



# THE MAD KNIGHT'S BRIDE

By

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## Chapter One

1064

Off the Coast of Northumbria

Elaine of Rockland stood at the bow of her ship, squinting bleary eyes against the icy winter wind. She and her crew had spent a frightening night fighting to keep their course through an ice storm. Had Rockland not been so desperate for money and goods, they never would have ventured out until spring. Their people were hungry, many were sick, and the raids earlier that year had left them with little resources and in dire need of repairs. Elaine and her crew were forced to sail up the coast of Essex all the way to Northumbria and possibly to Scotland, if necessary, to gather supplies for their survival.

Thus far most villages had been unwilling or unable to trade in the midst of winter. They needed their supplies for themselves, since Rockland was not the only village which had been sacked from summer to autumn. Though Viking raids were far less common than in earlier years, bands of outlaws throughout the land destroyed many of the smaller villages. William Blackridge, a man who had once been one of the finest knights in the land but had turned to looting, led a particularly fierce band of raiders. Only through a recent failed attack on a village called Ravenhill, under the protection of a Viking who had converted to serve the king, had Blackridge's dishonorable actions been revealed to the king and his raiders disbanded. The knight was now an outlaw with an enormous price on his head.

*And I hope someone finds him and cuts his head off,* Elaine thought. *Actually, beheading is too good for him. He deserves to suffer as he made others suffer, as he's made every man, woman, and child in Rockland suffer.*

"It's cold, but if the weather stays clear, we should reach Ravenhill soon," Ezekiel, Elaine's brother, said as he came to stand beside her.

Elaine nodded. Since hearing of Ravenhill's success against Sir William Blackridge's raiders, they had decided to approach them for trade. If Ravenhill possessed such a fine army, perhaps they retained the resources to assist Rockland.

"I hope this won't be another futile attempt," Elaine said, folding her arms across her chest to keep some warmth beneath her worn, frost-covered cloak. She lifted her chin and shook a tendril of thick black hair from her face. Always rebellious, Elaine defied fashion and refused to bind her hair; however, loose hair was the least of her feminine sins. Most of the time she dressed as a man with breeches, boots, and loose shirts. She even owned chain mail and a fine sword, which she treasured above all else. The weapon had saved her life many times in the past and she was sure it would continue to do so in the future.

Though a woman living in an age ruled by men, Elaine had endured physical and emotional hardships to earn her people's respect. They considered both her and Ezekiel the leaders of Rockland.

"We haven't got the best supplies to barter with," Ezekiel said. "People don't want embroidery in the middle of winter."

"We also have the dried herbs," Elaine added. Such herbs were extremely valuable for

healing. The people of Rockland had gathered an overabundance that summer. "Someone is bound to want... What is that?"

Elaine placed her hands on the ship's wooden rail and stared closer at the water.

"What?" Ezekiel joined her. "I don't see any-- God, it looks like a man!"

Elaine narrowed her eyes at the dark shape in the waves and saw it was indeed a man, hanging onto a piece of drifting wood. Freezing waves crashed over him, threatening to drag him beneath the churning sea.

"Somebody get a rope," Elaine shouted over her shoulder, then called to the man. "Hello! Can you hear us?"

"I don't think he's conscious," Ezekiel said, shrugging off his cloak and reaching for the rope supplied by a crew member. "I'll have to get him."

"Are you mad, sir?" said the crewman. "You'll catch your death in that water."

"Aye,"--James, one of Ezekiel's closest friends, glanced into the sea--"and by the look of him, he's already dead. Frozen for certain."

"But we don't know that," Elaine said. "We can't just leave him there."

Ezekiel secured himself with the rope. "Once I've got him, pull us up."

The men nodded, and Elaine grasped the end of the rope, assisting the others as they lowered Ezekiel into the water.

Within moments, both he and the stranger were on deck. Ezekiel trembled from head to foot. Elaine threw a cloak over his shoulders and ordered him below deck and out of the icy wind.

When she turned back, several crewman had gathered around the stranger.

"I'll be damned." James looked up at Elaine. "He's still alive. Scarcely. He has a hell of a gash on the head and a worse one on his arm."

Elaine pushed her way through the hulking sailors to look at their unexpected guest. Other than a mass of curly, black hair and a neatly trimmed beard, she could discern little of his face. Blood gushed from a cut on his forehead, streaking his face red. He wore black boots, breeches, and shirt beneath finely made leather and mail armor, the breast and arm of which had been slashed open. Blood leaked from both wounds. The chest injury appeared minor, the mail having absorbed most of what could have been a fatal blow. Still, Elaine would have to inspect it more carefully to be sure.

She stood. "Bring him to my cabin and put him on the cot."

"My lady?" James's eyes widened.

"What else are we to do with him? If we're going to save his life, it's the only decent place on the ship."

James and the others knew better than to question Elaine once her mind was made up, so they dragged the stranger down to her cabin. She followed, ordering water to be boiled so that she could cleanse the man's wounds and see how much damage had been done. She ordered everyone but James from the room while she gathered dry clothes, a needle and thread. James removed the stranger's drenched clothes, covered him, and went to find another blanket.

Elaine approached the wounded man, unconcerned for his naked state, as she'd spent years training and fighting alongside men and had dressed wounds many times before.

The more serious of his injuries were the gash on his head and the one on his arm. She bound his arm tightly, then immediately set to work cleaning blood from his face so she could better see the wound. It was small but deep, the flesh around it bruised.

"Dressed for battle. Wounded. What were you doing?" Elaine whispered, pressing the

cloth to his forehead to slow the bleeding. He trembled so badly from drifting in the icy water that when James returned, he'd have to hold him steady so she could stitch his forehead. While applying pressure to the injury, she took note of the man's face. Though his skin was grayish white from exposure to the winter sea, he was quite handsome, with finely chiseled bone structure and thick eyelashes. He was extremely tall, at least a head taller than Ezekiel and every man on their crew. Lean muscle rippled in his torso visible above the bedcovers. For a man of his size, he hadn't any spare flesh whatsoever. For the first time, Elaine felt the stirring of desire, a foreign emotion to her at any time, particularly with an injured man whom she'd never seen before.

*Too many worries, Elaine. You're letting your thoughts run away with you.*

James stepped in and Elaine asked him to assist her while she stitched the man's forehead.

"Who do you suppose he is?" Elaine murmured, sliding the needle in and out of flesh, grateful that her patient was unconscious. She wished he would stop shivering. Even with James steadying him, stitching his wound proved difficult. Still, the idea of floating in that freezing water for any length of time made Elaine wince. Between that and the blood loss, she wondered how he'd survived at all.

"I haven't any idea," James grunted, his brown hair tumbling into his eyes as he leaned his hands into the man's shoulders. "But he's strong as a horse."

"I'm almost finished. Hold him tighter before I end up sewing his eyes shut."

"I'm doing the best I can. You know he'll probably die anyway."

"Not if he's as strong as you claim." She moved from the man's head and began stitching his arm. After several moments, she said, "Finished. I think I can manage now, James."

Nodding curtly, James shrugged on his cloak and left Elaine alone with their unconscious guest.

She turned her attention to the shallow wound on his chest. The blood had already begun to clot. Since the injury wouldn't need stitching, she pulled the blankets up to his neck and sat back on her heels. She squeezed water from a cloth and dabbed blood from the corner of his mouth. Except for a slight swelling on one side, his lips were finely drawn beneath his dark moustache, the top lip delicate, the lower full and sensual. An angel's face.

Elaine shook her head. By the look of the man's wounds and the quality of his armor, he was certainly not an angel. She wondered what color his eyes were. She imagined they were dark, as brown eyes so often accompanied black hair.

Picking up the bowl of bloody water, she left the cabin.

"Elaine," her brother called from where he sat on a storage bin, wrapped in a dry cloak, his teeth chattering from the cold. Lifting a mug in trembling hands, he took a long drink of broth. "How is he?"

Elaine shrugged. "He's lost plenty of blood and is half-frozen, but he might survive."

"He better. I didn't dive in that bloody ocean for nothing."

Elaine smiled at her brother. Strong, brave, skilled, and charitable to anyone weaker than himself, the young man personified knighthood. Elaine and her mother were very proud of him, as she was certain their father would have been, had he lived.

Elaine walked topside, dumped the bowl of bloody water overboard, and stopped for a mug of stew before returning to the cabin. Their unconscious guest's shivering had finally subsided. She placed the stew aside and fixed the blankets he'd thrown off. When she looked up she nearly jumped with surprise to find him staring at her. She'd been wrong to think his eyes

dark. They were the purest blue she'd ever seen, like jewels peering through a veil of thick, black lashes.

She smiled. "How are you feeling?"

He shook his head slightly then closed his eyes against what must have been dizzying pain.

"Try not to move." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "You hit your head badly. My name is Elaine. This ship belongs to me and my brother Ezekiel."

"Elaine," he murmured, his rich, lovely voice making her tingle from head to toe.

"What are you called?" she asked.

His gaze dropped from her face to his chest. When he looked back at her, a hint of panic shone in his eyes but disappeared so quickly it might not have been. "I haven't the slightest idea."

Elaine lifted an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I don't know who I am. I have no memory of ... anything."

Elaine held his gaze for a moment before she said, "Sometimes that happens after a blow to the head. I'm sure your memory will return in time. You were adrift on the ocean when we pulled you in. Your armor was slashed and by the look of your wounds you were in a fight. Does any of that sound familiar?"

He thought for a moment. "No."

"Well, sit up slowly." Elaine grasped his arm to assist him. The sensation of hard muscles beneath her palm sent her heart beating out of control. Embarrassed by her uncharacteristic attraction to the man, she released him abruptly and turned her back on him to reach for the mug of stew. Careful not to touch him again, she passed it to him. "Drink this. If you need anything, shout. My brother is just outside the cabin trying to warm up. He's the one who pulled you out of the water."

"I should thank him." He attempted to stand, but the pain in his head made him unsteady.

Elaine impulsively reached out to him. "You can thank him later. Just rest for a while. You're lucky to be alive."

She glanced at her hands splayed across his broad chest. Dark hair, surprisingly soft beneath her palms, dusted his warm flesh over solid muscle. His gaze dropped to her hands as well and she cleared her throat, clutching her fists behind her back, frustrated because she'd wanted to keep touching him. Even pale and wounded, he practically glowed with male sensuality. If he wove such a spell around her now, she wasn't sure she wanted to know him at all once he regained his strength.

"You have absolutely no idea what your name is?"

He smiled slightly and shook his head. "I'm sorry, my lady. I'm sure in time--"

"Gabriel," she said. The face of an angel...

"Excuse me?"

"Until you remember who you are, I'll call you Gabriel. Do you agree?"

"If you like."

Elaine smiled as she turned and left the cabin.

## Chapter Two

Gabriel watched Elaine leave the cabin. The strange yet beautiful young woman piqued his interest. Even her masculine attire couldn't conceal her luscious body. As tall as most men, she possessed long legs, full breasts, and a narrow waist. She moved gracefully, her steps steady in spite of the rocking ship. Her square jawline gave her face a stubborn look in spite of the smoothness of her skin and the softness of her large gray eyes.

His chest still felt warmed by her touch and the sound of her voice resonated in his mind. Gabriel, she had called him. He wasn't sure why she'd decided on that particular name, but it didn't matter. One name was as good as another, considering he hadn't the faintest idea what his real name was.

She said he'd been fighting and by the look of the long, red cut across his chest and the pain in his head he must have been on the losing end.

*Either that or the other man's dead. Yes, I think I like that version better.*

He lifted the mug to his lips and took a sip, not really tasting it as he forced himself to try to remember something, anything, about his identity and the circumstances leading to his present situation.

He finished the stew and pulled up the blankets against the cold. Every muscle in his body ached and his head throbbed. He felt like he'd just come from a battle, but with whom? His mind still searching, he drifted to sleep.

When he next awoke, the lamp had burned so low it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness. He glanced around the tiny cabin and noticed Elaine, bundled in her woolen cloak and a blanket, lying on the floor in the corner. Apparently he was taking her bed. He rose, lost his balance, and braced himself against the wall before he fell.

Elaine snapped awake, blinking blindly for a moment before she discerned Gabriel's shadowed form in the dimness.

"What are you doing?" she asked, brightening the lamp's flame while he sat on the edge of the cot, silently cursing his weakness. "Do you need a chamber pot?"

"No, I just wanted to give back your bed. You've been more than kind..." His voice drifted as he followed her line of vision to his manhood. He hadn't realized he was completely naked. Instinctively, he pulled a blanket across his lap, but not before Elaine received a full view of his male organ, which, even in its flaccid state, was impressive to behold.

"Forgive me, my lady, but if you could bring me my clothes, I'll spare you this crude scene."

Elaine left the chamber, her cheeks flaming not so much from seeing a naked man but from the thoughts filling her mind. She felt as if she'd walked into an armorer's shop and saw the most magnificent sword, close enough for her to take in her hand and wield, yet untouchable since the price stretched beyond her reach.

Since Gabriel's breeches were still wet with seawater, she borrowed some from Ezekiel. Though her brother was several inches shorter than Gabriel, he wore his clothes loose enough that their guest would have no difficulty fitting into them comfortably.

She returned, placed the breeches on the bed beside Gabriel and said, "I'll give you some

privacy, but please stay in the cot. You've just begun to recover and I don't want you sustaining more injuries by falling."

"May I ask where we are?"

"Sailing along the coast of Northumbria. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes. I can remember everything but details of my own life. It's very strange not having an identity."

"Tomorrow I have business in a village called Ravenhill. I'll return by nightfall and if all goes well, we'll sail back down the coast. I'm not sure where you came from but you're welcome to travel with us and stay at Rockland until you've recovered. I warn you, though, Rockland is a poor village. It wasn't always, but raids this summer nearly destroyed us. Many of our people are ill and our supplies are scarce. We're trying to rebuild, but it's difficult without the resources and the hands."

"Perhaps I could help you. I have a vast knowledge of herbs and am good with my hands. Besides, I want to repay you for all you've done and apparently I have nothing of value."

"You remember those things?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how I learned them, however. I haven't the slightest idea. Damn! This not knowing is driving me mad!" His jaw visibly clenched and he tightened his fist in the blanket.

She looked at him with sympathy. Not knowing his identity must be strange and frightening.

"I'm sure in time you'll remember. Just try to rest." She placed a hand lightly on his shoulder.

His gaze fixed on hers, making her stomach churn with desire.

"You're very kind. Thank you for all you've done, my la--"

"Please call me Elaine."

He took her hand from his shoulder and politely bowed his head over it. His hand was large and rough, yet his touch was so gentle that she scarcely felt it at all. She stared at his thick, black curls until he lifted his head and slowly released her.

This time when she left the cabin, she glanced at him over her shoulder. He smiled slightly and she hurried up on deck where she let the winter wind fan her heated face.

With his seraphic face, god-like body, and eyes that spoke to her of all the devil's sins he could teach her to enjoy, this man was an almost irresistible temptation. Why had she offered to take him with her to Rockland? She should have dumped him off along the coast where they'd found him. He probably knew people there, maybe even had family.

But what if he didn't? What if he was fighting far away from home? He could wander from town to town, not knowing anyone, completely alone.

Before that morning, she hadn't even known him, so why did it matter to her what happened to him after he recovered enough to leave the ship? But it did matter. She cared because he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, because he made her feel desires she'd never experienced. She cared because his eyes held stories, promises, knowledge, pain. She wanted to know him, the person he was once he remembered and the person he would become even if he never regained his memory.

*You're losing your mind, Elaine. You don't have time for this foolishness. Rockland is depending on you. The last thing you should be doing is bringing home another injured party, another mouth to feed.*

But he said he had knowledge of herbs. Rockland could always use another healer. The



elderly woman who was their most experienced midwife and healer had died of a fever one month ago. Not only did Gabriel possess healing skills, but he was obviously a soldier. Perhaps once he was strong enough he would fight with them.

There were a hundred reasons for him to stay and a hundred more for him to go, but if she must be truthful, she wanted him to come to Rockland, even for a little while.

Concerning herself with thoughts of a man served no purpose. She had more important worries, such as the meeting with Wyborn of Ravenhill the next morning. Hopefully he would trade with her so Rockland could survive the winter.

She drew a deep breath of air so cold her throat ached, then went back below to try to get at least some rest before morning. Ezekiel leaned against a sack of dried herbs, his head dangling backward in sleep. Stepping over his booted feet, Elaine was about to lie down but felt compelled to look in on Gabriel first. She glanced inside the dimly lit cabin and discerned his shape on the bed. The evenness of his breathing told her he had fallen asleep again. She could scarcely believe he'd tried to rise from the cot when he must have felt like death. He'd lost so much blood that she wondered how he'd been able to stand. What irritated her most was that she hadn't been able to disguise her fascination with his body. She'd never really thought about men as creatures of beauty. She'd always thought of men as competition. By law women were the property of men, first of their fathers, then their husbands. If a woman had neither, she fell into the care of her brother or some other male family member. Elaine had struggled for her independence and she'd been luckier than most women. Ezekiel respected her and recognized her strength and intelligence. His was the hand that defended Rockland, but Elaine possessed the mind that had kept the village together through times of hardship. Still, her education had come at a price.

As children, she and Ezekiel had been inseparable. When he'd left Rockland to begin his training as a knight, she'd been proud of him but also envious. The feminine tasks her mother forced upon her bored her to weeping. She wanted to ride and fight like her brother, so in her early teens she ran away from her homeland and, disguised as a boy, joined a band of mercenaries where she trained as a soldier. During the first few months, she'd almost given up. The physical demands proved greater than she'd anticipated and for the first time in her life she'd been away from her mother and friends and the people who cared for her. She often longed to give up and go home, but a stubborn voice inside told her she must persevere. This was her one chance to live the sort of life she truly wanted.

For nearly three years she lived with the mercenaries until one night while bathing alone in a river she was discovered by one of her comrades and her secret revealed. Because of her deception and unconventional behavior, the man had thought her a wild, loose woman and tried to force himself upon her. Elaine never knew if he lived or died after they fought but she'd run away from the band, fearful of what would happen should the others discover she was a woman.

She returned to Rockland and for the first time realized the devastation she'd caused her mother and brother. After chastising her, they'd been interested to hear about her travels. Ezekiel had been shocked to learn that she'd seen as much war as he had, and he was greatly impressed by her skill. He agreed that she should take an active part in helping him oversee Rockland. She had been on her own for too long to ever consent to marriage had her brother demanded she take a spouse, and she didn't relish the thought of running off again and never seeing her homeland. Ezekiel's understanding and faith in her meant more than she could ever express.

While her brother completed his training and became a knight, Elaine took over leadership of Rockland. She worked hard to prove her brother's trust was not misplaced.

Rockland prospered and when he came home, it continued to thrive. Shortly after Ezekiel's return, Sir William's raiders swept through the village, killing and thieving, taking everything of value. Blackridge was a monster and rumored to be a madman who supposedly laughed in the midst of battle as he slaughtered man after man. Though he had become an outlaw out of desire for wealth, he obviously took pleasure in killing.

Ezekiel in particular despised Sir William. He couldn't fathom how a man who had been such a skilled soldier, who had risen up from a penniless orphan to one of the finest knights in Northumbria, could turn away honor and embrace evil. Often Ezekiel said he longed for the opportunity to fight the wicked knight, destroy him, and spare the world his wrath. Elaine didn't doubt that he'd try, and though she knew Ezekiel's skill, she'd also learned that more often than not evil won over good. It wasn't how the legends went, yet it was true.

Now, as she gazed at Gabriel's sleeping form, she wondered if he'd been fighting against a force of evil, just as Ezekiel aspired to. Elaine was certain that he'd been defending a cause he believed in. When she'd looked into his compelling blue eyes, she'd seen a wild spirit lurking beneath his confusion, but no evil. She rarely misjudged a person, and she would bet her sword that Gabriel was a good man.

She turned from the door and sat between two bulky storage bags, pulling her cloak around her before she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning, Elaine rode behind two guards from Ravenhill. When they'd reached the coast at dawn, she'd felt a moment of apprehension upon seeing the imposing fleet of Viking ships in the harbor, but Wyborn the Indomitable, the man who oversaw Ravenhill, was among the last of the powerful Viking raiders. The king had awarded him the coastal village with the stipulation that he keep the shoreline safe from his raiding cousins. Not only had Wyborn held true to his word but he also managed to crush Sir William's band of raiders and alert the king to the knight's evil doings. Elaine had no great love of Vikings, but if saving Rockland meant dealing with Wyborn the Indomitable, she would do so.

They rode over a hill, leaving the shoreline behind them. In the midst of a vast, snow-covered meadow stood the village of Ravenhill surrounded by the finest wall Elaine had ever seen. If Rockland had possessed such a wall, they might have been able to save themselves from the raiders. Once they were thriving again, Elaine and Ezekiel planned to build a similar defense.

"It is a beauty, isn't it?" One of the guards, a tall, dark-haired Scotsman called Derek slowed his horse to ride alongside Elaine.

She nodded.

"It should be. We worked our arses off all autumn building it."

"Wyborn is serious about defenses, I see," Elaine said.

"Wyborn is serious about everything."

The Scotsman shouted to the guards on the wall who opened the gate. As they plodded through the snow, Elaine glanced around the village. All the buildings were in good condition and the villagers seemed healthy and content. Ravenhill looked exactly the way she wished for Rockland to appear. She prayed nightly that one day her village would be the happy, thriving place she remembered from childhood.

They rode behind the manor house to where a powerfully built man was splitting logs while a boy of about seven gathered them into a pile. Nearby, a dark-haired woman bundled in a woolen cloak stood laughing with a tall, blonde woman.

Upon seeing them, the blonde skipped up to Derek and placed an affectionate hand on his

knee. "We didn't expect you back so soon."

"Couldn't keep away from you." The Scotsman gazed down at her. "When Elaine approached us on shore and asked to speak with Wyborn, I volunteered to bring her in because I knew I'd see you all the sooner."

"I'm not certain whether you're truthful or teasing, but I like how it sounds," the blonde said.

Derek tore his gaze from her and turned back to Elaine. "This is my betrothed, Sonja, Wyborn's sister. That," he pointed to the man who had just lowered his ax and begun to approach them, the dark-haired woman falling into step beside him, "is Wyborn, master of Ravenhill, and his wife, Lady Marion."

Other than Derek and Gabriel, Wyborn was the tallest man she'd ever seen--and the biggest. His hair was wild, windblown blond, and his rugged face looked as if it had been chopped out of stone. A bandage covered his right ear and she noted he walked with a slight limp. His wide-set blue eyes stared at her with an unsettling harshness.

Marion, however, was a small woman with eyes as warm as her husband's were chilling. Her skin was smooth except for a thin, white scar down one cheek, and her features were delicate, but for a straight, aquiline nose. In spite of their obvious differences, she clung affectionately to Wyborn's hand and walked close to his side. She whispered something to him and he glanced down at her, his expression softening and the slightest smile tugging the corners of his solemn mouth.

They were obviously in love. Seeing this inspired envy and longing in Elaine. Love matches were rare in a world where marriages occurred for profit. She wondered what it would be like to feel such love for a man and have that affection returned.

"Wyborn, this is Elaine of Rockland," Derek told his master. "She's interested in trading. It seems her village was hit pretty hard by raiders this year too. They need supplies to get through until spring."

Elaine dismounted and bowed respectfully to the couple.

Wyborn merely nodded, but Marion smiled warmly and said, "What sort of supplies do you need and what have you to trade?"

"Our food supply is very low," Elaine said. "Our crops were burned this summer. We have tapestries and dried herbs to trade."

"Herbs?" Marion beamed, glancing at Wyborn. "I told you our luck is changing." She looked back to Elaine. "Much of our own herb supply was destroyed during a raid this autumn. I've been trying to trade with surrounding villages, but they only have enough for themselves."

Wyborn spoke for the first time. "We will go inside." He glanced over his shoulder and called to the boy gathering logs, "Finish up, Sven, then you can do what you want but don't wander far. I don't want to spend the day looking for you in snow drifts again."

The child waved, and Wyborn shook his head. "Children are often more trouble than battling uphill in an ice storm."

Marion patted her stomach. "You'd better get used to it."

"If you don't mind my asking, when is your baby due?" Elaine asked Marion. She handed Derek her horse's reins and followed Wyborn and his lady inside.

"This summer," Marion told her. "Have you any children, Elaine?"

"No children. No husband. I prefer it that way."

Marion smiled. "I once felt the same."

In the great hall Wyborn asked a serving girl to bring them wine and a warm meal. They

removed their snow-dusted cloaks, and Elaine noted the reason for Wyborn's limp. One of his thighs revealed the bulk of a bandage beneath his worn breeches. She wondered if he'd been in an accident or a fight, but deemed asking inappropriate.

They sat at a long wooden table to discuss the trade.

"First, I must congratulate you for capturing Sir William's army," Elaine said. "He's the one who sacked our village this summer, and though I can't say I don't wish we destroyed him, I am grateful that you did. Now if they only catch the bastard ... excuse my language, Lady Marion."

Marion smiled and shook her head, glancing at Elaine's masculine attire, thick black hair braided over one shoulder, and the sword at her hip. She said, "I'm married to a Viking; therefore, I'm not easily offended."

Wyborn lifted a dark blond eyebrow. "We can argue about that later, my lady."

"Only if you promise we can make up, my lord." Marion's eyes glistened with amusement. Wyborn grunted with feigned disapproval, but Marion ignored him and continued, "No one will be catching Sir William. Wyborn killed him not even a day ago."

"Killed?" Elaine's gaze shifted from Marion to the Viking. At least that explained the bandages.

"A vile man," Marion continued. "Completely mad. I could tell you stories ... but truly I'd rather forget them."

"I understand." Elaine looked at her with sympathy. "We'll not soon forget the damage he did to Rockland."

"Speaking of Rockland," Wyborn interrupted. "Let's get to business. If the trade now is profitable for both of us, in the spring we can continue. Good relations between villages is valuable."

"I couldn't agree more," Elaine said.

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By late that afternoon, the trade was completed. Rockland's crew unloaded supplies of herbs from the ship and food was packed on. Wyborn and Marion wished Elaine, Ezekiel and their crew luck through the winter and by dusk they had set sail back down the coast toward home.

"He was very accommodating for a Viking," Elaine said to her brother. The siblings stood on deck and watched Wyborn's fleet fade behind them.

Ezekiel nodded. "He seemed fair, but it might kill him to smile."

"He smiles at his wife."

"I suppose even Vikings feel."

"But he's not really a Viking anymore, is he? I mean, he is loyal to the king, and he did us all a great service by killing Sir William."

"That's right enough," Ezekiel admitted.

"Besides," Elaine continued, gazing into the churning blue waves, ignoring the icy wind, "I think he and Marion are a charming couple."

Ezekiel stared at her, amusement in his eyes. "Is my cold-hearted sister starting to long for family life? Motherhood, perhaps?"

"No!"

"Too bad. I'd rather like some nieces and nephews."

"Then marry and have your own children. I want nothing to do with the shackles of matrimony." Even as she spoke the words, the vision of her and Gabriel locked naked in a

passionate embrace flashed through her mind. What was it about the stranger that prompted such thoughts? She knew nothing about him. Even worse, he knew nothing about himself, yet she desired him.

"How is our guest?" she asked, hoping to sound nonchalant.

"I'm sure he has felt better, but he hasn't complained. I spoke to him this afternoon. Poor bastard has absolutely no memory of who he is or where he's from. Said you've been calling him Gabriel."

"What's wrong with that? It's a good, biblical name," Elaine snapped, once again feeling heat rise in her cheeks.

"Nothing's wrong with it. You're in a strange mood. I'm going to stand watch for a while before you chew the rest of my head off."

Elaine sighed and watched her brother walked away. She had no idea what was happening to her. All her life she'd been confident, collected. She'd known exactly what she wanted and chased after it. Suddenly she desired something ridiculous, elusive. She longed to make love with Gabriel, to be devoured by his magnificent body and see his eyes brilliant with passion for her alone. Was she losing her mind? After so many years struggling for respect in a male dominated world, she'd convinced herself she couldn't feel passion, but Gabriel inspired feelings she hadn't realized she possessed.

*You can't have him. Lose yourself to a man and you'll hate yourself. Give in to desire, and you'll regret it.*

Eventually, Gabriel would remember who he was, then he'd leave her and Rockland behind. Better not to become attached to him.

"Did your negotiations go well, my lady?"

Elaine's heart pounded. She'd been so engrossed in her thoughts that she hadn't heard Gabriel approach.

Dressed in breeches and a woolen cloak borrowed from Ezekiel, he stood beside her, his face stark in the dimness. Though he looked a bit haggard, his posture remained proud.

"You shouldn't be out here," she said.

He smiled. "I can't abide being cooped up. I'm feeling much better, thanks to your expert care."

"It was nothing to speak of."

"No, it was something." He gently cupped her chin in his hand and turned her face to his. She knew she should pull away, but his gaze held her captive. A lock of dark hair blew across his forehead and she had the sudden urge to brush it away. Instead she clenched her fists behind her back.

He continued, "James and your brother told me about the trouble you've been having in Rockland. You've offered to take me in when you're just about surviving yourselves. Not everyone would do that."

"You said you have knowledge of herbs. We can use such help."

He nodded, his gaze focused on her full, soft lips. Slowly he dropped his hand to his side. "I am at your service, my lady."

"Not if you get sick and die on me," she said. "Now get down below."

His fine lips curved in a half smile. This time when he bowed from the neck and took her hand, he kissed the back of it so gently that all she felt was the slightest brush of his cool, smooth mouth and the tickle of his beard. She stared after him when he released her hand and walked below. Once he'd disappeared, she ran her fingertips over the place he'd kissed, her stomach

fluttering with desire.

## Chapter Three

That evening Elaine was surprised to find Gabriel and Ezekiel seated on the floor below deck playing dice and laughing together. Gabriel stood upon seeing her.

"I've stolen your bed long enough, my lady."

"Elaine," she said, brushing aside his cloak, rolling up his sleeve, and removing the bandage from his arm so she could examine the stitches. "You're lucky. No infection has set in. How do you feel?"

"Like I could take a watch tonight."

"We have plenty of men," Ezekiel said. "Wait at least one more day before making yourself useful. Those injuries were serious."

Gabriel nodded, glancing at Elaine who was wrapping his arm in a fresh bandage. "I'd like to see the clothes I was wearing when you rescued me. Maybe they'll give me some memory of who I am."

"Good idea." Elaine tied off the bandage, her hand straying to the warm flesh of his forearm. A dusting of hair covered smooth skin over hard muscle. The body of a warrior and the face of an angel. God, how she wanted him!

She looked up and found him studying her face.

"What?" she demanded, irritated by his apparent fascination and furious with her body's response. Her heart beat faster, and she thanked goodness for the thick cloak and rough shirt concealing her hardened nipples.

"I was just thinking your husband must be crazy to allow you out on a ship like this, miles from home, in danger..."

Elaine's desire faded in the face of her anger. "I have no husband, and I certainly don't want one. As for danger, what could be more dangerous than bearing children? You men are all the same, pretending that women are fragile possessions to be hidden away when we're stronger than the lot of you."

He raised an eyebrow. "I meant no offense. It's just that if you were mine, I'd be fearful of losing you out here."

"Yours?" She stepped back. His, as in lying naked in his arms, tasting his lips and sharing his bed? "I'll never belong to any man, least of all one whom I plucked from the sea like a half-drowned dog."

The amusement glistening in his eyes fueled her anger even more. He bowed, though with genuine or mock politeness she couldn't be sure. "I don't claim to be worthy of you, Elaine, but it does give me something to strive for."

"First of all, don't bother trying. I have no interest in marriage. Second, what if you have a wife somewhere?"

He narrowed his eyes, looking momentarily perplexed. "I don't think so. I just don't ... feel married."

"Really?" She wondered if he caught her note of sarcasm.

"Something tells me I'm not the marrying kind, but who knows? Perhaps I am."

"She must be devastated right now," Elaine murmured before she even realized she'd

spoken aloud.

"Or maybe she's celebrating."

Elaine glanced from his chiseled face to his long, sinewy legs in the snug breeches.

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Here they are." Ezekiel returned carrying Gabriel's battered armor and clothes stiff with dried saltwater. Gabriel arranged the garments on top of several trunks and ran his hands over the slashed chest plate. His smooth brow furrowed.

"Anything?" Elaine and Ezekiel asked simultaneously.

He shook his head slowly, his fingers tightening on the armor. "Damn. Why can't I remember?"

"Don't try so hard," Ezekiel told him. "Maybe it'll just come back on its own."

Gabriel touched twin scabbards attached to a wide leather belt.

"You had no weapons when we brought you aboard," Ezekiel said, "but obviously you carried twin swords. Unusual. Wonder which hand you fought better with?"

Gabriel shrugged.

"Maybe once your arm is healed, we'll find out. I have to go up for the next watch," Ezekiel told them.

Elaine wasn't sure if Gabriel even heard him as his eyes were closed, his hands sifting through the clothes. "In my mind, I see a blond man, but I can't make out his face."

"A friend?"

"I don't think so. I don't know." He sighed, dropping onto a sack of goods and pressing his hands to his temples. His thick black hair parted over his shoulders, baring his nape. A dark patch on his skin drew Elaine's attention, and she stooped beside him, her fingers touching his neck. A tattoo of a slim, razor-backed demon formed a perfect circle as it devoured its own tail. Elaine had seen tattoos on a few of the mercenaries she'd trained with years ago, but never had such marks on the body sent a chill coursing through her as the one on Gabriel's neck did.

"What is it?" He glanced at her, placing a hand to his nape.

"Your tattoo. It's strange."

"I have a tattoo?"

"On the back of your neck. It's a demon eating its tail"

"Bizarre. I wish I could see it."

She gave a curt laugh. "I wish I hadn't."

"It's only ink from a needle."

"I've always thought such marks reveal something about the wearer, about who they are or who they want to be."

"What do you suppose I want to be?"

She shook her head slightly. "I don't know. I suppose that's something only you can answer, Gabriel."

"Not right now. Perhaps in time."

"Why don't you get some sleep?"

He nodded. Truthfully, he did feel tired and his head and arm ached, but his mind churned with thoughts about who he was. Who was the man who had worn that slashed armor? Who was the warrior who carried twin swords? He had to remember. The suspense was driving him to madness.

He lay down, pulling the cloak about him, and turned toward Elaine's cabin. Her lamp dimmed and he imagined her lying in bed, her beautiful gray eyes closed, her smooth cheek



resting against the pillow. Whenever he was with her, he longed to touch her thick, dark hair. Her fiery eyes and spirited manner intrigued him. He doubted that even if his memory returned he'd ever in his life known such an exciting woman. Though they'd just met, he already wanted her so badly it ached almost as much as his half-healed wounds. What sort of experiences had made her so strong and adventurous? Outwardly, she seemed to hate men, yet he'd seen desire in her eyes when she'd looked at him. Not that he assumed he was in any condition to appeal to a woman, especially if he looked half as bad as he felt.

Closing his eyes, he listened to the waves lapping against the ship, men snoring softly, and the wind wailing above. He tumbled into a deep, dreamless sleep and awoke later to a slender ray of daylight shining through a crack in the ceiling.

Up on deck, he squinted against sunlight glaring off the icy shoreline and approached Elaine and Ezekiel who stood talking at the stern of the ship. Elaine's windswept black hair lifted in the cold breeze and mingled with the shaggy white wool cloak draping her shoulders. Nearly as tall as her brother, she possessed the same confident expression as Ezekiel. In spite of her beauty, she was no delicate maid to be swept off her feet with carefully chosen words or appreciative looks. She was a woman of power, one who sought to be treated as an equal. Still, she was a woman underneath all her warrior's clothes and fiery words, and he meant to uncover the feminine side she strove to conceal. Contrary to what she believed, femininity was not weakness but a power meant to be enjoyed--with the right man.

"Gabriel," Ezekiel greeted him. "Feeling stronger?"

"Much. What can I do to help?"

"Nothing now." Elaine turned to him, examining the stitches on his forehead. "Good. It won't leave too noticeable a scar."

Elaine's fingers gently touched the bruised flesh around the cut and swept across the ridge of his cheekbone. His gaze held hers, the intensity in those eyes startling her. It seemed as if he could see through to her very soul and knew all her secret desires. To him she was naked, vulnerable, and she hated the way such feelings thrilled her.

She dropped her hands, cleared her throat and said, "No infection and you look better already. James was right. You are strong as a horse." Gabriel lifted a questioning eyebrow that Elaine ignored. She continued, "We'll reach Rockland soon."

"I've heard so much about it, I'm curious to finally see it."

"Don't be too eager," Ezekiel said. "It was once a fine village, but now we're scarcely surviving. Hopefully the crops will be good this summer and we will find the means to build better defenses. The wall needs repair as well as all the houses. People are sick and our best healer died a month ago."

"I can help with that. You said your supply of herbs is good. I'll see what you have and what we can do. How is your supply onboard?" He glanced at his arm. "It would help if I could make a compress for this. Some of your men below have bad coughs. If you have the supplies, I can give them something to help their ailments."

"Half of Rockland has bad coughs." Ezekiel looked disgusted. "I'm afraid when we get back, more people will be sick or dead. Those raids this summer may have killed us after all. Damn William Blackridge. Now that he's dead, he's sure to burn in hell."

"Seems to me many people must feel that way," Gabriel said. "He sounded dishonorable."

Ezekiel's lip curled. "A knight, no less. Imagine spending almost your whole life training

for such a vocation only to throw it away and become a bandit?"

"Worse than a bandit," Elaine hissed. "A bloodthirsty murderer. I've seen war in my time and I can never imagine liking it. You wonder what manner of man takes pleasure in killing innocent people, of riding into a village and destroying it without regard for anyone else."

Elaine gripped the wooden rail until her hands ached.

"Wretched life he must have had," Gabriel said.

"He?" Elaine glanced toward him.

"He must have been constantly lonely, constantly watching his back. From what I hear, everyone and his brother wanted to kill him, if not for his deeds then for the price on his head."

"I wouldn't have minded killing him for the reward," Ezekiel said. "It would have been enough to rebuild Rockland."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "That much?"

Elaine snorted with laughter. "That much and more, however I'm satisfied that Wyborn of Ravenhill killed him, after what he did to him and his wife."

"What did he do?"

"It was all some kind of plot to take over Ravenhill. First he abducted Wyborn's young brother, then he nearly killed Wyborn by poisoning him. Later, he abducted Lady Marion."

Gabriel looked disgusted. "Not much of a man to have preyed on a woman and child."

"Unusual too," Ezekiel reflected. "William Blackridge murdered countless men in his time, but never targeted women and children."

"Just because he didn't slaughter them in battle doesn't mean he never destroyed them," Elaine snapped. "Look what he did to Rockland? Left it in ruins. Women and children have suffered every day since the raid."

"At least now he's dead," Ezekiel said before leaving Elaine and Gabriel together.

"Your William Blackridge might be dead, but another like him will rise," Gabriel sighed. "Unfortunately, it's the way of the world."

"Hopefully next time we'll be ready for whoever comes. This spring we're going to rebuild as best we can. I don't care how far I have to go to trade. Anyway, enough talk of Blackridge. Now that the bastard's dead, I want to forget about him. I'll take you below and show you what we have for herbs. I'm afraid I'm the closest thing to a healer onboard. I can save lives in a scrape, as I did for you, but I don't have a vast knowledge of remedies. In a way, it's a good thing we found you. If you could train some of our younger healers in Rockland, it would be appreciated."

"I'll show them all I know."

"You just can't remember where you learned?"

"I see bits and pieces of things. Battles. Plenty of battles. I'm guessing that's where I learned most of my skills."

Below deck, Elaine brought him to a trunk in her room. She lifted the lid and he looked at the assorted pouches and bottles.

"Most of this belonged to Gwen. She was our healer."

Gabriel opened a brown leather pouch and held it out to her. "Be careful with this one. Red Squill. It shouldn't even be in here."

"What does it do?"

Gabriel smiled slightly. "Poison, Elaine. Perfect for getting rid of all sorts of vermin."

He turned his attention back to the contents of the trunk and she took the opportunity to study him carefully, noting the trimmed angles of his beard and the beauty of his sharp bone

structure. His curly hair was bound at his nape with a piece of rope, revealing the jagged curve of his demon tattoo. Tearing her gaze from his face, she lingered over his hands that were searching through the supplies. They were long, slender hands, the veins on the backs of them prominent. Though his knuckles and palms were callused, his hands moved with gentleness and grace. Those hands had felt so wonderful when he'd touched her.

Unconsciously, she leaned closer to him, her body nearly brushing his.

"Ah, horehound. Perfect for coughs and..." He turned to her, his words fading. She was so near that their faces almost touched.

Startled, Elaine moved backward and took the horehound from him. She hoped the dimness below deck disguised her blush. "What should I do with it?"

"Mix it with honey and give it to your men. It'll help their coughs."

Her heart racing, she nodded and hurried to find the cook. She and Gabriel had been so close that if one of them had moved forward a bit, their lips would have met. How humiliating that would have been. But how welcome. She wondered what his lips felt like, if his kiss would be soft or rough, and how his body would feel pressed against hers.

When she'd finished administering the horehound, she reluctantly returned to Gabriel who was applying a compress to his wounded arm.

"Allow me to help you." She reached for the compress and held it in place.

Together they sat on the wooden trunk. Elaine kept her eyes focused on the compress, feeling his gaze hot upon her face.

"Does it help?"

He nodded. Slowly, gently, his hand covered hers. In spite of his rough flesh, his touch was so gentle she scarcely felt it, except for the heat of his palm. Reluctantly, he removed the compress. "I suppose that's enough. Thank you, Elaine."

"Yes. I'm needed on deck."

She stood, walked several paces then turned back suddenly and surprised them both by pressing a quick kiss to his mouth. Blushing, she hurried topside without looking back. What was wrong with her? She was a woman of the world, yet she'd acted like a young girl with her first tender feelings for a man. Truly, in spite of her years of traveling and fighting, she'd never experienced intimacies with a man, had never even kissed one before. She'd wanted to taste Gabriel, just to find out if he would be as pleasant as she'd suspected. To her horror, he was even more delicious than she'd dreamed. Now that she'd done it, she wanted to repeat the action. His lips had been so soft, his beard rough, and the wonder in his blue eyes headier than strong wine.

*Stop being a fool, Elaine. Curiosity. It's simple curiosity.*

Then why did she suddenly want more now that her curiosity should have been satisfied?

\* \* \* \*

Avoiding Gabriel was difficult on board ship, yet Elaine managed to keep her distance from him. He spent most of the day preparing herbal remedies for members of the crew and talking with Ezekiel who showed particular interest in Gabriel's skills.

She wanted to know what else they had discussed and planned to ask Ezekiel about it later. By dusk, she'd convinced herself that she was ridiculous. Never in her life had she been intimidated by anyone, least of all a man. She'd made the decision to kiss Gabriel and there was no use acting like a child about it. She had always stood firmly behind her decisions and admitted to her mistakes. Not that she was sure if kissing Gabriel *had* been a mistake, but she would never find out by avoiding him.

## Chapter Four

That night Ezekiel volunteered to take the first watch. The other crew members bedded down below or on deck, wrapped in their worn leather and woolen cloaks. Gabriel stood at the stern of the ship, watching the froth on the dark water churning behind them and the stars scattered like diamond dust across the sky.

The wind blew hair across his face, yet he made no motion to brush it away since he was lost in thought, straining to remember a past just beyond his reach. In his mind he saw clashing blades, fire and fields awash with blood. He saw black-helmeted warriors. Faceless. Evil. And always a tall, blond-haired swordsman with a face carved from stone. Two glistening swords, one set with a ruby, the other with onyx.

*Sodom and Gomorrah.*

Why did those words keep coming to mind? Had he been religious? Had he been a knight?

*Nonsense. I was obviously a healer. But why was I wounded? Why did I have armor of such quality?*

"Gabriel?"

He turned sharply and smiled. "Elaine. I'm glad we can talk. You were busy today. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I wanted to thank you for helping my crew. We took the healthiest men with us, but as you can see, even most of them aren't well."

"Minor things." Gabriel shrugged. "In a few days, they'll be better."

"I hope you can do as well with the rest of our village, but as far as I'm concerned, you've already more than repaid us for pulling you out of the sea."

"If it hadn't been for you and Ezekiel, I'd be dead. There's little I can do to repay that." He tried to hold her gaze, but she looked out to sea, her smooth face shadowed in the moonlight. The need to touch her again almost overwhelmed him. He longed to feel her lips on his, for her unexpected kiss earlier had been all too brief. Throughout the day he'd relived the kiss in his mind and wondered if it had left her as hungry as it had him.

The sound of the wind and waves broke the otherwise still night. With the crew asleep and Ezekiel's back to them, Gabriel decided it was time to find out exactly how Elaine felt about him.

He took a step closer to her and rested his hand beside hers on the wooden rail. "May I kiss you, my lady?"

Elaine nodded.

He pulled her to him, one arm winding around her waist and pressing her to his body while his other hand cupped the back of her head. His fingers sifted gently through her hair. His mouth covered hers firmly yet tenderly. The kiss was chaste at first, then his lips parted slightly, the tip of his tongue tracing the shape of her mouth.

Though he sensed she had never been kissed like this before, she learned quickly and surrendered so completely that Gabriel felt as if he were soaring. Tentatively, her tongue darted out to meet his. His arm tightened around her, his tongue stroking hers, mating with it.

Slowly he drew back, his arm still supporting her until she opened her eyes and stepped away.

"God, I hope you're not married," she breathed, leaning over the rail and gulping cold air to clear her head.

He nodded, his smile fading. She was right, of course. He had no business kissing her like that. It would do neither of them any good to develop feelings for one another when he had no idea who he was.

"I'll take the next watch," he said, walking away.

"Gabriel."

He turned on his heel and faced her.

"Next time, you don't have to ask."

He smiled slightly and went to relieve Ezekiel. A watch was exactly what he needed. After the kiss he and Elaine had just shared, he doubted he'd have been able to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Once the ship docked, Ezekiel and James rode several miles inland to Rockland while Gabriel helped Elaine and the crew unload the cargo. By the time they'd finished, Ezekiel had returned with two wagons and several villagers to carry the supplies.

Gabriel shared a wagon with a silver-haired man of middle years called John. Gabriel offered a slight smile in greeting, but John merely nodded, his face unchanging.

"He doesn't speak," Ezekiel said. "Hasn't said a word since his son was killed in the raid earlier this year. He was his only family."

Gabriel silently stepped onto the wagon. Occasionally he glanced at Elaine who rode ahead on her black stallion. Twice she looked over her shoulder at him and smiled, making him eager for the next moment they would share alone.

Had there been another storm, the wagons would never have made it through the snow to Rockland which was located in a hilly field.

Smoke rose from fires in the tiny, round cottages. Several villagers, dressed in worn clothing and bundled in tattered woolen cloaks, trudged through snow toward the river flowing with ice-cold water.

Men, women and children, many thin and sickly looking, approached the wagons once they rolled to a stop.

Elaine dismounted and handed her horse over to a boy who took it to the village's one shared barn. She and Gabriel began removing sacks of grain from the wagon.

"You shouldn't be doing this," she told him. "You're still not healed."

"I'm fine," he said, ignoring the pain in his arm each time he grasped a sack.

In less than an hour they had finished unloading. The villagers divided up some of the food and saved the remainder in a storage shed in the village square. By then snow had begun falling again.

Blinking bits of frost from her lashes, Elaine turned to Gabriel. "Follow me. You can have Gwen's cottage. All her supplies are still there. She had no family, so the place has been empty since she died. Her bedclothes and personal belongings were burned. It was the best way to rid the place of fever, but I'll bring you some blankets from our house."

They walked to a cottage built beneath an enormous tree on the outskirts of the village.

Elaine pushed aside the thick piece of leather that served as a door. Gabriel followed, glancing around his new home. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the ceiling of the cottage's one small room. There was a loft that he was tall enough to reach without using the ladder.

Shelves filled with pouches, wooden boxes, and glass bottles were built into the wall across from a fireplace in which hung a black metal cooking pot. An empty wooden trunk rested at the foot of the bed and a dusty rope rug covered most of the dirt floor.

Though the house carried the pleasant scent of herbs, a dismal chill hung in the air.

"Not the cheeriest place in the world, but it won't be so dreary once it's cleaned up a little," Elaine said. "I'll bring you some blankets, towels, and a pitcher and bowl. One good thing is you're closer to the river than the rest of us."

"It's fine," he said, distracted since he had begun taking inventory of the herbs and oils. "Once I'm settled, I'll have a look at your people. See what I can do about the illnesses you told me about. I think once they have something decent to eat, they'll improve."

"They would have had plenty if it wasn't for--"

"Blackridge. I know, but he's dead. What we have to worry about now is pulling your village back to its feet. We will, you know."

"You sound confident."

"Nothing's impossible."

"I suppose you're right." She sighed, looking weary. Since arriving in Rockland, he noticed that sadness and worry had etched lines in her beautiful face. She obviously cared deeply for her people and hated watching them suffer.

He placed aside a box of dried rosemary and crossed the room in two strides, placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Maybe we were meant to find each other. Maybe that's why I fell in the ocean and you pulled me out. I can help you, Elaine, as you helped me."

"I believe you can," she murmured, placing her gloved hand on the base of his throat and kissing him.

Tingling from head to toe, Gabriel closed his eyes and enjoyed the kiss. This woman could easily consume him.

He brushed his lips across her forehead and tugged her close. His cloak had fallen open, and she rested her cheek against his chest. Surely she must feel the pounding of his heart.

"I have to go," she whispered, not moving from his embrace. Finally she stepped away, tucking loose wisps of hair behind her ears. "I'll send you the blankets and a change of clothes."

He nodded, following her with his gaze until she disappeared behind the leather door.

He turned and glanced around the dusty room for a moment before he started a fire in the hearth. The cottage warmed as he dusted off the shelves and bottles. Elaine had been right. There were countless herbs and prepared remedies, many which had even been imported from the far east. Gabriel was surprised that he recognized each one and had even more stored in his mind. Whoever had trained him as a healer had done well.

A boy of about eight years shoved his way through the leather door, dragging a small sled of supplies that tracked snow and ice through the cabin.

"Lady Elaine said this is for you," the boy said. "So I brung it."

"You brought it," Gabriel corrected, glancing at the snow melting into the rug. "Has no one taught you to knock or at least announce yourself before entering a room?"

"Eh?" The boy wrinkled his nose, squinting up at Gabriel. "Bloody hell, you're tall."

"Cursing doesn't become a young man, or any man for that matter."

"What does that mean, 'become'?"

"I mean you sound like you were born on a dung heap and raised by pigs."

The boy laughed and Gabriel's lips curved slightly upward. He stooped beside the sled

and picked up several blankets, towels and a drawstring bag of food, then arranged them on the bed.

"What's your name?" Gabriel asked.

"Christian. Where should I put this?" He picked up a large wooden bowl. Gabriel nodded to the trunk. "Lady Elaine says you're staying with us for a while. She said you hit your head and don't remember nothing."

"Succinctly put, my young friend."

Christian's lip curled up in question and he shook his head. "She said you're a healer and a warrior. Didn't think a man could be both. Herbs are for women."

"Oh really?" Gabriel glanced at him with amusement. "Then I suppose men who save lives on the battlefield aren't important? And what of assassins who specialize in poison?"

Christian chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully. "Didn't think of that. I'm going to be a warrior, you know. A knight. Like Sir Ezekiel."

"A noble aspiration."

"You talk funny."

"No, I speak properly. If you want to be a knight, education is important, not only learning to ride and use weapons, but knowing how to speak and conduct yourself among nobility. You must respect yourself and have pride and confidence in your abilities, both intellectual and physical."

Christian studied Gabriel for a long moment. "I guess all that means knights have to be smart?"

Gabriel smiled. "That don't have to be, but if they want to be successful, they should be."

"You know about knights. Do you think you were one?"

Gabriel's fingers tapped the rim of a vial he'd uncorked. "I don't know. Maybe. I was wearing some fabulous armor when they pulled me out of the ocean."

"Can I see it?" Christian's large, dark eyes shone with excitement. "Only a few of the men here have armor. Sir Ezekiel has chain mail and Sir James has a helmet with a lion on the back of it."

Gabriel shrugged. "It's in the trunk. Useless now. The chest plate is slashed."

Christian shoved aside the bowl and lifted the lid of the trunk. He tugged out Gabriel's black and silver armor and scabbards.

"Bloody he..." The boy stopped himself, looking sheepishly at Gabriel. "This is fine. Must have cost you a half a herd of cattle. Looks like you seen plenty of battles, though."

Christian ran his hands over the leather and mail, noting old nicks and worn spots. "I bet you were a knight. I'll probably never be one. I'll be a farmer all my life."

"Farming's important."

Christian looked glum. "My father don't want me to leave home because he don't like to plant and plow. Me and Mum have to do it."

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at the boy. "And what does your father do?"

"Drinks ale."

Gabriel shook his head and raised his eyes to heaven.

"I bet Sir Ezekiel would let me be his squire if he wasn't so busy and my father wasn't so mean. Lady Elaine took me riding on her horse and sometimes she lets me hold her sword."

"Does she?" Gabriel smile slightly.

"Aye, and one day she knocked my father down right in the pigpen when he tried to slap Mum."

“Good for her.”

Christian's face became solemn. “Wasn't good for mum later.”

*So why doesn't someone just kill the bastard? During a raid, it would be so easy.*

“I got to go,” Christian said, replacing the armor almost reverently and closing the trunk. He stopped to look at the shelves of dried herbs. “You really know what all this trash is for?”

“See if you call it trash when your throat's sore or you're sick to your stomach.” Gabriel sat on the trunk so that he was at eye-level with the boy. “Who do you think the powerful people in a village are?”

Christian laughed as if Gabriel was a raving fool. “The warriors, of course.”

“Warriors go to the healers. Kings and queens go to healers. Healers wield power like no one else. They bring forth life and like a warrior, they know which poisons can take it away.”

“Never thought of that.” Christian sighed, then his eyes brightened. “Think I could learn?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It would take dedication.”

“Whatever that means, I'll do it.”

“It would mean learning to knock before you track slush in here.”

“Done.”

“Then I'll see you tomorrow.”

“I'll come as soon as I do my chores.”

Christian rushed off in his excitement, the runner of his sled catching a frayed piece of the carpet. It unraveled as he ran out of the cottage.

“Christian! Wait!” Gabriel bellowed, chasing after the boy who was already partway to the village, leaving half of Gabriel's carpet unraveled and exposing the dirt floor.

The boy stopped, his cheeks flushed. “Sorry. I didn't mean it. You won't tell my father?”

“No.” Gabriel sighed. “Of course I won't tell your father. Just unhook my rug, will you?”

After tugging the rope from under his sled and winding it up, Christian handed it to Gabriel.

“I have accidents,” the boy explained sheepishly. “Sometimes.”

Gabriel watched Christian hurry, slipping in the snow, toward the village. He briefly wondered if allowing the rough-edged youth access to the many fragile containers of herbs and oils was such a good idea. Still, how much real damage could one boy do?



## Chapter Five

After spending the following morning training with Ezekiel and the other warriors, Elaine searched the village for Gabriel. She found him administering herbal tea to the blacksmith and his family who had been ill for weeks.

"I'll leave some of the tea with you," Gabriel told the blacksmith's wife who lay on a cot with her two young daughters. His back was to Elaine, his hair bound at his nape with a piece of rope.

He turned to her, his blue eyes devouring her face. "Elaine."

"I've been looking for you," she said. "Chasing you from house to house. Mary, Gwen's protégée, told me you showed her several new cough remedies. Seems like everyone in the village has met you."

"I started at dawn. Almost everyone needed something. You weren't exaggerating when you said life's been hard here."

"We've had no resources, but this new year will be different."

Gabriel picked up his cloth bag of supplies and followed Elaine out the door.

"Thank you, Gabriel," the blacksmith called from where he sat by the fire.

He glanced over his shoulder. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Outside, Gabriel inhaled the fresh winter air, glad to be out of another stuffy cottage, yet he preferred those to the ones damp from roofs in need of repair.

He and Elaine waded through the snow toward the river. "I saw you on the field this morning."

"I like to get in a few hours in the morning. When your wounds are healed, you might like to join us. Think you remember how to fight?"

"I suppose we'll find out."

Her gaze raked him from head to boot. "You look like you can fight."

"Is there not an old saying, 'looks can be deceiving'?"

They stopped by the river where he washed his hands, then approached her, standing so close she merely had to inch forward and they would be touching. She tilted her face up to his and he admired the wildness of her windswept hair and the flush of her cheeks in the winter chill. The handle of her sheathed sword was just visible over her shoulder, and he looked forward to the day when they would engage in some friendly training. The thought of fighting her and then kissing her made his pulse race. She was a most intriguing woman, Elaine of Rockland.

"You look beautiful."

She laughed. "I'm a mess. I just came from training."

He was about to protest when a loud crash from Gabriel's cottage nabbed their attention.

"What was that?" Elaine asked, following at his heels as he ran up the snowy incline.

"Christian," he replied.

Inside they found the boy kneeling on the floor, frantically gathering up broken glass. The entire cottage reeked of eucalyptus.

"I'm sorry," Christian said. "I didn't mean to break it. I was rolling bandages like you told me and one got caught."

"Christian, you cut yourself," Elaine said.

Gabriel squatted beside the boy and took his hands before he could gather up any more of the broken bottle. Several shards of glass stuck out of the boy's fingers. Gabriel removed the glass gently and washed Christian's small hands in a basin of water. He applied balm and bandages.

"I'm sorry," Christian said.

"It was just an accident," Gabriel told him.

"I always have accidents."

"Everyone has accidents," Elaine said, taking a broom from the corner and sweeping up the rest of the glass. "At least this place will smell..."

"Potent?" Gabriel supplied.

Elaine glanced at him through her lashes. "I like your choice of words."

He held her gaze, desire stirring inside him.

"I have to go home," Christian said once Gabriel had tied off the last of the bandages. "I guess you don't want me to come back tomorrow."

"Quitting?" Gabriel shook his head. "I told you it takes dedication to learn how to use these herbs."

"But I stunk up your house."

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment and repressed a smile. "Just come back tomorrow, Christian."

Grinning, the boy ran out of the cottage, tripping on a corner of the unraveled rug.

"What happened there?" Elaine nodded at the rug.

"Christian."

"Ah. I feel for that child. I sometimes think he's so clumsy because of his father. The man is a monster. He's enough to shake most people's confidence."

"I've yet to meet him. Neither he nor Christian's mother would allow me in this morning."

"Be thankful. I've been there on several occasions when I wanted to kill the man."

"What stopped you?"

Elaine looked a bit startled. "You can't just kill someone, Gabriel. It's not like a battle."

"He's making it a battle, isn't he?"

"I guess that's one way of looking at it, but there's so little one can do between a husband and wife. By the way, what was Christian doing here?"

"He wants to learn the healing arts."

"And you agreed to teach him?"

"It's a better vocation for the boy than soldiering."

"Yes. He has his heart set on knighthood. Ezekiel's spent some time with him, but we've all been so busy just trying to stay alive that he has little time to train the boy. I think what you're doing for him will be a great help."

Elaine shrugged off her cloak while Gabriel stoked the fire, sending light and warmth throughout the tiny room. He removed his cloak and sat beside her on the floor.

"Fire is so beautiful," she said. "So many shapes and shades."

"Beautiful," he murmured, gazing at her. He longed to touch her, kiss her. What was stopping him? She hadn't tried to disguise her attraction to him, yet he sensed apprehension in every kiss they shared. Her lips and tongue were sweet but untrained. In spite of her worldliness and his amnesia, he recognized an inexperienced woman when he met one, yet she'd chosen him

to vent some of her passion. He reached out a hand and released her hair from where it was pinned at her nape. The glossy black tendrils fell loose down her back. His fingers sifted through her tresses.

She turned to him, her gray eyes reflecting the dancing flames. "You must think I'm wanton. I know it sounds hard to believe, but you're the only man I've ever wanted to ... kiss me. Kiss me?"

Cupping the back of her neck, he tugged her toward him, his mouth devouring hers. She leaned closer while he gently bit her lower lip then swept his tongue over it.

"Gabriel," she breathed, locking her arms around his neck and straddling him.

Gabriel closed his eyes, completely absorbed in the woman he held. Her fingers caressed his hair and her tongue stroked his mouth, making him tingle with desire. Her breasts, so soft beneath the masculine shirt she wore, flattened against his chest so that he was certain she felt the throbbing of his heart. Pressing his palms against her back, he held her even closer.

A voice inside him said to stop lest he take her right there on the floor.

He reluctantly tore away from her mouth, his breathing as heavy as hers.

"Elaine."

She stared at him through passion-glazed eyes, her thighs still clasping him firmly.

"God, Gabriel, I almost don't care who you are."

"I'm a man who desires you. That much I'm sure of." He brushed tendrils of hair from her forehead and kissed the smooth flesh. "But I can wait."

"We must wait," she murmured as his lips moved from her cheek to her neck. Her fingers tightened on his shoulders. "Gabriel, please..."

Unsure if she was pleading with him to stop or begging him to continue, he pulled back, his gaze intent on hers.

"I have to go," she said. "Come to the house tonight and have dinner with my family."

"I would be honored."

He slipped her cloak over her shoulders and walked her to the door where they exchanged one last kiss before she left.

What was it about her that touched him so deeply? Surely they couldn't have fallen in love so quickly? No. It was lust. The drives of their bodies. Their attraction was instinctive yet mystical. For a moment he almost believed it had been fate that had washed him onto her ship.

\* \* \* \*

"Elaine, what is wrong with you?" Ezekiel said, leaning back in a nicked wooden chair, his booted feet resting on the table in the great hall of the manor house.

It wasn't nearly as elaborate as the manor house at Ravenhill and was made up of only a single floor divided into the great hall, a kitchen, and three chambers. One of the chambers belonged to Elaine, the other to Ezekiel, and the third to their mother, Katherine. Though old and nearly blind, Katherine possessed keen insight that many considered magical. She rarely left her room but tonight she had insisted on meeting the newcomer with whom her strong-willed daughter was so taken.

"Nothing's wrong with me that a little cleanliness won't cure," Elaine snapped, shoving Ezekiel's calves aside. "Get your feet off the table."

"God, James," Ezekiel turned to his friend who sat on beside him, drinking a mug of ale, "I think she fancies the new healer. She's never had an interest in cleaning this place before. The cook nearly fainted when Elaine swept out the pantry."

"I've seen pigs' mud holes that are cleaner than this house. There's nothing wrong with

freshening the place up," Elaine said.

Ignoring her frustrated scolding, Ezekiel playfully slapped James's shoulder with the back of his hand. "She's even in a dress. Looks rather good, too, for a sister, that is."

"She looks very lovely, if I may say so, Lady Elaine." The older knight nodded respectfully to her.

Elaine lifted her chin and said, "Thank you, James. Ezekiel still acts like a child at times."

"At times?" James laughed in the young knight's direction.

"I think it's wonderful that she's finally found a man," Ezekiel teased, continuing to ignore the assault on his character. "I only say good luck to him. He might have been better off if we had left him to drown."

"You better be prepared on the training field tomorrow." Elaine wrenched a glass of wine from Ezekiel's hand and drained it. "I'm going to show you no mercy."

James smiled. "You're in trouble now."

Katherine, who had been half asleep in her cushioned chair at the end of the table, opened her filmy blue eyes and said, "Ezekiel, stop teasing your sister. To think you're a knight."

"We're just having fun, Mother." Ezekiel winked at Elaine who narrowed her eyes in mild anger at him.

"I'm curious to meet this man to whom you've given the name of an archangel."

Elaine cursed silently. Leave it to her mother to expose her most secret thoughts.

The cook brought a tray from the kitchen and placed it on the table.

"Umm, finally a decent meal," Ezekiel said. "Glad we decided to try trading with Ravenhill."

Elaine glanced at the front of the hall. It was already sunset and Gabriel had yet to arrive. She hoped he hadn't forgotten. In spite of the frustration her brother caused her, there was truth to Ezekiel's words. She had worn the blue tunic-style dress and plaited her hair for Gabriel's sake.

"Eat and stop looking at the door," Ezekiel told her.

Elaine chose a slice of bread and meat from the tray and brought it to her mother, who began eating in tiny, slow bites.

"He'll come, my dear." Katherine smiled slightly. "Your archangel."

"Mother!"

A moment later, Gabriel entered the hall, pushing the hood of his snow-covered cloak from his face.

He smiled in a general greeting to everyone and approached Elaine, taking her hand and bowing over it. "You look beautiful, my lady."

Elaine smiled, warmth spreading through her at his compliment.

"Refinement. So rare these days," Katherine said. "Come closer, young man. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

"Gabriel, this is my mother." Elaine placed a hand on his forearm and led him to Katherine.

"My lady." He bowed and sat in the chair Katherine motioned to.

The older woman leaned close to Gabriel, squinting almost rudely.

"Do you like the name my daughter's chosen for you?"

"I suppose."

"Hmmm," Katherine reached for his hand, tracing his palm with her withered fingertip. She stopped moving suddenly, her face serious.

"Mother?" Elaine placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you feeling well?"

"I think she's getting another of her blessed visions." Ezekiel reached for the jug of wine and poured a glass for himself and Gabriel.

Gabriel ignored the drink, still watching Katherine curiously.

"You have no idea who you are?" the old woman asked.

"No."

"Some things are best unremembered. For all of us."

"I'd still like to know."

"Do you sense something from Gabriel, Mother?" Elaine asked.

"Turmoil."

"Of course." Ezekiel laughed. "He almost got his head knocked off in battle."

"That may be the reason." Katherine released Gabriel's hand and patted it gently.

"You're a man of passion, and I don't mean the kind between you and my daughter."

"Mother!" Elaine snapped.

"She's got you there." Ezekiel pointed at Elaine.

Katherine continued, "Your passion is your undoing and your savior, Gabriel. You could devour yourself, my boy, like a serpent swallowing its own tail."

Gabriel turned to Elaine and asked, "Did you tell her?"

"No," Elaine murmured.

"Tell her what?" James asked.

Gabriel brushed long tendrils of black hair over his shoulder, revealing the tattoo on his nape.

Ezekiel and James stared at it for a long, silent moment before Ezekiel said, "Well, Mother, you certainly haven't lost your touch."

"Can you tell me anything more?" Gabriel asked. "Do you know who I am?"

Katherine smiled. "No. My powers are not that strong. I just feel things from people at times. There's something more, a last observation, if you're not upset by an old woman speaking her mind?"

"Please go on," Gabriel said.

"You've been given the opportunity to live the fresh, unblemished life of a child but with the intellect of a man. Few are so lucky."

The slightest smile tugged at Gabriel's lips. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"I'm starved," Elaine said, sitting beside Gabriel and reaching for a slice of bread.

Katherine shook her head. "Enough of my fortune telling. I have the worst aches in my joints in this winter weather. Perhaps you could suggest something, Gabriel?"

"I can give you a balm and tea. They won't cure you, but they'll help with the discomfort."

"That's all I ask. Gwen used to bring me an ointment. She's been missed terribly, but from what the others tell me, you have ever greater knowledge. I'll wager she was a healer for longer than you've been alive. You must have had a superior teacher."

"I wish I could remember."

"I'm sure in time all your memories will return."

"Another premonition?"

"Just words of comfort."

They spent the rest of the meal talking about repairing the village in the spring and trading more with Ravenhill. Afterward, Katherine retired to her room, and James and Ezekiel

fell asleep by the fire while Elaine and Gabriel remained at the table, sipping wine and talking in low voices.

"You look so beautiful," he said, glancing at her over the rim of his glass. "Did I tell you that?"

"Several times, but don't let that stop you. I haven't worn a dress in over a year."

"And you decided to wear one tonight?" The appreciative expression in his eyes incited her passion. She doubted she would ever meet another man who made her feel like this.

"I thought I'd try to look pretty."

"You succeeded, but you didn't need a dress to do it. You're beautiful regardless of what you're wearing. In fact, there's something very alluring about you in your warrior's clothes."

"You're the only man I know who has ever felt that way," she murmured, edging closer to him, tilting her face up to his.

"Then there's a nationwide epidemic of blindness," he whispered against her lips before giving her quick kiss. He longed to take her in his arms and explore her mouth, her face and her throat, but there were too many people present. She might be a warrior but she was also a lady and he meant to treat her as such. Always.

"I should go," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Taking his hand, she walked with him to the door.

"My mother liked you. I could tell."

"She's charming. Like you."

He pulled on his cloak and she stepped outside with him, closing the door behind them.

"Elaine, it's freezing out here. Go back in."

"Kiss me first. It'll have to last all night."

"That's too long."

He opened cloak and drew her inside, holding her to the warm, hard expanse of his chest. His warm lips covered hers. The taste, scent, and feel of him enraptured her and sent her heart beating out of control. She stood on tiptoe to better reach him, her hands slipping over his waist and up his back, her fingers biting into the curved muscles of his shoulders.

His palms slid up her ribs, grazing the curves of her breasts. He kissed her temple and whispered, "Goodnight, Elaine."

"Goodnight, Gabriel." She used her thumb to gently wipe snow crystals from his black eyebrows before she disappeared into the house.

Inside, she leaned against the closed door for a moment, her mouth still warmed by his sweet, passionate kiss.

## Chapter Six

For Gabriel, the following weeks fell into a normal pattern. He spent his days as a healer, making rounds of the village while training Christian and two young women who had already spent several years studying with Gwen. Slowly, the people's ailments began to vanish. Most villagers admitted their improved health was due as much to Gabriel's care as to the fresh supplies brought from Ravenhill.

"If only we could have repaired the buildings before the snow came," Ezekiel said one evening after dinner in the great hall.

Like James, Gabriel was a nightly guest and included in most of the plans for rebuilding in the spring. Though his new companions wanted him to recover his memory for his own sake, they regretted it might take him from Rockland. They had grown accustomed to approaching him with their health problems at any time of the day or night. He did everything except act as midwife and even then the female healers took his advice about which herbs to use to ease the pain of childbirth, induce labor, or slow its progress when necessary.

Though she never spoke of it, Elaine feared the return of his memories. She wanted him to be happy and gain relief from the frustration of not knowing who he was, but what painful secrets would his past reveal? A wife? Children? A master he'd feel compelled to return to?

He and Elaine spent hours together each night, talking. They shared many probing kisses in his cottage or beneath the frost-covered trees. Though their desire for one another was almost painful in its intensity, neither was ready to consummate a relationship that might never have a chance to grow.

"We'll start repairs at first thaw," James said, cleaning a chicken bone and tossing it into his bowl.

"At least our soldiers are in good form," Elaine added. They practiced daily, relentlessly, as no one in the village wanted a repeat of the summer's raids.

"I'd like to start training with you in the morning," Gabriel said. "It's long past time for me."

"But your arm still isn't completely healed," Elaine said.

"The other one's fine and I'm restless. That means I'm ready to train."

"You can borrow our father's sword," Ezekiel said. "It hasn't been used in years, but I've kept it in good condition."

Gabriel nodded in thanks.

"I have to admit, I'm curious to see what you've got," Elaine glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "I'm so accustomed to looking at you as a healer that it's hard to imagine you fighting."

"Even if you can handle a sword well, should we be attacked I don't think you should be in the front lines," Ezekiel stated. "You're too valuable as a healer."

"I agree with that," Elaine said. "A man of your skill is rare."

"Imagine if he's as good with a blade as he is with herbs," James said.

Ezekiel lifted his glass of wine. "Then at least we know our backup can defend us if enemies breach our initial forces."

Gabriel stood, extending his hand to Elaine. "Walk with me?"

Her hand slipped into his, warmth against warmth, and they walked toward the door, pausing only to slip into cloaks and gloves.

"Don't wear yourselves out walking," Ezekiel teased. "We're on the field at dawn."

"Not if you keep swilling ale like you have been tonight," Elaine retorted before she and Gabriel stepped into the cool winter night.

Outside Gabriel took Elaine's hand as they walked, his gentle touch warming her.

"I've been meaning to tell you what an improvement I've seen in Christian since you've been teaching him. He's actually turning into a respectable little man. I spoke with his mother yesterday and she's very pleased."

"I saw her briefly two days ago feeding chickens," Gabriel said. "She thanked me, but she wouldn't talk long. Said her husband would be home from hunting soon and he wouldn't like seeing her with me. From what Christian says, he hunts every morning."

"When he's fairly sober," Elaine muttered. "It's a pity when a woman and child are chained to a man like that."

"Perhaps someone should talk to him?" Gabriel's harmless words didn't match the expression in his blue eyes, an expression Elaine had never seen before. She felt an odd chill that had nothing to do with the weather. For a moment, her archangel became one of the fallen, a beautiful, dangerous visitor in hell.

"Ezekiel and I have tried. He stops being cruel for a time, but it never lasts. Unfortunately too many men are like him."

Gabriel's eyes narrowed in disgust. "They're not men."

"I agree, but at least Christian has your influence now."

"My influence," Gabriel murmured. "The influence of a man who doesn't even know himself."

She squeezed his hand. "No matter what your past, I know you're a good man." Elaine stopped walking and gazed skyward. "The moon is so big tonight."

"So many stars." Gabriel straddled a secure section of the battered wooden fence at the edge of the village. He gently grasped Elaine's wrist and guided her so that she sat facing him. Taking her face in his hands, he covered her mouth with his.

When they reluctantly broke apart, Elaine whispered, "It's getting harder to stop each time you kiss me."

He traced her lips with his fingertip, his gaze holding hers. "I marvel at my self-control whenever I'm with you."

"What if it doesn't come back?" she whispered, hating herself for even suggesting such a thing but unable to refrain, as the question had been plaguing her for weeks.

"My memory?" He drew a long breath and released it slowly. "I don't want anything we do to ever cause you pain."

"Or you." She took his hand and squeezed it. "I should go back to the house. Ezekiel's right. We have to be up early tomorrow."

"I'll walk you home."

She nodded, the slightest smile touching her lips. No man other than Gabriel would ever suggest escorting her home. Her fighting skills were well known and respected. Though Gabriel acknowledged her strength, he also understood her feminine side, her unspoken desire to be treated as a lady.



When they reached her door, he said, "I'll see you on the field tomorrow."

"At dawn."

He nodded, kissing the back of her hand before he made his way home.

\* \* \* \*

Elaine awoke long before dawn, so eager to finally train with Gabriel that she knew she couldn't sleep any longer. After washing and dressing, she made her way to the field, carrying her sword and her father's for Gabriel.

While awaiting the others, she began practicing. Gabriel arrived first. He accepted the sword from her and performed a few movements, familiarizing himself with the blade after so many weeks away from training.

After several moments, he and Elaine faced each other, touching blades, each feeling out the other's skill.

Though Elaine hadn't underestimated Gabriel, she had expected him to be somewhat rusty after recovering from his wounds. She'd trained with soldiers for years, yet his skill managed to impress her. For a man of his height, he was shockingly graceful. His eyes penetrated her, judging her movements almost before she could execute them.

Ezekiel, James, and the others arrived, casting curious glances at Elaine and Gabriel before starting their own training.

When Elaine and Gabriel finally broke, Ezekiel approached.

"Not bad," the knight said, drawing his blade and inviting Gabriel to practice with him.

Ezekiel was strong and well trained, yet Gabriel matched him almost effortlessly.

At one point, Elaine realized she'd stopped judging his movements as a fighter and had begun appraising his appearance. His long, black hair tied at his nape snapped like a whip each time he shifted his stance in attack or defense. Muscles moved sensually in his long, sinewy legs as he glided across the snowy field. Her heart beat faster at the thought of her legs entwined with his, of resting with him, flesh on flesh.

She had to force herself away from him to continue her training. Several hours later, during archery practice, she spoke with Gabriel again.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"The arm is a little sore, but other than that I feel better than I have in weeks. I needed the exercise more than I realized."

Her gaze swept over him before she leaned closer and whispered, "You hardly look it."

His lips curved up slightly before he took the bow she offered him. As she suspected, he was as skilled an archer as he was a swordsman.

Elaine watched him hit target after target dead center. She knew his partially healed arm must be nagging him, but it didn't show in his expression or his performance.

*Who are you really?*

Healer. Warrior. He was well educated in so many areas. She wondered where he had learned and whom he served, for she was now certain that he had been a knight. A great lord somewhere must be truly missing such a skilled warrior.

\* \* \* \*

It was early afternoon when Gabriel finished training and returned to his cottage to gather healing supplies and start his rounds.

Stepping through the door, he found Christian awaiting him, mixing the ointments he'd taught him to make for Katherine.

The boy's eyes widened as Gabriel dropped the scabbard and sword on the bed.

"You've been fighting?" Christian approached the weapon, staring at it without daring to touch.

"Training."

"Will you teach me?"

"Achieve one goal at a time. You've just begun to learn the healing arts," Gabriel said, tossing aside his cloak. Beneath, his sweaty shirt clung to his body. He tugged the damp garment over his head and tossed it aside. After filling a wooden bowl with water from a pitcher on the trunk, he began to wash.

A brief look of disappointment passed over Christian's face but was quickly forgotten as he sat at the table and continued mixing the ointment.

Rubbing a towel over his chest, Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "Using two hands would be more effective, Christian."

The boy kept his eyes lowered to his work and Gabriel noticed the way he held his free hand motionless at his side.

"What's wrong with your arm?"

"Nothing."

Gabriel approached and touched the boy's elbow. Christian jumped in obvious pain and tried to step back, but Gabriel held his good arm with one hand while the other gently pushed up his sleeve. The boy's usually scrawny arm was swollen and bruised.

Gabriel examined the arm carefully and said, "It's not broken. Badly sprained, though. How did this happen?"

"I fell."

Gabriel held the child's gaze. "You've never lied to me before."

"I'm not lying."

Gabriel lifted an eyebrow and Christian looked at the floor.

"Your father did this, didn't he?"

Swallowing audibly, the boy nodded.

Gabriel remained outwardly calm though fury tightened his stomach. He prepared a paste of comfrey and used it to set Christian's arm in a cast. While he worked, he explained the procedure to Christian, teaching as he healed.

When he'd finished, he asked Christian to deliver the ointment to Katherine. After the boy had gone, instead of going about his rounds, Gabriel walked across the hillside to the woods where he knew Christian's father, Richard, hunted and trapped. It didn't take him long to pick up the man's trail and locate him where he was cleaning a rabbit he'd shot with his bow and arrow. Richard was a large man, not as tall as Gabriel, but more heavy set. His hair hung in filthy brown tendrils over his matted fur cloak. Even from a distance, the wind carried the scent of ale to Gabriel.

The man took no notice of Gabriel who approached as silently as an assassin. He jumped when Gabriel squatted beside him.

"Bloody hell! You scared the piss out of me!"

"I'm not surprised. All cowards frighten easily."

"Who are you calling a coward?"

"Cowardly and stupid. You're the only one here beside me, fool, so who do you think I'm calling a coward?"

Richard's hand tightened on the dagger he was using to clean the rabbit and he snarled, "I know you. You're the new healer. A woman's work and you've got my son talking about it."

"It's your son I've come to talk about."

"He's none of your business."

"His arm is badly sprained."

Richard stood and Gabriel followed. "Yes, well, everyone knows how clumsy he is."

"You sprained it."

"Is that what the little fool told you?" Richard's bloodshot eyes glistened with fury.

"Even if it was true, it's none of your business. And if you know what's good for you, you'll keep away from my son and stop filling his head with stupid thoughts of healing and soldiering and talking pretty. He's going to work my farm, just like everyone else in our family has since my great grandfather's day."

Gabriel glanced at the dagger. "You'd love to use that on me, wouldn't you?"

"Unless you close that arrogant mouth of yours, I will."

"Please do." Gabriel opened his arms wide.

Richard looked both disgusted and incredulous.

"I mean it. Truly." A slow smile spread over Gabriel's lips. "In fact, I implore you."

"What the hell do you mean, 'implore?' You and your damn fancy words. Talk so the rest of us can understand you."

"Maybe you can understand this," Gabriel said with deliberate slowness. "Village idiot, take the big, bad knife and stick the shiny part in my gut."

Richard growled like a sick wolf and lunged at Gabriel, the blade thrusting at his middle with all his considerable strength. Gabriel turned slightly, catching Richard's wrist with one hand and pressing his forearm to the man's upper arm. A crack followed by Richard's shriek of pain resonated through the woods.

"You bloody bastard." From where he knelt in the snow, Richard stared up at Gabriel, cradling his limp arm. "You broke it."

Gabriel said innocently, "I did no such thing. Even if I did, it's no one's business."

"You won't get away with this!"

"No, it's you who won't get away with abusing your son." Gabriel picked up the dagger from the snow, grasped a handful of Richard's hair, pulled his head back and pressed the blade to his exposed throat. "Think about this--whatever happens to Christian happens to you until I get tired of evening the score. Get my meaning?"

Richard's eyes spat fury and fear at Gabriel but he said in a strained voice, "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Gabriel looked thoughtful for a moment before he replied, "I have no idea, but I'm liking myself more every day."

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel was in the stable helping Ezekiel tend a lame horse when Elaine and James approached.

"Good day." Gabriel smiled at Elaine who didn't respond in kind.

That morning she'd heard a startling rumor about her angel, and she meant to discover the truth.

"Did you break Richard's arm?" she asked.

Ezekiel raised a curious eyebrow that Gabriel seemed to ignore since he was again focused on the horse.

"Hold his head steady while I finish applying the ointment."

"Gabriel, a complaint has been lodged against you and we must address it," James said.

"I was gathering bark in the woods for a treatment this afternoon when Richard attacked me out of nowhere with his dagger. I acted in self-defense, but I must say I think it might have been a mistake on Richard's part. He was staggering drunk and might have confused me with an animal. One should never hunt while drunk."

James nodded, satisfied. "I'll wager everyone in Rockland has had problems with Richard at one time or another."

"I'd take Gabriel's word over Richard's any day," Ezekiel said. "Everyone knows the sort of man Richard is and Gabriel has been with us for weeks and done nothing but lend aid."

"That's about all I can do for this boy," Gabriel patted the horse's flanks. "No heavy work for a few days and he'll be fit as a colt."

While James and Ezekiel remained talking in the stable, Elaine walked with Gabriel to his cottage.

Gabriel glanced up at the fat, gray clouds masking the setting sun. "Storm's coming, I'll wager."

"I saw Christian's arm when he brought my mother your ointment," Elaine said. "Tell me the truth, Richard didn't attack you, did he?"

"He did attack me, Elaine. It just so happens I can handle myself better than a frightened eight-year-old boy."

"I know that. I saw you on the field today." She cast him an admiring glance. "Gabriel, I want you to know that whatever reason you have for roughing up Richard now or in the future, you'll get no argument from me. He deserves everything he gets."

"It's a pity a man like that has a child. If Christian were mine, his life would be different."

Elaine looked ahead to the cottage, disturbed by the thought that Gabriel might have children somewhere waiting for him. No matter how much she cared for him she had no right to wish his amnesia to last forever. If he had his own family, he belonged with them. They must miss him terribly, for she was certain that when he finally left, she'd never forget him.

"None of your memories have returned at all?" she asked softly.

"Just bits and pieces. They make no sense. That blond man I told you about haunts my nightmares. I wonder who he is? And those warriors in black. I know I was fighting them, but why?"

"Do you see any women in your dreams?"

He shook his head and held the leather door aside for Elaine to pass. "Only you."

She turned, meeting his gaze. Stepping closer to her, he pulled her into his arms. She placed her hands against his nape and stood on tiptoe, kissing him lightly. "You say such lovely things to me."

"Pale offerings to your brilliant beauty."

"God, who are you?" she whispered. "I'm starting to care for you very much, Gabriel, but what if it's all wrong between us?"

"I care for you, Elaine. I don't want to hurt you. There's so much I wish I knew about my past and so much I don't want to know because I'm happy here with you."

She rested her head against his shoulder and he held her tightly. "Gabriel, what are we going to do?"

"I wish I could answer, my lo--"

He stopped suddenly as her head jerked from his chest, her gaze meeting his with such intensity that his heartbeat quickened.

*His love. He had started to say that I'm his love.*

Those words both elated and tormented her. Was it possible for them? Would it last or be an illusion that passed through their lives, changing it forever, yet changing nothing?

\* \* \* \*

"He's good," Ezekiel said to Elaine the following morning on the field as they watched Gabriel fighting with several men at once. His movements were sure, unfaltering, calm, and his defenses impenetrable.

"He's better than good."

Ezekiel shook his head, his gaze following Gabriel who blocked and countered several fierce attacks from soldiers. "His technique is almost flawless, but eventually he'd be destroyed in battle."

Elaine raised an eyebrow. "He's stronger, faster, and more graceful than ten of our best men put together."

"That's movement, Elaine, but you know it takes more than that. Look at his eyes. This is a game to him. He doesn't have the warrior's instinct one needs to survive in battle. He's a true healer and that's a good thing. We need men like him."

Elaine watched Gabriel for several moments longer. Finally she had to admit her brother was right. There was no fury in Gabriel's eyes, no passion. He was a good man. A strong man, but his angel face matched his temperament for fighting.

"So much skill but not the will." Ezekiel folded his arms across his chest. "But that's all right. Not all men are meant to be warriors. Gabriel is a healer and that's just as important."

"More, at times," Elaine agreed.

"He'd be wonderful training warriors," Ezekiel said. "Imagine a man with his skill and a warrior's spirit?"

"We can ask him about it, but he is busy training healers."

"We need about a dozen more of him. Suppose we could pluck any more from the ocean?"

Elaine stared at Gabriel's muscular legs and murmured, "One's enough for me. More than enough."

## Chapter Seven

The following afternoon when Gabriel had finished training and completed his rounds, he, Elaine, and Christian packed a meal and went ice fishing.

Elaine led them to her favorite brook where they built a fire and dropped their lines through the ice.

"I've never done this before." Christian smiled from where he sat between Elaine and Gabriel.

"Ezekiel and I used to go ice fishing all the time as children. Our father used to take us. After he died, we continued. How about you, Gabriel? Does this bring back any memories for you?"

He shook his head. "Somehow I can't believe I'd forget freezing my tail off in the middle of winter holding a fishing pole over a frozen lake."

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," Elaine chided him.

"Actually I can think of no better way to spend the day." He cast an affectionate gaze in her direction and she smiled, lowering her gaze to the icy water.

By late afternoon, they had eaten all the food in Elaine's basket and each had caught several fish that they brought back to Gabriel's cottage for cleaning.

"I have to go home." Christian glanced out the door. "I hope my father's not there yet. If I'm late, he'll be really mad."

Gabriel handed him a bucket of cleaned fish. "Take these to your mother."

The boy snatched the bucket and hurried through the snow toward home, calling, "See you tomorrow, Gabriel. Goodnight, Elaine."

Elaine sighed and shook her head. "I truly despise Richard. Some couples would love to have children and can't, yet Richard has a son and doesn't appreciate it."

"All he seems to appreciate is ale," Gabriel muttered, adding another log to the fire. He washed his hands with herb-scented soap one of the village women had given him when he'd treated her daughters' coughs.

Taking Elaine's hand, he walked to the bed and sat upon it.

"I think you'd make a wonderful father." She looped her arms around his neck.

His lips curved upward slightly before he kissed her.

Outside, the wind shrieked across the fields, wailed through the trees outside the cottage, and beat against the leather door, but Elaine felt anything but cold. Her body was pressed to Gabriel's, her breasts crushed against the hardness of his chest. His palms caressed her shoulders and back while his soft, moist mouth explored hers. She closed her eyes, completely lost in sensation, wishing they could slip into the same skin, share the same soul.

His lips moved gently over her jaw and down her neck, his beard tickling her sensuously. He loosened the ties on her shirt and slipped it down her shoulder, exposing her smooth flesh to his mouth. The tip of his tongue licked random circles in the hollow of her shoulder, making her quiver with delight.

Her heartbeat quickened and her breathing deepened when his thumbs brushed across her nipples through the rough material. They hardened to sensitive peaks. He pressed her back onto

the blankets and slipped her shirt down the slightest bit more, baring one of her breasts. His tongue traced her nipple and she grasped him tighter, her fingers biting into his muscular back.

"Gabriel," she murmured breathlessly, forgetting everything but the sensation of his mouth on her breast. Never in her life had she felt like this. Her body had become the primitive female element, aching marvelously, wanting more of his touch.

Kissing the flesh on the tops of her breasts, he took one of the soft mounds in his hand while his lips once again found hers. Slowly, he replaced her shirt. She opened her passion-dulled eyes and watched his long, graceful fingers fix the ties. In spite of his ragged breathing and the desire burning in his eyes, his tender expression revealed his affection for her.

"By the sound of the wind, it must be cold outside." Elaine tugged him onto the bed. He stretched out on his back and she pulled the blanket over them, curling up against his body.

Placing an arm around her, he held her close.

They rested together until the fire dimmed and their eyelids grew heavy with sleep.

"May I stay here tonight?" she whispered, not looking forward to leaving the warmth of his bed for a cold walk home.

"As long as it won't dishonor your reputation."

She offered him a sleepy smile. "I spent my youth traveling with a band of mercenaries. Everyone in Rockland knows whatever I do is my own affair."

"Then I'd love you to stay tonight." He kissed the top of her head before they drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel woke before Elaine the next morning. He washed, dressed and went to the river to bring fresh water. The sun was just starting to rise as he filled his bucket. Sensing someone behind him, he turned and found Christian's mother, Rebecca, walking slowly toward him, a bucket in her hand. Though a young woman, she was pale and haggard, her large, dark eyes worried. She wore a tattered dress and shawl but no gloves in spite of the cold weather.

"Gabriel, I wanted to return this." She held the bucket out to him. "Thank you for the fish. Christian had a wonderful time."

"So did I," he said, accepting the bucket. "You didn't have to bring this back. Christian could have brought it this afternoon."

"There's another reason I wanted to see you. I--" She looked hesitant. "I was wondering if you could stitch this for me. I can't do it myself."

She rolled up her sleeve, exposing a blood-soaked cloth swathing her thin forearm.

He examined the wound. "Come with me."

When they stepped into the cabin, Elaine was preparing tea. She glanced at Rebecca in question, then noticed her injury and brought her a chair while Gabriel retrieved cloths, a needle and thread.

Elaine assisted him in cleaning and stitching the wound.

"How did this happen?" Gabriel asked, forcing himself to appear calm though fury burned inside him. He really didn't have to ask how the woman had been injured.

"Silly really. I was slicing bread to break my fast and slipped."

Gabriel paused for a moment in stitching and glanced at her. "You don't really expect us to believe that."

Rebecca's expression was pleading. "It's true."

Elaine's fists clenched at her sides. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. Truly, my lady. I don't know. He left early this morning."

"After he cut your arm?" Gabriel added.

"Please don't let him know I've been here," Rebecca whispered. "When he learned you'd taken Christian fishing, he was so angry. I thought he was going to hurt him but he didn't. It's better that he vents his temper on me. Christian deserves better."

"You both do," Elaine snapped, taking Rebecca's good arm and helping her to rise. "I'll walk you home and for Richard's sake, he better not be there. Gabriel, I'll see you on the field."

Gabriel nodded, clearing away the bloody rags and cleansing his needle.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner that night, Gabriel left Elaine's house but didn't go directly home. He waited in the shadows outside Christian's cottage and watched until Richard left to relieve himself for the night. No sooner had he squatted over a hastily dug hole behind his house than Gabriel leapt on him from behind. He gagged the bastard before he could scream, ignoring the filthy, ragged nails clawing at his gloved hands.

"Shh," Gabriel said, tracing the flesh around Richard's terrified eyes with the tip of a glistening dagger. "I want you to listen to me, Richard. I'm so disappointed. You apparently didn't take our little chat the other day seriously."

Richard tried to speak but with the gag, his words were incomprehensible.

"Excuses, excuses," Gabriel quipped, slicing Richard's forearm. The gag muffled his scream though Richard struggled violently, his blood dripping onto the snow. Gabriel used the dagger handle to strike him unconscious.

He slipped off his gloves, took a needle and thread from his leather bag of healing supplies, and stitched Richard's arm.

Later he knocked on the door of the cottage, Richard's heavy, unconscious form slung over his shoulder.

Rebecca answered the door, her eyes wide with surprise.

"He must have gotten drunk and hurt himself in the woods. He showed up at my door bleeding then fell unconscious. It looks like he struck his head as well."

Gabriel hauled Richard's body inside and dumped him none too gently on the bed. "I've stitched him up but I don't think he'll be doing much hunting these next couple of days with both of his arms injured."

"Thank you for helping him, especially after he attacked you the other day."

"Mother?" Christian's sleepy face glanced down from the loft. He blinked several times. "Gabriel? What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, Christian," he replied. "Go back to sleep, and I'll see you tomorrow."

The boy nodded, yawned and disappeared.

Rebecca had stooped beside the bed and was examining her husband's arm.

"Strange," she murmured, holding her own injured forearm next to Richard's bandaged one. She glanced at Gabriel. "It looks like mine."

"What irony. Goodnight, Rebecca."

"Gabriel," she said softly, "thank you."

"I was merely doing my duty. I'm a healer."

He stepped out into the snowy night and smiled wickedly, laughter bubbling in his throat.

\* \* \* \*

The next day was surprisingly warm, so much that ice melted from the trees, the brook thawed and snow drifts shrank beneath the sun's glistening rays.

Gabriel, Elaine and the others took advantage of the clear weather and spent extra time on



the training field while Ezekiel organized a hunting party, hoping to bring back a supply of fresh meat for the village.

"Lucky for Richard you were there to sew up his arm and treat his head wound," James said to Gabriel during archery practice.

"Should have let him bleed to death," Elaine commented. "I'm surprised you didn't."

"I guess it's the healer in me." He fired his arrow and it struck dead center.

"Well, you'll be missed when you're gone," James said.

"I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever be going. I still have no coherent memories of my past."

"Well, it'll be our gain if you stay." James was about to pull back his bow when shouting and the pounding of horses' hooves filled the air. Ezekiel and his party were charging toward the village.

"We're under attack," Ezekiel bellowed. "Get everyone indoors!"

"Who the devil attacks in winter?" James snapped.

"It's the thaw," Gabriel said. "Must be raiders looking to replenish their supplies."

The warriors leapt onto their horses.

"Get on!" Elaine shouted to Gabriel who jumped on the back of her horse. They rode toward the village where people scurried to safety.

A small army of black-garbed men, their faces concealed behind metal helmets, had already ridden over the hill and were swarming the village, breaking into homes and knocking aside any man, woman, or child who crossed their path.

"Gabriel, get the women and children and bring them to the manor house," Elaine ordered, stopping only so that he could slip from the horse.

Several of Ezekiel's men had formed a circle around the manor house, making it the safest haven in Rockland. Elaine rode to join them, drawing her sword and clashing with two of the black-garbed raiders on her way. The second man was large and strong and nearly sent her flying off the back of her horse, yet she remained seated, desperate to join the others. Fear that Rockland, already weaker than it should be, would not survive this unexpected winter attack nearly overwhelmed her.

As she backed her horse into the circle of warriors around the manor house, she noticed James fighting beside her and Ezekiel riding throughout the village. Already her brother had knocked several of the raiders from their mounts. She only wished Rockland had more warriors like him. Unfortunately most of their people were farmers and no match for the raiders.

Gabriel followed behind the first group of villagers that included Christian and his mother. They rushed toward the manor house and Elaine thought they would make it through the barrier without mishap when a raider caught sight of them. He dug his spurred heels into his horse's sides, drawing his sword and galloping headlong into the group. He knocked two children to the ground. The local blacksmith raced toward him carrying a pitchfork, but the raider struck him in the head. Blood spurted in the trampled snow and several children screamed.

"Gabriel!" Elaine shouted, her heart throbbing with terror. The raider turned his horse toward Gabriel, Christian and Rebecca. Though she knew she'd never reach them in time, she kicked her horse in their direction.

Gabriel heard Elaine's cry but he had already seen the raider. Instinctively, he used his foot to flip the fallen pitchfork into his hand. He leapt onto the back of another raider's horse, punching the rider in the temple and shoving him to the ground. He turned the horse so sharply that it nearly stumbled in the slush.

He and the raider charged each other in the midst of scattered villagers. Gabriel's pitchfork rammed through the raider's chest, knocking him backward off the horse. Gabriel jumped from the horse almost before it came to a complete stop and picked up the fallen man's sword in time to fight off two more attackers on foot.

Elaine glanced over her shoulder as she guided the remaining children toward the manor house and saw that Gabriel had taken up a second sword. Using a blade in each hand, he fended off a group of men who had formed a circle around him.

Amidst the screaming, the stench of blood and the dirty snow flying from horses' hooves, Elaine watched Gabriel fight his way toward the well. Leaping up on the stone rim and using the leverage to his advantage, he continued fighting. Already he'd drawn most of the raiders' attention. Bodies lay around the well, chests slashed open, mouths streaming blood and dead eyes gaping up into the blood-splattered face of Elaine's fallen angel.

\* \* \* \*

Atop the well, Gabriel balanced on the slick stone without giving a second thought to his precarious position. His heart pounded, not with fear, but with excitement. As soon as he'd knocked that first raider to his death, something foreign had overtaken him, rendering him mindless of everything but the desire for blood.

He wielded two swords smoothly, without thinking and with equal skill. Blows rained upon Gabriel, but he deflected each one. As one raider died, he was replaced by another. The sight of their fear, the reek of their blood, and the knowledge that he had called forth both made Gabriel almost giddy with power. He could have laughed from the thrill had he not been so concerned with the safety of Rockland.

Finally the men surrounding him dwindled. An arrow struck his shoulder and he lost his balance, falling onto the bloody slush. A raider's sword lifted above him but before the man could strike, Gabriel kicked his midsection, ramming him into the well's stone edge.

Someone was calling for retreat, and the raiders left alive galloped out of the village.

In the distance, Ezekiel still engaged in battle with two raiders. His helmet had fallen off and blood streaked his face, yet he was besting his enemies. Pushing himself to his feet, Gabriel noticed an archer taking perfect aim at Ezekiel. He picked up a dagger belonging to a dead raider and flung it hard at the archer. The blade embedded deep in the archer's back before he fired at Ezekiel.

"Nice shot," James called to Gabriel as he galloped toward Ezekiel and helped him finish the fight.

Elaine dismounted and approached Gabriel, her pulse racing from more than the battle. She looked into his blood and sweat-streaked face. His eyes glistened with an unfamiliar, frenzied look that slowly ebbed. She wasn't exactly sure what to make of him. She'd spent years training with mercenaries who were skilled and hardened to battle, yet she'd never seen anyone fight like Gabriel. He was relentless, animalistic in what had looked like enjoyment of the battle itself.

"Are you all right?" He turned to her and lifted a hand to her cheek, brushing a fine spray of blood from her skin.

"I'm fine, but you're hurt." She examined his arm where the arrow protruded from his bloodied flesh.

"Odd." He narrowed his eyes at the wound as if seeing it for the first time. "I scarcely felt it go in."

"I guarantee you'll feel it coming out."

This time he couldn't control his smile. "I'm sure."

Bewildered, Elaine met his gaze again. She was having difficulty relating the fierce warrior in front of her to the gentle healer she knew.

"Let's just get it over with," he said. "Once it's taken care of, there are people who need my attention."

Silently, Elaine walked with him to the manor house where Gabriel's apprentices and Christian already tended to the wounded.

Rebecca assisted Elaine in removing the arrow from Gabriel's arm. In spite of the discomfort she knew the procedure caused, he remained still and quiet, watching her work. She felt him tense as she pressed the brand-hot knife to the hard muscle of his torn shoulder. He closed his eyes, scarcely breathing while she held the knife in place and slowly counted, "One ... two ... three ... four ... five..."

He cursed softly.

"Six ... seven ... eight," she continued, her stomach tightening at his pain, "Nine ... ten."

She removed the knife and he released a pent-up breath, opening his eyes and managing a slight smile. "Thank you, my lady."

"For burning your arm?"

"Your healing touch is worth the pain of a burned arm." He stood, brushing his lips across her cheek before joining the healers who were tending the more seriously wounded victims.

Rebecca sighed, glancing after him. "Oh, Elaine. You are so lucky. He is just beautiful."

Elaine looked at Gabriel's broad back as he stooped beside a villager to set a broken arm. Her feelings of desire and love--yes love, she finally admitted--for him were more powerful than she'd ever imagined. The sight of him fighting for Rockland, of his skill and the ferocious warrior's spirit that she and Ezekiel had so foolishly thought he hadn't possessed, filled her with almost uncontrollable desire.

She no longer cared about Gabriel's past or her future. All that mattered was the present. One day he might not be in Rockland, so she must enjoy what pleasures they could share together now.

There was work to be done. Repairs to make, wounds to tend, and sadly, bodies to bury. Later, when they were alone, she would tell him they couldn't wait any longer. They had to surrender to their passion or delay like cowards until it destroyed them from within.

"What was it you were saying about him not being able to hold his own in battle?" Elaine glanced at her brother when he joined her at the well where she was fetching water.

"I've rarely misjudged anyone so badly. When he was fighting, he didn't even look like the Gabriel we know."

A shiver of apprehension and desire crept up her spine. "He was like an animal, though we all are in battle."

"But he seemed to like it. Not that I'm complaining. He saved my life. If he hadn't been here, the damage would have been much worse."

"I'm sure."

"And the way he handles those two swords. What style. We really can use a man like him in Rockland."

Elaine leaned on the bucket. Cool water splashed against her forearm. "He belongs somewhere, Ezekiel. His skills, the way he carries himself. I wish I knew who he was."

"I'm sure so does he."

"We might never know," Elaine murmured.

Ezekiel stared at his sister. "You love him?"

"I don't know."

"Be careful, Elaine. No man has ever caught your interest like this before and I'd hate to see you hurt."

She smiled slightly. "Thank you, Ezekiel, but I can take care of myself."

"I know. I just hope..."

"What?"

"I hope he's right for you. I hope he can stay, for all our sakes."

"Me too." She stared into the water, watching it ripple in the breeze.

*I don't want him to leave Rockland. Ever.*

## Chapter Eight

It was well into the night when the last bodies were buried. Rockland had lost few lives to the raiders, but those who had died were sorely missed.

Snow began falling heavily as the villagers stood over the fresh graves and spoke prayers for the dead.

Gabriel watched from the door of the manor house since he had volunteered to remain inside with the worst of the injured. His apprentices relieved him after the burial. Satisfied that his skills were no longer required, he walked back to his cottage, surprised to see smoke rising from the chimney. Perhaps it was Christian tending to unfinished chores.

Inside, he found Elaine seated on his bed, wrapped in her ankle-length woolen cloak, her glossy dark hair hanging loose down her shoulders. His gaze riveted to her bare feet, the tips of her toes brushing the worn rope rug.

"Elaine." He shrugged off his robe, his injured shoulder smarting from the movement, then sat by the fire and unlaced his boots. Before he could remove them, she approached, one hand sliding down his arm as she knelt between his knees. Placing a palm on each of his thighs, she stared at him, her gray eyes filled with affection and desire.

"I wanted to thank you for fighting for us today," she said.

"The pleasure was mine."

"It was, wasn't it?" She tilted her head slightly to one side, studying him with wonder. "You shocked us all, Gabriel. You are a warrior."

"As you are." He ran a hand through her soft tresses. "You fighting on horseback is not a sight a man will soon forget."

She chuckled. "You practically drove off the raiders by yourself. Who are you, Gabriel? Who are you really?"

He shook his head slowly.

Rising to her knees, she slipped her arms around his neck and murmured against his lips, "I want to give you something for what you did. I want to give you myself, Gabriel."

He shook his head, grasping her shoulders to keep her from kissing him. His heartbeat quickened at the sight of her full, moist lips and the feeling of her warm body close to his. "I don't want you to share my bed as payment for fighting in a battle. I want you to share it because it's what you desire, because *I'm* what you desire."

Her dove-like eyes glistened. "You are what I desire, Gabriel. I think you have been since the first time I saw you."

He pulled her to his chest, his mouth claiming hers with an urgency that startled them both.

Elaine sighed deeply, her fingers untying the laces on the front of his shirt. She wanted him as much as he wanted her! He felt it in every stroke of her tongue and every touch of her hand.

He slipped her robe down her shoulders, his eyes raking her naked body, lingering on her full, rose-tipped breasts and the dark patch of curling hair between her pale thighs. He grasped her waist as he stood, catching her to him, enveloping her bare body in his embrace. The

sensation of her smooth, warm skin against his sent his heart beating out of control. His mouth sought hers with devouring kisses and he lifted her onto the table, scattering bottles and pouches of herbs onto the floor as he lay her on the smooth wood. Her legs locked around his waist as tightly as her arms held his neck. Aching with need, his staff pressed hard against her. The sensation was heady and he longed to tear off his breeches and bury his sword to the hilt in her damp, velvety sheath.

Elaine tore eagerly at his shirt and pulled it over his head.

Gabriel kicked off his boots without ever breaking contact with Elaine. He lifted her into his arms and placed her on the bed. Her slender, deft fingers untied the strip of rope binding his hair at his nape. Threading her fingers through the curls, she teased him with gentle caresses that promised so much more pleasure.

"Gabriel," she whispered when his mouth left hers to travel down her neck and stop at one of her pert nipples that already stood out hard and waiting for him, relishing the taste and feel of her flesh. She gasped and clutched his head closer while he drew upon her nipple until her breath rasped. Then he moved to the other, torturing her with pleasure so that even when she begged for mercy he was wonderfully, frustratingly slow in submitting to her fevered request. To Gabriel, lovemaking was an art not meant to be rushed. A woman such as Elaine deserved all the joy that was in his power to give.

Stretching out beside her on the bed, he offered her a portion of seeds from a pouch.

"What is it?"

"Eat it," he commanded softly. She obeyed, her nose wrinkling at the taste. "It's awful."

He smiled slightly, holding a glass of water to her lips. She drank several sips to wash away the taste while he took leaves from the second pouch and placed one between her lips with his fingertip. Her tongue darted out to caress his callused finger as she took the leaf, sending a ripple of passion through him that settled in his loins. How desperately he desired her!

"Umm," she said, chewing the leaf. "Mint."

He took one of the brisk-tasting leaves into his mouth, then discarded the pouch and kissed her. The taste of the herbs combined with the power of the kiss intoxicated him. She rolled closer, her smooth legs entwining with his hair-roughened ones. Her knee brushed his staff and he repressed the urge to groan. When she reached down and took him into the warmth of her hand, he allowed a low moan to escape his lips. Placing his hand over hers, he squeezed and stroked, teaching her what pleased him. She caught on quickly and soon had him rock hard and panting.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, shifting position slightly so he could suck her nipple. His tongue lapped the taut peak and his teeth gently worried the flesh until she sobbed with need.

Elaine uttered a soft sound of desire. He moved up her body and held her wrists above her head while kissing her lips and throat.

When he finally left a trail of kisses down her belly, he felt the rapid pulsing of her heartbeat and the swelling of her taut stomach from her agitated breathing. Her eyes were closed, lashes casting shadows against her cheeks. Parting her kiss-bruised lips, she drew tiny, quick breaths. He kissed her inner thighs and his fingertips brushed through the coarse hair covering her groin. Slowly he slid a finger into her wet sheath. Moaning, she tightened around the digit while he stroked, gathering moisture. Withdrawing the finger, he stroked her sensitive nub, now plump with desire. Gasping his name, she clutched his hair and shoulders. As he stroked faster, her legs trembled. When his mouth finally fixed where his finger had just touched her, she cried

out with delight. Her hot flesh throbbed beneath his torturous strokes until she shattered. In the midst of her pulsations, he covered her body with his and slipped inside her. Her center was hot and slick, yet it took her a moment to adjust to his length and girth.

He waited patiently, concentrating on keeping his breathing slow and even in an attempt to control his passion. It was incredibly difficult when buried deep inside her. She was so tight and wet.

Finally she opened her eyes, stared into his, and breathed, "Please."

Gabriel began to move within her. His long, steady strokes teased her to another shattering climax. Smiling slightly, he concentrated on giving her pleasure. He could have exploded several times already, but not when he knew she could climax again. He wanted her completely sated and limp with fulfillment before surrendering to his own needs.

When she reached yet another climax, his control began to slip.

"So beautiful, Elaine." His voice was a panting whisper.

Gabriel forced his movements to slow in spite of the desire to lunge into her with enough ferocity to ease his almost unendurable arousal. His heart beat as if he'd just swum the length of the river underwater and his thoughts could scarcely focus on anything except the body of the woman beneath him.

Elaine's breath came in sobbing pants. Once again she soared in ecstasy, her fingers biting the slick flesh of his back. "I can't, Gabriel. That's enough."

Her plea of ultimate fulfillment satisfied him and he finally released the fragile hold he had left over his body. Crying out her name, he poured into her, momentarily losing sight and sound. All that was left was sensation. His body dropped onto hers and he buried his face in her shoulder. Slowly his ragged breathing returned to normal. Slight tremors coursed through him even as he rolled from her and drew her to his chest.

He kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I love you, Elaine."

"I love you too, Gabriel." She touched her lips to his chest before resting her cheek against it.

They fell asleep to the soothing dance of dwindling firelight.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel awoke in darkness. Elaine's head was a pleasant weight on his chest and one of her smooth, lithe legs was draped across his. He moved his wounded arm to a more comfortable position, closed his eyes and smiled. If Rockland hadn't been attacked, last night would have been perfect. A small part of him felt guilty that he could still experience pleasure when people he'd known, people he'd used his skills to heal, were now dead or injured. Still he couldn't help it. Perhaps it was because he had no real, coherent memories except the ones he'd made in Rockland, but making love with Elaine had been an earth-moving experience for him. Their bodies hadn't simply mated, but their souls had touched.

Since they'd met, he'd felt admiration for her strength and gratitude for her unquestioning acceptance of him. She and her people had taken him in when he had nowhere to go and he looked on them as his own. Even if he regained his memories, he'd never forget Rockland and would do everything in his power to see that they rebuilt successfully. And Elaine! In the back of his mind he worried that he might have a wife and family. Somehow in his heart, he knew he hadn't, but if by chance he couldn't marry Elaine, he'd seen to it that no children would come of their union. She meant too much to him to risk getting her with child until he was certain he could be a proper husband and father.

A thin stream of light shone through a slit in the leather door, telling him that dawn was

breaking.

"Gabriel?" she murmured, her fingers sifting through the dusting of hair on his chest.

"Yes, my lady?"

She giggled. "It sounds so strange to hear you say that after we ... you know."

"Oh, I know." His arm tightened around her. "I'd need to hit my head again to ever forget that."

"I wish we could stay here all day, but we'd better see what we can do about the damage outside."

"I have rounds to make." He stretched and slipped out of bed. "At least the other healers didn't disturb us throughout the night. That's a good sign that no one took a turn for the worse."

"Several houses were destroyed. I don't think we'll be able to repair them in this weather, so many of the villagers will be staying in the great hall or with other families."

"I can take someone here," he said, pouring water into the large wooden bowl on the trunk and splashing his face.

Elaine brought him a towel and slid her arms around his waist, hugging him close, her cheek pressed to his chest. "I was rather hoping I could stay here and give my room at the house to one of the families."

Embracing her, he closed his eyes and rubbed his face against her silky hair. "I like that idea better."

"I almost forgot to tell you. Ezekiel wants to talk to you today about assisting him and James in preparing the village for battle."

"That I can do," Gabriel stated, the same confident thrill washing over him as it had during the battle the day before. Something about fighting made his spirit soar. His lust for battle disturbed him, but he could no more control it than he could stop his feelings for Elaine.

A quizzical look passed over Elaine's lovely face, and he asked, "What is it?"

"I was just wondering who you were fighting when we found you. I know your skill. Who could have hurt you like that? It must have been more than one warrior."

Gabriel looked far off for a moment. The big blond man doused in blood flashed across his mind. *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

"I don't know," Gabriel murmured. "Maybe. Maybe not. Each man has his match, Elaine."

"I'd hate to meet yours."

"Perhaps I killed him."

"I hope so. He must be terribly dangerous."

Gabriel couldn't argue with that observation.

They left the cottage to go about their work, Elaine to help with the rebuilding and Gabriel to the great hall where he aided his healers in caring for the injured. Christian and Rebecca were there. Katherine sat by the hearth rolling bandages, her gnarled hands surprisingly deft.

"Gabriel," she called upon hearing his voice.

"My lady?" He approached her, accepting the basket of bandages she offered him.

"All morning I've been hearing about your exploits during the battle. Thank you for all you've done for Rockland."

"My thanks to Rockland for all it's done for me."

Katherine smiled slightly. "Not an archangel, but a guardian angel, perhaps."

"My lady?"



She shook her head. "Nothing. I won't keep you from your business any longer."

Gabriel spent the morning in the great hall, then joined Ezekiel who was still helping villagers clear away the rubble from the battle. Several houses had been destroyed and the barn damaged. Some of Rockland's meager livestock had been slaughtered or stolen, so James had taken a group of men to track down the animals that had been driven off by the fighting.

"This is terrible," Ezekiel panted as he and Gabriel lifted part of a fallen wall from the rubble that had once been a house. "We were in desperate need of repair before. It's lucky we stored most of the food supply in the manor house. If that had been taken, we wouldn't be able to survive."

"We'll have to start rebuilding right away," Gabriel observed. "No point in waiting until spring."

"I agree, but if we get another big storm it'll be impossible."

Gabriel squinted at the sun. "Today is clear. We can at least get some lumber. If you'll give me a few men, I'll start this afternoon."

"My men are your men. You've proven yourself more than worthy and we need all the help we can get. Most of Rockland is made up of farmers. Our defense is sparse, and most of the best young men I've trained have taken off to find their fortunes in richer places than Rockland."

"I think your best solution is to train everyone. At least that way you'll have back-up if we're attacked again."

"If," Ezekiel snorted. "You can bet on it. It's our position. We're secluded and bands of raiders hide in these parts. We're their source of supplies."

"Yes," Gabriel murmured, momentarily lost in pieces of memories that he couldn't bind together. Ezekiel's description of the raiders' reason for attack sounded so familiar.

"Gabriel?"

He glanced at Ezekiel who had been talking to him, only Gabriel had been concentrating so intently on memories just beyond his grasp that he hadn't comprehended what his friend had said.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Gabriel replied. "I'll choose some men and be back later. We can use the barn to prepare the wood. We'll need to get to work on a wall too."

Gabriel's group left for the woods within the hour and spent the remainder of the day chopping trees. Elaine and a group of village women used the war horses to drag the logs back to the village where Ezekiel organized the rest of the uninjured villagers to start with repairs.

"I hope the snow holds off," Elaine said, offering Gabriel a drink of water. In spite of the winter weather, he was perspiring freely from cutting trees.

"We'll do as much as we can while we can," Gabriel told her. He took another long sip of water before handing the horn back to her. "I can't imagine why I didn't suggest this before."

She smiled. "You were too busy curing everyone's illnesses. Where did you learn all this? Herbs and weapons. Aren't you dying of curiosity?"

He kissed her cold earlobe and whispered, "I'm dying to be alone with you again tonight."

"I love you, Gabriel."

He smiled at her over his shoulder before she turned to offer water to the other cutters.

## Chapter Nine

At dusk, Elaine assisted the healers in the great hall and ate dinner with her mother.

"You plan on spending nights with him?"

Elaine glanced into her mother's nearly blind eyes. "You know about that?"

"Dearest, all of Rockland knows about it. If you were any other women, your reputation would be destroyed and you'd be chased from the village, but you've always been good at making your own rules and seeing that others follow them."

"I wish I could be sorry for that. I wish I was a better daughter for you."

Katherine reached for Elaine's hand. "I couldn't ask for a better daughter. Mine is strong and caring. How many women compete as warriors in a world ruled by men? I'm proud of you, Elaine. I just don't want to see you hurt."

"You think he'll hurt me? You think he's married?"

"I don't know. All I can say is I feel in my soul that he would never intentionally hurt you. But intentions don't always make for reality."

*I know he'd never hurt me.*

He'd even taken the precaution of ensuring no child would come of their union until he knew he could care for both of them without hindrance. The seeds he'd given her the previous night had been wild carrot, used to prevent conception. He'd given her a supply, told her how to prepare it and how much to take. Only a man who cared deeply for her and any children they might create together would go through the bother of seeing that she was so protected. Most men didn't think once about the children who evolved from their sexual exploits, but Gabriel was rare. He was honorable.

"I love him," Elaine whispered.

Katherine smiled sadly. "I always knew one day you would find a man who appreciated your strength and passion. I'm just concerned because I sense so much turmoil in him, in the life he once had."

"I wish we knew who he was. He has flashes of memories. He sees battles. 'Sodom and Gomorrah' he says."

Katherine fell silent for several moments. "I'd tell you to be careful, Elaine, but it's a little late for that."

"We love each other. Surely that will be enough to help us through whatever comes."

Katherine smiled sadly. "Sometimes it amazes me that you are worldly in so many ways, yet completely innocent when it comes to some things."

Elaine finished her meal, glancing several times at the door, waiting for Gabriel, but he never came. It was dark when she left the great hall but torches and fires littered the village where men were still working on repairs. Elaine approached Gabriel, Ezekiel and James.

"We're organizing training sessions for everyone in the village," Ezekiel informed her. "Gabriel's idea."

Elaine glanced at Gabriel with approval and said, "I don't think you'll be able to finish much more in the dark. I'm going to bed. We have plenty of work to do in the morning."

"I'll be home soon," Gabriel told her.

She smiled at him, loving the way he said 'home,' as if they were a married couple.

After stopping at the well, she walked to the cottage and started a fire to take the chill from the room. She undressed and climbed under the blankets. Turning on her side, she watched the door. She wasn't sure how long she rested there before she began to wonder if Gabriel was ever coming to bed.

She was about to get up and stoke the fire when he stepped quietly inside, his gaze finding hers in the dimness. "You're still awake?"

"You must be starving." She sat up, the blanket only half concealing her breasts. The aroused expression in his eyes made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

"I'm only hungry for you." He smiled, removing his damp, frost-covered cloak and his shirt.

She narrowed her eyes at his injured arm and popped from the bed to inspect the inflamed wound that had been irritated from the day's overuse.

"That must hurt," she said, turning to dampen a cloth in the bowl of water on the table. Before she'd finished ringing it out, his arms slipped around her, holding her to his chest. His manhood pressed against her back and the hairy hardness of his thighs against her legs sent little thrills of desire coursing through her. She closed her eyes for a moment before turning in his embrace so she could bathe his arm with the cloth.

"Better?" she asked.

He replied with a low growl and covered her mouth with a kiss that was both rough and gentle, his tongue stroking hers. The towel dropped to the floor beside them as her arms slid around his neck.

"God, I've been thinking about this all day," he murmured, sweeping her into his arms. He reached the bed in two strides and placed her on it. A sinewy arm braced on either side of her shoulders, he loomed over her, kissing her so deeply she nearly lost her breath. His mouth left a warm, wet trail of kisses down her neck and over her breasts.

"Don't you ever get tired?" She closed her eyes, her body tingling beneath his carnal assault. They both had been up since dawn and he'd worked through dinner and well into the night. Even Ezekiel had commented on his seemingly boundless energy.

Gently pinning her hands above her head, he smiled and rubbed his bearded cheek against her smooth one. "I intend to make love to you until we faint. That should ensure a perfect night's sleep."

His words made her belly tighten and her legs go soft as water. She slipped her foot up his calf, enjoying the sensation of his hair-roughened flesh while he licked and kissed her neck, his beard tickling and lips soothing, until she writhed beneath him in anticipation of what was to come. He bestowed the same attention on each of her breasts, not leaving one until the other was so sensitive teasing it further would be cruel. He ran his tongue over the tender skin on the underside of her breasts then kissed her taut belly while his warm, callused palms stroked her hips and slid under her buttocks. His clever tongue teased her to the brink of heaven so many times that his name became a sobbing plea on her lips.

Completely lost in sensation, Elaine closed her eyes and trembled though her body felt feverish. Her fingers clutched handfuls of his satiny hair, then dug into the powerful muscles of his back, wrenching a moan from deep in his chest. She nearly loosened her grip for fear of hurting him. Then she realized that it hadn't been a sound of pain, but of pleasure.

His assault intensified and her nails scored his flesh. A tremor ran through him and his breath rasped in her ear. Rather than take his pleasure, he brought her to a climax that left her

weak and trembling in its marvelous aftermath.

When she calmed, she half opened her eyes and found that he was staring at her intently, his blue eyes fiery, his lips parted and glossy.

"Touch me," he whispered.

She smiled wickedly. Two could certainly play the game he'd begun. She splayed her palms across his chest, shoving him hard onto his back. The slightest smile tugged at his lips.

She kissed his chest, licking his flat nipples as he'd done to her. She bit one gently before she moved lower, running her tongue over the indentations where his legs joined his hips. Clutching his iron-hard thighs, she sat between them. She curled a fist around his manhood, loving the thickness of it and the pleasure it gave them both.

"I never thought of how good this part of a man could feel."

His gaze followed the movements of her hand.

"You seem to like this," she teased.

"Harder," he whispered.

She complied, rewarded by a lustful moan from deep in his chest. She lessened the pressure, fearful of causing him discomfort, but his breathing calmed again until she tightened her fist.

"Harder," he panted.

She complied, rubbing his stiff, velvet-skinned staff fiercely.

He gasped, his neck arching back in the pillow. Finally understanding his desires, she smiled slightly. She lowered her face, her hair stroking his stomach as she used her teeth on every exposed inch of his body. His breath rasped and he clutched her hair.

With trembling hands, he tugged her away from him. Her teeth raked him one last time, and with a swiftness that shocked them both, he pressed her onto her back and drove into her with several long, fast strokes. Suddenly he stopped, leaving them on the edge.

"Gabriel, Gabriel," she chanted softly, running her fingers over his straining neck, then gripping his chest hair. Sweat slicked his flesh, dampening their bodies.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She forced her eyes open and stared into his pale eyes so intense with desire that she felt completely claimed by him. He was in control of her very will as his hips resumed their steady rhythm. This time he didn't stop until she convulsed beneath him, pulsing and twitching with the most intense pleasure she'd ever felt. She fought to keep her eyes focused on his, but the sensations coursing through her body were too powerful. She closed her eyes tightly and surrendered, thrilled by the knowledge that he was also under her spell.

Elaine slid her hands up his ribs, feeling his heart pulsing rapidly beneath her palm.

"Come to me, Gabriel," she whispered, locking her legs around his waist, forcing him deep inside her. His entire body shuddered with each long, deliberately slow stroke. Again she edged toward another climax and this time he couldn't wait to join her even if he'd wanted to. Her fingers tightened on his shoulders almost painfully. She tugged his face to hers and absorbed his gasp of pleasure as he exploded within her.

\* \* \* \*

During the following weeks, Gabriel spent his days healing, training troops with Elaine and rebuilding with Ezekiel. There was little time for pleasure or rest, except at night when he and Elaine would make love with the ferocity of animals in heat and fall asleep in each other's arms, completely sated.

One afternoon when Gabriel was teaching his two apprentices and Christian how to make

tinctures, Elaine burst into his cottage. She took his bag of healing supplies from the trunk at the foot of the bed and tossed it to him.

"Robert's children have gotten worse," she stated, referring to one of the farmers whose five children had been sick with fevers throughout the winter. Gabriel had tended them several times and for a while they had improved. However, during the recent attack, their home had been damaged and they had been forced to spend nearly a day in a damp, drafty house while repairs had been made. The rest of the villagers had been unwilling to take the sick family under their roof for fear of the illness spreading throughout the rest of Rockland.

Only Elaine and Gabriel had set foot inside the house, leaving the widower in sole care of his children.

Without hesitation, Gabriel followed Elaine outside. Together they mounted her horse and rode to Robert's home.

They left Elaine's horse plodding through the field behind the farmhouse along with Robert's plow horse and a sleek golden stallion.

"Thank God," Robert said when they entered the house. He sat by his youngest son's bed, arranging heavy blankets around the child. Gabriel examined each of the children, noting their fevers were very high and their breathing difficult.

"Elaine, find the horehound in my bag and make tea. That should loosen their coughs." Gabriel thought for a moment, straining for a memory just beyond his reach. Then he recalled something important and began pulling the blankets off the children, leaving them covered with thin sheets.

"Are you mad?" Robert demanded, grasping Gabriel's arm to stop him from discarding the woolen blankets. "They have fevers."

"I know this treatment is unusual, but you must trust me if you want to give them a chance to live."

Robert sighed, his face taut with worry. He dropped his hand from Gabriel and gestured helplessly. "Tell me what to do."

"Get cold water and bathe them with it."

Both Robert and Elaine looked horrified, but they obeyed him without question while Gabriel forced some of the tea into the semi-conscious children.

They remained at the farmhouse throughout the day. Rebecca brought them a meal and Christian delivered more horehound. As Gabriel glanced out the window at the mother and son walking over the hill toward the more thickly settled part of the village, he noted that neither had been abused since his last "talk" with Richard. He smiled slightly before joining Elaine and Robert at the table for dinner.

"I can't believe their fevers are down." Robert swallowed a chunk of warm bread and glanced gratefully at Gabriel. "Imagine the method! Keeping them cool."

"How did you learn such a thing?" Elaine asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "I remembered an old man using the same method on a soldier after a battle. I think it was the man who taught me, but I can't be sure. Like everything else, it's just a flash."

"What did he look like?" Elaine asked, hoping that further discussion might bring back more memories.

Gabriel closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "Gray hair and beard. Blue eyes. I can't remember..."

"It's good that you remembered that much, for the children's sake."

His fingers entwined with hers, and he said, "Why don't you go home to bed? You have to be up early tomorrow. I'll spend the night here to make sure nothing changes."

Elaine nodded, not liking the idea of spending the night without Gabriel, but understanding the sense of his suggestion. She slipped into her cloak and he walked her to her horse. Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her deeply.

"I'll miss you tonight," she whispered in his ear.

"I'll dream about you, but I do every night."

She smiled, touching her lips to his once more before mounting her horse. He watched until she disappeared over the hill.

Gabriel and Robert took turns sitting with the children throughout the night. Gabriel boiled eucalyptus leaves to ease their breathing and helped them cough up the phlegm that had been causing their breathing difficulty.

By the following afternoon, their fevers had broken. Two of the youngest seemed weaker than the others but Gabriel was confident that with rest, they would survive.

Early the following morning, Elaine rode to Robert's farm on her way to the training field and was relieved to find the family improving. Inside, she joined Gabriel by the fireplace while the children slept.

"I'm going to stay here for the rest of the day," Gabriel said. "Explain to Ezekiel why I'm not on the field. James knows where I've left off training the villagers. I wonder how the repairs are coming?"

Elaine hugged him and said, "You've only been here a couple of months, but I wonder what we'd do without you."

"I wish I could remember who I am." Frustration gleamed in his eyes. "Then I'd know if I'm free to spend the rest of my life here."

"Here?" Hope burned inside Elaine, but she couldn't allow herself to be swept up completely in such an uncertain desire. "What if..."

"All that could keep me from Rockland would be a wife and children elsewhere, but I really don't believe I have either."

"You keep saying that, yet why wouldn't you, Gabriel?" she said, though the thought of him married to another woman and fathering any children but hers, tore at her heart. "You're a handsome, honorable man. Educated, a wonderful lover. Why wouldn't you be married?"

He smiled, his eyes shimmering with an unfamiliar touch of embarrassment at her complimentary words. "It's just something I feel inside. I..."

"What?"

"Something about the attack, the fighting. I *liked* it, Elaine. Not the innocents getting hurt, but the fighting itself. The feeling of steel on steel. The sting of being struck." He clenched his fists and paced the room, his eyes suddenly wild. "I *enjoyed* it."

Elaine watched him carefully, the slightest bit of apprehension creeping into her mind. She discarded it. "You're obviously a warrior, as I am. We all like to test ourselves."

"You don't understand, Elaine." He glanced at her. "The greater the number attacking me, the harder they fought, the better I liked it. When I take a step back and think about it, it disturbs me."

She looped her arms around his neck and held his gaze. "It's just part of who you are, Gabriel. Like being a healer. You're a complicated man. I find that attractive."

"You are a wild woman."

"Yes. I guess I am."

He whispered into her hair so the children couldn't hear, "Tonight, we'll be wild together." He took her earlobe gently between his teeth and ran his tongue over the soft flesh, sending little ripples of desire through her.

"I'll hold you to that promise."

\* \* \* \*

That night, Gabriel visited the great hall and was pleased by the results of his apprentice healers' skill and organization. He ate dinner with Elaine's family. Afterward he and Elaine returned home early, pleading fatigue.

As soon as they stepped into the cottage, they shed their clothes and dropped onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and mingling tendrils of silky black hair.

"I feel like it's been forever since we've made love," Gabriel said in a husky voice.

His lips trailed over her breasts and stomach, teasing her with gentle kisses.

"You mean it hasn't been?"

His warm, wet mouth covered her plump nub of desire. Elaine gasped and clutched handfuls of his hair. She writhed beneath him, eager for a quick release, but he had other plans. The sound of her breathing and the tension in her body told him when she was close to fulfillment and he kept her on the brink of climax. He moved lower, caressing her right leg with his hands and kissing her from thigh to ankle, running his finger across the delicate arch of her foot. His kisses trailed up her left leg and back to where she was so hot and yearning.

Swiftly he covered her body with his. She clung to him tightly, her eyes closed, lost in a world of passion only the two of them shared.

His lips covered hers, his tongue seeking every corner and crevice of her mouth. She placed her hands to his nape, pressing him closer, wishing they could climb inside the same flesh and never be parted.

Twice he brought her to heaven, but as she began the third ascension, she wanted him with her. She opened her eyes, stared into his passion-darkened ones. Smiling wickedly, she slid her palms gently down his back to his hips, then raked her nails along the length of his body. He closed his eyes, his head arching back with the heady combination of pleasure and pain. She linked her arms around his neck, pulled closer and kissed him hard.

When the kiss broke, he stared at her with glistening eyes and panted, "Clever girl, but I'm in no mood to rush."

He grasped her wrists above her head and kissed her while thrusting into her straining body. Crying his name, she shattered beneath him again. He released her hands and she clutched him tightly, her fingers biting into his shoulders. Her strong, sleek legs tightened around his waist and he joined her in ecstasy.

He collapsed on top of her, their hearts throbbing in unison.

"Oh, you're in fine form tonight, Gabriel," she giggled, panting softly against his hair.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "I amaze myself, considering how simply the thought of you makes me hard as an ax-blade."

"And just as sharp."

He rolled onto his back and drew her into his arms before they fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning while Elaine and Gabriel were dressing, Robert called to him from outside.

"I hope it's not the children," he said, stepping out the door, Elaine at his heels.

The widower stood by the river, his hand holding the halter of his stallion.

"I know you've never accepted payment for your healing, except for provisions, but I want you to take him." Robert guided the horse toward Gabriel.

Gabriel stared at the perfectly formed stallion with the sleek golden coat. The horse was well cared for and obviously meant a great deal to Robert.

Gabriel shook his head. "No, I can't."

"You saved my entire family and you're a skilled warrior. You should have a horse. He'll do you more good than he does me. I can't even ride him since my leg was injured in battle years ago, and it's not fair to him. I just couldn't bear to give him up, until now. I insist that you take him. If you refuse, I'll consider it an insult."

Gabriel ran a hand over the horse's sleek neck and glanced at Elaine who said, "Robert's right. We can use you on horseback if we're attacked again."

"His name is Juniper." Robert placed a palm on the horse's nose. "He tends to be spirited, but some of Ezekiel's men have borrowed him in battle and he obeys perfectly. I trained him myself."

Gabriel nodded. "I'll take good care of him."

"Then he'll take care of you."

"Thank you, Robert."

The farmer smiled before limping back over the hill toward home.



## Chapter Ten

Elaine awoke in almost complete darkness. Red embers burned low in the hearth across the room. She rolled toward the wall and reached for Gabriel but found the bed empty.

"Gabriel?" She rose, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, she saw Gabriel was not in the cottage.

Elaine stoked the fire to brighten the room. She dressed hastily and stepped outside. The moon shone in the clear winter sky, turning the snow-covered hills golden. Movement in the field behind the cottage caught her attention. Gabriel stood practicing with the two swords he'd taken from the raiders he'd killed. His feet shifted across the snow, his legs powerful as a great cat's. Swinging the swords, he cut imaginary opponents and blocked their blows, each of his deadly movements appearing effortless.

Elaine approached silently, shivering in her woolen robe. Her gaze following his every motion, she devoured his warrior's beauty.

He stopped suddenly and turned to her, his breath coming in short, visible puffs in the cold. Sweat misted his face in spite of the frigid air.

"These swords are the wrong size," he said. "I'm getting accustomed to them, but if they were a bit shorter and lighter, they'd be easier to handle together."

"It must be the middle of the night, Gabriel. Couldn't you sleep?"

He shook his head slightly, raising one of the swords and examining its glistening tip. "I keep dreaming of battles."

She tossed him a teasing smile. "I thought you dreamt of me."

"Those dreams are even greater torment." He sheathed his blades and drew her into his arms. "When I wake, no matter what the hour, I want to take you then and there."

"Feel free to wake me at any time." She slipped her arms around him and touched her lips to his before she buried her face in his hot neck.

She tilted her face up to his and he kissed her. "I love you, Elaine."

"I love you too."

"I was thinking that spring's not far off. I'd like to build a barn behind the house so Juniper can move out of the one in the village. It'll be easy to expand the cottage."

"Expand?"

He nodded. "It's a too small for a family right now."

"Family?"

"In the spring, after Rockland is rebuilt, if I still haven't regained my memory, I'm going back to Northumbria and try to find out who I am and where I came from. Once I know for certain I'm not married, I'm coming back here to stay. I want to marry you, Elaine."

Her heart pounded with excitement. "Marry?"

"Can you speak in sentences longer than one word?" He smiled, kissing her, taking her bottom lip gently between his teeth and licking it. "Will you be my wife, Elaine?"

"If you're free, yes, I'll be your wife."

Elaine could scarcely believe she'd agreed to marriage. She'd vowed that she would never bind herself to any man, but here she was promising herself to one that she loved so deeply

it ached. Worst of all, neither of them were even sure that he wasn't already married.

"We shouldn't tell anyone about this until we know for certain," she suggested.

"It'll be our secret, my lady," he whispered against her lips.

\* \* \* \*

The first thaw came later that week, melting most of the snow and revealing the muddy grass beneath. Elaine organized a two-day hunt with Gabriel and four of the villagers so they could replenish their dwindling food supply while Ezekiel and James began constructing the new wall to protect Rockland.

"We'll separate in the woods," Elaine said as they rode across the field, her chestnut stallion walking alongside Gabriel's golden one. "Then we'll regroup tomorrow morning and ride back to Rockland together."

"Fresh meat will be good," said one of the men.

"We can get some skins to trade," another said. "It will be good to see Rockland back on its feet again."

"We'll be ready for raids this year. No more victims, right, Gabriel? Or at least we'll put up a fight they won't soon forget, especially since that bastard William Blackridge is dead," Elaine snarled. "He was the worst of the raiders."

"I bet even his own men celebrated his death," said one of the villagers.

"Especially since the ones who survived the battle with the Wyborn's army at Ravenhill are now rotting in the king's prison," Elaine said. "I have no fondness for Vikings, but the master of Ravenhill is a man to be reckoned with, especially if he killed Blackridge in a fight."

"I'll wager Ezekiel or Gabriel could have done the same to him," said another villager.

Elaine cast a loving glance at Gabriel and said, "I'm glad we never had to find out, even though Ezekiel would have loved to kill Blackridge for revenge alone. I wouldn't have minded his blood on my blade either."

"Or mine," Gabriel added. "I'll wager it would have been a thrill to fight him, if he was half as good as his reputation claimed. Who fought him during the battle last spring?"

"I don't even know if he was actually here or just sent his men," Elaine said. "Most of the raiders wore helmets."

Upon entering the forest, they split into three groups, one pair going east, one west, and Gabriel and Elaine north.

They hunted until midday, then stopped by a brook where they drank the running water, frigid from the thaw's melting ice. They cooked a rabbit Elaine had killed, then continued hunting until dusk.

While Elaine gathered firewood, Gabriel pitched their tent.

As dusk turned to darkness, they sat talking by a fire.

"I like being completely alone with you like this," Elaine licked her fingers and discarded a bone from the piece of rabbit she'd been eating.

Gabriel drew her into his arms and licked her lips.

"Take me, Gabriel," she whispered fiercely, straddling him and clutching handfuls of hair at his nape. She bit his lower lip and parted his cloak, slipping her hands beneath his billowy shirt and stroking his ribs. Her palms pressed to the hard muscles of his chest, her fingers biting.

His hands mirrored her actions, his palms gently cupping the softness of her breasts, his thumbs brushing her nipples while he kissed her, his eyes closed, completely absorbed in her kisses. Smiling wickedly, she removed a hand from his chest and dipped it in the snow. He gasped into her mouth as her ice-cold hand stroked him where he was hard and clutched him

where he was soft. His kiss became more demanding, his body shivering from more than just the cold.

She'd guessed that dipping her hand in a patch of snow would get his attention. Most men would have shriveled from the cold, but not Gabriel. Severe sensations aroused him far more than gentle touches.

They disappeared into the tent and tugged off their clothes. Gabriel opened his cloak and pressed her onto it. Neither could see in the darkness but they found each other's most sensitive places by touch alone. Gabriel's hands rubbed her hardened nipples while his mouth stroked the soft, moist folds of flesh between her legs. Moaning his name, she threaded her fingers through his hair. He drove her toward a quick initial climax before settling back for a long, teasing journey. His lips and tongue tasted every inch of her from brow to heel.

When he'd finished, she pulled him to her with a deep, tender kiss. She pushed him onto his back and kissed every part of him just as he had kissed her. She delighted in the hardness of his lean, muscled body, in the smoothness of his shoulders and arms and the texture of the hair dusting his chest, stomach, and legs. Simultaneously she trailed her teeth over his ribs and raked her nails along his inner thighs. When she rested her head against his chest, the sensation of his heart pounding against her face sent a thrill of desire racing through her. Grasping his hard staff, she took the head in her mouth. Her tongue swirled over it, the tip teasing the underside with feathery touches.

Gabriel gasped and buried his fingers in her hair, his back arching. He reveled in her newly found expertise for several moments before he panted, "Stop, Elaine."

She ignored him, bestowing the pleasure his body yearned for. Sucking him deeply into her mouth, she stroked his staff and kneaded his sac until he exploded, his hips thrusting and his entire body straining with the force of his release.

Even before the last tremor ran through him, he grasped her arms and pulled her onto the cloak beside him.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded, holding her to his chest.

"As if you wanted to stop me."

He buried his face in her neck, kissing it fervently. "Do you have any idea what you do to me, Elaine of Rockland?"

"The same thing you do to me Gabriel of wherever." She smiled, quivering as his beard tickled her sensitive flesh.

He covered them with a heavy fur blanket before they fell asleep, locked in each other's arms.

\* \* \* \*

It was late morning when the hunting party returned to Rockland with a supply of deer, rabbits, and boar. The meat was taken by the village women to be smoked and some of it to be prepared for a feast that night.

While Gabriel and Elaine groomed their mounts in the stables, Ezekiel briefed them on the progress of Rockland's defenses.

"Rebecca and Christian were helping make arrows, but no one's seen them since yesterday," Ezekiel said. "Pity too. Rebecca has deft hands for such things. James went out to their house yesterday afternoon to make sure all was well, but she said Christian had a sore throat and she wanted to keep him in to rest."

"I'll stop by and check him on my way home," Gabriel said.

"I'll meet you there later," Elaine told him. "I want to say hello to Mother first."

Gabriel kissed her cheek before he left the stable and walked to his cottage by way of Christian's house.

He knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Rebecca called from inside.

"Gabriel. How is Christian feeling?"

"He's fine, Gabriel. I just want to keep him in for a few days."

"May I see him? I can give him something for his throat."

She took so long to respond that Gabriel repressed the urge to kick the door in from pure frustration.

She opened the door a crack and looked at him through blackened eyes.

"Oh, no," Gabriel muttered. "Not again."

"It was my own fault this time. I poured all his ale out the window. I thought if he stopped drinking, maybe things could be different. He hadn't touched us in so long I thought..."

Gabriel pushed open the door. Christian was seated at the table, separating dried herbs. His large, dark eyes flew to Gabriel and he smiled.

For a moment, Gabriel was relieved. Apparently Christian hadn't been hurt by his father's wrath. Then he stepped closer and saw the bruises on Christian's small neck. For a moment he forgot to breathe.

"I wish I could send Christian to live with you," Rebecca said, tears welling in her eyes. "But Richard would never allow it."

*Two days. I'm gone for two days and the bastard thinks he can do whatever he wants.*

"Keep him here for a few more days," Gabriel spoke calmly to Rebecca. "Both of you. I'll tell everyone you're ill."

Rebecca nodded and walked with Gabriel to the door. "I wish he was your son instead of Richard's."

On his way home, Gabriel's calm fury turned to utter rage that even practicing with his swords couldn't relieve. Instead, each violent cut increased his anger and he imagined each thrust sinking into Richard's gut.

Elaine found him wielding his swords with the same ferocity as when he'd fought the raiders on the well.

When he finally lowered the blades, he was drenched in sweat and his arms ached, but his entire body pulsed with rage.

"What's wrong?" Elaine asked, concern and apprehension in her eyes.

Though he longed for the comfort only she could offer, his anger created a barrier between them.

He didn't speak but walked past her toward the house.

"Gabriel." She touched his arm and he spun around, glaring.

"He is a complete waste of skin," Gabriel snarled.

"Who?"

"Richard, who do you think?" He shook his head and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm just so furious I can't think straight."

"What did he do? Are Christian and Rebecca hurt?" Elaine reached for her sword. "Where is he?"

"Put that away, Elaine. The law is on his side, after all."

She looked aghast. "Gabriel!"

"Rebecca asked me to tell everyone that she and Christian are ill, that's why no one will

see them for a few days.”

“And you’re going along with that? I can’t believe--”

“Trust me. It’s better this way for everyone.”

“I wish he was dead,” Elaine whispered.

*Hold that thought, my love. It might just come true.*

\* \* \* \*

The following days passed with little event. The thaw continued, and at night, Elaine and Gabriel would rest in each other’s arms and listen to melting ice from the tree branches tapping on his roof. His impending journey to Northumbria would prove that he was indeed free and they could begin the life they’d planned together.

Often Gabriel’s thoughts teetered between Elaine and Richard. Something had to be done about the man. He couldn’t bear the thought of Christian and Rebecca at Richard’s mercy while he left for Northumbria. He’d seen in the village. Both times the man had glanced at him almost fearfully, as if he somehow knew Gabriel had discovered what he’d done to his wife and child, but Gabriel never revealed what he’d seen until the day the Richard rode into the woods to check his traps.

Gabriel took Juniper from the stable early that morning and rode off under the pretense of locating places to gather herbs in the spring.

He trailed Richard deep into the woods, leaving Juniper in a clearing and following silently on foot.

From behind a tree he watched Richard stoop beside a trap and mutter to himself as he removed a dead fox with its leg half chewed off.

Richard never heard Gabriel approach, only felt the excruciating thrust of the sword slicing through his back. He stared at the blade protruding from his stomach.

Though his mouth opened, no sound came out. Gabriel squatted in front of him and stared into his wide, horror-filled eyes until they dulled in death.

Gabriel removed the sword, cleaned it, and enfolded Richard’s body in a thick blanket. He slung the corpse onto Juniper’s back and rode through the forest to a secluded field with a deep lake in its center. Two days before, he had made a small raft and hidden it in the trees. Gabriel gutted Richard, filled his belly with several large rocks, and brought him to the deepest part of the lake. He dropped the body, along with his own bloody clothes and the blanket, into the water.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Gabriel joined the unsuccessful search party for Richard.

“He must have gotten drunk somewhere and animals dragged him off,” James said over dinner in the great hall. “Lord forgive me, but it’s no great loss.”

“Perhaps a blessing for Rebecca and the boy,” Katherine said. “They have a guardian angel, I’ll wager.”

Elaine glanced at her mother, narrowing her eyes in question, but the old woman didn’t speak again until Elaine walked with her to her room.

“Mother, do you know what happened to Richard?”

“My darling,” Elaine took her daughter’s hand and patted it, “I think you and I both know what happened to Richard.”

“We can’t speak here,” Elaine whispered. “Too many ears in this house.”

Katherine whispered back. “He’s a clever one, your angel. See that he doesn’t fall, Elaine. He needs you as much as we need him.”

Elaine shook her head. At times it seemed Gabriel didn't need anybody. She'd seen him kill during battle. She'd also done her share of killing, but it was different with him. Her Angel of Death.

Though she knew he loved her, there was something remote about him, something almost frightening that she couldn't explain. Still, the thought of him needing her made her warm inside, as did her dreams of spending the rest of her life with him and bearing his children.

Impulsively, Elaine kissed her mother's cheek, then went to meet Gabriel so they could walk home together.

Once they were alone in the cottage, they undressed and slipped into bed. Gabriel drew her to his chest, his fingertips tracing circles on her hip.

"You killed Richard, didn't you?" Elaine met his gaze in the fire-lit room.

He didn't speak, but the faintest smile played with his lips.

"You don't even trust me enough to say. I guess I don't blame you."

"Forget Richard." He took her earlobe in his teeth and ran his tongue along the edge of it. She sighed, snuggling closer to him, surrendering completely to his touch.

\* \* \* \*

Spring weather immediately followed the first frost and rebuilding began in earnest. All the homes were repaired and the finest wall Rockland had ever seen surrounded the village square, leaving only Robert's farm and Gabriel's cottage on the outskirts.

Gabriel and Elaine spent their mornings on the training field with Ezekiel and James. Due to Gabriel's diligence and expertise, every man, woman, and older child in Rockland had mastered at least one form of defense, from swordplay to throwing daggers.

When he wasn't training or assisting with the building, Gabriel helped gather fresh herbs with Christian and his healers. His keen eye discerned poisonous plants from life-saving ones, often with herbs that appeared so similar that a mistake in judgment could prove fatal.

He and Elaine worked together to ensure the safety and prosperity of Rockland, but neither forgot the words he'd spoken that winter night they'd spent in the woods. When he was satisfied that Rockland no longer needed his help, he would depart for Northumbria and seek his origins so he could return and marry Elaine, unhindered.

"I'm going to miss you so much when you go," Elaine said one warm spring evening when they rested in bed, her naked body draped over his. Though she no longer had to spend nights at his cottage, she often did. Both of them knew there were whispers among the villagers, but no one spoke openly about the love affair between Lady Elaine and Gabriel.

"I hope I won't be gone long," Gabriel told her.

"When will you be going?"

"A few weeks."

"At least you're leaving us with some well-trained healers. Especially Christian. I can't believe how far that boy has come since he met you. He hasn't dropped anything or tripped in months, and he knows as much about herbs as you do."

"He's intelligent and has good concentration," Gabriel said. "He was happy to learn how to use a bow and arrow, but not nearly as much as he would have been before he started learning the healing arts. He's not meant to be a warrior. It's not in his nature."

"He's nothing like Richard was, thank goodness," Elaine noted. "He and Rebecca have done so well since he disappeared. You have no idea how much she appreciates what you've done for Christian."

"He's been a wonderful apprentice."

“You’re going to be a wonderful father.”

“I don’t know about that.” He stroked her hair, thinking about his lust for battle, his cold killing and the laughter inside him when he wielded his swords. “I hope so.”

“I have no doubts.”

*I wish I was as confident*, Gabriel thought, but his concerns were forgotten when she began kissing him from throat to thigh.

## Chapter Eleven

*Sir William Blackridge, knighted less than a year ago, had already proven himself in battle. Rumors circulated that he could be the greatest warrior the country had ever seen.*

*His had not been an easy rise. The sole survivor of the village of Aubrey that had been destroyed by Vikings, penniless, retaining only his title and the ruins of his village, he had been passed from relative to relative and treated as a useless burden, until he came to live with his Uncle Charles. In that rich, dark castle of pain, he became the whipping boy of Charles's favorite son, Harold. By careful observation, often through a keyhole, William absorbed all the lessons in etiquette, reading, writing, mathematics, and languages meant for Harold.*

*A knight must be educated.*

*William paid particular attention to the bearded, elderly man hired to teach Harold the use of herbs, especially poisons, that could be used for assassinations. This was unusual training for a boy whose goal was knighthood, but Charles had his own beliefs regarding a man's strengths and weaknesses.*

*A knight must be resourceful.*

*On the field, the best horsemen and swordsman trained Harold, using William as his sparring partner. According to the swordsman who trained them in the rare technique of wielding two swords at once, both boys showed remarkable talent for fighting. William's talent with a blade, however, surpassed Harold's, so Charles called the master swordsman aside and ordered him to punish William for attempting to outshine his cousin.*

*"But, my lord, if your son only fights someone who allows him to win, how can you be sure he reaches his own potential?"*

*The swordsman's words infuriated Charles, yet he saw the truth in them. Still, no matter how Harold tried, William remained a little bit better.*

*Harold was knighted. William was not. He was cast out of his uncle's house. Determined to prove himself, William never surrendered to the harsh fate he'd been dealt. He was educated, resourceful and burned with anger. Only in battle did William feel utter contentment. When swords clashed and terror ran high, the crazed urge to laugh aloud often overcame him, frightening many opponents who thought him mad. His reputation grew as lords purchased his skills. With money earned as a mercenary, he bought chain mail and weapons. Finally the king himself, grateful to William for saving one of his favorite cousins in battle, knighted him.*

*Now William had the resources to fulfill his lifelong dream. Finally on equal footing with his cousin, he followed Harold to France to compete in an upcoming tournament, an event yet unpracticed in his home country. The prize would be enough gold for William to rebuild Aubrey.*

*Talk circulated and most of the favor fell upon the Sir William Blackridge, known to be the most powerful of the competitors. The epitome of a true warrior, he was honorable, strong and considerate of those weaker than himself.*

*Sir William felt the power of the horse beneath him as he rode across the field several miles from the tournament ground. After the competition tomorrow, he felt certain he would win the means to rebuild his village.*

*He slipped from his mount, undressed and swam in the clear lake while his horse grazed*



*nearby. As he emerged from the water, the ground shook with hoof beats. A small army of warriors in chain mail and black helmets charged him.*

*His heart throbbing with fury, William wielded his swords, deflecting blows from the mounted men and even managing to knock several from their horses. But naked and terribly outnumbered, he was thrust to the ground, slashed, beaten, tied and tossed in the woods. By the time he freed himself, half dead from blood loss and infection, the tournament was over. Harold had won.*

*William lay on what many expected to be his deathbed.*

*Harold came to him and whispered, "Did you enjoy the bout with my father's men? Never again will you steal my honors. You've always been a penniless, pathetic dreamer, and that's how you're going to die, cousin."*

*Sir William's heart raced in his aching chest, his swollen hands clenched the sheets and his stinging eyes spat hatred at Harold and the Vikings who'd destroyed his home, at the relatives who'd abused him, and the men and women who'd mocked his devotion to battle.*

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel awoke with a start, his heart pounding and temples throbbing. He raised his sweat-beaded body from where he lay half draped over Elaine. She still slept peacefully beneath him and he shifted position, touching a tentative hand to her hair.

"God," he murmured. "I know who I am. Everything. Everything."

Elaine stirred, stretching like a satisfied kitten, and turned to him. "Gabriel? Is it time to get up?"

"No," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

She reached for him and he shivered beneath her touch. "What's the matter? Are you sick?"

He shook his head. "Just a dream."

"Another battle dream?"

"Yes. Another battle."

"Go back to sleep." She gently tugged him into her arms. Resting his head on her shoulder, he closed his eyes while her fingers sifted soothingly through his hair. He didn't sleep, just listened to her steady breathing, felt her body against his, and tried to think of the best way to tell her the painful truth about his identity.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning, as Elaine and Gabriel dressed, she noted he was unusually quiet. His blue eyes watched her carefully.

Folding her arms across her mail-covered chest, she said, "All right, Gabriel. Tell me what's wrong."

"I have something to say, Elaine."

His obvious discomfort worried her. "What?"

He drew a deep breath. "It's not easy. I ... remember who I am."

She smiled, though her body tensed with apprehension. "That's wonderful." He shook his head and her smile faded. "It's not? Oh, God. You're married!"

She dropped onto the bed, pressing her fingertips to her temples.

"Elaine, I'm not married."

Relief washed over her. "You're sure?"

"Oh yes. Quite sure. Before I tell you any more, I want you to know I think you're the most honorable, beautiful woman I've ever known."

"Gabriel," she stood, touching his arm, "you're scaring me. Tell me who you are."

"I love you, Elaine." He paced the room. "Before I met you, before I came to Rockland, I never even knew what love is. Do you love me?" He grasped her arms gently and tilted her face up to his so that their gazes met.

"Of course I love you. You know that."

He nodded, his expression frantic. Again she sensed the wildness in him, the madness that she so often tried to ignore.

"Gabriel, tell me who you are."

"Elaine..."

"Out with it, man!" She giggled nervously. "It's not as if you're going to tell me you're William Blackridge."

He dropped his hands and stepped back, struggling to control his breathing.

Elaine froze. Tears of anger and denial welled in her eyes and she shook her head, whispering, "No. It can't be true. He's dead. Wyborn of Ravenhill killed him."

"I wish he had," William said.

"You bastard!" Elaine snarled, trembling with fury. "How dare you sleep with me? How dare you live in Rockland? I bet you knew who you were all along and decided to hide here to throw off suspicion since there is a price on your head!"

"That's not true."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"If I had my memory, I never would have wasted my time and talents on this pathetic excuse for a village."

Her teeth clenched. "We saved your life! You destroyed us and we treated you as one of our own!"

"Not if you'd have know who I was. You would have burned me alive, or turned me in for that enormous reward on my head."

"Could you blame us?" Elaine dragged her hand across her eyes, unable to control her tears.

"Elaine." He reached for her, but she shoved his hands away.

"Are you happy with what you did to us? Was it bad enough?"

"I wasn't even here when Rockland was attacked! I sent my men to get supplies we needed! I gave strict orders that the woman and children weren't to be harmed."

"Oh, you might not have cut them down with swords, but they were harmed," she spat. "You left them with nothing! You stole their food, maimed and killed their husbands and fathers! You're a cold, evil bastard and I slept with you!" A sick feeling twisted inside her. She paced the room. "God. I shared a bed with William Blackridge."

"And I shared a bed with Elaine of Rockland," he shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "A harlot who lived with mercenaries! I should cut off my manhood and be done with it!"

"No, let me do it for you!" Elaine snarled, lunging at him. Her forearm braced against his throat as she pinned him to the wall by the fireplace.

He laughed, broke her hold easily, and threw her hard onto the bed. He glared at her with coldness she'd never seen before. "A moment ago you swore your undying love, now you want to kill me."

"Who could love you?"

"You're right," he said softly, gazing at her with Gabriel's eyes. Strong, hurt, glistening with affection for her even through the madness that was Sir William Blackridge. "No one could

have loved me as I was, but I've changed. I've changed because of you and Rockland. I could never harm any of you now. Not ever."

"No one will feel that way about you." She sat for a moment, numb with emotional pain that far surpassed any physical injury. "They might want to kill you or turn you in, even though you've done much for us."

"I'll do more, if you'll let me."

"No!" she snapped. Then spoke calmly, though her stomach twisted and her heart ached. "I think it's best if you leave, for your sake and ours."

He nodded, lowering his gaze to the floor. "If that's what you want."

"It is," she said with more sureness than she felt. Part of her hated what he'd done to them during the raid. Another part remembered his kindness and devotion over the past months and longed to throw herself into his arms and soothe away the sorrow gleaming in his eyes. She must be insane! Even though she knew who he was, she couldn't stop loving him.

"I'm going to talk to the others. I'll convince them to let you go."

He laughed wickedly. "Let *me* go? I admire the confidence you have in your pitiful little group."

"Gabriel's tongue was never so vicious."

"You were never so unforgiving."

Elaine stopped halfway to the door and turned to him. "Think about what you did to me and my people. Do you really think anyone could forgive you for that?"

He thought for a moment, remembered the Vikings who'd destroyed Aubrey and the hatred he'd carried ever since. He thought briefly of Wyborn of Ravenhill and the violent assault he'd launched against him and his family, all because he'd never been able to let go of what had happened to his village.

"No," he whispered. "I'll be gone by noon. Just let me sort out some things here so everything will be left in order for Christian and the healers."

Elaine nodded.

"I'll always love you," he said as she slipped out the door.

His words caused fresh tears to well in her eyes, but she walked toward the village without looking back.

\* \* \* \*

William stared blankly at the leather door for several moments before turning back to the table where several piles of dried herbs awaited sorting. He started bagging them, but his hands trembled violently. Cursing, he sat still for a moment, willing himself to calmness to no avail. His head pounded and his throat ached with unshed tears. When had he developed emotions other than hatred? Where was the chunk of granite he called a heart, the one that had kept him alive when others would have given up and perished? He hadn't felt so devastated since he was six years old and his family had been hacked to lifeless bloody heaps before his eyes. Part of him hated Elaine for her cold rejection, but another part of him understood. He didn't deserve her love. In his fury and greed, he'd hurt many people. He'd despised Vikings and had initiated a personal battle with Wyborn of Ravenhill for doing exactly what William himself had done--raiding and conquering.

Wyborn of Ravenhill, or by his Viking name, Wyborn the Indomitable. Thinking of his old nemesis calmed William a bit. Wyborn had been the blond warrior he'd seen in flashes. He'd been the man he'd been fighting before he'd fallen from the cliffs outside of his family's ruins in Aubrey. Never in his life had William met a warrior as skilled and powerful as Wyborn. Just

thinking about fighting the man made him tingle, and he'd sensed Wyborn had felt the same about him.

William's only regret was that he'd kidnapped Lady Marion and imprisoned her below the manor house ruins. Up until the battle for Ravenhill, William had never harmed a woman or child, yet he had kidnapped both Wyborn's wife and young brother.

Since the beating he'd suffered at the hands of his cousin, William had turned from the life he'd tried to build as an honest soldier to one twisted toward thievery and destruction. All his life he'd struggled to become an honorable man whom his parents would have been proud of, but he'd failed. His relatives had tolerated or abused him, so he immersed himself in the illusions of knighthood. He'd known all his life that he'd been different from other people, that his temper was a little worse and his desires often overpowering. He'd struggled to control himself, but why should he bother when men like Harold got whatever they wanted? Why should he repress his desires when a Viking like Wyborn the Indomitable was given, yes *given*, by the very king whom William had served with his blood, a village such as Ravenhill?

Toward the end, before Wyborn's army had defeated his raiders and Wyborn himself had sent the knight tumbling off an icy cliff into the sea, William had reached the height of madness and hatred.

William closed his eyes and sighed. Yes, by kidnapping a woman and child, he had sunk to the lowest depths. He'd wanted to fight Wyborn. He'd wanted Ravenhill, but it was not worth such innocent blood on his hands. For the first time, he was glad Wyborn had survived the torture William had put him through and stopped his reign of terror before there was nothing left of the tiny shred of goodness buried deep inside the mad knight.

Though William still despised Wyborn's arrogance and thought him a rival, he finally admitted his own wickedness in his quest for Ravenhill and in his raids.

Elaine and her people had changed him. Now they were casting him out. A fitting punishment for his crimes, but what was he to do once he'd gone? The desire to fight burned inside him, incinerating him. It was the only way he knew to unleash the anger within him, but the idea of massing another army of raiders no longer appealed to him. Now that he'd lived with the people of Rockland he could no longer blindly destroy lives. Yet he was an outlaw with a price on his head. If he was caught, he would be executed and he had absolutely no desire to die. Perhaps he could travel to Rome for a while. He'd once studied with an herbalist there. Also there were fascinating places in the far east he'd heard about from the elderly man who'd tutored him and Harold in herbal remedies. He could go there for a time.

William finally managed to bag the remainder of the herbs, then he filled his saddlebags with what few belongings he'd accumulated. Two changes of clothes, a couple of days' worth of food, his bag of herbal remedies, a razor and comb. He slipped in a supply of henna as well.

He'd just sheathed his swords when Ezekiel called to him from outside, "Blackridge! Get out here!"

William stiffened at Ezekiel's tone but forced himself to remain calm. The man had every right to be furious.

He stepped outside and was faced with the entire village. Many people were armed and shouting abuse, while others merely looked at him curiously. Ezekiel, Elaine, and James stood in front of everyone, all three looking enraged except for Elaine whose eyes still held a trace of sorrow.

"Many, myself included, would like to kill you here and now," Ezekiel began. "However, at Elaine's request, and for the work you've done for us, we're willing to let you walk out of

here. You will not be allowed back.”

William met Ezekiel's gaze. “I'm on my way.”

“I still say we should kill him,” someone shouted from the back of the crowd. Several people raised pitchforks, shovels, and daggers.

“Wait a minute!” Robert shouted above the crowd. “He saved my children. He has healed everyone here at one time or another and he has worked alongside us rebuilding.”

“Rebuilding what he destroyed,” someone else shouted.

“The last band of raiders had nothing to do with him,” Elaine said. “We agreed to let him leave Rockland and that's what we'll do.”

“Have you anything to say for yourself, swine?” James spat at William's feet.

“It has all been said and it has all been done.” William held James's gaze with an icy look that caused the other man to glance away. William cast the same wicked look to the crowd before disappearing into the cottage to retrieve his belongings.

“That's it,” he heard Elaine say. “Everyone go back to your business.”

At the sound of someone entering the cottage, William spun, his hand on his swords. He relaxed upon seeing Roger, Rebecca, Christian and the two healers wearing benign expressions.

“We just want you to know not everyone hates you,” Rebecca said.

“I really couldn't care less who hates me or not.”

She nodded, casting her gaze down.

William glanced at Robert. “Juniper is in the stable in the village square. Thank you for letting me use him.”

Robert shook his head. “The horse is yours. That was our arrangement. I don't like what your raiders did to us last spring. I hate it, but I don't hate you. How can I? You saved my children. I hope Juniper takes you on the path to redemption. Good luck to you, sir.”

Robert extended his arm to William who, after a moment's hesitation, gripped it and said, “And to you.”

William turned to the healers and Christian. “I've left everything in order for you and wrote down many of the remedies. I've taught Christian how to read them for you.”

“You're not the monster we expected,” one of the healers said.

“You'll be missed,” added the other.

The two women and Robert left the cottage. Only Rebecca and Christian remained.

“I know you're somehow responsible for what happened to Richard,” Rebecca said. He started to speak, but she held up her hand. “You don't have to say anything. Thank you for all you've done. You will always be welcome in our house.”

William smiled slightly.

Christian approached and said, “Take me with you.”

“Christian,” Rebecca scolded.

“I want to go with him!” The boy turned to his mother, tears welling in his eyes.

William dropped to one knee so he was at eye-level with Christian and placed his hands on the boy's narrow shoulders. “I wish you could come with me, but it would be no life for you. You're a good healer, Christian. Stay here and use your talents. Teach others. I might have taught you how to heal bodies, but you've given me far more. You've been a friend.”

Impulsively, Christian flung his arms around William's neck and the knight held him tightly before he stood and took up his belongings. “Take care of your mother, Christian.”

“I will.”

William nodded at Rebecca and headed for the village. He ignored the stares and

whispers as he saddled and mounted Juniper and rode out of Rockland.

\* \* \* \*

As William rode over the fields, leaving Rockland behind him, he felt numb. For a few months, his heart had thawed, now he felt as if a snake had crawled into his chest and used its deadly coils to squeeze it to pulp. He finally remembered why he'd avoided love for so many years. It made one weak and weakness impaired survival.

Rockland was far behind him when he heard hoof beats. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Ezekiel galloping toward him, his sword drawn and face contorted with fury.

William drew one of his swords and turned Juniper to face the young man's attack. Twice they passed each other, blades clashing. William could have knocked Ezekiel from his mount, but not without cutting him and he had no desire to harm him. On the third pass, the force of William's defensive blow swept Ezekiel off the back of his horse. The young knight rose without hesitation. William dismounted and met him on the field.

"Don't do this, Ezekiel."

"Because of the help you've given us, I could probably let you go for what your raiders did last spring, but you hurt Elaine and for that I can't let you live."

"I'm sure your sister has no desire to see you die for her," William said. "And if you fight me, you will die."

"You arrogant bastard!" Ezekiel attacked.

William deflected Ezekiel's hard blows. The young knight was good, but not nearly as skilled as William.

They broke and circled each other on the grass. Ezekiel's breathing was labored and his eyes flashed with rage.

William tried to force his own fury into submission but the fighting sent a shiver of excitement through him. The desire to win was almost tangible.

"Turn back, Ezekiel."

"Not until one of us is dead!"

"I'm not going to kill you," William hissed through clenched teeth.

He saw underlying fear in Ezekiel's eyes. The man knew he was outclassed but his sense of honor wouldn't allow him to back down.

"Then you can die!" Ezekiel shouted, attacking with renewed strength.

It took William several moments to disarm Ezekiel and strike him on the back of the head with the hilt of his sword. He stooped beside the man's unconscious form and checked for a pulse, then dragged him beneath a tree and tethered his horse nearby.

"See what I mean, boy?" William whispered into Juniper's ear as they galloped away. "Weakness. I'm infected. I'll have to do something about that. My first order of business is to get as far from Rockland and Elaine as possible."

## Chapter Twelve

William rode through fields before turning into the woods to better hide his trail, should anyone else from Rockland follow him. He'd been attacked many times by people who hated him but never by someone he had considered a friend. Before coming to Rockland, he hadn't any friends. In his younger years he was too busy training and when he'd finally achieved his goal, he'd thrown himself into battles with the same vigor as he'd pursued knighthood itself. Then he had turned to the ways of the wicked and outlaws had no friends. At least not the outlaw William Blackridge.

His usual response to an attack such as Ezekiel's would have been to slaughter his opponent like a rabid wolf ravages a lamb, but he couldn't. Not only because he was Elaine's brother but because William *liked* him.

"I should know better," William hissed to Juniper. "Every time I try to be good, I end up destroying myself. Everyone can go to bloody hell. Nobody's ever given a damn about me, so why should I give a damn about them?"

After dismounting, he undressed, waded into a nearby brook and washed away the day's filth. He pulled on his breeches and sat on a rock by the water. Without hesitation, he took his razor and cut his long, black hair to his nape. He mixed a paste of henna and applied it to his short, curly locks. While he waited for the auburn highlights to take effect, he cleaned his razor, set one of his swords against a tree, and gazed into the shiny flat of the blade, using it as a mirror. He touched a hand to his chin and sighed. "Damn. My beautiful beard. Oh well, it's either my beard or my neck."

He scraped his face smooth, revealing chiseled bone structure. He washed the henna from his hair and as the water stilled, he looked into the face of a different man.

"Gabriel?" he asked the image in the water, then broke into hysterical laughter, slapping the calm surface, his reflection disappearing in ripples.

He kept to the woods for the rest of the day and camped in a clearing. He stretched out on his back, watching the stars through a space between the tree branches, and wondered if Elaine missed him as much as he missed her. Half of him hoped she did, while the other half wanted only her happiness.

He didn't sleep much that night or the nights that followed. When he did close his eyes for a few brief hours, he dreamed only of Elaine.

\* \* \* \*

It had been two days since Gabriel--Sir William--had gone, and Elaine had spent almost every spare moment on the training field trying to forget about him. Her angel had fallen and in her eyes there was no hope for his redemption. She didn't eat much and slept less, but she didn't notice any discomfort except for the gaping hole where her heart had been. Leave it to her that when she finally fell in love, it would be with the most evil bastard in the land. Yet he hadn't seemed so horrible. The man she'd known had been kind, caring, a little hot tempered in battle, yet he'd been loyal to Rockland and to her.

*But he hadn't known who he really was.*

Still, he'd appeared sincere in his love for her.

Impossible. He was William Blackridge. The man could not be trusted.

Elaine shifted uncomfortably on her bed, staring at the fire's low burning embers and trying to sleep. A knock on the door preceded Katherine's entry. She used a smooth walking stick to guide her toward her daughter's bed and sat on the edge of it.

"You haven't said a word about him since he left," Katherine said.

Elaine shrugged. "There's nothing to talk about. He's a liar, a monster, and I want to forget I ever met him."

"He didn't seem like a monster to me."

"Mother! How can you say that after what his raiders did to us? Don't you remember how many friends and family members we lost? People we've known all our lives died because of him! We lost supplies we needed for survival!"

"He's done terrible things, not only to us but to others as well, yet can you honestly say that he left here a creature of pure evil? Do you think what he shared with us meant nothing to him?"

Elaine shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know what to think anymore. You can sense things, mother. Do you think he's evil?"

"I sensed turmoil in him from the first. Violence surrounds him. He's a man of powerful emotions. I wonder what wounds could cut so deep that a man's soul would bleed away."

Elaine wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "As usual, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're my daughter. I know you're a good woman, and I can't believe you would give your heart to someone truly unworthy. Perhaps there's hope for your fallen angel."

"I miss him, mother." Elaine sank into Katherine's open arms and let her mother hold her as she'd done so many times when she was a child. "I do love him."

"I know you do. Time will tell if he's worthy of that love, Elaine."

"Do you think I'll meet him again?"

"You'll see him again, but under what circumstances I cannot tell. Trust your heart. That's the best advice I can give."

\* \* \* \*

Three days after leaving Rockland, William approached another village, hoping to replenish his supplies. The wind shifted in his direction and he caught the sent of burned flesh and wood. It wasn't heavy on the air but the fading stench of an earlier battle.

Nearing the partially destroyed settlement, he saw a few gaunt men in tattered, bloody clothes digging graves for bodies half covered with ragged sheets. Other fresh graves littered the field. Women and children, their expressions hollow, huddled on the grass or hauled water from a nearby stream.

William dismounted Juniper near an elderly woman packing dung into the infected leg of an injured warrior. The man's face was as pale as the ashes on which he lay.

William took his bag of healing supplies, stooped beside the warrior and said to the woman, "May I?"

"Who the devil are you?" she demanded.

"I'm a healer. I can help you."

"Look around you," the woman scoffed, extending a grimy hand to the ruins. "We can't afford to pay any charlatans."

"Really?" William lifted an eyebrow. "And I thought to receive a king's ransom. Do you want my help or not, old woman?"



She shrugged and sat back.

"I need water," he told her.

She called to a girl who lugged over a bucket of muddy water.

He glanced at it. "Fresh as new rain. Go get me clean water."

"I ain't lugging up no more." The girl plunked down onto the grass. "Been helping dig graves all morning and I'm too tired to stand."

The elderly woman picked up the bucket and brought it to the stream.

As Gabriel examined the man's leg wound, he asked the girl, "What happened here?"

"Raiders. Two days ago. We were all farmers here. No one to fight them. Mercenaries came, but only because some great lord paid them to. They did almost as much damage as the raiders before they drove them off." She glanced at the wounded man. "He's one of 'em. We tossed the others who were left into a hole with the dead raiders."

*Mercenaries. Perfect.*

When the man he was treating awoke, he could find out where his comrades were headed and join them. He had not a coin to his name. All he had was his armor that had been repaired in Rockland and the two swords he had stolen during the attack there. If only he hadn't lost his twin swords in the fight with Wyborn the Indomitable. The blades had been the only gift anyone had ever given him. He'd called the swords Sodom and Gomorrah. Since the day he'd received them, had never been without them.

The old woman returned with the bucket of water and William cleaned the wound. Though he wasn't pleased with what he saw, he believed he could save the leg and the man's life. He removed dirt and puss, cauterized it, treated it with balm and bandaged it.

William stood, glancing around the destroyed village. "Who else needs help?"

Casting him an apprehensive look, the old woman walked with him to the small groups of people in need of care. By the end of the day, he'd treated cuts, burns and breaks.

As dusk fell, he joined the old woman and the wounded soldier who had finally awakened.

"Why did you help us?" the woman asked William.

"Because I can," he stated, turning his attention to the soldier who sat with his back braced against a rock. "Where are your men headed?"

"North."

"Who's in charge of the raiders you were fighting?"

"Don't know, but it's the worst bunch since William Blackridge's band."

William lifted an eyebrow. "Better trained?"

The soldier shook his head. "Just bigger. Richer."

"The richer part wouldn't take much," William muttered.

"How's that?" asked the soldier.

"Nothing. Who should I contact when I find your men?"

"Contact for what?"

"To join."

"I thought you were a healer, not a soldier?"

"I'm both."

"Tell them that. They'll give you a bigger cut of the loot."

"Perfect. Now tell me where to find them."

\* \* \* \*

William knew when he rode into the mercenary camp and requested to join there would

be a test. He was more than simply prepared for it. He longed for it. He needed to vent the pain and rage in his soul. Fighting was the only way he knew to find the release he sought.

The mercenaries, a small band of about fifty in all, were camped in a flat, barren field. Two of the men serving guard duty approached him as he rode up. After making his request, William was brought before the leader of the group, a tall, thickly built man with filthy blond hair and worn leather armor calling himself Dim Bone. He circled William, his black eyes raking him from head to boot. William's frigid gaze followed him during the assessment.

Finally Dim Bone said, "My five best. Beat them and you're in."

"No," William said.

"No?" Dim Bone growled.

"Your best ten."

Dim Bone threw back his head and laughed. "Don't expect a decent burial when you die. We have no time to dig holes for the remains of fools."

"Neither do I."

William mounted Juniper and trotted to the empty field behind the camp while Dim Bone selected the ten warriors. The first, a tall redhead with rippling muscles beneath his leather vest, mounted his horse and rode toward William. The rest of the group formed a wide circle around the opponents.

William drew his sword, his heart racing with excitement. It had been far too long since he'd fought, really fought, not like his confrontation with Ezekiel. Here he didn't have to worry about hurting anyone. That was the kind of fighting he yearned for. Maybe if he fought enough, he could cut Elaine from his soul and fill the emptiness in his gut with hatred.

The redhead drew his sword and kicked his horse to a gallop. William's heels nudged Juniper's golden sides and they rushed to meet the challenge. Steel clashed, but both warriors remained seated. At the second pass, the redhead was knocked from his horse. He melted in to the circle of men as another soldier charged out to meet William almost before he could turn Juniper, giving him little time to block the powerful blow from a burly, sandy-haired man. At the next pass, he shrieked a war cry and knocked his opponent onto the grass.

William faced two more men on horseback. It took several clashes before he knocked his last opponent off his mount. The man owed his longevity more to strength than skill. For several moments before he won, William wondered if the mercenary might knock his arm from his body. He hadn't felt such power since Wyborn the indomitable, but this man didn't have the talent or experience of the Viking chieftain.

With his fifth opponent, the test shifted to ground fighting. A bearded man with a chest covered in mail and legs clad in worn leather strode to the center of the circle.

William dismounted and drew one of his swords, striding toward his match and attacking without hesitation. The blond scarcely had time to deflect William's rapid, well-placed blows, let alone attack. Within moments, he was weaponless and on his knees, a hand clutching a long, shallow slash on his sword arm.

The next warrior lunged at him from behind. William turned in time to avoid severe injury but sustained a slice on his shoulder. Like William, the sixth man attacked with serpentine speed. They traded blows for several moments and William couldn't control his smile.

"What's so funny?" snarled his rangy opponent, his rotted teeth bared as he and William momentarily broke from one another.

"I feel slightly challenged," William replied. "Novel. Exciting. Keep it up. You might even cut me again."

"Oh, I'll cut you," the man seethed.

Their blades clashed again.

William possessed the uncanny knack of ignoring pain and fatigue during battle. Enveloped by passion, he fought like a rabid animal, unaware of reality, focused only on the anger and violence.

The arm he'd been using ached and his breath came in short gasps as he faced his next opponent. Each man he fought came into the match fresh. William noticed that Dim Bone had been wise enough to begin the test with the worst of his ten best, so each new man William faced was slightly better than the last.

He also realized their brief conversation had broken his latest opponent's concentration, so he continued to taunt him until he relieved him of his sword and struck him unconscious with a blow to the head.

Dim Bone stared at William with discerning eyes. "Your arm is getting tired."

William flashed a smile and switched his sword into his left hand. "That's why I have two."

Four more challengers remained before the test was complete. Dim Bone's words were the only break between bouts, but William preferred the tests in quick succession. He hadn't felt so focused since leaving Rockland. The fighting forced him to concentrate on something other than Elaine. He would have gladly fought until he passed out or died rather than continue to succumb to the frustrating pain of separation from the only person he'd loved in over twenty years.

Neither happened. As usual, William fought and won.

When the last warrior was defeated, Dim Bone approved William's joining the band temporarily.

"We'll see how you fare," Dim Bone said, admiration, even a hint of apprehension, in his eyes.

"We'll all fare well from this," William called over his shoulder as he walked to Juniper. Resting a hand on the horse's saddle, he took a moment to catch his breath. He wiped sweat from his eyes and glanced at his wounded shoulder. The shallow cut had already begun to clot.

As the battle-high faded, his thoughts returned to Elaine. He wondered what she was doing and if she missed him.

*This love-sickness is repulsive, especially on you, William.*

Well, at least now he could immerse himself in fighting. Love made one soft, vulnerable. He'd spent his life forging a body and spirit of iron. No one had touched him and that alone had kept him alive. Though Elaine might not have realized it, she had the power to kill him quicker than the reward on his head, Wyborn's sword or any battle. She held his heart, the source of all life. She'd coaxed it out of hiding, kidnapped it, and twisted it with the indomitable fingers of love.

*Love. The word itself makes me sick.*

He glanced over his shoulder at the warriors sleeping, talking and eating by random fires. *I'm home.*

At least that's what he told himself, yet when he thought of home, all he could imagine was a cottage scented with herbs with a dove-eyed woman smiling at him from the bed.

## Chapter Thirteen

For William, the following weeks became a blur of hard riding and fighting. The mercenaries chased raiders through several villages, often causing as much destruction as the outlaws whom they pursued. The mercenaries were being paid by a wealthy lord to capture a particular group of raiders. William knew after the first battle that by the skill and quality of their weapons and armor the raiders were backed by a powerful source.

That first battle also earned William more respect from his comrades, though he realized Dim Bone watched him with wary eyes. His blood lust challenged even the most hardened and twisted of the mercenaries. It wasn't his untouchable skill or his raptor-like war cries that unsettled them, but the moment in the peak of the battle when he laughed. Giddy, infectious laughter as blades slashed and maces swung at him. Laughter that rang out above clashing steel and the agonized shrieks of dying men. Laughter that he tried to control, but melded so deeply with the fighting that he lost all sense of reality and only the battle itself existed.

White teeth glistening in his blood-smeared face, he killed and wounded more raiders than any man in the band.

Afterward, he used his healing skills to salvage wounded mercenaries and aid the villagers. Dim Bone tried to question some captives they'd taken, but the men didn't know the true identity of their leader. William watched from a distance as Dim Bone ordered the captives to be executed. More curious than ever about the mysterious raiders, he was glad they were heading north away from Essex. He hated to think of what would happen to Rockland should they be attacked again, especially by such a highly skilled and well-armed band.

William fought all the succeeding battles with ever-increasing enthusiasm, since those were the only times he didn't dwell on Elaine. He'd hoped that returning to his dangerous, hectic lifestyle would help him forget, but instead he longed for Elaine and Rockland more. At night he missed her body entangled with his. During the day he missed her voice and penetrating looks across the training field or over the dinner table at the manor house.

A few of the raiders attempted to learn more about him, asking him to join them by their fire in the evening, but William kept to himself. For hours every night, he'd stare into the flames of his own small fire, straining to remember the times before Aubrey had been destroyed. He tried to remember what his mother looked like or the sound of his father's laughter. He'd been so young then, with his entire life stretched before him, including leadership of a village, wealth, marriage and children. Vikings had destroyed everything. The cruelty of the relatives to whom he was passed had twisted that innocent child into a driven, hardened creature. The touch of insanity might have always been within him, but his circumstances had nurtured it and turned it into a weapon that kept him alive.

He wondered who he would have grown into had the Vikings never attacked, his family lived, and he'd been raised as a person of worth. In Rockland, it was as if he'd been born again. He had no memories of hatred, death. He had no knowledge of the pain he'd caused others. If given the chance, would he have grown into Gabriel or would he still have become Sir William Blackridge, feared knight and dangerous outlaw?

Sometimes, when he dragged himself out of his morbid thoughts, William heard the

raiders whispering about him in the distance.

"He's mad."

"I don't care how well he fights or if he heals us afterward. We still should watch him."

"He can't be trusted. Devil's seed."

"He has the look of death."

William couldn't argue with the last statement. Earlier that morning while bathing in the river, he'd seen his reflection in the water. The angles of his face shone beneath stubbled skin. Dark smudges of sleeplessness rimmed his eyes. How could he sleep when all he thought about was Elaine?

To combat his frustration, he trained like a fiend between bouts with the raiders. Though he'd grown accustomed to his stolen swords, he still wished he had Sodom and Gomorrah back. They fit him as smoothly as he and Juniper fit one another, as perfectly as he and Elaine... *Stop*. He could think of her no more.

Elaine was gone from his life and the sooner he truly accepted it, the better off he would be.

It had been several days since their last battle. The mercenaries reached a small, coastal village at almost the same time as the raiders. Memories of Aubrey struck William like a fist. The town under attack so resembled his home that as he fought, in his mind, William was defending Aubrey.

The mercenaries meant nothing to him and now more than ever the raiders were monsters to be destroyed.

He fought his way through a group of raiders looting a barn. Axes and swords broke through the wooden doors. The screams of women and children sounded from within; however, they weren't only directed at the raiders. Dim Bone and two of his men had fought their way into the barn and were tossing aside villagers while looting with the same fervor as the raiders.

Blocking blows from every angle, William glanced at them. Mercenaries fought off raiders on the outside. He could join them or continue into the barn where, in his mind, his only option would be to turn on Dim Bone and the others. It wouldn't be an easy fight,

The tip of a raider's blade slashed his cheek and he plunged his sword into his enemy's chest. Inside the barn, a woman shrieked as Dim Bone grabbed her and flung her face down in a pile of hay. He jerked down his breeches and the woman's young son jumped at him. The mercenary leader kicked him aside.

Memories of the mother he'd struggled to recall flashed through his mind.

Without hesitation, he drew his second sword and leapt into the barn. His blade sliced the redhead's neck almost completely off. Dim Bone immediately dropped the woman and he and the soldier with the rotten teeth attacked William simultaneously.

Both were highly skilled, Dim Bone almost as much as William; however, William's talent with two blades combined with his maniacal determination tilted the battle.

"I never trusted you," Dim Bone snarled. "No one turns on us. One way or the other, you're going to die."

"It won't be by your hand." William's teeth snapped like a shark's on prey. He noticed an opening and stabbed the rotten-toothed mercenary in the chest. Gurgling on blood, the man collapsed into the dirty hay.

William turned his full attention to Dim Bone who attacked relentlessly, hatred gleaming in his black eyes. He'd been leader for a long time due to his skill, but William was better and both of them knew it. They fought their way out of the barn. Other mercenaries saw the new man

battling their leader and rushed to Dim Bone's aid.

William blocked and slashed, his stances and parries smooth, fluid, deadly. Lost in battle rage, he didn't even feel the lacerations when several blades found their mark on his flesh.

He killed Dim Bone just as fresh soldiers arrived. The new warriors were dressed in fine leather and mail and easily drove off both the raiders and mercenaries.

One of the warriors noticed William fighting on behalf of the village and aided him.

The fighting ended quickly.

The warrior who had approached William dismounted and removed his helmet, revealing a mass of curly brown hair. William recognized Thomas, a knight he'd met at court years ago. He hoped Thomas wouldn't remember him.

"I don't know who you are, but thank you for your help," Thomas said.

Relief flooded William. "I'm Gabriel. I've been traveling with the mercenaries you just drove off. We've been chasing those raiders."

"Mercenaries," the man sneered. "They're little better than raiders themselves."

William touched a hand to his face and glanced at the blood smearing his palm.

"I'm Thomas. This settlement is part of a larger village in my charge. That's what took my army so long to get here. Most of the raids happen closer to the manor house, but lately there have been so many. They're impossible to predict." Sir Tomas narrowed his eyes at William.

"You look very familiar to me, Gabriel."

William smiled pleasantly and shrugged. "I have a familiar face."

"You have some injuries that need tending to. One of the women will clean them."

"Afterward I can help with the injured. I'm a healer."

"We thank you for your help, and since you've lost payment defending us, we'll make sure you're paid for your services. Fighting like yours doesn't come cheaply and healing is a profitable skill as well."

"For the fighting, my horse is in need of new shoes, but I don't want payment for the healing."

Thomas's back straightened proudly. "We're not as poor as we look. We will pay you."

"Shoes for fighting. I don't want anything for healing. Call it penance."

"If that's how you want it. When everything's in order, I'll bring your horse to my blacksmith. You can rest here for a while, then you'd best be going. Those mercenaries won't like the idea that you turned on them. I can show you a pathway north through the woods. You are going north?"

"Possibly."

"You're from the north. I can tell by the way you speak," Sir Thomas probed, but William had no intention of satisfying his curiosity with details.

*Penance.*

No amount of penance could ever pay for his sins, so why should he bother trying?

*Because it's what Elaine would do. Because having Gabriel partially exist is better than not having him exist at all.*

By nightfall, William had traveled deep into the woods where he set up camp. He decided to spend a few days in the forest where he could think without the risk of being discovered.

The first night, he sat by the fire in his hastily built camp and realized he had no idea what his plans were. He only knew that the life of a mercenary or the life of a raider were no longer options for him. He could no longer destroy innocents and live with the guilt that followed. Damn Elaine! Before he'd met her, he'd never felt guilt or sympathy or love. More

than anything, he wanted to return to Rockland, throw himself at her feet and beg her forgiveness. That picture made him tremble with uncontrollable laughter until his throat ached and tears streaked his face.

*Beg her forgiveness. I've never begged for anything in my life and I'm not about to start now.*

"Not that it would work even if I tried it," he said to Juniper, stroking the horse's foreleg. "So what do I do from here? I suppose I'll have to go east."

Unable to sleep, William took his swords, walked to the center of the clearing and began fighting imaginary opponents. Constant practice and battles with the mercenaries had sharpened his already deadly skills so that he was better than ever, but even working with his swords didn't thrill him as much as it used to. Nothing compared to holding Elaine, talking with her and simply being with her. No amount of rage could envelop him as snugly as love.

Feeling as if he was being watched, William whirled, facing a short, older man with silvery gray hair and a beard, dressed in brown monk's robes.

The monk drew a sharp breath, glancing at William's swords. He smiled. "William of Aubrey? Your father was Blackridge of Aubrey?"

"Gregory?" William sheathed his blades. "My God, it is you. I didn't recognize you in those robes."

The man smiled broadly. "But I'd recognize you anywhere, henna-died hair, beardless and all. No one wields swords with your style. It's very distinctive. I heard you were dead."

"I was. It's a very long story."

"Have you the time to tell it to an old friend?"

"Old friend." William gave a wry laugh. "Only friend and I'm surprised you admit to it."

"You were my finest student," Gregory said, following William to the fire where they sat while William made two cups of strong herbal tea. "Not that I can say I'm pleased with how you've used your talents, but you had your reasons."

"Reasons." William sighed. "I guess we can make excuses for all sorts of behavior."

Gregory lifted a curious eyebrow. "Excuses?"

"Are you really a monk?" William couldn't quite believe his old mentor had turned to the cloth.

"Yes. After your uncle cast me out when he discovered I was teaching you in private, I wandered around for a time before dedicating my life to God. My order in Scotland was destroyed several years ago by Viking raiders."

"The bastards. I despise those murdering, pillaging heathens. Not that I'm much better, but if they hadn't destroyed Aubrey--"

"What they do is wrong, but it was more than Vikings that destroyed Aubrey."

"What do you mean?"

Gregory drew a long breath, picked up a stick and poked at the fire. "You were so young when it happened. I thought it best not to tell you, that not knowing would make life easier for you somehow, especially since it was already done."

"What are you talking about?" William demanded. "If you know something, you have to tell me. For months I've been trying to remember details of what my life was like before Aubrey was destroyed. I'm trying to overcome this hatred that has ruined me and everyone I touch."

Gregory's gaze met William's as if trying to search for the truth in the younger man's soul.

"I knew your parents well," Gregory began. "Your father paid me to train many of his

healers. You're much like your father, a strong man and a skilled fighter. You look like your mother, though. Such a beautiful woman. As you know, your father named Aubrey after her."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Even though he was the oldest and inherited all your grandfather's land, your Uncle Charles was always insanely jealous of your father. Your father was a friend of the king; however, and his highness gave him Aubrey as a wedding gift. It wasn't large, but it was self-sufficient, except one summer almost all the crops died and sickness swept through the village. Your Uncle Charles knew it was vulnerable and he had contacts with a Viking chieftain who was pillaging the coast of Scotland. He told the Vikings about Aubrey's weakened state."

William's heartbeat quickened. He hadn't thought it possible to hate his uncle any more than he already did, but he'd been wrong.

"It was days before anyone discovered the raid, or so your uncle claimed. I was one of the first to arrive. I found you with your mother, covered in blood. You were the only survivor."

"I don't remember that," William whispered.

"I don't expect you would. You were nearly dead yourself. Your uncle wouldn't have you at first, so you were passed from relative to relative. I lost track of you for a time, but before you came to live in Charles's house, I heard rumors of why no one wanted to keep you."

"I didn't talk much, but I ruined plenty of furniture."

"You screamed in your sleep. And you were very ... energetic."

"Can't blame them for not wanting a crazy child, but really, who needed them anyway?"

William leaned back on his elbows and stared at the flames.

Gregory watched him carefully. "Such a pity that after so many years and so many sins you're still so wounded. Much of it is my fault. I knew all about you. I saw how you were treated, but I did nothing. I'm sorry for that, William."

William's eyes met the monk's with surprise. "For what? I wasn't your responsibility. I was lucky you taught me as much as you did, and look what it got you. Charles's wrath."

"I had to teach you. I watched you hiding behind doorways, learning more while peeking through keyholes than your cousin Harold did with teachers in front of him, pounding lessons into his head. You had talent for so many things--languages, mathematics and herbs. You were a better healer at ten than I was at thirty. Maybe it was that bit of madness in you that made you so diligent. I don't know. I only wish so much had been different."

"So do I," William murmured. "Every decision I've ever made has been inspired by revenge and hatred. I wanted to be a knight to spite Charles and Harold. I became a raider to vent my rage because no matter how I tried, I couldn't truly compete in Harold's world. What I never realized was that his world is *nothing*. It means nothing, not when compared to--"

"What?"

William shook his head and closed his eyes. Sometimes if he thought hard enough, he could pretend the breeze was Elaine's touch.

"There's more for me to tell, William," Gregory said. "But first, I want to know what has happened to you."

"I suppose you've heard about the incident between me and Wyborn of Ravenhill."

Gregory nodded. "You plotted to take his land from him. I can only imagine it had to do with your hatred of Vikings."

"I hate them, but I was wrong in what I did, not so much to him, but to his family. I abducted first his brother then his wife." William gave a snort of contempt. "A woman and a child. How much lower could I have sunk?"



"That wasn't like you," Gregory agreed.

"I didn't harm either of them, but if Wyborn hadn't been lucky enough to beat me, Marion could have died beneath the ruins of the manor house at Aubrey where I had her tied."

"Lucky enough?" Gregory lifted an eyebrow. "I hear that Wyborn is a powerful warrior."

"Luck as in the fight could have gone either way. He is very strong and very skilled. He wields two swords." William's pulse quickened with excitement. "What an opponent! However, I regret what I did to Lady Marion. She didn't deserve it."

"But Wyborn did?"

"Forgive me, but I cannot sympathize with a man who raided as much as I did."

"That's fair, I suppose."

"And because of him, I lost Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Those swords I gave you before I was tossed out of your uncle's house. They were a gift to me from my mentor in the east. I never did have a talent for them, but I heard from the sword master who taught you and Harold that your fighting skill was as sharp as your intellect."

"Those swords were the only gift anyone had ever given me, up until this past winter."

"Yes," Gregory leaned forward, staring into Williams eyes. "What happened to you after you fought Wyborn? He had men searching the coastline for your body."

"I fell into the sea and nearly died. A ship from Rockland in Essex found me by chance. A woman named Elaine and her brother Ezekiel saved my life in every way. They were sailing up the coast trading in the middle of winter because the people of Rockland were starving and sickly due to an attack by my raiders earlier that year. I almost destroyed the people who took me in, cared for me and accepted me as one of their own. Of course they had no idea who I was. Neither did I, for that matter. I had no memory at all, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had a real life there, Gregory. I've never had a real life before."

"What happened?" the monk asked softly.

"I became a healer for them. I trained other healers. I befriended a wonderful boy whose father was a monster, but I killed him before I left. I couldn't leave that child to be tortured--" William paused for a moment, realizing that words were pouring from his lips like a cascade of insanity. He continued more calmly, "I fought for them against other raiders. I think they're the same ones who've been attacking villages around here. I had friends there, people I cared for and who cared for me. And I had Elaine."

Gregory smiled. "Tell me about her. When you say her name, your eyes look like jewels."

"Elaine is ... everything. She's a warrior, a lady. She's the keeper of my soul."

"You love her?"

"More than anything. I'd die for her. It's strange. There's so much I'd kill for, but never would I have died for anyone or anything, except her. Now I know how Wyborn must have felt when I took Marion. She said that to me, you know. Lady Marion. She said that Wyborn would defeat me because I took her. I had no idea about the strength of love."

"Now you do."

"When I didn't know who I was, Elaine called me Gabriel. Gabriel was a healer, a man who fought for people he cared about. He was a good man. I can never be him entirely, but do you think that part of him is still inside me? You're a man of God. Do you think I can change?"

"Gabriel," Gregory murmured, standing and clasping his hands together. "I prayed for help. This is a sign. It has to be."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

“Gabriel carried a message. That’s what you must do. That’s why you’re here.” Gregory wrung his hands with excitement. “Would you truly do anything to keep your Elaine from danger? Would you even control that horrid temper of yours, just for a short time, time enough to listen?”

William stood. “What kind of danger is Elaine in? Answer me!”

Gregory gripped William’s wrist almost painfully and stared into the younger man’s eyes. “I’ll tell you everything. The truth of who’s behind the worst of these raids and what their plans are as long as you promise to keep quiet, look, listen and for once in your life use the intelligence God has given you.”

“I promise.” William forced himself to remain calm. “Just tell me what you’re ranting about.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Sir William followed Gregory deeper into the woods until they reached a cottage built in a clearing in the distance.

"My hospice," Gregory whispered. "It was abandoned years ago. I found it after my order was destroyed and restored it. A young Brother and I live here and care for those who are sick or in need of shelter. Lately it has become the meeting place of evildoers and we can't stop them."

"Evildoers?"

"You were right in thinking the raiders in these parts are from one group. The one who rules them all meets here with the leaders of his smaller groups to plan their strategy. He's massing a large army of raiders and plans to take over the entire land."

"If you know this, why don't you just go to the king?"

"It's not that easy. He said if I do that, he'll kill everyone in the hospice. These people depend on me, William. I can't endanger them any more than they already are."

"If the raiders meet here, why don't you just poison them? You taught me a thousand ways to kill with herbs."

"Because they don't eat or drink here. They know about my skills because the leader of them all is Sir Harold, your cousin."

"He's in there now?" Furious, William reached for his swords.

"Damn it, man! You gave me your word you'd control yourself and listen! You're the only hope I have, and if you ruin our chance to bring about the fall of Harold's raiders, thousands of people will suffer."

William drew a calming breath and released his hold on his weapons. "All right. I promised, but why did you bring me here if not to kill Harold?"

"Right now they're sitting around a fire making plans. There are twenty of them in all. They are the finest warriors in the land. Harold chose his minions well. You couldn't best them all at once. Even if you tried, Harold would ride off before you had a chance at him."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Learn as much about their plans as possible, then do whatever you can to stop them."

"Stop them?" William snickered. "I'm one man against a bloody army? Do you expect miracles?"

"All those years of fighting and strategy and you can't think your way out of the problem?"

"Just lead me to where I can eavesdrop."

Gregory smiled. "I knew you'd see reason eventually. Let me tell you this, so you'll know what you're fighting against. Your Uncle Charles was a crafty man. He smiled to the king's face, reaped the legal rewards of his high birth, but paid a secret band of raiders to mass even more wealth. He passed on his raiders to Harold, who has been living the same two-faced life as his father, except with larger ideas. Harold's army is growing."

William's thoughts spun with this newly acquired information, but he'd have to sort it out later. Gregory told him to climb onto the roof of the hospice. There was a hole in the thatching where he could listen.

William lay flat, peering through the hole at the group of warriors gathered around a long wooden table. Haggard men and women were resting on the floor, tended by a young monk wearing a frightened expression.

William's heart throbbed in his chest, his gaze fixed on Harold who sat at the head of the table. Tall, thickly muscled, with dark green eyes and shoulder-length blond hair, Harold wore his good looks with the same arrogance as he wore the twin swords at his hips. The only lack of physical perfection was in the slightly crooked twist to his nose. William smiled at the memory of how he'd broken Harold's nose in a sparring match when they were children. His uncle had ordered William flogged afterward, but it had been worth every moment of pain to see Harold's face splattered with blood.

"We've looted almost every village in the south," Harold said in the slow, pompous voice William remembered. "We have more than enough supplies to begin raiding to the north, then we can circle downward toward London. By winter, everything will be mine."

"And nothing can stop us," said one of the warriors.

"Nothing and no one," Harold agreed. "By the end of the week, we'll begin our journey divided into three groups, one on the east coast, one on the west, and one up the center. We'll merge in Northumbria."

William listened as the raiders were split into groups, all the while thinking of the best way to stop them. He would have to warn the villages to the north that the raiders were coming. He would... How could he warn anyone of anything when there was a price on his head? He was an outlaw himself. Should he be recognized, he would be taken before the king and executed. No one would believe his word over Harold's, not when the treasonous knight was still known as a faithful servant of the king.

The warriors stepped out of the hospice and William sank deeper into the thatched roof, peering at the men. They assembled in the clearing beneath the light of the full moon to practice swordplay, before they broke and returned to their own camps.

Gregory was right in his comments about the raiders' skills. All nineteen of Harold's leaders were powerful warriors, but Harold himself surpassed them all. Always a talented swordsman, Harold had sharpened his skills even more through years of training and raiding. He was the only man among his group who wielded two blades.

William watched him, his hands itching to grab his swords, jump into the raiders' midst and fight until he slaughtered them all or died trying. Most likely it would end up the latter and he couldn't risk his death at the moment. Not when Harold was planning such devastation that would affect Rockland. He couldn't bear the thought of Elaine and her people suffering under Harold's hand and knew of only one way to stop them. To do that, he had to go north, but he'd need help. The mercenaries had been following the raiders in a loop, therefore if he traveled day and night, he'd reach Rockland in less than two days.

He waited until Harold and his men left, then climbed down from the roof and spoke briefly with Gregory.

The monk's eyes widened with hope. "You have a plan?"

"Of course I have a plan, but I have to return to Rockland. I'll need their help, if they don't kill me on sight. The fastest way to Northumbria is by ship."

"Can you use any help?"

"Unless some miracle happens, I'm going to need all the help I can get. We all will. You saw my horse Juniper at my camp?"

Gregory nodded.

"I'm riding him until tomorrow afternoon, then I'll have to change horses. I don't intend to stop riding until I reach Rockland. I need you to pick up Juniper and meet me at my destination in the north. Your healing skills will be required. Follow me to my camp and I'll give you the details."

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until weeks after William left that Elaine's life took on the semblance of normalcy. Her mother's prediction that she and William would meet again had given her hope. Part of her was sickened by her desire for a man who had caused them all such grief. Still, she couldn't believe he was completely evil, not after all they'd shared and all he'd done for Rockland. Some part of Gabriel must exist in William, for even lack of memory couldn't change his soul, the core of who he was.

Elaine dreamed of him almost every night. Often during the day she found herself wondering where he was and what he was doing. He'd left Rockland with nothing but his horse, his weapons and a sack of herbal remedies.

"He'll survive," Ezekiel reassured her one morning as they were hunting together. "His kind always do. I just can't believe he didn't kill me when he had the chance."

"I can't believe you went after him. You're a great fighter, but did you really think you could beat him.?"

"I had to try. His raiders almost destroyed us and look at what he did to you."

"He did nothing I didn't ask for."

"Come, Elaine, you had no idea who he was. None of us did."

Elaine shrugged. "There are some here who still miss him."

"I miss him on the training field and for the rebuilding. He was strong as a draft horse."

"Yes," Elaine smiled dreamily, "he was."

Ezekiel shook his head as they continued walking in silence.

They returned home in early afternoon, both of their horses toting deer and rabbits. They were unloading their mounts when James shouted from the wall.

"Ezekiel! Elaine!"

Elaine glanced up and saw several archers poised to shoot.

"What is it?" Ezekiel called, practically flying to the wall, Elaine beside him.

Reaching the top, Elaine gazed out at a horse and rider surrounded by several of Rockland's mounted warriors. His hair was cut short and streaked with burgundy and his beard had been reduced to the shadow of several days' growth, but she'd know that face and body anywhere.

"Mother of God," she whispered, her heart pounding painfully in her chest.

It took Ezekiel a moment to recognize William, but when he did, he muttered, "I can't believe the bastard had the nerve to come back."

"He says he has something important to tell you," one of the soldiers called. Elaine knew by the man's tone and expression that he hoped they'd give the order for Gabriel--Sir William--to be shot down then and there.

"Elaine, I must talk with you," William called. "Lives depend on what I must say."

"If it's his own life, he can go to hell," Ezekiel whispered to Elaine.

"We should at least hear what he has to say," she said.

Ezekiel pulled her out of hearing distance from the others and murmured, "Are you saying that because you're still in love with him or because you think he really has something important to tell us?"

Elaine glared at her brother. "I would never endanger Rockland for my own feelings. Why would he come back and risk his life? We should hear him out."

Standing, Ezekiel called to William, "Dismount, place down your weapons, and follow our men inside, but I warn you, one wrong move and you'll be killed."

William smiled wickedly, his white teeth gleaming in his dirt-stained, stubbled face, and slipped from his exhausted mount.

Just seeing him again made her pulse race.

He placed his swords on the grass and the gates opened. William followed the mounted guards through, walking amidst them, two in front of him, two behind.

Elaine and Ezekiel met him inside the gates. His eyes immediately locked with Elaine's. Her hands trembled in spite of the warm summer's day. Though she tried, she couldn't look away from him. His face and clothes were streaked with dirt and by the look of him he'd ridden relentlessly to reach them. His blue eyes were rimmed with black lines of fatigue and he was too thin, with every muscle and bone showing beneath his sweat-soaked clothes. Still, the sight of his broad shoulders, powerful chest and steely legs made her stomach tighten with desire.

"What do you have to say?" Ezekiel demanded.

"In private," William stated. "And you might want James to hear, as well."

Ezekiel motioned for James to join them.

Villagers gathered around as the four made their way to the manor house. Some of them shouted abuse at William while others called to him in pleased greeting.

"Everybody out," Ezekiel growled, entering the manor house.

The servants, not accustomed to such gruff orders from their master, disappeared, casting curious glances in William's direction.

"It's Gabriel," one of the maids whispered to another.

"William Blackridge, you mean," her friend replied.

\* \* \* \*

William fought to keep his heartbeat under control, difficult with Elaine nearby. She was so beautiful with her black hair hanging wildly down her back and her long, curvaceous legs encased in masculine breeches. It was hard to feign indifference when gazing into those dove's eyes and seeing such anger and hatred.

Though tired after two days of hard travel without sleep or a decent meal, he thrust aside his discomfort to fulfill the important task he'd set for himself.

"All right. Say what you have to," Ezekiel snarled once they were alone.

"A raid is coming. Bigger than any we've ever seen. The man leading it plans to take over the entire land. He's a tyrant, and coming from me, that should make you think about how bad he really is."

"Take over the entire land?" James laughed. "Simple raiders?"

"These are *not* simple raiders," William said through clenched teeth. "Haven't you noticed an unusual number of raids in these parts lately?"

"He's right." Elaine glanced at Ezekiel and James. "Our traders came back not more than a week ago with stories of villages being destroyed and bands moving north. But since they're headed away from us, we thought we wouldn't have to worry."

"Should we believe him?" James motioned with his head toward William. "He's an outlaw himself. A raider, a murderer, a thief. For the love of God, this is William Blackridge we're talking about."

William's gaze darted frantically from James to Ezekiel to Elaine. He had to make them

believe him or else they were doomed to suffer Harold's wrath.

"Why would I have come back here if it wasn't true? I know you all want to kill me. Why would I risk that?"

"Yes, why would you?" Elaine folded her arms across her chest and circled him. "You almost destroyed us last year and now you expect us to believe you're worried about our welfare or anyone's for that matter?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe about me or my character, but know this--the man who is behind these raids will stop at nothing to get what he wants. He has wealth, power and the favor of the king."

"Why don't you go to the king and tell him?" Ezekiel taunted. "Oh, but you can't, can you? There's a price on your head."

"I say we turn him in for that price," James suggested. "It would be more than enough to make Rockland as secure as we were before his raid last summer."

"No!" Elaine snapped, then spoke more calmly. "Are you forgetting he did us some good and he left Ezekiel alive when he could have killed him?"

"He's Sir William Blackridge," James stated.

A soft voice spoke from the far corner of the room, "But he's also Gabriel."

All eyes turned to Katherine who approached the table, guided by her walking stick. Elaine took her mother's arm and helped her to a chair.

"My lady," William said softly to Katherine who held out her gnarled hand to him. He took it gently in his large, travel-dirtied one.

"What do you think, Mother?" Ezekiel asked hesitantly.

Katherine rarely spoke unless her premonitions were certain. Neither of her children ever remembered her being wrong.

Katherine closed her eyes, her hand still clasping William's. "He believes what he's saying. I sense no deception from him, but there is still turmoil." She opened her blind eyes and released William's hand. "Tell us everything you know, everything you've seen, then we'll decide."

William felt both relieved and annoyed. Since leaving his uncle's house, he had never allowed himself to be placed on trial for anything before anyone. Now he, William Blackridge, was bowing before people he could have fought and killed with one of his arms broken. Still, he found himself telling them almost everything that had happened to him since he'd left Rockland, from joining the mercenaries and fighting the raiders to his meeting with Gregory in the woods. He omitted his pining for Elaine, his reasons for turning against the raiders and the secrets of his childhood revealed by Gregory. Such things were far too personal and would be of no interest to any of them.

When he'd finished, they sat in momentary silence.

Finally, Ezekiel said, "Tell me, Blackridge, is there a decent person in your family or are you all cutthroats, traitors and thieves?"

William laughed. "The only reason your vile tongue is still wagging is because this cutthroat didn't kill you. Remember that, pup."

Ezekiel ground his teeth and reached for his sword. "If you weren't unarmed----"

"You'd most likely be bleeding right now."

"Stop it, both of you," Elaine snapped. "Ezekiel, he didn't have to come here, you know. And you." She turned to William. "We could have killed you on sight."

"So he came and told us we're all going to die or be ruled by his maniacal cousin." James

threw up his hands. "What good does it do us?"

"James is right," Elaine sighed. "Harold has the king fooled. Even if he," she nodded to William, "could get as far as court, he'd be executed, and without the king, where can we find an army big enough to fight Harold's?"

William drew a deep breath, his smile fading, as he said, "I know where."

\* \* \* \*

*Ravenhill, William thought while washing in the river outside of Rockland. I can't believe I'm going to ride directly into Ravenhill.*

Laughter bubbling in his throat, he spoke aloud. "Shall I say, 'Wyborn, old friend, I need to borrow your army?' or how about, 'I know I abducted your wife and we nearly slaughtered each other, but do you think we could ally ourselves for a month or two just to kill off my cousin?'"

He ducked under the cool water, scrubbed off quickly, and dressed in fresh clothes. He had just settled onto a stone and begun shaving when Christian raced over the hill toward him.

"Gabri ... I mean, Sir William! You're back!"

The boy dropped onto the grass beside him and William smiled, ruffling Christian's hair.

"I've only been gone a few months and you've grown like a sprig of wheat."

"Are you going to stay?"

"I wish I could," William said, continuing his shave. "But I don't think it's possible."

"Oh." Christian lowered his eyes. "We've been taking good care of your house. The healers and I use it for supplies and to make medicine."

"You remember everything I taught you?"

Christian feigned annoyance. "In the village, they call me to fix people up almost as much as the girls."

"I have a friend who'd love to meet you." William thought of Gregory and all he could teach the boy. "Maybe someday."

"Talk around the village is you're going away again. Sailing north with Elaine and Ezekiel."

"That's true. Actually, I have to go help them load the ship." William ran a hand over his smooth jaw, packed away his razor and stood.

"Can I help?"

"We can use all the hands we can get."

Together, they walked toward the village.

"William, now that you've come back, do you think you could visit again?"

"I hope so, Christian."

"Nothing has been the same without you."

"Nothing has been the same for me since I left."



## Chapter Fifteen

By midday the ship was ready to sail from Rockland. Ezekiel and Elaine decided that James should be left behind with some of the warriors to protect the village, while the others sailed to Ravenhill to join Wyborn's army.

"He'll probably kill you on sight," Ezekiel said of the Viking chieftain as he and William loaded supplies onto the ship.

William smiled. "No doubt he'll try."

Ezekiel shook his head with disgust. "You really are insane, aren't you?"

"Isn't it a bit dangerous to tell a madman he's mad?" William said.

"He's more malicious than he is mad," Elaine sneered, leading two horses toward the ship.

William winked roguishly at her and she turned away with an irritated expression on her lovely features.

A short time later, William stood beside Elaine on deck, gazing at the villagers who were waving from the shoreline as the ship sailed off.

"Well, it has begun." Ezekiel joined them on the bow, folding his arms across his chest. "There's still work to be done."

"I'll help you," William said.

"No," Elaine shook her head at Ezekiel, "he won't."

William narrowed his eyes at her in question. She grasped his wrist and tugged him to the cabin below.

"You look terrible," she said. "When's the last time you slept?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "How long have I been gone from Rockland?"

"Come up when you're rested."

She walked to the door, but he held it closed.

"Step aside," she ordered.

"You haven't addressed me once since I arrived."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you can't even bring yourself to say my name."

She shot him a fiery look. "The thought of it makes me sick."

He smiled humorlessly. "I award you points for honesty."

"You want honesty? Here's honesty. I've never been better since you left Rockland. Until you showed up this morning, I haven't thought of you once!"

"Shout a little louder, Elaine. They couldn't hear you on deck."

"Out of my way!" She shoved him hard in the chest, and he grasped her firmly, pinning her against the door, his lips inches from hers. The feeling of her body so close to his made his pulse race. He longed to kiss her tenderly but their tempers were well beyond that. He brushed his cheek roughly against hers and snarled, "You miss this, don't you, my lady?"

It seemed like forever that he'd dreamed of holding her again like this, with her soft breasts pressed intimately against his chest. Only in the dreams there hadn't been such rage between them. He gripped her upper arms firmly but not harshly.

"Don't call me that," she snarled, trying to force him to release her. Though a strong woman, she couldn't overpower him.

"You prefer *my concubine*?"

As soon as he'd spoken the word he regretted it. Her gaze met his but without the hatred he'd anticipated. Anger shone in her eyes, but also sorrow. His hands loosened on her. Perhaps it was best that they fought. She deserved better than him. She belonged with a good man who wasn't constantly running from the law and battling for his sanity. Suddenly he wanted to see hatred in her eyes, wanted to know she was safe from him.

"I'm sorry for you," she whispered. "The way you live, the way you are. You push away everyone who could possibly care for you. It wasn't always that way. Not when you were Gabriel."

"Gabriel," he scoffed. "Your angel. No man could be all of that."

"You were." She touched his cheek.

"Maybe I had started to become a bit of the man you wanted me to be, then when you found out who I really was, it was as if nothing I had done as Gabriel mattered to you." His words dripped with contempt, though whether or not it was directed at her for turning on him or at himself for caring so much about what she thought, he wasn't sure.

Drawing a sharp breath, she stared into his eyes with a guilty expression.

He jerked away and reached for the doorknob. "I'm going up."

Before he could open the door, she locked her arms around his neck. Her lips brushed his earlobe and she whispered. "I've missed you so much."

He knew for her sake he should walk away, but he hadn't the strength. For months he'd dreamed of such a moment and now it was happening. She was accepting him, not as Gabriel, but as William. She didn't hate him.

"God, I've missed you," he said, holding her so tightly that their hearts beat in unison. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

"You loved me once," she said.

He stepped slightly aside only to place his fingertip beneath her chin and tilt her face to his. "I love you still. Before I met you, I had no idea what love was."

She smiled slightly, took his hand, and walked to the bed.

Stretching out on his back, he pulled her into his arms. He suddenly realized how tired he was. His eyes stung and every muscle in his body ached, but he'd never felt better. Elaine was in his arms.

"They're coming," he said.

She placed her hand over his where it rested on her hip and replied, "But they won't come tonight, so rest."

He closed his eyes, tugging her nearer.

"You didn't have to come back," she said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, my lady," he murmured before succumbing to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

William awoke ravenous and more refreshed than he'd been in months. He ate the food and washed in the water Elaine had left in the cabin, then climbed on deck. Squinting against the sunlight gleaming off the water, he searched for Elaine who stood at the bow talking with Ezekiel. At William's approach, Ezekiel joined a small group of men at the opposite end of the ship.

"Good morning." Elaine smiled, placing one hand above her eyes to shield them from the

sun as she looked up at him.

"Morning?" he said. "I've been sleeping since yesterday afternoon?"

"You needed it. You look much better, even though I'll have to get used to you with that short hair. The henna will fade, I imagine?"

He laughed. "Is it that bad?"

"I don't mind the hair so much, but your beautiful beard..." She briefly stroked his smooth jaw.

"I miss it too, but it's safer this way. At least for now."

She gazed at the sea and he studied her carefully.

"Where should we go from here, Elaine? The two of us, I mean," he said softly so that only she could hear.

"I care about you. I can't help that," she said, "but everything can't go back to being as it was. Not now. Maybe not ever."

"I've done terrible things. I can't change that, but I can change how I live from now on. I won't bother you with excuses for my actions. There are none. At least none that make any sense."

She turned her intense gaze to him. "Try me."

He shook his head, not wanting her to be disgusted by his weaknesses, or even worse, to feel sympathy, if she was able to feel such an emotion for him at all.

"All I can tell you is this, Elaine, I will prove myself to you."

"I'm not asking you to."

"*I'm* asking. I have crimes to pay for. Penance to serve. I'm a warrior, Elaine. I have to fight, but now it can be for a just cause, as it always should have been. And I can heal."

She shook her head, clasping her hands tightly in front of her. "I want to believe you, but what made you realize all this?"

"You did. And the people of Rockland. You showed me a life I never imagined, at least not for me."

"Why not for you? Will you tell me something about who you really are? We've shared so much but I still don't know you."

He took a step closer to her so their bodies touched. They stood side by side, gazing out to sea.

"Just know that I love you, Elaine, and until I met you, I hadn't felt loved by anyone in a very long time."

She drew a breath and seemed about to speak.

"You don't have to love me," he said. "I know I haven't been the most loveable sort of man. Right now it's enough that you don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," she said quickly, looking up at him. "Not at all."

A smile flickered across his lips. "That's far more than I expected."

"I'm concerned about Ravenhill. Wyborn will try to kill you. I don't know them very well, only from that one day this past winter. If he wants you dead, we won't be able to protect you."

He laughed. "Protect me? I should be flattered. No one has ever worried about my safety before, but I assure you I need no protection. I'm almost looking forward to meeting Wyborn again. He's a great fighter and the strongest man I've ever met."

"He's tall as you, but he looks like an ox."

"That's a Viking for you." William couldn't keep the annoyed clip from his voice.

"I see you've had dealings with Vikings before?"

"Yes. Dealings."

"Where?"

"My village when I was very young."

"Your village." She turned to him, curious. "Where are you from?"

"Aubrey in Northumbria. It was destroyed."

"I'm sorry."

"It was long ago. I scarcely remember," he lied.

\* \* \* \*

William spent the day on deck with the others and took the first watch with Ezekiel that night. As the moon rose and washed the silent ship in its pale light, Ezekiel and William stood a short distance from each other.

Finally, Ezekiel asked, "Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?"

"You pulled me out of the ocean in the middle of winter and you have to ask why?"

"I didn't think honor was one of your attributes."

"It was once, then it lost meaning for me."

"When you decided it was easier to become an outlaw than to do what's right?"

"Yes, if you must know the truth."

"And now you expect us to believe you've changed?"

"I don't expect anything of you."

"And my sister?"

"I don't expect anything of her either."

"Because you already got it all," Ezekiel snapped.

William glared, but his voice remained deadly calm. "Elaine is a lady and your sister. Whatever we did or didn't share is no one's affair, including yours. I will not engage in a conversation that remotely disrespects her and I will not hear words of disrespect regarding her."

"She's my sister, you arrogant bastard. If you cared about her as much as you pretend, you wouldn't have ... you would have..."

"What?"

"Bloody hell!" Ezekiel's teeth clenched. "I can't even blame you completely because you didn't know who you were. I won't mention Elaine again, except to say this. You hurt her. Do so again and I will find a way to kill you."

"I wasn't left unscathed by the way our relationship ended, you know."

"Do you honestly think I care?" Ezekiel glared.

William's jaw tensed, but he fought to keep his temper under control. After all he'd done to the people of Rockland, he understood Ezekiel's fury toward him. "Don't worry. I'd sooner kill myself than harm Elaine." William walked to the other end of the ship.

When his watch ended, he lay down on deck and stared at the stars. Soon he and Wyborn would meet again. It was inevitable that they would fight, but he had to face the Viking. William knew the details of Harold's plans. The cowardly idea of sending Elaine and Ezekiel to Ravenhill alone had never occurred to him. As soon as he learned of Harold's twisted plan, he was already part of the battle.

A shadow passed over his face and he sat up quickly.

"Shh." Elaine held a finger to her lips. Crouching beside him, she whispered, "Come with me."

He followed her silently to her cabin where she closed the door and guided him to the

bed. When he sat, she straddled him, her hands clasping the back of his neck, her mouth covering his.

His palms splayed across her back and he closed his eyes. He traced the shape of her mouth with his tongue before it slid between her lips and mingled with hers.

She kissed his cheek and his temple, then drew back so she could meet his gaze. They exchanged slight, tender smiles.

"They can hear us outside," he whispered.

She placed a finger to his lips and said, "Not if we're silent."

He was about to speak again, but she mouthed silent before kissing him.

His hands slid beneath her billowy shirt and stroked her back and ribs until his palms cupped her breasts. His thumbs caressed her nipples and she closed her eyes, arching against him. At his delicious, relentless touch, a soft moan rose in her throat, but he whispered against her lips, "Silent."

Opening her gray eyes halfway, she smiled at him. Her fingers threaded in the short hair at his nape and she kissed him again, even deeper than before. She took his bottom lip between her teeth, tickled it with her tongue, and bit sharply, making him gasp with pleasure. His staff swelled with need, pressing against her.

Suddenly he grasped her arms, held her away, and said in a strained whisper, "That's enough, Elaine."

"Not nearly." She bent to kiss him again.

"Not like this." He stood, gently guiding her to her feet. "Not until you believe me. Not until I prove myself."

"You're serious?"

"I've never been more serious in my life."

"But--"

"Goodnight, Elaine." He brushed her lips with his, kissed the back of her hand and left her staring after him.

\* \* \* \*

William stood on deck between Elaine and Ezekiel as the ship neared the shore at Ravenhill. Upon seeing the vast fleet of Viking ships, an odd sensation coursed through him. It was strange seeing such ships without the threat of war. Threat? Wyborn had kept the shore safe, as he'd promised. From what William heard, he'd also opened up trade with Rockland. Wyborn was not only a strong fighter, but a shrewd man.

When they docked, a tall chestnut-haired man approached with an auburn-haired Viking whom he introduced as Kell. William had once ordered his raiders to beat Kell; however, William had never actually met him until now.

The chestnut-haired man smiled in greeting. "Elaine, Ezekiel, we weren't expecting you, but it's good to see you."

"You might not say that after you hear the news we bring, Derek," Ezekiel told him.

Derek. William stared at the tall Scotsman with interest. He was the one who had led Wyborn's army against--and defeated--William's raiders.

"What news?" asked Kell.

"If you don't mind, we'd like to discuss it in the presence of Wyborn and Marion," Elaine said.

"You've brought many men with you this time," Derek observed.

Ezekiel said, "We have good reason."

Derek led Elaine, William, Ezekiel and a small party of their warriors toward the manor house while Kell went to find Wyborn and notify him about his visitors.

As they rode toward the village, William's pulse raced. He was relieved no one had recognized him. Still, he wasn't surprised since he'd never met Derek or Kell before and the few of Wyborn's warriors who would know him weren't in sight.

In the great hall a plump, elderly maid toting an infant in each arm greeted them.

"My lady has gone upstairs for a moment, but I'll fetch her," the maid said. "She'll be happy to see you again, I'm sure."

"Oh, I'm sure," William muttered under his breath, causing Elaine to elbow him in the ribs.

"Thank you, Brenna." Derek nodded to the maid who placed the babies in a cradle by the hearth and hobbled up the stairs at the far end of the hall.

Marion descended the steps at almost the same moment Wyborn shoved open the door of the great hall. Upon seeing William, Marion's smile faded and her face drained of color. Wyborn's initial scowl turned to a look of disbelief, then full-blown rage.

"Marion, Wyborn, you have to listen to us," Elaine said. "We need to help each other in this matter--"

Bellowing curses, Wyborn drew both of the swords he carried on his hips and lunged at William who pulled out his blades in scarcely enough time to defend himself against the burly Viking's bone-crushing blows.

William couldn't control his smile. Excitement coursed through him. No one had ever challenged him as much as Wyborn. He nearly forgot his purpose for coming to Ravenhill as he avoided Wyborn's attacks and delved into his own. One of his blades nearly slashed Wyborn's chest, but for a man of his size, the chieftain was incredibly fast and agile. William moved like a panther, Wyborn like a lion.

"By Thor's hammer, I knew you weren't dead," Wyborn growled. "This time I won't be so careless."

Elaine rushed to Marion who had picked up her infants and thrust them into the arms of two terrified young serving girls, ordering them to safety.

"Marion, please. You have to listen to us," Elaine begged.

"How dare you bring him into our home?" Marion snarled. "Do you have any idea who he is?"

"Yes, but you have to listen," Elaine shouted above the noise of the fighting men. Kell and Derek had also unsheathed their swords and dove after William. That was when Ezekiel and his warriors drew their weapons.

"Stop this at once!" Marion stood in the center of the long wooden table and shouted at the top of her voice. "Wyborn, call off those men!"

"Both of you drop your damn swords," Wyborn bellowed to Kell and Derek, not taking his gaze off William. "This load of cow-dung is all mine!"

"Graciously put as always, Wyborn," William said between clashes of steel. "Tell me the truth, you've missed this as much as I have. God, you're good. Parry left. Thrust right. Ah! The slightest bit more and I'd be a eunuch!"

"For once in your life close your enormous mouth," Elaine screamed at William. "And the rest of you throw down your weapons!"

Derek, Kell, Ezekiel and his men stood glaring at each other and watching the battle rage

between Wyborn and William.

"Can't you convince him to at least listen to what we have to say?" Elaine clenched her fists at her sides, staring at Marion who still stood on the table, her small frame trembling, her dark eyes enraged.

"I can't convince him of anything, even if I wanted to, which in this case, I don't!"

With a barbaric cry, Wyborn kicked a stool into William who jumped backward onto the steps. Wyborn pursued, forcing William up the staircase. One of William's booted feet kicked the Viking in the face. Rather than falling, Wyborn, only slightly stunned, shook back his waist-length mane of blond hair and nearly missed blocking William's next swipe.

"Can't you see they're going to kill each other," Elaine cried.

Her words finally struck fear deeper than Lady Marion's hatred.

"Wyborn! Stop it!" Marion shouted, but her husband was obviously too enraged to even hear her voice.

"Give me that!" Marion tugged Elaine's sword from its sheath, ran to the stairs and scurried between the warriors. Wyborn had trained her in swordplay and she had complete control over the weapon, but her strength was nothing compared to the powerful blows of Wyborn and William. Elaine would have had a far better chance of blocking them but Wyborn would never have stopped fighting for her.

Luckily, when Marion stepped between them, both men ceased. William's blades froze in a blocking position, Wyborn's in a downward swipe. The Viking's sapphire eyes shot hatred at William's azure ones. Both men were breathing heavily.

"Drop your swords." Lady Marion seethed. In spite of her insignificant height, the look in her eyes was that of a furious bull and her tone commanding.

"What we have to say means life or death for thousands." Elaine walked to the steps. "You must listen."

"We can at least hear what they have to say," Marion said to her husband, then cast Elaine a hard look. "And it better be bloody important."

"I'll listen," Wyborn lowered his swords and wagged one at William. "But afterward, he's still going to die."

## Chapter Sixteen

Wyborn sat in utter silence as William, Elaine and Ezekiel told their story. The chieftain's dark blue eyes betrayed no emotion, not even mild curiosity, but William knew how adept Wyborn was at concealing his thoughts and becoming almost inhuman when the situation required it. His man Derek was almost as controlled as the chieftain. Almost. Derek's fiery Scottish temper shone in his green eyes. William could relate to the man. Keeping his temper had always been his greatest problem.

Once everything was told, Derek snapped, "Why should we believe you when more than likely you're a bunch of lying-arsed, land-stealing--"

"Land stealing?" Ezekiel laughed humorlessly. "As if we could defeat this village of Viking war mongers."

Wyborn's eyes narrowed at William. "We have absolutely no reason to believe you. Any of you, but especially him."

"There is an army of raiders coming this way," William said with forced calm. "You can either believe us and prepare for it or ignore us and possibly be destroyed."

"I never ignore any possibility," Wyborn stated. He glanced at Kell. "When this meeting is over, send a couple of men south to find out if what they're saying is true. If it is, we'll send word to the king."

"He won't believe you," William said. "Harold is favored by him."

"Nevertheless we will tell him."

"We've brought most of our soldiers with us," Elaine said to the chieftain. "We are at your disposal. Rockland was nearly destroyed once and we have no desire to see it ruined again."

"This fiend's," Marion motioned toward William, "raiders were the ones who attacked you or so you claimed. Why do you trust him now?"

"Because our traders witnessed Harold's raids for themselves and Rockland was attacked earlier this year," Elaine told her. "He helped to defend us."

Wyborn ignored Elaine and turned to William. "Now that you've told us what you know, you're no longer necessary."

Ezekiel stood. "Kill him and you'll have to kill us all."

Wyborn raised an eyebrow and reached for his swords.

William also stood and said, "He didn't mean that!"

Ezekiel fumed. "I certainly--"

William glared at the young knight. "One thing you never do is threaten a Viking chieftain in his own domain. Do so, and you'll die for it, isn't that right, Wyborn?"

A single muscle moved in Wyborn's square jaw and he said, "That is often true."

William smiled slightly. "If it wasn't, you wouldn't be a leader for long. I know something of your ways, but they do not. Overlook what Ezekiel said and deal with me, Wyborn, because I'm the one you really want."

Wyborn's hand still hovered over one of his swords, but he tilted his chin toward Ezekiel. "William Blackridge is an outlaw. A murderer who abducted my brother and my wife. He also raided your village. Why do you trust him now?"



"Everything you've said about him is true," Ezekiel stated, standing his ground before the towering Viking. "However, during the time he spent with us, before he regained his memory, he was loyal to us. We knew him as a healer, a man who fought for Rockland as if it was his own village. By coming to us with this information, he risked his life. Now he's part of us. We've learned to trust him."

Wyborn nodded. "That tells me something about the authenticity of your story; however, it's not reason enough for me to spare his life. There is no reason good enough for that."

"How about a postponement at least?" William suggested. "Once your spies return and you know that what I'm saying is true, I'm worth more to you alive than I am dead, at least until after the battle. I know Harold. I know how he thinks and his weaknesses. And, aside from you, I'm probably the best warrior from Scotland to Essex."

Derek stood, his green eyes flashing. "I wouldn't be so presumptuous there."

William's gaze raked the Scotsman from his curling chestnut hair to the leather boots below his short tunic. Derek was slightly taller than both Wyborn and William, not quite as thickly built as the Viking, but slightly heavier than William. If Derek's sword arm could back his temper and physique, William would be quite interested in some friendly matches to see just what the Scotsman could do.

Clenching his fists, Derek turned to Wyborn. "Surely you can't be considering letting the bastard live to see dusk! He stole Marion and Sven from Ravenhill, killed some of our own men, had Kell almost beaten to death and poisoned you!"

Kell's pale eyes flashed. "I say we break every bone in his body, then use him for hog-feed."

"It doesn't make sense to kill him now," Marion said quietly.

Everyone turned to her in surprise.

"If he's telling the truth, he can be of use," she continued. "Wyborn, you know I'm right."

"I'll make it even more interesting for you, Wyborn," William said. "No matter what you say, each of us is the greatest match the other has ever known. Every time we met, I saw fire in your eyes because you want to know as much as I do who would really win."

Wyborn's lip curled. "I *did* win."

William smiled. "I'm still alive. After this is over, you can try to kill me in an out-and-out fight. Just the two of us. None of my vile old tricks like capturing Lady Marion. Nothing to hinder us. This appeals to you, Wyborn. I can see it in your eyes."

Marion grasped her husband's arm. "Wyborn, no."

Turning her worried gaze to William, Elaine said, "This is insanity."

Wyborn glared at William. "I will consider it."

"Do we have your permission to bring in the rest of our men?" Ezekiel asked.

"Derek will show you where you can camp. You and Elaine may have rooms here. So will Blackridge. I want him where I can watch him," Wyborn said, then turned to William. "Before I open this hall again, I want to know why you've risked your life by coming here."

William folded his arms across his chest and held the chieftain's gaze. "A fair question. Rockland is the home I never had, or rather like the one that was destroyed by your kind years ago. Since living there, I've come to understand things that I didn't before. For instance I understand how you must have felt when I affronted your family."

"Forgive us if we're skeptical," Marion snapped.

William nodded to her and continued with his reply, "I want to keep Rockland safe. What

I feel for Elaine is similar to what you feel for Lady Marion. So if protecting her and Rockland meant coming here and confronting the man who, more than anybody, wants me dead, the decision was simple."

"You could never feel for anyone what I feel for my wife," Wyborn said.

William shrugged. "I don't care what you believe about me. You asked for the truth and I gave it. I'll not speak it again, so ask no more questions."

Wyborn motioned for Kell to open the door that had been guarded from the outside. Immediately two tall women burst into the hall. The first was a strikingly beautiful blonde with the body of a buxom goddess whom Elaine recognized as Sonja, Wyborn's sister. The other was a wild-haired brunette whose thickly muscled frame rivaled most men in size. The latter bounded down the three steps leading to the hall, grasped Kell firmly by the shoulders and demanded, "What is going on here?"

"It's a long story, kitten," the auburn-haired Viking grasped the woman's ample waist. "There might be a huge battle."

"A battle?"

"I'll tell you on the way, wife. I have work to do right now." Kell placed a smacking kiss on her lips before they left the hall together.

"What do you mean, a battle?" Sonja stood beside Derek.

"Raiders might be coming," Derek told her. "Wyborn's decided to ally Ravenhill with Rockland and William Blackridge."

"Blackridge?" Sonja's dark blue eyes widened. "But he's dead."

"The bastard lives." Derek nodded in William's direction. "The sight of him makes me sick--Sonja!"

The beautiful Viking woman picked up a wooden mug from the table and flung it hard at William's head. He knocked it aside before it smashed his nose.

Using the same foul curses as Wyborn had earlier, she flew across the room toward William. Elaine stepped between her lover and the Viking woman, her heart racing. Few women rivaled Elaine in height and strength, but she knew immediately Sonja was a female to be reckoned with. Fortunately, Derek caught her by the waist to restrain her, gasping as one of her wildly flailing elbows caught him in the ribs.

William laughed. "What is it your people used to call a woman like this, Wyborn? A Valkyrie? But I thought you had to die to see one."

"You'll be dead as soon as I get my hands on you," Sonja screeched. "Wyborn, why don't you kill him? Marion!"

"Control yourself, lass," Derek bellowed. "Everything has been arranged. Besides, I don't want you angering the likes of him. He'd as soon kill you as look at you."

"I don't kill women," William stated.

"Huh. You expect us to think you have honor of any kind?" Derek loosened his hold on Sonja who stopped struggling.

"I don't believe this," Sonja muttered. "Derek, let me go. I'm not going to harm him right now."

William glanced at Wyborn. "Fascinating women you have here in Ravenhill."

"And you thought you were the only one of your kind, Elaine," Ezekiel chided his sister.

"Sonja, come with me and Ezekiel to their ship," Derek said. "I'll explain everything on the way."

Glancing over her shoulder and spitting several more curses at William, Sonja followed

her betrothed and Ezekiel outside.

"You wait here," Wyborn ordered William and Elaine. "Marion will see to rooms for you. I will see to the guards."

"Wyborn, if he's going to be in our house, I suggest we place the children elsewhere, Sven included," Marion said.

"I agree. Make the arrangements as you see fit."

Several Viking soldiers remained standing by the stairs and the door after Wyborn and Marion left the hall.

William sat on one of the long benches along one side of the enormous wooden table. Sighing, Elaine dropped down beside him, leaning her forearms on her knees.

"You really want to fight Wyborn?" she whispered.

"Yes. No. In a way. It should prove interesting."

Elaine buried her face into her hands. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

"As much excitement as we can tolerate?"

\* \* \* \*

Elaine was given the room of Sven, Wyborn's young brother, while the boy and Marion and Wyborn's twins were taken to live at Kell's house. William and Ezekiel were to share the room across from Elaine's, but Ezekiel decided to camp with his men instead. Once settled, they joined the others in unloading supplies and making camp in a field just outside the main village.

"Impressive wall," William remarked as he, Ezekiel, Wyborn and Derek rode the length of it.

"Everyone comments on it," Derek said. "It's to keep out the likes of you."

William raised his eyes to heaven but refrained from commenting.

"It's a similar design to the one you used on our wall at Rockland," Ezekiel said to William, "except not as big."

"Rockland's not as big as Ravenhill." William shrugged before turning to Wyborn. "You have a settlement in the valley as well?"

"We do."

"Are your villagers trained to fight?"

"Most of them," said the chieftain. "Many of them are soldiers and the ones who aren't can at least use a bow."

"Let's hope it won't come down to the villagers fighting," Derek added.

"It shouldn't," William said. "We have more than enough time to plan and I'm guessing Wyborn's army is ready to fight at any given moment."

"You should know since it took merely half of it to defeat your raiders," Derek reminded him.

"If you needed that many to take my little band then you're not as strong as I thought."

Derek clenched his hands into fists. "Let me knock his teeth down his throat. Just his teeth. Just one punch."

William lifted an eyebrow. "You think it would land?"

"My foot will land up your arse if you don't keep silent!"

William laughed.

"That's enough," Wyborn growled. "We have work to do."

They separated briefly to help make camp and William was able to speak privately with Ezekiel while they hauled firewood from the main village to the camp.

"I was surprised you backed me against Wyborn," William said. "Thank you."

"You can thank me by proving me right in what I said about you."

"You won't regret it."

\* \* \* \*

That night, while the others ate in the great hall, William remained alone in his room, four guards outside his door and two at the end of the hall.

After a few hours, he heard voices outside the door.

"I would like to see the prisoner," Elaine said.

The guard, a young man called Stig, replied coldly, "If you ask me he should be in a dungeon cell awaiting execution, not permitted to stay in such a fine room."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Elaine said. "I asked to see him."

"Hand over your weapons, then. I know you people of Rockland have been fooled by him, but not us, and especially not me. I was among those captured by him with Wyborn when we rescued his brother. I remember what he did to us and how he planned on murdering us. Whatever he has told you are lies."

"I know more about him than you think. During his raid, I lost friends and family, but for every life he took, he saved two more by healing and fighting for us. There are different parts to all of us. I'm sure your Wyborn has made his share of enemies during raids. No one earns the name "The Indomitable" without stealing more than a few lives."

Listening to her defend him, William warmed inside. Still, he couldn't cling to the false hope that she would ever forgive him.

Elaine stepped inside, closing the door behind her. William stood from where he had been sitting on the floor by the fire, rearranging his bag of remedies.

She glanced around the windowless room that Wyborn had ordered emptied of furnishings. William had spread a blanket on the floor to use as a bed. Still, the accommodations were far better than the dank, filthy prison cell where he'd once held Wyborn captive.

He met Elaine halfway across the room and pulled her into his embrace.

"You've made quite a reputation for yourself," she said.

He gave a wry laugh. "I tried."

"You did well." She pushed away and paced the room. "God, I feel so torn, like I'm a traitor by being here with you."

"I didn't ask you to come."

She laughed sadly. "I know. I guess I just want your body."

He turned back to the fire and sat down. "And I guess I want more than just yours."

"I look around at all these people who want to kill you, I remember what happened to Rockland because of you, and I want to hate you, but when I'm with you, all I can see is Gabriel."

"I'm not Gabriel," he whispered, closing his eyes, his fingers tightening on the carpet behind him. "I'm William Blackridge."

"I know that."

"Say it."

"What does it matter?"

"Say it."

"William Blackridge," she practically shouted.

He looked up at her, wishing she could love him like she once had.

"Damn everything," Elaine folded her arms across her chest and left him alone in the room.

William stared into the flames, feeling cold in spite of the heat from the fire and the warmth of the summer evening. She said she didn't hate him but part of her obviously did and most likely always would.

It was funny that he'd always felt alone. Surrounded by people, first his relatives, then other soldiers and later his band of raiders, he'd never felt like a true part of anything. Only as Gabriel had he been accepted by and could accept others.

Loneliness had never bothered him before, but since meeting Elaine his entire life had changed. He knew she'd never forgive him for what he'd done, but he'd hoped in time the love she felt for Gabriel might be passed on to him.

He stood and paced the room. More than anything, he wished he could go outside and practice with his swords. It was the only release he knew to rid himself of excess energy and frustration, but he'd given his weapons to the guards and Wyborn would never allow him to have them back, at least not now.

William sat by the fire and poked at the food that had been sent up to him. Wyborn and Marion refused his admittance to the great hall, not that he'd have been welcome there by anyone even if the chieftain had allowed him access to it.

"No sense." William stretched out on the blanket, placing his arms behind his head and staring at the ceiling. "I must truly be insane to subject myself to this place. Still, I've known worse." He thought of life at his uncle's house. "Goodnight Elaine. I hope your sleep will be more peaceful than mine."

\* \* \* \*

Across the hall, Elaine stared out the window of her room, her gaze focused on the moon but her thoughts on William. She'd said she only wanted his body, but that had been a half-truth. She loved him. So much that just being in the same room with him made her heart ache with the desire to take him in her arms, tell him exactly how much she cared for him and soothe away the despair in his eyes.

William Blackridge. She was in love with William Blackridge. Why couldn't she just admit it?

"And spit on the memory of my cousins who died and my soldiers who were killed during his raid?" she said aloud. "But he did so much for us afterward--or rather Gabriel did."

Ezekiel had supported William in front of Wyborn but Elaine knew how much her brother despised what William had done. Had his words just been a performance for Wyborn and his people to show that Rockland was unified against Harold's raiders, or did he truly believe everything he'd said about William?

On board ship, Elaine had almost been ready to completely accept William, but since arriving in Ravenhill and hearing more stories about the knight's evil deeds, she wondered if he was being completely sincere with her or was she simply a whim? Could his experiences in Rockland truly have turned demon into angel? Was his love for her that strong?

*Of course it's not. No man has ever thought so much of you before, so why should he?*

He would prove himself to her, he'd said. She would just have to control her emotions and desires long enough to let him try.

## Chapter Seventeen

William was awake and dressed for training before dawn the next morning. The sun's light was just bleeding through the narrow windows in the hallway when he emerged from his room. Watching him warily, the guards followed him to the great hall where Wyborn and Derek were breaking their fast amidst snoring servants.

Wyborn's gaze fixed on William. He dismissed the guards with a slight motion of his head.

Wyborn and Derek glanced at William then at each other and exchanged several phrases William couldn't understand. He seethed because he hadn't bothered to learn the Viking language and knew the men were deliberately speaking in a tongue he couldn't comprehend. William spoke several languages fluently but hadn't desired to spend enough time in the company of Wyborn's kind to master their speech.

"You look like a Scot but mimic these barbar--Vikings," William commented.

Derek stood, nearly toppling over his chair. "My mother is a Viking, you rutter of sheep!"

William lifted an eyebrow and said to Wyborn, "According to your culture, such as it is, I'm allowed to kill him for that manner of insult, am I not?"

"Both of you sit down and keep silent. We have work to do and the last thing we need is for you to be carrying on like a couple of hens with your tail feathers plucked."

Still snarling in William's direction, Derek sat, reached for a loaf of bread and tore off a piece, chewing furiously.

Wyborn took an apple from a fruit bowl, glanced at William, and used the apple to point to one of the benches. "Sit and eat. We'll be on the field most of the day."

William straddled the bench and ripped a chunk of bread. Chewing slowly, he observed his companions.

The men ate in silence for several moments, then Wyborn bit into his apple core and spit it on the bowl in front of William.

William's expression didn't change, but he chose a fat, ripe cherry from the bowl, popped it into his mouth and fired the pit at Wyborn's mail-covered chest.

"Forgive me, but my aim isn't as true as yours, Wyborn. I haven't perfected the Viking skill of spewing my food. I'm sure I'll master it during my time here at Ravenhill."

Wyborn's upper lip curled in an animalistic snarl. He stood, walked toward the door and ordered, "Come. Enough amusement. There's work to be done."

"Amusement?" William murmured.

"You'll learn about Wyborn's sense of humor, if you're alive long enough," Derek said.

He and William followed Wyborn out of the hall and to the training field.

They were the first to arrive, but Kell, Ezekiel and the other men soon followed. Elaine came shortly after in the company of Marion. Elaine wore her usual breeches and shirt, but Marion had discarded her embroidered, tunic-style dress for masculine attire of her own.

William's gaze met Elaine's for a long moment, and then he smiled. Her full lips curved upward slightly before she and Marion drew their weapons and began practicing together.

William glanced at Wyborn and noted that the Viking's expression softened a bit as he

watched his wife. Though Elaine had learned the fighting arts as a mercenary, Marion had been trained in swordplay by Wyborn himself.

"Your lady is well trained, Wyborn," William commented.

He grunted in reply. "Elaine is also ... unusual. It's unheard of for a woman to lead men in wartime."

"Elaine is a rare woman," William said with pride, his gaze lingering on every movement of Elaine's long, sleek legs.

"Derek can supervise here. I'm needed at the other end of the field. You go give archery instruction with Kell."

William turned toward the archers, glad to finally immerse himself in training. Both he and the men were forced to ignore their personal dislikes and concentrate on the matter at hand. That was something William understood, something he could comfortably undertake.

They trained until mid-afternoon. Wyborn preferred to rotate his instructors so that skills wouldn't stagnate and William liked the Viking's fast-paced, challenging methods. If he and Wyborn hadn't despised each other so much they might possibly have developed a friendship, but it was too late for that.

William also watched Derek with interest. The Scotsman's strength and skill supported his temper. In hand-to-hand combat, he was fast as a fox and powerful as a draft horse. Like Wyborn and William, he was ambidextrous. William had heard the story of how Wyborn himself had trained Derek in the simultaneous use of two blades. He'd also heard about a match that had once occurred between Derek and Wyborn. In it, the chieftain had finally wrestled Derek into a hold from which he couldn't free himself, but it had been a very close match. Many believed the fight could have gone either way. This impressed William greatly, for he knew from experience anyone who could challenge Wyborn was a man to be reckoned with.

\* \* \* \*

Lady Marion, having duties to perform at the manor house, abandoned the field after an hour, leaving Elaine to continue her regular training with the men.

She and William trained on opposite ends of the field for most of the morning, but between sessions, Elaine looked for him. To her, he was outstanding amidst the other warriors. Most of the henna had finally washed out of his hair so it gleamed like a blackbird's wing in the sunlight. His tall, muscled body moved with grace and power. She had never imagined starving for something other than food, but she was insatiable for him. The desire to make love with him again was almost painful in its intensity. No matter how much he reiterated his good intentions, she knew he wanted her just as badly. Passion shone in his eyes whenever their gazes met. It was inevitable that he would make love to her again. She only had to find away to expedite the process before she went mad from desire.

At noon Marion and women from the village brought food and water to the field. Elaine sat under a tree with her meal and William joined her.

He brushed blood from her cheek with his fingertip. "What happened?"

"Training. It's just a scratch."

His bag of supplies was always with him, the same as his weapons. He dampened a rag with water, cupped her face in his palm and cleaned the shallow cut.

"It's nothing, really," she protested, her heartbeat fluttering at his touch.

Ignoring her, he treated the injury with balm. When he'd finished, he lowered his arms, but she placed her hands on his wrists. Forgetting that they were in the middle of a training field, forgetting everything but his warm body and finely drawn lips so close to hers, she leaned nearer.

He withdrew from her, brushed two fingers gently across her mouth, and turned his gaze to the men and women milling around the field, talking and eating.

"Wyborn's very diligent," Elaine said, leaning her back against the thick tree trunk and allowing her body to relax.

"He's relentless." William's eyes gleamed. "I love it."

"Why do you enjoy fighting so much?"

"Don't you?"

She sighed. "Sometimes, but not like you."

"I don't know. I suppose when I'm fighting I feel in control. It's something I know I'm good at."

"You're a good healer."

"Healing gives me a different feeling altogether. When I heal someone, I know I've done something good, something right, but fighting... There's nothing like the rush of excitement. It's like being drunk, only my thoughts and motions aren't impeded. It's like soaring."

She smiled coquettishly. "Sounds like making love."

"Like making love with you, maybe." His gaze met hers with such intense desire that Elaine's entire body went weak. Her nipples tightened beneath her billowy shirt.

He must have felt just as aroused because he directed his gaze toward the field again, his hands momentarily tightening into fists on the grass beside him.

"Wyborn has a good armorer living in the valley behind the main village," William said, redirecting the conversation. "I'm going with some of his men to place an order for extra weapons we'll need. I have enough saved from my time with the mercenaries to have new armor made."

"You need it. Wyborn really demolished yours. Those patches won't last forever. This is crazy." She sighed. "I want you. You want me. We might die fighting Harold, so why don't you just give in and come to me tonight?"

"Because you mean more to me than just a roll in the blankets. If that's all I want, I can get it from a whore. I want your love, Elaine. I don't deserve it. I'll probably never have it again, but it's what I want. Before I met you, I never would have felt this way, but you changed me and there's no going back to the man I was."

She drew a long breath. "I suppose that's best for everyone. I care for you. I could never hate you as I did before, but what you did to us cannot be forgotten."

"And it shouldn't be, but like you, I can't help what I feel."

"I just need time," she whispered, placing her hand over his.

Their fingers entwined and he said, "That's why I'm giving it to you. To both of us."

She nodded, but his sensible words did little to ease the uncontrollable ache within her.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon, William remained with Wyborn, Ezekiel and several others on the field after most of the men returned to the village. William noted Derek and Kell were among the best of Wyborn's swordsmen and though he didn't underestimate their skill, he was confident that he could beat them in combat. Wyborn was another matter. He still remained William's single greatest challenge. Though the Viking's expression was difficult to read, the rivalry between them was almost tangible.

Inevitably, against the discreet protests of Kell and Ezekiel, the two paired off for practice.

It began slowly, a mere touching of blades. Their movements picked up, a testing of one



another's strength and speed. At the first sign of a smile on William's lips, Wyborn's attack became savage.

William responded by releasing the fine grip he held on his control.

Men stopped their practice and formed a loose circle around their chieftain and his opponent. William's agitated laughter mingled with Wyborn's bellows of fury as steel struck steel. Each block and blow jarred them to the bone, but neither noticed since hatred of one another overtook their reason.

Wyborn's blade slashed the chest of the knight's armor.

Enraged, William snarled, "Not again!"

The chieftain swung, William dodged, spun and nicked Wyborn's ear. A stream of blood ran down his neck to stain his shirt.

William smirked, recalling their fight so long ago when he'd nicked the Viking's other ear. "Now you have a matching set."

Wyborn's teeth clenched in rage. He launched an attack that nearly numbed William's arms as he blocked the blond man's incredible strength.

\* \* \* \*

Elaine and Marion stood by the well, talking.

"I still can't believe the man you're describing as Gabriel," Marion said. "William Blackridge is a twisted, bitter outlaw with a barren heart."

"That's what I've always believed." Elaine lowered her gaze to her hands. "But that was before I knew him--knew Gabriel. Before him, I never thought about men as anything but fighting partners. I never thought I could ... care for one, and when I finally do, it turns out to be the man who nearly destroyed us."

"I wish I could offer you words of comfort. All I can think is that William Blackridge took Sven so that Wyborn could be killed and Ravenhill taken from us. I remember a man who thrived on tormenting others with his vile actions and painful words."

"Wyborn was a conqueror. Don't you think there are people in some villages who feel about him what you and I have felt about Blackridge?"

Marion's gaze turned icy and she said, "Wyborn is nothing like William Blackridge. He might have conquered, but he's not cruel." She regained her composure and sighed. "I'm sure there are people who hate Wyborn, but I don't. I never could. When he first arrived in Ravenhill, there was a bloody battle and he did wound and kill some of our men, but ever since we met, I've loved him. I can't explain it."

"Then maybe you understand me better than you think," Elaine said. "What matters now is that we work together to defeat Harold."

"Yes. Destroying him is our focus. To do that we all must get along, especially Wyborn and William."

"Elaine!"

Both women turned to the soldier racing toward them. "You must come right away, my lady. Sir William and Wyborn--"

"What?" Marion demanded. "Speak, man!"

"They started out practicing, but I think they're trying to kill each other!"

"Damn that bastard you brought back to us," Marion shouted to Elaine. "If he harms Wyborn, I'll have him drawn and quartered!"

"Harms Wyborn?" Elaine scoffed as she and Marion mounted her horse and galloped to the field. "He's a sword-wielding ox and you're worried about *him* getting hurt?"

"We're never going to stop them this time." Marion's voice carried a hint of panic.  
"Yes, we are. I have an idea."

\* \* \* \*

When they arrived at the field, the women used the height advantage of their seat on the horse to glimpse the battle raging between the Viking and the knight.

Blood flecked Wyborn's shirt and William's lower lip was split. Wyborn charged like a furious bull and William's laughter chimed out over the warriors shouting around them.

The women quickly dismounted and drew their swords.

"Make this good," Elaine whispered to Marion. "Give it all you've got."

Marion needed no encouragement. The women attacked one another with a vengeance.

Soon they gained the attention of the men. As William spun to avoid one of Wyborn's blades, he noticed Elaine and Marion fighting like a pair of sleek foxes. Lady Marion's blade swept so close to Elaine's face that a chunk of her black hair floated away on the mild breeze. Elaine kicked Marion onto her back, but before she could land her blades, Marion rolled away and nearly stabbed Elaine in the buttocks.

Wyborn also caught sight of the women. He and William momentarily forgot each other and raced across the field.

"What the hell are you doing?" William raged.

Wyborn cursed as he and William pulled their respective partners aside.

"Let me go!" Elaine shoved William.

"Yes, Wyborn, get your paws off me!" Marion snarled. "Lady Elaine and I are going to kill each other!"

"A fight to the death!" Elaine raged. "Isn't that just what we need right now? To fight amongst ourselves. Harold won't have to do any work. We'll just defeat ourselves for him."

"All right, we understand," Wyborn said through clenched teeth.

"We were merely practicing," William told them.

Marion threw up her hands. "Practicing!"

"No, you were acting like fools," Elaine snarled. "We're getting ready to fight a man who wants control over the country and our two best warriors are hacking each other to pieces!"

Around them, the men were listening with interest, some smiling and shaking their heads.

"Enough! Go back to your business," Wyborn bellowed.

The men scattered.

Still panting from the fight, William and Wyborn cast each other one last, furious look, and walked to opposite ends of the field with Elaine and Marion.

William dropped to the ground beneath a tree, wiping sweat from his eyes and drawing several deep breaths.

"Bloody hell, he's strong," the knight muttered, casting a look at Wyborn who sat with Marion on a log while she scolded him and inspected the sliver in his ear.

"I don't believe you." Elaine used her sleeve to blot blood from William's chin. "Either of you. It's bad enough you're here, without goading that blond brute into fighting with you again."

"Worried about me?"

She didn't speak but the expression in her gray eyes reflected her feelings.

"Promise me you won't practice with him again."

"I could promise, but I'd be lying. We're good practice for each other. If I can fight him

and he can fight me, do you really think Harold's men can stop us?"

"Sometimes I think you're going to drive me mad."

He raised an eyebrow. "Madness can be liberating."

"It can also be bondage."

William's gaze dropped to his swords. There was no way she could understand what he and Wyborn did for each other. They hated one another, yet each felt a certain respect for the other's ability.

Elaine's hand touched his gently. He forgot about Wyborn and found himself whispering, "I'm sorry. I'll do my best to avoid him."

Elaine smiled. They stood and walked back to the village.

\* \* \* \*

That night, William lay on his back, staring at the dark ceiling as the embers burned low in the hearth. For hours, he'd listened to the sounds of talking and laughter from the great hall. It hadn't taken the men of Rockland long to merge with the Vikings. Though William hated to admit it, from his time spent training with Wyborn's men, not all of them were as terrible as he'd thought. Perhaps it was Elaine's lack of forgiveness for his sins against Rockland that forced him to at least try to judge the Vikings as individuals rather than a single hated group.

Eventually the house grew silent and he waited, part of him hoping Elaine would come to his room, part of him praying she'd stay away.

Hours passed and Elaine never came.

*Then why can't I sleep?*

William's fingers tapped the floor. He closed his eyes, trying to force himself to sleep, but his thoughts were too troubled. It was becoming more difficult to keep from making love with Elaine, but that was only half of his worries. Each day Wyborn waited to hear back from his spies was another day that Harold's army gained strength. William didn't believe that he'd take over the entire land, but he would do terrible damage trying.

Outside came the sound of galloping horses and men shouting. He jumped up and dressed when he heard Wyborn bellowing orders in the hallway.

Once clothed, William threw open the door. The guards reached for their weapons. Wyborn, still dragging on his armor, glanced at them from the top of the stairs.

"The settlement in the valley is under attack. Come." His gaze met William's. "All of you."

Kell and Derek had already assembled a group of soldiers outside the manor house. A horse was saddled and waiting for Wyborn who jumped on and kicked it to a gallop, his men following close behind.

Elaine rode up beside William and passed him the reins of a second horse she'd been leading.

"He belongs to one of Ezekiel's men," she explained. "You're a stronger fighter than he is. Let's go!"

They raced after Wyborn's army and caught up to them as they reached the valley.

Ezekiel and his men had already joined Wyborn's guards in fighting the attackers.

The fresh troop galloped into the valley and joined in the skirmish. Before his first clash of steel on steel, William saw Wyborn knock two charging raiders off their horses and turn sharply to meet a third. He glanced briefly at Elaine before they were separated by the crowd and noticed her sword was drawn, her supple body poised for attack. The impulse to follow and protect her back almost overcame him, but a horse and rider charged him and he was forced to

defend himself. At the first drawing of blood, battle-lust overtook him. He lost count of how many charges he made, but only knew that each one ended with an enemy crashing to the bloody ground.

Though the moon was bright, it was still nighttime and fighting was difficult. His horse stumbled over a corpse, and William was thrown. He rose amidst a group of raiders, their swords slashing downward. Rolling into the legs of one, he knocked him onto the ground and sprang to his feet, fighting the others. Doused in blood, he met even more attacks. He wasn't sure how much time had passed before the raiders retreated, but as he chased three to the rim of the valley, he was vaguely aware of Elaine shouting to him. He slashed one through the back and the other across the throat. The third was racing ahead, but before he could follow, Wyborn's battle-dirtied mount blocked his path.

The chieftain's eyes narrowed at him through his round helmet and he said, "We already have enough prisoners for questioning."

His heart racing, William glanced past Wyborn.

"You'll need that taken care of." The chieftain nodded at William's chest where an arrow had struck through his armor, turning the leather dark with blood. Only at that moment did William notice the pain.

Elaine rode up beside him, dismounted, and inspected the wound.

"We'll get the injured back to the great hall. Kell will see to the prisoners," Wyborn said and kicked his horse to a trot.

"Let's go." Elaine mounted and extended her hand to William. "I've already had someone take care of your horse."

He slid onto the mount with her and rode to the manor house.

In the great hall, some of the wounded were already being tended. Lady Marion, Brenna and Sonja were ministering to their wounds.

Sonja cursed upon seeing William's injury. "Pity it isn't fatal."

Elaine forced herself to keep from attacking the blonde woman. She had to remember that everyone in Ravenhill would like to see William dead.

Wyborn shoved open the door, toting an unconscious warrior over his broad shoulders. He lowered the man to the floor and turned to William who stood by a wall while Elaine considered the best way to remove the arrow.

"This is such an annoyance," William muttered.

Wyborn approached and stood at arm's length from them, his legs spread wide, his thickly muscled arms folded across his chest. "You didn't even feel that go in during the battle."

"I probably did," William said. "I just don't remember."

"My people have a name for men like you," Wyborn said. "Berserker."

"Fascinating." William's voice held little interest. "Elaine, just remove this thing quickly so that I can help the other healers."

"Quick is best," Wyborn stated, nudging Elaine aside, gripping the arrow in his gloved hand and viciously tearing it from William's chest.

"God!" William hissed through clenched teeth, dropping to his knees, his hands clutching the jagged hole where the arrow head had been. Pain flared through his torso.

Wyborn shrugged. "Beats Red Squill poisoning."

"You Viking dog!" Elaine snarled at the chieftain. She knelt beside William and helped him remove his bloody armor and shirt beneath.

Wyborn shook his head and he walked away, muttering, "Just like a woman."

The elderly servant, Brenna, walked toward them with the cauterizing iron.

Elaine snatched it from her hand. "We've had enough help from Ravenhill, thank you."

The old woman shrugged and tended to other people while Elaine sealed the wound in William's chest. She felt him tense, and a low moan escaped his throat the last few seconds before she removed the iron.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the cool stone wall while she cleaned the wound, treating it with balm.

Her fingertips brushed tangled hair from his forehead. He caught her hand, the movement causing his chest to ache, but he ignored it and touched his lips to the back of her hand.

"I have to help the others," she whispered, longing to embrace him, curl up beside him and spend the night next to his warmth. Maybe she would.

"Give me a couple of moments and I'll join you," he said.

She nodded, squeezing his hand gently before she went to assist Marion in setting a man's broken leg.

William waited several moments until he felt steady enough to stand. He retrieved his bag of supplies and began aiding the healers. Most of the soldiers from Ravenhill refused his assistance, but those from Rockland, familiar with his skill, eagerly accepted his help.

As he was stitching a shoulder-wound, he felt Lady Marion's gaze upon him. Also a skilled healer, she observed him with interest.

He glanced at her, smiling slightly. Though her face remained stern, she watched until he completed his treatment with a sweet-smelling salve.

"Lavender?" she asked quietly.

He nodded, noticing that her brown eyes peered curiously into his bag. He nudged it toward her as he washed his hands in a bowl of water. She jumped slightly, startled by his movement, but curiosity overtook her and she began searching through his supplies.

"So you know more than just how to poison people," she remarked.

"I owe you an apology."

Again Marion looked startled. "What?"

"I never should have abducted you and Sven. It was a despicable act. Up until then, I had never harmed a woman or child. In a way I'm glad Wyborn knocked me off a cliff before I could continue with the greed and insanity I'd succumbed to."

"Just because we've allied ourselves with you now doesn't mean we still don't hate you. I don't despise you because you abducted me, but because you almost killed Wyborn. You killed his men, had him beaten, and then poisoned him. If I could drive a dagger through your heart right now, I'd do it."

"I understand."

Marion brushed past him and said, "Try to clear your conscience elsewhere. It won't work with us."

William stooped to close up his bag and Elaine touched his nape.

"I'm tired and we can still get a few hours sleep," she said.

William glanced around the hall. There was little more he could do there, and his own injury was nagging him. He followed Elaine up the steps.

Instead of crossing the hall to her room, she stepped into his. The guards watched her with disapproving eyes but didn't try to stop the couple who closed the door behind them.

When she began undressing, William said, "Go to your room, Elaine. I don't even have a bed."

“I don’t care.”

She slipped into one of his billowy shirts and cuddled beside him on the floor, tugging a blanket over them. She rested her head on the uninjured side of his chest and he draped his arm over her shoulders.

Having her close by felt wonderful. Almost completely content, William drifted to sleep.

## Chapter Eighteen

The following morning, William remained at the house to rest his injury and help the other healers. As he worked, he noticed Lady Marion watching him with suspicion, as if he would poison everyone in the great hall at any moment. He didn't blame her, but it became tedious as the day wore on. Still, he did his best to ignore her and immersed himself in mixing medicines and changing bandages.

In late morning, a young, blond-haired boy raced into the great hall.

"Sven, slow down," Marion called to him. "People are injured here."

Wyborn's young brother immediately slowed to a walk. "Sorry. Wyborn wants me on the field at noon and I forgot my bow and arrow."

Sven's gaze caught William's across the room and the knight smiled slightly.

"You." The boy strode to Sir William, his lanky young body held tall, mirroring Wyborn's proud carriage. He stopped in front of William, his hands on his hips, and said, "When this battle is over, my brother's going to kill you."

William smiled. "Done any good fishing, lately?"

The boy looked momentarily confused by the knight's lack of fear and seemed about to speak again when Marion called sharply, "Sven! Did we not tell you to keep away from him? Now go get your bow and don't be late meeting Wyborn."

Glaring once more at William, Sven disappeared up the steps, hurried down moments later with his weapon and left.

Marion approached William, wiping her hands on her apron. "If Wyborn caught you talking to Sven, he'd kill you where you stand. Not that I care for your sake, but we have other problems to consider."

"I didn't approach--"

"It doesn't matter if you approached him or he approached you. Wyborn is very protective of Sven and so am I. Keep away from him, keep away from our children, or you'll be dead before any damn battle."

Biting back a retort, William picked up two buckets of dirty water and trudged to the well in the center of the village.

Elaine rode up beside him and dismounted.

"Good afternoon." She smiled at him, her face streaked with sweat and dirt from the field. To him, she looked incredibly beautiful.

Muttering a reply, he continued filling the buckets.

She leaned against the well's stone rim, her smile fading. "What's wrong?"

"Not a bloody thing. Everybody around here tucks away their children whenever I pass. Up until the time I took Wyborn's brother, I had never harmed a child. I never hurt Sven. I'd never hurt a child. I like children."

"You have to expect skepticism, especially from Wyborn and Marion. I mean, from what I heard from some of Wyborn's men, you held Sven at knife point."

William threw up his hands. "But I didn't do anything! I wouldn't have hurt him at all. I was very wrong to have taken him. It was a horrible crime. You believe me, at least. Don't you?"

Elaine lowered her gaze and folded her arms beneath her breasts. "I want to believe you. I really do. I know how much you did for Rockland, how many lives you saved." She touched his hand, but he pulled away and gathered the buckets.

Screaming from several houses away drew their attention.

"Fire!" someone shouted. "Fire at Kell's house!"

Still carrying the buckets of water, William raced toward the screaming, Elaine at his heels. Villagers scattered around them, hurrying with buckets toward the well.

In front of a thatched cottage, Kell's wife, Helen, was throwing herself against the door and sobbing. Other women grabbed for their children as flames leapt through the two small windows of the house. Men threw water in the windows.

"The children are inside," Helen screamed.

William picked up one of the large rocks lining the garden in front of the cottage and nudged Helen aside. He slammed the rock into the door latch until it gave way, then kicked in the door. A wall of smoke struck him. He stepped into the almost intolerable heat, ignoring the flames licking at him from both sides. It was difficult to see through the smoke and flames surrounding the room, edging their way inward. The fire had crept up one of the walls to the ceiling.

He noticed two small feet sticking out from under the bed and tugged. An unconscious girl of about four popped out and he carried her to the door. Helen grasped her and said, "Where are the twins? The babies! The babies! Wyborn and Marion's!"

Almost before she'd finished speaking, William turned back inside. Smokey tears stung his eyes and he could scarcely draw a breath. Dropping to the floor where it was easier to see, he groped for the cradle. He pulled out the twins, gratefully noticing they were somewhat protected by sheets and swaddling. As he turned for the door, a beam dropped from the ceiling, nearly striking the three of them.

His booted feet stepped through the lowest of the flames and he exited the door as Wyborn and Kell, still in training attire, raced in.

Gagging on fresh air, William shoved the twins at Wyborn. Elaine grasped the knight's arm and tugged him away.

The villagers had formed a line from the house to the well and were passing along buckets of water to douse the flames.

Marion and Wyborn brought the babies into a neighboring home, and Helen followed with the young girl.

Between coughs, William sipped the water Elaine had given him. Neither spoke for several moments while she examined the burns on his hands and legs. Her eyes gleaming with concern and admiration, she sat beside him until he was able to breathe normally.

Wyborn stepped out of the cottage where they'd taken the children and approached William.

"How are they?" Elaine asked the chieftain.

"Marion thinks they'll be fine. The young girl Helen usually sits for has some burns, but she'll survive as well. It seems the child decided to lock the door when Helen stepped out to empty a bucket of slop for the pigs. She opened up several flasks of oil and emptied them around the house, then knocked over some candles."

"God," Elaine murmured.

Wyborn shook his head and shrugged. "She's only a child. What did she know? We'll have to make room at the manor house for Kell and Helen while we rebuild their home."



Marion emerged from the house, carrying a twin in each arm. They were awake and miraculously breathing normally, though they still whimpered more from fear than physical harm. Marion handed them to Wyborn and nodded to William. "Thank you isn't enough for what you did. I'm forever grateful."

Wyborn nodded. "What you did to me before is forgotten, as if it never was."

"And to me," Marion agreed.

"Thank you. I'm only glad they're safe," William said.

"Go back to the house with Elaine and Marion and see to your burns," Wyborn called to William as he joined the others in putting out the fire.

Derek, Ezekiel and several of the soldiers from Rockland had also arrived and were lending aid.

At the manor house, Sonja and Brenna met them at the door.

"What happened?" Sonja demanded.

"Is the fire out? What's wrong with the poor little ones?" Brenna exclaimed, taking one of the squalling twins from Marion.

"Yes. I'll explain everything but first I must get the children upstairs."

Sonja glanced at William's ash-stained face and burned clothes. "This bastard probably started the whole thing..."

"Sonja, if it hadn't been for him, Raynor and Birget would be dead. He saved their lives," Marion said.

The blonde woman raised a curious eyebrow toward William.

Marion continued, "Please get him something to soothe those burns."

Sonja brought William salve that he and Elaine took up to her room along with a pitcher of fresh water. Elaine closed the door behind them and ordered him to undress.

"Still thinking about one thing, Elaine?" he teased, refusing to wince when she slipped his tattered breeches over the raw patches on his thighs and calves. His hands were also red but the skin wasn't broken and hadn't blistered.

When he was naked, Elaine guided him to the edge of the bed.

He sat and reached for the cloth in the bowl of water she'd placed beside him. "I don't need any help."

"Just sit still and keep silent for once in your life," she said, taking the cloth from him and bathing his legs with cool water.

She'd spent so long yearning to have his naked body close to hers. Now that it was, the last thing she thought of was making love. Her only concerns were his comfort and safety. When he'd rushed into the burning house, she was certain it was the bravest act she'd ever witnessed, but she'd been terrified he might be killed, especially when the roof began to collapse.

She finished with the water and applied a thick layer of salve to his legs while he took some and smoothed it over his hands. When she'd covered all the burns, she sat back on her heels and looked at him. It was then that the absolute beauty of his body struck her like a sword swipe. A bandage still swathed part of his chest where the arrow had struck him the previous day. Other than that, he was all bare flesh over hard, lean muscle.

Drawing a long breath, she gazed at his steely chest and muscle-ridged stomach. She was kneeling between his hard, hair-roughened thighs. By the swelling of his manhood, his thoughts must have been traveling the same path as hers. She dared not look up into his blue eyes, for if she saw desire burning there, she might devour him without regard for his injuries.

Instead she sat up straighter, placed her smooth, salve-covered hands on his inner thighs

and caressed.

"Elaine," he scolded softly.

"That is my name." She smiled slightly, leaning forward, her hands still stroking his legs. Her lips touched his stomach and she heard his sharp intake of breath. The muscles of his belly quivered beneath her tongue as she licked lower, lower--

"Elaine, that's enough." He grasped her shoulders gently before her lips found their mark.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, standing between his legs and sliding her hands over his broad shoulders. "How insensitive of me. You're wounded."

He took her hands and held them to his warm, hard chest. "Only my heart because it loves you so much."

Elaine drew away from him, blinking back tears.

"I have to help the others. I have to go," she whispered. After slipping out the door, she raced down the steps and didn't stop until she reached the village square. The others had just gotten the fire under control.

Looking stunned, Kell and Helen stood near the ruin, shaking their heads. Wyborn shouted orders to his men who were clearing away the debris.

Ezekiel approached Elaine from behind and touched her shoulder. She spun to face him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm sorry for Kell and Helen."

"So am I, but Wyborn has ordered immediate rebuilding and they're making a place for them at the manor house."

"Still, we know how devastating losing a house can be. During Blackridge's raid last year, so many homes were ruined."

"Elaine, I hardly think this is the time to bring up William's past deeds. He did a very good thing today. Anyone who manages to earn forgiveness from Wyborn must deserve it."

"Yes," Elaine murmured, "he does. Let's get to work."

\* \* \* \*

William spent the remainder of the day assisting the wounded in the great hall. Everyone was stable enough to be moved back to their own homes and Ezekiel's men came to help with the ones who were still unable to walk.

By early evening, servants brought dinner to the long, wooden table. William retired to his room, surprised to find the furniture had been returned. Apparently Wyborn really had forgiven him.

He put his healer's bag back in order, replenished his supplies and stretched out on the bed. Closing his eyes, he tried to relish the comfort of blankets and pillows and ignore the persistent throbbing of his burned legs and hands. At least the burns got his mind off the healing arrow wound in his chest. If strange occurrences didn't stop happening, there would be little of him left to go to battle.

At least Wyborn had called off his guards and given him a bit of privacy.

Someone tapped on his door and he stood to open it.

"Hello." Elaine smiled sweetly, brushing past him with an armful of clothes and weapons.

"What are you doing?"

"Moving in with you. Kell and Helen are taking Sven's room. Sven is sleeping with Wyborn, Marion and the twins."

"Moving in with me? Elaine, we're not in Rockland. What will the people here think?"

This is unseemly.”

“Worried about your reputation?”

“You know I mean for you.” He folded his arms across his chest and watched her open the trunk at the foot of his bed, move some of his clothes aside and place hers next to them.

“Look what Marion was kind enough to give me.” Elaine tossed him a flask of wild carrot.

William shook his head. “You are an impossible woman.”

“It was sweet of her. She was so concerned I’d be offended. I told her you had already given me a supply but this will save you the trouble of fixing more.”

William sat on the edge of the bed and pressed his hands to his temples. “We won’t need it, Elaine. I already told you--”

“I know.” She finished storing her belongings and sprawled on the bed, patting the empty space beside her. “Let’s have a nap before dinner.”

“You have a nap.”

She sat behind him, slipping her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. “Come on. It will be like old times, the two of us sharing a room.”

“What am I going to do with you?” He smiled, stretching out beside her and pulling her into his arms.

“Oh, I can think of a number of things.” She kissed his mouth before resting her head on his shoulder. “Dinner will be in a few minutes. You’re coming tonight.”

“I am?” His voice dripped sarcasm.

She lifted her head and met his gaze. “You have to. Wyborn and Marion are making an effort. I thought you wanted to make peace with them.”

“I do. I at least want to make peace with someone.”

She brushed her lips against his and whispered, “I thought you were very brave today.”

“Courage had nothing to do with it. It was just an impulse.”

“Well, it was a brave impulse. Not everyone would have done it.”

He didn’t speak, just held her for several moments before they joined the others in the great hall.

Wyborn and Marion sat side by side at the head of the table, Derek and Sonja at the other end. Wyborn’s favored warriors and their families lined the benches on either side while friends and servants mingled around the room. Bread, fruit, meat, and cakes were spread out on the table along with mugs of wine and mead.

Marion smiled at Elaine and William and bid them to sit on the bench to her left. Wyborn’s face remained stern, but his eyes glistened with amusement as he shoved a wooden mug at William.

William drank deeply and placed the mug aside, reaching for bread that he split between Elaine and himself.

Lifting an eyebrow, Wyborn motioned with his head toward the mug. “You like that?”

“I’ve tasted worse.”

“I detest it,” Marion said. “Wyborn brought several barrels of it when he landed here over a year ago. Horrible.”

“No one makes mead like my cousin’s wife back home. I tell Marion it will put hair on your chest.” Wyborn lifted his mug to his wife and swallowed.

Marion cast him a sidelong glance and said smartly, “Wyborn, the last thing either of us want is hair on my chest.”

The slightest smile broke through Wyborn's sullen expression. "Well said, my lady. One thing I've learned since being married is that she is usually right, and even when she's not, agree with her."

Several warriors laughed, earning annoyed looks from their spouses. Marion slid away from Wyborn in mock anger.

"Aye, Wyborn, but at least Marion won't fly at you with her hands like talons," Derek called from the end of the table. "I've earned several scars from your beautiful sister and we're to wed at the beginning of autumn."

Sonja's lovely pink lips curled at the Scotsman. "Keep talking and you'll earn yourself more."

William smiled slightly at the barbs being traded among the couples. He glanced at Elaine who was laughing about something Marion had said. Her gray eyes glistened and her smooth cheek beckoned for his touch. He placed his hands on his knees to keep from reaching out to her. How he was going to share a room with her and not give in to the overwhelming desire to make love with her?

Dinner was pleasant, the conversation ranging from frivolous jests to the more serious situation of the coming battle and the rebuilding of Kell and Helen's home. Afterward, most of the guests returned to their homes. Some of the drunken ones flopped into corners for the night. Kell and Helen went upstairs early, emotionally exhausted over the loss of almost all their belongings. Elaine and William remained at the table sipping wine with Wyborn, Marion, Derek and Sonja.

"You both plan on living at Ravenhill after you're married?" Elaine asked Sonja and Derek.

"We hope to." Sonja clasped Derek's arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. "But we're going to Scotland first to spend some time with his family."

"You're betrothed?" Derek nodded toward William and Elaine.

Color rose in Elaine's cheeks. "No. The idea of marriage doesn't appeal to me."

"I felt the same way, until I married Wyborn. Our marriage was actually arranged by my first husband upon his death. I'll always be grateful to him for that."

"As I will." Wyborn cupped Marion's cheek in his large hand and flashed her one of his rare smiles.

Elaine turned to William and met his gaze. Sorrow and longing shone in her eyes. He thought of the plans they'd once made to marry. It seemed so long ago.

Stig flung open the doors of the great hall and walked down the steps followed by Gregory.

William smiled and crossed the hall to greet his old mentor. "Gregory! How was your journey? Is Juniper well?"

"My journey was long but smooth. I kept to the woods. I did stop at a few villages and saw the ravages of Harold's men. They're moving rather slowly."

The others were looking at the newcomer with interest and William made a hasty introduction before excusing himself to see to Juniper. The horse was already being cared for by a stable hand, but William took a few moments to talk to the animal and look him over. After giving Juniper's nose a final stroke, he returned to the hall where Gregory was seated at the table eating and talking with the others.

"I think we should prepare the army to ride in a few days," Wyborn said. "I don't want to leave Ravenhill, but it's better if we don't allow these raiders to gain any more power."

“Were they connected in any way to the raiders who attacked the valley yesterday?” William asked.

Wyborn shook his head. “Those raiders were Vikings.”

“You’re certain?”

“Very certain. They probably came down from Scotland,” Wyborn stated. “What I found strange was that they were dressed as Scotsmen. When we questioned them, they were unsure of who their leader was, but I’m less worried about a few small Viking raids than what Harold is planning.”

“I think Wyborn is right,” Derek said. “We’ll ride south at the end of the week.”

Marion and Sonja exchanged nervous glances, but saw the wisdom in the men’s words.

“If we’re going to make plans, I’ll get Ezekiel,” Elaine said.

Wyborn shook his head. “We’ll plan in the morning.”

“I still want to tell him what we’ve discussed.”

William turned to the door. “I’ll go.”

“And we should all get to bed,” Wyborn added. “We’ll have plenty of work to do this week.”

After speaking with Ezekiel, William returned to his room where Elaine waited in bed, nearly asleep. A warm feeling enveloped him at the sight of her. He undressed and slipped between the covers.

She placed her hand over his and whispered, “Goodnight.”

“See you in the morning, love.”

“I hope to see you every morning.”

“You do?”

She nodded, touching her lips to his in a chaste kiss. “Always.”

## Chapter Nineteen

The following afternoon after Elaine finished training, she sought out Gregory and found him gathering herbs in the field behind the village.

"Ah," the monk smiled when Elaine dismounted and fell into step beside him, "William's lady. His descriptions of your loveliness were not exaggerated."

Elaine smiled. "I'd like to get to know the man who taught him so much and perhaps learn about William Blackridge himself."

Gregory raised an eyebrow. "I knew him as a child, as a wild youth. Surely you know the man better than I."

Elaine shook her head. "I knew Gabriel."

"He's not the same man?"

"No. Maybe. Sometimes I don't know who he is."

Gregory looked at her with sympathy. "It must be difficult loving the man who nearly destroyed your home, but I'll tell you this, as much as you hate him, it's not nearly as much as he hates himself for all he's done."

"Then why did he do it? I've asked him to talk to me. He won't discuss his past. If he could give me some reason--"

"Is there a reason that would satisfy you, one that would justify his crimes?"

She sighed. "No, but it might help me to understand who he is."

"Gabriel was a healer, was he not?"

"Yes."

"What more?"

"A friend. He was strength, someone we could depend on. Someone who always put others before himself." Elaine thought of William's recent rescue of the twins and how he'd spared Ezekiel's life when the young knight had attacked him in vengeance.

"Who is William Blackridge?" Gregory prodded gently.

"A madman, one who evokes terror. A warrior without peer."

"It sounds to me like these are different parts of one man. He is Gabriel. He is William Blackridge." Gregory hesitated for a moment before adding, "He loves you deeply. Lady Elaine, you've done what a lifetime of hatred and neglect were unable to do. You've tamed him."

"Nonsense. He's untamable. Have you ever seen him in battle?"

"Oh, yes, I have. I won't lie to you and say he isn't touched by madness. That seed was planted young in him. Perhaps it was always within him, but situations nurtured it and made it grow inside him when gentler impulses were squelched."

"Gregory, please tell me about him. He claims to love me but he won't let me know him. He says he has to prove himself to me. All I want is to understand him."

Gregory sat under a tree and bid Elaine to join him. She watched as the monk stared up at a flock of birds flying across the clear summer sky and waited for him to speak.

"He wouldn't want you to know all this. I should respect his silence and his privacy, but I failed once to give him the help he needed. I will not do so again."

"What do you mean, you failed him?"

"He told you that Aubrey, his village, was destroyed during a raid?"

Elaine nodded and Gregory continued, "His uncle provoked that attack out of jealousy of William's father. Aubrey was ruined, the men slaughtered, children killed, women raped and left to die. Homes were burned to ashes. Only part of the manor house still remains."

"He used it as a camp when he was raiding," Elaine said.

"Yes. All his life he clung to the memory of Aubrey like a beacon of violence and anger that guided his aggression. His anger, you see, was all he was allowed to keep. It was the one thing no one could take from him. He was six years old when Aubrey was attacked. I found him nearly two days after the battle, clinging to his mother. Like everyone else, she was dead. Violated, cut to pieces. William was nearly dead himself. At first I thought he was. He was covered in blood, some his own, some his mother's. He was suffering from exposure and lack of water and nourishment. He was passed from relative to relative, but no one wanted him. Finally his Uncle Charles, Harold's father, took him, but only as a whipping boy for Harold. I was hired to teach both boys the uses of herbs, more for assassination than for healing. Only William showed a keen interest in the healing part, so I took him aside and taught him all I knew. In the end, that's what led to my banishment from Charles's house. William was young and vulnerable. I knew he was suffering as he was shuffled from place to place, unwanted, venting the anger and fear he felt in energetic, sometimes violent, bursts. I watched him be humiliated, beaten, many times his basic needs neglected, but all I managed to do was give him some of the knowledge he starved for. He wanted to know everything. He was intelligent and had many talents. The sword master who instructed Harold and William often remarked to me about William's fighting skills. He was what knights were made of."

"He still is." Elaine smiled sadly, disturbed by what she was learning about William's past. No wonder his sanity was often questionable.

"He wasn't allowed the formal education Harold was given, but he hid in the shadows and listened. He learned far more than his pampered cousin. He took to heart all the virtues of knowledge, courage and protection of those weaker than himself. He tried to be a good man, a powerful warrior, one worthy of knighthood, yet his goal was not to be easily achieved. Harold was knighted and William was cast out of his uncle's house forever. He survived as a mercenary and was knighted by the king for saving one of his highness's favorite cousins. William's fondest desire was to restore Aubrey, which still legally belonged to him. He was penniless, except for what he earned soldiering and in some competitions in France where he gained a reputation as a warrior without equal. He finally entered a competition in which the prize was enough gold to restore most of Aubrey."

"William didn't win?"

"He would have, but Charles and Harold had their secret band of raiders attack William when he went for a swim before the competition. He was unclothed, unprepared. They nearly beat him to death, but he survived. After that, he gave up on trying to live an honest life. In his mind, he reaped more rewards as an outlaw. I guess after so many years of striving for respectability and watching it go to men like Harold, he gave up. The violence he'd always suppressed and had only released in battle finally overcame his fragile hold on sanity. And believe me, that hold was fragile. As a young child, he'd scream like a wild beast in his sleep. He outgrew it only when he learned to place aside his feelings. He hardened himself to everything, but that was the only possible way for him to survive."

Elaine nodded, remembering how many nights she'd awakened to find William gone from their bed, practicing with his swords. She murmured, "He still never sleeps easy."

"In a way, Elaine, you and your people saved him more than simply by plucking him from the ocean. He once told me that when he was in Rockland it was the first time he'd ever had a real life. I'm not asking you to forgive him. What he did to you and your people was horrible. You wanted to know about him so you could understand his actions. I sincerely hope our conversation has helped you do that."

She nodded and stood.

"Elaine, one more thing. Up until his abduction of Sven and Lady Marion, he'd never directly harmed a woman or child, nor did he allow his men to do so. I know his raids devastated them, but in his mind, physically harming a woman or child was a line not to be crossed. Perhaps it had something to do with Aubrey. I don't know if any of this will matter to you. I suppose it will if your love is as true as I think it is."

"Thank you, Gregory. In a way, I respect him for his resilience."

"He's doing all in his power to atone for his sins, but I think you know that."

"Yes," she whispered, mounting her horse. "Would you like a ride to the village?"

"I think I'll stay here and enjoy the sun for a while longer."

Back in the village, Elaine asked around for William and was directed to the stable. Outside, a young hand took her mount and she ventured in. William, who looked as if he had just come from the training field, was brushing Juniper's sleek, golden coat. His back was to her as he worked, but her gaze lingered on the length of his legs in the breeches. Her pulse raced at the sight of his broad shoulders and back beneath the grass-stained shirt clinging damply to his perspiring body.

"Sir William," she said, for the first time calling him by his true name.

Glancing over his shoulder, he watched her with intense azure eyes. She stepped up to him, locked her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the lips. His arms slid around her, the hand not holding the brush opened on her lower back and pressed her closer to his body.

Slowly, she drew back only to whisper against his lips, "Come up to the room with me."

"Elaine, I told you that--"

"I love you."

His eyes narrowed slightly and he shook his head.

"I do." She tightened her hold on him. "I've never stopped loving you, I was just afraid to admit it, afraid of what might happen if it turned out you aren't all you seem to be. I was afraid of you turning on me and I was also weak. I lacked the courage to admit what I felt for you in front of the people of Rockland."

"Then why are you saying this now?"

"Because I don't want to waste another moment." She took his face in her hands, her thumbs caressing the dark beard that had finally grown in. "I love you, Sir William Blackridge."

For a moment he said nothing. He placed the brush aside and returned Juniper to his stall. She waited in anxious silence. What if she had been right in her fears? What if now that he knew he had her, he wouldn't care anymore? All that was Gabriel would fall away and be replaced by the merciless raider so many had feared.

He stood in front of her and cupped her cheek in his palm, staring deeply into her eyes. "I'm not going to question this. I'm just glad."

She tossed him a coquettish smile. "Care to show me how glad you are?"

He pulled her into his arms, his hands sliding up her back as his tongue traced her lips, parted them gently and slipped into her mouth, caressing, tickling, loving her by touch. Melting against him, she closed her eyes and sighed with utter contentment.



"I'm taking you upstairs, Elaine," he whispered against her ear. His tongue flicked out to tickle her earlobe, sending a ripple of desire through her. "I'm going to stroke every inch of you until you beg for release, then I'm going to take you until you're fulfilled beyond your wildest imaginings."

"Oh, yes, William," she sighed, burying her face in his shoulder, her fingers clutching his lean waist. "That's what I want."

He took her lip gently between his teeth and ran his tongue over the soft flesh.

Hand in hand, they walked through the village to the manor house, taking no notice of anyone around them. They held each other's gaze, pausing only to make sure nothing was in their path as they ascended the steps. No sooner had they entered his room and closed the door behind them than William pressed her against the wall. He grasped her wrists and pinned them on either side of her head as his mouth descended on hers in a breath-stealing kiss.

Elaine closed her eyes, her heart pounding with excitement. His tongue traced her lips and tasted every corner and crevice inside her mouth before he moved to her neck and shoulder, undressing her as he slid down her body. He kissed her breasts, using his teeth to gently worry her nipples to hardened peaks then swirling his tongue over them. He dropped to his knees, jerked off her boots and breeches, and ran his lips over her stomach and hips. His mouth covered her soft, warm nub and he licked and sucked it gently. Elaine cried out, thinking she might collapse with sensation. His tongue stroked the soft folds of flesh, and she clutched his shoulders, her breathing ragged, her legs almost too weak to support her. It didn't matter. His large hands grasped her waist and steadied her.

As passion grew, she tightened her fingers in his hair. He seemed to judge by the rhythm of her breathing and the trembling of her legs how close she was to release. He teased her to the brink so many times that his name was a sob on her lips. In a single fluid motion, he stood, swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Clinging to his neck, she kissed him, tasting her essence on his lips.

When he left her momentarily, she murmured a protest, but he merely shed his clothes then rejoined her on the bed. Looming over her like some dark, wild beast claiming his mate, he gazed deeply into her eyes. This time when he kissed her, she trailed her nails across his chest and abdomen and clutched his stiffening manhood in her hand. She simply held him for a moment, savoring the hardness beneath the velvety skin. Opening her eyes halfway, she watched him. His blue eyes were dark with passion, but he smiled slightly, teasingly at her and she sighed with contentment, prepared to enjoy a long, fulfilling afternoon.

She guessed he wanted their lovemaking to last for as long as their bodies could endure.

From forehead to toe, he covered every inch of her with kisses, ignoring only the throbbing little core of her passion. Elaine writhed and moaned softly, more content than she'd been in months. Suddenly he licked her overstimulated nub. She had been skittering close to fulfillment for so long, that it took only seconds for her to climax. Closing her eyes tightly, she rolled her hips and arched her neck with pleasure.

After a moment, she smiled and opened her eyes. He was stretched out on his side next to her, his long fingers stroking her hips and breasts, sending little ripples of delight through her.

"Now that the initial edge is off, let's really enjoy ourselves, shall we?" He smiled wickedly, narrowing his eyes and slipping his fingers inside her. Gathering her feminine juices, he rubbed her little bud of pleasure until once again she was panting and writhing with delight.

"Keep this up and I'll be too tired to go back to the field tomorrow," she teased.

"Not me." He kissed her deeply, covering her body with his and sliding into her liquid

heat. "Not yet."

Elaine would have laughed if his long, steady strokes weren't driving her toward another climax. At times the heights he took her to surprised her, but his unpredictable nature was part of what she loved about him.

His movements were frustratingly slow. As she reached what she knew had to be the final crescendo, she clutched him tightly, her nails raking his back, her teeth sinking into the hard muscles of his shoulders, not enough to draw blood, but nearly. She heard his desire in the rasp of his breath, felt it in his tensing muscles and increased movement. Her fingers bit into his flesh and she giggled as waves of fulfillment broke over them.

Several moments later, Elaine stirred beneath William, a half smile still on her lips. Her palms gently stroked his back, moving upward. She ran her fingers through the soft, damp hair at his nape.

He made a contented sound deep in his throat and rolled off her.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I must have been crushing you to death."

"It's the only way I want to die." She snuggled into his embrace and kissed his chest. "I've dreamed of this every night since you left Rockland."

"I dreamed of it too, but not as much as I dreamed of you declaring your love to me. Not Gabriel, but me, William. I never thought I'd hear you speak those words."

"How could I not love you? You *are* Gabriel. I loved him with all my heart, but he's only part of you. He never would have existed if it hadn't been for William's strength and desire to overcome and survive."

"What are you talking about?"

She sighed. Though she hadn't intended to tell him about her conversation with Gregory, she decided there had already been too many secrets between them.

"Gregory told me about the sort of life you've had. I'm sorry--"

"Don't be," he snapped before she could finish. "I made my own decisions. Most of them were wrong."

"But the ones you're making now are right. Surely that means something."

"I don't know anything anymore. Everything used to be so certain for me. It's easy when you don't care for anyone or anything."

"Were you happier before?"

"No. That's another thing. When I'm with you, I'm so happy. I don't deserve it. Not after all I've done, especially to you."

"The only happiness you ever had was taken from you when you were a child. Everything you deserved and everything you should have had was destroyed. You deserved love then and you deserve it now, not for your crimes, but for the acts of kindness you've always been able to show the people of Rockland since you lived with us. You saved Wyborn and Marion's children. You came here with us to try to stop Harold even though you knew it might mean your death. What you've done in your past can never be forgotten but I know you've begun to make serious changes. Many men would have slipped back into their old ways, but you've risen above that and I admire your efforts."

He traced her cheek with his fingertip. "Hearing that from you means everything to me, Elaine. I love you very much."

"And I love you. Always."

He kissed her forehead. "As much as I want to stay here all day, we still have work to do."

"But first a swim." She sat up, reached for his billowy shirt on the floor by the bed and slid into it, then went in search of her discarded breeches. "In the woods behind the village is a secluded little clearing with a brook."

"Sounds wonderful." He stretched, and her gaze raked his long, lean body before he stood and dressed.

As they passed through the great hall, Elaine noticed Brenna and several of the servants watching them with interest, but she ignored them. She and William walked to the woods. Approaching the clearing, they heard laughter.

Wyborn, unclothed except for his breeches, was sprawled on his back by the edge of the brook, Marion curled like a kitten on his chest. Both were soaked from their swim and giggling over some private joke.

Elaine and William were a bit shocked, not to stumble upon the couple, but to hear Wyborn laugh. He was always so solemn and the most humor they'd seen on him was in a rare, half-smile.

"Excuse us," William said when Marion caught sight of them and moved away from Wyborn, though one of her hands still held his. "We thought we'd come for a swim."

"It's a good day for it." Wyborn sat up, shrugging pebbles from his impossibly broad shoulders. "Water's warm. It's all the hot weather we've been having."

"To him anything outside of snow is warm." Marion smiled, brushing tendrils of loose hair from her face.

Wyborn glanced over his shoulder at Marion and shrugged. "It's colder in my homeland."

The chieftain reached for a robe and held it for Marion who slipped into it. He took his shirt in one hand and his wife's hand in the other.

"Have fun swimming." Wyborn's face had resumed its usual serious expression, but he winked at the couple before leaving the clearing with Marion.

"They're such a nice match." Elaine sighed, folding her arms across her chest. "How lucky they are to have a marriage that works so well. Love matches are next to impossible."

"Unless the couple chooses each other."

"Call me unconventional, but I think that's the best way to marry."

"You are unconventional, but I agree."

Elaine watched him, waiting for him to continue and perhaps suggest it was time they marry, but he merely undressed and waded into the water. Sighing, she followed him. Her momentary disappointment was washed away in a rousing water fight that ended in another lovemaking session.

It was nearly dusk when they finally arrived at the manor house. People were gathered in the great hall and Wyborn stood among them talking with Kell, Helen and Derek. When he saw William, he approached.

"Come with me," the Viking said, walking up the steps.

William glanced at Elaine who shrugged and joined the others at the table. He followed Wyborn upstairs to the master chamber.

"I have something you'll want," Wyborn stated, opening the large trunk at the foot of the bed.

William watched with interest as the chieftain moved aside clothes and weapons, digging to the very bottom of the trunk. He pulled out something wrapped in cloth. Wyborn placed the

object on the bed and unwound the cloth.

William drew a sharp breath and stared at the twin blades. Sodom and Gomorrah. He thought they had been lost forever.

"I found them after I thought you were dead," Wyborn explained. "I don't know what possessed me to keep them. You may have them back."

William's heartbeat quickened. He ran his hands reverently over the silver and leather handles. His long fingertip traced the curved, eastern-style blades. He picked up the swords, spinning them lightly. The fit so perfectly to his hands, as if they'd never been parted.

"Odd little blades," Wyborn commented. "Where did you have them made?"

"They were a gift from Gregory. He got them while he was studying herbal remedies in the east." William held the chieftain's gaze. "Thank you. I saved your children and you saved mine."

Wyborn shook his head. "Maybe one day you'll really have children. Then you'll see that those are just pieces of steel, worthless unless you're defending the people you love."

William smiled. "That's almost philosophical, Wyborn. I never would have guessed you had it in you."

"I never would have thought it was in you to place the lives of others above of your own."

"Well said."

Wyborn led the way back to the great hall where he joined Elaine and Gregory who stood by the hearth talking.

Elaine's gaze immediately riveted to William's swords.

"Sodom and Gomorrah." He offered her the blades.

"So they weren't lost after all." Gregory looked at the weapons Elaine now held.

"Wyborn had them all along," William said. "Imagine that."

"Odd blades," Elaine observed, glancing at William. "But somehow they fit you."

"May they keep you safe," Gregory said, "and may you use them for justice."

"For once," William murmured, taking the swords from Elaine and sheathing them at his hips.

Across the room, servants were bringing trays of food to the table. William followed Elaine to the table, watching with affection as her braid swung behind her slender back. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at him. Suddenly he realized how right Wyborn had been. He would have given ten thousand swords, or been stabbed by as many, to protect Elaine.

## Chapter Twenty

Two nights before Elaine, William and the warriors of Rockland were to join Wyborn's army traveling south to meet Harold, a feast was organized in the great hall.

Elaine noted that Marion and Sonja laughed and drank with the others but ate little and never left the sides of Wyborn and Derek. Part of her was fiercely glad she'd struggled through the hardships of posing as a man and learning a soldier's skills. At least when the warriors rode off tomorrow she would be with them. She wouldn't have to endure the endless waiting to see if William would return to her alive.

Taking a long sip of wine from William's glass, she wondered if she might be wrong. Watching him die in battle might be worse than learning of it later.

Beneath the table, William took her hand and she smiled at him.

Several hours later, Wyborn stood, kissed Marion soundly on the mouth and left the hall followed by Kell and a small group of men. Derek remained in his seat between Sonja and William.

"Where are they going?" William asked, watching the men leave.

"To make a sacrifice before the battle."

Elaine's brow furrowed. "Sacrifice?"

William glanced at Derek with interest. "What sort of sacrifice?"

"A ram, I'll wager. Maybe some cattle." The Scotsman shrugged. "Wyborn and his men are the last of his kind, I suspect."

"You're half Viking. Why aren't you going with them?"

Derek snorted, "I'm Christian."

"Most of us became Christian long ago," Sonja said. "Wyborn is rooted in the past and would never pretend to believe in something he doesn't, even though his beliefs can be dangerous."

"We're raising our children as Christians," Marion added quickly. "That satisfies the king, and it pleases me. He knows I'll pray for his safety and the safety of all of you."

Elaine smiled gently at Marion and said, "I know you worry for him but I respect how well you conceal it. He's a strong warrior and I'm sure he'll return to you safely when this is over."

William studied his mug of wine before raising it to his lips. He shrugged. "Sacrifice all they like. Pray all you like. No god will influence the battle one way or the other. Of that I'm certain."

Sonja leaned over Derek and looked at the knight. "Don't you believe in anything, Sir William?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, caressing Gomorrah sheathed on his hip. His gaze riveting to the silver handle, he said, "I believe in this."

Sonja shook her head, glancing away from William and resting her head against Derek's shoulder.

William and Elaine finished their wine and retired early. In their room, Elaine lit a candle on the table by their bedside. They undressed and slipped naked into bed. Elaine stretched out on

top of William, entwining her smooth legs with his hair-roughened ones. She raised her head and looked into his eyes, enjoying the warmth of his body against hers.

"Elaine, tomorrow when we go to fight Harold, I want you to stay here."

"What?" She narrowed her eyes and crinkled her brow with irritation.

"Some of Wyborn's men are staying behind to guard Ravenhill. You can join them."

"I don't think so. I didn't come all this way to avoid a fight. I have a good sword arm and I'm experienced. It would be a waste for me to stay here, especially when my people are riding into battle."

William grasped her shoulders, his gaze intent on hers. "Elaine, I can't bear the thought of you being harmed."

"And you think it's any easier for me to watch you fight?"

"Whenever I know you're fighting, I want to chase after you and protect you. I won't be able to concentrate knowing you're out there."

Her expression softened slightly. No man had ever felt protective of her or expressed such concern for her safety. She placed a hand to his cheek. "William, I'm touched by your caring, but you can't ask me not to go. You said you wanted me to accept you as William Blackridge and I have, but you have to accept me as Elaine. I am a warrior. You've always known that."

He gently pushed her onto her back. Covering her body with his, he whispered against her lips, "Doesn't mean I have to like it. But I do understand. You've always been untamed. That's part of what I love about you."

"Then don't try to kill that in me."

"I just don't want you to be killed."

"Kiss me. No more talk of battle. We'll be in the midst of it soon enough. Just make love with me, William. Take me in your arms and make me feel that nothing exists but the two of us."

Placing a hand behind her neck, he drew her closer and claimed her mouth in a soul-stealing kiss.

\* \* \* \*

About an hour before sunrise, Elaine and William were awakened by pounding on their door. Dragging on breeches and shoving tousled hair from his eyes, William flung open the door.

Derek stood anxiously outside. "Come down to the hall now. One of Wyborn's spies has returned. He's badly wounded, but he's brought word of Harold's raiders."

Elaine slipped on her robe as William reached for his bag of supplies. He, Elaine and Derek hurried down the steps to the great hall. Wyborn had placed the wounded man on the long table. Lady Marion was trying to stanch the flow of blood from a stomach wound. Immediately William began assisting her.

"Wyborn," the man searched blindly for the chieftain.

"I'm here, Stefan." Wyborn placed a solid hand on his shoulder.

William glanced quickly into Wyborn's eyes, both men silently noting that no healing skill would save the man's life. Still William helped Marion bind the wound and attempted to make Stefan as comfortable as possible.

"He's coming. A few hours behind me. He'll reach the valley by dawn."

"Gregory said he was moving slowly," Wyborn said. "I wonder what made him increase his speed?"

"He warned him." Stefan struggled to speak as his life waned. He pointed a trembling finger in what could have been William's direction. "He--"

"Sir William?" Marion asked, glancing at William's startled face.

"No." Stefan's voice was scarcely audible. "Viking ... raider ... son of..."

Stefan expired mid-sentence.

"Damn!" Marion clenched her fists, tears springing into her eyes. "I've known him for years. He was loyal to my first husband and to Wyborn, as well."

Wyborn's hand remained on the dead man's shoulder for a long moment and he said, "A courageous death."

"It will be little comfort to his wife and children." Marion swiped at her eyes.

Wyborn nodded. "They'll be cared for."

"What did he mean, Harold was warned by a Viking? The son of who?"

Wyborn shrugged. "He must have meant the Vikings who attacked the valley earlier this week."

"My uncle also had connections with Viking raiders," William said. "Harold has taken after him in all respects, why not in that one?"

"Wake up Kell and get the men ready," Wyborn stated. "Looks like the battle has come to us."

William met Elaine's gaze. They hurried to their chamber where they dressed hastily and took their weapons.

"I wish you'd stay here," William said again, adjusting Sodom and Gomorrah on his hips.

"I can't do that, William. I'm sorry."

"When this is over, it will be just the two of us in this room, making love. Swear it."

"I swear it," she whispered against his lips before he took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, his tongue probing her mouth, memorizing her taste, her scent and the feeling of her warm body so close to his.

"I love you, Elaine."

She embraced him tightly. "I love you, William." She stepped away and drew a steadying breath, before his eyes changing from his sweet lover to the warrior woman of Rockland. "We must go."

They darted down the steps and to the front of the manor house where their horses were saddled and waiting. Marion and Wyborn stood near his mount. The chieftain held his helmet under one arm and pulled his wife close to him with the other, his mouth claiming hers in a fierce kiss before he released her and swung into the saddle.

William and Elaine followed Wyborn, the other soldiers falling into step behind them.

As the sun rose, Wyborn's warriors encircled the settlements of Ravenhill. Wyborn, with William and Elaine beside him, headed the troops facing south. Derek and Kell were stationed with the groups to the east and west while Stig and Ezekiel joined the troops at the north.

While Wyborn spoke to his men, William glanced at Elaine. Though her face was composed, her eyes looked as tense as he felt. Already the tingle of battle madness was coursing through him. The slightest smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Harold was leading the battle. Stefan had told Wyborn that when he'd first arrived. Harold. The man who had tried to destroy William's life, the son of the man who had slaughtered his family, shattered his innocence and stolen his sanity. William touched his hands to Sodom and Gomorrah and swore an oath to himself. No matter what happened, Harold would not survive this battle.

\* \* \* \*

To Elaine it seemed like they'd been standing there for hours before the first tremors of hoof beats vibrated across the ground and Harold's army rode into view. She wondered if

surprise shone in her eyes at the number of men Harold had accumulated. How had he managed to disguise so many from the king? Surely his raiders rivaled the size of Wyborn's army, vast as it was. She glanced at the chieftain from the corner of her eye, but his face was hidden beneath his helmet.

She leaned forward a bit, taking a last look at William before the fighting began. His new armor had been completed days ago. The silvery helmet and shirt of mail gleamed in the sunlight, the black sleeves of his tunic, dark leather gloves and boots showing beneath. She shook her head, chastising herself for thinking how handsome he looked when within moments they would be thrust into a bloody battle that neither might survive.

Her mind drifted to the first kiss they'd shared so long ago.

A storm of arrows flew, signaling the start of the battle.

She heard the Wyborn's bellow to charge and immediately her thoughts became only for survival.

\* \* \* \*

William kicked Juniper into the onslaught of Harold's men. Between blocking sword cuts and knocking men from their horses, he searched for Elaine but she was already lost in the mass of battle-crazed bodies.

He hadn't expected Harold's army to be so large. Where had he gotten so many men? He must have made connections with every raider in the land as well as several groups of Vikings.

Wyborn's army was large and well trained, one of the best suited in the land to compete with a group the size of Harold's, but William wondered briefly if Ravenhill would survive. If it did, what would be left of it?

Those were his last coherent thoughts before a lance nicked his thigh, drawing a stream of blood and unleashing the mindless fury that always overcame him in battle. He wasn't sure how many men tried to kill him or how many he killed in turn, but the day became a blurred nightmare of blood, screaming and death.

The green valley turned red with blood, but Wyborn's men kept Harold's away from the settlement. Bodies of crushed warriors and dying horses littered the field and from the corner of his eye, William saw Wyborn standing a short distance from him, surrounded by three black-clad raiders. The chieftain dispatched two easily and was about to land a death blow on the third when a horse and rider charged into him. Wyborn scarcely had time to jump out of the way to avoid being trampled. Still, the warhorse grazed him hard enough to throw him onto the grass. Wyborn's helmet flew off. He pushed himself to his feet, blood streaming from a gash on his forehead where he'd struck a rock. Momentarily disoriented, the Viking failed to notice one of the raiders lift his sword, intending to split his skull.

William pulled a dagger from his boot and flung it at Wyborn's attacker, stunning the man and giving the chieftain a few precious seconds to recover enough to finished the fight.

Already there were less warriors standing, but Harold's men had begun to press toward Ravenhill's main square. William kicked Juniper toward the settlement where some of Harold's raiders had broken through Derek's defenses. He caught sight of Elaine by the well. Fighting a tall, mail-clad warrior, she clearly had the advantage. William almost turned away when the same warrior who'd knocked down Wyborn shouted a war cry and galloped toward Elaine. She turned to defend herself against the horseman, and the man she'd been fighting used her distraction to slash her upper arm with the tip of his sword.

William turned Juniper sharply in Elaine's direction, so absorbed in reaching her that he hadn't noticed the body on the ground beneath them. Juniper stumbled to his knees and William



flew over his head, landed hard and twisted his already injured leg. He pushed himself to his feet but nearly fell again as his leg wouldn't completely support him. Glancing down, he realized the lack of strength wasn't from a sprain but from the gash that was far worse than he'd first imagined.

The warrior on horseback had dismounted to fight Elaine. Nearly as tall as William but more thickly built beneath his knee-length shirt of mail, he wielded twin swords. William didn't need to see the face beneath the helmet and nose guard to know it was his cousin, Harold.

Elaine was skilled, but Harold more so--far better than William remembered.

Fury overwhelmed William as Harold attacked Elaine's wounded arm. His leg injury completely forgotten, he lunged between Elaine and his cousin. Their blades clashed in several quick, hard motions, but neither succeeded in breaching the other's defenses. They broke momentarily.

Harold shook his head, squinting at William. "So it is true. You are still alive."

"Alive and quite well," William sneered. "Thanks for the interest."

Harold attacked ferociously, using his size advantage to press William backward onto his injured leg. William stumbled against the well and turned as Harold's sword crashed into the rock rim so hard that sparks flew.

"William," Elaine screamed, lunging at Harold who blocked her with one of his blades and cracked the back of his fist across her face. To his annoyance, she didn't fall, only staggered slightly and lunged again.

"Elaine, get out of here!" William snarled through clenched teeth, driving Harold away from her with several powerful blows.

"Elaine?" Harold panted, his eyes glistening joyously. "You bring your whore into battle, cousin?"

One of William's blades slashed Harold's cheek and he grunted in pain. Fired by the drawing of blood, William attacked harder.

From the corner of his eye, William caught sight of Ezekiel. He was surrounded.

"Help your brother," William shouted to Elaine.

William saw her go and was grateful. He turned his full attention to Harold when Derek's voice rang out above the noise.

"Look!" the Scotsman shouted. "The king's men are coming!"

A third, fresh army charged into the waning numbers of Wyborn and Harold's men. Cheers of relief combined with shouts of retreat echoed throughout Ravenhill.

Harold took the moment of distraction to run off, fighting his way through the battling crowd. William was about to follow when Wyborn rode up to him.

"The village is secured." Wyborn dismounted and loomed over William who sat on the edge of the well, glancing at his injured leg. "It appears the king thought my message was serious enough to send troops. Harold had a great army, but it is no more. Odin was with us today."

"I have to find Harold. He rode off. I'm not letting him get away with this. Not again," William snapped.

Wyborn stooped beside him, inspecting the knight's leg. The cut was short, but to the bone. Blood soaked William's breeches to the knee. Wyborn shook his head. "You can't fight like this."

William sliced off a piece of his tunic and wrapped it tightly around his thigh. Still tingling with battle-rage, he said, "You watch me."

Juniper had loped to his master and William mounted, clenching his teeth against the pain as he swung his leg over the horse's back. He kicked Juniper to a gallop in the direction Harold had ridden off in.

Harold had taken to the woods, anxious to escape the wrath of William and the king's army. Familiar with the forest around Ravenhill, William tracked him easily.

They met in a clearing and drew their weapons.

"I think it's pathetic that you still feel the need to compete with me," Harold said. "Even after so many years."

"There is no competition between us, at least not to me," William stated. "You're the one who hired men to beat me while I was swimming because you knew I'd win if we both entered that tournament."

Harold lifted his chin. "I've won countless tournaments. I've also gotten a taste for war. I've seen battles, both for king and profit. I've traveled, studied with the best warriors--"

"I don't care how you've spent your life, Harold. I've had my own problems. Let's just get on with this before you put me to sleep."

"I'll put you to death!" Like a vicious dog, Harold snapped his large, yellowed teeth, took up his swords and attacked.

William admitted to himself that Harold's swordsmanship had improved. He would be difficult to beat with two good legs. Whatever he did, William knew it would have to be quick. Already he was feeling lightheaded from blood loss, or was it excitement? He couldn't decide. He despised Harold with every fiber of his being, yet his cousin's skill was a thrilling test.

"This time you will die," Harold taunted. "You're a pompous fool just as your father was, always pretending to be more than you are. Let me tell you what you are, William. You're a penniless outlaw who should be rotting at Aubrey along with the rest of the corpses."

William saw Harold's blade swipe his arm, but he didn't feel it. All he felt was the power of Sodom and Gomorrah as they clashed with Harold's twin swords. All he heard was his own bubbling laughter. He and his cousin fought like wild creatures. William was completely free to kill or die because Elaine was no longer with him. She was back at the village. She was safe. He had protected her and helped to protect Ravenhill, something he hadn't been able to do for Aubrey. Knowing this gave him a strange sense of release and accomplishment. He'd bested Harold and in doing so had bested his uncle. Harold and Charles had stolen his chance for a decent life. Now he'd taken it back.

"Let me tell you something else," Harold panted between blows. "When I finish with you, I'm going to find that warrior slut, Elaine is her name? See if she's as feisty in bed as she is in battle."

The idea of Harold with Elaine sparked William's anger to a level he'd never felt before, not even when he'd learned it was Harold who had him beaten before the tournament so long ago.

William spun, knocking one of Harold's blades from his hand, but his cousin moved quickly, the point of his other weapon repeating the earlier wound in William's thigh. William howled with pain and laughter. Sodom knocked Harold's blade aside and Gomorrah stabbed him through the heart.

Harold shrieked in agony as William pushed him onto his back, Gomorrah sinking deeper into his chest, pinning him to the rocky forest floor.

As Harold's eyes dulled in death, William sat back on the ground, panting, another wave of weakness washing over his entire body. It took several moments before he was able to stand

again. He sheathed his swords at his hips, then drew a deep breath and lugged Harold's body onto Juniper before mounting painfully and returning to Ravenhill.

\* \* \* \*

Elaine saw William ride in and hurried to him. She glanced at Harold's body, then met her lover's gaze and nodded.

"You're all right?" she asked, wondering how much of the blood on him was Harold's and how much was his own. His face was bathed in blood and sweat, but he sat very straight in the saddle and had obviously possessed the strength to return with Harold's body, so she assumed his injuries weren't life-threatening.

"Your arm?" he asked.

"Fine. Only a scratch. I'm on my way to find Marion so she can stitch it. You should come too. You'll need care."

"I'll meet you."

Elaine turned toward the manor house and William approached Wyborn.

"Harold." William nodded toward the corpse behind him. "Give him to the king's men. I can't or they'll arrest me."

"Excellent work." Wyborn gifted him with a rare compliment as he hoisted Harold's body onto his shoulder. He glanced at William, narrowed his eyes for a moment's consideration and finally said, "It was good you were with us today."

William nodded and turned toward the stable. Most of the warriors had yet to return and it was almost empty. He dismounted slowly, stumbling on his injured leg. Inside, he attempted to remove Juniper's saddle but gave up when he nearly lost his balance from dizziness and nausea. He steadied himself against the horse for a moment, then unbuckled his sheath, thinking he might feel better once he was relieved of the weapons and mail.

He turned, another wave of dizziness driving him to his knees where he fell forward against a pile of hay, Sodom and Gomorrah dropping from his grasp onto the straw-covered floor.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Elaine sat on a bench in the great hall while Marion leaned over her arm. Though fairly shallow, the gash still needed stitching. As Marion worked quickly and gently, Elaine reassured her that she needn't worry about Wyborn since she'd seen him just before entering the great hall.

Marion smiled with relief. "Kell came in moments ago and said the damage to the village was minimal. Most of the homes are untouched. Unfortunately, the valley was hit harder."

"I'm sure Ezekiel will agree that we can stay and help you rebuild. If it hadn't been for Wyborn's army, there is no telling how much damage Harold would have done to the entire country."

"Your help will be appreciated." Marion finished with Elaine's arm and turned to the door as Wyborn stepped in.

Elaine smiled, watching Marion launch herself into the Viking's arms. Seeing the couple made Elaine eager to be with William, but she waited until Wyborn finished kissing his wife before she approached.

"Where's William?" she asked. "I saw him talking with you outside."

"I think he was headed toward the stable."

Elaine skipped up the steps and walked quickly to the stable, scarcely noticing the tangle of warriors and villagers mingling throughout Ravenhill.

She entered the stable and immediately saw Juniper, his saddle unbuckled yet still on his back, prodding William's unconscious form with his nose.

Elaine dropped to her knees beside him, grasping his broad shoulders and shaking him. "William!"

He didn't respond and panic tightened her belly when she noted the pallor of his skin beneath the streaks of blood and dirt. She moved her knee slightly, feeling wetness seeping into her breeches. Glancing down, she saw she was kneeling in blood dripping from William's wounded leg.

She eased him gently onto the hay and ran from the stable to the great hall. Gregory was the first healer she noticed. He was setting a man's broken arm.

"Gregory, William's wounded in the stable."

The monk took one look at her panicked face and followed her from the hall. Outside, Elaine noticed two of her men and ordered them to follow her.

Gregory knelt on the hay beside William and bound his leg with a fresh bandage. Blood leaked through it and Elaine felt sick with worry.

"Get him to the hall," Gregory told the men. They hoisted William's tall form and carried him to the manor house.

Upstairs, they placed him on the bed and removed his armor and clothing while Gregory bent over him to work.

"I'll get water," Elaine said, leaving the room momentarily. She returned a short time later with fresh water that she heated. Gregory cauterized the wound, but William had already lost enough blood to kill him. Whether or not he survived would be uncertain. Elaine didn't have to ask Gregory to know that. She'd seen enough injuries in her life to judge their seriousness.

While Elaine cleaned blood from William's face and body, Gregory stitched the gash in his upper arm, minor compared to his leg wound. When he'd finished, he applied salve to both injuries and wrapped them in fresh bandages.

"I have to go back to the hall. There are others who need tending to," Gregory said. He placed a hand on William's shoulder and met Elaine's gaze. "Stay with him. In a few hours, you can apply more salve. I know this will sound like madness to you, but if a fever starts, keep him cool and bathe him with water."

"I know," Elaine said, causing Gregory to lift an eyebrow in surprise. "William used that same method several times in Rockland. You made him a good healer."

Gregory nodded. "We could use him about now."

Elaine's attention was no longer on the monk. She sat beside William, feeling numb. For the first time in her life she wanted to cry over battle wounds.

Gregory quietly closed the door behind him.

Edging her chair closer to William, Elaine stroked his face and prayed he'd live. She knew how strong he was. Even when they'd first found him at sea his wounds had been life-threatening, yet he hadn't sustained a fever and had recovered quickly. Still, he hadn't lost this much blood.

He stirred slightly and his eyes opened halfway. "Elaine?"

When he tried to move, she placed her hands gently on his shoulders. "Stay still. You've been badly injured. Whatever possessed you to chase after Harold when you were--"

She stopped speaking and stared at him, aghast. He had actually begun to laugh. "What the hell is so funny?" she demanded.

"Everything. My whole bloody life."

"William, stop." She touched her lips to his forehead.

"God, I must be dying." His laughter faded to a tired smile. "I've never seen such a look on your face."

"You are *not* dying!" she snapped.

"That's more like it. I can take an Elaine with a temper."

"Just keep quiet and rest." She shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. Somehow, he always knew what to say to make everything right for her. How she would miss that if he--

*Stop it, Elaine. He is not going to die.*

William reached for her hand before he closed his eyes and slept. By evening, as Gregory had predicted, William's fever rose. Elaine spent the night bathing him with cool water. Gregory came to the room several times to check on him, but there was nothing he could do that Elaine wasn't already tending to.

It was late when someone knocked softly on the door. Elaine was surprised when Marion stepped inside, carrying a bowl of fresh water, and approached the bed.

"I thought you might want some company," Marion said. "I've been through this with Wyborn."

Elaine sighed. "I know. Because of what William did to him."

"He redeemed himself when he saved our children earlier and Wyborn today."

"Wyborn?"

Marion nodded, placing the bowl on the table beside the bed and pulling a chair next to Elaine's. "During the battle, Wyborn fell and struck his head. He was nearly killed, but William stunned his attacker and gave Wyborn time to recover. I never would have suspected the William Blackridge I knew a year ago is the same man who has been here in Ravenhill."

"He has hurt many people. Nothing can change what he has done."

William made a pained sound. Elaine removed the cloth from his hot forehead and dipped it in the fresh water. She rung it out and replaced it, her fingertips brushing his cheek before she settled back into the chair.

"No," Marion agreed softly.

Elaine continued, "But he has changed. Given the chance, I'm sure he'll continue to do good. I know he will."

"I'm sure you're right. Before I met Wyborn, I heard awful stories of his raiding and plundering. As you said before, though I don't want to admit to that side of my husband, there are probably people in villages across the sea who hate him for what he did."

"How did you know you loved Wyborn, I mean really loved him?"

Marion's smile became tender. "I knew that when he wasn't with me, part of myself lay barren. I knew when he cared for my people as much as I did. I knew I loved him when I could tell him anything, without fear, and he would always accept me, not as a possession, but as a human being."

"I love William," Elaine whispered, more to herself than to Marion. "I don't even care about what he did anymore. I want him with me. Always."

Marion nodded, placing a sympathetic hand on Elaine's knee. "Then we'll do our best to see that happens."

\* \* \* \*

William drifted on the fiery shores of hell, his body hot and aching, his mind trapped in unconsciousness that wasn't sleep, wasn't death, but somewhere in between.

He remembered Aubrey engulfed in flames and blood. He remembered the hatred and violence of his uncle's house, and worst of all, he remembered in vivid detail all the villages he'd destroyed in bitterness and greed. Those he'd killed laughed at him from shores of red sand.

His blades sliced flesh while others slashed his own, but the wounds never killed. They bled forever into the sea where he struggled.

Somewhere in the fever induced nightmare, he floated back to reality. Though he tried to open his eyes, they wouldn't obey. He heard Elaine and Marion's hushed voices.

Elaine said, "He has hurt many people. Nothing can change what he has done."

*But I have changed, Elaine! I swear I have. I love you, not that I deserve your love. Please hear me. Forgive me. Let me try to redeem myself.*

He tried to speak aloud but hadn't the strength to form the words, though his heart raced in the struggle to do so before he dropped back into blackness and nightmares.

\* \* \* \*

By the following evening, due to Elaine's constant care and Gregory's skill, William's fever had dropped, though it wouldn't vanish completely for nearly a week.

Elaine brought him a bowl of stew that he finished quickly and asked for a second serving, completely famished.

"How is Ravenhill?" he asked while he ate.

"Wyborn had repairs underway immediately. There were many injuries and lives lost among the soldiers, our own included, but the village itself was well protected. They'll be all right. Wyborn and Marion are excellent leaders and they have some good people behind them. Derek and Sonja, Stig, Kell and Helen."

"I should be helping them. The healers can use--"

"If you get up, I'll stab your other leg." Elaine glared. "Gregory and Marion have

everything under control and the last thing Wyborn needs is a stubborn gimp causing trouble with his repairs." William looked about to protest, so she changed the subject. "The king's men will be leaving tomorrow. Wyborn sent word to all his people that no one was to mention you've been here."

William nodded, grateful to the chieftain. One word from Wyborn or any of his people would have sent William straight to his execution.

"Ezekiel and I have decided to stay in Ravenhill for several more weeks to help and we've all been invited to Sonja and Derek's wedding two months from now."

"Imagine that." William smiled slightly. "Whoever would have thought I'd be invited to a wedding in Ravenhill?"

"Sonja showed me her dress. It's beautiful. She and Marion made it. She has been having such fun planning the wedding."

William concentrated on his bowl of stew, trying to ignore the nagging desire to take Elaine in his arms and propose marriage then and there.

"When we get back to Rockland, I'll help you clean up your cottage," Elaine said. "As Christian told you, they've been using it to store herbs, but--"

"My cottage?"

A worried expression crossed Elaine's face. "You are coming back to Rockland, am I right?"

"You want me to come back?"

"Yes, I want you to come back." She relaxed visibly. "Dolt."

Placing the bowl aside, he reached out to stroke her cheek. "I love you, Elaine. I never thought I'd be allowed back in Rockland. Not after--"

"Ezekiel agrees, you're part of us now. Even if he didn't agree, either both of us would return to Rockland or neither of us would."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Yes." She sat on the edge of his bed and kissed him. "I love you, William Blackridge."

"I don't deserve you." He pulled her against his chest. Giggling, she stretched out beside him on the bed.

"I can't wait until you're completely recovered." Elaine cuddled against him, her hand splayed across his chest.

"I don't think I can either." He pushed her back against the pillows, burying his lips in her shoulder, his deft fingers unlacing her shirt.

"William, no," she giggled, catching his hand in hers before he could loosen any more ties. "You're white as wax and you've still got a fever. Scarcely a day ago, you almost died."

Nibbling her ear, he said, "If I'm to die, then this is the way for me to go."

"I'll sleep with you now, here in this bed, but I won't make love with you until you're well."

He sighed, resting his cheek against her breast and listening to the rhythm of her heart. She was right. Though he wanted her every time he looked at her, he still felt extremely weak and had no desire to begin a pleasant task he couldn't finish.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of her fingers playing with his hair. Enfolded in each other's warmth, they drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Weakness and the lingering remains of the fever kept William in his room for nearly two weeks before boredom drove him out.

Ezekiel brought him a strong, smooth stick to aid his injured leg. He spent his first morning out of confinement assisting Gregory during his healing rounds. He visited Juniper at the stable and was glad to see the horse was well cared for and Elaine had been exercising him.

William was stroking the horse's neck and speaking to him softly when Wyborn entered the stable to see to his chestnut stallion. William almost smiled at the similarities between the chieftain and his horse, both sturdily built with wild manes.

The men nodded briefly to one another before Wyborn began grooming his horse and William turned his attention back to Juniper.

After a moment, Wyborn said, "A group of us are spending the night at the lake. If you and Elaine would like to join us, you're welcome to."

"I'll ask her. I'm sure she'd love to."

Leaving the stable, William thought how strange it was that he and Wyborn had gone from violently hating one another to almost being friends.

William shook his head, realizing the only friends he'd ever had were ones he'd made over the past year. He'd wasted so much time obsessed with anger and greed.

He found Elaine in the great hall talking with Lady Marion. Both women were looking forward to spending the night at the lake. With the wounded to care for, people to bury and repairs to make, there had been no time for relaxation or enjoyment and they were eager for a night of diversion.

\* \* \* \*

The lake ran through a clearing in the woods just outside the settlement. William and Elaine left early since he was unable to ride due to his leg injury. Aided by the walking stick, his gait was quick if a bit awkward and several times Elaine snapped at him to slow down.

"I've had all I can take of slowing down, lying down and everything else that goes with being injured."

"Nevertheless, you *are* still injured."

He stopped, tugged her into his arms and kissed her deeply.

"I think I like having you worry about me," he murmured against her lips. "I like having you lust after me, shout at me, laugh with me. Since meeting you, I've been indulged by all this attention."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled. "Get used to it."

They were about to kiss again with Wyborn and Sven called to them.

Elaine and William smiled at each other once more before stepping apart. They turned to Wyborn and his young brother who fell into step with them.

"And we thought we'd be early," William said.

"You are," Sven told him. "Wyborn and I are going fishing for tonight's dinner. You can come with us."

"Marion and Sonja are already at the clearing gathering firewood," Wyborn said. "Derek, Kell and Helen will come later."

When they reached the clearing, Elaine joined Marion and Sonja in gathering wood while William, Sven and Wyborn sat by the lake fishing. Wyborn and Sven had brought poles with them and William made one of his own from a stick. After nearly an hour, the chieftain and his brother had caught several midsized fish and were about to suggest returning to camp when William felt a tug on his line and hauled in a fat catch.

Sven shook his head, glanced up at his brother and said, "He always gets the big ones."

Winking at the boy, William said, "You remember that."



Sven nodded, gathered up the string of fish and brought it to camp.

William followed, leaning on his stick for support, once again feeling guilty over abducting Sven last year. He'd taken an instant liking to the boy and was glad he didn't seem deeply disturbed by the event. Sven was a strong child who had the love and support of his family. Perhaps if William had had the same, his life would have been different.

*Life is what you make it and it's much better now that I'm making it good.*

He only wished there was some way he could completely redeem himself with Elaine. She cared for him, of that he was certain. She even accepted him, but as he'd heard her say to Marion, nothing could change the terrible things he'd done. He knew in his heart she could never forgive him and he should be satisfied with her acceptance.

At the clearing, Derek and Kell had set up camp. Elaine and Sonja had a fire going while Marion left briefly to nurse the twins.

Elaine and William smiled at each other before he joined Wyborn and Sven in cleaning the fish that Helen cooked and served along with loaves of bread she'd baked that day.

By the time they'd finished eating, the sun had set and the only light came from the fire. It was a pleasantly warm summer night. The couples stretched out on blankets, the twins between Marion and Wyborn, Sven seated at Kell's feet.

"Will you tell us a story, Kell?" the boy asked eagerly.

"That's like asking Thor if he'll throw his hammer in battle," Wyborn muttered, but the amusement in his eyes belied his sarcastic tone.

"Kell's our village bard," Marion explained to William and Elaine.

"The very best." Helen kissed Kell's cheek. He smiled, stretched his arms over his head and cracked his knuckles, preparing himself for a tale.

"Are you going to tell the one about Twelve Fingered Thorlief?" Sven asked eagerly.

Sonja raised her eyes to heaven. "Sven, you've heard that story a hundred times."

"Aye, but it's a good one." Derek winked.

"No, it's too soft a night for a tale of horror." Kell leaned back on his elbows and looked up at the moon through the treetops. Suddenly he sat up. "All right. It was a night similar to this long ago before our great, great, great grandparents were born. Olga, a chieftain's beautiful daughter with long, golden hair and eyes the color of a summer sea, had been promised in marriage to a rich, powerful young warrior. He was an unloving, selfish man and didn't appreciate the lovely, kindhearted woman who had become his wife.

"Soon after the wedding, the warrior left on a profitable sea voyage where he plundered many villages and gained much wealth. During one of his raids, he came across the cottage of an old man on the outskirts of a village. The man was poor and his home scarcely more than a ruin. Still, the warrior and his men took food from him and were about to burn his home when he begged them for mercy. He had nothing of worth, so the warrior left the cottage intact. What he didn't know was the old man was a powerful shaman. He placed the young, handsome warrior under a curse and as soon as he landed on his native soil, he became a hideous ogre whom his people drove into the woods in fear."

Sven interrupted, "Is that the same woods Twelve Fingered Thorlief lived in?"

"Yes," Kell said, "but this was many years before."

"Sven, let him finish," Wyborn scolded his brother and muttered teasingly, "or else this could go on all night."

"The warrior had nothing left," Kell continued. "No ship, no wealth, no handsome looks. He lived in the woods like an animal, growing more lonely with each passing day.

“While he’d been at sea, Olga had spent her days in despair. She was married to a man who cared for nothing and no one. The thought of him returning was more than she could endure. She packed her few belongings and fled the village. In the woods, she found an abandoned cottage and lived there.

“One day when she was gathering herbs, she came upon an enormous, lizard-skinned ogre in a clearing, bleeding and near death from a fight with a bear. She had no idea the ogre was her husband. In spite of his hideousness, she was moved by pity. She cared for his wounds and became the only creature who would approach him in friendship and not cringe from his wretchedness.

“The ogre became her loyal servant and her protector. He brought her gifts of food and flowers and fell desperately in love with her. Soon, because of his kind and generous nature, she scarcely noticed his ugliness and looked forward to the time they spent together.

“One peaceful summer evening as they sat watching the stars, she said, ‘If my husband had been like you, I never would have left my village.’

“The ogre sighed. ‘Your husband was a fool. He didn’t know what true wealth was.’

“Upon this realization, the ogre’s shell fell away, revealing the young warrior who dwelled beneath the monster.

“Olga was shocked to find she’d fallen in love with her husband, and the young warrior was surprised by how much love, both the love he was able to feel and the love felt for him, had changed his life.

“He realized the shaman’s curse had actually been a gift. He never forgot what he’d learned and he and his wife lived out the rest of their lives in happiness.”

When Kell finished, everyone sat for a moment in silence.

Helen wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “That was beautiful. He has such talent for stories.”

Kell laughed and placed an arm around his wife.

“A nice yarn for women.” Derek leaned back on his elbows.

Sonja shoved his shoulder playfully. “Perhaps there’s a bit of the ogre in you.”

“I liked it very much,” Elaine said to Kell.

“It does have a good moral,” Wyborn admitted. “Now let’s get some sleep.”

Elaine stretched out on the blanket beside William and rested her head on his shoulder. He placed an arm around her and held her close.

“He’s right, you know,” Elaine whispered in his ear. “Love is all that matters.”

William kissed the top of her head. Drifting to sleep, he thought there was more to Kell’s tale than just fireside amusement.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Early the following week, Elaine and Ezekiel decided to leave for Rockland with their crew. Though eager to return home, they had made unbreakable friendships in Ravenhill and promised to write often and visit again.

Wyborn and several of his men helped them load the ship. When they were ready to board, William packed his belongings on Juniper.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'll ride down. I'd like to stop at Aubrey along the way."

"I'll go with you."

"That's not necessary." He smiled, touching her hair. "I can't travel quickly because of my leg."

"I don't mind. Besides, it'll give us some time alone. Let me tell Ezekiel and get my things."

She turned and walked to the ship and William gazed after her, glad she'd decided to join him.

"William," Gregory said, leading a donkey. He stopped beside the knight and placed a hand on his arm. "I'm on my way back to the hospice. Wyborn was kind enough to loan me this animal and Marion gave me a fresh supply of herbs and salves."

"Best of luck, Gregory. The work you do is important."

"I do what I can. You won't forget about me? Come and visit your old teacher once in a while."

"You have my word."

Gregory mounted the donkey, but before he walked toward the road, he said, "I'm proud of you, William. You've become the man I always imagined you would."

"I had a good teacher."

The monk waved and turned the donkey toward the road.

Elaine approached on horseback and called her good-byes to Gregory who smiled and waved at her.

"He's such a sweet man," Elaine said. "Are you ready?"

William nodded, mounting Juniper carefully. His leg still hurt, but he'd begun riding again, a bit each day, and was grateful the injury hadn't been permanent. It would have made training difficult and fighting more dangerous.

Aubrey was a short ride from Ravenhill, so it was early afternoon when they approached the seaside ruin.

Twenty years ago, Aubrey had been nearly burned to the ground. A few rocky foundations were scattered and overgrown with grass throughout the field. The broken remains of half a manor house still stood, the rocks covered with moss, holes in what was left of the roof. Some half burned, rotted furniture remained inside along with circles of rocks and old wood where campfires had once burned. Beyond a rocky ledge, Elaine heard the crashing of ocean waves. Seabirds flew overhead, shouting their high-pitched calls.

She glanced at William's face and noted his features were composed, distant, yet she

almost felt the turmoil within him.

"It looks like it was once a beautiful place," she said as they stopped and dismounted.

"I don't remember. All I can recall is the slaughter. Fire. Blood. I can't even begin to tell you what it looked like intact. When I close my eyes, I can only picture these ruins." He shook his head, disbelieving and ashamed. "To think I did this to people."

Elaine slipped her hand into his as they approached the manor house ruin and stepped inside. They walked slowly along the perimeter.

"I never thought I'd stand here without feeling anger. I never wanted to," he said.

"What do you feel?"

He ran his palm over the filthy back of a scratched wooden chair, then turned to her and placed his hands on her shoulders, gazing at her. "I feel love for you. That's all that matters to me now. You've changed my life, Elaine. Twenty years ago I died and I was dead every moment after that until I met you."

She embraced him tightly. "I love you, William. Do you want to camp here for the night?"

"Let's cover a few more miles."

\* \* \* \*

Elaine and William set up camp in a field. After eating, they stretched out on a blanket by the fire and watched the stars.

"I hope everything is well in Rockland," Elaine said.

"So do I. I'm looking forward to seeing how Christian and the healers are faring."

"I'm so glad you're coming home with me." She raised her head onto her elbow and traced patterns on his chest with her index finger.

His gaze jerked to her hand as it moved lower and grasped his manhood. She stroked him firmly and felt him grow in her palm.

"An impressive weapon." She smiled coquettishly. "Perhaps you could give me a demonstration?"

"Anything my lady wishes." Rolling onto his side, he cupped her breasts. He lowered his head and ran his tongue over her nipple, then teased it gently with his teeth.

He licked and kissed every inch of her until her breathing was ragged and her hands clutched him eagerly. When he loomed over her, she braced her hands against his chest and pushed him onto his back.

Her body slid onto his, her thighs clasping his waist, her fingers entwining with his as she rode him masterfully, her head thrown back in abandon. She tugged her hands from his grasp and raked her nails over his chest while driving their bodies to heaven.

With a contented sigh, she snuggled onto his chest, kissing the red scratches left by her short nails. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head before falling asleep.

\* \* \* \*

As William and Elaine approached the village, one of the guards called to Ezekiel, letting him know Elaine had returned. When her brother rode out to greet them, she knew something wasn't right. Though he was obviously pleased to see her, his face was etched with concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Ezekiel sighed and shook his head. "Something happened to the crops. Most of them died, and it's nearly the end of summer. We still don't have enough resources to purchase more food and with the raids from this past summer, trade will be difficult."

"Oh no." Elaine's brow furrowed. "We have one bout of bad luck after another."

"People have been hunting and gathering food, but with the crops dying came sickness and more than half the villagers are bedridden." Ezekiel looked to William. "We can certainly use your skills now."

Glancing at William, Elaine realized their few days of frolic were over.

Once they'd unpacked and seen to their horses, William joined the healers in aiding the sick. He was glad that neither of the healers nor Christian had sustained the illness that had swept through Rockland.

Afterward he went to the manor house where Elaine was talking with her mother.

"My lady," William said to Katherine, approaching her chair by the fire.

Katherine reached for his hand and squeezed it affectionately. "Elaine has told me everything that happened in Ravenhill. I'm glad you've returned with her."

"I'm glad that I'm welcome."

"Let's just hope they'll continue to be a Rockland to be welcome in," Ezekiel said from the table where he was sharpening his sword.

"He and James showed me what's left for supplies," Elaine explained. "Looks like we're going to have another difficult winter. The hunters have been working extra hard and women have been gathering roots in the forest but with most of the people unable to leave their beds, the village is in bad condition."

"We'd need a small fortune to get us back where we should be," Ezekiel said. "I'm starting to wonder if Rockland can survive any more disasters."

William glanced at the flames dancing in the fire.

*Small fortune, he thought. If that's all they need, I know where they can get one.*

\* \* \* \*

"Absolutely, positively not!" Ezekiel shouted, glaring at William.

"It's the only way and it makes sense," William stated.

He and Ezekiel sat across from each other by the fire in Ezekiel's room. It was late at night and they were completely alone.

"You're madder than ever," Ezekiel ranted, standing up and pacing the room. "I will not, *will not*, turn you in to the king!"

"But you said yourself you'd need a small fortune to get Rockland comfortably through the winter. The price on my head is a small fortune. Turn me in and you'll have it."

"I can't believe you'd even suggest such a thing. Do you know what they'll do to you? They'll execute you."

"Ezekiel, I committed the crimes I'm wanted for."

The young knight sighed. "I can't, William. Earlier this year, I would have done it gladly, but now I can't. I know you. I even like you and what about Elaine? If I do what you ask, Elaine will execute *me*."

"I can't stand the thought of Elaine suffering this winter, of any of you suffering when I can stop it."

"And you think I can stand the thought of being the one to end your life?"

"I ended my own life long ago. It's not only about Rockland. Ezekiel, if you don't turn me in, I'm going to turn myself in. Either way, I'll be tried, so you might as well get the reward and use it for Rockland. At least let some good come out of this."

Ezekiel looked torn. The thought of so much money to rebuild Rockland was obviously tempting.

William stood, his gaze meeting Ezekiel's. "It's long past time I paid for my crimes. I'm

going to the king tonight. Come with me. My life was worthless but give me the honor of having a meaningful death."

\* \* \* \*

Elaine awoke the next morning and reached for William, disappointed to find the bed empty. He'd made love with her for so long the night before that she was ashamed to say she'd fallen asleep before he'd finished. Still, she smiled at the memory and longed to find him and share a good-morning kiss.

She washed and dressed hastily, then hurried to the hall. Katherine and James, their faces pale, stood talking with Ezekiel who looked as if his closest friend had just died.

"What's wrong?" Elaine asked, approaching the table.

Katherine shook her head sadly and took her daughter's hand.

"What is it?" Elaine demanded, glancing from her mother to Ezekiel.

"I'll see you on the field," James said softly, took up his sword and hurried from the great hall.

"Elaine," Ezekiel began softly, "William thought of a way to get the supplies we need for Rockland. I disagreed with him, but he was adamant--"

"Oh no," Elaine felt choked by sudden fear. "Tell me he hasn't gone back to raiding. I can't believe that."

"He hasn't gone back to raiding, dear," Katherine said. "Quite the opposite."

Elaine threw up her hands in exasperation. "Will someone tell me what's going on?"

"He had me bring him to the king and collect the reward on his head," Ezekiel hissed. "And I did it. I can't believe I did it!"

"You--" Elaine stared at her brother in disbelief before she punched him as hard as she could.

Ezekiel staggered a bit, blood pouring from his lower lip. He wiped it on the back of his hand and looked sadly at Elaine. "I'm sorry, Elaine. He was going to turn himself in anyway, and you know how convincing he can be."

"Ezekiel," Elaine whispered, tears streaming unchecked down her face, "how could you?"

"Elaine," Katherine said, "I'm not saying I agree with what your brother did, but it was William's decision. He said he wanted to atone for his crimes. It was something he had to do."

"Has he been sentenced?"

"He's being tried tomorrow morning, but I think you know what the sentence will be," Ezekiel said.

"I have to go there," Elaine murmured. "I have to be with him."

"Elaine, don't go," Ezekiel said. "Don't make it any harder for him than it already is."

Heartbroken, Elaine glared at her brother before going to her room. She packed quickly, readied her horse and was gone within the hour.

By late afternoon, she was allowed to meet with William who had been placed in a solitary cell.

Elaine and the guard walked down a narrow corridor strewn with filthy straw. The only source of light was a single torch. Elaine heard rats scurrying across the floor and the rancid odor nearly gagged her before she became accustomed to it. They passed several cells and the guard said, "We had to move him last night for fighting with the other prisoners. He killed two of them. We can't have that kind of trouble."

Elaine nodded, knowing that many of the prisoners belonged to William's old band of

raiders and him being thrust in among them should have been a death sentence. Obviously his men had forgotten William's blind battle rage.

At the farthest end of the windowless hall, the guard placed the torch in the wall above William's tiny cell. It was too small for him to lie down and almost too low for him to stand. Grime covered the walls and matted the ancient straw on the floor where William sat, his back against the wall, knees up, his shackled arms dangling over them. His eyes were closed, but as his visitors stopped outside his cell, he said in a voice dripping with venom, "Go to hell."

"We've been there before, you and I."

William's eyes snapped open and he stared at Elaine, his teeth shining in the darkness as he smiled. He stood and walked to the bars. In the flickering torchlight, she saw that his cheek was bruised. Dried blood streaked his face and clotted on a cut above his left eye.

"Elaine. You shouldn't have come."

"Neither should you," she said.

"It's for the best."

"No. How can this be for the best?"

"It's the only way I can think of to truly repent for what I've done."

"But--"

"A few more moments," the guard called.

Elaine linked her fingers over William's through the bars.

He drew a long breath. "I know I have no right to ask this of you, but will you forgive me for what I've done?"

"William," she took his face in her hands, her gaze on his, trying to reinforce through her expression how deeply she loved him, "of course I forgive you and I love you. Always. I'll never, never stop loving you."

He smiled slightly, a look of relief in his eyes.

Pressing closer to the bars, she kissed him deeply. He closed his eyes, seeming to lose himself in their final kiss.

"Time," the guard said, taking the torch from the wall.

"Elaine, promise me you won't come here again and promise me you won't watch the execution," he said. When she shook her head, he practically shouted, "Promise me!"

Seeing the panic in his eyes, she nodded. "I promise."

He dropped his hands from the bars and smiled at her. Following the guard out, she glanced over her shoulder until she could no longer see in the darkness.

## Chapter Twenty-three

To Elaine, keeping her promise to William was almost as torturous as knowing that he would be put to death. Ezekiel attended the trial where William admitted to all his crimes.

As Ezekiel approached Elaine in the stable where she had been caring for her horse, she knew a judgment had been passed.

"Well?" she demanded.

"He's to be burned at the stake two weeks from now."

Elaine suddenly felt lightheaded and she leaned against the horse for support. Ezekiel reached out to her, but she waved his hands away, still not having completely forgiven him for turning William in.

"Why the delay?" she whispered.

"Word is the king has sent a message to Wyborn. It was his army who captured William's last year and the king respects Wyborn, even though he's a heathen. He wants to give him the opportunity to watch the execution."

"Wyborn," Elaine whispered. "How well did you say the king likes him?"

"Elaine, I know what you're thinking, but even if we could convince Wyborn to speak on William's behalf, the king despises him as much as anybody. This is even assuming Wyborn will come."

"He will. Remember, William saved his life and the lives of his children."

"And he also abducted his brother and his wife and nearly killed Wyborn himself with Red Squill poisoning."

"You saw how much Wyborn cares for his family. Do you think he'd place his own pain above the lives of his children?"

"Elaine, I don't want you to rely on false hope. I know how much you love Sir William--"

"You have no *idea* how much I love him. If you had, then you never would have gone along with his crazy idea to turn him in!"

"Elaine, you know I regret it, but you didn't hear him. He wanted to pay for his crimes."

"And he hasn't already? He has done everything in his power to change."

"Except give his life."

"You've killed, Ezekiel. So have I. Would you die for the things you've done?"

"That's different."

"Is it?"

Ezekiel sighed. "Elaine, I can't say anything more..."

"You'd better think about what you'll tell my child about who turned his father over for execution."

Ezekiel closed his eyes and shook his head. "Elaine, don't tell me this."

"It's true." She swallowed past the tightness in her throat. While in Ravenhill, she'd stopped using the wild carrot to prevent conception. She'd *wanted* a child for her and William to raise together.

"Does William know?"



"Of course he doesn't know! What good would it do him to know now?"

"None, but we can certainly tell Wyborn. If he agrees to help us, it might give him added leverage with the king."

"The king won't care if I have ten of William's children. You know it, and I know it."

"It can't hurt to try."

"Let's just pray Wyborn comes."

\* \* \* \*

William remained silent as six guards marched down the hall to his cell, unlocked the door and guided him out, his wrists and ankles bound with chains.

Outside the prison, William squinted painfully in the sunlight, his eyes unaccustomed to the brightness after the utter darkness of his cell. He heard the shouts of the crowd that had gathered to watch his execution. As his vision became clearer, he focused on the pyre where he would die and he laughed.

"Quiet!" One of the guards struck him in his lower back with the pommel of his sword. William staggered, though his laughter never ceased. Loud peals sounded above the taunts of the crowd even as he walked fearlessly to the pyre and stood without struggling while the guards bound him tightly to the stake.

Once he was secure, the guards stepped back and one lit the pyre. It smoldered, the smoke rising. Tears streamed from William's eyes and his laughter turned to choking. Heat edged closer, licking his boots and legs, almost unbearable even though the flames had yet to reach him.

His thoughts focused on Elaine and how their time together had been too short. Something so beautiful couldn't have lasted. Not for him.

Suddenly the heat faded and he felt something cool splash him. Rain? He opened his eyes and blinked through the clearing smoke. Guards were dousing the flames. Two of them picked their way through the partially burned wood and untied him.

"Come," said one of the soldiers, guiding William away from the pyre.

At first, he thought his legs would be too weak to support him. His heart pounded and for several moments he could scarcely draw a breath without coughing violently. The guards led him through the crowd to where the king waited.

Seated on a carved throne, the king was speaking to Wyborn who, still dusty from the road, stood with his arms folded across his broad chest, his blond hair a disheveled tangle down his back. Elaine, dressed in a demure green tunic-style gown, her black hair braided down her back and covered with a filmy golden veil, stood beside him. William's heart fluttered. She was so beautiful, so perfect, and he was still alive to enjoy the sight of her.

Elaine, Wyborn and the king himself turned their attention to William who bowed deeply before the monarch's stern gaze.

"William Blackridge, your crimes are atrocious, but it has come to my attention by Wyborn, a most valued servant, that you are responsible for stopping Sir Harold. Wyborn, as I've learned, is a fine judge of men. At his recommendation, I'm pardoning you of your crimes."

William's gaze moved from Wyborn to Elaine. The chieftain nodded slightly and Elaine's smile dimmed the sun.

"However, should you return to your old ways, there will be no future pardons and you will die for your crimes, both old and new."

William bowed again. "That is more than fair, my lord."

The king waved his hand and one of the guards released William from his bonds. The

chains fell away and he gently rubbed his raw wrists, wondering what a sight he must be--filthy, smoky and covered in old blood from fighting with the other prisoners weeks ago. He almost gagged on his own stench. Still he kept his posture proud, his gaze steady, and did his best to control the smile tugging at his lips.

"One last thing," the king continued, "the land of Aubrey is still yours. What you do with it is up to you, but I hope your decisions from here on out are good ones."

"Thank you, my lord."

The king gestured with his hand in dismissal. William, Elaine and Wyborn left the hall. Outside, Elaine flung her arms around William and held him tightly.

"Elaine, I smell like a swamp," he said.

"I don't care." She tightened her hold on him and he embraced her, still not quite believing he was free.

When Elaine released him, he turned to Wyborn.

"I don't know how to thank you."

Wyborn held up his hand. "You can thank me by not going back to your old ways."

"Never."

"Good."

"Rockland is only a few hours away. Will you stay with us while you're here?" Elaine asked Wyborn.

"Thank you. I plan on leaving in the morning. It's not often that I travel without Marion anymore, but once I received the message, I had to ride fast to get here before the execution."

"Ezekiel has our horses ready in the stable," Elaine said. "First I must change out of this silly dress, then I'll join you."

William touched a gentle hand to her veil. "Silly maybe, but you look beautiful."

She leaned closer to him and whispered, "I'll save the dress for tonight."

He flashed her a smile before she turned on her heel and left.

\* \* \* \*

When William and the others arrived in Rockland, several villagers assembled to greet them, including Christian, Rebecca, Robert and his children.

"Did the king really free you?" Christian asked.

"Thanks to a few good words from Wyborn." William glanced at the Viking.

Wyborn snorted. "More like an hour of convincing."

"I've heard about your great army, my lord," Christian said, a bit shy of Wyborn.

The chieftain glanced kindly at the boy. "And I've heard you're a great healer in the making."

"One day I will be."

"No more interest in soldiering, Christian?" William asked.

The boy sighed. "Maybe someday. I still have too much to learn about the healing arts."

William smiled with approval and Wyborn said, "A good healer can salvage hundreds of warriors."

Rebecca fell into step beside Stig who had accompanied Wyborn on his journey. She glanced at the handsome young man and said, "If Ravenhill's army is made up of such men, I can see why Harold didn't defeat you."

To the others' surprise, a blush rose in the young warrior's cheeks as he said, "We do our best."

Elaine smiled at Stig and Rebecca, thinking the two would make an attractive couple. She

knew Stig to be kindhearted and courageous, the sort of man Rebecca deserved after a lifetime of hardship. It was a pity she lived in Rockland and he in Ravenhill.

"What are you going to do now that you're free?" Stig asked William.

"Stay here?" Christian looked eager.

William turned to Elaine. "I not exactly sure. I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Elaine raised an eyebrow. "Why tomorrow?"

William merely smiled.

At the manor house, Katherine awaited them. She welcomed Elaine and William with an embrace. For a moment, she held their hands in hers. She smiled. "You both have secrets to tell and questions to ask."

Elaine's eyes widened slightly, though it shouldn't have surprised her that Katherine had already perceived she was pregnant, but what secrets or questions did William have?

"Mother, this is Wyborn of Ravenhill," Ezekiel introduced the chieftain.

"Lady Katherine," Wyborn said, "an honor."

Katherine narrowed her blind eyes and reached for Wyborn's hand. "You will be the father of many and the grandfather of more."

Wyborn smiled slightly. "Only two children, so far."

Katherine laughed. "No, son. My guess is four times that many."

"I don't ever recall mother being wrong about such things," Elaine said.

Wyborn lifted an eyebrow. "Then I'm glad my wife is not here to listen."

While William, Ezekiel and Wyborn went to bathe in the river, Elaine soaked in a warm tub. She looked forward to spending the night in William's cottage. Not only would it bring back the wonderful memories of the first months they'd spent together, but it would be the first night they could enjoy without the fear of some impending disaster. Rockland was safe, since the king had not revoked the reward for Ezekiel turning in William, and William himself was free.

As Elaine washed, she touched a hand to her flat stomach that would soon reveal the child she carried. She longed to tell William but not before she learned of his plans for the future. She wanted to be sure she'd be a part of them because it was what he truly wanted, not because she was trapping him with her pregnancy. Tomorrow he said he'd announce his plans, but what made tomorrow so special?

After bathing, Elaine went to William's cottage and prepared a meal for two. She lit candles and slipped into her green and gold dress. She brushed her hair and let it hang thick down her back and over her shoulders.

She was still brushing it when William entered the cottage. His dark curls were still damp from the river and the open ties of his cream colored shirt revealed the hard planes of his chest.

She placed the brush aside and stood as he approached and pulled her into his arms. His mouth descended on hers, his tongue tracing the shape of her lips before hers darted out to meet it. She tightened her fingers in his hair and held him closer. His arms tightened around her, the soft curves of her breasts crushed against his chest. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss.

"You look beautiful," he said, gently rubbing his bearded face against her smooth one, then kissing her neck.

"I can't believe everything's over." She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his lips against her flesh.

He stopped kissing her for a moment. "Over? I was hoping it was just beginning."

"What do you mean?"

"Elaine." He gazed so deeply into her eyes that she felt she was wading in a warm

summer sea. He lifted one hand and caressed her cheek. "I don't have anything to my name except for Aubrey and that's a ruin, but I know in time, with hard work, I can restore it. I love you with all my heart."

She stared at him, her pulse quickening, and waited for him to continue.

"I had intended to wait until tomorrow for this, but I'm too eager. Elaine, will you be my wife?"

She flung her arms around his neck and laughed in pure joy. "Yes! Yes, I'll be your wife!"

His laughter mingled with hers. He swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed, placing her on it and stretching out beside her.

"I won't ask you to come to Aubrey until it's fit to live in, but--"

She touched her fingers to his lips to stop him from speaking and said, "Wherever you go, I'm going with you. If we're going to live at Aubrey, then we'll rebuild it together."

"There's more," he continued, his voice calm, though he was unable to fully conceal his excitement. "I've been thinking about this for a long time and wondering how to do it. Now that Aubrey is mine again, I have a place to make my plan a reality, but only if you agree."

"What?" she asked, never having seen him so enthusiastic about anything.

"Gregory's hospice is a wonderful idea, but it's buried in the woods with little resources. Aubrey would be the perfect place for a hospice. The land is fairly fertile and we could farm to support ourselves. Once restored and expanded, the manor house could shelter plenty of people."

Elaine smiled broadly. "Sounds to me like we have our work cut out for us, but I'm looking forward to every moment."

"If I traveled overseas and did a couple of tournaments a year, I could earn enough to keep the hospice running."

Elaine nodded. She'd known that William would have to fight in one form or another. It was a part of him she accepted, something she knew he needed as a release for his wild nature. At least he'd found a positive way to focus his talent and energy. Love of training was also a feeling she shared.

"I assume you'll give me control over the home guard while you're away?"

"Fear not, my lady. I won't expect you to become a typical wife. No matter how beautiful you look in a dress and veil, without a horse under you and chain mail on you, you wouldn't be my Elaine."

"If I didn't know you felt that way, I'd never consent to marrying you." She slipped her arms around his neck. "All my life I've worked to ensure no man would ever take control of me, but other than Ezekiel you're the only man I've ever met who truly respects that desire, even likes it."

"It's not about tradition with us, Elaine. We both rejected such nonsense ages ago. For us, it's about love."

"And we'll raise our child with the same values."

"Yes, we will. After the wedding you may toss the wild carrot and we can--"

"I tossed it in Ravenhill. I'm several weeks late."

"You--" He stared at her, dumfounded. He'd always wanted children, but had been careful to ensure none were conceived by him. Growing up as an orphan had been painful and he wanted no child of his to suffer the same fate. In the back of his mind, he'd also realized the wrong of his crimes even as he committed them and he wanted no child to be tainted by the violence in him. Yet that violence, that madness was still a part of him and he feared he would

not make a fit parent.

Elaine's smile faded. "You aren't happy?"

"I am." He stretched out on his back and she folded her arms on his chest, resting her chin on them so their gazes met. "I just don't want a child to be hurt by who I am and what I've done."

"This child will love you as you are, William. As I do."

"But will I be good for it?"

"I see how you are with Christian. You've changed his entire life. When you put your mind to it, you're a good teacher. You have so much to offer a child. Both you and Lady Marion made certain I didn't have to conceive. I chose you to be the father of my child because I know you'll be a good one and because I love you."

"I promise you, Elaine, that you and our children will always be my priority."

"I know." She smiled, touching her lips to his. She slid one of her hands down his body and clasped the bulge in his breeches. "You can start by giving me some much needed attention."

"At your service." He rolled her onto her back and kissed her.

## Epilogue

William and Elaine sent for a priest the following day and were married. They convinced Wyborn to stay an extra day for the wedding. Before he left, the chieftain offered the hospitality of Ravenhill for when they began rebuilding Aubrey.

The couple left the following week. Tears of sadness mingled with hope for a joyous future as Elaine said good-bye to her mother. The blow was somewhat softened by Ezekiel's announcement that, while at court, the king had arranged a marriage for him that would take place the following year.

Rebecca, Christian, Robert and his five children also planned to move to Aubrey within the month where Robert and his family would farm. Christian would continue his education as a healer and Rebecca and Stig hoped to explore the interest kindled in one another during their brief meeting in Rockland.

Elaine and William rode to Aubrey by way of the forest where Gregory's hospice stood. The old monk and the young Brother who aided him were thrilled by the invitation to move their work to Aubrey. William and Elaine promised to send for them as soon as they were able to house people.

The first night they arrived in Aubrey, the couple camped in the manor house ruin.

"I can't believe we're finally here." Elaine cuddled next to William near the fire and admired the gold wedding band gleaming on her finger. He'd traded his finest dagger for the ring, but it had been well worth it.

"Part of the forest behind that field belongs to Aubrey." William pointed to the silhouettes of trees in the distance. "We'll have plenty of wood to build with. Wyborn and Derek have offered to bring some men to help me raise the walls."

Elaine drew a deep breath and smiled. "This is all so exciting, even better than when I ran away to become a mercenary."

"To think I compete with that." His voice was laced with humor. She turned and looked at him, her gray eyes shining with love. His heartbeat quickened. Tenderly, he buried his hand in her thick, soft hair. "May I kiss you, my lady?"

Smiling, she lifted her chin toward him.

His mouth claimed hers in a kiss of pure passion. Bathed in the moonlight shining through a crack in the roof of the old manor house, they made love on the ground of Aubrey, a place that would flourish with their love for years to come.

The End