



ESCAPE TO LOVE

By

Carolyn Hinchy-Wertman

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CHAPTER ONE

Near Newcastle, England 1643

Above, a full silver moon illuminated the night from a starless sky, speckled by scattered dark clouds, as its gray beams stretched over the barren land in ghostly fashion. On a narrow path that twisted through the damp leaves and thick trunks of trees, Celine Hollingsworth fled. Thorn-like branches grabbed the strands of her hair as it billowed behind her. They tore at the bloodied nightgown against her battered body. Rocks sliced at the soft flesh of her feet, tore the skin, and left her blood on the leaves as a marker of her passage. White-hot pain seared her with every step, every movement.

She cared little where the path led, only that each step brought her closer to freedom, and further from the nightmare that held her captive for nearly two years.

The echo of horses' hooves somewhere in the night held her to her place, listening intently as fear set her body to trembling. She slid in the thick sludge as she struggled to maintain her balance. The wind entwined her gown to her body, and pressed her hair to her face. Its might slowed her progress. She staggered, and fell to her knees.

Again the clamor of hooves resounded somewhere in the night. The wind seemed to distort the sounds. One instant Celine was convinced they came from deep in the woods, the next from close by. Confused, she darted with abandon along the road.

Low dense clouds moved before the moon, casting the earth into a shroud of darkness. For a moment she stood frozen, unsure where the trees began and the roadway ended. The thunderous din at her back sent an icy chill along her spine.

The clouds parted for an instant, as she twisted about, and a scream rose in her throat. From the darkness came a monster ... with giant bat-like wings flapping in the wild wind. Hidden in a voluminous cowed hood, features were engulfed in shadow. Haunting eyes impaled her, gripping her with tendrils of fear as the beast bore down upon her. Fear saturated her as she gazed at the massive form unable to determine whether real or imagined. She was certain fire spewed from its nostrils. Again her distress escaped her lungs in a ragged whimper, however, was silenced before it could be released.

Sinewy bulk crashed against her. Her body pulsated in pain. Bones snapped along her ribs, and the air rushed from her lungs. She tried to duck; to curl into a tight ball as the beast drove its might against her forehead. Torturous agony surged through her brain. Consciousness left her long before her body sprawled in the thick mire.

* * * *

Astride his mount, Michael Aberdeen hunkered lower in the folds of his cloak. He closed his eyes against the bite of the wind. For a moment he reined his steed, and ceded to the strength of the gale, too tired to fight it. Thus, he braced against the wrath of God. A frown furrowed his lips as he struggled to raise his hand to keep the hood of his cloak from flailing behind him.

Were there an inn he would have sought it out, grateful for its warmth and shelter. Yet he knew he would find no reprieve from the night until he reached his destination.

His dark cape lashed on the currents of the wind. Hidden in the deep hood, he was certain his appearance mirrored his sinister mood. The night alone would have soured him. The mission he found himself on left a bitter taste in his mouth long before he braved the forces of the wind. Each mile closer his destination only increased the scowl on his face, and the anger seething within him.

If not for his father he would never have ventured out on such a night. Already three days late due to a storm at sea, he found himself with little choice. His bride awaited, and no further excuses to the elder lord would keep him from his destiny. If not for the promise of the lands to be had with this imminent marriage, he would have fought being tied down. He had no love for the woman betrothed to him; in fact, he had only laid eyes on her a half dozen times many years passed. Still he was not naive. Unions of love were rare. What mattered were the things his future wife brought as a dowry, a sizable acreage of land bordering the Aberdeen estates. It was the bride price, and a minor sacrifice to ensure her wed to a man with a name that met with her family's standards.

For Michael, marriage came at a time when he loathed the thought of settling down. He made no protests. It would have done little good. The marriage was agreed upon when he was no more than a child, his intended an infant at her mother's breast. Over the years, many gifts were exchanged to seal the bargain. There would be no change of plans now.

With great reluctance, he kicked at the horse's flanks, and goaded him into a sprint. They fought the tempest, both with heads down and shoulders drawn forward. At last the road turned, and granted a reprieve for a short time as the wind moved to their backs. Though not eager to be on his way, he spurred the ebony mount beneath him and sent the steed into a full gallop over the dark road.

Leaves danced before horse and rider, scattered in thick clusters as their wet surfaces clung together. Haunting moonbeams skimmed along the road, through the spiny branches of the trees, and over the dark shadows. Horse and rider all but flew atop the muddied surface. Thick clumps of mire scattered into the night behind them. The wind pressed Michael's cape to his body, molded it to him, and then changed direction to flay it into the darkness behind him.

For a moment thick clouds moved before the moon and snuffed out its light. Swallowed by the gloom, he did not slow in his pace, for the road was familiar, having been ridden many times in his youth. Several seconds elapsed before a slender ray of silver filtered through the trees. It illuminated the span of road just in front of the steed.

Too late Michael glimpsed the wraith-like figure that wove along the path only a hair's breath from where his mount's hooves thundered. He reined, but could not stop the impact. In his chest, his heart somersaulted as a scream rent the air from the one beneath the heavy charger. A vain attempt was made to sidestep, though it mattered little. Michael felt his stomach lurch as the body impacted with his steed. He twisted about to spy the form of his victim, now rolling against the sodden surface of the road. His leg over the horse's back before the animal had come to a complete stop; he staggered through the mire to the still figure.

Michael's knees buckled. His breath lodged in his throat. Nausea threatened. His fingers shook as he gripped the thin cloth twisted about the huddled form. With tender care he rolled the body. Wild tangles of hair obscured his view of his victim's

face. Trembling fingers brushed at the mass. Beneath the muddied tresses appeared the bloodstained visage of a young woman.

What was left of her gown gave her little in the way of modesty. The coarse material had rent from her back, leaving her exposed to the waist. The front, stained crimson, and entwined with bits of leaves and bark sagged low over her bosom. Michael felt his stomach lurch once more as he gazed at the bloodied material. Frantic, he searched her for the wounds that warranted such blood loss. Though scratched and battered, he could find no injury severe enough to justify the crimson fluid against her. Only a long gash on her lower arm hinted as the culprit. But that wound had been wrapped in dirty cloth, and was caked with dried blood. Nor did it seem extensive enough to have caused such a massive flow of blood. Only a fresh gash to her forehead, and the darkening bruises to her shoulders signified the impact with his mount.

With a careful hand Michael reached to the woman's throat. The slow beat of her heart, though faint, fluttered beneath his fingers. Relief flooded him and a ragged breath escaped his lips. At least she was alive. "I'm sorry...." he whispered. "I never saw you until my mount was upon you." In response her head lolled to the side. Again he sought a pulse. Still it beat.

Michael dragged his hand over the length of his face, and then rested back on his haunches. The weather alone should have been an omen this night was ill fated. Had he protested this journey, just until the storm passed, none of this would have happened. Yet ... no one disobeyed Michael's father. The storm was an inconvenience ... not an excuse. He knew better than delay this meeting. Not even a lengthy stay in India gave him argument against his father's demand he return home to face his fate.

At last he rose, and pulled the woman into his arms with gentle care. She moaned in agony, the sound tearing at him. Even in her unconsciousness her pain was evident. Michael leaned close, his lips just above her ear. "I have to get you help. There is no way to avoid the pain." His eyes searched her face, and he shook his head. "Greenhearst Manor is not far." He spoke more for the sound of his voice, it being the only familiar thing to calm him. He knew the woman did not hear, or comprehend his words.

Close to two miles further down the road, the glow of candlelight in the windows of Greenhearst Manor was a welcome sight. Though relieved to see the gray stone fortress, a lump formed in the pit of his stomach. He did not look forward to this meeting. Now, as he glanced at the limp figure in his arms, he knew it would be even more strained than he anticipated. Somehow he doubted his betrothed would welcome him with open arms, now three days late, and another woman in his embrace. He sucked in a deep breath. Slow in his dismount Michael gazed up at the imposing edifice. In days passed a stronghold, it lacked warmth. One wing, lost to a fire many years passed, remained ruins, having never been repaired. Its cold façade should have been a warning. Reluctant to enter, Michael braced against the savage wind. Only the moans of discomfort from the woman in his arms forced him to move forward. At the stoop, he peered down at her for several seconds. "Explaining my tardiness will be hard enough. I'm afraid you will be an entirely unbelievable story."

For a moment he raked his gaze over her attire, or lack thereof. A weary sigh escaped his lips, and he lowered her to the ground before slipping his cape from his shoulders. Wrapping the warm material about her, he swept her back into his arms. One more long, slow breath, and he tugged the pull-cord beside the door, and listened with

pursed lips to the chimes that rang within the manor.

* * * *

Marguerite Haverston bolted from her chair at the sound, startled from a lengthy session of chewing at her lower lip. It was only the stern frown from her mother that held her to her place. Nervous, she smoothed her gown, trying in vain to seem calm and in control. An eternity elapsed before she nodded to the liveried butler. "Alistair, we have a visitor."

Marguerite pursed her lips in nervous agitation. Her body trembled and she twisted her fingers in the skirt of her gown to keep her hands from shaking. Several years separated her last encounter with Michael Aberdeen, and she wanted to assure herself their first meeting since her childhood was perfect. Yet, he was late. Every dress in her wardrobe adorned her body at least twice. Each was discarded for another. At last she settled for a gown of deep plum, which she hoped would capture his attention and imagination. The bodice was cut low, revealing a goodly amount of her bosom. Her mother noted the display with chagrin, though she said nothing aloud. Marguerite scoffed at her disapproval. Whether the betrothal was binding or not, she wanted Michael to be captivated the instant he set eyes upon her.

Waiting for the frail old butler to answer the door, Marguerite perused her image in the silvered glass of the tall mirror that dominated the wall opposite the portal. Beauty was one of her most treasured gifts. At ten and seven she possessed more maturity in her body than most girls her age. Her hair was dark, cascading over pale shoulders in thick ringlets that bounced with each movement she made. Equally sooty lashes fringed eyes like pools of black onyx.

For a moment she lifted her chin, and peered at her reflection for any imperfection. Much to her content she found none. Hers was a timeless beauty, kept by countless hours before the mirror. Giving a quick flick of her head, she watched her curls sway and bounce in the silvered glass. Her cheeks were high, accenting full sensuous lips and a slender slightly aristocratic nose. Pale skin, pampered by many hours of sleep, and little manual labor, glowed in the soft candlelight. Full breasts threatened to overflow the bodice of her gown, and shapely hips, accented her narrow waist. Wasn't she always the topic of conversation at every event? Many envied her beauty. Marguerite dared admit only to herself she had knowledge of such things as a result of careful eavesdropping.

* * * *

Not sparing the time to announce himself, Michael pushed passed the butler and bore his burden to a nearby chaise, a path of mud left in his wake. He cared little that the butler followed with arms akimbo. "How dare you enter here?" The annoyance in his voice was evidence of his outrage. His fingers encircled Michael's sleeve.

In no mood for the man's foolish games, Michael jerked from the servant's grasp and turned his back on him as he placed his bundle on the long couch. "Send for the barber surgeon. This girl was trampled by my mount, and needs be tended to before she succumbs to her wounds."

The older man snorted as he pulled at the hem of his waistcoat and straightened it over his round belly. His balding head glowed red with his rising anger. "This is not the local inn, sir!" He said. "You have no right to barge in here as if you belong."

Seething, Michael faced the domestic and towered over him. "Be damned! She

might die!” He leaned close enough to glimpse the sweat that beaded on the butler’s face. “Send for the surgeon at once.” The elder man scampered several feet away, his fear etched in his features as he glanced to Michael’s balled fists.

Though he had given little more than a glance to the room, now Michael scoped it as he sought a familiar face. His future mother-in-law remained to her chair, her lips drawn and tight, and her eyes revealing no recognition. His gaze moved to the dark-haired beauty closer him, and Michael perused her for an instant. Though matured since last they met, he knew her to be his betrothed.

The anger that snapped in her large eyes assured him he would find her no more welcoming than the butler. “How dare you enter here?” Michael noted she maintained a careful distance. “I demand you remove yourself, and...” she peered in disgust passed him to the girl on the chaise. “...Your little strumpet, from these premises at once.”

Giving her his undivided attention, he folded his arms behind his back and assessed her for several seconds. No longer the child he remembered from his youth, he had to admit she was quite lovely. Yet, in no mood for her antics, he graced her with the same icy glower he bestowed on the butler. “You would turn your back on this girl....” Without taking his eyes off Marguerite he indicated the limp figure on the couch with his spread hand. “...Knowing full well she might die?”

The defiance in her squared shoulders was his answer. “Her kind ... can be better treated in a part of the city equipped to take care of her.” Her jaw was ridged as she added; “We can do nothing for either of you. Now I demand you leave here at once.”

It was her mother’s glower, and lips flattened to a thin line, which forced Marguerite to bestow a heated look at her. “Have you something you wish to say, mother?”

Sylvia Haverston, Countess of Durham, blanched. Her hands trembled as she rose from her chair and faced Michael. “We expected you some days ago, milord, and feared you met with an unfortunate accident.” Sinking into a deep curtsy, she gave him a tight smile. “’Twould seem we were not far from the truth.” She caught the eye of the butler. “Send for the surgeon at once.”

The old servant eyed his mistress with furrowed brows. Yet, he brooked no argument, and gave a slight bow before tossing his cloak over his thin shoulders and departing the front hall.

Mortification paled Marguerite’s visage. Her lips parted, yet no sound emitted forth. Her breathing came in rapid exhalations that threatened to spill her bosom from the low cut of her gown. Slipping into a deep curtsy, she gave Michael a feeble smile. “Milord ... please accept my deepest apologies....” She rose and forced her gaze to meet his. Toying with the lace draped over her hands at the edge of her sleeves, she murmured. “You have changed ... in my mind, I still remember a boy on the verge of manhood....” Her tongue flicked over her lips, moistening them. Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin a notch, and assessed him in silent contemplation.

Had he not had more pressing things on his mind, Michael would have commented on her perusal. The soft moans of the woman on the couch behind him reminded him this was neither the time nor place for such things. Stooping beside the chaise, Michael spoke in tender tones to the woman. “You must be still. You are badly hurt, and judging from the bruises along your side, I think you might have broken some ribs.” Michael brushed a muddled tress of auburn hair from the young woman’s face.

“The surgeon will be here soon. Rest.”

Her eyes flew open. Her breath was ragged from her lips. Peering at him with panicked green orbs, she reached for, and curled her fingers through the material of his shirt. A croak escaped her lips. Words, uttered in soft whispers, slipped against Michael’s cheek. “He will kill me....”

Leaning closer, Michael shook his head. “I did not hear....” Yet, already her fingers were slipping from his shirt. Again, she drifted into unconsciousness.

Rising, Michael scanned the room in exasperation. He raked muddied fingers through his wind-blown hair. “Where in blazes is that doctor?” Shouting to no one in particular he vented his frustrations. At last, unable to sit idly by, he crossed to Marguerite with bold forceful steps. “A basin of water, please.” His voice was ragged with emotion. “And perhaps a cloth to lie against her brow.”

Hesitating for a moment, Marguerite nodded with great reluctance, and disappeared up the stairs. Several minutes passed before she returned with the items requested, and a deep frown upon her beautiful features.

Carefully Michael took the rags and bathed her face, washing away the grime. Once cleaned, revealing the natural pink hue of her skin, he sat back on his haunches and peered at her in wonder. She was lovely. An oval face with high cheeks was accented by the deep auburn of her hair. Tiny freckles dotted the bridge of a slender pert nose. Lashes, a shade darker than her hair, fringed palely lidded eyes. A rosebud mouth curled above the soft angles of her chin and the slender column of her throat. Even the bruises marring her face could not detract from her beauty, and Michael found himself gawking at her.

Marguerite grunted. She made no attempt to hide her displeasure as she bestowed an icy glower upon her betrothed. “Really, milord, must you be so obvious?”

Michael peered at her with raised brows, stunned by her flippantness. Nonetheless, he felt the barbs of her words, and ashamed of his actions, cleared his throat before apologizing. “ ’Tis only that I had not expected her to be so young. Do forgive my inappropriate behavior, Marguerite.” He held her gaze, rather than return his gaze to the woman on the chaise. Starting out his marriage at odds with Marguerite wasn’t going to help anything.

In a strange way he was relieved when the front portal crashed inward, slamming against the wall behind it as the wind swept it from the grasp of the butler, who staggered toward them, his muddied footprints joining Michael’s on the stone floor.

The servant shrugged and sighed with dramatic flair. “Never made it to town, my lady. I rode like a demon possessed, but the horse took lame ... I had to walk him back to the stables.” He gazed at his hands for several seconds.

Michael eyed him with pursed lips. Tiny bits of straw clung to his cloak, and the only mud against him was on the soles of his boots. Had he ridden with the fervor he claimed, he would have been as muddied as Michael. More likely he cowered in the barn until a reasonable amount of time elapsed. Yet, he made no comment. Already he was feeling the discontent of his future mother-in-law, and dared not exacerbate the situation.

Rising from his perch beside the unconscious woman, he searched the great hall in exasperation. “Blast this retched weather!” For a moment he peered into the faces of the three before him. At last, frustrated, he shook his head in resignation. A heavy sigh slipped from his lips. “Then there is nothing left to do. I shall go in search of the man

myself.” A few steps shy of the front portal, he halted and glanced over his shoulder at the Ladies Haverston, who gasped with indignant effrontery. “Countess, Marguerite is aught amiss?”

Marguerite chewed at her lip, yet said nothing. Michael watched her features darken with anxiety. For several seconds her mouth opened and closed, yet no words escaped.

Brows raised in challenge, Michael peered from daughter to mother. “Countess?” Squared shoulders and lifted chin from Sylvia Haverston gave him the answer he sought.

“Milord, surely you would not leave that...” She paused. Swallowing, she cleared her throat before continuing. “Milord, ‘tis only myself and my daughter here.” Glancing to the butler she gave a lame smile. “Alistair is far too old to be expected to be our guard.”

Michael pondered the lack of other staff, yet voiced no query. Even away these many years, he was well aware of the Haverston financial situation. Each time the Earl lost heavily at cards, another servant paid the price, either as the prize, or in the loss of their position.

Exhaling in nervous agitation, Sylvia licked her lips. “You can not drop this filthy girl at my stoop, and leave her.” Her chin raised a notch. “What if she has planned this entire charade to gain entry here?”

Michael slipped his arms behind his back, interlocking the fingers of both hands. It was more to control the anger rising in him than the contemplation it appeared. His voice was calm as he questioned the older woman. “Is it my understanding, madam, you believe she ran into the path of my mount under the guise of gaining entry to your home?”

Sylvia’s nod was curt. “These are bad times, milord. With King Charles and that horrid Cromwell at each other’s throats, and England on the verge of rebellion, there are many willing to take advantage. Who knows what her motives are? Mayhap there are others with her, waiting for the opportunity to gain entrance here.”

Drawing in a long slow breath, Michael snorted, “Even your servant could not abide a night such as this. Surely you do not think she, or any other would do so merely to steal your candlesticks?” The acrid tone of his voice was biting. He pointed to the unconscious figure on the chaise. “She has little more than opened her eyes. Do you expect her to make a miraculous recovery the instant I leave?” Venting a ragged sigh, he added, a bit softer in his tone, “Look at her, madam, surely she poses no threat.”

Like her daughter, Lady Haverston was a slight woman, in both stature and weight. Even so, the fire in her eyes assured him she would not be bullied in her own home. Folding her arms over her chest, she dared him to over-ride her authority. “Milord, in truth, I have no idea what she might have planned. I only know, sir, she cannot stay here. With my husband...” again she paused. “With my husband away hunting, I feel it is my duty to ensure the welfare of this house.”

Michael felt temptation rise in his throat. On the tip of his tongue was the challenge of just what the Earl of Durham hunted. For it was well known he had an unquenchable appetite for the ladies. Swallowing back the retort, Michael sighed in exasperation. Angering his future mother-in-law would gain him nothing. Still, he could not believe the woman so callous as to turn away one in such obvious need. He pivoted

toward Marguerite, hoping for support. She returned the same defiance as her mother. For a moment he stood gazing between the two, amazed at their lack of compassion. At last he nodded in slight acquiesce, resigned he had no say in who the mistress of the manor allowed into her home.

“Countess,” He bowed. “Lady Marguerite, I must beg your forgiveness.”

Marguerite moved forward, a soft smile curling her lips. “Milord, it relieves me that you understand.” Fair pressing her bosom to his arm, she added. “I will send for the carriage ... and have the girl taken where she can be properly tended to....” She nodded toward the butler, who made a hasty retreat toward the back of the manse.

Michael again folded his arms behind his back and shook his head. “That will not be necessary. I shall take her back to Brier Point, where my personal surgeon can tend her wounds....”

Marguerite gasped. “Milord, she is nothing more than a street urchin, a lowly little guttersnipe!” She peered around Michael to the woman on the chaise. “I could no more allow you to take her back to Brier Point, than let you leave her here.” The storm rising in his eyes made her cringe.

“You can not allow it?” His jaw flexed as his anger rose. “And just what makes you assume you have the right to make such a choice?” He glared at her, his ire rising. “You are not my wife yet, madam! Nor would that title grant you the authority to make such a decision.” His acrid bark elicited a startled gasp from both mother and daughter. Lifting his hand in surrender, he lowered his voice, and attempted to pacify both women. “Countess, Marguerite, I have braved the mightiest of storms to be here this night. My temper and nerves are frayed. I mean neither of you any disrespect.”

Reaching out to him, Marguerite attempted to appease him. “Milord, you misunderstand my intentions. ‘Twas only your safety I feared for. You have no idea who might come looking for her, or what sort of vermin are waiting in the wings for a chance at a purse....” Her fingers brushed his hand. “I only thought of you ... to ensure the little doxy did not sink her claws into your family’s—” she hesitated. “—interests.”

A vein at the side of Michael’s neck pulsed. “You mean my wealth, don’t you Marguerite?” His tone was tinged with rancor.

She shook her head and stammered in response. “Milord, she is a guttersnipe and quite possibly adept at stealing.”

“Madam,” Michael hissed, nearing complete rage, “I was not aware you were acquainted with her prior to our arrival a short time ago.”

With all the aplomb of an accomplished actress, Marguerite gasped and brought her hand to her throat. “I assure you, milord, I have never laid eyes on the urchin before this night!” In disgust she added, “I would not be caught dead with the likes of her.”

His finger danced in midair just beneath her nose, as if a rapier challenging her. “Then what makes you think her some urchin, or street rat? For those are the only words I have heard pass your lips since we arrived.”

Marguerite squared her shoulders. “No proper young woman would be out dressed in her night clothes, milord!” Michael watched her gaze return to the tattered remains of the other woman’s clothing. The cape had fallen open; revealing her shredded gown, and muddled body. “Besides look at her!” He could hear the rancor in her voice, and see it in her eyes. “She is positively retched.”

Obliged to do as Marguerite insisted, Michael gazed at the pale form on the

chaise. Though dirty and battered, he could see nothing distasteful about her. In fact, had he the time to argue he would have assured his future wife she was the one lacking. He might have pointed out the widow's peak, which parted Marguerite's hair, the slight hook to her nose, and the sallow cheeks that were much in need of a bit of meat, and a less liberal application of rouge. Instead he spoke in a softened tone. "I see only a person in need." His words were filled with pity. "I care little if her clothing is made of the finest silks, or of sackcloth." Facing Marguerite he added with a bit more tartness than necessary, "Apparently that is where we differ, madam. I would gladly reach out to help anyone in need, though it is quite clear the same can not be said of you."

As if he had struck her with a physical slap she stumbled backwards. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. For a moment her lip trembled. Then, Marguerite replied in a curt manner. "Having only set eyes on me a few times in your youth, milord, I find your assessment of me quite appalling!" Her chin raised a notch. "And utterly insulting."

"Insulting, madam is that you would turn your back on someone simply because the clothing they wear is not up to your standards, or their social status is beneath your own. Have you forgotten my family's reputation?" At her blank stare, he continued. "We are well known for our charities, Marguerite. I can not remember a time when someone was turned away without food." His eyes bore into hers. "Are you prepared to go among the less fortunate to provide aid? My mother and her sisters have done so for years." For a moment he paused. Though his tone was soft, within he struggled to keep his temper in check. "I plan to continue their work ... and as my wife, I will expect the same of you."

Pursing her lips in contemplation, Marguerite released a heavy sigh. "As your wife, milord, I shall support you in whatever endeavors you choose. But that does not mean I have to join you in them, or like them. Nor do I expect you to like or be involved in many of the choices I make. In marriage there are often disagreements."

And disappointments ... Michael mused with wry discern. Aloud he answered in a terse manner. "Aye, madam, and we have just had our first. Now if you will excuse me, I shall return to Brier Point before this girl dies in my arms." His boots echoed against the stone floor as he crossed to the door.

Marguerite followed behind him. "I shall have the stable hand bring the carriage around ... that your journey might be less burdensome." Her chin lifted in stubborn defiance. "Our marriage date grows close, milord, and there is much we need discuss. Can we expect your return posthaste?"

His frown expressed far more than his words. "That would depend entirely on how rapid her wounds are to mend." He glanced to the woman in his arms for a second. "Or if I am able to locate her family." He sighed, weary from this exchange. "In any case, madam, I think it might behoove everyone if we allow tempers to cool before meeting again."

Marguerite gave a stiff inclination of her head. Michael was certain she was incapable of offering apologies. At last she exhaled a slow breath. "God speed, milord, and may your journey be safe. I shall await your return." Then she curtsied once more and stepped back to her mother's side.

Michael inclined his head, understanding. Already he glimpsed a part of his future bride he did not care for. Yet, there was little to be gained by arguing her merits, or

lack there of. She needed this marriage far more than he. Even still, he would not challenge his father edict. He would take her as his wife; marry her for the dowry she brought, as his father before him, and his father before him. Marriage was not a place for foolish thoughts of love. Finding such things were most often done in the arms of others, and Michael had no doubt it would be the same for him. Placing his charge to the seat of the carriage, he paused to glance once more at the Ladies Haverston. No clever repartee came to mind, nor was he in the mood for any. At last he hauled his weary body to the coach, and leaned to pull the door closed behind him.

“Ladies.” He found no other words to leave them with, and tapped the side of the conveyance to let the driver know he was ready. He did not bother to look back at Marguerite or her mother as darkness swallowed the carriage.

CHAPTER TWO

Within the confines of the carriage, soft lantern light glowed, bobbing with the sway of the wheels as they cut through the muddied ruts of the road. Michael sat, the young woman cradled in his arms. As the miles passed she mumbled, her words laced with an accent he was certain was French, though not so heavy as to insinuate she was there recently. Her speech was clear, concise; leaving little doubt in Michael's mind she was no street urchin as Marguerite presumed. Even still he pondered the blood staining her gown and hands? It was not her own, of that Michael was certain. Deep bruises marred her face and arms, evidence of a heavy hand against her. The imprint of knuckles was now clear in the purple blemishes, assuring Michael her encounter with his mount did not do all the damage to her.

She stirred, opening her eyes to gaze at him in confusion. Michael could feel her panic, sense it in the ragged breath she drew into her lungs; the trembling that shook her body. "Rest easy. I mean you no harm." His voice was a whisper above her.

It seemed to spur her anxiety. She began to fight, clawing at him with long razor sharp fingernails. Crazy eyes flashed her fear. An attempt was made to draw air into her lungs. She arched, her pain evident in the fine line of perspiration that moistened her brow, and the space between her upper lip and nose.

Michael pinned her close to his chest; fearful she would do more harm with her flailing. "Cease! You are badly hurt, and I want only to help you."

She exhaled a ragged breath against his cheek. "Her blood will stain your hands for all eternity, like a festering wound upon your soul!"

With raised brows Michael searched her visage. Her eyes were glazed, unfocused; assuring him she viewed a scene far from the carriage. "Whose blood?" A shiver raced down his spine as she glared at him.

A noise, somewhere between a sob and a tortured laugh escaped her throat. "Play your games if you insist. It changes nothing. She could not bring herself to spend the money, knowing full well it was tainted, cursed. It lies still in the garden where she buried it, marked with the evil of your deeds!"

Michael swallowed against the lump that lodged in his throat. "Is she dead?" He had no idea whom 'she' was, but felt an urgent need to know her fate.

The girl raised her hand, peering at the dried blood there. "Know you full well she is. Her blood stains my hands, my clothing." Her gaze met his. "Do you not see it?" A raspy croak passed her lips. "I could not save her. God knows I tried. The wounds you inflicted were too grave. Her blood continued to seep between my fingers, taking her life with it." Struggles ceased against his strength. Yet, there was defiance in her eyes. "I will not go as quietly. You have been the victor far too long. I have been to hell ... but refuse to stay there."

Her body went limp. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she was still once more. The drama was over. Michael fought down the shiver that threatened at the base of his spine. His breathing was strained. Who was this person she spoke to? What

horrid things had he done? He found no ready answers in the pale visage before him. Shaken, he watched her in silence until the carriage pulled before the doors of Brier Point, and the safety its thick stone walls offered.

* * * *

In slumber, she rested easier. Michael watched from a spot by the door, chewing nervously at his lip as the doctor examined her wounds. "I have sewn the cut on her arm, and placed a dressing there." The short stocky man whispered over his shoulder. "Her ribs are badly broken, and will have to be wrapped tight as they mend. She will likely be in great pain, milord." His English was choppy and broken, thick with an Indian accent. However, Michael nodded in understanding. Manuv Jamina was one of the finest surgeons in existence, and Michael's most trusted friend. They had been through more together in the past seven years than most people encountered in a lifetime.

"I appreciate you coming at such an hour, Manuv. There is no one I would have trusted more in such a situation." Michael sighed, tired and spent.

The older man glanced at him askance. "Have you any idea what happened to her..." A slight grin curled his wrinkled mouth. "Other than being trampled by that old nag of yours?"

Michael returned an awkward smile. "I only know what I told you, she was on the road ... running for her life, it seems.

Washing his hands in a basin next to the bed, the other man released a deep sigh. "In India when a man saves another, they are linked forever." He peered at his friend with a seriousness Michael rarely glimpsed in his old eyes. "She is young, milord, and likely to heal in body with little trouble. But she has been through something horrible. The mind does not always heal as quickly as the body. You must be prepared in either case. In bringing her here, you have assumed responsibility for her, and must see this through to the end."

Michael nodded. "I shall, sir. Have no doubt of that." Then he too turned his gaze to the young woman on the bed. They were linked now, through the blood spilled before they met, and a fate he no more understood than how the universe was formed.

* * * *

Michael bolted upright in the bed, peering into the darkness in confusion. For a moment he was not certain what brought him from the realms of sleep. His heart raced in his chest, a wild pounding in his ears and at his temples. Another scream drifted from the room across the hall, and he scrambled from the sheets, caring little he was dressed in nothing more than the pants he left on before falling across the bed in pure exhaustion.

Moonlight filtered through the leaded windows, dancing across the floor, and over the bed like gray waves. On the edge of the four-poster, she sat trembling. Her eyes were glassy, frightened. Crossing to her Michael reached out to touch her hand. She drew away as if burned. Panic gripped her voice. "Please help me ... I do not belong here!"

He leaned close. His voice was a soft whisper. "You are safe. I brought you here after the accident."

Her breathing became a frantic rhythm of exhalations. "I do not understand. I have no need to be here. Who has sent me to this dreadful place?"

He perched on the edge of the bed, wanting to comfort her. "You were hurt...."

Wide eyes pleaded to him. "Please hear me! I know you must hear me!" Her

voice quaked and broke as she sobbed.

Confused, Michael replied, "I do hear you."

Trembling fingers pushed at him. "I demand you release me at once. You have made a grievous error!"

Michael sighed in frustration. Again she was locked in the nightmare world that held her captive for three days. Gently he brushed a strand of hair from her brow. "Rest now...."

She gripped his arm, digging long nails into the flesh there. "I beg you listen to me. Please, I do not belong here." Again her voice broke. "My name is Celine ... Celine Hollingsworth. Please, you must believe me. I do not belong here. Someone has made a mistake. I am not insane." Her panic caused her to shake. "Look at me ... see me!" Her voice became a desperate plea. "Hear me." Of a sudden she crumbled to the floor, and wrapped her arms about his legs. "You cannot leave me here." Eventually she sagged in defeat, her arms drooping at her sides. Tears glistened on her cheeks. Tormented sobs racked her. In a frail whisper she implored him, "Please, just say my name ... Celine. Show me that you know I am here. Mercy...." Her breath came in ragged labored gasps. She sniffled. It was a long time before she closed her eyes, and once more drifted into a deep sleep.

Michael slipped his arms about her and pulled her to his chest. Tender, as he placed her back against the pillows, his fingers brushed the soft tresses of her hair. Whispered words were spoken near her ear. Yet Michael did not leave her. He could not return to the room across the hall, the memory of her pleas like a dagger in his heart. "I promise beautiful Celine, no harm will come to you here. I will not let it pass through these doors." Then he placed a soft kiss against her hair, and closed his eyes to sleep, her warm body still nestled in his arms.

* * * *

Exhaustion at last won the battle over Michael. For six days he sat by Celine's bed, letting no servant near her, wrestling the demons that fought within her as she moved through her nightmares. The slightest sound brought him from sleep as she cried out in her dreams. At last, unable to fight either her demons or his, he drifted into the realms of slumber.

His reprieve lasted only a short time. Again screams tore him from his rest, and he stumbled from the chair by the window in confusion. Catching a glimpse of himself in the silvered glass of a tall mirror, Michael stopped and gazed at his reflection in amazement. A thick beard covered his face. Hollowed cheeks caved beneath darkly circled eyes. For a moment he was unrecognizable even to his own eyes. A weary sigh escaped his lips. Though he thought he could take care of the girl alone, he realized now he was doing neither of them any good. He had to admit defeat. His shoulders sagged as another sob rent the night, and he nodded to his reflection before turning his attention back to the frightened woman on the bed.

Wringing a cloth in the basin on the bedside table, he folded it over her brow. "Rest Celine. I am here." His lips were dry and his throat scratchy. His touch was tender as he reached his hand to her cheek, relieved to find the skin there cool to the touch. Mayhap the fever, which held her in its grip for the better part of a week, was ebbing. Even as he dared to hope, her actions proved him wrong.

Celine rose from the pillows. She seemed oblivious to the pain in her ribs. Her

eyes flashed her ire as she gazed at the man before her. "Do you think to weaken me?" Sweat beaded at her brow. "Do you think the filth and despair of this hovel will tear me down?" Her body trembled with her wrath. "I will prove stronger. My father's blood stains the papers you thrust before me. It gives me strength. I will not cede. His death will not be in vain!"

Michael released a slow breath. "Will his blood be a festering wound upon my soul?" Playing the game had become as much a part of his world as breathing. It gave him a glimpse into what Celine endured before their meeting, and who she might be.

"I know only that he is dead, and you hold the papers found in his carriage. You do not have to have the stains of his blood upon your hands to bare the guilt. Even facing death as my father before me, I will not allow you to win. Kill me now if you must. For even an eternity in this hell will not change my resolve." Rising, she crossed to the window and gazed out to the wind-swept landscape. "I am stronger than you realize. You will not break that which my father instilled in me." But he could see how her body trembled, and knew by the way she chewed at her lip, break she would....

* * * *

Celine slipped her hand to his lips. The shake to his shoulder was gentle. He bolted upright in the chair, alert and fully awake. "Celine ... what is it?" He half rose.

Her hand to his shoulder, she applied a slight pressure to keep him in his seat. She motioned him to silence. "Shh! Make no sound." Her words were soft at the base of his throat.

Squinting in the dim light of the early hour, Michael searched for the threat he was certain must be there. No sinister creature lurked in the shadows. All seemed as it was before he closed his eyes. Anxious, he repeated, "What is it?"

"I am leaving." Michael could hear the fear in her voice. "I must go now, before he returns. 'Twould be better if I go while the night can hide my passage."

Uncertain whether she was lucid, or caught once more in a nightmare, he asked, "Where will you go?"

Pursing her lips she shrugged. "In truth I do not know. Falcon's Ledge will offer no safety. 'Tis the first place he will look. Besides, I am not certain I am ready to face the memories that await me there." Exhaling a ragged breath she shook her head. "I shall decide once I am away from here where to go. To involve you further would only bring his wrath. 'Twould be better if you knew nothing beyond this moment. Then no lie would cross your lips." Celine gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I am in your debt. Know that I am grateful for all you have done." Standing, she took several steps before halting. Peering back at him over her shoulder, she gave a feeble smile. "You are a dear woman ... and I shall hold your kindness in my heart as long as there is breath within me."

Michael's brows rose. So it was a dream, which inspired her words. "Will you not take some coin...?"

She was already shaking her head. "Nay. You have done more than I can repay as it is. I leave here as I came, with my wits and the strength to overcome the obstacles placed before me." She sniffled. "God willing we will meet again some day and I shall thank you properly for all you have done." Her hand was on the knob, ready to depart, when a scream escaped her lips. Stumbling backwards, she threw her arm across her face as if to protect it from a blow.

Michael moved forward, tightened fists at the ready. But the room was empty, save he and Celine, and he found no foe to do battle with. His heart raced in his chest as he watched in stunned amazement as Celine cowered at the side of the bed. Her pale face and wide eyes assured him of her fear.

“Celine?” Her panic became his.

Trembling, Celine glared in defiance at the entity only she could see. “Kendall.” She hissed in anger. “I should have known ‘twas your stench I smelled.”

Her head snapped to the side as if struck. Trembling fingers brushed against the spot on her lip where a bloodied gash marred her that first night. Her arm curled over her head as she braced for another blow. When it came, she crumbled to the floor, holding the limb to her chest as if in pain.

Unable to defend her, Michael knew he had no choice but to waken her. Covering the distance between them, he wrapped his arms about her, and cradled her close. His whisper was frantic in her ear. “Celine ... ’tis a dream. He can not hurt you anymore.”

Flailing, she pushed at him. “I will not let you be the victor any longer!” Her fingers dug into the flesh of his arm. Blood oozed from the furrowed scratches as her nails etched a path across his wrist. “Let me go!”

Michael only tightened his grip. Celine kicked with her feet, and nipped at him with her teeth. Nothing deterred him. At last, she sobbed near his throat. “I beg you end this. Kill me! For I can not endure it any longer.” Tears sparkled in her eyes. At last her struggles ceased. Her head sagged and her arms fell limp at her sides. A retched sob slipped from her lips. She collapsed in his embrace, unconscious once more.

Filled with a rage Michael never felt before, he cradled her in his arms. He would gladly have fought her battle, but could no more slay her enemy than see him. Weary, he sank to the bed, and pulled her against him. “Rest easy Celine. I will not let him cross through these doors. No harm will come to you here, I promise.” Then he placed a tender kiss to the silky strands of her hair, and exhaled a shaky breath. Sleep was a long time coming. When it took him, he was content to feel Celine warm and secure against him.

Lucidity returned to Celine by slow degrees. Like the sunlight filtering through her windows, her mind cleared away cobwebs. The steady rhythm of a heart beat close to her ear. Heavy breaths brushed against her hair. The presence of another suddenly penetrated into the recesses of her mind. Her eyes flew open in alarm. Her breath caught in her throat as her vision was filled with the bare chest of the man beside her on the bed. Pain seared her lungs as she struggled to be free of his encompassing arms. Reflectively she pressed her hand to her chest, and was bemused at the tight wrappings there. She could no more recall how they had come to be there, than how she had come to this strange place.

Both were the least of her problems. His fingers laced through her hair, allowing a soft strand to curl about the slender appendage. Celine’s brows rose in surprise as he drew the tress to his lips and placed a feathery kiss against it. What on earth had she done? Nearing panic, she attempted to rise, and move far from the man beside her. She found the simple task impossible. Pain, white-hot and blinding, riddled her body. It left her panting for breath and soaked in sweat. Her lungs burned with each intake of air, forcing her to give up the idea of flight. For a moment she closed her eyes, desperate to

block out the consuming ache that threatened to destroy her.

Tilting his head to the side, the man peered down at her and gave a gentle smile. Yet, as she inched along his body, attempting to remove her from him, an odd grimace crossed his lips, and he drew in a sharp breath. For an instant he remained to the bed beside her, and then suddenly scrambled over the mattress as if afire. Her battered body collided with the mattress where he had been a second before. She groaned as she watched him as he stood before the basin of water on the bedside table, panting as if distressed. Several times the cool liquid was brought to his face, before he at last graced her with conversation.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to frighten you.”

Her body throbbing from his sudden departure beside her, Celine watched him with guarded apprehension. She had no memory of him, no hint as to how she came to share a bed with him. Afraid and nearing total panic, she inched toward the far edge of the bed. Her gaze darted around the elegant room, seeking any means of escape. The moment she tried to rise, the pain within forced a scream from her lips.

He was beside her in the blink of an eye. His arms enveloped her, and his fingers stroked her hair in comfort. Celine snorted near his ear. “Let go of me!” She pushed at his strong arms yet could not find the strength to move him.

His voice was a whisper against her cheek. “Rest easy. I will not harm you.” When her struggles did not cease, he dropped his arms to his sides, and stepped back.

Though uncertain what injuries she sustained, Celine knew her chances of fleeing were slim. Assessing the man beside her, her thoughts raced. There was no memory of him in the recesses of her mind. Though frightened beyond anything she could recall, the intense pain that gripped her assured her escape would not happen. Cornered, unable to defend herself, Celine cowered from his touch. “Who are you?”

The tall stranger leaned to one of the posts that supported the bed, and gave her a smile meant to relieve her anxiety. “Michael Aberdeen.” He presented her with a slight bow.

Celine eyed him for a long moment. “This place, where is it?” Her greatest fear was that she was still close to the pits of hell.

“Brier Point.” Her brows furrowed in confusion. “A keep on the cliffs overlooking the sea, half a day’s journey east from Newcastle.”

She exhaled a soft breath, and eyed him for along time. He did not seem a threat, yet ‘twas obvious there was more to their relationship than met the eye. Glancing to the nightgown of fine silk against her flesh, she cringed. Had he changed her, and bound her wounds? “What happened to bring me here? I remember nothing, beyond braving the storm.” She would not divulge the reason for her flight for safety sake. Mayhap he only toyed with her, and knew far more than he revealed. Still, her heart raced with relief that she was nowhere near the asylum.

Shifting, Michael pursed his lips until they blanched. At last he released a deep exhalation of air, and answered, “My horse came across you in the darkness ... trampling you before I could rein him about. We were on the road to Newcastle ... braving a storm in a brief moment of insanity.” His gaze locked with hers. “You came out of the darkness like a phantom, racing along the road in nothing more than a tattered nightgown.”

Celine perused him for several seconds. If he spoke the truth, he had no

involvement with the nightmare she endured for the better part of two years. However, she trusted before, and it nearly destroyed her. This time she would not be as easily swayed. Yet answers were not only needed, but also expected. Sizing him up, she asked. "Dare I wonder why we shared a bed?" Her voice edged with trepidation.

Pausing for a long moment, he replied, "In truth, madam, you woke screaming in the night. I did nothing more than comfort you." Celine noted that he averted his gaze, as if ashamed.

Vague images of a nightmare world haunted Celine. Wanting to scope out his words as truth or deception, she gave him a feeble smile. "We did nothing...?" She left the question open, fearing the answer.

Michael raised his hands before him in assurance. Nay, madam, you are as you were when I found you."

The long slow sigh that escaped her lips was ragged. "If what you say is true, I owe you my gratitude, sir. These are difficult times. Not many would have taken in a stranger..." To herself she added wearily, 'Certainly not one soaked in blood and fleeing through the night as if the dogs of hell chased at their feet.' "However," She ventured, feeling a bit braver with the knowledge she was away from the asylum. "The last thing I recall is being on the road near Newcastle..."

Michael gave a shrug. "As you elaborated, madam, these are bad times. Few are willing to open their doors much less help another. I had no choice but to bring you back to the keep."

Celine watched him from beneath hooded lids. He was rakishly handsome, and in no way threatening. Even so trust was hard to give. The last time she did so she nearly sacrificed her sanity. Unwilling to delve further into his motives she lowered her gaze to her hands. "I can only offer my thanks, sir..."

Michael moved toward the door. "I am sure you must be as famished as I." He announced over his shoulder. "I'll have Mrs. Cobb prepare a tray."

* * * *

Clenching her teeth against the pain, Celine rose by slow degrees. The color drained from her face, leaving her ashen. Each breath left her faint. For several seconds she stood, her head pressed to the post at the edge of the bed, her knuckles white as she tried to gain control over the agony that seized her. Nausea roiled in her stomach, and threatened at the base of her throat. She closed her eyes, forcing her thoughts to happier times, concentrating on memories long since lost to the passage of time. A soft smile curled at her lips as a scene played out in the recesses of her mind....

"Celine, come sit with me by the fire." Her mother's smile was warm as she patted the seat beside her. "We have a surprise today..." Her eyes sparkled. "Someone you have not seen in quite some time." Her thick French accent rolled off her tongue as if she only left her native country yesterday, not years earlier. Patrice Hollingsworth slipped her slender fingers over her daughter's eyes. "Now close your eyes, my sweet. You mustn't peek."

Celine giggled. Her mother deliberately left her fingers parted, allowing her daughter to peer through the gaps. Holding her breath in anticipation, Celine squinted as she gazed through the openings. She knew who it was, had waited an eternity for his return. But the sight of him, tall and powerful, still caught her breath in her throat.

He was very handsome, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb, and a

delighted squeal escaped Celine's lips as she peered at him. Patrice's hand dropped, freeing her daughter to run to the man across the room. Celine gasped as he threw her into the air, her stomach somersaulting with her descent back into his arms. "Papa!" Her tiny arms circled his neck, squeezing until he pleaded for mercy. Her mouth covered his face with kisses. "Oh papa. I have missed you terribly." She cried out in French, as her tears mixed with his on his cheeks.

Andrew Hollingsworth wrapped his arms about her slender frame, cradling her against him. "My little angel, I have missed you too." He held her from him for a moment, and shook his head in mock sadness. "Did we not talk before I left?" He teased. "I thought we agreed you would not grow the slightest inch while I was away." Smiling he shook his head once more. "But just look at you. Why you are practically a lady."

Celine's lips curled into a broad grin. She pulled the hem of her gown before him to show off her new dress. "Mama says it is high time I began dressing like one too!" Wanting his approval, she eyed him carefully. "Is it not beautiful?"

Andrew nodded in agreement. "Indeed." Fresh tears glistened on his cheeks. "But it will never compare to, or be as lovely as the lady who wears it." Then he placed another kiss to her cheek, and hugged her to him once more....

Another vision flashed in the recesses of Celine's mind, one more sinister and frightening. Her breath lodged in her throat. Her body trembled. He who haunted her dreams was there, just before her, laughing at her. Blood stained his hands, his clothing, and the walls surrounding them.

"She should have minded her own business. Mayhap she would have lived to spend her riches." He shrugged, glancing for a moment at the dead woman at his feet. "No matter. I will spend it for her." He snorted in disgust. "She was a fool. I was prepared for her deceit. I have yet to meet a woman to be trusted." He wove a path close to Celine's face with the bloodied knife still clasped in his hand. "Even were your plan to have worked, I would have hunted you down to the ends of the earth. Your folly would have been in trusting. For there are many willing to take over where she left off. You will never be free Celine. I will make certain of that ... even if I have to kill you to make it so..."

* * * *

Michael halted in the doorway, uncertain whether to enter. Celine stood, her hand to the bedpost for support, a frightened gaze on her face. She seemed in another world. Fear glazed her eyes and turned down the corners of her mouth. The color drained from her features. Hesitant to enter, Michael cleared his throat. Her head snapped toward him in surprise, and she focused on his visage for several seconds.

Michael scolded as he crossed with a tray of broth and bread. "I had not expected you to rise, madam." He placed the tray on a bedside table and admonished, "I will not allow you to do anything foolish. Are you planning your escape so soon?" Her body took to trembling, and he reached for her.

Evading his outstretched hand, she darted across the room, and peered at him with wide eyes. Her knees gave beneath her weight. Too far from her to keep her from her decent, Michael lunged forward as she collided with the floor. Again, he reached for her. A frantic sob from her throat halted him. She was terrified. "Please ... I only want to help you back to bed..."

Celine shook her head, and slapped at his chest with her open palm. "Nay!" Wild eyes revealed her panic. "You will not trick me again. I am wise to your ploys." Looking directly at him, she shook her head. "This time he will not win, Mr. Aberdeen."

Michael was surprised to hear her use his name. In her hysteria these passed days, she spoke as if to one not in the room. Gazing at her for a moment, he realized she was quite lucid and aware of her surroundings. Whatever she spoke of now, had not to do with nightmares or hallucinations. His tone was anxious as he asked, "Who will not win?"

In silence, Celine peered at him for a moment. "I know he sent you after me." Her breath came in short rapid gasps. "I will not go back there. Should death be my only option I would gladly choose it."

Michael watched her, confused. "I know not what you speak of, madam. No one sent me. I only want to help." This time he refused to be swayed, and pulled her into his arms. Placing her against the pillows, he added. "No harm will come to you here." Yet, he could see by the panic that settled in her green eyes, she did not believe him.

* * * *

The footfalls on the broad expanse of stairs were silent. The silver streams of moonlight through the window at her back, her only guidance. She dared light no candle, fearing it would bring her captor after her. She had not, however bargained on the journey being so long from the bedroom to the front portal, and was now weak and fatigued. At last she sank to the stairs, and leaned her head against the cool wood of the banister as she struggled to catch her breath. Another few feet and she would gain the door. Yet, it might as well have been a million furlongs. Her body seemed weighted and she could not force herself to rise.

The minutes stretched into a half hour, still she remained to her place. Lightheaded, she could barely focus on her surroundings. Pain washed through her with every breath. She knew the longer she remained, the more likely she would be discovered. At last she rose. For a moment she stood unmoving, her fingers curled about the banister for support. Then she slid her feet beneath her, crossing to the portal and the freedom beyond.

* * * *

Michael stood gazing out the window of his room; watching the soft billowing clouds dance before the moon. He could not sleep. His thoughts returned often to the woman across the hall, and the strange things she spoke of. What horrid atrocities had she endured before their meeting? He found the answers as illusive as before, and sighed in frustration.

For a while he peered, mesmerized, at the beauty of the night. His thoughts drifted to Marguerite. Though quite lovely to look at, she was not what he hoped for in a wife. In truth, he could not name that which he craved in a companion, but knew she possessed nothing that left him longing for her touch, or company.

Sighing, he pressed his forehead to the cold glass, watching as his breath misted on the pane before him. Again his mind drifted. Emerald eyes formed in the picture creating in his thoughts. A slender nose followed. Delicate rosebud lips curled above a finally sculpted chin. The hunger he fought earlier returned, arousing him. His body surprised him. He could not remember any woman stirring him so. The response confused him. He knew nothing about her. Every moment he spent with her only

heightened the mystery surrounding her. Yet, he could not rid her from his thoughts.

As if to confirm where his mind wandered, she materialized near the trees, her hair billowing behind her on the currents of the light breeze. For a moment Michael thought her some strange vision his mind conjured. When she began to weave a path through the spiny branches, a knot formed in his throat. She was as real as the trees surrounding her.

* * * *

Exhaustion came much quicker than Celine expected. Weak, she almost turned back toward the massive stone keep, towering gray turrets stretching toward the sky like claws. It had been foolish to attempt such an escape. She had no idea where she was; only that the sea blocked her way on one side, and the road leading away from the fortress was not familiar. With no mount, she doubted she would get far before succumbing to her weariness. She had already begun to slow, and stopped often to rest. Finally ceding that this ill-thought folly was useless; she turned back, retracing her steps toward the castle in the distance.

She had only taken a few laborious steps when she froze, her heart pounding with wild abandon in her breasts. Against the dried leaves the footfalls came, a thunderous roar in the darkness. Panic welled as she peered through the trees. Her lungs screamed with each ragged intake of air she drew into them. He was after her! She turned and began once more to weave a path beneath the spiny branches. Yet she had no idea in which direction to go, or where she thought she might find the safety she sought.

A voice, frantic, shouted into the night. Celine trembled. It was her name ... called from the darkness. It echoed over the land, sending a slow icy shiver up her spine. It only served to confirm in her mind that he was not to be trusted. For she never offered her name to him, and knew he could not have known it unless part of the plan against her.

Hoping to weave a path around the stone exterior of the castle, Celine moved away from the trees. Every fiber of her being hurt, cried out for mercy as she pushed herself to the limits of her endurance. A fine bead of perspiration glistened at her brow. Searing pain filled her lungs. Still she refused to cede. Her heart pounded in her ears, its frantic beat thunderous at her temples. She would not go back! Nothing, and no one would force her back to the hell she escaped.

Stumbling, she reached her hand to the cold exterior of the keep, scraping her fingers against the rough stone until the skin there shredded. As on a night not long passed, her blood became a marker of her passing. Still she continued on. Almost at the corner of the towering structure she sighed in relief. Another few feet would see her safe. She rounded the bend at full speed, blind to the cliffs looming before her.

Again she heard him call her name, closer, as if he knew which direction she chose. Celine staggered onward. Her vision blurred. Another step and her feet slid against tiny rocks at the cliffs edge, sending them over the crag to the sea below. Celine heard the small rocks bounce against the jagged wall beneath her. Her heart lodged in her throat. Skidding to a halt, she teetered, the barest inch from plunging to her death.

"Celine!" Michael raced from the side of the keep, fear etched in his face. "No!"

His shout startled her, and she lurched forward. A scream escaped her lips. Feeling her body falling forward she closed her eyes, sensing death as the air rushed from her lungs. Blindly her hand reached for anything to halt her decent, yet found nothing. Another screech was torn from her throat. Her eyes closed, and the coward in her

clenched her jaw against the horrid pain that would be her last memory. The roar of the white-capped waves below joined with the frantic pounding of her heart, deafening. Celine was not certain whether she screamed anew, or just replayed one in her mind.

Powerful arms wrapped about her waist, pulled her against a hard broad chest, crushing her. His own feet skidding on the pebbles at the cliff's edge, Michael leaned back, using his weight as an anchor. The sudden force caused Celine to cry out, his arms a vice over her battered ribs.

"Be still!" He hissed, as she flailed against him. "I for one do not wish to die this night."

Celine bit her lip, ashamed of the pain she brought upon herself. "Please, sir, I implore you, let me go!"

Michael refused the request with a stubborn defiant shake of his head. "I cannot ... will not!" As if to enforce the statement, he took another step back toward the fortress behind them. Celine remained pressed to his chest.

She scanned his visage, as if searching his soul. "Whatever Kendall paid you—I will...." She hesitated, knowing full well she had nothing to offer. Forlorn, as she shook her head, she whispered, "I have nothing to barter with. He has taken everything." Lifting her chin in a hint of pride, she locked her gaze with Michael's. "I beseech you, sir. I have nothing to buy your loyalties, no coin, no name, nothing. But surely you would show mercy." A ragged sigh passed her lips. "Have I not endured enough?"

"It is not your money I seek, madam." His breath was ragged against her cheek.

"There is nothing else to offer!" Misunderstanding his intent, she retorted. "Save my honor! And it is not for sale! I would rather you let me plunge to my death than cede that." Her eyes snapped, indignant. "It is all I have left, and I will not sell it for any price."

For a moment Michael watched her in awe. "Are you saying, madam, you would rather meet your death than relinquish your virtue?" He was incredulous.

Celine squared her shoulders. Turning his words back on him, she countered, "I would ... I will!" As if to prove her sincerity, she leaned against his arm, allowing his strength to support her as she dipped over the cliffs. Though her body trembled, she drew in a deep breath, and waited.

Releasing a weary sigh, he shook his head. "Rest easy, madam, I have no intentions of casting you to the lion's den. I have no need of your coin ... or your honor."

Surprised by his words, Celine eyed him for several seconds. "What then?" She shifted in his embrace. "What would you have me do? I will not go back. I have found freedom from the very pits of hell, and nothing will force me back there. 'Tis just us two here. That demon Kendall need never know you showed me mercy. I would go far from here ... I swear it on my life." Her shoulders sagged, her body weary. "He has won. I will not defy him."

His hand reached to her hair, and caressed it with tender strokes. Stooping, he gently swung her into his arms, and moved a safe distance from the cliffs. "I give my word, Celine, I do not know this beast Kendall you speak of. He did not send me to destroy you. Were that my intent, I could have done so on the road, that night we first met." His eyes sparkled with his sincerity. "I only want to help."

Her voice was feeble, bemused. "But you know my name...."

Michael nodded. "I know your name because you told me...."

“Nay!” Celine shook her head in adamant denial. “I did not.”

“Indeed, madam, you did. You cried out in your sleep, begging me to see you, hear you. ‘Twas your lips which spoke your name, Celine.” He reached for her, brushing a tress of hair from her brow. “I gain nothing by lying to you.” His voice was soothing. “Tell me who this mad man is, this Kendall ... that I might help you slay the demon which haunts you ... Please trust me.”

A shiver raced up Celine’s spine. She heeded those words before, and another’s blood stained her hands for it. A whimper escaped her lips as she refused him. “I cannot. He has taken the ability from me. I have trusted before. Never again.”

Again Michael reached for her, caressing her cheek with the tips of his fingers. “Would that I could take the fear from your eyes. It is like a dagger in my heart. But I am patient Celine, and will bide my time. Trust must be earned ... and I shall do whatever necessary to see I earn yours.”

She trembled, chilled, though not certain if it was from the crisp air, or the determination she heard in his voice. Not willing to delve too deep into his mind, she changed tactics, wanting only to buy time. “Cold....” She murmured in a hoarse whisper. “I am so very cold.”

His arms were about her, crushing her against his chest. She bit her lip, refusing to let him see the pain he caused. Nonetheless, she could not deny the strange comfort she felt in his embrace, or the overwhelming relief that he had not released his hold to see her plummet to her death far below.

* * * *

Reclined on the soft thick pillows, Celine eyed Michael for several seconds from behind lowered lashes. Who was he? The manse he called home spoke of wealth in every tastefully decorated corridor. Scanning the room, she accessed its grandeur for several seconds. Tapestries of knights in armor graced two of the four walls, their vibrant colors of red and gold reflected in the large gilded mirror atop the vanity in the corner. Warm rich wood edged both ceiling and floor, and adorned the head and footboards of the massive four-poster bed now her sanctuary. Against each column, thick drapes of bronze cascaded toward the floor, pooling there like liquid copper. Lush carpet, also woven with deep crimson and amber, accented the tapestries.

Again her vision settled to the man, now her savior. Though he was never forceful, he gave orders and expected them to be carried out without argument. Yet, when he introduced himself to her, he offered no title. He displayed none of the airs usually found with aristocracy and seemed comfortable with everyone he encountered.

Braving a question, Celine cleared her throat. “Are you lord of this keep?”

Michael answered, “My father holds the title. He is Duke of Northumberland.” His sigh was heavy. “Though his heir, I would gladly give all of this up.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, he asked, “And you, Celine? What titles has the world placed on you?” Her trepidation was instantaneous, as her lips turned downward, and her eyes widened.

“No title, milord. I am just what you see.” With her father striped of his lands and title, she was exactly what he saw, and nothing more.

Michael frowned. “Please, call me Michael.”

Celine shook her head. “Nay I could not. We hardly know one another, milord, and I would not be presumptuous as to speak so freely to you.”

Michael nodded. “Won’t you tell me what troubles you, Celine? Would that I

could help....”

Silent for a moment, Celine exhaled a long slow breath. At last she lifted her hand and stared at it as if seeing it for the first time. Turning it over several times, she gazed at the long slender fingers and finely boned structure of it, studying. “Tell me, milord, when you look at my hand what do you see?”

“I know to answer you literally is not what you seek.” Puffing his cheeks in contemplation, he finally answered. “I see the hand of a woman who would rather face death than sell her honor....”

The first hint of a smile curled at the corners of her mouth. A slight blush rose in her face. It lasted only a brief time as her gaze returned to her hand. “I see the blood that was spilled because of my folly. No matter how many times the flesh there is washed, the stains remain. What has passed disturbs my sleep, and torments my every moment.” Her voice was a haunting whisper, filled with emotion. “The flesh there—” Celine held her open palm toward him. “...Will never be free of the blood that stains it because I trusted.” She turned her gaze to the window. “I will not let that happen again. I trust no one ... save myself.” Her voice became a ragged whisper. “And I question what is left of my sanity.”

CHAPTER THREE

A fortnight passed since Michael brought Celine to Brier Point. Each day only heightened the mystery surrounding her. He did not press her for answers she was not ready to give. Instead, kept to his promise, and was patient. They settled into a strange routine, and though there was still tension between them, Celine did not seem to fear him as she had before.

Perched at his desk, quill at the ready, Michael peered at the paper in bemusement. His thoughts drifted once more to Celine, and he could not remember what he had been writing. At last he gave up, and stretched back in the large chair, eyes closed and a slight frown upon his face. He did not notice the carriage that pulled before the manse until it halted. Curious, he peered out to the drive with raised brows. Before the door fully opened to the conveyance, a mass of ruffles and silk filled the space, and Michael felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. With pursed white lips he watched Marguerite step to the ground, her mother close on her heels.

A heavy sigh escaped Michael's lips. He put Marguerite far in the back of his mind, and was not overly excited to see her now. Still, he knew avoiding her would solve nothing. With shoulders suddenly weighted, he moved to the great hall. The smile he displayed for his guests' benefit was strained and tight, and he forced a happy tone to his voice.

"Countess." He nodded slightly. "Lady Marguerite" He bowed gallantly as they approached. "What a surprise." His gaze moved to the dozens of trunks being carried in by the servants. "Do I gather you are on your way for an extended visit somewhere?" He hoped it was abroad, but made no comment to that effect.

All smiles, Marguerite crossed to him, her hands outstretched to take his. "Milord, 'tis good to see you." Her smile was dazzling. She nodded in approval at his clean-shaven features, and fine clothing. "You look much better than when last we met." Scanning the great hall, she added, "And your little ward? Dare I hope she has recovered?" A smile curled at her lips. "Mayhap she has returned to her home?"

Her change in attitude put Michael on edge, and he nodded slowly. "She is fairing well." Again he sought to assure himself his guests were not planning to stay. "I see you have brought nearly your entire house." He cringed, aware of how harsh he sounded to his own ears. "Where are you headed?"

Marguerite squeezed his hands affectionately. "Here, milord." She sighed. "You must think me some horrid beast for the way I acted when last we met, and I have come to make amends." At last she released his hands. "Your little ward has gone home?"

Michael shook his head. He was not certain what Marguerite was up to, but wished to spare Celine any further insults. "She's upstairs resting."

He noted in silence the tightness that changed the smile on Marguerite's lips to a slight frown. "Is she?" Marguerite asked, her tone stilted. For an instant the color drained from her cheeks. Yet she regained her composure quickly. "Poor sweet child." She moved toward the stairs, leaving Michael peering at her with furrowed brows. "Then

I shall see to her needs at once.”

Having spent little time around Marguerite, Michael could not assess her motives in any other way than they were offered. Nonetheless he was leery. “Have you come all the way to Brier Point just to see her?” Thinking to dissuade her, he added, “With my parents in London, there are only a few servants here ... Mayhap you would be more comfortable at Greenhearst Manor.” His tone, gentle and cajoling, belied the nervous agitation that pricked at his spine.

Ignoring his suggestion, she averred, “I am ashamed of the way I acted when you brought her to our home. ‘Twas not very solicitous of me.” She lowered her gaze. “I only wish to make amends, milord, and see she recovers quickly that she might return to her family as soon as possible.”

Michael eyed her in silence. Perhaps he misjudged Marguerite after all. Crossing to her he offered his arm, and graced her with a charming smile. “It pleases me that you have altered your views, madam. I am quite touched, as I am sure Miss Celine will be, at your change of heart.”

Marguerite brows rose as he spoke Celine’s name. “Are you on a first name basis, milord? How charming.” The captivating smile she bestowed upon him was warm. Glancing back to her mother, Marguerite slipped her hand around Michael’s arm. “I am certain the sweet child must have suffered greatly.”

* * * *

Letting the warmth of the sun caress her skin, Celine sat in a large wingback chair by the window. The view of the sea beyond, waves capped white and foamy, captivated her. They were, she thought, much like her. On the surfaces they churned with the forces of things beyond their ken. But beneath the choppy waves the waters ran calm, refusing to be controlled by the raging tides above.

The light rap at her door went unheeded. Celine knew it would only be the young Highland girl, Grace, who had become her constant companion. She mentioned something about a warm bath, and scurried off to see that water was heated. Another rap followed the first. It was not like Grace to wait to be beckoned in. Her usual custom was to give a quick knock, then bustle in with all the energy of a doe racing across the lea. Once more, Celine ignored the summons. She had not slept well, nightmares stealing into her slumber to torment her. Her reflection in the mirror, dark circles beneath puffy eyes, deep yellowish bruises marring her pale skin, only convinced her she was not fit company for any one, especially Michael.

Another rap, insistent, assured her he would not retreat. She would have to face him; lest he crash through the portal to placate himself she had done nothing foolish. At last, resigned to the fact he would not take her hint to be left alone, Celine called for him to enter. The door barely opened when a blurred shape rushed passed the man standing there, crossing the expanse in a wild swish of lace and silk.

Celine eyed the other woman in apprehension. Her guest showed no such inhibitions, and nearly swallowed Celine into an embrace that threatened to snap her aching ribs. A cry escaped Celine’s lips. Pinned, she found no way to escape the arms encompassing her. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. In that split second, she realized how infinitely gentle Michael was whenever he touched her.

It was his sharp command from the door, which finally relieved Celine of the other woman wrapped about her like a second skin. “Marguerite, she is injured. Be

careful.”

At last Marguerite released Celine, who sucked in a ragged breath. Perusing Celine for several seconds, Marguerite gave a reluctant smile. “Isn’t she lovely?” She mused in a tone tinged with dismay.

Peering passed Marguerite; Celine raised her brows at Michael questioningly. He cleared his throat sheepishly, before providing an introduction. “Celine, may I present the Lady Marguerite Haverston, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Durham.” A knot formed in his throat. To Marguerite his nod was stiff. “Lady Marguerite, Celine....”

Huffing Marguerite crossed to Michael and slipped her arm through his. “Michael, darling, such formality.” She turned back to Celine and smiled. “I am quite certain this young girl will understand the use of my given name. After all,” She locked her gaze with Celine’s, the challenge clear in her dark eyes. “With our betrothal culminating in marriage in less than six months, it would seem rather silly to use titles.” Piercing Celine with a smug look, she asked. “Wouldn’t you agree, Celine?”

With shoulders sagging, Celine’s nod was stilted. She hardly knew Michael Aberdeen, and certainly had no claim to him. Yet the knowledge of his betrothal stung. Forcing her tone to sound jovial, she replied, “You are to be married? How wonderful. I wish you both great happiness in your life together.”

Marguerite’s smile faded. Celine watched her from behind hooded eyes. Her dark orbs shone like flint and it was clear as she assessed Celine, she hoped to dig a barb against this woman she perceived a threat. Marguerite gave Michael’s arm another gentle squeeze. “Oh, Michael, she is positively darling.” Her eyes gleamed. Only Celine saw the glimmer that danced in her dark eyes. “I just knew there was no way she could have been one of the people who escaped the asylum!” She released a ragged sigh, and pressed her hand to her breast. “I will never understand why I allow mother to fill my head with such things...”

“Asylum?” Michael felt his stomach tighten at the mention of the place.

She tilted her head to see his eyes. “How silly of me.” She gave him a forced laugh. “Being so far from town, you have probably not heard....” Again she faced Celine, and drew in a slow deep breath. “It was horrid.” Her eyes locked with her rival’s. “The very same night your mount trampled Celine, the matron of the asylum was found dead.” Her gaze assured Celine she had no doubt as to where the blame lay. “Her throat was slit. There was blood everywhere.” Breathless she added, “The sheriff says there are at least six people still roaming free ... and mama and I were so afraid for you here alone with....” She cleared her throat before continuing. “Heaven knows who might have come this way.” Celine felt the color drain from her face, and shuttered as Marguerite smiled smugly.

Feeling sick, Celine pressed her hand to her lips, vainly attempting to keep the bile rising in her throat from escaping. In the recesses of her mind a pool of blood stained the floor at her feet. Then, as now, she lost her battle to contain her nausea. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Slowly, consciousness slipped away, and she crumbled to the floor.

* * * *

Soft sobs woke Michael in the early hours before dawn. They pierced his heart with greater effectiveness than the screams that most often drew him from slumber. Pulling on his robe he crossed the hall, entering Celine’s room quietly. She was there, on

her knees by the window, tears sparkling like diamonds against her cheeks.

"Celine?" Moving closer, he knelt beside her, and caressed the soft skin at her nape with the tips of his fingers. "What is it?"

Crumbling against him she sobbed into his shoulder. "Oh, Jean Luc, what will I do now?" She sniffled against him. "I am lost without him. Papa was everything to me."

Michael wrapped his arm about her shoulder, enjoying the feel of her, warm and soft at his chest. "'Tis all-right, Celine. I will take care of you." Though he knew it was not he she sought for comfort, he gladly gave it.

Reaching her hand to his cheek, Celine smiled. "You have been my strength these passed days. I would not have made it through without your care." Michael surmised this Jean Luc was not Kendall, for she spoke with heart-felt tenderness, not as she had on the cliffs.

Swallowing hard against the arousal awakened in him, Michael stood. Yet he could not leave her, and pulled her into his arms. "Come back to bed, Celine. 'Tis cold here on the floor."

Wide eyes peered up at him. "I have given a goodly amount of thought to your proposal, Jean Luc." Lowering her gaze for a moment she continued. "But I must decline." Sadness filled her voice. "I would never marry you, knowing what a burden that would be to you."

Michael guided her to the bed. Once settled in its soft feather mattress, he tucked the covers up to her chin. Playing the game, as was his habit, he asked, "Do you think yourself a burden, Celine? For 'tis not so. To take one such as you to wife would never be a burden."

Again she caressed his cheek. "You are far too kind. With my father's death, and his name in question and lands striped from him, I can offer you nothing. I would not do such a thing." She sighed. "There is enough money left for me to start over ... perhaps as a governess." She shook her head. "Marriage is not important. Many people never marry." Her fingers traced a path along his jaw. "Besides, Jean Luc, I would rather not marry at all, than take a husband for the name he offers. My mother had nothing when she married my father. It mattered little to him. He loved her. One day I shall find someone to love, and titles will not be important." Her hand slipped to her side. Tears once more glistened on her cheeks. "Though I care deeply for you, I do not love you with the love a man and woman share in marriage. You are the brother I never had." Wide green eyes peered up at him for understanding. "Forgive me, Jean Luc, and thank you for wanting to see me properly wed. But as I said, I must decline the offer."

Michael leaned close, placing a tender kiss to her brow. "Sleep, sweet Celine. It is a matter we can face on the morrow." Then he left her. The sleep he bade her seek, however, eluded him as the stars faded and the first rays of a new day rose on the horizon.

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"I am only saying, milord, that you know nothing about her." Sylvia Haverston countered as she sat gazing at her future son-in-law. "Marguerite feared for your safety. Can you say with absolute certainty the girl did not come from the asylum? If so, I beg your forgiveness for my daughter's error yesterday."

Facing the hearth, Michael closed his eyes as his pulse beat at his temples. To

deny Celine had come from the place in question would be a lie. In fact he knew from their conversations through her dreams, Celine was there. He also knew she had not taken the life of the matron. Hadn't she professed to attempting to stem the flow of the woman's blood that first night in the carriage? Surely it was she who buried the coins in the garden. Shaking his head, he exhaled a slow deep breath. "Is that why you came here, madam? Was it your intent to accuse her?" He was defensive, angry.

"Nay, milord. I give my word; we came only to assure ourselves all was well. If you should want to blame anyone, 'tis me needs take it. You have been abroad much of late, and I feared you were want to do away with the betrothal. My daughter's name and honor are at stake. 'Twas I who insisted we travel here. I hoped you would spend time with Marguerite and get to know her before the vows are spoken." They were alone in the great hall, at an hour just passed six. Sylvia assured Michael they would have plenty of time to speak alone, as Marguerite rarely rose before nine.

Dragging his fingers through his hair, Michael sighed, exasperated. "I am a very good judge of character, madam, and can say with certainty if she was there, she no more belonged in that place than you or I!"

Crossing her arms over her bosom, Sylvia snorted. "Character does not make one less sane, or less insane for that matter. Have you questioned her? Who is she? Where is she from? Why was she out on such a night? Why has no family come looking for her?" She rattled the questions off with such rapid succession; Michael had no time to answer. Nor could he have, for he knew of nothing he could say in Celine's defense.

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Grace stood back and gazed at Celine with a furrowed brow. Her ministering had caused the other woman to pale considerably. Already having voiced a thousand arguments against flight, she eyed Celine hesitantly. At last, folding her arms over her chest, she sighed. "'Tis the best I can do, miss." She mused in her thick Scottish brogue. Frowning, she shook her head. "Would that I could talk ye out o' this." At Celine's lowered gaze she exhaled a slow breath. "I won't lie. The money I bring 'ome is greatly needed. I can't afford ter lose me position 'ere."

Celine took her hands and gave a gentle squeeze. "I would not ask you to. I ask only that you give me time to be on my way." Peering at her reflection in the silvered glass of the mirror,

Celine pursed her lips. The clothing was Grace's, who stood several inches shorter than Celine. The gown came nearer Celine's shins than was proper, and the bodice was tight over her bosom. Still, they would do far better than the nightgown she wore these passed days. Her hair was pulled into a tight knot at her nape, and covered with a kerchief. Celine gazed at herself and could not contain the laugh that rose in her throat. She looked, she thought, for the entire world like a simple farm girl. Little trace of Celine Hollingsworth remained, which was just as she wanted it.

"I don't like this, miss, not one bit." Grace huffed. "Where 'ill ye go? Ye said yerself; ye have no family in this area. An' the weather be very unpredictable this time o' year ... it gets terrible cold at night." Sinking to the bed, she huffed again. "Why ye can barely stand. 'Ow ye goin' ter make it ter Newcastle?"

Giving her a feeble smile, Celine leaned to pat her hand. "I have been beyond the borders of hell, Grace, and survived to tell the tale. I rather doubt there is anything between here and the city that could be worse to face. Promise me you will not seek out

Lord Aberdeen this day. For I have no wish to return to that which I left behind. He must not know I have gone until I have had a chance to gain some ground.” Then she leaned close and placed a tender kiss to the girl’s cheek, before slipping from the room.

* * * *

Marguerite forced herself to face Michael. Her eyes still bore the puffiness of her tears, and the broken blood vessels that left the whites pink. “I must, once more, beg your forgiveness, milord.” Nervous, she twisted her fingers together in her lap. “ ’Twas never my intent to start trouble. I feared for your well being ... that she meant to do you harm.” Remembering the rehearsed words she and her mother had gone over several times this morning, she added. “It was foolish of me to think you could not take care of yourself, and I am truly sorry for my actions. It will not happen again, milord.” She lowered her gaze to her hands wanting to give him the illusion of subservience. Marguerite had been surly to many men in her life. None, however, held her future in their hands as strongly as Michael Aberdeen. He was her future. With the family funds all but depleted due to her father’s love of gambling, and the lands promised as her dowry her only remaining possession, she knew marriage to another would be impossible. Curbing her tongue and acting the good wife were her only hopes at securing a name and the protection it offered. Without those, she might as well throw herself from the cliffs to her death.

Frowning, Michael exhaled a deep breath. “Though I understand your motives, madam, I must disagree with them. There is nothing about Celine to suggest she belongs in such a place as the asylum. Had you given yourself a few days to know her ... nay, not even that long, you would have realized she is just as sane as you or I.”

Ceding to his determination, Marguerite nodded. “I am sure you are right, milord. I ask you forgive me for my foolishness.”

Eyeing her, Michael warned, “ ’Tis not me you need ask forgiveness of. If you can ask her, I will know you are sincere.”

For an instant anger rose in Marguerite’s visage. How dare he request such a thing? She would not belittle herself for a common street urchin! Ready to release her double-edged sword of a tongue, she stood with arms akimbo. Again it was her mother who silenced her words before they left her lips. Marguerite felt the daggers sting her as her mother glared at her from her place behind her future husband. Unable to hide her fury, Marguerite turned toward the door and exhaled deeply before conceding. “As you wish, milord.” Every word left a bitter taste in her mouth, and a hatred burning in her.

As if somehow Celine heard her, she appeared near the door to the dining hall. She was dressed in the garb of a common peasant, though even they could not diminish her beauty.

Celine pleaded silently with imploring eyes. Marguerite curled her lips into a grin that twisted across her face. Her nod was almost imperceptible. She would not stand between Celine and freedom. Without taking her gaze from her rival, she assured Michael, “I will speak with her, milord, but only if you allow me time to gain my composure.”

His back to the door where Celine stood, Michael’s nod was stiff. “The sooner the better, Marguerite.” Then his gaze moved to the fire burning in the hearth.

* * * *

By the time Michael retired for the night, his temples throbbed with an incessant

ache. Marguerite seemed determined to know what he had done every moment of the passed seven years. Her chatter grated on his nerves. Knowing he would appear rude should he leave her, Michael answered her questions dutifully. His mind was on other things. A need began within him to see Celine, growing until it became almost unbearable. Now, standing before her door, he debated knocking. What would he say? Her silence this morning when he knocked revealed her anger. He knew nothing he could do to alleviate it. At last, he turned toward his own chambers, weary and exhausted.

The door no more than closed against the jamb when a knock came upon it. "Milord..." Michael stiffened as Marguerite called out to him. "A word, please."

Tired and mentally drained, he peered at his reflection in the mirror for several seconds. "Can this wait, Marguerite? I fear I have a rather bad headache."

"Please, milord, I will not keep you long." She was insistent, yet not demanding.

At last, finding no good reason to postpone this meeting, Michael pulled open the door and peered at her frowning. She moved into the room like a cat, with long languid strides meant to make a man wild.

Her smile was warm, curling at the corners of her mouth, as she brushed her fingers along his temple. "Perhaps I can help." Gentle, she rubbed the flesh there, kneading the skin with tender strokes.

Of a sudden very aware of her womanly form, he swallowed hard. "Marguerite, please. I fear I am not good company right now..."

Molding her body to his, she purred near his ear. "Let me take your mind off your woes, Michael." Brazen, she reached for his hand, and guided it to her breast. Her eyes closed as his palm moved over the soft skin. "Oh, Michael," she breathed against his throat. "Show me the ways of love."

To Michael it seemed she knew far too much already. He drew in a ragged breath as her hand slipped beneath the material of his shirt, and caressed the broad expanse of his chest. It had been a long time since he was last with a woman, and his body responded to her touch. Hungry, he lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue forced open her lips, chasing, tasting, and seeking more. There was no passion returned.

Marguerite pulled away, a look of astonishment etched in her countenance. Gracing him with a feeble smile she pressed trembling fingers to his lips. "Milord ... Michael, we have all night." Her breath brushed his cheek as she peered up at him. "Perhaps some port ... to relax both of us?" Already she crossed to the side table where the wine was kept.

Deep green eyes flashed in the recesses of his mind. The memory of a body, warm against his own, took his breath away. Long auburn tresses, cascading over pale shoulders, caused a lump to form in the pit of his stomach. Gazing at Marguerite, Michael knew he could not let this continue. Clearing his throat, he crossed to her. His hand replaced the decanter to the table. "Marguerite, forgive me." His eyes were dull and his voice listless. "I will not take your honor before we have spoken our vows."

Marguerite peered at him with wide eyes. "We shall be married soon. Let me know you, that I might learn what pleases you." Her hand pressed against his chest once more.

Michael shook his head. His fingers wrapped about her hand, and with gentle, but forceful intent lowered it to her side. "I think it would be best if we wait." His mind

returned to Celine, who was willing to plunge to her death rather than cede what Marguerite offered freely. Again Michael found himself comparing both women. Again he found Marguerite lacking. There was no passion in her kiss, no stirring at all. It was as if he kissed stone. She aroused a need, nothing more, and even that faded as Michael thought of the woman across the hall.

Placing his hand to Marguerite's lower back, he guided her to the door. Then, giving a sheepish smile, bowed as he gave her a slight shove into the hall. The portal closed before she could protest.

Michael sighed in exasperation. Relief flooded him as he listened to Marguerite's footfalls fade down the corridor, and he pressed his head to the jamb. Exhausted, he moved toward the bed, wanting sleep, and to clear his mind. Once more the visage that often intruded into his thoughts captured him, pulling him toward the portal and the room across from his own.

The door opened, revealing darkness beyond. He could hear her breathing as he moved into the room. "Celine, are you awake?"

A movement by the window startled him, for he expected her abed. A figure rose, standing in silhouette as the moon's silver beams filled the space behind her. But it was shorter, more girlish. "M' lord? Be that ye?"

"Grace?" Michael crossed to her, his legs leaden and sluggish to respond. "What on earth are you doing here in the dark?" Nearer her he could see the tears that glistened on her cheeks.

"Oh m' lord, 'ow glad I be ye finally come. She made me promise no' ter seek ye out. An' I've been waitin' all day fer ye ter come, knowin' it were yer habit ter see 'er...."

A deep-rooted fear tore through Michael's insides. "Where is the lady Celine?"

Grace trembled. "As I said, she would no' let me seek ye out. I tried ter stop 'er, I swear on me life I did. She would no' 'ear o' it." A ragged breath was sucked into her lungs. "I didna know what else ter do. I told 'er I would no' lie ter ye about 'er leavin'. But, m' lord, I thought surely ye would 'ave come and found out fer yerself that she 'ad gone, an' ye never did ... an' I fell asleep...." Grace peered into the darkness as the words faded into silence. Already the room was empty.

* * * *

Near nightfall Celine sank to a soft mossy spot beneath a tree. Exhausted, she leaned against the thick trunk and closed her eyes. She stayed to the woods, knowing the road would leave her exposed to too many eyes. Muscles she did not know she possessed now alerted her to their presence with sharp cramping pain from every part of her body. Chilled, she regretted taking no cloak, or shawl for warmth. Now she had no fight left in her, and lay in the soft moss, spent.

It was the cold air, which forced her to rise. Shivering, she stumbled through the woods in hopes of finding a house, or barn where she could seek rest away from the icy wind that began to blow. Lost, she wandered with no particular destination for nearly an hour.

Thick black clouds rolled in from the sea, bringing with them a gale force wind that set her teeth to chattering. It reminded her of another night when she had also been fleeing. For a moment the clouds moved before the moon, casting the world into darkness. A memory moved through her mind. Horses hooves echoed in her thoughts.

As if to confirm the memory, thundering hoof beats rang in the night. A shiver crept along Celine's spine. The clouds drifted from the moon, revealing the road a few feet from where she stood. A dark figure emerged from the night, on a steed breathing fire as he raced along the path. Every few seconds he was swallowed by the heavy shadows, as if he were part of them, made from them. For a long time Celine stood motionless, unable to force her feet from the path before him. It was all happening again, and she found herself mesmerized as the drama played out.

A silver ray of light cast an eerie glow over the figure moving toward her, and Celine drew in a sharp breath. Where the phantom she glimpsed a few weeks ago had had no face, this one was clearly visible, and it was not one she wanted to see. Her heart lodged in her throat, blocking the breath from escaping there. Her body trembled uncontrollably. Complete consuming fear sank its talons into her. "Kendall...." The name escaped her lips before she could quell it. How had he found her? There was no time to seek the answer to the question. Pulling her skirts into her hands, Celine darted away from the road, and deep into the trees.

Atop the horse, the rider reined his mount in surprise. Sitting erect on his steed, he peered into the night. Prancing nervously, his mount snorted and whinnied in protest. Nonetheless his rider refused to allow him the lead. Holding the reins tight, Robert Kendall scanned the darkness.

Sliding his leg over the broad expanse of his steed, he dropped to earth, crouched and ready. Almost casually he moved in a wide circle, peering into the night. In the underbrush, Celine held her breath. For an instant she thought he looked right at her. Yet he never wavered or looked back as he continued to turn, and she released a small sigh of relief. Trembling, she bit her lower lip, and prayed he would mount his steed and be on his way.

Though not an overly big man, he outweighed Celine by at least five stone, and had the strength to best most men in a fight, as she had witnessed first hand. He once confessed to her that he shaved his head, rather than sport the large bald spot that began to crown it. It gave him a demeanor that seemed to put people on edge, which was just as he liked it. Muscles rippled along his arms from many hours of tossing logs ... and people ... around as the mood suited him. He was a formidable man even in the light of day. At night, with the gray beams of the moon casting a ghostly aura about him, his appearance was frightening.

Kendall stepped on softly placed feet into the underbrush, moving away from Celine's meager hiding place. For a moment Celine felt her body relax. He was not coming toward her. A voice in her mind shouted into her conscience. "Run! Now! Before he tricks you again!" A shiver raced along her spine. Picking up her skirts, she took flight. This time she would not be blind.

* * * *

Michael reined his mount near another, tied to a branch along the road. The wind swirled his cloak about him. Reminded of another night, he sat gazing into the darkness, his thoughts on green eyes and auburn hair. In no hurry to relinquish the visage forming in his mind's eye, he sat for a moment absorbed. An icy chill raced along his spine as a voice called out from the darkness. "Celine ... know you full well I shall win. How you managed to elude me this long is a mystery. Rest assured I will not allow it again. If you think you have endured all there is you are wrong by at least a hundred inventive tricks I

have up my sleeve.”

The panic that welled within him was steeled beneath the resolve to find her before the one who threatened. Inching his leg over the saddle, Michael eased to earth, and drew his mount's muzzle to his side, silencing the snort the horse released as it sensed his apprehension. Calculated in his step, he merged with the trees, using their shadows to conceal his passage. Nonetheless, his heart beat out a chaotic drum roll in his chest, and the air that misted before him had him clenching his teeth. Burrowing his face deep within the folds of his cloak, he exhaled deeply, his warm breath masked in the heavy material of the cape.

Celine slipped beneath the low boughs of an old fir, where the darkness was thick and unyielding. Huddled against the massive trunk, she pulled air into her bruised lungs by slow degrees. Her teeth chattered, and she clenched her jaw until it ached. The wind parted the branches of the tree and she fought the urge to cry out as Kendall appeared just in front of her.

His back was to her, as he listened. “Celine?” His voice joined with the howl of the wind. “I know you are close. I can smell your fear.” A hoarse laugh rattled from his throat. “Had you only signed the papers, all of this could have been avoided. ‘Tis too late now. You have seen far too much.” He snorted. “This time I make the rules. I cannot afford to have you telling tales. This time I will kill you, as I should have done months ago.”

Celine closed her eyes, trying to fight the panic that welled within her. How could she have been so foolish to think he would not seek her out? In the recesses of her mind the thought formed to beg his mercy. Mayhap she could convince him she would leave these climes, never to return ... but she knew seeking clemency was useless. Robert Kendall had not a merciful bone in his body.

“This time, Celine,” he continued, “I will bury you as the matron buried her riches. You have caused me great pain, and suffering.” He turned, and walked several feet away.

From her hiding place, Celine exhaled a slow shaky breath. If she could make it to his mount, mayhap she could flee into the night, leaving him stranded in the woods. Once more taking her shirts into her hands, she darted from her refuge. Her feet raced along the path, oblivious to the stones and roots that tore at her flesh. As on the night she fled the asylum, branches shredded her skin, and tore her hair from her scalp. She paid no heed. Freedom was in gaining the road, and the steed there.

Kendall twisted about in time to see her disappear through the ticket. “Even if you reach him first, Celine,” he shouted as if reading her mind, “He will obey only my commands.”

A frantic sob escaped Celine's throat as the horse came into view. A few more feet and she would gain her freedom. Almost blinded by the tears that blurred her vision she stumbled forward. Her head spun and her lungs screamed in agony. Nearly to her destination, her foot caught on an exposed root, sending her to flight for a moment. She came to earth with a resounding thud, which took the breath from her. In the far recesses of her head, she could hear Kendall advancing, and knew he was close.

Hands reached for her, hauling her from the ground so quickly, she sucked in a ragged breath. Panicked, she reached out with sharp nails, ready to fight to the end. A visage appeared before her, and she peered up in confusion. “Michael?”

Deep blue eyes searched her own desperately. "Are you all-right?"

Time stood still. Celine gazed into the depths of those eyes in disbelief. How had he found her? There was no time for such questions, or the answers to them. Already the one who chased could be heard crashing through the brush. Celine curled her fingers about Michael's arm and pleaded, hysterical. "Run, milord. 'Tis me he wants. Save yourself!"

Michael gave her no response. Instead he slipped his hand behind Celine's back, and moved toward his mount. He lifted her hastily to the steed's back. "If I do not return, get yourself back to the keep." His whisper was terse.

"Nay!" Her plea halted him as he turned toward the sound of rustling leaves. "He has spilled the blood of others, milord. I owe you more than I can ever repay. Do not let this day end that I am unable to try. I beg you, flee now while you have the chance." Her eyes filled with tears. "Please."

Kendall advanced through the trees with the speed of a wild animal. The air misted from his nose and mouth. It circled about his head in a thick gray fog. Like a demon he charged from the thicket toward the road.

Grasping a thick branch from among the debris of the forest floor, Michael hauled it back toward his shoulder, waiting. The other man careened through the trees, almost leaping onto the road. He moved with such speed, stopping abruptly was impossible.

Celine gasped as the log in Michael's hands swung forward. It hit Kendall square in the chest, cracking ribs as it collided with him. The impact sent him to flight, and he lost several yards before coming to earth once more. His right foot buckled beneath him, and snapped as his weight came against it.

His screams sent an icy chill along Celine's spine. What frightened her most was that he raised, a look of pure loathing in his eyes, and walked on the foot now twisted and misshapen. He seemed oblivious to the pain. Of a sudden he was charging again, his head aimed at Michael's torso.

Once more the branch met its mark with calculated accuracy. This time, Michael aimed higher, squaring the branch at the other man's head. Splintering wood flew as the weapon smashed against Kendall's face. Celine wasn't sure the sound of snapping emanated from the wood or the man it came in contact with. Nor did she care. All that mattered was that Kendall stumbled back into the leaves. Blood trickled from his mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head. He did not rise again. Broken and beaten, he drifted into unconsciousness.

Staggering to the mount still tied to the trees, Michael pulled a knife from his boot and reached for the animal's Achilles tendon. The blade moved over the muscles severing them, and ending any hope of Kendall's pursuit. The agonized screech of the steed was carried on the wind like the haunting scream of a keening phantom. The sound stayed with Celine for nearly an hour as she and Michael made their way through the woods in strained, tense silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was the rain that ended their travels. It came in large stinging drops that beat against them like sharp daggers. With only Michael's cape as cover for them both, it was not long before he reined the mount near a massive pine, where they found shelter beneath wide low hung boughs.

Celine huddled against him, shivering from both the cold and the events just passed. No words passed her lips since leaving Kendall by the roadside. Michael's voice was soft, concerned as he asked after her health. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Nay, milord. The only injury was to my pride. I was foolish to think I could make it back to town so ill prepared."

For a moment Michael peered at her, auburn hair catching the tiny rays of moonlight that penetrated into their secluded world. What was it about her that captured his every thought? He hardly knew her, yet when he discovered her gone, felt as if his heart threatened to snap in two. The screams torn from her as she raced from the man in the woods sent an icy shiver up his spine. What would he do if he did not make it to her in time? Careful he moved his hand over her shoulder, and wrapped his fingers through a tress of hair that had come free from the knot at her nape. "Celine if I have done anything to warrant your fear, I would know now, that I can attempt to make amends."

With wide eyes she peered up at him. "You? Milord, you are the only one who has had faith in me from the start." Lowering her gaze to the broad expanse of his chest she whispered, "Unlike your betrothed and her mother, who have judged me solely on rumors and gossip ... and their narrow-mindedness."

Sighing, Michael brought his fingers beneath her chin, lifting that delicate feature until their eyes met. "The Ladies Haverston are blind to anything beyond their existence. People such as they should be forgiven for their foolishness."

Snorting, Celine shook her head. "As they have forgiven me, milord?" Her lips trembled. "I have done nothing to warrant their hatred, yet they give it freely."

He nodded, understanding why she sought to leave. "And it was their hatred that sent you to flight?"

Celine shook her head. "Nay, milord, it was not their views which sent me from the keep. 'Twas yours...."

"Mine?" He was incredulous. "I don't understand."

Swallowing hard, Celine turned to gaze at the rain beyond their small nest. "They condemned me, milord, for what they thought might be truth. You defended me in what you hoped was not." Her voice grew soft, solemn. She closed her eyes as tears crowded at the corners. "I could not bare the thought of you being wrong after everything you have done for me."

For a moment Michael peered at her in bemusement. "Are you saying you escaped the asylum, and had some part in the matron's death?" Her nod was almost imperceptible. Michael felt her body stiffen, awaiting his response. It surprised him his opinion mattered so much to her. "And you left because you thought I would judge you

as Marguerite has done?" Again the slight nod was his answer. He sighed. "I see." Now it was his turn to stiffen. "Do you think by knowing the truth I would condemn you, and send you back there?" His voice was a hoarse whisper.

At last Celine lifted her gaze to his. "Wouldn't you, milord? I will not deny the blood against my gown that night belonged to the matron. Her death weighs heavy upon my conscience."

Michael watched her for a long moment. Finally he shook his head. "But was her death at your hand?" Before she could answer he continued. "I think not. For you said yourself that the blood seeped between your fingers as you tried to save her." Leaning closer he whispered, "You said her death would haunt my soul like a fester wound." Again he shook his head. "Not my soul ... Kendall's?" He asked as he peered at her in solemn understanding.

Eyes wide, Celine tried to pull away from him. Michael could see the fear his words inspired, knew they hit a cord. "Words that crept into my mind, nagging me, spurring me to know the truth. I have been patient Celine, waiting for you to trust." His eyes bore into hers. "Trust me now. Know that if I was involved in the plan against you, I could easily have let you die at his hand."

"How do you know these things you speak of? I have not spoken them to you...." Her whisper was hoarse.

Already shaking his head, he corrected her. "Indeed you have. As I brought you back to Brier Point that first night. You wove a haunting tale of murder, coins buried in a garden, and money she could not bring herself to spend. You spoke of blood against your hands, as you tried to keep the life from slipping from her." Celine shook her head wanting to deny his words. He continued, determined to convince her he meant no harm. "Later you woke me with your screams. When I tried to comfort you, you begged me let you go, insisting you were not insane." Exhaling deeply, he went on. "You see, Celine, I have known since the first you came from the asylum. Yet, I made my judgments based on the woman I saw, watched in the grip of terrifying nightmares." His eyes delved to the depths of her soul. "Trust me, Celine. Let me help you from that which torments you."

She pulled away, and slipped from beneath the tree. Her back to him, she answered, "This is not your fight, milord. I do not want to place another burden on your shoulders. If you will but take me to the authorities in Newcastle...."

Following her into the sparkling world beyond the boughs of the tree, Michael sighed in frustration. "You have made it my fight, Celine. I will not rest until I understand what has taken place, or what I can do to see you from the hell you have endured." The warmth of her skin beneath his fingers sent tiny darts of pleasure through him. He took a step back, surprised by the sensations.

Celine crossed to an old rotted log and braced her foot upon its wet surface. "In truth, milord, it is a complicated tale, to which I have few answers. I do not believe you can help me, for I know little more than you."

Forcing himself to remain where he was, Michael slipped his hands behind his back and laced his fingers together. "Give me the chance to make that decision, Celine."

Sighing, she gave a slight nod. "I only pray in telling you, your blood does not stain my hands as hers did."

Wanting the feel of her warm against him, Michael moved closer. He had only

taken a few steps when he froze, a vision of Marguerite burned into his mind's eye. A contract had been made. No matter what strange emotions Celine evoked, he had no choice but to hold to the betrothal. His resolve was like a heavy weight on his shoulders. Sighing, he turned away from her, attempting to calm the trip-hammer beat of his heart. His voice shaky, he whispered. "I am much smarter than you give me credit for, madam. I too have been to the gates of hell and lived to tell the tale." He glanced back at her, and added, "Hell has many forms, and many ways to torment us."

Nodding, Celine turned her face toward the moonlight beginning to break through the clouds. For several seconds she focused her attention on the slow moving clouds. At last, she cleared her throat, and asked timidly, "Where do I begin? For 'tis a mystery, and I am not certain what event started this affair, or which will finally end it."

Michael sighed. Sinking to a damp log, he propped his elbow on his knee, and dropped his chin into his open palm. "Begin with the asylum, and we shall put the pieces together from there."

Following his lead, Celine sank to the log at her feet. Entwining her fingers together, she exhaled a slow deep breath. "In truth, milord, the asylum is the only part of this puzzle I do understand. I know exactly what sent me there." Glancing up at Michael she brushed a strand of hair from her face. "'Twas the papers I refused to sign." A frown turned down the corners of her mouth. "But I could not, milord. My father gave his life for those papers, and I could not let his death be in vain."

Michael sat forward, intrigued. "What papers, Celine?"

She cleared her throat. "The papers found hidden in my father's carriage after his death."

Searching her visage for answers, Michael urged, "From the beginning, Celine."

She rose and retraced her steps to his side. Lowering her head, she began anew. "He had been upset, my father I mean, for several days before leaving for London. He would not speak to me of what troubled him, but I gathered it had something to do with a claim made against his name and his rights to his lands. I begged him to allow me to accompany him on his journey, but he refused." Celine gazed at Michael with tears in her eyes. "I think he knew something dreadful was going to happen, and wanted to spare me."

Celine wiped at her tears with trembling hands. "The news of his death at the hands of robbers nearly sent me into a despair I could not climb out of. It was the discovery of the papers hidden beneath the seat of his carriage that began my spiral toward the asylum." For a moment she peered off into the distance. "They were given to me by the stable hand ... who found them while cleaning my father's blood from the conveyance." Celine's sigh was weary. "I could not look at them. In my grief I refused to read more than the first page, an accounting of his possessions. His blood stained against the folded parchment, made it too painful. So I left them on my father's desk, with many other papers I knew his business secretary would handle." Glancing to Michael, she shrugged. "In truth, milord, I gave them no more than a passing thought." She pursed her lips in frustration. "Perhaps had I read them, none of this would have taken place."

Celine leaned her head against Michael shoulder. Sniffling, she continued, "Not long after his death, a man came to call on me. He introduced himself as Robert Kendall, one of my father's barristers." She shook her head in dejection. "I had no reason to

doubt Mr. Kendall's claims. Not until he produced those very same papers I left on my father's desk." Celine released a shaky sigh. "He told me they were useless now that my father was dead, and bid me sign them. Yet it made little sense that my signature was needed. As a woman I could not hold the title, or the lands, even had they not been in question."

Celine pushed from the warmth of the cloak, and rose. Rubbing her hands over her arms, she shuttered. "I refused, wanting to speak with my father's secretary on the matter first." Again she released a ragged sigh. "Kendall insisted, stating things might get ugly for me if I did not cooperate."

"I could not!" Her refusal was emphatic. "I was not allowed to read them, or have anyone else do so for me. Kendall stated women had no business knowing how to read, much more about business affairs. 'Sign them' he hissed, 'or I shall make your life a living hell!'"

"Confident he could do nothing worse than evict me from my home, again I refused." Shrugging, Celine added, "There were only sad memories at Falcon's Ledge now, and leaving was the only joy I could find."

Michael perused her. Captivated by the way the moonlight danced over her hair, and pale skin, he had hardly heard much of the last few sentences. A tightening in his body made him draw in a ragged breath. The urge to reach out, pull her into his arms was nearly uncontrollable. Hastily, he stood and moved several feet in the opposite direction. Gathering his composure, Michael leaned against a tree, far from the warmth of the cloak, and the woman whose scent still lingered there. Trembling fingers scattered the thick mass of his hair. His breath was strained and uneven. What spell had she woven about him? Why did his body respond as it had to no other? Several moments elapsed before he found his tongue and the ability to speak calmly. "Forgive me, Celine. As I said, I have been to the gates of hell myself, and your tale brings back memories." It was not a lie, though he did not reveal that those memories quickly faded as thoughts of her warm against him filled his mind.

"Shall I continue, milord?" Her voice was a whisper of uncertainty.

Michael could not speak. A stiff nod was all he could manage.

Taking in another sharp breath, she began where she left off. "After about a week, Kendall returned with another man. He introduced him as Jack Sikes, an associate. Kendall insisted I accompany them to the local magistrate's office where everything could be cleared up." Celine pursed her lips. "At last, I would get the chance to speak before someone in authority." Her voice broke. "Alas, we never made it there. I remember only a sharp pain at the base of my head as the carriage traversed the road. I woke in a room fit for no living thing. Waste from those before me, covered the floor. Rats fought roaches for every meager crumb." Michael's lips were tight as he noted the shiver that crept along her spine. "I am not sure how long I was there before food was brought. The sun had risen and set several times before so much as a single word was spoken to me."

"'Twas Kendall who graced me with conversation." Celine glanced to Michael with sad eyes. "In truth, even his voice was welcome. For the first time in over a month I was acknowledged, seen, and heard. None other had so much as looked at me." Celine shook her head. "Where is this place?" I begged. 'The asylum? I do not belong here!' He paid no heed to my protests." Rain began to pelt the ground, and Celine reached for

the cloak, left on the log where Michael abandoned it. Moving toward the old fir, she called, "Milord, will you come out of the rain?"

For a moment, Michael turned his face to the large drops. At last, exhaling deeply, he nodded and joined Celine beneath the wide boughs. Awaiting his decent beside her, she continued, "Again he produced the papers from my father's carriage. He demanded I sign them immediately. His threat was clear. I would spend the rest of my life in the asylum, or choose freedom with the stroke of the quill." Celine lifted her chin, defiant. "I spit in his face." For a moment the line of her jaw was ridged with her ire. "Thus days turned to months, and still I refused."

Michael gazed at her aghast. "Are you saying rather than sign the papers you choose to remain in that place?"

Celine searched his eyes for understanding. "I had no choice, milord. Don't you see that? My father died for those papers. In signing them I let his death be in vain." Her voice grew soft. "Besides, I was carefully tending the guard placed at my door. I could see in his eyes he did not believe I belonged there. In he and his wife, the matron, I found hope. Even the monies Kendall sent to buy their silence went unspent. They were my chance at freedom." Her gaze dropped to her hands. "Somehow Kendall discovered our plans." She drew in a ragged breath. "He was waiting beyond my room, knife at the ready. I fought him, even after he sliced my arm." She glanced to the wrappings still covering the gash. "The matron put herself between us...." A soft sob escaped her lips. "Kendall drew the knife along her throat as if gutting a pig. There was no remorse at her death." Celine was silent for a long moment. "I tried to stem the flow of blood from the matron's wound, but it was no use. As I peered at Kendall, something inside of me snapped. I charged him with a piece of wood from the cot that served as my bed, and brought it against his head until he slumped to the floor." A frail laugh passed her down turned mouth. "If not for the matron's husband, I might have killed him."

At last she murmured, "I have never been prone to violence, but I cannot deny, striking him gave me great pleasure." Lifting her hand before her, Celine studied it. "Nevertheless, I still see her blood, and I know it was my foolishness that cost her life." Sorrowfully she added, "Had I left without involving them, the matron might still be alive."

Amazed at her choices, Michael shook his head. "There are not many who would have chosen as you did. I should think any put in your position would have gladly signed the papers for their freedom. I find it baffling that you did not."

Gazing at him, Celine asked, "Do you, milord? Would you have signed the papers knowing someone you loved had already lost their life for them? Then you would have been a fool, sir." She squared her shoulders. "For I knew, as did Kendall, that once I fulfilled his request, my usefulness ceased. I would have been no more important than the matron dead at his hand. I might have spent nearly two years in that dreadful place, but I had hope. As long as that remained there was a chance at freedom. I had no doubt then, nor do I now, that my life would have been the price for signing those papers."

* * * *

Brier Point loomed like a gray beast in the predawn hours. Celine sighed in relief atop the mount. She slid silently from the broad back of the steed. Michael watched her grimace as she struggled to take the steps leading to the manse. Taking pity on her he scooped her into his arms, and mounted the steps, covering the span in quick easy strides.

Once in her room, he placed Celine to the bed, and pulled the blankets to her chin. "Sleep well, Celine. We shall talk more when we have rested." Of a sudden the desire to pull her close and press his lips to hers was so over-whelming, it took his breath away. It startled him so; he nearly tripped over his feet putting some distance between them.

"Milord," Celine whispered. "Are you all-right?"

He could not answer. A stiff nod was his only response. Then he was gone, leaving Celine gazing after him.

* * * *

Marguerite bestowed her most charming smile on Michael as he entered the dining hall several hours later. Crossing to him, she reached her hands to his and gave a gentle squeeze. "Milord," Her lips turned down into a slight frown. "You look rather beaten this morn." She stuttered briefly, and corrected, "I mean ... did you not sleep well?" As she did the night before, she reached her fingers to his temples and kneaded. Michael wrapped his hand over her wrist, stopping the ministering.

He could see his appearance was not up to her expectations by the lines that creased her brow, and the frown that pulled at her mouth. He cared little. Sleep was elusive. The hunger Celine awakened in him kept rest at bay. Oddly enough, even the sight of the woman before him, breasts barely contained within the confines of her plumb gown, did not stir him. In fact he found himself wishing for some excuse to leave her. Though none came readily, and he settled for her hand on his with stiff resolve.

It was Grace, moving through the room, which gave him cause to slip his hand from Marguerite's. Crossing to the young woman, Michael touched her shoulder, halting her progress. "Grace, I think the lady Celine is in need of a hot bath this morn. She did not answer my knock, and I fear she might be in some pain." He paused, feeling Marguerite's gaze upon him. It unnerved him that she would listen so blatantly. Leaning closer the servant, he added, "Have the seamstress sent for immediately." Giving the doe-eyed girl a wink, he smiled. "Though I know your intentions were good, your gown was scandalously short. I think it would be best if she were to have something more ... fitting." Again he smiled, assuring the girl he was not angry with her.

Grace returned his smile. Giving a quick curtsy, she nodded in agreement. "I'll see ter it right away, m'lord." Then she scurried off to see to her duties.

Marguerite's smile was stiff. "Forgive me milord, I could not help but hear. Is all well with your little ward?"

Giving his betrothed the briefest of glances Michael's nod was half-hearted. "In truth, Marguerite, I have not spoken with her this morn."

Marguerite interrupted him. Pressing her hands to her cheeks in dramatic form, she mused, "Oh, milord, I was so caught up in your tales yesterday, I forgot completely to see to her comfort and apologize for my actions." Picking up her skirts she moved toward the grand staircase. Over her shoulder she called back, "I shall see to her needs immediately."

Marguerite had taken no more than a dozen steps when Michael's words halted her. "Please, Marguerite, I do not think she is up for company this morn. It might be best if you leave her to her privacy for a while."

Marguerite shook her head. "Nay, milord, I could not. What sort of friend would I be to leave her there with nary a word of comfort?" Bestowing a charming smile upon him, she spread her hand toward the living quarters above. "Mayhap you would join me

to know my intentions are honorable..."

Shaking his head, Michael declined. Seeing Celine would only cause him more turmoil. "I shall leave you to your visit, madam." He cocked his head, and peered at her with genuine admiration. "I am pleased by your change of heart, Marguerite, and a bit ashamed I cast judgment on you so quickly." He gave a slight bow. "Forgive me."

* * * *

As she traversed the corridor, Marguerite rehearsed in her mind the scene she would play before her betrothed when she returned to the dining hall. Many an hour had been spent in preparing for her part, and she murmured the words as she neared Celine's rooms. A smile crossed her lips as she thought how marvelous her performance would be. With hand to her breast, she would rush into the hall, calling frantically for Michael. Breathy sobs would escape her lips as she broke the news of Celine's absence. She would fret, and show her concern over the girl's welfare. Then she would shake her head forlornly, and comfort Michael. 'How ungrateful of her to leave with nary a word of thanks, or goodbye. How disgraceful!' A frown would crease her brow, one practiced in her mirror to ensure it showed sincerity. 'Mayhap it would be best to put her from your mind, milord, for 'tis clear she has done so with your kindness.'

A smile curled the corners of Marguerite's lips as she neared the portal at the end of the hall. Knowing there was no need to knock, she gripped the handle and pushed the door open with a triumphant smirk. Nearly half way into the room, she stopped in confusion. There in the chair by the window sat Celine. Marguerite gazed at the other woman for several seconds. "What are you doing here?" She stuttered, aghast.

Celine watched her for a moment. Peering at her in bemusement, Celine shrugged. "'Tis my room, milady, where would you expect me to be?"

Flustered, Marguerite could not find anything innocent to say. Snidely she blurted, "Gone! Were you not fleeing yester morn?"

Giving a soft laugh, Celine denied the accusation. "Is that what you thought, milady? What reason would I have to do so? 'Twould have been foolish. Besides, had I wished to leave, I have no doubt his lordship would have allowed me use of his carriage." Eyeing Marguerite, she continued, "I was simply in need of time alone." Raising her brows she asked, "Was there something you needed of me, milady?"

Flushed, Marguerite stood in silence for several seconds. At last she stammered feebly, "I came to check on your welfare, and now that I have, I shall leave you to your morning toilet..." Her chin high, she retraced her steps to the door.

It was nearly closed behind her before she heard Celine comment dryly, "How interesting, considering you did not even think me here!"

* * * *

The moon was high in the night sky when Marguerite and her mother slipped from the keep and braved the wind coming off the sea. Both huddled beneath thick dark cloaks, sheltering two empty baskets against their hips. For a moment Marguerite eyed the landscape, uncertain in which direction to go. Time would not allow this foray to be long, and she needed be quick in her quest for what she sought. At last, espying a good place, she nodded to her mother and moved through the darkness to her destination...

Careful to ensure the door made no sound as they entered the manse once more, Marguerite used nearly all her strength to keep the heavy iron portal from making the slightest noise. A smile curled at her lips as she eyed her mother, basket in tow. "Just

like old times.” The thrill of her coming victory sent a pleasurable chill up her spine. How many times had they done this same ploy against another that threatened Marguerite’s domain? She was always the victor, and had no intentions of ceding that title now.

Taking a step toward the stairs, she drew in a ragged breath. The soft glow of candlelight spread over the floor of the hall from the library. Her heart lodged in her throat. There was no way to ascend the stairs without passing the open door. Motioning to her mother to remain where she was, Marguerite slipped her basket to the shadows and crossed on slippered feet to the open portal, and peered in.

By the fire, large snifter of brandy in his hand, Michael stood gazing at the flames. At Marguerite’s sharp intake of air, he glanced up in surprise. Perplexed at her attire, he crossed to her in concern. “Marguerite? What has you up at such an hour?”

Marguerite stepped into the room, and shut the door behind her. Leaning seductively against its panels, she sighed. “I was in need of some air, to clear my head.” Her shrug allowed her cloak to fall open. Beneath she wore nothing more than a thin nightgown, which left little to the imagination. The swell of her breasts rose against the cloth, awakening desires in Michael.

His voice hoarse, Michael croaked, “’Tis cold outside, madam.” His gaze dipped to the taut nipples teasing him beneath the thin material. Swallowing hard, he struggled to bring his gaze back to her face. Her hair was windblown, sultry, and alluring. Michael had to admit; he had never seen her look lovelier than she did at that moment.

She brought one shoulder up innocently. “I could not sleep. I thought perhaps some fresh air would clear my mind.” Turning her lips into a pout, she added, sullen. “But ‘twas too cold, and now I am chilled near the bone.”

Eager to take the bait, Michael reached for her cloak with trembling fingers, wanting to secure it over her shoulders. Before he could grasp the small frog to clasp it, Marguerite stepped from the door. The cape puddled on the floor behind her.

Leaning nearer him, she whispered, “’Tis doubtful the cloak will warm me completely....” Her dark eyes pierced his with wanting. “I am certain, Michael, you can think of several ways to raise my body temperature that have not to do with clothing at all.” Her breath was warm against the base of his throat.

His gaze dropped once more to the dark circles beneath her gown. Erect nipples peaked invitingly. It had been so long, and she was right; they would be married soon. Forcing down the lump in his throat, his smile was impish. “Yes, Marguerite, I know many ways to warm you....” He stepped forward, and devoured her with his hungry leer. His advance forced her back against the portal, and trapped her there. Brazenly his thumb circled a hard point beneath her gown. The nipple grew taut under his caress.

Marguerite closed her eyes and turned her head to the side to reveal the soft length of her throat. Her breasts rose and fell with each ragged breath taken into her lungs. “Warm me....” Her whisper was hoarse.

Lowering his lips to the column of her neck, he began to trace a path over the silken skin there. Her soft moans spurred him on. Wanting to take his time, he forced his mouth from her throat, and peered into her eyes. Gently he captured her hand and brought it to his lips. He brushed feathery kisses along the inside of her wrist, and began to work his way toward her fingertips. Michael halted as his gaze took in her fingers.

Tiny cuts and traces of dried blood marred the skin there. Concerned, he held her hand toward the candlelight. "Marguerite, what have you done?"

Tears sparkled in her dark eyes. "While out walking, a gust of wind tossed me. I stumbled against a brier bush and caught my hand in the thistles there." She removed the appendage from his grasp, and curled the scratched fingers through his hair. Pressing her cheek to his, she whispered against his ear. "Warm me that I might forget the pain there."

Michael complied by lowering his lips to her mouth, and molding his form close to hers. The need in him rose, consuming. It mattered little that she did not respond as he hoped. Once more her kiss was like stone. The wanting in him was strong. His fingers entwined through the thick tresses of her ebony hair, as he enjoyed the softness of it. In his mind rosebud lips pouted. Deep green eyes and tiny freckles followed. Her name, ready to be whispered, rose to his mouth....

Like a lightening bolt searing through his body he jerked with the realization of the name he had almost spoken. Shocked she could invade his thoughts, even now; he pushed away as if burned. "Be damned!" He shouted as he turned away from Marguerite. "Why do you torment me so?"

Marguerite reached for his shoulder. "Michael 'tis all-right, we shall speak vows soon...."

He could not tolerate her touch, and crossed to the fireplace, where he peered into the orange flames. Chaotic emotions raged within him. Seconds elapsed into long minutes before he spoke. Hoarse, he explained over his shoulder, "Forgive me Marguerite. 'Tis nothing you have done." He could not look at her, his shame overwhelming. "I bid you leave me. I am in need of some time alone."

Marguerite took a step forward, her fingers outstretched. It was Michael's hand, raised at his shoulder, which halted her. Her distress evident in her trembling lips, she leaned to retrieve her cloak, and scurried from the room.

Listening to her footfalls on the stairs to the second floor, Michael sighed. How could she have invaded his thoughts so easily? Pressing his head to the cool granite of the fireplace, he released a soft moan. Explaining to Marguerite why another's name came from his mouth in the heat of passion might not be the best way to start their marriage. Yet, he could not deny it had been Celine's name ready on his lips.

* * * *

Celine sat at the vanity in her room; her mind absorbed deep in thought. Since her flight four days passed, she had tried to find the missing piece that might answer the questions of her plight. She was no closer now than before, and sighed in frustration. For a moment she gazed at her reflection, scrutinizing the woman peering back at her. At ten and nine, she should have been married, with a babe of two by now. Kendall destroyed any hope of that girlish fantasy. It did not matter that she was penniless. Or that she found herself bereft of both title, and estate. What man would want her, with nightmares tormenting her sleep, and the fear of being carted off to the asylum hanging over her head? Angry at the loss of her youth, Celine swept her arm over the small table. Her attack sent soaps, perfumes, and brushes scattering to the floor in a loud crash.

As the items broke against the floor, she did not hear the door open, or realize she was no longer alone until an audible gasp rang out behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she felt the hairs at her nape bristle. Instantly shame shrouded her face, and her

shoulders sagged in despair. There with arms laden, stood Mrs. Cobb, the housekeeper, Grace, and Marguerite. Next to them was a short round woman with a stunned countenance, and slack jaw. Turning her back to them, Celine whispered, "Forgive me, but I am in no mood for company. I beg you please leave me."

Marguerite snorted. Under her breath she murmured, "She orders people around as if royalty."

The scathing glare she received from the housekeeper, silenced any further comment, and she turned her gaze out the window. Ramrod stiff, Agetha Cobb focused her attention on Celine, as she clapped her hands, and directed the other women where to put their loads. "Nonsense! If you ask me, Miss Celine, you've had far too much time alone. 'Tis time to stop wallowing in self-pity." She pushed passed the trio before her, and took charge, as was her habit. "This is Mrs. Beech, the seamstress. His lordship bid us send for her, that you might have some proper attire to wear." She jerked her chin toward the women waiting behind her. "Well, come in then. Times' wasting and there is much to do."

Though eager to be alone, Celine found no argument the kindly older woman would listen to, and finally ceded the victory. For nearly an hour, she was subjected to measurements, from head to toe, and the incessant chatter of everyone, save Marguerite, who sat perched on the bed and silently watched.

At last sighing dramatically, Marguerite stood with arms akimbo, and peered at Celine with a deep frown. "Twill take at least a month to make anything decent." She gave the seamstress' sneer no notice as she continued, "I have a dress or two that can be sacrificed...." She hesitated for a few seconds. "Though with your being so very tall, Celine, I fear they will be scandalously short." Shrugging, she added magnanimously, "Still, 'tis better than those retched nightgowns you've been wearing."

Without ceasing her task of pinning material about Celine's waist, Mrs. Cobb retorted acridly, "Those retched nightgowns, are the Lady Aberdeen's, made of the finest silk from India." She gave Marguerite a quick sidelong glance. "Lord Aberdeen, the younger, sent the material home as a gift for his mother's birthday."

Stammering, Marguerite muttered. "Well Celine, they make you look terribly pale. Mayhap you should get some fresh air." Striding to the door, she peered back at the women gathered in a circle around Celine. "Regardless, you really do need something to wear other than night clothes." She smiled sweetly. "Please come to my chambers and let me help you find something ... more appropriate."

The seamstress nudged Celine softly. "She's right, my dear. Mayhap a gown would bring up your spirits at bit."

Reluctantly, Celine nodded in concession. "Very well, milady. Your offer is very generous, and I thank you for your kindness." Yet even as she followed Marguerite down the hall to her rooms, Celine could not help wondering if the woman had some ulterior motive for her graciousness.

The gowns tossed carelessly to the bed were for a younger girl, with little in the way to accent hips, or curves. Celine thought wryly, they were perfect if it was Marguerite's desire to make Celine appear younger, more childish. Such an illusion would greatly enhance Marguerite's goal of downplaying Celine's womanly form to ensure Michael kept his gaze where it belonged.

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Weary, Celine sank to a chair and closed her eyes. Every muscle ached. Though the seamstress was thoughtful in her care, each movement sent a stabbing pain through Celine's torso. Her strength was quickly exhausted. Her foray the other night still haunted her in the form of tender bruises and ribs. She voiced no complaint. The thought of having something to wear other than the nightgown made the pain dull and the price of silence worth paying.

Her head against the high back of the chair, she felt her tensions ease, as the other women enjoyed each other's conversation. Their soft laughter brought back memories of her mother, and a life lost to the passage of time. Content to sift through such memories, she drifted into a half sleep.

* * * *

Marguerite smiled as she watched Celine drift into a weary slumber. 'Enjoy it while you can, dear Celine.' She mused to herself. 'For 'tis likely to be the last good sleep you find while at this keep.' Giving a sidelong glance to the three women who sat sewing on her floor, she smiled in satisfaction. By this time tomorrow, Celine would have no doubt who ruled here. Her exit was careful, and silent, leaving the women in her chambers as she made her way down the corridor toward Celine's room.

Nearly fifteen minutes later she stepped cautiously into the passage once more, ready to rejoin the group in her chambers. The smile that curled at her lips held a bit of devil in its softness. Empty basket in hand, she turned to close the portal, unaware of the housekeeper gazing at her from the top of the stairs. A high-pitched scream escaped Marguerite's lips as she faced the older woman. Pressing her hand to her breast, she sighed in relief. "Dear me, Mrs. Cobb, you near frightened me to death." Swinging the basket she shrugged innocently. "I was just looking for something Miss Celine wanted ... but I could not find it." Taking in a nervous breath she inched passed the frowning servant. Only after assured the housekeeper could not see her face, did her triumphant smile return.

* * * *

"He is terribly strict." Marguerite confided to Celine as they enjoyed a rest from the afternoon's events. Amid material and accessories, Mrs. Cobb, Grace, and Mrs. Beech sat on the floor, sewing frantically. They seemed absorbed in their work, and gave no notice to Marguerite and her discussion. Rolling her eyes, she added, "And he cannot abide crying." She chewed on a piece of bread before continuing. "What bothers him most are people who can not handle their own affairs. That is the ultimate failure to Michael." She sighed. "He says if a person can not handle their own affairs, they are useless." For a moment Marguerite glanced to the trio on the floor. The steely look returned to her by Mrs. Cobb should have sent a shiver creeping up Marguerite's spine. Still she refused to be daunted. Instead she gave the housekeeper a smug look of defiance; certain the woman would not dare challenge her authority.

In response, Aggie Cobb snorted. "Forgive my impertinence, milady, but the master has changed since last you saw him. He is no longer the child you remember." Continuing her sewing, she added, "I think you might be quite surprised to see just how generous and caring he has become."

Marguerite sneered at her, seething. She would make certain the old woman was dismissed as soon as she became Michael's wife. Yet, at the moment there was one much closer to dig her talons into, and she turned her attentions back to Celine. "What a

shame you have no gown to wear. There is a grand ball the end of next week at the Covington estate, and I am certain you would be the most beautiful woman there.” It was easy playing the game when she knew Celine could not challenge her. Marguerite looked forward to being the belle of the ball, as she always was. The piece de resistance would be having Michael as her escort. Many was the young maid eager to stake a claim on the handsome young lord, and Marguerite could not wait to rub their noses in her victory.

Exhausted, Celine sagged against the jamb of her door, relieved at the prospect of sleep. Mrs. Beech spent the better part of the afternoon and well into the evening, pinning material to her, altering, and cutting, taking in and letting out. Drained, Celine begged understanding, and wearily headed for her room. Her frustration mounted when Marguerite insisted on escorting her. Her chatter rang in Celine’s ears until they throbbed.

As they neared the chamber, Celine gave a feeble smile, and pleaded with her eyes. “Milady, you have been most generous this day, and I am grateful for everything you have done. I fear I have no energy left for even small conversation. I implore you let me rest.”

Marguerite touched Celine’s arm. “Then I shall see you abed. I would not feel right leaving until you were beneath the covers on your way to sleep.”

Finding no argument to offer, and too tired to deny the woman’s request, Celine nodded in acquiesce. “As is your wish, milady.”

At the bed, Celine slipped from the robe Marguerite loaned her. The blankets were turned down, invitingly, and she sought the comfort she knew would be found there. As her shoulder came against the mattress, a sharp pain raced along her arm. Needle like barbs stabbed at her flesh like hundreds of razors against the softness of her skin. Celine cried out, wanting to rise. Marguerite’s hand prohibited it.

“Comfortable?” Marguerite asked sweetly, her fingers against Celine’s shoulder keeping her to the sheets. “I hope so. It took quite some time to assure myself your bed was perfect.” The sneer that crossed her lips belied the sweetness of her tone.” It would be my pleasure to ensure it just as comfortable every night ... even if it means losing sleep to do so.” The threat was clear, and Celine nodded in understanding. The Lady Marguerite had just bared her claws.

Tears stung at Celine’s eyes. Every breath drove the sharp barbs beneath her blankets deeper into her skin. She had not the strength to remove Marguerite from her position above her. Refusing to let the other woman see her so vulnerable, Celine clenched her teeth together.

Clearing his throat at the door, Michael peered at the two with raised brows. The color drained from Marguerite’s face, and she released her hold on Celine. Fidgeting, she gave a quick curtsy and a tight smile. “Michael, I was just seeing that Celine was abed.” For the briefest second she glanced back at Celine, the threat in her eyes clear.

Celine bit her lip. If she spoke up she doubted the younger lord would believe her. Marguerite was to be his wife. He would not be foolish enough to take another’s word over hers. Besides, Marguerite said he could not abide people who were unable to handle their affairs. Were she to tell him of the spiteful act his future wife did, would he condemn her for not fighting her own battles? Choosing to deal with the Lady Marguerite in her own way, Celine nodded to Michael. “I am weary, milord, good

night.” She whispered. Each word jabbed a thistle into the flesh of her back, and she closed her eyes against the pain.

Marguerite’s smile was smug. “Rest, sweet Celine. I shall tend you on the morrow.” Then she crossed to Michael, and slipped her arm through his, before closing the door behind her.

* * * *

Michael leaned against the cold stone of the keep, frozen to his place. His breath caught in his throat as he peered at her, mesmerized. The wind rose against the cliffs and crashed over them with brutal force. Its power tore at the thin material of her gown. Then the gale dragged the cloth behind her until the folds whipped out around her. Deep auburn tresses joined in the haunting dance. They flowed over her shoulders and behind her in wild abandon. Thick gray clouds cast her into shadow as they played a game of tag with the moon. Silvered beams of haunting light revealed her once more as the clouds were swept on the currents of the wind.

For a long moment she closed her eyes. Then turning slowly, her gaze locked with Michael’s. “With death my only option, I shall gladly choose it.” Her voice was a whisper on the wind, but by the time it reached him, had amplified to a deafening roar.

The lump that lodged in his throat refused to allow him the reply he sought. Struggling against the wind, he reached for her. The might of the storm held him to his place. His eyes pleaded with hers. Intensifying, the wind took his voice and sent it sailing over the white-capped waves far below. The single word he screamed was lost in the wrath of the gale. “No!”

For an instant the wind ceased, as if holding its fury at bay to allow Celine to step from the cliffs. There was no hesitation as her feet advanced. Like a bird she spread her arms. Her eyes closed. Then she drifted for a long second on the currents of the wind, before disappearing over the edge.

* * * *

Soaked in sweat Michael bolted up in the large bed, and gazed into the shadows. A ragged breath slipped from his lungs. The image of her, hair flowing on the wind, burned in his mind. Familiar objects assured him it had been nothing more than a dream. Even so the need to see her drew him from the bed. Nearly at her door, he questioned his rationality. What would he say? Would she think him some mad man for intruding into her chambers at such an hour? He disregarded his trepidation. He had to see her.

Searching for her in the shadowed expanse of the bed, his heart lodged in his throat. She was not there. The bed was empty. The fire had died, leaving the room cold. Panic rose in him. Perhaps it had not been a dream after all ... spinning on his heels, he retraced his path to the door, ready to follow her over the cliffs.

A sound near the window caught his ear, and he glanced there. Relief flooded him. She was there, curled in the large wingback chair deep in the realms of sleep. Stoking the embers to life in the hearth, Michael calmed his fears. He thought for a moment he lost her. At last, in control once more, he turned his attention to the woman by the window. Crossing to her, Michael leaned and caressed the softness of her cheek with trembling fingers. “Celine ... you are safe.” He whispered.

His words roused her. With wide frightened eyes she peered up at him. “Milord is aught amiss?” Taking in his lack of attire, bare chest, and tight britches, her brows rose in concern. “What is it?”

Caught in the spell his strange dream wove, Michael caressed her shoulder. The feel of her, warm and alive soothed him. He sighed. "I tried to stop you, but you simply stepped over the crag. I thought I lost you forever."

For a moment Celine peered at him in confusion. She reached for him, brushing the tips of her fingers over the light stubble of beard at his jaw line. "'Twas a dream, nothing more. I am here." She murmured.

Michael heard little of her words. The touch of her hand to his face sent wild pulses racing through his body. Banked desires were awakened. Of a sudden his hands were on her shoulders, trapping her to the chair. Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers. His lips caressed with feather-softness. When she did not resist, he became bolder, more insistent. His mouth opened, tasting, exploring, and delving to the heart of her soul.

Celine responded. A ragged sigh slipped from her throat as her lips answered his. His mouth traced a path along the column of her throat. She trembled as his lips moved over the swell of her breast. "No! Milord, please." At last he raised his head, and searched her eyes. Shame mottled her features and she turned away. "Forgive me, milord. I only meant to comfort you." Trembling fingers traced a path over her lips. "I am sorry. I would never do anything to jeopardize the vows you will soon speak. I can not imagine what came over me."

Michael gazed at her in surprise. If anyone was to blame, it was he. He had wanted it, still wanted it. A vision of Marguerite leaning seductively against the library door flashed in the recesses of his mind. He wanted that too. Not as he craved this. His body ached to be touched, and touch. To bring Celine to the heights of passion was an all-consuming need. With Marguerite it was nothing more than a physical arousal. Yet, Celine made the blood in his veins burn with fire. Ignoring the voice shouting in his head, he leaned and pulled Celine into his arms. His mouth covered hers. She responded, assuring him he had not imagined it before. His mouth traced a path along the column of her throat. Celine put up no resistance.

Lowered to the sheets, Celine closed her eyes and attempted to still the trip hammer beat of her heart. Ignoring the voice now shouting in her head, she curled her fingers through his hair. His weight came against her. The sharp thorns of the thistles sliced into her flesh and she cried out. Trapped beneath Michael, she could not rise. Again she cried out as he pressed her further into the mattress. At last she gathered her strength and pushed him from her. Clenching her teeth against the pain, she shook her head. "Nay, I beg you. We cannot do this."

Michael rose above her. "I want you Celine ... as I have never wanted before." Again his lips sought hers.

The words Marguerite spoke echoed in Celine's head. "He cannot abide people who can not handle their own affairs." If she allowed this to continue, he would discover first hand what Marguerite was capable of. Would he side with Celine over his betrothed? Sick to her stomach, Celine shoved at him. "Please, Michael, we cannot allow this to continue. For 'tis certain we would both regret it come morning." Her lips trembled. "I implore you, leave me that you can look upon your betrothed with no quilt ... and I may know I have kept my honor."

CHAPTER FIVE

The warmth of the sun brought Celine from her sleep. For a moment she forgot the reason she slept in the chair, and stretched lazily. Immediately the gashes along her back and shoulders stung. Yet, it was another memory, which brought her fully awake. In the back of her mind warm lips pressed against her own, awakening desires and passions she did not know existed. Touching her fingertips to her lips, she closed her eyes, relishing the visions in her mind's eye. Uncertain if real, or some strange dream conjured in her sleep, she played each scene over in her thoughts. He spoke of her falling from the cliffs ... of trying to stop her. Celine knew she had been nowhere near the crag. Almost dejectedly her shoulders sagged. He could only have been a dream.

It was Grace, bustling into the room with linens and towels, which brought Celine from her revelry. Her cheery smile refused to be ignored, and soon Celine returned it. "Good mornin', miss. I see yer up early this morn." She crossed to the bed and placed the linens against the quilt. "Hot water's comin', and I'll see ter yer bed while ye bathe."

Remembering the thistles beneath the sheets, Celine all but shouted in dismay. "Nay!" At the maid's inquisitive gaze, she stammered, "I am not an invalid, Grace. I can take care of the bed myself."

A snort assured Celine that would not be allowed. "Mrs. Cobb 'ill 'ave me cleanin' the privy pots as punishment! I am supposed ter take care o' ye, miss. I shant shirk me duties." Crossing to Celine, she stepped behind her and began to unlace the nightgown. A slow hiss escaped Grace's throat. "Glory. What's 'appened ter ye?"

Self-conscious of the cuts marring her flesh, Celine turned away as she gathered the nightgown close. "'Tis nothing."

Again Grace snorted. "If ye think that be nothin', I'd 'ate ter see what ye consider somethin'." Gently swiping at Celine's fingers, she moved once more to Celine's back. Carefully she parted the material. Fresh blood still oozed from some of the deeper cuts. Her eyes wide, she sucked on her tongue. "I swear ter ye, miss, I 'ad nothin' ter do wit this."

Celine shook her head. "I never thought you did. You are in no trouble."

Grace sucked at her teeth. "I'll fetch 'is lordship. He'll want ter know about this."

"No!" The single word was near a shout from Celine's lips. Raising her hand imploringly, she whispered. "They are only cuts, Grace, and will heal soon enough." Turning toward the window, she released a weary sigh. "His lordship is the last person I wish to burden with this." Glancing at the maid she asked, "Please, Grace, leave him out of this."

Huffing, Grace crossed her arms over her bosom. "I told ye afore I wouldna lie...."

Celine took her hands. "Dear Grace, as I said before, I am not asking you to do anything that might put your position here in jeopardy. I ask only that you let me handle this. I have been a great burden on his lordship as it is, and do not wish to make things

worse.”

Tapping her feet on the thick carpet beneath them, Grace huffed again. “Ye be no burden, miss. Ain’t none here what thinks such a thing.” She winked, and a smile curled at her lips. “‘Cept maybe a raven-haired one what thinks ye be a threat.” Celine bestowed a deep frown upon her, ending the discussion. Folding her arms across her bosom, Grace scurried from the room murmuring something about slow boys, and Mrs. Cobb having her head if she did not finish her chores.

She had only been gone a few seconds when a knock at the door surprised Celine. Naked, she stood gazing at the portal as she chewed at her lip. “Who is it?”

“‘Tis Michael, Celine. Might I come in?”

Trembling fingers returned to her lips, remembering the heat of his touch. Still uncertain if he kissed her the night before, or she imagined it, she felt a blush rise in her cheeks. Unwilling to face him, regardless, she called out, “I am not decent, milord, can this wait?”

Yet, a moment later Celine felt his presence. Like a soft caress against her flesh, his gaze sent a shiver up her spine. Very slowly, she turned her head. A gasp escaped her lips, and instinctively she brought her arm across her bosom. “Milord, you intrude.”

His gaze was riveted to her back. “Dear God, what have you done?” The concern in his voice made the lie on her lips bitter to speak. Yet before she could answer, he solved the problem for her. “Did that happen in the woods the other night?”

Her nod stiff, Celine turned her face from his. Though not the truth, neither had she denied his assumption. It was a lie just the same. Feeling his gaze move along the curves of her hips, she scanned the area near her for something to use as a cover. Nothing was in easy reach, and she felt a blush rise from her buttocks to her shoulders.

Her discomfort obvious, Michael stepped to the bed and grasped the nightgown discarded there. His voice hoarse, he whispered, “Forgive this intrusion, Celine. In truth I thought you were still angry with me for my behavior last night, and your refusal to admit me nothing more than a ploy.” He paused. Swallowing hard, he whispered hoarsely. “I only wanted to apologize for my actions, and beg your forgiveness.” His hand rose, tracing the jagged path a thistle traveled as it tore at her. The contact took the breath from Celine’s lungs, and she struggled to replace it. Michael’s fingers lingered on her flesh, sending pleasing pluses through her body. Soft singing in the hall alerted them to Grace’s presence. The silent plea in Celine’s eyes turned down the corners of his mouth. Holding the gown against her, she turned to face him. She spoke no word, yet her eyes left no doubt to her dilemma.

Nodding in understanding, Michael slipped behind the door, holding his breath as he waited for Grace to enter. Occupied with buckets of water, the maid never noticed the lord of the keep as she moved into the room. He darted noiselessly into the hall, and then peered back at Celine with an impish grin before crossing to his own chambers.

* * * *

Content to soak in the warmth of the bath, Celine closed her eyes for a long moment. The sounds of Grace moving about lulled her and she drifted into a semi sleep state. It was the gasp of horror from the maid, which roused her from her slumber. Opening her eyes in surprise she gazed at the young maid sheepishly. Celine had forgotten the thistles hidden beneath her linens, and now felt a wave of shame course through her as she looked to the bed. There scattered over the mattress and along the

floor where they flew as Grace pulled back the sheets, were hundreds of razor sharp thistles. Celine gazed at them for several seconds. Then hesitant, she gazed at the maid.

“Glory!” Grace whispered in stunned amazement. “Be this what tore ye up so?”

Celine looked at her hands in the bath water, toward the fireplace beside her, but not at the young servant. The nod she gave as an answer was almost imperceptible. She hoped to take care of the briers without involving the other woman. A ragged whisper was forced from her throat. “Someone put them there yesterday.”

Snorting, Grace leaned to pick up a cluster of the thistles on the floor. A mass of dark black hair twisted through the thorns. “Someone indeed! An’ I’d bet me every cent it were someone wit raven black ‘air, and a ‘int o’ the devil in ‘er eyes!” Shaking the thistles before her, she added, “Just ye wait ter ‘is lordship ‘ears what she’s done...”

Celine half stood, panic welling in her visage. “Nay, Grace. We have already been through this. I will not have his lordship involved.”

“She must be made ter pay fer what she done.” The maid was indignant.

Again Celine shook her head. “No.” Releasing a weary sigh, she sank back into the tub. “Though I do not condone her actions, I understand them. Somehow I have become a threat to the Lady Marguerite, and jealously has reared its ugly head.” Pursing her lips, she gazed at the spiny briers. “The Lady Marguerite has bared her claws to protect that which she claims as her own.”

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“I’m tellin’ ye, the woman be pure evil!” Grace asserted as she dusted shelves in the library. “And them cuts...” she shook her head sadly. “Why she near took Miss Celine’s hide off wit them briers. The poor dear be still bleedin’.”

Aggie frowned from her perch on the ladder. “She always was a bit of a spoiled one. Yet I can’t believe she would do such a spiteful thing.” Her hand to her hip, she shook her finger as if disagreeing with herself. “Still, I can’t deny she was coming from Miss Celine’s rooms yesterday when I brought up the tea.” Pursing her lips, she added, “Looking for all the world like the cat that swallowed the canary.”

Grace sighed heavily. “Well I don’t mind tellin’ ye it near tears me heart apart that I promised not ter go ter ‘is lordship wit what she’s done. He’d not put up wit it, that’s fer sure.”

For a moment Aggie leaned against the ladder in thought. “You know Grace, perhaps Miss Celine is right in not wanting to involve his lordship. To pit him against his betrothed would bode ill for all concerned.” A slow wide smile curled at her lips. “But I don’t think it would hurt for Miss Celine to have a few people on her side. I like the girl, and I think she deserves better from the Lady Marguerite.” Nodding she chuckled softly. “In fact, I believe ‘tis time the Lady Marguerite had a taste of her own medicine, if you get my meaning.”

In the hall outside the library Celine leaned to the wall for support. She had not intended to eavesdrop, yet now felt compelled to speak her mind, and squared her shoulders as she entered the room. “Though I fully understand your motives, I implore both of you leave this to me. I can handle the Lady Marguerite.” For a long moment she watched both women in silence. Then she gave a stiff nod, and departed the room.

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Sitting at the vanity in her room, Marguerite admired the image reflected back at her in the mirror. Her beauty amazed even her. Turning her face to better see her jaw

line, Marguerite sighed. Within her circle of friends none could compete with her. Having such beauty made for a very small circle, for few wanted to be reminded of what they lacked. It mattered little to Marguerite. The fewer people around her, the less likely anyone would outshine her. Not that many could. Although there was that one young woman who caught the eye of every rutting swain in or near Newcastle a few years back. Marguerite quickly put an end to her reign. Smiling at the memory, she peered at her reflection in contentment. She had been a difficult one to break, but in the end proved no match for Marguerite and her mother. Briers were only a small hint of what Marguerite unleashed upon her rival.

Her lips curled into a vindictive smile. Already she had dozens of things planned for Celine. By the time Marguerite was done with her, she would be thankful to have the skin on her back, and even a strand of hair to her head. The image in the silvered glass smiled back at her. If she planned right, Celine would be gone before the end of the week.

Slipping between the sheets, she snuffed the candle by her bed, and sighed contentedly as sleep took her into a world of dreams....

She was still there several hours later, when the door to her chamber quietly opened. A figure crouched on all fours. Moving carefully over the carpeted floor, the culprit clenched two small burlap bags in chattering teeth. The light of the moon became a guide. Near the four-poster, the intruder paused; assured the one in the bed slept on. With tender care the sheets were lifted. Trembling fingers reached into the first sack and retrieved the cargo within. By the time they were all snug beneath the sheets with their host, a quarter of an hour elapsed.

The person edged toward the wardrobe, and smiled as the next bag was opened. No amount of coaxing could entice hands into the sack. Instead, after shuttering, the entire bag was unceremoniously dropped into the compartment, and the door closed quickly. Relieved of the parcels, the figure took one last look at the sleeping woman in the bed. In a few hours, Marguerite Haverston would find out just what sort of things lurked in the dark corners of the barn.

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The gale that rose beyond the stone walls of the keep sent an eerie moan across the land. Its haunting sound roused Michael from his slumber. Startled, he leapt from the bed in confusion. In the depths of his soul he knew something was wrong. A sense of panic filled him. Crossing the space to

Celine's room he entered before even giving a thought of knocking. It mattered little. Again the room was empty. Celine was gone. His heart lodged in his throat. Some how he knew where she would be found, and raced from the room as if the hounds of hell nipped at his heels.

She was there, sitting on the edge of the cliffs. Pressing close to the keep, Michael peered at her for a long time. As in his dream, her hair streamed behind her, caught on the currents of the wind. The folds of a threadbare cloak tied at her throat joined in the dance. Silver beams of light caressed her face and caught the deep red of her hair. Bathed in their splendor, she seemed some phantom of the night. Yet, she exuded life from every fiber of her being. Inching closer, Michael sank to a place by the wall, nearer her, yet hidden in the shadows. Her voice drifted to him on the wind. The sadness of her words tore at his heart.

“Oh, papa. What am I supposed to do without you? You were my strength. I am alone now, and each day is a struggle. I know in my heart by refusing to sign the papers Kendall dangled before me, I was right. Yet, what price have I paid for that refusal? I am not brave. I cower at the slightest sound, certain he has come to steal me away in the night.” Picking up a stone, she cast it to the white-capped waves far below. “Every waking moment I am certain he will knock upon the door, ready to take me back to that retched place.” A long shaky sigh slipped from her lips. “And to close my eyes at night, is to know the horror of the dreams that torment me.” Her head lowered. “I fear I border on insanity, and there is no one here I can turn to.”

Closing her eyes, she was silent for a while. At last the gale subsided for several minutes. Celine reached to the stars glistening beyond the low clouds. “Oh, papa! You promised never to leave me ... yet, I am alone.” She gazed to the heavens. “There is always Jean Luc’s offer of marriage....”

She laughed and shook her head. “Nay, I am sure by now even he has given up on me. Besides, I would rather die an old maid, than marry for a title, or wealth. If there was one thing you taught me, it was never to give anything less than my best. As Jean Luc’s wife I could not have done so.” Casting several stones to the sea, she shrugged. Another soft laugh bubbled from her. “I have no doubt it would have always been a contest with Jean Luc to see who was the best dressed. You know how he loved his clothes.”

Leaning his elbow to his knee, Michael listened in fascination. Here again was a contrast between Celine and Marguerite. Material things meant everything to his betrothed. It was evident in her clothing, her jewelry and her time spent before the mirror. Yet, Celine showed no interest in such things. Michael had no doubt she once lived a life of wealth, yet, monies, titles and possessions seemed of no real value to her. He never heard her complain about the lack of things she had now. Frowning, Michael shook his head. Marguerite complained for two days after her arrival of the lack of comforts at the keep. If it wasn’t too cold, the floors were too hard, and how was she supposed to present herself with any dignity without a personal maid? Her incessant harping left Michael with a headache, and a new appreciation for the peace to be found in his rooms. Shaking his head, he gazed at Celine. She captivated his every thought, and he listened with renewed eagerness to her tale.

“I thought perhaps I would return to France. Yet the memories there are no less uplifting than here.” Solemn, she exhaled a ragged breath. “I know in my heart I would spend my days by mama’s grave, pining for the past.” Sweeping some of the tiny pebbles into her hands, she tossed them toward the moon. “Just as I would do if back at Falcon’s Ledge. I am still haunted by the vision of you being pulled from the carriage.” Tears glistened on her cheeks.

Finally she stood. Leaning out over the sea, she watched the foamy waves below. “With death my only option, I shall take it....”

The sound of her words gripped Michael in terror. As in the dream she seemed on the verge of disappearing over the crag. Rising, Michael raced from the shadows, shouting her name as he came. His body impacted with hers with such force, the scream ready on her lips was lost in a rush of air. Scooping Celine into his arms, he staggered back until the threat of falling no longer lingered. Panting from the exertion, he placed Celine to the ground by the keep, and exhaled a deep breath of relief.

Celine brought her hand against his cheek with all the force she could muster. "Again, milord, you intrude."

"I will not allow you to take your life!" He snapped, riled she would be angry he saved her.

Celine glared at him. "Not that it is any of your business, milord, but that was never my intention." It was the quick glance at her hands, which assured Michael she lied. "Even were I planning such a thing, it is none of your concern. You are not my keeper, sir!" Squaring her shoulders defiantly, she added, "This is not your battle!"

Weary, of a sudden, Michael released her. "Whose battle is it, Celine? Your father's?" He shook his head before she could answer. "Nay, for you said yourself he gave his life in this battle. Your mother's?" Again he shook his head. "Nay, I say. For I heard you lament you would pine at her grave." Locking his gaze with hers, he searched to the depths of her soul. "I am all you have, Celine! If not for me, you fight alone ... and alone you will lose!"

CHAPTER SIX

The warmth of the fire did little to take the chill from Celine. Michael's words echoed in her mind. "If not for me, you fight alone, and alone you will lose." He was right. Already verging on insanity, she was willing to take her life rather than face the asylum again. In truth, she was a coward. She doubted she could have taken that first step off the crag. What if death were not instantaneous? What if she lay broken on the rocks, death slow in taking her? Once in her youth, she saw a man who had been shot. Death took several weeks to conquer him, racking him with horrid pain. In the end, he lost what small hold on sanity he had, and babbled of fairies and sprites. Those close to him prayed God would be merciful, and take his life soon. That was not the death Celine wanted, if indeed she wanted death at all.

Gazing into the orange flames dejectedly, Celine sighed. For two years she fought the demon. Each day her spirits waned, but she never gave up hope. Why now had it left her? In part it was the life she would never have. Seeing Marguerite with her arm entwined through Michael's, waiting on the fulfillment of marriage, was something Celine would never experience. Her hatred of Robert Kendall was fueled with that knowledge. It was an emotion she was not used to. Never in her life had she succumbed to such loathing, and it left a bitter taste in her mouth. Regardless, no matter how hard she tried, she could not forgive him for the life taken, and the future she would never have. At last, exhausted, she slipped beneath the sheets and drifted to sleep. The words Michael gave as a challenge echoed in the back of her thoughts.

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At his window, Michael could not find the same rest. The thought that he almost lost her ate at him. What if next time he was too late? Just thinking of it sent an icy shiver along his spine. How could he keep Celine safe, without making her a prisoner? She had already escaped one hell; he certainly did not want to put her into another.

Again, as if just thinking of her, made her materialize, she appeared by the trees. His breath caught in his throat. Was she headed for the cliffs? This time, would she take that first step? Frantic, Michael grabbed his robe and raced through the manse. His heart pounded in his ears, and at his temples as his fear mounted.

Rounding the corner of the keep, he skidded to a stop and peered at the empty crag for several seconds. Was he too late? Had she thrown herself to the sea? "Celine!" Her name was a desperate shout into the night. Almost reluctantly, he inched toward the cliffs. What if she was there, on the rocks below? Apprehensive, Michael peered down to the white-capped waves. There was no sign of her. Yet, his trepidation did not diminish. Something was wrong; he could feel it in his bones. Again he called out to her. "Celine."

Shoulders sagging, he turned back toward the keep. For a moment he stood peering into the shadows, certain they played tricks on his vision. She was there, beside an old oak, on her knees. Michael stood watching her, uncertain whether she was once more in the grip of a nightmare, or as awake as he. She trembled as the wind swept over

the cliffs. Her hair danced across her shoulders, and in the air behind her. Eventually, Michael moved closer, and slipped his robe about her shoulders. "Celine, are you all right?"

She gave no response. Tears welled in her eyes as she scooped a handful of dirt into her fingers. The wind caught it, and sent it scattering through the night. "Who would do this?" She whispered as she continued to gaze at the ground.

Bemused by her question, Michael asked, "Who would do what, Celine?"

As if aware of him for the first time, she peered up at him with wide eyes. Sitting back on her haunches, she released a heavy sigh. "If only I had gone with him, mayhap he would still be alive." Her tears at last won the battle, and cascaded over her cheeks. "Would that I could have died with him. Then I would not have to face this emptiness." Gazing up at Michael she released a ragged breath. "He was all I had left, now I have nothing."

Sensing she spoke of her father, Michael knelt beside her and wrapped his arm about her shoulders. "I am grateful you were not with him, Celine. Let me protect you. Let me be your strength."

As if she did not hear him, she continued, "There is nothing for me here. Falcon's Ledge is merely an empty shell, a place filled with memories too painful to endure." A wistful look slipped over her. Her gaze turned to the moon. "I have decided to contact my father's barrister in London to see about selling the estate." For a moment she chewed at her lip. "'Tis not a home any more. The laughter is gone, and along with it my reason for staying."

Still uncertain whether she was caught in a nightmare, Michael urged, "Stay here with me, Celine. I will take care of you."

"Nay, Jean Luc." The mention of the other man's name stabbed at Michael like a dagger. "We have been through this. I beg you find someone worthy of your status to take to wife. I have nothing to offer you."

"I do not care that you have no money, or title, Celine. Stay here with me." Michael wanted only to placate her, yet instantly knew he meant what he said. He did not care that she had not money, or title.

Celine reached her hand to his temple. Her fingers combed through his hair. "You are too kind. Yet again I must say no." Leaning close she placed a soft kiss to his cheek. "You have been my strength this past week, in the face of your own troubles. With your father dead no more than a few months, you have carried the burdens for both of us." Her hand moved to the sturdy line of his jaw. "Thank you for everything. I beg you go back to France. Find a wife who can do honor to your name. For we both know I can never be that person." Her thumb traced a path over his lips. "I love you Jean Luc..." Michael's heart did a series of somersaults within his chest as he realized how painful it was to hear her speak those words to another. "Just not that way." Celine replaced her fingers with her lips. The feather-soft touch of her mouth to his took his breath away. It lasted only an instant before she moved backward. Then she rose, and slipped into the woods, leaving him gazing after her as she returned to the manse.

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Stretching lazily beneath the warmth of the blankets, Marguerite opened her eyes slowly. A small blurred shape, resting on her chest, caused her to cross her eyes as she focused on it. A trembling began in her feet, and crept up her legs. By the time it

reached her throat in the form of a scream, her entire body shook. It was followed by three more, all of which shook the rafters with their intensity.

The third one echoed against the walls of the room, leaving her ears ringing. Breathless, she danced against the pillows, and kicked at the linens. Only a gasp from the doorway brought her from her hysterics. The crowd amassed there was humiliating, and she squared her shoulders with indignant effrontery.

Michael pushed inward. At first, seeing nothing to warrant her actions, he stood beside Celine gazing into the room in bemusement. Another ragged scream sent him rushing toward the four-poster on the other side of the chamber. "Marguerite, for heavens' sake what has you so upset?" He barely got the question out when something moved on the bed near her feet. Another blood curdling scream was torn from her lips. Startled, Michael leaned close, and carefully lifted the blankets.

Shifting from one foot the other, Marguerite pressed harder against the headboard. "Get them out of my bed!" She hissed through gritted teeth. "Now!"

Michael pulled the covers back until they tumbled to the floor. Instantly the bed came alive with scurrying creatures, and another ear-shattering scream from Marguerite. Frantic, she leapt into Michael's embrace and wrapped her arms about his neck.

Michael stumbled backwards and nearly lost his balance as he tried to gain control. Setting her to her feet near the door, he gave her a gentle but firm shake. Then, he turned to stare at the bed where creatures scattered in every direction. A sigh escaped his lips. Reaching to scoop a small animal into his hand, he turned toward Marguerite. She in turn danced across the floor and screeched anew.

His visage mottled, Michael gazed at her in wonder. "'Tis only a field mouse, Marguerite, he will not hurt you." Her reply was to slap the small rodent from his grasp, and scream once more. "Marguerite!" He shouted over her hysteria. "You are acting ridiculous!"

Turning to face the audience in the hall, Marguerite glared at them. All but her mother hid smiles behind their hands. The thought that they were laughing at her infuriated her, and she shrieked at them. "They are vile, filthy little rodents, and I demand they are removed from my bed this instant."

A snicker came from someone in the hall, and Marguerite sneered at the group. "Do you think this funny?" She demanded. "Perhaps one of you could explain how these dirty creatures got into my bed?" Of a sudden her eyes widened as she peered at Celine in disgust. "'Twas you, wasn't it?" Shoving Grace out of the way, she inched close to Celine. "You retched little urchin. You did this, didn't you?"

Celine shook her head in adamant denial. "Though I must admit, milady, I would not have missed this moment for anything, I had nothing to do with it."

Marguerite brought her hand back, raising it above her head in her anger. It came against Celine's cheek with a resounding noise. Instantly the skin there welted. Yet Celine made no move to defend herself. That alone, infuriated Marguerite beyond self-control. Her arm rose again, ready to strike another blow.

It was seized from behind, forcing a sob from her throat. Angry that someone would dare interfere, Marguerite twisted about, her nails ready to draw blood. The color drained from her face and she felt her knees weaken. The fury she saw in Michael's eyes assured her she had once more over-stepped her bounds. Marguerite cringed beneath his glower. His nostrils flared with his ire. The pressure he applied to her wrist threatened to

snap the delicate bones there. For the first time in her life, Marguerite knew true fear.

Her body trembled beneath his deadly glare. Her lip quaked, and she sagged against him sobbing. Michael watched her sink to the floor. He hissed at her through clenched teeth. "You judge too quickly, Marguerite. Raise your hand again, and the judgment will be mine."

Aghast at his threat, Marguerite shook with rage. Pulling her hand free from his fingers, she rubbed the red area of her wrist as if to ease a pain there. "I know you are fond of her, milord. But I will not let her blind you." Staggering to her feet, she faced Celine, and sneered. "Deny it to my face, you filthy street rat. Deny you have done this!"

Celine shook her head slowly. Lifting her chin high, she squared her shoulders in defiance. "I did not have anything to do with this. I would never be so cruel and vindictive."

Chewing at her lips Grace stepped forward. She reached her hand to Marguerite's shoulder. Marguerite wrenched free, and glared at her icily. "You stay out of this!"

Clearing her throat, Agetha Cobb challenged Marguerite with an evasive question. "What reason would the Lady Celine have to do this?" Her glare was icy. Crossing her arms over her bosom, she asked the question again. "What reason would she have to do such a thing?"

Shaking with her rage, Marguerite opened her mouth in retort. "Revenge ... for the other night..." A snort from her mother halted her words. Pursing her lips, Marguerite fought for control. At last she stuttered, "She needs no reason!" Turning to Michael she sobbed, "What else am I to think, Michael? 'Tis clear she hates me ... and the mice did not come into my bed of their own accord!"

Michael closed his eyes for a moment. His fingers massaged the indentation at his temples. At last he echoed the housekeeper's question. "What reason would she have to do such a thing Marguerite?"

Incredulous that he would question her, Marguerite glared at him. "Mayhap because she is jealous of me, milord. I do not know her motives, but I am certain she has done this."

Grace stepped forward. Peering at Michael with large doe eyes, she stated softly, "I did it, m'lord. I put the mice in 'er bed."

Agetha Cobb also stepped forward. "Don't do this Grace." Her shoulders sagged. Arms akimbo, she stated in a matter-a-fact manner. "'Twas I who put the mice in her bed, milord."

Pressing through the crowd, Celine eyed both servants in dismay. "Don't do this, Grace, Aggie." Squaring her shoulders she faced Michael defiantly. "I did it, milord. I put the mice in her bed."

Both servants gazed at her in amazement. Aggie snorted. "You don't need to do this. I'll take the blame."

Grace sniffled. "Nay, I will. I put them there, and I'll not let either o' ye take the fall for me."

Folding her arms over her breasts, Aggie turned to the young lord. "Seems you have a choice, milord. Who shall you punish? For I will not take back what I have said."

Grace squared her shoulders. "Nor will I, m'lord."

Exhaling a deep breath, Celine raised her gaze to his. "Nor shall I, milord."

Marguerite peered at the three in awe. Never had she seen servants come to the defense of a complete stranger. Her own servants would never have been so foolish, or loyal. "Then there is nothing left to do, save punish all of them!" She turned to Michael, assured he would agree.

He only shook his head wearily. "Mrs. Cobb, Grace ... gather up the mice and send them back to the barn where they belong." Crossing to the door he sighed. "And make certain they do not find their way indoors again." Eying both for several seconds, he added, "Do I make myself clear?" He waited just long enough for a stiff nod from the housekeeper, before staggering down the hall toward his rooms.

Marguerite glared after him; miffed he had not taken her side. Eying Celine, she sneered, "You may have blinded him, you little whore, but I will not be as easily swayed. This is war ... and have no doubt who the victor will be!"

She turned; ready to make a grand exit, when Aggie's hand curled about her wrist. "Rest assured, milady, the mice were nothing compared to some of the things lurking in the barn. Should you insist on revenge, the next time it might well be a rat you find in your bed." She leaned close and whispered, "I've heard tell some of them are bigger than a child." Releasing her grip on Marguerite's wrist, she stepped back. A smile curled at her lips. "Then there are the bats, blood-sucking bats...." Turning toward the stairs, she squared her shoulders triumphantly, and left the Lady Marguerite and her mother gazing after her with mouths agape, and eyes wide.

Infuriated, Marguerite released a feral growl. It was her mother's hand to her wrist, which stayed her to her place. Allowing a long slow breath to ease passed her parted lips; she closed her eyes for several seconds, gaining control. The servants could be taken care of later. She dared not rile Michael with further tantrums, not now, not when her very existence relied upon this union. A smug smile curled her mouth up at the corners. War was best fought on one's own lands, and Marguerite had the stamina to ensure herself the victory.

* * * *

Weary from the day's events, Celine pressed her forehead to the cool glass of the window, and pensively watched as twilight captured the sky. Thinking back to the night passed, she sighed forlornly.

For the first time in her life, she thought of death as an answer. The fact frightened her more than Kendall ever could have.

Her knees weak, she gazed at the rocks far below, watching the waves crashing against them as she envisioned her lifeless body tossed on the currents. Wistfully she murmured, "Perhaps had I agreed to your proposal, Jean Luc, I would never have lost that which was in me before Kendall took it from me." Her voice was a whisper against the cold windowpane. Tears began to slide over her cheeks. "I thought by refusing you, and him, I would be stronger. But I am not." Lowering her head, Celine closed her eyes against the tears. "Would that I could turn back the clock, and make different choices..."

"What would you change?" His voice was a tender whisper just behind her, and Celine drew in a shaky breath as she realized she was no longer alone. Slowly she turned; peering at Michael with eyes misted with tears.

She could not speak. It tore at her heart that he should see her this way. Last night on the cliffs, he glimpsed a side that revealed her weakness. Gone was the woman who rode bareback on her mount, challenging the wind to a race over the fields near her

home. Gone, too, was the woman who knew in her heart she could face anything she put her mind to. Her lip trembled. She shook her head, unable to find the words to express her emotions.

Michael gazed at her, and searched her eyes. "In my travels, I have met many people, Celine. None quite like you. You say you are weak, and have lost that which made you the person you once were." He reached his hand to her cheek, and touched the bruise left by Marguerite that morning. "But that is not what I see when I look at you." Taking her hand in his, he raised it before her. "You asked me once what I saw when I looked at your hand." A strange pleasure raced through Celine as he held the appendage. Gazing at her long slender fingers, he sighed. "I see the hand of a woman who would not sacrifice her identity for a title, or wealth." Slowly he turned the trembling hand in his and studied the palm. "I see the hand of a woman who held to her convictions though threatened with eternal hell."

The touch of his fingers to her flesh sent darts of pleasure coursing through Celine. Her breath lodged in her throat. Unable to remove her hand from his, she relished the feel of him. With his other hand, he traced the path of a tear as it cascaded over her cheek. Fires, banked since their encounter the other night, sprang to life. She did not pull away as his mouth lowered to hers. A broken gasp escaped her throat as his lips brushed hers, wanting all he gave, and giving in return. The feel of his arms wrapped tight about her weakened her knees. Heady, as if drunk, she relished his mouth as it moved over hers. What spell had he cast over her? She could not recall any other who caused her heart to beat so wildly in her breasts. She wanted only his arms about her for eternity ... and the touch of his lips to hers until she could no longer think rationally.

His breath against her hair sent shivers along her body. "Celine, what spell have you cast over me?" He whispered, mirroring her thoughts with his words. "I wake in the night wanting to touch you, to protect you from the demons that haunt your sleep." Once more his lips found hers. "I know it sounds cruel, but I thank God you endured that hell, for it brought us together."

"Good evening, miss ..." Grace chimed as she entered the room with a tray of tea and broth. Her voice trailed off as she gazed at the lord of the keep; Celine still wrapped in his arms. A blush spread up the girl's face. Giving a quick curtsy, she murmured softly, "Beggin' yer pardon, m'lord...." Then she scurried from the room and quietly shut the door behind her.

Humiliated, Celine raised her hands to her face, feeling the heat of a blush rise in her cheeks. Michael's hand to her shoulder forced a startled gasp from her lips. Pulling away from him, Celine turned toward the window. Tears glistened on her cheeks. What had she done? He was betrothed, to be married in a few short months. Yet, she could not deny she wanted his arms about her even now.

His voice was a hoarse whisper as he touched his fingertips to her hair. "Celine...."

She dared not hear the words he was ready to speak. "Nay! Please, milord. I beg you leave me." A strangled sob slipped from her lips. "'Twas only my self pity which allowed me to put you in such a position. I...." Her body trembled. "I should not be here. 'Tis time to go, before I cause both of us more troubles...."

Placing his hand to her shoulder, Michael forcibly turned her to face him. "I kissed you. I wanted to. I cannot ... will not deny that. You stir something in me I do

not understand, Celine. I know only that you are ever in my thoughts.”

Certain he needed stop before she begged him to pull her back into his arms, Celine did the only thing she could think of to gain his attention. With all the force she could muster, she brought her hand against his cheek. “Stop it!” She begged. Her trembling fingers rose to the reddened flesh on his cheek, and she tenderly caressed the site. “This is not supposed to be. You are betrothed, and I am fleeing for my life. Please, milord, say no more. Let me leave here before we both do something we will regret.” Then she sank to the chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing.

* * * *

Stepping from her mother’s rooms, Marguerite could not hide the smile that teased her lips. Sylvia Haverston played the game many times in her youth, and knew tricks Marguerite never thought of. The revenge to be taken against Celine had to be one no one would question. Thistles and briars were meant to cause pain. What was needed now was something much more clever, something that would damage her integrity.

Making one quick stop before heading to Celine’s chambers, Marguerite rehearsed in her head what she would say. Then she moved down the hall, the plan begun, and seeds ready to be planted. At Celine’s door, she took several seconds to gain her composure. At last she lifted her hand to rap at the portal.

The surprise was evident in Celine’s face as she peered at Marguerite with raised brows. A bit apprehensive, she stepped aside to allow Marguerite entrance. “Milady, is there something I can do for you?” Her voice was laced with trepidation.

Marguerite reached for the bruise on Celine’s cheek, yet her fingers fell short as Celine drew away. Gazing at her for a moment, Marguerite frowned. Then slowly, she reached to touch the area once more. A long dejected sigh passed her lips as Celine yet again moved out of reach. “I have such a terrible temper.” Her shoulders sagged. “I know you must hate me for all I have done to you.” Lowering her head to appear contrite, she added, “I would, were I you.”

Celine watched her from the corner of her eye. “What do you want, milady?”

Passing her tongue over her lips, Marguerite seemed to force her gaze to meet Celine’s. “ ’Tis hard for me to face what I have done to you. I know I have treated you with nothing but contempt.” Her gaze lowered once again. “I wish to express my deepest apologies.”

Her doubt was clear as Celine peered at her with furrowed brows. “You are apologizing to me?” She stepped back several feet, cautious. Over her shoulder, she asked, “And might I know what inspired such a thing?”

Crossing to her, Marguerite caught her reflection in the mirror. “In truth I have been jealous of you since arriving here. I see the way Michael looks at you....” She cleared her throat. “He does not look at me that way.” They were the first words out of her mouth that bore truth. “I have never had anyone challenge my domain before. Yet, you do so without even being aware of it.” Practiced tears crowded at the corners of her eyes. “Apologies do not come easily to me, and this is difficult.” Finally she stepped before Celine and gazed directly into her eyes. “Please forgive me. I know you have done nothing to warrant my hatred, and I only want to make things right between us.”

Celine pursed her lips. “I am no threat to you.” She avowed. “What you perceive is not true.”

Marguerite shook her head. “I know that. I have been such a fool. Forgive me.”

Reaching to her throat, she played for a moment with the clasp of a beautiful necklace. "I want you to have this." She held the jewelry before Celine. "'Tis one of my most treasured possessions."

Celine put her hand up and spread the fingers, as if warding off the suggestion. "I would not dream of taking such a thing from you, milady. Your apology is quite enough."

Marguerite could not hide the look of disbelief that crept over her face. She would never have turned down such a gift. Leaning to take Celine's hand, she placed the necklace in the palm, and curled Celine's fingers about it. "I insist. Please, it would help mend my guilt at the way I have treated you."

Celine opened her hand slowly. The necklace sparkled in the candlelight. A large sapphire shone azure blue from a nest of diamonds. The chain was made with small sapphires and diamonds, alternating from the larger gem to the clasp. Celine's hand traveled to her cheek, tenderly tracing the bruises there. She shook her head once more. "Nay, milady, I can not accept this."

Marguerite backed away. Defiantly she squared her shoulders. "I will not take it back. 'Tis yours." A smile crept over her lips. "Words are difficult. Let the necklace speak for me. I want us to be friends, Celine. Please take it and know how sincerely sorry I am." Then she turned and nearly ran from the room, leaving Celine gazing after her in awe.

* * * *

Mrs. Beech walked around Celine and smiled in approval. "I knew the green would be lovely on you." Reaching to the sleeve, she adjusted its length. "With your red hair and fair skin, the color is quite becoming."

Celine had to agree. Gazing at herself in the mirror, she smiled. It had been a long time since she wore anything so lovely. The collar was high, fanning in tight ruffles up the sides of her throat, and back of her neck. The cut of the gown was straight against her bosom, flattening her breasts to her ribs. It tapered over her waist where folds of material gathered to drop over a farthingale, which added volume to her hips and backside. A lace collar had been added to the bodice, draping over her shoulders and down the front of the gown toward her waist. The sleeves were puffed to add the illusion of fullness to her arms, and then cut tight against her wrists.

For a moment Celine admired the craftsmanship of the gown. Eventually she exhaled a heavy sigh, and faced Mrs. Beech with sad eyes. "Mrs. Beech, it is by far the most lovely gown I have ever worn. But it is much too extravagant."

"Nonsense!" The older woman snorted. "You'll want to look your best for the ball...."

Celine gave her a sidelong glance. "We both know the Lady Marguerite's invitation was based solely on the knowledge I would not be able to attend. Besides," She shook her head. "...I have no business going to such an event." For a moment caught in the fantasy, Celine reached for the necklace

Marguerite gave her that morning. Wistfully she held it to her throat. "Though I must admit it does feel good to hold the fantasy for a few minutes."

The seamstress sucked her breath in between her teeth. "Glory, ain't that most beautiful thing you ever did see?"

A frown furrowed the small lines at Celine's brow. "Aye 'tis lovely, isn't it. The

Lady Marguerite gave it to me this morn, as an apology for her actions of late.” Still suspicious of Marguerite’s generosity, Celine curled her fingers about the necklace, and added dryly, “Such finery would do me little good as a governess, or scrubwoman.”

“What finery?” A familiar voice called from the door.

Instantly Celine’s pulse beat faster in her breasts. Turning, she peered at Michael as her breath caught in her throat. “Milord, I did not hear you come in.” A strange sensation came over her. Suddenly certain the necklace in her hand was trouble; Celine tucked it into the folds of the gown.

“Madam,” He croaked, “You are breathtaking.”

Blushing at the compliment, Celine lowered her face. “And you are either completely blind, or far too kind, milord.” Celine barely noticed the old seamstress as she quietly left the room. A shiver traveled the length of Celine’s spine when she realized they were alone. Far too close to Michael, she backed toward the window, nervous of a sudden at his presence.

He followed, and trapped her to the corner. A smile curled at his lips. “I have paid a handsome price for the work Mrs. Beech has done, and will not have you refusing the gowns.”

Feeling the heat of his nearness, Celine tried to slip passed him, yet found the simple task impossible. Flustered by the hunger she saw in his eyes, she kept her gaze to the floor. “Though I must admit Mrs. Beech’s talents are extraordinary,” she brushed the soft material, “They will not be very practical once I find work.”

Michael wove his fingers in the stiff collar at her throat. “Mrs. Beech has done a wonderful job. ‘Tis enjoyable to see you so richly adorned.” A crooked grin played at his lips. “Though I must admit the nightgowns also had advantages.” A soft blush fussed Celine’s cheeks at the memory of her body pressed to his in passion.

Her voice was shaky as she tried to take his mind from their encounter the other night. “Neither will be very practical in my search for employment. One would be far too costly for work as a scrubwoman, and the other far too inappropriate.”

Slipping his fingers beneath her chin, Michael tilted her head until she looked at him. “A scrubwoman?” He frowned. “Is that what you aspire to be, Celine?”

Stubbornly, she asked, “Is there something wrong with such work, milord? It is honest labor, and I am not afraid to roll up my sleeves.”

Laughing, Michael peered at her in amusement. “You are far too beautiful to be scrubbing floors....” His head moved forward, lips slightly parted.

Sensing his intent, Celine ducked beneath his arm, and moved from the corner. Her heart raced in her breast. To allow him to touch her would ignite passions she was not certain she could bank. “Regardless, milord, I cannot accept the gown.”

“You will, even if I have to keep you prisoner here until you see the folly of your ways.” The lines at the corners of his eyes assured Celine he teased.

Eager to lighten the somber mood she found herself in Celine ceded to his wit. “That is the only way I shall change my mind.” A soft laugh passed her lips.

He chuckled. “’Tis good to hear you laugh, Celine. You should do so more often.” He tilted his head, as if contemplating an idea. “Yes, and the gown will do quite nicely to help you on your way to your recovery. You will be the envy of every woman at the ball tomorrow night....”

Celine felt the blood slowly slip from her cheeks. “No! I have no business

there.”

Michael’s hand caressed her cheek. “You have just as much right as any other....”

His touch sent waves of pleasure through Celine. Still she refused to be swayed by the warmth of his hand. “Have you lost your senses, milord?” Her tone was snide, angry.

Michael peered at her with raised brows. He lowered his mouth toward hers. “I want you to go, Celine.”

Knowing she would not be able to stay strong in the face of his attack, she pulled away. Twisting about in his arms, she presented him her back. Her voice was ragged with emotion as she asked, “And how would you introduce me, milord?” Tears rolled silently down her cheeks. Hurting him was never her intention, but he was talking irrationally, and she needed to stop this insanity.

“Wouldn’t you give everyone a tidbit to chew when you arrive with Marguerite on one arm, and me on the other.”

The color drained from his face, and he lowered his hand from Celine’s hair. For several seconds he stood before her, his jaw clenched, and a feral look in his blue eyes. At last, defeated, he murmured, “No ... I do not suppose that would be acceptable.” Then he left her, his shoulders sagging like a child being punished.

* * * *

Standing in the great hall several moments later, Celine gazed at a portrait above the fireplace. The man was rugged, with the good looks of his son. The woman at his side was petit and stunningly beautiful. Her eyes were the same deep blue of Michael’s. Yet, it was not the woman herself who captured Celine’s attention, but the jewelry adorning her neck. A cold feeling settled in the pit of Celine’s stomach. The necklace was the same one Marguerite had given her earlier. Trembling fingers touched the base of her throat as she gazed at the portrait. Panic welled within her. What trick had Marguerite played on her?

Crossing from the library, Grace cocked her head and peered at Celine questioningly. “Is somethin’ wrong, miss?”

Her jaw tight, Celine nodded toward the painting. “The Lord and Lady Aberdeen?” She asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Aye.” Grace agreed. “’Twas done for their twentieth wedding anniversary.”

“And the necklace?” Celine queried innocently, “It is Lady Aberdeen’s?”

Smiling, Grace nodded. “Aye. “’Tis one o’ ‘er most treasured possessions. ‘Twas a gift on ‘er weddin’ night from ‘is lordship.” Snorting, she added snidely, “Been ‘anded down fer generations. The Lady Marguerite ‘ill probably take possession o’ it when she becomes the next Lady Aberdeen.”

Celine felt the blood run cold in her veins. “Does the Lady Marguerite know that?”

Shrugging in thought, Grace shook her head. “I don’t think so, though I can’t say fer sure. Lady Aberdeen left it ‘ere, afraid it might get lost in London, but I can’t recall ‘er mentionin’ anything ‘bout it ter Lord Aberdeen the younger.”

Fighting the bile threatening to rise in her throat, Celine asked hoarsely, “The necklace does not belong to Marguerite now?”

Again Grace shook her head. “Not unless ‘is lordship give it ter ‘er recently.” She huffed. “But knowin’ that un, she’d o’ not kept it a secret.”

Feeling weak of a sudden, Celine released a ragged breath. "Forgive me Grace, I am in need of rest...." The maid reached for her, eager to help, but Celine pulled away as if burned. "Nay. Please leave me be. I shall be fine...." Then, she stumbled to the stairs, and mounted them on shaking knees.

* * * *

Michael stood at the door, watching Marguerite brush her hair with long patient strokes. It shone blue-black as the light from the window danced over it, and Michael had to admit the ebony tresses

captivated him. Crossing to her, he leaned and placed a tender kiss to her shoulder, wanting to rid the image of Celine from his mind.

As if startled by his entrance, Marguerite gasped. Still in her nightgown, she brought her hand to the low cut of the bodice, covering the swell of her breasts. "Milord, I was not expecting you."

Forcing his thoughts from Celine, he filled his gaze with the rise of Marguerite's breasts. Michael leaned closer. "You look quite lovely this afternoon, Marguerite. You near take my breath away." She was beautiful, and it would be easy to erase Celine from his mind if he tried. Reaching for her hand, he lowered it slowly to her side, allowing him the view he sought. Perhaps in taking Marguerite now, he would banish Celine from his thoughts. Slowly his hand slipped beneath the material of her gown. It moved over her breasts, cupping each and kneading the flesh. Capturing a nipple between his forefinger and thumb, he teased it until it grew taut.

Relaxing against his chest, Marguerite purred. "Oh, Michael, I have wished for this moment."

Moving before her, Michael pushed the vanity away, and leaned to touch his lips to her throat. She craned her neck, allowing him access. His mouth inched toward her breast. Releasing his grasp on the soft mound, he gently pulled the material down to free the pale orb. Marguerite released a ragged breath from her lungs as his lips replaced his hand. His tongue flicked over a hard point.

In Michael's mind, her features formed: soft rosebud lips, and pert nose, deep green eyes surrounded by rich auburn hair. Her name rose toward his lips, ready to be whispered against the softness of her skin. As happened the other night, the reality of where his mind wandered sent a shock through his body. The hunger in him ebbed. Pushing from Marguerite, he nearly tripped over his feet as he put some distance between them. His breath ragged, he stood gazing out the window for several seconds before he found the strength to speak. "Forgive me, Marguerite. I am eager for this marriage to take place, but will hold myself in check until the vows are spoken." In his mind he prayed he would be able to thrust Celine from his thoughts before her name was uttered at a most inopportune moment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A light breeze wafted from the sea. It beckoned Celine, who stood on the cliffs content to feel the wind through her hair. A full silver moon glowed from high above. Celine relished the peace to be found on the crag. Here she could clear her head, and enjoy much needed time alone. Sitting, she drew her knees to her chest, and relaxed her chin against their bend. The burdens on her this night were great, and she closed her eyes as the weight of them became more than she could bear.

The hairs at her nape bristled, and alerted her to his presence. Celine stiffened. With Michael close, she would not find the peace she craved. She did not understand the feelings he evoked. His mere presence sent her heart beating chaotically in her breast.

"Celine?" His voice scratchy, Michael cleared his throat before continuing. "May I join you for a moment?" Not waiting for an answer, he lowered himself to the spot beside her. With one leg stretched before him, and the other drawn up, as Celine's was, he leaned an elbow to the ground and peered at her for a long time.

She forced herself not to look at him. Her heart was already doing a trip-hammer rhythm and she knew to glance his way would be her undoing. "You wanted something, milord?" Her voice was stony, and she fought to keep it thus.

Reaching to her shoulder, his fingers traced a slow path over her flesh. "What strange spell have you cast over me, Celine? You are ever in my thoughts, my dreams." He moved closer. His breath came against her ear. "Even before going to your room, I knew I would find you here." His forefinger circled the indentation at the base of her throat.

Celine closed her eyes, enjoying his caresses. Yet, she was afraid to let them continue. "Milord, you and I travel a dangerous path." Drawing in a ragged breath as his fingers moved against her, she tried to calm the wild beating of her heart. "I am grateful for everything you have done" A slow hiss slipped from her lips as he brushed her ear with a soft kiss. "But we both know it is time I leave. The Lady Marguerite will not be tolerant forever." Exhaling a deep breath she lowered her head. His touch was breaking down her resolve much quicker than she expected. He was far too close! Celine could not breathe. Nearing panic, she rose and hastily put some distance between them.

Michael sighed. "You are so beautiful." He stood, and moved nearer.

Celine sidestepped his outstretched hand. "Please, milord, this is difficult enough without your distractions." She faced the raging sea. "In the face of all you have done, asking for a small loan near tears me apart. Yet, I have no funds to secure lodgings in Newcastle...."

Michael stepped behind her. His voice was a whisper next to her ear. "If I pretend not to hear your words, will you then forget this folly of leaving?"

"Nay, milord, I cannot! I must leave here...."

"Why?" She felt him advance, until his body barely brushed hers. "I cannot bear the thought of you leaving."

Wanting to be free of his touch, she tried to slip passed him. He wrapped his

arms about her waist and trapped her. Celine fought the trembling that threatened. Attempting to prove he did not affect her, she stated, "There is nothing in England for me. I had thought I might return to France...."

The warmth of his mouth at the nape of her neck caused her much discomfort. "Nothing?" He whispered.

Her knees weak, Celine shook her head in denial. "Nothing!"

"What of me?" Michael gently turned her about in his arms. "You deny it with your words, but what of your lips?" He gave her no pause before lowering his mouth to hers. His tongue played a game of tag with hers, tasting, arousing, and igniting fires. At last he lifted his mouth. "Nay, Celine, they do not speak the same. In them there is passion beyond anything I have ever known." A blush fussed her cheeks as he whispered, "Tell me you feel nothing when my lips are on yours? Tell me the passions I feel when your body is pressed to mine are only imagined."

"It does not matter, milord, whether they are real or imagined. You are betrothed, and I am haunted by what has passed. There can be nothing between us."

Michael searched her eyes. "Do you think it that simple, Celine? Mayhap you can leave here and never dwell on the feelings between us, but I cannot. The thought of you leaving scares me more than anything I have faced in my life." Reaching for her hand, he brought it to the scar on his cheek. "I nearly lost my life some years ago. I wear this scar as a reminder of how close I came to death. Yet, even the memory of that does not frighten me as much as the thought of losing you."

Hoping to take his mind off the present, that she might regain some control, Celine traced her fingers over the jagged scar, and asked, "Would you tell about it?"

He frowned. "I will if only to make you understand why we should be together." For a long moment he studied her features. At last he released her. Turning his back to her, he lowered his head. "As I said in the forest the other night, hell has many ways to torment us, Celine." Michael raked his fingers through his hair. "The only child my parents were blessed with, I wanted for nothing in my youth. Yet, it was never enough. Gambling became my favorite pastime. I didn't care if I won or lost, it was the thrill involved; the uncertainty, the risk."

He faced Celine. "One night, with nothing left to my name, I bet the keep." His gaze moved to the stone fortress behind him. "I lost." For a moment he chewed at his lower lip. "The man who won was a stranger to these climes. He was infuriated when he discovered he had no more claim to Brier Point, than I. My father held title here, and refused to honor the bet. The keep, he said was never mine to use as collateral. Whatever I owed, was to be taken out of what I had ... which was nothing, save my stupidity." His fingers moved over the puckered skin at his cheek. His voice lowered. "The man beat me into unconsciousness." Returning his gaze to Celine, he murmured, "I blamed my father. The hatred I carried for him could not be eased." A long sigh slipped from him. "One night, in a drunken rage, I stood before his door and challenged him to a duel. He laughed at me, told me to sober up, and then grow up." Michael watched the waves crash on the rocks below. "I demanded he give me satisfaction. Eventually he agreed. My pistol misfired. The shot went through my cheek. Months of agonizing pain followed." He sighed. "When I was well, my father banished me from the keep." Michael pursed his lips. "I had no money, no lodgings, nothing. I refused to grovel to him. For nearly four months I lived on the streets, fighting dogs for food." Gazing at

Celine he released a heavy sigh. "One morning I woke and took a long look at who and what I had become. I crawled on my knees before my father, and begged his forgiveness."

Celine frowned. "We are alike aren't we, milord? We've both overcome adversity."

Michael reached for her hands. "Mayhap that is why I find myself so drawn to you, Celine." He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. Looking at her, a strange glimmer sparkled in his eyes. "I can't lose you. In fact, refuse to let that happen." Almost excitedly, he continued, "I have a home in London ... not as big as the keep, but quite comfortable."

For a moment Celine thought he was willing to give up his life here for her. She gazed at him in amazement. As the meaning of his words sank in, her shoulders sagged in dejection. "I would keep you there, with anything you might need. We could share time together, when the stresses of this place have become too much. When Marguerite has become a burden on my shoulders."

Celine turned toward the sea. Was he asking her to be his mistress? Fighting the urge to spit at him, she closed her eyes. "I would be a succor for you? Is that what you are saying?"

"It would be so much more than that Celine. I would treat you as a queen. There is nothing I would not do for you."

"Except give me your name." Celine whispered beneath her breath. She fought the trembling that threatened to consume her. How could she have thought he would give up everything for her? She could offer him nothing, save herself. She had no money, no title, and no possessions. Unlike the Lady Marguerite, she had only the warmth of her embrace. Struggling to maintain her composure, Celine clasped her hands together until the knuckles whitened. At last she spoke. Even as she said the words, a feeling of despair swept over her. "It is something I shall have to think on, milord." Could she truly become his mistress? A voice in the recesses of her mind quietly answered yes. Celine released a ragged sigh. "I beg you leave me, milord, that I might have time to consider what you suggest."

Leaning close, Michael pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder. "I shall eagerly await your answer."

* * * *

Trembling fingers lifted to the door and rapped lightly. Within, Celine could hear heavy snoring, and she chewed at her lips. The hour was nearing three in the morning, and though she hated to wake the housekeeper, she knew no other course to take. Beyond the portal a snort was heard, and Celine lifted her fingers to rap once more. At last she heard the other woman lift her body from the bed, which groaned with her movements.

"For heaven's sake, I'm coming." Aggie murmured sleepily. "If the house isn't burning to the ground, this won't be important enough." Throwing the door open, she peered at Celine in surprise.

Attempting to gain control over her emotions, Celine sniffled, and wiped at the tears glistening on her cheeks. "Mrs. Cobb ... Aggie, I need someone to talk to, please."

Her visage downtrodden, Aggie slipped her hand to Celine's arm, and gently guided her into the room. "Of course, dear. Never you mind the ravings of an old

woman. Come sit by the fire, and I'll heat water for tea while you tell me what has you so upset."

Celine chewed at her lip. A new round of sobs racked her. The housekeeper wrapped her arm about the younger woman's shoulders comfortingly. "Here now, it can't be all that bad. Better to get it out rather than dwell on it."

Celine drew in a slow breath. "First I must thank you and Grace for what you did for me the other morning." Another snuffle escaped her throat. "I am deeply touched that you would risk so much for me. It has been a long time since I have known such friendship."

Shrugging, Aggie queried, "Still don't understand why you took the blame. Grace and I were just making sure that spoiled brat understood she did not have the upper hand. How can you let that conniving little witch get away with what she is doing to you?"

"In part I am to blame." Celine interjected. "Had I realized how jealous she has become, I could easily have avoided this mess long before it became a problem." She shook her head before continuing. "I have become a threat, and should have seen the signs."

"I should think the thistles were sign enough." Aggie snorted.

Celine could not help but laugh. "They are still a painful reminder." Sobering, she added, "Had I left when first she bared her claws, most of this could have been avoided." She sighed. "As I said, in part the blame is mine." The burdens on her shoulders were great, and she peered up at the housekeeper sadly. "Now I find myself in a bit of a quandary, and I see no easy way out of it." Forcing her gaze to meet the other woman's, she whispered. "He has asked me to be his mistress, Aggie. To live in his home in London." Ashamed, Celine turned toward the fire, hoping the heat would hide the blush that rose in her cheeks.

For a moment the elderly housekeeper was silent. "I see." Aggie finally mumbled. "And what did you answer?"

"I gave none." Celine whispered. "I told him I would have to think on it."

Aggie perused Celine carefully. "Would that be so bad? I have no doubt he would treat you with the deepest respect."

Surprised by the housekeeper's willingness to accept such a proposal, Celine peered at her with wide eyes. "'Twas not exactly what I dreamed of growing up." Her shoulders sagged.

Shrugging, Aggie pulled the teakettle from the fire, and poured water into two small cups. "'Tis quite common. And in most cases the mistress is adorned with far more attention than the bride." Stirring her tea, she asked, "Are you considering it?"

Celine pursed her lips in thought. "I don't know. There is something about him that makes my heart beat wildly in my breast. The thought of never seeing him again frightens me. Yet, the thought of being his mistress leaves a bitter taste in my mouth." Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. "I am confused, Aggie, and know not in which direction to turn."

"Aye," The older woman nodded. "Love has that affect on people."

"Love?" Celine shook her head as if to deny the accusation. "I have only known him a few weeks."

Sipping at her tea, Aggie asked, "Is there some law that says you can only love

after a year?" She shook her head in answer to her question. "Some things are simply meant to be. And I can see by the look in your eyes, deary, you are completely in love." She sighed. "No wonder his offer stings so. To see him with Marguerite on his arm must be a painful cross to bear."

Celine lowered her gaze to her hands. Quietly she whispered, "I can not stay here. To be what he wants would destroy what little pride I have left." She peered up at Aggie imploringly. "Please, help me find a way to leave. Let him seek out another's arms for his succor." Her voice rose with the fear she felt at her decision. "I cannot be that person."

Patting Celine's hand, Aggie gave her a soft smile. "Now deary, let's not rush into this. Mayhap he feels the same. Men are a stubborn lot. Sometimes it takes getting hit on the head to see the folly of their ways. Give him a little time. If he feels the same, he'll come round soon enough." She leaned and took the cup from Celine's trembling fingers. "Come on, love, back to bed with you." She gave Celine's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "If he hasn't come round by the end of the week, then I'll do whatever I can to help you leave here. But give him a chance. I have a feeling you might be surprised."

* * *

Michael sank into the hot water and closed his eyes. For a long moment he enjoyed the heat as it soaked into his flesh. Tensions eased. The knowledge that Celine would not leave lifted the stress from his shoulders. Though she had not said yes, neither had she said no. Marguerite might carry his name, give him heirs, but Celine would carry his heart. For a long time he relished the feel of the water against his skin. It reminded him of Celine's touch, soft and soothing. His mind drifted to their kiss, and the passions she evoked in him. Content, his lips curled into a smile.

"I see by the look you're wearing, you have her on your mind." Aggie snorted, her arms folded across her chest.

Sliding lower in the tub, Michael instinctively covered his hands over his manhood, embarrassed by the housekeeper's intrusion. "Mrs. Cobb, you have me at a disadvantage. As you can see, my smile is the only thing I am wearing. Perhaps we can continue this conversation after I have dressed."

"You haven't got anything I haven't seen before. Changed and bathed you when you were a babe. Know what's there." She plopped on a stool next to the tub.

Uncomfortable, Michael glared at her. "That may well be, but I would prefer to finish whatever you wish to talk about at another time."

Shrugging, Aggie replied tartly, "We'll finish it now. Mayhap if you are trapped in that tub, you won't be as likely to run from the tongue lashing I plan to give you."

Finally, acquiesce to her stubbornness, Michael nodded in defeat. "Very well than, what has brought you here with such spit and fire?"

"You think you are quite smug, don't you, milord?" She eyed him down the length of her nose. "Got everything worked out. Gonna have your wife on one arm, and your mistress on the other."

Michael peered at her aghast. He never expected Celine to mention the arraignments to another, and felt a bit of shame.

"That what you want, milord, a wife and a whore?" His face mottled red, yet she continued. Flustered, Michael answered, "It was never my intention to make her a..." He could not say the word, and let the sentence trail off.

“Make her what, milord, your whore?” Aggie cut him off. “It’s what she’ll be, a whore!” She stressed the word, almost spitting it at him.

“Stop it!” Nearly forgetting his lack of attire, he half rose from the tub, angry at her choice of words.

Aggie seemed unaffected by his wrath. “That is what everyone will call her. Whore. It near breaks my heart to think of the life she’ll live. While the Lady Marguerite is here attending balls and the like, Miss Celine will not even be able to hold her head high in the market place.” She glared at him. “And God help her should she take your seed in her belly. A whore and a bastard ... with everything they need in your home in London ... except a name!”

Michael was appalled at her lack of discretion. “That is quite enough, Mrs. Cobb! I will not allow you to speak of her in such a way.”

“In what way, milord? I’m just saying it as it is. Calling a cat a cat, so to speak. I won’t be the last. No matter how angry you get, there will always be whispers behind her back.”

The pounding headache Michael fought the day before returned, and he rubbed at his temples. Exhaling a ragged breath, he asked feebly, “Why are you doing this? Celine and I should be the ones working this out.”

“Aye that you should. Except you have the poor dear confused. She doesn’t know which direction to turn in. Being blindly in love will do that. She’s ready to say yes, just to be near you. She’s willing to give up the chance at happiness with another.” Shaking her head, Aggie pointed her finger at him. “At least give her that, milord. Let her leave here. Mayhap she’ll find one to return her love, one who won’t be afraid to give her his name.” Standing she peered at him with squinted eyes. “She’s been through so much already, milord. Let her leave here with her dignity.” Crossing to the door she paused. “And I’ll leave you with a bit of fat to chew. Of all she has endured, what you have placed on her shoulders is the worst. It tears me apart to see her in such anguish. If you were half the man I think you have become, you’d take the choice from her.” Over her shoulder she stated softly, but firmly, “What you’ve asked of her is far more painful than the briers the Lady Marguerite stabs her with.” Then she was gone, and Michael sat in the tub until the water grew cold.

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Celine fingered the necklace for several seconds. She made up her mind through the long hours of the night, to return it. But how? Were she to go to Michael with it, would he believe her story? Her shoulders sagged, and she sighed. It did not matter any way. Her mind was set to leave Brier Point. She could not trust herself to be alone with Michael, and was too weary to defend herself against Marguerite’s jealousy. She would return the necklace, and leave tonight while they attended the ball. It would be better this way. Facing Michael, saying good-bye might well prove her undoing. One touch from his tender fingers, and she might cede to his wishes and take him up on the house in London.

Knowing Michael would be occupied with his morning toilet and bath, Celine slipped quietly from her room. She headed toward the wing Marguerite and her mother shared, where the master’s chambers were located. At the portal she sought, she tried to slow the frantic beating of her heart. By this time tomorrow, she would be in Newcastle, and Michael Aberdeen would be in the past.

Her fingers shook as she closed the door behind her. Searching the room, Celine sighed in relief to find a large jewelry box on the vanity. With trembling hands, she lifted the lid. The necklace slipped from the folds of her gown, and she held it forward, ready to drop it into the box. Before she could release it, the hairs at her nape bristled, alerting her to his presence. Still holding the necklace in her fingers, Celine turned toward the door. The color drained from her face as she stared in stunned surprise at Michael.

For a moment there was silence between them. Michael's gaze moved from the necklace to the woman holding it. "Celine?" His voice was hoarse, filled with disbelief. "What are you doing?"

Like a child caught in the act of something bad, her arm slipped to her side, in an attempt to hide the necklace. She was aware how this looked. He hardly knew her. It would be pointless to argue her innocence. Finally she turned back to the jewelry box, and held the necklace over it. Gravity pulled it from her hand, and it slipped noiselessly into the satin-lined chest. The lid closed over it, sealing her secret in its soft interior. It took all her inner strength to face Michael. She could not speak, and silence hung heavy in the air.

Michael clenched his jaw. Again he questioned her. "Celine, I would have an explanation."

"I was returning it..." Even to her own ears the statement sounded ridiculous, and her shoulders drooped with the hopelessness of the situation.

"Tell me what I see is not the case." He asked with ragged emotion. "Tell me you are not stealing from me."

His words may as well have been a physical slap, they stung so badly. Chewing at her lower lip, Celine gazed at him with wide eyes. "Is that what you think, milord? Do you think I would repay your kindness by doing such a thing?"

His voice rose in pitch. "Then give me an explanation. Tell me what I see is not so. Tell me why I find you in my mother's chambers, with her necklace in your hand?"

For an instant she thought to tell him the truth, but discarded the idea quickly. It would be her word against Marguerite's. If Michael were forced to choose between them, Celine doubted he would side with her. Marguerite was his betrothed, and his loyalties would remain with her. Swallowing hard, Celine shook her head. "I cannot, milord. For there is nothing I can say which will change the judgment you have already cast." Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. "If you truly believe what your eyes see, than there is no point in arguing." Standing tall, she squared her shoulders in a last attempt at bravado. Her body trembled as she moved passed him. "Now if you will excuse me, I shall be in my room if you should choose to have the magistrate sent for."

* * * *

Aggie placed a damp cloth to Celine's brow. "Here now, tell me what happened. I've never seen you so upset."

With blood shot eyes Celine peered at the older woman for a long time. "Oh, Aggie, I have been such a fool. This time she has dug her claws in so deep, I may never recover from the wound."

"What happened dear?" The housekeeper queried.

Celine rolled her head to the side and sobbed. "Yester morn, the Lady Marguerite came to me full of apologies." Wiping at the tears against her cheeks, she drew in a ragged breath. "I should have known she was up to something. I did not see her

deception until it was too late.” Seeking understanding she looked deep into Aggie’s eyes. “She gave me a necklace ... a large sapphire surrounded by diamonds.” She watched the housekeeper’s eyes widen. “I tried to refuse it, but she would not hear of it. She said it was a gift to make amends for the way she has treated me.” Celine peered at the older woman in desperation. “I swear on my life, I did not steal it. He has done so much for me. Why would I do something so foolish?” Fretful, she twisted her hands. “God’s truth, I did not realize what she did until I saw the necklace on the Lady Aberdeen’s portrait in the hall.” Burying her face in the pillow, she mumbled as she peered at Aggie with one eye. “I thought if I could return the necklace before it was missed ... oh, Aggie, if you had seen the look in his eyes when he caught me in his mother’s room....”

Shaking her head, the housekeeper frowned. “Why didn’t you come to me? I could have helped.”

Pulling the pillow over her face, Celine sobbed. “You and Grace have already done so much for me. I could not involve you in this.”

“Did you think to tell him the truth?” Aggie pried.

“What good would it have done? He caught me with the necklace in my hand, over his mother’s jewelry box. The judgment he cast was clear in his eyes. Besides,” she croaked, “It would only mean a confrontation with Marguerite. It would come down to my word against hers. I have no doubt who would win.”

Aggie pursed her lips in contemplation. “Mayhap ‘tis time for a confrontation. The longer you let this go on, the worse it will be.”

Celine shook her head. “Nay. I will not be responsible for a rift between she and Michael. Let her win Aggie. I am too tired to fight her, and it would gain me nothing even if I did. He made it quite clear last night how he feels about me.” At last the tears freed themselves from her eyes and traveled over her cheeks. “I am suitable for a mistress, but not a wife.”

* * * *

Spreading the linens over the bed, Aggie snorted in disgust. “I’m telling you Grace, ‘tis a terrible mess. I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

In the hall Michael paused, not intending to listen to their conversation, but eager to enter his rooms. About to clear his throat to alert them to his presence, he stepped closer. Yet when Celine’s name was mentioned, he slipped back into the shadows beyond the door, and cocked his head curiously.

“Poor Miss Celine has begged me help her leave.” Aggie sighed remorsefully. “’Tis too much for her right now.”

Grace shook her head. “Ow can ‘is lordship be so blind? I’ve known the girl only a few weeks and I canna imagine ‘er takin’ the necklace.” Folding her arms over her breasts, she huffed. “There must be a ‘undred things in this ‘ouse what she could ‘ave taken which were easier ter trade, and not as likely ter be missed. Why take a necklace what would be remembered by anyone she tried ter sell it ter?” Exhaling slowly she queried, “Surely ‘is lordship must realize ‘ow absurd the whole thing be.”

Aggie huffed indignantly. “She’s been with me several times when the tinker came round, or a farmer was paid for his wares. Knows just where I keep the monies for the kitchen. There wasn’t any reason to take the necklace.” Drawing in a heavy breath, she sighed. “How can she expect his lordship to side with her? Marguerite is his

betrothed.” In the hall Michael’s brows rose in bemusement. What did any of this have to do with Marguerite?

Grace curled her lip contemptuously. “She’s evil that un is. I thought she ‘ad shown ‘er true colors wit ‘em briers. That were just a taste o’ what she ‘ad up ‘er sleeve.” Her shoulders sagged. “She ain’t goin’ ter stop till Miss Celine be gone from ‘ere, I can guarantee that.” A deep sigh slipped from her throat. “So what are we goin’ ter do, Aggie?”

The older woman puffed her cheeks. For a moment she was silent. Then, releasing the air, she peered at the younger woman through squinted eyes. “I don’t know exactly. But we’ve got to make certain Miss Celine does not leave until we’ve had a chance to straighten this whole thing out. Mayhap if we put our heads together, we can come up with something to spoil Marguerite’s plans. She has to reveal her true colors to his lordship, for he won’t believe us, that’s for sure.” She huffed again. “And Miss Celine is willing to take the blame rather than cause a riff between his lordship, and his betrothed.”

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Idly, Michael scratched his chin as he gazed at the portrait of his parents in the hall. Deep in thought he seemed oblivious to Marguerite perusing him from across the room. His arms folded over his chest for several seconds, and he seemed to talk to himself.

Intrigued, Marguerite crossed to him and peered at him quizzically. “Milord is aught amiss?”

Still mumbling to himself, he queried, “Where could you be?” His head tilted to the side as he gazed at the portrait.

Marguerite eyed him curiously. “I am right here milord.”

As if realizing she was beside him of a sudden, Michael peered at her in surprise. “Marguerite, I did not realize you were here.”

She gave him a crooked smile, a bit perplexed by his statement. “Were you not talking to me just now?”

“Huh?” Still gazing at the picture he shook his head.

“Milord?” Marguerite cocked her head and peered at him in confusion. “What has captured your attention so?”

At last Michael faced her. “’Tis nothing. I have misplaced something, ‘tis all.”

Following his gaze to the portrait, Marguerite studied it for several seconds. Eventually her eyes lit on the necklace, and a shiver of triumph raced up her spine. Celine’s world was about to come crashing down around her. Barely able to maintain control, Marguerite asked under the guise of pure innocence, “Mayhap I can help, milord. What is it you search for?”

Michael indicated the necklace with his chin. Folding his hands behind his back, he spread his feet slightly, and leaned back far enough that his gaze was comfortably on the woman in the portrait. “The necklace my mother wears....” Giving Marguerite a sidelong glance he asked, “Do you see it, Marguerite?”

She nodded, barely able to contain her exuberance. “Yea, milord.”

Michael pursed his lips in thought. “’Twas to be a wedding gift for you.” Marguerite drew in a sharp gasp. She pressed her hand to her throat. Michael seemed not to notice the sudden pallor that made her skin ashen. “I am certain my mother told

me she left it here at the keep. Yet I cannot locate it.” His shoulders shrugged in frustration. “I thought to give it to you to wear to the ball tonight.”

A lump formed in Marguerite’s stomach. She fought the bile rising against it. Her intent was for Michael to see the necklace in Celine’s possession without Marguerite ever being involved. For she knew Michael would draw the conclusion she gave it to the other woman with malice in mind. Her quandary now was how to steer him in that direction without making it seem she knew anything.

Pursing her lips, Marguerite thought frantically of a way to change her plans. At the moment the most important thing on her agenda was retrieving the necklace from Celine. Revenge would have to wait. Forcing a tight smile to her lips, she gave her betrothed a quick curtsy. “I am certain it will turn up, milord. Mayhap it has simply been misplaced by one of the servants.” Then, before he could respond, she gathered her skirts, and fairly flew up the stairs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Standing by the window, Celine silently watched the waves far below. Her room had become as much a prison as the asylum. She could not leave it in fear of Marguerite's sharp talons, or Michael's hungry gaze. Her mind was made up to leave this place. Yet, the decision stung like a burn. The words Aggie spoke that morning haunted her, and she played them over and over in her mind. 'Love will do that to you.' Pressing her head to the glass, she exhaled. Did she love him? How did one know it was love? Did a star shine from above? Or was the wild beating of her heart the sign she sought?

Celine closed her eyes. To dwell on it would only cause her more grief. Even if it was love she felt, what good did the knowledge do her? Michael made his feelings clear. He would not return the emotion. Yet, to realize her true feelings only made the decision to leave harder to bear. Still, there was no place for her here. She could no more be his mistress, than share him with Marguerite. Lost in thought, she jumped as the portal to her chambers was thrust open with such force it slammed against the wall behind it. Its space was filled with billows of material, and Celine felt her shoulders stiffen as Marguerite stormed into the room.

"Where is it?" The raven-haired beauty snapped as she closed the portal behind her.

Celine gazed at her in silence. Whatever game Marguerite played, she was not of a mind to join in. "I am weary of your pricks, milady, and in no mood to be your patsy. Please leave me alone."

Marguerite glared at her. "Where is the necklace I gave you yester morn?" Without waiting for an answer, she crossed to the vanity and snatched up the jewelry box there.

Perplexed by her strange behavior, Celine watched the other woman in guarded fashion. If she was here, than she knew nothing about Michael finding Celine with the necklace earlier. So why come demanding it? Was it not her intent to let her betrothed find it in Celine's possession? What game did she play? Squaring her shoulders, Celine crossed her arms over her breasts, and gazed at Marguerite for several seconds. "Do you speak of the necklace you gave me as a token of apology, milady?"

Sneering at her Marguerite hissed icily, "Do you have any other in your meager possessions?"

Celine shook her head. "Nay, milady, only the one you gave to make amends for your cruelty." Her voice was calm, collected. Whatever Marguerite was up to, Celine would not fall for it.

Marguerite retorted, "I need it back. Now give it to me!"

Celine eyed her cautiously. A slow smile curled at her lips. Somehow she attained the upper hand. "Though I realized yesterday it was far too expensive a gift to bestow upon me, I knew you gave it with a sincere heart." Celine shook her head as she continued, "To return it would jeopardize the integrity of your word, and I could not

bring myself to do such a thing. Without one's word, what else is there?"

Marguerite stomped her foot in indignation. "'Twas given in error! I must have it back now!"

Celine felt a surge of strength flow through her veins. This time she would not let Marguerite be the victor. In a few hours she would be gone from this place. What better way to say good-bye than by giving the Lady Marguerite a taste of her own medicine? Again she denied the request. "Nay, milady, I could not ruin the kindness you have bestowed upon me in giving it, by returning it. What good would your word be then?"

An exasperated shriek was vented from Marguerite's lips. "You filthy little urchin, how dare you deny my request?" A deep crimson color rose in her cheeks, giving her a mottled appearance. "Give me that necklace before I tear this room apart!"

Celine made no move from her place by the window. Instead she shook her head. "I cannot in good conscience. Your giving it to me means more than you can imagine, and I cannot bring myself to part with it."

Another shriek escaped Marguerite's throat. Her anger near exploded from her, and she threw the jewelry box toward the window. It smashed against the floor, ruined.

Celine laughed. "Temper, temper, milady. You really should try to control that."

Her hands raised, ready to do battle, Marguerite advanced. When Celine remained to her place, Marguerite halted. For several seconds she stood chewing at her lip. Of a sudden contrite, Marguerite's shoulders sagged. The sweet smile that replaced her scowl put Celine on edge. Lowering her head, Marguerite spoke in a soft tone. "Mayhap I should clarify my reasons for needing the necklace back. 'Tis a family heirloom, and the loss of it has made my mother quite upset." Her fingers brushed against a ring on her finger, and she drew it forth. Reaching out to Celine she offered, "Mayhap I could exchange the necklace for this ring. I would still be able to show my sincerity, and we would both get what we wanted."

Celine eyed the ring with raised brows. "I think not, milady. In taking back what you have given, you also take back your apologies. No matter what you give in its stead, the meaning would not be the same." Celine smiled at her sweetly, enjoying this moment of power.

Marguerite slapped Celine across the face. "Enough of your simple-minded games. Give me the necklace!"

"No." Celine refused once more.

Marguerite stomped her feet like a spoiled child. "How dare you defy me? You are nothing more than a filthy little urchin, and I will not allow you to treat me so!"

For a moment Celine gazed at her in silence. Normally not one to boast of titles, she found herself eager to rub a little salt in Marguerite's ire. Stepping closer, until their noses almost touched, Celine eyed her skeptically. "You are quite willing to bestow titles upon me, Marguerite. I doubt you have any idea just how far from the truth you are when you assume I have no name."

When Marguerite raised her hand once more, Celine was prepared for the strike, and deftly caught the other woman's hand before it struck its mark. Marguerite cowered under the ire she saw in Celine's eyes.

Celine released her wrist. "Much better, Marguerite. Being submissive suits you."

The line of Marguerite's jaw became rigid with her anger. "How dare you speak

to me as if we are equals? My family name alone demands you give me respect.”

Celine locked her gaze with Marguerite’s. “Shall we compare titles, Marguerite? For I have no doubt you will be the one lacking. Though I find them pompous and a means for the rich to display their arrogance, I will grace you with mine.” Her breath was warm against her rival’s cheek. “My grandfather was the Marquis de Trousseau, of Province France.” At the raised brows Marguerite lifted to her, Celine nodded. “’Tis true, milady. And if that is not enough title for you, my father was the Duke of Edinburgh, second cousin to the king.” Marguerite paled. Nonetheless Celine was not finished. “So Marguerite, if there is anyone here who deserves respect, ’tis me.” Smug, she gave her rival a satisfied smile, before turning to the window. “Now, though I have no need of your meager offering at peace between us, I shall keep it just the same, as a reminder of this day!”

For a moment Marguerite was silent, leaving Celine to think she had departed. At last her scratchy voice filled the room. “If what you say is true, you would not be here in the garb of a common peasant. You are nothing more than a thief, come to pray on Michael’s kindness.”

Celine turned to face her, her jaw ridged. “Leave me Marguerite, for I am in no mood for your waspish tongue.”

Squaring her shoulders, Marguerite bestowed a heated glower upon Celine. Defiant, she crossed to the wardrobe and flung open the doors. Within was the only gown Celine owned, the one finished just the day before. Scanning its perfect stitches, she curled her lips into a snide smile. “Michael has paid handsomely for a gown such as this. You do not deserve its costly material to adorn your beggar’s body. Mayhap I should take it as my own, rather than have it wasted on the likes of you.”

Having had enough of Marguerite’s vicious barbs, Celine sneered, “Then ’twould be up to you to explain to Michael why I am unable to wear it to the ball this night.”

All color drained from Marguerite’s face. She began to tremble uncontrollably. “What say you?” She hissed in disbelief. “I do not believe he would ask you to our ball!”

Celine shrugged. “Ask him, Marguerite. Though as I said before, I find them a means for the rich to parade in their finery, I would not miss this night for anything!” Suddenly feeling the bite of her own words, Celine released a ragged breath. She was ashamed she stooped so low as to use Michael against Marguerite. Yet the damage was done, and it was far too late to take the words back.

Silence hung between them. Marguerite searched Celine’s eyes. Her lip trembled. Then, squaring her shoulders once more, she glared at Celine with renewed ire. “I will not let you spoil this night. The only way you will attend that ball is over my dead body!” Glancing about the room, her gaze lit on an ink well on the small desk in the far corner. A vindictive smile spread over her lips.

A cold dread crept into Celine’s veins. Though she had no intentions of attending the ball, Celine realized her sharp tongue incited Marguerite to ensure the fact. Both women moved at the same time. Marguerite was closer. She gained the desk a fraction of a second before Celine. The cork was off the well before Celine could grab for it. Ink splattered over the gown in Marguerite’s hands.

Smug, Marguerite tossed the dress to the floor, and stomped on it. Still seething with anger, she pressed her hands to the dark liquid and smeared it in every direction.

Her eyes sparkled with her victory. Her chin held high, she rose and squared her shoulders. "I shall eagerly await your entrance to the hall, milady!" She stressed the last word, assuring Celine it was meant derogatorily. Then she strode to the door, and left Celine gazing at the gown with large tears in her eyes.

Celine sank to the carpet beside the dress. A long ragged breath escaped her lips. How could she have been so foolish? Defeated, she caressed the stiff collar of the gown as if it were a child. At that moment, she would gladly have endured the asylum, rather than face Michael with what she provoked Marguerite to do.

* * * *

Scrubbing at the black stains on her hands, Marguerite sobbed in anguish. Her temper cost her dearly. Not only had she left Celine's room without the necklace, but also now she sported the deep stains from the ink she smeared over the gown. The flesh of her hands was raw from her efforts to rid it of the dark blemishes. Yet no amount of wiping, or washing seemed to have any affect on fading the blackened areas.

A light rap at her door almost sent her into hysterics. For a moment she stood, hands dripping over the basin, and gazed at the portal as if by doing so she could will the person on the other side away. When another knock followed the first, she forced a feeble reply from her lips. "Who is it?"

Michael cleared his throat. "Marguerite may I come in?"

Turning her hands palms up, Marguerite peered at the dark stains. Explaining this to Michael without incriminating herself would be next to impossible. Her mind raced. Searching the room for something to hide the stains, revealed nothing of use. Again he queried about entry, and she fought a sense of panic welling within her. At last, she slid the basin of dirty water beneath the bed, and wove her hands through the folds of her gown. "Yea, milord, enter." Her smile was beguiling as she faced him.

Michael peered at her with furrowed brow. "Marguerite are you all right?" He moved closer. "You seem on edge." He searched her dark eyes. "Did I not see you coming from Celine's rooms earlier?" The concern in his voice sent tiny barbs along Marguerite's flesh.

She blanched. She had thought of no tale to give about her confrontation with the other woman. For a moment she simply gazed at the crisp white material of Michael's shirt. At last she gave a stiff nod. "Yea, milord."

"And what was the purpose of your visit?" His tone was trite.

Drawing in a deep breath, she swallowed hard before answering. "In truth, milord, I only went to her rooms to invite her to the ball tonight." The lie flowed from her lips with ease.

Michael tilted his head. "Why Marguerite, how very thoughtful of you." He eyed her for a second. "What was her response?"

Marguerite bestowed her most practiced pout upon him. A plan began to form in her mind, and she quickly sorted it through. "Well," She lowered her gaze and paused for affect. She was apprehensive about answering.

Michael urged her on. "Well?"

Marguerite let her shoulders sag. A weary sigh passed her lips. "Forgive me, milord, but I would rather not discuss this. I know you do not think I like her, and would rather not start anything..."

"Say what you will, Marguerite. I will not think ill of you."

Exhaling a deep breath, Marguerite gripped her fingers about the material of her gown, lest she forget her dilemma while she wove her tale. “ ’Tis only that she became very angry with me, and took great offense at the suggestion.” She could not meet his gaze, and peered at the floor like a child.

“What did she say?” His tone was suspicious.

From beneath long lashes, Marguerite played her game. “She said such events were only pompous ways for the rich to parade around in their finery, and boast of their titles.” Marguerite sniffled at the insult. “She said, even if she were the daughter of the Duke of Edinburgh, second cousin to the king, she would not allow herself to be seen at such an affair.” Marguerite released a ragged sigh. Chewing at her lower lip, she continued, “Then she took a bottle of ink from the well on her desk, and poured it over the gown Mrs. Beech only just finished yesterday. Her fingers smeared it in every direction. No amount of repair will mend it.” She peered at Michael with wide eyes. “I tried to stop her. She was like a mad woman.” Marguerite could not hide the smile that crept over her lips at the reference. “It was terribly frightening to see her so, and I left her before she had the chance to lay harm to me, as well.”

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Michael scanned the gown in disbelief. Ink snaked in every direction, clear evidence of fingers being raked through it. Yet, even with the proof before him, he could not imagine Celine doing such a thing. He was alone in her rooms and could not ask her to defend herself. Weighted, he moved to the window, and watched her as she stood on the cliffs. What did he really know of her? Mayhap there was a legitimate reason for her incarceration in the asylum. He discarded the thought immediately. She was as sane as he. Yet, again, he caught her with his mother’s necklace, and she did not deny his assumptions as to why she had it. Could she have taken her anger out on the gown? Had he put too much on her shoulders these past few days? She said herself even she questioned her sanity. Exasperated, he pressed his forehead to the cold glass, and closed his eyes. In truth he knew little of what motivated her. Mayhap she had a dark side....

Yet, the memory of her lips to his filled him with warmth. How could he feel for her as he did, if she were anything more than what he saw with his eyes, and felt with his heart? Tossing the gown over the chair beside him, he moved to the door. He would have some answers ... even if in asking the questions, he brought forth the side of Celine only Marguerite seemed to have seen!

* * * *

Celine braced against the force of the gale. It tore at her hair, and savagely smashed against her face. Tiny grains of sand pelted her flesh, stinging until her skin reddened under the attack. Yet, she refused to cede to its might. In her mind the titles she placed on herself while fighting with Marguerite echoed. What good were they? They had not saved her from the asylum, or the pain she now endured. Her father and grandfather before her died with no titles, or riches, and she would be the same.

The sensation she was watched caused her to stiffen. She knew before she turned he once more interrupted her musings. Yet, she raised her chin a notch, and defiantly refused to surrender to the emotions his nearness caused. Even still, when his hand came against her shoulder, a ragged breath slipped from her throat, and her composure threatened to crumble.

“If you are not in your rooms, I know I will find you here.” He whispered near

her ear. Pressing closer her, he breathed deeply the scent of her hair. "Marguerite told me of the confrontation you two had."

Celine stiffened. "Indeed?" She fixed her gaze on the white-capped waves. She found it hard to believe the Lady Marguerite incriminated herself, and asked, "And just what did she say?"

Michael shrugged. A soft chuckle escaped his lips. "She told me your opinions of the rich." A smile played at his lips. "Did you really tell her that balls such as the one tonight were only excuses for the pompous rich to flaunt their titles and their wealth?"

A deep blush fused her cheeks. "I believe the words were a bit different ... but the meaning is the same."

"I must admit though, I find myself awed at the anger you displayed. I would not have thought you capable of such a thing." His fingers played with a tress of her hair.

Glancing over her shoulder at him, she retorted, "Though I try to keep my temper in check, milord, there are times when such a feat is impossible."

Nodding, he agreed. "Aye, I know that well. Still if you did not wish to attend the ball, all you had to do was say so. Was it really necessary to destroy the gown?"

A lump formed in Celine's throat. Whatever Marguerite told him, it was not the truth. Yet, he seemed content to take it as such. Clenching her jaw against the ire building within her, Celine replied with bitter disdain. "Though the fault for the physical act is not mine to bare, milord, the blame belongs to me just the same. 'Twas my actions, which brought it to fruition." Struggling against the driving force of the wind, she added, "I know you put a goodly amount of funds into the making of the gown, milord, and I shall see you are paid in full." She exhaled before continuing. "Even should it take me the rest of my life." She stepped away from him, hurt by his lack of trust.

They did not know each other well. He had no past experiences to judge her actions by. And, Celine thought wryly, only the knowledge she spent nearly two years in an asylum to make his opinions on. Now the dye was cast. She could see by the look in his eyes, the trust he asked of her was not returned. He had his doubts. She might well be a thief, or worse. He accepted her quilt about both the dress and the necklace without question, which only proved he saw nothing beyond what his eyes allowed. Had he any feelings for her, he would have doubted, or at the very least denied in his heart what his eyes saw.

The reality of his feelings, or lack there of, was like a crushing blow against her heart. Afraid, of a sudden, she would crumble to the ground, and sob out her tale; she picked up her skirts and began to race toward the keep.

Michael covered the space between them easily. Grasping her hand, he pulled her to a stop, and peered at her in confusion. "Celine ... I beg you stay and talk to me."

Shaking her head, she denied him. "There is nothing to talk of, milord. I can give you only my sincerest apology for the gown, and my word that I have done nothing against your kindness."

"Be damned! 'Tis not the gown I care about. Trust me. I want only to help you."

Tears threatening, she pulled free. "Please let me go. My dignity is all I have left. I implore you, let me leave before I lose that too."

Again his hand captured hers. This time he pulled her to him, molding their bodies together. "I cannot! You have cast a spell upon me, and I want only to feel you in my arms and protect you from whatever evokes your fears." His hand slipped to the nape

of her neck. A strangled sound escaped her throat, and she tried in vain to turn her face from his. Her strength was no match for his. His lips brushed hers. Eventually she sagged against him, her will defeated. For one glorious moment she forgot the world beyond their spot on the cliffs. As his lips covered hers, she thought only of the fires ignited by his touch, and the need to feel his arms about her.

By slow degrees they separated. Celine searched his visage in bemusement. How could he kiss her so and yet still believe her capable of the acts she was accused of? Turning from him, she attempted to regain her composure. For an instant her gaze drifted to the keep and she froze. A slow hiss passed between her lips. Something caught her eye as she peered up at the gray stone of the manse. Celine exhaled a shaky breath. A figure stood at the window gazing down at them.

Michael pulled her back into his arms. Her sobs ceased his advances. She struggled against him, at last freeing herself and staggering several feet away. Michael sighed in frustration. His gaze followed hers. There, high above them, stood Sylvia Haverston, the glower in her eyes, clear evidence of her views regarding what she just witnessed.

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Though not eager to be trapped in the confines of a carriage for nearly an hour with Marguerite and her mother, Michael resigned himself to the fact as he dressed for the ball. He had seen neither woman since earlier in the afternoon, and was relieved with their absences. Nevertheless he had no doubt there would come a time when Sylvia would voice her opinions of what she witnessed on the cliffs.

Dressed, he stood before the mirror perusing his reflection for several seconds. Not one for frills, he chose instead a basic tunic of soft gray, with cuffed sleeves. It came to his upper thighs and was hemmed by corded pipes of deep blue. His deeper gray pants ended at the knees where they tied at the outside of his legs. Sheer stockings covered the remainder of his legs to his shoes, which were adorned with large silver buckles. They were the only piece of apparel on his body that was in any way ornate.

Yet, he had to admit, he cut a dashing pose. Though not vain, he cared about his looks. Eyeing the scar along his cheek, he frowned. In his youth it had stood for the foolishness he clung so stubbornly to. Now it was only a reminder of a life lost to time. Sighing, Michael pulled his cloak from a peg by the door, and carelessly tossed it over one shoulder. Then he flipped the other end over his arm, and nodded to his reflection. He had not been looking forward to this night, but would go, and do what was expected of him.

* * * *

Celine released a slow breath before leaving her rooms. Though certain she did not want to face Marguerite, she moved toward the grand staircase with her shoulders back and her chin high. Just one last time she would gaze upon Michael's visage. By the time he returned from the ball, she would be in Newcastle, and they would not see each other again. When she caught a glimpse of him, standing so tall and handsome, her heart skipped a beat. The pain of her decision threatened to snap that tender spot in two.

Michael crossed to her and tenderly took her hands in his. As if reading her thoughts he asked. "You will be here in the morning, won't you?" Celine nodded stiffly. Michael brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her fingers. "You once told me the only thing you had left was your honor. Is your word part of that?"

Celine fought the urge to take her hand from his. Every fiber of her being tingled at his touch, and she was certain her resolve would crumble at any moment. "Aye, milord, it is." She whispered hoarsely.

"Then give your word you will be here on the morrow. There is much we need talk about, Celine." He pressed her fingers to his cheek.

Celine turned away, as she fought tears. Couldn't he see what he was doing to her? Didn't he understand the turmoil raging within her? Why had Aggie even mentioned love? Facing that emotion, was threatening to destroy her. What good did it do to love him when he did not feel the same? It would have been better to never cede to such a sentiment, than endure the pain she carried now.

"Celine?" There was a panic to his voice. "Tell me you will be here, and that I will not have to seek you out through the night."

Finally she caressed his cheek. "You ask more than I can give, Michael. I am grateful for all you have done, and will one day find a way to repay you. But 'tis time for me to leave. I cannot come between you and Marguerite. If I stay, I will give you my honor ... and everything I hold dear." Her words were a soft breath against his throat.

His thumb rubbed the spot just behind her ear, sending darts of pleasure through her. "I will search for you to the end of the earth, Celine. For I cannot release you as easily as that." His lips lowered toward hers.

It was a deep disgusted clearing of the throat, which brought them from their intimate world. Michael pulled his head up and gazed with raised brows at Sylvia. She in turn eyed the lord and Celine with distaste. For a long moment time seemed suspended, Michael refusing to release Celine's hand, Celine gently attempting to pull it from his grasp, and Sylvia glaring at them both.

At last the Lady Haverston descended toward them, her shoulders back and chin high. As she passed them she gave Celine a sidelong glance, and sneered, "It seems you have lowered your standards, milord."

Anger rose in Michael. It reddened his face and stiffened his jaw. Before he could respond, the sound of Marguerite's heels echoed in the hall above like drums signaling an execution. Slowly Michael released Celine's hand and let his own slip to his side. Several seconds elapsed before he looked to Marguerite awaiting his perusal from the landing above.

Sensing the tension, Marguerite gave a feeble smile and straightened her deep blue gown. "Have I interrupted something?" Her gaze darted to Celine anxiously.

Michael bestowed a tight smile upon her. Bowing, he offered Marguerite his hand as she descended. "You look lovely, Marguerite. I have no doubt you will be the envy of every woman, and man at that ball tonight."

Desperately in need to be away, Celine moved passed the other woman, and hurried up the stairs. Her pulse beat wildly in the column of her neck. An uncontrollable trembling began in her feet, and raced through her body. Only Michael's question from the hall slowed her ascent. "Celine, will you honor your word?"

Halting one step from the landing, Celine peered at him in disbelief. How could he ask such a thing? Didn't he realize her world was crumbling around her? Unable to voice the turmoil within her, she gave a stiff nod. Then she fairly flew down the hall to her rooms, leaving the three below peering at her in stilted silence.

* * * *

Michael fought the urge to chase after her. Instead, he forced his attention to Marguerite, and helped her from the last step. Assessing her, he glanced to the black gloves covering her hands. "Black, Marguerite?" He mused as he turned her hands over.

Giving a tight smile, she pulled her hands away. "I heard tell it is all the rage in France."

Michael eyed her skeptically. His mouth opened several times to contradict her statement, yet eventually he ceded to her reason. "Ladies, our carriage awaits." Yet, he did not move. For a moment he fingered the necklace in his vest pocket. At last, in a stubborn attempt to rid Celine from his thoughts, he drew it forth, and dangled it before Marguerite.

A ragged breath escaped her throat. She seemed on the verge of collapse, and staggered several feet before recovering. "The necklace ... she gave it to you?" She queried.

Michael peered at her with raised brows. "I told you Marguerite, my mother left it here for you. I hoped you might wear it tonight."

Marguerite nodded in awe. "'Tis only that when we spoke this morn, you seemed to have misplaced it."

Michael fingered the delicate clasp as he stepped behind her and placed the necklace about her throat. "In truth, had it not been for Celine it might still be lost. She found it a little while ago, and returned it to me."

Marguerite glanced at him from the corner of her eye. Touching the large sapphire with trembling fingers, she asked softly, "Don't you find it rather strange that Celine would have cause to snoop about the keep? I for one would question her motives for being anywhere near your mother's wardrobe, much less her room."

Michael replied innocently. "She found it in her room." Done with the clasp, he peered at Marguerite's shoulder for a moment, watching a small spider resting there. Absently he brushed it away, and gathered her cloak from a nearby chair. "It was in a box by the window. I forgot my mother often placed it there when she spent the night in the guest chambers due to a headache, or such."

Marguerite smiled tritely. "How fortunate she is honest. It is an expensive piece of jewelry and would have brought her a goodly price in town."

Michael brushed another tiny spider from her cloak before answering. "Mayhap we could all learn something from her honest nature." Placing his hand to Marguerite's lower back, he guided her toward the front portal. A snort from Aggie gave him pause, and he peered at the older woman in confusion. Her lips trembled as if seized by a nervous tick, and her features contorted into a strange mask. She seemed on the verge of exploding. But before Michael could question her, she simply picked up her skirts and hastened from the room. Grace scurried after her, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

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Tears streamed over Celine's cheeks. Her head spun, leaving her unable to stand, and she sank to her knees by the chair. Had she known before leaving the asylum what awaited her, she would have ventured in another direction. Now it was too late. Her heart tasted something she thought she would never find in her life. What good was it? Michael did not return her feelings. Numb, she closed her eyes and let the tears wash over her.

The sounds of giggling pulled her head from the chair, and she peered at the

portal with bloodshot eyes. Grace entered first; holding her sides as the laughter swept over her. She was followed by Aggie, who snorted loudly as she tried to remain dignified and poised.

Espying Celine, Grace moved forward, her giggling starting anew. "Would that I could be a fly on the wall o' that ball...." She held her ribs with each spurt of laughter. "I 'ave no doubt the Lady

Marguerite 'ill be talked 'bout fer years ter come."

Aggie took in Celine's swollen eyes, and tear-stained cheeks. The smile on her lips faded and she sighed forlornly. "Grace ... we can fill Miss Celine in on Marguerite's plight later." Nodding toward the door, she gave instruction for the maid to leave. "I think Miss Celine has other things on her mind right now. Perhaps if you fetch some tea...."

Eyeing Celine with a furrowed brow, Grace nodded in understanding. "Aye, she looks fer all the world as if she's lost her best friend." Then she slipped from the room, and closed the door behind her.

Aggie brushed her fingers over Celine's hair, and asked, "What is it dear?"

Her world crashing around her, Celine rose and flung her arms about the older woman's shoulders. "Oh Aggie, what will I do? My heart is breaking!" Her tears soaked the housekeeper's blouse.

Caressing Celine's hair, Aggie sighed. "Oh deary, this is all my fault. Had I any idea he didn't feel the same, I never would have asked you to stay. I'm not usually wrong about these things." She shook her head. "I feel just terrible that I led you on, by giving you hope. He does care for you. That I know. But 'tis obvious not as much as I thought."

Celine sobbed against her shoulder. "I love him Aggie."

The housekeeper patted Celine's back in comfort. "I know you do."

Celine pressed closer. "I had no idea love could be so painful. My chest is weighted by the knowledge that I will never be more than a mistress to him...." Releasing a ragged sigh, Celine choked.

"I never want to feel this way again. If this is what love is I shall avoid it whatever the cost." At last she sank back into the chair, and buried her face in her hands. "How could I have been so foolish to think it would be like legends and fairy tales? There is no such thing as the love spoken of in them."

Aggie knelt beside her. "There is, deary. I have no doubt you will find such love one day. Unfortunately, his lordship is not the man to return it."

Celine peered at her from swollen eyes. "If I leave here, I shall die of a broken heart. Yet, if I take him up on his offer, I shall cede the only thing I have left, my honor." She searched the older woman's face. "To never know his touch again...." She closed her eyes. "Do I leave, or stay?"

Aggie pursed her lips. "I can't make that decision for you deary. 'Tis up to you. I beg you, think long on what will be best for you. Can you be his whore?" Celine drew in a sharp breath. Aggie shrugged. "'Tis the hard truth about what you'll be. Is that what you want? Is it worth such a sacrifice to be near him?" Aggie sighed. "If you leave now, you'd still have the chance at a life ... mayhap with a man who will love you as you want. I think the world of you, and would love for you to stay. Yet I would never ask you to do something that goes against your morals. Whatever your decision, I'll

honor it and do what I can to help.”

Her shoulders sagging in defeat, Celine released a weary sigh. Though ultimately she knew the decision was hers to make, she hoped Aggie would sway her in one direction or the other. Instead she left Celine with the agonizing choice, and she was no better off now than before.

CHAPTER NINE

Determined to put thoughts of Celine as far in the recesses of his mind as possible, Michael faced the night ahead with a stubbornness matched by few. For a while it worked. He smiled at the crowd of young men who surrounded Marguerite as she entered. "Gentlemen," He called as he put his arm about her possessively, "I claim the first and last dance...." He bowed to them, as they sighed in relief. "...And every other in between." Then he pressed a soft kiss to Marguerite's cheek, and stood by as her dance card was filled.

As they moved over the dance floor, Michael studied the people around him. For the first time he saw them as they truly were. Their wealth and titles were indeed what drove them. Giving a slight chuckle, he shook his head. "They are rather pompous, aren't they Marguerite?" His betrothed simply gazed at him in confusion. "Everything depends on the cost of their clothing, and the titles before their names." Michael observed as he guided Marguerite across the floor. "But clothes don't make the person, nor does wealth. They are only fronts, a clever way to hide their secrets. The more money, and the bigger the title, the more secrets there are to hide."

Absently Michael brushed his fingers over her shoulder, gently sending another tiny spider to the floor. Yet, he made no connection between the one at the keep, and this, and continued the motions of the dance without giving either creature another thought.

For Michael the façade lasted only a short time. On the fifth dance, as he stepped to the beat of the music, he caught sight of her from the corner of his eye. His heart beat faster, and a bead of sweat glistened at his brow. The transition of the dance forced him to turn, putting the woman to his back. By the time he was able to look again, he saw no one with deep auburn hair. By the ninth dance, he spied her once more, twirling on the arm of another, and an all-consuming jealousy took hold. Yet, again, by the time he was able to look for her in earnest, the object of his attention had faded into the crowd. Each time he caught a glimpse of her, he was forced to relinquish it as the dance turned him in another direction. By the time the music struck its last cord, Michael gave up being coy in his search. With his head craned as he perused the crowd, he cared little how obvious he was, or that Marguerite began to fume with his missed steps and disinterest in anything she said or did.

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Angry with him, Marguerite gave an indignant huff, and left him at the side of the dance floor in search of a glass of sherry. She mumbled under her breath at the man she would soon take to husband. Standing at the long table adorned with an array of foods, she glared at Michael's back. She was not certain what captured his attention, but knew his thoughts were far from the dance, and she. Nor, it seemed were any other man's thoughts on her. Normally fought over for every turn on the floor, Marguerite found herself seeking out those who signed her card when their turn came. Yet, many left her the instant the music stopped. Others had the audacity to leave her while the music

played.

Alone, Marguerite positioned herself near a large gilded mirror, and coyly perused her reflection in its silvered glass. Her gown sparkled with a radiance that gave her a surreal appearance, and she smiled at the image captured there. She was beautiful. So why, then, the lack of interest this night? It was certainly not on her part that her dance partners seemed hard pressed to meet her on the floor. She smoothed her gown. More likely it had to do with Michael. The scowl that creased his face was undoubtedly what kept the men at bay. Satisfied with such reasoning, she smoothed her hair. When her hand returned to her glass of sherry, her eyes crossed as she focused on a rather large spider inching his way up her arm. A startled scream escaped her lips, as she flung the creature to the floor and quickly stomped upon it. Gaining control, lest others see her display, she searched the room to assure herself she attracted no undo interest. Only a small group of women several feet away seemed the least bit interested in her. She gave them a stilted smile before returning her gaze to the dancers on the floor.

Absently she brushed at her neck, feeling the slight sensation of something crawling there, and watched in horror as yet another spider appeared on her finger. He too met his death beneath her shoe. It was not, however, until one of the tiny creatures residing on her person decided to take a short cut from her hair to her neck that Marguerite felt a slow shiver creep along her spine. He dangled just before her nose. She went cross-eyed as she peered at him. A startled scream erupted in her throat as she batted at him, and sent him flying toward the floor.

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No longer interested in dancing, Michael stood at the edge of the dance floor searching. At last he spied her, near a set of French doors across the room. He set out in pursuit. His heart raced in his chest. She came after all. The need to be near her was overwhelming. Blind to anything save the goal he set for himself, Michael pushed passed dancers and small groups gathered in conversation. Several feet away, he paused for a moment as he attempted to calm his nerves.

What small measure of control he gained lasted only a few seconds. Pure rage filled him as he gazed at her. Locked in the embrace of another man, their lips pressed together, it was quite apparent Michael was not on her mind as she was on his. A shiver darted up his spine. How could she betray him so? It should have been his lips pressed to hers, his body molded against hers. Jealousy reared its ugly head, and could not be tamed. Of a sudden Michael was beside them, his fist driving hard into the other man's jaw.

The couple separated, the man sprawling to the floor in stunned shock, and the young woman covering her hand to her mouth. His hands balled to fists, Michael turned his attention to the woman, glaring at her for her betrayal. But the eyes that peered back at him were brown, not green, the mouth large, not the soft rosebud he expected. There were no freckles along the bridge of her nose, no dark auburn lashes fringing her eyes.

Michael had no time to protest, or explain his error. The man he felled, scrambled to his feet and charged. The blow that came against his temple sent him reeling backward, until a chair caught him just below the back of the knees. Off balance, he teetered for an instant before losing the battle and stumbling over the arm of the chair and into a small group gathered nearby. The wind escaped his lungs in a loud whoosh. Plates shattered as his body came to ground. Breathless, Michael raised his hand in defeat, and

slowly sank back against the remains of the broken dinnerware.

Above him the young gentleman glared angrily. "What the devil is wrong with you, Aberdeen?"

Michael shook his head. Ashamed of his actions and unable to explain them, he simply closed his eyes and let his head loll against the carpeted floor. When he gave no response to the question asked, the other man snorted in disgust. Taking hold of his companion's hand, he left the younger Lord of Brier Point alone to his misery.

He had not been there long before the hall erupted with hysterical screams. He shivered, knowing he heard those very same screams before. Nonetheless he was slow to respond, not wanting to face the man and woman, or the stares of those closest to him. It was only the reverberating echo of more shrieks from his betrothed, which pulled him from the floor, and forced him to seek out Marguerite.

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Her feet moved in a strange dance, and her arms flailed about her head and shoulders. Her hair had come partly loose, and was mused and in disarray. Hysterical, she swiped at the fallen strands as if attempting to rid them of something. The gown adorning her was torn beyond repair, the bodice shredded and dangling well below her bosom. But her lack of modesty did not seem to concern her. If anything, she tore at the gown all the more.

Michael watched her with wide eyes. He reached for her shoulder, wanting only to calm her. "Marguerite, for heaven sake, what is the matter with you?"

Her reply was to slap his cheek with every ounce of strength she could muster. "She did this, and you knew about it!"

Michael stared at her in bemusement. For a moment his gaze moved over the gown, and a shutter inched up his body. Thousands of tiny spiders brought the dress to life beneath the lace overlay. "Marguerite, what happened to your gown? How did all those spiders get there?"

Again, Marguerite's answer was to slap him. "Don't play the fool, Michael! I know she did this. 'Twas her way of getting even for the necklace."

Michael peered at her in confusion. Whatever she spoke of, this was not the place to air it. Leaning closer, his whisper was stern, "Marguerite whatever it is you babble about, this is not the place for it. You have made a fool of yourself in front of all your friends." He did not mention his own indiscretions. "I think it might be time to make a quick exit."

Marguerite snapped, "I hoped you would have the sensibility to send for the magistrate when she was caught with the necklace. You did nothing." Her eyes filled with fire, and she hissed, "My mother was right; you are in love with her!" Glaring at the rather large crowd they had amassed, Marguerite squared her shoulders. Stomping at a wayward spider making his way across the floor, she huffed to the throng. Then gathering up the remains of her gown to her bosom, she began the long journey to the front door. One shoe had been thrown off in her foray with the spiders, and still remained on the floor several feet away. Marguerite seemed to give it no thought as she spanned the space, one hip several inches higher than the other, leaving her with an oddly pronounced limp.

Retrieving the shoe she left behind, Michael crossed the space after her. At the entrance he turned back to the crowd and bowed gallantly. "I hope Marguerite and I have

given you plenty of entertainment this evening. I am certain we could not have made bigger fools of ourselves had we tried.” Then he swept his cloak from a liveried servant’s arm, and bowed once more.

Michael glanced toward Sylvia, who cringed in embarrassment. At last she advanced toward the portal to join her daughter. The mortification etched into her face assured Michael she would never live down the disgrace of this night.

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The journey home was taken in stilted silence. A hundred things filled the space of Michael’s mind. Marguerite spoke of the spiders being revenge. For what and by whom? It made little sense. As she stood to exit the carriage something else she said came to him, and he gazed at her with furrowed brow. “Were I you milord, I would question her motives for being anywhere near your mother’s wardrobe, much less in her room.” Michael cocked his head toward her. He never mentioned where his mother kept the necklace. How could Marguerite have known it was in the wardrobe? When Michael came across Celine with it, she was at the vanity, not the wardrobe.

Now, reaching to take Marguerite’s hand as she descended from the carriage, Michael looked at the gloves as if truly seeing them for the first time. Marguerite said Celine smeared the ink she poured over the gown with her fingers. Yet, no ink stained Celine’s hands. The tightness that gripped his chest all but kept him from drawing a breath. He accepted her guilt without question. How could he have been so blind?

Lifting Marguerite’s hand to his lips, he pressed a soft kiss to the dark material. His voice was a whisper. “Come to my rooms, Marguerite.”

Aghast she shook her head in denial. “I am not exactly in the best of moods, milord.”

Michael insisted. “I am not interested in you mood. I shall await your expeditious arrival.”

It was Sylvia, stomping at a wayward spider as she attempted to exit the carriage, who forced Marguerite to make a decision. Marguerite nodded as she ceded to his request. “Allow me to repair myself, than I shall join you.”

Michael still held her hand in his. “Do not delay, Marguerite. What I want from you will not wait long.” As an after thought, he added, “Wear the necklace when you come to me.” Then he released her, and watched as she moved to the manse, for the first time seeing her for what she was.

* * * *

A single candle illuminated Michael’s rooms. He lit no other. At Marguerite’s light rap on his door, he bid her enter, but made no move from the hearth where he stood watching the flames of the fire.

Her hair streamed over her back in glorious fountains of ebony. No hint of the inhabitants from earlier could be found. A thin gauze nightgown now replaced the tattered ball gown. It left little to the imagination, even in the dim light. Yet, as Michael gazed at her, she stirred nothing save contempt.

Beckoning her move closer, he watched her in silence. Before him, she gave a nervous smile and a stiff curtsy. Michael reached for her hand. A frown spread over his lips as he gazed in stunned amazement at the black gloves still covering her flesh. “I don’t care if they are all the rage in France, Marguerite. In this room they are an insult. Remove them.”

Once more attempting to free her hand from his, she hesitated. Instead she reached for the ties at her shoulders. The gown pooled about her breasts, where she pinned it with a trembling hand. "I have come to you nearly every night, Michael. I was always turned away." Pressing closer, she whispered near his ear. "At last I will know you...."

Gently he removed her hand from her bosom. The gown slid over her body, and puddled at her feet. Naked before him, Marguerite drew in a shaky breath. This night he would not turn her away.

Neither would he be satisfied with her silent refusal to remove the gloves. Michael began to peel them from her fingers. "Take them off Marguerite. Let me see you, all of you."

Marguerite tried in vain to slip her hand from his. He only increased the pressure. "Michael..." She whispered against him. "Snuff the candle, that I might not feel shame."

Shaking his head, Michael continued to work at the glove. "No Marguerite. I would see you as you truly are."

His tone changed, was now hard, and she peered at him with confusion etched in her features. "Michael, are you angry with me?"

"Only curious." He replied as he pulled the glove from her hand. The black stains were clear, even in the dim light. A deep frown creased his brow. The weight against his shoulders seemed to crush him. Peering at the necklace about her throat, he sighed in dejection. His fingers reached to her nape and carefully worked the clasp. His voice was a whisper against her ear. "How did you know my mother kept the necklace in her wardrobe?"

The color drained from her cheeks, and Marguerite squirmed uncomfortably. "I don't understand?" Her voice was frail and shaky.

"I think you do, Marguerite." Michael let the jewelry drop into his hand, and stepped away from her. "This afternoon, when I placed it upon your neck, you said you would have questioned Celine's motives for being anywhere near my mother's wardrobe, much less in her room. How did you know my mother kept the necklace in her wardrobe?"

Marguerite gave a feeble smile. "I am sure you must have told me...."

He was already shaking his head. "No, I said nothing about where it was kept. Yet, you mentioned the only place it should have been. How could you have known that, Marguerite?"

Marguerite leaned to gather the nightgown at her feet. Michael set his hand to her shoulder, preventing her from the action. Placing his fingers beneath her chin, he lifted that feature until she had no choice but to look at him. "You took it, didn't you?" The pain in his eyes was clear. "You gave it to Celine in hopes she would be caught with it ... that I would think her a thief." He closed his eyes in disgust. "What was it you said at the ball, that the magistrate should have been sent for?" Floored by the truth, he rubbed trembling fingers over his temples. The pain there could not be relieved.

Marguerite glared at him. "What did you expect me to do?" Her voice rose in pitch. "She threatened everything I prepared my whole life for!"

Michael reached for her hand and spread the fingers before him like a fan. "And this, Marguerite?" His head shook as he gazed at the black stains against her flesh. "Can you explain this?"

Marguerite jerked her hand from his. “She said you invited her to the ball!” Her shrill sob echoed in the expanse of the room. “My ball! Our first ball together!” Her eyes flashed fire. “I would rather have died than allow your whore to parade before my friends.”

Michael closed his eyes once more. His chest ached, and he felt sick to his stomach. Celine never tried to defend herself against Marguerite’s vengeance, and even took the blame without cause. He never questioned her guilt. Grabbing Marguerite’s wrist, he began to drag her toward the door.

Digging her feet into the carpet, she tried to slow their progress. “What are you doing?” She struggled against him. “Allow me to clothe myself...”

The glower he bestowed upon her gave no doubt as to his anger. “Nay, I would have her look upon you as you are; a lying vindictive witch, who would tear her apart bit by bit.”

“Her?” Marguerite renewed her efforts to be free from his grasp.

“Celine.” Michael hissed as he flung open the portal to his room. As he crossed to Celine’s rooms, he added snidely, “I would have her hear from your own lips what you have done to her!”

Marguerite glared at him. “I will not! She is no more than a common street urchin, and I owe her nothing. Now I demand you release me this instant.”

Michael refused to listen to her pleas. “I thought her a thief, Marguerite, and crazed. I have been blind, and owe her as much an apology as you.” He thrust open the door to Celine’s room without giving the slightest knock. It smashed against the wall behind it with a reverberating crash, causing both Celine and Marguerite to flinch in surprise.

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Celine closed her eyes in distress. She had not yet worked up the courage to leave, and stood gazing at the pair before her in sorrow. Dressed in the clothing Grace lent her several days passed, she smoothed the skirt, nervous. Apprehensive, she let her gaze range down Marguerite. A flush of color rose in her cheeks, and she asked, “Milord, what is the meaning of this intrusion into my room?” Her heart threatened to snap with the knowledge he returned earlier than she expected. Leaving would be much harder now.

“Tell her!” Michael barked at Marguerite as he pushed her forward. “Tell her what you have done.”

Marguerite turned her body toward the shadows, and covered her breasts with her arm. Sneering at Michael over her shoulder, she glared at both of them. “I will not.” Her chin lifted a notch in defiance. “Besides, what difference does it make, she is quite well aware of the situation.”

A vein at the side of Michael’s temple pulsed. “Tell her, Marguerite. Let her hear from your own lips the evil you are capable of.”

Her dark eyes seemed almost black with her anger. Her nostrils flared and she curled her lip. “She is nothing to me, and I will not waste my time giving apologies I do not mean. ‘Tis she who should apologize for taking you from me.”

Infuriated with her, Michael snapped, “I asked her to be my mistress, Marguerite!” Celine closed her eyes in humiliation. “But she refused. She said she could not come between us. Yet, you tear her apart at every turn.” He faced Celine.

“She admits to giving you the necklace with hopes you would be thought a thief ... and the stains on her hands are evidence it was she who ruined the gown.”

Feeling the bite of the words that sent Marguerite into her vengeful anger earlier, Celine nodded slowly. “Though she has done the physical acts, milord, the blame is mine to bear.” Her shoulders heavy with the weight of the situation, Celine whispered, “I can fully understand her reasons and her actions, milord.”

Michael gazed at her with wide eyes. “You condone her actions?”

Celine could not face him, and turned toward the window. For a moment she gazed at the starless night beyond the keep.

Again, Michael asked the question, this time fair shaking the rafters with his ire. “Celine, you will answer me! Are you saying you condone what Marguerite has done?”

Flinching at his tone, Celine bit her lip. Her body trembled, and she fought tears. She never meant to come between them. She drew in a ragged breath, and exhaled it before whispering, “What I said, is that I understand her reasons.” She swallowed back a sob. “Nonetheless, as I said the blame is mine to bear.” She closed her eyes against the pain threatening to snap her heart in two. “Had I done the decent thing and left at the onset of her anger, none of this would have happened.”

“You would take the blame?” Grabbing Marguerite’s hand he thrust it toward Celine. “Look at the evidence of her crime, Celine. You know as well as I the blame is hers to take. How can you ignore what she has done?” Disgusted, he thrust Marguerite’s hand from his grasp and glared at both women. “Explain how the blame should be yours.” He bellowed. “For I do not understand.”

For several moments, silence hung thick in the air. Celine’s lip trembled. “Surely you are not so blind, milord, that you cannot recognize jealousy when it rears its ugly head?” Her tongue darted over lips suddenly dry. Tears cascaded over her cheeks toward her throat. She closed her eyes, the love in her heart much too close to the surface. Her voice broke as she continued, “Were I your betrothed...” She paused for a few seconds. She could not rid herself of the trembling, which took control, and tried once more. “Were I your betrothed, my love would be so great, I would do whatever necessary to keep you for my own.” The urge to shout her feelings to him caused her great distress, and she wove the fingers of both hands together, fighting to remain silent. At last she added, “The Lady Marguerite is no different.”

Marguerite pressed her hand to his arm. “Even Celine kens the jealousy that has taken hold of me. Surely you can understand my motives?”

For several seconds there was a stilted silence as each gazed at the other. Then, Michael slipped his arm to Marguerite’s back and turned her toward the door. “In truth, Marguerite, I do understand.” Advancing toward the portal, he whispered over his shoulder. “Forgive this intrusion, Celine.” Without even glancing in her direction, he stepped to the hall with Marguerite. “Marguerite and I have some things we must discuss in private.”

As the door closed behind him, Celine felt the small amount of control she attained slip away. Knees weak, she crumbled to the floor. Racked by wrenching sobs, she let her tears flow freely. She gambled and lost. Mrs. Cobb was wrong. Michael did not feel the same.

* * * *

Gracing him with a beguiling smile, Marguerite stroked her fingers along his

chest. "Darling," Her breath was soft against his arm. "'Tis cold here in the hall. Take me back to your room, and warm me."

Absently Michael shed his waistcoat, and slipped it over her shoulders. It did little in the way of covering her pale body, though it kept the chill away. Reaching for, and curling his fingers over hers on his chest, he shook his head. "Do you believe in fate, Marguerite?"

Her lips curled into an uncertain smile. "Yes, I suppose so."

Michael lowered her hand to her side. "Once in my travels I met a man who told me every second of a person's life was predestined. He spoke of the challenges we all must face in life to achieve our goals." Giving a soft laugh, he continued. "He said that when two people found each other, people who knew from the moment they met they belonged together, it was decided long ago." Peering at her, he asked, "Are you following me, Marguerite?"

Again she gave him that uncertain smile. "I think so."

"He believed the fewer challenges a man and woman faced to come together, the less likely they were destined to be life mates." He sighed. "The more difficult the journey, the more true the love that would bind them together."

Placing her hand to her brow, she exhaled deeply. "Forgive me, darling. You speak in riddles, and my mind is addled. It has been a strange evening. Mayhap you can explain this further in your chambers." She rubbed her hands over her arms. "'Tis cold, and I am not properly attired."

Michael made no move to follow her as she stepped toward his door. Instead he began again to plead his cause. "Take us, for instance, Marguerite. The journey that was taken for us to be here tonight had few challenges. Our fathers' fathers lived in the homes we now call our own. Our betrothal was set in stone nearly from the moment of our births. The only real challenge was growing to adulthood." He was silent for a moment. Finally he began anew. "Then there is the journey Celine and I have taken to be here this night." A soft laugh escaped his throat. "Why at least a thousand things have taken place ... just in the passed few months to bring us together."

Marguerite's snort was indignant. "How can you speak of her? I for one cannot abide her! It would behoove you to put as much distance between she and I as possible."

Michael's shoulders sagged. "Don't you ken what I am trying to say, Marguerite?" Searching her eyes, he whispered, "Your mother was right..."

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, Marguerite released a weary sigh. "My mother is rarely right about anything. What could she possibly be right about now?"

Michael pursed his lips. Finally he shrugged, and replied, "I love her Marguerite. She is the soul-mate I was meant to share my life with."

Her brows furrowed and she blinked several times before asking, "My mother?"

Laughter escaped his drawn lips. Finding no humor in their conversation, Marguerite huffed. At last he shook his head. "As a young man I was convinced love existed only in legends and fairytales. I never met anyone who truly found such an emotion. Until now, that is." A soft sigh passed his lips. "She is in my thoughts every moment. To see her makes my heart race in my chest and my breath quicken. I love her more than I thought it possible to care for anyone. I want her in my life, always."

She peered at him with mouth agape. "You do not say, 'I love you' ... You say 'I love her'...." Her gaze moved to the door, which separated them from Celine. Her body

trembled. Lifting her chin toward the portal, she asked, "Her?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry, Marguerite. I never meant for this to happen."

The sting of her hand to his cheek gave clear evidence his apology was not accepted. "If you think for one moment I will allow you to parade your little whore before me...." Stomping her foot, she nearly spat in his face. "Once our marriage vows are spoken, I will not tolerate even her name uttered in these halls!"

Shaking his head, Michael released a slow deep breath. "You mistake my statement, madam. No whore or kept woman will she be. I shall ask her to be my wife."

Again her hand came against his cheek, welting the flesh there. "Your wife?" The words rang in the empty hall. "Your wife?" Fire flashed in the depths of her eyes. "Have you forgotten you are already betrothed to me?"

She vented her wrath against his chest with balled fists. He put up no resistance. "As I said, Marguerite, I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you. But what I feel for her cannot be dismissed."

Her voice rising to a shrill wail, Marguerite screeched, "Nor can the contract of our fathers!" Her wrath shook the rafters. "Have you any idea how many men have vied for my hand? Each time I had no choice but to turn them away." Wrapping her fingers through his shirt, she hissed, "All because of a betrothal to a man I hardly knew. I have played the game dutifully, Michael, and will not allow you to spoil everything now. We have a binding contract, entered into by our fathers many years passed. You cannot, and will not, decide at the last moment not to honor it."

Michael released a heavy sigh. "Madam, if you choose to stand before the world and speak vows, you shall do so alone. For I will not be there. I love her, Marguerite, and will take her as my wife, if she will have me." Raking his fingers through his hair, he added tritely, "Even were my father to threaten me with disinheritance, I would not be swayed in my decision. I would rather live as a pauper, than marry another." Releasing a ragged breath, he pulled her hand to his lips and pressed a tender kiss to her fingers. "Tis over, Marguerite. I ask your forgiveness, but will understand if it is not given."

In response her hand stung against his cheek once more. "I will forgive you when you beg me from the pits of hell!" Then she turned on her heels, and stormed down the hall.

* * * *

"Celine?" Startled by the sound of his voice, Celine peered up at him in confusion. "May I come in?" His tone was soft, like a gentle caress.

Forcing herself to rise, she wiped at her tears with trembling fingers. Only her hand to the sill kept her from crumbling. Bracing for what she knew would come, Celine whispered, "I am sure I know what you want...."

"Do you?" He moved closer. His fingers brushed her shoulder. The contact forced a harsh gasp from her lips. She inched toward the window. He followed.

Cornered, Celine exhaled a shaky breath. A voice in the recesses of her mind screamed 'take his offer, at least you would know his touch.' She argued with herself. 'What of my honor? It is all I have left.' The voice became patronizing. "Tis better to lose pride than true love."

Weary of the battle she fought internally, she pressed her head to the cool glass of the window. "I have given your suggestion a great deal of thought...." She peered at him for a long moment, still battling within her mind. "But I must refuse." Her heart

threatened to break. "I could not be your mistress ... for eventually I would not be satisfied with having you only when Marguerite did not. And the thought of sharing you near turns my stomach. I fear, I would be just as jealous as she." Finding a small amount of bravery, she added, "With that said, I shall leave here, milord." Just saying the words aloud caused panic to well within her. "Once I have gained employment, I shall send monies to repay you for the gown."

"Is that what you think I want, Celine, payment for a gown? It would never be enough." His hand rose and trembling fingers traced a path over the line of her jaw. Slowly, they brushed the column of her throat. "You are so beautiful." His fingers slipped to the nape of her neck. "To allow you to leave would drive me mad."

Tiny pulses of pleasure raced through Celine's body, weakening her resolve. The voice in her head shouted, "Cede! What he offers can be enough." Stubbornly she refused to listen. "Please, milord, I beg you stop." Reaching to her back, she curled her fingers about his wrist, wanting to remove his hand and the pleasure his touch evoked.

Of a sudden she was pressed to him, her arm trapped. "Let me taste of you, that I might hold the memory in my heart always." His mouth lowered to hers.

Knowing his kiss would be her undoing Celine struggled against him. "Nay." Turning her head, she gasped as his warm mouth seared the flesh of her throat. She closed her eyes, enjoying the pleasure of his touch, her resolve weakening with every second that passed.

His voice hoarse, Michael whispered near her ear. "Love me, Celine. Forget for a while the world beyond this room."

The denial ready on her lips, she turned to face him. His lips covered hers. She had no recollection of her arm being freed, but found it about his neck, pressing him closer. At last they parted. Her knees shook, and she leaned against him for support. The tender caress of his fingers against her shoulders made it difficult to breathe. "Tell me you love me, Celine." He whispered as his breath brushed the base of her throat.

She shook her head. "Nay, I cannot."

His lips caressed her nose, the lids of her eyes, and her brow. "I see in your eyes what you will not say aloud. Let me hear the words from your lips."

Near ceding, Celine pushed from him. Tears sparkled on her cheeks. "You ask too much, milord."

Of a sudden he slipped to one knee. Smiling impishly at her, he took her hand in his and pressed each finger with a kiss. "Marry me...."

A shaky breath slipped over the lump in Celine's throat. "Milord?"

"'Tis Michael, Celine. Let no titles come between us."

Nervous, she attempted to remove her hand from his. "Please, I beg you, do not play such games with me."

"I play no games, Celine." His whisper was soft. His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Say you will marry me, that I might hear words of love from your lips."

Her stomach knotted. Celine peered at him in disbelief. "Whether I say yea, or nay, does not matter. I cannot confess feelings that will destroy me once spoken. You are already betrothed ... and what I feel for you cannot change that."

He rose and pinned her to the corner once more. "What matters, beautiful Celine, is that you are the life that flows through my veins, the reason my heart beats, and the love I never thought I would find." Again his lips traced a path over the column of her

throat. "I was a fool to think I could settle for less ... than all of you. Marry me, and mend the heart that threatens to break within my chest."

Closing her eyes as his touch sent waves of pleasure through her, Celine exhaled against his hair. "Though I know to deny it is a lie, yet to speak it will not change that you are already betrothed to another."

"Nay." His lips sought hers. "Marguerite packs as we speak. 'Tis over." Pulling away slightly, he continued, "I could not stand before God and speak vows with her, when my heart belongs only to you." Again he slipped to his knee. The love Celine saw in his eyes took her breath away. "Say you will be my wife, Celine, for I have no reason to go on living if you do not."

Stunned, she sank to the floor before him. "And what of the Lady Marguerite?"

Bestowing a crooked smile upon her, Michael shrugged playfully. "You are welcome to invite her, my darling, but I rather doubt she will attend." He shook his head and cringed. "I believe she said something about forgiving me only when I begged from the pits of hell."

A strangled laugh escaped Celine's lips. But she sobered quickly. "Even if that be the case, I cannot marry you." She searched his eyes for understanding. "I have nothing to offer as a dowry, not even a name of good standing."

Michael tenderly moved his knuckles along the soft skin of her cheek. "In truth, Celine we might both enter into this marriage as paupers. In breaking the contract with Marguerite, I stand to lose everything. But you once told me you would rather marry for love than a title. I pray you meant that."

Celine peered at him perplexed. She could not recall ever voicing such a sentiment to him, yet agreed with it whole-heartedly. Used to him quoting words she knew she had not spoken to him, she smiled crookedly. "Did I?" A deep sigh slipped from her lips. "Then I must stand behind the statement." Carefully she raised her hand, and touched her fingers to his lips. "I love you Michael Aberdeen. Lord of this keep, or of a hovel, it matters not. As long as you are by my side I will find contentment." Then she leaned closer, replacing her lips where her fingers had been. "Yea, I will marry you!" And she sealed the words in a passionate kiss, her lips slanting over his, and igniting fires that left them both heady and yearning for more.

CHAPTER TEN

The sun was cresting the horizon when Michael entered Celine's rooms once more. She felt his presence as she gazed toward the turbulent sea below, and smiled. Pressing close at her back, Michael slipped his arms about her, and brushed a kiss to the side of her neck. "I could not sleep. Like an elixir, you intoxicate me."

Celine relaxed against him. "Nor could I. I thought the love I felt for you would never be returned, and now that you profess it, my heart threatens to explode with joy."

Michael breathed deeply of her hair. "Now that I profess it, 'tis clear it has been a part of me since that first night in the carriage, when my heart nearly broke because I could not take away your pain." He closed his eyes. When he spoke once more, his words were a tender caress against her cheek. "You are the breath that fills my lungs, the blood that flows through my veins, and the life that beats in my heart. How could I have been so blind to the feelings you evoked in me these passed weeks?" Before Celine could answer, he continued, "In truth, I could not accept such emotion when we knew each other just over a fortnight. I never dreamed love was true beyond the stories found in legends and fairytales. To find it with nary a thrice of weeks passed between us, was beyond my ken. Yet, I know I love you as surely as the sun knows to rise each morn."

Turning in his arms, Celine peered at him with raised brows. Quoting Aggie, she asked, "Is there some law that says you may only love after a month, or mayhap a year?" Her fingers traced a path over his cheek. "Then let the time pass quickly, that I may profess my feelings."

Capturing her lips with his, Michael sighed against her. "Profess them now, dearest Celine, and fill my heart with wonder and joy as I have never known before...." Celine left little doubt as to her love.

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The noon hour had come and gone before Marguerite descended to the great hall. Her chin defiantly high, she moved with the grace and stature her position in life warranted. Even so, there was a paleness much deeper than normal to her soft skin, and if one looked close it was clear she trembled.

Reaching to take her hand, Michael placed a soft kiss to her stained fingers. The action only made her stiffen, and she pulled from him, indignant. Searching the great hall, she questioned, a snide tone in her voice, "Where is your little strumpet? Is she too much a coward to face me?"

Understanding her anger, Michael refrained from a heated retort. He asked Celine to join him for this uncomfortable farewell, but she declined. "I could no more stand before her, rubbing salt in her wounds, than be able to stand for her doing so to me." Celine uttered as she gazed to the sea below.

Michael reminded her of the likelihood of Marguerite doing just that was she the victor. Celine simply shook her head. "'Tis not the way my mother raised me. Let her leave with her dignity, and her shoulders back." Michael admired Celine for her choices, and found his heart swelling with pride at her decision.

Now standing beside Marguerite, he smiled at the memory. Shaking his head, he sighed. "She did not think you would be comfortable with her at my side, and has chosen to stay to her rooms. She wished to let you leave with your dignity, Marguerite."

"What dignity was there in being cast from your home? Or in being replaced by a street rat with no name or lineage?" At last, she pushed passed him, and made her way to the front portal. "I have no dignity, milord. I have lost far more than you will ever know." Then she strode into the midday sun, and left him gazing after her in the hall.

Sylvia hastened after her. At the carriage, she turned back to Michael and sneered, "This is not over, milord. Were I you, I would not rush to the altar. Just because it is your wish to end this betrothal, it is not your father's. I should think he would do whatever necessary to have any vows you speak annulled ... and the contract agreed upon enforced."

Marguerite leaned passed her mother and added, "We shall see how readily your father accepts her once he knows who she is, and where she has come from." Arrogantly lifting her chin and fixing her gaze on the windows above, she added, "In fact, I think it might be quite a piece of fat for all Newcastle and Edinburgh to chew, when they find out you harbor an escaped mad woman from the asylum." She released a long slow breath. "I shall make it my personal duty to convey that fact to every person I come in contact with!"

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Celine faced him as he entered his rooms, at the front of the keep. "I was certain she looked beyond my soul when she gazed up here. What did she say?"

The urge to tell her lodged in Michael's throat. He would not ruin this day, and only smiled wearily. "Nothing worth repeating." His arms slipped about Celine and he lowered his head to her hair. "She is bitter, and who can blame her?" His lips brushed Celine's temple. "I will not dwell on her anger. Time will heal her wounds." Wanting to enjoy what time he and Celine might have, Michael breathed against her brow. "As for us, my dearest, time is of the essence. I am fully prepared to take you to that bed now ... but will respect the promise I gave you on the cliffs some days back, and let you keep your honor. Yet, I am only human, Celine, and cannot wait much longer. If you do not wish to sell that which you fought so heroically for on the crag, I beg you lead me to the nearest vicar, that we might speak vows as man and wife."

"Aye, and be quick about it." She breathed at the base of his throat.

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The only low point in her day was that her parents were not at her side. The small church, overgrown with ivy vines, and tinted green with moss, seemed the perfect place to seal their union. For a long moment Celine perused its interior, large marble basin of water sparkling in the candlelight, plaster slightly cracked and weathered. Sunlight filtered through the narrow windows, illuminating the rich oak of the pews in a glorious golden glow, captivating her for several seconds.

Coming from her musings, Celine lifted her gaze to the man waiting for her at the altar. The smile that spread over his features took her breath away. Adorned in breeches and waistcoat of deep blue, crisp white shirt contrasting both his tanned skin and the dark color of his apparel, he seemed some God from the fantasies conjured in her youth. His hair, slightly defiant as it curled recklessly at his brow, was tied at his nape with a piece of ribbon that matched the royal blue, which trimmed her gown.

Cautious of his gaze she dipped her head slightly, perusing the newly finished gown to her form, and swallowed passed the lump in her throat. Delicate lace overlaid the rich blue bodice, cut low at her bosom, revealing their swell with each ragged breath drawn to her lungs. Ribbons of ivory wove through the full skirts, their satin strands glimmering with each movement she made. Though she found no mirror to garner a glimpse of her hair, Celine recalled her image reflected in the silvered glass before departing the keep. Aggie had taken great care to ply the thick tresses atop her head, weaving more of the ivory cloth through the deep red mass, and allowing it to cascade over her shoulders in wild ringlets that flowed well passed her waist. The housekeeper had assured her she was more beautiful than any woman alive, and though rarely one to seek such vanity, Celine agreed silently.

"You are radiant." Michael breathed near her ear. A soft laugh escaped his throat as the vicar repeated for the third time the vows. "I find myself so enamored, I can concentrate on nothing else, save your beauty." Nudged by the reverend, Michael leaned and pressed a soft kiss to Celine's lips. "I have thought of this day many times over the years. Yet, I never imagined it would be like this." The twinkle in his eyes was mesmerizing. "Truth be told, I nearly jumped ship, so strong was my desire to have no part in it."

Celine leaned against him. "Had your betrothal been to me all these years, I would have dove in after you."

Michael laughed as he caressed her cheek. "Had my betrothal been to you from the start, I would never have departed from these climes."

The love Celine felt in his arms, and saw in his eyes, took her breath away. "My father often said that the more challenges people faced in life, the stronger they were. Right now, I am certain I could fight the entire French army if it meant keeping you beside me."

Brushing his lips over hers tenderly, Michael shook his head. "You need fight no one, dearest, for there is nothing that could take me from your side. I love you, and will happily spend the rest of my life proving that to you."

Dusk captured the land earlier in the winter, casting shadows long before true night fell. In the carriage, Marguerite leaned to turn down the wick of the lantern swaying beside her. The sneer her mother graced her with was annoying, and Marguerite found contentment in the darkness.

On the morrow, she would begin her crusade, and within a week, all of Newcastle and Edinburgh would know of Celine. She smiled, pleased with the plan forming in her mind. That little strumpet had no idea whom she dealt with. Marguerite Haverston was not one to cede quietly, or, for that matter, to cede at all.

A shout from the driver, enticed her to lean her head out the window. Darkness enveloped the land, and she could see little. When the carriage halted, she snorted in indignation, and lashed the driver with her razor sharp tongue. "What reasons have you to stop? I told you I wanted to be back at Greenhearst tonight. I demand you move this rickety old wagon this instant." She cared little that the carriage easily put any she had ever ridden in before to shame. Her anger was in need of venting, and she would not be calmed until she did so.

The driver's voice was stilted and tight. "Carriage on the road ahead. He's blocking the way so's I canna go 'round."

Infuriated, Marguerite thrust the door opened, and forced the material of her gown through the opening with little delicacy. "I don't care if the royal family is in that carriage. Do whatever you must to get this ransack contraption going!"

She was about to step back into the conveyance when a shadow near to her came to life, and moved closer. A scream began in Marguerite's throat. It just began to cross her lips, when a hand tenderly slipped over them, and trapped it there. Eyes wide, Marguerite peered with anxious trepidation at the figure materializing from the darkness before her.

He was rakishly handsome, with soft brown hair tied back at his nape, and clothing of finely tailored linen. Tall and willowy, he towered over Marguerite's slight stature by head and shoulders.

The flesh of his face was nearly as pale as Marguerite's, and like hers was pampered to keep it that way. His cheeks swelled slightly, the only round feature in his angular, clean-shaven face. Softly curving lips spread above his chin, assuring Marguerite he meant her no harm. A slightly hooked nose was his only flaw, and Marguerite drew in a sharp gasp as she returned his perusal with candid interest.

"Fair maid," He whispered as he took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips. "Forgive me if I frightened you. I would beg a moment of your time." His accent was thick and exciting.

Bestowing her most practiced and beguiling smile upon him, Marguerite curtsied and nodded eagerly. "Of course, milord. What ever might I do for you?" She gave a sidelong glance to the carriage, but heard nothing from her mother.

He licked his lips. Nodding toward the emblem, he asked in nonchalant fashion, "Is that the crest of the Aberdeen family?"

Soured by reminders of Celine, Marguerite snorted. "Unfortunately, yes." Heated, she pulled her hand from his. "What do you want with them?"

Tenderly he drew her hand back to his lips and placed a feather soft kiss to each finger. "Beauty such as yours should never be marred with a frown." He sighed. Her stance relaxed, and she favored him with another smile. "Would you grace me with your name that I might know such enchanting loveliness belongs to more than the angels."

A soft blush fused her cheeks. Giving a slight curtsy, she volunteered, "Marguerite, milord. Marguerite Haverston." Her chin lifted and her shoulders squared. "Daughter of the Earl and Countess of Durham."

A slow languid smile curled at his lips. "Indeed?" Glancing passed her to the carriage once more, he asked, "Yet the carriage you travel in belongs to the Aberdeen family, does it not?" His thumb caressed the back of her hand. "Have you been there recently?"

Marguerite released a ragged breath. His eyes seemed to mesmerize her, and she had trouble focusing her attention on his words. "What?"

"Have you just come from the Aberdeen estate?"

Marguerite frowned again. "I have."

His pitch rose slightly. "Was there a woman there; one with deep red hair, and beauty surpassed only by your own?"

Marguerite glared at him. Though flattered he placed Celine below her in regards to attractiveness, Marguerite fumed. "Celine." She hissed under her breath. "What reason do you have to seek that filthy urchin?"

Light danced in his eyes, and his breathing became rapid. "So she is there?"

Aware that the opportunity to slander Celine was at hand, Marguerite nodded in agreement. "But I cannot imagine what a fine gentleman such as yourself would want with the likes of her." Marguerite leaned closer, as if to reveal a secret. "I believe her a mad woman." Her eyes searched his. "It is my presumption she escaped from the asylum nearly a month passed." She smiled. Already she would find revenge against her rival.

"Indeed?" He leaned closer as if intrigued.

Marguerite nodded quickly. Placing her hand to the side of her mouth, she whispered, "She claims to be the daughter of the Duke of Edinburgh, second cousin to the king." A laugh escaped her throat. "Can you imagine?"

He too laughed. But the light had left his eyes, and his stance stiffened. "Has she spread such a tale to many?"

"She has Michael Aberdeen, the younger lord, convinced he is in love with her." She snorted. "We were betrothed, but he cast me from his home."

"Indeed." He whispered once more.

Marguerite grew braver. Leaning until her bosom barely touched his cloak, she stated. "I have every intention of telling every man, woman and child from here to Edinburgh about the crazed 'Duchess'." The smile that spread over her mouth consumed her face. "By the time I finish with her, she will not be able to show her face within a hundred miles of that city."

The frown that creased his brow deepened. Slowly, he slid his hand along his side. Keeping his gaze locked on Marguerite's dark eyes, he shook his head. "I am afraid I cannot allow that, madam." His voice was calm, yet edged with a strange quiver that gnawed at her until she shivered.

The man drew in a slow breath, and inhaled the fragrance of Marguerite's perfume. "What a pity." He murmured so softly only Marguerite heard him. "I would have enjoyed getting to know you." His hand barely moved from his side as he thrust the blade of a knife between her ribs. "If only you didn't know about her...."

Marguerite gasped as the slender blade pierced deep into her flesh. A sob slipped from her lips, but was silenced against his chest. The blade was forced upward. Marguerite's eyes glazed. Another sob escaped her throat. It never left her lips. She sagged against him. The knife was pulled from her none too gently, and her body crumbled to earth.

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Slowly Michael untied the laces at the back of Celine's gown. Though every fiber of his being cried out for release, he took his time. His fingers brushed the flesh of her back, eliciting a gasp from her throat. His caress was tender as he traced a long jagged scar left by sharp briers. "Mrs. Cobb mentioned briers. Are these scars from some vindictive act Marguerite was responsible for?"

Celine lowered her head. "'Tis in the past, Michael. They are only scratches and will heal with little effort." She turned to face him. Searching his eyes, she urged, "Put them from your mind, as I have." Drawing her shoulders forward, she allowed the gown to part from her bosom. "Surely there are other things we can think of right now."

Michael felt a familiar tightening within him. His breath was warm against her cheek. He needed no further enticement, yet forced himself not to move. This night

would be special. He would not frighten her with his zeal.

Pressing against him, Celine smiled. "Hurry." Her fingers worked at the laces of his shirt. Each slight contact of her flesh to his caused him to draw in a ragged breath. Parting the material, Celine brushed a soft kiss to his bare chest. Brazen, her lips traced a path around a nipple.

The air lodged in his throat. He felt like a schoolboy, on the verge of losing his innocence. His fingers trembled as he caressed the silken skin along Celine's shoulders. "Celine...." Her fingers to his lips ceased further words.

"Shh...." Her mouth replaced her fingers. The kiss they exchanged was slow and heady. She molded her body to his, enjoying the warmth of his flesh. "Love me, Michael."

Reaching behind her he continued to unlace her gown. At last, he gently moved her back a step. With nothing to hold the material to her, the gown slid with a soft swish to the floor at her feet. The farthingale followed soon after.

Celine slipped her hands against his chest, and gently forced his shirt over his shoulders. It joined her gown on the floor. Michael swallowed hard in a vain attempt to dislodge the lump in his throat. The very air seemed charged.

Presenting her back to her husband, she lifted her hair from her shoulders. Her eyes closed as he worked the ties of her corset. By the time it was discarded to her feet with the other items of clothing, she was panting. For each tie Michael loosened, his lips pressed a soft kiss to the area of her back exposed. His desires mounting, he wasted little time ridding her of the remainder of her clothing. A vision of her a few days passed, standing as she did now teased him. "You are so beautiful."

Again her fingers brushed his lips. "No words, Michael. Show me...."

Slowly, he lowered her to the rich carpet beneath them. His hands caressed as they explored. Capturing the full swell of her breast, he brushed his thumb over the peak until it grew taut. His mouth replaced his fingers, eliciting a gasp from Celine. She arched, her fingers entwined through the soft waves of his hair. Inching his hand over her hips, he caressed her flesh, enjoying the purr-like sound that emanated from her throat. His fingertips brushed the downy hair that guarded her woman's secrets, then moved over the inner curve of her thigh. A ragged gasp parted her lips as he brushed her where no other had ventured. He lingered there, exploring with his fingers, and remembering just where to return to later. His mouth explored every inch of her woman's body, searing a path over her flesh. Only when he reached her feet, did he begin again his journey, this time provoking sighs of pleasure as he tarried at each place his memory assured him caused her to cry out.

Celine's hands move over his lithe form. The muscles along his shoulders tightened as she caressed, massaged, and kneaded. Hands moved with slow intent along the flesh of his buttocks. She too plied her mouth to his skin, tracing a path with her tongue over his adam's apple, and along the indentation at the base of his throat. Capturing a nipple between her teeth, she teased it, until like her own it grew taut. His warmth lodged her breath in her lungs. Pressing her body to his, she slid down his length, caressing him until he vented a strangled sigh. A languid smile turned up the corners of her lips as he closed his eyes, the feather soft touch of her hand to his manhood eliciting a gasp that echoed in the silence of the room.

His need great, he rolled her to the carpet, melding his form to hers. Celine

gasped as he entered her. For an instant they remained still. Then he began to move within her. Her eyes, perfect emeralds, closed, and her breath warmed his throat. Arching to meet him, her hips joined his in the slow languid movements. She buried her face against his shoulder. A sound released itself from her throat, growing in volume with each stroke of his body against hers. Michael shuttered within her as he took her to the clouds. Beyond their room the world ceased to exist, and the only thing that mattered was the love they shared.

* * * *

The first rays of a new day spread through the window. Like them Celine felt warm and content. Her legs were entwined with Michael's, as they lay by the fire caressing one another tenderly. Both were unwilling to respond to the persistent knocking at the door. At last, it could not be ignored, and Michael rose to drape a blanket over Celine's naked body. Then wrapping another quilt over his torso, he flung the door open with all the force of a demon-possessed wild animal. "This had better be important!"

Pursing her lips as she gazed at Celine sinking beneath the blanket like a frightened turtle, Aggie squirmed uncomfortably. "You know I would not interrupt your wedding night if it weren't, milord." Taking Michael's hand, she pulled him into the hall and whispered softly.

Celine could not hear their words, but knew as she watched the color drain from her husband's face, the bliss they shared was over. Slowly she rose, and moved closer. "What is it?"

Michael brushed his fingers over her cheek. "Nothing...." He stepped passed her, and tossed the quilt to the bed before grabbing his pants. He seemed oblivious to the housekeeper. The deep frown that creased his brow said a thousand things he had yet to voice.

Celine reached for him. "Michael, please ... I need to know."

He avoided her gaze, and peered at the floor. "The Countess Durham is downstairs."

Celine stiffened. "Oh." She said. No other word came to her mind. Swallowing, she turned toward her clothing still on the floor. "Aggie, would you help me dress?"

The older woman did not move. In fact the suggestion seemed to agitate her, and she shuffled her feet nervously. Looking to Michael she murmured, "Milord?"

Reluctantly he nodded. Already dressed, he crossed to the door. His shoulders sagged, and seemed weighted by something Celine did not understand. "Join me in the hall, Celine." Then he left her, and his footsteps echoed like a death march.

Peering at Aggie for answers, Celine asked timidly, "What is it? Why does he look as if the world is about to end?"

Aggie helped her into her gown. At last, she replied, "You'll see for yourself, milady."

Celine sighed forlornly. "We were married before God, Aggie. Nothing she can do will change that." But the housekeeper only frowned.

At the top of the stairs, Celine perused Sylvia Haverston carefully. Her back was to Celine, yet, there was something odd about her. Her shoulders sagged, her hair was in disarray, and she seemed to have acquired a tic that caused her to spasm violently. Celine forced her feet to move on the stairs and over the expanse of floor until she was just

before the older woman.

She squatted, wanting to see the woman's face.

Sylvia gave her no notice. Soft humming slipped from her lips, a song Celine recognized from her childhood. Her eyes were glazed, unfocused. Her lips trembled. Celine leaned closer. A gasp rose in her throat. The woman before her was not that same one who left only the day before. Sylvia was no more than forty-five. This woman, though the same, looked more like seventy. Lines furrowed her face. Her hair, a day ago slightly gray with age, was now white as snow. Confused, Celine gazed at her husband with wide eyes. "Michael?"

He shook his head. "Whatever happened to her must have been horrid." He released a deep sigh. "She has lost her mind ... no words have passed her lips. My stable hand found her wandering near the manse." He hesitated before adding. "He found no sign of Marguerite."

Celine returned her gaze to the woman before her. "Countess ... Sylvia...." Tenderly she brushed a strand of hair from Sylvia's brow.

As if aware of her for the first time, Sylvia lifted her gaze. A strangled sound began in her throat. Her body shook so violently, the chair moved over the stone floor. Saliva trickled from the corner of her mouth. She bolted from the chair, and backed away as if terrified. By the time she met the wall behind her, her hum had become a shriek. It grew louder, until it echoed through the great hall like a keening wail. She twisted her fingers through her white hair, and pulled at it. Clumps came away with her hands.

Celine edged closer, wanting only to comfort her. Sylvia screamed. A word formed, and exploded into the room. "Murderer!"

Celine stumbled back as if physically struck. She shook her head in denial. Sylvia paid her no heed. Again the word left her lips. "Murderer!" She screeched it until it lost any hint of being a word, and again became a mournful wail.

Tears welled in Celine's eyes. She backed away, her body trembling. "No." Her knees buckled beneath her, and she sank to the floor.

Michael crossed to his wife, and wrapped his arms about her. Glancing to Aggie, still on the stairs, he ordered, "Get the Countess up to her rooms, Mrs. Cobb, and see that she is comfortable." He glanced to Sylvia, and frowned. "Quickly." Her screams continued to reverberate in the great hall long after she was gone, and Celine sobbed softly against Michael's shoulders.

* * * *

"Please, I beg you, don't go." Celine wrapped her fingers about his arm. "What if it is a trap?"

Michael stroked her fingers with his. "I must." He did not voice his concerns about Marguerite or his stableman. The fear he saw in Celine's eyes assured him she knew the likelihood that they were dead. He placed a tender kiss to her trembling lips. "I want your word you will not open that portal for anyone." He glanced to the heavy iron door that was the main entrance to the keep. Cupping Celine's chin in his hand, he stressed, "Your word, Celine. And this time I expect you to honor it."

She peered at him in bemusement. "Milord?"

"You gave your word the other night, you would be here after the ball. Yet when Marguerite and I returned, you were dressed and ready to leave. This time, I want your word to mean something." There was no anger in his tone, only concern. Again his lips

sought hers. "You are not to cross that threshold, or allow anyone to cross it from without, unless it is myself, or Benton. Do you understand?" She could only nod, for her mouth was covered by his, and he lingered there enjoying a lengthy kiss.

* * * *

Michael sat astride his mount and released a weary sigh. The carnage sickened him. Sliding to earth, he removed his cloak, and draped it over his steed. His legs felt like lead, and had to be forcibly moved. The smell of blood stung his nostrils, nauseating him. The bile in his stomach rose and passed his lips before he could quell it. He leaned against a tree until there was nothing left to bring up. Then, wiping the back of his hand to his mouth, slowly moved toward Marguerite....

* * * *

The sun began its descent on the horizon before Celine roused herself from a tormented sleep. Her eyes were puffy from the tears she shed, and she sat at the edge of the bed lost in self-pity. Had she left Brier Point, as was her plan, none of this would have taken place. Again blood was spilled because of her folly.

Feeling dejected, she stumbled to the window and watched the last rays of sunlight disappear over the trees. Dusk, faded into night, leaving thick shadows in its wake. The view from Michael's windows was not familiar to her, and for several seconds she peered toward the trees with squinted eyes. One shadow seemed to move, separate from each tree, and reform near another. Cold fear settled in her. Kendall ... But she discounted the notion immediately. When last she saw him he was far too broken and beaten to have risen so quickly from his sick bed.

Again she searched the darkness. Again the shadow moved. In a small clearing it halted for an instant, and Celine drew in a ragged breath. She knew that dark cloak, and the form beneath it. "Michael!" Her fingers pressed to the glass, wanting to reach out and touch him.

The figure stumbled, groped for a slender trunk before collapsing to its knees, and then slowly rose once more. Celine gasped. He was hurt. It had been a trap! Caring little she had no shoes on, or that she was in only a thin nightgown, she raced from the room.

In the great hall all was still. No servants lingered there. Celine knew Aggie would be with Sylvia, and that Grace was probably seeing to supper. For a moment she chewed at her lip. She gave her word not to cross the threshold of the iron door before her. Yet, how could she keep it? With no one to turn to for advice, she finally made up her mind, and shoved the iron bar from the portal. Then she was racing into the night, rounding the corner of the manse with little thought to anything save her husband.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Prickling barbs of uneasiness crept along her spine. In the recesses of her mind a small voice began to sound an alarm. Yet, she refused to turn back. If Michael were hurt, she would find him and tend his wounds. Apprehension kneaded at the taut muscles of Celine's neck. Her footing was carefully laid, lest she alert someone to her presence. Even still, it was she who was surprised when one of the shadows moved from the trees, and materialized into a man just a few feet from where she stood.

A gasp slipped from her lips, and was quickly silenced by a large hand. "Shh...." For a moment his features were lost in the shadows. Celine held her breath. He stepped closer, at last revealing his visage. Burly, and as massive as an old tree, a familiar face loomed before her. "Had ter talk wit ye."

Celine relaxed. The husband of the asylum's matron, Horace Peabody posed no threat. He not only was the guard at Celine's door, but helped in seeing her free. A man towering over most men, he had a girth as round as Mrs. Beech's, though his height seemed to lessen its paunchiness. A thick mustache of gray hung over his upper lip, and passed his chin, giving him an unkempt appearance. Releasing a weary breath, Celine pressed trembling fingers to his thick arm. "Mr. Peabody, you near scared the life out of me." Scanning the forest behind him, she murmured, "though heartened to see you, 'tis not a good time...." She gave no thought as to how he knew she was at the keep, or that he almost seemed to be expecting her.

His large hand reached out, encircled hers, and tightened its grip. Celine was not frightened. He was never a danger to her before. Still, she eyed him with raised brows as he prevented her from departing. Annoyed she attempted to remove her hand from his. His grip increased, until a small gasp escaped Celine's lips. "Mr. Peabody, you are hurting me."

His eyes were sad. "Shouldna come out 'ere." He shook his head dejectedly. "Said ye would, but I were hopin' 'e were wrong."

For the first time Celine listened to the voice in the back of her mind. Like floodgates opening, the questions she should have asked ran through her thoughts. Timidly she queried, "Horace, how did you know I was here? Other than those behind these walls," She inclined her head toward the manse. "None know of my presence at this keep." Again she tried to pull free.

He held her with little effort. In fact, seemed to expel no extra energy at all, though Celine's struggles increased with each passing second. His gaze darted behind her. Following Horace's gaze, Celine turned her head and peered over her shoulder. Another shadow detached itself from the night, and moved forward. The lump that formed in her stomach was like a heavy rock. Advancing from the trees was Jack Sikes, the man with Kendall when she was kidnapped.

Stout, with thick arms that could easily hoist a fallen tree, Sikes eyed Celine with a crooked smile playing at his thin lips. Pox-marks marred his ruddy face, and disappeared into the greasy brown hair that receded at his forehead. Though not as

formidable as Horace Peabody in stature, he frightened Celine a hundred times more.

Celine dug her fingers into Horace's hand. She whimpered like a frightened child. Even the blood she drew with her frantic attempt at escape did not deter the man who held her captive. Once more he shook his head. "Ain't no sense fightin'."

Glaring at the other man, nearly beside her now, Celine hissed, "I shall fight to the death. You will not take me back to that asylum!"

Sikes chortled at her snidely. "Ain't much sense in worryin' yer head 'bout that, missy! Ain't goin' back ter the asylum." He scratched at the stubble of hair along his jaw. "Though ye be right 'bout this bein' ter the death. Alls Kendall wants be yer head." He leered at her womanly shape through the thin nightgown. "The rest be mine."

Celine could not stifle the hard shiver that raced along her spine. Every few days her guards at the asylum would change. Jack Sikes was the one she feared the most, and looked forward to the least. The others gave her no notice, in fact did not acknowledge her presence at all. Not so Sikes. He found any excuse to touch her. Many a time he left her door unlocked, hoping to lure her from the cell. After the first few times, Celine gave up, and remained where she was; her body bruised and sore from his pawing hands.

In the recesses of her mind a vision of him fondling her headless corpse sickened her. Determined never to let such a thing happen, she squared her shoulders, and pierced him with a scathing glare. "You so much as breathe on me, and I shall tear you to pieces."

"I plan on doin' a lot more than breathin' on ye." He gave her a crooked smile, revealing rotted teeth. "Kendall said I had ter kill ye. He never said I couldna have some fun afore 'and."

The slight curling of Horace's lip showed his distaste. "I agreed ter help catch 'er, but I ain't gonna stand by an' let ye disgrace 'er. We deliver 'er ter Kendall as planned ... nothin' more."

Celine wasn't about to wait around for what either of them had in mind. Though Horace outweighed her by at least a dozen stone, she had the wits to outsmart him. Sikes was a different story. Her best hope was using the element of surprise to her advantage. First, she had to make them let down their guard.

Solemnly she peered at the big man. "I don't understand, Horace. Why would you help me escape and then seek me out to return me to Kendall?"

Shrugging, he answered, "Got a price on me 'ead back in London. An' a hangman's noose waitin' ter be fitted ter me neck. Thought I could hide out the rest o' me days at the asylum. Somehow Kendall found out." Again he shrugged. "'Twas either ye, or me." He turned his attention to the dirt under his fingernails.

Celine nodded. "And you think I wish to die more than you?" She glanced to the smaller man. "After he finishes with me, I will be left for the birds to pick at." Her hand pressed against his fingers still wrapped about her wrist. "I have no doubt I shall beg for such an end long before he," she tilted her head toward Sikes, "...grants it." Imploringly she murmured, "I beg you do not let him touch me. I would rather die at Kendall's hand, than live one moment with his," again she inclined her head toward Sikes, "...hands upon me."

Horace also glanced to Sikes. "We deliver 'er as planned. Whatever 'appens after that don't concern me." Shifting position to put Celine slightly behind him, he added, "Ye so much as lay a finger on 'er afore we gets ter Kendall, and I'll snap ye like

kindlin'." This time it was he who tilted his head. "Fetch the 'orses sos we can be away from 'ere afore an alarm be sounded."

"She better be 'ere when I gets back, or you'll be the one picked apart by the birds." Sikes murmured as he disappeared back into the shadows.

* * * *

Exhausted, Michael slid from his mount before the keep and stretched wearily. Cold, he rubbed his hands over his shirtsleeves; aware for the first time he no longer had his cloak. The thought barely had time to form before it was dismissed. A cold shiver gathered strength as it crept up his spine. The door to the keep stood open. Light from within illuminated the landing. His breath lodged in his throat. "Celine."

The great hall was empty. Still the trepidation within him grew. Taking the stairs two at a time, he gained the landing above in a thrice of seconds. His heart raced in the confines of his chest. "Celine?" Her name was on his lips before he opened the door to his chambers. The room was empty, as he somehow knew it would be. The chambers across the hall, which until yesterday she claimed as her own, also were empty.

Retracing his path to the stairs, Michael fought the panic welling within him. "Celine?"

From the far hall Aggie peered at him. "Milord? I did not realize you returned. Was it as bad as you presumed?"

In no mood to answer questions, Michael shook his head as he began his descent to the great hall once more. "Where is Celine?" He called over his shoulder.

Aggie followed him to the landing and shrugged. "Isn't she abed, milord?" She fidgeted with her starched white apron. "Last I spoke with her, she was terribly upset, and in need of rest."

Agitated, Michael hissed through clenched teeth, "If she were abed, Mrs. Cobb, I would not be asking." For a moment he stood in the hall, turning in a slow circle, as if by doing so he would make his wife materialize. He halted as he faced the open entry. "Who opened the portal?"

Aggie gazed at it as if just realizing it was ajar. She shook her head apologetically. "I don't know, milord. I was with the Countess...." Her words faded as she peered into the empty hall.

* * * *

Wanting to ease Horace's mind, Celine gave him a stilted smile. Softly, she encouraged him. "Horace, mayhap if we fled together. ..."

He frowned at her. "Kendall's part bloodhound. He'd find both o' us."

Celine was undaunted. "I managed to elude him for quite some time ... you could do the same." He released her and ran his fingers over his bald pate. Celine gave him no second thought. Turning, she sprinted into the woods, and the darkness beyond. Her destination was the cliffs, where she hoped they would take Horace by surprise.

Her lungs burned with the exertion, yet she paid them no heed. Darting between the trees, she was blind to anything save her goal. Branches tore at her, tangling through her hair, and shredding the thin material of the nightgown. As on a night some weeks ago, the skin on the soles of her feet tore and left her blood as a marker of her passing. Still she raced on. Horace's heavy breathing roared behind her.

Ahead, she could hear the sea crashing against the rocks. Or, was that the wild beating of her heart? The trees thinned, and became smaller saplings the closer she got to

the cliffs. At the edge, Celine slowed slightly. But she did not want to alert the man behind her to what was beyond, and leapt off the crag. Her arms circled about a thin sapling, clinging precariously to the wall of the cliff. Her body twisted, as it flew over the raging sea. The flesh of her arm peeled as it scraped against the rough bark of the trunk. Celine tightened her hold, knowing to give in to the pain would see her plummet to her death. Thus she hung, her arms wrapped about the slender pole of the tree as it leaned and creaked with her weight.

Behind her, Horace was in a full run by the time Celine disappeared from view. He had no time to slow his massive form. He crashed through the trees and leapt from the cliff before he realized the danger. Like Celine, his arms groped for a thin sapling to anchor him. His girth far exceeded hers, and the tree could not support his weight. It snapped. Celine closed her eyes and bit her lip as his screams echoed up the side of the cliffs until they were silenced when his body collided with the rocks. The sound of the impact sickened Celine, and she could not hold back the bile that rose in her throat.

* * * *

Horace's screams sent an icy chill up Michael's spine. He steeled himself as he moved along the wall of the keep. Fearing for his wife's safety, he placed his feet with care, lest he alert those with her to his presence. His heart pounded so wildly within his chest, he was certain every living thing within a hundred miles of the keep heard it. He kept to the shadows as he inched through the woods, materializing for an instant between them before he was swallowed in their depths once more.

Nearing the cliffs, a sound caught his ear. Was it a sob? Edging close, Michael leaned and peered over the crag. His breath lodged in his throat. There, below him, was his wife, clinging to a reed thin tree, which bent toward the rocks. The only thing that seemed to hold her to the spot was the gentle wind that blew in from the sea.

"Celine." Her name was a ragged whisper.

Tilting her head, Celine peered at him in relief. "Michael." She shifted, eager to reach her hand to his. The tree groaned in protest, and sagged further over the cliff. Her lips trembled as she whispered. "I love you, Michael."

His heart threatened to snap. How could she think of such a thing at this moment? "And I you. But there will be time to talk of such things later. We've got to get you off that sad excuse for a tree."

As if to confirm the precariousness of the situation, the limb creaked, and began to snap. Celine released a high-pitched shriek. Her eyes closed, and her grip on the tree tightened. "Michael!"

Stretching out prone atop the cliff, Michael edged closer to the brink. His hand reached for hers. "Celine." He was calm, in control, and she opened her eyes to peer at him. "Take my hand."

She could not move. Sensing her angst, Michael's voice took on a commanding tone. "Celine, take my hand, now!" He repeated the words several times, until they penetrated into her mind.

Roots pulled free of the soil, causing the tree to dip so low, it near touched the wall of the cliff. Another scream rose in Celine's throat. Blindly, she raised her hand and groped the air above her. Warm fingers encircled her wrist. The tree began to give, releasing its slight hold above her. Then it was soaring through the night, and disappeared into the darkness below.

Held only by her wrist, Celine sobbed softly. Again Michael's voice was stern. "You must help me, Celine. Walk the side of the cliff." When she made no move, he ordered, "Celine, put your feet to the wall, and walk up. I cannot hold you much longer." The muscles in his arm tensed, veins bulged, and his arm shook with the effort he put forth. His tone was angry. "Celine do not make me a widower after only one day of marriage."

Her gaze met his. Giving her husband a shaky nod, she swung her feet to the wall of the cliff, and braced them there. Slowly, her feet inched up the wall. Another hand encircled her wrist. She was almost to the top. Another step ... and the surface of the cliff seemed to disintegrate beneath her. Tiny pebbles scattered down the rock face. For a moment Celine swung free of the cliff, and dangled above the sea.

"Again, Celine." Michael barked. White-hot pain burned through his arms as his muscles tightened. "Walk!"

Her steps were small, gaining the crag inch by precious inch. Near the top, she suddenly took flight. Colliding with her husband's torso as he stretched on his back, she sobbed against his chest. Both lay there for several seconds, grateful to be alive and allowing muscles to calm their spasms. Michael caressed the softness of her hair. "Now," He exhaled deeply. "What were you saying about loving me?"

Celine's tears moistened his shirt. Her head pressed to his chest, she touched her lips softly to his throat. "I love you more than anything in this world ... and can never express my thanks in saving my life ... again."

"Touching." A raspy voice hissed behind them.

Michael twisted on the ground, and eyed the stranger. The barrel of a pistol held the couple in its sights. Celine stiffened against her husband. "Sikes." She murmured hoarsely.

With arms raised to show the other man he was unarmed, Michael rose and reached his hand to his wife. "You trespass on private property. These are the lands of the Duke of Northumberland, and I am his son."

Sikes spit just before Michael's boots. "Don't care who ye are. I just wants the girl."

Michael gently glided Celine behind him. "The girl," he paused for an instant, "happens to be my wife."

Again Sikes spit. "She also happens ter 'ave a pretty price on 'er 'ead, which I aims ter collect." He raised the pistol until its sights rested on Michael's head. "Now step aside, afore I helps ye ter meet yer maker sooner than ye expected ter."

Thrashing in the woods near by, forced him to turn. At the same instant, Michael shoved Celine from him. She stumbled, and fell to her knees. As she collided with the ground, a shot rang out. Instinctively, she huddled with her hands over her head. Another shot echoed in the darkness, and was followed by a ragged scream. For a long moment Celine remained in her balled position. Cautiously she peered toward her husband.

Panting, Michael stood above the other man's body. From the shadows, Benton emerged, a smoking pistol still held tightly in his hands. Behind him, Aggie carried a frying pan, and a pocket full of knives. Grace inched close beside her, a fire poker in her grasp. Staggering to her feet, Celine moved to her husband. She fell against him, sobbing.

He stumbled backwards, taking her with him as his arm wrapped about her waist. “Michael?” Celine peered at him in confusion. Warm sticky liquid coated her fingers as they pressed to his side. The scent of his blood stung her nostrils. For an instant their gazes locked, and she saw all the love he held within him. “He has shot me....” Then his knees buckled beneath him, and he crumbled to earth.

“Michael!” His name was a scream that rose in her throat. As with the Lady Haverston that morning, the single word was repeated until it blended together and became a mournful shriek....

CHAPTER TWELVE

Peering at the freshly dug graves below, Celine leaned against the windowpane for support. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her, and no amount of coaxing ceased the trembling that took hold of her. Spent, she had no more tears left to cry. Blood still stained her hands where she applied pressure to the wound at Michael's side. Her face was dirty and tearstained, and she seemed to have aged a score of years in just a few hours.

"Milady?" Aggie cleared her throat and gently touched Celine's shoulder. "Come away from the window. I've brought up hot tea, and something for you to eat...."

Wearily Celine eyed another tray left earlier in the day. As had the one at breakfast, it went untouched. Celine could not remember when she had eaten last. Nor did it matter. She had no appetite. Absently she curled her fingers about the warm cup of tea Aggie pressed into her hand. It would grow cold long before she ever gave it a second thought.

A disgruntled sigh near the bed forced her attention from the window. Sad green eyes searched weathered brown ones. Manuv Jamina pursed his lips as he peered at the young woman before him. The dejection in his visage gave Celine little hope. Glancing back to Michael's still form, he exhaled deeply and shook his head. "I can do no more for him, milady." He whispered in his thick accent. At last he met her gaze. "You have sewn the wounds with great care. Now the rest is up to your God, and time. You must watch carefully for infection, and change his wraps daily." Again he looked away. "I wish I had better news. I am sorry."

Her nod stiff, Celine moved passed him and sank to a chair near the bed. Tenderly she took Michael's hand in hers and caressed. "I should have left here long ago." She murmured sullenly. "How could I have been foolish enough to think it would end happily?"

The old doctor patted her shoulder thoughtfully. "Regardless, you are tied to each other now, and nothing you do will change that. As he was responsible for you when he brought you here, so you are for him now." As if reading her thoughts, he added, "You mustn't abandon him in his darkest hour, milady. Now is when he needs you the most. Fate brought you together. Let nothing else tear you apart."

Forlornly, Celine lowered her head to the bed, and closed her eyes. How could he have known she contemplated leaving? Was it so easily read on her face? Unable to deny the truth, she simply refused to respond. Instead, she whispered her thanks, and remained with her head to the bed until the old man departed.

* * * *

Hell indeed had many forms, as Michael said. For Celine it came as nightmares that crept into her slumber, and the certainty that each noise beyond the manse was some demon come to take her from her husband's side. While the sun hung in the sky, she nursed him with tender care. Once, however, the shadows of night swallowed the last rays of day, she huddled on the bed next to Michael and watched and waited. Lack of

sleep began to torment her mind.

For hours she would sit, knees to chest, and arms wrapped about trembling legs. Wearily she perused the knob of the door, certain it moved ever so slightly. The wind became the howl of a demon, hungry for her soul. Leaves crackling as they brushed over the land, became the haunting footsteps of the dead, come to seek revenge. Long after the sky lightened with the first rays of dawn, Celine continued to tremble in fear. Her sanity faltered. The days melded together, one indistinguishable from the next....

Lost in a nightmare, Celine twisted on the sheets next to Michael. Deep in the recesses of her mind the memory of tenderly whispered words, and gently caressing fingers soothed her. Now, they were lost to her and she struggled against the demon she called Kendall for so long. His long gnarled fingers wrapped about her throat, slowly taking the life from her. A scream rose, but could not be expelled. Sweat beaded at her brow, glistening like tiny diamonds. From the shadows of the room, death moved forward with slow languid strides, ready to take her at last. Kendall bowed to the might of the monster, and stepped aside, knowing he was no match for one such as this.

With little fight left in her, Celine closed her eyes, spent and ready to die. The creature leaned toward her, its breath warm on her cheek. Deep in her thoughts she questioned such a thing. Would death be warm? A misshapen hand reached to her, and she thrashed in a vain attempt to get away. Instead of drawing the last breath from her lungs, it brushed her hair from her brow, and caressed her cheek. Celine blinked several times in disbelief. Did death have compassion? Perhaps knowing all she endured, it would now take pity on her, and be gentle as it drew her from this life.

"Celine." It knew her name, and she cringed. Once she had been ready to face death. Now, she had love, and was frightened at the thought of losing it.

Trembling, she huddled at the head of the bed, her head shaking in denial. "No ... she no longer lives!" She pleaded. "She died in the asylum." Reaching to the shadowy figure, she implored. "I will never be her again, if you spare me."

"Celine, 'tis not real. Come from your dreams and know that I love you." Again the fingers brushed at her hair. Warm lips placed a feather soft kiss to her brow. "No harm will come to you here, sweet Celine."

The words drifted through her thoughts, piercing her fear. Again she blinked. The dark figure before her began to fade, change. Its grotesque shape molded into that of a man. The features softened, becoming recognizable. A mournful sob escaped her throat as she realized the demon no longer tormented her. In its stead was the pale visage of her husband. Her fingers traced the scar along his cheek, reassuring her he was no part of the nightmare that gripped her so recently. "Michael." His name was a whisper against his cheek. Tears replaced it, and she wept as his arms wrapped about her, and chased the demons away.

* * * *

A fortnight passed, and though Celine found comfort in her husband's arms in the darkness of night, she still feared. When the tinker came to sell his wares, she was certain it was Kendall, and cowered in her room, trembling. What small strength she attained in the last weeks, was now stripped away, and even the slightest noise sent her scurrying.

Weak, Michael watched from their bed with pursed lips. He offered comfort, and sent the demons to flight when they stole into his young wife's dreams. Still it tore at

him to see her frightened, and he resolved to cast the monsters from Celine's mind as quickly as possible.

Caressing her cheek one early morning, he sighed in resignation. If they waited much longer, she might well succumb to what haunted her. The time had come to face that which tormented her. "Celine..." He searched her eyes. "My strength returns each day." Approaching the subject with caution, he added, "Yet as I grow strong, you grow weak. 'Tis time, Celine." He left the sentence hanging, allowing her mind a moment to absorb what he meant.

She took to trembling. "I cannot." Tears spilled over her cheeks. "I know he waits beyond the safety of this keep, to take me into death ... or worse to finish the job Sikes did not."

"I am not afraid of him, Celine. Nor should you be. He is a man, with weaknesses like any other. If we face him together, we will find that weakness."

She shook her head in adamant denial. "I can't!"

Taking her hands in his, Michael brushed each with a tender kiss. "Would it be better to fear sleep each night? Would it be better to lose your mind? He wins either way, Celine." His fingers moved over the thick strands of her hair. "I will not give up what I have so recently claimed as my own." His brows rose as he searched her green eyes intently. "I will help you chase your demons away, Celine. But to do that, I must know the truth." His eyes searched hers. "Who are you Celine? Who is it I have claimed as my own?"

Celine's answer was hesitant. "I am not certain I understand." Fidgeting beside him, she chewed at her lip. "I am no different now than when we first met."

Brushing his fingertips over her jaw line, he sighed. "When I returned to the keep after finding Margeurite..." His tone grew soft; "It occurred to me that I knew very little about your life before we met. There must be something in your past, Celine, which has spurred Kendall to such drastic measures." Sensing her trepidation, he tried to ease her discomfort. "Tell me who you are. Tell me of your life. Somewhere in your memory there is an answer to all of this."

Certain he was wrong, Celine drew her knees to her chest, and rested her chin on their bend. "I am who you see, Michael. That which I was is no more. What good would it do to delve there?"

"Celine, please." He cajoled. "No harm will come to you here. I only seek to find that which sends you scurrying like a frightened rabbit, and torments your dreams." Wanting to ease the fear he saw in her eyes, he encouraged. "Tell me of your family. What were they like? Is there someone who might help you in this situation?"

Releasing a deep sigh, Celine spread her arms before him. "My family is what you see before you. I am all that remains." Her voice broke and for a moment she was silent. Softly she murmured, "I am the only living child of my mother and father. My mother died in childbirth ... and the babe followed soon after." She lowered her head, and continued. "You already know about my father."

Regretting the sorrow he glimpsed in her eyes, Michael drew her to him, and brushed a kiss to her brow. "I am sorry to make you relive painful memories, Celine. Somewhere in them there is an answer to what haunts you now." Wanting to ease her sadness, he changed the subject. "How did you come by that soft hint of France in your voice?"

Forgetting for a moment the sorrow of a life lost to time, she replied, "My mother was French." She smiled, the sparkle returning to her eyes. "Now there is a tale worth telling ... how my parents met, I mean. It truly rivals ours!" Relieved at the prospect of putting thoughts of Kendall from her mind, Celine delved into the story with great zeal.

"I must go back a bit further for you to truly understand the importance of the tale." Her cheeks took on a rosy hue as she sifted through memories and collected her thoughts. "My mother and her sister Lizette were the daughters of the Marquis de Truseau." Michael's eyes widened in disbelief, and she could not contain the soft laugh that slipped from her lips. "When my mother was ten, her sister married the Marquis de Bevion. She was sixteen, he was forty one."

Celine shrugged. "They never even saw one another until their wedding day." Her countenance changed and she frowned. "He was a man who used his fists freely, and the marriage was not a happy one." Looking off to the distance, she continued. "When their son Jean Luc was five, things took a drastic turn in my grandfather's house. Late one night soldiers came to the manor house and took my grandfather from his wife and daughter. He was accused of treason." Celine drew in a slow deep breath before going on. "There was no trial, no defense. Barely two days after his home was stormed, he was beheaded in the public square. Wife and daughters were forced to watch." Pale, of a sudden, Celine asked, "How could anyone be forced to view such a thing?"

Michael caressed her tenderly. "If this is too painful ... we can talk of something else."

Celine squared her shoulders and shook her head adamantly. "No, I want you to know." At last she continued. "All lands and titles were striped from the family." Peering up at her husband, she added, "Not unlike what happened to my father ... though he did not lose his life until later."

For a moment she was silent. Then giving a feeble smile she went on. "His wife could not endure the loss of her husband, and simply stopped eating, or caring. She joined him in death just a few months later. My mother was left alone and destitute." Again Celine sighed. "The man my mother was betrothed to could not be bothered with her. Fearing for the safety of his own family, he called off the engagement. So my mother went to the only person she could turn to, her sister Lizette. The Marquis de Bevion refused to allow my mother into his home. He too feared repercussions, and turned her away."

Celine wiped a tear from her cheek. "My aunt Lizette begged him reconsider. He silenced her pleas with his fists. Desperate, she slipped out one night and sold some of her jewels. She gave the coins to my mother ... wanting only to assure herself her sister would not starve." Pursing her lips, Celine paused as tears welled in her eyes. "When the Marquis found out what she did, he near beat her to death."

Celine eyed Michael for a moment. "My cousin, Jean Luc, told me once that she was nothing more than a shell after that night." Her voice broke. "She was found dead several weeks later ... hanging in her chambers."

Silence reigned as she gathered her composure. At last Celine began anew. "Fearing the Marquis would seek my mother's head as revenge, she went into hiding and lived on the streets. She had no one to turn to. Frightened, and with little money left from Lizette, my mother bought passage on a ship bound for England. On the ship she met a young man ... who secreted her away and risked his own life for her safety. She fell in

love, and after a very short courtship, she became his wife.” Celine smiled at the thought. “She often told me she would gladly have endured all of it again, save the death of her family, if it meant having my father in her life.” Her gaze locked with her husband’s. “As would I to be with you.”

He smiled, and caressed her cheek. Still she had yet to give him the answers he sought, and he cajoled her softly. “And your father, tell me of him.”

Her lips turned slowly downward. “He was a lot like you, Michael, gracious and loving, yet strong and protective of his family. You would have liked him ... and he you.” The fondness in her voice warmed her husband.

For a long moment Michael studied his wife’s face. At last he continued his query. “You speak with the refined speech of one brought up into wealth, Celine.” He frowned slightly. “Yet when I found you, your garments spoke of poverty. You told me once your father’s title and lands had been striped from him.” He paused, licked his lips before continuing. “What happened to cause that?”

Now it was her turn to frown. “I don’t know, exactly.” She shrugged. “He would not speak of it. I know only that he was accused of some dreadful act, which brought his rights to his lands and title into question. Both were taken from him. Just before his death...” She released a ragged breath and shuttered. “He went to London to straighten everything out. I received a letter saying he would explain the outcome on his return ... it was the last...”

Michael cradled her close. Though painful to relive, such events might well hold the key to her present predicament. “And home, Celine? Where is the place you call home?”

Her face pressed to his shoulder she whispered, “Here, Michael. I have no other place to call home.” He caressed her cheek. “The place where I grew up is just outside Edinburgh. But I doubt I have any claim to it after being in the asylum for so long.”

Michael released a weary breath. “Mayhap not, but it is a starting place. All your troubles began there, and I have no doubt the answers to be sought will be found there as well.”

* * * *

Standing by the window, Celine watched a large trunk loaded on a coach bearing no insignia, or crest. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her, and she gripped the ceil of the window for support. No amount of pleading with her husband changed his mind, and she finally resigned herself that face her demons she would. Resignation, however, did not make the task any less formidable.

The strength of his arms about her waist gave comfort, and she leaned against him. Her voice was a ragged whisper. “I can’t help but think he is watching even now. I know in my heart he waits, biding his time until the moment is right.”

“Then let the moment be at hand.” Michael breathed against her neck. “I grow weary of the game.”

Twisting about to face her husband, Celine shook her head solemnly. “He is not a forgiving sort, Michael. You’ve witnessed first hand just what he is willing to risk. I would never forgive myself should something else happen to you.” Lifting her hand before him, she murmured hoarsely, “My hands will never be free of the blood he has spilled. Do not force him to spill more yet.”

His lips traced a path over hers. “I was taken by surprise the last time, Celine. It

will not happen again.”

Celine closed her eyes and relished the warmth of his embrace. There was no sense arguing the point. Yet deep in her soul, she feared for her husband and the new life she found.

* * * *

Edinburgh bustled with activity. The streets were alive with shoppers, vendors and noise. For Celine it brought back memories of her childhood, traversing the streets with her mother. The tensions eased from her shoulders, and a smile returned to her face, easing lines that furrowed her brow these last weeks. For the first time in weeks she laughed with an abandon that hinted at the person she was before her life was cast into turmoil.

On their second day Celine stopped before a shop to admire a feathered hat in the window. It had been a long time since she wore anything so lovely, and she could not hide the wistful look that settled in her eyes. She traced the delicate shape of the hat through the glass with trembling fingers.

“Do you like it?” Michael breathed near her ear.

Releasing a deep sigh, Celine nodded. “’Tis lovely.” She gave her husband a sheepish smile. “Though I profess not to need such finery any longer, I cannot deny I miss many of the things once part of my life.”

“Let me buy it for you.” Michael stepped forward.

Celine pressed her hand to his sleeve. “Though I admit a fondness for such finery, they are not important any more. Just because I admire it, does not mean I must have it.”

Smiling, Michael covered her hand with his. “I am not a pauper yet, Celine. Allow me the pleasure of spoiling you while I have the chance. There may well come a time when such gifts will be treasured memories of better days.”

She leaned and pressed a tender kiss to his cheek. “Very well, Michael, but know this,” She traced the line of his jaw with her fingertip. “You are my most treasured gift, and nothing will ever come close in comparison.”

Stepping to the side, Michael waited for her to enter the shop. Instead she shook her head. “I would much rather remain here on the street.” She replied. “There are a million memories vying for my attention.” At her husband’s raised brows, she caressed his cheek lovingly. “You have my word, I will go no further than the front of this shop. I wish only to take in the sights and sounds of a life lost to time.”

Finding no reason to deny the request, Michael ceded. “Your word?” His breath was warm on her cheek.

Celine lowered her gaze; ashamed he felt the need to question her promise. “I know it has not been worth much of late....”

His fingers lifted her chin until their eyes met. “I have never doubted your word, madam. I only wish to assure myself no harm will come to you.” Then his lips brushed hers tenderly.

For a moment Celine stood lost in the warmth of his faith in her. A deep sigh escaped her lips as he released her, and stepped into the shop, leaving her on the stoop gazing after him. At last she smiled, content with her life for the first time in many months.

Absorbed in a menagerie of music boxes set on a table just in front of the shop,

she felt a blush rise in her cheeks as her husband perused her from within. She needn't have looked up to verify his gaze upon her. As on the cliffs at Brier Point, he left her with a disquieting feeling whenever his gaze rested on her overly long.

To the left of the shop a puppet show played out, and children laughed in gleeful abandon. Drawn to them, Celine moved just out of sight of the shop window. For several seconds she enjoyed the melodious sounds of innocent giggles, imagining what it would be like to take her own children on such an adventure.

Not until the hairs at her nape stood and bristled did fear prick her with its barbs. Aware of a sudden that she was watched; Celine raised her head stiltedly, scanning the crowd about her. A knot formed in her throat. Breathing became an arduous task. Sweat beaded on her upper lip, and along her brow. For an eternity she stood frozen, peering across the throng of people into dark brooding eyes.

Though she willed her feet to move, they remained steadfast in the soft dirt. Her knees quaked beneath her weight, threatening to buckle. A thousand images from the past two years collided in her mind's eye, vying for attention. Bile threatened at the base of her throat. She felt the blood drain from her face. Her composure on the brink of abandoning her, Celine could not control the violent trembling that took hold. Panic welled on the verge of exploding.

From his vantagepoint across the street the man smiled. Nodding in acknowledgment to being seen he stepped into the muddied street with the assistance of a gnarled cane, and began to close the gap between he and Celine. Each step seemed painful and laborious as he attempted to put as little weight as possible on his mangled foot. Yet, for all his marked pain the smirk on his lips attested that he thoroughly enjoyed the ashen pallor that settled over Celine's features.

Still unable to force her feet to move, Celine shook her head as he neared. A feeble whimper escaped her lips, but went unheard above the din of the laughing children. Her mind raced. How could he be here? When last she laid eyes on him he was left to the side of the road, broken and beaten. Even now, his nose noticeably crooked and his foot mangled, his eyes snapped like flint, reminding Celine of long months in the asylum.

A slow languid smile curled his lips as he took in the finely tailored gown fitted so perfectly to her slim form. Positioning his body in a way that blocked any attempt at flight, he bowed gallantly, and eyed her in appreciation. "I knew you'd come back to Edinburgh. Been waiting nigh on a month for you to show your face."

Icy droplets of perspiration rolled between Celine's shoulder blades. A dry tongue scraped over even drier lips. Desperate, she scanned the crowd near the shop for some sign of her husband. Panic left her barely able to breathe. For an instant her gaze dipped to his lame foot. Surely she could outrun him....

As if reading her thoughts, he released a hoarse laugh. "Rest assured, Celine, any attempt at flight will end badly for you. There are at least a dozen men ready at my beck and call should the need arise."

Wearily Celine scanned the crowd. Several miscreants caught her gaze and she shuttered. For a long moment she weighed her options. Her wits were what brought her through two years at the asylum. She needed no brawn then. Strangely, a peace came over her, and she released a slow steady breath. Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin a notch, and nodded to Kendall. Her voice was calm as she spoke. "It would be

futile to deny I fear you.” At the sparkle of satisfaction in his eyes, she continued. “Nevertheless I am not the same girl you took advantage of two years passed. I have been to hell and back. There is nothing you can do that could be worse.” Now her eyes glinted like fine steel. “Unless you plan on killing me right here before a thousand witnesses, get your filthy carcass from my sight.” The words were a hiss from thin blanch lips.

The laughter that spewed from him surprised her. Leaning forward on his cane, he released a lengthy breath against her cheek. “Your bravado is wasted on me, Celine. I know your fears, and what feeds them. You have only tasted what hell can be. Believe me, the asylum was paradise compared to what I have waiting for you.”

“You would have to get passed me first.” Michael stepped before his wife’s tormentor, and glared at him icily.

For a long moment Kendall assessed the other man. “Lord Aberdeen the younger, I presume.” He cocked his head. “You would be amazed what you can learn with a tankard of ale. That old servant from the Haverston’s was more than willing to tell tales once into a few cups.”

Michael’s nod was stiff. “Mr. Kendall.” He returned the introduction. His eyes flashed fire. Raking his gaze over the other man he added snidely, “I see you’ve faired well since last we met. Though ‘tis clear your nose and foot will never be as they were before our encounter in the woods.”

Kendall paled. “You?” The single word escaped his lips in a soft rush.

This time Michael bowed gallantly. “At your service, sir!” Slipping his arm about Celine’s waist, he pulled her to him, and nodded as he continued. “You already know my wife, Celine.”

Again the other man’s color waned. “Wife?” The disbelief was evident in his features. “Impossible.”

Drawing strength from her husband’s arm about her, Celine’s smile was triumphant. “We were married six weeks ago.” Brave now, she added. “I’ve come back to claim what is mine.”

“What a pity we’ve so many witnesses about.” He murmured as he caressed a slender dagger at his waist. Giving both a snide leer, he stepped back toward the street. “Best watch your backs.” He hissed. “Never know what dangers wait in dark corners.” The knife glinted as he wove a small path next to his leg with its sharp blade. “Enjoy her, milord, while you have the chance. I will finish what I started, rest assured of it. ‘Tis death that will end this.”

Michael returned his leer. “Aye, ‘tis to the death then. But t’would be wise not to count yourself the victor.” With that, he led his wife away, and faded into the throng milling about the market place.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His head comfortably in Celine's lap, Michael stretched across the bed. Idly he caressed her arm as it rested atop his chest. "When did you first meet Kendall?"

Though weary of all the questions, Celine repeated that which she knew she told him before. "After my father's death. He came to the manor with the same papers found in my father's carriage."

"Was that before or after your cousin Jean Luc arrived?" When she did not answer, Michael peered up at her with raised brows.

For several seconds Celine searched his face in confusion. She had no memory of ever speaking of Jean Luc other than a brief mention of him as a child in France. Again, her husband knew things that baffled her. Hesitantly she replied, "After ... and before...."

Michael laughed at her cryptic response. "Which is it?"

Celine pursed her lips in thought as her fingers caressed the line of Michael's jaw. "Both, actually." Her brow furrowed as memories drifted through her mind. "Jean Luc came first when my father was alive." Her thoughts turned inward for a moment. "I think he and my father must have argued, though I can't be certain of it. I woke one morning to find him gone, and my father seemed distant and angry."

Celine gave a soft snort. "In truth, I was relieved to have Jean Luc gone. For weeks he was relentless about seeking my hand in marriage. Nothing I said or did deterred him."

"Mayhap he should have trampled you with his mount!" Michael winked at her.

Still in deep thought, Celine gave only a feeble smile. "Kendall arrived just a few hours after my father's body was found ... but I was too overwhelmed to speak with him." She delved into her memory once more. "Jean Luc returned a few days after my father's death." Her eyes misted. "Were it not for him I doubt I would have made it through those retched days."

He probed, "Was there something between the two of you?"

Celine chuckled at the thought. "Heavens no! Though not for lack of trying on Jean Luc's part. He could not fathom my father's refusal to find me a husband based solely on title and stature. It was simply unheard of for a young woman of my station to be left to my own devices to find a husband." She chewed at her lip for a moment. "As my cousin, he would eagerly have filled the position. In fact was incredulous that my father refused such an offer."

Shifting to his elbow, Michael peered at her in bemusement. "I must admit, Celine, that baffles me as well. My betrothal to Marguerite was set in stone nearly from our births."

Celine's smile was coy. "A stone that became a heavy weight about your neck, milord." Her finger traced the frown that pulled down the corners of his mouth. Sobering, she conceded, "I consider myself quite fortunate I had no arraignments set in stone. 'Tis unlikely you and I would ever have met were that the case." A heavy sigh

slipped from her lips. "After what my aunt Lizette endured from a prearranged marriage, my mother vowed never to put me through such misery. If I could not find love on my own, she would rather I die an old maid, than sacrifice my identity for a title."

"In any case," She continued, "When Jean Luc returned the second time, he became a thorn in my side. His insistence at marrying me was relentless, and eventually I lost my temper with him, and ordered him back to France." Her lips pulled down into a weary frown. "He was my strength, and helped me through one of the worst times I can recall in my life. I was spiteful and mean to him before his departure, and regret my actions terribly."

Michael frowned. "When Kendall returned after your cousin's departure ... had he the papers you've spoken of?" At Celine's nod, he asked, "You suppose he retrieved them on his first visit?"

Celine shook her head adamantly. "He couldn't have. He had not so much as put his foot in the manor."

"Yet, he had obtained the papers...." Michael mused. "How do you suppose they came to be in his possession?"

Weary of a sudden, Celine slid from the bed and stood gazing into the night beyond their rooms at the inn. "I can't imagine." Her tone was listless and tired. "Don't you think I have been over all of this a thousand times? Every moment in that asylum I racked my brain for answers. I am no closer now than then, Michael." Her shoulders sagged in defeat.

Michael joined her at the window. His arms wrapped about her waist, and he pressed a soft kiss to her neck. "Mayhap we shall find the answers on the morrow, at Falcon's Ledge." His fingers moved up her torso, and caressed her breasts. Her moans urged him on. Her nightgown fluttered to the floor, and was joined by his pants ... and for a while they forgot the world beyond.

* * * *

"This day might well end in tragedy. I cannot ask you to risk your lives for me. No ill will would be thought should you choose to remain here, or return to Brier Point." Michael took Benton's hand in his and gave a gentle squeeze. "You and Grace have the chance at a long life together."

Benton shook his head. "I won't leave you to face him alone."

Michael peered past the stable hand to Celine and Grace waiting at the stoop of the inn. "Though I would be grateful for your loyalties, 'tis a grave price to ask of you."

The other man shrugged. "The risk is no less for you and the lady Celine." Patting Michael warmly on the shoulder he added, "Together, milord, we shall put that coward to flight." Then he hoisted his lanky body to the driver's seat of the carriage, and drew the reins into his hands.

Grace swept into the carriage before Michael could deny her access. With her chin high, she stated, "I give me word ter Mrs. Cobb I'd do whatever necessary ter 'elp, an' I won't be breakin it." To add credence to her vow, she picked up one of the long pistols from the seat beside her and clutched it between her fingers. "I may not 'it 'im between the eyes, milord, but I'll give me best try!"

No words could express the gratitude Michael felt. Knowing it was futile to try, he simply reached his hand to Celine and aided her ascent to the carriage. Then he slipped in beside her, and rapped lightly in single to Benton.

* * * *

Several miles beyond the city, the landscape opened to rolling hills and lush green farms. Forgetting for a moment the reason for this journey, Celine leaned to the window, and sighed. "I'd almost forgotten how beautiful it is here." Her eyes sparkled as she faced her husband. "Isn't it lovely?"

His eyes were only on his wife. "Indeed it is." The husky tone of his voice sent a deep blush to Celine's cheeks.

"I referred to the countryside, my sweet." She chided.

Michael caressed her throat. "I am well aware of what you referred to." His lips brushed the tip of her earlobe.

It was Grace, clearing her throat, which separated the lovers on the opposite chair. "I think I'll ride up top wit Benton fer a space." Winking at the couple, she opened the small window at Benton's feet. "Ain't enough room in here fer the three o' us."

Once alone, Celine moaned softly as her husband's caresses sent pleasurable pulses through her body. Content to feel his touch Celine closed her eyes as his hands moved over her. Passions rose. Their breath mixed together in heated kisses. Their ardor cooled quickly as Benton rapped against the window. Michael opened the small portal and whispered, "Guests?" Atop the carriage Benton nodded. Michael frowned. To Celine he stated stiltedly, "Do you remember what I told you?" At her nod, he thrust a pistol into her hand. Over his shoulder he called. "Benton, find a good spot, then get to the trees!"

The conveyance halted several yards farther down the road. Hidden in the dense underbrush, Celine and Grace readied the bags of gunpowder stashed beneath their skirts, and waited for the first shots to ring out. For several hours the day before, Michael and Benton patiently taught them the process of loading. It would be their responsibility to retrieve the weapons once fired, and reload as the men scurried about to take aim from another site.

The silence was deafening. To Celine it seemed to span an eternity. A fine line of sweat gathered between her shoulders blades, and inched down the valley between her breasts. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears, and pulsed in chaotic fashion at her temples. Horses hooves joined the tempo, becoming louder with each passing minute.

Celine watched Michael sidle beneath a large shrub. The muzzle of the musket in his hands leveled toward the road. The weapon barked as the first horseman rounded the bend. A shrill scream erupted from the man's throat as he fell to earth.

Smoke wafted through the trees. Celine searched for her husband, but found the spot empty, save the gun he discarded as he moved to another site. On all fours, she crawled through the trees, and slid her shaking hand about the musket. Several prayers were murmured beneath her breath as she tried to steady her hands to load the weapon.

Another shot echoed behind her, and she ducked low. The bullet missed its mark, and whistled through the trees until it bored a hole in the trunk of a towering pine. She caught sight of Benton crouched low by an old oak. Gripping the pistol tucked into his waistband, he took aim, and fired before the riders could set their sites on his position. A brilliant smile lightened his features as the lead horseman slumped atop his mount, and crumbled to the dirt.

Again a shot rang out. Celine scanned the brush, and sighed as she glimpsed her husband crawling toward her. Near the carriage another man slumped upon his steed.

Michael hastened from his place and retraced his steps to Celine, who thrust the musket back into his hands, and traded it for the useless pistol. The same scene played out across the road where Benton and Grace huddled.

Four men atop horses careened around the bend, pistols at the ready. The two out front trampled the rider Michael felled, and the second, who escaped death, but was crawling toward the woods with a bullet lodged in his leg. His screams were testament he never made his goal.

Benton set his sites, and fired once more. Another man joined the two on the ground. Dropping the musket at Grace's feet, he shimmied beneath a low hedge, and readied the pistol. He never had the chance to fire it as a shot rang in his ears. The bullet shattered his arm. Celine watched the gun fall from his grasp, the limb now useless. Her heart sank. Yet, a ragged gasp of disbelief escaped her throat as he hoisted the weapon into his left hand, and leveled it toward the clearing. Though the shot danced off into the thicket, she could see the determination in his face as he disappeared in search of Grace for the gun she loaded.

Another shot echoed from the trees, and to Celine's amazement one of the miscreants screamed as blood spurted from his chest. No less amazed was Grace, who gazed at the gun in her trembling fingers in complete awe. Heartened, she began to reload.

Celine drew in a shaky breath as she packed the musket with gunpowder. She had little time to think of where the bullets emanated from, or who might be watching for the smoke to rise from the trees. She knew only that time was of the essence. When a twig snapped close at her back, she twisted about, the musket still clutched in her fingers. Yet it was too heavy, and she struggled to lift it to her shoulder. A hand gripped the muzzle. Blindly, Celine grasped for the trigger. The shot exploded. Her ears rang and her fingers throbbed. Her eyes widened as a hand, still clinging to the barrel of the gun, spewed blood against her face. A haunting scream reverberated in her ears as the man, now detached from his appendage, spied his blood as it stained the forest floor. His own gun lost in the debris of leaves at his feet, he stumbled away, in shock.

Crashing through the trees, Michael released a ragged breath as he espied his wife. "Are you hurt?"

Too emotional to speak, she shook her head and continued packing the barrel of the gun. Michael began to do the same with the pistol. Another shot rang from where Grace crouched behind a thick shrub. Though it missed the man she aimed for, it struck his horse. The animal reared, tossing his rider like kindling. As he struck earth, his pistol, cocked and ready to fire, barked, taking him into death.

"Down to two." Michael released a weary sigh. Retrieving the musket from Celine, he thrust it to his shoulder and fired. Smoke obscured his view, though the whimpered sobs in the clearing were an assurance he hit his mark. Tossing the musket to earth, he darted to another vantagepoint. This time the pistol ended the sobs.

Celine peered to the other side of the road as she fought to reload the musket. Benton eased his way along the tree line until he once more knelt next to Grace. The young maid wiped frantically at her tears. Yet, she continued to press the shot into the barrel of the pistol. Once finished, she tore strips from her undergarments, and hastily tied them about his upper arm, stemming the blood flow.

Intent on her task of loading the musket, Celine was unaware of the danger

lurking just a few feet away until the barrel of a pistol pressed firmly to her temple. The hammer cocked in her ear, and she froze. Cautious, she peered from the corner of her eye. A lump formed in her throat. Breathing became difficult. The hatred she glimpsed in Kendall's eyes sent a shudder along her spine.

"Milady!" His derogatory tone assured her he gave no compliment. "To your feet, if you will."

Celine complied. The musket lay as she had left it in the bed of leaves at her feet. Her thoughts were on her husband. She heard the pistol report, and knew he would be on his way back, unarmed.

"Milord Aberdeen!" Kendall shouted above the din of gunfire. "Come pay your last respects to your wife before I send her to her death!"

Stepping from the underbrush, Michael raised his hands to show he was unarmed. "All right, Kendall," He said. "You have my attention."

Another shot rang from the trees several yards away and the last of Kendall's men staggered to his knees. Michael inclined his chin in that direction. "We were out numbered only a few moments ago, Kendall. Seems we've evened the odds. Should you shoot me, my man is out there, yet. Your chances of escape are rather slim."

Kendall pulled the gun from Celine's temple, and aimed it at Michael. "Then we go to hell together, milord."

Celine felt her chest tighten. She would not allow Kendall to destroy another life. Of a sudden she lurched against him, shoving at him with every ounce of strength she possessed. He stumbled backward. The report of the pistol was deafening, but the shot danced off into the woods, never coming close to its mark. With Michael already advancing, Kendall's fingers curled about the hilt of a dagger tucked into the top of his boot.

In the bed of leaves at his feet, Celine shook off the cobwebs clouding her vision. The blade of the knife in Kendall's hand glinted, as a knot tightened in Celine's stomach. Her fingers wrapped about the musket, forgotten at his feet. Had she packed the shot? Would it fire were she to squeeze the trigger? Uncertain she eyed it for a long moment. Regardless, it was her only hope, and she heaved it to her shoulder. It only gave a slight click; having no bullet to be fired.

Frustrated, Celine tossed the musket to the forest floor. It landed in the leaves, just beside the pistol the brigand left when his hand was shot off. Celine dove atop it, and rolled with it in her hand. Prone, she shrieked, "Kendall, I have already been to hell ... 'tis your turn!" Her voice quaked with her fear. The explosion of the weapon numbed her hand. For an instant she lay in the dry leaves, the smoking pistol still clasped in her trembling fingers, as Kendall turned toward her with wide eyes.

He moved toward her, one step, than two. The hatred she glimpsed in his eyes sent an icy shiver along her spine. Nearly on top of her, he staggered, and went to his knees. The dagger in his grasp wove close to Celine's throat. Blood trickled from his mouth. For a moment his body swayed. Then he fell forward. A slow hiss escaped his parted lips. His eyes remained open, gazing forever, yet not seeing the victory gained by the woman he tortured for nigh on two years.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Celine staggered into Michael's arms, sobbing. It was over. She buried her face against his neck. Her tears moistened his shirt. His lips sought hers. Though Kendall lay dead, Michael could not rid himself of the unease that taunted him. If it truly was the end, why did he feel such overwhelming trepidation? There were still a thousand questions running through the back of his mind. Yet with Kendall dead he doubted they would ever be answered.

Grace and Benton stumbled toward the carriage. "Milord!" Grace shouted as she tried to keep Benton from collapse. "'e will die if we do not get 'elp!" She seemed to have aged a score of years over the past moments, and was nearly as pale as Benton.

Michael raced through the brush. "Get him in the carriage." He hoisted Benton to the seat, and nearly tossed Grace in beside him. "Celine, we've got to get Benton back to Edinburgh!"

Joining him atop the conveyance, she scanned the landscape. At last she pointed toward the rolling hills off in the distance. "There!" A plumb of smoke curled over the horizon. "Follow the road ... 'tis much quicker to go to Falcon's Ledge than back to town!" Her husband snapped the reins vehemently, sending the team to flight, and the carriage lurching over the rutted road.

* * * *

Atop a hill a short distance from the manor, Michael halted the carriage. The manor house stood nestled on the slope of a hill, like a perfect ruby among a sea of emeralds. It gleamed a vibrant red, surrounded by spring's newly lush greenery. Dozens of chimneys spired toward the sky on a roof pitched and peaked with hills and valleys. Awed, he turned to his wife. "That is Falcon's Ledge?"

Celine nodded. Tears welled in her eyes. Home. A deep frown pulled down the corners of her mouth. No ... she corrected herself. It was no longer her home. Now the rolling hills and lush lawns belonged to another. The thought turned her stomach, and she paled. Weaving her fingers through Michael's she queried, "What if the lord who lived here now turns us away as Marguerite did? I would have no say were he to do so."

Squeezing her hand Michael assured her. "We come as Lord and Lady Aberdeen, not muddled street urchins." His wink did little to alleviate her fears. When she did not relax, he comforted, "Rest easy, my love. They will not turn us away."

Though she nodded in agreement, Celine could not rid herself of the feeling of impending doom that settled on her shoulders as the conveyance traversed the remaining miles.

* * * *

With trembling fingers Celine pulled the chimes at the door and listened to their lilting melody as she waited beside her husband. In her mind the reunion would be joyful, with tears and hugs from those who had not seen her in years. She could not deter the smile that curled at her lips as she waited for the door to be opened. It faded quickly as a tall lanky gentleman answered their summons and peered at the couple with raised

brows. Confused that he was not whom Celine expected, she found no words ready on her lips, and instead stood peering at him in bemusement.

Michael cleared his throat beside her. "We were attacked on the road. My driver is badly hurt and in need of care."

Peering passed the couple on the stoop, the butler nodded grimly. "We've had our share of robberies of late."

Michael turned back to the carriage. Scooping Benton into his arms, he asked, "Where might I take him?"

The butler frowned at the unconscious man. "I'll show you into the front parlor." Once back in the house, he reached for a red pull cord near the door, then directed Michael to a long couch before a wall of windows. The sunlight there streamed into the room gloriously illuminated the entire space with golden hues.

Celine peered at the interior of the manse, heartsick. How many hours had she spent with her mother by those windows, reading, sharing secrets, and perfecting her needlepoint? A rush of memories flooded her, and she leaned against the wall as they overwhelmed her.

From the back of the house a young girl appeared, wiping her hands on a crisp white apron. "Mr. Smithers, did you need me?"

Nodding toward the wounded man on the couch, he ordered, "Have your brother hie himself to Edinburgh for the leecher."

At last Celine found her voice, and shook her head in adamant denial. "No!" She crossed to her husband. Imploring him with her eyes, she begged for his strength. Over her shoulder she queried, "Where is Mrs. Garrett?"

Shocked at her tone, the butler replied, "There is no Mrs. Garrett here."

Celine would not be deterred. Stepping to the girl still waiting by the grand staircase, she gave a sheepish smile. "You're new here...." The statement sounded odd to Celine's ears. No one here seemed familiar. "Do you know the cottage down by the swamp?" At the girl's hesitant nod, she continued. "Send your brother there, quickly. Tell the old woman who lives there she is needed, and to bring her basket of herbs."

Waiting for approval from the butler, the girl made no move. Celine crossed to the man, and took his hand in hers. "Please ... I will explain later ... trust me ... before our man dies!" His nod sent the girl scurrying to the back of the manse and a deep sigh of relief from Celine's lips.

"We'll need water, and clothe to bind the wound...." She called as she crossed once more to Benton, and began to roll up her sleeves. "Mrs. Garrett often kept herbs in the pantry in the kitchen ... mayhap they are still there ... just search the shelves in the back."

The butler eyed her with raised brows. Though he hesitated for a long moment, at last he did as ordered, and disappeared through the doors toward the kitchen. The amazement on his visage was clear as he returned carrying a basket of herbs firmly in his grasp.

Celine found none of the items she sought, and released a frantic sigh. "There is a small shed where the tools are kept. Do you know it?" The butler nodded. "Beside it are herbs ... I need some of the mistletoe, and mayhap some..." The look of complete confusion on his weathered face gave her pause. Her shoulders sagging, Celine turned back to her husband. "Michael give me your hand." She pressed it to the gaping wound

at Benton's elbow. "Press firmly to keep him from losing more blood." Wiping her crimson fingers over her new gown, she pursed her lips in thought. "T'would be best if I gathered them myself. Should Mrs. Garrett arrive before I return, she'll know what to do." Again she faced the butler. "Needle and thread, sir." Then, not waiting for him to respond, she raced through the manse to the kitchen and slipped from the back door to the garden beyond.

Mixing the herbs together with mud and water, Celine frowned over her work. Where on earth was Mrs. Garrett? Her fingers stirred the slimy mixture into a thick paste. Releasing a weary sigh, she shook her head in frustration. "There is no time to wait for her." Though uncertain which herbs would do the best job, Celine applied them to Benton's wound. Anything was better than watching him slip into shock ... or die. She chewed at her lips as Benton cried out in pain.

* * * *

Nearing the manse the new lord reined his mount in surprise at the unmarked carriage in the drive. Visitors were rare these days. His brows rose in agitation as another figure appeared near the side of the manor and moved closer atop a bleating old mule stubbornly refusing to be goaded into anything faster than a slow amble up the drive. "Mrs. Garrett." His reception to the old woman was less than hospitable. "What are you doing here?"

They met near the front steps. A strange trepidation worked its way into his shoulders, and the muscles there tightened. The response was very much the same from the frail woman before him.

Grabbing her bag from the saddle, she slipped from the mule and brazenly advanced toward the door. "Was summoned, milord, for a man what was attacked on the road." She eyed him in defiance.

Nodding, he stepped aside. The tenseness in his shoulders relaxed somewhat and he gave her a stilted smile. "I can think of no one better qualified to mend his wounds."

In the hall, the old woman passed her cloak to the lord, and continued toward the parlor as directed by the butler. Behind her the lord of Falcon's Ledge peered beyond her to the group gathered near the long row of windows and a tiny prick of panic began to needle its way along his spine.

At Benton's side, Celine turned toward the door. A gasp escaped her lips as she watched the other woman cross the room. She half stood, arms outstretched in welcome. She made no move, when her eyes lit on the man behind the housekeeper, and the color drained from her features. The bowl of mashed herbs in her hands slipped to the floor. Blindly she groped for the side of the couch.

At the door the lord's reaction mirrored her own. The breath in his lungs escaped with a long slow hiss, and he leaned against the jamb for support. "Celine..." Her name slipped from his lips in a shaky whisper.

She too whispered a name. "Jean Luc?"

* * * *

Linda Garrett set her gaze between the two. A quirky smile curled at her lips and she faced Jean Luc with sparkling eyes. "Milord, you must be over-joyed. 'Tis not every day a person is pronounced dead in one country but found to be the picture of health in another."

A fine line of sweat glistened at Jean Luc's brow. Nervous, he dabbed at it with

his sleeve. Glancing at each person in the room he seemed dazed and addled. A lump formed in his throat, and he found it difficult to swallow. His body trembled.

Celine eyed him quizzically. "Jean Luc, what is this all about?"

Feeling his world collapsing around him, he searched the faces of those in the room. His lips moved, yet no sound issued forth. Trembling fingers raked through his hair. He swallowed passed the large lump in his throat.

Michael slipped his arm about Celine's shoulders. Searching the pale visage of the man before them he asked, "Are you lord of this manse?" It was the butler who gave the affirmative nod. Michael turned to his wife. "Celine, I thought you said your cousin left shortly after your father's death?"

Mrs. Garrett chimed in, the gleam in her eyes assuring Jean Luc she was enjoying his distress. "They both left ... for France." She eyed him in distaste. "At least that is what lord Bevion told us." She glared at Jean Luc. "A letter was sent shortly after their departure stating that the lady Celine wished to stay abroad for a while, and would remain in France for several months." Her glower was icy. "It also relieved all of us of our duties here at the manse."

Celine stepped to the window. "I was not in France." Her words were a whisper. "I have spent the last two years locked away in an asylum." Turning to face her cousin, she added hoarsely, "Sleeping in filth and sharing my bed with rats and roaches; a prisoner." Imploringly she gazed at Jean Luc. "Why would you tell everyone I was in France?"

From his place by the couch, Michael queried, "It seems some answers are needed, lord Bevion."

On the verge of panic, Jean Luc snapped defensively, "Silence!" Grabbing Mrs. Garrett's cloak he stormed toward her and hissed, "Get out, all of you! There is nothing we can do for your man!"

Michael crossed his arms over his chest. "We leave when we get answers, not before."

Jean Luc glared at him. "I owe you no explanations! You have no rights here!" Sweat beaded at his brow. "Who do you think you are? This does not concern you!"

Eying Celine, Michael averred. "I am the son of the Duke of Northumberland." His eyes flashed like fine steel. "And if there is anyone this concerns, sir, 'tis I. As Celine's husband, I have rights to all her possessions!"

For a long tense moment silence reigned. Jean Luc moistened his lips several times. His gaze darted from Celine to her husband. His world crumbling around him, he searched Celine's visage for denial, but found only affirmation.

Again it was the old housekeeper who chimed in. "Milord," Her eyes sparkled. "Imagine the coincidence." Her voice took a hint of sarcasm. "In one day the lady Celine has gone from dead to alive, and become the wife of the Duke of Northumberland!" A soft laugh escaped her throat. "How can that be when she is supposed to be married to you?"

To Jean Luc's way of thinking the older woman was having entirely too much pleasure at his expense. He worked harder than ever in his life to attain what was being destroyed in a matter of minutes. His heart threatened to explode from the confines of his chest. He dabbed at the perspiration along his upper lip.

Celine crossed to him with fire flashing in her eyes. "Jean Luc what is the

meaning of this? Look me in the eye and dispel what I think to be true!” He made no attempt at denial, and her hand came against his cheek with a resounding slap. “Tell me you are not behind all of this!”

If given just a few moments to explain ... surely she would understand! Panicked, he pulled her to him, and wrapped his arm about her throat. Michael started across the room, but halted as the other man tightened his hold, and Celine’s face took on a soft blue hue. “Get away!” Jean Luc hissed. “I told you this does not concern you!”

Michael raised his hands in surrender. “Lord Bevion, I implore you ... You hold in your arms that which I treasure above all else. Release my wife, and we shall do as you ask, and leave!”

A sound between a laugh and a snort escaped Jean Luc’s lips. “’Tis too late for that now! You would tell them ... and all would be lost.” He sounded like a child, his voice whiny and high in pitch.

“You’re right, sir, ’tis too late. Your secret is out. What then will you do, kill all of us?” Michael inched closer.

Dragging Celine toward the door, Jean Luc fought to keep his panic at bay. “I would speak with Celine alone!” Peering at her soft cheek, he pleaded, “I am certain once you know the truth, you will understand, and forgive me!” At the bottom of the stairs, he released his strangle hold about her throat, and clasped his long fingers about her wrist. To Michael he screeched, “Should you follow us, I will kill her!” Then he took the stairs two at a time, dragging Celine behind as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

* * * *

High into the rafters they climbed. He slowed only when they entered a tiny room under the eaves, where he secured the door behind them. Out of breath, Celine could do nothing more than cede to his will. Her head still spun and felt clouded by cobwebs. Gasping, she leaned with her hands to her knees. “Now Jean Luc, we are alone. I would know what this is all about.”

In reply he moved a small chest from its place by the wall. Beyond was an opening that led into the very structure of the house itself. “After you.” He panted.

Beyond the entrance the area was dark and smelled of mold. Celine shook her head. “Jean Luc this is not necessary....”

His fingers curled about her bruised wrist and he thrust her toward the small entrance. “I am lord here, Celine! Don’t challenge my authority!”

Once they were both secreted within the wall, he groped for the chest, and replaced it over the opening, sealing them in a strange tomb like environment. Carefully he inched passed Celine, and wrapped his fingers through hers, almost lovingly. His voice was a gentle whisper, an odd contrast to his outburst only a few moments before. “I’ve often imagined bringing you here ... I thought it would be a romantic place to take you as my wife.”

Celine dared say nothing. The darkness was disorienting, and the narrow confines of the space left her feeling a bit claustrophobic. Helpless, she allowed him to lead her through the passage. It twisted as it wound beneath the eaves for what seemed an eternity.

Then a glorious light brightened the space before them with soft hues of red that near took Celine’s breath away. Awed, she craned her neck to search the area passed

Jean Luc and released a ragged sigh. At last, she knew where they were.

* * * *

In the great hall below Michael ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Though relieved Jean Luc did not take Celine from the manse, he still felt a sense of doom as the minutes slipped by. There was no doubt the Marquis de Bevion was a desperate man. Would that desperation force him to do something irrational? Unable to sit and wait, Michael mounted the stairs toward the living quarters above, leaving Grace and Mrs. Garrett to tend to Benton.

He returned to the hall exasperated, having found no trace of his wife, or her cousin. "Have you a key to all the rooms? There were several on the servants floor that were locked." He asked the butler.

The man nodded with enthusiasm. From a peg by the kitchen door he produced a strap of leather bearing at least a dozen keys. Before handing them to Michael he offered, "Milord, I know we are strangers ... still I feel I must assure you I have no loyalty to Mr. Bevion. I am the fourth butler to occupy this position in only eight months." He paused. "Mr. Bevion is rather ... free with his fists, milord. Few of the servants here have kept their stations longer than a year." Michael's eyes widen in dismay. "The point of this conversation is to assure you that I will do whatever necessary to help you. As I am sure all the staff would."

Understanding, Michael nodded. "Then help me get those doors open before the Marquis has the opportunity to make us both regret his actions." With that, both men mounted the stairs, and began a systematic search of every room of the manse.

* * * *

As a child, Celine was fascinated by the way the sun pierced the pedals of the stained glass window high above the great hall as it sank each evening. Glorious rays of pink and red would scatter over the floor, casting a perfect rose upon its surface. Yet, though she often commented to her father how it appeared there were two roses when the sun struck them for just a few seconds as it made its descent, Celine never imagined it to be true.

As if reading her mind, Jean Luc whispered, "It has intrigued me since the first moment I came here. Often I would stand in the hall and gaze up at the window in awe. As the sun lowered toward the horizon, for just a brief time, there appeared two windows." He released a heavy sigh. "It has been my comfort and refuge. I come here when I need time to think."

Celine studied him for a long time. Still unwilling to accept his involvement, she asked softly, "What are you thinking now, Jean Luc?" His silence annoyed her, yet she dared show no anger. If there was one thing she knew about her cousin, it was to tread lightly. He was not one for confrontations, and would only lose his temper should she push him. Touching her hand to his sleeve, she tried once more. "Don't you think I'm entitled to know after what I've been through?"

Like a child caught and ready to be punished, he refused to meet her gaze. Celine brushed her fingers over the fine stubble at his chin. She had to gain his trust. "I promise to listen with an open mind. Whatever you tell me, will not be judged harshly."

His countenance softened, and he peered into her eyes for understanding. "I love you." He murmured as he took her hand, and placed a tender kiss to her palm. "I have always loved you, Celine."

She cupped his face in her hands. "Then talk to me. Dispel the confusion in me and prove you are not the monster I fear."

The down turned bent of his mouth assured her the words stung. "Do you fear me, Celine?" A lump formed at the base of his throat, and he swallowed hard. "I am no monster, only a man driven by necessity." Gently his fingers traced the line of her jaw. "Once I reveal the dire straits I faced I know you will understand everything, and realize I had no choice." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Willing to play the game for the answers she sought, Celine nodded. "I have no doubt you are right, Jean Luc. Now tell, what is this all about."

* * * *

Frustrated, Michael slammed his fist against the wall of yet another empty room. "Where could they be?" He mumbled to the butler. It was as if the two vanished into thin air.

Exiting the tiny room under the eaves, the butler sighed. "Milord, I can only assure you there are no secret back stairs. They must be up here somewhere!"

His words did little to placate Michael, who retraced his step through the narrow passage, and once more descended to the great hall below. He would start again, and search beneath every bed; every stick of furniture, no matter how long it took....

* * * *

"Do you have any memories of your mother?" Jean Luc asked softly.

Celine nodded, a bit confused. "She died when I was six ... but I remember her laughter ... and the sparkle that always seemed to shine in her eyes."

Jean Luc frowned. "The only memories I have of my mother are sad ones. She spent most of her days in a state of melancholia, gazing out the window of her room at nothing in particular." Sighing, he added, "The only time I ever saw her smile was when the Marquis de Bevion put his arm about my shoulders and vowed one day I would own all that I could see from my window."

His nostrils flared, and his tone took on a snide sarcasm. "It would be many years before I truly understood the strange smile that curled at my mother's lips each time the Marquis called me son." His jaw line hardened. "While cleaning some things from the attic, a servant came across a chest belonging to my mother ... long since forgotten in the years after her death. It was given to the Marquis."

"At dinner one night, he slid a bundle of papers across the table to me, and bade me read the top one." Jean Luc snorted. "He took great pleasure in watching the color drain from my face as I read those words." For a moment he was silent. "The child moved within me today..." He recanted as if reading from the papers he spoke of. "For the first time I knew joy. Yet it is difficult to look Simon in the eyes, knowing what I have done."

To Celine, Jean Luc added snidely, "Simon is the Marquis de Bevion." At her nod he continued. "I pray he never finds out it is not his life's blood which flows through the babe's veins. I have no doubt he would send us both into the streets were he to know the truth." A hoarse laugh escaped Jean Luc's throat. "I pray the child bares the darkness of my hair, and not the sun-kissed beauty of the smithy who sired him. For though I love the man dearly, he can offer nothing to either of us. At least as Simon's heir, this babe will want for nothing."

The glower in his eyes sent a chill down Celine's spine. "Imagine finding out you

are the bastard child of a smithy ... over dinner.” Again his nostrils flared. “The Marquis was well entertained watching me read that letter. It gave him pleasure, just as applying his fists to my mother had.” He chewed at his lower lip. “Over desert, he calmly ordered me to be gone by morning. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “There was no fan fair, no remorse. It was as if he were sending back a meal that did not meet with his satisfaction. In the short span of a few moments, I went from a pampered man of wealth, to a pauper.” He spread his hand before him as if wiping a slate clean. “Done, over, thank you for everything, and good-bye!”

Uncertain what her cousin wanted from her, Celine offered, “I am sorry, Jean Luc. His actions were callous and I am certain they hurt you deeply.”

“Hurt?” He was incredulous. “Hurt?” He repeated. “You have no idea what he did to me! Everything I ever knew was suddenly gone. I had no money, no title, nothing!”

Pricked by his barb, Celine lifted her chin in defiance. “I too have faced the loss of everything.”

His voice taking on a whiny tone as he countered. “You handle things better than I, Celine. Your mother came from the same diversity. It is in your blood.” She graced him with a look of disdain. “You know I am a coward. The prospect of a life in poverty frightened me beyond anything I ever faced before.” His voice whinny, he added, “The de Bevisions have never been much for life’s challenges.”

Though she did not voice her opinions aloud, Celine doubted her cousin ever faced anything too daunting. The urge to remind him he was no more a de Bevision than she was difficult to suppress. Instead she said, “I’m sorry for you, Jean Luc. Your father lost much in turning you away.”

“Haven’t you been listening to me?” He snapped. “He is not my father! That was made abundantly clear when he cast me from the only home I ever knew.”

Weary, Celine released a deep sigh. “What does this have to do with me, Jean Luc?” She folded her arms over her bosom. “Explain how your fate and mine are connected.”

He perused her for a long moment. Once more his tone was tender and in contrast to the rage he displayed just a few seconds before. “If it is possible, Celine, you are more beautiful than you were when last I saw you.” His fingers caressed her hair. “You take my breath away.”

Annoyed with his games, Celine pulled from his touch. “I am weary, Jean Luc. If you do not wish to enlighten me, release me, that I might find rest.”

The sigh that slipped passed his lips was slow and heavy. “Every door in France was not only shut, but slammed in my face. It was as if I did not exist!” A ragged breath passed his lips. “Death would have been more desirable than the open scorn.” His fist slammed to the wall beside him. “I deserved the money and the title he took from me. It was not my fault my mother lay with a common smithy!” He sneered in anger, “Why couldn’t she have at least given herself to a man of title? To disgrace herself with a commoner....” He shuttered. “I had no one to turn to.” He faced Celine. “Save an aunt who long ago left France for England.”

His lips turned down in a weary frown. “When I arrived, I found her dead these many years.” Taking Celine’s hand in his, he cajoled. “You were young and naïve. It would not take much to win your affections. In truth, I found myself falling in love with

you, and looked forward to a life together. It should have been easy.” His gaze took on a stony hint. “But you scorned me at every turn!”

Uneasy with the rancor she heard in his voice, Celine tried to calm him. “I care for you, Jean Luc, but not the way you wanted me to.”

A high-pitched laugh eased from his throat. “You willingly told me your hopes and dreams, but could give me none of your heart.” Flexing his hand as if tender after his outburst, he continued, “I was certain I could win your affections, change your mind.” His fingers traced the outline of her lips. “I loved you so much ... it was as if you stabbed me to the quick each time you refused my advances.”

Again his eyes became like flint. “That stubborn father of yours did nothing to aid my cause! It was unheard of that you should not be betrothed. Countless hours were spent trying to convince him I was the perfect match for you. He not only refused to listen, but demanded I leave before he lost his temper with me.”

Of a sudden he glared at Celine. “Yet you come here with a husband on your arm, after knowing him less than a thrice of months!”

The color drained from Celine’s face and she backed away. How could Jean Luc have known how long she and Michael were together? Tears welled in her eyes and she huddled at the corner of the narrow space, clearly afraid of him.

He reached for her hand. She pulled away as if burned. “Celine, you must understand ... I was backed into a corner and had no other choice....”

Her voice was ragged with emotion. “You put me in that hell!” The lengths to which he was willing to go for greed’s sake sickened her.

Jean Luc tried once more to take her hand. “You threatened to sell the estate!” He raked his fingers through his hair. “If you had only signed the papers....”

Again she blanched. “How do you know of them?” Her heart threatened to snap with the weight of his deceit.

“Celine ... surely you of all people have an open mind. They put a price on my head after the Marquis was found dead....” She glared at him, unsympathetic. “He deserved to die. After what he did to my mother ... and me ... it was a pleasure to drive that dagger through his cold unfeeling heart!”

Celine groped for the wall beside her, certain her knees would buckle beneath her weight.

“Some how your father found out, and confronted me. Fearing he too would cast me out, I sent a missive to the King, hinting that your father was not the rightful heir to his estates.” Again he pleaded with her. “I had to Celine! It was the only way to get him to stop snooping into the Marquis’ death.”

At last Celine sank to the floor, sickened by her cousin’s testimony.

“On his way home from London, I stopped his carriage, intending only to argue my cause ... but he became indignant, and ordered me to leave before he sent the magistrate after me.”

On her knees, Celine peered up at him with tears sparkling in her eyes. “Did you kill my father as you killed the Marquis?”

“Do you think me so callous, or capable of such a deed?” He was incredulous.

Until a few moments ago, she did not think him capable of many things. Rising, Celine curled her fingers through the lapels of his waistcoat. “Did you kill my father?”

“I tried to make him understand that all I wanted was your hand ... it would have

solved everything.”

Celine brought her palm to his cheek with all the force she could muster. The skin there welted. “Answer me! Did you kill my father?”

“No!” He rubbed his face. “Kendall grew impatient with him. They argued...” He shrugged as if excusing his partner’s actions. “You know first hand he is a man easily swayed to lose his temper. There was no stopping him. Once he began beating those fists of his into your father, I could gain no control over his rage.”

* * * *

His sides aching from his wild run through the manse, Michael leaned against the wall at the last door on the third floor. What was he missing? Where could they be? Every moment that elapsed put him closer to pure panic. Rationality was quickly fading. Weary, he stumbled back to the great hall, and slumped to the last step, where he hung his head in his hands. On the floor in the center of the massive room, the image of a perfect rose shimmered over the tiles. Michael peered at it through bloodshot eyes. He had not noticed it before, and absently took in its beauty. As he gazed at it, an odd shape mingled with the pedals. For an instant the shadow resembled a woman ... his eyes lifted slowly to the window high above and his breath lodged in his throat. Against the setting sun two silhouettes entwined with the red hues of the glass flower.

Rising to his feet, Michael peered up at the apparition in disbelief. “Mrs. Garrett!” His shout sent the older woman scurrying from the parlor. Mesmerized, Michael lifted his finger toward the window. “Tell me you see what I see.”

She sucked in a deep breath. “They’re in the flower!” Her sighed with relief. “Milord, I know how to get there!” She did not wait for his response, but picked up her skirts, and raced up the stairs as if she were a spry woman in her youth. Michael followed on her heels, his heart pounding in his chest with both relief and apprehension.

* * * *

“I was certain you would cede to me after his death. You only scorned me all the more.” Jean Luc sighed. “It ‘twas the papers that convinced me drastic measures had to be taken to change your mind.” Weary, he paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “I would not be allowed access to any of his properties, or inheritances unless legally your husband. No marriage would be honored between us unless witnessed by his barristers, who were to affirm you under no duress. Yet, I was no closer to gaining your trust than your love.”

“Kendall assured me it would only take a few days in the asylum for you to change your mind. He was certain after a night there, you would gladly sign anything!”

Celine’s eyes flashed fire. “He left me there nigh on a month before even approaching me.”

“I knew you were as stubborn as your father, and needed to truly understand the brevity of the situation.” He reached for her cheek. “Yet month after month, you refused to sign, and the barristers were beginning to put pressure on me.”

Hatred boiled within Celine. It was an emotion she rarely dealt with in her life. “Have you no idea what it was like there, Jean Luc? I shared my bed with mice, and rats, and roaches. The filth was overwhelming. All the while you enjoyed my home, and my father’s wealth.”

“It could have been yours as well!” He snapped. “All you had to do was sign the papers!”

"In signing them, I also signed my death." She spit vehemently.

Jean Luc shook his head adamantly. "No!" He caressed her sleeve. "Kendall wanted you dead from the first, but I refused! I could not bare the thought of your death on my hands. I saved you!"

"I nearly lost my sanity in that horrid place!" Celine hissed. "Death would have been a welcome escape on many a night!" Tears moistened her cheeks. "Is that your idea of love, Jean Luc?"

"I did love you Celine." He implored. "Regardless, I needed your money more than anything ... and you refused to give it. I did what was necessary for both of us to survive."

"Both of us?" She sneered. "When was I to become more than a prisoner at the asylum? We both know I would never have agreed to your plans once free."

"This is your fault!" He barked. "All you had to do was agree to be my wife."

"Is that how you sleep at night, by casting the blame?" She asked. Wanting to change the subject, Celine ventured, "Mrs. Garrett made a comment in the hall about us being married. How did you carry that off and convince my father's barristers it was true?"

He smiled, smugly. "While in London I came across a young woman who could have been your twin." His eyes sparkled. "She was very adept at forgery, and easily mastered your signature, which I found in some letters tucked in your room." He seemed to relish this part of the tale. "I told her stories from your past, things you told me about your mother and growing up at Falcon's Ledge. Things only you would have known. She even had me convinced she lived here! Those old barristers were practically swooning over her. I took her," He corrected himself. "You, as my wife, with their blessings." He laughed. "It was the easiest part of this whole ordeal."

Feeling used, Celine frowned. "You took my confidences and used them against me."

He shrugged. "Desperate times, desperate measures."

"And your wife, where is she now?" Celine remembered Mrs. Garrett commenting about her death and shuttered.

Jean Luc pursed his lips. "Her greed was her undoing. I could not abide her constant yen for new clothes, or frills that she did not need." Celine gazed at him with wide disbelieving eyes. Callously, he waved his hand as if shooing at a fly. "Her death was not hard to see to fruition. Besides, Kendall worried she might turn on us one day, and tell her tales to someone willing to listen. Killing her was a necessity." He was almost nonchalant as he made the statement. "Like sending you to the asylum ... I did what was important for the good of all!"

A shiver crept along Celine's spine. "Had I consented to be your wife, would my fate have been the same?"

"I told you, Celine, I loved you. Had it not been for me Kendall would have ended your life long ago!" He chewed at his lip. "That does put me in a bit of a quandary now. I came home a widow. Your sudden resurrection would undoubtedly cause problems." He added, "Like that fair flower Marguerite, I could not afford to have her spouting tales of you to every person in Edinburgh." As if twinged with guilt, he murmured softly, "Pity. She was quite lovely, and I would have enjoyed her pleasures."

Celine felt the bile rise in her throat. She could not contain it, and it spewed from

her lips freely. Her body convulsed for several seconds as she emptied her stomach onto her cousin's shoes, and the hem of her gown. She always assumed Marguerite's death was at the hand of Kendall. This revelation left her dizzy, and more frightened than she could ever recall.

Suddenly certain Jean Luc planned to remain a 'widow', and dispel with any one who stood in his way; Celine attempted to make him see the whole picture. "By now, Jean Luc, all of the servants know the truth. In fact, I'd wager half Edinburgh already has their tongues waging with this juicy tidbit. 'Tis over. Surely you realize that."

Caressing her cheek, he whispered, "All I ever wanted was a life of ease and comfort. We could have shared so much together, Celine. You are right, however, 'tis over..." He sighed deeply. "We both knew that long before I brought you up here, though, didn't we?"

Fear etched her features. "Did we?"

"Do you truly think I would have brought you to this lofty place had I thought there hope of escape?" He drew in a deep breath and exhaled it before continuing. "You know I am a coward, Celine. The thought of spending the rest of my life in a cold cell ... or hanging from the gallows, scares me more than anything I have faced thus far." Leaning close, he slipped his fingers about her wrist once more. "It was never my intention to face the consequences of my actions ... nor, can I face death alone. We shall die together. I will have you in death even if you denied me in life."

* * * *

Cool air brushed Michael's face as he moved the chest from the wall, and peered into the darkness beyond. His quizzical gaze to the old housekeeper was met with a stiff nod. "Follow the passage, milord. It will lead you to your wife. But tread carefully. I do not know how solid the boards are, or if it is even safe in there!"

* * * *

The knot in Celine's stomach threatened to bring up more bile, yet she could only gag in protest to her rebelling insides. "Jean Luc would that I could give you all you crave. I want none of it." Her body trembled as he neared. "Allow me the life you denied me these past years, and I shall turn my back. Take Falcon's Ledge, and the money! But I implore you, spare me. If you truly love me as you profess, allow me the chance at happiness."

Tenderly he wiped at the tears against her cheeks. "He makes you happy?" He inclined his chin toward the hall below.

Celine nodded. "Yes, Jean Luc." His softly spoken words gave her a false sense of ease.

Jean Luc glared at her. His fist thrust into the center of the rose, shattering it, and sending glass to the hall below. "What can he offer that I could not?" The rage in his voice caused Celine to flinch with each word. Lurching forward, he wrapped Celine in his embrace, molding her to him until breathing became difficult. "Would that you could have loved me as you love him!" His lips brushed her hair. "The thought of you in his arms sickens me." He inched toward the shattered remains of the window; Celine pressed to his chest. "If I can not have what you offer him in life ... I shall take you with me into death."

He relaxed, and for an instant Celine thought he would release her. Then he leaned backward, and she felt their bodies falling. A scream erupted from her lips, and

echoed through the hall below. Celine closed her eyes, having no desire to watch her body plummet. Her stomach somersaulted as her head changed places with her feet, and dangled toward the tiled space far below. Yet the impact she anticipated never came, and she opened her eyes in bewilderment. Suspended upside down, Celine assessed her predicament with a shutter. She hung by nothing more than the hem of her gown, snagged on a nail no bigger than her finger.

His arms still about her; Jean Luc clung to her sobbing. His body slid over hers, and he curled his fingers through the folds of her skirts. Yet he found no safe hold in the silk material.

"Celine." As if in a dream her name was called over and over again. She opened her eyes, and met the gaze of her husband in the rafters above. "I will not let you fall, trust me!"

He spoke those words on a cliff several weeks passed, and she refused that trust. Now it was all she had. "I am afraid, Michael."

Jean Luc groped for her arm. His body peeled away from hers in slow degrees, until their only contact was his hand to her wrist. He hung below her far from the rafters, farther still from the floor. For several seconds their eyes met. Celine could almost feel his fear. Her heart ached for him. Though she doubted she would ever fully understand his motives, this was not the way she wanted to see this end. "I forgive you, Jean Luc." She whispered.

As if her absolution gave him a strange freedom, he smiled up at her. Then, closing his eyes, calmly released her wrist, and descended silently to the floor below. The sound of his body as it impacted tore at Celine. Tears blurred her vision, and she wept softly.

The hem of her gown rent against the nail, releasing her several inches closer the hall below. Celine screamed. Panicked, she clawed her way up her skirts. Again the material tore. Held to her precarious place by what could only have been the hand of God, Celine prayed that her life would be spared. Above her Michael tossed his waistcoat over the shards of broken glass, and lay prone in hopes of reaching her. Yet, Celine knew as she peered into his blue eyes there was no way to gain leverage. From below, the butler called to her. "Milady?" Celine inclined her head, and searched his visage. "I have an idea ... but you must trust me."

A strangled sob escaped her throat. Once she told Michael she lost the ability to trust. Now it was all she had left. No words passed her lips; yet she nodded stiffly in acquiesce to his request.

"As a child," The butler related, "I survived a fire ... by jumping from the rafters of the house into a blanket held by my family...."

Celine eyed him skeptically. "Nay. 'Tis too far...."

"It will work, milady. God put us together at this moment in time for a reason. Nothing is left to chance. I believe that with all my heart." Signaling to several servants waiting near by, he took hold of the corner of a thick wool blanket, and waited for the others to do the same. They formed an oddly shaped circle beneath Celine.

Above her Michael gave her a solemn nod. "There is no other way, Celine."

As if to take the choice from her, the fabric of her gown released its fragile hold on the nail. Celine closed her eyes as her body plummeted. Her stomach flip-flopped as she gained speed. She could not help but tense, aware that her impact with the floor was

imminent. To her amazement, she felt only a slight sagging of the blanket as her body sank into its center. Then she bounced upward, floated for an instant, and rested once more in the softness of the makeshift tarp.

Congratulations were echoed throughout the hall, and backs were patted for a job well done. Celine searched the rafters for her husband, but found the space empty. Picking up her skirts, she raced up the stairs, eager to feel his arms about her. They met in the hall on the second floor, and clung to each other as kisses were exchanged, and soft sobs shared.

His hands cupped her face as he perused her. "Are you hurt?" Celine shook her head. A mischievous twinkle danced in his eyes. "'Tis over isn't it? For I am in need of a long rest."

Pressing her lips to his, Celine nodded adamantly. "You have my word, milord!"

Leaning back slightly, Michael gave her a frantic look. His eyes sparkled teasingly as he whispered, "Couldn't you give me better assurance than that?"

EPILOGUE

His apprehension clear in his visage, Michael pulled the cord at the door, and listened to the chimes echoing through the home beyond. Next to him, Celine squeezed his hand. "Whether lord of a keep, or lord of a hovel, I will always love you, Michael Aberdeen."

An elderly man with graying temples, and sparkling blue eyes opened the door. A smile spread across his thin lips, and he opened his mouth, ready to greet the couple before him.

Michael put his fingers to his lips, and shook his head. "Are they in, Grady?"

The butler nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed, milord. I have no doubt they will be overjoyed to see you." His gaze moved to Celine.

Possessively, Michael slipped his arm about Celine's shoulders. "Grady Danbury, may I present the lady Celine ... my wife." He held his breath for an instant.

The butler showed no hint of anything save elation. "How wonderful for both of you. My sincerest congratulations." He took Michael's hand, and shook it warmly.

Michael smiled. Leaning to Celine he whispered, "if only my parents can be as receptive." Stepping passed the older man he pressed his hand to Celine's arm. "Perhaps it would be best if I speak with them alone for a moment."

Celine leaned close and brushed his cheek with a soft kiss. "I shall be here should you need me."

From within the cozy room, warmed by a large fireplace, and the glow of candles, Lara Aberdeen craned her neck. "Grady, who is it?"

Michael poked his head around the entrance, and smiled. "If you are too tired, I could wait to see you back at Brier Point..."

"Michael!" His mother fairly flew into his outstretched arms. A tender kiss was pressed to his cheek. "What a wonderful surprise!"

His father rose from his chair by the window, and reached to shake his hand in greeting. "'Tis good to see you, son!" Yet his countenance hardened and he asked hesitantly, "Has this visit anything to do with your impending marriage?"

Celine watched her husband's shoulders shrug as if a small child caught in some act of disobedience. "Somewhat, yes sir."

David Aberdeen's smile turned to a scowl, and he removed his hand from his son's. "Michael we've been over this. 'Tis time to take a wife, and begin acting like an adult. There will be no putting off this marriage!"

Michael swallowed hard. "I have no intentions of putting off marriage..."

His father cut him off, as if he did not hear a word. "I'll not hear of it, Michael!"

From her place at Michael's side, Lara shifted uncomfortably. She turned her gaze toward the front hall. Reflected in a large mirror near the front door an image caught her gaze, and she drew in a ragged breath. Saying nothing, she left her husband and son to their battle, and slipped quietly from the room.

Celine eyed her wearily. She was quite beautiful, with a hint of gray to her dark

hair. Petite in both stance and weight, she looked to be about forty. Her eyes shone the same intense blue of her son's, and assessed Celine carefully. Celine swallowed hard. This woman held her future in her hands. Nonetheless she would not grovel. Shoulders back and chin high, she faced her mother-in-law with calm defiance, though inwardly she trembled. Offering the respect the woman deserved, she gave a deep curtsy, and murmured, "Lady Aberdeen."

As if afraid, Lara reached shaking fingers to the sleeve of Celine's gown. Her voice quaked. "Patrice?" Shaking her head, she corrected, "Nay, it can not be. She has been dead these many years." In French she whispered, "The resemblance is uncanny. Surely you would be her daughter, Celine."

Surprised by the statement, Celine gave a slow nod. Responding in French, she answered, "Oui, madam, I am Celine."

Lara caressed Celine's cheek with trembling fingers. "You are just as beautiful as your mother." She lowered her head and sighed deeply. "She is missed greatly."

Still speaking French, Celine queried, "How do you know my mother?"

"Oh my dear!" Lara laughed softly. "She was my dearest friend. There was a time when she and your father were our constant companions." She pursed her lips. "After her death your father pulled away from everyone. He loved her more than life itself, and had a terrible time when she was gone." Celine nodded. She remembered those dark days well. Lara paused for a moment. "His death was a horrid shock to us. When we traveled to Edinburgh to pay our respects and offer you comfort, we were told you left for France, and would not be back for some time."

Celine peered beyond her mother-in-law to her husband. He in turn noted the absence of his mother, and abruptly turned his back on his father. Joining the women in the entrance, Michael cleared his throat and braved to say, "Mother ... this is Celine."

His mother smiled warmly. "Yes, I know. We have already introduced ourselves." In French she said to Celine, "My son seems terribly nervous, my dear. Is there something we should know?"

Celine peered to her Michael uncomfortably. In French, she replied, "I think it would be best if he tells you..."

David Aberdeen joined the group. His brows rose as he peered at Celine. "Patrice?" He looked to his wife, confused.

Lara took his hand in hers and shook her head. In French she whispered, "Nay, my dear, 'tis Celine ... her daughter."

Michael heaved a weary sigh. "Father," he began again. "This is Celine ... my wife." Before his father had the opportunity to speak, he continued, "I know I promised to take Marguerite as my bride, but I could not." His words were a rush from his lips. "Celine is my soul mate ... we were destined to be together..."

Waving his hand to silence his son's babbling David gazed at Celine in awe. "He always was pigheaded." He whispered to Celine in French. "Never could do things anyone else's way."

Michael pressed his hand to his father's shoulder, forcing him to turn about. "Father I demand you listen to me!" He features were mottled with his anger. "And for heaven's sake speak English!" Stepping to Celine's side, he slipped his arm about her waist. "Celine is my wife! I love her, and will not allow you to treat her with disrespect."

David winked at Celine. "Who is treating whom with disrespect?" He asked in French.

Still on his bent, Michael snapped, "I will brook no argument in this, sir!" Sweat beaded at his brow. "Even should I lose everything ... I will not be swayed."

"Really, Michael," His mother pondered, "What are you babbling about?"

Again, Michael started his tale. "Mother, father, this is Celine, my wife. We were married just over three months ago." Having their complete attention, he added, "I have only come for your blessing, not your permission."

Her eyes sparkling, Lara leaned close to Celine. "He loves you?" She asked in French. Celine nodded hesitantly. Lara's smile spread over her face. "And you him?"

"He is my reason for rising each day." Celine returned.

Slapping her hands to her cheeks, Lara bubbled with exuberance. "How wonderful!"

David reached for Celine's hand, and brushed it with a tender kiss. "Welcome to the family, Celine." His sincerity warmed Celine. "We could not be more thrilled."

"At last, words in English!" Michael whooped. Yet his countenance was bemused as he gazed at his parents. "You could not be more thrilled?" He studied both with furrowed brows. "I thought you would be furious. What of the contract with Earl of Durham?"

Shaking her head at her son, Lara sighed. "Don't you realize who this is, Michael?" A laugh slipped from her lips. "You don't, do you?"

David supplied the missing puzzle piece for his son. "Have you not heard us talk of the Hollingsworth family many times?"

Michael's brow creased in bewilderment. Gazing at his wife in disbelief, he asked hoarsely, "You are the daughter of Andrew Hollingsworth ... Duke of Edinburgh, and second cousin to the king?" His shoulders sagged in amazement. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Celine caressed his cheek lovingly. "I told you, Michael, I am no longer that person. Titles are not important to me. Had I told you before, I would always have wondered whether you loved me, or what I could bring you in marriage." Brushing a tender kiss to his lips, she added, "Besides, you told me you would gladly give up everything if it meant staying together. Were those words lies?"

"Of course not!" He countered. "Still it would have been nice to know this before making a complete fool before my parents."

Lara clucked him under the chin. "You've done a fine job of that all by yourself!"

David patted his son on the shoulder. "Surely you know Celine was always our first choice for your wife. From the moment she was born, she was the one we wanted. But Patrice refused to betroth her. She insisted Celine be allowed to find a husband of her choice. Living so far from them, your mother and I doubted love would ever play a part in bringing the two of you together. So we settled for Marguerite."

Michael gazed at his parents with slack jaw. "What of the lands Marguerite brought as her dowry?"

His father sighed. "They were never important, Michael. I only wanted to see you married, and producing heirs." He shrugged. "They are inconsequential now. The earl lost them in a poker game nigh on three months ago." Winking at his son, he

whispered hoarsely, "I could think of no one I would rather see claim your heart, son! You have chosen well, and your mother and I are well pleased!"

Michael caressed his wife's hair lovingly. "As am I, father! As am I!"

THE END