



No Recourse

June Girls: Book One

Mari Carr

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Blurb

2008 is one year that Hayley Garland would like to forget. Devastated by the disappearance of her best friend, she's spent the year in limbo. But now she's back to where it all went wrong. Returning to Fernwood Grange in the hopes of finding out what really happened to Erin seemed like a good idea, but Hayley can't find anything more than a stormy English night and an old oak tree. If only she could go back in time...

Captain Jack Campbell is searching the Dover shoreline for another missing girl. Racing through the woods, he's caught in a sudden downpour. Drenched and in need of shelter, Jack is stopped short when lightning strikes a tree in his path. The split trunk reveals a young woman, in obvious pain, and he reaches out to her just before she loses consciousness.

Desperate to find Julia, a local woman who has disappeared recently, and escape the powerful storm, he heads to a small cabin in the woods, determined to question the unconscious woman in his arms. Little does he know, Hayley is not what she appears to be, and this woman is about to change his future drastically. Because in Jack's world the year is 1818.

Prologue

The piercing pain in her chest grew worse, but she couldn't stop running. A flash of lightning split the darkness once again, temporarily blinding her. Thunder roared in her ears and her racing heart felt as if it would burst. Again, the pounding of the horse's hooves beat the dirt path behind her. Closer this time. He was closer. A high-pitched scream sliced through the night, the horrible sound quickly swallowed by the thick mist. "Erin!" she yelled. "I'm coming."

The cramps in her legs intensified and she stumbled over a rock in the path, but caught herself before she fell. She could not keep up this insane pace much longer. She had to get to Erin before the dark man on the horse caught her again. More lightning, another crash of thunder. Blinded by the rain, she stumbled through the brambles. The wind howled as she struggled forward against its gale force. "Aaaa!" she cried as she tripped over a tree root. Another faraway scream, another flash of lightning.

Dragging herself back up, she felt the hot breath of the horse against the back of her neck. Two callused hands lifted her up through the air. Out of time—he'd caught her again. The sound of familiar laughter was beside her now. Another scream—farther away this time—barely perceptible. She'd failed again. "Erin!" She kicked out with all her might. "Erin!"

The man beside her laughed harshly, whispering in her ear familiar, terrifying words. One last scream—this time coming from her own lips—trying to drown his words, his laughter. The rough hands began to shake her. Shaking her so hard her teeth rattled. Fight back, she thought. Fight back.

Chapter One

June 2008

“Hayley, wake up! Wake up!” Hayley opened her eyes adjusting her vision to the dark room. Bright light from the hallway poured in from the open doorway and she felt disoriented.

“Tori?”

“Yes. God, Hayley. Wake up!” She shook slightly as her friend patted her hair and murmured comforting words. “You’re awake now. You’re safe.”

Hayley sat still for several moments, silently willing the trembling to stop. She hated the look of absolute panic on Tori’s face. “I’m okay. Really.”

“That was a hell of a nightmare. I heard you all the way down the hall.”

Hayley shrugged nonchalantly though her hands shook as she tried to untangle herself from the sweat-soaked sheets.

“I thought you said you didn’t have nightmares anymore. How long have you been having these?”

“Awhile ... just since she disappeared,” Hayley whispered, her voice hoarse from screaming.

Tori looked unconvinced. “You need to talk to someone about them. It’s not good for you to have such violent dreams. You know, I bet my mother knows someone who could help you.”

“A shrink?” She felt calmer and her wits were returning to her. “No, thanks, I don’t think a psychiatrist is going to be able to do anything about a silly nightmare. Besides, I tried it before, remember?”

Tori crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows angrily. “Two months, Hayley. You tried it for a total of two months, and then you quit when some progress was being made.”

“She was a hack and it was a waste of money. I work hard for my paycheck, and I resented giving it to her so she could blame all my problems on Marian. It’s just being here, Tori. It brings everything back.” At Tori’s incredulous look, she deepened her lie. “I’m fine at home.”

“Right, you don’t have these dreams anywhere but here?”

“No, well, maybe a couple of times right after I went home last summer, but not since then.” She hoped her light tone made her lie more convincing. Truth was she had endured bad dreams since she was a child, but the nightmares had become more frequent and frightening since last June. A year. She still couldn’t believe it had been one year. She’d spent the last twelve months in a fog, simply going through the motions of living.

Tomorrow was her best friend Erin’s birthday. It was also one year to the day since Erin had mysteriously disappeared without a trace. The June girls were together again for the summer, minus one very special member. Erin, Hayley and Tori had spent every summer together since they were ten years old. The first ten summers were spent at Camp Spring Rock, then last year here at Tori’s family estate, Fernwood Grange, in Dover, England. They had penned themselves the June girls during their first summer at camp as

all three of them had June birthdays, and they had remained friends through the best and worst times of their lives.

Hayley was spending a couple of weeks at Fernwood Grange with Tori. It was only her second vacation since beginning her job as a counselor in a women's abuse shelter in St. Louis two years earlier. Tori, an elementary school librarian, was spending her entire summer break at the Grange, and Erin, until her disappearance, had traveled the United States with her band Delancy's Dreamers.

Tori disrupted her thoughts. "We should have gone somewhere else this summer."

Hayley reached for her friend's hands. "No, Tori. I wanted to come back, to spend time with you. Besides, I've been thinking that perhaps time and distance may help us solve this mystery. There are some things about last year that have been bothering me and I thought we could run down some of the leads that weren't fully explored."

"Are you kidding me?" Tori yelled. "Dammit Hayley. I didn't come back here to start the search up again. There are no leads to track down."

"I'm just not sure the detectives followed up as much as they should have."

"Will you just stop it, Hayley? She's gone. Erin is gone. I thought coming here might help us heal."

"Heal?"

"Yes, heal, let go of the past, move on. I know those are pretty radical concepts, but they're something you might want to try sometime."

Hayley felt her friend's words like a blow to the chest. She knew she had a tendency to carry around her ancient history like well-worn luggage, but Tori, of all people, should understand why she did so.

"I—I don't think I can—"

"Aw hell, Hayley. I'm sorry. So sorry. I shouldn't have said that, but dammit, I can't drudge all of this up again. We have to get past it. We were both in such a daze at the end of last summer. I haven't been back to this house myself since then. Despite my mother's nagging, I spent Christmas with my cousins in Liverpool. I didn't think I could face the demons here without you." Tori's voice broke. "I came back, hoping we could find closure. I miss her so much."

Hayley reached for her friend, holding her as Tori cried. She didn't think this trip would help either one of them. They were ghosts of their former selves, and although she found solace with her friend, it wasn't enough to counteract the guilt and pain she felt over losing Erin.

As Tori quietly cried, Hayley realized she hadn't cried since Erin's disappearance—not once. Instead, she lived in a hollow cocoon, feeling cold and empty all the time. Her childhood with a tyrant father taught her from an early age that emotions showed weakness, and—having learned that lesson the hard way many times—she refused to be weak.

Gradually, Tori regained control of her emotions and looked up guiltily. "You had the nightmare, and I'm the one who's falling apart. Isn't that always the way? Erin was so much a part of us. This last year it's felt like we were missing a limb, but we've gone on. We've both been successful in our jobs and we have each other. There are still good times to be had and I really don't think Erin would want us to wallow in self-pity and misery. Remember the time Tuck Mathews fell into the lake?"

"As I recall, he didn't fall in. Erin pushed him." Hayley laughed at the memory.

For the next hour, the two friends reminisced, sharing laughter and tears as they talked about the wild adventures of the June girls at camp.

Finally, Hayley said the words that never completely left her consciousness. “The worst thing is not knowing.”

Tori nodded, clearly understanding what she meant.

“I think that’s what hurts the most. It drives me crazy sometimes, Tori. Just wondering, never knowing for sure she won’t walk through that door any minute with some crazy tale of her lost year.”

“Wouldn’t that be great?” Tori said. “Actually, I think deep down inside, I hoped we would come back and find her here. Isn’t that silly?”

“No, it’s not silly.”

“Sometimes, these past few days, I’ve actually felt like she was here.” Tori shivered. “Maybe I need to see the shrink?”

“No, I’ve felt her too. I thought it was just me.”

Neither of them spoke for several minutes as they considered what it might mean to feel Erin’s presence—her spirit in the house—until Tori, shaking off thoughts of her friend’s possible death, stood quickly. “That’s it. I’m for bed again.”

“Me too. Rough day tomorrow. Her twenty-third birthday.”

Tori paused in the doorway. “Tonight helped, I think. I’m stronger with you, Hayley. Sweet dreams?”

“Tonight helped,” she repeated. “Sweet dreams.”

She listened as Tori returned to her room, then got out of bed and crossed to the window seat. Curling up on the blue brocade cushion, she felt bad for lying to her friend about the nightmares. Erin and Tori were her best and only friends. After her mother, Marian, divorced her alcoholic father, she and Hayley moved frequently from one run-down apartment to another, usually trying to escape bill collectors or the latest in a long line of Marian’s seedy boyfriends.

Because of the instability of her home life, Hayley became a loner. Growing up, she watched her mother cower under the demands of her abusive father and then a string of other unsavory men. Determined not to be like Marian, she had difficulty fitting in. She was strong-willed, with a quick temper and an independent streak a mile wide. Her tendency to speak her mind tended to make others uncomfortable, and she had never trusted anyone until she met the June girls.

Tori and Erin were loners as well, although for different reasons. Erin’s isolation was the result of lifestyle, not choice. She was an only child traveling with her father and a folk music band comprised entirely of adults. Despite the lack of other children to play with, she was vivacious, beautiful and made friends easily. Tori lived a life of privilege with wealthy parents. The problem was they were both extremely successful workaholics, who left the rearing of their only daughter to a string of nannies.

Shaking herself back to the present, she decided sleep was beyond her. Looking around the room, she decided to read the romance novel Tori had loaned her earlier that afternoon.

“Damn,” she murmured after ten minutes of searching. “I must have left it outside.”

They’d spent the afternoon under a large oak tree at the edge of the Grange property. It was close enough to the shoreline that they could listen to the sounds of the English Channel as they relaxed. The tree had been a favorite gathering place for all three of the

girls last year.

However, today, she'd found herself unable to concentrate there. The tree was the last place Erin had been seen, and Hayley was the last person who had seen her. The memory of that day served to increase the feelings of guilt she had suffered throughout the year. She'd left her friend alone, unprotected, and that fact ate at her insides like a cancer. In her haste to escape the tree this afternoon, Hayley must have forgotten her book, as well as several other things, now that she thought about it.

Wide-awake and too antsy to sleep, she decided a brisk walk to retrieve her belongings would do her good. Decision made, she began to pull on the jeans and green blouse she had worn earlier in the day. Taking a quick peek out the window, she could see it was a clear night. A walk might be the trick to driving out the dark thoughts that were overwhelming her senses and leaving her so restless. She knew Tori didn't want to continue the search, but Hayley couldn't give up the idea that perhaps with a bit more effort, this time they could solve the mystery.

Besides, if she was being truthful with herself, she was simply unwilling to risk sleep with its terrible images. Lacing up her tennis shoes, she tip-toed past Tori's bedroom and out the front door. Taking a deep breath of the fresh air, she felt a tremor of fear and for a moment considered turning back to the house. Shaking it off as unwanted weakness, she started down the dirt path toward the tree.

She had almost reached the spot when she was startled by the sound of thunder somewhere in the distance.

"Damn, I hope it doesn't start to rain."

Looking up at a clear night sky twinkling with stars, she wondered where the thunder had come from. The light of a full moon lit the path ahead of her, and the walk was easy and relaxing. She loved walking at night. While she knew night sounds and eerie shadows frightened others, she took comfort in the darkness, refuge in the peacefulness, and loved the shelter it provided.

Again, she heard a crash of thunder, louder this time. Glancing toward the shore, she wondered if a storm was blowing in from that direction. Increasing her pace, she cursed herself for being a fool, tramping through the woods in the middle of the night for a silly romance novel. As she approached the giant oak, she glanced around looking for Erin.

"Erin," she cried to the stormy night. "Where are you? Why can't I find you?"

She bent down trying to pack up her forgotten backpack in the darkness. Rushing lest the storm begin, she hastily retrieved her book, water bottle and sunglasses, then started to place the pack on her back.

Suddenly a bright flash of lightning struck the tall oak tree, throwing her back onto the ground where she lay stunned. Every hair on her body was standing straight up, and every nerve felt as though it had received an electric shock. Dazed, she looked up at the tree. It had split right down the middle all the way to the ground. Amazingly, it was still standing. The two halves were pointing outward at sixty-degree angles, but they had not fallen to the earth.

Impossible.

An unexpected movement on the other side of the tree caught her gaze. Through the opening in the oak, she could see a man on a large, dark horse looking straight back at her. He was wearing a large cloak with a hat pulled low over his face—rainwater gushing off the brim.

The dark horseman from my dream, she thought with panic as she looked at him. Glancing quickly at her surroundings, she considered running, but realized—as her recurring dream had repeatedly proven—she would never be able to escape him and his horse in the dark. The saying “the best defense is a good offense” popped into her mind and she decided the only course of action would be to stand her ground.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t standing on the ground, but sprawled across it due to the force of the lightning strike. Rising slowly, she tried to get a better look at the man. Occasional flashes of lightning served to cast even darker shadows across his face. The moon had deserted her, leaving a bleak darkness that allowed her to see the outline of his colossal form on the horse, but no more than that. However, even in the dark, she could feel him staring at her, his gaze burning into her.

Taking a deep breath, dusting herself off and leaving her backpack on the ground, Hayley cautiously approached the split in the tree. The man from her nightmares had been chasing her for years; however, the horse had been a new addition, only appearing since Erin’s absence. She had no idea what that could mean.

Seeing this stranger led her to wonder if she were actually dreaming once again. Yet somehow, deep inside, she knew for certain the broken tree, wild storm and strange man were very real. Cognizant of the possible danger he presented, she searched the ground looking for a broken branch or anything else she could use as a weapon. She feigned amazement in the rend the lightning had caused, stepping closer to the tree, hoping to draw him into conversation. For some reason, Hayley needed to hear his voice. Needed to be sure it wasn’t the same one that laughed in her ear—that whispered those horrible, terrifying things—even though she knew that was impossible.

All her concerns about the man quickly diminished as she began to sense a strange stirring around her, like a powerful wind was blowing somewhere nearby, but not touching her. Glancing around, she tried to determine where the sound was coming from. It was eerie, frightening and unlike anything she had ever heard before. It was as if every bee on earth was hovering overhead. The surrounding air was extraordinarily calm, yet seemingly alive.

Looking back at the stranger, she took one more tentative step toward the tree and was violently thrust into a whirlwind of vibration and noise. She felt as though she was caught up in a tornado. Painful, powerful strokes lashed at her body, while a million high-pitched voices shrieked inside her head. She tried to scream, but couldn’t hear the sound of her own voice over the roaring around her. Her body was tossed and turned like a feather in the wind, and the world exploded in bright, flashing lights—blinding her, searing her eyes with fire and heat. Desperate to save herself, she reached out trying to grab something, anything, that could pull her back to safety.

Suddenly, she felt large, callused hands grab hers—pulling her out of the chaos, away from the noise and pain, the light and heat. As quickly as the cyclone had captured her, it released her to the rough hands that held hers tightly and silence fell again. Weak and exhausted, she looked up into the concerned eyes of a man she had never seen before, and then the world went blissfully black.

Chapter Two

June 1818

Jack stared at the unconscious woman in his arms. Her presence had taken him by surprise. Before lightning struck the tree, he was unaware that anyone else had been nearby. Who the hell was she?

I should have stayed on the ship, he thought, not for the first time tonight.

Taking in the strange appearance of the woman, he wondered why she would be out alone on such a treacherous night and dressed in male clothing. He pondered whether she could be part of the smuggling ring suspected to be operating in this area.

Alex, the Marquis of Dorset and his good friend, had written several months ago discussing his concerns about light signals he had observed off the coast. Alex had heard there was a group of smugglers at work and, although smuggling wasn't new to these parts, he had been concerned by rumors that it wasn't goods being brought in, but people.

With the end of the war against Napoleon, there was still a fear that some of the French weren't happy with the return of their king and would like nothing more than to punish England for its unwanted interference. If French spies were trying to enter the country, Dover would be the perfect place to land. Its close proximity to the French shoreline and many secluded beaches made it an accessible port for such dissidents.

However, it wasn't the possibility of French spies, but Lady Julia's disappearance that prompted him to travel to Fernwood Grange at the moment. He'd spent the better part of the last three months aboard one of the ships in his shipping company, traveling to Spain and Italy, then back again, only to return home to discover Julia Parker, a friend and ward of his uncle, Robert Campbell, the Earl of Wilshire, was missing.

If he'd taken the time to think about his actions he would never have made such an ill-advised trek at such a poorly chosen time, but he was anxious to discover Julia's whereabouts. She'd already been missing for two days. The Grange, Alex's home, bordered his uncle's land, and determined to remain in the area until Julia was found, he thought it was the perfect place to begin his search.

Driven by his anger toward his uncle and desperation to see Julia safely recovered, he had traveled first to his uncle's estate, the Homestead. The journey there had proved to be an unproductive waste of time as his mad uncle uttered inane threats, and Jack had left in a furor. Even though Fernwood Grange was only ten miles away from the Homestead, the trip had taken three times as long as normal due to the unnatural darkness, then the pounding wind and rain.

Regardless of whom this odd-looking woman in his arms was, no gently bred lady would be out on a night such as this doing anything honorable. No one at Fernwood Grange expected him—especially not in the middle of the night. Looking down again at her still form, he came to a quick decision as her unnaturally pale face stirred him to take immediate action. Carefully, he lifted her onto his horse and then hoisted himself into the saddle. Adjusting her to a secure position, he rode off back through the woods; the way he had just come. There was a small hunting cabin not too far away, deep in the copse. He would take the woman there and question her, as he couldn't see any reason to wake

up the entire Grange household.

If she were involved with the smuggling of French spies, he would get the answers he was seeking and then personally deliver her to Alex in the morning. If the woman could give him names of others involved, he and Alex could contact the local magistrate and put an end to the criminal activity at once. Perhaps these smugglers knew of Julia's whereabouts. That thought alone prompted him to quicken the pace of his horse, anxious to put the nightmare of these past two days to rest.

Slowed by the continuing storm, they arrived at the cabin a quarter of an hour later. He dismounted carefully and carried the woman through the rain to the shelter. Using the occasional flashes of lightning as his guide, he picked his way across the room and deposited her on a straw pallet. Immediately, he went back out into the storm and led Lancelot to a crude stable behind the cabin.

As he cared for the horse, he wondered again who the woman was. Why was she out on such a terrible night by herself? He decided her presence could not be a coincidence. Had the lightning not struck the tree she was standing behind, he would never have known she was there. The god-awful weather had taken away most of the senses he relied on. He hadn't heard her over the thunder, and the rain was coming down so hard he could barely see a few feet before him. It was evident she was as shocked by his sudden appearance as he was by hers. The suspicious way she regarded him immediately clued him into the fact that she clearly had something to hide.

Returning to the cabin, he threw his saddlebag on a nearby table and used the flint by the fireplace. Fortunately, the last occupant had left a large load of dry firewood inside the cabin. It would last through the night, he thought thankfully, as the room was extremely cold due to the howling winds.

After a few minutes, Jack had a large fire blazing and two candles lit. From his saddlebag, he produced a dry shirt and breeches. He had packed only a single change of clothing as he'd been anxious to make his way to the Homestead. His valet was to meet him at the Grange with his belongings tomorrow. Glancing quickly at the bed, he confirmed that the woman was still asleep, and he started to peel off his wet things. Once dressed in dry clothes, he tried to decide how best to question her when she awoke.

Rifling through a battered trunk at the end of the straw pallet, he pulled out three thin, wool blankets. With the light from the candles and fire, he stood at the end of the bed and studied the unconscious woman. She was definitely a stranger to these parts. He'd grown up in this area and had spent many holidays with Alex at the Grange as a youth. He'd never lain eyes on this woman, of that he was certain.

Jack studied her unusual outfit more closely. Her breeches were not those of a man, but tailor-made for a female figure. Cut low on her waist, they enhanced the curves of her shapely legs and bottom. Her damp green shirt clung to her body, revealing firm, full breasts. She had no coat, leaving him to wonder if perhaps her late night adventure was unplanned. No woman would venture out on a night like this dressed in such inappropriate clothing. As he ran his eyes over her exquisite form, undeniable desire passed through his body.

Shaking off his lustful thoughts, he turned his attention to her face. Her fiery red tresses were unpinned and cut so that they just brushed her shoulders. The mass of spiral curls lay loose over the pillow. Before he could stop himself, he walked to the side of the bed and bent down to brush a stray curl away from her face.

From this angle, he suspected her pale complexion was not natural, but a result of the intense pain she suffered under the tree. If he hadn't seen her walking toward him after the lightning strike, he would have suspected the lightning had struck her. However, she didn't scream in pain until she approached him, or rather until she approached the tree and he didn't question that the pain had been truly intense. He had seen men wounded in battle too often not to recognize the real thing.

For now, the pain seemed to have waned as she rested peacefully. Long lashes hid her deep-set eyes and he felt vaguely curious about their color, though he expected with hair that color, they would be an emerald green or perhaps hazel. She had a few freckles, obviously placed there by the sun, on her delicate nose and cheeks that he found endearing. Although her features were not what conventional society would consider beauty, he thought she was one of the loveliest women he had ever seen.

Enough! He was disgusted with the direction his thoughts were heading. This woman could be a spy. No doubt his lustful musings were from the lack of female company endured these past few months. While he loved sailing the open seas, it certainly left a man lonely for the comforts of home and a soft, willing woman.

He realized any soft thoughts about this woman would not help him discover her identity. Picking up one of the threadbare blankets, he cut it into strips. Testing the strength of the material, he put it to the side lest he need to restrain her later. He didn't want to harm her, but he was determined to get the answers he was seeking. With smugglers in the area and Julia missing, too much was at stake.

She shivered slightly and he noticed a blue tinge around her lips. The fire was not producing much heat in the drafty cabin, and her clothing was still wet. Grabbing the two remaining blankets, he covered her and then pulled a chair over to the corner of the room. He needed a plan and found he couldn't concentrate when he was so close to this beautiful stranger.

Sitting down heavily, he rubbed his brow. His head was aching from fear and anxiety as he considered his lost friend once again.

"Damn Julia Parker!" He cursed aloud. Where on earth was she? Grimacing, he realized the past three years spent in his presence had no doubt jaded the girl. Ruined her chances of being a proper young woman. He took credit for the fact that, with his grandfather Sebastian's help, he had made the young lady impulsive and reckless by allowing her freedom to roam the countryside at will. He should have gone to see her as soon as he'd returned home rather than journeying on to London. He'd been three months at sea, and the trip to London could have waited. If he had gone to see her first, she wouldn't have felt the need to run away. She'd been missing for two full days now and despite her knowledge of the area, an eighteen-year-old girl alone in the woods was prey to all sorts of dangerous things—human or otherwise.

A slight stirring on the bed dragged his attention back to the present and to the woman. Jack knew the exact moment she woke up. Her soft breathing quickened, becoming shallow.

With some amusement, he watched her take in the room. His initial plan had been to scare her into answering his questions. With his naturally dark features and large build, he knew he could have this woman shaking with fear in a matter of minutes. However, watching as she conducted her calm evaluation of the room, he decided she was likely intelligent and, by her lack of panic, very brave. Deciding to pursue his planned course of

action, he broke the silence.

“How nice of you to join me,” he said in a deep, menacing voice.

At the sound of his words, the woman on the bed flinched slightly and then slowly turned her head. The big, brown eyes that looked back at him astounded him. For some inexplicable reason he had truly expected them to be green.

“I trust you are comfortable?” He had placed one candle on the table by the pallet so that he could see her expressions clearly. The other candle he’d placed on a shelf behind his chair, as it cast his face in shadow, hiding his identity and, he hoped, increasing her fear.

“Actually, no.” Her voice was strong and clear, and Jack found her confidence slightly infuriating. Although he knew he wouldn’t harm her, she didn’t know that, hence he felt she should be acting with more caution. “What the hell kind of mattress is this? Straw? The scratchy stuff is cutting into my skin.”

He was struggling with her accent. It was very unusual and he only knew one other person who sounded like that. Again, he found himself questioning the woman’s origins.

He realized the woman was studying him and waiting for a response. “I beg your pardon if you are not comfortable, but I have several questions I need answered. Until I discover the information I am seeking, you will have to endure the straw.” Closely observing her features, he sensed hostility, confusion, and then, he thought with some satisfaction, the slightest hint of fear flashed in her eyes before she shuttered the emotion away.

*

Hayley’s mind reeled as she considered the man’s bizarre behavior. This *was* the stranger by the tree, she had no doubt about that. What she couldn’t figure out was where she was and what questions he could possibly have for her.

Her first impression when he’d spoken was “pirate.” His British accent seemed coarse, and he was the very picture of a swashbuckler in his old-fashioned pants, loose fitting shirt and high boots. His dark brown hair, tied neatly at the base of his neck, was touched with natural highlights. His deep tan suggested he spent most of his time out of doors. She couldn’t make out the specific features of his face or eyes, nor could she discern what he was thinking as he stared at her so intensely, but the strong jaw line certainly looked promising.

In fact, she had to admit—from what she could see of him—he had a very handsome face, perhaps even worthy to be the hero in one of those romance novels Tori was always reading. Though she should have felt overwhelming fear, her instincts told her she was not in danger, and she felt certain, despite her current predicament, he wouldn’t hurt her.

She also had the strong impression he was trying to frighten her with the calculating stare, cool demeanor and dim lighting. Even his distance from her suggested some premeditation. His mistake, she thought with a grin. She’d lived with the greatest intimidator in all of history for nine long years. Her father had thrived on producing fear in the people around him, and she’d learned at a very young age how an abuser’s mind worked. Pirate or not, this man had met his match.

She cleared her throat. “What on earth could you have to ask me? I don’t even know you.”

Standing slowly, he approached the bed. “Oh no, you don’t understand. I ask the questions and you answer them.” He was standing right beside her now, looking down at

her on the bed.

She recognized the movement for what it was—yet another means of intimidation. This time he was using his size to hover over her in a threatening manner. Unwilling to let his towering presence unnerve her, she struggled to rise to a sitting position. Her head swam with the too quick movement as a wave of dizziness consumed her and she fell back against the prickly mattress. Her face flushed with anger and frustration at being so weak and helpless.

Finally, through gritted teeth, she yelled, “I won’t answer anything until you back off. Either sit down or help me up.”

Fury flickered across his face and she silently cursed her tongue. “You were in pain earlier. I think perhaps it would be best if you continue to lie still.”

“I’m fine. I just need to move a bit slower,” she said, pushing up with one hand while she rubbed her forehead with the other.

Strong hands grasped her shoulders and gently pulled her up. He dragged her to the head of the bed, so that she could sit with her back against the wall. Then he sat down in front of her, closer than she liked. Although they were more or less on eye level now, his close proximity and sheer size still left her feeling at a disadvantage. His smell was an odd, though not unpleasant, combination of rain and fire.

The closeness also gave her a clear view of his distinctly handsome face. Clear, deep blue eyes, chiseled jaw, and, oh my, dimples. Never one to swoon and giggle over the *hotties* in school, she felt as if she could do just that as she peered into the face of the most gorgeous man she had ever seen. However, her giddiness was short-lived when, aware of her close scrutiny, his features darkened even more and he actually began to scowl.

“What were you doing out on a night like this?” His voice was a deep growl.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to take a walk. I left my backpack under the tree earlier today and thought I would retrieve it.” At this, she paused, glancing around for her bag.

Clearly the stranger noticed her look. “Backpack?”

“Bag.” She wondered briefly if people in England didn’t use the term *backpack*.

“I didn’t see a bag. You must have dropped it.”

Shrugging, she recalled putting it down before approaching the tree. Stifling a shudder, she remembered the violent grip of the storm tossing her around like a rag doll.

“Continue.” The man was obviously expecting a more detailed answer to his question.

Never one to take orders lightly, she narrowed her eyes. “The thunderstorm caught me by surprise. I was about to return home when lightning struck that tree. I didn’t see you until it split in two. Why were you riding a horse at night in the rain?”

“I ask the questions.”

“Well, that’s not fair. I have as much right as you to ask questions.” She started to rise from the bed, but he halted her.

“You are hardly in a position to refuse to answer.” He reached over and placed a strong hand on her shoulder as if to accentuate the fact that at this moment in time he was clearly stronger than she.

Something was terribly, terribly wrong, but Hayley couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was. She needed answers about what was happening as much as this man, and

continuing this contest of wills wouldn't get either one of them the information they were seeking. "I'll make a deal with you. For every two questions I answer, you have to answer one of mine."

"I do not make deals."

"Then I don't answer questions," she said angrily as she leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes. Damn arrogant, impossible man. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

Chapter Three

Overwhelmed with a burning desire to do something to this infuriating woman, Jack seriously debated between shaking her and kissing her. Her mannerisms and speech marked her as an educated lady, although certainly not a gently bred one. She was intelligent, yet her language and behavior was coarse. To his chagrin, she was certainly undaunted by the fact that she was in serious danger. Even now as she seemed apparently relaxed, he could see the wheels in her brain frantically working—assessing him and her situation. He found himself respecting her courage, despite the fact she was obviously lying.

Walking alone in the woods? The only house within walking distance was Fernwood Grange. A nagging suspicion that something unusual was happening began to take root in his mind. He couldn't quite grasp what was wrong, but he was certain she was deceiving him somehow.

"Since it would appear you are unwilling to talk, perhaps we could find something else to do to pass the time." He leaned closer to her.

Her eyes flew open and he knew she understood his meaning. Closing the distance, he paused, expecting her to protest his forward actions. When she didn't, he placed his mouth on hers. He'd intended to give her a simple, chaste kiss to scare her. However, the moment his lips touched hers his body burst into flame. He raised his hands to her arms and roughly pulled her closer to him.

Her lips remained tight for several moments before he felt a gradual softening. Then, she parted her lips allowing him to delve even deeper into the kiss and her tongue swept against his. His conscience screamed at him, and he broke off the kiss, looking at her flushed face. Her eyes opened slowly, and he saw that while her lips were red and slightly swollen, she looked at him with neither contempt nor embarrassment.

The woman clearly wasn't a stranger to kisses and that thought both thrilled and appalled him. He briefly considered seducing her into answering his questions. In fact, the idea of bedding this unconventional beauty appealed to him a great deal. However, her overly cautious mannerisms left him with an overpowering desire to protect her, even though he knew the only thing she needed protection from was him.

He stood up and walked toward the fire, keeping his back to her and trying to rein in his conflicting emotions where she was involved. Bending down, he put two more logs on the fire. The storm had not abated, but grown. The wind was blowing through the cracks in the walls with alarming strength, and it actually sounded as if a hurricane was battering at the cabin. He hoped the structure was strong enough to sustain the pounding it was taking.

Bringing her here had been a mistake. He should have questioned her at the Grange. The cold wind and pouring rain guaranteed it would be a long, uncomfortable night. Taking a deep breath, he decided there was nothing he could do now, but continue the interrogation. Without turning around, he asked, "Who are you?"

"I wondered when you were going to ask me that. My name is Hayley." No surname, he noticed. Very well, they had all night. At her casual tone, he concluded that perhaps his initial plan of intimidation was not the way to go. Her fearlessness and willing

response to his kiss led him to believe that charm may work better, and he certainly preferred a friendlier course.

He turned back to her with a somewhat forced smile. "I believe that was two answers on your part. You may ask a question."

With a suspicious smile, she acknowledged his concession. "What is your name?"

"Jack," he replied. No last name—two could play that game. "Well, Hayley, it would seem you chose a very bad night to walk out of doors. Do you live around here?"

"No, I'm from America. Guess you can tell from the accent," she said. "I'm here visiting a friend on vacation."

"Friend? And why would this friend allow you roam the countryside on such a treacherous night?" He began to suspect, much to his dismay, the friend to whom she was referring was Alex's wife. She was also an American.

"Oh, Tori's house is only over the hill a little ways from the tree that was struck by lightning, and it wasn't even threatening rain when I set out." A confused look crossed her face. "You know, this may sound weird, but it wasn't raining on my side of the tree. I didn't think of it until now. I didn't see you until lightning struck the tree. When I saw you through the split in the oak, the rain was pouring off your hat, but it wasn't raining on me. How is that possible?"

He thought back to glimpsing her in the storm. The rain was falling so hard he could barely make her out until she approached the tree, but she was right. When she began to cry out in pain, he grabbed her. Shocked by her sudden appearance and violent screaming, it didn't dawn on him until this moment that her clothing had been dry. "I cannot explain that. It's strange. You said your friend Tori lives over the hill? The only home in this area is Fernwood Grange."

"That's right," she said. "My friend Tori Hamilton and her family own it."

"I know the owners of the Grange, and there is no Tori Hamilton there. Why are you lying?"

Her blatantly stupid lie made his anger rise. Julia's disappearance, the argument with his uncle, the perilous trip through the storm and meeting this unusual woman had worn him down. At the end of his patience, he felt the last straw break. The woman was playing him for a fool with her beautiful face and spirited words. He'd had enough of her feminine games—now it was time to get to the truth. At least one thing he attempted to do tonight would be resolved.

Stalking back to the bed, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her roughly to her feet. She struggled to stand, obviously still shaken from the pain she'd suffered in the storm, and only his firm hands held her steady. For the first time, he saw true fear in her eyes. Good, he thought, maybe now she will realize that I am a serious danger to her.

"I am going to ask you again, for the last time, why were you under that tree?" He shook her slightly. "And I want the truth."

"I told you the truth!" she yelled. "Let me go!"

Furious, he refused to listen to her continued lies. He was not to be trifled with. He was a soldier, an officer, a sailor, and a fierce businessman and she was playing with fire whether she realized it or not. Julia's life was at stake, and he didn't have time to play her games. Even at this moment, Julia could be outside in this cold, dangerous weather.

She began to struggle in earnest as he gripped her shoulders more roughly, but he was forced to release her when she unexpectedly kicked his shin, the sharp pain taking

him unaware. She followed that blow with a kick to the gut, and he realized she had the strength of a horse. Taking several painful breaths, he struggled to remain upright. He'd never met such a physically powerful woman. He threw her down on the pallet using his entire body to hold her down. "Stop fighting me. Who are you? Where is Julia?"

Gasping for breath, she ceased her struggles, her face paler than before, and he realized what her exertions were costing her. His flash of fury was immediately replaced with shame. He'd never treated a woman so harshly, yet she had antagonized him to a point where he'd almost allowed his anger to take over.

He released her and moved away slowly, an apology hovering on his lips until she came at him like a wildcat straight from hell. He had no time to protect himself as she hurled herself at him.

He fell back, with her on top of him, hitting his head hard against the dirt floor. Stars flew behind his eyes. Before he could gather his wits, she managed to punch, scratch, kick and slap him everywhere she could, while he attempted to grab her flailing limbs. With Herculean effort he was able to press her back onto the floor. He straddled her kicking legs with his strong thighs and then went to work trying to catch her arms, which were still pummeling him with painful blows. Before he could stop her, she landed a smashing punch on one eye. Grasping both her wrists in one hand, he dragged her arms over her head.

Frustrated and exhausted, he watched as the fight seemed to leave her with the realization she was trapped beneath him. Any gentle feelings he may have had about her had been driven out by the battle she'd just waged. He tightened his grip on her wrists painfully and pressed his weight more fully onto her legs taking a perverse pleasure in her gasp of pain.

With his free hand, he took stock of his injuries. She'd left four long gouges from ear to chin on one side of his face and he had a tender spot on his scalp from the handful of hair she'd pulled out. He tasted blood on his lip and felt a sudden swelling underneath his left eye, which was sure to be black by tomorrow morning. On top of all that, his head was throbbing from hitting the floor so hard and he was still seeing spots.

Turning his attention to her, he realized with fury, and a little relief, that she'd fared much better. Her hair, a matted, sweaty mess, was clinging to her face and he thought he saw the beginning of a bruise on her left cheek. Other than that and her flushed face, she appeared to be the picture of health—which caused the anger to again pump through his veins.

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What made her think she could fight and win against a pirate who was a foot taller, a hundred pounds heavier and pure muscle? Christ, she'd never met such a strong man, and she'd basically broken every rule ever pounded into her head in her self-defense classes. Realizing she wouldn't be able to escape his hold, all the fight left her and she did something she never did—she gave in.

"I'm s-sorry." Her voice struggled with the words as she tried to remember the last time she'd said them. Apologies didn't come easy to her.

She looked into his eyes and for the first time that night, she could see them clearly. They were the most stunning blue she'd ever seen—cerulean blue, her favorite crayon color. What she saw in those beautiful, now gentle eyes comforted her and against her better judgment, she closed her eyes in sheer exhaustion and repeated her words. "I'm

sorry.”

Lifting her, he cradled her as her body shook with fatigue, fear and confusion. Something was so very wrong, but she was too weary to figure it out. With quiet, kind mumblings, he rocked her until the trembling subsided—the motion strangely reminding her of her mother, although she couldn’t recall Marian ever holding her or rocking her so. Eventually the stress of the evening drained out of her, leaving her more tired, more exhausted than if she had run a marathon.

They sat rocking silently until a strong draft blew out the candle behind them. She shivered slightly in the chilly air, and he carefully stood with her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

“Shh,” he said as he pulled two blankets over her. He hesitated briefly, looking down at her, and then he lay down beside her on the small cot. She immediately tensed up.

“No more fighting,” he whispered. “I won’t hurt you. It’s too cold in here and I want to lie beside you to keep you warm. Nothing more, I promise.”

Gently, he lay on his back and pulled her to his side with his arm around her shoulder. She knew she should rebel against this closeness, but she couldn’t find the energy or desire to fight it. Besides, the room was freezing, in spite of the fact they were both fully dressed. Her clothes were still damp, and she was briefly concerned about the possibility of pneumonia. How she wished she had worn a jacket before embarking on the short trip to the tree. However, he was right; she was already beginning to warm up with the addition of his body heat under the thin blankets.

All in all, it had been an odd night—one of the strangest of her life. Her entire body ached and her mind screamed that something bizarre was happening, but for the moment, simply lying in this handsome man’s arms seemed comforting and right. Never in her life had she felt so at ease with a man and, for once, she didn’t fight the feeling. For now—for this moment—she felt safe and she refused to let her fears, her demons take control. Outside the wild storm continued to rage, but exhausted, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Four

Warmth and pleasure like Hayley had never known hummed through her entire body. Feathery light touches and soft hands caressed her back, rubbing her sore muscles up and down, up and down. They were magic hands, soft hands, soothing, calming and kind. She stretched, her eyes still closed, and sighed with delight.

Awake now, she realized the touches were coming from real hands. Jerking upright, she winced—her muscles protesting the quick action. A chuckle from behind her on the bed brought the previous night's events back to her. Peering over her shoulder, she saw the source of those hands. They weren't pirate hands, although they did belong to a black-hearted thug cruel enough to be a pirate, and his obvious amusement at her discomfort sent her hackles up.

He seemed to sense her mood. "Easy, firebrand, I don't think you want a repeat of last evening. At least not until we've both had time to heal." He smiled at her with such unguarded charm she nearly smiled back. In addition, taking notice of his use of the word "we," and the black eye he was sporting, she realized it was likely that he was in more pain than she was. For some reason, the thought gave her a strong sense of satisfaction.

She shivered. "I'm cold."

"Well, I'm not surprised about that." He gently pulled her back under the cocoon of blankets and into his arms. "Even with the fire, this cabin is no better than being outside. I can see your breath. At least, the storm has passed. Dawn broke about an hour ago, and the sun is peeking through the trees. It will warm up soon. If we could get a few things settled between us, I would like to return you to your home."

"Settled?" She was amazed at how relaxed she felt lying in his arms. "Are you sure you don't have me confused with someone else? You ask me a bunch of strange questions, and then get pissed off and call all my answers lies. I've spent the last two summers at Fernwood Grange with my friend Tori Hamilton, yet you say she doesn't live there. This cabin looks like something out of the stone ages—so do you for that matter—and you look at me most of the time like I have two heads."

"Two fiery redheads? No, thank you. One of them is frightening enough. I don't know what it is about you, but you are unlike any woman I have ever met."

"How so?" Still drowsy, she was enjoying their lighthearted banter, until that nagging little thing called reality intruded.

He could be a criminal, for God's sake. A pervert, a thief, a kidnapper. Get up and out of here.

With that uncomfortable idea, she attempted to rise again, but he tightened his grip on her shoulders. "No, don't," he said firmly. "I said I wouldn't hurt you and I meant it. Now lay still—it's too cold to rise yet. Besides every muscle in my body aches thanks to that boxing contest last night. Just lay still for a little while longer. We should try to sleep more. We were up rather late."

Once again, she allowed his gentle voice and reassuring words make her feel secure about her safety and contentedly warm. The cabin truly was bitter cold and she had no wish to brave the elements at the moment. She closed her eyes and snuggled closer soaking up the amazing amount of heat radiating from his body and inhaling his scent,

which was masculine—woody—and surprisingly nice.

She asked again, lazily this time, “How am I different from other women you know?”

“Ah, yes.” His voice was heavy with sleep. “Let’s see, where to begin? It is quite simple really. If not for these telltale curves,” he rubbed his hand over her hips seductively, “I would say you’re more like a man than a woman.”

She lunged out of his arms as his words and her recollections of his actions the previous evening fueled her fury. “Why? Because I refuse to tremble in fear at your pathetic attempts of intimidation? You think as a woman I should cower at your mere presence and succumb to your bullying charms?”

Her anger continued to build. “Well, I have news for you, buddy. I have very little respect for men who feel like they have to use physical strength to scare someone weaker than them. Men like you think they can overpower women with sheer aggression, but I think it’s only fair to warn you that you won’t get that kind of response from me. You can expect a fight every step of the way if you try.”

At this, she left the bed, cursing the cold and quickly crossing her arms firmly across her chest for warmth.

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Jack noted the passion behind her words and felt certain she was speaking from more experience than their battle the previous evening. He couldn’t help but wonder who had hurt her. He even felt sorry for his actions and flippant comment until her next smug words.

“Besides you’re just mad because if you take a look in a mirror, Black Jack, you’ll see that I kicked your ass.”

Rising on his elbow, he spoke through gritted teeth. “Adding offensive language to your list of charms does not endear you to me, and if I look rough, it is because I was too much of a gentleman to use my *brute strength* against a woman last night.”

Despite his annoyance, he reached out without thinking and tried to grab her hand as she paced beside the bed. Her impassioned speech had put the color back in her cheeks, and he felt the now familiar tightening in his loins that she seemed to inspire. He’d thought her attractive last night, but this morning, all tousled and angry, she was absolutely lovely. He wanted her warm body back in the bed, more than was honorable, more than he cared to admit. Although they’d only kissed once and slept together, huddled under the blankets for warmth, he’d certainly done more than enough to compromise her, and he knew that thought should be more unsettling to him than it was. Fact was he couldn’t seem to summon any remorse about his behavior.

She backed away from him and avoided his touch. Irritated at her withdrawal and his body’s uncontrollable response to her, he lied. “Believe me, you have nothing to fear from me. I like my women soft and willing. That was a hell of a fight you put up last night, and while I must admit I admire the effort you expended to protect your *virtue*, you didn’t have to try so hard, firebrand. It was never in danger.”

She flinched at his sarcastic use of the word *virtue*, and he was sure he left no doubt in her mind that he considered her to be less than virtuous.

His blatant insult seemed to infuriate her even more as she launched into a new tirade. “You insulting, arrogant, smug son of a bitch,” she yelled. “How dare you insult me for defending myself? If your present charms are any indication of your typical

behavior, I'd be surprised to discover that you weren't a virgin."

He was shocked by her crude language and insult to his reputation. "Well, if you weren't such a shrew, I'd give you a demonstration of my charms that would leave you in no doubt of my experience."

"Touch me again and I'll blacken the other eye," she threatened as she stormed toward the cabin door.

She'd just reached for the knob when he caught up to her and caged her in with his arms while holding the door closed. Spinning angrily, she was about to utter another string of insults. However, her scathing words never made it past her lips as he pressed his mouth hard against hers. Struggling against him, her threat had only served to incite him as he roughly grabbed her shoulders. He knew his mouth was cruel and relentless on hers, but once again he was lost to the taste and smell and feel of her. His tongue forced her lips apart and he invaded her mouth.

She seemed to realize her struggles were useless against his strength as he attempted to give her a lesson in dominance and control. She stood still against his assault. However, she also refused to allow herself to be swept away as she was last night, and he grew frustrated and angry as she held herself aloof, apart from the kiss.

He cursed himself for a fool and knew power wasn't going to scale the walls she'd built around herself. Last night, she'd responded to his kiss, and he wanted that response again.

Changing tactics, he softened the kiss, but refused to release her. His hands moved from her shoulders to her face, touching her with soft, butterfly caresses. Gasping, she tried to stop him and his mind briefly registered the strangeness of her responses. She stood still, braced and resigned to his hard kisses, while his kindness unsettled and upset her.

"Shh, I won't hurt you." He spoke the words against her lips. Eventually, the gentle touches and soft kisses slowly broke her resolve, and she raised her hands to his chest.

He was thrilled by the touch of her hands, even though they only rested unmoving on his chest, and he slowed his kisses even more. He barely moved as his lips rubbed lightly against hers, his tongue running softly along her lips and teeth, teasing hers to come out to play. Neither of them moved, and time stood still as they explored each other's mouths with the simplest and sweetest of kisses.

Their tongues danced together as he reached down and began to unbutton her shirt. His actions were so slow and deliberate; he knew she didn't realize what he had done until she felt his firm hands touch her breasts. All the breath left her body as his hands caressed her.

"No." She started to shake slightly, whether with cold, excitement, or fear, he wasn't sure. Then, with more power, she shoved his hands away. "No!"

With a shudder he pulled away, his confusion about her deepening. She responded to his kisses like a wanton, then pushed him away as if the hounds from hell were chasing her. Despite his previous thoughts on the matter, he suspected this woman truly did have her virtue to protect.

The idea that she could still be a virgin left him feeling as if someone had suddenly dumped a bucket of cold water over his head. Once again, he had let his body control him. Groaning, disgusted with himself, he stepped back. Her big brown eyes looked at him fearfully, as though expecting him to continue his assault. Her lovely lips were puffy

from the brutality of his first kiss. Even more distracting, he could see the tops of her firm, white breasts peeking out from the strange, small corset that left her waist and stomach completely bare.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "I'm afraid you've proven my previous statement false. You do tempt my primal instincts and to an alarming degree." He had to force his gaze to remain on the fire as she struggled to button her shirt with trembling fingers.

"It would be better if you would simply tell me who is involved in the smuggling ring and what part you play. The longer you and I remain in this cabin alone, the less likely I'll be able to control my brutish impulses." For the moment, he had regained control of his body, but the threat was valid nonetheless.

She looked at him with confusion. "Smuggling?"

"Yes, I am afraid your tale of a walk at night in a storm doesn't hold much weight with me."

Her stunned face ignited his fears that perhaps he truly did have her confused with someone else. And now he had compromised her far beyond the limits of society's strictures regarding appropriate behavior between unwed men and women.

"*You found me.* You brought me here. You're the one holding me here against my will. Shit. I should call the cops and have them slap you with assault and kidnapping charges." She gasped, and he sensed her own words had triggered some shocking thought. He watched in confusion as her expression turned to absolute outrage. Suddenly, she flung herself at him with an inexplicable, intense anger. "You took her!"

One night in Hayley's presence had taught him to be on his guard. The second she lunged for him, he was ready. Using her momentum and his quick response, he dodged her blows and forced her to the floor. Grimacing, he found himself in nearly the exact same position from the night before. Once again he was holding her down, straddling her hips while his hands held her wrists above head. Damn her. Why didn't she realize that strength-wise she was no match for him?

"And just who is it that I am supposed to have taken?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Erin," she whispered with a trembling voice. "Erin Delancy."

Shocked by her mention of the name Erin, he immediately released his hold on her and stood up. "You know Erin?"

"Of course, I do." She rose furiously, as if his question proved that he too knew Erin. "Why didn't it occur to me before? You took her, just like you took me. You stole her away from us—you hateful man!" She began to hit him in the chest. "How could you? How could you?"

A stunned Jack felt her blows, though numbly. His mind was reeling. Erin kidnapped? Erin Delancy was the wife of his best friend, Alex, and she never gave any indication that she was anything but ecstatically happy with her life. Hayley must be mistaken. He grabbed her hands. "Stop!" She struggled to release herself from his grip, and when she failed to break free, she simply fell silent.

"Hayley, I didn't kidnap your friend. I do know Erin Delancy, well actually, she's Erin McCormick now. She's the wife of my friend, and I can assure you I would never kidnap or hold her against her will."

At her disbelieving huff, he continued, "You were somewhere you should not have been last night. I need to know why you were there. No proper lady walks alone at night

without an escort, dressed as a man, without a reason. Were you meeting someone? Are you involved with smugglers?" Damnation. He'd made a terrible mistake. The more time he spent with her, the more he was convinced that she was not involved in any illegal activities.

However, her accusations concerned him. Had Erin been kidnapped by Alex? A cold chill came over him as he considered the possibility. At the time Erin appeared, Alex was desperate to find a bride on very short notice in order to keep his inheritance. Shaking his head, he dismissed the thought. Alex was not a kidnapper, and he and Erin were one of the few couples he'd ever met who were truly a love match.

"I'm not a smuggler, and I'm a grownup, you idiot. I can walk alone at night whenever the hell I feel like it." Her hands shook as she brushed red curls out of her face. "Where is Erin?"

"Last time I saw her was at Fernwood Grange," he answered quietly.

"When was that?" Her eyes glared with accusation.

"Six months ago."

"Now who's lying?" she hissed. "If Erin was at the Grange, someone would have seen her. She would have called us."

Again, he attempted to make some sense of her words. Erin had lived at the Grange for the past year. He was certain she was there right now. Again, he had doubts about Hayley's veracity. Hell, he was starting to worry about her sanity. Was she attempting to confuse him with this farfetched tale, or were her words genuine? Looking at her sad eyes and deeply concerned face, he could not find her guilty of such a strange subterfuge.

Either this lady was the world's greatest actress, or he'd made a mistake of mammoth proportions. Kidnapping a virtuous young woman, a friend to the marchioness, no less, and holding her hostage overnight in a secluded cabin without the benefit of a chaperone was a serious offense and one he doubted Alex would take lightly.

"Hayley, how do you know Erin?"

She gave him a cold, malicious look. "She's my best friend. I've known her since we were ten. She disappeared a year ago, and she was last seen under the same tree where you grabbed me. We searched for her for weeks. The police told us she had probably met with foul play and been killed. As the weeks passed, they told us the chances of her returning home alive were slim. It was my fault because I left her alone under that tree. I should have stayed with her."

He could hear the pain in her rambling speech, and he wondered if she would have revealed so much if she hadn't been so tired and overwrought. It was obvious she blamed herself for Erin's disappearance, and she had lived the last year of her life with the weight of her friend's supposed death on her conscience. He didn't doubt the sincerity of her reply although some of her words were unfamiliar to him. Cops? Police? Foul play?

"I'll take you to her," he said suddenly. Something was wrong, and he had the feeling only Alex and Erin could explain it. Nothing this woman said was making sense.

"You will?"

"Yes, right now. We'll go right now." Right or wrong, all he wanted was answers.

"If you've hurt her, if you've done anything to her, I will kill you."

He had no doubt her threat was genuine. What he'd said earlier was true; he had never met a woman like this in his life. She was brave, beautiful and loyal to her friends. He'd tried charm, intimidation and even violence to break her fighting spirit, but she

hadn't given in.

Then it dawned on him, she'd never cried. Any other woman would have been reduced to tears no less than a dozen times in the last several hours, and yet she'd refused to shed a single one. He couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her in her life that made her fight so hard?

"I'll get the horse."

Chapter Five

Nervously, Hayley tidied the room while Jack went to saddle his horse—a horse, for God’s sake. Where was his car? For the thousandth time, she considered running away from this cabin as fast as her feet would carry her and escaping the entire, bizarre scenario. The niggling in the back of her brain had grown to migraine proportions, and she didn’t really like the ideas that were sprouting there. She was actually beginning to think that she had stepped into some parallel universe or had been abducted by aliens who’d transported her to their mother ship with a lightning strike.

Oh yeah, Hayley. Real good theories. Sarcasm laced the words in her mind.

She glanced toward the door and decided against running. For the first time in a year, she felt a glimmer of hope that she would find Erin alive and well and decided any risk was worth discovering the truth. She considered the wisdom in going anywhere with Jack. Everything about him from his clothing to his style of speaking was a bit off. Hell, even the cabin was bizarre—no running water, electricity, bathroom. He’d actually left her alone earlier with a damn chamber pot. Her head may be telling her to run, but her instincts continued to insist that he wouldn’t harm her.

When he returned with the horse, she was waiting at the front door, arms tightly crossed. His strong hands grasped her elbows and lifted her into the saddle in front of him with ease. She gasped at his sheer brute strength.

With a powerful arm locked around her waist, he gripped the reins and the huge horse took them toward Fernwood Grange at a slow, but steady pace. She grasped the saddle horn tightly. She’d never ridden a horse before, and it was more frightening than she would have imagined. She had no idea how high off the ground she would be.

“Are you well?” he asked, no doubt sensing her fear.

“Yep, just fine. I’ve never ridden a horse before.”

She sensed she’d surprised him with her words. “Really?” he asked.

“Not a lot of riding trails in the inner city,” she joked, but he didn’t laugh. They continued on in silence.

Apprehensive about the strange circumstances of the night, she soon forgot about the horse and wondered if she could trust Jack to take her to Erin. Regardless of the potential danger, she had to take this chance if it meant discovering what had happened to her best friend. The last year without Erin had been pure hell. She’d never stopped looking for Erin’s face in crowds; never stopped blaming herself for her disappearance.

The nightmare ends now. It all ends now.

At the outskirts of the woods, Jack stirred. “What the hell?”

Pulled from her thoughts, she glanced up and saw the old oak tree where they had encountered each other the previous evening. It was whole again. It looked as it always had, and there was no evidence of the deep tear the lightning had rent the night before.

Hayley struggled to grasp what she was seeing. “I don’t understand. The lightning—”

He pulled back on the reins, and the horse came to a stop a few feet from the lowest branches. With surprising grace for a large man, he dismounted. “Stay here.” He handed her the reins. She grasped them firmly in her hands as he walked away from her and

toward the tree.

Spellbound, she watched as he circled the entire perimeter of the tree. He ran his hands around the trunk, looking at the bark very closely. After several minutes of close inspection, he returned to the horse. Without taking the reins, and without much conviction, he looked up at her. "It must have been another tree."

She shook her head. "No, this is the tree. I know it is. I don't understand. W-what's going on, Jack?" Her hands began to shake, the reins falling loose.

Without responding, he grasped them quickly and pulled himself back up into the saddle. Instead of starting out again, he wrapped both arms around her waist and lightly rested his chin on shoulder. His breath tickled her ear as he whispered to her. "We'll figure this out. It will be fine." She relaxed in his embrace before remembering herself. She stiffened at his touch.

He took Erin. He took Erin. She repeated the mantra in her mind.

Sighing heavily, he released her, jerked the reins and continued the short journey toward the Grange. She couldn't understand what made her act so familiar with him. Typically, she was distrustful and suspicious of strange men, an occupational hazard born from working in a women's abuse shelter.

When they arrived at Fernwood Grange, a young groom ran out to greet them. He took the reins and held Lancelot steady as Jack dismounted before turning to reach up and lift her down with his strong hands upon her waist.

As they approached the front steps, she paused, looking up at the grand house. While the structure and frame were certainly the same, the house was actually quite different from the one she had left the previous evening. The stone walls were a newer, light gray, the windows large with many panes, and the shutters a much older style—made of wood and painted white.

The Grange she knew sported newer, smaller, more economically sound windows with beautiful, freshly painted green shutters. The stones were darker and weather-beaten. In fact, there was an entire addition—a three-car garage—missing and the paved driveway was now a smaller, graveled path.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's different," she said. "Oh crap. This is all wrong. I really am in a parallel universe."

"I beg your pardon?" Jack asked at her bewildered rambling.

"Nothing," she said quickly. Squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath, she resumed her journey toward the front door uncertain what she would find behind it. Climbing the wide porch steps, she stumbled slightly as she took in the rough, unadorned planks that led to the front door. Tori's mother employed a full-time gardener who had installed ornate flower boxes on both sides of the steps, and creating a grand entrance to the home. The boxes had been filled with lovely summer flowers in shades of red, orange, and yellow yesterday. There were no flowers now.

Jack watched her briefly, remaining close by her side. He seemed to sense her confusion and no doubt suspected she might bolt before they made it to the front door. She felt a bit like laughing at his astute observation as getting the hell out of Dodge was definitely her primary thought at the moment. Problem was she didn't know where to run to. Lightly resting her hand on his arm, he gave her a tight smile. "Shall we go in?"

Giles, the ever-present, excruciatingly diligent butler, had the front door open before Jack could knock.

"A butler?" she murmured.

Jack was certain only he had heard her question, but he had more pressing matters on his mind. Glancing behind the butler, he felt mildly reassured that the Grange was as calm and peaceful as ever. No one appeared dismayed over the disappearance of Erin or her visiting friend. In fact, Giles appeared not to recognize Hayley. Obviously, she had not been at the Grange yesterday as she'd said, and the thought of her carrying her blatant lie so far infuriated him.

"Giles." His hold on her arm tightened. "Could you please inform the lord and lady of the house that we wish to speak to them? Immediately."

Giles paused briefly at the uncharacteristic fury in his tone, and the old man's eyebrows rose as he took in the unkempt woman beside him. He could see the butler studying her disheveled appearance and masculine clothing, as well as his own battered face, before gesturing toward the dining room. "Lord and Lady Dorset are breaking their fast, sir. If you and your lady friend would be so kind as to wait in the morning room, I will inform them of your arrival. We were not expecting you until this afternoon, Captain Campbell."

Expelling the breath he didn't realize he had been holding, he grasped her hand and pulled her toward the dining room. Erin had not been kidnapped, Hayley had not been here yesterday and he was about to prove it.

"Breakfast? Wonderful," he said, brushing by Giles. "We are starving."

Pausing briefly at the closed dining room door, Jack struggled to decide if there was time to come up with an acceptable excuse for kidnapping Erin's friend and holding her against her will, just in case Hayley was telling the truth. Grimacing, he remembered the scratches on his face and the black eye. Looking over at a wide-eyed, perplexed Hayley, he could clearly see the bruise on her cheek, darker than the night before.

One glance over his shoulder at Giles convinced him that even if they retreated from the house now, the butler would announce his visit and battered state just the same. *No other recourse*, he thought, as he pushed the door open. The McCormicks looked up with surprise as they entered the room.

Crash!

Glass shattered across the floor as Lady Erin McCormick, Marchioness of Dorset, dropped her teacup. Alex stood quickly, alarmed at the look on his wife's face, but Erin's eyes never strayed Hayley's face.

"Happy Birthday, Erin," Hayley said, her voice cracking on the words.

"Hayley?" Erin stood slowly, visibly shaken. At her mention of the name, Alex turned his head sharply toward the red haired woman standing beside him.

"Hayley?" Alex repeated. "Your Hayley?"

The silence in the room was broken as, with matching screams of delight, Erin and Hayley ran across the room, straight into each other's arms. Hugging and laughing, neither woman seemed capable of speech, the sheer force of their embrace the only thing keeping them upright.

Alex looked questioningly at him, but Erin's obvious delight at seeing her friend made his blood run cold. Had Alex kidnapped Erin? Hayley said Erin had been missing for a year and from the looks of this reunion, it had obviously been a long time since the

two women had seen each other.

He thought back to the previous year when Alex needed to find a bride—fast. Erin appeared out of nowhere and the two had wed only a couple of weeks later. Had Alex somehow coerced Erin into the marriage? No matter how he tried, he could not reconcile his mind to the fact that they were anything less than completely in love. Nothing Hayley said made any sense. How could she claim to have been staying at the Grange and not see Erin?

Finally, the women separated, both speaking at the same time in fast, excited voices.

“We thought you were dead,” Hayley said.

“I couldn’t get back to you,” Erin replied.

“Tori will be thrilled.”

“Is Tori here too? I’ve missed you both so much,” Erin replied, apparently looking for this Tori chit.

“I don’t know where she is right now.” Hayley glanced around the room as well, her gaze uneasy.

“How is she?” Erin asked, tears in her eyes.

“Tori? The same. Romance-crazy librarian.”

“The tree—was it the tree?” Erin grasped Hayley’s hands in hers.

“Lightning struck it. Did you see anything?”

“Is it still broken, split?” Erin asked. “Was Tori with you when it opened?”

“No—to both questions. How did you know about that?”

Startled by Erin’s mention of the tree, Jack began to ask his own question, but Alex interrupted the women’s reunion. “Erin.”

The marchioness, still smiling, looked at her husband. “Oh, Alex. I’m sorry. Forgot about you.” Only she and Alex laughed as Hayley turned toward the handsome man standing next to her best friend with a scowl.

Jack realized that as far as this fiery redhead was concerned standing before her was Erin’s kidnapper, and he watched as her back stiffened. She looked as if she may do serious damage to his friend until Erin went to him and put her arm through his. Erin looked happy and in love, just as she always did with Alex, and he watched Hayley’s mind attempt to process that fact.

She glanced around the room. “This really is Fernwood Grange, but it’s not the same.” Then, she looked at Erin more closely. “Dear God Erin, what are you wearing?”

Jack watched as Erin blushed. He thought she looked quite normal in a high neck dress with long sleeves. Erin was taller than most women he knew, and while her hair was pinned up today, it wasn’t unusual for the marchioness to wear her long, black hair down.

“You look like someone from an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* in that get-up. What gives with all the old-fashioned outfits?” Hayley gestured to him and Alex.

Looking down at her simple, long morning dress, Erin stumbled slightly. “I-I can explain.”

“We can explain.” Alex grasped Erin’s hand in his.

Jack crossed the room to stand next to Hayley. Glancing at her, he saw the tension in her lovely chin and the anger in her dark eyes. Obviously, she still suspected his friend of foul play.

“Alex,” Jack roared, feeling his own frustration breaking free. “What the hell is

going on here?" The McCormick's looked at each other uncomfortably.

Taking a deep breath, Erin looked from Hayley to him. "You don't know?"

"Parallel universe? Aliens?" Hayley asked with an uncomfortable laugh, repeating one of the same odd phrases she'd used outside.

Jack struggled to control his growing anger. However, before he could speak, Hayley gestured at the room. "This is Fernwood Grange, isn't it? But it looks so strange."

"The tree," Alex said. "It is ... well ... I suppose you could say—" He paused and then mumbled something incoherent that sounded a bit like "Ah hell."

"Alex," Erin admonished lightly. "Hayley, the tree is a doorway."

Hayley continued to stare at Erin. "A doorway?"

"A magical doorway."

At Erin's words, Jack let out a hard, harsh laugh.

Erin glanced at him sharply. "It's true. It is. Hayley, what year is it?"

Jack looked at Erin in utter bewilderment. "What kind of question is that?" he asked.

His words were overshadowed by Hayley's answer. "Two thousand eight."

"What did you say?" he shouted, turning to Hayley.

"You know, you don't have to yell all the time. We're standing right here and can hear you perfectly well." At Hayley's admonition, Alex chuckled lightly.

Jack glared at his friend before pinning her with his stare again. "Hayley, my little firebrand, what year did you say it was?"

She offered him a cold, forced smile as she spoke through gritted teeth. "I said two thousand eight, you great big ass."

Stunned, he looked at her as if she were insane and then turned his attention to the McCormick's, who were holding hands and looking grim.

"What the hell is going on here? She's out of her mind!" he roared.

"I'm out of my mind?"

"Jack, calm down," Erin crossed over to him. "Hayley isn't crazy. She's perfectly sane. Alex and I can explain. At least, we can explain as much as we know."

Alex stepped forward. "Perhaps we should retire to the library. We would be more comfortable there." Without waiting for a response, he led the way to the hall with his arm around Erin. Still thunderstruck, Jack looked at Hayley and then gestured toward the door.

With a haughty tilt of her head, Hayley walked passed him. "You are the only person in this room whose sanity is in question."

Jack stood in the empty dining room and tried to will himself awake. There was absolutely no way Hayley could be from the future. No way Alex and Erin could believe and accept that fact. Things like time travel simply didn't happen. Did they?

He sighed heavily and rubbed his aching head.

I should have stayed on the ship, he thought again as he followed the others down the hallway.

Chapter Six

The library was a comfortable room clearly decorated to both the lord's and lady's tastes. There were two large picture windows on the north and west side of the house; one of which displayed a beautiful rose garden, the other the front drive of the house. In front of the north window was an ornate grand piano, while a large oak desk stood before the west window. Hayley could imagine Erin playing the piano, while her handsome husband worked behind that lovely desk. To her relief, she could see Erin's beloved, battered guitar case propped up in a corner and was strangely pleased by the notion that Erin had not suffered its loss. Erin's guitar, a gift from her beloved father, was an extension of herself, and Hayley couldn't imagine her friend without it.

A cozy fire was burning in the room's large fireplace due to the chill left behind by the previous night's storm. Grateful for the sudden warmth, Hayley sat on a chaise beside it. Alex chose a comfortable chair across from her. She saw Erin heading for the spot beside her on the chaise, but Jack, who was closer, quickly came and sat next to her. Hayley was silently amused at his sudden change from intimidator to defender. For better or worse, it would appear she and Jack were now linked by whatever bizarre force had plucked her from her home, her time.

Erin, ever cool, walked casually to the chair next to Alex's as if it was what she'd intended all along. Still a bit miffed at Jack's earlier insult, Hayley pointedly ignored his closeness.

"Tea or coffee?" Erin asked when they were all settled.

"Brandy would be nice," Jack muttered.

"Jack," Erin said with a soft smile. "It's still morning."

"I don't want anything." Hayley had the distinct feeling she was skating on thin ice and everyone around her understood exactly how thin, but her. "Erin, why did you want to know what year it is?"

"Hayley, clearly you find it strange to discover me here in Tori's house. I can see that much in your eyes. I've been here the whole year and yet neither of you have seen me, nor have I seen you."

"I've been back in this house for two days with Tori and we stayed at the Grange through late August last year hoping for some word of you. You weren't here. Rather, you weren't there. It's as simple as that."

"Nothing is that simple, I'm afraid," added Alex.

Hayley began to share Jack's anger. "If nothing is that simple, then why don't you explain it? Please tell to me how you managed to kidnap my best friend, suck her into this black hole in time and hide her for a year. While you're at it, why don't you explain why the hell I'm here too?" Her hands were shaking. Jack reached over to grab one, but she quickly pulled it out of his grasp.

"No!" Hayley yelled at him. "You knew she was here. You're a part of this."

"No. He's not." Erin's voice was raised and betrayed her own dismay at the situation. "Enough, Hayley. Enough. Jack doesn't know anymore about this than you do. Please, let me explain."

Puzzled, she looked at Erin. "Erin, what have they done to you? Why are you

dressed like that?” She pointed to the yellow dress Erin was wearing. Seeing her friend in the old-fashioned dress unnerved her more than the strange changes in the house. Erin’s love of tatty jeans was one of the few things she could rely on, and the fact that Erin seemed to accept this fate so easily rocked her to the core.

Erin smiled, the same kind smile she always wore, and walked toward her. Kneeling before her, she took both of her hands in her grasp. “What I am going to say will sound strange, but you and Jack may be the only two people who will believe me because you’ve seen it, even if you didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Seen what?”

“Time travel. The tree,” Erin said quietly. “It is magical. When it splits open, it transports whoever walks through it from our time,” Erin said looking at her, “to theirs.” At this, Erin glanced at Jack and then Alex. “You can’t tell me neither one of you haven’t noticed some glaring differences in each other. Didn’t each of you think the other dressed strangely? Spoke strangely? Hayley, it’s not two thousand eight. It’s eighteen eighteen. Same bat place, wrong bat time.” Erin laughed at her misquote from the old Batman show.

Jack looked as if he was going to argue, but Alex quickly interjected. “It’s true, Jack. Think back to last year when I brought Erin to the house party. I found her beneath the tree. I asked Lord Sipe to help me create a background, an identity for her so that we could explain her presence here.”

“He claimed she was his great-niece from America, and that he was trying to launch her into English society,” Jack said. “You never said anything about time travel.”

“Time travel? Would you have believed that?” Erin asked with a laugh.

“Face it, Jack, if I had come to you and said Erin is from the future, what would you have said?”

“I’d have said you were headed for Bedlam.” Jack managed to smile, albeit uneasily, at his friend.

“Alex found me. He saw me come through the tree. He offered to help me return, while keeping me safe in this time.”

“But you never returned.” Jack glanced back at Hayley, and she sensed he was unnerved by her utter silence in the face of such disturbing news. Hell, she was disturbed. She wondered briefly if she was going into shock. She suddenly felt very, very cold. She’d suspected what Erin was going to say, but hearing it put into words rattled her more than she cared to admit.

“That’s where it gets a bit more complicated,” Alex began.

“I couldn’t figure out how to return.” Erin paused for a long time, although Hayley could tell she had more to say. Finally, Erin hastily added, “and then when I learned how, I no longer wanted to. The thing is, Hayley,” she began again, and Hayley could see her friend measuring her words, “you’re stuck here. For a year.”

At this, the dam burst open. “What?” she asked incredulously; hysterical laughter breaking out and taking over her body. The preposterousness of the situation was simply too strange, too unreal, too funny to stifle the uncontrollable giggles.

“Hayley?” Erin was confused by her unexpected response. “Did you hear what I said? The tree only opens one day a year.”

“Erin,” Alex began, but Erin cut him off with a hard glance.

“If you knew that—” Hayley said, stopping to take a deep breath while struggling to

stifle the pounding of her heart. Her body was beginning to go numb. “Erin, why weren’t you at the tree when I came through? Why weren’t you there? We could both be home right now.”

“I told you. I didn’t want to go back,” Erin answered simply.

“Why?” she asked. “Why would you stay here?”

At this question, Alex groaned lightly. “For me.”

“You?” she asked, sudden understanding dawning.

At this, Jack burst out laughing. “She gave up her whole life just to stay with you. You always were a lucky son of a—”

“I don’t think this is funny,” Hayley added, cutting off Jack’s comment. “It’s not you who’s been ripped from your home, your friends and your job.”

Seemingly humbled by the chastisement, Jack stopped laughing, his eyes clouded with such true concern that she wondered what he saw in her face. She hoped it wasn’t the very real fear that was slowly threatening to drown her. Typically she was able to shield her emotions easily, but this time she couldn’t seem to regain control of her panic. *Yep, she thought. I’m definitely going into shock.*

“I apologize,” he said seriously. “You are correct. This is not the time for jests.”

Erin, apparently seeing the fear as well, crossed the room to the fireplace and gazed into it as if unsure what to do next.

Alex followed her. “Erin,” he repeated softly.

After several long moments, she spoke again. “I’ve created a life here, Hayley. One that I want to keep.” Erin glanced at Alex and the love Hayley saw reflected in her gaze stole her breath. “I don’t want to return.”

Stunned, Hayley looked at the room where they were sitting. Only two nights ago, she’d sat in a chair by this fireplace wondering for the millionth time in a year where Erin was, and now Erin was here telling her that she’d been sitting—happily—in the same room almost two centuries in the past.

This was insanity. She felt as though she were free falling from an airplane without a parachute. What Erin said made no sense, even though she knew without a doubt that she was in Fernwood Grange. The lack of electricity and amenities was obvious as she glanced around, and if everything Erin said was true, the direness of her situation began to sink in.

“Are you saying I’m trapped here?”

After a nervous glance from Erin, Alex looked at his wife, waiting for her to speak. When she remained silent, he answered her question. “Hayley, you are safe and welcome to stay as long as you choose. The tree has opened twice now that we know of and perhaps—”

“No, there is no ‘perhaps,’” Erin interrupted. “Next year, on this day, if you want to go home, it will open again. A year isn’t so terribly long.”

“A year,” Hayley repeated in disbelief, rising from the chaise. “What about my job? My apartment? Oh my God, what about Tori? She’ll be devastated. She can’t lose us both.”

Hayley began pacing the length of the room. Halting by the window and breathing rapidly, she pressed her forehead to the glass in an attempt to cool herself off. “I should have stepped back through last night, when it was still open. I didn’t realize I was making such a momentous leap. We just passed by there, and the tree is most definitely whole

again.”

At her words, Alex glanced sharply at Jack. “Last night? When did you find her?”

“Shortly before midnight,” Jack replied. Then he seemed to realize Alex expected a more thorough explanation. “It was in the midst of the storm. We took shelter in the hunting cabin.”

Confused, Erin said quickly, “But the Grange is just as close and a good bit warmer. Why would you go to the cabin?”

Alex scowled at Jack’s nonchalant shrug. “Rather unusual to travel at night in a storm, wouldn’t you say, Jack? We were not expecting you until this afternoon.”

“Alex, we can discuss this later.” Jack gestured to Hayley, and she knew she must look a wreck when all conversation halted.

Erin crossed the room and put her arms around her shoulders. “I know it seems impossible, but perhaps you could treat this like an adventure. This time is so fascinating. Think about it, Hayley. It’s an amazing opportunity we’ve been given. And besides, I’m sorry to be selfish, but I’m so happy you’re here. I’ve missed you so much.” Erin laughed lightly. “I don’t think I realized how much until I saw you. It’s like finding a part of myself I had forgotten existed. You will get back, but until then, I intend to show you the time of your life.”

“Oh, Erin. I’m the one who’s sorry. Seeing you again is like a dream. I’ve been so worried about you. Don’t mind me. I’ll be fine. You’ve just sort of shocked the hell out of me. Let’s just chalk it up to exhaustion. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Again, her comment caused Alex to look sharply at Jack.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to speak with Hayley alone for a moment.” Jack came to stand beside her and again she was overwhelmed with the comfort this stranger provided.

Alex hesitated as he looked at Jack.

“Dammit, Alex. I managed to get her here safely. She’s in no danger with me, and I have no doubt you will be stationed right outside the door.”

Taking in Jack’s bruised and scratched face, Alex broke into a smug smile. “From the look of you, it is not *her* safety that concerns me. You are correct though, I will be right outside. Yell if you need any help.” His last comment was directed at Jack. With a devilish grin, he and Erin walked out, gently closing the door behind them.

*

Out in the hallway, Erin looked at her handsome husband as he shook his head lightly and then laughed aloud.

“There is nothing funny about this,” Erin said. “Her life has just been turned upside down.”

Alex reached for his wife’s hand. “Oh, no,” he said. “Don’t throw that in my lap. You know someone who could possibly send that girl home right now, and you didn’t tell her. I expect you have a good reason?”

“I do,” Erin answered.

“Good, I look forward to hearing your reasoning. But that’s not why I am laughing. I meant what I said in there. Hayley is perfectly safe. Once she becomes accustomed to this time, she may well enjoy it. I know that she was as happy to see you as you were to see her. I don’t know when I’ve seen you look so pleased.”

Erin leaned in and lightly kissed her husband. “Yes, I am thrilled, and I have several

reasons for not telling Hayley the whole truth about how the magic of the tree works. First of all, Lady Linley and I aren't sure how to send her home. We have suspicions, but I would hate for Hayley to get her hopes up only to have them dashed. Besides, having her here will be wonderful, even if it is only for a short time. I've always worried about what the June girls must be going through, not knowing where I was. It would have killed me to lose one of them. I don't think the past year has been easy for her. I can see it in her eyes. I have a lot to make up to her, and I can't do that if she returns right away."

"You were not to blame for your disappearance."

"I know, but I feel guilty just the same. I've been living a dream here, while she's had months of worry and pain. I want time to make things better for her."

"Are those the only reasons you're keeping her here?"

"No, I have another reason," Erin said mysteriously. "What exactly is it that you found humorous just now?"

"Ah," said Alex. "Well, that would be Jack. Poor lad's in over his head."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what happened last night, but I intend to find out. As it stands now, Hayley may not need our assistance to keep her safe. It would seem that friend of yours has done the impossible and won the hardened heart of Jack Campbell. I could see it in his eyes. He is falling fast." Alex started to laugh again as Erin looked toward the library door pensively.

"Yes." She considered Hayley's response to Captain Campbell. "I thought so too."

* * * *

Hayley left her station by the window and walked closer to the fire. Jack suspected she would step into the flames if it would bring heat back to her shocked body. He walked across the room to her and reached out a hand to her shoulder.

"No." She shrank away his touch.

"Hayley, you've suffered a terrible shock. No one expects you to go through this alone. Alex and Erin are good friends, and you will be perfectly safe at the Grange. I would like to help you as well." Looking at her face, full of tension, he wondered if she ever let anyone take care of her.

"I'm fine," she said tersely. "I just need some time to sort this out by myself."

"That's the last thing you need."

"Do you really believe what they said? About me being from the future?" she asked. "It's pretty far-fetched. How can you believe such a thing?"

"I don't know." He shook his head, surprised by his conviction that his friend's story was true. "I know it seems amazing, but I trust Alex implicitly. Besides, it certainly explains some discrepancies in Erin's appearance here last year. It also explains why you are so unique." The last he said with as charming a smile as he could muster. He had some serious making up to do after last night's disaster of an introduction. Hell, he'd accused the woman of being a smuggler, kissed and slept with her; not to mention the fair bit of tussling. "Why you are so different from other women," he added.

She grinned, clearly remembering his comments this morning. "Ah, and here I thought it was because of my lack of femininity."

"You aren't lacking anything there."

"Ha!" she said, and he was pleased to hear her laugh. "That's not what you said in

the cabin.”

Sobering up, he recalled his purpose in speaking to her alone. “Hayley,” he began, “about the cabin. I wanted to apologize to you for my behavior last night. I thought you were someone else, and my actions were unforgivable.”

“Last night was confusing for both of us, but I never truly felt like I was in any danger ... regardless of how big and bad you tried to act. Besides, given the ever-darkening color of that black eye you’re sporting, I’d say you actually got the worst end of our misunderstanding.”

He grimaced at her reminder of their battle, and he knew from her impish grin she was not sorry for punching him in the eye.

“Let’s just forget about last night, Jack. Neither one of us can be held accountable for our actions. I mean, let’s face it, with the circumstances of my arrival and the storm, everything was blown out of proportion. It’s still too bizarre to even comprehend.” She extended her arm for a handshake. “Let’s start over. Hi, my name is Hayley Garland.” She introduced herself properly—first and last name.

Smiling, he took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Captain Jack Campbell, at your service, Miss Garland.” Kissing her knuckles lightly, she gasped as she felt the slightest touch of his tongue. Grinning devilishly, he kept her hand. “Friends?”

She cleared her throat. “Friends, and please don’t call me Miss Garland. I’m Hayley. Just Hayley.”

“Well,” he began seriously, “as your friend, I consider it my duty to help you in your transition to this time. I meant what I said before, Hayley, I would like to assist you.”

“I appreciate your offer, but I have no intention of meekly biding my time here as Erin seems content to do. I plan to find a way back home.”

“Well, then perhaps I can help you in that endeavor.” Jack found himself reaching for her hand again, appalled by the fact that he couldn’t seem to stop touching her.

She quickly pulled her hand away and turned her back on him. “I told you, Jack. I can take care of myself.”

Upset by her sudden withdrawal, he grabbed her by the waist, turning and pulling her into a bear hug. “It seems to me you do everything by yourself.” He was unwilling to watch her walk away from him once again. He couldn’t resist this woman. Irrational as it seemed, he couldn’t stop trying to take all her burdens, fears and worries off her shoulders and onto his. He simply couldn’t understand how she could make him feel this way after such a short acquaintance, but he was powerless to fight the feeling.

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She stood stiff for a moment, before relaxing in his arms. His hands gently caressed her back, comforting her and reminding him of the previous night when he had rocked her. Slowly, she wrapped her arms around his waist and settled into the warmth of his embrace.

No man had ever made her feel safe, truly protected, yet with Jack, she was completely at ease; free to be herself and let go of all her fears. The tension of the past few days rose up and she felt the emotions begin to boil over. The uncertainty of her future, the awareness of all she had unwittingly left behind, and the image of Tori’s face when she’d discovered her missing this morning clogged her throat and left a sudden stinging in her eyes.

Slowly, she lifted her face to his. Seeing the trace of one tear sliding down her pale

cheek, he caught it with his finger.

At the touch, she stiffened and struggled out of his grasp. The intimacy of his action and her overwhelming feeling of weakness consumed her.

“No.” Her voice shook uncontrollably with the tremendous effort it took not to cry. “No. Leave me alone. I know what you’re trying to do.” She felt herself lose control. Quickly she wiped the tears away and retreated, seeking solace in a corner. Laughter—the laughter from her dream began sounding in her head—the dream voice taunting her, calling her weak, stupid, useless. She covered her ears in an attempt to drown it out.

“You won’t break me.” she said loudly, more to the voice in her head than to Jack.

Rough hands on her shoulders turned her around, shook her. Coming back to herself, she saw Jack’s face, inches from hers. “Break you? I’m not trying to break you. Dear God, Hayley, it would appear you’re already broken.”

“Please, leave me alone,” she whispered hoarsely. Jack’s face, full of sadness and concern, studied her for only a moment before he nodded slowly. Without another word, he walked out of the room leaving her alone and confused, yet surprisingly relieved, as the voice in her head was silent again.

Chapter Seven

Hayley woke late the next morning feeling as though she'd slept the sleep of the dead. She'd expected the revelations of the last twenty-four hours to keep her tossing and turning all night, but instead she felt lighter and happier than she had in a year. Taking a deep breath and rising, she walked over to the same window seat where just two nights ago, she'd sat fretting over her nightmare and worrying about Erin.

Now that she was back with her best friend, she intended to take Erin's advice and make an adventure of it. There was an overpowering sense of freedom in living in a time other than your own. She knew three people in the entire world and felt completely secure and accepted, at least by Erin and Alex. Alex was Erin's soul mate. She had no question about that. Five minutes in their presence would convince a complete stranger of their love and affection and she could understand her friend's attraction to the handsome man. With his curly chestnut-colored hair and ice blue eyes, Alex no doubt turned the head of every woman he saw.

Hayley sighed. Seeing Erin alive and happy removed a huge burden from her shoulders.

She'd decided to take a couple of days to get her bearings before starting her investigation into the mystery of the tree. Despite her resolve to enjoy herself, she intended to make sure her time here was limited to the same length of her planned stay with Tori. She'd intended to stay at the Grange, circa two thousand eight, for three weeks. If she applied herself, she was certain she could find a way to make that damn tree open again and send her back by then. She prayed, for Tori's sake, her time here wouldn't last any longer than that. She knew firsthand what her friend was going through at home, and the idea of putting her through that pain left a ball of ice in Hayley's stomach that simply wouldn't thaw.

The other blemish on her new life as far as she was concerned was Jack. She had no idea what to make of him. He was overbearing, domineering, and controlling—all of the things she typically abhorred in a man, which made it even harder for her to accept the strange feelings that came over her whenever he was around. The night they had spent in the cabin was tumultuous, to say the least, but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was some sort of connection between her and this arrogant stranger.

She also had a strong suspicion that he was not what he seemed to be—a friend simply staying for a visit. Apparently, there was mischief afoot; something serious enough to compel him to travel all night in a storm to reach the Grange. She'd seen him deep in conversation with Alex the previous evening, obviously discussing something grave if the looks on their faces were any indication.

Jack had accused her of being a smuggler and she was determined to find the underlying cause of his supposedly casual visit to the Grange. She wondered if Erin was aware of the problem and resolved to discuss it with her friend today. Curiosity, according to her mother, was one of her biggest flaws. "Curiosity killed the cat," Marian used to say. Then with a grin, Hayley would reply, "Luckily, I'm not a cat."

Dressing quickly in breeches she'd secretly borrowed from one of the young stable boys and a loose fitting top, she put on her tennis shoes and decided to take a run by the

shore. Running always helped her think, and she had some plans to make and some mysteries to solve.

* * * *

Rising late, Jack entered the dining room secure in the knowledge that he would be alone. He planned to eat fast and take off for a long ride on Lancelot to search for Julia. He had some thinking to do as well, and he wanted to postpone the inevitable time when he would have to come face to face with Hayley again. He didn't know why the woman left him feeling so unnerved. Known for his charm with women, he couldn't understand why five minutes in her presence left him wanting to throttle and ravish her at the same time. He also knew Alex's inquisitive nature would not be satisfied until he managed to question him about his strange injuries and the night he and Hayley spent at the cabin—unchaperoned.

Last night, he was granted a reprieve only because Erin and Hayley dominated the conversation—becoming reacquainted, reminiscing and laughing about the old times. He had to admit that it had been a thoroughly enjoyable evening. They were so unlike the women of this time that he found their stories, while shocking, extremely entertaining. It was unusual to spend time with ladies who had lived lives even men in this time could not boast of. Listening to their descriptions of modern transportation left him wishing he had been the one to step through the tree. The future sounded fascinating, and he desperately longed to see it.

He had also learned that the case of the smugglers had been solved a couple of months earlier. Alex had filled him in on all the details after dinner last night, and he had successfully managed to avoid going into the details of his night at the cabin by steering the discussion toward his visit to the Homestead and his concern for Julia's welfare.

Jack silently groaned upon entering the dining room. At the end of the table sat the self-satisfied marquis, and he could tell by the look on Alex's face that his friend had anticipated his planned escape. No doubt Alex had settled in for the long wait until he put in an appearance.

"Good morning, Jack," Alex said lightly.

He inclined his head slightly. "Alex, you're up late. Thought you country gentlemen types liked to get a jump on the day."

"Usually, yes," Alex said with a grin. "I made an exception today so that I could catch you before you made good your escape."

"Ah, the gloves are off, I see."

"Do I need to call you out, Jack?" While his tone was still friendly, he knew Alex's intent was deadly serious.

"You know me better than that, Alex." He grabbed a plate from the sideboard and filled it with eggs, kippers and toast. He could feel Alex's penetrating stare through his shoulder blades as his back was turned.

"I do know you," Alex replied as he came and sat at the other end of the table. They faced each other like adversaries over a battlefield. "There are several concerns I have regarding your story about the events of the night before last. I'd like you to 'fill in the blanks' as Erin says."

"Blanks?" he asked innocently. He refused to make this easy, friend or not.

"Regardless of Miss Garland's bold nature, Erin assures me her friend is a virtuous

young lady. I trust she still is?" Alex's tone had taken on a chilly undercurrent, and he found his hackles rising at his friend's questioning of Hayley's morals or his.

"Miss Garland has never been in any danger from me in that regard." He hoped his face confirmed the lie. In fact, she had been in great danger, but Alex need not know that.

"You must admit, the two of you showed up in a rather shocking way—quite disheveled and bruised. By the way, that black eye looks even worse today."

At Jack's bland look, and blatant silence, Alex continued, "Dammit, Jack, what happened between the two of you? Why are you treating me as an enemy? If you didn't touch the girl, just say it—but you are acting guilty as hell which leads me to wonder what did go on. You both looked like you had been through a battle when you walked in here. I have to know—did you force yourself on her?"

At the question, Jack exploded. "What the hell kind of question is that? I do not rape innocent women, Alex. I mistook Hayley for someone else. Trust me, I came out worse for the misunderstanding than she did. She took exception to my questions and came at me like a wildcat. Any harm that came to her was a result of me simply trying to protect myself without injuring her. If you don't believe me, ask her." He rose to pace the length of the room. He had a tendency to prowl like a hungry tiger when angry.

"I'm sorry," Alex said softly. "I know you would never hurt a woman, but it looked—well, forget it. I believe you. Do you mind telling me who you mistook her for?"

Ceasing his tour of the room, he looked at his friend. "A smuggler."

"Ah," Alex replied, with a guilty grin. "I think I understand now. Perhaps I should have sent word earlier that the hunt was over, but as you were out of the country, I didn't think it mattered overmuch. I can imagine a young woman, dressed as a man, alone in the woods at night would give that appearance." Alex's smile grew and he chuckled. "So she didn't appreciate your suspicions, eh?"

"That would be an understatement," he replied grimly. "I should warn you. Hayley doesn't intend to bide her time here idly. She's determined to discover a way back to the future."

Alex fell silent and merely nodded. Jack fought against the niggling feeling that there was something about the magic of the tree his friends weren't sharing with him.

"Anyway, I wasn't coming to the Grange because of smugglers, but to find Julia."

"I wish I knew where she was," Alex answered seriously. "Simon's been out of his mind since we received word of her disappearance. The two of them have become friends over the past year as you probably know, though he hasn't seen her since she went into mourning for her sister."

"I was aware that they'd become friends. Perhaps we should call him in to assist us."

Alex agreed. "Actually, I rose early to make preparations to organize a proper search party as we discussed last night. I've sent out messages to the tenants. Julia is well-loved in this area. I have no doubt everyone will be anxious to help us."

Julia Parker and her sister, Helena, had come to the Dover area five years earlier when Wilshire shocked the ton by finally marrying at fifty-five years of age; determined to produce an heir to cut Jack out of his inheritance. He'd always wondered why the old man refused to marry earlier, as he so obviously despised him. Rumor had it that Wilshire was partial to young men, although he'd never heard anything more concrete than mere gossip and speculation.

Helena, the unfortunate young bride, was practically sold to Wilshire by her

dissipated father. Unwilling to leave her sister to such an unsavory fate alone, Julia, only thirteen at the time, accompanied Helena to her new home at the Homestead as a companion.

He was relieved to hear of Alex's plans for a search party. "I was about to begin my own search as well. Perhaps we should divide the area into sections. Save ourselves searching the same places—"

However, before he could say more, a pale-faced Giles entered the dining room interrupting the conversation.

"Sir," Giles said, "I am terribly sorry to disturb your breakfast, but I thought you should be informed—" Giles paused as if unsure whether or not to continue.

"Yes, Giles, what is it?"

"Well, sir, it is Miss Garland."

At this, Jack jerked around to look at the butler. "What about Miss Garland?"

"She left a few moments ago. She was dressed quite strangely again. When I asked her if she required an escort, she said no."

"Did she say where she was going?" Jack asked with concern.

"Well, that is the strange thing, sir. She said she was going r-r-running," Giles stammered. "She did the most unusual bending on the front porch, and then started running toward the shore as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I'm sure I've never seen anything like it, not even her ladyship has ever gone running."

Alex smiled at his flustered butler, but Jack looked at the butler with disgust. "You let her leave?"

"Sir, it is not my place to stop the guests from doing what they please," Giles responded, obviously affronted. Then he looked at Alex. "We do have an understanding regarding the marchioness, and I wondered if perhaps the same thing should apply for her friend." Alex had obviously learned to make concessions for Erin's twenty-first century independence long ago. "I should come and inform you, my lord?" Giles, recovering from his shock, resumed his haughty air.

"Yes, Giles, you were perfectly correct in your actions," said Alex. "Captain Campbell and I will take care of Miss Garland, thank you." Giles gave a short bow to Alex and left the room without sparing Jack a glance.

"Running?" Jack looked out the dining room window, hoping to spy the wayward woman. "No doubt her strange attire was men's clothing. Where the hell could she be going? Why aren't you doing something about this? She cannot be out there alone. What if someone sees her dressed like that?"

He turned around quickly and realized from the shake of Alex's shoulders his friend was on the verge of laughter. Seeing Jack's dark face, Alex lost total control and burst in to great howls. Alex's amusement fed his growing anger, which in turn, caused the man to laugh even harder. After several gasping breaths, Alex wiped his eyes and attempted to resume control.

"What the hell is so funny?" Jack asked.

"You are, my friend. You are. I'm sorry if I do not find Hayley's actions cause for alarm, but I'm afraid my sensibilities are a bit duller than they were a year ago. I have been living with my time traveler for a year now and have become accustomed to some fairly irregular activities. If it would make you feel any better, you are welcome to go escort Miss Garland, but I warn you not to expect her to thank you for it."

Jack gritted his teeth, biting back the stinging retort at his lips. "Fine. If you aren't going to see to the safety of a woman in your charge, then I guess I will." With that, he stormed from the dining room as Alex burst into laughter again.

A quick glance from the front porch confirmed that either Hayley was a fast runner, or she had a good head start. She was nowhere to be seen. Making a quick decision, he turned right toward the stables. If he was going to catch her, it was going to have to be on horseback.

Several minutes later, he had Lancelot saddled. He galloped down the path toward the shore. Once he broke through the clearing in the trees, he reined in the horse and looked as far down the beach as he could. He could barely make out a bouncing figure quite a distance to his right. How the devil could she go so far, so fast? He and Lancelot took off toward the running woman at a trot.

He slowed his approach as he drew nearer. He could see Hayley better now, her long red hair loosely pulled back in a ribbon. The curls were swinging side to side as she kept a fierce pace. Glancing back toward the Grange, he realized they must have come well over two miles down the beach. Amazed by her strength and stamina, he wondered if he could run so long and so far without a rest. Not ready to announce his presence, he kept Lancelot close to the tree line and followed at a slower pace, retaining his distance. Enjoying the view, he was curious to see what this firebrand would do next.

After more than a quarter of an hour, she ceased her run and began to walk, arms akimbo, apparently catching her breath. He nudged Lancelot off the beach and into the cover of the trees, while keeping her within view. Eventually, she ceased walking, turned to look at the water and stretched her arms up into the air while curving her back. After a quick look around, she sat on the sand and began to take off her shoes and stockings.

Certain she was unaware of his presence, he'd decided to approach her when she stood quickly and, with another glance around, took off her shirt. Stunned, he stared as the beautiful redhead then pulled off her pants. She stood on the shore in the tiniest drawers he had ever seen and the strange, small corset he had briefly uncovered during their heated interlude in the cabin. Her breasts were firm and full, and he noticed how they rose and fell rapidly as the result of her strenuous run. His gaze admired the sleek curves of her buttocks and the shapely muscles of her legs. He had no idea how beautiful well-defined calf muscles could be on a woman. She had the most striking figure he'd ever seen. She was muscular, yet feminine at the same time. It was a heady combination.

Without hesitation, she began to walk into the channel. When the water reached the top of her thighs, she raised her hands in front of her and lightly dove under the water. Mouth dry, he watched as she swam with strong, sure strokes against the current going farther and farther out to sea. His admiration quickly turned to fear as he realized exactly how far she was going. Without a thought, he tied Lancelot to the nearest tree and took off down the shore toward the water. As he hurriedly walked, he shed his waistcoat and shirt. Stopping at the water's edge he quickly removed his boots and stockings. Leaving his breeches on, he dove into the cool water and swam after her.

*

Hayley stopped swimming when she heard splashing behind her. Turning, she felt a jolt of fear as she saw a man swimming toward her. Her fear quickly receded when she noticed the familiar dark hair and realized it was Jack. Treading water, she waited patiently until he reached her. As he approached, she admired the muscles of his arms

rippling through the water. He was a good swimmer and he reached her quickly. She wondered how long he had been following her. She'd sensed someone behind her during her run, but when she'd looked around, she hadn't seen anyone. As he pulled up even to her in the water, she saw that he was angry. Actually, he always seemed to be angry with her.

"What—the hell—are you doing?" he asked, between attempts to catch his breath.

"Swimming," she replied with a grin. She was really starting to enjoy pushing his buttons. "What the hell are you doing?"

His eyes narrowed as he winced at her use of foul language. Despite being quite accomplished at provoking him to extreme anger, she realized with some alacrity she would probably be wise not to push him too far. Problem was she simply couldn't seem to help herself.

"I was coming to help you. Do you realize how far away from shore you are?"

Glancing back at the shoreline, she could see that she was not as far out as she normally swam.

She shrugged lightly. "Yes."

Her lack of concern, and clothing, apparently left him completely unnerved. "You are naked."

At this, she laughed. "No, I'm not. This is typical of what women wear to go swimming in my time. It's called a bikini. Well, actually, this isn't a real bikini, but it does run along the same lines." Her undergarments were perfectly respectable for the twenty-first century, although she belatedly realized she must look shocking to this nineteenth century man.

He snorted in disbelief. "It is indecent. Where are all the men in your time when women are paddling around in next to nothing? I cannot fathom that this is permitted, let alone accepted."

"The men are usually paddling around in next to nothing with the women. People shed their inhibitions about revealing their bodies over the next couple hundred years. My bra and panties are downright conservative compared to most bathing suits." Imagine if she were wearing a thong.

She could see it was better that she had stepped through the tree rather than Jack. The idea of him trying to adjust to life in two thousand eight tickled her. She laughed, splashed him and began swimming back to the sandy beach. While she had worn bikinis in her time, being so close to him with so little on did make her feel a bit uncomfortable. His attitude toward her swimming attire affected how she felt in it, and any time he came too close, she felt an unfamiliar, overwhelming heat course through her body, which she decided was a bad sign given the chill of the water.

Hayley stopped swimming as she neared the shore, her feet firmly on the sandy bottom. She remained where the water still reached her neck until he caught up to her.

"I need to get out and get dressed," she said simply.

"Fine," he replied. "Go right ahead."

She blushed slightly at the idea of him watching her get out of the water. She realized the feeling was foolish as she'd often sunbathed like this in front of men all the time. It was his feelings about it that made her uneasy to reveal so much of herself to him.

Then she recognized his comment for what it was—a dare. Hayley loved dares. Grinning, she threw her head back proudly and walked through the white foam and

across the cool sand to her clothing. Instead of dressing quickly, she sat down and lifted her face to the sun, letting it dry her body.

He stood in the channel, watching her and clenching his jaw so tight she thought it must hurt. She wondered if the cool water would calm his temper. After several minutes, he managed to rein in his emotions, both the anger and what she was certain was a touch of lust disappeared. She actually felt a bit of uncharacteristic guilt when she saw his previous emotions replaced with concern.

He emerged from the water and sat down beside her. When he spoke, it was in a quiet, almost pleading voice. "Hayley, I realize you are not familiar with how things are done in this time period. However, I can assure you that the way you are dressed and acting right now will get you ravished or worse. If any man other than myself had come upon you this morning that is exactly what would have happened."

She listened to his words and noticed that for the first time, his tone was actually reasonable and polite. He was not barking commands at her. His anger seemed to have evaporated, and it dawned on her she liked him this way.

"I understand," she said in a softer voice. "Really, I do. I'm just used to doing things my own way. Jack, I can't give up my exercise routine while I'm here. It makes me feel happy and healthy—I enjoy it. Isn't there anyway I can continue to run and swim safely?"

"You should have an escort with you any time you are away from the Grange. It is not proper for young, unmarried ladies to go anywhere unchaperoned. However, no escort is going to approve of your swimming attire." She recognized an undeniable spark of appreciation in his eyes as he tried to hide the fact he was looking at her body.

*

Jack disliked the thought of any man ogling her luscious body as she propelled herself gracefully through the waves wearing what she called a bikini. What an odd term. He rather wanted to keep that image as his own personal gift. It was a vision he expected to see in his dreams for the rest of his days.

"Don't women swim in this time?"

"Some do, but they wear considerably more clothing," he answered. "I am sure Erin can have her seamstress make you a bathing costume in addition to the dresses you will no doubt need made."

"I think that more clothing would make it harder to swim, but I suppose I could try it. Erin has offered to have some dresses made for me, so I'll ask for a swimsuit as well."

Standing, she brushed the sand off her bottom as he glanced toward the house. If Alex came upon them now, his friend would not believe him innocent of seducing her, and he certainly would not believe they had merely gone swimming. In fact, if anyone spied them in their current state, he had no doubt he would be saying wedding vows with this unconventional woman with Alex's pistol at his back. Somehow, the thought did not upset him as much as he thought it should.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw she was nearly dressed again. Rising, he pulled on his shirt, and then sat back down to pull on his stockings and boots. His breeches were still very damp, as was her hair, and he realized some explanation would be called for when they reached the Grange. She sat back down to put on her shoes. The best thing to do would be to postpone returning to the house until they were sufficiently dry.

Hayley broke the companionable silence first. "I suppose I'm not supposed to wear pants either, but I refuse to run in a long dress. If I agree to the escort and the swimsuit, do you think I can get away with wearing pants? I promise they will cover my terribly tempting ankles." She thought it was absurd that a woman showing her ankles was taboo. He shook his head as he recalled how she and Erin had giggled all night as they'd tried to explain some of the ways of the nineteenth century to her.

Considering the vision of her running in the sand in her tight breeches, he felt an overwhelming temptation to lock her up in the Grange for the next year. "I think that would be acceptable, depending on who escorts you."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully. "I guess I'll have to choose my escort well then. Since you seem immune to my alluring ankles, how 'bout you?"

"Me?" he asked incredulously. "I don't think—"

She interrupted, looking over his shoulder toward the woods. "Oh, I see your horse now. I wondered how you ran in those boots. Well, if you're unable to run, I'll just have to find a physically fit footman or maybe that young blond groom who works in the stable—he looked like a capable escort. I'm sure there must be several *strong* men in Alex's employ. I'll ask him when we get back to the house."

"I would be happy to accompany you in your morning activities." He was unwilling to picture her alone with any handsome young groom—blond or otherwise.

Obviously pleased with his answer, she rose and began to walk toward Lancelot, trying—and failing—to conceal her grin.

Gritting his teeth, he followed. While he didn't particularly care to subject himself to the daily torture of watching this firebrand exercising and not being able to touch her, he liked the idea of another man watching her even less. Escorting her on her daily run seemed a small price to pay for the discomfort, and actually he felt as if he were the winner of this contest as he would have the benefit of spending time alone with her everyday.

Chapter Eight

"How long do you plan to stay at Fernwood Grange?" Hayley asked casually as they approached Lancelot. Her initial discomfort at being around horses was passing quickly, and she discovered they were quite affectionate creatures.

"I will remain here for awhile. I promised to help you find your way home."

She grinned, before feigning a very serious demeanor, imitating his old fashioned style of speaking. "Then I am quite honored you will be providing me with an appropriate escort, even though I'm very sure I should still be angry with you."

"Angry?" Jack asked, smiling at her teasing.

"I haven't forgotten, Captain Campbell, about you kidnapping me rather than bringing me to the Grange right away, and I also seem to recollect you calling me a smuggler."

He stifled a groan. "If you have an ounce of kindness, firebrand, you will forget that minor faux pas on my part." He quickly recounted Alex's tale of the capture of the small band of smugglers operating in the area.

She giggled. "So you held me against my will and questioned me relentlessly for nothing."

"I don't recall it being against your will," he muttered, but when she merely raised her eyebrows, he shrugged. "It would appear so."

She fell silent, still unable to shake the fact that something was bothering him and keeping him here at the Grange beyond his promise to her.

"Why were you traveling to the Grange in the middle of the night if not to look for smugglers? Alex and Erin weren't expecting you until this afternoon."

Clearly astonished by her observation, he sighed. "I'm certain you will discover the truth soon enough. I am searching for someone."

"Who?"

"A woman. She disappeared several nights ago not far from here."

"Near the tree?" she asked, her mind racing as she pondered the idea that perhaps someone else had been swept away by the magic that had brought her to this place.

Jack looked at her for several long moments, and she could see that he hadn't considered that thought until she'd spoken the words. Eventually, he shook his head. "I don't know if she was near the tree when it opened. I certainly didn't see her."

"It was raining pretty hard," Hayley added. "You didn't see me at first either."

Jack was obviously unconvinced. "No," he said. "I don't believe she was there. I would have seen her."

Hayley nodded. She was fairly certain no one else had been there as well. She was flooded by the sense that she would have known if there had been another person trapped in the swirling, agonizing void with her. "So you know this woman? She's a friend?"

Hayley felt foolish for the slight pang of jealousy that invaded her mind.

"She is," he replied.

"Why didn't you tell me? We're wasting time. We'll cover more ground if we split up." She walked quickly in the direction of the woods.

She didn't take two steps before he grabbed her around the waist and turned her to

face him. His eyes were dark with concern. “You will leave this alone. Alex and I are organizing a search party and the last thing I need is for you to go missing as well. Leave this to the men.”

She narrowed her eyes and removed his hands from her waist. “The men? And why would I leave something so important to a bunch of arrogant males? I’m just as capable as you of searching in these woods. I spent much of my time last summer in this very area searching for another lost woman—Erin. I know every tree, cave, cliff and hiding place.”

He started to protest, but she cut him off. “And don’t tell me that the terrain is likely to be different in the future, because you and I both know that’s a lame excuse. I know how your mind works, you think it’s your job to keep women safe from all danger, but I’d be willing to bet it’s a man’s fault that this woman has vanished.”

He winced at her accusation, and she knew she’d scored a direct hit.

“I don’t intend to be kept in a little box, Jack. I want in. So either include me in your search party, or watch as I organize my own—comprised of only women.” Pleased with her threat, she smiled before running back toward the Grange.

Somehow he retrieved his horse, mounted and caught up to her more quickly than she thought possible. As he rode up beside her, he reached down from Lancelot with strong, quick hands and pulled her up in front of him on the saddle.

“What do you think you are doing?” She struggled to escape his grip and return to the ground. His action briefly brought back the image of the man in her dream, grabbing her from behind, pulling her up on his horse. Her stomach lurched at the frightening feeling, and she began to fight in earnest.

“Stop struggling. You’re upsetting the horse.” His deep voice sounded in her ear, immediately calming her. Still unfamiliar with horses, she froze. “That’s better. I don’t believe we finished our conversation. You have a rather annoying habit of walking away in the middle of a discussion.”

“Sorry,” she said sarcastically, regaining her composure. “I thought we had finished our negotiation.”

“On the contrary, we’ve only just begun.”

“There’s nothing more to discuss, Jack. I meant what I said.”

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“Fine, Hayley. We’ll finish this conversation later.” If he had his way, they would never continue it. He did not intend to involve her in a potentially dangerous situation. Wilshire was conducting a search of his own and Jack didn’t want to think of what would happen if the horrible man found Julia first or, heaven forbid, Hayley.

“In the meantime, I think it would be best to take our time returning—until we are dry. I don’t think it would be wise for us to return to the Grange until we do. Alex is rather suspicious as it is.”

“Suspicious of what?” she asked.

“Of this.” He turned her so she was sitting sideways on his lap. He moved so quickly, she didn’t have time to reply before his mouth was on hers in a hard, passionate kiss. He struggled to cool the liquid fire that pulsed through his body at the sweet taste of her lips. His hands stroked her back, arms, shoulders and neck.

“Stop,” she whispered against his lips even as she began to return the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Make me,” he whispered as he took her earlobe in between his teeth. Her hot breath on his neck caused a delicious tremor down his spine. He placed his hands under her shirt, lightly touching the skin at her tiny waist, desperate to see if it was as soft as it had looked down by the sea.

“No,” she said shakily, struggling to remove his hands.

Jack began to wonder about her reluctance to be touched as he recalled her similar reaction in the cabin. Removing his hands from her waist, he continued his gentle kisses. Her hands dropped down to his waist, tightly gripping the muscles of his abdomen, and he couldn’t decide if she was pulling him closer or pushing him away. Every move she made seemed to be a contradiction; she was unperturbed by his kisses, yet terrified by his touch.

Curious and unwilling to frighten her, he softened the kisses and broke away. For a split second, he saw something that looked very much like terror in her eyes before she shut it away and resumed her cool composure.

The sound of an approaching horse jerked them from their heated interlude. She glanced up at him as a deep blush covered her cheeks. “I find it difficult to keep a proper distance from you. Perhaps I am not the most suitable escort after all.” Then, after a pause, he added, “I will aspire to do better in the future. You have my word.”

He shifted her astride the saddle before him and turned Lancelot around to face the approaching rider. He was surprised to see his valet approaching from the direction of the Grange.

“Do you know who he is?”

“Yes, I do,” he answered as Templeton reined in and stopped his horse next to Lancelot. His valet quickly, and none too subtly, took in their appearances before speaking with a distinctly amazed tone. “Sir, pardon the intrusion.”

Templeton, obviously curious, appeared uncertain of what to say next.

“Templeton, is anything wrong?” he asked shortly when his valet, slack jawed, continued to stare at Hayley.

“Well, sir.” Again, Templeton glanced pointedly at her.

“I beg your pardon. Allow me to introduce you. Templeton, this is Miss Garland, a guest at Fernwood Grange and an old friend of the marchioness. Miss Garland, this is my valet, Templeton.”

“Pleased to make yer acquaintance, my lady.” Templeton’s voice was tinged with awe.

“Nice to meet you. I suppose you would like to speak to Jack, I mean, Captain Campbell, in private. I’ll just be running along.”

She attempted to dismount Lancelot, but Jack tightened his arm around her waist preventing it. She gave him a questioning glance over her shoulder. “Anything Templeton has to say to me, he can say in front of you. As your escort, I would be remiss in my duties to allow you to return to the house alone.” He would be damned if he would let his valet see his beautiful redhead running down the beach in her clinging, damp breeches. Templeton was already ogling her, oblivious to his rudeness. Then he thought ... *his* redhead? When did he begin to think of her as his?

“It’s not far,” she answered shortly. “I did, after all, make it here on my own without any calamity befalling me. If you will just let me down—”

“No.”

“Jack Campbell. Let me down. Now! When will you learn you cannot boss me around?” Her voice had risen to a shrill pitch. “I ran here on my own, and I can return on my own. I am a big girl.”

“I was following you; therefore, you were not alone. You will stay, and I will take you home.” His grip around her waist tightened as he spoke in a tone that meant he would broach no further discussion.

Her face flushed with anger. He doubted that anyone had ever tried to control her, and he strongly suspected he would pay severely later for his highhandedness. Before she could continue the berate him, he turned back to his valet, who seemed to be enjoying the interchange. Templeton had never seen anyone question his authority and Jack thought he saw Templeton’s opinion of the young woman go up rather quickly.

“What brings you here, Templeton? I trust all is well?” He expected the man to report that something had happened to his luggage—Templeton was not a very good valet—or perhaps some problem had arisen at the shipping company. After all, the man was supposed to have arrived the day before.

“Well, Cap’n,” Templeton started, again glancing at Hayley. “I arrived less than half an hour ago with your trunk. I went to the Homestead afore I came here as I knew you was headin’ there. Didn’t like the thought of you goin’ there by yerself like ye did as I figured yer uncle might do you in or somethin’.” Templeton chuckled at his jest.

He raised his eyebrows impatiently and Templeton’s laugh quickly turned into an embarrassed cough. Jack felt Hayley turn to look at him inquisitively, but she said nothing.

“Poor timing and circumstances with my uncle sent me here earlier than I intended. My uncle was not of a mind to allow me to spend the night. Was anything amiss at the Homestead?” He was concerned by the fact that Templeton had sought him out rather than wait for him at the Grange.

“Apparently, the earl told the constable that you were responsible for Lady Julia’s disappearance.”

“What do you mean responsible?” He knew his uncle, uncharacteristically upset by Julia’s disappearance, had attempted to blame him, but Jack hadn’t taken his angry words seriously. The man was clearly out of his mind.

Obviously, his rash visit to the Homestead had given his uncle a scapegoat. What he couldn’t understand is why the old man would bother. He’d only recently returned from London, and any number of people could vouch for that fact. The night Julia had gone missing, he’d had dinner at his club with Ben, then gone to a gaming hell to finish making a deal with a prospective buyer for the goods he had brought in from Portugal. There was no way he could have played a role in her disappearance.

He’d said as much to Wilshire during his brief visit two nights earlier, but the earl’s grasp on sanity seemed to be slipping. He’d even accused Jack of killing his wife, Helena, who had died in a fall down the stairs a month ago. The accident was made even more tragic by the fact that Helena had been seven months pregnant at the time. Unable to discover anything about Julia’s possible whereabouts, or why she would have run away, he left while his uncle was still deep in the throes of a rage. He shuddered to think what Wilshire might have done to Julia to cause her run.

“Mrs. Smythe said you left afore she could talk to you. Said you and the earl got into a terrible row. Not like that’s anythin’ different.”

He'd hoped to speak with Mrs. Smythe, the earl's kind and capable housekeeper. The only reason he'd felt relatively safe leaving Julia to the earl's care had been because of the housekeeper's presence in the house. She had been very kind to him during his brief, but painful, stay at the Homestead as a child. Shuddering slightly at the memory of living in his uncle's house, he pushed the thought away.

"Did Mrs. Smythe know why Julia ran away?" He hoped against hope that the earl had not hurt her.

Templeton, struggling to keep his nervous horse still, finally gave up and dismounted. The mare he'd borrowed from the marquis' stable obviously didn't like being in such close proximity to a warhorse like Lancelot.

Looking up at him, he related Mrs. Smythe's tale. "She said the earl kept the girl locked up in that room of hers after her sister died. She ate all her meals on a tray as he wouldn't let 'er even go in the dining room. The evenin' she went missin' a maid hepped her undress and settle in for the evenin'. Mrs. Smythe said the earl drunk hisself into a stupor pretty near on every night." Templeton paused, attempting to keep the horse calm. "Housekeeper said she always waited for the earl to fall asleep before retirin' in case he tried to hurt the poor little lady. When the house got quiet, she turned in. Didn't hear nothin', but when the maid went up next mornin' to wake her, Lady Julia was gone."

The idea of Julia being locked in a room for weeks on end made his blood run cold. He'd been in Italy when he'd received word of Helena's death. Alex had made mention of the fact no one had seen Julia since her sister's death. Obviously, all the neighbors suspected she'd been in mourning. How long had Julia been trying to escape?

"Had she packed a bag or taken anything with her?" He wondered if perhaps the unhappy girl had returned to her family in London, although he suspected only a catastrophe would prompt Julia to return to her parents. Two colder people, he'd never met.

He had gone to ask the Parkers to take Julia back in shortly after his return from the war. He cared deeply about the young girl, and he thought perhaps her family, a titled one, would want to raise her and give her a season in London—especially when he informed them of the earl's tendency toward violence. It was too late to help Helena, but he wanted to see Julia safely out of Wilshire's clutches. Jeffrey Parker informed him he did not have the time or funds to attempt to make a silk purse of a sow's ear, and all Julia was good for was to be a companion to her sister, the countess.

Rumor had it that Parker, destitute due to gambling debts, had offered Helena's hand in marriage to the earl. His uncle had paid a pretty price for the sixteen-year-old Helena. If Julia did turn up on their doorstep, Jack had little doubt her father would return her promptly to the earl—for an additional price. Fortunately, the earl ignored Julia, and as a result, she was free to roam the countryside at will. The earl, desperate for a son in order to displace Jack as his heir, put all his hopes in the young, beautiful Helena.

If only he'd come straight home when he'd learned of Helena's death. If only he'd come straight home instead of traveling to London. All the "if onlys" continued to rattle through his guilt-ridden mind. Wilshire had done something to make Julia run and the thought of what it might be made his stomach churn uneasily.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Templeton. "According to Mrs. Smythe, Lady Julia didn't take nothin' but the clothes on her back and her favorite red cape—the one you give her last year for Christmas. I hepped the other servants search the surrounding

area for a bit agin this mornin', but we didn't find her."

"Where was my uncle?" He knew that the earl was not taking the disappearance of his ward lightly.

"He left to see the local magistrate afore I got there. Mrs. Smythe thought that was right surprisin' since he hadn't been outta the house since the countess died. Said she was worried he might convince the magistrate that you did have somethin' to do with her ladyship goin' missing. Wanted me to warn you that he may come here to make trouble for you. She's right worried about you gettin' arrested."

He shrugged off the idea of an arrest. "Mrs. Smythe is likely correct. It's only a matter of time before the earl shows up here, but I think there's little reason to be concerned about an arrest."

"Mrs. Smythe's worried that the poor lass may do herself in, if you take my meaning. She said the girl was fair distraught after her sister died, not at all like her usual sweet self," Templeton replied sadly. "Mrs. Smythe sent me straight here, so as I could warn you what the earl was up to. Mrs. Smythe thinks it's disgraceful that the earl's blamin' you for the little lady's disappearance. Everybody knows you'd never harm a hair on that sweet miss' head."

"Why would the earl think you helped Julia run away? The earl is your uncle, right?" Hayley asked him. She had been so quiet during Templeton's story, Jack had forgotten she was there.

"The relationship between my uncle and I has always been, what I believe you would call, strained." At Templeton's snort, he narrowed his eyes at his valet. "Actually, we hate each other. He views me as his greatest enemy, and it would give him pleasure to cause me trouble—anyway he can."

"His enemy? Why?" She was clearly intrigued.

"Because I am. I have been since birth." His vague answer sparked her curiosity even more.

"But why have you always been his enemy? Why would he accuse you of taking this Julia? Who is she to you or to him?"

"Lady Julia is my uncle's ward, and he suspects I took her because I would do anything to protect her from him—even kidnap her."

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but I really think we should get back to the house. Lord Dorset wants a word with you in case your uncle and the magistrate show up."

Alex knew he had no idea where Julia was as he'd briefly recounted the earl's angry reaction to his visit last night over brandy while Hayley and Erin were reminiscing in the next room.

Over a year ago, Julia had shown up at the docks with bruises on her arm. He'd threatened to remove her from the Homestead, but Julia, sobbing, begged him to forget about it. She said she would never leave Helena alone, and he was powerless to take the unfortunate countess away from Wilshire without facing prison.

He'd sent one of his own men, Josh Harrison, to the earl's house to secretly keep watch over Julia. Harrison had managed to be hired on as a footman. In addition, Jack kept in contact with Mrs. Smythe, who also tried to protect her. Unfortunately, neither Josh nor Mrs. Smythe seemed to know why Julia had run away.

Wilshire, upon his arrival at the Homestead two nights earlier, had accused him of killing his wife, so that she could not give him an heir. He accused Jack of plotting to

steal his money and estate; of trying to destroy him by taking the only woman he'd ever loved. At one point, he called him Jonathan, Jack's father's name, and threatened to kill him again if he didn't leave.

With Julia missing and the earl unable to answer his questions sensibly, he'd left. It was his conversation at the edge of his uncle's property with Harrison that had caused him to leave the Homestead so late and in the midst of the storm. Josh had been removed from his duties as footman shortly after Helena's death and moved to the stable as a groom. Unsure what to do next, he'd decided to wait for Jack's return and tried to guard over the young girl from a distance. Jack had assured Josh the fault did not lie with him. In his heart, he knew the blame rested squarely on his own shoulders. Now, somehow, he would make it up to Julia. If only he could find her.

Chapter Nine

Jack's arm around Hayley's waist tightened so sharply she was afraid he would break her in half. "Jack." She gripped the muscle in his forearm in an attempt to loosen his hold.

"Oh, sorry." He released her. "Templeton is right. We should be getting back."

Jack shifted her more firmly in his lap and headed back to the house. She could sense the tension in his body and suspected he was not looking forward to the coming confrontation with Lord Wilshire.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that Templeton had fallen well behind them. Jack noticed her look and grinned. "He's trying to give us some privacy. I have little doubt he'll pester me to death with questions about you when we return to the house."

"Why does your uncle hate you?" She couldn't stand his vague answers regarding his uncle and Julia.

Jack seemed unsurprised by her persistence and briefly explained the adversarial relationship between his father, Jonathan, and his uncle. Apparently Wilshire had intended to wed Jack's mother himself, but she chose Jonathan instead.

"Where are your parents?"

Jack fell silent, and she silently kicked herself for her prying nature. She could see the blank expression beginning to form on his face, and she recognized it as the same look that took over Erin's face when her father's untimely death was mentioned; or that erased laughter in Marian's eyes whenever Hayley tried to talk about her own father. She was good at reading faces, and she knew that when an overwhelming pain was recalled, people tended to lock the doors and bar the windows to protect themselves from powerful feelings. She was pretty good at the technique herself. She watched as Jack erected his battlements before answering her question.

"My parents passed away," he said quietly. She bit her tongue to keep from pursuing it, but he answered her unasked question anyway. "They were killed in a carriage accident when I was eight."

"I'm sorry." She felt at a loss for words to soothe what was obviously such a painful topic for him even after so many years.

"My little sister was with them. The wheel came loose as they were taking a rather sharp turn. My father had a tendency to drive too fast, usually at the urging of my mother and sister. It was exhilarating and exciting and he'd do anything to please them. Unfortunately, without the wheel, the carriage tipped over and crashed into some large rocks. My parents were killed instantly, but Annie—" he paused, unable to say anymore.

She grasped the reins to slow the horse and then turned to wrap her arms around his neck. Words failed her and all she could do was hold him.

*

Jack clung to her as if she were his only lifeline back to shore. He had never spoken to another living soul about his parents' deaths or his sister's painful struggle to cling to life. He'd stayed by Annie's bedside, talking to her, begging her to wake up, willing her to come back to him. However, she'd passed away, never regaining consciousness, never giving him the chance to tell her how much he loved her.

He cleared his throat. "She died a week later."

The sound of Templeton approaching pulled them apart, and Hayley, with a sweet, comforting smile, kissed him lightly on the cheek before turning back around. Amazed by the kindness of the gesture, he struggled not to turn her back around and cry out his anguish on her shoulder, the eight-year-old child reemerging, as the painful memories shook his entire body.

A horse's ninnny behind him recalled him to the moment and Templeton's presence. Grasping the reins more firmly, he shut away the agonizing memories before continuing to the Grange.

"So who is Julia?" Hayley asked.

"Ah, well, that's an easy question. She was the most difficult woman in my life until you appeared." He found his grin and made sure it was firmly back in place.

"Oh. The competition, eh? Well, it's good to know that someone else has been giving you a run for your money prior to my arrival." Although she spoke lightly, her face tightened for a moment and it gave him a moment's pause.

"Actually, before this disappearing act, Julia was no hardship at all." He studied their surroundings more closely.

"You've been searching for her during this entire ride back to the Grange, haven't you?"

He shrugged.

"And she lives with your uncle? Is she a cousin?" She must have assumed that his relationship with Julia was a familial one.

"No, she was the sister of my uncle's wife."

"I see. Templeton mentioned her. I was sorry to hear about your aunt's death. How did she die?"

"She fell down the stairs. She was seven months pregnant," he replied. "My uncle almost managed to displace me as his heir. I'm sure to come so close to ridding himself of my inheritance only to lose it has been very hard on him."

"That's a rather cold statement." She seemed shocked by his apparent indifference, but she didn't know the earl. "Surely he was distraught by the loss of his wife and child."

"My uncle cares only for himself. Helena's death and that of her child's would not have affected him in any way other than to damage his pride at having lost the means to remove me from his life once and for all. He used that poor girl for years and honestly, I can only believe that she's better off in some higher place than in that house with him."

*

"Well, surely he can't be as bad as all that," Hayley said stiffly, as she recalled her own troubling childhood. She hated to think how bad the countess' life truly could have been.

She was suddenly anxious to meet his uncle, and she wondered what could have happened between the two of them to create such powerful animosity.

"Hayley," Jack said. "If, actually, when my uncle arrives, I want you to stay in your room until he leaves."

"What? Why?"

"Just stay in your room," he said hotly. "I have my reasons and they are good ones. You will have to trust me on this."

"I don't see what harm there could be—"

“Dammit, Hayley,” he shouted. “Just do as I say and stay in your room.”

If she had one major failing, it was that she never knew when to pick her battles. Softly, though sharply, she said, “I think you have the mistaken impression, Captain Campbell, that you are my keeper. Let me assure you—”

Jack interrupted her. “I am your keeper. It’s my fault you’re here instead of safe at home in your own time.”

“Your fault?”

“Yes, my fault.” His voice had taken on an almost remorseful tone. “In case you have forgotten, I was the one who yanked you through that tree. You were safe on your side until I pulled you through.”

For a moment, Hayley was speechless. Jack blamed himself for her unexpected trip to the past. “Don’t be silly,” she said after a moment. “You didn’t know what was happening. Neither one of us did. I was in pain, and you reached out to help me.”

She turned at the waist and looked closely at Jack’s face. It was full of anguish and regret. “Jack,” she continued softly. “What makes you think I’m sorry to be here? If you hadn’t pulled me through, I would never have found Erin. You have no idea how grateful I am to you for that.”

Jack’s features softened at her words, but he still seemed under the control of some powerful emotions. She sensed the confessions of the last few minutes coupled with the events of the past few days had taken a heavy toll on him.

“Please,” he said. “Stay away when my uncle comes. Trust me.”

Hayley simply nodded, then turned back to face the front again. They rode in silence and Hayley could feel the tension in Jack’s arm around her waist. She pondered the revelation that Jack blamed himself for her current predicament. She certainly didn’t think it was his fault, and she wasn’t even upset to be here.

The whole experience was an adventure that she found herself enjoying immensely. Finding Erin safe, happy and in love lightened Hayley’s heart, and for the first time in a year, she felt more like her old self. She had Jack to thank for that. *No*, she thought, no blame, no regrets, no other recourse for her. Seeing Erin in this environment was the salve to heal all her wounds, and as soon as she could unravel the secret of the tree, the doorway would open again so she could return to her life in the future. She would be able to set Tori’s mind at ease as well. Tori had hoped they would be able to heal, and with the truth, they finally could. The tree had opened twice that she knew about, and it would open again. Until then, she would cherish this time like a precious gift and savor every minute with her friend while it lasted.

Hayley decided to break the silence and change the subject. “Templeton seems a nice man. It is obvious he likes working for you. Not really what I thought a valet would be like, though. He actually looks more like a bodyguard.”

*

Jack, happy for the distraction, chuckled at Hayley’s accurate description. “Templeton was a soldier during the war with France. He served under my command. When the war ended, he came to work for me. He does have the look of a bodyguard, which probably is not a bad thing, given my line of work. The docks can become dangerous at times.”

What Jack didn’t say was that Templeton, like so many other men who returned to England after the war, was a hero without a job. Down on his luck and homeless, Jack

found Templeton in a back alleyway in London begging for food and offered him a job. Many of the young men in his employ were former soldiers who had served under Jack's command, but now they worked at the docks or as sailors aboard the boats in his shipping company.

Doubly cursed, Templeton had an intense fear of the water and suffered from severe seasickness. After two brief weeks as a crewmember aboard one of his trade ships, Jack decided Templeton would be better suited to join his household staff as his personal valet. Jack genuinely liked the man, despite the fact he tended to fawn over him, considering him some sort of personal savior.

Hayley was silent during the remainder of the ride, and he wondered what she was thinking. In his brief time with her, he had never seen her sit so still and quiet. Templeton was riding a discreet distance behind them again, and Jack was pleased to note that her hair had completely dried, as had his breeches. With any luck, Alex and Erin, distracted by the imminent arrival of Wilshire, would not notice that their appearances were suspect once again.

Hayley sighed and slowly leaned back against his chest. Her sweet, trusting gesture astounded him. In their two-day acquaintance, they had experienced time travel, brawling, swimming and passionate kisses together. Jack shuddered to think what the next two days might bring. Life with his firebrand was never boring. His firebrand. His. His.

The head groom met them in front of the house and took Lancelot away after they dismounted. Jack offered Hayley his arm, and she took it with a friendly smile. Giles was waiting in the front hall when they entered the house and told them that the lord and lady were in the library. Erin looked up as they entered.

"There you are. We were beginning to get worried." Erin rose and walked over to Hayley. "Still obsessed with running I see. Don't tell me you dragged poor Jack along with you." She turned to Jack, "Tori and I could never keep up with her. Her stamina is incredible."

"He dragged himself along with me," Hayley said with a grin. "And he kept up—on his horse."

The two women laughed as they sat down on the chaise nearest the fireplace. Jack rolled his eyes.

"I sent your man, Templeton, to fetch you. I assume he filled you in on the unfortunate events surrounding your uncle." Alex's tone expressed his concern as Jack had described Wilshire's unstable behavior and strange comments to him last night.

"Yes," Jack responded. "I'm not surprised my uncle is blaming me, though I didn't think he would go so far as to involve the law. I will dispatch a messenger to London to find Ben. We dined together at White's the night Julia ran off. He can confirm my innocence. The truth is, Alex, I wish I had been here to help her escape. At least then I'd know she was safe."

Erin sighed sadly. "I hope she's alright. She's such a sweet girl. I would hate to think of anything bad happening to her." As she spoke, Erin glanced over at Hayley and noticed her unkempt appearance. "We'd better get you cleaned up. You're a mess. Did you go swimming as well?"

"Yep," Hayley said with a grin. "The water was great. That reminds me. Can I have a swimsuit made?"

“Sure,” Erin said. “I should have realized you couldn’t resist the water for long. It may be a few days before it can be completed, and I should warn you I don’t think you’ll like the amount of material that goes into swimsuits.”

“Oh, Jack already warned me. The sight of me in my bra and panties nearly gave him a heart attack.” Hayley shot a quick grin toward Jack.

Erin choked on the tea she was sipping, Alex stood up quickly, and Jack scowled at her.

“What do you mean bra and panties?” Alex asked gruffly.

“I was swimming when Jack found me. He said I would have to wear a proper swimming ... what did you call it, Jack? Oh, yeah, bathing costume. Sounds like Halloween. Anyway, he said I couldn’t parade around in my underwear anymore,” Hayley said matter-of-factly.

“And I take it you were walking around in your undergarments in front of Jack?” Jack intently studied the tips of his boots to avoid what he was sure was a nasty look from his friend.

“Actually, he was swimming with me,” Hayley added nonchalantly.

“Alex,” Erin added quickly. “It will take Hayley some time to get used to the way things are done here. I’m sure you will recall that in the beginning I did things that you considered shocking as well. I still do actually. Just this morning, he had a fit when he caught me—”

“Erin, I don’t think they would be interested in the topics of our marital disagreements.” Alex quickly interrupted Erin’s story, clearly embarrassed.

“I’m interested.” Jack was happy to turn the attention away from his uncanny knack to get into compromising situations with Miss Garland.

“Let’s just say,” Erin continued with a sheepish grin at her husband, “that Hayley is lucky to have people like you and me *and* Jack to help her adjust.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Actually, if you don’t mind, I think I will go freshen up. I need to wash the salt and sand off. My skin is itchy.” Standing, Hayley threw Jack a mischievous grin, grabbed Erin’s hand and the two women left the room giggling.

Alex looked at Jack through narrowed eyes, but Jack simply threw up his hands. “Don’t look at me. You’re the expert on these June girls. You’re married to one, after all.” Jack laughed at the name Erin and Hayley had given themselves when they were children.

Alex shook his head, chuckling. “What is that old saying? ‘One is one and two is ten.’”

“I think that’s referring to children.”

“Somehow I think it applies to time-traveling women as well. I’m not sure I’ll be able to manage those two alone. What are you for doing the next year?”

“Oh no, don’t look at me. I have a shipping business to run.”

Alex shrugged, grinning and then changed the subject back to the imminent arrival of Robert Campbell. “So you think Wilshire will come here to confront you?”

“I’m sure of it,” Jack responded grimly. “Apparently, his hatred of me has magnified tenfold since Helena’s death. I think, in his arrogance, he truly believed he could produce an heir simply by willing it. The fact that Helena didn’t give him a son in five years of marriage has him in a state of panic, and he cannot abide the fact that I will inherit

everything he holds so near and dear to his heart. As if I would want to live in that mausoleum he calls an estate and carry a title that, through his tireless efforts, is now continually linked to the terms depravity and cruelty.”

“Helena’s untimely passing has apparently affected Wilshire more than any of us realized.” Alex crossed the room and sat behind his desk. “I’ve heard tales—through the servants—of his uncontrollable rages. There was a rumor that right after Helena’s death, he nearly beat a young groom in his employ to death with a horse whip.”

“That’s not a rumor. I visited the young man at his mother’s home on my way here after my visit to the Homestead. It’s one of the reasons I was traveling so late. My man, Josh Harrison, caught up to me and took me to see the lad. He is only twenty-three, Alex, and he has a long, hard recovery ahead of him. The doctor doubts he will ever walk again.”

Jack related the details of the beating to Alex. “Since then, many of the servants have quit in fear for their lives. Unfortunately, I don’t think it was the loss of his wife and child that unhinged him. There is something else at work in that house, and I suspect Julia knew about it. Whatever it is, I think Helena’s death must have brought things to a boil. I wish I’d been here when she passed away. Poor girl. No one should have had to suffer as she did—married off to such a heartless bastard at only sixteen.”

Jack stood by the window, looking at the rose garden without seeing the flowers. His mind was on Julia. She’d been an energetic thirteen-year-old when she’d arrived at the Homestead. With her fascination for sailing and general curiosity about everything, she’d become a constant fixture at the shipping company, much to his grandfather Sebastian’s delight and Jack’s dismay.

When Jack returned from the war on visits, Julia would follow him around like a faithful puppy. Sebastian had taken a liking to the lonely little girl—who reminded him of Annie—and the old man had allowed her to run freely around the office and docks. Over the years, Jack had also developed a special fondness for Julia and constantly worried that she was suffering at the hands of his uncle as he had. However, Julia adamantly denied any abuse. Wary, Jack had kept watch over her throughout the past few years, as Sebastian had done prior to his death, making sure that she remained safe and unharmed in Wilshire’s care.

Devoted to her sister, Julia had insisted life at the Homestead was tolerable, and that the earl ignored her more often than not. Now, with Helena gone, Julia had seen to her own escape. For the thousandth time, he kicked himself for not returning to her the moment he’d learned of Helena’s death. Julia looked up to him as an older brother, and he, in turn, protected and cared for her as if she truly were his little sister. He couldn’t help but think that Annie would have been so much like Julia had she lived. Now, Jack had failed in his duty to protect a sister once again.

“Dammit Alex. We need to find her. You know as well as I do what can happen to a young woman alone.” Jack slammed his hand down on Alex’s desk.

“We’ll find her, Jack. In fact, several of the men from the nearby farms are working with my servants to search for her. She’ll be found. I think we need to focus on keeping suspicion off you and figuring out a way to calm your uncle down. If he is as mad as you say, he may try to harm you when his attempt to have you arrested fails.” Alex was obviously concerned about him.

“He can’t arrest me. He has no evidence.”

“Be that as it may,” Alex replied. “He is better suited for Bedlam than the Homestead, and we both know what he is capable of when angry. If he thinks you have taken something of his, I have little doubt he will come after you with sword drawn to retrieve it. Do something for me?”

“What?”

“Don’t lose your temper and provoke him. I have a wife to protect, and I’d prefer to keep the coming Campbell battle from erupting into a full-blown war in my home.” Having grown up in the area, Alex was well aware of the long-standing feud between the Campbell men.

“I promise,” Jack said, thinking of Hayley. “I won’t let things get out of control here. I won’t provoke him at the Grange.”

“Thank you.” If Alex noticed the careful wording of Jack’s promise, he gave no indication.

Chapter Ten

"I borrowed some dresses from Katie's closet for you to wear until we can have a few made for you. She's much closer to your size than I am." Hayley laughed at the idea of trying to wear one of Erin's dresses. Hayley's five foot seven inch frame was more of an hourglass, while Erin, just shy of six feet, was super model thin.

"Who's Katie again?"

"Alex's cousin," Erin replied. "And Simon's sister."

Hayley had met Simon last night at dinner. The young man, working as Alex's secretary, had kept the two couples entertained at dinner with his witty stories about the nobility in London.

"Oh, he's cute. It's a shame he's so young. How old is he? Eighteen? Nineteen?" Hayley asked.

"He's twenty, which is not really all that much younger than us," Erin replied.

"Yes, but for some reason, my twenty-two years feel like so much more in this time period. But maybe you're right. He's not that young, and a younger man might make life interesting."

"Don't bother. You aren't fooling me a bit by pretending to have the hots for Simon. You forget I've seen you with Jack."

"Jack? You must be joking. He is the exact opposite of my type. My God, Erin, he's practically a Neanderthal with his ideas of women and their place in the world. I'm surprised he hasn't tried to club me over the head and pull me around by my hair yet. It's all I can do to be in the same room with him."

"Save it. I may not have been with you this past year, but I still know you better than anyone, save Tori, and you are definitely attracted to Jack Campbell. The heat that rolls off the two of you when you're in the same room is scorching." Erin made a sizzling sound and touched her finger to Hayley's arm.

Hayley was appalled by the idea. "I don't know what you're talking about. Jack Campbell is the most insufferable man I have ever met, short of my father and I can assure you I am *not* attracted to him. Besides from the way you and Alex were talking last night, I got a sense that he's a womanizer as well. Why would you try to hook me up with someone like that?"

Over dinner the previous evening, Alex had made a joke about Jack's latest conquests—an earl's much-ignored wife, an opera singer and an Italian countess, who'd recently become a wealthy widow.

Erin shook her head. "Jack is not a womanizer. He's just never found the right woman. He says he's a confirmed bachelor, but I don't think he's happy being on his own. Alex is worried about him too. He says Jack's lonely. He lives in his parents' old townhouse near the docks and works from early morning to late night at that shipping company he inherited from his grandfather. When he gets bored, he hops on one of his ships and sails away for months on end. He travels to London when business takes him there, but according to Alex, he doesn't keep a permanent mistress, and he doesn't seduce innocent young women. He's restless, Hayley. Wandering around, filling in time, waiting for something *or* someone."

Hayley listened to Erin with interest, but when she finished her brief biography of Jack, Hayley burst into the laughter. “Well, I can assure you the only waiting Jack’s doing in regards to yours truly is for that tree to split open again, so he can wave bye-bye as I leave, never to return. Restless or not, I don’t think I’m curing any of his loneliness. At best, I’m raising his blood pressure, making him a prime candidate for a heart attack. In case you’ve failed to notice, he’s always furious with me.”

“Which just proves my point. He wouldn’t get so angry if he didn’t care about you.”

Hayley giggled. “Interesting theory, but wrong. What do you know about Jack and his uncle?”

“Not a whole lot really. Jack doesn’t talk about it much. I know that he lived with his uncle for a couple years after his parents died. I’m not sure what it must have been like for him there, but Alex said he never saw an angrier boy than Jack Campbell when he started school at Eton. Apparently, even though Alex’s estate borders the earl’s property, Alex never saw Jack when he lived there. Alex said it was like he went into the house, and he didn’t come out again until his grandfather came and took him to school. After that, whenever he returned home on holidays, he always stayed at his grandfather’s house.

“This earl sounds like a nasty piece of work. What’s he like?”

“He’s a slimy one, that’s for sure. I’ve only met him a couple of times, and I’ve never spoken to him for more than a minute or two. Alex always finds an excuse to drag me away from him, and I’ve never minded. He gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“How so?” Hayley was fascinated to hear Erin, who liked everyone, admit to being uncomfortable in the earl’s presence.

“Well, I know you’ll think I’m crazy when I say this, but the air surrounding Lord Wilshire actually feels colder. There is something very dark and evil residing in him. The stories I’ve heard about his cruel treatment of his servants and tenants would straighten your curls. He’s a villain, plain and simple.”

“Jack told me to stay away when his uncle shows up here.”

“I happen to agree with him,” Erin added seriously and then a smile crossed her lips. “See I told you he liked you.”

Hayley hit Erin with a pillow from her bed. “Oh, puh-lease. Not that again. I’ve told you there is nothing between me and Jack.”

Erin rolled her eyes and hit Hayley back with a pillow of her own. “Say what you will. I know better than to disagree with you about anything. Let’s just say time will tell on this particular discussion.”

“Ugh.” Hayley groaned, swatting Erin with the pillow again. “Were you always this smug? I don’t remember.”

“Oh, you remember, and yes I was and still am very smug when I’m right about something. As well as incredibly talented, humorous, creative, glamorous...” With each adjective, she hit Hayley again with the pillow.

“Humble.” Hayley giggled and returned the swat. The dress she’d donned was hanging open at the back and trapping her arms so she couldn’t continue the pillow fight properly. “Okay, I give. Here, button me up.” She turned her back to Erin for help. “You’re sure Katie won’t mind me running around in her clothes?”

Erin came to stand behind Hayley and began to button her dress. “Katie will not mind you wearing her clothes. I can’t wait for you to meet her. She’s absolutely

wonderful. As is Alex's Aunt Sarah who played a big role in getting Alex and I together. She's quite the matchmaker when she puts her mind to it. Perhaps you'll find out first hand when she and Katie return from London."

"Oh God, no more of the 'Jack attraction' thing. It simply isn't going to happen. You know, the more I think about it ... twenty isn't so young, and Simon *is* cute," Hayley replied with an equally devious smile. "And he's such a great guy."

Erin grinned and continued hooking all the buttons on the back of Hayley's borrowed dress. "Nice try, but you aren't fooling me, and I'm not listening anymore. Besides, I suspect that Simon is nursing a broken heart. I'm pretty sure he had a girlfriend, although he won't admit to it. He used to spend his afternoon off gone for hours, and when he returned he wore the most adorable grin for days afterward."

"Not anymore?"

"Not in a few weeks, but you know how it goes. Gotta kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince, or in Simon's case, princess. There." She patted the back of the dress. "All done. Do you need any more help getting dressed?"

"No thanks." Hayley shook her head. "I've been dressing myself successfully for over twenty years now, but these high-waisted dresses will defeat me. Why are they made so it's impossible to put them on by yourself? Damn tiny buttons all the way down the back," she muttered.

Erin shrugged. "I wondered the same thing when I first got here, but it's amazing how quickly I got used to someone else helping me. I was extremely uncomfortable with having a maid at the beginning. And it's not just the clothes. I ran a brush through my hair once a day back home to pull in up into a ponytail. I could never do my hair in the styles of this time on my own. The fact of the matter is most of the clothes and hairstyles women wear nowadays are impossible to put on or do alone. As Tori would say, we must suffer for fashion."

They shared a laugh. "Good thing you and I have had plenty of experience adjusting to different surroundings—you in a different city every night, playing with the band, living on a bus. Marian and I moving from one run-down dump to the next until they all started to look the same. This house is one of the most luxurious places I've ever been in. Now that I think about it, I've been living in the nineteenth century my whole life—no water and no electricity."

"I never thought of it like that, Hayley, but you may be right. Growing up as we did was training for this experience. You know what my childhood was like. I was cooking and cleaning for my father as soon as I could walk. The true test of this place would be to plop Tori down in the middle of it."

"Oh, no." Hayley shuddered, still giggling. "The original modern girl would wither up and die in this early rendition of Fernwood Grange." She quickly sobered up at the thought of Tori suffering in this same house, devastated over her sudden and unexplainable disappearance.

"Don't." Erin must have noticed her distressed look. "There is nothing you can do, believe me. I drove myself crazy last summer trying to figure out a way to get word to you both that I was okay. I carved my name in the trees on the border of the property along with the year 1817. I've written messages in more books in the library than I care to admit. I've hidden scraps of paper with coded explanations all over this house. The servants keep finding them and bringing them back to me. I'm sure they think I'm

borderline insane. Did you find anything when you were staying at the Grange?"

Hayley shook her head.

"No, you didn't, so listen to me. You found your way here and you will find your way back. When you do, Tori will be waiting. Besides, she's stronger than you give her credit for. I know you were her savior when we were at camp those first few years, defending her from all the bullies, but we were just kids then. She stopped needing your protection a long time ago. She'll be fine."

Hayley simply nodded, remembering Tori the night she slipped through the oak tree, crying about Erin and claiming she was stronger with Hayley around. She couldn't shake the feeling of guilt at having left her friend behind. She should have woken Tori up and asked her to walk with her, then both of them would be here with Erin; the June girls together again. As soon as the thought popped into her head, she immediately dismissed it. Tori was twenty-first century, through and through. Hayley started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"I was trying to picture Tori here. Can you see her without her hair dryer, curling iron, hot showers and fully-stocked kitchen; complete with microwave, coffee maker and Kitchen Aid mixer?"

Erin laughed. "Oh, my God, no. You're right. She'd go into serious culture-shock."

"Besides, if she did come, she'd be tearing the place up looking for a pirate like the ones in her romance books."

"Well, it seems to me, that you've claimed the pirate, so it's just as well she's still safely tucked away in two thousand eight." Erin headed for the door. "I need to go check on some things with the housekeeper, Mrs. Scott. Will you be okay?"

"Of course, I will. I'll just put these dresses away and rest for a little while."

"You—rest? Ha! I'd love to see that." Erin laughed as she shut the door behind her.

Hayley decided that no matter how long she stayed in the past she would not get used to all the servants around the house and wondered how Erin adjusted to it so well. Hayley had made her own bed and tidied her room this morning only to be firmly scolded by the overbearing Mrs. Scott.

Hayley walked over to the mirror in the corner and checked out her new—actually, old—self. "I look ridiculous," she mused as she studied the tableau she painted. "Now *I* look like Laura Ingalls." She twirled around, trying to get used to her new look. She never wore dresses at home and given the discomfort of this particular fashion, she understood why. Although Erin had attempted to pin her hair up in the accepted style for these times, her curls were already revolting and breaking the restraints of the clips.

Glancing around the room, she wondered what women from this time did for entertainment. She'd never been a big reader like Tori. She couldn't play an instrument like Erin, and she was not about to take up embroidery. "Erin was right," she mumbled to herself. "I can't rest."

Immediately feeling cooped up in the small room, she decided to explore the house and grounds. She also hoped to catch a glimpse of Jack's uncle if he arrived. Her curiosity about the earl was definitely getting the better of her.

Chapter Eleven

Upon leaving her room, Hayley looked up and down the wide hallway. Seeing a smaller staircase at the end of the hall, opposite the main stairway, Hayley decided to see where it led. This staircase must have been boarded up at sometime in the future as she had never seen it before. At the bottom, she came to two doors. One appeared to lead to the kitchen, so she chose the other, delighted to discover that it led out to a lovely, small garden in the rear of the house.

As she walked among the herbs and flowers, Hayley considered Jack's earlier comments. He said he would have helped Julia escape if he'd known her plans. What could cause a woman in this time to want to leave her guardian? No doubt whatever the earl had done—and Hayley shuddered to think about what it could be—had to be serious enough for Julia to strike out on her own in the middle of the night.

What bothered Hayley the most—much to her annoyance—was Jack's concern about Julia. Was he in love with the woman, and if so, why was he kissing and flirting with her? At least, it felt like flirting. Hayley's experience in the boyfriend department was extremely limited. She didn't trust any man as far as she could throw him.

Jack seemed to be the exception to that. She trusted him and actually looked forward to the time they spent together, even if they were always arguing. The fact that Jack might possibly be in love with someone else left Hayley with a nagging stomachache she didn't want to acknowledge or think about. Hayley had intended to ask Erin about Jack's relationship with Julia, but changed her mind after her friend's relentless teasing. That question would only add more fuel to Erin's suspicions that she was interested in Jack romantically.

Chiding herself for her foolish feelings, Hayley continued walking. She'd only known the man two days for pity's sake. Yet, she felt this incredible pull whenever she was around him, much like the tide pulling the ocean. She couldn't help but think that being trapped in the past would not be nearly as exciting if Jack were not around.

While she was thrilled to be with Erin again, Jack's presence challenged her and actually left her feeling slightly breathless most of the time. The fact that he was overbearing stimulated her mischievous side and she loved sparring with him, loved making him see her not as a woman from this time, but as a woman of the future. She was in charge of her destiny, and she didn't need a man to take care of her or tell her how to spend her days. She also loved testing Jack's preconceived notions about women.

While Hayley's knowledge of this time period was limited, she did know that women were still basically at the mercy of men. This poor treatment of women made Hayley furious, although when she considered Alex and Erin's relationship, she thought it would be a stereotype to accuse all nineteenth century men of treating women as inferior beings. Alex treated Erin as an equal, and their relationship was actually better than many she had seen in the future.

Then, she realized that things hadn't changed much in the last hundred and ninety years. Hayley had spent day after day working at a job where she tried to help women break free from abusive relationships. There was something deeply ingrained in some women that made them only feel valuable if they had a man in their lives.

Lost in her thoughts, Hayley didn't notice the small woman hiding behind the arbor until she nearly tripped over her.

"Oh," Hayley exclaimed, trying to keep herself from falling.

The young woman didn't appear to notice Hayley's arrival. She simply sat hunched down amid the flowering bushes. She had pulled her legs up to her body, wrapping her arms around them tightly and she was resting her chin on her knees.

"Hello," Hayley said softly, bending down. "Are you okay?"

The woman didn't reply, but Hayley suspected the woman knew she was there when she curled herself into an even tighter ball.

Hayley was familiar with the haunted look on the woman's face. She'd seen the same fear in the eyes of many of her clients at the shelter.

"My name is Hayley." She lowered her head down, so that her face was level with the woman's. "I am staying here with Lord and Lady Dorset as a guest. Are you a friend of the McCormick's as well?"

The woman's unblinking eyes turned to look at Hayley's face, and it was then that Hayley saw the cuts and bruises. She had been beaten very badly and just recently. One eye was swollen completely shut and her lower lip was puffy and severely bruised. Although the woman seemed to have heard Hayley, she made no effort to respond. Her lovely blonde hair hung limp and unkempt about her shoulders, and Hayley suspected she hadn't bathed in several days.

"Are you alright?" Hayley asked, reaching out gently to touch the woman's face. Panicking, the woman flinched and moved away from Hayley's outstretched hand.

Hayley froze. "I won't hurt you. I just want to help. I have some experience with cuts and bruises like these. Will you let me look at them?" Hayley hoped her soft tone would set the woman's mind at ease.

The look of intense fear and pain on the pretty, young woman's face tore at her heart. "I've only been here a couple of days, so I realize you may not know who I am. I'm a friend of Erin Delancy, I mean, McCormick. I traveled from America to visit her, and I'll be staying here for awhile." Hayley paused, sensing the woman was struggling to speak.

"M-my name is J-Julia," the woman whispered, through dry, split lips.

Julia? This is Jack's Lady Julia? That was impossible. This young woman couldn't be more than eighteen. She was too young for Jack—who according to Erin—was thirty years old. This young girl certainly didn't seem to fall into the same category as Jack's supposedly usual conquests—widows, opera singers and married women. "Julia. That's a pretty name."

Her legs, tired from squatting for so long, finally gave out, and Hayley sat down heavily in front of Julia, so that they were both hidden amongst the bushes. Hayley was concerned that the earl may arrive any minute, and she didn't want him to find his young ward until she'd had an opportunity to speak with her. Hayley knew who had given Julia the bruises, as well as the reason why she had run away, and there was no way Hayley was going to let the earl take her back now.

"While it certainly is a nice day to spend in the garden, I suspect you aren't here to stroll. Are you looking for someone?"

"Y-y-yes," Julia stammered. Her grip on her legs relaxed a bit, and it was then Hayley noticed the lashes across Julia's upper arms. It looked as if someone had used a whip to beat her. Shuddering, Hayley wondered how the girl could have made it here

from The Homestead, which she understood to be nearly ten miles away. Then she recalled the terrible storm the night she and Jack had spent in the cabin. How on earth did this poor girl make it so far in such adverse conditions?

Hayley needed to find a way to earn Julia's trust so that the young woman would let her help her. Her wounds needed to be treated and soon. She'd been missing for a few days, which meant she'd already gone too long without care. However, that fact gave Hayley hope that she hadn't suffered any serious internal injuries.

"Are you looking for Jack?" Hayley asked.

"N-no," Julia replied vehemently. "Is Jack here? Oh n-no. I must leave," Julia tried to rise, but her weary body seemed to resist the effort. Hayley quickly reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder.

"No," she said softly. "Don't move. We're hidden from the house here, and you're in no condition to go anywhere. Why don't you want Jack to know you're here? I thought—" Hayley realized she really didn't know anything about Julia and Jack's relationship other than the fact that he was deeply concerned about her disappearance. Julia's desperation to escape him left Hayley completely perplexed.

A door slammed in the distance and Julia's head jerked sharply at the sound. The terror in her eyes was more than Hayley could stand.

"Julia," she said. "It's okay. You're okay. I won't let anyone hurt you or even find you for that matter. All I want to do is get you somewhere safe where we can tend those injuries."

Julia looked at Hayley as if seeing her for the first time. "I c-can't go back."

"You don't have to," Hayley replied. "You can stay here."

"He will f-find me and m-make me go back," Julia said. Tears began to fall down her pale cheeks and her body started to tremble.

"Who will find you? Jack?"

"No," Julia responded softly. "The earl."

"I won't let him take you back and neither will Jack. We'll protect you." At the mention of Jack's name, Julia scrambled to her knees, wincing in pain, before grabbing Hayley's hands. "J-Jack can't see me like this. Please, I was l-looking for..."

Julia paused, clearly unsure if she could trust her. Hayley decided whoever Julia was looking for was not as important as keeping her hidden from who was looking for her. She struggled to pull Julia back down, anxious to keep her concealed behind the bushes in case the earl was already here.

"Listen to me," Hayley whispered as Julia continued to try to rise. "The earl, Wilshire, he's coming here."

Julia froze at the mention of the earl's name. Hayley dragged her to the safe shelter of the bushes, while Julia repeatedly whispered "no" over and over again. The panic in her small body was palpable, and Hayley fervently wished there was something she could do to alleviate it.

"Julia," she said soothingly. "Listen to me. Listen." She waited for Julia to stop her anguished mantra. "I want you to stay here. I'll go into the house and make sure he doesn't come out here. No one knows you're here except me. Once the earl leaves, I'll come back. I know of a place where you can hide. There's a cabin in the woods that's abandoned. No one will look for you there. We'll go there, and I'll clean up these cuts. You can rest and get your strength back. Then we'll decide what to do next. You don't

ever have to go back to the earl. I promise.”

Hayley prayed she would be able to keep her promise to the terrified girl. Unfamiliar with these times, she didn’t know if it was possible to protect a woman from an abusive guardian. Somehow, she suspected Julia had no recourse in that area, and whatever Hayley did, it would have to be done covertly and apparently without Jack.

She wondered why Julia was so adamant about not seeing Jack. The idea that Julia seemed to be afraid of him left her unsettled. Surely, Jack would never hurt the young girl or send her back.

Unless, he didn’t have a choice.

Hayley decided to think about that later. Right now, she had to keep Julia quiet and safe until they could make their move to the cabin. “Promise me you will stay here.”

When Julia made no response, she repeated her command. “Promise me.”

“I p-promise.” Julia’s voice stammered with pain and fear.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Hayley gently squeezed Julia’s hand and headed back to the house, considering what she would do next. Jack would be furious with her for interfering, especially when he’d specifically asked her to avoid his uncle.

As she headed toward the library, she could hear raised voices shouting. Obviously the earl had arrived, and Jack had not exaggerated the intensity of the animosity between them.

“I am not leaving here without her.” Hayley could hear the earl’s deep voice shouting threats. “Maybe the magistrate won’t arrest you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t keep you from taking what doesn’t belong to you. You are a deceitful, conniving, son of a bitch—just like your father. How dare you interfere with my household! I will have that girl back, and I will marry her.” Hayley froze at the words. The earl intended to marry Julia?

“Dammit, Wilshire! I told you—I don’t have her. But you can be sure Hell will freeze over before I’ll ever let you marry that girl!” Jack’s booming voice resounded through the hallway.

Hayley could hear another voice, softer than the other two. Alex must be in the library as well. Suddenly, there was a loud crash.

Before she could think about what she was doing or how Jack would respond, Hayley knocked on the door sharply and opened it before waiting for an invitation. At her appearance in the doorway, all three men in the room stopped shouting to turn and stare at her. Frozen in mid-argument, the picture they painted would be almost comical if the situation were not so serious. Alex was standing behind the big desk, his fists clenched on top. Jack was standing by the fireplace; his face was flushed with fury. The earl was standing by the piano in the midst of broken glass. Apparently, in his anger, the earl had smashed a lamp with his cane.

Hayley’s gaze stayed on the Earl of Wilshire, who had been approaching Jack with his cane lifted menacingly. The family resemblance was instantly recognizable. Both uncle and nephew had the same thick hair, but the earl’s was a dark gray. They were both tall, although Jack’s youth kept his stature more erect. However, the most striking similarity was in their eyes. Both men possessed eyes the color of dark midnight blue when angry, but while Jack’s eyes were passionate, the earl’s seemed hard and cruel.

The room was silent for only a moment as each man reacted differently to Hayley’s arrival. Alex looked concerned, Wilshire furious and Jack—well, Jack looked terrified,

Hayley thought. For a second, he looked as frightened as Julia had in the garden, but he shuttered the emotion quickly as he strode across the room to her.

"Miss Garland," he said smoothly. "I'm sorry if we disturbed you, but as you can see we are in the midst of a meeting here. Perhaps you would be more comfortable in the morning room." He was pretending to be a gentleman and stranger, but when he took her arm to lead her out of the library, his grip was tight and painful.

"The whole house can hear what you are in the *midst of* here. The walls are vibrating with the shouts." She shook off Jack's grip. In for a penny, in for a pound, she decided as she strode to the middle of the room.

"Who is this?" Wilshire came to stand beside Jack. His previous furor replaced by a reptilian-like charm. "I know all the beautiful women in this area, and I don't believe I have had the pleasure."

"You aren't going to have the pleasure now, either," Jack retorted. "Miss Garland, leave." Then just for her ears, he added a somewhat desperate *please*. The tone in his voice left Hayley in no doubt of his anger.

"Miss Garland, is it?" Wilshire took her hand in his, lifting it to kiss her knuckles lightly. His fingers were icy cold, and she stifled a shudder as the impression of holding the hand of death ran through her. Erin's words returned to her as she too felt the chill that seemed to surround this man.

"My dear, if you wouldn't mind giving me a few moments alone to complete some business with my nephew, I would like very much to make your acquaintance."

Jack abruptly grabbed her hand out of Wilshire's grip and attempted to pull her behind him. Undaunted, Hayley slipped back around Jack. "Business? Is that what all the shouting is about?"

"My nephew has something that belongs to me—a possession of mine—and I have come to retrieve it."

"A possession?" Hayley asked the question sweetly, although her anger began building at the earl's reference to his ward as a possession.

"Yes, my nephew has lived his whole life coveting what is mine. He is very much like his father in that regard. This time, he went too far and took something that wasn't his. I have come to reclaim it."

"My goodness, what kind of *possession*," Hayley started again, emphasizing the word that was causing her outrage, "would be worth such a fuss?"

She sensed the overwhelming tension in Jack as he stood quietly beside her. She had no doubt that he was barely restraining his great rage. Briefly, she worried what he would do or say to her later, but Julia's terrified face kept her talking.

"My betrothed," Wilshire said wrathfully, looking once again at Jack.

"Your betrothed?" Hayley asked. "You did say betrothed, as in a woman?"

Wilshire, hearing the anger in her voice, looked more closely at her. All of his previous charm left him as he took offense at the audacity of her questioning. "Yes," he barked, "of course, a woman. He took her, and I have come to take her back."

"Well, how interesting," she said. "I had no idea a woman could be a possession. Your soon-to-be wife is a living, breathing, human being, is she not?"

Wilshire's attempt at controlling his rage left him again as he narrowed his eyes and responded to her outburst. "She is mine and no one else's. She is my ward and betrothed, which makes her my property, and I keep what is mine, in spite of my nephew's

interference—and yours.”

“How dare you!” Hayley fairly shouted. “No wonder she left you. For your information, a woman is a person with feelings, thoughts and opinions. Not a possession. Not something you can own like a house or a horse. It’s no wonder you couldn’t keep her, you arrogant, insufferable, self-important—”

“Hayley.” Alex rose and came around the desk quickly. “That’s enough.”

“Oh, no, Alex. It isn’t enough. This *man*,” Hayley said as if he were unworthy of even that title, “believes he can own a person. That he has the right to—”

“Hayley, dammit, stop talking. Now!” Jack was standing between Hayley and the earl.

Wilshire, momentarily shocked by her comments, quickly came to himself. He raised his finger, pointing it in her face. “You impertinent, saucy, little chit. Someone needs to teach you to respect your betters. I would be happy, Lord Dorset, to teach her that lesson.” With his words, he raised his cane menacingly.

“Get out!” Jack shouted. He roughly grabbed his uncle by the lapels and began to shove him toward the door. “I don’t have your ward, so this conversation is at an end. If you ever threaten or come anywhere near Miss Garland again, I swear I will kill you as slowly and painfully as possible. Now, get the hell out of this house!” With that, Jack continued to shove his uncle out of the library and down the hall. The earl—his face purple with rage—managed to escape the worst of Jack’s blows.

As he reached the front door, he turned to Jack, his face distorted, his voice malicious. “You will pay for this outrage.” Then he looked at Hayley with malevolent eyes. “You will *both* pay.” With that, he turned and left the house.

For a moment, no one said anything. Hayley could see Jack struggling to get control of his emotions, and she was shaking. She grasped the doorframe in an attempt to remain standing. Her life had been threatened numerous times at the abuse shelter, but something in the earl’s eyes scared her more than any threat that had come before.

“Jack,” she said softly.

“No,” he said sharply, not looking back. “Not—a—word.” Suddenly, she remembered the terror in his eyes those brief seconds in the library. She wondered what had happened to cause Jack such fear. Having now met the earl, she began to imagine that Jack’s childhood had been every bit as violent and painful as hers. She wanted to reach out to him, to explain that she understood, but before she could say anything, Jack walked out of the house, without a backward glance, slamming the door behind him.

Bewildered, Hayley felt a steadying hand on her elbow.

“Come into the library and sit before you fall down,” Alex said gently.

“Alex, I’m sorry.” She recalled Alex’s earlier rebuke.

“I understand,” he replied. “Wilshire brings out the worst in everyone.”

“What happened between Jack and his uncle to cause such intense feelings?”

“I’m afraid the seeds of hatred were planted in that family long before Jack was even born. I don’t know the whole sordid tale. Jack lived with his uncle for a brief time after his parents died. He and I had been playmates before that, but when he went to live with his uncle, I didn’t see him again for two years, not until we entered school.”

Alex crossed to the front window to make sure Wilshire had truly gone and to look for Jack. “I recognized Jack right away during our first week at Eton. I had looked forward to renewing our friendship as we had always gotten along well, but he was

different. More closed-off with a quick temper I'd never seen before. He wasn't as carefree, though deep down inside I sensed he was still essentially the same boy he'd been all those years before. The years with Wilshire changed him. It was as if something had been taken from him." Alex paused as if trying to put words to his thoughts.

When he couldn't, he changed the subject. "He's always been a loyal and true friend to me. There is no man I respect more. I've tried on numerous occasions to discover what happened during those years he spent at the Homestead, but Jack won't talk about it. I suppose you have come to realize he is a very private person."

Weary after the heated encounter with Wilshire and Alex's revelations, she suddenly felt the urge to return to the bedroom that only an hour ago had seemed so boring and burrow there for a week, but she needed to get back to Julia. Quickly she stood and turned to leave.

"What is it? Where are you going?" Alex asked, clearly confused by her sudden exit.

"I forgot there's something I have to do. I'm sorry for my interference. If you'll excuse me—" Hayley inched closer to the door.

Just as she was about to step into the hallway, Alex stopped her. "Hayley, wait. About Jack, give him time. Don't push him to talk about his uncle."

"But—" Hayley began.

"No," Alex interrupted. "Trust me, if you push him on this, you will push him away." He rose quickly and met her at the door. "I wouldn't go after him, if I were you."

"After him?" Hayley realized that Alex thought she was rushing out to find Jack. "Oh no, that isn't where I'm going. Even I know not to pull on a tiger's tail when he's angry." Then with a mischievous grin, she added, "Most of the time, anyway." With that, Hayley shrugged slightly and started to walk away.

Alex simply shook his head as she departed, and she clearly heard him say, "You could have fooled me."

Chapter Twelve

Hayley quickly made her way down the path where she'd left Julia. However, she stopped short at the sight of a man's back, looking down at the very spot where Julia was hiding.

She must have made a sound of distress because the man turned to look at her. Relief flooded her system. "Oh, Simon. I can explain."

Simon raised a hand to stop her, his face angry. "You knew she was here, and you left her alone? Look at her." He pointed to Julia cowered behind the bushes. "She's injured."

"I know." She was offended that Simon would think her so heartless. "But I had a very good reason for leaving."

"What reason could be good enough to leave a woman alone in such a state?"

Julia, her voice weak with pain, interrupted the argument. "Stop." Her breath was coming in short, harsh gasps and Hayley suspected she had some bruised—if not broken—ribs. "Is he gone?"

"He's gone. Both of them." Hayley was unsure if Julia was asking about the earl or Jack. She bent down to place a reassuring hand on Julia's shoulder and looked back up at Simon. She wasn't sure how he would fit into her plans to help the young girl.

Julia answered that unspoken question. "Simon has offered to help me hide." She attempted to continue her explanation, but the small amount of strength she had left was rapidly leaving her as she'd expended every bit in the effort it had taken to walk to the Grange on her own.

Simon, sensing her waning strength, knelt beside her. "Julia told me your plan to put her in the old hunting cabin where she may remain safe until her wounds heal. I cannot convince her that she will be safer at Fernwood Grange."

"I tend to agree with Julia on this. The earl was just here, and I don't think he'll rest until he's found her. He already suspects she may be here. With so many servants in the house, I'm not sure we could keep her presence a secret."

At her words, Julia struggled to rise. "I c-can't go b-back. P-please." With her last plea, she lost consciousness. Simon caught her and gently lowered her to the ground.

"Thank God for small mercies. She won't be able to walk to the cabin." He looked up at Hayley, concern etched in the lines of his young face. "I'm still not sure how she made it here on her own. She's quite a remarkable woman."

"Do the two of you know each other?" Hayley asked.

She noticed Simon blush slightly. "Yes, we have been introduced before."

"Well, as you can see she needs to be cared for. I'm afraid she may be going into shock." Julia's face was even paler than before—something Hayley didn't think was possible.

"Julia." Hayley leaned down close to her face. Julia stirred slightly and opened her pain-filled eyes. "Would you mind if Simon helped me carry you to the cabin? I won't be able to get you there alone."

She was concerned that Julia would balk at the idea of a man touching her, but Julia's eyes simply drifted closed again.

“Let her rest.” Simon reached down gently and lifted her as if she weighed no more than a small baby. Relieved to have help, she watched as Simon headed stealthily to the edge of the woods, careful not to hurt the young woman in his arms.

“I know where the cabin is,” he said over his shoulder to her. “I’ll get her there. Why don’t you dig up some bandages and food and then follow?”

Without waiting for a response, Simon continued with his precious cargo. His unexpected appearance was the answer to a prayer as Hayley had worried how she would be able to get Julia to the cabin unseen. Now she hoped to convince Simon to help her care for Julia. Between the two of them, the task of caring for the injured woman secretly would be easier, and from the look in Simon’s eyes, she doubted he would leave Julia’s side until she was completely well. Julia seemed to draw champions to her side as honey drew flies.

Hayley paused at the back door for a moment, wondering where Jack had gone, about his past and about the hatred that pulsed between him and his uncle. She considered, once again, that brief look in Jack’s eyes when she’d first entered the library. He was scared. She wouldn’t push him, as Alex feared she would, but she certainly wouldn’t let it rest. Jack intrigued her as no man had ever done. She found herself extremely interested in everything about him, and she was determined to uncover the mystery surrounding him.

Great, she thought. Another damn mystery.

Hayley turned again looking down the path where Simon and Julia had disappeared safely into the thick of the woods. Relieved they had escaped unseen, she entered the house with a mission. She had an abused woman to protect and perhaps—as she considered Jack again—an injured man as well.

Hayley spent the remainder of the afternoon with Simon and Julia in the cabin tending the woman’s wounds, which once cleaned up did not seem as serious as she’d previously feared. She suspected the ribs bruised, not broken, and after washing off the dirt and dried blood, she discovered that most likely all of Julia’s injuries would heal completely with time and bed rest.

Most of the pain Julia was experiencing centered on the bruised ribs, blackened eye and the fact she’d traveled several days in nasty weather to reach Fernwood Grange. She was exhausted, half-starved and frightened to death. Hayley suspected a good night’s sleep and full stomach would go a long way to returning her strength and health.

Hayley had originally insisted on staying the night with her, but Simon had convinced her that her absence at dinner would be missed more than his. He’d returned briefly to the Grange to leave a note for Alex, explaining that he needed to go to London immediately at his mother Sarah’s request and would return in a few days.

Content that Simon would watch over Julia, Hayley promised to return early the next morning with more supplies and food. She wondered briefly whether it was actually permissible for two young unmarried people to spend the night together and what Jack and Alex would say if they realized Simon and Julia were alone in the cabin. Her conscience was soothed by the fact that, for now, there really wasn’t any other option. Julia was extremely fatigued, and Simon seemed to be a trustworthy man who wouldn’t hurt a flea.

Julia had remained adamant about not asking Jack for help and having seen Wilshire’s determination to find his ward firsthand, she understood the importance of

Julia remaining hidden. As of yet, Julia had not confided in Hayley how she had sustained her injuries, although she'd certainly formed her own opinion.

After Julia had a good night's sleep, Hayley planned to talk to her about her attack and try to determine exactly what the earl had done. She felt fairly certain the young woman had not been raped, but she wanted to make sure of it. Tomorrow, she promised herself as she returned to the house, she would get to the bottom of things.

Jack didn't return for dinner that evening. No one had seen him since he'd stormed out of the house shortly after his uncle's departure. Dinner was a somber affair, despite the fact Erin tried to keep the conversation light. Alex seemed to be as concerned about Jack as Hayley. After dinner, she joined Erin and Alex in the library. Alex worked at his desk quietly, while Erin tinkered with a new song she was writing. She played softly on the piano, humming and stopping often to write the notes down.

Hayley sat before the fire with a book on her lap. She'd grabbed it off the bookshelf without even glimpsing at the cover. As soon as she sat down, she'd realized it was written in French, so she'd simply closed the book and watched the fire.

Her mind was frantically wondering where Jack had gone. Had he returned to his home? She'd never seen him so angry and she wasn't sure who had infuriated him more—her or his uncle. She hadn't anticipated that her meeting with Wilshire would unnerve him so, but she had little doubt that her untimely appearance in the library had shaken him to the core.

He didn't want her to meet his uncle. No—not that. It was more like he hadn't wanted his uncle to meet her. The fear. It was the fear she'd seen in his eyes that haunted her. She recognized the look. It was the same one she'd seen in the eyes of the children who'd come to her shelter with their mothers. They were afraid, abused and uncertain. Was that why he'd run out? Because she had seen something he wanted to remain hidden. What had his uncle done to him? What was there to fear? Every time she ran through the scene in the library, she ended up with more questions and no answers.

Alex had warned her not to push Jack, but Hayley didn't think she would be able to rest until she knew. Something about Jack Campbell tugged at her heart. Setting the book aside, Hayley excused herself, claiming to be jet-lagged with a small laugh. She left the McCormicks to their blissful married existence, and she sensed they secretly welcomed the time alone together, even though she knew they would never complain about her presence.

Sleep—she thought as she climbed the stairs—would be a long time coming. She paused outside her door and then continued past it. To hell with Alex's mysterious warning to give Jack time and not push him—he owed her some answers. After all, she'd taken Julia into her protection, even though Jack didn't know about that and she had endured his uncle's threats. She needed to know exactly what was going on in the Campbell family if she was going to be able to help Julia and Jack.

She also wanted to know what the nature of their relationship was. Jack obviously cared a great deal for Julia, yet the young woman seemed reluctant to see or speak to him. Was Julia merely trying to protect him from his uncle's wrath, or was the romantic interest only on Jack's end? There was a noticeable age difference between the two, and Hayley thought Simon and Julia were actually better suited.

Hayley couldn't quite explain why she couldn't see Jack and Julia living happily ever after together—yet the entire idea of it seemed wrong to her. Maybe it was because

she could only see Jack with her.

Groaning, Hayley tried to stop that silly thought from taking root. She could never be happy with a man like Jack. She could never be happy with any man. She had long ago accepted that a romantic relationship was something she would never be able to have. Too much baggage from her childhood, she'd decided, although the knowledge of that fact left her feeling empty and alone most of the time. Watching Alex and Erin together had uncovered some long buried desire in her heart, and she found herself wishing for their kind of love for herself.

Of course, the fact that Jack lived in the past and Hayley had every intention of returning to the future as soon as that damned tree would let her was another obvious hurdle to any budding love affair she might be imagining between them.

Walking farther down the hall, Hayley knocked softly on Jack's door, confident that he was not yet home. However, she wasn't sure where Templeton was. Did he wait in Jack's room for his master to return, or had he retired for the night?

When there was no answer, she quietly turned the knob and pushed it open. Jack's room was similar to hers. Alex and Erin had taken great care to ensure their guests' comfort. One candle was burning by the bed and another lit on the small writing desk by the window, while a fire blazed in the fireplace. The room was overly warm after being closed for several hours, so Hayley opened a window, allowing the cool summer breeze to blow in before crossing to the chair behind the desk. She settled down to wait, but before long the soft lighting and gentle breeze left her drowsy. Putting her head on her arms on the desk, Hayley tried to fight sleep, but the quiet night sounds outside soon lulled her in to slumber.

*

Jack entered his dark room well after midnight. Alex must have instructed the servants not to lock up the house in case he returned. The fire in his room had burned down to glowing embers, and the candles had gutted. Wearily, he walked over to the bed, sitting on the edge to pull off his boots and stockings. Standing again, he stripped off his waistcoat and started to drape it over the desk chair.

A slight figure in the chair caught his eye, startling him briefly. The moonlight streaming through the open window shone on the desk. For a moment, Jack simply stared at the top of Hayley's head; her curly red hair spread all around her face like vibrant rays shooting from the sun. Without thinking about why she was there, Jack walked around the desk and gently lifted her from the chair. She did not awaken until she felt herself being placed in a soft bed.

Chapter Thirteen

Opening her eyes slowly, she saw Jack leaning over her. His features were no longer hard and angry, but soft and tender.

“Jack?” she whispered.

“Sshh,” he said softly. “It’s late. Go back to sleep.”

Waking slowly, Hayley glanced around the room, confused. Then she remembered where she was and why. Looking at Jack perched on the edge of his own bed, Hayley sat up suddenly aware of the fact that she was lying in his bed. “Jack,” she repeated.

“I think we’ve established that it’s me.” His voice was deep.

Remembering all the day’s events and the fact that she had been seriously worried about him, Hayley took exception to his calm, cool tone. “Where the hell have you been?”

All trace of kindness left his face at her words. “Out.”

Hayley waited for him to elaborate, but instead he pushed off the side of the bed, crossing the room, away from her. It was clear he didn’t intend to say more.

“Out?” Hayley repeated sharply. “Out? I’m afraid you will have to do better than that. I’ve been—”

“Do better than that?” Jack stalked back to the bed, his face transformed to its previous angry state; the one that had frightened her so when he’d stormed out of the house that afternoon.

He leaned toward her. “Mademoiselle, you are in *my* room in the middle of the night, and you have the audacity to question my whereabouts. You are the one in the wrong place, as usual.”

“What does that mean, ‘as usual’?” she asked angrily, continuing to speak without allowing him to answer. “You’re the one who stormed out after that scene with your uncle. Do you mind explaining what the hell I did that was so wrong?”

“I’ll tell you exactly what you did wrong. You came into the library when you weren’t welcome. You deliberately placed yourself in my uncle’s presence after I expressly forbid you to go anywhere near him, and you provoked him into a rage causing him to threaten your well-being when you should have kept your mouth closed.”

By the end of his speech, Jack’s voice had gotten menacingly softer, instead of louder, clueing her into just how furious he really was. His face was mere inches from hers. She could feel the heat radiating from his furious body, and she wondered briefly if she could actually be burned by someone else’s wrath.

Retreat seemed the only way. “I’m sorry.” Her voice shook slightly, but Jack’s face remained the same. He was still as a stone, leaning over her in the bed. “You’re right. I was wrong, and I am sorry.”

When he didn’t respond, she attempted to back away from him on the bed. He was looming over her, larger than life. Her only thought was to put distance between them, but he stopped her by placing his large hands on her upper arms. He half sat, half dropped to the bed beside her, and she had only a moment to gasp before his lips crushed into hers. His kiss was hard and brutal as he pushed her lips roughly against her teeth. She tasted her own blood and, in fear, raised her hands in an attempt to shove him away. She

may as well have attempted to move a jumbo jet.

Apparently, Jack sensed her fear as the tenor of his lips on hers changed. Slowly, the kiss became softer, gentler. His hands left her arms and moved slowly up to clasp the side of her face. He ran his fingers through her hair, stroking it as his lips roamed over her face and neck.

Hayley stopped pushing against his chest and moved her hands up to the back of his head, her fingers playing with his thick hair. His tongue brushed against her lower lip, coaxing her to open her mouth. When she did, his tongue caressed her mouth, soothing it, taking away the pain of his earlier aggression.

He pulled back briefly to look in her eyes. "You shouldn't be here," he whispered before he returned to kissing her without waiting for a response. Afraid he would stop, Hayley moved her hands to his face. She was beginning to crave his kisses like she craved Moose Tracks ice cream. She rubbed her hands over his rough, day-old beard.

Spurred on by her touch, Jack's hands trailed down her throat and arms, moving to her breasts. She was still wearing Katie's plain blue day dress having never returned to her room after dinner. With knowing fingers, Jack lifted her lightly and began to undo the buttons at the back, sliding the dress off her shoulders.

Breaking the kiss, he glanced down at her bra. Hayley blushed, remembering the last time he had seen her in just this state. It was after their swim earlier that day. Had it really only been this morning? It felt like ten years since then. Grinning, he returned to kissing her, while his hands stroked her breasts through the thin material. He continued to rub them tenderly while his lips traveled from her cheeks to behind her ear, then trailed along her neck.

She shivered as his lips moved down to caress her nipples through the material of her bra. "Jack," she whispered, holding him to her before stiffening; the feelings his touch evoked unfamiliar and frightening to her.

Jack was the one to pull back, obviously sensing her sudden fear. Hayley was amazed by how in tune to her emotions he seemed to be. He shook himself as if he were in a daze. "Dammit, Hayley." Stopping seemed to hurt him physically as he stepped back from the bed. "You shouldn't be here."

Shuddering, she pulled her dress up. "You're right." Thinking him still angry, she added, "Jack, I'm sorry about earlier. That's why I'm here. I wanted to apologize. I didn't mean to interfere in your business with your uncle."

"I don't give a damn about that," Jack said. "You need to go back to your room. If Alex finds you in here, we'll be standing before a minister tomorrow morning saying wedding vows."

"What?" Hayley said with a small laugh. "Just for making out?"

Jack looked at her, puzzled. "Making out? Is that what you call this? You mean you've done this before?" Alex had warned Jack about some strange pact Hayley and her friends had made about remaining virgins until they were married the first night he and Hayley had arrived at the Grange. Jack couldn't imagine it actually being necessary to make such a strange pledge with friends. In this time, innocence was expected and generally found on the wedding night. The idea that women in the future would not save themselves for their husbands seemed foreign to him. Of course, if he was being honest with himself, most things about Hayley were foreign to him.

Alex had been warning Jack away from her with the information and he knew it, but

Alex's explanation of the carefree nature of sexual relations in the future had shocked him just the same. He couldn't conceive of a place where men and women could engage in sex so freely, unless, of course, it was in a brothel.

"Well, yeah," she said, blushing. "It's not so unusual in my time for men and women to kiss and touch and stuff." He couldn't believe he was having this conversation with a woman. She seemed to be so afraid of being touched that he was surprised by her words. There was an innate innocence about her tangled with that damned fear that never seemed to lessen.

"You've been with a man before?" Jack wanted to clarify his question so there was no misunderstanding between them. "I thought—Alex said—I understood him to mean that you were an innocent." Jack stumbled as he spoke. He was never uneasy with females, and he struggled to stifle a groan. Hayley had a knack for bringing the worst out in him, and she continually left him stuttering and tongue-tied.

"Oh, I am," Hayley added quickly. "I mean, I guess, in the way that you mean. We are talking about sex, right?"

Jack nodded.

"Actually, what you and I just did, well, that's a bit farther than I've ever gone. Although I have been kissed and—" Hayley blushed, and he wondered how they could end this uncomfortable discussion. "There was a guy in college that I kinda liked, but we never—" She stopped talking, clearly too mortified to continue.

"I see," Jack said.

Hayley rubbed her brow, trying to push back the memory of her single attempt to get close to a man. That night had ended with her having a major panic attack and running from the boy's dorm room like she was being chased by a serial killer. Needless to say, he'd never called again.

Jack shook his head and closed his eyes, and Hayley tried to decide if he was disgusted or intrigued.

"I think it's a good idea if we stop then. I—well—I really think—damnation, woman, regardless of what happens in your time, in this day and age it is extremely inappropriate for you to be in a man's room." Then he seemed to take note of where she was. "And in a man's bed."

"I wasn't in your bed until you put me here," she teased, wishing she could lighten the tension that was stirring in the air.

Growling, he ran his hand over his frustrated face and through his hair. She had mussed it up during their kiss, and he'd only succeeded in making it worse.

Hayley began to giggle.

Jack eyed her, first with annoyance and then her mirth reached him. "And what," he asked with a grin, "is so funny?"

"Oh, Jack ... your face, your hair. You look like the Cowardly Lion. I'm sorry. I know I'm a total pain in the ass, and you're so sweet to keep putting up with what must seem like extreme eccentricities. Look on the bright side, when I set my mind on something I usually see it accomplished; which hopefully means my time here will be short."

"So you still intend to figure out a way to open that portal again, before the end of this year?"

"Heck yeah. I'm hoping to be back in two thousand eight before the end of my

planned three week holiday. Just think, soon I will be gone, and you can go back to your normal, peaceful, existence complete with your boats, horses and women who behave as they should.”

Jack’s smile dimmed a bit before he corrected her. “They aren’t boats—they’re ships. And I don’t consider myself cowardly or a lion.”

Hayley burst into true laughter at his playful words.

“In the future, Miss Garland, if you feel the need to chastise me, perhaps you could wait until we are in neutral territory.” Jack continued his retreat from the bed until he was standing before the door to the hallway.

“Okay,” Hayley said softly. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning then.” Hayley stood up, attempting to straighten her dress despite the fact it was hanging open down the back. “Friends again?” she asked tentatively.

Jack nodded. “Hayley,” Jack said, catching her upper arm as she passed by him to leave the room. “Today was one of the worst of my life, and I’ve had more than my fair share of dreadful ones. I’m sorry for the roughness of my kiss and for the past few moments—what happened between us on the bed. What did you call it?”

“Making out,” Hayley answered with a blush.

“Yes, what exactly does *making out* include?”

“Oh.” Hayley smiled at him, unsure how to respond. “Well, what we were doing, of course, classifies. As well as—oh hell Jack—I already told you that is farther than I’ve ever gone on the ‘making out’ scale.” As she said the words “making out,” she made quotation marks with her fingers and his smile grew.

“I mean I took sex ed. in high school, and I know how it all ends; so I guess making out is everything short of actual, er, intercourse. Damn, this is an embarrassing conversation.” She turned away from him and crossed over to the fireplace. She was hoping to escape his penetrating gaze, but she could feel it even with her back turned. When she realized her dress was still unbuttoned, and she turned around quickly, leaving her back to the flames.

“I see.” Jack seemed entranced by her disheveled state and unconcerned by her embarrassment. “And what we did, that’s as far as you’ve gone?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ve already said as much—twice. You don’t have to remind me how inexperienced I am in this area. I know you’ll probably find this terribly hard to believe, but in my time, I’m not exactly ... approachable.”

“Unapproachable? You?” Jack’s eyebrows raised in mock astonishment.

She smirked at his jest. “I tend to intimidate men. I’m rather abrasive. But in my own defense, my upbringing and my job haven’t exactly instilled in me a lot of respect for men.”

“What do you mean—upbringing and job?” Jack asked. At his question, Hayley realized the two of them really didn’t know much about each other. The thought struck her as strange when she realized how relaxed she was in his presence. He felt like a comfortable shoe or dear old friend. The idea that he didn’t know all of her deep, dark secrets was unfathomable.

“My father was an alcoholic. He used my mother as a punching bag when he was drunk.” Hayley said the words automatically and without inflection, as if she were merely reading the headline of a newspaper rather than announcing something as dreadful as spousal abuse.

She'd talked about her mother's past experiences, often with the women from the shelter. The words came easily as she told her tale only in third person, as the child who watched her mother's abuse. She'd never discussed the past from her point of view, and she had learned to separate her words from the feelings they stirred. Years of pushing the terror of her childhood to the deepest recesses of her mind had allowed her to do her job; to relate to the women at the shelter on a personal level without falling apart on a daily basis.

"As for my job, I am a social worker and counselor at a women's shelter." At Jack's questioning glance, she elaborated. "I work with women and children who are living in abusive situations. They are victims of violent husbands, lovers or fathers, and they come to the shelter in an attempt to break free. To escape the pattern of abuse and make new lives for themselves."

"What happens when the men come to retrieve their wives?"

"Women aren't property in my time. Divorce is common. However, the same problems exist in the future as they do here. Many women feel trapped and stay with the abuser because they don't have a job or a way to support themselves or their children. At the clinic, we give them a temporary home and then help them find jobs, apartments and provide counseling to help them see that it isn't okay to let some man beat the hell out of them just because he can. Sometimes, they return to their abuser despite the help we provide." Hayley stopped as she realized she was ranting a bit. She gave Jack a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get carried away."

"Don't apologize. You're a passionate woman—in more ways than one. The job sounds dangerous."

"Sometimes it is. These men don't take kindly to interference. I've been threatened loads of times. My car has been keyed, my apartment spray-painted with some very choice language and I've been hit a few times." Hayley rattled off the list nonchalantly.

"Hit?" Jack asked angrily. "Who hit you?" His tone was so sharp it caused Hayley to jump back.

"Does it matter who? Are you planning on running into them?" Hayley said it teasingly, secretly pleased by his concern, but also hoping to bring some levity to a conversation that had gotten a bit personal.

Jack shrugged as he seemed to realize how foolish his response was, but he still looked irate.

"So I guess that's why your uncle's threats didn't really bother me that much. All in a day's work for me." She didn't want to admit that Robert Campbell's comments and malevolent looks sent cold chills racing through her, and she seriously doubted she would sleep without hearing his threats in her constantly evolving, yet never-ending nightmares.

Scowling, Jack approached her. "Regardless of what you are accustomed to, Wilshire is not someone you should cross." As he continued to speak, he turned her away from him so he could fasten the buttons he'd only unfastened moments earlier. "In the future, I would appreciate it if you would do as I ask and stay away from him. It shouldn't be too difficult as he has no reason to return here. I honestly don't know where Julia is. I wish to God that I did. I actually spent most of the evening riding in the woods between here and the Homestead hoping to find her."

Hayley felt guilty keeping her secret, but she'd promised Simon and Julia. "I'm sure wherever she is, she's fine."

Finished with his task, he began to pace the room, and Hayley sensed how truly worried he was. What was the relationship between these two? While she suspected Julia was protecting Jack, she didn't get a sense from her that she was head over heels in love with Jack. If it were her in hiding, Hayley would want the man she loved to be with her. Jack's demeanor, while certainly concerned, didn't strike her as a man out of his mind with worry for his beloved.

"You seem very fond of Julia, but you've never told me what she is to you. I mean you said you aren't related, yet I sense you're very close." Hayley silently kicked herself for the personal nature of the remarks.

"Jealous?" Jack asked with a wicked grin.

"Don't flatter yourself, hotshot." Hayley replied with more cockiness than she felt.

"It's late," he said. "You should go back to your room before someone finds you here."

Tired, Hayley conceded the battle and decided she would resume the war tomorrow to discover more about the mysterious relationship of Jack, the earl and Julia. For now, she was ready for rest. The day had been more than adventurous, and tomorrow seemed to offer more of the same. It was funny how her life in the future—while always busy—never seemed to be quite as fulfilling or exciting. Stifling yet another yawn, Hayley murmured a soft "good night" as she headed to her room.

"Goodnight, firebrand," Jack whispered as he closed the door behind her.

Chapter Fourteen

Hayley opened her eyes, rolled over in the bed and cursed. Looking out the window confirmed that she was still stuck in the past. Three weeks had flown by in a whirl, and she was no closer to discovering the secret of the tree's magic now than she had been when she'd first arrived. A crushing weight seemed to have settled on her chest, and she wasn't sure what to do next. While she wasn't unhappy here, she'd definitely set all her hopes on being home by now. Tori was probably over her initial shock and panic at finding her missing and had moved on to utter resignation and grief. Hayley recalled those feelings well, as they'd been forced to face those emotions when they realized that Erin was coming back.

Jack, true to his word, had tried to help her uncover the secret magic of her time travel, but they'd hit several snags along the way. Despite Jack's insistence that they involve Alex and Erin in the investigation, Hayley resolutely refused. She didn't want her friend to worry that she was miserable and desperate to escape, when in fact she was not. Besides, Erin had made her peace in this time, creating a happy life for herself. Hayley wasn't sure if the knowledge of how to return to the twenty-first century would impact Erin's feelings in that regard. The most difficult thing was trying to question the locals about a magic time traveling tree without actually saying those words.

Despite her lack of success in returning home, her new life in the past had settled into a comfortable existence. Jack served as escort on her daily jog and swim, while she wore the swimsuit deemed appropriate for the times. The outfit was ridiculous and made swimming difficult, if not downright dangerous. Each morning after her exercise, Hayley smuggled food from the kitchen and then crept out the back door to see Julia. Simon had stayed with Julia the first couple days, then claimed he truly did have to go to London on business. Hayley had pitched a fit the day he'd left, but none of her insults or attempts to evoke guilt in the young man had changed his mind. Julia had tried to explain to her how important Simon's job was and how much Alex relied on him, but Hayley had put his name on the very long list of men who, in her opinion, could not be counted on.

So far, no one had approached the cabin while Julia was hiding there. Hayley assumed that since she and Jack had stayed there after Julia's disappearance, the men had marked it off their search list. She felt guilty not divulging to Erin about Julia's presence in the cabin, but the young woman had insisted that no one else be told; not even the marchioness of Dorset.

"Morning, sunshine," Erin said cheerily as she walked into Hayley's room.

"Is that what this ungodly hour is?" Hayley answered, her voice still rough from sleep.

"Yep, it's this little thing we early risers like to call sunrise."

"Tell me something, Erin. Were you always this annoying back home?"

"Oh, hell yeah, sweetie. Don't you remember?"

Hayley nodded and grinned at their teasing banter. "It seems to be coming back to me."

"What's on your agenda for today?" Erin asked.

"I guess the same damn thing that's on it everyday." Hayley didn't intend her answer

to sound so grumpy, but she couldn't seem to shake the depression that had taken root as soon as she'd awakened to find herself still firmly ensconced in eighteen eighteen.

Erin's smile faded, and Hayley silently cursed her harsh answer.

"Don't mind me, Erin," she said quickly. "I appear to have woken up on the wrong side of the bed." She sat up slowly, propping her back against several pillows.

Erin nodded and came to sit beside her. "Are you terribly unhappy here?" she asked.

They'd seemed to have reached a tacit agreement not to speak about the tree or returning home.

"No, Erin. Of course I'm not." As she spoke the words, she realized the truth behind them. When she thought about it, these were probably the most relaxing, carefree days she'd ever spent anywhere.

She'd learned to ride a horse and thoroughly enjoyed their afternoon jaunts. The Grange and surrounding countryside were beautiful and untouched. Some days she and Erin traveled to the nearby village and walked through the shops.

On other days she and Jack would ride along the beach, exploring the caves and cliffs while looking for Julia. She thought Jack had begun to hope that Julia had escaped the area completely and was hiding out with friends or relatives elsewhere. Twice they'd had the misfortune of running into Lord Wilshire, who was also conducting a search for Julia. Both incidents had ended in an argument between Jack and his uncle, but Hayley—having learned her lesson—wisely kept her mouth shut. After both these meetings, Jack had disappeared into his room refusing to come out even for dinner.

"I was thinking that perhaps after dinner tonight, we could do another sing-along," Erin suggested hopefully.

Hayley laughed recalling their last attempt at teaching the men the words to several Beatles songs. Most evenings, the two couples enjoyed a nice meal before retiring to the library, where they all sat together reading, talking and singing. The evenings were her favorite part of the day. She and Erin told Jack and Alex all about the future. Jack—especially fascinated by the descriptions of modern-day modes of transportation—usually ended up quite frustrated when neither Erin nor Hayley could answer his sophisticated questions about the inner-workings of cruise liners, automobiles or airplanes. Other nights, Erin sang her songs for them.

"And who were you thinking about honoring tonight?" she asked.

"I thought perhaps we could shock the guys with some women anthems. Maybe Helen Reddy's 'I am Woman' and Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive.'"

"Why stop there?" Hayley joked. "Why not introduce them to Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' and the Dixie Chicks' 'Goodbye Earl.'"

"Oh, my God. Can you imagine if we sang a song about an abused wife killing her husband?" Erin giggled at the thought.

"Might keep them honest," Hayley said, laughing.

"Ha, as if either one of those men would raise a hand to harm us. You know I've always considered myself extremely fortunate to have met Alex. So many men of this time wouldn't accept me. But Alex not only accepts who I am, he loves me. He really loves me."

"I know," Hayley agreed, a lump forming in her throat. For a year, she'd believed her missing friend had met some brutal, horrible end. To discover that she'd been happy, loved and cherished washed away all the self-pity Hayley had suffered since waking up.

So what if she was still trapped in the past? Erin was alive and living the perfect life. That knowledge was worth the trip. Taking a deep breath, she felt her confidence return.

"Sometimes—" Erin said before pausing.

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I wonder if perhaps you were lucky to find Jack as well."

Despite the fact they spent so much time together, Jack had kept his distance from her physically, and she was unwilling to risk the comfortable friendship they'd formed by pushing for more of his lovely kisses. "I don't think it's exactly the same for us, Erin. Jack and I are just friends."

Erin nodded, but Hayley could see her friend wasn't convinced.

Unwilling to venture any further into the topic of Jack Campbell, Hayley threw back the covers and rose.

"Well, I suppose I'll get dressed, and we can head down to breakfast. The guys must be wondering where we are."

"Actually, Jack headed out just before dawn to return to his shipping company, but he did say he would be back in time for dinner tonight." Erin helped Hayley fasten her day dress. "He wanted me to apologize for the fact he won't be able to escort you on your run."

"That's okay," Hayley said. "I think I'll actually skip the exercise today and do a bit of exploring."

"Haven't you seen every rock and twig on this property by now?" Erin teased.

Hayley's common lie was that she was exploring when actually she was sneaking off to check on Julia. In the short time she had known the young woman, she had come to care for her as a sister. Julia's sweet, carefree nature drew Hayley to her and, despite the small twinges of jealousy she felt about Julia's relationship with Jack, she enjoyed her company very much. Julia would have been a June girl in two thousand eight. She was vivacious and optimistic, despite her uncertain future and painful past. When Hayley questioned her about the bruises and cuts, Julia confirmed that Wilshire had gone into a rage after her sister's death and beaten her. Unfortunately, that was all Julia would say.

Julia had never mentioned Wilshire's insistence that the two of them were to wed, so Hayley decided not to mention it in case she didn't know of his plan. Also, Julia had never spoken about Jack as anything more than a beloved friend.

Each time, Hayley had tried to broach the subject of Julia's options for the future, the young girl had become uncharacteristically angry and demanded that Hayley let things remain as they were. She'd tried to explain that each passing day was increasing the odds of Julia being discovered. Hayley desperately wanted to confide in Jack or Erin, but Julia was dead-set against it. After each heated debate, she'd conceded, deciding ultimately it was Julia's decision to make as it was her future that was at stake, and Julia understood this time period better than she did.

"Oh I don't think I've managed to see everything yet," Hayley said vaguely. "In fact, I may just take my breakfast and lunch on the run. There's a walking path along the cliffs I've been wanting to try." Grabbing up a handful of food would disguise the fact she was sneaking it out to feed her fugitive friend.

"Fine with me," Erin said. "But do be careful. I have a few household chores to attend to with Mrs. Scott, and I'm sure you would just be bored around here. Why don't I catch up with you at supper?"

“Sounds perfect,” Hayley concurred. She had several things she hoped to do today and all of them would be more easily accomplished without Erin or Jack hovering nearby.

She’d come up with a cover story she wanted to try out on some of the locals in an attempt to discover more about the tree. Determination—and perhaps a bit of desperation—was driving her now. She wouldn’t stop until she figured out a way back home.

* * * *

Hayley walked through the woods along the now familiar path to the cabin. She’d excused herself from the library early tonight, her heart heavy with disappointment. Jack had sent word that he would be arriving home late, so dinner had been a quiet affair. Her attempts to speak with the people in the village had failed miserably. Nobody seemed to know of any local legend involving a magic tree or time travel; although several people had mentioned a crazy woman they called Lady Looney, whom they’d believed to be a fairy. She’d been too tired and disheartened to visit Julia this afternoon, so she was doing so now.

After three weeks of increasingly difficult deception, Hayley had hit her limit with Julia’s wishy-washy answers. She’d spent weeks lying to everyone she cared about, constantly looking over her shoulder for an evil earl and swallowing copious amounts of guilt all to protect a young woman who was strangely content to spend the rest of her days in a rundown cabin in the middle of nowhere. Tonight, Hayley was determined, the dishonesty would stop. At least one thing she attempted today would be accomplished, she decided.

As she approached the small house, she was determined she would not leave until she’d convinced Julia that time was up. The young woman needed to make some definite plans about her future. Hiding out in the cabin was a temporary solution at best and one that was about to quickly run its course. Julia needed to seriously consider going away somewhere—preferably somewhere far away where Wilshire couldn’t find her—and she needed to go to Jack for help to do that. Staying so close to the earl was only increasing her odds of being discovered.

“Hello Hayley,” Julia said, her voice friendly as Hayley let herself into the cabin.

“Hey Jules,” she said quietly.

“Are you well?” Julia asked. “You look a bit pale.”

“Actually, no. I’m not feeling that great.”

“Is there something I can do?” Julia quickly crossed the room and offered Hayley one of the two roughly hewn chairs at the table.

“How long are we going to do this?” Hayley asked as she sat down. She hadn’t intended to broach the subject so tactlessly, but her energy was zapped, her confidence drained.

As Hayley expected, Julia insisted things were fine the way they were. “Please Hayley. Let’s just give it a few more days.”

Hayley wished—as she had on numerous occasions—Simon had not gone to London. He was more familiar with the area, and he would probably have already found somewhere safer for Julia to stay. Knowing it was only a matter of time before Julia’s secret hideout was discovered, Hayley refused to buckle to Julia’s demands yet again.

“No!” she yelled angrily. “Enough is enough. You’re in danger here, and I won’t be a party to this any longer. I was a fool to let you convince me to hide you this long.”

Julia began to interrupt, but Hayley forged on, irate and frustrated. “You need to know what Wilshire is planning. I didn’t mention it before because I didn’t want to upset you, but perhaps if you know, you’ll see that the danger is very real here. He’s planning to marry you. He showed Alex a special license he received from the bishop just the other day granting him permission to wed you as soon as you’re found. Julia, you have to run. Fast and far away. Don’t you understand?”

Julia burst into tears. “Oh, God, Hayley. Of course, I know he means to wed me. Why do you think I ran away? I saw what he did to my sister. All those years. All those beatings when each month confirmed she wasn’t pregnant. That’s all she was to him, a means to an end. Her sole purpose in life was to give him an heir.” Julia’s words were muffled as her crying turned to sobbing, but she forged on, painting a picture more horrible than Hayley could ever have imagined.

“For five years, I tended her wounds and held her as she cried. I listened to her screams when he went to her bed each week to give her his seed. He didn’t make love to her—he ravished her, hurt her. Repeatedly. It was the only way he could be with her. He didn’t desire her unless she screamed, unless she was in pain. Do you think I’d let him do that to me? Do you?” Tears streamed down Julia’s face as she spoke.

The horror of her words cut Hayley to the core. “Then why stay here? Why risk being found?”

“All I care about is here,” Julia whispered. “I’m tired. Can we finish this discussion tomorrow?”

“Julia,” Hayley began, but Julia interrupted her.

“Please, not tonight. I’ll think about what you said. I promise.” Julia rose, walking to the bed.

Dismissed and distressed, Hayley left the cabin.

All I care about is here.

What could that mean? Her sister was gone. She had no other family in the area, unless she counted Jack. But if she was staying for Jack, why wouldn’t she see him and tell him she was safe? Julia’s comment sparked even more questions in Hayley’s mind.

She tried not to think of the horrible picture Julia had drawn of Helena’s miserable existence with Wilshire. She thought back to that first day with Jack by the sea. He’d alluded to the fact that Helena was better off dead than alive and with Wilshire. Could it be possible that Jack knew about Wilshire’s abuse and let it continue? She refused to believe that he could be so callous, so uncaring that he would let a young woman suffer such unspeakable cruelty. No, Jack couldn’t have known how bad it truly was. Of all the questions raised in her mind, that was the only answer she was sure of. Jack was good and kind, and he would never have let Helena remain in such a terrible place if he had known what was happening.

Her return trip to the Grange was slow. Instead of taking the path straight back to the house, she made a detour and walked to the oak tree. She had only come to the tree a few times since her arrival, which, when she thought about it, was probably unusual for someone so anxious to go back to the future.

She slowly circled the tree, running her hands against the rough bark. As she walked, she wondered why she was here. Why had this tree sent her away from her home, back to

this time of dukes and earls, of nobility and tenants, of peaceful evenings and long rides on horseback?

In her own time, she prided herself on her honesty. It was the one attribute of her character from which she'd never strayed, and yet, here—in this time, she had lied every single day to the people she cared about in an attempt to protect an abused woman. She'd spent her whole life shying away from arrogant, domineering men, and yet, here—in this time, she found herself seriously attracted to one. At home, she'd dedicated her life to protecting abused women, and here—in this time, she found a young woman who desperately needed her help, and she didn't know what guidance to give. The rules were different now, and Hayley felt like a fish out of water.

"What am I supposed to do?" she whispered to the tree. "Why am I here?" Pressing her forehead to the trunk of the tree, she waited for something, some words, some great epiphany that would help her figure out what to do next. After several minutes, she gave up. Taking a deep breath, she resumed her trek back to the house. She would simply go with her gut, just as she always had and pray that everything worked out in the long run.

As she approached the edge of the woods, Hayley felt the hairs on the back of her neck prick. She sensed someone was watching her. Perhaps Julia had come to her senses and decided to come back with her to the Grange after all.

"Julia?" she asked quietly. "Did you change your mind?" Silence was all that followed. Shaking off her fear, Hayley decided it was just stress and exhaustion making her a little loopy.

However, she was unable to shake the sensation of being followed as she continued her way back to the Grange. She quickened her pace until she entered the small garden at the rear of the house. Breathing a sigh of relief, she had gone no more than a few steps down the winding path before a large hand clasped over her mouth from behind. She tensed up ready for a fight when a familiar voice hissed in her ear, "What the hell do you think you're doing out here?"

Removing the hand with ease, she turned to face an angry Jack. She realized that she hadn't seen him this furious since her first days here. "You nearly gave me a heart attack," she replied unrepentantly, yet relieved that it was only Jack who had been following her.

"That's not an answer. Again, what are you doing out here?" He was clearly not going to be easily appeased.

"Walking, obviously." She hoped he would let the subject drop, and then she panicked briefly, wondering if he'd heard her call Julia's name. Attempting to distract him with a fight, she asked belligerently, "And what the hell are you doing out here?"

"I saw you slip into the woods from my window, but before I could get down here, you disappeared. That was over two hours ago. I've been sitting out here waiting for you to return, imagining all kinds of horrible scenarios of what could happen to you alone. Now, are you going to give me the real reason you're here, or am I going to have to force the truth from you?" Jack continued to stalk her until her back was pressed up against a tree.

"I told you," she repeated. "I was taking a walk, just like I was the night you first found me. I love walking in the woods at night. It's one of my favorite places. The woods are peaceful and help me sort out my thoughts." Hayley prayed her words sounded convincing and realized they should as she was speaking the truth. She did love to tromp

through dark woods.

“How many times do I have to tell you things are different here? Women are not safe walking alone at night, anymore than they are in the daytime. How many times have you done this?”

Hayley sensed that though he was exasperated, he was calming down. “This is the first time. I felt restless tonight. Too much energy. I needed to spend it somehow.”

Jack seemed to accept this reason, and she suspected she might have quite a lot in common with this rough pirate. She’d noticed Jack often went for long, hard rides on Lancelot when he had too much on his mind.

“I suppose this time must seem dull to you. After listening to you and Erin talk about the future, I cannot imagine what a woman like you would find here to keep occupied. I personally would love the opportunity go over the ocean on one of those flying machines—an airplane, what a great name—and travel from place to place quickly in a car.”

Hayley grinned at Jack’s enthusiastic outlook of the future and wondered if she had been too rash in her earlier pronouncement that it was good she had come through the tree and not Jack. Although his ideas regarding women were old-fashioned, she was beginning to find them endearing. No one had ever attempted to shelter or protect her before. She had always said she wanted it that way, but she couldn’t lie to herself and say she didn’t enjoy, and even crave, Jack’s overprotective concern.

“Who knows, maybe when the tree opens again, you can sneak back through with me. We could open up a foreign exchange program between the time periods.” Hayley giggled as she spoke, but Jack just shook his head.

“No, I can’t go through. It doesn’t work that way.”

“What do you mean? You think it’s one way?” Hayley felt herself beginning to panic at the idea. She hadn’t allowed herself to consider the fact that she may not be able to return at all.

Seeing her fear, Jack reached for her hands. “No,” he added quickly. “No, I don’t mean *you* can’t go back. I mean it only seems to work for you and Erin. You both spoke of being swept up into a tornado of noise and chaos when you approached the tree. I actually leaned through that tree to grab you, but I heard and felt nothing. Alex said the same was true for him—there was nothing, only Erin, in pain and struggling. If it were possible for us to go, I think we would have been swept away as well when we approached the tree, but we weren’t.”

“I never thought about that, but I suppose you’re right.”

Hayley thought back again to the incredible pain she had felt as she was ripped back in time. She couldn’t clearly recall when Jack had grabbed her, but she did have a sense of being saved, just before the pain rendered her unconscious. Recalling the agony of the trip planted a different seed in her brain—fear. The fear of experiencing the intense throbbing once again was actually more horrifying to her than not being able to return at all.

Jack, feeling her hands begin to shake, put his arms around her and led her to a nearby bench.

“Hayley, what is it? Oh, hell, sweetheart. I shouldn’t have mentioned that blasted tree. I’m sorry,” he said quickly as they sat.

“I was just remembering how bad it felt. Nothing in my life has ever hurt so much.

Jack, what if the tree opens again and I chicken out?" Hayley didn't consider herself a coward, yet when faced with the idea of traveling through that tree again, her knees went weak and her hands shook. Besides, who would be on the other side to grab her and pull her through? Certainly not Jack. What if she was caught up in the tornado forever?

"Chicken out?"

She laughed suddenly as she considered how the strange term must sound to him, grateful for the distraction from her irrational fears. "It's an expression. It means to be a coward."

Now it appeared to be Jack's turn to laugh. "A coward? You? I don't think you have anything to worry about, Miss Garland. You have more courage than twenty men put together. When the time comes, if you really want to go, you'll go."

She pondered his words *if you really want to go*, but didn't question them aloud. She still had time to prepare for that battle, and the fact that he believed she could do it went a long way toward making her feel better. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and they sat in comfortable silence for long time, lost in their own thoughts.

Hayley glanced around at their surroundings and then up. It was a beautiful night. The sky was clear and full of stars with a bright shining moon. She'd never seen so many stars in her whole life and realized at home, they were hidden behind the rooftops of the apartment buildings and the lights of the city. She never realized how many stars there really were. Sighing contentedly, she felt like she could spend the entire night on this bench counting stars.

Jack interrupted her reverie. "I've been thinking."

"Uh-oh," she said, with a look of mock horror.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You—thinking. It never bodes well for me." She giggled, and Jack laughed at her words.

"You may have a point there," he said lightly, "but I think you'll like this thought. I promised you a tour of one of my ships." At his words, she sat up attentively, and Jack laughed again. "You look like a small child on Christmas morning. One of the largest ships in my fleet is in harbor for the next few weeks, undergoing some minor repairs before embarking on a voyage to America. I thought you might like to take a small trip with me to see it."

"Oh, yes, Jack," she answered enthusiastically. "I would love to. When can we leave?"

"If you could perhaps skip your morning exercise again tomorrow, I thought we could head out right after breakfast. It's not a terribly long trip, but I want to get an early start so we can have most of the afternoon for the tour. There is a nice inn on the outskirts of town where we can have dinner, and we'll be back here before dark. Alex and Erin have offered to serve as our chaperones."

Chapter Fifteen

"I can skip my exercise. No problem. I can't wait to go see one of your ships," she said.

Jack, pleased by her excitement, had never met a woman so interested in the inner-workings of his business and the ships, in general. Over the past few weeks, he'd answered no less than a hundred questions for her from everything about the cargo he carried, to how the ship was able to maneuver, to who served on board. She had a natural curiosity that he found refreshing, and her questions were intelligent and probing.

Most women of his acquaintance thrived on conversation that involved no more than a discussion of the weather, the latest gossip and current fashion. The tediousness of society was one of the main reasons Jack stayed away from it, although it wasn't always easy to remove himself from the *haut ton* completely. He was an enigma as far as the *ton* was concerned. As one of the most successful and wealthy businessmen in England, society couldn't shun him as they were apt to do to other men who earned their living by actually working. In addition, he was a war hero and the sole heir to the earldom of Wilshire.

Until his uncle managed to produce a legitimate son—which was looking more and more unlikely by the day—society not only endured his common ways, but they welcomed him into their ballrooms and tried to entice him to offer for their unwed daughters. Jack avoided the social whirl assiduously figuring that if—and only if—he should someday find himself the earl would he consider marrying and producing an heir.

However, spending time with Hayley left him questioning that decision. She was the only woman he'd ever met with whom he actually thought he could live happily ever after. Too often though, she spoke of the time when she would return home, and he knew she had no intention of staying if or when the blasted tree deemed it was time for her to return to the future and away from him. The idea of her leaving was the impetus behind his reluctance to continue flirting and kissing her. To continue to tempt himself with her sweetness would only lead the two of them down the road to certain heartbreak.

"Penny for your thoughts." Her soft voice drifted to him.

"They aren't worth that much. Actually, in light of our busy day tomorrow, I think we should return to the house and retire for the evening."

She sighed softly, but showed no signs of moving. "I suppose you're right, but I'm not tired. It's so beautiful and peaceful here."

Looking at her, Jack agreed. "Beautiful."

Hayley blushed shyly. "Jack, if I asked you something, would you answer me honestly?"

"If I can," he answered. "What's on your mind?"

"What happened when you lived with your uncle?"

Taken aback by her question, he sat silent and stunned for several moments. He'd never told anyone about those terrible years, except Sebastian. He'd resisted drudging up all those horrible memories for years, but somehow, as he looked into Hayley's bright eyes, he felt she may be the one person to truly understand what he'd gone through. He didn't know much about her childhood, but he sensed that in many ways it had been as

difficult as his own.

He cleared his throat. "I told you about my parent's accident. How they died?"

Hayley nodded.

"After their deaths and that of my sister, the earl came to retrieve me from my grandfather's house. He insisted that as I was his heir and my parents were gone, it fell to him to raise me. Sebastian didn't want to let me go, but he didn't have any recourse. He wasn't nobility and the law would side with the earl, so he let Wilshire take me to the Homestead. I don't think you can begin to understand the contrast between living with my parents, who were loving, kind and generous to living with Wilshire, who hated everything about me." He shuddered as the memories began to creep back, and she quickly grabbed his hand.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I shouldn't have asked. It's really none of my business."

"No," Jack replied. "I just haven't thought about those years in a long time. I don't mind telling you—I think you need to understand how truly wicked Wilshire is."

Hayley nodded and tightened her grip on his hand.

"Initially," he continued, "I was confused by my uncle's cold reception. After all, he claimed I was his heir, so I thought that meant he wanted me there. I was only eight years old and had been raised in an environment where I had been pampered and doted upon. I knew nothing of hate and cruelty. Despite my attempts to please Wilshire, I was treated worse than the earl's hunting dogs. He fed me table scraps and took great pleasure in beating me for minor offenses. Once he gave me a dozen lashes for entering his study without knocking."

"What about your grandfather?" Hayley asked. "Surely he could have done something to help you."

He shook his head. "No, Wilshire threatened to kill Sebastian if I ever told him or anyone about the beatings. I was a scared child, and I believed what he said."

"Fortunately, I didn't have to tell. Sebastian was no fool." Remembering his commanding grandpa brought a smile back to Jack's face. "He began to become suspicious of my sudden, so-called clumsiness and started arriving for surprise visits at various times and days of the week, hoping to catch Wilshire in the act of hurting me. For all my uncle's bluffing, I suspect now, he was actually intimidated by my grandfather. Sebastian's visits did curtail the beatings for awhile."

"Awhile?" she asked. "But not permanently?"

"No, Wilshire's a mean bastard, pardon my language. He didn't like having to forgo the privilege of using his whipping boy to vent his spleen. I made the mistake of defending my father one day. I'd been living at the Homestead for a couple years. Two years in Hell can toughen up even the softest of souls. It wasn't uncommon for Wilshire to tell me I was as useless or as stupid as my father. One day something inside me snapped, and I'd had enough. I told him he wished he could be a quarter of the man my father was, and that he would always be the man my mother didn't choose."

"Oh, my God," Hayley replied as she paled at the thought of the effect his words must have had. "You're lucky he didn't kill you."

Jack grinned coldly. "Oh he tried. Luckily, Sebastian came by for one of his surprise visits before he had the chance to finish the job."

"Finish the job? What did he do?"

“He tied me to a whipping post he had behind the stable and proceeded to take nearly all the flesh off my back. I still have scars. Sebastian showed up and informed Wilshire that if he ever came near me again, he would chop him up into little pieces and ship him off to China in a cask of liquor. You have to understand that Sebastian was a former sailor—and suspected pirate—not to mention one of the largest men I’ve ever seen. My grandmother used to call him her gentle giant. The earl released me into grandfather’s care, claiming to be glad to be rid of me.”

Hayley seemed pleased that Jack had a defender in his corner. “I think you must take after Sebastian, and I don’t just mean your size.”

“I hope so,” Jack replied, his easy smile returning. “I can think of no greater man to emulate.”

Jack continued to relate to her the rest of his life history, flattered that she was so interested in him and not horrified by the stories of his past. He told her of his experiences at Eton with Ben and Alex, about joining the army—much to Sebastian’s dismay—about fighting in the war with France and the battle of Waterloo.

He told her about returning home to Dover after the war to find his grandfather’s health was failing. His grandmother had passed away the year before, and Sebastian died a mere six months after Jack’s homecoming. Upon his death, Jack inherited one of the largest and most profitable shipping companies in England.

“It must have been overwhelming to suddenly find yourself in such an important position with so much responsibility resting on your shoulders.”

He was touched again by her insight. “I was scared to death the day after my grandfather’s funeral. I walked into his office at the shipping company to find men looking to me for direction.”

“Obviously, you succeeded.”

“I discovered a trick,” Jack replied.

“Trick?”

“For the first few months, I pretended I was Sebastian.”

“What?” Hayley asked, laughing.

“I’m serious. I barked out orders like I’d seen him do a thousand times, sat at his desk with my feet up just like he did. For months, I was playacting and it worked.”

*

Hayley giggled at the idea of a thirty year old man imitating his grandfather. Shaking her head, she leaned back against him again as he tightened his grip around her shoulder. It felt so good to simply sit and talk to Jack.

Her thoughts quickly returned to Julia alone in the cabin, surrounded by the horrible memories of her sister and her untimely death. “You must be terribly worried about Julia.”

“Yes, I am concerned. Julia is a bit impulsive, and I’m afraid that it’s gotten her into some danger she can’t get out of.”

“She must be very special to have secured you as a champion.”

“Like you, I think it’s important to protect the people who need it. My uncle is not a suitable guardian or husband for Julia.”

“You must care for her a great deal. I mean I see how much you worry about her, and I wish—” Hayley paused, suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to confess everything. The stress of keeping Julia’s secret was weighing heavily on her conscience, but she had

promised Julia to remain quiet for one more day. After hearing Julia's confessions about the horrors she'd witnessed and experienced for the past five years, Hayley decided to honor that request and stopped mid-sentence.

"You wish?"

"I mean, I think you don't give your loyalty or trust easily, but when you do, you're a friend for life. It would be nice to be on the receiving end of—"

"Don't stop." Jack gently reached over to take her hands in his. She didn't realize how chilly the night had gotten until she felt the warmth in his touch. Jack seemed to notice the drop in temperature as well, and he pulled Hayley closer, placing his arm around her shoulders once again.

"I forgot what I was going to say." She snuggled closer to place her head on his shoulder. She had missed his touch the past few weeks. At night, she'd dreamed of him holding her again, as he had that night in the cabin. She'd never slept in a man's arms before that night, and the warmth and comfort of it clung to her like a soft, terrycloth robe.

"Never mind." Jack's arm moved slowly down her back. "It's not important."

She waited for him to say more, but he didn't. Instead, he continued to move his hand slowly, his caresses slowly lulling her into a state of total relaxation. She waited for the panic that always accompanied this type of closeness with a man, but it didn't come. His other hand reached over to touch her cheek, lifting her face to his, placing his lips against hers.

He was kissing her again, and she realized in that moment how much she'd missed his kisses. The kiss was light, more touch than kiss, and his lips moved against hers in the same soft way his hand was still rubbing her back.

Hypnotic, Hayley thought. His kisses were hypnotic. The hand Jack had used to lift her face now moved through her hair. She'd taken it down before sneaking out earlier, and it now lay in curly disarray over her shoulders.

"This hair," Jack murmured against her mouth, not ceasing his movements even to speak.

"Isn't it awful?" Hayley whispered back against his cheek, as his lips began their descent toward her neck.

"Not awful." His tongue darted out to touch her earlobe. "Glorious," he breathed into her ear. His hot breath and sweet words soothed her soul like a hot bath on aching muscles. It was all she could do not to purr like a well-loved kitten. His lips came back, harder this time, and with his tongue he parted her lips and began to stroke inside her mouth, playing tag with her tongue and dancing it along her teeth.

A limb breaking at the edge of the woods shocked both of them out of their embrace.

"What was that?" Hayley looked in the direction from which the sound had come. A shadow moved deeper into the woods, and Hayley realized someone was out there.

"Stay here," Jack whispered. Rising slowly, he crept along the cover of the rose bushes attempting to reach the woods by stealth. Unwilling to remain behind, Hayley silently followed, holding on to the tail of Jack's coat for support in the dark. Glancing over his shoulder at her, Jack scowled. Then he must have decided she was safer with him than attempting to find the stalker on her own. He removed her hands from his coat and placed both of them around him to rest lightly on his chest.

Breast to back, the two of them moved quietly toward the edge of the woods as a

single being. They'd nearly reached their destination when suddenly a dark figure leapt from behind the large tree they were approaching and took off through the woods. Jack—releasing himself from Hayley's hold—turned. "Stay here, and I mean it. If you move, I will take my belt to you." Then, he chased after the shadow.

Hayley—briefly appalled by Jack's rude threat—was ready to chase him down and give him a piece of her mind when she noticed that both men were headed in the direction of the cabin. Anxious to divert them before they stumbled across a hidden Julia, she took off through the woods and attempted to catch them before they reached the cabin. Stumbling over roots, she cursed her foolish impulsiveness. She should have returned and taken the path instead of trying to move quickly through the underbrush in the dark.

A noise to her right altered her direction, and she headed for the sound. She slowed after several minutes of running and listened again. She could hear someone gasping for breath about a hundred yards ahead of her, and her instincts warned her it was not Jack. The fact that the stranger was unaware of her presence yet, and that he was obviously exhausted, gave her an idea.

Moving away from the direction of the cabin, Hayley began to yell.

"Jack, where are you?" She ran as quickly as she could. Taking the bait, the man in the woods began to pursue her. Hayley hoped Jack would hear the ruckus and change direction too. She had no doubt she could outrun the stranger given his harsh breathing. With any luck, Jack would catch the assailant before the man caught her, and no one would find Julia's hiding spot.

Her luck ran out quickly as she tripped over a large protruding root, hidden by a pile of fallen leaves. Hayley flew face down, hitting her head on the ground hard. Breathless and stunned, she lay still for only a moment before she realized someone was standing above her, his breathing harsh and heavy.

"Got you, whore," a deep voice growled. "Did you like that bastard's hands on you?"

Before she could move, a giant hand yanked her up by her hair and began to shove her forward. "You took the master's woman, now you can give her back or take her place." Hayley tried to turn and see her captor, but his rough hand in her hair held her head firmly while his other hand pushed her forward. So this had been the person she'd sensed in the woods earlier this evening. He had been following her, and he'd heard her call Julia's name.

A small hope bloomed in Hayley's heart as she recalled his words—he wanted her to return Julia to the earl. Obviously, he didn't know about the cabin. Hayley saw a horse tethered to a tree before them and realized he intended to take her with him. She shuddered when she thought of facing Wilshire again. She'd not forgotten his angry threat at their first meeting or Julia's revelations about Helena's life. She could only imagine what he would do to her if he believed she knew where Julia was.

Suddenly, a loud *crack* pierced the air, and Hayley found herself falling hard to the ground once again, this time pushed down by the large man behind her. She felt only a moment of fear before her head hit a rock, and the starry night turned completely black.

Chapter Sixteen

Loud whispers and an agonizing pain in her head brought Hayley back to the world of stars and light. However—instead of seeing the nighttime stars in the sky—she could only see the shooting stars in her head stabbing her like she was a giant pincushion. The bright light was provided by numerous candles—too many candles—which increased the pain tenfold.

Jack—the source of the loud whispers—demanded to know where the servant was with the doctor. Erin was attempting to calm him down and ask Mrs. Scott to bring some tea and brandy.

Glancing to her side, Hayley spotted Alex looking at her with a sympathetic smile. “Welcome back,” he whispered.

At the sound of his voice, both Erin and Jack stopped their pacing and hurried toward the bed.

“Oh, Hayley, how do you feel?” Erin asked, tears in her eyes. “I was so worried when Jack carried you in and there was so much blood. I’m afraid you have a rather nasty gash on your head. After hearing that gunshot, I thought you’d been shot. What were you doing traipsing around in the middle of the night?” Hayley winced at the loudness of her friend’s voice, but Erin didn’t seem to notice and only ceased her rambling speech when Alex reached over and grabbed her hand.

“Erin,” he said quietly. “She, no doubt, has a headache, so let her rest. She can answer your questions later.” Erin smiled apologetically at Hayley, then leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so glad you’re awake. Someone has gone to get the doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” she replied.

“The hell you don’t,” Jack said loudly, causing her to wince again in pain.

“Jack,” Alex admonished. “I know you’re angry, but now is not the time. She has a rough night ahead of her, and your yelling is not helping. If you can’t control that temper of yours, you can leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jack said, quieter this time. He came and sat beside Hayley on the bed, reaching for her hand and scowling down at her. “I told you to stay put,” he started, but stopped after a warning glance from Alex.

“How do you feel?” Erin asked.

“Like there’s a stampede of buffalo running around in my brain. What happened?” Hayley spoke softly as each word pierced her aching head.

“There was someone in the woods. I went after him, foolishly thinking that for once in your life you would do as you were told. Next thing I know, you’re screaming bloody loud, and when I find you, some man is pushing you through the woods. I fired a shot into the air to scare him off. Instead, he pushed you down and took off. If I live to be a hundred years old, I will never forget the sound of your head hitting that rock.” Jack stopped speaking as he shuddered slightly at the memory of her fall.

“Why did you have a gun?”

“I’ve taken to carrying one with me all the time since Julia’s disappearance and my uncle’s threats.”

“Oh,” Hayley replied weakly.

Alex continued the tale. “The shot woke up the entire house. When I reached the edge of the woods, Jack was carrying you in, yelling for a doctor.”

“The man?” Hayley asked.

“I have several footmen out searching in the woods, but I doubt they’ll find anything. He’s probably well out of the area by now,” Alex replied. Tension filled the already overly warm room. She tried to fight the agonizing throbbing in her head, but with little success. Jack gripped her hand tighter, his face showing he understood what she was feeling.

“Well,” began Erin. “That didn’t take you long. How long have you been here—less than a month?” She grinned down and Hayley felt her own answering smile despite the pain. Jack and Alex simply looked puzzled.

“Long for what?” Jack asked.

“Have you ever gone so long without an injury?” The teasing tone in Erin’s voice and her words brought a full-fledged smile to Hayley’s face. “Our Hayley is somewhat of an expert in getting hurt.”

“What can I say?” Hayley answered softly. “It’s a talent.”

“One I was hoping you had lost with your trip through time. Oh, well, strap yourselves in boys, it’s going to be a bumpy ride,” Erin added, giggling.

Hayley laughed before clutching her head. “Don’t make me laugh, it hurts.” However, she was still smiling, and the tension of the room was quickly dispelled, filled with the soft laughter of the two women.

“I didn’t want to tell you guys this,” Erin whispered as if revealing some big secret, “but Hayley tends to get into situations like this *all* the time.”

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“All the time?” Jack was not laughing.

“Every phone call I made to Hayley usually included her describing the latest brawl, accident or attack—complete with all the gory details about her injuries.” Erin was still smiling, but Jack could see in her eyes that she was no stranger to worrying about her friend. He grimaced slightly to think that he would now be included in the list of people who had to fret over Miss Garland and her impulsive, self-destructive activities.

“It was not every phone call,” Hayley protested.

“It was *every* phone call,” Erin contradicted. “Hayley is a bit of a tomboy, if you haven’t figured that out.”

At Jack and Alex’s confused looks, Erin explained the term. “A tomboy is a girl who acts less like a lady and more like a rough and tumble boy.”

Jack did laugh now. Hayley scowled as she obviously remembered their first night together in the cabin when she’d been offended because he told her she acted more like a man than a woman and she’d hit him for it. He raised his eyebrows and grinned. Hayley stuck her tongue out at him before looking away.

“I don’t think defending yourself is quite the same thing as being a tomboy, Erin,” Hayley replied.

“Maybe not,” Erin answered. “But you wouldn’t have to defend yourself quite so often if not for your actions prior to the confrontations.” Though Erin’s tone was still light and playful, Jack sensed she was hoping to convince Hayley to take better care to stay out of trouble.

Hayley rolled her eyes, gasped at the pain the motion caused, then took a deep breath. Jack squeezed her hand sympathetically as Erin continued describing Hayley's penchant for trouble. He had the feeling this was not the first time these ladies had had this conversation or one similar to it.

"Erin, I don't go picking fights. You know that. It's the nature of my job to occasionally run into some trouble. I'm not going to back down and allow someone to hurt one of my women or children. Who's going to stand up for them if I don't?" Hayley asked.

"I'm not telling you to stop protecting those people. I'd convince you to stop breathing before I could persuade you to do that. And I'm not saying there aren't times when you can't avoid being caught in the middle of a violent situation. That's the nature of the job you've chosen for yourself, and there isn't anyone in that shelter who doesn't know that you've found your true calling. I just wish you would take better care of yourself. Why does it always have to be you who stands up to take the punch?" Erin was no longer laughing, but truly concerned for her friend.

Jack remembered the look of sheer panic on Erin's face when he carried Hayley into the house. He couldn't help but think that these two women were more like sisters than friends, and Erin's words made his blood run cold.

"What do you mean by 'take the punch'?" Jack asked Erin.

Hayley started to answer that she didn't, but was cut off by Erin. "She places herself between bullies and their victims. She's done it for as long as I've known her. We met when we were ten years old at a summer camp. In fact, that's how we befriended Tori. Tori was an extremely shy, chubby little girl with glasses and braces, and a few of the older girls had begun to pick on her. Hayley and I were late coming out of lunch one afternoon, and a group of them had tripped Tori and wouldn't let her get back up. Hayley approached the pack of three girls. All of them were twelve years old and enormous. She walked over to the meanest of the pack, threw a fist that would make George Foreman cry and knocked the girl out cold." Erin shook her head. "We picked Tori up, dusted her off, and she's been a June girl ever since."

"What about the other girls?" Jack asked, unsure he wanted to know.

"Hayley became their target after that instead of Tori. They didn't really approach her physically, but they put bugs and snakes in her sleeping bag, spit in her food, made rude comments and so forth."

"Yes, but they left Tori alone." Hayley seemed to believe that made her actions acceptable.

"That's right," Erin said. "You put yourself between Tori and the bullies. You took the abuse, just like you always do. God forbid, any of us actually have to take care of ourselves."

A burly groomsman appeared at the door, motioning to speak to Alex. The others fell silent while Alex consulted with the man. After a few moments, the servant left, and Alex told them what had been discovered. "They found where the man had tied his horse, but had no luck following the tracks. They're going to continue the search, but as dark as it is in those woods they don't expect to find anything."

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No, Hayley thought, they'll find something. Lady Julia. All her help was for naught. Surely, someone would remember the cabin and search it. Well, she thought, perhaps it

was for the best. Hayley was tired of the deception and lies. She wanted to help Julia, but she was finding it damned difficult to do alone.

A soft rap at the door was followed by the arrival of Mrs. Scott and the doctor. An elderly man with a full head of white hair and blue eyes that twinkled entered the room, and Hayley was immediately reminded of Santa Claus. He approached the bed with a kind smile for her before he promptly ordered everyone out of the room.

Erin squeezed her hand, and Alex patted her shoulder before they headed for the hallway.

However, Jack did not move. "I'm staying," he informed the doctor in no uncertain terms.

"Very well," Dr. Claus replied. "I welcome the help." With light, cold fingers, he removed the bandage from her head as she squeezed her eyes shut to hold back the tears that threatened to fall.

Jack leaned forward and whispered reassuring words to her as the doctor pressed and poked her head and looked into her eyes. "Well," he started after a few moments, "not as bad as some I've seen. I'm afraid you may have a concussion, nothing too serious mind you, but that gash will have to be stitched up." At his words, she struggled to sit, but was stopped in an instant by Jack's strong hands on her shoulders.

"Can't you just bandage it up tight? I'm sure it will be fine." She didn't even want to think about what it would feel like to be sewn up without the benefit of painkillers.

"Chin up, my dear," Dr. Claus replied with a kindly pat on her shoulder "I've been told I have a magic touch when it comes to stitches, and the gash is at the hairline, so I doubt you'll even notice the scar once the healing is done. Captain Campbell, I'll need your help to hold her down."

"Hold me down?" Hayley once again attempted to escape.

"First—" Jack said, pouring something from a decanter by the bed. "Drink this."

Helping her raise her head slightly, Jack held a glass of brandy to her lips. It tasted awful. She choked after the first swallow and attempted to push the glass away.

"No." Jack refused to remove the glass from her lips. "Drink it all. Trust me," he said with a grim smile. "It will help."

After she drained the glass, Hayley lay back on the bed as the liquid heat spread through her body. She couldn't understand how anyone would purposely choose to drink the stuff, but she didn't have long to consider it as Jack quickly placed a strong arm across her shoulders and straddled her legs with one of his own powerful thighs. His movements were so quick and unexpected she didn't have a chance to fight him. His placement ensured she could not move a muscle if her life depended on it.

With his free hand, Jack gently grasped the top of her head. His position left his face only inches from hers, and Hayley took comfort in his dark blue eyes. Dr. Claus quickly wiped the gash with alcohol, and then began to close the wound with a needle and thread. Hayley shuddered violently.

"Relax," Jack said after the first stitch, "and breathe. It won't get any worse than that."

Hayley began to breathe, though shallowly, and decided that while the procedure was certainly not pleasant, it wasn't as painful as she'd imagined. After several minutes, Dr. Claus tied off the final stitch.

With a soft smile for Hayley, the doctor looked at Jack. "No tears? Amazing. I've

stitched up wounds for soldiers and sailors who cried like babies, and this little slip of a thing didn't shed one. Well, my dear, that will do for now. I'm leaving some laudanum to help your pain. Don't take any tonight though. Not good after a head wound. All you can do tonight is sleep, and I want you to stay in bed and rest for a couple days. Concussions are tricky things, and you don't want to overexert yourself."

"She'll stay in bed." Jack gave her a look that would have turned a lesser mortal to stone.

"Thank you, Dr. Claus," she murmured drowsily. The long night, brandy and pain from her injury had sapped the last of her strength, and she closed her eyes to shut out the light.

"Dr. Claus?" the doctor repeated with a small chuckle. "I will be back tomorrow to check on her. And I will talk to the McCormicks before I leave. She should not be disturbed anymore tonight. Thank you for your help, Captain Campbell."

"Thank you," Jack said as the doctor left and closed the door behind him. Jack returned to the chair by her bed, and Hayley drifted off to sleep aware that he would watch over her and keep her safe.

Chapter Seventeen

Jack awoke late the next afternoon to a hand gently shaking his shoulder. He was sitting in the chair by Hayley's bed, and she'd finally fallen into a deep sleep. She'd had a restless night, crying out several times as if in the throes of a violent nightmare. Each time she thrashed about, Jack would hold her and whisper comforting words until she settled back to sleep. Trying to get his bearings, Jack glanced up to see Erin, looking down at him.

"It's late," she said with a smile. "Mrs. Scott said you refused breakfast and lunch. It doesn't look like she's going to stir anytime soon. Why don't I take a shift with her and you go get some rest in your own room?"

Weary, Jack reluctantly agreed, stiffly rising from the chair. He headed toward his bedroom, but halfway there he decided to go speak to Alex first. He wanted to know if the footmen had found any trace of the man in the woods.

Knocking on the door and entering Alex's study, Jack walked over to the chair opposite the large desk and fell into it.

"Hayley?" Alex asked.

"Still sleeping," Jack replied. "It was a rough night. I've never seen anyone suffer from nightmares like that. Poor thing is worn out. You should have seen her when the doctor put the stitches in. She didn't move a muscle or cry. Alex, do you ever wonder why—" Jack paused, uncertain whether he should begin this line of conversation.

"Do I wonder why she's so strong?" Alex supplied when Jack failed to continue. At Jack's brief nod, Alex said, "I sense you and Hayley have formed a friendship. I'm not sure how much she's told you about her past. Erin told me a bit about her upbringing that would certainly explain her strength of character. I don't think she had it easy growing up."

"Erin's a good friend to her. They seem more like sisters actually," Jack answered absently. Once again, he found himself wondering about Hayley's childhood. "Hayley mentioned having a father who was a bit too fond of drinking. She said he hit her mother. I'm sure that couldn't have been easy."

Alex quietly nodded, pondering the information.

Jack decided to change the subject. If Hayley wanted him to know anymore about her life before traveling back through time, she would tell him. "The doctor wants her to stay in bed for a few days."

"Yes, he spoke to me before he left. He seemed to think that there was perhaps an understanding between you and Hayley. He hinted around that there may be some feelings between the two of you. You know what a nosy old man Doc Jonesbury is."

Jack merely shrugged. He was well aware how things must have looked last night to the doctor and to Alex. He and Hayley had been outside alone in the middle of the night prior to the stranger's appearance and subsequent attack. Jack hadn't explained and even though Alex had not questioned him last night, Jack was sure the time of reckoning had arrived.

After several strained minutes, Alex cleared his throat. "I consider myself responsible for Hayley, despite anything she might say to the contrary, all that bloody

nonsense about being an independent woman and able to care for herself. Erin would never forgive me if anything happened to her best friend. Therefore, I have to ask. What exactly are your intentions toward this woman?"

Jack stood quickly and walked toward the desk where Alex sat. "My intentions are completely honorable, I can assure you. She's your guest and Erin's best friend. I have and will continue to treat her with respect."

"I sense there's more to it than that. I feel I have to remind you there is a very good chance that she will be leaving eventually."

"I realize that," Jack said sharply. "For God's sake, Alex, you know me. I am not about to get involved with Hayley. Marriage is not in my future. It never has been."

Alex nodded. "And that's my biggest concern. Hayley's time here is not permanent. Perhaps you see that as tempting. She's not a threat to your blasted life of bachelorhood, and let's face it, your reputation as a rake is only surpassed by your reputation as a businessman."

"What kind of man do you think I am?" Jack roared. "Do you really think I would compromise an innocent woman for my own selfish needs because there's no risk of commitment? I may be a rake, but I'm not a bastard. I know when a woman is unavailable, and I'm able to control my animal instincts."

"Good," Alex replied quietly, "because Hayley is definitely unavailable."

Furious with Alex's accusations, Jack stormed out of the parlor, slamming the door behind him.

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Erin watched from the top of the stairs as he stalked out the front door and headed toward the stables. She'd left Mrs. Scott to watch over Hayley when she'd heard the yelling begin.

Walking down the stairs to the study, she opened the door and peered inside. Alex was sitting back in his desk chair staring out the window. Crossing the room to stand behind him, she massaged his shoulders. "Trouble?"

"No, yes, I suppose I handled that situation wrong."

"What situation is that?" Erin asked.

"I basically told my friend he was a cold-hearted bastard and warned him to stay away from Hayley."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"I don't know. I suppose I was remembering when you came into my life. I kept telling myself not to fall in love with you because I knew there was a chance you wouldn't be staying. Then I did fall in love with you and the agony of thinking you would eventually leave nearly killed me. I don't want Jack to go through the pain of losing a woman he cannot keep." Alex pulled Erin around the chair and placed her across his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her forehead against his.

"You forget, Alex, I chose you. I stayed. Hayley and Jack will have to find their way, just like we did." She moved closer and kissed him lightly. "You can't control other people's feelings, no matter how much you might think it's for their own good."

Alex tightened his hold on Erin's waist and kissed her deeply. "You're right," he whispered, "as always."

Erin giggled and wiggled out of Alex's hold to rise. "I may have to get your signature on that *always right* comment for future use. Now go apologize. You'll feel

better for it.”

“In a minute,” Alex said lightly, chasing Erin around the desk. “Right now, I have something much more pressing to do.”

Laughing, Erin continued circling the desk, staying out of his reach. “What is that?”

“I need to make love to my wife.” Alex leapt over the desk as papers flew everywhere and caught her. Erin squealed with delight at his surprise attack. Gently, he led her over to the chaise and laid her down. “Have I told you lately how glad I am that you stayed?”

“Not today,” Erin said breathlessly.

“I am so glad that you stayed,” he said before kissing her again. “So very glad.”

* * * *

Jack was only halfway to the stable, when he remembered Hayley and stopped in his tracks. Much as he wanted to ride hard in an attempt to forget his argument with Alex and his anger toward himself for denying his true feelings, he didn’t want to leave her alone. Not until he was sure she was well. The image of her trembling with the terror of her nightmares tormented him. She needed him, but he needed to get himself together before facing her.

Shaking his head in frustration, he turned and strolled to the bench where they’d sat together the previous evening. Sitting down, he replayed the argument with Alex over and over again. Everything he’d said to Alex was a lie. He was a rake of the worst kind. He’d tried to keep his distance from Hayley and had actually been successful for a few weeks. Then last night, sitting beside her in the moonlight, he’d lost control and kissed her with every intention of seducing her. If the stranger in the woods had not appeared, he would have laid her down upon this very bench and taken her.

Groaning, Jack closed his eyes, holding his head in his hands. What was it about this woman that caused him to throw all his morals out the window? He wondered if perhaps there was some truth to Alex’s words. Did he only want her because she was a temporary distraction? Was her main appeal due to the fact she would be leaving and he wouldn’t be forced to make a real commitment?

The thought of that tree splitting and taking Hayley away forever left Jack cold inside. No, he thought, he definitely did not want her because she would eventually leave. It felt as if he wanted her *despite* the fact she would almost certainly leave him. He couldn’t begin to imagine his life without her. In one month, this fiery, feisty redhead from the future had turned his life inside out, and he doubted he’d ever recover.

The fact he was still here at Fernwood Grange was a tribute to that, as Jack had never left his business for this long unless he was sailing. The last message from his secretary had been a desperate plea for his return, and Jack suspected the man had actually shed tears while writing the missive.

The best thing he could do for his sanity and Hayley’s virtue was return to his own home. He’d convinced himself that his staying on had been in hopes of finding Julia, but it was time to admit that she was most likely far away from the area. He only hoped wherever she was, she was unharmed and safe. Everyday he remained at the Grange burned his obsession for Hayley deeper into his skin—his firebrand was leaving a mark on his heart that would never heal.

Spending so much time with her was tempting fate and his wavering willpower as he

couldn't spend five minutes in her presence without wanting to touch and kiss her senseless. He had to leave.

He stood and was halfway to the back door when he thought of Hayley's eyes last night when he held her as the doctor stitched up her head. She looked to him to keep her safe. The trust he'd seen—without the usual walls she erected around herself—had been like an arrow through his heart. She'd put herself in his hands, and Jack knew that kind of trust from her was an amazing gift. He couldn't leave until he was sure she was well again. He would stay for a few days more until she'd recovered and was able to take care of herself. Again, he started for the only to stop once more when he heard hushed voices coming from the front of the house.

Peering around the corner, he spied Wilshire and his man Rawlings climbing the front stairs. The two men appeared to be arguing, and Jack hung back in an attempt to hear their heated, hushed conversation.

"Shut up, you fool," Wilshire hissed. "You're lucky you weren't caught last night."

"But I tell you, my lord, that redhaired woman, she knows where Lady Julia is. I heard her say—" Rawlings began, but Wilshire shushed him before knocking on the front door.

As Giles opened it, Wilshire asked to speak with the marquis, and he and Rawlings entered the house.

Leaning against the side wall of the house, Jack pondered Rawlings' words. He was the man from the woods last night. Jack wanted to go inside and challenge the man for the injuries he'd inflicted on Hayley, but his last words gave Jack reason to pause. Rawlings said Hayley knew where Julia was. Last night, she'd been gone for nearly two hours while he paced in the garden worrying and waiting for her to return.

Concern for Hayley quickly turned to anger as he realized she knew where Julia was, and she'd hidden it from him all this time. He'd been worried about Julia while Hayley had known that she was safe and sound. Furious at her deceit, Jack pondered his next move. She was still injured and, despite his anger, he didn't wish to cause her anymore stress. Besides, Jack couldn't help but wonder why Wilshire had appeared here. No doubt the old man hoped to corner Hayley and question her about Julia's whereabouts.

Determined to keep Hayley safe from his uncle until he could speak to her himself, Jack rushed into the house. He could hear the earl in the library with Alex and Erin.

"I can't tell you how distressed I am to hear your young friend was injured. I do hope it isn't serious." Wilshire's voice oozed fake sincerity.

"The doctor says she simply needs to rest for a few days. Nothing to worry about," Erin replied.

"How did you hear about her injury?" Alex inquired.

Jack paused at this question, curious to hear his uncle's response.

"My man, Rawlings, ran into one of your tenants this morning. They informed him of the search for the attacker and how the marchioness' young friend had been harmed," Wilshire answered smoothly. "Do you have any idea when she will be up for visitors? I was hoping to express my concerns for her wellbeing personally."

"I'll be sure to let her know you stopped by," Jack replied harshly from the doorway. "There's no need for you to call again."

The earl turned his scowling face toward him, his anger blazing. "I would think you would have the sense to stay away from me, boy. How is my bride-to-be faring these

days?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Jack answered with a smug smile.

“She is my betrothed. Surely, the marquis has informed you that I have a special license from the bishop to marry her upon her return. If I find that you have been hiding her all this time—you *and* that red-haired trollop of yours—I can assure you I will make you both pay.”

“Trollop?” Erin asked incredulously. “Are you referring to Hayley?”

Wilshire smirked. “You would be wise to warn your friend to be careful who she is seen with. An innocent, young woman in the company of a faithless rake can have her reputation ruined rather quickly.”

“And when,” Jack asked, “have you ever seen me alone with Miss Garland?”

Jack knew Rawlings had seen his passionate embrace with Hayley the night before, but he also knew that his uncle couldn’t reveal this without exposing Rawlings as the man who had attacked her.

“People talk,” Wilshire answered vaguely.

“What people?” Alex asked angrily. “What are you talking about?”

“The people in his head,” Jack answered coldly. “No one in their right mind would speak to my uncle, especially not after his brutal attack on that young stable boy and the fact that he drove away his ward.

“How dare you insult my reputation?” Wilshire bellowed. “I will have you know I am highly revered in this community. I am a peer of the realm—wealthy and well-respected. Damn you for insulting me so!” With his last words, Wilshire lashed toward Jack with his ever-present riding quirk.

Dodging quickly, the tip of the whip missed Jack’s cheek by mere inches, but smashed into a vase on the table by the door.

Unable to restrain his fury any longer, Jack lunged for his uncle.

Chapter Eighteen

Hayley jerked awake to the sound of breaking glass. Listening closely, she could hear raised voices downstairs, and she immediately recognized Jack's booming baritone. Gingerly lifting her head from the pillow, she took a deep breath and slowly rose to her feet. The afternoon sun was shining through her window, and she was amazed to realize she'd slept so long.

Glancing down, she saw someone had removed her dress sometime during the night and left her clad in only her chemise. The pounding in her head had receded to a dull thud. Again, she heard arguing downstairs. Determined to see what was wrong, she quickly pulled on the first dress she found in the wardrobe. Fortunately, it buttoned up the front. She slipped on her shoes and walked to the bedroom door.

When she approached the top of the stairs, she could hear Wilshire angrily accusing Jack of taking Julia from his house, while Jack retorted that Wilshire was losing his mind. Glancing through the open doorway, Hayley could see Erin attempting to calm the Campbell men down, while Alex seemed to be restraining the earl from attacking Jack with what looked like a whip. The scene was total, noisy chaos. Wilshire pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and waved it in Jack's face in a threatening manner. According to him, it was the special license granting him permission to marry. Only instead of Julia, Wilshire kept insisting the license was for him to marry a woman named Isabella.

That was Jack's mother's name. Good lord. The man really was off his rocker. He seemed to be drifting between the reality of the present and a past that he'd fictionalized in his mind.

Suddenly, Hayley realized there was a large man standing in the corner of the front hallway. He was partly obscured in the shadows, but she could see that he was looking directly at her. His malevolent gaze held hers as his lips formed a single word, yet uttered no sound. "Whore," he mouthed, and then he smirked at her. Stepping back from the railing, Hayley struggled to stifle her sudden shaking. This was the man from the woods who had attempted to abduct her the previous evening.

Turning suddenly, she stumbled back down the hallway, away from his hard stare. She passed her bedroom door and continued to the servant's stairs, which led to the back garden. She had to get to Julia. She had to warn her Wilshire was here, and he knew Hayley was hiding her.

Dizzy from moving so quickly, she concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other until she found herself outside the cabin door. Shocked, she heard voices inside. Someone had obviously discovered Julia's hiding place. Rushing in to protect her friend, Hayley flung the door open. She stopped just inside, stunned as she witnessed Simon and Julia in a lover's embrace. The crashing of the door surprised the young couple, and they hastily jumped apart.

"Simon." Hayley said loudly. "What the hell are you doing here? When did you get back from London?"

Simon seemed to heave a sigh of relief when he realized the intruder was only Hayley and not someone else. "I never went to London," he replied with a guilty grin.

“I don’t understand,” Hayley said. “What do you mean?”

Noticing Hayley’s pale face and the bandage around her head, Simon quickly walked across the room and offered his arm. He led her back to one of the chairs in the cabin. “You’re hurt.”

“Hayley.” Julia quickly knelt before her. “Simon heard a couple of the stable hands talking about you being chased through the woods by a stranger last night and, that you’d been injured. I’ve been so worried. What happened?”

“Just a little accident,” she replied, unwilling to upset the overwrought girl. “I’m fine. Forget about my head.”

Glancing up at Simon, Hayley repeated her earlier question. “I want to know why you’re here and not in London. If you never went there, where the hell have you been these last few weeks?”

Blushing slightly at her curse, Julia answered. “He’s been here with me.”

Hayley frowned, but before she could question Julia further, Simon continued to explain. “I knew Julia was in danger, and I refused to leave her unguarded, even for a moment. However, I have duties I must attend to for Alex. In order to be able to stay here constantly, I told Alex that my mother and sister had asked me to come to London for a visit. They’ve been after me for quite some time to find a nice girl and marry, and I alluded to that fact so Alex would assume they’d found someone they wanted me to meet. They spent years trying to marry him off, so he understood they would not be deterred.”

At this, Simon looked down at Julia and put his arm around her shoulders in a proprietary manner. “I guess you can see I’ve already found the perfect woman.”

Julia blushed at his words. “Simon and I have been secretly meeting for nearly a year. We were waiting until he was more established before he approached the earl to formally request my hand in marriage. Unfortunately, my sister passed away—” Choking on the words, Julia wiped away a tear. Hayley was able to figure out the rest.

“After your sister’s death, the earl locked you up deciding he would marry you himself.”

“Yes,” Julia whispered. “He’s an awful man. I don’t think anyone could even begin to understand the depth of his depravity and cruelty. He beat my sister for the smallest things. If she broke a dish or spoke too loudly, he would hit her. Every month, when her courses came, he would beat her mercilessly. He is desperate for an heir. Helena’s inability to conceive drove him to madness. When she finally became pregnant, he was elated. For seven months, he treated her like a princess. He coddled her and indulged her every whim. It was the first time she had ever been treated so kindly by him,” Julia stopped as if unable to go on.

Simon, sensing her distress, looked at Hayley. “I don’t know if you can imagine how difficult life was for Helena and Julia.”

Hayley simply nodded. She understood abuse better than the young couple before her realized.

“She was desperate to give the earl an heir,” Julia said so softly Hayley had to lean forward to hear her. “She began to wonder if her inability to conceive was her fault or his. You don’t know how badly he hurt her each month. It was awful.” Tears were streaming down Julia’s cheeks, and Hayley began to tell her to stop. Julia didn’t owe her any explanations, but she continued anyway. “Helena had an affair with one of the grooms in the stable. She became pregnant.”

“He found out,” Hayley said, suddenly understanding. “Somehow, he found out. The young groom he beat—”

“It was Rawlings who discovered the truth,” Simon interrupted. Julia began to cry in earnest and he gently rocked her as he spoke. “One of the other grooms knew about the affair. He and Rawlings got drunk together one night, and the groom let it slip. Rawlings immediately ran back to the earl and told him his unfaithful wife had every intention of passing a common groom’s child off as the heir to his earldom. Wilshire—” Simon paused, unwilling to say more, afraid of upsetting his beloved.

“I think I can imagine the rest. He pushed Helena down the stairs. He killed her and her baby, and then he went and crippled the groom. I heard Jack and Templeton discussing how badly Wilshire had beaten the poor man.” Hayley had sensed Wilshire’s malevolent nature when he’d threatened her, but she had no idea how deeply that evil ran.

The room fell silent except for an occasional snuffle from Julia. Hayley’s thoughts ran over the events of the past month as all the pieces began to fall into place. Obviously Julia and Simon were very much in love, which would explain why she was desperate to escape from the earl. However, there were several other things that didn’t make sense to her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t in London?” she asked Simon.

“We thought you would disapprove of us spending the nights alone together. The times of your visits were quite regular, so I would slip off into the woods right before you came and then return after you left.”

Hayley nodded.

Simon—unaware of her twenty-first century sensibilities—thought she would be uncomfortable with two unmarried people shacking up together. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand, so he wouldn’t see her smile. “I see.”

“Why were you so adamant about keeping Jack in the dark? You must know he would never stand between the two of you marrying when he realized you were in love. He would have helped you.”

“That was my decision.” Julia attempted to stem the tears that were streaming down her pale cheeks. The revelations, hidden for so long, had obviously taken their toll on her. “The night Wilshire beat me, he told me if I approached Jack for help he would kill him.” Julia stopped and looked up at Simon. “I—I was there—the night Wilshire killed my sister. Rawlings held me, and he made me watch as he pushed her to her death.”

Hayley felt nauseous at the thought of such cruelty. Struggling to catch her breath, Julia continued speaking through the wracking sobs that were shaking her entire body. “I vowed I would never let him harm anyone I loved ever again. The earl is looking for an excuse to kill Jack, and I won’t give it to him.” Simon wrapped his arms around her, rocking her gently, wiping her tears and whispering soft words Hayley couldn’t hear.

After several moments, Julia regained control of her emotions. “I’m sorry if Jack’s been worried, but I couldn’t risk his life that way, I mean—” Her voice broke on a sob and she couldn’t finish.

“Never apologize for loving someone,” Hayley answered. “Your sister was lucky to have you. I’m afraid I still don’t understand why Wilshire beat you so badly the night you ran away.”

Julia offered her a sad smile. “Wilshire came to my room and informed me I was to be his wife and if I attempted to escape or contact Jack, he would kill him. I was stupid—

a fool. I told him I would rather marry a goat and then—" Julia shook her head slightly as if unable to believe what she had done. "I ridiculed him for being unable to produce an heir. I wasn't thinking clearly—I mean, he'd killed my sister, and I was furious—out of my mind with grief. I think I wanted him to kill me. If I couldn't marry Simon, then I didn't want to live. I'd lost everything to this evil monster. I just couldn't bear anymore." Julia shivered and Simon reached out to grasp her hands.

"He went crazy, hitting me and yelling. He said that I would marry him or die. I didn't speak after that. I fell and hit my head. I think I lost consciousness for a few seconds. When I awoke, he'd stopped hurting me. I suppose it's no fun hitting a target that won't cry or scream," Julia said. "I pretended to be unconscious and he left. For the first time since Helena's death, he didn't bother to lock my bedroom door. I guess he decided I was in no condition to go anywhere."

"So you ran away and came here to find Simon," Hayley said.

"I thought Jack was in Portugal. I didn't know he was back in the country until that day you found me in the garden."

"That's why you panicked when I told you Jack was inside," Hayley said. "I see now. You were trying to protect him."

Hayley stood up and walked over to the door, glancing out into the woods. Ever since Rawlings had seen her on the staircase, she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that things were about to go terribly wrong.

"Well," she said, still looking outside, "much as I hate to disturb this cozy, little love nest the two of you have created, the jig is up."

"I beg your pardon?" Simon asked, brows furrowed.

"I mean," Hayley continued, walking back toward the center of the room, "the earl's nasty henchman, Rawlings, knows that I know where you are."

"How?" Julia asked, her voice laced with feared.

"He was watching the Grange and saw me creeping home through the woods last night. Actually," she pointed at her bandaged forehead, "I got this attractive headpiece trying to lead him away from the cabin."

At Julia's cry of distress, she immediately regretted her flippant words. "Oh, Julia, I'm sorry. This isn't your fault."

"But it is," Julia said. The confessions of the past few minutes had drained the last of her strength. Simon helped her sit in a chair by the fire, before taking a blanket from the bed and gently wrapping it around her shoulders.

"No, Julia," she said adamantly. "It's Rawlings' fault and that damned nasty earl. I promised I would help you see this through to the end and if that means getting stitches all over my body, I'm glad to do so." She smiled, hoping her words would cheer the desolate girl.

Julia laughed softly at her words, shrugging off the blanket and rushing to embrace Hayley in a tight hug. "You are such a wonderful friend, Hayley. I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you for all you have done for me."

"For us," Simon added.

She hugged Julia back. "I didn't do anything anyone else wouldn't have done in my place. But enough of this," she said, breaking away. "We need a plan—and fast."

* * * *

“That’s enough!” Erin shouted, over the raised voices of Alex, Jack and his uncle. “I’ve had enough. Lord Wilshire, Julia is not here, nor has she been here since her disappearance. You have my word on that since you seem so unwilling to take your nephew’s. Now if you have no other business, I suggest you leave.”

Erin walked to the doorway, but stopped when Wilshire suddenly said, “Where is that impertinent redhead? I wish to speak with her. She knows where Julia is.”

“Excuse me?” Erin asked angrily. “That impertinent redhead is my friend, and if you value your health, you will refer to her only with respect in my presence.”

“I told you before, Julia is not here. Leave Miss Garland out of it,” Jack growled.

“She is involved in this, and I will see her. In fact, I demand to—” The earl never finished his statement.

“Excuse me, sir,” Rawlings interrupted, peering into the room. “I was wondering if I might have a word with you.”

“How dare you interrupt me. I’m speaking here,” Wilshire yelled.

“Just a moment of your time, sir,” Rawlings insisted.

Wilshire retreated to his man’s side and after only a brief consultation, turned quickly to the McCormick’s and offered a hurried, smug farewell before leaving.

“What was that about?” Alex wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but I hate that asshole,” Erin said when the front door closed.

Alex—apparently immune to his wife’s foul language—heartily agreed.

Jack, furious beyond words, walked to the nearest wall and soundly punched a hole in it. Grimacing at the pain in his knuckles, he turned to see Alex chuckling.

“Feel better?” Alex asked.

“No,” Jack replied.

“Well, maybe this will help,” Alex continued. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

At Jack’s blank look, Alex elaborated. “I’m sorry for accusing you of ungentlemanly behavior toward Hayley and for interfering in your personal life.”

Jack grinned and then looked at Erin. “Do I have you to thank for this?”

Erin attempted to act coy, but failed miserably. “Me?”

“Don’t play innocent with me, Lady Dorset,” Jack said with a laugh. “You of all people should know the marquis never admits he’s wrong, and he certainly never apologizes. What did you do to him?”

Erin giggled while Alex scowled.

“Obviously,” Erin replied, “you don’t know how to handle headstrong males, being one yourself. Just accept the apology, shake hands and go make sure my best friend is all right. I cannot believe she just slept through World War Three.”

“World War Three?” Jack asked. “Was there a one and a two?”

“You’re changing the subject, but yes there was.”

Jack reached out to shake hands with Alex, and the two laughed, patting each other on the back. “I won’t hurt her,” Jack said quietly.

“I know,” Alex replied.

Rushing upstairs, Jack paused outside Hayley’s closed door thinking about his uncle’s sudden departure. It made him uneasy. He took a deep breath and decided concussion be damned, his firebrand had some confessing to do. Opening the door, he stopped and stared at the empty bed. Glancing around, he confirmed that she wasn’t anywhere in the room. Mrs. Scott entered the room behind him with a tray of food.

“Where is Hayley?” Jack hoped his suspicions about her sudden disappearance were incorrect.

“Why, I don’t know,” Mrs. Scott replied. “She was just here. I went to fix her some supper. I thought she would be hungry when she woke up. Where on earth could she have gone? You don’t think she wandered off, do you? With her injured head, what would become of her?”

“Go tell Lord and Lady Dorset Miss Garland is missing. Tell the marquis to form a search party immediately.” Jack ran to the hallway. She must have left the house by the back stairway as everyone else was in the library, and the door to the foyer open. He would have seen her had she descended the main staircase.

Running downstairs and out the back door, Jack paused in the garden. She had returned from the path through the woods last night. The cabin, he thought. The only place Hayley knew of besides the Grange was the cabin where he had taken her the first night. Running down the path, he prayed Hayley and Julia were safe.

The sun was setting behind the trees when he arrived at the cabin. He stayed hidden at the edge of the tree line, watching to make sure things were quiet and normal. He had an uneasy feeling about the quick exit Rawlings and his uncle had made. What if Rawlings had seen Hayley leave the house and knew she was headed here? He doubted if the earl knew about the existence of the cabin, but Rawlings had watched Hayley come out of the woods last night; he obviously suspected she knew of Julia’s hiding place. Wilshire and Rawlings could be on their way this very moment.

Stirred to action by that unsettling thought, he crept slowly to the front door. Inside, he could hear voices speaking softly. Peering in, Jack saw Simon, Julia and Hayley gathering up food and blankets, obviously preparing to escape into the night.

*

Hayley quickly threw what food was remaining into a bag while Julia and Simon packed up the clothing and blankets. Having very few options, the trio had decided Simon and Julia would travel all night to London where Simon hoped to convince his mother and sister to take them in. Both Simon and Julia were unhappy about endangering Sarah and Katie, but they could think of no other place to go. The two young lovers were unwilling to separate. Simon insisted they would only stay in London a day before securing the means to travel on to Gretna Green as they were desperate to marry.

Although she didn’t mention it, Hayley suspected that after spending the past month alone together, they probably should wed sooner rather than later. The real problem with the plan was the feasibility of getting the twosome safely to London and then Scotland without being captured by Wilshire. The earl had men posted all over the countryside keeping a lookout for Julia. The first leg of the journey was going to be especially long and difficult as they had decided it would be easier to slip through undetected if they weren’t on horseback. Simon planned to purchase a horse at an inn once they’d made it through the most dangerous stretch of territory.

Hayley was going to see them to the edge of the woods before returning to the Grange. She’d promised to keep the young lover’s secret only until the day after tomorrow—giving Simon and Julia a decent head start—then she planned to confess everything to Jack and the McCormick’s. She was dreading the look on Jack’s face when he realized she had been deceiving him. Unfortunately for her, she didn’t have too long to imagine that look.

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice from the doorway said. “What do we have here?”

Jack was leaning against the doorframe, his long limbs seemingly relaxed. However, Hayley could feel heat radiating from him as he attempted to conceal his fury.

“Jack,” Julia said running to him. “Oh Jack,” she cried, grabbing his hand.

“Julia.” Jack pulled the young girl into his embrace. “Thank God, you’re well. I’ve been so worried about you.” Jack sent Hayley a cold glance over Julia’s shoulder. “Why didn’t you come to me? You know I would have protected you.”

“Jack, I couldn’t.” Julia looked up into his eyes. “I didn’t want to cause any more trouble between you and Wilshire. He threatened to kill you if I came to you for help. He’s insane, Jack. I was so afraid. Besides, Simon was here to protect me.” Julia said the last hesitantly, unsure of Jack’s response to her declaration.

“Simon?” Jack looked at Alex’s young cousin. “Do I need to call you out?”

Simon simply walked to stand beside Julia, placing his arm lightly across her shoulders. “No sir,” he replied. “I’m in love with Lady Julia, and I intend to make her my wife. With your permission, that is. I promise to keep her safe and happy for the rest of her life.”

“Jack,” Julia began, but he cut her off.

“I’m not Julia’s guardian. I cannot give you permission to marry her. You realize that the Earl of Wilshire has a special license, and he intends to make her his bride.”

“I’ll die before I let that man touch her,” Simon said heatedly.

Jack smiled at his response. “Well, you’ve kept her safe this long. For what it’s worth, you do have my blessing.”

Turning to Julia, he took her hand. “He’s the one you love, little one?”

“More than anything. Will you help us?”

“Yes, but we need to be quick. If I’ve figured out you’re here, it’s only a matter of time before Wilshire and Rawlings come to the same conclusion. In fact, they could be on their way as we speak. I have a plan, but we need to move fast.”

Simon and Julia quickly gathered their bags, while Jack moved over to where Hayley had been quietly standing in the corner.

“Jack,” she said, but Jack interrupted her.

“Not now,” he said harshly. “One of my ships is leaving port tonight,” Jack said to Simon. “You and Julia are going to be on it. It’s traveling to Portugal. I have a friend there who will take you in. I’ll send a letter of introduction with you, and I’ll make arrangements for the captain of my ship to perform the wedding ceremony during the trip. I want the two of you to stay there until I determine a time when it’s safe for you to return.”

“What about Alex?” Simon asked.

“I’ll explain the situation to your cousin tomorrow. Tonight, we need to make haste. We’ll all return to the Grange. Simon, you and Julia will remain hidden while I have three horses saddled. Hayley, you will go back to your bed and stay there until I return tomorrow. Do you understand?”

The anger in Jack’s voice was palpable, and Hayley—too tired to argue—simply nodded. She feared from the look in his eyes she had destroyed any trust the two of them had built. Losing Jack’s friendship hurt her more than she could believe. Weary and upset, she followed the others back to the Grange, feeling more alone than she ever had in her life.

Chapter Nineteen

Hayley watched from her window as the three silent riders made their way through the trees toward the shoreline. In her hands, she held Julia's beloved red cape. Jack insisted Julia wear one of his dark overcoats, a pair of breeches and hide her hair in a cap in an attempt to look like a young boy. Julia had given the cape to Hayley as a gift, thanking her for all she'd done for her. Erin came in after lightly knocking on the door.

"Mrs. Scott told me you were back," Erin said. "We were worried about you. Where did you go?"

"It's a long story," Hayley replied, feeling too weak to disappoint the only other friend she had in the world.

"You look exhausted," Erin said quietly. "Go to sleep and we'll talk about it in the morning. Alex got a message while you were out and had to leave immediately for London. Apparently, Simon is missing. This is becoming an epidemic. You, Julia, Simon."

Hayley could see the worried look in Erin's eyes, despite her attempt to make light of the situation. Unable to hold back any longer, Hayley rushed to hug her, the words flying out.

"Oh, Erin," Hayley said, heartsick over her deception. "Simon is fine. He's with Jack and Julia right now."

"What?" Erin asked. "What are you talking about?"

Hayley quickly recounted the events of the past month for Erin, telling her about finding Julia in the garden, discovering Simon at the cabin this afternoon and Jack's plan to help the couple escape safely. Erin listened, horrified by the abuse Julia and Helena had suffered at the hands of Wilshire and thrilled by the news of Simon and Julia's elopement. The only part Hayley omitted in her tale was Jack's anger and disappointment in her. The wound was too fresh and painful to talk about.

"And I didn't want to hurt your feelings, but I've been secretly trying to find a way back to our time. Back through the tree."

"You have?" Erin asked quietly. "Oh, Hayley, are you that unhappy here?"

"No, of course not. Although, it doesn't really matter if I were. No one I've talked to knows a damn thing about that tree. I've been pretending to have heard some legend or story about a magical place by the sea."

"What a clever ruse," Erin added.

"Yeah, well. Not that clever. Most folks just shrug. Although a few have said I should talk to a woman called Lady Looney. Problem is everyone who mentions her has a different opinion on whether she's a wise woman, a fairy or a crazy old bat."

Erin laughed sadly. "I didn't know you were so anxious to return. You've been so busy, and I truly thought you were enjoying your time away from the real world."

"Oh, Erin, I have, but I know I've made a mess of things and my being here has only brought everyone pain and—"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Erin asked.

"I've been lying to you and Jack since the first day. Hiding Julia even though I knew how worried everyone was."

“Hayley, you kept her safe. You made sure Wilshire didn’t find her. Because of our station in life, Alex and I couldn’t have sheltered her, and Wilshire’s been watching Jack like a hawk. Julia was right to stay away from him. You were the only one who could care for her and you did. You and Simon looked after her.” Erin grasped her hand and led them to the bed where they both sat down. “I think it is I who owe you an apology.”

“Me?” Hayley asked.

“I knew about Lady Looney, actually her name is Lady Linley,” Erin said.

“So?”

“I think if anyone could explain the magic of the tree to you, it’s her. I should have taken you to see her right away.”

Hayley was surprised by Erin’s confession. “Why didn’t you?”

Erin shrugged. “So many small reasons that seemed to make sense at the beginning. I was so pleased to have you here, and I could see in your eyes how much you’ve suffered this past year. I’d hoped I could make some of that up to you. And then, there was Jack.”

Hayley dropped her gaze to her hands. She’d denied her attraction to Jack since the day they’d met, but she knew her protestations had been nothing but lies. “He’ll never forgive me,” Hayley whispered, her voice breaking on the words.

“Oh, Hayley,” Erin wrapped her arm around her shoulders. “Of course he will. He cares about you, and once he’s gotten Julia to safety and calmed down, he’ll see that you did the right thing.”

Hayley didn’t believe the words, but she didn’t have the energy to fight. “You’ll take me to see Lady Linley?”

Erin nodded. “I will, I promise.” Then, remarking on the dark circles under Hayley’s eyes, she excused herself, telling Hayley she wanted to send a messenger to try to intercept Alex to let him know Simon was safe.

Alone again, Hayley rose and walked over to the window. She pressed her head against the windowpane and stared out into the dark night. The sky was overcast and threatening rain. She sent up a silent prayer that Simon, Jack and Julia would make it to the docks safely. As she looked out toward the shoreline, she saw two horsemen riding full speed in the direction Jack had gone. A flash of lightning briefly revealed the shock of gray hair on one rider and the incredibly large size of the other—Wilshire and Rawlings.

Without a thought, Hayley grabbed up Julia’s cape, throwing it over her shoulders and rushing down the front stairs. At the door, she nearly knocked over Templeton who was standing guard.

“My lady,” he said, startled by her rush to leave.

“Oh, Templeton, thank God you’re here. I need a horse. Now!” She flung open the front door.

“Oh, no, my lady. Cap’n Campbell would have my head on a silver platter if I let you ride out on a night like this.” Templeton moved to stop her journey down the front porch stairs.

“What’s going on?” Erin rushed from the library at the sound of Hayley and Templeton’s voices raised in anger.

“It’s the earl. I just saw him. He knows—he knows Jack has Julia. He’s going after them. I have to warn him,” Hayley said, tears threatening to fall.

Understanding the desperation and anguish in her friend’s face, Erin nodded. “Go.

Go after them. I'll send word to Alex."

"My lady, you can't let her go off by herself in the middle of the night," Templeton argued.

"Sir, I know my friend and I know no force on earth will stop her. I'm asking you to go with her and keep her safe," Erin said.

"Templeton, Captain Campbell is in danger. I need to warn him. Either get me a horse or get out of my way!" Hayley shouted, unwilling to waste anymore time.

Upon hearing the captain was in trouble, Templeton rushed to the stable in front of Hayley. "Seein's as how you won't stay put and the Cap'n's in trouble—"

"Be careful," Erin yelled after them as they entered the stables.

Templeton, with the help of several groomsman, had two horses saddled and ready to go in less than five minutes. As the first boom of thunder sounded, they flew off into the night.

Templeton was a major asset in getting her to the docks as quickly as possible. Having traveled from the Grange to the shipping company everyday for a month running messages to and from Jack, he knew all the shortcuts. The rain grew progressively worse as they rode, limiting their visibility and slowing them considerably. She cursed aloud several times—much to Templeton's dismay—in her impatience to get to Jack.

Lightning became their guide, illuminating the path for them every few seconds. She grimaced as she recalled the last time she'd been in a storm like this. It was the night Jack had pulled her from the tree's grasp. If only she could go back to that night, she thought, knowing what she knew now. Would she have done anything differently? She wrestled with the question, but before she could settle on an answer, she was pulled from her thoughts by Templeton.

"There they be, miss," he said, speaking loudly so as to be heard over the rain.

Squinting, Hayley could barely make out the docks less than half a mile before them. She could see two ships anchored slightly offshore. Urging her horse forward, she moved closer to the shoreline. Near the water's edge, she stopped again.

"I don't like this, miss. We're out in the open. Anybody can see us. Come back a ways, back to them trees," Templeton was frantically surveying the surrounding area as he spoke.

Pulling the hood of Julia's cape around her head in an attempt to keep the rain out of her eyes, Hayley stared hard at the decks of both ships until she found what she was looking for. Finally, she saw him. Jack.

"He made it," she shouted with a grin to Templeton.

"Not yet he ain't."

At his words, she turned to look in the same direction Templeton was. There at the edge of the woods was the earl and Rawlings, looking straight at her. Saying a quick prayer that Wilshire hadn't seen her clearly, Hayley twisted toward her companion. "Templeton, run!"

Hayley spurred her horse down the shore at a dangerous speed. After a moment, she could hear Templeton pounding behind her. "Yer crazy! Yer crazy!" he shouted over and over.

The rain was blinding her, but she refused to ease up. She could only hope the earl had taken her bait, assuming her to be Julia, and was giving chase right now. Pure fear kept her from turning her head as the speed, the storm and the prospect of being captured

by an irate earl of Wilshire kept her thoroughly focused on the path before her.

"This way, miss!" Templeton yelled when he was finally able to pull up beside her. "I know how to lose 'em."

Lose them, Hayley thought. The earl and his lackey must have fallen for her trick. Upon seeing her in the red cape, they no doubt believed they were chasing Julia. It was the answer to a prayer. Now all she and Templeton had to do was lead them on a merry chase long enough for Jack's ship to depart with the tide. She could hear someone shouting behind her. Chancing a backward glance, she peered over her shoulder and saw Wilshire and Rawlings bearing down on them.

They weaved a complicated path through the woods before emerging onto the streets of Dover. Once in town, Templeton seemed to know every small side street and alleyway. After nearly an hour of hard riding with too many close calls to consider, Templeton suddenly dismounted and led his horse and hers into a small stable, closing the door as the earl rode by. Holding her breath, she watched as Wilshire and Rawlings paused, looking up and down the side street for their lost prey. After a quick consultation, they split up and disappeared around different corners.

"I don't dare run 'em anymore, miss. Ain't good for the horses. We're safe 'nuff for now."

"Templeton," Hayley gushed. "You were brilliant." Overcome with joy, she hugged the surprised valet enthusiastically. "That was great. The way you kept losing them, then reeling them back in, only to lose them again. It was amazing. Like watching an expert fly fisherman. Surely that gave Jack plenty of time to get Julia and Simon safely away."

Blushing a bright scarlet from her effusive praise, Templeton simply grinned.

Hayley took a moment to study her surroundings. "Well, I guess we should brush these sweet horses down. At least there's clean straw. That should be okay to sleep on." Shrugging off the red cape, she wrung it out like wet laundry, leaving a huge puddle of water on the ground at her feet. "I don't think I've ever been this wet. I don't suppose there are any blankets we could use to make a dry bed with."

"Oh, no, miss. You ain't gonna sleep here. I'm gonna take care of the horses, and you're gonna sleep in the house."

"The house? What house?"

"Cap'n Campbell's townhouse. This here is his stable."

"Oh, Templeton, you wonderful man. I could just kiss you." Hayley was thrilled by the prospect of dry clothes and a warm bed.

"Now, my lady, don't be doin' that. I don't think the Cap'n would like that too much. You git along there, and I'll be in directly—once I got these horses taken care of," Templeton replied, still blushing slightly. He proceeded to pull the saddle off her horse.

"I can help," she said, through a yawn.

"Miss, you're dead on your feet and injured to boot. Go along with you now. Cap'n will be hotter than fire when he finds out about this. If ye get pneumonia on top of it all, there won't be no help for me." Templeton shoved her lightly toward the door. "Butler's name is Rogers. A regular nodcock. Don't take no for an answer if he don't wanna let ye in."

"Okay," she said, sleep beginning to overcome her previous exhilaration. All the adrenaline escaped her body, leaving an overwhelming weariness in its wake.

"I don't think I've ever been this tired. Templeton?"

“Yes’m?”

“Don’t worry about Jack. I’ll explain to him this was all my idea. I’ll make sure he understands you were protecting me.” Hayley shuffled slowly out of the stable, her feet dragging as she made her way to the townhouse.

*

Templeton watched her go, making sure she made it inside safely and unseen. Then he murmured to himself. “Not me who should be worried. Gonna have to make sure Cap’n knows he got himself one in a million there.” Shaking his head, he smiled at the spirited woman he soon hoped would be his captain’s wife. Then despite his weariness, he began to whistle as he worked.

Chapter Twenty

It was the middle of the night when Jack entered his townhouse. Exhausted and wet from the rain, he quietly let himself in and headed toward his bedroom.

"Excuse me, sir," said a quiet voice behind him.

"Rogers," Jack said surprised. "I didn't expect you to be awake."

"Yes, sir, usually I do retire earlier but—" Rogers paused as if unsure.

"What is it?" Jack asked impatiently. He was anxious to change his clothes before heading back out into the rain again. Damn Hayley Garland. When he got his hands on her, he'd kill her. He was weary to the bone from riding all over Dover trying to track her down. His only consolation was that he'd spotted his uncle and Rawlings still on the manhunt only ten minutes earlier. At least, she hadn't been captured by them—yet.

"Well, sir, I thought I should inform you that you have a guest," Rogers said quickly.

"A guest?" Jack asked angrily. "At this hour? Why would you admit him? Who is it?"

"I am afraid, sir, *she* was quite adamant that I allow her to come in. In fact, she pushed her way through the door. I was uncertain what to do. She was quite forceful, and I didn't wish to hurt her. She—" Again, Rogers paused as if uncertain how to continue.

Jack was overcome with relief. "Tell me, this unwanted guest, she wouldn't happen to be a redhead, dressed in men's clothing and wearing a long, red cape?"

Relief enveloped Rogers' face. "Yes, sir, you do know her."

Gritting his teeth, Jack simply nodded. "Is she in the study?" Jack asked as he continued to make his way down the hall.

"Actually, no," Rogers said quickly causing Jack to stop and turn, his hand poised to open the study door.

"No?" Jack asked. "Then where is she?"

Rogers' face became a mottled purple as he searched for the answer least likely to throw his employer into a rage. "Well, sir—" he stammered.

"Where the hell is she?" Jack bellowed, his patience at an end and fearful that Hayley had escaped again into the stormy night.

"Your bed chamber," Rogers answered quickly, ducking his head.

Without another word, Jack rushed to his bedroom, his blood boiling with anger. He had expressly told her to stay at the Grange. She had a concussion and stitches, for God's sake. What was she thinking riding out in a damned storm in the middle of the night? The fact she had recklessly endangered her life—again, and the fact she had purposely thrown herself in his uncle's path—again, threw him into a black rage.

Did she not have a care for her injuries and the fact the doctor had warned her to remain abed? He could only assume that the other rider had been Templeton, who was supposed to be guarding her at the Grange. He would kill his valet in the morning. Tonight he had a wayward firebrand to contend with.

Swinging the door open, he stormed into the room ready to teach the impetuous Miss Garland a lesson she would not soon forget. However, her sleeping form on his bed stopped him dead in his tracks. Curled on her side under a mountain of blankets, her head was resting on his pillow with her hands tucked under her cheek. One quick survey of the

room revealed her breeches and shirt hanging on a chair by the fire—drying.

Glancing back at the bed, he saw she had helped herself to one of his shirts. Her hair, pulled back into a loose queue on the base of her neck, had broken free of its constraints, and several long, thick strands were swirling around her pale cheeks. Apparently she'd replaced the bandage on her forehead as the clean, white pad was spotless and dry. Even with her injury, she had never looked lovelier. She was so fierce and passionate when awake that the calm, peacefulness of her at rest struck him to the very depths of his soul.

Slowly, he released the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. The image of her in his bed had been playing in his dreams since the first night he'd met her. Grimacing, he pondered what to do next, torn as usual between ravishing her and beating her, neither of which seemed likely to cool his blood completely. He'd come to understand that nothing would ever calm the passion she stirred inside him.

Without thinking, he moved toward her. As he walked, he removed his wet shirt. Sitting in the chair by the bed, he pulled off his boots and stockings. He paused for only the briefest second before peeling off his damp breeches, all the time keeping his eyes on her sleeping form. Naked, he walked to the opposite side of the bed, extinguished the candle and crawled under the sheets.

*

Hayley awoke with a shiver as something large and cold brushed up against her.

"What—" she began, the rest of her words captured as a mouth came over hers.

Jack was in bed with her, kissing her as never before. All rational thought left her as she wrapped her arms around his neck and lost herself in the touch of his tongue against hers. This kiss seemed different from all their previous ones, and Hayley wondered how each kiss from this man could be so unique and compelling. It was a gift, she decided. His hands left her hair and traveled down her arms and around her waist. Without breaking the kiss, he tugged at her—actually his—shirt and reached beneath.

"Hey," she squealed, breaking the kiss and jumping back as his icy hands touched her bare skin. "You're freezing," she exclaimed. Then another fact made itself apparent. "And naked."

Shadows cast from the fire and faint moonlight hid his features from her. She could only see the outline of his face so close to hers.

"I believe I warned you before about being caught alone in a man's bedroom, Miss Garland." His voice was deep and quiet, and she couldn't quite discern the tone behind it. Was he angry? She was sure he must be. He had to know she was the one who'd intercepted the earl. She was certain he had seen her from the ship.

"Jack," she said softly. "I know you're probably upset with me, but—"

"I'm not upset," Jack interrupted. "In fact, I am delighted."

Delighted? Not likely.

"If you would just let me explain—"

"No explanation is necessary," Jack said, interrupting her again. "You came to my bed fully aware of what would happen. I'm simply taking what you're offering."

"What?" Hayley said, leaping up. A strong arm across her shoulders halted her attempt to flee the bed.

"Jack—" she began, only to have her protest stopped with another kiss. A powerful kiss that would have blown the shoes off her feet had she been wearing any. Damn the man, she thought. She was powerless against his kisses and he knew it.

Speaking against her lips—as if unwilling to separate even an inch—he said, “I can’t let you leave here without touching you.”

Hayley’s heart was pounding so hard she couldn’t believe it was still residing in her chest.

“I can’t let you leave without tasting you,” he added.

His tongue flicked across her top lip before moving to sample the bottom. She thought briefly she should protest. She knew where this was leading, but she simply didn’t care. She wanted him. For the first time in her life, she wanted a man to touch her.

Jack’s mouth slowly nuzzled her neck before moving up to take her earlobe between his teeth. His breath was hot in her. “Let me touch you.”

Uncertain whether it was question or a command, she decided it didn’t matter because he didn’t wait for a reply. His hands were sliding her borrowed shirt over her head. Naked except for the panties she’d worn when she was pulled through the tree, the slightest amount of fear began to creep into her heart as she realized that no man had ever seen her undressed.

The familiar sense of being powerless began to race through her as he bent his head and took her nipple in his mouth. Gasping, she froze. Then resisting her initial fears, she slowly raised her hands to Jack’s hair, relishing the feeling of his hot breath and wet tongue on such a surprisingly sensitive area.

His hands roamed over her waist and stomach gently rubbing the soft skin as his lips traveled to her other breast. Hayley breathed a soft sigh, and she felt Jack’s smile against her body. When he was finished his ministrations to her now taut nipples, he began to slowly inch down; his mouth and tongue caressing her abdomen, teasing her navel. With two fingers, he tugged her panties down. She stiffened, trying to grab Jack’s hands to stop him.

“No,” she whispered, but he didn’t stop until her panties had been completely removed. “Jack,” she said more forcefully. “Wait, please.” She hated the pleading sound of her voice, but her previous passion quickly turned to ice-cold fear.

He moved until his body was parallel to hers. Elbow bent, his head resting on his hand, he lightly caressed her stomach as he bent over to kiss her again.

“Why? Why wait? You must be as aware as I that this is inevitable.” His voice was soft with no trace of the previous anger.

She caught a glimpse of his dark eyes as he gazed at her. “Jack,” she said, her voice quivering. Clearing her throat, she began again. “I just need a second to think.”

She sensed his smile more than saw it. “Hayley, my love, if I’ve learned anything over the years, it’s that thinking in bed is never a good idea. What I’m going to do to you is best felt, not thought about.”

Throughout their conversation, his hand continued its light touches over her breasts, around her throat, rubbing her stomach.

Leaning over her, he continued to touch her. “For example, when I do this…” He placed his hand between her thighs, his fingers traveling to her most private place. They gently prodded and caressed her mons, eliciting a shudder of ecstasy from her before pausing briefly to rest at the entrance to her body.

Her breath was coming in heavy, short pants, though whether from fear or excitement she wasn’t sure. Jack brought his face closer to hers, watching her reaction. His thumb brushed again her clitoris, while he slowly slid one finger into her.

She gasped, her eyes wide and focused on Jack's face. He kissed her lightly as his fingers moved slowly over her most sensitive places.

"Are you thinking, firebrand," he whispered, "or feeling?"

Hayley couldn't force her mind to focus on anything except his fingers and the feelings he was creating in her untried body. Her treacherous hips betrayed her by thrusting forward to capture more of Jack's finger. His soft chuckle brought her back to her senses, waking up another voice, another laugh, one she'd been a fool to think she could escape.

"No," she said pushing his hand away and attempting to escape from the bed. Her entire body was trembling and cold. Jack sat up and caught her.

"Wait," he said softly, though his hands on her shoulders were anything but soft. He wasn't going to give her an opportunity to leave the bed. "I'll stop," he said as Hayley began to fight him in earnest. Panic and fear had taken over, and she was no longer in control of her actions. She stumbled as she hastily retreated to the far end of the room. She was gasping for breath, her teeth chattering, her body betraying her with violent tremors.

"Hayley," Jack said, obviously frantic to understand why she was so frightened and desperately trying to devise a way to calm her down. "I won't hurt you. I'm sorry. I should have stopped when you said no. I swear to you, I won't touch you again. Please calm down."

Taking deep breaths, she felt immediate guilt and sorrow for the concerned look on his face. After several moments, she regained control of the shaking, and her breath was coming more naturally. Glancing down, she noticed her knuckles were white from the death grip she had on the back of the chair she had retreated behind, and she slowly unclenched her hands.

Not again. Please God, not again.

She closed her eyes in embarrassment, afraid to look at Jack, afraid to see in his gaze what he must truly think of her. She was standing before him completely naked and acting like a lunatic. How could she explain? She doubted he'd ever want to see her again after tonight. At least, that was the response of the other man she'd dated—although that panic attack had left him with a black eye after he'd merely kissed her. She'd never gotten this far with any man.

Why should Jack be any different from anyone else?

Who wants to be with a woman you can't touch?

Deep inside, she'd hoped—no prayed—Jack would be different. What she felt for him was different from anyone else in her past. She had—for a brief moment—wanted him to touch her, wanted him in a way she'd never thought possible.

"Hayley." His soft voice came from across the room. "Look at me."

"Jack," she whispered, unable to lift her gaze and face him. "I'm s-sorry. I should leave."

"Look at me, Hayley," he repeated. She sensed he was on the verge of coming to her, and the idea frightened her enough to allow her to open her eyes and look into his. She was surprised by what she saw, or actually, what she didn't see. There was no disgust or pity in his gaze, only concern.

"I'll leave," she said again.

Jack simply shook his head. "Oh, no, you're not going anywhere tonight. Not until

we discuss what happened here.”

“No,” Hayley answered emphatically. “There’s nothing to talk about. I think it would be better if I left and we forgot about this.”

She watched him look at her and then the door. She knew he was gauging his chances of stopping her. Under ordinary circumstances, she could definitely make it before he reached her. Unfortunately, she didn’t intend to escape into the cold rainy night without any clothes on.

“I want to get dressed.” She felt exposed and embarrassed.

Slowly, he got out of the bed and bent over to pick up a dry pair of pants. He slid them on as Hayley swayed slightly at the sight of his naked form. She’d never seen such an incredibly handsome man or one so physically fit. She had felt the strength in his arms and legs before, but seeing them without clothing made her suddenly feel helpless. The terror reappeared and she had to avert her eyes to control her overwrought emotions.

When would this feeling go away?

Why couldn’t she be normal?

Quietly, she walked to the fire, praying her clothing had dried. Donning her shirt, she reached for her damp jeans. She began to pull them on only to have them taken from her. She flinched as Jack—silent as a stalking panther—came up beside her.

“You’ll get sick if you put those back on.” He was careful not to touch her or get too close. Hayley grimaced, feeling foolish for making such an ass of herself in front of him. He was obviously afraid he would set her off again.

The thought of him no longer touching her crushed what was left of her already breaking heart. Ever since the first night they’d met, she’d felt comfortable with his small caresses and touches. She couldn’t understand why he alone could touch her so casually and she didn’t freeze up or act like a crazy woman. She was mistaken to believe her phobia cured, and now—thanks to her typical overreaction—she’d driven away the only man she’d ever truly wanted.

“God.” Anguish rife in her voice. “What’s wrong with me? Dammit, why does this always happen?” Her frustration and anger began to break through. Picking up a glass from the table by the fire, she threw it against a wall, shattering it and cracking the plaster.

Running her hands through her hair, she began to pace the room. She could feel tears gathering in her lashes, and she urgently attempted to choke them back. She dashed them away swiftly with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry about the glass,” she said. After a brief glance at her destruction, she added, “And the wall.”

“Sit down, Hayley.” Jack seemed calm and slightly detached as he spoke. Ignoring him, she continued to walk the length of the room, gathering her belongings. She had to get out of the room before she did anything else she would regret.

A strong hand reached out, stilling her movements. “I said sit down.” His voice was soft, yet firm, but what stopped her was not his words, but his hand. It was resting lightly on her shoulder. She tensed up waiting for the cold grip of fear to consume her, but it didn’t come.

Confused, she looked at Jack’s face and saw he was as puzzled and tense as she. He seemed to be expecting a reaction as well. When he realized she wasn’t going to run away, he repeated his request. “Please sit down. We’re going to talk even if I have to tie you to that chair. Do you understand?”

She smiled at the imperious tone of his voice. For some reason, his demand suddenly made her feel as though perhaps she hadn't scared him away. He'd seen her at her worst, and he still wanted to talk to her. Relief flooded her body and she found words flowing out of her that she'd never spoken before.

"I have a problem with being touched," she began. "Well, I mean—not casual touches, brushing up against someone or that kind of thing, just more intimate touching. For some reason, it doesn't bother me when you touch or kiss me, or at least not after the first night in the cabin—when we had that big fight. I don't know why. I liked it even."

She saw his eyes falter slightly at her use of the past tense. "I do like it. It's just tonight, you caught me off-guard and everything started happening so fast. I wanted you to do all those incredible things, I really did, but then suddenly I didn't want it, and he started laughing at me again, and I screwed everything up, just like I always do."

She was standing by the bedroom door clad only in her long shirt and twisting the hem of it nervously. She realized she probably wasn't making much sense, and she struggled to find a way to explain it all better, but the words simply wouldn't come.

She'd never realized how much she craved a man's touches until Jack entered her life. She wanted him to want her, despite her insecurity, her past, her strange fear. No one had ever broken through her barriers until Jack, and surprisingly, it felt good to have a friend on the inside of her self-erected walls with her. Safe, warm, content.

Jack reached over and pulled the material from her hands. "You're going to tear your shirt if you keep twisting it like that."

The room was stifling hot, and she wanted to get away, outside, into the cool night air. She couldn't breathe. She started for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jack asked as he passed her, blocking the exit.

"I—" She shrugged. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does matter, and you—of all people—should realize I don't make idle threats. You can go sit on your own, or I'll put you in that chair and keep you there however I have to until I'm satisfied that we've said all that needs to be said. Do you understand?" Jack's voice was laced with something that sounded surprisingly like humor. Glancing up at him, she caught the slightest glimpse of a smile before he lightly turned her and pushed her toward the chair.

Wearily, she sank down. Her brief nap before Jack's arrival left her mind fuzzy and dull, and she longed for a week of nothing but sleep.

"Now then." He sat in the chair opposite her. "Who started laughing at you?"

"What?" Hayley asked, confused.

"You said you wanted me to touch you until he started laughing. Who is he?"

While she felt emotionally drained, Jack looked fully charged. He sat forward in his chair with his elbows resting on his knees. His gaze held hers and refused to let go. It was as if he was willing some of his strength to her through the connection of their eyes.

"My father," Hayley answered softly. "I haven't told you much about him, have I? I don't like to talk about him. Maybe Erin told you something?"

Jack shook his head.

"No," Hayley continued. "Erin wouldn't tell you anything about him. She doesn't know much. I never told her or Tori. I don't know why I didn't. I suppose I was afraid they would look at me differently, and I couldn't stand that. They were my best friends, the only friends I've ever had, and I never wanted to run the risk of losing them. Not that

I would, I mean—” She stumbled over her words, struggling to try to make him understand.

Jack reached over and grasped her hand, giving it a small squeeze. “We have all night. Take your time.”

Taking a deep breath, she continued, calmer than before. “My father was a drunk—a mean drunk. He would stay out late drinking. When I was little, I’d lay in bed praying to fall asleep before he got home. He always woke Marian up and picked a fight, usually over the way the house looked or even just because she hadn’t waited up for him. I’d hear him hitting her, yelling at her, calling her a worthless slut. She’d cry and beg him to stop.”

Hayley stopped and looked at the fire. “I was six years old when I finally pulled my head out from under the pillow and left the sanctuary of my room. I couldn’t take it anymore. I thought maybe he would stop hurting her if he saw me watching him. Fool that I was, I thought he would feel ashamed to hit her in front of me. In my mind, I decided I could stop him.”

Her lips curled up in a mirthless smile before glancing back at Jack. “Silly, huh, a little girl standing up to a huge man who spent his free afternoons in a boxing ring. Guess you know how that ended. Instead of one punching bag, he had two. He broke my arm in two places the night I decided to make my stand against him. Marian told him to get the hell out and took me to the hospital. She’d never fought him or yelled at him, so it came as quite a shock—to both of us. He took off, and we didn’t see him for six months. I don’t know if it was Marian or the police who chased him away, but it didn’t matter—he was gone.” She felt a tear slide down her cheek and quickly wiped it away.

Glancing at Jack, she saw not sympathy, but something more like hatred flashing in his eyes as her words registered. Strangely, she felt comforted by that look—it was one she’d seen far too often when she looked at herself in the mirror.

“So Marian and I were on our own. It was hard because there wasn’t a lot of money, but I remember those months as the best of my childhood. Then my father started calling and coming by. He swore to Marian he’d quit drinking, that he’d turned his life around, and she’d believed him. He moved back in and things were okay for a few months. He had a job, he was home at night, he bought Marian some new clothes and even gave me a doll.”

Jack never moved as she spoke and she briefly wondered what he was thinking.

“Before long, he fell back in with some old buddies and starting hitting the bars again. I could hear Marian crying at night, waiting for him to come home, waiting for it to all start again. And then it did.”

She shivered, her body moving slowly beyond tiredness to a calm numbness. “You know, it’s funny, but the nighttime with all its screams and tears and fists wasn’t what bothered me the most back then. I’d gotten used to those things. It was the daytime I could never get used to. He would come home every night and hurt her, but the next morning, he would kiss her and take care of her as if she was some kind of fragile china doll. I don’t know how you can beat someone with that kind of hate and then touch them with so much love.”

“Don’t you think that would explain why you don’t like to be touched,” Jack asked softly.

“I’m sure that’s part of it, but no, that’s not why. Marian stayed with my father for

two more years, always the same routine of beatings and forgiveness. He never hit me again—after the night he broke my arm—regardless of how many times I stood in his way. I put myself between them night after night, but he knew Marian wouldn't forgive him if he hurt me again. And I knew it too."

"One night, I had just turned nine, and he came home drunker than I'd ever seen him. He'd lost yet another job and we were broke again. The landlord had hung an eviction notice on our door. Marian was in bed recovering from the flu, and I was sitting up, waiting for him. I wasn't going to let him hurt her when she was so sick. She was worried about the rent, and we hadn't had anything for dinner because there was no money for food. I just wanted her to be able to sleep. He stumbled into the apartment and saw me sitting there. He started shouting for Marian, but I knew she wouldn't answer."

"Why not?" Jack asked.

"I'd slipped two sleeping pills into her hot tea before she went to bed. I told him she was sick and to leave her alone. You know, in all my life, I don't think my father had ever really looked at me, but that night, he did. He'd always allowed me to exist in the same house, but he had no use for me. I think I knew from the cradle he didn't love me."

Jack started to say something, but she stopped him with a wave of her hand. "No," she continued, "it's true. I knew my father didn't care for me, but that night, when he looked at me, I saw something in his eyes that scared the hell out of me—hatred." She shivered once more and Jack rose, walking to the bed to retrieve the quilt. Gently he wrapped it around her before returning to his seat and reclaiming her hand.

She'd never spoken about any of this before. Not to the psychiatrist, Erin, Tori, not even Marian, who'd been there for most of it. Since she was nine years old, she'd kept all these things buried deep inside, afraid to let them out. Jack squeezed her hand and gave her an encouraging smile.

"All my life my father ignored me. Frankly, I didn't think he had feelings for me one way or the other, but that night I realized I'd been wrong. He hated me. He asked where Marian was and I told him she was asleep, and that I wasn't going to let him anywhere near her. He laughed then. The worst laugh I'd ever heard. I'm sure it must have seemed funny to him—a scrawny, hungry little girl trying to protect her mother from the big, bad giant. But I did intend to stop him, anyway I could." Hayley closed her eyes, reliving a time she hadn't let herself think of in twelve years.

"What happened?" Jack whispered.

"He walked over to where I was standing and punched me in the stomach—hard."

Jack stood abruptly at this, coming to her chair and kneeling in front of her.

"Hayley," he began, but she shook her head, continuing quickly, the words flowing freely now. The floodgates were open and nothing could stop her words.

"I wasn't expecting it. He hadn't touched me since the night he broke my arm, and I believed because of that I was somehow immune from his abuse. I sank to the floor, the wind knocked out of me, and he stood over me, laughing. Then without a word, he grabbed my hair and pulled me up so his face was only inches from mine. I could smell the whiskey on his breath and then he—" Hayley stumbled then, unable to go any further in her story.

"And then he?"

"He k-kissed me."

Whatever Jack had been expecting to hear, it obviously wasn't that. He reeled back

on his heels. “What do you mean he kissed you?”

“Just what I said.” Hayley struggled to swallow around the lump in her throat. “He kissed me. Put his tongue in my mouth. I was gagging and trying to shove him away, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t.”

At this, she shivered, pulling her hands out of Jack’s grip and wrapping the quilt more closely around her.

He stood up, pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace. “I’m sorry,” he said gently as he lightly rocked her back and forth. “No more. You don’t have to talk about this anymore.”

“No,” she said. “I need to explain to you why, why—” She stopped speaking, unsure of what to say next.

*

“I don’t need to hear anymore, Hayley. I think I can guess what happened.” He didn’t want her to replay anymore of that horrible night. He was angrier than he’d ever been in his life. He wanted to punish her father—he wanted to kill the man, but that would never be possible. The wild look in her eyes reminded Jack of a cornered animal, and he hadn’t seen her like this since the first night they’d spent together in the cabin. He understood why she hadn’t told anyone about that night. Hayley was proud and brave. It would kill her to have to admit to weakness of any kind, regardless of the fact she’d only been a child.

She’d been a child abused by an adult who should have loved her. He could understand that—he’d suffered abuse at the hands of his uncle for two long, terrible years. Hayley had suffered through nine. He was touched she trusted him enough to confide something so painful to him.

“No,” Hayley said again frantically. “You don’t understand. I have to tell you. I have to say this. I’ve never come this far. Please, please let me finish.”

He saw how much the conversation was costing her—her face was white as parchment, her eyes dark with pain and fear, and her body was shaking despite the warm quilt and blazing fire. He felt as though someone had driven a sword into his chest.

“Hayley,” he began again, but she halted his words with shaking fingers on his lips.

“Please.”

The pleading look in her big, brown eyes brought home how important it was for her to speak the words. For years, she’d carried the burden of that night alone. Tonight, she was sharing the load—with him.

“Very well,” he said, “but no more distance.” He picked her up and returned to the chair. This time, he sat with her on his lap, holding her as one would cradle a baby, tightly clutched against his chest. She sat stunned for an instant as she tried to adjust to this unfamiliar closeness. He could feel her heart beating rapidly. He took several deep, calm breaths and hoped she would follow suit.

“I didn’t understand why he would kiss me like that. He’d never touched me except for that one beating, so the fact he was kissing me in such a horrible way confused me. Even though I was only nine, I knew what happened between a man and a woman.”

Startled, Jack started to speak, but she continued. “One time, I’d hidden behind the couch when he’d come home early. I was only five at the time and still quite afraid of him. I’d gotten up to go to the bathroom, and Marian didn’t realize I was out of bed. He came in, in a furor and started yelling at her. He’d accused her of sleeping with one of his

friends. I didn't understand much of what he was saying, but Marian was crying and denying it. I kept waiting for him to hit her, but he didn't that time. Instead, he said he would make sure she never wanted any other man. He started tearing her clothes off. I was confused and scared and couldn't understand what he was doing. I know now. He raped her."

She tried to get up, but he stopped her. He lightly brushed her hair away from her face and gently rubbed her back. Again, he started to rock her until she calmed down.

"The night he kissed me, I remembered what he'd done to her. I shoved him away and was able to break loose, but he caught me before I could get my bedroom door closed and locked. He dragged me over to the bed, slapping me over and over until I couldn't run or fight anymore." She paused briefly as his hold on her tightened.

"He ripped my nightgown and started touching me. All over, everywhere. His hands were so cold, so hard. He said if I wouldn't let him have his wife, I would take her place. I tried to make him stop, but he just kept laughing at me, calling me horrible names. He put his fingers inside me. It hurt. I begged him to stop, but he kept on, laughing, calling me a slut, a whore."

Jack started to stop her again. Each word she spoke made him more determined to slip through that damned tree and kill her bastard of a father. "I couldn't fight him. I tried, but I couldn't. Then he stopped."

"Why did he stop?"

"Marian was in the doorway. I saw the look in his eyes when he realized she'd seen what he was doing. God, Jack, I could see it so clearly. He loved her. In a sick, completely obsessed kind of way, he truly loved her, and in that moment, he'd lost her. I could see the love she'd had for him die as clearly as if it were a rose withering on the vine. Despite everything he did to her, she loved him too. My whole life, until then, I thought he'd hated us both. But it was just me. He only hated me."

She rested her head against his shoulder, and Jack knew exhaustion was claiming her. The words she'd spoken had taken every bit of her remaining strength.

He wondered how she could tell such a horrific story with so little emotion. Then, he recalled his relationship with his uncle, the abuse he'd suffered as a boy at Wilshire's hands. He, too, thought of those years in a calm, emotionless way. Over time, he had learned to separate the memories from the emotions. He realized Hayley had done the same. The two of them had so much in common and yet so much to overcome.

Looking at her tired face, tight with anguish, he decided it was better she didn't feel too much about that night.

"Why?" Jack asked after a few moments. "Why did he hate you?"

"At the time, I didn't know. Marian and I never talked about him after that night. She simply packed our bags and we left. I think I must have threatened him. He loved Marian to the exclusion of everything, and when I was born, I took part of her away from him. He wanted her all to himself, and he didn't want to share her, not even with his own daughter. I don't know really. That's probably just me overanalyzing something that makes no sense," Hayley smiled at Jack wearily. "Too many psych classes in college."

"It's a good explanation." Jack returned her smile briefly. "What happened to Marian?"

Hayley shrugged at the question, and for the first time, Jack could see real pain and suspected Hayley missed her mother quite a lot.

“I know it may seem like she wasn’t a good mother, bringing me up in such a violent house, but truthfully, never once did I doubt Marian loved me and, later, when it was just the two of us, we had some great times. She was funny and attentive and all the things a good mother should be. Unfortunately, she fell in love with a horrible man. When all was said and done, she left him not because he hurt her but because he hurt me.”

Jack smiled at her description, relieved that Hayley had experienced love in her childhood. It explained much about her unwavering loyalty toward her friends and her determination to reach out to other women like her mother, to care for other children like her. She had learned to love through her mother.

“Why do you call her Marian, not mother?”

“My father,” she answered. “When I learned to talk, he told me to call her Marian. I think he thought that would put some distance between us. If I didn’t call her mommy, she would cease to be that. Silly, huh?”

“He was a fool,” he said, “and if I ever meet him, he’s a dead fool.”

Hayley giggled. For some reason, his fierce defense of her against a mean-spirited drunk who wasn’t even born yet seemed to please her. She had told him her deepest, darkest secret, and he knew he would never be able to let her go.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t want to see me again if you knew,” she whispered with a yawn. Her body was giving out on her—exhaustion kicking in.

“Now who’s being silly?” He lifted her slight body.

“I like your strength,” she whispered.

“It doesn’t scare you?”

“Not anymore. You make me feel safe.”

He carried her to the bed and pulled the covers over her before coming around the bed and climbing in. He turned her into his embrace and placed a light kiss on her forehead.

“Go to sleep, firebrand. It’s been a long night.” She was asleep before he’d finished speaking. However, Jack lay there long after the fire had banked thinking of everything she’d told him and ready to guard her from the nightmares should they return.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bright sunshine fell across the bed creating such a feeling of warmth and contentment, Hayley opened her eyes with a smile on her face. The smile quickly diminished as she looked around the strange bedroom and struggled to remember where she was. This same disoriented feeling had come to her every single morning she'd found herself still trapped in the past. She'd only just become accustomed to her room at Fernwood Grange, but once again, she suffered a momentary pang of alarm as she tried to figure out where the hell she was.

The memory of the previous night came flooding back—the rain, Simon and Julia's escape, the earl, the chase, her late night confession to Jack. It all replayed in fast-forward in her mind, and she groaned. The harsh light of day cast too much focus on the personal things she'd managed to keep safely hidden for so many years. Now that it was out in the open, what would Jack think? How would he react toward her? She didn't have long to ponder those concerns as the bedroom door opened, and Jack entered. All of her fears were washed away the moment she gazed into the face of her handsome pirate.

Smiling and juggling a tray of food, Jack was clad only in the wrinkled pants he'd slept in. His chest was bare, and she admired his smooth, bronze skin and well-defined pecs.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked.

"Like a Mack truck ran over my head. Like I just rammed my Volkswagen bug into a brick wall. Like I drank a whole bottle of tequila *and* ate the worm. Like I..." She started to giggle as he interrupted her.

"I think I understand." He laughed and placed the tray of food on the bedside table. "I don't know what a Mack truck is or what kind of bug a Volkswagen is, but I am familiar with tequila having spent some time in Spain."

The room fell into an awkward silence as Jack arranged the food on the tray, and Hayley settled to a sitting position on the bed. Grateful she was decently clad above the waist, she was somewhat captive beneath the sheets as she spotted her jeans hanging over a chair all the way across the room. Despite the previous evening's revelations, she felt shy and didn't think she would have the nerve to prance across the bedroom clad in only a shirt and panties, regardless of having gone swimming in much less in Jack's presence.

"Actually," Hayley said, anxious to end the stifling quiet, "I feel empty." Jack looked at her, concern in his gaze. "It feels kind of good. Weird, but good."

Smiling, he pulled a chair over to the edge of the bed. "Well, let's see if we can fill you up again. While you were lazing about and sleeping half the day, I was slaving in the kitchen, preparing your breakfast."

"You cook?" She eyed the tray of food suspiciously. "I didn't think anyone cooked for themselves in this time period, especially not men."

"I cook," he answered sourly. "And if I may say so, I cook well."

"Well, I'll be the judge of that," she replied lightly as the delicious smells reached her nose. She reached over to pick up a fork, only to have her hand slapped away.

"Hey," she cried.

"Not yet," he said, and Hayley noticed a new look enter his eyes. His previous

lightheartedness was gone, replaced with something she couldn't quite place. "You, mademoiselle, have some explaining to do." He picked up the fork and loaded it with a huge dollop of the most scrumptious looking eggs she'd ever seen. "In fact, after last night's midnight ride, I may lock you up and feed you nothing but dry bread and water for the rest of your life." He ate the eggs, chewing slowly with a smile on his face.

Incensed by his arrogant threat and hungry beyond belief, she rose up on her knees in the bed and poked a finger into Jack's chest. "Listen, buddy, just because I told you some secrets about me last night does not mean I've handed you the position of my keeper. If I hadn't come along, dear old Uncle Bobby would have caught you all. I saw you on that ship, and I know—thanks to your lessons—you would never have been able to cast off before he and Rawlings boarded and searched every inch of it. The way I see it, you should be offering *me* the position of *your* keeper." Each word she spoke became increasingly louder and was punctuated with her finger poking him harder and harder.

Suddenly furious, Jack yelled back. "I specifically told you to *stay* at the Grange with Alex and Erin where you would be safe. Not two hours later, I see you riding a horse in the middle of the night in a torrential downpour being chased by a deranged madman I have the misfortune to call a relative. What the hell could have possessed you—"

"Possessed me?" she screamed back. They were nose to nose—their words growing more heated and angry by the minute. "Do you think you're the only one capable of executing a rescue? And now that you mention it, I did *not* appreciate you ordering me to stay behind—"

"Dammit woman, you were seriously injured for failing to listen to me the night before. You've stitches in your head and a concussion, and you still won't heed my words. I've had enough of your disobedience and these deliberate attempts to place yourself in danger."

"Disobedience?" she cried incredulously. "What am I? A dog?"

"I will not spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder to make sure you aren't following me into danger," he yelled back.

"Who's asking you to?"

"You may not have a care for your own safety, but I do. I promised to take care of you when I dragged you—"

"Oh stuff it—you're nothing but an arrogant, pompous, self-righteous son of a—" Hayley yelled over his words.

"Ahem!" came a loud voice from the doorway. Both Jack and Hayley paused, looking toward the doorway. An exceedingly uncomfortable Rogers was standing behind a harried-looking Alex and a handsome, dark-haired man Hayley had never seen before. The stranger was leaning comfortably against the doorframe with a huge grin on his face.

From beside her, Jack muttered a loud curse, worse than his usual ones and the stranger laughed aloud. "What are you two doing here?" he asked, suddenly sounding weary.

"My wife sent a messenger to London urging me to come here immediately." Alex looked ready to kill and after only a short time in eighteen eighteen, Hayley was pretty certain his anger had something to do with the fact that she was dressed in only a shirt and in Jack's bed.

"I can explain," she began.

"I—for one—cannot wait to hear an explanation." The strange man looked as if he

would burst with merriment.

"I'm sorry," she said, still poised on the bed on her knees. "I don't mean to be rude, but do I know you?"

"Miss Hayley Garland," Jack began in a formal tone. "May I introduce you to Lord Benjamin Sinclair? Ben, Miss Garland is a friend of Lady Dorset's from America."

Her attempt to rise from the bed and shake Ben's hand was stopped by Jack's firm grip on her shoulder. "Let's save the formalities for a time when you're dressed."

Responding in a loud whisper, she replied hotly, not forgetting her previous anger, "I am dressed—mostly."

Ben erupted in uproarious laughter at her words. Upon hearing it, Hayley immediately decided she liked this man. At any rate, she liked him better than she liked Alex, who looked ready to kill Jack, and Jack, who looked ready to kill everyone.

She smiled coyly at Ben. "I've heard a lot about you from Erin. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Approaching the bed, Ben bowed formally, taking her hand and kissing it. Hayley, glancing at Jack from the corner of her eye, definitely liked Ben. She liked anyone willing to risk life and limb to push Jack's buttons, and Ben was certainly doing that. Jack's face quickly left the bright red range and was moving straight into a vivid purple. Even she hadn't been able to provoke that much color in all her time here, and she had certainly done her best.

"You are even more handsome than Erin said," she added flirtatiously.

This playful jab took in another victim as Alex's head jerked up. "When did Erin say that?"

Ben laughed again. "I told you your wife fancied me, Alex."

"Oh, Alex," she said giggling. "You know Erin is head over heels in love with you. You can't seriously be jealous of some harmless girl talk."

"What else did she say about me?" Ben asked.

"Never mind what she said," Alex retorted. "Dammit, Ben, stop muddying the waters. Jack, what the hell is going on here?"

"It's a long story." Jack cast a seething look at Ben, who was staring appreciatively at her. Glancing down, she spied her legs peeking out from underneath his shirt before Jack reached down and threw a blanket over her. "Why don't we talk in the study? We'll be more comfortable there."

Alex grabbed Ben's arm and pulled him toward the door. "We'll wait for you there. Five minutes, Jack. You have five minutes."

Sighing heavily, Jack watched as Hayley rose and crossed the room to where her clothes lay before the fire. "I'll explain everything to Alex," he said quickly. "Why don't you stay here and eat the breakfast I made. I'd prefer that Ben not see you in your breeches."

"I thought I was being restricted to bread and water."

"Firebrand," Jack began, but he appeared to be stopped by the image of her in her panties.

She rolled her eyes at his typically male reaction to a woman in her underwear, then slid her jeans on slowly, taunting him with a slight wiggle as they cleared her hips.

"Actually, I think I'll head back to Fernwood Grange."

It took several moments before Jack could process her comment. "Oh, no, you aren't

going anywhere without me, especially not dressed like that. You and I need get a few things straight between us.”

“Jack,” Hayley pulled on her socks. “I don’t want to argue with you anymore. Erin is probably worried sick, and who knows how long it will take you to straighten things out with Alex. Templeton will ride back with me, or maybe your friend Ben wouldn’t mind escorting me.”

“You aren’t going anywhere alone with Ben Sinclair,” he said.

“Erin said you, Ben and Alex are the best of friends. The three of you went to school together and served in the same unit in the war. Certainly, he would be a perfectly suitable escort.” She secretly savored his show of jealousy and the image of his lovely blue eyes going green with envy.

She was also relieved her confession hadn’t changed their relationship. He wasn’t treating her with kid gloves as if she would break, and it lightened her heart. Sparring with Jack Campbell was quickly becoming her favorite pastime. Oddly enough, she actually felt giddy over the fight Alex and Ben had just interrupted.

Slowly, Jack crossed the room. “You aren’t leaving. No more arguing, Hayley. In fact, you’re right, no more talking.” With that, he pulled her into his arms and proceeded to kiss her into a stupor. Hayley clung to him for fear she would fall down. The kiss was not gentle or loving. In fact, it was as if the devil himself was possessing her and she was helpless to resist. When he finally pulled away, he gently pushed her down into a chair. “This is for your own good.”

Before she could recover from the kiss or understand his words, he tied her hands, then her feet to the chair with two of his cravats.

“What are you doing?” She struggled to free herself. “You better hope I don’t get free, Jack Campbell, because the second I do, you’re a dead man.”

“Hayley, my love, I’m about to spend my next few moments of my life completely free of worry. Something I haven’t done since you stepped through that blasted tree. Believe me, it’s worth the risk to my person. I only wish I’d thought of this earlier.” Smiling wickedly, he bent and planted a quick kiss on her pursed lips.

“I’ll scream,” she said vehemently.

“Oh, my sweet firebrand, I’d expect no less from you as you have a gorgeous voice.” He calmly pulled out another cravat and tied it securely around her mouth before she could utter a single sound of protest.

She watched a humming Jack walk out of the room, locking the door behind him. She struggled only for a moment, her furor quickly turning to amusement. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the far wall, she started to giggle. Oh, she was going to make Jack Campbell sorry for this. Very sorry, she thought, as her shoulders shook with laughter.

* * * *

Jack paused outside the door to his study. No sense rushing in to face a firing squad. By the look on Alex’s face when he entered Jack’s bedroom this morning, it was going to be a miracle if he emerged from the room unscathed and rightly so.

In the past twelve hours, he’d smuggled Alex’s cousin away in the middle of the night on one of his ships, helped the man elope and allowed Erin’s friend to stay unchaperoned in his townhouse—in his bedroom, in his bed and in his shirt. Regardless

of the true events of the previous evening, the way they'd been found was certainly compromising. If it had been Alex alone who'd entered the room, perhaps he would be able to explain the situation, but Ben had seen it also, not to mention poor Rogers, who was probably a mass of quivering nerves by now.

Stiffening his spine, he slowly turned the knob and entered the room. Ben was comfortably reclined in Jack's favorite chair by the glowing fire. He had helped himself to a glass of Jack's best brandy, despite the early hour and was slowly swirling the liquid around with an annoyingly cheerful look on his face.

Ben was obviously enjoying Jack's predicament enormously. It was all he could do not to walk over and wipe the smug smile from his friend's face. Unfortunately, Jack couldn't deny if the shoe were on the other foot, he too would be taking great delight in Ben's discomfort. Such was the nature of their friendship. When the chips were down however, Ben was the man Jack would choose to have at his back. There could be no more loyal friend than he.

Ben's reclining comfort was sharply contrasted by Alex's furious, tense pacing. His hands were clasped tightly behind his back and it looked as if he were crushing his own fingers. He halted briefly when Jack appeared in the room, then began his trek again. "Finally! One more minute and I was coming to drag you in here myself."

"Alex," Jack began, but he was instantly cut off as Alex launched into the tirade he had obviously been rehearsing since receiving Erin's message.

"What the hell were you thinking? How long did you know where Julia was? Good God man, all those weeks we spent searching for her. Erin was worried sick about the poor girl. We aren't worthy of your trust? Did you really think we'd send her back to the earl? Where is Simon? Katie and Sarah are out of their minds worrying about him. Did you think about that and what his disappearance would mean to them? Poor Ben's been running all over London searching for him. And Hayley!" Alex continued, without taking even a small breath. "Damnation, I don't even want to think about that yet."

"Alex." Ben rose from his chair. "Why don't you let the man answer a question before you ask the next?"

"Oh, he'll be answering my questions, if I don't beat the hell out of him first. I rode all night in one of the nastiest storms I've ever seen to get to London to search for my wayward cousin, only to receive word from Erin he's with you—here. I ride all the way back after no sleep to find the young woman in my charge naked in your bed. You promised, Jack."

"Technically, as the lady pointed out, she wasn't naked." Ben gave them a mischievous grin. "She was wearing a shirt, and if I must say, it looked quite fetching—"

"Enough!" Jack and Alex shouted in unison.

Feigning remorse, Ben fell silent.

"Alex, I only discovered Julia's whereabouts last evening. Apparently, Simon and Hayley have been harboring her in the hunting cabin on the edge of the Grange property. You're familiar with it."

Alex nodded.

"By the time I arrived," Jack continued, "Wilshire and Rawlings were hot on our heels. There wasn't time to inform you and frankly, I wouldn't have anyway. You're a peer of the realm, Alex. How could I ask you to help me smuggle away an earl's betrothed bride?"

"You couldn't," Alex replied, beginning to calm down. "You said Hayley and Simon have been hiding her in the cabin?"

"For weeks. I never thought to look there after—" Jack paused, glancing at Ben, who was listening to every word. "After the night I stayed there several weeks ago." Jack omitted the fact that Hayley had been with him.

Alex nodded his understanding. "So, Simon never went to London?"

"No," Jack answered. "Apparently, he and Julia have been secretly meeting during the past year. They're in love. Simon has been with Julia in the cabin the last month."

"Good God," Alex exclaimed. "How dare he compromise that young girl."

Jack and Ben passed amused grins at that and looked back at Alex, who shook his head. "When did I get this old? I sound like a self-righteous prig. Hell, even worse, I'm starting to sound like my father."

"Where are Simon and Julia now?" Ben asked.

"Aboard one of my ships headed for Portugal. The captain of the vessel is a former vicar. He performed a wedding service last evening before the ship departed. I thought it best not to wait given the fact the two have been alone together every night for weeks. I'm sorry there wasn't time to seek your approval." Jack was afraid word of his cousin's unexpected nuptials may upset his friend again.

"Nonsense. I would have approved. I think they are too young, but overall, it's a good match."

"A tidal wave wouldn't have prevented him from marrying that girl. I haven't seen anyone that much in love since you at your wedding last year." Jack felt the previous tension in the room lessening.

"He's still in love," Ben added, pointing at Alex. "All he ever talks about is Erin this or Erin that. It's enough to lead a man to drink." So saying, Ben lifted his glass in salute.

"The earl won't be pleased to learn his prey has escaped him. I fear what he'll do to you in retaliation," Alex said soberly.

"Actually," Jack replied, "it's Hayley I'm worried about."

"Hayley?" Alex asked.

"She followed us last night when I was attempting to get Simon and Julia to the ship. She disguised herself in Julia's cape and arrived just after the earl. He would have had plenty of time to board the ship and retrieve Julia before they could cast off, but he thought Hayley was Julia and gave chase." Jack shuddered as he recalled the image of his uncle racing after Hayley through the storm and Jack helpless to get to her.

"What a woman." Ben exclaimed appreciatively. "I knew I liked her."

Scowling, Jack began to warn Ben about staying away, but Alex quickly halted that line of conversation. "How did Hayley end up here?"

Still wanting to set Ben straight about Hayley, Jack took a moment before replying. "Templeton was with her. The two of them kept Wilshire occupied for well over an hour before finally giving him the slip. Because the horses were exhausted, and they were soaked to the skin due to the storm, Templeton thought it best to bring her here rather than attempt to make the longer trip back to the Grange."

"That makes sense," Alex said. "Ben, would you mind asking Hayley to gather up her things? We need to leave soon. Erin will be out of her mind with worry and angry as hell at missing out on this adventure."

"Uh, Ben. I should offer you a warning." Jack wondered what his friend would think

of Hayley tied to a chair. “Miss Garland is likely to be angry. I hope you will have a care.”

“Angry?” Ben asked, intrigued. “Don’t worry about me. I love a feisty woman.”

“Don’t even think about that feisty woman.” Jack yelled.

Ben groaned dramatically. “Oh, God, not you, too. I’ll be a raging drunk if I have to deal with two love-struck friends.” Chuckling, he walked across the room and paused at the door. “Do try not to kill each other while I’m gone. I’d hate to have to offer a consoling shoulder to both your lovely ladies. Then again, perhaps I wouldn’t.”

Grinning, Jack watched him walk out the door without warning his friend of the whirlwind he would have to unleash in the bedroom. Serves him right, Jack thought jealously.

Alex, ignoring Ben’s comments and departure, cut to the chase immediately. “What the hell happened between you and Hayley last night?”

“I don’t suppose you would believe me if I said nothing.”

Alex rolled his eyes in response.

“It’s more complicated than merely doing the right thing, Alex. You of all people should understand that. I’d marry the woman tomorrow if I thought she’d have me, but she still expects to return to her own time through that blasted tree.” Jack ran his hands through his hair.

“Ah, I see. Blasted tree, is it?” Alex said. “So Ben was correct.”

“About what?”

“You are in love with her,” Alex stated, no question in his voice.

Jack began to deny the claim, but quickly shut his mouth. “Oh, hell,” he muttered. “Yes, I am.”

“What do you intend to do about it?”

“What can I do about it? I told you, she doesn’t plan to stay.” Jack walked over to the fireplace, gazing gloomily into the empty grate.

“Take it from me, old friend, if you truly love her, fight for her.”

“Fight whom? Or rather what? A tree? The future? Her life in another time?”

“I suppose,” Alex replied, “Hayley.”

“Hayley?” Jack asked, and then slowly nodded. “How did you convince Erin to give it all up? Didn’t you feel guilty? Asking her to forsake everything for you?”

Alex smiled sadly and shrugged. “Yes, I felt guilty. Hell, I still feel guilty. And I still can’t believe she chose me, but honestly, to keep Erin by my side, I would have fought a hundred Napoleons.”

Jack grinned back at his friend. “Yes, well, fighting Hayley *will* be like fighting a hundred Napoleons. I don’t know—” Jack faltered, as if unsure what he wanted to say.

“Yes, you do know. You love her and if she feels the same for you, then the rest will be easy. I’m surprised at you. You aren’t a man to give up what he wants.” Alex crossed the room to rest a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Isn’t she worth the fight?”

“God, yes,” Jack whispered.

With a pat, Alex grinned. “Then, there’s your answer.” He crossed the room to pour them each a brandy and to give Jack time to consider his next move.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hayley's lighthearted attitude toward being bound in Jack's bedroom lasted exactly five minutes, at which time she began to become angry again. How dare he leave her like this for so long. By the end of twenty minutes, Hayley had plotted no less than ten very violent, painful ways she was going to kill Jack Campbell when he finally came to set her free.

Slowly, the door to the room opened. Ready to appear docile, she sat still and was surprised when Ben—not Jack—entered the room. His obvious shock at her state proved that Jack had thrown his friend into the lion's den unprepared. She actually felt sorry for Ben, until his face broke into the charming smile she thought she'd admired when first seeing him, but that now only served to add fuel to the growing furor inside her.

"Miss Garland," he said. Recovered from his immediate astonishment, she could definitely see a gleam of mischief in his gaze. Narrowing her eyes, she waited patiently as he crossed the room. There was little she could do or even say until he saw fit to remove the gag in her mouth. If he didn't do it soon, she decided he was going to share Jack's same miserable fate. "I must say I am shocked to find you thus. Please don't tell me some horrid villain broke in here and did this to you. And three able-bodied soldiers just down the hall. Tsk, tsk, tsk." He shook his head as if he actually believed his farfetched tale. "Very distressing. Yes, very distressing."

Her fury reached a new level, and she struggled to speak from behind the gag. Ben acted as if the sound suddenly reminded him of her predicament.

"Oh, my dear woman, please let me remove that." Ben reached over and slowly untied the knot holding the gag in place. "There, that's better."

"Untie me." She was in no mood to play games with Lord Sinclair.

"Of course, I certainly will." However, he paused right before his hands reached the cravats as if suddenly thinking better of it.

Hayley glared at him. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I was thinking it may be a bit premature of me to simply let you loose without first discovering why you are bound."

"I'm tied up because your friend, Jack Campbell, is a gigantic ass. Now let me loose."

"Ah, I see," Ben replied with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Then it would certainly be thoughtless of me to untie you without first asking for some reassurances from you."

"Reassurances?" she asked. "What the hell do you mean?"

Shocked by her coarse language, Ben's eyebrows reached all the way to his hairline. Hayley smirked, pleased to be able to turn the tables on the devious Lord Sinclair.

He recovered quickly. "I can see you're not happy in your present state. Yet, it might be imprudent of me to untie you only to suffer your wrath myself. Don't kill the messenger—that sort of thing."

"Fine," Hayley replied shortly, "please let me *reassure* you that I won't take my anger out on you."

"And Captain Campbell?" Ben asked, as if concerned for Jack.

"He can rot in hell."

Laughing, Ben replied, "Fair enough." He untied Hayley, then hastily retreated a safe distance lest she change her mind.

Hayley grinned at his mock fear, shaking her hands in an attempt to restore the feeling in them. "Damn that man," she murmured as the numbness gave way to sharp, shooting pains.

"Mademoiselle, I must say I find your language quite colorful. It's apparent you and Erin are mates. She's the only other woman I've ever met who could out-curse a sailor. Americans," Ben admonished with a grin.

"Erin is the queen of foul language," Hayley laughed. "She loves the shock value, and it was always a surefire way to bring attention to the June girls."

"June girls?"

"Oh, just a silly name for our little group of friends. There are only three of us, actually. Erin, Tori and me. We grew up together and named ourselves the June girls, as we all have birthdays in June. Sounds a bit juvenile, I know, but we were only ten at the time and the name seemed terribly clever back then." Hayley sat back down, pulling on her shoes and lacing them up.

Ben sat down in the chair opposite hers. "Well, I've met you and Erin. Where is Tori?"

Her smile faded as she thought of Tori. "She's still in America." Or at least, she would be soon. She wondered if Tori had given up the search for her. It was the end of July and her new school year would be starting up in a few weeks. Hayley's heart ached to think of Tori going back home alone.

"So how do you plan to give Jack his punishment, and can I help?"

Hayley laughed at Ben's joke. "Oh, I have several revenge schemes in mind. I'll let you know if I need your assistance."

"Clever girl like you," he added thoughtfully. "I can't imagine how you got yourself into such a spot to begin with."

Blushing slightly, she recalled the kiss that had caused her to let down her guard. "He tricked me, but I can promise you I've had ample time to plot my retribution."

* * * *

Jack entered his bedchamber to find Ben and Hayley laughing by the fire like lifelong friends. A curiously strong heat began to course through his blood while black spots hindered his vision. For the first time in his life, he seriously considered hurting one of his best friends.

"Isn't this cozy?" He leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe, trying to keep from crossing the room and wringing Ben's neck.

Ben, sensing his friend's anger, obviously decided a quick retreat was in order. "It has been a pleasure meeting you, Miss Garland. I look forward to speaking to you as we journey back to Fernwood Grange."

Ben took Hayley's hand in his. His friend lifted her hand to place a light kiss on her knuckles. Jack was across the room in three large strides, and he quickly grabbed her hand from Ben's grip.

"Fernwood Grange? Are you planning to go there?" Jack asked.

"Of course I am. I wouldn't miss the Grange's end-of-summer party."

Jack groaned, suddenly recalling the week-long house party, an annual event held at

the Grange each August. He'd been attending the event since his youth. Alex and Erin, in keeping with the tradition started by Alex's grandfather, invited the local gentry and many friends from London to a week-long house party. On the final day of the party, the tenants and surrounding neighbors came for a day of food and games, followed by a ball. It was the highlight of the year for most of the local folk, as they celebrated the last days of summer.

"I forgot. With Julia's disappearance and other things," Jack glanced at Hayley, "I suppose it slipped my mind."

"Well, the party is in two weeks, and Alex has graciously invited me to stay at the Grange until then. As things are slow in London right now, I took him up on the offer."

"I see," Jack replied. "Ben, Alex is in the stables preparing for the return trip. He asked me to send you out to assist him."

"Can I trust you to be a gentleman alone here with Miss Garland?" Ben asked, half jokingly. "I would hate to find her tumbled in your sheets again or even worse, trussed up."

Jack gritted his teeth at his friend's attempts at humor. "She will be fine."

"Do you mind if I leave you alone, mademoiselle?" Ben turned to Hayley and offered her a friendly wink. "I don't mind staying here to protect you."

"Ben," Jack said angrily.

"I'll be fine," she assured Ben with a wicked grin. "It's probably Captain Campbell you should be offering to protect."

With a laugh, Ben headed toward the door. "I have no doubt you're correct. I look forward to the return trip to the Grange, Miss Garland. I find you highly amusing."

Jack turned as if to attack, but Ben simply saluted the couple with a smug grin and closed the door.

"I'm going to kill him," he muttered.

"And I am going to kill you." Hayley cuffed him on the back of the head. "How dare you tie me up like that. What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Jack pivoted before she could strike him again and grabbed both her arms. Putting them behind her back, he lowered his head for a kiss, ceasing anymore of her criticism. After only a moment, he felt her sink into the kiss, parting her lips and sighing sweetly. Releasing her arms, he grasped her to him, feeling her breasts crushed against his chest. Her arms wrapped around his neck as she took the initiative to deepen the kiss. With tongues dueling, Jack reached around to touch her breasts, rubbing firmly through her shirt.

The sweet moan that escaped her lips erased all reasonable thought from his mind as he backed her up to the bed and pushed her on to it. Following her descent, he lay on top of her, running his hands over her arms and breasts, down her hips and buttocks, all the while kissing her senseless. Her hips pressed up against the firmness in his pants, the sensation of her innocent gesture driving him wild.

Reality crashed over him in a rush as Jack rose up on his elbows and looked down into her passion-filled eyes. Shuddering slightly, he muttered more to himself than her, "Dammit Hayley. What am I going to do with you?"

His words seemed to bring her to her senses as she realized she was lying beneath him on his bed. "Oh," she said, startled. "Get off me, you oaf. You tricked me again."

Jack laughed at her words. "Tricked you? How?" He placed a light, teasing kiss on

the end of her nose.

“You know I can’t think straight when you kiss me like that. Get off.” She attempted to shove at his shoulders.

Jack continued to laugh and refused to release his hold on her. “Hold still. No more kisses, I promise.”

“Jack—let me up. What if Alex and Ben come in again?” Hayley glanced nervously toward the door.

“They won’t,” he said confidently. “I want to talk to you, and you have this rather annoying habit of trying to run away when a conversation doesn’t suit you.”

“That’s not true.” She continued to squirm under him.

“Damnation, woman,” he said hotly. “If you plan on remaining a virgin any longer, you will hold still this instant.”

At his words, she froze, suddenly aware of what she had been rubbing against.

“That’s better,” he said through gritted teeth.

“What do you want to say?” She was obviously hoping to finish the conversation quickly, so she might be allowed to get up. “We’re going to be riding back together for at least an hour. Can’t we have this discussion then?”

“I’m not returning to the Grange.”

“Oh,” Hayley tried to mask the disappointment in her eyes, but failed. “I see.”

“No,” Jack replied, “you don’t.”

“I do, honestly, and I don’t blame you. Truly, I don’t. Now if you’ll just get up. I’ll leave.” She lowered her eyes, but Jack caught the glimmer of despair on her face.

“I believe I told you the whole reason you’re on this bed is because I don’t want you to leave. And you don’t understand anything. I can see it in your face.” He studied her expression, ashamed of feeling secretly pleased to see her disappointment. It meant she cared about him, that she was slowly overcoming her fears, which relieved the small part of Jack that worried she would reject him.

“Fine,” Hayley said stiffly. “Talk.”

He took a deep breath and said what was in his heart. “I have several things to see to here in town. Business things I need to attend to. Things I’ve let go since you arrived in my life. Two weeks, Hayley. I will be returning to the Grange in two weeks for the house party, at which time I intend to court you seriously.”

“Court me?”

“Court, woo, seduce, whatever word you use in your time,” he replied quickly. “I mean to have you. You’ve infected my blood. Two weeks, and then I’m coming for you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I want you to prepare yourself. I also want you to have time to consider what I’m saying to you. You need to think about whether or not you want me. Do you understand what I’m saying, Hayley?” he asked, suddenly very afraid of her outright rejection.

“I understand,” she whispered in reply. “Jack, I’m still afraid. When you touch me—”

“I know, love.” He lightly kissed the end of her nose. “We’re going to find a way to overcome those fears together—in two weeks.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Come on. We’re going for a ride,” Erin announced one morning as she breezed into Hayley’s bedroom.

“We are? Where?” Hayley had been back at the Grange for several days, most of which she’d spent lazing about. Her body had quite frankly given out due to the stress of the previous weeks, exhaustion from her midnight ride and the concussion she’d suffered. She’d never in her life felt so tired and had put up very little fuss when Erin suggested she hang about the house for a few days. Curtailing her daily exercise, Hayley had remained indoors, doing very little besides visiting with Erin, napping and eating. She’d never been so idle in her entire life.

Besides, her thoughts were consumed with Jack’s parting words to her. He wanted her—all of her—exactly as she was. It was shocking to realize that with him she had slowly lowered all her defensive walls. She’d shown him her true self, and he still wanted her. It was a heady, dizzy, wonderful feeling.

Since telling Jack about the night her father molested her, she’d felt lighter, happier than ever. She hadn’t suffered the nightmare since that night, even though she knew better than to be too optimistic. Her dreams always had a way of reappearing just when she thought the demons long gone.

“Hello, earth to Hayley. Are you listening to me?” Erin waved her hand in front of her face and Hayley grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry, Er. Checked out on you there for a minute.”

Erin didn’t laugh at her joke, but rather looked concerned. “Maybe it’s too soon for an outing. How’s your head feeling?”

“Fine, really. I’ve just got some things on my mind.” Hayley hadn’t confided Jack’s words to Erin, and she wasn’t really sure why she hadn’t. In the past, or rather the future, there was very little Hayley didn’t tell her best friend. She just wasn’t sure how to explain her feelings about Jack. They were too intense, too raw.

Her main concern was whether or not she would be able to accept Jack into her bed—without the usual panic attack occurring. She no longer had any doubts about her desires. She wanted Jack—badly. If she could keep the memories at bay, she knew he could teach her about passion, about sex, about love.

“Well, okay. If you’re sure you’re up to it. We really don’t have to go anywhere today.” Erin didn’t seem convinced, so Hayley bounded out of bed with more energy than she really had.

“I’m right as rain, Erin. Honestly. Here, help me put on this damn dress. Unless, this is an outing where my jeans would be appropriate?”

Her question had been a tease, as Hayley had become accustomed to the fact that there was really nowhere here where her jeans didn’t raise eyebrows. However, Erin seemed to seriously consider the thought before dismissing it.

“No, perhaps a dress would be better.”

Hayley turned as Erin began to fasten the buttons up her back and again Hayley’s thoughts drifted back to Jack.

Marriage had never been a possibility for her future. Her experiences with the

institution had soured her toward the whole idea. She refused to give any man the power to hurt her. Not after the way she'd witnessed Marian's abuse at the hands of her father or the beatings—physical and verbal—suffered by the women at the clinic. She'd decided at a very young age she would never marry, which made Jack's offer all the more appealing. Her time here was limited. They both knew that. Jack said he wanted to court her, woo her, seduce her, not marry her and the fact he omitted that statement from his declaration made him even more attractive to her.

"I have to say I'm surprised at you," Erin said, interrupting her musings again.

"Why?"

"You haven't even asked where we're going. Did you lose that insatiable sense of curiosity with the trip through time?" Erin asked.

Hayley grinned. "Where are we going?"

"To see Lady Linley."

Hayley's stomach dropped to her feet at her friend's words. Lady Linley. The one person so many people seemed to think held the secret to her return to the future.

"Oh."

Erin crossed in front of Hayley and took her hands in hers. "Oh?" Erin asked.

"That's all? Just oh?"

"What did you expect?"

"Enthusiasm, excitement. I thought you were desperate to return home, Hayley."

"I am," she replied with feigned eagerness. Problem was she'd been so consumed with her thoughts of Jack these past few days that she'd put the mystery of the tree out of her mind. What if Lady Linley did hold the secret? What if she could step back through the portal and be safe and sound in two thousand eight by tonight? Would she go? The thought jarred Hayley as she considered the fact that for the first time, she wasn't so sure she would leave. At least, not right away. The image of Jack's face floated through her mind, and she realized she could never leave without first saying goodbye to him. However, the thought of that goodbye created a pain in her chest that cut like daggers.

No. If Lady Linley held the key to her return, Hayley would merely hold it in her pocket and use it later. She wouldn't, couldn't leave until she'd seen Jack again.

A knock on the door interrupted her musings. Alex popped his head around the door. "Going riding?"

Erin nodded. "We're going to visit Lady Linley."

Hayley watched a strange look cross Alex's face. "Oh," he said. "I see. Well, I wanted to let you know it's quite chilly out. You may want to wear a coat. I didn't realize you would be riding so far, or I would have made plans to accompany you. I've scheduled a meeting with several tenants this morning."

"We'll be fine, Alex," Erin reassured him.

"Even so, perhaps, you would indulge me by allowing Ben to escort you?"

Erin smiled at her husband's loving concern. "That would be fine, Alex." Erin crossed the room to give him a kiss on the cheek. "However, he will have to wait outside during our visit. Can you think a suitable excuse for his remaining outdoors while we speak to Lady Linley?"

Alex nodded before excusing himself. "I'll go talk to him."

"Are you sure you have time to make this trip?" Hayley asked.

The past few days had been filled with plans for the house party and ball. Alex's aunt

and cousin had returned from London the day before to help. Hayley had liked the women immediately and was thrilled to see how much Erin looked up to Aunt Sarah. Having grown up without a mother, it appeared Erin had found the perfect one in Sarah. Katie, a bubbly and beautiful sixteen year old, had infused the Grange with her laughter and energy.

"I have time." Erin scrutinized her face, and Hayley fought to keep an impassive look upon it. "Really, Hayley. If you'd rather not go, we don't have to. I just had the impression you were anxious to return home."

"I am. It's just, well, it seems a shame to rush right back, I mean, if this Lady Linley can even help me. I was kind of looking forward to the house party and the ball."

Hayley had been helping Erin organize the games, decorations, music and food. At night, Alex and Ben took turns teaching her how to dance, so she would be prepared for the ball. The lessons were great fun, but she couldn't help wishing it was Jack who was spinning her around the room in his arms.

Grabbing Julia's cape, Hayley quickly descended the staircase behind Erin to find a smiling Ben waiting for them.

"Good morning, Miss Garland. Lady Dorset. I hope you don't mind being stuck with poor old me for company this fine morning. I must say I'm a bit distressed to learn that you won't be resuming your daily exercise today. I'm interested in seeing this so-called running you do. The servants seem mighty disappointed you've ceased. They found it quite entertaining."

Hayley laughed. Ben had become a good friend in a short time, and she was rather fond of his teasing. He'd become obsessed with the idea of a woman running for exercise and had constantly nagged to see her action. However, she knew she wouldn't start running again until Jack returned to escort her. Their morning runs had become a private, special thing she was only willing to share with him.

"Shall we go, ladies?" Ben said, opening the front door.

Hayley walked toward the carriage with a heavy heart. Fear had taken root and for a moment she struggled to understand it. Was she afraid Lady Linley wouldn't be able to offer her a way to return home? Or afraid she would?

* * * *

As they stood at the doorway of the tiny house, Hayley fought back the waves of nausea attacking her. If Lady Linley couldn't offer her an answer about the mystery of her arrival and the secret behind returning, she really would be stuck here for the rest of the year. Hell, there wasn't even a guarantee that the tree would open then.

The door opened and Hayley was surprised to see an attractively dressed, kind-faced elderly woman. Given the townspeople's descriptions, she'd expected a hag-like crone.

"Lady Dorset," Lady Linley exclaimed, joy lighting her face. "What a pleasure to see you again."

Erin grinned. "Oh, no, none of that, Lady Linley. You know better."

"Erin," the older woman said, reaching toward Erin and pulling her into a warm hug. "I've missed you, my dear."

Erin returned the embrace, then gesturing toward her. Hayley noticed as the anxious look Erin had given her during their entire journey here reappeared.

"Ah, you've brought another caller with you," Lady Linley said.

“Two, actually,” Erin confessed “This is my good friend Hayley Garland. Lord Sinclair accompanied us as well, but we’ve asked him to remain with the carriage so that we may speak in private.”

Hayley watched Lady Linley’s gaze flash back to Erin’s face quickly. So Hayley wasn’t the only one to notice the slight tremor in Erin’s voice. What on earth was going on with her friend? Erin was never scared or nervous.

“Please, do come in.” Lady Linley led them into a small, but well-kept home. Hayley was slightly surprised by the fine quality of the furnishings. It was clear the woman had some money and marvelous taste, and Hayley wondered why she lived alone. It was an uncommon occurrence in this day.

Once they were all settled, Lady Linley looked at Erin expectantly. “So, Erin, what brings you here?”

“Hayley and I have been friends for many years, since we were ten, actually, and I thought she should meet you.”

Lady Linley rose unexpectedly and crossed the room, kneeling at Hayley’s feet. The sudden movement and close proximity caught Hayley unaware. “So the tree chose you as well.”

Hayley was shocked by the woman’s words. She’d been prepared to recite her well-rehearsed cover story about the ancient legend. “You know about the tree?”

Lady Linley looked over at Erin, confusion in her face. “But of course I know about it, surely Erin—”

Erin interrupted her words. “I didn’t tell her.”

“Didn’t tell me what?” Hayley asked.

“I’m afraid I lied to you, Hayley,” Erin said softly. “When I said the tree only opened once a year. When I said I didn’t understand how the magic worked.”

Erin looked utterly miserable, but Hayley found it difficult to be sympathetic. “You know how it works?” she asked sharply. Erin nodded and Hayley forged on, her temper spiking. “And could I be home right now? Right this minute, could I be at the Grange with Tori, setting her mind at ease?”

Erin shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, but maybe.”

Hayley rose, stunned and furious. “Maybe? Why, Erin? Why in the hell didn’t you tell me this weeks ago?”

“Miss Garland,” Lady Linley said calmly. Hayley glanced at the woman. In her anger, she’d forgotten she was there. “I believe it’s important that you sit down and let your friend and I explain more fully. Nothing will be accomplished until you put your anger away.”

Hayley struggled to take a deep breath, tried to fight the fury clawing at her chest, begging to be let loose so she could yell and scream and rant and rave at her so-called best friend. “I can’t believe you did this to me,” she said to Erin after several moments.

“She didn’t do anything to you. Now sit down,” Lady Linley’s words were spoken gently but firmly, and Hayley, still trapped in the past with no answers, realized she had little choice but to do as the woman commanded. As she sat, she purposely turned her face away from Erin.

“Fine. Let’s hear it.”

“First of all, you have to realize that we only understand a tiny portion of how the tree is able to transport people from one time to another, and the information we’ve

gathered up until now has only been based on my experiences and Erin's. Your friend was correct when she said she didn't know if you could return. We've deducted that the tree seems to grant wishes of the heart."

Hayley struggled not to scoff at the absurd comment. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It seems to understand the deepest desires of a person's heart, and its magic works mainly during the Solstice."

Erin smiled and shrugged. "My birthday is June twenty-first, the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. Lucky me."

"So you were right. The tree only opens once a year."

"No," Lady Linley answered quickly. "There is another time of the year when the magic appears to work as well. When I traveled the second time, it was in December. The Winter Solstice."

Hayley shook her head. "When you traveled the second time?"

Lady Linley returned to her chair. "I was born in this area in the year seventeen sixty-three. The year I turned eighteen I was at a house party at the Grange with my family. I'd gone to rest under the oak one afternoon. My heart was filled with dismay over the fact I'd had a rather unsuccessful season in London. I must confess, Miss Garland that I believe people can be born in the wrong time. It's a cruel twist of fate, but one I do genuinely consider to be true."

Erin grinned, but Hayley didn't find anything funny in Lady Linley's words. She hadn't been born in the wrong time, just to the wrong father.

"I was terribly depressed and lonely, and I'm ashamed to say, feeling quite sorry for myself. I wished I could find a man who would truly love me and then the tree opened."

Hayley frowned. "It just opened?"

Lady Linley shivered slightly, and it was then Hayley realized the tree had taken the woman from her home with the same violence with which had gripped her. "You've felt the tree's power. It was the same for me," the elderly woman replied softly.

Hayley nodded apologetically. "Where did it take you?"

"Nineteen eleven. And like in Erin's experience, there was a young man there who pulled me from the tree's brutal grip."

Hayley recalled Jack being there to save her, but she said nothing as Lady Linley continued her tale.

"This young man and I were both immediately struck by the wonder of what had happened. George was a handsome, kind-hearted gentleman and he protected and sheltered me as we tried desperately to discover a way to return me back to my own time. Regardless of our attempts to learn more, we were unsuccessful."

"But you did return," Hayley said, trying to put the pieces of the woman's story together in some way that would help her.

"Years later."

"Years?" Hayley asked weakly.

"I stopped trying to return, Miss Garland, because I fell madly in love with George. We married and were quite happy for several years."

"What happened?"

"The Great War or, as Erin has informed me, the war people in your time refer to as World War I. George enlisted to fight and was killed in battle. It was mid-December

when I received word. I was distraught, devastated. I returned to the tree, cursed it for its cruelty and—”

“And it brought you back,” Hayley whispered.

The elderly woman nodded sadly. “Without George, there seemed to be nothing left tying me to that time, and so the tree granted my heart’s deepest desire. To return home to my family. To cry out my grief on my mother’s shoulder.”

“But you’d been gone for so long. How did you explain?” Hayley couldn’t imagine anyone who hadn’t seen the magic personally believing such a far-fetched tale.

“I told a half-truth,” Lady Linley replied sadly. “I was truly blessed with loving parents, so I said that I’d run away with a man I’d fallen in love with, and that he’d died in a carriage accident. They took me back, but of course, I’ve been shunned from polite society ever since. I’ve never minded. I had five wonderful years with the most marvelous man, and I wouldn’t trade those days for a lifetime of fancy balls and house parties.”

Hayley leaned back and tried to determine how Lady Linley’s words would help her return home. The most useful information seemed to be that the tree opened twice a year, and at the worst, she could return home in December. “So I have to wait until mid-December?”

“Honestly, my child,” Lady Linley began, “I don’t know. It is only my belief that the magic of the tree is most powerful at the solstice. Erin believes the tree’s true magic relies primarily on the heart and time of year has little to do with it. Have you returned to the tree since your arrival?”

“Yes,” Hayley replied. “Nothing happened.”

“Is there anything tying you to this time? Anything in your heart that would keep you here?” Lady Linley asked.

An image of Jack’s face floated before her eyes. Jack? If the tree listened only to your heart, would it find her heart tied to his? She’d never been in love before, but she was beginning to sense—no, fear—that she’d fallen quite madly for Jack Campbell. She glanced over at Erin and was surprised to find complete understanding in her friend’s gaze.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

“Well, then,” Lady Linley replied sadly. “Until you can answer that question, I fear you may never be able to return home.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Dammit Ben. It is no big deal. Let it go!” Hayley yelled, her face flushed.

“You need a lesson in manners, Miss Garland. That foul language of yours—” Ben replied loudly.

“What’s going on here?” Alex asked, rushing out of the dining room.

“Nothing.” Hayley glared daggers at Ben.

“Not nothing.” Ben looked directly at Alex. “We ran into the Earl of Wilshire upon our return from Lady Linley’s home.”

“Ben and Erin are making a mountain out of a molehill,” Hayley said. “That arrogant earl is all bluff and hot air. Let’s just forget it.”

Concerned, Alex looked at Erin. “What happened?”

“He threatened her,” she answered.

“Not seriously.” Hayley tried to shrug off the incident as unimportant.

“Not seriously?” Ben yelled. “The man took one look at her in that cloak and flew into a rage like I’ve never seen.”

“He’s a hothead,” Hayley yelled back. “Right, Erin? The man is seriously unstable.”

“What did he say?” Alex suddenly looked worried.

“I think perhaps we should send word to Jack.” Ben spoke directly to Alex.

“He’ll want to know about this,” Erin agreed.

“No.” Hayley said. “I told you both, we are not sending for Jack. I’m perfectly capable of looking out for myself. The man was just pissed off at being tricked and losing his victim. He was trying to intimidate me, and it won’t work.”

“Be quiet, Hayley!” Alex demanded. “What happened?”

“He rode up alongside the carriage and asked if he could have a word with Lady Dorset,” Ben replied. “I told him if he wished to call upon her ladyship, he need only come to the Grange. I knew you’d want to be present to hear whatever he said.”

Alex nodded.

Crossing her arms across her chest, Hayley turned her head as if bored and sighed loudly.

“I wasn’t aware of his presence until he approached us, but I got the impression, they’d been following us for awhile.”

“They?” Alex asked.

“He and that fellow that’s always with him. Riley or Rose or…”

“Rawlings,” Erin and Hayley responded in unison.

“The cape.” Erin glanced at Alex. “She was wearing Julia’s cape.”

Alex nodded. “Weren’t you wearing that the night you lured the earl away from Jack’s ship? The night Simon and Julia escaped?”

Hayley shrugged.

“Yes,” Erin answered quietly. “She was.”

“Now the earl realizes it was Hayley who aided Jack in the kidnapping of his betrothed, I fear his wrath will know no end,” Alex said.

Hayley rolled her eyes and refused to acknowledge the truth of his words.

“Now you’re quiet.” Ben was obviously still angry with Hayley. “Where was that

self-control when we were with the earl?"

Alex groaned. "What did you say to him, Hayley?"

"Nothing," Hayley replied shortly.

"Nothing!" Ben exploded. "You call that little tirade of yours nothing!"

"The man is a bully. You didn't see Julia when she first got here. None of you did. He'd beaten her—badly. He needed to be taken down a notch or two."

"Oh, Hayley," Erin said softly. "I would say that was a tad bit more than a notch."

"Not again," Alex replied.

"You need to understand it's not your job to defend every woman in the world. The earl—he's different from the men we're used to." Erin stumbled over her words, careful not to say too much in front of Ben. As far as he was concerned, they had come from America eighteen eighteen.

"What did you say?" Alex's patience was definitely at an end.

"I—" Hayley started, but she didn't get far.

"She taunted him," Ben interjected. "Told him as long as she was around she'd make sure he never hurt another woman. Told him he was a bully and a coward, and his title did not give him the right to terrorize young women."

"Good God." Alex visibly paled. "How did the earl respond?"

"Can't you imagine?" Ben said hotly. "He was so furious he could barely speak. When he did, Christ, when he did—"

"He made the same lame threat he made before," Hayley finished for him, anxious to bring this discussion to an end. The earl's threats had terrified her, and she desperately wanted to escape to her bedroom before her outside began shaking as violently as her inside.

"His threats aren't lame." Erin said before doing a double-take. It seemed she'd noticed Hayley's distress. "Why don't you go up and change out of those clothes, Hayley? We'll figure out how to deal with the earl over dinner."

Alex looked like he wanted to continue, but Hayley caught sight of Erin's discreet headshake, and she was grateful for her friend's help.

She offered a quick apology for upsetting everyone before dashing up the stairs to her room.

*

"What the hell is wrong with that woman?" Ben asked when Hayley was out of earshot. "He threatened to kill her, and he meant it, Erin. You heard him. His whole being was totally focused on her. I've never seen him so angry, not even with Jack. He's out of his mind with Helena's death and Julia's desertion, and now Hayley has become the target of his unsavory attention."

"I'll send a note to Jack," Alex said. "He needs to be informed the earl knows for sure it was Hayley who helped Julia escape."

"Jack will want to kill her himself," Ben replied. "I've never seen such an impassioned put-down. Remind me never to get on her bad side." Ben, obviously shaken by the events of the morning, excused himself and retired to his room.

"What should we do?" Erin asked.

"I'll put the servants on alert. Hire a couple extra men to guard her. Pray the earl forgets about her." Alex held little hope the conflict between the earl, Jack and Hayley would end in anything good.

“Feels like a volcano poised and ready to erupt at any minute,” Erin replied shuddering.

* * * *

Jack arrived at the Grange, shortly before dinner the next night—one week earlier than he had planned. By the grim expression on his face, Hayley had no doubt he’d heard about her argument with his uncle. She’d expected him to corner her and give her hell for her actions, but as the night progressed, he’d made no attempt to draw her aside. He’d treated her courteously and even joined in on the dance lessons. He’d taught her how to waltz and—just as she’d suspected—being in his arms had left her overheated and breathless.

As everyone retired for the night, Jack bid her a goodnight and went up to his room. Confused, she wondered if her unwise words to the earl had changed Jack’s intentions toward her. Maybe she’d gone too far and pushed him away. Disheartened by the thought, she climbed the stairs debating whether or not she should go to Jack’s room to clear the air. She dismissed the thought instantly, upset that he would forget her and his promise to her so easily.

Upon returning to her bedroom, she crossed to the fire, depressed. Jack’s distance from her bothered her more than she cared to admit. She’d been looking forward to his return. Staring at the flames, her depression quickly turned to anger. To hell with him, she decided. If he’d changed his mind after only a few short days, then he obviously wasn’t the man she’d thought he was. In fact, she should have known better. In the long run, didn’t most men disappoint women? Weren’t they all frauds?

She walked to her bed, but as she sat down, a note on her pillow caught her attention. Heart racing, she snatched it up. The clear, brisk handwriting caused her heart to race.

Our Bench ... Midnight

J

Forgetting her damning thoughts, Hayley—suddenly thrilled—looked at the clock. It was half past eleven. Our bench, she thought with a smile, recalling the night he’d caught her returning from the cabin. Walking over to the mirror, she ran her fingers through her hair. Quickly, she shed her dress and donned her comfortable green blouse and jeans. It was the outfit she’d worn on her trip through time, and the only one she truly felt comfortable in.

At five minutes to twelve, she snuck down the servant’s staircase. As she approached the garden, she could see Jack sitting with his back to her, looking out into the woods and seemingly lost in thought.

She paused to watch him and get her feelings under control. She couldn’t help but admire his strong back and broad shoulders in his tight-fitting shirt. He’d gotten a haircut since she’d last seen him, and his dark locks barely brushed his collar. Breathlessly, she stood and took in all of him—relaxed, calm, perhaps a bit brooding. She’d expected him to return to the Grange angry and prepared to do battle, and she was slightly uneasy with this quiet, unemotional Jack.

“Are you going to stand there all night or come and take your punishment like a man?” His voice sounded more like a growl, and his back was still turned.

She struggled to restrain a giddy laugh. Her Jack was back. Elated, she approached and stood before him, struggling to keep her face impassive.

“Hello, Jack,” she said with a mischievous grin.

His scowl was short-lived as for the first time since his return, he seemed truly pleased to see her. “Come here. What are you wearing?” His voice was so low she could barely hear him.

She took one step closer and was quickly swept onto his lap. His lips landed upon hers—hard and hot. He kissed her as if he’d been away for years, not merely a few days, and she relished the passion behind it. Each of them battled for control of the kiss—sucking, licking, biting. Jack winced as her teeth nipped his lips, drawing blood.

“Hellcat,” he whispered against her mouth, diving even deeper into its depths. After several moments, he broke the kiss abruptly. “Dammit, firebrand, I meant to take you over my knee, not kiss you.”

“Over your knee?” She was still dazed by the power of his kisses.

“Yes, over my knee,” he replied louder, as if suddenly recalling his reason for being at the Grange a week earlier than planned. “What the hell is wrong with you? How many times do I have to tell you not to—”

“I know,” Hayley interrupted, “I was wrong.”

“—speak to my uncle. You were foolish, impulsive, and—what did you say?”

“I was wrong,” she admitted calmly. “I was stupid to taunt your uncle. I should have known better. I sunk to his level, and I’m really sorry about it.”

He seemed suspiciously surprised by her quick acquiescence. “I don’t think you realize the danger you’ve submitted yourself to.”

“You’re wrong, Jack,” she replied quickly. “I do realize. He was furious. I don’t know what got into me.” She shrugged slightly before continuing to explain. “It’s always the same. I hear these horrible, stupid words coming out of my mouth, but I never seem to be able to stop them. All I could see when I looked at the earl was Julia’s labored breathing, her bruised face and the pure terror in her eyes when I first found her. It’s always the same—no matter who the abuser is. I see the victim, and my words take on a life of their own. I’m not an idiot, Jack. I know my words only incite more violence, but I truly don’t seem to be able to stop myself. I was just so angry.”

What she didn’t admit was she also pictured Jack as a young boy, tied to a whipping post, his back bleeding. It was that image—more than Julia’s face—which spurred her to speak up against the earl.

*

Jack listened to her admission, awed by her fire, her passion, her unwavering desire to right every wrong she encountered. He’d often felt the same way on the battlefield. At times it felt like his sole mission in life was to save the scores of innocent faces he saw from a ruthless dictator. He fought against Napoleon until the end despite the fact there was money, security and family waiting for him in England. It was the same after the war as he hired one injured soldier after another, wanting to save them from poverty, starvation and humiliation.

Hayley’s cause was no less important, no less vital than his. It was her incredible bravery and pluck that had first drawn him to her. How could he now try to extinguish that fire? Why would he want to?

“Hayley,” he whispered against her soft hair, drawing her into his embrace. “I don’t think you’re an idiot. I think you’re remarkable.”

With gentle lips, he set out to show her his feelings. Holding her face between his

hands, he worshipped her mouth, ears, forehead and cheeks. His lips trailed down her pale throat as her head fell back. His hands moved down to her shoulders to her waist, drawing her even closer to him. Breast to chest, she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, offering herself to him without fear or trepidation.

He made short work of the buttons on her blouse, quickly freeing her breasts to his touch and mouth. He suckled her nipples and she moaned. Jack grinned before his own overwhelming feelings of desire swamped him. She was no longer shy or scared, and her hands seemed to have taken on a life of their own. They touched him everywhere—chest, shoulders, back and he reveled in the feeling of her fingers—no longer tentative, but confident and sure. He'd intended to go slow, to ease her into this passion, not wanting to frighten her, but apparently she had her own agenda.

He moaned when she untucked his shirttails, sliding her hands beneath to stroke his chest, to tease his nipples as he was hers. He saw her quick grin of satisfaction and set about to bring yet another sound from her lovely lips. With his lips and tongue, he drew her taut nipples into his mouth, biting lightly and eliciting a sharp gasp from her. While his lips played at her breasts, he slowly dragged his hands down her waist and stomach and began to tackle the button and strange fastener of her pants.

Without hesitation, she reached down to assist him and Jack secretly celebrated her uninhibited act. He cursed his luck when he realized her pants were too tight to allow him much access. Groaning with frustration, he was determined to bring her pleasure, to show her the touch of a man didn't have to be hurtful or frightening. Spreading open the front of her breeches, he slid one finger into her cleft, lightly touching the delicate button hidden inside. He moved slowly, giving her plenty of opportunity to halt his actions if she wanted.

"Tell me to stop if you're frightened," he whispered into her hair. His finger continued to torment and tease her wet warmth until she was practically panting.

"I like it," she replied. "Don't stop."

Thrilled with her progress, he removed his finger to move their play up another notch. Lifting her, he moved one of her legs over his, so she was straddling his hips on the bench. In her new position, she could feel the very hard evidence of his desire for her. Her hips began to rub against his erection and he practically jerked off the bench at her innocent, yet intensely sensual movement.

"Ah, Hayley, you don't know what you do to me," he murmured as his lips found hers again in a blazing kiss. With his hands on her waist, he encouraged her gyrations and wished he could remove the bothersome clothing that was keeping him from the heaven he so desperately wanted to explore. "I want you," he whispered. "Can you feel it?"

"I want you too," she replied, breathless from their sensual dance and the new sensations he was creating in her untried body. Her hands moved down his chest and over his stomach to the fastening on his breeches. Jack grasped her hands to stop her. "Hayley, we shouldn't do this here."

"I want to touch you, Jack. Please."

Lacking the will to fight her request, he said a quick silent prayer that no one would decide to venture outside tonight and let go of her hands. She moved back to gain better access. With sure fingers, she struggled to loosen his pants. After several attempts, she was able to free the object of her desire. Shyly, she looked at him as she wrapped her fingers around his turgid member, stroking it lightly.

“Show me what you like,” she whispered.

Gritting his teeth, Jack was only able to mutter, “That’s good.”

Laughing softly at his anguished reply, she continued to stroke him as Jack reached back for her. She sucked in a harsh breath as his finger found her clit again and began to apply just the right amount of pressure.

“Oh, Jack,” she whispered as they continued to touch and kiss and explore.

He was afraid he would explode into a million pieces before he could show her the pleasures that lay ahead.

“I can’t take anymore,” she said. “It feels too good.”

“You can take it,” Jack answered lightly, increasing the pressure and speed of his finger.

Struggling to catch his breath, he watched her slip further into herself and the sensations he was creating in her body.

“Oh, my God, Jack, please,” she hissed and he knew she didn’t realize what she was asking for.

Jack hissed in pain as her grip on his erection tightened. Out of her mind with the unfamiliar ecstasy, she’d obviously forgotten what she was holding on to. With his other hand, he gently pried her off of him, privately amused by her strength. Sex with this woman was likely to be rough, exciting and downright powerful, and the thought of it caused him to get harder.

Gripping his shoulders, her head fell back as her climax shook her long and hard. Jack pulled her mouth toward his in an attempt to stifle the scream that escaped from her lips with a kiss. He’d been a fool to ask her to meet him in the middle of the night so close to the house. His intention had been to give her a lecture she would not forget regarding his uncle before sending her back up to her room. Past experience should have warned him that two minutes in her presence would leave him on his knees desperate and begging for a single touch.

Slowly easing back, Jack held her at the waist, his eyes trailing down her body, drinking in the sight of her breasts through her open shirt. Her hair was a tangled mass of red curls, hanging over her shoulders, partially hiding her big, brown eyes. Her face was flushed in the aftermath of her orgasm and she blushed even deeper at his intense scrutiny and his grin.

“Jack,” she began, but he cut her off.

“No, let me look at you.”

She raised her arms as if to pull her blouse together, but Jack stilled her hands.

“Wait,” he whispered. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She stopped protesting, grinning at the look of absolute adoration in his eyes. He briefly wondered if anyone had ever looked at her with such naked desire.

“Have you thought about me this week?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And have you considered what I said?”

“Yes.”

“And?” He was growing impatient with her monosyllabic answers.

“And,” she replied, “I want you, too.”

*

Elated, he flashed the biggest, most attractive smile she’d ever seen. His entire face

seemed to explode with light and joy and happiness as he bent to give her the sweetest kiss she'd ever received. In all her life, this was the kiss she would always remember and when she died she was sure the memory of his lips on hers as they were in that instant would be the last thought she ever had.

"I'm going to spend every day of the rest of my life making you happy, Hayley. I promise."

Confused, she pulled her lips away. "Rest of your life?"

"You won't regret your decision. Not one minute of it." He tried to pull her closer, but her hands on his chest stopped him.

"What decision are you talking about?" She felt an uncomfortable churning in her stomach.

"Your decision to stay here with me." Jack suddenly looked wary of the look on her face. "What did you think I meant?"

Shaking her head, she rose from his lap, hastily buttoning her shirt and fastening her jeans. "Stay here? You mean in this time? Forever?"

Angry at her retreat, Jack stood quickly. "Of course—here—forever. What did you think?"

"I thought you meant sex, Jack." She was also starting to become angry.

"Sex?" he shouted. "What I want from you, firebrand, has very little to do with sex."

"You could have fooled me," she hissed back. "And be quiet before you wake the whole house up."

Jack's jaw tightened. "I don't want to just make love to you, Hayley. Christ, what kind of man do you think I am? I want to marry you. I want you to be my wife."

All the color left her face, her body trembling. "Married?"

"Don't look so horrified," he responded. "Marriage is not fatal, contrary to what you may believe. A few people are actually able to be married and happy at the same time." His words were sarcastic, and she realized he was angry and hurt that she would view marriage to him with such horror.

"A few people," Hayley repeated, "but not me. Oh, no, Jack, not me. Never me. I can't marry you. Good God, I don't belong here. You know that. I've told you about my parent's marriage. Why would you think..." She began to stumble over her words, her fear of marriage so palpable, she could almost reach out and touch it.

"So you've found me acceptable to sleep with, but not to marry, is that it?" Jack's question was hard, and his eyes were blazing.

"No," she replied. "I mean, maybe. Dammit, Jack, why are you doing this? Why can't we let this be what it is until I leave? I want you, and you want me. No strings attached. Why ruin it?"

"Ruin it?" Jack asked, his temper boiling over. "Amazing. You're the only woman I know who thinks marriage would ruin a relationship. I happen to be in love with you, Hayley. For some unfathomable reason, I actually want to spend the rest of my life with you. And only you, although may God please help me for it. I'm not a wife beater, child abuser or whatever other type of villain you may want to paint me. I would think in the last few weeks you would have begun to realize that about me."

"I never said you were any of those things, Jack."

"Then what is it? Because I sure as hell can't figure it out. We're perfect for each other."

“Perfect for each other? We fight twenty-four seven. I annoy the hell out of you, and you’re an overbearing, demanding ass to me. How is that perfect?”

“I don’t know.” A small, sad grin formed on the corners of his lips. “It simply is. Hayley, when I told you I was coming back to court you, I didn’t mean to seduce you. I want to marry you. I want you to stay with me always. Can’t you at least try to consider it?”

“No,” Hayley whispered. “No, I can’t.”

*

Jack watched as she escaped into the house, his heart heavy and his mind depressed. Without a thought to his actions, he walked quickly through the woods. Heedless of the underbrush and rocks, he stumbled along until he reached the oak tree at the edge of the property. He stared at the strong, tall tree for several long minutes. His mind and heart empty, devoid of feeling. Then he threw back his arm and hurled a hard fist at the rough trunk. The bones of his knuckle crunched and blood began to drip from the deep scratches in his skin, but he didn’t feel anything. No pain. No emotion. Nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The two weeks after their meeting on the bench were the longest of Hayley's life. She'd suffered a perpetual stomachache that wouldn't go away and fallen into a deep depression; tired most days as her nightmares came back with a vengeance. Unable to sleep or eat, she'd spent most of her time wandering the grounds of the Grange and avoiding the guests at the house party. She had no desire to leave the property for fear she would run into the angry earl.

Her feelings regarding Jack's confessions of love ran from confusion to sadness to anger. Unable to reconcile any of her emotions where he was concerned, she'd grasped the one most familiar to her—anger—and had clung to it like a lifeline.

How dare he ask her to give up everything—her mother, Tori, her job—to stay here? What was he going to give up for her? Nothing, that's what. He still got to live in the house where he grew up, keep his business and eventually he would probably be an earl. In addition to that, all his friends were here.

Besides, any fool could see how badly she fit in here. She hated dresses and refused to pin her hair up. She liked to ride horses astride, swim in less clothing than permissible and had the tendency to speak her mind. If she stayed here, the people of this time would probably burn her for a witch.

She was sorry she'd ever gone down to that damned bench. She should have known better and left well enough alone. It was foolish of her to think she could have her cake and eat it too. And yet, she wanted Jack's friendship back. She missed him. Not having him to talk to, laugh with or yell at left a huge hole in her chest that refused to close. Not even Erin had been able to cheer her up. Frustrated and unsure, she'd continued to avoid him, afraid of opening her mouth and driving an even bigger wedge between them.

Not that it had been hard to keep her distance. Jack was gone from the house when she came down each morning, usually off for a long ride on Lancelot. Upon his return, he'd locked himself into Alex's study every afternoon, supposedly to work on his shipping concerns. Dinner each night had been a somber affair, despite Erin's attempts to keep the conversation light and enjoyable. Jack always retired as soon as the meal ended and Hayley sat quietly with the others, smiling thinly and trying to act as if her heart wasn't slowly breaking apart at the seams. The doctor had removed her stitches, but not even that had made her feel better.

She'd returned to the tree several times, but its massive trunk never parted to return her to the place where she truly belonged. She would feel better if she could put all of this behind her and return to her tiny apartment and eighty hour a week job. At least at home she wouldn't have time to think about Jack Campbell and perhaps this two-ton weight on her chest would lift.

The last day of the house party had finally arrived, and the beautiful weather and jovial spirits of the servants, neighbors and guests lightened Hayley's mood. Anxious to throw off her cloak of doom once and for all, she threw herself into the festivities, helping Erin run the games for the children and awarding prizes. Jack also seemed to be getting into the spirit of the day. He'd participated in and won the bow and arrow competition, and he came in a close second to Templeton in the arm wrestling

tournament.

The day was filled with laughter, good food, and loud, lively conversation. So far, she and Jack had managed to be cordial to each other, although neither of them seemed able to initiate any kind of real conversation.

She watched as he approached her. She was helping Mrs. Scott serve lemonade to the thirsty contestants.

"I'd love to have a glass of that, Mrs. Scott," he said with a charming grin. He looked at her as the housekeeper turned to pour his drink.

"Lovely day," he said, his words clipped.

She nodded, working hard to produce a false smile. "Congratulations on the archery win."

"Thank you," he said, taking the lemonade from Mrs. Scott.

They stood and stared at each other for several awkward moments before Jack nodded shortly. "Well, have a good day. Excuse me."

The lump in her throat at their intolerable distance doubled, making it difficult to catch her breath, and she struggled to swallow some lemonade hoping to dislodge the thing that was pushing tears to her eyes.

Good God, I'm going to cry right here in the middle of a picnic.

Desperate to get away, Hayley pushed her way through the crowds, nodding politely, unable to speak. Once she made her way through the throngs of people, she hurriedly walked toward the shore, hoping the gentle motion of the waves would comfort her.

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It was by the sea that Jack found her nearly a half an hour later. He'd watched her rushed departure from the picnic, but was drawn into a conversation with Serena Dunsford, the daughter of a well-to-do earl with designs on Jack's fortune. He'd suffered through the usual discussion about the weather and who was wearing what at the ball tonight before finally managing to break free.

Hayley had removed her shoes and stockings and was facing out to sea with the waves lapping around her ankles.

"I thought perhaps you would participate in the foot race," he said as he approached.

She startled slightly at the sound of his voice before turning and offering him a small smile. She shrugged. "No, I didn't think it would be nice to embarrass all those poor young fellas."

He grinned at her joke until he saw tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She turned away quickly, obviously hoping Jack wouldn't see her distress.

"Why are you doing this to us?" he asked.

"Me?" He could sense her struggle to pull her anger around her. He knew her. Anger she could manage, but she wouldn't give in to the tears, lest he think her weak. "I don't recall doing anything to us. You were the one who ruined everything."

"How?" Jack refused to rise to her bait. "By falling in love with you? Yes, that was badly done of me. How dare I ask you to take a chance on being happy? How dare I challenge you to try to overcome your past and make a good life for yourself? How dare I ask you to believe in someone other than yourself for once? Dammit, Hayley. We have a chance for real happiness here, and you're tossing it away with both hands." He turned away from her, running his hands through his hair, as he often did when he was frustrated. Her continued denial was ripping through him like a knife.

“Jack—” she began, but he could tell from her tone she wasn’t going to say anything he wanted to hear.

“Forget it,” he said. “Forget all of it, Hayley. I won’t bother you again.” And he turned and walked back toward the Grange, and away from her.

* * * *

Hayley leaned over the balcony, breathing in the cool evening air and trying to compose herself. Her first ball was nothing like she’d expected. Three weeks ago, she’d looked forward to this night like none other in her life. She’d planned to dazzle Jack with her new ballgown and sophisticated hairdo. She had fantasized about his face when he saw her all dressed up, and she’d tried to imagine what he would say to her. She’d envisioned dancing every dance with him, causing a great scandal and the two of them relishing every minute.

Instead, she’d danced a set of country dances with Ben and a rather staid waltz with Alex. Then, she’d proceeded to hold up a wall along with three other wallflowers and watch as Jack flirted and danced with every beautiful woman, ignoring her completely.

Unable to stand it any longer, she’d escaped to the balcony where her depression continued to grow rather than abate, and she wondered how she would be able to return to the ballroom at all. She was so deep in thought she didn’t notice Wilshire come out of the shadowed corner until he was standing right beside of her.

“Good evening, my dear,” he said deeply.

Hayley jumped slightly. “Lord Wilshire.”

“Forgive me, I certainly did not wish to alarm you. You looked so lonely out here on your own. I wondered if there was something wrong.” His voice was cool and menacing, and she glanced over his shoulder toward the balcony doors in hopes of seeing Jack. It had been foolish to separate herself from the crowd. She didn’t like being alone with the earl. His cold eyes drifted down over her body, lingering at her breasts as if assessing her worth. Her skin crawled in his presence, and she shivered slightly. “Cold, my dear?”

“Yes, a little. I think I’ll return to the ballroom. Dancing will certainly warm me up again. By the way, I saw the guest list, and your name wasn’t on it. I assume you can find your own way out?” She started to pass him, but he grabbed her upper arm tightly holding her close to his side. “Let go of me.”

“Not yet,” he whispered. “I have plans for you. Very important plans.”

Alarmed, she struggled in earnest to release her arm from his punishing grip. She opened her mouth to scream, but closed it quickly as Wilshire pressed a knife to her ribs.

“I would not scream if I were you,” he threatened. Turning her toward the balcony stairs, he dragged her down to the back gardens. Several couples were strolling, but they were too far away to see her distress.

“You and I are going to take a little ride,” Wilshire said in a hushed voice. “We have plans to make—plans for our future.”

“You and I have no future,” Hayley hissed. “You are a lecherous, disgusting old man, and I won’t go anywhere with you.”

“Ah, but my dear, I need an heir.” Wilshire waved the knife in front of her face. “And as I hold you personally responsible for the disappearance of my betrothed, you will be the woman to provide one for me.”

“How can I provide you an heir when I won’t let you to put your filthy hands on me

or say anything even remotely sounding like a wedding vow to you?" Hayley hoped she'd put enough strength into her words. She didn't want the earl to suspect the paralyzing fear coursing through her veins. He was obviously walking a thin line between sanity and insanity.

"I intend to correct my previous mistakes. You and I will couple first. Once you have proven you can bear my child, we will marry to save you the inconvenience of bearing a bastard. I will not be trapped with another barren wife." His voice was laced with bitter malice and she realized the true danger she was in.

"Ah, but your wife wasn't barren. She conceived a child. Perhaps the problem lies with you," Hayley replied. She dug her feet into the ground, hoping the earl was too weak to drag her to the carriage. However, her arm soon throbbed with pain as he tightened his grip, propelling her farther away from the ballroom with ease.

She fought down the panic threatening to take over. Don't show fear, she thought, it's what he wants. Visions of her drunken father floated in front of her eyes as she remembered him grabbing her, slapping her, pushing her down on the bed.

Wilshire dragged her deeper into the garden, down a secluded path, while Hayley kicked and struggled the whole way. It was a moonless night, and the path was becoming increasingly difficult to see. She stumbled over a root, but Wilshire's incredibly strong hands caught and steadied her and brought home the direness of the situation. She needed to fight him before he took her away. She swung her arm around, catching Wilshire on the side of the head. Unfortunately, it was a glancing blow that only served to infuriate him more.

"You little bitch!" He tightened his hold painfully. "You will pay for that, but not now. Now you'll go to sleep." He raised the hilt-end of the knife, bringing it down on her head before she could evade the blow. She fell to the ground, and the world went dark.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The first thing Hayley felt when she opened her eyes was an intense throbbing in her head. The second thing was the ropes binding her arms and legs to the four corner posts of the bed on which she was lying. The thick twine was abrasive and rough, making her struggles painful as it cut into the sensitive skin around her wrists and ankles. The knots—well tied and tight—didn't loosen, despite her desperate attempts.

The room was dark except for a single candle on the table by the bed. Squinting, she tried to discern the features of the room with little success. The walls were shadowed and hidden from view due to the dim lighting, and the entire place had a sinister feel. A sweet smell—like incense—permeated the air. The bed on which she lay was large and ornate, covered with red silk sheets. Two large armchairs sat before the empty fireplace, and the lack of fire kept the room cold and drafty. She wished she had thrown her cape over her thin ballgown before venturing out on to the balcony.

Unable to escape her bonds, her thoughts turned to the events leading to her imprisonment. She remembered the earl taking her away from the ball at knifepoint and knocking her unconscious. The pounding in her head had not receded, and it felt as if someone was using her brain for a bass drum. How long had she been unconscious? She said a brief prayer her friends had realized she was missing. The room's only door opened, and her heart began to race as the earl and his large groomsman, Rawlings entered.

"Ah, you're awake. Good," Wilshire said as he walked to the bed. She noticed he had the same knife in his hand—it was large and ominous-looking, and she shrank away from the sight of it before she could stop herself. She resumed her struggles against the ropes regardless of the painful slivers they left on her wrists, desperate to escape the earl and his vile weapon. He chuckled at her fruitless efforts. "I assure you the ropes are secure. I would never underestimate you. That was quite a fight you put up in the garden. Such strength for a woman. I like that."

"Must make you feel like a pretty big man. Tying up a woman who's smaller than you. Trying to intimidate her with a knife." She spoke with more bravado than she felt, but years of defending herself against the cruelty of her father and the men from the shelter came back in an instant. She'd discovered long ago that words were sometimes the only defense a woman had. Besides, the earl's smug look infuriated her so much, she felt compelled to strike out with the only weapon he'd left her. "You're nothing but a coward."

Wilshire slapped her hard across her left cheek, and tears blurred her vision as a thousand pinpricks attacked the side of her face.

"Shut up!" Wilshire roared. "You don't seem to understand your position." He brought the knife up to her chin, the sharp point puncturing the sensitive skin underneath. She felt a drop of blood roll down her neck. "I am your master now, and it will give me great pleasure to break your spirit. You are too bold by far, and it's time a strong man took you in hand. My nephew is obviously too weak for that job. If you learn your lessons well, if you please me, I will make you my countess. It all depends on how well you learn to obey me and, of course, on your fertility. How do you like my bedchamber?"

He gestured around the room with his hand.

Rawlings had lit several candles as she and the earl spoke. Their light cast eerie shadows around the room, providing enough light to bring it into view. Chains hung from the walls, along with weapons and whips. There were dark stains on the carpet she assumed to be blood. A horrified gasp escaped her lips before she could hold it back.

"I see you are impressed. Pain," the earl continued, "is a hobby of mine. I cannot wait to introduce you to the pleasure of it. I have come to realize the error of my ways in my first marriage and even in my affairs. I've chosen weak victims in the past thinking it would make my pleasure greater to hear them cry, to see them cower before me. But with you, I anticipate my greatest pleasure ever. The joy I expect to receive in bringing you to your knees is greater than any I have ever known. Why, I grow excited just thinking about it."

One quick glance at his breeches proved he was certainly excited. Fear lodged in her throat as she realized he wasn't just a cruel man, but a madman. Julia had told her about the earl's penchant for brutality, but seeing it firsthand only made the fact more frightening. Face to face with his sadistic tendencies, she realized her predicament was worse than she could have imagined. He brought his wife, and God knew who else, here to torture them for his own sexual pleasure. She'd heard of people who found pain sexually stimulating, but seeing it up close terrified her.

Pleased by the fear in her eyes, Wilshire smiled and moved the knife lower pulling it through the fabric of her bodice. The thin material of her dress and shift gave away easily beneath the sharp edge. He continued to cut until he reached her midriff, then he laid the knife aside, separated the torn edges of her dress, and pulled roughly. In seconds, Hayley, bared to the waist before the earl and his baleful henchman, felt the cold hands of horror spread through her body. A million leeches crawling over her skin would have been preferable to their leering looks. She closed her eyes as Wilshire roughly took one of her nipples between his fingers and squeezed—hard. Tears filled her eyes at the pain caused by such a small touch. She was amazed that two fingers could produce such a torment.

"What? No comments? Threats? Insults?" he asked coldly. "You disappoint me. I expected more from you." With that, he roughly pinched the other nipple.

Hayley took several deep breaths in an attempt to fight back the panic. *Jack will come, Jack will come.* The words were like a mantra, a prayer in her mind, only to be silenced by another voice that asked *Will he come in time?*

The latter realization caused her to conclude she needed to take care of herself. She had never succumbed to the threats of bullies, and she would not start now.

"You realize you're too late." She silently thanked God her voice was not as shaky as her insides.

"Too late?"

"I'm no longer a virgin. Your nephew Jack took care of that. I wonder if you will be comfortable with the possibility of raising Jack's son as your heir." Hayley hoped her lie was convincing. "After all, there is a very good chance I am already carrying his child."

"I do not believe you," Wilshire said, but his eyes flashed doubt. She was sure he would never risk raising Jack's son, as there was too much hatred between the two of them. If he was so violently opposed to Jack as his heir, she was sure the same would hold true for Jack's child.

"Rawlings," Wilshire said with a threatening grin. "Confirm Miss Garland's lie."

Hayley glanced at the large man with alarm. How could he confirm her story? Then, as he approached the bed with a malicious smile, she realized and began to struggle in earnest.

Rawlings grabbed the edge of her skirt and lifted it to her waist. "Wait," she said quickly as Rawlings reached toward her most private area.

"Yes, my dear?" Wilshire said. "You wish to say something."

Hayley paused, wondering what to do now. She didn't want to give up her story in case it deterred Wilshire's intent toward rape. However, his baboon bodyguard mauling her in such a demeaning way was even less desirable given the fact he was sure to prove her words false. "I lied," she whispered.

"I am sorry, dearest, I did not hear what you said," Wilshire said with a malevolent grin, leaning closer to her.

"I lied," she said louder. Her lungs were constricting, and she found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

"Yes, I thought as much. Proceed, Rawlings." He stepped away from the bed.

"What?"

"I am afraid I cannot trust you. You will not play me for a fool. If you have lied, this will be your first lesson. Do not lie to me. If you are telling the truth, the lessons are complete, and I will take great pleasure in killing you slowly." With that, he gestured to Rawlings.

Rawlings roughly grabbed her thighs, parting them easily despite her efforts to press them together as much as the ropes would allow. He tore open her drawers, and two fat fingers prodded at her opening. She was dry and his large fingers hurt her. Hayley closed her eyes and tried to separate herself from the painful jabbing.

"Carefully," Wilshire said to Rawlings, his face lit up with excitement. "If she really is lying, then I want to be the one to break her maidenhead."

"She's tight," Rawlings' deep voice said. He found the proof he sought. "No man's been there before." Finally, the hurtful fingers left her and her mind began to float away. Desperate to separate herself from the men in the room, their cruel words and touches, she sought to disappear into herself. Her helplessness was almost as unbearable as their torture. A hard slap across her face brought her back to reality.

"Don't plan on escaping this," Wilshire said, his vile face inches from hers. "You will be cognizant of everything I am going to do to you. I am the master of your pain, and I will take great pleasure in hearing your cries." With this, he brought his lips to hers in a cruel, hard kiss.

Something in Hayley snapped. Her fear turned to anger. She would not give him what he wanted it. She would not show him fear, and she would not succumb to the pain. She was a fighter and she could defeat this bastard. The earl forced her lips open with his, and she tried not to be sick as his repulsive tongue invaded her mouth.

Furious, she brought her teeth down on it and bit—hard. She watched the earl's eyes open wide with alarm and pain as she tasted his blood, yet she kept her teeth clenched. He grabbed fists full of her hair and shook her head in an attempt to get loose. She held on as long as she could wondering briefly if she could actually bite his tongue off. The earl's hands moved from her head to her throat, choking her, cutting off all air until she was forced to release his tongue in an attempt to breathe again. Once free, Wilshire's hands left her neck, and he stumbled away from the bed. Turning her head, she spit

several times between gasping breaths, then prepared herself for the blows she knew would come.

Wilshire moved off to the side of the room and landed heavily into one of the armchairs. Rawlings rushed to his side, clearly alarmed and confused by the amount of blood on Wilshire's face. Evidently, he thought the grappling between she and the earl was part of the earl's torture. Quickly, he placed a towel on the earl's mouth and glanced back at her on the bed. His penetrating look proved he wasn't sure what she had done.

The earl attempted to speak, but the damage done to his tongue prevented him from doing so clearly. His eyes flashed murder, as she realized most of his intimidation came from verbal threats. He'd lost a powerful weapon. Slowly, he staggered back to the bed. Hayley attempted to hold his gaze, refusing to look away, but the eyes looking back at her were those of a lunatic. Her foolish actions had sealed her fate.

Wilshire grabbed the knife from the bedside table and advanced toward her. *He's going to kill me*, she thought. Then, she realized death was preferable to rape or a wretched marriage or even giving birth to this monster's child. The pain and humiliation of the night were about to end, and she took a deep breath as she prepared for the final blow.

The calmness in her eyes must have betrayed her thoughts because Wilshire stopped his approach and reconsidered. Decision made, he used the knife to cut away the rest of her clothing. Like a cat with a ball of string, he was not finished playing with her yet, and he wouldn't give her the peace she so desperately sought.

Once she was completely naked, Wilshire let his eyes roam up and down her body slowly before he reached out and grabbed her breasts tightly. He squeezed and twisted them hard before bringing his mouth to them. He bit her, hard enough to bruise and break the skin. She felt blood trickle down her sides. Clenching her teeth, she fought the urge to cry out. There was no end to the agony and no way to stop him. Once again, she closed her eyes and fought to escape, and once again, reality surfaced with a slap to her face, harder than all the rest. Bright lights flashed behind her eyes and she groaned. When her eyes focused again, he was smirking at her. Even without words, he was powerful.

No longer content with just her breasts, he moved his hands lower. With a terrible grin, he began to prod at the opening to her body. His fingers were cruel and hard as they pressed into her. Unable to speak, his vicious, victorious smile did the talking. Obviously, he was delighted to be causing her such pain.

He stepped away from the bed and began to undress, removing his waistcoat. She could see a hard bulge pushing against the material of his breeches. The idea of his vulgar body on top of her caused her stomach to lurch. Shaking herself for her silence and with nothing left to lose, she launched in to her last line of defense—words. Wilshire may have lost the use of his voice, but she had not.

"Well, well, well," she said hoarsely. The effects of his earlier strangling were evident, but she forged on. "Looks like you've certainly let yourself go in old age. No wonder you can't get a wife without resorting to abduction and rape. What sane woman would choose to look at that flabby body for the rest of her life?"

Wilshire's body tensed as he flashed a furious look at her. He had removed his shirt, but paused as he unbuttoned his breeches. His mouth contorted awkwardly as he struggled to respond. Obviously, his tongue was causing him great pain, and he found it impossible to speak. Her taunts were having the desired effect, as she could no longer

discern any evidence of his previous hardness. She took a deep breath before continuing. “Well, let’s see what you have in those pants there. I understand men of your advanced years have trouble achieving, well, you know. How about you?”

The earl suddenly *was* having trouble in that regard and seemed less anxious to undress.

“Well,” Hayley said impatiently. “You were so anxious a moment ago, let’s see it.”

In a furor, Wilshire refastened his pants. He came back to the bed, punched Hayley hard in the stomach, then stalked to the farthest wall from the bed. Gasping for breath, Hayley fought back nausea. The punch had caught her unaware.

The earl disappeared into shadows, and she felt apprehensive about what he would do next. His unrestrained fury was no longer contained. She had pushed the last button. He was back in an instant with a whip in his hand. Her whole body lurched at the thought of him using the whip on her. She had expected the knife, but not this. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly as Wilshire raised the whip above his head, clearly intent on bringing it down on her. She tensed, waiting for the blow that never came.

A thunderous crash came from the side of the room, followed by loud footsteps and scuffling sounds. Hayley opened her eyes in time to see Jack land a devastating punch on Wilshire’s face. The earl’s eyes rolled up in his head, and she heard a sharp snap, as his head hit the corner of the bedside table.

Behind Jack, she could see Ben and Alex holding a gun on Rawlings, whose nose was bleeding profusely. Without another glance at his uncle, Jack grabbed a blanket from the bottom of the bed and covered her shaking, naked body. Using the earl’s knife, he cut the ropes at her wrists and ankles.

“Jack,” she whispered, her throat still raspy from the throttling. “I k-knew you would c-come.” Her body began to betray her as strong tremors ran through her. Teeth chattering, she tried to say more, but Jack stopped her with a soft, “Shhh, I’m here. Don’t talk now.”

With strong arms, Jack lifted her off the bed and began to carry her toward the door. Glancing down, she saw the earl’s body, his neck bent in an unnatural position.

“He’s dead,” she whispered. Jack didn’t respond, but clutched her tighter, quickly retreating from the inert body of Lord Wilshire.

He paused at the doorway, looking at Alex and Ben, but before he could speak, Ben nodded. “We’ll take care of this,” he said, gesturing toward the lifeless earl. “You take care of her.”

Jack continued out the door, and Hayley tried to lift her arms but felt too weak. Jack must have sensed her efforts. “Don’t move. I have you. I won’t let you go.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his chest. She was vaguely aware of leaving the house and Jack holding her firmly in his lap in a carriage. She groaned softly at the pain the bouncing of the carriage caused her head.

“Try to rest.” Jack tightened his hold on her. She looked up at him and found him studying her face intensely. He was struggling with some powerful emotions and she wanted to console him, but her mind finally won its long battle to escape and she passed out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

She awoke on a soft bed in a dark room. Jack was speaking to someone at the door in hushed tones. After a moment, he closed it quietly, and he came over to the bed where she lay.

"Where are we?" she asked disoriented.

"My bedchamber." Jack tucked the soft blanket around her more securely, and then sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

"My head hurts."

"I'm sure it does." He leaned over and lit a candle by the bed. She winced at the brightness of the light. "I'm sorry, but I need to check your injuries." His cool, detached tone hurt her.

"Jack," she whispered. "Are you still angry with me?"

His face crumbled as he gently placed his hands on each side of her head and leaned close. "Dear God, no. Hayley, I died a thousand deaths tonight trying to find you, afraid that when I did—" He paused as if recalling all the terrible things he had imagined over the course of the evening. "And then when I did," his voice broke on the words. "When I did, my uncle, that whip." Jack, always composed and cool, struggled to find the words. "Tell me, Hayley, tell me. Did he rape you?"

"No," she said softly. "No, he didn't."

"Thank God for that," he said. He leaned forward pressing his forehead to hers and closing his eyes. He struggled to compose himself. They clung to each other for several silent moments, and then Jack pulled away.

When he looked at her again, his eyes were kinder, softer. He moved his hands through her tangled hair, gently massaging her scalp, finding the bump left by the handle of the earl's knife that had rendered her unconscious. Then, he leaned closer and looked at the bruises on her face.

"There's dried blood around your mouth, but I cannot see a cut."

"It's his blood, not mine. I bit his tongue." Her voice felt like it was regaining some of its strength, though it still sounded scratchy.

Jack grinned and shook his head. "My firebrand."

He jerked back then and looked at her seriously as if suddenly suspecting the reason for her hoarse voice. His hands tilted her chin up and he leaned closer inspecting the fingerprints no doubt left around her throat. Jack murmured a strong curse, then gruffly apologized. He moved back slightly and looked into her eyes. "I need to check all of your injuries."

Realizing what he meant, she took a deep breath and then nodded. "Okay," she whispered.

Gently, Jack drew the blanket down to her waist. He inspected every inch of her closely, delicately touching the red marks on her shoulders. Tenderly he lifted her arms to inspect the cuts left on her wrists by the rope. With light fingers, he touched the bites and bruises on her breasts, then ran his hands over her ribs, prodding gently.

"Does this hurt?" he asked, pressing lightly.

"No."

A mask fell over his face, and Hayley watched him attempt to subdue the powerful anger coursing through him. His jaw was set and his eyes cold. "Death was too good for him," he whispered so faintly she almost didn't hear. The image of the earl's head flying back and his lifeless body hitting the floor came back to her. She shuddered slightly, and Jack pulled the blanket back up, thinking her chilled.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Hayley knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until he knew everything. Her throat burned, but she felt compelled to talk about it. She knew sleep wouldn't come easily for her either. The fear and pain of the evening was gnawing at her insides, and she needed to get it out. Needed to share it with this man who had scaled the walls around her heart and shown her how good it felt to trust someone.

"I went to the balcony for some air," she began. She didn't mention the argument on the beach or how hurt she had been when he'd ignored her at the ball. She didn't want him to feel any guilt for what had happened. "Wilshire was there with a knife. He dragged me down a secluded path in the garden. I tried to fight him, but he knocked me out. When I woke up, I was tied to the bed where you found me. Where was I? The Homestead?"

Jack nodded.

"But how did you know I would be there?"

"Templeton saw Rawlings. He came to tell me about it at the same time we discovered you were missing."

"Oh," Hayley felt a tear slide down her cheek and quickly fought back the sob that was building in her chest.

Jack clasped one of her hands in his and lifted it to his mouth. He kissed her knuckles. "Can you talk about it?"

She took a deep breath. "He planned to rape me. He said I was going to give him an heir since it was my fault Julia had escaped. I thought I could dissuade him."

"How?"

"I lied to him. I told him you and I had—that we had made love and there was a possibility I was pregnant with your child."

"What a cool head you have." He bent forward and placed a soft kiss of her forehead.

"Well, it wasn't such a good plan, actually. He—" She struggled to catch her breath.

Jack's eyes narrowed. "You said he didn't rape you."

"No," she said quickly. "He didn't. He didn't believe me. He told Rawlings to check." She stopped again as her eyes filled with tears. She closed them in an attempt to fight them back.

Through clenched teeth, Jack said, "Check? That bastard touched you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It's okay. I'm okay." However, her body betrayed her words as she began to shake again at the memory of Rawlings' harsh treatment of her. Jack lifted her at her shoulders and pulled her into a comforting embrace.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to talk about it. It's too soon," he murmured as he rocked her.

"No," Hayley said, her voice muffled by his chest. "I need to tell you. I need—" Again, tears threatened to fall and again she fought them back. "I just feel so dirty and tired."

He continued to rock her until she nearly fell asleep in his arms, then he gently laid her back onto the pillows. He rose from the side of the bed and started to walk away.

"No, don't go," she cried, reaching out for him.

"Shhh," he said, "I'm not leaving." He walked over to the fire and picked up a basin of water and a cloth. "Tomorrow, after you've had a good night's sleep and some time to heal, you can have a bath, but for tonight, this will have to do."

He dipped the cloth into the warm water and gently washed her face, neck, shoulders, then moved down her arms. He continued his ministrations, dipping the cloth in the water repeatedly. Then, he pulled down the sheet. Hayley shivered slightly at the cool air on her bare skin.

Using the warm cloth and slow movements, Jack gently washed her breasts and stomach, and then moved farther down cleansing her legs, ankles, and feet. She laid perfectly still, her entire body relaxing with his soothing sponge bath. She knew she should be embarrassed lying naked in front of him, but something about his careful washing made her feel adored and cherished, like a fragile china doll. He moved the cloth back up the inside of her thighs, then paused.

"Hayley, open your legs," he said softly. "Please."

Slowly, she spread her legs apart and Jack gently washed her there. His eyes never left hers as he worked. Finished, he covered her again with the blanket.

Placing the wet cloth back in the water, he sat down on the edge of the bed with his back to her. He removed his boots and stockings. Walking around the bed, he climbed in beside her still wearing his clothes. Turning her on her side facing him, he wrapped his arm around her and settled her head upon his shoulder. His warm breath caressed her hair. "I can clean the outside, Hayley, but only you can clean the inside."

"What?"

"Dammit, I've watched you swallow your tears all night and every single day since you stepped through that bloody tree. It's time to let them go."

Without a thought, the tears began to flow. The horrors of the night came out in quiet sobs that wracked her entire body. She cried as she recalled the pain and fear of the night. She cried about the long years waking up alone and frightened by nightmares caused by her father. She cried about the year she'd lost Erin—afraid and worried for her friend, and she cried for Marian and Tori, who were now suffering the same agony over her disappearance. She cried for Helena and her young lover and all they'd lost at the hands of an evil earl, and she cried for Jack—for the years he'd suffered the cruelty and abuse of his uncle.

All the emotions came streaming out—having been bottled up for too long. For the longest time, he simply held her until the crying and shaking subsided. Finally, with the tears spent, she slept.

* * * *

Hayley awoke to the sound of hushed voices. Disoriented, she tried to discern where she was without opening her eyes. Two male voices were whispering. In the distance, a door closed and the voices stopped. Wilshire's leering face, Rawlings' rough hands, the knife—all the memories came back in a rush.

"Jack!" Hayley bolted up in the bed.

"I'm here," came his deep voice beside her.

Turning slowly, she saw Jack sitting in the chair beside her, looking concerned. Blushing, she realized the sheet covering her was pooled around her waist and she was completely naked. Quickly, she grasped it and pulled it up to her chin. He gave her a familiar teasing grin and started to make a joke, but seemed to change his mind before speaking. She sensed his hesitance and regretted the loss of his good-natured teasing.

“Don’t,” she said softly.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t treat me differently. I’m not different. What were you going to say?” Her tone was challenging, yet tentative.

After only the briefest hesitation, he smiled. “I was going to say it’s a little late to be modest. I have been swimming with you.”

Hayley smiled weakly at his response.

“However, perhaps you would be more comfortable with something to wear.” He rose, found a large shirt in a trunk, returned to the bed and gently pulled it over her arms, buttoning it up. “How are you feeling? Are you in pain?”

Blushing slightly at the intimacy of Jack dressing her and the memory of his care from the previous night, she glanced down at her body and took stock of her injuries. “Not pain really, just sore—all over. I don’t think I said thank you for all you did last night. Was there someone else here a minute ago? I thought I heard another voice.”

“Oh, that was Rogers. I asked him to hold lunch for awhile. It is quite late, but I thought perhaps you would like to sleep longer. I can ring for him if you’re famished.”

“No, I’m not hungry. Actually, I feel a bit queasy. I think I’ll just stay in bed a little longer if you don’t mind.” She settled her back against the headboard.

“Of course, I don’t mind. Do you feel up to a bath? I promised you one last night.”

Heat rose in her cheeks as she remembered Jack giving her a sponge bath. Looking at him, she realized he was remembering as well. “Not yet. I don’t feel up to much of anything. I’m—” Hayley stopped, suddenly shaking her head.

“You’re what?” Jack coaxed her to continue, obviously aware of the fact she was holding something in.

“I’m afraid,” she confessed, despite the discomfort she felt at admitting a weakness. “I’ve never felt so afraid. He—” She couldn’t bring herself to say the earl’s name, and just the thought of him caused her heart to race. Jack did not respond, but simply looked into her eyes and waited for her to continue.

Uncomfortable under his probing stare, she looked away. Her hands were gripping the sheet tightly around her. Her knuckles were white, and she could see scratches around her wrists left by the ropes. “He wanted me to be afraid,” she whispered. “My fear—that was what he wanted most of all. Men like him only feel powerful when they have made the people around them powerless.”

She knew she was referring to her father as much as his uncle.

Jack reached down and pulled her face up until she looked him in the eye. “This isn’t the Hayley I know. Are you saying he succeeded?”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I do,” he said harshly. “He didn’t. You fought him, Hayley. You fought him in spite of the odds stacked against you. You never gave up or waited for someone to rescue you. You never stopped believing you could survive. You are the most incredible woman I’ve ever met. You are beautiful, intelligent, and strong. That is who you are.”

That is who you were last night, and that is who you are now. Wilshire didn't change that. Your father didn't change that. No one on earth could go through what you did and come through so valiantly. So, no, he didn't break you or take away your power." Without waiting for her response, he leaned toward her and softly kissed her bruised lips. Gently, he laid her back on the bed and pulled the covers up. "Sleep some more, firebrand."

Unaware—until his words—that she was still tired, Hayley closed her eyes and fell into another deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

For four days, Hayley drifted in and out of sleep, and Jack began to wonder if she was in shock from her attack. She'd never been able to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time, and yet now, she didn't seem to have the strength to leave the room. Erin came to visit every morning, helping her bathe and keeping her company.

They'd all agreed Hayley should remain at his townhouse until she'd had time to fully recover. There were several family members and friends staying at the Grange following the house party. Hayley was unwilling to face them and answer questions about her bruised face, so Alex and Erin claimed Hayley's aunt had arrived in London from America to begin a grand tour. According to the lie, Jack had generously offered to accompany her to London so she might stay with her aunt for a few days. Erin joked the best part about time-travel was that it allowed the freedom to create past experiences and relatives as needed.

Jack spent every afternoon with her. They talked only about safe subjects when they spoke at all—the weather, his shipping trade, what a season in London is like. However, most of the time they played cards. Hayley taught him how to play rummy, and the two became fierce competitors. He allowed Hayley her silence, understanding her mind needed as much time to heal as her body.

The events with his uncle seemed to bring the horrible memories of her father back to the foreground. The night with its silence and darkness caused her nightmares to return. Jack had taken to sleeping in the chair by her bed, while the terror that waited in her subconscious came to claim her. Often, she didn't wake during her bad dreams even as he stroked her hair and spoke quiet, soft words in an attempt to calm her. As a result, Jack had started napping each morning when Erin arrived, so he would be able to stay awake to see Hayley through the night.

"I can play my ace there, discard the seven and I'm out." She laughed as she beat him at cards yet again. "That gives me five hundred. I win. You need to wake up, hotshot, or I'll be forced to find someone who can give me a little competition." He was pleased to see that with each passing day his feisty Hayley reemerged a little more.

"Is that right?" he asked. "And did it not occur to you that perhaps I'm letting you win to make you feel better?"

"Ha!" she yelled. "What a poor sport you are, trying to blame your bad playing on my injuries." She giggled, and Jack felt as though he'd been given the moon on a silver platter. Her laughter, absent until that moment, soothed his soul like rain on parched land. Pleased to see her smiling, he leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. It was a short, sweet kiss, but it caught them both unaware.

"Hayley—" He was about to apologize for his impetuous action, but she spoke first.

"It's about time."

"What?" he asked.

"I've been wondering if you would ever do that again," she answered softly.

"You've been so patient, so kind and understanding these last few days."

"So?" He was confused by her comment.

"It's just so unlike you." A mischievous grin crossed her lips.

"Unlike me?" Jack rose and placed his hands on his hips. "In other words, I'm usually impatient and rude?"

Her giggle turned to full-blown laughter. "Hey, those are your words, not mine."

"You ungrateful wench." He feigned anger when what he really felt was overwhelming joy. "I've given you my bed, waited on you hand and foot, let you win at cards—"

"You did not let me win." She yelled back, her grin taking over her entire face.

"I did let you win," he taunted, coming around the table. Hayley rose from her seat, ducked under his arm and jumped onto the bed. He stalked to her side, thrilled by her playfulness as she lobbed a pillow at his head.

"I can see I've spoiled you." He continued coming toward her, dodging her repeated blows with the feather pillow, her delighted laughter filling the room. "I think it's time to remove the kid gloves." With his words, he grabbed the pillow out of her grasp, pulled her down on the bed, straddled her hips and proceeded to tickle her senseless.

"Stop, stop," she gasped between tortured laughter. "I mean it," she said when he showed no sign of ceasing his torment. "I'll pee my pants."

Shocked by her words, and afraid she was serious, he stopped tickling her, his head shaking. "What you won't say."

"I can't help it. Tickles always make me have to go to the bathroom," she replied, mock seriousness in her voice.

"Well, that's useful information to have, I suppose, for future reference." They both laughed then. The tension of the past few days forgotten.

"Ah, firebrand." Jack leaned over her. "It's good to have you back." He kissed her forehead, then placed both hands on her head and kissed her lips. She caressed his face as they remained locked together, giving each other everything, holding back nothing. His hands engulfed her as he stroked her hair. The kiss was a release of the tension that had been building up between them.

"Hayley," he whispered as his kisses trailed over her cheek, around her earlobe, and down her neck. Something wet trickled down his cheek. She opened her eyes, and he knew she saw the tear sliding down his tanned skin before he could dash it away. Hell, he never cried. Not once in his whole, damned miserable life. Surprised, she pulled back.

He released his hold on her and slowly sat up with his back to her. Sitting up, she reached over to place her hand on his shoulder. "Jack?"

He rested his head in his hands for several moments. When he felt able to speak, his voice shook. "I'm so sorry, Hayley. When I think of what he was going to do to you—" He stopped and took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. "Seeing you tied to the bed with that monster standing over you. My God, I was almost too late. He could have killed you." He stopped speaking, his hands still supporting his head.

"It's okay," she said softly. "You were in time. It's over."

Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her forehead before pressing his own brow to

hers. "I'm sorry. I'm tired as hell, and I've been so worried about you."

"You haven't been getting much sleep in that chair," she answered softly. "I know you've been staying with me. Thank you."

"My pleasure." A small smile crossed his lips. Noticing the dark circles under her eyes, he laid back on the pillows, tucking her in the crook of his shoulder.

"It looks like we both need to get some rest. Try to sleep." He pressed a light kiss in her hair. "We'll talk in the morning."

Wanting to say more, she started to protest, but he stopped her by placing his fingertips on her lips. "We're both tired. There is plenty of time to say what needs to be said. Later."

Unsure of his feelings, of what more to say, he kissed her lightly once more. Hayley simply nodded. Her eyes were already closing. Her exertions with the pillow and tickle fight had drained her low reserves of energy.

"Don't leave me." She clung tightly to him as she drifted into sleep.

Jack watched her as she slept; knowing rest would not come as easily for him. He'd never shared his emotions with another person. However, Hayley with all her spice and energy, broke down his barriers. She'd challenged him from the first night he'd met her. Smiling, he remembered the black eye she'd given him after he accused her of being a smuggler. Even then, he'd felt drawn to her, like a moth to flame. He'd let her into his heart. Jack Campbell had met his match—not in some soft, quiet, accommodating woman, but in a feisty, argumentative, tough redhead.

She was his kindred spirit, his other half, his heart and soul. Watching her struggle with her own fears made him realize how many of his own he had faced. He had avenged Helena's death and Julia's abuse at the hands of his uncle. He'd removed a truly evil person from the world, and he should be feeling jubilant. He'd brought Wilshire to justice, but at what cost to himself or Hayley?

He loved her as he'd never loved anyone. He wanted her with him forever. Now he had to convince her to stay in the nineteenth century and to trust him with her battered heart. With a small smile, he realized fighting his uncle was easier than battling Hayley's pride and mistrust of men.

A soft sigh escaped her lips and she nestled closer. Running his fingers lightly through her hair, he kissed her forehead. A slight smile crossed her face in sleep. He grinned back, taking it as a sign. "We'll make it through this," he vowed to her sleeping form.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Hayley opened her eyes, the room was bright with sunlight. Glancing out the window, Hayley could see it was early afternoon, and she was amazed that she had slept through most of another day. She'd never slept this much in her life.

The sun was making its slow trek across the sky, and she felt lighter and happier than she had in weeks. No, she reconsidered. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt this happy. Glancing beside her, she realized why. She was still nestled in the crook of Jack's arm. Raising her head, she watched him as he slept. He hadn't left her. He'd stayed with her as she'd requested.

She smiled as she watched his face, peaceful at rest. His breaths were long and deep, relaxed. Her thoughts returned to the night of the attack and everything the earl had done to her. She remembered Jack crashing into the room, just when she had given up hope. He'd saved her life. Regardless of his comments about her strength, the only thing that pulled her through the harrowing experience was her faith in him, her never-ending belief that he would come.

She relied on him. She trusted him with her life and her heart. Looking at his face, peaceful at rest, she realized she'd finally relinquished the last part of her she'd always been so careful to keep to herself—her heart.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, barely making a sound. "I love him."

Slowly, his eyes opened as he chuckled lightly. "I can think of worse things." He gathered her closely to him.

"You're awake." Hayley said accusingly, pulling away from his grasp.

"I never said I wasn't," he replied. "Now what's this about you loving me?" He gave her an arrogant, but charming smile.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said coyly. "You must have been dreaming." She sat up and clasped the blanket around her. "Besides, isn't it against nineteenth century policy for you to be lying in bed with a woman with no clothes on?"

Jack grinned at the challenging tone of her voice. "Alas, we have clothes on, but generally speaking, yes. It would be frowned upon for the two of us to be in bed together like this. In fact, your family—were they here—would expect me to do the honorable thing," Jack sat up and took her hand in his. His face was no longer laughing, but serious. Gently, his thumb circled her wrist.

"Honorable thing?"

"Marriage, Miss Garland. When a man goes to bed with an innocent young lady, society dictates that he should take her as his wife in order to preserve her reputation." He spoke lightly, but she sensed his words served a double purpose. He was not simply educating her about the times. The way he was holding her hand and looking at her made it seem as if he were actually proposing.

Pulling her shaking hand out of his, she sat up. "Well, that's just silly." She gave a little laugh she hoped sounded genuine. "I mean, we didn't have sex or anything. And as you said, we're not really naked, and no one knows we slept together. Well, except for your servants, but they wouldn't tell anyone, would they? Besides, as luck would have it, I don't have any family in this century and if Marian were here, she would be trying to

get you in her bed, not trying to force you into a marriage with me.”

Suddenly, Jack laughed. A deep, long laugh that had Hayley stiffening her spine. “What is so funny?”

“You,” he replied between chuckles. “You’re rambling. Still worried about the prospect of marrying me? You might actually enjoy it, you know.”

Concern quickly replaced his smile as he watched her attempt to rise, panic-stricken. She flinched in her desperation to flee the bed, stiff after so many days abed.

“Stop,” he said gruffly. “Get back in bed. You’re not well enough yet.”

She ceased her retreat, swaying slightly by the side of the mattress. However, she didn’t attempt to return.

“I said, get in bed.” His voice was tinged with anger. “I will drag you back if you don’t move—now! Look at you. You can barely stand.”

“I’m fine, just stiff,” she said. “It’s my own fault for acting like such a weakling these last few days. What I need is to go running.” Despite her words, she turned as she spoke and sat down. Jack’s strong arms on her shoulders pulled her back down onto the pillow, then covered her with a blanket. Sighing, she kept her eyes down, too afraid to continue on the path their conversation had taken. She’d been a fool to say she loved him aloud.

Shaking his head, he got off the bed and strolled over to the window. “My brave Hayley, I have made an astounding discovery.”

Bewildered, she looked at him as he stood with his back to her. “Astounding discovery?”

“You battle everyone’s demons for them. You would risk your life everyday for a scared child or a battered wife. You stand up to bullies who threaten bodily harm to a woman who is too weak or powerless to defend herself. You aren’t afraid to fight with your fists or your words, and amazingly enough, you are a coward.”

“A coward?” She began to rise again.

A powerful hand on her chest pushed her back to the bed as she realized Jack had returned to the bed. He bent over her, arms braced on either side of her head, boxing her in. He leaned down so closely she could feel his warm breath on her face.

“A coward,” he repeated. “You battle everyone’s demons, but your own. Those you allow to defeat you. You will only fight with words and fists, never emotions, never feelings, never with your heart. I watched you defend yourself against one of the most evil and dangerous men I have ever known and barely blink an eye, but right now, your fear is so tangible I can almost touch it. You’re afraid. Afraid of me and of what you feel for me. Admit it,” he said. “Admit it.”

With her heart racing and her breath coming in quick, shallow pants, Hayley looked into his eyes, so close to hers and so angry, and realized she was terrified. Too paralyzed to move, she struck back with the weapon that saved her with Wilshire—her words. “Afraid? Of you? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have any demons. I just don’t want to get married.”

Jack laughed again, but this time it was a cold, mirthless laugh. “Ah, no fear, eh? Then you should have no trouble repeating your earlier statement.” Leaning closer, his lips almost touched hers. “Tell me you love me, Hayley. Say it and mean it.”

Full-blown panic rose up in her chest. She’d never said those words to anyone—ever. Not Marian, not the June girls, no one. “Jack,” she started, but she couldn’t speak

another word. The damned familiar lump formed in her throat again and she struggled to catch her breath.

“Look at you,” he said. “You’ve lost all the color in your face, you’re trembling and having trouble breathing. You faced death with more bravery than you face love. Come on, firebrand. You’ve already said the words. I’m simply asking to hear them again.”

“Get away from me, you big bully!” She attempted to push him away, but he was immovable and her strength had not yet returned. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why? Can’t you tell? Look at me, Hayley. Really look at me.” He shook the bed around her as he spoke. “I’m as big a coward as you.”

His last words, spoken so quietly she could hardly hear them, caused her to cease her struggles. Looking up into his face, she could see it was the truth. He was also having trouble breathing, and what she had earlier thought was anger in his eyes, now looked more like fear and something else. Something she didn’t recognize. She closed her eyes, unwilling to look.

“Oh, no you don’t.” His hand gripped her chin. “Open your eyes. See what you’ve done to me.”

Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw what she had been afraid to find—love. Jack truly loved her. He’d said it before, but she hadn’t believed it, not really. But now she knew it as surely as she knew herself. She braced herself for the oncoming panic attack, but it didn’t come. Instead, she felt warm inside.

“Jack,” she said softly, but found there were no words. Slowly, she reached up to touch his face, running her fingertips along his lips. Her hand seemed to break the last of his restraint. His entire body came down on hers as he took her mouth in a kiss that was surprisingly gentle, despite the passion behind it.

Even in his ardor, he was cognizant of her injuries. Hayley responded, kiss for kiss. Their tongues battled while their hands ran deeply through each other’s hair. The kiss seemed to last for hours, during which she scarcely remembered to breathe. Jack began to soften the kisses and pull away.

“No,” she said, clinging to him. “Don’t stop.”

He kissed her lightly on the end of her nose. “Hayley, if I don’t stop now, I won’t stop.”

He attempted to rise, but her grip around his neck tightened. “Don’t stop,” she whispered against his lips.

“I have to. Your body still needs time to recover, so does this.” He tapped her head lightly. “And this,” he said touching her heart.

Jack slowly climbed out of the bed and walked across the room to gaze out the window. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said as he turned to look at her. “You see, I love you very much. And before this relationship progresses any further, we are going to have to establish some rules.” His deep voice returned to its arrogant, captain-like tone.

“Rules?”

“Yes. First of all, I want to hear you say you love me again. Say it and mean it,” he demanded.

Taking a deep breath, she whispered, “I love you.”

Jack smiled. “Say it again.”

Grinning herself now, she said it louder. “I love you, Jack Campbell. Now stop being such a demanding ass, and tell me what the rest of these rules are.”

"I want you to stay with me, here, in this time. Not just for the remainder of this year, but forever. I can't touch you, Hayley, then let you leave. If you cannot commit to me in this time, it would be better not to go any further. Although frankly, I think we've already gone too far."

She wasn't surprised by this condition. He'd asked her to stay before. She'd dismissed his request without much thought. The idea of giving up so much, while giving someone so much power over her had terrified her at the time. Could she give up Whoppers with cheese, hot showers and her VW Bug? Yes, she could, she decided. And quite easily too.

The thought of staying with Jack didn't seem like a power struggle so much as it just felt right. She'd never met anyone like him, and she didn't know how she could face one day, let alone a lifetime without him.

"Okay. Okay, fine. I'll stay."

"Really?" he asked. "You mean that? You understand what that means?"

"Yes, I understand," she replied shortly. "I want to stay with you. Forever."

The smile he flashed at that moment was so bright Hayley knew without a doubt she was sure about her decision. She could easily spend every day of the rest of her life looking at that smile.

"Is that all?" Hayley asked. "No more conditions, rules, laws, etc.?"

"There is one more. I want to marry you." He approached the bed until he was standing beside her again. With his last words, he knelt on the rug and took her hand. "You've sworn you will never marry, but Hayley, that is the only way we can be together. I won't make you my mistress. There can be no twenty-first century understanding. I want you to be with me, mine—legal and binding."

Hayley flinched at the last comment, until he continued.

"Just as I will be yours—legal and binding. Will you marry me, Hayley?"

Stunned, Hayley looked at her hand held tightly in his. His proposal didn't frighten her as much as she thought it would and she realized for the first time in her life, she had found a man she truly trusted with her heart. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt Jack would never hurt her, never be cruel, never raise a hand to harm her.

While they may disagree vigorously over her freedom and his arrogance, they would never try to change each other. In fact, she enjoyed their heated discussions immensely because he challenged her without threatening her safety. He wouldn't beat her like her father beat Marian. He wouldn't try to hurt her like Wilshire. He loved her, and she loved him. That was all that mattered.

"Yes," she said, her voice breaking. "Yes, I will marry you."

With a loud whoop, he swept her out of the bed and into his arms, spinning her around and laughing.

"It's about damn time," he shouted. "You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met."

"Don't blame me." Hayley laughed, clinging to his neck as they twirled. "I had to think long and hard about hitching my wagon to your arrogant, demanding horse for all time. You didn't make it an easy decision."

The spinning slowed to a stop. "Ah, my fault, I should have realized."

Hayley reached up on tiptoe and kissed him. "Just say that after every argument, and we will have a long and happy marriage."

Walking back to the bed, he laid her down, tucking her back under the covers.

“Jack,” she said, pulling him down to her. “Make love to me.”

“It’s too soon,” he replied. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she said softly. “I need you.”

She watched him shudder at the sound of her words. Weeks of wanting him, desiring him, touching him—had worn down all of her defenses. She had agreed to stay, to marry him. She was his and she needed him more than she’d ever needed anyone in her life.

When he didn’t move, Hayley took the initiative, sitting up and pulling her shift off. The sight of the fading bruises on her breasts left him visibly shaken, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to kiss away all the pain she knew her ordeal had caused him. She wanted him to make love to her so she could replace all their fears and bad memories with pleasure.

She reached over to lay her hand on his cheek. “Now, Jack. I need you now.”

The dam broke, and all of his doubts seemed to wash away as he gently pushed her back on the bed, kissing her lips, invading her mouth with his tongue; soft despite the power behind it.

They kissed for minutes, hours, days. Hayley wasn’t sure as time stood still for them. Slowly, he trailed his lips to her cheek, nipping her earlobe with his teeth, before moving down to her neck.

She grabbed the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head, so that she could touch his chest, his back, feel the muscles of his arms. He felt glorious and strong, and he was hers—now, forever.

When his lips moved to her breasts, a soft moan escaped her lips. Feeling his smile against her skin, she ran her fingers through his thick hair. Lightly, he ran his tongue over her nipples, causing them to bud. He took one in his mouth and began to softly suckle. Hayley felt the familiar tingle he created within her begin, and she became anxious for more, for all.

He continued to play with her breasts as if he had the rest of his life to make love to her. He didn’t seem to share her sense of urgency, but was instead trying to make the moment last an eternity.

“Please, Jack.” She was desperate to have him inside her.

He rose and began to kiss her lips again. “Patience, firebrand,” he murmured against her lips.

“No,” she argued. “Now, please, now.”

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He chuckled until her hands slipped lower. She started to undo the buttons on his breeches, while he sucked in a huge breath. Freeing him from the pants, she grasped him in both hands, slowly moving them down to cup his balls, then pulling them back up to the smooth head. With one finger, she found a small drop of liquid at the end and slowly rubbed it around and around.

“You’re right,” he growled, pulling her hands away and rising from the bed. “Now.” He quickly removed his pants before crawling back into the bed beside her. She wrapped her hands around his neck as his kisses took on a frantic pace. His fingers briefly touched her breasts, before moving down her stomach, sliding through her hair to find her opening.

Hayley was hot and wet, and it was all he could do to keep from pushing into her.

Running his fingers around her soft petal, he found the spot that made her squirm. "Jack," she said, breathlessly.

"We have to go slow, firebrand," he whispered between kisses. "It's your first time, and I would have the pain be as little as possible."

"I am one giant mass of cuts and bruises and believe me, this waiting hurts worse than all of them put together. Do it now."

"Damn it, woman, we're doing things my way for once," he snapped, kissing her quickly, in an attempt to cut off any reply she may have.

His fingers probed at her opening, and he slid one finger in. She was tight, too tight, he thought, grimacing. He would never be able to come into her without causing some discomfort. Her hips rose to meet his finger, her inner muscles contracting around it.

Sliding another finger in, Jack rose above her, parting her thighs with his legs.

He matched the rhythm of his fingers to that of his tongue, dancing with hers in a passionate kiss. With his thumb, he began to rub her clitoris.

Her hips lifted to meet his fingers, and he toyed with her until she leapt from the cliff, giving into her pleasure. She screamed as she climaxed, her muscles clenching so tightly on Jack's fingers, he feared he wouldn't be able to make it inside her before he came.

Quickly removing his fingers, he positioned himself over her body and slowly began his journey to heaven. Hayley, still overwhelmed by sensation, gasped as he pushed into her.

He paused as he felt the constriction of her maidenhead, mumbling curses over what he was about to do to her. He looked into the clear, beautiful brown eyes of his firebrand and saw complete trust and love. He smiled at her as he pushed through the barrier and completely into her, sunk to the hilt. The contact of their eyes never broke even as she winced. Jack froze, studying her face, until she smiled and moved beneath him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear.

"No, you aren't," she whispered back, drawing him into a light kiss, sprinkled with their shared, soft laughter.

Then the dance began again as they slowly moved together, in and out, up and down, neither breaking the connection of their eyes or their bodies. When Jack felt as though he would burst, he reached down to touch her, determined to bring her with him. However, when the moment arrived he realized it was Hayley who had brought him with her. Her muscles contracted against him, massaging him, carrying him to a climax so overwhelming, he actually felt light-headed. As he emptied his seed deep into her body, Jack knew the universe had corrected itself when it sent her back to him.

Epilogue

June 2009

Come for me. The late afternoon sun shone down on her face as she sighed heavily. Alone under the oak tree, Tori thought back to happier times—summers filled with laughter, shopping excursions, hiking, sleeping out under the stars and sharing secrets. Summers spent with Hayley and Erin. The same familiar lump formed her throat, the same ache in her chest as she thought about her friends and how much she missed them.

The trip to the tree had been deliberate and thought out. Tori was tempting fate, daring the same unknown force that had snatched her friends to come and take her as well. Come for me, she thought again. All the day had brought her thus far was sunburned shoulders and a sore bum from sitting on the hard ground. For the past two hours, she'd been telling herself to give up, to go home, but still she sat—determined to stay all night if need be. She had spent an entire year anxiously awaiting this day. The day her questions would be answered.

This time, this year, it was her turn. She refused to be the one left behind. The one struggling on her own. The past year had been pure hell, and her friends were going to come back for her. Sheer force of will would make it so. Silently begging—she repeated the same words over and over. Come for me, come for me, come for me. As she whispered the words, the tree began to tremble.

The End

About the Author:

Writing a book was number one on Mari Carr's bucket list, and on her thirty-fourth birthday she set out to see that goal achieved. Now, years later, her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends, and several of her books have been published.

High school librarian by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr found time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

To learn more, visit her website at www.maricarr.com

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