



# UNFORGETTABLE LOVE

By

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## PROLOGUE

Derbyshire, England 1560

The man bent low against the horse's neck, exhausted. Their sweat mixed together. Gasps of labored breath were drawn into burning lungs. For several moments they remained thus, unable to continue, and unwilling to relinquish this small reprieve. Eventually, paranoia began to play tricks with his mind. Each sound, each shadow had the potential to be those who chased him for nigh on two days. His mount snorted. The man searched the darkness apprehensively. Was the animal simply eager to be on his way, or was there something in the woods which caused him to prick his ears back, and sent him into a nervous prance? The ebony gloom revealed nothing, gave up no secrets. At last, the night itself forced him to move. No longer warmed by his wild flight, the chill air bit into his flesh until it stung, and left him shivering. Reluctantly, he spurred the steed beneath him, and once more raced along the edge of the road, flitting from one shadow to the next.

Ahead there was a break in the trees, a place where roads crossed and he would have to risk being in the open. He paused in the thicket, just before the crossing, and surveyed the area. The hairs at his nape bristled. His eyes glinted as he scanned the thick brush. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted; its call returned by the mournful howl of a wolf. In response, his mount snorted, and absently he patted the animal's neck to calm it. Then he kicked the steed in the flanks, spurring him into a fast gallop, and they leapt toward the expanse of trees on the other side of the clearing.

Instantly the night filled with sound. Riders merged from the woods, cutting off escape. He reined his mount, attempted to switch direction. More men joined the chase. From the woods they materialized, quickly surrounding the one they sought. His adrenaline pulsing through his veins, he made a valiant leap for the safety of the trees. Digging his heels into his steed's flanks, both took flight, arcing over several of those in pursuit.

One dark figure, hidden beneath the folds of a voluminous cloak took flight from his mount. Like a bird he soared until his body crashed against the one who fled and they both fell toward earth. Tangled in the folds of his captor's cape, the man found no opportunity at freedom. Fists made contact with flesh. Blood stained the earth beneath them. He fought, knowing his very life depended upon gaining the safety of the trees. Yet, he could not attain the upper hand. Others joined the foray. Outnumbered, his strength waning, he prayed for victory. But the only triumphant one in this battle was the group which set upon him.

Eventually his head sagged on his shoulders and his knees buckled. They continued to beat him. A knife glinted in the moonlight. He thought it strange he felt no pain as the blade disappeared between his ribs. There was only a slight tug as the dagger was pulled free, then plunged in once more. His blood moistened his shirt. The smell of it, like forged iron, assailed his nostrils. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his body

crumbled to the road. Barely conscious, he could feel death hovering above him. Weary, he let the darkness fill his mind, and lay unmoving in a pool of blood.

## CHAPTER ONE

The chill air sent a shiver along Rachel's spine. The thread-bare cloak wrapped about her shoulders did little to warm her. Huddled deep in its folds, she clucked to the mule before her small cart, eager for him to traverse the road quickly. He only brayed in protest, and ambled on at his slow steady pace. Had it not been for the coins she earned selling pies and breads in town, Rachel would have never ventured out on such a ghastly day. An eerie fog clung to the dead leaves on the ground and wafted amidst the trees and overgrown brush. Its dense gray mist obscured all but that just before her, which left her little choice save to move along the road cautiously.

Near the crossroads the mule snorted in agitation, and sidestepped as if frightened. Rachel sat forward in the cart, peering into the haze. It was unusual for dangerous animals to be in this part of the woods, but not unheard of. Seeing nothing to alert her to danger, she gently slapped the reins to the animal's back, and urged him on. He brayed once more and stubbornly refused to move. Instead, he twisted about, and released a mournful wail to his mistress. Exasperated, Rachel slid to the road and cursed the mule under her breath. Many was the time she led the cart, while the nag gratefully ambled behind. Pursing her lips in frustration, she moved before him, and wove her finger beneath his nose menacingly. "I'll not hear of it this morn, Claudius! You'll pull the cart whether you like it or not." Even as she admonished the old half-breed, she nuzzled his muzzle lovingly.

As she turned to climb back into the wagon, something in the road caught her gaze, and she peered apprehensively through the mist. Blood stained the soil. It trailed off into the woods, as if whatever spilt it was dragged in that direction. A knot formed in Rachel's throat. Willing her feet to move, she followed the smear of crimson until it disappeared into the dense underbrush. The fog and the heavy bed of dead leaves carpeting the forest floor obscured the animal she knew must be there.

Only the thought of it suffering urged her on. A twig beneath her feet snapped, echoing in the mist like an explosion. It blended with the pounding of her heart. At an unnatural mound, she halted. Trepidatiously she kicked at the pile of leaves with the tip of her toe. They scattered to the forest floor, revealing a hint of white material ... and a human hand. Rachel's breath caught in her throat, blocking the threatening scream. Slowly she sank to her knees. Trembling fingers brushed against the cold flesh. Clawing at the leaves and dirt, she tossed them frantically to the sides.

Her breath lodged in her throat. It was a man, his face swollen, with both eyes fat like over-ripe melons, his lips split, and a gash along one cheek now caked with dried blood. Sitting back on her heels, she perused him with wide eyes and slack jaw. The doubt was strong even his own mother would recognize him at this moment. Blood saturated his clothing, leaving only a small piece of his sleeve to testify that his shirt was once white. Her hand to her mouth, she fought a wave of nausea. Knees quaking, she rose. Her feet barely moved when his hand darted toward her skirts, and wrapped about her ankle. This time the scream escaped with little effort.

Frightened, Rachel kicked at him until he released his hold. Stumbling back to a nearby tree, she leaned to it for support, the wild beating of her heart drumming in her ears, and at the base of her throat. Several seconds elapsed before she was able to regain some semblance of control. Until this moment she thought him dead. On quaking limbs she staggered back to his battered body, and reached trembling fingers to his neck. Though faint, a pulse beat there.

Prickling fear crawled up her arms, and nestled at her nape, where the hairs bristled. It was obvious he did not place himself beneath the shallow bed of leaves which obscured him from view. Mayhap those who had would return....

\* \* \* \*

As if in the depths of a long tunnel, he perused her. For several seconds, as he peered into those light brown eyes, he was certain death was successful in taking him. For surely an angel hovered close. Her hair was the color of ripe wheat, and even in the mist, glowed as if a halo atop her head. It was braided into a thick plait that draped over her shoulder and stopped just short of her waist. The same gold highlights that set her hair afire sparkled in her large doe-like eyes. Her heart-shaped face encompassed a slender nose and full expressive lips. Her skin was like fine rose porcelain, and he knew it would be delicate and soft to the touch. Her body was trim, though not gaunt as was the goal of the ladies of court, with full breasts and hips that sent his heart into a chaotic beat as he filled his vision with her beauty.

In the recesses of his mind he imagined death differently. It should have been cold, bleak, not vibrant and warm to the touch. His lips parted, yet no words issued forth. No rational thought took hold in his throbbing head. Trembling fingers reached to her. The effort cost him dearly. Pain seared him. His arm collapsed back to the bed of leaves, and he drifted once more into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Tender as she brushed his blood-matted hair from his brow, Rachel whispered, "I'm just going to get my cart ... I promise not to leave you." The crimson pool of blood beneath him gave her pause. His skin was ghostly pale, and his lips nearly invisible. Stemming the blood flow was paramount. Removing her apron, she began to tear it into strips. Then she bandaged as many of his wounds as she could find. At last, she sighed in satisfaction. Already he seemed to be breathing easier.

Claudius brayed in opposition to being led into the thicket. Adamantly refusing to be coerced into the dense underbrush, he dug his hindquarters into the soft dirt, and eventually sat down, rather than submit to his mistress's will. Rachel cursed him again. Though she knew it would do little good. Once planted it would take God himself to move Claudius.

Slipping her hands around the man's torso, she hoisted his head and shoulders to knee level, and inch by precious inch dragged him to the cart. His moans of protests went unheeded. Unceremoniously, Rachel released him into the dilapidated wagon. His long legs hung over the side; his head bent at an odd angle against his shoulder. Still he was in, and the journey home would be much easier.

Plying Claudius with small apples she stashed in her pocket, Rachel compelled the mule to the road. Contentedly he nibbled the sweet treats as she kicked dirt over the site where the carnage had taken place, erasing as best she could, all evidence of the ordeal. Then, weary, she climbed into the cart, and clucked to the mule, who snorted

indignantly before finally ceding to her bidding, and moving once more along the rutted lane.

\* \* \* \*

Thatched grass hung low over the eaves of the quaint cottage Rachel shared with her mother. Nestled in a glen, it had always reminded her of fairies and sprites. Though not so small as to be cramped, it was certainly not large, having two bedrooms above an open area that served as both kitchen, and parlor. Before it a weedy garden browned as winter threatened. To the side was a narrow stream that pooled into a small pond, and a massive oak, beneath which, two mounds spotted the landscape like pox marks. Rachel closed her eyes rather than glance in their direction. The deaths of her father and brother were far too fresh and she could not look upon the crosses that marked their graves without anguish.

Instead, she opened the door to the cottage, and drew the scent of freshly baked bread and stew into her nostrils. It was a small slice of sanity which, gave her strength. For several seconds she remained thus, unwilling to relinquish the moment of serenity. It was a weary moan from the man in the wagon, which forced her back to the issue at hand. She sighed as she contemplated him. Her muscles ached with the strain of hoisting him to the cart. Dragging him to the house would be far more laborious, and she pursed her lips at the thought. Yet, there was no one else to do the task. Her mother lay abed in the room upstairs, her mind taken by the fever that stole into the tiny cottage in the spring. Like a serpent it slithered through the house on silent feet, death hovering next to it. By the time it finally sought out other entertainment, Rachel's father and brother had succumbed to its ravenous appetite, and her mother was left a shell of her former vibrant self.

Fetching a large quilt from the rocking chair by the fireplace, she tossed it over her shoulder, and returned to the cart. Then she spread the blanket over the ground at the foot of the wagon, and drew in a slow breath to prepare herself for the work to be done. Muscles cramped as she inched the man out of the small space and carefully placed him on the quilt. His moans tore at her, yet she gave him no pause. Hoisting his makeshift stretcher to her knees, Rachel began the slow journey to the cottage. At last, she settled him by the hearth, and drew in a ragged breath. Though her body cried out for rest, she stifled her complaining muscles, and began to gather what she would need to repair his wounds. Water was collected from the stream, several herbs from the root cellar, and needle and thread from the pantry.

Then came the arduous task of washing and mending the stranger. Her stomach roiled as she gently poured the cold water over his body. Each time a wound was found, she would stop, take up the needle and thread, and carefully draw them through his flesh. Once finished, she rose, her back stiff and her legs tingling from lack of movement. Four basins of bloodied water were tossed to the forest. Then Rachel washed her face and hands, stretched for several seconds, and, assured the man rested easier, began the chores she neglected for his benefit.

His image lingered in the recesses of her mind, dark hair, curling against his brow, full pale lips that, though cracked and swollen, were expressive even in unconsciousness, eyes as dark as his hair, seen through the narrow slits revealed between the melon-like mounds from his beating, slender aristocratic nose, and firm chin, dimpled by a cleft. His tanned skin, and muscular arms assured her he spent a goodly amount of

time in the outdoors, as did his lean waist, and well-toned legs. She imagined him to be quite handsome, even in such a state.

\* \* \* \*

Weary, she mounted the stairs to the room above, and braced a tray of warm bread and stew on her hip as she turned the knob to open the door. The deep frown she wore all morning was replaced by a cheerful smile, and she did her best to leave the stresses of the past hours in the hall. Her eyes sparkled as she set her gaze upon her mother, still in the chair by the window Rachel left her in before heading out to town. "Morning, mama." Rachel deposited the tray on a small table, and leaned to press a tender kiss to her mother's cheek. "I'm sorry to be so late this morning." She pulled another chair closer the window, and seated herself before continuing. "The fog was horrid."

She made no mention of the man downstairs. It would not have mattered. It was rare for her mother to acknowledge her in any way. The only words that passed her lips concerned things long ago lost to the passage of time. Yet Rachel sat with her every morning, and again in the evening as the sun faded on the horizon. She chatted of inanities that held no importance just to have noise in the room that most often was silent. No response was given, or expected.

\* \* \* \*

Claudius remained at the edge of the path, unable to traverse the dense foliage that led away from the road. Abandoned there, he brayed in protest, as Rachel disappeared into the fog. Cautiously she placed her feet as she made her way through the thick brush. Here the limbs of the trees interwove above her, blocking out what meager sunlight the mist-filled day afforded. Massive roots laced the ground like spider webs. Strange animals screeched and cawed, skittering beneath naked bushes and through the branches of the trees at the intrusion as Rachel crept along the path. As it always did when she ventured this way, her flesh prickled with anxiety.

Cold, she huddled deeper into the folds of her cloak, though the icy shiver that raced along her spine had naught to do with the weather. Her breathing became a slow inhalation of air that burned her lungs. It misted before her lips as it was expelled, and for a long moment she concentrated on the grey clouds. Her feet moved of their own accord, leading her through the weeds and down the path long ago overgrown and returned to the forest. The beat of her heart exploded at her temples, and rang in her ears. She was certain it pealed an alarm to the one she sought.

Just short of the clearing, Rachel halted. The hovel was just as she remembered, dilapidated and sagging to one side. The wood, a grey-green from both the elements and mold, seemed barely able to support its own weight. Years of thatch piled atop the roof gave the appearance of a strange giant mushroom. The smell of wet hay and mildew hung in the air, trapped by the heavy mists.

Frozen, Rachel remained in her place. The crone who resided there scared her beyond anything she could recall. Burned in a fire as a child, the hag's face was scarred into a grotesque mask. One eye was missing, leaving nothing save an empty socket. The other was covered with a thick white film that afforded her only the distinction of light and dark, but no finer details. Her nose was pressed to one side, the skin fused to her cheek. Her lips pulled up at one corner, and drooped at the other, giving her a sinister sneer. Her body was twisted and gnarled, leaving her stooped and misshapen, and barely

clearing four foot in height, giving her a trollish appearance. The grey hair atop her head was sparse, and so fine it almost appeared to be spider webs that crisscrossed over her pink scalp.

Try as she might, Rachel could not will her feet forward, and remained at the stoop until the old woman opened the door for her. Inhaling deeply, the hag nodded in recognition. "It be Rachel Summerfield come callin'." She moved to the side, allowing her visitor access. Hesitating, Rachel steeled herself against the shiver threatening at the base of her spine. The old woman always seemed to know her identity, though she could not see, and Rachel never spoke when first admitted. As if reading her thoughts, the crone snorted. "I never fergets smells, and ye always 'as the scent o' lilacs to ye."

Apprehensively, Rachel inched past her host. If her appearance gave Rachel pause, her home made the younger woman positively squeamish. Dead animals, both in pieces and whole, hung from every rafter, every board. They intermixed with herbs and dried plants, exuding a pungent odor that assailed the nostrils and turned the stomach. A collection of eyes floated in a jar on a shelf by the only window. Beside them birds' feet lay in a tangle in a shallow bowl. Spiders contentedly spun webs in every crevice not used by the old woman in her daily movements. An owl perched atop a branch wedged in a corner; his head twisting about in complete circles as he scoped out which spider would be his next meal. The only furniture was a table and two chairs beside the hearth. There was no bed. The old woman could not lie to sleep, and spent her slumber upright in a chair.

The shiver that raced up Rachel's spine and ended in a ragged breath that escaped her parted lips made the hag cackle in laughter. "Thought yer stomach were stronger than that!"

Steeling herself, Rachel wrapped her arms over her chest, and rubbed her fingers over flesh suddenly icy and laced with goose bumps. Her voice broke. "I need medicine for my mother...." She mentioned nothing of the man.

"What ails her?" The old woman asked as she crossed to the shelf with the eyes.

For several seconds Rachel remained silent. Though her mother had begun to lose weight rapidly these past few weeks, short of refusing to eat, Rachel could find nothing wrong with her. The man needed poultices, and herbs to fight off infection. How to ask for them without alerting the crone posed a difficult problem. She did not want to lie. Lying took her family nearly to ruin. Regretting the story she thought up on the road, Rachel squirmed uncomfortably. At last she murmured, "The fever has left my mother addled. Often she wakes frightened and confused." It was no lie, yet had little to do with the herbs she sought. "She harmed herself with a knife...." Again, no lie, though she failed to mention it was only a slight cut to her mother's hand, nearly two weeks passed. "The wounds are great ... and I fear death might be imminent...." There! She had not lied, really.

The old woman fingered several herbs hanging from the ceiling. Once settled upon, she plucked bits of them into a small pouch. "How many wounds?"

"Three severe ... several not as life threatening," Rachel managed.

The hag stopped in her quest for the plants she sought. "Mayhap I should return with you?"

The emphatic no that rushed from Rachel's lips startled both of them. Flustered of a sudden, she stammered, "'Tis only that I would not want to leave her to bring you

back here ... t'would be best if I took the herbs and did the work myself." Shuffling her feet nervously, she added a bit less urgently, "I promise to follow your directions with the utmost care."

Finished collecting her supplies, the crone turned to face her visitor. "Use only dirt with nothing added save water and these herbs. Moisten the mixture until a thick paste, no more. Once plastered to the wounds, wrap them tightly." She crossed the room to Rachel. "Once the paste hardens, peel it away and begin anew."

Rachel nodded in understanding, realized her error, and answered vocally, "I promise to do just as you have instructed."

The hag shuffled forward. Her gnarled fingers reached toward Rachel's hand. Slowly she pressed the sack to the younger woman's palm, and curled her twisted fingers about Rachel's. She drew a slow hiss of air into her lungs. Her lips blanched and she shivered. "He will bring death to your door!" Her voice was a raspy whisper. "'Twould be better for every one if you put the man with no name back where you found him." Rachel attempted to pull her hand free. The old woman refused to relinquish it. Her strength surprised her visitor. "Even now they search for him."

Panic welled within Rachel. Again she attempted to peel her hand from the crone's, wrapping the fingers of the opposite hand over the gnarled hand of the hag. Still it remained trapped. "Please..." she pleaded as her breath rushed from her pale lips. "I must get back to my mother..."

The old woman snorted. "She will be dead by the end of the week. There is nothing more to be done for her. Make her comfortable." At last she released Rachel's hand, which was shoved amid the folds of her skirts, lest the crone seek it again. "Mark my words, Rachel Summerfield, you play a dangerous game. Take him back to the woods and forget about him. Death hungers for him, and is angry to have been denied that which it was promised."

Staggering to the door, Rachel dropped the small bundle of sweets on the table before stumbling to the fog-enshrouded day beyond. Her cloak dragged the ground, yet she made no effort to pull it to her shoulder. She dared not look back at the crone as she groped her way through the brush toward the cart and the urgent braying of the mule now eager to be away from this wretched part of the forest. Yet, long after the old woman and the hovel were lost in the trees, Rachel could still hear her raspy voice as she repeated the warnings. Their ominous threat haunted her well beyond the setting sun and into her dreams.

## CHAPTER TWO

The melodic drone of humming pulled him from the depths of oblivion, lifting the heavy cloak of haze that surrounded him. Through narrow slits he watched her, the angel from his dreams. In profile, she traced her fingers through the basin of water on the stand before her, allowing the liquid to drip from their tips. Drawing the piece of ribbon from the end of the thick braid, she combed her fingers through the tresses, until they cascaded over her shoulders and down her back in glorious waves of gold. Captivated, he watched her as a knot lodged in his throat.

Sweat moistened his brow, and the space at his upper lip as she released the laces that held her blouse to her shoulders, the material inching over the creamy flesh until halted by her hand at her bosom. Mesmerized, he followed the path of the cloth as she plied it to her skin, the warmth of the water casting a rosy glow to her flesh. A soft groan eased from his lips as she craned her neck, allowing the liquid to travel in streams along its curve, and disappear beyond the swell of her breasts.

Finished, she repositioned the material over her shoulders, and secured the laces. Then she leaned, drew her skirt well above her knees, and lathered the soapy cloth to her calves. His chest grew tight as he took in her shapely curves. Breathing became nearly impossible as the bodice of her blouse gapped, revealing the deep valley between her breasts, and their pale swells. Gaze darting from her bosom to the enticing sway of her hips, he clenched his teeth, his body responding of its own accord.

The frustrated moan that passed his lips had her pivoting about, brows arched in concern, as she peered at him. Taking up the basin, she crossed to him, and knelt beside his bedding, her touch tender as she pressed her fingers to his sweat dampened cheeks. The same cloth used to cleanse her skin caressed his brow, his face, and the light furring of hair at his chest.

Seemingly unaware of his perusal, she drew the quilt from his torso, leaving it to drape just above his loins. Again, the wet cloth soothed as it slid over his body. Enjoying her ministrings, he let his lids slope toward his cheeks. Yet no amount of control could cease his wild pulse as she inched the blanket upward from his thighs, leaving only his manhood beneath the warm covering. Her touch to his inner thigh had his desires surging, tenting the blanket, and releasing a startled gasp from her parted lips. Hastily she rose, a crimson blush fusing her cheeks as she assessed him from a distance.

Ashamed of his response, he remained with eyes barely opened, unmoving as his teeth clenched and fists tightened. She eyed him for a long moment. At last, she staggered forward, swept the basin to her hand, and curled the quilt in her grasp all in the same motion. It was draped over his body once again before she scurried from the cottage, and cast the water from the bowl to the garden.

The remainder of the day she kept her distance, glancing at him only briefly as she tended her chores, or cooked the meal at the hearth next to his bed. She spoke no word, yet the crimson blush that fused her cheeks assured him his reaction left her unnerved. Nonetheless, he craved her touch as sleep once more drew him to its realms.

\* \* \* \*

*Blood stained the blade of the dagger clutched in the man's hand. It dripped from the tip and gathered with the pool of the dark fluid on the floor. The smell of it stung his nostrils, and choked him with each ragged breath drawn into his lungs. By the light of the single candle flickering on the wall, he could see it against his fingers, its crimson stain against his shirt. Apprehensively he knelt and pressed his hand to the throat of the only other occupant of the tiny room, the queen's first cousin, Lord Saracey of York. Though still warm, no life pulsed through his veins. Wide unseeing eyes remained open, as if death were quick and unexpected.*

*Beneath the onslaught of a battering ram, the only door to the small chamber splintered, and sagged from its frame. They would be upon him soon, and he stood, searching for any means of escape. The space was confined, no more than twelve feet square, and cluttered with linen-covered portraits, broken chairs, and miscellaneous items that were no longer used in the great hall beyond.*

*The man pressed his body to the wall, attempting to fade into the shadows as the door ceded to the might of those assaulting it. For several seconds he watched the flame of the candle dance chaotically, as if an errant wind tossed it. Yet, the room was deep in the castle. His shoulders stiffened as he reached toward the flickering torch. Cool air brushed his flesh. Beyond the candle's meager light, darkness swallowed the back wall. He inched closer, following the temperature change, and the rush of air with his fingers.*

*The door finally relinquished its hold to the frame, and caved inward. As it did so, the candle snuffed, leaving the back corner where he crouched in total darkness. The man leaned to the wall. That solid structure shifted beneath his weight, and whispered a soft moan as it seemed to vanish. Intrigued, he followed the surface with his fingers. Though unable to see beyond the small room, he knew he moved into another space. Fearing discovery, he leaned his back against the wall. As before, it shifted, and moaned softly. Instantly the rampage faded. Though he could hear frenzied voices, and shuffling feet, they seemed far away. For several seconds he held to his place. An eternity elapsed before the man peeled himself from against the stone. Cautiously he inched along the cold surface, blind as the darkness enveloped him.*

*Disoriented, he was not certain how far he progressed, or how much time passed before his fingers grasped a small hook. Carefully he pulled on the lever. Once more the wall shifted. With trepidation he slid through the crevice. This time heavy drapes blocked his way. Guardedly he pulled them to the side and peered around them. A laugh of disbelief escaped his lips. He was in a room he knew well, and safety was within his reach!*

*Once to the gardens, he released two shrill whistles and scanned the hedges. In the distance a horse reared its head, snorted, and leapt over the expanse toward him. Grasping the saddle, he tightened the muscles of his arms, ready to mount the steed and be away from those within the castle walls. Yet, barely on the mount's back his leg was seized, and he found himself dragged to the ground. Fists drove the wind from him as they pummeled his chest. He returned the assault, knowing his life depended on gaining his freedom.*

*Curling his fingers through his assailant's hair, he slammed the man's head to the earth beneath him as he drove his knee into his vulnerable groin area. Eventually the attacker's hands ceased their quest for victory, and dropped to his sides. The one atop*

*him staggered to his steed, breathless, his body racked by pain. He laid against the horse's back, weary and exhausted for several seconds, allowing the crisp air to fill his lungs. Then they were racing over the lea, and into the forest beyond.*

\* \* \* \*

Rachel did all she could to calm the man as he battled demons in his sleep. His eyes were glazed and wild, seeing only that which his mind allowed. A veteran to the ravages of fever, she plied his brow with cool compresses, and spoke soothing words of comfort. When he lashed out at her, driving his fist against her ribs, she struggled to put some distance between them. Yet he followed, determined to win the fight. His strength surprised her, for when awake he could barely lift his head from the downy pillow. His ire pummeled her until at last, blessedly, unconsciousness took her pain away.

\* \* \* \*

White hot agony seared her lungs, the back of her head, and the space just behind her eyes. Reluctantly Rachel came from her induced slumber. Nausea forced her to her knees, and she vomited into the basin left beside the man the night before. Every fiber of her being ached. Her vision was blurred, her mind addled. She struggled to remember how she had come to be in such a state.

Sprawled on the floor by the hearth, one arm over his chest, the other stretched out to the side, the man slept. No longer held in the grip of the fever from the night before, he was far from the savage beast who attacked her. The bruises on his face were now yellow, and though the swelling had subsided somewhat she doubted him recognizable to any who knew him before she discovered him in the woods.

Slowly she inched to her feet, and leaned her head against the cool stone of the fireplace. The room spun and she fought another wave of nausea. By the time she gained her footing, her head was pounding. For several seconds she pressed to the smooth stones while she waited for the flipflop motion of her stomach to cease. Eventually she staggered into the sunlight and made her way to the pond on the side of the house. There she collapsed to her knees once more, and scooped icy water into her trembling hands. It was poured over her throbbing head, and allowed to trickle down the valley between her breasts and shoulder blades. Gradually the fog lifted from her mind, and the pain in her temples dulled.

Returning to the cottage, she cleaned up the basin and covered the man with the quilt he tossed off during the night. Though her body yearned for rest, she knew none would be found. The sun was already high in the sky, and a thousand things needed tending. Gathering a bowl of porridge and tea for her mother, she climbed the stairs with sagging shoulders. The smile she forced to her swollen lips held no sincerity.

Entering the small room, she called out her usual greeting. "Good morning, mama!" The words drifted off hollowly as Rachel crossed the threshold. The tray in her hands clamored to the floor, forgotten as she gazed at the ghostly white features of her mother.

Having seen death far too many times to pretend it was not heavy in the air, a strangled sob vented from her lips as she lurched toward the bed. Tears glistened on her cheeks as she reached trembling fingers to her mother's brow. The skin there was cold and leathery to the touch. A ragged breath slipped from her lips. "No!" Rachel leaned her cheek close to her mother's nose and mouth. There was no breath. She shook her head in denial. "No, please! I can't make it without you!" Grabbing her mother's

nightgown, she drew the other woman to her breasts, her tears moistening both their cheeks. "Mama! Please...." Frantic sobs echoed in the stillness of the room. "Please ... don't do this to me!" Then she held the older woman close and wept for a long time.

Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen when; at last, she descended the stairs. Glancing at the man by the fireplace, she sighed in relief. He slept. In a daze, Rachel stumbled outside and began the arduous task of digging another hole next to the one her father and brother shared. It took her most of the day to complete it. She rested only for about an hour to eat, and tend to the man.

Taking up needle and thread, the sheet was sewn about her mother's body and dragged to the stairs. Each thump as it was inched to the room below sent a shiver along Rachel's spine. At last to the door, she released a soft whimper. From here it would be much easier. There were few obstacles between the house and the pond. Not wanting to release her hold on the blanket, she left the door open in her passage, and dragged her mother toward the grave.

\* \* \* \*

He woke disoriented. In the depths of his mind vague images battled. Mist clouded his vision as he raced atop a horse of deep ebony, bloodied hands clutching a dagger, a passage of stone where flickering torch light cast eerie shadows, a lonely cross roads, an angel who took the breath from his lungs. None made sense, and he closed his eyes as a persistent throbbing tormented his temples. Pressing his palms to the sides of his head he tried to sort through the shifting reflections. Pain riddled him as he drew air past his lips, and he pressed his hand to his side. The crimson stain of blood soaked his fingers. Another image toyed with him, remaining just far enough in the recesses of his mind that he could put no form to it.

Biting his lip, he inched his way up the hearth. Each movement left him sick to his stomach and dizzy. Several times, he ceded to the weariness that overtook him and pressed his head to the cool stone of the fireplace. At last standing, he slid his feet before him and advanced toward the door. He had to go, but where? His mind was blank. He was on his way ... with news ... of what? Again the images faded. His head spun as he staggered toward the door. Time was of the essence, but why?

On the stoop, he released trembling fingers from the jamb, and stood for a long moment fighting for balance. A blurred figure, prone atop a mound of dirt in the distance intrigued him, and he forced his feet toward it. Bile rose in his throat, as his head seemed to float above his body. Knees threatened to give beneath his weight, and he swayed. Yet there was nothing to grasp to keep him from collapsing and he met the ground with enough force to take the breath from his lungs. Darkness edged from the corners of his eyes and just before it swallowed him, the angel from his dream hovered above him.

\* \* \* \*

She moved about as if unaware of him, chopping roots at the table, sweeping the sparsely furnished room, and washing at the basin of water near the window. He watched her as if in a tunnel with the edges of his vision clouded and dark. In the recesses of his mind, the images toyed with him. One crept to the forefront and remained. His shoulders tensed as he let it play out in his mind's eye...

The rhythmic thump of the body hauled down the stairs made him cringe. Though wrapped in linen there was no mistaking the form beneath the material. Sweat moistened the valley between the woman's shoulder blades, and along her brow, though

the banked fire left the room chilled. At the bottom of the stairs, she hesitated, dragging her arm over her tearstained visage. For an instant, she peered at him, but seemed not to realize he watched her. Then she hoisted the linen draped body to her knees and moved backwards with it toward the door. The portal remained open as she continued to the yard. At the massive tree next to the pond, she halted, peering at the setting sun for several moments before finally pushing the corpse to the shallow hole, and picking up a shovel to fill the dirt in over it. He fought a shiver threatening at the base of his spine. Her face was swollen and bruised as if pummeled by a heavy fist. Had she slew the person in the linens as revenge? Would his fate be the same? At last finished with her chore, she stood above the mound, her shoulders sagging. Then she collapsed upon the fresh pile of dirt and wept. A slow shaky sigh eased from the man's lips. She was no murderer.

The image faded. Assured she was no threat, he asked softly, "Whom did you bury next to the pond?"

The young woman released a startled gasp and brought her hand to her breast as the bowl of roots on the table tumbled to the floor. She drew several inhalations of air into her lungs before facing the man by the fire. "Forgive me, milord, I did not realize you were awake again."

He eyed her silently for a long moment. "Was I before?"

She nodded, and then knelt to pick up the bowl and its contents. "A few times, but you made little sense and seemed out of sorts."

He searched his thoughts. No recollection came of anything beyond this moment. Annoyed that he could put no memory to such an event, he pried once more. "Who did you bury next to the pond?"

Tears sparkled at the edges of her hazel eyes and she looked to her apron rather than at the man. "My mother, milord."

"What happened to her?" He inched his body against the hearth, grimacing with each painful movement.

Her lip quivered. Still, she avoided his gaze. "The fever stole into our home in the spring. My father and brother succumbed to it." A ragged sigh escaped her lips. "My mother was not as fortunate." At last gracing him with a sidelong look, she added, "It took her mind, left her a shell of the woman she once was. She spent her days in a state of dementia, unaware of me or her husband and son buried in the yard." The air slipped from her lungs slowly. "At least now she is at peace. My only regret is that I did not join her in death."

Her sorrow tore at him. Wanting to ease the pain in the depths of her eyes, he changed the subject. "I have been hurt." He furrowed his brow. What a ridiculous statement. His injuries were the only obvious thing he could focus on. "Did you tend my wounds?"

She nodded, and turned her attention to the pot over the fire, dropping the cut roots and vegetables into the simmering broth. "I found you by the cross roads, milord, buried in a shallow grave, near death."

Again, he searched his memory. Yet, he could find no particular image to confirm or deny her statement. "What happened to me?"

She peered at him with raised brows. "Surely you know better than I, milord."

He closed his eyes, delving to the recesses of his mind. Vague images flitted at

the edges of his thoughts, but none came into focus. Frustrated, he snapped. "Just answer the question. What happened to me?"

She backed away. The fear in her eyes humbled him. "I only know what I told you. You were badly beaten, and stabbed before being buried beneath the brush just off the road."

He reached for her, ashamed of his outburst. His voice was soft and contrite. "I did not mean to frighten you." He searched her visage. The bruises against her were fresh, and swollen. "Were you injured by those who did this to me?" She concentrated on the pot of stew, and remained silent. "Madam?" He urged, "Did they lay harm to you for rescuing me?"

She chewed at her lips as if nervous. "Nay, milord. I did not encounter those who set upon you."

"Who then harmed you?" His voice was ragged. "Though I have little strength, madam, I will seek vengeance for you."

"It is not important. Time will heal my wounds, just as it will yours." She leaned to stir the food in the pot over the fire and he curled his fingers at the hem of her gown.

He could not name that which inspired him to know how she came by her injuries, only that the need to know was strong. "Surely your mother did not...."

Her shoulders drooped as she shook her head. For a moment, she gazed at the flames of the fire. A pink tongue darted over quivering lips. At last, she peered at him and whispered. "'Twas you, milord. You did this to me."

He snorted. Still, the look in her eyes assured him she spoke no lie. "Impossible!" He was indignant. "I have never struck a woman in my life."

She eyed him cautiously. Swallowing, she murmured, "I am certain it was the fever. You shouted things that made no sense and fought as if for your very life."

As a child chastised, he released a weary sigh. "I assure you, madam, that could be the only excuse. I am no monster." Once more he reached to the hem of her gown. "I implore you, forgive my actions and trust in my word it will never happen again."

She gave a feeble smile in response. "No forgiveness is required, milord. I know 'twas not done with intent."

Ashamed of his actions, he changed the subject. "And this place, where is it?"

"Not far from Derbyshire, milord," she murmured as she stirred the stew.

"Derbyshire?" He was incredulous. "Derbyshire!" he repeated. "What the hell am I doing near Derbyshire?"

Peering at him with furrowed brows, she replied, "Again, milord, you ask questions you would know the answers to better than I."

He raked his fingers through the thick mass of his hair. In the recesses of his mind vague images flitted, yet none settled long enough to give him answers, and he pursed his lips in frustration.

She moved to a cupboard by the table and reached for two bowls. He watched her in silence for a long moment. His head spinning, once more he changed tactics. A soft laugh passed his lips. "Madam," He murmured, "It has just occurred to me I owe you my thanks. Yet I know no name to call you by." A slow grin spread over his lips. "Although you remind me of an angel that has invaded my thoughts of late."

"No angel, milord." She corrected. Slipping him a bowl of the hot stew, she supplied, "My name is Rachel. Rachel Summerfield."

The firelight caught the strands of her hair and set it aglow with brilliant highlights of gold, reminding him of another time, when she drew a cloth against her rose hued skin. Captivated, he barely heard her answer. His voice was husky as he murmured, "Were I not in such pain, madam, I would aver I am dead, for at this moment you look like an angel with the glow of the fire behind you."

A soft blush fused her cheeks. She gave a stilted laugh. "Mayhap you are still feverish, milord." Trembling fingers brushed his brow.

He captured them and drew them to his lips. "And you are beautiful, Rachel Summerfield."

The crimson color deepened against her cheeks. Focusing her gaze to the fire, she asked softly, "And you, milord, what name shall I call you by?"

He opened his mouth, yet no words passed his lips. Of a sudden his thoughts held no deeper memory than waking earlier. Confused, he scanned the room as if seeking answers from the small space. None were forthcoming. Bemused, he stroked his tongue over dry lips. "I can think of none."

Rachel eyed him quizzically. "Your pardon, milord?"

He shrugged and vented a weary sigh. "God's truth, madam, I can think of no name to give you." He chuckled as a means to hide his sudden discomfort. "I am a man with no name."

The color drained from his host's face. She rose and stepped to the far corner of the room, her arms crossed over her breasts and her jaw set. "She called you that, the man with no name." Searching his face, a feeble attempt at laughter escaped her parted lips. "How can that be, milord? Everyone has a name."

Her unease riled him. Yet he knew no other option to grace her with. Lamely, he spread his hands before him, and shook his head. "Forgive me, Rachel, I mean no disrespect. Beyond waking in this room, I can recall nothing." For several seconds they peered at one another in silence. Desperate to rid her of the apprehension in her golden eyes, his lips curled into a smile, and he queried, "Surely you know who I am. You call me 'milord'." He raised slightly, a glimmer of hope in his visage. "What do you base that on?"

Rachel watched him for a moment. "Your clothing for one, milord."

A sheepish grin spread over his lips as he glanced to his bare torso, wrapped only with strips of linen where the poultices healed his wounds. "What clothing, madam?" Slowly he lifted the quilt at his waist, and peered beneath it. His eyes widened in mock dismay.

A deep crimson hue fused Rachel's cheeks. Yet his impish grin eased the tension in her shoulders, and she moved to stand above him. His gaze flustered her, and she crossed to a cabinet by the window. From it, she retrieved shirt and pants, freshly washed and mended. Her voice quaked as she handed the items to him. "The material is worth a fortune, milord, and the stitching done with great care. It would take me a year alone to earn the money it cost to make your shirt."

The sheepish grin remained at his lips. He was enjoying the blush on her cheeks. "Mayhap I stole them and am nothing more than a commoner."

Rachel shook her head. "Your speech is refined and crisp, milord. You are no commoner."

"As is yours, madam," he countered.

"I am not the one questioning my lineage," she retorted.

The laughter that erupted from him had her eyes sparkling. He held his sides as it caused him great pain. Lifting his hand in surrender, he sobered slightly. "You win, madam. However, it might behoove us both to leave my status in life in the past. Those who did this to me," he indicated his body by waving his hand toward his torso, "Undoubtedly know who I am. Mayhap a little anonymity would be best for all concerned."

A frown spread over Rachel's lips. She nodded in understanding. "I see your reasoning, milord, but what name shall I call you by?" Of a sudden, there was a twinkle in her brown eyes that took his breath away. "Since I was little I have brought home strays of all kinds. My mother positively cringed with all the vermin roaming about." Her excitement grew. "There was Mr. Jingles, our cat." She paused, pursed her lips, then shook her head. "Of course, mister was the wrong title, as she had kittens not long after coming here."

He cringed and shook his head in mock aversion. Rachel laughed. The sound was as spring rain, and he found himself captivated. "Mayhap something a bit more masculine?"

Thoughtfully, she rubbed her chin with slender fingers. "There was an owl with a broken wing ... I think we called him Crinkles...." At his frown, she snickered once more. "His feathers made an odd sound when he flapped them."

"Madam, I implore you, something I can hold my head up to," he teased. This small bit of levity helped take both their minds from heavier concerns.

Folding her arms across her chest, she countered, "Mayhap you have a suggestion, milord?"

He shrugged. "When I said to leave my status behind, I was referring to my social status, madam, not my species!" He was tired, but reluctant to end this inane conversation. "Perhaps we could compromise with a name more along the lines of something human." As if to direct her, a vision came to him of a sultry scantily clad woman sauntering toward him. A name whispered from her sensuous lips.

"Christopher?" His attention was brought back to Rachel as she repeated the name.

Had he spoken aloud? Still unnerved by the vision, he cleared his throat. "Madam?"

She studied him, as if trying the name on him. She nodded. "Yea, milord, Christopher suits you nicely." Satisfied, she tried the name once more. "Christopher."

Eager to rid his thoughts of the other woman, he replied, "'Tis certainly better than Mr. Jingles!"

As if hurt by his comparison to the cat, Rachel snorted softly. "He ... She was an honored member of our family, Christopher, and I take offense to your tone!" The sparkle in her eyes assured him she teased.

Though reluctant to cede to his weariness, he leaned his head to the hearth, and exhaled a slow deep breath. "My deepest thanks, Rachel Summerfield, for all you have done." Barely able to lift his hand to her cheek, he brushed his fingers over the soft flesh there and smiled. "Yet, I fear I have no energy remaining to continue our conversation. Might we do so on the morrow?" Her smile warmed him. Sliding a cup of cool water nearer him, she nodded. Then she ascended the stairs to the rooms above, leaving him

gazing after her.

The silence after her departure left Christopher feeling empty. Exhausted, he sank into the softness of his pillow and closed his eyes. For an instant, the alluring woman from his mind's eye teased him. She was quickly replaced by flowing golden hair, and hazel eyes. He gladly let the image lull him to sleep.

## CHAPTER THREE

The old hag woke late in the night and listened. They were looking for something ... the men in the woods. But it was no longer there. The girl Rachel came to her mind's eye. She had what they searched for! They would come soon and they would not stop until they found what they wanted.

She rose from the chair and put on the kettle to heat water. The girl had no idea just how close death was ... if she was not careful, she would join her mother much sooner than she expected! Then there was the man ... the one with no name. Many people would kill to hide his secrets.

She poured the water over a pouch of herbs and let the steam caress her cheek. She must warn the girl. She smiled. If she could not go to her in person, she would travel through her dreams!

She spit on the table and threw a clump of herbs into the spot. Then, she mixed the two together with long yellowed fingernails. Placing her hands just above the pile, she slowly began to chant. She continued this way until the sun burst through the cracks of her home, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel woke in a cold sweat and gazed about her in confusion. The strong feeling of another's presence left her unable to draw breath to her lungs, and she peered into the shadowy room with apprehension. The sensation of a hand on her shoulder had her bolting upright in the bed, searching the darkness in panicked hysteria. Yet, her vision settled on nothing to cause such alarm and eventually she released the air from her chest.

Even still, the prickling of fear that enveloped her remained, forcing her from the warmth of the blankets and to the window. Her breath misted against the cold pane, clouding and obscuring the landscape beyond. Trembling fingers swiped at the haze until once more her gaze fixed to the trees. Somehow the shadows looked almost thicker, if that were possible, and there was heaviness in the air that did not seem natural. Though she wrapped a shawl about her shoulders, it did little to take the chill from her flesh.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher was deep in the realms of slumber when a hand slid over his shoulder and shook him gently. Eyes wide, and fist raised, he searched the darkness, ready to do battle. Even still, his gaze lit only on the girl, labored breaths lifting her bosom as she leaned beside him. Though his pulse pounded within his chest, her panic spurring him, he noted the gentle curve of her full lips, and the indentation at the base of her throat. Both awakened an ache deep within him and he tamped it down as she leaned close, pressing her finger to his mouth.

Understanding, he nodded, speaking no word as she circled his arm with trembling fingers and aided in his ascent from the floor. The pain nearly unbearable, he closed his eyes and bit at his lip to keep from crying out. Knowing she would not have wakened him had it not been important, he searched her visage for a long moment, attempting to delve to the depth of her fear. He could feel her anxiety as if a physical

thing!

Silently she directed him toward a cupboard by the fireplace. Pressing her shoulder to it, Rachel moved it slowly from the wall. Christopher reached to help her, yet was met by a scathing glower and ceased his attempt, lifting his hand in surrender. "I worked hard on those stitches, milord," she whispered tersely. "Don't make my efforts in vain!"

The cupboard was barely away from the wall when the roar of horses' hooves echoed in the predawn. Her hands flattened to his back, she urged him toward the small indentation. "Hurry!" Had he weighed even a stone more, he doubted he would have fit into the narrow niche. Even still, he did not argue the matter and squeezed into the space hastily. Rachel was already leaning her shoulder to the cupboard as he settled into place. Just before she sealed him in the strange tomb, she peered in at him. "Do not come from here, Christopher! No matter what, you stay put!"

Though he could no longer see her, Christopher could hear her moving about just beyond his secreted space. His clothing was thrust into the tiny space with him, making him painfully aware he was nude. If he were caught ... his dignity would be the only thing left to strip from him!

Dawn was yet an hour away. Riders this early could only mean trouble. Christopher leaned his head against the wall. He would never forgive himself should something happen to the girl. Though he had no idea what he'd done to warrant his death, one thing was certain, if caught here with the woman, she could suffer the same fate.

\* \* \* \*

Lighting a lantern by the fire, she sank to a chair, curled trembling fingers about the small basket of mending, and drew it to her breasts. Shaking hands attempted to maneuver the needle to the sewing, yet missed their mark repeatedly as the thunder of approaching riders sent a wave of panic through her. The shiver that inched along her spine had little to do with the cold. Though the air was cool, she could feel the sweat against her breasts and along the nape of her neck.

Once before, soldiers came in the middle of the night. They ransacked the cottage, not caring what they broke in their quest for a man who killed two people in a coach several miles away. They even pulled her and her family out to the muddled clearing in front of the cottage and made them lay face down until they searched the house completely. Two days later, she stood on the side of the road in town and watched them pull the man's body behind their mounts. It was a silent warning to those who watched not to try the men of the queen's guard!

Eyes closed, she whispered a silent prayer. It would be different this time. Her father was gone, and his ranking as an officer of Her Majesty's guard gone with him. She continued to sew. It kept her fingers busy and her mind from filling with panic regardless of the fact the tips of her fingers now glistened with tiny droplets of blood where the needle punctured her flesh. Even so, she jumped when the rap came against the door. Her feet leaden, she moved toward the portal, every ounce of her strength utilized to reach it.

The sky beyond was still ebony. Rachel noticed in those first seconds that there was no moon, nor stars, just the dark expanse of sky. She did not get a chance to see much else. A cloaked figure blocked the doorway and her view of anything beyond. For

an instant, he looked like a giant bat swooping down upon her. Before she could speak, he thrust through the doorway and stormed past her. Another man followed, and another after him. They did not speak, only began to ransack the house with incredible haste.

Her glower was meant to assure them of her displeasure. "What is it you are looking for?" Her arms folded over her bosom as she crossed to one of the men now busy tossing her father's books wherever met his whim. "If you would just tell me...." He swung his gauntleted hand out, as if dismissing her. It slapped against her cheek and across her lips, splitting the soft skin there. Stubbornly she refused to be treated so in her own home. Rachel grabbed his arm and tried to pull him towards the door. This time his anger was sparked and he balled his gloved hand into a fist. It came against her jaw and sent her reeling.

Still she refused to cede! She crossed to another man, standing by the fireplace, and craned her neck to see his face. He towered over her by at least a foot. "If you would at least tell me what you want....," she snarled, hands to hips, her anger fueling her.

Raven black hair protruded from beneath his hat, yet she could see at the brim, that the hair there was thin, and most likely balding. His eyes were almost as dark as his hair, giving him a rather sinister look. A thin mustache graced his upper lip and a carefully manicured goatee covered his chin, coming to a sharp point about three inches below. A long scar adorned his cheek and disappeared into his hairline just past his ear. Aside from the hag, he was by far the most frightening person Rachel ever set eyes on and she trembled as she locked her gaze with his. Nonetheless, she forced her fears down, and demanded once more his purpose in her home.

One of the other men came close and shook his head. "All clear upstairs, captain! There is no one else here."

Pivoting to face him, she sneered, "If someone would just tell me what you are looking for...." Her petition went unanswered; his back to her as he joined another of the guards tossing items from the very cupboard behind which Christopher was secreted. Again, she faced the one by the fireplace. His stance and bearing gave her the assumption he was in charge, and she leaned close, her voice raspy as she queried, "Captain?" Her gaze locked with his, cautious. "Is this really necessary?" The indignation in her tone was evidence of her angst. "If you would just tell me what you want...."

Eyes snapping like cold flint, he turned on his heels and gave her a long slow assessment before responding. "We seek a murderer!"

Her foot met the floor with a loud thump, averring her ire. "And do you expect to find him in my cook pot?" Glancing to the two now destroying a shelf of spices and herbs, she curled her lips contemptuously. Her defiance was clear in her squared shoulders and set jaw.

For the first time he let the corners of his mouth curl into a crooked smile. Yet, he did not halt his men in their wild destruction. Rachel clenched her teeth. Angry, she challenged, "Is this murderer you seek the size of a mouse?" She spread her hand to indicate the mess scattered over the floor. "I think he must be! For 'tis certain they search for him where only a mouse could be!"

He did not answer, instead clapped his gloved hands together sharply until the two other men ceased their 'quest' and departed. The nod he graced her with was stiff as he too merged outside.

Finding a bravado she did not feel, she clasped her trembling fingers to his sleeve, knowing she risked his wrath, but caring not. "You come in here and destroy my home and then just walk away! Surely I deserve some sort of explanation!"

None too gently he removed her hand from his sleeve. The icy glare he bestowed upon her sent a chill through her. Moving outside, he hauled himself into the saddle atop his steed and finally faced her. "Who is buried by the pond?"

The size of the lump that lodged in her throat left the simple task of breathing near impossible. Craning her neck, she peered over her shoulder, her eyes widening and a strangled sob erupting from her lips. Men were already there, digging! Torches lit to illuminate the area, gave her a clear view of her mother's body, hauled from the dirt and strewn carelessly beside the tree. Panic set her feet to flight. "No! Please!" Only a few feet into her frantic dash, her feet departed the ground and her body crushed against the sinewy expanse of the man on the horse.

Every ounce of her strength went into gaining her freedom as her long nails raked over his features, along the column of his neck, and against his hands. When he made no move to release her, she balled her hands to fists and drove them to his groin with enough force to vent a slew of curses from his thin lips. Even still, he only tightened his grip, pinning her to him, until air could no longer pass from her lungs. Head spinning, she murmured, "Let me go!" One good blow delivered to his chest was all she managed before his gauntlet drove hard to her temple. Addled, Rachel slumped against him for a long moment, her will defeated.

"Cease, you little wild cat or I shall bring more harm to your home than done already!" he hissed next to her ear.

Having no protest left in her, she peered into his dark eyes, her head lolling atop her shoulders. It was useless to fight him. Besides, the graves were already dug up. "Please ... don't let them do this to my parents!" The ragged emotion in her voice left her choking. "Please!"

Dragging his hand to the dirt on his brow, another of the soldiers ventured forth, shaking his head as he neared. Above him, the captain of the queen's guard inclined his head. "Enough!" Immediately the men ceased their labors. Waiting for his men to remount their steeds, he kept his arm at Rachel's waist, hindering her escape. Solemn as he assessed her, he hissed, "You are either very brave, or very foolish to come against the queen's guards." His gloved finger traced the blood at her lip. "Be thankful these men did harm only to your home! It could have been much worse!" Leaning, he lowered her to earth, almost gentle now as he placed her on the path. Then without another word, he spurred his mount and disappeared into the trees. His men followed close behind.

Dawn was just beginning to lighten the horizon when she staggered into the cottage. Sinking to the floor once over the threshold, she vented a weary sigh. The destruction of the house did not bother her as much as the desecration of the graves! Remaining by the stoop as the first rays of the sun crested through the trees, Rachel could not quell the violent trembling that seized her body. She knew the captain spoke the truth. She, and the cottage, could have fared much worse!

Sobbing, she remained on the floor for a long time, only rousing from her anguish when a muffled voice intruded into her thoughts. "Are you all right?" There was panic in Christopher's tone.

Ashamed she forgot him; she clawed her way to her feet and stumbled forward,

tears wet on her cheeks. Plying her shoulder to the cupboard, she inched it from the wall and peered into the narrow indentation with wide eyes. His flesh wan and colorless, Rachel pressed trembling fingers to his arm. Slipping her hand about his waist, she aided his departure from the crevice and led him to the hearth. Quaking, her tone stilted, she whispered, "What a horrid beast of a man." Her lips quivered as she sank to the place beside him. "What sort of person would desecrate graves with such callous disrespect?"

Cradling his head in his hands, Christopher was silent for a moment. At last, drawing his fingers over the darkening bruise marring her cheek, he whispered, "We both know it was me he searched for. I think it would be best if I were to leave. I will not put you in danger!"

The gentle caress as he moved his hand over her split lip left her trembling, yet not from fear and she lifted her gaze to meet his. Though she understood none of the motivation that drew her body to his, she closed her eyes and released a ragged sigh as she molded to him. His arms encircled her, enveloping her in their warmth and strength. Relishing his embrace, she remained there for a long moment. Adamant, in her denial of his request, she whispered, "You cannot leave, Christopher. You would die!"

Lifting his head from her hair, he searched her visage before responding, "Though I do not understand the images that haunt my dreams, I know one thing is certain. The blood of another stains my hands. His lifeless eyes torment my mind. Mayhap the captain speaks the truth..." He hesitated, swallowing hard before conceding, "I might well be what he claims, Rachel."

She too drew her head from his shoulder, and shook it, sending the long curls swaying against her shoulders. "Nay! You are nothing of the sort! I will not let you leave, knowing he waits to take your life."

"You know nothing of me, yet are willing to risk everything to harbor me?" His hand cupped her chin. "I would never forgive myself should something happen to you!"

She shook her head! "The choice was mine. I stand by it!"

The lump that lodged in her throat made breathing difficult as his mouth lowered toward hers. Yet, she found no strength to turn away. Warmed, as his lips slanted over hers, she closed her eyes, the pleasure of his kiss sending pulses to her toes. A gasp escaped her throat as his tongue traced her lips, parting them and delving deep within her mouth.

From the recesses of her mind, an image took shape, searing her with its intensity, and she pressed her hand to his chest, forcing him from her. "No!" Staggering to her feet, she stumbled back from him. "Though I know you innocent of the crimes he slanders you with, I can offer nothing more than this cottage until you are well enough to face your demons..." The heat that rose in her cheeks assured she blushed. "Forgive my impertinence, milord. I did not mean to convey any notion of more..." Then she hastened up the stairs, her sobs echoing through the small house.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher woke in a pool of sweat. For a moment he was uncertain where he was, and how he came to be there. Nothing seemed familiar. Even with the sun streaming through the windows, he was disoriented. His heart pounded in his chest, and he took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. Slowly, the dream that wakened him came back into his mind.

*He had been in a long tunnel-like corridor. The walls were jagged and rough,*

*carved from the stone that surrounded them. Torches were placed every hundred feet or so down the long hall, casting just enough light for him to make his way, but not enough to see more than a few feet in front of each one. Rats scurried out of his path as he moved along the passage. At the far end, a thick iron and wood door blocked his progress. He could hear a key turned in the lock. He nodded to, but did not speak with, the man who opened the door for him. Once through he continued down yet another hall to a place where two others joined the first. Knowing the way, he did not hesitate in his journey. At last, his footfalls stopped before a door and held the torch high. Movement from within assured him the person he came to see was there.*

*“Have you news?” A hoarse whisper emitted from beyond the door, though he could see no one.*

*Christopher felt a chill travel the length of his spine. Within the depths of his mind, intuition spurred his anxiety. Something did not feel right. “Step closer.” He held the flame nearer the door, craning his neck for a better view of the one within the cell.*

*“The light is painful to my eyes.” His companion murmured.*

*Heart racing within his chest, Christopher fought the urge to drop the torch and retreat back down the passage! He had come before, and though he never saw the man up close, there was never unease as there was now. Something was wrong; he sensed it with every fiber of his being! Adrenaline coursed through him. Gaze locked on the shadowy area beyond the cell, he drew his feet from their place, backing with caution from the portal.*

*When the door swung inward, assuring him a trap had been laid, he tossed the torch toward the emerging figure and pivoted on his heels, maneuvering the passage with enough haste to mist his breath before him as he fled. However, upon rounding the corner, he skidded to a halt. There before him were four guards adorned in the colors of the queen. His exit was blocked. He spun about, not sure in which direction to go. Behind him, those who gave chase from the prisoner’s cell advanced, blocking his retreat. They too wore the queen’s colors!*

*He scrutinized a tall man with thinning black hair as he moved down the hall. “Maxwell! I should have known you were behind this!”*

*The captain of the queen’s guard sneered at him. Bowing gallantly, he spread his hand before him. “I have been waiting for the better part of the night...I am honored you did not disappoint me.” The laugh that echoed in the cavern was sarcastic.*

*Christopher studied the men around him, assessing. There was a time they were each called friends, and it saddened him to know they now turned against him. Trying to fight his way out of this was futile. He bowed slightly in concession. “So this is how it ends.”*

*Careful of his movements, the sword was drawn from the sheath at his hip; its hilt turned toward the guard closest him lest the action be mistaken for aggression. “Take care of it, Marcus, it was my father’s.” Facing Maxwell, Christopher gave a slight bow. “Shall we?” His compliance had the other man peering at him with furrowed brows. Even still, he allowed his lips to curl to a slight grin as he stepped between the guard holding his sword, and the captain. Mind racing, he contemplated any avenue of escape. Maxwell sneered at him. “Always the gentleman, even to the last.”*

*Though he gave only a minimal indication of his interest, Christopher responded, “One of us has to maintain the art!”*

*As they moved toward the end of the long corridor and the exit to the building, Christopher gauged each man close to him. Though experienced swordsmen, few had the ability to best him in a fight. Yet, their numbers were daunting. Too find freedom from this predicament; he would need to use his wits, not brawn. Only one guard separated him from the door, all the others were behind him, a fact he thought odd, considering Maxwell's penchant for over reaction. Yet, he dared not contradict the captain's poor judgment. Instead, he inched closer to the guard in front, stumbling slightly as they approached the portal.*

*As the sentry leaned to unlatch the lock, Christopher lurched forward. In one swift motion, his fingers curled about the sword at the guard's side, unsheathed it, and whirled about. The tip of the blade slammed to his other hand, and he thrust with all his strength against the column of men, using the sword as leverage to send them tumbling backward into the narrow space. Almost in unison, they careened against one another, until tangled in a large mass on the floor.*

*Christopher took full advantage of their immobility. Pivoting on his heels, he drew a dagger from his boot and drove it deep into the ribs of the man who had been his only hindrance to freedom. Casting the heavy weight of the youth to the side, he leapt over him, and raced from the corridor. The heavy door slammed quickly, using his weight to shove it back to its jamb. Then the long bar was dropped into place, locking those on the other side within.*

*Astride his mount, he leaned low over the horse's neck as he drew labored pants of air into his lungs. Then he was racing through the allies and shadowed streets of London, his weary body clinging to the steed's neck as the animal careened over the rutted lanes.*

\* \* \* \*

Coming from his thoughts, he peered at the young woman who had come to be his savior. She sat beside the newly covered graves and gently brushed her fingers through the soil. He could not imagine her grief. Yet, she never once voiced her pain. Anger left his chest tight. "You will pay for the sadness you caused her, Maxwell!" Even as he voiced the words, he realized he knew the man who had visited the cottage so early in the morning. The same one who left him in the woods to die!

Two things were certain! One, he had been betrayed and led into a trap. Two, his troubles revolved around the captain of the queen's guard! Now he just needed to put the missing pieces together between those facts. He sighed. Yet how to do that when he knew little more than his name? He promised himself he would find the answers, whatever the cost.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Again pulled from her dreams, Rachel listened to the sounds of the night. The fear that gripped her three nights past was not in evidence yet, unease settled at the base of her spine. Muffled noise from the parlor forced her from the bed, panic twisting at her throat with the certainty that the captain of the guard had returned. Tossing her robe over her shoulders, she stumbled to the landing, where she listened with her breath lodged behind her teeth.

The soft glow of candlelight illuminated the room below, calming her trepidations and assuring her, her fears were unjustified. Cautious, she descended on carefully placed feet and scanned the room with arched brows. Settling atop the last step, she drew her knees to her chest and watched in awe, the man near the hearth.

Unaware of her entrance, Christopher stood before the fireplace, a phantom foe pinned to the hearth by his mighty sword -- a stick only about a foot long. Though slow in his movements, he pivoted, backed away, then moved in and thrust hard toward this would-be enemy. Movements much like that of a practiced dance led him over the floor, his meager sword jabbing and thrusting at an enemy only he could see.

Fascinated, she studied his features; the set line of his jaw as he drove his weapon forward, the muscular shape of his arms and legs beneath the worn clothing borrowed from among her brother's things, and the sparkle in the depths of his dark eyes. He cut a dashing pose, and she found herself mesmerized. Several minutes elapsed, yet she made no attempt to alert him to her presence.

Christopher spun about on his heels and began to 'chase' his opponent toward the front door. As he passed the narrow stairway, his gaze met hers. He halted, slowly turned back and faced her with surprised wide eyes.

She pursed her lips together to keep from laughing and brought her fingers up to her mouth to hide the grin that threatened there. At her inquisitive glance to the stick still in his hand, he slowly lowered it to his side and slightly behind his back.

Unable to hide her amusement, she queried, "Did you slay the dragon, sir..." A soft laugh eased from her lips. "Or was it some other demon that your sword laid low?"

The lopsided grin that spread over his features had her breath lodging in her throat. "So," he nodded, "You've been there that long, have you?" At the slight incline of her head, he bowed and pretended to sweep a phantom hat from his head. "For you fair damsel, I would gladly slay even the mightiest of beasts!"

\* \* \* \*

The firelight cast highlights of bronze through her hair and across her flushed cheeks, leaving him unable to release the air from his lungs. When she sauntered past, placing her between him and the fire, a knot formed in the pit of his stomach. Cast in silhouette, the glow of the flames illuminating her body, no curve was left to his imagination. The swell of her breasts, the indentation of her narrow waist, and long shapely legs beneath her robe had him struggling with inner yearnings and desires.

Apparently unaware of his turmoil, she spun about, sending her gown swirling as

she halted before him and searched his face for a long moment. "I am in your debt for slaying the beast, milord, and keeping my humble home safe."

Again, he bowed. Reaching for her, he brought her hand to his lips, pressing the soft skin with a feathery kiss. The scent of lilacs teased, and he inhaled deeply. Lost in those gold-brown eyes, his body responded, aching to draw her close. A slow languid grin pulled up the corners of his mouth. Though he had no memory to counter the thought, he was certain she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Of their own accord, his feet drew him to her. Hands encircling her waist, he molded her form to his. His voice, husky as he lowered his mouth toward hers, was a whisper against her cheek. "Do I then, win the heart of the fair maid?" Waiting for no response, he covered her lips with his, enjoying both the heat of her response, and the softness of her body against his.

As she had with their first kiss, she allowed his tongue to chase hers. For a moment, she put up no resistance. A moan eased from her throat. Yet, when his fingers inched along her spine, caressing the silky skin at her throat, and descending toward her breasts, she vented a gasp, and once more pushed from him. Her lips, swollen from his assault, quivered as she staggered backward. Trembling fingers traced the path his mouth took in capturing hers. "I..." He watched her swallow, the slender column of her neck entrancing. "'Tis late ... I really should try to sleep.... With winter threatening, there are a thousand things vying for my attention." Speaking no further word, she curled her fingers into her robe, and dashed up the stairs, her labored breaths echoing in the room long after her departure.

\* \* \* \*

Her silence the next morning had him cursing his actions under his breath. Ashamed, he cleared his throat before speaking. "Rachel..." The only hint of a response was the stiffening of her shoulders as she placed a stack of wood in the ring by the fireplace. Frustrated, he slipped his fingers about her wrist, and gently, yet forcibly turned her to face him. "Please don't be angry. You have done more for me than I can ever repay. My actions were inexcusable, and I beg your forgiveness."

The crimson blush that darkened her cheeks was evidence of her discomfiture. Nonetheless, she murmured hoarsely, "I too am sorry, milord. I don't know what came over me..."

"Will you take the blame for my deeds?" He was incredulous. Tilting her chin with his thumb, he searched her eyes. "Though I know I have overstepped the bounds of propriety, I must admit, were you to give even the slightest indication of willingness, I would continue where we left off last night with little hindrance." His admission had her backing away, and he lifted his hand in surrender. "Rest easy, madam. I would never force myself upon you. Yet, neither can I deny the ache within me when you are near..." Pursing his lips, he locked his gaze with hers for a moment. "That said, Rachel, I believe 'tis time I left..."

The adamant no that rushed from her lips took him by surprise. "You have not the strength to defend yourself should the need arise, milord. Stay until you are recovered..." The soft slope of her lips left him hungry for their taste, yet he steeled himself against such yearnings. "Know this, sir..." She murmured as she turned once more to the fire. "I can offer nothing more than the herbs and poultices that mend your wounds. Understand there cannot be anything else between us..."

“Why?” His hand to her shoulder had her venting a strangled sob.

“The reasons are not important,” she stammered. “Besides, though you profess to have no memory, we both know your past will one day catch up with you...”

“Think you I am a murderer, Rachel?” His tone was raspy. “I cannot say for certain one way or the other...”

Her hand to his cheek was soft. “Nay, milord, I think nothing of the sort. Yet, ‘tis clear the captain of the guard is set upon your death.” Her voice quaked as she added; “I have lost all those dear to me ... and cannot suffer such emptiness again. I shall tend your wounds, and nurse you back to health, no more. I ask only that you respect my request, sir, and take this no further.” Then she stumbled from the cottage, her shoulders curled forward as she rested her head in her hand.

Christopher drove his fist into his pillow. Though he dared not delve too deep into the yearnings she instilled, he knew she was right. Ashamed, he vowed to keep his distance, and cast thoughts of her womanly form from his mind. Still, he lay awake long into the night, her image tormenting him and leaving his body aching.

\* \* \* \*

In the solitude of her room, Rachel peered toward the velvet night beyond her window. The memory of his lips against hers left her heart somersaulting in her breast, and an ache in her woman’s body she did not understand. Absently, she brushed her fingers over her mouth. Her thoughts focused on the heat his kiss spread through her, and the yearning to feel his arms about her once more. No matter how hard she tried, she could not deny his affect on her. His eyes, smoldering with desire, captured her every daydream. He was rakishly handsome, the yellowed bruises lining his flesh not withstanding, and she had to admit he captivated her mind well beyond their time spent together, and into her dreams. Even still, she squared her shoulders and forced him from her mind.

They came from different worlds. Though he had no memory of his life before their encounter, everything about him attested to wealth, his clothing, his speech, and his mannerisms. She was a commoner, with a past she dared not reveal. It would be best this way, convincing both of them they had no business together. Sending him away once healed, she would not have to delve into the secrets that cast her to the small cottage, and forced her family into a life of exile. Were such things open to his perusal, Rachel felt confident he would toss her by the way side as easily as the captain of the guard.

Yet, she could not send him away, not as she had the others seeking a life with her, and nearly collapsed at his feet when he suggested such a thing. Already the house seemed empty, though her mother’s spirit disappeared long before death took her. Once Christopher also departed, she would have nothing, no reason to continue on. Yet, neither could she allow herself to cast down the barriers she erected so long ago. A life of exile was her destiny, a punishment for crimes committed long before her birth. The thought sickened her, and she pressed her forehead to the cold glass of the window, tears dampening her cheeks as she searched the night beyond for answers. They were, as always elusive, and eventually she meandered back to the bed and huddled beneath the blankets until sleep blessedly took her from her torment.

\* \* \* \*

The tension between them the following morning was palpable, leaving him with

a set jaw and a heavy weight in his chest. Her gaze, when at last she locked it with his, seemed far away, erecting the wall between them higher still. Determined to mend the rift between them, Christopher forced an impish grin to his lips, as he watched her sheath a slender dagger to her hip. "A dagger at your hip? Is it dragons you prepare to slay, madam?" His tone was light, a hint of laughter edging it.

Shrugging, Rachel nodded. "I fear there is no meat for our supper this night." Though her reply was stilted, her eyes sparkled. Gracing him with a sidelong glance, her lips curled into a half-hearted smile, and she softened her tone. "Though dragon meat is far too tough to eat, had I one to slay, surely I would do so. Other than small rabbits and squirrels, game is hard to find this time of year."

Christopher's brows rose in surprise. Eager to relieve her trepidation, he challenged. "Do you hunt, madam?"

"Not as well as my father, but I manage." Once more, she turned toward the door.

Christopher cleared his throat. "Mayhap it would be best were I to attain the meal...."

Eying him skeptically, she scanned the strips of cloth against his torso. His heart did a series of flips within his chest as the corners of her mouth twisted to a wicked grin. "'Tis certain, milord, you would have little trouble sneaking up on your prey, for you move with the speed of a snail...." His mock outrage had her giggling. "But 'tis doubtful once you set your sights on your intended victim you will have the strength to finish the deed. Phantom beasts not withstanding, I fear you would leave us both starving before slaying anything worth eating."

Enjoying the banter, he challenged, "And you presume that slender dagger at your hip will fell anything mightier than a mouse?"

"Do you think me incapable of such a task?" The sparkle in her eyes assured him her morose mood from the night before was no longer an issue.

A soft smile curled at his lips. Arching his shoulders, he stated the obvious. "You are but a slip of a girl ... and I see no weapon worthy for a hunt...."

Rachel snorted. "Do you provoke me?" The glint of defiance in her eyes was testament to her amusement. "By all means, milord," she spread her hand toward the portal. "Let the best ... person win." Pausing by the door, she added, "Are you a good cook, Christopher?"

A lopsided grin curled his lips. "Probably as good as you are a hunter."

Rachel smiled coyly. "I've a proposition for you then." She eyed him down the length of her nose. "There is a crossbow hanging in the shed out back. If you bag us dinner with it before I do so with my dagger, I shall cook a fine feast." Her tongue darted over her lips. "If, however, I bring back the prize, you shall perform the honors." Laying her finger along side his cheek, she shook her head. "To make the game fair, milord, you may bag something small." She snickered at his astonishment. "For I know in your weakened condition, anything larger than a squirrel might tax your strength!" Then she fairly danced from the cottage, her laughter drifting back as she slipped into the woods.

Though unable to advance without the aide of several trees along the way, Christopher followed her into the woods. He halted beside an old oak, weary, yet intrigued by the woman several feet before him. She gave no inclination of being aware of him, and carefully withdrew the blade from her hip. The hilt balanced in her palm as she assessed a yearling boar. The blade of the knife turned until it fair brushed her breast.

Her wrist flicked swiftly, and the dagger sailed through the air. It arched slightly, and then began its descent. The pig squealed as the tip pierced its thick hide and disappeared into the beast's throat. For several seconds he ran in circles, blood spurting over the leaves carpeting the forest floor. Eventually he staggered, his short legs buckling beneath him, and crashed to earth with a resounding thump. His protests diminished as the breath ceased from his flared nostrils, and he lay still.

Stooping beside the animal, Rachel withdrew her dagger from his neck, and cleaned it amid the leaves surrounding the carcass. Then she sheathed it back at her hip, and turned toward Christopher. The smile that curled her lips spoke volumes. "I prefer my meat slightly rare, Christopher." His jaw was slack as she passed him, the boar draped about her shoulders. "Perhaps you could dig up some potatoes from the garden by the cottage ... though the ground is rather frozen, and I will understand if the task is too much for you!" Then she sauntered cockily back toward the house.

\* \* \* \*

The old hag slowly allowed her fingers to drift through the bucket of water she drew from the stream by her home. In the recesses of her mind, she watched the men searching the woods. At the spot where another's blood still stained the ground, they found pieces of material, like that a woman used for an apron.

Near it, the ruts from a cart still marred the road and their tracks clearly led toward the only habitable place for miles, the cottage searched a week before.

The crone knew the girl was in danger. They would return to her home once more and this time it would be destroyed. There was not much time. The sun would set soon, and they would ride! Her fingers dipped into the water and scratched the bottom of the bucket. When she brought them out, blood pooled beneath her fingernails. Touching the crimson liquid to the pile of herbs on her table, she shrank back as the tangle burst into flames. Their heat seared her flesh. Death would knock at the girl's door this very night!

\* \* \* \*

Chilled, Rachel huddled in her quilt by the window. She wakened as before, to the feeling someone was near, drawing her from her dreams. This time she did not lie in the bed waiting for the feeling to abate, but rose and quickly moved to the window. Only there a mere second, the fear struck her as if a physical slap, reeling her about, and sending her feet to flight down the stairs to the room below.

Christopher too was awake, his gaze riveted on the window. A slow shiver inched over Rachel's spine, the wild thunder of horses' hooves a distant rumble in the dark. She spoke no words, simply began to gather his things from the floor and hid them in the niche by the fireplace. This time she did not send him to join them. Something told her this time would not be as easy as the last. "Hurry!" She grabbed his hand and almost pulled him toward the door. "There is no time!"

He put up no argument. Instead entwined his fingers through hers, and followed as she hastened to the trees. Their barren limbs offered little concealment; forcing them to their knees as the clearing a few yards away, filled with the din of pounding hooves, and shouted curses. Inch by precious inch they gained the depths of the woods, leaving the havoc behind, until only the rush of their labored breathing echoed in their ears.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell thrust the door open with enough force to send shards of wood crashing

to the wall behind. Arms folded across his chest, he ventured no further than the tidy parlor. Within him, he knew his men would find no trace of the girl, or the man who robbed him of sleep. Nonetheless, his raised hand was instruction to search every crevice, every indentation. Christopher's things, hidden in the niche, but now discovered, were placed at his feet, his ire twisting his mouth into a snarl as he realized yet again his foe had outsmarted him. The careful mending of the material assured him of the girl's involvement. "So, my little wildcat was hiding something!" He threw the shirt to the ground, trod upon its crisp white cloth, and sneered, "Find them!" Along the side of his jaw, a muscle twitched, his anger steeled behind his eyes. "They could not have gone far!"

An hour later his ire had risen. In response to the officer's admittance the two were not located, his gauntlet drove hard against the man's face. "How dare you come back here without them? No order was given to cease the search!"

The other man mumbled a feeble excuse. "The girl knows these woods well...."

Maxwell raised his hand to strike once more. When another blow came against the guard's temple, it split the skin on his face from just beneath his eye to the edge of his lip. He remained motionless, blood rolling to his chin before dropping to his uniform. Maxwell sneered close to his face. "I don't want to hear why you didn't catch them!" His breath misted before him. "I want to hear that they are dead!"

Annoyed, he snarled, "They are well away from here by now! We shall wait until morning." Facing the small cottage a smug smile curled the corners of his lips. "Perhaps having no place to come home to will flush them. Burn it!" The thatched roof was set ablaze, the wood frame quickly catching the flames. Arms crossed over his chest, he watched in satisfaction as the fire hungrily devoured the house and everything in it! A smug smile curled his lips as the structure succumbed to the orange monster. There would come a time soon when his foe would suffer the same fate, for he could ill afford loose ends.

\* \* \* \*

The gray illumination of the moon guided them. Christopher staggered, collapsed to his knees, spent. Rachel wrapped her arm about his waist, to aid in his ascent, and gasped as her fingers brushed warm wet liquid along his side. With gentle care, she helped him from the cold ground. Though the glow of the moon was dim as it filtered through the trees, his blood was clearly visible against his clothing.

Unmindful of the cold, she tore her robe into long strips and bound his wounds. "That should hold you until I can get my sewing things." Her sigh edged with desperation. His eyes, glassy and unfocused, assured her of his state, and she pursed her lips in frustration. It would be a miracle if he survived this latest onslaught, his chances much worse in the woods!

Within the confines of a cave, the crisp winter air left her body trembling, and she huddled with knees to chest, as she perused Christopher from weary eyes. "I need to get some things from the cottage...." Her body refused to respond to her urging to stand, and she clenched her jaw to quiet her chattering teeth.

The adamant toss of his head was enough to convince her he was not agreeable to the idea. "No!" Arms crossed over his chest, he dared her defy him. "He will be there waiting!"

She too folded her arms to her breasts. "We are not prepared to spend much time

here, Christopher. The nights are bitter. How long do you think we can manage without warm clothing, or even the simplest weapon to hunt for food?" As if to aver her statement, her teeth clacked and her body shivered, as she rubbed trembling hands along the length of her arms. "Besides, he cannot connect us, if I go alone, you will be safe."

Easing closer to her, he slipped his arm about her shoulders, and drew her to his body. "It is something to worry over in the morning. For now, let us concentrate on keeping warm." His lips, blanched and flattened to a thin line evidenced his pain.

Lifting his shirt, she peered at the new strips of cloth at his wounds. "All that hard work...." Her eyes misted as she assessed the darkening stains. "You will never survive without help, Christopher ... and I can offer nothing here to change that. I have to go back...."

Encircling her in his embrace, he leaned his head to her hair. "I will not allow you to risk it. Returning would sign your death warrant. Now cease your prattle, madam, and allow me to drift once more to the enchanting dream of an angel that captivated my thoughts before Maxwell's rude interruption." With that, he closed his eyes, and seemed to sleep immediately, Rachel trapped against him. The warmth of his body lulling her, she too drifted into slumber.

\* \* \* \*

Her footfalls carefully placed, she eased from the cave, and staggered several branches against its mouth to conceal it. Pleased with her efforts, she scanned the opening with smug satisfaction. It appeared to be nothing more than a dead bush. Serious scrutiny would be needed to ascertain it anything but.

There was an eerie stillness as she traversed the overgrown path. Her breath misted before her, the crisp air setting her body to trembling regardless of her attempts to quell it. Even still, she continued on, determined to attain what she sought and be back to the cave before Christopher ever realized her gone. Keeping to the low brush, she made her way the last yards of her journey on all fours, her progress slow as she inched over the brittle leaves.

She was still quite some distance from the clearing when the acrid smell of smoke and ash filled her nostrils. Lodging at the base of her throat, her heart beat out a chaotic rhythm that reverberated in her ears. Only fear kept her from racing from the trees. Yet she knew, long before espying the ruins, her home was gone!

All that remained were a few charred pieces of wood, and the stone fireplace. Even the stone wall at the front collapsed as the wood supporting it fell. Smoke still wafted through the air from the smoldering remnants. "If he thinks to scare me...." She forced the lump in her throat down, "He does not know me well!" However, even as she uttered the words, she felt a shiver inch down her spine.

Secreted behind a sad excuse for a shrub, an icy dread filled her as a guard stepped through the trees, headed straight for her. Exhalation became impossible, the air trapped behind her teeth. Stopping just short of her place among the underbrush, he urinated, scanned the thicket disinterestedly, and finally turned back toward the charred remains of the house.

Jaw clenched, she endured a cramp in her thigh, its intensity moistening her brow with a fine line of perspiration. Shifting the barest inch, she cringed as her hand came against a small twig, snapping it beneath her weight.

The guard halted, pivoted about, and peered toward her shadowed space with his

hand against the hilt of his sword. Tucking her head to her chest, she held her breath, lest its gray haze alert him to her presence. Lungs threatening to explode, she chewed at her lip, an eternity elapsing before a large hare suddenly leapt from the expanse of trees only a few feet from her, darting chaotically in front of the guard, and disappearing into the shadows. A strained chuckle eased from the man's lips as he watched the rabbit scurry beneath the brush. Releasing his sword, he nodded toward the woods before spinning once more on his heels, and started back to the clearing.

\* \* \* \*

Her back to the cave as she inched within, Rachel released a startled sob as Christopher's snide tone alerted her to his ire. "Where have you been?"

Feeling as a child, caught in some wicked act, she lowered her gaze to her hands before murmuring, "Out." Emotions threatening to collapse her knees, she allowed her body to slide down the cold rock wall, and hung her head as tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Joining her there, Christopher tilted her chin up with his finger, and perused her with tight drawn lips. "Where?"

Ashamed, she locked her gaze with his chest. "Just out. Looking for things."

Persistent, he clucked her with his finger until she met his gaze. "You are hiding something. In the short time I have known you, you have never looked away unless you are hiding something."

She frowned. Her mother always knew when she was not truthful, also. At least now, she understood how. Finally, she sighed in resignation. "I went to the cottage...."

His fingers bit into the soft flesh along her arm. "You could have been killed!"

For the first time since their meeting, sobs of pure anguish rolled from her quivering lips. Swiping at the tears, she chastised herself, rarely allowing such weakness to surface. "They burned it ... to the ground." Everything that mattered to her was now gone.

His arms enveloping her, he cradled her trembling body to his. "I am sorry, Rachel." She clung to him, her ragged breath against his throat, as she vented her torment. His hands, soothing as they stroked her hair, and shoulders, calmed her, and eventually she stilled, her misery eased as she allowed his caresses to lull her to sleep.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Her approach to the shanty, trepidation slowing her stride, was cautious. It seemed just as before; nonetheless, she did not want to risk walking into the arms of hidden visitors. Only a few feet from the door, she paused as the old woman called out to her. "'Tis safe here, girl. Enter."

Even still, she was hesitant as she curled her fingers around the latch and lifted it from the frame. Peering within, Rachel scanned the small room, her breath caught behind her lips. Though it contained no place to secret even a small person, she allowed her gaze to move to every shadowed corner until satisfied no other lurked in their depths. A ragged sigh eased from her lips. "I need your help..."

Her host was already reaching into a box, and Rachel wondered why she spoke at all. The crone pulled several things from the little chest, and laid them on the table. One pouch in particular, clinked like coins, and Rachel opened her eyes wide. She never paid the old woman with money. She would pick her berries, or cook her a meal, but never brought coins.

"Bring him ter me." The hag whispered as she continued to lay things on the table.

Chewing her lips, Rachel countered. "He is not with me." Though the other woman could not see, Rachel steeled herself to remain steadfast in her posture and gaze. Even so, the old hag knew just the same.

"Ye have never lied ter me, girl! There be no need now." Her white eye bored a hole into Rachel's soul. "Bring him ter me!"

Shoulders sagging with the weight upon them, Rachel nodded, and stepped to the door. She did not have to go far. He was there, leaning against the sad excuse for a jamb, his face pale and the energy nearly gone from his weary body. Quickly she slid his arm over her shoulder and helped him in. Almost gratefully, he sank into a chair, and closed his eyes.

The old woman ceased her task. She sniffed the air and shook her head. "This be the one death follows. It has tried many times ter take him, but he has outsmarted it again and again." Crossing the room, she lifted a bony finger to his cheek. The raspy intake of air she sucked to her lungs unnerved Rachel. "It still hovers close."

Of a sudden fearing he would succumb after all, Rachel whispered, her voice hoarse. "Please do something!" She did not voice her feelings ... that if she lost him, too, she would go insane. Right now he was her reason for living. Taking care of him made her forget the loss of her family, and her home. Without him, she feared her world would come crashing down on her.

"There is needle and thread in the box." The crone pointed to a small container by the hearth. "Repair what ye can. I will mix a poultice ter do the rest."

Grateful for any task to take her mind from her anguish, she gathered the items, her chest tight as she drew the needle through Christopher's skin, knowing with him awake, the pain would be tremendous. Yet, he never spoke, or made the slightest sound.

The only evidence of his discomfort was the sweat that beaded on his brow, and the tightness of his jaw. Once completed, she peered up at the hag and sighed. "Finished."

Her host was busy mixing herbs in a small bowl with oils, and for a moment did not respond. Finally, she slid the mixture toward Rachel and bade her apply it liberally to the wound. Squeezing his eyes shut, he vented a strangled snort, yet spoke no word of objection. Circling his fingers with hers, Rachel drew his hand to her cheek, and pressed a tender kiss to the pale knuckles. "The sting will not last long."

Later she watched him as he slept. A stubborn strand of hair lay across his eyes, and she absently brushed it to the side. The old woman at the hearth snickered. "Ye care for him as if he were yer husband...." She cackled at Rachel's hasty denial. "I may not be able ter see wit me eyes, but I knew what I smells! Something is between ye and he!"

Rachel allowed her lips to turn down at the corners. For the first time since visiting the woman, she was wrong. She had no feelings for this man, only a need to see him well. Yet, she knew, just as she felt earlier, that without him she would have no reason to go on.

\* \* \* \*

Night descended, leaving their journey back to the cave taken in dense shadows, forcing their passage to a slow crawl as they stumbled over roots. Feet throbbing, Rachel eagerly halted when given the chance, allowing Christopher to rest as she wiped at the scratches against her soles.

Within her grasp, she carried a large basket of blankets, herbs, oils, food, and the pouch of coins. The hag handed them to her, and when Rachel tried to return them, she placed them in Christopher's care. "I have no use fer them," she replied. "Many come ter me with hopes of love, or children." She continued to place things in the basket on the table. "I would rather they comes wit pies, but they comes wit coins." She revealed her rotted teeth once more. "Pie taste better!"

When they at last reached the small cave, Christopher gratefully slid against the wall and closed his eyes. "I fear even in slumber I shall envision a world of dried bats on the walls, and strange white eyes that seem to look into my very soul." The words faded to silence as sleep drew him into a world of dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher thrived, the wounds healing with relatively little effort under the poultices. Thus, the confines of the cave began to wear on him. As Rachel did nigh on a week past, he maneuvered from the narrow opening, and concealed it with the branches. The scent of ash lingered in the air, guiding him as he made his way to the clearing.

Crouched beside a dense bush, he listened intently as the crackle of dry leaves announced another's arrival. When she came into the clearing by the remains of the cottage he drew in a slow breath. The sun was behind her as she moved, and the thin material of her nightgown became almost transparent. Though he could not see details, her shapely figure was clear beneath the soft cloth. Her hair was braided in a thick plait down her back, as was her habit, and Christopher swallowed passed the knot at the base of his throat. Within him, a hunger grew, tightening his chest, and taking the option of breathing from his lungs.

The soft breeze twisting the hem of her gown, she seemed surreal, like a phantom lost between worlds. Turning, her figure in silhouette caused him much discomfort. Again, Christopher drew in a ragged intake of air. In profile, the peaks of her breasts

brushed the thin material, their gentle slope leaving him with a fine line of sweat on his brow. Flicking a dry tongue over even drier lips, he attempted to stymie the desires she forced to the forefront of his thoughts. Nonetheless, his heart did a fervent dance in his chest. The arousal she stirred in him left his knees weak, his cheeks heated.

Reluctant to cede his vantage point, his advance from behind the low brush was slow. Regardless, his approach cast the sun at a different angle, leaving him disappointed, as it no longer afforded the enticing view. His throat tight, his words sounded stilted as he gave a valiant attempt to bring his mind around to other things. "I am sorry about your home."

The heavy sigh that slipped past her lips tore at him. "Would that I could see the future as the crone. Had I knowledge of this day, surely I would have willed myself to die with my mother."

The grief in the depths of those brown eyes was like a dagger to his heart. Desperate to rid her of her anguish, he countered, "Then where would I be?" His mouth twisted to a sheepish grin. "No doubt calling myself Mr. Jingles, or heaven forbid, Crinkles."

Pressing her fingers to her lips, she vented a muffled laugh. In the depths of her eyes, he glimpsed an instant of levity before she sobered, and turned her attention to the charred remains of her home. "There is nothing here for me now." Her melancholy tone sent a shiver along his spine. "I have never felt more alone than I do at this moment."

Again, he attempted to lighten her morose mood. "Alone? Madam, what more could you want out of life? You have a wounded man with no memory, a damp musty cave for a home, and the threat of death lingering from the captain of the queen's guard. Why, madam, surely you realize how much better your life is now, than a mere few weeks ago, when the highlight of your day was scolding a stubborn mule!"

The reminder of the animal seemed to spur her anxiety. "Claudius!" Her gaze darting about the ruins, she released a ragged sob, spying his burned carcass among the ash.

Christopher's hand against her arm halted her frantic lurch toward him. "Nay, don't. There is nothing you can do for him now."

For a moment, she stood peering at him, her lips trembling, nostrils flaring. Then she sank to her knees, her shoulders curled forward as she vented her anguish in breathy sobs. He too settled to the ground, enveloping her in his arms, his voice a soft whisper against her hair. His surprise knew no bounds when she molded to him, pressing her body the length of his. Head tilted, she searched his eyes. After a long moment she inched her hand to his nape, and drew him toward her, her lips parted in invitation.

At first, the contact was feather soft, their mouths brushing. Again, she amazed him, opening her lips, and darting her tongue to the depths of his mouth, clinging to him, as if wanting to meld to his flesh. He responded by tightening his embrace, his head slanting as his mouth took hers captive.

Wanting to banish her torment from her mind, Rachel allowed his advances with no resistance. Yet, she was not prepared for the longing his touch ignited in her woman's body. Every fiber of her being tingled beneath his caressing hands, yearning and aching for more. Having never experienced such intensity, she closed her eyes as his lips traced a path over the curve of her throat, his teeth nipping at her ear lobe, and down toward her shoulder.

Only when his hand inched along her ribs, brushing the swell of her breast, did she listen to the voice shouting from the recesses of her mind. She was indeed her father's daughter! Sobering beneath the thought, she gasped, her hands pressing to his chest as she pushed from him. Released from his embrace, she fell backward. For a moment, she remained in the dirt, hands behind her, and knees drawn toward her chest. He reached for her, the hunger in his eyes forcing a strangled huff from her throat. Lifting her buttocks from the ground, she slithered from him, like a crab scurrying over the sand, her fear kicking up a cloud of dust with her retreat.

"Rachel?" His hand brushed the hem of her soiled nightgown, eliciting a gasp from her quivering lips.

Backed to a trough, she groped for its support as she staggered to her feet. Fingers pressed to the heat at her cheeks, she shook her head violently before stumbling from the clearing and disappearing into the woods.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell eyed the small shanty for several moments before alighting from his mount. It was a pitiful excuse for a home, and nearly taken over by the brush and vines that grew about it. Yet, this was where the man from town directed him. There was no sound from within, and he wondered if the woman he was told resided there was even alive. Still, he moved forward. Those he questioned in town said she knew everything, about everyone, and could tell the future just by touching a person's hand. They called her a witch, but he put little stock into such names.

He peered through a large space where the boards of the hovel separated. The small room beyond was dimly lit and smelled of cat urine and pungent herbs. He backed away, his nose wrinkled, and debated knocking at all.

For several seconds he remained to his place, until finally a voice called out to him. "Enter."

Cautiously, Maxwell stepped inside. He had seen many things in his life, been exposed to death and fevers, but this tiny hovel was worse than any of them! His skin crawled at the creatures suspended from pegs on the walls, and the smells that hung in the air like a physical mist.

The old crone sat on the cool stones of the hearth and faced him. Her remaining eye was so white he could barely tell where the pupil once was. Her hair was thin, revealing large areas of her scalp, and her face was lined with deep scars. She was tiny, almost an elf, and her home was built for her size. He had to bend to keep his head from touching the ceiling, and the many things suspended from it.

"Come." She patted the place beside her. "There are many things to talk o'."

His lips curling contemptuously, Maxwell moved closer. He could not hide his distaste as he stood above her. She frowned at his silent refusal to sit, and patted the place again. Finally, he conceded and took a small corner of the hearth.

"I knows the smell o' them that comes here...." She sniffed the air. "But yers has never been through me door afore." He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised a gnarled hand to silence him. Reaching out, she took his hand in hers, and then dropped it quickly. "Ye are the one...." She rose, moved away from him, and took tealeaves from a cup to spread on the table. Then she added a small amount of oil and water, and flattened her fingers over the thick clump. A long slow sound escaped her lips, much like that of a snake. "Ye search fer the man wit no name...."

Maxwell stood and crossed to the table. "I search for a murderer..."

She peered up at him with that white eye and shook her head. "No murderer, he!" Her fingers lifted from the patch of leaves. Mounting the chair, she smeared the pasty mess over his cheeks. "I knows the truth..." She held her hands to his cheeks and pressed firmly. "The blood of those ye have laid low is like a stain against yer skin!"

Maxwell grabbed her hands and thrust them from his face. "Enough!" He held her hands tightly, almost crushing the frail bones beneath his strength. "I want to know of the man, and the young woman who saved him."

The crone hissed as the pressure increased where his fingers held hers. "She found him in the shallow grave ye tossed him in!" The hag made no attempt to pull from his tightening grasp.

"Where are they?" A strangled sob passed her lips as the bones in her hand snapped beneath his force.

"The girl has left these parts ... she has no 'ome now..." The force Maxwell placed on her fingers did not cease. "The man wit no name is ... dead."

"Lies!" Maxwell snarled close to her face. "Where are they?"

She spit against his cheek, her saliva rolling into the mixture she smeared over his flesh. "As ye will be the death o' me ... so, too, they will be the death of ye! It has already been decided!" They were the last words she spoke before he circled her throat with his large hand, and easily snapped that frail column.

He stood in the clearing and watched her small shanty burn. He learned little from her, nonetheless he was certain those he searched for were still close, and he would have to make sure they met an end before the old woman's prophecy could come to pass!

\* \* \*

Listening to the even sound of her breathing, Christopher peered through the hazy darkness to her with pursed lips. Frustrated with the tension between them, he leaned his head against the cold stone of the cave, and puffed his cheeks. The promise he made to keep his distance from her left him annoyed. Broken no more than a week after resolved in his mind, he felt the guilt of it heavy in his chest. Yet, he reminded himself stubbornly, she kissed him. That he was more than willing to press her body to his, and slant his mouth over hers was not the issue. A soft snort eased from his throat. Who was responsible was not the point. Within the confines of the cave, she was far too close. He found himself obsessed with her, his thoughts lingering on their kisses, and the soft warm feel of her body pressed to his. If he did not leave now he was likely to regret staying.

Squaring his shoulders, he nodded as if to a spoken comment. Though still weak, his mind settled to the idea quickly. Besides, he had already put her in more danger than he could imagine. Groping for the bag of coins, he poured several over his palm, and shifted them, feeling their weight. He needed only enough to purchase a mount, and perhaps a small amount of food. The rest he would leave for Rachel.

His mind set, he rose, groped for the wall as the pain took his breath away, and peered across the space to the woman deep in the realms of sleep. Had he parchment, he would have written a note, rather than glimpse again the torment in her golden eyes. For a moment, he pondered whether she could read or write. A soft sigh eased from his lips. Not that it mattered. He had neither quill, ink, nor paper. His good-byes would have to be given face to face. Yet, he found himself a coward. After everything she sacrificed for him, taking such a route of escape seemed childish. Even still, he crossed the expanse

and sidled down the wall beside her. It was best this way. He was a man with a price on his head, and mostly likely, she too now would bring a handsome payment for her death.

Brushing his fingers along the curve of her jaw, he whispered her name, his throat tight with resolution. "Rachel."

After the third summons her eyelids fluttered, and she pried them from her cheeks. For a long moment, she peered at him, her eyes wide with uncertainty. "Christopher?" The panic to her voice was evidence of her anxiety. "What is it? Maxwell?"

Placing his finger to her lips, he shook his head. "Nay, no threat." His tongue moistened his lips, and he cleared his throat before continuing. "I need to talk to you."

"Now?" Her gaze darted about the dim space. "'Tis well before dawn..."

Assured he had her undivided attention, he drew a slow breath to his lungs. "'Tis time for me to leave here, Rachel. I think 'twould be best if I did so now, while darkness can aid in my departure..."

Nausea teased her. Inching her shoulders up the wall, she drew her knees to her chest, and tamped down the surge of hysteria that threatened. Why had she allowed herself to kiss him yesterday? Moreover, that ridiculous scramble from his embrace must have him thinking her mad. For an instant, she debated revealing her secret, telling him everything. Just as quickly, the notion departed. At least if he left now, he would not hate her. Still, the fear that gripped her had her lips trembling. What would she do without him?

Though she dreaded this moment, him leaving as everyone else she cared for did, she had not expected it so soon. The urge to fling herself into his arms and beg for forgiveness had her fisted hands digging along her thighs. She found no words to convey her angst. Instead, she swallowed down the lump in her throat, and nodded in understanding. Nonetheless she babbled, "Where will you go, have you any idea whom to trust, or not? What of your wounds? They need the poultices..."

Raking his fingers through his hair, he focused his gaze on the far wall. "In my dreams I race through the streets ... of London, I think. 'Tis there I believe I will find the answers to my predicament."

Desperate, she queried, "Yet with no memory, whom shall you place your trust in? Mayhap it is also where you shall discover your betrayer. How will you know until once again you lie in a pool of your own blood?"

"I have to take that chance..." His breath warmed her cheek, sending a pleasant tingling over her flesh.

"At least allow me to go with you..." The words rushed from her lips, surprising herself as much as he.

"No!" His refusal stopped the beat of her heart. "I have already put you in far too much danger. Take the coins, Rachel, and leave here." Searching her visage he questioned, "Surely you have relatives who will take you in?"

Relatives ... the thought sickened her. Since cast from London society six years ago, her mother's family made no contact, pretending her mother dead. Even those her mother called friends, rarely wrote and never visited. On her father's side, she doubted any would admit to knowing her, much less to blood ties. Their exile left her family with no one save each other. Lowering her head, she murmured, "As I said the other day, Christopher, I am alone..."

The ragged emotion in her voice had him longing to envelop her in his arms. However, he steeled himself against the desire. That was precisely the reason for his departure. Regardless, he cupped her face in his hands, and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "I can never thank you enough for all you have done. Know there will always be a place in my heart for you Rachel."

The warmth of her flesh beneath his fingers had his heart pounding. Even fighting the temptation, his thumb traced the outline of her cheek, followed the curve of her jaw, and then descended to the column of her throat. Longing reared, and he tamped it down with stalwart determination. Releasing a weary sigh, he rose, his hand remaining on her face, his body bent as he refused to relinquish his hold. At last, victorious over the yearnings to sweep her into his arms and kiss those softly pouting lips, he dropped the appendage to his side, and straightened.

"Get away from here, Rachel. Leave before Maxwell's temper is sated only with your death. God willing, we will meet again. However, I would not place you in harms way, knowing your belief in me is likely to be false. If indeed a murderer, as the visions in my mind attest, I will likely hang for my crimes, and would not want you to suffer such a fate as well." Every ounce of will went into moving his feet over the cold earth. Only when to the starry night beyond the cave did he release the breath held behind his teeth.

Certain her heart would snap, she curled to a tight ball, the ground beneath her leaving her body aching as she huddled in a fetal position. The emptiness within her was as vast as the English Channel; a void that left her sobbing softly against her arm as she listened to his footfalls through the leaves.

In the recesses of her mind, a thought took shape. She had denied him her woman's body! Could that be the reason for his sudden retreat? Were she to cede, give him what he craved, would he then stay? Even as the thought took hold, she cringed. To give him her honor would only confirm her blood-ties to her father. Yet, the thought of him gone from her forever left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Staggering to her knees, she called to him, her fingers groping along the cold wall as she stumbled forward, gaining her feet and the entrance to the cave at the same time. Nonetheless, she found no sign of him in the gray light beyond the hole, and vented a strangled whimper as her vision scanned the shadows. "Christopher?" Panic welled.

For a moment she pivoted, twisting about in a circle as she peered into the night. Behind her a twig snapped, sending her whirling about, her breath lodged in her throat. He was there, just to the side of the cave, his dark eyes glinting in the moonlight. Reckless, she staggered toward him, her anguish passing her lips in labored pants. Unmindful of his injuries, Rachel fell into his open arms, pressing her body to his with enough force to send him stumbling back against the hill, which housed the cave.

He released a groan as the solid mass forced the breath from his lungs, yet she continued to mold to him. Only his hands, gentle yet firm as they held her from him, allowed their bodies to separate. "Rachel?"

Balanced to the tips of her toes, she reached and caressed his face with trembling fingers. "I beg you don't leave me." Encircling his hand with hers, she drew it to her breast, crushing it around the orb. I will do anything ... do whatever you desire ... if you will promise not to leave."

Like a crushing blow to his heart, her words tore at him. In the back of his mind,

several images took shape, teasing him. Though he could recall none of their names, no finer details than their naked bodies to his, a plethora of women drifted through his memory. He had enjoyed their intimacies, yet never allowed himself to open his heart to any. This slip of a girl before him, now offering what she thought he desired, turned his stomach with the sacrifice she was willing to make.

Though he could not deny the ache she instilled, neither could he allow her to cede her honor. She was more important to him than a night of passion. Gently he drew his hand from her chest, lifted it to her face, and cupped the pale skin in his palm. "Until this moment I thought that was what I wanted, you in my arms soaring to the clouds in the throws of passion." He searched her eyes, mesmerized by the way the gray light reflected off them. "I will not take your honor."

Watching her throat as she swallowed, he forced down the consuming need to envelop her in his embrace and seal his lips over hers. "Keep it for a man who can love you and offer a long life...." His voice was raspy, and he cleared his throat before adding. "I am not that person."

"Why not?" she whispered, her breath at the base of his neck.

Raking his hand through his hair, he leaned his head toward the hill behind him. "Would you give up the chance at happiness with another, knowing I might well swing from the gallows? I cannot, will not ask such a thing!"

Her hand to his chest, she locked her gaze with his. "I told you before the choice was mine. I still stand by it." The brush of her lips to his warmed him, casting doubts to the shadows, as he slipped his arms to her waist, and enjoyed the feel of her against him.

\* \* \* \*

"Up, madam." His breath on her cheek roused her, and she vented a sleepy moan, stretching the weary aches from her body.

"Tis still dark out, Christopher. What insanity has you awake so early?" For an instant, the fear he would leave after all had her clenching her jaw. Yet, as she pried her eyelids from her cheeks, and peered up at him, she realized her error. The sparkle in his dark eyes lodged a lump in her throat, and took rational thought from her mind.

Leaning, he offered his hand, and waited patiently as she perused him for a long second. When she made no move to accept the appendage, his lips curled to an impish grin. "Sweet maid, it has occurred to me you are far too beautiful to wear rags." Heat rose in her cheeks as she watched his gaze drift over her soiled nightgown.

Ashamed, she set her vision on his feet. "There was no time to gather other clothing...."

Again, he presented his hand. "Regardless, madam, I cannot present you to London society dressed as you are."

Air rushed from her lungs. "London?" Already shaking her head in denial, she countered, "I have no business being anywhere near London." Her jaw set with determination, she averred, "For that matter, neither do you."

Aiding in her ascent, he graced her with a glint of defiance in his eyes. "As I said last night, my answers will be found there."

"But...." His hand to her cheek left her stuttering, and she stammered several times before refocusing her thoughts. "Would you risk your life for such answers?"

"I have no life without them, Rachel." The frown that turned down the corners of his mouth was evidence of his resolve. "Even if a murderer in truth, I must know."

Stroking her hair, he whispered, "I cannot spend the rest of my days running ... even if my life ends tomorrow." Stepping toward the door, he glanced back to her over his shoulder. "I will not force you to go, Rachel, though after last night, I will confess to wanting you at my side."

Last night ... spent cradled in his arms, the heat of his body warming her as she drifted to sleep, the memory of his lips on hers forged to her mind. She had offered herself once again back in the cave, but he refused. "Though the desire to make love to you is strong, I want it to be special, more than just a fleeting moment." His eyes twinkled as he locked his gaze with hers.

"Moreover, it won't take place in a cold damp cave, but by a roaring fire, our bodies atop a thick pelt." His laughter, as her cheeks fused with color had her gaze riveted to her hands in her lap. Encircling her in his embrace, he whispered, "Sleep, Rachel." For several moments, he remained with his head to her hair, his deep breaths weaving through the tresses. Again he laughed. "Such a feat will be near impossible with you so close." Nonetheless, it wasn't long before his body relaxed in slumber.

Now, allowing her fingers to entwine through his, she murmured, "I understand your reasons, however, it doesn't mean I have to agree with them. Perhaps, it would be best if you remain here, and let me journey to London."

"I'll hear nothing of the sort! If we go, 'twill be together." The gentle squeeze of his hand to hers silenced further protests.

\* \* \* \*

They reached Derbyshire by mid morning, keeping to the alleys as they watched for Maxwell and his men. Rachel avoided the public areas, knowing they had a much better chance of being successful with this silly venture if they stayed out of the open. Necessity only brought her to the market area, thus she knew little of the places Christopher wished to go. Still, they made their way with no trouble.

Her gaze drawn to the finery of the shops, silks and lace far more expensive than she dared spend their meager funds on, a deep frown creased her brow. "Please, Christopher, the things here are far too costly."

He walked casually to the shop closest their alley and stepped inside. Astounded by his brazenness, she peered after him with slack jaw. Glancing fretfully in both directions, she too, darted into the shop! The woman within smiled at her, and seemed unconcerned with her attire.

"Good morning, milady." Her smile was sincere, relieving Rachel's anxiety somewhat as she scanned the space for Christopher. Espying his lithe form in a chair toward the back, she mouthed the word 'milady', and raised her brows questioningly. His response was to fold his arms over his chest, and cross his legs at the ankles, as if daring her to challenge his authority in the matter.

Another woman emerged from the back with a basket of sewing things. Giving a slight curtsy, she chimed in, "I think we have some things here that will do nicely." Her perusal of Rachel's figure beneath the tattered nightclothes had a heated warmth spreading over Rachel's cheeks. "There is a gown in the back that should fit you well. It was made for a young woman who could not afford it once done." Gracing Christopher with a knowing glance, she guided Rachel behind a screen, admonishing his leering look with a shake of her head.

Stripped, bathed, and fitted with undergarments, Rachel spoke no word, listening

to the two women chatter as they combed her hair, and plied her with perfume. Yet, it was the corset wrapped around her torso that finally forced words from her constricted throat. "Nay, that is not necessary." She hated the binding stays, which left her unable to breathe, and sore for hours after removed.

Swatting at her hand as if a child caught taking something, the older of the two women snorted, "Your husband insisted we clothe you as a proper English woman, and we aim to see his request honored. Besides, the corset will only enhance your shapely figure, milady, and keep his eye from wandering."

Again, Rachel mouthed the word 'husband', though she dared not lean to the end of the screen and look at Christopher beyond. Instead, she lifted her arms, the laces and stays drawn tight, and winced with the loss air as her lungs and ribcage rebelled.

Even still, she had to admit their victory when a gown of soft green was slipped over the corset, and molded to her curves. The bodice, swept off the shoulders, accented her bosom. The corset pushing them high and the material dipping low. Delicate lace cascaded over the long sleeves, draping against her hands. Full skirts enhanced the curve of her hips, the farthingale beneath rounding her backside. Peering at her reflected image in the silvered glass before her, she swallowed the lump in her throat. Never had she envisioned herself so lovely. Hoarse, as she flicked her tongue over her lips, she murmured, "Madam, your talents as a clothier are extraordinary. Surely you have used magic to make me look so beguiling."

Winking at her cohort, the woman averred, "'Tis only bolts of cloth sewn together, milady. Though each stitch was placed with care, it is only clothing until adorned to one who will give it life." Her gentle nudge had a blush warming Rachel's face. "I am sure your husband will like this one, milady." She tilted her head toward Christopher.

About to correct the assumption, Rachel clamped her mouth shut as the man in question leaned his head around the screen. His gaze, sliding over every inch of her, left her unable to draw a breath to her lungs. In the back of her mind, she attempted to justify the tightness as a side effect of the corset, but knew the undergarment had little to do with it. His eyes smoldered with hunger, a longing that left her flustered and unable to form a rational thought. Mortified by his perusal, she stammered, "Husband?"

The croak that eased from his throat sent a shiver of pleasure along her spine. "Madam, you are breathtaking."

Having never received such a heart-felt compliment, she could not cease the warm heat that suffused her body. A strange, but delicious, tension welled between them. Her gaze locked with his, she forced air into her lungs, and held it for several seconds. Pressing her hands to the skirts, she whispered, "'Tis beautiful, milord, but far too costly." When he gave no response, she turned to the woman beside her and reiterated, "It is not vary practical."

The seamstress gave a sidelong glance at Christopher, her brows raised. At his nod, she released a sigh of relief. "Your husband is quite taken with it! I believe he has made his choice."

Her gaze returning to him, Rachel queried, "Is this your choice ... husband?"

Leaning against the wall beside the screen, he replied, his tone oddly high, "It will do to start. Perhaps some traveling clothes as well. We will be returning to London soon."

The sparkle in the clothier's eyes assured of her delight. "Yes, milord, I shall start sewing immediately. Like a matronly grandmother, she shooed him back beyond the screen, and called out, "Perhaps, milord, you would give us an hour or two. Now that your lady looks her part, you need attend yourself." Peering at him from around the partition, she bestowed a charming smile to him. "Two doors down, on the left, milord, my brother has a shop. He will take good care of you, sir." Then she returned to her task, aiding her assistant in removing the gown, and beginning again the process of pins and measurements.

\* \* \* \*

Exhausted, Rachel stepped from the shop and scanned the street for a long second, searching for Christopher amidst the throng. For a moment, she remained in her place, drawing the crisp air into her lungs, and enjoying the feel of the expensive material on her flesh. Catching sight of her reflection in the storefront glass, she admired her appearance. Her hair, swept off her shoulders, and curled to cascade over her back, now shone with highlights she never noticed before. Though slender, she had never considered herself curvy or shapely, and marveled at her trim waist and sensual form. The memory of Christopher's assessment earlier had her hand to her bosom, and a strange thrill inching along her spine.

\* \* \* \*

James Maxwell stood with feet slightly spread apart, hands behind his back, and gazed at the young woman across the street. There was something strangely familiar about her, yet he could not put his finger on what. Finally, his curiosity pricked. He sauntered across the street with his lips curling into a devilish grin the closer to her he drew.

Almost tenderly, his fingers caressed her elbow. The fear that widened her eyes pleased him, broadening the grin that spread over his full lips. "Well, well!" Immediately his grip tightened to her arm. "If it isn't my little wildcat!"

A smug satisfaction settled within him as the color drained from her cheeks. A fleeting attempt at escape brought his fingers about her wrist. He wrenched her against him. One arm slipped around her waist, while the other moved up under her hair and cupped her nape. Her body pinned against him, he enjoyed the thought that they appeared lovers caught in an embrace. Curling his fingers through her hair, he tilted her head back and searched her gaze. "What is your hurry, little wildcat?" The trembling of her body excited him. A slow languid smile broadened his mouth and he peered at her with raised brows. "You're trembling. Are you frightened of me?"

The nod she returned was stilted. "Having already seen the extent of your wrath, I would be foolish not to be."

He shrugged. "I must admit it has been quite some time since someone angered me so!" His advance, face almost touching hers, had her twisting her head to the side. Yet, he did nothing more than release his breath against her cheek. "At least I left your family as they were! I could easily have done to them what I did to your home, but I remembered your anguish the last time, and showed mercy."

"I doubt that emotion has ever entered your thoughts," Rachel hissed, finding a bravado that surprised her.

Annoyance darkening his eyes and angling the line of his jaw, he bent her in such a way that she was forced to stand on the tips of her toes. Pressing his body to hers, the

strain sending a bolt of pain through her until she cried out, she finally sobbed, "What is it you want from me?"

"What is it I want from you?" He was incredulous, his eyes wide with amazement, and repeated the question again. "What is it I want from you?" Forcing her body back even farther, until she closed her eyes against the tears gathering at the corners, he snarled. "I want to know where he is!" His breath brushed her brow. "Tell me now," his voice became a hoarse whisper, "Or I shall snap your neck with my bare hands!"

Sucking a ragged intake of air past her throat, Rachel steeled herself against the thought. In the recesses of her mind, she prayed such an end would be swift, and painless. Nonetheless, she squared her shoulders, and sneered, "He is dead."

"Lies!" Maxwell growled, his grip to her nape tightening. "He lives!"

Her hair swayed against her shoulders as she denied him. "No! He died only a few days after you came to my home."

His fisted hand pressed into the small of her back, eliciting a small sob from her quivering lips. Though she knew him incapable of such an emotion, he peered at her sympathetically, his gaze softening and a frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Have I hurt you?" His voice was still a whisper close to her face. "Believe ... it will only get worse if you lie again!" In response, she bobbed her head. "Now...." His dark eyes bored into hers until she ceded and looked away. "Tell me what I want to know."

Just beyond his left shoulder, Rachel was surprised to see Christopher. He put his finger to his lips in silent warning. Then he crooked that same finger and motioned her to follow him. Her heart racing within the confines of her chest, Rachel locked her gaze with Maxwell's and nodded in concession. "I will take you to him." She caught a quick glimpse of Christopher as he turned into an alley just a few feet away.

Though a smile twisted his lips, he relinquished none of the pressure against her back. "Just tell me!"

"I can't...." She winced as his fingers curled tighter at her nape. "'Tis true!" she croaked. "If I do not show you, you will never find him!"

For a long moment, Maxwell seemed to debate her reply. At last, he relaxed his grip, and she nearly collapsed without the support of his hand on her back. "Do not think to play me the fool!" His grasp on her arm left her sick to her stomach. "The damage done to your home and family would be nothing compared to what I would do to you. Do you understand, girl?" Once more, she gave a stiff nod in reply. His were not threats she took lightly!

Allowing her no lead, he drew her to his side. Inching into the alley, Rachel staggered, uncertain what to do when she found the space empty. Her knees weak beneath the gown, she was oddly grateful for Maxwell's support. Chest tight, she maneuvered the narrow space, her gaze darting to each shadowed niche as they traversed toward the opposite end.

Nearly to the opening on the other side, she stumbled as he pivoted about, her arm still firmly ensnared in his grasp. Bent slightly, a startled screech emitted from her lips as her gaze focused to a long flat board careening toward her captor's visage. The sound of it splintering left her nauseous and she cringed as Maxwell sank to earth beside her, his face stained with his own blood.

## CHAPTER SIX

Still holding the length of board in his grasp, Christopher bestowed a crooked grin on her, his chest heaving with the exertion of his labor. Kneeling beside his nemesis, he slid a long dagger from the other man's hip. For a moment, it glinted, suspended above Maxwell's chest. Her heart lodged in her throat, Rachel lunged forward, circled his wrist with trembling fingers, and released a ragged exhalation of air. "No! He is not able to defend himself!" Searching Christopher's visage, she murmured, "Would you kill a man unable to fight for his life?"

"Though I must admit a strange pleasure in seeing him in a pool of his own blood, madam, I am not so callus as to thrust a knife in his cold heart. Though I rather doubt the same can be said of him." He handed her the dagger. "In truth, I was only going to ask you to cut some of the hemp binding those barrels." He nodded toward a stack of kegs several feet away. "No matter what he has done to both of us, I will not stoop to his level." Glancing back at Maxwell, he sneered, "Though he may deserve far more than the broken nose he will wake with, I would not harm him without just cause!"

Rachel sighed. Relieved to find her judgment of him correct, her heart warmed. Unable to find the words of gratitude to express, she simply smiled, and turned toward the kegs on the other side of the alley.

They tied him, hands and feet together behind his back so movement was close to impossible. A filthy piece of cloth was shoved between his lips, silencing any outburst once roused from his induced sleep, and dragged him into a small space between the kegs where he would not be readily noticed.

A deep frown creased Christopher's brow as he hauled his aching body to the steed's back. "I did not count on leaving so abruptly, and am not prepared for a long journey. We will stop at the marketplace for what food we can carry. But I fear, madam, anything else will have to be sacrificed." His gaze drifted to the clothier's as he leaned forward, and offered his hand to Rachel. Nodding in understanding, she settled on the horse's back, enjoying Christopher's warmth before her. They were well on their way, Derbyshire many miles behind them before she realized she never once looked back!

\* \* \* \*

Night shrouded the land when at last they alit from the mount, weary and exhausted. A dark gray mass of clouds began to roll in from the east, and large drops of rain pelted them as they searched for some place to take cover. They found nothing, and finally slipped into a thick clump of evergreens where the leaves gave them meager shelter from the downpour.

Long into the night the rain continued. Both huddled together with eyes half open, listening for the roar of horses' hooves. Rachel laid her head against his shoulder, and found sleep as the rain poured around them. Christopher could smell the fresh scent of lilacs in her hair, and closed his eyes as the aroma wafted through his senses. Eventually, he too, drifted into an exhausted sleep.

\* \* \* \*

*His bow was low, one foot placed well behind the other, as he swept his hat, grasped in hand over his head, and brought it back across his chest. A defiant smile twisted the corners of his lips. Though she returned no such emotion, the stiff nod of her head beckoned. "Come close, that we might see thy face." The flick of her hand indicated a place nearer her chair. "We have heard many things about thee, and wish to know if they are true."*

*Advancing, he halted several feet short of the designated spot, intimidated by her mere presence. Though in her early forties, her face was painted a pale white, and heavily rouged. The red wig atop her head was piled high, adding several inches to her slight stature. "Your Majesty ... I would request a private audience with you..."*

*She waved her hand, the motion alone silencing him. "Be still!" Her gaze was intent, leaving him holding his breath, waiting her approval. "We are not through looking at thee!"*

*He could not quell the grin that curled the corners of his mouth. "At the risk of insulting Your Majesty, what I have come to discuss is of the utmost importance...."*

*A simple clap of her hands sent all but one guard from the chambers. Gazing at Christopher with deep blue eyes, she pursed her lips. "We are disappointed that thee chooses to make this a meeting in business only...." At his soft laughter she continued. "The news thee brings must be of great import." The inclination of his head affirmed the statement. "We are ready to hear it."*

*Swallowing past the tightness in his throat he took a deep breath, before continuing. "Your Majesty, several nights past, my mount threw a shoe, and I had the misfortune of spending an evening in a rather seedy part of the city." Each word gauged, knowing their impact had to be felt, taken seriously. "A man, very intoxicated, stumbled into my room. He must have thought I was someone else, for he began to tell me of the arrangements made ... to kill you!"*

*The queen remained silent for several seconds. "We are still listening."*

*"I do not know who he was, or who he was to meet, but I am certain it was someone from within these walls!" Christopher frowned, and leaned forward, that she might see the concern in his eyes, and hear it in his voice. "I ask that you leave the palace for a time, perhaps to your country estates, until it can be discovered who is behind this plot."*

*An eternity elapsed as she assessed him. "Are thy intentions to receive a reward for this information?" At his denial, she smiled. "What does thy want for this news?"*

*Christopher shrugged. "Only to know that a wrong was put right, Your Majesty, nothing more."*

*"We have heard from many that thy are very honest, and to be trusted. Thy father was a man of great courage and merit in our court. In respect for him, we shall do thy bidding, and await word." She stood, the meeting ended. "Do not disappoint us." Then she stepped through a door that, had he not seen her enter, he would have thought was part of the wall. The meeting was quite brief, yet had gone well. Now he needed only to find the man responsible for the plan, and expose him. He smiled to himself as he exited the room. That should be a relatively simple task! After all, there were only two or three hundred people considered close to the queen!*

\* \* \* \*

Roused slowly from his induced slumber, Maxwell blinked past the throbbing

pain along the bridge of his nose. Hog-tied, his arms and legs rebelled, seared with white-hot pain as each muscle tightened. As the fog cleared from his brain, a vague memory of walking with the girl and then an exploding pain in his head surfaced. Movement impossible, he vented a snarl of pure rage.

The cramp along his thigh, as if a hot poker struck there, was excruciating. A scream rose in his throat, but remained unvoiced against the damp and moldy cloth stuffed between his lips. Eventually, he ceased his struggles and focused his efforts on the daunting task of attaining freedom.

Scanning the confines of his small alcove he searched for anything useful in the aid of loosening the bonds to his wrists. At last, a piece of metal on one of the barrels caught his eye. Careful, he inched toward it. By the time he gained a position to use it as a knife to cut the hemp, he was soaked in sweat, and close to exhaustion. Nevertheless, he refused to cede. For several moments, he rubbed the hemp against the sharp metal, until he felt it give. The hint of freedom, no matter how slight, spurred him on. Shoving his aching arms closer to the makeshift blade, he thrust them hard, sawing at the hemp until it sagged and gave. Even still, another quarter hour passed before he was at last liberated. Uncooperative limbs had him stumbling, his exit from the alley more like a drunken sot, then his normal proud bearing.

Attaining the inn across the street, he staggered, and nearly fell attempting to mount the stairs as a stabbing sensation darted through his throbbing limbs. Several of his men sat enjoying a repast, and rose slowly as he stumbled through the door.

The officer, who had suffered the cut across his cheek at the cottage, came forward and gripped Maxwell's arm. "Captain, what happened?" Maxwell allowed his assistance to a chair, where he collapsed to its hard surface, and rested his head on the back of his shoulders for several seconds.

Across from the bar, Maxwell eyed his battered visage in the silvered glass of a mirror, and his jaw tightened in fury. Beneath his eyes a deep purple bruising settled, almost giving him the illusion of wearing a mask. His nose was nearly three times larger than a few hours ago, and from the odd way it bent, quite obviously broken. Dried blood caked beneath the swollen nostrils and around his lips and chin. It was a long time before he felt up to gracing the officer with a response. When he did, his voice was hoarse and raspy. "Conyngham is still alive!"

The officer gazed at him in surprise, yet gave no comment. "If I were a betting man, I'd say he is headed for London as we speak." Maxwell peered at the men around him. "The man who finds him and brings me his head will receive a years' pay!" Grabbing the shirt of the officer before him, he sneered. "But the girl with him is not to be harmed! She is mine, and I want to deliver justice to her personally!"

In the quiet solitude of his room, he took quill and parchment. The missive was brief. 'Badger still alive. Most likely headed back to London. Tread with care. JM.' Sealed with wax and pressed with his ring, he thrust it at a guard with instructions as to where to deliver it.

\* \* \* \*

"Christopher!" He came from his dream slowly. "Christopher! Please!" The panic in the voice as it penetrated into his sleep, forced his thoughts to the present. "Someone is coming!"

Slipping his finger to his lips, he motioned her to silence. For several moments

they remained unmoving, the thundering of horses' hooves heard even above the pelting rain. A sigh eased from Rachel's lips as the throng of riders continued over the road, fading to the shadows. However, the relief that allowed her to breathe once more was short-lived. Retracing their path to a spot not far from their nested place, the unit of men reined their mounts as Maxwell shouldered his steed to their midst.

His voice, raw, raspy, and fueled by rage, had Rachel curling her fingers around Christopher's arm. He, in turn, parted the brush slightly, his gaze riveted on the captain of the guard as that one shouted orders to his men. "They could not have gone much farther! I want every inn and tavern searched from here to London!" He reined his mount and arced in a circle around his men. "Conyngham is fair game for any man who spies him!" He shook his head. "But the girl belongs to me! If even one hair on her head is harmed before I get my hands on her ... I will personally kill the man responsible!"

The stilted gasp that eased from her parted lips had Christopher pressing a finger to them. "Silence, sweet," he mouthed. Her body trembled beneath his touch, assuring him of her panic. Only when Maxwell dug his heels into the steed's flanks, spurring the animal over the muddied road, and disappeared into the night, did he envelop her in his arms, and press a soft kiss to her hair. His chest heavy, he cradled her to him. Though he dared not speak the words aloud, he knew, as did she, judging from the look of terror in her hazel eyes, if Maxwell found her now, nothing would deter him from making good on his threats!

\* \* \* \*

Exhaustion toyed with both of them. It left Rachel with sagging head and shoulders as she fought to remain awake atop the mount. Glancing back at her, Christopher chuckled softly. "Sleep while you can." As an after thought, he added as he caught her gaze, "Though not the most comfortable place to rest your head, my back should suffice as a pillow." Too tired to argue, she closed her eyes, and allowed her head to press against the expanse of his frame, then willingly drifted into a world of fragmented dreams.

It seemed only a few moments before he was shaking her gently. She opened her eyes slowly, pulling from him in confusion. The click of his tongue to his teeth, had her straightening, her mind instantly alert. Yet she released the air from her lungs when her gaze drifted to a tavern nestled snugly off the road.

"We need to find rest, Rachel." His voice, laced with heaviness that matched the dark circles beneath his eyes, assured of his state.

Still, she shook her head. "'Tis not safe ... find another tree...."

The slow vent of air from his pale lips was ragged. "We are both chilled to the bone. To spend a night in the elements, clothing soaked, with nary a cloak between us, would likely take the task of killing us from Maxwell's hands."

Shifting, she peered at him for along moment. "I shall see if 'tis safe."

"Nay." His arm circled her waist. "There is no need. Two within and two over by the stables." Her soft sob had him leaning close. "Rest easy, sweet. I've a plan, and if it goes accordingly, we shall spend the rest of this night in the comfort of a soft bed, with a roaring fire to take the cold from our bodies."

\* \* \* \*

Steeling herself against the shiver threatening at the base of her spine, Rachel

pressed her fisted hands to her thighs. Nonetheless, the icy sensation won the battle, creeping toward her nape and leaving her flesh cold. Only a few feet from the guard, she released her breath by slow degrees, allowing it to mist at her chest rather than alert him to her presence. In the darkness, the caw of a bird disrupted the night, and she closed her eyes, seeking the strength needed for this foray. Outwardly calm, she swallowed hard before inching from her place.

It was the crackle of the leaves beneath her feet, which alerted him to her presence. She froze as his head snapped up from his chest. Sensual, Christopher had murmured in her ear before skittering off into the darkness. Sensual ... she swallowed hard at the thought. Never in her life had she used her feminine wiles to snare a man. Truth be told, she avoided men as if they carried the plague. It was easier than facing her past, easier than confessing, easier than their disgust and aversion.

Thus, sensual was not a word that evoked positive images. She dared not reveal to Christopher her lack of confidence with his plan, though the sparkle in his dark eyes assured him amused by her furrowed brows. "You need do nothing more than look at him, Rachel. Nature will do the rest."

Hence, she stood peering at the guard, her body trembling beneath the folds of her gown. Groping for the musket forgotten in his slumber, he rose and leveled the weapon to his shoulder, its long muzzle swaying as he too fought to gain control over his shaking body. Recognition gleamed in his eyes. Their encounter in her home had her pressing her hand to her lip, the slight scab on it a reminder of his temper.

As instructed, she lifted her arm, crooking a finger, and motioned him forward. Only when he merged to the trees, did she curl her hands through her skirts, and dart into the shadows, the rustle of the material a deliberate noise for him to follow. Rounding a large old maple, Rachel skidded to a halt, Christopher's hand encircling her wrist, as he drew her against his chest. Finger to her lips, he shook his head. Both listened as the sentry advanced, his own steps an alarm as he neared.

Releasing her, Christopher gave her a gentle push back to the forest. The thick log he hoisted to his shoulder left her sick to her stomach, the memory of Maxwell's bloodied face leaving little doubt the weapon's intent. Its splintering echo against the guard's face, and his subsequent whimper, gave the bile in her throat reason to spew forth, blanketing the underbrush as she held her sides against the rebellion.

Christopher's hand, sweeping her hair from her shoulders, as she relieved her stomach of its contents, surprised her. Ashamed, she presented her back to him, and whispered a terse thank you. The hint of laughter in his voice mortified her as he queried, "Are you up to the next one, sweet?" Her only response was a stilted nod. "Shall I use my blade, rather than have you endure the sound of the wood?" Indignant, Rachel spun on him, ready to vent her outrage. Yet, the gleam in his dark eyes assured her he teased, and she sputtered to silence before shaking her head in denial. Leaning, he brushed his thumb over the curve of her cheek, and countered, "Surely this is not the same woman who mended my battered body? I cannot imagine her so easily undone."

\* \* \* \*

Sauntering past the open stable doors as if on a jaunt through the park, Christopher halted in mid stride. The shout of the guard beyond the open portal ceased his advance. Innocently, he applied his hand to his chest, and studied the man as if bemused. "Speak you to me sir?" he asked, his brows raised.

His eyes sparkling, the sentry leveled his weapon as a brilliant smile twisted over his lips. "You just earned me a year's wages, milord!"

"Indeed?" Christopher countered. "How so?"

"Captain promised any man who brought your head back would be paid in kind." His cohort chortled.

Lifting his hand to his chin, Christopher rubbed his fingers along the line of his jaw for a long moment, as if contemplating the other man. "Ah, but you need have my head to fulfill the bargain. Yet, I find I am most disagreeable to giving it to you." With that he pivoted, and leapt into the darkness, leaving the other man sputtering behind him.

Sprinting over the expanse, Christopher halted just around the corner of the tavern, catching his breath and waiting. His would be captor careened past the stables, his heavy breaths misting a gray cloud as he charged. Spotted, Christopher lurched around the bend, almost losing his footing on the damp ground. The guard too, surged forward, staggering as he careened around the corner. Once fully beyond it, he skidded to a halt, his features contorted in confusion.

Panting, Rachel pressed her trembling body against the wall, her hand uplifted as if pleading a moment. "You win, sir," she labored to say. "I can run no farther." His lips curled into a smug smile. She watched it fade as Christopher tapped him on the shoulder and he spun about, his eyes wide and jaw slack. Unable to quell the gasp that drifted past her lips, she shuddered as he too was introduced to the unforgiving log, and his body slithered to earth.

Stepping over him, Christopher cupped her face in his hands, and pressed his lips to hers. "Genius, my sweet, the way you used that sensual charm to draw him in."

As if struck by a bolt of lightning, she staggered from him. Though the kiss was nothing more than a gesture of thanks, she found her body responding with far more pleasure than the moment warranted. Drawing a shaky breath into her lungs, she fought to keep her feet in their place, and her arms at her sides. Regardless, she found herself in his arms once more, relishing the warmth of his embrace. Trembling fingers traced the outline of his mouth. Lips parted, she gave no resistance as he slanted his head, covering her mouth with his, and slipping his tongue beyond her teeth.

In the recesses of her mind an odd hum annoyed, as if a bee. Tamping it down, she wove her hands about his neck, molding their bodies together. A gasp eased from her throat, growing in volume as his lips forged a path along the curve of her jaw, over her ear lobe, and down the curve of her neck. Wanting more, she arched, pressing chest to chest. The hum grew louder, ringing in her ears. Nonetheless, she ignored it, the air lodged at the base of her throat as his lips moved along the swell of her breast.

It was he who ceased their dangerous game. His voice raspy, he murmured, "There are yet two within, Rachel. Though 'tis my fondest desire to tear down this wall between us, it must wait." Drawing her hand to his lips, he placed a kiss over each finger. "Soon, sweet, soon." Then he released her, and staggered toward the door of the tavern, his breath clouding the space before him in chaotic gasps.

\* \* \* \*

Thrusting the heavy portal inward, Rachel stumbled into the tavern, and leaned back against the door as it slammed behind her. Labored breaths forced her breasts to the edge of her low bodice, threatening to spill them from the confines of the gown. Gracing the keep with a sidelong glance, she flicked her tongue over her lips before releasing a

weary sigh. Hand clutched to her throat, she surveyed the room. Other than the owner, his hand halted in mid-sweep as he cleaned the bar, and a small girl in the corner with a doll, no threat caught her gaze.

It was the scrape of a chair on the wood floor, which lifted her gaze to the back of the room. The deep purple of their cloaks captured her attention, and she drew a shaky inhalation of air to her lungs. Knees quaking beneath her dress, she glanced once more to the keep. "Oh." She murmured, her hand groping for the handle of the portal behind her. "I wasn't expecting them."

The door reverberated, cracking the wall beside it as she dashed beyond, and disappeared back into the night. Heart pounding in her chest, she maneuvered to the corner of the building, her lungs releasing a thick mist before her. A shout to halt had her doing just the opposite, lifting her skirts and digging her feet in the muddied soil in determination.

\* \* \* \*

Poised at the wall beside the portal, Christopher positioned the branch on his shoulder, waiting. Rachel's departure from the tavern had him drawing a ragged breath into his lungs, holding it for the eternity it took the twosome inside to gain the darkness. Allowing the first to advance, he set his sights on the second, leveling the limb against the man's skull with enough force to snap the thick log in half. The guard, a soft groan easing from his lips, came to rest with his face in the mire, and made no attempt to rise again.

Now weaponless, Christopher sprinted toward the end of the building, his heart beating at his temples like the sea in a raging storm. In his mind, he recalled the guard already unconscious beside the tavern, and leapt over the man, his goal the far corner of the structure. Yet, he halted, spun on his heels, and peered to the earth with wide disbelieving eyes. There, sprawled atop the sentry, was his cohort, already unconscious, a bloodied gash to his temple.

Bemused, Christopher twisted about, searching the shadows. "Rachel?" His tone grew frantic as he called to her, the pitch rising when he received no response. Emerging from the night, she stood several feet away, her body shaking, a long metal rod clutched in her trembling fingers. Enveloping her in his arms, Christopher released his breath over her hair. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Allowing the long bar to drop to earth, she vented a slow sob against his chest. "I don't even remember grasping it ... it was just there in my hand." Glancing toward the two guards on the ground, she whispered, "God's truth, I cannot even recall bringing it against him. One moment he was towering above me, the next at my feet." Molding to him, she sobbed, "I am not prone to violence, Christopher, I swear it!"

A shaky laugh emitted from his lips as he held her to him. "You never cease to amaze me, Rachel." His lips caressed her hair, the scent of lilacs filling his senses, and evoking a longing he was certain was vastly different from anything he had ever experienced before.

Barreling around the corner, the keep eyed both with disbelief, a long-nosed pistol in his grasp. Yet, the twisted wicked grin that spread over his full lips had them both confused. Smug, he sneered, "Serves em right. Bunch o' cutthroats sent all me customers away, drank half a keg o' ale, and then informed me they would not be paying." Tossing a length of rope to Christopher, he snarled, "I says we put em in the

cellar, tied up nice an' neat, and lets em have a day or two ter think on their manners."

Astounded, Christopher shook his head. "Nay, sir, I would not want you to bear the brunt of their anger when they gain their freedom." His arm still around Rachel's waist, he continued, "Though we could use a good night's sleep."

Spitting on the ground beside the unconscious duo, the keep averred, "I ain't worried about them none. When and if I decides ter let em out o' the cellar, I'll just tells em ye tied us up too, and it were a few days afore we gots free." With that, he squatted before the two, and began to hog-tie them, the grin spreading over his lips testament of his glee.

\* \* \* \*

Eyeing the large bed, Rachel fought the shiver at the base of her spine. Advancing within the room, she voiced no word, her distress unnoticed by the man behind her. Too weary to face such trepidation, she sank to the mattress, and peered about the room with tightly drawn lips. The stays of her corset bit into her flesh, bruising already tender ribs from the long hours atop the horse when the tight bindings refused her even the slightest ill posture. Pressing her hand to her side, she vented a ragged gasp.

Beside the fireplace, stoking the wood to ignite the embers banked beneath the grate, Christopher graced her with a sidelong glance, and pursed lips. "Rachel?" Crossing to her, he drew her from the bed and searched her eyes. "Are you hurt? What is it? What happened?"

Ashamed, she lowered her gaze to the floor, and shook her head. "'Tis nothing...."

"Nothing?" Tilting her chin with his finger, he countered, "You seem in pain, madam, your color ashen." His tone frantic, he queried, "Did he hurt you?"

Wanting to waylay the panic in his features, she pressed her hand to his chest. "No, Christopher, nothing like that." Unable to draw a decent breath into her lungs, she sucked several short pants of air past her lips. "Tis only...." Her humiliation heating her cheeks, she turned from him.

"Rachel?" Forcing her to face him again, he whispered, "What is it?"

Burying her face in her hands, she mumbled. "The corset.... I cannot take a breath without it threatening to snap my ribs...."

For a long moment, he remained silent, inspiring her to lift her visage from her hands, and search his gaze. The laughter that bubbled from his lips had heat warming her neck, and the valley between her breasts. "Is that all?" Her indignant huff had him lifting his hand as if in surrender. "God's truth I thought he hurt you!"

Placing his hands along her shoulders, he turned her, her back to him. His fingers left her holding what meager breath she could draw into her lungs as they worked the laces of her gown. "Nay...." Her attempt to step from him only resulted in him tethering her, his hand secure to the strings, as he pulled her back against his chest.

"For heaven sake, sweet, I only want to help. Be still while I free you from your hell." His breath warmed her skin, at her nape, leaving her swallowing hard against the lump at the base of her throat.

The gown parted in the back near her waist, falling forward over her shoulders, and exposing a goodly portion of her breasts. Trembling fingers trapped the material before it dislodged, and left her open to his perusal. The annoying hum began again in her ears, droning in the recesses of her mind. Yet, she dared not speak, certain she would

only sound a fool, and steeled herself against the feather soft caress of his fingers as he began to unlace the ties of the corset.

At last free, the offending undergarment was pulled from her waist, and cast to the floor. For an instant, she drew in a weary breath, relieved. Yet, when his hands came to rest at her shoulders, stroking the flesh, she found breathing more difficult than before. A startled gasp rose in her throat as his mouth seared her, brushing the curve of her neck, the slope of her shoulders, then the valley between the blades.

Every fiber of her woman's body responded, aching for, and arching with his touch. Eyes closed, she exhaled a slow ragged puff of air as his hands slid over her bare arms, eliciting pleasurable tingles that raced to her toes. Deep in her mind, the hum began to intensify, rushing in her ears. Nevertheless, she ignored it, wanting his exploration to continue.

Still, when he turned her, their bodies touching as he peered into her eyes, the drone grew in volume, bouncing off the confines of her head. His hand, slow in its descent, moved over her flesh from the curve of her shoulder to the swell of her breast. Labored pants of heated air passed her lips. Never had she allowed a man to touch her so. Never had she wanted something as much as this. A gasp rose in her throat, passing her mouth in a shaky sob, as fingers snagged the material of her undergarments, and drew them down over the pale orbs.

His thumb teased the peak, enticing it into a hard nub, and evoking a breathy groan from her parted lips. Kneading the mound, he flattened his palm against it, rubbing until the nipple was taut. Still, she was not prepared for the jolt that dashed through her as his head lowered, and his lips replaced his hand. Her eyes widened as she wove her fingers through his hair, pressing him closer.

A word pealed in the recesses of her mind, becoming louder until it filled her senses. "Whore!" Echoing, it pealed, and she was certain he heard it too. Yet he continued his quest, his tongue leaving her breathless as it circled the hard nipple.

Knees weak, she staggered back. He followed, encircling her waist to keep her from her flight. "Whore!" Again, the word reverberated off the inner walls of her head. She was indeed, her father's daughter! Thrusting her hands to his chest, she shoved hard, forcing him from her.

Bemusement etched his features. It turned down the corners of his mouth, and furrowed his brows. "Rachel?"

Fair flying across the room, she positioned her body behind a chair. In the silvered glass of the mirror above the fireplace, she gained a glimpse of her image—hair reckless over her shoulders, skin flushed a rosy hue, eyes wild with complete consuming terror. Sinking to her knees, she silenced another round of sobs with the back of her hand.

Reaching for her, Christopher whispered, "What is it? What happened?"

She shrank from his outstretched hand, cowering against the wall. Cradling her head in her hands, she murmured, "I told you before I could offer nothing more.... Please don't ask me to give what I am unable." Tears moistened her cheeks as he sank to the floor beside her.

"Speak to me, please." His fingers wove through her hair.

"Nay, I cannot!" Dropping her head to her hands, she whispered, "If I tell you, you will hate me."

Refusing to be cast aside, he enveloped her, drawing her body to his, and holding her there until she ceased her struggles. "I don't understand what sends you scurrying from me, the terror in your eyes a dagger to my heart. Nonetheless, I will not allow you to continue on this bent. Whatever separates us must be faced, Rachel." Pressing his finger to her chin, he tilted it until her gaze met his. "I love you." She shook her head, sending the curls swaying. "Whether you deny it or not, sweet, 'tis true, and I will not keep silent any longer. I love you Rachel, and will do whatever necessary to break down this barrier between us." Eventually her breathing eased, and, still cradled in his embrace, she drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Astride the mount, Christopher leaned, offering his hand to her. For a moment, she peered up at him, the sorrow in the depths of her hazel eyes tearing at him. Her lips moved, as if searching for words, yet she said nothing. An eternity elapsed before she inclined her head from side to side, denying him. "I cannot, Christopher. I should have never left Derbyshire. 'Twould be best if I returned."

Tossing his leg over the steed's broad back, he eased to earth by slow degrees, the pain still reminding him of the severity of his wounds. "Don't talk that way, please. 'Twould be best if you stayed. I need you, Rachel."

Tears sparkling at the corners of her eyes, she again refused. "I cannot go back to London."

"Back?" His tone laced with anxiety. "Were you there before?"

Locking her gaze with his, she gave a slight nod. "Aye, some years ago." Her tongue darted over her lips. "I do not belong there." She choked as she continued, "I would only bring shame to you."

Lacing his fingers through her hair, he inched her closer. "I am accused of murder, Rachel. I doubt there is anything in your past worse than that. Confide in me. Tell me what torments you. Beyond you I have no memory ... yet I know without you I have no life."

Her face to his chest, she vented several sobs. "At least without me, you have the chance to clear your name. Though your injuries robbed you of a past, one day you will regain all you have lost. Would that I could forget my past as you have." Lifting her chin, she set her gaze to his, and squared her shoulders. "My father, my mother ... they are gone, yet what took place remains." Her lips quivered. "Do not profess to love me, Christopher, for I am trash, spit upon by those in the palace, and discarded."

Weaving his arms about her, he hovered the barest breath from her mouth. "You are the most beautiful woman in my memory." The strangled laugh that eased from her throat assured of her distress.

"I am the only woman in your memory," she averred.

"Regardless, you are everything to me. Were Maxwell not set upon my death, surely I would live out my days with you wherever you choose. I must set right my life. I will not allow him to destroy it, and force me into hiding." His fingers traced the line of her jaw. Her skin was soft beneath his questing touch. "I told you last night I love you. If in truth a murderer, 'tis likely I shall hang for my crimes. I ask only that you give me comfort in my final hours."

Glimpsed in the slight softening of her stance, he saw hope. Yet, her words were terse as she peered into the trees rather than he. "As I said before, sir, I can offer nothing

more than what I have already given. I shall help you back to London; place you in the care of one to be trusted. Beyond that there can be nothing between us.” Lifting her chin in defiance, she locked her gaze with his. “Your word, sir, to be a gentleman, and honor my request.”

Dropping his hand from her cheek, he released a terse sigh. “Aye, madam, my word.” Still, he smiled inwardly. If ‘twas a gentleman she sought, so be it. As such, he would woo her, break down the barriers between them, and capture her heart as she had his.

\* \* \* \*

Cold from far more than the chill air, Rachel huddled, her shoulders drawn forward, teeth chattering. She dared not plead to stop, the tension between she and Christopher all morning, leaving no allowance for conversation. In her mind, she replayed the night past. The memory of his mouth against her flesh left her cheeks warm, and an ache in her she did not understand. The desire to twist about on the steed’s back, pour out her tale, and beg Christopher’s forgiveness had her craning her neck, lips parted ready with the words. Nonetheless, the scowl on his features forced her back to her rigid posture in front of him, her thoughts unspoken as the miles passed.

Christopher wrapped the steed’s hooves with strips of cloth to muffle their sound. Even still, the journey was arduous and progress was slow. By late afternoon, both gratefully slid from the horse’s back, and stumbled wearily toward a dilapidated barn unused in many years. Sloping to the ground at one end, the doors long ago slipped from their moorings to rest on the ground, it offered less than comforting accommodations. Yet, it was dry, and gave a bit of privacy from the outside world.

Mumbling an excuse, she slipped into the woods, eager for some much needed time alone. Her focus still on Christopher, she paid little attention to where she moved. It was not until a twig snapped near her that she pulled her gaze from the forest floor, and peered into the shadows. Shoulder to a tree, Maxwell inclined his head slightly, the smug grin curling his lips causing a shiver to dance up her spine.

Frozen, she eyed him with her jaw set and shoulders back. An eternity elapsed, the heat in her cheeks assuring her fear was clear to his hard gaze. Only when he drew his away from the thick trunk, did her feet take flight, scattering the leaves as she raced through the woods, shouting Christopher’s name. Her breath misted before her, blurring her vision, and she stumbled, dragging her cold fingers over the rough earth for several seconds before regaining her balance.

Maxwell overtook her with ease, throwing his body against hers, and pinning her to the damp leaves. The air escaped her in rapid haste, leaving her gasping, his weight upon her stymieing her attempt to fill her lungs. Hauling her from the ground, he slammed her to his hip, his fingers biting into her flesh like daggers, and swung her about in a wide circle as he bellowed, “Conyngham! I have the girl, and she is as good as dead unless you show yourself!” No answer was received, leaving even Rachel pondering abandonment.

His terse voice, from deep in the shadows, had Maxwell pivoting on his heels, his flinty eyes squinting into the brush. Espying Christopher, chest rising with his rapid flight through the trees, he wove his fingers through Rachel’s hair, pulling until she cried out. “So, you have decided to show yourself!” The snide twist of his lips was feral. “Were I in your position, I would have chosen differently! She is but a piece of trash! I

planned to kill her whether you showed your face or not!”

Stepping from the shadows, Christopher gave a slight nod as his gaze rested on Rachel. “I had already surmised as much. But I could not let you harm her without at least trying to free her.” Another step, yet he halted, Maxwell’s hand at the curve of Rachel’s throat assuring he would carry out his threat if need be.

“Let her go, Maxwell! The only thing she has done is wound your pride. She has no involvement in the things you and I vie for. Her only crime was caring.” Again, he moved forward, his hands raised as if in surrender.

The taller man bestowed an icy glower to his nemesis. “Like you, she chose her acquaintances poorly.” Gracing her with a sidelong glance, he sneered. “Pity! If she had cared less, she might have stood a chance!”

His gaze on Rachel, Christopher responded, “At least let me fight you fair and square for a chance at her freedom.”

The snort that passed Maxwell’s lips attested to his denial. “The time for that has long passed. I shall take great pleasure in killing her while you stand helplessly by. That would bring me the utmost joy!”

Rachel, silent since accosted, realized her only hope lay in surprise. She began to use every defense she could think of to be free from the captain of the guard. Just as she did that night when he first came to her home, she began to claw, scratch, kick, and hit. Her fingernails dug into his arm until blood moistened his sleeve, while her heels came against his shins repeatedly! He glared at her, but refused to relinquish his hold. “Quite a little wildcat, isn’t she, milord?” he sneered. “What a ride she would give beneath the sheets!”

Indignant with his crude comment, she twisted about in his arms, and spit in his face. Her fingernails raked the flesh of his cheek, leaving a crimson stain trailing into the collar of his uniform. In response, he slammed his fist along the indentation of her temple, and dropped her to the leaves as if she were nothing but a rag doll.

Stunned, Rachel remained there for several seconds, unable to focus. Christopher took advantage of the moment and lowered his head. With it, he rammed the captain of the guard in the stomach, both men careening onto the bed of leaves. Fists drove into soft flesh. Maxwell aimed with deliberate care for the wounds he knew Christopher sported. Yet, his opponent refused to give up the fight.

Lurching to her feet, Rachel scanned the forest floor for anything that might be brandished as a weapon. Spying a thick branch, she hoisted it over her shoulder. Several times, an attempt was made to bring the heavy wood against Maxwell’s head, yet she found him a less than easy target as he moved and wrestled with Christopher in the dead leaves. When she made contact at last, her aim was true! He stumbled back, and lost his footing as he tripped over a thick root protruding from the ground. Staggering against a tree, he split the skin on his already battered nose. Rachel did not wait to find out if he would rise. She brought the branch against him once more, and sighed in relief when his head finally rolled back on his neck, and he slithered to the ground, unconscious.

In Christopher’s arms before she realized what she was doing, she pressed against his chest and relished his strength. Content there, enveloped in his embrace, she closed her eyes as her breath warmed his chin. This time they did not wait to bask in their victory. Both knew there would be others upon them in a matter of minutes and wasted no time in retreating to the barn and mounting the steed. Even as they raced from the

dilapidated building, they heard the thunder of horses close by, and made a wild dash into the trees and the covering they offered!

## CHAPTER SIX

Night once more granted them the blanket they needed. They kept to the trees and in streams as they made their escape from the men who sought them. With the sun now low, and the shadows thickening, they were able to move at a much less frantic pace. Gratefully they slowed the mount and moved through the woods, merging with shadows to conceal their passing. Eventually they heard only the night sounds of the thicket surrounding them. Both relaxed.

Christopher breathed deep of the scent of her hair, and was content to feel her before him on the mount. Her flight into his arms earlier confused him. Though she professed to want nothing between them, her lips, her embrace, and the hunger glimpsed in her hazel eyes attested to a different stance. Whatever kept her from him was wearing down with each passing hour, and he smiled as he watched the moonlight weave through her hair. She could have left any time, yet remained, averring to see him safe first. Nestling closer her warmth, he sighed, his body spent but enjoying the softness of hers as they traversed the forest.

He did not understand the feelings she invoked in him, but knew it was important to him to be her protector! He found himself surprised by his panic when he heard her screams, and suddenly felt as if he was about to lose something more precious than any jewel. In addition, when she raced into his arms, he knew with a strange surety, it was where he wanted her to stay.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel realized the horse meandered of his own accord. She leaned, took the reins, and guided him through the trees. Christopher swayed against her from pure exhaustion, and sleep took him into a world of dreams. He had slept little over the past two days, and had no more strength.

London loomed like a dirty pox mark against the horizon! She knew a place where they would be safe, and doubted any of Maxwell's men had ever even set their feet there. Carefully she directed the horse toward a part of the city most people avoided like the plagues that rose from it!

\* \* \* \*

By the time Christopher roused from his slumber, the stench and filth surrounding them made him draw in his breath and choke against the fetid smells. He glanced about them in wonder. Rats outnumbered the people two to one, and the filth was overwhelming. Hovels were castles to those who could call one home, but most simply found their living quarters among the waste and refuse of the streets. Children, who had never seen clean water, scampered from their path, and gazed with wide starving eyes as they passed.

"Where are we?" He leaned close and was grateful for the scent of Rachel's hair to mask the stench around them.

"Some place they will never think to look for us!" She glanced back at him and smiled. "We will be safe here."

Christopher nodded. He was in complete agreement that the queen's guards would never think to look here. He doubted they even knew of its existence! Softly he whispered. "Safety is a matter of opinion, madam. We may be safe from Maxwell, but I can think of at least a hundred things crawling in these streets that could bring us harm!" He wrinkled his nose at the offensive smells.

She gave him a soft pat on his hand. "This is the London most people never see ... or if they do, refuse to acknowledge!" She peered at the children. "But it is a part of London that cannot be denied. My mother and I came here often when we lived at the palace...."

Christopher eyed her in surprise. "You lived at the palace?"

She lowered her eyes. "You said yourself that I was no commoner!" She turned the horse down another street, and focused on maneuvering through the narrow alley. Finally, they slowed and stopped before a dingy building of weatherworn rotted wood, and dismounted from the steed. Rachel eyed the animal for several seconds, before shrugging at Christopher. "I fear he will not be here when we venture out once more!"

Scanning the throng, he murmured, his voice strained, "They won't eat him will they?"

She laughed at him and shook her head. "It is obvious, Christopher, you have never known hunger!" She eyed the horse once more, then turned toward the building. "More likely, he will bring a handsome purse, and the monies will buy enough food to satiate their hungry bellies for a least a fortnight."

Once inside, they both stopped and let their eyes adjust to the dimness. Animal skins stretched over the windows, leaving the space in a hazy darkness where shadows melded together, and the building seemed suspended in an eerie cloud of dark gray. It was several moments before they felt confident enough to move.

Trash and debris were everywhere. Though four walls to block the weather, the building was little more. There were few interior dividers within its frame, and at least twenty families resided in the first floor alone, a space of about forty feet by thirty feet. Just moving was difficult.

The sounds of children crying echoed in the darkness. Christopher reached for Rachel's hand.

They mounted the stairs to the upper floor slowly. They creaked and moaned with each step, and seemed determined to sag toward the wall. Christopher was reluctant to even touch that which 'supported' it. For the wall seemed as likely to fall as the stairs, they held. By the time they reached the top, both sighed. Though they did not voice it, neither was certain they would return to the bottom the same way. More likely, the stairs would give way, and they would crash to the floor below!

Many of the windows were too high to reach, which allowed the light to spill into the upper level. Christopher almost wished for the darkness. What he saw, turned his stomach and made him long to be away from this horrid place. Children sat in their own filth and waste. Many of them had open sores that festered and oozed. Rats crawled over them as if they were nothing more than the trash that covered the floor. There were also the elderly, of which the average age was forty. They were the survivors of the filth and disease, now trapped by illness and unable to work to provide for their families. They kept the children. However, most could barely take care of themselves, much less the babies left in their care.

Rachel moved toward a back corner. Christopher had yet to release her hand, and followed, though cautiously, as she stepped through and over the clutter on the floor. When they reached their destination, she stopped, sighed at a woman leaning against the wall, and whispered. "Hello, Julia."

Eyes barely opened peered back at her as if in a stupor. For several seconds there was no recognition. Eventually the dark orbs widened, and she sucked a slow ragged breath between her rotted teeth. She coughed, tried to stand, finally gave up the idea, and sank back to the wall. "I never thought I'd see ye again, girl!"

Rachel stooped beside her and took her hand. "It has been along time. Are you doing well?" Her voice was a soft whisper.

The other woman shrugged. "Same." She eyed Rachel, and the expensive gown she wore. "Seems like things be goin' better fer ye, now." She eyed Christopher for several seconds. "Done much better than what ye should 'ave. Got yerself quite a regal 'usband." Her glance returned to Rachel with a bit of distaste. "I would 'ave thought ye would 'ave settled fer a farm boy after what happened wit yer pa."

Rachel stiffened. "It is in the past now." She made no attempt to correct the older woman's assumptions about her and Christopher, a fact that did not escape him. "In truth, Julia, I am in need of your help."

Her 'host' sat forward and eyed her carefully. "Got yerself wit a wee one?" She reached out and touched Rachel's flat belly.

Features mottled, she shook her head. "No, Julia." Finally she stood. "I could never give myself so recklessly."

The older woman gazed at her for a long time. Finally, she shrugged and asked, "What is it ye wants from me?" She eyed the rich fabric of the dress once more and continued, "An' how 'igh ye willin' ter go fer a price?"

The deep crimson stain that colored her cheeks was evidence of her discomfiture. Locking her gaze with the floor, she whispered, her tone raspy, "Surely the kindness my mother bestowed upon you is worth something?" Christopher watched her shoulders stiffen and the set of her jaw grow firm. "What price do you ask?"

Julia assessed her for several moments. Finally, she waved her hand before her and replied; "Yer money won't take me from this place ... as I come inter the world here, sos I'll die 'ere. What do ye want from me?"

The smile that curled at her expressive lips, took Christopher's breath away. Stooping before the older woman Rachel took her hand once more. "We need to get into the palace...." The pause seemed to suspend both her words, and time. "Without being announced."

Brows raised, her host eyed her down the length of her nose. "Ye could walk in the front, an' no one would question yer being there!" Her gaze lingered on Christopher overly long before she added, "I won't be party ter no attempt on someone's life. If that be yer plan then be on wit ye now!"

The soft motion of her head set her hair swaying over her shoulders, again captivating him. "You have known me since I was six, Julia. Do you truly think me capable of such a thing?" When the other woman slowly inclined her head in the negative, Rachel continued, "The reasons are not important, but rest assured, they have nothing to do with anything dishonest."

Once more Julia's gaze locked on Christopher. "She told ye everything what

happened wit her pa?" The frown that creased her brow was testament she was rather disappointed when he gave an affirmative nod. "An' ye still wants ter be wit her?" He nodded once more, though he had no idea what she spoke of. She shrugged. "Sarah will show you the way." She leaned back and closed her eyes as if to indicate the conversation was over.

Rachel caressed her hand softly. "Julia ... what can I do for you?"

The older woman coughed, and a trickle of blood slid down her chin. "Ain't much what can be done fer me now." She eyed then both sadly. "Mayhap slip a pillow over me face and end my life afore it becomes painful." Even as she spoke, she gave a half smile. "'Course then I wouldna git ter see me Sarah's boys grow" Then she closed her eyes and let her head loll against the wall behind her.

Rachel stood and backed away. Her eyes sparkled with banked tears. "When will Sarah be back?" Her words were almost a whisper, and the woman before her made no indication she heard them. Nonetheless, Rachel did not speak them again. "We will wait on the stoop...."

She took Christopher's hand and led him toward the stairs once more. "It may be quite some time before her daughter Sarah returns home...." Rachel peered at him and sighed. "She was a very pretty little girl the last time I saw her ... but that was several years ago, before my family moved to Derbyshire." He could see her lower lip trembling, and knew she fought with inner demons. "Before the world I knew was turned upside down."

He did not respond until they were in the sunlight once more. "Would you tell me about it?"

Rachel frowned. "It was a long time ago ... and I am certain would bore you...."

He put his hand to her chin and raised it so their eyes met. "Nothing about you bores me.... Please, tell me how you were once welcomed at the palace, but now profess to be nothing more than a country girl?"

Her sigh echoed amid the clamor of beggars and hungry children. Then she sat on the stoop of the building, and waited for him to do the same. "As I said yesterday, would that I could forget my past as you have done! I would be grateful to wake one morning and remember none of it!"

Christopher gazed at her profile for several seconds. He doubted there was anything she could tell him that would alter his opinion of her. "Rachel, I am a man accused of murder. Surely nothing you can tell me could be worse."

A small laugh escaped her parted lips and she shook her head. "No murder, but plenty of skeletons!" she sighed. She drew in a ragged deep breath. "In truth I fear in telling you, I will lose you." At his indignant gasp, she lifted her hand in a plea for silence. "Yet, I know to keep this secret within me is likely to destroy me." Her lips quivered, and she struggled to keep her shoulders back and chin stubbornly high. "However, I have fulfilled my promise to see you safe, and will accept your choice to leave if 'tis your inclination to do so." Fear etched her features, drawing down the corners of her mouth, and creasing her brow. Several ragged breaths passed her lips, their moist heat clouding before her as she twisted her fingers in her lap.

Longing to wrap her in his embrace, he steeled himself, and slid his hands beneath his thighs. "There is nothing you can tell me that will change my opinion of you, sweet."

A snort escaped her drawn lips. "'Twould be premature to say so without

knowing the truth.” She swallowed hard, the slender length of her neck mesmerizing as he locked his gaze there. “Nonetheless, I shall tell you, for ‘tis best you hear it from me, rather than from those within the palace walls, whose hurtful gossip would shred the hide off the thickest beast.”

Another intake of air settled in her lungs. Focused on some object he could not readily discern, she continued, “My mother was a lady-in-waiting for the queen several years ago.” He gave no other reaction than to give her a sidelong glance. Rachel pursed her lips for a moment then continued. “She was well liked, and was quite close to the queen. She met, and fell in love with, the captain of the guard.” Rachel lowered her gaze to the ground. “He was beneath her station ... an unacceptable match, and she was forbidden to see him any further. However, they could not deny the love they had, so they ran off and married in secret. When the queen found out, she was furious! If not for the babe within my mother ... she would have ended the union immediately.” Rachel frowned. “Things began to settle down ... I was born, and though my mother had lost her standing with the queen, she was happy, and still remained in the palace walls.”

Rubbing her hands together in agitation, she hesitated. Only his fingers, curled around hers, spurred her to continue, “Unfortunately, my father was not a man who found it easy to stay faithful to one woman. He began to have affairs ... while my mother’s belly grew large with my brother.” She peered at Christopher once more.

“When he found his way into the bed of another lady-in-waiting, the wife of the Marquess of Carlisle, it created quite a stir in the palace!” She shrugged. “Not that those sort of things did not happen often, but they were kept discreet. My father seemed almost eager for everyone he encountered to know of his conquests!”

She looked at the filth of their surroundings. “My mother buried herself in other things, wanting to deny that her marriage was a disgrace, and that my father was a laughing stock. She began to come here with food and herbs to help the sick. Every week we would arrive with a large basket of things, and she would leave feeling as if what she did covered up the wrongs of my father.”

“In turn, my father began to pretend they had no marriage. He was with many women in the years that followed, and sired two more children ... one to the Marquess’s wife. She threw herself and the child from the tower when the babe was born ... for her husband was quite fair, and the babe was dark. She left a note begging both her husband and the queen for forgiveness. It was something that eluded them both, she and my father. The queen spared my father’s life out of respect for my mother ... but she never forgave either of them. She told my mother she would be able to stay only if my father left, permanently. It was a choice my mother could not live with. Although her marriage was a disgrace, she kept hope that one day he would mend his ways, and return to her as the faithful husband, for she loved him above all else!”

Christopher sighed. “I am sorry, Rachel.” His fingers traced a tear as it rolled over her cheek. He knew his words did little to heal the wound her father caused. “Mayhap, if you were to go to the queen...”

The adamant shake of her head averred her stubborn refusal. “That was another life and I have no desire to relive it. Even the loneliness of the cottage was better than the stares and whispers of those at court!” She frowned. “Would that I could have burned with it...” She gazed at Christopher with tears in her eyes. “You are my only reason for being alive but once you know what it is that haunts you, and you no longer need me ...

you will leave me also.” The tears streamed down her cheeks. “And with you will go my life and my soul!” Then she sobbed against his shoulder, leaving Christopher at a loss as to how to take away her sadness.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel felt the need to be away from the depression of the slums, and with only a few hours left before the sun set, she led Christopher toward the market place. Neither of them had eaten at all, and their hunger ached to be satisfied. They bought apples and chewed then as they meandered through the maze of stalls and carts. For the first time in many days, Rachel smiled, and her joy as she gazed at the jugglers and men doing slight-of-hand tricks was contagious. Christopher found himself laughing and enjoying the sights simply because she did. For a brief time they forgot the burdens that waited for them, and the threats of the captain of the guard!

Christopher stopped at a stand and bought chestnuts, which they ate with relish as they moved through the throngs of people. Though his memory consisted of little beyond his time with Rachel, he knew he had not enjoyed himself this much in quite some time. Eventually the tensions eased from his shoulders. However, what amazed him most, was the woman beside him. She captured his attention so completely; he was hard pressed to see anything beyond her.

He watched as she doled the remainder of the chestnuts to several children, and then smiled as they raced to a corner and devoured the small treats. Her eyes sparkled as she peered at them, and the smile on her lips warmed Christopher completely. To the man beside her, she seemed to glow, and he caught his breath as the sunlight danced through her hair like a thousand sparkling jewels. She was beautiful, and he was entranced!

An idea suddenly came to him and he left her side for a brief moment as he searched the stalls for what he sought. Fresh flowers were hard to find at this time of year, so he compromised. Returning to Rachel’s side, he knelt on one knee, and lifted a sprig of holly, bright with red berries, to her. “Rachel,” his voice trembled. “Marry me!”

Her answer stabbed at him from the depths of her gold eyes, long before she uttered the words of denial. “I cannot....” Trembling fingers caressed his hair.

Rising, his hands cupped her face, memorizing every inch of the delicate features. “I would make a good husband....”

A strangled sob passed her lips, tears spilling over her cheeks. “I have no doubt you would.” Already her head was swaying side to side. “But my father left my family in disgrace....”

“Your father be damned! It is not him I wish to take as my wife!” his voice croaked, his thumb following the path of a fat tear.

Pressing her hand to her mouth, she stammered, “Have you not listened to anything I have said? My father was an adulterer, a man who sired two bastard children, and was cast from this city in disgrace. As his daughter, I am looked upon with loathing for his sins.”

Brushing her lips with his, he whispered, “You are the breath in my lungs, and the reason my heart beats within my chest. I do not care what others think, Rachel. No condemnation will come from my lips for his mistakes. I love you, and desire to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter how long that might be.”

The ragged exhalation of air from her throat left her choking. “I have nothing to

offer.”

He slid his fingers under her chin and forced her to look at him. “Rachel, I seek nothing from you, but your arms to comfort me, and what life we can make together.” He frowned as he continued. “Mayhap when my memory returns, I will find that I am guilty of some crime and spend my final moments swinging from a tree. But at least I would go to my grave knowing my last days were spent in happiness.”

Silence hovered in the air, though the din of the shoppers and peddlers fair left their ears ringing. When finally she spoke her, anguish was overwhelming. “Mayhap there is another woman who has already spoken vows with you ... would you leave her ... or any children from that union?”

He sighed. In truth, he did not know if such a thing were true. “In my heart I know that I would remember. No one has captivated me as you have! I would know if there was another.”

However, she shook her head once more and gingerly caressed the berries in her bouquet. An eternity elapsed before she whispered. “In good conscience, I can not say yea.”

Christopher pursed his lips. Then his eyes sparkled, and he smiled. “Were I to prove to you no other woman has taken my name, could you then be swayed?”

Returning his hesitant smile, she agreed in a soft whisper. “Aye. Should that be true, I would think about your offer.”

Leaning close, his lips brushed hers with a tender kiss. “Then I shall do everything in my power to make certain to sway you.” Lifting her trembling fingers to his mouth, he plied each with a feather soft brush before at last sliding the limb to his side, and turning once more toward the slums in hopes of finding Sarah.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel watched Sarah make her way toward them and drew a long deep breath. For a moment, she almost hoped she was wrong, that the young woman nearing them was not the one she sought. However, the nearer she drew, the surer Rachel was as to her identity. “There” she pointed at a woman with a child on her hip, and another holding her hand. “That is Sarah.”

Christopher’s surprise was evident, his jaw slack and his eyes wide in disbelief. “I expected someone younger, mayhap a score in years. She looks to be at least a score and ten, or fifteen.”

Returning her gaze to the woman approaching, Rachel could not help but peer at her in disbelief. At a year younger than herself, Sarah should have held the vision of youth, but she had aged well beyond her years since last Rachel saw her. There was a hardness to her that spoke of the slums she lived in, and the loss of her youth before she had a chance to enjoy it. Now, close to her, Rachel could see that her light brown hair was already graying. Her eyes were sunken in an emaciated face, and her skin was stretched taut over small bones. She had a distant lost look in her eyes, which tore at Rachel’s heart. In their youth, both girls had been compared often. Now the distinction between them was as vast as the English Channel.

However, what made her heart lodge in her throat were the two children, one at her side, and the other in her arms. The little boy beside her looked to be no more than three. Large blue eyes gazed back at her from beneath dirty blond hair, and an equally dirty face. Even in this state, he was quite a beautiful child, and Rachel smiled at him as

he peered up at her. The babe in Sarah's arms looked only to be about six months of age. He slept against his mother's breast, his mouth slightly open as if searching even in his sleep for the comfort he would find at that spot. Where his brother's hair was light, his was almost black, leaving little doubt they did not share the same father.

Rachel forced her lips to curl into a smile. As her gaze moved once more to the small boy beside his mother, she noticed that Sarah's belly was round. Yet, another mouth would need to be fed soon. "Hello, Sarah." She forced herself to look the other woman in the eyes. "How are you?"

Sarah's gaze in turn ranged down the length of the gown adorning Rachel, and she bestowed a withering glower upon her. "Me mum says ye wants ter go ter the palace." Once more, she eyed the rich fabric of the gown. "What sort o' price we talkin' about?"

Rachel was stunned, but dared say nothing. Before she had the chance to gather her thoughts, Christopher tossed the entire pouch of coins at the other woman's feet. Sarah's eyes widened as she heard it clink against the soil. The color drained from her features by slow degrees. Yet, when she lifted her dark eyes at Christopher once more, he glimpsed only greed. "It ain't enough!"

At Rachel's indignant gasp, she shrugged, "If I got ter put my neck on the line, I wants twice this." She jiggled the bag and listened to the coins as they clinked together inside.

Now it was Christopher's turn to shrug. He calmly reached over and took the pouch from her grasp. "I am certain we can find plenty of people willing to show us the way for less than what is in the bag." He began to search the faces of those on the stoops near by.

Sarah grabbed for the pouch. Christopher held it tight, and refused to release it to her. Finally, she nodded and replied, "I suppose it 'ill do." Her fingers entwined through the strap that cinched the sack closed. "Being as 'ow yer Rachel's friend an' all." Christopher released his grip, and the sack fell into the palm of her hand. She smiled. Tucking the bag to her bodice, she turned as if to leave. "Be ready in two days...."

Christopher slid his hand about her wrist and gripped it tightly. "We are ready now." She winced as the pressure of his grip increased. "I would have no trouble removing the pouch from there." He glanced down at her sagging bosoms. "And finding someone to take the money who would be willing to show us the way within the hour."

Rachel remained silent. She watched Sarah for several seconds as the other girl squirmed. Finally she spoke, "Had I more to give you, I would gladly do so." She touched her fingers to the soft cheek of the little boy at her side. "But 'tis all I have." She gazed at Sarah pleadingly. "In giving it to you, we have nothing, save the clothes on our backs."

An attempt to free her hand left her rubbing her wrist and sneering at Christopher. "Just let me put me babes wit me mum."

She turned to leave, when he once more circled her wrists with his fingers. Leaning close, he brazenly slid his free hand to her cleavage, and withdrew the pouch of coins. "They remain here, until you return." Defiantly he placed the sack to his waistcoat.

Sarah bestowed a scathing glower upon his visage. Reluctantly, she gave a curt nod, and stormed into the building, all the while cursing the stranger beneath her breath.

When she disappeared, Christopher frowned at Rachel. "Her mother must have had her very young, for them to be so close in age."

Rachel glanced at him in confusion. "Sarah is the youngest of ten children. At seventeen, and a year younger than myself, it near breaks my heart to see her already with two babes, and a third on the way!" She pursed her lips and shuttered. "It confuses me that we are so different. For the past seven years, I have known little better wealth than she, yet our lives have moved in such completely different directions."

It was several moments before Sarah returned to the stoop. His shoulders sagging in relief, Christopher released a heavy sigh as she reappeared. "I was beginning to think she slipped out a back way." He leaned close to Rachel and whispered, "Are you certain she can be trusted?" Rachel nodded, but did not speak. Sarah was close now, and she did not want to insult her.

"This 'ill take the better part o' the night, so let's be about it." Her hand turned palm up, as if waiting, and she smiled, revealing rotted teeth as the sack found its way back to her care.

Darkness became their cloak once more. They moved through the streets of London silently, encountering few people in their passing. At a cemetery, Sarah pulled the heavy gate open and moved into the overgrown area beyond it. Rachel eyed Christopher for a moment, not certain if they should follow. Finally, she let him lead her in among the stones.

Sarah twined through the graves with little hesitation. It was clear to those who followed she'd traversed this way many times. She stopped before a large grotto; glanced about for a moment, then disappeared into the stone building. It was so black beyond the door; Rachel peered into the thick darkness hesitantly. Only the pressure of Christopher's hand on her back forced her feet to move. For several moments, they had no choice but to stand frozen, unable to see even their hands before their faces. Then there was the sound of stone rubbing stone and a few seconds later the flicker of light.

Sarah inched toward an opening at the back of the room, a narrow sliver that barely accommodated her belly, and slipped within. Leaning her head back to the tomb, she whispered hoarsely, "Hurry! I doesn't likes this place." She held the torch high to light the way, and Rachel stepped into the tunnel hesitantly. She quickly grabbed Christopher's hand once more, and held it tight. She had to agree, although silently, that she did not like this place either.

In the darkness time seemed to stand still. The confines of the passage left Rachel disoriented, and a bit claustrophobic, and she squeezed Christopher's hand seeking reassurance from his strength. Uncertain how long they traveled, she was beginning to feel a bit queasy when the ground suddenly began to slope upward, and their journey became more difficult. Rachel stopped and took her soft slippers from her feet, and held them in her hand. Her footing improved immediately, and she was able to keep up with Sarah with little trouble. The journey ceased for a long moment as they stood beneath a curving stairway that disappeared into the darkness beyond. The steps, carved from the rock of the tunnel spiraled against the wall upward into total darkness.

Sarah began to ascend quickly, at one point so far in the distance, Rachel stumbled in the darkness, and groped for Christopher's arm as a startled gasped passed her lips. The sneer in Christopher's tone left little doubt as to his annoyance. "If you would slow your pace, I will make certain you receive a handsome reward." Immediately

the torch above them stilled, as if she waited.

As they neared her, she held the light high once more. Time had worn the stairs away in several places above them, leaving only a narrow ledge in its place. "Ye gots ter be careful there." Sarah moved toward the first ledge. "There ain't nothin' below what 'ill break yer fall, but yer own bones."

Fighting a wave of nausea, Rachel closed her eyes. Always apprehensive of high places, she swallowed the lump that lodged in her throat. Her grip on Christopher's hand increased. The breath expelled from her lungs was ragged. "I can't go up there, Christopher."

"I will be right beside you," he whispered close against her ear.

"'Tis not that simple," her voice quavered. "I have never done well with high places."

His hands cupped her face tenderly. Locking his gaze with hers, he admonished, "You are the strongest person I know." A sparkle danced in his eyes. "Okay, you are the only person I know. Nonetheless, you possess a strength few others can attest. Where is that woman who faced fever, death and destruction, yet never faltered in her resolve?" He searched her to the depths of her soul. "We will do this together, Rachel. I promise to be by your side. I will not let anything happen to you, you have my word." A slow grin spread over his lips. "As a man with no name..."

A soft chuckle eased from her throat, and she nodded, though she felt as if her knees might buckle beneath her. "Your word?"

Leaning close, he brushed her lips with a feather soft kiss. "My word."

They traversed the first ledge with relatively little trouble. The second one was much more narrow, causing them to press to the cool stone as they advanced by slow degrees. Rachel dared not open her eyes. She knew if she let her vision focus on the emptiness beyond the torchlight, she would panic. She flattened her body so snugly against the rock face; it seemed more a part of her than her own flesh!

Christopher moved ahead of her, careful of the way the ledge narrowed. Twice he nearly lost his footing on the tiny pebbles that lined the ledge, and like Rachel, sidled close against the stone wall. Only a few feet from where the ledge broadened, his foot slipped. He threw himself back against the stone in an attempt to hold onto the ledge.

As he did so, Rachel lurched forward, and suddenly teetered on the edge. A scream escaped her throat! In an instant, the narrow strip of rock she stood on, disappeared from beneath her feet, and she felt herself falling. Suspended by nothing more than his hand gripping her wrist, panic welled within her.

For a long moment, she thought her arm would separate from her torso, and she would crash to the floor below. In a strange way she wished it would be over quickly, for her arm burned from the strain, and she knew she would not be able to hold on much longer. Finally, she glanced up at Christopher. He held her wrist with both of his hands, and the strain in his face made her tremble with fear.

Because the ledge was so narrow, he could gain no leverage, and found himself trapped in a dilemma with no feasible way out. Rachel hung straight down, with nothing to support her. She could see that every ounce of Christopher's strength went into simply keeping her from falling.

"Rachel please, dearest, just hold on!" Christopher whispered as he leaned slightly from the wall, and peered down at her.

Rachel forced her eyes open. She had to think of something else. Something that would take her mind off her panic, and help her focus. She thought of all the herbs hanging on the walls of the shanty outside of Derbyshire. Slowly she tried to put in place in her mind every detail, every item hanging there. It seemed an eternity, but eventually it calmed her, and she took a deep breath. "Christopher..." her voice was almost stoic, "I cannot hold on much longer ... please let go of me!" She gazed up into his eyes pleadingly. "You will never be able to pull me up and I know the strain is difficult with your injuries." Her tone was resolved as she murmured, "Please, let me go!"

He shook his head. "Never!" His pain was evident in the sweat at his brow, and the tightening of his jaw. He glanced toward Sarah, now slumped against the wall sobbing softly.

Rachel was stunned when she felt herself move against the cold rock. She had closed her eyes once more, trying to collect her thoughts, and did not expect to shift in any direction but down. She watched as the muscles in Christopher's arms, shoulders, and neck all tensed. Then he took another side step, sliding her with him as she hung from his hands. Once he gained the safety of the wider area, he sank slowly to the ledge, causing Rachel to slide down the rock face even further. She clenched her teeth. The pain in her arm and shoulder was nearly more than she could stand.

"Rachel." His voice was calm now. "Listen to me. You must be strong! Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and focus!" His firm tone penetrated through her panic. "Grab my arm with your other hand." She did as he asked as if in a trance. "Good!" He swallowed hard as his muscles began to burn. "Now, you must climb the rock." Though she voiced no objection, he could see the apprehension in her eyes. "I will not let go! I promise. But you must help! There is nothing here for me to hold onto, and I can only be an anchor for you. You will have to do the work yourself!"

She was certain she did not have the strength to pull herself up, but could not voice it to Christopher. They were both close to exhaustion, and she knew it would only be a matter of time before he could no longer hold her. Slowly she nodded, not wanting to argue the point. At least he was safe ... and would be able to put right the accusations against him! She pulled her feet up, and swung slightly out from the wall. She could feel Christopher tremble as he held her wrist even tighter. Rachel surprised herself when she found a foothold, and was able to rise several inches. Then her foot slipped, and she fell against the rock with such force it nearly knocked the wind from her.

Tears streamed down her face. Christopher suddenly shouted at her, and she jerked hard at the tone of his voice. "Stop it! Don't think of anything save reaching me!" His commanding voice seemed to take the panic from her, and she nodded as she pulled her feet up once more.

Each inch she gained, he leaned back a bit more, until he was almost lying flat on the ledge. When she was nearly to the top, he suddenly pulled with all his might, drawing her up along his body until they both pressed to the ledge! Christopher glanced at Sarah. "Grab her!" He could not hold her much longer, but knew she was not out of danger yet.

Sarah slid toward her, and grabbed her arms. Then she pulled with all her strength, and at last, Rachel gained the plateau. Christopher released her, and quickly moved close to her. Tears streamed down her face, and she took in short panting breaths. Sobbing against his chest, she whispered, "I am grateful you did not take me up on my

request to let me go!”

Christopher cupped her face in his hands, and gently pulled her close, then his lips touched hers sending darts of pleasure through her weary body. “I thought I lost you!” He breathed against her hair. He pulled away slightly, and gazed into her eyes. “As you hung there, I suddenly realized just how much I need you!” Tenderly he wiped at the tears on her cheeks. “My life is nothing without you!”

\* \* \* \*

Sarah held the torch high. “These tunnels ‘ill lead ye ter any place in the palace ye wishes ter go.” She gazed at Rachel. “Ye can find yer way from ‘ere.” At Rachel’s nod, she brought her torch against another one in a crevice in the wall, and waited for it to take light. Then she handed it to Christopher, and began to move back down the corridor from whence they had come. She did not turn about or say good bye, and in a few short moments even the glow of her torch was gone, and Rachel and Christopher stood together for a moment in silence.

Rachel scanned the seemingly endless tunnels that branched out around them. She had been here only once, when she was eight, and she had found one of the entrances purely by accident. Hopelessly lost, she spent the night in the tunnels; certain she would see her end there. It was just pure luck that she did not close the door well, and her father discovered the passage. She vowed never to step foot in them again, and until now, had had no desire to do so!

She peered down several of the passages, holding her own torch high, and shook her head. “I am afraid I don’t remember which one leads where I want to go.”

Christopher sighed. He gazed down a few of the long halls, and finally shrugged. “This one is as good as any.” He put the torch before him, and indicated the tunnel closest to them. Then he took Rachel’s hand in his, and began to walk. They had no idea what time of day it was, or even if it was day at all. There was no light save the torch, and no sound, save their own footfalls.

\* \* \* \*

Nearly an hour elapsed before Rachel pulled Christopher to a halt and sighed. “I think we passed this same spot a while ago.” Christopher eyed her skeptically. He was not sure how she could tell. To him every inch looked the same as the one before.

“At the risk of alerting someone to our presence, it might not be a bad idea to just start opening doors.” They passed several wooden doors, but from this side they all looked just the same. There was no way of telling just who they might barge in on. Nevertheless, tired and lost, the thrill of the adventure was long gone. Stepping to the nearest portal, Rachel lifted the lever and slowly pushed inward.

A thick tapestry covered the entrance from ceiling to floor, and she inched along the wall until able to draw the curtain aside slightly for a view of the room. When she turned back to Christopher, a smile played at the corners of her mouth. “I know where we are!” She entered the tunnel once more, and began to back track until they were at the entrance of another tunnel. “If I remember the number of rooms,” she walked down the corridor slowly, counting the doors as she went. “It should be ... this one!” She handed him her torch and gently pushed inward on the door. Once more, a tapestry blocked her way, but she smiled as she viewed it from the back. She glanced at Christopher and nodded. “At last!” She whispered, then moved beyond the thick needlework, and disappeared from his view.

\* \* \* \*

Abigail Huntington Smyth sat brushing her hair at her vanity. Absorbed in thought she was unaware of the intruder until a cool breeze toyed with the hairs at her nape. Thinking it her lover, she remained to her seat. "You're late." Her voice was husky. Peering into the mirror, she studied her reflection and pursed her lips in thought. Her raven black hair had begun to gray slightly, but was thick and lustrous. Skin as fine as porcelain gleamed in the candlelight. Few wrinkles marred its perfection. In a robe of silk, her shapely body needed no bindings or stays. Deep green eyes sparkled like emeralds beneath sooty lashes. Full expressive lips curled into an apprehensive smile.

A soft whisper near the tapestry brought her from her musings, and she adjusted her gaze in the mirror to scan that area. Tiny darts of unease inched along her spine. A name forgotten through the course of time passed her lips. "Rachel!"

Rachel's eyes twinkled. "Hello, Abby." Their eyes met in their reflected images.

Abigail rose from the chair slowly; worried haste might cause the likeness to vanish, for surely it could not be real. Again, she whispered the name, "Rachel?"

Of a sudden she pivoted, knocking the chair over in her haste. Their arms wrapped about one another, squeezing. Muffled sobs echoed against shoulders. Trembling fingers caressed the younger woman's hair, her cheek, and the beaded gown at her shoulder. "How beautiful you are!" she murmured hoarsely. "You are the image of your mother."

Rachel smiled at the compliment. "Abby, I believe you are feverish. I am nothing like my mother."

A small laugh slipped from Abigail's lips. Her hand cupped Rachel's chin tenderly. "My dear, you are more lovely than any here at court." A whimsical sigh escaped her throat. "Were I twenty years younger I would cringe with jealousy to be in the same room with you."

Sobering, Abby assessed Rachel's gown and frowned. Though the material was costly, it was soiled and torn beyond repair. Concern furrowed Abby's forehead in the form of fine wrinkles. "You enter here through the tunnels, as if hiding something." Her finger traced the bruise along Rachel's jaw, now streaked with yellow. "What happened?" Guiding Rachel to a chair, she squeezed her hand tenderly, and queried, "Are you in some sort of trouble?"

A slow breath slipped from her lips before she replied. "My mother succumbed to the fever just over a month ago."

Abby released a ragged sigh. "No!" Her shoulders sagged. "I had no idea she was that sick."

Rachel bit back the retort that she had written of her mother's illness many times, with no response, yet knew it would solve nothing. "In truth, it was a blessing. She was not the woman you remember, and spent her days lost in a world only she could fathom."

Usually self-centered, Abigail surprised Rachel with her tears. "I wanted to come to see her but could not. Your letters described a woman nothing like the Anne Summerfield I thought of as a sister. To see her thus would have been more than I could bear." Her sincerity assured Rachel it had not been lack of caring which kept her away.

"She talked of you often before the fever," Rachel assured the other woman.

Abigail crossed to her vanity. "If only your father had been more disciplined."

In his defense, Rachel countered, "They were very happy after leaving London."

My father changed ... my mother was everything to him."

Abigail returned to her, and took her hand. "It was I who encouraged your mother to pursue a relationship with him. I wanted only the best for her." Abby pursed her lips. "Let's not dredge up things we can not change." Of a sudden, she smiled beguilingly. "We need cheering, you and I!" She crossed to her wardrobe, and threw the doors open. Rifling through several gowns, she held up two or three for inspection; rejected one far too daring, then settled for two. "Clothes always lighten my spirits!" Handing one to Rachel, she indicated the screen in the corner. "Try it on, darling!" She eyed the dirty gown adorning the younger woman. "You look a fright in that, and can't possibly be presented to all the young swains at court in such attire."

The gown was of deep organdy, with tiny roses of pink along the bodice and waist. Filmy sleeves of gauze swayed as the material danced in a soft breeze from the portal left open as Rachel entered the room. It was lovely, yet Rachel made no move to don it. "Abby, I am not here to attend court. I need your help."

The other woman refused to be swayed. Gently giving Rachel a shove toward the screen, she insisted, "What ever it is, will wait until you are more presentable!"

Weary, Rachel ceded to her bidding. She had to admit, as she gazed at her reflection in the mirror at the vanity, clothes made all the difference in lifting her spirits. Christopher flashed in the recesses of her mind, and she gasped. She had forgotten him as she discarded the tattered gown for the new. "Abby!" Stepping to the tapestry, she pulled it back. "I nearly forgot the reason for my visit!" His hand entwined hers as he stepped through the secret portal.

Abigail paled. Trembling fingers pressed to her throat. Her lips quivered. Several seconds elapsed before she found her voice. "Milord." She bent her body into a deep curtsy.

Christopher eyed her with arched brows. He bowed, and then reached for her hand. The action sent her skittering across the room. A ragged soft scream passed her lips.

Rachel watched her in amazement. She could not recall the elder woman ever acting so. "Abigail, what on earth is the matter?"

The only color in Abby's face was the rouge painted on her cheeks. She pressed shaking fingers to her temples, as if to ease a pain there. Her voice quaked. "How came you to be here, milord?"

Christopher raised his hand as if in surrender. "Madam, rest easy, I mean you no harm."

Cautiously, Abigail stretched her hand toward his. "You are alive!" She whispered in awe.

The light of understanding flashed in his eyes. "As alive as you, madam. I am no apparition."

Abigail swallowed hard before venturing, "We had heard rumors of your demise, milord, and seeing you now has nearly caused me to go to my death as well."

Rachel volunteered, "I found him in the woods near Derbyshire ... almost dead. He has no memory..." Christopher shook his head almost imperceptively, and Rachel stammered, realizing he did not want Abigail to know his secrets. "He has no memory," she repeated. "Of the incident."

Abigail released a heavy sigh. "How dreadful, milord."

Christopher studied her for a long moment. "It would be best if I remained dead to all outside this room, madam. Might I count on you for such discretion?"

She nodded, hesitantly. "None shall know you have been here, milord."

"Save, one..." he added for her. "My mother."

Abigail cleared her throat. "She has not been to court since you disappeared. I heard tell she is at the family home in Conyngham."

"Send her a missive for me, will you?" he asked hoarsely.

"Indeed, milord." She drew paper and quill from a small desk. "What shall I tell her?"

Christopher shrugged. "Tell her I live," he replied simply. Rubbing his fingers to the stubble of growth at his chin, he added, "As there are those who wish it other wise, use of my given name might be safer than titles."

Flustered, Abigail nodded. "Yes, milord, I see your point." She hastily corrected herself. "Christopher." The deep frown that creased her mouth was testament she was uncomfortable with such familiarity. "Mr. Conyngham...." Shrugging, she stammered, "Forgive me, milord. What shall I call you? 'Tis difficult to know how to address the Marquess of Conyngham by any other name!"

Slowly Rachel's hand lifted to her mouth. Marquess of Conyngham? She had never imagined him to be of such nobility. Her knees suddenly weak, she slipped to the chair by the vanity, and pressed clammy hands to her cheeks. Christopher joined her there. Touching her brow, he whispered, "It changes nothing, Rachel." Mischief sparkled in his eyes as he quipped, "Perhaps she could call me Mr. Jingles." Rachel's lips curled into a soft smile.

Abigail leaned closer. "Your pardon, milord, did you speak?"

His hand still to Rachel's, he replied, "Christopher will do fine, madam."

Glancing back to Rachel, he added over his shoulder, "Madam, mayhap some food could be sent for. We have not eaten in quite some time."

Though she hesitated for several seconds, eventually she crossed to a pull cord near the door, and gave a hard tug. Almost instantly, a maid rapped at the portal. Abby allowed her no entrance, but kept the door shut all save the smallest degree. "Martha, bring a tray. I am famished!" Then she closed the door in the girl's face.

Christopher pried, "Is there any other you think might be informed of my resurrection?"

Abigail shrugged. "Other than every young maid from here to Spain...." At his questioning brows, she added, "After all, milord ... you are one of the most eligible bachelors in England."

The smile that curled his lips was warm. "Though I fancy they might be heartened at the news, madam, I doubt they would be able to help me in this situation."

Flustered, Abby murmured, "No, I suppose that is true." She released a slow breath. "I can think of none here at court, milord. You would know better than I who you can trust ... or who will aid you without fear of betrayal."

Her mind racing, Rachel asked, "What about your husband?"

Abby eyed her in confusion. "Harry? What about him?"

Rachel pressed her fingers to Christopher's arm. "He can be trusted, milord." Choosing to ignore the frown that played at Christopher's lips, she continued. "The Earl of Kent is a fine man, and well respected. Mayhap he could arrange a meeting with the

queen....”

Abby lifted her hands as if to signal Rachel to stop. “Rachel, surely it has not been that long since I have written you. The earl is dead.” She sank to a chair, and hung her head. “At least that is what I was told. I was never allowed to see him when they brought his body back to London.”

Rachel crossed to her and took her hands in consolation. “What happened, Abby?”

“He had been acting strange for nearly a week....” She peered at Rachel as if seeking understanding. “I could not pry from him what troubled him so.” Her shoulders lifted in resignation. “Then he was gone, just vanished. We searched for months. News came from the captain of the guard that he had been found in a shallow grave by the roadside....”

The comparison of how she found Christopher just over a month ago sent a shiver along Rachel’s spine. The glance she raised to Christopher assured her it did much the same for him. “I’m so sorry, Abby. I had no idea.”

A light rap at the door left neither time to ponder the issue. Suddenly apprehensive, Abby twisted her fingers together. Christopher silently moved to the tapestry, and disappeared beyond its thickness. The drape barely fell back into place, when Abby grabbed Rachel’s hands, and squeezed. “Rachel, whatever you’ve gotten yourself into, I’ll try to help but you must understand, the Marquess is in more trouble than you can imagine. He murdered the Chancellor, and Lord Saracey, the queen’s cousin!” Her words were a frantic whisper, as she peered to the drape with wide eyes.

Rachel shook her head in denial. “I know that is not true!” Slipping her hands from the elder woman’s, she pressed her fingers to her temples. He could not be a murderer. “If you knew him as I do, you would believe none of the rumors....”

“They are not rumors!” Abby hissed. “I saw the Chancellor’s body taken from the palace ... covered in blood.”

Refusing to listen, Rachel implored, “Then answer me one question, Abby.” She raised her index finger. “Just one question. If you can do so, and convince me he is what you say, I shall turn him in myself!” Her face had taken on a deep flush, and her eyes snapped fire. “If a murderer as you say, why wasn’t he brought back to face the charges against him or at the very least, why wasn’t his body dragged through the streets to show everyone he faced justice?”

Abby stood silently as the maid deposited the tray on a side table. Once gone, she answered, “He outsmarted them....”

“He was found by the side of the road Abby, buried beneath a pile of leaves in a shallow grave!” Rachel hissed. “Hidden from the world, not brandished as the killer he was purported to be!”

“What did you say?” Abby’s voice was a timid whisper.

Rachel nodded slightly. “That’s right, Abby, I said he was found by the side of the road, just as you were told Harry was found. Doesn’t that make it clear to you there is something sinister at work here? There is a common thread, I just do not know who, or what it is, yet in my heart I believe the captain of the guard is behind all of it.” Grasping the other woman’s hand in hers, Rachel implored, “All I’m asking is you give us time.” At the look of distress on the other woman’s face, she pleaded. “A fortnight ... Abby. If your heart still tells you he is the murderer he is accused of being, than go to the

authorities with no guilt. Just give us a little time to change your mind, please!”

Abby searched her eyes for several seconds. “You’re in love with him!” It was a statement, not a question.

A few weeks past the old crone said there was something between Rachel and the man with no name. It was denied immediately. Now, she gave no such contradiction. To do so would be a lie. To Abby she replied, “I know he is innocent. I also know someone here at the palace would like him to remain dead at all cost!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Abby slipped to the tunnel. With her finger, she jabbed Christopher several times in the chest. "I've given my word, milord, against my better judgment, that I will sound no alarm. You have a fortnight to prove your innocence. Rachel is more important to me than your title, or your neck. I will not hesitate to turn you in should I feel she is in danger. Do I make myself clear, milord?"

He gave a slight nod. "Rest easy, madam. No harm will come to her. I am in love with her, and would lay down my life to protect her."

"You have done nothing to disgrace her?" Abby's tone was harsh.

"Never!" Christopher averred.

Abby sighed in relief. "My town home is not far from here. With the queen in residence at the palace, I rarely have time to leave here. You will be safe there." She pressed a bag of coins into his hand. "All I ask is that you leave Rachel here."

"I go with him, Abby." Rachel stood at the entrance of the tunnel. "Though I trust you, were I to stay, I fear you would go back on your word. If I am with him you are not as likely to betray either of us."

The tapestry was barely in place once more when a knock came at Abigail's door. Her visitor did not wait for her to usher him in. Weary, he sank into a chair and closed his eyes. Calloused fingers massaged throbbing temples. "A glass of wine," he sneered. "Then get out of your clothes. I've a hunger to feel you against me." There was no preamble, no romance. There never was.

Abby stared at her lover coldly. She had grown to detest him, yet feared him, and knew no way to end this nightmare. For several seconds, she gazed at his bulbous nose, the dark circles beneath his eyes, and the bruises along his jaw. "What on earth happened to your face, Maxwell?" The glass of wine was pressed to his hand.

From the corner of his eye, he assessed her. "A fight with a little wildcat I fully intend to see hanging from the gallows," he sneered.

She had not seen him in over a month, but dared not ask where he was. Questions only resulted in his ire being sparked. Instead, Abby did as directed and slipped from her robe. She closed her eyes as he took out his frustrations on her woman's body. He was never gentle. This night, he was doubly cruel.

Finished, he stood dressing near the fire, his jaw set, his mind a thousand miles away. In the recesses of Abby's thoughts, something Rachel said began to eat at her. "The captain of the guard is behind all of this." A cold shiver crept along Abby's spine. Maxwell had brought her husband's body back. However, he denied her a final glimpse of the man. It was he who described finding Harry beside the road.

Daring a moment of bravado, Abby ventured, "Maxwell?" He acknowledged her in no way. "Did you find Harry, or was it one of your men?"

"What sort of question is that to ask after lying with me?" The glower he bestowed assured her he was not amused.

Unwilling to let the matter go, she pressed, "Had he been hidden beneath the

leaves, or was he just...?" Her stomach did a somersault and bile rose toward her throat. "There..." she queried nervously.

Maxwell halted his dressing and peered at her. "What difference does it make?"

She could see his patience with this conversation was growing thin. Wisely retreating, Abby shook her head. "No difference. I was just thinking of him, and wondered, that's all."

Feeling physically ill, Abigail staggered behind her dressing screen, and numbly began to don her gown. Maxwell joined her there. Idly he leaned his shoulder against the wall and peered at her.

Unnerved by his presence, she tried to remain nonchalant. Yet, her fingers trembled as she laced her gown. Eventually she gave up the task. In need of something to do with her hands, she reached for the dress Rachel left earlier. It barely touched her fingers when it was snatched from her grasp, leaving a small piece of the soiled material behind. Surprised by the sudden assault, she glared at Maxwell in outrage. No words passed her lips. The anger in his dark eyes assured her something was terribly wrong.

"Where did you get this?" His tone was biting and filled with rancor.

Abby opened her mouth to answer, but quickly closed it. Somehow he was at the center of what happened to the young marquess, and her husband. To reveal anything about Rachel's visit would seal her fate as well as Christopher's. Wisely, Abby kept her silence.

His wrath near exploding from him, his face crimson with rage, Maxwell slipped his hand about her throat, and lifted her from the floor. "Where is my little wildcat? Tell me what you know, or I'll send you to your grave."

Abigail could not remember a time she feared more. Every fiber of her being shook. Nausea rose in her throat, and would have spewed forth had his hand not blocked its escape. Her eyes bulged as her oxygen levels dropped. Her lips trembled. Tears rolled silently over her cheeks. For the first time in her life, she knew death waited patiently in the shadows.

Maxwell reluctantly released his hold. Her body crumbled to the carpet. For several seconds she lay there, gasping. Her fingers rubbed at the bruised area of her neck. In the back of her mind, a decision was made, and she steeled herself for the consequences. From deep within, she found a strength she had not known she possessed.

Rising, she faced him with shoulders back, and head high. "Somehow, you are behind everything bad that has happened to me. When Rachel came to me for help, I realized how blind I have been to your evil bent. No longer!" She averred. "I would rather die, than bring harm to her."

His fist slammed against her jaw with enough force to send her staggering against the wall. "That can be arranged!" He snarled.

Abigail fought the trembling within, and forced herself to defy him once more. "Then kill me, now, for I will not betray her." His hand rose, ready to strike another blow. Defiant, she warned, "Should I die, you had best know I have already made certain your head will swing for the crime. Letters have been sent to my husband's barristers, as well as the queen..." She bluffed, "In my death I shall have vengeance for everything you have done to me!"

For an instant, his hand remained in midair. Maxwell's face mottled red as he glared at her. At last, he vented his ire on the screen and a wall of nearby pictures. All

went flying across the room, broken, as Abby was certain he desired to break her body.

Though the force of his anger terrified her, it also gave her strength. He had not touched her. Her bluff worked! Her nostrils flaring, she pointed to the door and sneered, "Get out! And should you ever darken my door again, I shall have your skin peeled away layer by cowardly layer!"

Maxwell sent the things atop her vanity to join the screen on the floor. "You have no idea whom you deal with, madam! You think to order me about as if I am nothing?" His face was so close she could see the pox marks that scarred his flesh. "Though I have no time to deal with you now, I shall gladly do so once I have found the girl..." At the door he sneered, "Where do they travel, your town home?" His laughter sent chills up her spine. "I shall be there before them, and end this once and for all..." The door slammed behind him, echoing in the stillness like an explosion.

For all her bravado, Abby could muster no further strength. Slowly she sank to the floor and sobbed. What had she done? Rachel and Christopher were in more danger now than before, and she knew only a miracle would keep both them from meeting death face to face this very night!

\* \* \* \*

He waited in the shadows, impatient. Minutes stretched into an hour, then two. At last, the one he sought materialized, and he smiled in relief. Peeling himself from the wall, Maxwell swooped down atop his prey. "Where the hell have you been? I have been here for hours. The badger has returned." He waited for no answer, instead opened the door, and drew the person in. The portal was shut silently behind him.

\* \* \* \*

At an intersection, where tunnels converged, Rachel paused, scanning the routes, uncertain. Christopher held no hesitation. Slipping his fingers about Rachel's he motioned toward the left. "This way."

She shook her head. "That would lead out of town, milord." Still assessing the tunnels, she peered into the darkness and chewed her lip. "I am not certain which will take us toward Abigail's home..."

"We're not going there." The conviction in his tone assured her there would be no arguing the point.

Lifting her torch, Rachel peered at him in confusion. "Is something amiss, milord?"

Choosing his words with care, Christopher answered cautiously, "The countess is involved in this some how."

Denial ready on her lips, Rachel shook her head adamantly. "Milord, I trust her as much as I trust you. She would never bring harm to me..."

Tenderly his hands cupped Rachel's cheeks and he gazed into her large eyes. "It was not my intention to accuse her of wrong doing, Rachel. Yet, 'tis clear she is part of this mystery. It is far too coincidental that her husband and I were found along the road exactly the same way. Mayhap she is as innocent as you claim, but I dare not take the risk. Though I doubt she would turn against you willingly, betrayal will come from her lips, whether by accident or not. In either case, I will not fall victim to whatever waits. 'Twould be best if we got out of the city, quickly!"

Ceding to his wishes, she nodded slowly. "All right, milord, if that is what you think best."

Again, his fingers cupped her cheeks. "Christopher."

Rachel shook her head. "You are the Marquess of Conyngham..."

"I am the same person who trudged through the mud with you, and slept in a cave for nigh on two weeks. Nothing has changed, Rachel."

"Everything has changed, milord," she whispered hoarsely.

The sheepish grin she had come to recognize when he was up to mischief, curled his lips. "If you would insist on a title, I would much prefer Mr. Jingles.... At least that name would not bring an army of men atop us."

Rachel could not hide the smile that crept to her lips. "Like him, it seems you have nine lives...."

His tone grew serious. "If you insist on using titles, I fear I will use all of them up rapidly. For both our sakes, it would be wise to use only given names." His lips lowered toward hers. "Besides...." He whispered as their mouths touched. "How would it look for my wife to call me by such titles?"

Rachel shook her head and quickly turned her face to the side. She knew full well his kisses would break down her resolve. "I cannot be your wife."

His arms wrapped about her, and pulled her close. "You said if I could prove there was no other, you would become my wife. Abigail made it abundantly clear I am not spoken for...."

Rachel twisted in his embrace. Her heart raced within her breast, and her breathing had suddenly become labored. Her attempts at escape only caused him to tighten his hold, and he gently pressed her to the stone wall of the tunnel, trapping her there. "I said I would consider it, milord ... however, that was before knowing who you are...."

He brushed the side of her neck with a soft kiss. "I am who you see before you, no different than a few hours past." His lips traced a path up her throat, leaving her gasping for air.

Rachel pressed her hands to his chest, wanting to put some space between them, but he refused to give even the slightest inch. "You are the Marquess of Conyngham, and I am nothing...."

"You are the daughter of the Ann St. John, Countess of Rutherford, who married beneath her station, to the captain of the guard. Regardless of what your father did, Rachel, you are a lady, and by rights should be treated as such." Rachel peered at him in alarm. How could he have known that? He continued before she could voice her question, "Though the knowledge was not in evidence prior to meeting Sarah and her mother, their reminder, sparked a memory of the scandal."

Ashamed, Rachel pushed him away. "Then you should fully understand why I can not marry you!"

His arms encircled her waist, and molded her body to his. Gently his lips moved over her brow. "I understand only that I love you. Nothing else matters."

Dizzy from his assault, she leaned against him wearily. "I have no dowry," she whispered as his mouth sought hers.

"None is required." His voice was a hoarse murmur near her ear.

Rationality was quickly fleeing, and she grasped for anything that might bring him to his senses. "What of the Queen?"

His lips flitted over hers like a gentle breeze. Her head swam and for several

seconds she allowed his advances. "I..." His mouth covered hers, hungry. "Do not..." Warm breath mixed with warm breath. "Wish to marry the Queen..." he mused.

A muffled laugh escaped her throat. "She must give her permission..."

A strange tone slipped into his voice. "I am dead to the queen, and all who once knew me. The only permission I need is my own. Let God proclaim this union, no other." Once more, his mouth sought hers. Tongues played a game of tag. "Marry me, Rachel. If indeed a murderer, I shall swing from the gallows." At her gasp, he caressed her nape tenderly. "All I ask is that you make what time I have left happy. Marry me!"

Her torch dropped to the ground, forgotten as her lips sought and found his. "You are no more a murderer than I, Christopher."

His assault became bolder. His hands moved along her hips, up the curve of her back, and through her hair. "Marry me," he repeated several times.

Knowing her determination was failing, Rachel queried softly, "Mayhap you only feel this way for me because I saved your life..."

"Though infinitely grateful for the life you have given back to me 'tis not what makes my heart threaten to burst from my chest when you are near. I love you, Rachel."

Her head spinning, she reached for one final straw.... "Mayhap I do not feel the same." Even as the words passed her lips, her heart threatened to snap with such denial.

Christopher wove his fingers through her hair. "Deny you feel as I do ... look me in the eyes, and proclaim what I feel when our lips touch is not so for you."

Rachel peered at him for several seconds. Did she love him, as he seemed so positive she did? Was that frantic beat of her heart when he was near love? Or was it the lump that formed in her throat when his lips touched hers? Searching his eyes for confirmation, she sighed in resignation. As his mouth covered hers, she murmured, "You certainly give a persuasive argument..."

Caressing her cheek, he encouraged, "And?"

Rachel shook her head. "And I cannot deny the feelings you evoke in me..."

He would not be deterred. "And?"

Rachel laughed softly as his lips teased hers. "And ... I love you."

Again, he pressed her to the wall behind her. "And?" His voice echoed in the narrow cave.

Rachel leaned against him, enjoying the feel of his arms about her. At last, ceding, she breathed near his ear. "And ... I will marry you."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Maxwell sent yet another crystal goblet to meet its end against the wall. Like the many before it, it shattered into hundreds of pieces and was scattered about the floor. The act did little to appease him. His anger near boiling, he vented his wrath with a scream that fairly rattled the rafters. Night had long since crept over the land, with nary a sign of the marquess or the girl. Yet again, they had outsmarted him. He knew the young marquess had friends willing to help him, and that the longer he eluded the captain of the guard, the more likely the plans put into motion months before were to go awry. Damn the wagon of gypsies that interrupted his quest to seek Christopher Conyngham's death near the crossroads! And damn that little wildcat for rescuing him!

Guards were posted everywhere Maxwell anticipated Lord Conyngham might receive the aid he sought; yet, none had reported anything unusual. Rising, he crossed the expanse to the door with nary a thrice of steps. His cape flailed behind like the wings of a giant bat. There was yet one place he had not thought to search for his foe ... where this nightmare began....

\* \* \* \*

His footfalls echoed in the long passage, signaling his arrival well before his visage appeared at the small opening of the barred portal. The space beyond was dark, and he pressed close to the iron rails, eager to relieve his fears. Though he saw no form, heavy breathing assured him the man was still there. At least this part of the plan had not gone awry.

Eager to find out if his foe had made contact, Maxwell squinted into the ebony cell. He would have to tread carefully, lest he reveal his blunder in allowing Christopher to escape. "Good morning." His adversary gave no response. None was expected. "The jailer tells me you've been up to your old tricks again." He shook his head, and made an admonishing sound as if scolding a child. "You will not find him as easily swayed as the last one. He would sell his own mother for money." He laughed; a deep guttural sound that resembled a dog barking. "As you have none to buy him off with, 'tis doubtful you will see anything beyond this cell ever again."

Sobering, Maxwell fished, "Had any visitors lately?" He snorted out a deep-throated laugh once more. "I mean human, not the vermin that dwell with you in the dark."

A rumbling sound began in the prisoner's throat, and erupted from his mouth. As it grew in volume, it became a guffaw that sent a shiver along Maxwell's spine. "He lives!" He pressed his face to the cold bars that separated one man from freedom, and the other from hell. "You have never come here without some purpose." He slapped the wall beside the door as another snicker echoed in the cell. "You allowed him to escape, and now wish to know if he has been here!"

Maxwell's face mottled red as he sneered, "I did not allow him to escape ... he was hunted down like the dog he is! I thrust that knife into his flesh with my own hands."

His companion shook his head. "Yet, you are here ... why?"

A tick tugged at Maxwell's cheek. The man within the cell had already answered his question. If only now aware the young marquess had survived, it was clear he had not come here as yet. "The man has a knack for falling into manure and coming up smelling like roses! Before I could bury his sorry carcass, he was rescued and nursed back to health."

Another gleeful round of cackles bounced off the stone walls. It riled Maxwell. Wrapping his fingers about the bars of the cell, he hissed, "Do not get your hopes up, milord!" It was the first time he was ever careless enough to use such a title. "I will find him. Even should he try to see the queen, she is convinced he is a murderer. He will never get the chance to plead his case."

Nonetheless, the man beyond the iron door only chuckled. "Soon, Captain, I shall be free from hell ... and you shall dwell there forever!" Then he slithered back into the darkness, and Maxwell heard the cot creak as he settled once more upon it.

Infuriated with the captive's audacity, Maxwell thrust one of the torches into the distance, and watched its flame sputter then finally cease. "If he is foolish enough to attempt rescue, you will both be silenced for eternity!" Then his footfalls boomed in the narrow tunnel until they faded completely.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher cautiously entered the small church. He and Rachel avoided the queen's guard dozens of times over the past few days, and he eyed the solitary figure at the front of the building for several seconds before advancing toward him. He was a tall, thin man with a head full of yellow blond hair, and a smile that brightened his face. Hesitantly, Christopher cleared his throat.

The willowy man turned about in surprise, his smile increasing over his features as he did so. It faded as he took in the younger man's disheveled appearance, and drawn face. "My son." He placed his arm about Christopher's shoulders, and guided him to a pew, where he instructed him to sit. "Are you alright?" His assessment was thoughtful. Christopher knew he looked on the verge of collapse, just as he felt it. Filthy, at least a week's growth of beard on his jaw, his clothing in tatters, he presented quite a picture.

Releasing a weary sigh, he ventured, "Reverend, I am in need of a safe haven." The last days of crawling through the woods on hands and knees, through mud and swamps, had taken their toll. He and Rachel were physically exhausted. Yet, they found no peace from Maxwell and his men. They had traversed from London toward Conyngham, sometimes sinking beneath icy water, and breathing through reeds to avoid capture. Now, both were near frozen, and incapable of flight.

The vicar eyed his visitor with a furrowed brow. "What is it I can do for you?"

Christopher pursed his lips for several seconds. Though the man seemed honest enough, he hesitated. Many was the man of God tempted by worldly things such as wealth, and the price on Christopher's head would be mightily tempting. This church was chosen on its humble appearance, and desolate location. Yet, he was reluctant to trust, even now on the verge of exhaustion. At last, spurred by the thought of Rachel, near frozen, waiting hidden in the trees, he nodded in acquiescence. "I have no choice but to put my trust in you, sir." Furtively, he scanned the small church once more.

"Rest easy, my son." The older man patted Christopher's hand. "None here will bring you harm. This is a house of God. Only He brings judgment in this place."

Christopher nodded. "I hope you are true to your word, sir." Swallowing the lump in his throat, he continued, "I would ask two favors of you, reverend." His shoulders sagged. "First, sir, I am in need of a safe place to stay for the night ... where the queen's guards would not seek me." He paused, waiting for a reaction from the man before him. When none came, he added, "I have been accused of murder, sir." His breath escaped his throat in slow ragged exhalations.

The minister nodded in understanding. "If 'tis absolution you seek, son, I can not give it. That is for God."

Christopher laughed softly. "I seek no forgiveness for a crime I did not commit, sir. My conscience is clean. I only ask for a warm dry place to rest."

The older man's eyes sparkled. "Well put, son." He glanced toward the door in annoyance. "The queen's guard have come and gone this day. They will not be back any time soon."

Christopher relaxed somewhat. If the reverend were true to his word, he and Rachel would be safe here. "Second, I would ask you to perform a wedding." He let the silence hang after the statement, holding his breath with anticipation.

His host's eyes widened. "A wedding, sir?"

Releasing the air in his lungs by slow degrees, Christopher inclined his head. "If 'tis my fate to swing from the gallows, I would ask to spend my last days in happiness...."

The reverend frowned. "Your bride is not under duress of any sort?"

"I come of my own volition, sir," Rachel whispered as she sank to the pew beside Christopher.

She too, looked weary and exhausted. Yellowed bruises marred her pale flesh. Mud matted her hair and body. Her gown was torn and beyond repair. "I'll agree to this union only on one condition." He paused, eying both for several seconds. "I'll know the whole of what has brought you here ... to assure myself there is no wrong in joining you in wedlock."

Christopher squeezed Rachel's hand in his. "Sir, there is not much to tell. I was attacked on the road near Derbyshire and left for dead." He turned his gaze to Rachel and smiled, the love reflected in her brown eyes warming his heart. "This beautiful woman nursed me back to health. I love her, and want to make her my wife."

The minister pursed his lips in thought. "And the murder accusation?"

The frown that creased his brow was deep. "In truth, sir, I do not know the exact details of that. My memory has faltered since my attack, and I recall no event before waking near Derbyshire. I do know I was carrying papers for the queen." He sighed, realizing with certainty the statement was a true memory, not just an assumption.

As if to assure the older man of his innocence, Rachel added quickly, "He was left for dead in a shallow grave, sir. Not typical practice for one accused of murder."

The minister nodded in agreement. "One of my parishioners was accused of theft, and was chased like a dog. Once caught, he was dragged through the streets, a rope looped round his neck, and locked in the stocks for five days," he snorted indignantly. "He was starving, and only took enough to feed his family." Shaking his head, he added, "My heart broke for him. He was a good man and a dear friend." For a moment, he was lost in thought. Of a sudden, he slapped his leg and rose.

Rachel and Christopher watched him hurry toward the back of the church in

bemusement. At the door he paused, and looked to his guests in surprise. "Well, for goodness sake, be on with you. My sweet April would skin me alive if I allowed you to wed looking like that!" Gesturing with his hand, he urged them to him. "Come, we will eat while water is heated for your baths." His eyes sparkled with his glee. "Then we will have a wedding!"

\* \* \* \*

Rachel slowly drew the cloth over her shoulders, allowing the water to soothe aching muscles. Her eyes closed as the heat relaxed and eased stresses. Slow languid breath slipped from her lips as she sank deeper into the brass tub scented with lavender.

The soft rap at the door brought her from her revelry, and reluctantly, she bid entrance to April Dorman, and her daughter Millicent. Though grateful for their attention, and kindness, Rachel was equally grateful for the small respite the bath afforded.

April bustled in, laden with towels and fresh clothes. She was as willowy as her husband, with vibrant red hair, and deep green eyes. Like her husband, her smile spread over her face, inclining anyone in her presence to feel her joy and smile back. Her daughter was the image of her, though in the prime of youth at ten and two, and the oldest of six children. April placed the items on a small table, and settled on a stool. Wistfully, she eyed Rachel's hair. "I envy very little of this world. Yet, I must admit, your hair is glorious. Were I to be an envious person, I would surely be so about that."

Rachel smiled. Odd how she had thought herself plain, yet Abigail had professed her beauty to rival any at court. With April, the delusion was the same. She was breathtaking, with lustrous auburn hair, and high cheekbone that accentuated her features. Her husband beamed when she was near, and clearly adored her. "You are quite lovely, April." Rachel assured her. "'Tis I who should be envious. You have a wonderful family, and husband."

April preened. "My Charles is all I could have hoped for in a husband." Her eyes sparkled. "I took his seed in my belly on our wedding night..." She blushed, realizing she spoke so freely in front of her daughter. Lowering her voice, she added, "Mayhap you will be as fortunate. What with all the turmoil surrounding you two, it would be a wonderful blessing from God for you to take your man's seed quickly."

In the bath, Rachel's smile faded, and she felt the blood drain from her face as an icy shiver crept along her spine. She had not considered a child. What if there was another woman to whom Christopher had professed his love? Would he abandon Rachel were his memory of undying devotion for her to resurface? Could Rachel face a life with a child, but no husband? Bile rose in her throat and she pressed her hand to her lips, quelling both it and the whirling motion of her head.

April, close enough to appreciate the pallor that drew the color from her cheeks, stroked her hair thoughtfully, and soothed her with soft whispers. "There dear, rest easy. I know taking a man to your bed for the first time can be a frightening experience, but sharing a bed in marriage is quite beautiful. Your man seems very gentle, and I am sure will treat you with utmost care."

Rachel dared not open her mouth to correct the other woman's assumptions, fearing her stomach might win the battle. Instead, she nodded stiffly, and swallowed down the lump in her throat. Nevertheless, she could find no strength to voice her trepidations. Instead, she forced a stiff smile to her lips, and tamped down her

reservations. Still, she resolved to speak with Christopher as soon as the opportunity arose.

However, she found no moment alone with him, and could drag forth no words to halt their union. She stood beside him, flushed, her stomach roiling, and spoke vows of devotion; all the while silently praying God would kill her before she had to face Christopher in the marriage bed. Yet, while the minister was performing the ceremony, she could not deny the swell of glory in her heart. She loved him and he professed to love her. Mayhap it would be enough.

That was the prayer she whispered as April helped her into a nightgown, and brushed her hair to a radiant luster. The older woman's inane babble was both calming and exasperating. The longer April remained in the room, the longer Rachel delayed the night to come. However, the longer she stayed, the more nervous Rachel became. At last, unable to hide her trepidations, she cupped April's hands in hers, and asked as gently as she could, "Could I have a bit of time to myself?"

Her host laughed. "Forgive me. 'Tis just that I am excited for you." She moved toward the door, yet stopped before reaching for the handle. "There really is nothing to fear. It can be a wonderful time ... just allow yourself to trust in him." Then she smiled, and left Rachel to her anxieties.

Having been politely shoved into the room, Christopher smiled sheepishly. "Their intentions are good," he murmured as he turned to watch the door close behind him.

Rachel returned a stilted smile. She was his wife, yet had never felt so alone in her life. Nervous, she faced the window, and closed her eyes as she tried to calm her quaking knees.

Christopher moved behind her and slowly wrapped his arms about her waist. Tenderly he pressed a soft kiss to her neck. "Did I tell you how wonderful you looked tonight?"

Rachel stiffened. His touch sent pulses of pleasure through her body. It also frightened her. "Thank you." Her whisper was hoarse.

Christopher traced a path along her neck to her ear lobe with his tongue, and then back down toward her shoulder. Rachel closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations his touch evoked. Her breath caught in her throat as his hand brazenly cupped a breast. Much to her chagrin, the nipple grew taut, encouraging him onward. Try as she might she could not force her body to deny the pleasure he drew forth.

When she moaned softly, her body arching against his hands, Christopher eagerly moved his thumb over the hard peak. His body cried for a release it had not known in many months. Yet, he forced himself to take his time. He did not want to ruin this night. Carefully he turned Rachel in his arms, and brushed her lips with his. "I love you."

Rachel shivered as his hands caressed her back, and moved over her hips. Yearnings she had never known caused her to press against him, wanting something she could not describe. Her head lolled on her shoulders as his mouth inched over her throat, and down to the swell of her breast. Heady, she kneaded her fingers against his shoulder. Her breathing came in short rapid pants that brushed his hair. For a long moment, she forgot the promise she made earlier that she would not consummate this marriage until completely certain no other woman held Christopher's heart.

It was the soft cry of Ella, the Dorman's youngest child, which brought Rachel from her bliss. For an instant, she pictured April drawing her daughter to her breasts,

cooing at her as she did earlier. The thought instantly sobered Rachel, and cooled her ardor. Of a sudden, she was pressing her hand to Christopher's chest, pushing him from her. A sob of frustration escaped her lips when he did not respond as she wanted.

"Christopher ... no!"

His tongue flicked over her nipple, and she gasped at the wondrous pleasure that raced through her body. However, even as her body responded, arching once more, her mind reeled with the certainty that she had to stop him. Again, she pushed at him. This time her arms locked, shoving until he stumbled backwards, confused at her drastic change.

"Rachel?" Cautiously he reached for her cheek, tenderly caressing it with the back of his fingers. "'Tis all right. I will not hurt you. 'Tis a beautiful thing when a man and woman come together...."

She brushed past him, wanting to be away from the corner, which had become a prison of sorts. Her heart beat a wild dance in her breast. Every ounce of her being wanted to rush back into his embrace. Every ounce of her brain convinced her it was a mistake. When Christopher advanced, she backed away hastily. A strangled sob escaped her lips. If he touched her again, she doubted she would have the strength to deny him. The best line of defense lay in keeping him at bay.

"Christopher we can't do this." Knowing he would convince her of his undying love were she to admit her fears, she paused to collect her thoughts. At last, she murmured hoarsely, her hand to her brow, "Everything has moved so quickly these past weeks. Just a short time ago I was nursing my mother and a stranger who had been left to die in the woods." Afraid her words would hurt him, she sighed forlornly. "I do not regret any of it, yet I have had no time to put things into prospective. Just over a month ago, I was alone and wishing for death. Now I am a wife, yet I am not sure I am ready to be so." Tears sparkled at the corners of her eyes. "Please give me time to better know you without the threat of the hangman looming over both of us ... please!"

His shoulders sagged. She was right. There had never been wooing and courting. Though he loved her beyond measure, they had spent little time getting to know one another. A soft smile curled his lips. Tenderly he caressed her cheek, and hair. "Rachel, you are more precious to me than anything. I will not deny that the urge to pick you up and carry you to that bed is stronger than I have ever experienced before. Yet, I understand your trepidations." He drew her hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to the palm. "If 'tis time you need, I shall give it until I can no longer hold myself away from you." An impish grin played at the corners of his mouth. "But I beg you be sure to tell me when you no longer need such a restraint, lest I miss your cues." The sparkle in his eyes mesmerized her. Leaning to the bed, he curled his fingers about a sprig of laurel, and grinned mischievously, as he waved it before her. "Legend says if two lovers pluck a laurel twig, and break it in half, each keeping a piece, they will be lovers forever." When she made no move to take the spring from his grasp, his brows arched teasingly. "'Tis tradition, Rachel."

Ceding to his good-natured whimsy, even after pleading they postpone their wedding night; she reached for the branch and snapped a piece off as she returned his smile. Encircling her waist, he lowered his mouth to hers, and sent her heart into a wild rhythm in her breast, as his lips opened, and his tongue played a game of tag with hers.

"Let the time pass quickly that we might know one another better, my sweet, for

you leave me with nary a thought save one, and the ache within me will only be satisfied by our union.”

\* \* \* \*

It was well before dawn when the two carriages departed the Dorman house. One traveled south on the road toward Conyngham. The other headed east, several miles before connecting with another road which also led to Conyngham. In the first Rachel and the vicar sat chatting, both tense, their faces drawn. They were at less a risk than the second carriage, which carried Christopher and April. Few of the guards had ever seen Rachel, and the group felt safe that she would not likely be recognized if stopped. Thus, she traveled openly, no disguise needed to bring her to her destination.

Christopher, on the other hand, was folded into a storage area beneath the seat, his body cramped and aching from the tight space. In the carriage April and her six children babbled and laughed excitedly, this being an adventure for them. None knew of Christopher's existence save April. It was far more likely he would arrive at his destination that way. If the carriage was stopped by guards, the children might disclose his whereabouts accidentally. Thus, none were told the well-kept secret.

A fine line of perspiration beaded Rachel's brow. Nervously she dabbed at it. Her hands trembled, and she could not gain control of her breathing.

Consoling, Charles leaned over and took her hand in his. “God put us together for a reason, Rachel. He is now, and always has been in control. Fret not, He will see everything works out for the best.”

She gave him a sincere smile, and released a rough shaky sigh. “You have done so much for us, Reverend. I fear for you and your family. It was never mine or Christopher's intent to put you in harms way. Should something happen to you, I would never forgive myself.”

He laughed softly. “I must admit this is the most adventurous thing I have done in quite some time. Though I fully understand the levity of the situation, I find the entire thing exhilarating.” He sobered at her down-turned mouth. “Rest easy, dear. All will be well.”

They had only been on the road about an hour when the call was heard to halt. Rachel drew in a slow deep breath as she watched the colors of the queen's guard surround the carriage.

Again, it was Charles' calm voice, which kept her from panic. “Say as little as possible. Let me handle this.”

The door was thrust open, and a burly guard leaned into the space threateningly. “Identify yourselves.” He sneered, though he could clearly see the reverend's collar about Charles' neck.

Charles smiled warmly. “Good day to you sir. I am the Reverend Charles Dorman.” He indicated Rachel with a slight flick of his hand. “My daughter Millicent and I travel to Conyngham.”

The guard turned his attention toward Rachel and a broad smile curled his lips. Bowing slightly, he puffed his chest and eyed her openly. “Ma'am.”

The reverend chuckled. “Now there my boy, don't go getting your hopes up. I have no doubt her husband would fight you to the death for her.” Across from him, Rachel paled. Her discomfort went unnoticed by the guard, who frowned and straightened as he backed slightly away from the carriage.

Charles smiled smugly. "What meaning do you have for stopping our carriage, sir?" He seemed so relaxed; to Rachel it appeared he abetted criminals every day.

The other man pursed his lips. "None of your concern, Reverend." He waved to the driver, allowing him to continue. "Be along with you, sir. But keep your eyes open...." Fumbling for words, he added, "Might be trouble along the road."

Once away from the group, Rachel sighed in relief. Searching the vicar's visage she murmured in awe. "You lied for me, sir. I am certain God did not intend you to break one of his commandments for my sake."

Charles' eyes widened in surprise. "Have I broken a commandment, my dear?" A slow languid grin curled his lips. "I think not. I said only that my daughter and I traveled to Conyngham. I did not say an untruth. All of my daughters are on their way there as we speak." A twinkle sparkled in his gray eyes. "Nor was it a lie when I said your husband would fight to the death for you. Now I ask you, what have I done against God's commandments."

Rachel laughed for the first time in hours. Nodding in concession, she relented. "My apologies, sir, your devotion to God is as true as it was yesterday."

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell straddled his mount in agitation. There was a prickling in him of fear, a rare occurrence for him, which would not be denied. He knew Christopher would head for Conyngham, as he knew he should have killed the other man near Derbyshire. If able to reach his home, the young marquess would find allies willing and able to help him. The patrols increased on every road, every avenue, yet Conyngham avoided capture.

A few days back, Maxwell was certain he had glimpsed the younger man and the girl near a swampy area. The chase had been futile, however, as if the two simply vanished. Even the dogs he hired from a local farm found no scent to follow. In the end, Maxwell took his frustrations out on one of his men. Yet, now three days later, his ire remained as brittle as before. His men wisely avoided him, leaving him alone in his misery.

For several moments, he watched the lone carriage amble over the road, as if in no particular hurry. A shiver raced along his spine. As if a hound on a scent, he spurred his steed. Within him, he knew the one he sought was close. Maxwell smiled as he spanned the distance to the advancing coach. At last, he could taste the victory denied for so long.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell pursed his lips as he viewed the bobbing heads of at least a half dozen children, necks craned out the windows of the conveyance, as he approached. Yet, he continued toward the carriage. Rarely did his intuition steer him wrong. Along side the coach, he ordered the driver to halt in the name of the queen, and received no resistance.

Abruptly five excited children filed to the road, chattering in one continuous babbling noise. They surrounded Maxwell in a flurry of swirling skirts, and wool coats. He noted only one was a boy, about seven years old, who was swallowed by older and younger sisters as he emerged from the conveyance.

Their mother joined them, still wrapping an infant in a warm blanket. Her smile was radiant. She made no attempt to calm her children as they milled about his steed. "Good day, sir," she greeted jovially.

Alighting from his mount, Maxwell leaned into the carriage and scanned the

inside silently. He was so certain Christopher was here. It riled him to find the space empty, save a few blankets for warmth, and discarded mittens and scarves.

A tug on his cloak drew him from the interior of the coach. With raised brows, he eyed the small girl of about four, smiling up at him. "We went to a wedding yesterday!" she announced. "Mama let me spread dried rose petals over the floor." She tilted her head as she asked, "Have you ever been to a wedding before?"

Having no time for such inanities, Maxwell brushed passed the tike in annoyance. For a moment, he stood in the road turning about slowly, as if by doing so, he could will his foe to materialize. His hands clenched to fists as he faced the woman once more. Never had his senses been so honed. "Where is he?"

Her response was as innocent as the look of bemusement in her large eyes. "Who is it you seek, sir? If 'tis my husband, the Reverend Dorman, you wish to see, I am afraid he is not with us this morn. He had business in town."

Patience having never been a virtue of his, Maxwell sidled closer and wrapped his hand about her wrist. "Don't play games with me, woman. I'll snap your neck right before your children's eyes."

Another tug on his cloak drew his attention from her face. "Mama said Rachel was the most beautiful bride she had ever seen." The girl wrinkled her nose. "Though she was very muddy and tattered before mama sent her to the tub."

Tenderly her mother reached for her hair, and gently stroked it. "I am certain this kind man doesn't have time for your tales, Bea. Hush now."

The smile that spread over his mouth was smug. Maxwell stooped to the child's side. "Tell me more. What color was her hair?" His tone was soft, cajoling, yet laced with rancor.

Bea nodded, only too glad to relate her part in the wedding. "I have never been to a wedding before. Mama helped Rachel do her hair on her head. It changed color when the lamplight caught it. One minute it was blond, the next gold, the next kind of like mama's." Her cheeks flushed with her excitement.

Maxwell squared his shoulders as he rose to face the woman once more. He remembered too well the enchanting way Rachel's hair caught the light of the torches carried by his men that first night they encountered one another. His gaze locked with her mother's, he asked the child another question. "And the man she took to husband, tell me about him."

Bea was practically dancing as she bubbled, "He was very handsome. Mama said if I were only a few years older, he would have had a hard time choosing between Rachel and me. His name was Christopher. Do you know him?"

The exhilaration that coursed through his bones left him slightly euphoric. "Indeed I do."

Carefully, she drew Bea against her hip. "Enough, Bea. We've many miles to go before we reach Aunt Martha's." With the flip of her hand, she directed the children back into the carriage. "Come now, dears, 'Tis cold out here, back into the hansom with you." She could not control the trembling of her arms as she lifted Bea to join her siblings.

Maxwell's hand to her wrist halted her ascent. "I am not a man to play games with, madam. Your children can easily become pawns should you choose not to tell me what I want to know." To punctuate his statement, he added, "Snapping their necks

would be as easy as breaking a twig.”

As if sucked from her, the color drained from her face. Her lip quivered. “What would you have me say, sir? They came to our church yester morn and asked for a safe haven for the night. My husband married them ... as was their wish.” She flinched as the pressure of his fingers increased.

Maxwell peered in at the children. “Is that the way of it, Bea?” he asked softly to the small girl.

She nodded enthusiastically. “Papa took them in the other carriage. Mama said he would join us at Aunt Martha’s later.”

Cracking his knuckles, Maxwell glared at the trembling woman anew. “Which road?”

The breath slipped from her lips in rapid pants as she peered at the juncture just behind the carriage. No more than twenty feet beyond the conveyance, three other roads joined the one they stood on.

Maxwell eyed her for several seconds. Her shaking made it difficult to determine which avenue she indicated. He pointed to the one leading west. “That one?”

She lowered her hand, and closed her eyes as if in distress. Maxwell took it as a sign of agreement. In a thrice he was mounted atop his steed. “Rest assured, madam, if I find you have steered me wrong, I will hunt you down, and kill you like the dog you are.” Then he spurred the horse into a frantic gallop, and left her standing by the carriage.

A nagging sensation began to gnaw at Maxwell with each passing mile. Reining his steed, he paused on a hilltop, and gazed in the direction he had come from. The carriage was no longer in view, yet, he knew if he forced the steed, he could easily overtake it once more. Of a sudden, he spurred the mount, sending it into a wild flight over the cold ground. The air misted before him as he steered the horse headlong toward his destination. Even the ache that gripped his lungs in this frantic flight did not deter him or slow his pace. He had been duped, and would seek revenge!

The two carriages parted, again in different directions. The first ambled along the road, as if in no particular hurry. The second left a trail of dust skirting the road behind it, as if the devil himself chased after.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell thrust the door open with such violence it ricocheted off the carriage wall, and slammed back on its hinges before finally ceasing movement. Though surprised to find a man in the seat beside the woman, he regained his composure quickly, and glared at the two icily. “Where are they?”

The vicar half stood, in defense of his wife. “Sir, this is a private carriage. As you can see, my wife and children fill its space. There is no room for you.”

Maxwell ignored the lanky man, and reached in to wrap his hand about the trembling woman’s throat. “I had better have answers before the count of three, madam, or you and your family will not live to see another day!”

The pistol leveled at Maxwell, caressed his nose as the hammer drew back. “Release my wife, sir, or be judged by your maker for your sins.”

Reluctantly, Maxwell did as ordered. “You dare threaten the captain of the queen’s guard?”

Steely eyes locked with his gaze. “It makes no difference who you are, sir. You go too far when you accost my wife this way. We have done nothing wrong.” He

searched Maxwell's face earnestly. "My wife tells me you seek the couple married in our church yesterday. They were an odd sort, and made haste to be away as quickly as possible. I left them to their own devices several hours ago." Pressing the bore of the gun to Maxwell's temple he added, "Now kindly remove yourself from our conveyance before my finger accidentally slips and you lose part of your face."

Seething, Maxwell clenched his fists several times. His luck had gone bad the day he set eyes on Christopher Conyngham, and he cursed the younger man vehemently. Weaving his finger before the frightened couple, he swore, "Be forewarned, should we ever meet again..." He smiled snidely, "And rest assured we will, I shall make you beg for mercy as I tear apart your children limb by limb." Then he threw his body to the saddle of his steed, and kicked the animal as he took out his rage.

At the crest of a hill, he halted for a second, the dust of another carriage a thick haze before him. Inspired, he sent the mount hurtling over the rough terrain, vengeance driven.

The driver reined the conveyance at Maxwell's barked shout, and peered at him in confusion. Maxwell offered no explanation, simply threw open the door as he had with the other carriage. Much to his annoyance, he found the coach empty. "Where are they?"

Shrugging innocently, the man responded, "Gone, sir. I was paid handsomely to spur the mounts, and keep the carriage at as fast a pace as possible ... until either the animals could endure no more, or I was stopped by anyone wearing the colors of the queen."

A roar erupted from Maxwell's throat. Above him, the sky filled with hundreds of birds, ousted from their perches with the violence of his scream. He vented another, and another until his throat grew dry. Yet, he found no relief for his wrath, and cursing Christopher once more, he hoisted himself into the saddle and scanned the countryside for the illusive one he sought. Ceding the victory for the moment, he nodded to the hills. "Very well, your lordship, have it your way. However, remember, whether we do battle on your terms or mine, I shall win. The fate of England rests in the balance. The stakes are far greater than you realize, and you and I are but pawns!"

## CHAPTER NINE

As Rachel slept against Christopher, her dreams were of his lips on hers and his arms about her. She felt him shift behind her, and bolted upright, fearing they were in danger. He only sat staring across the rolling hills with a strange look in his eyes. She followed his gaze over the pastures. With the sun setting far off ahead of them, it cast deep shadows over the land. On one hill, still three or four miles away was the silhouette of a large building, now beginning to glow with the flickers of candlelight in the windows.

Rachel tilted her head and peered at her husband. "What is that?"

Christopher sighed. "Pheasant's Roost, home!"

Elated at the thought his memory had returned, she asked excitedly, "You remember? That is wonderful."

Christopher continued to soak in the views of home. A quirky smile spread over his lips. "I can see every hall, know every passage. A thousand images are vying in my mind, of my youth, my family!" For a moment, he was lost in his joy. Slowly a frown replaced his smile. "Yet, I can not recall a single thing that happened in the days and weeks before waking in the cottage." His shoulders slumped. "'Tis frustrating. If only I could put into order the visions that flash in my mind of Maxwell. Mayhap this mystery would be solved, and I could put an end to all of it."

Rachel caressed his hand tenderly. "It will come." She pressed her head to his chest, to both feel his warmth, and hide the fear in her eyes. Whether Christopher remembered or not, the broken pieces of his past would eventually fall into place. Her only fear was that she would no longer be a part of his future. The thought soured her stomach, and she closed her eyes as tears threatened. He was the Marquess of Conyngham, and she was the daughter of a fallen man and a disgraced mother. It was doubtful his family would welcome her warmly.

\* \* \* \*

Night once more became their cloak. Feet were gingerly placed, breath held as guards scouted the woods surrounding the estate. The short distance took an eternity to traverse. Each yard gained, though a small victory left them both apprehensive and edgy, as they were forced to take cover behind meager shrubs and willowy trees. At last, however, they gained the gardens and worked their way closer to the house, darting behind naked shrubs and ghostly fountains now empty in readiness of winter.

Near a cluster of holly, Christopher halted and pursed his lips in contemplation. Though the house was no more than twenty yards beyond their meager cover, to gain its safety, they would have to risk being in the open. Unlike that night several weeks past, when Christopher had leapt into the clearing where roads crossed, this time he knew danger waited. Two guards, squatting as they tossed dice, leaned against the very place Christopher hoped to gain access to the house. Hidden behind a dense copse of evergreen, a secret door allowed entry. Yet, how to attain it?

Squeezing Rachel's hand, he edged along the shrubs until the men were out of

sight. "I'll distract them. The moment they follow me, run to the manor. Tucked behind the evergreens there is a door. A small lever will allow you within. Leave the door open slightly, that I will not have to search for it. Light no candle. Should any other enter with me, follow the wall until the passage opens to a large room. Another door will lead you into the manse, and safety." He was stern, expecting his orders be obeyed without argument.

Rachel eyed him for a moment. "Mayhap I should distract them. None here know me."

"I have already put your life in danger more times than I can count. Besides," he sighed and scanned the area for a long second. "I know what path will lead me to safety. 'Twould be best if I lured them away from the portal." His lips brushed hers tenderly. "I love you, wife."

Trembling fingers caressed his cheek. "Husband..." Another kiss was exchanged. Christopher released her and moved silently into the shadows, which swallowed him almost instantly.

Once more at the edge of the garden, Rachel attempted to slow the wild beating of her heart. Her blood pounded in her ears with such intensity, she barely heard Christopher as he called out. "Guards, quickly, the marquess is over here!" His voice faded as he made a hasty retreat into the thicket.

Instantly, both men lurched to their feet. However, before advancing, one halted and kicked at the trees. "Get up, you lazy good for nothing slob. He's been sighted!" Then he followed the first guard in the direction from which Christopher's shout originated.

Rachel had not expected another guard to be secluded in the brush, and was already clear of her hiding place before she realized her error. As the man rose and dusted off his breeches, she froze in mid step. She could not contain the gasp that passed her lips.

Surprised, the sentry's head snapped up, and he peered into the darkness apprehensively. The moon was just above the trees, casting a strange eerie glow over the area. Rachel bit at her lip as the soft breeze toyed with her gown, sending it weaving about her ankles, and clinging to her limbs. It played with her hair, teasing it as it flowed over her shoulders in soft waves. The man swallowed several times, yet remained in his place, as if frozen by some invisible shield.

Rachel was not certain why he did not come closer. She also held to her place, not sure herself what to do. He looked frightened. But she was equally so, and thus they stood, neither wanting to be the first to move and break the strange spell.

It was the sound of a twig snapping nearby that finally brought them both from the trance like state that gripped them. The guard glanced toward the sound, and immediately Rachel faded into the foliage, and slid behind a fat tree trunk. A noticeable shiver inched along his spine as he gaze returned to the spot where she was only an instant before. Pivoting on his heels, he dashed in the direction his cohorts had taken, and rounded the corner of the building with his cape flying behind him.

Certain her knees would buckle beneath her weight, Rachel hesitated the slightest second before lifting her skirts and racing into the clearing. She was only about half way across when her foot twisted in an indentation in the grass, and she fell forward. The impact knocked the wind from her, and she could not draw enough breath to rise.

Voices near the corner of the manse froze her in her place, and she pressed against the cold earth, fervently wishing to disappear into its hard soil. "I'm tellin' ye, I saw a ghost!" The first guard scanned the trees slowly, but could see no sign of the woman. His friend shook his head, and turned to go back toward his station on the other side of the house. "She were right there!" The sentinel almost pleaded. The other man barely slowed his pace as he vanished back into the night.

Rachel forced herself to stay calm. She held her breath, fearing he would hear it escape her lungs. Her ankle throbbed with pain, yet she forced herself not to think about it. Instead, she bit down on her lip to keep from making even the slightest sound. Her entire body trembled as he moved within inches of her, even stepping on her hair as he passed. Nevertheless, his eyes were riveted on the woods, and gave no notice of her prone on the ground beside him. Finally, he forced himself to move on. His gaze never left the trees, and Rachel almost sighed in relief when he rounded the corner at the other end of the house, leaving her alone in the clearing.

Attempting to stand, Rachel staggered several feet, her ankle unable to take her weight. A desperate sob passed her lips as she peered toward the corner of the manse, fearful the guard would return. The copse of trees behind her seemed a thousand furlongs away, the manor house, though closer, also appeared a distance unfathomable to reach as her ankle throbbed and sent shooting pain up her leg.

All of a sudden, warm arms enveloped her, sweeping her against a broad hard chest, and fair taking the air from her lungs with the motion. "What happened?" Christopher's visage loomed above her, the concern in his blue eyes sending an embarrassed flush to her cheeks. He waited for no reply, as he hastened to the side of the house, and eased her to the ground beside the cluster of trees. Only once secreted beyond them, the entrance to the manor revealed as he pressed to it with his shoulder, did he ask after her well fare. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Humiliated, Rachel looked at her trembling hands rather than face him. How could she tell him she had fallen into a rabbit hole, and nearly cost them everything? "I am sorry ... I tripped."

Sealing the door behind them, casting them into darkness as bleak and consuming as that of the crypts they traversed with Sarah, she felt his arms encircle her once more. The warmth of his breath against her hair left her weak, and she sagged into his embrace, relishing the feel of him. The tremor that edged his voice assured her of his anxiety. "I thought for certain he would step right on you!" His lips brushed her cheek. "I was ready to come screaming from the hedge so he would leave you, and you would have a chance to get to the safety of the trees!"

Allowing her head to rest against his shoulder, she whispered. "I feel so foolish, I could have caused us both irreparable damage."

Even in the blackness, his words caressed her. " 'Tis I who am the fool! I should have never let you be put in this situation! Would that I could go back in time and find a different place to encounter Maxwell on the road!"

Reaching up to his face, she traced a path over the features that remained with her even in sleep. "Then I never would have met you." The sorrow of her tone echoed in the narrow passage. "And I would have spent the rest of my days looking for something more." In response, he cupped her face in his hands, and pressed a passionate kiss to her quivering lips. For a brief time she forgot the pain in her ankle, and her heart.

\* \* \* \*

Richard Smalley felt the presence hovering over him, and came from his sleep with a start! His eyes widened as the shadow before him became a man, and he bolted upright in the bed! He swung wildly, missed, and tried once more. A strong hand gripped his, and forced it down against the sheets. "Be still, Richard!" The figure before him warned. He quieted, leaned forward, and peered into the darkness at the other man.

A slow hiss of air was sucked into his lungs. For an instant panic filled him. As the intruder moved back slightly, and the light of the moon illuminated his features, Richard sighed in relief. "Christopher! Is that you?" He reached for a candle ready to light it, but Christopher gently forced him to replace it on the table.

He shook his head. "No light, Richard. We don't want to attract any unwanted attention." He moved toward the door. "Get dressed, and meet me in the room next to the wine cellar." Pausing, he glanced beyond the other man to the woman slumbering beside him in the large bed. "Best to leave my mother to her dreams for a while. We've much to discuss, and precious little time." Then he moved to the door, and disappeared into the darkness.

Down the stairs with great haste, Richard was still tucking his shirt into his pants when he entered Christopher's study, and pulled on a thick knob by the fireplace. Silently a piece of the wall slid away, and he stepped into a dimly lit area beyond. He took up the torch Christopher left for him, and moved along the passage until he entered yet another room. Here, the light was bright, and he gazed in wonder at the two people before him. Christopher he knew, yet the young woman beside him was a mystery. He eyed them both for several seconds before finally facing Christopher with raised brows.

"We have been worried sick ... we heard tell you were dead!" He sighed in relief. "Still, I knew if that were true, there was no need for all the company we have had of late."

Christopher shook his head. "Though Maxwell did his best to ensure otherwise, we have outsmarted him." He took Rachel's hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Rachel saved my life."

Richard eyed them closely. There was more here than met the eye, of that he was certain. He had never known Christopher Conyngham to bring women here, to this secret place hidden in the wall. He gazed at the young woman silently. She was very lovely, but young, mayhap sixteen or seventeen, and nothing like the ladies Christopher usually spent his time with.

Christopher slipped his hand about Rachel's waist. "Richard, stop staring! You are being rude!" He gently pulled Rachel closer. Nodding toward the slender man Christopher introduced her to him. "Rachel, Richard Smalley, the Earl of Manchester, and my stepfather." To Richard, he crowed, "May I present the Lady Rachel, my wife!"

The smile that spread over Richard's features was slow in coming. "Wife?" he murmured, confused. What of the Lady Catherine, already promised to be Christopher's wife? It could not be! Christopher had only been gone just under two months! No one married in so short a time! What of the queen? A thousand questions raced through his mind. Finally, he gave up trying to answer them, and gazed at Christopher with a strange twinkle in his eyes. Catherine had never been what Richard considered a good match for his stepson. Ten years Christopher's senior, Catherine was opinionated and vengeful, and made no attempt to hide her dislike of how things were run at Pheasant's Roost.

Richard had, however, kept his opinions to himself, rather than stir up trouble. Christopher was not a child, and quite capable of selecting a wife without input from an old man. Yet, the earl could not disguise his elation with the knowledge Catherine no longer had Christopher's fancy. Taking Rachel's hand in his, he brought it to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to the back. "What wonderful news." An impish grin curled his lips. "'Tis not everyday a man returns from the dead, with a wife in tow, no less."

Rachel assessed him from behind lowered lids. As tall as Christopher, and mayhap a stone heavier, he was fit and hale. Deep blue eyes sparkled back at her, hinting at mischief. Though gray had long ago taken over his hair, it was thick and curled slightly at the edges. His nose was slender, slightly pointed, above expressive lips that seemed to wear a perpetual grin. His easy smile relaxed her somewhat, and she returned it. "It is a pleasure to meet you, milord."

Richard chuckled. "Richard will do fine. Besides, if there is anyone here titles should be afforded to, 'tis you, Marchioness."

Uncomfortable with such an address, Rachel shook her head hastily. "Nay, sir, I would much prefer given names, also."

He nodded in agreement, and then turned his attention to Christopher. "I am certain you've more important things to discuss than this."

The frown that creased his lips was deep, leaving indentations at the corners of his mouth. "In due course, Richard. First, I need your help getting Rachel to my rooms."

For the first time she realized how pale he was, and looked at him closely. Tenderly her fingers caressed his brow. "Christopher, are you all right?"

"I fear I can not carry you to our rooms." His gaze lingered on his hands for several seconds. "Our wild dash from the trees drained what little strength I had left."

The ragged sigh that eased from her throat was slow in its escape from her lips. "Nor do I need such gallantry. I twisted my ankle, 'tis all. Such heroics are not necessary." To prove her point she gingerly slid from the stool she was perched on, and applied weight to her swollen leg. Instantly white-hot pain darted through the limb, and she stumbled back until her fingers gripped the chair for balance.

Christopher wrapped her in his arms immediately. "Now who is being heroic?" Over his shoulder he queried, "Richard, if you could take one side, I shall take the other."

Brushing Christopher's hand from his young wife, Richard scooped her into his arms, and pursed his lips. "Lead on, sir. I am not so frail I am unable to help a maiden in distress."

Rachel blushed deeply. "Truly, this is not necessary." Nevertheless, her protests were silenced as Richard advanced through the passage, Christopher leading the way with the torch held high.

Once settled in the large four-poster bed in his chambers, Christopher pressed a soft kiss to her brow. "Rest awhile, Rachel. I've some things to speak with Richard about." At the door, he smiled at her. "I won't be long." Then he left her to the slumber that quickly took her into a world of dreams.

\* \* \* \*

A tender kiss brushed Lauren's cheek, bringing her from the realms of sleep. Content to remain in the warmth of the bed, she murmured, "Did you not get enough intimacy last night, Richard?" She stretched lazily and opened her eyes fully expecting to find her husband above her. A scream rose to her lips, ready to be vented as she gazed

into the sparkling eyes of her son. His fingers against her mouth stifled the noise. Wide blue eyes peered up at him as if seeing a ghost.

Slowly Christopher released his hold and smiled at his mother. "Rest easy mother, I am as alive as you."

For several moments she simply gazed at him, her heart lodged in her throat, and her breathing rapid pants. Trembling fingers traced the line of his jaw. "Christopher? Is that really you?" Immediately tears glistened on her cheeks. "Richard insisted you were not dead, yet I would not allow myself to have such hope." Her voice faltered. "Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive." He moved toward the door. "Put on your robe and join me in the great hall. I've much to tell you." As an after thought, he added, "Do nothing to alert the guards without. My death is still very much a possibility."

As her husband did in the early morning hours, Lauren Smalley, Countess of Manchester, near flew down the stairs, still tying the sash about her robe. Breathless, she halted at the foot of the staircase, and stared at the trio gathered near the fireplace. A bit confused, she smoothed her robe before advancing. Reaching trembling fingers toward her son, she gratefully allowed him to draw her close, and embraced him warmly. "Christopher." She breathed against his shoulder. "I was afraid I had dreamed you." Tenderly, she pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank God you are safe." Pulling back slightly, she surveyed his lean figure, and pale complexion. "Though you look a fright. What on earth happened?"

Her son drew her hand to his lips. "All in due course, mother." He turned toward the lovely young woman seated in a large wingback chair by the fire. "First I would like to introduce you to someone." Christopher led his mother closer to the fire. "Mother, may I present Rachel." He squeezed her hand excitedly. "My wife."

Lauren could not hold back the gasp that escaped her lips. "Wife?" She searched her son's visage for denial. Christopher was well known for his pranks, and she studied him for the hint of mischief.

Richard slipped his arm about her waist. "It seems Rachel quite swept him off his feet."

As her husband had earlier, Lauren forced a smile to her full mouth. "What of..." Her husband's nudge ceased the question from being expressed, and she cleared her throat uncomfortably. A momentary silence followed as she assessed the younger woman. She was quite beautiful, yet she seemed so young. At last, Lauren reached for Rachel's hands. "My dear, welcome to Pheasant's Roost. Apparently Christopher has been quite busy while away."

Rachel smiled at the older woman. She had her son's dark hair and deep blue eyes. Both shared the same nose. Her chin was slightly pointed, but not so much to take the feminine features from her visage. She was trim, petite in stature and in waist. She was as beautiful as her son was handsome, and Rachel had no doubt his good looks came from his mother. "It is a pleasure to meet you, milady."

Lauren waved her hand. "Pish posh! Such titles belong at court. I would much prefer mother or Lauren, whichever you feel more comfortable with."

Rachel had no time to respond. From the staircase, a shrill scream echoed through the great hall. "Christopher Allen Conyngham!"

As a group the foursome turned. Christopher released a ragged sigh. "Alexia."

He hurried forward, his hands raised to both greet his sister, and silence her outbursts.

Richard rolled his eyes. "That, Rachel, is Alexia, Christopher's sister, and the world's most skilled dramatist."

A bit indignant, Lauren corrected. "'Tis only that she is very vocal about things."

"I believe outspoken is a better word....," Richard interjected.

Christopher enveloped her in his arms and pressed a tender kiss to her brow.

"Lexie, you are positively radiant." He held her at arms length, and surveyed her round belly. He placed his hand to her swollen stomach, and smiled warmly. "Motherhood agrees with you. You are breathtaking."

Alexia, obviously in no mood for such lighthearted bantering, shoved at him, and gave him a scathing glower. "This time, Christopher, you have gone too far with your pranks. Have you no idea what you put mother through?" She waved her hand toward the massive front portal. "Guards are more abundant than servants, and think nothing of entering this house as if they own it." She jabbed him with her finger. Lifting her chin indignantly, she added, "I for one am disgusted with your actions."

The bemusement of her statement clear in his furrowed brows and deep frown, Christopher glanced from her to his mother before taking her hand and squeezing it gently. "Lexie, dear, you haven't changed a bit. How that kindhearted man you call husband puts up with you is amazing." He began to drag her toward the group by the fire. "But your waspish tongue will have to wait. I've someone I want you to meet."

Christopher stopped before Rachel's chair. The smile that warmed his features took his wife's breath away. "Rachel, though her bark is enough to send even the hale of heart fleeing, I would like to present my sister, Alexia." He faced his sister, his lips curling into a broad grin. "Lexie, it gives me great pleasure to introduce you to Rachel, my wife."

The snort that escaped Alexia's throat was guttural. Stamping her foot, she pulled away from her brother, and crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, really Christopher, you are unbelievable! As if your disappearance was not enough. Now you show up here with ridiculous tales that are simply unfathomable!" She barely gave Rachel a second glance as she continued. "Mother, how can you allow this to continue?" She released a dramatic sigh. "I could forgive your foolishness, Christopher, if you would but cease this inane game. But to think any of us dumbfounded enough to believe you've come home with a wife, why 'tis..." She paused, as she seemed to search for the word that would suit the situation. "Why 'tis absurd!"

Christopher eyed her quizzically. "Absurd?" he asked incredulously. "How so?"

Richard lifted his hand toward his stepdaughter. "Alexia, you have no idea how much a fool you are making of yourself."

"Me?" she huffed. Casting her hand toward Rachel, she retorted, "I am not the one attempting to convince everyone I have brought home a wife, who cannot be more than twelve, for heavens sake! Besides, Richard," she sneered, "Am I truly supposed to believe he has forgotten all about Catherine, and the betrothal he announced himself, just before leaving two months ago?"

The silence that remained after Alexia's outburst was almost as deafening as her retort. Christopher turned toward his parents, his jaw slack. There was no need for verbal confirmation. The truth was clear in the down turned mouths of both, and the avoidance of eye contact.

Of a sudden, the room seemed small, and void of oxygen. Rachel could not draw enough air into her lungs. Desperate, she rose on quaking legs, wanting to flee. Immediately, her ankle throbbed and she teetered. Knowing if she remained, she would lose the contents of her stomach, she braved a step. She bit her lip as the pain seared her from her toes to her knee. Yet, she refused to cede to it. Another step darkened the vision at the corners of her eyes. Undeterred, she took another, and another. However, by the time she gained the fifth, she could take no more. Darkness clouded her vision, her head swam, and her stomach roiled. The last thing she heard was Christopher shouting her name.

\* \* \* \*

Slowly the fog that gripped her lifted, and Rachel opened her eyes hesitantly. Christopher peered at her with furrowed brows. Tenderly he caressed her cheek. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

Added, she gazed at him for several seconds. She remembered sitting by the fire ... someone was shouting ... and darkness. Dragging her hand over her face, she queried, "What happened?"

Christopher brushed at a tress of hair against her cheek. "You fainted."

Rachel attempted to rise, but found the task more than her spinning head could handle, and relaxed back against the pillow. "Don't be ridiculous, Christopher, I have never fainted in my life."

An impish grin curled his lips. "There is always a first time for everything." His eyes sparkled, and he released a weary breath. "Had I knowledge to the contrary, I might believe you with child."

The statement sobered Rachel instantly. Memories of the tirade Alexia displayed in the great hall rushed through her senses. Her cheeks grew cold as the blood drained from them. Her lips trembled, and tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. "You are betrothed," she murmured hoarsely.

Christopher also paled. Straightening, he released a ragged sigh. "So it would seem." He pursed his lips in concentration. "God's truth, I can't recall a single feature of the woman. No matter how hard I try, no memory of her comes to mind ... not one."

Rachel swallowed passed the lump in her throat. She was certain her heart would break with the next words she voiced; yet spoke them just the same. "Christopher, I would step aside and go back to Derbyshire, if 'tis your desire to honor the betrothal made before we met."

His jaw slack, eyes reflecting the pain she inflicted with such words, he looked at her in disbelief. "What?" He was incredulous.

Rachel drew a slow breath. "We have not...." She groped for words. "This is not a marriage other than in word." Certain her heart would snap, her voice faltered. "Thank the Lord I did not allow you to consummate this union." The words were mumbled beneath her breath, but loud enough for him to hear.

Shoulders squared, he locked his gaze with hers, nostrils flaring with his indignation. "What?" His tone alerted her to her error. Curling his fingers about her arms, he lifted her from the pillow and gave a gentle, yet forceful shake. "Are you saying you kept us apart? Why?"

Tears finally won the battle and cascaded down her cheeks. "I feared this very thing, Christopher. I only wanted to be certain there was no one else before we...." She

paused. "I could not have endured raising a child alone. I am not as strong as Sarah."

"Why would you bring a child up alone?" The rancor in his tone surprised her.

Rachel fought the turmoil within her. "As I said, if 'tis your desire I would honor your wishes and return to Derbyshire."

Releasing her back among the pillows, he snarled. "I am not sure which insults me more, madam, that you think me capable of something so callus, or that you think I would take the vows we spoke before God so flippantly!"

The words bit into her tender psyche, forcing a strangled whimper from her trembling lips. "I only thought ... I only wanted what is best for you, Christopher. I love you, but do not want to burden you if there is another you wish to take to wife."

Even angry, his finger traced the path of her tears, and he released a deep exhalation of air, his tone softening, "You are what is best for me, Rachel. I love you with every ounce of my being. Nothing will change that. What took place before we met is in the past where it belongs. You are my wife, no other will take that position." Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers. "Though I understand your reasoning, I find it misguided." He tongue forced open her lips, and played a game of tag with hers.

Her response, tongue darting against his, breasts pressed to his chest, drove rational thought from his mind. His anger quickly waned. Curious to see how far she would allow his advances to go, he inched his palms along her arms, eliciting gasps from her lips. Venturing a bit more daring, his mouth departed hers, and began a wicked game of tag with her chin, the line of her jaw, the curve of her throat. Encouraged by her moans, he moved his hands along the swell of her hips, then slowly back up until they cupped her breasts. No resistance was given, and he plied his thumb and forefinger to the nub, gentle as he pinched it until it grew taut beneath his questing touch. Her breath escaped her lungs in slow exhalations. Her lips parted, as her eyes closed.

Encouraged, Christopher slipped his hand within the material, drawing it down over the swell of her breast until the pale orb was exposed to his hungry gaze. A startled gasp passed her lips as his mouth followed suit, his tongue flicking over the nipple until it hardened against his warmth. Again, she arched. Her hands cupped his head, fingers weaving through the thick tresses, as she molded him to her.

Working their way over her ribs, and lower to the curve of her hips, his fingers provoked ragged pants from her throat. Inching her skirts toward her thighs, Christopher hesitated, his mouth leaving her breast as he locked his gaze with hers. "I will not deny the longing within me Rachel. Neither will I force you. Will you hold yourself from me yet again?" His voice was raspy; barely a whisper as he swallowed the lump in his throat.

In response, she cradled his face in her hands, and drew him along her body. Their lips joined, her breath warm as she slipped her tongue deep in his mouth. "She means nothing to you?"

In mock annoyance, he pulled from her, and gave her an attempt at anger as he retorted, "Would I be so eager, sweet, to see this marriage consummated if she did?"

Once more, she drew him close. Against his ear, she murmured, "Take the doubts from me Christopher." A moan growled from her throat, as his fingers began again their journey along her waist, over the flesh of her thigh, still exposed, and caressed through her undergarments that secret place no other touched before.

Her fingers kneaded the tight muscles along his shoulders. A gasp broke from her

lips as his tongue circled the indentation at the base of her neck. "Love me, Christopher..." she murmured as she entwined her fingers through the thick tresses of his hair.

Slipping from the bed, he offered his hand, and pulled her to him, enjoying the heat of her body to his. Turning her about, he worked the laces of her gown, as he had at the inn, forcing short gasps from her lips. This time, his mouth caressed each inch of skin, replacing his fingers as they moved lower. Allowed to pool at her feet, the gown was followed quickly by both the corset and undergarments. When at last she stood naked, he moved his hands over her flesh, investigating each indentation along her back, until his palms flattened to her buttocks.

Though eager to find the release he craved, he took his time, relishing the soft purrs his touch evoked. His shirt and pants followed her clothing to the floor next to the bed, and he allowed her a long moment to return the perusal with a languid smile curling his mouth. Her assessment left him swallowing hard, his adam's apple bobbing as her gaze lingered on his swollen manhood. "My sweet, you look at me like that, and this union will not be long in the making." His voice was hoarse, his breathing labored.

Lifting her hand slightly, she asked hesitantly, "Might I touch you?"

Again, his adam's apple rose and fell several times. "Aye, madam," he murmured. "But be forewarned, my need is great, and such contact might well have me casting you against the pillows far more quickly than you expect."

His eyes closed as her fingers circled him. For a long moment, he exhaled no breath, it being lodged beyond the lump at the base of his neck. Guiding her to the bed, he pressed his torso to hers, applying just enough pressure to put her off balance. Tumbling back against the sheets, she found no time to rise, as he plied his body over hers. His lips burned a path along the curve of her neck, down over the creamy soft skin of her breast, lower still to her ribs. Each kiss left her exhaling labored breaths that exited her mouth in short quick pants.

Parting her thighs, his fingers delved into the secret warmth of her womanhood, pinching the nub there until it too grew hard beneath his touch. She arched, her head falling back against her shoulders as his finger slipped within. A soft rumble of laughter threatened in his chest as she thrashed, her legs stretching out, and then curling back toward his hand. In response, he placed his thumb against the nub, and stroked it as his finger caressed, moving in and out.

The vocal scream that erupted from her lips released the chuckle from him, and he lifted his gaze to view the smoky pools of her eyes. "Shall I stop, sweet?" he whispered.

Lifting her head from the pillow, she took several seconds to answer, her hips joining his fingers in a thrusting motion. "I ... is it supposed. Oh!" The question remained unspoken as he withdrew his fingers from her, and slid his body over hers. Her eyes widened as he maneuvered within her, his hardness taking the words from her lips. Slow, he filled her, remaining still until she arched once more. It was the slow motion of her hips to his, which assured him her need, was as great as his. Joining her in a dance as old as time, he moved within her until unable to hold back. Then they soared toward the heavens....

## CHAPTER TEN

Nestled in each other's arms, they gave no thought to those they left in the great hall downstairs. Rachel pressed against her husband, enjoying his warmth, and the gentle caress of his fingers along the soft flesh of her hip.

The door to their rooms burst open, and instantly filled with frills and lace. Alexia huffed as she swept into the space. Her brows rose as she viewed the couple in the bed, nonetheless made no move to excuse herself, and continued forward. "Christopher, after what Richard says the two of you have been through, I find it amazing you have the energy for such romantic interludes." She eyed Rachel as she sank beneath the blanket, humiliated. "Rachel, is it?" She plopped to the edge of the bed, and smiled. "I owe you my sincerest apologies."

Pulling the quilt over his midsection, Christopher asked snidely, "Lexie, can't this wait?" A crimson blush fused his cheeks. "You intrude at an awkward moment."

Ignoring her brother, she gave her attention to Rachel. "Richard says I was quite shrewish downstairs." She sighed deeply. "Can you imagine? Me shrewish? Richard is like all men. They understand nothing of being with child." She glanced to Christopher and snorted. "You try carrying all this extra weight, for nine months. For that matter, endure the mood swings ... one minute laughing, the next sobbing." She returned her attention to Rachel. "They are oblivious. Anyway, dear, I really must apologize for my tirade earlier. My only excuse is ignorance." To Christopher she retorted icily, "This really is all your fault, Christopher."

Indignant, he half rose from the pillows. "My fault, how so?"

Alexia snorted. "Oh Christopher, for heaven's sake, even you can not be so blind." She flounced from the bed, and smoothed her gown as she twirled about in a circle. "You are not exactly innocent in all this. Were you not such a prankster, I would never have thought ill of you. Besides, had you simply told me about your ordeal, none of this would have happened."

His eyes deep pools of violet blue, Christopher rose on an elbow, and glared at her. "I don't recall ever being given the opportunity. That razor sharp tongue of yours cut me to the quick before I ever opened my mouth."

Rachel remained silent beside him, the quilt to her chin, and her face crimson with embarrassment. At that moment, she was not certain being a part of this family was what she wanted.

Alexia faced her brother with hands on hips, and flashing eyes. "Don't you dare try to change the subject. Rachel and I know full well this was your fault." She looked at her sister-in-law for support. "Men are such ridiculous creatures. They never take the blame for anything." Giving another dramatic sigh, she crossed to the door. "Well any way, I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for acting so foolish downstairs. I hope you do not think me some horrid monster. It really would not have happened had Christopher simply spoken up." Then she sidled through the door, closing it gently behind her, and leaving the twosome in the bed gazing after her with slack jaws.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell eyed the manor through squinted eyes. A deep frown creased his mouth and brows. The surety that Christopher was at the family home was as certain as the broken nose that distorted Maxwell's features. He watched as candlelight began to flicker in the windows and smiled. "You've upped the stakes, milord, but rest assured the outcome will stay the same. Even should your entire family have to suffer for your error, so be it. They are a small price to pay for the future of England." Spurring his mount toward his destination, he added softly, "On the morrow, we shall end this game."

\* \* \* \*

Stillness held the land in its grip. From the realms of sleep, Rachel crept. For a moment confusion welled in her as she surveyed the unfamiliar room. The steady breathing of the man beside her assured her he slept undisturbed, at last at ease after so many nights in fear. Though chilled to the bone, with the fire banked low in the hearth, Rachel drew a robe borrowed from Lauren tightly about her shoulders. Cautiously she inched toward the window.

Often, in her youth, she wandered through the woods and listened to the night sounds, discovering an assortment of creatures that only viewed the world from the curtain of darkness. She longed for such freedom now, yet knew of the dangers beyond the manse. Weary, she reached her fingers to the cold glass of the window, and sucked in a sharp breath as its icy chill left her fingers tingling. For several moments, she stood gazing out over the dark land. The rolling hills reminded her of Derbyshire, and the life she left behind there. A weary sigh escaped her lips. That life was lost to time now. Her family was gone, as well as the home, she shared with them.

Christopher was all she had left. Though deeply in love with him, the thought saddened her, and she pressed her forehead to the pane as a bit of anxiety rushed through her. What would she do if Maxwell finally caught up with them? Without Christopher, she had nothing. His family owed her no loyalty, and she doubted they would allow her to remain at Pheasant's Roost alone.

Shaking off her melancholy, Rachel focused once more on her surroundings. She peered toward the gardens below, and sucked in a slow hiss of air. There, gazing at her with wide eyes and slack jaw was the sentry from the night before. Locked in the spell once more, she could not move. For an eternity, they stood thus. Only when the man staggered toward the wall beneath her window, and disappeared from view, did she release the air from her lungs, and sag against the window on limbs suddenly quaking.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher's hands exploring her body brought her from the realms of sleep. She stretched and purred as he woke her with hot kisses, and warm breath upon her skin. Reluctant to break the spell, she arched, allowing him access to every inch he sought. His hands explored, caressing her flesh, leaving it tingling and eager for his touch. She released a shaky breath of air as his tongue followed the path of his fingers, eliciting purrs from her throat. She welcomed his advances, her body pulsing with pleasure as he once more took her to the clouds....

Her head in the crook of his arm, she brushed her fingers over the furring of hair on his chest. Knowing avoiding the subject would only make things worse, she murmured, "Christopher, I think I have done a horrible thing...."

Lifting his head from the pillow, he gazed at her for a long moment in silence. "I

assure you madam,” he grinned as his gaze swept her flushed body, “There was nothing horrible about it.”

The crimson color deepened, and she returned his smile sheepishly. “Making love to you would never be anything but wonderful.” Her smile faded, and she leaned on her elbow to look him in the eyes. “Last evening, I woke, restless and feeling a bit sad for myself.” She chewed at her lip, nervous as she ventured to tell him her tale. “The guard was there ... beneath the window.” Her eyes widened as she continued, “I did not know what to do, Christopher. As happened the other night, I froze. This time surely he will sound an alarm.”

Cradling her in his arms, he pressed a soft kiss to her brow. “Then let us enjoy each other’s company a while longer before this paradise is taken from us.” He nestled against her, breathing deeply the scent of her hair, and drifted once more into the realms of slumber.

\* \* \* \*

*Pleased things had gone well with the queen; Christopher stepped from the antechamber into the corridor beyond. The door barely closed behind him when a figure blocked his exit, and he halted in surprise. For a long moment, he peered into the eyes of the Chancellor in confusion. “Forgive me, lord Chancellor...” A bit flustered by the other man’s nearness, Christopher attempted to sidle past, but was prevented by the other man’s outstretched arm.*

*“You speak of treason, milord.” The words were whispered from pale lips. Annoyed his conversation with the queen had not been completely private, Christopher glared at the chancellor, and began to shoulder past once more. Trembling fingers were curled about Christopher’s arm, ceasing his attempt at departure. “Before you condemn me, know this, sir. I was duped...”*

*Bewildered by the statement, Christopher tilted his head and peered at the other man for several seconds. “You know something of the threat against the queen?”*

*His words seemed to echo in the passage, and instantly the chancellor pressed shaking fingers to his lips. “Are you insane? The walls here have ears!” he whispered frantically, and glanced about in nervous agitation. Swallowing hard, the adam’s apple bobbed violently at the base of the chancellor’s throat. His nostrils flared with his anxiety.*

*Sweat beaded his brow. Breathing seemed difficult. Raking blanched fingers over his mouth, he scanned the corridor once more, as if fully expecting to find the eavesdropper he feared. “I have done a grievous thing. Go to the prisoner in the catacombs ... he can help.” His breath came in short rapid pants. Each moment seemed to strengthen his anxiety. Pulling Christopher close, he murmured, “My conscience can take no more. I must set right what has been done. Meet me in my chambers two days hence, at the noon hour.” Then he pressed trembling fingers to his throat, and quickly hurried down the passage.*

*Alone, Christopher watched the other man disappear, just as confused as when he entered the corridor a few moments before. His thoughts on the strange encounter, he did not notice as another person quietly faded into the shadows...*

\* \* \* \*

Rachel slowly slid down in the tub, and let the warm water wash over her shoulders. She closed her eyes and felt the tensions of the night past begin to ease. The

door to the chambers she shared with Christopher opened. Yet, she made no move, nor did she open her eyes; certain it was only the young maid who had gone to fetch more water. It was the masculine clearing of the throat, which drew her from her contentment, and forced her to open her eyes in surprise. She had expected to see her husband. Instead, Richard eyed her apprehensively.

He gave her no time to vocalize the panic clear in her features. "Hurry!" He whispered as he crossed the room toward the bed. Snatching her robe into his hands, he thrust it at Rachel. He gave her no pause as he leaned into the tub and slipped his arms beneath her naked flesh.

Rachel vented a startled scream as he pulled her to his chest. Only when next to a bookshelf by the fireplace, did he place her on the floor. Rachel thrust her arms into the sleeves of the robe, but had no time to secure the sash about her waist before he once more swept her into his arms. A rush of air passed her lips. Panic welled within her. Of a sudden, Richard leaned his hip against the wall. A slight squeak was the only indication of the hidden mechanism that rolled the shelf backward. Beyond a dark tunnel disappeared with the bend of the inner wall. Placing his hand on her lower back, Richard gave Rachel an unceremonious shove inward.

She stumbled, her ankle throbbing as she was forced into the darkness. Richard's only reply was to place his finger to his lips as the wall moved back into place, casting Rachel into total darkness and confusion. Her heart lodged in her throat, and pounded at her temples. She could see nothing, and groped shaking fingers over the rough stone of the wall. It was icy cold, and rough against her fingertips.

Frozen with fear, she leaned against the wall and attempted to calm the panic flooding through her. A sharp intake of air hissed through her lips as the glow of candlelight danced beyond the bend she viewed just before Richard sealed her in the strange tomb. Yet, the passage ended only a few feet from where she stood, and she found no escape possible. A soft sob croaked from her throat. The candlelight advanced, bobbing as if being carried up stairs. Its soft luminance spread over the floor and crept up the stone walls, casting eerie shadows. Tucked in the corner, Rachel bit her lip to quell the scream ready there.

A figure emerged from the passage, its shadow growing as it neared. The candle rose, illuminating a face. She staggered, both relieved and fretful. "Christopher..." She stumbled toward him, her sobs echoing in the narrow corridor. The candle fell to the floor and sputtered as he enveloped her in his arms, his lips to the crown of her head.

"Richard made it in time." His words were so soft she strained to hear them.

"What is it?" Rachel pulled back slightly and searched his visage. "What's happening?"

Tenderly pressing his finger to her lips, Christopher warned, "Hush, now. They will be in the room at any moment." Enveloping her against him, he whispered, "Maxwell is here."

As if an omen, the candle's flame flickered several times before finally snuffing against the smooth stone floor. In total darkness once more, both huddled together seeking comfort in each other's embrace. Christopher caressed her cheek tenderly. Beyond their narrow space, the chambers Rachel had so recently vacated erupted with sound, and she clung to her husband.

\* \* \* \*

"I know they are here!" Maxwell bellowed. "Their fear is like the smell of sewage!"

Richard shook his head in denial. "You are mistaken, Captain. I have not seen the Marquess in nigh on three months."

Maxwell crossed to the bath, and fingered several soaps scented like summer flowers. "And I suppose you will tell me these are yours?" He held up the soaps, and looked at the other man skeptically.

Richard shrugged. "Would it be so hard to believe I enjoy a comforting bath once in a while?"

The sneer that curled Maxwell's lip assured him it would. "Are you suggesting you scent your baths with perfumes?"

Richard returned the sneer. "My wife does not find the practice to her liking, thus," he spread his hand toward the tub. "I do so in private, using this wing of the manor, rather than upset her."

Maxwell crossed the room, and raised his hand as if to strike. "I think, milord, that you had better not risk my wrath! Where is the Marquess?"

Richard crossed his arms over his chest. "I have no idea."

This time Maxwell delivered the blow he'd held in check before. "I am growing impatient with you!"

Richard seized his arm in air, halting yet another attack. "Think hard before striking a titled lord, Captain. 'Twould not be to your benefit to lose your temper with me again."

The rage that threatened heated his cheeks. "Mark my words, milord," he hissed, "The day draws near when the game will be over. The young Marquess is a murderer, and will face his accusers."

Richard nodded in agreement. "If indeed the murderer you claim, I shall personally see he faces his accusers. However, Captain," he wove his finger beneath Maxwell's nose. "Mark my words, sir, should one hair on his head be harmed prior to his day in court, you will meet your maker at the end of a very sharp sword."

Undeterred, Maxwell's nostrils flared. "How dare you threaten me?"

The smile that curled Richard's lips was wicked. "No, sir, you mistake my statement. Rest assured it is no threat. I will personally kill you."

Infuriated, Maxwell fought the urge to take the earl by the throat. Knowing he could not risk such actions until Christopher was in his clutches once more; he slammed his balled fists into his thighs, and advanced to the door. "This is far from over, milord." He glanced about the room, scanning it briefly, his gaze settling on no particular item. "You have no idea whom you toy with, sir." Then he was gone, leaving the portal open in his passing, and his footfalls echoing on the grand staircase.

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell mounted his horse and reined the animal about ready to be away from the laughing eyes of those within the manse. His horse advanced only a few strides when a guard stepped before him, and halted the steed. The young man gazed at his captain a bit timidly, and swallowed hard. "A word, sir."

Maxwell glared at him, in no mood to listen to another simpleton complain about the food, or the boredom. He did not move, and the other man continued in his reason for stopping him. "I would like to speak with you regarding a transfer, sir."

The captain of the guard eyed him in annoyance. "I have little time for your complaints man, so leave me alone!"

Nevertheless, the young guard refused to cede. "I cannot stay here, sir. I have no problem with the duty, but can not abide the ghost!"

Maxwell leaned closer and eyed him in amusement. "Ghosts?" His lips curled into a snarl. "Are you afraid?" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

The sentry nodded. "I must admit, sir she is by far the most beautiful ghost I have ever seen...." He hesitated, stumbled over his words for a moment, and then continued, "In truth she is the only ghost I have ever seen ... but she near makes my heart stop beating when she appears. I have gotten little sleep these past nights, and cannot endure it any longer."

Maxwell peered at him for a long time. "She? This ghost is a woman?" He could not believe he was even having this conversation.

Again, the youth's head bobbed. "Aye! With long hair the color of ripe wheat, and a face as lovely as a summer day!" He shivered. Slowly his gaze drifted toward the window above, and he swallowed hard.

Maxwell followed his gaze, and drew in a long breath. A smile curled his lips as he looked toward the room he just vacated! So they were in residence at the manse! He knew they could be nowhere else! Slowly he drew his gaze from the manor, and bestowed a languid grin on the guard. "If things go well, you will have your transfer, and a years' pay as a bonus!"

\* \* \* \*

Rachel only just removed her robe, to return to the bath when the door flew open once more. This time Christopher and Richard both rushed through the door. Christopher grabbed her from the tub, and hurried toward the passage where Richard already had the door open. "Hurry, he is back!" The panel was just closing when they heard Maxwell burst into the room!

His fury reverberated off the walls as he shouted, "Where are they?"

His voice muffled, Richard retorted. "Haven't we been through this already?"

The sound of his fists making contact with Richard's body made Rachel cringe in the dark narrow space. Her heart lodged in her throat as the captain of the guard released his frustrations to the room at large. "Conyngham, 'tis now or never! If you do not come out this instant I burn the house!"

Richard's tone was frantic. "He is not here! I told you before we haven't seen him."

Once more Maxwell called out. "Your family shall meet their maker if you do not show yourself!" His snide tone left little doubt to his sincerity. "There will be no second chances! Every servant, every family member, every living thing will be ashes."

The weary sigh that eased from her husband's lips sent tears gathering at the corners of Rachel's eyes. Inching from her side, she felt him grope for the lever that would reveal their place, and she curled her fingers about his arm in desperation. "No! Please!" Though she could not see him in the dark passage, she knew he was ready to show himself. "You are my life! I could not bear to lose you!"

"I must! I will not let him destroy all my family has done." Tenderly he took her hand from his sleeve, and brought it to his lips. "I love you!" Before the door slid open, he gave her a gentle shove back to the corner. "Richard will keep you safe!" Then the

light from the room beyond flooded into the small space, and Christopher stepped out to face his enemy. When the door slid closed behind him, Rachel sank to her knees, and closed her eyes to stop the tears, yet they flowed over her cheeks just the same.

Maxwell smiled triumphantly as the younger man stepped from beyond the door. "Yes!" He bowed slightly. "I knew you were in this room!"

Christopher gave no reply, instead remained in his place, arms crossed over his chest, jaw tight, shoulders squared. At least the game was up, and he did not have to hide any longer.

Richard's shoulders sagged in dejection. "Christopher, you should have departed when you had the chance!"

His gaze locked on the captain of the guard, Christopher's brow creased into a deep frown. "Mr. Maxwell has a terrible habit of torching things to get his way. Have no doubt this home, and everything in it would have burned to the ground under his orders."

The slow curl of his lips into a smug grin averred the statement. "Indeed!" He looked about for a moment. "It shall still happen if the girl does not come forward."

Christopher felt a shiver travel down his spine. "Girl?"

His nemesis rolled his eyes, proving his weariness of the game. Once more, he shouted into the room. "Come out and join us, my little wildcat!" The look of pure pompousness that etched his features revealed his claim at the victory. "Like your lover, you have one minute. Should you decide to stay where you are, rest assured you will burn to death when the house is set ablaze!"

Having no doubt as to the man's threats, Christopher sighed in resignation, and pressed the lever on the shelf. However, before Rachel moved close, he handed her robe into her, and whispered softly, "Cover yourself, my love."

Slowly she stepped from the passage, her eyes bloodshot, and her tears moist on her cheeks. Defiantly, she lifted her chin as she faced Maxwell. He in turn bowed, and smiled once more. His eyes traveled the length of her, and he gave her an impish grin. "My but we have come quite a long way, haven't we? I hear tell you were married a few days past. The whore has become a lady."

Fists balled, Christopher advanced, ready to defend his wife's honor. It was Rachel's fingers to his arm, which halted his attack. "They are just words, Christopher. They have not hurt me!"

Maxwell watched them for a moment, then exhaled dramatically. "Yes, yes! Enough!" He crossed to them, and pulled Rachel away from the marquess. "You are both under arrest for treason."

Christopher nodded, and moved close to Rachel. "I will go without a fight, Maxwell. But leave her be! She has done nothing!"

"She has aided a known criminal, and will face a hangman's noose for her crimes!" his nemesis snarled. His fingers became a vise around the soft flesh of her upper arm, causing her to cry out.

Digging her feet into the carpet, Rachel snorted. "At least allow me to clothe myself! I do not think the hangman will be overly upset if we are five more minutes!"

Maxwell's chuckle was biting. "There is that little wildcat I remember!" He stood holding her arm for a few seconds, before finally nodding in acquiescence, and releasing her. "I have grown impatient, madam. Do not keep me waiting." His feet

braced apart, arms to hips; he stood by the door, making no attempt to leave.

The set of her jaw assured she would not tolerate such behavior, and she growled at him in a deep-throated sneer, "Mr. Maxwell, you know I am here, there is no escape! Prove to me there is a bit of good in every man, by at least turning your back, or leaving the room while I dress!"

Eying the small group, Maxwell nodded ever so slightly before pivoting on his heels, and stepping to the door. His voice was trite as he called over his shoulder, "Gentlemen, join me!"

Richard moved into the hall, yet Christopher remained where he was. "I will help her dress, and then be out." He tried to sound nonchalant.

Maxwell poked his head back into the room. For a long time he assessed the couple. "Once more, milord, you have chosen badly. I would have let the house burn, rather than given up my life!" He eyed Rachel for a moment. "And women can be replaced just as easily as homes! What a pity, you did not learn from your earlier mistakes!" He smiled. "If you are not out in five minutes, I will make certain this house ... and everything in it, burn to the ground." He turned and eyed Richard as if to push his point. "Everything, milord!"

Christopher nodded in understanding. He would not do anything to jeopardize his home or the people in it. Once the door was closed, Christopher bolted for a small table by the bed. From it, he withdrew a dagger.

Rachel clutched his arm, frantic. "Nay, do not make this situation worse than it already is!"

Gently guiding his wife to a chair, Christopher tore strips from the bed linens and began to bind her swollen ankle. As he wrapped the area, he placed the dagger along the side of her leg, and carefully covered it with the bindings. "Use it, if he dares try anything." Then he pressed a soft kiss to her lips, and helped her into a gown borrowed from Alexia. He was just finishing the laces when Maxwell thrust open the portal, and glared at them.

"Milord, and milady, the hangman waits." He smiled snidely, and stepped aside.

Rachel refused the aid of her husband as she advanced toward the door. Her head high, and her shoulders back, she stepped past Maxwell with gritted teeth, no longer displaying the fear that consumed her in Derbyshire.

\* \* \* \*

In the great hall, Lauren blocked Maxwell's passage from the stairs. "I will accompany my son to London."

Maxwell snorted. Though he intended to relieve some of his wrath on all who had aided the young Marquess, he could not allow any to escort them back to London. The accident he had planned for Christopher ... while escaping, naturally, would not allow for on-lookers. "That would be quite impossible, milady."

Leveling a pistol at the captain of the guard's head, she corrected him. "I said I am coming with you. I have already seen your heavy-handed care in the scars my son bears. This time, he will arrive with no injuries."

Beside her, Richard also brought a gun to his shoulder. "My wife is an excellent shot, Captain. It would behoove you to heed her." His gaze was feral. "We shall both make the journey."

Maxwell glared at them. "You think to scare me. Should any harm come to me,

the queen will watch all of you swing from the gallows.”

“Then she shall be very busy.” Alexia retorted as she too stood before her brother. “I have had a carriage brought around. Our journey will be much easier if we travel together.”

Christopher eyed her swollen belly. “Alexia, though I admire your decision, I cannot allow it. You are too far along with child to make the journey safely.”

Her nostrils flaring his sister snapped, “I said I would make the journey with you. It was not a statement meant for argument, Christopher. Now hold your tongue.” With that, she folded her arms over her girth, and glared at Maxwell. “You, sir, shall ride atop your mount, for I could not abide your stench in the carriage.” Then she turned toward the massive iron portal that protected the manse, and exited it with chin high, and shoulders back.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel sat on a small bench in the cold cell, and gazed at her husband across the passage. She longed for his arms about her, but knew it was not possible, and that her courage would come from her own inner strength. She watched him pace the small room, his visage tense as he concentrated on plans to get them out of this situation. In her own mind, there seemed little hope, and she let her shoulders sag in defeat.

"He will not win." She looked up at her husband. He gave her a soft smile, and blew her a kiss. "Rest easy, my love. He will not win the day." His arm slipped through the iron bars, reaching for her, though the distance was too far to touch her. "Though I remember little of what sent me to Derbyshire, I know this. Bits and pieces of those days drift through my mind. God willing they will fit into place. My mother has requested an audience with the queen on my behalf. I have all confidence everything will be rectified."

The smile she forced to her lips was tight. Her own thoughts were not as optimistic. Not wanting him to see her doubts, she nodded, and agreed. "He will not win!"

\* \* \* \*

Lauren wove her hand between the iron bars, and caressed her son's sleeve tenderly. Tears sparkled in her eyes as she shook her head. "She will not even see me, Christopher. There will be no audience."

Rubbing his fingers along the curve of his jaw, Christopher nodded in understanding. Pleading his case to the queen was his only hope. "Don't punish yourself for this, mother. I'll think of some way to get her to listen..."

Rachel hobbled to the gate of her cell, and leaned to it for support. "Milady ... Lauren, if I might be so bold." She drew in a ragged breath. "Mayhap the wrong person seeks an audience." At her mother-in-law's furrowed brow, Rachel continued. "Go once more to her." She licked her lips nervously. "Implore her. Tell her Rachel Summerfield, daughter of the Countess of Rutherford, seeks an audience."

Lauren eyed the younger woman with slack jaw. "You are Anne's daughter?" she whispered. A sigh of disbelief slipped slowly from her lips. "I did not realize." Another release of air escaped her lungs. "How is your mother?"

Rachel lowered her gaze to the floor. "Dead." Her throat tightened, and she drew in a ragged breath. Gathering her courage, she faced Lauren purposefully. "Tell the queen, she owes me an audience after what she did to my mother."

Eyes wide, Lauren pursed her lips. "She does not take it well when threatened, Rachel. Mayhap another approach would be in our best interest."

Rachel curled her fingers about the cold bars. "Tell her exactly what I have said. If there is a descent bone in her body, she will hear what I have to say."

\* \* \* \*

The echo of his booted feet along the stone corridor signaled his arrival long before Maxwell finally made an appearance at the gates that separated Christopher and

Rachel. His smile was smug, and the intoxicating scent of mead clung to his rosy lips. Bowing gallantly, he leered at Rachel. "Nothing will give me as much pleasure as taking my frustrations out on your woman's body." He turned toward Christopher, and laughed sarcastically. "Nothing, save knowing you will hear her screams and be unable to come to her defense."

Christopher curled his fingers about the cold bars and pressed his face as close to Maxwell's as possible. "You lay so much as a finger on her, Maxwell, and I will kill you."

His nemesis snorted. "Brave words for a man locked behind iron bars. I'll do whatever I choose, milord, and you will have no choice but to listen to her sobs." He fumbled with the key, attempting several times to slip it into the lock before finding success.

The heavy metal bolt slipping in the chamber was like a death toll to Rachel, who backed into the far corner, and swallowed down the lump lodged in her throat. "Mr. Maxwell, think hard before you do anything you will regret," she whispered hoarsely. "I am the wife of the Marquess of Conyngham and the daughter of the Countess of Rutherford. Though we met under circumstances that did not merit respect for my station, that is not so now."

"You are a street rat, who will give me pleasure as whores are meant to do." He advanced, the leer in his eyes sending icy shivers along Rachel's spine.

Attempting to turn his words on him, Rachel hissed, "Brave words for a man who can only take his revenge against a frail woman ... while locked doors separate my husband from your throat."

Maxwell halted, his prey trapped in the corner, her breathing erratic and testament to her fear. "Shall I release him, milady? Mayhap you would prefer to watch him die before I take my pleasure with you." A long slender dagger glinted in the dim torchlight. "Though it would bring me infinite joy to have him watch me mount you, killing him would be just as stimulating." Staggering, he leaned closer to Rachel, his breath stale as it warmed her cheek. "Choose, my little wildcat, for in truth both would bring me pleasure."

Refusing to be baited, she remained silent. His fist slammed against the stone wall, then hissed as he shook the bleeding hand as if in great pain. His anger mounting, he charged her. A sob of dismay escaped her lips as Maxwell forced her to the cot. The gleam in his eyes spoke volumes.

In his cell, Christopher released a feral scream. "Maxwell, you have my promise I will tear you limb from limb!"

His face buried against Rachel's breast, Maxwell hissed, "I eagerly await your attack, milord!"

Panic coursed through Rachel. Pinned beneath his weight, she found no leverage to rise. Hysteria welled, and she clawed at him with her nails. In response, Maxwell pressed the dagger to her throat. It seared her flesh as it opened a slender cut, and blood seeped from the wound.

Assured, she would meet death this night, Rachel groped for the dagger Christopher had bound to her ankle. A ragged sigh passed her lips as her fingers circled the hilt, and she drew it back to strike.

"Your pardon, Captain." From the passage, a voice interrupted Maxwell's

assault. "The queen requests an audience with the lady."

Twisting on to his side, Maxwell glared at the guard. "At this hour?" To emphasize the question he peered toward the narrow window high above, where darkness left the space ebony. Quite young, mayhap twenty, with a spattering of freckles along the bridge of his nose, and burnished red hair, the younger man posed no threat.

The intruder shrugged innocently. "Shall I tell the queen you have other plans for the young woman?"

Gritting his teeth, Maxwell sheathed his dagger as he stumbled from the bed, and murmured beneath his breath. "That will not be necessary." To Rachel he sneered, "We will continue this later, milady." With that, he pushed past the guard. His vehement curses to both the queen and the guard could be heard long after he had disappeared up the winding staircase.

The guard chuckled. He turned to Christopher and winked. "Though the queen did indeed request your lady's presence, I believe she mentioned something about first thing on the morrow. The captain of the guard, however, does not need to know such privy information." Advancing to Rachel, he gently relieved her of the dagger still clutched in her trembling hand. "This would be best kept for an emergency, milady. Though Mr. Maxwell can be intimidating at times, he is not worth going to the gallows over." Much to Rachel's surprise, he handed the blade back to her, before turning toward her husband.

Relief coursed through Christopher. Reaching his hand through the bars, he placed it on the shoulder of the man before him. "Stewart, you are a sight for weary eyes." To his wife he called out, "Rachel, your savior is Stewart Thurston, a fine man and trusted guard of the queen." Christopher's attention quickly returned to the other man. "Stewart, can you get us out of here?"

Shoulders sagging, he shook his head forlornly. "Nay, milord. The captain holds the keys. Besides, he would only hunt all of us down."

Weary, Christopher leaned against the wall for support. "My foolishness has already put too many at risk." He raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. "If only I could remember what started all of this."

Stewart peered at him in confusion. "You mean the prisoner in the catacombs?" He shrugged. "He remains where he was, milord, under heavy guard. It would be foolish to attempt to see him, even were you free to do so." Hearing footfalls on the stairs, he backed from the cell, and gave a quick nod before hastily departing to join the other guards at their quarters above.

\* \* \* \*

Sinking into a deep curtsy, Rachel eyed the woman before her from behind lowered lids. Stark red hair contrasted her pale skin, giving her almost a clownish countenance. Yet, Rachel knew she was as shrewd as any man who'd sat on the throne of England. Rising from her bent position, she faced the monarch with shoulders back and chin high. She dared not speak, however, and an eternity elapsed before the silence was broken.

"Come closer that we might see thee better," Elizabeth commanded.

Rachel complied, careful to place her slippered feet softly, that they not echo in the vast confines of the throne room. Her breath lodged in her throat as the queen assessed her, yet stubbornly, she refused to show fear or intimidation.

At last Elizabeth spoke. "Thou are the mirror image of thy mother ... and just as impertinent!"

A soft smile spread over Rachel's lips. "Thank you, Your Majesty." Her chin proudly lifted a bit higher.

The older woman snorted, yet the thin line of her mouth curled at the corners into a vague smile. Rachel knew it was the only concession she would be granted, but was happy with it just the same.

"If thou hast come here to plead a cause for the Countess of Rutherford, thy words will not be heard. We will only hear them from thy mother."

Rachel lowered her gaze to the floor. "Nay, Your Majesty, I come not for my mother." Her voice softened to a whisper. "She succumbed to the fever."

Again, there was silence. A weary sigh slipped from Elizabeth's throat. "We are sorry for your loss. Thy mother was a dear friend, and has been missed at court these many years."

Choking back tears, Rachel murmured, "She spoke of your kindness often, Your Majesty."

A bit unnerved by Rachel's sentiment, Elizabeth cleared her throat. "If thou hast not come on thy mother's behalf, what brings thee here?"

Drawing in a slow breath, Rachel pulled her shoulders back, and faced her queen with all the bravado she could muster. "I come on behalf of the Marquess of Conyngham, Your Majesty."

The indignant huff that escaped Elizabeth's lips assured Rachel she would not be as welcome on his behest as she would on her mother's. Yet, she gave no outward indication of intimidation. "Would Your Majesty cast judgment without knowing all the facts in this issue?"

Elizabeth's thin brows rose sharply. "We are well aware of the facts involving this issue. The young Marquess has murdered the chancellor, and our cousin, Lord Saracey. His own dagger was found beside the chancellor's body."

Now it was Rachel's turn to snort. She cared little that Elizabeth eyed her in surprise for her forwardness. Braving a retort she queried, "Were I to sit upon your throne, would it make me queen, Your Majesty?" She shook her head and answered her question. "Though it would appear I held the title, it would none the less be a falsehood." Releasing a slow breath, she added, "The same is true of Christopher Conyngham. Though appearances would determine him a murderer, it has yet to be proven it was his hand which did the deed."

Leaning forward in her chair, Elizabeth peered at the younger woman for several seconds. "Hast thou information to prove otherwise?"

Rachel's chest fell. "Nay, Your Majesty, I do not. That is why I have come here today. I wish to petition you for a stay on any trial, or judgment until the Marquess can prove or disprove his innocence."

Elizabeth eyed Rachel quizzically. "How doest thou know the young Marquess?"

Swallowing down the lump in her throat, Rachel showed the first sign of nervousness. Her lip trembled as she sought in her mind how to phrase her response. At last, she answered, "Nigh on two months past, I stumbled upon him buried in a shallow grave near my home. He had been stabbed and beaten, and left for dead." A ragged breath slipped from her lips. "He has no memory of what event placed him there, nor of

the crimes he is accused. Only through dreams have we put together pieces of what occurred. In truth, Your Majesty, even he cannot say for certain he is innocent. I ask only that you allow him time to seek the truth. Should that point to guilt, he will turn himself in with no argument.”

Apparently unsatisfied with the response, Elizabeth probed, “Why hast thou sought an audience with us? Could not the Marquess have done this?”

“The captain of the guard hungers for his blood, Your Majesty. In all honesty, he is safer behind bars than free, unless assured of his welfare by your word.”

Leaning forward, that her gaze might meet Rachel’s she cried, “What gain doest thou seek in his innocence? There is no monetary reward offered.”

The pause was long as Rachel contemplated her response. “I seek none, Your Majesty.”

Her queen pressed the issue. “Then we would know why thou hast come here.”

Exasperated, and realizing there would be no easy way around the question, Rachel nodded in acquiesce. “I love him, Your Majesty.”

“Then thy opinion is not to be trusted,” Elizabeth snapped.

Knowing she tread a fine line, Rachel braved to say, “As his wife, I would do anything for him, even grovel to you for his life if I thought it would gain his freedom.” To prove her sincerity, she sank to her knees, and reached a trembling hand to the woman who held her husband’s fate in her hands. “If that is what you seek from me, Your Majesty, I shall do so. I implore you, give him this chance. I ask only a fortnight....”

Near standing, Elizabeth glared at her. “What sayest thou?”

Rachel drew in a ragged breath. “Please, Your Majesty, I beseech you to give him time....”

Waving her hand impatiently, Elizabeth silenced Rachel’s pleas. “We care little for thy groveling. What sayest thou about being the Marquess’ wife?”

Her stomach roiling, Rachel rose, and faced her queen with shoulders back and chin high. “Yea, Your Majesty, we spoke vows before God just over a week ago.”

“Why were we not consulted regarding this matter? The Marquess of Conyngham has already given his pledge to the Countess of Westbury.”

Rachel nodded in understanding. “As I said earlier, Your Majesty, he woke with no memory of the life he left here in London. We were wed in the eyes of God.”

“We care not who witnessed this union!” Elizabeth barked. “This marriage shall not be honored without our consent.”

Her knees quaking beneath her gown, Rachel stood her ground. “Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty, but God’s decree far outranks your own!”

“Insolent!” Elizabeth roared. “How dare thou enter here and speak to us in this manner!”

At last breaking under Elizabeth’s anger, Rachel crumbled to the floor. “Please, Your Majesty, forgive me. I came here only to plead for my husband, not to anger you. Take your anger out on me, not him. Allow him time to prove to you he is as loyal as before.”

The silence that hung in the air was palpable. Lowering her body back to her throne, Elizabeth watched the younger woman for several seconds. The sigh that escaped her lips was nearly imperceptible. “We will give the Marquess three days, no more.” Her anger still foremost, she added tritely, “As insurance of his return, we shall require

thou to remain in the dungeons.” Her nostrils flared. “Should the Marquess of Conyngham flee for his life, we shall hang thee in his stead.” With that, she waved to the guard at the door, and watched as he took Rachel by the arm and led her from the room.

In the corridor beyond, Rachel released the breath she had been holding. The meeting had not gone as she hoped, yet, Christopher had his freedom, and three days to prove his innocence. It was a small victory, still one she felt fortunate to have received.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher slammed his hand against the stone wall beside Rachel’s cell. “Damn her!” he sneered. “Why would she insist you remain here?”

On the rope cot in her barred room, Rachel sighed. “Christopher, it doesn’t matter. You have only three days. I beg you do not waste them. If you are not able to get to the truth, we will both hang from the gallows.” She reached for his hand through the bars, and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I do not wish to spend my last moments on this earth watching you die. Please, think this through rationally. Maxwell will not dare lay a hand on you with an edict from the queen assuring your safety.”

Pursing his lips in frustration, he hissed, “’Tis not my safety I fear for!” Caressing Rachel’s face in his hand, he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. “I could not bear it were he to touch you in any way.”

From the passage, a clearing of the throat brought them both from their conversation. “Milord.” Stewart nodded to the pair as he approached. “Most of the guards remain loyal to you. Only a few would allow Maxwell to harm your wife. We’ve all promised to keep him at bay as best we can.” He placed his hand on Christopher’s shoulder. “Do not let this day be in vain. Find the truth, milord, and make haste to do so.”

Rachel nodded in agreement. “Find the truth, Christopher, for our future.” Then she pressed a soft kiss to his lips, and gave him a gentle shove toward the stairs, and the freedom, which lay beyond them.

\* \* \* \*

Slamming his fist against the palm of his other hand, Maxwell vented his frustrations. Again, he took up quill and parchment. ‘The game has become dangerous. The badger must be stopped at all cost. Under orders from the queen, I can lay no hand on him. Do what you must ... but make it appear an accident.’ The guard graced with the safety of the missive was promised twenty pounds for its speedy delivery.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Trepidation gripped him as he entered the room. Everything seemed in its place, yet he was ill at ease just the same. The hairs at his nape bristled. Glancing about for the man he was to meet, a shiver inched along the length of his spine as he noted the emptiness of the chamber. Apprehension drew the corners of his mouth to a frown. Again, he scanned the room.*

*About to leave, he halted in mid-stride, his head tilted to the side, listening. Slowly he pivoted in a circle, his gaze searching each piece of furniture, each corner. Yet, no one thing caught his attention and warranted the needling at his nape. Releasing a tense sigh, he turned toward the entrance. A muffled sound, as if from the very walls, teased his ears. This time Christopher peered into every space. Still, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. When the noise came a third time, he moved toward a place by the wall where a large tapestry hung. Here the sound was louder, though still distant. For an instant, he thought of an animal scratching at something. Carefully he pulled the tapestry back and peered into the area behind it. The space was empty, and his shoulders sagged in relief and frustration. He was just dropping the needlepoint canvas back into place when something caught his eye, and he grabbed the heavy material once more!*

*He perused the wall behind the drape carefully, and drew in a slow breath. There, almost hidden in the design of the wall covering, was a small handle. Christopher pinned the tapestry back and moved a candle closer to see better. Shaking fingers brushed the surface of the wall slowly; looking for what he was certain was there. At last, he snagged his fingertip against it and almost smiled the artfully hidden seams of a door!*

*The drone came again, but less insistent. Christopher reached for the handle and both turned and pulled it at the same time. The door swung outward toward him. As it did so, something behind it shifted. He had little time to react! He attempted to slip back into the room, yet the tapestry hung down against the side of the door, and he found himself trapped. The portal opened farther, and that which was beyond it began to fall forward.*

*Face to face with a man, his body crashing inward from the space beyond, Christopher felt his knees buckle under the added weight, and he stumbled back into the room blindly. Panicked, he shoved at the man atop him, forcing that one off his shoulder, and casting him to the floor. A slow gurgling sound escaped the man's pale lips as he slid against the carpet.*

*For several seconds, Christopher remained above him, his breathing frantic, his pulse clamoring at his temples. Blood was everywhere! It saturated the other man's clothing, and pooled quickly beside him on the floor. His eyes bulged and he struggled for each ragged breath drawn into his lungs. Eventually all movement ceased, and the man hissed one final time before silent. Kneeling, and placing a hand to the injured person's neck, Christopher sought a pulse, yet found none. A slow shiver crept the length of his spine.*

*Realizing the identity of the man was no mystery; Christopher released a tight breath from his lungs. "Chancellor!" Sweat beaded at his brow, and moistened his shirt. "Milord!" He shook him once more, knowing his efforts were in vain. Still, he covered the deep wounds to the chancellor's chest with his hands. At last, he stood and peered into the darkness from whence the man had fallen.*

*A long tunnel made from the rock disappeared into the darkness on either side of the door. There was no sign of anyone close, and the shadows swallowed all within them. As Christopher began to back away from the portal, something glinted in the flame of the single candle beside him. He pulled the small torch closer, and peered into the ebony expanse. Again, it glinted. Squatting, his fingers groped along the floor, searching. The touch of cold metal to his hand halted his exploration, and he curled trembling fingers about the object. Carefully he brought it toward the candle. His heart skipped a beat within his chest. The slender blade of the dagger in his grasp sent icy rivulets of fear through him. He knew it well, nonetheless, turned it over to verify the crest on the handle. It had been in his family for many years.*

*Instinctively he reached into his boot where the dagger was normally sheathed, though he knew he would not find it there. Crouching onto his hunches he gazed at the weapon for a long time. He could not remember it missing, and tried to think back to the last time he saw it. He was certain it had been there only a few hours before! So how did it make its way into the chancellor's rooms, and body? No ready answer came to him.*

*Of a sudden, the room erupted in sound, as men rushed the entrance. He attempted to stand, yet gained only his knees, as another body impacted his, and sent him crashing beyond the hidden door, and into the darkness of the tunnel. The dagger, lost to his grip, disappeared into the shadows.*

*He had only a slight glimpse of the captain of the guard as that man rushed him, tackling him to the floor, and pummeling his head and torso with vengeful fists. Christopher responded in kind, and shoved the taller man back with all his strength. For an eternity, they thrusted fists into ribs, broke the skin of each other's faces as knuckles drove hard, and rolled to the stone floor in a heated battle. Gaining a slight advantage, Christopher lowered his head, and drove it into the groin of his assailant, sending him back against the wall. The air escaped Maxwell's split lips in a ragged whoosh.*

*It was all the delay Christopher needed! He raced into the darkness of the tunnel, leaving Maxwell by the door to the chancellor's room! He had no idea where it would take him, or even if it would lead to freedom. Having no other option, he gratefully disappeared into the darkness, and staggered along the cold wall until the sounds from the chancellor's chambers faded, and the rhythm of his labored breathing hummed in his ears.*

*A tiny spot of light several hundred feet away became his focal point, and he raced through the passage at break-neck speed. As he neared it, it became a torch, and he sighed in relief. It was in his hand as he passed the niche it was in, and he continued into yet another corridor! His sides ached, and his throat burned. Sunlight streaming through a door at the end of the passage, beckoned! He dropped the torch as he neared the portal, and flung the door open to find exit in a small courtyard. For a moment, he stopped and bent forward with his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. Then he dashed into the trees, and to safety!*

\* \* \* \*

Frustrated, Christopher gazed at his chambers with sagging shoulders. Nearly half this day had been futilely wasted in dead ends. Though Richard and his mother were eager to help in any way, neither knew in which direction to guide the young Marquess. Thus, he had spent a good portion of the day walking the streets of London in hopes of jogging his memory. Now, standing in the center of his room, he felt no closer to finding the answers he sought than the day before. Precious hours had been lost, and the vision of Rachel in the cold cell left him nauseated.

His head throbbing, Christopher shrugged his shirt from his weary shoulders, and moved to the basin on the washstand. Numbly he scooped the cool liquid into his hands. Its tepid temperature forced him to focus. For several moments, he was content to feel it trickling down his bare chest, and over his arms.

"I had almost forgotten how handsome you are." The words were whispered from behind him, and he twisted about in surprise.

The woman was quite beautiful, with raven black hair that gleamed almost blue in the candlelight. Emerald green eyes sparkled as they assessed him. Rosebud lips curled into a soft smile beneath a slender nose. Her figure was trim, slightly more petite than Rachel's was, but equally as curvaceous in the hips.

Staring at her, Christopher searched his mind for some hint as to her identity, yet no memory came readily to the forefront. Pursing his lips, he queried hesitantly, "How did you gain access to my chambers?"

As if amused by the question, she laughed and crossed to the bedside table, where she poured two glasses of port. She lingered over long there, her back to him. At last, she faced him, and raised one of the glasses toward him. "As often as I have warmed your bed, Christopher, your servants know better than deny me entrance." She pressed the glass to his hand, then lifted her own to her lips. "Welcome home, darling."

The scent of roses wafted through his senses and a hint of a memory crept from the recesses of his mind. Eagerly, he attempted to draw it forward, but as quickly as it had come, it vanished. Frustrated, Christopher balled his hand into a fist, and released his anger against the ewer and basin beside him. Both crashed to the floor, shattering.

Startled, the woman skittered backward, putting a goodly distance between her and Christopher. A feeble smile curled hesitantly at the corners of her lips. "Christopher, surely you are not still angry with me."

Ashamed of his actions, Christopher placed the glass of port to the table, and raked his fingers through his hair. "Forgive me, madam."

"Madam?" she frowned. Inching closer, she pressed trembling fingers to the soft furring of hair on his chest. "You are still mad." Molding her body to his, she moved her hands over his back, massaging tense muscles, and releasing her breath at the base of his throat.

A vision of Rachel seared Christopher's mind. Quickly, he circled the woman's arms with his fingers, and drew her from him. Though still not certain of her identity, he risked her wrath by speaking a name. "Catherine ... stop."

Bemusement furrowed her brow, and turned down the corners of her mouth. Searching his visage, she murmured, "Christopher, don't be angry. I love you." Her fingers inched toward the highest of the scars upon his chest, and traced the puckered skin hesitantly. "How dreadful it must have been, left for dead." Boldly, her fingers moved to the next scar, and the next, as if she knew exactly where to find them. When

they lingered at the waistband of his breeches, he curled his fingers about her wrist, and gently guided her hand from his flesh.

Surprised Richard had been so frank with her about his wounds, Christopher made a mental note to speak with his stepfather later. To Catherine, he whispered hoarsely, "So much has changed...." Even now, no memory of her came to mind, frustrating him further. Yet, if Richard had told her about his near-death experience, surely he also informed her of Rachel.

Leaning close, she pressed her lips to his chest. "Make love to me, Christopher, hold me as you did before." She slipped her fingers through his, and began to back toward the bed.

He removed his hand as if burned. "I think it would be best if you left." As if to assure her he would not change his mind, he moved to the door, and opened it. Already today, he had wasted precious time. He had not the patience for this right now.

Catherine eyed him in disbelief. Her lips trembled. Tears sparkled in her green eyes. Frantic, she crossed to the port he had discarded on the bedside table, and lifted it toward him. "Please, Christopher, have a bit of port. It will calm you ... that we might discuss this rationally."

Annoyed, he shook his head. "There is nothing to discuss, Catherine." What could he say that would take away the pain he glimpsed in her eyes? He had taken another to wife, and nothing, no amount of discussion, or pleading would change that. Nor did he want to. Rachel was everything to him. What he and Catherine once had, no longer mattered.

Again, she guided the glass of port toward his lips. "Please, Christopher...."

His ire rising, he vented his wrath on the glass rather than the woman. It sailed across the room and shattered against the far wall. Why could she not understand that the only thing of importance right now was his wife? Discussions could and would wait.

The fear he glimpsed in her emerald eyes averred her discomfort. Nonetheless, she lifted her chin high and squared her shoulders, as she strode passed him with the regal stature of the queen herself. "Very well, milord, have it your way. But know this," she paused at the portal. Her tone softened as she peered at him. "I love you, Christopher, and always will."

The scent of her perfume teased him anew, and once more, a memory crept from the recesses of his mind. Before it could take form, it vanished, leaving him both frustrated and weary.

\* \* \* \*

*The city was dark, at an hour just past two. The sound of his footfalls echoed through the silent streets, nonetheless Christopher did not slow his pace. Knowing he was followed, he took care to use a winding path toward his destination. His skin crawled as he felt eyes assessing him from the shadows, yet when he peered into their depths he saw no hint of those secreted there.*

*He was close to his destination when three men came from the night and began to move in on him. Quickly Christopher rounded a corner, and slid into the hazy umbrage, grateful for the ebony folds of his cape, which enveloped him. Instantly he became part of the darkness, and drew in a slow breath that he held until he thought his lungs would burst!*

*For a moment the three that followed stood gazing into the thick folds of the night,*

*not certain just where they lost him. "He outsmarted us." One of the brigands cursed in a hushed whisper. Shrugging, he turned on his heels, and added, "Worked up a thirst chasing him, needs a pint ter clean me gullet."*

*The haunting laugh that issued from the night, left all three with sweat beaded brows, and trembling knees. Unfolding from the shadows, Christopher bestowed a gallant bow to each, and spread his cloak as if to envelope them like a giant winged creature. Stumbling over each other, they attempted to put as much distance between themselves and the monster now swooping down upon them.*

*When at last he spoke, revealing himself as a man, all signed in relief. "Rest easy, gentlemen. I only want a moment of your time." Slowly he pulled a sizable purse from within his cloak, and bounced it in his palm. "If 'tis money you seek, I have plenty!" They gazed at one another in confusion. The smile that curled at his lips was smug. Their wide-eyed aplomb assured him no one ever offered to give what usually was taken by force. "'Tis yours..." He buoyed it a few more times in his hand, displaying its weight. "But there are better riches to be had than this."*

*One of the men eyed the purse with anticipation. "We could be quite 'appy wit what ye gots right there!"*

*Christopher nodded. "As sure as I am of that, sir, is it not true you would be even happier with three, or mayhap four, times as much?" He knew his time was short, and he had to ensure these men were in their places before the others closed in on them.*

*"Within the next few moments, others will be here. Men of the queen's guard intent on tracking me down." He knew in these parts of the city it was rare not to find someone the guards had abused, whether by throwing them into debtor's prison, or dragging a loved one through the streets to make an example of them. He could see by the hatred in the men's eyes, they had no great love for the men who followed. "They carry a great quantity of money ... that I am sure you could find a better use for." At their skeptical looks, he laughed softly. "'Tis true, I assure you!" He balanced the purse in his hand. "This, and what they carry will all be yours, if you do just as I say."*

*The leader of the men peered at Christopher apprehensively. He was a burly man, with round cheeks, and a bulbous nose. "What we gots ter do?"*

*Christopher smiled. "I ask only that you delay them for me a few moments, nothing more. Then the bounty they hold shall be yours for the asking." He nodded as he heard the footfalls of those who followed him closing in on the small group. "They are upon us, my good men, and I would have your answer." He eyed them carefully. "If you wish only the monies I have here, so be it! However, the men who near us, wish to have it as well! Or it can be added to the monies they carry, and split amongst yourselves!"*

*The man weighed the purse, and pulled a coin from within to inspect it carefully. Finally, he nodded, and slid the sack into his pants. "Best be on wit ye, afore they gets 'ere!" Christopher nodded, and seemed to vanish before their eyes. He had barely settled into his shadowy hiding place when the queen's guards rounded the corner, and faced the three waiting there for them.*

*The lead man smiled. "Give us yer money." He drew forth a long sword, and wielded it before the foursome. The smug smile that creased his mouth faded as those before the trio also drew forth swords.*

*The guard nearest him shook his head. "You have picked the wrong men to rob*

*this night.” He moved the tip of his blade over the cheek of the thug, instantly splitting the skin and watching in amusement as blood trickled toward the miscreant’s chin.*

*The thief swallowed hard. He backed away, followed closely by his cronies, and almost took flight as they rounded a bend. The guards pursued them, unaware that the one they sought was only a hairs’ breath away. That same one slid from his place, and quickly darted into another alley, and then another ... until he knew he was alone once more, and his journey continued at a more relaxed pace.*

\* \* \* \*

*At last, before the entrance he sought, Christopher noiselessly slipped beyond its barrier. A long tunnel, carved from the stone surrounding it, stretched before him, and he made his way slowly, his fingers tracing his advance along the wall as an aid to guide him. Several yards farther into the passage, a torch glowed, but it gave him little light where he stood, and he moved with care. Rats scurried from his path, and several times water and filth were as high as his ankles. He knew what he sought here was more important than his comfort, and continued onward. At the end of the dank corridor, a heavy iron portal blocked his way, and he lifted his balled fists to its surface, rapping only once, then waiting apprehensively for any response.*

*Peering with caution through the small window in the door’s frame, he perused the man beyond. An elf of a man with a girth as large as he was tall, the gatekeeper contentedly gnawed at the bones from his dinner, as if by doing so, and more food would appear to satisfy his hunger.*

*Again, Christopher tapped softly on the door. Attempting to sound authoritative, he spoke, though with no name to place to the one he sought, felt odd. “I wish to see the prisoner.”*

*The gatekeeper shrugged, and opened the door. Arms folded over his massive belly, he offered no instruction to his visitor, and eyed Christopher down the short length of his round nose as if waiting for something. Finally, Christopher pulled another purse from his cloak, and tossed it to the other man. Its weight put a smile to the gatekeeper, who revealed a mouth with only three teeth, all rotted.*

*Taking up the torch in the sconce beside his chair, he began to waddle down the long hall. He spoke no word, and Christopher followed cautiously. At last, they came to a door near the end of another corridor, and the keep halted. He pressed the flame of his torch to another, waited for the orange glow to cast off the deep shadows, then turning without so much as a sound returned back down the passage with nary a look back.*

*Christopher peered into the darkened cell. His skin crawled. As on a night some weeks past, his intuition assured him, something was wrong. Yet, he leaned closer, and scanned the dark interior of the cell. He could see nothing, and moved the torch closer. The room beyond remained deep in shadow, yet he could make out a bench and a pile of straw, no person, however could be distinguished. He called out, “Are you there?”*

*No answer came from within, and for a moment, he thought the keep directed him to the wrong cell. As he turned to leave, a noise from within made him stop. Caution made him raise the torch slowly. Though the man beyond the door did not come close to the small window, Christopher could see his face fairly well. A thick beard and mustache covered most of his cheeks, and chin, obscuring all but his eyes and nose. There was something vaguely familiar about the deep blue eyes that gazed back at Christopher, and a shiver went up his spine. He knew this man. No name came to mind; still he had no*

*doubt they'd met before.*

*"I was told to seek you out by the Lord Chancellor." Leaning closer to the cell, he attempted to view the captive's visage more clearly. In response, the man faded farther to the shadows, and settled back to the worn cot in the recesses of the room.*

*"There is a plot to over-throw the queen ... to kill her..."*

*Eyes glinted in the torchlight, assuring Christopher the man listened, though he gave no reply. An eternity elapsed with the silence like a shroud between them. At last, the man spoke his voice raspy and barely more than a terse whisper. "I cannot help you."*

*His chest tight, Christopher ventured, "I trust few, sir, especially a man secreted in the very depths of the city, yet was told to seek you out. Unless there is another in these tunnels, and I have mistaken you for he, 'tis you I need speak with."*

*The other man shook his head. "You were told wrong! I know nothing."*

*For a long moment, Christopher stood gazing at him. Finally, he sighed, and turned to leave. "I am sorry for waking you. 'Tis obvious a mistake has been made." Taking no more than a half dozen steps, he paused as the prisoner appeared at the door, his fingers curling about the bars to reveal long yellowed nails.*

*Once more, his tone was hoarse as he queried, "What reason brings the Marquess of Conyngham to my cell?"*

*Christopher peered into the darkness in stunned silence. He did know this man! His attempt to gaze upon the person was again denied as the captive slithered back into the darkness.*

*Christopher released a heavy sigh, realizing this was the best look he would receive of the prisoner. "You know me. I am certain I know you as well ... but am not sure from where." He placed the torch in the sconce, allowing the prisoner to stay in shadow. "Your speech is that of an educated man." He gazed at the other cells. He heard no sounds from any of them, and the keep knew which prisoner he spoke of without having to ask. It was safe to assume that this man shared the passage with no other. "What reason have you for being in these catacombs, sir, hidden away in a dungeon no other occupies?"*

*"Like you, milord, I trust few people. I will ask the questions." Once more, he neared the portal, his deep blue eyes glimmering with the flames of the torch. His tone was acrid as he stated, "You say the Lord Chancellor sends you. I say you lie. 'Twas his order which put me here."*

*The slow release of air Christopher allowed to pass his lips was ragged. "Though I understand none of the cryptic message he plied to my ear in the corridor outside the queen's throne room, sir, I gather he attempts to make amends for some wrong he has done. Nonetheless, he avers we might help one another. Have you some knowledge of the plot against the queen?"*

*"I know of the plan." His 'host' gave no further details.*

*"You've been here quite some time, sir, based on the condition of your clothing and hair. How come you by such knowledge?" The unease that tickled Christopher's flesh raised goose bumps along his arms.*

*The snort that escaped the prisoner's lips was weary. "Knowledge can be both a blessing and a curse, milord. Mine put me here. I advise you watch your back, lest the same fate befall you as well." Sinking into the shadows, his voice drifted through the*

bars. *“Guard your secrets, milord. There are many willing to ensure your silence, as they did mine. I cannot, and will not jeopardize my family by speaking more to you. Leave me, sir.”*

*Frustrated, Christopher pressed his face to the window. “You have given me nothing, sir. Have you no idea what I risked to be here this night? Have you any notion who might be behind any of this?”*

*“I know only that the Lord Chancellor sent me here, and the captain of the guard ensures my captivity. Beyond that, I remain ignorant. Now leave me!” His cot squeaked as he settled on its hard surface, and Christopher pursed his lips as the prisoner rolled to the wall, presenting his back.*

\* \* \* \*

Slowly Christopher moved from the window, and sank once more against the bed. Each dream brought a little more of his life into focus, yet only confused him more. Who was the man in the cell? Exasperated, he raked his fingers through his hair. Nothing made sense. He closed his eyes, and the sweet visage of his wife filled his mind. In all of this she was the only thing that was a constant. He missed her, and the gentle touch of her hands. If he failed in this quest, her slender neck would snap against a hangman’s noose. Already, he had wasted an entire day, with nothing to show for it save another haunting dream, and questions to his family that produced no new leads.

For a moment, his thoughts returned to the dream. Tilting his head to the side, he allowed the vision to replay in his mind’s eye. The meandering tunnels twisted and turned through his memory. No, he thought, as he bolted upright in the bed, not tunnelscatacombs! Stewart had mentioned the prisoner held there. Christopher cast off the blankets and did a strange dance as he collected his clothing from the floor where he discarded them before throwing his weary body to the mattress. The man in that cell was the key. Tossing his cloak around his shoulders, he raced from the room, his heart a wild crescendo of beats in his chest.

\* \* \* \*

Try as he might, Stewart could not quell the violent shaking of his knees as he approached the portal. Sweat dampened hands were rubbed against his breeches. His throat swelled with trepidation as he swallowed down the anxiety that left him pale and trembling. Nonetheless, he lifted his hand to the heavy door, and brought his knuckles against its cold surface. Then he attempted to gain control of the shaking that left his knees weak, and his heart racing.

Beyond the iron portal a cluster of guards rolled dice. Visitors were rare, especially those who knocked. Alarmed, the group rose as one, and drew swords. The door swung open slowly, the men beyond at the ready. Forcing down his fear, Stewart leaned his head inward and assessed the space beyond. Espying the man he sought, he smiled feebly and stepped into the room. Heels clicked together, and his arm struck his chest in salute. “Lieutenant Bradshaw.”

The one he addressed eyed him skeptically. “Thurston, what are you doing here?”

From his vest pocket, Stewart drew forth a folded parchment, sealed with wax, and pressed with the crest of captain of the guard. “Captain commands the prisoner be moved,” he barked. The sound echoed in the cavernous space, and he sputtered to silence as all eyes glared at him. Unnerved, with the eyes of his peers upon him, Stewart licked

suddenly dry lips.

The lieutenant snatched the parchment from his fingers. Scanning its contents hastily, he sneered. "Why didn't Maxwell come here to give the order?"

Stewart shrugged. "He was a might busy with that bit of fluff the Marquess of Conyngham took to wife." Glancing about the dimly lit cave, he pondered, "Course, I could tell him you insist he gives the orders himself." Fixing his gaze to the scar that marred the other man's cheek; he smacked his lips together several times, and added lamely. "Though I must admit, he scares the hell out of me. Wouldn't want to sport a scar like the one you wear."

Instinctively, the lieutenant traced his fingers over the rough skin on his face. Still tender, he remembered well receiving it in one of Maxwell's fits of anger. He was no more eager to receive another, than Stewart to receive a first. Nodding to two of the other guards, he sneered, "Bring the prisoner out in irons."

The trembling that gripped the younger guard began to subside, and he leaned against the wall almost cockily. "Captain says your men are to split up in groups of four. Each group is to take a different route." His confidence surging, he played his last card. "I alone am to take the prisoner."

The lieutenant's jaw dropped. "What?" He perused the slender young man, and almost laughed in his freckled face. "You? What good would you do if ambushed?"

Taking offense, Stewart straightened to his full height, and lifted his chin indignantly. "I've as much skill with a sword as any of you!" Dejectedly his chest fell, and he murmured, "Besides, Maxwell says no one would think to follow me. He said only a fool would put me in charge of a prisoner, and that if anyone follows, they'll think the same thing." After a few self-pitied moments, he brightened. "It was my idea to have the prisoner change clothes with one of the guards." He shrugged once more. "If we are followed, no one will be the wiser." He drew forth a razor and sheers. "Captain says make certain he looks the part."

Fingering the missive in his hand, the lieutenant pursed his lips in contemplation. "I still cannot believe Maxwell did not come here to give such strange orders." Quickly he scanned the letter once more. At last, he tossed the parchment into the fire, and nodded in acquiesce.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Numb, Christopher perched on the stoop waiting. His frustrations mounted as the hours passed, yet he made no attempt to depart. For at least the hundredth time he pulled his watch from his waistcoat and opened the lid. Half past six. He had been waiting since before eight in the morning. Though dressed as a commoner, he still felt eyes upon him as he paced the street before the sagging building, and several times held tight grip on his dagger; certain several miscreants pegged him for robbery. Thankfully none ventured close, and as the sun began to sink, Christopher settled to the stoop in exasperation.

From doorways crowded with filthy children, women sold their bodies. Approached on several occasions, Christopher turned them all away. He sought only one, and was beginning to think she left London all together. At the glimpse of light brown hair, Christopher rose and scanned the throngs of people returning from the markets, and jobs that paid a pittance for hours of hard labor. His heart skipped a beat as she came into view, her children heavy against her sagging shoulders.

Several yards away, she halted and peered at him. He watched the color drain from her face. Less than enthusiastic to see him, Sarah stood frozen, her knees quaking and her lip trembling. Unable to fathom her reaction Christopher neared cautiously. "Sarah, how are you?"

Clutching her sons to her breasts, she staggered back. "Ye stay away from me!" Christopher lifted his hands in surrender. "Sarah, please, I mean you no harm." Snorting, she scanned the crowd for any familiar face. Eying Christopher fearfully, she hissed, "I knows all about ye. I did some checkin' after I showed ye and Rachel the tunnels. Hear tell ye murdered the Chancellor, and the queen's cousin." Apprehensively, she peered about. "Where's Rachel?"

Her voice seemed to carry in the throng of people, and Christopher cringed as several burly men eyed him. "Sarah, please, can we go somewhere and talk?"

The huff that escaped her lips assured him of her answer before she spoke it. "Ye bleedin' mad? I'll not be as foolish as Rachel. Ye won't be slittin' me throat."

Weary, and running out of time, Christopher sighed. "Do you really think I would do such a thing? What purpose would it serve?" Pursing his lips until they blanched, he continued, "I came here for your help. Rachel is in prison, and likely to be hanged in two days. I plan to help her escape, but need you to do so."

Sarah sucked on her teeth. "Ye are daft! I'd be hangin' right along side 'er." The weight of the world on his shoulders, Christopher reached for her hand, and gave it a soft squeeze. "Sarah, please, she means more to me than I can express. Had I any other thought as to how to gain her freedom, I would have employed it by now. Don't let the kindness she and her mother showed go unrewarded."

Chewing at her lips, she eyed him for several seconds. "Ye really the Marquess of Conyngham?" At Christopher's slight nod, she queried further, "How much ye willin' ter pay this time?" Absently, she caressed the soft blond hair of one of her sons. "I gots

little uns ter think o'. What ye paid last time ain't gonna be near enough."

For a long moment, Christopher contemplated her. No amount of money would assure her children a better life. "I've something better."

Sarah grunted. "Ain't nothing better."

"Sarah, you do this for me, and I will make sure your children never want for anything again. There is a smithy on my estates in Conyngham, an older man who never married." At her raised brows, he assured her, "He seeks no wife. However, he has no one to teach his craft to, and is eager for an apprentice or two." The slight sparkle in her eyes was testament to her interest. "I would bring all of you to Conyngham ... including any you might wish to accompany you. You would be welcome there for as long as you desire."

Sarah drew in a ragged breath. "And yer man would teach me boys? They wouldna 'ave ter grow up in this filth?"

"None of you would." Christopher released a weary breath. "Time is quickly running out, Sarah. I would have your answer that I might seek some other way if you say nay."

"Afore I says yea, I'll know what I'm getting' into. What are ye expectin' o' me?"

Christopher smiled in relief. "I promise, nothing that would bring you harm." He fell into step beside her as she continued toward the dilapidated building she'd called home nearly all her life. "I shall explain it to you while you drop your children with your mother...."

\* \* \* \*

Awakened by the clatter of keys and bright light, Rachel dragged her weary body from the rope bed, and peered toward the door. The silhouette of a man moved inward, and she squinted against the glow of the torch he carried. "Prisoner, rise!" he barked.

She stood slowly, her body sore from the hemp bed, and lack of movement. Sleepily she placed her hand over her brow to shield her eyes from the light. Judging from the darkness beyond the window it was a few hours before dawn, and she felt a tremble go through her as the fear of the unknown gripped her. Yet, he only slid a tray of food across the floor, and waited until she picked it up before leaving. Had he left it on the floor while she slept, it was doubtful any of it would have remained when she woke. Already, rats were coming from their hiding places to investigate the smells. Rachel pulled her feet onto the bench, and sat on her haunches as she ate the cold meat and hunk of cheese. She washed them down with stale water from a bucket by the door. Hunger forced her to eat, though she tasted none of the fare before her.

She had barely finished when the door opened again, and the glow of the torch once more blinded her for a moment. "Prisoner, rise."

Slowly she moved from her perch. She placed the tray on the ground, and gave it a gentle push with her foot.

"Return to the bench," he barked his orders as if instructing a battalion of men, and expected no disobedience. Rachel gave him none. Moving forward, the sentry eyed her as he stooped to gather the tray. "When the food is brought, you shall pick it up at the door and leave the tray there when finished. Is that clear, prisoner?" At her nod, he opened the gate and slipped back out, and she heard the lock fall into place.

Slowly she sank against the bench again, and closed her eyes. It had taken her an

eternity to let sleep lull her the first time. Now she knew it would not come easily once more, and resigned herself to watching another sunrise.

The sun had barely become an orange ball in the sky when her door was opened again, and the captain of the guard stepped into her cell. His leer sent a shiver the length of her spine. "I see you survived!" He eyed the rat in the corner, and shrugged. "I suggest you stop feeding him so he will leave!"

Rachel frowned. "Would that the same could be true of you, sir!"

He glared at her. "Already making flippant remarks this morning!" Raising his hand as if to strike, he sneered, "I would have thought you would be more eager to curb your tongue by now!"

She shrugged, not caring this morning what her attitude brought her. "You bring out the worst in me, Captain Maxwell!" She gazed at him defiantly. "If I go to my death with the barbs of my tongue stuck in you like thistles, I will have done what I could to make my last days worth while!"

"I have the power to make your last days the worst you have ever experienced. Are you not frightened by that?" He leaned against the door, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I am certain I will die here regardless of whether at the hand of the hangman, or your own. Either way, death will come, and when it does, I will be the victor, just the same!" She was surprised at her defiance this morning, yet had no desire to curb it.

Maxwell ceded to her rancor. He straightened, and nodded toward the door. "We are expected this morning. Shall we?" At her nod, he called to the guard, and the door opened. The man entered, and handed the captain a dagger, which he pressed against her throat. Then the shackles were placed on her ankles and her wrists before she was allowed to exit the room.

Her passage was slow, and difficult. For she could not hold her gown up before her and her feet caught several times on the hem. Her ankle throbbed beneath the shackles, yet she gave no indication of her pain. As she mounted the stairs, she stumbled. The guards beside her stepped close to help her up, though Maxwell shoved them aside. "Leave her!" The other men nodded, and watched as she rose, straightened her shoulders, and continued her ascent.

\* \* \* \*

They stood in the outer room waiting for the queen to call upon them. Rachel felt her stomach toss and turn in nervous anticipation but forced herself to keep calm. When the door was finally opened, she moved with as much grace as the shackles would allow. Her curtsy was clumsy, and more a bow because she could not place her feet properly, still she did not care.

The queen gazed at her stoically. It was apparent she was in no mood for any games, and Rachel lowered her gaze to the floor humbly. She dared not speak until called upon, and stood almost as if praying for a long time.

"Thy husband has not returned, as was the bargain. Are thy prepared to take his place on the gallows?"

"If need be, Your Majesty," Rachel whispered hoarsely.

The queen raised thin brows to the girl before her. "Thou shows great courage."

Rachel shook her head. "In truth, Your Majesty, I am terrified." She swallowed down the lump in her throat. Locking her gaze with her queen's, Rachel ventured, "It

must be very difficult condemning another for crimes they did not commit, Your Majesty.”

Snarling, Elizabeth half rose from her throne, “Dare thou speak to us with such insolence! A bargain was struck!”

Rachel shook her head in denial. “Nay, no bargain, this. ‘Twas an order.” Lifting her chin defiantly, she retorted, “I had no say in my fate. Though grateful for the time given my husband, we are both aware it was an insult.”

Elizabeth slammed her scepter to the floor. “Thou speakest as one willing to die!” Nodding stiffly she added, “So be it! On the morrow, thou shall be hanged by the neck until dead.” Then she waved her hand in dismissal.

\* \* \* \*

At a place where two tunnels converged, Sarah turned down one not traveled before, and moved cautiously over broken rocks and debris from long ago. She hesitated at another crossing, and pursed her lips while she thought. “I ain’t been this way in quite some time. I ain’t sure if I got the right one.” She held the torch high, and gazed in both directions before choosing the tunnel to the right. “We wants ter go toward the center o’ the city ... if we start being outnumbered by the rats, we know we’re heading in the right direction!”

Richard Smalley frowned. What an interesting method of choosing directions. He much preferred a compass, or the sun. Nevertheless, he said nothing, and continued beside her with caution. To his manner of thinking there were already far too many rats, and he could not imagine wanting to move in the direction of more. Carefully he stepped over them as they moved about in the tunnels, and shuddered when his foot accidentally caught one. However, if the rats bothered him, then the smells made him want to die! He thought the stench in the dungeons was more than he could stand until now. Here the air was thick with the odors of rotting food, human waste, and decay. Several times, as they moved through the passages, he brought a kerchief to his nose to help guard against the stench, though it did little good.

Christopher, also, covered his nose. He was glad he had eaten nothing for several hours, for the stench here would surely have brought anything left in his stomach up. He moved quickly, wanting to keep up with Sarah, and unwilling to ask her to slow in her passage. The longer they were here, the more vile the smell. He looked forward to being above ground, where he could take in a long deep breath of clean air!

Sarah stopped at the bottom of another spiral staircase, and held the torch high. “It ain’t as bad as the other one, but it got some tricky places.” She eyed both men for a moment. “Ifin ya got a weak stomach, ye better not come!” She did not wait for any response, instead began to climb the stairs, leaving the men behind her as she moved.

Christopher quickly followed. He remembered the last time when she had gotten so far ahead, and maneuvering the steps was so difficult, and preferred not to risk the same this time! Richard hesitated a bit longer, but finally began his ascent as well.

They traveled for what seemed like hours before Sarah stopped once more, and held the torch high. “This one ‘ill take ye to the tower.” She touched her torch to another one on the wall, and waited for it to take light. “We used ter come this way ter watch the hangins.” The blood drained from Christopher’s features, and she shrugged innocently. “Sorry, milord. I didna mean nothin’ by it.” Then she continued on, the glow of her torch illuminating the narrow passage with eerie shadows.

\* \* \* \*

The narrow window high above Rachel left her little opportunity to view the outside world. She occupied her time watching the shadows shift along the walls, and counting the rodents and bugs that shared her cell. No visitors whiled her afternoon away, a fact she was certain Maxwell saw to. Often her thoughts returned to Christopher. Surely, he would not abandon her as Maxwell insisted. Yet, time grew short, and she could not deny her trepidation.

Lost in her melancholy, she paid little attention to the short round man who positioned himself near her cell. He placed a small table by the wall, and took a quill from above his ear. Then he reached into his vest, and pulled forth a small bottle of ink. The visitor never looked at her.

Rachel watched him from the corner of her eye, but she dared not speak. Essentially, he seemed to be ready to make out her will, and she was certain she could not face such a thing now! Not that she owned anything worth willing to anyone! Her home was a pile of ashes, and she had nothing save the clothes on her back; which in truth belonged to Alexia. She peered at him silently as he began to dip the quill in the ink, and write in a small ledger he also produced.

The guard who entered with him suddenly barked at her, and she jumped. "Prisoner, stand!"

Rachel did as directed, yet made no move from the side of the bench. He barked at her once more. "Prisoner, in the center of the room!" Again, she complied. Her knees began to tremble beneath her gown.

The short man took a long piece of string from his vest, and let all but one end fall to the floor. It was painted different colors, and she knew it was for taking measurements. Rachel gazed at it with raised brows. She could not imagine what he needed it for. He moved forward, and knelt beside her, and placed one end under his foot. Then he stood, and stretched it until it cleared her head. He wrote in the ledger. Then he moved close once more, and wrapped it about her hips. Again he wrote in the ledger. He finished by measuring around her shoulders. When he had written the information in the book, he packed up his things, and departed with not so much as a word. Her stomach roiling, Rachel staggered back to the bench, sickened by the knowledge he measured her for her coffin.

The sun crept higher in the sky over the next few hours. No longer able to focus on her surroundings, Rachel grasped at memories of her life, of her childhood and happier times. However, the sounds from beyond her window intruded on her thoughts, and she found herself listening to the pounding of the hammers and humming a soft song to their rhythmic beat.

Afternoon had come and gone, and still no food was brought. She was eager to fill her stomach, and called out to the guards in the space beyond her cell. "Please, would it be too much to ask for something to eat. Even a condemned man is allowed to eat."

The guard nearest her tossed a chunk of bread to her. It sailed in an upward arch and disappeared through the bars in the window. His laughter assured her she would receive no other. Eventually Rachel curled atop the bed, her arm beneath her head as a pillow, and closed her eyes. Silent tears moistened her cheeks. Sleep finally took her into a world of dreams.

The rattle of keys and the clang of metal brought her from her slumber, and she

sat up slowly. A small tray of food was by the door. Rachel moved close, and ate it there on the floor. She knew she would not be given much time, and was eager to put as much in her stomach as possible before the guard came for the tray. The last bite was in her mouth when he peered into the cell, and shouted. "Prisoner, move away."

At dusk, footfalls on the stairs alerted her to another's arrival. Numb, and stiff from lack of movement, she made no effort to rise from the bench. Even when Maxwell sauntered into the cell, smug and cocky, Rachel only gave him the slightest of glances. "Good evening, milady! I hope your day has gone well! We have some things to do." He motioned toward the door. "Shall we?"

Refusing to allow him to see her fear, she rose with shoulders back and chin high. Though her knees quaked and a fine mist of perspiration dampened the valley between her breasts, she gave no outward indication of her distress.

Movement was difficult, and she stumbled often as they advanced from the dungeons. Her ankle throbbed in the confines of the shackles, causing her to bite her lip. No concession was given for her injury, and she mounted the stairs unaided. At the top, they did not continue in the direction of the palace, and a sudden anxiety gripped Rachel as they stepped from the dimly lit passage to the courtyard. Brilliant hues of gold and orange washed over her, and for an instant, she halted, bathing in the warmth of the sun. The guard nudged her with his shoulder, and she staggered. Unable to place her feet far enough apart to stabilize her balance, she stumbled several feet. At last, her knees gave beneath her and she crashed to the ground. Dirt caked her nostrils and mouth, and she spit the grime from her lips. Surprisingly, a gentle hand helped her to her feet.

For the first time, Rachel glanced at the guard beside her. The freckles along the bridge of his nose drew her attention, and she peered into his eyes with raised brows. Stewart Thurston nodded slightly to her, but spoke no word. Instead, he kept his hand on her upper arm, and guided her toward their destination. Only when at the base of the platform did Rachel focus on her surroundings. Panic welled within her. On the steps before her, the shadow of a noose swayed with the gentle breeze. Bile rose in her throat. She was not prepared! The breath escaped her lungs in a ragged hiss. Peering about the courtyard, she sought desperately for a familiar face. The only one she located was the short round man who entered her cell earlier. A sob slipped from her throat at the workers busily making her coffin, as the man leaned over the wood and measured, much as he did her body.

Hysteria threatening, Rachel crumbled to her knees. Though death was not unknown to her, she feared it just the same. The smile Maxwell bestowed upon her left her head spinning, and she felt the heat drain from her cheeks. "How does it feel to know your husband used you to gain his freedom? Think you he will be in the crowd tomorrow watching as you swing from the gallows?" Maxwell hauled Rachel to her feet as he answered the question. "Nay, madam, me thinks not. He is probably far from London, with nary a care in the world."

Refusing to grant him a response, Rachel pulled her gown into her trembling hands, and carefully gained the platform. A glimpse of the noose sent the bile in her stomach racing toward her throat. Unable to quell it, she turned to the side to vomit. Her meal spewed over Maxwell's boots, causing him to dance away in disgust. For an instant, Rachel felt a bit of vindication, and could not hide the smile that curled her lips!

Infuriated, Maxwell brought his fist against her jaw. The impact sent Rachel

reeling, and she pivoted to the right. Her flight halted as she came against the broad expanse of the hangman's chest, as that one circled her in his arms. Surprised by the collision, Rachel's head snapped up. Her heart dropped to her toes as she peered at the leather mask draping his face. Holes were cut for the man's eyes, and two smaller ones to allow him to breathe. Other than that, there were no distinguishing features. An icy shiver crept along Rachel's spine. On the verge of total panic, she pushed from him, and sobbed in anguish.

The guard barked once more. "Prisoner, step forward."

Rachel felt her feet move, though unsure how they had managed the simple feat. She felt like lead, and was certain she would crumble to the floor at any moment. Stiffly, she placed her foot on the barrel that would raise her toward the noose. The hangman's hand steadied her as she mounted the keg. Maxwell stood on the ground a few feet away, the glint of satisfaction in his dark eyes assuring her he enjoyed her fear.

Trembling, Rachel closed her eyes as the noose was lowered over her head. A snort erupted from the hangman. "This thing's getting in the way!" He pulled at the thick plait of hair down her back, ready to toss it over her shoulder.

Annoyed, Maxwell drew his dagger from its sheath, and shoved the other man aside. In a thrice, he sliced the thick mass of hair from Rachel's neck, and held it high. The sparkle in his eyes chilled Rachel to the bone. "A trophy, milady, of the coming victory!"

Rachel peered at the braid, no longer part of her body, and suddenly felt the tears stinging at her cheeks. It was only hair, but it was the final straw, and she could take no more! She felt her composure waning, and let out a small sob.

The hangman leaned close, and whispered against her ear. "'Tis only hair. It will grow again. Don't let him see your pain." Then he moved back slightly.

Rachel swallowed hard, and fought back the tears ready to spill from her eyes. He was right. It was only hair! She turned to gaze at him, but the guard barked again. "Keep your eyes forward, prisoner!" She obeyed.

The hangman shook his head. "Have to adjust the rope. Too long. It will take her forever to die with it that length." He began to pull up on the cord until he was satisfied the length was where it should be, and nodded. "That will do nicely!"

Maxwell pressed the twist of hair beneath his nose, and inhaled deeply of the scent of lilac. Content for a moment, he paid the hangman no heed. From the corner of his eye another guard caught his attention, and he lowered the braid slowly to his side. "What the hell is he doing here?" he murmured as he stepped blindly from the platform.

Stewart peered past the captain of the guard and swallowed hard. Taking Rachel's hand, he quickly led her from the platform. "Captain?" he queried, his voice slightly high and anxious. "Shall I take the prisoner back to her cell?"

Maxwell halted, glared at the younger man for a long moment, and then began to move across the courtyard toward the guard he sought. Again, Stewart called to him. "Captain, shall I take the prisoner back to her cell?"

Frustrated, Maxwell dug the keys from his waistcoat, and tossed them to the man. "Be about your business ... make certain that gate is locked securely." Then he hurried toward the edge of the building where the man he sought disappeared from sight.

\* \* \* \*

Suddenly in a rush, Stewart gripped Rachel's hand in his, and near ran across the

expanse toward the dungeons. Unable to keep up with him, she cried out as she staggered and stumbled. Of a sudden, another swept her into strong arms, and fairly raced across the space. Breathless, Rachel twisted about and peered in bewilderment into the leather mask of the hangman.

At her cell, she was nearly dumped on her feet. "Quickly!" Stewart hissed. His fingers trembled as he tried several keys before locating the one that opened the gate. Yet, when Rachel attempted to gain entry, he halted her with his hand to her arm. "Nay, milady."

Confused, Rachel eyed both men with mounting fear. "What game do you play with me?"

The hangman lifted his hand to his mask, and swept it from his head. Rachel drew in a ragged breath. "Christopher!" She was in his arms before his name completely left her lips.

He brushed a soft kiss to her brow, and then gently stepped away. "Later, my darling. We've much to do, and precious little time to do it."

From the shadows, Richard inched forward, Sarah beside him. A gag had been shoved in her mouth, and bindings twisted about her ankles and hands. Rachel's mouth dropped open, and tears stung at her eyes as she confronted her husband. No word passed her lips, however, before Richard tossed her shackled body over his shoulder, and raced toward another corridor at the far end of the passage.

Sarah snorted as Christopher anxiously shoved her into the cell. "Change of plans!" he whispered hoarsely. "Maxwell will be here any moment." He grabbed Rachel's cloak from the cot, and draped it about Sarah's shoulders. Then leaning close, asked softly, "Are you all right?" At Sarah's frantic nod, he smiled. "You remember what to do?" Again, her nod assured him. "God willing, we shall see you in Conyngham in three days." As he turned to leave, he halted and bestowed a broad smile to her. "Thank you!" He tossed the hangman's hood to the floor beside her cot. "Oh to see the look in Maxwell's eyes!" Then he too raced down the passage, and disappeared around the shadowed bend. Stewart locked the gate, and quickly followed the trio already out of sight.

## CHAPTER FORTEEN

Rage boiled in Maxwell as he neared the trio of guards sauntering toward their quarters as if they had not a care in the world. "Lieutenant?" he hissed, and when he did not receive a response, shouted. "Lieutenant Bradshaw."

Bringing his arm over his chest in salute, he greeted the captain of the guard. "Good evening, Captain." Wisely, his companions murmured excuses and departed.

In no mood for inanities, Maxwell curled his fingers through the man's shirt, and hoisted him from the cobbled stones. "What the hell are you doing here? You dare abandon your post?"

Bradshaw swallowed hard. "Captain, I saw no need to continue at the catacombs....," he cleared his throat, and his voice faded as he finished, "What with no prisoner there.... It did not seem necessary...."

The heat that rose in his cheeks beaded sweat to his brow. "What say you? Where is my prisoner?"

His feet barely touching the ground beneath him, Bradshaw swayed as Maxwell shifted position. Feebly he murmured, "Did not you send a missive to have the man moved to a new location...?"

A guttural growl escaped Maxwell's lips, "Why would I do that?"

The lieutenant released a ragged sigh. "Your missive ... the one we received, ordered the prisoner be moved as you feared an attempt might be made to free him."

Maxwell lifted the other man several more inches from the stones. "Do you think I would be foolish enough to send a missive, rather than deliver such orders in person?"

The lieutenant refrained from answering. Instead, he shook his head ever so slightly.

"Where was he taken?" When he received no reply, Maxwell released his hold on his lieutenant, allowing him to drop in a heap to the cold ground. "Where was he taken?" The words came from between clenched teeth.

Closing his eyes, Bradshaw whispered, "I do not know, Captain."

Maxwell's boot found its mark in the other man's thigh. "Explain yourself, Lieutenant."

Quickly staggering to his feet, Bradshaw vented a slow weary breath. "I should have known something was not right," he mumbled. To Maxwell he hissed, "He said it was your idea to have the men split up and leave the catacombs separately." Bradshaw raked his fingers through his hair in exasperation. "I should have known something in his orders did not ring true."

Maxwell leaned close, his breath warm on the other man's face. "Stop your babbling, and get to the point."

The lieutenant nodded as he continued, "He said you ordered him to take the prisoner alone, dressed as a guard, as it would draw little or no attention should any be watching...."

Once more Maxwell hoisted the man from the ground. "Pray, Lieutenant, of

whom do you speak?"

The lieutenant swallowed hard. "Thurston, Captain...."

Maxwell eyed him from behind furrowed brows. "That sniveling little brat barely old enough to be away from his mother's teat?" At Bradshaw's slight nod, Maxwell grunted in disgust. Suddenly recalling who escorted Rachel from the gallows, his face contorted into a sneer. "You released a prisoner to a man known for his loyalty to the Marquess of Conyngham?" His own error in doing much the same thing would not be mentioned, and he waited for no answer. Reaching to his side, Maxwell drew his dagger from its sheath, and thrust it deep into the other man's chest. "That is what I think of your judgment, Lieutenant." Then he tossed the man to the ground, and stepped over him as he wiped the bloodied dagger against his cloak before racing toward the dungeons.

\* \* \* \*

For an instant, Maxwell relaxed. She was there, curled on the cot, her back to him. Her hair streamed over her shoulders, catching the last rays of the sun as it filtered in from the window high above. Reaching to his waistcoat, he searched for the keys to unlock her cell. His fingers brushed something soft, silky. Confusion marred his features. Wrapping his hand about the item, he drew it forth. It was the thick braid of her hair, which he had snipped from her nape as she stood with the noose about her throat... Again he glanced to the woman in the cell. A low growl began deep in the pit of his stomach, and erupted from his lips as a screech that fair cracked the stone ceiling above.

Frantic, he sought the keys to open the gate. A fragmented memory of tossing them to the young guard danced in the recesses of his mind. Another scream joined the first. Racing to the anti room above, where the guards eyed him in trepidation, he bellowed, "I need the keys to the woman's cell!"

None moved. One guard, further in the back the others, volunteered, "You mean the ones you allowed no one else to keep, Captain?" He wisely sank into the throng of men before Maxwell could pinpoint who had spoken.

His teeth clenched, a muscle at the side of his cheek twitching, Maxwell vented his wrath on the wall beside him. He cared little that two of his fingers snapped beneath the onslaught, or that his blood marred the stone as it shredded his flesh. Turning back toward the stairs to the cells below, he hissed, "Secure every exit, and find something to get that gate open, or I shall personally see everyone of you hanging from those gallows on the morrow!"

\* \* \* \*

In the passage, Christopher and Richard leaned to the hidden door and waited. Still shackled, Rachel eyed the two in disbelief. Once Stewart rounded the bend, the two men began to move the thick rock portal. Their muscles strained beneath the force, yet, eventually the stone ceded to their might and slipped back into place, blocking their exit to any who might come that way.

Exhausted, both men sank to the cold floor, and filled their lungs with air as their heartbeats calmed and adrenaline slowed. Tears sparkling in her eyes, Rachel said nothing as she watched her husband. Though overjoyed to see him, she feared for Sarah, and found it difficult to comprehend what Christopher had done. A deep frown pulled down the corners of her mouth.

"I thought you would be more eager to see me, my love." He breathed softly, as

he rose and gently brushed his hand over the nape of her neck, now void of her hair.

Rachel's lip trembled. "Christopher ... what have you done to Sarah?"

He sighed and enveloped his wife in his arms. "Rest easy, sweet. She is fine. The original plan was to leave her in the cell over night ... giving us time to escape. But when Maxwell espied one of the guards assigned to watch the prisoner from the catacombs, things changed slightly." Leaning back, he tilted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "She was bound to make it appear she had no part in your flight. No harm will come to her, I promise."

Breathless, Stewart stood bent, with hands to thighs, gasping. "Milord...." He drew gulps of air into his lungs. "Shall I meet you as planned?" At Christopher's nod, he pulled himself from the wall, and brushed his fingers through his hair. "Then I'll be on my way...." Turning to Rachel, he bowed slightly. "It has been a pleasure, milady. Would that I could see the look on Maxwell's face when he discovers you gone!"

\* \* \* \*

At last, the heavy gate was loosed from its hinges, and allowed to fall in the space before the cell. Maxwell stepped over it, eager to view the woman on the cot. She made no move, or sound, and for a moment, he thought her dead. Gingerly he turned her. Wide eyes peered back at him above a gagged mouth. Gripping the cloth, he tore it from her lips. Instantly a barrage of accusations issued forth.

"It's about bloody time!" Sarah snorted. "They took me right off the street! Left me babies standing there wailin'." Tears glistened in her eyes. "Said if I weres to make any noise, they'd slit me throat! I been terrified!"

"Who?" The single word echoed in the confines of the cell.

Sarah snorted indignantly. "Ye think I 'ad tea wit um? There weren't no names exchanged! I spent the last hours wit the blade o' a knife ter me throat. I weren't foolish enough ter ask questions."

Maxwell had to clench his fist to keep from putting the gag back in her mouth. Realizing she would give him no more information, he staggered from the cot with shoulders down. Glaring at the hangman's mask on the floor, he kicked it with such vehemence it sailed against the far wall. "Give her a few pounds to keep her silent, and send her back where she came from!" he snarled as he passed the cluster of guards waiting beside the cell. His footfalls echoed on the stairs as he disappeared from sight. His head hurt, and his stomach roiled. If he did not catch up with Conyngham by this time tomorrow, all would be lost....

\* \* \* \*

Stewart released a weary breath as Christopher held the torch high. "Milord!" He stepped from the darkness and reached his hand toward the young Marquess. "What took you so long? I was beginning to think you were discovered."

Pale, Christopher sighed in exhaustion. "In your haste, young Thurston, you left without leaving us the keys to unlock my wife's shackles." His tone softened as the color drain from the younger man's features. A soft chuckle escaped Christopher's lips. "Though Lord Manchester professes to have the strength of Sampson, and insisted on carrying my lady, he stopped often to rest." A wink assured Stewart his error warranted no anger.

Embarrassed, the guard drew the keys from his waistcoat and dangled them before Christopher. "My apologies, milord ... milady." He released a slow breath.

“This adventure business is new to me.”

Leaning against the stone wall as her husband began to unlock her fetters, Rachel peered into the shadows where another lingered. A slow chill crept up her spine. The man beyond the young guard remained concealed, the torchlight illuminating his features only slightly. Rachel squinted to view him better. Everything in her senses told her she could not be seeing what she saw. Yet, he was there, and no amount of denying would change the fact. Frightened, she tugged at her husband’s sleeve. Her stomach knotted as she eyed the man. “My God,” she whispered. “Surely ‘tis a ghost before me.”

Following her gaze, Christopher peered for the first time into the face of the man he visited in the catacombs. Recognition did not come readily, though he knew in the recesses of his mind they met before.

His gaze locked with Rachel’s, the man shook his head in wonder. “Anne?” The name escaped his lips in a soft whisper. “Surely I died in that retched cell, for this can only be an angel before me.”

Inching from the wall, Rachel crept closer him, her hand outstretched, though she was certain it would glide through the figure before her. Christopher curled his hand about her arm. “Rachel, what is it?”

Ignoring him, she brushed past Stewart as if in a daze. “I should think the angel is you,” she whispered to the man as she sank to a deep curtsey on quaking knees. “Milord.”

He reached for her, gently caressing her cheek in disbelief. “Not Anne...,” he countered, “Her daughter. Rachel Summerfield, is that truly you?”

Christopher eyed the two with furrowed brows. Gazing at the older man, he asked softly, “Sir, how is it you know my wife?”

Rachel responded. Rising from her curtsey, she released a ragged sigh. “Christopher, have you no idea whom this is?” Tears sparkled on her cheeks. “Your prisoner ... the man you are convinced holds all the answers to the nightmares that plague you.” She glanced to the older man in amazement. “Christopher, this is Harrison Smyth, the Earl of Kent, Abigail’s husband.”

“I do not understand what purpose you had in taking me from my cell, Lord Conyngham.” His tone was terse. “But I assure you I can help you no more now than when you first visited me.”

Christopher nodded. “Mayhap, sir it would benefit both of us were I to explain what has motivated me in the actions I have taken. Should you still feel there is no point in trusting me, I shall walk away and never bother you again.”

Rachel slipped her arm about her husband’s waist. “We mean you no harm, milord. Please just listen to what my husband has to say. I implore you.”

Reluctantly, Harry folded his arms across his chest. “I will grant your request, though I admit, I have my doubts you will change my mind.”

Christopher sank against the wall, and pulled his knees to his chest. “The pieces are not complete, sir, but I will do the best I can to put them in some semblance of order for you.” He released a slow breath. “First, you must understand, I have no memory of the days and weeks leading to this moment. I rely on bits of fragmented images that drift through my mind, and dreams that make little sense.” Christopher slipped his arm about Rachel’s waist as she joined him against the tunnel wall.

“I know that I visited the queen, and warned her about a plot against her life. The

Chancellor met me in the hall outside the throne room. He spoke cryptically, of being duped, and insisted I seek you out for the answers I sought. When you refused to speak with me, I returned to the Chancellor, more confused than before.” Christopher paused. He pursed his lips to a thin line. “In my dreams I stand over his dead body, my hands bloodied, the dagger used to end his life in my grip.”

Harry eyed him apprehensively. “Did you kill him?”

Shrugging, Christopher responded as honestly as he could. “Nay sir. He was secreted in the tunnels that connect the palace. When I discovered him, the damage was already done. Nonetheless, ‘twas my dagger that took his life.”

Snorting, Harry lamented, “He got what he deserved. ‘Twas he that sent me to the catacombs. Like you, I stumbled upon a plot against the queen. I made the error of confiding such knowledge to the Chancellor. Two days later, I found myself a prisoner.”

Nodding, Christopher agreed. “I will not dispute his involvement, sir. However, I know not to what extent. But, I feel certain his conscience weighed heavy on him, and that is why he sent me to you.” He sighed. “Though I at last know your identity, I find the knowledge less than helpful. What common thread do we share, sir?”

“Maxwell...,” Rachel murmured tritely.

The Earl of Kent hissed between clenched teeth. “That vile snake! What has he to do with this? He acted on the Chancellor’s orders, nothing else.”

Christopher shook his head. “Were that true, this nightmare would surely have ended with the Chancellor’s death.” Tapping his finger to his lips, he searched his memory for the answers that eluded him. “Mayhap, between the two of us we know more than we realize. I shall tell you of the images that haunt me. Perhaps together we can solve this mystery.”

Yet, his tale at an end, Christopher’s shoulders sagged when Harry could add nothing more. “I am sorry, Lord Conyngham, I can shed no light on your problem. My knowledge of this chaos extends only to the plot against the queen, and the Chancellor’s involvement. Beyond that, I am as lost as you.”

\* \* \* \*

Little sleep and worry left Abigail looking aged and weary. She had not changed her gown in two days, and no brush had touched her hair in at least that long. Dark circles marred the indentations beneath her eyes. Sunken cheeks left her looking gaunt. She cared little as she peered at her reflection in the looking glass on her vanity. The tray of food brought up the night before remained untouched. No longer able to shed tears, her body convulsed with dry sobs.

The knock at her door went unanswered. She had no desire to see anyone, including the servants who fretted over her the past week. Beyond the portal, the butler cleared his throat. “Milady, there are guards downstairs requesting to speak with you.”

Cold dread gripped her heart. Though Maxwell had not bothered her physically, he made a point of informing her about Rachel’s arrest and eminent hanging. Guards visiting could only mean the younger woman met her end. A renewed round of sobs choked from Abigail’s throat.

Again, the butler rapped lightly at the door. “They refuse to leave, milady. You must speak with them.”

Staggering to her feet, Abigail stumbled toward the portal, her vision blurred and her head throbbing. She cared little that the servant drew in a sharp breath at her

appearance. For several seconds he perused her, his mouth opening and closing, though no words issued forth. At last, he stepped to the side, allowing her exit, and followed her to the great hall below.

Abigail bestowed the guard a sour sneer as she strode into the room. "As much pleasure as the captain of the guard takes in tormenting me, it surprises me he did not come to deliver the news himself." Steeling herself for the news to come, she queried, "Is it over? Is she dead?"

The guard peered at her in confusion. "Mayhap you misinterpret my meaning for being here. Your presence is required, posthaste."

Of a sudden, Abigail paled. Had Maxwell finally called her bluff? Now that Rachel was dead, would he see her face the same fate? Her knees quaked beneath her gown. Weak, she sank to a chair and drew in a slow deep breath. Her voice trembled with her anxiety. "This is how it ends." She rose and smoothed her gown. Her shoulders squared, and she faced the guard defiantly. "Well then, let us be about our business...."

The guard cleared his throat. "Mayhap it would be best were you to take a few moments to clean yourself ... and take some care with your appearance...."

Abigail glared at him. "What care I how I look? Let Elizabeth see me as I am."

Shifting from foot to foot, the guard pursed his lips as he assessed her. "Milady, far be it for me to instruct you in anything ... but I believe 'twould be to your advantage to look your best." He fidgeted as she refused to move. "Please, milady...."

Snorting, Abigail crossed her arms over her chest, and defied him with the glower she bestowed upon him. For several moments, they stood thus, each daring the other to be the first to look away.

At last, the young guard shrugged. "Do as you wish, milady." Stepping to the door, he bowed crisply. "Shall we?"

Abigail hesitated. A vision of Elizabeth laughing at her drifted through her mind. Refusing to allow the other woman the opportunity to ridicule her, Abigail pursed her lips. Arrogantly, she turned toward the stairs, and without a word strode passed the guard defiantly. "I shall change and be with you shortly." Then she mounted the stairs to her chambers, leaving the guard gazing after her with mouth agog.

Several moments later, she descended the stairs, as regal as ever, her hair piled atop her head, face washed and flushed, and fresh gown adorning her body. The only sign of her distress was the pale thin line of her lips and the slight tremble of her hands as they gripped the banister.

The guard smiled. "I think you will be happy you chose to repair yourself, milady." He bowed once more. "Shall we?"

Abigail nodded stiffly. Her heart lodged in her throat, and her breath came in short rapid pants. Every ounce of her strength went into forcing her legs to move. Of a sudden, they felt like lead. She passed the guard slowly, as if walking to the gallows.

Before her town home a carriage waited, another guard atop it, huddled in the folds of his cloak as the chill wind nipped at his flesh. Abigail paid him no heed. Bile threatened at the base of her throat, and she closed her eyes as the guard beside her opened the door for her. Once more, she glanced back at her home. Though she gave no outward indication, she was certain it was the last time she would ever see it, and already fond memories of her life there flashed in the recesses of her mind.

Trees replaced houses, as the carriage slipped from the city and traversed the rutted road beyond. Numb, Abigail watched in silence, her torso stiff as she sat across from the guard. Briefly, she contemplated his youth, and the spattering of freckles along the bridge of his nose.

The sun was nearly directly overhead before the conveyance halted beside a small humble church. The guard within leaned to the window. A smile curled the corners of his lips. Exiting the carriage, he left the door open, and bowed gallantly. "Milady." He spread his hand, waiting for her to join him.

For several moments, Abigail chewed at her fingernails, apprehensive and uncertain what awaited her beyond her place. A thought occurred to her, and she released a ragged breath. Of course, Maxwell would not bring her to court. He could ill afford to have her spouting tales. More likely, here her death would not be witnessed by any of import. Bile raced toward her lips. Eventually, however, she accepted the hand offered to her, and stepped from the carriage.

Within the small church silence reigned. Abigail hesitated. Was she here to pray, seek atonement for her sins? Glancing to her escort, she studied him with raised brows. He spoke no word. Instead, he directed her with his hand toward the altar, but made no move to accompany her. Knees quaking, she sank to the first pew and allowed her head to bob forward. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

The touch of a warm hand on her shoulder released the scream held in check. Certain she was not ready to die, Abby twisted about, willing to beg for mercy. The guard's red uniform filled her vision. She groped for it, to both push the man away, and plead her cause. "Please do not delay this any longer! If 'tis my death I face this day, make it happen quickly, that I not become a blubbing idiot."

"Rest easy, sweet maid, no harm will come to you." Tenderly his fingers traced the line of her jaw.

A shiver crept along her spine. Tears blurred her vision, and she wiped at them frantically. Surely, she had lost her mind. The voice belonged to one long gone. Her lips trembled. The air in her lungs escaped in a rapid rush. Slowly Abby lifted her gaze from the man's chest, and peered at his visage in disbelief. Shaking fingers rose toward, but did not touch him. "Harry?"

A soft smile curled his lips. "Abby." His hand brushed hers. "Though your visage was in my mind every day, it did not do justice to your true beauty. You are breathtaking."

She was in his arms before he finished, her sobs echoing in the stillness and her tears moistening his cloak. "Harry!" For a long moment, she clung to him, weeping. Of a sudden, she pulled away. "How came you to be here? Surely I have mourned for you these many months."

His hands caressed her hair, her shoulders, and the curve of her hip. "Tis a long story, my darling. One best told as I hold you in my arms at the base of a warm fire." His lips brushed hers. "Maxwell would not dare seek me out now. Dead men tell no tales ... but live ones can bring a man low."

Instantly the color drained from Abigail's features. "Maxwell..." His name was a whispered hiss. What would she tell her husband of her involvement with the captain of the guard? Gently she pressed her fingers to Harry's chest. "There are some things we must speak of..."

He silenced her words with his finger to her lips. "There is no need to speak, love. Nothing you say will change my feelings for you."

She shook her head. "Nay, Harry, I must tell you...."

He replaced his finger with his lips. "While in the catacombs, a prisoner these many months, Maxwell visited often. His soul purpose was to taunt me with tales of his involvement with you. Nothing you can say will come as a surprise. Nor do I blame you for what transpired in my absence. Maxwell set you in his sights from the first, determined to have you. Ironically, it is what saved my life. The Chancellor ordered my death, but Maxwell stashed me away with the simple goal of tormenting me with his conquest of you." He brushed his fingers through her hair. "He came often, after each time you and he...." He closed his eyes in anguish. "He thought by torturing me thus, I would tell him what I knew. Eventually he realized I had no knowledge of what he sought. He used you much as he did me ... in hopes of learning what you might have been told by me. We were both pawns, Abby." Tenderly he wiped at the tears that rolled down her cheeks. "None of it matters. I love you, and want only to begin our life together anew..."

Abigail pressed to him, her tears mixed with his. "I have never loved before, nor will I again, the way I love you, Harrison! God at last heard my prayers and delivered me from my hell!"

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lauren drew Rachel into her arms and wept softly against her shoulder. "I was certain I would never see you again."

Tears glistened on Rachel's cheeks. "I thought much the same thing."

Eying her son pensively, Lauren whispered, "I am overjoyed you are both safe." The thin line of her lips assured Christopher of her anxiety. "We must get you away from England." She chewed at her lower lip nervously. "If only that damned masque was not tomorrow night."

Christopher peered at her with raised brows. "Masque? What masque?"

Lauren waved her hand impatiently. "The masque she throws every year at Michaelmas. I must make an appearance, Christopher. If Richard and I are not in residence, the queen will think us involved in all of this."

In the recesses of his mind several fragmented visions vied for Christopher's attention. A sharp intake of air alerted those around him to his excitement. "The ball at Michaelmas!" His eyes sparkled with his jubilation. "That's it! Dear God, that's when they plan to kill Elizabeth!"

Richard raised questioning brows to his stepson. "Surely not, Christopher. Only a fool would attempt to kill the queen at such a crowded event. They would never get away with it."

Fairly dancing about the trio before him, Christopher shook his head. "'Tis the perfect place, really." He released a ragged breath. Another memory surfaced, and he inhaled sharply. "Poison. They are going to poison her...."

Lauren frowned. "Christopher, no one would attempt such a thing. Her tasters would be the victims...."

"Mayhap those who seek Elizabeth's death are willing to go to great lengths to see their plans to fruition." He pressed his hands to his temples as images fought for position in his mind's eye. "Who would be the wiser was the poison to take several hours to take its toll, with several victims, not just the queen. No blame could be cast if the guests were long departed and the masque many hours over." Circling his mother's arms with his fingers, Christopher averred, "I must get into that ball...."

Richard released a heavy sigh. "How certain are you of this, Christopher?"

Slipping his arm about Rachel's waist, Christopher responded emphatically, "There are few things I feel such certainty about these days. This, I know for sure." He pressed a tender kiss to his wife's temple. "I feel it with the same conviction I felt when I took Rachel as my wife. As with that event, I have no doubts."

Blushing, Rachel smiled up at him. "Thank you." She whispered. Gently she laid her hand to his arm and faced Lauren. "We must get into that ball...."

His excitement waning, Christopher peered at his wife in disbelief. "Nay! I will not put you in danger again. This I do alone."

Hands to hips, Rachel denied him. "We do this together, Mr. Jingles." She whispered the name before continuing. "The choice is mine to make, and I stand by it."

We go together, or not at all.”

Seeking support, Christopher turned to Richard. “Tell her this is insane. She can not go to that ball.”

To Christopher’s amazement, Richard planted his arms across his chest, and shook his head. “We go together, or not at all!”

\* \* \* \*

The gala at Michaelmas was a gallant affair. It was one of the rare times guests were not announced. Each person arrived dressed in costume, a mask on their face, and their identity well hidden. Though laughter abounded, conversations were conducted in soft whispers, and only to those familiar with the speaker’s identity. As the hours ticked away, names were jotted on dance cards, as identities were revealed. The last couple to remain anonymous won wonderful prizes. Thus the costumes were elaborate, and the masks cleverly concealing.

Having never experienced anything so grand, Rachel drew in a sharp breath as she and Christopher entered in their finery. Lauren had carefully crafted her short hair into a twist, giving it the illusion of length. Beads intertwined through the silken tresses, sparkling as the candlelight flitted over them. Her gown, once more borrowed from Alexia, was of pale green, and accented with pink roses. It drooped seductively off her shoulders, revealing a goodly amount of cleavage, a fact that continually drew her husband’s attention to the swell of her breasts. The mask that concealed her visage was adorned with a rainbow of peacock feathers, which spread about her face like a glorious crown.

Rachel giggled as she perused her reflection in the looking glass. “In truth, I need no mask. ‘Tis doubtful any will put a name with my face.”

Lauren corrected her. “That is where you are wrong, dear. Many remember your mother. You are the mirror image of her. I fear without the mask you will draw far more attention than with it.”

It was in the quiet moments after adorned that Rachel truly thought of the evening ahead. Her future balanced on the coming hours. Alone in the chambers she shared with Christopher, she pursed her lips as apprehension gripped her. If Christopher were correct, this night would see them free of Maxwell’s threat, or facing a hangman on the morrow. Gingerly she fingered the dagger her husband had given her before Maxwell took them to the dungeons. Her mind set, she carefully strapped the slender blade to her arm, and concealed it beneath the long flowing sleeve of her gown. A strange sense of calm filled her. She would protect her husband, at all costs.

Now, beside Christopher, she smiled warmly as she stole a glance at his handsome silhouette. His attire was much like his demeanor, speaking volumes without being loud. A crisp white shirt stretched over his broad shoulders. Atop it, a form-fitted waistcoat of dark blue tapered to pants of smoky gray. Gold piping accented his jacket, and the outer seam of his pants. A ruffled cravat filled the space beneath his chin, softening slightly the rugged cut of his jaw. He wore his clothing with the natural grace of a man comfortable with himself, and needed no other accessories to bring attention to his presence. Unlike his wife’s, his mask was quite simple. Made of porcelain, it formed to the chiseled lines of his face, concealing his visage with nothing more than its seamless mold. From beyond the eyeholes blue sparkled. He was perfection, and Rachel beamed as she admired him from behind lowered lids.

Leaning close, Christopher whispered near Rachel's ear. "'Tis unlikely anything will be attempted until the masque begins to wind down. They would not want to risk a guest becoming ill, or dying before an escape was possible." His hand on her lower back sent shivers of delight through her body. "Thus, madam, I suggest we enjoy the night. Do, however, keep your eyes open, and be alert. I have no doubt Maxwell will be in residence. We can ill afford discovery prior to learning who is behind all of this."

For a while, they lost themselves in the motions of the dance, their gazes locked as they drifted apart, continued with a new partner, then merged together once more. When they drew too much scrutiny, they quietly moved a safe distance from the crowds. Laying his finger along his lips, Christopher cautiously advised his wife. "Take care as you look to the left." When Rachel casually glanced as directed, she espied a tall thin man adorned in red. Close to her ear, Christopher warned, "Maxwell."

Stiffening, Rachel queried, "Are you sure?" His mask revealed no features, and though his hair thinned at the temples, Rachel could distinguish no other noticeable attribute.

A soft chuckle slipped from Christopher's throat. "Aye. He does not wear his clothing.... His clothing wears him." Rachel tilted her head in confusion. Again, he laughed softly. Nodding toward their nemesis, he pointed out, "His waistcoat is loose, as if made for another, his pants slightly off center. It is as if he grabbed them from a line with many others, uncaring whether they fit or not."

Looking at the captain of the guard as if for the first time, Rachel studied him for several seconds. She had always been too afraid of him to truly assess the man before. Of a sudden, he seemed far less frightening, and strangely more human. "Indeed." She murmured in agreement. "His clothing does wear him."

\* \* \* \*

Maxwell espied the couple shortly after their entrance. There was something about the man, which caught his attention. It was not so much arrogance as a subtle mastery of his person that alerted Maxwell to his presence. Careful not to let the man know he watched, Maxwell kept a safe distance. Strangely enough, however, it was the woman by his side, who revealed his identity. Eager to placate the gnawing of disquiet that settled over him, Maxwell approached the couple and gave a curt bow. Keeping to the rules of the masque, he extended his hand toward the dance floor as he perused the young woman before him.

Shaking her head slightly, in denial, she remained at Christopher's side. Maxwell, however, refused to be put off. Once more, he indicated the dance floor, and bowed as he awaited her. Her hand slipped from her companion's slowly.

Maxwell swept her about to a lively tune, his hand familiarly at her waist. "Have we met, milady?" Her only reply was a stiff shake of her head. "Me thinks we have." He averred as he leaned close and inhaled deeply of her perfume. Rachel lifted her finger to her lips in warning. The action only made him sneer. "'Tis not your voice I need to hear to know the truth. 'Tis the scent of lilacs which assures me of your identity." The fear he saw in her hazel eyes reminded him of their encounter in Derbyshire, and pleased him. "Were I in your shoes, milady, I would have fled England. How delightful the hangman's noose will not go to waste."

Her mind racing, Rachel missed several steps, and nearly fell as she pulled from his grasp. The wild beat of her heart echoed in her ears. Unmindful of the dancers she

stumbled past; she made a hasty retreat to the safety of her husband's side. Her breath escaped in a ragged rush as she clung to him. "Christopher, he knows...."

Tenderly Christopher caressed her nape. "Good. The game has begun." Calmly he escorted her to his mother's side. A slow shiver inched along his spine as goblets of champagne were brought from the next room, to toast the winning couple of the evening. He nodded toward the servants as they placed trays of the golden liquid on the tables stretching along one wall. "The perfect criminal, innocent looking to the eyes, and gone before his crime can be noticed." Glancing toward Maxwell, he hissed, "The game begins."

Rachel clung to him. "Christopher, this is no game." Her whisper was a hoarse growl. "This time he will make certain you die."

"We will see who has the final word, love." Then he leaned against the wall cockily, and gave the captain of the guard a daring nod.

Rachel pressed to her husband's side, her gaze riveted on Maxwell as he made his way toward the throne. "All the careful time your mother took with my appearance was for naught. He knew it was me, Christopher, by the scent of lilacs." Her husband stiffened, of a sudden, and flung himself from the wall.

Memories flashed in the recesses of Christopher's mind savagely. The intensity of them sent him staggering backward, his hands to his temples. Rachel curled her fingers about his arm. "Christopher, what is it?"

His stomach roiling, he cupped his head in his hands for several seconds before answering. "I know who is behind all of this."

Rachel searched his blue eyes anxiously. "Are you certain?"

In response, he heaved his weary body from her, and stumbled forward. "I have to speak with the queen." He waited for no response from his wife, instead merged quickly into the crowd, and disappeared from view.

Christopher's focus was on the queen, and the small group of people surrounding her. His heart beat a wild rhythm in his chest, and his breath escaped his lungs in rapid pants of anxiety.

\* \* \* \*

Shy of his destination, Maxwell halted and peered in surprise as the Marquess brazenly passed him, and boldly headed for Elizabeth. An icy shiver crept along Maxwell's spine. Near running, he attempted to intercept his nemesis. Yet, he dared not call out to the man. He had to silence Christopher without drawing attention to himself in any way.

\* \* \* \*

Near the queen, Christopher stopped and drew in a deep breath. His senses reeled with the knowledge of everything hidden in the recesses of his mind these many weeks. For a long moment, he searched the cluster of people around him. At last, he moved to one person in particular. Leaning close, he whispered, "Catherine, I need to speak with you."

She stiffened beneath his touch, and turned hesitantly to peer beyond the eyeholes of his mask. "Christopher?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper. At his subtle nod, she released a ragged sigh. "Have you no idea the danger you are in being here?"

Even sheltered behind a mask of crimson velvet, and laced with gold beads, he could see he unnerved her with his presence. "I must speak with the queen, Catherine,

and want you by my side as I do so.”

Catherine shook her head as if to deny the request. “Christopher, leave here before harm comes to you ... I beg you, do not pursue this further.”

Gently he curled his fingers about her upper arm, and forced her to turn toward him. “I cannot, Catherine. I will speak with her.” He paused an instant, then murmured softly, “And you shall stand beside me.” Even as he moved toward the queen, his hand remained on her arm, forcing her to follow.

Catherine stumbled after him, gently attempting to remove his fingers without causing a scene. Her voice grew frantic as she whispered his name. “Christopher, release me. I cannot bear to watch you do this!”

Near the throne, he raised his hand to his mask and drew it from his face. Then bowing gallantly, he made Elizabeth aware of his presence. “Your Majesty, I require a few moments of your time.” His voice boomed in the cavernous room, drawing the attention of many surprised dancers. Those around Elizabeth peered at the young Marquess in amazement.

Maxwell pushed his way through the crowd, his sword drawn. Casting his own mask to the floor, he sneered, “Halt!” The tip of his blade was leveled at Christopher’s chest. “You so much as breathe in a way that seems threatening, and I shall run you through.”

Christopher paid him no heed. Instead, he raised his free hand as if in surrender to Elizabeth, and assured his queen. “I am unarmed and pose no threat. Your Majesty, was it not your decree that gave me three days to prove my innocence?” At her hesitant nod he continued, “Give but a few moments of your time.” Locking his gaze with hers, he challenged, “Surely ten minutes more will not cause you undo duress. After all, Your Majesty, it is my innocence I seek to prove.”

Maxwell snorted in disgust. “You cannot prove that which is not so.” Facing his queen he added sarcastically, “Your Majesty, shall I take the prisoner to the dungeons to await the hangman’s noose on the morrow?” He stepped closer and circled Christopher’s wrist with his hand.

Again, Christopher ignored the captain of the guard. He squared his shoulders defiantly. “Prove to me ... and them, you are a monarch of honor. Allow me a few moments of your time.”

Lips white, Queen Elizabeth eyed him with eyes that flashed fire. “We find thy intrusion into our masque insulting, Lord Conyngham.” At Maxwell’s advance on the other man, she raised her hand to halt him. “However, we are intrigued by your display and bravery in the face of certain death. The hour draws nigh, sir. Should thou not prove thy lack of guilt within the next few moments, we shall not hinder the captain of the guard in his thirst for thy blood.”

Seething, Maxwell snarled, “Surely Your Majesty would not allow a known murderer such luxury?”

Elizabeth glared at him. “Hast thou suddenly become King of England, Captain? For thou challenges our authority as if thou holds power over us!” Her eyes gleamed with her indignation.

Chastised, Maxwell lowered his head contritely. Bowing, he conceded humbly to his monarch, though his sword remained at Christopher’s chest.

Facing Christopher, Elizabeth assessed him with pursed lips. “Time slips away,

Lord Conyngham. Thou now have only three minutes.”

Christopher nodded in understanding. “I am grateful for what time you grant me, Your Majesty.” He cleared his throat. “If it pleases Your Majesty, do you remember our last meeting?” He waited for no reply. “I came to you with a warning of a plot against you.” Christopher paused for an instant. “When I exited your throne room, the Chancellor approached me in the hall. He was cryptic in his address, but mentioned something about treason, and being duped.”

The music had ceased, and the entire room buzzed with soft whispers. Knowing she had an audience, Elizabeth exerted her power as she snapped, “As the Chancellor is dead, and unable to defend his actions, we shall not hear words that discredit him.”

Christopher shook his head. “Nay, Your Majesty, I do not discredit him. I only wish to prove my innocence.” Releasing a weary breath, he admonished, though with care how he phrased his statement. “Forgive my forwardness, Your Majesty, but as you stated yourself the time is nigh. Give a moment of attention and silence that I might accomplish my goal.”

Elizabeth’s nostrils flared with her ire. Her face mottled red. Eventually she gained control, and nodded in acquiesce. “Continue, Lord Conyngham.”

Again, Christopher bowed. “The Chancellor said he wanted to make right a wrong. He sent me to the catacombs to speak with a prisoner there. Yet, the man in the cell refused me. Confused by the Chancellor’s actions, I returned to the palace to seek him out. I found him dead....”

Maxwell snorted. “Your Majesty, this is ridiculous! I doubt there is a soul in this room who does not think the Marquess wastes your time. His own dagger was found beside the Chancellor’s body.”

Elizabeth raised her hand to silence the captain of the guard. But before she could speak, Christopher countered, “Captain, how is it you knew to come to the Chancellor’s rooms that day?”

His brows furrowed in confusion, Maxwell glared at Christopher. “Don’t you try to twist this around, milord. I will not fall victim to your tricks. I had nothing to do with the Chancellor’s death.”

Christopher shook his head. “Nor was I suggesting such a thing. I only want to know how it was that you knew to go to the Chancellor’s chambers. I had only been there less than a minute myself, when your men began to break down the door. What sent you there?” For several seconds Maxwell remained silent. Christopher could see he battled thoughts in his head. At last, Maxwell uttered, “Am I on trial here?” He faced his queen. “Am I to answer questions, rather than the man accused of the crimes?”

In response, Elizabeth focused her attention on Christopher. “Thou hast two minutes left, Lord Conyngham.”

Christopher nodded in understanding. “I was in a panic, Your Majesty, after the Chancellor’s death. I sent a missive to the only person I thought might help me ... my cousin, and yours, Lord Saracey. He responded that it was not safe to meet at the palace, but assured me he would investigate my assumptions, and speak with you on my behalf.” Christopher released a ragged sigh. “I received a missive from him three days later, stating he had evidence of my innocence. Papers were found in the Chancellor’s rooms, detailing the plot against you. We were to rendezvous in a small room beneath the stairwell to discuss a course of action. He was dead when I arrived.” His voice grew soft

as he continued, "It was then I knew I had been betrayed." He swallowed hard before going on. "Only one person was aware of my contact with Lord Saracey." For a long moment, he stood silently collecting his repose. At last, he turned to Catherine, and gently removed her mask. His voice was hoarse and raspy as he confronted her. "Why did you betray me, Catherine?"

The Countess of Westbury peered at him with wide eyes. Her lips trembled. Shaking fingers reached for and caressed his cheek. "Christopher, I would never...."

Christopher faced the queen. "Your Majesty, what is the one thing that comes to your mind when you think of the Countess of Westbury?"

Elizabeth searched his visage with furrowed brows. As if uncertain what he sought from her, she hesitated. At last, she replied, "We always think of roses when the Countess is mentioned."

Encouraged, Christopher continued. "Indeed, Your Majesty, her perfume lingers in the air long after she has departed." He frowned. "As it did that day I encountered the Chancellor outside the throne room." Once more, his attention returned to Catherine. "I thought it only a coincidence that the scent of roses teased me that day, and gave it no more than a passing inclination. Yet, when I entered the Chancellor's rooms the following day, the aroma once again tantalized me."

Catherine shook her head in denial. Slowly, she backed away. It was only Christopher's hand on her arm that halted her progress.

Maxwell snorted indignantly. "Your Majesty, surely you will not allow this to continue. First, the Marquess murders the Chancellor. Now you permit him to slander one of your ladies-in-waiting...."

Christopher bestowed a scathing glower on the captain of the guard. "Perhaps the blame should be cast on you Captain!" he sneered. "As I said, you seemed to know of the Chancellor's and Lord Saracey's death before an alarm was sounded."

Though the chimes seemed a death toll to the entire amassed group, no word was spoken to condemn the Marquess of Conyngham. Elizabeth gave no indication of even hearing them. Leaning forward in her chair, she peered at Maxwell with raised painted-on brows. "Captain, thou will answer this question for us."

Maxwell glared at Christopher. "You will not pin this on me, milord! I had nothing to do with their deaths."

Christopher shook his head. "It would have been impossible for you to exit the Chancellor's rooms and gather your guards in so short a time. Besides, you would most likely have been spattered with his blood." Once more, he faced Catherine. "Whoever killed the Chancellor knew of the tunnels, and used them in their escape."

Wide green eyes searched his. "Christopher, it distresses me that you would think me capable of such a thing."

The sadness in his eyes tore at Rachel's heart as she inched closer with Richard. She longed to enfold him in her arms and banish the pain these revelations marred his features with, but dared go no closer for fear Queen Elizabeth would have her arrested.

The long slow breath that slipped from her husband's lips spoke volumes. "I must admit, Catherine," he murmured hoarsely, "I refused to acknowledge your involvement at first." His gaze returned to Elizabeth. "There was only one who knew of my contact with Lord Saracey, the person who took my plea to him...." Once more, he searched Catherine's green eyes. "You, Countess." He swallowed several times. "I

denied the truth, even then. When I confided in you that I knew the prisoner in the catacombs was the answer to everything, and that I was going to see him once more, it was my fondest hope my suspicions were false. Yet, Maxwell was there waiting for me." Again, he paused. "Why Catherine? What horrid thing did I do to deserve this from you?"

Once more, she reached for him. "Christopher, I love you. How can you think me capable of something so vile?" Trembling fingers traced a path over his waistcoat, as if caressing each scar along his chest.

Another vision seared Christopher's mind, and he staggered as a rush of air escaped his lungs. Circling Catherine's wrist with his hand, he peered at her in disbelief. "You were there, outside Derbyshire, with Maxwell." His stomach roiled with the depth of her involvement. "Yours was the last face I saw before slipping into unconsciousness."

Catherine leaned against him, and sobbed. "I saved your life, Christopher! 'Twas I who assured Maxwell no breath escaped your lips, though your pulse beat beneath my fingertip."

Christopher's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Now I understand why I held no memories of you. My mind could not comprehend such betrayal from one who professed undying love. I erased you from my thoughts, rather than allow myself to admit your guilt." Confusion marred his features. "Why Catherine? Why?"

Pushing from him, she glared at his handsome visage. "I begged you to walk away from it. How many times did I implore you to give up your quest to know who wanted Elizabeth dead? You refused me at every turn!" Her face mottled crimson as she glared at her queen. "She deserved to die, Christopher. You have no idea what it has been like beneath her tyrant's thumb. But you would not cease your investigations, and I knew no other way to stop you." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "The Chancellor was a fool! He could have reigned in her stead, had he not found a conscience. I tried to reason with him, but he gave me no pause." Between clenched teeth she hissed, "You left me no choice but to kill him, and pin his murder on you."

Stunned with her revelation, Maxwell's sword dipped toward the floor. "You killed the Chancellor?" Facing Elizabeth he averred, "Your Majesty, I was misled. The Countess betrayed all of us."

Seething, Catherine spit at him. "Don't you dare play the innocent. 'Twas not I who imprisoned the Earl of Kent to keep his silence when he discovered our plans to kill Elizabeth!" The entire room inhaled as one. Catherine laughed at Maxwell as the color drained from his face. "Nor was it I who drew a blade along lord Saracey's throat."

Maxwell's body trembled with rage. "How dare you accuse me of such deceit?" He clenched his teeth as he faced Elizabeth. "She is mad, Your Majesty. I admit my part in the Marquess of Conyngham's injuries, but will not take the fall for anything else."

Glaring at Christopher, he sneered, "Ask her of the potion she slipped in your drink when she visited a few days past, milord. The only reason you are not dead now, is she was too much a coward to run you through with her dagger when you refused to drink the port."

Christopher closed his eyes. Catherine had been insistent he drink the port she'd offered. Only his fit of anger sent the glass shattering against the wall, and saved his life. He needed no word of confirmation from the woman beside him. Her downcast eyes and

sagging shoulders assured him of the truth. For several seconds he remained silent, assessing her, and gathering his composure. At last, he queried, "Again, I ask why, Catherine?"

An icy glower was bestowed upon his ashen visage. "You have no idea what she did to me, Christopher! My son is dead, and she deserves the same!"

Confused, Christopher glanced at Elizabeth with raised brows. Every eye shifted to the queen. Anticipation was as thick as London fog. Her lips a thin line against her pale features, Elizabeth's eyes flashed fire. It was the only indication of her ire. "The Countess of Westbury lost her son in a tragic riding accident when he was nine...."

Catherine sneered at her. "Nay! No accident. He was murdered to keep my silence about your affair with the Earl of Essex!" As one, the crowd inhaled sharply.

Face red, Elizabeth half rose from her chair. Her voice was a low guttural hiss as she corrected, "We answer to no one, especially thou, Countess! We would have no need to ensure thy silence. There are several men here this night who have warmed our bed. Shall we name them to appease thy assumptions that such things matter to us?" Blatantly she gazed toward the crowd.

Maxwell's mouth opened, his jaw sagging in disbelief. Seething, he glared at Catherine. "You conniving witch. All along, you've sought revenge! This had nothing to do with the future of England, did it?"

Catherine returned his icy glower. "What of my son's future? What of the heir she took from me?" Her shoulders drooped, and she sobbed uncontrollably. For several seconds her weeping was the only sound in the massive room. Then, she lurched from Christopher's side and stumbled forward. Blindly, she groped for the goblet of champagne, placed beside her queen.

Christopher leapt after her. "Catherine, no!" Nevertheless, the liquid passed her lips before he could wrench the glass from her grasp.

Tears sparkled in her eyes as she turned to Christopher. "I did love you. We could have been very happy together."

Twisting about, Christopher searched for some means of forcing the poison from her throat, but found nothing to aid in his cause. Facing Elizabeth, he cried out, "'Tis poison! That was how she planned to kill you." Angered he sprinted toward the long table laden with glasses. His arm swept several to the floor, yet did not appease his wrath. Though he felt no love for Catherine, he raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. Glaring at Elizabeth, he roared, "Do something! Surely you will not allow her to die this way."

Settling back to her throne, Elizabeth turned stony eyes to Catherine. "Take her to her chambers and make her comfortable. Should she live through the night, hang her at first light." Then she faced the captain of the guard with the same stoic glower. "The choice is thine, sir. Drink the elixir thy lover has tasted, or feel thy neck snap beneath the hangman's noose at dawn. We care little which avenue thou elect. Rest assured, one way or the other thou shall be dead on the morrow."

Rachel watched Maxwell's nostrils flare. Though he spoke no word, the same fear he instilled in her in Derbyshire tingled the length of her spine. Only a subtle flick of his wrist alerted her to his intent. In the candlelight, the dagger cupped in his palm glinted. The air in her lungs lodged beneath the lump in her throat. Trembling fingers unsheathed the blade strapped to her arm. As Maxwell did several feet away, she cupped

the knife in her palm. Yet, she hesitated not. Instantly she turned the blade that the tip pointed to her breasts, and flicked her wrist with skill and assurance. The dagger sailed through the air silently. Its only sound was a soft whoosh as it penetrated the captain of the guard's waistcoat, and pierced his flesh.

Astounded, Maxwell staggered back several feet. His lips blanched as he circled trembling fingers about the hilt of the blade buried deep in his chest. He withdrew it as if it were nothing more than a splinter. His head lowered as he stared at his blood against the small weapon. A feral roar erupted from his throat. Like a bull, he curled his shoulders and braced his body, ready to charge, Elizabeth in his sights.

Christopher, yet by the tables along the wall, raced forward. Too far away, he gained little ground before the captain of the guard crashed against the queen, the dagger in his palm at the ready. He raised his hand, needing the backing of his entire strength to deliver the fatal blow.

Rachel twisted to Richard, and curled her fingers about the blade sheathed at his waist. Like the one preceding it, it arched perfectly and sank it deep into Maxwell's back. A groan escaped his lips. Teetering at the edge of Elizabeth's chair, he twisted his arm toward his back, but could not locate the blade between his ribs. Swayed from his goal, he staggered several feet before stumbling. His knees buckled beneath him, and he crumbled slowly to the floor. Glassy eyes searched the crowd for the one who had felled him. They rolled back in his head as death stealthily conquered another victim. For an instant, he remained on his knees. Then his body swayed forward and crashed at Elizabeth's feet.

Her mouth agape, the queen peered at him in disbelief. The dagger intended to be used against her remained in his palm. Rising on quaking limbs, she scanned the throng of masked onlookers. "Who hast done this?" Her voice echoed in the stillness.

Stepping forward, Rachel lifted trembling fingers to her mask and removed it from her visage. "This time, Your Majesty, the crime is mine to bear."

Elizabeth eyed her for several seconds. At last, she released a weary breath and smiled graciously. "Thou are still just as impertinent as thy mother!"

Near collapse, Rachel gave her a feeble smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

## EPILOGUE

Sunshine streamed through the windows of the manse as the crowd of people moved slowly through the rooms. The last Marquess of Conyngham smiled. He opened the doors to a large room, and stepped aside to let the group enter. Once they were within, he raised his hand toward a large portrait on the wall above the fireplace. "This is the Lady Rachel Conyngham!" He smiled at the oohs, and ahs from the people who gazed at the woman in the portrait. "She was the wife of the seventh Marquess of Conyngham! And hers is my favorite story to relate!" He moved toward a massive chair and sat down. No matter how many times he told the tale, he never tired of it! "Hers is a tale so intriguing you will find yourselves asking is it real!" He smiled. "Though a story related many times to the descendants of Conyngham, I shall leave it to you to decide once you have heard it!" Therefore, he began his story of a cold winter night in 1560, when the sound of horses' hooves rang in the dark! He smiled as his audience began to sit on the floor. It was always this way.

Sometime later he stood, gazing at the portrait of the woman with the flecks of gold in her eyes, and the soft knowing smile on her lips. He bowed to her, and then to the people around him. "She died in the fall of 1621, at the ripe old age of sixty eight. Her husband followed three days later. Six children and twenty-three grandchildren survived them. Many legacies started by the seventh Marques and his wife remain in existence to this day."

He smiled at the woman in the portrait. "The silversmith shop we went through earlier is still run, and managed by the descendants of Sarah McDermott, whose sons apprenticed there as young boys." He moved to the window, and gazed out at the sprawling hills, and breathtaking scenery. "There is also a camp where children from London's more impoverished families can spend the summers learning many of the trades that still keep the estate operating, such as carpentry, landscaping, and many others."

He turned to the crowd, and smiled. "Now if you would join me in a short walk, I will show you where the original manse stood before a fire burned it to the ground in eighteen hundred and five." He looked one last time at the portrait. "This portrait and most of the things in this room were all that were saved!" He bowed once more. "And we have been honored to glimpse a moment in the lives of two people who changed history!" He moved outside through a set of French doors, and waited for his tour to follow. "Did I mention, that the Lady Rachel and her husband were never buried?" He smiled at the looks he received. He enjoyed the end of the tour even more than the beginning. "They were burned, as was her final wish, and their ashes left to scatter on the wind wherever it would take them!"