

Varden's Lady

By Maren Smith

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family, and my parents in particular, who were so excited when I began writing spanking stories that they couldn't wait to tell my grandparents. Who told everybody else. Until now pretty much all of Utah knows I'm into spanking. Just one more state I can never go back to.

PROLOGUE

England, 1587

Near the Scotland border

Seven mounted riders and two footmen lined the grassy hillside that marked the lip of the Wooler forest. With green grass under their boot heels and endless meadow spilling down below, becoming a golden ocean of rippling autumn grass, they waited and watched as the sun gradually sank to the horizon. All but one wore the green and blue plaid kilts of the Kincaid clan. The one without wore the noose.

"Why nae get on with it?" the eldest among them said. As his dappled pony shifted nervously, the grizzled old man rested his sinewy forearm across his kilted thigh and chewed on a stretch of dried mutton. "Hang the mon so we can all go home!"

"We wait for the Sassenach," said another mounted rider--a man Varden presumed to be the leader. "The bloody English kins t' watch and I kin t' get paid."

Varden de Lyssoue, Duke of Cadhla, the fourth Baron of Landborough and holder of several other minor titles, struggled to remain in his saddle. The snorting, restless beast had been his mount for four days, a length of time that proved just long enough for Varden to cultivate his newfound hatred for ornery Scottish ponies. As it stamped and shifted impatiently, each jerk pulled the noose that much tighter around his throat. Varden had nothing to hold onto. His hands were tied so far up his back that his shoulders ached and his fingers felt numb from a lack of circulation. His legs ached, too, though not so much from injury as from clinging to the saddle for so long in so awkward a position without any help from his arms.

While a footman held tightly to the reins, the pony leaned an inch forward and the noose pulled

Varden another inch back. Balance was a precarious thing, and he was out of inches. Any more and Varden would hang himself by toppling backwards out of his saddle. An undignified death, to say the least.

Concentrating only on breathing, Varden closed his good eye. The other was swollen shut, a remnant of Scottish hospitality. He shivered. Little better than rags now, his once fine linen shirt did nothing to protect him from the cold. Alternatively, to hide the nasty blue-black bruise that had spread the previous night from a few inches below his left armpit, down over his ribs to his chest, and around his back almost to his spine. Breathing hurt. Leaning backwards in the saddle was nothing short of agony. But even the acute pain of a few broken ribs vanished from thought as the noose tightened again and suddenly Varden found that he could not breathe at all. An aristocratic urge to die with dignity abruptly gave way to the indomitable need to force his next breath of air into his aching lungs.

While the Scots looked on with interest, Varden choked. His mouth gaped like a fish on land, opening and closing as he strangled. Like the relentless boots of a marching army, his blood pounded in his temples. Pinpricks of light flared and died before his eyes.

"Back it up noo," the leader called out. "Tis nae time for that yet."

The leather saddle creaked as the footmen forced the pony back and the noose loosened. Varden could breathe again. He gulped air greedily, glaring daggers at a point between the pony's ears. One more step and Varden could sit comfortably in the saddle again.

He was not grateful. The beast belonged in hell!

Above his head, nature bowed to a chilly gust of wind. Trees waved their branches to the sky. Like the beckoning arms of children, they reached ever upwards to touch the pink, orange and red hues cast across the clouds by the failing sun. Multi-

colored leaves shivered and let go of their branches, flying free for only a moment before tumbling back to earth, swirling and scattering dryly across the ground around the ponies' hooves.

Varden was running out of time.

With each passing moment, the evening sky dulled, its earlier brilliance fading into shades of indigo, while thunder rumbled overhead. Swelling black clouds stalked them from the east. Varden breathed in the heavy scent of rain, wincing as his ribs complained. It was a gloomy night, perfect for a hanging. Even his own.

He shouldn't think such things, he chided himself. He couldn't die right now. He was simply too busy. And what of Claire, his tiny, green-eyed sprite? If this really were, as he suspected, the beginnings of yet another border war, his executioner would hardly be likely to spare his wife and child.

"I dinna kin the man will show," the leader finally admitted.

The older Scot laughed. "One less Sassenach in Scotland be payment enough for me, lad."

"Aye." The leader urged his mount to the rump of Varden's restless brown pony. He studied Varden with a dark, remorseless stare. "For what it's worth, lad, t'were an honor t' match wits wi' ye. A good soldier, ye are. Kept us right on guard wi' all those patrols. It were a stroke of bluidy good luck seeing ye and yer lass out alone. Imagine that, bluidy luck felled a giant."

The black clouds were now overhead and still chasing the sun, which had finally disappeared below the distant horizon. As the first few drops of icy rain hit Varden's face, lightning split the sky. A booming roll of thunder promptly followed, shaking both heaven and earth. The pony tensed beneath Varden. It tossed its head nervously and the noose again pulled taut around Varden's throat.

The old Scot looked up. "That's done for it, lads. We're for a good watering now." He pulled the folds

of his tartan up over his head just as the first scattered raindrops became a freezing deluge. Within a minute, they were all soaked to the skin and shivering.

As the leader raised his arm, the two footmen stepped back from Varden's restless pony. Varden lifted his face to the rain and closed his good eye.

Claire—

With a watery smack, the Scot clapped the hell beast's rump and the horse lurched for freedom. The noose jerked Varden out of the saddle. He swung backwards into empty air...

Chapter One

Seattle, Washington, 2001

With absolutely no memory of how she had gotten there, Mallory stared at the ceiling. The tip of her freckled nose was a scant two inches from the fluorescent light fixture, which buzzed and rattled in time with the air conditioner somewhere below. She had to be drunk. It was all she could think of. Either drunk or hung over, in which case this was not unlike waking up after an all night Jack Daniels spree with a wedding ring and a new tattoo. Except that to find oneself suddenly immune to gravity was slightly more unnerving than the words 'I love Doug' in a heart on your arm, regardless of whether or not you knew anyone named Doug.

Yes, she must be suffering from the effects of a nasty hangover. That really was the best of all possible explanations.

Too bad Mallory didn't drink.

It was also too bad that--next to vomiting, a headache, and discovering that you've married a total stranger--as far as Mallory knew, involuntary flight was not a known side affect of drinking.

She had to get down from here. What if someone walked in and found her like this? How could she possibly explain without ending up a freak in a circus sideshow?

"How typical," Mallory muttered as she pushed back against the light. "Can't get tattooed like everyone else. No, you up and learn how to fly."

She rolled off the light fixture, onto her back, and looked down. Good Heavens, she was in a morgue!

The fluorescent lights emphasized the stark white walls and white tiled floors. Even the plastic wall clock was framed in white. Cold, slate-gray steel doors and equipment provided the only splash of color, and galvanized refrigeration units lined the north wall at her feet and the south wall a good ten

feet from her head. Directly below her, parked in front of unit number twenty-three, refrigeration door 'B', was a single, stainless steel cadaver transport. Somehow, Mallory knew the body beneath that white morgue sheet was her own.

This was not right. This had gone beyond not right. Not only was she in a morgue, but she was dead!

Mallory covered her mouth with one hand and her stomach with the other. If only it were a physical one, she'd be sick to it right now.

The heavy steel doors swooped inward as the pathologist in a full-length, blue smock and cap, and a balding, plainclothes detective in a gray suit led Mallory's boss, Jeremy Flynn, into the room. Flynn's eyes darted uncomfortably to the transport and then away. He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth and cleared his throat as the pathologist took his position opposite of Flynn at the head of the cadaver transport.

"Ready?" the pathologist asked.

Flynn cleared his throat again and then nodded. But when the sheet was lifted, he turned away with a grimace of revulsion. "Oh my God!"

Mercifully, the sheet was not peeled back far enough for Mallory to see her own corpse.

The pathologist immediately let the sheet drop back into place while the detective took Flynn a short distance away.

"Why do I have to do this?" Flynn asked. He bent over, his hands braced against his knees as he took several deep breaths.

"Her wallet was stolen before police arrived at the scene. The only thing on her was a book stamped with your bookstore's name and address." The detective opened his notebook, flipped a few pages, and then took a pen from his shirt pocket. "Again, Mister Flynn, I apologize, but any information you can give us would be greatly appreciated."

"She works for me... er, worked, I guess. Her name's Mallory Connally."

"Any family you know of?"

"Uh, no. Nobody. Her father died about a year ago, I think. She lives by herself. I've got her address back at the store, if you want it."

Mallory didn't hear the detective's reply. Suddenly, she was remembering walking to the bus stop. Two days of drizzle had left the roads wet and slick in places. If not for the screech of tires sliding on blacktop as the taxicab slid sideways up onto the curb, Mallory might never have known what hit her at all. The force of the impact had thrown her against the side of the brick Savings and Loan building. She gently touched the back of her head, beginning to shake.

She really was dead!

"Is that it?" Flynn asked as the detective led him from the room. "Do I need to sign anything, or can I go now?"

Their voices trailed away to nothing as the giant swinging doors swooped shut after the pathologist. Mallory stared at her covered corpse. What was she supposed to do now? Where could she go? Back to her crummy two-room apartment down on Riverside? She didn't want to live there when she was alive; she sure wasn't going to haunt the place now!

Two fingers lightly tapped Mallory's shoulder. When she turned her head, a pretty blonde woman was lying next to her on the ceiling. She looked to be somewhere in her thirties. Laugh lines crinkled at the corners of her sparkling blue eyes when she smiled, and dimples dented each side of her mouth. Apparently, gravity didn't affect her either since the full-length white dress she wore hung straight down her body, as if she were standing upright instead of lying upside-down against the ceiling.

"Hello, Mallory," the woman said.

Mallory returned the greeting without thinking. "Hi."

Barbie, she thought. The woman looked exactly like Barbie might have if she were a real woman instead of a ten-inch tall plastic doll. Mallory would have given her eyeteeth to look like that. Instead, she had been cursed with straight black hair, cow-brown eyes, and a half a million ugly brown freckles.

And to add insult to injury, Mallory didn't even get to wear a cool, white dress. She was still in the same blue jeans, black and white Woodland Park Zoo T-shirt and black, holey sneakers she had died in.

"Are you an angel?" Mallory asked. Realizing how ridiculous the question was, she added, "I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say."

"It's all right," Barbie said, her smile widening. "It's surprising how often I get asked that. My name is Monica. I'm like you."

"Dead?"

"Influenza pandemic. Summer of nineteen-eighteen."

"Oh." Now that she thought about it, Monica's white dress did look like an antique nightgown. "Are you. . .haunting the hospital? I didn't think it was that old."

Monica grinned. "I'm here for you, Mallory. I'm your guide."

"My guide?"

"It's time to go."

"Go?" Mallory echoed. "Go where?"

"Home." Monica gave her hand a reassuring pat, then took Mallory's arm and pulled her up through the perfectly solid light fixture, through eight inches of buffer space filled with electrical wires, water pipes, and fiberglass insulation before floating up through the floor of a very busy admitting room.

A television hung from one wall whispering the six o'clock news to a man sitting in a wheelchair. His foot was wrapped in ace bandages and propped out in front of him. Three empty chairs separated him from a woman holding a fussy baby in her arms

and a sleeping four-year-old against her left shoulder.

At the reception desk, an oriental woman stood cradling her right arm, while her husband argued in Chinese with the haggard-looking nurse. As he paused to catch his breath, the nurse pointed at the clipboard on the counter between them. "But I need you to fill out these forms," she said, and he started up again.

To the left of the desk, a teenage boy with a black eye and a cut on his forehead was holding a cold pack to his split lip and dropping quarters into a soda machine.

As Monica pulled Mallory up toward the ceiling, a couple came through the automatic sliding glass doors. The ashen-faced man had his right hand wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth. Behind him, his wife carried a plastic sandwich bag filled with ice and two fingertips.

"I told you not to hold it that way," she said, her voice high-pitched and near to panic. "I told you. I told you."

The man stopped just short of the reception desk and turned on her. Very softly and very dangerously he said, "You say that one more time, and not only am going to dust your seat, I'm going make you eat those fingers."

The woman shut her mouth, and Monica pulled Mallory up through the next floor into an empty hospital room with two neatly made beds. The next floor was also a hospital room, with the second bed occupied by an elderly woman on a heart monitor and respirator. She was watching Wheel of Fortune.

"Man of La Mancha," she said in a brittle voice, talking to the television. "'N,' you idiot!"

"Is there an 'R'?" the woman contestant on the television game show asked.

The buzzer signaled no, the audience dutifully oh-ed its disappointment, and the old woman smacked the blankets that covered her with both hands. "Is there an 'R' in Man of La Mancha, you

brainless ninny?" As Monica and Mallory floated up to the ceiling, she took two shallow, wheezing breathes. "Man, I need a cigarette!"

From there, Mallory found herself on the roof. The sun was preparing to set. The sky was bright blue with clouds like tufts of white cotton, gathering and swelling directly overhead. A gentle tornado funnel formed, extending down from the sky until it touched the rooftop near their feet.

"Time to go," Monica said. "Your family is anxious to see you again."

That was when it hit Mallory. Really hit her. She was dead, and she was leaving. No more two-room apartment in a building that should have been condemned forty years ago. No more struggling from month to month to pay bills that just kept growing. No more bus stops spray-painted with street gang graffiti, or running to catch a cab in the rain, or dodging the prostitutes and drug dealers that hung out on the streets in front of the building she called home. No more bookstore either. Or old Star Trek re-runs. Or hot mocha lattes on cold winter mornings. Or escaping real life, however briefly, between the covers of a good Tom Clancy novel.

Mallory began to panic. What was going to happen to her cat, Charley, who slept with her at night and kept her feet warm in the winter when her dinosaur of a radiator invariably quit working? And who would see to her funeral? With both parents dead and no siblings, would anyone even attend, or visit her grave in the years to come? She was friendly enough with most of the regular clients at the bookstore, but she doubted many would do more than inquire when a new counter clerk suddenly appeared to take Mallory's place. Mallory didn't even have a will ready. The idea of her landlord going through her belongings made her shudder. And then she remembered what she had hidden between her mattress and bedsprings, and she blushed.

"This is not happening," she groaned. "I am not dead and this is not happening."

"Don't be afraid." Monica hooked arms with Mallory as they started toward the funnel. "It's a short trip, relatively speaking."

"Wait!" Mallory dug her incorporeal heels into the hospital's roof. It surprised her when they actually stopped. "I don't want to go!"

"There's nothing to worry about. Think of this as. . .well, as a well-deserved retirement. Your labors are done. Now you get to relax. Go fishing. And travel. Extensive travel."

Mallory pulled back. "But I'm not ready!"

It was a ridiculous statement, and Mallory knew it. How much more 'ready' than stone cold dead did one have to be?

Monica sighed. "They rarely are."

"But you don't understand," Mallory said. "There's so much I haven't done. Isn't there a rule someplace? How can I die when I haven't accomplished anything important in life. Like—" Her mind went blank; she floundered. "Like buying kitty litter. Nuts! I knew I was forgetting something."

"Come along." Monica started for the tunnel again.

"But what about Charley? I can't leave my cat. I'm all he has!" It was really the other way around, but Mallory couldn't bring herself to tell this beautiful woman (who'd likely had dozens of family and friends to mourn her) that Mallory's own social life revolved solely around the longhaired, black and grey feline that kept her apartment rodent-free.

"He'll be fine," Monica said. "Your next door neighbor loves the cat. She'll take good care of him."

"No, wait!" Again, Mallory dug in her heels. "What about all the things I haven't done? Like--I--I haven't raced across Saudi Arabia on a camel. Or climbed the Alps. Or protected the rain forest. I haven't even saved a whale! Can you get into Heaven without saving a whale?"

Monica's grip on her arm only tightened. "Earth is for the living and Heaven the dead. Rules are rules. There simply is no place for you down here."

Mallory pulled at her imprisoned hand. She hated whining. She refused to whine. She failed miserably.

"Please," she begged. "I can make one."

"You had your chance," Monica said gently. "Now it's up to the Powers That Be to decide what's to be done with you. Plead your case eloquently enough, and they may find a way to let you come back. We've got plenty of employment opportunities open right now--everything from guides to Harbingers of Doom. We've even got an opening for a guardian angel if you're interested in that field of work."

"Do you think they'd let me do that?"

"You're a good person." Monica squeezed her hand. "I think your chances are also good. Trust me, Mallory. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Still Mallory hesitated, but Monica would not be denied. The guide stepped into the mouth of the funnel and pulled Mallory in behind her. With a sensation not unlike riding an elevator, the funnel drew them upward.

The funnel itself was quite lovely. The setting sun painted the clouds in hues of orange and pink. Were there sunsets where she was going, or would this be the last one Mallory ever witnessed? She watched the play of colors changing as the sun moved across the sky, not wanting even to blink lest she miss one nuance of nature's magnificent display.

They had not journeyed far when the funnel ended and the clouds parted to reveal a second, larger tunnel. Rather than trail upward, it ran horizontally left to right like an extra long hallway as far as Mallory could see in either direction.

Stretching up her hand, Mallory strained on tiptoes to touch the cloud ceiling above her. She tried not to sound disappointed. "Gee, I always

thought Heaven would be--I don't know--bigger, maybe wider than this."

"This is only the Crossroads," Monica explained. "Everyone comes through here at some point in their journey."

"Oh, I see. The right takes you to Heaven. Left and you're Purgatory bound. You'd think there'd be a sign or something."

"I am the sign," Monica said dryly. "Come along."

They started walking. To the right, Mallory was encouraged to note.

Just then, another hole opened in the sun-colored wall before them. A teenaged boy in a leather jacket and spiked, green hair appeared through the clouds. He had a silver ring in his right nostril and two more through his eyebrow. His guide, a petite brunette with large brown eyes, giggled into her hand as she led him onto the Crossroads. Unlike Mallory, the boy did not appear the slightest bit confused or apprehensive.

"So." He kissed the brunette's hand as she guided him to the right. "Do you, like, have a phone number or something? I don't suppose you want to go out this Friday, huh?"

The brunette giggled again and Mallory watched the duo stroll off together. With a stab of regret, she suddenly realized she had never fallen in love, either. She drew a line in the tunnel floor with the tip of her sneaker. A section of cloud swirled up to twine in ethereal wisps round her ankle and calf, but no hole magically appeared to take her back down to Earth. Her shoulders drooped a little.

"Ready?" Monica asked.

"Do I get to go home, if I say no?" Mallory shook her leg until the wisps dissipated.

"You are going home." Monica took her arm and they continued on.

As they journeyed, periodically the cloud wall parted to allow the passage of other guides and their frightened or confused, joyful or relieved

human counterparts onto the Crossroads. Old and young, male and female, people of all sizes, shapes, ethnic origins, and backgrounds began to pass Mallory by. Like lemmings headed for the sea, they all turned to the right and started walking. At one point, she was even passed by four NASA astronauts in spacesuits and helmets. The words 'Huguenot 2013' were stitched in black letters an inch tall on their sleeves.

When they had walked perhaps half a mile, Mallory began to notice that new arrivals on the Crossroads now were dressed more like an old photograph Mallory had once seen of her Depression-era grandparents. The changes in dress were minute at first, but, after a mile or so, quickly became more obvious.

And it wasn't merely the change in dress that caught her attention. Mallory started when she heard a woman suddenly cry out behind her. She turned in time to see a young man drop down onto one knee and tug a not-so-willing young lady face down across that makeshift lap. As Mallory watched in shock, the man yanked up her skirts, jerked her panties down to her knees, and raised his hand ominously high above the poor girl's wiggling rump.

When their guide, a pretty young blonde, tapped him hesitantly on the shoulder, he turned his angry glare on her and growled, "Don't try to stop me unless you want to be next, young lady."

The little blonde immediately backed up a step, worrying her bottom lip. Then, from the folds of her gown, she pulled out a long wooden hairbrush and held it out to him.

The man hesitated only a moment before he took it. And as Mallory watched in open-mouthed shock, he laid a barrage of hearty smacks all across the poor girl's bare bottom. She screamed at the very first crack of wood against bare skin, and then began to cry. The entire Crossroads echoed with the steady crack! crack! smack! of the hairbrush, as

well as the wails of the girl being so soundly punished.

"Do something!" Mallory cried. Except for a precursory glance here and there, the people around her had already dismissed the scene and started walking again. Not one person seemed inclined to help the woman, whose once pale bottom was now a blazing, sizzling shade of red.

"I have absolutely no desire to be next," Monica said as she took Mallory's arm and led her away. "I doubt you do either."

"But--but can he do that?"

"Well, she did get them both killed, you know." Monica didn't seem the slightest bit sympathetic.

Monica dragged Mallory along behind her, quickly putting distance between them and the spanking taking place. With every step, the hardy smacking sounds grew a little fainter and yet, somehow, seemed to intensify. The girl's wails quickly turned to heart-rending sobs, and finally the spanking stopped all together. Mallory turned around again, but there were too many people for her to see the couple so far behind them. She swallowed hard, a little surprised that she could still walk on legs as shaky as her own had become. Maybe she was headed for Hell after all.

"Don't worry," Monica said. "She'll have to stand with her nose to the wall for a while, but Doug's a good man and he loves her dearly. I'm sure he'll comfort her, too."

The further they went, the stranger the people became. It was like watching a play in which costumes of the ages was the only theme. And Mallory wasn't the only one to give her guide trouble, either. An aged miner stubbornly clung to the reins of a mangy brown mule and refused to move.

Half-buried beneath mounds of animal furs and dirty buckskins, he tugged at the snow-white bush of a beard that all but obscured his weather-wrinkled face. "I ain't budging! If Whiskey cain't

come with me, than I ain't a-gonna go! I done told that ornery critter we was gonna strike it rich together and that's just what we're a-gonna do! Ya ain't about to make a liar outta me, are ya, gal?"

Whiskey turned soulful brown eyes to Mallory, as she drew abreast of them. She knew exactly how the miner felt. She patted the mule's flank as she passed, already missing Charley. They continued on in silence for another half mile. Cowboys and Indians gave way to samurai, musketeers, and women in wide pannier skirts. One in particular had a hairstyle a good two feet in height, decorated with a bird's nest halfway up and topped with a small, wooden boat.

"How far does this tunnel go?" Mallory asked.

"As far as it takes to get back to the Beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Time and creation," Monica said. "Where else would Heaven be?"

Mallory had not given it much thought. Outer space, she supposed, since people generally aimed their prayers to the sky. Though perhaps outer space was too crowded for God, what with all the UFOs, space aliens, and such.

Booming thunder rolled through the tunnel, and the clouds surrounding them turned midnight black. For one horrible second, Mallory was certain her blasphemous thought had just earned her a one-way ticket to the far left of the tunnel. But then a hole opened in the floor near her feet and a red-haired woman clawed her way onto the Crossroads.

"Free!" she cried, her green eyes wide, though not as much in panic as it seemed in victory. She shoved past Mallory and Monica, hugging her own shoulders as she twirled around in circles, the cloud floor darkening under her feet. "Finally, I am free!"

Her laughter bordered upon hysteria as she ran toward that destination Mallory had yet to reach.

When no guide immediately followed, Monica cautiously peered down into the hole. Her face was

grim when she looked up again. She shouted, "Somebody grab her! She's not ready yet!"

"What's going on?" Mallory asked.

"Her body hasn't died," Monica said. "She will have to go back. Wait for me here."

Monica ran after the red-haired woman. For the first time since her own arrival on the Crossroads, Mallory found herself alone. She looked down at her feet, bare inches from the gaping hole. She could see the funnel extending far below her, with a picture of life too distant to clearly make out at the other end.

Mallory squinted. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw people moving way down there at the end. Not that it mattered. At least it was a life.

"Shame on you, Mallory," she said. "Don't even think it."

She was dead and that was another woman's body, another woman's life.

But the redhead obviously didn't want it, and Mallory really did. At her feet lay the perfect opportunity, a second chance to have all those things she'd missed the first time around. Mallory had always taken for granted that she would live to a ripe old age. But now, as she thought back on her mere twenty-two years, it all seemed. . .well, wasted. How could she go to Heaven, look into her father's eyes, and tell him that she'd wasted her life. Especially when cancer had robbed him of his. She wouldn't be at all surprised if her father borrowed the hairbrush from that man several miles back, and then the Crossroads would echo with the sound of her sobs as a measure of regret was paddled into her behind. That he had never spanked her before didn't matter. For something like this, there was always a first time.

Mallory stared down the length of the dark funnel. It was wrong to consider this, and she knew it. But what guarantee did she have that the Powers That Be would send her back? What if they made her stay here? Forever.

Mallory glanced over her shoulder. Monica and the other guides had already caught up with the redhead and, though she struggled fiercely and it took three to hold her, they were slowly dragging her back.

The urge to shake some sense into the woman was almost as strong as Mallory's urge to fall to her knees and beg to be allowed to take her place.

Mallory did neither, however. She bit her bottom lip instead and looked back down at the hole. Perhaps the Powers That Be had arranged for this to happen. The excuse was nothing more than a convenient conscience salve. In all likelihood, this blackened hole at her feet was Mallory's last chance to live. And this time, to live the way she should have done the first time. No missed opportunities, and no regrets.

As if sensing something amiss, Monica looked up and her gaze locked with Mallory's. Monica's eyes widened. She knew. Her face creased with disappointment. "Oh no, Mallory. Don't!"

Mallory dove head first into the hole. Thunder exploded through the clouds. The funnel that had been so gentle before was now an angry tornado, spinning, churning, battering her with its fury and pulling her rapidly back to Earth. Down to that new life that waited so far below.

The last thing Mallory heard was the red-haired woman's triumphant laughter as flame-hot agony tore her body in two.

Chapter Two

England, 1587
Castle Cadhla

The pain was unbearable, ripping through Mallory's body and leaving no nerve unmolested. She screamed once from shock and confusion as she fought to sit up in the huge four-poster bed and then again from sheer agony the instant she tried to move. How could anything hurt so much?

Mallory writhed, raking the hot, sweat- and blood-soaked sheets with her nails, thrashing her head from side to side on the mound of pillows that kept her half-propped upright. The blankets had been kicked to one side and the hem of her ankle-length nightdress was rolled up nearly to her breasts, exposing her feet and legs and--most importantly--the huge, round girth of her belly, painted orange by the flickering candlelight.

A haggard old woman stood at her bedside, wringing excess water from a damp cloth, which she then pressed to Mallory's face. Her gray hair was falling out of its simple bun and the full-length white apron she wore over her plain brown dress was soaked down the front with blood. She looked both exhausted and worried. "Your Grace, if you don't stop fighting us, you are going to die!"

"God willing, she will," said another even older woman. She sat a fair distance away on a short stool, her back to the flames burning high in the stone fireplace behind her. Her blue dress shimmered. It was the most authentic Elizabethan gown Mallory had ever seen outside of a museum. A variety of jewelry sparkled in the light, emerald rings on both withered hands, gold hawk-shaped brooch pinned at her bosom, twin pearl and diamond necklaces that hung low to her waist, and an elaborate ruby and silver comb that crowned the coiffure of her completely gray hair. An ebony cane was braced on the floor between her knees with

hands folded demurely over the ivory handle. Her mouth pinched and hard, she watched Mallory with a look of disdain that bordered on hatred. "It would be better for all involved if she did die."

A flicker of irritation crossed the first woman's face. She quickly turned her back as though she dared not show it and dipped the cloth in water to wash Mallory's face in earnest now. "Listen to Doctor Wilcox, Your Grace. You shall be fine." But her voice trembled and worry lined her face.

"Who are you people?" Mallory demanded, panting through the heat and hurt. The pain surged again and she screamed, "What's happening to me?"

"Push!" The doctor--the only other person in the room--snapped at her. Both his dark hair and narrow beard were streaked with gray. His brown eyes were lined with age, red-rimmed from exhaustion and, judging by the fumes on his breath, too much drink. He stood just behind the first woman with one hand between Mallory's splayed knees and the other pressing down upon her swollen belly. His entire front, from the sleeves of his rolled up shirt to his dark britches, was covered in blood.

Hers, Mallory suddenly realized. She stared at her stomach in shock. Before her eyes, it rippled as another contraction moved through it and pain chewed into her.

"Push, blast you!" Wilcox shouted. "Bess, help me!"

Bess flung the cool cloth aside. She grabbed Mallory's shoulders and heaved her upright as another surge of raw agony tore through her. It built from her spine, circled her midriff, and chewed right through her abdomen as if with needle-like teeth. Mallory screamed.

"Push!" Wilcox bellowed again.

And, mindless from torment and rising hysteria, Mallory obeyed. The pain was excruciating; the heat in the room stifling. She could barely breathe and

the sweat that ran off her forehead stung her eyes. Her nightgown was so damp and hot it felt as if it steamed against her skin. She screamed through gritted teeth, eyes squeezed tightly shut, every muscle in her body drawn taut as she strained against the pain.

"Good girl!" Bess crowed in encouragement.

"Again!" the gruff doctor said. "Push!"

Hurt built upon hurt. Mallory drowned in it. She screamed and sobbed at once, the salty taste of her sweat and tears stinging her lips where she had bit into them. She pushed again, eyes squeezed tightly shut, until finally, mercifully, the force of the pain began to ebb and the contraction died away. In the lull that followed, Mallory wilted back upon the pillows while Bess again bathed her face with the cool cloth.

"This isn't happening," Mallory told her, so weary she could barely keep her eyes open.

"You are doing fine," Bess said as she pressed the soothing cloth to Mallory's cheek. But to the doctor in a softer voice she said, "There's too much blood."

"She'll be fine." Doctor Wilcox spared neither woman so much as a glance. "The baby has crowned. One more good push and, God willing, it will be over. Have fresh water brought, Bess, please."

"She will get nothing more from me," the old woman by the fire announced. "The servants in this house do not cater to her whims alone."

Wilcox rounded on her furiously. "Confound it, Abigail! She is still family, despite what she has done! Do you wish both her and your grandchild dead?"

"Yes!" Abigail hissed back. Her wrinkled mouth pursed in anger and defiance. Her dark eyes flashed with it.

Cursing, Wilcox stalked from the bed, threw open the door, and shouted down the hall for fresh water and linens.

Abigail thumped her cane twice against the stone floor. "How dare you!"

"Madame," Wilcox said briskly, "you have no idea the lengths to which I'll dare."

"This can't be happening," Mallory said again, her voice cracking. She had traded Heaven for the fiery pits of Hell. Her distended belly rippled as another contraction began and the pain came, a tide of pitiless agony. "Oh, please not again." Twin tears slipped down both cheeks and she screamed, "Oh God, help me!"

Wilcox immediately returned to the bed. This time Mallory did not wait for the order to push. She bore down with the cresting pain, pushing for all she was worth and sobbing with relief as the child was expelled from her body into Doctor Wilcox's waiting hands. He said, "We have an heir!"

Abigail cursed loudly.

"Thank God!" Bess laughed. She released Mallory, who collapsed atop her pillows too weak and hurt to move.

In the brief silence that followed, the frowning Abigail leaned back in her chair. "Did it live?"

"Yes, he moves!"

While Bess hurried to take the baby from Wilcox, Abigail angrily thumped her cane against the floor and swore a second time.

Mallory stared up at the canopy curtains over the bed. Her body shook. She alternated between sobs and laughter as she heard her son's first lusty wail. For a brief moment, exhilaration conquered her exhaustion and pain. And in that moment, all she felt was intense, overwhelming happiness.

"I did it!" Mallory laughed breathlessly. "I had a baby!"

And then she laughed again, because she finally understood what was happening.

A dream. This was all a dream. Monica, the Crossroads--all part of Mallory's twisted imagination and the result of too much pepperoni pizza on her lunch hour break. Maybe the Parmesan cheese was

old, or she had eaten too many of those spicy, crushed red peppers.

Whatever the cause, she was better now. The taxi had hit her, impregnated her, and she was now. . .Where? In a hospital?

If it was, it was the strangest hospital she had ever dreamed up. The room looked like a dungeon, with stone walls, floor, and a mammoth fireplace at one end. Even the arched, poured-glass window was framed in cold, gray rock. All that was missing was a set of bars, a torture rack, and maybe a whip or two, and the image would be complete.

The power must be out. The room was dark despite the efforts of three candle lamps and a bon-fire-sized blaze roaring in the fireplace, around which were set two box chairs, a sewing basket, and a white- and green-striped settee. A huge armoire dominated one wall while, next to her bed, a three-legged table supported an elaborately painted porcelain pitcher and bowl. Rushes were strewn across the floor.

With a room like this, it made sense for the people to be dressed like something straight out of a Renaissance Fair. Mallory supposed she ought to be glad that her fevered brain hadn't conjured a man in a chicken suit to cluck, flap, and dance all around her bed throughout her labor.

She heard splashing water and her son bellowed. Which brought to mind another question: since when did hit-and-run automobile accidents leave a woman pregnant? From what Mallory remembered, she hadn't been pregnant yesterday. But then, from what she did recall, she was dead and lying under a sheet in a hospital morgue, so the idea of having a baby without the standard nine-month pregnancy hardly seemed worth the effort of a raised eyebrow.

She definitely had to be dreaming, Mallory thought. There was simply no other explanation.

The doctor leaned over her to set a small bottle on the bedside table next to the pitcher and bowl.

He said, "Take no more than a dose of this laudanum. It will help you rest."

Wrapping the afterbirth in a cloth and removing it from the bed, he then helped to pull the hem of her gown modestly down again and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. Despite the stifling heat of the room, Mallory was shaking and her teeth had begun to chatter.

"Where's m-my b-b-baby?" she managed to ask.

There was a whispered rustle of cloth as Bess approached the bed with the baby bundled loosely in a brown blanket in her arms. As Bess bent to lay him next to her, somehow Mallory managed to roll onto her side and wrap her weary arms around him.

Her son looked nothing like the newborn babies depicted in the movies or on any of the soap operas Mallory used to watch on her days off from work. In fact, the poor thing hardly looked human. Though Bess had made an effort to clean him, he really needed a bath. His skin was still blotchy, covered in patches by a downy white fuzz. His misshapen head was sparsely peppered with dark strands of hair. His nose looked squashed, his movements jerky and completely without coordination. As Mallory touched him, the baby gazed up at her with unfocused blue eyes. His head wobbled weakly in the crook of her arm.

Nothing could have been more beautiful.

Tears pricked her eyes. If only she had dreams like this more often. With a little less pain, maybe. That was just too realistic.

And the next time she went into labor, she was going to be in a real hospital with a working air conditioner, plenty of epidurals, and enough morphine to knock her on her butt for a good week afterward. Enough of this 'natural' nonsense. Mallory wasn't like other women. Pain hurt her.

Counting his fingers and toes, Mallory quickly checked to make sure he came with all of life's essentials before turning her attention to freeing her breast from her nightgown. High-necked, the entire

front was nothing but tiny pearl hooks that refused to come unfastened. That brief euphoria was fading and exhaustion rising quickly to take its place. Her hands would not stop shaking. Though she managed the ribbon bow at the top of her gown easily enough, the hooks that came after that were another matter, entirely. In her next dream, Mallory decided to wear something easier to get off. Elastic, at this point, would have been a godsend.

Were her dreams always this life-like? Mallory could not remember, but the struggle to unhook the front of her nightgown rapidly consumed what little remained of her strength.

"Here, Your Grace. Let me help you." Bess bent to finish the task and helped to pull the sweat-dampened fabric off her left shoulder.

Rooting instinctively, the baby nuzzled against her before latching on with a force that was surprising for one so tiny.

Absorbed as she was in the antics of her dream infant, Mallory almost missed seeing the blonde man enter the room. He came in behind a maid bearing fresh water and linens and, after a brief pause in the doorway, reluctantly approached the bed.

He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. Back stiff, broad shoulders straight, as if so accustomed to the constraints of heavy armor that he seemed ill at ease without it. His white shirt was of a finer quality than Doctor Wilcox's and his tan breeches fit snugly on narrow hips and muscular thighs. His hair was tousled and windblown and extended down slightly past his shoulders. Unbrushed, it was long, and so bleached by the sun as to be almost white. As were his eyebrows--bright, thick, white-blond lines that stood out against a sun-bronzed, weatherworn face. Amazed that she was capable of dreaming up so fine a man, Mallory's gaze danced over his features, the wide cheekbones, cleft chin, and strong square jaw. The muscles there pulsed as he repeatedly clenched his teeth. What color were

his eyes? Her gaze flicked up to check and unconsciously her grip on the baby tightened. Unsmiling, he stared at her with hard and narrowed eyes.

Blue. Her dream man had eyes that were an ice-cold shade of blue.

Her subconscious mind must be trying to tell her something. Perhaps this was all a premonition of future wealth and happiness with a hitherto unknown Mister Right. She had never had such a happy dream before, even though her dream man did seem a bit grumpy.

Of course, she might just as easily be demented, sick in the head, a lunatic bound for a straightjacket and her own private, padded room in Bellevue.

Or, perhaps even. . .

"I'm going to marry a sun-bronzed surfer and have lots of children," Mallory said aloud, then smiled because she was a practical girl and that was really the best explanation that she could think of for this kind of a dream.

Instantly those blue eyes mirrored a hurt comparable to the worst of her labor pains. Then, like a door slamming shut, his expression closed against her and the dream man stepped back from the bed. "I doubted he was mine. Thank you, Madame, for your cold, brutal honesty."

With one last, lingering look cast down at the baby in her arms, he turned and headed back out the door. More than a little confused, Mallory watched him go. She had just hurt his feelings, but how could that be? He was a dream, after all. It wasn't as if he were real.

Wilcox threw back his head with a harsh bark of laughter. "Claire, you are despicable!"

He flung the cloth he had been using to clean his hands into a basin on the bedside table. Bloody water slopped over the rim and onto the rush-strewn floor.

"What did I tell you, Robert?" Abigail stood, the cane apparently serving as an object of decoration since she did not lean upon it. "A whore. And you condemned me for wishing her dead."

Mallory stared at the doctor, her eyes widening as she realized she was the 'Claire' in question. She looked down at the very realistic baby in her arms. She touched his tiny hand, letting the fingers close around the tip of one of her own. She noticed the fan of auburn-red hair splayed in damp and tangled tendrils across her pillow.

The red-haired woman from the Crossroads. . .

Could it have been real after all? Mallory's chest tightened. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

"I've done all I can to help you," Wilcox said, leaning over her. "You have a son again. For once, Claire, try to think of someone other than yourself."

Gathering his bag, the doctor followed her dream man from the room.

"I don't understand," Mallory said to no one in particular.

Abigail arched her gray eyebrow. "What is there for you to misunderstand?"

Mallory touched the baby's face. Had she really died? Could the Crossroads have been real? Or Monica? Had she really, literally stolen another woman's life so that she could have a second chance at life? She must have. As she traced the baby's round features, it hit her. This wasn't a dream. She really was holding a baby--her baby--in her arms.

Abigail smirked. "I am going to enjoy this, you know. I never wanted you here, I have made no secret of that. But now even Varden, fool that he is, has seen you for what you truly are. Take a good, last look around, Jezebel. Your stay in my house is at its end." She looked at the baby in Mallory's arms. To Bess, Abigail said, "You can take that. . .that thing to the nursery, but tell the wet-nurse she needn't bother to unpack. It won't be staying long enough to require her."

As Bess approached Mallory's bedside, she averted her eyes. For a moment, she looked as if she might apologize. But then, before Mallory could tighten her arms, the baby was lifted from her grasp.

As Bess passed by, Abigail backed from the infant as if it were an abomination. But when baby and midwife disappeared out the door, she seemed to collect herself. "Grete will continue to attend you. Although I must admit, I am rather hoping that you bleed to death during the night, thereby solving half my problems for me."

Mallory tried to sit up, to protest, but there was simply no strength left within her. Stunned, she could only follow Abigail with her eyes as she swept after Bess, her cane clasped tightly in one bejeweled hand.

Mallory wasn't alone for very long before a tall, stocky woman, perhaps ten or so years younger than Abigail, arrived. As she placed strips of cloth on the bedside table, her stern face showed only disapproval, which she directed solely at Mallory. "Here are some rags for the bleeding. The water is beside you. I assume you can clean yourself."

"Are you Grete?" Mallory asked, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

"As if either of us could forget the other." Grete stood back from the bed, her hands clasped before her. "Will you be needing anything further tonight, Your Grace?"

Mallory pulled the blanket that much tighter around her. "No."

"Good." Turning on her heel, Grete found a comfortable chair by the fire and took a piece of mending from the basket on the floor beside it.

Mallory lay on hot, damp sheets, thirsty and shaking. Her body ached. The majority of her--or rather, Claire's--blood was drying on her skin, and the coppery smell of it, combined with the stuffy heat of the room, turned her stomach. On the bedside table, the water basin was inches beyond

her reach and Mallory was simply too tired to get it. Finding a dry spot on the mattress was as painful as it was futile. After only two weak attempts, she gave up trying and managed, gingerly, to roll onto her side, putting her back to the unfriendly lady's companion.

Where was she? Great Britain would be a good guess, considering the accents. But when? That she had gone back in time was obvious. At least it was an English-speaking country. She should be grateful she hadn't dropped herself into France or Siberia or someplace equally foreign.

Mallory stared at the huge red and gold tapestry that covered the dark stone wall from floor to ceiling directly across from the bed. Shaking violently, wondering if she were going into shock, Mallory watched golden dogs leap across a crimson field after a family of deer.

The dream had become a nightmare.

When Varden first heard that riders were coming, he immediately strapped on his sword and rushed out into the rain to meet them. Unfortunately, he doubted he would get the opportunity to draw the weapon. Godfrey was too clever for that, more's the pity. And, of course, Abigail was standing beside him, waiting impatiently for the portcullis to be raised so the long procession could ride across the moat, through the iron gate, and into the cobblestone bailey. And there in the lead rode his brother, beside his man-at-arms.

Icy rain trickled from the tips of Varden's wet hair into his collar and then down his back. Wishing he had taken the time to don a coat, Varden made no move to greet Godfrey, though Abigail more than made up for his lack of enthusiasm.

"Godfrey!" She ran out to meet him with arms flung wide apart, receiving him with a jubilation she would never have bestowed upon Varden. "What are you doing out in this weather?"

"I could not bear to be away from you another day," Godfrey said as he dismounted. The soldiers that accompanied him remained cautiously in their saddles, eyeing Varden and his fully armed and armored soldiers, who crowded the bailey walls above and all around.

"Foolishness and poppycock," Abigail laughed. "See how wet you are!"

Covered nearly head to toe in thick, leather, riding armor, Godfrey accepted his mother's clucking with little more than a tolerant smile. He looked at Varden, studying him before bending to buss Abigail's cheek with a greeting kiss. "It was either come here or sleep another night in the mud. I admit the siren's call of a warm, dry bed was difficult to resist. Court sends its fondest wishes for your well being. The old crony circle wasn't the same without you."

Abigail lovingly smoothed her hands across his face, her usual sobriety gone with his arrival. "You should have stayed among them. Things have not improved here. You know, sometimes I wonder if you have as little sense as Varden."

Godfrey looked stricken. "Mother, you wound me!"

While Varden pretended to ignore the exchange, Abigail linked her arm through Godfrey's. "Come inside now. I'll have a hot bath and meal brought to you. Ah, my baby is returned; I am so happy!"

As they neared the bottom of the steps, Godfrey flashed Varden a sharp smile. Though slightly smaller and leaner than Varden, he was his near image in appearance.

"Hello, brother," Godfrey said, as though nothing had ever happened between them.

Varden did not move.

"You are being rude," Abigail said, her tone as icy as the rain that dripped down the back of his neck. "You cannot leave him out here in this awful weather!"

"I can do however it pleases me," Varden stated bluntly, and everyone present knew it.

With one foot raised on the bottom-most step, Godfrey shrugged. "You cast me from our house six months ago. Surely your anger has been appeased by now."

"This has gone beyond anger."

"You're right, of course. But I am tired of riding, and we are all quite thoroughly drenched. I stand before you a humble man. Would you have me beg, brother, for entrance to our father's house?"

"I would rather you left here entirely. Go back to court. Go to the devil for all I care. So long as you are gone, it matters not to me."

Abigail thumped Varden on the chest with her fist, though not hard enough to move him. "He is your brother, curse your black heart!"

"Half brother," Varden interrupted coldly, "As you used to say so often when we were children."

"You are just like your father: a drunk, heavy-handed brute as stubborn as he is witless." Abigail abruptly closed her mouth when Varden stiffened. She visibly composed herself before continuing in a slightly calmer tone, "Let him in, Varden. The two of you can bicker and bellow all night if that is what you want. Just let Godfrey do his share from the kitchen hearth where it is dry and warm!"

"He has already done his share," Varden said, turning his icy stare back to his younger brother. "It lies squalling in my nursery. Feel free to take it with you when you go."

Godfrey threw back his head and roared with laughter. "She is your wife, brother! Your wife, your bastard, and your problem."

Varden's hand found the hilt of his sword. In a flash, the amusement was gone from his brother's face as the younger man hastily followed suit. An unmistakable excitement lit Godfrey's eyes as his palm came to rest on the hilt of his own blade. That alone was enough to make Varden want to draw.

"Oh!" Abigail pushed between them. "May the Heavens grant me patience. The two of you are enough to age a saint! Varden, for once, show some sense! Your Jezebel wife has slept with every man in the country. There is no proof that Godfrey is that bastard's father. He could not possibly be, I tell you. He would never do such an terrible thing. Let your brother inside! Now!"

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" Godfrey mocked softly, ignoring his mother's warning glare. "Four, five bottles? Does your thirst crave the Scottish whiskey or are we in a mood tonight for wine? Go back to your bottle, brother. Drink to the health of your new heir. I am certain that, by midnight, you'll not even remember I'm here."

Varden's face disappeared into the shadows as he took one ominous step forward Godfrey, stopping only as he came up against Abigail's up thrust hands.

"Stop it," Abigail said through gritted teeth. "Varden, let your brother inside."

"I would sooner give the devil access to my house." But Varden stopped advancing. Self-restraint pulled his hand reluctantly from his sword hilt. He glanced at the soldiers Godfrey had brought. "They can bunk with my guard." To his brother, he said, "I trust your stay with us will not be long. To throw you from the ramparts would be my fondest desire, though I doubt Abigail would approve."

Godfrey smirked. "Mother always did love me best."

Varden turned sharply and marched back inside Cadhla. He would have slammed the door, but Godfrey and Abigail both jumped to catch it.

Chapter Three

Three guides hovered at the edge of the Crossroads, a rebellious Claire held between them. Even surrounded by the night and outlined against the star-studded sky, the clouds looked angry and black.

Mallory could not remember how she came to be outside the castle or Claire's bedroom. She hovered in the air perhaps thirty feet over the cobblestone bailey just outside the window. The rampart of the high stone wall that surrounded the castle lay to her left, and a balcony and door that lead back inside to her right. There were three men on duty along the length of the wall and two more down below in the bailey by the portcullis. Each wore a uniform of dark blue homespun underneath arm and leg guards and a breastplate marked with the crest of a gold and black hawk, talons extended. Each wore a helmet as well, and crossbows and swords were positioned in cache piles along the walk. From the way they acted, Mallory knew they couldn't see her, Monica or Claire, or the black tornado funnel descending to the wall where Mallory hovered in dread.

She glanced back over her shoulder through the narrow poured-glass window. Grete was asleep in her chair by the fire, the unfinished mending still on her lap. Not far away, Claire's body lay limp and unclaimed on the bed. Mallory turned her back on Monica and the funnel, and reached for the bed. "I don't want to die!"

"I don't understand why you're doing this," Monica said. "Don't you know you can't stay here?"

Claire smirked. "You will not want to."

"You left!" Mallory accused. "You chose to die. Well, I want to live! Where's the harm?"

"This is not your place," Monica said.

"I can make it mine." Mallory wanted to sound confident, but her words came out desperate and pleading.

"You don't realize what you are asking. This goes against all the rules."

"I don't care!" Mallory struggled to pull herself back to Claire's body, but the window refused to be tangible. Or maybe it was her hands as they passed without substance through the stone windowsill and wall. Behind her, she could feel the funnel drawing closer, pulling her back towards it.

Above them, the clouds rumbled with angry thunder. Monica looked up briefly and then back to Mallory. "This is your last chance. There can be no others. Please think about what you are doing. Come back to us before it's too late."

Monica reached for her while the others pushed the struggling Claire into the funnel's gaping maw.

"No!" Mallory shoved violently away from them. She fought to reach the bed just as fiercely as Claire fought to keep away from it. The funnel closed in behind her. "No! I don't want to die!"

The candles had burned down to nubs. Half had gone out entirely, leaving only a few embers in the fireplace and a smattering of candles near the liqueur cabinet to light Varden's chambers. Varden did not mind. He had grown accustomed to the darkness and gloom. It was the perfect atmosphere for drinking oneself insensible.

In one of two fireside chairs, Varden stretched out his long legs to absorb what little heat the coals still provided. In one hand, he held a glass of dark red wine and in the other, the near-empty jug was propped against his thigh. It was hard to ignore the cries coming from Claire's adjoining bedchambers, but he was trying.

He held out his glass to the portrait above the mantle, a painting of him commissioned when he was younger. Much younger. He still knew how to smile back then.

"A toast to the new father," he said. "Congratulations on the safe arrival of your heir."

He swallowed all that was left in the glass. The wine went down smoothly. Not too sweet. Licking his lips, he looked into the mouth of the jug. How unfortunate that he would have to switch to something a little stronger if he wanted to be passed out drunk before dawn. Whiskey, Godfrey had suggested. Scottish whiskey, no less.

Varden suddenly erupted from his chair, shouting curses at the top of his lungs as he flung the glass into the fireplace. It shattered, spraying tiny crystal shards back across the room around him. He took several deep breaths before settling back down in his chair. Glass crunched under his heels as he again stretched his legs to the fire. Resting his elbow on the chair arm, he rubbed his closed eyes. The destruction did not make him feel any better.

From across the room, his dark hair and clothes blending him into his surroundings, Kenton paused in the midst of straightening Varden's freshly laundered wardrobe. The somber valet eyed the duke with a carefully neutral expression. When the cries came again from the adjoining room, Kenton's black gaze slid from Varden to the door that separated the bedchambers and then back again. Seeming to dismiss his lord's foul temper, Kenton shook the creases from a shirt on the bed and checked it carefully. "I will order more glassware, Your Grace. When you have finished destroying this set, it shall be nice to have a spare to fall back on."

"Get out," Varden growled. "I want to be alone."

Ignoring him, Kenton placed the shirt into the clothes press. "I think either you should go to her or cast her out."

Varden did not turn around. "I'd sooner turn you off."

"No, you wouldn't." The dark-skinned manservant picked up the lint brush and vigorously whisked the stiff white bristles over the shoulders of tomorrow's red and black doublet. "My father worked for your father, and his father for your

father's father before him. It is a long standing tradition that began the first day a de Lyssoue set himself above all others and declared that he should be waited upon. Sometime during the Crusades, unless my grandfather was lying."

"The other nobles brought back rugs or chests," Varden said. "Or rare and beautiful vases from the Holy Land. Tangible things they could hold aloft and say with pride and conviction, 'Yes, I answered the call of Alexius and partook of the noblest of ventures.' But instead of treasure, my great, great, however-many-greats-it-was grandfather brought home your surly, disrespectful forefather."

"Which is what happens when your horsemanship does not equal your horse, and you break a leg before ever setting eyes on Jerusalem."

"Ha! He barely made it to Anatolia. He was gone for four years and all he had to show for the venture was one cracked vase--"

"Which he stole from a drunken companion in a crooked game of dice." Kenton said dryly.

"And an insolent servant--"

"Which he kidnapped from a fishing boat that he helped to plunder and sink," the valet pointed out.

"--who promptly married and produced equally insolent children to service the rest of us like a bloody Egyptian curse for the rest of our lives." In the act of raising the wine jug to his mouth, Varden abruptly set it back on his thigh. "Ah! I've a marvelous idea. Pack your bags, my man. I'll send you home."

Setting the lint brush aside, Kenton carefully examined the coat. "Having never seen Egypt, alas I cannot call it home."

Varden laughed, though there was little amusement in it. "You've more English blood in you than I have."

"Perhaps you could remind the dowager of that. She still counts the silverware every time I leave the room, as she did with my father from the moment she first arrived here. She'll no doubt do

the same to one of my future sons when this happy little legacy carries forth one generation further and he too knows the joy of playing manservant to a Lyssoue. You can no more break such a time-honored tradition than I can throw up my hands and say 'I quit.'" Satisfied with the coat, Kenton went to work on Varden's pants. He held up the first; a pair of tan breeches with a hole the size of his fist in the upper thigh. One dark brow arched above the other. "You may have your heir, but you are still required to provide a spare. I suggest you find a better sparring partner, else there may be no future sons on your part."

"I have not had an adequate sparring partner since you left the Field."

"The last time I met you on the Training Field, Your Grace, you were so drunk that you nearly loped your head off with your own sword." Kenton tossed the torn breeches aside and reached for another pair. "I have better things to do with my time than to watch you commit suicide."

"I don't need a lecture from you, sirrah." Varden drank directly from the wine bottle. "Leave me in peace."

For a length of time no longer than a few short breaths, they glared at one another. Outside, the wind shrieked through the courtyard.

"Fine." Kenton picked up the rest of Varden's clothes and dumped them into the bottom of the press. "Listen to your stepmother, like a good little boy. Drink yourself into a stupor and fulfill all of our expectations. Just don't expect me to hold your chamber pot tomorrow while you heave your insides out. Personally, I do not think you need that drink so much as you could use a stout cane across your backside."

"Try," Varden said, dangerously soft.

"Violence is not in my nature. I shall leave that to my betters--the English nobility--who seem to enjoy it." Kenton opened the hall door and stepped outside. "Shall I reduce tomorrow's breakfast to

mere coffee and have it sent up at noon? Hopefully by then you will be recovered enough to keep it in your stomach."

Kenton closed the door, and Varden was left alone. He went to the liquor cabinet for a new glass and to exchange the wine for a near-empty jug of whiskey. He poured a respectable two fingers depth into the glass as Claire cried out again in the other room. Varden paused only a moment, then filled the glass to the brim. While his wife wept out loud, he tossed back his head and drank it all at once. The whiskey burned all the way to his stomach, warming him from the inside out. There was just enough left in the bottle to fill his glass a second time.

He still loved her. Varden grimaced. Where the hell had that come from?

Love? Bah! He wanted to strangle her more. Or better yet, to turn her across his knee and paddle her backside until she literally could not sit down again afterward.

He set the empty bottle aside to cradle his whiskey in the palms of both hands. It was amazing what details he still remembered from that night almost a year ago. That Claire had chosen his bed for her affair only proved that she meant for Varden to catch her. She had known what it would do to him, the sight of her body twined with Godfrey's, bathed in sweat and an almost orange-ish glow from the fire. There were even times he thought he could still smell the sex; the room had reeked of it. While frozen in the doorway, tired to his bones from a day spent on the Field and reeking himself of horses and sweat, Varden had listened to their endearments and their moans and sighs of increasing passion.

Then they saw him and the sounds of pleasure had turned to thick silence. Though Godfrey had jumped up to cover himself with a castoff pillow, Claire had been far less shy. She had laughed her beautiful laugh, trailed her hands down her trim belly and arched in feline pleasure as she stroked

between her glistening thighs. "Join us, my beloved."

The endearment was a mockery coming from her lips. To cut his heart from his chest would have been kinder. The cruelty had served its purpose, however. Varden found that he could move again. Backing from the room, he simply closed the door. Her laughter had followed him all the way to the library where he locked himself inside. And when he'd finally consumed enough alcohol to convince himself that he no longer cared, Varden had systematically destroyed every article of furniture in the room and cried until he passed out.

Now there was a bastard sleeping in the nursery down the hall. The temptation to denounce his 'heir' was powerful. But even as he considered it, Varden discarded the option as impossible. He had seen how society treated its castoff children. He would not punish an innocent--not even one of Godfrey's--for Claire's wrongdoings. More importantly, he refused to shame himself or his family name by making her adulteries a public playground for London's frolicking gossips.

As another desperate sob came from the adjoined bedchamber, Varden raised the glass again. In a moment of cutting pleasure, like a double-edged sword, he saluted her. "May your demons be the Devil's own acolytes, my dear. May they prick you all the way to Perdition."

In this, at least, they would be together.

Varden consumed his bitter toast, the whiskey burning his throat and igniting his stomach with alcohol-induced fire, bringing neither happiness nor the blessed blackness of oblivion. He still remembered, and that was the worst cruelty of all.

As Claire moaned and sobbed, the sounds tugged at his heart, fool that he was.

Stalking back to the liqueur cabinet, Varden had every intention of hunting the shelves for more whiskey but found he was lighting a candle instead. Before he quite realized what he was doing, he was

at her bedroom door with his hand on the latch. He was a fool all right. And of the worst sort because he could not make himself stop. The latch seemed to lift of its own accord, and Varden was inside Claire's room in a matter of two quick steps.

It never ceased to amaze him how so cold and bitter a woman could create so soft, so warm a room. Tapestries and throw rugs created a comfortable blend of colors and enlivened the cavern-like chamber of stone. Pretty baubles lined the tables. He remembered giving her some of them, back when he had cared enough to try to please her and before he realized that was impossible. He had no idea from whom she had received the rest.

By the fire, oblivious to her mistress's distress, Grete slept on undisturbed. One of Abigail's gowns in a heap upon her lap. He scowled at the woman's callousness, though a part of him understood it. Claire was difficult to work for under the best of circumstances and impossible at all other times. It was somewhat surprising that Grete hadn't sought employment elsewhere by now.

He left her sleeping by the fire and turned back to his wife. His boots made only the slightest scuffing sound as he picked through the rushes and made his way to the foot of her bed. Darkness completely dominated the burgundy canopy and shadow spilled down curtain grooves, dripping like black molasses onto the tousled bedclothes and pooling around the solid box base.

A cloying, sickeningly coppery smell wafted from the sheets. Varden wrinkled his nose and would have stepped back if she hadn't groaned just then. Drawn to her misery like a moth to torchlight, Varden went to her.

"No, please." She tossed her head restlessly against the mattress, her flailing arms knocking a pillow from the bed. Her legs thrashed weakly, confined by sheets that twisted like tentacles around her. Fever flushed her cheeks but left the

rest of her skin pale and clammy to the touch. Long auburn locks clung in sweat-dampened ringlets to her face and neck. Here and there between the hem of her nightgown and the twining sheets, her shadowy flesh played a mocking game of peek-a-boo with the flickering candlelight.

Without thinking, Varden reached down to brush her hair back from her beautiful face. He caught himself just before he actually touched her cheek. Abigail was right. He was an idiot.

A good and considerate idiot, who had checked on his wife the way dutiful husbands were expected to. He could now spend the rest of the night drinking with a clear conscience.

As he turned to go, Varden was momentarily distracted. The shadows flowed in odd patterns on the sheets around her legs. He raised the candle higher.

Blood. A lot of blood.

Leaving the candle on the bedside table, Varden was across the room in an instant. He grabbed the back of Grete's chair and tumbled the waiting woman onto the floor. "Get up!"

Grete sat up, a look of stupefaction on her face. "Y-Your Grace? W-wh-what--"

She shrieked and covered her head with her arms as Varden grabbed the scruff of her dour gray gown and, while she scrambled to gain her feet, dragged her back to the bed.

"You dare care for your mistress this way?" He shoved her face down into the worst of it and held her there. "Abigail is not master of this house, despite what she may think! Clean this up!"

The moment Varden released her, Grete struggled to her feet. Ducking into the barest of curtsies, she scrubbed at her face even as she fled the room.

With the lady's companion gone, Varden bent to touch the sheets. Most of the blood truly was as dry as it appeared. Only a small portion was still damp

enough to be considered fresh and most of that had soaked into Claire's nightgown.

Small wonder nightmares plagued her so.

She moaned and managed to roll onto her back. When she turned her face to him, the soft candlelight bathed her features. She was crying, twin tear tracks streaking her face. Varden gently touched the backs of his fingers to one flushed cheek. She was feverish, but it wasn't very high.

He should leave, just walk away and let her suffer whatever demons tortured her dreams. She more than deserved it. But then she sobbed and arched her back, her arms flailing as if struggling to push something away.

"I don't want to die!" she sobbed as the tears rolled down her cheeks, mingling with the sweat that glistened on her feverish skin. "Please, help me! Help me!"

Every instinct demanded that he fold her into the safety of his arms and kiss her tears away.

Varden caught her shoulder and shook her roughly instead. There was no response. In fact, there was hardly a twitch from her at all. He shook her again, harder. "Claire!"

Her entire body convulsed. Her bright green eyes snapped open and she gasped, flinging out her arms and grabbing hold of the mattress as though to stop herself from falling. She stared first up at the canopy curtains above her, then turned her head to look at the deer tapestry on the wall.

"You were dreaming," Varden grimly offered, and this time she turned her head to look at him. She stared as if she didn't know him. He narrowed his eyes. Shaking her shoulder again, he asked, "Are you awake?"

She smiled, and in a small, fragile voice said, "You're the surfer. What's your name?"

Now it was his turn to stare. There was no spark of recognition for him in her gaze. There was no hatred or thinly veiled malice. No disgust. Not even that mocking glint that usually lurked in the lovely

green depths of her eyes just before she cut his soul to shreds with words as sharp as the barbs he notched in his crossbow.

Varden shook his head once at his own boundless stupidity and turned to go. He didn't need this, not when he had a full cabinet of liqueur waiting for him in the next room. "I am not in the mood for games."

"Please don't go." She caught his hand, but her grip was weak and her fingers felt hot enough to burn his skin. "I don't want to be alone."

Varden rounded on her like a wounded bear. "Madame, I don't give a damn what you want!"

He jerked his arm free and her hands fell limp to the mattress. But his fury was short-lived. He had never seen Claire look so helpless. Her face was ashen, the only spots of color being the fever against her pasty cheeks, and she shook with pain. Her normally bright and crafty gaze was dull. She seemed disoriented and far too fragile, sunk into the goose-down bedding that dominated rather than cradled her.

"Do you have any aspirin?" she asked.

"What?"

"I've never felt pain like this before," she whispered. A choked sob caught in her throat and her voice broke. "I hurt so much."

Though her words were not meant to wound, they pierced him just the same and Varden found himself staring at her, once again at a loss. The Claire that he knew would have cut out her own tongue before ever begging anything from him. Varden hesitated. He hardly knew what to say. Almost against his will, his hand reached down to brush a damp, curling lock of auburn back from her face. "I know."

He hurt, too.

Amazingly, she turned her cheek into his palm. "Stay with me."

Stay? Were he not so astounded, he might have laughed. He could not remember the last time Claire

had wanted anything of him. He was a brute, as she was so fond of reminding him. Bullish and vulgar. English, in other words, despite their mutual French ancestry. Yet here she was, cradling her cheek in his open palm when she ought to be jerking away and shuddering delicately the way she had taken to doing whenever he neared her.

"Stay?" Varden took back his hand.

"If you want to." Her words slurred together and her eyes were barely open, focused somewhere beyond his shoulder. "Maybe they won't take me if you're here."

Now he did laugh, an abrupt and bitter sound. "Take you? Madame, your fever has made you delirious. Who on God's good earth would want you?"

Though Varden had meant the words to wound, she only smiled. A small smile, admittedly. One that was laced with exhaustion and pain and only the tiniest hint of good humor.

"Fever," she mumbled. "Well, no worse than blaming the pepperoni, I suppose."

"Pepperoni?" He began to wonder if perhaps he shouldn't call the doctor.

Varden almost touched her again, but stopped himself. With a pang of dismay, he realized he was actually beginning to feel sympathy for her. Fool! Fool! Fool! He was doing it all over again! Falling for her lies and games with blind enthusiasm. He turned back to his own room, ready now to drink himself into a stupor he would not recover from for years. And maybe, somewhere between the whiskey and the wine, this time he would be able to forget that he had ever loved her at all.

She groaned as he stalked away. "Please stay with me. Just for a little while. I didn't mean to make you angry."

Again Varden stopped, drawn as taut as a bowstring, notched and ready to snap. He glared at her bedroom door, feeling as if she burned holes in

his back with those dazed and pain-filled, beautiful green eyes of hers.

What was she trying to do? How dare she smile at him now, after all these years of coldness and malcontent. He wanted to slap her, to make her feel as he did--wounded and betrayed. Instead, he returned to her bedside. Varden took a deep breath and held it, slowly lowering himself to perch at the edge of her bed. He refused to look at her. The last thing he wanted was to let her manipulate him into feeling more than just this fleeting sense of sympathy.

Folding his hands between his knees, his mouth a hard line, he braced himself to hate every second that he was beside her. And it worked, too. Right up until she lay her hand over his and Varden's gut reacted as strongly as the first day he had seen her.

"Did you see the baby?" she asked.

Varden scowled at the tiny white fingers holding his much larger ones. He was losing his fury even as he fought to hang onto it. And it did not help that she touched him. Of her own volition, she touched him! When was the last time she had done that? He couldn't remember. His jaw clenched and clenched again as he tried to swallow past the sudden knot in his throat.

"I saw him," Varden finally admitted.

"Isn't he wonderful?"

But for the fact that he belonged to another man. . .

Varden could not tell which of them was shaking harder: he, from the fury of his hurricane emotions, or she, trapped in the weakness of childbirth and fever.

It bothered him too much to stay. He needed to get distance between them. He tried to pull his hand from hers, but she would not let him go and, rather than make an issue of it, Varden relented. He glared at the door instead. Grete had five seconds to come scuttling back in here or, by God, he would hunt her down and thrash her to within an inch of her life!

Wincing as she shifted, Claire lightly touched his back with her other hand. Varden stiffened, Grete abruptly forgotten.

"Blonde," she murmured as she touched his hair.

Varden half-turned around, scowling down at her with his hard and narrowed eyes. "What do you want, Madame?"

"To start over." Claire took a deep breath and seemed to collect herself. "He's so beautiful. The baby, I mean. This is almost like a dream come true."

For him, it was a nightmare that had lasted for far too many years.

"It's one of the things I wanted to do before I died. I think I'll make a good mother."

Spoken so softly, so innocently, Varden was unprepared for the image her words conjured. Wounds he'd thought long since scarred over were torn open anew. What about that night seven months ago, he wanted to shout, when he had stormed the midwife's cottage barely in time to stop her from aborting a baby that might have been his. He had been forced to lock her in this very room to keep her from finding other ways to kill the baby or herself.

Unbidden, another image arose, even stronger than the last. A tiny face so much like his own when Varden was a child: Caleb, his first-born son. The four-year-old had been a laughing, fearless bundle of energy and the only thing that helped to make life with Claire bearable.

Turning away so she would not see his hurt, Varden ran his free hand through his tangled hair. Not a day went by that he did not grieve. At times, it felt as though a part of him were entombed alongside Caleb in the Lyssoue family vault. Claire, on the other hand, had never expressed any mourning over the loss of their son.

Now she wanted to be a good mother?

Varden lost control. He caught Claire's chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his eyes. He knew he hurt her, his fingers digging into her jaw, but he could not stop himself. The urge to rail and shake her was almost unbearable. It was all he could do to keep from striking her, to wake her from the lethargy that addled her mind, and make her feel the same pain that had consumed him.

"I didn't think it possibly to hate you more than I already did," Varden seethed. "I don't know what you hope to gain by this. But you are mad if you think I will play along."

She cupped his face in a far gentler imitation of his hold on her. "Do you believe in miracles?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you believe in miracles?" she repeated. "Or God? Or life after death?"

He let go of her chin to knock her hand away. "No."

"Do you believe in souls?"

"Why?" he asked dryly. "Do you regret the loss of yours?"

She reached for his arm. "Please give me your hand."

Reluctantly, Varden complied. Claire turned his hand sideways and then shook it, as though she were a complete stranger greeting him for the very first time.

"Hello. My name is Mallory Connally. I was killed in a car accident in the year two thousand and one. I didn't want to die. Your Claire and I sort of swapped places. It doesn't take a genius to realize that there's problems here, but I'm hoping that we can work through them, for the baby's sake." She managed a small smile. "Pleased to meet you."

Incredibility warred with bitter laughter inside him. Varden studied her face for signs of cruel amusement. He found none. Disbelief won as he realized that she was actually being serious.

"You still haven't told me who you are," Claire prompted.

Varden spotted the bottle of laudanum on the bedside table. He picked it up. "How much of this did they give you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he shook it near his ear to gauge how much of the bitter medicine remained inside.

"Is that the aspirin?" Her body rocked as Claire coughed. She clutched her stomach and groaned, seeming to crumple inward. Tears collected at her lashes to spill unhindered down her pale cheeks. She focused her eyes on the bottle. "None, but I wish they had."

Laudanum in hand, Varden stormed from the room. He sent the door crashing against the wall as he bellowed down the hall for Doctor Robert Wilcox. He did not care that it was past midnight or that he woke the entire house with his shouting. Dimly he heard a servant acknowledge him, but Varden had already turned back in the doorway to stare at Claire once again. The huge canopy bed all but swallowed her in its shadowy folds. He wished he had not drunk so much. His mind felt too tangled to think.

Servants wandered into the hall, most dressed for bed. Abigail was next to arrive, still pulling her robe over her nightgown as she hurried to his side. Her gray hair hung over one shoulder in a single, long braid that bounced back and forth between her small bony breasts. "What is it, Varden--Oh, your breath! You are already drunk!"

Ignoring her, Varden held up the bottle of laudanum. "How much of this did Wilcox give her?"

"Claire?" Taken aback, Abigail pulled her wrap more firmly round her shoulders. "Why? Is she dead? Has my dream been fulfilled already?"

Varden grabbed her arm. "How much?"

"How dare you? Let go of my arm!" Abigail drew herself upright, her mouth drawing tight with disapproval. "You forget yourself!"

"How much!" Varden bellowed and shook her once, but it was enough to shock her into silence.

"None of it," she finally answered. "He gave her not a drop, and let her suffer, I say. It would serve the harlot right--"

Varden turned his back on his stepmother to find Claire watching him from the bed.

"Varden," she whispered. "Good, sturdy name. It suits you. Now we just need to find one for the baby."

For an instant, the world fell away. Varden barely heard the servants whispering in the background, or Abigail, more put out than worried, asking again what was wrong. He didn't even notice as Doctor Wilcox came huffing down the hall, his clothes disheveled, his lined face reflecting a lack of sleep and too much wine.

His wife beckoned and patted the mattress next to her. "Shut the door, Varden. We really should talk."

"Well?" Abigail folded her arms across her small chest. "Explain yourself. She obviously has not died, more's the pity."

The bottle of laudanum slipped from Varden's fingers and fell to the floor. It rolled a few inches in a tottering half-circle before coming to rest at the heel of his black boot.

"Claire has lost her senses," Varden said woodenly, hardly believing the words even as they fell from his mouth. "She has gone mad."

Chapter Four

Varden was just shrugging into his practice armor--a well-padded patchwork of heavy leather and canvas--when Godfrey rode onto the Field. His brother glanced around the camp once before his gaze settled on Varden. He smiled and dismounted. Varden swore under his breath.

From behind him, also strapping on his armor, Kenton said, "There is a foul wind coming from the south this morning, Your Grace."

Varden smiled only slightly. "I see him."

"We could set the new recruits on him. We'll say it was target practice and the lads simply mistook the target."

"Don't tempt me," Varden said, but his smile widened marginally as he considered the small group of boys waiting with a mixture of excitement and trepidation not far away. Not a one of them was more than fourteen. In fact, Gilette de Moya, whose grandfather had been a good friend of Varden's father, was only eleven. He stood anxiously in front of the others, wiping his red, running nose on the sleeve of his tunic. Definitely younger than Varden preferred, but he had been reluctant to refuse the request of such an old family friend.

"Accidents happen," Kenton said softly. "I'm sure thirteen boys can take down a bumbling idiot like your brother."

Varden felt no such confidence. Even outnumbering Godfrey, not a boy among them could walk across the Field without tripping over his own feet at least once. Few could wield their practice swords without the risk of lopping off something vital, which was why Doctor Robert Wilcox virtually lived on the Field when new recruits first arrived.

As if reading his mind, Kenton snorted. "You know as well as I that your brother would not stand to fight them."

"No," Varden agreed. "He would run home to Mother, crying of my injustice, and then who would

face the sharp edge of Abigail's tongue? Me. Not bloody likely."

"Well, then," Kenton said, strapping his own sword around his narrow hips. "Ignore him. Mayhap he'll go away."

But Godfrey had no intention of going away. As Varden prepared to instruct the boys on the short blades that Kenton was now passing out among them, he became acutely aware of his brother approaching from behind. Varden kept his gaze straight ahead and fixed on Kenton, who watched Godfrey's approach with an unwavering black stare.

"Good morning, lads," Varden began. "Welcome to the Field. Before we begin, I want to thank those of you who were here on time. Those who were not--James, Meredith--I don't suggest you repeat your tardiness tomorrow."

Though he did not turn around or even pause in his opening speech to the attentive students, the hair along his nape prickled. A cold bead of sweat trickled down his spine. He itched to draw his sword and even imagined he could feel Godfrey's eyes burrowing into his back. He heard his brother's footsteps coming closer, crunching through the crisp autumn leaves that littered the ground around them, and it took every effort for Varden not to turn with fists swinging and knock Godfrey flat on his back. It would be a mistake, but among the most pleasurable of ones that he had made to date.

"Gillette," Varden admonished sharply when the boy turned his attention from Varden to Godfrey. "Your father has paid a lot of money to send you here. I expect you to pay attention."

Gillette came stiffly to attention, his face flushing with the embarrassment of having been singled out. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Kenton gave each of you a sword; pick it up." Varden held his own sword, aloft. "This is not your weapon; it is your new best friend. You will keep it sharp. You will keep it polished. You will never, ever be without it. From this day on, your sword will be

an extension of your arm. You will know every inch of this blade, and it shall become more familiar to you than any woman ever will be."

"Careful, lads," Godfrey drawled as he came around Varden's left side. "He may even ask you to sleep with it."

Hands clasped behind his back, Varden shrugged with his eyebrows. "As a matter of fact--"

"Know a cold steel blade better than a warm and willing wench? Whatever are you trying to teach them?"

"Skills that will hopefully keep them alive."

Noticing Kenton standing among the boys, Godfrey stopped where he was. "Brother, are you aware your servant has taken up arms?"

"He had an aptitude for it," Varden said. "Seemed a shame to waste the talent. Besides, these are dangerous times."

"More so than you know," Godfrey said, circling Varden with slow and measured steps, the epitome of casual disinterest.

Varden turned as well, keeping him fully within his sight. "I sincerely hope you are referring to poor news from court."

"Nothing that affects you directly, of course. Her Royal Majesty has always regarded you as her golden-haired favorite, as you well know. Indirectly, however, the rumor mills have laid bets on whether or not the savage Scots raze Cadhla to the ground should the Queen, in her vast wisdom, decide her Scots cousin deserves not to keep her head firmly attached to her shoulders. I would hate to hear that something has happened to you, so far out in the country." Godfrey smiled a smile of crafted sincerity, which never reached as far as his cool Lyssoue blue eyes. "Where no one could reach you in time to help."

Again, Varden itched to draw his sword. He spread his arms instead, gesturing to the surrounding camp. "I have all the help I need, a bare stone's throw from my front stoop."

Godfrey looked at the small group of untrained boys watching the exchange with wide and curious eyes, and laughed. "A pity you haven't more experienced soldiers."

Varden calmly said, "That would be a mistake for the Scots to assume."

They glared at one another, the silence stretching on, broken only by intermittent bird calls and the gentle whisper of the wind rustling through the crimson and amber leaved trees and the long fall grass.

Finally, Godfrey took a deep breath. "We used to spar here as children. Right beneath that old oak, unless I am mistaken."

"I remember knocking you down a lot," Varden said flatly.

"And I remember the canings you got every time you did." His brother smiled again. "Those bloodied noses were well worth it."

"I've grown too big to cane these days."

"I dare say you'll have a harder time knocking me down as well. I've been practicing."

Varden growled, "Then you might almost be a challenge for me."

Godfrey smirked, "I'll try to keep you entertained."

As the two men headed for the giant oak a short distance away, its sprawling branches laden with fall leaves, Kenton separated himself from the children and rushed to catch up with Varden. "What are you doing?"

"I am going to silence a braying jackass."

"He has already tuppé her," Kenton hissed. "The babe has been born. This proves nothing."

"It will make me feel a damn sight better," Varden snarled, his hand already on his sword hilt.

"Godfrey will not stop at merely bloodying your nose. He will slide that blade between your ribs and be moved into your bedchambers by supper."

If anything, Varden's long-legged stride lengthened. He almost seemed to smile. "So be it."

Kenton stopped just shy of the tree. He stood, grim-faced, his black eyes flashing as the two men found their positions. Finally, he swung back to the boys, still standing where they had been left, and clapped his hands to bring them forward. "Gather around, lads," he called as he turned back to glare at Varden. "Watch the masters at work."

From the look on Kenton's face, Varden knew the temptation to say "idiots" must have been overwhelming. But then Godfrey drew his sword and Varden's attention was instantly redirected.

"I've been looking forward to this moment for a long, long time," Godfrey said, raising his blade.

"I'll try not to disappoint you." Varden swung first. There were no timid swings or cautiously measured strokes. The Field rang with the crisp, metallic echo of steel on steel as, fury unleashed, Varden attacked again and again without pause or hesitation. The sheer force of his anger knocked Godfrey relentlessly back blow after blow until he lost his balance and fell. Varden pinned him there on the ground, the tip of his sword to Godfrey's throat.

"This, brother," Varden growled, "is what I have been looking forward to."

"Do it," Godfrey hissed back. "It changes nothing."

It was the hardest temptation he had ever resisted. He kicked Godfrey's sword away and stepped back slowly to allow his brother a gradual return to his feet.

Godfrey ungraciously accepted the reprieve with a smirk of derision. "You should have finished it."

"Keep practicing," Varden finally said, and turned and walked back to Kenton and the boys. He could feel Godfrey's hatred burning into his back. When he had put a safe enough distance between them, he re-sheathed his sword.

"And that," Kenton explained to the children as Varden stalked passed them, "is a sample of the skill we will teach each of you, if you are diligent in

your studies and practice daily. Suitably impressed, are you?"

As they nodded in wide-eyed awe, he muttered, "So am I."

"A book, a book," Mallory said, deadpan. "My kingdom for a book."

"Why?" Grete asked. Though she never looked up from her sewing, her tone plainly said she could not have cared any less that Mallory was bored. "You would not read it even if you had one."

Slightly annoyed, Mallory asked, "How do you know what I'd do?"

Propped against her goose-down pillows, her fresh white nightgown a stark contrast against the dark blue quilt, Mallory stared at the canopy that stretched across the top of her bed and flowed gracefully down to become curtains all around. For now, the curtains were tied open to let her see into the sun-lit room. She had counted every wrinkle and groove in the curtains. She had studied every knick-knack and painting she could see. She had even counted the blocks in the walls and in the ceiling; there were seventeen hundred forty-nine of them, not including the floor, which she could only see in segments through the rushes.

"Would you like something to embroider?" Grete asked.

"Not unless you want to rip it all out again. I can't sew."

"You should be birched for lying. And by the way, such a tale would be easier believed had you not been sewing alongside me these past six months. And I am not going to finish stitching the border on that linen set for your mother either. When you make it up in your mind to be sane again, they shall be waiting for you in exactly the same condition that you left them."

"We've been stuck in this room for six months?"

"Six months, one week, and five days," Grete said without enthusiasm. "With guards posted at the doors."

"No wonder you can't stand me." Though Mallory could only see Grete from the side, she thought the older woman smiled. "Am I a prisoner or under extreme protection?"

If Grete had smiled before, all trace of it was gone when she lowered her sewing to fix Mallory with a very cold stare. "You tried to murder your unborn son. When His Grace prevented it, you then tried to kill yourself. Nearly hurled your self from the balcony. He barely caught you in time, as I heard it."

Mallory deflated a little. "Why would Claire do that?"

"You," Grete emphasized, "attempted suicide because the consequences of your affairs had finally caught up with you. You may not have liked being faithful, but you hated being caged even more."

"Oh. How many affairs have I had?"

"You would know that better than I." Grete tied off the string, then snipped it and re-threaded the needle.

"Don't you ever get tired of doing that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I hate sewing. I could cheerfully live in a house without a single stitch of embroidery in it. But I don't. Most of the time, I live here in this room with you."

Mallory shrugged. "So don't do it anymore."

"The Dowager wants the lacing completely replaced. She has given me a fortnight to finish it for her."

"Oh." Mallory studied the canopy a moment before asking, "If you're my maid, why do you work for the Dowager?"

Offended, Grete lowered her sewing a second time. She glared at Mallory from across the room. "I am a lady's companion, not a maid, as you very well know. And it doesn't matter who I was hired to

keep company with; what the Dowager wants, she gets, or I don't remain employed."

"Oh," Mallory said again. She twiddled her thumbs, and then sighed. "If you'll just tell me where the books are, I can get one for myself."

"Ha! You can't get yourself to the chamber pot without my help."

Mallory grimaced, but there was no denying that. Two days of child labor had taken its toll on her body. She exhausted easily and even still hurt at times. Mostly whenever she moved. And everyone seemed determined to keep her permanently bedridden because of it.

She rubbed her chest gingerly. Her milk had come in and she was very tender. "I feel better today than I did yesterday."

"How thrilled I am to hear that, Your Grace," Grete said, sounding anything but.

"You said I could see the baby when I felt better. How about today?"

Grete bent back over her sewing and said nothing; an answer in, and of itself.

In frustration, Mallory threw a pillow at her, though it fell a good ten feet short of hitting Grete's chair. "Why won't anyone let me see him? It's not like I'm contagious. I haven't got the plague!"

Grete gave her a sudden, sharp look of reproach. "The plague is not something to make light of."

"If I don't do something soon, I am going to lose my milk!"

"His Grace has already hired a wet-nurse. A capable woman, so I have been told. Her infant is too old now to suck, so the babe will have her most attentive care."

"He doesn't need her attention! He needs mine! I can't believe this. I can't see the baby, I can't get out of bed, and I can't even read a book." Mallory stared up at the canopy curtains overhead. Then she took a deep breath and began to sing at the top

of her lungs, "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall. Ninety-nine bottles of beer--"

"Don't start that again!" Grete clapped her hands over her ears. "You've sung every chorus to that song twice already!"

"All right," Mallory said calmly. "We'll compromise. You bring me a book, and I won't sing anymore."

"Oh! If any woman deserved a birching, it's you!" Grete stood. She threw her sewing on the chair and started toward the door. "I am going to check on the status of our supper."

Mallory called after her. "Bring me a hamburger, French fries, and a strawberry milkshake!" She finished her order in a rush before Grete closed the heavy bedroom door. She was willing to bet, two-to-one, that she got greasy chicken broth and a hunk of the stalest black bread Grete could find in the kitchen.

Again.

This was ridiculous. How often did a girl wake up after dying to find herself centuries back in time? And in a castle no less! How could they expect her to just lie here? Mallory wanted to explore her new home. She wanted something exciting to happen. She wanted to get out of this miserable bed! All of which proved easier thought about than accomplished, for when Mallory pushed her blankets aside and slid her legs over the edge of the mattress, the pain upon sitting up nearly left her sobbing. She groaned, holding her midriff with one hand even as she reached out to grasp a sturdy bedpost. By the time she climbed to her feet, sweat and tears streaked her face.

Gradually the sharp pain faded into a dull pulsing ache. Mallory straightened slowly. She let go of the bedpost and smoothed her rumpled nightgown over her trembling legs. This wasn't so bad. She hardly felt any discomfort now. She just needed to move around, that was all.

Mallory took two faltering steps and swayed as a sharp dizziness spun the room. She reached for the next bedpost just as her eyes rolled back in her head and she folded unconscious to the floor.

Grete had her back in bed before Varden arrived at midday. For an old woman, the lady's companion had a wiry strength to her. She was also a tattletale, relating in exaggerated detail Mallory's first foray out of bed. "Her Grace apparently thinks herself well enough to run around the room."

"I was hardly running." Mallory muttered. Enduring Varden's icy stare wasn't easy. He wore his displeasure like he wore the stiff leather of his practice armor: hard and dark, it surrounded him completely. And Grete wasn't helping matters, either.

"In fact," the lady's companion stated. "It's a fight to keep her quietly in bed."

Fresh from the Training Field, he stood at the foot of Mallory's bed with one hand on the pommel of his sword and the other braced against his hip. He smelled of dust, sweat, and the sunny outdoors. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled past his elbows and his muscular forearms were lightly sunburnt. Mallory could practically feel the sun's absorbed warmth emanating from his skin and clothes. It was hard not to reach out and touch him. Though judging by the way he glared, he might well have slapped her hand if she tried.

"How can she expect to heal when she will not lie quietly?" Grete continued. "Imagine! She demands a bath brought every night!"

"Four words," Mallory said, holding up as many fingers. She counted them off. "Your deodorant doesn't work."

"Ties a wonder she has not caught pneumonia and died already!"

"I'm healthy as a horse," Mallory protested.

"A horse as healthy as you would be put down for its own sake." Grete turned to Varden, spreading her arms as if to say 'See what I have to put up

with?' "Your Grace, she is disagreeable simply for the sake of being so. She asks for the baby constantly. She--"

"I have heard enough," Varden interrupted. He sent Grete away with a single dark glare, and then fixed it on Mallory. "You will remain in bed until I permit you otherwise. Is that clear?"

Now it was Mallory's turn to glare. "If you hated your wife so much, why didn't you divorce her?"

All traces of anger fell from his face. Before her eyes, he seemed to harden even more. She hadn't thought that possible.

"Is that what you want?" he asked. "A divorce?"

"Why not? You don't love me. You don't even like me." Mallory held up two fingers a half-inch apart. "I seem to be this far away from becoming your mortal enemy."

"It is not required that we like each other. What is required is for my name to remain unsullied and pure. I train soldiers for Her Royal Majesty's army. That is how Cadhla keeps its coffers in good health. Families send me their sons. I take these young men who would otherwise be farmers and merchants and I turn them into warriors. Her Royal Majesty then sends them to guard our ships against pirates and our borders against invaders. The Scots are not so much a problem now as the Spaniards, and I have been requested to train as many soldiers as possible as fast as possible. Those farmers and merchants that survive--and if they demonstrate exemplary service to the crown--stand a good chance of coming home to knighthoods, monies or lands, things they would not otherwise gain if they labored for a lifetime. There is a waiting list with the names of over four hundred hopefuls, all of whom would give everything they own to be on my Field at the start of next quarter's training. Half of society has sent their youngest sons to me. Do you really think I'd let you ruin that with the kind of scandal a divorce would cause?"

His voice was soft, almost gentle. It never once rose above normal tones but, though Mallory did not know Varden well, his very stance betrayed his anger. She had been mouse enough in the past to know that this man was accustomed to being a lion, an uncontested king.

"So we quietly hate each other until one of us dies and the other is free." Mallory shook her head. "What a sad way to live. No wonder Claire tried to kill herself."

"You surprised me before," he said softly. "Claiming to be a woman from the future is rather an intriguing new play for you. And I admit, this strange accent you have adopted did give me pause to believe you. However, once I had time to think with a sober mind, it occurred to me just how much you have to gain by this lunatic farce. Pitiful, isn't it? To be in a situation where insanity can actually improve matters for you."

"This is my second-chance life, Varden," Mallory said. "I only want to live. Nobody lives when they're being treated like a doormat and constantly trampled under foot. Frankly, I'm surprised that you haven't sent me packing already."

Varden leaned even closer, as friendly as a smoking volcano, and just as volatile. "I will never let you leave, mon âme. You can suffer in this marriage and be damned right alongside me."

"The more I get to know you, the more I realize how wrong we are for each other. I like lovable, huggable men, and you're about as lovable and as huggable as a cactus." Glaring, Mallory pressed her hand against his chest and pushed him a few inches back.

He hissed a long, angry breath between tightly clenched teeth and in the next instant, Mallory found her self abruptly flipped onto her stomach. She gasped, more with shock than pain as he yanked the skirts of her nightgown up over her back. Frozen in horrified disbelief, Mallory stared at

the lion tapestry as the first brush of cool air kissed the swells of her bottom.

"I know all about the loveable, huggable men you like," Varden growled. With one broad and callused hand pressing her shoulders into the mattress, he raised the other high above her. "I'll be damned if I let you rub your indiscretions in my face!"

"No, wait!" Mallory tried to roll over, but her protest was abruptly cut short when she felt the first hard crack of his palm flattened her right buttock. She shrieked, the sharp pain chewing into her flanks as he immediately struck the left side equally hard.

As abruptly as it had begun, her spanking was over and Mallory found herself flipped back over onto her back. She grabbed her bottom, rubbing fiercely. She had a whole new respect for Varden's hard hands, and a helluva lot more sympathy for what that poor girl on the Crossroads had suffered through. How a mere hand could hurt so much was beyond her understanding! It couldn't possibly have hurt more if he'd used a paddle!

Too stunned to speak, she rubbed her smarting bottom and eyed Varden warily as he leaned back over her, bracing his hand on the pillow next to her head. He was close enough now for her to feel the heat of him, even through his armor. Close enough even to kiss, though at the moment that was the last thing she wanted to try.

"I suggest you curb your saucy tongue, or I will curb it for you," he told her, his tone ominously soft.

Mallory quickly nodded, still trying to rub away the hurt from those two--merely two!--bare handed swats.

"Be grateful for your illness, Madame, or I would give you the full measure of what you deserve!" He shoved away from her and stalked from the room. He slammed the door hard enough to rattle the bric-a-brac throughout the room.

Mallory rolled immediately onto her side, yanking her nightgown up as she craned her neck to see the extent of the damage done her. The bright red print of his fingers and palm were rapidly darkening against her skin. She felt sorry for whoever was unfortunate enough to run across Varden next. The poor soul was bound to catch the brunt of an impressive amount of misplaced anger.

Disturbed, afraid that she was now stuck in the Middle Ages with a vicious, wife-beating brute, she lay back against her pillows. So far, this second-chance life hadn't turned out the way she'd envisioned it. She still didn't have any good friends. She had a child, but no contact with him. And as for love, well. . .She sighed again. A lifetime of spousal abuse was a horrible thing to contemplate.

"You would do best not to displease him," Grete said. Sometime during the argument, she had retired to her chair by the fire and was now picking out the stitches that attached the old lace to the Dowager's gown. She was smiling. "He is your staunchest defender, you know. It is only on his continued good graces that you remain at Cadhla at all."

Immensely embarrassed that Grete would have been witness to her spanking, Mallory snapped peevishly, "Somehow I doubt you'd lose much sleep if Varden did throw me out."

"No." Grete's smile broadened, showing her teeth. "I cast my lot with the Dowager to have you banished several months ago."

"The love in this room is overwhelming." Mallory pulled the blankets up over her head and rolled onto her side, away from Grete. Folding her arms across her chest, she pouted.

Varden stormed into the near empty dining hall, his face as dark as the shadow-covered walls. One look from him sent the servants, still clearing away the noonday meal, scrambling to get out of his way.

He flung himself in a chair at the head of the table where Kenton was standing, grabbed a carving knife and vindictively stabbed a well-done boar haunch a half dozen times. The mutilation gave him no pleasure and he threw down the knife in disgust.

"Let me guess," Kenton said as he poured a little wine into a fresh cup and placed it in front of Varden. "Marital spat?"

"It is an act," Varden growled. "It has to be. God does not hold me in such high favor. He would not strike her mad. Me, yes; her, never."

His ice blue glare swept the chamber. There were no tapestries to cover the naked stone walls. There were no flowers or vases, no senseless trinkets of art, no knick-knacks anywhere in sight. The only portrait was a ten-foot painting of his father, which hung high on the wall behind Varden's chair for all to see. Particularly Abigail, whom it seemed to nettle to no end. In all, the dining hall was neat and clean and sobering, with no signs of Claire anywhere within. Exactly as Varden preferred it.

Pouring himself a glass, Kenton sat down next to Varden. Varden glared but the reprimand was completely lost on the somber valet. "Were I you, I would leave God to the clergy and let the affairs of the brain, working or not, worry themselves out. There is little you can do at this juncture, anyway."

"I could have her locked away in a nice, dark cell in a nice, dark sanitarium where I need never see her again unless it pleased me to do so."

"You would not do that."

"Varlet," Varden said, but his tone had lost its malice. "Leave me at least one pleasant fantasy."

"The cold touch of reality is always preferable to pointless fantasy." Stretching his long legs and crossing them, Kenton braced an elbow on the table while he studied his wine. "Unfortunately, your reality is that to imprison her would be to invite speculation. Equally unfortunate is the fact that speculation breeds rumor and gossip. Let one bone

out of the closet and you might not be able to keep the skeleton from tumbling after. You would do as well to stand on a mountain top and proclaim to the world that the Duchess of Cadhla is a few figs shy of a fritter."

Varden rubbed his face with both hands.

In his calm and stoic manner, Kenton said, "Though I know you have been trying your best not to, think a moment about the babe. If you decide not to declare him illegitimate, then he will grow to be your heir. How will people regard him if it ever became public knowledge that his mother went insane at some point after his birth? Society will forever shun him, wondering when heredity's lightning will strike again. He would be mocked, not respected. That is a difficult position for any noble to command authority. You might as well give everything to Godfrey. Let that arrogant pup run it all to rot and ruin, and get it over with right now."

Varden only grunted. Those were the least of his reasons. Despite everything she had done, it would be far easier to sever his own arm and lock it away. Certainly, it would be a lot less painful.

Sighing, he looked at his hand. He had spanked her as hard as he dared--considering her current state of poor health--but although his palm did tingle a little, it had left no mark on his calloused skin. He didn't regret what he had done. In fact, he realized with a wry twist of his mouth, he probably should have paddled her backside a long time ago. Doing so might have prevented much of the hell he was suffering through now.

Varden shook his head. "Protect your heart, my friend. Love is a curse I would not wish on anyone. Not even the bloody Scots."

Mallory awoke the next morning to a bellow of commands from both in and outside the castle. Though Varden was hard on her, he was even harder on his men. They seemed to respect him for

it. At the very least, no one complained. And surprisingly enough, it was her that everyone seemed to fear anyway.

Every morning the chambermaid took great pains to sneak into Mallory's room without attracting any attention, fetch the chamber pot, and then sneak back out again. The first morning, Mallory had only asked her name and the poor girl had apologized rapidly and profusely and fled the room in hysterics. Now whenever she came, Mallory pretended to be asleep.

Grete and Varden were the only ones that bothered themselves to speak to her. After suffering through three days of this exile, Mallory had finally had enough. Perhaps if her sore bottom had lasted three days instead of the bare ten minutes that she had felt the after affects of that slight spanking, Mallory might have reconsidered. But as it was, she was tired of staring at the same four walls and the portraits and tapestries that decorated them. She had become an expert at twiddling her thumbs and had sung every verse to every song she could think of, including television commercials.

This was ridiculous! Here she was, living in a real, working English castle and so far, she hadn't even got out of bed. She should have been out exploring from the very first day! How many rooms did Cadhla have? How many servants were required to keep it running from day to day? Were there secret passages, or a dungeon? Excitement mingled with horror, tickling down her spine as she considered exploring a real dungeon and perhaps even finding someone imprisoned there: a dashing highwayman or black knight or daring spy caught stealing important secrets. Not that she would know what to do with them, should she indeed find someone there. She was practically a prisoner herself.

And how far back in time had she traveled, anyway? Chamber pots and sylvan tapestries were not all that informative when one had to figure

dates by them. Was there any point in trying to go home, to America? Or would she run headlong into a bunch of angry Indians? Where in England was she? And what about the food here? Thin broth and black bread hard enough to chip a tooth could hardly be called culinary delights, though Mallory's meals had religiously consisted of broth three times daily. For the sake of her stomach--if not her bottom - it was time to go exploring. Even if it--or Varden--killed her.

And her first adventure, Mallory decided, was the discovery of who she was. There was a polished metal mirror framed in silver next to her armoire. All she had to do was walk over there.

Despite three days of complete bed rest, her first attempt to stand left her feeling shaky and weak. She clung to the bedpost and waited for the initial dizziness to pass before staggering along the edge of the bed to the next post. The entire adventure lasted only a few minutes. She felt like a toddler, completely lacking in grace as she took her first steps. And she was still clinging to the bed, trying to catch her breath, when Grete, Doctor Wilcox and Varden walked in. Mallory was immediately shrieked at, yelled at, glared at, and promptly ordered to lie back down again.

Mallory rebelled. "You can't make me!"

She realized her mistake instantly when Varden's expression darkened. Before she could hobble to the next post, he caught her and lifted her into his arms. In an instant, he was seated at the edge of her bed and Mallory was suddenly face down across a very hard, very capable lap. While Doctor Wilcox and Grete looked on without protest, Varden laid four stinging smacks to her nightgown-clad backside. His hand hadn't softened since her last encounter with it, and it was all Mallory could do not to cry out as he dropped her, none too gently, back on her mound of pillows.

As he jerked the blankets up to her chin, he said, "If you get up again, ill or not, witnesses or

not, I will bare your bottom and spank you until you cannot sit for a week."

Bottom stinging, her cheeks flushed hot with indignation, Mallory threw her better judgment aside with her blankets and shouted, "You can't do this to me! The Emancipation Proclamation gave me rights, dammit! Lincoln freed the slaves! Or at least, he will!"

Varden glared at her, brawny arms folded across his chest, completely unmoved by her display of temper. "What Lincoln does in his own castle is his own bloody business. In this castle, mon âme, you will do as you are told, and stay in that bed."

"It is too early for you to be up anyway," Doctor Wilcox interrupted as he stepped between them. "You need time to rest and recover."

"Rest?" Mallory said hotly. "Lying here like an invalid is what's left me like this!"

"Fighting the midwife is what's left you like this," Wilcox returned. "Your foolish rebellion nearly cost you your life."

"It wasn't my rebellion!"

"No, of course not," Varden said. "It was Claire's. You are a twentieth-century dead woman."

Her mouth falling open in shock, Mallory sat up a little straighter. "I thought you thought I was crazy. But you actually believed me!"

Varden and the doctor exchanged identical dry looks.

"I'm so sorry, Varden." Mallory took his hand in both of hers, patting it sympathetically. "You have my deepest, most sincere sympathies for the loss of your wife. Even if you didn't like her. And I forgive you for spanking me just now--so long as you don't do it again. I know how difficult it must be for you to look at me, knowing she's gone. Maybe it would be better for everyone if I left just as soon as I'm well enough to travel."

Varden removed his hand from her grasp. "Where do you intend to go?"

"Someplace that hopefully hasn't heard of the Spanish Inquisition. When the truth gets out, I think I'll be prime kindling." She smiled, but Varden didn't seem to find any humor in the comment. She cleared her throat. "Or I could go back to America and wait for the skyscrapers to go up. Yeah, that might be the better plan."

"You get seasick just looking at a boat," Varden said. "You haven't visited your parents once in the last seven years. If you can't bear a few days journey to France, why should I believe you're willing to take a month-long voyage to a godless, savage wilderness like America?"

"It's not godless." Mallory was affronted. "I was born there. It's my home!"

"How strange. I always thought Cadhla was your home and, up until a few nights ago, you claimed France was."

Mallory wilted slightly. "Oh, I see. For a moment, I thought you were actually talking to me."

Varden folded his arms across his broad chest. "You are the one I am looking at. Who else would I be talking to?"

"Claire." Mallory didn't even try to keep the sarcasm from her voice. "I'm the twentieth-century dead woman, remember? I've never even been to France. Oh, and I take it all back! I don't forgive you at all!"

She folded her hands across her chest and scowled.

Varden's retort was interrupted by Doctor Wilcox, clearing his throat. "Perhaps we should get started, what hey?"

Staring straight up at the ceiling, Mallory answered all of Robert's questions in short, single-word sentences. No, it did not hurt when he pressed lightly on her abdomen. Yes, the bleeding was steady but slight and, the doctor assured her, perfectly normal.

It was obvious that Varden was going to keep her here, regardless of what she herself wanted. Although, if forced to be honest with herself and despite his brutish obedience tactics, Mallory really didn't want to leave, either. Aside from the fact that she had no place else to go, what would happen to the baby if she left? How could she abandon him to be cared for by people who held as much love for him as they did for her?

Doctor Wilcox squeezed her hand. "Buck up, girl. You'll heal, eventually."

His craggy face wrinkled in what might have been a smile if only Varden were not hovering over them both like a malevolent storm on the verge of eruption.

"Are you going to keep me locked in this room for the rest of my life?" she finally asked.

Varden considered her question seriously. "Yes, I think that would suit me very well."

Mallory lay staring at the ceiling for several minutes after Varden and the doctor had gone. Then she threw the blankets aside and sat up again. She was going to reach that mirror if it killed her.

Once more in her chair by the fire, Grete hardly looked up from the book she was reading. When Mallory slid her legs over the edge of the mattress, she said, "If you fall, I will not help you back into bed. And if His Grace should catch you. . ."

Mallory knew exactly what he would do. She winced, tenderly touching her right bottom cheek. She could feel the aching heat of what he'd done right through her nightgown, but resolve had already steeled her spine.

She got up twice more that day, but was content to wander around the bed, hobbling from post to post. The next morning she declined Grete's assistance with the chamber pot, and later, she managed a short jaunt from the bed to the chair by the fire. Sweat beaded her forehead and she was out of breath by the time she gingerly lowered herself into the chair next to Grete. As she rested,

she admired her companion's handiwork with the Dowager's gown.

"It looks beautiful." Mallory felt the blue chiffon between her fingers. "Which is the new lace?"

"The ruffles on the bodice. I still have to replace the hems, sleeves and collar."

"The old lace looks fine to me. Why does she want it replaced?"

Grete began to pick the stitches from the lace on one of the sleeves. "Because she wore it once."

"Oh." Mallory laughed.

Grete half-smiled as well. Then she remembered whom she was smiling with and her frown returned full force.

By the morning of the sixth day, Mallory was feeling much stronger. She was hardly in any condition to do jumping jacks, but she felt more than ready to face the mirror. She waited until Grete took the breakfast dishes back to the kitchen. Just in case Varden caught her again, she didn't want an audience. Then she slipped from the bed and took her first steps, slowly, carefully, like an old woman unsure of her balance, toward the mirror.

Regardless of what else Claire had been, she had also been beautiful. She had the high cheekbones, elegant nose, and a tiny chin that poets considered 'classical' and wrote sonnets over. She hadn't escaped her freckles, but her eyes were green and her lips soft and full. Mallory touched them, traced their shape, and then grimaced to see her teeth. Not only did she have all of them, but they were, also, white and reasonably straight. Mallory could hardly believe her luck! She was beautiful. She was actually beautiful! No more ugly duckling days. She fluttered her long eyelashes at her reflection and laughed. It took dying first, but finally she had become a swan.

She twirled round in place and immediately grabbed the back of a nearby chair to keep from falling. She was weak and she was dizzy, but she was beautiful first. Long auburn hair hung down her

back in a thick tangle of hopeless curls, the tips lightly brushing the rounding swells of her hips. Holding onto the chair, she bent and shook her hair wildly back and forth before flinging the whole molten mass back over her shoulders. With the application of a little hair spray, it might be fashionably shaggy. Perfect for a twentieth century woman at a KISS concert, but horribly unsuitable for--well, whenever she was.

Being a bookworm had its merits. She knew she was somewhere in time between Robin Hood and the Three Musketeers. Varden had mentioned a queen. Possibly Elizabeth? She needed to narrow down the time line a bit.

But first things first.

Casting a quick glance at the door over her shoulder, Mallory pulled her nightgown up over her head and dropped it on the floor. She smoothed her hands down over her stomach and eyed her new body critically in the mirror. Admittedly, she did just have a baby, but she could stand to lose a few pounds off her stomach. Turning first one way and then the other, Mallory smoothed her hands down over her hips. Her legs were nice, her skin was smooth and soft, and being full of milk had done wonderful things to her breasts.

Yes, Mallory smiled. She could definitely work with this

Chapter Five

Sitting at the foot of his bed, Varden groaned at the prospect of having to bend down to pull on his boots. He groaned as he leaned over to do it, and then again as he straightened back up. Some days it felt good to get up early, head for the Training Field, and wear himself out with hard, physical labor. There were times when he even looked forward to the aching muscles, the sweat and pain, the cuts and bruises that few of his men ever left the Field without.

This was not one of those days.

In fact, on this particular day, he actually felt too bloody old. He was also hung over, which may have accounted for that 'too old' feeling at the ripe age of thirty-four. He rubbed his blood-shot eyes. His mouth tasted as if he had spent the night licking out the insides of both boots, which he might have done. He wished he could remember. . .

Given his druthers, Varden would have stripped back down and gone back to bed. Unfortunately, he had new recruits on the Field. And that meant, no matter how much he wanted to, there would be no going back to bed.

He stood up instead. It took forever to crawl into his bulky practice armor. Stringing his scabbard onto his belt was easy, getting the belt around his waist was only marginally more difficult, but it took four attempts to loop his belt through the buckle and actually get it fastened. When he finally succeeded, he lost his balance and sat back down. Holding his head in his hands, he groaned again, then sighed. "Go ahead. Say it. I know you want to."

Just coming into the room, Kenton carried a silver breakfast tray laden with warm ale to the bedside table. "I told you so. There, feel any better?"

"No."

"Good, then my work here is done." He prepared Varden a cup and handed it to him. "Perhaps tonight you'll drink less. At the very least, try to pass out in your own bedroom. I am not picking you up off the stairs again. Considering the position I found you in, it's a wonder your back doesn't ache too much to move."

"It does." Varden stretched slowly. "I was wondering what happened."

While Kenton picked up Varden's discarded clothes from the night before, Varden stared at his cup. He took only a sip before setting the cup aside. He didn't think his stomach could handle anything more.

"If you plan to see the Field at all today, you had better get going," Kenton reminded him.

"I know, I know." Varden staggered to his feet, stretched and stumbled toward the door. He stretched again as he walked, gradually regaining coordination as he crossed the room. "Have someone saddle my horse. I'll be down after I check on Claire."

"No need. According to the maids, Her Grace is still Bedlam bound." Kenton picked up Varden's discarded cup. "The only noted improvement has been her disposition. Hm, the ale is a little too warm."

"Nothing can sweeten that disposition." But as Varden opened the door and leaned inside, he froze.

He had not expected to find Claire out of bed. Well, all right. Maybe he had expected her to be out of bed, but not out of her clothes and prancing naked in front of the mirror. Submerging his head in a cold barrel of rainwater could not have cleared his hangover faster.

Her body still bore all the signs of her recent pregnancy. Her breasts were full and heavy with milk; even as he watched, a creamy drop leaked from one budding tip and she wiped it away with her finger. Then she turned to look at her back in the mirror, smoothing her hands down over her

flanks, and one thought set itself above all others in his mind: she had another lover. Why else would she be studying herself like this? It certainly wasn't for him that she wanted to look beautiful.

His hands clenched into fists. All but growling, Varden said, "Who is it this time?"

Claire spun with a startled gasp, then swayed and grabbed the back of a nearby chair. It was several seconds before she could regain her balance enough to risk bending over. Snatching her nightgown back up off the floor, she held it in front of her as if it were a shield. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Not when the house is mine. Besides, if you are hoping to cover yourself, *mon âme*, it is a wasted effort. I have seen you dressed, in various states of undress, and I have seen you covered only by me. I could draw your form from memory: every curve, valley, and secret little place--wet and hot and freshly touched by me. Ah, but I forget. It's not for me that you primp these days."

"You look awful." She took a hesitant step toward him. "Are you drunk?"

"Not any more, unfortunately." Varden glanced over his shoulder at Kenton, who had come up silently behind him. "Never mind about the horse. I don't think I'll be going to the Field right away."

Kenton glanced into the room and immediately backed up a step. "I can see how your attention might be redirected. Still, with only a mere twenty-two paid instructors to cover your absence, I only hope the new lads can survive a day without your personal expertise to guide them."

"I am the master; you are the servant," Varden said for his ears alone as he stepped through the doorway into Claire's room. "Try to remember that."

"Hm," was the only comment Kenton made before Varden softly closed the door.

She looked lovely. The sun shone through the uncovered window behind her and sparkled in her hair as if the red curls were on fire. Her skin glowed in the light and that nightgown wasn't hiding a

thing, though he doubted if she knew it. And it did absolutely nothing to cover her backside, either, of which the mirror provided an unhindered view. He almost had to remind himself that they were enemies. Funny how he seemed to keep forgetting.

"Dare I ask who you seek to enthrall with your charms today?" Varden asked, his tone as soft as the satin gown she held to her breasts, deceptively gentle as he slowly stalked her from across the room. "Even were Godfrey not making use of the Training Field right now, I doubt your current state would appeal to him. Lecherous sod that he is, my brother still prefers his women somewhat thinner."

Shoulders drooping, she looked at him as though depressed. "Oh no, there's a brother mixed up in this mess, too?"

"I walked in on the two of you," Varden said. It took effort, but he kept his hands from clenching into fists. "Don't pretend to have forgotten him. I'll never believe it."

Sympathy crept over her features. "Oh, Varden. What Claire must have done to you."

"Don't look at me like that!" Varden drew back as sharply as if she'd slapped him. "I don't know why you have taken on this charade, but you are not insane!"

"You're right, I'm not," she agreed. "I'm perfectly sane; I'm just not your wife. I think you must have loved her very much."

"Love has nothing to do with it."

"Then why are you so angry?"

"Perhaps I want revenge," Varden said as he stalked her. "Maybe I want to give back a little of the hell I've received these many years."

"Even if I'm not Claire?"

"End this ridiculous game. What can you hope to gain with a title like Crazy Duchess? That's the nickname the servants have given you, you know. The Crazy Duchess of Cadhla. I can't say I'm in love with the new title, although it does have a catchy ring to it."

At that, Claire grinned. "I know. I helped select it. You should ask Grete what they originally came up with: The Mad Whore. How very unflattering. She was so amused that I would pick my own moniker, she cheerfully offered to help spread it around the floors. Took all of yesterday afternoon but Grete says word has finally reached the kitchens and everyone's using it now. We have a little bet running on whether the title reaches the village before Friday. I don't suppose you could spare me a penny, just in case I lose."

"The Crazy Duchess of Cadhla," Varden repeated.

"If they're going to call me something, I may as well pick a title I like. I'm just happy it caught on so quickly."

He couldn't believe she was smiling so proudly.

She lowered her voice, leaning toward him as if they were conspiratory partners in the joke. Her green eyes positively sparkled. "Do you like it?"

"No." His palm began to itch.

"It was a toss-up between that and The Babbling Bedlamite, but I thought it too much of a mouthful. You don't like that one, either, I suppose?"

"No." He folded his arms across his broad chest and tried to look as stern and as unsmiling as he could. It was very difficult. She looked almost adorable with her sparkling red hair and her nightgown shield to cover her.

"That's because you don't think I'm crazy. This is all an act, and I am just pretending to annoy you."

"Right," Varden said in agreement.

She leaned even closer, mischief dancing in her eyes. "Is it working? Are you annoyed yet?"

Hell, yes. But he wasn't about to admit it. "Is that your goal?"

"Nope." Her smile turned smug. "It's more of a bonus, really."

"Then you should be prepared for the consequences of rousing my temper."

Her smile faltered. For the first time she seemed to notice how close he had come to her. She sidled around the chair in an attempt to put it between them, but the obvious ploy didn't work. He merely picked up the chair and moved it to one side, his predatory eyes never leaving her.

She cleared her throat softly. "Consequences?"

Varden was almost close enough to grab her now. "I told you that to get up before I allowed it would earn you a trip across my knee. Apparently, the prospect must not be an unpleasant one, especially since you seem to take such glee from nettling me. Let's see if I cannot change your mind."

She took another hesitant step backwards, absolutely no trace of her smile anywhere in sight. She looked almost afraid of him. For some reason, which he cared not to study closely, that irritated him even more.

"I--I just want to go for a walk."

"And I just want you to obey me."

"I'm a grown woman. I don't have to obey anyone if I don't want to. And since it's my decision whether I stay in bed or not, I--I'm going for a walk," she stammered with a tiny, defiant lift of her chin. It was such a small gesture, a less angry man might have missed it all together. Varden did not miss it. He sure as hell wasn't going to ignore it, either. When he reached for her, panic borne of self-preservation had her blurting, "I've decided that you can come with me! It's a beautiful day; we could walk in the garden together!"

That stopped him. With his hand on her arm, he stared at her as though he hadn't heard her right. "You want me to come with you?"

He could not have been knocked more off kilter had his legs been swept from out beneath him. Claire hated the outdoors. She hated the wind that mussed her hair and the weather that ruined her clothes. She claimed the sun put freckles on her skin and that she could not breathe the air for the

stench of the courtyard animals. Yet here she was, accepting his offer--and only with him no less! The vulgar, brutish, English barbarian.

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

She had cringed away from him as though wishing she could dissolve herself of her arm. "I--I'd miss y-your sunny personality?"

He glared.

She relented. "All right, I don't want a sp--um, a spanking. There, I said it. You have a very hard hand, and it hurts when you do that."

"It's supposed to."

She flushed. "I know it's supposed to, but I don't think I've done anything to deserve to be beaten."

"I have no intention of beating you," he stated coldly. "I am going to spank you. There's a difference."

"Not to me there isn't. Besides, I still haven't done anything wrong." She tugged timidly at her arm, but his fingers only tightened around her.

"I beg to differ." Varden held up his free hand and began to tick off the reasons. "You are endangering your health. You are disobeying me by prancing around the room after I have warned you, repeatedly, to remain in bed. And you are attempting to distract me from my purpose by proposing this garden walk of yours."

She flushed even brighter. She looked distinctly uneasy. "I'm feeling much better than I used to."

"Which is why you've nearly fallen over twice since I've been watching you."

"I've got low blood sugar," she lied.

"And you're about to have a very soundly spanked bottom to go with it." Varden snagged the back of the chair with his free hand and thumped it down on the floor next to him.

"Please don't!" she protested even as he sat down. "I just need a little fresh air!"

Varden studied her for a long moment in silence. "And you want me to come with you?"

The relief that swept through her was visible. A trembling smile touched her lips. "Yes, please. To be honest, I don't think I could find my way outside without you."

"All right," he said finally. "We will go for a walk. But first things first."

"No, don't!" Claire tried to yank her arm from his steely grasp, leaning stiffly backwards, though it certainly didn't keep her from tumbling facedown over his lap the very first time he pulled. She fought wildly, kicking and clawing to get up again.

Her elbow caught him in the side and, through clenched teeth, Varden growled, "When I get done with you, Madame, you're going to wish you had a smaller bottom."

"Oh!" Her hand snapped back, palm up to ward off the blow she knew was coming. He merely caught her wrist and pulled her only defense out of his way. "You can't--you--don't you dare--do this and I'll kill you--you son of a--OW!"

His broad hand cracked across her unprotected bottom, flattening both cheeks simultaneously and causing an instant, bright pink mark in the shape of his palm and fingers to stain her skin.

Varden could count on one hand the number of times he'd held his lovely wife bottom-up across his lap. Three times in all: the first time just after they were married when, in a fit of unreasoning temper, Claire had struck an upstairs maid. Twice more this last week alone--two pitiful displays of authority that only counted as spankings in the remotest definition of the word. And then, of course, there was now. By God, he was going to enjoy this.

With a hoarse, unladylike voice, Claire bellowed, "You have no right! Ow! Oh! Stop it! Stop it! Ow!"

Varden laughed, a sound that had absolutely nothing to do with amusement. He clutched her waist tightly with one arm and, with his other, paddled her vigorously, vindictively, his hand never once missing its target, no matter how she kicked or squirmed or cursed him. And she did curse him.

Fluently. Colorfully. He never realized what a foul-mouthed little hellion he'd married until--despite the vigor with which she'd initially fought him--Claire suddenly drooped limply over his knees and let loose with the filthiest string of obscenities to ever fall from a gentle-bred lady's lips. Not only did she bring into question the validity of his birth, but whether or not his parent's were human and his own sexual preference, which according to her ran to diseased camels. The other half of what she said, he had never heard before and barely understood. That in and of itself was rather impressive, considering that he spent the majority of his time surrounded by soldiers.

If he weren't so angry, he might have laughed. As it was, Varden intensified his efforts, expanding his target to include the tops of her thighs, and spanked until there wasn't a hint of white left anywhere to be seen on the bouncing, juddering bottom before him. Claire shrieked like a banshee, kicking when he repeated his attack on her thighs. She began cussing all over again, but halfway through the second round, she burst into tears.

Varden's open hand came to rest on her writhing flanks. His arm was tired and his hand stung, but damn if this wasn't a satisfying sight!

"I hate you," Claire sobbed.

"I don't much care for you, either," Varden lied, and dumped her from his lap onto the floor.

Her nightgown lying in a forgotten heap, she climbed slowly to her feet. Crying hard, she simply stood in front of him, holding her wounded buttocks in both hands. Any other woman would have been dancing around the room, stomping her feet and carrying on like a well-punished waif should after a spanking the likes of which he'd just given. That his wife merely stood there on wobbling legs was a testament to how unwell she still was. Varden felt a momentary twinge of guilt, which he had to work at swallowing.

"You're a monster!" she sobbed at last.

"You deserved every bit of that, and a hell of a lot more."

She pointed to the door of his adjoined chambers. "Get out! Just--just go away!"

"No," Varden said simply. "We're not done."

He watched her tear-filled eyes snapped open wide as he stood up from the chair. He listened with relish as her horrified gasp followed him to her vanity. He wondered if perhaps she thought he was there to retrieve the wood-backed hairbrush that rested near the mirror. But he much preferred her priceless look of dismay when he took his knife from his belt and cut a sliver off the cake of lye soap that he picked up.

She covered her mouth with two fistfuls of crumpled white nightgown, backing away from him even as he calmly pursued her all the way into the corner.

He held up the piece of soap. "Open your mouth."

Claire shook her head.

Softly, dangerously, he said, "Do we need another lesson in obedience?"

Very, very hesitantly, she lowered the nightgown and her soft ribbon-pink lips parted. She whimpered once as he placed the sliver directly onto her tongue.

"Close."

She made a face, shuddering at the awful taste spreading through her mouth, but obediently closed her lips. Her shoulders hunched as she gagged.

"If I ever hear such profanity from you again, I will scrub out your mouth three times daily until I have used up that cake of soap and am satisfied that all filth has been washed from your vocabulary."

She gagged again.

Varden put his hand on the back of her neck and turned her until she faced the corner. He couldn't help but twist the knife a little, and leaned in close

to whisper against her ear, "Naughty. Naughty. Naughty."

Claire bowed her head. Her blistered bottom facing the room and the horrible lye coating her tongue, she began to sniffle and then to cry all over again.

Victory.

Varden returned to sit in the chair and savored every bit of it. As the minutes stretched on, he let her cry it out, knowing the lye had probably melted in her mouth completely and she would likely be desperate to rid herself of the taste. He should have done this years ago, he mused, admiring his handiwork. Perhaps things would be different now if he had.

Claire sniffled and with the nightgown wiped at a few lingering tears. Very softly, she asked, "May I please come out now?"

He almost smiled. "You may."

Sniffing again, she faced him, but didn't come so much as one step out of the corner. She hugged her nightgown to her, smoothing the fabric down over all the appropriate places and eyed him warily. And waited. Finally, she said, "Aren't you going to leave?"

"Not until after we've had our little walk in the garden. It was important enough for you to earn a sound spanking over, have you changed your mind?"

She gave him the most incredulous look. "I wouldn't go anywhere with you if you were the last man--the last creature--on the face of this planet!"

He did smile at that, though admittedly it was a small smile. "Would you like to go for our walk dressed, or as you are? You have one minute to decide, because in one minute your hand will be on my arm and we will be walking out that door as husband and loving--" he bit out the word as if it were a rotten morsel against his tongue, "--dutiful wife."

Claire blinked at him several times, biting her lip in consternation before finally clearing her throat. "Okay. I'll get dressed."

"Good." He waited.

She blushed. "Do you have to watch me?"

As though he had not seen everything she had to offer multiple times in this last half hour. "We have been married seven years. I have seen your body many times."

There it went: her chin tilting up in that stubborn angle of hers. "Yes, well, not since I've been in it." She motioned with one hand. "Please turn around."

Varden snorted. "And give you the opportunity to stick your knife in my back?"

"Absolutely. I've got one hidden in my hair right now." Though her voice held the proper degree of sarcasm, the look on her face told him the idea definitely held merit.

After a moment's pause, Varden stood up and reluctantly turned his back to her. And found himself looking straight into the mirror. A wolfish smirk turned up the corners of his mouth. It was a look that Claire missed entirely since she'd turned her attention to her nightgown. Unaware of his wandering gaze, she was struggling to unfasten the dozens of tiny hooks that lined the back. She sniffled and swiped at her eyes again, then bent slightly to catch the sunlight from the window and better see the hooks.

"How does this silly thing open?" She muttered, turning the gown over in her hands. "Grete does it every day. I know these come undone."

Varden was about to tell her the task required a hooked needle when she gave up entirely. She turned the gown upside-down and crawled into it from the bottom, squeezing her head past the collar with all the hooks still linked. She winced as the fabric settled down over her hips, and indulged in a gentle caress to her very tender bottom.

She froze when she saw his reflection watching her unabashedly in the mirror. Her face flushed almost as red as the cheeks beneath her hand.

"You peeked," she accused. "You're not only a beater of defenseless women, you're a peeping tom!"

She was embarrassed, angry, and was nursing a well-spanked bottom. He'd let her get away with that one. Smugly, he said, "I'll get your wrap."

"I'm not cold."

"Getting out of bed is bad enough. I don't want you falling victim to pneumonia before I gain my full measure of vengeance." And besides, he could afford to be magnanimous; he still had his dignity. He wasn't even going to tell her the nightgown was inside out. He was enjoying himself too much.

He retrieved a green cloak and a pair of soft shoes from her armoire. As he wrapped the cloak around her shoulders, his hands lingered next to her skin.

She pulled away. "Don't do that."

"Do what?" he snapped. Even knowing that she would rebuke his attempt at kindness, it still rankled and stretched his patience that much thinner. "Don't take care of you?"

"Be nice to me," she snapped back. "Don't you dare be nice to me and make me think we're going to be friends. Not after beating me and putting soap in my mouth! And making me stand in the corner like I'm five years--"

"Do you really want me to beat you?" Varden demanded, interrupt her tirade before it could really get started. "Do you? I've never had much of a stomach for men who treated their wives with such ill regard. But with you I think I might learn to like it."

Claire swallowed hard. By the look on her face, it was clear she thought him capable of such violence, and that irritated him even more.

"Sit down," he ordered angrily.

She sat in the very chair he had spanked her on, groaning piteously the instant her tender flesh made contact with the hard wooden seat. She closed her eyes against a fresh wave of tears.

Varden drew a deep breath and held it. He counted to twenty, forcing himself to soften as he knelt before her. "In all the years that we have been married, with all the provocation that you have given me, have I ever once taken my fists to you, Claire?"

"Mallory," she whispered, so softly that at first he almost didn't hear her.

"What did you say?"

In a slightly louder voice, she repeated, "My name is Mallory."

He grit his teeth. Grabbing her ankle in his combat-roughened hands, Varden began to force the slippers onto her feet.

"Ow." Claire cringed, almost pulling her foot from his hand. When he persisted, she settled for grabbing her knee with both hands. "Ow, Varden! You've got it on the wrong foot!"

"You never had these slippers tailored to your feet, Claire. If you'll recall, you said it would ruin them."

Taking the slippers from his hands, she turned them upside down to look at the bottoms. "No wonder it hurts. And they're too small, too!"

As she rubbed her toes with ill-concealed relief, Varden sat back on his heels. Since when did she complain of physical discomfort when modern fashion was at stake? She had worn these slippers a dozen times and never once said a word. "You swore those shoes were the absolute vogue, worn by every fashionable lady in all of England and even France. You stood in the middle of Madame Bell's dress shop, pitching a tantrum like a spoiled child, and shouting that if you could not have these slippers then you would go barefoot."

"It wasn't me, I guarantee it." Glancing up, she caught him scowling at her. "But they're too small!"

Maybe her feet have grown since you bought them for her."

"It has been less than two years. Your feet have long since ceased to grow."

"I guess I brought my own with me then, because the shoes don't fit!" She dropped them on the floor and rubbed her toes.

"I buy you the slippers and you go barefoot anyway?" he asked in a low, dangerous tone.

"My nightgown drags the floor," she protested. "Who's going to notice if I wear shoes or not? For that matter, who's going to care? Everyone thinks I'm loony-toons anyway."

"Fine." Varden snatched up the slippers and stood. He towered over her, both his countenance and his mood as dark as midnight. "Go without."

Shifting gingerly in her chair, a worried look on her face, Claire relented. "If it's going to start World War Three, I'll wear the stupid shoes."

"World War Three?" He glared at her.

"Oh, that's right. You haven't had a world war yet. Hey, are the Crusades over?"

"Of all the idiotic--" Muttering under his breath, Varden flung the slippers back into the bottom of the wardrobe. He didn't mind the extra walk across the room. It got him away from her and the senseless chatter that made him want to beat his head against something solid, preferably the nearest stone wall. Bracing his hands on his hips, he faced her again. "What do you want, Claire? What exactly is this lunacy supposed to get you?"

"A second chance." Unable to bear sitting another moment, she stood up. A sulky frown tugged at the corners of her mouth as she pressed a hand to her hips. "Don't ask me why. At this point I'm having a hard time remembering my exact reasons for wanting to come back."

"Mallory." Varden growled. "A dead woman from the future--not to mention an undeveloped continent--come back to life in my wife's body?"

"You make it sound so improbable when you say it like that."

"No, not at all. It happens all the time here, actually."

She sighed. "There's that sarcasm I've grown to love."

"What killed you?" Varden asked suddenly.

"A car."

"Which is what?"

"A very fast carriage that doesn't need horses to move."

"Let me guess--it flies, too."

"No, that's a plane."

He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers and laughed. It was not a happy sound.

Shaking her head, Claire said, "I probably wouldn't have believed me, either."

She tugged at the skirt of her nightgown. Not only was it inside out, but it was also backwards.

Varden half-expected her to admit defeat right then. For a moment, it was there on her face--the realization that he didn't believe a word she had said and probably never would. For a moment, a fleeting triumph surfaced above his anger. But then she squared her shoulders and that momentary defeat was abruptly replaced with solemn-eyed, chin-jutting determination.

"Have it your way then." Hands on hips, she squared off against him. "Believe whatever you want. But I have a new body and a new life. The next time I die, I'm going to be ready for it. No regrets and no missed opportunities. I don't think that makes me crazy, but if that's what it takes for you to accept me, then fine. I'm a nut!"

She turned and marched to the nearest wall. Reaching for a painting of two dancing lovers, she tipped it sharply to one side.

"Ha!" she barked at him. "How's that for crazy?"

Varden watched her walk through the room tipping portraits, lifting chairs on tables and up-ending vases regardless of whether or not they

were empty. It was a blazing show of defiance, one that had him caught between the urge to laugh at her foolishness and an even stronger urge to turn her across his knee again. When she finally reached the hall, she cast him a furious backwards glare and swept right out the door.

Varden looked at the slanted dancers. Stepping back, he tipped his head at an angle to match. It almost looked better this way. He was half-tempted to leave it, but propriety got the best of him. Returning the lovers to their proper position, he decided that he should, for the good of all Cadhla, chase down his errant wife before she got herself into any real trouble. Thankfully, Claire had not gotten far. Less than twenty feet from her bedroom door, turning first one way and then the other, she looked utterly confused, as if she didn't know the castle that had been her home since she was a girl of seventeen.

To Varden, the disruption of her chambers and all talk of twentieth-century dead women aside, as far as true insanity went, this seemed only too real.

She looked both left and right, then wandered across the hall to poke her head into another room. "Okay, I give up. How do we get to the garden from here?"

Varden thumbed in the opposite direction. "That way."

"You should post some signs here. Big You-Are-Here maps with a huge red 'x' to show where we are." As if she were nothing less than the Queen, Claire straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin and marched off down the hall. "How am I supposed to know the way out? As if I've ever been here before."

Varden silently fell into step behind her. He would trip her up in this charade if it killed him. He would have to be more careful, though. She almost had him believing her confusion was real.

Supper that night was a depressing event. There was nothing quite like a family that despised one another, all sitting down together. The dining hall was as dark as a tomb despite the multitude of candles that lined the table and walls, and the darkness made the silence all the more oppressive.

A line of servants filed in from the kitchen, each bearing a silver serving tray laden with mutton, rabbit, slices of beef, cheese and bread, spiced pudding and a thick pottage. They approached the table. Sixty feet in length and made of oak, it dominated the dining hall and yet, strangely, was far too small for each of the four diners, who could not get far enough away from one other.

The serving procession began with Varden, who sat at the head of the table with the giant-sized portrait of his father high on the wall behind him. Abigail was next, thirty feet down the right side of the table, where she had moved her chair to a place beside Godfrey's. Another ten feet further down on the left side, Doctor Wilcox sat surrounded by his textbooks, which he studied attentively throughout the meal to spare him from having to contribute to any conversation that might accidentally spring into being before etiquette allowed him to excuse himself.

Claire's end of the table was vacant, as it had been every night for the last seven months. Throughout the travesty of a family meal, Varden found his eyes wandering back to it time and again. Which wasn't odd, he supposed, since all he had to do was stare straight down the table. Certainly, it was preferable to looking down either side.

After having spent the better part of the afternoon with his wife, Varden was ready to admit defeat. Either she was a better actress than he had given her credit for, or she really had lost her mind. Right now, he was leaning heavily towards the latter. After the first hour, between all her talk of plastics and Velcro, the Women's Movement, and

escalators, he was convinced that something about her just felt. . .wrong.

As if on cue, Abigail asked, "How soon can we expect the harlot back amongst us?"

Varden paused in the middle of cutting into a slice of beef. "I assume by that you mean my wife?"

"Are we housing more than one whore these days?"

He bent back over his plate. To protest against Abigail was the epitome of uselessness. He decided to save his breath for an argument that he had at least a small chance of winning. "She will remain sequestered until I decide otherwise."

Abigail seemed pleasantly surprised. "You must truly believe her mad, then."

"After four hours in her company, I was ready to question my own sanity. However, for now at least, I am considering the possibility that she may not be pretending."

"No need to bother with that." Abigail unfolded her napkin in her lap before picking up her spoon. "Even if she is only pretending, I am sure Bedlam could be persuaded to take her. For a small donation, of course."

Varden lifted his cup of wine and drank all that was left in the glass. His first for the evening. He could already tell it wasn't going to be enough. "I have made my decision. There will be no institute."

"We certainly cannot keep her here," Abigail scoffed, spreading her hands. "You aren't blind, Varden. Even you can see she is destroying this family. After all we have been through, how can you not send her away?"

"To where?" Varden countered. "And don't say Bedlam again. She is not an unfortunate. I will not have her locked naked in a cell with her head shaven to endure being gawked upon by learned doctors and morbid-minded onlookers."

Abigail hardly bothered to stifle her sigh of exasperation. "A pity."

"So where do you expect me to send her?"

"Well, you do have a small holding in Wales. Life among those drudges would be perfect for her, I should think."

"Wales is far enough away for you?" he asked dryly.

"No." Abigail stirred her soup with her spoon. "But it is the most miserable place I can think of. A big, drafty castle with slovenly servants, no luxuries, and residing so far away from the nearest town as to be a country of its own. If you don't approve of Wales, then give me a little time. I am sure I could come up with some place worse."

"The colonies, perhaps," Godfrey suggested, between bites.

Abigail brightened with a rare smile. "Splendid idea!"

Varden glared. "You have become spiteful in your dotage."

"After so many years dealing with your father--and now you--spite is all I have left." She looked pointedly at the portrait hanging behind Varden. "Left up to me, I would take that thing down and burn it in the courtyard."

"My father was a good and honorable man," Varden said.

"Who had the nerve to suffer heart failure in that brothel, so don't paint him out to be a paragon of virtue!" Abigail snapped. She suddenly dropped her spoon in the soup. "This slop is barely fit for pigs; the only thing you can taste is the grease! Godfrey, dear, remind me to be rid of Claire's fat French chef the minute this Jezebel issue is decided. Perhaps we can make due with a woman from the village until I can send to London for a decent replacement."

Varden slammed his cup down on the table. It took all his will to keep from shouting. "This is not now--nor has it ever been--your decision to make! I will decide what is to be done with Claire. I will decide whether or not that 'fat French chef' will continue to cook in my kitchens. And if you cannot

refer to her by her name or title, then you need not refer to her at all! Is that clear?"

The Dowager drew herself up stiffly. She turned her head away. "I wish to change the subject."

"By all means," Godfrey agreed, patting her withered hand. "I know. Shall we discuss how many drunken lords have claimed the right to lead this family? Who was the last one, Mother?"

"Your father," Abigail said coldly.

"Ah, that's right. Too much liqueur, too many mistresses, and not enough money to support all of his many bad habits."

"I have a better idea," Varden interrupted, his voice carrying loudly through the hall. "Let us discuss how soon you will be leaving. How about tomorrow morning?"

"Varden!" Abigail slapped the table with her open hand. "How rude! Just like your father was. You have always been just like your father!"

She opened her mouth to say more, but the door to the outer hall burst open and the hysterical wet-nurse ran in, screaming, "The Crazy Duchess 'as the baby! She's 'urting 'im, she is! Somebody do something a-fore she kills 'im!"

The servants--trained to move like ghosts, heedless to what was said around them--stopped in the midst of clearing away the soup and stared. Varden was the first to move, nearly knocking the wet-nurse down in his haste to get past her and out the dining room door.

"With any luck, she shall succeed," Abigail said to no one in particular. "It would solve a good many problems."

She sipped her pottage and smiled at Godfrey, who stared after his brother and brooded.

Varden took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. He had already buried one child. The thought of burying another, even one that was not his own, was unbearable. His boots pounded the

stones. A maid with an armload of folded bed sheets leapt out of his way, scattering the linens all across the hall floor. He could not run fast enough. He passed his room, then Claire's and charged around a corner. By the time he reached the nursery, Varden was panting heavily.

He flung open the door, sending it crashing into the wall. He didn't know what he expected to see--perhaps Claire in the throes of lunacy with her hair disheveled and her green eyes grown wild. Certainly he expected to find the baby squalling, if not already dead.

Instead, his wife sat calmly atop two pillows in a chair by the window, her legs crossed, the baby nestled tenderly in her arms. She was still dressed in the same nightgown, still inside out and backwards, only now it hung off one shoulder as she nursed the infant at her own breast.

Her expression changed from one of surprise to wary irritation. "You either sneak into the room or crash in. Can't you find a happy medium?"

Varden took a long, deep breath, his shock rendering him momentarily speechless. Then, like a sudden flash of lightning, an intense anger shot through him and his blue eyes turned as cold as the Arctic. He did not speak; the sound that rumbled from deep inside his chest was more of a roar. "What are you doing in here!"

It was the same tone he used when issuing orders to new recruits who weren't paying attention on the Field. Abigail was even known to obey that tone upon occasion.

Claire had the nerve to look surprised. "What are you mad at me for? What have I done now?"

"I told you to stay in your room!"

"I went through a lot of pain giving birth to this baby!" She glared right back at him. "I'm his mother now, and I have every right to be here. I want to hold my son and cuddle and feed him."

"I don't give a damn what you want!"

"Stop yelling at me!" she yelled back. "When you get to know me better, you'll find I don't respond well to yelling!"

"Oh, but I know what you do respond well to," he growled, his palm actually itching to deliver a very sound paddling for all the worry he had just suffered.

She jumped up from her seat. Her eyes became suddenly wide, and a hint of fear touched them. "Don't--Don't you lay a hand on me--you--you--"

The baby began to cry.

Hands on his hips, Varden turned around in a complete circle. He glared at the floor, then at the ceiling, anywhere but at her as she tried to soothe the baby's distress. Varden took several deep, calming breaths. He needed to get a handle on his anger. Aside from not staying where he had told her to, this wasn't her fault.

Doctor Wilcox appeared in the doorway behind Varden, red-faced and panting. When he saw Claire, his eyebrows snapped together. "Is the baby all right?"

"He's fine," Varden snapped. "They're both just fine. Where is that bloody wet-nurse? I'll wring her scrawny neck!"

"But what is she doing here?" Wilcox asked.

"Don't women take care of their own children in this time?" Claire asked. "No wonder you people are all so cranky. Not a one of you has ever known a mother's love."

"Don't!" Wilcox pointed at her. He would have crossed the room to her, but Varden's outstretched arm stopped him from entering the nursery. "Don't you dare claim maternal devotions now! Not after Caleb!"

"Caleb?" She looked from him to Varden. "Who's Caleb?"

The doctor gasped his outrage. Varden simply went white. For a moment, it felt as if a knife had been plunged into his stomach. He almost doubled

over from the pain. Leaning one hand against the wall, he closed his eyes instead.

"Caleb was your first born son," Wilcox growled.

Claire looked around the cavernous, nearly empty room. There were no toys and little in the way of furniture: only a couple of chairs, a crib for the baby, and a chest for his clothes. The walls were ugly, cold and very un-welcoming. A small room adjoined the nursery, but it was for the wet-nurse and her few belongings. There was absolutely no sign of a second child anywhere in residence. "Where is he? Or am I not allowed to see him either?"

Varden felt his anger slipping away. The more tightly he tried to hold onto it, the more elusive it became. She did not know. She honestly did not know Caleb was dead. No one could feign ignorance this well.

She truly had lost her mind.

Varden wanted to feel as if the punishment were justified, but inside there was only the same empty sadness he had known for longer than he cared to remember.

"We buried him," he said woodenly. "Last year."

Along with all his happiness, his pride, and his soul. Varden turned his head away. The last thing he wanted was to see those sympathetic eyes of hers fixed on him.

"I'm sorry," she said, gently. "I didn't know."

And despite himself, Varden believed her.

"How can you not remember?" Doctor Wilcox demanded.

"Robert, please. Just--" Varden waved his hand in the direction of the door. "Just leave."

Though at first Varden thought Wilcox might refuse, the older man eventually stepped backwards into the hall. "Are you certain?"

"If she intended to hurt the child, she would have done so by now." When the doctor seemed about to protest, Varden simply shut the door. It

was several minutes before he could bring himself to face his wife again.

She cleared her throat nervously. "Are you going to--um, spank--um, me again?"

"I should." But he didn't move from the doorway, and after a long, tense pause, he shook his head. "No, I'm not."

After an even longer pause, Claire asked, "Do you want to sit down?"

It was the last thing he wanted, but he took a straight-backed chair from the wall and set it down in front of her. He sat and, after a long minute, forced himself to look at the baby, wrapped so protectively in her arms.

"You're not being fair, you know," she said.

A few wisps of blonde hair stuck up off the baby's forehead above her elbow; his tiny hand was braced against her pale breast as she nursed. Was that Godfrey's chin? The nose looked a little like his own, and Varden sighed. "Do you know where I was a minute ago?"

Leaning back in the chair, Claire blinked at him. "No."

"I was having supper. That--woman came into the dining hall in hysterics. She said you were killing the child." Varden paused, trying to avoid apologizing for a wrong he didn't think he committed. "I hope you appreciate the position that put me in."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you know where I was right before I came to the nursery?"

He glared at her. "Your room, I hope, which is where you ought to be right now."

"I was in a cell. It's decorated to look like a bedroom, but it could just as well be Sing-Sing." She slipped her hand beneath the skirt of the baby's dress and tickled his tiny feet. "Do you know that babies are at their most alert when they are eating? This is prime bonding time and you're asking me to let another woman take advantage of it. I want this

child, Varden. I want to be a mother to him. I'm the only one here who does."

Varden watched as the baby kicked his feet and waved one hand in the air, making only small grunting sounds as she stopped tickling.

"My milk is almost gone. If I don't nurse him now, I'm going to lose the best opportunity I'll ever have to know him. And, frankly," she pointed in the direction the wet-nurse had fled, "I don't know what you think, but that woman you hired is a nervous wreck. All I said was 'Hi' and she ran off screaming."

"Wet-nurses are fashionable." Varden said softly, watching Claire carefully. Would she even recognize the words as having once been her own? "What would your friends say if they knew you were nursing your own babe?"

"I have friends?" She feigned shock. "Name me one. Please, just point her out to me. I would really like to know who she is."

"What about society?"

She gave him a dry look. "Society can take a long walk off a short pier, for all I care. This is personal family business; it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks."

Varden watched her switch the baby from her breast to her shoulder. She gently patted the infant's back. He had never known Claire to abandon her devotion to all things fashionable. But then this was also the first time that she had shown any interest in a child. Or indulged Varden in a walk around the courtyard and garden. Or buried her nose in a late blooming flower as she had earlier in the garden when she'd smiled at him around the yellow petals and told a risqué joke about a doctor, lawyer and priest that had walked into a bar together. He hadn't understood the joke. It might have been funny. Regardless, this was all a side of her that he'd never seen before.

Varden shook his head. "I swear I do not understand you."

"What's there to understand? I'm crazy, remember."

"Like a fox," he scoffed.

"If you like. Are you always going to regard me with such distrust?"

"Ma petite folle," Varden ran both hands through his hair. "Consider it a miracle that I regard you at all."

"What a hateful thing to say." But there was no malice or condemnation in her tone, only a slight resignation toward sympathy and understanding.

"I have had years receiving such statements from you to learn how to give them back again." Varden watched as the baby rested his head against her shoulder, his fist already stuffed into his mouth. Contented, sucking on his own fingers, he grew drowsy.

"Do you want to hold him?" Claire offered, changing the subject.

The question startled Varden. Instinctively, he almost said no. It had been a long time since he'd last held anything that small, but the yearning to do so now was surprisingly strong. That it wasn't his child didn't seem to matter as much.

That surprised him even more.

"Yes," Varden finally said. "I would like that very much."

As his wife bent forward to give him the baby, Varden almost changed his mind. His hands were big and rough and much too accustomed to holding a sword than something as fragile as a tiny human life. But then the baby was in his arms, gazing up at him with unfocused blue eyes and a mouth puckered with wonder, and the experienced father that had lain dormant inside him this long year past suddenly awoke.

The baby looked a lot like Caleb had. The resemblance was so strong in fact that, for just a moment, Varden felt as if he were the one back in time and the babe he held in his arms was Caleb once again. The chin was slightly narrower and the

eyes seemed a little different. But those were subtle contrasts and mattered very little when the baby cooed at him and reached out to touch Varden's hand.

This was his heir. His son. Regardless of the biological sire.

Varden held the baby against his chest, bending to press a kiss to the tiny head just so he could breathe in that sweet newborn scent.

"Have you thought about naming him?" Claire asked.

Cradling the baby in one arm, Varden tapped his large finger in and out of one tiny palm until the baby caught hold of the tip. The strength of that grip made him smile. He would make a good soldier one day. "I confess, I have been trying very hard not to think of him at all."

She glanced around at the wide, bare nursery. "I can tell."

"It wasn't exactly happy news when I discovered you were with child." Varden looked about him. "I may have been a little irrational. I didn't want to share Caleb's things with a--with another man's child. They will be returned by the end of the day." He bent to kiss the baby's head again, smoothing back the tufts of blonde hair as he whispered, "I am sorry I did not make you feel welcome."

"The baby?" Claire asked. "Or me?"

He looked at her. "There was a time when you were very welcome here."

"Will that time ever come back around?"

It was an honest question, deserving of an honest answer. "No, Claire. I think those days are well beyond us."

She brushed a lock of red hair back from her face. "Are they past Mallory, too? Even if you get to know her better? Will Varden and Mallory ever be friends?"

"As interesting as this morning was, it doesn't make up for the last seven years. Whether you remember them or not."

"Fair enough." She tried to sound cheerful but fell a little short. She changed the subject again. "Well, since we can't go around calling him 'Hey, you' all the time, we should probably come up with a name."

It seemed they were calling a truce rather than selecting a name for the infant in his arms. At least Varden accepted it as such, saying, "What about Lawrence?"

Claire grimaced. "Uh, no."

"Frederick?"

"I don't think so."

"All right, then. Martin."

She rolled her eyes, half laughing as she said, "Oh, Varden, look at him. Does that look like the face of a Martin to you?"

Now that he thought about it, no. He tapped his finger in and out of neither Lawrence's nor Frederick's nor Martin's palm. Tilting his wobbly head to one side, the baby tugged clumsily until he could get it into his mouth.

"Damon?" Varden said.

"I think the name you're looking for is Devin," she said, smiling softly as she peered over Varden's arm to better see the baby. "It was my father's name. He died several years ago--I mean, several years before I did. Well, you know what I mean. I think he would have liked knowing that my son bears his name."

Now it was Varden's turn to roll his eyes. He sighed, a long-suffering sound. "Your father's name is Ettienne. He is alive and well in Paris, and still complaining of gout from what I last heard."

"Claire's father is Ettienne. My father," she emphasized, "was Devin Maxwell Connally."

"Fine. Devin." Varden tested the name on his tongue before he grudgingly conceded, "He does look a little like a Devin."

He had never gotten on well with Ettienne anyway.

Pulling her skirts around her legs, Claire moved from the chair to kneel on the floor next to Varden.

"Is he sleeping?" she asked.

"Not yet."

The candlelight cast a light glow across her face. It set the red in her hair on fire and turned it into a molten stream that flowed over her shoulders and down her back. His hand itched to touch the fiery tresses. Were they still as silky as he remembered? As soft and fragrant as the lavender perfume she wore?

Or used to wear.

Varden sniffed the air, but there was no hint of the sensuous fragrance. He frowned. She never went without her perfume. To her, perfume and clothes were one and the same. If a lady were not doused in the former then, to Claire's way of thinking, she may as well be naked. And there were times when it was good that she did wear so much perfume, since her bathing habits were fashionably infrequent. Except that now she bathed nightly, or so Grete claimed. And, come to think of it, he couldn't recall smelling perfume on her this morning, either.

Light kissed the curve of his wife's cheek as she smiled up at him. "Varden?"

He wished she would not look at him like that, with one corner of her mouth curved up in an utterly too kissable fashion. Those sultry lips of hers had a lure all their own. Even when he closed his eyes, he still wanted to taste them. If only she weren't a raving lunatic, without a shred of reason or sanity.

Of course, what better time was there to take advantage?

Even as the errant thought scampered through his mind, Varden pushed it away. He was not quite that desperate. . .yet.

"Varden?" she called again in a singsong voice.

He sighed. "What?"

"Let me take care of Devin. Let me be a mother to him."

He did not answer.

"Varden?"

He opened his eyes, but nothing had changed. Claire was still beautiful, still looking at him, and unwittingly re-kindling a passion that he would have had die.

"Not all lunatics are violent people." She lay her hand on his knee as she leaned over to watch Devin sleeping. "Some of us are actually quite nice."

Varden could hardly believe the way she kept touching him, as if she couldn't help herself. He remembered feeling that way towards her once. He tried not to think about it.

As she lay the tip of her finger in Devin's other hand, the baby's tiny fingers closed around it and she smiled. Without releasing Varden, Devin brought her finger to his mouth to gum on it as well. It was inevitable that their hands should touch. When they did, she smiled at Varden, too.

What had happened to all that anger he had come into the nursery with? He couldn't find the smallest trace of it now. "The day the words 'Claire' and 'nice' fall into the same sentence will be the day I eat my boots."

"Mallory," she corrected with a devilish grin. "That leather looks awfully tough. I could cook them for you first. Five or ten minutes in the microwave ought to soften them right up."

"Microwave?"

"A box that can heat your food and cook it quickly."

"We call them ovens in this century," Varden said dryly. "In fact, Cadhla has three in each of its kitchens."

He smiled for the first time without sarcasm or rancor

Chapter Six

Varden stared at the stack of bills before him, his mouth a hard line of censure. He selected one from the pile. "Here's another one. The Ames farm. Seems three of our would-be soldiers stole the family sow. The piglets she provides usually see them through the winter. The Amesese are asking for two shillings compensation. I wonder why they don't simply ask for the pig back."

On the other side of his desk, Kenton sat, comparing two bills with the ledger in front of him. He didn't look up. "Possibly because two days ago an impromptu pork roast was held just off the Field. Young master Kellington the Fourth and two of his cronies, Dobbs and a fellow by the name of Bull, hosted the barbeque."

"Bull." Varden drummed his fingers on top of his desk. "Do I know him?"

"A peasant's son. Quite strong but equally stupid and very good with a sword."

"Ah yes, that's right. Showed remarkable potential, if I recall."

"So long as he isn't required to think," Kenton agreed.

Varden studied the note. "Have Bull transferred to the third rank, and send Dobbs and Kellington both home. I'll write Lord Kellington personally and inform him of his son's disgrace. As for the Amesese, send them a sow from my pig yard and ten shillings, and offer to have her bred free of charge when the time comes."

Kenton made a note in his ledger. "Very generous, Your Grace."

"I need the good will of all of the Wooler residents too much not to be generous. If it happens again, the entire camp will go on half rations."

"Look at these." Kenton passed three notes across the desk.

Varden picked them up. He groaned. "Not again."

"Three different brawls, same night, all of them at the Vulgar Crown."

Varden dropped the notes on his desk and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. "Have a notice posted by nightfall: Wooler, Candlewick, and Barton-Under-The-Hill are all off limits for the rest of the quarter. Anyone caught near those villages will be flogged and confined. That and about two pounds should take care of the tavern-keepers grievances."

"Not to mention this sudden rash of pregnancies." Kenton held up a wrinkled paper. "There's another one in Candlewick, Willie the Butcher's daughter. She was promised to Alan the Bricklayer, and now he has cried off. There is some question as to whether poor Meg was willing or not."

"Same as the last: a parcel of good farmland and three pounds dowry to the man who weds her." Varden sighed. "Is it just me or do they get worse every year?"

"The trainees or the tenants?"

"Trainees, of course."

"I don't know. Seems about the same to me." Kenton handed him the last note. "Sperry's medical expenses and the cost of a new pair of trousers."

"How is he?"

"Improving, though he'll likely limp a while yet. At least he's stopped threatening to kill the Douglas boy."

"That's good." Varden lay the note on top of the stack to be paid. "First time I've ever had to yell at a boy who had to squint to see me. You'd think someone would have noticed he was halfway to blind before they put a bow in his hands. Where did you manage to hide him?"

"With the blacksmith. Apparently, Douglas sees well enough if things are up close. Hollis is happy enough with the arrangement. Says the boy shows

real aptitude for the craft, when he isn't wringing his hands over what you intend to do to him. What did you say to him, by the way?"

"He fired three arrows directly into the Training Camp. What do you think I said? It's a miracle that no one was killed or even seriously wounded. Except Sperry's pride, of course."

"And his ability to sit," Kenton added.

Varden struggled to keep from smiling only to fail at the same moment that Kenton, shaking his head at his own lack of restraint, lost his composure to a smile. They both leaned back in their chairs and laughed. "In all the years that he's been with us, I've never seen Sperry that furious at a new recruit!"

"The poor boy ran four miles," Kenton laughed. "If I hadn't been on horseback, I never would have caught up with him. I thought he was going to run all the way home."

Still chuckling, Varden wiped a tear from his eyes. "Thank you, Kenton. I needed to laugh."

Gathering his ledger, Kenton stood to go. "Any time."

"Your Grace!" Grete charged into the study, pink-cheeked and short-of-breath from running. "Her Grace is vanished! I only turned my back for a moment and she just disappeared!"

"The day just gets better and better," Kenton said under his breath.

Varden set the bills aside. "Have you looked in the nursery?"

"I have searched everywhere!"

"How long has she been missing?"

"A half hour," Grete said, wringing her hands. "Maybe more, I'm not sure. The Dowager wished to inspect the progress of her gown. Her Grace said I should go, and so I did."

Varden turned to Kenton, who had already put the ledger away and was waiting quietly for instructions. "Where is Godfrey?"

"I am not sure." Kenton paused, thinking. "I don't believe that I have seen him all morning. He might be on the Field, or still in bed asleep. Were I a betting man, I'd put my money on the latter."

Varden stood up, straightening his desk and neatly drying his quill. He saw no need to hurry. He already knew where she had gone. After two weeks of "madness," things were finally returning to normal. The walk in the garden had been feigned. Her devotion to Devin, when she smiled at Varden and got him to smile back, all a ruse. How she must have laughed behind his back! Poor Devin would no more know his mother than Caleb had.

It hurt, but it was also a vast relief. No more craziness. No more insanity. No more smiles and laughter and soft, sweet glances cast from eyes so green and large that a man could lose himself in them.

At least now, he knew where he stood. Smiling grimly, Varden walked to the door. Grete backed hastily away, swallowing convulsively, but Varden's interest was not in her. Anger propelled him upstairs and through a veritable maze of corridors until he reached the room he sought. He reached for the door, pausing only briefly as the high trill of feminine laughter touched his ears. Throwing open the door, Varden charged the bed. He ripped back the blankets and dragged his brother off the mattress by his hair. Reeking of ale, Godfrey fell to the floor with all the gracelessness of a complete drunk. Varden had done it often enough himself to know.

When Godfrey tried to get up, he fell again. "What--"

Varden's fist connected solidly with his brother's jaw and the woman shrieked as the younger man dropped naked and unconscious to the rushes.

Never had hitting anyone felt this good. If it were not so far beneath him, Varden would have danced in victory. But then he heard a whimper and remembered the second half of this betrayal. He

turned on the woman who cowered in Godfrey's bed, ready to drag her back to her room by her long, red hair.

He stopped.

The maid was huddled against the headboard, her brown eyes as wide as a frightened doe's, trying to cover as much of herself as was possible with only two hands. He should have known her name but for the life of him, he couldn't recall what it was.

"I'm sorry, Yer Grace," she said, trembling. "I was finished wi' me chores, I swears it!"

Varden looked from her to Godfrey, lying half underneath the bed. He had lapsed from unconsciousness into sleep and deep snores rattled out of his open mouth. Hopefully, he was too drunk to remember who'd hit him, otherwise there would be hell to pay.

Picking the blanket up off the floor, Varden handed it back to her. "What is your name?"

"Mary, Your Grace. I--I work downstairs."

"Mary." He gave the blanket back to her. "I apologize for ruining your night."

Mary offered him a tremulous smile, and Varden turned and walked slowly back out of the room. He closed the door, then leaned against it.

All right, so she wasn't with Godfrey.

Varden made a quick search of every set of chambers in the hall. Then, even knowing it would be empty, he checked Claire's room for himself. He even glanced into his own, though he seriously doubted that she would be there. And he was right; his room was just as vacant as hers.

Just to rule out the possibility, he searched the nursery next.

Leaning over the cradle, the new governess, Nanna, raised her head. A plump grand- motherly woman with round, blushing cheeks, she beamed him a broad smile and hastened to bob a quick curtsy. He still considered himself lucky to have found her on such short notice. "Good day, Your Grace."

"Has Her Grace been here?"

If the woman was surprised by his question, she didn't show it. "Not since she put the little master to 'is nap."

"She put him to bed?" Varden echoed, surprised.

"Bathed and cuddled and fed the wee darling, then popped 'im into 'is gown and down 'e went without so much as a whimper. I swear Lady Mallory 'as a special touch, she does. If I 'ad not seen it with me own eyes, why I never would 'ave guessed 'Er Grace could be so devoted a mum."

Lady Mallory? Varden scowled. Well, at least her interest in Devin seemed a stable thing. He started to withdraw.

"'Er Grace is a strange duck, pardon me saying."

"So long as you say it only to me." Frankly, Varden was in whole-hearted agreement.

Because the library door was slightly ajar, and he could think of no other place to look, Varden checked there next. He wasn't greatly disappointed to discover the room empty, but somebody had been there quite recently. There was a candle on the table by the settee, which was surrounded by a small scattering of books. He gathered them together: The Modern Warrior by Edgar Viceroy; The Evil of the Female Animal by Vicar Thomas Westcraven; Illnesses of the Brain by Doctor Richard Henry Henderson the Third. Varden turned that one over in his hand. Several pages were marked with down turned corners. Kenton must be studying up on the subject. He paused when he glimpsed the only book lying open on the settee cushions, Bawdy Annie meets the Buccaneers by Anonymous. Varden had the grace to blush. He'd forgotten all about that book. Wondering where Kenton had found it, Varden slid it beneath one of the settee cushions. The rest he returned to their regular shelves before leaving the library.

Standing in the hall with his hands on his hips, he looked first one way and then back down the

other. Where was Claire? Nestled with a new lover in some darkened corner, perhaps?

No. Varden banished the thought. More than likely, madness firmly in hand, she'd stepped out of her room and promptly gotten lost. There was probably a trail of tipped paintings and overturned vases to lead him right to her, if he only knew where to look.

With Kenton and a few servants, Varden began a search of the castle from the servant's floor all the way down to the cellar. Having spent his entire life in Cadhla, Varden had never really paid attention to all the dark and winding passages that led to closed off rooms and dead ends, and all the steep, narrow staircases, which emptied into empty wings that hadn't seen a trespasser in over half a century. A wanderer unfamiliar with Cadhla's immense size could easily find herself thoroughly lost in a very short period of time. After an hour of fruitless searching, Varden felt the first twinges of real concern knotting his stomach.

Standing on the second floor corridor that overlooked the Great Hall, he was contemplating checking the nursery again when he spied Kenton and another servant coming out of the first floor west wing. Varden leaned over the banister and called down, "Anything yet?"

"One of the maids saw her near the kitchen about an hour or so ago," Kenton called back. "The cook is threatening to quit, by the way. Someone more fluent in the Parisian tongue should speak to him. All I make out is some nonsense about crinkle cut french fries, whatever the hell those are."

Varden braced his hands on the banister. "Was he upset?"

Kenton smiled, though only faintly. "That is a mild understatement."

"Did he stomp on the ladles?"

"With both feet. His apron was also on the cook fire and he was flinging plates."

"The tin or the porcelain?" Varden asked.

"Both."

Varden grunted. "Is anything cooking?"

"Beef pottage, I believe." Kenton thought a moment. "You're right. If he hasn't tossed it to the pigs, then he's not yet serious about quitting."

Staring at the section of banister between his hands, Varden frowned. "Mayhaps we should try to think like a lunatic. If you lost your mind, Kenton, where would you go?"

"Egypt," the valet said promptly.

Varden straightened in alarm. "You don't think she'll try to sail to America, do you?"

"No, of course not. She has probably locked herself in a room somewhere," Kenton said blandly.

"That is what I've been hoping. Has anyone searched the old well house?"

"I have two men there now."

Varden glared down at him. "You think I'm being irrational, don't you?"

"I think you should decide whether you love or despise your wife and stop bouncing back and forth between the two passions. The rest of us have cricks in our necks from watching the two of you spar."

"Search the castle again," Varden ordered.

As he marched away, Kenton called after him. "Perhaps she went outside."

"She hates the out-of-doors."

"Of course she does, which is why she went with you to the garden last week. Showed particular interest in the hedge maze, if I recall."

Varden stopped where he was. The flowers and rose bushes had been close to the hedge maze. Naturally, she had asked about it. He directed the servants into two groups and to Kenton said, "Take those men and search Cadhla again, top to bottom, room by room. Everywhere, do you understand? If a door is locked, break it down. The rest of you, come with me. I want a complete search of the grounds."

While not small, the garden was restricted in growth by the parameter of the encompassing castle walls. Flowerbeds of hyssop and germander formed elaborate designs around a variety of stone statues, both nude and not, some holding bountiful baskets, or grateful lovers, or with arms out stretched to the heavens. David wrestled a stone Goliath, surrounded by a tidy sand walkway, while further on Sampson dallied with a perfectly formed, white-marble Delilah on a bed of twining ivy. Toward the center of the garden was a giant stone fountain with an ornate centerpiece that spouted water. Behind that was the hedge maze: cypress and lavender shrubs standing eight feet high and planted impenetrably close together.

Taking with him only those who knew the way, Varden entered the maze. He ventured around every corner and into every dead end, past marble benches, smaller fountains and decorative statues. Nothing. They searched the flower beds, under rose bushes, even going so far as to search the branches of every tree in the orchard in case she had climbed one and could not get down again. Still no sign of Claire.

Finally, hot, sweaty and tired, they reached the far edge of the garden. Discouraged, Varden looked back at the castle.

"Again," he said. "I want every place searched again."

By the time Varden rendezvoused with Kenton, half the day was gone and his twinges of concern had tied themselves into full-blown knots of alarm. "Tell me you found something."

"Nothing that has to do with your lady wife." Kenton seemed subdued, which meant he was also growing concerned. To insult and needle the nobility was one thing, but to misplace one was an unpardonable breach of responsibilities.

"She left," Varden said.

"There is little point in panicking until we have sufficient reason."

"Such as being absent for four hours?"

"The baby is still here, the horses are all accounted for, and so is her jewelry," Kenton said. "Even insane, where would she go without money or clothes?"

"You're right." Varden looked over the group. A few servants were still missing, still searching. He took some comfort from that. Unfortunately, those missing party members all straggled back as empty-handed as he, and his slim hopes vanished.

"All right." Eyes closed, Varden held the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "If she hasn't left me, then she might have wandered beyond the castle walls. I will kill whoever is on guard if she did, but for now ask the noon shift if they have seen her. Search the pig yard and the well." It stuck in his throat to say it. "And the moat, just in case. The rest of you are back with me."

Varden led half of the search party to the outer bailey. All around, people were calling for Claire, but there was no answering hail.

A few off-duty soldiers approached and expectation rose along with a smothering sense of dread. One had seen her by the stables but that had been much earlier in the day. Having heard the searcher's calls, they offered to join the hunt.

A thought occurred to Varden. "We are using the wrong name. Kenton, have them call for Mallory. She might answer to that."

They split up: Kenton taking a small group to check the pig and chicken yards; Varden following grimly behind four men with long poles to search the length of the moat. Another hour passed before Kenton and Varden finally reunited on the castle steps.

"She must be inside," Kenton said. His white sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. Angry red scratches marred his forearms where he had tangled with a thorn bush in the garden. Rips in both his shirt and vest suggested Kenton wasn't the victor in the match. There was also a smudge of

mud on his cheek. "We have been all over both the courtyard and the garden. A few of the lads are still searching the wall-towers. I even sent two riders to the Training Field, but--"

Varden swung sharply back to stare at the gate. "You don't think she could have gotten as far as Wooler, do you?"

Kenton held up his hands, catching Varden before he charged for the gatehouse. "No one saw her leave. I was just taking precautions."

"Yer Grace!" Heads turned expectantly as a young stable hand crossed the courtyard to them, half-jogging and half-hopping over a small pile of hay like a freckle-faced, gangly frog. "They found 'er! She's in the barracks!"

For the barest of moments, Varden knew relief. She was not floating in the bottom of the moat where the searchers' poles could not reach. She was not lying unconscious at the dark bottom of a flight of steps, waiting to be found. She was in the barracks.

The barracks--sleeping quarters for the eighty-six permanent soldiers that patrolled Cadhla and its grounds day and night. While he could attest to Claire's safety--if not fidelity--in the hands of his own men, Godfrey's soldiers were also quartered in the barracks. And Varden trusted them no more than he trusted their master.

"Tell her I will see her in her chambers," Varden commanded and started back toward Cadhla. It was definitely time for a drink. He dared not trust himself to deal with her without calming down first.

"I-I told 'er, Yer Grace."

The boy flinched when Varden stopped on the top step and turned slowly to face him. He scowled. "And? Is she coming?"

"Not exactly." The boy ducked his head in obvious reluctance. "She--she said if you really wanted to see her, you'd 'ave made the effort six days ago."

Varden's face darkened as the servants, still gathered in the courtyard, looked on.

Clearing his throat, Kenton turned around. He clapped his hands. "Back to work, ladies and gentlemen. Time to return to your positions."

Varden glared at the barracks. "She said that, did she?"

The boy bobbed his head. "Said she'd, uh, be back when she was ready."

"There are too many witnesses present for you to pull off a successful murder," Kenton told him, but already Varden was headed toward the barracks.

On the opposite end of the bailey and far from the garden, it was little wonder no one had found her before now. As Varden ducked through the open doorway and into the long room that bunked the soldiers, he heard a cheer and his wife's bright laughter.

Barefoot, she sat cross-legged on the floor with the skirts of her pale, blue nightgown bunched around her dusty knees. Her legs were bare. She had rolled her sleeves up over her elbows so they would not get in her way, and every inch of exposed skin along her arms, legs, and even her shoulders and face were peppered in dirt. She had obviously been here awhile, encircled by two of Godfrey's men and four of his own, all of them engaged in a boisterous game of dice. There was a small pile of coins near her dusty feet, and a larger pile in the center of the players' circle. It increased marginally as each of them tossed in their next bids. While a common cup of honey mead was passed from man to man around the circle, it was his wife who scooped up the dice. Judging by the flush on her cheeks, the cup had already passed her lips more than once.

As Varden watched, she shook the dice. "Come on seven! Mama needs a new pair of shoes!"

His scowl blackened. As if she'd wear them.

She tossed them onto the ground and cheered, whooping and clapping with joy. "Okay, boys, hand over your money. I am hot tonight!"

It was among the good-natured laughter that followed that saucy little comment that the soldiers first noticed Varden. He smiled, a decidedly unfriendly smile. One by one, they fell silent. Except for Claire, who was too busy exclaiming over her newfound wealth to pay attention to what was happening around her.

"Ooo, look at that. This one has a picture of a . . . a lady on it. And this one has a . . . building. And this one has . . . what is that? A beaver? No, looks more like a rat." She squinted at the coin. "Maybe it's a weasel. Could be a person. It's too worn to tell." She nudged the man next to her and showed him the coin. "What is this?"

"A groat, Yer Grace."

"Groat?" She turned it over in her palm and looked at the back. "Is it worth a lot?"

"Depends on what yer buying."

She put the groat down and sifted through her coins again. "Do I have a farthing in here? They talk about farthings in all the old Robin Hood movies, but I've never seen one. Are any of these farthings?"

When no answer was forthcoming, Claire raised her head to find that everyone but her had stood up.

"What's everyone so serious about?" She turned, and her eyes lit up when she saw him. She scooped up all the money that she could hold in both hands. "Look, Varden. I'm rich."

There was a dusty brown streak on the end of her nose and her hair was unpinned and unbrushed. It curled around her cherubic face in complete disarray. She looked like a street urchin.

He struggled to keep his anger from lashing out. Not here. Not in front of everyone. He would wait until he got her back to the relative privacy of her room. Then he was going to throttle her where, as

Kenton had already pointed out, there were no witnesses.

"We have been searching for you for five hours," he growled.

"Well, I've been right here." She hardly spared him another glance as she gathered her coins into a small pouch and right before his eyes--as well as everyone else's--tucked it down the front of her nightgown. The pouch of coins clinked as she patted her chest. "I've been exploring. This place is really magnificent. Everything is so different, here. Except dice. You know, dice haven't changed a bit. They look almost exactly like this in my time, too."

He clenched his teeth and the muscle at his jaw began to pulse ominously. "Come along, ma petite folle. We are leaving."

"You leave. I'm too busy plying my new trade. I've decided to become a gambler and live like a queen of debauchery off the proceeds of my raunchy new lifestyle. I like debauchery. Be proud of me, Varden. That's something I never knew before about myself."

She wasn't going to be able to sit comfortably again for the rest of the week. "Where did you get the money to gamble?"

"From the pouch on your bedside table." She hardly looked up. "I couldn't very well gamble without funds, you know. Where's the fun in that?"

Make that, the rest of the month. "There was no pouch in my room."

She reached back into her bodice to show him the pouch in question.

"I remember what it looks like," Varden snapped. "I don't remember leaving money there."

"Don't be angry. I'll give it back to you." She bounced the pouch in her palm to hear the coins jingle. "I've probably doubled the number of coins in here, but I don't know if I've doubled the sum. I'd better learn how to count your money or I may end up a rather impoverished queen."

Forget the month, she wasn't going to sit down comfortably again for the rest of her life. Varden drew a deep, calming breath, then forced himself to smile. "We are leaving. Both of us. Right now."

"You go. I'll come in when I'm ready." She turned back to the game and scooped up the dice for another cast.

Losing patience, Varden grabbed them from Claire's hand and hauled her to her feet by one arm. "I said now!"

No longer smiling, she jerked her arm from his grasp. "Let go of me! What's wrong with you?"

Varden darkened even further. He was too angry now to care who was watching. "You will do as I tell you. Now go to your room!"

She drew back with a look of surprise, then she glared at him. She was getting better at it. "I keep telling myself to be patient and understanding and kind, and maybe your nasty little temper will cool enough for you to become something approaching human again. But you are really starting to push my buttons!"

His temper almost to the point of boiling over, Varden growled, "I'm warning you--"

"Just because Claire treated you badly doesn't mean that you can do the same to me. I'm not a child to be ordered about by some egotistical, arrogant control freak!" She bent to pick up her money pouch, which had fallen out of her nightgown when he'd grabbed her arm, and the cup of mead from her neighbor's hand.

The muscle in his jaw jumping erratically, when she raised the cup to her lips, Varden grabbed it. In the brief tug-of-war that followed, Claire's fingers slipped and the force of his jerk knocked the cup to him. Mead sloshed over the rim and splashed backwards into his face.

Varden swiped at his burning eyes, fury surging through his veins. It spilled out vocally in a bellow of unprecedented rage

Chapter Seven

The old stories lied. Death was not a bony skeleton, shrouded within the folds of a heavy black cloak. No, it was a sixteenth century, flesh-and-blood duke, with ice blue eyes, a sword strapped to his hip, and cheap honey mead dripping from his bangs to his chin. Growling, Death wiped his face with one hand, then glared at her. His breath hissed between tightly clenched teeth. He seemed to swell, growing bigger right before her eyes. And it was in that instant, as Death stretched out his hand to grab her by the scruff of her nightgown, that Mallory saw her life--both her lives--suddenly flash before her eyes.

They were very brief.

Varden roared, and Mallory ran as fast as she could in the opposite direction.

The servants and soldiers gathered in the bailey parted before her like Moses at the Red Sea, clearing a path from the barracks to the castle steps. She had just reached them when Varden lurched out of the barracks and bellowed something that sounded a lot like, "Get back here, woman!"

She might have been mistaken, but since there was no way that she was going back to ask for clarification, she only picked up her skirts and ran faster.

At the top of the stairs, Kenton calmly opened the door and then stepped well out of the way. Not because of Mallory, who puffed a quick 'thank you' as she darted past him into the Great Hall, but because Death had given chase, his boots pounding the cobblestones as he closed the distance between them.

Mallory ducked behind three servants, the last remnants of an indoor searching party, and crouched, hoping to hide. Unfortunately, they provided her with little cover because the instant Varden burst through the door, they scattered like

panicked chickens and Mallory found herself fully in his sight.

He pointed. "Stay right where you are!"

Mallory ran for the stairs.

"I said stay!" Varden bellowed and chased her up to the second floor.

By the time Mallory reached the upper hall, she had a hand pressed to her aching side and could barely catch her breath. Her new body was badly out of shape, but she couldn't afford to stop. Varden was taking the stairs two at a time, coming up fast behind her.

"Wait until I get my hands on you!"

His growl provided all the encouragement she needed to get moving again. Mallory barely reached her room ahead of him. She felt his fingers brush the back of her gown as she flung herself inside and slammed the door. She threw the locking bar into place just as his heavier bulk crashed into the other side. The entire frame rattled, but the door remained standing.

Thank God for sturdy English oak.

Amid an explosion of curses, Varden beat his fist against the door. Then all fell ominously silent.

Mallory pressed her ear to a crack in the rough wood planks, but there was no sound beyond her own pounding heart and ragged gasps for breath. Maybe she was safe.

"Claire," Varden called softly, the wood muffling his voice. "Ma petite folle, you have until the count of three to let me in."

Relief made her giddy and Mallory leaned back against the door, laughing. "Not until you admit that what happened outside was all your fault. You're a tyrant and a bully, and you need help dealing with some unresolved anger issues."

How did one go about finding a psychiatrist in the sixteenth century? She closed her eyes, covered her face with her hands, and laughed until her stomach cramped. It wasn't until she heard the creak of door hinges that Mallory remembered her

chamber adjoined his. She turned just as Varden, in all his black fury, stepped into the room.

Mallory worried her nightgown in her hands. "Are you very angry?"

He laughed without mirth, an evil throaty sound, and closed the door behind him.

As he started toward her, Mallory edged away from the door to keep from being cornered against it. "I have a great idea: let's take a time-out. Once we're both calm, I'll bet we can think of a nice, rational solution to our ongoing incompatibility problems."

"I already have the perfect solution for them." With murderous intensity, Varden stalked her from across the room. "Come here, Claire. You're in enough trouble without my having to chase you down again."

She cringed against the wall even as she opened her mouth to correct him. "Mallory."

Varden paused. Anger darkened his eyes to a stormy shade of gray. He clenched his teeth and a muscle pulsed ominously along his jaw.

"I know it doesn't make a whole lot of difference," she admitted. "But if you're going to kill me, the least you can do is get my name right."

"I am not going to kill you," he smiled nastily, "Mallory. You're just going to wish I had."

Nervously, she licked her lips. Her only chance for escape lay with the table on the opposite end of the room. But first, she would have to get around the bed without being grabbed by Varden's itchy, twitching, menacing fingers. Panic flooded through her as she contemplated those hands. She had no doubts that he was going to beat her again. The last time had hurt so much, and Varden hadn't been anywhere near this angry then! What he would do to her now Mallory couldn't bear to think. Gasping, her eyes suddenly open wide, she pointed behind him. "Look! A dodo!"

"I couldn't care less."

"All right, fine." Mallory grabbed a heavy vase from the knick-knack table beside her and hoped it wasn't expensive. "Catch!"

She flung it wildly and ran for the bed.

Instinctively, Varden ducked. The vase missed his head by inches and hit the wall instead. It shattered and he stared in shock at the pieces scattering at his feet. "That vase was as old as this castle."

Snatching the hem of her nightgown up in both hands, Mallory jumped onto her bed. She stumbled, her feet sinking deep into the feather mattress. Very nearly losing her balance, she grabbed the canopy curtains to steady her.

Varden leapt after her, even more angry than before, catching hold of her trailing skirts. He yanked. The canopy tore as Mallory toppled to the goose-down mattress. There was a second rip and the hooks that lined the back of her nightgown rained down to the floor.

"We don't have an incompatibility problem," Varden growled as he pulled her back across the bed. His eyes glittered icily. "What we have is a problem with authority: I have all the authority and you constantly defy it. In front of my men, as well as the servants. And let us not forget the mead." He reached for her ankle.

Mallory shivered, more frightened now that she had ever been in both her lives. After all, Varden was very strong and very angry, and she was in the body of the woman he hated. "What are you going to do?"

"I promise you'll faint before it becomes too painful."

"Oh!" Mallory twisted onto her stomach and rolled until her nightgown came up over her head. In an instant, she had wriggled free of it and once again ran for the table.

Lying half across the bed, Varden stared at the abandoned nightgown as if unable to fathom exactly how it had come to be in his hands in the first place. Left in only a thin chemise, his wife had run halfway to the table before Varden recovered enough from his surprise to move.

She had already begun to lose the extra weight she had picked up during her confinement. What little she still retained only served to add a slight rounding to what would otherwise have been a willowy frame. A maelstrom of red curls tumbled over her shoulders and down her back, brushing tauntingly over the alluring swell of her bottom.

Her skin glowed healthy and pink, bared to his gaze, just waiting to be caressed. His eyes warmed briefly, then chilled as he remembered he wanted to throttle her. He could make love to her any time; how often did one get a good excuse for committing murder?

Claire watched him warily from behind the table, trembling and afraid.

He beckoned with one finger. "Come here, young lady."

She shook her head. "Not until you agree to discuss this like a rational adult."

Varden climbed off the bed. "I am as rational as any tyrannical bully with unresolved anger issues."

As he neared her, Claire moved to keep the table between them. Her hands touched lightly on the table's rough surface as she watched him come. Her legs were braced apart, her hips pushed slightly back. She unwittingly rocked back and forth as she tried to anticipate the direction that he would charge her, so she could run the other way.

Varden was suddenly decided: that was the position he wanted to take her in. Standing up, with her breasts filling his hands and her bottom arched back against him. As he kissed and caressed her, he would watch the pleasure playing across her face in the full-length mirror just beyond them. Of course, he would have to catch her first.

And kill her. He mustn't forget why he was here.
Planting his hands on the table, Varden vaulted over the top.

With a shrill shriek, Claire ducked and scrambled underneath. By the time his feet touched the ground, she was pulling herself up on the opposite side. Once again with the table between them, they glared at one another: one afraid, covered better by the long tresses of her hair than what remained of her clothes; one incensed, but not so much with anger anymore.

"Well, well." Varden smiled. "This is the first time I have had to chase you around the table when love-making was not the outcome."

Varden darted one way, his wife went the other, struggling to keep abreast of him. After two laps, he vaulted over the top again and Claire almost didn't swerve fast enough to avoid capture. She fled back across the room and ducked behind the settee. His fingers only barely brushed the ends of her hair before she was safely out of reach. Once again, they eyed one another from opposite sides of the furniture.

"This too has seen a lot of use." Varden wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She actually looked annoyed. "Is that all you think about?"

Varden grabbed the back of the settee as if about to jump over the top, but instead of running, as he anticipated, she smacked him across the chest with one of the pillows and dashed into his chambers. She tried to slam the door, but Varden grabbed it, shouting as his fingers were pinched between the door and the frame. In a raw burst of pain and renewed fury, he pushed into the room. But Claire was already running away. She headed for the biggest obstacle in the room--the bed and the open balcony doors, which stood a mere ten yards beyond that.

"Oh no you don't." Varden ducked around the bed even as she scampered across the mattress to the other side.

She was quick. Thankfully, the skirts of her chemise hampered her mobility or he might never have got between her and the balcony in time.

The race was now over. He had just won.

Trapped by the bed that should have saved her, Claire faced him. She was panting and holding her side with one hand; he was barely winded. While her eyes were wide and wary, his were smugly half-closed. She still had a smudge of dirt on the end of her nose. He had the most incredible urge to bend down and kiss it.

Instead, he asked, "Are we to have laps around my bed now?"

"It's against the wall."

"I never said we had to be above covers."

"I thought you hated me," Claire accused.

Varden smiled. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh!" Grabbing a pillow from the bed, Claire smacked him across the chest again. Twice this time. And when Varden threw up his hands to block the third blow, the seam tore and a cloud of grey and white goose down feathers exploded into the air. He grabbed the deflated pillow at the same moment that she seized a six-inch dagger from his bedside table. He barely jumped back in time to keep from being skewered on his own boot knife.

"You just leave me alone!" she panted.

Backed against the bed, she held the tiny knife as competently as any new recruit on the Field. Two red, corkscrew curls hung over her wide green eyes. When she crouched, he could see all the way down the front of her bodice to her navel. She was breath taking.

"I must say," Varden admitted, eyeing the knife, "I haven't had this much exercise with you in years."

She didn't pretend to mistake his meaning. "What about Devin?"

His smile was dry and humorless. "That was Godfrey's exercise."

"You cynical, son of a--Back off!"

When she stabbed dramatically at him with the short knife, Varden's glacial eyes flashed in warning. "There isn't one man within a hundred miles who wouldn't be quaking in his boots right now were he in your place and holding a knife on me. Do yourself a favor, bise, and put it down before you get hurt."

"Get back! Don't you touch me!" Claire jabbed at him again, coming scant inches from cutting his arm. His hand clamped down on her wrist like a vise. He squeezed just hard enough to make her drop the knife. It fell to the floor with a clatter and bounced under the bed. She stared after it in dismay. "Oh dear."

Varden was inclined to agree. "You should have come when I told you to."

She kicked his shin as hard as she could and wrenched her wrist free. While Varden roared and grabbed his leg, she ran past him.

If he had been angry before, he was positively livid now. Clutching his throbbing leg with one hand, he glared after her. His teeth were exposed in a grimace that was as much fury as it was pain. "Pray I never find my knife, mon âme. I may skin you with it."

Claire backed out the balcony doors. "You'd have to catch me first."

"You are already in for the worst spanking of your young life." He beckoned her to him. "Don't make me come out there and get you."

She glanced down in dismay when she bumped the stone railing with her hip.

"I mean it, Claire," Varden hissed. At the edge of the balcony, he gestured for her to get back inside. "Hurry up before someone sees you!"

She stared down to the bailey a good fifteen feet below her, then looked back at him. It was then that Varden noticed how frightened she looked. She was shaking, so badly now that she could barely stand and her eyes had filled with tears. When she craned her neck to look back down at the bailey, he felt his blood chill. She was going to jump.

Varden held up both hands in a belated attempt to calm her. "Don't, Claire. Mon âme, please come back inside."

Claire spun, flinging one leg over the banister even as he leapt for her. His arms wrapped around her waist and she was lifted, kicking and screaming, into the air before she could fall.

It was like trying to carry a devoted dervish. She bucked and thrashed, bit and clawed, burst into tears and wailed out of sheer panic, and it was nothing short of stubbornness that kept him from dropping her when she threw her head back and clipped him in the jaw. But he dragged her in off the balcony and got her safely back to her room.

Sitting on her bed, Varden pulled her writhing and screaming onto his lap. His strong arms wrapped tight about hers, holding her as close as he could while she struggled herself into exhaustion and her screams dissolved into wordless wails and terrified sobs. Seven years of hell had not prepared him for the sudden rush of tenderness that overwhelmed him. While she quaked in his arms, Varden gently began to rock her. "Shh, shh. It's all right, bise. Shh. You are safe with me."

Held tightly in his embrace, he felt her shake her head. She was crying loud and so hard that she could barely gasp for breath.

"Yes, you are." He brushed her hair back from her face, pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, and rocked her some more. "What were you thinking? If you had jumped, you would have broken your legs at the very least and possibly even your neck. How is jumping even an option? Are you that afraid of me?"

Claire tried to struggle off his lap, but Varden refused to let her. When she covered her face with her hands, he caught her wrists and pushed them down into her lap again.

"Look at me, Claire. Calm down, mon âme, take deep breaths. There's a good girl." He waited until her sobs eased into ragged gasps and soft hiccups, then cupped her chin in his large hand and gently forced her to meet his eyes. "I swear to you, I will never beat you. I will never strike you with my fists or kick you or shove you against the walls. I will never slap your face or stripe your back. You know this; there is no reason for you to look at me with such fear in your eyes. I will never, ever hurt you. Do you understand me?"

Twin tears spilled over her lashes, trickling unhindered down her cheeks as she gasped and hiccupped. She nodded.

"Do you believe me?"

She hesitated, biting her lip before nodding again.

"All right then. Let's talk about what I will do." His hand on her chin prevented her from looking away. "I will, any and every time you ask, lay you across my knees. I will raise your skirts and bare your bottom. And I will spank you, as long and as hard as is required for the lesson to be learned."

"B-but you j-just said you wouldn't hurt me!" she wailed. Once more, she struggled to break free.

"And I won't," he said calmly, holding her securely on his lap. "A spanking won't hurt you. No, it won't," he said when she frantically nodded. "In fact, I believe spankings in your case are very necessary and will do you a world of good. Especially the one that you have asked for today."

Chest heaving, she began to sob. Varden only wrapped her back in his arms and lay her head back against his shoulder while she cried into his shirt. "I d-didn't ask f-for anyth-thing!"

"Your actions did the asking for you." He brushed her hair back from her face. "But I am not

an ogre, despite what you seem to think, and I will make you a deal. I will list why I believe you deserve to be spanked, but if you can give me one good reason why I shouldn't discipline you, then I won't."

Hands in her lap, sniffing and hiccupping, she picked at her fingers and didn't look at him.

He took her silence for acquiesce. "All right, then. Number one, you disappeared without a word to anyone. For the last five hours, we've been searching for you, both in and outside of Cadhla and at the bottom of the moat. You have caused everyone a lot of trouble and concern. What do you have to say for yourself?"

In a small and shaky voice, still not looking at him, she said, "I was bored. I-I just wanted to look around."

"Does your excuse negate five hours worth of disruption in more than forty people's lives as we all searched to find you? We were hoping alive, but we really didn't know."

Claire winced, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. When she said nothing, Varden continued, "Number two, we had an agreement: I would allow you to care for Devin and at all other times when outside of my presence, you would remain in your room. This has broken that agreement. Unless you can give me a good reason not to, then I am going to spank you for breaking your word."

"I was bored!" Claire wailed. "You keep me locked in my room like a prisoner! Out of sight, out of mind, that's all I am!"

He was inflexible. "Is that a good enough excuse for dismissing the promise that you made to me?"

She tried again to get off his lap. Varden shifted her in his embrace, pulling her close to his chest, a little surprised when she allowed him to press her head to his shoulder. He was even more surprised when she tucked her hand beneath her chin and

clutched a fistful of his shirt. In a childish wail, she cried out, "Please, Varden, don't spank me!"

He stroked her soft red hair. "Number three, I will not brook defiance from you, Madame. Not in front of the servants, not in front of my soldiers. When I give you a command, I expect you to drop whatever you are doing and obey it without pause or question."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed brokenly. "You keep telling me what to do, as if I'm a child. I was angry-"

"And that is also no excuse."

Her breathing quickened as she realized he was coming to the end of his list and so far, she hadn't been absolved of anything.

"Number four, you ran from me."

"I was afraid."

"I know. But you should know better. Other than a sore bottom now and again, when have I ever hurt you? Which leaves us with your near head-first dive off the balcony. You are never to try to harm yourself again. I won't permit it, Claire, and there is no excuse you could give me to justify the attempt. This is the second time that I have had to pull you back from jumping. I intend to make damn sure, there isn't a third one."

"Please," she begged. "Don't hurt me!"

"Everything you have done today has been geared to land you bottom-up across my knee. So, yes, this is going to hurt. I'm going to use your hairbrush over there, in fact, and it's going to hurt a lot."

Claire sobbed with frustration and despair, but she didn't argue further and Varden determined the discussion was over. He stood her up. Taking her by the hand, he led her to her dressing table. She only tried to draw away once, and that was when he picked up the hairbrush. Next, he pulled the straight-backed chair away from the mirror and set it into the middle of the room. When he sat down,

Claire gave first the hairbrush and then him the most forlorn of looks.

"Over my knee," he told her, stern and unyielding.

Her shoulders drooped. "Do you have to use that on me? Your hand hurts enough as it is."

"I've already had to chase you down once today. How much worse do you want to make this?"

She drew a deep breath, holding it as she considered what few options she had. Then, with a slow exhale, Claire surprised the hell out of him. With trembling hands and without being asked, she raised the skirts of her chemise to her waist and bared her own bottom before bending over. She rested her hand on his hard thigh, then lowered herself awkwardly across his thighs.

"There," she whispered. "Will you please not spank me so hard now?"

It was the hardest spanking he'd ever yet had to give. He attacked her bottom with the hairbrush, laying dozens of hard and fast strokes that elicited immediate kicks and shrieks from Claire. Her hand snapped back to try and stop him, and for a brief moment, he did stop. Just long enough to pin her hand behind her, haul her bare bottom more fully across his lap, and then begin again. With a few well placed smacks across her sensitive thighs, her tears once more began to fall, but Varden wasn't content with mere crying. He paddled her until his wife had kicked and struggled herself into exhaustion, until she was bawling too hard even to beg him for mercy, until her bottom and thighs were crimson and hot and he could all but see them throbbing with pain. Dark shadows hinted at bruising, especially across her sit spot, where he had concentrated the majority of his sterner smacks.

And when it was finally done, he dropped the brush on the floor and simply held her across his knee while she sobbed. He kept her hand still pinned up behind her, although he did give in to the

urge to gently caress her until the worst of the agony had faded into a dull, pulsing ache and Claire gradually came back to herself.

"I hate you," she finally sobbed.

"Fair enough," Varden said.

He carried her back to bed and lay her down against her pillows. Almost immediately, she groaned and rolled onto her stomach.

Discipline was done, it was time to walk away. But the problem was, he didn't want to walk away. He wanted to keep holding her, to kiss the tears from her cheeks and pretend that they were still in love. He lay down next to her, but couldn't bring himself to touch her. The time when they were lovers felt like a lifetime ago. Certainly, the look she was giving him now, as she lay on her stomach, her face wet with tears, her scarlet bottom bared to the cool air of the room, didn't invite closeness.

She sniffled, dashing at her wet cheeks with the back of her wrist. "Say my name."

Varden lifted a stray lock of hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear. "Claire," he murmured.

"No," she told him. "Say my name."

When he only sighed, her eyes narrowed bitterly.

"I can't believe I came back for this," she muttered. "You can't even say it."

"I see no point in helping you delude yourself."

"I'm not the only delusional one in this room!" she sniffled again. "You wouldn't believe how happy I was the first time I saw my reflection. I thought, wow, I'm actually beautiful. Do you know what happens when you're not beautiful, Varden? You get Joe Barker, the guy in apartment 3-C, who sniffs modeling glue for fun and is down to his last two working brain cells. I made it a point to smile at Joe whenever I saw him, just in case I ever got that desperate.

"Then this happened. I thought things would be different here, easier. The beautiful girl always gets

the guy of her dreams. That's the way it ends in every movie and romance novel I've ever seen. And don't start looking at me like that, dammit! If you weren't so cussed stubborn you'd realize," Claire jabbed him none too gently in the ribs with her elbow, "You're the dream guy I'm talking about!"

Sighing, Varden said, "I would love to lose my mind, too. I'd give anything to forget what has happened between us and just start over again fresh. But it doesn't happen that way."

"Then how does it happen? Because for the life of me, I can't even see the sunset we're supposed to ride off into."

He looked confused. "And go where?"

"We don't actually go anywhere. It's a metaphor. When the hero and heroine ride off into the sunset, then you just know they're going to live happily ever after." She winced as she gently touched her tender flanks. "Not that I could sit on a horse at this point anyway."

He cupped her cheek, the calloused hand he had so ruthlessly punished her with a moment ago now capturing her attention with its gentleness. "I don't understand half of what you say anymore, however, you have always been beautiful."

Claire made a face. "My grandpa used to say that all the time."

"He told the truth," Varden said.

"No, he lied like a rug. Grandpas have to say that crap. It's in their contracts."

Varden smiled, despite himself. He inclined his head, brushing his lips first across her right tear-moistened cheek and then the left. She felt soft and warm and familiar lying here next to him. And when she lifted her chin, brushing his lips to her own came easily. It was a small kiss, chaste and gentle, and it left him dizzy.

By the time he raised his head, her eyes were closed. She took a long, slow breath before opening them.

"You know," she breathed, "the first time I saw you, I thought you were a dream."

"Funny, you once told me the first time you saw me I looked like a stable boy."

His wife looked confused. "When did I say that?"

"Years ago. I was covered in mud at the time. You don't remember?"

"Humor me."

Varden half-smiled. "It had been raining for days and my hackney had got stuck in the mud. I had just climbed down to help free it when your family coach drove right by us. You looked straight out the window at me. I thought you were an angel."

"Some angel," she murmured sleepily, eyes half-closed. "If it really had been me, I'd have stopped to help."

He could almost believe her. Varden shook his head, tucked another curly lock of red hair away from her face and stood up again. "Stay in bed a while. Take a nap. I know you must be very tired. And in future, if you want to go exploring, Grete is to go with you and I am to know where you are. Agreed? Claire?"

Her eyes had closed.

"Claire?" he said a little louder.

She opened her eyes briefly. "I'm tired."

When her eyes drifted closed again, Varden only shook his head. He tucked a blanket around her shoulders, then opened her door to signal to Grete that it was safe to enter before he returned to his own room.

Kenton was waiting for him, a riding coat and his sword laid out on the bed. Varden looked from them to him. "How long have you been here?"

The dark manservant shrugged with his eyebrows. "I arrived shortly before the wailing began. Good set of lungs on that one. I assumed you would not want to be disturbed."

Closing the door between his room and Claire's, Varden approached the foot of his bed to pick up the sword. "Where am I going?"

"Two homes in Candlewick were attacked," Kenton said, matter-of-factly. "Both were looted and burned. The families have just arrived. I thought you would want to know."

Chapter Eight

Exploring Cadhla was like walking through a museum. It was dark, cool, quiet and full of an assortment of strange and antiquated relics. Mallory spent an hour studying portraits of stiff-backed, cross-looking people in a room full of nothing but. She spent another hour wandering through the maze of servants' stairs and back halls, telling every man, woman and child that she passed, "I'm going exploring. If Varden should ask, I'll be in this hall another half hour or so, and then I'm on to the next one, okay?" And though it grated that he insisted on treating her like an untrustworthy child, the last thing Mallory wanted was another trip across Varden's merciless knee. She didn't have Greta with her--the older woman having been summoned to the dowager's side earlier that afternoon--so Mallory suspected she might end up there anyway. But at least this way, the consequences for an afternoon spent exploring would likely be lessened.

Coming to the end of the hall, Mallory carefully negotiated her way down a steep flight of servants steps only to end up in the kitchen for the second time in as many days. The instant the cook saw her, he began shouting in French and waving his ladle in the air. She assumed that to mean there were still no french fries.

Sure enough, between two wide-eyed maids cringing away from the livid Frenchman, Mallory spotted a familiar meal tray laden with a bowl of thin chicken broth and two thick slices of black bread. On the surrounding tables, there were garlic, onions and leeks as well as bowls of fruits--oranges, currants, figs and raisins. A thick meat pottage was bubbling over the fire while no less than two dozen plucked pheasants were being spitted for roasting.

"Look at all this food." Mallory pointed to her tray. "Why am I still eating broth when we've got all this other stuff?"

With a brusque motion, the cook gestured to the bowl with his ladle. "Cela, c'est votre soupe."

"I don't want to eat that anymore. It's all grease. I need more than greasy broth to eat."

"J'ai préparé cela pour vous. Mangez-en mangez-le."

"I don't want that." Mallory protested. "I want what everyone else is having. And there's no reason to shout at me!"

The cook shook his ladle at the tray again, then at her, his voice rising. "Sors de ma cuisine!"

Hands on her hips, she began to shout back. "I'm not leaving this kitchen until you start giving me what everyone else gets!"

"Embettante espèce de femelle, partout and toujours sous pieds."

"Bread and broth. Bread and broth! It's always bread and broth!" Mallory spread her arms to encompass the kitchen. "There's tons of food in here: lamb, pork, beef, eggs, onions."

"Ingrate!"

"From now on, breakfast will be fruit and eggs or oatmeal," Mallory declared, holding up her finger.

"Bouillon!"

She held up two fingers. "Lunch will be soup and a salad with cheese, chicken and bacon bits."

"Tu n'apprécies jamais mes efforts. Je finirai pour des cochons avant de réchauffer quoi que ce soit pour toi! Crève, je m'en fous!"

"Dinner," she bellowed, matching him volume for volume and holding up a third finger, "will be exactly what everyone else is having! I don't think I'm being unreasonable here!"

He threw his ladle on the floor and stomped on it. "Mes talents considérables sont gaspillés sous ces conditions horribles!"

"And it wouldn't kill you to throw in dessert once in a while!"

The cook turned an apoplectic shade of red. He bent backward, shaking both fists in the air as he shouted, "Je t'enverrai ton dessert!"

Mallory grabbed an orange from the table and darted out the door just as a bowl of spice pudding hit the wall behind her. The sound of breaking crockery followed her all the way down the hall.

By sheer accident, she discovered a small library stacked nearly to the ceiling with old manuscripts, loose parchments and books of all sizes, shapes and thicknesses. One dusty volume in particular caught her eye. It was full of a mixture of drawings, art and architectural designs. Since there were no chairs, Mallory carefully knelt on the floor to spare her tender bottom the pain of having to sit and flipped through the thick parchment pages while she peeled and ate her orange.

Afterward a passing maid led her to the Great Hall, which was, Mallory discovered, where all the good rooms were located. Like Varden's study, and a bright gold and white ball room where she ran her fingers over the taut strings of a gold-gilded harp and played a strained chorus of Pop Goes the Weasel on the spinet, which badly needed tuning.

There was a hall with eight huge double doors, each securely locked and elaborately carved with slightly similar battle scenes. This hall connected to a second, narrower corridor that ran left to right. To the right, a small door took her out of the castle and down six large steps into the sunshine that bathed this private section of the courtyard. Three soldiers were seated on a wooden bench at the entrance of the main courtyard, eating their dinners. They looked up when they saw her. She waved; they watched her.

A small square structure attached to the bailey wall directly across from her. The entrance to Cadhla's prison system, it was obviously still in use since a man was seated at the desk just inside. He looked up from his ledger when she came in, then immediately stood up.

"Your Grace," he said, politely. He was fully armed, as well as armored. Grey tinged his mustache and beard. "May I help you?"

"Just looking." She smiled, even as her eyes were drawn to the only other door--an iron gate, really, locked from the outside at the bottom of a narrow flight of stone steps. Two men were stationed on the other side, armored, but not armed, looking back at her through the bars.

"Are there people down there?" she asked, thumbing toward the door.

The man came out from behind his desk, standing between her and the gate. "This is not the proper place for a lady, Your Grace. Shall I summon an escort for you?"

"No, no. That won't be necessary." She heard what sounded like a very distant cough as she backed out the door, the heat of the sunshine warming her shoulders again. "Sorry to have disturbed you."

He touched the rim of his helmet. "Always a pleasure, Your Grace."

Mallory returned to the castle. This time, choosing the left wing of the corridor, she followed a flight of stairs down to a narrow door with hinges that squeaked when she pushed it open. The room beyond was completely empty. The wall lamps here had long since been removed and the only light was provided by a series of narrow windows along the far wall. A huge round grate with a hinged iron hatch was set in the middle of the floor. She had just found the dungeon.

The obviously unused dungeon, which was locked and much too dark to see into.

Remembering that she had seen several candles in the main Hall, Mallory picked up her skirts and hurried to fetch one. On the way back, however, she took a wrong turn and ended up in another strange hall. At least thirty feet in length, the entire right side was lined with arched windows overlooking the garden. On her left, nestled in narrow nooks every eight feet or so, a freestanding suit of armor, each with a different shield and emblem, waited a silent vigil over her trespassing.

Out of curiosity, Mallory lifted one of the faceplates. What would it have been like to wear one? By the weight of the faceplate alone, very heavy.

At the very end of the hall, a pair of large double doors opened into a vast conference room. A huge map of Great Britain--incredibly outdated to her way of thinking--covered one entire wall from floor to ceiling. The map was dissected into different colored territories, with Varden's taking up a sizeable area at the top left where England and Scotland joined, and similarly colored smaller sections scattered throughout Europe.

Books were stacked on every available chair, some open, most closed and a few fallen on the floor in neglected piles that had slid half under each of the three long tables that stretched the room from end to end. Papers overflowed every flat surface on the tables, stacked upon all but one chair, stuffed between pages in some of the books. Though the fireplace was cold, a near empty glass of whiskey and a single burning candle had been set nearby.

Mallory wandered over to take a closer look. Curious, she opened a book near the candle. It was a ledger of names, admissions and rejections, recorded casualties and injuries, and successful graduations from the Field.

She picked up a loose sheet of parchment and tipped it to catch the light. A letter of sorts. Roughly half of the words were misspelled and, after stumbling through what appeared to be a progress report that listed the number of soldiers currently in training, the number on the waiting list and a damage tally accrued due to 'dire circumstances across the border,' she put the letter back where she found it. Obviously, proper spelling had yet to find its niche in the English language.

"Snooping?"

Mallory jumped, guiltily snatching her hands back from the document even as she turned to

confront Varden's younger brother. There was no doubt in her mind that Godfrey was the man leaning propped against one shoulder in the doorway. The family resemblance was uncanny. His hair was longer, but the same color blonde, tied back from his face with a single black ribbon. His eyes were a slightly different shade of blue. He had a leaner build, and stood perhaps an inch or two shorter than Varden. But aside from these, the only glaring difference Mallory could see lay in their clothes: Varden wore items favorable to the conditions of the Training Field; Godfrey was dressed in a gentleman's finery, his dark blue doublet matched his pants and hose. And when he smiled at her, laugh lines appeared around his mouth and eyes.

It was easy to see how Claire might have been tempted.

"I have missed you," Godfrey said as he stepped in to the room. A shiver of apprehension trickled down her back as he closed the door behind him and then moved towards her. He stopped less than an arm's length away and reached out to touch her hair, twirling the captured lock around his finger.

"Don't." Mallory took her hair from his hand. She stepped back, but he followed her, closing the distance with a larger step of his own.

"Don't," he echoed, slightly mocking, still smiling. "Don't what, don't touch you? You used to like the way I touched you."

He smiled again, a winning, charming smile that left her uneasy. "After all those months at court I've almost forgotten how truly lovely you are. A painter's muse just waiting for a brush, canvas and the proper lighting."

Mallory took a deep breath. This was it; the opportunity to fix the first of Claire's many wrongs. She wondered if there was a correct way to break up with the lover she never took in order to be faithful to the husband she never married. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Claire is gone, and

I don't want to pick up where the two of you left off."

At first Godfrey didn't move. Then, very slightly, he tipped his head to one side. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have decided to remain loyal to Varden, even if he never accepts me for who I am."

"Loyal to Varden." His eyes hardened. Mallory took another step back and bumped into a chair. A book fell from it to the floor with a bang that echoed throughout the shadowy chamber. "You needn't play games with me, my pearl. If you fear being caught, I assure you Varden will not be back for hours yet. No one else will disturb us."

"No one will disturb us, because we aren't going to do anything that needs disturbing." Mallory lifted her chin, sounding much more confident than she felt. Though his manner seemed so carefully unthreatening, the intensity of his hardened stare felt. . . wrong. She took another step back and this time bumped into the wall.

Godfrey followed without hesitation. He leaned over her, bracing his arm against the wall next to her head. "You must know I will provide well for you. Your every desire shall be painstakingly fulfilled: money, a place at court, a fancy townhouse and no one to protest should you invite a gentleman home for an hour, or an evening."

"Please go away." When he brought his mouth to hers, Mallory quickly turned her head aside. "You're too close."

His breath caressed her neck and ear. "I think I am not close enough."

"Leave me alone," she said, but her voice quavered and he did not take her seriously. She tried to push past him, but he grabbed her shoulders and shoved her back against the wall. The map crinkled at her back; Godfrey loomed over her.

"You are not insane and I don't appreciate being made a fool of." He cupped her breast. "The time to fear the consequences of our commitment has long since gone."

Mallory immediately slapped his hand. "My commitment is not to you."

His smile vanished and his expression turned as hard as the stone at her back. She stiffened when his hand came to rest at her throat, his fingers stroking the smoothness of her skin. Again, he tried to kiss her, but she twisted and turned her head as far as she could in the other direction. She pushed away from the wall, and he slammed her back against it.

His sigh seemed more like a growl. "My pearl, you are in this all the way to your pretty little chin. And lest you forget, your sins already outweigh mine."

"Let go of me," Mallory said, trembling, but Godfrey slammed her violently against the wall yet again. His hand came to rest at her throat.

"Be careful," Godfrey whispered against her cheek. "Or I might have to carry a tale or two to my dear brother. Remember your son, poor little Caleb. What would happen, I wonder, should Varden ever discover the extent of your crimes. Your neck won't be the first noblewoman's to ever feel the headman's axe."

The smell of his whiskey-laden breath turned her stomach, but Mallory only had to breathe it once. Then Godfrey squeezed, and she could not breathe at all. She gasped vainly for air, her hands clawing at his.

"It displeases me that I am forced to punish you," Godfrey said, ignoring her struggles. "But you should feel honored I give you this second chance to make amends."

He kissed her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth as she suffocated. She raked his arms with her nails, desperately gasping for air. Her chest began to ache. Her heart pounded at her ribs, thundering in her ears.

The darkness of the room seemed to close in around her. Mallory let go of his arm and grabbed for a book on the table beside her, something heavy

that she could hit him with. Her fingers knocked a stack of papers to the floor, scattering them around their feet.. It was the last sound she heard, and Godfrey's face the last she saw, as the darkness conquered her completely.

Chapter Nine

It was all Varden could do to stand without swaying. It was past midnight, and he was exhausted. But he was also a duke, and weakness was never allowed. So, with one hand on his hip and the other on the pommel of his sword, he glared daggers at Claire's armoire and wished that he'd been born a peasant.

He had spent five hours riding between each of the three villages within the borders of his property. Candlewick had been a hornet's nest of panicked activity by the time he arrived; too late to do anything more but ask questions. Two farms had been set on fire. Most of the livestock had been taken, the food store emptied and the fields torched. One woman had been assaulted. On the other farm, a father and son were badly beaten for trying to protect a neighboring woman from the same fate. In Barton-Under-the-Hill, a man had been hanged.

According to eyewitness accounts, the raiders were Scots. So, Varden posted sentries at each town and at various points along the border until morning when he would be better able to track them. It was going to be a long night for everyone and an even longer day tomorrow.

Now, all Varden wanted was to relax in the privacy of his own room. To sit peacefully before the fire with a warm drink and nothing to do but close his eyes and sleep. He hadn't even been given the chance to remove his muddy boots before Kenton had informed him of this disaster.

Disaster? Ha! For whatever lunatic reason, his wife was sitting in her armoire and refused to come out.

"She wanted to explore, she said." Grete wrung her apron between her hands. "Then she came back and crawled in there. I have tried everything to bring her out, but she will not even speak to me."

Varden was in no mood for this. He pounded his fist against the door and waited. His fingers drummed impatiently on his sword hilt. When no response was forthcoming, he pounded again. "Claire?"

Still no response. He tugged on the latch.

Grete told him the obvious. "She has somehow barred it from the inside."

"How could she possibly--" He tugged at the latch again, but the door didn't budge.

The lady's companion shook her head. "I am at a loss to understand it."

Varden bent to press his ear against the door. "Are you sure she's even in there?"

"I watched her crawl into the thing, Your Grace. She seemed terribly upset." When Varden turned his black glare on her, Grete backed quickly away and repeated, "She said she wanted to go exploring!"

"Why weren't you with her?"

"The Dowager--"

"The Dowager does not give the orders here!" Varden roared. "I do! Tomorrow you will pack your things and collect your wages. You are leaving."

"No!" The armoire shouted.

Varden rounded on it, his face darkening as his temper rose. "Don't you contradict me, Madame. I--" His mouth snapped shut and he beat his fist against the door again. "I am not going to yell at you through the bloody door. Get out here!"

"This is my room. You get out!"

In a fit of temper, Varden grabbed the latch and shook it vigorously. The door barely budged. He took a deep breath and counted to ten. He would not lose his temper. He wouldn't yell. He wouldn't even break down the door, drag her out by her feet and shake her until her teeth rattled. No matter how tempted he was. "Claire, ma petite folle, you are my wife. You made a vow to honor and to obey your husband. To date, you haven't done either very well."

"She's my only friend. If you send her away, I'll have to break in another one."

"Friend?" Varden turned his head to look at Grete, who was staring at the door in shock. When she noticed him watching, she flushed guiltily. Varden snorted. "That's what I thought. Wait outside."

With a bobbing curtsy, Grete did as she was bade and they were left alone.

Now what? Varden heard a muffled sniffing. He squatted in front of the doors and pressed his ear to the crack between them as he listened. "Claire?"

"Oh, go away."

There was no doubt about it. She was crying. So much for sleep. Varden almost swore. He banged his head twice against the door, then sighed.

Even knowing the door wouldn't open, he tried the latch again. "Please open the door, mon âme. I want to go to bed sometime before sunrise."

There was silence and then a soft scraping sound before the door creaked open just a sliver. She peered out at him with one red-rimmed eye. "How is your going to bed contingent upon my not sitting in the closet?"

"It is contingent on the happiness and well-being of my household."

She actually laughed at that, then sniffed again. "No wonder you're grumpy all the time. Sleep deprivation will do that."

Varden smiled wryly. "What are you doing in there?"

"I'm just thinking, that's all. It's quiet in here, or at least it was before you started beating on the door." After a moment, her eye disappeared from view as she retreated to the back of the armoire behind a shroud of gowns. "You should try it. Very therapeutic. Come in if you want to."

How absurd. Grown men did not sit in armoires. He rubbed his chin, feeling the scrap of his whiskers

against his callused palm. Of course, they were alone. Who was going to know?

Shaking his head at his own foolishness, Varden climbed into the wardrobe backwards and pulled his long legs in behind him. Feeling both silly and awkward, he tried to get comfortable in a crowded space that was too little for him by half. He practically sat on top of Claire, and she had to help him fold his legs before he stuck his knee in her nose. A half-shelf directly above his head kept his neck bent at an unnatural angle and a shoe under his right buttock ensured he didn't get too comfortable. The gauzy fabric of a chemise tickled his nose. He batted it out of his face but, no matter how he moved, the sleeve stubbornly followed.

He sighed again. "Now what?"

"Now we sit here quietly and enjoy the peace and solitude."

"Peace and solitude," Varden echoed. In the back of the closet, the skirts blocked out most of the light, leaving them surrounded by a soothing near darkness. "I've almost forgotten what those are."

"Don't worry," Claire said. "With me, you're guaranteed to get plenty of both. When you get to know me better, you'll see how boring I really am."

Covering his eyes with his hand, Varden didn't know whether he should laugh or cry. Laughter won.

The corner of her mouth turned wryly upward. "I said, when you get to know me better."

They shared a companionable silence for another minute more, then Claire asked. "Where did you go tonight?"

He looked at her. Her head was bowed and she was picking at her fingernails. "To take care of my responsibilities."

"You smell like smoke. It must not have been very fun for you."

"Not this time."

"Are you really going to send Grete away?"

"Your only friend?" Though he tried to keep the sarcasm from his tone, he wasn't very successful at it.

"Well, she almost laughed at one of my jokes this morning. Just you wait. Pretty soon we'll have a civil conversation."

"Fine. I will give her one more chance. But the next time you leave this room without her, she will be on her way back to London that very night."

"Deal," Claire agreed. She picked at her fingers again.

Varden took her hand in his and kissed the back, softening his tone as he added, "The gaol is off limits. There is no reason for you to go there."

"You heard about that?"

"First thing when I rode in. I wasn't even off my horse before Heston reported that you paid him a visit."

"Oh. I was just looking around. I didn't realize what I had walked into until I was already there."

"The only reason you are not across my knee right now is because I had eleven servants rushing up to tell me exactly where you were today." Varden kissed the back of her hand again, turning to her at the same moment that she looked away. He froze when he saw the bruises on her neck. "What are those?"

"Nothing." Claire combed her hair around her neck. "Don't worry about it."

He swept several skirts aside with one arm, letting in enough light to see. A disgruntled glare was her only protest when he tilted her chin up and gently touched the side of her throat where the bruising was worst, long dark shapes that almost looked like fingers. "Who did that?"

Unable to meet his eyes, she nervously twined her fingers in her nightgown, then rearranged the shoes that were scattered around their feet to form a kind of barricade between them. "Does Godfrey live here with us, or would it be possible to send him away somewhere?"

Varden stiffened, letting go of her hand. "Godfrey did that? Did he come here or did you go to him?"

"I didn't go to him," Claire protested. "We ran into each other downstairs. I think he might be planning to hurt you."

"You waited until I left so you could meet with him," he accused, a swelling fury seeping all through him.

"I didn't meet with him! I told you, we ran into each other."

"As if anything you have ever said to me could be believed!" Varden removed himself from her. First emotionally, as his face became abruptly unreadable; then physically as he climbed back out of the closet. "I suppose I can't complain. It's lasted longer than I expected."

His coldness was his armor, making him seem stiff and unbending as he called Grete back into the room. "You are to stay with her twenty-four hours a day. Sit on her if you have to. No one comes into this room without my express permission." He turned his glacial stare on Claire, who had crawled partway out of the closet. "And nobody leaves."

"I didn't meet with him! Please, Varden, you have to believe me!"

Varden stalked back to his room, ready now for that drink, a warm fire and bed.

"Varden, wait!" Claire scrambled after him.

He stopped just short of slamming the door in her face. His expression did not invite closeness. Even his eyes glittered, icy and completely devoid of warmth. "What do you want?"

"Please may I stay the night with you?" With pleading eyes, she rushed to explain. "You don't have to touch me. You don't even have to look at me. I'll sleep on the floor. But I'll be safe with you! I know he won't come if I'm with you!"

There was no change of emotion as Varden continued to glare. Then his eyes flicked down to

the dark bruises against the pale skin of her throat. Without a word, he shut the door.

Varden did not go to bed. He got drunk instead. It took over an hour of single-minded dedication before he reached a state of devil-may-care feeling good. He couldn't walk straight, but at least he was enjoying himself.

Kenton had to half-carry and half-drag him to bed. He stripped Varden of his boots and trousers, rolled him so that all his limbs were on the mattress and his head was cushioned by a pillow, and then covered him over with the blankets. Banking the fire, Kenton left him, unchastened, to sleep it off.

Sometime in the night, Varden blearily awakened. Someone else was in the room with him. Sprawled in the center of his bed, he cautiously opened one eye to find a shadowy figure hovering over him. Slowly, it pulled a corner of the blankets back and cautiously crawled up onto the mattress next to him. The shadow paused, seeming to look at him for a long moment before laying down to rest its head upon the pillow.

His head was already pounding. He really needed to quit drinking.

Varden growled. "I told you, no."

"Are you awake?" Claire whispered back.

Varden rose up on his elbow. "No. I talk in my sleep. Now go back to your own room. I don't want you with me. I already told you that."

"You didn't tell me anything. You just shut the door in my face."

He held his head in his hand and sighed. "That should have told you plenty."

She wrinkled her nose. "You smell like a brewery."

"Go back to your room, Claire, or I swear I will drag you there by your hair."

Again Claire paused, studying him as if trying to decide whether or not to take him seriously. "I was going to sleep on the floor, but you don't have a rug."

Then she rolled onto her side and pulled the blankets up over her shoulders.

"See here, Madame," Varden began, dangerously soft. He struggled to pull himself into a sitting position, but Claire reached behind her and took his arm. She pulled it around her waist and snuggled back against him. He made a half-hearted attempt to tug it free, but she only took his hand in both of hers and folded her fingers between his. She wiggled, making herself comfortable before heaving a soft and happy sigh.

He was trapped.

Varden scowled at the back of her head. There was no way he was going to blithely share his bed with his brother's mistress. No fathomable way at all. Inconceivable! Absolutely ridiculous!

"Good night, Varden." She kissed the backs of his fingers.

It was the most miserable night of his life.

He never did successfully disentangle his arm from her grasp. Every time he tried, she only wiggled closer. Her soft bottom was now firmly nestled against his groin and he could feel the heat of her burning into his skin even through her nightgown.

Tiny drops of sweat had long since broken out across his brow and upper lip. Varden gritted his teeth and firmly told himself he did not care if she spread her legs now and invited him into her. She was still a lying, unfaithful, viperous wench, who was making his life a living, breathing, firm-breasted, satin-skinned, moist, pulsating hell.

Varden closed his eyes, determined to resist temptation.

She was hugging his hand. With every soft breath, his fingertips brushed the soft skin of her breasts. His hand tingled--hell, his entire body tingled. He ached with the effort it took not to reach up and cup one. He stifled a tortured groan. The worst hangover he had ever experienced wasn't as bad as this.

By the time the sun rose above the rim of his balcony railing, spilling its warming yellow rays across the foot of the bed, his arousal was painfully uncomfortable and she showed absolutely no signs of stirring. Varden bit his pillow savagely and growled. She shifted, her soft round bottom pressing back into the cradle of his hips. This was nothing short of torture. The rack would have been easier to bear.

Claire sighed softly and he cast the back of her head a half-wistful, half-baleful glance.

"I want to go exploring again today." Claire suddenly said. "Will you take me?"

Varden started. He sat up, throwing off her enticing limbs. "You miserable, intoxicating witch! How long have you been awake?"

She rolled onto her back. Her hand found his erection, closed tightly around him. "You make it hard to sleep when you keep poking me with this."

"I make it hard to sleep?" Growling, Varden grabbed her shoulders and pressed her back into the pillows as his mouth swooped down to claim hers. She gently squeezed and stroked him, only releasing her hold when he pulled her nightgown up over her head and threw it to the floor.

"Sleeping with you is like snuggling with a furnace," she murmured between kisses. "I thought you had a fire burning under your skin."

"You should know," he said as he moved over her. "You put it there."

She was completely unrepentant. "I like that. You burn because of me?"

"Oh yes." Varden caressed her cheek, brushing his thumb lightly across her mouth. "And now you will burn because of me."

She lifted her mouth to meet his, asking, "Is that a promise?"

The door to Claire's room suddenly flew open as Grete burst into the room. "Your Grace, she is gone! I--"

Varden turned with a roar. "Get out!"

The door immediately slammed shut again.

He glared after her. "I will see that woman flayed alive."

Catching his face in both hands, Claire gently forced his attention back to her. "You made a promise to me first."

"Ah, yes," he looked down at her again and a wolfish smile tugged at his mouth. "This touchy subject of burning. First you have to find the source of the heat." He placed his hand on her chest between her breasts. "Is it here?" His callused palm smoothed a path down her stomach, his fingers tickling over her ribs while she tried not to squirm. "Or here?" He stroked her hip, caressing the outside of her thigh down to her knee.

Claire shivered as his hand moved around to the inner side of her knee and began the trek back up. When he touched her, she cleared her throat. "Yes, I think things are definitely heating up."

"I am not content with 'heating up,'" Varden said as he parted the moist folds to find the tiny nub hidden therein. "You have tortured me all night. I have to get my revenge."

"Go ahead. Make me pay." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I like this kind of revenge."

He laughed. "When you are well enough, I will torment you more fully. Until then, there are others things that we can do."

"Mm." She closed her eyes when he kissed the tip of her breast and the heat of his mouth closed over her.

His bedroom door flew open with enough force to send it crashing into the wall. They both froze; Varden darkened, the muscle in his jaw jumping erratically.

"Good morning, Your Graces." Kenton brought a silver breakfast tray bearing a steaming pot of spiced ale to the bedside table. "It's good to see you patching your differences. Getting along. Making

amends. I only hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive such an untimely intrusion."

Varden remained over Claire, stiff and unmoving. A protruding vein pulsed at the side of his neck. "I will give you a two-second head start. I suggest you run."

"How gracious, but also unnecessary." Kenton went to the balcony doors and threw back the curtains to let in the morning sun.

Varden winced and lowered his head to Claire's breast.

"Your immediate attention is required at the north gate." Walking back around the bed to the small table, Kenton filled two cups with the hot ale. He looked at Claire. "Do you prefer cream or sugar?"

Varden glared at him. "What's wrong with the north gate?"

"The Laird of the Kincaids is standing outside the castle walls with a small army." Kenton looked first at her, then Varden. "He demands to speak with you."

One minute Claire was nestled in Varden's arms, the next she was sprawled on the bed by herself, while he hunted the floor for his clothes. She pulled the sheet up to her neck even as Kenton offered her the cup.

If the valet was at all embarrassed at interrupting so intimate an embrace, he did not show it. He held up the creamer. "Lady Claire, would you care for some?"

"Mallory." She shook her head. "No, thanks."

He put the creamer back on the tray. "Sugar then?"

"Thank you, no."

"Shall I ring for your breakfast?" he inquired, ever solicitous. "Biscuits with jam? Poached eggs perhaps? You must have worked up quite the appetite."

"Kenton, leave her alone," Varden said as he pulled on a pair of black pants. "She does not need any nettling from you."

"I disagree," Kenton said. "My influence is boundless. I have yet to meet the man or woman who could not benefit from a daily dose of nettling. Besides, I was merely offering her breakfast."

But Varden was not listening. He was wrestling with his shirt, tucking in the tails and trying to smooth the worst of the wrinkles from it. It still looked as if a drunk had slept in it. He ran an impatient hand through his mussed hair. "How long has he been out there?"

"Only a few minutes. I fetched the ale when I saw him coming." Taking the second cup for himself, Kenton retired to a nearby chair. "He claims to have grievances. If you will not speak with him, he threatens to take them to the Queen."

"What could he possibly have to complain about?" Varden sat on the edge of the bed. He fought a minor war with his boots as he struggled to get his bare feet into them, then grabbed his sword belt and swung it around his slender hips. "Are my cows not fat enough? Perhaps my sheep need more wool. Ah, I have it. My pigs are too small. I shall simply tell him to come back in a month or two when they will have grown into nice fat slabs of bacon and ham."

Claire sat up and set the ale aside. She pulled the sheet tighter around her, trying to ignore Kenton. "What are you going to do?"

There was a crisp, metallic whine as Varden slid his sword into its scabbard. "I suppose I shall ride out to meet him."

Kenton set his own cup back on the tray. "Do you not understand the situation, or have you lost your mind as well?" While his face revealed only minor irritation, his disgust was obvious. "Most of your soldiers are on the Training Field. The Kincaid has an army with him. He will kill you at

the mouth of your own portcullis."

Varden strode out the balcony doors with the irate Kenton fast on his heels. "Saddle my horse!"

They jogged down into the courtyard together.

"Fine," Kenton said. "Ride out to meet him, and I'll send for Vicar Meadows in Candlewick. He gives the most smashing eulogies. I'm sure we could arrange a spectacular service for you."

"How many men does he have?"

"I counted thirty."

"Then I out number him twenty to one," Varden said. "If he wanted a war, he would not have come to my doorstep to wage it. He could just as easily have caught me on patrol and taken my life there. It makes no sense for him to come here when I need but sound the horns and summon the Field. He would have to battle his way through that before making it back to Scotland in one piece. He hasn't got a prayer and he knows it."

"Insanity must be contagious."

Varden paused in the midst of running his hand over his unshaven chin. Still. At this point, he may as well grow a beard. "Either that or he is very clever. I am more inclined to think the latter. I suppose he could attack me, and I would appear the aggressor because I have more men and no one would believe he's that suicidal."

"I meant you," Kenton snapped.

Varden selected seven men from the soldiers gathered in the courtyard and calmly mounted the black stallion the stable master brought him. A slight flicker of white caught the corner of his eyes and he looked up to see Claire, wrapped in the sheet from his bed, watching from the balcony. Her unkempt hair billowed softly around her face and shoulders as the early morning breeze played with it. She smiled and waved to him as if he were only going for a jaunt around the countryside.

Would she still be waiting for him there when he returned? A part of him hoped she would. Of course, he hoped that she would be a little more dressed by that time.

He pointedly fingered his own shirt and mouthed the word "clothes" to her. Claire blew him a kiss, and Varden almost smiled. The sun warm against his back, he clicked his tongue and lightly spurred his mount toward the portcullis at the north gate. He rode out of Cadhla's protective walls to meet with the Kincaid.

"You should not be out here."

Mallory spun with a start, and Kenton quickly caught her arm before she fell backwards off the soldiers' walk. "Oh Kenton, you scared me!"

"Yes," Kenton drawled. "All the really attractive women tell me that."

Mallory knew little about valets, but Kenton was nothing like what she expected. He watched her with a spark of interest in his obsidian eyes. And despite his earlier comment about the soundness of her mind, he seemed not to expect anything illogical from her.

"What's going on down there?" She went back to spying on the two small armies through the narrow murder holes in the outer wall. "Who are those people?"

"Our nearest and dearest neighbors." Kenton leaned his shoulder against the wall beside her. He folded his long arms across his chest and studied her with far more interest than the scene playing out below them. "That brutish red-haired man bellowing at His Grace is the Laird Kincaid. What happened to your neck?"

"Low hanging clothesline. Almost took my head clean off. Very dangerous."

"A clothesline?"

"Yes."

"In your bedchambers?"

"Actually, I was wandering around downstairs when I ran into it."

"I see." Kenton hardly looked convinced, but he didn't argue with her. "Our lower maids have

become lazy. I shall have to have a word with them. We cannot have errant clotheslines where the nobility can accidentally garrote themselves."

Mallory changed the subject. "They're yelling at one another."

"I'm rather surprised they've not drawn arms." Kenton hardly spared a glance over the

wall. "The Kincaid has been raiding along our borders. They've done it for years. Usually they steal a few sheep here. A cow or two there. They call it reiving; an infamous Scottish past time, traditional, if not honorable. But lately they have begun to take herds and to kill. Only last night they murdered a man and burned two homes to the ground, stealing everything that was not reduced to ash and embers. His Grace has good cause to be angry." With a drawn pause, Kenton tipped his head to better see the Kincaid. "I have no idea why the Kincaid is upset."

The Kincaid's face, or what could be seen of it above the orange bristle-brush of a beard and beneath the tangled mop of his long hair, turned red as a beet when he flushed. His fingers tightened on the reins. The stallion chewed at his bit and backed up several feet.

"Ye kin because yer English ye can burn me people from their homes!" he bellowed. "Ye starve my clan while ye sit high and fancy, eating me stock until ye cannae roll yer fat backsides out o' yer chairs!"

"You have stolen from me," Varden returned hotly. "Not the other way around."

"Ye lie t' salve yer conscience!"

The flush of Varden's own temper quickly basted his neck and cheeks. "If your clan had its thieving way, my people would starve this winter!"

"Mine be the only clan starving. Ye've seen t' that, aye, ye have! Dinnae be denying it! We've all

seen ye scuttling off wi' the dawn, like cowardly dogs wi' tails tucked!"

Varden's temper erupted, spewing forth in a volley of curses that the Scot was only too eager to return.

"Cowardly," Varden spat, "is raping women and beating old men and children!"

"Aye!" Spittle flew from the Kincaid's mouth. "And well d' ye be knowing it! Ye've practiced long enough on me kin t' make murder a bleeding art!"

Varden abruptly reined his horse to one side of the Kincaid's. "When?"

"What d' ye mean, when?"

"When was the last attack?"

The Kincaid glared at him, his dark eyes narrowing. "This morning. Got word on me way here a field was burned an hour a-fore the dawn."

"Where?"

"Dunne, four miles north." The Kincaid scowled. "Dinnae try t' tell me t'wasn't ye who did it, I kin the truth when I hear it!"

"An hour before dawn I was in bed with my wife," Varden snapped. "Which is where I would still be, given my preference. However, I did patrol the border between six and midnight last night, trying to catch those responsible for hanging one of my farmers in Barton-Under-the-Hill."

"That's eight miles from Dunne," the Kincaid said.

"And four miles from Candlewick, where two houses were torched earlier. I also lost a good deal of livestock."

"If yer nae responsible, then who?"

"That is a very good question." Turning his horse, Varden signaled his men to return to Cadhla. To the Kincaid, he said, "I have set up border patrols. I suggest you do the same. I'll let you know if I catch anyone."

"Ha!" the Kincaid barked. "Aye, and we'll see if I dinnae catch ye!"

Chapter Ten

He had returned from his meeting with the Kincaid only a few minutes ago, and already Varden was leaving again. Wrapped in his bed sheet, Mallory leaned her forehead against her chamber's only poured glass window and tried not to feel disappointed. She needed to be more understanding. The world hardly revolved around her, after all. Varden couldn't be with her twenty-four hours a day; he was a busy man. He had responsibilities. Duties. It was selfish of her to want him to take her back to bed and finish what they'd started.

In the courtyard below, Varden was one of eight men saddling their mounts near the stables. He had already donned his battered leather armor and was checking his saddle cinch when Kenton handed him a package. He said something, and Varden turned and looked up. He pointed at her, tugged at his shirt collar, and mouthed the word "clothes" again. He seemed a little more insistent this time.

Mallory smiled and waved back at him.

Beside him, Kenton said something and Varden's back and shoulders went immediately broomstick straight. The valet quickly moved out of reach before Varden could lay hands on him.

Mallory sighed. She didn't even know where he was going.

"Grete?"

Behind her, a silent shadow standing in the doorway, Grete said, "Training Field, most likely. Where else would he be headed this time of day?"

"Is it very far away?"

"Do you really consider me a friend?" Grete countered.

Mallory cast a quick glance back over her shoulder before turning her eyes back to Varden. "Kinda sad, isn't it?"

"Had you not spoken for me, I would now be on my way back to London."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Mallory turned, a slight frown tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Did you want to go?"

"Six months ago, I would have leapt at the chance and been grateful for it."

"But not now?"

"No, things are different now." With her hands folded over her waist, Grete came to stand beside her at the window. Together, they watched Varden climb up into his saddle.

After a while, Grete said, "It doesn't matter. The Dowager will send me off anyway. I haven't finished her gown."

"I thought you finished that days ago."

"She called my seams sloppy and ordered them ripped out. I still haven't repaired all the damage."

"She can do it herself, then."

"She is the dowager. She doesn't do anything herself."

"Sounds like a bossy old biddy."

"She's not as bad as some."

There was a slight pause, and Mallory wondered if Grete had been about to say her. She ignored the inference and instead said, "Two men waiting at the Pearly Gates of Heaven strike up a conversation. 'How'd you die?' the first man asked. 'I froze to death,' says the second. 'That's awful,' said the first. 'How does it feel to freeze to death?' 'Uncomfortable at first,' says the second. 'But eventually, it's a very calm way to go when you drift off to sleep. How about you, how did you die?' 'I had a heart attack,' said the first man. 'You see, I knew my wife was cheating on me, so one day I showed up at home unexpectedly. I ran up to the bedroom, but found her alone, knitting. So I ran all over the house and when I got to the last room, I had a massive heart attack and died.' The second man shakes his head and says, 'That's so ironic. If you had only stopped to look in the freezer, we'd both still be alive.'"

Grete looked at her, without the slightest hint of a smile. "What is a freezer?"

Mallory sighed again. "Well, guess that takes care of my 'Two guys sitting at a bus stop' joke."

They shared a companionable silence, then Grete said, "There once was a man from Monclair, who loved his wife on the stair. The banister broke, he quickened his stroke, and finished her off in the air."

Mallory grinned. "Grete, was that a dirty limerick?"

"I know it wasn't very good, but it's the only one I know."

Mallory threw back her head and laughed.

They watched as Varden rode out across the drawbridge, the sound of horses' hooves echoing like thunder back through the darkened gatehouse.

"He will not appreciate our following him to the Field," Grete said with a small shake of her head. "He will probably be quite angry, in fact."

"Our following him?" Mallory turned to her with a smile. "Why, Grete. Are you coming with me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do. We could explore the dungeon instead."

Grete stared at her. "Why ever would we want to?"

"You wouldn't find it interesting?"

"Heavens, no! What a morbid thing to say." The old woman shook her head and turned away. "I'll have a lunch made. When we get caught, we can say we were on a picnic."

Mallory clapped her hands once. "Great! I'll get the horses."

"You get dressed," Grete called back to her. "You'll not go to the Field wrapped in a bed sheet."

Faced with the nauseating prospect of wearing one of Claire's dresses, of feeling cloth that had touched that woman also touching her skin, Mallory instead opted to wear a nightgown. She selected an

off cream white one, with enough frills and lace to almost be considered a real dress anyway.

Within the hour, with each woman saddled upon her own mare, Grete and Mallory were on their way.

The Training Field lay roughly one mile from Cadhla's westernmost tower and only a short distance from the village of Wooler. The main camp was nestled amid a hodgepodge of multi-colored tents, smoldering pit fires and crowded merchant stalls. Squires and servants ran amuck between the various sectioned off areas, ducking under ropes and dodging soldiers, camp followers, merchants, and inevitably, each other, while fetching and carrying everything from weapons to water to buckets of horse dung. Clotheslines linked nearly every available tree. Most were heavy with freshly washed laundry that fluttered gently as a comfortable breeze swept through.

Mallory drank in the sights. It would be a challenge to find Varden among such a thick crowd of people. Calling out was useless. Her voice would be lost in the roar of shouting soldiers, clashing swords, chanting merchants, shrieking women, laughing boys, crying children, pounding hooves, and the insistent 'ching-ching ching-ching' of a blacksmith's hammer on anvil. There was no help for it. Mallory grinned. They were going to have to tie the horses somewhere and search for Varden on foot.

"Well?" Grete half turned in her saddle to look back at Mallory. "Where shall we begin?"

"I can see why he likes to come here. This is incredible! Just like a county fair without the rides." Putting out her arms, Mallory allowed a passing man to help her dismount.

"Be careful, Your Grace," Grete called as the young man helped her down as well. She tied both their horses to a common hitching post. "It's easy to get lost here, so stay with me."

Reluctantly dragging her eyes from the display of armor hanging on the walls of the blacksmith's

booth, Mallory nodded her agreement. Almost immediately a whole new wonder caught her eye: a group of children sitting before a makeshift puppet show.

"I guess we could try the jousting field first." Grete searched above the crowd, noting the multicolored banners that marked the different areas of the sectioned off Field. "It's this way."

Mallory followed Grete past the hitching post and between two tents. A man was sitting on the ground sharpening a knife. He glanced up at them, at Mallory in particular and her cream-colored nightgown. With a shake of his head, he turned his attention back to his knife.

"Meat pies!" A nearby vender called out. "Fresh and hot! Fresh and hot! Meat pies here! Here-o!"

The pies smelled wonderful and spicy, and Mallory wished she had the money to buy one. When she turned back she found that Grete, unaware Mallory had stopped, had disappeared in the crowd. Mallory rose up on her tiptoes, trying to see over the ocean of people around her, looking for a familiar grey head. She turned in a slow circle, not even sure now which way they had been going.

"Eeny, meeny, miney, moe." Mallory picked a direction and started walking. As intent as she was in her search for Grete, she hardly noticed the effect her presence was having on the people around her.

Startled by the sight of a lady in her nightgown, one man turned to watch her instead of where he was going and tripped over a tent stake. He stumbled and fell into a stack of loosely crated chickens. The crates buckled under his weight and the captive fowl flapped and squawked in a mad dash for freedom. The merchant who owned them roared. He and his family set off after the birds while a gathering crowd laughed and applauded their awkward efforts.

Mallory paused to watch two entertainers performing for a small crowd. One spat fire into the air while his partner swallowed a long blade. She

moved on quickly enough, however, when she discovered they did not work for free and she had no penny to add to the collection given by the other spectators. A sweaty blacksmith trimmed the back hooves of a horse. Men practiced hand-to-hand mock fights with swords and bayonets. Two old women sat turning a woven basket of combed sheep wool into yarn. As the spindle whirled, they gossiped and laughed.

One soldier dragged a very willing girl behind some shrubs. She giggled and laughed, then squealed with delight as she was fondled more liberally than Mallory thought anyone ought to be while still in public. Blushing, she moved on.

Further along, she found an open area where two men duked it out in a light-hearted game of fisticuffs. Uninterested in the barbaric display, Mallory turned to find herself back where she had started, staring at the puppet show. One of the boxers caught sight of her. Pausing mid-swing, he was promptly knocked to the ground by his opponent who was not as easily distracted.

A pre-adolescent boy carrying a pail of muck turned all the way around to stare in wide-eyed surprise as he passed her. He fell over a tent rope, the contents of his bucket landing in the laps of two soldiers involved in a makeshift game of dice.

"Dung!" one shouted as he shook the stuff from his hands.

The boy jumped up and ran.

"Get back here!"

"Knave!"

As the bellowing men gave chase, one tripped on the same rope, which snapped and the tent collapsed, startling two horses tethered to the hitching post a short distance away. The horses shied in opposite directions, knocking over the post and subsequently freeing every animal on the line.

A passing woman bent to scoop up the forgotten earnings of the dice game, shook off the worst of the muck, and tucked the coins into her bodice.

There was an extra bounce to her step as she continued on.

A dozen people ran after the startled horses.

As Mallory pushed through the crowd, she paused to run her fingers over some silk at a cloth merchants' stall.

"Ye like this bolt, do ye?" the merchant asked. He was fat and pleasant and slightly bald on top.

Mallory liked him at once. "How much?"

"Well, now. This isn't ordinary cloth, ye know." The merchant lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "This 'ere be real dragon silk. Spun from the scales of the mighty beasts centuries ago. Been in me family for years. I'm 'ard-pressed to part with such a treasured 'eirloom."

Mallory dutifully felt the soft, smooth texture between her fingers and giggled. She was being hustled!

One newly freed horse charged between two riders engaged in a mounted sword-fighting competition. Both were thrown, narrowly avoiding being skewered on their own blades. All three horses galloped together across the field and into the blacksmith's stall.

"Ye can't beat the quality of pure, one 'undred percent cured dragon 'ide," the merchant said. "Treat it with care and it'll last a lifetime."

"I'll take it," Mallory said. After a story like that, the merchant deserved a sale. "The whole bolt. Just bring it by Cadhla and my husband--he's the duke--will give you whatever price you're asking."

The merchant threw back his head and laughed. "Touche, luv. I know a 'ustle when I see one. Be on with ye now."

"No, really," Mallory said. "I'm Mallory, the Crazy Duchess." She did a graceful pirouette to show off her nightgown. "Don't you listen to local gossip?"

The blacksmith dove over his anvil to avoid being trampled and fell into the center post. The entire stall began to lean to one side. The wood

creaked ominously and the blacksmith and horses barely made it out before the whole structure collapsed. Previously attached to one of the posts, a clothesline fluttered to the ground, draping clothes across the nearest fire pit. The damp pile began to smoke, then bright orange flames licked up around the edges.

The merchant stroked his chin thoughtfully. With a rueful chuckle, he tucked the bolt under the counter. "I'll bring it by, then. But I doubt if I see a farthing for me trouble. I've been telling tales long enough to know when one's being told to me."

"I promise, your heirloom will not be given away for nothing." She had just made a purchase in a medieval market. Tickled by her accomplishment, Mallory resumed her search for Varden and Grete. She could hardly wait to tell them.

"Fire!" a soldier shouted.

People came from everywhere to put it out before it had a chance to spread. Behind them, the pile of wood which moments ago had been the blacksmith's stall, was beginning to smoke as well. Fingers pointed after Mallory as, unaware of the chaos behind her, she ducked beneath two ropes and started into the field beyond. Two well-padded horsemen in the midst of a joust abruptly reined back their mounts before she was trampled underfoot between them. Both horses reared up; one rider was thrown.

Mallory looked neither left nor right as she delicately stepped over a pile of fresh dung. Continuing on, she ducked back under a second set of ropes and trotted up to the top of a small grassy knoll. Up ahead was a series of scarlet banners, snapping smartly in the breeze.

She came up behind several bundles of straw that had been dressed in what looked to be shirts, pants and shields. Funny place for a scarecrow. She picked one up, turning it around to get a better look. There was a whistle of air, a sharp tug at her sleeve, and a dull thud as a crossbow quiver struck

the tree beside her. Mallory ran her finger through the hole that had suddenly appeared in her sleeve. She pulled the bolt from the tree and, shading her eyes from the sun, peered back across the field. A line of men faced her a good two hundred yards away. One was on his knees, holding his head in his hands. She carefully scanned the line, looking for a set of familiar clothes.

Was that--? Yes! That one way down on the end. She had found Varden!

Sticking the bolt in the center of the target, where she was sure it would have landed had she not moved the butt, Mallory then waved to let everyone know she was all right. Confident that they could see her, she started into the field.

Varden glanced up from the stripling archer he was trying to instruct. "What do you mean there is a woman on the field? The banners are clearly marked. Everyone knows we are practicing here."

"Nevertheless," the soldier repeated. "There is a woman on the field. Look. You can see her from here."

Varden eyed the line of butts far to the south. "Tom, the boundaries of this field are signified with red ribbons. I watched the boys set them up myself. Who would be stupid enough to--" He squinted against the sun as he spied a figure in white wading through the tall, golden grass. He shaded his eyes against the sun. Boundaries or not, there she was, just as Tom said.

The young man to Varden's left rose up on tiptoes and asked, "It's not Blind Aggie again, is it?"

As they watched, the figure's nightgown fluttered in the breeze. Varden paled. He knew that nightgown. He knew that red hair! "Claire."

What was she doing here? How had she even got out of the courtyard? Neither question made the slightest bit of difference now. All down the line, his archers--every man a new recruit--were doing

exactly as he'd instructed them to do: block out all distractions, focus only on the target, and fire when ready. Hell, even an experienced archer might not see her until it was too late.

Far behind his wife, Varden spotted Grete ducking under the ropes that sectioned off the archery field. Though he was too far away to hear, he could see the old woman shouting and frantically waving her arms.

"Oh, great," the young man said again. "Here comes another one."

"Claire, stop! Stay where you are!" Varden frantically waved his arms, his sudden shout startling the archers closest to him. Mallory waved back.

Further down the line, someone fired his crossbow. The bolt hit its mark not far from her.

"She'll be killed!" Varden gave up trying to warn her and turned his attention to his archers. He grabbed the bows nearest him. "Hold your fire! Don't shoot!"

Tom rushed down the line, shouting the order over and over. Too late one of the newer boys released his quiver even as Mallory walked between him and the butt. And, as the steel tip slipped through the skirt of her nightgown, missing both Mallory and the target by bare inches, Varden fell to his knees and, for the first time in his life, thanked God for new, inexperienced, untrained boys from the country.

Fast on the heels of that relief, came a surging tide of anger. Through narrowing eyes, Varden watched Mallory lift her skirt to look at it. She poked a finger through the new hole, then tipped her head to regard the quivering arrow that stuck out of the ground less than six feet away. Slowly, she turned to face the archers and frowned. She shielded her eyes against the sun, studying them.

The boy had fallen to his knees.

His legs in a similar state, Varden latched onto a nearby shoulder and climbed back to his feet. So close. The bolt had come so close to hitting her.

"Look." The man Varden clung to gestured towards the merchant's end of the Field. "I think the Training Camp's on fire."

With a detached sense of calm completely alien to Varden's rampaging emotions, one thought set itself above the rest.

Tonight, he seethed, there was going to be a murder.

Varden tossed his horse's reins in the general direction of the stable master, then grabbed Mallory's arm and hauled her out of the stables into the sun-lit bailey. Chickens scattered clucking noisily in front of them. Mallory was almost running as she tried to keep up.

"I will hang you from the tower by your thumbs!" he snarled. "I will tie you upside down by your ankles and have you flayed alive!"

Such statements did not bode well in a marriage.

"Please don't be angry with me," Mallory begged, and he cast her a dark glare over his shoulder. "I didn't know your archers couldn't see me. How could I have known? Everybody else saw me just fine!"

Before her eyes, he became an even darker, more formidable man. She hadn't thought that possible. And by the time they reached the steps leading up to his balcony, he was all but growling.

"You set my Camp on fire!"

"It was an accident, I swear!" Mallory stumbled on a step. "Wait! My nightgown--"

She was a little surprised when Varden actually paused in his ascent while she lifted her gown to keep from tripping on the hem. He did not, however, relax his grip on her arm.

"Get up the damn stairs," he snarled.

"I'm trying!" She hadn't seen him this angry before--not even yesterday, and she still couldn't sit without wincing first. Her panic intensified when they finally reached the top of the steps and he pushed her through his room and into Claire's. She cringed when he slammed the door behind them.

When he turned, his hands were at his belt, unfastening the heavy buckle and pulling the thick leather free of his breeches with an ominous hissing sound that only a belt could make. He took one step toward her, and Mallory jumped on him. Throwing her arms around his neck, she kissed him fiercely. All her desire to waylay his anger was poured into that meeting of mouth on iron hard mouth. It was equal parts the desire to avoid what she knew that belt was for and the desire simply to touch him, and to have him touch her in turn when anger was not the cause.

Stiffening, Varden neither responded nor pushed her away. In a small sense, that was oddly encouraging.

Softening her mouth, Mallory let the tip of her tongue tease the corners of his mouth. Warmth unfurled in the pit of her belly, reaching through every part of her. Although her initial reasons for kissing him had been motivated by self-preservation, now she just did not want to stop. Ever.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his lips. "I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

"Bise." Varden softened in her arms and, miracle or miracles, he kissed her back once, gently. His arms came up around her, holding her close. "Ma petite fille, I know you did not mean it."

He kissed her forehead, stroked her hair, and rocked her gently in his strong embrace. Then he pulled back and took her by the arm, leading her to her bed.

"B-but I said I was sorry!" Mallory clutched his hand on her arm, but didn't try to pull free. She already knew his grip was inflexible.

"You don't have to be sorry," Varden told her. "But I want you to obey me."

"I want you not to spank me!" Mallory wailed plaintively.

He sat on the edge of the bed and, despite her instant stiff-legged struggles, pulled her neatly across his lap. "Well then, I suppose neither of us is going to get what we desire."

Her heart was pounding so hard it felt as if it would burst from her chest. Mallory stared at the rushes mere inches from her nose, helpless to do anything but make a pitiful grab for the back of her nightgown when she felt him raise the skirts well up past her waist. As a result, her hand was pinned at her side before the first smack even fell, and her bottom ended up bare anyway.

Mallory began to cry. She couldn't help it. She had never been very brave when it came to pain, and yesterday's experience had already taught her just how horrible this was going to be.

Varden's open palm came to rest on the soft swell of her right buttock. "You are never again to go to the Field without me there to guide you, is that understood?"

"Yes," she wept, nodding her head as well.

SMACK!

It was inconceivable that a bare hand could hurt so much. Admittedly, some of her soreness was likely due to yesterday's session with the hairbrush, but when Varden began that hard, steady rhythm, Mallory could have sworn that he was using a paddle and not his broad, flat palm.

"No! Ow! Stop!" Her cries quickly turned to shrieks, and then to heart-felt sobs. Holding still was impossible, but so was breaking free. And no matter how she fought--kicking and bucking, rocking her hips as though wanting to roll off his lap to get away from the fire his hand was ruthlessly igniting behind her--he never once relaxed his hold. His arm around her waist may as well have been a

thing happened. The pain. . .changed. It still hurt, it was still horrible, but the heat seemed to intensify. It grew and pulsed in time with the beating of her heart, spreading from her bottom to her womb and down between her thighs. She trembled as he deepened the kiss and his hand wandered from her tender bottom to delve down between her thighs, expertly igniting a fire of an altogether different sort there.

Confusion overwhelmed her. Breaking the kiss, Mallory turned her head away with a broken moan. She began to cry all over again. But instead of pushing him away, she buried her face in the side of his neck and clung to him.

"Shh," Varden told her. He rocked her softly, his errant hand returning to soothe the hurt from her well-spanked bottom. "It's all right, bise."

With her cheek against his chest, Mallory gently touched her lips and wondered at the odd arousal that still hummed inside of her. How easy it had been to fall in love with the hard and embittered Duke of Cadhla.

How easy and how devastating. Because when all was said and done, although Mallory's love for him may be real, she knew Varden didn't love her. He loved the woman he saw every time he looked at her. His real wife, Claire.

Chapter Eleven

"I see she is no longer confined to her room," Abigail said from the doorway, her blue and silver dress glittering in the light of the candles.

Standing over the table, surrounded by books and notes, with a large map of the English/Scottish countryside unrolled before him, Varden marked a point near Wooler. "No," he said as he carefully circled the location. "She is no longer confined."

"Whatever happened to our plan to send her away? To Wales, or someplace equally inhospitable?"

"Your plan, stepmother, never mine," Varden said calmly, studying his map. He made another mark at Dunne, and drew a circle around it as well. He noted the distance and then looked at Candlewick.

"How typical of you." Her voice seethed with bitterness. She began to pace the rug. After so many similar arguments, Varden wondered that there was not a path worn right down the middle of those green and blue threads.

With one finger on Candlewick and his thumb on Dunne, Varden stopped what he was doing and put his quill aside. He sighed. "Lecture me now, if you must, and have done with it. I have other things to do tonight."

"Just like your father."

"You say that as if it were a curse, while I consider it to be the highest of compliments. My father was loving and kind. He was also noble, generous, and honorable, which suited you well enough when you found yourself with child. You may not have liked his methods, but at least Godfrey was born within the bonds of matrimony and far enough away from London to give society's wagging tongues a false date by which to count the months. They do so love hasty weddings."

"You paint him to be a paragon of virtue," Abigail spat.

"I'm his son. What do you expect?"

"Respect! Loyalty toward your living family members and not just the dead ones!"

Varden glanced back down at his map. "Funny how I am only family when you want something of me."

Abigail reddened. "After all I have done for you, you ungrateful, selfish--"

"Ungrateful and selfish, why? Because my father married my mother first or because he never truly stopped loving her after she died, even after wedding you? What does it matter, anyway? You were more in love with his money and title than you ever were with the man. If you're capable of love."

Her hand rose as if to slap him, but just as quickly Varden was on his feet. She stepped back even as he leaned toward her, his face hard, his broad hands braced over his map. "I told you when I was twelve that you would never strike me again. You will find, stepmother, that I am in a better position now to defend myself against you."

Lowering her hand slowly, Abigail touched the butterfly brooch on the front of her silver-trimmed bodice. Her eyes chilled. "You were always difficult."

"It must really gall you that I inherited everything, while Godfrey is set to inherit only your meager dower. I give him ten years before he runs it all to ground." Varden picked up his quill again. "Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do."

She glared, her eyes narrowed and hard. "If it weren't for me, Cadhla would still be in ruins, this family would be a laughing stock, and the only inheritance you would have is that mountain of bad debts your father left behind."

"I never said he was perfect."

"He was nowhere close to it." She pursed her wrinkled lips. "You were only nine when he died. I suppose it only natural your youth should blind you to what he was, even though it turns you against me."

"You did that all on your own," Varden said. "There was a time I would have happily called you mother and meant it. So before you build yourself a cross and apply for martyrdom, let us not forget that you didn't throw yourself into saving Cadhla until after a bout of russo put me at death's door."

"You were too ill to remember matters clearly."

"In all the weeks that I was bedridden, you paid me one visit and then it was only to ask the doctor if he thought I would survive. The fever had not put me as far out of my mind as you like to pretend. The prospect of my demise excited you, and I remember that very clearly. That visit did more to distance us than all of your thrashings combined."

Abigail looked at him coldly. "Our memories obviously differ."

"Obviously." His tone matched her own.

"Regardless, I am the only reason you had anything to inherit. I could have let the debtors take it all. Where is your gratitude for that?"

"It lies in your extra quarterly supplements, since you no longer seem able to live within your allowance. And it is in the fact that I continue to allow you and your son to live here instead of packing you both off to your house in Chatham, a maneuver that becomes more and more favorable every time you open your mouth."

"You are bitter and tyrannical," Abigail said. "I dislike the man you have become."

"The fault is your own." Varden turned his attention back to his map, marking Candlewick, then circling it as well. "You made me this way. Good night, stepmother. Sleep well."

As he continued to note the distances between the surrounding towns, he felt the heat of Abigail's angry stare on him. Finally, she turned and walked sedately from the room. Once outside, however, she slammed the door violently behind her.

Frowning, Varden glanced up briefly, then went back to his work. He put a finger on Foulden, a very small village of about thirty families on the Scottish

side of the border. The other towns surrounded it and, because of that location, if Foulden was lucky enough to avoid attack until now, it was only a matter of time before it, too, succumbed.

He tugged the bell pull and waited for Kenton to arrive.

"I do so enjoy being summoned by that clanking contraption."

"I need five men and my horse saddled. We'll be riding sentry tonight."

"What about this one?" Grete held up a bright yellow chiffon and lace gown. The square-cut bodice was low enough to show more than just a little bit of cleavage.

Mallory grimaced. "Yellow is not my color."

"You used to love this gown."

"Just trust me on this, okay? For the sake of argument, all the dresses go."

The armoire was nearly empty, only the petticoats remained inside. The dresses were folded in neat stacks all over the bed.

"But why?" Grete asked.

"Because they're Claire's. I don't want to wear anything of hers. And don't start in about the nightgowns again," Mallory told her sternly. "I'd like to think her affairs kept her too busy to wear any of them. And if I'm wrong--" she held up her hand when Grete opened her mouth to correct her. "--then let me be wrong. I don't want to know differently."

"Well, I still don't understand. It's a waste of good fabric."

"Then take some," Mallory said. She began to dig through the stacks of folded gowns piled high on the counterpane. "Where's that green one with the blue-striped sleeves? That would look so good on you, bring out the green in your eyes."

Grete snorted. "What would this old woman do with a dress like that?"

"I don't know. Catch the eye of that certain soldier on the third tower, maybe. You think I haven't noticed the way you bat your eyes at him every evening when we walk around the walls, trying to catch his attention?"

Grete colored instantly. "I most certainly do not! Bat my--catch his--Why, I never!"

"Then why are you so embarrassed? There's nothing wrong with it. Ah, here it is." Mallory pulled a folded green dress from the bottom of the third stack and handed it to Grete. "Now where's the sleeves?"

"I'm fifty-eight, not some simpering schoolroom miss."

"And he's fifty-six. So what?"

"How do you know how old he is?" Grete asked.

"I asked him. His name is John Huckle, and the only reason he hasn't been to see you sooner is because he thought you were put off by his scar."

"Oh, that doesn't matter." Cheeks a bright pink, Grete waved her hand in the air. "Hardly noticeable, really."

"Grete," Mallory paused in the midst of matching sleeves to gowns to give the older woman a knowing look. "It runs down the side of his nose, through his mouth, all the way to his chin. I don't know how he got it, but it's a wonder he didn't lose his eye."

"I know." Smoothing her hands over the green gown, Grete began to smile. "And doesn't it make him seem so dashing?"

Mallory shook her head, chuckling. "So wear the green dress."

"Absolutely not! I won't go getting above my station."

"Suit yourself. Just don't be surprised if he comes calling on you after his shift tonight."

Grete blushed even brighter. "You didn't!"

"I sure did."

They finished pulling the rest of the clothes from the armoire. The green dress with the blue-striped sleeves ended up on Grete's chair by the fire.

"Are you sure you don't want to keep just one until the seamstress has the replacements ready?"

"Positive," Mallory said. "She promised me the first within the week and the rest as quickly as she can get them done."

"I'm surprised His Grace agreed to purchase you a new wardrobe so soon already."

Mallory grimaced. "I haven't quite had the chance to tell him. Don't look at me like that! I'll ask him, but I don't think it'll be a problem. See, he sent this to me this morning." Mallory pulled the bolt of dragon's silk down from where she had stashed it on top of the armoire. She unwrapped the protective wool cover to show Grete the actual fabric. "Isn't this nice?"

Kenton had brought it to her room earlier that afternoon, along with a note that said: For what this cloth cost me, you had best make something spectacular out of it for me. Varden

Mallory had returned a note via Kenton back to him: How could I possibly cut up something as expensive and rare as dragon silk? Now that would be crazy! Mallory

Mallory smiled as she remembered his response to her note: a lovely pink flower delivered via one by this time very surly Kenton, just as she was returning from her noontime visit with Devin. She re-wrapped the cloth and carefully tucked it back up onto the armoire. "I'm sure I can make him understand why it's necessary."

"What about these petticoats?" Grete asked.

"Those should be okay. In fact," Mallory selected one and held it up to her. "I think this one is about to become a pair of running shorts. Can I borrow your sewing basket?"

Grete looked at her suspiciously. "I thought you said you couldn't sew."

"I can't. But this shouldn't be hard to make. I'll do it in the morning."

Varden crouched unmoving in the briars while an insect crawled over his collar and across his skin. He could feel the thin stick legs clinging to his nape, tickling as it moved up into his hair. Yet Varden dared not brush it aside. He did not turn his head. He barely even breathed for fear that the slightest movement would give him away.

The rain had stopped, but the canopy of leaves above their heads still wept. It was cold and would no doubt grow colder as the night progressed. In Foulden--several hundred yards beyond the line of brush and foliage that concealed him--nothing stirred. The gentle bleating of sheep was the only sound to be heard aside from a lone owl that hunted somewhere overhead. A low rustle shook the tree branches. Too light a sound to be manmade. An animal, then.

"Yer full o' piss and wind," the Kincaid whispered, sitting in the bushes next to him. "I cannae believe I let ye talk me into this. I should be home, wrapped in me soft bed, and warming me wife." He suddenly grimaced. "Then again, maybe I owe ye me thanks, lad."

Varden refrained from rolling his eyes. The last thing he wanted was to listen to his neighbor talk about his love life. Unfortunately, for the past hour, the Kincaid had indulged them both in a one-sided discussion that changed without warning from one unappealing topic to the next. Varden glared at the dark empty cottages that made up Foulden. He supposed it was inevitable that reproduction should eventually find its way into the conversation. At least they were off his brother's crossed-eye.

"Bloody woman wants another bairn," the Kincaid was saying. "We've nine boys, but she's heart-set on a wee lassie t' round things out."

From the corner of his eye, Varden glimpsed movement, but it was only two sheep, who had somehow escaped from their enclosure.

"Nine babies, and she wants another." The Kincaid shook his head. He nudged Varden in the back. "I hear tell ye've just gained a wee bairn yerself."

It was an invitation to join the discussion that was impossible to refuse and still remain civil.

"Yes," Varden said.

"Lad or lassie?"

"A boy." And then because he knew the Kincaid wasn't going to leave it alone, Varden added, "We named him Devin. He's perfectly healthy and getting fatter by the day. My wife is fine. Thank you for asking."

The Kincaid slapped him heartily on the back. "Always good t' hear when they d' well! I know he's yer second; sorry t' hear aboot the first. Meself, I've buried two o' me own." He grew quiet as he tugged at his thick orange beard. "You know, I dinnae kin it's in me t' throw a lass."

Movement caught his eyes and Varden sent a quick prayer of thanks skyward. He nudged the Kincaid and pointed in the brush to their left. "Someone is coming."

For the first time in over an hour, the Kincaid shut up. Unfortunately, it didn't last. "Ach, 'tis only me son, Cullen. I had him watching the road."

Though he looked to be no more than fourteen, the boy snuck through the brush better than Varden did. The boy's eyes were round and wide, and even in the dark of the pre-dawn morning it was easy to see that he was upset.

"Hutton's been hit," he whispered. "They ha' burnt the fields and hanged a mon when he tried t' stop 'em."

Varden rubbed his eyes and swore under his breath.

"That makes five they've killed s' far," the Kincaid growled.

"Eight, if you count my people." Varden rubbed his eyes again.

"I dinnae ha' the men t' protect every village and house along the border," the Kincaid said.

"If I sent you some--"

"They would nae be welcome anywhere I could post them."

"If it means keeping someone else alive," Varden told him, "then they can handle not being welcome."

The Kincaid studied him for a moment, pulling on his bushy beard, before he reluctantly nodded. "All right, then. I'll d' me best t' ease things when they arrive."

Exhausted, cold, and wet, Varden signaled his men to return to Cadhla. He looked at the still quiet huts of Foulden, sighed, and wearily rubbed his face yet again. He batted at the back of his neck where the bug still clung and shook his head to clear the excess water from his hair.

The ride back home was the longest of his life. He really must be getting old, he mused. There used to be a time when he could stay up all night and still function the next day without difficulty. Now, he hardly remembered climbing the bailey stairs to his balcony doors, and he didn't bother to get undressed before falling into bed. His head found the pillow and his exhausted arms pulled it to his chest. He didn't move again, not even when Kenton struggled to pull the boots from his feet and peel the wet clothes from his chilled body.

"As if I haven't better ways to spend my nights than to wait up for you," Kenton grumbled under his breath.

"Kill me or let me sleep," Varden groaned. "I don't care which."

"And me, without my sword." Kenton rubbed him vigorously with a towel, then covered him with a blanket. "Were you more considerate of others, you'd catch your death of cold and spare me the hangman's noose!"

A low rattling snore vibrated from the bed.

Before he quit the room, Kenton stoked the fire and added another log to ensure it would continue to burn hot for another hour, then went to wake the kitchen staff.

Sewing had never been Mallory's forte.

Of course, she had never been in a situation where she needed to make her own clothes, either.

Sitting cross-legged on the foot of her bed, the tip of her tongue pressed to her upper lip in concentration, Mallory cut along the narrow chalk line she had drawn inside Claire's petticoat. When she was done, she held up the two edges and congratulated herself on having saved time by cutting out both halves simultaneously. The edge was a little sloppy but, considering she had no idea what she was doing, it was not a bad attempt.

She was surprised at how easy sewing was. Just bring two pieces of cloth together via a thin line of thread. Anybody could do it.

Anybody but her, it seemed.

Too lightweight to be thrown very far, her first two attempts were wadded in balls on the floor beside her bed. Both were too small to pull up over her hips. She had taken great care to make this one bigger, cutting the halves over-large so that they would be sure to fit and she wouldn't have to cut out a fourth. Quite frankly, she was running low on petticoats.

Since she couldn't find any buttons in Grete's sewing basket, Mallory braided three narrow strips of cloth into a rope that she sewed into the waist of her shorts to help hold them up. Until elastic was invented, a drawstring was the best that she could do.

The actual stitching was the most laborious part. Although she tried to keep them small and evenly spaced, impatience got the best of her. After a while, each stitch seemed to grow in size directly

proportional to the length of sewing left to do. Some, she noticed, were half an inch long. And when she was finally finished, the stitches on one side were small, if unevenly spaced, while in places on the other they were big enough to stick her finger through. The whole thing would probably slide off her hips mid-lap, but they were hers, and she was determined to be proud of them.

Just in case, she turned the cloth over to add another row of stitches alongside the first one. Her gaps growing larger as she went, she overlapped little stitches on the big ones and hoped they would even themselves out.

Tying her unruly red hair back into a ponytail with another strip of cloth and using a white linen shirt stolen from Varden's wardrobe, Mallory tried on her new jogging suit. The shorts were a little snug across the seat and the material was thin. But it covered what it was supposed to, and there was no telltale ripping sound when Mallory bent over.

She opened the door to Varden's room. A long snore rattled up from the bed as she tiptoed past him to the balcony doors. Mallory stepped outside into the warm sunlight and closed the doors quietly behind her again. The sun was barely up, shining brightly in a cloudless, blue sky. In the bailey below, the cobbles were still muddy from all the rain the night before, and people were beginning to stir. As Mallory leaned against the banister, stretching her legs, two carts rolled through the gatehouse. It was going to be a busy day. It was probably best to stay up on the soldier's walk and out of everyone's way.

After a brief warm up, Mallory jogged out onto the soldiers' rampart. She hated exercise, especially running. But she disliked being out of shape even more. And if mad-dash chases around the furniture were going to become weekly occurrences, then building her endurance to it could mean the difference between a comfortable life and Varden's

broad hand vigorously paddling her bottom until she was crying too hard even to breathe.

As she made her first lap, Mallory called ragged hello's to the guards she passed. One waved back at her.

"Dice after dinner, milady?" he called after her.

She gave him a quick thumbs-up, "Count me in!"

He was the only one who spoke to her. The rest were too busy looking everywhere--anywhere--but at her to reply. Mallory didn't take the snubs personally. At any one time there were no less than eleven guards stationed along the walls and four in each of the three watchtowers. Varden did not strike her as the sort to do things needlessly, so she assumed there was probably a good reason for such precautions. Heaven forbid she should take a man's attention from his job and get them all killed by an invading army.

As she rounded her first lap, Mallory glanced over the wall to the green hillside that spilled down into the forest a good football field away. She made a mental note to ask Varden just who their enemies were the next time she saw him.

For the fourth time in a half hour, a steady stomping echoed along the wooden walkway just outside Varden's bedchambers. The sound stopped briefly at the stone of his balcony, then re-appeared on the other side where stone met wood again. Varden groaned and pulled his pillow over his head as the sound gradually faded away. But a few minutes later, just as he was beginning to drift back to sleep, the stomping returned.

The next time he heard it, by sheer force of will, Varden managed to peel his eyes open. He attempted to focus on the balcony doors. The sun had climbed above the stone rail. He had only been asleep for two hours. Growling under his breath, he rolled out of bed and reached for his robe. Stubbing

his toe on the leg of a misplaced stool, he hopped and swore the rest of the way to the balcony. As Varden threw open the doors, he recoiled from the bright light of dawn.

Shielding his eyes with his hand, he scanned the parapet for the cause of that sound. He stared, then stared a little harder. There was his wife running around the outside parameter in pantaloons so skimpy that she may as well have been wearing nothing at all. No gentlewoman would have been caught dead wearing such a garment. For that matter, no prostitute would, either.

"Claire!" His bellow shook the balcony rafters and echoed through the bailey. Servants looked up from their work to see what he was yelling at. Soldiers jumped to attention. His lunatic wife was not even fazed.

"Mallory!" she bellowed back.

Varden started to yell before he realized he was really more startled than upset. Ill-fitting and scandalous though it was, at least she was wearing something other than that damn nightgown.

"Morning, honey." Mallory raised her hand in mock salute, as she came around the walk. Her green eyes sparkled as she sized him up and down in his morning robe. "Nice legs."

"What are you doing?"

But she was gone, jogging steadily away again. He had to wait until she made her loop before he could get his answer.

"Practicing," she puffed.

"For what?" He called after her as she tromped past and away. With a wide yawn, he scratched his chest sleepily and waited. When he heard the steady slap of bare feet on the soldiers' walk--he really needed to get her some shoes--he turned to watch her approach. "You never had an interest in exercise before."

"I'm a changed woman." As she ran past, Varden thought he heard her mutter, "Not that you believe me."

Again Varden was made to wait for her next round before he could talk to her.

"Practicing for what?"

"The next time. . .you. . .ch-chase me." And she was gone again.

Varden bent to rest his forearms on the railing. He watched the stable master lead two horses through the gatehouse to the grazing paddock just outside the outer wall while she took another lap. "Rest assured, if I wanted to catch you, I could."

"Wait until I. . .I get into. . .shape!" she panted and passed him again. "You'll never sp. . .spank me. . .again!"

He laughed. So much for sleeping until noon. His eyes burned with exhaustion but, rather than return to bed, he was content to remain as he was, with the banister holding him upright. "This exhibitionist habit you have for running round in your unmentionables really should stop. What do you call that thing you're wearing?"

"Jogging. . .suit."

"Scandalous."

She was sweating, her face a bright pink. She swiped the perspiration from her brow with the back of her wrist. Her other hand was pressed against the gnawing stitch at her side.

"Perhaps you should stop before you fall off the wall," Varden suggested.

Panting heavily, Mallory shook her head and would have kept going had Varden not caught her elbow. She jogged a half-circle around him before gradually coming to a stop and leaned on his arm.

"You are a very stubborn woman." He led her back to his room. While she walked aimlessly to keep her legs from cramping, he called down the hall for a breakfast tray.

"And a bath, please," Mallory panted as she flopped down to sit on the edge of his bed.

Mildly surprised, Varden relayed the request. Claire had never had much use for bathing. To her, it was a trial to be endured when perfume failed. As

he watched, Mallory wiped the sweat from her face and neck with the hem of his now ruined silk shirt. That was not like Claire, either. His eyes narrowed as he studied her, this strange woman who would rather her feet be bare than suffer through the pains of an ill-fitting pair of shoes. Who spent her days in simple nightgowns rather than corsets and gowns. Who spent her mornings jogging through the bailey wearing shabbily made pantaloons and a plain, gentleman's shirt. And what in the world had she done to her hair?

She plucked at the front of the shirt and fanned it rapidly in and out. The silk fell in around her breasts and clung damply to her curves.

Everything about her seemed so different, so changed. Varden didn't realize he'd said that aloud until she looked at him in surprise.

"Is that good or bad?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." Varden caught a wisp of an auburn curl that was tickling her ear and twisted it around his finger. "Good, I think. At least, much of it is, when you're not setting my Field on fire."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd hate to think I was getting worse."

Varden smiled lopsidedly. Without thinking, he cupped her chin to bring her lips to his. For so light a touch, the potency of the charge that shot through him was as surprising as his sudden need for more. He kissed her again, hard, full of passion, full of need, with all the fierceness of a desire held too long in check.

When he finally broke away, she stared dazedly at his mouth. When the tip of her tongue flicked out to taste him on her lips, nothing seemed more natural for him than to press forward, part her lips with his tongue, and taste her in return.

Intoxicating.

He didn't realize that he was pressing her back until suddenly the mattress was beneath them and Varden covered her. His hips rocked into the cradle

of her thighs with an intimacy belonging only to lovers.

He touched all of her, his hands tracing the softness of her face to her throat, his palms rasping over her smooth skin. He marveled when she arched into him, pressing her breasts into his palms, the peaked tips raising the white silk of her shirt. Catching the hem of the unwanted barrier, he pulled it over her head and tossed it impatiently away.

Again his calloused hands rasped over her skin. He paused, frowning, until she lay her hand to the side of his face.

"It's all right," Mallory said. "I like it when you touch me."

Varden bent to kiss her again, more gently this time as his hands stroked over her ribs, down her stomach to the band of her shorts and back up again. Feather light, he caressed the smooth undersides of each breast with the backs of his fingers. In light, endless circles, he traced each creamy globe, spiraling ever inward until he reached the center. He plucked the nipple, gently tweaked it, and smiled when she moaned and put her arms around him.

"What do you want?" Varden asked, his voice husky with mounting desire.

When Mallory only shook her head, Varden delved past the belt and down between her thighs. He pressed into her. Even through the thin fabric of the shorts, he could feel how hot and moist she was. Ready for him.

His body surged. Every aspect of him was hard and throbbing. When she eagerly curled a leg around his hip, he nearly lost control entirely.

"Say it," he coaxed as her hips moved instinctively against his hand. "What do you want, ma petite folle?"

"Oh, Varden!" Eyes squeezed tightly shut, she trembled under the tender ministrations of his hand.

"Mon bise," he murmured as he took the lobe of her ear between his teeth. She shivered as the heat of his breath brushed her nape. First he nibbled, then drew it into his hot mouth and suckled it. "Say it."

"You," Mallory breathed. "Please, Varden, I want you."

The power of those words made the agony of his restraint worth every torturous second. He found the loop of her belt and quickly had the knot undone. The shorts ended up on the floor with the shirt.

Varden stood up.

"Don't leave me!" Mallory reached for him. "What have I done now?"

The disappointment on her face was enough to make him laugh aloud. "No need to look so stricken. I have no intention of leaving you."

He shed his robe. Soft as velvet, hard as steel, his manhood strained skyward. He stroked her soft belly; bent to kiss her thigh. "Say it again."

There were no hesitations now.

"I want you." Mallory opened her arms to welcome him, and Varden went into them.

Chapter Twelve

He held himself stiffly off her, braced up on shaking arms. It had never been like that. The honesty of her reactions, the helpless way she had clung to him--still clung to him--as though afraid to let go. Even when they were first married and it was simpler to pretend to return his love, Claire had never truly done more than endure him. After Caleb, when she could no longer stand to touch him, he had grown so weary of pretending that things were perfect between them. And now, he wasn't sure exactly how or why things had changed, but he was grateful. For the sake of their son, and his own sanity, he was grateful.

Varden lowered himself to kiss her once more, tender, gentle, marveling that she would respond so sweetly, combing her fingers through his hair, sighing her enjoyment into his mouth. He held her as close as he could, her musky woman's scent filling his senses as he stroked her shoulder and brushed his lips over her smooth skin. He could not help it; he confessed to her, "I love you. Despite all that has happened, Claire, I still love you. You are a fire under my skin."

Mallory stiffened beneath him. She twisted out of his arms to look at him, hurt. "What did you say?"

"I love you."

"Not that part, the other one!" Mallory stared at him accusingly. Her voice rose. "You just called me by her name!"

He rolled onto his side, fondling her breast. "What does it matter?"

"What--what does it--Oh!" Mallory shoved him off her and scrambled from the bed.

Varden sat up. "Where are you going?"

She struggled into her shorts. "It's not as if I'm asking you to give me the moon!"

He rolled his eyes. "All right, fine. I apologize. I love you, Mallory."

Her back stiffened. "Don't bother."

"I said I was sorry, now come back to bed."

Mallory rounded on him. "You don't even know what you're apologizing for! This isn't funny, Varden! What's it going to take for you to see me for who I am?"

"I don't want to argue with you today. Come back to bed, mon âme," he coaxed, holding out his hand, but Mallory would have none of it.

Her hands shook as she grabbed her shirt from the floor. "I thought I could do it. I thought I could just move in where she left off and be your wife. But I'm not your wife, because she still is! How do I fight that? How do I make you love me?"

"I do love you," Varden protested.

"You love her!"

"You are her!"

Mallory recoiled as sharply as if he'd struck her. "Don't ever say that to me again! Oh my God, I feel like I'm having an affair with a married man. Like a good, dutiful mistress, I suppose I'll be waiting forever for you to get divorced so you can marry me instead!"

"I give up." Varden threw up his hands. "I am not having this conversation. You are already my wife!"

"This body may have walked down the aisle with you, but I didn't!"

"What aisle?" Exasperated, his voice had begun to rise. Varden forced himself to calm. It would do no good to yell at her. "Come back to bed. Let us discuss this like two rational adults."

"I'll never get back into that bed with you unless you know who you're sharing it with!" Mallory stalked back to her room. Grabbing the door, she turned back to him. "And I'll give you a hint: it's not your wife!"

Then she slammed it.

Varden heard her burst into tears and the sound of Grete's voice. He punched his pillow and rolled onto his side, his back to the door. Grumbling under

his breath, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. But he kept thinking of a certain redheaded duchess, with green eyes and a winning smile, jogging barefoot around the courtyard. Despite reason and all logic, there was something very different about her.

Not enough to make him believe her ludicrous 'Mallory' story. Certainly not enough for that.

But there was. . .something.

"How long is she going to stay mad at you?" Doctor Wilcox asked.

Varden shrugged. "Who knows, but that's not the argument I want your opinion on."

They stood side by side at the opposite end of the nursery from where Mallory and Nanna were bathing Devin. Varden wished he could be closer. He wanted to be the one to hold the cooing, kicking baby in the giant bathing tub while Mallory gently washed and tickled him. Unfortunately, if Varden got any closer than the doorway, she fixed him with that cold stare of hers until he backed away again.

Hands clasped tightly behind his back, the doctor glared at the stark stone wall. "You are as insane as she is."

"So they keep telling me. Just look at her and keep an open mind." He was careful to keep his tone low enough for Mallory, who occasionally glared back at him over her shoulder, not to overhear. "She is acting differently, isn't she?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, does she act like the same woman we had to lock up to keep from committing suicide? Don't look at me, look at her. She's been fighting mad for two days, but does she act like a fighting mad Claire?"

"For once I agree with your stepmother," Wilcox snapped. "This is foolishness! What are you really asking me? Is the soul of a futuristic dead woman

inside Claire's body? Do you expect for me to actually say yes to that?"

"You'll forgive me if I find the fantasy appealing," Varden said.

"Beg your forgiveness from the Church. They will make a bigger issue out of it than I. Men have been imprisoned and even executed for saying less." Wilcox caught a nasty look from Mallory and lowered his voice. "I hear she was running through the castle in pants this morning."

"They were pantaloons, not pants."

"The Church won't make that distinction, either," Doctor Wilcox said. "And neither should you."

"If her mental state is not enough to protect her, then my money and position will. It's not the Church that concerns me."

"Well, it should."

"Just look at what she does." Varden gestured at her. "In all the years that you've known her, has she ever acted this way? I don't care what she wants to call herself. Frankly, I could accept 'Mallory' over Claire, and cheerfully, if it could be assured that Claire would not re-surface a year or two from now and rip everything apart again."

"There is no Mallory," Wilcox insisted. "The woman before you is the same woman she has always been. Claire. Insane, definitely more pleasant to be around, but your wife just the same!"

"Lower your voice!" Even as Varden hastened to quiet the sour doctor, Mallory paused in the act of lifting Devin from the tub and glared at them both. Varden smiled and inclined his head in a kind of bow; Wilcox just stared at the floor.

Knowing he lacked his mother's attention, Devin began to fuss, and Mallory handed him into the towel Nanna held up. When the governess handed him back to her, Mallory began to rock him and sing. "Here she comes just a-walkin' down the street, singin' 'Do-wah ditty-ditty dum ditty-doo.'"

Varden turned back to Wilcox, gesturing at her as he did so. "And what about all these strange little

songs. What was that other one? That tune about the special sauce and beef patties?"

"I need to get drunk," Wilcox said.

"Where does she come up with them?" Varden lowered his voice. "And did you know she threw all her gowns away? There are servants scrubbing the floors with the finest blue chiffon rags this side of Londontown."

"Claire lives for new clothes. That doesn't prove a thing."

"True, and she is finally going to get some. A grand total of three brand-new dresses sewn for her by a seamstress in Wooler. I saw the material for one of them. I don't know whether to laugh or interfere. Grete will be better dressed than she."

The doctor's bushy eyebrows came together. "I didn't know Wooler had a seamstress."

"It doesn't, that's my point. Nanna's daughter knows how to put a needle to cloth. Her husband raises sheep and she is renowned for making prettily patterned blankets and shawls. Apparently, that makes her a qualified seamstress for ladies' dresses. But she certainly is not equal to even the youngest apprentice in Madame Bell's dress shop." Varden leaned toward him. "Robert, I want to know what happened in that room. You told me she refused to cooperate. That something went wrong."

The doctor's face darkened. "Talk to the midwife."

Varden scowled. "If you don't start answering my questions, you're going to find yourself in your own, private gaol cell very quickly. The coldest, dampest, most rat-infested one I can find. I may even forget you are there."

A snorting laugh was the response he got. "You'll remember quick enough the next time there's an accident on the Field and someone lies bleeding to death." But the bite was not as sharp in his tone. He glared from Varden to Mallory, then snorted and shook his head again. "I don't know what went wrong. But by the time I was

summoned, she had already lost so much blood that it was all I could see of her. Bess was convinced she would not survive. I was only there to cut Devin from her body after she died. Personally, I thought we would lose them both. But that doesn't mean that there's another soul lurking somewhere under her skin! I don't believe it for a second! And if you repeat any of this, I'll deny it to my dying day!"

"I'm not sure what to believe," Varden said honestly. "I know how ridiculous this sounds, but I also know that the woman I see before me now is not the same woman I have called 'wife' these last seven years. Take away all the physical attributes and compare her with what she was two months ago. She moves differently. She even speaks differently. She is a completely different person."

"I'll admit that she is not entirely the same." A nervous twitch tugged at the corner of his mouth as Wilcox reluctantly said, "Something did happen, though, shortly after I arrived that night."

Varden gave the old man his attention, though the explanation was a long time in coming.

"She quit breathing," Wilcox finally said. "She just fell back in bed and lay there, eyes dull and staring straight up without looking at anything. That last breath--it whooshed out of her. Her heart stopped. I thought she had died." He grimaced, as if realizing that he would regret what he was about to admit. "I was about to cut into her when she started to breathe again. And not just breathe, she actually sat up and pushed. She was very weak by then. She had lost a lot of blood, but she acted as if nothing had happened. I think that was the point when she lost her sanity. Yes, that must have been when it happened."

Varden watched as his wife dressed Devin in a long, white gown, one of Caleb's. "They say when a man has a brush with death, it can change him."

"No one ever said it exchanges their soul for another's!"

"True. But I would bet my entire estate that she honestly has no memory of who she used to be. Or perhaps the only way she feels she can make amends for the past is by 'killing' Claire, which would make 'Mallory' the model individual that she wishes she could become."

"Or," Wilcox said, "she's a madwoman who seems very rational."

"You're right." Varden sighed and rubbed his eyes. "This is all wishful thinking. Go get drunk, Doctor. And with my blessing."

Wilcox lay a heavy hand on Varden's shoulders. "She may not be dangerous now, my boy, but it's inevitable that she will worsen. I understand your reluctance to have her committed in a public asylum, but that is an eventuality that you must prepare for."

"I like her better this way," Varden muttered. How could he lock her away when what he wanted most was to hold her in his arms and pretend they were the only two beings in the known world?

"So do I," Wilcox grunted as he walked out the door. "So do I."

Varden wasn't leaving.

Though the baby had been asleep for almost half an hour, Mallory still sat beside his cradle with her hands folded in her lap, ready to go back to her room but with no way to leave gracefully. Why couldn't he just go away? Surely he wasn't going to stand there all day, propped against the wall with his arms folded across his chest and his right leg crossed over his left, looking the very picture of comfort, as if he fully intended to wait her out. And to make matters worse, every time she glared at him, he smiled at her. Smiled! The nerve! Mallory fumed. He'd probably follow her out into the hall and all the way back to her room.

This chair really needed a cushion. The wood creaked as she shifted on the hard, flat seat but,

after receiving two spankings in the same week, getting comfortable sitting anywhere was nearly impossible.

When she shifted again, Nanna glanced at her over the top of her needlepoint and smiled knowingly.

Mallory flushed. She was acting childish and she knew it. But she wasn't about to let Varden gain the upper hand. She could sit here all night if she had to. She didn't know what it would prove, but a sore behind was nothing compared to the satisfaction of beating Varden at his own game.

She shifted in the chair again, then rolled her eyes. Who was she kidding?

She stood up. The day you start running is not the day to try to out-wait anyone. She walked past Varden on stiff and aching legs. "Don't you dare smile at me."

"Of course not," he said. He smiled as he followed her out of the nursery. "Are you going to avoid me all day?"

"That was the plan." Mallory quickened her pace, but his legs were longer and he kept up with her easily. "I'd like to stick with it."

"It's not a good plan."

"It was working well enough for me up until a minute ago."

"Ah, but if we continued with this plan then I would have to leave tonight without first escorting you through the dungeon."

Mallory stopped walking so suddenly that Varden had to sidestep to avoid bumping into her. She turned to look at him. "You're going to take me to see the dungeon?"

"You did show a rather morbid interest in it. I thought if I had the time, and if you were so inclined, then we could take a quick walk through the cells." He leaned toward her when she didn't answer right away. "The candles are already there, waiting for us."

Her desire to explore a real, live medieval castle dungeon was beginning to outweigh her anger. Her resolve wavered. "Is this an apology?"

"Let's call it an acknowledgment of differing view points." He picked up a lock of her hair and twirled it around his finger. "Madame wife, may I have the pleasure of your company?"

She glared. "Only a few weeks ago you couldn't stand the sight of me."

"Perhaps I can see something now that's worth saving."

At least he no longer hated her. That was an accomplishment, considering the short time that she'd been here. Maybe she was expecting too much out of him too quickly. Give her a couple of months or even a year more and who knows, she might be able to convince him to actually believe in Mallory and not just call her by name.

"Well, I would like to see the dungeon," Mallory admitted.

"All right, then," Varden said. "I have just enough time to take you through it. I hope you won't be disappointed, though. It's not very exciting."

Kenton was waiting for them at the round, iron grate trapdoor entrance with a small handful of unlit candles. As he handed them to Varden, he said, "If you're looking for a romantic setting, Your Grace, could I suggest a walk in the gardens or, perhaps, a picnic on the hillside?"

"This will do." Varden handed Mallory the candles. Together, he and Kenton heaved the grate open, the heavy iron hinges screeching in protest. "The ladder should be fine, but I'll go down first. You two wait here."

"I'll do my best not to abduct her in your absence," Kenton drawled as Varden lowered himself down into the passage below. From the bottom rung, he held up his hands and Mallory passed the candles down to him.

Giddy with excitement, Mallory watched through the bars as Varden lit one and then disappeared down the corridor as he lit other candles and put them into the wall lamps. He came back to the ladder and held out his hand. "I'll help you down."

Mallory pulled her skirt close around her thighs and sat on the edge of the grate. She felt for the ladder with her feet and, finding the first rung, rolled onto her side and stood. Varden's warm, rough hand settled on the back of her calf at the same time that Kenton braced one foot against the open grate door and took hold of her arm.

"Don't be afraid to lean on me," Kenton said.

"And try not to kick me in the head," Varden called from below.

With their combined help, she managed to get down the ladder without tangling the skirt of her nightgown around her feet.

"Welcome to my dungeon," Varden said as her feet touched the cool stone floor.

"I'll leave the grate up," Kenton called down. "Have fun."

It was plain by his tone that the valet thought them both out of their minds.

The dungeon was strangely clean. That was the first thing Mallory noticed. There were no cobwebs and very little dust anywhere. Behind her, the corridor ended in a small, empty room without a door. In front, the corridor widened enough to allow two people to walk side by side before a second door of iron bars blocked their passage.

She ran her finger between two stone blocks in the wall, then looked at it.

Varden laughed. "I had a few people come down yesterday to clear out the cobwebs and sweep up the worst of the dust. However, you can expect to get a little dirty."

"How long has it been since this place was used?" Mallory asked as he unlocked the door.

"Forty-two years. My father was sixteen when construction of the new gaol was completed. My grandfather hated this place."

She looked around. "Why?"

"It's cold in the winter, wet and slimy every time it rains, and by the fall, the mildew smell is overwhelming. It was a miserable place to be, for the guards as well as the prisoners." Varden held the door open for her. "But the biggest reason, I suppose, would be the man we had in the second to last cell down the right side."

"Did he die?" Mallory asked, wide-eyed. She clutched his arm in a sudden burst of excitement. "Oh! His ghost is haunting the place, isn't it?"

"My, you are a little ghoul, aren't you? No, he tunneled up through the drainage system and escaped. It took thirteen years, and in all that time no one ever noticed what he was doing."

"You're kidding!"

"Well, the man stunk so bad no one wanted to go near him."

Laughing, Mallory wrinkled her nose. "That's awful."

"You asked."

The door opened into a long rectangular room, lined with twelve small cells on each side. Shackles still hung from the walls in some of them, while thick metal cast iron support rings protruded from the bare stone in others.

"What are those?" Mallory pointed at the far end of the room.

"Stocks," Varden said. "I don't use them."

Mallory turned back to him, smiling. "Because you're a man ahead of your time, in tune with a special awareness toward what's cruel and unusual punishment?"

"Because they are both riddled with wood rot. The new ones are located in the center of Wooler, if you'd like to see them."

"Uh, no thanks."

Varden unlocked and opened one door for Mallory. "This is a three man cell," he said as she went inside. The only thing left in it, aside from the shackles on one wall, was a tattered mat of woven straw on the floor. A bed of sorts, she supposed.

"I don't think one man could fit in here comfortably."

"It's not intended for comfort. If it were, everyone would want to live in one instead of working for a living. We'd all starve to death."

Standing up against the wall, Mallory slipped her wrists into the shackles that hung there. "These don't seem so bad. I wouldn't mind having a pair in my room." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

He arched one of his own in return. "My, my," he said, stepping through the open cell door. "Yet another side of you I've never before suspected."

"I've never seen it before, either. Maybe shackles are too extreme. What about silk scarves? I could be a seductive harem girl, dancing for my attentive sultan. Have you ever heard of the Dance of the Seven Veils?" When he shook his head, Mallory said, "I'd wear nothing but seven scarves to cover me. And every time I danced close to you, you could reach out and take one, until I'm dancing for you wearing nothing at all."

"I suggest a different locale for that fantasy."

"True, and we are here now." Mallory shifted against the wall, the chains clinking softly above her head. She sighed with mock disappointment. "I suppose we're stuck then. I'm your prisoner, Varden, my stern and merciless gaol keeper. What, have I shocked you?"

"A little," he admitted.

"Have I scared you?"

A corner of his mouth turned slightly upwards. "It takes a lot to scare me."

"Then why are you standing way over there." Mallory looked up at the narrow shackles around her wrists, then smiled at him. "I'm your helpless

prisoner. I can't hurt you, but you'd better do something with me before I escape."

Varden came slowly toward her. "I have the only key to the doors. So unless you're willing to crawl through the drainage system, I'm afraid you'll simply have to remain my prisoner until I decide to let you go."

"I might have something that can pick the locks."

"That's unlikely."

"Maybe you should strip search me, just to be sure." Though she blushed a little as she said it, her smile never wavered.

He took another step toward her, his blue eyes smoldering. "You could even be armed."

"You never know what could be hidden in my hair."

"I'm more concerned about the contents of that nightgown." He reached up to check the shackles, opening them as far as they would go.

"Have I just been freed?" Mallory asked.

"Not until you've paid for your crimes." Varden lowered his head to press a light path of kisses down the slope of her neck. "But I don't have a key for these. The last thing I want is to have to summon a blacksmith and explain what you're doing chained up to the wall in the old dungeon."

She began to lower her hands. "Then I probably shouldn't--"

He caught her wrists and put them right back where they were. "I like the image," he said against her throat. "And since I am the warden here, my wishes take precedence over that of the prisoner."

Mallory shivered as his hot mouth nibbled the shell of her ear. His hands glided down her arms, over her ribs to her waist, the heat of his palms burning through the cloth and into her skin. They slid up her stomach to cup her breasts. Two fingers dipped into the neckline to stroke the satin-softness of her cleavage.

"A warden must be thorough in his job," Varden said against her ear. The heat of his breath prickled her skin, and she closed her eyes. "I can't afford to make mistakes."

His hands were on the move again, sliding down over her waist, her hips and her thighs. He bent, laying kisses down her chest and between her breasts, his hands following the length of her legs until he found the bottom hem of her nightgown, then his fingers slipped underneath it. As he stood, the skirt of her gown came up with him. Mallory trembled, feeling the cool air against her skin, as the fabric bunched around her waist.

"So far I haven't found anything to confiscate."

"Perhaps," Mallory said, clearing her throat. "Perhaps you should perform a more in-depth search."

He chuckled, a deep rumbling sound, before his mouth claimed hers, hungry and demanding. Mallory didn't realize that she had let go of the chain until she felt his hands on her bottom, cupping and lifting her off the ground even as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. Before she knew what had happened, she was on the floor with the straw mat at her back and Varden hard above her, his eyes a stormy-blue hue, dark with desire. He rose just far enough above her to jerk his shirt up over his head and throw it aside. She helped him with his pants, laughing breathlessly as she glimpsed real proof of his passion.

"Of course," Varden said, cupping her woman's mound. "No stay in the dungeon is complete without at least one torture session."

"I'll never talk," Mallory said, trembling as he caressed her.

His smile was nothing short of wicked. "We'll see."

He kissed her mouth one last time, then his hands pushed her thighs apart and he moved further down.

Mallory didn't just talk; she moaned, gasped, and cried out. Her hips moved against his fingers and mouth as she arched and writhed against him. She grabbed the mat and then her own legs, shivering and trembling, arching up into his touch and then sobbing as he brought her right to the brink of ecstasy's abyss.

His mouth found hers again and she was consumed by his intensity, the demanding mating of tongues broken only when he entered her. Together, they fell over the brink.

Chapter Thirteen

It was three in the morning when the horizon was lit up by the warning fires at Barton-Under-the-Hill, a half hour's hard ride from Yetholm where Varden and the Kincaid were hunkered together under the same prickly bush. Less than a mile from the village, they nearly collided horses with the six-man troop of reivers, galloping hard for Scottish soil. Two of Varden's four soldiers stationed in Barton-Under-the-Hill rode fast up behind them.

The reivers grouped closer together even as Varden and the Kincaid surrounded them with twice their number in troops. Killing them would have been easy and just. The problem was the little girl held fast on the saddle against the lead rider. Crying and calling for her father, she was still in her nightgown, her blonde hair braided and mussed from sleep, her eyes wide and frightened. The leader promptly put his knife to her throat.

"Let us go," he told Varden. "I'd kill a bairn t' save me skin and nae think twice aboot it."

"Dinnae listen," the Kincaid said to Varden's left. "We've got them now, let's end this!"

Ignoring the Kincaid, Varden told the reiver, "Give her to me now, and for tonight I'll let you go."

The thief laughed. He shook his head, inching the knife tighter against the girl's throat while she wailed in renewed terror, her small hands clutching his arm. "There be a glen two miles t' the north, wi' an old tree stump in the middle, wider than a mon is tall."

"I know it," the Kincaid said.

Varden nodded. "So do I."

"Ye give me half an hour's ride, and I'll leave the wee one for ye there."

"If I agree, what assurance have I that you'll leave her alive?"

"I assure ye she'll be dead if ye dinnae," the reiver said bluntly. "Give me half hour, and ye'll find her there safe and sound. I swear it."

"Dinnae ye let that bastard go," the Kincaid warned. "Ye'll nae see that bairn alive anyway. Dinnae ye let them go, blast ye!"

Ignoring him, Varden concentrated on the sobbing child. When she looked at him, he said, "Wait for me at the stump, do you understand? I'll be there soon, little one, and I'll take you home."

"Aye, he'll take ye home." The reiver relaxed his knife and moved it away from her throat, but didn't put it away.

To the reiver, he said, "If she isn't there, I will hunt you down."

The man shrugged. "Finding me'll be the thing. I kin ye could eventually. But I'll lead ye a merry chase a-fore it's o'er."

The Kincaid scowled as Varden motioned his men aside to allow the reivers to pass. He drew his sword and bellowed, "Ye can sell yer soul, Sassenach, but I'll nae make deals wi' the likes o' these devils!"

He almost charged after the fleeing reivers but for Varden's own sword, which had suddenly found a cool resting place against the Kincaid's throat. In an instant, every Scot and soldier followed suit and the ring of swords coming free of their scabbards was deafening on that suddenly still and very quiet road.

Nobody moved.

The Kincaid was the first to lower his blade, seething as he said, "We could ha' ended this tonight, but ye let them go. Cozied right up t' them, in fact."

"I will not face her parents and tell them I sacrificed their child just to catch a thief."

"How noble o' ye. So they'll kill the bairn, and keep on killing 'til we catch them again." The Kincaid backed his horse until Varden's sword was no longer at his throat. "This is what comes o' trusting the English. Nae a one o' ye has the stomach t' d' what needs doing."

But despite the Kincaid's certainty to the opposite, when they rode into the glen, the little girl was sitting on the tree stump, wringing her nightgown in her small hands, and sniffing. When Varden took her home, he discovered the full measure of damage done. Two homes, the mill, and a field were destroyed. Livestock had been slaughtered instead of taken. The little girl's father lay on the ground where he had been killed when he'd tried to prevent his daughter's abduction.

"Congratulations," the Kincaid said. "Thanks t' ye, we can look forward t' seeing more o' this."

It was past noon before Varden finally made his way home again. With less than six hour's sleep in the last three days, he was in no mood to handle another crisis. In retrospect, he should have left a message to that effect with Mallory. But since he hadn't, he supposed he deserved what he got.

"What do you mean we had a fire?" Still in the bailey, still saddled on his horse, Varden scowled at the half-dozen house servants that had charged from the castle to surround him the instant he rode through the gatehouse. He pointed at the ground. "Here? In my house?"

"In your house," Kenton told him. "In the third kitchen to be precise."

"Was anyone hurt? Where was Claire?"

"Right in the middle of it," Kenton said, hands clasped neatly behind his back.

"How--" Varden stopped in the act of pulling his riding gloves from his hands. He stared at each of the men and women around him, then glanced about an otherwise vacant bailey. "Please don't tell me she was responsible." When Kenton said nothing, Varden glared. "She started the damn thing, didn't she?"

His ice-blue gaze swept the bailey again. Half-hidden in the shadowed arch of a doorway, he caught a glimpse of red hair as Mallory peered back

at him. The horse snorted and stamped his hooves as if sensing Varden's foul temper darkening that much more. Pointing at a vacant patch of ground near him, Varden snapped. "Come here!"

Servants parted from the spot as though the devil had just condemned it; Mallory cringed back into the shadows.

"I said, come here!" he shouted, and Mallory turned and ran the other way. "Here! Don't you run from--God damn it!"

She fled up a short flight of steps and disappeared through the front door.

Swearing, Varden swung off his horse, though he kept a firm hold on his saddle. For a moment as he stepped down, he was afraid his legs would not hold him. He straightened slowly. He was too old for this. "Kenton, I'll pay you to run her down for me."

The valet snorted. "I have absolutely no desire to get involved in this, Your Grace."

Sighing, Varden rubbed his eyes. "Neither do I."

"Then don't chase her."

"And let her think she's won?" He snorted. "Did anyone actually see her start this fire?"

"No," Kenton said. "She was seen fleeing the scene of the . . . er, accident. But in all honesty, I suppose we can't be certain that it was Her Grace who knocked over the ladle, which fell into the fireplace, thereby disturbing the log, which rolled onto the rug and started the fire, as is claimed by the three maids, who were there making candles at the time."

"Hell." As Varden started after Mallory, servants scrambled to get out of his way.

"She only wanted to help," Grete stammered when Varden stalked up the front steps. His scowl deepened, and she quickly backed out of his way. "I--I only turned my back for a moment!"

Varden did not want to hear any more. "That is beginning to become a kind of catchphrase for her."

"Stay there!" Varden leapt over a table to keep her from escaping up the servants' stairs, only to watch as Mallory spun and ran back the way she had come. "Get back here, woman! I am not going to chase you down this hall again!"

Her early morning jogging was paying off. Not only was she lighter, but faster, too. Varden had to really push just to catch up as she raced into the dining hall. Somehow she managed to get the forty-foot solid oak table between them. The exertion had not diminished Varden's temper a bit. He glared at her from the opposite side of the table, his hands resting lightly on the smooth wooden surface, fury showing in every line of his face.

"I am tired," Varden growled. "I am hungry. I have spent all night sitting in a bush, and all morning butchering sheep that by all rights should still be alive and producing wool! I smell like a wet horse, I hurt in places I'd rather not mention, and the last thing I need when I come home is to find my house on fire because you, you miserable wretch, cannot keep your meddling hands to yourself!"

"I swear I--"

"And when I tell you to come," Varden interrupted with a bellow. "You had bloody well better learn to come!"

"Then calm down so we can talk about this rationally!" Mallory bellowed back.

He lunged at her, and she darted to the right. Varden started to jump over the table, then dropped to his knees when he saw Mallory duck beneath.

"Whoa!" She spun on her knees and crawled as fast as she could between the rows of chairs at either side of her to the far end of the forty-foot table.

Knocking a chair aside, Varden grabbed at her foot but caught the hem of her nightgown instead.

"Let go!" As he pulled her back to him, Mallory kicked at his hand. "Let go, let go, let go!"

The cloth tore. Varden was left holding a strip of flimsy white chemise as Mallory scrambled for safety. He threw it aside and crawled after her. He had a distinct advantage, since he wore pants and she a skirt. But he was also larger than she was. More than once he forgot to duck and cracked his head on the hard underside of the table.

Thwack!

Varden swore.

"Ha!" She shouted back at him. "Serves you right, you heavy-handed brute!"

"Get back here!" he yelled after her.

"When pigs fly and angels oink!"

"Cinglée!" Varden bellowed. "Qu'elle cloche!"

Mallory turned so suddenly that they almost cracked foreheads. "What did you just call me?"

He glared back at her. "I said, you are a damned nuisance and your bell is cracked."

Her lower lip jutted out as she considered the insult. It seemed to satisfy her. "I suppose that's all right, then."

"I am so glad you prefer it." Varden lunged, but she was already gone. God may have robbed her of her mind, but He more than made up for the loss with dexterity. She reached the end of the table barely ahead of him and was back on her feet, running for the door. In contrast, Varden's joints popped when he stood.

"I am too old for this nonsense." But he hobbled determinedly after her. The next time he married it would be to an elderly, toothless heiress. One who was old and decrepit and too slow to run away. Despite his brief bout of stiffness, Varden gained speed quickly. As Mallory ran through the doorway, she turned and slammed it shut just as Varden collided with the other side. She threw the bar that locked it.

"Ha!" Mallory panted. "Now we're going to stay right like this until you calm down and listen to reason! You're not going to spank me this time! Varden?"

Hearing nothing, she pressed her ear to the door and heard the creak of hinges off to one side. She turned just as Varden stepped into the room through a side door. He smiled unpleasantly.

"This place has more passages than Swiss cheese has holes," Mallory grumbled.

"God bless the Swiss," Varden said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

"Please don't lose your temper."

"I am a very patient and understanding man. I only want two things out of life: my home in one piece and you obedient to my every command without question from now until the day you die. I seriously doubt the latter will ever happen. So I am willing to settle for keeping Cadhla whole."

"But I have nothing to do!" Mallory complained.

"Then do nothing."

"I'm bored. I never thought I'd say this, but I want a job. I actually want to go to work."

"Duchesses don't work. They do needlepoint, sew, share society gossip, and eat dainty candies with their dainty fingertips."

"That doesn't sound like much fun."

"It doesn't send the castle up in flames, either!"

She had the grace to look sheepish. "That was an accident."

"I certainly hope so."

"Isn't there anything I can do? Maybe something that doesn't have a high risk of being flammable?"

"If I promise to find something, will you promise to obey me?"

She blinked. "Well. I promise to do my best."

Varden calmly extended his hand. "Let's make the agreement official."

Mallory looked at his outstretched hand, then back at him. She reached out to take it. "Thank you for being so understanding about this."

In the time it took to grab her arm, Varden's expression changed from calm reasoning to dangerous fury. Bracing his boot on the bottom

rung of the nearest chair, he hauled her roughly across his knee.

In front of his bedroom mirror, the back of her nightgown bunched up around her waist, Mallory examined her bright pink derriere. "I can't believe you beat me again!"

Having already called for a bath, Varden sat down at the edge of his bed to remove his boots. "We've had this discussion before. If you don't like the punishment, then the next time I tell you to come I suggest you not run."

"I ran because I knew you were going to hit me!" she argued.

"And I hit you because you're doing your bloody best to bloody well irritate me!"

"That's no excuse, and I'm not going to put up with this anymore!" Mallory dropped her skirt and turned to face him with her hands on her hips. "If you touch me in anger one more time, Varden, then I will divorce you. I will leave you and take half of this castle, half of your dukedom, half of all your money, and Devin with me!"

Varden stared at her in stunned silence, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "I'll never consent to a divorce. And even if I did, do you honestly think the Church or the Queen will give theirs?"

"If I tell them what you just did--"

"Mon âme, they would laugh you right out of court! I daresay, a good many people might wonder that I didn't begin such disciplinary action sooner."

Bottom and pride both stinging, Mallory lifted her chin stubbornly. "Fine. I don't need a legal divorce. I never married you anyway."

He laughed even harder.

Mallory swept up her skirts and stomped from the room when Varden fell back on the bed and laughed himself to tears. She took vindictive pleasure from slamming Claire's door.

Pacing at the window and wringing her hands, when Grete saw her, she rushed over. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." Stalking to the fireplace, Mallory stood with hands on hips, glaring at the flames. After a moment, she turned that dark look on Grete. "How much chalk do we have?"

Grete took a wary step back. "What are you thinking?"

"He only thinks I've irritated him before. I'm about to show him the error of his ways."

"Oh dear." Grete began to wring her hands again. But by the following day, both she and Mallory had drawn chalk lines down the middle of every room, hall, and staircase in the castle. True to Mallory's word, Devin was on her side of the line and Varden wasn't laughing anymore.

"That is your half," Mallory explained, pointing to one side of the hallway outside the nursery room door. "This is mine. You may not cross the line."

"You can't be serious." Everywhere Varden looked, there was a white line. Even the paintings on the walls had lines drawn through them. He couldn't even begin to calculate the small fortune it would cost to have them repaired or replaced. Had he known wives were this expensive, he'd have settled for a comparatively cheaper, significantly less complicated mistress. "I can only look at half the picture?"

"That's right. The left side is yours and the right is mine. I've marked everything with either a 'B' or a 'J,' so you'll know which is yours."

"This is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of! Have you marked the towels, too? After each bath, may I only dry off with half of one?"

"Don't get sarcastic with me, bright boy," Mallory said briskly. "I've done everything I can to save this marriage, so it's your fault that it's turned sour. Had you taken better care of me, I'd still be your stand-in wife right now. Notice I am using the past tense. That's because 'we' are no longer plural."

'We' are now the singular 'you' and 'me.' You should be glad this dysfunctional marriage is finally over and we can both get on with our lives. Varden, you're getting too close to my side."

"What is to prevent me from crossing the line?" Varden stepped over the chalk to stand on her side of the hall, nose to pixie-freckled nose with her. His fingers twitched. He was sorely tempted to put her across his knee right here and now.

He wanted to kiss her, too. She was beautiful when she was being annoying.

At this point, either would have been equally satisfying.

Kenton, who had been silent until that point a short distance behind them, pulled a piece of parchment and dark chalk from his doublet and made a small tally. "That will be two pounds, Your Grace."

"Two pounds for what?" Varden demanded.

Tucking the scorecard back into his pocket, the unflappable manservant clasped his hands behind his back and stared passively straight ahead. Though he seemed as neutral as always, Varden could have sworn there was a glint of amusement in those black eyes.

"You get fined," Mallory said smugly. "As of this moment, I declare us divorced. Our life together is over. Custody of Devin has fallen to me because I am his mother. You may see him on weekends and alternate holidays. I'll let you have Thanksgiving, or England's equivalent thereof, but he's mine for Christmas."

"What happens when you walk on my half?" Varden snapped. "You have no money, and do not tell me you have somehow magically confiscated half of all mine in this farce! It will be a cold day in hell before I give you the key to my treasury!"

Mallory smiled sweetly. "Well, I have two pounds now, haven't I?"

Varden glared at her, then at Kenton, and finally at the floor. He took small satisfaction from the fact

that if she wanted to visit the nursery, she was going to have to hop over the wide section that was his half of the hall.

Noticing the direction of his gaze, Mallory said, "The doorways are neutral territory, as are the lavatories. I couldn't quite see myself trying to divide the garderobe or chamber pots."

"Thank God for that shred of sanity."

Gathering her nightgown around her, Mallory hopped over his half of the hall to open the nursery room door.

Looking at the floor, Varden frowned. "Claire?"

"Mallory."

"Whatever. The line across this room is horizontal, not vertical. I would need wings to get to my half without accruing a fine."

"Start flapping." She batted her eyes at him even as she turned her back and skipped all the way to Devin's cradle. As she reached for him, she cooed, "There's my big boy. Are you ready for your bath?"

"Two days!" Varden roared, startling the baby who began to cry. He stalked across the floor to his area, flung a chair against his half of the wall, and threw himself down on it. "I don't give this two bloody days!"

"Ha! Kenton, you saw that. That's two more pounds to me!" Mallory bounced the baby and began singing, "I'm in the money, I'm in the money--"

"Bless me," Nanna whispered to Kenton. "Are they both moon-touched?"

"Absolutely," Kenton replied, taking out the scorecard again.

"Daddy's making Momma a rich woman," Mallory cooed, as she gently rocked Devin back and forth to calm him.

As he made the appropriate mark next to Varden's name, Kenton shook his dark head. "Personally, I don't give this two hours."

They were both wrong. It lasted all day and most of the night.

Mallory divided everything including the dining room table. There was a place set for Varden at one end and one for Mallory opposite him. The candles, condiments, and the extra trays of food were all set on 'neutral ground' along the chalk line that left the rest of the table dark and extremely bare. As were Abigail and Godfrey, who were both watching the show with hostile amusement. Wilcox had taken one look at the situation, then retired to his room to eat his meals in relative peace.

"May I please have a candle?" Varden droned for the hundredth time. "I can hardly see what I'm eating."

"That's probably for the best," Mallory said. She squinted at her plate. "Chef What's-His-Name has really outdone himself tonight. All I did was ask for french fries. What is this stuff, mashed beets? Gag me."

A candle sputtered and, in that flickering instant, Varden almost seemed to smile. A dark, angry, evil smile. And Mallory could well believe him capable of taking her off-hand remark to its literal lengths.

"Why not simply pass the candles out along the table, an equal number for you and an equal number for me?" Varden suggested.

"Half the light from every candle in this room is mine, and I'm not going to let you hog it."

Varden threw down his knife and napkin. The silverware bounced off the table and fell to the floor with a clatter. "I demand that you be sensible about this!"

"If you want my opinion," Abigail began. "I recommend--"

"Stay out of this!" Varden roared, and for once she obeyed.

"The nice thing about being divorced is that I don't have to do a thing you tell me to," Mallory calmly replied, ignoring the dark look of warning he sent her way. With her spoon, she poked what she

privately hoped was not the eyeball that it appeared to be floating in the grease in her soup. She tipped the bowl to the candlelight and a river of gravy spilled over the rim. She quickly covered the mess with her napkin and hoped that it was too dark for anyone else to notice. "Besides, you've only yourself to blame if you're unhappy. It was your heavy-handed tactics that started all this."

"Your persistent disobedience started this!"

"You want obedience? Get a dog!"

And they carried the argument all through dinner and into the library, where they sat on separate halves of the same settee in front of separate halves of an equally divided fireplace. Varden glared at the destructive chalk line drawn up the wall to halve the only portrait he had of his great grandfather, poised with his fourth wife, who had been twenty years his junior and quite a lovely young woman at the time. "I still don't see how you can charge me ten pounds for getting a drink of brandy."

"The liquor table is on my half of the room," Mallory said from the other side of the settee. "Face it like a man. You broke the rules, now you have to pay."

"Ten pounds?" he demanded.

"You walked across my space, stood there, then walked back again. I think I'm being generous. Technically, I could charge you by the step."

"The least you could do is put the table on the neutral line, or draw a line through it the way you've done with everything else I enjoy around here."

"It wouldn't matter if I had drawn a line through it. The brandy would still be on my side and you would still be fined."

"You don't even drink!"

"But you do," Mallory snapped. "This is a nasty divorce, Varden."

"It's my brandy!" Varden thundered, his face mottled with rage.

"I beg to differ." Mallory calmly held up a finger. "Now, it is my brandy. It's every woman's prerogative to drive her ex crazy; I'm exercising my right. Move over, Varden. You're hogging the couch."

He got up to get another drink, but halfway into pouring his second glass he changed his mind. Setting the brandy decanter aside, he picked up the liquor table and began to slide the heavy furniture over the dividing line to his half of the room.

"Hey, you can't do that!" Mallory jumped off the settee and rushed over to stop him. Bracing both hands on the opposite side of the table, she tried to push it back. "This is mine!"

"Ha! That's two pounds for crossing the center line." He shoved the table back over the line again. "At last I have the chance to win back some of that hundred and sixty-four pounds I've already lost to you."

"It's not my fault you were standing on the wrong side of the room!"

"You cheated!"

He was simply too strong. Realizing that she'd never be able to out shove him, Mallory abruptly gave in. She folded her arms across her chest and glared while the table was relocated back to his side of the room. "I didn't either cheat."

"You purposely stood on the marks to prevent me from seeing which side I was on. What was I supposed to do, lift your skirts and look? Lifting your skirts is what started this outrage in the first place!"

"It still wasn't cheating," Mallory stubbornly maintained.

Varden glared at her. "Then what do you futuristic, dead people call it?"

"An ingenious financial strategy."

Varden growled, stalking back to the settee. "When you make enough, are you going to leave me?"

"I might!"

"Good!" he snapped.

Hurt, Mallory snatched up the brandy decanter, as well as the bottle next to it, and stormed to the window. She opened the shutter, shouting down into the bailey, "Look out below!"

"Don't you dare!" Varden bellowed, but the second bottle was airborne before he could get the words out. He leapt at her, jumping over the settee in his haste. Mallory drew back her arm to send the brandy sailing just as Varden reached her, grabbing first her arm and then the bottle. "Give me that!"

She latched onto the decanter with both hands. "That's another two pounds!"

"For what?" he demanded.

"Touching me! I'm off limits too!" She yanked on the brandy, but he refused to let it go.

"I'll show you off limits!" Varden grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet, snatching the brandy from her when, in her startlement, she let go of it. Leaving the brandy at the window, he carried her back to the couch and upended her belly down across the back.

"No! No, wait!" Mallory scrambled to get back on her feet, but in an instant he had one of her hands pinned back behind her and his hand braced against the small of her back, holding her firmly in place. "Please! I'm sorry, Varden! I didn't mean it! It won't happen again!"

"Damn right it won't." Her nightgown came up in back, quickly followed by her chemise, and her bottom was bared to sight. There wasn't even a pink flush remaining from the light spanking he'd given her yesterday. Obviously that was what he'd done wrong, Varden decided. Well, if light spankings made her behavior worse, then it was time he found out what a comparatively harder one could do. "If you think you can manipulate me into apologizing for spanking you, then you can think again. If anything, all this nonsense has only proved to me that a good, sound spanking is exactly what you need!"

This time when Varden removed his belt, he put it to use. The thick leather strap cracked across the summit of both nether cheeks, briefly hugging them together, and Mallory jerked sharply, shouting hoarsely, "Oh no!"

He lay five rapid-fire blows without hesitation or variance across the same place, and the surface of her round bottom heated almost instantly. Even in the orange of the firelight, stripes of bright red began to appear everywhere the belt had struck her. The sixth stroke he lay lower, catching the tops of her thighs, and Mallory shouted again, her legs scissoring wildly. With sharp, quick bursts, he attacked the entire surface of her bottom until Mallory was bucking and wagging her hips from side to side in a hopeless effort to avoid further strokes.

"Please!" she shrieked.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Please, what?" Varden asked, laying two strokes in quick succession back down on her thighs, satisfied when she writhed and kicked and burst loudly into tears. "Please spank you some more? Why, certainly. I intend to give you a whole lot more before I'm through."

So saying, he began to spank in earnest, each stroke separated by only a bare few seconds. Mallory threw back her head, her long red hair flying wildly across her shoulders. Her sobs became more racking and by that time her bottom was blazing, the deep scarlet color spreading down the back of her thighs, her struggles had faded to nothing. Mercifully, he finally stopped.

"Stand up," he ordered.

Mallory obeyed slowly, sobbing as her bottom and legs protested their abuse. She gently put her hands back to rub away the worst of the hurt.

"Now," he said, folding his arms across his chest, the belt still in hand. "You've succeeded in irritating me. How well do you find it to your liking?"

"I don't," she admitted through her sniffles. "But when you won't be reasonable, what else am I supposed to do?"

"What part of any of this was reasonable?"

Mallory sniffled again, and then softly said, "Touche. It made sense at the time, but right now I can't remember my line of reasoning."

"Truce?"

"I suppose." She swiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands, then bent to grasp the backs of both thighs. She moaned, "Oh, that hurts so much!"

Dropping the belt on the floor, Varden took her hand and led her back around the settee. He sat down, but when he reached for her, Mallory drew back. Tearfully, she said, "Please don't make me sit down. I can't bear it. I really can't."

"Then kneel." He patted the cushion to the right of him. "Put one knee here and straddle my lap. There's a good girl. It's all right. You can lean on me. Put your head on my shoulder."

Mallory sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck even as he enveloped her in the strength of his own embrace. He had thought she was done weeping. But in the minutes that followed, as he caressed her back, she first turned her face into the side of his neck, then her shoulders began to shake, and finally she just sobbed.

Varden held her throughout, never once letting go of her until she had cried herself out, and once more lay in his arms, sniffing.

"There it goes again," She hiccupped.

"What goes where?"

"The funny heat that I get when I want to make love to you, even though you've just spanked me." She didn't look at him, but he could hear the uncertainty in her voice. "Must be part of being crazy, I guess."

Varden smiled and kissed the top of her head. "No. It comes from knowing that I spank you because I love you. And because you both deserve and need it."

"Are you sure?" she asked, tipping her head back to look at him. "I might just be weird."

He chuckled. "I'm positive."

"I'll have to trust your judgment then, since you seem to know." She nestled once more against him, her head resting on his shoulder. "Varden, am I too heavy for you?"

His hands caressed her back. "Never."

She sniffled again. "Varden?"

"What?" He stroked her hair, following the cascade of curls all the way to her waist.

"What does mon âme mean?"

His smile softened. "My soul. It means 'my soul.' For that part of me you stole the first day I set eyes on you."

She was smiling as well when she tipped back her head to look at him again. "Wow, that was almost poetic."

Varden snorted. "Be grateful that I don't attempt to make it so. No one can mangle a verse quite the way I can."

"What about bise? You've called me that, too." When Varden hesitated, Mallory sat up, still straddling his lap, her smile fading a little. "Is it a bad thing?"

He cupped her face in his calloused hands and the pad of his thumb caressed her lips. "It means 'little kiss.'"

"Oh. I like that one." She closed her eyes as he caressed her, then took his hand with both of hers and slid it down into the neckline of her nightgown. The tiny peak of her nipple had hardened and was pressed against his palm, as though begging to be touched, and a deep, pulsing ache began to build inside him. He squeezed gently, and she asked, "Would you like to take advantage of my funny little heat?"

He caught his breath. "Oh, yes."

His own heavy arousal needed little stirring. Already the confines of his breeches were too tight, and when she pulled her nightgown over her head,

tossing it onto the floor and baring herself completely to his steady gaze, he found himself more than ready to take full advantage. Mallory was not above noticing. She stroked the sizable bulge straining the front of his pants.

"I think this is a big yes," she said, her eyes sparkling. "Did I mention it's my turn to be on top?"

Varden didn't bother taking his pants off. It was all he could do to get them unfastened and the hell out of his way. And then he turned his attention to her.

"What's ma petite folle?" Her small hands clutched his broad shoulders as he cupped her woman's mound, sliding a finger inside her, testing her readiness. She shivered all around him. "That's not--oh yes, do that again--not 'my skinny horse,' is it?"

"No, but it doesn't translate well." He found the tiny nub of pleasure hidden within the folds and stroked it with his thumb, and Mallory buried her head against his shoulder with a low, shuddering moan.

"Try," she whispered.

He chuckled, reveling in her body's reaction to his touch. Her hips bucked, riding his hand as he stroked and rubbed, letting the pleasure overwhelm her until she stiffened above him with a soft cry. "You please me, Madame wife." He kissed her tenderly, loving the way she clung to him, not just with her arms, but with her whole being. "Ma petite folle. My little, female, crazy person."

"I want you inside me," she whispered against his lips.

What gentleman could refuse a lady? And Varden was nothing if not a gentleman.

In the middle of the night, Mallory shook him awake. "Varden?"

He started awake, at first not sure where he was. It took a moment before he remembered they

had retired from the settee to his vastly more comfortable bed sometime before midnight. He rubbed his eyes.

"Varden?" she shook his shoulder again.

He looked in her general direction. All he could see was a slightly darker human outline sitting up in bed next to him.

"How do you say 'my roaring lion'?"

"You woke me up for that?" He rolled back over and covered his head with the pillow.

She nudged him. "Come on. Teach me how to say it."

Reluctantly, he pushed the pillow away. "What do you mean, teach you? I learned the language so that I could talk to you."

"The only thing I can say in French is, on se couche."

"We are in bed together."

"You see! A totally useless phrase."

Unable to comprehend why he should have to be involved in this conversation, Varden stared blindly in the direction of the ceiling. He rubbed his chin. The rasp of his calloused palm as it passed over abrasive mid-morning whiskers was irritatingly loud, even to himself. "Ah, mon lion rugissant, I think."

Mallory snuggled against his side. "That's what you are, then. Mon lion rugissant."

"Good. I'm glad. Thrilled. Go to sleep."

"Mon lion rugissant," she whispered in his ear, then gently bit it.

"Leave me be." Varden batted at her with the back of his hand. "I have a lot to do tomorrow."

"My roaring lion."

"Quiet!" He punched his pillow twice, glared in her direction, and then rolled over. Arms folded across his chest, his eyes drooped shut. He sighed.

Mallory snuggled closer to him and wrapped an arm around his waist as she pressed her cheek to the warmth of his back. She giggled. "My roaring lion, even in sleep."

"I am not going to tell you again," he warned,
but she didn't say anything more.

Mon lion rugissant. How ridiculous.

Varden smiled.

Chapter Fourteen

A rooster crowed in the yard as the sun crept over the treetops. It peeked over the balcony railing, spilling sunshine through the poured glass windows and across Varden's bed. Mallory rolled away from the light, but only dozed. When the rooster crowed again, she stretched sleepily and reached her hand toward Varden's pillow. His side of the bed was cold.

The door softly opened, and leather boot heels scraped lightly across the stone floor to her side of the bed. As the sheet was pulled away and feather-soft kisses brushed her bare shoulder, Mallory sleepily smiled. "I thought you'd left already."

"I have no intention of leaving you," Godfrey said.

Mallory came instantly awake.

He half-stood, half-knelt, on the edge of the bed, his chest bare for he had already removed his shirt and dropped it on the floor. He lifted a lock of her hair from her pillow and twined it round his finger. "I have missed you."

Mallory sat up, yanking the sheet up to her neck. "What are you doing?"

Godfrey caressed her cheek. "I stopped by the nursery this morning and looked at our son. He looks too much like Varden. Our father's genetic influence, so I suppose it can't be helped. Although I do hope he takes after me more as he grows."

"Get out of here!"

"Now don't be like that, my pearl," Godfrey said mildly. "You are just angry because of the way I treated you. But even you must admit, your betrayal deserved punishment. I am willing to forgive your transgressions, but I don't know why you lie with Varden after professing so enthusiastically to love me."

Her voice rose. "I said, get out!"

"Stop playing hard to get. I grow tired of these games." Grabbing the back of her neck, Godfrey bent to catch her lips with his.

"No!" Mallory yelled. She grabbed a pillow and hit him with it, wrenching out of his grasp.

His eyes turned cold and calculating. "Obviously a woman's heart is a fickle thing."

She scrambled backwards on the bed, but he grabbed her foot and pulled her back to him. When he bent to catch a better hold on her arm, two years of Women's Self-Defense classes at the 'Y' took over. Mallory rolled to her knees, drew back her fist, and punched him as hard as she could. Pain shot back through her wrist even as she felt the cartilage of his nose crunch under her knuckles. Godfrey reeled backwards, clutching his nose as blood spurted through his fingers.

"That's for choking me, you bastard!" Clutching the sheet around her, Mallory jumped off the bed and ran out the balcony doors.

"You broke my nose," Godfrey said in disbelief. He drew back to look at his bloody hands, then at her. His face turned murderous. He leapt after her, shouting, "You traitorous bitch!"

Without looking back, Mallory ran down the steps to the soldiers' walk and past the first guard to the small cache of bows and guns kept at the ready against the wall. She grabbed one of the two handguns there and turned, the gun held straight-armed directly at Godfrey. He stopped not ten feet from her, his nose still bleeding, his cold eyes locked first on the gun and then on her.

"Go ahead," he said softly. "Kill me. You'll hang within the day."

"Don't come any closer," Mallory said through gritted teeth. Whether the gun was loaded or not, she had no way of knowing. There was no obvious place for a bullet to go, except down the muzzle. In truth, the gun was more wood than metal and shaped like a boomerang. And it was obvious Godfrey didn't believe her capable of pulling the

trigger; her hand shook so badly, Mallory didn't believe it herself. But when Godfrey took a step toward her, she held the gun a little higher, a little straighter. "I'll shoot you, I swear I will!"

Beyond his shoulder, she thought she saw Grete looking out at them through Claire's bedroom window, but her face disappeared so quickly that she couldn't be certain. Godfrey took another step toward her. Wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, he looked at it before turning his attention back to her. He held out his hand. "Give me that gun before I throw you off the damn wall."

She was more frightened than he was. When he took yet another step toward her, coming almost close enough to grab the gun from her hand, Mallory panicked and pulled the trigger. There was a metallic click, then nothing.

Godfrey shook his head once. "Misfire."

When he charged her, she flung the useless gun at him. Godfrey ducked too late and the butt struck his temple, knocking him back a step. Jumping forward, Mallory shoved with all her might and knocked him off the wall. He dropped the short distance to the stable roof, rolled down the slant, and fell into the haystack directly below.

"Claire!"

Mallory spun to see Varden storm onto the balcony, Kenton and Grete fast behind him. Both frightened and relieved, she pulled the bed sheet tight around her as she ran to him, back along the soldiers' walk to the bottom of the balcony steps. "Oh thank God!"

Her relief didn't last the length of her statement. Varden looked at Godfrey, partially unclothed and struggling out of the hay with blood on his face and chest. And then he looked at her, his eyes as hard as Godfrey's and bordering on hatred.

"He was in my bed again. And after what we shared last night?"

Mallory could only stare. "How can you look at me like that? Varden, he--"

"He was in my bed!" Varden shouted. "His shirt is on my floor! His blood is all over my sheets! What, did the game get too rough for you?"

From across the bailey, Godfrey began to laugh. "What a shame that you do not love her more often, brother. I can hardly describe what you are missing."

"Get out of my house!" Varden roared. And then he turned his hate-filled gaze on her. "Give me one reason why I should not send you with him."

She would not cry; Mallory refused to cry. For a moment, she could almost hear the ghost of Claire's laughter, as if the woman had reached beyond the grave and back into their lives. Everywhere Godfrey had touched her, she felt dirty in a way that no amount of scrubbing could clean. And the way Varden looked at her somehow made it worse. Her voice breaking, she said, "It didn't happen the way you think. Please--"

"Do you remember the French word for 'whore?'" Varden shook with anger, even his voice. "It's putain." He shoved past her, jogging down the stairs to the bailey.

"My horse!" he bellowed. He didn't stop or even slow his pace. Every servant and guard in the bailey quickly found something to occupy him while the stable master hurried to obey.

"Wait! Listen to me!" Mallory watched helplessly as Varden mounted his horse without looking back. Tears had a certain mercy of their own. They blurred the sight of him riding through the gatehouse and away from her. Possibly for the rest of her life.

"Varden!" She beat her fists against her thighs, but he was already gone. He had left her. When she needed him most, he had simply ridden away. The tears slid unhindered down both cheeks as she watched his back until he was gone. She turned away from the portcullis.

Halfway back to the stairs, Godfrey intercepted her. "Let him go. What can he give you anyway? With me, you would have your freedom, money, a place at court, and all the courtiers you could possibly despise."

"You were told to leave." Mallory stepped sideways to walk around him.

He grabbed her upper arm, swinging her around to face him. A hint of madness in his Michadle blue eyes, he shook her savagely, "You belong to me!"

Just as quickly, Kenton's dark hand grabbed Godfrey's wrist while the edge of a long knife came to rest along his neck. "I beg pardon, my lord, but Doctor Wilcox really should look at your nose. It's already starting to swell."

Neither Godfrey nor Mallory moved. Slowly, Godfrey let go of her arm. When he backed away, Kenton let him go but didn't lower the knife. "I'll have fresh water and linens sent to your room. Grete, be a dear and fetch Master Godfrey his shirt."

Still on the balcony, Grete vanished into Varden's room only to reappear a moment later. She dropped Godfrey's shirt over the rail. It landed in a puddle on the cobbles. As he approached it, Godfrey glared at Mallory, then bent to pick up his shirt. Without a backwards glance, he stalked up the front steps and disappeared inside Cadhla.

Less than an hour later, dressed once more in the comforting folds of her nightgown, Mallory watched from the ramparts as Godfrey and his retreating soldiers kicked up thick clouds of dust behind them. Beside her on the soldiers' walk, Abigail was weeping.

"Are you satisfied now?" Abigail asked bitterly. "He's worth more than the lot of you put together and you've cast him to the wolves!"

"It's not too late for you to go with him," Mallory snapped.

The older woman drew herself up stiffly. "You will never have that satisfaction!"

She stormed back along the wall and into the castle, leaving Mallory to watch the road alone.

A deep rumble of thunder rolled through the dark clouds overhead. A tiny raindrop splashed across the bridge of her freckled nose. Several more hit the wall, wetting the stones around her hands. Then the heavens gave way. A torrent of rain fell like a thick gray veil across the treetops, bending their branches toward the ground and turning the dusty road to mud. The courtyard quickly cleared as servants and soldiers sought shelter. Aside from the guards on duty, who couldn't leave, Mallory was the only one left outside. Her hair and nightgown were soaked in seconds but still she stayed on the wall, watching the road.

Varden was nowhere in sight.

Mallory didn't realize Kenton had come up behind her until he lay a heavy black cloak around her shoulders and drew the hood up over her head.

"Her Grace will catch her death if she stays out in this," he said mildly. Then, for clarification, he added, "And I do mean you, by the way."

"It's always raining," Mallory complained.

Kenton shrugged. "It's excessively foggy in the summertime as well. Sometimes you cannot see farther than an arm's length in front of you."

Clutching the cloak closer, Mallory sighed. "Where is he now, do you think?"

"Getting drunk." Kenton was matter-of-fact.

Mallory turned on him, eyes burning with tears that she stubbornly withheld. "Godfrey crawled into my bed, not the other way around. I didn't ask him there. It was not my fault!"

Black eyes boring into hers, Kenton was silent for a long time. "I didn't say it was. But I sympathize with His Grace's point of view, considering Claire's past. Her relationship with Godfrey always was--to put it mildly--stormy. This would not be the first time a little rough play entered their bedroom. So, I also know how it must have looked to His Grace."

Mallory blinked. "You said Claire's past, not my past."

Kenton leaned close to her. "This is the longest conversation I have ever had with you. Do you know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because duchesses do not speak with slaves." Kenton smiled dryly. Very dryly. "The very first day Claire arrived here, that is what she told His Grace when I offered to introduce the staff. Understand though, Lady Mallory, that my heart is not involved. I can afford to see things more clearly than His Grace."

"Do you think he'll ever see me clearly?" she asked softly.

"Up until this morning, I thought you were bringing him around quite nicely."

They stood in the rain, watching the road together.

Mallory rubbed her arms, shivering. "He's probably drinking it up with some blonde floozy in a cheap two-bit bar."

"Ah, that would be either the Vulgar Crown in Wooler or the All Knight Drunk in Candlewick."

"Do you think I should go after him?"

Kenton shrugged with his eyebrows. "That is entirely up to you, Your Grace. However, I have already called for a carriage and it should be ready within the half hour."

Wiping the tears and rain from her face, Mallory marched back along the soldier's walk, up the steps to Varden's room, then into her own. Grete was in her chair by the fire, cutting out the seams on a full pink and yellow gown. Mallory stopped beside her. "What are you doing?"

"The colors have faded. The Dowager requires the gown turned. She has given me four days to do it."

Mallory snatched the gown from Grete's hands and stalked to the outer hall. Throwing the gown onto the floor, she slammed the door behind her.

"What are you doing?" Grete asked, eyes wide with alarm. "I'll be dismissed!"

"She can't dismiss you if I don't want you to go," Mallory said. "And I really don't want you to go. In fact, I have a favor to ask you." She came to take the older woman's hands in her own. "Do you still have that green dress I gave you?"

Grete looked surprised. "Of course. Do you want it back?"

"No, but I do want to borrow it, which leads me to my favor."

"You have but to ask."

"I'm going after Varden," Mallory said. She took a deep breath. "I need your help to make me look beautiful. Like a real lady should look in this century. Can you make me look like a real lady?"

"I thought you would never ask!" Grete raised her eyes heavenward. "Finally, we can be rid of that damned nightgown! We can even fix your hair, if you like. His Grace will fall at your feet, begging for forgiveness!"

Mallory couldn't imagine Varden falling at anyone's feet, but she liked the image. "Then make me beautiful, Grete, before I change my mind."

Little did she know that those words would give Grete a license to inflict pain, beginning with the whalebone corset. And when Grete pressed her knee into Mallory's back, forcing her up against a bedpost as she cinched the strings tighter and tighter, Mallory lost all the excess air in her lungs in one loud, unladylike gasp. With each jerk and pull, her waist was reduced to four inches smaller than Mother Nature ever intended the human waist to be. Her back was forced into rigid straightness. She could barely breathe and the parts of her breasts that were not pressed flat to her chest by the bands of whalebone were pushed up over the top of the heavily starched bodice.

"I'm dying," Mallory groaned.

"Beauty is pain," Grete replied, completely unrepentant.

A crinoline was fastened round her waist, creating a large bell-shaped frame that swung gently from side to side as she moved. A lightweight wool petticoat was pulled over her head and rolled down over the frame. Another made of blue taffeta was laid over that. Then Grete brought out the green dress. The skirts were swept up behind her and tied back at her sides to expose the taffeta petticoat beneath, and the outer sleeves were tied into place. Mallory smoothed her hands over her skirts while Grete adjusted and readjusted her chemise above the bodice. In her time, a gown like this would have been worth a fortune. She twirled around in place, the taffeta and silk feeling sinful against her skin. It was hard to imagine Claire suffering through this torture on a daily basis, but she had to admit, the dress was prettier than the nightgown.

The stomacher was the final attachment to be fastened over her bodice. Made of steel splints, mother-of-pearl, and finely trimmed satin, it tapered to a point well below her hips, making her bound waist seem even smaller and narrower than it already was. It both looked and felt like a knight's breastplate.

"I feel like I'm heading into battle." Mallory rapped it with her knuckles. "Can this thing stop bullets?"

"Don't be silly. Sit down." As Mallory sat in one of the chairs, Grete removed a heavy wooden chest from the wardrobe and set it on the stool in front of the fireplace. She opened the box. Jewelry.

"Let's not go nuts," Mallory said. "I don't want to get robbed the second I step outside."

"You'll be well protected, don't worry." Grete picked through and discarded a variety of hair ornaments before settling on an emerald studded comb.

Grete brushed Mallory's hair and pinned the fiery mass into a high bun on top of her head. The final crowning adornment was a black opal brooch pinned

to her stomacher and nestled between the pale mounds of her breasts.

"To draw his eyes," Grete said.

"Do you think he'll like it?"

"It's a pleasant change from those nightgowns, certainly." After fussing with her wayward bangs, Grete paused. Her cool, wrinkled hands rested against Mallory's cheeks as she studied her creation critically. "There. Look in the mirror and tell me what you think. Have I done too little? Would you like more?"

Mallory stood up and went to the mirror. As heavy as the gown was, the bell-shaped crinoline helped to keep the extra weight evenly distributed, and it swayed with a fluid, graceful motion as she walked. Her reflection in the mirror was stunning, but instead of being pleased, Mallory felt almost sad. Her former body would never have compared to this, not with its boyish frame and plain, unremarkable features. She drew as deep a breath as the corset would allow and smiled. "I wanted to be beautiful. You've certainly done that. Thank you."

Grete blushed.

"Surely I've said thank you before."

"Get out of the way, old cow,' was more likely."

"Claire didn't deserve your kindness." On impulse, Mallory reached into the jewelry box and dug until she found the comb that looked the most costly. Diamonds glittered in the light of the fire.

"Would you prefer to wear that instead?" Grete asked.

Mallory picked up her hairbrush and gestured to the stool. "Sit down."

Grete took a step backward. "What are you doing?"

"Sit," Mallory said again. "I command it, and we nobles always get our way. It's one of the few things I've learned since coming here."

Grete slowly lowered herself into the chair. Her unease was obvious as Mallory unfastened her long, graying hair and gently brushed it down her back.

"I'm not used to being a lady's maid," Mallory said as she twisted Grete's hair into a loosely fastened bun. She worked the comb in while the other woman watched in mute wonder.

"I am not a lady," Grete finally said.

"You should have been."

She touched the comb. "It looks silly in this old woman's hair."

"I think it looks handsome, surrounded by dignified gray. I'll bet John Huckle likes it, too."

Grete jumped up from the stool as if the chair had burned her. She rapidly paced the floor, stopped to look at her reflection in the mirror, then paced again. "I can't accept this. I'm a simple baron's daughter. It's beyond my station. The Dowager--"

"The Dowager can suck an egg for all I care," Mallory cut in smoothly. "It's my comb. I can give it to whomever I like."

Grete stared at her as if she could not comprehend what had just happened. Abruptly, she turned and walked to the wardrobe to fetch a dry cloak for Mallory to wear. She cleared her throat. "I hope your evening goes well, Your Grace."

Mallory closed her eyes. "If it's not going to offend anyone's sensibilities, can you please just call me Mallory? No title or anything. Just Mallory."

"That would be highly improper."

"I'm an improper girl. How about when we're alone? I want to hear someone say my name and mean me. The real me."

For a moment, Grete looked as if she would refuse. Throwing both her hands and her gaze to the heavens, she capitulated. "Lady Mallory, then. You had better go, or His Grace will be too drunk to reason with."

The smoke in Wooler's only tavern, the Vulgar Crown, was thick enough to cut with a knife. It made Mallory's eyes water and her throat ache. How Varden could stand the smell she didn't know, but there he was at a table playing cards and smoking a pipe with five other men of obviously better means than those drinking in the tavern around them.

But for the barmaid, Mallory was the only other woman in the entire lower floor of the tavern. Upstairs, however, there were four scantily clad women leaning on the railing and calling to the drinkers below. As Mallory watched, one woman bent over the railing and adjusted her bosom in her bodice for the benefit of a drinking patron. The man promptly finished his ale and went upstairs to her. The two then disappeared into an empty alcove, the woman drawing the curtain closed behind her.

Mallory turned her attention back to Varden in time to see the young barmaid bringing a new round of drinks to his table. Though she looked barely fourteen, she flirted openly with him, brushing her breasts along his arm as she set his drink in front of him. To his credit, Varden paid her no attention.

Wiping the rain from her face, Mallory did her best to rub the smoke from her eyes with the inside fold of her cloak. She then wrung the excess water from the hem to the floor. No one moved to approach her. In fact, most turned back to their drinks and tale telling without paying her much attention at all. Mallory supposed the large, brightly adorned Michadle insignia on the cloak she wore had something to do with that. Or it could have been the four burly and well-armed escorts that Kenton had bullied her into bringing along, three of whom stood behind her, while the fourth waited with the carriage.

Gathering her skirts and her courage, Mallory stepped over a man lying passed out and facedown on the dirty wooden floor. She had no idea what she

was going to say when she got to Varden's table, but if that barmaid whispered one more thing in his ear or brushed her practically bare breasts against him just one more time, she was going to give him a blistering earful.

As she approached the table the game came to its conclusion, and one of the well-dressed gentlemen got up with a weary sigh.

"Come on, James," another of Varden's companions said with a groan. "Don't quit now. The night has just started."

"Sorry, old man," James replied. "The cards simply aren't falling in my favor."

"That's because you're not dealing," the other man grinned.

"Neither are you," James said. "Which explains how I managed to stay in the game this long."

"Time to retreat and recoup your losses," Varden said, tossing his cards back to the dealer and raking the winnings to him.

"Just what I was thinking," James said with a good-natured smile. He clapped Varden on the shoulder. "Enjoy your night. Think of me fondly while drinking your whiskey and fondling your women. Poor James, forced to return home to his dear, sweet, shrew of a wife. She is never happy unless I bow my head and lend an ear to her saintly nagging. Madeleine is convinced that all this midnight debauchery, as she calls it, endangers my immortal soul. What can I say? The poor thing is Catholic."

Good-natured laughter accompanied James as he turned to go--all but Varden, who barely cracked a smile. "Ah, yes. The blissful infatuation of newlyweds."

"Go and enjoy her, then," a third man at the table said. "Have fun while you still can. Before you become as soured against women as this one." He gestured to Varden, who glared back but said nothing. As James walked past her, he executed a smart bow to Mallory and disappeared into the rain.

"Where are we going to find another pigeon to pluck at this time of night?" one of the remaining men asked.

"You must be drunk." His companion glanced around the bar. "Wooler is a farming town. It doesn't have any pigeons."

Another tossed his cards on the table. "Well, I guess we're all in for an early night, then. Between the Spaniards and the Scots, you'd think we could keep things livened up around here!"

Mallory cleared her throat. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

Though he sat with her back toward her and she couldn't see his face, she did see Varden's hand freeze in the act of stacking his coins. He stiffened in his chair before turning halfway around to glare at her. She came up to the table, stopping a short distance from Varden's chair. "I couldn't help but overhear that you're in need of a pigeon. Mind if I join you for a game or two?"

"Yes, I mind," Varden snapped.

"No, of course not," the others assured her, grinning at Varden even as they quickly scooted their chairs closer together to allow more room for her wide hooped skirts.

"I mind," Varden said again, glaring at each of his companions in turn. "Go home, Claire."

Mallory took a seat next to his. She looked at the young gentleman next to her. "I don't believe we've been introduced." She held out her hand. "My name is Mallory."

"Thomas, Your Grace." The young tow-headed man bent to kiss the backs of her fingers. "We actually did meet, very briefly, at your wedding. Isn't it Claire?"

"Please, call me Mallory."

"You are not playing," Varden said again, a little louder. He was ignored.

"The other's just a pet name." She smiled and bat her eyes at Varden. "I'm Claire and he's the ogre. It's a little joke between us. Isn't that right,

my loving ogre?" He looked ready to grab her by the neck and strangle her. She blew him a kiss and turned to the next man. "My real name is Mallory. And you are?"

"Morgan."

"No wife of mine is going to gamble in a common tavern as if she were one of the whores that attend it," Varden snarled, his teeth clamping down on the end of his pipe.

"Be quiet, Varden. You're making a scene."

His expression darkened, and his nostrils flared. He leaned over the side of his chair, beckoning her with one finger to do the same. She obligingly followed suit and he said, softly, "If you don't leave now, very shortly you'll find yourself running all the way back to Cadhla with me chasing you."

"I'm not leaving," she said, just as softly. "So quit asking."

She straightened in her chair and continued gathering names from around the table.

"Basil," the spindly gentleman said. He was a narrow-faced, bespectacled man who would have looked more comfortable as a clerk in an office rather than in a bar called the Vulgar Crown. The last player was Edward.

"So." Mallory cracked her knuckles. "How much to start?"

"Oh, this is a friendly game, really," Morgan said before Varden interrupted.

"What money do you have to play with?" Varden demanded.

"You still owe me the fines from our divorce." Mallory stood up, and before Varden realized what she was doing, reached across the table and neatly relocated half of his money to her side. "So, since the money problem has been resolved, let's play cards."

"What divorce?" Basil asked, wide-eyed. He turned to Varden. "Is she serious?"

"No," Varden snapped.

"That was another little game we had to play," Mallory said, casting Varden the sweetest smile she could muster. "And one which we'll probably be playing again tonight, just as soon as we get home."

The other gamblers were eyeing Varden with a mixture of sympathy and amusement. Thomas was outright laughing. "Poor James! He's going to be sorry he left."

Chapter Fifteen

Struggling for calm, Varden put his pipe back in his mouth and clamped his teeth on the stem. He wasn't going to lose his temper. At least not in public. He would wait until he got home, then he was going to blister her backside! And he'd enjoy it! He actually chuckled, a low, ominous sound as he envisioned the moment when he could pull her across his thighs and her bare bottom finally began to dance under the firm application of his palm.

The young barmaid approached the table. "Another round?"

"Brandy, please," Edmond asked. "Lady Mallory, would you care for a sherry?"

"A cola with a lemon twist would be perfect," she said. "But since I know they don't have that here, I'll just have whatever Varden's having."

"The usual," Varden said around his pipe. He glared at his wife. "Make mine a double."

"Me, too." She cast him another sunny smile in return, then turned her attention back to her cards. She chewed on her bottom lip, glancing up only once when the others began to push their money into the center of the table. She picked carefully through her stolen coins until she found ones that matched what the others had selected.

When the barmaid brought the new round of drinks, she again brushed the swell of her breasts against Varden's arm as she set his cup on the table. Varden pretended to ignore it.

Mallory didn't. "Honey, if you keep rubbing on my husband, I will snatch you bald."

The girl pouted, but retreated from the table without argument.

Varden flushed. He wasn't pleased to be the woman-child's object of infatuation, and he really didn't want the observation broadcasted across the tavern--especially not to her quick-to-brawl tavern-keeping father. "Can you possibly try to embarrass me any more tonight?"

"Oh yes, I can." She picked up her drink and toasted him with a smiling salute. "Here's to swimming with bow-legged women."

Thomas choked on his drink. Basil spewed his. Edward and Morgan just laughed.

Varden glared. His eyes narrowed, almost daring her to drink as she brought the glass to her lips. His conscience got the better of him and he tried to stop her. "Wait, you don't want to drink that--"

She drained the glass in two swallows.

--quickly," Varden finished lamely.

Halfway to her stomach, the drink decided to become an unfriendly one. Her face turned red. Mallory sucked in a deep, ragged breath and then began coughing. She grabbed her stomach and covered her mouth, hunching her shoulders as she tried not to throw up.

Edmond leapt across the table to whack her helpfully between the shoulder blades.

Varden sat back in his chair and smiled. This was better than any revenge he could have thought up. Loving every coughing, wheezing minute of her torment, he took a handkerchief from the cuff of his sleeve and put it in her hand.

"She doesn't drink," he explained to the others, who were trying very hard not to laugh at her expense. "She especially doesn't drink whiskey."

Mallory glared at him between hoarse gasps, then raised her hand to signal the barmaid. Still coughing and wheezing, she said, "I'll have. . . another. . . of those. . . please."

Varden's smile vanished abruptly. "No, you will not!"

His black scowl had the right effect on the barmaid, but absolutely none at all on his wife.

"Bite me," she rasped. She tossed the barmaid a coin. "Get my drink."

The coin must have been a good one, because it immediately disappeared down the front of the girl's bodice and she hurried back to the bar to carry out the order.

Clearing his throat and looking from Varden to Mallory, Thomas turned over the top card on the remaining stack. "Let's begin, shall we."

Holding her cards to her nose and coughing surreptitiously into them, Mallory spread them into a fan. With a look of intense concentration on her face, she crossed her legs and began to gently kick his shin under the table. Varden shifted, scowled at her, then shifted again, but her foot seemed to follow his leg no matter where he moved it.

"I guess I will be the first to start," Edmond suggested. Plucking four more coins off his stack, he tossed them into the middle of the table. Everyone went in, rapidly adding money to the growing pile until Mallory was the only one left out. She was still studying her cards.

"Lady Mallory?" Morgan asked.

"I'm thinking," she said.

"There's nothing to think about," Varden snapped. "Either you ante or you quit the game and go home where--believe you me--I will deal with you later."

She looked down at her money. Again, she glanced at the pile, then carefully picked through her coins again, seeming to use the coins that he'd tossed in as a reference. He studied her suspiciously. "You don't know how to read the money, do you?"

She looked at him sideways, almost guiltily. Her cheeks flushed a little. "Don't worry about me, I'll do just fine. I know what a groat is, I just don't see one here."

"You're not dicing with soldiers," Varden said and immediately held up his hand to stop Morgan, who had opened his mouth. "Don't ask."

Basil patted her hand. "Don't fret, my dear. My sister has the same problem. Never had to touch the stuff in all her young life. I swear, the way she shops you'd think stores just gave their wares away--she has no concept of expense. Thankfully,

her husband has a sound financial mind and plenty of boot to keep her blissfully ignorant."

He showed her which coins to use and Mallory pushed her money towards the pot. "There, I'm in."

Thomas tapped a coin. "You're a crown short, luv."

"Oh." She quickly added the right coin to the pile. "Sorry."

"Not at all."

Mallory smiled at Varden. "And now I know what a crown is, too."

Finally, Varden sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Are you paying attention at all? The player to the left of the dealer goes first. That's you."

She glanced at her cards in surprise. "Oh, okay. Um, what are we playing?"

Morgan and Edward began to laugh again. Basil just shook his head.

"You placed your wager without knowing the game?" Varden asked. He congratulated himself on not having lost his patience yet. His sense of humor, yes. But not his patience.

Mallory looked around the table, then back at her cards. "Yes, I did."

The other players erupted into laughter. All but Varden, who cracked only the barest of smiles. "Can you even read the cards?"

"I think so." She chewed on her lower lip again.

Varden leaned back in his chair amid his friend's renewed laughter. "Do you remember that pompous Lord Perceval Winthrop the Third? He used to boast of beating his servants and family because he said it kept them in line. I'm beginning to see his point."

Mallory shrugged. "If you think you can handle another divorce, go ahead."

"We both know how the first one ended."

"That's the second time she's said that," Thomas said, shocked. "Are you getting divorced?"

"No," Varden snapped.

"Depends," Mallory said at the same time.

"Didn't Winthrop's wife throw him down a flight of stairs?" Edward asked.

"That was the rumor," Morgan said. "Though if she did, there's no proof, and two servants even claimed to have seen Winthrop slip and fall on his own. Said he was drunk at the time."

"A just end to him, I think," Mallory said.

"Maw, Lady Mallory," Basil said, still laughing. He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes with the lacy hem of his sleeve. "We are playing Maw. And, I must say, this is better than the theatre."

"Maw?" She studied her cards again. "What is that?"

"If you don't know how to play, then lay your cards on the table and go home," Varden said.

His wife turned in her chair to glare at him, her jaw stubbornly set. She selected a card to lay on the table.

"Well done, Lady Mallory," Thomas congratulated her. "You made the first trick."

"Did I really?" Grinning with excitement, Mallory studied the pair of cards. "What's a trick?"

Basil began laughing again and nearly fell out of his chair.

Mallory accidentally won the first hand.

"Very well played," Thomas said again.

Still holding two cards and not at all sure what she had done, Mallory glanced at the others who had already passed their cards back to Thomas. "Is it over?"

Smiling ruefully, Morgan shook his finger under her nose. "I apologize, Lady Mallory, for thinking that I could take advantage of your naiveté. I can see I am going to have to watch my hand a little more closely."

"I won?" Mallory asked, even more incredulous.

Unamused, Varden drummed his fingers on the table. "Collect your winnings so we can play again."

His wife passed the cards back to Thomas and racked her money to her. "This game is kind of fun."

"Deal again," Varden growled, and Thomas passed the deck to the right to Morgan, who shuffled and then dealt out the next five cards.

"Maw is all the rage in London," Basil said. "How long have you been playing?"

"I've never even heard of the game before." Mallory studied her cards. "I'm just making this up as I go."

"You made three perfect tricks without even knowing what you were doing?" Varden slapped his cards face down on the table and glared at her. "I had to play my trump on the very first card!"

"Is that bad?" she asked.

As the others laughed again, Varden scowled blackly, threw in the first wager, and chewed the end of his pipe. "Let's play."

"It's a points game," Edward told her. "The object is to play three tricks, or at least to prevent anyone else from doing so. The first to make three tricks, wins the wager. If there is no winner, then we increase the wager until somebody does win. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, still wondering what a trick was.

"All right then, here's the trump." Morgan turned the top card over and they began to throw in their bets.

She won again.

"This is embarrassing," Thomas said, shaking his head. "I'm losing to someone who doesn't know the silly rules of the game!"

"Are you calling it a night?" Basil asked, shuffling the cards.

"Be serious! I have to recoup my losses." He tapped the table with one finger. "Pass the cards, Basil, my man. And make them good ones."

It was a matter of male pride that Varden remained in the game, though the amount of coins in front of him was dwindling as quickly as the sum of Mallory's was growing. He was half-tempted to quit when Mallory, unknowingly, nipped that idea in the bud.

"If you need to, Varden, you can use the castle as collateral. I'll have to make a few changes on how it's run, of course. But at least it will stay in the family."

Varden won the next hand. "I don't think we need worry about mortgaging Cadhla quite yet."

Basil passed around his pipe tobacco during the next game and, to everyone's shock, Mallory took Morgan's pipe from his hand. "I've never smoked a pipe before. How do you light it?"

Varden lay his cards face down on the table. "If you put that in your mouth, I will take you across my knee right here and now."

"No you won't," Mallory said, unconcerned. She turned the pipe over in her hands and sniffed at the tobacco. She wrinkled her nose, then turned her head and sneezed.

"Try me," Varden dared.

"I'll divorce you so fast it will make your head spin." She put the pipe stem in her mouth, despite the awful smell. She turned to her right. "Would you light this for me please, Thomas?"

"Thomas," Varden cut in smoothly. "Do you like having your head attached to your shoulders, and would you like for it to remain there?"

"Ah," Thomas said, glancing from one to another.

"That's okay, never mind," Mallory said. Glaring at Varden, she stood up, went to a nearby table, and politely repeated her request to the elderly merchant who had just seated himself there.

Overcoming his surprise, the man smiled and lit the pipe. She thanked him pleasantly and sauntered back to Varden, triumph in her eyes.

Arms folded across his chest, Varden eased back in his chair to watch as his wife inhaled the first pungent draw. Her eyes watered. She turned three shades of green before the coughing kicked in.

Without a word, she handed the pipe back to Morgan.

Varden smiled at his companions. "Well, gentlemen, I think this just about ends our little night of debauchery. I'm sure she will remember this experience for quite a while. I know I will."

"Ugh," Mallory added, clutching her stomach.

Gathering up their separate winnings and his handkerchief, he signaled to the soldiers that he was ready to go and took Mallory's arm. Through gritted teeth he said, "Come, my dear. We are going home."

"Ugh," she repeated. "Those things are nothing like cigarettes! How can you stand to smoke them?"

Varden hauled her out the tavern door while the other gamblers threw back their heads and laughed.

"He is going to paddle her backside when they get home," Edmond chortled.

Morgan laughed. "Two pounds says he doesn't wait that long!"

"Done," said both Edward and Thomas at the same time.

Outside, Varden picked Mallory up by the waist and all but tossed her into the Michadle carriage. After tying his horse to the back, he climbed in only to discover that she wasn't in the carriage anymore. Instead, she had jumped back out and climbed halfway up the ladder to the driving box. She clutched a wooden rung in one hand and the driver's hand in her other, vainly kicking to free her tangled skirts which she hadn't yet realized she was standing on.

"I won't be any trouble at all," she was saying to the dubious driver. "I'll sit quiet as a mouse; you'll hardly know I'm here. And if we get set upon by outlaws, I'll ride shotgun for you. I'm a pretty good shot if the gun is loaded. Just ask my brother-in-law."

Much to the relief of the driver, Varden plucked her off the ladder and tossed her back into the carriage, swearing under his breath. He immediately climbed in after her and slammed the door, shutting

her inside with him before she could scramble away again.

As the carriage rocked into motion, he glared at her. "What is a cigarette and when did you smoke one?"

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she thrust her chin out stubbornly. "I'm not talking to you any more. All you do is yell."

Varden laughed grimly. "You object to my heavy handed tactics and yet you are doing everything in your power to provoke one."

"That's your answer to everything I do! You're a savage, boorish brute!"

"A brute who has aged twenty years in the last six months!" he shouted. "One whose wife drinks and smokes, gambles in bars, and whores with his brother in his own bed!" He broke off sharply when her palm cracked hard against his cheek.

They both stopped stunned.

Mallory recovered first. "You wronged me, not the other way around! You're pig-headed and stubborn, and so wrapped in your own hurt you can't even see what really happened. Your brother tried to attack me, and I sprained my wrist punching him. When you came out onto the balcony, I thought you were coming to save me." Her voice cracked. "I actually thought you were my knight in shining armor, right up until you looked at me. Like I was scum at the bottom of the moat." She swallowed, her chin quivering although she was fighting hard not to cry. "I needed you and you walked away from me. So don't you tell me what I did was wrong, because what you did was much worse!"

Though he tried, there wasn't much Varden remembered after Grete had burst into his study in near hysterics. He had seen the blood on his bed and on Godfrey. After that, the only thing that mattered was the connection between the two. Varden hadn't even paused to wonder how Godfrey had come to be bleeding. He hadn't cared. Godfrey

had been in his bed again; nothing else had been important.

"You're right," he finally admitted. He reached across to take both her hands in his. He looked at her wrists; one was swollen and slightly darker than the other. Tomorrow it would likely be bruised. He let go of her again. "I judged the situation by your past. I shouldn't have done that, Claire. I'm sorry."

Their minute truce didn't last the length of his apology.

"Claire!" She shrieked, furious and incredulous all at once. She struck him in the chest, shoving him away. "You bastard!"

She threw herself on the opposite seat, moving as far from him as was possible inside the carriage. Not wanting him to see how easily he could make her cry, she steadfastly watched the country go by outside the draped carriage windows.

"I never knew how phenomenally bad I was with women until I met you," Varden snarled, throwing himself back in his seat. "What an education you have been."

Without warning, Mallory jerked open the carriage door and jumped out. Though the carriage wasn't going any faster than the horses could walk, she landed first on her feet and then dropped to her knees to the accompanying snap of a crinoline hoop. With mud on her skirts, hands and even a few splattered drops on her face, she struggled back to her feet and started walking.

"Oh, for the love of--" Varden rapped on the top of the carriage again, but the driver had seen Mallory and was already reining the horses to a halt.

Varden didn't even try to convince her to get back into the carriage. She walked with quick and angry steps, despite the drizzling rain, dragging the hem of her gown through the muddy road and ruining the only pair of Claire's slippers that she had bothered to wear since Devin's birth. As he watched, she suddenly yanked her skirts up to her knees, shocking the driver, the escorts, and all of

Mother Nature as she took the muddy slippers off, turned sharply, and flung them into the woods.

"I guess we're walking," Varden said as he climbed down out of the carriage.

He untied his horse from the back, so the driver and soldiers could return to Cadhla ahead of them. One stayed behind, though he lingered perhaps a hundred yards ahead of them out of deference to the brewing argument.

Varden swung up into his saddle and followed her brisk march down the road, his huge horse plodding slowly along behind her. "I have called you Claire for seven years, it's how I think of you. Mallory isn't a difficult name. I don't know why I can't seem to remember it."

She rounded on him. "Because you don't believe in her, that's why! She's just a convenient sex partner when you're in a good mood and a lunatic to be locked away when you're not. You must think I'm a real idiot! I'd have to be not to notice the third story library is being refurbished into Cadhla's own private sanitarium. Complete with padded walls, I understand. How cozy!"

Varden pulled back on the reins, stopping the horse. "It's a comfortable room. I've spared no expense."

"Then you go sit in it!" She grabbed her muddy skirts, spun, and started walking again.

"This is a pointless argument," Varden said, following her once more. "The room is unfinished. In fact, no work has been done on it for weeks now. And I haven't locked you in it, anyway."

"You haven't dismantled it yet either."

As he had no intention of dismantling that room, Varden tried a different approach. "I don't think of you as a convenient sex partner."

"Well, that's half right; you just don't think of me!" She swung back to face him and he stopped the horse again to keep from getting ahead of her. "All you have to do is snap your fingers, and I come running like some little bug-eyed lapdog. Arf-arf, oh

what can I do for you, master?" She flung out her arms, flecks of mud flying from her fingertips. "I can't believe this is what I thought I was missing. This is why I came back. To be some embittered duke's beck-and-call girl!"

When she turned and started walking again, Varden asked, "Are you done feeling sorry for yourself?"

He hadn't yet started after her, which turned out for the best because she spun back around so fast and so near to him that, had his horse been moving, it would have walked right over the top of her. Before he realized her intent, Mallory had scooped up a handful of mud and flung it at him, hitting him square in the chest.

The horse shied, snorting and stamping its feet as a second mud ball hit Varden in the side of the head. He fell out of the saddle more than he dismounted, barely managing to get the reins around a tree branch as the third mud ball hit his shoulder, splattering across the back of his neck. Clumps of cold, wet dirt dripped into the collar of his doublet and down the back of his shirt.

"Stop!" Varden threw his hands up to protect his head and darted away from the horse before the stallion panicked. The fourth mud ball was so wet that it fell apart mid air, spraying through his fingers and hitting him in the mouth, cheek, and chin. He kept his arms up, hoping to deflect the fifth, which never came. After several seconds, he cautiously lowered his hands a few inches.

Mallory had more mud splattered on her than he did. Her hands were covered in it, nearly up to her elbows. There were splotches across her stomach and breasts and muddy clumps oozing down the thick strands of her hair that had fallen out of her coiffure. As he watched, she dissolved into tears.

Varden held open his arms, and sobbing loudly, she walked into them. She wrapped her filthy arms around his waist, and they simply held one another, neither caring about the mud or the rain, or even

the soldier, waiting patiently atop his horse a hundred feet away, watching the road. Though as the first booming roll of thunder passed overhead, they both looked up.

"Figures," Mallory said, sniffing.

Studying the darkening sky, Varden said, "I think we're going to get even wetter. Are you done walking?"

She nodded. "My feet are cold."

"I would like to point out--if it won't start another argument--that you did throw away two perfectly good shoes." He held up both hands when she drew back from him. "But only if it's not going to start another fight."

Mallory raised her hands to wipe her tears away, but Varden stopped her in time. "Trust me, your hands are worse than your face right now. Here." He reached into his doublet for his handkerchief and tried his best to wipe her eyes, nose and mouth clean. Folding the handkerchief to find a clean spot, he then wiped his own. By the time he was done, there were no white spots anywhere on the cloth. Varden sighed and tossed it into the woods along with her shoes. "Kenton is going to love this explanation."

They both did their best to shake the excess mud from their hair and clothes before Varden helped her up on the horse and then swung into the saddle behind her. As they again started back toward Cadhla, Varden said, "I'm glad we got the chance to talk. Although, in the future, given the preference, I would like to stick with pillows."

Mallory lay back against him, her face turned up to the Heavens, letting the rain wash over her skin. "We should have picked a better day, too. Just look at those clouds. We'll be drenched."

He slid his palm up over her stomach to cup her breast. "Did you dress this way to please me?"

She wiped at the mud on her skirts with an equally muddy hand. "It doesn't matter. I've ruined it anyway."

"You look beautiful."

"I'm covered in mud."

There was one clean patch on the back of her neck, and Varden kissed it. "You are still beautiful. I don't think I've ever seen such a fiery display of temper as the one you just gave me."

"You're as crazy as I am." She reached up to cup the back of his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. "I like that in a man."

"We're too dirty for this," Varden murmured against her lips.

"I know."

He kissed her anyway. "You will be the death of me yet."

"Dying isn't as bad as most people think."

"In your arms, bise, I can well believe it."

Chapter Sixteen

The next night it stormed even harder. Lightning and thunder split the darkness, rattling the glass in every windowpane and seeming even to shake the floor.

Mallory stood at Varden's balcony windows, looking out over the empty bailey as she chewed her thumbnail. It was a horrible night to be out chasing reivers, but, despite the brewing storm, the warning fires had been glimpsed at Candlewick, and that's where Varden had taken his soldiers. But that had been hours ago and, in that time, the warning fire at Barton-Under-the-Hill, as well as Yetholm, had briefly appeared before the lights gradually winked out in the heavy rain. A second and third sentry patrol rallied in the bailey, drawing reinforcements from the Field before setting out to defend the towns. In all likelihood, Varden would not return until dawn.

And when he did return, he would likely be cold and wet and ready for a warm, relaxing bath. Much like last night, Mallory thought with a smile. She hadn't thought that bathtub capable of holding two people. Varden had ingeniously, pleasurably proved her wrong. In fact, he had proved her wrong in three different positions. She couldn't wait for him to come home tonight and test her theory on position number four.

The entire night's sky flashed with blue-white light and thunder boomed through the bailey, shaking the castle walls, and startling Mallory. She hoped Varden had found shelter out there.

There was a knock at the door, and Mallory nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Good evening, Your Grace," Kenton said as he eased open the door.

"Kenton!" Mallory pressed a hand to her rapidly beating heart as the manservant entered the room with a silver tray bearing a porcelain teapot and two

cups. "You scared me! Is Varden back? I didn't see anyone ride in."

"Not yet." Kenton set the tray on a small table between two chairs by the fire. "I saw your light was still on and thought you might like something to help you sleep. Nanna said you seemed a little restless when you visited the nursery tonight. Has Grete retired already?"

"She has a cold, I think." Mallory left the window for the first time in hours. She sat down, not realizing how chilly it was by the window until she felt the heat from the fire.

"Spiced wine?" Kenton offered her a cup, which she took with a murmur of thanks.

"I thought toddies were the usual bedtime relaxant in primitive England." Mallory blew softly at the lip of the cup before sipping the hot drink. She needed to relieve some of the worry churning within her, worsening with the growing ferocity of the autumn storm outside.

He arched his brow. "Primitive England?"

She blushed. "Sorry, it just slipped out."

"Hm." Kenton let the comment slide. "Lady Abigail prefers a small sip of claret, perhaps with a dollop of laudanum, though only on the nights when her arthritis is particularly painful. Grete occasionally sneaks a pint, and I have an unfortunate fondness for good brandy."

Mallory took another sip. "This is good. Not too sweet. A little bitter even."

"I'm glad you approve." Kenton topped off her cup before filling his own. He sat down in the chair opposite of her and neatly crossed his knees.

Mallory asked. "What about Varden?"

Kenton's hesitation was barely noticeable. He sipped his drink. "His Grace used to imbibe anything that couldn't move faster than he did. However, as of late, I have noticed his liqueur cabinet remains locked. I suspect the key was given a liberal tossing off the castle wall. A shame, really. Now I shall have to find some new fault on which to needle him."

The room suddenly brightened with a brief, flickering white light and the thunder that followed sounded more like a cannon exploding in the bailey. The windows rattled.

"The storm is coming closer," Kenton commented mildly as Mallory looked back at the balcony doors over her shoulder. "Don't worry about His Grace. He did not become a favorite of the Queen's through incompetence. He is very good at what he does."

"Do you think he'll be back tonight?"

"He is more likely to ride through the gatehouse at dawn. He'll stagger into his den to record the night's activities, consult me as to whether there is anything that requires his immediate attention and then, if there are no emergencies, he will fall face first into bed, not to move again for approximately six hours. If there is an emergency, then he'll be here yelling at you, since you are most likely to be the one responsible for it." When Mallory smiled, Kenton toasted her with his own cup. "On behalf of myself and the rest of the staff, none of whom have fallen victim to his temper for nigh onto a month now, Lady Mallory, we thank you."

Setting her empty cup aside, Mallory studied him by the firelight. "You really do believe me, don't you?"

"I feel no inclination to quibble over identities and the theological improbability of souls coming back from an immortal state." Kenton shrugged. "What do I know anyway? I am merely a servant in my master's house."

At that, Mallory snorted. "Most servants don't sit with their masters' lunatic wives to share a cup of spiced wine."

"I said I knew my place. I never said I practiced it."

When the wine was gone, Kenton turned down the covers on both sides of Varden's bed and warmed the sheets for her. "Would you like me to wake you when he arrives?"

"Yes, please."

"Very well." Kenton removed the tray and cups, taking them with him. "Good night, then."

When the door had closed, Mallory climbed into Varden's side of the bed. It felt empty without Varden there to fill the space beside her. She shook her head at her own foolishness and rolled onto her side. She must be getting spoiled if she could not spend one night alone.

Having no delusions about her abilities with a flint and stone, Mallory left a candle burning on the bedside table should she need it. She felt a little silly, like a child in need of a night-light for fear of the dark. Lightning lit the room again, and the balcony doors rattled from the cannon-like boom that quickly followed. With blankets snug around her, Mallory hugged Varden's pillow to her chest and watched the rain splash shadowed patterns on the small poured-glass panes.

Had Varden taken cover somewhere or was he boldly out in the thick of the storm? Mallory could almost see him, seated so proud and strong astride his horse with rain that dripped from his hair to the end of his nose. He would be soaked to the bone when he got home.

She smiled to herself. It would be her job to warm him again.

As the next flash of light washed the room with its blue-white light, Mallory sat bolt upright in bed. Did she blink and dream it, or was that indeed a face staring back at her through the window?

The face closely resembled Varden's, but not closely enough.

Thunder masked her shout as Godfrey kicked open the balcony doors, breaking the windows and scattering glass like white pebbles across the stone floor. Mallory fell out of bed when he lunged after her, but the sheets snared her legs and she spilled head first onto the floor.

Mallory screamed, "Kenton!"

Then Godfrey was on her and his hands were around her throat, squeezing. She kicked, her knee catching his ribs and the pressure let up, but only for an instant. He slapped her, knocking her head back against the stones. Stars exploded behind her eyes, the room spun and his hands were again around her throat, squeezing until she couldn't breathe.

Darkness closed in around her. Afraid that he would kill her if she lost consciousness, Mallory fought to stay awake. She forced herself to stop struggling and lay still beneath him, feeling the icy rain dripping from his hair onto her face.

"You said you loved me," Godfrey rasped. "You said you would do anything for me. And yet, the first time I turn my back, you betray me by cozying back up to Varden. I have suffered for you, my pearl. I think you owe me a little gratitude." He bent, as if about to kiss her, then stopped bare inches away. "A little appreciation." He grinned suddenly, letting go of her throat to flip her onto her stomach as if she were little more than a doll.

Mallory gasped and choked. His hands were no longer squeezing the life from her, but his knee was jammed into her mid-back, pressing down on her lungs until she wheezed.

"I wonder how willing you are to save your life right now." He bent back over her, the stubble of her beardless chin scrapping her neck, his hot breath caressing her ear. "Desperate enough to want to please me? You would have to work very hard to do that, with this mood that I am in. Are you willing to try?"

Mallory felt nauseated. She gagged and almost lost the wine she had just drunk, then forced herself to nod.

"Liar," Godfrey hissed into her ear. "Do you think I'm stupid? Maybe you think I'm forgetful, and just don't remember how you pointed a gun at my head, stared straight into my eyes, and pulled the trigger."

Mallory cried out as he grabbed the collar of her nightgown and ripped it down the back, past her waist and to her knees. Cold drops of water splashed her buttocks and thighs as he grabbed a fistful of her auburn hair and jerked her back onto her knees. He pressed his groin into the cradle of her thighs while she braced her hands against the floor and tried not to throw up.

"How does it feel knowing you are about to die, hm?" Godfrey yanked her hair.

Scalp burning, hurting, Mallory grabbed the back of his fist to keep him from ripping her hair out by the roots. She hissed through clenched teeth, "You tell me."

He laughed, low and soft. "No matter what you do tonight, come the morning, my brother is going to walk into this room and he is going to find your broken body right here on the floor. I want you to know your fate, know that I will carve your treachery into your flesh and that I will enjoy hurting you over and over again." He kissed the side of her neck. "Don't worry about our son. I will take good care of him as well."

Mallory opened her mouth to scream again, and Godfrey stuffed the torn scraps of her nightgown in it. The gag muffled her cries, but did nothing to protect him against her teeth. She bit his fingers, savagely grinding her jaw back and forth until she tasted blood. He struck her, cracking her head against the stone floor again and a warm rush of blood gushed over her nose and lips.

"That did not please me," he said, wrapping torn strands of her nightgown around her throat and pulling them tight. "You are going to have to try harder."

Mallory clawed at his hand, choking.

"Don't worry," he said as he fumbled with the fastenings of his breeches, his excitement making him clumsy. "I promise to make you buck with pleasure before you die."

A chair splintered across Godfrey's back, the impact knocking him into the bedside table, which broke. Grabbing her arm, Kenton heaved Mallory up off the floor and out of Godfrey's reach. Mallory immediately fell back to her knees when he cut the cloth from her throat and at last she could breathe again.

A sword in his hand, as calm as ever, Kenton stood between him and Mallory. Though Godfrey was by far the larger man, the manservant made no show of backing down.

"You've made your last mistake," Godfrey said as he warily gained his feet.

Kenton bowed in mock servility. "If that is what you choose to think, who am I to correct you?"

Godfrey drew the steel blade from its scabbard at his hip. "A dead man."

He lunged, the clash of steel striking steel singing over the howl of the storm outside.

Holding a hand to her bloody mouth, Mallory staggered toward the door. Blood streamed in jagged lines between her fingers and down her arm. The room was spinning. Every time she tried to catch her balance, the floor gave a lurch and she stumbled. Nothing would hold still. Her shaky legs gave out before she reached the door. She fell against a chair, then slumped to the floor. Her head throbbed. Bile rose in her throat and her stomach lurched. Mallory doubled over, vomiting.

As powerful as Godfrey despite his leaner, wiry frame, Kenton beat him back in strokes as expert as they were merciless. With each inch that Godfrey receded, he became more furious. He ducked around a chair, forcing Kenton to pursue and gaining enough time to grab the lit candle from Varden's bedside. He flung it, the hot wax splashing Kenton's face as the candle sailed past him to land against the bed.

The sheet caught fire.

Kenton advanced on Godfrey, unfazed. Again steel clashed on steel. Godfrey tripped over a tangle

of blankets and stumbled, his sword dropping a bare few inches as he struggled for balance. It was an opening Kenton could hardly ignore; he thrust, cutting Godfrey from wrist to elbow.

Smoke choked the air. The fire spread over the bed and chewed up the tapestry-covered wall. The room swam in dizzying circles. When Mallory looked at the door, she saw three instead of one. Every time the swords met, the reverberations echoed in her skull like a busy little blacksmith beating his anvil.

"Help!" Her cry came out barely more than a raspy whisper. She pulled herself along the floor, too tired to climb back to her feet. "Don't faint," she told herself, the words slurred and malformed even to her own ears. "Don't faint."

"You really ought to come to the Field more," Kenton said. "If there's one thing that twenty-seven years of sparring with Varden has taught me, it's that you can never have too much practice."

"I will see you hanged, sirrah," Godfrey snarled. He lunged for Kenton's throat, his blade flying wide of its target.

Kenton stepped sideways and neatly sliced Godfrey's other arm as the bigger man fell past. "You always were an impatient pup."

The door flew open and both Grete and Abigail stumbled into the smoky room in their nightgowns. Grete turned immediately, shouting down the hall, "Fire! Fire!"

"Stop this at once!" Abigail demanded. Her horrified gaze missed Mallory completely, focusing instead on the two men. "Kenton, put down that sword! How dare you raise arms against your betters!"

Both men had fallen back through the open balcony doors. The pounding rain quickly soaked through their hair and clothes.

An entire wall of the room was in flames. The bed and table were completely engulfed, the fire spreading to the throw rugs on the floor.

"Hurry! Get up!" Grete grabbed Mallory beneath her shoulders. Even as slender as Mallory was, the older woman could barely get her off the floor. She looked wildly about her. "Help me! Please, someone, help!"

Abigail was the only one near enough to hear, and the dowager did not move. Her hands covered her mouth as she stood in horrified disbelief as the next flash of lightning illuminated the moment when Kenton's sword pierced Godfrey, the point sinking into his shoulder, only to reappear again out his back. She screamed as Godfrey stumbled against the banister, lost his balance, and fell over backwards.

Swearing as capably as Varden and stumbling on the hem of her nightgown, Grete dragged Mallory from the burning room. Once safely in the hall, she collapsed, cradling Mallory to her breast as if she were a child.

"Easy, girl," Grete crooned, rocking her. Her eyes filled with tears as she tried to wipe the worst of the blood from Mallory's battered face. "Oh, my poor flutter-headed Duchess!" With the hem of her gown, she tried to wipe away the blood. "You are safe now, Lady Mallory. Rest easy, luv. I have you, and you are safe."

Soldiers and servants arrived quickly after the smoke began to flow through Cadhla.

"Don't just stand there!" Grete commanded, a tinge of panic in her voice. "Put out that fire!"

She tried to pull the tattered edges of Mallory's gown over her exposed flanks. Failing that, Grete covered her with the loose folds of her own nightgown.

"Dear Lord, what's happened here?" Wilcox appeared suddenly beside them. He touched Mallory's cheek with gentle fingertips. "She's bit through her lip."

A bucket line formed quickly to extinguish the fire. They were barely in time to keep it from

spreading into Mallory's chambers. The Dowager Duchess hardly noticed any of them.

"Filthy whore," she hissed from the doorway. Despite the broken droop in her shoulders, hatred burned deep and hot in her eyes. "You've killed my son, you filthy whore. F-filthy. . ." Abigail stopped and tears spilled down her face. Shoulders shaking, she sank to her knees and wept, heedless of those who gathered in shocked, silent witness to the Dowager's moment of weakness.

Shaking, Mallory turned her face into Grete's embrace. Letting the maid's arms tighten around her, she finally gave in to the darkness that enfolded her.

It was past dawn and approaching noon the next day when Varden returned. And yet it was, surprisingly, into the courtyard of a quiet castle that he came. There was no chaos. There was no screaming, shouting, or servants milling about aimlessly. The windows in his balcony doors were broken and there was just a hint of a smoky scent in the air, but all in all, things seemed peaceful.

His wife was losing her touch.

Varden swung down from his saddle. Groaning with relief, he stretched. He was tired to his bones. With a hand pressed to the small of his back, he hobbled like an old man up the bailey steps and into the Great Hall.

He thought longingly of bed. Dirty and wet from the drizzling pre-winter weather, Varden went to his study instead. There was a message on his desk from Kenton, notifying him that the green room was now his bedchamber and that his immediate attention was required in the blue room that adjoined it.

Varden shook his head. "What have you done this time, madame wife?"

Sinking into the chair at his desk, Varden leaned back and closed his eyes. Rubbing his face with

both hands, he heard the door creak open. He smiled and, without opening his eyes, said, "Good morning, Kenton. I hope you brought me food. No, I take that back. Whiskey. I could really, really use a glass of whiskey right now."

"So could I," Kenton said. "Unfortunately, I don't seem to have any on me."

"What a pity."

Varden opened his eyes to look first at Kenton, then to the empty doorway behind him. He half-expected his wife to be hiding in the shadows, worrying her fingers, and gauging his temper before she decided whether or not she needed to start running. He was slightly disappointed when she wasn't there. Then Varden took a second look at Kenton and his smile faltered.

"Why do you have a bandage on your arm?" In this light, it almost looked as if Kenton had a fat lip. "Good lord, man! Have you been brawling?"

Maybe she hadn't lost her touch, after all.

"There was," Kenton paused, and Varden could almost see him picking his way through a mental list of explanations. "There was an incident while you were out."

"What did she do?" Varden sighed and rubbed his temples. On top of everything else, he was developing a headache.

Kenton's mouth tightened ever so slightly in disapproval. If Varden didn't know better, he would have thought the disapproval was directed at him. "She tried to defend herself."

Varden's angry shouts trickled down through the darkness, lifting Mallory from the empty void that cradled her and forcing her back into painful consciousness. "I want the names of every man on duty last night! What am I paying them for if they can't keep my bedchambers secure?"

Mon lion rugissant, Mallory thought fondly. Just listen to him roar.

Doctor Robert Wilcox shouted right back at him, just as loud and just as angry. "You should be grateful Kenton was within hearing range! Content yourself that she lives at all!"

Good ol' Doctor Bob.

"How the hell did he get in here?" Varden bellowed. From the way his voice moved about the room, she could tell that he was pacing.

Then she heard Grete interrupt with a slightly worried, "Your Grace, please--"

"How," Varden repeated, just as loud, "did he get in?"

"How do you think?" Wilcox shouted back, matching him decibel for decibel.

Oh, don't tell him that, Mallory wanted to say. Now he was going to think she did it!

"If the two of you don't lower your voices," Grete began, beginning to sound a little angry herself.

"Your stepmother let him in, that's how! I don't see you yelling at her!"

"You don't know how comforting it is," Varden said, his tone seething with fury, "to know that anyone can just walk into my private chambers without raising so much as an alarm!"

This was shaping into a fairly decent fight; Mallory wished she could get her eyes open to watch it.

"Godfrey killed the only man close enough to notice," Wilcox shouted. "The storm covered the noise from the rest, so you can bloody well blame Mother Nature!"

"That's it!" Grete shouted louder than either of them. "Both of you, get out! Lady Mallory is trying to rest!"

"I'm not leaving," Varden said in a forcibly calm tone.

"Then sit down and shut up," Grete snapped. He turned his dark glare on her, and as if suddenly realizing to whom she spoke, in a much quieter and more respectful tone, she added, "Your Grace."

Bravo, Mallory wanted to say, but her mouth felt as if it were stuffed full of foul-tasting cotton. She swallowed--or tried to--but moisture refused to come. The sound that emerged from her throat was hardly more than a rattled whimper. It was a pitiful attempt, but it was enough.

The response was instantaneous as several people rushed to her bedside. Someone took her hand to stroke it lovingly. "Claire? I mean, Mallory. Mallory, mon âme, are you awake?"

She struggled to peel back her eyelids, but they were too heavy to raise. Her body felt so weighted it could have been made of lead. She managed another whimpering mew.

"Come, *bise*, open your eyes. Look at me, *mon volcane*, so I can know you are awake."

Mon volcane? Ooo, that was a new one!

Mallory felt the soothing brush of fingers against her cheek, smoothing back hair that felt sweaty, damp and hot. She tried again to open her eyes and this time succeeded. Focusing, however, was something else entirely. She blinked twice and, gradually, Varden became a little less blurred.

He smiled at her. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, worry, and probably a little too much liquor. He looked as if he hadn't shaved or changed his clothes in days. He stunk, too. Or was that her? It was difficult to tell.

"You look awful," she tried to say, but what came out was a raspy mumble that only barely resembled English words.

"Shh." Varden stroked her hair as he bent to kiss her forehead. Several days of whisker-growth scratched her face where his lips touched her skin. Mallory grimaced. If her head were not so heavy, she would have turned away.

"Watch the bump," Wilcox said.

"I know." Varden glared at him, then turned back to her. He smiled again. "I look horrible, is that what you said?"

She couldn't make her mouth smile, so she blinked instead.

Varden raised her hand, pressing a kiss into her palm. "You're not a raving beauty right now, either."

Mallory's heart melted. Tears rose in the back of her throat as she smiled weakly up at him. Only someone who loved you could say something so awful that sweetly.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Wilcox hissed. "That's the last thing she needs to hear!"

When Varden saw her smile, he bent to brush her hair back from her face, careful to avoid the bruises and her swollen, split lip. He pressed another kiss into her palm and whispered against her skin, "I missed you, bise. Don't you ever scare me like this again!"

Clearing his throat, Wilcox quietly excused himself from the exchange. "She probably has a headache. I will fetch some laudanum."

Mallory croaked her gratitude.

"Thirsty?" Varden asked. He turned his head to call after Robert. "And some water."

Mallory closed her eyes. She must have dozed, because when she opened them again, Doctor Wilcox was back with the water. Varden had slipped a hand beneath her nape and helped her rise far enough to drink.

She flinched, expecting agony to slice through her at the slightest of movement. To her surprise, there was only a mild twinge of discomfort.

"Sip slowly," Varden coaxed. He touched the rim of the cup to her lips and cool water flooded her mouth. Mallory drank greedily. She coughed and shook with each swallow until Varden took the cup away.

"That's enough," Wilcox said. "It could make her sick again."

Again?

She was asleep before Varden lay her back on the mattress.

As Varden stepped from Claire's new bedchamber into the hall, the two men assigned to guard her door snapped to attention and Abigail, who had been pacing the floor, rushed to him.

"Have they found him yet?" she demanded, catching his arm.

Varden glared at her. Abigail had aged in the last few days. Lines he had never noticed before had appeared out of nowhere to crease her eyes and the corners of her mouth. He wondered how long it had been since she'd last slept. How strange, to see this woman whom he had always considered so strong and indomitable looking so. . .frail. "Do you realize that when I find him, if he is still alive, I intend to hang him?"

"He is your brother!"

"Half brother," Varden emphasized. "Most of my life has been spent with you hammering that distinction into me."

"Callous and cruel," Abigail hissed.

"Just like my father," Varden said with her. "Except that, unlike my father, I'm not going to ignore you any longer. In fact, as an accessory to his crime, I am sorely tempted to hang you alongside him. There, now I have given you reason to think me callous and cruel."

Abigail drew herself up stiffly. "I have done nothing wrong. It's a mother's duty to protect her son."

"Is it a mother's duty to condone and aid murder?"

She studied him coldly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Varden stepped toward her. "I'm talking about your financing Godfrey's raids up and down the border. He doesn't have the money to do it by himself. He had to have help."

Abigail blinked. "You have no proof."

When she turned to walk away, Varden grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Do you realize what you have done? What he has done? What if he had killed her?"

"It was her own fault!" Abigail knocked his hands from her. She fell a step back, glaring as she rubbed her arm. "She is a siren. She has him snared tightly round her smallest finger. I have tried to break his fascination, but the whore opens her mouth and he is taken by her all over again!"

Varden laughed. Even knowing it wasn't funny, he laughed anyway, and ran his hands through his hair. It was in desperate need of washing. His rumpled tunic both looked and smelled horrible. He rubbed his eyes, fervently wishing he could either take a bath or sleep for a week. Both would have been equally heavenly, and either meant that he wouldn't have to stand here and listen to her. "You never give up."

"He was confused!" Abigail cried.

"He suckled from a viper's bosom and has taken the lessons that you've taught him to heart," Varden said coldly. "What else? What else does Godfrey have planned for me?"

"You'll have to ask him," Abigail said. "When you find him. If you find him."

Varden shook his head. To one of the guards, he said, "Take her to her chambers. See that she stays there until I decide what's to be done with her."

"You cannot lock me in my room as if I'm an errant child," Abigail said as the soldier took hold of her arm to lead her away. "I am the Dowager Duchess! This is my home!"

Varden walked into his new bedchambers, shutting the door on her protests. He didn't bother calling for a bath. He didn't even bother to get undressed. He lay down face first on his new bed and waited for the oblivion of sleep to overtake him

Chapter Seventeen

"This isn't a horse. It's a mule." Grumbling under her breath, Mallory nudged the stubborn beast with the heel of her foot. Grazing contentedly on the grass at its feet, the horse took a step and then refused to budge. The three men that made up her escort looked everywhere but at her, she suspected, as an aid to hide their amusement. "Why the hell am I doing this? I want to go home."

"Yer perfectly safe out 'ere," Cort said. "'Is Grace 'as chased Godfrey and 'is men 'alfway to London this past week. So long as we stay near Cadhla, we'll be fine. Besides, this 'ere's the first sunny day we've 'ad in weeks. Ye should enjoy yerself while it lasts."

"It's 'is Grace's orders, anyway," Rafe said, smiling through his beard, not in the least bit apologetic. "We're to take ye for a long, relaxin' ride. And we're not to return until ye're back to yer laughin', 'appy self again."

"'Is Grace commands it," Cort added, equally amused.

"He can't command me to feel something I don't," Mallory snapped, then winced. She gently touched her split lip, which still hurt. Being angry wasn't helping it, either. "What if I don't want to be happy?"

Cort shrugged. "Then we're to drown ye in the first stream we find."

Mallory jerked around in her saddle to glare at him. "What?"

"'Is Grace's orders," Rafe repeated.

Collin, quiet and younger than the rest, was more sympathetic. "'E might 'ave been jokin' about that part."

"Aye," Rafe said. "But when 'e does it all straight-faced like that, it's 'ard to tell."

"A pity, really," Cort said. "Ye're the only lady I've ever gambled with. Ye were so good with the dice."

"Can't I at least go back for a better horse?" Mallory asked. "Or a decent saddle. I feel like I'm about to fall off this thing!"

Rafe said, "That's a right proper lady's saddle and a fine little mare. Ye just 'ave to learn 'ow to 'andle 'er, that's all."

Some joy ride this was. Mallory scowled, then winced and touched her lip again. That and the sore spot on top of her head were the only reminders left of her encounter with Godfrey nine days ago. She supposed she should consider herself lucky. What was a scarred mouth compared to what would have happened if Kenton hadn't heard the struggle?

"Be firm with 'er, Your Grace," Rafe suggested.

"Aye." Collin was also quick to give advice. "Let the beast know who's boss."

The mare already knew. That was the problem.

"Move, you stupid horse." Mallory bounced in the saddle, kicking the horses flanks, but to no avail. Varden made this look so easy, and here she was jerking on the reins and the animal wasn't moving more than an inch at a time. She grit her teeth.

Cort could hardly contain his laughter; Collin was more sympathetic. "Pull 'er 'ead up and give 'er a little slap on the flanks with yer reins."

Her temper at a boiling point, Mallory jerked on the reins even as the horse decided it had had enough of its cantankerous rider. As it reared, she shrieked, let go of the reins, and grabbed for a more substantial hold on the saddle.

Cort grabbed for the reins, but the mare bolted past him with Mallory clinging to the back for dear life. Swearing and shouting, her escorts spurred their mounts after the runaway beast heading straight for the dense woods. Mallory flattened herself against its back, ducking her head just as a low hanging branch whooshed over her back and almost swept her off the saddle. There was nothing smooth or graceful about the ride. At a full gallop over rocky and uneven ground, every lunging step

jolted Mallory until her teeth rattled and her arms and legs ached from her death grip hold.

Suddenly the ground, rushing by at breakneck speed, fell away beneath them as the horse leapt across the mouth of a narrow ravine. Gravity plucked her from the saddle as the mare bucked free of her. It landed safely on the other side of the steep hillside and continued running. Mallory fell, the thick grass softening her impact with the ground. She rolled, end over end, all the way down to the bottom of the ravine. A jarring pain shot through her wrist as she flopped to a stop at the base of a small green bush. She lay on her back and stared up through the trees at the pale blue sky, too stunned at first to move.

Mallory spat the leaves from her mouth and coughed. Her body felt bruised, as if she'd hit every rock and bush on the way down. Her right arm was scratched from a chance encounter with a briar patch, and her wrist throbbed so badly that, at first, she couldn't feel her fingers.

A pair of flaring white nostrils came into view as a horse leaned down to snuffle at her hair. It nuzzled the front of her plain brown dress--the first of three delivered from Nanna's daughter in Wooler just that morning--and serenely lipped the lace off the front of her bodice.

It took a moment before she realized the horse dismantling her new dress was not the same animal that had thrown her a moment ago. Neither was the other horse grazing a short distance off to her left. She didn't know the riders, either, but she recognized the bold colors of their jerkin emblems well enough. The Michadle hawk stood out in dark contrast against the blue homespun background.

"Are ye all right?" one of the riders asked, his forearm resting across his thigh as he leaned over her, watching her through narrowed eyes, neither friendly nor otherwise.

"Yes." Mallory rolled carefully onto her side. "I was just taking the quick way down."

She stood slowly, once again aching from head to toe and feeling much as she had nine days ago. Her cheek burned where she'd obtained a small scratch from crashing through a shrub midway down the hill, but nothing felt broken, not even her wrist, though she moved it gently up and down to be sure there were no sharp, shooting pains.

"Boyd," said the first man. "Take 'Er Grace back to 'er escorts a-fore they come lookin' for 'er all in a panic."

Boyd, the younger of the two, rode toward her, reaching down with one hand to help her up into the saddle with him.

Gingerly brushing the leaves and twigs from her dress and hair, Mallory was about to reach for his hand when she noticed the boy. She froze in horror.

Not more than ten years of age, his hands were bound up between his shoulders and the noose end of a rope was fit snugly round his neck. Seated atop a horse of his own, he looked at her from out beneath the shaggiest mop of bright orange hair that she had ever seen. His blue eyes were overly large in a face dominated by freckles and dirt.

"What are you doing?" Mallory demanded. "Cut him down right now!"

The two men glanced at one another. Reluctantly, the leader said,. "'E's a thief, 'e is. Caught 'im raidin' Candlewick just this morning, 'im and some others. Like as not, they'd 'ave killed somebody, but that we nabbed 'im first."

"That's a lie!" the boy shouted. "Run, lassie! Run a-fore they hang ye next!"

Mallory ducked between the two men's horses and went to him. "No one's going to hang anybody."

"We've the right!" Boyd snapped. "'E's a Scot, isn't 'e?"

"Shut yer 'ole, Boyd!" the leader ordered. He turned his hard eyes on Mallory, then his mouth twisted into a smile. "I'm right sorry, Yer Grace. Our orders comes from 'Is Grace 'imself. Justice 'as to be served ye know."

"He's just a little boy!"

"I'm nae!" The boy stiffened, affronted. "I'm a mon!"

"Cut him down now!" Mallory ordered.

Neither soldier moved. Finally, the leader dismounted. He pushed aside his mount's head as he stepped around the horse towards her. "If 'e's old enough to steal, 'e's old enough to 'ang. Must be right 'ard for a woman o' yer sensibilities to understand, what with ye 'aving a little one o' yer own. Go on with Boyd, Yer Grace. 'E'll take ye home, won't ye, Boyd?"

"Sure." Boyd extended his hand to help her into the saddle again, but by the look on the younger man's face, the acquiescence was grudgingly given. "Come, milady. Mount up."

A dark tickle of foreboding crept over Mallory's skin as she looked from Boyd's outstretched hand back to the leader.

"Dinnae listen t' him, lassie!" the boy shouted again, panicked. "Run!"

Mallory stood her ground. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Ye don't know 'ow sorry I am to 'ear ye say that, luv," the leader told her, his eyes hardening as he stepped toward her.

"What goes here?"

Mallory started and all three turned to see Rafe and Cort half-walking and half-sliding down the same steep embankment that she had rolled down a moment ago. Cort reached her first. "Yer Grace, are ye all right?"

Collin remained at the top of the ravine with Mallory's misbehaving mare and the other horses in hand.

"See," Rafe said, not quite hiding his worry. "I told ye she'd be fine. Safe and sound and with our own lads, at that."

"I'm not safe, and I'm sure not sound," Mallory said stiffly. She pointed at the child. "They want to murder this little boy!"

The redheaded boy stiffened in his saddle. "I'm nae a little boy, I tell ye! I'm a mon!"

"Christ's bones, send the woman away!" Boyd snapped. "Damned chit's squeamish, and we got the right!"

Both Boyd and the leader stiffened when Cort and Rafe drew their blades. The ravine became still and quiet, but for the soft snuffling of placidly grazing horses.

In a menacing tone, Cort said, "That 'damned chit' is the Duchess of Cadhla, our lord's lady, and ye'll give 'er all due respect or I've just found meself a new--and very temporary--practice partner."

Eyeing the sword, Boyd pulled his reins until his mount backed up.

"Excuse me." Taking a knife from Cort's belt, Mallory went to cut the young boy's bonds.

Studying both men, Rafe said, "I don't think I've seen either of ye a-fore."

"Not surprised. We've only just arrived," the leader said.

"New recruits?" Cort asked.

The leader nodded. "We've been on the Field a few days now."

"Odd." Glaring up at Boyd, Cort took hold of his mount's bridle. "New recruits never ride patrol."

The leader reached for his own sword, but stopped abruptly when Rafe lay his blade against the man's neck. Not that it would have mattered anyway. While they had been talking, eight armored soldiers dressed in Michadle blue had ridden up from behind, leaving no chance for flight.

The ice in Varden's voice brought everything to a stand still. "What goes here?"

"Lady Mallory stumbled on these two about to 'ang the boy," Rafe said.

"What boy?" Varden asked sharply. "Where is my wife?"

Rafe turned to indicate the tree, but stopped. Both Mallory and the boy, as well as the horse the child had been tied upon, were gone. Only the

noose remained, swaying idly in the breeze. "But--but, Yer Grace, she were right 'ere!"

"Let me guess." Varden scowled. His eyes swept the narrow ravine and surrounding trees for a glimpse of red hair or a nightgown. "You only turned your back for a moment."

"I can't be gone long," Mallory said over the young boy's head. They rode the mare together, her arms wrapped around his waist as they shared the saddle. "If Varden finds out I'm out here by myself, he'll probably tack my hide to the dungeon wall."

"We're nae so verra far now," the boy assured her. He pointed up the steep, rocky hillside ahead. "Just o'er that northern rise, then we'll be on Kincaid land."

She nudged the docile mare in the direction the boy indicated. Her spill down the ravine had left her body aching in places she didn't know she had. Even as well behaved as this mare was, if Mallory never sat upon another horse again it would be too soon.

Hoping to take her mind off her discomforts, she said. "So, your father is the Laird Kincaid."

A grin of sheer pride split the boy's freckled face. "Me name's Alasdair. What's yers?"

"Mallory. What were you doing at Candlewick?"

"The bloody Sassenach caught me at Dunne," Alasdair protested. "I was waiting for the raiders. Father takes me brothers wi' him sometimes, but I always have t' stay at home." He made a face. "He says I'm too young, but I'm nae! I'm a mon!"

"Oh, I see." Mallory hid her smile, then winced as the horse went down a mild incline, bouncing her in the saddle. "I need to get back before I'm missed. Can we hurry this horse up a bit?"

"Father can escort ye home, lass."

Mallory looked back the way they'd just come. Beyond that rise was the Wooler forest line. "I'd be

grateful if he could. I'm not sure I can find my own way."

"We'll ask him." Alasdair straightened slightly and began to wave his arms.

Startled, Mallory turned back in time to see a line of mounted Scotsmen riding down the hill to greet them. The Kincaid was easily recognized; his hair matched the boy's and his scowl was darker than any of the rest, though not by much. All together, they were a fearsome lot, dressed in kilts with swathes of tartans draped over their shoulders. And all were very well armed.

"That's me father," Alasdair said smugly.

"They don't look very happy to see us."

"Weel, ye were trying t' hang me."

"Oh, nuts."

Alasdair patted her on the knee. "Dinnae worry, lass. We'll say yer me prisoner. That way, when we ransom ye back t' yer mon, it will nae look sae much yer fault."

Mallory groaned. "He's going to kill me. He is absolutely going to kill me."

The horse whinnied, as if in sympathetic agreement.

"I'll be flayed alive. He'll use my skin to make a lawn chair." She wilted in the saddle like a neglected fern.

The boy patted her knee again. "Yer a sweet lassie."

"He's going to shake me until my teeth rattle and my eyes pop out of my head."

"Dinnae fash yerself. If yer mon dinnae pay the ransom, I'll proudly wed ye meself and let nae mon say a word agin ye. Dinnae look sae gloomy. 'Tis nae small honor ye know, t' be the wife o' a Scottish laird's son. Course, while I d' appreciate yer helping me, in the future, if ye disobey me as ye d' yer husband, then ye'll be feeling me belt agin yer backside."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," she said dryly.

"The only belt t' be felt t'night'll be mine," the Kincaid growled as he drew near. "Ye were told t' stay home, boy. Where've ye been? Yer mother's been a mess o' worry for ye." His hard eyes locked on Mallory. "I know ye." He circled them on his horse. "Yer a long way from home, Red Hair. And a long way from the border."

"I realize that, sir, and I'd be very grateful for an escort back to Cadhla."

From behind them came the rumble of a dozen horse's hooves as a small army of English soldiers galloped up to the hilltop. Like the Scots, Varden and his men were fully armed. Even from this distance, Mallory knew which rider Varden was. She shivered; she could feel the ice of his fury from here.

Alasdair looked back at him. "Are ye sure ye dinnae want t' come home wi' me? I'll treat ye weel. I'll feed ye everyday."

Mallory patted his shoulder. "Maybe next time."

"If ye change yer mind, just come asking for Alasdair. I'd be more than glad t' have ye stay a wee while."

"Come on with ye, boy," the Kincaid said, turning his horse back to the Scottish side of the border.

Mallory hurried up the hill toward Varden and his waiting men. No one looked pleased to see her. The closer she came to the top, the more the trepidation tightened in her chest. She tried not to let it show, not even when Varden pulled off his helmet and she saw just how angry he truly was. For a brief moment, she almost high-tailed it back to the Scots.

Varden swooped down on her like the taloned hawk insignia on the blue front of his jerkin. Before Mallory could move, his arm was around her waist and she was being lifted up into the saddle before him. His arm felt like a band of steel around her waist. When he set her down across his armored thighs, Mallory felt every bruise down the back of

her legs cry out. But she dared not complain; she dared not even wiggle.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride," Varden growled behind her. "I guarantee it will be the last time you comfortably sit down for a long, long time."

She definitely should have gone with the Scots.

"Varden--"

"You be silent or I will cut a switch right here and now!"

She stiffened, but didn't say a word, and he ordered his men back to Cadhla ahead of them.

Varden and Mallory stayed a little behind as the small group of soldiers turned back the way they had come. Seeking privacy, Varden followed at a more sedate pace, letting the group pull perhaps a hundred yards ahead of them. And then he did not give her one word, he gave her a thousand. All spoken loudly.

"Bloody hell, madame, what were you thinking?"

"You're the one who wanted me to go riding," Mallory said, glaring back over her shoulder at him. She was trying not to squirm in front of him, but the hard edges of his armor were biting into her legs and back, and he was not being gentle. "Get out, you said. See the country and return home a happier, more relaxed person. And what else--oh yes, something about drowning me in a stream if I wasn't smiling."

He glared right back at her. He was better at it. "I did not say you could do it unescorted or this far away from the protection of Cadhla! Have you been paying attention, or are you completely unaware that I have a band of murderers running loose somewhere on the outskirts of my property? God only knows where Godfrey is!"

"Did you want that boy hanged?" Mallory asked.

"Of course not! Neither of those men took his pay from me."

Mallory craned her neck to look at him over her shoulder. "No?"

The muscles were jumped along his jaw as he scowled down the road ahead. "They were Godfrey's."

"He's still that close to us."

"If he is, that means he's close enough for me to catch him."

"What did you do with them?"

"They are sitting in my prison." His temper exploded again. "And no, you can't see! There is still this habit you have for wanton defiance. Your behavior jeopardizes my authority with my men. How can they be expected to respect me when my own wife will not obey my commands? I will be mocked behind my back, if I'm not already. And all because you continuously undermine me. In their eyes, I'm not the master of Cadhla. That honor lies with a red-headed lunatic, and I doubt they'd obey you either!"

Angry silence stretched between them, broken only by the steady clomping of the horse's hooves in the dirt and the twitter of birds hidden in the tree branches above.

Mallory was the first to break it. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to undermine your authority."

"Save your apologies," Varden snapped. "I am going to paddle your bottom until you can't sit for a week, and apologies aren't going to change my mind!"

"Fine!" Mallory snapped. "At least I apologized! You could accept it gracefully, you stubborn, arrogant ass!"

She struggled to break free of his one-armed grip and slide off the horse. When that failed, she settled for holding herself as far away from him as she could while still remaining in the saddle. And she fumed.

After a half-mile of watching her precariously perched over the horse's neck, half expecting her to fall out of the saddle and onto her nose, Varden grudgingly capitulated. "All right, damn it! Apology accepted."

When she still kept herself stiffly leaned forward in the saddle, he grit his teeth and capitulated further. "I am sorry I yelled at you. But you can't know the fears that ran through my mind when I learned where you were going, alone. My heart jumped into my throat and didn't come back down again until you were safely back in my arms."

The horse trudged on several steps before Mallory wilted ever so slightly. She still wasn't touching him, but neither was she as angry. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. Truce?"

"Are you still going to spank me?" She wasn't very hopeful that he'd let her off the hook so easily, but she couldn't help asking.

"I told you apologies weren't going to change my mind. You, me, and the hairbrush are going to discuss your habitually risking your life every time I turn my back the minute we get home."

Her stomach clenched at the thought, but Mallory leaned back against him once more. "Will I at least get the chance to tell my side of what happened?"

"Of course."

At least that gave her one small hope. Mallory sighed. "Truce then."

The rest of the ride was made without speaking. Just as the upper turrets of Cadhla came into view between the trees, Varden suddenly swore and stopped his horse in the middle of the road. Mallory didn't even see the small militia of kilted Scotsmen until they came out of the surrounding trees and had them surrounded.

Mallory clutched Varden's arm, whispering, "What's going on? What do they want?"

"Retribution," Varden said, low and even. "Looks like I have finally found my reivers. Don't be afraid, mon âme. They have no reason to keep you."

Craning her head back, she looked up at his chiseled face and a cold thread of panic wove

through her. He looked calm, almost resigned, and that scared her even more. "What about you?"

Separating his horse from the rest, a dark-haired, hook-nosed Scot approached them. "Yer t' accompany us, or we're t' kill ye where ye stand."

"I'll go," Varden said, "if you'll agree to allow the woman safe passage back to Cadhla."

"No!" Mallory cried.

Hooknose gave her a disdainful once-over look before returning his attention to the real prize: Varden. "I've nae orders t' hold her. Yer lass can go."

In the distance, Cadhla raised its portcullis and the bridge slowly lowered over the moat. Riders charged across the bridge, raising an instant cloud of dust as they galloped onto the dirt road. They were coming to help, but even Mallory could tell they were too far away to do any good.

"Don't ask me to leave you here." Mallory twisted in the saddle to better see him. "Varden, I can't!"

Hook-nose tipped his head to one side, eyeing Varden with a cold, emotionless detachment. Other's were readying their guns, taking aim at both Varden and Mallory. "D' ye come peaceably, mon, yea or nay?"

"I'll come." Varden's arm tightened around her, a silent warning to obey. "Do you see Kenton there, coming out to meet us?"

Mallory shook her head. "I won't leave you here."

"Do as I tell you," Varden said, soft and low against her ear. "Go to him. He'll make sure you get safely back to Cadhla."

"No." She blinked back tears, but he still blurred before her eyes.

As his rough hands caressed her face, he said, "I love you, ma petite folle."

"Don't!" Mallory said sharply. "Don't you dare say goodbye to me!"

Though she clung to his arm with both hands, he disengaged her easily enough and swung down out of the saddle. As he handed her the reins, he lightly squeezed her hand. Though she knew he meant to reassure her, it felt more like a touch of farewell. "Don't worry. We will finish this conversation later."

Her chest tightened. She could not breathe. "Don't go with them, Varden. Please don't go."

As soon as he was on the ground, Hook-nose looked back at his men. Though no words were exchanged, a path was cleared between them wide enough for her to ride past. "Like I said, yer lassie's free t' go."

"Not without Varden!" Mallory repeated, sounding stronger this time though she trembled visibly.

Varden didn't give her the chance to disobey. He slapped his horse's rump, sending the animal into a gallop past the Scots and straight for Cadhla. Clinging tightly to the saddle, Mallory looked back over her shoulder in time to see the Scots close around Varden. Her tears obscured the sight of Hook-nose striking the butt of his gun on the back of Varden's skull, knocking him to the ground. By the time Kenton and his men had reached her, Varden was thrown over the back of another horse and the Scots were fleeing with him back the other way.

"You have to do something!" Mallory cried to Kenton.

But instead of pursuing the Scots, Kenton grabbed the reins of her horse and vaulted from his saddle onto the back of hers. His arms came around her, grabbing the reins, and the party turned as one and galloped as fast as possible back to Cadhla.

"What are you doing?" Mallory looked back over her shoulder, but Varden and the Scots had already disappeared into the woods. "We have to go back! We can't leave him!"

"This is neither the time nor the place for hysterics," Kenton said. The minute they were across the moat and through the gatehouse, the bridge was drawn and the portcullis lowered. Kenton dismounted near the stable and held out his hands to help her down.

"How could you leave him like that? I thought you were friends!"

"He is my greatest friend," Kenton told her as he set her on the ground. He grabbed her shoulders. "Trust that I would never have abandoned him by choice."

"Then why--"

She was interrupted by a warning shouted down from the ramparts. It echoed through the bailey and stirred the men around them into a flurry of activity that was strongly reminiscent of the drills Mallory had seen on the Training Field. As she looked around, she realized that there were literally hundreds of men gathered in the bailey and stationed along the walls. Every one was dressed in full body armor. Archers readied their bows at every loophole along the parapet. At the top of the wall, soldiers loaded their guns.

She turned back to Kenton. "What's going on?"

"We have a serious problem." The manservant led her up the stairs to the top of the ramparts.

Looking through a loophole overlooking the valley west of where Varden had been taken, Mallory saw an army marching toward them. The number was equal to, if not greater than, Varden's entire Training Camp. Armor and weapons glittered in the sunlight as the sound of stamping horses and shouting men grew louder, becoming a low and continuous roar of noise.

"Are we being invaded?" she finally asked.

"Convenient, is it not?" Kenton clasped his hands behind his back, stoically surveying what would surely be the demise of Cadhla. "I think we have more men, but those are experienced soldiers

while the majority of our Camp consists of green, inexperienced boys just learning the craft of war."

"Maybe they only want to stop for a drink of water before moving on." But Mallory could not even delude herself with that excuse.

"Look at their colors."

Mallory shrugged. The army was not near enough for her to make out the uniforms. There were no distinguishing banners either. "What am I looking for?"

"Orange and gold are the Dowager's family colors." Kenton looked at Mallory meaningfully. "At least we know where Godfrey is now."

"How long can we hold them off?"

"With Varden we might have a chance of surviving the siege. Without him we haven't got a prayer."

By the end of the first evening, the score against Cadhla showed at a glance. Sections of the parapet along the south wall had been hit the hardest of all, mostly since the terrain to the south was best suited for the three cannons Godfrey had brought. Sometimes the balls fell short of the wall, but mostly they didn't, and then the newly broken stones and bits of lead would rain down into the crowded courtyard amid the screams and curses of those hit by the debris. There was, Mallory decided, no such thing as "the thrill of battle." It was simply horrific.

The smoke-filled air burned her lungs and eyes. Above the constant hiss of arrows and bullets being exchanged came the high-pitched whistle of yet another lead ball shot from the cannons. And as if the daylight hours weren't bad enough, the night was worse.

The multitude of enemy campfires spread out around Cadhla like a swarm of fireflies that covered the ground. The cannons belched forth a half-hearted volley of smoke and ammunition, just

enough to keep the castle residents exhausted and unable to sleep, while, during the lull between shots, all along the base outer wall, a muted scraping could be heard.

"Diggers," Kenton said. "They're coming in at three different positions, tunneling under the outer curtain. The holes are too far out; we can't even route them. They will either collapse the walls or dig up through the berm. It's only a matter of days now."

Unfortunately, Kenton was right. Four days after Varden was taken, the outer curtain wall fell to the diggers' tunnels. There was still the inner curtain and moat that kept the castle and its inhabitants safely ensconced, but neither were expected to hold up indefinitely. And if they got through. . .

Mallory stood at her bedroom window, biting her fingernails and watching as the south wall crumbled a little more as another cannon struck. This wasn't how she'd wanted to get out of her spanking.

Behind her, Nanna and Grete were talking softly together and Devin was sleeping in his cradle by the fire. There had been no time to get him out and safely away. And there was simply no knowing where Varden was, or what was happening to him. Was he even still alive?

Outside, soldiers slept all along the walls, wherever there was room and a little bit of cover. Those that weren't asleep were helpless to do anything but mark the progress of the diggers. Everyone was tired, exhausted from lack of sleep, and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. If they hadn't been, there was simply no way that the Dowager Duchess, her pale gown concealed by a hooded black cloak, could have she stepped through Cadhla's broken front doors and crossed the debris-cluttered bailey unnoticed. She stayed in the shadows, moving silently around the sleeping and the dead, slowly making her way to the front gatehouse.

The guard was sleeping sitting up next to the wall. Abigail stepped around him, reaching for the gate lever without hesitation. With every ounce of strength in her aged body, she heaved the lever up, setting the gears that raised the portcullis into motion.

She clasped her hands in front of her mouth as if in prayer while roaring shouts went up on both sides of the wall. Her eyes teared. "Welcome home, my son."

Chapter Eighteen

Mallory hardly knew what happened. From her window she watched as the courtyard suddenly flooded with Godfrey's soldiers. The clashing ring of sword on sword was deafening as Michadle men scrambled to intercept.

"Oh no," Mallory breathed.

"Hurry!" Grete threw shoes at her and, as Mallory put the ill-fitting slippers on, she and Nanna swaddled Devin in a blanket. With one shawl, they quickly made a sling to carry him and used another to wrap around Mallory's waist, binding him tightly to her stomach so that her hands could be free.

"What are we going to do?" Mallory asked, cradling Devin close.

"We are going to hide," Grete told her. "John thinks he's found a safe place for us. But you have to run. They might not hurt us if we're found, but Godfrey will kill you and the wee master."

"Don't worry about us old women," Nanna said. "We haven't lived this long without learning a thing or two about soldiers."

The bedroom door flew open and Kenton burst in. As he had been the night he'd saved her life, he was furious.

"Time to go." He grabbed her arm and ran with her from the room. There was panic everywhere: soldiers, tousled and sleepy-eyed, grabbed up their arms and ran down stairs to fight; servants ran room to room hiding anything of value even as they looked for places to hide themselves, knowing that they would be found, regardless.

Kenton pushed Mallory down the hall and into the servants' wing. For the first time, she found herself in the tiny room that was his personal bedchamber. His Egyptian heritage was obvious. Artifacts and artwork were scattered everywhere. For such an impeccable person, his room was terribly cluttered.

After rummaging through a large trunk, he tossed a cloak at her. "Put that on."

Though it wasn't necessary, she held Devin with both arms, surprised that he didn't seem upset by their mad-dash run through the halls and grateful that he wasn't crying. "Where are we going?"

"Nowhere unless we can get out of the courtyard." Kenton paused to lift a corner of the curtain and looked out the only tiny window in the room. He shook his head. "Godfrey's men are everywhere. There's a passage under the kitchens that we can use to get outside, but then we'll need a distraction or a miracle to make it past them all."

"Isn't there a secret escape route or something for situations like this?" Mallory asked. "What kind of castle doesn't have secret passages?"

"There are several," Kenton snapped. "Varden knows them. Claire knows them. You and I do not know any of them. Thankfully, Godfrey doesn't know them, either, or he'd have come in that way."

For once, Mallory wished she was Claire just long enough to get them to safety. "What about the dowager?"

Kenton swore. "Wait here. I'll fetch her."

Mallory stepped back in surprise when he drew a very unservant-like sword from the same trunk that he had taken her cloak. He strapped it around his waist and disappeared back down the hall.

A low rumble shook the floor. It pervaded the walls and rattled the poured glass pane in the window nook, steadily growing in volume until it was a deafening roar. It was shouting; the masculine bellow of hundreds of men as they spilled into the Great Hall, finally gaining access to Cadhla itself. A few of Varden's men still fought to defend the castle. Others capitulated. Mallory heard the bellows of the attackers, the screams of the wounded and dying; she felt the echoes of the fighting vibrating through the stones beneath her slippered feet.

Charging back into the room, Kenton grabbed her arm and yanked her after him as he ran back out again.

"What's happening?" She tripped on the hem of her nightgown and nearly fell.

"Don't talk!" Kenton shouted. "Run!"

With one arm clutching Devin, Mallory barely kept up. Her shorter legs pumped hard to keep pace with him. Kenton was not about to let go of her arm, but he was not going to stop either. If she lost her footing, she would likely find herself being dragged along the ground.

And then she heard shouting directly behind them. Godfrey was searching the floor for her and rapidly closing the distance between them. Kenton pulled her down a flight of servants' steps to the kitchen where they were enveloped by a huddled mass of servants waiting for the inevitable. Women hung onto their children; male servants formed a protective barrier around their families, holding unfamiliar swords in hands unaccustomed to wielding the heavy steel. The same look was on all of their faces. This was the end.

"Run!" Kenton bellowed, charging into their midst and dragging Mallory behind him. "He's right behind us!"

Pandemonium erupted everywhere as Godfrey and his men broke into the room. Servants scattered, screaming, blocking Godfrey's pursuit as much as they did Mallory's and Kenton's escape.

Kenton threw over a table, dashing food and dishes across the floor. One soldier stumbled on a potato, knocking himself and two others down. Sliding in a pool of lard, two serving maids collided with Godfrey and all three went down in a stack of flailing limbs. He came back up, infuriated and partially coated in semi-liquid fat. He slid twice trying to regain his feet. Raising his sword against the two women, Godfrey slipped again and nearly fell on his own blade.

From the other side of the room, Mallory felt a tap at her shoulder. Caroline pointed to a small hatch in the floor near the fireplace. "Looking for that, I believe."

"That's it," Kenton said, pushing Mallory towards it at the same time. As he bent to grab the small door, he looked up at her. "Hold your breath."

"What is it?" Mallory gathered her skirts even as Kenton raised the hatch. As she squatted at the edge, about to step down into it, the stench hit her. Rotten food and rancid grease drippings covered the chute as far down as Mallory could see.

She grimaced with revulsion. "Ugh!"

Caroline smiled, and not all that pleasantly either. "'Tisn't as nasty as the garderobe. Of course, it's not much better either."

Kenton planted a hand on top of Mallory's head and shoved her down the filthy chute. Mallory didn't scream. Her body as stiff and straight as a wooden plank, shielding Devin from as much of the filth as possible, she held her breath and prayed she wouldn't get stuck halfway down.

There was no trough in the pigpen, just a knee-deep pile of slops that not only broke her fall but sent her sliding through the mud and waste and into a huddle of resident pigs, who promptly scattered, squealing. She tried to stand, but her foot slipped out from under her and she fell to one knee just as Kenton hit the bottom of the chute and slid over next to her.

"The situation hasn't improved," she told him.

Even the fierce driving rain did nothing to help the smell. It was cold and ineffectual and, rather than wash them, only caused the filth to run off in streaks. Mallory gagged every time her aching lungs forced her to take a breath. Somehow she managed not to lose her dinner.

"Up!" Kenton said. "That little disappearing trick will not fool them for long."

Mallory staggered to her feet. Her slippers had fallen off somewhere in the chute. She did not even

want to think about what was squishing between her toes and dripping from her hair.

Covered in mud, slop and pig by-products, they looked little better than the other peasants that were being rounded up in the courtyard. They ran, half crouching in the opposite direction. Kenton helped her over the garden wall and they ran through the shrubs and late blooming flowers to the garden's entrance and the bailey beyond. The servants and captured soldiers were thick here. The confusion of so many moving bodies, coupled with the hard, driving rain, made sneaking to the stables easy. The stable master was waiting for them in the furthest corner with two saddled horses.

"Bloody 'ell, ye stink!" Tim said.

Mallory didn't wait to be told, but went straight to Varden's horse. The animal tossed his head and stepped back when she drew near.

"'Ee don't like pigs," Tim said.

"I'm not that fond of them either," Mallory said as Tim helped her up into the saddle and Kenton mounted the mare.

She tried to wipe the mud from the blankets around Devin's face, while he made soft fussy sounds back at her. Her heart pounded in her throat. She was terrified that the next sound would be the soldiers charging into the stables and they would then be caught. Trembling from cold as well as fear, she whispered words of comfort to her wide-eyed baby and clutched the horse's reins in her hands.

"Look at the gate," Kenton told her as he moved his mare closer to her. "Focus on it. When I tell you, ride as if your life depends on it. And since it does, you should have no trouble relating."

From the courtyard outside, Godfrey could be heard shouting oaths and orders.

"We should have escaped through the garden," Mallory said.

Kenton shook his head. "Had we crawled over the garden wall, we'd have landed right in the middle of their camp."

"Why isn't anyone stationed in front of the stables where the horses are?"

"This is the last place they will look," Kenton said. "The only escape from here is through the front gates. They will see us leaving, which means that our only hope is to outride them and flee somewhere they can't track. Quite frankly, we haven't got a prayer. With all this rain and mud, they could still track us a week from now." Kenton looked from her to Tim, then back again. "I am a valet, not a bloody general! I press cravats, fetch drinks and, once in a while, have the privilege of delivering a sarcastic remark! If you don't like my rescues, then come up with one on your bloody own! I'm doing the best I bloody well can!" He hunkered over his mare. "Now get ready, damn it. Focus on the door and wait for my mark."

The soldiers had already begun a methodical search of the bailey, garden, and pig yard. A few even lifted the heads of the slain and those not already dead were quickly dispatched. The two men stationed at the front gates moved into the courtyard to help.

"Now!" Kenton shouted.

Both horses shot from the stable to the open portcullis and through the gatehouse. For Mallory it was a matter of simply letting the horse run while she clung to the saddle and tried not to fall off. Even as Godfrey bellowed after them, the horses were across the drawbridge and beyond the broken curtain walls. Bullets and crossbow bolts whistled past their heads, and Mallory hunkered even lower over the saddle, covering Devin with her body and following Kenton's lead until they had broken through the shield of the outlying forest.

The rain was blinding and they were both soaked in minutes. The cloudy skies provided no light and riding at this speed, unable to see the

ground, was akin to suicide. And it seemed forever before Kenton grabbed the reins from her near frozen hands and gradually slowed both panting animals to a walk.

"Godfrey won't bother hunting us tonight," Kenton panted. "He'll wait until morning when it will be easier to track us in the mud."

"What now?" Mallory asked. Rain and muck dripped from her hair. She tried to wipe the worst of it away before it washed into her eyes. Shivering and cold, the rain having finally soaked through to him, Devin had begun to cry.

Kenton alternately watched the road behind them and looked at her. He adjusted his own ruined uniform self-consciously. "I confess I have no plan. Getting you out of Cadhla was as far as I thought."

"My hero," Mallory said sarcastically. "You drop me down a grease chute into hog crap, throw me onto a horse and ride me around the countryside in the rain with no shoes or coat. Some rescue this is."

"I suppose we could head for someplace dry," he suggested blandly. "That maple tree over there looks good. It may not be fully out of the weather, but it's likely drier than standing out in the open like a pair of hapless ninnies. In the morning, we'll head for Dryburgh Abbey. If we can get there ahead of Godfrey, we can beg for asylum and hope the Scottish clergy are blind to English refugees."

Mallory looked at the maple and then back at him. "I think I have a better idea."

Malcolm Kincaid was reading in front of a warm fire, enjoying the remnants of a full belly, fresh pipe and a cup of warm brandy when word reached him that an English woman and servant were standing at his front gate.

"Scuttle her off," Kincaid said around the stem of his pipe. He stretched his boots to the fire.

The man did not go away. "She kins t' be Alasdair's captive."

"I dinnae care if she kins t' be a bloody fish. If she will nae go away, shoot the wench and be done wi' it!" He turned the page and shifted in his chair. He did his best to ignore the man at his elbow, but he still didn't go away.

"She kins t' be the Duchess o' Cadhla. She wants t' turn herself o'er t' us as a prisoner o' war."

The Kincaid looked up from his book. "We're nae at war wi' Cadhla."

"Aye, and weel I know it," the other man said, sounding confused. "That's why I thought ye'd want t' know."

This was how indigestion got started. What had begun as a pleasant evening was now all shot to hell with heartburn. He reluctantly set his brandy aside and climbed to his feet. "For Christ's sake. Bring her t' the Hall."

Curiosity killed the cat. Twenty minutes into his interrogation of the "prisoner" and her surly servant, Kincaid decided it was not far from doing him in either. "I already told ye," he said, almost shouting just to be heard over the crying baby. "I dinnae have yer husband; I dinnae take him captive."

"But they were Scots, I swear it." Mallory clutched her dripping cloak closer and shivered violently in the open draft of the Kincaid hall.

"That dinnae make them mine."

"B-but if it wasn't you, then who?" Mallory stuttered. Rain dripped from her bangs onto her nose. "How am I sup-p-posed to find him now?"

"That isna me problem." The Kincaid shrugged. "Ye ha' a busy night ahead o' ye. God speed."

"I saved your son's life."

"Aye," the Kincaid snapped. "And yer mon be the one t' try t' snuff it. Dinnae be asking me for favors. If ye want t' leave yer bairn, I'll keep him warm, dry, and fed. I'll d' that much out o' gratitude, but ye'll get nothing from me for the father!"

When the Kincaid turned to leave, she grabbed his arm and he jumped with surprise. Her hands were icicle cold.

"Please," she begged. "I am b-begging you, please just listen to me. G-Godfrey was responsible, not Varden. I need your help before it's too late."

He stared at her, blue lips, chattering teeth, shivering and cold. As pitiful as she was to look upon, he could not help but feel a spark of admiration. He looked down at the fussy baby, tied to her waist with two muddy, smelly shawls. "If I send out patrols, what d' I get for me troubles?"

"M-my eternal gratitude?" Mallory said, hopefully. She sniffled as he looked at her incredulously, and then began to laugh. The booming sound echoed through the near empty Hall.

Again the Kincaid turned to walk away, but for her tiny grip on his arm, which stayed him. She was shaking so badly it was a wonder that she did not fall down. "I could show you to the man responsible for the raids."

"Oh, Aye? And where is this mon now? In yer back pocket? Gratitude or nae, I'm more o' mind t' throw ye in me gaol and forget all about ye."

"You don't know what we've g-gone through to get here," Mallory protested, and despite himself, the Kincaid almost smiled. She had the prettiest green eyes. And spunk. He liked spunk.

"I know you c-could lock me in your d-dungeon, or hurt m-me, or cut me up and feed me to the dogs."

Now he did smile.

"I'm cold and hungry and tired." Mallory sneezed, and the baby squalled even louder. "The only thing I can do is beg your help. If you won't, then fine! Who needs you? I'll do it myself, and I'm sorry I wasted your oh-so important time!"

This time it was Mallory who turned to go and the Kincaid who stopped her. He sighed. "I willnae lock ye in me dungeon. Nor cut ye up and feed ye t'

the hounds; they're too picky aboot what they eat. As for attacking ye, I prefer me lassies nae t' reek o' pig shit. Go, sit yerself by the fire a-fore ye catch yer death. I maun be as daft as ye, but I'll try t' find yer mon."

In minutes, Mallory was wrapped in a clean blanket in the Kincaid's comfortable chair while bath water was being heated for her in the kitchen. She had been given a warm, dry blanket for Devin, who had fallen asleep just as soon as he was warm and fed.

Unable to sit still, she got up and went to the window. She almost popped her thumbnail into her mouth before she smelled pig, remembered where she had been, and put her hand back down again. She sighed. Between the dark and the rain and the cloudy, poured glass of the window, she could barely see Kenton outside saddling a fresh mount for himself. He was going with the Kincaid and his men. He hadn't even bothered to change into dry clothes before he left. As she watched, he shook his head once and then again. He was probably wondering where his wits had gone off to.

Saddling a horse next to him, the Kincaid's younger brother, Lachlan, was obviously wondering the same thing. "Never in a thousand years did I kin t' be helping the Sassenach."

Malcolm Kincaid snorted. "The last thing we need is a lost Englishmon wimpling aboot. If we dinnae find him, the next ye know we'll be crawling in 'em and we'll never get 'em all out o' Scotland."

They both turned to cast equally black stares at Kenton, who swung up into his saddle and pretended not to be listening.

"God help us," Lachlan muttered under his breath.

The Kincaid nodded. "Amen."

Varden de Michadle, Duke of Cadhla, the fourth Baron of Lanbrough, and holder of several other minor titles, struggled to remain in his saddle. The sun had set; the night sky had opened up in a downpour of icy rain that surprised no one. It had done little but rain off and on since his capture four days ago.

"That's it then," the old Scot said cheerfully. He brushed his hands off on his kilt and grinned at his companions through the rain.

"I dinnae kin the man'll show," the leader finally admitted.

The old Scot laughed. "One less Sassenach in Scotland be payment enough for me, lad."

"Aye." The leader urged his mount to the rump of Varden's restless pony.

From the corner of Varden's eye, he glimpsed the leader raise his arm high. The pony tensed beneath Varden's thighs, as if it sensed that it would finally be allowed to run. Varden braced himself. He lifted his face to the rain, letting it sting his face, and he closed his eyes.

Claire--

With a watery smack, the leader slapped the hell beast's rump and the pony lurched for freedom. The rope around Varden's neck became a deadly constriction that jerked him backwards out of the saddle. He swung into empty air just as the choking grip on his throat suddenly went slack. He fell flat on his back in the mud. Pain shot up through his bound arms into his aching shoulders. Pain was good. It meant he was still alive. And he could breathe again. Varden sucked unabashedly at air and rain while his surroundings erupted into blood-curdling yells and kilt-clad Scotsmen. His would-be executioners scattered in the confusion, but the attacking Scots came from all directions, and they were quickly and expertly surrounded before they could escape.

Flat on the ground, still trying to catch his breath, Varden stared straight up at the severed

rope that had nearly caused his demise. A horse and rider came into view and quickly cut off all else.

Varden focused on the Kincaid, who was grinning down at him. "Well, ye d' look a sight, lad."

"Believe me," Varden rasped, closing his eyes in relief. "I feel worse, but I thank you just the same. I'll even take back every nasty thing I ever thought or said about you."

The Kincaid grinned. "Ye'll nae want t' g' that far."

"Viva la victory!"

Varden lifted his head when he heard Mallory's shout. With the muddy hem of her drab brown dress hiked up round her knees, she sat astride Varden's horse like a redheaded angel gone astray. Her long hair hung in thick, dripping wet tendrils down her back, damp curls sweetly framing a face flushed bright and shining with excitement. In one hand, she held a long dagger. A revolver was impudently tucked into a sword belt that she had tied about her waist. To add insult to injury, the Kincaid tartan was wrapped around her shoulders in a loosely flowing shawl.

"Don't worry, honey," Mallory called and waved at him. "We took back the castle. Everything's fine now."

Varden stared. What lunatic had given her a gun? And that knife--it was a wonder that she had not loped the ears off his horse. It took a minute for her words to register, but when they did, the Kincaid abruptly had all of his attention. "Took back the castle?"

"Weel," the Kincaid hedged. "There wouldnae much t' retake. There were nae defenses left, and most o' the mercenaries had already gone. That one," he gestured at Godfrey, "and a few o' his men were all that we found by the time we got there."

Varden stared at Godfrey, his hands tied together, filthy and bruised atop one of the Scotsmen's ponies. Kenton appeared from out of

nowhere to cut the ropes that bound Varden's hands and helped him to his feet.

Dismounting, the Kincaid clapped Varden roughly on the back. "Welcome back t' the living."

"You're enjoying this." Varden glared at him.

The Kincaid's grin widened. "Tis a good thing yer wife makes a lousy prisoner. She cannae even make candles wi'out burning down the entire west wing! Ye owe me." The Scot shook his finger under Varden's nose. "Ye owe me a new west wing!"

Varden glared at Mallory, who, having suddenly become unusually interested in the uneven ends of her hair, didn't notice. Then he turned to Godfrey, now positioned with Varden's other would-be executioners.

They had never been close. Not even as children. Their gazes locked, and Varden read only animosity for him in Godfrey's eyes.

"We've got our reivers," the Kincaid said. "I dinnae know about ye, but they've murdered nine o' me people wi' their bloody raids."

Varden shook his head. "He was going to hang anyway. He tried to kill my wife."

Godfrey actually began to laugh. "If you knew half what I do, brother, you'd kill her yourself. Why don't you ask her how Caleb really died?"

Varden went cold. "What are you talking about?"

Godfrey sneered. "Ask her about the special honey cakes she included, just for you, in that picnic lunch. Only you didn't eat them, did you? No, Caleb ignored the cakes meant for him in favor of Papa's. Children have no respect for the best laid plans."

The implication hit Varden like a fist to the gut. For a moment he couldn't breathe. He turned to Mallory, who was staring at Godfrey with a look of absolute horror. His eyes pleaded with her. "Tell me he is lying."

Mallory reached for him. "Varden, please believe that it wasn't me."

Varden began to shake. He shook his head in disbelief. "You killed our son?"

Godfrey smiled viciously. "Go ahead, hang me. My son is still your 'heir.' My blood will inherit all."

Varden felt a hand at his shoulder.

"G' home, lad," the Kincaid said gruffly. "Ye dinnae need t' be here for this. I'll take care o' it. Just g' home."

Varden turned numbly for his horse. For a long moment, he stared up at Mallory. Her gaze was unwavering, sympathetic, but without a shred of guilt or remorse. Perhaps he could have forgiven her if there had been remorse. With trembling hands, he pulled her from the saddle and set her roughly on the ground.

"Your eye." Mallory would have touched the swollen bruise, but Varden knocked her hand away.

"Do you remember?" he asked, hoarsely. "Is any of what he said true? Please, I beg you, with God as your witness, tell me he is lying. Make me believe it."

Mallory lowered her hand. "I didn't poison your son. I would never hurt a child."

Varden nodded, and then he shook his head. The grief doubled him over. It was the first time that she had ever seen him cry, however briefly. And when he straightened back again, it was as if he were back in his armor. Cold, aloof, he glared at her with hatred, his tears still on his face. "Don't ever touch me again."

As Varden swung up into the saddle and rode away, the hard, straight lines of his back were quickly blurred by her own tears.

"We should go with him," Kenton said softly behind her. "If you ever hope to make this work between you, Lady Mallory, you must bury Claire for good."

"How?" she asked, swiping at her face with the back of her hand. "How can I possibly do that now? It would be easier to save a whale."

Kenton wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He did not even try to figure that out. "Come. Let me take you home."

As they were picking their way down the hill, they heard the Kincaid order fresh ropes to be tossed up over the branch Varden had nearly been hung from moments ago, then a whinny from the devil pony as Godfrey was mounted onto it. She covered her ears as the command was given and the pony went galloping free

Chapter Nineteen

Grief had been chiseled into the crypt wall along with these simple words: "In loving memory of Caleb Daniel Michadle, first born son. Given unto God, August 1586. He is missed."

Mallory stood in the Michadle vault, a freshly picked bouquet of purple, blue and white flowers held tightly in her hands. Half were already wilted since the season for flowers had passed, but she couldn't find any that looked nicer. She didn't know why she felt it so important to bring flowers to the grave of a child she had never known, but as she bent to lay them on the ground, she reverently touched the last line of the inscription. Her fingers traced the word 'missed' and then the head of the lamb carved above it, before once more gaining her feet.

Poor Varden. Had he shouldered the burden of his loss alone? Mallory reread the inscription, then turned to Grete, who held the flickering candle that cast the only light throughout the shadow-strewn mausoleum. "Do you think Claire ever regretted what she did?"

"Your Grace?"

"Did she grieve for Caleb?" Mallory asked again, her eyes burning with unshed tears. "Did she ever come here or talk of him? Did she ever, just one time, show that she was something other than monstrous?" Her voice cracked, but she managed to keep the tears from falling. "Because if she did, then maybe there is a way to make Varden look at me with something other than hatred! I'll even take a spanking, if only he'll just touch me again!"

Grete touched her shoulder sympathetically. "Milady, if Claire ever felt remorse--for anything--I never saw it."

Mallory covered her face with her hands, then wiped away the tears she couldn't hold back any longer. "Will you do it for me again?"

"You are torturing yourself," Grete said with a shake of her head.

"It's the only way I can see him anymore. Please, just one more time."

"You could come in, or we could sneak him out. I won't say anything. I don't think Nanna would either."

"No," Mallory said. "I don't want to break any more of Varden's rules. I'm tired of having to always break his rules."

Sighing heavily, Grete put her arm around Mallory's shoulder. "All right."

They walked to the nursery in silence. While Mallory remained in the hallway, Grete went inside and closed the door. When she heard Devin's fussy cries, Mallory pressed her hands against the smooth wood panels and lay her forehead between them.

From the other side of the door, Grete said, "He's getting very big now, very fat. Nanna says the new wet-nurse is attentive and takes good care of him. His little blonde hairs are coming in. He doesn't look near as bald as he used to. His eyes are like his father's. And he smells sweet."

Mallory slowly sank to her knees, listening to Devin fuss. She wept.

Varden sat cross-legged on the floor where his desk used to be. Elbows on his knees, head in his hands, he stared unseeing at the papers spread out in a half-circle around him. Cadhla was in shambles. The walls needed immediate repair, and most of the furniture and valuables in his home had been stripped away. He'd probably never recover it all again.

Confirmation of Godfrey's death had reached Cadhla two nights ago. That same night, Abigail had packed her things into the Michadle carriage and left without a word to anyone. Not even Varden. Her son had been murdered, and she left no doubt as to where she lay blame for that. Varden sighed and

rubbed his forehead. When she had stepped up into the carriage to leave, she had looked...broken. He probably shouldn't have let her go, but he doubted he'd ever hear from her again.

In truth, he even felt a little grateful that Abigail had let Godfrey into Cadhla when she had, otherwise it might have been completely destroyed. As it was, the curtain walls and the castle's south side had taken the brunt of the damage. The Training Field was nothing more than a charred patch of earth. Wooler had all but been destroyed and its people scattered into the woods. He would have to go to London to draw the necessary funds in order to rebuild. A staggering sum, but he would manage. And he would rebuild. Although, at this point, it might be easier to simply pick up and move to another estate entirely.

He picked up a paper and looked at it. At the very least he needed another desk.

Then he thought of Mallory. It had cost him more than two thousand pounds just to repair the damage to the Kincaid's west wing. He'd spent half again as much to complete the work on the third story library. The construction was done; all that remained was to furnish it as would befit a lunatic duchess. Grete had offered to continue her post locked inside that room with Mallory. She and Varden would be the only ones allowed contact with her. Devin, he had decided, would never know his mother. Telling Mallory of his decision had been almost as hard as making it to begin with. But after Caleb. . .

Varden rubbed his weary eyes, then his throat. The marks were almost gone. He dropped his hands to his lap and gazed across the remains of his study. He owed his life to her, and now he was going to lock her away.

From the doorway, Kenton said, "Care to drown your troubles?"

Varden looked up at the brandy decanter and two glasses that Kenton brought in with him on a

silver tray. "I'm afraid they learned to swim a long time ago." He gestured to a bare patch on the floor across from him and his papers. "I'd offer you a chair, but I haven't any."

"Perfectly all right, Your Grace. I am not yet so lofty that I cannot sit on the floor." But as Kenton lowered himself to sit cross-legged across from Varden, his joints popped and he groaned. "That's a sign of old age if ever I heard one."

Varden threw back his head and laughed. Actually laughed. It was the first time in days.

"Trust me, my friend. If you ever marry, make sure that she is old and toothless and can't move faster than you. It only gets worse from here."

With a non-committal grunt, Kenton poured two drinks and handed one to Varden. They sat in companionable silence, contemplating the warming fire.

Kenton spoke first. "She's not the same person, you know. At this point, I don't know if that counts for anything, but I do know that Mallory loves you dearly."

Varden rolled his glass slowly between his palms.

"She loves you enough to go to a man considered to be your most dangerous enemy and beg for your life," Kenton told him. "And there is nothing that she would not do for Devin."

"Would you gamble his life on that?" Varden set his brandy aside and stood up. "I appreciate what you are trying to do. In fact, I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done, both in protecting her as well as Devin when I couldn't. I have been racking my brain for a fitting reward."

"Reward?" Kenton studied him warily. "I don't think I like the way you're looking at me."

"I own a little estate in Wales," Varden said as he stretched stiffly. "Won it in a game of dice years and years ago. It's only about three hundred acres, most of it poor, isolated farmland. I consider it a

miracle any year it produces enough crops to sustain itself through the winter. Eight house servants, fifty-six tenants, low funds, and run down rooms."

Kenton actually paled. "You wouldn't dare."

"It's all yours. A gift. I hope it drives you crazy."

Outraged, Kenton leapt to his feet. "You bastard! After everything I've done for you! You cannot give me an estate! I am low class servility!"

"And now you are jumped up nobility." Varden took a paper from a stack on the floor and tossed it at Kenton, who made no move to catch it. The parchment landed at his feet and he drew back as if it were a coiled snake. "Enjoy your title, Baron Kenton Merenamun. The Queen charged me dearly to purchase it."

"You son of a bitch." Kenton looked stunned. "You can't do this to me. I won't allow it!"

"You're welcome." Varden patted him briskly on the back. "You leave for Wales in a week. I will give you enough funds to ensure you can get on your feet if you are frugal. Knowing you as well as I do, it should be more than enough. Don't forget to write and let me know how you're making out." Varden headed for the door, then stopped and turned back. "Oh, and before I forget. Watch out for that termagant housekeeper. She has run off every solicitor I've sent there to manage the place. I doubt she'll regard you any differently."

Varden patted Kenton's shoulder again and added a new manservant to his mental list of things to be replaced. Regrettably, there would never be another quite like him.

Mallory looked around Claire's bedroom one last time. There wasn't a lot that she wanted to take with her. A trunk with all her favorite nightgowns, her pillows, and that flower Varden had given her all those weeks ago, which she had carefully pressed

between the pages of a book she'd borrowed from his second story library.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Grete asked. "He might still change his mind."

Mallory shook her head. "He won't change his mind, and I don't think I could bear for him to shut me in there himself. It's better if I just do it now, no fuss, no muss. Let's stop by the library first, though. If I have to live in a padded room, at the very least I want something to read."

"I'll meet you there, then. I want to be there when they start arranging the furniture."

"I won't be long," Mallory said.

They parted at the library doors and Mallory went in alone. If there was one thing about Cadhla that she really liked, it was the libraries. The rooms were huge, with wall-to-wall shelves and books stacked ceiling high in places. They had, for the most part, escaped the raid without much damage. Apparently, books weren't considered by anyone to be very valuable.

Mallory walked up and down the aisles between bookshelves, trailing a finger along the many horizontal stacks. Few had any kind of writing anywhere on the outside of the covers and so, here and there when she found one whose leather binding attracted attention, either by color or wear, she took it down to create a small stack in the crook of her arm. She had selected six to start with when, by sheer luck, she ran across a small familiar volume stuffed between two thick, heavy books.

She smiled and took it down. "I was wondering where you'd gotten off to, Miss Anne."

She turned and froze. Varden was watching her from the doorway, his eyes hooded in shadow and unreadable, and the sight of him sent a sharp stab of pain straight through her. For a moment, Mallory was afraid her heart would break. She had to steel herself not to feel it.

"Hi," she said.

Despite everything, it was hard to believe how much he was going to miss her. Varden mentally traced her outline, part covered in the shadow of the bookcase, part lit up in the soft light of the fireplace behind her.

"The room is done," he said, because he couldn't think of any other way to tell her.

She tried to reclaim her smile. "I know. Grete has some men moving my things right now."

He looked at the books in her hands. "What are you doing with those?"

She shrugged, staring down at the books so that she wouldn't have to look at him. "Something to do while I'm incarcerated."

"I imagine needlework might be more stimulating for you," Varden said as he started towards her. "Not one of those has any illustrations."

Mallory allowed herself one small, mirthless laugh. "You know, I can read. I read very well, in fact, and well enough to know that this book--" she held up Bawdy Annie's little red book, "--has absolutely no business being in one of your libraries. It's completely out of character for a stick in the mud like you. Although, I'll admit, illustrations would make the reading more interesting. Hell, I've got the time now. I'll draw my own."

Varden stared at the book in her hand, an odd look on his face. He took it from her outstretched hand. "You know what this is? Did Grete read it to you?"

"I can't imagine Grete reading from that book!" She took it back from him and lay it on top of the pile she carried. She shifted the stack to her other arm. "She'd be absolutely scandalized. Why are you looking at me like I just sprouted a second head?"

"But you're not?" he asked, staring at her intently. Studying her, really looking at her for perhaps the first time in months. What was it she had said to him the night Devin was born, when

she'd lain so still and pale against the pillows of Claire's bed, her green eyes clouded with pain and not the slightest trace of recognition for him anywhere within them?

Do you believe in miracles?

In life after death?

Do you believe in souls?

"I'm not what?" She turned away from him, blindly selecting a book from the shelf and pretending to look at it.

"Scandalized?" Varden stared at her, for a moment afraid to even think it. It was ridiculous.

It was insane.

My name is Mallory. I'm a used bookstore clerk.

A wry smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "If you knew what I'd kept under my mattress back home, you'd be the scandalized one. Actually, you probably wouldn't even believe me and I doubt I could adequately describe how a vibrator works. Batteries alone are a full day discussion."

Varden took the book from her hand and replaced it on the shelf.

"Hey!" she protested when he took the entire stack of books from her arm and dropped all but the little red book none too gently on the floor. "I was going to read those!"

He handed her the little red book. "What is the title?"

Without a word, Mallory showed him the title page.

"Read it to me," Varden commanded.

"Why?"

"Humor me," he said.

"Bawdy Anne and the Buccaneers."

"Who wrote it?"

"It's signed Anonymous. Someone was probably too ashamed to put their name on it."

"Shame had nothing to do with it," Varden said. "More than likely, he was afraid of arrest."

When he held out his hand, she handed the book back. He opened to the middle, looked at the page and held it out. "Read to me."

Mallory tried to put the book on the shelf. "I don't feel like it."

"Read!"

She jumped for he had all but shouted the command as he thrust the book back in her hands. While she glared, Varden turned his back to her and closed his eyes. In truth, he half-expected her to make something up, to have his sudden and impossible hopes instantly slaughtered should she tell him a tale about fairies or dragons or dashing heroes that spouted romantic nonsense. The last thing he expected, however, was for her to throw the book at him. It bounced off the back of his head and crashed open-faced on the floor at his feet. He spun back around, but she was already storming towards the door.

"I won't spend my last few minutes of freedom with you telling me what to do! Let go of me!" she bellowed when he grabbed her arm and forced the book back into her hands.

"Please!" Varden shook her once to still her struggles, and she glared, making absolutely no effort to comply. He gentled his plea. "Please, bise. Just a few words. Please."

Although she looked as though she'd rather have hit him again, Mallory opened the book. "She was now at his mercy, wiggling and squirming, his hands wandering over her plump thighs, reveling in their smoothness and softness. . ."

Varden closed his eyes. His breath whooshed out of him and he almost sagged against her.

Anger abruptly forgotten, Mallory dropped the book and braced her hands against his chest to keep him upright. "Are you all right? Varden, are you sick? Wait here, I'll get help!"

She grabbed her skirts and would have dashed for the door had Varden not grabbed her about the waist. He lifted her off the ground, catching her

startled lips beneath his own. It was not a kiss; it was ravishment.

"I am sorry," he whispered. He lay a trail of kisses down her throat to her ear. "For what I have done, and for what I was about to do today."

Now it was her turn to give him the odd look. She felt his forehead for signs of a fever.

"I am not sick." He caressed her face, traced her familiar features, lightly tapped the tip of her nose with his finger. Then he kissed her again, hungrily. "And you are no crazier than I am."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't think that's saying much right now."

Chuckling, Varden took Mallory's hand and executed a courtly bow as he kissed the back. "Welcome to Cadhla, Lady Mallory. My name is Varden Edward de Michadle, the Third, and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"You believe me?" Her jaw dropped. "Wait! How? What did I do to make you believe me?"

He could not resist stealing a kiss from her startled lips. Now that he knew--now that he was certain--he could not help it. "Bise, Claire never went to the Training Fields. She shuddered every time I came into the room, much less touched her. She never would have tried to help the Kincaid boy, because she considered the Scots to be of even less worth than the English. She certainly never would have gone to one for help. And, Mallory," he cupped her face in aching gentle hands. "Claire could not read. Her father thought it unimportant knowledge for a mere female. Can a fool say that he is sorry? Or that he is blind? Or that he loves you?"

Mallory pulled back. "Me or her?"

"Bise," Varden said, soothingly.

"Do you miss her?" she choked, tears already filling her eyes. "The next time someone brings up her past, will you hate me for it? Tell me who you want in this body, Varden: me or Claire?"

"You." He pulled her into his arms, though she stood stiffly in his embrace and did not hold him

back. "Claire is dead, everything that she ever did is in the past. Forgive me, Mallory, because I should have seen you standing before me a long time ago. I should have known the first time you held Devin to her breast. Certainly, I should have known the first time you held me. You are nothing alike. Say that you forgive me, *ma petite folle*. Say that you will stay with your *lion rugissant*."

He stroked her back, feeling as she gradually softened in his arms.

"You're not angry, then?"

"For what?" he asked.

"The way I intruded on your life? I know it was wrong, but there was so much I hadn't done. I didn't want to die."

"Have I made you regret your choice?"

Mallory shook her head, and for the first time in days, she smiled. It animated her face, sparkled and danced in her eyes. "A few less spankings might be appreciated, though."

"Madame, I know you too well now to agree to something like that."

She feigned disappointment. "Well, I still haven't any regrets. Not even if you'd locked me away. There was always a chance that someday I might have been able to convince you of who I am. But I can't imagine my life without you or Devin in it."

"That's right." Varden laughed. "I do remember you mentioning something about a husband and child on that list of yours."

She grinned. "Right after saving a whale. I think you were comparable with that degree of difficulty."

He let the comment go without question. Besides, he had the rest of his life to figure it out. "I love you, *ma petite folle*."

"Come here, *mon lion rugissant*." She rose up on tiptoes, tilting her face to his, her smiling lips utterly kissable as she said, "Show me how much."

