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The Lost Baroness

Book VI in the Behind the Ranges Series

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Dedication

My grandmothers became hotel maids after being widowed and forced to support themselves with no skills beyond housewifery. My daughters were hotel maids because such work was easy to find while they were learning other skills. They soon moved on to jobs that paid better. Many women can't move on because, like my grandmothers, they are all that stands between those they love and the wolf at the door.

This book honors my grandmothers, my daughters, and all the women who daily perform the menial, invisible, and so necessary tasks that keep the rest of us comfortable.

And let's not forget Neil, who does floors so I'll have time to write.

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Glossary

A glossary of foreign words and phrases used in the story is at the end of the book.

Prologue

Somewhere in Eastern Europe, January, 1871

Buffalo Lachlan stepped from the swift stream on numb, icy feet. Clumsy under his burden, he climbed the shallow bank, eased between the close-spaced shrubs. He gave silent thanks to the mud that was too frozen to take footprints.

He hadn't heard the dogs since just after dawn. Maybe he'd confused them when he went into the water. Pausing briefly to draw a deep breath, he peered between the tangled branches. Beyond the band of shrubs, the forest was dim and shadowy. Patches of snow lingered where the dense canopy hid it from the sun.

Staggering, he emerged into the open. Few shrubs grew in the shade of the enormous fir trees, giving the forest a cathedral-like appearance.

"Damn little cover," he muttered.

Eventually he stumbled into a glade where a rotting snag stood. At its base, he eased his burden to the ground and knelt beside the limp body, watching for any slight sign of life.

At last he saw the chest move, a shallow lift and fall. Moving carefully, stiffly, Buff removed his filth-encrusted jacket and laid it across Anders. He shivered as an errant draft found its way inside his ragged shirt.

Anders moved then, wrapped his arms around himself, as if holding in what little warmth he possessed. Buff saw he'd been bleeding again.

Shit! They'd probably left a trail a blind man could follow.

Wanting only to rest, to sleep, Buff forced himself to his feet and pushed his way through the surrounding brush. He should go back and make sure they'd left no sign of their passing. But first he had to take care of his friend. Within a few minutes he had gathered an armful of fir branches, never taking more than one from any tree, breaking them off carefully, so the white scar of torn wood would not be easily visible.

He covered Anders with the branches. His pa had shown him this trick a long time ago. Who'd have thought he'd ever use it here? And he had a hunch he'd be using more of the woodcraft Pa had taught him before he got himself and Anders to safety. They were still a long way from the border.

He tried to stand, for he knew he should fetch water. His legs refused to lift him. Kneeling there, he knew he could go no farther until he had rested. With a sigh, he burrowed under the fir branches next to Anders and wrapped his arm around the unconscious man. It wouldn't be the first time they'd slept thus entwined. The dungeon had been little warmer than the forest.

Buff woke once to moonlight-silvered night. Beside him Anders seemed to be sleeping naturally, but his skin was still icy and his breathing shallow. He thought again of water, for his mouth was dry. Anders' wound, where the guard's thrown knife had buried itself deep, should be cleansed. In a moment he would rise, would fetch what he could carry in his cupped hands. In a moment...

Birdcalls woke Buff before sunlight pierced the forest canopy. Immediately he checked Anders, who still lay in the curled-up position he'd taken when Buff put him down. To Buff's surprise, the younger man opened his eyes.

"Buffalo?" He paused, licked his lips. "Are we safe?"

"For the time being. How are you doing?"

"Thirsty. Give me a moment and I will be ready to travel." He rolled to the side and tried to push himself upright. He fell back and lay still, his eyes closed. "I am sorry, Buffalo. Had I been quicker, we would have been away without notice."

"Not with the moonlight. The guard would have seen us, sooner or later." They'd had to cross almost a mile of open ground before they reached the edge of the forest. "I'll get water," he said, rising.

"No--" Anders lifted a hand to catch his pantleg. "No, stay, please."

Kneeling again, Buff said, "You need to drink. There's a stream not far away."

"Water will do me no good, my friend. I fear I am dying."

"No you're not--"

"You know I am." He coughed.

Buff saw a froth of blood on Anders' pale lips. He wiped it away with a corner of his jacket. "Not if I can help it."

Anders had been growing weaker, more ill, for some time. The months in the cold, dark dungeon had sapped his vitality, and the poor diet--some days they had bread with their water--had been hard on the slim young man who had grown up to a life of privilege. But he had never complained, and had often cheered Buff when it seemed as if they would die, forgotten, in *Festung Uberderwelt's* dungeons.

The information they'd acquired before being caught would be old news by now. Still, as soon as he saw Anders to a safe haven, he'd report to Lord Heatherford. Perhaps the Coalition could salvage something. Surely Ruprecht wouldn't have halted his very profitable operation because two inept young tourists had stumbled upon it.

At least he and Anders had managed to convince their captors that they were merely tourists gone astray. Otherwise they'd not have lived a day.

A low groan reminded him they'd have to be moving soon. But could they? Anders must have concealed his failing health for months. In the dim light of their underground prison, Buff had not seen how thin his cellmate had become, or how pale and infirm.

Just as he had. Buff knew he wasn't the man he'd been when they were tossed into the dungeon--how long ago? It had been early summer when they'd been caught at their surveillance of the Festung. His reflexes were slow and his thinking dull. If he'd been more alert, the guard wouldn't have been alive to see them.

At least the bastard would never abuse another prisoner.

A hand plucked at his sleeve. He looked down at Anders. The man's gaunt but still aristocratic face was drawn and twisted with pain. "Sleep," Buff said. "We'll be here a little while yet."

"Buffalo, promise me..."

He caught Anders' hand, held it tightly. But he could feel life slipping away.

"Promise me you'll look for her." Anders' voice was stronger, his grip on Buff's wrist tight. "She's alive. I know she is. I can feel--"

A shudder shook his body.

After a moment Buff took back his coat and laid the lifeless hand across his friend's body.

"I'll look for her, my friend," he vowed, knowing Anders Thorssen could no longer hear him. "I'll find her."

Chapter One

Columbia River Bar, January, 1873

Eyes narrowed against the salt spray, Buffalo Lachlan stood at the rail of the *Chinese Duchess*, straining for a first glimpse of the shore. The waves crashing against the hull were a sure sign the ship was approaching the bar that made entering the Columbia River a challenge to even the most skilled seaman.

He was almost there. Almost home.

Home! He could be there in a week, if he traveled fast.

If he didn't have a promise to keep.

"The mate said we ought to be in port by sundown."

Buff replied without turning his head. "It won't be soon enough for me. My feet are itching for solid land." The ship had been standing offshore for nine days, awaiting a break in the weather. This afternoon the waves were merely half again as high as the ship, the wind only a mild gale. Fairly calm conditions for the most dangerous bar in the world, according to the captain.

The priest grabbed the rail as the ship shuddered, then dove into a trough. "Please God, we'll get there safely. This is like nothing I've ever seen."

"Captain Hanks says our pilot is one of the best," Buff said. Right now he just hoped the captain hadn't lied. Even the fierce storm his ship had survived during the Atlantic crossing eight years ago hadn't been this violent, this tempestuous. He tightened his grip on the rail as the ship heeled over. Buff looked straight ahead, down into the brown-tinged water, wondering if his luck had run out at last.

The priest's voice rose above the howl of the wind, Latin words running together into a tremulous moan. He'd done a lot of praying on this crossing from Honolulu, for the weather had been foul. Buff had heard his voice through the thin wall between their cabins, night after miserable, stormy night, a low, wordless murmur.

Part of Buff exulted in the battle. Puny man against raging nature. One more exciting adventure in a life that had been full of them. Was he really ready to give it all up, to settle down and stay in one place?

He just didn't know.

Another dive, another recovery, time and again, until Buff wondered if any vessel made by the hands of man could withstand Nature's stunning power. For what seemed like hours, the ship fought the waves and the wind, a fragile leaf on an infinite river. Finally, as the fog-softened light dimmed, the waves subsided and the ship's prow turned toward the south shore. It steamed across the wide river towards a cluster of distant buildings.

Astoria, Oregon.

Was the woman he sought here? The last clue he'd found had pointed this direction, but that clue was more than thirteen years old. There was a good chance he'd find no trace of her, in Astoria or anywhere else.

At last they were docked. The few debarking passengers hurried down the gangplank, eager to set foot on solid ground. Buff lingered to say goodbye to fellow passengers bound for ports to the north. Then he shook hands with Ezra Hanks. "A good voyage, Captain, but I have to admit I'm happy to be ashore

again."

"Not everyone's for the sea," the captain agreed, "or for the mountains. I feel penned in when I can't see the edge of the world."

"Ah, but in the mountains the edge is sometimes a hundred miles away." Buff smiled. They had had this same argument all the way from Honolulu, and neither expected to win it.

Hanks clapped him on the shoulder. "Give my best to your uncle, lad."

"You'll probably see him before I do. I'll be staying hereabouts for a while."

He sketched a salute. "Good sailing, Captain."

At the bottom of the gangplank, Buff hesitated. Somehow it seemed like he should make some ceremony of his homecoming. Again he smiled. *You could have come home anytime. Nothing was keeping you away.*

Nothing but itchy feet and a thirst for new places.

And a promise.

* * *

Jaeger stepped into the deep shadow between two buildings. He watched young Lachlan pause and look around him, for all the world like a raw yokel on his first visit to the big city. How could anyone be quite that countrified, especially after making his way around the world?

Despite a somewhat low taste in lodgings and entertainment, Lachlan seemed to slide through life without hindrance. That small contretemps in Honolulu had surely been less than it had appeared. An inept thief, a lucky thrust of the gold-headed cane, and rain-slick cobbles underfoot. Otherwise it would have been Lachlan lying half-conscious in the slime while his attacker stripped his pockets.

He waited until Lachlan turned the corner, then stepped into the muddy street and followed. First he would find a room, for he must stay in this miserable hole as long as his quarry did.

Perhaps he could find a woman who already had a room. Then he would leave no trace of his presence.

* * *

Siri staggered as a stone turned under her foot, then caught her balance. So tired. If only she could fall into her bed once she reached the hotel, but she could not. Tonight she had to finish the christening gown for the Warburton baby.

She rubbed her fingertips together, aware of their roughness. *It's a wonder they don't leave snags in the fabric.* The lace trimming the long gown was handmade, delicate stuff brought from Brittany, the fabric a fine, almost transparent batiste.

Light spilled from the open door of the Deep Six, the wildest and biggest saloon on the waterfront. She walked faster, knowing this part of town was no place for a decent woman once darkness fell.

Hearing footsteps behind her, Siri glanced over her shoulder. A tall man, head bent, was briefly silhouetted in the patch of light. Was he following her? She broke into a jog, not even slowing to pick her way across the muddy street marking the imaginary border between respectable Astoria and the waterfront.

Once on the wooden sidewalk in front of the darkened haberdashery, she slowed again, but could not resist looking backward.

He was still behind her.

Even as her breath caught in her throat, she saw him turn the corner and disappear. *Tack gode Gud!* He had not been following her, after all.

Her belly growled, reminding her that dinner had been many hours ago. Hotel employees were expected to eat when the food was set out. If they missed a meal, they went hungry until the next.

She turned a corner and ducked into the Chinese store. Mrs. Leong kept a pot of tea on the stove at all hours. That and a cold rice ball would have to hold her until breakfast. They were all she could afford.

"Good evening," she said to the tiny woman behind the counter.

Mrs. Leong smiled and nodded. "Rain come morning," she said. She poured steaming tea into a handleless cup and set a fat rice ball in a chipped bowl. The pennies Siri laid on the counter disappeared into an apron pocket.

With her tea and rice, Siri retreated to the corner behind the stove where she sat at a small round table. Instead of lingering here, she knew she should be in her room, sewing, but the hotel seemed so far away. And she was so tired.

Lulled by the warmth of the stove and her tea, Siri relaxed. Perhaps she almost slept, for when a man spoke, she jumped.

"No woman here," Mrs. Leong said to him.

"I'm not looking for a woman. I just want to know who deals in women here," the man said. His deep voice was mild, but Siri heard a hint of steel in it.

"No woman here," Mrs. Leong repeated. "Rain come morning."

"I wouldn't be surprised. Well, if you don't know who deals in women, then tell me who's boss here in Chinatown."

Siri leaned forward, curious. The man was tall, slim, with a wild mop of curly golden hair. He wore a caped canvas coat that hung to the tops of his high boots, and held a broad-brimmed hat in one hand. Droplets of mist sparkled on the hat and on his shoulders.

He doesn't look like a man who needs to buy a woman. She bit her lip. She would never have had a thought like that before she went to work at the hotel. Carleen Gilroy, the other maid, sometimes provided more than clean sheets and towels to guests. She wasn't at all shy about talking about her experiences. Siri had become far more worldly wise in the past three months.

For a single mad moment, Siri wondered what intimate relations with this man might be like. Would he be quick and rough, as her husband had been? Or would he be, as Carleen had said some men could be, gentle and concerned with her pleasure as well as his? Siri shivered, then banished the thought.

She missed Mrs. Leong's reply, but heard the man say, "I'm looking for a shipload of women who might have arrived twelve or thirteen years ago. Was he Boss then?"

"No Boss so long ago. Not many China people here then." Mrs. Leong shrugged as if that settled that.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll go see him." He turned to go, then reversed himself. "Li Ching, you said? Did he come here from the gold camps? Tall, bald fellow."

Speaks good English?"

Mrs. Leong nodded vigorously. "Li Ching very smart man. Find much gold."

"Well, I'll be damned," the man said, a peculiar smile on his face. He put on his hat and left.

Siri waited until he was out of sight before setting down the empty cup and rising. She'd wasted enough time sitting here, yet she hadn't wanted to leave until after he did. If she didn't get to her room soon, she'd be too sleepy to finish the christening gown. She set her cup and bowl on the counter. "Thank you, Mrs. Leong. I'll see you soon."

"New ship in. You hurry home before sailors come ashore."

"I know. I saw it at anchor. Good night." She stepped into the rain. She'd noticed the newest arrival. It was one that had not been in the harbor for nearly a year, and its captain would have no answers for her. None of the Dewitt ships traded along the Coast or went upriver.

Head down against the fine drizzle, she walked toward the hotel she called home now. The tiny room in the attic was cramped and comfortless, but it was dry and warmer than a tent. She had been fortunate to be hired as a maid in one of Astoria's two respectable hotels, even more fortunate the hotel provided room and board to its maids. There weren't many other jobs for a decent woman without family.

But she had a family. She *did*!

Ah, Gud! Why? Why did You let her take my babies away?

Blinded by sudden tears, she ran into a solid wall. One with hands.

Instinctively Siri fought the grasp of the man she'd collided with, but found herself held securely. "*Nej! Släpp mig!*"

"Stand still! I won't harm you." The hands held her fast. "Did you hurt yourself?"

His voice was deep, warming her from within. And familiar. She sagged within his grasp a moment, grateful for the support. Then she set her feet solidly on the ground and straightened her spine. "*Nej...No... I'm fine... Let me go!*"

The last word died on her tongue as she stared into sea-green eyes. His face was narrow and tanned, his head haloed with gold.

He let her go.

"Excuse me," she said, the words sounding faint and weak to her ears. "I'm sorry. Please. I must--" She dodged around him and all but ran up the street, forgetting her fatigue, intent on reaching the refuge of her tiny, cold room.

Buff stared after her, curious. Something about the woman... He almost felt he'd seen her before, somewhere.

But why would he remember her? And from where? There was nothing remarkable about her except, perhaps, her height. She had scarcely had to lift her chin to look straight into his face. But the tired eyes, the bracketed mouth, and the drab clothing--none of them were memorable. She looked like a servant. Or a poor man's wife.

Shaking his head, he resettled his pack on his shoulders and strode in the same direction she'd gone. Somewhere up this hill was the hotel Captain Hanks had recommended.

* * *

This room would be adequate until he knew what his next step would be. Jaeger detested the shabby, usually filthy lodgings one found at every waterfront in the world, but sometimes they served his purpose. No one paid attention to the transients who stayed a few hours or days.

He cleaned the lamp's chimney, wondering when soot had last been wiped from the scratched glass. So. Now he could see himself in the small mirror.

The eyebrows must go. They were distinctive, the first feature someone noticed when meeting him. He winced as he peeled the adhesive loose.

Now, what *persona* would he assume for his stay in Astoria?

* * *

The wind and rain forecast by Mrs. Leong had come with a vengeance. Storm warning flags had gone up the night before, and were snapping like rifle shots in the wind when Buff made his way to the Deep Six the next morning. Rain fell almost horizontally, beating against his borrowed oilskins like half-spent shot.

The saloon was crowded. He wasn't surprised. Any skipper who launched in this gale was crazy.

He told the bartender, "I've got an appointment with Abner Longstreet. Lachlan's the name."

The man nodded. "He's expectin' you. Through that door at the back. Go to the end of the hall. It's the door on the left."

As he threaded his way among the tables, one of the faces in the crowd caught his eye. *I've seen him before. But where?*

A bar girl caught at his arm. "Looking for company, mister?"

"Let him be, Yolanda. He's here to see the boss," the bartender called.

The girl turned him loose, but her carmined lips puckered in an airy kiss. "When you're through with your business, honey...." she said, leaving nothing to Buff's imagination.

He smiled, vowing silently to take the back way out. That chancre on her neck told him more about her than her profession.

Abner Longstreet was a big man, tall, wide, but not fat. He looked as if he'd made a living in the woods or before the mast before he became a saloonkeeper. A street brawler, if Buff had ever seen one, but now doing his best to disguise his past in well-tailored worsted and fine linen.

After the usual polite greetings, Buff said, "This isn't the best of times..."

"Nor is it the worst of times, my friend," Longstreet replied. "But you're a far, far better man than I have met before."

"Then perhaps we shall see the spring of hope." Buff chuckled. "I always feel like an idiot, mouthing those words."

"They're for your own good," Longstreet replied as he leaned forward. "You have a message for me?"

Buff recited the message he'd carried from Honolulu. "I don't suppose you can tell me what it's about?"

"Better you don't know. We're still not certain there's anything to this latest

alarm, but if there is..."

Buff nodded. In the seven years he'd worked for the Coalition, he'd discovered that couriers were rarely told anything about the messages they carried, and infiltrators often gathered information with no idea of why.

"Well, then, perhaps you can tell me something else, you being the Boss hereabouts."

Longstreet's smile held something more than humor. "Sometimes things are not what they seem." He offered Buff a cigar from the humidor on his desk. Neither spoke as they went through the rituals of snipping and lighting. Soon aromatic smoke drifted about their heads.

"And what would you like me to tell you?" Longstreet said, once they were comfortable.

Buff took a leisurely draw, let the smoke out slowly. "I'm looking for a lost child. A little girl."

Longstreet's eyebrow twitched.

"Well, if she's still alive, she's a woman now." Buff had asked these same questions a hundred times over the past two years, but now they held a new urgency. If the answers existed, they were here, somewhere along the Pacific Coast.

"Back in 1859," he said, "a girl child was stolen from a diplomat's family outside of Batavia, in the Dutch East Indies. They were on holiday at the beach. She was playing in the sand with her twin brother. The boy wandered off for a spell. When he came back, she wasn't where he'd left her. She was never seen again."

"You're sure she didn't go into the water and drown?"

"The sand was torn up where she'd been playing, and there were marks where a small boat had been run ashore. A man's footprints." Buff remembered what Anders had told him. "Her favorite dolly was lying in the sand, one arm ripped off." He looked Longstreet straight in the eye. "She never went anywhere without that dolly."

"Ah! I see." Another long inspection of his cigar. "White slavers?" he said at last.

"Slavers, anyhow. In that part of the world, they take any color of girl they can get."

"So are you the twin brother?" There was more than curiosity in that question. Skepticism and opportunism were there too.

"No, but he was...he is my friend. I'm doing a favor for him." No need to tell more. "The family never knew for sure what happened to the girl. Her brother believes she's still alive."

"Seems to me they waited a long time to start a search for her."

"Oh, they searched. For years. Rewards were posted all around the Pacific. Even after the family went back to Denmark, the rewards held." He paused for effect. "A thousand dollars for information leading to her recovery or proof of her death."

"A thousand? Pah! Chicken feed!" Longstreet waved his hand, as if to dismiss such a paltry sum. "No wonder they're still looking."

"Not all diplomats are wealthy," Buff said, although he secretly agreed with Longstreet. Baron Thor Mogensen could have offered ten times the reward, had he chosen. Why he hadn't was still a mystery to Buff. Anders had believed his father hadn't really wanted Astrid back, because he believed she had been ruined.

Having met the baron, Buff was inclined to agree with Anders. Respectability had seemed almost as important to him as holding on to his fortune. His will must have come as a surprise to everyone, especially to his surviving son.

"You're following a cold trail," Longstreet said. "What makes you think you'll ever find her?"

Since he had often asked himself the same question, the answer came readily to Buff. "I don't. All I want to do is find out what happened to her, to clear up the mystery. If she's being held against her will, I'll see she gets free. I doubt if her family would want her back, if she's spent all these years in a brothel."

Longstreet nodded. "I doubt if she'd go. Not after so long." He sat back again, drew on his cigar. After a moment he said, "So you think she might be in Astoria?"

"I don't know. It's where I'll start. If I can't find anything out here, I'll have to try elsewhere. I can't give up until I'm sure she can't be found."

"The reward is still good?"

Knowing Piers Thorssen wouldn't lay out a penny for word of his sister, Buff shrugged. "I don't know. Her father died last year, and her twin brother... hasn't any money. Like I said, I'm doing this as a favor, not for the reward."

After a bit, the saloonkeeper set his cigar aside. "I'll put the word out. Now, what else do you know?"

For the next quarter hour, Buff filled him in on what little he'd been able to discover, both proven fact and supposition.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Buff went to the portmaster's office, full of questions. He introduced himself to the young man behind the tall counter. "Do you keep records of shipwrecks?"

"When there's survivors to tell about them. Too often we don't hear about the ships until the wreckage washes ashore." The young man scratched behind his ear.

"I'm not asking you to dig the information out yourself," Buff said, letting the clerk see the golden eagle in his hand. "I can do that. All I need from you is a place to work and access to whatever records you have."

"Sure, Mr. Lachlan. Just let me clear a space."

Within a few minutes, Buff was seated at the table, facing a stack of old and new journals. The older ones were water-stained, their covers rough with mildew.

"We had a leak in the roof," the clerk said, by way of apology. "Didn't notice it until everything in the cupboard got soaked."

"As long as I can read them, that's all I care about." Buff opened the first book, scanned its first page. The spidery handwriting was almost obscured by a dark stain, but he was pretty sure he saw 1855 in the title. Many of the entries were perfectly readable, and the last one was dated December 1857. He closed it and picked up the next one.

For two hours, he went through the journals, daily recordings of port activities. At last he closed the last journal, the one in which the arrival of the *Chinese Duchess* had been recorded only the day before. "There's a gap here," he said, when he'd caught the clerk's attention. He tapped one of the journals. "This book ends in early '59, and the next one starts in September of 1861. Any idea what happened to the missing ones? Two or three, more likely."

"Oh, golly, Mr. Lachlan, I don't know. We've got some records stored in a warehouse down by the docks. Maybe they're down there."

"I'll be happy to pay someone to see if they can be found. I'm sure you're busy--"

"Oh, I'll be happy to look. It might take me a day or two, but I can go down after work and dig around."

"Fine," Buff told him. "No hurry. I'll be hereabouts a week or two." He told the clerk where he was staying. "Let me know as soon as you can, will you?" He handed the young man the coin. "And thanks."

A man could get his daily exercise in Astoria, just walking to town and back, Buff decided later that afternoon, as he turned up the steep street toward the Pacific Western Hotel. The level ground along the waterfront wasn't much more than a couple of hundred yards wide at the main dock. So narrow, in fact, that the lowest row of buildings sat on pilings, with boardwalks connecting them to land. Everything else perched on the slopes above, where many of the buildings looked as if they could slide into the river at any time.

The hotel was up the hill a quarter mile or so, a tall, narrow building of four stories. It was not as grand as the Occident nor as large. The hotel was really a boarding house that catered to maritime men and permanent residents more than

to ordinary travelers. It was known for its comfortable rooms and plain but tasty cooking. Like so many of the buildings in Astoria, the front door and the back door opened at different levels, so that the lobby was a flight up from the dining room and kitchen, yet from both one stepped out onto solid ground.

The other good thing about the Pacific Western was the maid service. He'd learned to appreciate how comfortable life could be when there was someone to do the laundry, make the bed, and polish the boots. Idly he wondered if the maids also warmed the beds, given the clientele of the hotel, ships' captains, retired seamen, and prosperous local bachelors.

The drizzle hadn't let up all day. Buff wondered how long it would take him to grow mold. Even Copenhagen hadn't been this wet. Shoulders hunched against the damp that seemed to creep into his very bones, he turned the corner and entered the narrow front yard of the hotel. Behind the unpainted board fence, a few shrubs and a small patch of grass showed that someone cared enough to pretty the place up.

No one was behind the counter in the lobby, but he heard voices from the billiards room. Perhaps some of the other guests might have information he'd find useful to his quest. In his experience, many a fact came to light over brandy and billiards.

He watched the game in progress for a while, a hard-fought contest between a white-whiskered man with the weathered skin of an old salt, and a younger fellow with a fancy waistcoat and fancier necktie. When the older man sank the last ball, he gave a bark of laughter and said, "There now, Caleb, I told you I haven't lost the touch!"

"No, indeed you haven't, Captain." Racking his cue, Caleb winked at the spectators. "That makes the third bottle of good brandy you've won off me this year. At this rate I'll have to spend more time selling and less relaxing in your fair city. I can't afford to stop over here long if I'm going to lose all my profits to you."

After the general laughter had died, the old salt said, "Get some glasses, George. I don't want to be selfish with my winnings." He regarded Buff for a moment. "You're not a seaman, young feller. What brings you to Astoria?"

"Just passing through, sir, on my way to visit my family over in Boise City. I'm looking for some information." He accepted a glass of brandy from George Welkins, then saluted the other men before sipping.

"There was a ship bound for either here or San Francisco..." He spun out the story he'd decided upon, made up of a bit of the truth and a bit of imagination.

"Well, I've been here goin' on eleven years now, and I never heard of a ship full of women going down," George Welkins said after Buff had spun his usual tale.

"It would have been before then. Closer to '59 or '60. I'm not sure."

"It appears to me," the traveling man said, "that a man looking for a lost ship would at least know her name."

"As for that, there are half a dozen ships she could have been, according to the port records in Honolulu." He knew for sure that two of those ships had reached San Francisco safely. He had seen no mention of any of the others after 1859, not in any of the ports he'd visited.

The conversation detoured into a discussion of what constituted proof of a

ship's loss. From what he heard, Buff concluded such proof was seldom found in the dangerous waters off the Columbia's mouth. He sat quietly and listened to the talk. A man could learn a lot by keeping his mouth shut and his ears open.

When the conversation veered to politics, he rose from his seat and went to the desk in the parlor. Since he'd been out of the country throughout Grant's first term as president, he only knew what he'd read in the occasional European newspaper. The man was a disgrace, no doubt about it. And now he was in office for another four years.

Buff smiled. For all their pious condemnation of corrupt European and Asian governments, Americans seemed to have just as many scandals and as much vice. He pulled a sheet of paper to him and dipped the pen. His folks weren't expecting him home any time soon, but he should let them know he'd made the crossing safely.

* * *

Men! Although many of the lodgers were tidy creatures, such as one would expect from a man who spent most of his time in a compact ship's cabin, some were terrible slovens. Siri started picking up the clothing scattered about the room. How any man who could afford such fine linen shirts and handkerchiefs and such elegant silk cravats could care so little for them, she did not understand. She stroked her cheek with one of the cravats, a red-and-gray striped one, and wondered if this was how a silken gown would feel against her skin.

With a sigh, she folded the cravat and laid it on the dresser with the handkerchiefs. Quickly she picked up the rest of the clothing and made a tidy pile of it on the chair. A dirty boot print darkened one of the shirts. Seeing it, she shook her head. *What a shame.*

When she'd finished with the scattered garments, she stripped the bed, an easy task, since the sheets were pulled loose and the blanket tossed onto the floor. Even the pillow had been abused, its slip half off and ripped. A person would think there had been a riot in this room, instead of a man who'd only slept here. *Mrs. Welkins will have a fit about the pillowslip. She'll probably add it to his bill.*

Soon the room was tidy again, and everything was in place. She wiped the dustcloth across the windowsill once more for good measure. It was a caution how soot from the kitchen fires crept in through every crack and cranny. For a moment she paused, staring up into the woods beyond the street, wondering, as always, if there would be news today.

"What the hell?"

Siri spun around. Standing in the open doorway was the man from the Chinese store, the man who had been looking for a woman. Once again his sheer masculine presence came close to overwhelming her, stealing the breath from her chest and drying her mouth. She curtsied, while she was thinking of what to say.

He came toward her, stopped barely a foot away. Although he was not much taller than she, he seemed to loom over her. Siri tried to retreat, but her bottom was snug against the windowsill and she could not move.

"Disappointed, are you?" he said, his deep voice silky and threatening at the same time. "No gold, no jewelry, nothing at all worth stealing."

"Stealing? I was not--"

"Bullshit! You had a fine time pawing through my gear. The only problem is, you didn't have time to put it back, did you?" He waved his hand, the gesture encompassing the entire room. "Or were you unpacking for me? Just another service of the house?"

"I did nothing except--"

He took a step toward her. Siri felt the warmth of him, even though their bodies were not touching. Then his hand, hard and strong, cupped her chin. "You're a lot younger than you seemed, last night. Your eyes... iceberg blue..." He chuckled. "And about as cold."

He drew a finger across her cheek, and her skin burned as if he'd branded her.

"What were you looking for, sweetheart? Money? There are better ways than stealing it."

She slapped his hand aside, pushed against his chest. She might as well have tried moving a rock. "I do not steal. I cleaned your room, picked up your clothing. You are *en gris*...a pig. Your clothing is so fine, and you strew it about like so much *skröp*...so much trash." She squeezed around him and went to the pile of shirts. "Look!" She shook the one with the boot print before him. "See! So dirty it may never come clean! *Vad synd!* What a shame!"

"Let me see that!"

Siri handed it to him.

He turned the shirt over in his hands, inspected the black smear. "Where was this?" His tone was mild.

His gaze was not. It was full of anger.

She recoiled, stumbling over the rag rug before the dresser. "On the floor. There." She pointed to the spot near the bed where the shirt had lain.

"And you say the room was a mess? How? What else was out of place?"

"*Allting*...everything. The shirts were on the floor, your cravats, even your... your *underkläder*." Siri felt her cheeks heat.

His lips twitched. "Even my underwear, huh? Okay, I believe you. If you'd been rifling my gear, you'd not want me to know it." He looked around the room, almost as if he expected to see an intruder's name writ on the wall. "How long have you been in here?"

Suddenly she understood what he was thinking. "Not long. Only enough time to clean, pick up, give you clean sheets. Half an hour?"

"And I went out early. So the room was empty for five or six hours, maybe." He cast another searching look around. "Was anyone else likely to be on this floor, other than lodgers?"

"No one is allowed above the stairs," she told him. It was a strict rule of the house. Only guests could enter the guest corridors leading to bedrooms and suites. The door in the lobby was kept locked at all times, and it was the only entrance to... "Oh!"

"You thought of something?" He was leaning against the windowsill now, looking much like Siri imagined a lion would look at its rest. His mane of tawny curls only added to the impression of a big cat ever alert and ready to spring upon

its unwary prey.

"The servant stairs. They come up the outside of the house. The doors are kept locked, but sometimes, when we are bringing up linens..." She paused, thinking about the many times she had left a door unlocked, knowing she would return soon from the laundry with her arms full of clean sheets and towels. "I had to wait for Chu to finish ironing." She bit her lip. "It was only a short while." No more than the time it had taken her to drink a cup of tea, but enough time for someone to go up the stairs and enter the third floor corridor. She had cleaned the suites first, then had gone to dinner, so an intruder could have had more than two undisturbed hours in this room.

"I am sorry," she told him. "Was anything stolen?" What if he complained? Mrs. Welkins was particular about the maids lingering in the laundry, but the day was damp and cold, and the steam-filled room had been warm. She had not been able to resist.

"I doubt it. Let me take a look and I'll let you know." He smiled for the first time. "I don't keep anything valuable in here, so the most he would have gotten was a few dollars."

A few dollars? He must be a rich man. Siri earned only two dollars a week.

Buffalo believed the maid. She simply didn't look, didn't sound like a woman bent on stealing. He was sure she was the same woman who'd been sitting in the shadows in the Chinese store last night. At the time he'd wondered at a white woman being there. Then he'd forgotten her in his surprise at hearing Li Ching was here in Astoria.

"I am finished here," the maid said. She was eyeing him as if he'd grab her and prevent her leaving. No fear in those ice-blue eyes, though. Just suspicion and wariness.

"Look, don't say anything about this--" He glanced around the room. "I'd just as soon keep it quiet that I had a... a visitor." Let the thief think he'd gotten away with his robbery. If the intruder had indeed been a thief.

"But you do not know if something was stolen. We should tell Mr. Welkins. The police..."

"If something was stolen, I'll let the police know. No need to upset the hôtelier, though. I don't want a fuss made."

She looked as if she would argue, so to forestall her, Buff said, "How long have you lived in Astoria?"

"As long as I can remember." She picked up the basket of cleaning supplies. "I must go now. I have more rooms to clean." She dodged past him and all but scurried out the door.

She's afraid of me, all of a sudden. Why?

There was something about her. Something familiar. He'd seen her--or her twin--before.

No, it's just not possible. You heard her. She's always lived here. It's just a coincidence.

Buff sorted through his possessions. Nothing was missing, not so far as he could tell. The intruder had searched carefully and thoroughly. His trouser pockets were turned inside out. The small piece of Baltic amber he carried as a good luck

piece was in a different pocket of his waistcoat than he usually kept it. And most telling of all, the careful arrangement of bills and notes in his shaving kit had been disturbed. Ever since the first attempted robbery on the ship from Boston to London, he'd kept his valuables about his person or in a safe, and set a trap so he could tell if someone had searched his room.

Hattie Lachlan hadn't raised any stupid children. And his Pa would have a fit if he let himself be robbed like any greenhorn.

Once his clothing had been restored to the dresser drawers, Buff lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking about what step to take next and the likelihood of its being any more productive than today's investigations.

"I'll talk to Li Ching," he decided. Although he'd done little more than nod a greeting to the Chinese labor contractor back in Idaho, he knew about him. Reasonably honest, a hard taskmaster, but one who'd fight for decent treatment of the men who worked for him. More than once, Li Ching had pulled his Chinese laborers from a job because they'd been mistreated.

The question was, would he be honest with a white man?

He stayed on his bed until the supper bell rang, making little sense of the disparate bits and pieces of information he'd collected so far in Astoria.

The only thing he knew for sure was he was going to be in town for a while.

* * *

Jaeger sipped his lager and watched the others in the smoky tavern. They were mostly northern Europeans, Swedes and Danes and Norwegians, so he fit right in.

Of course, he always did. That was one of the reasons for his success. He was part of the background, the man no one remembered seeing.

This town, this Astoria, what a peculiar place it was. The Occident Hotel was small, but it was as elegant as any of its size in Europe. Yet one stepped from its lobby into a muddy, unpaved street and faced the unpainted façade of a mercantile that sold gum boots and oilskins as well as bolts of velvet and silk. On the few streets, carriages as fine as any in Copenhagen wove among sledges drawn by shaggy oxen. A Chinese store sat next to a saloon, a milliner's elegant window looked across into another saloon. A raw, crude town.

The waterfront was as rough and dangerous a place as Macao's or Bombay's. Anything could be had, from opium to a man's life. Already he'd seen a knife fight which left both combatants bleeding. When he'd first stepped off the ship's tender, he'd been cornered by a pair of would-be robbers, sure they had found helpless prey.

He had surprised them.

Chapter Three

Buff had never met so many inscrutable Orientals in his life as he encountered the next morning. Only one or two admitted understanding English, and those looked at him blankly when he mentioned he was seeking Li Ching.

After a while he couldn't even find a Chinaman to ask. It was if they'd all faded into the mist.

He went back to the Chinese store. The woman behind the counter was using a cleaver with frightening competency. "Can you pass the word to Li Ching that I need to speak with him?" he asked.

He might as well have spoken to the wall.

"Look, ma'am, I only want to ask Li Ching about a ship that might have gone aground a long time ago. There may have been Chinese women on it. That's all. Can you pass the word?"

The woman continued to chop vegetables.

Well, hell! Buff shook his head. "I'm staying at the Pacific Western Hotel," he said. "Tell Li Ching to get word to me there, if he'll talk to me. And tell him my name. Buffalo Lachlan. He'll remember me."

He touched his hat brim. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Rain come morning," the Chinese woman told him, just before he pulled the door closed.

He knew that. Rain came every morning in Astoria.

* * *

When Siri went to pick up clean sheets from the laundry on Friday morning, Chu handed her a slip of paper. "What is this?" she asked the laundryman.

"From Li Ching," he said. "You read."

She tucked it into her pocket without looking at it. If it was bad news, she wanted to be alone. After picking up the stack of towels and sheets for the top floor rooms, she paused, unable to restrain her curiosity. "Chu, have you heard anything about the new man? Mr. Lachlan? He asked about Chinese women the other night at Mrs. Leong's store."

Chu's eyelids lowered and his busy hands stilled. "He look for Li Ching, ask many questions. Not know why."

"But you've heard nothing bad about him?"

"Not hear bad, not hear good. Wait." Chu turned back to his labors, stirring the steaming cauldron of lye-scented water.

Siri knew better than to try to learn more. Chu would not tell her anything unless he thought she needed to be told.

Once she was on the fourth floor, she set the bundle of clean linens down and opened the note. In spidery letters it said "No new. We ask more." Under that was a Chinese character, like a signature.

Depressed, yet hopeful too, she hurried through her work. No news was better than bad, she supposed. And the note said they were still looking, still asking about her children. Today she wanted to finish early so she could go to the

waterfront. The *Lolochuck* had docked last night and was scheduled to lay over until tomorrow, in hopes of picking up cargo from a coastwise steamer waiting to cross the bar. Captain Witherspoon had promised to ask about a woman with children arriving in Portland aboard any of the Columbia steamships.

For once her work went quickly and Mrs. Welkins let her go before four. She hurried down the hill, waving at Mrs. Leong as she passed the Chinese store. Captain Witherspoon wasn't in the Deep Six Saloon, as she'd feared he would be. She finally found him outside the Portmaster's office.

He was deep in conversation with Mr. Lachlan.

Siri stood well back, so she could not be thought eavesdropping. The men had glanced at her as she approached, but neither acknowledged her presence. Looking about, she saw a barrel lying on its side against one of the pilings that supported the narrow boardwalk across the street. It called to her, a place to sit and rest. She hitched herself up on the barrel and leaned against the tarry wood behind it. Despite the chill of the mist, she was comfortable here, out of the wind and off her tired feet.

Behind her the water *slap-slapped* at the pilings, and the strong smells of tar and dead fish filled her nose. It brought back memories she usually kept firmly in the back of her mind. She had often gone down to Daws' Landing to meet Valter when the gillnetters came in at day's end. The light little fishing boats, with their wide sails, had earned the name of "The Butterfly Fleet." She had heard that tourists wrote poetic accounts of how they looked, flying over the rough waters of the Columbia.

She hated them, as she hated anything to do with the sea or with boats. The gillnetters were dangerous and demanding, leaving a man with little energy for anything after a day's fishing. Valter Trogen had courted her in the winter, when he had time to walk with her, energy to speak sweet love-words and make seductive promises. By spring, when she realized that marriage to a gillnetter would be no better than to a deepwater fisherman like her father, it had been too late.

After a while, she saw Captain Witherspoon slap Mr. Lachlan on the shoulder. They both laughed. Then Mr. Lachlan shook the captain's hand and walked away.

"Well, missy, I suppose you're after the news I bring?" Captain Witherspoon said, as he came across to where she sat.

Siri slid off the barrel. "Yes. How are you, Captain? Did you have a good voyage?" Captain Witherspoon's sidewheeler plied the rivers between Astoria and the Falls of the Willamette, making three or four round trips this far downstream a month. He was the only one of the several steamer captains on the river who had shown any interest in helping her. The others answered her questions grudgingly, if at all.

But of course, Valter's father had been one of them, and most had stayed at his mother's boarding house. Why should they take her side?

"Tolerable. Business is slow in Portland this winter. Must be the weather." He pulled out a big-bowled pipe and began filling it. "I don't have anything for you, missy, and I'm sorry. I kept my ear to the ground, but I never heard a word about a woman with little ones debarking anywhere along the rivers." He got the pipe

going, and puffed a moment in silence. His brow was wrinkled, as if he was deep in thought.

Siri backed away a step, out of the cloud of rank smoke. "Nothing?" she said, and despised the quaver in her voice. "So she must have gone up or down the coast, then."

"Could be. Yes, could be, but I doubt it. Martine, she had a lot of friends along the rivers. They could have helped her disappear."

Exhaustion overwhelmed her. Siri bit her lip and willed the tears not to gather. "*Tack*, Captain." One deep breath, then another, until her voice steadied. "You will keep asking? Please?"

He patted her shoulder, awkwardly, like a man unused to touching women. "Of course I will, missy. That was a bad thing Martine did. She shouldn't get away with it."

How I wish all the others felt that way, Siri thought, but she said only, "I am so grateful. *Tusen tack!* Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. Now you take yourself off home, young lady. It's gettin' too late for a nice girl like you to be roaming these streets."

"Yes. Of course." She was reluctant to leave him. "You *will* ask again?"

"My word on it," he said. "Now scat!"

Siri hurried up the street, walking on the opposite side from the Deep Six.

Even so, she had to evade two drunken sailors and dodge a woman-hungry fisherman before she reached the decent part of town.

* * *

After supper, Buff decided to walk downtown and see what excitement he could scare up. Tonight he wanted bright lights and loud music.

And maybe a fancy woman to dance with.

He looked into a couple of saloons, had a beer in the third. None was the kind of place he was looking for. They were filled with fishermen, still clad in wool jackets smelling of fish and seaweed. The looks turned on him as he entered had been curious, questioning. Suspicious.

When he bellied up to the bar in the third place--Fisherman's Rest it was called--he heard snatches of German, Swedish, Portuguese, and an almost familiar tongue he assumed was Norwegian. The beer was strong, much like the brews he'd tasted in northern Europe, and dark. But the message in the faces of those at the tables had been *You don't belong here*.

He went to the next street over, the one that led to the commercial docks. Ahead a spill of light invited him to the source of tinny piano music and raucous laughter.

As he reached the corner, a man stepped from the shadows. "*Guten Abend*, Herr Lachlan."

Buff stopped, peered. A Roman collar identified the man, as did the tinted glass of his spectacle lenses. "How are you, Father Spatz? Glad to be ashore, I reckon."

"I am indeed. Although I wish I did not have to board any kind of watercraft for several weeks."

Less than a block away, the evening's entertainment waited. Buff contained his impatience. "Oh? You're not staying a while, then?"

"No. I shall travel upriver tomorrow."

"Well, good luck in your new assignment." He touched his hat brim. The priest was a fine enough fellow, but not a companion he'd choose this evening. "Good night."

Father Spatz, nodded, his narrow lips widening in a slight smile.

For a moment Buff wondered if he was being laughed at, for there was more amusement than friendliness in the expression. Then he decided the German priest had so little practice at affability that smiling was difficult for him. A more serious fellow Buff had never met.

He left the priest behind and went on to the saloon. The Deep Six, it was called, and aptly so. Many of its patrons were more than likely to find their fate thereabouts, sooner or later.

There was none of the subtle rebuff here. Buff found an empty chair at a table with two common seamen. "Join you?"

"Aye. Set yo'self down, mon," the big one said. He kicked the chair out so Buff could be seated.

His companion, one-eyed and swarthy, glowered, but scooted sideways. On second look, Buff saw he had no choice of expression, for his face was badly scarred. "Don't drink the whiskey," he said, his voice barely audible. "It's probably spiked."

"Shanghaiers?"

"More 'n likely. I wouldn't want to be fallin' face down on the table, that's for sure," the big fellow said. "Might wake up in the mornin' in a different berth than I signed on for."

"I'll be careful," Buff said. He paid for the beer a buxom waitress set on the table. Content to watch the action for a while, he pushed his chair slightly away from the table and tipped it back onto two legs.

The clientele was primarily sailors, common seamen for the most part. A few weather-beaten men in heavy boots and wide suspenders looked like they might work on land, but whatever they did, it took muscle and bulk. They clustered together in the corner to the right of the door.

Someone pushed his chair hard enough to slam the front legs hard on the floor. Buff looked behind him.

"Buy me a drink," the big man standing there commanded.

"I don't think so," Buff said, as he slowly stood up. "We haven't been properly introduced." The fellow was two or three inches taller and probably outweighed him by fifty pounds. *Well, hell!*

"Don't need no introduction, mister. You got money, and I ain't. That mean's you're buyin'."

Again Buff said, "I don't think so." He set a hand against the other's chest and pushed.

The man was so astonished he gave way.

Buff slipped past, and wondered how far he'd get.

The next instant he heard a roar behind him. A rush and a sharp breeze, as

he stepped nimbly aside to let the giant bumble past him.

The man came up short against a table. Before he could push himself upright, one of its occupants had smashed a fist to his jaw.

Buff glanced around, decided his position was as good as any in the room. He rose to tiptoe, rotated his shoulders to loosen them.

The giant had his hands full, because the three sailors at the table he'd run into had all taken offense. Feeling a faint disappointment, Buff headed for the door, moving slowly enough that he didn't look like he was running away.

He got about a yard before the giant tackled him.

They went down in a tangle of chairs and tables. Buff kicked his way free of the thick arms, and butted the fellow in the midriff. Before the bigger man could recover, Buff caught his arm in a half-nelson and had him wiping the floor with his nose. The fellow bucked, but Buff simply tightened his hold and said, "Had enough?"

The only reply was a stream of vicious curses.

Buff grabbed his ballocks.

One meaty hand slapped the floor. Buff tightened both holds for a second, then released the man.

Both climbed to their feet and stood facing each other. "No hard feelings?" Buff said, holding out his hand.

"For such a little feller, you're quick," the other said, rubbing the back of his neck. He took Buff's hand and squeezed.

For nearly a minute they stood there, tightening their grips. Finally, when Buff was beginning to wonder if his hand was going to be squeezed from his wrist like an overripe grape, the other relaxed. "Buy me a drink?" he said. No demand this time.

"With pleasure," Buff told him, slapping his shoulder. "What'll you have?"

* * *

Jaeger wiped his hands on the dead woman's skirt. She'd bled slowly, died slowly. He'd grown impatient finally, and had snapped her stringy neck. There was no pleasure in watching an easy death. She'd fainted when he made the first cut on one sagging breast.

He looked down at her, unsatisfied. Usually he took pride in his artistry, but not this time. There was no beauty in a half-finished composition.

A quick glance around the pathetic crib showed that he had left no trace of himself. He pinched the candle's flame and tossed the stub of wax aside.

Next time he would not be so impatient. He would take the time to find a young woman, one with stamina and enough anger at men she would not cower and beg until he had eased his animal needs.

* * *

Saturday's dinner still sat like a lump under Siri's ribs, and sour bile rose into the back of her mouth every time she bent over. Each step she took was an effort. All afternoon she dragged herself through her tasks, wondering how much longer she would be able to keep working.

Because Carleen always got off work early on Saturday nights, Siri washed up in the kitchen, while the other maid served supper. Once the table was cleared, Carleen would go to meet her current young man at the Fisherman's Rest. Tonight Siri scrubbed pots and pans slowly, glad she had seen no new ships in port when she looked through the hall window on the fourth floor about an hour before sunset. She doubted she would have been able to walk to the docks.

Carleen came in and set the tray of empty serving dishes on the big table. "They're done," she said, as she tossed her apron over a chair back, "and I'm off." She snatched her shawl from a peg by the back door. "See you in the mornin'," she called as she slipped out the door.

The men would linger over coffee and whiskey. Siri didn't care, as long as she could clear the table. She trudged to the dining room and began loading the cart with dirty dishes. When old Captain Stokes patted her bottom, she had to force a smile.

She noticed Mr. Lachlan raise an eyebrow as the old man's hand lingered at her waist. Was he thinking of trying his luck? Just in case, she kept her distance, not giving him a chance.

"Good supper, Siri." The captain dabbed at his lips with a napkin. "Tell Bao the toadstools were tasty."

Her stomach roiled at the thought of pickled mushrooms, a favorite on the menu. "Ummm," she said noncommittally, as she gathered and stacked empty serving dishes. "Will you gentlemen want anything else?"

"We're fine."

"Just a kiss, darlin'" Captain Stokes said.

She pursed her lips at him. The dear man was harmless, and it cost her nothing to flirt, and he enjoyed the game. She knew it gave some of the younger men the wrong idea about her, but so far she'd been able to evade them.

Once again she was conscious of Mr. Lachlan's questioning gaze. It was as if he touched her. "Any cigars?" he said.

"Oh. I am sorry." She went upstairs to fetch the sandalwood box from the library, resting a moment at the top. When she set it before him, she apologized. "I should have..."

"Bry dig inte om det! I could have gone and got it, if I'd known where it was."

O nej! Han talar svensk! He spoke Swedish. Had she said anything to offend him? Siri gave him a quick smile, hoping he would forgive her if she had.

He winked.

Her cheeks burned. Quickly she brushed the crumbs from the tablecloth and bundled the soiled napkins together. "Good night, gentlemen. The bell is there, if you need something more." Before anyone could speak, she escaped, almost running to the kitchen, the dishes on the cart rattling as she pushed it ahead of her. She tossed the bundle of linens on the big table and went to the chair by the still-warm oven, where she huddled in misery. *So cold.* She shivered uncontrollably. If only she could go to her bed, but she had to stay here until the men finished their whiskey and went up to the parlor or library.

She still had the dishes to wash, too.

After a while she dragged herself out of the chair and filled the dishpan with

hot water from the reservoir. With her hands immersed in it, she felt a little warmer. Instead of hurrying through the dishes, she lingered, adding more hot water to the dishpan twice. By the time the last dish was set to drain, she was feeling much better.

The bell rang when she was hanging the dishtowels up to dry behind the range.

Wearily, Siri walked down the hall to the dining room. When she entered, she saw the men crowded together near the head of the table.

The commodore saw her. "Get blankets!" he called out. "And bring the mop. We've got a sick man here!"

Chapter Four

Before Siri was done cleaning up after Captain Stokes, she was close to following his example. If her stomach hadn't been already empty, it would have rejected its contents violently. As it was, she swallowed bile more than once as her stomach clenched and spasmed.

The smell was the worst. She breathed shallowly through her mouth until she'd emptied the bucket down the cess pit. She filled it with fresh water from the rainbarrel and set it beside the back stoop.

"For a minute there I thought you were going to be as sick as the old man."

Startled, she dropped the mop. It clattered on the wooden steps and rolled off into the darkness.

Mr. Lachlan stepped out the back door, held it open for her by leaning against it.

Siri hesitated, then slipped quickly past him. "*Tack*," she said. "Thank you."

He caught her wrist, pulled her to a halt. "You're not just sick, are you? You're scared to death of me."

"*Nej*... no, I do not feel well. Something I ate..."

"Ate? Did you eat supper? Have you vomited?"

She pulled, only half-heartedly. The heat of his hand on her bare skin was... soothing. "No, I was not hungry. At dinner, something I ate then." She'd not felt well even then, and had only nibbled on a bit of bread, sipped some of the strong green tea Bao kept on the stove for himself and Chu.

"No," he said, slowly shaking his head. "You'd have been sick long since if it had been dinner. And no one else was sick this afternoon." He released her wrist as he seemed to sag back against the wall. "Whatever it was, it acts quickly." His voice was faint, as if speaking was an effort.

Startled, Siri looked closely at him. He was pale as a ghost, and a sheen of sweat filmed his brow.

"You are ill!" Caution forgotten, she caught him above the elbow, guided him in the direction of the settee in the corner of the kitchen.

He stiffened, but when a shudder shook his whole body, he let her push him onto the seat. "The rest of us," he said, his voice not as strong and deep as before, "made it outside, so you won't have to clean up again. "

"You were all sick, then?"

He buried his face in his open hands, braced his elbows on his knees. "Yes. God, yes!"

Ignoring her own misery, Siri stirred the coals in the stove, added kindling. Once she was sure it would catch, she replaced the lid and set the teakettle atop it. "I will make you peppermint tea. It will settle your stomach."

He looked up, his grimace telling her what he thought of the idea. After a moment he leaned back, closing his eyes again. "Yes, everyone was sick. The old men were the worst off. Pete and I got Captain Stokes into bed, but the commodore wouldn't go."

"I will--"

"No!" He started to stand, then sat back. "No, there's nothing you can do

that's not been done. I sent Tuomas after the doctor. Let's wait and see what he says."

Unable to look away, Siri studied his face, shadowed by the light of the single lamp on the table. *Why, I don't believe he is any older than I am*, she decided. Although faint crow's feet at the corners of his eyes told of an outdoor life, the skin of his cheeks was still unweathered, the line of his chin firm. His hair, now tangled and sweat-damp, curled in tight ringlets and shone like antique gold in the lamplight.

Siri kept one eye on him as she prepared his tea. When the kettle started to talk, she poured steaming water over the crumbled mint leaves. Impatiently she stirred until she could smell the mint. The infusion had not steeped long enough, but he needed it now.

She picked up the cup and went to sit beside him. "Here. Sip slowly." She held the cup to his lips.

His nose twitched. "Ughh."

"Drink," she commanded, pushing the rim against his closed mouth. "It is good for you."

His smile came and went so quickly she wasn't sure she had seen it.

"That's what Ma always said, just before she poured some god-awful concoction down our throats." But he sipped. And made a face. "Faugh! That's disgusting! Haven't you got any honey?"

Tears filled Siri's eyes. Just so had Rolf behaved when she'd tried to give him medicine, last year when he had the sore throat. "You are acting like a baby," she scoffed, but she took the cup across to the sideboard and spooned a dollop of honey into it.

When she held it out to him, he took it and sipped again. "Better," he said, and took another swallow.

Siri hovered until he had emptied the cup. "Does your stomach feel better now? More calm?"

He considered. "I think it does. Thank you... Siri, isn't it?"

"Yes, I--" The bell from the parlor rang, interrupting her. "I must go. You rest here--"

"No, it's probably Tuomas with the doctor. I'll be fine." He swayed for a moment when he got to his feet, then steadied. "Let's go. I want to hear what the doctor has to say."

She followed him down the hall and up the stairs, determined to catch him if he fell. His knuckles whitened with the force of his grip on the banister, but he managed to get to the top without help. Siri stayed behind, stopping just at the top of the steps and listening while Mr. Lachlan explained to the doctor what had happened. When the men--Doctor Fredericks, Mr. Lachlan, Tuomas, and two other boarders--went into Captain Stokes' suite, she wondered if she should follow.

No, she decided, *they have enough help. Poor Captain Stokes. I hope he will be well*. She sat on the bottom step and leaned against the wall. Although she no longer felt ill, the weakness that had plagued her all afternoon persisted.

Buff leaned against the wall at the back of the crowd around Captain Stokes'

bed, wishing his belly would quit cramping. He couldn't remember being this sick. It was worse than starving or being beat, because this came on so suddenly.

The doctor finished his examination. "Cholera morbus," he said, nodding his head sagely.

"You're crazy," the commodore said. "I've seen cholera, and it wasn't anything like this."

The stout little physician drew himself tall. "I could just as easily have said 'cholera nostros' or 'gastric catarrh,' my good man. This gentleman is suffering from a surfeit of food, not from any disease." He removed his *pince nez*, polished the lenses. "In other words, he overate." As if to demonstrate, he prodded the captain's belly, which was distended.

The old man didn't respond. He seemed to be unconscious. His cheeks were hollow, his color almost bilious.

"The hell with that," one of the others, a middle-aged revenue agent, said. "We've all been sick as dogs. I say it was the stew. It was off."

"Mushrooms," Tuomas said. "No good."

Since he was the only one who hadn't been sick, Buff wondered if he might know what he was talking about. "Did you eat the mushrooms, Tuomas?"

The big Finn shook his head. "They are not food."

"Nonsense," the doctor said. "This is not food poisoning. The symptoms are all wrong."

Everyone tried to speak at once.

Buff stepped to the door and looked out. Not seeing the woman, he jerked on the bell pull. When Siri appeared, he motioned her inside. "When did you get sick?"

"I told you. I was sick right after dinner."

"Vomiting? Belly cramps? Diarrhea?"

Her cheeks bloomed, but she nodded. "All of those. And weakness. I could hardly stand."

"Did you prepare the food, girl?" the doctor demanded. "Maybe stick your finger into the stew for a taste?"

"I do not cook. I did not serve. Tonight I washed up."

Buff could tell she was angry at the doctor's accusation. He didn't blame her. "The other girl, the red-head, she served tonight." He raised an eyebrow at Siri. "Where is she?"

"She went to the dance at Liberty Hall."

"She wasn't ill?"

"No. Just me. And Chu. He was sick yesterday. Very sick."

"Aha!," the doctor said. "There's the source of the infection. Filthy coolie. Probably spat in the food."

"Chu is not fil--"

Buff stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Doctor, instead of trying to lay blame, why don't you see what you can do for the captain? He looks pretty sick to me." He caught the other men with his gaze. "We'll get out of here so you can be about your work." He held Siri back when she would have followed. "Do what you can, and let me know if you need any medicine."

The doctor huffed a bit before he bent again over the old man in the bed.
"Have the girl warm some beef tea. He needs sustenance."

"We'll take care of it," Buff said, herding Siri before him as he left the room.

"I did not make you sick," Siri said as soon as he'd pulled the door closed.
"and Chu did not either. He is a good--"

"Hush. Nobody's blaming you, or Chu, whoever he is. Now, tell me, is there some beef broth in the kitchen, or should I send out for it?"

"I... I do not know. Bao is cook. Perhaps..."

"Never mind. Tuomas?"

The young man came out of the shadowed hallway. "Yes, sir?"

"Can you run down to the Chinese store and see if the lady there can make us up some beef tea? And have her send up a quart or two of strong green tea, while she's at it. Captain Stokes needs liquids more than he needs sustenance, I reckon."

The commodore spoke from the stairs, where he sat. "What can I do?"

"Go to bed, sir. You're in not much better shape than Captain Stokes. I'm feeling halfway decent now. Between Tuomas and me, we'll take care of things tonight." The older man looked like he could use a hand going up to his suite, but Buff wasn't sure he could be much help. His knees still wanted to fold, and all he wanted to do was huddle close to a stove until he stopped shivering.

"I will help," Siri said. She went to the commodore's side. "Come. Together we have perhaps strength enough. Will it take us upstairs, do you think?"

With his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist, she half-supported him as they made their slow way up the wide stairway. Buff watched until they reached the landing, then turned to go into the library. Gratefully he sank onto the horsehair-padded sofa. His belly no longer cramped, but he wouldn't want to face an angry kitten about now.

* * *

"My, you're a pretty one."

Jaeger raised an eyebrow at the whore, wondering if he had made a mistake. He'd picked her from the three who'd flirted with him at the saloon because she seemed the cleanest and the youngest.

She might also be the most talkative. Since they left the saloon, he didn't believe she had been silent for more than the space of a breath. "We Prussians are a handsome race," he said, feeling the complacency of a spoken truth.

"Well, if you say so, but Otto Pflug, down at the brewery, he's a German, and there's nothing pretty about him." She tuned into a narrow entryway. "Here's my place. Up two flights and to the left."

A quick glance told Jaeger he might have found his ideal lodging at last. The entrance to the upstairs apartments sat between a haberdasher and a bakery, so there would be no one to see who used the stairs in the night. He stood aside so she could precede him up the stairs. "Who else lives up here?" he asked as they reached the first landing and she started up the second flight.

"Fishermen, mostly, on this floor. We're so close to the harbor, you know. And up on the third floor, there's Millie and Yolanda. They're dancers like me."

Yes, she could dance, as he'd seen during the show at the saloon. Another reason he had chosen her. Dancers' bodies were supple and strong, not doughy and soft.

They climbed higher, into a dark, narrow hallway. Only one lamp lit it, a gimbaled brass fixture hanging from the low ceiling. Jaeger wondered if it had been salvaged from a shipwreck.

Crystal opened the second door to the left and motioned him inside. She lit a candle waiting on the small table beside the door. "Just a minute. I got to blow out the lamp."

He looked around. The room was smaller than he'd hoped, with only a single straight chair tucked into the corner beside the chiffonier. A narrow window looked out into darkness, its torn lace curtain offering little concealment. *This will not do.* "Are there any rooms for rent?" he asked her when she came back.

"Oh, yes. There's the one next door, and another one down on the second floor. At least I think that one's still for rent, because Old Sourpuss was complaining about how much money he was losing with two vacancies. I call him Old Sourpuss because--"

"I want the one on this floor." Jaeger stretched his lips into a smile. "Closer to you," he said softly, touching her cheek.

His finger came away feeling soiled.

"Oh, honey, that's so sweet. I'm sure Old Sourpuss will rent it cheap. He doesn't charge much for the rooms, but he makes us girls pay him a percentage, just because we use them for trade." Her pout told him what she thought of that idea.

Still, it was seductive and he felt a stirring of desire.

"Now, I ask you, is it fair to do that and not charge the fishermen any extra for stinking up the place when they come back after a week at sea, reeking of dead fish and seaweed?"

"Life is seldom fair." Jaeger removed his damp wool coat. "But surely we have other subjects to discuss." Again he touched her cheek, reminding himself that he needed what she could provide. Tomorrow he would go to the steam bath and cleanse himself. With the skill of long practice, he set his mission and his plans aside in the back of his mind and set about making this whore fall in love with him.

He was very good at doing that.

* * *

Buff heard Tuomas return. Still feeling as if his legs weren't reliable, he stayed where he was. If he was needed, Tuomas would fetch him.

When he heard the captain's door open and shut quietly some time later, he pushed himself to his feet. He felt much better, much to his surprise. He could walk with nary a wobble.

Siri was sitting on the bottom step.

"What are you doing there?" he said.

She shrank back, as if afraid of him. "Waiting," she said.

Damn, I thought we'd got past that. "Relax, Siri. I don't bite."

She avoided meeting his eyes. "I wanted to know if Captain Stokes will be well."

Her tone told him she had no reason to trust him. Buff stifled a smile. Maybe she was right. Now he looked at her--really looked at what was under the pulled-back hair and the servant's clothing--he could see she was a beautiful woman. Of course, she could use a few good meals, a decent dress... *Oh, hell, you randy bastard. When did you start lusting after the maids?* "You should have come into the parlor. It's cold out here," he said, doing his best to sound harmless.

"Oh, no! We are not allowed to sit in here. If Mrs. Welkins--"

"The Welkins are gone for the weekend, aren't they? Who's going to tell her?"

A dimple flickered at the corner of her mouth. "*Förstås*. Of course. You would not... *skvallra*... tell tales, would you?"

Buff couldn't help grinning. "Tattle," he said. "'Tattle' is the word you want."

"Ah! *Tack*." She almost smiled.

He could tell she had not relaxed. Not completely. "Was that Tuomas I heard come out?"

"Ja. The doctor sent him for clean blankets."

Just then the young handyman came up from the first floor with his arms full of bedding. "The captain is not sick now," he said, in response to Buff's raised eyebrow. "I am to sleep there tonight. Listen for him." He went into the captain's room again.

"Good idea." Not that Buff couldn't stand watch if he had to, but he'd just as soon not. He still felt a little rocky. He settled himself on the steps beside Siri. "So tell me. Why is a nice girl like you working as a maid in a place like this?" In any city in the world, she could find better paying work and hold onto her virtue--if she chose. And if she didn't choose, which some hotel maids did not, her beauty would earn her a fortune.

All life, all vitality, left her face, as if she had been turned to ice. "There is little work for a respectable woman in Astoria, not if she is unmarried and without family."

"You're an--"

The door they were both watching opened again and the doctor emerged. "Where the dickens is everybody?"

Buff got to his feet, doing so more easily than the last time. "Everyone's gone to bed but us." From the corner of his eye, he could see Siri's face. If she didn't stop gnawing on her lip, she'd have it bleeding.

The doctor set his bag on a table. "Get me some coffee, girl! I've been on the go since dawn."

Siri scooted around him and down the stairs before Buff could tell the doctor to get his own damned coffee.

"So," he said, "how's the captain?"

"He's better, but still not well. Dehydrated now, mostly. I got the beef broth into him, and some of the tea." He looked around. "Where's my overcoat."

"Hall tree, I imagine. He'll be all right, then?"

"Oh, I don't think he'll die, if that's what you're asking. It's hard to tell, though,

with a man of his age. I told the lad to keep feeding him tea and more broth if he'll take it. I'll stop by in the morning and see how he is."

"Was it the mushrooms?" Buff didn't believe it was, but he was no expert.

"Doubt it. The rest of you seem to be coming around. I'd say that damn yellow heathen brought in one of his foreign sicknesses. I don't hold with foreigners, myself."

Siri came up from the kitchen with a tray on which were a coffeepot and two cups.

She'd hardly set it down before the doctor was beside her, filling his cup. He blew on the steaming coffee and slurped noisily. With his free hand, he picked up several of the small turnovers they'd had as dessert after dinner and slipped them into his jacket pocket.

Buff considered reminding him they'd been cooked by one of the Chinese men he condemned. Instead he said, "Have you been in Astoria long?"

"Came just last year. I'll be moving on come spring. A more god-forsaken place I've never seen. Can't understand why anyone would want to live here."

"Pretty country," Buff said, with a shrug.

"Too much rain." The Doctor slurped one last time and set the cup aside. "I'll be by after church tomorrow. See that the boy keeps forcing the old man to drink."

"I'll do that." Buff followed the doctor to the door and closed it after him. After locking it, he turned and looked at Siri. "I'll check on Captain Stokes myself and let you know how he is."

"I will come in, too." Not a question.

"Let me make sure he's decent, then."

When they'd satisfied themselves that the elderly man was sleeping peacefully, they left his room together. "Come with me," Buff told her. "I'd like to talk to you."

"I must..."

"There's nothing you have to do that won't wait a while." He jerked his chin in the direction of the parlor. "Just for a few minutes."

She shrugged and walked ahead of him across the hall and past the stairs. Her feet, shod in worn boots, made little noise on the bare wood floor, and her limp, gray dress rustled not at all. He had a brief vision of her clad in rich blue satin elaborately decorated with pearls and fringe, her milk-white breasts half-concealed behind delicate lace. With her silvery hair dressed high, tiny curls tickling her vulnerable nape, she would be at once delectable and distant, a shy temptress.

"Mr. Lachlan?"

He started, realized she was looking curiously at him. Blinking, he took a moment to gather his wits about him. "Sit down, Siri," he told her, gesturing toward the brocaded wing chair.

She perched on the very edge of the seat, as if she feared she might damage the upholstery. "*Varför kallade du på mig?*" She bit her lower lip. "I am sorry. I forget sometimes... Why did you summon me here?"

He stared at her, trying to see what it was about her face that seemed so familiar. It was more than the coloring, more than the squarish jawline. There was an elusive quality... "Did you grow up in Astoria?"

"Ja. *Min far*... My father was a fisherman."

So were half the men in town. "When did he come here?"

"Long ago. Before I was born, perhaps."

Buff looked at her sharply. "Perhaps? You don't know for sure?"

"I do not remember what he said. Once he told me he had lived here for twenty years."

Well, hell! "So he was here in 1859," he said, almost to himself.

"*Förlåta mig?* What did you say?"

"Nothing important." He sat back and stroked his chin. So she'd been born here. And she spoke Swedish, not Danish. The resemblance was pure chance.

"How old are you?" he asked, more out of curiosity than anything.

"I don't... I am twenty-five."

Why had she hesitated? Was she older than she claimed? She looked to be. "Are you married?"

"Why do you--" Once again she hesitated, staring at him while she gnawed on her bottom lip. "I was," she said at last. "My husband drowned last summer."

Chapter Five

Siri did not care for the direction Mr. Lachlan's questions were taking. Her past was not something she liked to think about, let alone speak of. "I must go to bed," she said, rising.

His hand rose, as if he wished to prevent her leaving. "Wait--" A pause. "Please, I'd like to ask you some more questions."

A lifetime of training held her in the room, victim of a man's wishes. What would he do if she told him she did not wish to stay? Would not answer him?

"Look," he said, "I know you must be tired. Just answer a couple of questions and you can go to bed."

Instead of reseating herself as he gestured her to do, she simply stood and waited.

"I'm looking for a woman," he said, as he had to Mrs. Leong.

"I do not--"

"Not that kind of woman. This one would be a little younger than you. Her name is Astrid. She's Danish. She'd be tall, and her hair would be like yours...like liquid moonlight."

She forced herself to ignore his words, the sudden seductive tone of his voice. There was only one reason a man who looked like him would seek a woman, no matter what he claimed. "There are Danes in Astoria." She shrugged. "I know a few of them, but no woman named Astrid." A yawn caught her unawares, and she made no effort to hide it. "I am very tired."

He stared at her for a long time, holding her in place with his gaze. "You remind me so much of him," he said at last, almost as if speaking to himself. "It's uncanny."

Siri refused to ask who he was talking about. "Do you have any other questions?"

He continued to stare at her, his gaze intent and suspicious. At last he said, "No. No, that's all. Go to bed."

She was on the stairs when she heard his deep voice again. "You were a big help tonight, Siri. Thank you."

She continued up the stairs without answering. A warm glow sat in her middle, though. Having a man thank her for anything she did was rare. They all seemed to believe that women were put upon this earth to serve them.

* * *

Buff saw Siri go out the back door and head towards town shortly after breakfast the next morning. He was lingering over his coffee, wondering what to do on this fine Sunday. The sun was trying to shine, an event worthy of note in January hereabouts, he understood. He strolled over to the side window, cup in hand, and watched her out of sight. "Off to church?" he wondered out loud.

"We take turns," Carleen said, behind him.

He hadn't meant to speak aloud, and certainly hadn't meant for the red-haired maid to hear him. Carleen was a lusty wench who'd already made it clear

she'd warm his bed whenever he wanted. One thing Buff had learned in his years of travel was to appreciate subtlety.

Carleen was about as subtle as the breakers at Point Adams.

"I saw a couple of churches while I was walking about town," he said, "but didn't pay any attention to which ones." When he'd seen the newly painted spire of the Methodist Church, he'd been reminded of something his pa had said, years ago. Something about civilization being measured by how many churches a town had in comparison to how many saloons. As far as he could see, in Astoria the saloons were winning, hands down.

"Seems to me there's more churches every year," the commodore said, joining Buff at the window. "Used to be, a man had to look far and wide to find Sunday services. Now all he has to do is walk down the street."

"I imagine you've seen some changes," Buff said. He glanced at the older man, who last night had been pale and hollow-cheeked. "How are you feeling this morning, sir?"

"Tolerable, now I've had my victuals. I woke up hungry enough to eat a whale." He rubbed his rotund belly. "Felt like I'd been turned inside out and scraped clean."

Since that was a pretty good description for how Buff had felt upon waking, he smiled. "First time I can remember porridge tasting halfway edible." He felt pretty good now. Unlike Tuomas, who he'd met in the hall on the way down. The poor lad had been pretty green about the gills.

"Yessir, I have seen a lot of changes hereabouts," the retired bar pilot said. "When I first came, back in '42, there wasn't even a dock here. Ships offloaded by tender, those few that had cargo for Astoria. Most of us still lived in log cabins. A man could walk outside and shoot supper without going a mile. *Now look at it!*"

Buff did, what he could see of the town from this side window. Astoria was still a raw, frontier place, but he'd seen others far less finished. In fact the first town he'd ever seen made this one look downright civilized.

He set his empty coffee cup aside. "I think I'll take a walk. Would you care to go with me, sir?"

"Not this morning, lad. I'm still a little shaky on my pins. When you're as old as I am..."

"I'll see you later then." Buff went to his room and got his coat and hat, knowing if he didn't take them, it would be sure to rain. He'd seen most of the town already, but only shrouded in rain. A place looked different in sunlight.

As he came back downstairs, he heard Carleen speaking to someone in the lobby. The man's harsh, demanding voice belonged to none of the hotel's residents. Buff slowed and listened.

"Where's your boss?"

"The Welkins went to Lexington for a few days. You'll have to tell me what you want, Brody." She didn't sound as if she particularly cared what the fellow had to say.

"You've got a new boarder." It wasn't a question.

Buff silently descended the last few steps and peered around the corner. He knew Carleen saw him, but like the good girl she was, she gave no sign.

The big man standing with his back to Buff wore a dark blue uniform with braid on the shoulders. A billy-club hung from his wide ammunition belt, on the opposite side from a holstered revolver. A policeman. He'd known Astoria had a police force, but had not encountered any of its members yet.

"We don't talk about our guests," Carleen said, primly, and with emphasis on the word guests.

"Look here, Carleen, I know he's staying here. Just give me his room number."

"Whose?" Her tone could not have been sweeter, or more innocent.

"That fella came in on the *Chinese Duchess* last Tuesday. I don't know his name."

Carleen picked up a pen and inspected its nib. "Then how do you know you want to talk to him?"

"I'm supposed to talk to everybody who got off. Now are you gonna tell me which room is his?"

"It's Number 8, up on the fourth floor. But Brody, it's still early. He might be sleeping in." Considering she'd served him breakfast about an hour ago, Buff decided Carleen was just trying to get the officer's goat.

A meaty fist hit the counter. "I don't care. I want to talk to him."

"He may have gone out," Carleen said, not sounding at all cowed. "I heard him say something about it."

"Then I'll wait." He turned away, then looked back. "I thought you said you hadn't seen him this morning."

Buff chuckled aloud when she stuck her nose in the air.

The policeman looked over his shoulder. "Something funny, boyo?"

"Private joke. You're looking for me, I believe?" He gestured. "Let's go into the library. I think it's empty." He led the way.

Stopping in the doorway, as if to prevent Buff's escape, the policeman pulled out a notebook and pencil. Moistening the lead, he said, "You came in on the *Chinese Duchess* on Tuesday, the seventh of January, 1873?"

Relaxing into the captain's favorite wing chair, Buffalo nodded. "I did. Is there a problem, ah...officer...?"

"Gillespie. Officer Gillespie. And I'll be asking the questions. Where'd you come from?"

"Honolulu," Buff said. Then as if it were an afterthought, because the man's officiousness irritated him, "Shanghai, Rangoon, Bangkok, Macao. Bombay. Uh, Let me see..." He pretended to count on his fingers. "Cape Town?"

"Never mind. Your business?"

"Business?"

"What you do for a living, man. What brought you to Astoria?" A muscle jumped in the policeman's jaw.

Buff said gently, "I'm an adventurer. I play cards. Or dice. Roulette...Baccarat..." He carefully omitted the principal way he'd made a living over the past few years.

"Gambler." The pencil point dug into the paper. "Now then, you were seen to get off the ship last, but not that long after the rest of the debarking passengers."

How long did it take you to get to the hotel?"

Frowning, Buff tried to remember. He'd chatted with one of the wharf rats for a few minutes, then he'd strolled around town a while. "An hour? Perhaps two. I'm not sure. I believe I arrived here well after supper."

"You were seen going into the Chinese store." The man's tone was accusing, as if that in itself was a crime.

"I did. Members of the Chinese community are often founts of information." He steepled his fingers. "I am seeking word of a ship that may have gone down off Point Adams. You'll find that I also have visited the Portmaster's office and several of the bars, as well as talking to a number of long-time residents of your fair city." He watched Gillespie while the man made more notes. "May I inquire," he said when the officer looked up again, "why you are asking these questions?"

Gillespie looked from side to side, as if to assure himself there were no eavesdroppers. "I am not at liberty to divulge that information," he said, as if reciting something he'd been told. "Now then--" The pencil tip dabbed at his tongue again. "I'll want a list of who you spoke to between the dock and here. And what else you did." His tone made it clear he rather thought that whatever Buff's other activities had been, none of them were particularly wholesome or virtuous.

Buff gave as complete an account of his journey from the docks to the hotel as he could recall, then asked again why the officer needed the information.

"You'll be told what you need to know when...if we call you down to the station." Gillespie stood and stuffed his notebook into an inner pocket. "Just don't leave town until we finish our investigation."

Stung by the preemptory order, Buff said, "I've got business elsewhere."

"Don't leave town," Gillespie repeated. "Not 'til your name's cleared." He turned and stomped out the door, without a word of thanks for Buff's cooperation.

"He's not my favorite cousin," Carleen said from the doorway.

"I can see why. Any idea what's up?"

"Not a one. I'll go see his mother this evening. She'll tell me."

"I'm obliged." He grinned at Carleen. "Since I'm stuck here, I guess I'll go get better acquainted with the neighborhood."

She grinned back. "Try the Fisherman's Rest. There's no spiking of the drinks there."

"Thanks." He picked up his coat and hat and put them on. When he stepped outside he realized that, for the first time since coming to Astoria, he could see all the way to the top of the hill behind town. Trees still lifted their pointed tops to the sky up there, but the lower slopes had been logged off, leaving ugly scars, enormous piles of branches and debris, and stumps of remarkable size. Not far up the denuded hillside from where he stood, he saw one that had to be ten feet across.

Taking a deep breath of the fresh, fir-scented air, he started down the hill toward town.

To his surprise, the door of the Chinese store stood open. He stepped inside. "Good morning."

"Rain come morning," the tiny woman behind the counter said.

"Mrs. Leong, you can't fool me," Buff told her, with a grin. "I'll bet your English

is as good as mine."

Her lips pursed, but she didn't say a word.

Having had experience with oriental inscrutability, Buff said, "I'd like a cup of tea. Keemun, if you have it."

She set the cup before him.

Buff carried it to the door, where he stood so he could see anyone passing by. "I haven't heard from Li Ching yet. Did you give him my message?"

"Li Ching very busy."

"Li Ching is always very busy. Tell him I bring greetings from Sung Su Mei and Silas Dewitt." Buff was pretty sure Li Ching would remember his name, but just in case.... He didn't want to stay in Astoria indefinitely. He sipped.

A steady stream of men walked past, heading toward the waterfront. The street was as busy this morning as it had been Friday night. Most of the men were dressed in heavy work clothing and wore the wool caps that marked them as fishermen. A few wore the heavy boots necessary for work in the sawmills.

A Chinese boy came running downhill, dodging among the white men. He slid past Buff and stopped, chattering at Mrs. Leong. She answered, her voice calm. The boy chattered some more, then laughed as she handed him a rice ball. Her smile was doting, proud.

"Your son?" Buff asked.

"Son of my son. Very good boy. Very smart. Works hard."

"Very smart, huh?" To the boy he said, "If you'll carry a message to Li Ching for me, I'll pay you a dollar."

Before the boy could answer, Mrs. Leong said, "No need! Li Ching not here now. Be back in three day. You wait."

"Why didn't you tell me that? I thought--"

"I tell you Li Ching very busy. You not listen."

Buff heard echoes of another Chinese woman's words and wondered why he had forgotten how oblique their reasoning could be. "No," he sighed, "you're right. I heard your words, but I didn't listen to their meaning." He smiled down at the boy, whose disappointment showed plainly. "Here, youngster. You can tell me when Li Ching gets back to town, can't you?" He handed over a two-bit piece.

The boy took the coin after a quick glance at his grandmother, who nodded. With a flash of a smile, he was gone, dashing back up the hill as if it were level ground.

"A good boy," Buff said. "Handsome, too." He set the empty cup on the counter. "Thank you, Mrs. Leong. I'll expect to hear as soon as Li Ching returns." He made the statement not quite a question.

"Three days," she said, nodding. "Wind, rain come."

He wondered if she had a big toe that forecast the weather. His ma had insisted hers could. "Thanks. I'll be--"

A ruckus on the street caught his attention. Buff stepped out the door and looked down toward the Deep Six Saloon.

Men were erupting from the saloon and running up from the dock. He headed that way himself, curious. Fights on Sunday mornings, were, in his experience, rare. Most everybody was more interested in waiting out a hangover than starting

a new drunk. He was close to the outer edge of the milling crowd when he heard the yell. A woman's voice. Oh, shit!

Deeper, louder cries drowned it out. Buff knew he was probably being a fool, but he pushed through the outer fringe, knowing he had no choice. If there was a woman in danger, he had to help, no matter why she'd got herself in a pickle.

The inner circle of men was, to his surprise, simply acting as a ring around the combatants.

Combatants? It looked to him like the man was doing his best to get away, while the woman was set on beating him to a pulp. She was clubbing him on the head and shoulders with a bent umbrella, all the while yelling imprecations in some foreign language.

"*Du ljuger! You lie! Martine stal mina--*" Her voice was drowned out by a cheer as she got in another good swat.

He decided to watch. *I wonder who Martine is and what she stole.* If the woman started losing the fight, he'd drag her away, but until then he'd mind his own business.

Apparently everyone else had decided to do the same. The men were calling encouragement to both of them, although he'd bet more of them were on her side than his.

The fellow ducked away from another blow. "No. She was alone when--"

"*Du ljuger! Djävul, djävul,*" she cried as she followed him. The movement brought her around so Buff got his first good look at her face.

Siri! My God, it's Siri!

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "*Du ljuger!*," she cried again, giving her victim one last good whack. "*Djävul,*" she whimpered, as she sank to her knees and let the ruined umbrella fall from her hands.

Amid catcalls and laughter, Buff went to her. Cautiously, because a woman could be as dangerous as a man in the right circumstances. "Siri," he said, softly. "Siri, It's me. Buff Lachlan."

She only drew in upon herself and settled lower onto the rutted street.

Without touching her, he looked around at the few men remaining close by. "Can somebody tell me what that was all about?"

"Hell, she's crazy!" one said.

"He was mindin' his own business and she come up and started yellin' at him," another added.

The big fellow Buff had bested on Friday night was on the porch of the saloon. Barney? Yes, Barney. "What do you know about this?" Buff called to him.

"Not much. Her kids went missing a while back and she's been lookin' for 'em ever since. She yelled something about him knowin' where they was before she started thrashin' him."

Children? She'd said she was a widow. She'd said nothing about children. *Well, hell!*

Carefully he slid his arms around her. She made no resistance. He might as well have been picking up a sack of grain. When he was on his feet, she lay perfectly slack in his arms. For her height, she was surprisingly light. No wonder her cheeks were hollow and her eyes shadowed. She was nothing but skin and

bones.

He headed up Benton, the quickest route to the hotel. He'd crossed Wall and was finding the hill steeper than he remembered when she spoke.

"I can walk." Her voice was rough with swallowed tears.

"I'm doing fine. Why don't you relax and enjoy the ride?"

She pushed against his chest, tried to break free of his grasp. "*Släpp mig!* Put me down!"

Buff held on tighter. "Calm, down. I'm not going to hurt you. Unless you wiggle so much you make me fall. Then I'll probably land on top of you, and we'll both end up with broken bones."

She pulled back as far as she could go and stared at him. "You are joking?"

"Not a bit. You saw how sick I was last night. I'm still weak. Why, I can hardly hold onto you." He loosened his grip momentarily and made as to let her drop.

She gasped and grabbed his shoulders. "*Nej!*" Immediately she bit her lip, as if the word had snuck out while she wasn't watching.

"Then hold still."

Actually, Buff hadn't been entirely joking. He was feeling the effects of last night's illness. Now he was honor bound to carry her all the way home without staggering the last hundred feet. It wouldn't be easy. His knees were going rubbery and his arms ached. *Good thing she's a skinny little thing. Last night took more out of me than I realized.*

He kept silent the rest of the way, knowing if he spoke, his words would show just how hard he was working. No man worth his salt would let a chivalrous deed seem difficult.

It was a good thing he didn't have to climb the last ways to the front door. He'd never have made his legs raise him another half-block. At the back steps, he let Siri slide to her feet and took a deep, hopefully surreptitious breath. As her body slid along his, he noticed that, while she was skinny, she wasn't lacking in the soft flesh that made women so much different from men. So delightfully different.

He held her a moment longer than good manners allowed.

She clung to him a little longer than was necessary.

Chapter Six

So, he already has a woman, Jaeger observed, as he watched young Lachlan carry the virago away. *But what a woman--homely, scrawny, and with a fishwife's temper.*

This American was such a contradiction. He had money, although Jaeger had not discovered its source. He had polish, except when he visited the rough waterfront saloons he favored, when he shed his civilized manners and became one more drunken wastrel.

Lachlan had no difficulty attracting women. In Honolulu the ones Jaeger had seen him with had been beautiful, elegant, gracious. Never a saloon girl or, like this one, a hotel maid.

So was this the woman Lachlan sought? Jaeger doubted it. There was a resemblance, albeit a slight one, if the small painting he'd been provided was accurate. Perhaps it was due more to her coloring and the shape of her chin than anything else.

More likely Lachlan found this woman convenient. She could warm his bed at night, and make it in the morning.

* * *

Mr. Lachlan was a good man. Perhaps a true gentleman, such as she had read of in a book someone had left in the hotel. Mrs. Welkins had told her to throw it away. "No need to keep that. Men don't read romantic tripe," she'd said, when she looked at the title page.

Instead Siri had taken the book to her room and was reading it--the first book she had ever owned. She had little time for reading, and there was much of the story she didn't understand, for it contained many words she had never seen written and could not interpret.

Perhaps Mr. Lachlan...no, she would not ask him, for if he discovered the depths of her ignorance, he might have nothing to do with her. The captain had said that intelligent men admired women who were educated and skilled in the womanly arts.

He had not been forthcoming about what womanly arts he spoke of, except for embroidery and painting.

Siri would match her sewing skill against any woman's but she had never held a paintbrush.

On Wednesday she would tell Mr. Lachlan of her quest, and perhaps he might be willing to help her. More than once his gaze had been speculative. Yesterday, when he had set her down outside the kitchen, he had been aroused. She had felt his engorged *lem* when he let her slide along his body.

She must not let herself be distracted by a man, even one so attractive as Buffalo Lachlan. Unless he could help her...

She had not found her babies by asking the few people who might know where Martine had gone. She had no money to hire someone to search for them.

Siri had only one thing to trade, and if that was the price of finding her

babies, she would give it willingly.

What would it be like to share the bed of a man who cared about her pleasure as well as his? The thought had never occurred to her when Valter was alive. Not until she listened to Carleen speak of some of the men whose beds she'd warmed.

Now Siri knew a woman could enjoy coupling--no, Carleen called it *lovemaking*, a term that spoke to Siri of gentle kisses and soft caresses, of sweet words and being held close and safe.

She forced herself to eat well, even though the food threatened to choke her. She was bony, and no man wanted a bony woman. Had not Valter told her so many times?

Perhaps she should fatten herself, so Mr. Lachlan would find her desirable.

* * *

After hearing what Carleen had discovered, Buff decided to visit the police station. He used his uncle's name shamelessly, and after a few minutes' wait, was led into the chief's office.

"Being under suspicion for a crime I wasn't aware I committed is a new experience for me," he told the chief, doing his best to sound both rueful and amused. "I don't claim to be an angel, but I've kept pretty close to the straight and narrow since I arrived."

"Officer Gillespie gets a bit heavy handed at times," the chief said. "His usual beat is the waterfront, and soft words don't go very far down there." He flipped through a stack of papers on his desk, pulled one out from about halfway down the stack.

As he read what was written, his eyes narrowed and his mouth hardened. Buff waited, wondering what the dickens he'd fallen into. Something beyond merely unsavory, it looked like.

The chief flipped to the second page, read farther, then looked up at Buff. "You're lucky. Old Henry says he kept an eye on you, followed you until you got to the hotel. You must have given him money?"

Buff shrugged. "He looked hungry and cold. I'm a soft touch." He didn't mention he had a habit of making the acquaintance of one or two wharf rats in any port where he intended to stay a while. They always knew where the honest games and the unwatered whiskey were to be found.

This wasn't the first time the practice had paid off.

"So I'm clear? Of what?"

"Not entirely. I'll ask you to stay around town for a few more days." The chief laid the paper down. "Mainly because we may want to ask you more questions about the passengers and crew of the *Chinese Duchess* than because you're under suspicion for anything. Any objections?"

"No, not when you put it that way. Can you tell me what I was suspected of?"

"Murder. Or maybe three of them."

"Great God!"

"I won't pretend Astoria's not a rough town." The chief leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "It's a port, and we get the world's riffraff passing

through. Or worse, hanging around because they reckon there's easy pickings here."

"Not much different from any port town I've seen," Buff agreed.

"No, you're right. Ordinarily I don't worry too much about killings down on the docks, because the dead are generally the sort we're well rid of anyhow. But these... Mr. Lachlan, I've been a lawman on and off for thirty years. I've never seen anything so...so vicious, so bestial, as these." He slapped his hand on the papers. "Two footpads--we knew them, were hoping to catch 'em in the act sometime so we could run 'em out of town. Well, they were bad men, but they didn't deserve to be gutted and left to die in the mud."

He shook his head. "That was bad enough. But the other...well, it just makes me sick to even think about it." He pushed a single sheet across the desk. "If you want to know, go ahead and read it. I can't. Not unless I have to."

It was a stark account of the discovery of a woman's body behind a warehouse, found the third morning after Buff's arrival. The last paragraph was a clinical description of the body. Buff read the first sentence, a few words into the second. "My God," he breathed, laying the paper back on the chief's desk. "How could anyone...?"

"Even a whore didn't deserve to be treated like that," the chief said. "The doc says she was alive through most of it."

"I'll tell you anything I can," Buff said. "Anything to catch the bastard who did this."

"Just tell us what you can about the passengers who got off with you. And any of the crew you got acquainted with." He heaved himself to his feet. "I'll tell you frankly, Lachlan. I don't have much hope we'll solve this one. Whoever did it is probably long gone."

* * *

Mr. Lachlan hardly spoke at supper Monday night. When Siri went into the library later to turn out the lamp, she found him sitting alone. A book lay open on his lap, but he was not reading it. Instead he seemed to be staring at something unseen.

Something unpleasant, she decided, from his frown.

He started when she tapped on the open door.

"Please turn out the lamp when you go to bed," she said.

He nodded, but did not look at her.

"*God natt*," she told him, wishing she could ask what troubled him so.

He did not answer.

* * *

When Buff woke Tuesday morning, he resolved to put the murders out of his mind. The police were doing their best to find the killer, and he'd done all he could to help. Today he'd check at the Portmaster's office, see if the clerk had found anything useful.

The list the young man handed him was disappointingly short. "Don't you have any record of survivors? All I see here is cargo and numbers. Nobody kept

lists of who was lost?"

"They did, when there *were* survivors. But too often we didn't hear about the ships until the wreckage washed ashore." The young man scratched behind his ear. "There was a fire, back a few years. We lost some records, but I don't know which ones."

Once more Buff read down the list. "What about this one? The *Dancing Goddess*, out of Macao? It says there were eleven passengers and two crewmen saved." The date was right, the ship's name was one he'd run across before in his search, but she was listed as carrying spices and silks. He pretended surprise. "That many passengers? On a cargo ship?"

"All I know is what I copied. You can look at the original entry in the port log, if you want. I brought 'em up here to make the list."

"I'll do that," Buff said, "if it's not too much trouble."

"Oh, it's no trouble. You can use the table back there. I'll get the logs." He stepped aside so Buff could pass behind the high counter.

Two frustrating hours later, Buff had a little more information, but not much. He'd read each entry in the port log, struggling with faded writing and dog-eared pages, even a hole where someone's pipe or cigar ashes had landed on the page. The *Dancing Goddess* was the likeliest candidate for the ship he sought. She had been in the Java Sea at the right time, had made landfall in Macao and offloaded half a dozen girls. He'd seen her listed in the Honolulu port records too.

He returned to his research. Except for a laconic note that the surviving passengers of the *Dancing Goddess* were all 'China girls' who had been passed on to someone in Chinatown, there was nothing that might shed light on his search.

He waited until the secretary leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "I've got a few more questions. Got a minute?"

"Sure, Mr. Lachlan. Did you find something?"

He hadn't told the young man what he was looking for, just that he was seeking a passenger list for a ship that had been reported lost off the mouth of the Columbia in 1859. "Maybe. There's a note here that a fishing boat, the *Magli Arnesdotter* picked up some shipwreck survivors. Is her master still about?"

"I don't recognize the name. Let me check." He pulled a big book from a shelf, opened it toward the middle, and ran his finger down the page. Then the next. A third. "I don't see it. If it was registered here, then it isn't any longer. Hasn't been for at least five years."

"Do you have records before that?"

"Nope. They were stored in the old port office and it burned down about three years ago."

Well hell! "So where would I go to find somebody who's been around since 1859?"

"Well, there's the Seaman's Hall. Somebody there might be able to help you."

Buff thanked the young man and departed, taking the list of shipwrecks and his notes. He wasn't much forwarder than he'd been this morning, but at least he had an idea of the next place to look.

Siri's habit on her day off was to breakfast on the remnants of the previous night's supper, then sew until dinnertime. This morning she attempted to work on little Annie Beglan's lace-trimmed communion dress. After having to take out nearly six inches of poorly-done insertion, she gave up and went downstairs, nearly drowning in the process. Yesterday's storm had not abated. She hung her coat on a hook in the back porch and went into the kitchen where she curled up on the settee near the fire. Her skirt was damp and her half-boots squished as she walked. She slipped them off and slid her feet into the boiled wool scuffs Bao kept near the hearth for that very purpose.

"Have you seen Mr. Lachlan?" she asked Carleen when the other maid came through, carrying a basket full of soiled laundry.

"And is it my day to watch over him?" Carleen said, shouldering her way through the door to the laundry. "That Captain Stokes! If he don't learn to keep his hands to himself..."

Siri followed, used to Carleen's complaints about the captain. She had done her share of dodging the old man's pats, until she'd realized they were only harmless displays of affection. "They mean nothing. He's a *raring*...a sweetheart."

"He wants to lay his hand on my bottom, he'll give me a present like the others do. I don't give nothin' for free."

"There is much difference between letting a harmless old man pat you now and then and sharing your bed with him." Siri said. Carleen's activities were common knowledge, but Siri was still embarrassed to be speaking of such things in Chu's presence. She was sure he understood far more English than he admitted.

"I don't share my bed with nobody," Carleen said, as she started to sort through the basket's contents. "I share theirs. You'd better get out of here before the old besom comes in and puts you to work."

Mrs. Welkins didn't like it when the maids loitered in the kitchen and laundry. She believed it distracted Chu and Bao. Her favorite saying was 'Idle hands are the Devil's own workshop,' and she certainly allowed no idleness in her house. Siri truly believed the housekeeper resented giving anyone a day off. Nevertheless, she took time to make herself a pot of tea and to wrap a thick slice of fresh bread and a slab of *gjetöst* in a napkin.

At the door leading to the outside stairway, she paused, looking with dismay at the rain beating on the window. If she went up to her room, she'd be soaked before she reached the first landing. She and Carleen were not expressly forbidden from using the indoor stairs to the fourth floor, but they were certainly not encouraged to do so. The lobby looked directly on the stairs, so Mrs. Welkins was sure to see her if she went that way.

"You come hide here," Chu said from behind her. "She no find you."

Siri turned. He held the door to the drying room open. While sitting among damp linens to eat her meal was not Siri's idea of comfort, it would be better than making her way up the stairs. "Let me bring my boots. They will dry just as well in there." And not be so visible as they were sitting by the kitchen hearth.

Chu had set a chair close to the open fireplace that provided heat for drying laundry. Today he was washing guests' linens. Already two lines were hung with

shirts and nightshirts. She would be completely hidden from anyone peering in the door. "*Tusen tack*, Chu." She set her tray on the floor and herself on the dilapidated wooden chair. Almost immediately she jumped up again. "Chu? Wait! If Mr. Lachlan *söker mig*, if he comes seeking me, I..."

"He come back suppertime. You wait," the laundryman said. "Stay here, nice warm. Welkins Missus not know you here."

"How do you know--"

"He go talk Li Ching. Back suppertime. You eat now."

"But--"

"Eat," Chu ordered, before closing the door.

Once again she forced herself to eat abundantly. This morning she had taken a good look at herself while she was dressing. Always slender, she was now gaunt and bony. No man would find her attractive. She'd peered into the scrap of cloudy mirror that hung on the wall and had seen the face of a stranger. Her cheeks were hollow, her eyes were sunken, and her lips, once her best feature, were thin and tight across her teeth.

The food sat on her belly like so much lead. She willed it to stay there, to digest.

After a while the feeling of over-fullness went away and she sipped at her now-tepid tea.

Mr. Lachlan had reacted to her on Sunday, but might he not have reacted to any woman he'd held in his arms? He was young, surely lusty. Would she offer herself to him in return for his help? Could she?

And would he want her, if she did?

Chapter Seven

"Ten? Not eleven?" Buff stared across the table at Li Ching. The man had not aged a day since Buff had last seen him almost nine years ago. "The Portmaster's records say there were eleven passengers saved."

"I assure you, Mr. Lachlan, if my predecessor recorded the receipt of ten girls, then ten was the correct number. He might have been somewhat lax in some ways, but not where profit was concerned." He sipped from the delicate, bowl-like teacup, never taking his gaze from his visitor. "Perhaps there was an error made in recording the number of survivors."

"Maybe." Buff shrugged. "More than likely, in fact. But I'm not giving up until I find the skipper of that fishing boat that helped in the rescue. The *Magda*... No, that's not right." He pulled his leather notebook from an inner coat pocket, flipped through pages until he came to the last one written upon. "The *Magli Arnesdotter*. You ever hear of it?"

Li Ching looked thoughtful. "Perhaps. Just a moment." He clapped. When a young man peeked through the door behind him, he spoke in Chinese. The young man retreated, closing the door behind him. "He will see if our records show a boat of that name berthed here or in the Skipanarwen moorage. It may take some time." He gestured at the lacquered tray sitting to his left. "Will you take more tea?"

"Perhaps I should come back later," Buff began.

"Please, no. It is not often I have the opportunity to speak English with one who does not assume I am an ignorant, unlettered simpleton."

"Your English is better than half the folks I know." He accepted the fresh tea, sat back. "I don't recall your talking half this well, back in Idaho."

"I had not yet learned the language well. One winter, a young miner was severely injured in a fall. When I discovered he had been a schoolteacher before coming west to seek his fortune, I offered to provide him lodging and meals during his recovery. In recompense, he taught me the principles of your language and introduced me to its literature. Your uncle lent us several books from his library, in fact."

"Shakespeare," Buff said, remembering how Silas had enjoyed reading the plays aloud of an evening, the winter they'd spent in the gold camp.

"Among others. Your literature is rich, though young and brash in comparison with that of my country. Still, it holds wisdom and is worth reading."

They discussed books for a spell, then Li Ching changed the subject. "You say you seek a lost child, but you have not told me why you do this? Is there a reward?"

"I'm doing a favor for a friend. That's all. I was coming this way anyhow, so it's been easy to do. I'm on my way home."

"Ah? You have traveled then?"

"Lord, yes, I've traveled. I left Boise City in '65 and I've been on the move ever since." Except for those months in *Festung Uberderwelt*, but he wasn't about to tell anyone but his pa about that misadventure. "I've seen a good bit of the world, including some of *your* country. I was in Shanghai six months ago. Took a boat ride up the Yangtze a ways. That's some river."

"You were seeking this child there?"

"No. No, there's no indication she was taken to China. I was just sightseeing." And what sights he'd seen, too. He sure wished he'd had one of those fancy cameras, so he could have brought home pictures of the places he'd been to show his folks. "I figured since the trail was more than twelve years old, there was no need for me to hurry."

"You enjoy visiting new places? You are not in a hurry to reach your honorable father's home?"

"I don't reckon it's going anywhere. Ma and Pa know I'm coming. They won't expect me until they see me." To himself Buff admitted he was getting a mite anxious to see his family again. Eight years was a long time. He still couldn't feature his tomboy sister, Katie, as a mother.

"Perhaps you would be interested in performing another favor then, a good deed, for one who has nowhere else to turn."

Buff looked at him carefully, wondering what trap was hidden in the mildly spoken suggestion. "That depends," he said. "I want to finish up this wild goose chase I'm on. If there are answers, I want 'em. If there aren't, then I'll be done with it." He stared across the desk, but Li Ching was as inscrutable as they came. "Tell me more."

"Of course." Li Ching picked up a long stemmed pipe.

"There is a woman," he said, when his pipe was giving off fragrant smoke, "whose children were stolen. She has no money, no influential friends, and no means of seeking them. The one who stole them has many friends, some of considerable influence. She has gone to ground--"

Buff leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. "She?"

"Yes, the one who stole the children is their grandmother. She is a woman of strong beliefs and one of them is that her daughter-in-law was a bad mother."

"But you don't think so?"

"I am certain the woman was an excellent mother. But she lacks...audacity. She was a quiet, obedient daughter, and then she became a quiet, obedient wife. Not a bad thing for a woman, but too much obedience can be seen as subservience."

Buff thought about his ma, and how she'd been willing to kill a man to protect his oldest sister. "So she just let her mother-in-law walk all over her?"

Li Ching nodded. "A good way of putting the situation. I have provided some small bits of information, such as came my way, but I have neither the resources nor the inclination to involve myself in your countrymen's affairs. As long as we Chinese keep to ourselves, we are left alone...most of the time. If it were known we have helped the young woman, some might be tempted to show their displeasure."

"Yeah, I've heard about anti-Chinese riots here and there. Pa wrote me how feelings against the Celestials in the Boise Basin had led to some problems for a while."

There was a knock on the door behind Li Ching. When bid enter, the young man stuck his head inside again. He spoke at some length.

Li Ching responded briefly.

The interchange went on for a minute and more. Buff wished he understood Chinese.

Li Ching turned back to face Buff as the young man withdrew. "The records have been located and the information about the fishing boat will arrive soon. In the meantime, I have sent for the young woman. She can tell you her story and you will decide if you can assist her." His lips twitched briefly in what might have been a smile. "More tea?"

Buff had a hunch the records were sitting in the other room, waiting until he'd been conned into taking on this 'favor' for a bereft mama. *Oh, well, I haven't anything else to do until this evening. I wonder if Astoria has a decent restaurant I can take Siri to.* He allowed Li Ching to refill his cup.

Lord a'mighty! If I drink much more of this tea, I'll burst. He sat back, cradling the warm porcelain in his hands. "So, how long have you been in Astoria?" he asked Li Ching. He was prepared to make small talk all afternoon, if it got him some answers.

* * *

Chu came into the drying room with a basket full of wet laundry. Siri watched him hang up a pair of longjohns. When he reached into the basket for the next piece, she said, "Chu, why did Mr. Lachlan go to see Li Ching?"

Children in Astoria were frightened into obedience with threats of being given to Li Ching. He was believed to have long fangs and breathe fire, somewhat like the Chinese dragons pictured on the scrolls and silk paintings she had seen on the walls in Mrs. Leong's store. While Siri had never spoken to anyone who had dealings with the powerful Chinese merchant, she had heard enough rumors and whispered anecdotes that she believed Mr. Lachlan could be in danger.

He could be murdered and his body thrown in the river and we'd never know... Her mind pictured other fates, all every bit as terrible, all derived from stories she had heard as she'd grown up in a town on the edge of civilization.

"Not know. He come back suppertime." Chu hung the last shirt on the line and went out, his cork-soled shoes making almost no sound on the brick floor. Siri put her teacup on the tray, slipped her almost-dry boots on, and followed Chu into the laundry room. Warm and dry now, she went on into the kitchen. Bao was nowhere to be seen, but Siri could hear his voice from the back porch. He was speaking rapidly, excitement plain in his voice.

When she heard him say her name, all the disasters she had imagined became real. *Ah, Gud! Nej. Var snäll och!*

She burst through the door and saw Mrs. Leong's grandson huddled under the big spruce tree that almost filled the back yard. His padded coat was dripping and his short, bowl-cut hair was plastered to his head.

He grinned up at her, then shook his head and said something to Bao.

Bao replied with a stream of incomprehensible syllables. He waved his hand, pointed toward town. The boy spoke again, then turned and ran down the hill, cutting diagonally across the intersection before he disappeared.

"What is it? Is Mr. Lachlan--"

"Li Ching say you come. Pretty quick."

"Me?" squeaked Siri. "What does Li Ching want with me?"

"He find one to help you. Go. Pretty quick."

"To help me?" Her heart leaped into her throat. "You mean--"

"Go Li Ching. He tell you." Bao took her coat off its hook, picked up an umbrella. "Go now," he said again. He held her coat so she could slip her arms into the sleeves.

Siri let him settle the coat on her shoulders, but didn't go in the direction he was gently pushing her. "Bao, why is Li Ching helping--"

"Only Li Ching know. Hurry. He not wait all day." He pushed her harder.

Wondering if she wasn't making the second biggest mistake of her life, Siri took the umbrella and stepped out the kitchen door.

* * *

They were sitting in comfortable silence when a knock sounded on the door.

Li Ching called out something in Chinese. "This will be the information you seek," he told Buff as the door opened.

Footsteps, then the sound of a quickly indrawn breath. Turning his head, Buff saw Siri standing just inside the door, her eyes enormous, her hands clenched so tightly around the handle of an umbrella that her fingers were white. *Siri? Her children? What the hell is going on?*

Setting his suspicion that he was being had aside, he stood. He pried the umbrella handle from her clutching fingers and removed the dripping coat from her shoulders. It was like undressing a mannequin. Or a child. When he realized she was staring at Li Ching with the stupefaction of a mouse mesmerized by a rattler, he hid a smile. *Of course. The Bogeyman.*

He hung the coat on a hook on the wall, then guided her to his chair. Her body was so tightly held it almost thrummed. For a moment he wondered if her knees would bend before she folded clumsily.

She did not relax. Her gaze was fixed on Li Ching. Buff had the feeling she didn't even realize he was there.

"What the hell?" he demanded, looking across the table to the slightly smiling Celestial.

"One moment," Li Ching spoke to the young man who had brought Siri. After a short exchange, he accepted a packet of papers, tied with a scrap of blue cloth. The young man retreated, closing the door quietly.

One hand on the packet, the other stroking his chin, Li Ching looked across the table at Siri. "I regret, Mrs. Trogen, I have not been able to discover the fate of your children. My men have searched as far south as Tillamook and upriver to Portland. They found no trace of a woman traveling with children. I believe you received my message that she was seen boarding her brother's fishing boat on the day your children disappeared. She was alone then."

Buff looked over at Siri. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and her fingers were twisting in her lap.

"The boat was docked at Chinook the next morning, although it was not seen to land there. Neither was she seen there--or anywhere--since then." Li Ching's moue of disgust spoke volumes.

Were heads rolling because he was being forced to admit an intelligence failure? Li Ching did not impress Buff as one to accept less than perfection. "You don't know where the boat went between times?"

"Alas, no. In the ordinary course of matters, my people would hear of any unusual occurrences. To my great disappointment, this time we have failed."

Siri licked her lips with a tongue dry as dust. "Nothing? You've heard nothing?" Her fear of Li Ching had disappeared the instant he claimed responsibility for the scant information she had received via Bao and Chu.

The face of the man she had believed a *djävul* now seemed sympathetic, fatherly. He appeared genuinely distressed that he had no more information for her.

Someone took her hand. She looked down. Saw strong fingers wrapped around her own chapped ones. She looked up the arm, clad in wool, saw a face that for a moment seemed a stranger's. Then she recognized him. "Mr. Lachlan! *Varför är du här? What are you...?*"

"Apparently Li Ching thinks I'm the man to help you find your children," he said, sounding as if it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Oh, but--"

"Mr. Lachlan is seeking information. You are in need of assistance. I believe you might find your interests are not as far apart as you thought," Li Ching said. He stood and held out a packet of papers to Mr. Lachlan. "Here are the only records we could discover. When you have perused them, I trust you will return them to the proper authorities."

"And now, there is other business I must attend to. Please convey my best wishes to your honored aunt and uncle." He bowed before slipping through the door behind his chair.

"Let's go." Mr. Lachlan half lifted her from the chair.

Before she could resist, he was holding her coat for her. Siri shivered as she slid her arms into the damp sleeves. "Wait. Tell me--"

"Not here." He held the door, motioned her to proceed him through it. "Let's find a place where we can talk in private."

When they emerged into the street, the wind knifed through Siri's damp coat. She shivered.

"Hell! You're going to freeze in those wet clothes. Can you hold out 'til we get to the hotel?" He took her arm and almost pulled her up the street.

"Please!" She dug in her heels. "We cannot talk at the hotel. I am not allowed to sit in the parlor, and you cannot...there is no private place we can be." She would not dare take him to the drying room. If Mrs. Welkins ever heard of it, Siri would have no more work.

"We'll go to the Occident, then," he said, pulling again at her arm, which he held in an unbreakable grip.

"*Nej, nej!* I cannot go there!" She could only imagine the reception she would receive at Astoria's elegant hotel, when the haughty headwaiter saw her gown. It was a shabby gray faille she had cut down from one of Martine's after Rosel's birth. Her own clothing had no longer fit her through the bosom, and her mother-in-law had reluctantly provided some cast-offs for the sake of decency.

"There is a café," she told him, "near the docks. They have good food, but it is not elegant like the Occident."

"I don't give a damn about elegant," he said impatiently. "I'm hungry."

The café served plain food, fit for loggers and fishermen. It was smoky and dark and, in the middle of the afternoon, nearly empty. Mr. Lachlan seated her at a table near the back, well away from the few other diners.

When they had given their orders and received steaming mugs of coffee, he sat back and looked at her across the table. "Well?" he said. His voice was hard, as if he suspected her of...of what?

She cradled the mug between her hands, absorbing its heat. "I...I do not know what you ask." He had seemed to be so kind, so gentlemanly, before. Now he was stern, a little fierce. And even more handsome, with his jaw set just so.

"What did Li Ching mean, we may have more common interests than we thought?"

Siri had paid little attention once she heard the Chinese had been unable to trace Martine. "I do not know," she repeated. "You have just arrived. How could we have common interests?"

"Beats me." Mr. Lachlan sipped his coffee, never taking his piercing gaze from her face. After a few moments, he patted the front of his wool jacket. He pulled forth the small packet Li Ching had given him. "Let's see if the answer is in here."

The blue fabric scrap that tied the papers resisted his tugs, so he cut it with a small knife that appeared as if by magic from under his cuff. He set knife and cloth aside and unfolded the papers. One by one, he smoothed the first three, glancing quickly over each. At the fourth, he paused, read carefully. "Here it is. The *Magli Arnesdotter*. Master--"

"Oh! That is--" She stopped when he held up a hand.

"Master, Arne Hansen. Lost at sea, June, 1865. All hands."

Siri bit her lip. "*Min far*," she whispered.

"Your father? *Your* father was the fisherman who picked up some of the survivors of the *Dancing Goddess*?" He leaned toward her as if about to come across the table and shake her. "I'll be... Do you know how many? Were they all women?"

Siri shrank back in her chair, feeling as if he was about to come across the table and pull the answers from her by brute strength. "I don't know. The ship...I have heard the name. That is all." A sudden shaft of pain went through her head, from nape to temple. "Oh! I do not know. My father did not always tell us of his adventures."

The waiter came then, with their dinners. Siri was grateful for the interruption, because Mr. Lachlan leaned back and let the food be set before them.

* * *

Three tables over, Jaeger smiled to himself. So. The homely little maid from the hotel had knowledge of the shipwreck Lachlan was so interested in. Could she be brought to remember the names of the survivors her father had picked up? Given proper incentive, she might.

Was there a vacant room in the Pacific Western Hotel? He would have to inquire. Perhaps he could charm her, glean any useful information from her in the aftermath of sex. Women were prone to reveal all their secrets when senseless with repletion.

And if that approach did not yield results, there were always other means.

Chapter Eight

Buff sopped the last of the gravy up with a chunk of sourdough bread. *Sourdough?* He'd eaten most of the thick slice before its distinctive taste snared his attention. Of all the things he'd been homesick for, this had been one of the strongest yearnings. For a moment he forgot his quest, his impatience for answers. After so many years of European cuisine, *haute* and *ordinaire*, the taste of bread like his ma made told him he'd come home.

He came to a decision. "Eat your stew," he told her, hating to see the thick mixture of elk meat, onions and parsnips go to waste.

She looked up. "I am not hungry."

"Eat anyhow. You look like the next strong wind would blow you away. I won't work with a woman who's apt to faint from hunger." He wasn't sure he wanted to work with her at all. Except that she might have one of the missing pieces to his puzzle.

Her eyes grew round. "You will help me? You will find *mina barn*?"

"I'll do what I can. If you'll do your best to remember what your pa said about the *Dancing Goddess*."

"Ja. I will try. Perhaps *min mor*...I will write to her."

"Your mother's still alive? Where is she?"

"She went to Monterey after... to stay with her sister. She was not happy here. Too much rain." Siri stirred her stew, as if looking for something edible. At last she spooned up a small chunk of meat. The swallowing of it looked almost painful, even though she had chewed it to death.

She looked up, saw him watching her. "I am sorry," she said. "The food...sometimes it sticks in my throat."

"Worry will do that to a body," he said. His ma had always lost her appetite when she fretted. "Just keep trying." He reminded himself he had no reason to believe she'd been party to Li Ching's scheme. The wily Celestial was certainly capable of thinking it up all by himself, as a means of getting rid of two pests at the same time.

She nodded, spooned up a lump of parsnip. This time she seemed to find it easier to swallow. "It is good," she said, with a pathetic attempt at a smile.

Buff contained his impatience until she had eaten more than half of her stew and most of her bread. "Okay," he said when she put her spoon down and shook her head in defeat. "Let's talk about what we're going to do to find your children."

"What can we do? I have asked everyone I know. You heard Li Ching--his people have been able to discover nothing. No one saw Martine with them. No one knows where she went."

"Tell me everything. Start the day they disappeared." Before she could say anything, he changed his mind. "No. Tell me about how you lived, where you lived. Why could your mother-in-law just take your children without you knowing?"

"Valter was a good man, but he liked the cards. Sometimes he bet more than he should. So we always lived with her. After Rolf--my son--was born, we had to pay rent. Before I had cleaned and other chores. Rolf was...*sjuklig*?"

"Sickly? Not well? Not healthy?"

"*Ah, ja.* He was sickly, so I could not work as much. Martine did not like that. She said I was lazy. And she did not like it that I taught Rosel English." A fleeting grimace twisted her face. "We did not speak English in Martine's house. Only *svensk*."

"I did not want to live with her, but Valter said we must. She had room for all."

"She is wealthy?"

"*Ja.* Her husband traded along the coast. When he died, she sold his ship and had a grand house built upriver, at Daws' Landing. She rented rooms to seafaring men and others who were there only sometimes. Never fishermen--she believed they had no *god uppfostran*...their manners were not good."

A quick glance upwards and Buff was sure he'd seen a fleeting smile. "Valter was a gillnetter. She did not approve, but he was happy in his work."

"So you always lived with her?" *How had the old woman been able to steal the kids, then?* Something was fishy here. Or had he been mistaken in his impression of Siri? Was she less naïve and unsophisticated than she acted?

"Only until Valter...until..." She bit her lip. "There was a big storm. The salmon were running. So many, until the river seemed to boil with their passage. Only a few gillnetters went out that day. The foolish, the hungry." Her shrug was eloquent.

"Afterward, Martine said I must find a job. She would support me no more."

What an old witch! "So you took the children and left?"

"*Ah, nej.* I could find no work that would pay enough that I could afford a place for us to live." A pause, and her lips thinned, her hands fisted on the tabletop. "She said she would keep the children until I could get my feet...get my feet together?"

"Get on your feet?" he offered.

"*Ja*, get on my feet. I only saw *mina barn* on my day off, and then for so short a time. An hour, perhaps two. The walk...it was so far, through the woods. And the days so short in winter..." A tear spilled down her cheek. Impatiently she wiped it away. "Little Rolf, he was forgetting I was his *mor*."

"One day when I went to see them, carrying the small gifts I had for them to open Christmas morning, they were--" Her voice broke and she covered her mouth. After a moment, she said, "They were gone. The house was locked. I thought...at first I thought Martine had taken them to Astoria to visit me, but had forgotten to tell me. I went to Mr. Daws who lives nearby, and he told me they had not been there for five days. Martine had left him a note saying that she was moving away and would write to him when she was settled in her new place. But she did not say where the place was, and she has never written. It is nineteen days now, and I do not know where--"

She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. Again her lips firmed.

"Enough! I waste time weeping." Leaning forward, she looked him in the eye. "Why did Li Ching say we could help one another? What must I do so you will help me?"

Buff wondered what outrageous tasks she would undertake to regain her children. For a moment he was tempted to forget his quest and tell her if she would fulfill the fantasies he'd had of her, he would go to the ends of the earth on her behalf.

For a moment.

"Write to your mother, see what she remembers. In the meantime, I'll keep my ears open. Something may turn up."

"But you will not wait, will you? Please!" She reached across the table and clutched his wrist. "You *will* begin your search now?"

Laying his hand over hers, Buff squeezed gently. Her fingers slowly loosened, until he could believe the blood might flow to his hand again. "I'll start. Tomorrow I'm heading upriver. There's a fellow up at Westport..." *Never mind. She doesn't need to know what sort of people I'm talking to. But it's true that Pete, up in Westport, might have heard something about her kids. According to Longstreet, he has interests all along the rivers. The sort of interests that would see a possible profit in information about stolen children.*

After a moment he said, "I'm looking for another missing child, which is one reason why I said I'd help you. Maybe I can make it sound like the two cases are related."

"Another? Other children have disappeared?"

Hearing the pain in her voice, Buff wished he'd kept his mouth shut. "It was a long time ago...."

For the second time that day, he told of the girl child he sought, of the strong possibility she had been on the *Dancing Goddess*.

"So young a child? Why was she alone? Why were her parents not with her?"

"Because she was cargo, Siri. She was to be sold, like any commodity. To the highest bidder."

At first she didn't understand him. When his words at last made sense, her jaw dropped. "*Ohyggligt! Vad syndig!* A child! So terrible." Again tears spilled across her cheek, leaving wet trails on skin gone pasty white. "How her parents must have grieved! I will help you. Just tell me what you want me to do." She reached across the table again. This time she clasped his right hand in both of hers.

An arrow of heat stabbed through Buff's gut, leaving him dry-mouthed and weak. Then he realized she had not offered herself in payment for his help.

Buff was no celibate. He had bedded some of Europe's infamous beauties, had spent most of a night in a Hong Kong bordello known worldwide for the charm and allure of its courtesans. He liked women, all ages, shapes, sizes. He enjoyed the feel of them, the smell of them, the taste of them. Women thought differently than men, and he liked that, too. Some women were his friends, some had been his lovers. A very few were both.

Siri was like no woman he'd known. He became aware that her hands, work-roughened and strong, were still holding one of his. In that clasp he sensed more than the first stirrings of friendship. More than the simple pleasures of sex.

He and Siri were bound together, for some as yet unknowable purpose.

"What's your other name?" he demanded, determined to break the spell. "Siri what?"

"Hansen...no Trogen. My name is Sigrid Hansen Trogen. Siri is a... a *smeknamn*... I do not know how--"

"A nickname. A pet name, used by your friends and family."

"Ja, but not just my family. Everyone knows me as Siri. Sigrid is so fine, so formal. I am a plain woman, not fancy."

He looked past the lines of exhaustion, past the weight of worry and fear for her children. Her hair was the color of moonlight, her eyes as blue as the river that flowed deep and clear past Cherry Vale. The hollows in her cheeks showed the underlying bone structure. She would be a beautiful old woman, would be lovely now if she had a bit more flesh on her bones.

Ice blue satin and silver lace. That's what she should wear.

Buff vowed he'd feed her every chance he got, until she filled out as she was meant to be.

And wondered why he cared.

Shoving that thought aside, he disengaged his hand. "Looks like the wind's died down. Let's walk awhile. We're mostly dry." If he wasn't looking into eyes that invited him to dive in and never come up, maybe his thoughts could be kept where they ought to be.

Obediently she rose. From the astonished look she gave him when he went to help her with her coat, he decided her mother-in-law might be a rich woman, but she hadn't taught her son any manners. Siri acted like no man had ever treated her with common courtesy.

Her shy smile, as he settled the coat on her shoulders, warmed his heart.

And other, less mentionable parts, too.

* * *

Jaeger watched them go. He had been unable to hear the last of their conversation, due to the three men who'd taken a table between his and theirs. It did not matter. He had heard what was important.

When she smiled, the little hotel maid was almost pretty. It was a pity she wore such ugly clothing and made no effort to be attractive. She was not to his taste though, for she was gaunt and bony.

No matter. Once he was established in the hotel, he would cultivate her. She would come to trust him and would tell him what he wished to know. Perhaps he would make her fall in love with him.

It might be amusing to take a woman from Buffalo Lachlan.

* * *

The light rain that fell that cold January afternoon was nothing like the morning's storm. The wind still gusted wildly between the buildings, turning umbrellas unexpectedly into sails. So Buff pulled his hat low on his forehead and Siri concealed her moonlight bright hair under an ugly wool shawl.

They walked slowly down Main Street, stepping carefully on the still-wet boardwalk. After they crossed Cushings Court, the river was visible. They were also out of the wind, more or less.

Buff said, "You were going to tell me why you were trying to kill that fellow Sunday."

"Kill? Nej, I did not try to kill him. Only to make him stop his lies. I was so

rasande, so angry. When I asked Oskar--he had been Valter's friend since they were boys. He now works at the docks but he was a gillnetter, like Valter--"

"Siri, why were you beating the tar out of him?"

"I am telling you," she said primly. "Oskar tells me when a boat comes in. Sometimes I do not see, if they dock while I am working. Oskar sends word and I can come to the docks and speak to the captain, sometimes to the crew also. Someday I will--"

She ducked her head but not before Buff saw her throat work. When she spoke again, there was the faintest quaver to her voice.

"Someday one will have news for me. Someone will have seen them, *mina barn*."

He pretended he didn't see her wipe tears from her cheeks. If she wanted to seem brave and strong, the least he could do was act as if she was.

Well, damn it, she is brave and strong. What a life she's had. That husband of hers must have been a real useless piece of work. And his ma...what a heartless bitch! "So what did Oskar say to make you so mad? I heard you call him a liar."

She stopped walking and turned toward him. "Oh, *nej!* Not Oskar. His friend, Karl. He said the reason Martine took Rolf and Rosel was that I was a careless mother. That I starved them and gave them only rags to wear. That the best thing that ever happened was when Martine took them from me. Karl lied! I am a good mother. I love *mina barn*. I love them!"

Her voice had grown stronger with each word, until the last ones came out almost as a shout.

"I don't think there's any doubt of that, Siri," Buff said, soothingly. "But wasn't beating the shi...the tar out of him a little extreme?"

"Ah, *ja*. I would have snubbed him, if that had been all he said. But then he said he knew why I worked at the hotel, instead of at the cannery. He said I..." She looked away.

In the flickering light from a street lamp, Buff saw her mouth tremble. He waited.

"He said the reason I work at the hotel is so I can earn more. That I...the men pay..." Her chin came up and she looked him straight in the eye. "I am *respektabel*. I do not..."

"Of course you don't. Anyone who even thinks you would is crazy." He doubted Siri would ever come to a man's bed for money. She wasn't that sort. But for love? Out of gratitude?

He pushed the thought aside. A woman like Siri could add all sorts of unwelcome complications to a man's life.

"He laughed. When the men at the hotel tired of me, he said, he would come to me and I would welcome him, because he was a real man. Bah! He is a *dumbom*, with a mouth bigger than his brain. But he made me so angry, when he would not stop laughing. So I hit him."

Again that swift duck of the head. In a near-whisper, she said, "I could not stop hitting. It was as if...as if I was hitting Martine. I wanted to hurt... Perhaps..."

"You wanted to kill her," he said, understanding the red rage she must have

felt. Berserker, they called it in the north countries, but a rage anyone might feel when driven beyond human endurance. Gently he gathered her into his arms. "Siri, we'll find your children. One way or another, we'll find them."

Her body slowly lost its unnatural stiffness and she relaxed against him. After a while she sighed, a long, sad exhalation that almost broke his heart.

* * *

While Mr. Lachlan was gone on his upriver errand, Siri found sleep elusive and her appetite vanished. Each night she lay awake in her bed, forcing herself to be still instead of tossing and turning. At mealtimes, she forced herself to eat, although each bite was an effort.

She no longer went to the waterfront each evening. Mr. Lachlan had arranged with Li Ching for her to get word if a river steamer landed. He had also made other arrangements--she had no idea what they were--for crews of both river steamers and ocean vessels to be questioned. "They'll often hear things the captains don't," he'd told her.

And she counted the days. He had departed early Thursday, saying he planned to return no later than Monday.

On Friday a new resident moved in, a Mr. Gans. He took the last unoccupied room, one of three very small ones on the third floor. He was a writer, he told Mrs. Welkins, planning a book about Astoria's history.

Siri saw him for the first time at supper on Saturday night.

"This is our other lovely maid, Adolf," Captain Stokes, said, catching her around the waist as she reached past him to set dessert on the table. "This is Siri."

Knowing that the captain's feelings would be hurt if she tried to escape, she smiled down at him and stood quietly in his loose embrace. When she looked across the table at Mr. Gans, she had to stifle a shiver.

His eyes were pale, almost colorless. They held no warmth, no curiosity, no friendliness. It was as if she looked into and through his head, into a vast emptiness. "*God middag*, Mr. Gans," she said, wondering if her lack of sleep was making her fanciful. "I hope you will enjoy your stay at our hotel."

His reply was flavored with a slight accent. German, she thought.

Seeing that the captain had his eye on the trifle she'd brought in, she slipped free of his arm. Quickly she distributed the bowls and spoons. "I will bring coffee," she said, hurrying back to the kitchen.

The hair at the back of her neck wanted to stand on end.

"You are being *fånig*," she told herself on the way to the kitchen. "Fanciful. He is a perfectly respectable man."

"Gans is handsome, isn't he?" Carleen was primping at the small mirror over the settee, getting ready to go to the dance.

For an instant, Siri envied her. Valter and Martine had not held with dancing. She had always thought it sounded wonderful. To be held in strong arms, to glide around a wide, polished floor with her skirt billowing out in graceful waves of velvet and satin.

Carleen worked a tendril of curl loose to dangle in front of her ear. "I wouldn't mind if he was going to the dance, but he said not tonight,"

"He gives me chills," Siri said. "He looks at me so...so..." A shiver crept up her spine. "As if I was a little *insekt* and he was thinking of stepping on me."

"Oh, pooh! It's just those eyes of his. I've never seen eyes so light gray before." She teased another tendril loose. "They're really something, aren't they?"

"Yes," Siri had to admit, "they are really something."

Each time she returned to the dining room, she felt his gaze on her. When the men had at last finished their coffee and she had cleared the last of the dirty dishes away, she was all too happy to retreat to the kitchen.

That night her dreams were full of danger and terror.

Chapter Nine

Buff took the *Kwitshadie* upriver. The shallow draft steamer carried freight to the settlements along both shores of the Columbia, going as far as the Northern Pacific rail terminal at Kalama. She also carried an occasional passenger, usually other rivermen. As they rounded Tongue Point, he stood in the pilothouse with Captain MacLasky, watching the scenery slide by. Although it was midmorning, the light seemed more like dawn's. A wet dawn, for moisture hung in the air so thick he felt as if he could almost sip it.

"You've been on the river for some years, haven't you Captain?"

"Ayup." The ginger-whiskered riverman shifted his pipe to the other side of his mouth. "Come in '57, been here ever since."

"You live in Astoria, don't you? Have you always lived there?"

"Ayup."

"Nice town. Friendly. Busy." Buff peered out at the channel between two islands. Was that a heron? It was. "I imagine you know just about everybody."

"Ayup. Pretty much."

Pretending to watch the heron stalk its fishy prey, Buff said, "I ran across the daughter of an old time fisherman at the hotel. Maybe you knew her father? Arne Hansen?"

"Ayup. Big Swede. Good man. Too bad about his girl."

"Yes, it is too bad. She's young to be a widow."

"Any age is too young. It's too bad about her marryin' that Valter Trogen in the first place. Bad blood there. Mother's tetches." He took his pipe out and looked at it. "Damn thing. Always goes out about here. Don't know why."

"I rented from Martine Pedersdotter--she wouldn't take her man's name like a decent woman ought. Stayed about a month. Got tired of having to take my shoes off in the parlor."

Buff chuckled. "Don't blame you." He stood and watched the scenery a while, as the captain maneuvered the *Kwitshadie* through a maze of sandbars.

After a while, he said, "Was the mother--Martine?--was she the sort to take children away from their mother?"

Captain MacLasky's face tightened. "Martine is one of them who knows she's right and everybody else is wrong. That's all I have to say."

"I see." Buff had his answer. Martine Pedersdotter was certainly capable of stealing her grandchildren from their mother. He no longer doubted it.

They docked at a sawmill about eight miles upriver from Astoria. "Fernhill," the captain said.

Buff spoke with the men on the dock while the *Kwitshadie* offloaded consigned cargo. None of them knew either Arne Hansen or Martine Pedersdotter. One man did claim to have been in Astoria when the survivors of the *Dancing Goddess* were brought in.

"China girls, all of 'em. They brung in some bodies too, evil lookin' fellas." He spat. "Good thing they was dead, else we'd have strung 'em up. Filthy slavers." He couldn't remember how many girls there had been. "A bunch," he reckoned.

All that day the little steamer made its slow way upriver, stopping here and

there at small settlements or homesteads. Often there was no one to meet the boat, and the crate or barrel consigned to that place was left standing on a rickety dock or a gravelly shore. Once they pulled in to a shallow beach where a ragged, torn banner flew from a branch. "Cheese," Captain MacLasky said, when Buff wondered aloud what the waiting barrel contained. "These folks ship a barrel every month or so, consigned to the Occident Hotel." He watched his deckhand roll the barrel aboard and secure it.

"You was askin' about the Hansen girl's babes," he said. "I hear things, now and then."

Buff waited.

"Martine was lookin' for a place in Portland, along last summer." He paused, watching a tangled mass of debris narrowly miss the starboard paddlewheel. "I never heard if she found anything." He glanced sideways at Buff. "Now if I was wantin' to find her, I'd check out boarding houses that cater to Swedes. She favors them who can speak her lingo."

They reached Westport near dusk. Once the *Kwitshadie* was tied up for the night, Captain MacLasky directed Buff to the small boarding house that was the town's only accommodation for travelers. Fortunately there was a room available.

After supper, Buff stayed at the table, listening to the talk among the other residents, sawmill workers most of them. He learned of the enormous market for lumber in Europe and Asia, heard stories of logs so big that twenty men, with their arms outstretched, could barely encircle the trunks. As a stranger, he was expected to listen in wonder and awe as the men described the land and its challenges. He refrained from telling them of his own adventures, doubting they would be much impressed by anything that didn't involve lumber.

Gradually the men departed, seeking their beds. When the big fellow who'd introduced himself as Pete-the-sawyer rose, so did Buff. "A word with you," he said, quietly, so the others didn't hear.

Pete cocked an eyebrow, but nodded. "I'm goin' out for a smoke, boys," he said. "G'night."

"I'll join you," Buff told him.

They walked down the narrow, rutted street toward the landing. Just short of it, Pete led Buff into a tree-lined path that paralleled the shore. When they came to a small shack with a lamp glowing in its window, he stopped. "What d'ye want?"

"Longstreet said you'd be the most likely to know about a cargo of girls that was shipwrecked off Point Adams back in '59. He said you were in on the rescue, and you'd dealt with the Chinese afterward."

Pete grunted. "Longstreet, huh? How do I know he sent you to me?"

"Belinda," Buff replied. He had no idea whether it was the name of a woman or a ship, but he saw Pete's teeth flash in a quick grin.

"Right. Maybe you ain't the greenhorn you look to be." He opened the shack's door and motioned Buff inside. An old woman sat rocking in a chair before a fireplace built of rounded river rock.

For a moment homesickness was an ache in Buff's gut. The fireplaces in the cabin where he'd spent his growing-up years had looked just like that. He greeted the woman politely, but she ignored him.

"Deef as a post," Pete said. He knelt before her and caught her attention. "I'm home, Ma," he said, his lips exaggerating the shapes of the words.

She nodded and patted his cheek.

Pete motioned Buff to a seat at the table, seated himself on a section of log.

"Ask away. Ma won't bother us."

Once again Buff told the story of a girl child stolen from her family, of the clues he'd found that had convinced him she could've been aboard the *Dancing Goddess*.

Pete didn't interrupt. "Wish I could help you," he said, when Buffalo was done. "I'd a girl of my own, not much older than that when she drowned. It's hard, losin' your own flesh and blood."

"That it is."

"I was a hell-raiser back then. Pretty much boss of Astoria, leastways the part of it where an honest man wasn't welcome. If there was a way to put gold in my pocket, I took it, or I sent my boys to take it. So when the boats came in with those China girls, I laid claim to 'em right off. Knew I could get a good price for 'em."

"I thought they were turned over to the Chinese community?"

"Well, they were, such as it was. Only half a dozen Chinamen in town back then, and only one who mattered. His lay was smuggling opium, not keepin' a crib, but he bought the girls, after we'd haggled some." Again he scratched his stubbled chin, his fingernails grating like sharkskin against the weathered skin. "Funny, there never was a Chinese crib in Astoria 'til five, six years back. He must'a sent 'em off somewheres."

Buff bit back a cussword. "You're sure?"

"'Twas my business to know that sort of thing." He grinned. "I still keep up with the news, for all I've left that life behind me. I'd've known if anyone had China girls for sale."

Well, hell! Longstreet had been sure Pete could help him.

"You're absolutely certain all the girls were Chinese?" he asked again, not yet willing to give up his most promising lead. "None were white?"

"I never heard a word of any white girls in that cargo. And believe me, if I had, I wouldn't have sold 'em to that pig-tailed heathen."

No, you heartless bastard, you'd have put them to work in your own cribs, for all they were no older than the daughter you treasured.

"Well, then, I guess I don't have any more questions. Thanks for the information."

"Anytime. And when you get back to Astoria, tell Longstreet he owes me a beer."

Buff went to the door, but paused with his hand on the latch. "You say you keep your hand in. Have you heard of any children--a boy and a girl--for sale? They're young, three and five, I think."

Again the prolonged chin scratching. "No, not a word," Pete said at last. "You want me to let you know if I hear anything?"

"I'd be obliged," Buff said. With a finger to his hatbrim, he went out into the cold night.

* * *

Mr. Lachlan returned just before supper Tuesday. Siri was in the back yard, beating tracked-in mud from the entry rug, when she saw him come up the street. She waved, before she could stop herself. She wanted to ask him what he'd discovered, but reminded herself that his trip upriver had been for his own purposes, not hers.

He waved back, but did not pause.

Although his smile had seemed forced, a tendril of warmth crept into her belly. *Vad stilig*, she thought. How elegant. Unlike the men she was accustomed to, Mr. Lachlan was polished and refined, as if he would be equally at home in a palace or in a small hotel in Astoria.

I wonder if he kisses the hand. She had once read a story about a brave knight. In one scene he kissed a lady's hand. Siri thought it was the most romantic gesture imaginable.

Her own hands tingled, as if ghostly lips had touched them fleetingly.

She did not see Mr. Lachlan again until she served supper. He did not even look up as she set his plate before him. "I'm going over to Fort Stevens tomorrow," he said to Mr. Gans, who sat next to him.

Siri almost spilled the pickled beets. Tomorrow! He had promised to take her to Daws' Landing when he returned. She bit her lip. Why had she believed he was interested in her problems? She listened as she went around the table, refilling water glasses.

"I don't think so," Mr. Lachlan said, in response to an unheard comment of Mr. Gans'. "I doubt they have accommodations for tourists. I'll be staying with a friend of my father's." He appeared to think for a moment. "I'd be happy to carry a letter to the fort commander, though, if you want to inquire."

"No, no," Mr. Gans said quickly. "It is a matter of small importance. My book is about the past, not the present. Idle curiosity, no more. I have never been to an Am-- an Army fort and thought to seize this opportunity."

"Well, let me know if you change your mind," Mr. Lachlan told him. He turned to Otto Pflug, on his other side. "I was by your brewhouse today. Any chance of getting a tour?"

Siri stopped eavesdropping and carried the tray of used dishes back to the kitchen.

She and Carleen cleaned up the kitchen and Carleen went to her room. Siri sat by the fire a few minutes, with a last cup of tea. She was tired, so tired she ached. Besides her usual duties, she'd had to beat all the throw rugs from the main floor and the two landings. Mrs. Welkins had decided that unless the ground-in, dried mud was removed immediately, they would be ruined.

"I could not see that a day or two would make a difference," Siri muttered. More than likely one of the residents had said something. Usually when Mrs. Welkins assigned extra cleaning duties that was the cause. "I wonder who?"

At last, unable to keep her eyes open, she poured out the cooling tea from her cup and rinsed it. With her shawl wrapped closely around her arms and shoulders, she went out through the porch and to the outer stairs. Although no rain had fallen since early morning, a fine mist filled the air now. She shivered as she

mounted the stairs.

The shape that rose before her as she reached the top landing seemed, for an instant, to be a nightmare monster, a *mardröm* from her childhood. She shrank back, clutching at the railing to keep from falling.

"Tarnation! I didn't mean to scare you. Here, Siri, come on inside."

Mr. Lachlan's arm around her steadied her shaking legs, but did nothing to calm the unsettled sensation in her belly. She let him guide her into the narrow corridor that gave access to the third floor. The hallway was dimly lit by a single lamp at the stairwell, so she wasn't certain if she had seen someone peering from the side hall when they passed it.

Only a shadow.

Instead of releasing her as they approached the stairs, Mr. Lachlan said, in a near whisper, "Come to my room. We need to talk about tomorrow."

"Ah, *nej*. I cannot. I would lose my position if Mrs. Welkin--"

"Nonsense. I've seen Carleen sneaking out of bedrooms in the middle of the night."

"In the midd... What were you doing--" A hand over her mouth reminded Siri that they were trying to be quiet.

He pulled her along the hall, not taking his hand from her mouth. Siri knew she should resist, knew that going to his room would be a terrible mistake.

When he opened the door, she went inside.

* * *

He released her as soon as he had the door closed behind her. If he hadn't, he would have kissed her, there in the pitch dark room. Kissed her, then peeled her out of those ugly, shapeless garments she wore, to discover for himself if the soft curves he'd seen only hints of were as lush and as delicious as he'd imagined.

With shaking hands, Buff fumbled to light the lamp that stood beside his bed. Once he had the wick adjusted, he turned. Siri was backed up against the door, eyes enormous, bottom lip caught between her teeth. Scared out of her wits, he'd bet.

"Well, hell," he muttered. Louder he said, "Siri, I'm not going to attack you. I wanted you in here because I didn't reckon we needed anyone else minding our business." Waving a hand toward the room's far end, he said, "Sit down. I've got some news for you."

After a moment's hesitation, she edged along the wall until she reached the easy chair, never taking her gaze from him. She sat on the very edge of the seat, with her hands tightly clasped in her lap. "News?"

"Well, speculation, anyhow. Do you know about any connections your mother-in-law had in Portland?"

Wispes of silvery hair sparkled in the golden lamplight as she shook her head. "*Nej*. No one in particular. She had many friends, many acquaintances. The men who boarded at her house, they traveled. Perhaps they had homes, in Portland or somewhere. I do not know."

"You never heard any of 'em talk about where they came from?" He glanced at the bed, the only other comfortable place to sit, but decided to stand. No telling

what she'd think if he relaxed, as he wanted to. He leaned one shoulder against the wall.

"*Nej*. Valter's mother warned me not to speak to them unless I must. They would take advantage, she said, because my husband was not there to protect me and maids were believed to be available." Her lips quirked in a half-smile. "I think she did not want me to distract them. She believed they were *her* friends only."

He relayed the scant information he'd gotten from Captain MacLasky in a few terse sentences. "I talked to a couple of fellows at Chinook Landing yesterday. They saw the fishing boat she was on arrive. She carried nothing but a small bag and had no luggage. So we'll have to assume she shipped everything-- Wait a minute? Was the house empty when you got there? Was the furniture gone?"

"*Nej*. *Nej*, it was not. I looked in the window. Only the small things the *prydnadssaker*--" She looked at him, brows raised.

"The knick-knacks," he supplied.

"Yes, the knick-knacks. They were gone. Martine had many of them, little glass and *porslin* dishes and figures." Again that quirky smile. "They took much dusting."

"But the furniture was still there."

She nodded.

"Well, that's something, then. If she had the furniture shipped to her later, maybe we'll be able to find out who hauled it away. The house was hers, you said?"

"*Ja*. She was proud she owned it." She looked down at her hands, busily pleating the fabric of her skirt.

"What is it, Siri? Something's bothering you."

"*Mina barn*. If she went without baggage, with nothing but a small case, where are *mina barn*?" Tears hovered on the edge of her voice.

"I think she sent them on ahead," Buff told her, a conclusion he'd drawn after trying to put himself into the mind of a woman intent on escaping without a trace. "A woman traveling with children would leave a trail. A woman alone wouldn't. If she had friends among the peddlers and drummers, then one of them could have taken the kids. Or two, since a man with two children in tow would be more noticed than if he had only one."

"Some of the rivermen stopped with her," Siri said, frowning. "Those who carry freight along the river."

"That's what MacLasky said. He's going to ask about, and let us know if he hears anything." He could tell the scant information he'd brought her only pointed out how hopeless her situation was. In the vast, empty spaces of the Pacific Northwest, a man--or a woman--could get lost and stay that way forever.

He went to one knee before her, caught her nervous hands in his. "Siri, don't give up hope. We've only scratched the surface. There are lots of places to look, lots of people to talk to yet."

"But you have your own quest. You have not time for mine."

The tears he'd heard in her voice now fell, leaving silvery tracks across ivory cheeks. As she had before, she swiped them away with an impatient gesture. He had a hunch she saw giving way to tears as weakness.

He lifted her hands, kissed one finger at a time. Although they were work roughened, they were clearly the hands of a woman, delicate, long-fingered, and slim. They smelled faintly of cinnamon, spicy and delicious. Desire snaked through him, desire quickly suppressed. As long as she was so vulnerable, he would hold himself in check. But if... no, *when* he found her kids, perhaps she would see him for the man he was.

A man who wanted her more every day.

He rose. "It's late. You'd better get some sleep. We'll want to get an early start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? To Fort Stevens? *Nej!* Oh, *nej, nej!* I cannot--"

"We're going to Daws' Landing. I want to see if the furniture's still in that house. And see if we can find some answers."

"But you said..."

"That's called laying a false trail, darlin'. No need to tell everyone our business. Any one of those men in the dining room tonight could know more about this matter than he's letting on." Rising, Buff pulled her to her feet.

She was tall, her eyes coming level with his mouth. So she didn't have to raise her chin far to look him in the eye. Even shadowed, they were clearly blue, the pale, cool blue of glaciers and shallow mountain streams flowing over white granite beds. He cupped her face, kissed her lips briefly, fleetingly.

Fought the urge to take her mouth in a deep, searing kiss of possession and need.

"Get some rest, Siri. I'll see you in the morning."

She stood, unmoving, for a moment. Her lips were parted and her eyes wide open as she watched him stride to the door.

"Siri?"

"Oh! Oh, *ja*, I must go. *God natt.*"

She fumbled with the knob. He laid his hand over hers. "Siri, I'm being a gentleman now. But when this is over... Never mind. Go to bed." Once more he dropped a quick, light kiss on her mouth. "Go!"

She slipped through the door. Closing it after her, Buff leaned his head against the hard wood. Maybe he should go to town. Longstreet ran a clean house and had tendered him an open invitation.

No. He could wait. He didn't want just *any* woman.

Chapter Ten

Siri climbed the steep stairs to the attic where she and Carleen had their small, narrow rooms. When she paused to light the lamp in the short passage between their rooms, she realized her hands were shaking. She was shaking all over.

Fear? With the unlit match in one hand and the lamp chimney in the other, she examined the tumultuous emotions churning in her mind and her heart.

No, she was not afraid, no more than at any moment since her children had disappeared. This giddy feeling had nothing to do with her children. Instantly guilt bit at her. Until her children were found, were restored safely to her, she must not allow distractions.

There had never been a man in her life so distracting as Mr. Lachlan.

"Buffalo," she whispered. "Buffalo Lachlan. Such a peculiar name, I wonder..." She lit the lamp, "He is a strong man. So different from Valter."

Her husband had been a big man, powerful of body, but weak of will. His appetites had been as large as he was, and he had been a slave to them. Had he not been so ready to spend his hard-earned money on drink and cards, they would have been able to live in town, alone in a small apartment with their children.

No, Mr. Lachlan had a will as strong as the arms he had held her with.

Siri lit the stub of a candle that remained in her candlestick and replaced the lamp chimney. The weariness that had plagued her earlier had turned into an edgy unrest, as if something bad was about to happen.

"*Fantasi*," she murmured. "You are tired. That is all."

* * *

Jaeger saw the light go on in the attic window. He waited, imagining her reaction.

Women did not like to have their clothing handled. It frightened them.

He had seen this with others. Let there be evidence of other hands touching, stroking, crushing the delicate fabrics, the beribboned and lace-trimmed chemises and corset covers, pantaloons and petticoats, and it was as if their very bodies had been violated. On the occasions when he had left other traces of his intrusion, fright turned into sheer terror.

He smiled. Sometimes he had violated the bodies, long after the initial fright, when they had forgotten the first numbing fear. When they had come to believe they were safe again.

So it would be with this woman. He had found no evidence she was the one he sought, but that mattered little to him. She smelled of spices and soap and she tempted him, despite her drab clothing and too-thin body.

He would enjoy watching her as she came to understand that she was his.

Had Lachlan lured her to his bed? Her reputation in the hotel was unsullied, but she could merely be more discrete than the red-haired maid, who would give herself to any man who rewarded her with gifts or money. All women were sluts, after all.

If she was warming Lachlan's bed, the taking of her would be all the more satisfying. Perhaps he would seduce her away, and show Lachlan who was the better man.

Or perhaps not. He had not had an unwilling woman for a long time.

The light in the attic window flickered, grew brighter, faded, then wavered, as if she was dashing about the room with the candle in her hand.

He pictured her, seeing the clothing on the floor. Imagined her picking it up, her hand clenching around the pathetic little drawers, with their frayed lace. She would not feel the dampness at first. When she did, it would take her a moment to realize what it was.

Would she lift the drawers close to her face, to see better in the dim candlelight? Smell them, wondering what the slimy fluid was?

He smiled. Was she frantically wiping her hands? Splashing water from the chipped pitcher into the enamel basin, scrubbing with the harsh soap he'd seen on her commode?

When the light faded, he turned and walked down the hill. *A good night's work.*

As he walked, he thought about Crystal, who was surely waiting up for him, despite his telling her not to. She was becoming a problem.

The trouble with women--all women--was that once a man did more than use them, they began to believe they owned him.

No woman owned Jaeger.

Perhaps it was time to teach Crystal a lesson.

* * *

Buff was in bed when the quiet tapping came at his door. He grabbed the knife from beneath his pillow and rolled upright. Three silent steps took him to the door. He set his mouth close to the wood and spoke softly. "Who's there?"

"Siri! *Hjälp! Öppna dörren!*"

He jerked it open just long enough to pull her inside.

She clung to him and burrowed her face against his chest. "*Min kläder. En inkraktare i min sängkammare. Han rörde min kläder... min underkläder....*" Hot tears scalded his shoulder. "*Och han...ond... fruktansvärd...*" Her body trembled against his.

Buff wondered, for just an instant, if she realized she was wrapped around a naked man. Only for an instant.

"Siri--"

Sobs shook her whole body. He held her close as he edged her across the room and seated her, unresisting on the edge of the bed. The irrepressible part of his mind noted that he'd gotten her into his bed tonight, after all.

"Siri," he said again, keeping his voice soft and soothing. "Hush. I can't help if I don't know what's wrong. An intruder? Was he in your room?"

She shook her head, but the sobs continued unabated.

Buff kept one arm behind her, stroking up and down along her spine. Her dress was unbuttoned, he realized, when it pulled off one shoulder. He attempted to take the chimney from the lamp at his bedside with the other hand, but quit

when he realized he'd need both.

"Siri, let me lay you down here and cover you up. You're shivering." Ignoring the lure of warm woman-skin, he eased her onto her back, lifted her legs onto the bed. Her feet were bare.

So she'd been undressing when she discovered the intruder. *The bastard!* Was he still in her room? Probably not. If he had been, he'd surely taken advantage of her flight to make his escape.

Once she was tucked under his quilts, Buff lit the lamp.

She shrank away from the light, turned to her side. *Is she afraid of me? No. She came to me for help.* All he could see of her was the curve of her cheek and a tangled mass of shining hair spread across his pillow like liquid silver.

Heat pooled in his groin. Resolutely he ignored it.

Resuming his stroking, he ran his hand down the long line of her back again and again, feeling the contrast of fragility and strength even through the two quilts that covered her. Gradually he felt the tenseness leave her, felt her sobs die away into soft little hiccups. When she was breathing slowly and evenly, he said. "Are you awake?"

"Ja." Her voice was soft, defeated. She did not move.

"Tell me what happened. Was there someone in your room?"

"I do not know. I went up. The lamp at the top of the stairs was not lit, but it never is, if I am first to my room." A shudder claimed her. "I lit my candle and went to my room. I sat on the chair to take off my shoes and stockings. Then I went to the dresser to comb my hair. At night I braid...no, that is not important. I was combing when I saw that my... my clothing had been taken from the drawer. It was on the floor. Scattered." Another shudder.

Buff continued to stroke, to soothe. "You knew someone had been there. Why didn't you come for me then?" But he kept his tone mild, not accusing, not scolding.

"I was not thinking. I picked them up. My... my petticoats and other...other *underkläder*..."

"Corset covers and the like, I imagine," Buff said. "I've got sisters. I know about all that folderol."

"Ja. And... and drawers."

She moved and he realized she had buried her face in her hands. He waited.

After a while she said, "They were wet. I did not realize, at first." The shudder that shook her this time was not a sob, but a terrible expression of disgust. "He had...he used *min underkläder*..."

Understanding burst upon him. Buff gathered her into his arms, turning her so her face was nested in the angle of shoulder and neck. "Oh, God, Siri. I'm so sorry. But you're all right, and that's what's important. The bastard didn't get his hands on you."

"I feel as if he did," she whispered. "I feel so... *så smutsiga*...so dirty!" The last word turned into a wail.

"As if you've been violated. Of course you do." He held her and rocked her until the new sobs died away. At last she seemed to drop off into a doze. But when he went to lay her back onto the bed, she clung to him.

Buff did his best. He tried to think about the weeks he'd lay starving in a dungeon, about the time he and Anders had almost frozen trying to climb the Matterhorn, about the typhoon his ship had hit the edge of in the Indian Ocean. He held her loosely, well away from his body. He stayed on top of the covers, with her under them.

Her breath was warm against his neck. Her body was soft and pliant in his embrace. Her lips were parted, inviting his tongue to enter and sample. When she sighed and nestled closer, his arms tightened on their own, pulling her against him. When a lock of her hair slipped silkily across his wrist, he turned his hand and caught it, wrapping it around a finger. Stroked it with his thumb. Pulled it to his nose and inhaled the cinnamon-and-soap scent of it.

He shivered, aware the room had grown cold. He was still naked. The covers were under him, not over him. He reached behind his backside, hoping to pull up enough of the overhang to cover himself.

Only a few inches of quilt was available, not enough to cover one cheek. Slipping his right arm inside the covers and under her, he tried to scoot her over. All he succeeded in doing was pushing the covers away, so only thin layers of clothing lay between her breasts and his chest.

Well, hell! You're man enough to resist temptation, Buffalo Lachlan. Better you suffer from a permanent bone-on than freeze to death. At least you know you'll not catch your death of cold from it.

Stealthily, so he wouldn't disturb her again, he slipped under the covers. *Ah, that's better.* Knowing he was playing with fire, he pulled her closer, so her head was pillowed on his shoulder. She signed, wriggled a bit, and draped her arm across his belly. Carefully he pulled it up so it lay across his ribs. *I've only got so much resolve.*

After a while he found the urgent need was receding, replaced by a warmth of spirit, a sense of comfort he'd not had since he'd left home. When he was a pup, he and his sisters and brothers had slept in heaps in the winter. At least that's what Ma had called the way they'd all piled into one bed and tangled themselves together, sharing a mound of quilts. Sleeping with a woman, even one he was fond of, had never had the same quality of loving closeness that sleeping with his siblings had.

I want her, he acknowledged, aware of a residual tumescence, *yet I'm comfortable just holding her.* He felt himself drifting off.

No, I need to get up there and see what that filthy bastard did. Clean up his mess so she doesn't have to. They'd need to get an early start tomorrow, to make the most of the short daylight. That meant he needed to see what he could find while she was sleeping.

"Siri," he said softly, "wake up."

"Hnnnh?" She nuzzled his shoulder, bringing his body to full alert.

"I'm going away for a while. You stay here and sleep. I'll lock the door behind me."

"*Nej,*" she murmured, clinging to him. "Do not go."

Gradually he eased himself away from her. When at last he sat on the side of the bed, he kept his hand on her for a while, until she settled down into deep sleep

again. "I'll be back," he promised, knowing she didn't hear.

After dressing quickly, he dug out his fancy candle lantern and lit it. The small brass cylinder had a sliding shutter so he could have the barest sliver of light showing. A handy tool for a sneak. Shoeless, he stole up the stairs.

It had to be well past midnight, which meant Carleen was probably back and tucked into her bed. With no door between the two rooms, he was going to have to work silently. Quickly he sorted through the clothing on the floor, kicking aside those that were still wet and slimy. He'd replace them, whether Siri wanted him to or not. She shouldn't have to ever touch those shabby drawers and the chemise, almost transparent from too many washings, again.

Since he didn't know if she'd kept any valuables in her room, he couldn't tell if anything was missing. He refolded the clean petticoats, rolled stockings into pairs. The scent of cinnamon clung to every garment, faint, so elusive he didn't notice it at first. When he picked up her flannel nightgown, soft and fragile from years of wear, he crushed it in his fist. With a mother-in-law rich enough to have a grand house--Siri's words--surely there should have been enough money to clothe one slender woman decently.

He was sorting through the contents of her top dresser drawer when he heard a sound. Pausing, he listened, but it wasn't repeated. Widening the slit in the candle lantern, he bent closer, the better to see the few papers in a sandalwood box. A note from a teacher, christening certificates for two children, Rosel and Rolf. Marriage lines for Sigrid Hansen, spinster, age twenty, and Valter Trogen, bachelor, age twenty-four. He checked the date again on a christening certificate--yes, she'd been six months pregnant when they married.

Did he force her? Or just take advantage of her innocence?

No wonder the mother-in-law had treated her like dirt. She'd probably had great plans for Valter-the-cocksman.

Gently he closed the drawer. Lifting the lantern high, he took one last look around the room. Everything was in order. He'd just--

"Turn around, mister, and keep them hands high. I'm not much of a shot, but you'd be hard to miss at this range."

Slowly he pivoted on one heel. Barefoot, looking virginal and innocent in a long, white nightgown, Carleen stood between him and the stairs. The dueling pistol she held might be an antique, but he wasn't about to see if it would still fire.

Carefully Buff lifted the candle lantern high enough that its light shone on his face. "I'm not a robber, Carleen," he said, keeping his voice low, his words slow and careful. Nothing scared him more than a woman with a gun she didn't know how to shoot.

"Mr. Lachlan? What the devil are you doing here? Where's Siri?"

"Siri's down in my room. Someone broke in here, searched her things. She came to me. I was trying to see what all he took. But I don't have any idea what was here before..." Letting the words trail off, he shrugged, doing his best to look helpless.

"Sure and I'm the Queen of the May." She hesitated, as if unsure of what to do.

"Let's go to my room. You can ask Siri."

With her free hand, Carleen gestured. "Go. But if she ain't there, I'm calling Mr. Welkins." She stepped back so he could pass her.

Given the width of the hallway, Buff could have easily taken the gun from her. But the ensuing racket would have woke the whole house. He went peacefully. All the way down the narrow, steep stairs, a spot in the small of his back tingled, as if anticipating a bullet. He sure hoped she didn't slip and fall.

At his door, Buff halted. "The key's in my pocket," he said.

"Take it out, then. Slow and easy."

Transferring the candle lantern to his other hand, he did so. When he pushed the unlocked door open, he could smell cinnamon, faint but unmistakable. He stepped back so Carleen could enter.

Instead she prodded him with the pistol barrel. "After you, boyo." Once inside, she leaned against the door.

Buff hadn't pulled the curtains on the bed alcove, but it was dark, with only his small candle lantern for light. "There's a lamp on the dresser."

"Light it, then. But no funny moves."

He felt his way across the room, fumbled to light the lamp. When its warm glow filled the room, he said, "She's in the bed."

Carleen stepped closer to the bed, forgetting to keep the pistol pointed at him. Buff didn't remind her. He sat down and watched.

After Carleen shook Siri awake, they spoke in whispers, both of them frequently glancing over at him. Carleen seemed to be scolding Siri, who looked as if she was defending her actions.

Siri's voice rose. "*Nej!* I did not!" She shook her head violently. "I was afraid and he..."

He didn't hear more because Carleen motioned her to be quiet. He had a hunch he knew what she'd been scolded for.

Too bad, she hadn't deserved the reproach.

Siri dropped her voice to a whisper at Carleen's sharp gesture. "If you will not scold me, I will tell you what happened."

"Okay, but keep it down." Carleen glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Lachlan, who sprawled in the easy chair. "I don't trust him."

"I would trust him with my life," Siri told her. "He is a good man."

"Yeah? So why was he tossing your room? Looked to me like he was pawing through your undies when I caught him."

"I think...he must have been putting them away. Oh, Carleen, when I got to my room..." Hearing the tears in her voice, she took a deep breath. "Someone was in my room tonight. Someone *ond*...evil. He...my drawers...oh, I cannot say..." Unable to stop the tears, she covered her face with hands that still shook. She took several deep, broken breaths before her voice steadied.

"Mr. Lachlan and I were talking. He will help me find *mina barn*. We made plans..."

"Talking?" Carleen's tone said how unlikely she found that idea.

"*Ja*, we were talking. *Only* talking. Then I went upstairs. I was undressing before I saw..." She gulped back the tears that still sat at the back of her throat. "*Min underkläder...så smutsiga!*"

"Damn it, Siri, you know I don't understand when you talk Swedish!"

"Siri, let me explain to Carleen. You snuggle down there and try not to think about it," Mr. Lachlan said.

"Ah, how can I not?" But she did as she was told. "He will tell you," she said to Carleen. "I cannot."

Resolutely she tried not to hear what Mr. Lachlan said. His voice was a soothing murmur and she relaxed.

A long time later, she felt someone slip into the bed beside her. Before she could more than stiffen, she heard Carleen say, "It's me. He said I shouldn't sleep up there alone. Who knows where the sick bastard is? He might still be in the house."

Gratefully Siri let Carleen snuggle up against her back. Just having someone to hold her was a great comfort.

Chapter Eleven

Buff woke early, stiff from sleeping in the upholstered chair. His pocket watch, seen by the light of a match, told him the time was five-forty. The house would be stirring soon.

He lit a candle. Two heads lay on his pillow, just visible above the covers, one sandy-red, one silver-blond. *Any red-blooded man's fondest dream.* Leaning close he said, "Siri? Carleen?" not touching either woman. "Time to wake up."

Carleen snorted and pulled the covers over her face.

Siri went very still. Her eyes opened a slit. Then widened. "Oh, it was not a *mardröm* then?"

"Not a nightmare," he agreed. "But if you don't want anyone to know where you spent the night, you'd better be getting back to your own room. It's almost six."

"Ja! Carleen! Wake. We must go" She shook the other woman. "Wake! Now!"

Carleen woke slowly. Until she saw Buff. Then she sat up very quickly. "You let us sleep!" she accused.

Buff had to grin. "Yeah, and I wish you'd done the same." He used both hands to cover a wide yawn. "Next time you get the chair."

"Oh! *Jag är obetänksam!* I did not think...You should have..."

"Later," Buff told her. "You need to get upstairs now."

"He's right, Siri. Let's go!" Now that she was awake, Carleen wasted no time. She pulled the door open, peeked outside. "Come," she whispered. "I don't think there's anybody about."

Siri paused at the doorway and looked back. "*Tusen tack,*" she whispered.

Buff caught her hand, squeezed. "Nine o'clock. The Chinese store."

She nodded and was gone.

* * *

A good thing he had followed. Lachlan seemed in no hurry, as a man would be if he had an appointment with the commandant of an army post. Did he know he was being followed, or was he naturally suspicious?

But where was he going? Jaeger found a deep doorway across the street from the Chinese store where he could conceal himself. Perhaps the man was simply engaged in illicit dealings of some sort, for all his appearance of respectability.

Steam on the inside made the store window opaque. What was Lachlan doing, to be inside so long? Jaeger had almost decided to return to the hotel when his quarry emerged, with a woman.

The maid from the hotel? Yes, it was she. Now why...?

Lachlan led the woman, who was visibly resisting, across to the mercantile. They disappeared inside, and Jaeger forced himself to be patient.

Eventually they reappeared, now both clad in the oiled-canvas garments called, for some incomprehensible reason, *slickers*. He shrank back into the shadowy doorway, curling into a ball, as if he were a drunk sleeping off a night's

carouse.

Once they were well along the street, he rose and followed. They did not stop at the edge of town, but continued along the rough trail toward Upper Astoria.

He turned aside and made his way to the waterfront. There were only two or three possible places they could be going. Why should he plod through the mud when he could follow them in reasonable comfort?

* * *

Rain was falling when Buff walked outdoors the next morning. Siri had insisted they meet at the Chinese store because she didn't want anyone at the hotel to know they were spending the day together. "Others will think I am available," she'd said, when pressed for a reason.

Not while I'm around. But he'd bit off the words before he could speak them. After all, he'd be leaving one of these days, and she wouldn't. No need to give the other men ideas.

She was sitting at the small table in the corner, sipping tea. The jasmine scent of the tea filled the room, reminding him of his aunt, who'd first introduced him to the delicately flavored beverage.

As soon as he entered, she drank the rest of her tea and rose. "I am ready," she said.

"Good. I've got a boat waiting." He'd made the arrangements last night, before he'd gone to the hotel.

She went stock still. "A boat?" Her voice was a hoarse croak, her face stark white. As he watched, she licked her lips once, twice. "You did not say...*nej*, I do not... I cannot..." Eyes enormous, she looked across toward Mrs. Leong, her expression a desperate plea.

"You not take boat. Walk is easier," the Chinese woman said, nodding rapidly.

"*Ja. Ja*, walking is more easy. There is no need to pay a boat," Siri said. The hoarseness was still there. Both hands were clenched tightly against her breast, the knuckles white.

Something was going on here that Buff didn't understand. He started to say he didn't have time to walk nine or ten miles through dripping woods. Then he took another look at Siri's face. *She's scared stiff. Of water? She's afraid to ride in a boat?*

"Mrs. Leong, may I have a cup of tea?" He pulled out the chair across from Siri. "Sit," he told her. "Let's talk about this."

Stiffly she lowered herself into the chair. Her teeth worried her bottom lip.

When tea was steaming in a mug before him, Buff set his elbows on either side of the cup and leaned forward. "You won't ride in a boat? Or you can't? Which? And why?"

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes.

"Siri, talk to me." Reaching across the table, he caught one of her hands. It was trembling. "Why can't we take the boat? If we walk, we'll be all day on the trail."

"*Jag blir sjösjuk*," she said.

"Seasick? You get seasick?" He laughed in spite of himself. "A fisherman's daughter."

"Ja. I become very sick, so I do not go in boats, not ever." As she tugged her hand free of his grasp, she frowned across at him. "It is not funny. Not at all."

"You're afraid of getting seasick? Why? Generally it doesn't last long."

"I am not afraid."

But she hadn't looked him in the eye when she said it, and her voice sounded...uncertain? "Siri, there's nothing wrong with being a little bit scared of getting seasick. Hell...heck, nobody *likes* it."

"I am *not* afraid! Do not *plåga*...plague me!"

This time there was no uncertainty in her tone. Only anger. It convinced Buff there was something more than seasickness that kept her out of boats. *I'll find out what*, he decided.

He wasn't sure why it mattered, but he knew it did.

Yesterday Buff had asked about the trail to Daws' Landing. It wound through the woods, a muddy track about twenty feet higher than high tide, following the contour of the land. A crow's flight distance of three miles was probably half again that far by foot. And wet. *Great God, it would be wet!*

Outside the rain drummed on the wooden walk. Already a rushing, muddy rivulet was cutting a new channel down the middle of the street. Buff's slicker was waterproof, but not watertight. Rain could find its way inside the collar, moisture would wick up the inside, soaking his sleeves. Despite the slicker's long skirt, his britches were already damp, and would be soaked before he'd gone a mile.

She wore a threadbare wool coat, already darkened with moisture about the shoulders and chest.

He looked at her, huddled into her chair. She still worried her lower lip. Taking a deep breath, Buff forced himself to speak softly and gently. "Look, Siri, if you're sca-- if you really don't want to take a boat, we'll walk. But you can't wear that coat."

"I have done it before. It is not so wet under the trees. And it does not take long."

He considered. The thick evergreen canopy would give some protection, unless the wind came up. Then it would be worse than being in the open, because the moving treetops would quickly drop their moisture loads. "How long did it take you to walk up there?"

More chewing of the lip. "More than an hour. Perhaps two. I do not know for certain."

Well, hell! "Let's go then." He caught her hand and pulled her to her feet. If he was going to half drown, catch his death, and otherwise behave like a damn fool, he might as well get to it.

The mercantile across the street was just opening. Buff took Siri over and guided her inside the door, despite her whispered objections. "The lady needs a slicker," he told the clerk, "and an umbrella."

She hissed at him.

He ignored her. "You got any of those Norwegian sweaters left, the ones made with unwashed wool?" He'd seen a few on the shelf when he was in here

last week and had thought at the time how practical they were for a climate like Astoria's.

Shortly he was holding one of the sweaters up to her.

"I have no money," she whispered, pushing it away. "Why are you doing this?"

"Hold still." He stretched out a sleeve, measured it against her arm. "That ought to fit. Now, how about the slicker?"

The clerk pulled one from a pile. "Smallest I got," he said.

"That won't do. She's skinny but she's long. It won't matter if it's a mite big around."

"I do not need a slicker," Siri said, stamping her foot. "I need nothing." She made a grab for her coat, which was lying on the counter.

Buff stopped her by grabbing the back of her collar. "Put this on," he said, holding up the sweater. "It'll keep you a sight warmer than that poor, wet thing."

"*Nej!*" She tried to jerk free.

"Siri, if you want my help, you're going to cooperate with me. Wear the sweater or--"

"You are not my--" She glanced at the clerk, whose ears were flapping with curiosity. "*Du är inte min man. Jag behöver inte lyda dig!*" Her square chin was set and firm; her pale eyes seemed to shoot blue sparks.

"I may not be your husband, darlin'," he said, so softly that the clerk could not hear, "but I'm the only man who's willing to help. Now, are you going to put on that sweater, or do we call this whole thing off?"

She wilted. "*Ja*. Of course. I forget..." She took the sweater and pulled it over her head. It was way too big. The sleeves were the right length, but the rest fit her like a gunny sack, loose and sagging.

"Now the coat."

Without a word, she took it. Like the sweater, the slicker would have gone around her twice. But it covered her skirt to the ankle and would keep her a hell of a lot dryer than that inadequate wool coat. She fumbled with the buttons.

Buff brushed her hands aside and did them up. When she was buttoned in, he looked at her. "You got any wool scarves?"

The clerk said, "Plaid or plain? The plaids cost more."

"Plaid," Buff said, knowing Siri would be twice as infuriated that he'd chosen the more expensive item for her. "Give me a couple. Blue."

He wrapped the blue-and-green one around her waist like a sash. Handed her the other. "Put this on your head. Your bonnet's worthless."

She seemed like she was ready to spit out a cussword or two, but she took the scarf. When it was wound around her head, she tucked the ends inside the collar of the slicker. The rich royal blue that dominated the plaid made her pale ivory skin glow and deepened the color of her eyes.

She still looked impossibly slender and deceptively fragile, but at least now she should stay warm. "Let's go," Buff said. "We've wasted enough time."

"I did not ask you to clothe me," she said, once they were outside. "So much money you spent. More than I make in three months. I cannot repay you."

"You can chew me out while we walk. Which way to the trail?"

He settled his knapsack more comfortably on his back. "I don't reckon we'll be able to use the umbrella in the woods, but we'll want the canteen. Can you carry it?"

"Ja." She slipped the strap over her head and one arm. "The umbrella too."

"No, I've got it. Ready?"

"I was not the one who wasted time spending money."

He didn't dignify that remark with an answer.

There were two trails to Upper Astoria. The better one was along the shore at low tide. The other one wound through the woods up the hill a ways, and wasn't used enough to be muddy. Since high tide was just about then, they took the high road.

A mountain goat would probably have liked it. Buff didn't, especially when it was partially blocked by tongues of soupy mud or cut by gullies filled with rushing, muddy water. The second time he found himself in water over his boot tops, he said, "Don't you wish now we'd come by boat?"

The look she gave him was answer enough. She took his hand, let him swing her across a narrow cascade.

Siri hadn't realized how hard it was raining until they were in the woods, where the trees offered some shelter, but allowed the rain to collect and fall as enormous globules of water, rather than soft little droplets. Much as she hated to admit it, she was grateful to Mr. Lachlan for the slicker and scarves. She would have been drenched before they reached Upper Astoria, had she been alone. *Which would not have hurt me. How many times have I walked this trail in worse rain?*

Since last September she had come this way once a week, nearly two hours each way, no matter how bad the weather. After the first time she had been caught in a deluge, she had learned to carry a change of clothing in an oiled canvas bag, so she would be dry while she visited her babies. Today she would be wet on the walk back to Astoria, but not as wet as she would have been without the slicker. *Such a kind man.*

When the forest gave way to settlement, she looked around in surprise. Never had the distance seemed so short.

Mr. Lachlan stepped to the side of the trail and waited for her to come up beside him again. He opened the umbrella and held it over her. "Do you want to stop and rest?"

For a moment she stared at him. "Rest? *Varför?* We have only come a little way."

He grinned and kept walking. When they came to the junction of the only two roads, he hesitated. "Which way?"

"There." She pointed to a narrow opening in the woods, directly ahead. "The other road goes up, away from the water. I do not know where."

Just before they reached the trees, she paused and turned her back to him. The scarf bound the slicker close to her body, so she had to remove it to unbutton the oiled canvas coat. Working quickly, because the wind kept whipping her garments about, she reached between her legs and caught the back hem of her skirt and pulled it up to the front. She tucked it snugly into her waistband, then

rebuttoned the coat. Despite the umbrella he'd held carefully over her the whole time, her stockings were as wet as if she'd waded a stream. Not sure what to do about the stiff skirt of the slicker, she retied the scarf around her waist.

"Are we going to wade?" Mr. Lachlan, who'd watched her every move, asked.

"*Nej*. The trail is very steep from here, and we could slip and slide. It is safer like this, without the skirts to..." She sought the word. "...To *hindra*."

"To hinder," he supplied. He looked at the umbrella. "Hmmm." After a moment's consideration, he reached inside his slicker and pulled a leather thong from somewhere. Quickly he tied it to the umbrella, forming a loose sling which he slipped over his shoulder.

From there on, she had no breath to waste on talk, for the trail seemed steeper and slicker than it had ever been. Sometimes it was covered with piles of mud and rock, broken away from the hillside above. Twice she fell, and might have slid all the way to the river but for his quick assistance. Once he lost his balance, and they both came very close to falling into a patch of the leafless, viciously thorned stems known as Devil's-club.

At last they came out onto a wider place whence they could see the mist-shrouded silhouettes of Martine's house, and beyond it, the Daws' enormous barn. Siri paused to catch her breath, for the last way had been difficult of footing and, in one place, almost blocked with the upper branches of a fallen cedar tree. At least the rain had stopped sometime during the last hour, although in the woods they had not realized it for a long time.

Mr. Lachlan came to stand beside her. "You walked this every week, you say?"

"Only one week I did not come, because there was a very great wind. I was afraid trees would fall and I could not get back." Had she failed to return, she would have lost her job.

"Weren't you afraid they'd fall on you?"

"*Ja*, but that would not be enough to keep me from going to visit *mina barn*."

He stared at her, as if trying to understand her. At last he said, "Yeah, I guess Ma would have said the same thing."

"You have a mother?" As soon as she'd said the words, she wished to call them back. Hot blood came to her cheeks.

His chuckle reduced her embarrassment. "A mother, a father, four sisters, two brothers. How about you?"

"About me? What do you mean?"

"Do you have sisters and brothers? I've heard you mention your mother and your father, but that's all. Were you an only child?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. When she thought she could control it, she said, "Only me. There were other *barn*, but they did not live long." Quickly she opened the slicker--it was muddy, but it had kept her almost dry and certainly cleaner than she had been after other journeys along the trail--and released her skirt. Once she was properly dressed again, she said, "There! Now we can go."

He stood still. "There's not much chance of us coming up on the house without being seen, is there?"

"Why should we-- Oh! *Nej*, we must cross the fields, no matter how we

approach." Martine had bought enough land for the house and a small stable, almost in the middle of the area which was now a new apple orchard. The trees had been brought around the Horn and planted just last spring. They were scarcely three feet tall. In five years, Mr. Daws had told her, they would produce enough apples to feed all of Astoria and he would still have enough to ship.

As they approached Martine's house, Siri had the feeling they were being watched. It was not a good feeling. Whoever the watcher was, he did not wish them well. She had no sense they were in danger, though. "*Fantasi*," she said, under her breath. Aloud she said, "The house looks empty."

"It does, that." When they reached the front corner, Mr. Lachlan motioned her behind him. He peered around the corner, then stepped back. "I don't see anybody, but I've got a feeling... You stay here while I look inside."

"But--"

"Shhh. I'll be right back."

The rain began falling again while she waited. Siri huddled against the house, wondering if he would be angry if she opened the umbrella he'd handed her. She decided to risk it.

He was gone a long time, or so it seemed to her. When he returned, he came up behind her. She jumped when he spoke her name. "*Du skrämde mig!*" Her heart fluttered in her chest.

In all honesty, she was unsure whether the cause had been alarm or reaction to his male beauty. Even soaking wet, he was handsome as a god.

"The house is empty. Not a scrap of furniture, not a curtain or blind. Not even the trash and litter you'd expect after a move."

"Perhaps in other rooms..."

"I looked in all the rooms. Even in the cellar and attic. Nothing. Not a scrap of paper, not a forgotten toy. *Nothing.*" Again he leaned around the corner to look.

At what?

As if in answer, he said, "Do you feel like somebody's watching us?"

"*Ja*, I have thought so since we came across the field. Someone evil." She shuddered, as icy, ghostly fingers scampered up her spine.

"I don't like this. Put the umbrella down." He unbuttoned his coat and reached inside. When his hand emerged, he held a...

"A gun?"

Holding it out to her, he said, "Do you know how to use it?"

Siri shrank back, eyeing the long-barreled pistol with apprehension. "I do not know--"

"Well, hell. Okay, let's find a place you can wait--"

"*Nej!* I will stay with you."

"Then stick close to me. We're heading for the stables. You keep your eyes peeled over your shoulder, make sure nobody sneaks up behind."

"*Varför?*"

"Shhh," he hissed over his shoulder as he edged back along the house. Once at the back corner, he crouched lower and moved into the open.

Siri slipped the makeshift sling over her head and shoulder, so the umbrella hung across her back. She followed as closely to him as she could, mimicking his

stance.

As they approached the stables, the feeling of danger increased. Whoever watched them did so from there. Siri bit back words of warning as Mr. Lachlan laid a hand on the doorlatch.

"Take this." He slid his knapsack from his shoulders.

She caught it and almost dropped it, surprised at its weight.

"Now stand off to the side," he said softly, motioning toward the left.

She moved along the wall to its end. When she looked back at him, he motioned for her to crouch down. She did, wondering what he intended to do.

Suddenly Mr. Lachlan kicked the door open. In an instant he had disappeared. A moment later she heard a crash, then nothing.

She waited an eternity. Then another. There were no other sounds, save the whisper of rain and the steady drip...drip...drip of water from the edge of the roof. When she could wait no longer, she crept to the door, peered inside.

The interior might as well have been a cave, for the windows were all shuttered. As her eyes grew used to the darkness, she saw a shape lying on the floor a few feet inside. Even as she stared, it moved. Moaned.

And rolled over, showing itself to be Mr. Lachlan.

Chapter Twelve

Buff rolled over and looked up into the face of an angel. He knew he wasn't dead.

The angel patted his cheeks. Sharp knives of pain shot through his head. "Don't--" He closed his eyes, because the world wanted to spin around him.

"Oh, you must wake! Please Mr. Lachlan. Awake!" She patted his cheeks again, this time more gently.

He smelled cinnamon. Wet wool. Cedar dust, horse, and hay. He opened one eye a slit. The angel--Siri? Yes, that was her name. Siri was stroking his brow, was murmuring soft words in a strange tongue.

Opening the other eye, he tried to see his surroundings, but the light was dim, gray, and flat. The shadowless space around him gave way to a dark vault above. From the smell, he was in a stable, but a stable that had stood empty for a while. "Help me up," he said, struggling to lift himself on arms that shook.

She slipped an arm about his shoulders and lifted. As soon as he neared upright, his stomach rebelled. Again he closed his eyes, and willed it to behave. After a while it settled down and he said, "What happened? Where are we?"

"We are in the stable. You came in and someone was waiting. He hit you. You have a very large goose egg on your head," she told him. "Are you *svindlande*?"

Buff looked at her. He should know the word. It nibbled at the edges of his mind, but he couldn't get hold of it. "I'm dizzy," he said. "Feel sick." He tried to remember why he was in this stable, why Siri was here with him.

She'd come to him, frightened. He'd gone to check her room. Hadn't he? *Damn. He must have hit me a good one.* He had a concussion, no question. He remembered the symptoms, from the time he'd fallen out of a tree when he was just a lad.

The last thing he could remember was facing a suspicious, gun-toting redhead in a nightgown.

"Where are we?" he repeated. "And why?"

What she told him made sense. He remembered making arrangements to come up here, to see what he could learn.

"You were *nedvetslös* for so long," she said. "Not awake. Then for a while more, you were half awake, talking in many languages. I was afraid you were dying."

"I'll live," he assured her, though at this moment, he wasn't sure he wanted to. His head hurt like the very dickens, and the world had a tendency to somersault before his eyes. He licked his lips with a tongue dry as a rock in the desert. "Do you think you could find me some water. I'm still a little shaky."

"Ah, *ja*, I have the canteen. Can you sit?"

Buff realized then that she'd been supporting him. "I think so."

When she moved, he wavered a bit, then found his equilibrium. She held the canteen to his lips and he sipped slowly, keeping his eyes closed. He knew the disorientation would pass, but he wasn't sure they had time to let it.

"Tell me what happened."

"When you searched the house, I had a...a feeling someone was watching. You said you felt the same, when you came back to me. You wanted to search the stables before we went to talk to Mr. Daws. When you found the door locked, you became suspicious."

"I did? Why?"

"The doors of the house were not locked. You thought the watcher might be inside. So you broke the door. Only a moment after you went in, I heard a crash. I waited, but heard nothing more, so I came to find you." She gestured in the opposite direction of the open door. "There was a window, at the back. It had been pried open."

"*Shit!* You came barreling in here without a thought of the danger? Damn it, Siri, what were you thinking of?" He caught her close. "Don't ever do that again. If you think there's danger, stay away. Stay safe, until you know it's past."

"I should let you face all the danger and do nothing? How foolish that would be, when you are facing it on my behalf!"

Buff tried to think. Could Siri's mother-in-law have left someone to watch for anyone seeking information about the stolen children? It didn't seem likely. As far as the old besom knew, Siri hadn't a chance in hell of finding her children. Even if she did, the odds were against her getting them back, even if she brought in the law.

Kidnapping, while a contemptible crime, wasn't something the law in a frontier area was going to worry about. He remembered talking to the County attorney, who'd told him if he could bring in the kidnapper, with proof a crime had been committed, prosecution might be possible. The trouble was, Siri had not reported the children's disappearance, and they had been staying with the grandmother, with their mother's permission.

His stomach had settled down, but the world hadn't. It still tended to spin when he turned his head quickly. Yes, definitely a concussion. "How long was I out? Unconscious," he added at her puzzled expression.

"A long time. Perhaps an hour? I am not sure. It is difficult to tell the time with the day so dark."

They had a boat waiting. Time to be getting back to the river. He pushed himself to one knee, waited while the world steadied. "Help me up," he said, hating the need to ask her. "We've got to get going." Once on his feet, he swayed, and was grateful for her shoulder, quickly tucked under his.

Together they made it to the door. The rain fell like a gray wall. Even the big house ahead looked indistinct, distant. "How far is it to the river?"

"Not far. A ten minute walk, perhaps. But why?"

"I can make that." He stepped forward, still leaning on her, then paused. "My hat. Where's my hat?"

"I did not see it. Let me look." She left him propped against the doorjamb. He heard her footsteps, but didn't turn to watch her. The less he moved, the happier he'd be.

"I cannot find it," she said when she came back.

Well, hell! "Did I have it on when I came in?" Even a ten-minute walk in this downpour without a hat was not something he wanted to undertake.

"I think...*ja*, you did." She grimaced. "Perhaps I missed seeing it. I will look again."

"Never mind. I'll bet the bas... the man who hit me took it." Again he looked out into the rain. "Well, there's no help for it. Maybe the boatman will have a hat he can lend me."

"Boatman? There is no boatman. We walked here."

Buff stared at her, not sure he'd heard right. "We *walked*? In this rain? From Astoria?"

She looked away. "*Ja*," she said, after a long pause. "I do not go in boats. So we walked."

Not sure what to say, Buff stared out into the rain. The dim light under low, heavy clouds gave no sense of morning or afternoon, but he had a hunch it was getting late. Even if they'd started at first light, it would have been going on for noon by the time they got here, given the likely condition of the trail. Allow him an hour to search the house, an hour to lie unconscious, another half-hour to gather his wits. It couldn't be any earlier than midafternoon. Two hours and a bit until sundown, he reckoned.

Aside from the early darkness of a January day, he knew he'd be a damned fool to tackle a wet trail in his condition, unless it was a matter of life and death.

"Siri, you lived in the house. Is there anyplace we could take shelter where we'd not be likely to be seen?"

"Shelter? But we must go back--"

"Not tonight. Now, tell me, is there a pantry, or some other room at the back of the house, with no windows?"

She looked doubtful, but didn't argue. "There is a cook's room. It is small, with a door to the outside."

"Good. We'll go there." He hoped there was a fireplace. Unless the skies cleared, a small smoke would be invisible to anyone a dozen feet from the house, as long as they covered any windows. He'd contrive something, just to be warm and dry. "Now if we can just find dry firewood."

"The woodshed is behind the stables. I will go."

Before he could object, she was gone. While he waited, Buff tried to pin down his most recent memory. There was a long walk through dripping woods, a woman on the trail ahead of him, tall and slim, wearing a tan slicker incongruously belted with a sash of Black Watch plaid. A big house with wide brick steps and empty rooms. Not a trace of...

Damn, it was gone again. Siri came around the corner with an armload of wood. "It is dry. Come." She headed toward the house.

Scrunching his head down between his shoulders, Buff followed.

* * *

The cook's room was little more than a shed attached to the back of the house. A crude fireplace, built of river rock, stood in one corner. There was no window. Against the far wall was a pole bedframe, strung with rope. A section of log, two feet high and about that much across, sat next to it. The faint odor of mildew lingered, as if the damp had never been entirely banished.

Siri led Mr. Lachlan to the log seat. "I will go get the wood," she said. Halfway here she had let it drop to the ground when he staggered. He would have fallen had she not caught him with a shoulder under one arm.

"Thanks, Siri. I feel so damn..."

"You were hurt," she told him. "I was not. Stay. I will be back in a minute."

She brought three more armfuls of dry wood. *I hope they will last the night. It is much colder than this morning.* When she brought the last load in, Mr. Lachlan was kneeling before the fireplace, blowing on a tiny blaze.

"You should not be doing that," she told him as she pulled the sodden scarf from her head and shook the rain from it. "I will take care--"

"I'm fine. Well, almost, anyhow." He continued to blow on the flames until the smaller of the logs above them caught. Then he sat back on his heels and looked around the room. "Did I have a pack?"

"A pack? Ah, a *ryggsäck*. *Ja*. It is..." She bit her lip. How could she have forgotten. "I will fetch it."

Although the distance to the barn was only as far as across two streets, she was drenched before she found his knapsack. The dim light of day had changed to near-darkness, and only because she could feel her way along the stable wall was she able to locate it. Fortunately she also found the umbrella she'd left propped against the wall, so she had it for protection on the walk back.

The knapsack yielded amazing treasures. A pot with a bail handle, its bottom soot-blackened, a large spoon, and packets of coffee, dried meat, sugar and salt. Twists of rope, both thin and fat, and a small hatchet. Even a tiny sliver of soap. When Mr. Lachlan pulled out a pair of thick wool socks, she smiled. "You are ready for anything. How did you know our feet would be so wet?"

"Forgone conclusion," he told her. "I've been in rainy country before. And I hate wet feet." He strung the thin line across the corner opposite the fireplace. "Take your stockings off and hang 'em up."

He followed his own advice, replacing socks with slippers similar to footwear she had seen Indians wear. "You can have these," he told her, holding out the socks. "My moccasins are way too big for you."

"*Nej*. I cannot take your socks."

"Sure you can." He continued to hold them out.

Siri took them. Despite the shivers that shook her, she felt warmer with them on. She huddled into a small ball on the floor, as close to the fire as she could. Her clothing was so wet it did little good, because the side of her away from the fire remained icy cold.

"You're freezing," he said a few minutes later.

"*N-n-ej*. I am only a l-l-little bit c-c-c-cold." No amount of will would stop her teeth from chattering.

"Come here." He reached out and tugged her toward him.

Grateful for the offer of his warmth, she scooted across and sat between his knees. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even closer. The hoped-for warmth was not there, for his clothing was as wet as hers.

His arms gave her a sense of safety that was worth any amount of warmth.

"This isn't working. Take off your dress."

Siri jerked around and stared up at him. He had risen, and was unbuttoning his wool shirt. "We're both wet to the skin," he said. "We're not going to get any warmer as long as we've got all these layers to dry." He pulled the shirt off over his head and hung it on a nail in the wall. When his hands went to the buttons of his britches, she averted her suddenly hot face.

"Siri, you're not going to get warm until you get dry. You've got a shift on, don't you?"

She shook her head. Under her dress and petticoat she wore an old Union suit of Valter's, far too big for her, but made of fine wool and warmer than any shift. "Turn your back," she said.

Back to back they undressed. She knew when he took off his britches because she heard the scrape of the heavy fabric on the floor. Once she was shed of her dress, she realized her petticoat was even damper, the hem almost sodden. He was right, though. Her clothing would dry faster hanging up, and she would be much warmer without the layers of wet cotton clinging to her body.

Even the Union suit was wet, but it was thin and would dry quickly. She looked down at it, the crotch sagging almost to her knees, now that the petticoat no longer held it in place. The scarf that had served as a belt for her slicker was hanging next to her stockings. Grabbing it, she quickly tied it around her waist, pulling the excess fabric of the Union suit up to blouse over it.

When she turned back to the fire, she saw him. He had unbuttoned his own underwear, so that his chest was all but bare. Tall he stood, with wide shoulders and strong legs. Although his face was in shadow, his halo of golden curls shone in the flickering firelight. The light knit of his Union suit clung to every angle and curve of his body, showing the breadth of his chest, narrowness of his waist, the unmistakable evidence of his sex.

Breath caught in Siri's throat, for she had never seen a man so comely. The long, sighing breath that escaped her lips spoke of her enchantment. She could look at him all the rest of her life, and never tire.

"*Skön*," she whispered. "*Så skön!*" She reached out to him.

For a moment he stared at her, then he took one step forward. His hand cupped her chin, lifting it so she looked straight into his eyes. "No, Siri, it's you who are beautiful. Your eyes..." He touched her cheek, a fleeting pressure no heavier than a butterfly's caress. "They remind me of glacier ice, cool, yet flashing with blue fire. And your mouth..." His thumb drifted across her lips. "Your mouth is an invitation to sin. I've wanted to taste you since the first time I saw you." With both hands framing her face, he dipped his head and brushed his lips across hers.

Siri felt tears rise to choke her. So tender, so gentle. No man--no person--had every touched her with such sweetness. She caught her lip between her teeth, lest he see it quiver.

"Afraid?" His voice was low, vibrant. Again that brush of thumb across her lips.

This time she let her tongue dart out to taste it. "No," she whispered. "Not afraid..."

"Oh, God, Siri, you should be!" He pulled her to him, crushing her breasts against the hard muscles of his chest, surrounding her with the strength of his

arms.

He kissed her eyelids, her temples, her cheeks. His mouth left a burning trail from eyebrow to chin to earlobe, and down her neck. When he reached the hollow at the base of her throat, she felt the hot moisture of his tongue as he tasted her, laved her suddenly tender skin.

The tears overcame her, Silently she let them stream down her cheeks, knew herself to be trembling in his embrace. When his hands skimmed her ribs and lightly settled on the sides of her breasts, she sighed and leaned into him.

He swept her off her feet. With an arm under her knees he carried her to the log stool and sat, holding her across his knees. "Why are you crying?" he said, as he wiped away the moist track from her cheek. "Do I frighten you?"

"Ah, *nej*." She gulped, burying her face against his shoulder. The knit of his Union suit was warm and scented with woodsmoke and sweat, a totally masculine odor, yet not acrid and sour as Valter's had often been. "I...I...you are *så god*, so kind. So gentle. No one..." She gulped again. Her father had been a good man, but undemonstrative. Her mother had demanded perfect behavior, and punished with a heavy hand when Siri had fallen short of her high standards. Valter had never touched her with anything but hot desire or anger. His kisses had been rough and eager, never tender and loving.

She had accepted her lot, for in many ways she had been better off than her few childhood friends. Her father had never beaten her, her mother kept a clean house and cooked nourishing meals. Her husband had only occasionally raised his hand to her. She knew that Valter had sometimes argued with his mother, who believed he was too gentle. And Valter had loved Rolf and Rosel, for all he had sometimes been cross with them.

With a few kisses Buffalo Lachlan had shown her that her life had been bleak and barren.

She clung to him, knowing this moment could not last, yet determined to imprint it in her memory for all time.

After too short a time, he shifted his hold and let her legs slide to the floor. "I think the coffee's ready," he said.

Sure enough, the rich scent of strong coffee filled the room, overpowering the odors of wet wool and mildew. Siri forced herself to think of that, rather than the cold she felt, now that he was no longer holding her.

Out of the depths of his pack, Mr. Lachlan pulled a tin cup. He filled it from the steaming pail, then he handed it to her. "Careful. It's hot."

Siri reached for it, craving the warmth, then drew her hands back. "*Nej*. You must drink first." Never had she eaten before the men in the house were fed.

His lips thinned as he thrust the cup toward her, sloshing some of the hot coffee on his hand. "Take it," he said.

Siri knew that tone of command. She took the cup. Even the wide metal handle was hot. She held it carefully, not even trying to drink.

He watched her.

Her hand shook. The cup tipped.

"Oh, for God's sake!" he exploded. "Give me the damn cup!" He took it from her, sipped. "Okay, I had some. Now take it and drink."

Conditioned by a lifetime of strict obedience to the man of the house, Siri lifted the cup to her lips.

He watched her as she drank every drop. The coffee was almost too hot. She felt it all the way to her belly. Yet it warmed her, from the inside out. Energized her. When the cup was dry, she lowered it. As the heat of the coffee spread through her body, so did the heat of anger. He was not her husband, her father. Why did she let him command her?

Perhaps the anger showed when she handed the cup back to him. He smiled down at her. "You'd like to part my hair with it, wouldn't you?"

Puzzled over the idiom, she stared at him.

"Hit me. Knock me silly with the cup. Maybe fill it up and throw scalding coffee over me." His grin invited her to laugh as well.

She resisted as long as she could. "*Ja*," she admitted, when his smile proved irresistible. "*Ja*, for one moment I wanted to beat you with it. But it is our only cup, and I want more coffee."

Once again he tipped her face up, this time with a single finger under her chin. "Siri, I think you're a fake. I don't believe you're anywhere as meek and mild as you'd like everyone to think." He bent and dropped a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "That was the real you on Sunday, wasn't it?"

Before she could answer, he had bent to fill the cup again.

How could he know of the anger that often seethed inside her until she was sick with it? If she went to his bed, would he believe it gave him the right to beat her for her willfulness, her stubborn nature, as Valter sometimes had?

Chapter Thirteen

They gnawed on dried meat, moistened with sips of strong, hot coffee. Not enough to satisfy, but enough to stave off hunger pangs. Buff set half the jerky aside for morning. "I wonder if we'd find any berries," he said, half to himself.

"*Nej*, no more until spring. What the birds and animals do not take, the rain spoils," Siri told him. "There are *svampar*...mushrooms. But I do not know which are good to eat."

"Neither do I. And I'm not about to experiment." He tested his britches. Still damp. So was her cotton skirt. But the lightweight wool of her petticoat had dried. Buff pulled it from the clothesline.

"What are you doing?" Siri caught at her petticoat, tried to tug it from his hands.

"I'm making us a bed."

Her eyes grew large. "*Us*?" she squeaked.

"Siri, unless you want to sit up all night and feed the fire, we're going to have to sleep close to keep warm. It's getting colder. I wouldn't be surprised if the rain turned to snow before morning."

Her cheeks took on a rosy bloom. "Of course. I did not think..."

She looked at the strained, rough boards under her feet. "I will help. Tell me what to do."

"I'm going to lay my slicker over the ropes. We'll use this and your slicker for covers."

He grinned when she picked up the other slicker and shook it out. What a mixture of prude and siren she was. He knew she'd been as aroused as he had earlier, yet now she was acting like climbing into a bed with him was unthinkable. The way she was chewing her lip, she'd have it bleeding pretty soon.

From what she'd told him she was about as inexperienced as a woman who'd been married could be. Once he'd tugged and smoothed the heavy oiled canvas slicker as best he could, he dropped the rest of their makeshift bedding on top of it. "Siri, would it help if I promised I won't lay a hand on you tonight?"

She shook her head, not looking at him.

"Hell, what *do* you want then? I'll be damned if I'll sleep alone. We don't have enough bedding."

She looked at him at last. "I don't want you to," she said, so softly he barely heard the words. Her tongue darted out, licked the lip she'd been chewing. "I don't want you to promise."

The last words were the barest whisper. Maybe he hadn't heard them at all.

Buff stared.

Siri stared back.

He opened his mouth. No words emerged. He cleared his throat. "Say that again."

"I do not want you to promise not to touch me."

Buff liked women and enjoyed them in bed and out. He'd been solicited, propositioned, seduced, and invited, blatantly and shyly, overtly and covertly.

Siri's simple words thrilled him as none ever had.

"Are you sure?" he said, finding the words difficult to frame with a mouth gone dry.

Her nod, hesitant and meek, humbled him.

Once again he gathered her into his arms. Without her outer clothing, she felt fragile, as if he had only to tighten his arms and she would shatter. The trembling of her slim body was not from cold, he was sure.

"You're afraid," he said into her hair. She had loosened the knot to let it dry, and now it flowed over her shoulders like a cascade of moonlight.

He felt her nod.

"Don't be. I won't..." He paused, wondering if she was offering herself like a sacrificial lamb, in payment for his help.

The thought acted like a bucket of ice water in the face.

"Ah, Siri. You don't have to sleep with me because I helped you." Because she felt so warm, so soft in his arms, he kept her there. But he loosened his embrace and held her as he would his sister.

She murmured something into his shoulder.

He bent, to bring his ear closer to her mouth. "What was that?"

"I did think to do that," she said clearly, "but I could not. I am no *hora*. I am afraid because I fear you will not find me *sinnligt skön*...pleasing. I have not much practice. Valter was...he..." She shook her head, pulled back.

Looking him straight in the eye, she said, "My husband did not approve of boldness in a woman. So I do not know any of the 'tricks' Carleen told me men like." Her fingers smoothed the neckband of his Union suit. "I sometimes think about asking her to tell me what they are, but..." Once more she bit her lip. "I will do whatever you want."

Well, hell! What am I going to do? Buff had a vision of pulling butterflies' wings off, of taking a carving knife to mice tails. How was he going to tell her that innocence was far more exciting than practiced skill? And that he didn't want a sacrificial lamb?

He pulled her closer, tipped her chin up. "Siri, let's just not worry about who does what. We've had a long day. Right now all I want to do is crawl into that bed and rest my weary head. It's still aching..."

It was, but nowhere near as painfully as he made out. His stratagem worked, though.

"Oh, I forget." Pulling free of his embrace, she gave him a shove in the direction of the bed. "You must rest! Your poor head--"

When he sat on the edge of the bed, she knelt and caught him by the ankles, lifted his feet. "There. Lie back. I will cover you."

He slid to the middle, as the ropes stretched under his weight. The cot was too short for him by a good six inches. Drawing his knees up, he did his best to fit.

She carefully spread her petticoat across his body, tucking it around his chest. "Are your feet warm? Do you want your socks?"

Buff decided to relax and see what happened. He angled his hands under his head, wondered if his butt was about to hit the floor. "I'm fine. You keep the socks." The slicker she flipped over him cut off any further speech.

When he'd dug his way out from under its stiff folds, she was back at the

fireplace, efficiently banking the fire for the night. "Do you want more coffee before you sleep? Water? I can--"

"Siri, I'm fine. Just set the pail away from the fire and come to bed."

"*Nej*, first I must turn these." She rearranged his britches on the clothesline, putting them closer to the fire, where her skirt had hung. "These are still damp. My skirt is almost dry." She fussed with the clothes a moment, smoothing them, straightening the pantlegs, undoing a fold in her hem. "I will just--"

"Siri. Come to bed."

She jumped. "Ah, *ja*. I will come in a--"

"Now."

She approached the bed as if it was a rattler about to strike.

Buff stifled another grin. "Take off your sash," he told her when she lifted the slicker to get in.

She did, after fumbling with the knot. Released, the baggy Union suit drooped, puddling around her slim ankles. It also clung to her high breasts, showing their shape, defining the erect nipples.

Buff swallowed and tried to look away.

She hung the scarf across the foot rail and scooted under the covers.

The bed squeaked. The ropes stretched even more. The two of them were caught together in the middle, held prisoner by the pole siderails, trapped by the sag. Their bent knees tangled, their heads bumped.

Under other circumstances, Buff would have been delighted to find a warm, wriggling woman in his arms. Right now he could hardly move, let alone take advantage of the situation.

Well, hell! "This isn't going to work," Buff said. "Can you get out?"

"I think so." She tried to sit up, and ended up halfway on top of him. She tried to roll away and only plastered herself more firmly against him. When she put her hands on his chest to brace herself and shove, her knee slipped between his thighs.

He inhaled sharply. "Stop! Don't move!"

She hesitated long enough for him to get hold of her. Carefully he lifted her away, held her while she got the other leg over the edge of the bed. After a couple of false starts, she climbed out and reached back to help him.

Buff grabbed the hand she held out. "Damn, Siri. You almost unmanned me!"

At first she didn't understand, then, when his words made sense, she gasped and covered her mouth with both hands.

"I am sorry!" she whispered from behind them. "I did not mean..."

"Of course you didn't," he told her as he rolled out of the mantrap. "I was teasing." *Halfway, anyhow.* "I guess we sleep on the floor after all."

"I will make us a bed. It will not be so bad." She picked up her slicker and pulled it over her head, like a cloak. "I will be right back."

Before he could argue, she was out the door. Almost as quickly she was back, carrying a fir branch. She held it outside, shook the rain off of it, then used it to sweep a place in front of the fire.

Feeling like an idiot, Buff watched her. He was the one who'd grown up in the woods. Why hadn't he thought of doing that?

When the floor was reasonably clean, he pulled the makeshift bedding from the pole bunk and spread it on the floor. He still made them one bed, because he'd be damned if he'd sleep alone tonight.

It really is too cold, he told himself.

Her cheeks burning, Siri stared into the fire. Behind her, she heard him arranging the two slickers and her petticoat. Going out into the cold, wet darkness had brought her to her senses. He did not want her, this tall, handsome man who could have any woman. Beautiful women, who were graceful and sophisticated. Small, graceful women, with soft hands.

I should not trouble him again. As soon as we return to Astoria, I should tell him I do not want his help.

And live the rest of her life, wondering what might have been.

"You coming to bed?"

She turned. With the fire behind him, all she saw was his silhouette, rimmed in golden light. His hair was like a halo--*en ängel*? Or *djävul*? Surely a *djävul*, for he tempted her almost beyond redemption.

Despite common sense, against her better judgment, she went to him.

He was gentle. No sooner had she lay down than he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him. Not face to face, as she had expected, but with her back against his front. He slipped his other arm under her head, giving her a pillow. "Sleep well," he said, the words little more than a breath in her hair.

Siri told her body to relax. She forced her breathing to be slow and even, refused to gasp for the great gulps of air her lungs demanded.

As warmth crept from his body to hers, she felt her bones melting, her flesh becoming soft and supple. Confusion knotted her belly. This strange, unsettling feeling would not leave her. At the same time, old warnings echoed in her thoughts. If he took what she offered so freely, would he ever respect her again?

Valter had taken her maidenhood, but he had scorned her for giving it up so easily. The old anger, so long stifled, rose in her belly until she burned with it. She could still hear his harsh voice, as he forced her skirts higher, as his big fingers bruised her thighs. "You want it. I know you do. Well, this time you'll get it, little *flörtis*."

Think about something else!

Her children. Where were they tonight? Were they warm? Safe?

Did they miss their *mor*? Or had they forgotten her?

Rosel would remember, she knew. Her daughter had not liked staying with Martine, had always cried when Siri left her to return to Astoria. But little Rolf was so young. The last time she had visited them, he'd shrunk away from her, had clung to Martine.

Would she ever find them? Sometimes, when the night was dark and her body ached from turning mattresses and beating rugs all day, she had trouble finding even a small kernel of hope alive in her heart. She feared she would grow old searching for them, always alone.

Ahh, I must stop this feeling sorry for myself. Surreptitiously she wiped the tears from her cheeks. Tomorrow, when they returned to Astoria, she would again go to the docks, would question every riverman one more time.

Tomorrow! Oh, *gode Gud*! She would be expected at the hotel tomorrow. When she did not appear to serve breakfast, the Welkins would be angry. Carleen knew where she was and why, but would she conceal Siri's absence?

Could she?

"What's wrong?"

"The hotel," Siri told him. "I must get back as early as I can. As soon as it is light. If the Welkins... My job..."

"Your job be hanged." Gently he pulled her over onto her back, rose on one arm to look down at her. "Siri, it's not your fault you're stuck here. Surely they'll understand."

The firelight flickered on his face, glinting off the day's growth of whiskers.

"They are very strict. But I will tell them why--"

"No you won't. You do that, Mrs. Welkins will assume the worst. I'll tell them--"

"

"The worst? What do you mean?"

"She'll figure we made a night of it." A small smile came and went, softening his face, making him appear almost boyish.

"A night?" Realization struck. "Ah, *ja*. She will. Mrs. Welkins believes that all who work for her are *omoralisk*. Sometimes I thought she did not believe I visited *mina barn*. That I met a man, instead."

"Immoral? You? Great God, Siri, any one who's been around you for any time at all knows you're about as strait-laced as they come." He chuckled. "For a woman who's been married, you're about as innocent as can be."

Stung, she said, "I am not innocent." No wonder he did not want her. No man wanted a clumsy, inept woman in his bed. "I may not be as skilled as the fancy women you have had before, but I can--" She sought the right words, the words Carleen would use. "I can show you a real good time," she quoted.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. His face had gone hard, still.

After a moment, he shook his head. "Look, we're both tired. Let's get some sleep." Once more he lay behind her and pulled her against him. His body was not relaxed now, as it had been before.

Nor could Siri let go of the tension that knotted her belly and her muscles. She had made him angry, and she wasn't even sure why.

* * *

Gott in Himmel! It is getting colder. Jaeger pushed past the tangled leafless stems, swearing as his coat caught on something. Was everything in this loathsome forest thorned or otherwise hostile?

Yet another cold droplet found its way inside his collar, making him wince. All the way from Daws' Landing, he had fought his way among ice-weighted branches that often drooped to the frozen soil. Here and there the hillside had given way, and long fingers of mud and debris lay across the trail.

Wondering if there was any place on the earth where more rain fell, Jaeger wiped the water from his face. Even the broad brimmed hat didn't entirely protect him, for the thrashing fir branches threw droplets in all directions.

A storm was coming. He'd felt the air grow colder over the past several hours. Now there was a hint of ice in the rain, as if it was turning to sleet.

It was unfortunate he had been unable to persuade the boatman to wait until after dark for the return journey. Now he would not get back to his room until after midnight. Following this narrow trail in the dark meant that every step he took had to be carefully placed and tested. One misstep and he could find himself careening down the steep, wet slope into the river.

Crystal would be waiting for him when he returned. Worrying. It was time to do something about her. Although she was amazingly inventive and satisfyingly eager for his body, she was a potential danger to his plans. He must deal with her.

But not until he had used her to ease his hunger, the hunger that always came when his plans came to fruition.

He smiled. While he slept warm and satiated in a soft bed, would Lachlan and the woman huddle, wet and hungry, in the drafty stables? Or would they find other shelter?

Wherever they spent the night, Jaeger hoped it would be cold and damp.

* * *

Buff woke sometime later, listening. Something had changed.

He held his breath. The wind had died down. But there was another sound to replace its voice in the trees.

A quiet susurrus, almost a whisper. Easing himself away from Siri, he got to his knees, then stood. An ear to the door told him nothing. He cracked it open.

A puff of freezing air blew in, carrying minute ice particles that stung his exposed face, his bare hand. *Damn! I was afraid of this.* He slammed the door, immediately regretted it.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

Her voice was husky with sleep, invitingly seductive.

"Sleet," he said. "We may be stuck here a while."

"Ah, *nej!* I must go back--"

"Siri, there's no way we'll be able to walk that trail with ice on it. We'd be crazy to even try." He knelt beside her, gently pushed her down. "We might as well get a good night's sleep instead of worrying about it."

"But--"

"Go to sleep, Siri. There's nothing we can do about it tonight. And we may need to be rested tomorrow."

Gradually she relaxed.

He didn't.

The small room was little warmer than the outdoors, and they had only a few small pieces of wood left. With a sigh, he went to the clothesline and pulled down his britches. *Almost dry.* Quickly, before he could change his mind, he pulled them on. After lacing his warm but still damp boots onto bare feet, he pulled on his wool shirt and grabbed one of Siri's scarves to tie over his head. *No sense freezing to death.*

As an afterthought, he grabbed the Norwegian sweater he'd bought for her. It was supposed to be waterproof. He'd find out.

He eased the door open, wondering if the watcher was still about. The hair on his nape lay flat, though, and after listening a few moments, he slipped through.

The distance between the house and the stables had seemed longer this afternoon. It was plenty far enough, he thought, feeling a trickle of icy water make its way down the back of his neck. Rather than going through the stables, he followed the wall around. *Why the dickens did they put the woodbin so far from the house? It makes no sense at all.* The woodbin at their cabin in Cherry Vale had been no more than ten steps from the door, far enough that any termites it attracted wouldn't move to the cabin, close enough a body didn't freeze while fetching more firewood.

He took as big a load as he could carry, good sized, well cured logs that would burn slowly and give off plenty of heat. Halfway back to the shed, he realized that the effects of the concussion had all but faded. He no longer felt weak-kneed and wobbly. *Must not have been as serious as I feared.*

He still didn't remember anything beyond standing outside the stable door. Had he seen his assailant?

Siri opened the door for him. "I heard you go," she said as he entered. "Why did you not wake me?"

"No need for both of us to be awake." He dropped the wood near the fireplace. "Here. Let me get out of these wet things."

She helped him pull the ice-crusting sweater over his head. While he was removing his boots, she took it to the farthest corner and shook the worst of the sleet from it. Once she had it on the clothesline, she turned to him. "You are so *dum!* So foolish! What if you had fallen unconscious? You could have frozen to death. Tripped and broken your leg. Gotten lost in the dark.. You could have--"

He did the only thing he could do.

He silenced her with a kiss.

Chapter Fourteen

Siri had never been kissed like this. Mr. Lachlan's mouth was soft on hers, yet demanding, hungry. She sighed into his mouth and gave herself up to paradise.

With every touch he warmed her, as his hands lingered on her breasts, smoothed the skin of her back, stroked lightly over her bare buttocks.

I am naked, she realized. Somehow it seemed right that she should be. Unembarrassed she leaned into his embrace, raised her face for more of his mind-drugging kisses.

"Touch me, Siri," he said into her mouth. "Touch me."

Her hands, which had been clutching the front of his Union suit, relaxed, as if his words had stolen her bones. Clumsily she flattened her palms against him, feeling the strength of his chest, its motion as he breathed deeply. Under the fabric she discovered a swollen nub, one that fascinated her. She toyed with it. Valter's chest had been so hairy that she had never seen his male nipples.

He groaned and pressed himself against her.

The hard ridge of his *lem* pressed into her belly. As she had with Valter, she fought the impulse to recoil, and stood passive.

Now he would lay her on her back and push himself in her. Siri could almost weep. For a little while she had felt cherished, protected.

She had almost felt loved.

He eased away from her, tipped her chin up. "Siri, what's wrong?"

Shaking her head, she said, "*Ingenting*. Nothing...I am ready."

Once again he picked her up, held her on his lap as he sat on the log stool. Her Union suit fell from her feet. Under her hip she could feel his *lem*, still hard.

"The hell there isn't. You were like warm wax in my hands, and all of a sudden you turned into an icicle."

"You...you surprised me. That is all." She shivered, then leaned against his chest as much to share his warmth as to show her acquiescence. "I am ready for you. Please...let us--" She hesitated, knowing no other word but the vulgar *jucka* Valter had called the marriage act. Something told her he would be insulted if she spoke that word.

She wished she could see his whole face, but the fire was on his other side. All she could see was a gold-rimmed profile. His jaw was firm, his eyes closed. When he swallowed, she saw the working of his throat.

Afraid to relax, Siri held herself stiffly, hands tightly clasped together. *Gåshud* rose on her arms, and she was afraid he would see it as a sign of fear. She let herself shiver again, so he would know she was only cold.

His arm tightened around her. After a while his hand began to stroke along her leg, from above the knee to mid-calf. He was staring into the fire, his face turned mostly away from her. Gradually the soothing strokes relaxed her, warmed her from the inside out. His *lem* must have gone soft, for she could no longer feel it pressing against her hip. She wondered if he had changed his mind.

She was nodding, about to drop into sleep when he spoke. "Why do you think men and women make love?" His voice was low, perhaps a little pensive.

"Women do it to make babies," she told him, certain of her opinion, "and to please their men."

"Hmmm. And men?"

"I think they cannot help themselves." She thought about Valter, whose *lem* had seemed to grow hard and big hourly. "I am happy I am not such a slave to my hungers. It must be *oläglig*...so inconvenient."

Did he laugh? She was not certain.

His hand continued to stroke along her leg. After another long silence, he said, "So you've never felt pleasure with a man?"

She had to be honest with him. "No, but sometimes I wondered...if Valter was gentle, there was a...a warmth, almost a tingle." Something like she had felt tonight, while he had been kissing her, she realized. Only smaller. Like a seed, instead of a flower. "But it always went away."

His hand stopped moving on her leg. "You've talked to Carleen. Why do you think she sleeps with the men at the hotel."

Such a silly question. "For the money, of course. She will not go to a man's bed unless he gives her a present."

"Is that what she told you?"

Siri thought back. "Well, no," she admitted. "But she did say I could make more money by warming the residents' beds than I do as a maid."

His hand moved again, and her skin heated under its touch. "What a shame," he said. "A damned shame."

"A shame? That Carleen sells herself? Or that I do not?"

His hand paused at her knee, then stroked higher. "That you've never learned to enjoy what happens between a man and a woman."

He turned his head toward her, and again she wished the fire was not behind him. All she could see of him was the halo of gold that was his hair and the pale gleam of his eyes. Then his teeth flashed. "Would you like to learn?"

Djävul! she decided. No doubt about it. Buffalo Lachlan was a *djävul*, bent on tempting her into sin. She licked her lips. "*Ja*," she said, her voice little more than a whisper. "*Ja*. I would like you to teach me."

She expected him to lay her on the bed and bury himself in her body.

All he did was kiss her hair. "You're sure?"

No, she was not sure. She was frightened. Confused. Afraid he would steal her heart, before he resumed his search for the missing girl. She would have given herself to him out of self-interest, to obtain his help. No price was too great to pay, if it brought her children back to her.

Or so she had thought, until this moment.

"Teach me," she said again, feeling as if she was about to step off a high cliff.

Buff knew she was scared to death. He did his best to contain his hunger for her, to be patient and gentle.

That husband of hers must have been a clumsy bastard. Buff hadn't a doubt Siri was as passionate, as responsive as any woman he'd bedded. That she had never been awakened was a crime to be laid directly at Valter's feet.

He closed his eyes. For to look at her body, gleaming pale in the flickering

firelight, was to go to the edge of a precipice whence there was no return. Once, a long time ago, when he was young and untried, he had desired a woman the way he wanted Siri. For a moment he let himself enjoy the anticipation of *the first time* again. He might be an experienced lover, but he knew he was about to take a step he'd never taken before.

Tarnation! What's happening to me?

He put all disturbing questions out of his mind. Siri wanted him to teach her the delights of the flesh. Tonight he would make a good beginning at it.

He caught her hand and brought it to the placket of his Union suit. "This works better if we're both undressed," he told her.

She closed her eyes. Her fingers fumbled at the first button, then became sure as she slowly worked each one free.

When she could go no lower without getting off his lap, he rose and let her legs slide to the floor. "Keep goin'," he said.

Was that hoarse sound his voice?

She hesitated as she touched the button just south of his navel. "That's good enough," he told her. "Now take it off my shoulders."

Her eyes flashed open, then closed again. But her hands went to his shoulders and pushed.

The knit fabric caught on the width of him, and she had to work it over one shoulder at a time. Buff felt his body thrum, but he kept his hands light at her waist. Beneath his palms, he felt a constant, fine quiver, as if a harp string vibrated somewhere inside her.

She freed one arm, then the other. As soon as she'd pulled the sleeve over his hand, the rest of the Union suit dropped, to lay about his ankles. *If there's anything more undignified...* Buff hadn't gone to a woman's bed clad in a Union suit for a long time. He kicked his feet loose and stepped back an arm's length. For the first time he really looked at her.

He'd thought her skinny. Now he saw she was naturally slim, with small bones and little spare flesh. But what flesh she had was well enough padded, with high, plump breasts, a sweetly rounded belly--no jutting hipbones here--and womanly hips flaring from a tiny waist. He slid his hands around to cup her buttocks, and found them firm and full.

"You're beautiful," he said. "All silver and ivory. Like a fine sculpture."

"Ah, nej. I am not--"

Again he silenced her with a kiss.

She tasted of coffee. She smelled of cinnamon. When he slid his fingers through her loosened hair, it flowed over them like warm, molten metal, a magical metal, half alive. "Ah, Siri, I feel like I've been looking for you all my life," he whispered.

Carefully he lowered her to the makeshift bed, she clung to him. "Let me see to the fire," he said.

The sleet must have stopped, he decided as he turned the half-burnt logs so they'd radiate more heat to the room. Not a whisper of sound came from outside.

Siri was flat on her back, hands folded across her waist, when he returned to her. Her eyes were enormous and her teeth worried her lower lip.

"Don't be nervous. I won't hurt you." As he eased himself down, he lay his hand on her midriff. The skin quivered, as if she'd fought an urge to recoil.

His temper, fed by the dull ache in his head, snapped. "Damn it, Siri! If you don't want this, just say so. You've been blowing hot and cold all evening."

"Oh, please. I do not mean...I do want...ohhhh! I am so confused!" The last words ended on a wail. Tears oozed from her tightly closed eyes.

"Then what's wrong? First you act like you're trying to seduce me, then you practically cringe when I touch you. "

She pushed herself upright, pulling the tail of a slicker across her lap. "You are a kind man," she told him, her face lowered so he couldn't see her eyes. "I know this, but my...my body does not believe it. Valter was...not gentle. Sometimes he hurt me. He was so big, and when he... I was too small for him. It hurt. Sometimes I bled."

She traced a pattern on the oiled canvas with one finger. "You are even bigger. I...I looked. I want you to teach me to enjoy, but I fear...I do not want to hurt again."

Well, hell! Buff flopped down beside her and stared at the smoke-stained ceiling.

He almost laughed. Here they were, both naked as jaybirds, alone and likely to stay that way. He was horny and she was willing. And every time they got too close to doing anything, they talked each other out of it.

"Siri," he said, "let's get some sleep. Tomorrow could be a rough day."

"Förlåt mig?"

"Lie down," he repeated, patting the floor beside him. "We can talk about this again, when we're safely back to town."

She eyed him suspiciously, but finally lay down next to him. He pulled the petticoat over them both, then arranged the slicker on top of it.

After a while he slept.

* * *

Morning came eventually. Siri felt as if she hadn't slept at all, but she must have. The harsh cries of crows had wakened her, as if a whole village of them were holding a meeting in the woods. For a moment she lay still, not wanting to open her eyes and face Mr. Lachlan.

She was so *förlägen*...so embarrassed. How could she have been so bold?

And then, when he had taken her invitation, how could she have been so *dum*...so stupid as to become shy and frightened?

Perhaps he was still asleep. She rolled toward him, as just waking. Her hand, that should have brushed his side, touched only the cold surface of a slicker. *He is gone!* was her first thought. *He has left me alone!*

Fear uncurled in her belly and she sat up. The air in the small shed was like ice. The fireplace held only a few glowing embers. Quickly she pulled the wool petticoat around herself and snuggled back under the slicker. At least the bed was still warm.

So dark! What time is it? Her clothing should still be on the clothesline. But where was her *underkläder*? The last she had seen, her Union suit had been lying

on the floor. *Over here*, she thought, and stretched that way.

Her groping hand found knit cloth. It was cold, so she clutched it against her body to warm it. The skirt and blouse would not be so uncomfortable once she was decently covered.

The crows kept up their noise. What could be disturbing them so?

A faint odor of tobacco and woodsmoke came to her nose. Curious, she looked toward the fireplace. No, it was not smoking. Then she realized that the garment she held was the source of the smell. *How I wish I could see!*

But she didn't have to see. Now that she was paying attention, she knew that the garment she held was not hers. The fabric was too new and too rich. Not stretched and thin from years of washing.

She hugged it close to her for a moment, before tucking it down by her feet, where it would hold the warmth of her body. Cautiously, with frequent glances toward the door, she crawled from the bed. Her Union suit had to be here, somewhere.

It was, lying half on top of the log seat. Not caring now how cold it was, she wriggled into it. With a hand out in front of her, she inched toward the corner where Mr. Lachlan had stretched the clothesline. The floor was rough and splintery under her feet. And cold.

I wonder what happened to those warm socks.

She was buttoning her skirt when a knock came at the door. Siri's heart stopped.

"It's me," Mr. Lachlan said, as he pushed the door open slightly. "Can I come in?"

"Ja. You did not have to knock." Valter never would have asked permission to enter any place where she was.

"Dark in here." Leaving the door open, he dropped the wood he was carrying beside the fireplace. "We'll have to hurry. It'll be full daylight in a bit. I want to get on the trail."

The gray light coming through the doorway barely penetrated the gloom inside. It was enough for her to see that his hair glistened with moisture. "I will be ready in a moment." She reached for the heavy sweater.

"There's water in the pail. As soon as I get the fire built up, you'll want to start it warming. I want coffee before we go."

"But--"

"Siri, it's going to be a rough trip back. Everything's iced up. You'll be glad of the coffee before we're halfway to Astoria."

Soon flames were leaping toward the chimney. Siri hung the pail of water on the crude hook. "I heard the crows. Were they scolding you?"

He chuckled. "I was taking a look around, trying to see if I could find where the bas...fellow who hit me had gone. I guess they decided I was getting too close to their roost. Must have been a couple of hundred of them."

"They are *uppkäftig*...sassy birds. I like them." She found one of the socks behind the log seat, but where was the other? Her hairpins were gone, every one. "Here are your slippers, but I cannot find the other sock."

"It's in the pack. I stumbled over it when I was dressing."

His grin was just a little bit sheepish. Siri wondered if he was as embarrassed as she was. Without looking at him, she handed him the footwear and the blue-and-green scarf. "You have no hat, so you must wear this."

Their hands met. Clung.

"Siri--"

"*Skynda dig*. We do not have time to speak of it now. We must hurry."

"Yeah, you're right. But we'll talk about it soon. There's something special between us, and we're going to discuss it."

The coffee was hot and bitter. It warmed her belly and sent energy seeping along her arms and legs. Although there were only a few small bites of the dried meat for each of them, she found her hunger satisfied. When he wrapped the scarf around his head, she had to smile. Even wearing a woman's headdress, he was totally masculine. And beautiful. "*Så skön*", she breathed, too softly for him to hear.

The world glistened and shone. The fine droplets that filled the air, not quite rain, froze the instant they encountered the layers of ice that coated everything. Even the ground was icy. Each careful step they took crackled. Siri was glad of the umbrella, for she could use it as a staff, to help keep her balance.

Mr. Lachlan led the way, across the end of the young orchard and to the edge of the woods. The crows berated them every inch of the way, and some followed along after they were in the woods, flying from tree to tree. Siri wondered if they were an escort, whose task was to make sure the intruders were well and truly gone.

Or are they warning someone of our progress?

As soon as the thought came, she banished it. *Fantasi*, she told herself. *Dum fantasi!*

Buff cut himself a walking stick soon after they entered the woods. Although the ground here wasn't ice-coated, it was still slick. The temperature must have hovered right at freezing all night long, for the mud was almost slushy, as if the water in it couldn't make up its mind whether to turn to ice or not.

Their pace was slower than yesterday. He turned often to check on Siri. She didn't seem to be having any trouble keeping up, but he still worried. His pa had raised him to have a concern for the women in his keeping, no matter how strong and independent they were. Siri was both, but she was still unused to living rough.

So was he, for that matter. *Too many years playing the gentleman*, he told himself. *Pa would be ashamed of you, letting yourself get caught like you did yesterday.*

I wonder who it was waiting for me. Or was he just a vagrant, defending the comfortable little hidey hole he'd found?

No, he didn't think his assailant had set up housekeeping in the stables. There'd been no sign that anyone had been sleeping there.

That leaves you with two choices. Either he was waiting for us, or he was a guard, set to keep any snoopers away.

Buff leaned toward the latter, but he wouldn't entirely eliminate the possibility that someone was following him. He'd had an itchy feeling along his spine more than once since coming to Astoria.

Chapter Fifteen

"Watch it." Buff held the icy branch up so Siri could duck under it. At the rate they were going, they'd be lucky to make Astoria by dark. It must be nearly eleven and they weren't halfway yet. A good thing he'd decided against taking time to talk to Mr. Daws.

Ice cracked and fell, showering her shoulders. "I think it's getting colder," he muttered. Although the sky had lightened somewhat since they'd started, here, under the heavy forest canopy, was like twilight. They couldn't see where they were putting their feet and could barely see far enough ahead to avoid running into the many drooping, ice-sheathed branches. He'd lost count of the times they'd had to push their way through ice-covered foliage or past fallen saplings.

"How are you doing?" he said.

"I am fine," Siri told him. But there was a catch in her voice.

"We ought to be getting to Upper Astoria soon. We can rest then."

She stopped in the trail and turned around. "I am sorry, Mr. Lachlan."

Her face was a pale oval in the mist, glistening with moisture. "Why? It was my idea to see what we could find at your mother-in-law's house."

"If we had come by boat..." Her teeth were worrying her lower lip again.

"We might still have been walking back. What if we hadn't showed up at the docks? Would a boatman have waited for us? Come looking for us?"

"I did not think of that. Perhaps not. The river is treacherous at night. He would have wanted to go back before dark."

"Then stop fretting about something you can't change." He smiled down at her. A more bedraggled female he couldn't remember. "Didn't I see a little cafe in Upper Astoria? I'll bet they have coffee?"

"I do not know. I have never stopped there."

He'd bet she'd never felt she could afford to. "Well, then, let's go see. It's probably not much farther."

One might have called it a cafe, he decided when they finally reached the small settlement, if one was feeling particularly generous. The important thing was that the tavern served food and hot coffee. The sheet-metal stove in the middle of the room gave off enough heat to set their clothing to steaming. Buff and Siri hung their slickers in the vestibule, but took their headscarves inside to dry while they ate.

They collected curious stares from the men at the tables. The bartender raised an eyebrow at Siri, but didn't say anything. Buff reckoned she wasn't the kind of female who usually frequented the place.

The beans had been on the stove a couple of days, but they were well flavored with ham and the cornbread was fresh. He made short work of his first bowl and asked for a second. His meager breakfast hadn't stayed with him very long. Siri stopped eating about halfway through her beans and toyed with the bread.

"Eat," he told her. "You'll need it this afternoon."

"I try," she whispered. "It...it sticks in my throat." In the harsh light from the kerosene lantern above their table, her cheekbones looked almost sharp in her

face.

"Damn it, Siri, you've got to eat. This afternoon's going to be every bit as rough a walk as this morning was."

"I know." She lifted a spoonful of beans to her mouth. Then lowered it again. "I cannot."

Buff thought a moment. "Bring me a beer," he called to the bartender.

"Beer?" Her expression went beyond disapproval. "You are going to drink a beer?"

He waited to answer until the beer was placed on the table. Pushing it across to her, he said, "No. You are."

"*Nej!* I do not--"

"Siri, my ma can't eat when she's scared or worried. So Pa gets her a little bit drunk and then she can swallow. I want you to drink the beer. It won't hurt you, and maybe it'll relax you enough so you can finish your dinner."

For a long moment she stared at him. "I get very sleepy when I drink beer," she said finally. "You will not want to carry me all the way to Astoria."

"Just drink. We'll worry about you walking after you've eaten."

Dubiously she sipped from the glass, made a face. "It is bitter!"

"Drink."

"You are *grym*," she told him. But she continued to sip.

After a while she stopped making faces. Pretty soon she picked up her spoon and took a bite. Then another. By the time Buff had finished his second bowl of beans and ham, she'd eaten everything before her. There was about an inch of beer left in her glass. "Must I drink that? *Jag är så mätt!*" She patted her middle. "I have not eaten so much for a long time."

"You did fine. Ready to go?"

The mist had turned to rain, much to Buff's relief. He'd rather put up with the big drips from foliage than have to fight his way through more of the icy barricades they'd encountered all along the trail this morning. He opened the umbrella, held it over her.

As if reading his mind, Siri said, "Perhaps we can use the lower trail. It will be muddy, but so much easier to walk."

"The one along the water? Will the tide be low enough?"

"I must see." She turned toward the dock. Buff followed her.

The water slapped at the pilings scarcely a foot below the thick planks they stood on. He stared at it, trying to see which direction it was flowing. In circles, it looked like to him. The mist was so thick he couldn't see out into the river more than a few yards. "It looks pretty high to me."

"There has been much rain." She watched for several minutes. Buff couldn't see what she was looking at. Just brown water, surging against the pilings with whispery splashes.

"I think we must use the upper trail," Siri said. "Even if the tide is going out, it will be a long time before we can walk on the beach."

Well, hell! "Let's get going, then. I'd like to make town before sundown."

Before he went to his lodging, Jaeger went to the post office. The next payment from Thorssen was overdue. Soon he would have to decide whether to abandon the task he had been paid to do, or to continue.

A letter had arrived. Once he was comfortably settled at the Pilot Whale Saloon with brandy-laced coffee, he opened the envelope. Inside was a bank draft in the agreed-upon amount for another two months' work. So. He would continue to follow Lachlan.

He read, skipping impatiently over the complaints that his search was taking so long and costing so much. Thorssen had no idea of the bargain he was getting. Jaeger was the best, yet his fee was little more than some of the clumsy oafs who pretended to follow his profession.

...word from my agent in Macao. Lachlan was there too. I fear he may be finding useful information. Perhaps he has discovered what ship she was taken by.

If he finds her, I depend on you to make sure she does not live to claim her inheritance. It would be best if she is never formally identified, so if you have the slightest suspicion that Lachlan has found her, make sure he has no opportunity to report his success. Remove the woman before he becomes convinced she is my sister.

But do not kill him, if you can avoid it. I have learned that he has powerful friends here in Europe and in America. His father is someone of importance, also. I do not want to occasion an investigation...

Jaeger sneered. The would-be baron had no appreciation of his skills. If he did decide to kill Lachlan, no one would believe it anything but one more instance of the random violence Americans were so prone to.

But first he would fulfill his contract. He would wait until Lachlan found the woman.

Or until he was certain he would not.

* * *

Buff lay absolutely still until the noise stopped. The mud slide had carried him along on its crest, as if he were a small boat skimming a huge wave. He was bruised and would ache like the very devil later, but now he was simply breathless. He crawled out of the thicket where he'd been caught and held.

"Siri? Siri, where are you?"

Only the *drip...drip...drip* of rain on wet foliage answered him.

He'd been too far behind to reach her before the slide hit. It must have started only a few feet above the trail, for there had been little noise to warn them. One minute they had been pushing their way through drooping, dripping branches. The next the world had turned upside down in a rush of mud and debris that had picked him up and tossed him fifty feet down the hill.

"Siri?"

He clawed his way up a sheer rock wall, catching at small protrusions, slipping on wet moss, nearly falling when a tuft of dead grass pulled loose. "Siri, where are you?"

A crow answered him. Another, and another, until the forest was filled with their harsh caws.

He hoisted himself to a narrow ledge, found himself facing a crumbling, weeping slope of mud and cobble. He inched along the ledge until it gave onto a steep slope densely covered with thimbleberry. "Siri! Answer me, damn it!"

The crows mocked him.

At last he reached the trail. A wide tongue of mud, littered with rock and debris, covered it, but it was still passable.

"Siri?"

Buff forced himself to stand still and get his bearings. There. He'd noticed that nurse log, with a young spruce straddling it. Siri had just passed it when he heard the slide. He walked slowly along the trail, trying to peer into the dark, tangled woods below the trail. Surprisingly the slide had done little damage. It seemed to have been restricted to a narrow path.

At the far end of the slide path, he paused and turned, looking back into the woods. All he could see was tangled underbrush and thick tree trunks, mist-shrouded and obscure.

The crows had gone silent as he walked the trail, but now they began their chorus again. Buff looked up, wondering what had set them off. One glided to a landing on a branch not ten feet away. He looked that way and saw her.

"Siri!"

Skidding and sliding, he got to her. She lay prone, almost buried under sticks and twigs, rocks and mud. Buff reached out, almost afraid to touch her.

He cleared away the debris that hid her face. It was turned slightly to the side and was scratched and pale. But when he lay his fingers on the pulse under her jaw, he felt the reassuring *thump-athump* of her heart.

Her slicker had protected her from the worst of the debris, its oiled canvas a tough covering for delicate skin. But it wouldn't have stopped her bones from breaking.

He slipped his knapsack from his shoulders and set it beside her. He started to unbutton his coat.

That was when he saw the handle of the umbrella, protruding from a mass of debris not three feet from Siri. He extracted it and wiped the mud from the black silk. To his surprise and relief, it opened. One rib was bent, but not badly. Buff propped it up so it protected Siri's head and shoulders. Then he removed his slicker and laid it over her lower body and legs.

Siri moaned.

"Siri? Wake up sweetheart." He stroked her cheek. It was warm, not icy as he had feared. "You need to wake up."

Another moan. A soft sound in the silence of the forest.

The crows had stopped calling.

* * *

She was picked up, tossed, dropped. But she did not sink, as she had before. She floated, on an ocean of pain, amidst waves as hard as rocks. She fought to escape the grip of the water, fought to breathe. As she rolled again, she found air and gasped, filling her lungs before she was dropped again, into a swirling maelstrom.

Icy cold water bathed her legs, surrounded her. A wild cacophony of sound filled her ears. She tried to curl into herself, but her legs were held, her arms would not bend. She fought the bonds, but it did her no good. They had chained her, and struggling would only wear the skin from her wrists and ankles. She had seen the scars on the other... *No! No, it is only a bad dream. Far, please, Tell me again it is only a dream.*

"Siri. Siri? Wake up sweetheart." A hand, gentle on her cheek.

Far?

Nej, han är inte min far. It is...she could not remember his name, but she could see him. *En ängel med gyllene gloria.* No, not an angel. A devil, for he tempted her and beguiled her and made her almost forget...*mina barn! Ah, Gud, jag glömde mina barn!*

She moaned, unable to help herself. How could she have forgotten her children?

No child now, but a woman grown. She had been a wife and a mother. And now she was a widow and her children had been stolen from her.

Siri opened her eyes and saw him. He was kneeling beside her, coatless, water dripping from his chin. His wool shirt was plastered to his body, streaked with mud and torn over one shoulder.

"Siri, how do you feel? Can you move?"

Move? She was not sure. Carefully she flexed her fingers, made a fist. Now her toes. They moved, but... "My legs..."

"Don't move." He turned away.

She felt cold air and moisture on her ankle.

"There's a vine wrapped around your ankles. Hold still."

A tugging, a careful touch that scarcely moved her foot.

"Try it now."

Cautiously Siri tried again. This time her knees bent and her ankles flexed without hindrance. Without more than a dull ache, in fact. "Yes, I can move." She put her hands under her shoulders to push herself upright. Sharp pain radiated from her shoulder. She collapsed, panting. The pain seemed to expand, to fill her chest. "I cannot."

"Lie still." His hands touched her lightly, skimming up her arms, pressing on her shoulder blades. Testing her ribs. "I don't feel anything wrong. Can you turn over."

She moved and the pain intensified. "My shoulder. I cannot..." She touched her right shoulder with her left hand. "This one--"

Gently he turned her to her back, handling her as if she would break with any sudden move. Again his fingers probed. "You've got a broken collarbone, near as I can tell. Just stay still. I remember..."

He scratched his chin, and she heard the rasp of whiskers against his fingers. After a moment's thought, he took the scarf from his head. "This is wet, but it's better than nothing. I'm going to sit you up. It'll probably hurt, but I need to wrap this around you."

Surprisingly, sitting up did not hurt any more than being turned, except her arm seemed to pull heavily on her shoulder. Siri reached across and held her right

forearm.

"What I want you to do is to pull your shoulders back as far as you can. Farther. Like that. Good girl."

Siri breathed through clenched teeth as she follow his instructions.

"Yes, keep holding that arm up so it doesn't pull." He reached around her.

"Now, I'm going to tie this so you can't move your arm. We'll hope that works. I think it's what Pa did when Katie broke her collarbone."

As soon as the scarf was tied, she realized the pain had almost gone away. Not the aches she felt in every muscle and joint, but the sharp pain in her shoulder. "Oh, *ja*, that is much better!"

His grin seemed forced. "Good. That must mean I did the right thing." He adjusted the umbrella so no rain fell on her head. "We'll rest a bit, then we've got to get going. Do you think you can walk?"

"I hope so. My legs seem to be working. There is no pain."

"Good." He shivered.

"*Jösses!* You have no coat." Guiltily she realized that his slicker covered her legs, doing little good. The ground was wet and so was she, from what had soaked through her clothing. She pulled the slicker off her legs and held it out to him. "Put this on."

He didn't argue.

When he shivered again, Siri made up her mind. She stretched her legs, flexed her feet. "If you will help me to stand, we can go on." Even if she had to crawl, she was not going to keep him in this cold, wet forest any longer.

Even with him taking most of her weight, she could not stand. "*Förlåt mig*. My knees, they are *ostadig*...weak and useless." The sound of her voice, at the edge of tears, shamed her.

"Give it a while," he soothed. Despite his shivers, his body was warm, and she wanted to burrow close.

"I should be asking you to forgive me, Siri. I was criminally careless, bringing you along. If I'd given the situation the thought it deserved, I'd've realized its potential for danger."

"You would have left me behind?"

"Damn right! A woman like you has no business on this poor excuse for a trail." His arms tightened around her. "Great God, Siri, you're lucky to be alive!"

"I have walked this trail many times, Buffalo Lachlan. I would come this way again, if *mina barn*..." She lost all English as a combination of anger and pain overwhelmed her.

How dare he think she would stay safely behind while he sought Rosel and Rolf? Her children. Her responsibility.

Just like min far. Like Valter. Så dominerande. Så dum. Are all men convinced women are helpless and weak?

Locking the words behind her clenched teeth, she pulled herself out of his embrace. Before he could assist her, she forced herself to stand. One day she would tell him what she thought of stupid masculine pride. But not until they found her children.

Once she was on her feet, she felt lightheaded for a moment, then the world

steadied around her. New aches made themselves known, but none were severe enough to prevent her walking. With his help, she climbed to the trail. Her first few steps were hesitant, but soon she found her stride. It was slower than before, because having her arm tied to her body changed her balance.

She forced a smile, wondering if she looked as grotesque as he did, with the mud smeared across his cheeks, with paler streaks where rainwater had trickled through it. "Let us go. I want some tea."

"Good idea. Do you have any idea how far we are from town?"

"I remember thinking we had only one more steep part to cross. So an hour? Perhaps a little more."

"Let's go, then." He gestured her to go ahead of him.

When he had indicated she should lead the way yesterday, Siri had been surprised. Valter would never have let her walk ahead of him, even if she had known the route and he hadn't. Neither would have her father.

After a while she realized he was letting her set the pace. He could have walked away from her had he chosen to do so, and not just because of her skirts. His stride was free and loose, as if he walked for pleasure.

She stopped, not trusting herself to speak over her shoulder with her balance uncertain. "Mr. Lachlan?"

He caught up with her. "Siri, my name is Buffalo. Or Buff, to my friends. I think last night qualifies us as friends, don't you?" His eyes held warmth as he looked down into hers.

Ah, *ja*! A *djävul* for certain. "It is not a common name. Why did your father name you for an animal?" She had seen pictures of buffalo. Great, ungainly beasts with shaggy coats and fierce faces.

"I wasn't named for the critter," he said, "but for a man. A good friend of my parents'."

"Another man named Buffalo?"

"Uh-huh. I think he named himself when he came West. Or maybe he earned the name. Lots of the fur trappers got nicknames hung on them for their exploits."

The trail opened into fields. Soon it turned into a road--Spruce Street. "I think we'll go to the Chinese Store first," Buffalo said.

"Why?"

"Mrs. Leong will dry our clothes and feed us. I don't want to take you back to the hotel looking like you do."

"Mrs. Welkins would have a fit," she said, imagining her employer's expression, should they arrive looking as they did.

As if her appearance mattered. There was small likelihood she would have a job tomorrow.

Chapter Sixteen

Mrs. Leong took them in without question. After a few painful moments while the Chinese woman helped her undress, Siri stood nude before a fire and let herself be examined. She held her right arm with her left hand, almost afraid to breathe. To do so sent shafts of white-hot pain radiating down her arms and across her shoulder.

"Many cut," Mrs. Leong said from behind her. "All little. No need to mend." She came back to stand before Siri. "Your face very pretty tomorrow. Many colors."

She shivered. And wished she had not. Now as she was getting warm she was becoming aware of scrapes and bruises everywhere. Her entire face hurt, although the ache was nothing like what she felt in her right shoulder.

"You bathe, then I give ointment. You hurt not so much." Mrs. Leong's smile was sympathetic.

"Can you do something so I can use my arm? I must work tomorrow."

"You not make beds for many days."

A noise at the door made Siri look frantically for a place to hide.

"Only my nephews. They make bath for you." Mrs. Leong went to the door and opened it a crack. She spoke, a long, musical spate of strange syllables, and closed it again. "One minute. Your bath be ready."

"What did you mean, I won't work for many days? I must. Mrs. Welkins--"

"Welkins already find new maid." She shrugged. "You not come home."

Panic rose inside Siri. Without a job, what would she--

"Come. Bath ready." Holding the door open, Mrs. Leong gestured for her to go to the next room.

Siri could only stare, as she tried to think what to do. If she had no work, no money, how could she find her children? How could she...

Gentle hands pushed her toward and through the door. "Bath now. Talk later."

Helplessly she let herself be led to the tin tub, stepped into the steaming water. When a strong arm slipped around her waist to help her sit, she did so, unresisting. She kept a grip on her injured arm because she was told to.

She bent her head and let water pour over it. Felt hands apply soap to her hair and work it into a lather.

She felt her last hope slipping away, while gentle hands bathed her.

* * *

Clean and dressed in ill-fitting clothing that must have been dug out of a missionary barrel, Buff stood beside the stove in the Chinese store and cradled a cup of steaming jasmine tea in both hands. The perfume wafting from its surface sent a wave of homesickness through him.

Maybe it was time he went home. Time he grew up.

He'd left home almost eight years ago, in May of 1865. His whole family had traveled all the way to New York, then to Boston. There he'd bid them farewell and

taken ship for Europe.

Hadn't looked back since.

Bright lights and loud music and fancy women. That's what he'd been seeking. And excitement. Oh, how he'd sought excitement. Anything different from the quiet and peace of the mountain-fast valley where he'd grown up.

He hadn't seen a real town until he was almost man high, hadn't worn real shoes or smoked a cigar or tasted good whiskey. The only played music he'd heard was from the fiddle his pa had brought home from the trading post at Fort Boise.

Then he'd gone adventuring, and had found more than he'd bargained for. From the day he'd walked through the door of the great house belonging to the Earl of Heatherwood, he had been catapulted into a glittering world beyond his wildest dreams. He'd hobnobbed with European nobility, won gold from princes and millionaires, flirted with women clad in priceless silks and jewels worth a king's ransom. All the while he had lived on the edge of danger, seeking out the secrets and the chicanery of those who lived beyond the laws that kept civilization operating.

Yes, he'd found his excitement, and had tasted its often bitter cost. And now he was almost all the way around the world from where he'd begun. How far was Boise City? Five hundred miles? Not more than that, he was pretty sure.

He stepped to the fogged window and wiped a circle clear. Outside the rain still fell, not yet turned to sleet. It would, though. He'd felt the bite of the wind when they'd come into town, and was sure it was even colder now.

The door behind him opened. "You come now."

Buff turned. Mrs. Leong gestured for him to follow her.

The light in the low-ceilinged room was dim, but even so he had no trouble seeing the woman in the bathtub. She was hunched over, curled into herself. Her dripping hair lay in dark strings across her white shoulders. "Siri?"

"She need you," Mrs. Leong said, before she stepped back into the corridor and pulled the door closed.

The room was warm and steamy. Puddles stood on the floor around the bathtub. Buff didn't care. He knelt. "Siri? What is it? What's wrong?"

She lifted her head, showed him a face ravaged by tears. "The hotel...my babies...how can I..." Her words ended on a low keen, a sound so grief-filled, so heart-rending he wanted to weep himself.

A towel hung over a low stool beside the tub. He scooped her from the water and wrapped it around her.

She screamed.

"Oh, God, Siri. Your shoulder. I'm sorry. Here..."

Carefully he set her on her feet and unwrapped her. "I need something... Mrs. Leong!" he yelled.

She came through the door almost before the words were out of his mouth. "Clumsy man!" She held out a wide strip of cloth. "Here. You wrap tight, not hurt her more."

Siri stood docile while he strapped her arm tightly against her body. She neither helped nor hindered when Mrs. Leong maneuvered her into a dark blue

kimono. Silk, from the feel of it. "Did she eat?"

"Little soup. No more."

"Can you bring more? I'll see that she eats it."

"I bring. Meat, too. She too skinny." In no time at all she came back, carrying a steaming teapot and a tray on which sat a bowl and a plate of thin-sliced meat. She set them on the floor beside the stool.

Buff had seated himself on the stool with Siri in his arms. "Thanks. I'll take care of her now." He felt a little guilty for imposing on Mrs. Leong like this. But he hadn't known where else to turn. Taking Siri to the hotel would have gotten her fired in a minute. He could have gone to Longstreet, but he didn't want Siri anywhere close to the upstairs of the Deep Six. Just being seen there could have ruined her forever in Astoria.

"Li Ching say you go see him come morning." With those ominous words, the Chinese woman slipped out of the door.

Buff heard a bolt slide home. They were locked in. *Well, hell!*

Were they captives? He looked around the room, his eyes having grown accustomed to the dim light. There was a pile of bedding in one corner, and beside it a low table on which rested a basin and ewer. In the opposite corner was a screen, elaborately carved, gleaming in the flickering candlelight from three ornately gilded wall sconces. A brazier filled with smoldering charcoal sat under a metal hood in the third corner, warming the room and giving off a faint odor of cloves.

Soomey had sometimes added herbs to the fire to perfume a room.

"All the comforts of home," he murmured.

The soup was cooling. "Siri? Are you awake?"

Her head moved against his shoulder.

"Good. Sit up a little will you? I've got some soup for you."

The head moved again, this time in a negative direction. Her body remained limp in his arms.

"God damn it woman! I'm tired of your die-away airs. Sit up and eat the blasted soup. Or I'll pour it down your throat. And I won't worry about choking you to death, either!"

She reacted to that. She shoved so hard with her good arm that she slid from his lap and ended up sprawled on the floor. The kimono gaped open. Quickly she snatched the edges and jerked them together. "*Jävlar också! Du mår ond! Du mår djävul! Ge dig iväg...*"

Well, he'd handled that well. Buff picked up the tray and set it on the stand, moving the basin and ewer to the floor. Then he went to gather Siri up, amazed once again at how slight she was for all her height and womanly shape. *She's been starving herself for weeks*, he realized. Probably since her kids went missing. "I can't go away sweetheart, and I only seem evil because you're hurting."

He made a nest of the bedding, sat her in it, propped against the wall. Kneeling before her, he held a spoonful of soup to her lips. "Here we go. Open wide," he said, using the words his ma had used with him whenever she'd fed him something that tasted bad.

She shook her head.

"Siri, I swear to God, I *will* pour this down your throat if you don't swallow it voluntarily. Now open your damned mouth."

"*Ge dig iväg*," she cried, slapping his hand away.

Patiently he wiped up the spilled soup. "I'm not going anywhere. Neither are you. But you are going to eat." He refilled the spoon and held it to her lips.

They opened.

He shoved the spoon inside.

Spoonful by spoonful, he got the soup into her. He set the meat aside, knowing miracles were hard to come by, particularly with a stubborn Swede. If they weren't turned loose in the morning, they'd use it for breakfast.

When the bowl was empty, he laid her down against the wall, tucking the bedding around her. After a quick trip behind the screen, where he shed his clothing, he added more charcoal to the brazier. There seemed to be enough in the hod to last them until morning. At least they wouldn't sleep cold.

Suddenly aware he was as tired as if he'd worked all day, Buff eased himself into the bed beside Siri. Tomorrow he'd worry about the locked door and about the next step in his search for her lost children.

With a sigh of his own, he turned on his side and pulled her close. The faint scent of cinnamon filled his nose and followed him into sleep.

* * *

When Siri woke sometime in the night, her memory was clear and her determination renewed. Today she would fetch her few belongings from the hotel, demand her pay for the portion of this month she had worked, and find a place to live. Then she would find work--any sort of work, as long as it paid her well and left her time to resume the search for her children.

She wondered what time it was. The only light in the room was a faint glow from one corner. Embers from a fire, one that had kept the room warm despite the wind she could hear howling outside. Experimentally she moved, and inhaled sharply at the pain in her shoulder.

"Siri? You all right?"

A dark shape came between her and the glow. She cowered back against the wall, even though she knew it was only Mr. Lachlan. "I woke," she said, "and tried to turn. It hurt, but I am fine now."

"You sure?" His voice was low, sleep-blurred.

"I am sure," she whispered. "Go back to sleep."

He settled down again, but she could tell he was not sleeping. She closed her eyes and told herself to sleep.

He turned and his arm went around her. Gently. At her waist so it did not disturb her injured shoulder. "You're not sleeping," he whispered.

"Neither are you." Her body wanted to melt against his, but she told it firmly to behave.

He moved, and his breath was warm on her face. "I know a good way to get back to sleep. Would you like me to show you?"

Because it was dark, because it was warm, because she felt safe and protected...because she wanted to taste him, touch him again, she said,

"Please..."

His fingertips on her cheek were like the kiss of a butterfly wing. His breath was scented with jasmine. His chest was hard, smooth. Hot.

When his fingers threaded through her hair, a shiver went all the way to her toes, leaving her weak and trembling. She lay passive under his touch, as his fingers stroked under her ear and along the line of her throat to the hollow at its base. They hesitated there, and were replaced by a wetness as he touched his tongue to her.

"So sweet," he whispered. "I love the taste of you. You smell of cinnamon. I could..." She felt the soft rasp of his tongue along her throat, felt his teeth nip lightly.

He returned to her mouth, to run his tongue along its seam until she opened to him, helplessly in his power. When he took her lip gently between his teeth, she wanted to scream. When he slipped his tongue inside and explored the depth of her mouth, she did scream. A small scream.

He swallowed the sound.

Siri pressed her free hand across his chest, found a pebbled male nipple with her fingertips. She flicked a nail across it, experimentally, lightly so she would not scratch.

He gasped. And took her mouth in a hungry, demanding kiss.

His knee pressed against hers. The silk of her kimono slithered aside, no barrier at all.

She opened her legs. The crisp hair on his thigh scratched against her tender inner thighs, a tiny pain, turning to heat.

He ended the kiss, but only to nibble at her chin, at her throat. Once more she felt the hot wetness of his tongue against the racing pulse at the base of her throat. He moved lower, running his tongue along the skin just above the wide cloth that bound her right arm to her body.

"Am I hurting you?"

She felt the words more than heard them, for his mouth was hot against her skin. "*Ja...nej...nej!*" Her breasts ached for his touch. She arched her back, pressing her chest against his face. "Please...oh, please." She was not sure what she was asking for, but she needed...needed....

He pulled away from her and sat up. "I want to see you." She felt him leave the bed. In a moment a light flared and he lit a candle held in a wall sconce. Two more, and the room was filled with a soft, golden light.

He was golden, too. His nude body was godlike, gleaming. Yesterday she had thought him beautiful. But now! He was indescribable.

His *lem* rose boldly from a nest of golden hairs. So big! Fear tightened her throat. Valter had not been so large, yet he had hurt her, most times when he drove himself into her body.

Yet then she had not felt so ready, so wet and hungry. *He will not hurt me.* She knew this with all of her being.

Buffalo Lachlan would almost certainly break her heart, but his lovemaking would bring her joy, not pain.

He knelt before her. "Let me help you sit. You can't be comfortable with your

arm tied like that."

She gave him her hand, let him pull her to a sitting position, with her legs curled under her.

He did not release her hand. Instead he lifted it to his mouth and kissed the palm. A long, lingering kiss, with tongue and teeth. When he was done, he curled her fingers closed, as if to tell her to hold the kiss close.

Still he held her hand in both of his, stroking her fingers with one thumb. "European women put a lot of store in having white, smooth hands. They perfume them and wear gloves and have conniption fits if they break a fingernail." He turned her hand over, opened her fingers and touched her work-reddened knuckles. "My ma did most of the gardening and the laundry, at least 'til us kids got big enough to lend a hand. Even then she worked hard. Not much time for putting lotions on her hands, or making her fingernails pretty." He rotated her wrist, so her hand lay open, so he could see the calluses on her palm, the rough skin of her fingertips. "You have hands like my Ma's. Strong. Capable. Beautiful." He lifted it to his lips again and took a fingertip into his mouth. He nipped, then suckled.

Ah, Gud, he is pulling my soul from my body! She swayed toward him, aflame. Wanting him as she had never dreamed she might want a man.

"Please," she whispered. "Oh, please...now...."

"Not quite yet," he said. Releasing her hand, he untied the sash of her robe and slid the sleek, sensuous fabric from her shoulders. "You won't need this any more." He tossed the garment behind him.

Instinctively Siri lifted an arm to hide her breasts, touched the coarse linen of her binding.

"I wish I could see all of you. I'll just have to remember your breasts--high and round and delicious!"

He laid his hands over the binding, and it was as if he had touched her skin. Again Siri shivered, and wondered how one could feel so hot and still wear *gâshud*.

He must have felt the subtle pebbling of her flesh. "Goosebumps," he said, smiling. "I give you goosebumps."

Of course. I should have known. Not for the first time, she concluded that perhaps English was not so different from Swedish.

Before she could say anything, he had lowered himself to the bed. Siri started to follow, but paused when he shook his head. "You're injured. I'm probably a cad for my lack of patience. But I want you tonight, Siri, not someday."

"Oh, *ja*! I want you, also." She swayed toward him, would have lain beside him. But his hands went to her waist and he lifted her to her knees.

"Can you straddle me?"

She did not understand what he was asking. "*Varför?*"

"Straddle me." He gestured. "Ride me, Siri."

Understanding bloomed in her mind, followed by a rush of heat so great that for a moment she could not move. He wanted her to be atop him. He would not crush her, would not pound her into the bed. Hesitantly, awkwardly, because she could not balance as well as she should, she slid one leg across his thighs. Without lowering herself, she said, "Like this?"

His grin flashed. "Well, more or less. We're not going to get much of anywhere if you sit way back there." He bent his knees slightly, until she was all but sitting on them. Arms open in invitation, he said, "Come here."

Siri worked her way forward until she straddled his hips.

His *lem* bobbed against her bottom, startling her. "Oh!"

His hands clasped her legs, just above her knees. "Can you stay like that for a while?"

"Ja..."

"Good."

Siri gasped as his fingers stroked up her inner thighs, coming closer to the hot, aching center of her with each pass. When they tangled in the hair that concealed her womanly parts, she gasped, flinched away.

"Did I hurt you?"

But he did not remove his hand. Instead, he moved it just a little, until she felt his finger penetrate her.

She tightened around him. She could not help herself.

"Like honey," he said, his voice low and strained. "Honey on my hand." He moved his finger. In. Out. Again. Faster, until she felt her hips jerk, her legs weaken.

Suddenly his hands were hard on her thighs and he was pulling her down, so his *lem* pressed against her. "Now, Siri. Take me."

A sense of power swept through her. Wriggling a little, she lowered herself until she felt a pressure, a stretching of her inner flesh. Lower, and the pressure grew.

Yet lower, her body trembling with the strain. She wanted to impale herself, to force herself hard onto him, until he filled her, until his *lem* touched her womb, where a strange, imperative fire burned.

As if he had read her mind, Buffalo pulled her hard against him. "*Ride me!*" he shouted.

Chapter Seventeen

Her eyes went wide, her mouth opened in an O of surprise. Buff held her hard against his groin, for if she were to move, he would explode. He breathed shallowly, willing himself into control.

She moved.

Only a small move, settling herself more securely across his hips, but it was enough.

He lifted her, brought her down, hard. Again. She caught the rhythm and rocked in synchrony with him, her inner muscles tightening and pulling at him, the fingers of her free hand digging into his shoulder.

Suddenly she arched back. "Ahhhhhh!"

He felt her come.

Inner spasms milked him, until he erupted inside her. When she collapsed against his chest, he had scarcely enough strength to wrap his arms around her. After a while he slipped out, and that was all right. They had time. He'd let her sleep a while, then he'd kiss her awake and see if the second time would be as good as the first.

Her breath was warm against his throat, her hair silky across his shoulder. When he could move, he stroked one hand down the long length of her spine, across the coarse linen that bound her arm.

"*Otrolig*." The word came out on a sigh. "*Underbar*..."

Buff kissed the top of her head, not sure what to say. Yes, it had been incredible, wonderful. He would be a long time forgetting how making love to her had been. A very long time.

Again he stroked her back, feeling the small knobs of her spine, wishing he could figure out a way to get her to eat without being half-drunk.

Her breathing quieted and her body relaxed. If she wasn't asleep, she was close to it.

That was fine with him. He had some thinking to do

When he'd agreed to help Siri find her kids, he'd assumed it would be an easy task. Something he could take care of in a few days, at the same time he was following up the last few traces of the *Dancing Goddess'* cargo. Tied to the hotel the way she was, and without money to pay for information and for bribes, she hadn't been able to do much of a search. Before yesterday, Buff had figured that the reason no one had any information about the mother-in-law's whereabouts was because no one had bothered to look very hard.

Now he wasn't so sure. The woman had done a good job of disappearing. Worse, if she'd really taken the children, she'd done an even better job of making them vanish.

There was a possibility the man in the stables had been there to discourage questions.

He still thought it more likely the fellow was a vagrant, protecting his snug little hidey-hole, but he couldn't entirely discount the other possibility.

So. He needed to think about the next step. Portland? Captain MacLasky had seemed to think it was a good possibility the mother-in-law had gone there.

But first he had to make sure there weren't any loose ends here in Astoria.

He still hadn't written that letter to Siri's mother. Or done much of anything else about tracing the eleventh girl on the *Dancing Goddess*. Nor had he read all of the documents in the packet Li Ching had given him.

Maybe it was time he settled down and concentrated on the important things, instead of haring off on wild goose chases.

No, yesterday hadn't been a wild goose chase. He'd established that the mother-in-law was not just off on a visit. She'd vamoosed, bag and baggage.

He sure wished he knew how she'd taken the kids. *If* she'd taken them. He hadn't mentioned to Siri the possibility that her children might be gone forever. What better way to explain their disappearance than with a fake kidnapping? The old woman could have sold them. Or worse.

He moved restlessly, feeling weighted down by tasks left undone. By responsibility. By choices he didn't want to make.

"Ummm?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

"*Nej*, I am awake now. You are thinking about something. I feel your *spänning*...your tightness." She moved her hand along his arm. "You cannot sleep when you are so unbending, like a board. You must let go of your worries."

Just that small movement sent blood to his groin, heat to his belly. "You're right. But I'll need help." He sat up, still holding her, and folded his legs tailor-fashion. "Wrap your legs around me. Yes, like that."

She sat on his crossed legs, held in the cage of his arms. His cock was trapped between them, cradled against her belly. "How's your shoulder?"

"It does not pain me, but it is not comfortable," she admitted, "as long as I do not try to move too quickly."

"Then we'll take this slow and easy." He nibbled his way across her shoulder and back again to her throat, enjoying the small shivers that shook her with each nip.

She touched his chest. "I thought all men were hairy. You are smooth. Warm." Her fingers circled his nipple, sent arrows of desire straight to his groin. She walked them up to his neck, along his shoulder. "I have never seen hair like yours. Like a *gloria*--I do not know the English word."

"Halo," he supplied, holding need on a tight rein.

"*Ja*, a halo. A golden circle about your head. Like an *ängel*, I thought." Her smile was quick and gently mocking. "Later I knew you were *djävul*, for you tempt me to sin."

"I do, huh?" He framed her face, bent to kiss her. *God she is sweet!*

Her response was all any man could ask for. Unable to wait, Buff fitted himself closer to her, slid into her honeyed depths, and found paradise.

The desperate imperative of the first time was gone, replaced by a delicious, languorous hunger that cried to be fed slowly, with infinite care and concentration. He made love to her with his body, his hands, his mouth, his words. He whispered to her what he'd like to do, what he was doing, using words both poetic and crude.

Her formless cries of yearning and need only fed his desire, until the languor turned to urgency and their bodies strained toward completion.

He felt the climax build in her, in himself, and was caught in the immutable power of his own.

Was swept along, in a paroxysm of pleasure that left him weak and drained.

Gradually, as reason and thought returned, his mind started back to work.

Siri slipped gradually into sleep, lulled by his soothing touch, as he moved one hand absently over her shoulder and along her captive arm.

Unable to relax, he found himself wondering what the future had in store for him. He'd all but forgot his quest for Anders' sister. The message he'd brought to Longstreet had been the reason he'd come here instead of San Francisco, a city with far more allure to a man like him, one with itchy feet and a thirst for excitement.

He'd planned to learn what he could here, then head south, for a few weeks of dissipation in the city he'd heard called Baghdad-by-the-Sea. Astrid Thorsdotter had been missing for almost fourteen years. How much difference could a few weeks make?

Now, every time he thought about moving on, a curious reluctance came over him. Astoria was the last place in the world he wanted to be, yet he didn't want to leave, either.

The sense of wonder, the thirst for excitement, that had driven him around the world, were still there. The other side of the next hill still called him. He was only twenty-five. His pa hadn't married until he was close to thirty.

He hadn't been to Australia yet.

Pa had never got there. Once he'd married Ma, he'd settled down and stayed close to home. Seemed like a man lost his wanderlust, once he got domesticated.

Buff couldn't imagine staying in one place the rest of his life. The world was too big and too full of beautiful places and interesting people. Why, he'd hardly touched what Europe had to offer, had scarcely sampled the exotic countries of the East. He'd never seen his own country, either, except close to home and the part along the stage and rail routes from Boise City to Boston.

He was too young to settle. So why was he even thinking about it?

Siri stirred and a lock of her hair slithered across his arm, silky, sensuous. Desire stirred again in his belly, banked embers still ready to burst into flame. He ran his hand along her back, thinking how different a woman felt. How smooth, how soft, how sleek. Warm, as if they all came from a tropical clime.

How hot she'd been, when he'd slid into her, honey-wet and welcoming. He'd never--

Great God! What had he done.

He'd come inside her. Twice.

What had he been thinking of?

Had he been thinking?

* * *

When Mrs. Leong knocked on the door, Siri was already up and wondering where her clothes had disappeared to. The only garment she had been able to find in their room was the brilliant blue silk robe. It covered her, but she was sure it hid nothing of her womanly attributes, for it clung to her every curve and hollow with a

sensuous caress.

"*Kom in*," she called, holding the neckline of the robe closed.

If only her fingers weren't so rough. They caught on the delicate fabric until she stopped touching it, for fear of ruining it.

The Chinese woman entered, carrying a tray. "You eat now," she said. "Go Li Ching short while."

"Where are my clothes?"

"I bring." Mrs. Leong set the tray on the stand. "Eat while hot. Rice good."

Buffalo groaned. "Rice?" He sat up, and the blanket slipped from his torso, to puddle in his lap.

"Rice good" She departed, locking the door behind her.

"She sounds just like my aunt. 'Rice good, fill belly'," he mimicked in a sing-song tone.

Four covered lacquer bowls sat on the tray, along with a steaming jug and two of the small handleless cups. Spoons and chopsticks lay along one side. Siri looked at the tray, wondering how she could serve Buffalo with only one hand.

Before she could say anything, he'd stood. Without a trace of modesty, he went to the screen in the corner. "Pour me some tea, will you, Siri," he said. "I'll be out in a minute."

Tea she could manage. While she waited she peeked under the lids. Rice in the largest bowl, of course. Chunks of salmon in another, a meat mixture in the third, and a pungent-smelling soup in the last. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered. *Perhaps I will be able to eat more than a few bites*, she thought. *I hope so.*

"Something smells good." He came from behind the screen, dressed only in britches.

Siri averted her eyes, for the mere sight of his naked chest dried her mouth and caused small wiggling things to swarm in her belly. "Sit," she said, gesturing at the single stool. "I will serve--"

"The hell you will! My arm's not broke!" He curled an arm around her waist and pulled her to the stool. "You sit. Can you use chopsticks?" Without waiting for an answer, he moved the stand closer, so she could use it as a low table. In a moment, the lids of the bowl were tossed onto the bed and he was holding out a spoon to her.

"I am not good with chopsticks," she admitted. "Mrs. Leong tried to teach me, but I am clumsy." She dipped the spoon into the soup. It was hot, and bit her tongue as she tasted it. But delicious!

She took a second sip, realized the bite came from the flavor, not just from the temperature. Her third dip into the bowl brought up a sliver of something green. She wasn't sure what it was, so she tasted it cautiously. Onion? Perhaps.

"You like that?"

Siri nodded. "It tastes very good," she said. "Do you want some?"

"No. If you like it, you can have it all." He dug into the bowl of meat with chopsticks, using them as if he'd had much practice. "Eat some rice too," he said, holding the bowl in front of her. "Soup's not enough."

"No, I--"

He spooned an enormous portion of rice into the soup bowl. "Rice very good. Fill belly," he said again.

Although she knew she could never eat so much, Siri stirred the rice into the soup. She would try. She must try, for he expected it of her.

All the while he was wielding the chopsticks with great skill. "Where did you learn to do that?" she said, between bites.

"What? Oh, you mean these?" He picked up a chunk of salmon, carried it to his mouth. "My aunt. She taught me the winter we were in the gold camp. Made me practice until I was almost as good as she was. I'm out of practice now, though. Haven't used them much for years."

If he was out of practice, she would have hated to see him when he was using the chopsticks regularly. He could pick up a single grain of rice with no difficulty. Siri had trouble with anything smaller than a bean.

"Your aunt? She uses chopsticks? Where did she learn?"

"I guess I haven't told you about my family, have I? Well, Soomey's Chinese. She and Tony were working the gold diggings in Idaho when my uncle Silas saved them from a mob. He hired them before he knew Soomey was a girl." His eyes looked somewhere beyond the walls of the small room. "Took her a while to convince him she was old enough for marriage, too, but she didn't give up easy." He chuckled. "Soomey never gives up on anything she decides she wants. Silas says she could teach a mule stubborn."

Siri had many questions, but before she could ask any of them, the door opened again. A small Chinese boy set a bundle inside, gabbled something, and ducked back out. This time the lock did not click.

She started to rise.

"Finish your breakfast," Buffalo said. "We've time."

"I am not--"

"Siri, I'm not a man to abuse a woman, but I swear to God, if you don't stop telling me you're not hungry, I may strangle you. Now sit down and eat. You haven't made a dent in your food."

She sat. After a while she dipped up another bite.

The food did not stick in her throat. Slowly she ate, until the bowl was almost empty.

She would never tell him it tasted almost good.

* * *

Crystal's door was closed when Jaeger came up the stairs, but there was a bar of light showing under it. He put his ear to the thin wood panel and listened. The sounds were familiar, gross, animalistic grunts and groans. She had a customer.

Gut! I will not have so much work to do.

He went into the room he'd rented. Last night he had removed all his possessions, but he wanted to make sure no trace of him remained. He wiped every surface, removed the bedding and shook it, rinsed the slop bucket and tossed the water from the open window. He was looking under the bed when he heard Crystal's door open. Voices came from the hallway, then a single set of

footsteps faded as someone went downstairs. He waited until the low thud of the door closing told him Crystal was alone.

"Who is it?" she called, when he knocked.

"Me, Herman," he replied. "Are you free?"

The door opened quickly. "Oh, honey, come on in. I've really missed you. Did you get your business all taken care of?"

"Yes, everything is taken care of."

He sat in the room's only chair and pulled her onto his lap. "There is only one more small thing I must do." The excitement of the hunt still stirred his blood, and he might as well enjoy this little whore one last time. She was extraordinarily skilled.

His first kiss was gentle. The next one was not. She winced when he sank his teeth into her lip.

He caught her wrists, held them with one hand while he wrapped them with the heavy twine he'd already cut to the proper length.

"What are you doing?" she cried, fighting him.

He slapped her. "Be silent!"

She gasped, then opened her mouth to scream.

He closed his hand across her throat. Squeezed. "You will not scream. If you do, I will hurt you very much. Do you understand?"

Her eyes were enormous. Her mouth worked, but only hoarse wheezes emerged.

"*Gut!* Now, I will show you some new tricks. You will find them...diverting." he lifted her, tossed her onto the bed. Before she could roll aside, he had her wrists tied to the rusty iron headboard.

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Her voice was a harsh whisper.

Perhaps he had squeezed harder than he'd intended. "It amuses me."

Standing at the foot of the bed, he took his clothing off, letting her see again his magnificent musculature, his enormous *penis*, and his handsome Prussian face.

He was fully erect, and he could have fucked her then. But pleasure deferred was all the better flavored. He knelt astride her. "Your mouth is clever," he said, smiling down at her. "You may show me just how clever it is. If you give me pleasure, I may untie you."

She worked him with lips and tongue, bringing him to the brink of climax. He drew back, and waited until the need ebbed into mere wanting. After a while, he turned her and mounted her from the back, bringing her to orgasm, and laughing as she threshed and moaned.

"Let me loose," she said, when he turned her onto her back again, "so I can touch you."

"Ah, my little *schatz*, you must not touch me tonight." He caught her nipple, pinched until she cried out. "I will do the touching. I am in command, you see. Tonight we will only do what I desire."

For two hours and more he had his way with her. Twice more he brought her to completion, once with gentle touches and sweet words, the second time with force and pain. Whores, he knew, liked to be hurt as much as they liked to be

pleasured.

When he tired of the game, she lay quiescent under his hands, exhausted and without hope. He knew she had at last understood he was done with her.

No woman who had ever warmed his bed had gone to another man afterward.

He made sure of that.

All the time he had been working her, he had held himself in check. Now the need threatened his control. He rose above her and fitted himself to her. Slowly he penetrated her yet again. Slowly he pushed in, in, until she could take no more of him. "Wake up, little *schatz*. I want to watch your face."

She moaned and moved her head from side to side.

He slapped her lightly, affectionately. She had been a good girl and he was pleased with her. "'Wake up', I said. Open your eyes."

Her eyes, pain glazed and only half-focused, opened, fixed on his face.

"You are a good girl." He reached to the table beside the bed, picked up the waiting knife. "Now we finish."

Chapter Eighteen

Once Siri and Buff were seated in Li Ching's sanctum, he waited with outward patience while the other man wrote with rapid strokes of a pointed paintbrush.

"I have good news for you," Li Ching said, when he'd set the brush aside. "An associate has arrived from Portland. He brings word there is a new boarding house for maritime men in the city. It is operated by a woman who calls herself Martha Peterson."

"Martine!" Siri leaned forward. "And *mina barn*? Does she have *mina barn* with her?"

"My associate was not seeking your children, Mrs. Trogen. He is a purveyor of teas and spices, and was dealing with the cook." Clapping his hands, Li Ching waited until the door behind him opened. He spoke briefly to the young man who appeared. "I have sent for him. Perhaps he saw something."

Li Ching had tea brought. Buff sipped at the smoky tasting infusion, thinking that some teas were better than others. He noticed Siri made a small face and merely touched her lips to the rim of the delicate china cup she held.

"Perhaps you will tell me of your adventures while we await my associate. Something delayed you, yes? Were you able to learn anything at Daws' Landing?"

Buff related what had happened, at least the bare bones of it. He concluded with, "I'd like to go back and talk to Daws, although I doubt it'll do much good. The way she covered her tracks, I'll bet Daws knows nothing about where the furniture went."

"I agree." Li Ching leaned back, tapped his fingertips together. "Perhaps you will allow me to send one of my men to speak with Daws' cook. Your people often ignore mine, as if we were invisible. It is sometimes quite convenient."

"I'd be obliged. As soon as I find someplace safe for--"

A knock interrupted him. At Li Ching's command, the door opened to admit a young Chinese man who bowed low.

"He does not speak English," Li Ching told them. "I will translate." He rattled off a long string of syllables.

The young man answered, shaking his head.

Li Ching said something more.

Again the headshake.

Li Ching frowned, gestured him to the side of the room. "He did not get inside the house. The woman apparently does not trust people of my race, for the kitchen is in a separate building and the cook is not allowed to enter. He did see the woman, however, and his description of her matches the one her cook at Daws' Landing provided."

He paused and stroked his short beard. "Very strange. Her cook at Daws' landing also served. In this new house, the cook carries food to a covered area near the back door and passes it through a window. No one is allowed to enter or leave the house through the back door, which is kept locked and barred at all times. Even to go to the... ah, the outhouse, the maid must enter and return through the front door."

"Does that sound like your mother-in-law?" Buff asked Siri.

"She does not trust the Chinese," Siri told him, "but she has never seemed to fear them."

"I think it is not fear, but secretiveness," Li Ching said. "There is something in that house she does not wish to have seen."

"That's what I think, too," Buff agreed. "Something like a couple of kids that don't belong to her." He turned to Siri. "I know you get seasick, but this time you'll just have to suffer. Can you be ready to go to Portland tomorrow?"

Her face went stark white and her mouth worked. "I do not know," she said after a long silence.

"We'll get to Portland, one way or another. Please tell your associate I am eternally in his debt." Buff bowed to the young trader.

The trader bowed too, and spoke a few fluid syllables.

"He was gratified you found his information useful," Li Ching translated. He waved a dismissal at the young man. "Now," he said, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Anything I can do," Buff told him, "as long as it's legal."

"It is entirely legal. Only a message I wish carried to your worthy uncle. Now I believe you must tend to Mrs. Trogen. She is distressed."

She sure was. Buff had been watching her from the corner of his eye. Huddled into herself, she seemed to have shrunk, like a bladder with all the air let out. "I'll be back," he told Li Ching, before scooping her up.

He sure hoped Mrs. Leong still had room for them. They needed a private place to sort this out.

* * *

Back in the little room behind the Chinese store, Buff sat on the bed and held Siri in his arms. He'd been doing a lot of that lately. Only trouble was, he'd rather the circumstances were a little different.

"Siri, talk to me," he said, after a while. "There's more than seasickness to your not wanting to get on a boat, isn't there? You're terrified. Aren't you?"

She didn't respond. If it weren't for the slight motion of her shoulders with each breath, he would have wondered if she was even alive.

"Gabe fell in the river when he was about three. He would've drowned if Katie hadn't screamed her head off. After that we couldn't get him near water. He didn't even like to take a bath. The rest of us kids were like little fish, always running off to the river to swim. But Gabe, he'd sit on the bank and watch us."

"Gabe is your brother?"

Well, at least she'd found her tongue. "Nope. He's Flower's boy, hers and William's. They're my godparents. When we lived in Cherry Vale, they were our only neighbors." He looked down. Her eyes had closed again, and she'd pulled back into herself. "Gabe, he was a holy terror. Never still a minute. Broke his leg the first time when he was about a year and a half, falling off the roof. He'd climbed up the woodpile and--"

"You are making that up. No baby so young would climb on a roof."

"You haven't met Gabe. I doubt I could make up some of the stunts he's

pulled. Like the time he decided he was going to ride the pig..."

Her elbow in his belly drove the wind from him. "I do not want to hear about this make-believe child. I will tell you why I do not like boats and then you will understand."

"Hold on a minute." He went to the brazier and poured two cups of tea from the pot that sat on its grate. When he joined her again on the bed, she was sitting with her back to the wall, her posture telling him she did not want to be held in his arms.

Buff settled himself, legs stretched out in front of him. "So why don't you like boats?"

"*Min far* was a fisherman. I told you that. Sometimes he would take me on his boat." She hesitated, took several deep breaths before going on. "That is what he told me. I do not remember. I remember nothing before I was twelve."

"Nothing at all?"

She shook her head. "We were fishing off Tillamook Head. The seas were high, he said, because there was a fierce storm far out where we could not see it. He was worried the weather would get worse, so he had turned us toward home."

"You remember that much?"

"*Nej*. I only tell you what *min far* told me." Setting the teacup aside, she rose to her feet and paced the length of the room, all of five steps. Without turning back, she said, "When a great wave caught us and almost tipped us over, I fell into the water. I could not swim."

"Your pa was a fisherman and you couldn't swim?"

She shrugged. "He said he had never thought about teaching me. No one had taught him. He learned the first time he fell into the water."

Buff swore under his breath. "He must have figured his method worked. You stayed afloat."

He could see the whiteness of her knuckles even from where he sat.

"There was debris--from a shipwreck. I fell into the middle of it, and was caught fast. It kept me afloat." Turning, she said, "Sometimes I dream of it still. So cold! And in my dreams, I sink. I go deep, until my chest hurts, until I must breathe. And I am caught in chains, that hold me so I cannot move."

"They thought I would die, for I had breathed water. I was ill...for a long time. All that winter, I think, for I cannot remember anything before the spring." She buried her face in her hands. "I have tried to remember, but I cannot."

"Only what *min far* told me. All the rest is gone...as if I had not lived at all until then."

He sat up straight. "Siri, when did it happen? What month? What year?"

"Does it matter?" She returned to the bed and sat down next to him, but not so close that they were touching.

"It could. When?"

"I was twelve, so it was 1859. In the fall, I think. *Far* never said, but once he mentioned I was sick for half a year."

Well aware that what he was thinking was about as possible as finding a palm tree growing in Astoria, he said, "September? Could it have been September? Around the eighth?"

"That is my *födelsedag*. How did you know?"

"Your birthday? I didn't. But something else happened that day. There was a shipwreck, a little south of Point Adams..."

"Oh! The little girl, the one you seek. Was that when...?"

"As close as I can tell, that's when the ship she might have been on went down. There weren't many survivors, but some of them were girls. Trouble is, the records show one more girl than I can account for. It could be her."

She turned to stare at him. "And you think that I--"

"I want to, but... No, not really. Either way, I can't leave a stone unturned." He caught her hands in his. "It's just so damned coincidental! You look enough like Anders to be his twin. If you fell in the water that day--the same day the *Dancing Goddess* is supposed to have gone down...in the same general area...."

When she tried to pull her hands free of his grasp, he realized he'd been holding her tightly enough to hurt. "If only you were a couple of years younger. And Danish." He slumped back against the wall. "Well, never mind. We need to think about finding your kids, and not worry about my search."

Siri laid her hand on his arm. "I am sorry, Buffalo. I hope you will find her someday." She was chewing her lip.

When he put his hand over hers, she blinked rapidly. "Look, Siri, I'm sure there's a way to get to Portland overland, but I'm not sure we'd be smart to try it this time of year. Are you sure you can't take a boat?"

"Could you not go without me? Find *mina barn* and bring them back to me?"

He considered. Sure, he could go up there to Portland, wangle his way inside the boarding house, and see if there were a couple of kids the right ages there. "Do you have pictures of your kids? Photographs? Drawings?"

She shook her head. "*Nej*. I wanted to have photographs made for our rooms, but Valter said it cost too much. He said we could always look at the ones Martine had."

So all he'd have to go on would be descriptions. Even though he'd come from a large family--or perhaps because he had--Buff knew that all kids below five or six looked pretty much alike, except for hair and eye color maybe. "Birthmarks? Anything that would positively identify either one of them?"

Slowly she shook her head. "*Nej*. Nothing."

"Well, then," he said, feeling like an ogre, "I guess you'll have to give up ever seeing them again. You'll not get anyone willing to kidnap a couple of kids without a definite identification."

"*Nej! Nej, nej, nej!* I will not give up *mina barn*! I will do what I must to have them with me."

"Good. I'll make reservations on tomorrow's steamer to Portland." He stood up, wishing there had been some other way to get her cooperation.

* * *

After Buffalo had gone out, Siri dressed in clothing Mrs. Leong had found for her. The shirtwaist must have belonged to a short, buxom woman, for it could have wrapped around her twice, yet would barely tuck into her skirt. The latter was too short, showing the tops of her boots. Ordinarily she would not have gone out

dressed so, but today she had no choice. At least the wool shawl was large enough to hang past her hips and was warm.

If Mrs. Leong was telling the truth, she was not only without work, she was homeless.

Icy rain was again coating every surface with a crystalline glaze as she made her slow and cautious way up the street to the hotel. The gusty wind made her umbrella all but useless, until she finally closed it and used it for a walking stick.

When she knocked at the back door of the hotel, Bao answered almost immediately. He motioned her inside. "Be quiet. *She* in parlor." When he said *she* with that particular inflection, everyone knew who he was talking about. Mrs. Welkins and Bao detested each other, but he was such a good cook that she put up with him.

She removed her coat and hung it on a hook, then stood the umbrella under it. "She's very angry with me, isn't she, Bao? Mrs. Leong said she'd hired someone to take my place."

"New woman start yesterday. She already in room." He shook his head. "Not nice person. Very holy."

Stifling a smile, Siri said, "I have to talk to Mrs. Welkins. Maybe she'll understand why I couldn't get back."

He shook his head. "Not understand. Not want to. New woman not smile. *She* like."

"Oh, dear." More than once Mrs. Welkins had rebuked Siri and Carleen for joking as they worked. Apparently the new maid was more to her liking. "Well, I still must try." She glanced into the mirror beside the door, and smoothed her hair. Her stomach churned.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Welkins demanded, as soon as Siri came into sight.

"I came to explain--"

"I want none of your lies. You were off with the Lachlan fellow. Everyone saw you leaving town with him. I'll have no whores working in *my* hotel."

"But--"

"Get out! And don't come back. I'll send someone with your worthless belongings. Carleen packed them up for you." She sniffed. "I would've thrown them out, but she wouldn't let me."

Siri straightened her shoulders and looked down at Mrs. Welkins "I will go, but you are wrong. This is a bad thing you do, not letting me tell you what happened." She started to turn away, then paused, holding out her hand. "You owe me wages since the first of January."

"You forfeited your pay when you didn't show up--"

"*Nej*, I did not. You will pay me. Now." She leaned forward, hands on the counter. "Or perhaps I will tell all the men how you treat me," she said, although she had no intention of doing so.

She thought she heard Mrs. Welkins mutter "Whore," under her breath, but said nothing. Not until she had her money in her hand.

When she'd counted the money, Siri put it into her pocket. "I am not a whore," she said. "I am a good woman. But you are not. You are *ond*, *en häxa*! I

am almost happy I work for you no longer."

She managed to walk steadily until she was around the corner, then her steps faltered as her knees threatened to give way. Although she shook with a terrible rage, she knew she had just made a great enemy. Mrs. Welkins would tell other innkeepers that Siri Trogen was a whore, and none of them would hire her.

"What'd you call her?" Carleen came down the stairs as Siri passed them. "A battleaxe? That's what it sounded like."

"I called her an evil witch. She is one," Siri said, as she slapped the kitchen door open.

"Did she give your job back?"

Siri shook her head. "*Nej*, she did not." Her rage faded as she paced the length of the kitchen. It gave way to fear. She sank on to the settee and buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Carleen, what am I to do? I have no place to go, no money."

"But I thought... Isn't Mr. Lachlan--"

"He is not keeping me," Siri snapped. The umbrella in its stand mocked her. Who had paid for it? "He is helping me to find *mina barn*. That is all." But her voice faltered on the last three words.

"Well, I'll bet he *would* keep you, if you played your cards right. That night--when your room was broke into, the way he looked at you..." She shivered. "I'd give a pretty penny if a man looked at me that way, all hungry, but tender, like he was right fond of you."

"He is a gentleman," Siri said. At least those words were true. "Mrs. Welkins said you had my things. I will send someone for them. And I thank you."

"What're friends for?" Carleen gave her a quick hug. "Where are you staying? If you need a place, my mother--"

"*Nej*, I have a place to stay, for now, at least. Mrs. Leong has a room for me."

"Oh, my, aren't you scared to stay there?" Carleen cast a wary glance over her shoulder, but Bao was no longer in the kitchen. "What if Li Ching finds out you're there? Next thing you know, you'll be sold into slavery."

Siri had to smile. "Oh, I do not think that will be a problem. Mr. Lachlan is well-respected by the Chinese. They know I am his...friend."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. Not for anything." Another quick, one-armed hug, and Carleen was on her feet. "Look, I've got to get back to work, before the old witch catches me." She winked. "So you really called her an old witch. Too bad you didn't say it in English." With a last wave, she was gone.

In a moment she was back, smiling widely. "I have something to tell you. I'll come over tonight." She disappeared, leaving the door swinging widely.

Siri knew she should get back to the Chinese store. There was much to be done before tomorrow.

Instead she sat in the empty kitchen, overcome by an enormous lassitude.

Chapter Nineteen

When Jaeger entered the empty hotel lobby, he heard the red-haired maid speaking with someone. He made sure the door to the library was closed, then he tiptoed down to the landing where he could listen. The other speaker's voice was indistinct, but after hearing what Carleen was saying, he decided she was the other maid, Siri, who Mrs. Welkins said was no longer employed by the hotel.

What is she doing here, then?

He listened a moment longer, then decided the women were saying nothing of interest, so he went up to the third floor. Curious, he detoured to the north hall and listened briefly at the door to Mr. Lachlan's room. There was no sound. Quickly he used the key he had stolen from the *hôte*lier's desk. The room was empty, the arrangement of brush, comb, and water glass on the bureau as he had left it three days ago. Lachlan had not returned here.

So. Perhaps he has found other lodging.

Astoria was not so large that Jaeger would have difficulty discovering where it was.

* * *

By the time Buff got back to the Chinese store, the weather had gone from miserable to downright frightful. The word on the docks was that bad weather was coming. Most Astorians seemed to pay no attention to the incessant rain, and considered anything under a full gale a gentle breeze. If they didn't go to Portland tomorrow, it might be a while. Siri would be frightened enough aboard a boat on calm water. He didn't want to make matters worse by forcing her to travel when the river was rough.

Siri. Was he being cruel to her to insist she come with him? He didn't really understand her fear, for all he'd made sympathetic noises when she'd told him of her near-drowning.

He wasn't at all confident he could identify her kids beyond any doubt, no matter how well she described them. Great God! He could just imagine snatching a couple of kids and bringing them back to her, only to find they weren't hers. A good way to get himself lynched.

Not to mention the grief he'd cause the kids and their folks. That was the justification he'd offer Siri. She'd never cause another woman to suffer as she had.

Satisfied he had the right tack to take, he made his way back to the Chinese store. This morning he'd made arrangements with Mrs. Leong for Siri to stay as long as she needed to, and for her possessions to be stored there.

What a place it was! A warren, hidden in the center of a block, looking like a warehouse, with high, blank walls. The only entrance, as near as he'd been able to tell, was through the Chinese store. He'd bet there were others, ones he'd never be allowed to see. Li Ching might have welcomed him, and might treat him with civility because he was Silas' nephew, but when push came to shove, Buffalo was not Chinese, and therefore not to be trusted.

Siri was not in the room.

"She go hotel," Mrs. Leong said, obviously disapproving, when he entered the store. "Not listen when I say Chu bring her belongings."

Buff looked out the dirty window. It was nearly full dark. "How long ago?"

"Long time. Little while after you go out."

Shit! Buff pulled his hat and coat back on. "I'm going after her. How do I get in if you're closed?"

"You knock. I hear."

How the hell did Siri figure to carry everything she owned down that hill one-armed? Damned independent woman. Just like his sisters.

Once he started up the hill to the hotel, he knew she could not have carried anything, not and kept her feet. Every surface was ice-covered and getting worse every minute. If it weren't for the deep, broken ruts, frozen almost solid now, he'd have never made it ten yards up the street.

* * *

Siri eventually found the energy to return to the Chinese store. She wrapped her shawl over her head and shoulders and stepped out the back door.

The world glistened. In the light from windows and the few street lamps visible from the hotel, golden sparkles blinked from branches, fences, even the rough surface of the street. A fine mist filled the icy air, giving the view an unworldly appearance, as if she stood at the bottom of a pool of clear, pure water.

Cold water. She shivered. Deciding the umbrella would do her more good as a walking stick than in keeping off the mist, she carefully descended the wooden steps and made her way across the narrow back yard to the street. She discovered that if she kept to the grassy verge of the street, she could half-step, half-slide along. Unbalanced, because she could not swing her strapped arm, she placed each foot carefully. At the first corner, a half-block away, she almost fell. The umbrella went flying as she reached for a fencepost, caught herself at the cost of a splinter and a scraped palm. Then she had to lean over and pick up the umbrella from the icy grass.

Clinging to the fencepost, she took a few moments to catch her breath before going on. With tiny, mincing steps, she crossed Wall Street. An orchard occupied the next half block, apple trees gnarled and twisted, looking like the trolls *far* had told her of when she was a child. Again she shivered, but this time only partly because of the cold. She had never realized how *kuslig*, how frightening, the orchard seemed in the dark. Still, she forced herself to take slow, careful steps, for the street was steep here, and if she fell she might slide all the way to the river.

Eyes aimed at the ground just before her, attention totally on choosing the next secure foothold, she did not see the man until he was upon her.

* * *

Jaeger watched the woman approach. She was distracting Lachlan from his quest. It was time he resumed seeking the Thorssen heiress.

Jaeger wanted to go back to Europe. He had been away from his homeland far too long, first pursuing the swine who had carried the *Graf's* stolen diamonds from Düsseldorf to Hawaii, then following Lachlan. He was sick of America, sick of

the rough denizens of this godforsaken town, sick to death of crude manners and plain food and ugly, utilitarian clothing.

The woman passed the pile of tree trimmings he crouched behind. She was moving slowly, picking her way along the ice-slick verge. When she was just beyond his position, he leapt, knife held low, its blade uppermost.

As he drove it upward, toward her belly, his foot slipped on icy grass. The knife, instead of gutting her, sliced through her skirt and caught in the heavy fabric. "*Verdammt!*" he snarled, as he fell past her. He held onto the knife, and heard cloth rip.

The woman screamed.

"Siri!"

Jaeger let go of the knife and rolled to the side. He half-crawled, half slithered into the orchard. Once he got cleanly to his feet, he ran, dodging between the trees, until he reached the next street over.

"*Verdammt!*" he said again, as he ducked into a shadow and looked backward. The woman had the luck of angels. Now Lachlan would be even more vigilant.

No one followed. He could not see through the block, but neither could he hear pursuit. Lachlan was likely making sure the woman was safe, instead of following. He had Jaeger's knife, but it would tell him nothing.

The knife was not traceable. Jaeger had taken it off a sailor, not wanting to use his cherished Solingen blade on a mere peasant woman.

Disgusted with his own clumsiness, he made his way downhill, to the raw little cabin by the waterfront. Next time he would plan more carefully, not be so impatient.

Next time.

* * *

"Are you hurt?" Buff knelt beside Siri, where she lay crumpled in the street. He couldn't see worth a damn, but he could feel. She was panting, but not writhing in pain. After that first scream she'd made no sound.

"*N-n-nej*. I do not think so." Moving slowly, she uncurled herself, moving slowly. "Only my shoulder. There is no other pain. But he did strike me. Here." She patted her hip, ran her hand along the fabric of her skirt. Then she gasped.

"What? You're hurt?"

"*Nej*, but my skirt...it is cut. See!"

He didn't see a damn thing. "You're sure you're okay?"

"*Ja*. Only shaken."

Her quavery voice would have told him that. "Look, I can't pick you up. I'd half-kill us both. Can you stand? If I put my arm around your waist?"

"I think so." She leaned heavily on his arm, gasping once when she slipped and fell against him. Her injured shoulder struck his chest a good blow, and she squeaked.

Buff shifted his grip, took more of her weight.

Slowly she got to her feet, clinging to his arm with her free hand. "My *parasoll*, I had it..."

He held her a moment longer, until he felt sure she was steady. Going down on one knee, he felt around their feet, wincing as the sharp ice crystals scraped across his palm. He'd about given up when his hand struck something hard, metallic. Not an umbrella. A knife!

He picked it up and rose to his feet. "Forget the umbrella. Let's get you back to the room."

"But--"

"Siri, whoever that was could be still lurking out there." He gestured at the orchard, its shadowy depths capable of concealing half a regiment." Now let's go. Just be careful. One of us slips, and we'll both end up tail over teakettle."

Her small chuckle was shaky, but at least she had the gumption to laugh.

They reached the Chinese store eventually, after one more tumble and several frantic scrambles to stay upright. The door was still open and Mrs. Leong sat behind the counter. She nodded when they entered. "Can you wait until I get Siri settled?" Buff asked her. "We had some trouble tonight and I'm going to need your help."

"I wait," the Chinese woman agreed.

Once in the room, Buff said, "You go to bed. I'll see if I can get some help. I want to see if that bas...the man who attacked you left a trail."

"I will not sleep," she said.

He could hear the control she was exerting. Most women would have been having a hysterical fit about now.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close while he stroked her back. "Siri, I'll be back as soon as I can. But if we wait until morning, we won't have a chance to find a trail. I wish I knew what's going on. Somebody's tried to kill you. I want to know why."

"Go," she said, pushing him away. "I will be all right in a little while."

"I'll be back quick as I can." Tipping her face up, he kissed her gently. When he left the room, he locked the door behind him. He didn't want her deciding to take matters into her own hands.

Back in the store, he asked Mrs. Leong if he could see Li Ching that night.

"I ask," she said, and went upstairs.

He heard footsteps overhead, a creak, as of a door opening, then more footsteps, fading quickly. After a while, perhaps a quarter of an hour, she returned. "You go Li Ching office. Right quick."

He felt the full force of the wind when he went outside. The freezing rain had let up, but the thick mist still hovered. He kept expecting to come face to face with a salmon on its way upstream.

* * *

Siri removed her skirt and unbuttoned the blouse. She had to leave it on, though, for she could not get it to slide over her right shoulder. Wearily she turned back the quilt on the pallet. As she eased herself down, she felt twinges of pain in her back and thighs. Her left knee was stiff, and a dull throb, almost like a toothache, in her elbow reminded her she'd taken her whole weight on her left arm when she grabbed at the fencepost.

The door opened. Mrs. Leong entered, carrying a tray on which sat a teapot and a single cup. "I bring healing tea," she said. "You drink. Tomorrow you not hurt."

"Thank you." She took the cup and sniffed at the steam. It had a peculiar aroma, almost bitter. Hesitantly she sipped. It tasted worse than it smelled.

"Drink," Mrs. Leong said again.

Siri obeyed, trying her best not to notice the taste. When Mrs. Leong lifted the pot, she obediently held out the cup. The second helping was as nasty as the first.

Mrs. Leong left, locking the door behind her.

Did everyone think Siri was going to be so foolish as to run away from a place she felt safe and protected? She settled herself on the pallet, trying to find a comfortable position. After a while, she realized the aches and pains were less. *The tea must have done some good*, she thought. Soon after she noticed that each thought that drifted through her head seemed caught in a thick substance, like cold molasses. Her body felt heavy and immovable.

* * *

Buff and the three young Chinese men searched for hours, using torches and lanterns to look at the ground in the orchard. They eventually found where Siri's assailant had emerged on Washington, but could trace him no farther.

While they were still seeking a trail along the street, Buff saw two policemen approaching, carrying lanterns. He went to meet them, knowing his companions would prefer not to be seen too closely. While the Chinese were accepted in Astoria as a necessary evil, they were not universally liked or trusted.

The taller of the two was Carleen's cousin. Gillespie. Buff greeted him.

"Oh, it's you, Lachlan. What're you up to, this time of night?"

"Trying to find the trail of a man who attacked Siri earlier. We've traced him this far."

"Attacked?" the shorter policeman said. "How?"

"He had a knife. She managed to dodge so he didn't cut her, but it was a near thing. Sliced her skirt some."

The two policemen looked at each other. After a moment, Gillespie said, "Did she get a look at him?"

Buff shook his head. "It was pitch dark. All she knows is he was taller than she is. Light-haired, she thinks."

"And you said you found footprints?"

"Such as they are." He gestured toward the orchard, noticing as he half-turned that his Chinese helpers had disappeared. "In there. I'll show you."

"Don't know what good it'll do," Gillespie's companion said. "We don't have footprints from the girl's room."

"Girl? Has there been another killing?" The first time he'd met Gillespie, the policeman had been looking for a killer. One who'd used a knife. Buff paused, pointed at the clear boot print in the now-frozen mud under a leafless apple tree.

"There. That's the best one we found."

"What do you know about--"

Gillespie interrupted his cohort. "I told him, Henry. After Carleen vouched for him." Letting the other man kneel to make measurements, he said to Buff, "It was ugly. Reminded me of the first one, but it wasn't the same. This one--a young whore--well, it almost looked like he played with her a long time, maybe all night long. He'd used her, too, more than once. When he got tired of that, he started carving pieces off of her--while she was still alive."

"Great God!"

"Yeah. Poor tyke. She didn't deserve to die like that. Nobody does."

They'd moved on to the next print while Gillespie spoke. It was not as well defined. Buff pointed it out. "From the size and depth, I'd say he was a big man, close to my height and heavier."

"Looks that way. Henry," he called, "come take a look at this one too."

"I suppose you want to know where I was during the time in question--or do you know when she died?"

"Sometime yesterday or the day before." He glanced up at Buff. "You've got an alibi, I guess?"

"Siri and I went up to Daws' landing day before yesterday. We had some trouble there, and didn't get back until late yesterday."

"I'd say you're clear, then." He knelt beside another print, this one blurred because the maker had slid in wet mud. "Too bad he didn't fall and break his noggin," Gillespie remarked. "Here's where he caught himself." He pointed to an ice-filled depression that was almost certainly made by an outspread hand.

"I missed that," Buff told him.

"No wonder, dark as it is. We'll come back in daylight and take another look around, but it's not likely we'll find anything helpful."

"I'll be checking along the street both ways, and will let you know if I find anything." He nodded to the other policemen and returned to the edge of the orchard.

The three Chinese men materialized out of the fog. "Let's go," Buff told them. "Mu Far and I'll take this side, your two do the other. We'll work our way up to the edge of the woods, then back down."

The three nodded.

Somewhere around three in the morning, they gave up. All four were half-frozen. They went to the Golden Lion Bar where, much as Buff had suspected, there was a back room where the Chinese congregated. Hot tea and sweet wine waited for them. He drank one cup of the strong tea to be polite, but soon departed, knowing he made the other denizens of the room uncomfortable just because of who he was.

Siri was sound asleep when he got to their room. He removed his boots and lay down beside her, telling himself to wake in two hours.

* * *

Siri woke when Buffalo called her, feeling stiff and sore, but not at all in pain. Whatever had been in the tea, it had worked well. When she looked in the small mirror, she wished she had not, for her face was indeed as colorful as Mrs. Leong had predicted and her hair hung in lank, tangled strands.

As if summoned, the Chinese woman appeared, carrying a basin. "Sit. I wash, comb." She prodded Siri toward the stool and set the basin on the floor beside it. "First, wash, then dress." She glanced over her shoulder. "You go now," she told Buffalo. "Food in store. I bring woman when clean."

Meekly Siri submitted to having her face washed, her hair combed. She bit her lip when Mrs. Leong made disapproving noises at the state of her blouse. "I could not take it off," she said, noticing for the first time how wrinkled it was. "There is a hole in my skirt, too." At least she had not caused that.

"No matter. I get better. You sit, no move." This time when she bustled out, she left the door ajar.

Siri sat waiting, clad in nothing but a thin linen shift, and hoped no one would walk past.

Mrs. Leong returned, carrying a bundle of black cloth. "You very tall. I bring man clothes." Shaking out the garments, she showed Siri a long shirt of silky fabric, decorated on the standing collar with embroidery of gold thread. In her other hand she held trousers made of something heavy, like canvas. "Very nice clothes. Long enough." She gestured for Siri to stand.

In order to satisfy Mrs. Leong's sense of style, Siri was forced to remove her shift. For a moment, as she stood naked in the small room, she wondered what had happened to her will. Somewhere yesterday it had drained away, leaving her as soft dough for Buffalo and Mrs. Leong to shape and direct.

This is indecent. Everyone will see I am naked under... She obediently stepped into the trousers and let Mrs. Leong pull them to her waist, where they tied with a wide twill ribbon.

"Now sit again. I fix arm."

Shortly Siri's right arm had been wrapped tightly against her body with a clean, soft strip of cotton. She slipped her other arm into the silken shirt when Mrs. Leong held it up. The silk slid across her shoulders and arms like cool water, soothing wherever it touched. When the frog fasteners were all closed, Mrs. Leong stepped back and said, "Now you beautiful! Lachlan will like!"

Never having been beautiful in her life, Siri merely said, "Thank you. They are very nice clothes."

She could not ignore the gleam in Buffalo's eyes when he entered. He said nothing, though, so she supposed he was merely hungry.

After they'd eaten, Siri and Buffalo walked the two blocks to the steamship docks. The food in her belly seemed to grow colder and heavier with each step. They rounded the corner of a warehouse and she saw the *Kehloka*, its cabin gaily painted in red and white, its smokestack gleaming black, even in the foggy dawn. The huge sternwheel was covered with an open fretwork of white-and-red painted wood and a brass rail around the main deck gleamed in the light from lanterns hanging from the side of the wheelhouse.

Her throat grew tight and her heart seemed to pound in her chest.

Buffalo led her to the small shack at the back end of the dock. "Two for Portland," he told the man inside.

Siri tried to take a deep breath, but felt as if her chest would not expand.

Buffalo paid for the tickets and turned to her. "Ready?"

She shook her head, and the world seemed to spin around her.

"Siri, what's wrong?"

His voice came from far away. She tried to speak, but her throat was tight and her tongue immobile in her mouth. His face blurred before her.

A roaring filled her ears and the world spun faster. Siri gasped, but could find no air to breathe.

Chapter Twenty

Buff caught her as she fell. He swept her up and turned away from the ticket office.

"Hey! You didn't get your tickets!" the agent called.

"Hold 'em," Buff said over his shoulder. "I'll be back later."

Siri lay quiet in his arms. If it weren't for the trembling of her body, he would have thought she'd fainted. As he walked up the litter-strewn street toward the Chinese store, he cursed himself for not paying attention to the way she'd toyed with her food earlier, the pallor of her face.

He was starting to wonder if he'd spend the rest of his life in Astoria. First the bad food, then the deal with Li Ching. Now a sick woman.

He'd been captivated by a pair of sad blue eyes, a sweet, poignant smile, a woman in need. Then he looked down at her still, pale face and knew there was more than sympathy in his feelings for Siri.

Mrs. Leong opened the door for him. "Sick?" she said, as he edged past her.

"No, she's...yeah, she's sick. I'll take her to our room."

"I bring soup." The Chinese woman bustled behind the counter, where a big black cauldron always sat on the small stove.

Once they were in the room, he lowered Siri to the pallet. Quickly he lit the candles in the sconces, then returned to go down on one knee beside the pallet. He laid a hand on her forehead and found it cold and damp with sweat. "Siri, what is it? What happened?"

She lay there, inert, but he saw movement under her eyelids.

When he touched two fingers to the pulse under her jaw, he was startled at how rapid it was. Much too fast, much too strong. Her chest moved spasmodically as she gasped for breath.

All of a sudden, Buff was scared. He'd seen a man drop dead of heart failure on the street in Paris. Just before the fellow collapsed, practically at his feet, he'd noticed the beads of sweat on the white face, had seen the way his chest had heaved in an effort to draw in a last breath.

Siri looked just as that man had, the instant before he'd fallen.

Not sure what to do, he laid his one hand on her chest, while with his other, he lightly stroked her cheek. "Siri," he said, "hang on. You'll be fine. Just try to relax."

He hoped she would.

Mrs. Leong came in and set a tray with a covered bowl and a teapot on the floor beside him. She touched his shoulder, then left as silently as she'd entered.

After what seemed an age, Siri's short, gasping breaths smoothed, although she still seemed to struggle to draw in enough air. Under his hand, her heart continued to beat rapidly, but with less force, he thought, and perhaps a little more slowly. He mouthed nonsense words at her, much the way his ma had to him that time he'd been so sick with the measles, caught from a wandering prospector who'd happened on Cherry Vale one spring.

Her hiccup startled him, but then he realized she had moved. Her eyes were open, staring into a distance only she could see.

"Siri," he said, finding his voice hoarse, his mouth dry. "Siri, what happened? Are you all right?"

He might as well have been talking to the wall. For a long time she lay there, eyes wide and staring, skin clammy. Her heart had slowed to a pace that worried him almost as much as the quick pounding, a light thump under his hand, a long pause, then another.

After a while she blinked. Her eyes focused on him, then closed. She huddled herself into a ball, her knees drawn up against her body. If both her hands had been free, she probably would have wrapped them around her legs and pulled even more tightly into herself.

"Siri, talk to me. What's wrong? Are you sick?"

Her head moved in a small negative motion.

"What's wrong then? You damn near fainted."

"The boat," she whispered. "I could not...my breath...my belly..." With a convulsive movement, she rolled to face the wall.

"You couldn't get on the boat? You're scared?"

"No. Not scared. I can...I will. *Mina barn*...if I do not go to Portland, I will lose them...I must get on the boat."

He eyed the bundle of misery on the pallet, wondering what he should do.

She was more than scared of boats. Her reaction had been from the gut, not from the mind. In the two short weeks he'd known Siri, he'd learned she had a determination and a strength few men had, let alone a slim, fragile-appearing woman like her. So she would go to Portland if it killed her.

What worried him was that it might.

Was there another way to get her to Portland? Could they travel overland?

He'd have to ask around.

She didn't say another word, just lay there on the pallet, an occasional tear leaking from under her closed eyelids. When he was sure she slept, he covered her with the quilt and blew out the candles. Mrs. Leong promised to look in on her occasionally. Since the only way she could get out was through the Chinese store, Buff was pretty sure she would be safe. As long as she stayed put.

He locked her in.

"It wasn't one of my boys," Abner Longstreet told him, when Buff went to his office seeking information. It was the closest the saloon keeper had come to admitting that some of the rowdies and hoodlums around Astoria were under his command. "In fact, I've had them keeping their eyes out. These killings--"

"Yeah, Gillespie told me. Ugly."

"I tell you Lachlan, I've seen some bad sights, but this was worse than any of them."

"Shit!"

"Yeah." Longstreet closed his eyes, shook his head. "I work for the Coalition sometimes, when it benefits us both, but I'm not a do-gooder, out to save the world. I've kept Astoria clean ever since I moved in. It's good for business." Leaning across the desk, he caught and held Buff's gaze with his own. "I'll find this bastard, and when I do..." Something primal and savage shone for an instant in his eyes.

"I'll be looking for him too. Maybe there'll be some left for you."

A spare smile tugged at Longstreet's thin lips. "I've heard. The little Swede. It's almost too bad you decided to give her a hand. I was hoping she'd get desperate."

Buff felt a momentary urge to smash the man's face. He pretended to be amused. "And go to work for you? Not a chance, Longstreet. She's a lady, through and through."

"Even ladies get desperate. I've never led a woman--or a man--astray, but I'm not above taking advantage of a lucky break." He turned aside and sorted through the papers piled on the side of his desk. "I just remembered--here's something that might interest you." He passed a slip of paper across the table.

Buff looked at the spidery writing. "Karl Lindholm? Who's he?"

"He used to be Arne Hansen's fishing partner." Leaning back, Longstreet steepled his fingers before his face. "One of my lads ran into him over in Lexington."

Buff studied the paper a moment, as if Lindholm's name should tell him something. "So why are you giving me this?"

"The old man was reminiscing to anybody who'd listen, going on about the early days, when he and Arne had fished together. Since Frank knew I was interested in Siri Trogen, he paid attention. Lindholm said something about Arne's daughter's funeral."

"A funeral? Hansen had two daughters?"

"Not as far as I knew." Leaning forward, he tapped one finger on the desktop. "I remember Arne Hansen and his wife. He was a big man, a square-headed Swede, but his hair was black as coal and his eyes were brown. His wife was short and round, but every bit as dark. That girl of theirs always reminded me of a fairy tale--a changeling hidden in a peasant's cottage." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he grimaced. "Good God! I'm getting fanciful in my old age. Don't tell anybody you heard me say that."

Buff grudgingly admitted he liked the man right then. "Lexington's across Young's Bay, isn't it? Over on the Skipanarwen River?" He didn't know how he'd get over there, but he wanted to talk to that old man. It shouldn't take long--over in the morning, back the same afternoon.

But what to do with Siri while he went? He'd never get her on one of those little steam ferries that crossed Young's Bay. Hell, he was going to have enough trouble getting her to Portland.

The small suspicion that lingered in his mind was even more fantastical than Longstreet's momentary whimsy, but he had to satisfy himself it was impossible. Siri's resemblance to Anders Thorssen was simply coincidence.

Or is it? Maybe I'd better stop hoping it is and get some facts.

* * *

After a couple of hours, he was convinced the trail to Portland wasn't something to tackle in the winter, especially with a woman. The weather changed while he was asking around. A stiff wind from the east blew the sky clear and brought bone-chilling cold to Astoria.

Siri was still lying on the pallet when he returned to the room, as if she hadn't moved since he left. At his entrance, she cowered back against the wall, her free hand covering her mouth, almost as if she was afraid of him. Her eyes seemed to have grown larger, and she looked at him with the expression of a frightened doe, about to dash to safety.

"Siri, I'm going to have to leave you here tomorrow. Will you promise to stay inside?"

Slowly her head turned, back and forth, in a negative motion.

"Siri? Promise me you'll stay indoors."

"I must go...to Portland." Her voice was husky, hesitant.

"We'll go to Portland. I give you my word." He just wasn't sure how he'd get her there. "Trouble is, there's no steamer headed that way tomorrow. So I'm going to take care of some business that I ought not leave hanging. It shouldn't take more than a day." He caught her hand, squeezed it lightly. "With luck I'll be back here by suppertime tomorrow. Now, will you promise to stay here, out of sight. I don't want to have to worry about you."

After another long silence, she blinked and seemed to come to herself. She licked her lips, then said, "Mrs. Leong asked me when we were going. I think she wants us away from here."

Well, hell! He went looking for Mrs. Leong.

"Many men come morning, need place to sleep. You go hotel one, maybe two days. Then come back," she told him.

Buff promised to vacate the room by evening. Only trouble was, he didn't want to leave Siri in some hotel. No telling what kind of trouble she'd get into.

It wasn't that he didn't trust her. Just that she was so damn desperate to find those kids that she was apt to take foolish chances. If somebody really was trying to harm her...

Once more he locked her in. No sense taking chances.

He arrived at the Pacific Western Hotel just as the others were finishing dinner. After a round of greetings, he explained. "Yes, I've been here and there. Taking care of business." He forced a careless smile. "There's no rest for the wicked, you know."

The round of chuckles told him his poor attempt at humor was appreciated. As they started to drift away from the table, he explained to the commodore that his business would take him away soon. "I've had word from my uncle that he needs me to see to some business in Portland." Good thing he'd introduced himself as Silas Dewitt's nephew when he'd first arrived.

"I am myself planning to journey to Portland," Frederich Gans said, from across the table. "Perhaps we will travel together. When do you go?"

"I'm not sure. It depends on how soon I get done here. Sometime in the next week, I expect." Just then Carleen came in to finish clearing the table. He said, "Carleen, that friend of yours up in Westport sent a message. I'll come by the kitchen before I leave and give it to you."

She caught on quickly. "Oh, thanks, Mr. Lachlan. I'll wait for you."

"Ah, a delivery man. That's a new approach," the commodore commented. "Nothing delights the ladies like a man who brings them love notes."

The maid winked. "Perhaps you should try it then, sir. Of course, with your charm, you need no other approach."

Buff was amused to see the stain of red that flooded the elderly seaman's face. "We younger men must do what we can, for we lack your finesse and style, Commodore."

The blush faded and a wide smile split the commodore's face. "Heh! You silver-tongued scamp! Just like your uncle!"

Both maids were still in the kitchen later, when Buff entered. The older woman looked up and frowned.

Carleen smiled and waved the dishtowel at him. "Hey, Mr. Lachlan, I'm almost finished here. Sorry I'm taking so long."

Another scowl from the new maid. "You're not supposed to hobnob with the guests," she said, as she rested her hands on the rim of the dishpan. "Mrs. Welkins made that very clear."

"Well, what she don't know won't hurt her, will it, Edna?" With a grimace in Buff's direction, she turned back to her work. "Here I am, giving you a hand out of the goodness of my heart. I can't believe you'd snitch on me."

Edna sniffed. "I won't, but don't expect me to turn a blind eye to improper carryings-on. I don't hold with licentiousness and godlessness."

"Believe me, Edna, neither do I. Mr. Lachlan brought me a note from an old school friend who lives in Westport. Nothing sinful about that."

As soon as they were out of Edna's hearing, Carleen said, "That woman! I swear she'd turn milk sour." She led him to stand under the big spruce. "Now, tell me what you need? I know you didn't come up just to see me."

He gave her a brief précis of what had happened since Siri left the hotel the previous night. "Someone's trying to kill one of us, and I'm afraid it's Siri," he concluded. "And now with this new murder..."

"I know," Carleen said, soberly. "My cousin told me. So what can I do to help?."

"I've got to go out of town for real tomorrow and I can't leave Siri at the Chinese store. Would your mother--"

"Not unless you want the whole town to know where she is. My mother is a darling woman, but she has a tongue that wags on both ends."

Buff chuckled. "I'd noticed. What about my room upstairs?"

"Now why didn't I think of that? Of course. Arvan Singh's in the other corner room, and he's off on one of his selling rounds. Mr. Kincaid next door never notices anything but food. If we can get her into your room without anyone seeing us, she'll be fine."

"Good. I'll bring her up while everyone's at supper."

In need of a change of clothing, Buff went up to his room. It was tidy, but not quite as he'd left it. Perhaps the new maid had rearranged his papers when she cleaned, but why would she have moved his shoes to the center of the closet? Suspicious, he looked inside the small leather case where he kept his few valuable pieces of jewelry. Nothing was missing, but his gold nugget cufflinks were not where he usually kept them, in the small, upper left compartment. His watch chain was tangled, and he knew he'd left it carefully coiled. He started to close the case,

and then he noticed the lining of the lid was slit along the bottom.

The slit was mostly concealed in a fold of satin, and he would probably not have noticed, had his ring not caught in it as he was recoiling the watch chain. Buff ran a finger inside. Nothing. But then, there had been nothing there to begin with.

"Hmmm." Interested now, and growing angry, he went over his possessions carefully. The intruder had taken his time. The lining of his shaving case was slit as well, and that of his large suitcase. He usually carried a small folding knife in his pants pocket, but had left it behind when he'd dressed to go to Daws' Landing. Now it was in the opposite pocket. "Careless? Or didn't care if I knew he'd been in here?"

Buff's room had been searched by experts and by amateurs. A wealthy young American tourist automatically fell under suspicion in many European countries. More than once he'd been suspected of spying. Although he'd often been actively engaged in espionage, he'd never been caught because someone found incriminating material in his room.

He went over his possessions more carefully. The only missing items were some coins he knew had been in his waistcoat pocket--a gold florin and a copper pfennig. Both bore the date of his birth, and he'd kept them for luck. "Figures I'd not miss them," he decided.

He glanced at the clock. After two. Siri would be getting worried. He removed his boots and tucked them under his arm. Then he took one more look around the room, making sure he'd remember the exact arrangement of his things. After turning the lamp low, he opened the door and silently slipped out.

Not for the first time he regretted having a room on the opposite side of the house from the servants' stairs. As he paused at the stairway, listening, he heard Gans' distinctive German accent and a deep voice that could only belong to Otto Pflug, the brewmaster. They must be sitting in the parlor. Earlier he'd noticed how voices came up the wide stairwell as clearly as if heard through a speaking tube. Sliding his stockinged feet across the well-waxed floor, he quickly crossed the open stairwell and turned into the narrow hall that led to the outside stairs.

Chapter Twenty-one

Jaeger saw Lachlan and the woman emerge from the Chinese store. He had been keeping watch here at random times for the past three days, whenever he could do so without compromising his other identities. Yesterday he had almost missed them at the docks, for he'd arrived at his observation point only to see them buying tickets.

Was she ill? Lachlan had carried her back here after her collapse at the docks, and this morning she was leaning heavily on his arm.

He followed them up the hill and was surprised to see them enter the hotel by the kitchen door. Quickly he went to a place where he could overhear them and leaned his head against the wall.

"...be back tonight if I can. But if the fog doesn't clear, I may have to take the long way 'round," Lachlan said.

"You take as long as you need. Siri will be just fine in your room." That was the red-haired maid--Carleen.

"I do not understand why I must stay in the room. Like a prisoner! What can happen to me in the daylight, when there are people all around me?"

"Siri, damn it..."

Jaeger stepped back, not needing to hear any more. So! The woman would be in Lachlan's room. Alone.

He smiled in anticipation.

* * *

Fog rolled in during the night, icy fog that left a coating of almost-ice on every surface. Buff went to the ferry slip anyhow, despite a near-certainty he was wasting his time.

Sure enough, the fog stayed, drifting lazily around pilings, turning buildings into ghostly, ever-changing shapes. At noon he hired a boatman who claimed to be able to find his way to Skipanarwen blindfolded. They set out to row around the point and up the bay to where it narrowed enough so crossing would be safe. By the time Buff arrived at Lexington, the short winter day had turned into dusk and he had no choice but to take a room in the one remaining hotel.

He chafed at the delay. Even though he told Siri he might not be back tonight, he knew she'd fret and stew until he showed up.

* * *

Siri read for an hour before she became restless. She knew the saloonkeeper who lived in the room just below rarely left his room before noon, so she had to sit in one place until then. He was a talkative man, and if he heard activity here, he would certainly mention it at dinner.

Buffalo had piled half a dozen books on the floor beside her chair. She looked at them, thinking how she had once believed that having the leisure to read for pleasure would be an extraordinary luxury. Now the thick books merely looked like work.

Beyond the stack of books, her sewing bag lay. *Ah, so! How could I have forgotten?* She still had a nightgown and a camisole to embroider for the Peets girl's trousseau. Stretching her arm out, she caught the bag's wooden handle.

Yes, everything was still as she'd left it the last time she'd sewn. That was--*himmel!* The garments were due on Monday. Just two days from now.

At first she found sewing difficult, with her right arm held so closely to her side. After some experimentation, she worked out a way to hold the fabric in her left hand so she only had to move her right wrist. Threading a needle was the most difficult task, because she found she could not hold the thread steady in her left hand. Eventually she trained her fingers to bring the thread to the needle, rather than the needle to the thread, as she always had done.

She forced herself to work steadily until Carleen brought a tray a little after noon.

"Mr. Hidalgo was coming down when I started up, so you can move around now. Just don't make too much noise. And you don't need to worry about Edna coming in here. She's working downstairs today." She set the heavy tray on the small table. "I'm supposed to go to Ma's tonight--it's her birthday. So I brought you enough for supper too. I hope that's all right."

The afternoon dragged. As darkness settled, she realized Buffalo would not be back tonight, for the fog had grown thicker. The ferries did not run across the bay in fog. She stood at the window for a moment and watched the ribbons of gray turn and coil in the fitful wind. Her father had told her that in Sweden a breeze blew fog away, but here in Astoria it only twisted it into ghostly shapes and patterns.

A figure stood in the back yard, half-concealed by the big spruce tree. She watched for a moment, but it did not move. Then a wisp of fog concealed it. A moment later the yard was empty.

She drew the curtains and lit another lamp. But all evening, as she sewed, she jumped at every small sound.

* * *

The hotel and one tavern were about all that was left of Lexington. Everything else was boarded up and falling apart. In the wet climate, it wouldn't be long before nothing remained but piles of rotting wood covered with invading shrubs and tree seedlings.

The innkeeper told Buff that Karl Lindholm lived somewhere out in the woods, but was to be found at the tavern most afternoons. "He stays until they kick him out at closing time," he said. "The old man's a little...you know..." A finger circled at his temple.

* * *

"Verdammt noch mal! Las mich los!" Jaeger fought his foot free of another clinging bramble. What miserable woods these were, with the fog dripping from every branchlet. The ground was covered with a tangle of trailing, prickled vines, and on every hillside were those abhorrent thorned shrubs the locals called 'Devil's Club.' He bled from a hundred small scratches on his hands and wrists, his coat was torn in half a dozen places, and even his face was marked by the vicious

plants.

But in his pocket was what he had come to find, and tonight he would finally be rid of the woman. Then Lachlan would get back to his quest and soon Jaeger's stay in this *Schrecklich* land would end.

* * *

"Buy you a drink?" Buff slid into the rickety chair across the table from the old man as he spoke.

Karl Lindholm would have been a tall man, had his head not fallen between his shoulders until he was almost hunchbacked. Straggly food-stained whiskers covered his lower face and thick, white eyebrows almost concealed his watery blue eyes. "I'll drink anybody's whiskey," he said. A faint lilt colored his words.

Buff sat silent while the old man threw back the first drink. When he poured a second from the bottle the bartender had left on the table, Buff picked up his own glass. "*Skål!*" he said.

"You Svensk?"

"No, but I spent some time around Stockholm, learned a bit of the lingo," Buff told him. "Pretty country."

"Ah, lad, it ain't nothin' compared to this. I left there back in 'thirty-two and never missed it a day of my life. Too dam' cold and no opportunity for a man with ambition." He swallowed the last of his second drink, poured another. "I hadn't been here five years when me and Arne bought our boat." Peering from under his eyebrows, he said, "Did I tell you me and Arne had us a boat? And I've got land of my own--a hundred sixty acres. Never woulda' had that back in the old country."

"I heard you did. In fact, that's why I'm here. To ask you about Arne Hansen."

"Arne's dead. Drowned." He lowered his head, swiped at his nose. "I wasn't there. That's why he drowned. Poor old Arne. He was a good man. A good friend."

"I'm sure he was. I've heard nothing but good about him. He left a wife and daughter, didn't he?"

Lindholm sat up and looked straight across at Buff. "A wife! God, yes, he had a wife, poor fellow. No man deserves a woman like Gudrun. Crankiest woman I ever did see. If you told her the sun was shining, she'd predict a drought."

"What about the daughter?"

"She died, oh musta' been around '56 or so. Pathetical little chick. She never was robust, and she finally just faded away." A filthy hand swiped across his eyes. "Poor old Arne, he was melancholy for a long time after."

So it was the truth. A good thing I came. "But I thought there was another girl. Sigrid? Isn't she Arne Hansen's daughter?"

The old man sat back, seeming to think. "Sigrid? Or was it Siri? Yeah, I think that's what Arne called her. After his ma." He closed his eyes.

Buff waited, knowing that old folks often told a story in their own time.

"We'd had one storm after another that year. Folks wondered if summer'd ever come. It never did, not really. The salmon were still runnin' come September, but we weren't catchin' many, mostly because we couldn't get out one day in five." His eyes opened. "Worst season I saw, in all the years I fished this Coast. Never seen winds like we had. Not even in the North Sea."

After a moment's pause, he continued. "We'd been fishing offshore for three days, working rough seas, when we spied the flares. Arne was all for goin' to give aid, but I argued with him. Well, there was no stopping him, but we was too late. The vessel broke up before we got there. All was left was debris."

Buff's belly clenched. "What vessel was she?"

"Oh, hell, I can't recall. She was out of Macao, though. I remember that. I've still got a piece of her captain's cabin, all painted up with gold and red. One of the girls was clingin' to it."

"Girls?"

"Ship was a slaver." He hacked and spat onto the floor. "We never did find out how many girls she carried, but they was all consigned to whorehouses along the Coast." Another hack, another expectoration. "Filthy business, that. They wasn't more than babes, none of them."

"You rescued some then." Buff leaned forward, willing the old man to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"We pulled three out of the water alive, twice that many bodies. Another boat picked up more. I heard tell that ten or twelve girls were saved. Wouldn't surprise me if four or five times that many weren't." He poured yet another drink, staring morosely into it without drinking.

Buff waited a while, then finally said, "The girls? Were they all Oriental. Ah...colored?"

Lindholm's head moved sideways. "Guess I can tell you. It's been long enough." Another long pause, and again he seemed to be thinking. "There was one, near dead she was. I pulled her out myself. She was tangled in some rigging, else she'd have gone under. We figured she was dead, too, until she started choking."

"But she was not Oriental? She was white?"

"Like a snow maiden. White hair, white skin. Even her eyes were like blue ice. Poor girl."

"Poor girl? Why?"

"She was like a newborn babe. Couldn't speak, wouldn't do nothin'. Just lay there, limp and silent. It was like she'd lost her mind."

Not wanting an answer to his next question, Buff had to ask it anyhow. "What happened to her? Did she die later?"

"Die? What gave you that idea? I thought you said you knew her?"

"Well, no, I didn't say so, but I do. And she says Arne Hansen was her father."

"And he called her daughter, once she came to herself and started talking again. Gudrun, now, she never took to the girl the way Arne did. But he put his foot down. There was no telling where she came from, so he took her for his own."

Only one missing piece was left. "She spoke Swedish?"

"She didn't speak nothin' for a long time. Then when she did, it was like she was learnin' to talk all over again. Whatever she knew before, it was gone. All of it. Arne said once it was like having a newborn babe, all over again." Leaning back, he picked up the glass and drained it. "Pretty little thing she was, once she got some meat on her bones." His words were slurred now, and his eyes tended to

wander.

Buff poured more whiskey into his glass. "How old a girl would you say she was?"

Lindholm scratched his head. "Well, now, from her size Arne figured she was about twelve. He decided to make her birthday the eighth of September, the day they found her." He cackled. "Mighty big babe she was. Purt' near as tall as Gudrun, even then. Last time I saw her, she was like a beanpole, as tall as Arne but skinny."

A curious sense of completion filled Buff. All the pieces were there, and he had them just about fitted together. The trouble was, he still had no proof that Siri Trogen was Astrid Thorsdotter, and without solid evidence, she had no claim on the fortune that was waiting for her.

He laid some coins on the table. "Have yourself a good meal on me, Mr. Lindholm. And I thank you kindly for the information."

He stopped briefly to hand the bartender a card. "Let me know if he ever needs help. Or if you can't get hold of me, send word to the Dewitt Shipping office in Portland."

* * *

Siri finished the embroidery late Monday afternoon. "If Buffalo does not return tonight, I will have to ask Carleen to deliver it tomorrow," she said aloud, needing the sound of another voice. Mondays were busy days in the hotel, and Carleen had merely greeted her as she handed in the dinner tray.

When the light knock came, she hurried to the door, hoping it was Buffalo. But it was only Carleen, with a supper tray.

"Toadstool soup tonight. I only brought you a little, because I know you don't like it."

"I do not like mushroom soup as you do," Siri agreed, as she took the tray. "But you have brought me too much food again. If I eat all of this, I will not sleep." The tray held enough food for three people, at the very least.

"This is in case Buff gets back tonight. He'll come up the outside stairs. Chu gave him a key. Now, I've got to get back. Mrs. W's in a ferment tonight." She winked and was gone.

Siri set the tray down and pulled a chair to the table. She lifted the napkin. A small pot of soup, half a loaf of bread, and half a meat pie. She dipped the spoon into the soup, knowing if she didn't eat the soup hot, she wouldn't be able to swallow it.

It had a woodsy flavor, as usual. Bao purchased the mushrooms from his countrymen who gathered them on the hills behind town. The small fungi brought the aroma and taste of the forest to whatever dish they accompanied. She ate a few swallows, then set her spoon down. Just bread and butter would be enough supper.

* * *

Sunday morning the fog was gone, blown away by a stiff, cold wind. The low clouds had cleared too, and now the sky was a clear, cold blue. The low winter

sun was surrounded by a bright ring of sundogs, a sure sign of bitter cold coming.

The steamer had engine trouble on its way over from Astoria and limped into its slip well after noon on Sunday. Buff paced the dock and fretted, eager to get back to Siri. He could hardly wait to see her face when he told her who she really was.

But as he paced, the doubts started piling up. Should he tell her? He tried to put himself in her place, learning she was heiress to a fortune, possibly to a title, but might not be able to prove it. By the time the ferry was repaired and ready to depart late in the afternoon, he'd about convinced himself that the less she knew, the happier she'd be.

At least until he could find proof of her identity.

He laughed aloud, the sound echoing across the water. No wonder she'd looked familiar. She was Anders' twin. His quest was done.

The ferry lost steam halfway across Young's Bay. Passengers and crewmen all working, they poled her to a safe moorage near Smith's Point, short of the Columbia's inexorable current. The passengers only had to wade a few yards to reach shore.

Buff's underwear was sweat-soaked and his boots and trousers were sodden. Each breath felt as if he was inhaling ice crystals. *Damn! Astoria's supposed to have mild winters.*

The night sky was clear, with stars seeming close enough to touch. Eager to reach Siri, he left the other passengers to spend the night in a ramshackle hut and walked rapidly toward town, using the heat of his exertion to counteract the effect of his wet clothing. His slicker kept out the wind, and soon he was warm, all except his feet.

Even from several blocks away, he could see that the big wooden building was not the dimly lit, quiet place he'd expected to see. Every window on the bottom two floors blazed light, and some of the upper ones, too. His window was the only dark one on this side of the building.

Chapter Twenty-two

Siri found herself unaccountably sleepy soon after supper. She had slept long and deeply the night before, so she should not be nodding now. After stabbing herself with a needle twice, she set her sewing aside.

As she rose to undress, she had a sudden dizzy spell. It passed quickly. Perhaps she had stood too quickly. The water in the ewer was cool, and felt good against the too-warm skin of her face when she washed. How she wished she could remove the wide band that held her arm immobile. She itched. A bath would be heaven!

Undressing was even more difficult than it had been the night before. Siri didn't know what she would have done if she'd been wearing her usual skirt and blouse, with a camisole and two petticoats underneath. The Chinese garments were not nearly so complicated. She had slept in one of Buffalo's nightshirts last night, and would again, liking the faint masculine scent of it.

The dizziness struck again as she climbed into the bed, followed by a sudden sharp pain in her belly. Weak and shaking, she fell back against the pillows and waited for the sensations to ease. The pain settled into a dull ache, not quite a cramp, but the dizziness intensified. She closed her eyes, and the room revolved around her. After a moment, she felt herself slipping into sleep.

She awoke minutes or hours later. So dark. Not a spark of light anywhere. Her body was trembling and taut. She was overcome by a terrible urge to get up and run. Somewhere. Anywhere! Just to get away.

A laugh bubbled to her lips, yet she wanted to weep. For her stolen children, for her father, lost at sea. For herself, in love with a man who would soon move on and leave her behind.

Just as everyone she'd ever loved had abandoned her.

The image of a fair woman came into her mind, and she heard a childish voice calling to her. But not to her, for it called, "Astrid! Astrid!"

Who is Astrid? Siri felt she should know.

Her wrists hurt, and her ankles. She could not move her arm. *I am chained! Let me go. Oh, please. I want my mother!*

Anders! Anders, please save me!

Pappaaaaa!

She rolled to the side and toppled off a cliff. She fell and fell. So far. Endlessly.

She landed on her right shoulder. Pain shot down her arm and across her chest.

For a long time she lay unmoving, her face pressed against a cold, hard surface. Gradually the pain subsided, but she could not move, could not roll over and sit up. Her left hand was trapped beneath her body, and her right was held close by bonds around her chest. She was naked and freezing, and lacked the strength to save herself. She would drown here, trapped in these tangles of rope, her body encased in salty ice, to float forever upon the waves of an indifferent sea.

Faraway voices babbled, shouted, screamed, laughed. But no one came to succor her. She tried to crawl across the surface of the ice floe on which she rode,

but it was slick, and the white shroud she wore twisted about her, hampering her movements. The darkness was broken now by a line of light on the horizon, a narrow ray that stayed the same until she was convinced the sun would never rise.

Siri watched the line of light, hoping it would brighten. After two or three years it split, became three short lines, just as a peal of thunder boomed. Again a voice called to her, but this one was deep, familiar. And it called her name.

"Siri! Siri, damn it, are you in there?"

* * *

The back door stood open. Chu was lying on the floor of the kitchen, surrounded by a pool of dirty, soapy water. The enamel dishpan was over against the settee, upside down. Buff paused long enough to check that he was breathing, before he pulled the skinny cook over closer to the stove and out of the puddle. He grabbed a coat from a peg by the door and tossed it over Chu, then dashed down the hall and up the stairs to the parlor.

The commodore was sprawled at the foot of the next flight, and beyond him Mrs. Welkins lay propped against the wall outside the manager's apartment. Buff looked past her through the door and saw her husband face-down on the floor.

"Lachlan?"

Turning around, Buff saw the rug merchant who had the room next to his trying to get out of one of the easy chairs in the parlor. He went to the man, laid a hand on his shoulder. "Stay there," he said. "What happened?"

"Poison." Singh's voice was hoarse. "Poison in the food. Everyone sick." He coughed, winced. "I sent Tuomas... ahh...doctor." He bent forward, clutching his belly.

"You sent Tuomas after the doctor? When? How long ago?"

"Don't know...long time...the captain...ver' sick..."

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes. I'll...tend them." He gestured weakly at the three people in sight.

"Go...Captain..."

Buff found the captain's door standing wide. He went through the empty sitting room to the bedroom. The old man lay on the floor near the corner screen. Kneeling, Buff put two fingers against his jaw. His heart beat was thin, thready, and irregular. Scooping him up, Buff laid him on the bed and pulled a comforter over him. Not knowing what had made him sick this time, he was afraid to do anything. Especially if Singh was right.

Poison. Buff's initial reaction was *Absurd!*

Singh was crawling toward the commodore when Buff went through the parlor again. He could get them as comfortable as possible, while Buff went to Siri.

Two bodies were on the stairs, MacLain and Lifton, both coastwise traders who were off on their routes as often as not. Just their bad luck to be in town this weekend. Both were breathing well, so Buff left them where they lay. They seemed more asleep than unconscious. He checked the rooms on the third floor. The banker was in his bed, but didn't rouse when Buff shook him. *Shit!* He was breathing regularly though, and his pulse was steady, so maybe he'd be all right.

The other rooms were empty. Not surprising, considering that one belonged

to a saloonkeeper who never ate supper in the hotel and another to a ferry captain who often stayed over in Chinook, where he had a lady friend.

"Has the doctor showed up yet?" he called down the stairwell.

"No...not yet." Singh's voice was stronger, but still shaky and hesitant.

Resisting the urge to dash to his own door, Buff went to the left when he reached the fourth floor. Pflug and Gans both were in their rooms. Gans was in bed and seemed to be sleeping normally, but didn't respond to Buff's hand on his shoulder. The brewmaster was agitated, pacing the floor, kicking the bedposts, crying out and flinging his arms about. He took a swing at Buff, but his aim was as erratic as his movements. Buff took the lamp, fearing Pflug might knock it over and start a fire.

The millwright, whose room was beyond Buff's, lay in the hallway by Singh's door. He was half-awake and moving restlessly, but was unresponsive when Buff spoke to him. "At least he's not unconscious," Buff said, stepping over him. He finally reached his room.

The porcelain knob turned but the door didn't budge.. *Well, of course not. I told her to keep it locked.* And he'd given Siri his key, so she could lock it from the inside. He pounded. "Siri? Siri, open the door."

Nothing.

"Siri, damn it, are you in there?"

* * *

Jaeger listened to Lachlan's progress from room to room, and when he deemed it safe to follow, he went to the corner by the stairs and peered down the hall, before dodging back out of sight. He wished he could see the fool's reaction when he burst into the room where his woman lay dying.

Once before this Jaeger had used the mushrooms, when a vengeful lord wanted to be rid of his brother. They worked quickly and were almost always deadly.

How fortunate he had been able to find them in this distant place. Once he had listened to the ongoing argument between the old captain and the banker about what had caused the illness they had all suffered some weeks ago, he had known how he could remove the woman who was distracting Lachlan from his quest.

He smiled as he heard the door split. Lachlan would find that his good luck had deserted him.

* * *

Siri screamed when the monster crashed through the door. She tried to escape him, but his long arms scooped her from the sea-girt rock where she lay. Before she could scratch or bite him, he dropped her on a warm cloud and covered her with silken sheets. She stopped fighting and clung to the insubstantial stuff, afraid to fall again.

The *troll's* face was hideous--heavy scowling brows, a twisted mouth from which long fangs protruded, and red, glowing eyes. He loomed over her, slaverling and growling, yet the hands holding her shoulders were gentle, though unyielding

as iron bands. Her legs were caught between his, immobile.

He snarled, yet seemed to be speaking. He roared, but under the blaring sound she heard almost-words.

Fear overcame her again and she fought, with one arm, her feet, her teeth.

"Let me go! Let me go. Oh, please!"

"Siri! Listen to me!"

How did the *troll* know her name? Or *was* it her name?

Who is Astrid?

She wrenched one leg free of his hold and kicked him.

He fell away from her. Disappeared below the cloud.

Siri lay still, listening.

The *troll* was making awful sounds, gasps and growls, somewhere out of her sight. Cautiously she rolled to the edge of the cloud and peered down.

As if released from a *förtrollning*, she saw the man clearly. He lay on his side, legs drawn up, arms wrapped around himself. His breath came in labored gasps. "Buffalo!" Fighting the dizziness that made the room spin about her, she climbed from the bed and went to him.

He continued to fight for each breath.

Just so had Rosel acted once, when she had fallen from a high porch. Her breath had been taken away for so long, until Siri had feared for her life. She knelt beside Buffalo and held her hand firmly on his belly. "Deep breaths," she told him. "Slow, deep breaths. One at a time. One...breath...at...a...time...." As she spoke, he seemed to relax, and after a few moments, his breathing became easier.

"You sure pack a wallop," he said, in a husky whisper, when his breathing had slowed and become even. "Remind me never to make you mad at me."

"Oh, Buffalo, I did not intend...I was not myself." She remembered how he had appeared to her, and decided not to tell him how long his fangs had been, nor how hideous his features. "I do not know...have never...Oh! You must not get up!"

He did, though, rolling to one side and getting to his feet. "I've got to. Siri, will you be all right if I leave you?"

Not certain she was being truthful, she nodded. "Yes, I am fine, but why?"

"The whole damn hotel is sick. Poisoned, Singh said. I've got to see if the doctor's here yet. The captain's bad. Real bad."

"Oh, no! I will come---"

"You'll stay right here. I don't think this had anything to do with you, but it could have. After what's been happening, I just don't want you to take any chances."

"Oh, that is *dum*! If everyone is sick, then no one will harm me. I will dress and come down. You go now, quickly."

He caught her to him and kissed her, hard. "I've got news," he said, "but it'll have to wait." Then he was gone.

Siri dressed slowly, because the room still wanted to spin around her and the walls kept trying to melt. Whatever ailed her had not gone entirely away. She pulled on a thick pair of wool socks, because tying her boots was beyond her ability. For a brief moment she considered removing the wide band that held her right arm to her chest--how could she be any use in a sickroom with only one arm?

But she decided against it, remembering the pain when she had fallen off the--off the bed?

Not ten steps from Buffalo's door she found Mr. Kincaid, the burly millwright, crawling toward the stairs. She knelt beside him and tried to get his attention, but he paid her no mind. His eyes were wide open, staring and vacant. "Flowers," he said, over and over. "Flowers. Flowers. Flowers."

He seemed otherwise unharmed, so she left him, hoping that when he came to the stairs, he would not tumble down. He was much too big for her to manage, even if she had had two arms.

As she left Mr. Kincaid, she thought she saw someone dodge back into the opposite corridor. But when she called out, there was no answer. She briefly considered going to see if anyone on that side of the house needed assistance. At the very thought the hair on her nape tried to stand on end. All the other fourth-floor residents were young and healthy. The captain was not, and Buffalo had said he was very ill.

When she reached Captain Stokes' room, she had to hold her breath. He had been sick, and his bowels must have given way. Strong, offensive odors permeated the air. The doctor and Buffalo were standing by his bed, and the doctor was shaking his head.

Siri caught the doorframe as another dizzy spell beset her. When she saw the doctor's expression, she whispered, "Oh, no!"

Buffalo looked up. "Will you sit with him, Siri? We need to see to the others."

"How bad is he?"

"He'll likely not last the night, poor old fellow," the doctor said. His manner was far less abrasive than it had been the other time he had come. "But someone should be here if he rouses."

"I will stay. Just tell me what to do."

"Unfortunately there's nothing much you *can* do," the doctor said. "If this *is* mushroom poisoning, then the captain will live or die according to his fate. That Indian fellow said he ate two big bowls of the soup, more than anybody else--"

"The captain is very fond of mushrooms," Siri said

"Yes, well, his fondness may kill him. Keep him comfortable, tend to him if he's sick again, and call me if anything changes." He picked up his bag and turned to Buffalo. "Let's go. This is going to be a long night."

As Buffalo went with the doctor, Mr. Singh came in. "Here is water to drink and to wash him with," he said. He set the tray on the dresser, then leaned against its front. "The cook is very sick, and I am taking care of him. The doctor refuses to."

"Chu? Oh, I will...no I cannot come to him. Please, Mr. Singh, is Bao all right?"

"I do not know him. The cook is the only person in the kitchen."

"Bao is the laundryman. Chu's cousin."

"I..." Mr. Singh shook his head. "I will look for him, after I have tended to the cook."

The captain lay as one dead. But his breathing, shallow and slow, went on and on. Siri occasionally heard others speaking in the parlor, but not what they

said. Now and then she felt dizzy for a moment or two, and several times the urge to be up and about was so strong she paced the room. But no more of the awful visions assailed her.

Captain Stokes had been so kind to her. When she'd first come to work at the hotel, she had been clumsy and slow. He had flirted with her and teased, had helped her over her fear of doing everything wrong. Even when he'd patted her *rumpa*, he had done so with kindness, not true lust. Wishing she could lend him strength to fight the poison in his body, she took his hand. It was limp and cold, but she held it, stroking the liver-spotted back with her thumb.

The night seemed endless. Gradually the coming and going in the parlor beyond the captain's sitting room ceased, but no one came to relieve her. She dozed once, waking with a stiff neck and a dry mouth. Captain Stokes' hand still lay in hers, completely unresponsive. With a sigh, she lay her head on the bed and wept silent tears of sorrow and helplessness.

Suddenly he moved. He jerked his hand free, flung the covers aside. With strength amazing in one so ill, he sat straight up in the bed, eyes staring wildly. He flung one arm forward, pointing. "Land ho! Look, lads, there she lies! Land ho!" His voice was strong, full and free like a young man's.

"Captain--"

"We'll find a safe anchorage here, lads. Drop the anchor."

For a moment more he sat, pointing at a shore that existed only in his memory. Then he collapsed, like a puppet with its strings cut.

And breathed no more.

Siri touched his neck, where a fragile pulse had beaten. Nothing. Moving her hand to his chest, she breathed a brief prayer for him. Tears seemed to clog her throat as she closed his staring eyes. She straightened his limbs, pulled the covers to his waist, and folded his hands together. Only then did she go to find Buffalo.

* * *

Everyone else had more or less recovered by the time the winter dawn broke. Buff saw Siri safely to his room. "Set a chair under the knob," he told her. She nodded, as numb and exhausted as he.

More so, for she had also been poisoned. He pulled her to him, held her close. "Ah, Siri, I should have been here. I won't leave you alone again."

"Then stay with me now. I...I am frightened."

"I'll be downstairs. I've got a few things to do, but I promise I'll come to you soon." He didn't want to leave her, but Singh and Tuomas were waiting in the kitchen. They were going to strain the leftover soup. The doctor had told them of a woman in town, an herbalist, who might be able to identify the poisonous mushroom, even though it had been cooked.

She went inside. Buff stood there until he heard the lock click into place.

The doctor believed the poisoning was an accident, due to ignorance on Chu's part and carelessness by the Chinese who gathered edible mushrooms in the woods.

Buff disagreed. He would bet his life that someone had deliberately added poison mushrooms to the soup.

The question was, who had been the intended victim?

* * *

The hotel was quiet. Everyone was in bed, sleeping off the lingering aftereffects of poison.

Jaeger did not understand why only the foolish old man had died. The mushrooms had looked exactly like the ones he had gathered before, called *Snehvid fluesvamp* in Denmark. Those were deadly to almost everyone who ate them, causing vile sickness first, then painful death. Even a small portion would kill.

He had put six large caps, chopped into small pieces, into the soup when the Chinese cook was out of the kitchen. Enough to kill a regiment, if they had been as deadly as they should have been.

What a waste of time! Most of the hotel guests had merely suffered a few hours of discomfort. The brewmaster had broken his hand when he thrust it through a wall, but his was the only injury, other than a few bruises and scrapes.

The woman was unharmed, and seemed to have been only slightly affected. She was unbelievably fortunate.

Thus far.

Chapter Twenty-three

The weather continued cold. Gale warnings flew on Tuesday, and were replaced by storm warnings on Wednesday. Siri could not recall such bitter weather. Ice formed along the shore. The sawmills shut down, and the loggers stayed out of the woods. Bao, who had escaped the poisoning because he had eaten elsewhere on Monday evening, told her that even the canneries had closed their doors after the Chinese workers refused to handle the metal from which the cans were fashioned. Their fingers froze to it. All river traffic ceased, even the ferries. Captain Stokes's funeral was postponed, because the ground was frozen. His coffin was removed from the parlor where it had sat for two days and was stored in a shed at the cemetery.

Nightmares haunted Siri's sleep, even though she had shaken off other effects of the poison. Other guests in the hotel also complained of disturbing dreams. Mrs. Welkins was still confined to her bed with a bloody flux and severe dizziness. Neither Carleen nor Edna had suffered greatly, but Edna had quit, refusing to work any longer in a house where the food was poisoned.

"Good riddance," Carleen had said to Siri, when she brought word from Mr. Welkins that he wanted Siri to come back to work. "She has to be the most cranky woman in the world."

"I will help out for a short while," Siri said, "but I can do little with only one arm."

"You can wash dishes, and easy things like that. I'll do the rest. We just won't do floors or any other heavy cleaning until we find someone else."

"Only for a little while," Siri repeated. "We go to Portland soon."

"Portland? *We*? Oh, Siri, are you and Buff...?"

"He is helping me to find *mina barn*, that is all." As she spoke, Siri knew she wanted more. She wanted to be with Buffalo Lachlan forever after, not just until her children were once again restored to her.

Buffalo openly went to the drying room to sleep at night. Siri remained alone in his room, secure behind his repaired door with its new lock--there were no doors on the maids' rooms in the attic. She protested, but he was adamant. Her reputation had suffered enough, he told her.

She would have argued, but a lifelong habit of obedience kept the words inside, simmering but unspoken. Obedience and pride. She would beg him to help her search for her children, but not to share her bed.

Long after the residents had gone to their beds someone tried the door. Although Siri's heart leaped into her throat with each quiet rattle of her doorknob, she did not tell Buffalo. He would worry and would insist upon protecting her. Since she was convinced that Mrs. Welkins' persuasion of her immorality had been broadcast far and wide, she wasn't surprised someone was testing her door.

As long as she kept it locked, she would be safe.

* * *

"*Guten Morgen, Frau Trogen*," Mr. Gans said when she brought the coffee to

the dining room Thursday morning. It was his first appearance since the poisoning. He had claimed to be suffering from lingering cramps and dizziness and had kept to his room. Siri had taken a tray with tea and pilot bread to him the previous afternoon, as he had requested, but she had refused to linger when he invited her inside. He had been sitting in his chair, looking as healthy as she. He still made her uncomfortable.

"Good morning." She deliberately spoke to everyone at table, rather than just to him. "Chu is well, but he is still weak. Breakfast is porridge again this morning, but he promises that dinner will be as usual."

"Welkins should hire a white woman to do the cooking. Then we wouldn't be eating all these outlandish dishes and getting sick," grumbled Mr. Palmer. The fussy banker was the only one of the residents who had continued to believe the poison had been Chu's fault.

This was an argument that had occupied the diners at both dinner and supper yesterday. Siri was amused to note no one even replied to the banker's complaint.

"Where is Mr. Lachlan?"

She looked Mr. Gans straight in the eye. "I do not know. He is not mine to watch."

Something about his knowing smile made her very uncomfortable. But all he said was, "I thought you were his," in a soft, suggestive tone.

Siri turned her back on him. *Gåshud* covered her arms and she shivered.

Buffalo came to dinner on Thursday with word that they could move back to the Chinese store.

"I am ready," she told him, keeping her voice low, as he had. "Tuomas' cousin Kerttu will start work tomorrow. She has not much English, but she will learn quickly."

When Siri had gone to the kitchen, Buff sat and listened to the conversation in the parlor. Everyone claimed to feel well except Mrs. Welkins, who still could not stand without holding to something for balance. Palmer was still going on about Chu's carelessness, but none of the others seemed to agree.

The Chinese cook had insisted that he had used no mushrooms he had not used before. "I ver' careful. Only good toadstool go in soup. I cook long time, not make sick ever."

The weather was the main topic that evening. Both of the traders, stuck ashore until the wind lessened, gave it as their opinion that it had to calm soon. "I've never seen a storm last more than five days, and this one's been goin' for three already," Captain MacLain said. "I told my crew to be ready to start loadin' tomorrow afternoon. We'll put to sea come Sunday, God willin'."

"I talked to the Portmaster this afternoon," Thurston said. He'd been stuck ashore since Tuesday, when the ferries had ceased operation due to the storm. "He hopes they can go back to a gale warning tomorrow."

Buff raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He'd seen a roof go sailing this morning, and had shuddered to think what conditions might be like on the open sea. If he had his druthers, he and Siri would stay high and dry until all warning flags had been furled.

* * *

Jaeger cursed under his breath. Lachlan and the woman were surely planning something. Why else would they have lowered their voices. If only the other fools in the room would be silent, instead of yammering on and on about the poisoned mushrooms. They had survived hadn't they? Why did they need to chew the subject to rags?

He was sick of this assignment. Sick of this miserable climate. Sick to death of provincial bumpkins and uncivilized louts.

Even the women here were crude and uncultured, with none of the gentle manners or refined habits he was used to. The little dancer had been comely enough, but unlettered and coarse. The world was well rid of her.

He watched the couple on the far side of the room. Lachlan was sleeping with the woman, he was sure, yet he left her alone each night.

Barbarian! Treating the yellow monkeys as if they were men. This morning Jaeger had seen him bow to the hotel laundryman.

Lachlan had no taste, no discernment. It was no wonder he was attracted to sluts and servants.

He turned away from the scene in the hotel parlor. Ahhh, how he looked forward to leaving this wretched country.

* * *

The weather continued to moderate. On Saturday the ferries started running again. So did the river steamers. Siri stood on the docks that afternoon and stared at the choppy gray water of the river, telling herself the big sidewheel steamers were perfectly safe. She would be carried to Portland without incident. She would find her children, would hold them in her arms again.

And then what?

She looked about her, wondering who had spoken. But there was no one there. The voice had been in her own mind.

What would she do once she had found her children? How would she provide for them?

Perhaps they were better off with Martine, for they at least had a home and warm clothing and good food.

Nej! They would not be better off. They needed their mother as much as she needed them. She would find a job. Surely in a big city like Portland she would find something to do that would let her care for her children well. A nursery maid, perhaps, or a housekeeper.

Yes, indeed. And the lady of the house will not object to your children being underfoot as you work. Of course she will not.

This time Siri did not look for the source of the voice. It was her own doubts speaking.

"What are you doing?"

She turned. Buffalo stood just behind her, his golden curls stirred by the brisk breeze, his long canvas coat whipping about his legs.

"I am convincing myself I can travel to Portland on a boat," she admitted. He

knew of her fears, so there was no need to lie.

His arm went around her waist and Siri found herself leaning into his embrace. She had missed him these nights alone in his bed at the hotel.

Last night she would have given anything to have been there. Every hour the sound of someone turning her doorknob had pulled her from troubled sleep.

"I talked to the dispatcher. We can take the *Maribelle* Monday or wait for the *Kehloka*. She'll be back Monday night and will leave for Portland early Tuesday."

"Will you...can we wait until Tuesday? I need the time to..." She gestured at the river, hoping he would understand. The *Kehloka* was reputed to be the safest steamer on the rivers.

"I'm in no hurry. Sure, we'll wait."

"And may we go back to the Chinese store? I am *trivs inte*...not comfortable at the hotel."

He looked down at her, all softness gone from his expression. "Is someone bothering you?"

"*Nej*. At least...I do not think so."

"Siri, what happened? What's got you so upset?"

She avoided meeting his gaze, for he would see more than she wanted him to know. "I am not upset. I am merely tired. My dreams, they are troubling. Many times each night I wake. Last night I could not go back to sleep."

"You're lying! Something more than dreams kept you awake." His expression was *skrämmade*. In an instant he had gone from a handsome man to a fierce warrior.

"It was nothing. I am being *fänig*." She tried to sound unconcerned, but her voice betrayed her.

"Siri," he said, as he tilted her chin up with a finger, "what really happened."

She shook her head. "It is nothing. Only someone at the door each night."

"Each night? And you didn't tell me?"

"It is nothing," she repeated. "The men, they see you behaving as if I am your woman, and they wonder if I am available."

Taking her arm, Buffalo turned her around and pulled her along with him as he walked toward the Chinese store. "It happened every night? Just once?"

"Only once. Until--" Again she bit her lip.

"Until? Go on."

"Last night he came back. Again and again. He did not try to force the door. He only turned the knob, back and forth, back and forth, as if he was playing with it." She could not stop the shudder that went through her. There had been such an impression of menace in the way the doorknob had turned so slowly, making a small rattle with each turn. As if whoever was turning it was telling her she was only safe behind the door because he allowed her to be.

"Well, hell! That does it. You're going back to the Chinese store, and you'll stay there until we get on that steamer."

She looked up at him. "Will you...will you be there too?"

"You're damn right I'll be there. I'm not leaving you alone again."

Buff left her locked in the room behind the Chinese store while he went to fetch her things. He'd have brought her back yesterday, but she'd seemed content

at the hotel. He still felt a little guilty about taking advantage of her when she was injured. There she'd been, hurting, exhausted, and scared, and he'd been unable to keep his hands off of her.

If he hadn't been tired and sore and still a little disoriented from the blow on his head, he might have had the strength of will to resist her, the first time. But he didn't have that excuse from all the other times he'd taken her. At least he'd had the sense to pull out, after those first two times...

Great God, she is delicious! Like a young doe, all strength and heart. Her skin was the softest thing he'd ever touched, and her mouth the sweetest he'd tasted. And the fire she hid behind her cool, Northern surface, like one of the volcanoes he'd peered into the mouth of, snow on the surface and a blazing cauldron of passion beneath.

What would she say if he asked her to go back to Idaho with him? Her and her kids, of course.

Wouldn't Ma be tickled if he brought home a ready-made family?! She was always writing about all the kids in the family, and bemoaning the fact that none of 'em were named Lachlan.

What am I thinking? I'm not ready to settle yet!

He crossed Lafayette Street and started up the path that led to the hotel's back yard. As he passed the big maple, he heard a rustling in the underbrush, more than the gentle sound of falling rain. Since 'coons and other critters lived there, he didn't think much of it. Not until he reached the edge of the yard and something moved at the corner of his vision.

He kept moving, but swept his eyes back and forth. The shadows under the big spruce could have hid half an army, with room to spare. Walking wide of its drooping branches, he approached the back door.

At the top of the porch steps, he paused and looked back. Nothing. The late afternoon light had turned the yard into a place of shadows and secrets, and the misty rain cloaked everything in a gray curtain.

"I'm in a hurry, Chu," he said as he passed through the kitchen. "I just came after Siri's things. She's going back to Mrs. Leong's"

"Ver' good. She not welcome here. Boss lady having fit this afternoon, say she not work here more."

If it had been up to Buff, she wouldn't have lifted so much as a finger to help out after the poison episode. But she was as stubborn as he, and he hadn't felt her willingness to lend a hand was worth fighting about.

Carleen poked her head into his room as he packed Siri's clothes into the straw valise Mrs. Leong had provided. His clothes had gone into his cases willy-nilly. He didn't care how they looked, he just wanted out of here. *The old witch.*

After all Siri did to help out when she was almost too sick to walk herself.

Everyone else appreciates what she did, but does the Welkins woman? No, all she can think of is that Siri may have acted like a real woman instead of a dry stick.

Well, I'll be damned if I'll stay where my woman isn't wanted.

"My woman?" Had he really thought that?

Siri wasn't *his* woman.

Was she?

He caught Carleen as she was on her way down to serve supper. "I've packed everything up. Will you get someone to bring my gear down to the Chinese store tomorrow? I'm checking out."

"I don't blame you, the way Mrs. W is carrying on. Why you'd think Siri set herself up in business in your bedroom. The old besom!"

He picked up the valise. "We'll be heading to Portland on Tuesday. Come by the Chinese store tomorrow, if you get a chance. Siri'll want to say goodbye." Halfway through the kitchen door, he paused. "And Carleen? Thanks. For being a good friend to Siri."

The rain had let up when he stepped out, and the sky had gone from gray to black. A single lantern at the corner of the house lit a small circle of yard, but its light didn't extend even as far as the spruce tree. Buff decided to take the streets, even though doing so would make the walk back to the Chinese store a couple of blocks farther. He went up the sloping path beside the house and out the front gate.

He started down the steep street, wondering how the locals ever got around at night. He felt as if he was walking into a deep tunnel, pitch dark except for a line of lanterns showing the way to town. Carefully, for the road was muddy and slick, he started down the hill.

At the bottom, Lafayette Street leveled considerably as it went along the side of the orchard. Buff felt a prickle of apprehension as he made his way past the even darker mass of bare-branched apple trees. Siri had been attacked right along here.

It was a perfect place for an ambush.

Chapter Twenty-four

Buffalo decreed they would remain in the little room behind the Chinese store until they departed for Portland. On Saturday morning, Siri woke to find him staring at her. He lay on his side, head propped on one hand, and his other hand playing with her hair.

"It's like milkweed silk." He smiled. "I'll bet you don't know what milkweed silk is, do you?"

Siri shook her head and willed her hands to be still. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to reassure herself he was here again, in her bed. "I am not certain I want to be compared to a weed," she said. "What does it look like?"

"I'll tell you later." He tugged on the lock of hair, pulling her toward him. "But first..." His mouth claimed hers, and Siri gave herself up to familiar passion.

She was still surprised each time he made love to her. Never had she felt so cherished, so precious. Buffalo took his time, kissing her mouth, her cheeks, her eyelids. He nibbled at her earlobe until shivers chased down her spine and *gāshud* pebbled the skin of her arms. When she lay quivering in his arms, he transferred his attention to her breasts, catching the nipples between his lips, flicking them with his tongue.

Siri was beyond thought when he finally took one turgid nipple in his mouth and suckled. "Please," she said. Over and over. "Please...please...*please!*"

She was caught on a wave of need, lifted high, held there. On and on it came, and she was borne on its foaming crest, helpless.

And then it broke, and she fell, screaming. And found herself caught within Buffalo's arms and held, safely, securely.

Unwilling--unable!--to move, she lay in the safety of his embrace, listening for the words she longed to hear. But he said nothing, only crooned a wordless tone as he stroked her into a sense of utter well-being.

An eternity later, he said, "My arm's going to sleep."

She blinked. "Your arm..." Something moved under her waist.

"You're holding it down."

When she realized her weight held it to the bed, she rolled aside. A draft swept along her body. When had he removed her nightgown? Before she could shiver, he had covered her with the quilt.

Siri lay quietly in his embrace as he slipped into sleep. Each moment was precious to her, for soon there would be no more of them. Surely once he had helped her regain her children, he would resume his search for the lost girl. Lying in the dark room last night, listening to him breathe, she had admitted to herself that she loved him.

Each time he made love to her, the love grew, until it all but overwhelmed her.

She had loved him since the day in Li Ching's office, or perhaps even before that. Perhaps when she had felt the strength of his arms in his room, when someone had searched it. He had been angry and had believed she had been the searcher, yet he had not been rough, had not hurt her.

Even believing she had tried to steal from him, he had treated her with

gentleness. No man had ever held her with such care. Except her father.

"That's some pretty fancy wool you're gatherin'."

"Vad? What did you say?" Sometimes he seemed to speak a foreign language.

His chuckle warmed her heart. "I asked you what serious thoughts you were thinking." His finger touched the space between her brows. "You had these two little lines here, and your eyes were looking a long ways off."

"I was thinking what a good man you are."

"Don't talk nonsense," he said, as he rolled away and got to his feet. Naked, he seemed slimmer than when he was clothed. His chest and shoulders were well muscled, but his waist was narrow and his flanks lean. Seeing him like this, she marveled at the sheer beauty of him, so unlike any man she had ever known.

Of course, she had only seen one other man unclothed, so she had little to compare him with. But she knew without any doubt that there were few men anywhere as breathtakingly handsome--no, beautiful!--as Buffalo Lachlan.

Unmoving, she watched him clothe himself, his motions graceful and efficient. Was there nothing he did not do well? "Must we really stay in this small room for two more days?" she said, as he was slipping into his waistcoat. "I know it is safe, but there are no windows, and only the one chair." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she bit her lip. They had sounded so *retlig*...so whining.

"I'm afraid so. But when my luggage gets here, my trunk will give us another seat." His smile flashed. "I reckon there's a book or two in there you haven't read yet."

"What are they?"

"Well, there's one I'm taking home to my sisters. It's called 'Alice's something-or-other'. The fellow I got it from said it was a fine book for grownups as well as for kids. I took a look at it, but when I saw it was about talking animals, I didn't think much of it."

"Oh, I would like that! Are there *feer*? Fairies?"

He shouldered into his jacket. "I don't think so. Look, I'm going up to talk to Longstreet. I'll be back in a while. If my things have come, I'll have someone bring 'em to you. The books are in the trunk, so help yourself."

"But you said we must stay here!"

"I'm just going across the way. Nobody'll see me."

Before she could protest, he'd bent and kissed her. "Bar the door." Then he was gone, slipping through the door and pushing it shut behind him.

Siri obeyed, more because she was truly frightened of intruders than inclined to obey him. She shot the bolt with enough force that her fingers slipped off and slammed into the door jamb. Sucking on the stinging tips, she went back to the pallet and sat down. "*Dominerande odjur*," she said. "*Din brutala människa*. Beast!"

When she had called Buffalo every unkind epithet she knew, she felt much better.

* * *

"Not a trace." Longstreet shook his head. "Whoever went after your woman,

he's disappeared like smoke. A couple of my boys went along with Li Ching's the next day, and didn't find anything new."

"She's not..." Buff shut his mouth with a snap. After a moment, he said, "He's still around. I'm sure of that."

"Oh, I won't argue. Someone put those poison mushrooms in the soup. What's more, I have a hunch he's the same one who did the killings." Longstreet removed the cigar from his mouth and inspected it. "It doesn't make sense otherwise. Two women killed the same savage way. Then that attack on Mrs. Trogen. The poisoning up at the hotel. And now you say someone was trying to get into her room."

"Somebody's watching the Chinese store, too," Buff told him. "A big fellow, dressed like a logger, with a full beard and bushy eyebrows. Nothing else to distinguish him. I told Mu Far to let him be, but to follow him. The man's good. He's lost Mu Far every time."

"I heard. Li Ching thought I should know about it."

"You two are getting pretty chummy all of a sudden."

Longstreet chuckled. "Li Ching and I are competitors, naturally, but we're also fellow businessmen. Any sort of to-do that's bad for business is our concern, and when that happens, we cooperate." He leaned forward and tapped on his desk. "We cooperate with the police too, if it's to our benefit. I vouched for you to Gillespie, or he might have been a bit more busy about your affairs. You came to town about the right time. You started a brawl in the saloon. And you took up with the Chinese, something no ordinary white man would do."

"I'm obliged." Buff sat back and looked at Longstreet. "I can't help but wonder if this has anything to do with the life I've led the past while."

"It's possible. You've had a lot of opportunities to make enemies, I'm sure."

Buff shook his head. "Of course I have, but I wouldn't have thought any of them would care enough to follow me so far. I haven't done any active work since I left Europe, and that's been more than a year ago. I've just carried messages."

"Sometimes that's enough. Watch your back, Buff. Whoever it is may be trying to get to you through your woman."

"Well, I won't be prowling around after dark, that's for sure. We're going to Portland in a few days. That should show whether this is all coincidence, or if there's something going on here we need to deal with."

"And if there's no coincidence involved?"

"Then I'll deal with it. Once and for all."

Chapter Twenty-five

No matter how Siri tried to stretch out the time between Saturday and Monday, the hours slid by faster than they should. Inexorably each minute ticked away, bringing her closer and closer to the moment she must board the steamer for Portland.

Why am I so afraid? I only fell into the water. Min far's boat was nearby. I was never in any danger. He would have risked his own life to save me.

This is not the sea. The river is not so dangerous, especially for the steamers. Only to the small boats.

Like Valter's gill-netter. Tiny shells of wood top-heavy with sail.

The Kehloka is like a floating hotel. Enormous. Did not Captain Stokes say she was the safest boat on the river? I will be in no danger.

Yet each time she tried to picture herself setting foot on the gangplank of the Kehloka, her throat grew tight, stopping her breath.

Perhaps if I drink much whiskey? Men always seem more daring, more bold when they are drunk. Would I lose my fear?

Siri hated the taste of whiskey.

I will not let fear rule me, she told herself again and again. For too many years fear had shaped her life, determined her future. Fear of being left alone had sent her into Valter's arms, when her mother had gone to California. Fear had kept her from insisting that she and Valter have a place of their own, instead of living with Martine. And fear was why she still had not found her children.

Oh, Rosel, Rolf, are you happy? Do you sleep warm? Do you miss me?

"I will go," she said. "I *will*!"

"Huh? Did you say something?" Buffalo laid aside the book he was reading.

"No, I...I was talking to myself. Pay no mind."

He grinned. "Ma always said she talked to herself because she knew she'd get an intelligent answer. Is that your excuse?"

"*Nej*," she said, laughing in spite of her troubled mind. "I talk to myself when I think others will see how *dum* I am being. You do not want to hear what I said."

He rolled toward her and caught her ankle in one big hand. "Oh, yeah? C'mere!" With a sharp tug he pulled her off the chair and on top of him. She gasped as his hands went to her ribs. "Tell me," he said, wrapping one leg over hers so she could not kick him. He wiggled his fingers. "Tell me or I'll torture it out of you."

Siri realized he had caught her in such a way that her injured shoulder was protected. His careful hold on her also prevented her from struggling effectively. She gasped as his fingers found a *kittlig* place on her ribs. "Ah, *nej! Nej!* Do not...oh! Please!"

"Tickle, tickle," he laughed, as his fingers found yet another sensitive place. "I knew you'd be ticklish."

The wiggles turned into strokes as his long hands caressed her body. Siri's giggles turned into gasps of pleasure when one hand crept under the loose Chinese jacket she wore and found her skin.

"You are becoming a habit with me," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. "I

can't seem to get enough of you."

"I know," she said, giving herself up to his touch. But her pleasure was tainted with bitter anticipation. How much longer would she know this perfect joy? She ran her fingers into his tightly curled hair, clasped his head tightly and brought his mouth to hers. "Take me now," she demanded, hungrily kissing his face. "Now!"

He drove his tongue into her mouth as he tore open the knot that held her silken trousers to her waist. In a moment he had shoved them down her legs and his hand was hot and heavy on her mound. Siri writhed against it, knowing his probing fingers had already found her body's honey.

"You're ready for me," he said, dipping into her. Siri reared against the pressure of his hand, drawing his fingers more deeply into her body. Then she was borne to the pallet with the weight of his body. In an instant he was inside her, driving her higher with each thrust. The maelstrom took her, and she clung to him as he swept her to complete disintegration of body and soul.

His shout echoed her scream, and then he collapsed atop her, gasping for breath.

Siri wrapped her one good arm about him and clung, as if she would float away if she did not.

When Buff woke from the deep sleep into which he'd fallen, he realized he was still coupled with Siri. Barely. With only a slight movement, he slipped free, then rolled to lie beside her. She made a soft, complaining sound and groped for him. Her skin was cool, but still moist from their exertions.

He pulled the quilt from the side of the pallet where they'd kicked it, and covered them both. The room, while warmed slightly by the brazier, still held a damp chill. *Like everywhere in Astoria*, he thought. *I wonder if this place ever dries out.* He'd heard that the summers were warm and dry. Not that he was planning to stay around to see for himself.

He lay there, letting random thoughts drift through his mind. Memories of home came and went, and he wondered if he'd ever see the cabin in Cherry Vale again. His folks had built themselves a great big house in Boise City after he'd left home. The mountain-girt farm where he'd grown up was now only pasture, with a herd of shaggy Scottish cattle Pa had taken a liking to watched over by his godfather, William King.

A wave of longing swept through him, but he couldn't understand why. He'd not seen a town until he was fourteen. One look had been enough to convince him he'd never again be content to stay in Cherry Vale.

Yet now he found it called him. *Yes, he decided, I'll go up and see the old place. But I'm not staying. Silas is still holding a place for me in the business. That'll suit me better, over the long haul.*

Great God! Was he actually thinking of settling down? Of giving up his exciting, adventurous life?

I think I am. If Siri will be with me.

Restlessly he turned away from her and from thoughts of settling down. Uncertain, undecided, he stared up into the dark ceiling. One of the candles had burned itself out, and a second was guttering in the sconce. It must be getting on

toward evening. Suppertime.

But he wasn't hungry. He'd done nothing but lay about and read all day. He was ready to be up and doing.

Well, tomorrow we'll be on the Kehloka and can walk on the deck. Not much exercise, but better than this.

Was he going to be able to get Siri on the steamer? Or would she freeze up like she had before? She'd told him yesterday she was certain she could do it this time, having had time to make up her mind to it. But she was still scared stiff. And the closer the time came, the stiffer she got.

He glanced over his shoulder to where she lay beside him. She was even sleeping stiff. Turning toward her, he touched her cheek. "Siri?"

"Hmmm?"

"Time to wake up." He slid out of bed and reached for his britches. As he did so, he grinned. *Man alive, she was hot as a firecracker!* Hadn't even given him a chance to shed his shirt. Each time they came together he discovered new depths to her passion, as if she was every woman he'd ever desired, all rolled into one.

While she was dressing, he went to find the young Chinaman who'd been taking care of them. The fellow had said something about water for baths. After that last passage of loving, Buff figured they both needed one.

When he got back to the room, Siri was brushing her hair. It rippled and shone in the light of the single candle like molten silver. Buff clenched his fists, or he'd have buried his hands in the slick strands. "We'll have water for baths in about an hour," he told her, burying his never-satisfied need in practicalities.

"*Underbar!* My hair is like I dipped it into a pan of grease, so sticky. And I smell like..." She wrinkled her nose. "Well, I do not say what I smell like, because I am *en artig dam!*" She tilted her nose in the air and held out her hand, as if for him to kiss.

Buff took the hand and bowed over it. But instead of kissing, he turned it and flicked his tongue over her palm.

She shuddered, and pulled her hand away. "*Nej.* Do not tempt me. I want a bath."

"We have an hour."

"That will be enough time for me to trim your hair, too. You are...I don't know the English word. *Lurvig*, like you have been in the woods a long while."

Running his hand across the back of his neck, Buff admitted he was getting a mite bushy. "The word is shaggy, darlin'. And you're right. I do need a haircut."

Shorn and bathed, Buff watched Siri relax in the tin tub. She had insisted he take the first bath, to wash the residue of his haircut away. When the Chinaman had refilled the tub with fresh, hot water, she'd asked Buff to go away while she bathed. He'd offered to scrub her back and she'd changed her mind. Now she sat with a linen towel wrapped around her hair, her head laid back against the tub's rim and her eyes closed.

She wasn't asleep, though. Nor was she as relaxed as she seemed. The cords of her throat still stood out, and he would swear her jaw was clenched.

Worrying about tomorrow, he decided.

"What will you do once you have your kids?"

She turned her head and stared at him. "*Förlåta mig?*"

"I asked what you plan to do once you've got your kids back. Have you a place to go? A way to support yourself?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Her fingers, clutching the edge of the tub, grew white with strain. After a long while, she shook her head slowly. "*Nej*, I have no plans. I have only thought of having them with me." Her throat worked. Twice she seemed about to speak, but only swallowed. At last she said, "I will find a way to make a home for them. I *will*."

Scrambling down beside the tub, he caught her shoulders. "Siri, it's all right. Don't cry. I didn't mean... Look, we'll figure it out."

"I am not crying," she said. "I must be strong. For *mina barn*." She wiped the back of her hand across her cheek, leaving a trail of soapsuds. "In Portland," she said, her voice trembling, "there will be work. I believe this." She blinked rapidly.

Buff grabbed the towel and wiped the soap from her cheek. Getting a good hold on her, he lifted her from the tub and stood her on the small rug beside the brazier. She sagged against him for a moment, soaking his clean garments. "Hold on, there. Stand up!"

Her spine stiffened, but she still felt...fragile.

Holding her up with one arm, Buff snatched the towel from the top of his trunk with the other. Awkwardly he wrapped it around her, then picked her up and carried her to the pallet, where he carefully laid her down. He stroked along her spine, slow, even strokes intended to soothe and relax. "Don't worry," he said, his voice a low croon. "I'll take care of you. All of you. Hush now." Over and over, until the words came automatically and his mind was free to consider the implications of what he was promising.

For some reason it didn't scare him anymore.

Much.

* * *

Resisting the urge to push the black-clad man carrying a shoulder pole from his path, Jaeger cursed under his breath. These barbaric yellow *kineser* would not be allowed to freely walk the streets of any civilized city. Only in the East and in this loathsome country were they given the freedom that should belong strictly to white men.

That Lachlan was friendly with them was proof that he was equally uncultured and uncivilized. What worthy man would associate with them, let alone live in one of their hovels?

Jaeger shivered in the early-morning damp. The rain had begun again. Overnight it had laid a slick layer of ice on every surface. Now everything was half-frozen and dripping. At least the day promised to be warmer. The bitter cold that had held Astoria in its grip for a week had made him appreciate the clouds that usually filled its skies. Yesterday he had watched the entrance to the Chinese store for most of the day. Not until he had gone for a steam bath after supper had he felt warm again.

A movement at the door across the street caught his eye. No, it was just the old woman, sweeping. He settled back against the wall of the butcher shop and

resigned himself to a long wait.

Lachlan and the woman were probably still abed. His lip curled with contempt. A man of low tastes indeed. Lachlan actually seemed to care for the woman, a baseborn servant. The sort to be used and cast aside by any man of refinement and culture.

Wait! Was that him? Jaeger eased back into the building's shadow. Yes! And the woman.

The two of them lingered in the doorway, apparently taking leave of the Chinese woman. When Lachlan bowed respectfully, Jaeger stifled a snort. As if an *unlænding* was deserving of respect from a white man. Lachlan was no better than the animals he consorted with.

Eventually Lachlan and the woman turned to walk toward the docks. He followed, keeping to the shadows.

Verdammt! They must be leaving on this morning's steamer. Lachlan had told the red-haired maid he still had business in Astoria and would wait until they could travel overland to Portland.

Lachlan had made a fool of him.

* * *

Once again they approached the dock where the *Kehloka*, with its red and white trim, slowly appeared out of the misty rain. Haloes of fog surrounded lanterns mounted on the wheelhouse. Shifting curtains of mist gave the steamer an eerie quality, as if it was a ghost ship waiting to carry damned souls to *helvete*.

I am going to find my children, Siri told herself for perhaps the hundredth time since she had awakened, held warm and safe in Buffalo's arms. *If I do not board the steamer, I will never find them, my Rolf and Rosel*. Her chest tightened with every step, and she forced herself to take deep, even breaths. *They are in Portland. Soon they will be in my arms*.

She would find work in Portland. In a dressmaker's shop, perhaps. Or in one of the fine hotels, where good service was rewarded. Then nothing would stop her from keeping them with her. Martine would never again steal them away.

She waited while Buffalo spoke to the man standing at the end of the gangplank, but paid no attention to what he said. Instead she forced herself to look at the steamer, with its gay red-and-white trim, its gleaming brass rails, and the warm light that shone from the many small windows on each deck. Other passengers pushed by her, but she ignored them too. *This is a good ship. Safe and strong. There will be no danger*.

Buffalo's hand slipped under her elbow. "Ready?" He smiled down at her, his eyes promising all would be well.

"As much as I can be," she said. Lower lip caught between her teeth, she took the first step onto the gangplank.

Her chest tightened. The air she breathed seemed to thicken, to catch in her chest. *I am going to my children*.

The second step was easier. She gasped for breath. When Buffalo's arm went around her waist, she felt her chest expand, felt cool air rush into her chest.

A man pushed by her, knocking her into the rope lifeline. She caught the wet

hemp with both hands.

"Easy," Buffalo said. "You're okay. Just let go, one hand at a time. We're in no hurry."

Her fingers refused to obey her mind's orders. They clung to the rope. *My children. I must go to them.* Slowly her fingers uncurled. "Yes, I am okay. *Tusen tack.*" A few more steps and she set foot on the deck. It moved beneath her and her belly clenched.

"You're okay," Buffalo said again. "They're just loading cargo." He pointed aft, where a winch had just released an enormous crate onto the deck. "Do you want to go to inside, or stand on deck?"

She looked around her, seeing the slick, gray water beyond the deck. Acid stung her throat as her stomach clenched. She still had to labor for each breath. "I...I had best go inside," she said, "where I cannot see."

"Good idea." He led her along the deck to a wide, semi-enclosed stairway. It seemed so much like it should be in a house that she found her breath coming more easily as she climbed. Numbly she let Buffalo guide her to a double door halfway along the upper deck. When he opened it, she looked inside and gasped in surprise.

Her father's sailboat had been of average size. It had a small cabin, open at the aft end. Inside there was a single hard bench on which to sit. She had played there one winter when the *Magli Arnesdotter* had been hauled ashore for keel repair. The gill-netter Valter had fished from had been tiny, scarcely large enough for two people and a cargo. On it there had been no shelter at all.

The room before her might have been in the Occident Hotel, for all its elegance. Gleaming brass fittings, including two ornate hanging lanterns, added richness to the deep maroon of velvet upholstery on easy chairs and sofas, the complex pattern of an oriental carpet that all but covered a shining hardwood floor. Small windows along both outside walls were covered with matching maroon velvet draperies that could be pulled aside with thick, twisted cords of gold that bore on their ends long, elegant tassels.

"We're early, so we've got a choice of seats," Buffalo told her. "Where would you like to sit?"

Most of the sofas were set with their backs against the outer walls. At least she would not be forced to look outside. She chose a small sofa, built to seat two people, between two groups of chairs. It looked almost too elegant to sit upon. "I thought you took a cabin," she whispered to Buffalo. She would be much more comfortable where she didn't feel ill at ease and clumsy. This room was far too elegant for the likes of her.

"I did, but I thought you might want some coffee or tea to warm you up. They'll start serving as soon as we get underway."

Siri did want some tea, so she sat gingerly on the sofa. "I hope there are no other passengers," she said, half to herself.

The double doors opened and a man and a woman entered, as if Siri's words had summoned them. She was clad in an elegant sealskin cloak and wore a bonnet trimmed with the same rich fur. Her companion wore a wool overcoat trimmed in velvet.

Siri, had insisted on wearing her one good dress today, rather than the Chinese shirt and trousers. Next to the woman's stylish appearance, she looked like what she was, a servant. How she wished she could crawl under the sofa and hide.

Three men came in over the next few minutes, but no one else entered. "Not much travel, as cold as it's been," Buffalo said.

Siri didn't answer. All her attention was going to moving breath in and out of her chest. If she moved, she was afraid she would jump to her feet and run screaming from the ship.

The whistle blew, a loud burst of sound that brought her to her feet.

"Whoa, there!" Buffalo caught her hand as she leapt up. She tried to wrench free, but his hold was unbreakable. His arms went around her, his voice was soft in her ear. "You're all right, Siri. You're fine. Just take it easy."

Part of her knew she was in no danger, but most of her was certain she was about to be thrown into the churning water. The floor jerked under her feet. She fought the bonds that held her, but she was trapped. "No! Let me go. Let me--"

Two warm hands enclosed her face and a deep voice said, "Siri, you're safe. We're not sinking." The voice held assurance and promise. She believed it.

Slowly the terror receded and she relaxed. When Buffalo guided her back to the sofa, she went willingly, sitting down almost bonelessly when the seat's edge pressed against the backs of her knees. He continued to hold her, murmuring wordless comfort, until she took a deep breath. "I am all right now," she said, pulling free of his embrace. Shame filled her that she would behave so badly, especially in front of the elegant woman across the room.

She stole a peek and saw that the woman was staring with disapproval. Buffalo must have seen the direction of her gaze, because he said, "Pay her no attention. She probably drinks vinegar for breakfast."

Siri couldn't help it. She giggled. But she stiffened when the whistle blew again. Almost immediately she felt a change in the vibration of the floor, and she saw the curtains on the windows across the room sway.

"Relax. We're underway. You'll be fine." Buffalo's arm went around her again, and she drew strength from it.

I am going to find my children. As long as she believed that, she could endure anything.

* * *

Lachlan would pay. No one made a fool of Jaeger.

Why was he taking the woman with him to Portland? She was not beautiful. She had no feminine wiles. Could Lachlan have discovered something that indicated she was the lost Thorssen child?

He pulled the miniature from his pocket and studied it yet again, holding an image of the Trogen woman in his mind. Although she seemed plain and unlovely to him, he had to admit she was more attractive than when he had first seen her. As if she had lost her air of defeat and had gained weight. Her cheeks were plumper, her eyes less shadowed.

He studied the small painting. The jaw was the same, square and strong.

The children had hair of palest silver, unusual even in Denmark. And their eyes were narrow, and light in color.

When he had first seen Frau Trogen, she had seemed too old to be the Thorssen child, almost middle aged. Now, thanks to Tuomas, he knew she was in her mid-twenties. Not so different in age from the Thorssen girl.

Perhaps...

Chapter Twenty-six

What should have been a ten hour voyage was lasting into the night. The river was rough, with white-capped waves pushed along by the strong wind. Even Buff, who had experienced a typhoon in the South China Sea, was glad to stay in the elegant lounge, where hot coffee came from a bottomless pot and good whiskey could be had for a quarter.

To his relief, after dinner Siri had gone to the small stateroom he'd engaged for her and had, the last time he'd peeked in, gone to sleep. A good thing he'd brought the small vial of laudanum. She hadn't tasted it in the tea. He felt like a betrayer, drugging her like that, but wasn't sorry he had. She'd been amazing, the way she'd conquered her fear. He'd been sick watching her start at the slightest noise, her eyes enormous and her face frozen, like a terrified doe facing a panther.

With any luck, she'd sleep until they arrived in Portland. The steward had told him they'd be docking in a couple of hours. He sure hoped Longstreet had taken care of reserving their rooms for a week.

Darkness fell while they were still in the Columbia. Restless, he went outside and took shelter in the lee of the wheelhouse. Standing there with his collar turned up and his hat pulled low, he was protected from the rain but not from the wind, which sought out every gap in his clothing. It seemed warmer than it had been this morning, though, for which he was grateful. Somehow the damp cold ate into his bones worse than the bitter dry cold he'd grown up with.

Sometime in the next few days, he was going to have to decide what to do with Siri. The question he'd asked her the other night--what she was planning to do once she had her kids--had been for his benefit as much as hers. He needed to know if she'd made plans she hadn't told him about.

She hadn't, which only added to his dilemma. He wanted to continue wandering, chasing the next great adventure. And he wanted Siri, no matter how it would change the shape of his future.

C'mon, Buff, admit it. You hoped she had plans that would take you off the hook. You wanted to go on playing until you're an old man. Flitting from pillar to post, like a butterfly sampling all the pretty flowers.

He strode out to the rail and stood, gripping it, staring at the dimly-seen shoreline where an occasional glimmer of light marked a homestead. When he felt the boat turn, he leaned over and looked ahead, but saw nothing new, no city lights. How much farther was it to Portland, anyhow? Shouldn't they be there pretty soon?

He wondered where Silas was. Right now he'd sure like to have someone to talk to. Maybe he'd be able to make up his mind, if he could talk it out. Silas had more good sense than anybody else he knew, and wouldn't offer advice, only a sympathetic ear.

Ma would like Siri. He was sure of that. Maybe he could take her and her kids to Boise City. It wouldn't be the first time Ma had taken in total strangers and made them part of the family. Then he could go on to Australia, as he'd planned to do, now he'd kept his promise to Anders.

Bullshit! You're acting like one of those spoiled lordlings you saw too much of

in Europe, with no thought for anything but your own pleasure, scared to death of responsibility.

Maybe it's time you grew up, Buffalo Lachlan.

"But I'm not ready yet!"

As soon as he spoke the words, they shamed him.

It was a pity he'd not be able to prove Siri was really Astrid Thorsdotter. As the heir to half of Baron Mogensen's fortune, she wouldn't have to worry about making a home for her kids. She would be able to live in style in Copenhagen, or anywhere else she chose.

Pipe dreams. There wasn't a snowball's chance in Hell he'd be able to prove anything. Astrid Thorsdotter had no birthmarks, no identifying scars. Just a remarkable resemblance to her twin brother.

He swung away from the rail and paced along the wet deck, up to the prow, where the steamer seemed to be cutting through a featureless black tunnel. How the dickens did the pilot know where to steer? Even as he asked, he saw a beacon, burning brightly right straight ahead.

He couldn't just abandon her. Siri was a strong woman, and would do whatever it took to give her kids a decent life. But strength and determination weren't always enough. She'd have to remarry. A single woman with a couple of kids to provide for really hadn't any other choice. She'd have to find herself a man willing to take on a ready-made family.

He just hoped she'd find a decent one.

Hasn't she? a small voice said inside his head. *Hasn't she found a decent man? Only trouble is, he may be too selfish to tackle a responsibility like that.*

* * *

Siri couldn't understand why she was so sleepy. She felt as if her mind was wrapped in batting, safely padded and protected. Her thoughts were slow, sluggish, and her senses seemed flat, as if she had a terrible head cold.

When Buffalo offered to help her into bed, she knew she should argue, but hadn't the will. Instead, she let him pull her nightgown from the small case that held every stitch of clothing she owned. Obediently she stood when ordered, so he could remove her skirt, raised her chin so he could unbutton her high collar, and when he told her to, she held her right hand in her left, so he could rewrap the binding that held it in place. As if in a dream, she stood passively while he let her braids down and slipped her nightgown over her head.

"Can you handle the rest?" he said as he buttoned the front of the nightgown.

"The rest..." *Why can I not think?*

"There's an ewer and water behind the screen. Can you manage?"

"Oh," she said, comprehending. "Yes, I can manage." She took a step toward the screen in the corner. Her legs felt heavy, as if they were caught in thick syrup.

Her nightgown seemed to have twice the material in it than before. She finally had to hold it in her teeth to keep it out of her way. When she had finished washing up, she emerged from behind the screen to find Buffalo sitting in the straight chair beside the bed. He was fully dressed.

"Where are...aren't you...Why...?"

"My room's next door," he said, as if he understood her half-formed thoughts. He rose to stand before her. But he did not take her into his arms, as she wanted him to do. "You're about to go to sleep on your feet. I'll talk to you in the morning." One quick kiss on her cheek and he was gone, striding across the room and out the door. She heard the rattle of a key as he locked her in.

"*Nej!* Do not..." she cried, as she tried to run to the door. Her feet would not move so fast, and she stumbled, catching herself with her free hand on the doorknob. For some reason, the thought of being locked inside a strange room in an unknown place terrified her.

A door she hadn't noticed in the side wall opened. "I'll leave-- Siri, what's wrong?"

She was still clinging to the doorknob when he caught her in his strong hands and lifted her against him. In no time at all she was tucked into her bed. Buffalo sat beside her, frowning.

At last he spoke. "Somebody's tried awful hard to kill you, Siri. I don't know who it is, or why. But until I do, we're both sleeping behind locked doors." His fingertip, rough with callus, stroked across her lower lip. "I was going to come in after you were asleep to tuck a chair under the doorknob. My room's got an easy chair, so I'll slide the dresser across the door in it."

"But--" Oh, why could she not think clearly? "How could he know we are here? You said..." What had he said. Something about Li Ching making the arrangements for their passage? Or had the Chinaman done something else and Carleen bought the tickets? She caught at his wrist and gripped it tightly. "I am so *dum!* My thoughts...they go nowhere..."

His mouth twisted and his brows came together. "That's my fault, sweetheart. You were so damned scared on the ship. So I gave you some laudanum. I guess I gave you too much." Lifting her hand to his mouth, he kissed her knuckles. "Will you forgive me?"

"You drugged me?" she repeated, not sure she'd understood. "Why?"

"Afraid so. In your tea, at dinner. I had the dickens of a time getting it in there, too, without anyone seeing."

Siri thought back to how she had felt, sitting on the steamer. Only an effort of will had kept her from giving way to panic. By dinnertime, she had been exhausted, and almost sick. She remembered toying with the food on her plate, but eating nothing but the applesauce that had accompanied the roast pork, drinking nothing but the one cup of tea. That had been only halfway into the voyage. Would her self-control have endured the rest of it? Possibly not. "You are a bad man," she told him, doing her best to be severe, "but I forgive you. Your intentions were good, even if your conduct was *högdragen*."

He chuckled. "Seems to me you've called me bossy before. I only did it for your own good, you know."

"Hmph!" She released his hand and turned away. "I am sleepy. Good night." *Men! Do they all believe they know what is best for everyone?*

* * *

Tuesday morning Carleen saw Mr. Gans' door standing open when she

turned into the hallway. "He's forgotten to lock it," she said to the armful of linens she carried.

But he hadn't. He was standing beside his bed, packing his valise.

She tapped on the doorframe.

He turned around. For a moment his expression was savage. Carleen took a step backwards, ready to run.

Then he smiled, and she wondered if she'd imagined the danger. "Good morning," she said, doing her best to return his smile. "Are you off again?"

"Yes, I must leave for a while. I have received word that there is someone in Portland whom I must interview. Today I will complete some business here, and tomorrow morning I will take the steamer."

"Well, we'll miss you," she said, but she wasn't being entirely truthful.

There was something about him. Something not quite...right.

* * *

Buff accepted the tray from the white-coated waiter, tipped him, and assured him that they would handle everything. Siri was still sleeping, so he set it on the table and poured himself a cup of coffee to drink while he finished dressing.

She woke while he was pulling on his boots. Her face, pink with sleep and drowsy-eyed, emerged from the pillow. For a moment he was tempted to join her in the big, soft bed and say to hell with responsibility. Instead he reminded himself of all he had to do today.

"I'll be back before dinnertime." He settled his coat on his shoulders and picked up his hat. "This afternoon we'll go shopping." If he were to kiss her, he'd never get out of the room.

"Wait! Where are you going!" Siri erupted from the bedclothes like a small explosion.

"To see what I can find out. I ordered breakfast. It's on the table in my room."

"*Nej!* You cannot go without me. I will be dressed in a trice!" His nightshirt, which she'd adopted as her own, billowed about her as she dashed behind the screen.

"Siri, I want you to stay here. I've got half a dozen stops to make and you'll only slow me down."

"*Nej*, I will not stay. How can you find *mina barn* if I do not go with you? I will be only a moment." His nightshirt came sailing over the screen and landed on the floor.

He wondered how she was going to get into her dress with only one arm. So far she hadn't managed the buttons up the back without help. He picked up the nightshirt and tossed it back. "I'm not taking you with me, and that's final. Now calm down, put the nightshirt back on, and have a leisurely breakfast."

Clad only in drawers, she came storming out, holding her camisole against her chest. "You will not give me orders. I say I go with you, and that is that. We will..."

Not sure whether to laugh or to curse, Buff did the easiest thing he could think of. He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Setting her on the edge, he held her there. "Now you listen to me, Siri. I've got business of my own here in

Portland, and I need to take care of it. While I'm at it, I'll ask around about this Martha Peterson, see what I can find out. Until we know more, we'd be crazy to go pushing into her place, letting her know we're on her trail. It could set her to running again."

He watched her absorb what he'd said. Finally she nodded. "I understand. You cannot devote all your time to my problems." She sounded subdued, disappointed. "But this afternoon? We will go--"

He stole her words with a kiss. "This afternoon we'll go shopping, like I said. There are some things we need to get before we can start."

He could tell she wasn't happy, but at least she didn't argue any more. Understanding her impatience, he wished he could rush right out and rescue those kids. But he'd learned a long time ago that planning could make the difference between success and failure.

"I want your word you'll stay here until I get back," he said, once again picking up his hat.

She hesitated, mouth set in a stubborn line, but at last she nodded. "I will stay."

His first stop was Chinatown, where he quickly found the man for whom Li Ching's message was intended. Once they'd both identified themselves, Buff recited the incomprehensible syllables he'd memorized. The fellow smiled widely and thanked him profusely. Buff wondered just what chicanery he'd made himself part of.

Well, needs must when the devil drives, as his Pa had been fond of saying. Li Ching had been helpful. Now they were even.

The local office of Dewitt Shipping was a busy place. He found his way to the agent's office eventually, having been distracted by the hustle and bustle of the warehouse, where crates and bales of merchandise from all over the world were opened and repacked for shipping inland. "I'm Buffalo Lachlan," he told the young man sitting at a desk in an outer room. "Any chance of having a word with Mr. MacCray?"

"He's in a meeting right now," the fellow said. "I expect him to be free soon, though. Can I tell him who you represent?"

"I'm from the Idaho store," Buff said, not sure what else to tell him. He hadn't heard that Silas had closed the hardware store in Centerville.

Disbelief was plain on the fellow's face, but he wrote Buff's name down and said he'd tell Mr. MacCray as soon as he was free.

Buff sat in a chair and picked up a booklet from the table beside it. *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*. He flipped through its pages. The second article was about Astoria and he started to read.

"So you're from the Idaho store," a voice from his past said to him a little later.

He looked up, unbelieving. "Silas! Great God! I never expected to see you." He was caught in a bear hug, one he returned with enthusiasm. All of a sudden, homesickness tightened his throat. He'd been among strangers too long.

"You wouldn't have," his uncle said, when they'd finished slapping backs and taking long looks at each other, "but for that cold spell. Soomey and I were

supposed--"

"Soomey? She's here?"

"Over at the hotel. Great God, lad, it's good to see you!" Silas turned to the man who'd been standing silently by. "Gil, this is my nephew, the one I was telling you about." He introduced his agent, then suggested Buff meet him and Soomey for dinner. "I've got a day's work ahead of me. Seven? At the Siskiyou House?"

"I'm staying there, too. And Silas? I'll have someone with me. A woman."

Only a raised eyebrow betrayed his uncle's surprise.

Conscious of a sense of great relief, Buff went back to the hotel. He'd been trying to figure out how to get inside Martine Pedersdotter's boarding house ever since they'd learned of it, and he hadn't been able to come up with any way he could do it. Not without help, and he didn't know a soul in Portland.

But Silas did. Or if he didn't, his agent would, which was why Buff had gone to the Dewitt office in the first place. By tomorrow night they should know whether Siri's children were with Martine.

And if they weren't, what was he going to tell Siri?

* * *

She was dressed and waiting when he arrived. "What did you learn? Are there children in the house? Will we go there tomorrow to get them?"

"Hold on, there! Give me a chance to take off my coat." He tossed it and his hat onto his bed. She was right behind him when he turned around. "Siri, I didn't go to the boarding house. I went--"

"You did not go there? Why not? You have wasted the morning!"

"What should I have done?" he said. "Barged in and demanded to know if she was hiding your kids? Oh, yeah, that would have worked, wouldn't it? She'd have had the police at the door in no time at all, and then where would we be? Damn it, Siri, you've waited this long. Can't you wait another day?"

"Another day? How can I--" She paused and bit her lip. After a moment she said, "You are generous to be helping me, and I only complain. *Förlåta mig? Var snäll och?*"

"Why is it you only slip into Swedish when you're upset?" He pulled her close. Her head moved against his shoulder, but she didn't answer. He really didn't blame her for being impatient. *It must seem to her that everything conspires against her.* "Siri, I'll get your kids for you if it's humanly possible. Just let me do it my way, will you?"

She nodded against his shoulder. "*Jag är obetänksam,*" she whispered. "I am sorry."

"No need to be sorry. You're upset, and I don't blame you. Can you put your mission out of your mind for one day? If I promise you that tomorrow we'll make progress?"

She pulled back and looked at him. Tears sparkled on her lashes. "*Ja.* I will not think of it."

"That's a fib! You can't *not* think of it, but will you try to think of other things besides?"

"I will try, then."

"Good enough. Tomorrow we'll get some answers, I promise."

They ate in the dining room, an experience that Buff could see made Siri uncomfortable. He had a hunch she was still self-conscious about her clothing. Compared to the other women in the hotel, she certainly did look drab. Well, he had plans to take care of that. "This afternoon we're going shopping," he told her, when they'd finished their meal. "I've been told there's nothing better to cheer a woman up." He wasn't going to tell her who'd shared that bit of information with him, but he silently thanked the woman in Paris who had.

"Shopping? How? I have no money? Only the few dollars Mrs. Welkins gave me when she discharged me."

"That's all right. I've plenty." He looked at her. "That's your good dress, isn't it?" The gown, made of a gray fabric that might be silk, wasn't exactly ugly. And it fit her well, showing her slim waist and her small, high breasts, but it was definitely past its prime and years out of style. Or maybe it never had been in style. There was nothing about it to flatter. It covered her body, decently, adequately, plainly.

"Ja." She touched the high collar as if apologizing. "I made it over from one of... of Martine's. The fabric is good, and it is clean. I only wear it to church."

"Would you be insulted if I told you it's as ugly as sin?"

She tried to frown, but couldn't quite manage. "It is, is it not? So plain, and with no style at all. I had no time to make it pretty. Not before Valter's funeral."

"Well, then, let's see what we can find. I'll bet there's a dressmaker or two in town who has something mostly made up that she can fit to you in a few hours." Buff was actually looking forward to shopping with her. More than once he'd imagined her in the sort of gown she should be wearing. Something in blue satin...

She looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap, but not before he saw the longing in her face. "I told you I have no money!"

"Siri, you will have to go with me to Martine's house so you can identify your kids. Do you want her to recognize you?"

"No, but how can I--"

"Trust me. When we get done, she'll never know who you are." He doubted it was possible to make Siri unrecognizable. Her silver hair was too distinctive and her face too beautiful. But if she believed him, that was all that mattered.

"Besides," he continued, "we have an invitation to dine tonight, and I want you to look your best." He ignored her look of alarm. Before she could ask a single question, he had his hands on the back of her chair, waiting for her to rise.

* * *

Jaeger cursed his ill fortune. The only other steamship scheduled to make the upriver run to Portland the day of Lachlan's departure was the *R.J. Wilson*, a decrepit sternwheeler that probably should be sunk. He was about to board when a burly man in a yellow slicker came down from the wheelhouse and mounted a handwritten sign on the gangplank.

DEPARTURE POSTPONED UNTIL NOON.

"What is this? Why have you postponed the departure?" Jaeger demanded.

The sailor said, pointing, "Look at them waves, mate. You really want to try your luck in the river today?"

The light from lanterns on the dock only penetrated a little way across the water, but that little way was enough to show waves that must be as high as he was tall. "But you will sail at noon?"

"Dunno. Depends on the winds. More'n likely we will." The sailor went back up the gangplank, not waiting for further questions.

At the ticket office, Jaeger learned that a sailing was scheduled for the next day. "The *Lolochuck* will sail unless there's storm warnings posted," the ticket seller said. "She's a sturdy vessel. No problem with rough water. Of course, it won't be a comfortable voyage."

"I do not care for comfort. It is important I get to Portland as soon as I can. I have business there that will not wait."

"Well, I'd advise you to wait for the *Lolochuck*, then. Even if the old *R.J.* sails, it's likely she'll lie up at Westport or Kalama. Her master don't like to travel up the Willamette after dark."

Verdammt! Jaeger uttered a curt thanks. Now he would have to find lodgings for the night. He went around the corner, toward the Pilot Whale Saloon, one of Astoria's more squalid bars. He'd heard that rooms were to be had there. And women.

A woman was what he needed, to mitigate his anger.

Chapter Twenty-seven

"*Så skön!*" Siri breathed, almost afraid to touch the sky-blue satin. The gown had been made for a woman who, for some unspoken reason, had changed her mind. When Buffalo had mentioned she needed something suitable for dining at the Siskiyou House, the dressmaker had brought it out and removed the linen in which it had been wrapped for storage.

"There's not many tall enough to wear this," Mrs. Abbot said. "I'm not above hoping you'll find it to your liking. I'll give you a good price on it, just enough to pay for materials and labor."

"Try it on," Buffalo said, before she could protest that it was much too fine.

All her life she had dreamed of a gown like this. Ropes of pearls draped across the front of the skirt and hung from the shoulders, across the bodice front and back. Darker blue velvet trim edged with more pearls outlined a high, pouffed bustle that fell away into a long train. Truly a garment fit for royalty!

She pretended her fingernails were not broken, her hands were smooth and white. Just this one time, she would be beautiful.

Siri had never worn such a corset before. Why, she wondered, did women inflict this discomfort upon themselves? She won the argument about leaving herself room to breathe, but only because the gown was made for a heavier woman. Even so, she felt as if she was wearing a tight iron cage around her middle.

She supported her right hand with her left while the dressmaker's helper assisted her into the petticoats. As the cool fabric slid over her bare skin, she shivered with delight and tried to ignore the sharp twinge when the bodice was gently slipped over her arms. Mrs. Abbot slapped her hand away when she would have adjusted the bodice, so she let the dressmaker tug and twitch until the low neckline lay smooth across her bosom. Looking down, she could see far too much of her breasts. Surely a tucker or a scarf belonged there. Why a man could just look down and see--

"It's a mite big through the waist. And it'll need taking in across the bosom." Mrs. Abbot pinned and tucked, until the bodice felt snug--but no more modest. "Nothin' we can't fix, though." She straightened the two strands of pearls that fell just below Siri's breasts. "There, now! Take a look!"

Siri turned to the mirror she had been straining to catch a glimpse of ever since coming into the fitting room. For a moment she could not believe what she saw there. An elegant lady.

Or a harlot, bought and paid for.

Well, had she not given him every reason to think so?

"*Ah, nej,*" she said then. "No. Please. I must take it off." She tried to reach the back, where the bodice fastened, but her hand tangled with more pearls. She paused, afraid of breaking the strands. Hot tears filled her eyes.

"Here, now! There'll be no weeping. That satin water spots the worst way!" Mrs. Abbot handed her a scrap of linen. "What on earth's the matter with you?"

Siri fought to speak. How could she explain she had seen her dream come true? And seen it soiled by the truth.

Sigrid Hansen Trogen was no elegant lady, but a fisherman's daughter. Buffalo Lachlan was, she had come to realize, a rich man. A worldly man, who had, for some incomprehensible reason, decided to help her find her children. And because he was handsome and appealing, she had fallen into his arms when he held them out. The days alone with him, in the small room behind the Chinese store, had been like time in a dream.

A wonderful dream she would cherish all her life. And hers was a life that did not include beautiful blue satin gowns or tall, handsome men with golden curls and elegant manners. She was a peasant, a servant. No matter how she was dressed up in rich clothing, she would never be more than she was born to be.

"Take it off," she said again, keeping her eyes tightly closed. If she looked again in the mirror, she was afraid she would be tempted beyond resisting.

A door opened and closed behind her. Two big hands settled on her shoulders. "Mrs. Abbot said you were upset," Buffalo said. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?" He turned her and enclosed her in his strong arms. "Siri, darlin', what is it?"

"Oh, it is so beautiful," she wailed. "You are so cruel. I cannot wear this. Oh, help me take it off!" Once more she tried to reach the hooks in the back, but this time Buffalo's hand caught hers before she could damage the gown.

"Look, Siri, I don't have any idea of what's going through that head of yours, but it's pretty clear you're not thinking straight. You look fine. They'll have the other dress ready by the time this one's fitted. So you just settle down and let these folks get on with their work."

"But I can't--" He did not understand. She could not let him clothe her this way, as if she was someone who belonged in his world.

"Yes, you can." His voice was hard, commanding. A tone she had not heard directed at her before. "I'm not taking you to meet my uncle and aunt with you looking like something the cat dragged in. So you let Mrs. Abbot finish fitting this dress and let's go. I've got other things to do today." He gave her a small shake. "You hear me?"

She gave up. Until she had her children, she must obey him. "As you wish."

Buff had a hunch he knew what was going through her head. That dress was something! Oh, it was a mite fancy for dining in the hotel, but he'd bet his bottom dollar that Soomey would be tarted up even more. In red, if she hadn't got tired of the color.

He'd noticed before that Siri had a strait-laced streak. She'd probably seen herself looking like a courtesan.

Well, no wonder. He hadn't said anything to her about what would happen after they'd found her kids.

He'd hoped this shopping spree would take her mind off her troubles for a while. Now he realized his mistake. A woman like Siri wouldn't be distracted by foofaraw.

Yet she needed decent clothing, damn it! Especially if they were to get her into the boarding house to identify her kids. A wig, a high-style dress, maybe some face paint--whatever else it took to keep her mother-in-law from recognizing her right off.

And pigs would sprout wings any minute now.

The early winter dusk was settling in when they got back to the hotel. She was truly furious with him. Even though he was amused, Buff didn't blame her. He'd been pretty high-handed all afternoon. After he'd told her she was going to get the blue satin gown whether she liked it or not, he'd dragged her to a milliner's, a shoemaker's, and a hairdresser's. At first she'd kept asking him about the business he'd told her he had to take care of, but after a while she must have caught on. The only business he had this afternoon was turning her into the vision of loveliness he'd imagined she could be.

And she was. He hadn't let her hair be cut, but the elegant chignon at the back of her head was a far cry from the simple knot she usually wore. The blue bonnet, with its ostrich feather and trailing ribbons made her hair appear even more silvery. The cape of rich blue wool turned her eyes from pale ice to the deep shade of northern waters.

He held the door of her room open. "Let me know if you need help. I'm a pretty fair lady's maid."

"I am sure you are," she said, sounding as if she'd like to scream at him instead of speaking softly. "You must have had much practice."

Since he couldn't deny her accusation, he just grinned and pulled the door closed. This morning he'd slipped the key to the door between their rooms into his pocket. A good thing. The mood she was in, she'd probably lock him out if she could.

A good thing he'd engaged one of the hotel's maids to help her dress. If he were to do it, they might not ever get to dinner.

His evening clothes, packed in his trunk since Honolulu, were pressed and hanging in the wardrobe. When he went into his bathroom to shave, he eyed the copper bathtub in the corner. It was big enough for two. "I wonder..." No. Siri wouldn't. Not in the mood she was in tonight, anyhow.

Maybe later. When they came back from dinner. He'd order some champagne--had she ever tasted it? She'd need help getting out of that fancy gown.

His fingertips tingled, as if he'd touched the warm, smooth skin under the gown.

* * *

"You're gonna have to pay me more, else I'm goin' back downstairs. The boss don't like us stayin' more'n an hour."

Jaeger looked across the room at the half-naked woman who'd just come from behind the screen in the corner. She was young, but already showed the ravages of the life she led. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her skin coarse. "I will pay. Come here."

"In advance," she said, not moving. "You gotta pay in advance."

"Very well." He sat up and reached for his trousers. The only coin he had was one of the tiny gold pieces worth two-and-a-half dollars. A quarter-eagle? Whatever that meant. "Here."

She snatched it out of the air. When she saw what she held, she said, "I don't

give change."

"Then I will take it out in trade." He snapped his fingers. "Come here."
How unfortunate the walls are so thin, he mused as she came to him.

* * *

The dining room was a feast for the senses. In one corner a small orchestra played, the music soft and complex, like nothing she had ever heard in church or at Liberty Hall. Rich purple velvet draperies framed mirrors made to look like windows, and three elaborate crystal chandeliers hung from a ceiling embossed with gilded medallions and ornate moldings. The tables were widely spaced, covered with white tablecloths, and decorated with small bouquets in silver vases. Only about half of them were occupied. Siri was not surprised. Seven o'clock was far too late for supper.

Buffalo said something to the man who had met them at the door. He wore clothing even more formal than Buffalo's. "Who is he?" she whispered as he led them across the room.

"The *maitre d'hôtel*," Buffalo whispered back. "The headwaiter."

"Oh, my! I thought he was a prince or something." Now she felt even more out of place.

The table to which they were led was close to the center of the room. With a flourish, the headwaiter pulled one chair back. "Madame?" he said.

"This won't do," Buffalo told him. "We'd like a table on the side of the room. Maybe back in that corner." He nodded his head toward the far end of the room.

"Of course. Right this way." This time he took them to a table set for six. With a snap of his fingers, he summoned a younger man who whisked away the extra place settings.

Fortunately Mrs. Abbot had showed Siri how to sit gracefully with a bustle and train, so when he again offered her a chair, she didn't quite make a fool of herself. She perched on the edge of her chair and looked around. Most of the other diners were men, but there were a few women. None of them were clothed as elaborately as she was.

As she glanced back toward the doorway, she saw a man and a woman standing there. She was tiny, the top of her head scarcely as high as the broad shoulder of the man beside her. Her gown was bright red, her hair coal black.

In a moment the headwaiter was leading them across the room.

"Here they come," Buffalo said. "My uncle and aunt."

She is Chinese! Siri automatically held her hand out to Buffalo's uncle, but almost jerked it back when he bowed over it. His beard tickled the back as his lips moved lightly against her knuckles. She turned to the woman when Buffalo said, "And this is my Aunt Soomey. Don't let her size fool you. She can lick her weight in wildcats."

"You have not grown too big for me to tell you to mind your manners, Buffalo." She let the headwaiter seat her, then smiled across the table at Siri, but there was a question in her eyes. "You did not expect a China woman, did you? Buffalo is very bad not to warn you."

"I thought I had," Buffalo said. "Siri's used to Celestials. Li Ching helped us

out in Astoria."

"I trust you found him well," Mrs. Dewitt said. "I have not visited with him for some time."

"He's fine. Just as wily as ever." Nodding when a waiter offered to fill the stemmed glass by his plate, he sat back. "Well?" he said to his uncle, "did you find out anything?"

"I did," Mr. Dewitt said, smiling. "Good news." He waited until they were alone, then leaned forward. In a low voice, he said, "The mate of the *Hattie's Fortune* is already staying at Mrs. Peterson's boarding house. We're installing some new rigging, so the crew's on leave. Trouble is, Simmons went off hunting, and isn't expected back until tomorrow or the next day."

"Great," Buffalo said. "I was afraid we'd have to find someone to take a room there. I sure hope he gets back tomorrow. Siri's waited long enough."

She had been paying little attention to the men's conversation. Instead she had let herself wonder about Mrs. Dewitt. Did she dare ask the question that was burning on her tongue? Buffalo's mention of her name caught her attention. "What are you saying? What have I waited for?"

Buffalo looked excessively pleased with himself. "You tell her, Silas."

"Mrs. Trogen, a crewman on one of my ships is lodging with Martha Peterson. When he gets back to town, we'll ask him if there are children there. If there are, we'll figure out a way to get you inside so you can see if they're yours."

She looked at him, unbelieving. So simple. Buffalo had not failed her. All this day she had been filled with resentment because his pleasures seemed to be more important to him than her quest. "*Jag känner mig så skamsen*," she choked out. For the second time that day, she felt the hot welling of tears. She snatched the napkin from her lap and buried her face in its thick folds. "So ashamed. I doubted you."

"I can't hear a word you're saying, darlin'" Buffalo's warm, deep voice sounded close to her ear. "But I can imagine what it is. I'm sorry we sprung this on you, but when I talked to Silas this morning, we weren't sure what we might do to get someone inside that house."

She lowered the napkin. "No, that is not it. I doubted you. I thought you only...that because I..."

"Clumsy men! You have no sense!" Mrs. Dewitt pushed Buffalo aside.

"Come, Siri...I may call you Siri? We will go to where we can be private, away from too-nosy people who want to mind everyone's business but their own." With a grip surprisingly strong for such a tiny woman, Mrs. Dewitt forced her to stand. "Come now. Follow me."

Siri followed her across the dining room, being careful to keep her gaze on Mrs. Dewitt's back. Even so, she could feel the curiosity and the contempt in the minds of all who stared at her tear-wet face. When they reached the room set aside for ladies' privacy, she sank into the first chair she found, not worrying about her train, or about tearstains on her gown.

Mrs. Dewitt said to the hovering attendant, "I will call you when I need you. Do not let anyone else come in." When the woman would have argued, Mrs. Dewitt said, "Go! I am important lady. You will obey me."

The woman went.

"Now, you will drink this water, then you will tell me your story with no roundaboutation." She sat next to Siri and folded her hands in her lap.

Hesitantly at first, Siri told how she had been forced to find work when Valter drowned, and how Martine had cared for Rolf and Rosel. "I visited them when I could, but it was only one day a week. And for so short a time, because I had to walk far and the days were getting short. Then one day, I went to visit, and they were not there." Her throat tightened, as it always did when she remembered that horrible, terrible day. "The house was empty. Martine was gone. *Mina barn* were gone."

Conquering the sobs that hovered in her chest, she went on, "I had little money, so I could not search. But some of the captains of steamers, they helped me, asking questions up the river. Martine was seen only one time, across the river the day after she disappeared. And Rolf and Rosel have not been seen at all!"

"You are sure she has your children?"

"I know she does. She hated me. In her eyes they were Valter's children, never mine."

"Bah! She is probably crazy in the head. You are the mother. They are yours." She handed Siri a cloth. "Wipe your face now. I will help you make yourself beautiful again. And we will go to our men and enjoy their company tonight. The food here is very good."

"Mrs. Dewitt--"

"I am Soomey. We will be good friends. I know this."

"Soomey, then. You are being so kind. Will you help me find *mina barn*? The men, they will plan and plan and perhaps in a week, or two, they will do something. I cannot wait!" She heard how shrill her voice had become. Ashamed, she breathed deeply and calmed herself.

"You are Buffalo's woman. He is family. Of course I will help you."

"But I'm not--"

"You are. I see it in his face. Now, here. Pat your cheeks with this damp cloth. Soon you will look as if you have not shed a tear."

Buff didn't know what Soomey had said to Siri, but it had helped. When they came back, they were both smiling and acting like they were old friends. For the rest of the evening, she was quiet, but not unsociable. She listened to the conversation around the table with obvious interest. When Silas got to talking about Sweden, she'd asked some questions that showed her folks had told her damn little about where they came from.

Of course, they weren't really her folks, and she hadn't come from Sweden.

They lingered at the table. The men sipped cognac and the women had tea. When Silas finally pulled out his watch and checked the time, Buff was surprised to hear they'd been here for three hours.

"Tomorrow I will take Siri shopping," Soomey announced when they had left the dining room. "We will do woman things together while you men work to pay for our pleasures."

Siri gasped. "Oh, no--"

"Indeed, yes. This is what men are for. You and I will have much pleasure. I will call for you at ten tomorrow."

Well, hell! Soomey's up to something. I've seen that glint in her eyes before.

And every time, he or Silas had ended up in a pickle.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you are tonight, Siri?" Buff said, once they'd said goodnight to the Dewitts at the door to their suite on the second floor.

"Any woman would be beautiful in a gown like this," she said. "I still believe you should not have bought it for me--so expensive!"

He slipped his arm around her waist as they mounted the stairs to the third floor. "No gown *makes* a woman beautiful. Clothing only gilds the lily. And I'm glad I bought it for you, darlin'. You look real fine gilded."

He nuzzled her neck, feeling the desire that had simmered all evening come to a boil. "I sure hope you're not tired."

Her body seemed to mold itself to his. "Oh, no! I am not tired."

Still holding her close by his side, Buffalo opened the door to his room.

"Good. Because I'm not either."

As soon as the door closed behind them, he took her mouth.

The tiny hooks at the back of her bodice resisted his best efforts, and he had to stop kissing her and turn her around. "Women's clothes are designed to be impossible to get out of easily," he complained as he undid the last one and tossed the garment aside. Her skirt was easier. It fastened with one large hook. The corset cover, a confection of lace and almost transparent embroidered fabric, confounded him, until he found its hidden placket. And more hooks and eyes, even tinier.

"Perhaps we should have asked the maid to come back. You seem to find this difficult."

Buff nipped her on the side of the neck. "If you'll hold still," he said, when she jumped, "I'll be done in no time." Her petticoat, with its double row of flounces over the bustle, was a pretty thing, with each flounce edged with lace. He'd seen many a bustle in Europe, but the one she wore took the cake. It looked more like a birdcage sitting on her behind than anything else. "I'm surprised you could sit with this on," he remarked, as he untied it and her hoops. "Or walk. Women!" He shook his head. "I don't understand why you gussy yourselves up like this. There's nothing so beautiful as the natural shape of a woman." Quickly he unhooked, untied, and unlaced, until she stood before him in nothing but a delicate silk chemise. It concealed little, only giving her lovely, pale skin a pinkish glow. "How's your shoulder? Can you manage with the sling a little longer?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed, as if she couldn't find her voice.

Buffalo put the wide ribbon that served as a sling over her head and helped her settle her right wrist in it. "Comfortable?"

She nodded. He turned her then, and slipped his hands around her ribs, slowly, enjoying the delicious sensation of silk over skin, until they cupped her breasts.

"Oh, God, Siri, this feels so right."

Her head fell back onto his shoulder. "I think it must be sinful," she said, her voice breaking on the last word, "because it feels good to me also."

He nipped along the curve where her lovely throat met her velvety shoulder.
"Is that what they teach you at church?"

"*Nej*. That is what *mina mor* tells me. That anything that gives great pleasure is wrong, because we are supposed to suffer for our sins." She gasped again, when he caught her earlobe between his teeth. "*Far* always said I was *trist*...gloomy. He was a man of great appetite for pleasure."

"A fellow after my own heart." Unable to wait any longer, he picked her up and carried her to the bed, already turned back and waiting.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Refreshed by his night's activities, Jaeger strolled to the dock long before dawn on Wednesday. The woman's body would be found today, he had no doubt, but by then he would be far upriver and forgotten.

It was unfortunate he had not known of Lachlan's intention of traveling to Portland in time to take the same ship upriver, but in the end the delay would not matter. He had learned that Portland was a city where a man could lose himself easily. More so if he was skilled in wearing many faces.

Jaeger smiled. His own lack of distinguishing characteristics had determined his career. Except for his height, slightly above average, he was not merely inconspicuous, he was forgettable. "One, for The Dalles" he told the ticket seller.

"You'll have a layover in Portland," the man behind the counter said. "The next run to The Dalles is on Friday."

"That will be inconvenient," Jaeger said, "but perhaps I can find customers in Portland to make the delay worth my while." He lifted his valise, so the ticket-taker could see it. "I have samples with me, always." This morning he had decided to wear his Rabe persona until he reached Portland. It was not likely Lachlan would be at the dock when he debarked. After that it would be only a short time before he disappeared into the underworld that existed on every waterfront in the world.

He had not yet decided who would emerge. Adler, perhaps.

Yes, that would be fitting. An eagle, fierce and deadly, to make the kill. At last.

* * *

Siri lay in bed and watched Buffalo dress. She had little ambition to rise this morning. He had loved her with wild passion last night. Almost, it had seemed, with desperation, as if he was saying goodbye.

Perhaps he was. He will leave me soon, once he has fulfilled his promise. Perhaps tomorrow.

Nej! She would not think of that. Today she would go shopping with Soomey and pretend she had no cares, no fear of an unknown future.

"I still wish you'd stay here," Buffalo spoke to his reflection in the mirror as he fastened his collar. He grimaced. "I hate these things." He gave it a last twitch, and picked up a striped silk cravat. Holding it in one hand, he looked over his shoulder. "I don't know why I've got a bad feeling about you going off with Soomey. Maybe it's because every time I've been around her, she's gotten me into trouble."

Siri propped her head on one hand and looked him over. "You are very elegant. A gentleman, truly."

"You keep looking at me like that, and I'll show you gentleman. Maybe I should send a note to Silas saying I've got another engagement. Would you like that? We could have breakfast sent up, test out the fancy bathtub, maybe." He came to the bed and sat on its edge. His arms caged her. "You look so damned tempting," he murmured as he bent to kiss her.

For just a moment, Siri responded, then she remembered what he had told

her last night. "Nej, you must not. Buffalo! Stop kissing me!" She pushed him away. "Your uncle wants to speak with you this morning. He is a very busy man, so you must not be late for your appointment."

"You're a hard taskmistress, Siri. Besides, I know what Silas wants to talk to me about. He's been trying to get me to work for him for years."

"And you do not wish to?" She could not imagine not taking employment when it was offered. There had been such little choice for her when Valter died.

His mouth twisted into a grimace. "Oh, I'll do it, when I settle down."

She thought he seemed angry when he went back to the dresser to fix his cravat. Siri lay back and closed her eyes. As soon as he went out, she would get up and test the bathtub for herself. She had heard that the Occident Hotel in Astoria had a few private bathrooms, but she had never seen them. *Så luxuös!*

Lying immersed in rose-scented water, Siri wondered guiltily if she was putting her own pleasures before her children's welfare. If only she could be sure that Buffalo was really seeking a means of getting her into Martine's house to identify them.

His words echoed in her memory. "Damn it, Siri, you're a woman. And injured, to boot. In my family, we don't needlessly expose our women to danger, no matter how brave and strong they are. I'll get you into that house when I can be sure of doing it without getting you or your kids hurt. Now stop arguing with me, and let me get about finding out what I can."

He had almost convinced her. Except she could not imagine that two important men like Buffalo and his uncle would devote much of their time to her small concerns. They were probably spending the day on business, and would discuss how to get her children at dinner, or while they rode back to the hotel this evening.

She got out of the tub and found that she could not wrap the towel around herself with one arm. She blotted and dabbed until she stopped dripping, then rang for the maid. Much as she disliked having someone help her dress, she had no choice.

Soomey arrived about eleven. "I am late! It is very bad of me," the Chinese woman apologized, with a sweet smile. "But when you learn what I was doing, you will be pleased. Now, where do we go first?"

"Could we just drive around while I tell you everything? I am afraid Buffalo will return. If he finds us in the hotel, he will wonder if I am doing something he will not approve of."

"Of course. As would Boss. We will see the sights as we talk, and no one will overhear."

The carriage was as fine as any Siri had ever seen, with well padded leather seats and sliding closures on the wide windows. Even though it was raining, Soomey insisted they leave them open, so Siri could see everything. For an hour and more, as they drove around the city, Siri answered all of Soomey's many questions. Once or twice her voice broke, despite her efforts to contain her anxiety.

Soomey insisted on pointing out sights, because, she said, the men might ask what they had seen when they returned to the hotel. Siri dutifully admired new

buildings and big houses, but soon found her forbearance stretched to the breaking point. Why should she care that the owner of a tall house surrounded by a landscaped yard owned the city's largest bawdyhouse? "Mrs. De...Soomey, I can waste no more time with driving about. I must..."

"We have seen almost enough," Soomey said. "Look. There is Simeon Reed's grand mansion. Is it not elegant?"

Siri obediently looked at the house, surrounded by an ornate iron fence. She had to admit it was more grand than any she had ever seen. As they turned the next corner, Soomey said, "Now we will go to meet my friends."

Soon they were close to the docks. The stores here were smaller. Another turn into a still narrower street, where many signs were written in Chinese. They pulled up before a narrow, windowless brick building, squeezed between two larger ones. "We eat now." She hopped nimbly down from the carriage and reached back inside to pick up a small valise Siri had not noticed.

In the front of the building was a small restaurant in which a dozen or so Chinese men were seated at a long table, eating. Soomey led Siri past and to a smaller table near the back wall. Seated there was a wizened Chinaman who smiled and greeted them. Siri had no idea what he said, but his bow was low and his smile welcoming.

"This is my friend, Zhao Pin Yue. He has no English." She spoke to the man in rapid-fire Chinese.

Siri smiled and extended her hand. "I am happy to meet you, Mr. Yue."

He clasped it, gave it one quick shake, and bowed again.

Soomey laughed. "You must call him Mr. Zhao. Chinese names are backwards to you."

Siri wasn't sure whether to apologize for her error or not. It had not seemed to upset Mr. Zhao, because he motioned them to sit. She had scarcely settled when a boy appeared, carrying a tray on which were several bowls, a teapot, and three cups. He poured tea for each of them. When he finished, Siri sipped at the delicately-scented tea and looked around the room while Soomey and Mr. Zhao spoke together. It was dim, lit only by a single lantern hanging from the ceiling. The walls were unfinished brick, hung with embroidered panels depicting birds and mountains. The musical sound of many voices speaking in Chinese was pleasing and she relaxed.

"Hah!" Soomey said, after a while. "He can help us. Today we will find your children."

Siri's mouth dropped open. "Today? How? Does he know where they are?"

"Buffalo said they were in the house of Martha Peterson. Pin Yue's brother is cook there. We will go there, pretending to be sellers of fine linens. Pin Yue believes the woman will let us into the house so we may show our wares."

"But how--"

"We will decide how when we have eaten. It is not good to make plans on an empty belly."

Siri hardly tasted the food, although a small part of her mind acknowledged it was delicious. Twice when she started to ask Soomey for more information, the other woman raised a finger and said, "Later." The meal seemed to go on forever.

At last the bowls were cleared away, but not before Siri was almost sick with anticipation.

"You are a very tall woman. Are you strong?"

"Why yes, but why?"

"You should not carry a pack. It would be painful. Can you use shoulder pole?"

"I don't know." Well, why shouldn't she? It did not look all that difficult. "Yes, I'm sure I can."

"Good." Soomey turned to Mr. Zhao and spoke rapidly. After several exchanges, he nodded and left them.

"You may ask your questions now." Soomey grinned at her. "I see you have many sitting on your tongue."

"How did you know Mr. Zhao's brother worked for Martine? Why will he help us? Why do I need to carry a shoulder pole? I cannot go there. She will recognize me."

"No, she will not. You will be very large, very stupid, one-armed Chinaman, only fit for carrying heavy loads." Clapping her hands, she said, "Oh, we will fool this evil woman. We will walk right into her house and you will see if the children there are truly yours."

Mr. Zhao returned then. He spoke to Soomey, then motioned them toward the door in the back of the room.

Siri followed Soomey, wondering what Buffalo would say if he knew what his aunt was planning to do.

* * *

"And that's the whole story. Am I imagining it, or is someone trying to kill one or both of us?"

The office in which Buff and Silas sat was in an upper floor of the big warehouse, and it looked out over the river, where rain concealed the opposite bank, half a mile distant. The wind had picked up overnight, and the rattle of rigging could be heard even indoors. Buff decided he'd sure hate to be on the river today.

Silas took a while to fill his pipe, a habit that showed he was thinking. Buff remembered it well from years ago. "What I think," he said, when he'd got it lit, "is we need to look at what you're doing, or what Siri's doing that has somebody after you."

"Well, I thought maybe it had something to do with my helping her find her kids, but that's hardly worth doing murder over. Unless her mother-in-law's crazier than a loon."

"She probably is, else she'd not have taken the kids. But that's a different kind of crazy from killing." He frowned. "Something I read... Nope, it's gone."

"Everybody likes Siri, so it's not like somebody's holding a grudge, or anything. The only other thing I can figure," Buff said, "is me looking for Anders' sister. But I don't see how--"

"Of course! You said there's a younger brother, didn't you?" Silas leaned forward and laid the pipe aside. "I'll bet he'd not look kindly on someone who found

his sister. Not if he's been counting on getting the whole kit and kaboodle."

"C'mon, Silas! There's enough in the Baron's estate to satisfy half a dozen heirs. I didn't take to Piers Thorssen--he's as unlike Anders and Siri as night and day--but to suppose he'd send somebody chasing around half the world just to protect his interest. Well, that's like something you'd see on the stage. One of those melodramas, where the villain wears a long, droopy moustache and the heroine faints at the drop of a hat."

With a chuckle, Silas said, "Where do you think those came from, lad? I don't doubt there's many an heiress out there who's been married or murdered for her fortune. Not every woman is as capable as the ones we know."

"I don't like it." Buff contemplated the tips of his boot toes propped on the corner of the desk. "That means somebody's followed me all the way from Aalborg. That's nearly two years ago!" He dropped his feet to the floor. "No! Absolutely not! There's got to be another answer."

"Well, if you figure it out, let me know. Now, what are we going to do about getting into the boardinghouse, once Simmons gets back?"

"The problem's not us getting in," Buff said, as he scratched his head. "How are we going to get Siri in there to identify those kids? There's no way you'd disguise *her*."

* * *

Once the plan had been explained to Siri, she stopped arguing. It would work. It *had* to.

She'd been given into the hands of an ancient Chinese woman. Now she sat naked in a dim little room, hardly larger than the pantry at the hotel. After the first few minutes of exquisite discomfiture, she had controlled her embarrassment and now could stand still without cringing and wanting to conceal herself. A hastily fashioned sling held her right arm, but was only temporary.

"We will bind it close to your body," Soomey told her, "so you appear to have only one arm. But not until we have made you look Chinese." She cocked her head. "How fortunate it is your eyes are not wide, like mine. I do not know how we would conceal their color. Keep them squinted, like this." She demonstrated.

A thick paste, oily and evil-smelling, was applied to her hair. The old woman said something as she worked it through.

"She says the color will wash out in a week or two," Soomey assured Siri. "It is too bad, but no Chinese person has hair like silver."

"As long as it doesn't make my hair all fall out," muttered Siri, as she tried to take shallow breaths so the smell did not sicken her.

"No, I promise it will not. You will be very pretty, with black hair like mine, and your skin will be dark too. You must tell Buffalo to buy you a red gown."

Buffalo will buy me nothing more, Siri vowed, but she said nothing.

Leaving the paste on Siri's hair, the woman began dabbing an inky-looking solution onto her face. She closed her eyes, and did her best to pretend it did not sting. Her left hand was dipped into a basin which from the sting, must have contained the same noxious mixture.

Again the old woman spoke. "Now you wait," Soomey translated. "The dye

will take time to go into your skin."

"But it will wash out, won't it?"

"Oh, yes, in one week, or maybe two."

What could Siri do but sigh? She would paint herself purple if it meant she would have her children back in her arms.

While she sat and shivered on the small stool, the old woman went away. She returned after a while, carrying an armful of black fabric. They were revealed, when shaken out, to be a long-sleeved shirt, trousers and a padded jacket. From a bag, she pulled several pairs of felt-soled slippers, such as Mrs. Leong wore, as well as some white stockings.

"I hope she found shoes to fit you. Your feet are very big," Soomey told her, holding up a slipper.

Since Siri's mother had often said the very same thing, she could hardly take offense.

At last the old woman declared her skin to be of the right shade. She washed the residue of the dye off with a cloth dampened with some sweet-smelling herb. Then she applied a rough towel to Siri's hair and rubbed briskly. The towel, when she was done, was blackened and filthy. Siri decided she didn't want to know what her hair looked like.

"Now she will make you a queue," Soomey said. "Of course, to do it right, she would shave your head in front--so." Her finger traced a line across the crown of her head from ear to ear. "But I tell her you would not like your head shaved, so she will give you a hat to wear."

Siri chewed her lip as the old woman worked a wide-toothed comb through her long hair. What if the black paste would not wash away? How long would it take her hair to grow out if she cut it off? She winced several times as the woman's callused fingers caught on the damp strands.

While her hair was being braided, Soomey disappeared. When she came back, she was dressed exactly like Mrs. Leong, in black silk trousers and a long tunic of embroidered silk. She carried a seaman's blue coat and a billed cap.

"Now we bind your arm." Soomey approached, holding a wide strip of fabric.

To Siri's unbelieving eye, it looked like embroidered silk. It felt like silk, too. Cool and slick and as light as swansdown. She looked a question at Soomey.

"Do not be concerned. It is soiled and cannot be sold. And it will be more pleasant to wear than the linen wrapping I wore."

"You broke your collarbone?"

"Oh, no! I only bound my breasts. For so long. Almost a year, while I pretended to be a coolie. Boss would not let me be his concubine, so I remained a boy. There. I am finished. Now, you will let me help you into these trousers."

So many questions Siri wanted to ask. Instead she docilely let the two women dress her, as if she was a child's dolly. But someday, she vowed, she would learn why Soomey had disguised herself as a coolie. And where.

The largest pair of the slippers was only a little too small. "If I don't have to walk far, I will be fine," Siri assured Soomey. But when she tried to walk, she found that one had a great lump in the sole, and she was forced to limp slightly.

At last Soomey pronounced her well disguised, and they emerged again into

the small restaurant. Siri saw someone had brought in a large mirror with an ornate, gilded frame. It was leaning against the wall. She hesitated when Soomey gestured toward it, not sure she wanted to see what had been done to her.

Reluctantly she approached and looked at her reflection.

Except for her eyes, she looked foreign. Not particularly Chinese, but *alien*. To hide the fact that her right arm was strapped to her body, the women had attached a folded towel to her shoulder and back, so she looked misshapen, almost hunchbacked. The wrappings about her torso gave her a bulky appearance, quite unlike her usual slenderness.

"I would not know you," Soomey said. "We did a good job."

"You certainly did." Siri was beginning to believe Soomey's crazy scheme might actually work. If they could get into Martine's house at all.

Soon they were on their way to the oldest part of Portland, where Martine's boarding house was located. The carriage let them off around the corner from the house because, as Soomey said, "No one would believe that two China people would ride here in a carriage, so anyone watching will think they just did not see us walk this way."

They walked along the alley to a small shack, Soomey said, "This is the cookhouse. So very stupid. The food will be cold before it reaches the table."

A path led along the side of the house. Siri stayed several paces behind Soomey as she had been instructed. The pole on her left shoulder was heavier than she'd expected, and she was glad they had padded a portion of its length. She waited at the foot of the front steps when Soomey walked boldly to the door and rang the bell. Remembering what Soomey had said about her eyes, she kept them aimed at the ground.

A maid answered the door. She argued with Soomey for several minutes, but Siri could not hear what was said. Eventually she went away, leaving Soomey standing before the closed door. Siri risked looking up at her.

A nod told Siri the maid had gone to fetch Martine. If it was Martine. Siri, who had not doubted for a moment that this was her mother-in-law, that her children were indeed inside, was suddenly beset with doubt. *What if this is all for nothing? How will I ever find Rosel and Rolf?*

The door opened again. The voice that asked Soomey what she wanted was graven on her memory.

Martine Pedersdotter!

A few minutes later she was called to follow Soomey inside. As she crossed the threshold, she heard the sound of childish laughter from somewhere in the house.

Chapter Twenty-nine

At the second floor landing, Silas paused. "You go get Siri. We'll order supper up to our suite and plan our strategy."

"Right. I'll be back in a bit." Whistling under his breath, Buff went up the next flight two steps at a time. Tarnation, but he'd missed Siri today. They'd been together so much the last while that he seemed somehow incomplete when she wasn't around. He tapped on her door as he passed it, then opened his. "I'm home!" he called.

Only silence answered him. Moving silently, because if she was sleeping, he wanted to kiss her awake, he went through the connecting door.

Her bed was empty, her room tidy, as the maid must have left it after her departure. Quickly he checked the dresser for a note.

Nothing.

He went back to his room and looked for a note there.

Nothing there either. *Well, hell, where is she?*

On a scrap of paper ripped from his notebook, he wrote. *I'm in Dewitt's room. Come down.* He carried it back into her room. A small dish on her dresser yielded a pin, which he used to impale the note, leaving it square in the middle of her pillow. *Be hard for her to miss that.*

Angry, but doing his best to conceal it, he strode back downstairs. It was only half-past five. Too early to worry.

Silas was just coming out of his door. "Is Soomey up in your room?" he said.

"No. I figured they were down here." He followed Silas back inside. "Where do you suppose--"

"They're probably still out shopping. The shops haven't closed yet."

Somehow Buff was sure that wasn't the explanation. He had the worst feeling... "Yeah, you're probably right. But after all that's happened, I don't like this."

"I don't either. But there's not a hell of a lot we can do about it. You want a drink?"

Buff had to resist the urge to toss back the whiskey. He sipped, then set the glass down. "I shouldn't have let her go out with just Soomey. What if--"

"Relax. If anything had happened, Evan would've got word to us."

"Evan?"

"My driver. Actually, he's more than that. A handy man in a tight spot. Only trouble is..." He scratched his chin again, staring off into space.

"What? What trouble?"

"He thinks the sun rises and sets in Soomey. He'll do just about anything she asks him to."

"Oh, shit!"

"Exactly." Silas began to pace the floor, his drink forgotten.

* * *

Siri kept her eyes well down when Martine motioned her and Soomey to

follow the hallway toward the back of the house. One of the shallow baskets swinging from her shoulder pole bumped the wall.

"Be careful, there. That's fresh paint."

"So sorry," Soomey said. "He is very clumsy. Very stupid. But there are not many who will work for a female."

When they entered the kitchen, Soomey stopped her with a hand on her humped shoulder. "Excuse, please. I tell him where to place samples." She said something in Chinese, and accompanied it with gestures, so Siri knew to set the baskets down beside the big table at one end of the room. Then she stepped back against the wall, careful to be behind Martine. She wanted to look around without worrying that the color of her eyes might be noticed.

Soomey kept up a running monologue about the samples she was showing Martine. They were lovely. Fine linen napkins, delicate cotton tablecloths embroidered in silk with dragons and flowers. Pillow cases of silk, of linen.

Martine fingered each piece as it was unfolded. She seemed unaware of Siri, which was what they had hoped for. Siri coughed.

Soomey looked up and nodded.

Moving silently, Siri edged toward the doorway. Once she was in the hall, she sped back to the foyer, where broad stairs led to the second floor. Again she heard the childish laughter. *Upstairs!*

The cork-soled slippers were silent on the slick wooden treads as she stole up the stairs to the third floor. A wide hall extended the length of the house. She paused at the top, listening. Voices, from the back of the house. Moving as swiftly as she dared, she moved in that direction, pausing outside each door to listen.

Only two doors remained when she found what she sought. Behind the door against which she leaned, at least two children were playing. She knelt, praying there was no key in the lock.

There was not! She peered inside, but could only see a little of the room. A ginger cat slept on a rug in the center, but no other living thing was visible. Siri pressed her cheek against the door, wishing she could see around corners.

Just when she was wondering if she dared open the door, a child ran to the cat. "Wake up, silly Parkaka. You lazy cat!"

Rose!

Siri's head spun. Her vision dimmed. She clung to the doorknob, afraid she would swoon.

For a moment more, she watched as the little girl tickled the cat. Then common sense reasserted itself and she rose. *I will be back*, she promised her daughter. *I will come for you. You and Rolf.*

Almost running, she made her way back to the kitchen. When she once more stood behind Martine, she realized her heart was pounding. Her skin felt cold, yet she was afire with excitement.

When Soomey looked up at her, she nodded. Only then did the enormous risk she had taken strike her. Cold sweat soaked the binding about her chest and arm, trickled into her eyes. Her knees shook until she could hardly stand.

For almost half an hour, she had to lean dumbly against the wall as Martine deliberated over linens for her boudoir.

She had found her children. Soon they would be with her again.

* * *

The carriage waited where it had left them off. "You took long enough," the driver grumbled when he'd jumped from the seat to help them load the baskets. "I was about to go get the boss."

"I tell you we might be a while," Soomey said. "Oh, Evan, we are successful! Siri's children are there. Now tomorrow--"

"Missus, I ain't doin' any more about this until I get orders from the boss. If you only knew what I was thinkin' might happen to you..." He slammed the door. The carriage dipped as he swung himself onto the seat, jerked as he set the horses to a trot.

"He is always like this," Soomey said. "Afterward."

Siri shivered. The quilted coat was wet through, and the cold was soaking into her. Before she could stop them, her teeth chattered.

"Oh, you must be frozen." Soomey wrapped her in a carriage robe that she pulled from a compartment under one seat. It did no good. All the way back to the hotel, Siri shook with uncontrollable tremors. Even when Soomey took her in her arms, she continued to shiver.

"It is often so," Soomey told her when she tried to explain, but couldn't make the words form themselves on her tongue. "Only after it is over do we understand the danger." She continued to hold Siri until the driver opened the carriage door.

"We're here," he said. "Want me to go get the boss?"

"No. You will carry Siri to our suite. Boss may not be there."

Siri couldn't even protest when they wrapped her from top to bottom in the robe, and the driver carried her into the hotel.

* * *

The *Lolochuck* had struggled upriver, fighting wind and current. She docked in Portland shortly after eleven at night, six hours behind schedule. Jaeger overheard one of the ship's crew telling another passenger that more than once the captain had considered pulling to shore to wait out the storm.

What a benighted land! What else could go wrong?

"The sooner I am done with this affair, the sooner I can return to civilization," he muttered as he walked up the cobbled street towards the small hotel he'd been told was most likely to have rooms at this hour.

Early tomorrow he would begin his search for Lachlan and the woman. They would be at a better hotel, he believed. Lachlan was not a frugal man, and he was one who liked comfort. Jaeger had never understood why he had lodged at the Pacific Western Hotel rather than the Occidental. It had been out of character, and Jaeger disliked it when his prey made unexpected moves.

Once he was in his room, a shabby, chill place on the second floor, he relaxed on the bed and made his plans. He was through with subtlety. When he found Lachlan and the woman, he would watch for an opportunity. When it presented itself, he would kill her, perhaps using the handgun he had found in the whore's room last night.

It was a fine gun, with a carved walnut handle and silver chasing on the barrel. A beautiful machine designed to kill.

Jaeger knew his preference for a good sharp knife was old-fashioned. He fingered the cylinder, turning it with a soft click. Was this the bullet that would rid him forever of Lachlan? The man who, despite his provincial manners and lack of refinement had managed to outwit him more than once.

Yes, tomorrow or the next day, he would be rid of Buffalo Lachlan. And then he would go back to Denmark and report to the would-be Baron Mogensen that he was indeed the only heir to his father's fortune and title.

* * *

Both men jumped to their feet when a key rattled in the lock. Silas strode across the room and jerked open the door.

A big fellow stood there with a blanket-wrapped figure in his arms. Beside him stood Soomey, dressed in an overlarge pea jacket and a disreputable billed cap. "Good evening, Boss. I am happy to see you here. Wait until I tell you of our adventure."

To Buff's amusement, Silas moved docilely aside and let Soomey and the big man enter. But when he set his burden on the sofa and the blanket fell away, he stopped smiling. "Siri! What the hell--"

"Be silent, Buffalo. She is very cold. First we must put her in a hot bath. Then I will tell you of our adventure." She knelt beside Siri and tucked the blanket around her. "Only a little while. Then you will be warm. Boss, I think she would like some whiskey."

Recognizing the sense of what Soomey said, Buff lit the water heater. While they waited for the water to heat, he stood behind the sofa with his hands lying lightly on Siri's shoulders. The shivers that shook her slender frame worried him. More than a simple chill was causing them.

While he bit back all the questions and curses that hovered on his tongue, Soomey and Silas were across the room, engaged in a real knock-down, drag-out argument. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he knew Silas was giving her hell.

"Oh, you stupid Boss!" she yelled. "While you men discuss what is best to do, we do it. Now you be silent too. I will tell you all when Siri is able to tell her part."

Reckoning that the water should be hot enough by now, Buff scooped Siri off the sofa. She struggled weakly. "Be still. I'll take care of you."

And he did. He held her with one arm while unwrapping her cocoon with the other. Then he sat her on one knee while he stripped the damp coat and coarse cotton shirt from her body. When he saw how she'd been given the ugly hunchback appearance, he smiled grimly, appreciating the ingenious disguise while getting madder every minute. Instead of unwrapping the binding that held the hump on her shoulder and her arm against her body, he pulled the knife from his boot and cut them off of her. Her angry protest only made him snarl, "Shut up!"

The trousers were fastened with a knot that resisted his fingers. He sliced them away from her long legs in ragged strips, tossing the scraps aside. When she was finally naked, he eased her into the steaming water.

Her breath hissed between her teeth. Then she slid down until only her head was above water. "*S-s-så varm. T-t-tack.*" Her eyes closed. After a while, her teeth stopped chattering.

That was when he finally took a good look at her.

"What the hell have you done to your hair?" he demanded.

She tried to answer, but he cut her off. "Shut up. Just don't talk to me. I swear, Siri, if you weren't so damn cold, I'd whale the tar out of you."

What he'd taken for soot or some other black substance rubbed into her hair was actually a greasy substance that repelled water. Biting back his anger, he loosened the long braid. His hands came away stained.

Not wanting her skin to be colored too, he piled her hair on top of her head. *God almighty, what a crime!* Her sleek, once-silvery hair was a mass of tangled black ropes, sticky and matted.

"I'll get you some coffee," he told her. "Warm you from the inside out." Because if he were to stay with her, he'd probably kill her, he strode through the living room of the suite and out the door. "Keep an eye on her," he flung over his shoulder as he exited.

A quarter-hour later he was back, followed by a waiter carrying a tray loaded with a coffee service, an assortment of sandwiches, and a plate of small cakes. She didn't like coffee, but she was damn well going to drink it. Nothing like it for getting the blood moving. Especially with a shot of brandy in it.

Siri slowly felt warmth seeping into her bones. The awful reaction that had overtaken her when she realized what a chance she and Soomey had taken had also relaxed its hold. After all, Martine would hardly have had them killed. But she might have attacked them with her big fists, as she had Siri one time.

Soomey could have been badly hurt. She was so small, so delicate.

Worst of all, Martine would have hidden the children somewhere else and Siri might never have found them a second time.

Well, what was done was done. Now all that was left was to remove the children from Martine's hold. She hoped Buffalo was not so angry with her he would refuse to help with that.

A heavy wool robe was tossed across a stool next to the bathtub, along with a soft linen towel. Siri eyed them longingly, but with her arm unbound, she knew she could not dry herself safely, let alone don the robe. "I hope someone will come in soon." The water was cooling now, and soon she would be cold all over again. She would have called for help, but the occasional loud, angry voices from the next room constrained her. Mr. Dewitt was very angry with Soomey. She hoped he would not beat her.

Eventually Buffalo entered, carrying a cup and saucer. "Drink this," he commanded, handing it to her. She sniffed.

"I do not drink coffee."

"Yes you do. Even if I have to hold your nose and pour it down you." He shoved the cup at her.

Siri had no choice but to take it. "Monster," she told him. "You are *grym!*" She sipped, and choked on the harsh beverage. "What did you put in it?"

"Brandy," he said. "Drink."

She drank, and found it warmed her from the belly out, a different. soothing warmth.

When she handed him the empty cup, he said, "Are you ready to get out?" He picked up the towel. "Careful. Don't slip."

Soon she was dry and wrapped in the wonderfully warm woolen robe. Her arm was supported by a sling fashioned from a silken scarf decorated with crimson dragons and bold flowers.

"We've got to do something about your hair." He reached toward her head, then drew his hand back. "How much of that color is going to come off?"

"Not much, I think." She let her distaste sound in her voice. "It is *otäck*...hideous, is it not? But you must agree I do not look like myself."

"So what? Why the hell didn't you wait--"

"They are *mina barn*! Finding them was my responsibility."

"The *hell* it was! Silas and I were planning to...Great God, Siri, you risked your life--and Soomey's--going in there. What if the old witch had caught you?" He paused, staring at her. "How the dickens did you pull it off, anyhow?"

"Don't say a word! I don't want to hear about it. If ever there was a woman needed beating, it's you. What possessed you--" He broke off and stalked across the room. Facing the blind-covered window, he said, "Siri, when you weren't here, weren't in your room, my first thought was that something had happened to you. If it hadn't been for Silas, telling me his driver was a good bodyguard, I'd have been out and searching for you--" His voice broke.

Slowly he turned around and came toward her. Stopping just out of reach, he said, "Siri, you...you've come to mean a lot to me. Promise me you won't put yourself into danger again." His hands shot out, grasped her upper arms. He shook her gently. "Promise me!"

Unable to make such a promise until her children were restored to her, Siri said nothing. With her lower lip caught between her teeth, she simply stared back at him.

After a quick rap on the door, Soomey peeked into the bathroom. "You will need help with your hair. Go away, Buffalo. Now she is warm, we will make her beautiful."

After Buffalo went, reluctantly, but borne to the door before a whirlwind named Soomey, Siri said, "Does everyone do what you tell them?" She had never known a woman--a person of either sex, in fact--who swept all before them as this small Chinese woman did.

With a chuckle, Soomey said, "No. My husband is master in our house and I am a very obedient wife. Besides, I think Buffalo would rather I washed your hair than he. It is very ugly." She wrinkled her nose. "It smells bad, too, like a ropewalk, or a tar barrel."

She produced a bottle of a clear liquid. With efficient movements, she spread a towel over Siri's shoulders and gave her a cloth to wipe the drips from her face. "For you do not want this in your eyes."

The next little while was as unpleasant as any experience Siri could remember. Fumes from the bottle's contents stung her nose, and the liquid stung her skin.

At last Soomey said, "Now we wash. Can you bend down beside the bathtub? The water is cool, but I think it will feel good on your skin."

She knelt, clumsily, and bent her head over the tub. Soomey dipped scented soft soap from a fancy dish and rubbed it through Siri's hair. "Keep your eyes tight," Soomey warned, and poured cool water over. Thrice she repeated the process, and after the third soaping, she rinsed again and again, using water from a pitcher on the commode at the last.

"Your hair is still quite black, but it is slick and clean," Soomey told her, as she wrapped Siri's head in another towel. "It is not ugly any more, but I think I liked it more the way it was."

So did I, Siri admitted. Aloud she said, "I would have shaved my head if it meant I could find my children. Thank you, Soomey. I can never repay you for what you did today."

Soomey hugged her. "It was a great adventure. My life has been quite uninteresting of late. I should thank you."

In complete agreement, the two women returned to the living room.

To Siri's surprise, Buffalo said no more about wanting her to promise to be careful. As soon as she had eaten two of the sandwiches, the men asked for an account of the day's adventure. She and Soomey took turns, interrupting each other, and sometimes speaking in unison, telling the whole story. She noticed that Mr. Dewitt's mouth seemed to twitch more than once, but Buffalo only grew more and more sober. Not angry, exactly, but *allvarlig*...thoughtful.

"What's done is done," Soomey's husband said when they were finished with the tale, "Soomey has promised me she'll behave, Siri, and I hope you'll do the same. I admit you probably found the easiest way to get in and identify your kids, but great God! The risk you took." He shook his head. "Never mind. What we need to do now is figure out how we'll get 'em out of there."

They considered and discarded several schemes as the evening wore on. Mr. Dewitt wanted to call in the police, but Siri was sure they would side with Martine. After all, she had nothing to offer the children, except the love of a mother. She grew more and more discouraged.

"This is wasting time," she said, after both Buffalo and Mr. Dewitt had urged her to wait until they could reconnoiter the house again tomorrow. "I will not wait. There are five of us, if Mr. Jones will help. Martine has only one, or perhaps two maids, and the children's nurse. We can make her give them to me."

"God save me from crazy women!" Buffalo yelled. "Only an idiot starts a battle without intelligence and planning. You saw a maid and a nurse. How do you know there isn't a bodyguard or two on the premises? And what are you going to do if she somehow summons the police?" He pushed his hands through his curly hair, standing it on end.

"I see what it is," she yelled right back as she poked him in the chest with her finger. "You only want to do this your way. Well, if we had waited for *your way*, we would still not know *mina barn* are in the house. And if we wait for *your way*, they will stay there forever."

"I tell you this, Buffalo, I am sick to death of being told what to do by men who only care for their own comfort. You believe the only wishes that matter are

yours. You say women and children are to be protected, but you really want us out of the way while you live as you choose. Only when you are hungry or wanting to...to *jucka* do we become important to you." She gave his chest one last poke. "Tomorrow I go to get *mina barn*. With or without your help. So there!"

"Wait just a minute--"

"Hold it!"

At Mr. Dewitt's sharp command, Siri wilted. Had she really said those words, really stood up to Buffalo that way? *Ah, gode Gud! Now he will refuse to help me. How could I...*

"Siri, you're understandably upset at what seems to be unreasonable delay. And Buff, you're probably a mite put out at what the women accomplished today. So why don't we all sit down and see what we can do to get this job done as safely as possible and as soon as possible?"

Siri chose a straight chair at the small table by the window, as far from where Buffalo sat beside the fireplace as she could get. For the next hour and more they discussed several possible plans, but always came back to the same one.

"Enough!" Buffalo said at last. "We're all so tired we can't think straight. First thing tomorrow, we'll send Jones up there to reconnoiter. I want to know where the doors and windows are, how far it is to the street, what cover there is around the house. I'll go talk to the police, see if we can keep them out of it." He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, and Siri saw weariness in the gesture. "I sure hope this weather messed up your man's hunting trip, Silas."

Mr. Dewitt nodded. "I'll send someone out to the boarding house first thing with a message that we need him at the office." He rose, and pulled Soomey up with him. "I'm for bed. We've got a big day ahead of us."

"*Tusen tack*," Siri said to them both. "I cannot tell you how I am grateful for your help. No matter what..."

"Tomorrow night you will have your children," Soomey assured her. "Buffalo and Boss will see to it." She hugged Siri and said good night.

Hesitating, Siri looked at Buffalo. He looked back, his expression saying nothing of his thoughts. When he opened the door, she walked through, careful not to brush against him. "Still mad?" he said, once they were alone.

"I was not so much angry as...I do not know the word. *Min far* used to say he felt as if he was trying to bail water with a sieve."

"Frustrated." He grinned at her. "Yeah, I can see why you felt that way. But trust me, Siri, the only thing we'll gain by going off half-cocked is a lot of trouble."

Before she could ask him what the expression meant, he had swung her off her feet. She could have struggled, but chose not to.

Such a good feeling, to be held thus. Safe. Treasured. Warm.

He helped her undress, as impersonally as any lady's maid. When she emerged from behind the screen, he was gone, and the door between their rooms was half closed. She started to climb into her bed, then paused.

Before she could change her mind, she went to the connecting door and tapped.

He was there in an instant. Siri all but forgot her purpose, for he was clad only in his trousers. "*Så skön!*" she breathed. She would never get tired of seeing

his beautiful body.

"Men are handsome, not beautiful," he told her.

"You are beautiful." She touched his chest, feeling his warmth. "I am sorry," she said, while she could still think. "I should not yell at you."

"Are you still fretting about that? Forget it. You had every right to yell at me. It must have seemed to you like Silas and I were sitting around talking and not getting anything done."

"Ja," she admitted. "I did think that. But--"

"But nothing. I'm not mad at you. Now, go to bed. Tomorrow could be a long day."

Obediently she went to her bed. It seemed too big, too empty. If only...

As if in answer to her unspoken wish, Buffalo crawled in beside her. "I was lonesome," he said, reaching for her.

She went willingly into his arms, but found she could not respond to his caresses. All she could think of was that tomorrow she would once again hold her children.

And then what?

She could not banish the question, for there was no more time to find an answer.

Still, when he stopped kissing her breast and lay back beside her with a sigh, she realized she had made a serious mistake. "Oh, please, you must not...I did not mean...you must go ahead and--" she faltered. Valter would never have left her alone because she felt no desire for him.

"Oh, sure. I'm supposed to climb on and rut away, just because I'm horny. Is that what you're saying? Never mind it's the last thing on earth you want." He rose to loom over her. "God damn it, Siri, what kind of man do you think I am? If you're not interested, all you have to do is say so."

She recoiled from the anger in his voice, different and much fiercer than his tone when they had argued before. "Oh, but, I do not mind. You are a man...you need..."

"I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a pisser of a day." He flopped back and laid his forearm over his eyes. "Go to sleep, Siri. Or lie there and fret and stew all night. I don't care."

After a while his breathing became slow and even. She thought he slept.

She did not.

Chapter Thirty

By midmorning the day after his arrival, Jaeger had found the hotel where Lachlan and the woman were staying, had hired three waterfront dregs to watch him 'round the clock, and had become Gotthart Taube, gentleman of leisure. Adler would remain in the waterfront hotel, but Herr Taube would be a guest here at the Siskiyou House, where only society's best were found.

Why had Lachlan brought the woman here, as if she was his mistress? She was not beautiful, nor did she in any way resemble the man's usual paramours. A drab little servant, with no family, she was the sort a man used and discarded.

He lowered his newspaper and watched a pair of attractive young women walk across the lobby. Tempting, but no doubt well-protected by fathers or husbands. When he wanted a woman, he would find one on the waterfront, not here, where a hue and cry would be raised if he allowed his passions free rein. He was too close to the conclusion of this assignment to chance exposure.

Now why had that thought occurred to him? He had been successfully executing commissions without even the smallest of difficulty for more than a decade. All that time he had taken his pleasure with convenient women and had never fallen under suspicion. Even his clients had not known of his secret life.

He smiled to himself. Clients who never hesitated at ordering the removal of someone who stood in their way would have been horrified to learn of his sexual habits.

Perhaps, when he had disposed of Lachlan, he would sample the woman. There must be *something* about her...

* * *

"Well, I still can't think of any other way," Buff said. He looked out at the river, higher than yesterday, and all but obscured by the rain that fell at a sharp angle. Once again river traffic had stopped, for even the most powerful steamers could make little headway against the wind. "And I don't like it any better than I did last night."

He was a little nervous about leaving Siri alone in the hotel all morning. No telling what sort of fix she'd get herself into next. And here he'd thought her a sensible, biddable woman.

Hell, she's as bad as Soomey!

A tap on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come," Silas called.

The big redhead who entered held a wool cap in two ham-like hands. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Dewitt?"

"Yes, I did. Have a seat." Silas gestured to the chair beside Buff's. "This is Buffalo Lachlan, Jamie. Buff, here's the man who can help us. James Simmons, mate of the *Hattie's Fortune*."

Buff shook hands, glad Simmons wasn't the sort to play the 'my grip's stronger than yours' game. "I'm glad to see you. How was the hunting?"

Simmons shrugged. "Too wet. We saw some elk tracks, but that's all." He

squirmed in the too-small chair. "How can I help you?"

"Silas tells me you're staying at Martha Peterson's boarding house. We need some information about it." He paused and looked a question at Silas.

"Jamie's loyal," Silas said. "I'd trust him with my life."

Simmons ruddy face grew even redder. "Thankee, sir," he said.

"You've seen the children? Mrs. Peterson's grandchildren, I believe?"

A nod. "Lively little tykes, especially the boy. It's a shame she won't let 'em outside to play. Kids shouldn't be cooped up."

"No," Buff agreed, "they shouldn't. But there's a reason why she won't let them outside, Simmons. She's their grandmother all right, but she's stolen them from their mother. Mrs. Peterson hasn't any right to those children."

"But she's such a nice lady..."

In concise, terse sentences, Buff related all Siri had told him about his landlady's behavior, both before her son was drowned and after. He had not believed it himself, not entirely. When he'd got done asking around Astoria, he'd decided Siri had spoken far too kindly about her treatment by Martine Pedersdotter. "Ordinarily," he concluded, "I'd stay out of a family feud, but what that woman's done is downright criminal." Leaning forward, he held Simmons' gaze. "So, are you willing to help?"

"Well, sure. It ain't right for a woman's kids to be stolen from her."

For the next half hour they discussed and discarded several plans. In the end, they were back to where they'd begun. Silas shook his head. "I just don't see any other way."

"Soomey and Siri will want to go along," Buff warned.

"Hell, don't I know it! We'll need 'em too. The kids might kick up a real fuss otherwise."

"I hadn't thought of that. Well, okay, so that's five of us--"

"Six. Evan's a good man in a tight spot."

"Six, then." Buff rose and paced across the room and back. He stopped in front of the window and stared out. "There's no sign of the weather easing. Do we want to wait? I don't look forward to traveling overland. Not with a couple of kids."

"Are you sure you want to take them to Hattie?" Silas said. "Won't she get the wrong idea, you bringing home a woman and her kids?"

Hearing his tone, Buff turned to stare at him. His uncle had an unholy grin on his face. "I just don't know where else to take them. Astoria's no good. Martine could find them in no time. And if I'm not there to keep an eye on Siri, God only knows what trouble she'll get herself in."

"Of course." Silas agreed, grinning. "The perfect solution."

* * *

"Men!" Siri paced the length of the Dewitt's sitting room. "They believe they always know what is best. 'Wait until we have a plan,' they say. 'Don't go off half-cocked!' they say." She paused and looked at Soomey, who sat on the sofa with a book open on her lap. "What does this mean, 'half-cocked'?"

"I believe it means we should make very careful plans," Soomey said. She shrugged. "Boss says it has something to do with guns."

"What is to plan? Martine is only one woman. Surely Buffalo and Mr. Dewitt could find other men who can help them force their way into the house and take my children away from her."

"I suppose it is possible, but what if that woman summons the police? Can you prove they are yours?"

"Why of course. They will know me. I am their mother."

"A child's word against that of a respectable woman. I do not think so."

Soomey looked indefinitely sad when she said, "No one will believe a child. Few listen to them, and fewer consider their desires. Children, to many, are only possessions, and may be disposed of as their owners choose."

For a moment Siri wanted to go to the small Chinese woman and offer what meager comfort she could. Then Soomey smiled and said, "Never mind. This time we will listen to our men. They are very clever and will make very good plans."

"Buffalo is not my man!"

"Ah, but you wish he were."

Tired of lying to herself, tired of pretending, Siri said, "Yes. But he will never be."

"Do not be too certain. There is something in the way he looks at you. As if he does not yet know his own mind, but is slowly discovering what he feels for you." She shook a finger at Siri. "Men are like ships at anchor, always tugging at what holds them. Only when they find a safe berth do they stop fighting their bonds. Buffalo has found his berth, but he is not quite ready to recognize it."

"He never will. I am not a lady as he is used to. This--" She gestured at the soft lavender wool day dress she wore, the second of three Buffalo had ordered, unbeknownst to her. She loved the feel of the fine wool challis, the graceful folds of the skirt and the perfect fit of the bodice. "This is not me. I feel... *trivs inte* in such fine clothing. As if I am pretending to be someone else. When we ate in the dining room, there were more forks at my plate than Valter and I owned." The sing-song quality of her speech sounded in her ear. "I cannot even speak good English. Listen to me!"

Leaning forward, Soomey said, "You are being very silly. Buffalo does not care for such things. Has he told you of his home when he was a boy?"

Siri shook her head, unable to speak. "Only a little."

"I have seen it. A log house, with two rooms and a loft. Neither room was much larger than this. The children all slept in the loft, girls on one side of the chimney, boys on the other."

"But he is rich!"

Soomey's merry laugh pealed out. "Rich? I doubt it. Boss told me that when Buffalo sailed from Boston eight years ago, he took five hundred dollars and gave his papa a promise he would make his own way. Whatever riches Buffalo has now, he has earned himself."

"But how...?"

"Honestly, you may be certain." Soomey's shrug showed that nothing else was important. "Ask him. Remember, Boss and I have not seen him for a long time, and know little of his adventures."

Determined that she would do just that, Siri asked a question that had been

on the tip of her tongue ever since she had met the Dewitts. "Why do you call your husband Boss?"

"Because he was my master, once. I will tell you, because we have nothing to do until our men return with a plan."

Siri listened enthralled, while Soomey told of a childhood of such incredible hardship that she was shamed. In comparison, her own youth had been luxurious. The men returned before Soomey could tell what happened after her parents sold her.

Siri was almost sorry to see them enter.

* * *

Jaeger saw them as they descended the stairs early Friday afternoon. He rose and laid the newspaper aside. When they walked toward the wide entrance, he followed. *Who are the others? The woman is foreign, yet they all treat her with honor. And why are they dressed so, as if they are laborers?* Lachlan was as crude as most Americans, but he usually was well dressed.

As the two couples climbed into a waiting carriage, he nodded to the scar-faced sailor leaning against a nearby wall. The man and his cohort would follow them and send word back. His other hirelings were waiting with a carriage. While he waited to discover where Lachlan and his party had gone, he would rid himself of all disguise. When he met Lachlan face to face this time, he would be himself.

Today it will end, this fruchtloses Unternehmen, this waste of time. Today I will kill Lachlan and his woman.

A shiver of anticipation speared up his spine.

* * *

They paused long enough at the Dewitt Shipping offices to pick up Simmons, then headed toward the boardinghouse. Buff had to smile at the women's appearance, now they'd shed their cloaks and removed their skirts. Both Siri and Soomey wore trousers and stout boots. They bundled their hair under dark watch caps, and smeared charcoal on their cheeks. The disguises turned them from beautiful women into street urchins.

Once again, Siri seemed to have only one arm. At his insistence, her right arm was bound tightly against her body and her whole right side padded with wool batting. He had a feeling in his bones that things could get rough today.

"How many were in the house when you left this morning, Simmons?" he said, once they were moving again. "Besides the kids?"

"Four. Mrs. Peterson, the nanny, and two maids. All the boarders had left before I came to town."

"All women," Silas said. "It doesn't make sense. How do we know there's not a guard there?"

"Zhao Pin Yue did not mention a guard," Soomey said with some certainty. "He only says no one may enter the house without a key."

"That's right, Mr. Dewitt. We all have to carry keys to the front door. And we're not allowed to have company, unless we tell Mrs. Peterson about it ahead of time. I wondered about that..."

"If I was hiding a couple of stolen kids, I wouldn't want strangers about either," Silas remarked.

"Did you speak to the police, Boss?"

"No, Buff took care of that this morning." His gave a short, sharp laugh. "Tell 'em"

"It was almost too easy," Buff said. He took Siri's hand, feeling her tension in the stiff fingers. "As soon as I told them we were trying to settle a family fight, they lost interest. As long as we don't rough anyone up too bad, or burn down the house--"

"Or start a riot," Silas interjected

"No riots," Buff agreed, grateful for Silas's attempt to make light of their mission. "Anyhow, as long as we keep it in the family, so to speak, they'll stay out of it. Oh, they'll be sympathetic, and promise to look into the matter when Martine reports it, but they won't do anything."

"Let's make sure we don't do anything to change their minds," Silas said. He twitched the curtains aside impatiently. "How much farther?"

"Maybe a quarter of a mile." Buff wanted to reassure him that all would be well, but the bad feeling was worse. *There's trouble ahead...*

The driver pulled the carriage into a vacant lot where leafless shrubs partially screened it from the street. Soomey looked out. "This is good place. We stopped here before."

"Let's just sit here a minute," Silas cautioned. "There's no hurry."

One look at Siri's face and Buffalo knew that for her, at least, there was very much a hurry. He reached for the door handle. "I'll be back directly."

Opening the door only as far as necessary, he slid out. Evan Jones was hitching the horses to a tree, so Buff only waved at him. *Good thing it's raining so hard*, he thought, as he made a quick dash across the street. *Not likely to be many out in this downpour*. The waiter who'd brought their breakfast had commented that folks were starting to worry about flooding, with all the rain the past couple of days.

He worked his way along the alley, counting back until he reached the yard Simmons had pointed out. The cook's shack stood just inside the back fence, next to a strong gate. Has Soomey's friend done his job? Was the gate unlocked?

He gave it a gentle push and saw it swing slightly open. *Good!*

Moving on, Buff circled the block. He examined Martine's house from across the street, noting the good visibility from the wide front windows. The stairs were about ten feet from the door, Simmons had said, and all floors were uncarpeted. So there'd be no stealth in their invasion. They'd probably sound like a herd of stampeding elephants.

As he stood there, he heard a carriage approaching. He turned his back and pretended to be looking at the house behind him, unoccupied and still under construction. The carriage went on by, moving at a sedate pace. When it turned the next corner, Buff headed back to his party.

Simmons went up the walk while the other five stood in front of the house next door. Buff sure wished there was some way to leave the women out of this. As soon as Simmons was on the porch, he said, "Let's go."

They ran toward the house. As the front door swung open, they were right behind Simmons. The mate headed toward the kitchen while Silas started checking the rooms in between. Buff led the women up the stairs, followed by Jones. "Remember," he said as they reached the landing on the second floor, "let us do any rough work. You two go after the kids." Jones peeled off and went to the first door down the hall. As Buff started toward the third floor, Jones kicked the door open.

Just then there was a scream from downstairs. "Ignore it," Buff told Siri when she hesitated. "Go!"

Once they were on the third floor, Siri pushed in front of him. "This way," she said, running down the hall. She stopped at the next to last door on the right. "In here."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Soomey was holding a short-barreled gun in each hand. *Well, hell! I thought she gave those to Katie.* But he didn't have time to worry, because more screams came from downstairs, and a crash, as if something heavy had fallen. He kicked at the door.

It gave, but didn't open. *Losing my touch.* He kicked again and the lock tore out of the door.

The room was empty of all but a ginger cat and scattered toys. The cat opened great yellow eyes and stared at them, but didn't move from where it lay. "Soomey, go out into the hall and make sure nobody comes out of that other door," Buff said. "We're going in. Stay behind me, Siri."

As he kicked at the door, a woman cried from inside, "I've got a shotgun. Stay away." She sounded scared, but determined. *Well, hell.* A deadly combination, women and shotguns.

He motioned Siri to the hall. "Trade places with Soomey," he told her. "We'll go in from the other door."

"The children are in there," Soomey told him when she came in. "I heard them crying. They are frightened."

"Stay here and keep her attention," he said in an almost-whisper. "Find something to beat on the door with, as soon as you hear me start a ruckus. I don't think she'll shoot unless we break in, but stay to one side, just in case."

"What are you going to do?"

"There are two doors. She can't watch them both. Step back." He knelt and looked through the keyhole, but saw nothing. The key was in the lock. On his feet again, he said, "Give me one of those little guns."

Soomey handed him one without a murmur. Buff took a second to check it. Two barrels, over and under, large caliber.

He ran out of the room and joined Siri who stood beside the last door. "I want you to move about ten feet away," he told her quietly. "No telling where she'll aim."

Siri nodded, and moved to the end of the hall. She was chewing her bottom lip, but showed no other sign of nervousness. *What a woman!*

He put his back to the wall beside the door, held the derringer close to the lock, and pulled the trigger.

Children's screams came from inside, almost drowned out by a pounding on the other door. Buff ignored them and pushed on the door. It held. He fired again,

and the door swung open.

He barely had time to pull his arm out of the doorway before the shotgun fired. Twice, with scarcely a pause between.

The edge of the door was gone, along with a bit of the frame. *Good thing I was on the other side*, he thought, as he ran inside. Siri was right behind him.

He dove for the woman who lay on the floor, clutching at her shoulder. She hardly resisted when he pulled the thongs from his pocket and bound her hands together.

When he turned around, he saw Siri sitting on the floor behind him. Her arm was around two tow-headed kids. All three were crying to beat the band.

Chapter Thirty-one

As soon as the last of them entered the house, Jaeger motioned to his henchmen. "Inside. Two of you to each floor. No noise."

"What about whoever's in the house? What'll we do with them?"

"I don't care. Just keep them out of my way. You three," he said, indicating the men he judged to be the most intelligent of the scum he'd hired. "You come with me."

They went up the front steps quietly. He let the others enter first, in case there was a guard on the door. But no one prevented their entrance. A scream came from the back of the house as he passed through the door. Two of his men sprinted along the hall. He followed more slowly, checking each of the open doors as he went by. No one was in any of the rooms.

In the kitchen his men were holding a big man in seaman's clothing and a skinny young woman at gunpoint. "She's a maid, Mr. Adler," one of the men told him. "Says this fella come in and told her she had to stay in the kitchen 'til he turned her loose."

"Are those doors secure?" The one with a window led onto a back porch, but the other, beyond the big table, was probably a maid's closet or a pantry.

"I checked 'em first thing," the smaller man said. "Nobody's comin' in them."

"Where is the lady of the house?" Jaeger asked the maid.

"Don't say anything, Sally," the sailor said. "They're up to no good."

Jaeger removed the folding knife from his coat pocket and flicked it open. "You are not a pretty woman," he said, his voice soft, almost caressing, "but neither are you ugly. You would be very ugly with a scar across your face." He touched her cheek with the point, lightly, only denting the soft skin. "From here, perhaps, to...here." The knife traced a line across her upper lip to her opposite ear. He jabbed, and a trickle of blood ran down her neck. "Where is the lady of the house?"

"Sh-sh-she's upstairs. Front bedroom. Oh, please mister, don't cut me!" The maid fell to her knees and buried her face in her apron. "Please."

Amused, Jaeger turned away. "Keep them here," he told his men, "quietly."

His boots made only soft thuds on the well-waxed stairs as he climbed. There had been no sounds of battle from upstairs, but even so, he ascended cautiously. One of his men lounged outside the front bedroom. "Report," Jaeger told him.

"There was two fellas on this floor. One of em's inside with the landlady and a maid. We had to knock him out. Hem's keepin' an eye on 'em. The other fella made it into that last room down there and locked the door. I been watchin', but he ain't tried to come out."

"Very well. Make sure he does not."

A shotgun blast sounded from somewhere above them, followed almost instantly by another. Then a crash. Another. And silence.

"Stay here." Slowly, cautiously, Jaeger climbed the second flight of stairs. When he could see through the railing at the top, he looked along the dim hall. Pale light shone from two open doors at the back. No one was in sight. He climbed

the last few steps, wondering where his men had gone.

As if in reply, a man stepped from the second door on the right. He peered to either side, then gestured to someone behind him. Even in the dim light, Jaeger recognized his henchmen. "Hsst!"

Both men recoiled. When they recognized him, they relaxed. He gestured them back into the room they'd come from. Checking the hallway one last time, he sprinted to join them. "What are you doing here? I told you to take care of anyone you found."

"They was standin' in the hall when we come up," the slight ruffian with sallow, lank hair told him in a whining tone. "A tall guy with curly hair, just like you said to look for. And two lads. The big guy kicked the door in. One of the lads kept watch, whilst him and t'other went in. There was a lot of yellin' then. Pretty soon he come back out and went to the other door. He shot the lock out and somebody inside fired a shotgun." He cackled. "Good thing the big guy was standin' to one side, 'cause that shot took out half the door."

"Cretin!" Clenching his fists so he would not strike the man, Jaeger said, "Come with me. I want the man unhurt. I care nothing for the boys."

He led them down the hall, gesturing for one of them to go into the room where a boy cowered against the side wall. At the damaged door, he peered cautiously inside. Lachlan was squatting beside a large woman whose hands were bound across her belly. Across the room two squalling brats clung to another boy. He looked again. No. it was the Trogen woman. Lachlan's woman. He stepped inside, reaching for the pistol as he did.

"Please do not move," he said.

A shot was fired in the next room. There was a thud, as if a body fell to the floor, followed by the sound of running footsteps. "See what happened," Jaeger ordered, never taking his eyes off of Lachlan.

"Who the hell are you?" Lachlan remained where he was, but his body tensed.

"I am Jaeger. Please to stand, Mr. Lachlan. You too, Mrs. Trogen. We are going for a walk together."

"The hell I will. Don't move, Siri."

"I will count to three. If you are not both standing then, I will kill one of the children. The little one? Or the big one?" He shrugged. "It matters not to me."

They both stood, the woman releasing the children reluctantly. They clung to her legs, weeping.

"Very good. Now walk to the door. Together. Take the children."

They obeyed, but the woman's movements were hampered by the children. "Lachlan, pick up the girl. Mrs. Trogen may carry the boy. Just remember that I will be aiming at one or the other of them at all times." He watched Lachlan lift the smaller child so the woman could hold it in her left arm. *Her right must be bound under her shirt*, he decided, and remembered she had been wearing a sling when he had last seen her in Astoria. The sight filled him with a certain small pleasure.

His neck prickled as he entered the hall. Where was the man he'd sent to check the next room?

His man stepped from the adjacent doorway. "The kid shot Bob, Mr. Jaeger.

Kilt him dead. He hightailed it downstairs afore I could stop him."

"He should have been more alert. Downstairs," Jaeger ordered his captives. "You, Go first. And watch for that boy." He hesitated. "Wait. Give me the girl."

"No!"

"Mrs. Trogen, you are being quite impractical. I can kill her with one shot. I might even miss and kill both her and your lover. If I am carrying her, she will be much safer. Now give her to me." He held out his free arm. "You, whatever your name is. Keep your gun on Mrs. Trogen. Kill the child if she does not obey."

Lachlan's mouth twisted. Jaeger wanted to laugh aloud at his expression--frustration coupled with impotent rage. "I have to, Siri," he said. He pried the child's arms from their clutch on his neck. "It's okay, Rosel. You'll be fine."

The girl squealed, then went limp. Her sobs died away into hopeless hiccups.

Jaeger wrapped an arm about the girl's middle and clutched her against his side. Her arms and legs flailed until he tightened his arm and said, "Be still, or I will hurt you." Then she froze. He felt the trembling of her slight body.

He found descending the stairs awkward with the girl dangling from his left side. His men were no longer guarding the front bedroom, so they must have taken care of its occupants and the man who had hidden in a back bedroom. The foyer at the bottom of the stairs was empty. No matter. He had accomplished his goal and what happened to the scum he had hired no longer concerned him. "Outside. There is a carriage waiting at the end of the walk. You will enter it."

"Just a moment." From the wide doorway to Jaeger's left, a man stepped forward. "I don't believe you're going anywhere. Put the girl down."

Verdammt! He had been overconfident. "I think not. There are two of us and two of you. We have guns and you do not." He looked at his hireling. "Kill the child!"

As he spoke, he struck Lachlan across the face with the pistol in his hand. When Lachlan reeled back, Jaeger shoved past him and out the door. The girl under his arm shrieked as he ran down the walk. He tossed her into the waiting carriage and snarled, "Silence, or I will hurt you very much."

A hard blow sent Siri staggering, just as something exploded beside her head and pain flooded her chest. She would have fallen but for strong arms that caught and held her and Rolf securely. Confusion and noise surrounded her, close by, yet at a curious distance. A voice spoke meaningless syllables close to her ear. Rolf's arms released their desperate clasp on her neck as she was lifted and carried into a darkened room. The voice spoke to her again, but the words still meant nothing. Her right shoulder burned, as if she had been branded with a red-hot poker.

"Follow that carriage," she heard someone say. "Don't lose sight of it."

A woman's voice said, "Sit still, Buffalo. You are bleeding."

"Where's Simmons?" The first voice said. Siri recognized it, but the name escaped her. A wide, strong man, with hair almost as light as hers.

"Sit *still* I tell you, Buffalo. I go find Simmons in a minute, Boss." Soomey? Yes, that was the woman. Soomey. Buffalo's aunt.

And the man is his uncle. Boss? No, that is only what Soomey calls him. Mr. Dewitt.

"Did he get the girl?" Buffalo said. His voice sounded strained.

"Yeah, I couldn't stop him, not without risking her. But Evan's on his tail. He won't be able to hide."

"Shit! Let me up, Soomey. I've got to--"

"Only when you have stopped bleeding."

"This one's not going anywhere," the uncle said. "I'll go look for Simmons."

Siri tried to turn her head, but could not. What had happened? Why was Buffalo bleeding? What girl? Suddenly her memory cleared.

Rosel? Ah, Gud! He took min dotter. She tried to sit up but the pain in her shoulder and chest made her gasp and fall back. She couldn't even turn her head without agony. "Soomey," she called weakly. "Soomey, help me!"

In an instant Soomey was beside her. "You are hurting? Lie very still. You were shot but not badly. Only when Boss pushed you, he may have hurt your shoulder again."

"Rosel?"

"The bad man took your little girl. Evan is following him, and we will soon have her back."

"Where is Rolf? I heard...is he..." She could not speak her fear.

"Rolf is not hurt. He helps me bandage Buffalo. The bullet struck you but not him."

"*Tack.* Oh, thank you. *Tusen tack!*"

"Nothing to thank us for. We blundered badly, Siri. We weren't expecting an attack from outside." Mr. Dewitt lowered himself to one knee beside the sofa. "I can't tell you how sorry I am we let your little girl be taken. As soon as I'm sure everything's all right here, I'll get a search organized." He rubbed one hand across his mouth. "The good thing is that he seems to want you and Buff, not the kid. Let's hope he'll offer a trade."

"*Ah, ja!* I will go to him, if it will save Rosel."

"Nobody's going to him, if I have any say," Mr. Dewitt told her. "Buff? You all taken care of yet?" He rose.

"Yeah. How about Simmons?"

"He's going to see to the women. The bastard roughed up the one in the kitchen pretty badly. I don't know yet about the others."

"The nanny's tied up, but not hurt. Well, except for her shoulder, which may be broken. She tried to *aim* a shotgun." Buffalo came into Siri's view. A wide strip of cloth covered his brow and a bruise was forming around his eye. "Let's go. I want to get moving." He came closer to the sofa and stood there. Looking down at Siri. His mouth was set in a hard line.

After a moment, he knelt and took Siri's free hand. He carried it to his mouth, soft and warm against her icy skin. "Siri, I'll get your girl back. I promise. And when I do, we'll go home. All of us." He bent and kissed her, a gentle, sweet kiss unlike any he had given her before.

"Let's go, Silas."

Siri watched the two men, unlike yet curiously similar, stride through the wide doorway. For an instant, their coats seemed to shine, as if they were made of polished metal.

Fantasi!

* * *

"Damn, Silas, how'd we let it go to hell that way? It should have been easy."

"More to the point, who the hell was that fellow? He knew you and Siri." Silas dropped to a trot.

The mud of the unpaved street clung to their boots, making each foot weigh a ton. "Look, there's Jones's cap. He came this way, all right." Evan Jones had dropped a glove at the first corner and at the second. Buff hoped the fellow had enough spare clothes to lead them to their quarry.

"I've seen him. I know it," he said, in reply to Silas's question. "I just can't remember where. Sure wish I could, though. Maybe I'd have a hint as to what grudge he's holding." They were in town now, approaching the docks. Traffic grew heavy, the closer they got to the waterfront, and soon they were forced to slow to a fast walk. "We'll never find him, if he's holed up down here. Didn't you say something about tunnels?"

"Yeah. Some of the saloons have cellars with underground exits. You can guess where they lead." Silas dodged a beer barrel, rolling across the road. "Look. There's Evan."

The driver-cum-bodyguard awaited them at the corner of First and Morrison. "He went in there, Mr. Dewitt," he said, jerking his chin toward a shabby two-story hotel halfway up the block. "I didn't see the kid, but he was carryin' a big gunnysack over his shoulder."

"The bastard--" How would he ever tell Siri...

"Hold on, Buff. She's probably fine. He couldn't carry a little girl into a place like that, now could he?" Silas's grip on his upper arm was like steel. "After all, the girl is his bait."

"Yeah, you're right. Now what?"

"I think it's time to get help. Evan, you keep an eye on this place, I'll send someone to watch the back as soon as I can get to the office." He strode off down the street, leaving Buff little to do but follow.

* * *

The pain in Siri's shoulder subsided somewhat by the time three husky young men arrived with a note from Mr. Dewitt. For the last hour, Martine had been pounding on the floor and yelling to be released. Siri was just as happy she was behind a locked door. She still lay on the sofa, with Rolf cuddled between her and the back, asleep. His warm little body gave her such a feeling of peace and contentment, until, as she did every few minutes, she remembered that his sister was in the hands of a vicious monster. *Ah, Rosel, min älskade dotter, var är du?*

"We go to the hotel," Soomey told her. "These nice men will carry you to the carriage, so you must not try to stand."

Obediently, Siri let them load her into the carriage like a particularly precious sack of oats. She clung to Rolf all the way to the hotel, and refused to let him out of her sight while she was being carried up to the Dewitt's suite. One of Mr. Dewitt's men had stayed behind to care for the injured nursemaid and to release

Martine. Siri hoped he would escape alive when he opened Martine's door.

"Boss says we will stay together from now on," Soomey explained as Siri and her son were settled into a big bed. "The bad man wants you, so you must not be alone. I will protect you."

"Where are Buffalo and your husband?" Siri could not believe she had not asked sooner.

Soomey shrugged. "I do not know. Boss does not tell me anything when he thinks I am in danger. I think Buffalo is the same. They want us to sit here and think about all the bad things that can happen to them."

A knock sounded at the door to the suite. Soomey said, "I will see," and hurried out the door. She pulled it firmly shut behind her.

A few minutes later she opened it again. "Here is doctor," she said, ushering an older man inside. "He will make you well again."

Perhaps in time she would be well again, Siri thought, a long, painful time later, but not for a while. The doctor had examined her carefully, with many a 'Hmmm' and an occasional 'Well, well.' He cleansed the bullet wound, informing Soomey as he did so that she was a very lucky young lady, for the bullet had passed through the least vulnerable part of her shoulder, and had, luckily, missed the collarbone. "Which wasn't made any better when she was whacked on the back," he commented, poking at her until she wanted to scream every time his fingers touched skin. "Wouldn't surprise me if it isn't rebroke, but maybe it's just cracked along the join."

He cleaned her wound and bandaged it, then wrapped her arm close to her side. "I don't want you using that arm for another two, three weeks, and then only gently. You start wavin' it around, and you'll end up with a crooked shoulder, sure enough." He patted her cheek. "You're a brave girl. I know a lot of men who'd have been cussin' before I was done."

"Now," he said, holding out his hand, "how about we take a look at you, young man? Your auntie says you've had yourself some adventures."

To Siri's amazement, Rolf hardly hesitated before crawling across her legs and into the doctor's arms.

After a brief examination, the doctor pronounced her son to be in the pink of health. "Nothing wrong with him that some mother's love won't cure. Mrs. Dewitt said he'd been stolen away from you, that right?"

Siri nodded, afraid to speak, for once again her heart was crying out for her daughter.

"Well, whoever did it took good care of him." He pulled a lollipop from his coat pocket, "There you go, youngster. Take that and go sit by the fire."

Rolf grinned, but made no sound. Siri realized he had not spoken since they had found him.

Before she could say anything, the doctor said, "He may act a little funny for a while. Little guys like him don't always understand what's gone wrong, but they know something has. Just be patient and don't fret him with too much fuss. He'll be fine, now that he's back with his ma."

"Doctor..."

"Yes? You've got a question?"

"If Rolf were older...would he still...*act funny*?"

The doctor scratched the back of his head. "Well, that's a hard thing to answer. Some do, some don't. Usually if a child's old enough to understand what's happening, and can talk about it, then he'll be all right. But sometimes, when there's been a terrible accident like...oh, last year a little girl saw her pa run over by a freight wagon...well, she still has nightmares." Shaking his head, the doctor said, "There's just no telling. Best thing is to do your best to show 'em you love 'em and hope they'll grow past whatever happened to them." He bent down to pick up his bag. "Now you take it easy and don't go gettin' in the way of any more bullets, you hear?"

"I will be good," she told him, wondering if she was lying. One way or another, she was going to find Rosel. With or without Buffalo's help.

Chapter Thirty-two

The men had not returned by ten that night, but a boy had delivered a note from Buffalo, saying they were keeping watch on the place where the bad man had taken Rosel.

"Keeping watch! Why are they not going after her?" Siri struggled to get off the sofa. "Help me up. I will go--"

Soomey pressed her back. "You will not. What good would it do? There is a good reason why they do not rescue your daughter. Boss will not let him harm her."

"*Nej!* I must go!" She strained against Soomey's hand. "You do not understand...Ouch!"

The sharp slap to her face left her cheek stinging. "You hit me!"

"I will hit you again, if you do not obey me. You have been very brave, but now you are thinking like a child. Our men are doing what they can to save your daughter. You would only be in the way. We will go to bed now. In the morning you will feel better."

Docilely, but inwardly rebellious, she let herself be helped into bed.

Tomorrow, she vowed as Soomey turned the lamp low, *tomorrow I will go there. I will find some way to make him give me my Rosel.*

Sleep did not come to her, even with Rolf's warm little body curled against her. She lay for a long time, staring into the shadowy darkness, watching light flare and sweep across the window. How different this city was from Astoria, where nights were dark and quiet, away from the docks. Occasional cries came faintly to her ears, and the rumble of carriage wheels against the cobbled streets.

She was still awake when the door opened quietly and Buffalo entered. Saying nothing, she watched as he turned away from her and silently undressed, laying his dark clothing upon the chair in the corner. In the faint, shifting light from the window, the angles and planes of his muscular back were dramatically evident. He turned, and his *lem*, half-aroused, stood in bold silhouette. But then he moved again, and his face became visible.

"Your face!" she gasped.

He spun. "You're awake? I was trying to be quiet."

"I was never asleep. Your face--"

He came to the bed, sat on its edge. "I guess it must look pretty terrible by now." Lightly touching his cheek, he said, "It hurts some, now I think about it. Sure hope the swelling goes down by morning. It's a nuisance, not being able to see out of this eye."

"Lie down. I will get cool water." She started to roll out of bed, when Rolf whimpered and clutched at her nightgown.

Buffalo jumped like he'd been stung. "Oh, hell, I forgot about him. Let me get some britches on." He went to the bureau, where he lit the lamp, but left it burning low. "Where the dickens...?" He opened each drawer in turn and pawed among its contents.

Since Siri had not been allowed to explore this room when she was brought to bed, she was of no help.

In the third drawer down, he found what he wanted. The white garment he pulled on was like nothing Siri had ever seen. Although it had legs like trousers, they were cut full, so that when he stood, he looked almost as if he was wearing a narrow skirt.

He saw her staring as he turned around. "Yeah, aren't they something? I got 'em in India."

The skirt-like trousers in no way took away from his masculine beauty.

She started to untangle herself from Rolf, but Buffalo said, "Never mind doctoring me. Let's just get some rest." He extinguished the lamp.

To Siri's surprise, he climbed into the opposite side of the bed, keeping Rolf between them. Remembering Valter's refusal to allow the children in his bed, she said, "I can make him a bed on the floor."

"Don't be silly. He needs his mama. And it won't be the first time I've slept with a kid. All of us boys shared a bed in the cabin. If it got cold enough, we slept in heaps, all of us together."

Wide awake now, she said, "Do you miss your brothers and sisters?" She had often wished she had sisters. Even a brother would have been nice.

"Yeah. I do." Tucking his arms behind his head, he turned his head to look at her. "Lord, but it'll be good to see them all again. All but Ellen, my oldest sister. She's back in Boston." He paused, and his gaze seemed to be on something far away or long ago. "You'll like my family, Siri. Ma's the salt of the earth, and Pa, well, Pa's quite a man. He's done about everything, been about everywhere..." His voice grew pensive. "Everywhere except Australia." He fell silent.

The question Siri had been almost afraid to ask burst from her lips. "What has happened? Rosel--"

"We don't know. A dozen of Silas's men are watching tonight. We'll go back in the morning."

"But--"

"Siri, my guess is that the bastard will take good care of her. It's me he wants, for some reason. We've already left him a message that I'll make a trade, me for her. My guess is he's thinking it over, looking for a trap. Silas reckons we'll hear from him in the morning.

"I know it's a hard thing to do, but try to stop worrying. Everything possible is being done to get Rosel back to you. I promise."

Rolf turned then, and burrowed into Buffalo's side. To Siri's great surprise, Buffalo pulled him closer. Then he held his hand out to Siri. "Can you scooch over here too? This bed's too damn big."

She slid clumsily across the bed until she could rest her head on his forearm. "I guess I can't reach to kiss you goodnight," Buffalo said when she'd found a comfortable position. "Should'a done it before." His voice trailed off on the last word. The arm supporting her head relaxed.

"Oh, Buffalo, how I love you," Siri whispered.

She swallowed the tears that threatened to choke her. *If only....*

* * *

"*Nej!* I will not stay in bed!"

Buff paused in his dressing. "Damn it, Siri, you were shot yesterday. Soomey says the doctor thought you cracked your collarbone. All you'd do is get in the way."

"She is *min dotter*! I will go with you!" She looked about ready to spit fire as she fought to unbutton her nightgown.

"No you won't. Now calm down. You're going to have your boy all upset."

"He cannot hear me." Soomey had come to get Rolf some time ago, and now Buff could hear the two of them laughing in the next room. "Buffalo, please, you must let me--"

They both jumped at the sudden rap on the door.

Buff opened it, standing so she could not be seen. "What?"

"There's a message," Silas said. "You'd both better come out here."

Buff looked behind him to see Siri clumsily wrapping a long robe about herself. He stepped aside to let her pass. Her eyes were wide and her teeth worried her lower lip. Wishing he could reassure her, he caught her hand and walked with her to the sofa.

Silas handed him the note. He tore open the envelope, good quality linen stock, with his name written in a spiky, bold hand. The single sheet inside bore similar handwriting. He read aloud.

Lachlan,

The child is unharmed. She will remain so until noon today, 8 February.

You will come alone to the entrance to the New Market Theatre at noon. A carriage will be waiting. You will enter the carriage without resistance, and will follow all instructions.

If Mrs. Trogen wishes her child to be released alive, she will be at the entrance of the New Market Theatre exactly one hour later. Alone.

Any attempt to follow the carriage will result in the child's death, as will any other interference.

Jaeger

Buff crushed the note in his fist. "Thank God! She's alive!"

Siri caught his hand. "Let me see!" She pried open his fist and removed the note. She read it though one time, her lips shaping each word. Then she laid it on her knees and read again, one finger tracing across the paper. "Look! He does not promise not to harm her after Buffalo goes to him. Only not to kill her!" Her voice trailed off on a sob.

Buff took the note back and reread it. "That unspeakable bastard," he whispered as the implication he'd missed became bitter truth. "Silas, how many men can you muster?"

"As many as you need. Too bad we can't call in the police."

"Yeah," Silas agreed, just as Siri cried "No!" He caught her hand and squeezed. "Silas, by the time we've convinced them that Rosel's in danger, she could be dead--"

"Not to mention," Silas said, his tone caustic, "convincing them we weren't really responsible for the imbroglio yesterday."

"Well, hell! I hadn't thought of that. Okay. We've got three hours. Let's figure

this out."

"Nej, you cannot. He will kill you, too!"

"Sweetheart, he's not going to kill anyone. Now, let's have some breakfast whilst we talk about this."

For most of the meal, he attempted to calm Siri. He didn't blame her for expecting the worst. Life sure hadn't dealt her a decent hand thus far.

"I'll go to meet him, just like he wants. Silas, your men can follow. But we can't take him until he releases Rosel."

"That mean's he'll have Siri, too."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"We will never find her." Desperation made Siri's voice thin and flat.

"Yes we will. Trust me. Trust Silas. It's not the first time we've been in a tight spot."

She shook her head. "You will die, too," she whispered.

"Don't you believe it. I'll be armed, if Silas will lend me his trick belt buckle. I've picked up some dirty fighting techniques I'll bet even *he* hasn't heard of. "

"It's yours. I'll get it, then I'll go talk to Evan. He'll round up some help for you."

"Wait," Siri said. "Soomey, will you let me use one of your little guns?"

Soomey came to the table and hugged Siri. "Of course. You may have them both."

"What the dickens--"

"Be quiet. He wants me, so I will go to him. But I will also go armed."

Buff glared at her. "The hell you will. You don't know how to shoot."

Before Siri could answer, Soomey said, "She will not need to know anything but how to pull the trigger."

"Come, Soomey. You will help me find a way to hide the gun, yet still use it." She pushed past Buff.

He caught her good arm. "Wait a minute, Siri! You're not going anywhere. We'll get a man to pretend to be you."

"*Nej*, you will not. I will not risk Rosel's life that way. The bad man wants me, and I shall go." She paused and her tongue flicked across her lower lip. "Soomey, if I...will you care for Rolf and Rosel? Please?"

"There will be no need. But yes, I promise they will be as my own children, should anything...I promise." The two women embraced, both weeping.

Buff's eyes were a little damp too. He joined them, putting his arms around both. He hoped they were as comforted as he was.

When the storm of tears had subsided, he tried again. "Siri, you can't--"

"I will not argue, Buffalo. She is my child. Do you not understand? *I must!*"

"It's dangerous as hell. We don't know where he's holding your daughter, or how many men he has guarding her. Before we came back last night, we found out that there's a tunnel from the cellar of the hotel. We don't know where it leads, or what other tunnels it connects to."

"So?"

"So once we get in there, we may have to fight our way out. That means I need another man with me, one who's used to--"

"She's right, Buff," Silas said. "This Jaeger isn't going to let the kid go until he's sure he has Siri. Sending in a substitute could get you all killed."
The worst of it was, Buff knew they were right.

* * *

All was in place. The child was in a place they would never find. When Lachlan and the woman were dead, Jaeger would sell her to a white slaver for a good price.

He took no pleasure in children.

Here he came. Alone as instructed. But undoubtedly followed.

A waste of time. Once on the river, anyone following would stand out clearly. And no one would hear the screams.

Lachlan spoke to the carriage driver, who nodded. With a pause to look around him, the young man climbed into the vehicle, which immediately began moving. When it turned the next corner, Jaeger looked to the roof, where one of his henchmen watched. A wave told him that no other carriage had pulled into the stream of traffic.

Perhaps Lachlan had indeed come alone.

He strode toward the dock where he could make certain his instructions were being followed. Everything was going as planned, which only proved that Americans, as a race, were short-sighted and ignorant. Any European would have suspected treachery and would have come prepared.

The fact that he intended no treachery gave his plans a certain elegance. The child would remain alive, even if her mother failed to appear, an unlikely happening. Alive, but living in hell.

Lachlan went quietly into the ship's boat. Although Jaeger watched the river, he saw no sign of followers. Good. His threat had been taken seriously.

Once he had the woman in his power, all his plans would come to fruition.

Then he could go home, away from this raw land filled with buffoons and simpletons.

* * *

Mr. Dewitt walked with her until the theatre was in sight. "I'll leave you now. He'll have someone watching, and we want him to think you're going in unprotected."

All Siri could do was nod. Her mouth was so dry and her throat so tight she doubted she could make a sound.

He looked down at her, his face grim. "Remember what Soomey told you. You'll only have one chance. Make it work."

Siri nodded. She saw only drays and freight wagons on the street. Licking her lips, she forced a whispery sound from her lips. "Thank you. I will..."

Not knowing what else to say, she turned and walked away from him. Her shoulder ached and her belly clenched as she forced her feet to take one step after another. As she drew close to the theatre, she saw a carriage approaching from the other side. She stopped walking and waited.

It pulled up in front of her. "Mrs. Trogen?" the young man on the seat said.

He looked young and decent. Had he any idea he could be taking her to her death?

Siri nodded.

"Get in," he told her, "and don't open the blinds."

She obeyed, with difficulty. The step was high. Having only one hand meant that her skirt twisted around her legs when she raised her foot. She all but fell inside, then had to untangle herself so she could pull the door shut.

As soon as the door slammed, the carriage moved. She tried to look out of the narrow slit between the wall and the closed blind beside her, but could only see motions and colors. Shivering from a bone deep cold, she huddled into the corner and wondered how much longer she had to live.

Would she see Rosel before she died?

The journey seemed interminable. They went around many corners, as if they were driving in a circle. The carriage slowed at last, and she heard a curious rumble. Then it moved, and the sound of the wheels changed, as if they were driving on a wooden street like some of those in Astoria. Fetid odors came to her nose, of filth and rotting meat and decay.

At last the carriage halted. She sat unmoving, not knowing what to expect. Her driver spoke to someone, but she was unable to hear the words. Then the door opened. "Get out."

The man who stood there was hideous. His face was scarred, one eye was milky white, and he had only one ear. She cowered back, even though she knew it would do her no good.

"C'mon, girlie. Out ye come. We've a ways to go yet." The man held out a three-fingered hand, as if to help her. "I ain't a'gonna harm ye."

Siri ignored the hand and stepped out of the carriage. Although her surroundings were dim, lit only by gray light from the opposite end, she could tell she was inside a warehouse of some sort. Crates and bales were stacked haphazardly along both walls. The center, a few yards beyond the carriage, was open water, a covered berth that could accommodate a small vessel. Outside she could see the river, and a sailing ship at anchor.

"This way, girlie. There's a boat waitin'."

"No--" The icy core of fear in her belly broke free and froze her. Siri turned to run, but an iron-hard hand clamped on her wrist.

"I hates to do this, but I been paid for the job," the hideous man said. "Come along."

She was all but jerked off her feet. Stumbling, twisting her arm, she fought every step of the way. When she lost her footing, she was dragged to the edge of the floor. The man released her and she simply lay on the filthy, splintery floor, panting.

"Jiggs! Git up here and give me a hand. She's half-faint."

A sailor came up a ladder. Between them, the men lowered her into a rowboat. "Now, girlie, I reckon you got two choices," the hideous man told her when they'd dumped her into the boat. "You can lay there and be good, or you can thrash around and capsize us. I ain't much of a swimmer, and neither's Jiggs here, so if we go in the water, we'll be busy savin' our own selves."

Fighting a panic that threatened to paralyze her, Siri crawled onto the seat. She clung to the rear transom, terrified of rocking the boat, as the men rowed out to the sailing ship. Her skirt was wet and cold against her legs, soaked by the filthy water sloshing around the floorboards. In her belly, terror pulsed with every heartbeat, ready to consume her.

I must be calm. Rosel depends on me.

Buff saw the rowboat approach, through the curtains of icy rain. Neither of the two deckhands seemed alarmed, so it must be bringing Siri.

Damn it all! Why'd I let them talk me out of having someone disguised as her?

Fat lot of good all our plans are. Why didn't we think of a ship? No boat's going to approach unseen.

He couldn't even get to the knife in his belt buckle, not with his arms tied this way. Nor could he sit, to reach the small dagger concealed in his boot heel. What a devilish position, with his arms spread wide, caught by lines to the foremast and the base of the bowsprit.

He shivered as another gust of rain-laden wind buffeted him. At least they'd left him his britches and his boots. Cold he could handle, but without a weapon, he'd have a piss-poor chance of taking care of Jaeger.

They brought her aboard like a sack of meal, slung over a big sailor's shoulder. He dumped her on the deck where she lay limp and still. Before Buff could call out to her, Jaeger came out of the cabin. He went to her and grabbed her by the hair. Tipping her face up, he studied it. "A shame to color your hair, Mrs. Trogen. It was the only attractive thing about you." He thrust her away, and she collapsed into a defeated heap.

Buff renewed his efforts to twist a hand free. The lines around his wrists were already red with his blood, where he'd worn the skin away. Neither gave, though his shoulder joints cracked with strain.

The fellow who'd brought Siri aboard heaved himself over the rail and disappeared down the side. Jaeger came toward him. "At last, Lachlan. I have waited long for this moment."

"Why? What have you got against me?"

"Against you? Nothing. No more than you have been an irritation to me for a long time. I am tired of you, so..." He made a throwing-away gesture. "So I am ridding myself of you as I would a gnat that irritated me."

"Then why did you want Si...Mrs. Trogen? She's done you no harm."

Jaeger picked up a quirt from where it lay atop a hogshead. Leaning against the fife rail, just out of Buff's reach, he drew the thick braided handle through his hands, then snapped the whip thongs across Buff's chest, just missing his face. As Buff recoiled involuntarily, Jaeger gave a hard jerk on the line between Buff and the foremast.

Buff pretended to fall, then stumbled back to his feet.

"Ah, you have good balance." He tucked the quirt under his arm and pulled a long-bladed knife from somewhere under his coat. "A worthy opponent. In other circumstances, you and I might have been friends. Sooner or later, though, one of us would have died. We are too well matched." He used the tip of the blade to

clean under his fingernails. "I think it would have been you, but the amusing thing is that I am not sure."

"So you decided to kill me first. Aren't you man enough to do it face to face?"

Anger darkened Jaeger's features, giving him character he otherwise lacked. Buff had never seen so nondescript a face.

"I am a better man than you will ever be, you ignorant, American savage!" He slashed the leather thongs across Buff's ribs again, leaving two stinging cuts. "But never mind. I have only this one day, and I intend to make the most of it. First you will watch me kill the woman, and then you will die. Slowly. Painfully." He licked his lips and an unholy smile crossed his face. His eyes went wide, with the whites showing all around.

Buff reined in his rage, almost berserker in quality. "At least tell me why. You owe me that, if I'm the worthy opponent you say."

"Why? Because I want to go home. I am sick of travel, of coarse food and crude lodgings and low company. Of women with rough hands and worse manners. Since Honolulu I have been following you, waiting for you to lead me to my quarry.

"Congratulations, Lachlan! You found the woman I sought! So I will kill you both, and then I will go home. I will tell Thorssen that his sister is safely dead and he will pay me well." He bowed from the hips, a formal, polite gesture.

"I salute you. To have learned so much, from such meager records, is an accomplishment worthy of respect. And now your quest ends."

Chapter Thirty-three

Thinking rapidly, Buff gaped at Jaeger. "Thorssen? Who's he? What the hell are you taking about?"

"You forget perhaps? The woman has so distracted you that you no longer remember you were seeking the lost daughter of Baron Thor Mogensen?" A harsh laugh. "So it always is. Common men such as you have no constancy, no loyalty to their betters." He turned away, as if watching the river traffic. "The baron is dead. If found, the girl will be baroness--an absurd circumstance, but unavoidable under the terms of the entail. She will inherit half of a vast fortune. Her unfortunate younger brother, who was such a good, loving son, will be left with no title and only half of what he deserves."

Well, hell! Maybe he has been following me like he says. "And you won't get paid, I expect." This put a whole different light on the situation. If he knew Siri was Astrid Thorsdotter, then there was no way Buff would talk him out of harming her. And if Siri died, what about her kids? Were they in line to inherit? *If they are, he'll do his best to kill them, too.*

Jaeger shrugged. "He had paid me as I reported on your continued failure. And I have...other means of income."

"Wait a minute! What if there's no way to prove she's the girl? Then Thorssen inherits, doesn't he?"

"Of course. But that changes nothing. If you found her--" He shrugged. "It does not matter." He trailed the thongs of the quirt across one of Buff's shoulders. "No one else will ever find the lost baroness, for she will be dead."

A scrape drew Buff's attention to Siri, who had dragged herself to a sitting position. She was off to one side and behind Jaeger. With her visible hand hardly raised from the deck, she pointed toward the east bank. She was frowning, and as he stared, she gave a quick shake of her head. Again she pointed east.

Keep him talking! "Other income, you say? From rolling drunks, I'll bet," Buff said, putting as much scorn into his voice as he could.

The quirt slashed across his shoulder. *Shit, that smarts!* He let himself gasp.

"Ah, you do not like that. Good. Then you will tell me what I wish to know or I will do it again. Perhaps next time I will mark your face, yes?"

"No, please..." He drooped, letting the ropes take some of his weight. "Ask your questions. I'll do my best to answer them."

"You discovered who she was in Astoria. How?"

Buff told him what he'd learned about the *Dancing Goddess's* cargo, and her survivors. "The fisherman who pulled her out of the water is dead now. It was pure dumb luck I found out he'd adopted her. I doubt anyone else would ever put the bits and pieces together as I did."

The quirt slashed across the other shoulder this time. "You lie! You sought information in the port records. What did you find?"

"Damn little," he said, deciding the truth wouldn't make much difference.

"They showed that there were some survivors, but said they were all Chinese girls." At Jaeger's skeptical expression, he went on. "The only record I found said there were ten China girls and two crewmen rescued. Apparently the fisherman

never told about the girl he'd saved."

"But there is no proof? If he is dead, who remembers? Tell me!" He touched Buff's face with the whip. A gentle, almost caressing touch.

"Nobody. I'm the only one who put it all together and I haven't told anyone. Siri doesn't remember any of it." He kept his voice low. "Great God, man! Even she doesn't know who she is. Why would I tell her, when she hasn't a chance of proving a claim against the estate?"

"I think you lie." Laying the quirt down, he went to where Siri was still huddled on the deck. Roughly he pulled her to her feet. "See your lover now, Mrs. Trogen? He is not so brave and handsome, is he?"

He dragged her toward Buff. She hung limp in his arms. *Good for her. She's making this as difficult as possible.* Buff stole a look at the east shore. A tender filled with men was making its way across, not quite aiming toward the ship where he was. *I sure hope that's Silas' men.* Knowing it was futile, he twisted against his bonds again, but the thick rope held him fast.

Jaeger kissed Siri. His mouth was hard and hurting on hers, his teeth biting at her lips and tongue, his fingers digging into the soft skin under her jaw. She wanted to bite him back, to spit in his face when he pulled away. Instead she simply closed her eyes and held her body as relaxed as she could.

"Bah! This one has no fire in her! Why did you bother, Lachlan? Or has she hidden talents?"

"Someone like you wouldn't understand the value of a good woman," Buffalo said.

The hand on her throat tightened until she could barely draw breath. Siri wondered why Buffalo seemed determined to anger the man.

"Oh, but I do. A good woman is the sort a fool like you will risk everything to protect." He pushed her toward a locker that sat on the opposite side of the mast Buffalo was tied to. "Take off your shawl," he told her, "and that ugly cloak."

"Oh, please," Siri whined, "it is so cold. The wind..."

The slap across her face knocked her back and she fell across the locker, rolling so she would not land on her right hand.

"Take them off!" he said, his voice as sharp as the long, thin blade he pulled from under his coat. "Take them off or I will cut them off. And I will not worry what else I cut."

"You bastard," Buffalo yelled as he strained against his bonds. "Leave her alone. I'm the one you want to kill. Not her." His face contorted into an agonized mask. "Give her the child and turn her loose. I'll give you...whatever you want. My pa's rich. I'll pay you! A thousand dollars! Listen--"

Jaeger walked up and pushed his face close to Buffalo's. "You will give me whatever I ask before I am done with you, Lachlan. Tell me how you learned Astrid Thorsdotter was aboard *Dancing Goddess*?"

Siri stared at him. *Astrid*. That was the name in her dream, the night she had sickened from the mushrooms. But she knew no Astrid. Had never known anyone of that name. While Buffalo told of tracing a slave ship from port to port in the Far East, she tried to remember why she should remember that name so well. Why it should seem so familiar.

Her attention went back to the two men when Jaeger struck Buffalo with the whip again. Buffalo's squeal of pain hurt her as deeply as the two short leather thongs did the smooth skin of his back. When he begged Jaeger not to strike him again, she wanted to add her plea to his. Although she was certain he was acting the coward, she doubted he had pretended the sharp intake of breath as the lashes dug into him. *How that must hurt!* Her own skin quivered in sympathy.

Again and again Jaeger struck Buffalo with the quirt, until his back and shoulders were a mass of bloody stripes. With each blow, he cried out, until Siri wasn't sure if he was still pretending. She closed her eyes, unable to watch. *Be patient.* Soomey's words echoed in her mind. *You will only get one chance, so make it count.*

Every impact of the leather thongs on his smooth skin hurt her as well. He was taking this torture so they could be rescued. But with the two sailors on the higher part of the deck, watching for approaching boats, she didn't see how a rescue was possible. Gradually she resigned herself to a slow and painful death, praying only that her precious daughter would be saved from whatever horrible fate this *djävul* had planned for her.

At last the sound of the blows came to a halt. She forced herself to look. Buffalo hung by his arms, knees slack under him, head bowed until his chin lay on his chest.

The sky was dark now, and the rain, which had stopped shortly before she had arrived at the theatre, was again falling, a fine, almost mist-like drizzle. She could see lights on the shores, many along the docks and in the town, but only a few to the east, whence Mr. Dewitt had said their rescuers would come. The big rowboat, loaded with a dozen men, had been the only one she had seen leave that shore. It had continued without pause toward town.

No one is coming.

Her coat and shawl, which she still wore, protected her from the cold rain, but poor Buffalo was half naked.

"I told you to remove your shawl and that ugly coat," Jaeger said. He loomed over her, a slender knife again in his hand. "But you did not obey. Foolish woman."

Siri shrank back as the knife flashed toward her face, but it only sliced through the shawl, which fell open onto her shoulders. "No! I will..." She scrabbled at the coat's buttons with her left hand, cold and clumsy now. "I will take it off."

To her surprise, he waited. "Why is your arm inside your coat?" he said, sounding only curious.

"My collarbone, it was broken." She tugged at the last button, but it insisted on remaining fastened.

He touched her hand with the point of the knife, but did not cut her. "How?"

Siri watched, mouth dry, as he sliced the button off. She couldn't help the gasp of relief when he did nothing more. "A landslide. On the trail to..."

"Ah! So you were injured! Good. Good." He laughed, a big, carefree laugh that sounded as if it should come from someone kind and jolly. "How unfortunate that Lachlan escaped unscathed."

"You are a...a *djävul*!" Perhaps if she kept him talking...

"Thank you. I tried to kill you, twice, you know. But the soup killed only the

stupid old man and Lachlan interrupted me when I followed you from the hotel. Now I am happy I failed those times. This will be so much better. Then it would have been quick. Now I may take my time." His knife touched her cheek, lay flat against the skin. It was icy cold.

She shivered. Her teeth chattered. *I will not scream. He would like that. I will not scream, no matter how much he hurts me.*

"Stand up!"

She struggled to her feet, letting the coat slide from her shoulders. She forced herself to stumble. "My foot... It is *domnad*..." She caught at his sleeve and shook her foot as if to restore feeling.

Rather than pushing her away, he pulled her close and held her against his body. Her right hand was crushed between her ribs and his as he kissed her again. Once more Siri forced herself to remain passive, unresisting.

"*Verdammt!* Are you then an iceberg?" With one hand he held her head tilted toward him, while he stroked the knife blade across her cheek. "I will warm you." He licked her mouth, his tongue rough on her icy lips. "Before I am done with you, little iceberg, you will scream with passion."

"Buffalo, help!" she cried as she sagged against him, forcing him to put his arm around her.

Buffalo's head lifted and he looked at her with bleary eyes. "Siri?" he said. But she saw sharp intelligence in his gaze. And hope.

"Oh, he cannot help you now," Jaeger sneered. "Look at him! This is your hero, Mrs. Trogen. A sniveling coward, too submerged in his own pain to worry about you now." He pulled her with him as he went close to Buffalo. "But perhaps he does not hurt enough. Perhaps I should do *this!*" He drew the point of his knife down Buffalo's breastbone, leaving only a scratch that oozed tiny droplets of blood. "No. I will not cut him. Not yet. Not until he begs me to." He drove the point of the knife into the foremast, just above the rope that held Buffalo.

"Not until I am done with you." Once more he pulled her to him. This time Siri resisted, pushing with all her might against his shoulder.

She fought to align her body against his at an angle, while he attempted to back her against the mast. *Now. It must be now!* She made one last, desperate lunge. Her hip wedged between his thighs. Before he could thrust her free, she pulled the trigger. Twice.

His hands tightened on her, then went slack. His eyes grew round, vacant. "*Du, Miststueck,*" he gasped.

Siri stepped back as he crumpled at the foot of the mast, hoping the intense heat she felt against her midriff was not her clothing set ablaze by the shots she'd fired. She snatched the knife he'd driven into the mast and used it to cut the rope that held Buffalo. As soon as his one hand was free, he took the knife and cut the other rope. "God, Siri," he gasped, "I kept hoping you had something up your sleeve."

"*Nej,* the gun was in my bodice," she corrected, wondering why he had forgotten. A shout made her look over his shoulder. "Oh!" The two sailors who'd been standing guard were running toward them, both armed with belaying pins.

Buff grabbed one for himself from the fife rail and waited for them, holding

the knife ready in the other hand. "Stay behind me," he told Siri.

The two hesitated when they saw he was free and armed. "Is he dead?" one asked.

"I hope so," Buff told him. "Does that mean you won't get paid?"

"Half," the other one said. "He gave us some on account."

"I'll pay you whatever he offered, if you'll help us."

The taller one scratched his head. "It don't seem right, somehow."

"The hell it don't, Jem," his shorter companion said. "If he's daid, he cain't pay us. And if he ain't, you think he's gonna pay us whilst he's in jail?"

Tall considered. "Okay, mister, but if you cheats us, I'll kill you meself."

"Fair enough." Buff knelt to search Jaeger's pockets. The stripes on his shoulders pulled, and he felt hot blood trickle down his spine, cooling as it mixed with the rain that wetted and chilled his skin. "Get me a coat, will you? And Siri, go put yours on. After all this, it'd be a shame if we both took pneumonia."

Aside from a wallet filled with a few papers, and a small purse holding perhaps a hundred dollars in coins and bills, Jaeger's pockets were empty. All but the watch pocket on his waistcoat. It held a key. And two coins. A pfennig and a florin.

"One of you go see if there's a small boat standing close by. If there is, hail it. I'm expecting company. They'll identify themselves as Dewitt's men."

Within minutes, their rescuers were aboard, and searching the vessel, despite Tall's sworn word that Jaeger had merely leased it for a couple of days. Most of the crew was ashore, on leave. "We're waiting for cargo, see, and the cap'n figured on pickin' up a couple of hundred the owners wouldn't know about."

Siri came back with the men who'd searched the cabins. She looked completely defeated. "She is not here, Buffalo." Her voice trembled. "Where else can we look?"

"Let's see what Silas has found out. Are you boys ready?"

Dewitt's men reported themselves satisfied there was no girl child aboard. Buff gave the two seamen the money he'd promised them, although it galled him to do it. They'd have killed him in an eyeblink. He helped Siri over the side and held her as they were rowed to the Dewitt docks. She clung to him all the way.

It was progress of a sort, he decided. A week ago she'd have been in hysterics to be in a small boat on a rough river.

* * *

This time Siri refused to go safely back to the hotel. She was with Buffalo and Silas when they searched the room in the waterfront hotel to which they'd followed Jaeger the previous day. They found a lettercase full of papers, a diary. The most interesting find was the small, locked case filled with hairpieces, spectacles, false moustaches, and theatrical makeup. And a clerical collar.

Buffalo stood with it in his hand, the most peculiar expression on his face.

"What is so strange about a priest's collar?" Siri asked him.

"Father Spatz," he said, his tone incredulous. "All that time on the ship from Hawaii. We played cards. Dined together. I liked him." He tossed the collar into the case. "Damn it to hell. I *liked* him!"

He pawed through the case's other contents. When he picked up a pair of gold-rimmed *pince nez* and dangled them by their brown silk ribbon, he said to Siri, "Ever seen these?"

"Why, they are just like the ones Mr. Gans wore. How curious."

"Curious hell. He was Gans. And half a dozen other people, I'll bet. No wonder he could follow me around and I never saw him." He tossed the spectacles back and closed the case. "We'll take this. I want to check the lining before I get rid of it." He set it aside with the other items they were taking. "Find anything, Silas?"

"A receipt, tucked into the mirror frame. It's for a room in the Siskiyou House. For a Mr. Adler."

"That's what he called him. 'Adler'."

Buff looked at her. "What who called who?"

"The man who took me to the docks. He called Jaeger 'Mr. Adler'."

"Let's go, then" Buffalo said. "I think we're finished here."

Siri had never been so happy to leave a place in her life. The room had felt...*spöklik*, as if something evil dwelt there.

* * *

"Mr. Adler's room? Where is it?"

The desk clerk stared at Buff, a sneer not quite curling his lip. "We do not give out information as to our guests' location."

Before Buff could leap over the counter and choke it out of him, Silas said, "My young friend has had an unpleasant afternoon, and is justifiably impatient. Perhaps you could send someone to inform Mr. Adler that he has visitors." He offered his card. It had the edge of a greenback peeking out from under its edge.

The clerk took the card, looked at it. "Oh, that won't be necessary, Mr. Dewitt." He made the greenback disappear so fast he might have made a living as a magician. "He's in room 403." He turned and looked at the pigeonholes behind him. "Let's see...yes, it looks as if he's in. You just go right on up."

As they mounted the stairs, Buff said, "Well, la-di-da, Mr. Dewitt. How'd you get to be so important."

"Money," Silas answered shortly. "Siri, I wish you'd go to the suite now. You look exhausted."

Knowing it was futile, Buff said, "Yes, sweetheart, do. We'll check the room and come right back. But I don't expect..."

"Oh, I know she is not there. But I must go. Don't you see?" She sounded tired beyond belief, as if she'd given up hope.

He was afraid of what they'd find. Had been, ever since he'd listened to what Jaeger had planned for him and Siri. A man like that, knowing he was going to kill the mother, wouldn't think twice of killing the daughter.

Or worse. Could history repeat itself? Was Siri's daughter even now on a slave ship, bound for the bagnios of the Barbary Coast?

Silas's knock drew no response. Buff laid his head against the wood panel and listened. No sound, not a rustle, not a whisper. "Hand me those keys."

Silas pulled a ring of skeleton keys from an inside coat pocket and handed them to him. Buff motioned the others to stand aside. The third key he tried

opened the door. He eased it wider, peering around the corner cautiously.

The room seemed empty.

The room *was* empty. A man's suit hung in the closet, and two linen shirts were in the bureau, along with expensive underwear and half a dozen collars. But the room didn't look lived in. It reminded Buff of a stage set, not a place where someone lived.

There wasn't even dust under the bed.

Well, hell! Where is she? His shoulders slumped in defeat, he stood in the middle of the room and looked about. He was missing something. *What?*

"Look," Silas said, after they stood a long time in silence, "it's late. Let's go have supper, and talk this over. She's got to be somewhere. My boys are watching every ship in the harbor, and all the roads. She's still in Portland. I'll bet anything on that. If the boys don't find her tonight, we'll call in the police. This isn't a family feud any longer."

"If she is alive," Siri said, a sob in her voice. But she allowed Buff to lead her out of the room.

"She's alive," Buff told her as they started down the stairs. "You've got to believe she's alive."

Chapter Thirty-four

Rolf was already asleep in Soomey's bed. Siri offered to take him, but both Soomey and Silas refused. "You need a good night's sleep," Mr. Dewitt said. "Besides, Soomey's having fun being an auntie again. She misses Tao Ni." At Siri's look of surprise, he added, "Our boy. He's Back East at school."

Curious, but too exhausted to ask questions, she went into Dewitt's bedroom. Her son and Soomey were cuddled together, fast asleep. Siri touched a finger to her lips, laid it on Rolf's chubby cheek. "Sleep well, *min barn, min älskling*."

Once back in the sitting room, she accepted without protest the small glass of wine he handed her. It was easier to drink it in one swallow than to sip it. Besides, it was bitter.

Once she'd set the glass on a table, she followed Buffalo into their bedroom. His hands were gentle as he helped her undress. "Great God!" he whispered when he'd unwrapped the binding that held her arm--and Soomey's little gun--close to her body.

"Is something wrong?" Oh, it felt so good to have the arm unbound. She found she could not unwrap her fingers from the little gun. "Please, my hand..." The fingers tingled as if waking, when Buffalo took it from her and set it on the round bedside table.

"You're burned," he said, as he carefully unbuttoned her blouse. "Let me get this off."

For some reason the fabric was stuck to her midriff. Siri gasped when he began pulling it away, for it felt as if he was taking skin as well.

"You're lucky you didn't set your clothes on fire," he muttered, as he helped her step out of her skirts.

"I did. I felt it smoldering after I shot, so I pressed very hard, and it got better."

His arms went around her and she found herself being held very, very tightly. "Oh, God, Siri, I...I'm sorry I got you into that. I should have insisted--"

"You are speaking nonsense, Buffalo! I am Rosel's mother. You could not have kept me away."

"Yeah, but I should have known there was more to this than was on the surface. Great God! Jaeger was after you all along. Only he didn't know it."

"What do you mean? How could he have been after me? I heard him say he had followed you all the way from Honolulu."

"It's a long story. Long and complicated. And I'm not sure I believe it, even now. Let's get some rest now. I'll tell you everything when this is all over."

She got into the bathtub, hissing between her teeth when the warm water struck the crusted, fabric-covered burns. By the time the charred fabric had been pulled free and the burns thoroughly cleaned, she was all but walking in her sleep.

Buffalo lifted her from the tub and dried her off. "You're not going to wear a nightgown tonight. We'll let that burn dry out a bit before we cover it." He carried her into the bedroom and placed her in the bed. After wrapping a soft band around her to hold her right arm in place, he pushed her back against the pillows. "Sleep now. I'm going to get cleaned up."

From under heavy eyelids, she watched him as he opened a bureau drawer. The ragged shirt someone on the ship had given him was stained with criss-crossing red stripes. "Your back. I will--"

"Go to sleep, Siri. Silas will tend to me."

She had no choice but to obey.

Poor girl. Buff was pretty sure Silas had drugged her wine. A good thing, too. Otherwise she'd have spent the night stewing about her little girl. He picked up his dressing gown and went back to the sitting room. "Ready to torture me?" he said to Silas, who was sitting before the fire.

The next hour wasn't the most comfortable Buff had spent. By the time Silas had cleaned all the shallow cuts from Jaeger's whip, he was stiff, sore, and mad as hell. "What's next?" he said, accepting the glass of whiskey Silas handed him. "I've run out of ideas."

"So have I. That's not to mean," he went on before Buff could speak, "that my boys have stopped looking. Before we're done, there won't be many spots in this town they haven't been. Them or the Chinese. Soomey's got them looking too."

"I'm obliged, Silas. Siri will be too, when I tell her what all you've done. Seems like you're always pulling me out of a tight spot." He downed the last of the whiskey and rose to get more. It wasn't his favorite drink, but tonight beer wasn't strong enough.

"No obligation. This is family business, the way I see it." Silas leaned back and cradled his glass in his clasped hands. "You are going to marry Siri, aren't you?"

"Yeah...yeah, I guess I am," Buff said, with a curious sense of relief. He simply could not imagine a future without Siri.

"Well, then, let's find that girl, so you can be on your way home. You can't marry her until Hattie gives her blessing. She still hasn't forgotten how she wasn't there to see Katie wed."

"Ma's going to love her. And won't she be tickled with some ready-made grandkids?" Buff could just see the big grin on Ma's face when he brought Rolf and Rosel to her.

Rosel! "Silas, how do we know the girl's not already been shipped out? It'd be just like Jaeger to sell her to a slaver."

"I thought of that. Even if he took her out through a tunnel, she's still in the area. There's been no sailings of ships that might take her in the last week. She's somewhere around here, Buff. I'd bet anything on that." Whiskey swirled slowly in his glass. "We'll find her."

"Yeah, well, I sure as hell wish I knew where. With all the identities Jaeger had, God only knows where he might have hid her." He drained the last of his whiskey, decided he'd had enough. "I'm going to bed. Wake me when you get up, will you?"

"Sure. Good night."

Buff slipped into the bed beside Siri. He shouldn't bother her, but right now he sure wanted the comfort of a warm body beside him. He'd never felt so damn helpless in his life. He rolled toward her and pulled her into his arms.

She burrowed against him. Her good arm went around his waist, and her

long legs tangled with his. Her hand found him, clasped gently. "*Älska med mig, Buffalo. Var snäll och.*"

To his surprise, he felt a growing desire. It was the last thing he'd expected, given the pain from his back and his exhaustion--how long had it been since he'd had a night's sleep? Still, she was tired, and mildly drugged. It wouldn't be fair. He pulled slightly away, and told his eager cock to go to sleep.

She clung. "*Nej.* Do not leave me." It was the barest whisper, but almost enough to melt his resolve.

His body tensed in response. "This probably isn't a good idea, sweetheart."

"It is a very good idea." Her thumb caressed the tip of his cock. "We could have died today, Buffalo. I do not want to die before I tell you--"

The roaring hunger that swept through him left him no time for words. If he didn't have her this moment, he'd...he'd explode. Even in his passion, he remembered her shoulder, but nothing else. He swept her up and lifted her above him. In the dim light, he saw her face, heavy-eyed with desire. "Oh, God, Siri, I can't wait." He lowered her, letting her take him with exquisite slowness. Holding back the surging need that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Wait," she commanded, when he would have started thrusting into her. "Wait, Buffalo. I must say this."

"Ah, Siri, this isn't a time for talk," he said, moving his hips just a little. Just enough.

Her back arched as she ground herself against him. He felt the heat that rushed through her, trembled with her as the great surge of completion clenched her every muscle. And then he was with her, ramming himself into her, his wordless shout drowning her shrill keen.

She collapsed against him and he held her tenderly, for she was infinitely precious to him. "Great God!" he whispered into her hair, "I thought you were tired."

She sighed. "I am weary beyond belief, but I needed you...I needed to tell you..." Her voice trailed off as her body melted into total relaxation. Her breath was warm against his chest. He stroked his hand along her spine, down, then up to her neck, where he tangled his hands in her hair, still dark and a little stiff with the dye.

He had almost joined her in sleep when she stirred. Her head lifted only a little, but enough so he could see the glint of her half-open eyes. "*Jag älskar dig.*" A broken sigh. "I wanted to tell you before... I love you."

Words Buffalo had sworn never to speak to a woman unless he could say them with his whole heart came easily then to his tongue. "I love you, Siri Hansen Trogen. Will you marry me?"

His only answer was a soft little snore.

* * *

Jaeger's face haunted Siri's dreams that night.

Sometimes he was Mr. Gans. Carleen had laughed at her when she'd said his looks gave her *gåshud*, accusing her of finding him very much a desirable man. But the shivers that accompanied the pebbly skin on her arms had been from fear, not attraction.

Sometimes he was a priest, although she'd never seen the man Buffalo called Father Spatz. Once he was a hideous face seen only for an instant through a dirty, smeared window as she knelt above Buffalo's unconscious body.

Most often, he was a grotesque *djävul* who screamed, over and over, "You will never find her. Never. *Never. Never...neverrrr...*"

She fought to escape the dreams, but only found others, as terrifying. She was lost, in a dark place, where she could not move, for cruel bands circled her wrists and ankles. The place moved, rolling her back and forth, against other bodies, across a slimy surface smeared with filth. She wept, called for her mamma, for Anders, who was her other self. No one answered her cries, and she wept again, until finally giving up all hope, she curled herself into a ball of misery. She was lost, and Anders could not find her.

The bonds that held her in the noisome place were removed after a while, and she was pushed out into bright light that made her close her eyes in pain. She was on a boat surrounded by nothing but water, and no one spoke in words she could understand.

"Mamma!" she cried. "Anders, where are you. Oh, where are you?"

Suddenly the boat was tossing like a treetop in a windstorm, and she was picked up and thrown through the air. But it was not air, but water. She sank, slowly, into the dark water, but then she felt the wind on her face again, and heard it screaming.

She was bound again, but now the iron lay heavy across her body, and held her so she could not move. Water splashed into her face, into her nose and mouth. She choked and gagged. Her hands clawed at the weight across her body, but it would not move, save to lift her high into the air, then carry her deep into the water.

As the water covered her face, she gasped and it filled her nose and mouth. She could not breathe. Could not scream. The last thing she saw was a bolt of lightning slashing across a *djävul's* face. He held a child in his arms.

Her child. *Noooooo!*

"Siri! Wake up."

"*Ge tillbaka min barn! Ge tillbaka dem!*" She clawed at the *djävul's* face, at his shoulders.

He did nothing to stop her, only said a name, over and over. *Siri. Siri. Siri?*

She stopped fighting. Was she Siri? Why did the word not feel right on her tongue?

Of course I am. It was only a dream. "Ja, jag heter Siri." Then she opened her eyes.

"You okay?"

Her mind still full of fragments of nightmare, she nodded. "*Ja. I dreamed...so terrible. I could not wake.*"

"You've been restless for maybe an hour. Muttering, then yelling and crying. When you screamed, I couldn't let you suffer any longer." He gathered her into his arms and held her close. "Oh, God, Siri, I can't stand to see you suffer."

"It was only a dream," she told him, touched by his tender caring.

They lay together, warm and safe, but she could not sleep. Neither did he,

she thought, for his body never relaxed. After a long time, she said, "Buffalo, did Jaeger stay in that hotel when he took Rosel there? All night?"

"Yeah. Silas had men watching all night, and he never stuck his nose out."

"But all those disguises... What if someone else did?"

He lay still for a moment, then said, "Well, hell! I never thought of that." He rolled away from her. "I'll ask Silas if his men--"

"Wait! Not now! It is the middle of the night!"

"You're right. It'll wait until morning." Settling back, he pulled her again into his arms. "I'll sleep if you will."

Curiously enough, she did.

* * *

The two men who'd watched Jaeger's hotel through the night came to the suite early the next morning, while Buff and Silas were studying a map of the city. Buff told them about the many disguises in the case they'd found. "So can you tell me who all came out that night? Particularly anyone carrying a kid, or even a big package."

"There was a couple of whores," the one Silas had introduced as Wilson said. "And a deckhand off the *Lillie Mae*. I didn't pay much attention to him, since he wasn't anything like who you told us to watch for. 'Sides, he's been around for years."

"One really fat fella come out way after midnight," the other man--Enoch--said. "'Twas whilst you was off checkin' the alley, Wils."

"Well, hell!" Buff sat back, wondering how he was going to tell Siri they'd hit another dead end. "What about the tunnels? Could they have gone out that way?"

"We checked. The one from the cellar there is flooded at high tide--around midnight."

"Wait a minute," Silas said. "Tell me about the really fat fellow."

"He musta' weighed three hundred pounds. I swear, Mr. Dewitt, I never saw nobody so big. He waddled like a duck, side to side. He had this little case that swung against his knee with ever' step." His hands showed a rectangle about a foot by twice that, far too small to hold a child.

"And you're sure he was fat? Not just wearing stuffing? Was his face fat, too?"

Enoch scratched his whiskers. "Now that you mention it, no. I didn't remark on it then, probably because of the scraggly beard. But his head looked real little atop all that blubber."

"Did you see which way he went?" Buff said, not allowing himself to hope.

"Well, he turned left out the door, so he come up this way." Enoch shrugged. "I didn't watch where he went."

"That's how he got her out," Buff said, sure he was right. "He wrapped her around his middle. She's long, but not heavy. He could have done it."

"Wait a minute," Silas said. "What was the fat fellow wearing, Enoch?"

The grizzled sailor frowned. "Something different. What was it?" Again he scratched his whiskers, a raspy sound loud against the expectant silence of the room. "His collar," he said at last. "It was one of them things preachers wear. No

necktie. Just white all the way across."

"Father Spatz!" Buff said. "The priest."

"How many churches are there in town?" Silas said.

"I don't know, but we'll find 'em all. I'll get Siri."

"I'll get my men on it too," Silas said. "They can ask around, see if anyone saw a fat priest that night."

They were forced to delay their search because it was Sunday morning. All the priests and preachers in town were in church. Buff paced and Siri stood staring out the window, despite all of Soomey and Silas's efforts to distract them. When the clock struck eleven, Buff said, "That's it! We're going. I'll haul every preacher in town out of his pulpit if I have to. Come on, Siri."

They walked out of the last church on their list late in the afternoon. There were no grossly fat clerics in Portland. Nor had any of the clergymen they'd talked to been called out the night Jaeger took Rosel. "Let's go check with Silas. Maybe some of his boys have found something." He doubted it, but didn't want her to lose hope.

Siri was staring off to the right, beyond the church. "What is that big house over there? Has it something to do with the church? See, there is a cross in the front garden."

Buff looked. "I don't know, but finding out is easy." He took her arm.

The house was an orphanage. The nun who answered the door was suspicious at first, but thawed slightly when Siri explained that a bad man had stolen her daughter. "She is very blonde, and her eyes are pale, like mine. Her name is Rosel."

The nun considered for a moment, then opened the door wider. "Come in. I'll take you to Mother Superior."

Buff decided he wouldn't want to get into a poker game with Mother Superior. She looked as if she could outbluff the devil himself. She listened silently as Siri haltingly related the events that had led up to Jaeger getting his hands on Rosel.

"So you acted outside the law when you went to your mother-in-law's house and took your children. Took them by force. Is that correct?"

"*Ja, Madam.* Because I knew Martine would never give them to me willingly. She believes I am a bad mother."

The nun looked Siri up and down. Buff knew what she saw. A tired woman with dark smudges under her eyes and hair that was poorly dyed an ugly, unnatural black. An expensive cloak and gown, both new, but worn, shabby boots. "Are you a bad mother?"

"I do not know. I love *mina barn*...my children, but I have not found work that will let me take care of them. I do not know--"

"She'll be able to take care of them from now on," Buff interjected. "I'm taking her to my mother, over in Boise City, as soon as we find the girl." He caught Siri's hand and gave it a warning squeeze. "We'll be married there."

The nun's dark eyes bored into his, as if she could read his thoughts. Buff resisted the urge to squirm guiltily. Then she looked at Siri, who had not even breathed since his announcement. "Is this true, Mrs. Trogen? You will marry this man?"

Again Buff squeezed her hand.

Siri opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "Ja," she whispered. Cleared her throat. "Ah, *ja*! I will marry him."

"Then perhaps I can help you." She picked up a small bell and rang it. When the door opened a crack, she said, "Bring the girl Father Spatz brought to us."

While they waited, she said, "He came late at night, Friday. He had just come off a ship, he said. The child's parents had been lost at sea. Relatives had been notified, but would not arrive for a day or two. He said he would come after the child when they did." Her mouth twisted in a moue of distaste. "I knew nothing of the man, and had no reason to disbelieve him. But there was something about him..."

"I know," Siri said softly. "Something that made the skin on my arms stand up in *gåshud*."

"Goosebumps," Buff translated.

"Exactly," Mother Superior agreed.

The door opened and they all looked toward it. The elderly nun who stood there had a little girl by the hand.

"Rosel!" Siri went to her knees, her free arm around her daughter. "Oh, Rosel! *Min dotter! Min älskling! Tack gode Gud! Ah, tack gode Gud!*"

The little girl clung to her, her high, sweet voice repeating "Mamma, mamma, mamma," over and over.

Buff, his eyes suspiciously stinging, looked over to see Mother Superior biting her lip. "Thank you," he said. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

* * *

Siri could not let go of Rosel. She still did not entirely believe a *djävul* like Jaeger would have taken her daughter to the safest possible place for her to be. When they reached the carriage, escorted by the stern-faced Mother Superior and two other nuns, Buffalo lifted them into it together. Rosel immediately crawled onto her lap.

She whispered something, too soft to hear. Siri bent over. "What did you say, *min älskling*? I did not hear you."

"The bad man. He told me you were dead. I didn't believe him, though."

"Of course you didn't. You knew I'd find you." Hugging Rosel close, she asked the question that had haunted her. "Did he...did he do anything to hurt you?"

"No, but he told me he would beat me if I cried." She sniffed. "I didn't, but I wanted to." She snuggled closer. "I didn't like it when he made me get into the sack. It was dark inside, and he tied it around his waist." A small giggle. "I heard his belly growl."

Siri looked across the carriage at Buffalo. He nodded when she mouthed *Tack gode Gud!*

Siri couldn't persuade Rosel to release her when they reached the hotel, so Buffalo carried them both through the lobby and up the stairs. People stared, and Siri didn't even care.

Rolf saw them enter the suite and came running. "Mamma! Mamma! Rosel!"

Buffalo let Siri down, and she pulled her son close. She didn't know how long she and her children clung together there on the floor. When she finally looked around her, only Buffalo was in the room. "Where are--"

"Gone out," he said. "They figured we needed some time alone."

Disentangling herself from the children, Siri went to the wing chair beside the fireplace. "Buffalo, I know what we told the nun, but if you--"

"If I want to marry you tomorrow, you won't argue. Is that what you were going to say?" A smile played over his lips.

"*Nej*. If you do not wish me to marry you, I will not hold you to that promise."

"Siri, I can't think of anything that'll stop me from marrying you. Anything but your absolute refusal, and then I'd do my best to change your mind."

"But...but you are rich and important and I am only a--"

He cut off her words with his mouth. After he'd kissed her thoroughly, he lifted his head. "Only the woman I love." His fingers traced lightly down her cheek. "Now, how do we convince your kids they need a new pa?"

Epilogue

"It's a castle!" Rosel bounced in the seat. "See, Rolf. It's a castle."

"Castle, castle," Rolf crowed, pushing his head out the window. His little shoe dug into Buff's groin, making him wince. He had to agree with the kids. This brick mansion his folks had built did have the look of a castle, with its tall, sharp-roofed tower and many narrow windows. Standing alone as it did, out a ways from town, it looked like it ought to be surrounded by a moat and have pennants flying from the roof instead of lightning rods. The carriage pulled into the circular drive, passing between lines of young trees, not yet leafed out. Elms, Ma had told him in one letter. The magnificent trees she'd loved, back in New York. *Be a while before these are anything but spindly*, he thought, as he lifted the boy and saved his manhood.

"How are you doing?" he said to Siri. She gave him a tired smile, reassuring him. This trip had been hard on her. She'd insisted on traveling by boat, even though she'd never gotten over her fear. Then at Umatilla, they'd been delayed by snow in the Blues. Once the road reopened, the journey had been slow and difficult, for if they weren't struggling over roads knee-deep in mud, they were rattling along on mud frozen in spine-shattering ruts. At least once a day, she'd been sick, until he was worried there'd be nothing left of her when they reached their destination.

"I am happy to be here," she said, leaning forward to look past her daughter's head. "Are you certain this is your parents' home? It is so...so big! *Så storslagen!*"

Under the noise of the children's excitement, he said to Siri, "The manor house in Aalborg is even grander. I wish I could have proven your claim to it."

She shook her head. "I am content," she said with a smile. "There is still no memory of that girl, although each time I hear her name, it seems familiar." Her hand, softer now, with smooth fingernails and white skin, squeezed his. "No title, no fortune could mean so much to me as having you. As being loved." She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it. "*Jag älskar dig*, Buffalo."

Just then the front door burst open. Three kids tumbled out, followed by a small woman wearing an apron over a dark dress.

"Well, that's my ma, and those look like my brothers and sisters--only bigger--so this must be home." He opened the door before the carriage had completely stopped. Before he could help Siri alight, Iris and a young lady who could only be Reggie were climbing all over him. Behind them stood a tall young man with the look of Pa about him. "Rhys? Is that you?" he said as he hugged the girls.

Siri was still waiting on the carriage step when his Ma careened into them, and he had to brace himself or fall flat. "Hold it, Ma! I'm real. You don't have to pinch me to make sure."

"Oh, Buff, I thought you'd never get here. Where is she? Are these the children? Oh, aren't you pretty? And you're such a *big* boy!" She gathered Rolf and Rosel into her arms, then smiled up at Siri. "Land sakes! You must think we're all a bunch of savages."

Buff lifted her down and kept one arm around her. "No, Ma, she knows it. Why she's willing to marry into this family, I'll never know, but thank God she is.

Siri, this hysterical woman is my ma, Hattie Lachlan. I reckon my pa's around somewhere, as well as the rest of the tribe."

Ma handed Rolf to Rhys. "Welcome. Welcome to our family." Half a foot shorter, she still managed to smother Siri in a big hug. "Thank you for bringing my boy home."

Buff detached himself from his sisters. "Take the cat, Reggie. He's in that basket. Yes, Iris, I brought you something from Siam, just like I promised. Now why don't you take these two in and feed 'em. They haven't had a bite for a couple of hours." He gave his youngest sister another squeeze. "I can't believe how much you've grown."

"I'm twelve now," Iris said, as she took Rosel by the hand. "C'mon. Ma's been making gingersnaps."

Buffalo shook his head. "She was such a little tyke when I went away. Not much bigger than Rolf. I guess I was gone too long."

"That's what I kept telling you," Ma said. "But why are we standing out here in the cold wind? Come inside, Siri. I'll bet you're worn out."

* * *

By the time supper was over and the kids had all been sent to bed--even the ones who weren't kids anymore--Buff's head rang. He'd forgotten what a noisy bunch his family was. Beside him, Siri drooped in her chair. Only one more thing to do. He sure hoped it wouldn't upset his folks. "Well, Ma, when's the wedding? Tomorrow?"

He sensed how Siri stiffened.

"Well, we can do it tomorrow, if you don't want anybody here. Since we didn't know for sure when you'd arrive, we couldn't tell folks when to come."

He sat back, torn between what he wanted and what he knew Siri wanted. "How long will it take 'em to get here?"

"Four, five days, I reckon," Pa said. "What difference does it make?"

"Well, I..." He looked an apology at Siri. "We're going to have a baby. In October, Siri thinks. She doesn't want everybody counting on their fingers." He couldn't interpret the look that passed between his parents.

"It's March now. Seems to me nobody's going to have to count very high," Pa said. "A week's not going to make much difference."

"And who cares, anyway?" Ma said. She got up from her chair and went to wrap her arms around Siri. "You've already brought me two of the sweetest grandbabies anybody could ask for. Now you say there's going to be another one. Siri, it doesn't matter a gnat's eyebrow how long a time passes between the wedding and the birthing. What matters is how welcome the child will be. And yours will be as welcome as any babe ever born."

Buff never did understand why Siri and his mother both burst into tears. All he knew was that from that moment on, his wife was part of his family.

THE END

FOREIGN WORDS AND PHRASES

These are Swedish, unless otherwise noted.

Allting -- Everything
Allvarlig -- Thoughtful, pensive
Älska med mig -- Make love to me
Angelägen -- Urgent
Bry dig inte om det -- Never mind, don't worry about it
Din brutala människa -- You brutal man
Djävul -- Devil
Dominerande odjur -- Domineering beast
Domnad -- Asleep, numb (as a foot)
Du är inte min man -- You are not my husband
Du ljuger -- You lie, you are lying
Du mar djävul -- You are a devil
Du mår ond -- You are a monster
Du skrämde mig -- You startled me
Du, Miststueck (German) -- You piece of filth
Dum -- foolish, stupid
Dum fantasi -- Stupid daydream
Dumbom -- Dummy, Stupid person
En ängel -- An angel
En ängel med gyllene gloria. -- An angel with a golden halo
En artig dam -- A grande dame, a great lady
En gris -- A pig
En häxa -- A witch
En inkraktare i min sängkammare -- An intruder in my bedroom
Fänig -- Fanciful, silly, ridiculous
Fantasi -- Imagination, daydream
Far -- Father
Feer -- Fairies
Flörtis -- Flirt
Födelsedag -- Birthday, date of birth
Förlägen -- Embarrassed
Förlåt mig -- Forgive me
Förstås -- Of course
Förtrollning -- Enchantment, bewitchment
Fruchtloeses Unternehmen (German) -- Fruitless undertaking, wild goose chase
Fruktansvärd -- Terrible, horrible
Gåshud -- goose pimples, gooseflesh
Ge dig iväg -- Go away
Ge tillbaka dem -- Give them back
Ge tillbaka mina barn -- Give back my children
Gjetöst -- A Norwegian boiled-whey cheese

Gloria -- Halo
God middag -- Good afternoon, good day
God natt -- Good night
God uppfostran -- Good manners, good breeding
Grym -- fierce, ruthless, sober
Gud -- God
Guten Morgen, Frau Trogen (German) -- Good morning, Mrs. Trogen
Han är inte min far -- He is not my father
Han rörde min kläder -- He handled my clothing
Han talar svensk -- He speaks Swedish
Helvete -- Hell
Himmel -- Heaven
Hindra -- Hinder, slow down
Hjälp -- Help, help me
Högdragen -- Bossy, dominant
Hora -- Whore
Ingenting -- Nothing
Insekt -- Insect, bug
Ja -- Yes (pronounced yah)
Jag älskar dig -- I love you
Jag är obetänksam -- I am thoughtless, I am inconsiderate
Jag är så mätt -- I am so full
Jag behöver inte lyda dig -- I don't have to obey you
Jag blir sjösjuk -- I get seasick
Jag glömde mina barn -- I forgot about my children
Jag heter Siri -- I am Siri
Jag känner mig så skamsen -- I am so ashamed
Jävlar också -- Damn it
Jösses! -- Good grief
Jucka -- Crude term for sexual intercourse
Kineser (German) -- Chinese
Kittlig -- Tickle
Kom in -- Come in, enter
Kuslig -- Threatening, frightening
Las mich los (German) -- Let me go
Lem -- Penis
Lurvig -- Shaggy, unkempt
Mardröm -- nightmare, bad dream
Min älskade dotter, var är du? -- My darling daughter, where are you?
Min älskling -- My darling
Min barn -- My child
Min dotter -- My daughter
Min far -- My father
Min kläder -- My clothing
Min mor -- My mother
Min underkläder -- My underwear

Mina barn -- My children
Mor -- Mother
Nedvetslös -- Inconsiderate
Nej -- No (pronounced nay)
Och han -- And he
Ohyggligt -- Monstrous, terrible,
Oläglig -- Inconvenient
Omoralk -- Immoral
Ond -- Evil, wicked
Öppna dörren -- Open the door
Ostadig -- Unsteady, weak
Otäck -- Hideous, ugly
Otrolig -- Incredible
Parasoll -- Umbrella
Plåga -- Plague, pester
Porslin -- Porcelain, china
Prydnadssaker -- Knick-knacks
Raring -- sweetheart, nice guy
Rasande -- Angry, outraged
Respektabel -- Respectable
Retlig -- Whining, petulant
Rumpa -- Rump, derriere
Ryggsäck -- Knapsack
Så god -- So good
Så luxuös! -- So luxurious
Så skön -- So lovely, so beautiful
Så smutsiga -- So filthy, so dirty
Så varm -- So warm
Schatz (German) -- Sweetheart
Schrecklich (German) -- Terrible, foul
Sinnligt skön -- Sexually attractive, sexy
Sjuklig -- Sickly, unhealthy
Skål -- Cheers
Skön -- Beautiful, handsome
Skrämmande -- Fierce, warrior-like
Skräp -- Garbage, trash
Skvallra -- Gossip, tattle
Skynda dig -- Hurry up
Släpp mig -- Let me go
Smeknamn -- Nickname, pet name
Snehvid fluesvamp -- A poisonous mushroom, the Destroying Angel (*Amanita virosa*) found in northern Europe. It is deadly poisonous. In the Western US an almost identical mushroom, the Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), is poisonous enough to make most people ill, by tripping them out (badly).
Söker mig -- Seeks me, looks for me
Spänning -- Tension, tenseness

Spöklik -- Spooky, haunted
Stal mina -- Stole my
Storslagen -- Grand, impressive
Svampar -- Mushroom, toadstool
Svensk -- Swedish, a Swede
Svindlande -- Dizzy
Tack gode Gud -- Thank God
Tack -- Thank you, thanks
Trist -- Gloomy
Trivs inte -- Uncomfortable, ill at ease
Troll -- Troll, evil creature
Tusen tack -- Thanks a lot, thanks a million
Underbar -- Wonderful
Underkläder -- Underwear
Unlæending (German) -- Foreigner
Uppkäftig -- Sassy, irreverent
Vad -- How
Vad stiligt -- How elegant
Vad synd -- What a pity
Vad syndig -- How sinful
Var snäll och -- Please, a plea
Varför -- Why
Varför är du här? -- Why are you here?
Varför kallade du på mig? -- Why did you summon me?
Verdammt (German) -- Damn it
Verdammt noch mal (German) -- Damned thing (sort of...)