constance choose to disguise herself?

Aye, she knew I would not give up if I knew her true appearance, he thought mildly, but 'twas no matter. I still would have married her despite her look.

Slow, purposeful raps at the door punctured the clouds of his dream. "Come in," he barked then gazed at the door, waiting to see if Father Cesare was indeed on the other side. The elderly priest was.

With a staunch waddle, Father Cesare lowered himself into the seat opposite Kieran. Bright gray orbs stared at him with concern brimming behind them. "I see you have returned from Ravenwood. Have you the answer you desire?" he questioned as his gray eyebrows arched in anticipation.

His lips curled into a snide smile as his hands laced behind his head, propping booted feet casually on the tiny table. "Nay, she denied me help." It did not matter. He was going to get his yea on way or another.

Father's eyebrows dropped, knitting in question. "Then why are you smiling, my son? I would have thought you would be furious.

His grin widened as he leaned forward, allowing his boots to hit the floor with a resounding thud.

"Because the little vixen had someone else playing her, making me think her to be portly and homely." He chuckled silently to himself. As if this little game was going to stop his persistence.

"How did you know 'twas not her?"

"The woman playing her had gray eyes, not green. Why she went to all this trouble, I know not. 'Twas but she assumed I would not leave her alone if I found her beautiful."

Deep peals of laughter erupted from the portly priest. "Aye, then she knows you all too well, my son. I had a sincere feeling she might try something of the sort to keep you from coming back and beg her help all along."

Kieran's eyebrows wrinkled softly as mild annoyance crept across his face. "Then you knew how she really appears then. Why did you keep that from me?"

"I wanted you to find out for yourself, Kieran. I also wanted you to explore what you felt in your heart about her before you found out how she really appears. Now that you know that is not her, are you going to expose her ruse?"

The posed question came much more quickly than he had anticipated, his gaze trailing to the ceiling as if part of the room contained the answer.

What was he to do?

Should he expose her ruse and risk her wrath or play into her little game?

Kieran let out a resigned sigh as his gaze returned to the monk. "Not at the moment. When the time is right, I shall," he questioned then leaned forward, "Tell me, Father, what does she truly look like?"

Father Cesare drew in a deep breath and laid his fleshy hands on the table, his fingers splayed out as they emerged from the edge of his coarse brown robe. "Her hair is still that same bright gold from childhood but 'tis her body that has changed the most.

"How so?"

His heart hammered in his chest as the anticipation rose, flooding his body. He had dreamed of Constance with yards of hair that floated around her head like a halo. Deep green eyes would stare at him from under that subtle brown fan of lashes, igniting his soul.... His groin tightened. Perhaps it was best not to think of her lest he betray his thoughts.

Father Cesare cleared his throat. "The fat you remembered is mostly gone. Constance is svelte with curves in all the right places," he murmured as his eyes took on a dreamy look. "Ah, if I were twenty years younger and not a man of the cloth," he lamented, "I would most certainly be throwing myself at her feet. "

"I see," he said slowly, taming the wild man inside of him that wanted shout from the highest peaks that Constance was all he had dreamed about. "Her eyes, tell me about her eyes, Father. Are they still that vivid bright green that I remember?"

Father tilted his head in a nod. "Aye, that they are my son."

His curiosity got the best of him. "How did she make the fat disappear?"

"I know not except that she is about a good a swordsman in the kingdom. I have seen her in the practice



field felling all of her pretend enemies quickly. I assume that is how she made it disappear.”

Kieran could help but stare at Father Cesare blindly, his mind rapidly putting all the facts together. First an escort arrives to take him to Ravenwood and he had thought how odd the knight was. The man was truly very small, his disfigured face hidden by a mask, tongue missing. Then the night of the ambush, he did not even hear the knight come up behind the thief. He had only realized the fact when he saw the man fall forward with the strange cavalier behind the dead man. Then the soldier had nonchalantly bent down and wiped his sword clean on the dead man’s clothing. With all of those pieces, he had the real identity of the escort.

Aye, it was Constance herself leading him back and forth to Ravenwood!

With the leather mask and silent manner, her telltale eyes remained hidden as well as her soft lilted voice!

His lips spread even further as he leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head. He stared at Father through half-closed eyes. Aye, this would be a sweet unveiling indeed.

“What is wrong, my son? Your face has a look as though the devil has invaded your body,” his mentor questioned with a ring of concern in his voice.

The corners of his mouth turned up lazily. Father Cesare need not be worried. He had all the necessary answers to this intriguing puzzle. “Nothing Father,” he yawned lightly, “Tonight when I was on my way to Ravenwood, thieves begged for money, ambushing the escort and me. Before I could draw my sword, they tore me from horse and threw me to the ground. One man had his sword ready to run me through when he fell forward with a large wound to his back,” he related, rising from his chair and walking about the room with the smile still stamped upon his lips. “I discovered that the strange knight stood behind him, his blade dripping with blood.”

Father’s eyes widened. “I am truly sorry about the incident, my son, but where is this story leading to?” Confusion reigned supreme on Father Cesare’s face but he would cure that emotion in just a moment.

He stopped and leaned on the table, placing one muscled arm on it. “I am getting to that Father. The knight simply wiped his sword off as the other thief ran away. Even then I thought that to be strange but I dismissed the notion.”

“What notion?”

“That escort was Constance herself.”

There it was out in the open and it felt wonderful. His notion of Constance posing as the escort had crossed his mind so many times yet he had always dismissed the idea as preposterous. Since, in accordance with Father Cesare's words, Constance was one of the best swordsmen in the land, could it not be possible?

Father's bald-head tilted in a nod. "From what you have told me, I would say the same. Now you know her secret, what will you do?"

He leaned back, allowing the cracking of the ancient wood under his weight to pierce the sullen air. Dubious, dark eyes raked the ceiling, his breath coming in deep draws. Haggard sighs followed. He was not sure what he was going to do. For now he planned to demand another audience and then make the understanding very clear that this would be his last attempt. It would be the best way to get her to lower her guard before bombarding her with more pleas for help. "I think I am going to ask for another audience. Constance is trying to punish me for all the things I did to her as a child. I will let her think she has. Once she thinks I have given up, I will let her I know of her deception and get a little retribution of my own."

"What do you mean?"

"Leave that up to me, Father but do not worry. It will not be something that will harm in her in any way."

The befuddled man's eyes brimmed with question but he dared not answer further. If the monk knew of what swam in the depths of his mind, the priest would be most shocked.

Worn, weary lines around Father's eyes became deeper, the concern emanating from the monk's face. "Be careful, Kieran for she is still a fragile woman underneath her hardened exterior."

He tilted his head in a slow, purposeful nod. "I know, Father. I will penetrate that armor surrounding her heart no matter what or how long it takes."

Father Cesare snorted his reply. "I have faith in you, Kieran. You always received what you set your heart on. On that note, I think I shall retire. May God bless you and keep you, my son." The elder man rose from his chair, his joints stiffened with age. With a slow gait, Father Cesare moved toward the door, stopping only to bless Kieran.

Kieran crossed himself. "Have a good night, Father. Rest easy."

"Aye and you too, Kieran." Father Cesare replied as he shuffled out of the chamber. Dark leather sandals on his feet made a slight scraping sound moving across the floor. Taking the door handle in his

fleshy right hand, Father Cesare closed the door tightly behind him. With the exit of the good Father, Kieran was plunged into the swirling air of question that only he could solve.

He sat there, trying to fend off the sleep invading his tired body. His mind remained on Constance while his body cried out to know the passion she held to her breast like precious gems. Her flesh would feel like the finest velvet next to his, a soft surface under which passion bubbled like an endless stream. He wanted to taste of the waters of that brook and lose himself.... Aye, he must stop or he will drive himself mad!

With quick fingers, Kieran removed the rest of clothing and settled into the much too small cot. His feet rested on the chair at the end of the bed, his body modestly covered by a sheet. Lacing his hands under his wild hair, he stared at the ceiling, his thoughts consumed with Constance. Image after image of her danced across his mind, causing his body to react accordingly. 'Twill be one long night, he thought to himself.

## Chapter 5

Constance sat at her place at the table in the dining hall, her hands limp on either side of her trencher. Her bowl was full of her favorite food but appetite had deserted her.

Why could things be as they were before Kieran came home?

Her life was simple and uncomplicated with every little worries. Now, with him back, it not only involved her head but also her heart.

She pushed it away with a sad hand and sat back in her high-backed ornately carved chair. She propped her elbow on her armrest, allowing her fingers to support her weary chin.

Would she ever sleep again?

Her free fist pounded the hard wood in frustration. Why did Kieran have to bother her again after all these years?

Before her mind could answer, a page entered the room, bowing deeply. "Forgive me, Milady but his message has just arrived for you from the Abbey of St. Stephen. A priest awaits to return with your

reply,” he murmured in a soft, reverent tone as he thrust a rolled parchment at her.

Constance acknowledged his presence with a slight nod of her head. “Much thanks, my good man. Where is the priest waiting?” she questioned then accepted the paper from his willing hand.

“In the foyer, Milady,” he answered.

Her head beat with the fury of the anger that rose like a storm within her. “Bring him into the dining hall and see that he is properly fed. As he dines, I will write the necessary reply,” she ordered then arose from her chair. Unfortunately, her gown did not want to cooperate. The hem caught on a splinter of wood that broke free from the edge of the table so she tugged gently but the delicate fabric would not come loose. With more pressure, she pulled and succeeded in creating a tiny tear in the expensive red silk. It took all the powers in heaven to keep Constance from swearing. When would the terrible things stop happening to her today?

With the scroll in hand, Constance stalked to her chamber with her fists clenched at her sides. When would this entreaty end?

Inside, she sat at her desk and unrolled the parchment to absorb the familiar handwriting that trailed across the page.

Dearest Constance,

Our meeting did not go as well as I had hoped. I implore you to grant me one more audience with you. I am truly sorry about the way I treated you as a child so therefore I can not expect you to lend me the help I need. I beg you to hear my case out one more time. If your decision is still nay, then I will go away and never return. Please hear me out one more time, Constance if you have any feelings for me. I know under your toughened skin beats the heart of a true woman so I am counting on that fact to help you decide whether or not to grant what I ask. If you decide to see me, you need not send your escort for I know the way to Ravenwood by now. I wish to give the poor man a rest. The novice carrying this will wait for your reply.

Kieran

Her eyes scanned the wretched parchment again. Spiky letters, coming only from his hand, left a lot to be desired but then again so did Kieran. Did he not know enough to give up?

Constance felt her resolve weaken the inner walls surrounding her heart. She tried to strengthen those edifices but Kieran had already begun to penetrate them as well. That was something she would simply not allow. Mayhap she will give him one more audience so he might fully understand the fact she wanted nothing to do with him and send him on his way.

Would this last audience be the convincing factor so he might never come back again?

She knew she must try something to get him to stop badgering her. With a frustrated hand, she casually tossed the golden rope of her hair over her shoulder and took quill in hand. Would this be the last letter she wrote to him?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran sat on his horse as the fierce pounding of his heart overtook his thoughts. Where was that novice? The boy had left this morning but had failed to return. Did he not understand the frailty of his mission?

The valley below him was lush with life, verdant and wild with tall emerald grasses swaying in the breeze. Fleecy clouds dangled in the sky, covering the sun now and then before moving one. Kieran took a deep breath, inhaling the clean fresh scent of the day. Deep aromas of wild roses mixed with juniper filled the air, adding to his tension and reminding him of her. His groin tightened beneath the black tunic provided by Father Cesare. Oh, how he longed to have her enveloped in his arms, crushing her beneath him in the heat of passion....

“Has the novice arrived yet?” the deep voice questioned as it interrupted his thoughts.

Anger exploded within him. He did not like to be ripped from his dreams in such a manner, especially when they dealt with Constance. “Nay, he did not. How long must it take to write a response?”

Exasperation bled through his voice but he simply could not help it.

Father Cesare clapped him on the leg in a parental fashion. “Patience, my son, patience. He will return soon. As for now, let us adjourn for the morning meal,” the kindly priest chided as he turned his brown robed stout form in the direction of the dining hall.

“I am not hungry, Father. I prefer to wait here until the boy returns,” he growled, his teeth grinding together. Nothing would make him move from his spot.

“Come in for the meal, my son. You must conserve your strength for what lies ahead of you.”

“I have already stated....”

An upraised stout hand of the priest cut off his words as the aged face darkened. “I said come in for the morning meal. When your answer arrives, I will make sure that it is laid in your hands. Until then, come and eat,” Father Cesare ordered then turned again in the direction of the kitchen.

Kieran shot the holy man an angry look but knew rotund priest was right. He did need his strength but a part of him wanted to stay upon the hill and watch for the Duchess’s message.

He pushed a hand through his unruly locks in frustration. Why was the boy not here yet?

With an annoyed sigh as well as the heat of anger stamped on his face, he turned his horse toward the direction of the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran sat at the dining table amongst the other monks, picking idly at the meal before him with no heart to eat the food. What was Constance’s answer going to be this time? Would she still stubbornly refuse him or perhaps had her heart softened a little? His lips turned upward. He wanted, hell, he needed to expose her ruse but not just for her sake but for his. Nothing but madness filled his mind as he could think of nothing except how she appeared after all these years.

“Come Kieran, you must eat.” Father Cesare chided as his pudgy hand pushed his trencher a little closer to Kieran.

He shook his head glumly. “I will eat when I desire to,” he snarled then pushed the bowl away from him. Food would continue to sicken him until he saw the messenger.

Father Cesare pushed it back. “Kieran, a man your size must eat a vast amount to keep your body alive. You have barely eaten enough to keep a normal sized man alive.”

“Leave me be, Father,” he growled at the priest next to him, not bothering to give his former mentor a sideways glance. His eyes remained fixed on the door opposite his chair. That boy had better come soon!

“Kieran, as your confessor....”

Father Cesare's word halted in mid-sentence as a shrill clang at the other end of the room pierced the conversation. Heavy oak, opposite Kieran's chair opened, the ancient metal hinges groaning in agony. From the vacant doorway emerged the novice, covered in dust and dirt. Kieran's gaze flicked down. In the boy's hand was the message that he had so long to have, covered in the same grime. His heart skipped a beat then pounded ferociously in his temples. What was her answer?

With a quick bow, the boy approached them with a quick gait. "I have brought the response from the Duchess," he confessed, holding it out.

"Give it to me!" Kieran shouted, holding his hand out. The novice nervously placed it in his hand. With quick fingers, Kieran broke the seal and unrolled the parchment letting his eyes soak up the familiar handwriting.

Milord Kieran,

I have read your request for one more audience. I will grant it but twill be the last time. If my answer continues to be nay, then you must never bother me again. I will meet you tomorrow night in my war room and you may plead your case to me once more. As you have suggested, I will not send my servant as your escort for the poor man has fallen ill so 'tis just as well you come alone. Remember if I say nay once more, you will never set foot in Ravenwood again.

Constance, Duchess of Ravenwood

His gaze strolled over the parchment again so that his stare may soak in the depth of her words. Finally, he rolled the paper back up and tucked it neatly into his tunic.

"What does the message say, my son?"

"The Duchess has graciously agreed to see me once more," he replied jubilantly as he seated himself before the overflowing trencher. Suddenly his appetite returned with unequaled rigor and he began to eat voraciously. Ah, she would see him again.

"I see your appetite has returned, my son," Father Cesare remarked as a slow smile came to his lips.

"That it has, Father," he stated as his spirit soared. She was going to see him again! It did not matter that she stated it would be the last time. She may have turned him down the past three times but tonight would be one night she would not turn him away.

\* \* \* \*

The anticipated night of the meeting fell quickly, turning up the heat of his anxiety a little more. He set out at dusk for Ravenwood, taking his time winding through the paths that would take him there. Time was no longer against him anymore so he saw no need to hurry, choosing instead to soak in the beauty around him.

Deep blue fingers of twilight jutted across the clear sky like a heavy woolen blanket. Trees, tall and majestic, turned to a pale version of their colorful day hue. Lazy clouds, like puffs of pale, fleecy silver, drifted across the otherwise clear sky. A pallid orb rose over the ashen treetops, greeting the world with its bright moonbeams. Creatures of the forest came out and called to each other in their ancient tongue as the moon rose higher to bathe the earth in a silvery light. Stars twinkled in the sky like tiny gemstones sewn into fabric.

He gazed at all the wondrous beauty around him as he rode onto Ravenwood Castle. Aye, this was one part of being in the Holy Land that he missed. The damp sweet smell of the earth that always reminded that he was home. It made him feel safe as well as pity for the men who would not return to enjoy the same things.

He let out a deep sigh as reflections and images of Constance floated amongst the brush as if she were legendary fairy trying to capture men's souls as they traveled. Aye, she can have my soul, he thought to himself.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran stood in the enormous foyer of Ravenwood as he had twice before, waiting for the inevitable voice to float down from the shadows of the stairs. He frowned as the moments ticked by. Would she not speak?

"I see you have come. Was your journey well?"

"Aye, that it was, Constance. Come down here so that we might talk face to face," he ordered but she seemed to shrink back into the shadows of the stairs. Her voice was the only evidence that she was



even present.

“Nay, I have changed my mind. I wish to remain up here and discuss the situation,” she stated, her voice cold and uncaring.

“Constance, in your message you said....”

“As I have already stated, I have changed my mind.”

“Have you given more thought to what I am asking?”

“Aye, I have. The answer is still nay. Now leave me,” she demanded from the shadowy recesses of the stairs.

“No, Constance. I will not leave here until you hear my case completely.”

“I have heard all I need to hear. Leave this house and never return,” she ordered in a tone that was slightly huskier than usual.

“Constance, I do not care what it takes to make you see my situation,” he stated sternly as he put one foot on the bottom stair as a gesture he would ascend the stairs to meet her. That will bring out Constance to save her servant, he hoped, and then I can expose her. Just as he suspected, he felt the sharpened tip of a sword poke through the metal joints of his armor.

“Guard, see this man out of here and make sure that he never returns,” issued the stern voice from the darkness.

“Man, you have pointed your sword at me once too often!” He shouted then turned upon the small cavalier, knocking the instrument of death from the soldier’s unsuspecting hands. Constance landed upon the stone floor with a thump then scrambled to grab the weapon a few feet away from him. With no other alternative, Kieran drew his own sword and engaged her in battle.

Round and round, they danced the ancient dance of death as swords clashed, metal upon metal. Sharp sounds reverberated throughout the chamber, ringing from the rafters. Constance seemed to hold her own despite the heavy armor along with a cloak and leather mask. What she did not realize was that he was backing her into a corner with no way out.

“You have no way out, knight. What shall you do?” He snarled with the tip of his sword pointed at her chest.

With a quick hand, she overturned the table in front of him, sending the contents spiraling forward. Kieran managed to duck out of the way in order to avoid most of it but not all. Swift thinking on

Constance's part afforded her a way out but Kieran was hot on her heels. They backed into the foyer with swords clashing until Constance managed to knock his sword out of his hand. His heavy broadsword spiraled from his grasp, landing in a remote corner with a clang. With Constance in front of him, there was no possibility of retrieving it. What should he do?

Faced with no other alternative, Kieran charged and pushed her roughly against the wall. He grabbed her wrist, slamming the slim arm against the wall in an effort to get him to drop the sword to no avail. Pale flickers to his left caught his attention. With nimble fingers, he grasped the tallow from the sconce, driving the flame into the Constance's wrist.

Suddenly a vicious, high-pitched scream split the air. "Let me go you bastard!" growled the female voice underneath the cloak and mask as the sword dropped to the floor.

He pushed the cloak hood from her head. Yards of gold greeted him, twined in a tight braid. His fingers immediately went to the back, tearing the leather straps holding the mask in place. It fell forward, revealing the true beauty of Constance.

Kieran's breath became stuck in his chest as he saw her face for the first time in years, the beauty of which was more than he dreamed. Her eyes were still the same vibrant green they had always been, her face slimmer than he remembered with an aquiline nose and perfect rose colored lips.

"Constance," he remarked slowly as his eyes scanned the planes of her face.

"This is for you, Kieran," she murmured then drove her knee into his groin

Kieran fell to the floor like a deer after the first shot, his hands covering his privates. Staggering pain soared from his manhood up his legs to his brain where it exploded in a fury. "Nice to see you again too, Constance," he managed to croak after a moment.

Her sumptuous mouth pulled into a tight line. "Why have you come back, Kieran? Did I not state in my message that if my answer was still nay, you would leave and never return?" She sashayed away from him, her voluptuous body outlined in the tight breeches and tunic. Oh, God, how he would love to wrap his hands around those sumptuous thighs

He shook his head. "But I did not hear it from your lips but your impostor's. I can not sincerely believe you would be so cold as to turn me away before I plead my case," he murmured seductively, striding over to where she stood. Methodically, he removed his gloves, laying his hand on her shoulder.

Daggers of ice dripped from her eyes when she turned. "I can be cold, Kieran, as cold as any man can.

If you wish my answer now you may have it.” She coldly threw his hand from her shoulder and walked the short distance to the fireplace where her gaze locked onto the flames licking up the sides of the stone hearth.

“Nay, I do not wish it now. I want to plead you my case before you decide your answer.”

She drew in a sharp breath then exhaled in exasperation. “All right, Kieran. Adjourn to the war room and I will return to my chamber and change into comfortable attire. If you require anything, ring for the servants.”

He could hear the weariness in her voice and knew his tactic worked. If he kept at her long enough, her resolve would weaken. Apparently, it already had. Aye, when I am done with her this night, she will beg for my arms.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran arose chivalrously when she entered the room. Dressed in her best white gown, she glided over to where he stood, extending her hand. With naked fingers, he grasped her hand, placing the gentlest of kisses on the back. Pulses of electricity raced up her arm from his heated kiss and exploded in her brain, mixing in the sea of newfound emotion.

She pulled back quickly. “Kieran, p ... please sit so that we get this ghastly nonsense behind us,” Constance stammered as she gestured to the chair opposite of hers. She should not be doing this. It was far too dangerous to be alone with him.

His lips pulled into a half cocked, seductive grin. “In time, Constance, in time. May I say you are looking very beautiful this evening.”

Inside, she felt like she was that fat little girl again, waddling around after Kieran like a lost puppy. No, she would not fall for his false words again. “Compliments will not get you what you want, Kieran. Please be seated and let us get down to the task at hand.”

Constance moved toward her own seat that was thankfully a good distance from him.

Tense silence enveloped them, broken only by the soft rustling of her gown across the hard floor. She felt his gaze burn through to her soul, causing the hated trembling to start again.

Why must he have this effect her after all these years?

Thankfully, her back was to him so that he could not see what his presence was doing her. At her chair, Constance's shoulders stiffened as she turned and seated herself then gestured for him to the same. "Now that I am seated you may plead your case," she remarked coldly as her nervous hands hid themselves in her lap where her fingers intertwined anxiously. Even from this distance, his charm worked on her.

His expression softened as he refused to sit. "Constance, why must we put all this distance between us?" Kieran's voice was like the finest velvet, smooth and warm. His dulcet tones moved toward her, clouding her in a mist of mixed emotion. She should hate him but a part of her wanted him to take her into his arms and make mad, passionate love to her. Nay, this can not happen, her mind cried, for you are sworn enemies!

"If you do not like it, Kieran, you may leave now with the answer of nay otherwise I will dictate what happens during this audience. Plead your case for I do not have all night," she snapped. The sooner he was out of her presence, the sooner she could feel normal again.

She watched as his stance shifted, his thick, well-muscled arms crossing in front of him, his legs splaying out in order to support his weight. Kieran's dark eyes swam in a plethora of emotion, dripping seductive promises that she was finding harder and harder to ignore.

"My case is, dear Constance," he remarked slowly and sensuously, the timbre of his voice rich and mellow, "is that I need use of your army to regain what Hugh has taken from me."

Her gaze flicked to him. In the dim light of the room, Kieran seemed as though he was a dark avenging angel from heaven, ready to do battle. His hair glistened with a regal blue-black hue as it streamed down his shoulders, covering the half armor on his upper body. Strong arms glared at her from underneath the stretched confines of his mail. Strapped to his side was his sword, made of good English steel. Constance's gaze traveled further. Dark breeches covered his legs, wrapping around his powerful thighs as though they were part of his flesh. Before she could stop herself, Constance glanced at his mid section and trembled. What sort of power lay under that dull woolen cloth? Realizing her mistake, she quickly looked away. "What about those men you brought with you from the Holy Land?" she said, feeling the heat of her embarrassment rise in her cheeks. She must be positively red by now.

He leaned a hip casually against the table, crossing his strong arms and glaring at her with a seductive light. "'Tis just a skeleton garrison and there is not enough by half to conquer Stratford."

Waves of desire flowed from him in such strong sways, Constance was unsure of how long she could resist. From the way his dark hair swept over his burnished brow to the invitation his lips extended, she

felt her resolve weaken slightly. She must hold out at all costs. Somehow, she knew it would prove to be harder than it appeared to be. "What can I expect in compensation, Kieran?"

He took two steps in her direction. "As I have stated before the only thing of true value is my name. I can offer you nothing else."

She shook her head. "Nay, 'tis not good enough. Now if you had other lands, then perhaps...." She stated coolly then stopped when she saw him move toward her. His walk spoke of his masculinity, strong and tall. Her heart beat erratically while blood sang in her ears.

What is he going to do to me?

Her eyes grew wider with every step he took, her mouth ready to scream for assistance if need be.

"Rise Constance," Kieran murmured seductively, grasping her hands into his own, encouraging her to her feet. With a long finger, he tilted her head up. He stared into her eyes for a long moment before his head made a swift descent and took soft possession of her lips. His tongue flicked and teased at the corners as well as along her lip line, tantalizing her into giving in. She resisted at first but he persevered, his arms wrapping around her for support, molding her body to the hard line of him. Her mouth opened and he took the invitation, exploring the cavernous regions with full intensity. He coaxed her tongue into play and for moment, she was frightened. With infinite patience, Kieran guided her through the motions. She played slowly, her breath quickening as well as the beat of her heart. His grip tightened, strong fingers digging into her ribs, the tips coming achingly close to her breasts. Through the hazy cloud of emotion, one thought emerged. She must stop this before it went any further!

With as much will power as she could summon, Constance put her hands on his strong shoulders and pushed him away. "Let me go, you brute. I do not like to be handled in this fashion."

His raven-wing brow rose as the left corner of his mouth turned up into a half smile. "What fashion do you like, Constance?"

"Not to be handled by you. Now leave me before I call my guards to throw you in the dungeon." She stepped out of his reach but it was to no avail. His intense, glittering stare was enough to melt her inner core let alone his touch.

His hand slipped around her waist, pulling her back to him. "You do not want to do that, Constance because there is something you need only I can give you," Kieran murmured softly, taking her hand and placing it on his armored chest. He slipped his hand over hers. It was cold yet she did not feel it.

The warmth of Kieran's hand prevented that.

"Aye, do not test me, Kieran. I..." she protested but it was to no avail.

His free hand went to her waist, joining the other. Together they traveled down the small of her backside, stopping to cup the rounded mounds of her backside and pull her hard against him. With one swift movement, he picked her up and sat her on the edge of the table as the blood in her ears sang. Constance's head whirled around madly, her terrified gaze searching the chamber for anyone else to save her.

There was no one.

Where was everyone? Who was going to save her from Kieran's wretched hands?

She turned to Kieran and opened her mouth to protest but he silenced her with a single finger to her lips. Flames of desire dripped from his eyes in a shower that bathed her in a warm glow, melting the last of her defenses. She felt the heat of his hands as they slipped over her thighs, stroking gently for a moment before parting them and placing his hips in between them to prevent closure. Constance felt the storm within her rise, a mixture of the same emotion as Kieran but hers was mingled with fury, unabashed and relentless. How dare he come into her house and prepare to seduce her to get what he desired!

"Gua....!" She tried to scream, but he put a hand over her mouth.

"I will remove my hand if you promise not to scream, Constance. I am not going to hurt you in the slightest fashion. I just want to keep you in one place while I try and make you understand the gravity of my situation."

She nodded her consent. Kieran removed his hand. Moist heat from his hand lingered on her lips for a moment, burning hotly in her mind. Somehow, this act of vulgarity excited her more than anything else she had ever known. "Any hopes of my help have just died, Kieran. After what you have done to me, I have decided to say nay."

His fingers trailed the side of her face, soft and tender, sending spirals of excitement racing through her body. "I am not done yet, Constance. When I am, you will cry out for me, I swear."

Kieran bent his head and reclaimed her lips in a flurry of passion. Their tongues engaged in play, making her forget the real reason why he was here.

Why could she not resist him?

Through the drowsy haze, Constance felt his hand on her breast. His large hand cupped the mound carefully while his thumb caressed the nipple to a ripe fruition through the gauzy material. Her button hardened as the pressure became more urgent and encouraging. Instinctively her body arched, begging for more of his caress as little murmurs of pleasure escaped her throat. Stop, her better sense cried, or else all is lost!

Constance pulled away, breaking the kiss. “St ... op ... th ... is, Kieran for this is madness to continue. Now be gone from here and let me be!” she demanded breathlessly. The sooner he was away from her, the better she would be.

Kieran shook his black head. “Nay, Constance. You have denied me far too long. This is one night you will not shut me out of your life.”

Her eyes widened as the sudden realization of what he meant sank in. “Surely you do not mean....”

“I will have you willingly or unwillingly, ‘tis your choice. I spent too much time in the desert dreaming of you,” he whispered into her ear, sending spirals of desire spinning out of control, “Now when I have you, your passion is denied. That is something that simply will not happen. What is your choice to be?” His dark brows arched in question, his earthen eyes brimming with desire. She grew frightened at the prospect of ravishment by this man.

Would he commit such a heinous act?

‘Tis no time to find out, her mind told her, for twill be over quickly then he can go on his way. Her shivering became more pronounced. As if he sensed her fright, Kieran drew her into the safety of his arms. She did not push him away. Part of her was scared of his wrath if she did so.

“I ... I ....” She stumbled. The words caught in her throat, dying to a soft echo. With all of his effervescent charm, Kieran penetrated the one wall she hoped he would never breach. Silent flames of desire resided behind the wall and slumbered peacefully. That is until Kieran kissed her. The fires of emotion began to lick up the sides of her being, threatening to consume her.

“That is what I thought. Do not worry, little one, I will not hurt you. I swear. I will kill any man that ever does because after tonight, you belong to me and only me.” Kieran murmured huskily in her ear before he took possession of her lips yet again. His hands cupped her buttocks gently, lifting her from the table. Her legs naturally twined around his waist but with a swift movement, she was in his arms. Instinctively, her limbs wrapped themselves around his thick neck, toying with the silky strands dancing on his shoulders as he made his way to her chamber.

Soft sighs of resignation escaped her lips as Kieran carried her through the hallway toward the stairs that led to her chamber. Perhaps it would not be so bad after all....

\* \* \* \*

Their arrival pierced the thin veil of silence in the chamber. He set her trembling form on her feet, drawing her into the circle of his mighty arms, continuing his provocative and drugging kiss. His tongue danced in tandem with hers, his fingers moving with an all too familiarity on the laces of her gown. Through the hazy seductive mist that shrouded her head, Constance's senses reeled. She was about to commit a mortal sin!

She put her hands on his well-muscled shoulders and tried to push him away, parting the kiss. "Kieran, this is not right. We are not married and have no intentions to do so," she whispered hoarsely against his mouth in the dimness. Her hands tried to remove his from the back of her gown but they remained insistent and steadfast.

Surprise crawled across his handsome features, mingling in the sweltering fire of emotion. "That is where you are wrong, Constance. I fully intend to marry you. Tomorrow I am going to see Father Cesare wed us as soon as possible." His eyes glittered like liquid pools, his gaze boring through her soul. Large hands gripped her waist, the electricity of which pulsed up and down her spine. Somehow, despite the way he made her feel she could not trust him. Was he doing this to get he wanted or had he really grown to care for her since their last meeting?

Constance shook her blonde curls. "Nay, Kieran. I will marry no one. I want no man to rule my life. Besides you will only bed me to get what you desperately need." Her words chilled the air between them, cutting the hostility like a knife. She waited for his reaction.

Kieran remained emotionless for a moment before his expression softened. Taking his index finger, he tilted her face up even farther. "What gave you the idea I would only bed you for your army?"

Her shoulders stiffened. "Our past history tells me. I remember the night when you told your father I was too fat for your taste and you wanted a wife so beautiful every man would envy you. From that night forward I learned never to trust you or your motives."

Kieran cast his eyes to the ceiling regretfully, his hands gripping her waist tightly. "Oh, Constance, that was the ramble of an immature child! I have grown since then! Did you not know I always dreamt of



you every night during the war?”

She shook her head angrily as the heat of her fury penetrated her cheeks. “Nay, I did not but then why should I? You had a fiancée and you were beastly to me as a child....”

Kieran gripped her upper arms in a strong grasp. “Odette was a mistake. I fully intended to send her back to Calais on my return. YOU were the one I wanted to marry and bear my children, not her,” he confessed, his dark brows lifting slightly.

She bit her lip nervously as the words sank in. Could it be true? “What if I had remained the same? Would you have married me then?” she conjectured. Surely, that would have made a difference.

He gripped her tighter. “I cared not what you looked like though I must admit this was a pleasant surprise. My intention was to marry you all along, Constance, no matter what you weighed or what you looked like,” he whispered gently into the soft funnel of her ear, his breath warm and inviting. Lucid heat from his breath flushed her skin, melting it completely. Constance felt herself weaken and would have fallen had it not been for the support of Kieran’s arms.

He worked her lacing with a frightening speed, amazing himself. With a quick tug, the material parted, allowing his fingers to get a quick brush of her bodice that encased her soft flesh. Kieran undid those just as quickly, exposing the skin of her back. His fingers touched her velvety flesh, exacerbating his longing for her. “So sweet,” he whispered as his lips found the swan soft hollow of her neck. “So God almighty sweet.”

“You should not blaspheme, Kieran,” she retorted in a throaty purr as her head bent back to allow him further access.

“It was God who brought me back to you,” he answered as his fingers drew the bodice and top of her gown away, revealing her perfect breasts, “and it is God who will see this union to fruition.” His hands cupped those glorious mounds that felt like pillows made of satin. Oh, how this woman fired his blood!

Constance felt his lips travel down from her neck, hot and sensuous, sliding down her collarbone, ending at her breasts. He knelt down, all the better to access her.

Kieran’s hands applied a maddening pressure, gentle yet urgent. His lips engulfed a nipple, bringing the pink button to a rich hardness while his fingers toyed with the neglected one. She threw her head back, letting out small gasps of ecstasy as his tongue danced around her aureola, teasing her to the brink of madness. She must stop, had to stop before it was too late. Each moment that passed took her farther and farther beyond the brink.

His body came to life even more as he heard her cries of abandonment and tasted her nipples between his lips, making it far more unbearable. He needed to be inside of her, drowning in the sea of passion that he had dreamt about for so long. Those creamy limbs and willing body was his for the taking.

He withdrew from her and stood up, much to her surprise. "What ... is ... the ... matter?" She questioned breathlessly, her arms covering her breasts modestly.

"Nothing," he said softly as he drew her arms away and stood up, "put your arms around my neck."

Constance's arms returned to their former place, trying to retain what little dignity she had left. "No, Kieran. This is enough."

He pulled her trembling body to the hard line of his. "Too much is never enough. Now do as I command."

"No."

"Then allow me."

He placed her reluctant arms around his neck and lifted her up, feeling the rounded cheeks of her buttocks molding neatly into the palms of his hands. She was finer than the sweetest wine. "Now put your legs around my waist."

"Nay, I cannot," she protested breathlessly as her resolve started to leave her. "Please do not ask me to do this."

"I am not asking, Constance. I am simply allowing you to do what you naturally want to do," he stated in a low tone, seductive and soft.

Reluctantly, Constance put her legs around his waist despite the remainder of her gown. His hips were broad and strong, the heat from which burned through her gown and set her thighs on fire.

Kieran's lips sought out hers in a fiery passion, strong and urgent. Through the kiss, he walked them both to the bed, his hands holding her buttocks to keep her supported. At the edge, he laid her down gently, his fingers trailing her body.

He stared at the beautiful creature before him, hardly believing what he was seeing. All those long years had dulled his senses for many things but the one thing that remained foremost was Constance. Now he was here where he belonged and nothing would tear her from him.

"Please do not make me do this, Kieran," she murmured in low tones, "I can not do this."

He shook his head. "Aye, you can my dear," he murmured as he bent from his waist. "Now 'tis time to

get rid of this.” His fingers grasped the waist of her gown and pulled down, past her thighs slowly then her knees until it finally fell to the floor, exposing her body for him to see.

She quickly grew ashamed. Her body was not exactly svelte but more on the voluptuous side with more curves and a little extra flesh. With a swift flick, she tried to pull the cover over herself but Kieran caught it.

His hand gripped the edge of the cover, not allowing her to use it. She would never cover her beautiful body ever again. “No, Constance.”

“But I am cold.”

“Fear not, I will warm you,” he said in low tone that dripped with sexual promise, “you’ll have no need of this.” With that, Kieran tossed the coverlet to the floor.

Before she could try to retrieve it, Kieran hovered over her, lowering his semi-armor clad body over hers. Cold metal swept over her nipples, hardening them instantly. She gasped. “You like the way I make you feel, Constance,” he murmured as he moved his body just enough to heat her up a little. “Do not deny it.”

“I do deny it,” she stated in what she hoped was a flat tone but it was not. Her timbre trembled entirely too much.

“Keep denying it,” he said as his lips started traveling down her body, leaving a scorching path of hot kiss. “Perhaps you will believe it.”

His tongue tasted the tang of her skin, sweet and plentiful, making his body cry out for hers even more. The pounding in his temples hardened, added to his already more than amorous mood. He must have her in the next few moments or burst from anticipation!

Kieran’s blue-black head moved down in the semi darkness, his hands traveling all over her body, lighting all the fires burning simultaneously, consuming her very soul. With each kiss, Constance knew that she delved far deeper into lovemaking that she had ever had before, going beyond the chaste kiss. Why could she not stop herself?

His tongue darted in and out of her navel, exciting the skin around the indent. Gooseflesh pricked her belly, adding to the heightened feeling in her body.

Dimly, she was aware of his hands as they stroked her thighs, applying gentle but maddening pressure. Kieran dipped below her navel, plunging toward her privates. His hands played with the flesh of her

legs, his fingers gently, bringing her closer and closer to anticipation. Oh, how he wanted to taste her and bring her into the partial blossom of womanhood before he took her the rest of the way. He wanted her first time to be something special, a memory to be visited in the dead of night when all other life had grown dull.

His fingers crept into the swollen folds of her womanhood. Virginal lips quivered, her legs wanting to close against him. He would have none of it. With his thumb, he parted the slit and started stroking up and down, feeling her flesh dampen from his efforts.

Loud gasps of excitement rang from her throat, pealing through the rafters. Oh, when would this blessed madness end?

"I told you I would never hurt you, Constance and that is a promise that I will keep to my dying day," he murmured, "so let me give you a beautiful memory."

With that, she felt fingers push back the hood covering her core. His tongue teased the nub, encouraging it to grow, her body moving with each ministrations. Back and forth, his tongue lapped and teased the secret button until it throbbed unmercifully. Her hips rose and fell, pushing into his mouth as if she wanted him to consume her entirely. Suddenly, a warm wash of headiness came over her, and she cried aloud, her body shuddering.

Kieran pulled away and kissed her inner thigh tenderly. "You taste so sweet, Constance, far sweeter than any woman I have ever known."

She lay there in trembling wonder, her breathing quite rapid. "Wh .... what .... happened to me?"

"Something that will happen quite a lot if I have anything to say about it," he stated confidently as he pulled away from her. With a quick flick, he had armor unfastened and to the floor, followed by his mail and armor jacket. Next, his boots then his breeches followed the same path, landing on the floor like a pile of cordwood.

She slowly regained her senses, making her understand what was about to happen and fear it completely. "No, Kieran," she said, her gaze trailing over his naked body, her words falling short.

Broad, thick shoulders tapered down to a slim but strong waist. Long legs greeted her, powerful and strong. She looked up further. Where his hips met his legs, there was a dark forest of private hair, as black as his hair. From the center of it sprang his manhood, large and erect. Its bulbous tip glistened with drops of moisture. "Come, touch me, Constance."

Her bottom lip quivered. "I ... I ... have ... never seen a naked man before."

"I know," his mouth spread in a wide grin. "After tonight, get used to it because you will see me a naked a lot."

Kieran stepped forward and grasped her hand, placing it on his pudenda. Her touch felt velvety and soft, making him a little harder. "See, it does not bite."

He saw the fascination grow in those emerald green pools. "Does it hurt?"

"A little but 'tis a pleasurable pain, I assure you," he replied as her fingers ran the length of his sword.

"Oh, Constance," he whispered as her palm cupped his sacs and squeezed gently.

"Am I hurting you?" Her innocent eyes glared up at him.

"No." He showed her how to move her hand and she followed his lead, becoming less shocked by the moment.

Constance could not help but stare at his organ. It was longer than her hand and grew with each motion! His flesh felt silky and smooth, its tip becoming wetter with each passing moment. An idea struck. What if she kissed him there just as he had kissed her? Would it excite him as well?

She laid her lips against him, letting her tongue flick out, teasing the flesh. Kieran's hips moved in time with her ministrations, deep moans escaping his throat. In order to get a better hold, she wrapped her fingers around the organ despite its large size.

His salty essences stained her lips but she did not care. She was completely enthralled with him.

Without warning, he pushed away. Stunned surprise flooded her. Did she do something wrong? "What is the matter, Kieran? Did it not feel well?"

Kieran pushed her back on the bed, his breath ragged. "It was more than all right, Constance. 'Tis just that I need to make love to you properly or else I will burst," he whispered as he laid himself over her, his lips searching out the cream expanse of her neck. He could not take anymore of this teasing. His seed would have spilled all over her instead of inside of her had he not stopped.

"Are you ready?" he murmured against her neck.

Constance dissolved under his hands, her hands tracing patterns over his broad back. Aye, she needed him to be inside of her as much as he needed to be. "Aye, I am, Kieran," she offered.

His hands crept to her folds again, teasing the already swollen nub so that it throbbed even harder. Her hips rose and fell as his fingers entered her crevice, making the area hotter and wetter than it was before. "Good because so am I."

She felt the tip of his hard manhood press at the inflated folds. Fright flooded her, encouraging her legs to press against his hips. Was it going to be so bad? “Will it hurt?”

He lifted his head and stared straight into her eyes. “Aye, it will but I will make you forget about it. After a few times, you will get used to me and the pain will be but a distant memory.”

Kieran possessed her lips again, making sure that she was distracted enough. When he felt her ready, he plunged into her, easy at first. The last thing he wanted to do was tear her privates. Slowly, he thrust, stifling her cries with his mouth, holding her closer. “Wrap your legs around my waist and lay still. That will lessen the pain,” he whispered into her ear as his hands slipped down to her hips. He pushed harder now, using her hips for leverage. Her pain disappeared gradually, allowing her to move naturally. Moans of ecstasy escaped her throat, driving him all the more.

Before he could stop it, his seed spilled inside of her all too quickly, a denouement to all the years of thinking of her, dreaming of her and wanting her.

Kieran rolled his sweat-slicked body away from her, leaving her to gasp in wide-eyed wonder. She blinked hard, the area between her legs throbbing. Her senses reeled while her heart pounded. What had she just experienced?

“Are you all right? I did not tear or hurt you, did I?” His arm encircled her and drew her close. Sweet perfumes of their lovemaking clung in the air, adding to the ambiance while their ragged gasps filled the air.

“Nay, you did not,” she answered in soft tones. He had finally made her a woman, she still did not trust his motives.

“I was worried about that.” He nuzzled her neck. “The last thing I would want to do is hurt you.” She remained silent. “I know you still do not trust me, Constance but I swear by the end of my days, you will never doubt me.”

Tears pricked the inside of her lids but she refused to shed them. It was her fault she had let Kieran into her life and her body. There was no turning back now. “I trust you,” she lied. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Kieran’s feelings. “What happened between us stays in the past.”

“As well it should be,” he agreed as his fingers swept over the rounded mound of her breast. “You are so beautiful, Constance. I can not tell you how much I dreamed of this moment.”

“We should have waited,” she remarked stiffly as the emotions swam over her again, his touch igniting those flames again. “We are not married, Kieran.”

“But we will be.”

She turned her head, facing him. “What if I decide to say no? There is nothing you can do to make me marry you.”

Kieran’s hand swept to her flat belly. “What if I gave you a child just now? Would you let our son or daughter suffer the stigma of being a bastard because you refused to marry me?”

“I am not with child.”

“What if you are?”

“Then that would be different. I would have to marry you.”

His lips pulled into a devilish grin. “You would?”

She nodded. “Aye, I would have to for the child’s sake.”

Kieran’s hand crept between her legs, teasing the nub again. “You can not resist me, Constance so do not even try.”

“Aye, I can,” she stated.

“Hmmm,” Kieran laid his body over hers again, his hands roaming, “let us see how long you can last.”

## Chapter 6

Shafts of bright sunlight filtered through the gauzy summer curtains, bathing the chamber in a golden light. Birds of the morning sang their cheery morning song, rousing her from a deep slumber. Constance opened her eyes, blinking wildly for a moment.

Was it just a dream or was it real?

Dull, satisfied throbs between her legs assured it everything happened as she had hoped.

Through it all, Kieran was utterly amazing. Despite his skill at lovemaking, she still distrusted his motives. Weary sighs escaped her. Feelings that she hoped would never be born were growing inside of her, resembling closely those she had in her youth for him. It was so much more a simpler time then,

when no responsibility existed for her except to learn the arts of war and embroidery. Now she had the task of running an entire household along with the expanse of her estates.

Why could things not be that simple again?

As the thought of Kieran drifted across her mind, Constance turned to where he lay only to find a beautiful rose along with a note on his pillow.

He was gone.

Her heart sank, shattering on the rocks of her soul. Constance truly expected him to be here when she had awoken but he apparently decided otherwise. She should have expected nothing less. I suppose this note is to tell me that now he has taken my innocence, he will not be back, she thought sadly. Tears formed and fell from her eyes to dampen the sheets beneath her face, her mind spinning wildly. With shaky fingers, she unfolded the note to read the spiky black letters as they trailed across the page.

My dearest Constance,

I am going back to the Abbey so speak to Father Cesare about joining us in wedlock. I know what you said last night about marriage but you will marry me. If not for me, for the possible child that could be growing inside of your right now. You belong to me and only me. After tonight, I will be forever by your side to protect from all harms. I will be yours just as much as you will be mine.

Love,

Kieran

Constance's tears fell on her exposed breast, the moisture running in rivulets down her chest.

Was this Kieran's way of saying that he was in love with her?

Nay, it could not be! Aye, she had strong feelings for him but she was not sure she could exactly call the feeling love, at least not yet.

Several fat teardrops fell on to the delicate parchment and mixed with the ink sending great, black spiky fingers spreading over the paper, the thought of his love dancing through her mind. Why was he so committed to marrying her even after she refused? She could live quite successfully without him. Besides, he was only doing this for what he could gain.



She sank back into the pillows imprinted with his scent as images of the night before traveled through her mind. Instinctively her eyes closed, allowing her to revel the feelings a little deeper, her heart hammering against her ribcage in excitement. Memories of their naked bodies intertwined in the ancient expression of desire, his body filling hers up so completely. The pain between her legs seemed inconsequential to the bliss Kieran provided. Twice more before the dawn, he provided the pleasure that she so desperately desired as an antidote to the pain. Afterwards, they fell into an exhaustive sleep, her head upon his smooth broad chest. His heavily muscled arm wound around her while her slender fingers sought out his large ones, intertwining completely.

'Twas this the feeling all the servants gossiped about so incessantly?

Could this be love?

She picked up the rose and held it to her nose, ignoring the prickly thorns. Its head aroma tantalized her brain as the continuous images of the sensual encounter of the previous night danced across her mind. She became lost in those feelings, her body tensing as if Kieran was right there, pushing her senses higher. No, it could not be love. Lust perhaps but not love.

Hollow knocks drew her from the hazy cloud of daydream that surrounded her head. She yawned.

"Come in."

Constance stretched lightly, pulling the sheet up over her naked breasts modestly. Slowly she worked out the overused muscles in her body, not expecting to be this sore. Never in her life had she felt this free. The burden of her innocence no longer bothered her and she was glad of the fact. It had not been as terrible as the servant girls made the act out to be especially when the seducer was most experienced. She could truly count herself lucky her innocence had gone to the man who evoked those womanly feelings in her and not some strange, much older man who was only interested in gaining an heir.

She watched as the door opened slowly despite the groaning of the ancient metal hinges. Mary entered the chamber with the most worried look upon her dour face; her limp braids drooping down her dark wool covered shoulders.

What was wrong? "Is there something amiss Mary?" she said softly, gesturing for Mary to sit in the chair opposite her bed.

Mary refused to sit, her face a mix of concern and fear as her hands wrung uncontrollably. "Aye, milady there is something wrong."

Fear soared through her veins like never before. She grinned lightly to reassure her servant, not to

mention masking her own fear. "Come, Mary, what could possibly be wrong on a day like today? 'Tis a most glorious morning."

Despite her cheerful attitude, Mary did not move from her spot, not even shifting from foot to foot as she usually did whenever she brought Constance a message. There was definitely something wrong.

Mary blinked hard and cleared her throat as if to choke back sobs. "The prisoner who tried to kill you the other night wishes to see you milady. He said there is something he must tell you."

This was getting graver by the moment. "Who does this news concern?"

"He said that it concerns the Baron of Stratford."

Her guard dropped. So here it was! Hugh sent this man to kill her and the dolt did not succeed. Ha! If that is all that it was, then she would gladly hear it then dispatch the traitor in the normal fashion in Ravenwood. "What is it about the Baron that he wishes to tell me?"

Mary shrugged. "He will not tell the jailers for he said 'twas for your ears and your ears only, milady."

Constance sighed deeply then moved to sit on the edge of the bed, her heartbeat and breath returning to normal. When Mary mentioned the news about the Baron of Stratford, she had briefly thought it concerned Kieran but most assuredly, it was about Hugh. Why would Kieran want to do her harm after professing his feelings last night after making long, languorous love to her?

She stretched then stifled a yawn. "Well, then the message must be important. Draw my bath, Mary and then I shall see this prisoner before I go about my daily duties."

Mary nodded. "Aye, Milady."

Her servant left with a quick step, leaving her alone to her own thoughts.

What would it be like to have Kieran around all the time, sharing her bed and her life? Mayhap it would not be bad.... No! She told herself. No matter what happened, Kieran would never be her husband, no matter what he thought. His motives were still unclear, as the future of Stratford was uncertain with Hugh still lording over the keep.

She let out a weary sigh. Both sides of her mind were ready to do battle yet again. Who would be the victor this time?

\* \* \* \*

His horse lumbered on as he enjoyed the peace of the morning. Soft winds blew across him gently, the air heady with the perfume of the wildflowers growing all over the land. Spots of color decorated the rolling hillsides that sloped into the gentle valley. Birds flew high overhead, chirping their special morning song.

Kieran's hair rode the wind along with his cloak fanning out behind him. Halting the horse for a moment in the wondrous meadow, Kieran closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath. Deep, earthy aromas of the wild honeysuckle and rose filled his lungs, reminding him of Constance and of the passion that flowed between them.

Images of the night with Constance danced before his eyes as though she was real, in front of him in living flesh.

How he longed to touch her again!

Kieran's heart picked up in pace as her name echoed in his mind like a long lost dream, his manhood reacting the same way as the appendage had so many times before when her name filled his mind. Never in his life had he felt this way about a woman. Smilingly, he supposed he never would. There was no woman like Constance. She was beautiful, warm and passionate with no fear of doing what she must to protect what belonged to her. Aye, she is a shade of me, he thought, for I will do what I must to take back what belongs to me. Though he wished to be enjoying her body once more, another matter needed his attention. With Father Cesare's help, he could take possession of her completely. He chuckled for a moment, thinking of what Father Cesare would say. He could almost hear the priest's words to him.

"Kieran, I can think of no better bride than Constance of Ravenwood. Tell me what convinced her to marry you?"

"Father, I do not wish to discuss how I convinced her but let us just say she was willing."

Father Cesare drew a deep breath into his lungs then let out a long whistle. His eyes danced with delight. "I see, Kieran. Your charm has won her over. Now that you have possessed her body, there is nothing left to but to wed you. Tell me, do you love the girl?"

That question hit him in the belly before he was ready for it but he already had the answer. Aye, it is love, for why else would I have spoiled her for another or dreamed of her all those long nights in Jerusalem? She belongs to me completely, body and soul, his mind conjectured. He put a hand to his

lips to hide the wide smile. Constance was certainly one prize worth possessing even at the cost of his own soul. With a quick flick of his booted heels, he urged his horse forward, toward the looming edifice of the Abbey of St. Stephen.

Just before he reached St. Stephens, evil black clouds appeared on the horizon, threatening the quiet of the morning. Strong, inky black fingers stretched as far as the eye could see streaks of lightning burning into the earth with distant thunder too low to hear. Birds remained silent as they perched on high branches, hiding from the advancing storm. Animals that normally scampered during the day stayed hidden in the woods. All around him bounded an uneasy silence, broken only by the occasional creak of his leather saddle stiff with sweat from both him and his horse. What sort of storm headed their way? His knight's intuition geared up, urging him to seek shelter before the fury of the storm broke loose. Heeding the warning, Kieran pushed his tired horse on toward the safety of the abbey's stable.

\* \* \* \*

Father Cesare was sitting quietly in his room, at the table paring an apple carefully with a small dagger. The poor man was hard of hearing and so intent on his food that an army could have accosted him and he would not know until it was too late. "Father, I must speak to you about an urgent matter. Can you spare me a few moments?"

Father Cesare jumped unexpectedly at his voice, slicing his finger generously. He swore softly and turned. "Come in," he ordered in his Italian lilted voice, sticking the bleeding digit into his red rimmed mouth.

Kieran stepped into the gray stone chamber, his eyes drawn to the open window as the rains began to pound the land with pent-up fury. 'Tis seems I have made the abbey just in time, he thought thankfully, remembering his horse safely ensconced with the strong stable walls.

Juice stained round fingers gestured to the vacant chair. "Sit, sit. Tell me what you wish to speak to me about."

Kieran unsheathed his sword and carefully laid the heavy steel upon the floor then seated himself across from the rotund priest. "Father, as you might have guessed, I did not return to the abbey last night. "

The older man nodded in a knowing sort of way. "Aye, I noticed my son. Tell me, what kept you from returning?"

His eyes narrowed as he leaned back, removing his gloves and throwing them down on the table. "Do not ask, Father. You would not be pleased with the answer."

"Then tell me the truth, my son. Did you make love to the Duchess?"

Kieran lowered his eyes to the scarred wooden top of the table, shifting nervously in his seat under the reproachful gaze of Father Cesar, feeling the silent chastisement. He was not a boy anymore so why was the man so judgmental? It was not as if he went out and killed someone.

"I assume from your lack of words that is aye. Do you plan to marry her?"

He raked a weary hand through his hair. "Aye, Father. That is why I wish to speak to you. I want you to marry us tonight for I do not want to take her body again without her hand in marriage."

Father Cesare rose slowly from his seat, walking slightly away from Kieran. His hands clasped behind his back, just as they always did when the priest was ensconced in deep thought. Through the quiet air, a soft scraping sound emanated from the sandals on the priest's feet, echoing through the room.

Kieran's eyes followed the movements of the holy man, waiting for his answer.

The priest halted before him. "Kieran, I will only do so on one condition," he stated in a stern tone as his hands disappeared into the edges of his bell shaped sleeves.

"What is that, Father?"

"If you can look me straight in the eye and tell me you will wed this woman on love alone and not because her army can afford you a means of getting back what is yours."

Kieran felt the man's stern gaze pierce through to his soul, causing him to search for the reason of his intentions. It was true that with her army, he could regain what was his but now there seemed to be much more involved with it. The once driving passion fueling his anger now directed to Constance and the desires she evoked in him. Never had he felt more alive with a woman. Then, as if mere echoes from the past, his father's words came to haunt him like a forgotten dream. When you find the woman that you wish to spend the rest of your life with, my son, ask yourself this one question. Can you live without her?

The answer that he waited for emerged through the cloudy haze of thought. Nay, he could not live without Constance's smile in his life or her soft touch not to mention always having those beautiful

pools of green to dive into when he needed salvation. Aye, he was in love with her.

He stood up to his full height of six and a half feet and gazed straight into the eyes of the white-haired rotund priest before him, his confidence exuding from him in waves and filling the entire room. “Aye, I love this woman and perhaps I always have. Mayhap that is why I treated her terribly when we were children. I was in love with her then but refused to acknowledge the feelings.”

“With that out in the open then aye, I will marry you both tonight. How does the Duchess feel about being wed?”

“I do not know,” he lied, “I left before she arose this morning. I left her a message telling her I will return with you tonight so we could be wed before sundown. I suppose she is most happy with the decision.” The truth was something Father Cesare did not need to know right now or otherwise he would not wed them.

“But you do not know, do you? Kieran, how can I wed you to an unyielding bride?”

“Suppose she was with child. Would that make a difference?”

Masks of fear mixed with realization crossed the priest’s face, amusing Kieran to no end. There was nothing would stop his marriage to Constance tonight. “Aye, that would....”

“Perhaps she carries my child in her womb at this moment but does not know it yet. Would you let my son or daughter carry the stigma of being a bastard because you were unwilling to marry his or her parents?”

Waves of indecision crossed the older man’s face in undulating waves, as if he could not decide which was the best road to take. Finally, after a few moments, Father Cesare let out a resigned sigh. “Aye, I will go with you to Ravenwood tonight. ‘Tis against my better judgment but I will not let any child of yours become a bastard because of me.”

His lips curved into a generous smile. “I knew you would see things my way.”

“Kieran, sometimes you go too far to get what you want but in this case I suppose one can never go too far for the one you love.”

He nodded slowly. “Father, I have never wanted anything more in my life than I want this woman. There is nothing I would not do to have her and keep her. In fact I would kill and gladly die for her,” Kieran remarked as waves of desire and joy danced within his soul, his heart as light as a feather. Before the night was over, Constance would be in his arms forever. He casually put his booted feet

upon the table, an action that irritated the priest no end.

The holy man frowned. "Then 'tis all settled. We will ride to Ravenwood tonight and see to it that you are married to her. Now, with your impending wedding, I will hear your confession now." Father Cesare sat his hefty body upon his chair once more, his eyes wincing in pain as the bones wracked painfully together.

"I have nothing to confess, Father."

Father Cesare removed his stole and bottle of sacramental water from the heavily jeweled coffer nearby. He kissed the hand embroidered cross on the sacred strip of cloth then placed it around his thick neck, glaring at Kieran. "You have much to confess, Kieran. Let us get started if we expect to arrive at Ravenwood later. "

Kieran sat unblinkingly for a few moments, the gravity of what was about to happen sinking in. For the first time in his life, he would truly have what he wanted, no matter what it took to get it. Even if he was about to do something, he did not necessarily believe in. Yet, Father Cesare was right. His soul did need deep cleansing before he wed.

He rose from his chair and took a deep breath then knelt with one knee on the floor while the other remained half-bent. Picking up his sword from the floor, Kieran placed his hands upon the ornate hilt bent his dark head in the gesture of prayer, his lips confessing all of his sin.

\* \* \* \*

Constance, dressed in her favorite blue gown, remained silent as the servant finished braiding her hair. Golden knots cascaded past her waist, adorned with tiny pearls and bits of blue silk ribbon. On the outside, she was calm but chaos reigned on the inside. Her heart pounded at the thought of Kieran returning tonight to make her his wife, the flickers of desire awakening at the thought of his expert touch. Constance shuddered with violent excitement. She would never have expected something like this from him. Had he truly changed?

If he had, she still did not trust him in the least. It would require a lot of effort on his part to make her believe him.

Nimble fingers slipped from her head. "Your hair is finished, milady. Is there anything else I can do for

you today?”

She sighed heavily. “Nay. When you leave, please send Mary in.”

“Aye milady.”

Her servant exited the room quietly taking the bowl of dirty water. Left alone with only her errant thoughts for company, Constance sat on the stool as her mind replayed memories of last night. Her hands covered her mouth in a childlike fashion as she tried to contain her knowing smiles behind them. Just as she felt the ecstasy rise in her throat, a sudden movement behind her caught her attention. She turned quickly to see the dour figure of Mary filling the doorway.

“You asked to see me, milady?” Mary questioned as she glided over to where Constance was sitting, clearing away the leftover amenities from Constance’s transformation. Her lips were silent.

“Aye. I am ready to see the prisoner now.”

Mary halted her ministrations, the hairbrush hanging limply from her bronzed hand. “Where would you like to see him?”

She stared at Mary for a moment then gave her answer. “I will go to the dungeon. I think he will be most cooperative there.”

Constance rose from the stool, smoothing down the blue velvet folds of her dress. A low squared neckline plunged a little further than she would have liked. It exposed the tops of her creamy breasts, something she did not particularly care for. Unfortunately, it was all the rage these days. Full sleeves adorned the gown while the rest clung to her body to accentuate her slim waist. She turned slightly.

“How do I look, Mary?”

Mary looked up, nodded then cast her gaze to the floor. “Most beautiful, milady as always.”

“Mary, is there something that displeases you?”

Mary sighed wearily. “Nay, milady. I am just tired this morning.”

The girl was acting strangely and it was beyond her to figure it out, at least for now. Shrugging, she followed Mary down the stairs towards the dungeon where her prisoner awaited her.

\* \* \* \*



Deep dank odors of the dungeon assailed her nostrils at the open door, making her belly knot as she began her descent while her heart pounded out of control.

What did this man have to say exactly?

Wet moss clung to the damp stones constructing the corridor, her fingers feeling the sliminess of the lichen as she touched the stones for support. Behind her, Mary held the plethora of fabric so the slimy floor would not damage the hem of her gown. In the distance, Constance could hear the drip of water and suddenly the sound was maddening as the echo reverberated through the slim, muck covered hallway.

Would the sound never cease?

Her guard led her way, lighted by the torch in his hand. Endless rows of cells comprised the dungeon with a few oubliettes at the end for the nasty criminals. If this man proved entirely bent on destroying her, perhaps a few days in one of the oubliettes should cure that.

In the corners, she could hear the sounds of the rats scurrying to get out of her way, the light driving them to the further corners of the dungeon.

After what seemed like an eternity, the guard stopped at cell nearest the oubliettes. Producing a ring of keys from his thick leather belt, he unlocked the door, swinging it open for her.

“Here’s the nasty brute that nearly took your life, milady,” he scowled then turned to the prisoner, kicking viciously in the leg. His swift intake of air rumbled through the cell, indicating his pain. “Get up when a Duchess comes into yer presence!” Sharp clanks of the chains echoed in the darkness, a moan erupting from the man.

“He is all ready for you, milady,” her guard announced and thrust the torch through, lighting her way. Constance stepped through the open cell door, her face grimacing when the stench of sweat and urine flooded her nostrils. Her stomach turned. Thankfully, Mary held the hem of her gown up so the contents of the cell would not pollute the rich fabric.

She stood before the broken man, clearing her throat, drawing a deep breath as she did so. “Why have you called me down here, man?” Her voice rang out in the darkness of the cell. Sounds of tiny scurrying feet were all around her in confirmation of the fact that this man did not inhabit the cell alone.

“I must tell you something that I think you need to hear.”

Her hands tensed, her body stiffening. She had not the time to play games! Anything she could use against Hugh would be a blessing! “Then tell me man! I wish to get out of here and back to my dining hall for the morning meal.”

“I wanted to speak to you before you made a most grievous mistake.”

Her eyes widened in dismay, her heart beginning to race. “What do you mean?”

“I mean ‘twas Lord Kieran who sent me to kill you. He wants only to have your army and will do anything to get it. He told me so himself,” her would be assassin answered in a slow tone. From the expression on the man’s face, he believed what he was saying.

Fists of anger clenched at her sides, fury spewing from the well inside. “You lie. Kieran would do no such thing.”

“Aye, but ‘twas Lord Kieran. He approached me upon his arrival at Stratford about killing you. Though the current Baron refused him entry, I met him deep in the forest. He said he wanted your army and would do anything to get it. When I explained it would be impossible but he merely laughed and said he would bed you if he must no matter what your looks be.”

She paled, nearly reeling against the grime covered wall of the cell, her heart pounding so viciously she thought it would hammer right of her chest.

Could what the man said possibly be true?

Did Kieran only bed her in the hopes of gaining her army through her trust? Nay, the man must be lying!

Her shoulders stiffened and she gave the man her hardest stare. “Why should I believe you? You are nothing more than a common criminal.”

“If ‘twas not him, how would I come by this?” he stated then rifled through the straw despite the short length of his chains. After a few moments, his hand found the item he sought. Pulling it up, he produced an empty velvet pouch. He thrust it towards her.

Constance took the bag with trembling fingers. In her nervous hands, she felt the elegant stitching on it. Eager to see the embroidery on it, she stepped closer to the torchlight. It was not enough. “Bring me a candle,” she ordered in a stern voice.

With the telltale pouch in her quivering hands, Constance stood before the prisoner and stared. Why would Kieran do such a thing? It made no sense! If she were dead, all that she owned would revert to

the Crown.

After several agonizing moments, one of her guards produced the badly needed candle, thrusting the wrought iron tier with the lit candles inside of the cell. Constance moved toward the golden light, her fingers lightly rubbing the richness of the fabric. Under the warm glow, she turned the bag over in her hands.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Embroidered by an expert hand, the crest of Stratford stood proudly. Two rampant stags faced each other on a red and gold field, with the first letter of Kieran's name lovingly tatted underneath. Her heart sank, shattering all that she had come to treasure in the last day. This pouch sealed Kieran's fate. This man spoke the truth. Composing herself as regally as a Queen might, Constance turned to the man, casually tossing the bag toward him, drawing a deep breath. "In gratitude of the information you brought me, I will let you go on the condition you return to wherever you came from and never set foot in Ravenwood ever again. If you do, I will have you executed on the spot. Do you understand me?"

He nodded. "Many thanks, milady. Rest assured I will not return unless I am summoned by you." The man murmured from his place against the wall, the chains squeaking with his movements.

"Then you will never return. Guard!" Within moments a guard appeared to carry out her appointed task.

Her guard bowed before her. "Aye, Milady. What would you like me to do with the prisoner?"

"Take him out of here and send him on his way. If he should ever return, I want him executed immediately."

"Aye, Milady." As he turned to leave, Constance laid a hand on his armor-covered arm. "Send your captain to my chamber. I wish to speak to him on a most urgent matter." The comfortable warmth surrounding her heart started to chill, reinforcing the previously penetrated wall. Tears filled her eyes.

Why would Kieran whisper words of seduction in her ear one moment then set out to kill her the next?

It did not seem fair that in one happy moment of her life, all should come crashing down on her head. Nay, she would stop this from happening. Whatever happened from here on in, she would always remain the strong woman she always was. The tears she shed would be the first and last for Kieran.

\* \* \* \*

Dusk fell around them as the forest came alive with the children of the night. Each one called to the other with an open invitation to come out of the brush so all might revel in the beauty of the moonlight. Kieran halted his horse for moment, Father Cesare halting his donkey beside his former pupil's horse. Father Cesare frowned, his hand going to his back to work out the kinks the donkey ride put in. He arched forward. "What is wrong, Kieran?"

Kieran's eyes narrowed, his mouth curved in a frown. Something in the air was not quite right. "I know not, Father, but I feel very strange at this moment. I feel as though something is going kill the passion between Constance and I."

Father chuckled slightly, as if his disposition was humorous. "'Tis only excitement running through your veins. Come let us ride if we wish to get there before sunup."

Father Cesare dug his thick heels into the donkey's flank, forcing the animal to lumber ahead. Though the feeling refused to leave him, Kieran urged his mighty horse on, following the path blazed by the priest's donkey.

\* \* \* \*

Ravenwood Castle loomed not far ahead, the silver-white stones rising high in the cloudless moonlit sky. Kieran could make out the crest of Ravenwood flying high above the drum tower, dappling in the slight breeze of the night. Kieran halted his horse for a moment. He stared at the giant edifice knowing his beloved bride awaited him inside. Ah, such a feeling!

This was going to be his home forever...wait a moment! The drawbridge was gone! Peering closer, he noticed it was up. His mind spun. Had Ravenwood threatened in some way?

"What is the matter now, Kieran?" Father Cesare gasped. Exasperation crept into the old man's voice as having to stop so often. Kieran cared not. All that interested him was why the drawbridge did not welcome him.

"There is something very wrong here, Father," he remarked slowly, his gaze darting all around the castle. Men, in full battle armor, decorated the battlements as if readying themselves for a coming war. His heart and mind raced. What was happening?

Father Cesare scowled. "What makes you think so, Kieran?"

"The drawbridge is normally down and has been the last few times I have been here. Now 'tis up. What do you suppose that is?"

"Well there is only way to find out, Kieran. Let us ride," Father Cesare huffed, his breath coming in and out of his stout body in ragged gasps, his thick legs hanging over the swaybacked beast's sides.

"Aye." Kieran answered absentmindedly as his mind pondered the sudden new position of the drawbridge.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran halted his horse in the edge of the moss filled moat with Father Cesare stopping right behind him. Strangely, there were two armored guards posted on either side of the ancient wooden drawbridge, their shining spears reflecting the light of the rising moon.

His eyes narrowed to slits. "Lower the drawbridge. I have business with the Duchess," he thundered as his gloved hands clutched the reins of his horse tightly. His thighs gripped the horse snugly with a wild, tense anxiety.

The sentry shook his armored head. "Nay. The Duchess has forbidden your entry. On her orders we are to signal the archers if you do not leave peacefully." The taller of the two men replied. Kieran instinctively gazed up to the battlements. Sure enough, archers were poised to rain down arrows upon him and Father Cesare.

Anger flooded his body while blood raced along his veins at Constance's sudden change of heart.

"What is the meaning of this? The Duchess knows I would be returning tonight with a priest!"

"We know not, milord but we were ordered to send you away the moment you arrived. Now if you value your life, you will leave Ravenwood and never return." The guard replied with his spear thrust forward in a gesture of combat.

Kieran's eyes darted around the scene, taking it all in. Deadly archers waited for that single command to kill them both while the two guards stood in their sentry boxes, waiting for a chance of hand to hand combat. He frowned.

He could not win this one battle alone.

I will come back and I will win her heart again, he vowed, his horse becoming unsteady beneath him. “Tell the Duchess, she has not heard the last of me!” His booted heels dug into the flanks of his horse, turning the beast toward the direction of the Abbey, urging the horse to gallop at top speed with Father Cesare close on his heels.

\* \* \* \*

She stepped out onto the battlements with her archers, a black cloak around her shoulders with the cowl covering her head. With a heavy heart, she watched Kieran gallop away with Father Cesare knowing the last vestige of happiness ripped from her life.

Never again would she ever trust anyone with her fragile heart.

She turned away but stopped to have one last look of Kieran as his hair blew out behind him along with his cloak to ride the wind his horse’s stride created, her heart breaking in two.

Why must he betray her trust and use her body for the sole purpose of getting her army?

After last night, she would have given him the aid he needed but instead he betrayed her trust. She should not have expected less from him. Well the damage is done, she thought to herself, but it is Kieran who will lose. I may have lost my innocence but his cost is so much more.

Silent tears tracked their way down her cheek at the thought as she entered the drum tower and descended the stairs and into the howling blackness of her betrayed mind.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran sat at the table in his chamber in the abbey as anger ate away at his soul. What was the reason for her actions? He had the fullest intentions of marrying her since the taking of her innocence but something caused her to change her mind.

What was the one thing that caused her to bar him from Ravenwood?

Unabashed fury grabbed hold of him, making him rise swiftly from the wooden chair barely holding his weight. The aged wood splintered to pieces. For a moment, he stared at the battered wood, his

rage boiling over. With a booted foot, he viciously kicked the elderly table thus causing the old wood to fall and splinter into tiny wooden fragments. Thankfully, Father Cesare was not around to see the destruction of the furniture in the chamber. Then, as if answering his thought, Father Cesare appeared at the open door. The old man's eyes darted to the fragmented wood then bounced back to Kieran's face.

Father Cesare shook his balding head sadly. "Oh, Kieran what have you done?" The bits of wood lay before them like a battered and beaten army.

Kieran's voice shook with fury. "Forgive me, Father but that damned woman exasperates me! One minute she is passionate and yielding then the next she is as cold as snow in winter...."

Father Cesare drew in a deep breath then exhaled a long sigh. "Enough of the foul language, Kieran. Now let us examine this carefully. Could there be anything you said or did that would make her act so?"

He shook his head, his mind spinning in an effort to remember if he had said something. "Nay. I was loving and patient with her, even in the note I left her this morning," he snarled then paced the length of the chamber, pieces of splintered wood crunching under his booted feet. His dark locks flew out behind him as did his cloak, his fingers clenching and unclenching in frustration. What happened with her since this morning?

"Something must have happened to make her act so strangely. Well, there is only one way to find out my dear boy."

"What is that?"

"I will write her a message in a day or so and then have a novice take it there. I know the Duchess and she will not refuse a man of God entry into her house especially if the message comes from me," Father Cesare suggested. His tired eyes trailed to the broken wood on the floor underneath Kieran's booted feet, his head shaking slightly.

Small glimmers of hope crept into his voice. "Do you think twill work?"

"Aye. Honestly, Kieran, you must learn to control your temper once in a while." Father Cesare commented before leaving the dim chamber. Kieran smiled slightly. It was rather silly of him to break the furniture in such manner. He watched the priest's departing form as he waddled down the long hallway, the sandals on Father Cesare's feet making a slight shuffling sound across the hard stones.

Kieran closed the door, his anger abating some but not entirely. For an all too brief period he thought to

finally have all that every man desired out of life but 'twas not to be. Nay, it is so! Deep down inside he knew he must possess her in any way possible no matter how much time elapsed before he made her part of his life forever.

As the thought of Constance crossed the sea of his mind, another hideous one arose to take the place. Now that his brother was a widower, Hugh would be free to marry anyone he chose.

What if his choice was Constance?

A little voice arose inside of his head, the voice he always trusted, warning him about Constance's safety.

What if Constance rejected Hugh's advances and he kidnapped her so Hugh could force her to marry him?

Nay he could not let that happen again! Constance would never suffer Odette's fate while he lived.

He must place someone at Stratford Castle that would inform him of all of Hugh's activities and plans. Aye, that someone should be a man of the cloth or one that was at least in training to be one. With a broad smile upon his face, Kieran left the safety of his chamber in search of the perfect novice who he hoped would agree to be his spy.

## Chapter 7

Hugh slumped behind the weathered table, his gangly arms resting on the arms of the chair. His stare concentrated on the veritable feast before him but he had no appetite to eat. The sickness that had invaded his body began to abate but not the sickness in his head. Jealousy ate away at the fabric of his mind while hatred consumed what was left of his heart.

All of his life, Kieran had forced him to live in the shadow, a weak thing compared to his younger brother. He leaned back, flexing his fingers slowly. It was his turn now. He lived in the light for once, not Kieran.

That little nuisance was going to be pushed back to the shadows where he belonged permanently.



Somehow, he had to get rid of Kieran. He grinned widely. How was he going to do that? Shooting, stabbing or drawing and quartering? All of that was too good for his precious brother. No, it must be something dastardly ... his hands clapped together excitedly. Ah, he had it! A band of mercenaries, the most cutthroat of the lot, would be necessary to rid him of the stone around his neck. They could happen upon his hapless brother in the woods and ambush him then bury the evidence where no one but wild coyotes would find it. Then he would get rid of the mercenaries...

“Are you not hungry milord?” said the sweet, sensuous voices that pierced his aura of thought.

Hugh whirled around at the timbre. It was Margaret. “What are you doing here, Margaret? I thought I made it quite clear that you are not to be serving my household any longer,” he snarled as a hard scowl swept across his features. He was not in the mood to be bothered, especially by a jealous bed wench.

Margaret sashayed to the front of his chair, making sure her hips swayed seductively under her kirtle. Her thin lips pulled into a sweet, taut smile. “I know milord but I have news for you. I know that you wish for the hand of the Duchess of Ravenwood and I have arranged for you to do so.”

Hugh nearly turned his chair over when he rose swiftly, grasping the upper arms of Margaret. She cried out at the pain he exerted on her tender limbs. Excitement coursed through his veins, the pressure on her arms tightening. “What do you mean?”

“Ouch, milord you are hurting me!” she squealed as the pressure on her limbs tightened.

“I am not hurting you, you silly goose! Tell me what you have done!” Hugh shouted into Margaret’s face, her upper lip curling in disgust

Margaret shuddered uncontrollably as her bottom lip quivered in fear, his favorite emotion. “After I told you of our child’s birth, I ran into Martin the groom. He comforted me and dried my tears. Together we came up with a plan to murder the Duchess so you could take over her lands. The factor of Milord Kieran was one we had not counted on. You see Lord Kieran has been courting her and actually even spent the night in her chamber. I have the news from a very reliable source that Lord Kieran was going to marry her even going so far as to bring a priest with him that very evening. So with the help of my spy, I gave the squire condemning proof that Milord Kieran wanted to bed her for what he wanted.” Margaret stated coolly. His grip lessened, allowing her slim fingers trail his scrawny cheek down to his bony shoulders as she had done so many times before.

Hugh had definitely underestimated this woman claiming she carried his child. Under the childlike demeanor, she was unlike any woman he had ever known. Therefore, this little wench had shown

loyalty to him. Perhaps she could be useful after all.

His thin lips curled over his decaying teeth. "You have demonstrated your loyalty well, Margaret. In repayment of your loyalty, you may resume your place in my bed but that does not mean I will recognize the child as my own. Now, tell me, is the Duchess harmed?"

Margaret shook her head quickly. "Nay, milord. My spy has told me that when Lord Kieran returned to marry her, he was turned away at the gate under pain of death should he decide to return."

His smile widened as those words assailed his ears. With this little wench's help and her shrewdness, he could very well have the hand of the Duchess and his brother disposed of by the end of the summer. "Good, Margaret, good," he said slowly, his gaze sweeping over her burgeoning form. "By keeping the information from Ravenwood coming, you will find yourself rewarded most handsomely."

Her fingers dipped lower in the open vee of his brown velvet tunic while her other hand lay on his groin, a deep, throaty purr emanating from her throat. "'Tis all for you, my lord."

Hugh closed his eyes reveling in the sensations her ministrations aroused. "That is the way I like it, Margaret. Now undo your clothing."

\* \* \* \*

Days passed slowly, almost too languidly for Kieran's blood. They felt like unending torture until Father Cesare sat down and wrote the necessary message asking Constance why Kieran was turned away. He continuously hovered behind Father Cesare, much to the old man's chagrin, as he wrote the letter, watching the careful script burn into the soft page. Slight, scratching sounds grew from the priest's ministrations, the handwriting small and neat.

His heart beat quickly, brimming with hope she would answer this message, putting an end to the mystery of her strange behavior. How could she completely dissolve in his arms only to imitate the cold wind in winter when he returned to fulfill his promise to her? Did she not understand that his love protect her from all harm?

Father Cesare's head whirled around, his beady eyes blazing. "Kieran, please, I am no child that needs to be watched so I finish my lessons properly!" the old man snarled then thrust the parchment at him. "Here, I am finished. Do you care to read the message?"

He took the paper from the withered hand, scanned it briefly then snorted his reply with an amused smile on his lips. "Aye, 'tis fine. My only hope is that she will answer this message."

Father sighed deeply, rubbing his ponderous belly. "I think she will Kieran. Is there anything you wish to add?"

Kieran shook his head then shrugged. "Nay. If she thinks I have a hand in it, she will burn the paper before she even reads the words scribed upon the page."

Father tilted his head in agreement. "Very true, my son. Now call for a novice so the message can be on the way to Ravenwood," he offered then rose stiffly from the chair. His face grimacing at the pain in his swollen legs that he claimed crept a little further each year.

With a quick hand, Kieran pulled the beautifully embroidered bell pull by the door.

\* \* \* \*

Constance hummed softly to herself as she worked on the embroidery she had started long ago. Unfortunately, her mind was not on the task at hand.

She looked up briefly from her sewing and stared blindly into the thin air. Memories flooded the empty expanse of her mind, reveling in the night she had spent in Kieran's arms. Wanton bliss poured from his knowing hands, bathing her body in pure pleasure. She shuddered, as the images possessed her body. Never before has she felt so free, her flesh moving in a natural rhythm. Her skin cried out for satiation from his hands now, every pore weeping for his touch. She could not let it happen again despite her feelings. I know what a conniver Kieran is and yet I gave myself over to him so easily! Still, she could not blame herself entirely. Kieran always possessed a certain aura around him that made women fall in love with him. 'Twas only natural for her to fall under his spell. She was no different from any other woman in the realm.

She quelled the unnerving thoughts in her head and resumed her humming and sewing. Contentment was the order of the day or at least she had to pretend that it was.

Soft raps at the door withdrew her attention from the tapestry and she peered up. "Come in," she said quietly, her mind trying to focus on the task at hand. It was nearly impossible. Kieran occupied almost all of her thoughts in some fashion or another.

Mary entered the chamber with a sorrow-ridden face, a tightly bound scroll in her hand.

Her mouth tightened as her eyes raked over the familiar face. “ Mary what is wrong?

Muscles moved in Mary’s heavy jaw. “There is message from Abbey of St. Stephen for you from Father Cesare.”

Flickers of apprehension moved through her. “What does Father Cesare want?” Angrily, she arose from her place, moving from behind the hoop. This had to be another trick of Kieran’s.

Mary sighed deeply. “I know not, milady. It is for your eyes only. The only thing I know is the novice was instructed to wait for a reply.”

Constance gazed at Mary for a long moment, blinking in bafflement.

What could Father Cesare possibly want with her?

Her eyes flicked down to Mary’s hand. Golden yellow fibers stared at her from the extended fingers; its seam sealed in bright red wax.

Should she read it or just throw it into the fire, chalking it up to one of Kieran’s useless tricks?

Aye, you should at least read it, her inner voice told her, would you take the chance on burning the word of God? Taking the parchment, Constance murmured her thanks and unrolled it. Bits of red wax rained on the floor, standing out sharply against the sooty stones.

Mary cleared her throat and shifted from foot to foot, causing Constance’s anxiety to rise. “What shall I do with the novice?”

Constance sighed, making her way to her desk. “Take him to the dining hall and see that he is properly fed while I write the necessary reply.” I shall feed the entire abbey, she thought to herself, if this keeps up.

Mary cast her dour eyes to the floor. “Aye, milady,” she answered solemnly then left the room.

Once she was alone, she decided to read it. Taking a deep breath in order to calm her erratic nerves, she unrolled it with trembling fingers. Carefully she laid two weighty objects on the corners so the fibers would lay flat. Neat, precise writing glared at her from the golden yellow of the paper reminding her of the summer wheat just before harvest.

Dearest Duchess,

I am writing to you on behalf of Kieran, the true Baron of Stratford. I was with him several days ago

when you denied us entry into Ravenwood. I must ask you this one single question. Why? Has Kieran committed such a heinous act that it bars from Ravenwood? He has explained what happened between you both those days ago and now he wishes to right the situation. He refuses to enjoy your body again without benefit of marriage so both of your souls might be saved. I beg of you, milady, please think over your decision very carefully for it will come to a point when there is no turning back. Then it is too late for anything except regret. I do not wish you to be longing for love when you have love before you. All that I ask is that you explain why you have suddenly changed your mind.

Father Cesare

Tears formed as the words danced before her eyes, hurt and shame washing over her in waves.

Why did Kieran have to return from the Holy Land?

‘Twas your own fault, came the answer from the recesses of her mind, you were the one who sent him the letter in the first place informing him of Hugh’s activities.

The sudden rushing, feeling of regret for sending the letter to him washed over her, the tears breaking through the dam constructed to hold them back. Moisture ran in rivulets down her face, splashing onto the fragile fiber of the parchment. Father Cesare’s words dissolved into inky, black puddles, long spiky fingers stretching out. Nay, she would not waste the water on Kieran. He was not deserving of her tears!

Sniffing slightly, Constance withdrew her tears, pulling out the quill as well as the ink.

Damn Kieran and all his charms!

Why did he make her go through this?

Because you care for him and always have, her mind told her

Out of her anger, her arm swept across the desk, black ink well falling to the floor where the contents spread like a midnight flood on the floor, oozing through the cracks.

No, she would never care for him!

Unable to take the strain of the situation, Constance’s head collapsed on her folded arms, her body racked with sobs.

Tears flowed, for her parents, for her situation and for her life. Why could things not be simple like they were before?

With a quieted and determined soul, Constance carefully scribed the essential words onto the paper, her

deft fingers moving quickly. Silence enveloped her, broken by the slight scratching of her quill against the raised fibers. Bold, brazen words spread across the page, appearing clearly so no one could mistake her words.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran, with his heart pounding against his ribcage as a mace might against a rock, paced the floor of the chamber waiting for any word from Constance. His boot heels clanged uneasily on the gray stones, black tendrils of his hair streaming out behind him.

Where was the damned novice?

Surely, she must have given an answer by now. As he paced, Kieran's mind thought back to that blissful night they had spent in unabashed pleasure, trying to think of what he might have done to make her act so strangely. Event by event, he replayed the entire night back in his mind and nothing stood out significantly. The only mistake he thought that he might have made was not to be there when she awoke. Aye, that was problem. She was not satisfied with the note he left promising to return with the priest. Before his mind could ponder more, a knock at the door withdrew his attention from his thoughts.

His anxious eyes narrowed on the door. "Enter," he growled then slumped in another chair provided from the dining hall, the elderly wood groaning under his bulky weight. Thankfully, the sun had begun to go down, making the ancient stones gave up their hold on the stored heat. Kieran wore nothing but his boots and leather breeches, taking advantage of the cooler air.

Father Cesare shuffled in slowly, a rolled parchment in his hand. On his face, he wore a sorrowful expression as if someone at the abbey had died. Sitting down across from Kieran, Father laid the roll on the table, placing meaty hands on his worn knees. "Your message has arrived, Kieran and I am afraid 'tis not good news."

Anxiety stormed through him, making him wildly to his feet, his hands grasping the parchment. "What does she say?"

Father Cesare shook his head sadly and held out the message. "Read her words," he murmured.

Oblivious to the priest's words, Kieran strode quickly over to the open window in order to read the

document a little clearer in the dying light of the sun. Unrolling the parchment, his eyes scanned the paper.

What he saw made his blood run cold.

Father Cesare,

I do not wish to be involved with Kieran anymore and you know why. Several nights ago, a man attacked me in my chamber by a murderer whom very nearly succeeded to kill me but I thwarted him with my guards. I had him locked up safely in the dungeon until I could decide what his punishment would be. The morning Kieran left me to retrieve you, the prisoner asked to see me. From his lips came the plan Kieran contrived that he would either kill me or bed me in order to gain my support for his cause. To make matters worse, he produced a black velvet purse filled with coins bearing the crest of Stratford embroidered on the material along with the first initial of Kieran's name. 'Twas all the evidence I needed. That is why I will not see him nor marry him. He betrayed my trust and now must pay the ultimate price for his betrayal. Please convey to him that my army will not assist him in any way for he does not seem to hear me.

Constance, Duchess of Ravenwood

Kieran's heart nearly fell to his feet along with his chilled blood. Thankfully, his steadily rising anger pushed the organ back into place.

Someone attacked and nearly killed her! His fury mounted even higher because of the lie contrived by the prisoner. He would never harm a hair on Constance's head! He loved her with all that was in him, down to the depths of his very soul. His lips curved into a frown while a snarl escaped his mouth. He would find out who plotted this scenario, making sure that the man paid with his life.

As he reread the message, a voice came to him like an echo of the past telling him this rang of Hugh's handiwork. Of course! If Hugh married Constance, he would be the most powerful man next to the King as far as land and armies were concerned. That was the missing piece to this strange puzzle. With him out of the way, Hugh stood a better chance of courting Constance and winning her hand. His fury burned hotter. He was going to prevent that, whether or not Constance wanted him to. Even though, she did not trust or love him, she would never suffer as Odette had done, not while he lived.

He crumpled the note in one large fist. "Father, has the novice I sent to Stratford reached there yet?"

Puzzlement crossed the older man's face. "I suppose so, Kieran. Why?"

Kieran moved to the table, placing his hands on the edges, gripping for dear life. His knuckle turned white from the strain of his wrath. "If I am not mistaken and I rarely am where Hugh is concerned, then Hugh will try his best to court Constance now I am out of the way."

Father nodded, his balding head shining a bright pink in the torchlight. "Aye, that he might."

"Then with your permission, I would like another novice to ride to Stratford to check up on the novice I planted at Hugh's court. I need the information of Hugh's doings to come to me much faster, especially with Constance's life at stake," he replied as a rough hand rubbed his stubble filled chin pensively.

Aye, that what would be needed if he were to succeed.

Light gray brows furrowed. "I do not see why not, Kieran. Do you think Hugh will do anything to harm the Duchess?"

Smirks crossed his mouth. "Nay, he will not harm her but if I know my brother, what does not come to him willingly he takes by force. What he does not know is that she belongs to me and I keep what I own."

"Kieran, we must let the Duchess...."

Kieran cut him off with an upraised hand and crossed his arms over his chest, casting a hardened look to Father Cesare. "Time is running out for decisions, Father. If Constance does not agree to be my wife soon, then I must do what my brother might to keep any harm from coming to her."

"Nay, you do not mean...." Father Cesare stammered, fully understanding what he meant.

He did not intend to relent, making the determination grow inside of him like a tiny seed. "Aye, Father. I will kidnap her myself and marry her. I left Odette to suffer at Hugh's hands because I did not send her back to Calais before I left. Because of that, I will always feel regret. I refuse let Constance suffer the same fate so that is why I will do what I must to protect her."

"Kieran, please listen to me," the elderly priest begged, "Before you do such a thing, can you not write her letters beseeching her to marry you?"

He stood proud and tall as the fire of his love for Constance filled his entire being. The man meant well but this was not the time for good intentions. It was time to act before Hugh did. Could the man not understand Constance belonged to him and he would go so far as to kill another man if he touched her? Anger crept into his voice. "Father, time is running out. Right now Hugh may be planning exactly what



I am and putting Constance's life in danger. Would you rather see Constance spend the rest of her life with that sickly bastard or with me to whom she belongs?"

Father Cesare cocked his head to the side as if to ponder the words Kieran spoke. His fleshy lips remained silent, dark gray eyes flicking all about the chamber. From the look of things, his words conveyed the gravity of the situation. If Father Cesare cared for Constance at all, he would give his blessing.

The old man sighed deeply, rising to his feet. "All right Kieran but I will only do this on one condition."

Annoyance crossed his face. This game was getting entirely too old. "What is that Father? I am growing tired of your conditions," he stated an annoyed tone.

"That you write her several letters to convince her of the truth until the information comes from Stratford concerning Hugh's movements. If you are right, we will take her before he can and wed her to you."

Kieran's lips curled in the same wicked fashion as they always did when he got what he wanted. "I knew you would see the wisdom in my plan, Father. Before I retire tonight, I will write the first of the letters and have one of the novices take it to Ravenwood."

"Now that dusk has fallen, Kieran, 'tis time for me to ring the bell for the evening mass. Do you care to join us?"

"Nay, Father for I wish to write this letter before I lose the vital words."

"Suit yourself. If you need anything, just summon a novice," Father Cesare offered then waddled out of the chamber leaving him alone with his chaotic thoughts.

After his mentor's departure, Kieran made his way to the priest's chamber. Sitting at the tiny desk, Kieran was dismayed to find that even Father Cesare's furniture groaned under his weight. Shrugging his shoulders, he ignored the sound breaking the deafening silence. If it holds Father's weight, it should certainly hold mine, he thought idly as he searched for writing instruments. Finding a parchment and a quill, he began to scribe the carefully thought out words in his mind letting them flow effortlessly onto the raised fibers of the parchment.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh paced before the raging fire, his eyes burning with black fury. Only the quick stepping of his boots on the cold stones of the floor broke the maddening tranquillity surrounding him while his mind burned with question.

Why did Kieran return from the Holy Land alive?

More frightening than that was the fact his brother knew that he had taken the Barony and Odette. Pensive fingers went to his bony chin. Someone close sent the information along to the Holy Land to Kieran prompting his return.

Who could have done such a thing?

\* \* \* \*

Margaret entered the chamber so quietly Hugh did not hear her. She stood for a moment, watching his errant pacing. Secretly her heart was glad the Duchess was not marrying Hugh's brother. She knew for a fact when the Duchess married Hugh, a killer would be waiting to strike her down before the consummation of the marriage. That would leave Hugh a very available widower. Then Hugh would have no choice but to marry her then and give their child a proper name. That was why she got herself with child in the first place. Many before her tried to become the new Baroness of Stratford but failed. She would be successful. Jewels along with rich silks and furs would all be hers soon enough. As the thought drifted across her mind, she giggled slightly, causing Hugh to halt in mid stride and stare at her with angry eyes.

Hugh whirled on her, his tunic whipping around his thin ankles. "What are you doing here, Margaret?"

"I brought what you have sent for, milord," she stated, stepping aside to let the bulky, chosen men walk forward. Most of them were well over six feet, bristled by war and hardship, dressed in clothing of peasants with giant claymores strapped to their sides. His eyes narrowed these men were no ordinary mercenaries. They were Norman and the best at what they did. Aye, this must be how they get into the most guarded of places undetected, his poisoned mind pondered.

Hugh smiled broadly, his eyes raking over the group of strong soldiers standing before him. "Now, I understand you are the best men money can buy. What have you done recently that would make me

believe that?"

A very tall man with a long scar and ragged black hair stepped forward, tipping his head. Apparently, he was the chosen representative for the group. "We were hired by the Church to wipe out heretics. Did you not hear about the mass killing in that little town outside of London? 'Twas our handiwork." The man stated nonchalantly, a broad smile upon his face, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of the ornate sword hanging from his leather girdle.

Hugh rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "I have heard. Do you men understand who I want you to kill?" From the looks of the men, Kieran would not be breathing much longer.

The malicious grin grew even wider. "'Tis your brother is it not? Tell us where he resides and we will see that is done before the sun rises again tomorrow."

"Aye, you are correct. There is an abbey near here called the Abbey of St. Stephen. My brother is hiding there for the time being until he convinces the Duchess of Ravenwood to marry him. I have it on the best authority she refuses him entry much less marry him. I want you to go the abbey and kill him," he demanded in a malicious tone as his thin body slid in a chair near the fire, his bones seeking the heat the roaring flame produced.

The man shifted, waiting for Hugh's answer. "What about payment?" he questioned in a harsh tone, his arms crossing over his chest indicating annoyance.

His hardened eyes narrowed on the man. He was in no mood to play games and wanted this ghastly mess over. "You will get what you were promised in the letter when the task is complete. Now leave me for I wish to be alone," he snarled then turned to the fire, ignoring the men standing near him. Ah, yes the Duchess would be his and his alone. Soon Kieran will be dead. Oh, how he rejoiced at the prospect of his sole ownership of Stratford and of the Duchess of Ravenwood!

\* \* \* \*

Night fell around Ravenwood, the forest coming to life with the creatures awaking to the declining sun. Constance gazed out the window, her mind totally blank except for the questions endlessly swirling.

How could Kieran have betrayed her like that?

She had slightly believed Kieran truly cared for her. With the new information, she seriously doubted

she could ever trust him again. Never would she give her heart to another.

Sharp stabs of pain from his betrayal plagued her mind relentlessly, causing her many a sleepless nights. Unfortunately, that was not all haunting her mind. The absence of her monthly course toyed with her as well. It was supposed to arrive after her tryst with Kieran but the course gave no sign of coming. Distant thoughts of a child existing in her womb briefly crossed her mind. She pushed the notion deep into the recesses of thought, explaining to herself the strain of the last few days meddled with her course. Still, if she was with child...Stop!

She must not think about that now. What she must think about is how to make the message clear she wanted nothing to do with Kieran ever again. Even if a child did exist in her womb, she would simply give birth and never tell the child who his father is.

For a moment, Constance's hands left the sill, wandering over her flat belly. Did a child exist or was it her imagination delaying her course? Nay, do not be a silly goose! Still though, if she were with child, the baby would be hers and hers alone. She did not intend to tell Kieran ever.

Her lips curled at the last thought. Aye, what revenge that would be! Perhaps many years later she would tell him of his child's existence. Until then, that would be her secret alone. What she would not give to see the look on Kieran's face...

Soft, hollow sounds echoed at her door, causing her to jump slightly, the sound penetrating her aura of thought. "Enter," she bade the knocker, turning her eyes back outside to the dying light.

Slow footsteps echoed over her shoulder then stopped. "Milady, I have a message for you," Mary announced barely above a whisper.

Constance turned to see Mary holding a roll in her outstretched hand. She trembled as her blood hammered in her temples.

Was this letter from Kieran?

She stepped forward, grasping the roll with trembling fingers. "Who is it from?"

"From the Abbey of St. Stephen. I think 'tis from Milord Kieran."

Constance drew a deep breath in an effort to calm her jangled nerves. "Is there a novice waiting for a reply?"

Mary nodded. "Aye, there is."

Her shoulders stiffened as anger threaded through her body. "Feed him then send him away. There will

be no reply.”

With a firm resolve, Constance retired to her chair. How tired she grew of this game!

Was Kieran that thick headed he did not understand she wanted nothing to do with him?

The parchment felt odd in her fingers, the rough edges biting into her skin. Should she read his pathetic words or just toss it into the fire?

“Aye, milady.” Mary left the room as quietly as she came in

Without her servant to drive the unending parade of thoughts through her mind. Constance was alone in the maddening silence. Crackles of the fire drew her attention and she cast her eyes to it. Fingers of flame licked up the walls, sounding as if it hungered for the paper in her hand.

You should at least read what he had to say in defense, her mind confessed, that is what afforded to a common criminal.

Aye, the voice was right. Breaking the seal on the edge, Constance unrolled it with quivering fingers, her eyes absorbing the words carefully scribed. Her heart pounded heavily against her ribcage.

Dearest Constance,

You must believe I would never want to do such a thing! I would much rather cut off my own arm than to harm a hair on your head. I would venture to say my brother Hugh is behind all of this, even going so far as to make believe I would want to harm you! I care deeply for you and am in love with you, Constance and I only wish to make you happy. That is why I beseech you now to marry me. It will be the only way I can protect you from the clutches of my evil brother Hugh. Now that he is a convenient widower, he will be on the hunt for another wife especially one that has great lands and armies to offer. I am afraid that if he courts you and you refuse, he will resort to more evil measures to get you to be his wife. I wish to spare you from all of that. Marry me and you will never want for another thing for the rest of your life. I love you, Constance, and nothing in the world is going to change that fact. I knew it from the first moment I laid eyes on you. Aye, we had a terrible history when we were children but that is all behind us now. I have realized I have loved you since childhood but was too foolhardy to admit it. Let me make up for all of my past mistakes, Constance. I promise for the rest of our lives to make up for what I have done and make you truly happy. If you do not wish to marry me for love then marry me so if my child exists in your womb, he might have a proper name and not be branded a bastard in the future. I know you are a strong woman, Constance but if you are indeed with child, I want you to get

any notion of raising this child alone out of your head. Even if you do not marry me and are with child, our child will indeed know who his father is. I plan to be a part of your life one way or another.

Kieran

Constance's fingers let go of the parchment, letting the page fall to the floor where the paper rolled itself back up as tears of hurt and confusion fell down her cheeks.

How did he know she thought she might be with child?

Her mind spun on his words as a strong streak of anger thrummed through her. Did Kieran not understand she wanted no part of him?

She rose from her chair, stalking about the chamber for a moment as the tears continued to fall, landing on the tops of her exposed breasts and saturating her bodice.

Why did he have to keep this up? How could she heal if Kieran would not leave her alone?

Constance shuddered as the fury mounted to new heights. Kieran certainly knew all the right words to say to bring about all the emotions coursing through her veins. Especially when those words were all lies. He most assuredly had the blackest heart of any man she knew.

She halted her pacing, her gaze drawn to the rolled up parchment on the floor as Kieran's words came back to haunt her delirious mind. Even if you do not marry me and are with child, our child will indeed know who his father is. I plan to be a part of your life one way or another.

Memories of their childhood drifted in as his words left. Even in childhood, he had never given up on anything he ever really wanted. She supposed 'twas the same now. The fact she did not want to have anything to do with him never seemed to matter.

Constance sank back into the safety of her chair and picked up the parchment, reading his script once more. Tears continued to fall like summer rain as the meaning of his words sank in.

Why must he do this to her?

Without a second thought, she cast the paper into the fire that hungered for it. Watching with detached fascination, Constance's eyes remained on that bit of fiber until it turned to ash.

## Chapter 8

Reams of heat from the fire warmed Hugh's tired body but did little to quell his chaotic mind. He wished the whole ghastly mess was over, ever tired of hearing about Kieran and his exploits. His brother fast became a bothering soul, one that he should have dispatched long ago.

Hugh took a deep drink from his tankard, drowning in the deliciously numb feeling the ale provided. It was somewhat soothing and felt good as it slid down his throat. Just as he was setting the cup down on the table, a sobering thought coursed through his mind.

What would he do if Constance refused to marry him?

His hand pounded the table, as the answer became clear. That was it! "Guards!"

Within moments two of the armored guards standing outside his chamber rushed in, gauntlet covered hands upon the hilts of their swords. "Aye, Milord. What can we do for you?" inquired the first one breathlessly, a gloved hand on the hub of his weapon.

He sized them up briefly then felt his smile spread further. "I have a small task for you, that is if you are up to the challenge," he said in a low menacing tone as his skeletal hand raised the full goblet to his lips. Hugh drained the contents as if they were the last on creation then wiped his wet lips with his sleeve, slamming the tankard back down on the table. A hollow thud resounded through the room, breaking the uneasy silence. He would seek his revenge even if it were the last thing he ever did.

Confusion clouded the guard's eyes. "What is it that you desire us to do?"

Hugh rose slowly from his chair and drew the blanket tighter around his thin shoulders. "I want you to capture the Duchess of Ravenwood for me."

An expression of greedy understanding cut across the haggard features. "When do you want this to be done, milord?"

He glared at his ready henchmen. "The sooner the better. I have asked for the Duchess' hand in marriage but she has seen fit to ignore my proposal several times. Especially, since she is under my beloved brother's spell. So with that in mind, I want you to bring her back unharmed. She is to be untouched except by me. Is that understood?"

His servant's head tilted in a methodical nod. "Aye, milord."

“Take only as many men as necessary. Constance knows not of my coming and I do not want her guards to be alerted to my presence,” he growled and prowled around the chamber restlessly, holding out his goblet. “Here, fill this up before you leave.”

The dour man took it from his fingers, filled it then returned the cup. Hugh took a deep drink.

He swept into a low bow, holding onto the hilt of his sword. “Aye, Milord, I will tell them. With your permission, I will begin readying my men tonight. Within a fortnight, we should be able to retrieve the Duchess.”

Hugh held up his goblet as if in salute. “Excellent. I will have her before Kieran even knows she is gone,” he remarked greedily, “if you execute this task with perfection, I will reward you handsomely as well. Now leave me. I grow weary at this late hour.”

He waved them away with a quick brush of his thin hands

The guard bowed. “Aye, Milord.”

His man turned and exited, the light swish of cloak rustling filled the air as well as the steady beat his boot heels issued on the floor. Once the sound died away, he was alone again.

Hugh went back to his chair and sank into its exquisitely embroidered, deeply padded cushions, huddled in the heavy woolen blanket, his very bones chilled to the core. Tremors of shivering suddenly racked his thin body as liquid began to flow from his nose. Hastily he wiped the moisture away with the back of his hand.

Why did he have to suffer and Kieran did not?

‘Twas hardly fair Kieran not only inherited his body build from their ancestors but the Stratford charm with the women as well. He was nothing more than a tall gangly boy who never seemed to gain an ounce no matter what he ate. Kieran, on the other hand, always seemed to be eating, his build getting more powerful by the day. Now ‘twas his turn to enjoy the fruits of life while Kieran suffered. His scrawny lips curled into a smile. Aye, it was his turn.

\* \* \* \*

The novice remained hidden deep within the recesses of the nook, his face secluded by his dark cowl. He was on his way to the chapel when he had heard the Baron’s voice ring out from the chamber,



calling for the guards. Quickly, he pushed himself into the inglenook, holding his breath as the guards rushed past him. Once he was sure it was safe, he let it out. With a pounding heart and sweat forming on his brow, the novice listened closely and carefully to what the real Baron's brother said. A slight smile curled his lips. This information would aid the real Baron very well.

He remained tucked in the niche, holding his breath as the guards passed him, his heart pounding wildly. Steady beats of their boot heels and clanking armor plates filled the air, adding to his fear of discovery. Instinctively, he put a hand to his mouth to stifle the sound of his breathing. Once they were past, the boy let out a sigh of relief, commanding his heart to abate in intensity. Ascertaining there was no one else about the apprentice slipped from his quoin and went to his chamber. Vital parchment and ink awaited his hand.

\* \* \* \*

Father Cesare ambled to the gate to welcome the visitors who rang the gate bell. Several dirty, ragged men awaited him. He stopped in his tracks. His wizened eyes fell to the swords strapped to their sides. Those were no ordinary swords.

Perhaps a rod long, their edges were honed sharply, their hilts intricately crafted. Smooth, highly polished steel glared at him. Their weapons appeared to be made of the finest metal England had to offer. Men this poor most certainly could not afford swords such as these! They are mercenaries, a voice told him, and they are here after Kieran. His mind whirled. Should he let them in or merely turn them away, thus giving away Kieran's existence? Aye, I should let them in then send Kieran on his way until they pass. He smiled.

That was exactly what he was going to do.

Father Cesare slipped his stout hands inside the sleeves of his coarse woolen robe then waddled to the gate. He turned his smile into a friendly one. "Why are you here, my children? Are you lost?"

A large man, his face covered in inking, moved forward. "We are lost peasants and we ask for room for the night."

He bent his head for a moment then looked up at them. "I am afraid I have no more room but if you will have some food...."

Scowls crossed the man's scar ridden face. "We seek lodging for the night, Father, not just a meal. Can you not afford us what we ask or not?" The stranger's demeanor also raised an alarm in his senses. Most starving people would take what they could get and demand what was impossible. In addition, the man's strange accent worried him. He had heard it before but he could not remember where.

"Aye but 'tis not much I am afraid. I only have the stable left as far as lodgings are concerned. As for the food, we were just sitting down at the dining table for a meal. You are most welcome to join us," he offered then waved his hand in a come-follow-me gesture. The men turned to look at each other then dismounted, bringing their horses through the abbey walls.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran watched the scene from his window high above their heads. His eyes narrowed to slits upon hearing the murmur of voices floating up. From first glance, they seemed to be peasants.

His knight's sense had told him otherwise.

High gleams of their swords in the moonlight gave telltale evidence these men were much more than peasants, mercenaries perhaps.

Why would mercenaries come to the Abbey?

His mind answered even before the thought left his mind. Hugh! If anyone were low enough to send mercenaries to kill him, it would be Hugh.

His hands tightened their grip on the windowsill, his tanned knuckles turning white. I can not believe my own brother sent men to kill me, he thought maliciously, but somehow this not only involves Stratford but Constance as well. His heart lurched. There was no way Hugh would ever touch Constance, not as long as he drew a breath. Instinctively, his hand went to his sword bound at his side. Aye, Hugh would die by his hand if necessary.

He continued to watch the men follow Father Cesare into the Abbey, their heads darting about. Their clothing, ragged and torn, was grimed with dirt. That was certainly easy enough to come by.

Kieran looked to their horses. The animals they rode were in good condition, unlike workhorses that most peasants possessed. That only meant two things. They were mercenaries and they were here for him. He could feel their evil intentions ride the wind like a rising storm.

Suddenly one man gazed upwards as if he sensed someone watching him. Kieran ducked into the safety of the shadows, hiding his bulky form. From the expression on the peasant's face, the man did not notice him. Once his curiosity was satisfied, the stranger's head lowered, allowing Kieran's breath to leave his chest. The last thing he wanted to do was alert them to his presence. Let that be a surprise to them.

He stepped forward and watched them until they disappeared beyond the walls of the monastery. He cast his gaze to the path. Hopefully, his spy would be sending news that he needed so desperately of Hugh's movements.

\* \* \* \*

"Please seat yourselves and everything will be on the table in a moment," Father Cesare suggested as he gestured toward the empty wooden seats surrounding the empty table. Slight murmuring flowed among the men, seating themselves in an unmannered fashion.

The apparent head of the group nodded his gratitude. "Many thanks, Father, for we are truly hungry," he answered in a guttural tone, a language that he had many years before. Then, as if it were a distant memory, the knowledge of where he had heard that tongue before rose in his mind like a raging fire. Normandy!

These men were Norman mercenaries sent to the Abbey to kill Kieran!

Father Cesare hid his emotions well, tucking his hands in his sleeves as he tilted his head. "Aye, my son you are welcome. Now if you will excuse me, I must go to the chapel and pray for the Duke of Lancaster's sister who is dying of consumption."

The leader stood up. "All right, Father. We will dine while you pray," he replied in mocking tone then threw himself into the chair amid the savage remarks made by the others.

Before he left the room, they fell on the meal as though it were the last they would have. Fear coursed through his veins as he watched their ruthless hands tear at the meat and bread not to mention the fruit and vegetables. He had to get to Kieran and warn him or his young pupil would not live to see the morning.

With a worried heart and quick steps, Father Cesare ambled from the room, closing the heavy oaken

door behind him. He scurried through the back stairs of the Abbey and made his way to Kieran's chamber as fast as his stout legs could carry him.

\* \* \* \*

Quick, terrified raps on his door withdrew Kieran from his thoughts. He frowned slightly, swiping the black tendrils from his eyes. "Enter," he snarled trying to hide his anxiousness. Had the novice returned from Ravenwood?

Father Cesare rushed in with a look of concern upon his weathered face. "I have just given sanctuary to men whom I am sure are Norman mercenaries. Dress quickly and get as far away from here as you possibly can. When the men have left, I will send for you," he muttered, his fat hands wringing in anxiety.

He frowned. "What gives you the idea that they are Norman?"

Father Cesare's fright deepened. "From the way they are dressed to their swords and tongue...."

Kieran cut him off with an upraised hand. "I am deeply touched by your concern but I am not going anywhere," he announced as he sank into the chair and propped his feet up on the table, glaring at the priest through half closed eyes. Nothing would take him away from this place.

Father's face reddened with fear, the lines of his face becoming deeper. "Be reasonable, Kieran! There is ten of them and only one of you! If you leave, you will have a chance. If you stay, you will die," he begged as his eyes moistened.

His hands laced behind his head as an arrogant grin covered his mouth. The priest was wasting his words. "As I have already said, I am not going anywhere, Father. I want to remain as close to Constance as I possibly can in case anything should happen to her," he stated through determined lips.

His gaze remained locked onto the body of the heavy priest, scrutinizing the man's demeanor. Did the priest not understand he was afraid of nothing?

Father Cesare pleaded with him more. "Kieran, you are not listening to me! At this very moment...." the priest trailed off, his words cut off by an urgent knocking at the door. With an annoyed sigh, Father Cesare stalked over to the door and threw it open.

"What is it, boy?" Father Cesare growled at the young man on the other side, his Italian lilt more

pronounced than ever.

“I...I...have a message from both Ravenwood and Stratford Castles,” he quivered, holding out the carefully sealed wax rolls.

Kieran leapt to his feet as he heard the name of Ravenwood. “What about Ravenwood? What did the Duchess have to say?” he demanded, his heart pounding. He must know the answer to his question now or else he would go mad.

“Milord, the Duchess says there is no reply to your message however there is a message from someone else inside the castle,” he stated and thrust the folded note toward Kieran. “The sender wishes you to read it alone. The other message is from Stratford,” the boy replied the laid the document in Father Cesare’s outstretched hand. With a courteous bow, the boy left them, ambling down the narrow hallway.

Kieran’s heart sank at the prospect of not receiving any more messages from Constance. In his heart, he did not want to give up on her though it seemed that she had given up on him. Perhaps if he could just make her understand he was not the one trying to kill her. Somehow Hugh had pinned this on him and he was going to find out how, one way or another.

“Do you wish me to read it Kieran?”

He drew a ragged breath. “Nay, Father, I will read it since it pertains to me.”

Kieran snatched the parchment from Father Cesare's extended fingers and moved over to the candle so he could see the neat handwriting more clearly. Glaring words that leapt from the page turned his blood to ice.

Baron Stratford,

There is a great danger that I write this to you. I overheard the contender Baron speaking to his guards about kidnapping the Duchess of Ravenwood and forcing her to marry him. He knows she would not come to his arms willingly so he will force her to do so. In a fortnight, there is a planned raid on Ravenwood with the contender’s guards to gather the Duchess and bring her here to be wed. I beseech you Milord, to do what you must to stop this travesty and protect your own life. If a band of ragged looking, men arrive asking for shelter claiming they are wayward peasants. Do not trust them. They are highly paid mercenaries for the contender who is consumed with a desire to see you dead. Godspeed to you Milord for I will pray for your safety.

He noticed there was no signature on the message, perhaps for the safety of the novice should anyone intercept the message before the parchment reached the abbey.

His fingers let go of the paper as the blood thrummed through his ears. The roughened parchment fell from his fingers to the floor where the fibers rolled up.

Father's brows knitted in concern. "What did the note say, Kieran?" Father Cesare his crinkled gray eyes drew to the floor to where the roll lay.

Heat from the flames of his anger crept up his face as he tucked the folded note in his hauberk. He would read that as soon as possible. "'Twas the spy I sent to Stratford. 'Tis seems my brother is planning to kidnap Constance just as I suspected and has sent those mercenaries downstairs to kill me,'" he snarled, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger with untouchable meat dangling before its muzzle. His hands clenched and unclenched as anger pounded his veins, his black hair flying. His boots beat an angry rhythm on the cold stone of the floor.

What was he to do?

Father Cesare held his hands up to stop Kieran's pacing. "Slow down, Kieran. When is your brother planning this attack?"

He halted in his tracks before the rotund priest. "In a fortnight. If he so much as touches her...."

"Kieran, listen to me. We will retrieve her before he can get to her. Now, you said it would be a fortnight before Hugh attacks?"

His eyes narrowed as he nodded. "Aye."

"Then we must plan now. Do you think if you write and tell Constance about the attack, she will believe you?"

"Nay for she did not even respond to the message I sent her," Kieran remarked ruefully, his massive arms crossed over his mighty chest while a scowl crept over his features. Did Constance not understand the gravity of her situation?

"Now what I want you to do is send her a message daily even though she does not respond."

Now Kieran was puzzled, his eyebrows rising in kind. "Why, Father?" What was the old man up to?

His mentor held out a much-too small robe. "I will tell you later. Here, get into this robe and come down stairs with me."

“Father, surely you do not expect me....”

“Put it on, Kieran and come to the dining hall with me. If these men suspect you are not here, they may move on thinking you fled to another part of the kingdom.”

Kieran shrugged. Father was right. If these men just moved along, he would have more time to gather his plan for Constance. Ah, I can almost feel her arms around me, he thought wistfully to himself, and no one will ever come between us. If they did not, blood would spill today.

With Father Cesare’s help, Kieran put the brown robe over his armor. The robe, already too small for Kieran’s massive frame, stretched with displeasure. Kieran tugged upon the unforgiving material, trying to get the fabric over his armor. Inch by inch the material slid downward until the robe could move no more.

“I doubt that this robe will disguise me, Father. Look.” Kieran murmured, pointing to his feet causing Father Cesare to step back and look at the robe. With Kieran’s tall frame, the robe only fell to just above his knees, exposing the shimmering armor.

Father Cesare put a pudgy finger to his red chin, his eyes distant as he was deep in thought. “Now that will be a problem. I have an idea that you will not like, Kieran but ‘tis for your own good. Hunch over and walk as though you have a lame leg.”

Kieran’s eyebrows arched mischievously, realizing what Father Cesare wanted. Aye, he would play the part of a lame brother, fooling the hired assassins. A sly smile crossed his lips as he obeyed the priest’s command. This just might work after all.

Father chuckled slightly. “Perfect. Walk that way through the dining hall so the men will not suspect your identity. If they do, then there will no one on their side.”

“Do you think they might?”

“If they do then twill be their own mistake, not yours. Come my little hunch backed friend. Let us join the other priests for the evening meal, ” Father Cesare stated, laughter ringing in his voice. Gingerly, he pulled the cowl up over Kieran’s head and tucked away the dark strands hanging limply outside. Father stepped back and gave him a perfunctory glance, nodding his head. Giving him a swift blessing, the holy man turned and waddled out of the chamber. Kieran followed his former tutor obediently, acting the part of the hunchback when they reached the hallway leading to the dining chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Spicy aroma of roast chicken assailed his nostrils the moment they entered the hallway leading toward the dining hall. Sage, thyme and rosemary permeated the air with their soft sweetness along with smell of fresh bread wafting down the passage. Kieran's stomach clamored for the fresh food, the growling quite loud.

"Keep your stomach quiet, Kieran. We do not want to give your identity away," Father Cesare whispered hoarsely as they made their way down the cold, drafty entryway.

"I am sorry, Father. I am truly hungry," Kieran whispered back, his stomach making another cry for food.

"Just keep that belly under control until we enter the dining hall."

"Aye."

He had tried with everything inside of him to quiet his belly but 'twas no avail. When he smelled food, his appetite tended to take over. If were not for Father Cesare's patient nature, he might have charged ahead into the dining hall and surely get himself killed.

They entered the dining hall amidst the busy monks putting the roast chicken, potatoes, carrots and beans upon the table along with many loaves of freshly baked bread. Yellow summer butter sat heaped in wooden dishes abounded the table. Greedy hands, covered in layers of filth, grabbed at the food within easy reach. Kieran peered up, as his cowl would allow him and saw ragged men seated around the large table, eating heartily without saying a blessing.

Father raised his hand, clearing his throat. "HALT!"

The men immediately obeyed, their hands frozen in mid motion while their eyes conveyed a murderous glare. Their leader looked up from his trencher, annoyance stamped clearly on his haggard face as well as the faces of his men. "What is the problem Father?"

Pudgy hands went to stout hips. "None of you have the courtesy to say grace to our gracious Lord above for the food. Put your hands in your laps and I will commence with the blessing."

Father Cesare prayed the blessing in Latin, making the blessing longer than it should be. Kieran assumed it was because the priest knew none of the mercenaries understood the language. He smiled beneath his disguise.



In his own way, Father could be so cruel.

Father blessed the crowd. “Now you may begin, men. If you do not care, my hunchbacked novice will be joining us.”

Kieran allowed himself to be helped to his chair by Father, keeping the ruse of his affliction alive. Slowly he rotated with the aid of the priest, seating slowly, his hidden gaze surveying the room. The eyes of the men remained on him, as if they alone knew his secret. For their sake, he hoped they did not. Father took a seat next to him and pulled various foods from bowls then placed it on Kieran’s trencher before him.

Father turned to him, speaking in a slow tone. “Are you ready to eat, my son?”

Kieran nodded. His back was already hurting from his position. With any amount of hope, his identity would be found soon that he could stand up straight again instead of hiding under a priest’s robe.

The older man turned his attention to the newcomers. “Tell me, men how are you enjoying your food?”

“Fine, priest,” Answered one man as he ate quickly, the half-chewed food from his mouth tumbling down his long beard.

“I did not ask before but what brings you to this humble house of the Lord?” his mentor questioned as he tried to steer the conversation away from Kieran’s unmoving slumped form.

“We are searching for someone, priest. Perhaps you can tell us where he is?”

“Who are you searching for? If it is the Lord, you most certainly are in the right place.”

“Nay, ‘tis not God we are searching for. ‘Tis the brother of the Baron of Stratford and upon rumor he is said to be residing here along with the garrison that accompanied him from the Holy Land to England.”

Father Cesare shook his pink, balding head. “I am truly sorry but I can not help you. Lord Kieran left some time ago and has not seen fit to keep in contact with me as to his whereabouts,” he confessed mildly as he dug into his part of the roasted chicken carcass.

The raggedy man lifted his head, his eyes darting about the room as if he scented Kieran’s presence. An inky brow lifted as a malicious grin covered his bearded lips. “Oh, he is here. I think he is closer than we know,” he said slowly, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

His heart pounded. Now was his chance. Taking the cue from the man’s words, he leapt from the chair and tore the robe from his body. The man’s hand went quickly to the hilt of his ornate sword, and Kieran withdrew his blade in the ancient gesture of combat.

“If ‘tis I that you seek then you have found me, fool.” Kieran taunted. His sword made a few mechanical stabs in the man’s direction. The rest of the ragged band rose from their chairs with weapons draw from rough sheaths tied tattered girdles.

His enemy’s eyes glared with a deadly ferocity. “Aye, for when I return with your head upon a pike, the true Baron will reward me most handsomely,” he teased, thrusting his weapon dangerously at Kieran’s midsection.

“The only thing my brother will do is reward you with a sword to your gullet,” he scoffed, arousing the man’s anger even more, “Is that what you desire?”

With an anguished cry, the mercenary’s sword swung in his direction, cutting the air with a soft swish. Kieran caught it with his blade, halting its descent. Sparks flew where metal ground against metal.

“Had enough?” Kieran demanded as he pushed the man’s sword farther away from him. The man was no match.

“Never,” he snarled as he stepped back, thrusting his sword out again. “Not until you are dead.”

“Then let the battle begin.”

Around and around they danced in the ancient dance of combat, steel against steel, the clashing rising high through the chamber. Monks and mercenaries alike gathered around the combatants, the strong mix rising voices came to a fevered pitch.

Sweat beaded Kieran’s forehead, the moisture falling like rain around him. Some of it dripped into his eyes, causing a strong stinging sensation. He had learned long before now to ignore it.

Back and forth, their weapons clashed, the men matching the others skill, that is until one tactical mistake. His enemy raised his sword as if to thrust Kieran with it. Sensing the opportunity, Kieran drove home his sword through the man’s chest, piercing the unprotected heart. For a moment the dead man’s hands grasped onto the hard implement of war, his hands clenching the blade. The instant life left his body, the man slid backward from Kieran’s blade, landing upon the floor with a dull thud.

He whirled around, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Does anyone else wish to challenge me?”

The mercenaries tightened their circle around Kieran, each one gazing at the other for an answer. They had observed his skilled blade at work. Apparently, none of them wished to lie on the floor next to their fallen brethren. Slowly they lowered their swords, re-sheathing the heavy metal blades. “Nay, milord. Men, grab our dead and we shall leave here,” answered another.

Kieran nodded to them, his weapon still poised for battle. "'Tis a good choice. Now, I will give you five minutes to gather what is yours then you will leave this place and forget what happened here," he commanded, his breath coming back in a deep and even rhythm.

Silently two men stepped forward and picked up the lifeless corpse by the arms, dragging the body toward the open door. Thick dribbles of blood remained on the stones, the crimson puddle congealing quickly.

Kieran watched the mercenaries, his mind giving no more thought to the lifeless corpse than he would have a dead animal. 'Twas easy to feel nothing when a human life is extinguished. The years in the Holy Land turned those emotions he had toward life to stone. Strangely, his eyes drew to the spot on the stone floor where the blood congealed into a sticky puddle, deep red fingers running between the rocks. 'Twas just another nuisance out of the way, he thought to himself, and now I can continue with my pursuit of Constance.

Father's hands clapped in delight. "May the Lord be praised, Kieran! He has spared you again!"

He bowed mockingly from his waist. "Thank you, Father. The good Lord has certainly smiled on me today," he mumbled as his gaze trailed over the veritable feast before them. "'Tis a real pity for all this food to go to waste. Shall we eat?"

Father Cesare grimaced slightly, shaking his head. "I see nothing dampens your appetite, Kieran. Very well, go ahead and eat while I organize some of the novices to clean up your mess as usual."

With a quick flick of his thick wrist, Father Cesare summoned a few new novices to clean the floor. Kieran smiled slightly as he sat down. Aye, this indeed reminded him of his childhood.

\* \* \* \*

Urgent pounds at his door woke Hugh from a sound sleep. His heart beat quickly as the panic thrummed through his veins. Who could be knocking in these early morning hours? "Come in," he snarled, sitting up in bed and running his hands through his wild tangle of limp hair.

He looked over. Margaret slept peacefully beside him, her arm thrown around his thin waist. With a careful hand, Hugh put her arm over to the side, laying the limb down slowly lest she wake up early. She merely yawned and turned to her back, slipping in the plethora of dreams. Her belly had grown

quite a bit over the last few days and seemed to bulge out, sickening Hugh immensely. He preferred young women with taut lithe bodies not ones all stretched out due to the rigors of childbirth. With a grimacing face, Hugh turned away to see which fool decided awaken him at such an early morning hour.

His messenger, hurrying into the room, halted at the end of the bed and bowed. "Milord, the mercenaries have sent word from the Abbey."

A deep frown cursed Hugh's lips. "And what did they have to say?" His words woke Margaret from a sound sleep. She blinked then rose on her elbow, the sheet covering her demurely.

She rubbed her dark eyes furiously. "What is it, milord?"

"Bite your tongue, woman," he hissed then turned to the man standing at the end of the bed. "Now, what is this news?"

His herald appeared ever more anxious. "That Lord Kieran still lives. He is the best swordsman in the realm and the mercenaries could not beat him."

Fury stormed through his veins, lighting a fire that burned out of control. Damn those mercenaries! They should have killed Kieran where he stood!

Hugh leapt from his bed as the gravity of the situation sank in. He did not care that his gaunt body was naked. Let the man stare.

Stealthily, he paced the floor as his terrified servant looked on, crunching the brim of his hat in his hands awaiting the fury of his anger.

"How did this happen?" He growled as he paced the cold stone floor of the chamber, the chill from the stones creeping up his ankles causing pain to flare up.

"I know not, milord but the message stated that one man was killed. "

"Where are the survivors?"

"Again, milord I know not."

Hugh paced the chamber as vigorously as a caged animal; his skin breaking out in gooseflesh as the chilly wind passed his flesh with each stride.

Damn those mercenaries for not doing the job they were supposed to do!

Kieran still held life, which meant his claim on Stratford, was in dire jeopardy.

Somehow his brother must be disposed of and quickly!

Why at this very moment he could be gathering the necessary army that he needed to overtake Stratford!

Hugh abruptly halted his pacing and cast his furious gaze onto that of his terrified messenger. "Is there any news of my brother?"

"Nay, milord there is not."

"Good. He must not have enough men to regain Stratford. When you leave here tell the two men posted outside my door that the plan is to be enacted in a fortnight without delay," Hugh grunted, lumbering toward the bed. Climbing in between the sheets, Hugh settled his down again.

His man bowed. "Aye, milord." Quietly he left the dim room, the soft echoes of his footfalls ricocheting around the room. Sluggishly, the sound died away.

Hugh was alone with the exception of Margaret who sought refuge in slumber. Maniacal thoughts whirled chaotically in the fierce blackness of his mind, attaching themselves to the fabric of his forethought.

How was he to dispatch of Kieran?

Everything he sent his beloved brother's way was thwarted, by natural and unnatural means. Why he could...a soft coo seared the veil of thoughts. His eyes turned sharply to the stirring form next to him.

She rose languidly, resting on a crooked elbow. "What is the matter, milord?"

"'Tis nothing to concern yourself with, Margaret. Be quiet and leave me to my thoughts," he snarled then turned to his side avoiding her face. Margaret lay down quietly next to him, her arm around his thin waist.

The woman was becoming a fast nuisance.

An evil smile curled his lips. He would deal with her later in his own sweet time.

Days passed with all the sluggishness of a funeral cortege. Constance's only expectation for each one was the arrival of Kieran's never-ending stream of letters begging her to reconsider and marry him. She simply refused by not bothering to answer.

After the first few days, she did not bother to open them, merely throwing them in the fire. Deep down she knew he only wanted to marry her for what she could provide. Perhaps soon after their wedding he would neatly dispose of her just as his brother disposed of his poor wife. Poor Odette, she thought to herself, we are like sisters now.

With the passage of time, Constance waited for any sign her monthly course was going to appear. Tragically, the signs were not there. Its absence confirmed that Kieran's child indeed grew in her belly. What was she going to do?

Kieran would not know of the child's existence. It was as simple as that. The last thing she wanted in her life was Kieran's constant intrusion about raising their son or daughter.

Aye, she would raise the child herself.

When the child was older and asked about his or her father, she would simply tell the child he died in battle in the Holy Land, fighting alongside good King Richard. As far as she was concerned, Kieran was dead.

\* \* \* \*

Birds greeted the rising sun with their cheerful song causing Constance to rise early. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she gazed out at the window for a moment at the clear blue sky beyond. It was of the palest cerulean, almost the color of Kieran's eyes when he gazed at her intently. Stop thinking of him! Her mind cried the tears flowed at the pangs of regret invading her body. Why must he constantly toy with her emotions even when he was not present?

Even the letters he had sent dripped of his lies. Day after day, he barraged her with letters declaring his love for her.

How could she have ever believed him?

All he wanted was her army and would be willing to do anything to get what he wanted, including marrying her. Nay, she would not live in a loveless marriage. She would rather live a solitary life with

her bastard child than exist like that.

As the chaotic thoughts swirled in her head, Constance felt bile rise up in her throat and leapt quickly from the bed, making her way to the bucket in corner just in time. She rode the waves of nausea racking her body, her belly continuously retching though the contents of her stomach lay in the bucket. Gradually the nausea began to abate. Constance stepped away from the foul smelling bucket, wiping her face on a nearby cloth.

With that tide of nausea, Constance knew now she was with child. There was no longer any doubt. Kieran shall never know of this child, she thought to herself, for I will be beholden to no one.

On unsteady feet, she walked to the bed and slid her nausea-ravaged body between the cool sheets while her head spun in a wild fashion. Oh, my child, you will be the most loved and adored of anyone in the Kingdom, she thought, her hand on her belly, and I will never let anyone ever harm you, including your own father.

Slowly her heavy lids lowered until they closed completely as blessed sleep came to find her again.

\* \* \* \*

Urgent knocking at the door brought her from the blissful depths of sleep. Like a drowsy child, she rose slightly. "Enter," she mumbled as a tired fist rubbed the slumber from her eyes. Her gaze remained locked on the door to see who would be entering. As if on cue, Mary stepped from the other side of the door with another roll of paper in her nut-brown hands.

A frown crossed her lips. "If 'tis from Lord Kieran, throw the parchment in the fireplace where I have consigned all the others."

Mary stepped forward with a look of deep concern on her face. "Milady, one of the novices from St. Stephen's Abbey brought it. 'Tis from Father Cesare himself therefore you must read it," she urged gently.

Instinctively, the servant's head drew to the odor coming from the bucket by the door. Let her look for I am in no mood for foolishness. Silently, Constance wanted to hug her secret to her for as long as possible but everyone would find out eventually. 'Twas best to get it over with.

Constance sighed deeply the put her hand out reluctantly. What if it was some ruse by Kieran to get her

to read it? “Then let me have it, Mary.”

Dark eyebrows raised as Mary’s face swung around to meet hers. “Were you sick, milady?” she questioned as she laid the roll in Constance’s hand.

She peered up from her ministrations on the roll that Mary handed her. “Aye. Take that bucket and empty it for I may be sick again a little later.” Constance ordered off handily, breaking the seal with trembling fingers. Bits of wax clung to the blanket briefly before she swept the unwanted fragments on the floor. Her eyes flicked briefly to the tallow then back to the paper. Unrolling the fibers, Constance read the familiar words.

Dearest Constance,

I am sorry that I had to dupe you this way but ‘twas the only way I could get you to read my message. I know the others you have consigned to the flames and with any amount of hope, you will not consign this one as well. I beg of you, Constance please marry me. I fear for your life. Since Hugh is now a convenient widower, you are now in his sights. There is no telling what he might do to get you to marry him. Constance, I know now I love you and would never dream of ever hurting you. You must believe me in this fact. I know what the prisoner showed you belonged to me and through that, you believe the lie he told. Hugh had the evidence planted to make it appear I was out to harm you. ‘Tis simply not true. You must understand that since we were children, Hugh has always wanted what I possessed for he was the weaker of us both. All his life he was sickly where I was strong. Jealously now rules his heart. I beg of you to reconsider my proposal.

Kieran

Mary’s light footsteps broke the ugly silence in the chamber as she bore the gore filled bucket away. Constance reread the contents again, pondering on each word.

Why was he pursuing her so relentlessly?

He could have any woman he wanted. Why should he give her a passing thought?

Her heart thumped uneasily as she crumpled up the letter, consigning it to the floor. It skittered lightly away from the bed, as if heading toward the waiting flames. Her lips curved into an unforgiving frown.

Would Kieran ever understand that she wanted nothing to do with him and have the sense to give up?



Determined sighs escaped her lips. She was a strong woman with a large army to boot. Hugh could not make her marry him even if all the hounds of hell were at her heels. He was gaunt, pockmarked and gangly, causing her stomach to lurch whenever she saw him. Ha! More than likely, he needed aid in coupling. Perhaps he would break in half with too much strain!

She laughed loudly, her hand covering her mouth. Hugh would be the last man she would ever bed. Kieran was a different story all together. For a moment, she pondered how could two brothers, born of the same loins, be so completely different. Could it be they were born of the same angel and devil?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran lay in the too short cot with his stony gaze fixed on the gray stone ceiling over his head. Reams of bright sunshine streamed through the window casting golden rays over the ancient stone of the room, chasing away the chill of the night. He hoped the messenger he had sent last night reached Ravenwood by now. Mayhap Constance was reading his message instead of throwing the paper in the flames.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, imagining his sweet Constance standing by the fire dispatching his message to the greedy, licking fingers of the flame. With the help of the spy he had employed at Ravenwood, he knew all of her movements and words including the absence of her monthly course.

He smiled broadly. Not only was her course absent, he also received word Constance had the morning sickness. Aye, now it was complete. His child grew in her belly. Finally, his dream had become reality. Constance was bearing his child.

His heart lurched with unfettered excitement, his mind quickly conjuring an image of what his son or daughter would look like. Perhaps if it were a son, the boy would inherit his height and build but have Constance's hair and eyes. Mayhap, if it were a daughter, she would have the midnight colored hair like him...

Soft raps echoed through the door, ringing throughout the room and interrupting his thoughts. He turned his head sharply, utterly annoyed that someone would bother him at this most inopportune time. "Enter," he murmured, placing his large hands under his head. He was surprised to see Father Cesare. Acting oblivious to the priest, Kieran's eyes returned to the ceiling in an effort to recapture the last vestiges of his daydream.

Father waddled in slowly and seated himself at the table, stifling a yawn behind his pudgy fingers.

“Kieran, I thought you would be awake. An urgent message has arrived from my novice you sent to Stratford.”

Kieran arose quickly, almost too fast. He nearly hit his head upon the low ceiling over the bed. “What is the message?” he demanded, his breath shortening as his anxiety rose. Hugh was on the move.

“Your brother plans to move tonight in Constance’s capture. We must hurry if we hope to get to her first.”

His heart pounded while blood throbbed in his temples. He knew Hugh would be advancing but he did not count on it this soon. His hand stroked his stubble filled jaw thoughtfully.

It was time for him to act before Hugh did.

He turned to Father. “Father, is everything in place for our kidnap of the Duchess?”

Father Cesare nodded. “Of course, Kieran though I see concern crossing your face. Is there something about the plan you do not like?”

Anger heated the flesh of his face, the blood singing in his ears. “’Tis not that, Father. We must not fail in our task for two lives depends upon it.”

“Who else is there besides Constance?”

“My child, Father.”

Father Cesare leaned back abruptly as waves of concern crossed his elderly face, his eyes growing wide in surprise. “I see,” he remarked slowly, “You know for certain that she is with child?”

He smiled broadly, hiding his anger to a certain extent. “I have a spy engaged in Ravenwood Castle. I receive information about Constance continuously. The spy has reported that her monthly course has not occurred and has begun to retch every morning,” he confessed as he stood up from the bed and pulled the sheet around the width of his naked flesh. It was time to put everything in motion.

Pudgy fingers went to Father Cesare’s chin, his eyes taking on a determined look. “Well then that makes the situation a little more desperate. With my help and the help of the Lord, we will not fail, Kieran,” he promised, the sound of the older man’s voice comforting and reassuring him as it always had. If anyone was in open communication with the Almighty, it was Father Cesare.

“Aye, Father we cannot. Come let us get everything ready for we will depart for Ravenwood. By my estimation we shall arrive just before dusk,” he stated in a hurried tone as he pulled on his leather

breeches with fevered abandon, stamping his feet into his boots. Father Cesare melted away from the chamber leaving Kieran to dress while he prepared the rest of the plan.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat at the long dining table alone with food heaped before him, his appetite completely gone. Never in his life had his appetite been so horrible. Now he could not even force himself to eat. Gazing down into the food, he suddenly grew nauseous and pushed the full trencher away with a frustrated, gangly hand.

“Is the food not the way you like it, milord?” echoed Margaret’s sweet voice behind him.

Hugh whirled around, gazing at Margaret with murderous eyes. “Did I call for you wench?” He was in no mood for her company now especially since the sight of her expanding belly sickened him no end.

“Nay, milord but I thought perhaps....”

“That is your problem wench, you think too much. Leave me be.”

“But milord,” she protested as she trailed a finger down his cheek. “I have some news that might be of interest to you,” she continued to purr, walking round his chair. Her long fingers trailed down his chin in the way that normally excited him. Now it served no purpose except to annoy him. He threw the slender limb away. She flinched.

Hugh’s eyes narrowed. What could the calculating vixen be up to? “What news would that be wench?”

“There is a little rumor floating around the kingdom about the Duchess of Ravenwood,” Margaret stated with a mocking glee.

“Well, wench what is the rumor about my future wife?”

“The rumor is that she is already with child. Your brother’s child.” Margaret accentuated the last words of her sentence, driving the point home deeper. Expressions of infinite joy etched itself on her face, her slender fingers patting her belly lovingly.

Hugh sank deeper into the heavily embroidered chair, his fists clenching so hard his knuckles turned an ugly white then to an angry red.

Kieran did it again!

His 'beloved' brother got the Duchess with child so she would be in no condition to marry anyone but him!

How dare Kieran do such a thing!

Poison swam in the sea of his mind, consuming everything in its wake. "Where did you hear such a vicious lie?"

"'Tis idle gossip that is going around the kingdom, milord. I am surprised that you have not heard the same thing," she stated in a low tone, still rubbing her ever-expanding belly as if she wanted him to be proud of it as well!

He scowled, his fists clenching tighter. To hell with the gossipmongers! Somehow he must rectify this situation and fast before anything else happened. Quickly his mind spun a lie. "'Tis true, Margaret except there is one thing that is wrong. The child is mine." The look he shot her challenged her to say otherwise.

Margaret stood stock still as his words sank in, her eyes taking on a wild glare to them. Ha! There was something for the presumptive little vixen to chew on.

Her hands flew to her hips in defiance, lips pursing in a tight line. "'Tis not your child, Milord. You have not been near Ravenwood in these three years."

He smiled that slow, dangerous smile everyone hated, the corner turning up slightly. "Aye 'tis my child and there is nothing you can say about it!" he snarled as he rose from his chair, glowering over the small, cowering servant.

"'Tis a lie, milord! The Duchess would rather take her own life than spend a night in your spindly arms!" Margaret shouted, backing away from his advancing form.

He backed Margaret up until she was against the wall, no where to turn. His hands shot out on either side of her head, holding her form hostage. He grinned smugly. "I must have some charm, my dear for you willingly spend your nights in my bed and claim you are carrying my child. Tell me, is the reason my lovemaking methods or maybe my title? What is it sweet Margaret?"

"I ... I ... I ... love you, milord."

His thin lips curled into a snarl. "That is a lie, Margaret. The only thing you see in me is a title for your brats to inherit and money for you to spend like a princess."

"I truly love you, milord! How can you say that is a lie?"

His dry, cracked lips curled over his failing teeth. Her eyes widened. "Because 'tis, Margaret. Unfortunately, I will have to punish you for this little infraction of yours. Hmm, shall I inflict a lot of pain on your or merely humiliate you beyond your wildest dreams?"

"But milord...."

"I will have no more of your pleas, Margaret. Take your punishment now and learn your lesson. I will not be so easy on you next time." Hugh's mouth crushed hers, taking fierce possession of the quivering flesh. He drew her to him, holding on tightly. The sluggish manhood of his that had lately become lax sprang with a new life. Aye, it would be a most pleasurable punishment indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat back in his high-backed embroidered chair and examined his knuckles for any damage. There was only redness lingering slightly. Margaret was in her chamber, barely clinging to life after her punishment. Blood from the melee still stained the floor, ready to be cleaned by one of the servants. Crimson puddles of ooze stretching out in dark red fingers in the spaces between the stones, congealing quickly in the cool air.

Colors and properties of the blood never ceased to amaze him. Life's blood was the essential fluid of life, carrying all the necessary elements to keep a body living. Yet, when the vital fluid was lost, the properties changed from one of giving life to one of taking vitality away. Who decided this was the way things should be?

A strong, masculine voice pierced his thoughts. "Milord, we are ready to start for Ravenwood. Do you wish to accompany us?"

Hugh turned to see his guards ready for battle. Swords, battle axes and maces were strapped onto the burly men, their expertise for using the weapons unmatched. He grinned fiendishly. "Nay for I grow cold these days and wish to remain by the fire. When you bring the Duchess back, she is to be unharmed and I do mean unharmed. Do you understand me?"

"Aye, milord. We should be back by midmorning with the Duchess."

"Good. See that you do," Hugh replied blankly, continuing to stare at the pond of blood on the floor. He was deeply fascinated with the way the flames danced upon the congealed pool. Vaguely Hugh was

aware the guard had left his presence, his captain's footsteps a dying echo around him.

In the whirling madness of his mind, Hugh delved deep into thought and continued to stare at the pool, dimly aware one of the servants arrived with a steaming bucket of water. Just as the servant was about to pour the water over it, Hugh suddenly became a man obsessed. "Leave it," he commanded, his eyes never leaving the mess.

"But Milord, twill begin to foul the chamber...." the elderly woman protested, the bucket nearly overturned in her hands.

"I SAID LEAVE IT!" he shouted as he leapt from his chair. In doing so, the edge of his tunic caught on the lip of the chair. He glared at it with murderous intent, his anger getting the best of him. With a vicious yank, Hugh freed the garment but succeeded to rip his best tunic. He cared not. All he cared about was the blood remained where it was.

Grabbing the woman by the arms, he forced her to her feet. "When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed! Would you like the punishment that was handed out to Margaret a short while ago?" he growled, thoroughly enjoying the frightened look upon the woman's face. All servants should cower as this woman did.

"No, milord," she mumbled, the trembling throughout her body became more intense.

Hugh loosened his grip on her frail shoulders. "Good. Now leave me for I do not wish to be disturbed the rest of the day," he ordered then let her go.

With a quick nod of her head, she picked up the bucket leaving him to his own devices.

He sank back into his chair, his long fingers rubbing his temple in frustration at the situation. Here he was, surrounded by nothing but incompetent fools seeking only to line their own pockets! Nay, if anyone was to be the one bringing the Duchess back to Stratford, it should be he!

Hugh called for his guard. The individual who answered his call, half stumbled-walked into his presence, bowing quickly. "What do you wish, milord?"

"Ready my horse and armor. Has the guard that I dispatched to Ravenwood left yet?"

The man shook his head. "They will be leaving in a few moments, milord."

Hugh's mouth curved into a wolfish grin. "Good. Stop them. I have changed my mind. I will accompany them to Ravenwood after all."

"Aye, Milord," his servant answered solemnly then bowed and left the room, his boot heels beating a

steady rhythm on the gray stones.

In the dim silence, Hugh leaned back in his chair with his thin legs outstretched. Aye, tonight would be the perfect night for a wedding. Especially to a woman who would make him as rich as the King.

\* \* \* \*

Dusk deepened around Ravenwood with all the vengeance of an enemy army. Silvery fingers of moonlight streamed down from the pale orb that climbed high in the sky, highlighting the earth in a pale glow. Brilliant stars twinkled like tiny gems sewn dark velvet fabric of deepening blue sky. Constance gazed out of her window at the wonder and beauty of the night. She had not remembered an evening like this in a while.

Soft breezes wafted through the window, tantalizing her skin, raising gooseflesh at its gentle caress. She shuddered. For a moment, it felt as though it were Kieran's touch arousing her senses.... Stop, her mind cried, you must never think of him again!

She wanted to not think of him anymore but it was impossible, made even more so by the growth of his child in her womb. Briefly, she imagined his tanned hands coming from behind her, encircling her waist to rest on the rising swell of her belly and murmuring how beautiful she was... Tears formed. She knew that was one sight she would never see. Kieran was out of her life forever and there was nothing she was going to do to change that.

With a slight yawn, Constance stepped away from the window and walked slowly to her bed. Her thoughts continued to dwell on Kieran and the welfare of their child.

What would she do if Kieran found out about the child and insisted he be allowed to help raise it?

I will think about that when the time comes, she thought, for I can not have Kieran in my life if I wish to heal

\* \* \* \*

Kieran halted his horse upon a high ridge overlooking Ravenwood, his eyes narrowing to slits as he observed the burning torches in the inner bailey. His men halted behind him, all dressed in the same

black cloaks as Kieran.

“‘Tis Ravenwood, milord?”

His eyes remained on the mild activity of the bailey. “Aye. Remember the plan and we should be out of here with the Duchess in no time.”

The man patted the large beaker strapped to his side. “I have the sleeping potion in this vial. Father said to spice the wine the Duchess’ army was drinking from and it would take no time at all for the potion to take effect,” he offered.

Kieran chuckled slightly. Inside the container was a vile, green mixture guaranteed to put a person to sleep for at least an hour. One nasty side affect besides a convulsive belly and aching head, the liquid tended to make wine sweeter and entice the person to consume more. The sickness the next morning would be most evil.

His mouth erupted into a satisfied grin beneath his cowl. “Then let us ride,” he ordered as he urged his horse forward. His men followed in the same fashion as they wound their way down the ridge toward the path to Ravenwood.

The lowered drawbridge was the welcome invitation Kieran needed. Moving over the ancient structure, he gazed up. Nothing moved in the gatehouse, indicating the gatekeeper was not at his post. That was going to make his task easier should anyone discover why they were really there.

His smile became wider. ‘Tis easier than I thought, he remarked silently as he moved forward, the horse’s hooves beating a steady rhythm on the ancient wood. His eyes darted about searching for any signs of trouble but saw none. All around the outer bailey, her army reveled in the pleasures of life. Some of them were already asleep from having too much ale. Kieran kept his head down hoping not to be noticed but ‘twas to no avail. An elderly man with a long white beard stumbled over to them, his elderly, and gnarled fingers grabbing a hold of Kieran’s horses reins.

The man belched loudly. “There, who might you be now?” His hand remained on the horse’s neck to steady himself.

“I am Laird MacKnight on my way home from London. I wish to beseech the Duchess for a night’s lodging for me and me men,” Kieran answered in perfect Scottish brogue.

Scraggly, blanched hair shook with response. “No one is to see the Duchess. She has retired for the night. Now get on with ye.” The man put both hands upon Kieran’s horse for support, his aged body swaying back and forth.



“But I must see her.”

“No one is to see her. Now be off with ye!” The man garbled as he pushed Kieran’s horse in the other direction.

“I see my good man. I have a bargain for you. You let me in and wake the Duchess and I will give you something that will make ale much better than anything else you have ever had in your life.”

Kieran watched the old man’s crinkled brown eyes light up with delight. From the ravages of the sentry’s body, he was a heavy patron of ale.

“What have ye got?”

Kieran gestured for the beaker. His man produced with a flourish. Grasping the small bottle in his left hand, he held it before the guard. “I have a wonderful spice from the East. ‘Tis most delicious I assure you.”

The man held out a grubby hand. “Give me that.”

Kieran handed the container to him, smiling secretly under his disguise. Very soon, Constance was going to be in his grasp and he would wed her before Hugh would even know what happened.

The old man removed the cork, smelling the foul liquid inside. His features disappeared in his grimace.

“‘Tis most awful stench I have ever smelled! Get this and yourselves out of here!”

Kieran’s gloved hand pulled the cowl down further over his eyes. “Once the spice is put into the ale or wine, twill make drink much sweeter than ‘twas before.”

“‘Tis a trick! Now get ye out of here!”

He smiled broadly, an idea coming to mind. “I see you are not a foolhardy man. I will strike a deal with you. Bring me a tankard of ale and let me spice it. If you still find the taste repulsive, then my men and I will leave here. If not, you and your men are welcome to the entire vile.”

The man shot Kieran a questioning look then motioned for a tankard. A filled one emerged and the captain grabbed it. Dirty hands held up the tankard and Kieran dumped a few drops of the green mixture in. Pulling the tankard back, the guard held the cup to his lips and drained the contents, most of which spilled down his stained uniform.

The guard wiped his lips with his sleeve. “Ahhhhhhh! I must admit, Milord that was better than anything I have had before. Now give me the rest.”

“Will someone wake the Duchess?”

“Aye. Geoffrey,” he motioned to a young soldier standing nearby. The boy reacted, coming to his commander’s side. “Go and tell Mary to wake the Duchess. But first go dump this in the ale barrel.”

The sentry handed the beaker to the boy who did as he ordered. Before the boy left the barrel, he cupped some of the delicious wine to his lips and drank deeply.

The older man turned to him, laying a hand on the horse’s neck. “You wait here until we get word that the Duchess is ready to see you.”

Kieran tilted his head. “Godspeed to you, good sir.”

\* \* \* \*

With all the outer guards now completely out of commission, Kieran went through the door quietly expecting more. The hall was dotted with only a handful of servants, none of whom paid any attention to him or his men. Gesturing for his men to stay behind, Kieran ventured further into the foyer. Except for the slight murmuring of the servants, all was quiet. His heart thumped uneasily in his chest as the blood hammered at his temples. Aye, I will have Constance once and for all, his mind cheered.

Just as he put a booted foot on the bottom riser, a hand snaked out of the darkness, halting him. His hand immediately went to his blade.

Who was that?

Mary melted out of the dark shadows, her fox colored eyes, liquid and shining. “I knew you would come, milord. Please hurry for your brother is on his way here to do the same thing,” she warned quietly as her hands adjusted his cowl that fell slightly during his entry

He tilted his head into a nod. “I do not know how to thank you for what you have done, Mary.”

She smiled widely. “’Tis nothing, milord. I only wish to see milady happy. That is why I chose to be your eyes and ears here at Ravenwood.”

“I shall never forget this, Mary,” he whispered as he treaded up the stairs in a fast gait.

“And I shall never forget either, milord,” she whispered to herself as she disappeared back into the shadows.

\* \* \* \*

Constance lay in a half awake-half dream state, her mind focusing on the child growing within her womb.

Was the child male or female?

Did it have Kieran's height or her fine blonde hair?

Strangely, her bed seemed much more comfortable tonight for some reason. Was it the child making it seem so?

She nestled further into bed. There was nothing in the world like being where one was safest.

Through her comfort, Constance felt a strange, gloved hand slid over her mouth, stifling any scream. Her eyes widened.

Who was this person with the gloves reeking of horse?

Frantically, her hands clawed at the offensive hand, her mind utterly panicking. Someone was here to kill her again!

"Do not scream, Constance. 'Tis me, Kieran. Forgive me, but I must do this. You have ignored my pleas far too long. Now with your life in jeopardy, I must do what I must to protect you," he whispered hoarsely in her ear, "Now if I remove my hand, will you promise to not scream?"

She nodded. The hand slipped away. "I knew you would do something so vile, Kieran," she hissed through clenched teeth, "You really are a bastard. I will not now nor anytime in the future going anywhere with you."

Kieran shook his head. "Aye, but you will, my love. Right now, Hugh rides here to kidnap you for himself. That will not happen. You will come with me tonight to the abbey where we will be married before Hugh even knows you are gone."

Her jaw tightened. "You just do not understand, Kieran. I want nothing to do with you, not now, not ever! Now leave me or so help me, I will call my guards and throw you in my dungeon to rot."

His sensuous lips curled into a half smile. "Go right ahead but I assure you they will not come. All of them are so drunk and asleep that I doubt you could rouse any of them."

Her eyebrows shot upwards. "What? What have you done to my men?" Panic soared through her. What

was she going to do for aid?

“Nothing they did not do to themselves. I just added a little something extra into their ale to help them sleep. As for being in your dungeon, at least I would get to see my son grow into manhood.”

Constance winced, her mind reeling. How did he know about the child? “I know not what you are talking about, Kieran. Whoever gave you the ale clouding your perception made a bad batch!”

His eyes raked over her form, landing on her belly. “I know you are with child, Constance. Try to deny it,” he murmured as one hand captured her wrists, holding them above her head. The other pulled up her dressing gown, exposing her bare belly. Putting the forefinger of his glove in his mouth, Kieran removed it and lay it aside. Gentle fingers trailed up her bare legs, lingering, explosions of sensation coursing throughout her body. His fingers came to rest on her rising abdomen, his hand flat. Sensual heat burned through her skin. “Your belly is no longer flat, Constance and it has grown hard. So ‘tis true I will be a father. I would dare say we made him the first time.”

Constance turned away hastily, tears forming in her eyes.

This was to be her secret and her secret alone!

Kieran did not figure into this at all. What right did he think he had over her or the child? Her body began to tremble. “What makes you think ‘tis yours?”

He smirked slightly. “There has not been time, Constance. You are a chaste woman not about to fall into bed carelessly with every man that comes along. That is why I know the child is mine. Come with me so that I can give you and the child the protection of my name.”

She turned her head away. “Nay, Kieran. I will not marry you or anyone else. I need no man in my life.”

Kieran chuckled softly. “Aye, you do or else how would you be with child? Well, since you will not go with me willingly, I have no choice but to take you with me by force.”

“You would not dare....”

The grip on her wrists tightened. “I will and I must. Come with me by force or willingly. Either way you will marry me before this night is over. What is your choice to be?”

She scowled. “I have already made my decision, Kieran.”

His hand pulled down her dressing gown, the tantalizing feel of his fingertips against her bare flesh almost more than she could stand. She shivered slightly. Then, out of the pouch on his girdle, Kieran

produced a silken strip of thread as well as leather binding straps.

“Consider yourself forced,” he murmured in a low, sensuous tone as a soft hand caressed her cheek, awakening the slumbering flame of desire,” because I am not leaving here without you. Remember I love you and that is why I am doing this.”

“You do not love anyone but yourself,” she snarled, her eyes flicking over his handsome features outlined in the dim moonlight. Even in this state, he somehow managed to awaken her base desires.

“That is where you are wrong and if it takes the rest of my life, I will prove it to you. Now is not the time,” he stated forcefully as he bound her wrists and placed the swath of material in her mouth,” because I do not want Hugh witnessing the ceremony.” When he was finished, Kieran picked up her supine body in his heavily muscled arms. Her heart thumped wildly at his touch. Why could not hate him as she so desperately needed to do?

\* \* \* \*

Horses swathed in black as were their riders, waited out in the silvery moonlight, their breath rising in wispy clouds. Kieran carried her out to them quietly, her mouth bound by the silken tie.

Her gaze flicked about. Remnants of her men lay about in various states, including some of her household staff. Where they drinking all the ale in the storehouse? Damn them! They could have prevented Kieran’s entry into her house!

Kieran set her on her feet, the grass cool and dewy under her naked feet. Quickly he removed the cloak from his own shoulders and wrapped it around hers tightly, fastening the large hasp. “I can not have the mother of my child catching a cold,” he stated smugly. Encircling her waist gently with both hands, Kieran placed her on his horse then mounted behind her. With a quick flick of his wrist, he set the pace for their journey back to the abbey.

A heavy dark blanket of sky hung above them with the night creatures abounding on the edge of the forest. Heady odors of wildflowers growing near the edge of the forest permeated the air. Natural honeysuckle and rose danced on the chilly, gentle wind sweeping across the party.

Constance shivered slightly. Ordinarily, the beauty would have enthralled her but not tonight. She was Kieran's unwilling captive. She stared listlessly at the path in front of her as blades of grass crunched under the horses, piercing the uneasy calm of the night. Behind her, Kieran sat straight and tall with his massive arm around her waist, his gloved hand on her expanding belly protectively. She started to tremble as the feelings of desire coursed up and down her spine. Why could she not harden her heart totally against him?

His grip tightened. "Are you cold my dear?" he questioned, the sultry of his voice wafted over her shoulder, his breath warm and inviting against her neck. How could she help but tremble when he was this close?

She shook her head and rested her bound hands upon the hardened leather pommel of his saddle while the focus of her attention remained forward. In the depths of the shadows, she could make out a tiny gray speck growing larger the closer they came. Where they already at the abbey?

Kieran came to a high ridge and halted his mount, his men following suit. "Ah, the abbey were we shall become man and wife tonight," he announced triumphantly as he kissed her bare neck, his lips burning her skin where they touched. Her anger tried to push its way through sea of desire but remained at bay, held by the fragrant waters. Instead, her heart pounded loudly, so loud in fact she was almost sure he would hear it. I could have expected nothing less from this rake, she thought inwardly, and no matter what happens from this moment forward, I will never give my heart to him. Tears formed in the corner of her eyes. She could not keep that promise. Part of her heart already belonged to him and it was just a matter of time before he acquired the rest.

Slight movements on her belly drew her attention away from her thoughts. She gazed down. Kieran's gloved hand moved in circles, almost as if to comfort the child nestling within her womb. Tingles of desire raced from that area, coursing throughout her body. Anticipation rose high, bringing her senses to a new height. Soft sighs escaped her lips. She was a doomed woman and there was nothing she could do about it.

\* \* \* \*

She did not resist this time as he carried her up the stone steps to a small chamber. Her heart hammered against the bones of her chest, threatening to break through at any moment. Once inside, he set her on the floor and removed the cloth from her wrists. Her hands instinctively rubbed where the cloth chafed slightly.

Kieran gripped her tightly by the upper arms. "There is a gown I have for you. Put it on and come to the chapel," he ordered in a soft, seductive tone as he kissed her forehead, lightly rubbing her belly. "You are most beautiful, Constance. You will never want for a thing," he promised then left her alone in the alien room.

The room glowed golden from the lit tapers scattered around. Gray shadows danced in the dark recesses, driven there by the light. One thing she noted was the bareness of the room. Other than a small table with two chairs and a cot, there was nothing. Continuing to scan the room, she searched for any way to escape from the hell she was thrown into.

Why must these monks believe so heavily in poverty?

Constance treaded toward the window, peering out the window to see how far from the ground she was. She was severely disappointed, her mouth curling into a frown. Why it must be at least thirty feet! If she tried to jump, surely she would kill herself and the child. Nay, she could not endanger the life of an innocent.

"Do not try it, milady. 'Tis best to marry Lord Kieran and be done with it," issued the female voice from the open doorway. Constance whirled around to see Mary fill the space made by the unrestricted orifice.

She felt surprise mixed with disappointment creep across her face. "Mary, what are you doing here?" she questioned as she stepped away from the window, her hands behind her back. Chilliness crept up her ankles from her bare feet, the stones releasing their share of the cold. Her eyebrows lifted as the full realization of why her servant was here.

How could Mary do this to her?

Mary smiled widely. "I have come at milord's behest," she stated in a gentle tone, shuffling and picking up the silk gown Kieran referred to a few moments ago for her to see.

Anger, replaced the surprise, encouraging the fury to heat her cheeks. "Mary, were you Kieran's spy all along?"

Mary nodded shyly. "Aye, milady. I did not like deceiving you but 'twas necessary I assure you. "

"Why Mary?"

Tears flowed down Mary's cheeks. "You and milord belong together. I also did it for the child's sake. Children need their fathers as much as they do their mothers. Please, milady do not let your child go through what I had to suffer because of simple foolish pride!"

Constance turned her head away at Mary's words, feeling a stab of pain to her heart. Mary had come to her only a few years earlier looking for employment so she could support her mother and fourteen siblings. Mary's father had decided he no longer wished to be married so he packed what little he had and had left in the night, leaving the family to wonder about his whereabouts.

She turned back and saw the pain embroiled on Mary's face. That story was the deciding factor that Constance needed to employ her on the spot.

Her shoulders relaxed slightly as the anger abated a little. "Mary, please understand I do not love Kieran and it would be a grievous sin for me to marry him. The only reason he is marrying me for is my army, " she sighed, seating herself at the ancient table with the scarred top. Tears flowed freely, dampening her dressing gown. Nervously her hands fiddled with the lace edging of her sleeves. That was the only reason Kieran was marrying her, nothing more than that. Love did not factor into the equation.

Mary knelt next to her and took her hand, gazing up with determined eyes. "Milady, that is where you are wrong," she murmured, holding her hand tightly. "You do love him. I see how your face lights up whenever his name is mentioned."

Constance rose quickly and wrested her hand from Mary, prowling the room restlessly. "That is not true, Mary! Even if I did love him, he does not love me though he professes to do so. I know why he is doing all this. He wants my army and nothing more. Once the child is born, he will see to it that I am out of the way so he can free to marry again."

Mary shook her head solemnly. "Deny it all you want, milady, but I can see the love glowing in your eyes and 'tis not from the child. I know that milord does love you. Why else would he go to this much trouble? He would wage war with the very devil for you if he must. Now, 'tis time to prepare you for your wedding. Oh, before I forget, milord left this for you," she offered, pulling a black velvet pouch from the box sitting on the short cot. Mary picked up and glided over, the bulky pouch in her extended fingers.



Her eyes narrowed. Why did she not see that when Kieran brought her in? "What's this?"

Mary shrugged. "I know not. Milord said 'twas to be your wedding gift," she said, gesturing with both hands. "Go ahead and open it."

Constance took the pouch, feeling the heavy weight of mysterious object the fabric bag contained. Shrugging lightly, Constance dumped the entire contents onto the elderly wooden table. A beautiful necklace made of the largest emeralds she had ever seen tumbled out. The collar was short, studded with diamonds. Emeralds, surrounded by smaller diamonds, fell like teardrops from the collar. Her fingers danced over the polished stones in amazement.

Where had these beautiful emeralds come from?

Next to, the necklace lay a pair of earrings made to match, the emeralds nearly as big as the ones nestled on the necklace. For a moment, all Constance could do was stare at the wondrous beauty before her.

Was all of this just for her?

"Where did he get the stones?"

"I know not for sure, milady but I thought he may have mentioned bringing them back from the Holy Land."

Constance sighed heavily, her fingers lightly dancing over the jewels. "'Tis a long way to bring a present," she murmured, her gaze resting on the baubles, her heart growing heavy with sorrow. Here she was in the house of God, forced to marry a man she did not love...

Mary's strong hand urged her up. "Come, milady for the dawn will be coming soon along with them Baron's men. We must get you married before that happens." Mary chided, walking to the bed and picked up the gown again, a little more gingerly this time

She leapt to her feet. What did Mary mean by the Baron's men? "What does Kieran's men have to do with this? He has already kidnapped me!"

Suddenly, she realized that Mary meant Hugh's men, not Kieran's. Strangely, she always thought of Kieran as the Baron of Stratford and not Hugh.

Mary made a sharp turn, shaking her head. "Not milord's men but his brother's men. They were sent to kidnap you just as milord did and take you back to Stratford to be married to him tonight. Thankfully, milord beat him at his own game."

What Kieran had told her was true! Hugh had planned to do the same thing to her! Her blood turned cold as it raced through her frightened veins.

What if Kieran had not made it in time?

What if she was standing in Hugh's evil lair right now instead of at the Abbey?

Her body shivered as the reality of the situation hit home. Kieran was saving her from the clutches of his own evil brother. She frowned.

Was he saving her for his own use or for her protection?

Constance sighed, drawing strength from the endless pool inside of her. "'Tis time, Mary. Prepare me for my wedding." She unfastened her beautifully embroidered dressing gown. The answer was becoming quite clear as to what fate she must choose.

\* \* \* \*

The ancient chapel was alight with thousands of candles nestled securely in the sconces and tiers of the knave, bathing the room in a golden glow with dancing shadows. Rays of brilliant light shone from behind the steadfast altar as the relics from ancient times glimmered in the candlelight. Incense perfumed the air inside, the spices having come from the East to permeate the air with its enticing fragrance.

Constance stood at the open chapel doors gazing at the scene inside, her body trembling at the sight. Kieran stood at the altar talking to Father Cesare, his tall muscular body encased in armor as his long dark hair tumbling down his shoulders, standing out against the bright white of his crimson cross-emblazoned tunic. Suddenly his head turned as if he knew she was waiting before anyone informed him.

He abruptly stopped his conversation with Father Cesare the moment he felt her presence. Gazing down the long aisle of the chapel, he felt his heart nearly stop.

He never saw a more beautiful woman.

Constance stood quietly at the end of the aisle dressed in the white gown that he provided with a bouquet of flowers in hand. Her neckline was low cut and square with precious gems decorating the edge. Bright globes of pale creamy flesh greeted him. He smiled slightly, as memories of how he

brought the nipples of those spheres to life.

Had it truly been that long ago?

His eyes lowered. Her waist, which was slim only a few weeks before, expanded and rose a little, causing a strain against the silk of the form-fitting gown. He could see her better sense prevailed. She discarded her girdle for the sake of the child.

Pale blonde curls hung past her waist like a curtain while summer flowers decorated her hair, holding the sheer veil in place. With this sight before him, Kieran never felt love like this for a woman, even for Odette. Briefly his former fiancée crossed his mind every now and then but when he tried to remember her face, he could remember a little about her appearance. In the last days when he thought of Odette, Constance's face always appeared as if she had always been there and no one else ruled his heart. Now the only thing he felt for Odette was regret that he could do nothing to help her, leaving her to Hugh's evil clutches. What he could not do for her, he was doing for Constance. Your death was not in vain, he promised Odette silently, and will be avenged no matter how long it takes.

\* \* \* \*

She drew deep breath and walked up the aisle alone, her pace slow and deliberate. Inwardly she felt like screaming at this injustice imposed upon her. Blood pounded in her ears as she walked past the empty pews, the caudal of her gown trailing softly over the carefully interwoven stones of the floor. Reaching Kieran at the altar, she extended her hand and he took the delicate limb into his own, kissing the back of her hand. Turning toward the altar, he led her to where Father Cesare stood. Together they knelt while familiar priest began the ceremony in the sacred language of the church.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh rode ahead of his men, his anger rising greatly now. He was determined to marry Constance if 'twas the last thing he did. Did that little bitch think herself woman enough to fend off his advances? He chuckled slightly. Not while there was breath in his body.

Pale light, created by the full moon, hung high in the sky over head casting rich silvery beams down to

the earth, bathing the known world in a soft gray. Forest creatures abounded on each side of them. Hugh blocked them all out. Normally he would have enjoyed the sounds but tonight his mind was on one thing and one thing only.

Before the night is over, that little vixen will know my wrath.

He halted his armored horse upon the high ridge overlooking Ravenwood, his eyes narrowing so he could see all the better what occurred past the lowered drawbridge

"What is wrong, milord?" inquired the soldier at his left elbow.

Hugh whirled around to see who the man was, his stringy hair swiping his face gently. "Ask me no questions! You are being paid to do a job and not to speak!" he shouted then turned to face forward again, his sheathed sword slapping the horse's armored haunches with a soft thud.

Hugh narrowed his eyes to slits, noting the lack of activity inside the bailey. Bright reddish-orange shadows danced but there was no movement to give the dark figures proportion. How could that be?

He waited for movement, keeping his eyes trained on the edifice that was Ravenwood. There was not any. For a busy castle, the bailey 'twas eerily quiet. No sound pierced the still air surrounding the castle. Even the cry of the wolf could not be heard. With a cautious hand, Hugh urged his men ahead toward the strangely quiet castle.

\* \* \* \*

"By the power of almighty God, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride now, Kieran," Father Cesare pronounced as a smile swept across the reddened flesh of his rotund face.

Kieran needed no encouragement as he placed his finger under Constance's chin and tilted her head up. He took possession of her lips like a thirsty man finding water in the desert after searching for the cool moisture for so long. Wrapping his strong arms around her, Kieran drew Constance close, his tongue teasing and tantalizing the corners of her mouth, urging her lips to part. They parted after much persistence, her tongue engaging in play with his, her tiny arms wrapping themselves around his armored body. Her fingers entangled in the dark locks tumbling down his shoulders, arousing her ardor to an all fevered pitch. Wrapping her arms around him seemed natural though she still did not trust his motives or him, for that matter. She could feel the passion within him flow into her, sending those

familiar sensations coursing through her veins and through her spine to her brain where they came together in an explosion.

Father cleared his throat uncomfortably. "If you two would like to continue this, I have a room designated just for you," he whispered quietly.

They broke apart reluctantly. "Aye, Father we shall," he murmured as he picked up his new bride effortlessly and left the chapel with Father Cesare in tow.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh drove his men through the open gate as vicious thoughts ripped through his mind. What happened to Constance's men? Had there been a skirmish?

He halted in the middle of the desiccation and gazed about the outer bailey through disbelieving eyes. Bodies lay about in different states of disarray, weapons strewn about as if a battle had taken place before his arrival. Halting his horse near an overturned cart, Hugh dismounted and strode purposefully over the ancient man lying on his side with a goblet not too far from his fingertips. Peering down, he saw the man's chest rising and falling.

Hugh kicked the man's shoulder viciously. "What has happened here, man?"

"Nothing, Milord. We have been drinking all day...." The man slurred. Suddenly his dirty lips stopped moving as he went back to sleep. Hugh picked up the cup near the man's outstretched fingers and held the empty tankard to his nose. Ugh, that smells! He grimaced deeply then cast the fouled cup away.

Sleeping potion!

He could distinguish that awful smell through anything! He used the potion sometimes when slumber was hard to find.

The slow, churning wheels of his mind began to spin faster as to whom would put such a potion in ale...then the answer hit him as though he had been struck. Kieran!

Why would Kieran put sleeping potion in the ale?

Without another thought, Hugh backed up slowly then nearly tripped over the body in his path, and mounted his horse quickly. Digging his heels into the horse's haunches, Hugh charged ahead and raced to the door of Ravenwood Castle.

\* \* \* \*

As Kieran carried her lovingly up the stone steps, she said nothing as the silence abounded them, broken only by the steady rhythm of his boot heels as he mounted one step after another. What was she doing with him? She did not love him, as she should yet she married him.

You carry his child, her conscience reminded her.

A child conceived out of lust, nothing more.

Hot tears pricked the inside of her eyelids, threatening to flow. She did harbor feelings for Kieran, mingled with the mistrust she felt. How was she going to sort all that out?

At the door of the chamber, he merely kicked the ancient oak door open with his foot carrying her over the threshold and setting her on her feet. Her eyes darted around the sparsely furnished room containing a few chairs and a table. Suddenly, her gaze landed on the most magnificent bed she ever saw. Made of fine English oak, the bed was massive in length and width. High testers decorated each corner of the bed, their bases ornately carved with an angel motif. On the testers that nearly reached, the ceiling was a canopy made of the sheerest fabric. She gasped at the sight.

"I am truly sorry, Constance that we had to wed under such circumstances," he apologized, "but if you would have only come to your senses sooner..."

She whirled around, cutting off his words. Anger, intermingled with the confusion that she suppressed since her capture erupted at the rich, timbered sound of his voice. "Nay, no more lies, Kieran! I know why you have married me! It was not for love or the child growing in my belly because of you!" She stepped from his outstretched arms, moving instead toward the window.

Deep-rooted hurt stamped itself on his face. "Constance, when will you believe me? Tell me what I must do to convince you otherwise and I will gladly do it."

She turned away hastily, those words a stab to her own heart. Why could she not let her guard down for even a few moments?

Constance shook her head, keeping out of the reach of his arms. "There is nothing, Kieran. Please understand I do not love you and perhaps I never will. Is that the kind of wife you wish to be married to for the rest of your life?"

"If it means that you will be by my side forever then aye. As for loving me, I think you already do but refuse to admit the fact to yourself, " Kieran murmured as he walked toward her. Constance stepped backwards, her back hitting the wall. She looked around. There no where else to go.

"Nay, I do not Kieran..." He moved closer, almost like a predator moving in for the kill. Her heart pounded in that unhealthy but exciting rhythm whenever he came near.

"I think you do, Constance. Even now, you are frightened that you can not control the desire you have for me, " his voice low and masculine with velvety undertones. Putting both of his hands on the wall on either side of her head, Kieran made sure she could not retreat to another part of the room.

"Nay, I have no desire..."

"Look at me, Constance."

"Nay, I will...."

"Look at me," Kieran ordered. She peered up at him, the beautiful deep blue pools of life she could lose herself in gazing back at her. Alternating waves of passion and desire crisscrossed those pools. For a moment, she almost melted into his arms.

Constance opened her mouth to say those words but she quickly shut her lips. For the first time since this whole ghastly business began, she could not say she did not love him. An emotion danced behind his eyes, one that had no name. Suddenly she found herself wanting to fall into those eyes to yield a name for the feeling. Her heart hammered against her ribcage now, the pain merciless. "I ... I ... will...."

"Go on and finish what you were going to say."

"I ... I ... I ...can not!" Constance cried. Her hands went to her face in shame. Kieran was right. She could not say she did not love him.

Kieran laid a hand on her expanding abdomen. "Constance, how long will you deny to yourself that you love me? It would be a lot easier for all of us especially our child growing in your belly."

"I ... do not know!" Constance broke away from the prison of his arms, her hands hiding her face. Sobs racked her body. She was so confused. Though she did not trust him, her body still cried out for his touch, to satiate the newly born flame of womanhood. Why must her flesh betray her so badly?

Kieran took her unyielding flesh into his arms, her body shaking with sobs. "Shhh, shhh, Constance. Twill be all right," he whispered as he removed her sheer veil and dropped the flimsy material to the floor, stroking her pale golden hair gently.

"I ... I ... can not seem to stop, Kieran. Why ... why ... did you marry me?" Constance turned in his arms, wrapping her tiny arms around his armored waist. Tears fell in a collective pool on his tunic, spreading into a dark stain.

His embraced tightened, sending pulses of sheer excitement coursing through her veins. "I married you because I love you, Constance whether or not you choose to believe that. In the Holy Land, I thought of you every waking moment. On those times I fought the Infidels, the thought of you was always on my mind. I knew then I must stay alive to come back to you."

She brushed away the hated tears with the back of her hand. "How did you know what I would have looked like after all these years? What if I had never lost the weight you always made fun of?"

Kieran drew a deep breath in sharply, his naked fingers continuing to caress her hair. "I did not care, Constance. I know the type of woman you were and it did not matter to me what you looked like on the outside anymore. All that I knew was I had to have you. Even if I had not promised your father, I would have still found a way."

Constance jerked her head up to his direction, tears moistening her eyes.

Of what promise did he speak?

She pushed away slightly. "What of my father? What promise did you make to him?"

Kieran tilted her head upwards, wiping the few errant tears away with his thumbs. "I was with your father when he died. Just before, he made me promise to take care of you. After I vowed I would, he also made me promise to marry you when I returned."

"Why would you make such a promise? You had a fiancée in England who was yours before I wrote that letter to you telling you what Hugh had done ... " Constance clamped a hand over her mouth before she could say more.

\* \* \* \*

Finally, the mystery of the letter reaching him in the Holy Land was unmasked. Constance was the one who wrote the letter informing him all he possessed was gone!

Through that one act, she afforded him the chance to come back and reclaim what was his before his life was lost in the Crusade. Oh, he could have wished for nothing better! That confirmed she indeed



possessed feelings for him, ones he hoped one day would grow into love.

His eyes widened in surprise while his brows arched upwards. "So you were the one who wrote the letter to me in the Holy Land," a smile crossed his lips, "Secretly I hoped 'twas you and now my prayer was answered. Now you have shared your secret, now let me share mine. I was the one who wrote you the letter informing you of your father's death."

\* \* \* \*

Like Kieran, Constance had the feeling when she held the telltale parchment between her slim fingers Kieran was the one that wrote the letter. In that one act, Kieran showed he had true heart where she was concerned. She frowned. "Why did you not have one of your other men write it?"

"Because I wanted you to hear the truth from no one else's lips but mine. As for marrying Odette, I would have realized my foolishness soon enough and broken the engagement. Constance, you belong to me and always have even when we were children," Kieran murmured against her ear, tightening his grip around her body.

"But you treated me so badly ... " She stammered as she felt his strong arms go around her, her hands encircling his armored waist.

He kissed her forehead gently. "Constance, you must realize I was nothing more than a foolish boy then and not the man I am now. As I grew older, the ideals of youth no longer fit my needs. My tastes changed. I wanted a woman that was pure of heart rather than a wife that men would envy me. With you I have the best of both worlds."

Her body shivered, knowing what he expected next. How could she hate the man who had taken control of her body and soul? "Kieran, I do not know if I can..." She whispered, her cheek against the cold steel of his breastplate.

"Aye, you can my dear, trust me." He silenced her with his lips taking possession of hers, his passion beginning to flow into her. Without further protest from Constance, Kieran picked her up in his massive arms and carried her to the gigantic bed, laying her down on the silken sheets. She was a hungry for him as he was for her.

Constance laid her head on his bare chest, letting her fingers stroke his velvety skin, peppered with

black silky hairs here and there. Never in her life had a man made her feel the way Kieran did, filling a void she did not know existed.

Even through all this passion and depth of feeling, something still bothered her. After he proclaimed his love for her, she could not return compliment nor admit she loved him. She supposed part of her was that scared little fat girl he always made fun of whenever the other boys were around, making her always distrustful of his motives.

Constance looked up at Kieran and found him staring at the ceiling as though his mind turned. "What are you thinking, Kieran?"

He sighed softly, his fingers stroking her bare arm. "About how many nights I longed to be making love to you when I was in the Holy Land. My hunger increased since the first time I tasted your passion, " he confessed, tilted her head up with a long finger. "You, my dear, were definitely worth waiting for."

Constance swiped stray, dark tendrils from his burnished perspiration-dampened brow. "I am so confused, Kieran. I do not know what to feel about all of this," she replied quietly as her emotions tumbled inside of her with the fury of a storm. "I want to trust you but I can not," she sniffed. "What if Odette had lived? What would you have done?"

Kieran lay silent for a moment then took a deep breath. "I would have sent her back to Calais with the promise of finding her a more suitable husband." His eyes misted slightly. "My instincts told me to send her back before I left but I ignored them and it cost her life. I vowed when I discovered the truth never to let that happen to you. That is why I did what I did. It was all for you." Kieran's eyes moistened even further. "Everything I do from now on, is all for you." He turned his head, trailing his hand down her moist cheek. She shivered as the emotions pummeled her veins, exciting her even more. "Let us take each day as it comes," he stated, "I will wait until the end of time for you to trust me. Until then, I will do everything in my power to prove it to you."

Constance felt an overwhelming calm wash over her, diminishing her fears and doubts, at least for the moment. "I did not know about Odette," she said quietly. "Did you love her?"

Kieran did not hesitate. "No, my dear. There was no room in my heart for anyone but you. I only betrothed myself to her in order to forget you but I could not. It was unfair of me to keep her there and I would have sent her back ...."

She heard the shakiness and regret filling his voice, making her heart ache for him. Out of instinct, she

wrapped her arms around him, pulling her close. “That was not your doing, Kieran. It was Hugh’s. Had he not been the bastard that he is, Odette would still be alive.”

“But I can not help to think....”

“There is no point in thinking about the past. Odette never held it against you that you left. Deep in her heart, she knew that you had to.”

His eyes widened. “You spoke to her?”

She nodded. “We became quite close in those days before her death. She told me that you were the most kind man she had ever known despite the fact she was afraid of your size.”

Surprise crept across his face. “She was?”

“That was why she could not make love to you.” Embarrassment crept into her cheeks, heating them immensely. “She was afraid you would hurt her.”

“But I would not have.”

“She knew that but something held her back. Even after she married Hugh, she tried to stay as far away from him as possible. After she found out she was with child, it was Hugh’s name she cursed. Not yours.”

His features relaxed slightly as if her confession somehow lessened his guilt. “So she was not angry with me?”

“No, she was not. She confessed to me that after you left, she had found some letters in your chamber that explained everything.”

“What letters?”

“Letters that you had written to me, confessing your love that you had never sent.” Her heart swelled a little as the excitement surged through her veins. Odette had shown her some of the letters. At the time, she thought them to be the ramblings of Kieran’s immature mind but now she knew them to be true. He had loved her since their childhood.

“I thought I had those hidden,” he said mournfully. “I never expected Odette to find them and give them to you.”

“She did,” Constance replied, her finger stroking his cheek. “At the time I did not believe what you wrote but I do now.”

“What made you change your mind?”

Her lips touched his in the most delicate of kisses, feathery and soft. “Your actions, Kieran. What you did to save me from Hugh and his evil intentions. That is what told me.”

Kieran turned her head so that she gazed straight into his eyes. “Are you saying you love me?”

She swallowed hard. “I can not say it yet but with time, I know I can.”

“That is all I need to hear.”

With that, his tender lips brushed against hers, soft at first, becoming harder and more passionate with each passing moment. Constance pulled back, laying her head on his chest, her fingers tracing lazy patterns. “I wish we could stay like this forever.”

"Perhaps we can, my little one, perhaps we can." He murmured seductively as he began to nuzzle her neck once more. She sank below those blessed waters of sexual abandon, her mind completely free of guilt.

## Chapter 11

Hugh strode up the steps with a swift, purposeful gaze. Eerie quiet enveloped the castle, castle, from the drunken soldiers supposed to protect the edifice with their very lives to the absence of servants in the dining hall. His eyes darted on either side of him; wary of hidden soldiers poised with pike to kill him.

Where was everyone?

Strong thuds of his boots broke the silence as he continued to ascend the stone steps. An icy wind swept over him, freezing him to his very bones, his armor managing to ward off most of the chill.

Where did the cold come from?

At the top of the stairs, rich colored tapestries lined the walls, most of them depicting different scenes from around Ravenwood. His eyes leapt from one side of the narrow passageway to the other, still waiting for one of Constance's men to fall upon him from a shadowy recess. None did.

At the end of the long passageway stood a heavy wooden door, banded with thick iron, scarred from years of use. Hugh made his way down and pushed the elderly structure open with the tip of his broadsword, the hinges groaning unpleasantly as the old wood swung open.

Gingerly he stepped inside, his body poised to strike should an assassin decide to pounce. None did. The dimly lit chamber gave silent testimony that Constance did indeed reside here. Her ornately inlaid jewelry box was open, the precious gems sparkling with the light of the low tallow candles hanging silently in their sconces.

He took a few careful steps inside and gazed at the disarray. Then, like a flash, the realization hit him.

Kieran had beaten him again!

From the lax way Constance's soldiers lay strewn about the bailey to her absence in her own chamber at this ungodly hour told him so. He scowled.

To hell with his precious brother!

Just as he was about to exit the chamber, a flash of white glinted in the corner of his eye. Hugh turned to it, noticing the garment delicately placed at the foot of the bed.

Strewn across it was a silken dressing gown, embroidered with a lot of lace, laying as if someone meant to put the delicate material on but was in too much of a hurry to do so. Removing his glove, Hugh picked up the garment, holding the soft fabric to his nose, inhaling the deep fresh scent embedded in the wispy fibers.

He hardened instantly. Oh, how he wanted her to be his wife!

His thoughts drifted to Odette.

Why was Odette not like Constance?

With Kieran around, Odette kept herself clean and fresh smelling, like the flowers in spring. That was part of the reason he set out to seduce her.

When Kieran left, she kept up the appearance for a while. Then, after he seduced and married her, she had changed. She no longer gave any regard to herself. Bathing never crossed her mind. Several times, she had forced him to leave the room when she came in because the sickly sweet perfume she used to cover the smell was more than he could bear.

He dropped the gown and turned to leave when a thought caused him to stop. Why should he not take a little souvenir of his future wife?

Hugh returned to the bed and picked up the beautifully embroidered gown, tearing a length of the fabric from the hem. He tucked the piece into his vambrace carefully. The corners of his lips turned up into a tight smile. Aye, she will be my wife, he thought fiendishly, and I will make Kieran witness the ceremony before I cut his heart out.

With a broader smile on his lips, Hugh exited the treasured chamber with the plan on how to get Constance back slowly forming in his mind.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat before the roaring fire with his customary goblet of wine in his hand, having emptied it several times already. The wine seemed sweeter tonight yet he was not the victor, the spoils having gone to another. Strangely, he was most at peace. Constance had slipped through his fingers again yet somehow that fact comforted him. She may be out of my hands for now but she will not be for long, he thought as he drained the last bit of wine from his glass.

Fire danced on the gold of the cup casting brilliantly colored shadows upon the wall, creating odd and lithe figures he watched for several long moments before he realized he was no longer alone.

"I see milord has returned," she murmured quietly behind his chair. For some one so sick, she sounded better indeed.

He stared straight ahead, as if not to acknowledge his former bedmate. "Margaret, I thought the midwife said you should stay in bed," he said in a slightly slurred tone as the effects of the wine caused his head to spin unmercifully.

"I am feeling much better Milord since the child was delivered." Margaret's voice quavered for a moment then became steady. Her hands gripped on the back of his chair for support as she rounded it, gazing upon his seated form.

His lips curled unconsciously. "Go back to bed wench and leave me alone with my thoughts."

Her slender fingers trailed his armor-encased arm. "Please milord, do not banish me to my chamber for the night. I wish to be here with you."

He gazed at her, noticing the bruises beginning to brighten on her face. Below her left eye, the skin had swollen to almost twice the original size making the closing and opening of her eye difficult. The skin

itself was turning an unhealthy purple around her eye sockets, her lips split and bloodied. Hugh did not realize the magnitude of the injuries he inflicted on the poor girl. For a moment, he almost felt sorry for her but he quickly saw the foolishness in that. The girl deserved what she received, nothing more. He scowled. "I said leave me wench and mourn that bastard brat of yours that no longer lives," he snarled as he poured himself another goblet of wine.

Her mouth went agape, hands flying to the open orifice. "How can you be so heartless, milord? He was your son too!"

Hugh cast her a hard look. "Margaret, 'tis said that you bed half of the village men because the other half was too young for you. That is why I said that if you had picked out any man in the village that it likely that he was the father," he retorted and lifted the goblet to his lips. The contents slid down his throat, warm and fruity, calming him even more. Several drops landed on his tunic and brushed them away with a swift hand. It was not like it mattered but he did not want to become any colder than he already was.

He continued to stare at her upset form, ignoring her silent pleas. Margaret just did not seem to understand he wanted no children with anyone except the Duchess of Ravenwood. Constance was the only woman as far as he was concerned to be the mother of his children and not some servant whose body he used from time to time.

Hugh casually poured himself another goblet, his eyes never leaving her. Margaret's midnight hued hair hung down her sides in stringy clumps, her eyes wild with grief. The white dressing gown did nothing for her figure and the dark bruises under her eyes made her face see even less appealing.

"How can you be so cold?" Margaret demanded, glaring at him with her hands on her hips defiantly.

He snorted his reply. "'Tis easy, Margaret. I have no heart. You see I want no children with anyone except with the Duchess of Ravenwood. She is the only woman good enough for me," he stated in a stern tone, feeling the waves of hatred flow from her.

Anger colored the sun darkened skin. "Why must you hang onto something you can not possibly have, milord? The Duchess of Ravenwood does not want you for she would not have married Lord Kieran if she had any feelings for you." Margaret sniffed, her tears beginning to abate

"Because I will have her, dear Margaret, never fear. As for her wanting me, that will change in time. Now leave me or otherwise I shall have to punish those sweet lips of yours," he snarled then turned away, burying himself in yet another cup of wine.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn slowly arose to the sound of the birds welcoming the birth of the new day. Constance awoke to the song, her eyes blinking away the sleep enveloping them. Her body ached a little but 'twas nothing compared to the bliss she had in Kieran's arms. As the thought of him crossed her mind, she turned over to see him on his side, his broad muscular back to her. In the golden light of the morning, his skin radiated an ethereal glow while the glossy strands of his hair took on an almost blue hue. Reaching out, Constance ran her hand through his hair, discovering the silky strands did not feel like the hair of a knight. 'Twas more like the hair of a pampered prince. Would their child have the same hair?

As the soft strands fell from her tented fingers, Constance discovered a small scar on his back just below his neck. A little longer than her smallest finger, there was something strange about the wound. The edges of the flesh were rudely sewn together forming a skewed ladder. Curious, she put her fingers on the old wound, tracing the pattern with her fingertips, feeling the knitted flesh under her fingers. When did he receive that injury?

His shoulder twitched lightly. "I received that in the Holy Land in case you are wondering," Kieran murmured sleepily causing Constance to jump a little.

She lowered her lips on the impairment, kissing the mended flesh softly while her fingers kneaded the golden skin of his shoulder. "I am sorry for waking you, Kieran. The wound just intrigued me. Does it still hurt?"

He yawned then turned over to her, taking her blissfully happy body into his arms, his high-planed cheek resting on the top of her head. "Nay, not anymore with your healing kiss. Besides, I was already awake, Constance. There is no need of apology. Now, would you like to ride back to Ravenwood today or remain here for another day or two?"

She yawned as well then sighed with pleasure. "Aye, Kieran for I miss my own chamber. This bed was wonderful but 'tis not my bed in Ravenwood."

Kieran laughed softly. "Then that is what we shall do, my love. Perhaps mid morning but first...." One of his large hands came up to wrap around Constance's neck, drawing her close so his lips may be satisfied with the essence of hers. Their tongues engaged in play for a moment, dancing and teasing before Constance felt the bile rise in her throat. Pulling away quickly, she made the basin in time. Her



stomach emptied itself of all contents though there was not much. She could barely eat anything for all the nausea she had been suffering with lately.

As she stood over the basin, Constance felt long slim fingers against her forehead and a strong arm around her waist.

“’Tis the child making you sick, Constance?” Kieran asked softly, as genuine concern filled his rich, masculine timbre voice.

“Aye, Kieran. Twill be over soon I suppose,” she replied, sniffing slightly as the remaining contents of her stomach came up in fury. The fingers against her forehead felt cool and the arm around her waist felt strangely comforting.

The nursing hands pulled her to standing position then urged her to a stool nearby. “Here, sit down in this chair and let me take care of you.”

“Nay, Kieran I am not a child....” She tried to protest but a long finger on her lips silenced her words.

Kieran crouched down next to her, his warm and comforting hand on her naked thigh. “I know you are not a child, Constance but you need someone to take care of you now and then,” he murmured then stood up and filled a goblet with water then handed it to her. “Drink this my love. It will remove the nasty taste in your mouth.” She took the cup from his hands, drinking down the delightfully chilly water.

While she drank, he moistened a cloth then bathed her face with the cool cloth letting her enjoy the attention. “Kieran, this is not necessary....”

His lips spread into a wide, wolfish grin. “Nonsense. I enjoy taking care of you, Constance. Now, I want you back into bed so you may rest a while before we leave.” His fingers eagerly sought hers, the slender digits grasping her small ones.

She shuddered as bolts of desire raced throughout her body, causing her to tremble slightly. “But Kieran....”

The grin slowly disappeared, replaced with a small, annoyed expression. His pitch colored brows rose in response. “Constance, I do not wish to be angry with you but you are beginning to test my patience. I want you to rest so the child can rest. Come, let me carry you.” With that, Kieran picked her up effortlessly and carried her to the bed, covering her with the sheets

Her tired body could fight no longer. “Much thanks, Kieran for taking such wonderful care of me.”

His joy returned. "I would not have it any other way. While you are resting, I am going to get you something to eat then I will see to getting the men together and returning to Ravenwood."

Kieran pulled on his black leather breeches and his boots. Kissing her swiftly on the forehead, he left the chamber and a tired Constance to her thoughts.

Feathery kisses awoke her from the blissful land of dreams. She yawned then turned over. "Time to wake up, my dear. I have brought you something to eat," whispered a soft but masculine voice that was as smooth as the finest wine. She opened her eyes to see Kieran's handsome face above hers.

Her mouth curved into an unconscious smile. "Much thanks, Kieran, but I am not hungry...."

"Eat a little for the child must be hungry. If you hope he grows as big as his father," Kieran stated in a strong voice and patted his chest lightly in a proud, manly way, "then you must eat."

He walked over to the table and picked up the tray, bringing it to the bed.

Constance sat up a little, her stomach still churning under the threat of retching. She pulled the covers over her breasts demurely while a sleepy hand pushed the wild, golden tangles out of her eyes. Kieran laid the full tray across her knees. Her eyes grew wide. Heaped on the ancient tray were massive amounts of beef, vegetables, tarts and bread.

How in the world was she to eat all of this?

Her astonished eyes trailed over to the vessel, her heart sinking. A pitcher of sweet summer wine was perched in one corner as well as an empty goblet. How much did he think she needed to eat order for their child to grow strong?

"Kieran, I can not possibly eat all of this!" Constance laughed. His gesture was touching her heart in so many ways.

He paled beneath his bronzed skin. "I am truly sorry, Constance. I forget that other's appetites are not as big as mine."

She smiled gently, putting her fingers under his chin, drawing his face to hers. Deep blue eyes stared back at her, waves of passion and love dancing across the orbs. "Kieran, I am truly touched by your gesture. Since there is so much, will you share it with me?"

Constance picked up a piece of meat, tantalizing his lips with it. Kieran opened the slivers of delight that teased her to the heights of passion the night before. "With pleasure," he answered, his eyes never leaving hers.

The mid-morning sun rose high in the sky though a slight chill remained in the air. Birds chirped a welcome to the rising sun while a gentle breeze blew gently across the departing party. Constance shivered slightly and without a word, Kieran removed the heavy woolen cloak from his own shoulders, putting the warm material around hers.

“Much thanks,” Constance murmured, drawing the cloak tighter around her shoulders. Was she truly cold or was it the fact that Kieran was this near to her?

Father Cesare stood near Kieran’s horse, waiting to bless them. Wind whipped around his ankles, lifting up the hem of his brown heavy wool cowl exposing his sandal covered feet to the wind. Constance coughed loudly to hide her laughter. She had never seen such pudgy feet before. “May the Lord shine upon you in your new life, Kieran as well as Constance,” he stated as his hand moved in the sign of the cross. “May the Lord bless and keep you as well as give you many more children.”

Kieran extended a gloved hand. Father took it, grasping the leather tightly. “I owe you much Father. I could not have completed my task without your help.”

“I would have done what was necessary to help you, Kieran. Now Constance,” Father Cesare remarked as he turned to her, “Take care of Kieran and his child that is growing in your belly. When the time comes, I would like to be the one to christen the babe.”

Constance drew the wonderful priest into the circle of her arms, embracing the man gently and kissing his fleshy cheek. “Of course, Father. I would not have it any other way,” she turned to Kieran, “Kieran, do you mind if we leave now? I am growing weary and ‘tis a long ride to Ravenwood.” Constance sighed, a yawn coming to her mouth. She stifled it quickly with the back of her hand.

Kieran put his arm lightly around her shoulders, bringing her back against his armored chest. “Aye, my dear. I do not wish you to be on my horse longer than necessary,” he announced then clapped Father Cesare on the shoulder. “Much thanks again for all that you have done for us, Father. I do not know how to repay your kindness.”

The kindly priest patted his hand in a fatherly gesture. “Take care of Constance and your child. See to it that he is born healthy and well-schooled in the faith.”

“Aye, that I can do,” Kieran looked to Constance, “are you ready?” She nodded her head yes, the yawns coming more quickly now than before.

Would she ever have energy again?

Kieran held his arms out and she went to them willingly, letting him put her up on his gigantic war-

horse. Sweat soaked leather creaked under her weight, breaking the momentary silence surrounding them before Kieran mounted behind her.

Father stepped forward, grabbing a hold of the horse's reins. "If you need anything, Kieran, please do not hesitate to call for me."

Kieran mounted behind her, putting a strong around her waist. "Aye, Father. Good-bye and Godspeed to you." Constance felt the shift of his body behind her as his feet slipped into the stirrups, his powerful legs hanging over the sides of the horse.

Would their child be as tall?

Her new husband dug his booted heels into the animal's haunches and turned the stallion toward the direction of Ravenwood with Father Cesare gazing on. A soft sigh escaped her throat. She was going home.

\* \* \* \*

Blades of grass crunched under the horse's hooves as the party droned on, her head bobbing against Kieran's broad chest with each movement. His arm wound protectively around her, keeping her from falling off. Constance never felt so safe in her life now that Kieran was her husband. Her mind dreamt of the child that existed in her belly.

Would the baby be fair and slender like her or tall and dark like his father?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran felt the loll of her head upon his chest shortly after the journey began knowing she fell asleep again. He supposed his son was taking all his strength from her and perhaps that was why she was always tired. Secretly he was glad. It meant her pregnancy was healthy.

With each passing moment they were together, he felt Constance's heart moved toward blossoming with love for him. From the way, she kissed the old injury on his back to her tender caresses this morning after they made love told him so. He smiled broadly. All he ever wanted when he returned from the Crusade was to marry and begin a family, having what all men dreamed. Now his dream

slowly became a reality.

As the horse continued his march on to Ravenwood, Kieran let his hand slip over her bulging belly imagining the child that rested inside. Would the child be like him, tall and dark with fierce features or would the child be a girl, an exact duplicate of her mother? He cared not which gender the child was, only that the child was healthy though secretly he preferred a son. Soon I will see you my child, he told the growing being, and I promise to protect you and your mother until my dying day.

\* \* \* \*

Roughened leather caressed her face softly and a velvety, smooth voice echoed through the darkened depths of sleep. “Constance, we are close to home. Do you wish to wake up?”

Her eyes opened wide, taking in the scenery around them. From the slant of the sun, it must be late in the day. The trees glowed with gold as the light began to dim. She stretched gently then yawned. “Oh, we are at Ravenwood already? How long have I been asleep?”

Kieran kissed the top of her head, tightening his grip around her waist. “Just for a little while my love. If you wish to sleep a little longer then go ahead. When we get there, I will put you to bed.”

Exhaustion came to claim her body once more. “’Tis not necessary, Kieran for ... I ... can ... walk,” she murmured as Kieran drew tighter around her, the horse lurching ahead toward Ravenwood.

At the front door of Ravenwood Castle, Kieran halted then handed Constance to one of his men then dismounted, taking a sleeping Constance back into his arms. “Tell the squire to give my horse an extra bag of oats for he has done more than his share of work today,” Kieran ordered as he entered the foyer of Ravenwood

“Aye, Milord,” the squire answered with a nod of his head and took the leather reins of his horse, leading the beast away toward the direction of the stable.

Inside of Ravenwood, he walked slowly up the stone stairs as Constance slept on, her tiny hands curling in his hair. Winding his way to her chamber, Kieran kicked the door behind him closed. With careful ministrations, he laid her down on the bed and set about undressing her.

“I can undress her milord if you do not wish to,” stated a husky female voice from the dark recesses of the room.

Kieran whirled around, hand on the hilt of his sword, not sure as to whom the voice belonged. Mary emerged from the shadowy recess of the room. He breathed a sigh of relief, his hand falling away from his weapon. "Be careful next time, Mary. I nearly ran you through. When did you return?" Kieran turned his attention on a sleeping Constance, his nimble fingers working quickly on the fastenings of her gown.

Mary bowed. "I returned when you and Milady went to your chamber."

Kieran nodded his appreciation. "Much thanks for all your help in this matter, Mary. Without your and Father Cesare's help, I would not have Constance. In repayment, take the rest of the evening for yourself. I will tend to Constance myself and see that she is comfortable."

Mary turned and was about to exit when Kieran halted her. "Mary?"

Dark brown brows shot upwards. "Aye, milord?"

"I will see to it that you are greatly rewarded for all your help in this matter."

Mary's thin lips stretched into her version of a smile. "Your and Milady's happiness is reward enough for me. Many thanks for giving me the evening to myself but I cannot abstain from the work given to me. If you have need of me, I shall be in the kitchens to see about the evening meal. Will you be dining in the hall or do you wish to dine in here with milady?"

His eyes remained locked onto the slumbering form of his beloved bride. "Aye, I will dine wherever she dines."

She bowed again, her limp, mud-colored braids swinging back and forth. "Then I will bring a tray for both of you this evening. For now, I bid you leave." Turning on her heel, she left

He bent down and urged the material past Constance's shoulders. Slowly he removed her clothing, bit by bit, until she was completely naked to his sight lying against the deep dark of the cloak. For a moment, he could think of nothing but tearing away his armor and taking possession of her creamy body, enjoying the flesh to the highest peaks. Thankfully, his better sense prevailed.

With loving hands, he moved her gently and removed the cloak, dropping the heavy material casually to the floor. Covering her body with the silken sheets, Kieran was surprised she did not stir during his careful ministrations. Suddenly, a great fear overtook him. His heart pounded, his vision blurred.

What if she was no longer alive?

He stared at her chest for a moment, his own heart pounding in anxiety. Finally, he saw the slow

rhythmic rise and fall of her chest confirming she was still alive. The pounding slowed. Drawing a deep breath, he stepped away from the bed and removed his armor as quietly as possible, while keeping his eyes on her. As long he lived, nothing would ever get close enough to her or their child to harm them.

Somewhere in the murky depths of her sleep, a horrible dream arose.

She was in Stratford for a banquet. Flowers of white decorated the high rafters, garlands hanging low with soft petals wafting down. Tables were set up with all of them covered in the same white material. People danced to some innate tune, their bodies moving rhythmically like puppets on a string. All were in merry spirits.

She looked down. Her gown was made of the finest white silk, embroidered with beautiful gems. Where had it come from? Then she realized it was her wedding gown in which she had married Kieran. Aye, this is how my wedding should have been, her dream self thought.

“Take my hand, my dear, and become my ever loving wife,” said a familiar male voice next to her. She extended her hand. Constance stared while the limb slipped into her own. The hand was not tanned as Kieran’s but rather bony, the flesh cold and clammy. She became horrified. Then a sickening realization hit her. It was not Kieran that she was wed to but Hugh! Constance tried to snatch her hand away but Hugh was too strong.

He stepped in front of her, a glittering piece of metal in his hand.

“Hugh, what are you doing?” she demanded, her throat became dry and she could scarcely emit a whisper. In his hand was a lethal looking dagger.

“The child that resides in your belly is not mine so I must rid you of that atrocity. Once I do, my brother will truly be dead!” The moment his words died down, he lunged forward, burying the dagger into her belly to the hilt. Pain and fear convulsed her body and she sank to the floor, crying out for Kieran to save them as the blood poured from the wound.

Her hands clutched her belly that tightened with fear. “Kieran! Kieran, where are you? You must come and save us!”

Strong hands on her shoulders made the feeling worse. “Constance, wake up! What is wrong?” Kieran shouted, his voice full of concern.

She heard his voice piercing through the hazy cloud of the dream and suddenly the fog surrounding her began to lift. Opening her eyes, she was never more grateful to see Kieran’s face before her own. She flew into the circle of his arms, heart pounding like never before. Tears flowed like a raging river.

“Kieran, thank God you are here!”

He stroked her hair softly, holding her tightly. “Shhhh, Constance. Come and tell me what is wrong. Did you have a bad dream?” Kieran murmured as he tilted her head up, capturing her chin in his forefinger and thumb.

Her sobs came harder now, causing her to gasp. “I ... I ... I had this terrible dream about Hugh. I dreamed he was going to kill me and our child.” Rivulets of tears ran down the naked flesh of his tanned, muscular chest. Why did she have such a horrible dream? She had not heard anything from Hugh in a long time.

Kieran wiped away the tears falling from her eyes with his thumb. “There, there Constance, no one will ever hurt you, I promise. It was just a dream.” Even with his reassurance, the tears began to flow more.

Her grip around his waist tightened. “But ‘twas so real, Kieran. I could feel the cold steel of the dagger in my belly.”

Kieran kissed her forehead, swiping the wild tendrils out of her face. “Just hold onto me, Constance and never let go. No one including my brother will hurt you and live to regret it.”

From the look in his eyes, she knew he spoke the truth. Suddenly, she saw something different in him, something much more real than she could have ever imagined. There was no trace of the boy he had once been only the man he was today. The man was much more tender and understanding, giving and compassionate than that evil boy was so many years ago.

Could she really trust him?

Slowly the door of her heart opened more than a crack now, the light of love from inside shining brighter than ever before. I am falling in love with him, she thought to herself, and I can no longer deny it.

Kieran plumped the pillows behind her then lay her back down. “I love you so much, Constance and I will do whatever I must to protect you and our children. Now, I want you to go back to sleep for you need your rest.”

He moved to stand but she refused to let him go, clamping onto his arm like a frightened child. “Please do not leave me, Kieran. I can not sleep because the dream will come back.” The storm of tears abated slightly but the fear was ever present.

Kieran smiled broadly, squeezing her hand tightly. “I am not going anywhere, Constance. Let me take



off my breeches and I will hold you so the dream will not come back.”

He removed his breeches quickly and slid his muscular body next to hers, drawing her into his strong arms.

“You are so good to me, Kieran. I could not have asked for a better husband.” Constance confessed, the words escaping her lips before she could stop them. She was almost tempted to confess her love but she held back. Now was not the time.

The moment that he heard those words fall from Constance’s lips, his heart soared.

Was that her way of saying she was falling in love with him?

He tilted her head up slightly, her golden hair fanning all around them like an ethereal halo. He was truly happy for the first time in his life. “And I could not have asked for a better wife, Constance. Come, let us sleep for the meal will be coming soon and I wish to have some strength to eat,” he chided, stroking her long golden hair while her body relaxed under his touch. Sleep came for them simultaneously, both welcoming the dark depths of nothingness.

## Chapter 12

Constance opened her eyes after a long, restful sleep, blinking hard.

What time was it?

She noticed that dusk had fallen all around the castle walls, bathing the world in a silvery light. Soft rays of the moon caressed the sleepy earth and encouraged the night creatures to take in the beauty of the night.

In turning, she found the bed empty with some of Kieran’s armor missing. Where had he gone? Her eyes searched the chamber for him. There was no sign of his presence except the tray of food on the table, half the contents missing. She smiled. Kieran had finished his meal in silence, lest awaking her. Drawing her knees up, Constance wrapped her arm around her aching limbs. Everything seemed different now. Even the air in her chamber changed. When did that happen?

Suddenly her stomach clamored for food, something she had been barely able to hold down for the last few days. Constance looked at the tray, her appetite rising. All of her favorite things lay neatly compiled on one side, her tongue licking her lips hungrily. She had never been so famished in her life.

\* \* \* \*

“He is a well trained animal, Milord, ” The groom responded as his dirt grimed hand sleeked down the rich brown coat.

Kieran surveyed the animal for any obvious defects, his trained hands running over the well-muscled flesh. “Aye, that he is. Tell me, where might I find the Duchess’ captain of the guard?”

The groom jerked his head in the direction of the open door. “He should be out checking on the sentries then retire for the night, Milord.”

He locked his eyes on the animal, pondering the horse’s strength. From the beast’s deep brown eyes, he could see the horse had the heart of a lion. “Thank you, my good man. Have this animal ready in the morning. I wish to take him out and test his endurance.” Kieran gave the horse a pat on the nose then left the stable. He had other things and people to deal with.

\* \* \* \*

Life abounded all around in the inner bailey, torches blazing a fiery gold against the darkness of the night sky. Music rose from the various instruments materializing from different places. Everyone he passed bowed to him as if they knew he was the new Duke of Ravenwood. Good. That would save the trouble of explaining himself later.

His booted heels beat a steady rhythm of the solid cobblestones of the bailey, barely audible above the music and the festivities rising high as gentle breezes wafted over the castle. Halting for a moment, Kieran reveled in the feeling of the slight currents caressing his clean-shaven face, tendrils of his dark hair lifting to ride the wind. The smell of roasting meat along with the wild honeysuckle permeated the air.

Kieran inhaled deeply at the scent, his mind remembering what the world was like in the Holy Land.

For those years, he had seen nothing but sand and little vegetation, strange flowers infiltrating the air with their heady scent. He longed for the country scent of the English shores as well as the softness of Constance's arms. Now his dream was reality. He was truly home.

Ah, this was the part of England he had missed the most!

With this thought in mind, Kieran picked up his pace and strode toward the guard barracks. He wanted to waste no time in acquainting himself with Constance's guards.

\* \* \* \*

He found the captain of the guard; a dour man dressed in a grubby tunic and breeches, at the main gate, yelling at a young soldier. "If you fall asleep on duty again you dolt," he shrieked to the young man next to him, "I will see ye swing for it!"

The young guard merely hung his head, mumbling his 'aye' softly. When the captain felt satisfaction in order, he turned to walk away, nearly tumbling into Kieran. Waves of shock and surprise crossed his face. He bowed low. "Milord, I am truly sorry for I knew not you were there." The aging warrior was perhaps fifty with an enlarging gut around his middle, his legs stocky and ungainly. Kieran scrutinized the man carefully. How could someone of this nature become captain of the guard?

Kieran's eyes narrowed to a thin slit, his arms crossing over his chest. "You are the captain of the guard I presume?"

The captain tilted his head in a nod. "Aye, Milord. Name's Archer," he offered, extending his pudgy hand. "How can I be of service?"

"Do you know who I am?" Kieran stated in a low tone ignoring the outstretched hand.

Equally scrawny brows rose. "You arrived earlier with the Duchess but I have yet to know who you are."

He felt a muscle tense in his jaw as his gaze raked over the impudent sot. "I am the true Baron of Stratford. In addition, I am also the new Duke of Ravenwood," he announced with a deep rumble, causing the man to fall to his knees.

Archer snatched the mail from his head, exposing an expanse of pink, balding flesh. "Forgive me, Milord. I did not know you had wed the Duchess."

Kieran glowered at the smaller man, hoping to induce fright. If he were to get Constance's men into the necessary shape for battle, he had to show them that he was a man not to be crossed.

His eyes narrowed even more. "Aye, I wed her last night. Now, let us get down to necessary matters. Since I am the new Duke of Ravenwood, I want you to gather all the men and meet me in the practice field in the morning at sunrise." By the trembling of the man's hand upon the hilt of his sword, Kieran could tell that the man was becoming thoroughly frightened

Archer rose to his feet. "Why do you wish it, milord?"

Kieran leaned against the gray stone wall of the bailey, glaring at his charge, with his arms crossed over his chest. "I wish to introduce myself to the men so they will know who I am as well as see how they are practiced in battle tactics."

Archer tipped his head. "Aye, milord," he answered

Kieran waved a dismissive hand. "That is all for now. Remember, at sunrise, I want to see every man in the army out at the practice fields with no excuses. If anyone fails to show, there will be dire consequences. Am I understood?"

Archer's head tilted in a nod. "Aye, milord, no excuses."

He pushed himself away from the wall, towering over the trembling cavalier. "Now we understand each other, I must tend to the Duchess. From now on, all matters concerning Ravenwood Castle are to come to me and me only. I do not want the Duchess bothered with anything." The captain nodded.

Kieran waved his hand in final dismissal and his company departed. He gazed up. A cloudless sky greeted him, the stars twinkling brightly against the dark navy color of the sky. Ah, this was one beautiful night.

\* \* \* \*

Constance dressed herself in a new gown as her old ones were vastly becoming entirely too small with the expansion of her belly. She longed for them but she knew within a few months, they would adorn her body again.

She could wait.

Besides, the dressing gown was special. Her own mother wore the gown when Constance grew in her

belly and so now, it was her turn to wear the gown. She could not help but run her hands up and down the smooth, silky expanse of fabric, feeling its richness under her fingers

Tiny pearls danced around the neckline, lace and ribbon decorating the delicate fabric around the sleeves and bodice. The bodice was not really a bodice at all but merely a very loose girdle with which to keep the gown close to her body. Gossamer material floated around her body as though she were an angel. Never in her life had she felt more comfortable in a gown.

She frowned. Why did she have to wear a bodice anyway?

Walking around the chamber, Constance felt as if she were on a cloud high in the sky. Perhaps 'twas the child growing within her or perhaps 'twas something else but she could not be sure. All she knew was pure happiness abounded her body for the moment, her hands clasped around her expanding belly. Oh, my little one, she said to the child, your father and I will soon see you!

Feelings of mistrust hung way in the back of her mind like dusty cobwebs, always waiting to become known. 'Twas true she married him willingly but that did not stop the slight feeling of mistrust of his motives and insecurity riddling her body.

Would it never end?

Though their childhood was terrible, she gave into believing the latter. Unconsciously, the fact of his kindness and care toward her tugged at her heart, telling her that those acts were acts of genuine love and not acts of selfishness on Kieran's part. Be wary and do not commit before he had proven his worth, her mind told her. Her heart told her something completely different. He can be trusted and you can love him without fear of reproach.

To whom was she supposed to listen?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran entered the chamber expecting Constance to be asleep. He was pleasantly surprised that she was out of bed. Wrapped in layers of filmy fabric, Constance stirred to visions of holiness. Standing before him, surprised at his presence, Constance's belly bulged out against the soft material of the gown, her fingers dancing on the mound. Her pale hair hung in a shimmering curtain to her waist, giving the appearance of spun gold while the green orbs of her eyes sparkled with iridescent light. Kieran's breath

caught in his throat. Never had he seen a woman more beautiful than his wife was at this moment.

“Kieran, where did you go?” she asked innocently.

Her voice broke through the logjam of his vision, breaking his tender thoughts. Kieran shook his head slightly. “I went to search out your captain of the guard.”

Her lips curved into a generous smile while her tongue came out to moisten them, sending a raging fire to his loins. “Whatever for?”

His quick fingers worked on the straps holding his armor together. “I wish to see the men on the practice field tomorrow so that I might evaluate their skills and get them exercised. They seemed to have grown fat and lazy since they have no one to practice them.” His heart pounded out of control, all the while he kept his gaze on her, the fire of his ardor burning hotter.

She frowned. “I know they have but since Father’s death, their exercise was the furthest from my mind.”

Kieran stopped his actions. Turning to Constance, he chuckled her playfully under the chin. She was so beautiful “Have no fear, I will have them in shape in no time. That way if Hugh does decide to attack then we shall be ready for him.

His fingers went back to work on the fastenings. Suddenly, slender, childlike fingers swept over his. “Let me help you, Kieran,” she said softly, almost sort of a throaty purr. It was almost more than he could take.

She unfastened his shoulder plates quickly, removing the rest with lightning speed much to Kieran’s surprise.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Where did you learned to remove armor so quickly, Constance?”

Constance gripped his hand tightly, urging him to follow her. “Let me show you.”

She led him to a small wardrobe fitted with a tiny lock. Producing a key, Constance opened the wardrobe. Once it was open, she picked up a candle and thrust it inside. Much to his surprise, there was a suit of armor made exactly like his but only in a different size and color. Instead of shiny metal, this suit of armor was black with black chain mail. Red fabric emblazoned with the crest of Ravenwood hung over the armor, standing brightly against the darkness of the metal. On the peg to the right of the suit was a neatly hung black cloak.

Muscles bunched in his jaw as the sudden realization swept over him. “This is yours, Constance?”

Constance nodded slowly. "Aye, Kieran. I had it made for me by the finest armor smiths in all of England. Since I am the Duchess of Ravenwood, I must be ready to lead my troops into battle," she replied, moving the candle away in preparation to close the wardrobe.

He chuckled softly. "You can not be serious, are you Constance?"

Constance bit down hard on her lower lip, as if she were stifling the growing anger at his comment. "As you may not know, I know as much if not more about military strategies and war as you do. My father thought 'twas important I learn those things if so that when I ruled Ravenwood, I ruled her with a firm hand and knowledgeable heart," she said, her jaw tight. Kieran immediately regretted the comment.

What made him think that she could not lead her men in battle?

After all, she had killed a man with amazing skill that night on the road when the thieves fell on them.

Constance stepped away from the wardrobe and closed it, locking it securely. Laying the key on the table wearily, she seated herself at the table. A solemn gaze filtered through a fan of blond lashes, an untold emotion swimming in the depths of her emerald colored eyes. If Constance were truly angry, she was hiding it well.

Kieran stood there in his leather breeches, stunned by what he just saw. What woman in her right mind would her own armor let alone his wife? Shrugging, he moved over to her, caressing her soft cheek with his anxious fingers. "So you have manly skills as well as womanly skills. You never cease to amaze me, Constance."

Constance pulled a dark length of material from the chair next to her. "As well as you never cease to amaze me," she said in a soft voice as her fingers stroked his face. "Now we have your armor off, would you care to try something on for me?"

He nodded. She held up the rich, velvety tunic up to the dim light. Leaves and vines decorated the collar and cuffs, twining down either side of the opening, trimming the hem beautifully.

Where did it come from?

"This is beautiful. However did you come by it?" Kieran reached out and touched the soft velvet, the fabric feeling like a slice of heaven under his fingertips.

"'Twas my father's. With a few minor adjustments, the tunic should fit you perfectly."

He took the tunic from her extended fingers and slipped the rich velvety material over his head.

Perhaps, if he were lucky, it would be a perfect fit.

Try as he might, it would not go past his bulging arms and widened chest. After struggling to put it on, he gave up. "I am afraid 'tis too small, Constance."

Peals of laughter erupted from her. "No matter. I have several of my seamstresses working on tunics for you because you can not wear armor forever."

Kieran smirked loudly, chucking her under the chin playfully. "That is true, my dear. How will you know my size?"

She returned his smile with equal warmth. "Do not worry, Kieran. We women have our ways. Now, do you wish to eat with me?"

"As you can tell, I have already eaten, my love. If you wish, I will stay here while you eat and then I will bathe before retiring for the night."

"If you would like, Kieran, I will have the servants bring in my tub so you do not have to use the spring or their tub. You can do that while I eat." She sighed heavily, the exhaustion creeping into her voice. I will make her forget all her exhaustion when I get her into my arms, he thought devilishly.

"Aye, then that is what we shall do. Come, start eating and I will get the servants to bring the tub in. Is there anything else you desire?" Kieran smiled as he rose from the table.

"Just you," she answered in a deeply sultry voice. Taking his hand, Kieran lifted her chin, placing the gentlest kiss upon her lips. Swarms of sensation rode his body, coursing through his veins like a raging wildfire, adding to his heightened ardor. With a concerted effort, Kieran broke the passion flow and left the room to order the tub. If he had kept that up, he would never have a bath tonight. He did not want to come to her smelling like a sweaty horse and take a chance making her retching worse. Nay, she deserved much better than that.

\* \* \* \*

Constance sighed for a moment then pushed the tray away with a tired hand. Her appetite was there but her heart was not. For as much as Kieran cared about her, she found she could still not trust him yet. Somehow he still felt like a stranger but he was not. He was the father of her child.

Would this feeling ever go away?



If the misgivings would desert her mind like she had begged them to long ago, then she felt only then could she be truly happy. The mistrust built the wall protecting her heart against pain but like a double-edged sword, protected her from completely loving Kieran.

Would there be a time when she could open the door completely?

Constance rose from her place and wandered over to the open window as the breeze blew in, lifting up the golden tendrils of her hair gently. Wild honeysuckle infiltrated the air and she closed her eyes for a moment, inhaling the scent deeply and filling her lungs. Then, as if it were a slight current, a hand swept her hair from her neck. Warm, inviting lips descended on the nape of her neck, kissing gently and sensuously enough to cause her ardor to arouse.

“You tantalize me to no end, Constance.” Kieran murmured sensuously as he lifted his lips from her neck, his breath teasing the skin of her ear as he spoke promises of passion. His tongue teased the tip of her earlobe, his hands upon her waist turning her slowly to face him. Her lips sought his this time, her tongue furrowing into his mouth and engaging him into play surprising him. As his tongue engaged in play with hers, his hand roamed her body stopping to rest on the swelling of her belly before he pulled away.

“Constance, if I do not stop I will be having you right now,” he confessed as he pulled away, “and you have not eaten. Come, sit down and eat. Ah, here is the tub,” Kieran exclaimed as the servants brought in the wooden tub along with steaming buckets of hot water. One by one, they poured the buckets into the tub, ribbons of steam rising in the air.

Constance sat at the table again, staring at the tray ominously before her. Her eyes remained locked on the servant who poured the last of the steaming buckets of water into the tub. When he finished, he bowed quickly to Kieran then left her alone, closing the door tightly behind her.

Now her attention turned to Kieran. She watched with hungry eyes while he removed his leather breeches, exposing his darkly tanned skin to her hungry eyes. Dark, fleecy hair covered his legs and his pudenda, the muscular structures tall and lean. His broad back was thick with muscles twitching with life, narrowing down to a strong waist. From the nest of jet-black hair, his manhood sprang with life, bobbing gently with each of his movements. Kieran entered the tub, sinking slowly into the steamy water. His uncommon beauty completely beguiled her.

Enchanted, Constance walked over to the tub, placing her tiny hands upon his shoulders. Itchy fingers longed to caress the thick ropes of muscles lying below his sun-bronzed flesh. Slowly her hands began to rub his shoulders, working their way up his neck and into the dark thatch of hair that streamed over

his shoulders. His head lolled slightly, tiny moans escaping from his throat.

“That feels wonderful, Constance. Do not ever stop,” he murmured, his head bending to her every ministrations. Finally, she could not take the teasing anymore. Moving around to the front of the tub, Constance removed her gown and slipped in much to his surprise.

“Constance....” He stammered. Silencing him with the descent of her lips, Constance explored the nether regions of his body with fevered abandon, letting him slide into her body with infinite ease.

“You are a dangerous vixen,” he murmured as the grip on her hips tightened, making her strokes a little longer.

“All the more to tempt you with.”

\* \* \* \*

Hugh paced his war room impatiently dressed in his finest tunic, the clanging of his boot heels against the stones the only sound breaking the deafening silence. Where in the hell was his spy? The man should have returned by now. He wanted any news of Constance and Kieran so he could find the way to rid himself of Kieran for good.

Hungry flames crackled in the hearth next to him, the greedy orange fingers rising higher to capture as much as possible so the hungry flame might be satisfied. Turning toward the hissing, Hugh stared at the licking inferno for a moment, comparing the fire to Kieran. All his life Kieran reached out and took what he wanted no matter if anyone else wanted it or not. With his greedy hands, Kieran took the one thing Hugh could count on to be his and that was Constance.

Even as children, Kieran treated Constance terribly and Hugh always tried to comfort her through Kieran’s mistreatments. Unfortunately, his father saw fit to unite the two houses through Kieran. That is until Kieran told his father he refused to marry Constance because of her ungainliness.

Kieran did care to marry her then so why did he want her now?

Damn him! Hugh thought to himself as he continued his irksome pacing, his hands clasp and unclasp behind him irritably.

Where in the hell was the spy?

Soft, raspy sounds hovered near his elbow. He turned to find his spy standing before him, nervous

fingers crunching the brim of his hat. His lips curved slowly. What he waited for just arrived. .

The messenger shifted from foot to foot, his fingers working the brim of his hat even more briskly than before. "Milord, you have sent for me?"

Hugh clapped his hands together in fiendish delight. "Aye, I have sent for you! Bring me the news I have been waiting for!"

"Milord Kieran and the Duchess have returned to Ravenwood. Milord Kieran is going over the troops at sunrise to see what kind of condition they are in so if you attack, they would be ready. I also believe he will formulate an attack on Stratford once the men are ready."

Hugh sank down to his chair swiftly, his hands rubbing together in angst.

Therefore, that was what his bastard brother was up to! Putting his gaunt elbows on the armrests of his chair, Hugh interlocked his fingers, turning the fury of his stare on his man. "Is there other news?"

"News of what, milord?"

"Is the Duchess with child as all the rumors surmise?"

"Aye, milord. The child grows strong. Her belly has expanded greatly."

Hugh was taken aback a little further. He hoped she was not with child but this time the rumors proved true. Leaning back in his chair, Hugh let the wheels of his mind spin as to how he was going to rid himself of Kieran forever.

What was good for his beloved brother? Stabbing? Poisoning? Ah, he had a better idea. Before Kieran died, he would make sure that Kieran saw his child die as well as the taking of Constance. Oh how he relished the expression on Kieran's face before Hugh's sword ran him through! An evil grin crossed his lips at the thought. This would amuse him more greatly than he had anticipated.

Anxiety rippled the man standing before him, awaiting the maelstrom of anger "Do you have further need of me, milord?"

Hugh waved a gaunt hand, dismissing his servant. "Nay, my good man for your job is well done. See my steward and he will release to you the standard payment for your information. Before you see him, tell my captain I wish to see him."

He nodded reverently. "Aye, milord." The herald spun on his heel and left.

Hugh leaned back in his chair pondering to the words of the messenger resound against the walls of his mind. I also believe he will formulate an attack on Stratford once the men are ready. Not while there

breath resided in his body.

\* \* \* \*

Constance opened her eyes slowly. Reams of golden sun streamed through the open window, warming the room. Dust motes swirled, dancing to some inane tune. She stretched, feeling the satisfied ache deep in her bones. Kieran knew the way to send her senses spinning and set her body on fire.

She snuggled deeper, pulling the edge of the woolen coverlet up to her chin. Her mind replayed the previous night's lovemaking, her body tingling with excitement. His hands moved her over with gentlest of touches.... She shuddered. Even in memory, Kieran's experienced lovemaking still affected her.

As the thought of him drifted across her mind, Constance felt for his side of the bed.

It was empty.

Constance sat up on her elbow, staring at the void. Where had Kieran gone?

She ran for Mary and wrapped the sheet around herself, her body still on fire. Constance rose and walked to the window, peering out for any sign of Kieran. Out in the distance were the practice fields, her men gathered there by none other than her husband. How proud he seemed sitting high in his saddle, introducing himself to the men and finding out what their skills are.

Blood pounded in her ears, desire coursing through her veins like a runaway ship. Kieran's hair shined brightly in the sun, the blue-black tendrils falling below his shoulders, curling at the ends. Shiny metal composing his armor glinted brilliantly, his head nodding to each man as he stepped forward stating his ability. How truly lucky she was to have a husband such as Kieran. She never imagined in his youth what a man he would be. Perhaps that was the greatest gift of all.

\* \* \* \*

Mary swept into the chamber within moments, a basin of steaming water in her hands. "Forgive me, milady. I was held up in the kitchen," she set the bowl down. "You seem rather happy this morning."

"I am," Constance brushed the stray locks of hair from shoulder, remembering the way Kieran's hands threaded through the golden strands. "Very happy."

"Good," Mary set about lathering the cloths, "now I do not feel as guilty."

Constance spun around. "Guilt for what?"

Mary's brown eyes swam with depth of emotion, a solid mixture of happiness and regret. "For doing what I did. I suppose I should not have spied...."

Her hand on Mary's arm quieted the girl. "You did what you thought was right. Besides," she patted her swelling belly, "Kieran's child thanks you was well."

Tears moistened Mary's doe soft eyes. "Much thanks, milady but that does not rid me of my twinges of regret."

Constance took Mary into a hard embrace. "Do not regret, Mary. You did what anyone in your position my have done. Sometimes," she lifted Mary's head and stared into those fox colored orbs, "the mark of a true friend is saving them at all costs. Even if it means saving them from themselves."

Tears fell from Mary's eyes. "Are you saying that you consider me a friend?"

She nodded. "Could you ever be anything else?"

\* \* \* \*

Constance, dressing in her best and favorite crimson gown, roamed the bustling bailey unescorted. She peered into different makeshift stalls to see the goods for sale. Brilliant colors from the bolts of material greeted her as well as the aromas of roasting meat and bread. She inhaled. It was the sweetest smell in the world.

Her golden hair hung down her back in a thick blonde braid intertwined with pearls and ribbons, a stark contrast to the dark scarlet of her gown. Now that she was with child, she had extra panels put into this gown. It was velvety smooth, a gift from her father a year before he died. She treasured it even more because of that.

In one stall, fresh fish hung on hooks with water dripping from their black/silver scales. The woman, behind the counter conducted a steady business, the fish practically flying from the hooks. In another stall, an elderly man hawked handmade baskets intertwined with bits of ribbon and other brightly

colored reeds. For the first time in days her mind was clear and she felt truly free, to be around her people as much as possible. Halting in front of one stall, Constance admired all the bright fabrics laid out. Perhaps a length of the bright blue...

“What are you doing here, Constance?”

Kieran’s menace filled voice filled the air, making her blood turn to fire. She turned to see him dismounting his horse and stride toward her in an angry fashion, the horse’s leather reins tethered in his gloved hands.

Her lips puckered with annoyance. How dare he question her going about her what she was doing!

“What do you mean? I am merely getting some exercise so the babe will grow properly.” Fury ripped through her. She answered to no one but herself.

His dark eyes brimmed with fury. “I do not want you wandering alone around the bailey. ‘Tis far too dangerous. If you wish to walk then I will accompany you.” Without waiting for her reply, Kieran put his hands around her thickening waist and sat her on his horse.

Her eyes narrowed as her own anger mounted. How dare he treat her like a child? With that, she pushed herself off. “I need no man’s permission to do what I please,” she hissed through clenched teeth, “Now I am going to wander around this bailey whether or not you like it.” She turned to walk away but Kieran caught her slim upper arm in his gloved hand. Constance turned and glared at her husband.

Swift undercurrents of contempt and wrath forbade any further argument. “I think not, Constance. Now get up on my horse and I will take you back to the castle. From now on when you want to wander, you will do so with me at your side. Is that understood?”

It was an order, not a request and she noticed the subtle warning. Now was not the time or the place to argue with him. Once she had him in their chamber, he would be wishing he had not treated her this way. She sighed wearily. “All right, Kieran. I will let you take me back to the castle. I am growing quite weary.” Constance put her hands on his armored shoulders, allowing Kieran to lift her on his horse. He then mounted after her, his arm securely around her waist.

She seethed but she managed to quell it. He was not going to treat her this way and get away with it.

\* \* \* \*

Hard slams echoed through the room as Kieran closed them away from the world. She whirled about, letting her true fury burn. "Why must you treat me so, Kieran? You claim to love me yet you treat me like a child!" Constance backed away from him, her arms crossing her bosom. Just who did Kieran think he was?

She expected his anger to spill over so she waited for the maelstrom of his anger to sweep over her. Much to her surprise, he merely walked over to a chair and sat down, his eyes locked with hers in a strange and unnerving way. "Come over here, Constance."

She stood before him, defiant and strong. "No."

His eyes darkened again, the tinged fury rising. "I do not make a habit of asking twice, Constance." This was an order, making her guard rise. His mood was one of an animal about to strike its prey so it was best that she obey him for the moment

Gingerly, she walked over to him with the wariness of a cat while her eyes remained locked onto his. She stood at his side. With careful hands, Kieran pulled her down into his lap with his right arm around her shoulders while the other hand rested on her belly. "This is the reason I treat you this way," Kieran's large, tanned hand caressed her velvet-covered, expanding stomach lightly, "I want my son to grow large and strong. Constance, you may not understand this but 'tis my duty to protect you and the child inside of you from all harm that could befall you.

"I know, Kieran but I must be able to walk about on my own...."

He kissed her forehead softly. "'Tis simply not possible, Constance. With Hugh still on the horizon, I want to be by your side at all times so if he tries to harm you in any way, I can stop him."

Constance turned away for a moment as the truth of his words sank in. He was right. Hugh did lick his chops waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Would they ever be free of him?

Deep sighs escaped her lips as she laid her head on Kieran's broad armored shoulder. Her scarlet velvet encased arm encircled his neck, her fingers toying with the dark locks of his hair. "Forgive me, Kieran. 'Tis I am so used to answering to no one save me. "

Kieran's grip around her shoulders tightened. "No need for apologies my love. Rest assured I will never stop you from doing anything your heart desires but when it comes to your safety, that is where I will rule." He placed a gentle kiss upon her creamy cheek, igniting those slumbering fires.

She raised her head, peering into the dark blue depths of his eyes. “How did my men fare, Kieran? Do they pass your inspection?” she yawned, her hand going to her mouth to try to hide the exhaustion that overtook her these days. It did no good.

“Aye, Constance. They are well trained but with my guidance I believe they can be much better,” Kieran’s eyebrow raised slightly then a slight laughter crept into his voice, “come, my tired vixen, let me put you to bed. You are truly exhausted.

“Nay, Kieran....”

“No more protests, Constance. You are tired and that is something you can not hide from me.” Kieran rose from the chair with a very tired Constance in his arms. Her head remained on his shoulder until he laid her down on the bed gently with his cobalt eyes locked onto hers. “Now sleep, Constance and let nothing worry you for I am here. Nothing will ever harm you.” Planting a quick kiss on her cheek, Kieran stepped out of the chamber lightly and closed the door securely behind him.

With the unabashed silence at her side, Constance lay there for a long while, sleep evading her as quickly as the exhaustion had come. Kieran was so soft and gentle with her yet she still could not trust him completely.

What if he had married her just for her army?

Nay, he did not. The reliable inner voice, one that she always counted on, told her to follow her heart. She closed her eyes, listening for the truth. Then, as if in a dream, the voice called out to her. He loves you beyond all measure and will lay down his life for you if he must. Constance drew a deep breath. Her misgivings about his intentions flooded her being again, her mind questioning his plans. Halt! She cried to the thought circling her mind as a predator would its prey. Nay, she must listen with her heart instead of her head. That was the only way to discover the truth.

\* \* \* \*

Days sped by with Constance hardly noticing them until one day she realized ‘twas nearly a month since she and Kieran had been married. ‘Tis seems like only yesterday, she thought to herself, that we wed in the middle of the night.

Kieran was as caring as ever, taking her where she wished to go and bringing her food in the morning



now the nausea left her body completely. She loved watching him in the early morning light with the men on the practice field, his armor shining brightly in the bright overhead sun. I hope you are just like your father, she would tell the child that was growing in her belly, so when you marry, your husband or wife will feel the same way about you as I do your father.

Once those words crossed her mind, a sudden realization took place. Over the course of the last month, with Kieran's gentle support, she began to trust him. Faint love she had felt for him began to grow like a seedling breaking free from its pod. She did not know how or when it happened. All she knew was that it happened. Perhaps all along the seed of love lay dormant in her. With just a little attention, the love grew and blossomed.

Her lips curved into a knowing smile. The time had come to tell him of her feelings.

\* \* \* \*

Cloudy gray skies loomed overhead as Constance awoke, her hand going immediately to the space beside her, finding the void empty. Kieran had gone to the practice fields to continue training her men.

With a hard stretch, she arose from the bed with her belly a little larger now.

How old must the child be?

Surely, the child could not have been there any more than three months yet she could feel the life dwelling inside of her. Every now and then, she had felt a slight movement inside of her belly as if the child was confirming he was indeed there, causing her to stop and place her hand where the activity was. 'Twas a truly moving experience

Constance wandered over to the window and watched Kieran with her men on the practice fields, their armor shining with what little sun broke through the heavy blanket of clouds. Though the clouds appeared ominous, the army kept working the various battle tactics so if war came, they were prepared.

Gentle breezes wafted through the window, carrying the scent of the wild summer flowers giving off the last of the perfume before dying before as the vestiges of winter approached. Constance inhaled deeply, holding the familiar perfume in her lungs until she had to exhale. 'Twas a most delightful odor, especially in the spring for the scent brought the promise of a warm summer.

With the deep aromas dying the chamber, Constance decided to disobey Kieran's order not to be

anywhere without him. She dressed with speed then stepped from her chamber, choosing to wander up the steps of the drum tower.

At the top stood, an ancient door simply refused to budge when she tried to open it. Please help me get this open, she said aloud to whomever was listening. Placing both of her hands upon the old iron ring, Constance pulled with all of her might.

Sharp squeals of rusty metal against rusty metal pealed through the area. Heady air greeted her, swirling around her like a warm, woolen blanket. She stepped out of the drum tower and onto the battlements with her eyes locked onto Kieran's tall form. Desire raced through her veins at the sight of Kieran, her heart pounding hard against her ribcage. So this is love, she thought dreamily, I never imagined it could be like this. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught the color of black rising high in the sky.

She turned toward the offensive column.

In the distance, dark smoke rose high in the sky, wafting up from the middle of the forest.

Was there a fire?

She watched for several long and tense moments, realizing the cloud was moving in the direction of Ravenwood. Her eyes narrowed. What was it?

Before her mind could answer, a horse galloped from the distance, its rider partially slumped over the bow of the saddle. Her eyes narrowed. Black feathers connected to an arrow protruding from his back waved in the breeze. She watched mysterious man headed in Kieran's direction, halting when he reached her husband's horse.

From what she could see, foams of sweat bathed the animal, the moisture coming from running the extensive distance. The man was ready to drop to the ground, blood pouring from the arrow wound in his back. Few words passed between him and Kieran then the rider moved on to where the squires waited to take the horse to the stable while others waited to bear the injured soldier away.

Curiosity ate at her, urging her to move closer to the edge of the battlement, her hands gripping the ancient stone.

Kieran shouted a few orders then turned his horse around and headed for the safety of the castle, her men following closely behind.

What was going on?

\* \* \* \*

Her foot paused in mid-step when Kieran charged in, his broad chest heaving in anxiety. “What is the matter, Kieran?” She stared at him, her eyes widening. From the look of things, it was not good.

Kieran bounded up the steps, clamping on to her upper arms fiercely. “’Tis Hugh. He has mounted an attack that is moving this way. Come, I want you in our chamber with your women. Stay away from the windows and keep the door locked.”

Fury ripped through her. What right did Hugh think he had coming and trying to overtake Ravenwood and kill Kieran? Not while there breath resided in her body! “I will not! I can fight as well as any man! Give me a sword and I will....”

Kieran drew her to him roughly, tilting her head to meet his anxious eyes. “Constance, our chamber is where I want you and that is where you will stay until I tell you ‘tis all right.” Without another word, he picked up her resisting body and mounted the stairs two at a time. He had her in their chamber within moments.

Once on her feet, Constance stormed Kieran with a flood of angry protest. “How dare you treat me in this matter, Kieran! I am not some child you can order around!”

At that moment, she watched his face contort, a strange and unnatural change frightening her terribly, her feet tripping backwards as he approached her. “Constance, you will stay here and do as you are told. Hugh’s army is coming to attack Ravenwood and I must keep my mind on the battle tactics so you must give me peace of mind. If not then I am afraid Hugh will win and I will be dead. Is that what you wish?” he growled, his gloved hands reaching out and grabbing a hold of her shoulders, shaking her slightly as if to make her understand the gravity of the situation.

Her lower lip quivered. “N ... No ... Kieran. I apologize for giving you so much trouble.” She locked on to his amazingly darkened eyes flashing with shades of anger and trepidation.

Kieran kissed her on the forehead swiftly. “Remain here until I come for you.” Kieran left chamber, the sound of his quick stepping boot heels resounding throughout the room. With her heart banging in her throat, Constance scurried to the window and gazed out at the advancing plume of smoke. Hugh was coming and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

## Chapter 13

Kieran stood atop the battlements, his eyes narrowed to slits. Hugh's army approached, riding in typical battle formation, led by Hugh himself. His brother's gaunt, sickly form, encased in slim metal, sat high in the saddle. >From his brother's stance, Kieran saw that Hugh acted as though he had already won the battle. Muscles in his jaw bunched angrily. There had to be no life left in his body for Hugh to win.

Stratford's standard remained firmly entrenched in the bearer's hand, the crest of his beloved home dappling gently in the breeze. Kieran's anger flared to new heights.

How dare Hugh carry the banner of Stratford before him!

How could his brother do this?

Kieran's hand went to his sword and clutched the ornate handle tightly with his gloved hand. Hugh was going to have his blade in gullet before it was all over.

Gurgles and hisses echoed from his right and he looked over. Big vats of pitch bubbled nicely with ribbons of steam rising in the air, the young squires stirring the thick black mixture continuously to keep the hot liquid from boiling over. Thankfully, the archers had already dipped their cloth tipped arrows in the vile mixture before the tar became too hot.

He returned his attention to the advancing enemy. His blood turned cold at what he saw. They possessed a battering ram, made out of a very large tree trunk, pushed by the largest members of Hugh's army. Hugh rode safely behind, shouting orders. He grimaced. Hugh was even gaunter than he remembered.

Kieran commanded the archers to make ready. Blazing fires continued to burn under the pots despite the wind beginning to pick up with the advance of the thunderstorms.

His lips tipped up in a slight smile. It seemed as if everything moved in his favor.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh halted on the edge of the clearing that led to Ravenwood, holding his gauntlet covered hand up in the gesture of halt. His men followed suit, the battering ram standing to make ready to march ahead.

He had anticipated Hugh's every move, even down to the battering ram. Hugh's ranks remained silent for a few moments while he kept his eyes locked on his brother's tall, skeletal form waiting for the next move. Just as he expected, Hugh raised his arm again and signaled the battering ram to charge ahead.

\* \* \* \*

Constance remained ensconced in her chamber with her women, all trembling with fear at the melee occurring outside the safety of Ravenwood Castle. She could not help but pace the cold stone floor as fear and dread drummed along her veins. Her concern was not for the castle but for Kieran himself. Even with his treatment of her earlier today did not faze the fact she was falling deeply in love with him. With each passing day, she realized she could no longer live without the light that he provided in her life.

Mary's hand descended on her shoulder and guided her to a chair. "Please sit, milady. You seem tired and vexed."

Constance waved her hand in a dismissive fashion. "Nay Mary. I am most worried about Kieran...." Her words cut off with the spasms that crossed her belly. Fear erupted. What was going on?

Worry and concern crossed Mary's plain face. "Milord is well trained and will fend off any attack, I can assure you. Please sit down milady. You do look rather pale."

"Nay, Mary I do not feel...." Constance felt a sharper pain tear across belly as if someone drew a knife across her skin. She reeled against Mary, seizing her gown as a sudden, warm flow of liquid coursed down her thighs. What was happening to her?

Mary grabbed a hold of her before she could fall to the ground. "What is the matter, milady?"

More pain seared through her midsection. She winced. "The child...I think 'tis coming."

Mary immediately jumped into action, clapping her hands wildly. "Ladies, help me get the Duchess to bed!" She wound her arm around Constance's shoulders while the other women supported her, carrying

her to the bed where she writhed in agony.

Mary placed her hand on her risen belly and examining the area thoroughly, shaking her head sadly.

“The child is coming and I am afraid twill be too small to survive.”

She clutched Mary’s arm as though she was drowning and Mary was the lifeline she desperately needed. “Do what you can, Mary for I do not want to lose this child!” Constance grasped her convulsing belly, the warm flow of moisture seeping out and staining her ivory gown with the blood spreading in greedy crimson fingers.

“Ladies, help me prepare her for the birth,” Mary ordered as she washed her hands in the nearby basin while the servants helped her out of her stained gown. Her terrified eyes darted around the room, longing for Kieran, as the pains became stronger and closer together. Kieran, I wish you were here with me right now, her scared mind screamed, I can not lose this child!

Constance’s arms waved frantically in the air, her heart beating frantically. “No one tell the Duke! He must be able to focus on the battle ahead with a clear mind!”

Mary shook her head as she gathered linens on the table. “We will not tell him, milady,” she murmured as she readied everything for the impending birth. “He will be brought in after the battle is over.”

Please, God, help me to keep this child, she prayed desperately, do not take him from me! Her cry was ignored. With each pain tearing across her midsection, Constance howled in pain until she delved into the blessed darkness of unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Heavy thuds rambled through the ancient wood, rumbling through the bailey each time the ram struck the wood. With each thrust, Kieran commanded the archers to fire the flaming arrows. Most of them drove into Hugh’s men. One by one, they fell by the wayside, some of the arrows catching the ram on fire. Dry, old wood hissed then caught quickly, the thick plume of black smoke rising high in the air.

Hugh noticed that his offending ram did not work so he ordered his foot soldiers to move ahead.

Thankfully, he had anticipated Hugh’s tactic move. On his order, hot oil poured into the moat, forming a thick black slick on top. He ordered the archers to fire again, this time at the murky water. Red-gold flames rose high and gave off such a heat that Hugh’s men could get nowhere near the castle walls,

causing them to back away quickly.

He read the disgust on Hugh's face. Inwardly, he smiled. Victory was close. Hugh knew there was nothing else he could do.

Hugh, seeing that he could get nowhere near Ravenwood, turned his horse around but not before giving Kieran a most evil stare as if to say: You have not heard the last of me. He motioned to the rest of his soldiers then dug his heels into his horse, galloping away with his garrison following him.

Just as Hugh and his men disappeared over the hill, the fire in the moat died down along with the flames in the ram giving Kieran a good look at the dead surrounding the hammerhead. Some of them were his boyhood friends while others were comrades he knew quite well. 'Tis no good getting sentimental now, Kieran thought to himself as he gazed upon the familiar but lifeless corpses scattered around the smoldering tree.

One of the young archers stepped forward. "'Tis seems we have won the battle, milord."

Kieran's hand gripped the square, hardened stone of the battlement. "Aye, that we have. Now, if you have need of me, I will be in my chamber with my Duchess." Kieran turned toward the stairs of the drum tower.

The soldier tipped his head. "Aye, milord."

Kieran descended the steps quickly, his mind thinking only of Constance, his heart pounding. Did she fare well despite his treatment of her earlier? Was she still holding her anger? His lips tugged into a smile. If she were, he would make it up to her in more ways than she could imagine.

He put a hand on the handle of his chamber door to open it but the door opened on its own. Lithe figures moved about inside with one dark-haired girl in particular stepping out, closing the door behind her.

"Nay, milord, you can not come in, at least not yet."

His blood froze for a moment then fell to his feet with a heavy thud. "Why not? What is the matter with Constance?"

"Because she has given birth to the child. She strove to keep the babe within her womb but she has worn herself out with all her efforts. I am sorry to say that 'twas too small to survive."

Numb shock grabbed a hold of him, making him still. His child was lost. Forever. Tears pricked at the inside of his eyelids for the first time since the death of his father. How could this have happened? You should have treated her better. He only wanted to protect her from all harms and this is what happened.

Perhaps if he.... “How long ago did this occur?” He kept his back to the girl, not wanting to show his anger or tears. Womanish is not how he wanted to appear.

“As short while ago, milord. The child has been delivered and the women are attending to the Duchess now. When they are finished, you may go in and see her.”

She was about to step away when he spun on his heel and stopped her. There was one critical issue on his mind. “Was the child a son?” Blood hammered in his temples as he awaited her answer.

The girl nodded slowly, adding to his deep sorrow. “Aye, ‘twas a son.”

His heart sank lower than he could have ever imagined. The only wish he had out of life was lost. His son now rested in the arms of God.

Kieran drew in a ragged breath, raking a weary hand through his hair. “Has the Duchess asked for me?” His anxiety increased. Did she want to have anything to do with him anymore? Her love was the one thing he did not to live without.

“Aye, that is all she wants. When the ladies have finished attending to her....” A soft knock at the oak door cut off the woman’s words. Slowly, her red head tilted in a nod. “She is ready to be seen.”

Kieran rushed in. Constance was in bed, her face red with tears as she buried it further into the pillow. Her loud cries of lament filled the chamber, breaking his heart in two. He pushed past Mary and the others as they bore away the bloody sheets. Without the servants, it gave him time to comfort her in his own way.

He knelt next to the bed, his fingers hungrily seeking out the softness of her cheeks. “Constance, my love are you all right?” To his surprise, she lifted up and put her arms around his neck, embracing her hard.

Constance grasped onto him tightly, like a child hugging a new toy. “Oh, Kieran! I am so sorry for what happened! Please do not be angry and leave me!” Sobs racked her body, the tears flowing like a river. Oh, what he would not give to take this pain away from her!

He returned her embrace, stroking the wild, golden tendrils circling her face. “Shh .... Constance. I am not angry for you had no control over the child’s birth. As for leaving you, you could not rid yourself of me if you tried.”

She pulled away slightly, her eyes full of fright and sorrow. “I swear when you give me another child, I will not let this happen....”



Kieran smiled widely then chuckled airily. “Constance, we will have more children never fear.” He went to stand up but her arms remained locked securely around his neck.

Her expression turned wilder, her eyes wide. “Where are you going? I need you, Kieran, now more than ever!”

He drew her back into to his embrace. “I am just going to take off my armor, Constance, that is all. Shh ... I will not leave you when you need me so much.” He captured her face with both his hands, his large thumbs tenderly wiping away the tears flowing from her eyes.

Her gaze pleaded with him to give her the safety of his arms. “Oh, Kieran, please hold me. I need to feel safe in your arms again.” Her voice was soft though still tinged with sobs. He gazed down. Love could not even describe the feelings he harbored for her at this moment.

“All right, Constance but first let me take off this bothersome armor and I will hold you until the end of time.”

Kieran removed his armor as quickly as possible while remaining as close to Constance as he could. Once he removed the armor and breeches, he slid his naked body between the sheets, taking a trembling Constance in his arms. His hand stroked her flaxen hair while the storm of tears abated, her hand resting upon his bare wide chest. Never in his life had he loved a woman more, his whole purpose for being on the earth. That fact she needed him so badly thrilled him to no end despite the crush of his spirit caused by the loss of their son.

Deafening silence enveloped them, broken only by the occasional roll of distant thunder and approaching rain. Deep breaths resounded next to him, as if Constance summoned courage to speak. “Kieran, there is something I wish to tell you something I have carried around secretly for a while. I think ‘tis high time you knew about it.

She stunned him into silence. What could her secret be? Does she love another? Unfounded fear crept into him as dire thoughts entered his mind. Kieran cleared his throat in an effort to steel himself. “What would that be my dear?” His hand playfully caught hers, fingers intertwining in play with her tiny ones, his thumb caressing the soft palm of her hand as he waited to hear her confession

Constance leaned up on her elbow as best as she could, her belly still ailing her though the pain had faded considerably since the birth of the child. Her eyes sparkled like the gems he so carefully carried from the Holy Land for her. “Kieran, I want you to know I love you.”

He stared at her unblinkingly. Did he hear those words wrong? Did she just say that she loved him?

“What did you say?”

Constance nodded slowly, her slender fingers caressing his cheek softly. “I said I love you, Kieran. At first when you forced me to marry you, I thought you only did so for my army or for the sake of the child. In time, you have proved your love for me. I could not have asked for a better husband than you.” Her eyes moistened as the tears welled up then fell slowly down her cheeks.

How his heart soared! What he had been waiting to hear became a reality now! The love he sought from Constance, she gave freely, her heart belonging to him forever. His own eyes began to grow moist with tears but he held them back. He had to be strong for her.

Kieran’s grip on her tightened, drawing her ever closer to him, her naked flesh feeling like velvet next to his. “Constance, do you know how long I have waited to hear those words? When I fought with King Richard in the Holy Land, you were always on my mind. I often wondered what you looked like after all those years, picturing you as you are now. I must admit I was surprised when you had Mary as your decoy.”

She smiled slightly. “I was forced to, Kieran. I wanted to find out your true intentions before I committed my army to you. Secretly I denied you my army because of the way you treated me when we were children.”

“Now you see the real man before you. Perhaps I always loved you even when I taunted you terribly. If you must know, those green eyes of yours haunted my dreams and as time passed, I found myself more and more intrigued with you. Before I took Odette as my betrothed, I considered having Father arrange the marriage between us though I had not seen you in some time. I cared not what you looked like. All I knew was that I had to have you somehow.” He captured her face in both of his hands, feeling her soft skin under the flesh of his hands. “And now I do.”

Puzzled expressions crossed her face, her eyebrows lifting in question. “Why did you not have your Father arrange the marriage?”

“Because of the way I treated you when we were children. I was afraid you would say no and thus crushing my spirit. That was one blow I could not withstand.” His hands slipped from her face, stroking the silky strands of her golden mane streaming over his arms like a pale curtain.

Constance’s hand reached up and caressed his cheek, firing his blood no end. “Given our past, I most probably would have. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I always hoped to be your bride despite the fact I thought you hated me. After our last encounter, I grew to hate you but that hope remained alive

though I would not admit to it. When you announced your betrothal, I was saddened for some time,” she sighed wearily, “but that is all behind us now, Kieran. We are married and that is the way it should be. Let us not look upon the past with regret but rather look to the future so that we can enjoy our lives at this very moment.”

\* \* \* \*

For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Constance felt truly safe. Even in childhood, she felt safe in his presence not knowing why until now. Kieran always exuded a protective charm and like a moth to a flame, she was attracted to it.

She felt the protective air flowing from him and washing over her body like a tidal wave, relaxing the still convulsing muscles of her belly. Without warning, a leftover spasm crossed her belly. Her knees drew up instinctively, causing an alarm to rise through Kieran.

“What is the matter, Constance?” Concern filled his voice as he pulled her tighter to him.

Each pain was a reminder of her lost child. Tears continued to course down her face. “‘Tis just a little bit of birthing convulsions that must be done with, ‘tis all. “

Kieran hugged her tighter. “Come, Constance. I know we have lost our son but there is still hope! We will have more children, never fear.” His lips placed a gentle kiss upon her forehead.

For some reason, Constance felt she had to prove she tried to keep the child despite Kieran’s reassurances that he believed her. Why? “Aye, I know Kieran but I wanted the child so badly! As hard as my body fought to dispel the child, I fought just as hard to keep it!” Tears tracked down her face steadily as those words passed from her lips. Moisture fell from the corner of her eyes and onto his tanned chest where it ran in rivulets down his side.

“I believe you, Constance. When the midwife says ‘tis all right, we shall make another child. Until then I wish you to rest and conserve your strength for your body has been through much today.”

“But Kieran....”

Kieran laid a finger to her unquiet lips, silencing any further protest. “Sleep Constance.”

Once Constance fell into the warm welcome depths of dreamless sleep, Kieran let his own body relax slightly. Her head rested on his chest with her fingers still intertwined with his. He peered down. . With

that assurance, Kieran let the long held tears slowly fall from his eyes and onto the pillow where they formed a damp pool.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat before the long wooden table in the war room, his skeletal hands placed on either side of the oak board, a map of England drawn upon smooth surface. Little carved men staged upon the map in various formations. Clearly marked was Ravenwood and Stratford, the tiny men staged in attack position. With a frustrated hand, Hugh began to push the tiny men around the board to make a different attack but the result was the same. Kieran knew the exact moves he would make almost too well. If Kieran were not in the picture, then Ravenwood would be his for the taking along with Constance.

He leaned back in his chair, letting his fingers toy with the collar of his tunic, feeling the delicate embroidery under his callused fingers. Getting Kieran out of the way was not going to be easy. Strangely, Kieran knew his moves even before he did. How could he come by such information?

Hugh rose sharply and paced the length of the chamber, his hands clasped behind his back. Why must the disposal of his brother be this difficult?

Before he could think further, Margaret entered the war room and knelt before him, her head down demurely. "Milord, I have received news that about your losses."

His brow lifted. "How many men have I lost?"

"Fifty at the most with only ten injured."

"What was my brother's losses?"

"None that could be seen, milord."

Hugh walked away from Margaret toward the open window. His bony hands rested on the cold stone sill as he gazed out at the countryside, his anger rising. Why must he continuously endure the losses? Surely, there was some loss incurred on Kieran. He turned to Margaret. "Is there any other news?"

Her head raised with an evil, delighted smile upon her face. "Aye, milord. Word has spread the child in the Duchess' belly is no more."

Hugh stalked across the room, gripping Margaret tightly by the shoulders and jerking her to her feet. She cried out in pain but he ignored it. That was inconsequential to what he needed to know.

He shook the scared servant roughly, her braids flying around her head wildly. “What did you say?”

She tried to tear her shoulders from his ironclad grip. “Ouch, Milord, you are hurting me!”

Hysteria flooded his body, bleeding through his voice. “TELL ME WHAT YOU SAID!”

“I said the rumor flies the Duchess has lost the child she was carrying.” Margaret repeated as Hugh released her from his grip, her hands instinctively rubbing the area where the skeletal fingers dug into her firm flesh.

Wonderful news that he had waited for had finally come! For the first time in his life, he inflicted injury to his brother! His lips turned up in a malicious grin as the thought of Kieran’s child no longer breathing life, left to rot in the earth forever. Your father will soon join you, Hugh swore to the dead child, and so will your mother when her purpose has been fulfilled.

Evil glee filled his heart as he spun around and glared hard at Margaret. “Send me my herald. I need to send a message to Flanders.” Ah, that was it. New mercenaries were the answer. He would use the Flemish ones instead of the local rabble that had already failed him. Those men were much more ruthless and thorough. If they could not kill Kieran, then nothing would.

“Why send for the Flemish mercenaries, Milord?”

“They will rid me of my brother once and for all, Margaret. Ask no more questions for you test my patience!”

Margaret shrank away from him like a rabbit from a hunter; her hands drawn in a claw like fashion while her eyes grew wide with apprehension. “Forgive me, Milord. I will send in the messenger.” She rose from her knees and left chamber, seeking out the herald as she was bade.

\* \* \* \*

The messenger arrived shortly after Margaret left, wearing the garb of a common peasant. Apparently, the herald knew better than to dress flamboyantly when dealing with the Flemish. A ruthless lot who would strip everything from him and possibly kill him if they thought he possessed money. “You sent for me, milord?”

“Aye, that I did. Here, I wish you to take this to Flanders. Seek out the most ruthless mercenaries you can find. When you find them, bring them back here. I have a little task for them.” Hugh did not even

bother looking up from where he was hastily scribing a note for the messenger, his skeletal hand moving quickly over the parchment.

“It could take quite a while, milord. The mercenaries are not easy to find.”

“I care not. Find them. Make them understand they will be paid handsomely if they accomplish the given task.” Hugh applied the red wax to the seam of the roll then embedded the crest of Stratford in the soft tallow. Then he handed the roll to the messenger who bowed low before him then turned to leave.

Hugh put a hand on the man’s heavy woolen arm, gazing up at his servant with vicious eyes. “Go and do not fail me.” The man bowed then scurried from the chamber to his waiting horse outside the castle. When his footfalls ceased to exist, Hugh knew he was truly alone.

He leaned back in his enormous chair, his long thin fingers under his chin in a contemplative gesture, his eyes locked on the doorway. You will never live to walk through that door my brother, Hugh thought to himself silently as a smile curved his lips, at least while I still draw breath.

\* \* \* \*

Days crept by for Constance, her belly hurting less with each passing day, the youthful skin resuming its formerly flat state. As she awoke each day, she found less and less reason to get out of bed despite Kieran’s pleas for her to arise and take in some fresh air. The pain in her heart was too great with the knowledge of the child’s conception before they were married tugging at her mind. Was God trying to punish her for conceiving the child before the benefit of marriage?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran strode into the chamber in the bright mid-afternoon. Constance remained in bed, her eyes protected from the sun by the arm she put over them. She did not want to be around anyone, especially Kieran.

He lowered himself onto her side of the bed, his fingers gently caressing her arm. “Constance, come ‘tis time you got out of bed.”

She wrested her shoulder from his hand. Not even Kieran could make her heart hurt less. "Leave me alone, Kieran."

Nimble fingers tore the sheets covering her despondent form away. "It has been a week, my dear. It is time for you to get up."

"I SAID LEAVE ME ALONE!" she shrieked, pulling the covers back over her head. The last thing she wanted to do was face the world with an empty womb. Joy did not reside in her anymore.

"Nay, I will not leave you alone. Arise I say!" He snatched the covers away. Quickly she tried to pull the covers back but he was too swift and strong. They remained locked in his hand.

Fury crept up her cheeks, heating her skin greatly. "Kieran, go away! I do not wish to see you now! I wish to be alone!" Tears filled her eyes. In the quiet of her soul, she continued to grieve for the child that was no longer. That was her punishment for conceiving the child before marriage.

"Constance, I will never go away. 'Tis time you realized that."

Her anger and shame boiled over. "'Tis your fault I feel this way! If you had not seduced me, this would not have happened!" Racking sobs invaded her body as swift as the wind, her flesh quivering. Those words haunting her mind fell from her lips before she could stop them. He winced as if she had struck him. Constance felt a stab of pain in her heart. She did not mean to say those things. They just spilled over.

Kieran drew her into the tight circle of his arms, wiping away the errant tears coursing down her face and stroking the tangled, golden tendrils. "Constance, I know I am to blame for what happened. I am truly sorry but I wanted you so badly. I simply could not help myself. For the longest time, I did nothing but dream of you while I fought alongside the King. When the opportunity arose to quench my thirst, I took it. I never expected you to conceive a child the first time we made love. If someone must be blamed, then blame me," He murmured softly into her hair, pulling her closer.

She sniffed lightly then pulled her head away, gazing into the endless blue pools in search of solace. It was there, ready for her to dive into. "'Twas not entirely your fault, Kieran. I could have stopped myself but I did not. When you touched me it felt as though I was already your bride and 'twas our wedding night," she said, wiping the tears still falling from her eyes, "Forgive me for the angry words that escaped me."

Kieran smiled gently, caressing her creamy cheek with one hand while the other still petted her honey colored hair. "Constance, this was not a punishment from God or anyone else. 'Twas all the excitement

from Hugh's advancing army causing you to give birth so early."

She witnessed the tender side of him she never knew existed. Moisture welled in his eyes. Dark blue orbs glistened, almost turning to liquid. Still he refused to let them flow. "'Twas not the fact of Hugh's army advancing that caused the birth but 'twas your safety I feared." Finally, the storm of tears began to abate.

The expression of pain on his face changed to one of abject, unabashed joy, the smile becoming broader. "I was concerned for your safety too, my love. That is why I fought off all of Hugh's men. Now 'tis time you went outside to breathe in the fresh air."

"Kieran, I am not ready...."

His tanned thumb wiped the last of her tears away. "'Tis much too late to say no, my dear. I have already ordered your tub be brought in and your best gown brought out."

She wrapped her slender arms around his waist, her fingers gliding up his back to feel the strong muscles twitching with life. Slowly, the flame of desire awoke, spreading through veins like an out of control wildfire. Kieran was the only man to evoke such emotion in her. Her grip tightened. "You truly are good to me, Kieran."

He returned her embraced with fevered abandon. "And you are good to me, Constance. I truly could not have asked for a better wife." Kieran placed a slowly, lingering kiss upon her lips. His magical tongue sought entry into her mouth and she readily submitted. For a moment, their tongues engaged in play, each one teasing and tantalizing the other until Kieran broke the kiss.

Kieran broke the kiss, his chest heaving. "If we continue on my love, I shall be having you right here this moment but the midwife says 'tis still not safe."

"Ah, but when 'tis safe, Kieran, you will not leave this chamber for several days," she purred seductively, her arm going around so her fingers could explore the silky black tendrils tumbling down his shoulders.

He chuckled softly. "I will not want to, Constance rest assured," his head turned toward the heavy scraping sound at the doorway, "Here is your tub now."

Servants brought in the bulky tub, setting the wooden structure on the floor. More servants followed closely behind with steaming buckets of water. One by one, the buckets poured until the last one emptied, the servants left the chamber quickly. Following Kieran's orders, she removed her dressing gown and sank into the warm water, ribbons of steam rising in the air. Picking up the cake of soap, she



was about to lather the cloth when a tanned hand removed both items from her fingers.

“Allow me.” Kieran began to rub the cake between his large palms with bubbles of soap forming between his hands.

She sank deeper into the tub. She was truly the luckiest woman in the world.

## Chapter 14

Hugh waited anxiously for news from the messenger, his anger growing. Had the messenger survive the meeting with the Flemish mercenaries?

He smiled, rocking a little on his heels. Ah, the Flemish. Ruthless and bloodthirsty, they showed mercy to no one when they were paid extremely well

Thunderstorms erupted, sounding ominous as they crashed. Driving rain pounded the countryside with the fury the heavens contained, forming makeshift pools in the valley beyond the walls. Bright flashes of lightning pierced the aura of hostility in the room.

Hugh lay in his large bed with his hands behind his head, listening to the mighty peals of thunder. His lips curled. That sound signaled his dénouement of victory over Kieran. ‘Twould be the perfect end to his perfect brother. His grin widened. It was perfect.

Soft, sudden raps at the door pierced the thin veil of dreams, taking his demeanor to an air of annoyance. “Enter!”

He pulled the covers up a little more to cover his gaunt body, causing a slight shift next to him. He looked over at the bundle tucked under the sheets. Damn, had she not left yet? With that in mind, he pushed her roughly out of bed. “Get your clothes and leave me!”

The young girl fell to the floor, landing with a gentle thud, her dark hair fanning out around her. Her hurt eyes gazed at him, her pert, succulent mouth slightly open as to question why. Quickly she shut the bothersome orifice to avoid the blow he was about to reign on it.

His gaze raked over her form, blinking hard. The child could not have been more than twelve, her body blossoming into womanhood. Why had he chosen for a night in his bed? Ah, now he remembered. She was Margaret's sister.

Without a word, the girl gathered her clothes and left sullenly through the secret door in the wall.

His door opened. Hugh's quiet valet entered the room, his gait indicative of his uneasiness.

"What is it?" Hugh barked from the bed, his anger rising for many reasons

The valet cleared his throat. "I am sorry to bother you, milord. Your messenger has arrived with the Flemish mercenaries."

Hugh's hands clapped together in devilish delight. "Excellent! Put them in the dining hall and feed them whatever they wish! Dress me quickly for I wish to meet them!" He leapt out of his giant bed and hurried to his coffer, pulling everything out, scattering the rich material around the room. He cast a look to it then shrugged his shoulders. Let the valet pick it up. That was what he paid the man to do.

He continued his search until he found what he was looking for. Rich amethyst colored fabric rested on the bottom, as if waiting for him to find it. Gold threads embellished the sleeve and neck yoke, rivaling that of a king. Hugh chuckled softly. The end of Kieran fast approached and he wanted to look his best when it happened.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh entered the odoriferous-dining hall, surveying the scene before him. Ten men, dressed as battle weary knights, sat at his table, eating his food. Grease dribbled from in-between their grimy fingers, the stench of sweat and horse filling the air. Now and then, one of them paused to let out an obligatory slice of flatulence. He grimaced at their manners. Obviously, they possessed none

Between the men a coarse guttural language evoked, some of them grunting their responses. Did any of them know English?

He stepped in further, placing his hands on his hips. "I see you have all found your way to my dining hall." Perhaps the tone of his voice would halt them. It did not. The feasting continued, oblivious to his presence. Damn these men! Did they not know of whose presence they were in? Blasting flames of anger heated his cheeks, thrumming out to his limbs. How dare they...

One man stood up, dressed in dirty leather tunic and breeches. His hair, the color of rich flames, hung on each side of his face, straggly and coarse. He bowed quickly to Hugh. "I ... am ... sorry ... Milord for the men do understand ... English ... as ... I ... do." The man spoke with a strange accent, indicating the man's grasp of English was not well.

Hugh's arms dropped to his sides as he stepped toward the man who possessed faint understanding of his words. "I am glad one of you understands my language. Now I want you to convey to the rest the reason why I brought you here. Tell them that I have brought them here to carry out an assassination. When the job is done, there will be a handsome reward." He glared at the men before him. The man translated Hugh's words into their strange language, his hands moving in conjunction with his words. Suddenly a cry went up through the ranks, the men cheering in response.

His hand went to the hilt of his sword strapped at his girdle. By the look of things, he was going to need it. He turned to the English speaking man, his other hand gesturing toward the soldiers. "What is the matter with your men?"

The man smiled widely, the blackened stumps of his teeth clearly visible. Hugh cringed. "Excuse me, milord but ze men are, how do you zay in English, happy about getting ze money for ze work."

Loud peals of laughter rang throughout the room, erupting from his lips. "Good. I want them to keep the reward in mind when they are on their task."

"Vhat do you vant us to do?"

"Let your men finish eating while you and I go to discuss the task in my war room. Come with me." Hugh crooked his finger at the man. With a ragged smile, the man obeyed like an obedient dog. The others picked up where they left off, bits of food flying everywhere. Hugh was glad to be out of their presence, at least for now.

He sauntered down the narrow hallway that led to his war room, his heart higher than it had ever been. Kieran's time to live grew short and it was a shame his brother did not even know it.

\* \* \* \*

Constance awoke to the sounds of the birds chirping their greeting to the morning sun, stretching her tired muscles. Kieran as usual was not beside her. He was in the practice fields, making sure her army

was strong and capable of fending off any attack. She smiled. When the time was right, she would most happily make Kieran forget about exercising her men for a few days.

She rose from the bed and wandered to the window. Disappointment filled her when she noticed the clouds blanketing the sun, barring the bright rays of sunshine. Soft sighs escaped her lips. She loved the warm sunshine and gentle grasses swaying in the breeze that brushed against her ankles. It was almost like Kieran's caress.... At the thought of him, Constance cast her gaze to the practice fields. Kieran, his long blue-black hair flowing over his shoulders, sat proud and strong in his saddle, his head trained forward. She looked to her men. They drilled through their exercises like a well-greased wheel.

Suddenly the sun broke through the logjam of clouds, casting the bright rays down to the dark earth, currents sweeping through the valley. Unable to resist the brightness of the day, she dressed quickly and wandered out toward the practice fields

\* \* \* \*

Constance's men moved with swiftness and speed, something that had not been here when he arrived. Since his taking over of her army, they improved greatly. Now if they....

"Do you think the men have had practice enough?"

His lips curled into a smile as the silky sound of the soft female timbre drifted over his shoulder. There was only one woman to whom that voice belonged to. He pivoted in his saddle, his smile widening. Constance stood behind him, dressed in her best ivory colored gown, braided golden hair intertwined with bits of silk. Soft fabric outlined all of her womanly features, from her slender neck, rounded breasts, moving toward the swell of her hips down ... Kieran snapped out of his daydream. It was not safe yet.

His eyebrows knitted in question. "What are you doing here, Constance?"

Her sweet smile crossed her lips as she stepped forward, her hand on his leg. He drew a hard breath. No matter what she did, excitement coursed through his veins. "I missed you and wanted to see how my men were doing."

He chuckled softly. "Aye, I have missed you also but the practice fields is no place for any woman let alone my wife. Return to the castle and I will be there shortly to have the morning meal with you."

Petulant expressions crossed her features. "Nay, Kieran. I wish to stay." He went to reach for her but she playfully stepped out of his reach. "You are not going to make me do what you wish, at least not out here." Seductive tones fell from her luscious mouth, inviting the beast of lust to awaken. When he had her alone, she was going to pay for that remark.

He leaned back in his saddle, shifting so he did not crush his vital member as it started to spring to life. She was extraordinarily tempting this fine morning.

Weary sighs escaped him. It was pointless to argue with her. Constance had a mind of her own and was not about to bend to anyone's will save her own. "Come here Constance. I do not want you too near the horses when they are at full gallop." Surprisingly, she obeyed his command. Standing next to his horse, her tiny hand rested on his leather-covered calf and sent chills of wanton desire to course through his body. Unable to resist the nearness of her, Kieran bent down and placed a hand behind her head, tilting it backwards. Eagerly, he sought the safety of her lips, plowing the essence. She melted to his touch, placing a hand on the back of his head, massaging his scalp gently. When he felt her completely under his spell, he wrapped one strong arm around her tiny waist and brought her on his horse.

She giggled like a child, throwing her slender arms around his neck as she settled into the saddle in front of him, her gaze raking over his form. "Kieran, why did you do that?"

He nuzzled her neck, nibbling lightly here and there. "I want to keep you from getting hurt. Also, I can not help but touch you and be as near to you as possible," Kieran whispered in her ear, holding onto her tightly. Together they turned toward the field, observing the maneuvers.

They watched for a few more moments when a distant cloud of dust caught Constance's attention. "Kieran, what is that?" She pointed toward the advancing column

He trained his stare at the advancing cloud. What was it? Before he could ponder further, the answer rose from the depths of his mind. Hugh was on the attack!

Kieran lifted his arm and waved it wildly, his heart pounding out of control. This time Hugh had gone too far.

The men stopped and stared at him. "Back to the castle and prepare for battle!" he turned his horse around holding into Constance tightly. She protested but he ignored them. It was important that he get her to safety. His hold on Constance tightened. There was no way that he would allow Hugh to wage war again.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran stood atop the battlements and watched the tiny band of men come closer, their clothing appearing strange. He narrowed his eyes to slits so he could see the strangeness of their clothes. Their leather vests, dirty and torn as well as their breeches. He looked to the swords strapped to their hips. They were not English broadswords as he thought but of another make and metal. Where were they from?

His knight's sense itched. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had seen that type somewhere before but he could not remember where.

"Who are they, Kieran?"

He whirled around to see Constance standing there with confusion written on her beautiful face.

Kieran gripped her upper arms hard and drew her into a strong embrace. "What are you doing here, Constance?" he murmured against her hair.

"I wanted to see what was going on," she replied quietly then pushed away, striding over to the battlements. "Who are they?"

He closed the distance and stood next to her, sweat beading his brow as worry overtook him. "I do not know but I want you to get back to your chamber for safety until I deal with them," he turned his gaze to the advancing men. His tanned hands gripped the stone of the battlements so tightly his knuckles turned white. Whoever they were and what they were looking for was still a mystery but he was going to make damn sure there were not going to find it here.

Constance watched them as well, her verdict much different then his. "They appear harmless. More than likely they are in search of food and shelter for the night. They will move on in the morning."

"Appearances can be deceiving, Constance. Never forget that. Now, whatever they ask, we will deny it to them. Something tells me there is something sinister about those men." Kieran kept his eyes firmly locked onto the advancing men. Where had he seen their ilk before?

Annoyed sighs escaped Constance's lips. "I cannot believe that. Look, one of them is slumped over his horse. They are only looking for treatment."

He turned to grab her arm but Constance descended the drum tower steps, far out of his reach. Damn, when would she learn to trust him? Without hesitation, Kieran followed her path in the vain attempt to

stop her. .

\* \* \* \*

“Lower the gate!”

She watched as the gatekeeper lowered the drawbridge, its rusty hinges groaning. The men waited on the other side, their horses stamping slightly. When it was clear, the men came through, their ailing friend barely hanging onto his horse. She noticed the strangeness of their clothing, not sure of the origin. Surely ‘twas not English. Before she could ask their needs, Kieran stopped her by stepping in front, dwarfing her stature.

His legs splayed out in a military stance, his arms crossing over his broad chest. Constance cast a glance to him. Kieran’s deep eyes narrowed, his black brows knitting in anger. “What is it you require?” His voice was low and even, indicating the hidden danger that could arise at any moment.

The apparent leader of the group shifted in his saddle. “Who might you be?”

Muscles bunched in Kieran’s jaw as his teeth set. “The Duke of Ravenwood.”

The stranger bowed his head. “Forgive me, milord. Ve just require a little food and ze shelter for ze night.”

She watched them, feeling her own fear rise. Apparently, Kieran thought them to be a threat so perhaps they should send them on their way and be done with it.

“How is your man?”

His grizzled brown head turned at the sound of her voice, his smile revealing a row of blackened teeth.

“Ze is bad. Veree bad.”

“If you need the use of a physician, go to the village,” Kieran’s jaw tightened.

The stranger looked to her as she stepped out from behind Kieran’s immense stature. “But I hear zat you are de wonderful, kind lady of Ravenwood. Would you send a poor man to his death?”

She felt his pleading stare on her but her sense told her to abide by Kieran’s senses. They had not failed him yet. “I am afraid that my husband is the one who dictates who comes and goes in Ravenwood. I no longer do.”

“But you can not....”

“As my wife has so delicately put it, I rule in Ravenwood since I am the Duke. Now be on your way.”

“But....”

“If you do not leave,” Kieran gestured toward the battlements where the archers waited to fire, “they will see that you do. What is your choice to be?”

The strange man looked to Kieran then to the archers. He grunted. “Zen we will be on our way. I see zat chivalry does not reside here.”

“Not when it comes to mercenaries.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Why do you zink dat we are mercaries?”

“Call it my sense but you best be on your way before you die,” Kieran’s voice took on a deeper tone, conveying the meaning

Brown hair, straggly and greasy, dipped in a bow. “As you say, milord,” he gestured to the others, “there must be a keep near here that would afford us what we needed.” With that, they trooped back through the drawbridge. Once they were clear, Kieran gave the order to bring it up.

He turned to her, gripping her hard. “I thought you were going to defy me yet again, my sweet wife,” he drew her closer. “I thought I might have to punish you for it.” His voice was low and husky, like a smooth wine, making her shiver all over.

Her hands trailed up his lightly armor-clad arm. “I had not planned on disobeying you but with that promise, I wish I had.”

Kieran’s full lips pulled into a sensuous smile. “Perhaps I will have to punish you after all,” he bent low and swept her up into the safety of his arms. “You seem as though you need it.”

\* \* \* \*

Dusk draped itself over the countryside, blanketing the sleepy earth in its warm glow. Constance walked a little bit around the bailey, with the ever-present Kieran by her side, noticing how everything changed at night. Gray stones gleamed with a ghostly glow while the trees outside the curtain wall turned inky black.



“What are you thinking?” She felt the tug of Kieran’s fingers in hers as he asked his question.

“Not much really. Just about how full my life is now because of you.”

He halted and spun her around, pulling her toward him. “Aye that it is for me too. The only thing that is missing,” his hand slipped to her flat belly, “is a little one in here.”

Her hand covered his. “I know, my love but when the time is right, there will be.”

“When can we make love properly again?” Anxiety rose in his voice. She knew his loins were ready to burst from waiting but they had to until the midwife said it was all right. Though they had done other things that afternoon to pleasure themselves, it still did not satiate him entirely. She must seek out the midwife and find out when would be the right time.

“Soon. My term is coming to an end,” she whispered. “Oh how I want you to be inside of me again....”

“Stop,” he ordered, halting her in the middle of the bailey and kissing her lips softly, “You are driving me to madness, woman.”

She laid her cheek against the soft velvet that covered his chest, nuzzling him slightly. “When we can make love again, neither one of us will be leaving our chamber for a few days.”

Kieran’s long finger tilted her head up. Love filled his eyes, deep and unwavering. “Aye. That will be a much-anticipated time for me. To hold you again, feeling your body next to mine....”

She laughed lightly. “Now it is you, who is driving me to madness,” her fingers traveled further up his arm. “Shall we retire and finish our games of this afternoon?”

His eyes brightened even more, resembling a beacon. “I can think of nothing better.”

\* \* \* \*

Kieran lay awake in the semi- darkness of the chamber, the silence broken only by Constance’s soft and even breathing. Within the recesses of his mind, he replayed the men’s voices in a desperate effort to remember where he had heard the strange tongue before.

In a flash, it came to him. He had heard that strange tongue in the Holy Land. That was it! They were Flemish! From what he could remember, they mixed with Spanish forces, recruited heavily by King Philip. Known for their savagery, the Flemish made the perfect assassins.

Kieran nudged Constance out of the curve of his back and onto her own side of the bed. He rose and retrieved his broadsword, placing it on the floor next to the bed. Something itched in the back of his mind that their first meeting today with the strangers would not be the last.

He lay down next to Constance then took her back into his arms, listening to the sounds of the night drifting in through the open window. Relaxation came but he pushed it away. He had to be ready. His hand went to the hilt of his sword. Just in case.

Moments ticked by, his eyelids getting heavier and heavier. If this kept up...

Ear shattering cracks filled the air, splitting it in two. Several of the Flemish mercenaries rushed in, their weapons drawn. Kieran leapt from the bed, pulling his sword in front of him. Constance awoke with a jerk and scrambled out of the bed, backing away, her hand to her mouth.

He raised his sword while one of the Flemish mercenaries raised his. The man spat out a few words in their native tongue while the others backed off and left the room, presumably in search of treasure.

The older man struck hard but he defended himself with skill. His instigator was obviously no match. The man moved too slowly, with jerky spasms. Apparently, what little he knew of weaponry had been learned in a village pub.

Sounds of clashing steel filled the room as Kieran fought both men until one broke away, stalking in Constance's direction.

"I will help you, Kieran!" Constance cried as she backed away toward the wardrobe that housed her armor.

\* \* \* \*

Her hands connected with the knob on her armoire. She twisted it, finding it blessedly unlocked. She had put something away earlier in the day and forgot to lock it. Constance looked up. Kieran still battled one of them while the rest waited their turn. Clashes of metal against metal, rose in the air, making the situation more hostile. Kieran needed her help.

Constance turned the knob, sliding her hand inside. Her sword hung on the inside door. She gripped the blade and pulled it down, all the while keeping her eyes in the melee.

Before she could bring it around, one of the men stalked over toward her, holding his sword out before

him, his gaze traveling up and down her hungrily. She held her head high. This man was not going to touch her or Kieran.

“Come here, little girl. I am not going to hurt you.... much.” Fiendish laughter erupted through his broken English, making her angrier all the more. How dare these men invade her private domain? Kieran was right. These men had been mercenaries, sent to kill him, probably sent by Hugh.

Her stalker came closer, his breath hot and stinking. His hands descended on her shoulders, holding her captive.

She smiled widely. “So do you want me?” He nodded. “Then kiss me like you mean it.” His lips lowered on hers, the foul stench causing the bile in her throat to rise. She used Kieran’s technique to bring him under her spell. Once he was engrossed, she pulled the sword out from behind her and buried in the man’s gullet. Surprise filled his eyes as he gripped onto the blade then fell backwards, blood pouring from his wound. She breathed a sigh of relief, wiping his spittle from her mouth with the sleeve of her gown. Her breath came in gasps. This was only the second time in her life she killed someone and she hated it. Why must there be so much death in the world?

She stared at the fallen figure in the darkness then looked up when the sound of the swords clashing entered her ears. Kieran still battled the other man. She had to help him.

Constance drew a deep breath then put a foot on the lifeless corpse, withdrawing her blade. Her belly churned as the sick, sucking sound echoed the room. There was no time to think about now. Kieran needed her.

She followed the clangs of metal and made her way to the other side of the room where her husband fought for his life. Around and around, they danced. Constance could not make out which man was Kieran at first, her eyes narrowing. As if in blessing, a shaft of moonlight entered the room, showing her the culprit. Without reservation, she plunged her sword into the man’s back. The would-be assassin fell to his knees before falling forward, his body landing on the cold tiles with a thud. Kieran’s eyes grew wide as she stood there with a sword dripping great clumps of blood.

Kieran, with sword still in hand, quickly stepped over the body, drawing her into the circle of his moisture-laden arm, his breath coming in gasps. “Constance, are you all right?”

Her body shivered but went numb from the shock of having to kill to protect someone she loved. “Aye, I am fine. You were right, these men were up to no good.”

Kieran’s eyes drew to the lifeless heaps on the floor, relief flooding his voice. “I am grateful that you

listened to me, Constance and had not given them shelter. These men were Flemish mercenaries and a ruthless lot they are. I have the feeling they were sent here by my brother to destroy me,” his expression darkened. “ Somehow they got past my men. That is something I will not tolerate.” Before he could say more, guards rushed in. Out of decency, Kieran his nude body before Constance’s, hiding her state of undress.

The guard’s eyes darted around, noting the dead. “Milord, are you and the Duchess all right?”

Kieran’s arms crossed over his chest as annoyance and anger crept into his voice. “Aye, that we are. Where are the rest of the rabble?”

“We have them in custody. These two got away from us.” The guard replied solemnly.

“How did they get away?”

“They subdued the man set to watch them.” The soldier shifted uneasily in his position.

“I will tend to him later. In the meantime, I will dispense with the mercenaries’ punishments. As for these two,” Kieran gestured angrily to the two bodies littering the chamber,” get them out of here and bury them so they do not foul the halls of Ravenwood.”

Silver glinted where the man tipped his metal encased head. “Aye, milord.” He and few others of his rank bore away the two lifeless bodies before their foul stench permeated the air.

Kieran dropped his sword to the floor where it landed with a clang and drew her back into his arm again. “’Twas a brave thing you did Constance.”

She returned his embrace tightly. “Kieran, I love you and there was not any way I was going to let someone take you away from me. My father taught me a long time ago if I really loved someone beyond all reason, there was nothing I would not do to save them.”

Kieran gazed deep into her eyes, love dancing behind those cobalt orbs. “There is nothing I would not do to save you, Constance.” His lips touched hers briefly, his tongue dancing along the edges in feathery strokes, her body quivering. So this was what love was all about. Just as she enjoyed his attention, a dire thought entered her head.

She pulled away reluctantly. “What are you going to do to them, Kieran?”

His face took on a stern expression. “As the Duke of Ravenwood, that is my concern, Constance. They tried to kill me not to mention you. The punishment I must hand out is brutal so I want you to stay here until I tell you ‘tis all right to leave this chamber. Am I understood?”

Constance tried to protest. “Kieran, what....”

Kieran silenced her with a finger to her lips. “Constance, ask no more questions. Now get in bed.”

From the tone in his voice, Constance knew for the moment there was no fighting him. Silently she crept back into bed, the memory of the strange man laying his hands upon her replaying. With Kieran in her reach, she clung to him more tightly than ever before. The reality of what began to sink in, causing her to tremble even more. Kieran tightened his grip as if he sensed her fright, giving her the sense of safety she needed. Through the fright, however, one question still kept crossing her mind. What was he going to do to them?

\* \* \* \*

Loud rumbles of thunder tore Constance from her sleep. She sat up quickly, looking around her chamber. Blood that had congealed on the floor from the night before was gone. Thankfully, Kieran had servants clean it up before she awoke.

At the thought of him, she looked over. His side of the bed was empty.

He must be down with the prisoners.

On unsteady feet, she left the bed and went to the window. From the edge, she watched as Kieran headed a party of her men with the prisoners in tow toward the forest glen toward a clearing she used to play in as a child. Why was he taking them there? More than likely to mete out their punishments.

Her heart thumped hard. There is only one way to find out.

Dressing quickly, she made her way down to the stable and mounted her own sure-footed mare, riding in the Kieran’s direction.

\* \* \* \*

The prisoners, all mounted on their horses, sat with a hangman’s noose neatly tied around each of their necks. Kieran paced back and forth before them, anger stamped on his handsome features. Halting in his tracks, Kieran gazed directly at the only man in the party who spoke English.

He stood before the lead man's horse, his arms crossed and legs splayed out. This man held the key to his near destruction. A scowl traversed his face at the thought. "Who sent you to kill me?"

The man's shoulders stiffened as he sat proudly in his saddle. "'Twas ze Baron of Stratford. He was to pay us well for killing you."

"I see. Now was the gold you would have gotten worth your life?" The foreign man refused to answer, sitting even stiffer than before.

His captain stood behind the horses, his hand raised to strike them on the haunches. "Shall we proceed Milord?"

He nodded. "Aye, if they have no more to say."

Without another word, his man struck the horses.

\* \* \* \*

Constance crouched behind the large bushes and pushed herself as low to the ground in order to avoid detection by Kieran. 'Twas no different than when she was a young girl following him around.

Her tall husband's profile stood out against the lush green of the meadow, his angry words permeating the air around her. His language! Hopefully, Kieran was going to let these men go back with a warning to the person who hired them.

She heard Kieran's question to the leader but was not shocked to hear the answer. Hugh was definitely behind all of this.

When would he learn that he could not destroy Kieran?

Her gaze remained locked on the prisoners, with loops of rope around their necks. Kieran meant to hang them! Her stomach rolled into a tight knot. This was what Kieran talked about her not seeing.

Horses reared and charged forward, leaving the bodies to swing and struggle in the wind, jerking spasmodically.

She had never seen this type of punishment before so it was natural for her to scream.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran's head jerked up when he heard her shattering scream. His brows knitted in anger. Why did Constance not stay on her chamber as he told her to?

His gaze settled on a large bush shaking in the distance. She had to be hiding there. Kieran dismounted and strode over to the leafy bush, parting it with both hands. Constance, dressed in her fine blue velvet, sobbed hard. Her hands buried her face. He frowned. Why could she never do as he told her? This harshness of life he is what wanted to protect her from. "Constance, what are you doing here? I told you to stay in our chamber!"

With her fists clenched at her side, she gazed up at him through hurt eyes. "I know you had to punish them but in such a barbaric manner?"

"It was justified. If I remember correctly, you did not seem to mind killing them last night in our chamber." His tone was savage and accusatory. How could she question what he did when she was not above it herself?

Her lip stuck out. "That was different."

"How so?"

"It just was, that is all," she backed away from him, her hands out front of her. "Just stay away from me, Kieran. I am not happy with you at all this moment."

\* \* \* \*

Constance's horse pushed through the forest, dry leaves crunching underneath. It was oppressively hot. Sweat beaded her brow and she wiped it away. Dark clouds had rolled over the sun, indicating a storm was coming. She wished it would come and take the heat away. Still...

"Constance."

She stopped her horse at the sound of Kieran's voice. Her spine stiffened as she whirled around in her saddle. "What do you want? I told you I am not exactly happy with you right now," she re-seated herself in the saddle. "Why are you here? Were you following me?"

"Of course I was but I stayed hidden so you could not see me."

“Why?”

Kieran’s horse pulled up alongside of hers. Without ceremony, he reached over and grabbed her reins, holding them tightly in a gloved fist.

She was incredulous. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure that you do not get away.”

“I can ride my own horse,” she tried to grab them away from him but he hold was too strong. “Let me have my reins!”

“No. Not until you hear why I did what I did.” Kieran’s face remained stern as determination set in.

“You did what you must to protect the keep, nothing more,” she sat back, keeping her gaze straight ahead.

“I did it to protect you.”

She looked over at him, her heart banging in her throat. “Do you think Hugh would have killed me?”

“You would have wished for death before Hugh was through with you,” his brows knitted in anger.

“You are my wife and I love you, Constance, whether or not you choose to believe it. I will do what ever it takes to keep you safe and that includes dying.”

Constance looked down as guilt rode her mind. She should have just listened to Kieran and stayed in her chamber. Obedience was not one of her virtues. “Forgive me, Kieran. You did what you thought was best for Ravenwood and I should not have doubted you.”

His hand turned her face toward his. Constance trembled as his gaze intensified, her body melting under his touch. “You have fire and spirit, Constance and I do not ever want to extinguish that flame.”

Kieran’s lips touched hers, igniting her senses. Her heart beat increased, making the blood in her veins sing. He tease and tantalized, his tongue teasing the edges of her lips, his teeth nibbling lightly at her lower lip. She opened fully, allowing his tongue to probe the innermost recesses of her mouth.

Constance was nearly breathless. With each motion, she felt the tingle between her legs that run up her legs and out to the rest of her body.

He tasted the sweetness of Constance, his body becoming alight. She was the only woman who ever fired his senses this way. The only thing he wanted more right now was to bury himself inside of her to the hilt, showing her new things along the way....

Shock filled her when Kieran pulled away. “What is the matter?” Desire filled her to the brim,



threatening to overflow. Was he going to tease her then let her be?

“Come with me.”

They found the small woodcutter’s stable next to the dilapidated house. Weeds had overtaken the small garden. The roof, constructed of thatch, looked weather beaten and old, indicating no one had lived here for a long time. How had he found this place?

“What place is this?”

“My old boyhood hideout,” he pulled her horse along the twig-strewn path.

He stopped their horses in front of the stable then he dismounted, holding his arms out for her. She slid into them. “Why are we here?”

“You will see.”

Kieran escorted her inside then went out to retrieve the horses. The interior, neatly kept, overflowed with fresh hay despite the fact that no one had seemed to use it for a while. It was a long room, perhaps three rods long by two rods across. That was twice Kieran’s height!

Damp, musty air swirled around her head, not like the manure-laden atmosphere of a working stable.

He came in, leading the horses by the reins. “You never did tell me why we are here,” she turned and watched him put the horses in the stalls at the other end. With that accomplished, he strode to her and took her into his arms.

“We are here because I cannot go another moment without making love to you, Constance,” his head bent and started nibbling at her ears. “It has been much too long.”

“But the midwife says....”

“’Tis all right. I asked her this morning.” Throaty laughter escaped her throat, making his brows drew together. “What is so amusing?”

“That you would be so anxious to couple again,” she pressed her face into his chest. “I find it most wonderful that you are as anxious as I but I am frightened.”

“Why ever for?”

She pulled away reluctantly. “I am afraid of conceiving again.”

Kieran sank down to his knees in front of her, clasping her hands in his. “Our next child will grow to man or womanhood, I promise. Nothing will ever happen to our children.”

Constance wanted so much to believe him. Fear still rode her like a runaway horse, ever present, ever near. "I do not know if I can, Kieran."

His lips touched the back of her hands, sending out of control spirals. "You can, Constance."

She jerked her hands out of his and stalked over to the open window that stared out into the forest. Tears filled her eyes. Losing another child was not something she could do. "I ... I ... cannot, Kieran. The pain was too much."

His hands on her shoulders were calm and reassuring. "I will always be by your side. Nothing will harm you ever again," his arms circled her waist, pulling her hard against him, his experienced hands rubbing her thighs through her gown. His scent overwhelmed her, making the ache between her legs even stronger. Her breasts throbbed for his touch while her body yearned for him.

"Will you trust me, Constance?" he murmured, his chin on her shoulder.

"Aye, I do, my love."

"Then let me make love to you."

His hands roamed hungrily up and down her bodice, making her nipples achingly stiff as he stopped at them, caressing the nubs through the rich material.

Moans escaped her throat. She had longed for the taste of his kiss just as he had hers, the feeling of his being inside of her a thrill she needed again.

"You are so beautiful, Constance...." His breath was warm and exciting against her ear, making the fire rise higher.

"Let go of me," she demanded. She could no longer stand his teasing, her wanton desire rise. Thoughts of delicious sin crossed her mind. What if she made him her slave at least for a few hours?

His excited hands dropped. "Why?"

She spun around, her mouth curving into a smile. "We have played the game your way thus far, Kieran so for now we will play it my way." It was about time that she turned the tables.

His brows twisted sardonically. "What are you doing?"

Constance smiled. He was going to her bidding for a change. "You have me done what you have wanted so now it is my turn."

Shadows of understanding crossed his face. "I see," he said slyly, his hands reaching out for her waist.

“So I am to do your bidding?”

“Aye. You will do nothing unless I tell you.”

“So what is it that you wish me to do, Mistress?”

Her fingers traced the edges of his armor plates. “First, get rid of your clothes and ask no questions.”

Kieran stepped back and unfastened his armor with lightning speed, dropping them casually to the ground where they clanked together, metal against metal.

She sank down into the pile of clean hay and watched him with hungry eyes. When he was down to his breeches, she saw his member straining hard against the leather, probably making him uncomfortable. Good. After she was through with him, he would be more than ready to make love.

He removed his breeches and stood before her. Kieran’s member sprouted from the nest of black hair between his legs, hard and more than ready for her. “What do you wish, Mistress?”

Constance rose from the hay and glided over toward him. “Just stand there for me while I inspect you.” The raw sexual power in her voice astonished her. Was she truly the one saying all of this? Before Kieran, she would never have thought to do anything of this sort but he brought the animalistic side of her sexuality. “You are well formed, slave,” she purred, her fingers trailing over his chest. Kieran’s breath sucked in as she went around him, his body quivering. “So perfect.” She slapped his perfect backside. “Tell me, what is it you wish to do?”

She drew her hands slowly around his waist, her fingers threading through the forest of silky private hair, lightly scraping the skin as she moved toward his manhood. His breath pulled in hard as she gripped him, shifting slowly up and down, his hips moving slightly.

“Make love to you.” His voice quivered with anticipation as she circled around him.

Kieran’s heart pounded out of control. Constance certainly knew how to bring out the beast in him. He enjoyed her little game. It felt good to relinquish some control to her.

“Have you been good, slave?” She slapped his other cheek soundly. He flinched a little.

“I do not know, Mistress. Have I been good enough to deserve the comfort of your arms for the night?”

His naked body was deliciously moist with the dampness in the air, making the throbbing between her legs worse. She must end this now or else she would go mad. “Aye, you have been good so you deserve a night with me. Take off my clothes.”

Kieran’s quick fingers flew at her laces but she stopped him. “Do it slowly.”

His pace slowed, untying her fastenings. She felt the anxiety in his hands as he undressed her but it would make the lovemaking all that much more special.

Once she was free of her encumbering clothes, she strode over to the hay. "Lie down," she said, gesturing to the hay.

Without a word, Kieran did as she bid. "Now that is a good slave. Perhaps I shall reward you."

His eyes widened as he put his left wrist under his head in a casual fashion, staring at her through half closed eyes with a wolfish grin on his lips. "How is that, Mistress?"

"Let me show you."

Constance knelt beside him and trailed her fingers through the thick forest of private hair. Her hand closed around his member, squeezing gently. Drops of shiny moisture emerged from the opening, encouraged by her hand. He grew harder, his breath quickening. "Oh, Constance, do not torture me anymore!" he pleaded, his hips rising.

She laid a finger against his lips. "I will torture you as I please as well as pleasure you as I please."

With that, her lips touched his manhood, his breath drawing in sharply.

Kieran's mind as well as body was at near bursting. No woman had ever pleased him the way Constance had, making the wait for her all the more special. "Constance," he groaned as her mouth teased him to near bursting. "Please, let me...."

She raised her head, her lips curling into a sensual smile. "You are right, Kieran, it is time."

With that, Constance climbed on top, straddling his broad hips. She was not sure she could do this but she was going to at least try. "We will make love my way as well."

He slipped into her moist cavern with ease, the thrill of him being inside of her making her hips begin to move in a natural rhythm with Kieran's hands guiding her.

His hips moved in time with hers, the muscles deep within her holding him deliciously captive. Yards of golden hair swept around his legs, tickling the skin, making him drive deeper into her. This was what he had always waited for. Her fire. He did not care if it consumed him because she would never be anywhere without him.

Kieran watched as her full breasts bounced up and down, teasing him as well. He cupped the mounds with gentle pressure, his thumbs caressing her nubs to sheer hardness. She moaned louder so his thumbs moved in lazy patterns over them, making her ecstasy deeper.

“Constance, you do not know how you make me feel,” he groaned as her rhythm slowed tortuously, moving in slow circles.

“So why do you not tell me?”

Her cries grew louder as the movement of her hips picked up and together they culminated in the joyous climax, his seed spilling deep inside of her.

Constance collapsed on his chest, still engaged with his body. “I love...you...Kieran,” she gasped, her cheek against his moist skin.

Kieran’s breath heaved as well. “Aye ... as I do...you,” he stammered then helped her gently lay to his side where he took her into his arms. “Where did you have the idea of making me your slave for a short while?”

Her fingers tangled with locks of his damp black hair. “I know not but I think somehow you have brought that side out of me. Perhaps it was some of the games we have already played that have inspired me.”

His lips touched the moist flesh of Constance’s neck, nuzzling her slightly, tasting the salty tang of her skin. She was his forever, the only woman destined for him. Forget Odette or any of the women he had ever bedded. They all paled in comparison to her. “Perhaps we shall have a play a few more games before we return....”

## Chapter 15

Days drifted with a heady speed. Summer slowly turned to autumn, the resplendent colors standing out against the emerald blades of grass. Constance so enjoyed this time of year. What overjoyed her most was the absence of her monthly course. The more it delayed, the more it confirmed another child did exist in her womb. Secretly, she hugged the news to herself. When the time was right, she would gladly tell Kieran.

\* \* \* \*

Darkness fell around the castle with the quickness being a telltale sign winter was surely coming. Sullen quiet enveloped them in the dining hall as they consumed their meals. Constance could not help stealing a sideways glance at Kieran, a smile curling her lips. Oh how she could not wait for the right time to tell him that his son or daughter was nestled firmly in her womb!

He was so handsome, dressed in his best purple tunic, his fingers moving deftly in pulling the basket of bread toward him. Deep amethyst hues highlighted his bronzed skin, giving rise the blue-black highlights in his hair. Strength resided in his hands ... Kieran's head turned up and peered in her direction, a black eyebrow lifting. "Is something wrong, Constance?"

She jerked unexpectedly at the sound of his voice. "Nothing, Kieran, I was just watching you."

Corners of his sensuous lips curled up seductively. "Watch all you like, my dear. I enjoy your gazing quite nicely. Tell me, would you like to continue you this little game in our chamber, my dear?"

She nodded. He abandoned his meal, moving toward her chair and holding it for her while she rose. His hand swept her hair from her shoulder, allowing his lips access to the creamy expanse of her neck. Flares of desire crept up her body, demanding to be quenched by the rigors of lovemaking. She turned, her lips seeking his slivers of pleasure, her tongue engaging his in play. Just as Constance was about to melt in her husband's arms, a throat clearing at the other side of the room broke the kiss. Kieran pulled away, a wild anger on his face. She smiled slightly, her arms still around Kieran's neck.

The messenger bowed. "Excuse me, Milord but I have an urgent message from the Queen. Forgive me if I have interrupted you and your Duchess."

"Can this not wait? There is something," Kieran cast a sexually charged sidelong glance to her, a smile on his face, "I must tend to in my chamber."

The servant remained steadfast. "I am truly sorry, Milord, but the man who brought it here said it was to be given to you and answered without hesitation."

Irritation crossed Kieran's handsome features as he extended a hand. "Let me have it, man. I do not have all night. I must attend to this matter in my chamber as quickly as possible." The thought of Kieran putting off the Queen in order to make love to her thrilled her no end. What other man would do that?

He withdrew the parchment from the man, breaking the seal of Navarre. Fragments of red wax fell to the floor, shattering among the stones. Agile fingers unrolled the paper, dark eyes perusing the words.

Milord Duke of Ravenwood,

First, I must congratulate you on your recent wedding to the Duchess of Ravenwood. May you both have all the joys that are due to you. I was truly saddened to hear about the loss of your child. By the grace of God might you have more. The reason I am writing to you is that I need some of your military guidance. The Scots are massing to the North and threatening our borders. I know not what to do and when I left the Holy Land, His Majesty told me to call upon your guidance in such matters. That is why he trusted you to bring me back to London. I wish to see you here as soon as possible so that we can have this terrible situation taken care of.

Berengaria Regina

Constance watched his features darken, paling underneath his tanned skin. Anxious fingers rolled the fragile material back up. It remained in his tight fist where it collapsed under pressure.

She put a hand on his velvet-clad arm. "What does the note say?"

Kieran sank into his chair, his hunger for her obviously deflating. "The Queen wishes to see me as soon as possible. The Scots are massing to the North and she requires my advice in the matters of military strategy." His elbow rested on the arm of the chair, his fingers supporting his chin while a pensive look crossed his face.

Constance felt her heart drop to her feet. "When must you leave?" She never felt safe anymore without Kieran around. Thoughts of sleeping without him by her side frightened her no end.

He sighed wearily, his gaze drawing to the roaring flames. "By the urgency in the note, now I suppose."

With fear in her heart, Constance moved by his side, standing there silently. Her fingers raked through the blue-black tendrils, feeling their silky softness. He peered up with smoldering eyes and moved his arms, gesturing for her to sit in his lap. She obliged, sliding in with ease.

Constance lay her head on his shoulder, her fingers toying with the loose raven colored curls. Velvety softness under her cheek was most inviting, warm from the heat of his body. "I hate it when you are gone, Kieran. I will not be able to sleep while you are away."

His tanned hand stroked her hair reassuringly. "Aye, you will Constance but when I return, I will give you cause not to sleep," he promised in husky tones as he nibbled on her ear the way she liked.

“Aye, I will not want to either.”

\* \* \* \*

Night’s apex came without fanfare, the creatures calling to the yet to be born moon. Kieran waited, armor covering his massive body, his war-horse covered with the same protection. A small garrison of her men of his choosing would accompany him on the trip, to defend him from all possible danger on the way to London.

Constance stood next to his horse, her arms wrapped around her shoulders to protect from the slight chill in the air. She did not want to leave for any reason, at least while Hugh was still on the horizon.

Tears of fear and unhappiness fell down her cheeks. She tilted her head up and gazed up, her hand upon his metal encased thigh. “Kieran, please take me with you. I fear something will happen while you are away.”

Kieran picked up the reins of his horse in his gloved hands and peered down. He possessed the most endearing smile upon his face. “Constance, twill be a short trip. I will advise the Queen as best and as quickly as I can. Then I will be back here to you. Come give me a kiss before I go.” He leaned down from his horse, placing a steady hand on the back of her head. His lips sought her in a passionate endeavor, her mouth responding to his desires. Tingles of sensations rose high in her body, her hand gripping his shoulder in angst. Finally, he broke the kiss.

Constance trembled. “Please, Kieran, do not go. I am so frightened without you.”

Kieran sat up straight in the saddle, his armor gleaming in the moonlight. “Constance, please do not beg. This trip is hard enough,” he stroked her cheek with a gloved thumb. “I will be back before you know I have been gone.”

She hastily wiped away the last of her tears, feeling the hard facets of one of her emerald earrings digging into her left palm. “Then if I can not go with you, then take this.” His hand extended and she laid it in his lather-clad palm.

“What is this for?”

“Take it with you for luck,” she closed his fingers over it, “Whenever you gaze upon it, think of me.”

Kieran gazed it hard for a moment then tucked it in his hauberk for safekeeping, patting it protectively.



“I will always think of you, Constance,” his lips pulled into a seductive smile, “but I will take it with me.”

Tense air surrounded them, broken only by the soft whinny of the waiting horses. “I love you, Kieran,” she looked straight into the dark blue orbs that seemed to glisten with a life of their own. “I always will.”

“I love you too, Constance and always have,” he turned to his men, “Come men let us ride! I wish to be back here as soon as possible!” Kieran dug his booted heels into his horse’s haunches, leading the charge for the rest.

Constance watched with a heavy heart as her husband rode away in the dead of night, sounds of the hooves echoing over her like a distant thunder. As soon as they were out of earshot, she walked slowly into the castle. Her long climb to the empty chamber was dreaded because he was not there. Before him, she was content to go to it and sleep alone. Kieran, despite all his faults, had shown her what she had missed for so long. She had one consolation, though. She was not entirely alone with Kieran’s child anchored firmly in her womb. Her slender hand patted her belly. The midwife had confirmed it that morning. She smiled. Nothing in this world was going to take that away from her this time.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran slowed the horses down, not wanting to wear them down before they reached London. There was something about the trip that seemed out of place but he could not be sure what that was.

One of the younger soldiers rode up next to him. “Why would the Scots be massing to the North, Milord? ‘Tis seems highly impossible for that area had been quiet for some time.”

That same question floated through Kieran’s mind but he was not about to show his doubt to anyone else. He shrugged his shoulders. “I know. ‘Tis seems strange but if the Queen requests my presence then I must go. I owe his Majesty at least that much.” Aye, that he did. If it had not been for the King sending him home, Constance would not be his wife at this moment.

He looked out to the deep forest, letting a sigh escape him. Long roads to London lay ahead of them and they would be there by midday. The sooner he reached there, the better. Constance and the softness of her arms were the only thing he wanted return to.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh waited in his chamber like a predator about to pounce upon its prey. His note, in the guise of the Queen's hand, would most assuredly have Kieran on the road to London by now. The duty bound knight inside of brother would not let him waste a moment when royalty called for him, especially for his sage advice on military tactics. Hopefully, the messenger would be back soon with excellent news. Before he could conjecture when, a knock at the door pierced through the hazy cloud of thought.

The servant entered before he the man to. "Milord, the messenger has returned."

"Send him in."

His servant stepped aside, paving the way for the herald. Nervously, the man stepped in, anxious fingers crunching the brim of his dark hat.

Hugh glared at him, scrutinizing the man's appearance. Ah, he had done well. Vestments of the royal court decorated his body, giving no one notice that he might not be a legitimate messenger. Hugh's brow lifted. "You gave the parchment to the Duke?"

The herald's head tilted in a nod. "Aye, milord. He read it and left at once for London."

"Good, man, good. Did you hear what he said?"

"From my place amongst the reeds, I heard him promise the Duchess he would be back before she missed him."

His lips curled into an evil snarl. "Even better. Now leave me and send in my guard."

\* \* \* \*

Long moments passed before the guards arrived, only angering him. He should have their heads for being so slow!

One by one they filed in, standing before him dressed in red surcoats emblazoned with the crest of Stratford. His captain stepped ahead, bowing low. "You have sent for us, Milord?"

Hugh clasped his hands together, as if in prayer, glaring at them through anticipation-laden eyes. "Yes.

I have just received news that the Duke of Ravenwood has left for London,” he arose from his chair and wandered over to the window. He stood in a thin sliver of moonlight that streamed through the window. Everything has dark, just as he needed it to be. “The Duchess will be quite alone until he returns. ‘Tis quite a pity, is it not?”

The captain nodded. “I would say so, milord. I have seen the Lady Constance. There is nothing that could tear me from her arms even for a moment.”

Hugh chuckled deeply, the smile on his lips coming from the depths of soul. “Well, I am the one who made sure that Duke would not be around to protect her. Our task will be much easier with my brother absent.”

“What is our task, milord?”

Fiery anticipation turned to a slow anger. “You seem to be a bright fellow and I am truly surprised that I must lay out the plan for you. I want you to take a garrison of your men to Ravenwood and kidnap the Duchess. Bring her here. I need to get her with child again before my brother has a chance to return home again.”

The captain, slowly realizing Hugh’s reasons, laughed along with his master. “Aye, ‘tis a good plan, Milord. When do you wish for us to take her?”

His bony hands rubbed together in an evil glee. “In a few days. The Duchess is a delicate creature and I wish her to grow accustomed to my brother’s absence. Her guard will be down and twill be easier to kidnap her.”

The guard bowed his head. “We will move on your word, milord.”

He waved them away. “You may leave. When the time is right, I will tell you to proceed. Do nothing until I say.” Hugh snarled at the man. How else were they going to move? By Kieran’s orders? He thought not!

“Aye, milord.” His soldiers turned and left, their footfalls a dying echo resounding through the chamber. Once the sound was no more, Hugh turned to the fire, staring at the flames with a fierce abandon. A smile curved his lips. Within a fortnight, he would have the one woman he wanted out of the world by his side and there is nothing Kieran could do to stop him.

\* \* \* \*

Try as she might, Constance searched for sleep but found none. Their large bed felt strangely empty without Kieran, her heart pounding as his name crossed her mind. Where was he now?

Perhaps Kieran was very close to London now. Her only hope, besides his safety, was his business with the Queen would end quickly. Then she could have him back.

She shifted herself to his side of the bed. Here, she smelled the deep scent clinging to every fiber of the sheets, belonging only to him. Oh Kieran I am so lonely here without you! Her mind cried, deeply hoping he would hear her cry and turn around to return home. Even with his scent so near, she still could not feel comfortable.

Constance turned over, her eyes scanning the wall. There was nothing there but cold stone. She looked further. Her gaze landed on a dark length of cloth hanging near the wardrobe. She narrowed her eyes. Languidly, a thin shaft of moonlight entered through an open orifice, bathing the fabric in a silvery pall. Her eyes widened. Kieran's tunic that he had worn this evening! It gave her an idea. There was only one way to feel close to him.

She rose and glided over, removing the heavy fibers from the hook supporting the plethora of material. Holding the fabric to her face, Constance rubbed her cheek gently, inhaling the heavy concentration of his scent clinging to the material. Never in her life had she ever felt this way about another human being, including her own parents. Come home to me, Kieran or else I will die without you, she thought longingly.

Constance slipped her own silken dressing gown over her head, replacing the delicate fabric with Kieran's tunic. Rich velvety material felt comforting against her skin with his scent permeating the air all around her. Now I will sleep, she told herself. The tunic was much too long for her and much too big. 'Twas made for someone of Kieran's size, not hers but she cared not. All she cared about was being as close to him as possible.

She lay back on the bed, feeling the long forgotten sleep enter her body with tiredness pervading throughout. We are as close to your father as we can be little one, she told the child growing in her belly, and soon he will return. When he does, I shall tell him of your existence. Closing her eyes, Constance fell into the warm welcome depths of a dreamless sleep

\* \* \* \*

Kieran slowed his horse when they reached the clearing, halting at the edge.

“Do you wish to break camp here, Milord?” inquired the captain at his elbow.

Kieran nodded. “Aye. I wish to arrive in London refreshed so I can give the Queen the soundest of advice.” He removed the mail coif covering his head, letting his dark locks tumble down his shoulders.

Kieran looked down. This surcoat was much more pleasurable than the one he wore during his time with King Richard. Strangely, this crest felt more comfortable than anything else, including the crest of Stratford did.

Why did he not have the desire to wear his own crest anymore?

Somehow, Stratford did not seem as important as it had some time ago. That time was before Constance became such a large factor in his life. Perhaps that was why he did not plan an attack on Hugh when he and Constance married. He had the one thing in the world he wanted. A loyal wife who bore his child at the time. Maybe when he returned...

“Milord, do you wish me to erect your tent for you?” He whirled around. It was one of the squires whose question pierced his cloud of thought.

He glared at the intruder. “Nay, boy. I can do my own tent. I want all the tents set up and the men rested. At dawn we move again.”.

\* \* \* \*

Gentle quiet of the night enveloped the party while the creatures of the glen howled all around them, owls squealing with delight as they found their midnight meals. Trees loomed all around them, black and menacing. No moon pervaded the sky yet so there was no light save the light from the fire.

Kieran listened to all the sounds intently with half an ear, his mind staying with Constance. Lately she had been acting strangely. She was eating foods she disliked, having dizzy spells as well as waves of heat overcoming her though the days were cool. In the mornings when she thought he was asleep, she had gotten sick in the bucket near the door, getting rid of the contents before he awoke. What could be causing her such pain? The last time she acted so strangely was ... Nay it could not be! Could she truly be with child once again? Kieran's heart skipped a beat with the last thought. 'Twas almost too good to

be true. If she was with child, when did she conceive it?

His mind replayed the memory of when they made love out in the stable in the woods with the rain pounding the thatched roof. He remembered the strange essence glowing in dreamy green pools of her eyes. Even then, he had wondered what caused the mysterious glow. Aye, she must have conceived the child during that tryst!

Kieran's lips pulled taut as a smile emerged. Everything came full circle again.

He took her earring from his discarded hauberk and held the faceted jewel in his hand. With a twist of his finger, the faceted jewel worked in and out of the digits. His grin widened. When he returned, Constance was not going to leave their chamber for a few days.

Sleep came for him quickly though he fought the feeling as well as he could but he was no match. Exhaustion slipped in like an unwanted enemy. Kieran lay there for a while longer, listening to the soft movements of the horses outside. Their soft whinnies and snorts defied the sounds of the night. As his eyes slipped closed, Kieran's only burning thought was of Constance and her golden hair streaming out behind her like an angel, his cherubim of salvation....

\* \* \* \*

Constance awoke to the song of the morning provided by the birds surrounding the castle. She stretched sluggishly until the sudden feeling of wanting to retch washed over her. Without a moment to spare, she made her to the bucket she kept near the door, crossing the distance just in time. There was not much in her stomach so the retching halted within moments failing to return quickly as the feeling did the first time. Thankfully, Kieran had always been asleep when she retched. She did not want him to know she was with child again, at least not yet.

Once the storm of vomiting passed, Constance strode toward the window in Kieran's much too big tunic, a plethora of the material trailing behind her. Beyond the reaches of her chamber, the summer grasses gave way to the autumn ones. Tall greenish, brown blades swayed in the gentle breeze drifting through the valley now and then. Deep, earthy scents of the wildflowers clung to the air, the perfume less heady now. Fall was approaching, hailing the return of the winter. Our son will be born in the spring, her mind told her, and he will have many brothers and sisters. Her lips spread into a wide smile. Soon she would tell Kieran of their child's existence.

Constance's stare remained locked on the world below her window, her mind remaining on Kieran. Unexpectedly, a swift but gentle wind blew through the orifice, lifting the golden strands of her hair, caressing her neck as Kieran so often did. Even the wind whispered his name. Kieran. Kieran.

She sighed decided the best way to get the day to pass quickly was to roam about the grounds and pick some of the beautiful wildflowers before they died.

\* \* \* \*

Morning came almost too quickly for Kieran. He had barely slept all night, his body craving for the warmth and comfort Constance's body afforded him. Upon rising, he found Constance's earring still in his hand. Deep imprints of the facets etched onto the soft flesh of his palm. Had he squeezed the jewel that hard in his sleep?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran left the comfort of his tent fully dressed, his armor shining in the rising beams of the sun. Life abounded all around him, the animals of the day coming out to search for food and to play.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find the squire that had offered to put his tent the night before. "Do you wish me to dismantle your tent for you, milord?"

Kieran smirked loudly. "Aye, my boy. When you are finished, put the entire roll upon my horse." He watched as the boy scrambled off to dismantle his tent, his mind going to when he was just a young squire. He exuded the same eagerness and willingness this lad showed at that age. Secretly he hoped his son would fare just as well as this lad.

Once the tent was upon his horse, Kieran mounted and waited for the others to follow suit. With one large hand, he patted the tiny bulge beneath his hauberk. I will make this very short trip, my love.

\* \* \* \*

Bathed and dressed in her best crimson gown, Constance led a reluctant Mary out beyond the castle walls where the wildflowers grew in vast thickets. The sun rose high in the sky, chasing away the slight chill peppering the morning air these days.

“Where will you be wanting to go, milady?” Mary’s eyes flicked nervously over to the man assigned to guard them. Constance giggled slightly. Why was Mary always so suspicious?

Constance pointed to a large grove of trees where the perfume was strongest. “Wherever the wildflowers grow Mary. Perhaps over there.”

Mary shook her head wistfully. “Milady, you know milord does not want you walking around alone.”

Constance laid a reassuring hand on her servant then gestured to the man hiding in the thicket with the nod of her head. “I know, Mary that is why I have the guard following me constantly. Kieran gave him the task of protecting me. Come, Mary, some fresh air will do you a world of good.” She took the basket from Mary’s hand, swinging the wooden pannier freely. She strode down the tiny hill leading to the grove of trees with a suspicious Mary not far behind.

\* \* \* \*

Constance’s basket was nearly full of flowers when the strangers that galloped over the hill to her right drew her attention. Hot sun beat down and for a moment, Constance thought she hallucinated the strangers. There were dressed in fine armor as they galloped her way, tunics flapping the wind. Putting her hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun, she observed the crest on their tunics. Where had she seen that before? You silly goose, that is the crest of Stratford, a voice told her. Her heart thumped uneasily. What could these men possibly want with her? Fear pervaded her but she managed to remain calm.

There were perhaps ten in all. If Hugh were going to attack while Kieran was gone, he would certainly have been smart enough to send more men. She paled. Could there be more hiding in the woods? She gestured to the man beside her. He cupped his hands to his mouth, making a bird call. It was no ordinary birdlike sound. That was the signal to ready for attack.

Well-dressed soldiers halted at the edge of the grove of trees. The lead man, who stood perhaps six feet tall with a blonde beard and golden curls much like her own, dismounted, making his way over to her. He stopped in front of her and went down on one knee, his eyes to the ground.



His Irish lilted voice was clear. "Milady Duchess, I am sorry to bother you at this most awkward time but we wondered if there was any chance that we might see the Duke."

"Why do you need to see my husband?"

"I beg your pardon, Milady but 'tis business of a personal nature," the man stated, keeping his gaze firmly to the ground.

Constance's shoulders stiffened. "Whatever concerns my husband, concerns me. Now what is it that you need to speak to him about?"

The man shifted slightly. "We came to beseech the Duke for employment. You see we had a disagreement with his brother, the Baron of Stratford. Since our views did not match his, the Baron saw fit to terminate our employment. We have heard that his brother has been recently made the Duke of Ravenwood so we came here to see if he could use a few good soldiers. We have many years of battle experience among us."

Constance regarded the man before her carefully. What could they have disagreed so hard about that Hugh would end their employment?

Before she spoke again, a tiny voice inside of her head told her to send them away. Hugh would not be mad enough to send only ten men to take Ravenwood. Yet, something told her to be wary.

"My husband is unavailable at the moment. Perhaps if you return in a fortnight, he would be available to talk to you."

Blond brows drew in puzzlement "So he is not here?"

"He is away on business. The best I can offer you is a meal tonight then you will have to be on your way."

The blond man leaned forward and kissed her hand, his eyes lighting up at the mere mention of food.

"Much thanks, milady. We have been wandering many days without food before coming here."

She smiled, extending her hand. He gently kissed the back. "Then I will lead you to my dining hall where you will fill your bellies. After that, you must leave Ravenwood."

He rose quickly, nodding to her. "You are a most gracious and kind lady. We have heard much about the kindness of you, milady. 'Tis easy to see why the Duke married you." Even with this kind words, her guard remained up.

Constance laid her hand on his arm graciously despite the wariness that resided inside of her. "'Tis you

who are most kind with your words. Now we have that out of the way, come with me to my dining hall.”

\* \* \* \*

Kieran reached the castle by nightfall, the rumbling of the horses’ hooves across the ancient wood reminding him of distant thunder. Deliberately the horses ambled through the bailey as life began to come to a somewhat somber pace. People did not pay attention to him and his men as they went about their business, their shadows dancing in the golden glow of the torchlight. Ahead of him, the castle loomed large and impressive. The stone edifice stood for many centuries, holding back many an enemy.

He halted his horse at the entrance and wandered in the open door, searching for someone who might know where the Queen was. Before he could venture further, one of her ladies-in-waiting greeted him. Lithe with boundless red hair, she bowed before him, the woman calling him by his first name. “Lord Kieran, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

Kieran nodded, his eyes still scanning the room for any sign of the Queen. “A note arrived stating that the Queen had urgent business to see me.” He gazed into the face before him. She appeared familiar for a moment then suddenly the realization came to his mind as to whom she was. ‘Twas a woman he had bed many times before but scarcely could remember her name.

Her fingers trailed his face sensuously. “The Queen is resting for the night. Perhaps you would like to rest yourself in my chamber like you used to.” She laid a slender hand upon his vambrace. Politely, he took a gloved hand and removed those once sought after limbs.

“Nay, I do not. I will sleep where my men sleep. Awaken me when the Queen arises.”

The woman remained persistent. “But milord, would you not prefer the comfort of my chamber?”

Kieran stepped out of her reach. “Nay for if you have not heard, I have married the Duchess of Ravenwood.”

She stepped forward, her arms going around his neck. “’Tis no matter. She is in Ravenwood and you are here. You have spent many nights in my arms so why do you choose now to reject them? What is it that holds you from them?” Her eyes dripped seductive suggestions he once fell prey. That was no

more. Strangely, he did not miss the part of his life that no longer existed. Constance was the only woman he ever wanted or needed.

He removed her supple arms. "The love I bear for my wife. Now step aside and let me pass."

\* \* \* \*

Kieran lay in the dark of the quarters listening to the snores and soft breathing of his men. Sleep claimed them to the dark depths of the welcome nothingness but it eluded him. Something about this whole trip to London was not right. First, the Scots had been quiet for many years. The fact they were massing on northern borders seemed highly improbable but it was not impossible. Second, the strange crest stamped on the soft wax of the parchment roll sent to him. Was that the crest of Navarre? Surely, Queen Berengaria would be using the King's crest when she sent important letters.

He shifted quickly to his side, propping his head on his hand. Dear God, let nothing to happen to my beloved wife and child in my absence, Kieran's heart pounded against the solid wall of his chest. This whole situation had a certain stench connected with it. Somehow, Hugh was behind it. I will find out tomorrow from the Queen.

He rolled over to lay upon his back once. If this stinks of Hugh, he will pay with his life if he has harmed one hair on her head.

## Chapter 16

Constance lay in the big empty bed half-expecting Kieran to be there, pulling her into his mammoth arms before settling down to sleep. All that greeted her was the void on his side of the bed. Oh, Kieran how I miss you!

Her mind cried, her body demanding his touch. Even the knowledge of the child growing inside of her

did nothing to ease the feeling of loneliness. Waves of abandonment washed over her like the tide dashing against the rocks at high tide. Oh, why could he not be here with her!

She turned onto her back, placing a hand on her hardening belly. Would he have Kieran's height and build with her blonde hair or would he be more like her with hair as black as night?

It was strange that she thought of the child as a son instead of a daughter. For some odd reason, that emotion emanated from inside of her, that little inner voice she always trusted told her the child was a son. That would only increase Kieran's joy of becoming a father.

Hard thuds near the door echoed through the room causing her to jump. What was it?

Constance turned her head quickly, her eyes narrowing. She scanned again and found nothing. 'Tis only your imagination, she chided herself. Fluffing up the pillows with a frustrated hand, Constance lay back down. She tried in vain to close her eyes but they refused. Thoughts of Kieran danced across her mind, each vision causing her body to ache for him incessantly.

Small rustles near the corner brought her back from the brink of sleep. She sat up, looking at every wall. There was nothing. She sighed. Would her mind ever quit playing tricks on her?

She was about to lay down when strange hands melted out of the darkness, gripping her shoulders tightly. Knots of fear rose in her throat so strong she could only choke out a whisper. "Who are you?" Frantically, she tried to fend off the demanding hands but they were too strong for her.

"That does not matter. What does matter is someone wants a word with you."

\* \* \* \*

Kieran entered the foyer of the castle, met by the same alluring lady-in-waiting as the night before, her words more seductive than before. He grimaced. How in the world had he ever shared her bed before?

Her voice dripped promises of delight, purring with sensuality. "I see the guard's quarters were not to your liking. Did you change your mind and decide to share my chamber again?" Delicate fingers trailed the underside of his chin, making him ill. Did this woman not understand that he wanted nothing to do with her?

With a gloved hand, he threw them from his person. "Nay I did not and in the future I wish you to refrain from touching me. Has the Queen arisen?"

Her burning amber eyes contained reproach. He cared not. She no longer mattered. “Aye, the Queen has arisen,” the woman answered in a curt tone, “and is readying herself in her chamber. Wait in the war room and she will be with you shortly. By the way, milord, if you do not wish to touch me again then another will.”

He bowed to her mockingly. “Aye, then by all means let them have you.”.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran arose as the child-like Queen, dressed in a simple gown and wimple with a golden crown, entered the war room then bowed quickly to her. “My Queen. I received your urgent message and I am here to do your bidding.” Kieran went down on one knee before the Queen. Extending her hand to him, he kissed the lily white palm then rose to his feet.

Her russet brows knitted in question as the beginning of a smile curved her lips. “I am truly sorry, Lord Kieran but I do not know of what you speak.” Queen Berengaria gestured to the chair opposite. Please sit down and let us discuss the matter.”

He quickly seated himself, his mind spinning on her words. What was going on?

His heart pounded in his chest. “What do you mean your Majesty?”

She for the cup-bearer to pour her wine with a slender hand, the French lilted voice rising through the air. “I never wrote you any such letter asking you to come here. Would you care for some wine?”

Kieran waved a dismissive hand. “Nay, your Majesty. Now back to the parchment. I have it with me, written in your own hand.” He produced the roll in question from underneath his hauberk and handed it to her. If she did not write it, then who did?

The Queen unrolled the parchment, her gaze dancing across the page. Suspicious brows lifted.

“Hmmm, I see that you married the Duchess of Ravenwood and gotten her with child. How is that so when you were injured in the Holy Land, making you half a man?”

What was he going to tell the Queen? It did not matter now because what was important was getting back to Constance. “Your Majesty,” he said, leaning forward so that she would not mistake his words, “I will tell you how I came to heal so swiftly but now is not the time. Please tell me if you did or did not write that letter.”

The Queen glanced at it again, her eyes searing the fiber. She raised her head, puzzlement on her face. “’Tis not my writing, Lord Ravenwood. If I had sent a messenger to you, I would have instructed that he hand it to you personally then wait for a reply.”

Kieran sat across from the Queen, feeling his face pale underneath his tanned skin. Why would someone go to the trouble to lure him away from Ravenwood? Aye, I know who it is, he thought to himself, and the bastard will pay with his life if he has hurt my wife or child. He wiped all emotion from his face. It was best to betray his thoughts. “I think I am beginning to see, your Majesty. Someone has forged your signature so I might be lured away from Ravenwood leaving my beautiful bride alone and unprotected.” Rage built inside of his strong body but he kept the emotion under control in the Queen’s presence.

She smiled sweetly. “I suppose congratulations are in order for your marriage to the Duchess. I have seen her. She is a true beauty. Now, can you describe the seal on the roll?”

Kieran went into great detail about the image stamped into the wax. Queen Berengaria sat across from him, her face unmoving while her arms crossed over her small bosom. Her face remained blank until he finished his tale.

She shook her head sadly, handing the roll back to him. “That is not my crest. I would not have used the crest of the House of Navarre to stamp a royal request such as this. It would have been the King’s seal impressed upon the wax.”

His rage roiled inside but outside he kept a cool, aloof demeanor. He arose chivalrously then went to the Queen’s side, kneeling next to her chair. She extended her slim appendage and he kissed the back of it. “Thank you, your Majesty for your help in this matter. With your kind permission I must return to Ravenwood quickly.”

“Why so? Do you not wish to stay a while?” the Queen purred seductively

Kieran sat up quickly. “Nay. I fear for my wife’s life.”

The Queen tilted her head in a nod, with sympathy falling from her eyes. “Aye, Milord Kieran. Go and Godspeed with you. I pray the Duchess is all right.”

“So do I, your Majesty,” Kieran said as he rose from his place with a certain darkness to his eyes, “so do I.”

\* \* \* \*

Her tiny, dank room was almost more than Constance could stand. There was no light, no window, a diminutive slit in the door through which food could be passed through. Was this one of those rooms she possessed in her castle, where prisoners ‘disappeared’? What was the name? Ah, oubliette! Fear crept in her belly, knotting her stomach. Had Hugh put her in her to forget about her?

For what seemed like hours, Constance paced the corners of the cell listening to the tiny scurrying feet seeming to come out of nowhere when she approached. Apparently, she was not alone. There were prisoners of the four-legged kind as well.

Along with the rats, a mossy substance grew upon the walls, the slime clinging to her fingers in clumps. Every time she bumped into the wall, Constance wiped the grime on her dressing gown. My gown is beyond repair, she thought to herself. Silently she wished for a decent berth so that she could lie down. The cot standing in the corner of the room was most likely full of bugs. Since there was no light, she was not about to lie down upon the suspicious bed. The stones under her feet were thankfully dry but the cold crept up her ankles, causing a sensation of pain from the chill.

Sharp clangs filled the air as the bolt holding the door snapped back. She stopped in her tracks, turning to look at the door. Fear filled her heart, gripping her throat. Who was coming?

Brilliant, wavering light, emanating from a torch, came through first, followed by the gaunt form of Kieran’s brother, Hugh.

He swaggered over to the wall and placed the torch in the sconce. Hugh then turned to her and glared at her through contemptuous eyes, his hands on his hips. “Well, well, well. What do we have here? Could it be the beautiful and desirable Duchess of Ravenwood?”

She peered down at herself as the mockery in his voice gave rise to her anger. Her beautiful golden hair hung down in knotted tendrils past her waist, her hands and gown grubby from touching the sides of the cell. Her shoulders stiffened as she threw her tangled locks behind her in a gesture of defiance.

“Aye, Hugh you know ‘tis me. I demand to know why I have been brought here.”

Her reaction seemed to amuse him. His lackluster lips curved into an evil smile. “Did I hear you correctly, dear lady? Did you say you demand?” he snickered, “You are in no position to demand anything.” Hugh’s eyes raked over her form, his tongue licking his thin lips. Vaguely, Hugh reminded her of a dog salivating over a bone. She grimaced slightly.

Constance held her head high and stepped from the confines of his reach. "Hugh, why have you brought me here? I want nothing to do with you."

Hugh took several steps further ahead until he was standing so close she could smell his rancid breath. Her stomach gurgled in rebellion. "You see, Constance I want something to do with you. You once belonged to my brother so now you belong to me." Hugh encircled her slowly, as if she were a piece of property he was about to purchase.

She seethed with mounting rage, her fists curling at her sides. "I belong to no one save myself. 'Tis true I married your brother but I do not belong to him."

His thin lips pulled tauter. "Aye you do, Constance whether or not you like it. Perhaps in time you will grow as used to me as you have to him." Hugh picked up a golden tendril of her hair and held the fragrant strands to his nose.

Constance, outraged by his boldness, snatched her hair from his hand. Her wrath burned across her face, heating in her gaze. "I will never get used to you, Hugh. You make me ill. I would shrink every time you touch me."

"Aye you will in time, Duchess, " he repeated with contempt. In the dim light of the cell, Hugh appeared more haunted than ever.

Her blonde brows slanted in a frown. "Did you forget something, Hugh? I already have a husband."

Hugh's eyes grew openly amused. "That is something I am prepared to remedy, Constance. Once my brother is disposed of, you and I will be wed the moment after."

She retreated a few steps. "How can you be so cold blooded, Hugh? What has Kieran committed against you that caused you to feel this way toward him?" The moment the words reached his ears, Constance saw his shoulders stiffen. Fear knotted inside of her. She had overplayed her hand.

He whirled around, stalking toward her, menace dripping from his eyes like daggers. "He lived, Constance. That is what he did." His hand reached out and drew her back toward his stinking form. "While I remained sickly and thin, he became strong and brave. I could not fight in the war with the King but Kieran could. My father always favored Kieran. He was tall and strong with strong leadership abilities. Father could never stand the sight of me. I represented all he hated in life. Stratford should have passed to me but in my father's infinite wisdom, he saw fit to pass the barony to Kieran," he snarled, his lips curling, "and left me nothing. That is what Kieran committed against me. He lived." He shook her lightly as if to make her understand his diatribe.



“What does this have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you, Constance. All my life I wanted a beautiful wife who was strong and could bear me many sons. You are the wife I sought.” Hugh murmured as he encircled Constance’s form, his eyes traveling up and down her body.

“But what about Odette? Why did you marry her if you did not love her?”

“She was nothing to me. When she became engaged to Kieran, I vowed to take her away from him any way I could. Once Kieran left for the Holy Land, I took Odette and forced her to commit to me until she was with child. After we were wed, I wanted her no more. That was my revenge.”

Constance took a deep breath, quelling all the whirling emotions inside. She swallowed the forming lump in her throat. “Is that why you savagely beat her so she would lose the child and die? Is that how you would treat me?”

He sucked in his breath as if she had struck him. “Nay, my dear for you are what I have waited for. Now, tell me have you had your monthly course yet?”

Her mind reeled at Hugh’s rude words, the beating of her heart hammering harder than before. She saw his plan perfectly. Hugh meant to get her with child before Kieran could rescue her and force Kieran to turn her over to him! Inwardly she laughed haughtily. Kieran had already taken care of the feat Hugh hoped to perform.

She cleared her throat, lifting her chin higher. “I have already had my course as if you must know.”

“Good, “ he snorted then turned to the women standing behind him,” Take the Duchess and have her bathed then gowned in best dressing gown in my late wife’s wardrobe. Afterward, put her in my chamber.”

Hugh jerked her face toward the golden glow of the torch. Evil intentions dripped from his eyes, his tongue licking the corners of his thin lips. Without warning, he plowed her mouth, his tongue trying to burrow in between. Frantically, her hands beat at his bony shoulders. ‘Twas to no avail. Finally, she wrenched free, spitting in his face. Moisture fell in rivulets, dripping on this tunic.

His emaciated fingers trailed over his face, wiping the spittle away, a slow, malicious grin forming on his lips. Panic rose in her throat, stifling the air coming into her lungs. With a firm resolve, her face remained blank. “So my little cat still has claws. Prepare to lose them in the coming days, Constance for if Kieran tries to retrieve you, he will meet his death.”

She refused to back down from this brute. Tossing her head, she eyed him coldly. “Kieran will come for me and twill be you who will die. You can have this body but Kieran will always have my heart.”

Thin fingers methodically rubbed his cheek the spittle landed. His eyes remained determined with a touch of satanic glee to them. “You will pay for what you have done, my dear. Perhaps I can arrange for you to join Kieran in the grave.”

“’Twould be much more pleasant than living here with you. I warn you, Hugh that if you get me with child, I will join my husband most assuredly.” Her defiant smile angered him. From the way he acted her calm assurances of Kieran rescuing her ate away at the foundation of his hate. Good, she thought, for I will not lift a finger to help him get what he wants.

Hugh gripped her arms with such a force that she cried out from the pain, the delicate bones underneath crushed by his scrawny hands. “With pleasure, my dear. If that is what you want, then you shall have it!”

“Ouch! You’re hurting me!”

“‘Tis nothing to the pain you will endure, I assure you Constance. Take her and prepare her.” Hugh thrust Constance into the arms of the waiting women where she nearly fell but they caught her just in time.

“Aye, milord,” answered one then the women grabbed Constance half-pulling, half-dragging her up the stairs.

Hugh stepped out of the cell and leaned against the wall, his bony arms crossed over his thin chest. With a detached fascination, he watched the way Constance struggled in the arms of the women. His ardor started to rise. He always enjoyed the way women struggled before he ultimately took them, sort of like a cat playing with a mouse. His delight came with the struggle then the ultimate submission of his victim. Could nothing in life be better?

The jailer peered over his shoulder. “I see the Duchess will give you quite a struggle, milord.”

“That will be an added benefit. Do you know what will be the best part?”

“What would that be?”

Hugh pushed himself from the wall. “That I will be spitting the face of my brother whom had made my life miserable. Twill be a most glorious moment when I tell my brother that his little bride is carrying my child.”

\* \* \* \*

Kieran pushed his horse until the lather gathered thickly around the beast's neck, halting only when he felt the animal could not continue. His heart pounded in his chest while his mind spun crazily on the thoughts of Constance. What was happening to her now?

Densely wood glens loomed before his horse, leading toward an open meadow. Bays of the night wolf rang above their heads, its mate answering in kind. Moonlight streamed down from the cloudless sky, bathing the world in a blanket of silver, glinting on the plates of his armor. He halted his horse, narrowing his eyes. Would this place hide them from Hugh's men in case a garrison was searching for him?

His captain rode up to his elbow, halting next to his horse. "I am afraid we must rest here tonight, milord. The horses will not make it if we ride on much longer."

Fear and anxiety rang through his veins, mixing with the unpleasant emotion of rage, increasing the erratic pace of his heart. What was most important right now was getting to Constance before Hugh laid a slimy hand on her. "We will rest here awhile," he answered with a resigned huff, "but we must make Ravenwood tonight. My wife's life depends upon it."

\* \* \* \*

Constance, bathed and dressed in Odette's dressing gown, paced the length of the hedonistic lair. It was large room, covered in various dyed silks and cottons. Cushions lay on floor in multicolored hues, each more brilliant than before. Incense burned in the containers made for it. Objects of objectionable origin decorated the walls including the Infidel symbols. Where did Hugh get the idea for all of this?

She paced ceaselessly like a caged animal. There had to be a way out of it. She just had to find it.

Idly, Constance kicked one cushion and watched it skitter across the floor. Ugh, she thought, Hugh has horrible taste. I wonder whose room this was? Panic and fear nearly choked her throat, making it difficult for her breath.

In an effort to calm her erratic nerves, Constance tried to focus on something. Her gaze settled on the

massive bed in the center of the round room. It was large and wide, covered in silken sheets with roses embroidered on the pillowcases. Gigantic testers rose high with a sheer material draped from the ends. It was made perhaps by some of the finest craftsmen in all of England.

Her gaze drew to the end. Beautiful forestry scenes, carved deeply into the ancient wood, glared at her. Animals of all shapes and sizes scampered around, joined by the merriment of the people with them. In the middle of the scene was a large, flat area of the wood where there was writing stamped in raised relief. Constance took a step forward, focusing her eyes on it. She still could not make out what it was. The relief was the same color and grain as the rest. Drawing a deep breath, Constance wandered over to it warily and knelt down. Her fingers slipped over slowly, tracing the contours. First she could make out a K then an I followed by ERAN. Aye, this was Kieran's room. Why did Hugh choose to desecrate it in this manner?

Her heart lightened. Kieran, where are you? Her mind demanded, please come and save us as quickly as possible! Tears formed in her eyes. Her body ached for his touch and the safety his arms offered besides the pleasure of his flesh. Never in her life had Constance imagined feelings such as this. Aye, I am truly in love, she thought idly, I can not imagine my life without him. She lay a reassuring hand on her belly, wondering what state the child was in now. Was he asleep or did he hear her thoughts or felt her fear? Whatever it takes, my wonderful child, I will get us out of this. Even if I must lay my life down for your father's sake, then that is what I shall do.

Constance kissed the tip of her fingers then placed them on Kieran's name. He must feel her touch just as she had his, though he was many miles away.

She rose to her feet, her gaze wandering about the room. There had to be something she could use to dispatch Hugh...

Shafts of moonlight poured through the window at that moment, landing on a shiny object. Its shimmer filled the cold, gray room, creating the shiny shadows that danced on the stone walls. Constance followed the shine, finding it beneath the table. She pushed it away. Wedged in between the leg and the wall rested a dagger, perhaps lost after a meal. She reached for it, stretching her body out fullest to reach it. Her fingers danced on the metal until she finally grasped the blade. Pulling it towards her, she noticed the initial carved into the handle. K. It was Kieran's dagger.

Thank you my love, I will use it to protect us.

Nimbly, Constance pushed it the right sleeve of her gown. If Hugh tried to take her body tonight, he would get nothing more than a blade between his ribs for his trouble.

\* \* \* \*

The moon sank into the horizon, giving way to the greediness of the dawn. Kieran had not slept all night, his fear for Constance almost too overwhelming.

Mayhap, 'tis nothing, but I want to make sure that she and the babe are all right. To hell with everything else.

He mounted his horse and watched the rest of ghostly crescent descend beyond the lightning horizon. Now he could move.

Without warning, a wild gust of wind rode through the meadow, his hair streaming out behind him as well as his cloak. Then, he felt it. Almost like a feathery kiss, his cheek warmed instantly in the breeze, reminding him of Constance's lips brushing his flesh. He closed his eyes, drawing in the deep fragrance of the morning dew when a terrified voice rose, haunting his mind. Kieran, help us! He whirled around.

Where did the voice come from?

His breath hitched. It was time to go

\* \* \* \*

Sharp clicks rang through the air, making her jump. Hugh was here.

Constance, with a hard lump in her chest, leapt from the bed, her stare darting around the room. Where could she hide? Nowhere. She lifted her chin. No matter what he did to her, Kieran would remain her foremost focus as well as the child growing in her womb.

Hugh entered the dim chamber, candle in hand, the golden glow casting shadows dancing with the flicker of the flame around the room. His gaze settled on Constance immediately, a sardonic grin coming to his lips. He set the candle down, all the while his lecherous leer never left her. Thin fingers unhooked his belt and let it fall casually to the floor. "I see you are in anticipation, my dear."

She put her hands behind her, allowing her fingers to toy with the steel tip of the dagger. Aches to use it on him now rose considerably. "Nay, I am not anticipating anything, Hugh. I want you to know you

will die for what you will do to me.”

Hugh quirked his eyebrow questioningly. “And just who will be the slayer? Certainly not my dear brother Kieran again!” Hugh laughed smugly, the sound of his amusement sending cold chills up her spine.

Her ire heated her face. “Aye, he will slay you, Hugh. He will come for me.” Cold steel lay against the flesh of her forearm, quickly becoming a fast temptation. Just a few moments longer and she would have the opportunity to bury the blade between his ribs.

His amused expression grew stilled and serious. He advanced on her, his skeletal hands outstretched, gripping her arms torturously. “Constance, when I am through with you, no man in his right mind would have you.” With speed born of sheer terror, Constance removed the dagger from her sleeve, thrusting steel blade toward Hugh. His knight’s training served him well. Hugh managed to move away from the blade but not fast enough for the blade to keep from cutting his left hand.

Instinctively, his right hand covered the wound as blood dripped from the injury. He stared at it for a moment then peered up at her with cold, murderous eyes. “You will pay for this too, my dear. No woman inflicts a wound on me without getting retribution.” Unexpectedly, Hugh slapped her across the face with an open hand and sent her reeling to the floor.

Her first thought was the child already growing inside of her. Briefly, she almost put a hand upon her belly as if to protect the child but she remembered in time. The last thing she wanted Hugh to think was that she was pregnant. She lost one child because of him. She was not going to lose another.

Hard stings resounded her cheek, a thin trickle of blood running down from the corner of her lips, landing upon the white silk of the dressing gown. Gasping for breath, she turned to him, glaring at him with unabashed hostility, her hand gripping her cheek. “Do to what you will, Hugh for you will never possess the one thing you want.”

His mouth twisted into a threat. “What is that, dear Constance?”

“My heart,” she managed through stiff lips and clenched teeth, rising from her position on the floor. Her body continued to burn with the out of control fire of her wrath, fists clenching at her side.

Hugh laughed deeply, a maniacal laughter that sent tingles of fear creeping along her veins.

“Constance, you think too highly of yourself. I care not if I have your heart. ‘Tis your body I wish to possess.” Hugh advanced upon her, his hands working quickly to unfasten his tunic.

She moved away from him forthwith, finding herself on the other side of his bed with no where to turn.

Constance scrambled across the bed and ran for the door. Frantic hands clawed at the iron handle, trying to turn the ancient iron but 'twas no use. He had already locked it.

His bony hand slammed above her head, causing her to jump. She spun around, flattening herself against the wood.

Evil mixtures of hate and lust rose simultaneously in those dark orbs, the muscles in his jaw twitching irritably. "Trying to escape? I think not. Come Constance, twill be much easier if you would cooperate." His thin lips drew back, revealing his black, rotten teeth.

She felt his foul breath exuding from his mouth washing over her face in waves. Desperately, she tried to keep her stomach from retching. Did Hugh not know that his breath reeked of death?

Her shoulders stiffened. "I will never assist you in anyway, Hugh. I demand you let me out of here now and I will beg Kieran to spare your life."

His skeletal thumb caressed her cheek, sending terror sailing throughout her body. "Nay for 'tis more sporting this way, Constance. Now will you come to me willing or do I take you by force?"

"I will never come to you willingly, Hugh for I always have and always will detest you."

Hugh's mouth was tight and grim. "Then 'tis your choice, dear lady." Hugh bent his head and took possession of her lips while he held her resisting arms high above her head.

Constance thrashed her head from side to side trying to keep his sickening lips from touching hers but 'twas to no avail. Hugh captured her chin in his free hand, forcing her to submit to his putrid kiss.

## Chapter 17

Kieran arrived at Ravenwood just past dawn, his heart pounding. Was Constance waiting for him in their bed? Dear God, he hoped so.

His weary horse ambled across the ancient wood of the drawbridge, his men following at the same tired pace. Once inside the outer bailey, eerie silence abounded. Stalls, once alive with activity, were dens of sleep. Cautiously, Kieran looked left and right. What had happened?

Out of the semi-darkness appeared an old woman, dressed in ragged in bloody clothing, with a sword clasped between her withered hands, the tip of the steel weighed down on the stones. Her stance was one of combat though one could see she would not survive the first blow. Kieran's fear for Constance became unbound, his fingers gripping the reins of his horse tightly. He pulled the horse to a halt.

Her elderly eyes fell upon him then widened with surprise. Quickly, she dropped the sword where it thumped on the cobblestones with a resounding clang. She bowed low, her stringy white hair swiping the ground. "Lord Ravenwood, you have returned!"

He surveyed the too quiet, very serene scene with wary calm. "What happened?"

"Some men arrived begging for employment saying they had once been under your command at Stratford and asked to see you. The Duchess told them you she could offer a meal but they must move on." Her voice cracked with sorrow, rising high in the still air.

Constance was not here, taken by those men under Hugh's thumb. His stared trained on the old woman. "How many were there?"

She shrugged bony shoulders. "I know not. All I know is that the Duchess was captured by those awful men."

Kieran's rage grew from a small flame to a full roaring blaze, his eyes burning with the same fury as he glared at the bailey before him. Hugh had to know that Constance would have offered them a meal, perhaps giving them employment. So help me when I get her back, I will make sure she never leaves my side for a second. "Have they killed or injured anyone?"

"Aye. A few of the men that tried to stop her kidnappers as well as the man who was supposed to protect Duchess."

"Make sure he has a proper burial. Now, " his upper lip curled in a snarl as he turned to his second in command, "gather the army and raid the weapons stores. Meet me on the exercise field when all is ready."

\* \* \* \*

Constance huddled in a ball at the end of the bed, clutching her torn dressing gown to cover her bruised body. She drew her trembling knees up protectively, holding them close. He may have taken my body



but he will never have my heart, she reaffirmed to herself, that is one gift Kieran will always possess. Her body shuddered as the echo of his name crossed her mind. Was he mobilizing her army at this very moment to safeguard her return?

Hugh lay across the bed like a well-sated cat after eating its prey, his leather breeches clinging to his bony legs like a second skin. He let out a satisfied sigh. "Tell me Constance, did you not enjoy our little tryst as well as I did?" The overconfidence flooding his voice ate her firm wall of resolve but she managed to reinforce it.

Her arms wrapped themselves around her knees for warmth, the air inside the chamber growing chilly, not to mention her cold words. "The only thing our little tryst did was sicken me, Hugh."

He laughed mildly then rose from the bed on one elbow, his free hand stroking the tangled mess of her hair. "'Tis no matter. Hopefully, my child rests in your belly where my beloved brother's once did. If not, then we shall keep repeating this little performance until he does."

He rose from the bed, the sound of the wooden frame groaning in response. Striding languidly over to an ornate trunk, Hugh walked with pride. Constance grimaced. Bones protruded from his paper-thin skin, his structure completely gaunt. For a moment, she could almost feel the weight of his emaciated body on top of her again. Constance shuddered. She would most definitely kill herself again before he touched her.

Hugh rummaged through the coffer a moment longer, finally finding what he wanted. Thankfully, he slipped the tunic over his body, covering his hideousness

Absentmindedly, her tongue encircled her lips. She winced at the pain. Gingerly, she touched her broken flesh with her fingertips, grimacing harder at the pain. Even with all the blows Hugh rained on her, she never shrank from them and gave him a few of her own. Aye, a child is in my belly, you monster, but 'tis not the child that you think, she smiled to herself. No matter what happened, she must protect their child.

Constance peered up at Hugh, smiling a most seductive smile. From his reaction, his guard dropped. "Aye, I conceived a child last night, Hugh. By my estimation the child should be born near the spring." She trembled, the cold closing in like a fur blanket.

Delight danced in his eyes. "Is my poor bride cold? Here is something to warm you up," Hugh remarked off-handedly, throwing her a blanket from the bed. The cover landed several feet away from her reach.

Apparently, her ruse did not faze him. She tossed the tangle mass of curls behind her defiantly. “Are you so cold hearted you could not even hand me the blanket?”

Amusement flickered in the eyes meeting hers. “Did you not know, my dear, one must have a heart before one can be cold-hearted?”

Hugh fastened his girdle around his bone thin waist, his sword swinging back and forth with each movement. Before she could retort, Hugh stamped his feet into his boots and left the chamber quickly, leaving Constance to her own thoughts.

She rocked slowly back and forth, fright filling her body, her mind spinning wildly. Would he rescue her from Hugh or would he let Hugh have her? Somewhere inside some part of her doubted that he would come at all. Part of her knew he would this was his test of faith and love. Would he pass this final test?

\* \* \* \*

Kieran paused on a high ridge as the morning sun rose high in the sky, his hand over his eyes as a shield from the bright warmth. Narrowing his eyes to slits, he could see the outer bailey of Stratford coming alive with activity, his former men patrolling the grounds with regularity.

“How numerous is your brother’s ranks?” inquired his second in command, his eyes observing the same thing as Kieran. The bright sun shone on their armor, reflecting in a golden glint shining across the valley below.

He pulled the cowl further over his head. “Draw your cloaks over your armor!” He did not want Hugh to be alerted to his presence, at least not yet.

When he felt safe about their position, he leaned over to answer the captain’s question. “About twenty thousand strong though I doubt my brother has more than a thousand mobilized. Fortunately we have more than five thousand.”

“But how do you know, Milord?”

Kieran laughed lightly. He knew Hugh far too well. “I know my brother well enough to know his battle tactics. He will not have thought this far ahead.” Kieran’s eyes remained locked on the outer curtain of Stratford.

Life began to awaken in the sleepy castle, the guards patrolling the grounds with pikes in hand. Now 'tis time for the drawbridge to be lowered, Kieran thought to himself. Almost as if summoned by his thought, the drawbridge lowered. Even from the great distance, Kieran could hear the squeal of the ancient iron as the wooden structure fell over the moss filled moat.

“Your brother is a trusting lot. He has even lowered the drawbridge even though he knows we may be on the horizon. Do you think he has harmed the Duchess?”

“If he values his life, he will not have. Come, let us proceed,” Kieran growled waving his arm in gesture, his horse ambling down slight hill towards Stratford with his men following closely behind.

\* \* \* \*

Time passed slowly for Constance who remained locked in Hugh's chamber holding the dressing gown together, her face bruised and cut with a small amount of blood coating her hair. Several times she rose to her feet and tried the door but found the wooden edifice locked each time. Secretly she hoped Hugh would have forgotten but 'tis seemed like he was mindful enough to keep the door locked. Kieran, where are you? Please save me from this prison! Her mind begged of him.

She wandered about for a few moments, her hands clenching tightly together. Perhaps some fresh air might help her a little. Constance looked to her right. The window Hugh had left open at night was closed. Upon closer inspection, she found that the window had also been fitted with a lock. Was it possible it was unlocked? She laid her hand on the latch and tried to open it. Hugh had even thought to lock that as well.

She shook the heavy metal ring on the window viciously. “Let me out of here!” she screamed but it was no use. It would not budge.

Frustration rumbled deep inside, her body trembling. Suddenly, calm invaded. Somehow, she must get out of here with or without Kieran's help.

\* \* \* \*

Night fell with a swiftness of a leopard around Stratford, all the better to hide them. Kieran halted his

men in a forest as close to Stratford as he possibly dared. Dismounting, he and his captain peered through a dense thicket of foliage so they could observe the activity of Stratford undetected.

His captain crouched low next to him, the thick bushes moving in response. “When do you wish to strike, Milord?”

Kieran’s heart pounded heavily now, his mind whirling on the attack plan. “The activity around the castle should come to a slight halt with the changing of the guard at two hours past midnight. Then we shall strike.”

“Why wait until then?”

“If the attack goes as planned at that time twill created much confusion. Where there is confusion, there is weakness. We should be able to penetrate their ranks and retake the castle.” He watched actions outside the castle with a predatory eye, calculating all the risks. If Hugh had indeed only had about a thousand men mobilized, his victory would be much sweeter. The only problem remained. What if Hugh had all his men within the castle ready for battle? He shook his head. Hugh would never think that far ahead.

Garbled choruses of song rose above the walls, assailing his ears. ‘Twas not the sounds of the peasants as they went about their nightly chores but ‘twas the sound of drunken men deep into their cups. With any amount of luck, it was Hugh’s army. When he had been Baron, he allowed no drinking while the guards were on duty. Apparently, Hugh cared not what they did, so long as they remained on duty. This behavior could be his salvation.

“Who is that singing?”

“‘Tis Hugh’s men possibly drunken and if so, twill make our recapture of my wife all that much easier. Come, let us tie the horses hooves with the cloth while we wait.” Kieran withdrew from the dense foliage, his captain in tow.

\* \* \* \*

Constance resumed her place at the end of the bed, a blanket under her and another around her shivering shoulders in the den of the dimly lit chamber. With each moment that passed, the hope of Kieran saving her faded just a little more. Hours ticked by, the watchman calling out each hour as it

passed. Eleven. Twelve. One. Still there was no sign of Hugh. Not that she wanted to be in his presence by any means but she thought his absence rather strange.

Perhaps Kieran and my army are advancing and Hugh must deal with the situation,

Slim slivers of delight raced up and down her veins, causing her to shudder. When I am reunited with Kieran, there is nothing in the world that will ever take me away from him again, Constance vowed silently.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh sat next to the roaring fire with his customary goblet in hand, his mind swimming with the wine he had already consumed. As he took another drink from the goblet, his eyes beheld the sight of Margaret coming towards him with a basket in her hand.

Her sumptuous lips curved into a silky smile. "Would you care to join me in my chamber this evening? You look as though you need some warming, milord." She pulled back the cloth revealing all the sweetmeats and the bread the basket held.

He waved her away with a dismissive hand. "Nay wench. You will no longer be sharing my bed. I will be sharing my bed with my wife. Congratulate me, Margaret! The Duchess of Ravenwood is with my child." Hugh raised his goblet to her in a mocking salute, the golden glow of the fire dancing around the rim of the platinum cup.

Margaret's smile disappeared quickly, replaced with anger and dismay. "When will you learn, milord? She will never marry you!"

As those words fell on Hugh's ears, he leapt to his feet, grabbing Margaret by her shoulders, his grip crushing the delicate bones under his skeletal hands. He glared into her face with murderous intentions. "What did you say?"

Margaret tried to pry his fingers from her flesh. "Nothing! Ouch you are hurting me!"

Hugh shook her violently, her basket falling from her limp arms to the floor where the contents scattered. "What did you say wench? Tell me now or you will be learning more of your lessons!"

"I said she will never marry you, milord!"

Hugh released her then threw her resisting body to the floor on top of the spilled food. "I have had

enough of this foolish talk, Margaret. Gather your things for you are banished from here forever. If I ever so much as see your face anywhere again, I will order you hung. Do I make myself clear?"

Bending from his waist, Hugh leaned close to her so his words were not mistaken. Soundlessly she shook her head, turning to gather the contents of the basket when Hugh grabbed her viciously by the hair.

He jerked her head upwards so she could see the rage burning on his flesh. "I said leave now! Forget what is on the floor! If you are not out of here within the hour, you will be hanging from the gibbet!"

A shaken Margaret rose to her feet and stared at him through burning eyes. She threw her shoulders back in defiance. "You will be very sorry for this." She turned on an angry heel, leaving him to his own thoughts

Hugh's vision fell onto the mess congealing on the floor briefly before he malevolently kicked one of the loaves of bread. It skittered to a nearby corner, leaving a trail of crumbs in its wake. Nay twill be her that is sorry if I so much as see her again, Hugh vowed to himself as he sat down in his chair next to the fire and poured himself another goblet of wine.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran listened closely for the night watchman to call for the two o'clock hour, anticipation running rampant throughout his veins. His gloved hand remained on the ornate hilt of his sword, clenching and unclenching in anticipation for the agreed upon hour to come. Would the time never come?

He slipped his hand beneath his hauberk and touched Constance's earring. Hard facets dented his leather-clad fingers, smooth and strong. Soon my dear I will have you in my arms again, he thought to himself, waiting for the striking hour. Suddenly his stare drew to the window he knew to be in his old chamber. Slim light emanated from the frosted glass. Unexpectedly, a slender shadow passed in his line of vision. Could that be Constance?

Before his mind could wander any further, Kieran heard the cry of "Two O'clock and all is well!" echo over the hill, into the dense thicket of woods hiding them implicitly. Mounting his horse, Kieran gave the signal to move ahead, digging his heels anxiously into the haunches of his horse. He pushed the animal into a full gallop and sped toward the castle with the rest of his men following closely behind.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh grew drowsy with sleep yet that did nothing to slow his consumption of wine. Cup after cup went to his lips, his body growing heavy with tiredness. In the distance, he heard shouting and screams but he ignored them. When his men went on drinking binges and grew rowdy, they pillaged the peasants, especially the women. 'Twas nothing new. As he poured himself another cup of wine, a guard rushing in surprised him. Such abruptness caused him to spill the pitcher of wine all over himself. Curses erupted from his mouth. "Why are rushing into my presence like this? Look what you have made me do you clumsy oaf! I should have your head for this!"

The man's chest heaved mightily, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "I ... am ... truly ... sorry ... Milord ... to come ... into your presence ... but your brother ... is attacking!"

Those dreaded words fell into Hugh's ears, sinking into the poisoned well of his mind. Kieran attacked! For a moment, he said nothing, the wheels of his mind turning more quickly than ever before. He must act now or else all was lost!

He leapt from his chair with amazing speed, going to the window to see what was developing. Much to his dismay, Kieran and his men poured through the gate. "Tell the gatekeeper to raise the gate! Gather the men and I will meet you on the battlements!" The haze of the wine lifted and he was able to think more clearly. Aye, this was going to be a good day for Kieran to die!

"Aye, Milord!" the man answered, quickly leaving the chamber.

Hugh tore his dark blue tunic from his body. With quick fingers, he put on his armor followed by the surcoat of Stratford. Aye, I am the only one privileged enough to wear this. Grabbing his cloak, he left the chamber and joined his men on the battlements.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran and his men rushed as many as possible through the open drawbridge before the gatekeeper could raise the ancient wooden structure. Swords flew from sheaths, cutting a path toward the castle. Kieran instinctively turned his head in time to see the gate go up thus cutting off the rest of his army. He could not let this happen!

With his blade, he cut his way through the crowd of fighting bodies, slashing right and left, corpses falling everywhere. Reaching the gate tower, Kieran sheathed his bloody sword and grasped on the rope hanging down from the open orifice of the gate tower. Hand over hand, he went up slowly despite arrows flying by his ears only to bounce off the stones surrounding him. Slipping through the narrow opening, Kieran came face to face with the elderly gatekeeper. The man looked surprised.

Kieran withdrew his sword slowly, poising it to run through the man's chest. "Lower the gate."

The old man's eyes flicked to Kieran's blood caked sword then back to his face. Without another breath, he murmured his reply. "Aye." The man pushed the lever allowing the gate to go down. Ancient chains groaned mightily but the gate went down quickly allowing the rest of the army to enter. Slipping through the opening again, Kieran jumped to the battlements, a feat he had done so many times as a child. Moving swiftly over the stones, he drew his sword again and fought his way over to where Hugh was standing.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh turned just in time to see Kieran fighting his way over to where he was. A scowl crossed face as he caught a glimpse of Kieran's blue-black hair dancing in the wind, felling his men with swift strokes. Not about to be cut down, Hugh turned to his guard

"I will be in my chamber with my wife. When my brother is dead, bring me his head," Hugh growled as he moved swiftly to the drum tower and descended the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Constance could hear the melee outside, her heart thumping. Had Kieran arrived to take her home?

Quickly, she rushed to the window, forgetting the heavy locked that closed them. Damn them, she thought wildly, there must be some way to get them open! With a frantic hand, she tried to get them open but the stalwart glass refused to budge. Her gaze searched the chamber for something with which to smash the glass until they landed on a chalice on a nearby table. Moving swiftly, she picked up the cup, throwing the heavy goblet against the opaque gold of the glass. Fragile material shattered into a



thousand pieces, raining to the floor in a shimmering shower. She grabbed the blanket and threw it over the den of broken glass, peering out. There was no sign of Kieran anywhere but he was here because she saw her men fighting Hugh's. She looked to the left. Shocks of blue-black hair greeted her, his blade slashing left and right.

Kieran!

She stuck her arm out and waved furiously. "Kieran, I am up here!" Some of the jagged glass bit into her arm. That did not matter. Kieran was here to save her!

Despite her cries, Kieran did not hear her. He kept fighting his way through the mass of soldiers, slashing bodies to the right and to the left of him. Not wanting him to become distracted and thus lose his life, Constance stepped back into the chamber with her heart hammering against the strong bones of her chest. Kieran did come for me. Smiling to herself, she laid a hand upon her belly, reassuring the child. Your father is coming for us little one, she told the child, and he will be so happy to know you are coming.

\* \* \* \*

Hugh reached his chamber quickly, opening the door to see a smiling Constance standing in the middle of the room, clutching what was left of her dressing gown to her. The sudden gust of wind drew his eyes to the shattered window, his ire raising. "So what were you planning to do my little bird? Escape?" He closed the heavy door behind him, locking the wooden structure carefully with a broad smile upon his gaunt face.

Constance stared at him then backed away as the lanky, stringy-haired creature crept towards her. Strangely, she felt no fear of him. Knowledge that Kieran came brought an unknown strength to her. Basking in the knowledge of her power, Constance stared at him through smug eyes. "I will escape here with Kieran, rest assured Hugh."

With his stalking gait, Hugh moved toward her, hands outstretched. "The only thing you will do is marry me once my brother's head is in my hands. Now that you have my child in your belly, you belong only to me." Kieran, help me before he kills me! Her mind cried as she tried to fend off Hugh.

\* \* \* \*

Kieran stood on the stone roof above his childhood chamber, his mind trying to figure out a way to get into the room and save his beloved Constance. He knew without a doubt Hugh would have his door locked and there would be no possible way that he could get in. Hugh had a special door made many years ago when his mind reeled with thoughts of assassination. The door was reportedly the strongest in all of England. How was he going to get in?

He spied one of the long banners dappling the strong breeze blowing across the chaos reigning in the baileys of Stratford. Kieran pulled the cloth up and felt the material. Aye, the fabric would be strong enough to hold his weight. Putting one leg over the side of the battlement, Kieran carefully walked himself down the side of the castle, holding onto the banner. Hand over hand, he lowered himself down to the window, his booted feet slipping slightly over the polished stones. He saw one broken window, the naked iron panes staring at him blankly. It would cut him considerably to go through there. Kieran looked over to the other unblemished window. There were no panes in that one. It was one solid piece.

Over the cries of the crowd, he could hear a woman's scream echoing from inside the castle. It was Constance! Wasting no more time, Kieran plunged through the available window, sliding across the stone floor with a flourish.

Hugh heard the crash and rose from the bed to see. Constance peered up. What caused the sound?

Hugh's face twisted into a grimace as a tall figure stood up in the shadows, drawing a long sword that glimmered with moonlight. Kieran! "I see the prodigal son has returned. Why could you not die in the Holy Land like you were supposed to?" Hugh drew his own sword, poising to strike.

Kieran's strong, masculine voice filtered from the deep shadows. "Where is my wife?"

He was here to take her home! Her heart skipped several beats as she moved from the bed, toward the sound of her savior. Unfortunately, Hugh's strong, bony armor covered arm caught her around the neck, preventing her from moving any further. She struggled, trying to wrest herself from his torment.

Hugh's lips descended on her temple, kissing her like a long lost lover. His eyes glowed with a devilish delight. "What do you mean your wife, brother? She is my wife now. If you did not know, she carries my child."

Kieran stepped from the shadows, his face full of question. "Is this true Constance?"

She turned to face Hugh, smiling her sweetest façade smile. “Aye, I am with child Kieran. Hugh, please let me go.” Surprisingly he let go.

Constance glided over to Kieran, her hands outstretched, the tattered neckline of her gown forgotten. “Kieran, I want you to know your brother ravished me,” she stated, watching Kieran’s hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. “‘Tis true that I am indeed with child.” The love on his face was more than the strength she needed. Whirling about, she faced Hugh with power glowing on her face. “The child is Kieran’s, Hugh. We conceived it the last time that we made love. So, Hugh, all that you have done to me has been in vain.”

Constance watched the blood drain from Hugh’s face, making him paler than he was before. He stood still for a moment then ripped the sword from its sheath strapped to his side, poking it toward Kieran. “Now, my brother, you will pay for your crime!”

“I have committed no crime except for the ones on your head!” Kieran snarled through clenched teeth. Without ceremony, Hugh thrust toward him, initiating the deadly dance. Around and around they moved, their swords clashing in the ancient art of battle. Sounds of metal upon metal echoed over the stones of the hall.

Constance backed from the melee, her hand clutching her gown while the other grabbed hold of the bedpost. Please, God let Kieran prevail in this travesty, her mind prayed. Each time Hugh thrust forward, her breath caught in her chest in fear but ‘twas unfounded. Kieran was clearly the better swordsman. He anticipated every one of Hugh’s moves perfectly while he managed to inflict a few wounds on Hugh, including one on his brother’s cheek.

“You have grown slow in these past years my brother. Tell me, does your consumption of wine dull your senses that much?” Kieran taunted as he encircled Hugh, his breathing coming in ragged gasps.

Hugh’s face turned more ugly than it had been before, reminding Constance of a drowned rat. He spat to the side, answering Kieran’s taunts with ones of his own. “I swear my brother, I will see your head flying high above the castle turrets before I am done. Rest assured I will enjoy Constance to the fullest once I rid her belly of your child!”

They moved around the chamber with the swords clashing, forcing Constance to stand on the bed to get out of their way.

Kieran backed up slightly, his feet moving slowly to avoid any pitfalls. “That is something you will never do, brother! I will kill you for what you have done to her. May your soul rot in hell!”

Constance watched his every move with rising panic, her eyes surveying the room for any obstructions. Unfortunately, there was a trunk in his path. “Kieran, there is a coffer behind you!”

It was too late. Kieran fell over the large coffer, landing on his back with his sword clattering across the stone floor several feet out of his reach.

Hugh raised his sword, poised to strike. “Now my brother, who will be the victor now?”

Constance caught a flash of steel out of the corner of her eye. Turning toward that gleam, she witnessed a young woman with her dark hair in tatters, plunge a sword through Hugh’s back.

From the expression on Kieran’s face, he fully expected Hugh’s sword to run him through. His eyes grew wide in surprise when he saw an English broadsword come through Hugh’s gullet. His brother’s eyes grew wide in disbelief, his hands gripping the bloody weapon. Constance’s eyes darted from one to the other. Who was this woman?

With just enough strength, Hugh turned to see the satisfied woman standing there, a wide, triumphant smile upon her face. Hugh gazed at her through disbelieving eyes, his hands rising to grip her shoulders.

The servant stepped out of his reach, merely laughing. “Did I not tell you that you would pay, milord?”

Blood bubbled between his thin lips. “Nay, for you will not escape ... retribution ... Margaret.”

Hugh gripped a surprised Margaret by the shoulders and thrust her to him, impaling her on the sword as well. Her scream resounded through the chamber, causing Constance’s blood to turn cold as she gripped the bedpost for support. It was a very macabre scene.

Blood poured from their wounds, falling to the floor, creating a congealing crimson pool. Slowly the two dying bodies sank down until they fell to the floor with a resonant thud.

Constance pushed away from the bed and into Kieran’s waiting arms, her heart lifting in consummate joy. She felt his tight embrace around her, the feeling of safety returning to her. “Oh, Kieran! You came for me!”

Kieran rained kisses on her head, his hands holding her body tightly to his. “Of course, my dear. Did you ever doubt me?”

Constance buried her face into the thick, corded hollow of his neck, the softness of his skin under her fingertips a welcome feeling. “Up until this moment, I was uncertain but doubt has left me, Kieran. I love you and there is nothing in this world that will ever change that.”

His arms tightened around her, crushing her even harder to him. “Constance, you belong to me and no other. That is why I fought my way here. I want you by my side forever.”

She lifted her head, peering into the beloved pools of his eyes. “I want it no other way, Kieran. Just as you told me once that perhaps you always loved me but never admitted it, I too have always loved you. That is why I chose to write that letter to you in the Holy Land.”

Kieran bent his head to take possession of her lips but she quickly pulled away because of the pain Hugh’s blows caused them. Tilting her head to the light, Kieran scrutinized her bruises. “I shall have to take great care of you when we return home, Constance. For a week you shall do nothing but stay in bed.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, blonde brows lifting. “Do nothing, Kieran?” Constance asked in wide-eyed surprise.

His bent finger chuckled her playfully under the chin while seductive promises fell from his lips. “I will keep you most occupied, Constance and you will not want to leave bed, I assure you. Now, shall we return home?” Bending from his waist, Kieran picked her up, holding her closely.

She lay her head on his armored shoulder. “There is no place I would rather be.”

## EPILOGUE

Cold winds of the winter gave way to a most beautiful spring, the birds returning to the gentle warming climate of the countryside. Kieran paced brutally outside of his chamber, his boot heels striking the floor over and over again while the hem of his tunic brushed against his legs unmercifully. Why had the child not been born yet?

Constance had been ensconced in the chamber since the night before with the midwives, her cries echoing through the hallway. With all his might, Kieran kept from rushing in there and taking her into his arms so he might take away some of the pain.

Sudden creaks of the door startled him as well as the woman who emerged when he was about two

paces past the door. He rushed over and put his strong hands on the woman's shoulders. His heart thumped heavily while his mind reeled. "Tell me woman, do I have a son or a daughter?"

"The Baroness wishes to tell you herself," the woman replied nonchalantly.

He pushed past her and rushed to Constance, dropping to his knees by her side. She lay there in the massive bed, her golden hair fanned out on the pillow. The beautiful emerald hued eyes remained closed, the child sleeping in her arms. Grasping her hand in his, Kieran urged her awake. "Constance, I am here. Tell me, do we have a son or a daughter?" He peered into the sexless face, his heart beating heavily. It was the most beautiful child he had ever seen.

Her eyes fluttered then opened as a gentle smile spread across her face. "Would you not like to see for yourself?" Constance pulled the covers back to reveal the sex of the child. It was a son.

Kieran could not believe she gave birth to such a large baby with her body being so slender. Yet, the delicate flesh yielded a most beautiful and wondrous creature. Their baby possessed long limbs, just as he had at birth. Nervously, he counted all the fingers and toes, relieved the child possessed all ten. Black hair, thick and slightly curling, covered the baby's head as well as a soft, dark down on the rest of his body. Kieran had never felt more pride in his life than he had at this moment.

"We have a son, Kieran. Is he not beautiful?" Constance commented, laying her head back down upon the pillow.

Kieran could nothing but stare at the beautiful son given to him by the only other person he loved most in the world. "Aye, he is beautiful. I do not know what to say, Constance. You have given me such a precious gift."

Constance re-wrapped the baby then held the child out to him, her smile becoming broader. "Would you like to hold him, Kieran?"

"I ... I ... do not know if I can."

"Aye, you can my love. Just support his head."

With a nod, Kieran took the child from his mother's arms and stood up, his gaze locked onto the baby. Another thought plagued him. What color eyes did the baby have? Then, as if to answer his thought, the child slowly opened his eyes to reveal the same brilliant emerald hued eyes of his mother. He felt the breath escape from his body. "He has the same color of eyes as you, Constance," he whispered in awe as he laid a large finger in the infant's hand. He was surprised at the strength in the tiny fingers as

they enclosing his flesh.

Constance drew in a weary breath. “Aye, but he has your size and strength, Kieran. He will prove to be a mighty warrior like his father.”

Kieran continued to stare at the large wondrous creature nestled in the large expanse of his mighty arms. “Yea, that he will. What shall we call him?”

“I was thinking of naming him after the greatest warrior that ever lived

His dark brow lifted in question. “What great warrior?”

“You, Kieran,” she remarked in a gleeful tone, “ I wish to name him after his father.”

Kieran, deeply touched by her gesture, was nearly moved to tears but he pushed them away. “Then that shall be his name. And when the time is right, “ Kieran stated as he put a finger under Constance’s chin,” we will give him a sister who will be named after the greatest woman who ever lived.”

THE END