

Secrets



Charmain Callaway

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Prologue

England, 1157

The battle was over.

Rainier's horse carefully picked his way through the bodies and debris which lay in the courtyard as he quickly inspected the remains. It had taken ten days, but the castle walls had finally been breached.

In truth, he could have taken the castle sooner, but he wanted the men inside to worry, to be anxious, and to be afraid. The men had foolishly thought no one knew who or where they were.

But he had found them and patiently tracked them to this keep.

Dougal Castle.

Rainier had studied the surrounding area, and decided to lay a siege against the men instead of an outright attack. He already knew how many men were inside, and that there were neither women nor children. He had also learned how much food and water was inside.

Or rather, how little.

He had smiled.

The men had failed to stockpile needed supplies, not thinking they would be found.

He had decided to wait. He was good at waiting.

He had stopped all wagons delivering supplies. Instead, he used the supplies for his own men, patiently waiting outside.

After the first week, the men inside were suffering. He could hear the arguing over the smallest thing. He noticed the men were weakening, becoming lax in their duty to keep guard on the walls.

On the tenth day, he had waited long enough. His men had quickly scaled the walls and opened the gates.

The battle had been brutal, not for his men, but for those trying to hide inside.

The place smelled of death.

Rainier saw the destruction surrounding him and remembered the sight that greeted him three months ago when he returned home. He mentally shook his head to clear it.

He glanced down as he passed a slim body laying face up, wide unblinking eyes staring at empty space. Bending down, he gently brushed the hair from the youthful face.

The boy could be no more than ten.

He wondered if the boy had parents that would worry when he failed to return home after a few months, a mother anxiously waiting to lovingly wrap her arms around his slim shoulders, reassuring herself that her son was once again home, safe and sound.

With a heavy sigh, he closed the lifeless eyes.

Such a waste of life.

The loud cursing from the other side of the courtyard pierced his thoughts, demanding to be heard. He turned to see the one man responsible.

Hawkins!

His own hazel eyes darkened, making them appear almost black, *like a wolf*, his friends would say. And like a wolf, he had tracked Hawkins with cunning and patience.

With his eyes still on Hawkins, his stride was slow and purposeful as he made his way across the courtyard.

Rainier silently measured the man before him. With gray at his temples, Hawkins was older by at least twenty years. A few inches taller than himself, his faded blue tunic was spattered with blood. *Innocent blood*, he thought. He noticed a thin red scar across Hawkins' left cheek, his exertion during the battle causing it to stand out.

"Explain!"

Hawkins frantically looked at the men surrounding him, men with long swords in one hand and shields in the other. Helmets covered their heads, the long nose guard giving each soldier a menacing look.

He watched as the man who relentlessly tracked him halted a few feet in front of him, watched as he removed his helmet to reveal eyes as hard as diamonds glaring back, eyes that could penetrate his soul.

He quickly scanned the courtyard, noticing that only a few of his men were still alive.

"I will not ask again!" the deep voice quietly threatened.

"You took what was mine!" Hawkins quickly answered.

"What was yours?"

"Redding. You burned it down."

Rainier's eyes narrowed as he thought back. "You had one of the castles King Henry ordered destroyed?"

Hawkins' thin scar looked menacing when his face turned red from anger. "It was mine. King Stephen—"

"Stephen is dead" Rainier interrupted. "King Henry now rules."

"You had no right to destroy it!" Hawkins yelled.

"I had the order from the King. Those castles were built without royal authority by greedy noblemen and barons

wanting to increase their position.”

“That is not true.”

“They took advantage of the fighting and raiding going on by seizing land that was not theirs. They manipulated the law to undermine royal authority. King Henry ordered all unauthorized castles built during Stephen’s reign to be destroyed.”

Hawkins stood as tall as he could “You took what was mine! I simply took what was yours.”

Rainier paused, again remembering. “Is that how you justified killing innocent men, women and children?”

“I did not—”

“I *saw* what you left behind; old men slaughtered with makeshift weapons still in their hands, mothers still clinging to their young.” Rainier stepped closer, his voice lowered. “How many people died when Redding was destroyed?”

Hawkins was silent.

“I had everyone removed before the castle was burned. Not one man, woman or child died. My orders were to destroy the castle, not kill innocent people. You, on the other hand, trampled everything in your path. And when you heard I was returning home, like the coward you are, you ran away.”

Hawkins was unaware that death was a certainty for him now. He did not hear the quiet threat in Rainier’s voice. He failed to see the suppressed power in neither the wide shoulders nor the deadly grip on the sword.

No, he only saw the enemy; the one who took what he felt was rightfully his.

“I have heard enough,” Rainier calmly spoke as he took another step forward.

Hawkins watched as the men around him also stepped forward, closing the circle. He recognized the look of death in each of the men’s eyes. “You would kill me without

allowing a priest to hear my last confession?”

Rainier’s eyes narrowed as he remembered coming home to find his parents dead, senselessly murdered by the man standing before him. “You have had enough time to make your peace with God.”

Hawkins watched the soldiers nod their heads in silent agreement as Rainier stepped closer. “That is, if God even wants you.”

The eerie battle cry that suddenly pierced the air without warning surprised Hawkins as his enemy’s sword sliced through the air.

Hawkins had failed to see his executioner!

The lone knight stood before the two graves he dug a year before, his shoulder length black hair lifted by the breeze as it whipped around his face, his unfocused hazel eyes staring off into the distance. The sound of people below as they worked drifted up the hill, intruding into his solitude.

Rainier stood before the graves of his parents, a silent reflection of the many times he had previously done so during the past year.

They were resting in peace now.

The familiar faint sound of footsteps told him his friend was approaching. He felt Sinclair’s hand as it gently squeezed his shoulder.

“Tis getting late, my friend.” Sinclair softly spoke.

Rainier looked at the two graves side by side a final time, then gave a deep sigh. Rising, he turned to look at Kensington, his home, noting the work that still needed to be done.

It had been over a year since the attack by Hawkins, the evidence still visible to the inhabitants living.

The north wall of Kensington had already been repaired. The west tower had collapsed when Hawkins and his men undermined it, setting fire to the timbers underneath. In the great hall, the fire that swept through many of the major rooms charred the ceiling and floor. Walls that once held beautiful tapestries from his mother were now black with soot, the tapestries themselves greedily consumed by the fire. Much of the once ornate furniture that dominated the hall was now broken or badly scarred.

"Aye," Rainier agreed as he began to descend the hill with Sinclair at his side. "I see the north and east fields have been replanted. How much were we able to harvest?"

"The villagers gleaned what was on the ground. They managed to gather about a tenth of the crop."

Rainier took a deep breath. "Such a waste."

"Aye," Sinclair agreed as they continued walking. "The fruit trees were untouched."

"That is something."

"Royce is confident that what has been replanted should mature in time. The villagers are concerned about paying their dues since the fields have been damaged."

Rainier looked over the land. "Tell them this year we will adjust the dues."

"They will appreciate that."

"We all will be eating leaner this year. But we will make do with what we have left. How is the Tanner's shop?"

"Finished last week."

"Good. And the stable?"

"Almost done. Phillip is waiting for some iron works."

Rainier looked over the fields, noticing the various cottages. Over the past several months, they had replaced or fixed nearly half of the cottages now dotting the landscape. Some had been completely burned down, most had been unnecessarily damaged by Hawkins' men.

“Now that the west tower’s foundation has been rebuilt, I want to start work on the stonework.”

Rainier stopped at the edge of Kensington and looked around, again noting the work already done. “Did we miss anything?” he finally asked.

Sinclair shook his head. “I think not. We have both walked every part of Kensington, noting what needed to be restored or rebuilt. How could we have missed anything?”

Rainier took a deep breath. “I agree.”

“If we did miss anything,” Sinclair added as he followed his friend through the gates of Kensington, “it had to be a very small thing!”

Chapter 1

England, 1162

“Any ideas?”

A pause. “Well, there is Sir William.”

Henry gave a snort. “Justin, William is loyal only as long as it suits him.”

The secretary looked at the many parchments before him. “Her holdings are quite large. You have many landless knights who—”

“But I need someone I can trust!”

The secretary carefully placed the parchments back on the table, then gave his full attention to the man pacing in the large room. “Your Majesty—”

“I know, I know.” King Henry held up his right hand to hold back the speech he was sure his secretary was going to give him. “Is there any news as to who is responsible?”

“None.” Justin quickly searched through a number of parchments until he found the right one. “Last month, when his horse returned without him, Sir Richard was found dead in an adjoining field. It is still believed by some

that he was thrown from his horse and died when he fell.”

King Henry gave another snort. “Sir Richard is...was, an excellent horseman.”

“There appeared to be no evidence of foul play.”

King Henry gave a heavy sigh. “I know. But it seems that over the past several years, the Castelle family had met with disaster one right after the other. Sir Richard was the last of his family.”

“I agree. It is highly suspicious that all four of Sir Philip’s sons have recently died, including himself. Richard’s two sons and daughter drowned last year, and the year before his younger brother Wallace and his family were poisoned.”

“I should have known something was wrong when Eric’s house suddenly collapsed with him and his wife inside.” King Henry rubbed his forehead.

Justin began shuffling through more parchments. “The Castelle family does appear to have had its share of *accidents*.”

“Accidents!” King Henry almost shouted. “Eric’s oldest brother Jonathan and his wife were run over with a wagon. His father Phillip fell off a tower. Philip’s wife was in Scotland, joined the convent after his death. But she was found dead a few months later in a rockslide. Quintin, Eric’s uncle, supposedly died in his sleep, and now Richard! A whole family, wiped out!”

King Henry walked to the tower window and absently looked over the courtyard. People were chatting and laughing with one another. They gave the appearance of having not a care in the world.

“Has there been any more talk about Quintin’s death?”

Justin shook his head. “Just a few idle rumors. Most believe that he indeed died in his sleep.”

“He never did recover from his injury during that last battle,” Henry conceded. He took a sudden deep breath. “I

still say Sir Richard did not simply *fall* off his horse,” Henry continued. “He was an expert horseman. I would sooner believe Kyle was thrown off his horse.”

“Ah yes, Sir Kyle. If I remember correctly, he is the reason we are having this discussion now.”

King Henry looked back at his secretary. A short and stout man, Justin had no distinguishing marks. He looked like everyone else here at court. He would blend in and would almost become unnoticed, except for his countenance. Justin walked with his head held high, his eyes bright and knowing, like he was someone important.

Indeed, Justin was important. He was the secretary to Henry, King of England. And as secretary, he was privilege to information that only Henry himself knew.

And Henry trusted him. Over the years, he had proven himself as loyal as Sir Kyle.

“Aye, you are right,” Henry agreed.

“If not for that promise...”

Henry gazed back out the window, his hands linked behind his back. “Most anyone else would have asked for gold, or a title, or an estate.”

“He also obviously suspected the deaths as being anything but natural.”

“Well, in itself, it is a small enough deed. How long has she been a widow?”

“Two and a half years.”

“She is at her Uncle’s?”

“Last we heard. And since he is no blood relation, he should be in no danger, if our assumptions about Sir Eric’s family are correct.”

“Believe me. For some reason, the Castelle family is being systematically eliminated.”

“Lord Gerald may marry her off himself,” Justin spoke out loud.

“But to whom? Would he be as loyal as Kyle? Would he

be able to protect her?”

“Since she was only married to Quintin Castelle, she may not be targeted. After all, she is no blood relation to the Castelle family.”

King Henry shook his head. “There have been others of Castelle’s family who were not blood related, and have met similar fates. I cannot take that chance. When I rewarded Kyle for his continuing loyalty, I told him to ask for anything.”

Justin smiled at a thought. “He could have asked for your throne.”

King Henry secretly smiled. “He has been in my service since he proved himself at his first battle. Men who value loyalty and honesty are rare these days. Most men prefer to lean toward the winning side. I have only a handful of knights that, without a second thought, I would place my life in their hands.”

“Are any of them looking for a wife?”

King Henry stared at his secretary for a moment, then shook his head and chuckled. “Why am I thinking that giving Kyle half my kingdom would have been far easier?”

Henry was watching the crowds below as people continued to talk, the new ones entering the courtyard being greeted by friends and family and being introduced to new people.

A woman’s laughter drew his attention to the couple sitting off to the side, secluding themselves from everyone else.

Henry’s eyes narrowed.

Yes, he would do. His lands were not so far from hers. Most importantly, he was someone he could trust. His men were strong enough to keep her safe, if what both he and Kyle believed was true—and he was sure of it. She was the last link to her deceased husband’s family.

Which meant eventually an attempt would be made on

her life.

Chapter 2

“Are you going to frown all the way across England?”

Rainier made a scowl as he ignored his friend riding beside him. He was still seething over King Henry’s order.

Marriage.

He *knew* he should have left a day early!

Gaylon turned to his friend, raising his left brow as he continued his one-sided conversation. “Still peeling off Henry’s hide, inch by inch, in your mind?”

“Do not give me ideas.”

“You mean you were not thinking of doing just that?”

Gaylon was not put off by the stoic expression of his friend. Instead, he looked ahead as both horses walked side by side.

“You are just angry because you knew if you had left court a day earlier, Henry would not have discovered your presence so soon and you would still be a free man.”

“True,” Rainier finally agreed as he slowed his pace.

“Hmm.”

Rainier cast hard eyes toward his friend. “And what does that mean?”

“Nothing. Just, hmm.”

“I prefer silence over your grunts and groans.”

Gaylon watched as his friend looked ahead. “Hmm.”

Rainier ignored him as he kicked his mount, quickly taking the lead. Gaylon simply smiled as he brought his horse alongside his friend again.

“Maybe you should learn one or two of the love sonnets I heard the minstrels singing at court. With your sour disposition, you will need help to woo your future wife.”

“I do not need to *woo* her.”

“Women like that stuff.”

“I have the order from the King.”

“Women prefer the wooing over an order, even if it is from the King.”

“It matters not what she prefers.”

Gaylon gave a whistle, which Rainier ignored. “I think, my friend, you better start practicing your wooing. You are going to need it.”

“Your irritating chatter is beginning to bore me.”

Gaylon was undaunted as he fixed his gaze far into the distance. “I understand that my new bride is a beauty, with hair that reflects the rays of the setting sun and eyes that would put emeralds to shame.” He cast a sly look toward Rainier. “At least that is what the minstrels are singing.”

“Is that what you wish to do, sing love sonnets to your new bride?”

“You know me better than that, my friend. I much prefer a sword at my side.”

Rainier nodded his head as he watched Gaylon place his right hand over his sword. “I know what you mean. But in truth, I am tired of war and fighting. Henry wants his lands protected and I want peace and quiet in my life.”

“One look at your sour face and the poor maid will probably expire on the spot.”

Gaylon seemed oblivious to the stern look cast his way.

"Of course," he added "then you could return to the ladies of the court."

"One woman is as good as another."

Both men ducked as they rode under a low limb.

"What do you think your bride looks like?" Gaylon continued.

"Does it matter?"

"I would think so. You will be wanting sons to inherit your lands. And what she looks like will decide whether you leave the candles burning in your bedchamber or pitch the whole room into darkness."

"What she looks like does not concern me." Rainier could hear Gaylon's saddle creak as he turned and leaned forward.

"Really? And what if she has bowed legs and pox marks all over her face." Gaylon leaned further. "What if she is old and withered?"

"You talk too much."

Gaylon laughed as he looked straight ahead. "However did the ladies tolerate your disposition?"

"They knew when to keep quiet."

"Well, you cannot fool me. I know you wonder what she looks like."

"She comes with a large enough dowry to build up Kensington. That is all I need to know."

Gaylon turned to face Rainier as he thought of something else. "Is she not a widow?"

Rainier slightly paused. "She is."

"Who was her late husband?"

Rainier knew he would eventually ask. "Castelle."

Gaylon paused as he remembered. "Quintin Castelle?"

Rainier ignored Gaylon's whistle.

"She *could be* old and withered," Gaylon whispered to himself.

Rainier did not say anything, for in truth he had

considered little else this whole trip. He had never met Castelle, but had heard of him from his father.

As far as he knew, Castelle had no children. Was his wife barren? Was she too old?

What was King Henry thinking to saddle him with an old hag? Had he done something to earn Henry's disfavor?

"I am sure she is not as old as Castelle," Gaylon sympathetically voiced.

"It matters not what she looks like or how old she is," Rainier boldly spoke, "so long as she gives me a son, warms my bed, and gives me peace and quiet."

Gaylon had the wisdom to keep quiet as the two rode on. But Rainier was sure he could hear his friend beside him, though, his softly murmured expression spoken just under his breath.

"Hmm."

Rebecca sat with her cousin Ailene in the chapel as they waited for the groom to arrive.

"Delphina looks lovely," Ailene whispered.

"She has been working on her dress for over a month."

"I know, because we helped."

"The dress suits her well. She has been looking forward to this marriage for the past two years."

"Has she met her new husband yet?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No. Her father arranged this marriage a while back. For some reason, he waited until now to claim his bride."

"Shh, I hear him coming!"

Both Ailene and Rebecca turned to see who came through the door. Rebecca had a large woman sitting between her and the door, so she did not see the man immediately. Ailene obviously did and gave a start. "Oh

dear,” she whispered.

“What is it?” Rebecca whispered as she tried to see around the large woman.

“He is old. Very old!”

Rebecca finally saw the man walk toward his bride, followed by six younger versions of himself.

“His sons,” Rebecca offered.

“Four of them are taller than Delphina. And look at her face!”

Both Rebecca and Ailene looked at their friend, and saw the shock and surprise as the man came closer. Rebecca saw her frantically look around, looking for a way out, but there was none.

In less than ten minutes, Delphina was a married woman.

To an old man.

With six grown sons.

Rebecca felt her cousin hurriedly rise and leave the wedding party. It took several hours to locate her, but she finally found her in her room, packing.

“And where are you going?” Rebecca asked, already knowing the answer.

“I have to leave!”

“Uncle Gerald will be furious.”

“Father can yell all he wants. I am not marrying an old man! Did you see Delphina’s face? She was terrified!”

“Ailene, I know you are scared, but you have no reason to be.”

Ailene stopped moving. “No reason! Delphina waited too long and now she is married to a man old enough to be her, her grandfather.”

“I am sure he is not *that* old,” Rebecca tried to reason.

“You know what I mean. If I stay here, then when he arrives, I will have no choice but to marry him. I will not be married to an old man!”

“Quintin was an older man when I married him.”

“There, you see. I think there are only old men looking for young woman to take care of their homes and children. Their previous wives must have died from exhaustion.”

Rebecca watched as her cousin placed gowns in her trunks.

“How are you planning to take those?”

Ailene looked at the trunks, then dropped her shoulders in dejection. “I am not thinking properly.”

“No you are not. Even if you managed to leave here, you know your father will track you. You have nowhere to go. And who will go with you?”

Ailene looked at the floor. “Any of the guards will alert my father.”

“As is their duty.”

Ailene took a moment to consider her situation. Then she looked up, a spark of hope in her eyes. “You could come with me.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “Me?”

“Yes. You can take us to one of Quintin’s estates. I thought you said he had a summer home about two day’s travel from here.”

“Ailene, I cannot travel with you. You know these last few years have been difficult for me. And for once, things are really going so well since I came here.”

Ailene lowered her head as she smiled. “I imagine you are talking about your garden.”

Rebecca lifted her chin. “Well, yes I am. My garden this year did fine.”

“For about two weeks.”

“Finally, after two and a half years, I have a garden that is producing. You know how hard I have been trying to grow one.”

“Yes, I know. I remember how you cried the first year your garden died. Then the next year, you were sure it

would be better, but it died just the same. And this year, your herbs all but died out.”

“But not all of them,” Rebecca said cheerfully. “There are at least three plants that are thriving.”

Ailene sat on the edge of the bed, her head bowed again. “Rebecca, I am sorry.”

“Sorry? About what?”

Ailene looked up, her face clearly showing she did not want to say what she had to say. “Rebecca, the three plants that lived...”

“Yes,” Rebecca prompted at the pause. “The herbs.”

Ailene shook her head. “They are not herbs.”

Rebecca just looked at her cousin in confusion. “What do you mean they are not herbs? Of course they are herbs. They look just like—”

“They are weeds,” Ailene interrupted.

Rebecca looked at her cousin, waiting for her to announce that she was joking. But the announcement did not come.

“Weeds?”

“They only resembled herbs. In truth, they are weeds. I did not have the heart to tell you they were not herbs.”

Rebecca sat down heavily next to her cousin. “So, for the past month, I have been growing, tending and nurturing *weeds*?”

Ailene slowly nodded her head. “When was the last time you were in your garden?”

Rebecca thought. “Last week. We have been helping Delphina get ready. Why?”

“Because, the weeds died also.”

Rebecca looked up, like the God of Heaven would announce to her that it had all been a cruel mistake. “So, not only can I not grow a proper garden, but I also managed to kill the weeds that are growing too.”

Ailene was silent.

“Why can I not grow anything?” Rebecca whispered to herself. “Why must everything I plant die? Everyone else has a proper garden, full of vegetables and herbs, ripe for the picking. Me? I have a plot of land where even the weeds die!”

Ailene placed her hand on Rebecca’s shoulder. “Not everyone has that talent. I am sure you will get better.”

Rebecca began to laugh. “I tried to grow a small garden patch at Quintin’s. It died also. But at night, I would tell him about how everything was getting tall and ready for picking.”

“And he believed you?”

“I thought he did. I did notice he had this funny look in his eyes and a smile on his face when I told him. But he just said, *whatever made me happy.*”

“All he had to do was to look out his window and he would have seen the truth.”

“No. His eyesight was getting bad at that time.”

Ailene waved her hands and shook her head, returning to the subject. “The point is, when you were forced to marry, you married an old man. Delphina married an old man. I am not going to do the same.” Ailene stood up and faced Rebecca, her hands on her hips. “I am leaving, no matter what my father says.”

Rebecca considered the risks, and felt that Ailene would have better success if someone was with her. “How do you plan to leave?”

“I have already thought about that. When we go riding, we will just keep going. By the time the guards realize we are gone, we should be far enough away.”

“The guards may be watching us?”

Ailene shook her head. “We always ride in the fields. And the times we have gone into the forest, the guards never came after us.”

Rebecca paused, thinking and remembering. “True.”

“I think they will ignore us since we are out all the time.”

Rebecca cocked her head to the side. “I guess it could work.”

“Good. When we go for our ride tomorrow, we shall leave then.”

Chapter 3

The two men crouched in the bushes were tired and hungry as they watched the camp of eight men, especially the three prisoners toward the back of the camp, two women and one boy.

Gaylon signaled that he was going to circle the camp to locate the guards traveling with the women.

Rainier waited until Gaylon had slipped out of sight before he set out in the opposite direction. He was almost to the other side when he heard shouting from inside the camp.

Turning his head, he watched as three men argued with the leader.

"The younger men are getting ideas about the women," Gaylon whispered as he slid next to Rainier on the ground.

"Their guards?"

Gaylon shook his head.

They needed to act quickly.

Both men looked at the two men guarding the women and boy. One was short and stocky, the other tall and lean.

"The short one is mine," Gaylon whispered as he silently rose to get into position.

Rainier reached out to halt his friend.

The taller guard suddenly left his position to add his voice to the heated argument, leaving the short guard staring after his partner.

Rainier looked back as he felt Gaylon's fingers squeeze his arm.

One of the women silently rose, her bound hands quietly rising high above her head as she brought something down hard on the head of the remaining guard.

They heard the soft thud as the guard slumped to the ground. Looking toward the camp, both Gaylon and Rainier's hand automatically went to their swords, waiting for any indication that the woman was heard.

The argument continued.

As the woman bent over the fallen guard, the other woman and boy rose to stand beside her. Both men watched as the three silently turned and headed down the narrow path.

Rainier swore softly, his words echoed by Gaylon.

Without saying a word, both men rose to follow the women, who unfortunately took off in the opposite direction.

Rebecca leaned against the tree as she stopped to catch her breath.

"Where are we?" Ailene whispered as she leaned against the same tree, her own quick breath matching those of her cousin.

"I do not know."

"Think they know we are gone?"

Rebecca held her breath as she listened to the sounds around them. "Maybe not yet."

Ailene was wringing her hands together as she kept

glancing back. "I am so sorry, Rebecca."

"Do not worry about the past."

"If only we had our horses."

"I will get 'em!"

Rebecca grabbed the collar of the young boy's tunic as he took a step back toward the camp.

"No, Jeremy."

"But you said we needed the horses!"

"We will only get caught again."

Jeremy attempted to free himself, but Rebecca held on tight.

"If we get caught, they will make sure that we never escape again." She looked into the young eyes, eyes clouded with fear, but also with excitement. If anything happened to the boy, she would never forgive herself. Rebecca gave a heavy sigh. "Oh Jeremy, why did you follow us?"

"Lord Gerald would want me to protect you!"

The sudden shouting behind them indicated the camp had discovered their escape.

"We have to keep moving."

The fatigue in her limbs forgotten, Rebecca led them through the forest as fast as she could. A movement in the bushes made her turn her head.

The man moved so fast, she did not have time to cry out a warning. She twisted in his grip, kicking him as hard as she could in his knee.

The man doubled over, pulling her down to the ground with him.

Angered that they managed to escape only to be recaptured so quickly, Rebecca reached up with her one free hand and raked her nails hard across his cheek.

She barely heard him hiss through his clenched teeth before he captured both her hands and pinned them high above her head.

Eyeing the man's arm directly above her face, she sank

her teeth into his exposed flesh, biting down as hard as possible.

His sharp outcry turned into a harsh groan as her knee only managed to graze his groin. Unfortunately, though, within moments the man had her pinned down.

When he turned his head again, she pulled one hand free and reached for the dagger she had taken from the guard. As quietly as she could, she pulled the weapon free.

The man, though, felt her movements. Grabbing her wrist, he knocked her arm to the ground, forcing her to drop the weapon.

“Having trouble?”

Rainier ignored Gaylon’s whispered chuckle as he stood up, pulling the woman with him. His knee was stinging, his cheek was burning, his arm was throbbing, and the pain in his groin almost made him faint.

How did the woman move so fast? And where did that dagger come from?

The guard!

“Let her go!”

Gaylon pulled the boy back. “Quiet!” he whispered. “Do you want them to hear us?”

Both men tensed when they heard a shout behind them.

Rainier had taken only a few steps when he suddenly threw the woman down on the ground behind a bush, his own body landing on top of hers. His hand covered her mouth as he raised a finger to his lips. “Shh.”

He was studying the path they were just on when he suddenly caught his breath.

The dagger!

Rebecca felt the man above her crawl forward, then pause. Turning her head, she also spied the dagger laying in the middle of the path.

When the forest opened up with shouts of angry men,

the man above her was forced to crawl back. From underneath the bush, five pairs of eyes followed the shuffle of feet directly in front of them.

Rebecca felt the man above her press his body down on hers as one pair of feet stopped.

"Here is Stu's dagger," the man cried out as he picked up the weapon.

Another pair of feet came forward.

"They came this way," the leader cried out. "They cannot be far. Those women are worth a lot of money and I want them found," he threatened. "Now!"

Just as suddenly, the men took off in different directions.

Rainier eventually let out the breath he was holding. As he continued to scan the forest, he felt the woman underneath him take deep breaths.

Lifting his weight with his elbows, he glanced down. Her eyes were closed, probably giving a silent prayer of thanks for not being found.

"I want you to follow me without making any noise of any kind," he whispered. "Do you understand?"

Rainier watched her brown eyes narrow. What he wanted to see was understanding and acceptance of their help.

What he saw instead was rebellion.

Well, hellfire!!

Willing his mind to ignore the pain pulsing through his body, Rainier worked hard to calm his breathing and racing heart. Maybe what King Henry had planned was not so bad after all. He looked at her again and repeated his demand in a stronger tone.

She turned a frosty glare at him. She was planning something, he was sure of it. He could see it in her smoky eyes.

"Do not even think of it."

Rebecca was uncomfortable on the horse with her *rescuer*.

She heard him addressed as Rainier, heard him call his friend Gaylon. Well, that was simple enough. At least she knew the names of her new captors.

They traveled single file most of the time. The path was rough, making conversation difficult as they climbed, then descended through the valley.

The sudden jar as their horse started to descend another hill made her aware that she needed to stop.

Rebecca gritted her teeth while she held on tightly, sure the man she was clinging to was purposefully taking the roughest terrain so she would eventually be toothless.

With her head laid against his back, she glanced back to see how her friends were faring.

Jeremy rode directly behind her, his long legs dangling over the girth of his horse. Rainier had slipped back to camp and managed to retrieve only one of their three horses, which Jeremy fortunately was riding alone.

Behind Jeremy, Ailene held on to the horn of the saddle with both hands as she sat in Gaylon's lap. His hands were casually around her waist, securely holding her in place. Ailene's face, though, was pale from the rough ride.

They were so far from their original destination, Rebecca was wondering if they would ever see home again. Another jolt from the horse, though, reminded her of her immediate need.

"May we stop?" she politely asked through gritted teeth. The continued rocking of the horse told her either he did not hear or he was ignoring her. After a few minutes, she asked again.

Still no response.

Rebecca needed to stop. And soon. But the man in front of her seemed to be deliberately ignoring her.

Well, he would not ignore her this time as she pulled sharply on his hair.

Her smile of satisfaction at his sudden indrawn breath vanished when he reached behind and pulled her around him, landing her in his lap.

“Explain.”

His face must be set in stone, she thought. He was wearing the same scornful expression he had the last time she saw it. She wondered if he had been born with it.

“Born with what?”

Rebecca felt her face redden. She refused to be the first to look away. “Are we going to stop soon?” she asked instead.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We are not far enough away.”

Right now, Rebecca did not care if they were in the midst of a war. She needed to stop, now!

Rainier knew she wanted something. He heard her the first two times, yet chose to ignore her. His hair being pulled was a surprise. Looking down at her, he noticed for the first time her fine facial features.

Large brown eyes with slightly arched brows looked up without cowering under his gaze. Her nose was on the small side, yet it looked right on her face. The soft breeze caused the strands of brown hair escaping her braid to float around her oval face.

“What is your name?”

Rebecca looked up, surprised at the sudden question. “Rebecca. Rebecca Castelle.”

She noticed his intent gaze immediately returned back to her.

“And your friends?”

“My cousin, Ailene.” Rebecca could not help but notice the dark frown that caused the man's brows to come together in another scowl. Was that the only expression the man knew?

“And the boy?”

“His name is Jeremy. And he is in my charge.”

“Where is the rest of your party?”

Rebecca lowered her gaze. She wanted to tell him as little as possible. After all, these two could be after a ransom, just like the others.

“I would rather not talk about it,” she pleaded instead.

Rainier took a moment to search her face. “Where were you headed?”

“It really does not matter now. But if you would take us to the nearest village, I can send word to my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

She was not sure how, but his scowl deepened. “Yes, Ailene's father.”

Another jolt from the horse reminded Rebecca of her problem. “I really do need to stop.”

Rainier finally lifted his gaze to search the terrain, then signaled to Gaylon as they approached a small stream near a clearing.

“I will stand guard!”

Rainier and Gaylon each raised a brow as they watched the young lad position himself in front of the bushes, his arms crossed over his chest while he tried to make a threatening face.

“What do you think?” Gaylon asked as each man led his horse to the stream to drink.

“Has she talked?”

Gaylon turned to look at his friend. Rainier's tone indicated that he had learned something important.

“Not much,” he replied as he removed his water pouch from the saddle. “She still seems frightened. Why? What

have you learned?"

Rainier turned to look at Jeremy still standing guard. "It appears we will not have to travel any further for our brides."

"*What?*" Gaylon's eyes widened as he also turned to glance at the bushes. "*Them?* What are they doing here?"

"Maybe they were on their way to meet us when their party was attacked."

"What happened to their guards?"

"She would not talk about it." Rainier stroked his horse's neck when he finally had his fill of water.

Gaylon took a long drink from his pouch while he digested this new bit of information. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he bent to refill the pouch from the stream. Rainier did the same.

"They seem to have a protector in the young lad."

Rainier looked back at the boy in question. "She said he was her charge."

Gaylon gave a heavy sigh as he considered their new situation. "What do you purpose we do now?"

Rainier rose as he replaced the stopper in the pouch. "We could do one of two things. We can take them back to their home, or—"

"Or?"

"Or we could save Lord Brocksworth a small fortune by traveling to the nearest village with a priest and marry the women right away."

Gaylon nodded his head as he thought for a moment. "A messenger could be sent back to Lord Brocksworth informing him of the situation."

"We could be back home a full two weeks early."

Gaylon took a deep breath. "There is much I need to do to at Fallon."

Rainier led his horse back to the clearing. Gaylon followed, then sat on a rock as he considered his friend.

“Hmm.”

Leaving his horse to nibble on the grass, Rainier leaned against a nearby tree. “And what does that mean?”

Gaylon looked at the bushes where the women were. “You will want to keep the candles burning, I think.”

Rainier also looked toward the stream. “It makes no difference.”

Gaylon’s gaze snapped around. “You cannot tell me you are not relieved she looks like she does and not old and withered.”

“Of course I am pleased. Are you satisfied?”

Gaylon’s face split into a wide grin as he looked up at the sky. “Now, what was it you said yesterday? ‘It matters not what she looks like or how old she is, so long as she gives me a son, warms my bed, and gives me peace and quiet.’”

Rainier gave his friend a chilling look that warned of deadly consequences if this conversation continued much longer. But the look was wasted on Gaylon.

“Well, let us see,” Gaylon continued. “So far you have known your new bride for less than a day and already within moments of meeting you have been kicked, scratched, bitten, had your manhood jeopardized, and your life threatened with a dagger. Have I missed anything?”

Rainier gave an exasperated sigh. “Your point?”

“As first impressions go, I would say your marriage is off to an exciting start.”

“I do not recall asking for your opinion.”

“I am curious, though,” Gaylon continued undaunted. “When are you planning on telling her about her upcoming marriage?”

“When I need to.”

Gaylon raised his brows. “Women are rather picky about these things. My bride may not know who I am yet, but she is aware that I am coming and that she is to be

married. Yours, on the other hand, has absolutely no idea of her future.”

“I have the order from the King.”

“Hmm.” Looking down the path they had just come from, Gaylon did not see the mischievous glint in his friend’s eyes.

“I am surprised *you* did not recognize *your* new bride, especially after all the songs the minstrels are singing at court.” Rainier paused as Gaylon turned to face him. “You must have been blinded by the rays of sunlight reflecting off her hair.”

Gaylon smiled at the exaggerated tone Rainier used. “Obviously,” he agreed.

“And when do you plan on revealing who you are?”

“Soon.” Gaylon looked back at the bushes. “Very soon.”

The sound of the women returning cut their conversation short. Rainier pushed himself away from the tree. He looked back at Gaylon.

“Shall we do the deed?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Gaylon took a moment to think. “Gloucester is closest. We could be there by morning.”

“Gloucester is it, then.”

With every step the horse took, Rebecca soon began to feel the strain as she tried to keep her hips and shoulders from brushing against the man sitting behind her.

“You will be more comfortable if you lean back.”

Rainier watched the top of her head as she raised her chin. “Thank you, but I am comfortable where I am.”

Rebecca heard him mutter under his breath, something that sounded like ‘*stubborn woman*’ only a moment before he pulled her against his chest.

“I prefer you here.”

She made to lean forward, but his arm would allow no movement. She was considering the consequences of pulling the hair on his arm to get him to release her when she heard a cry from Ailene.

Trying to turn around, she was surprised when Rainier leaned over and quickly grabbed the reins from Jeremy, then spurred both horses further ahead.

“Wait! Something is wrong with Ailene.”

“She is fine.”

“But I heard her cry out. She may need my help.”

“Gaylon will take care of her.”

“How do you know, and why are you riding so far ahead?”

“To give them a chance to talk.”

“Talk? Why would he want to talk to Ailene?”

“Most men want to talk to their future wife.”

“Wife? Well, he is talking to the wrong woman.”

“He has the right woman.”

Rebecca heard the certainty in the man’s statement. “And how would you know?”

“I know.”

“Ailene is already promised to someone.”

The man merely nodded his head. Was he daft, or—

Rebecca looked around the broad shoulders again at the two now riding far behind them. Gaylon was talking while Ailene quietly listened. For a moment she considered that maybe, just maybe, the man might be—

“He is,” Rainier spoke out loud.

Rainier was silent as he considered his future with the woman in his lap.

She was not as young or beautiful like her cousin, but she was still pretty, with eyes that were very expressive and open. Her hair was thick, a single brown braid falling down her back that brushed her waist as she walked.

He would never admit it to Gaylon, but he was immensely relieved when he discovered his new bride was not old and withered.

He repeated the words to himself that he had told Gaylon yesterday, words that became a private promise to himself. The woman before him *would* give him a son, warm his bed, and give him peace and quiet.

And she would be thankful for the new marriage and children. What woman would not!

Kicking his horse forward, he smiled to himself, thinking just how grateful his new bride was going to be.

Chapter 4

“WHAT!” Rebecca all but shouted.

Father Thomas looked uncomfortable as he shuffled from one foot to the other. “I gather the lady was unaware of the King’s order of marriage?” he offered, trying to sooth the situation.

“*Marriage?*” Rebecca screeched louder, her voice echoing off the stone walls of the small church. From where Rebecca stood, she could see the broken royal seal on the letter in the elderly priest’s hand with the King’s signature large and bold. “Uncle Gerald never mentioned a marriage contract.”

“He was unaware of it, since King Henry gave it to me only a week ago.”

Rebecca turned around to face the man who was quickly shredding her life into pieces and found herself unprepared for the fierce look that crossed his face. Ruthless power emanated from the man who stood before her. There was not one thread of gentleness or warmth in the hazel eyes that glared down at her.

“I would wait and talk to Uncle Gerald,” she logically reasoned as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Rainier slowly shook his head. "Do not be difficult, Rebecca. I am not a man known for my patience."

Rebecca's eyes widened at the use of her Christian name used so freely. "I am not being difficult at all, *milord*. It is all really quite simple. I am not marrying you."

Rainier watched as she turned to face the priest, her unspoken words clear. She was done speaking.

At least to him.

Rebecca turned to the priest with a forced smile. "There has obviously been a mistake, Father Thomas. I am terribly sorry, but—"

"There is no mistake."

"Yes there is! Now look what you made me do. You made me shout in front of the priest."

Rainier thought that statement was absurd, especially since she had been shouting ever since they entered the small church. Rebecca turned to face the priest again, a look of proper submission with her head lowered and her hands folded in front of her.

"I am very sorry, Father," she softly spoke, "but you must realize that these are, trying times. This man is gravely mistaken. There are certain, uh, problems."

"You are already married?" Father Thomas asked sympathetically, hoping to resolve this problem and get these people out of his church as quickly as possible.

"No, no, of course not."

"You are promised to someone else?"

"Well, no."

"Then I see no problem," Rainer spoke from beside her.

Rainier stood before her with his arms across his chest. For some reason she was reminded of a rock Uncle Gerald had tried to remove from a field years ago. After a month of digging, pulling, and pushing, the unmovable rock eventually became a permanent part of the field. The men simply plowed around it.

This man appeared to be as unmovable.

"She does not *want* to marry you!"

Both Rainier and Rebecca were surprised when Jeremy shouldered his way between them.

"Jeremy—"

"You would go against King Henry's order?" Rainier interrupted Rebecca.

Jeremy frowned, then turned to look at Rebecca. "I would never go against the order of the King."

"This matter does not concern you."

"Jeremy, please," Rebecca stepped between them.

"But—"

"I would not have you place yourself against King Henry. And Lord Rainier is right, this concerns only us." Rebecca narrowed her eyes as she thought on something. "You have known all along," she challenged as she looked up at the man before her.

Rainier merely gave a slight nod of his head.

"Why did you not tell me?"

"Would it have made any difference?"

Only given me time to escape, she thought to herself.

Rainier took a step closer. "I did not ask for this marriage, Rebecca. King Henry had already signed the document when I was told."

"I cannot marry again."

"Why not?"

Rebecca quickly glanced at Ailene before lowering her head. "I just," she paused, "cannot."

"Why not?" he repeated.

She closed her eyes while she quickly thought. Uncle Gerald would most likely side with the man standing in front of her, telling her he would have to follow the King's command too, just like she was expected to.

And she would end up being married again, after all.

"You will only regret this marriage."

“Why?”

Rebecca raised troubled eyes to meet his. “There are, things, you are unaware of. Things that—”

“Yes?”

She shrugged her shoulders. She really could not tell him. That was her shame and hers alone. That King Henry would barter her off had never occurred to her.

It was so unfair. She was sure that after Quintin died, she would be safe. Now, here she was, about to be married again by order of the King. There were too many problems, too many secrets that needed to stay hidden.

This marriage would threaten those secrets and expose them. She was sure of it.

While standing there, she quickly thought of and discarded numerous plans.

But one thought always came to the fore.

What was her new husband going to do when he discovered her shameful secrets?

Rainier gave a sigh of relief as he finally rode through the gates of Kensington. He noticed people were milling around as usual. His quick glance confirmed the men were not only on the walls, but also about the courtyard. As Rainier lifted Rebecca down, Jeremy dismounted, then stood beside his new wife.

“Welcome home, friend.”

Rainier looked up as Sinclair slapped him on his back, his face smiling.

“Looks like you ran into something,” Sinclair added as he glanced first at the marks on Rainier’s face, then purposely looked at Rebecca. His smile increased by the second as his gaze returned back to Rainier. He was not put off by his friend's hard face.

"We received your message yesterday," Sinclair continued with a smile. "But was not expecting you back until the end of the month."

"Our parties met in between."

"Really? An anxious bride?"

Rainier's stern face made Sinclair only smile more.

"Ready a dozen men by morning," Rainier whispered. "Her guards are missing."

Sinclair's smile disappeared. "How far away?"

"A full two days." Sinclair followed as he headed up the steps to the hall. "I believe they are dead, but I would be sure before I tell Lord Brocksworth."

"The men will be ready."

When Rebecca reached the top of the steps, she stopped alongside her new husband, waiting for him to finish talking with his men. Jeremy stood beside her, his anxious gaze searching the crowds. She was actually comforted by his display of bravery. He was almost back to his old self.

After the brief ceremony this morning, her '*champion*' had quickly changed sides, practically talking non-stop the whole trip. Rebecca was used to Jeremy's chatter, but she was concerned with how her new husband would respond.

She had tried several times to quiet the boy with a look, but Jeremy was undaunted. He asked Rainier about Kensington and about the people. He asked about the land and what was planted. He asked if Rainier had ever been married and if he had any children, especially his age.

Rebecca's heart went out when he was informed that Rainier had no children. But he perked back up and asked if he had a warhorse, and what was his name. Did he raise him from a colt; did he feed him; did he break him himself?

After several hours of non-stop questions, Rebecca's head began to hurt. She wanted so bad to shout at Jeremy to shut up for just a few minutes, but Jeremy was oblivious

to her discomfort.

Through it all, Rainier was a model of patience. He never indicated he was tired of the endless questions and talk.

After half a day of Jeremy's voice ringing in her ears, the silence felt odd.

The people in the courtyard stared at them with a curious look, a few whispering among themselves. Did they even know that Rainier was ordered to marry?

Well, he would take care of that as soon as he properly introduced her.

In fact, she would make a point to remember each name, repeating them as each person came by. Most people were put at ease when you addressed them by their given names.

Yes, she would do that!

She slowly folded her hands before her and forced a smile as she scanned the many faces.

She wished Rainier had allowed her time to freshen up first. She was sure she would have made a far better first impression if her face was not dirty and her gown was clean.

The people continued to stare as she waited. Well, in truth, she was as curious about them as they were about her.

Taking a deep breath and forcing another smile, she turned around to see what was taking Rainier so long.

She was rather pleased with herself that she kept such a calm expression on her face.

Not a single person watching could tell what she was feeling or thinking when she realized that both her new husband and Jeremy had walked off and left her standing on the top step.

All

alone.

Chapter 5

He was calmer, now that he had counted to ten like his father sometimes did when talking to his mother.

He must have misunderstood.

That was it. He simply misunderstood.

So he asked again.

“What happened to your guards?”

Unfortunately, he got the same answer.

“We had none.”

Rainier had called Rebecca into the hall after she had a chance to freshen up. There was still a question that he needed an answer to.

When she sat down on the other side of the table, he asked it. In fact, he asked it twice to make sure he heard it right the first time. The same answer caused his voice to rise in anger.

“What were you two doing riding around the countryside without proper guardsmen?”

“It is not as bad as it seems—”

“No?”

“No.”

“Then why did you have no guards?”

Rebecca gave a heavy sigh. "We always rode without guards."

"Always?"

"Well, as long as we stayed in sight in the east field."

"And where were your uncle's men when you were captured?"

Rebecca turned to look at the right wall. "Well, they did not *exactly* see it happen."

"They did not?"

"No."

"And why not?"

Rebecca shifted in her seat. "We were probably too far away."

Rainier narrowed his eyes. "How far?"

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders.

"How far?"

A pause. "Further than normal."

"How far?" he repeated, sternness now in his voice.

"Well, pretty far."

He watched the sudden blush that darkened her cheeks. A warning signal went off in his head.

"Your uncle *did* know you left?"

She hesitated.

"He did know?"

"Well,"

Rainier stood up, his fists clenching and unclenching at his side. He looked down at his new wife, his eyes narrowing. "Did he?"

"Well, not really—"

"What do you mean, *not really*?"

Rebecca took a deep breath. "Well—"

"So help me, Rebecca, if you say '*well*' one more time, I will not be responsible for my actions! Now, was your uncle aware that you both had left?"

"Well—, uh, no."

Rebecca looked up when silence greeted her words. She realized too late that she should have kept her gaze down. His look was a combination of astonishment and anger.

Well, maybe anger was too mild a word. Wrath would be more descriptive.

Rainier looked up for inspiration and counted to ten again. He took his time lowering his gaze.

Truth suddenly struck.

“You were running away!”

Rebecca debated on setting him straight. But the look on his face indicated that it would be wise to not mention anything right now.

Rainier was furious. God, did they even know how close to danger they had come? Did they know what position they had placed themselves in?

“Why not tell your uncle you were leaving?”

“Because he was the reason we left.”

Rainier stared at his new wife. For some reason he had the strangest feeling that he had somehow missed an important part of the story.

“Okay,” he calmly spoke as he sat down again, his palms flat against the table. “Why were you leaving?”

“Because he was already on his way.”

“Who?”

“Ailene’s husband.”

“Gaylon?”

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. “Uncle Gerald told Ailene that she was to be married.”

Rainier tried to put all the pieces together. “So, you were not coming to meet us.”

Rebecca looked surprised. “Why would you think that?”

Rainier closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. “Why indeed!”

“Ailene did not want to marry an old man.”

“Gaylon?”

“Well, she thought he was old.”

In spite of himself, he heard himself asking, “Why did she think that?”

“Delphina married an older man.”

“Delphina?”

“In the village—”

“Never mind,” he interrupted as he rubbed his eyes, trying to ease the steady pain throbbing behind them. “If she was the one running away, why were you with her?”

“I could not let her go alone and unchaperoned.” Seeing his startled look, she quickly added, “She would have been unprotected.”

“Unprotected?” He looked at her incredulously. “My God, you were *both* unprotected!” he shouted as he stood up again.

“We had Jeremy with us.”

“Jeremy? Did you seriously think that young pup could have protected you?”

Rebecca was wondering if her husband would ever lower his voice as she shifted in her seat. “He had good intentions.”

“Good intentions did not protect you or keep you from being captured, did it?”

“Well—”

“Did it!”

Rebecca lowered her head. “No.”

The banked rage he had carefully controlled up till then was quickly igniting. “Do you realize what could have happened if we had not come by?” he continued to shout.

She kept her head down. “Yes.”

He leaned on the table, his face barely inches from hers. “Do you know how many men there were in that camp?” he asked as his voice dropped to just above a whisper.

She nodded her head.

“How many?”

She looked up.

“How many?” he repeated a little louder as he leaned closer.

She thought for only a moment. “About half a dozen,” she whispered.

“EIGHT!” he shouted. “There were eight men total. Do you know what eight men could do to two unprotected women? Do you have any idea?”

She was silent. As he pushed himself away from the table, he noticed the tears in her eyes. He decided to let her think about what he said while he tried to calm down.

Lord, but he was shaking with anger and fear of what could have happened.

Deciding this was a good time to change the subject, he asked another question. “I hope you had a destination in mind when you left your uncle's protection.”

She nodded her head, which was still bowed.

Rainier gave another silent prayer for patience as he sat back down and counted to ten again. He was beginning to wonder if it ever helped his father. It was sure not helping him.

“Where were you going?”

“Quintin has an estate less than two days away.”

Rainier suddenly had a horrible thought. “Did you tell anyone that you were leaving? *Anyone* at all?”

“No,” she silently mouthed as she shook her head for emphasis.

“No one? Your maid, perhaps?”

Another shake of her head.

The situation was getting worse by the moment.

Hopefully, the messenger he sent would reach Lord Brocksworth before he left. If not, then maybe they would run into each other.

“Why not take at least one guard with you?”

"Gwain was the only guard I saw, and we could not ask him."

"Why not?"

She seemed extremely interested in the workings of her fingers. "Because he would have informed Uncle Gerald."

He was trying to piece it all together, wondering if Gaylon was getting the same story from Ailene. If so, he almost felt sorry for Gaylon.

Almost.

"Who is Gwain?"

"Uncle Gerald's Captain of the Guard."

Rainier slapped his palms against the table as he rose again. "So you did not ask a competent guard to escort you, but you did ask a lad barely able to stand on his own two feet."

"I did not ask Jeremy to escort us."

Rainier raised his right brow again.

"He saw us leaving and followed us," she weakly confessed. "He felt it was his duty to protect us."

"At least *someone* had sense. But even you must have realized how useless he would be."

"He is *my* charge and *my* responsibility."

Rainier shook his head. "He is my responsibility now."

"You have no right—"

"As your husband, I have every right."

Rebecca looked around. "Where is Jeremy?"

"He will stay with the men."

Rainier paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, rubbing his jaw with his hand, then rubbing the back of his neck as he paced. He stopped, looked into the fireplace for a few moments, then purposefully walked toward Rebecca.

He lowered his head, his eyes the only evidence that he was still very angry.

"I do not, and I repeat, DO NOT, want you to ever leave without an escort. Do you understand me?"

She nodded her head.

“I will not allow a repeat of what happened the other day. Am I making myself clear, Rebecca?”

Rebecca swallowed as she nodded again.

He took a deep breath as he rose from the chair, trying to clear his head. He headed for the door, leaving Rebecca alone to think on what he said. As he thought of one more question, he turned to address his wife again.

“By any chance, did you leave a note behind?”

Rebecca's eyes widened at the thought.

That told him his answer!

He went out to inform Sinclair to cancel the order of readying men to leave, and instead to ready men on the wall and to be on the watch for a very angry uncle who would probably show up with his army, ready to do battle.

After several hours on the training field, Rainier decided that his new wife had had enough time to think long and hard about what he had said.

In fact, she was probably right now sulking in their room, her face red and swollen from crying for several hours.

Serves her right! he thought to himself as he climbed the hall steps.

He mentally braced himself to not be affected by her sorrowful attitude. He had every right to be angry.

He extended his hand and noticed it still slightly shook. Making a fist, he took the remaining steps two at a time, his anger finally under control.

Discovering their room empty, he spent the next good part of the afternoon looking for her. To his surprise, none of the servants had been able to tell him where she was. It was not until he rounded the corner of the buttery building

that he heard her.

She was humming.

And she seemed happy, not at all sulking like he was expecting.

Rainier leaned his shoulder against the garden wall and watched as she valiantly tried to replant a scrawny twig that was refusing to stand upright. She had mud all over her hands and smear marks over most of her tunic. As he watched, she rubbed her forehead, obviously trying to move a strand of hair out of her face. What she accomplished was to leave a long wide streak of mud across her forehead.

She looked like a drowned puppy, he thought, her hair coming out in all direction, dirt on her face, gown, hands, and arms. The front of her tunic was wet where she had tilted the bucket to water the plants.

She had obviously been in the garden for some time, a large pile of weeds mounting beside her.

Rebecca finally turned around and looked up, a contented look on her face.

No red eyes.

No swollen face either, he noticed.

"I have been looking for you," he simply stated as he pushed himself from the wall.

"I was looking out the window and saw this garden."

He knelt down and grabbed a handful of dirt, watching it slowly sift through his fingers. "It was my mother's."

"It appears she spent many hours here."

"This garden was very special to her."

"It must have been beautiful at one time."

Rainier was remembering his mother bending over her delicate plants and encouraging them with her soft chatter, as if they could hear. "It was."

"She had much to be proud of. Many of the herbs here I have not seen anywhere except at the market."

"Father was always coming home with plants he found

or bought for her.” He ran his fingers through the small leaves of one plant Rebecca had already replanted. “That was the only thing she had ever asked him to bring back; plants for her garden.”

Rebecca dug another hole and pushed the soil around the base of the next plant. “Your father chose well. I have not seen a garden with such a variety. I will have no need to purchase very many from the local merchants, if these survive.”

Rebecca gave the ground around the plant a firm pat, then straightened as she gazed at the whole garden. “A new start! And I could not let all this go to waste.”

Rainier heard the silent challenge in her voice. Rebecca had already laid claim to this small piece of earth.

Just like his mother.

Whenever his father was angry with his mother, after all the shouting was done, everyone knew you would always find her in her garden.

Just like Rebecca was now.

That evening, he had the servants retrieve the stored chest with his mother’s things when he realized that Rebecca had no other clothing except for what she was wearing. Tonight she wore a brown tunic with a blue overcoat trimmed in gold around the neckline.

He hid a smile as he heard Jeremy question Nathan and Sinclair. The boy was full of questions, and was unafraid to ask anybody who crossed his path.

He watched as Rebecca rose and left the hall. He liked watching her walk. She had a nice gentle sway to her hips, her back straight with her braid brushing her hips with each step.

As Rebecca climbed the stairs, he heard the silence in

the hall. It appeared he was not the only one who enjoyed watching her walk. When Rebecca reached the top of the stairs, he loudly cleared his throat, a scowl look appearing on his face. With guilty looks, the men returned to what they were previously doing.

He gave her a few minutes before he followed her to their room. He expected her to be preparing for bed.

Instead, he found her collecting clothing from his mother's trunk. She continued searching until she found his mother's brush.

"I am sorry," she began as she searched through the trunk, collecting a mirror. "But the servants put me in your room. The room across the hall is small enough for me. I will be gone in a moment."

Rainier was surprised for only a moment. "The servants made no mistake. We are married. Therefore you will stay here, in this room."

Rebecca rose, the items before her clutched almost like a shield. *What if she talked in her sleep?* She shook her head. "I cannot stay here."

"You are my wife. You stay!"

Rainier was accustomed to his men obeying him, no matter what. He expected no less from his new bride. So his surprise was obvious when she said, "I am leaving," and then did just that.

Rainier realized this was a new feeling, not being obeyed. He was trying to decide which surprised him more, the fact that she disobeyed him, or that a woman refused to share his bed. He had never had a woman refuse him before.

Yet his new bride did just that!

He was unsure how long he stood there, but he quickly collected his wits and made his way to the smaller room across the hall. She had already changed into a wool shift and was braiding her hair for the night.

She did not look up when he opened the door. "I need a bar for the door, if you can find one," she said to the servant she expected to be entering her room.

She gave a squeak as Rainier scooped her into his arms, then returned to his room.

Their room.

"I told you, I cannot stay here," she repeated as she struggled to get lose.

He placed her on the bed, but she quickly rose to her feet.

"Why?" he asked.

He thought she paled at the question.

"I cannot," Rebecca repeated again, her gaze shifting from the bed to the door. "I told you before, there are things you are unaware of. Things that will make you regret this marriage."

He cocked his head. "Explain."

She clasped her hands together, trying to figure a way out. *What if she talked in her sleep?* Quintin constantly talked in his sleep, and he was always unaware of what he said when he woke. *If she talked, he would learn her secret.*

No, that must not happen.

"I need to return to my room." She made to walk around him, but his arm prevented her.

Rainier knew something terrible was frightening Rebecca. He could see it in her eyes, in her stance, and in her pallor. It was evident she was not going to tell him what it was, though.

He reached out to touch her braided hair. "Wear it loose," he whispered as he began to unbraid it.

"What!" Rebecca slapped his hands away. "I always wear a braid." She tried to rebraid it as he quickly continued to unbraid it.

"Rainier, I told you, I am not sleeping here tonight!"

Chapter 6

She opened her eyes, one at a time. She felt relaxed, contented. Then she focused on her surroundings and quickly sat up in bed.

“Did I...” she began as she looked to her husband.

“Did you, what?” he asked for the fourth morning in a row.

She looked carefully at his eyes, looking for any indication that he knew or despised her. Again, for the fourth morning, she saw nothing. Only silent laughter and playfulness.

Still unaccustomed to walking around in the nude, she grabbed the sheet and padded barefoot to his mother’s trunk.

She was married, again.

She now had another husband!

It occurred to her how different her two husbands were. For some reason, she thought that marriage was the same everywhere, no matter who you were married to. She even mentioned it to Rainier.

“People have different personalities,” he responded as he lay back in their bed, not at all embarrassed by his lack

of clothing. "It would make sense that different people respond to different things different ways."

"I guess so," she agreed as she looked through the trunk of clothing. "When I married Quintin, I was very young."

"A child bride!"

"I guess. But Quintin was very different from you."

"I would hope so."

Most of the tables in the hall had been moved against the walls to allow for the crowd of people coming inside. Rainier sat behind a table that had been turned sideways, his steward sitting next to him, a large open book ready to record each and every event.

One of Rainier's many duties was to keep the peace at Kensington and resolve any disputes that arose among the villagers. Since he had been away for several months, there were many people with grievances.

Rebecca sat in a chair against the wall and watched her new husband. She was curious as to what kind of man he was. Observing him now would tell her.

The lists of complaints were not that different from when Quintin had to sit and listen to his people. The first two villagers approached.

Rainier obviously knew the two men.

"Stol," he nodded to the first man. "Brandon," he nodded to the second man. "What is the problem?"

Stol spoke first. "Brandon owes me five coins."

"Five coins?" Rainier asked as he looked from the one to the other.

"We were gambling," Brandon weakly confessed.

Rainier raised his right brow. "And I gather you lost."

Brandon nodded his head.

"Why have you not paid the man?"

Brandon shrugged his shoulders. "I do not have the money."

Rainier gave a heavy sigh. Rebecca could almost imagine her husband was preparing himself for a long day.

"If you do not have the money, you should not play the game," he counseled. He turned to Stol. "Since he does not have the money, what would you want?"

Stol looked from Rainier to Brandon standing beside him. "He has a carved box I would take."

Rainier looked to Brandon. "You have this box?"

Brandon nodded.

"If you cannot pay what you owe, then the box is now his."

Brandon nodded his head. Both men bowed as they left the hall.

Rebecca watched the two men as they left the hall. They were talking together, almost like friends. Friends who allowed a third party to resolve their problem.

The crowd parted and three men approached.

Rainier looked from one to the other. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the last two. "Leroy and Danek." He noticed Sinclair and Miles moving closer to the men. "I see you are here, again."

Both men were silent as the first man stepped forward. "They were fighting."

Rainier looked hard at the two men. "Did you not understand me the last time?"

"It was not my fault," Leroy almost shouted. "Danek started it."

"I did not!" Danek shouted back as he lunged at Leroy.

Sinclair and Miles quickly stepped in, each holding the men apart.

"It matters not who started it," Rainier spoke sharply. "The last time, you both damaged a new well being dug." He turned to the first man. "Kris, what did they destroy this

time?”

Kris looked at both men. “They threw barrels which collapsed my tool hut. Erica was on the other side and was hurt when the wall fell.”

Rainier’s posture stiffened, his voice controlled. “How is your daughter?”

“She is fine now. But her leg was badly bruised.”

Rainier allowed the silence to convey his anger. He finally signaled his men. “I have warned you both already, but you did not seem to listen. I warned you then what would happen if you caused a disturbance again. I will not have such a disruptive influence here at Kensington. You are hereby banished from Kensington. Your property will be given to Kris for payment of harming his daughter and property.” Rainier leaned forward, his voice lowering. “And if I were either one of you, I would never entertain the idea of returning to this land. Today you forfeit your property. If you *ever* return, what you forfeit then will be heavy indeed.”

He let them interpret the meaning of his threat. “Escort them off of Kensington property.”

The crowd was still and silent as Sinclair and Miles escorted the two men out of the hall.

Rainier took a moment to clear his head. He noticed his steward, Wil, sitting beside him frantically writing the complaint and ruling in his book. Rainier shook his head, then smiled as the next man came forward with a young woman beside him.

“Hugh, how are you today?”

Hugh bowed. “Fine, milord. This is my daughter, Adara.”

Rainier slightly nodded his head. “Adara.” Then he turned back to Hugh. “And what is your request today, my friend?”

Hugh turned and another young man appeared beside him. “This is Heath.”

Rainier turned to the young man. "Heath." He could see the young man swallow hard. He hid a smile, as he already guessed the reason for this visit. He knew the young man was nervous.

Heath finally gathered his nerves together. "Milord, I wish to marry Adara."

Rainier looked to the blushing young woman, saw her smile before she lowered her head, then looked back at Heath. "Where do you work?"

"My father's land is next to Hugh's. My father died last year, so I now take care of the land."

"And your mother?"

"She lives with me. I take care of her."

Rainier nodded his head in approval, then looked at Hugh. "You have any objections?"

Hugh shook his head. "Heath is a fine lad, and works hard."

Rainier looked at all three, then smiled. "Permission granted."

Heath grinned as he bowed. "Thank you, milord." He turned to take his future wife's hand and they left the hall.

Hugh smiled also as he bowed to leave. "Thank you, milord."

Rainier looked up at the next two men. "Hunter, Jaren. What brings you here?"

The first man quickly stepped forward. "Jaren stole my pouch."

"I did not," Jaren quickly replied. "What would I want with that old thing?"

"Why do you think Jaren stole it?" Rainier asked Hunter.

"Because he was the only one near it when it disappeared."

"You always blame me for everything," Jaren complained.

Rainier turned to Jaren. "Did you take it?"

"No."

"Yes he did," Hunter voiced back in anger.

"Men!" Rainier's voice silenced the two men. He turned to Hunter. "What was in the pouch?"

"I had my wife's jewelry I was going to take to Aaron to fix. And there was my knife. And I had three silver coins."

Jaren grunted. "There were no coins in it."

Rainier turned to Jaren, his eyes hard and direct. "Really?"

Jaren realized his mistake.

"You not only lied to Hunter," Rainier casually commented, "but you also lied to me."

Jaren shuffled from one foot to the other.

"Do you know what happens when someone is guilty of repeated stealing?"

Jaren looked down at the floor, no longer looking confident.

"I asked you a question." Rainier's voice was sharp, making Jaren look up.

"Yes," he whispered.

Rainier watched him take a deep breath as he curled his right hand into his left, as if already picturing the loss of it. Rainier leaned forward. "You could have your hand cut off," he affirmed, just in case Jaren did not get the point. "Where is the pouch?"

"In my hut."

"Where?"

"Under a loose stone beside the hearth."

"You will return the pouch with everything inside." He paused as he watched Jaren nod his head. "I hope to never see you here again for this offense. The next time, you will not like the outcome. As for now, I think you will work for Hunter for three months."

Hunter nodded his head, pleased with the verdict.

“Thank you, milord.”

Jaren bowed and turned to leave.

“Jaren,” Rainier called out. Jaren stopped and turned back. “Do not let me see you here again.”

Jaren slightly nodded, then turned and left.

Rebecca silently watched as the day continued, men bringing complaints and misunderstandings, another request for marriage. Through it all, her husband listened patiently. Every now and then, he would turn toward her and smile.

Standing behind the crowd, Marcus watched the men as they one by one approached Lord Hughes, presented their case, and waited for his ruling. He was mostly interested in the rulings, how Lord Hughes dealt with those committing wrong. He wondered how long it would be before Lord Hughes found out about him. What would happen to him then? What would happen to Tad?

Would he be punished? Banished?

He had made a mental note of every ruling Lord Hughes made. His young mind could not decide what Lord Hughes would do if he ever found out. Would he understand? Or would he be strict and ruthless?

He just did not know!

It was best if he kept as far a distance as he could from Lord Hughes.

He watched as Lord Hugh’s turned and smiled at his new wife. She was a new threat. He was sure if anyone would figure it out, it would be her. He needed to especially keep away from her.

He needed to keep a close watch on Lady Rebecca.

Chapter 7

The next day, Rainier had gathered a small group of his men and rode out. He would be gone several more days and she still had much to accomplish.

With a practiced eye, Rebecca spent much of the first few days learning about her new home. She was hoping Ailene was fine. According to Gaylon, Fallon was at least a half day away. Maybe she could write her cousin a note. Surely her new husband would allow them to communicate.

Rebecca stopped in the hall and gave a deep sigh as Etta walked in. Etta was an older woman who took care of the keep. In fact, Etta was the one who informed her that there was a trader staying with them who had been attacked just outside Rainier's land. His name was Simon, and Rebecca made it a point to visit the man whenever she could.

At first, all Rebecca saw when she entered the room was an unmade bed and a writing table. But the sound of his voice as he spoke drew her attention to the man sitting in a chair in the far corner of the room.

Younger than Rebecca imagined, Simon was tall and thin. His brown eyes told her he was no longer in much

pain, only inconvenienced by both the sling and bandages around his right arm.

With careful attention, Rebecca looked at the many bruises on his back and side, keeping up the small talk as she worked. She could only imagine what they looked like two weeks ago if they were still this discolored now. The cuts showed no signs of infection and had been properly cleaned. She noticed the bandages themselves were clean and obviously changed quite often.

“Your bruises are fading, and the cuts on your arm and side are healing nicely.”

Simon smiled at Rebecca. “I have been more than adequately cared for, thank you. I know how busy you are.”

“I am glad someone was here to help.” Rebecca moved to the edge of the bed and sat down. “Do you know who attacked you?”

Simon shook his head. “Your husband asked the same question two days ago. I was just carrying my wares in my wagon, heading back to court. Nothing of real value that they would want. In fact, they took nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“They only destroyed what I had, and roughed me up a bit.”

Rebecca frowned. “Why would they attack you and yet take nothing?”

“I do not know, but some of the cloth is irreplaceable.”

Rebecca spent the next half-hour listening as Simon described the different colors and textures of cloth he carried; the jumble of ribbons, thread, buttons and lace; the different tools and utensils; and the variety of people who purchased them.

It was evident that Simon enjoyed his trade.

Leaving Simon behind in Etta’s capable hands, Rebecca took the opportunity to inspect other parts of Kensington.

The men generally felt that the hall was the focal point

of any keep, but Rebecca believed the kitchen was the heart. To her, one of the most important roles of the household servants was the cook, in the kitchen preparing food. Uncle Gerald's kitchen had been a busy place when the castle was occupied.

Here at Kensington, Harry was the name of the cook.

He looked like he was lost, but he managed to make decent meals. She could not fault him with his cooking, but she knew there was something wrong.

"Harry, you do not look happy," she softly whispered as they both sat down and shared some hot broth.

Harry gave a heavy sigh. "I am fine."

"I know when someone is not fine," she corrected.

Harry looked around the kitchen, almost like he was remembering. "It is not the same anymore."

Rebecca looked around also. "Not the same?"

"Since Alice died."

Ahh! "And Alice was your, wife?" she prompted.

Harry nodded. "She worked in the kitchen, then."

They were quiet while they each took a sip of the broth. It was evident that working in the kitchen reminded Harry of better times. She was not sure what happened to his wife, and was not sure if asking would be polite.

A change needed to take place.

"Harry, if you could work anywhere in Kensington, where would you like to work?"

Harry looked up, surprised at the question. "But I work in the kitchen."

"Yes, but if you could work where you *wanted*, where would that be?"

Harry looked at her, then looked down at his large hands. "I always liked horses," he whispered.

"Horses. So you would like to work in a stable?"

"I think I would like that. I would be outside and..."

Not inside the kitchen, Rebecca thought.

She set her cup down and stood up. "Let me see what I can do. If I can manage it, I will find you another job working with the horses. Does that sound good to you, Harry?"

She was rewarded with a partial smile.

He does not believe I will follow through on this! She thought. She would show him.

All she had to do was find another cook.

A *good* cook, she corrected as she left the kitchen.

Next, she headed past the hall doors and looked around, trying to decide where to go first.

She had several projects she needed to get started.

She turned around when she heard footsteps running behind her. "Jeremy?"

Jeremy was trying to carry several swords, a bow and a shield. He looked up, a grin splitting his face when he recognized her.

"Lady Rebecca!"

"Jeremy, where have you been? I have not seen you for several days."

"Lord Rainier is letting me squire for him." A pause. "Even though I know I am slim."

Rebecca's brows knitted together. "What?"

"I am taking these over to the men in training." Another pause. "Uhh, carrying these is very straining."

For some reason, Jeremy looked pleased with what he just said, even though it made no sense.

"Jeremy, why are you talking so funny?"

Jeremy dropped one of the swords as he looked around. "I have to go, before it snows."

"Snow?" Rebecca looked up at the clear blue sky. "'Tis not the season for snow."

Jeremy did not hear because he was already half way across the field.

Rebecca shook her head. "Snow!"

"Are you wanting it to snow?"

Sinclair also looked up at the sky as he stopped beside her.

"No, but I think Jeremy thinks it will soon."

"Really?"

"Actually, very little of what he said made any sense at all. Can you tell me why he is talking so funny?"

"Funny, how?"

"Rhyming everything."

Sinclair smiled. "'Tis only part of his training."

"Training?"

"All new squires are required to rhyme all their sentences for the next four months. It teaches them to think at all times."

"Why only four months? Why not all the time?"

Sinclair gave a chuckle. "Do you really think you could handle listening to Jeremy for longer?"

Rebecca wrinkled her nose at the thought. "You are right! Four months sounds long enough."

"So, where are you going?"

"I need to visit the blacksmith."

Sinclair gave her a surprised look. "The blacksmith?"

"Yes. I have a project I need to get started."

Chapter 8

The blacksmith was a large man, with his son apprenticing beside him. His name was Aaron, and his son Timothy.

Sinclair left her after he delivered her to her destination, saying he needed to check on the men.

Aaron was nervous when he learned who she was. He kept wiping his hands on his apron and looking around, as if the place needed cleaning before company came.

“I was wondering if you could build a wagon?” Rebecca asked.

Aaron looked surprised. “A wagon?”

“Yes.”

Aaron looked around again, as if one would magically appear. “Lord Hughes has many wagons—”

Rebecca shook her head. “I do not want one from my husband. I need a new one.”

Aaron’s eyes narrowed as he considered her request. Rebecca could almost feel the hostility. He was looking at her like she was the new mistress and she wanted everything new for herself. She remembered the feeling when she first married Quintin.

“It is not for me,” she began to explain. She did not want Rainier’s people thinking she was selfish. “It is for the merchant recovering in the tower. He was attacked a few weeks back and his wagon and supplies were destroyed. I want to replace his wagon so he can continue his trade.”

Aaron’s eyes softened. “I am sorry, milady—”

Rebecca waved a hand between them. “Please, do not worry over it. I can see how you would think otherwise. Were you here when it happened?”

“Yes. But when the Lord’s men found him, his attackers were already gone.”

“Do you have any idea who could have done it, or why?”

Aaron shook his head. “Everyone here was surprised by the attack. Everyone passing around here knows this is Lord Hughes land, and that he protects it and those on it. We have not had any problems for several years.”

Rebecca nodded her head, then returned the subject back to her project. “Would it take long to build a wagon?”

“I would need about a week.”

“Would it be difficult to build?”

Again he shook his head. “I would need to know how he carries his items, so that I can make drawers and cupboards where he needed them.”

“Hmm, I did not think of that. Maybe you can come inside the keep and ask him yourself. I will tell Etta that you are coming so she can show you to him.”

“I will need some leather and material.”

Rebecca looked confused at the request. “Leather and material?”

The blacksmith almost looked apologetic. “Well, the merchants I have seen live in their wagons while traveling. So he will need leather to block the windows when the weather is cold. And he will need something to sleep on. Plus he will need pans to cook in.”

“Ah, yes. I never thought of that. Thank you, Aaron. I will go to the tanner’s shop and inquire about the leather. I am sure I can find some material for bedding and such, and I will check our kitchen to see if we have any spare pans and utensils.” Rebecca turned to leave, then turned back. “I am sorry, but how big of a bedding would I need to find?”

The blacksmith smiled as he described what he thought the merchant would need.

The trip to the tanner’s hut was easier. “I asked the blacksmith to build a wagon for the merchant who was attacked a few weeks ago. He informed me he will need some leather for windows and such. I was hoping you could meet with him and decide what would be needed and then make it?”

The tanner just looked at her, blinking as he slowly understood the question.

“This is for the merchant?”

“Yes.”

“The *traveling* merchant?”

“Yes. He is recovering right now, but has no means to continue his trade.”

“And you are having a wagon built *for him*?”

“Yes.”

For some reason, Rebecca was surprised by the response. People were supposed to help other people in need. And this particular need arose while on her husband’s land. Therefore, she felt justified in helping the merchant.

“I have already talked with the blacksmith, so I need both of you to decide what is needed.”

The tanner slowly nodded his head. “Very well.”

As Rebecca was leaving, she realized she was overlooking something important. She reentered the tanner’s hut.

“Excuse me, but could you possibly make a few leather items, like girdles or purses or belts or gloves?”

“Girdles or purses?” Again, that confused look.

“Yes. The merchant lost his inventory, and it will cost him dearly to replace it. I was hoping several of the people about would have some spare items that he could use to start his business back up.”

“I am not sure. I am very busy right now.”

“If you have nothing, that is fine. I just want to ask everyone, to give everyone a chance to contribute. Let me know if you find anything.”

With that, she quickly left and retraced her path back to the blacksmith’s hut.

Timothy was sitting out front. “Is your father still here?”

“He is just inside. Do you want me to get him?”

“Please, do not bother him. I will just go and ask him what I need and then leave.”

She found him easily by following the sounds of the anvil and hammer. He was in mid-strike when he saw her. Again, he looked like he was ashamed the place was not cleaned up.

“Please, I just thought of something else. My husband tells me you are one of the best blacksmith’s he has ever had,” she lied. Rainier had never said such a thing, but she figured her husband would not have a blacksmith who did not do competent work. Therefore, her statement could be true.

It was better to think positively about some things.

The statement had the desired result. Aaron stood taller and his shoulders went back.

“It has occurred to me,” she continued, “that the merchant will have no wares to sell once he leaves Kensington. I was wondering if you can think of the most common items people ask you to make or fix, and then make a few of them for him.”

The blacksmith looked surprised. “For the merchant?”

“Yes. I am going around asking everyone about contributing whatever they have extra for him to sell.”

The blacksmith rubbed his chin. “Aye, there are a few tools I am always asked to make. I think I can make a few extra.”

“Fine! When you have them, can you bring them to the hall?”

Rebecca left, a new purpose for the day. She determined to visit every hut and ask the same of everyone. She was sure she could get enough for Simon to get started again.

When she wanted to go outside Kensington’s walls, the guard would not allow her. Sinclair was sent for and he escorted her around.

“I can manage on my own,” she voiced as she left another hut, with the promise of buttons and ribbons to be delivered to the hall.

“I know. But Rainier wants to make sure.”

Rebecca stopped and looked up at the guard. “Make sure of what?”

Sinclair just smiled. “I am sure I do not know. But he gave me my orders before he left.”

“Really?” She would have a talk with her husband when he returned. “Are you usually in charge when my husband is away?”

Sinclair nodded his head. “Myself or Nathan. If we are both gone, then either Miles or Duncan would take charge.”

Rebecca nodded her head in understanding, then continued on to the next hut.

Each family that she talked to at first was hesitant. She was not sure if they agreed to her suggestion because she was Rainier’s wife, or because they really had a good heart.

Think positive.

She heard about Matthew who had been injured a few days ago and was unable to harvest his field, so she set

about to find him. Eventually she located him and his wife Tessa. Matthew was laying on his bed, his bandaged leg resting between two pillows. Tessa was nervous when she realized who Rebecca was.

"I only came to see if I could help," Rebecca reassured her as Tessa tried to quiet her baby son in her arms. Peeking out from behind her skirt was a beautiful young girl. Rebecca guessed she was around three years of age.

Rebecca leaned down. "Hello there," she softly called out. The girl gave a toothy grin as she held on tight to her mother's skirt. "And what is your name?"

The girl remained silent.

"Her name is Destina," Tessa offered as she placed her free hand on her daughters back, encouraging her forward. "And this is Nigel." She gave the infant a slight bounce on her hip.

Rebecca smiled. "You have a beautiful family." Tessa smiled back, pleased at the compliment.

Rebecca turned back to the man on the bed. "How did you get hurt," she asked.

Matthew looked embarrassed, so Tessa answered for him.

"He stepped in a hole and broke his leg."

Rebecca looked at the leg from where she stood. She knew the man would be off his leg for at least a few months. "May I take a look?" she asked as she pointed to the broken leg.

Matthew looked quickly at his wife. "If you wish," he finally said.

Rebecca could hear Tessa pouring water into a bowl, so she gently peeled the bandages back to see the leg properly. It was swollen and red, but the skin was not hot to the touch.

"You have done a fine job," she commended Tessa as she rewrapped the leg. "The leg looks straight and clean."

She examined the leg laying between the two pillows. "I have heard it sometimes helps if you prop the leg a little higher."

Tessa looked at her husband's leg. "I will try that."

"Good. And let me know if it really helps. Now, do you have or know someone to help with the harvesting?"

Matthew shook his head. "Everyone else has their own field to work."

"Well, we cannot let your hard work go to waste," she said. "There must be something we can do. What crop do you grow?"

"Wheat."

"And when is the harvest work to start?"

"In about a week."

Rebecca nodded her head. "And what do your neighbors grow?"

"Royce next to us grows wheat also. Simeon next to him grows oats."

"Very well. I will talk around, and we will get your crop harvested. Do not worry about it."

Matthew did not look convinced, but Rebecca knew something would have to be done. She would not allow the field to be lost.

She mentioned about collecting for Simon and Tessa promised to look and see what she could spare.

She left Matthew and Tessa and headed over to Royce's hut next. He was sitting next to his wife, Blanche, eating when she arrived. Royce was tall and big. Blanche looked small sitting next to him. They were older than her.

"Please, sit down," Blanche encouraged.

"I just visited with Matthew and Tessa," Rebecca mentioned as she sat down.

"How is his leg," Blanche asked as she gave Rebecca a cup of water.

"Healing nicely. And their children are precious."

Rebecca noticed the sudden silence and looked up. Blanche had her head bowed and Royce reached over and covered her hand. She noticed the slight pat he gave her hand, a silent reassurance. She looked around and noticed the clean hut. Everything was in place.

“How long have you been married?” she asked.

Blanche looked up and Rebecca saw her squeeze her husband’s hand before placing it in her lap. “Seven years.”

“And have you always been here at Kensington?”

Royce nodded his head. “We were here when Lord Hughes’ parents were alive.”

“I have heard a few of the people talk about them. They seemed like good people.”

Royce nodded his head again. “They were. And Lord Hughes is just as good as his father.”

For some reason, Rebecca was pleased that the people thought so well of her husband. “I am sure he is,” she agreed. “I was talking with Matthew and he mentioned that you also grow wheat, the same as him.”

“I do.”

“And is your crop due to be harvested at the same time?”

Royce nodded his head. “We planted together.”

Rebecca looked around again. “I was wondering if you had any extra help or children that could help Matthew.”

“We have no children.”

Rebecca looked at the woman and heard the maternal longing there. She understood the feeling. She had wanted children while married to Quintin, but Quintin was too old and frail. She had seen other women with their children, running and laughing. Her heart had ached for the loss of motherhood. After Quintin died, she was sure she would be a widow for the rest of her life, never to have a child of her own. Several nights, she had cried for her loss.

She was sure Blanche had cried several nights herself.

“My first husband and I never had children either,” Rebecca confessed, letting the woman know she understood her feeling of want.

Blanché gave a forced smile. “But I have Royce.” She grabbed her husband’s hand, and he gave her a comforting smile.

“I usually harvest my field by myself,” Royce spoke, bringing the conversation back to the fields.

“Is there any way to help with Matthew’s field?”

Royce shook his head. “I barely get mine harvested before the weather changes. And most of the villagers are the same. They only have themselves to harvest. The families that have children have larger fields, so their children are needed in their field.”

Rebecca nodded her head in understanding. “I see.” She took a moment to think, then rose from her chair. “Well, I will think of something. Have you heard about the merchant Simon?”

“The one who was attacked?” Royce asked as he stood also.

“Yes. He is being cared for but he lost everything. I am getting another wagon for him, and I am asking all the people if they have anything they want to contribute for his inventory.”

Both Royce and Blanche looked confused. “You are getting him another wagon?” Royce asked, bewilderment in his voice.

“Yes. I feel it is a small thing since the attack happened on my husband’s land. And so far, most people I have talked to have agreed to contribute something, either for him to resale or for him to use personally.”

Royce nodded his head as he looked at his wife.

“I am sure I can find something,” Blanche offered.

Rebecca smiled. “Good. If you find anything, bring it to the hall.” Rebecca looked at the door. “Can you tell me

about your neighbors? I am trying to meet them all.”

Royce walked outside and pointed to several huts, explaining who lived where and what they grew.

Rebecca made it a point to talk with everyone she visited with. She tried to include all in the conversation, even the children. The villagers were at first polite, but eventually relaxed in her company.

She enjoyed meeting Rainier’s people.

Then she met Agnes.

Agnes was about ten years older than Rebecca, with long wavy brown hair tied back with a scarf. Her face was round with soft brown eyes. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, the result of smiling and laughing much of the time.

Even though she was thinner than Rebecca was, she seemed to possess a strength that was amazing. While Rebecca sat in the tiny cottage, Agnes kept working, moving large bowls filled with food, lifting large bags of meal and flour. Rebecca wanted to help, but Agnes would have none of it.

“I can handle this. But thank ya anyway. My boys or Tom are always nearby.”

As if on cue, three boys came running in, heading for the same cupboard. Rebecca suspected there were sweets inside. All three of them were taller than their mother.

“You boys get out of there,” Agnes scolded with a smile in her voice. “Mind ya manners. We have important company today.”

Three sets of eyes turned and focused on Rebecca. She noticed they all had their mother’s soft brown eyes. One by one, they approached her as Agnes introduced her children.

Richard was the oldest and tallest. He was bigger than Agnes with shoulders that were already wide, and arms and legs that were already thick from constant use. He was a worker. An inch shorter, Pierce was not nearly as big as his

older brother was. Alex was the youngest, being the same height as Pierce, only much thinner with a boyish face. Three boys politely said hello then took off, something else commanding their interest.

"Your sons are very nice," Rebecca commented as she looked at the door the three young men had just raced through.

Agnes beamed with pleasure that someone noticed her young ones. "Aye, they be good ones." She smiled as she wiped her hands. "Although they eat enough to feed several families."

"They are growing boys," Rebecca agreed.

"Aye, they be. But they keep sneaking off with my food. Last week, they took a whole chicken I roasted. I cannot see where they put it."

Rebecca laughed. "I remember my uncle always scolding my brother for taking food from the pantry."

"Well, I would not be surprised if my Tom was not sitting with the boys, eating away."

Rebecca smiled as she watched Agnes continue to put vegetables together, making a thick hearty stew for her family. She closed her eyes as she took another whiff. She could smell the aroma of different spices and herbs mixed together.

"Have you ever worked inside the keep?"

Agnes stopped what she was doing and stared at Rebecca. "Now what would I be doing inside the keep?"

Rebecca hesitated for only a minute. "I visited the kitchen yesterday."

"Is Harry still there?"

"Yes. He does well in the kitchen, but he is not happy."

"He misses his wife."

"What happened to her?"

Agnes stopped cutting. "Five years ago, Kensington was attacked. Many of the people here were killed, including

Lord Rainier's parents.

"I did not know," Rebecca whispered.

"It was a beautiful place then." Agnes stopped and looked off into space, fondly remembering. "Lady Hughes had so many tapestries hanging on the walls, many with bright colors. I went to the hall a few times, and I would just stand and stare, it was so beautiful. And she had pillows for the chairs she embroidered herself."

Rebecca could almost picture the scene. "I would have loved to seen it then."

"When Lord Rainier returned, everything was so confusing and disorganized. People just started doing whatever needed to be done. Harry worked in the kitchen, likely because Alice had always been there. Over the years, no one bothered to replace him."

"I have talked with Harry and I know I can put him someplace where he would be happier and more useful. But that will leave the kitchen without proper supervision. I have talked with some people, but so far no one would be capable of handling it."

Agnes stopped, became very still. "Are ya *asking me* to work in the kitchen in the keep?"

"If you want to."

Agnes dropped the vegetables she was working with, grabbed a towel for her hands, and quickly stepped around the table to sit beside Rebecca.

"I would be honored to work there, milady. I be a hard worker, of that ya can rest easy."

"I can already see that. This house is spotless, and your children are not only well behaved, but clean. But more importantly, your cooking smells wonderful."

She told Agnes of the food that was served now and of the garden she found.

"I am sure I would be more than pleased with your work. But there are a few things that I want to be sure you

can handle first.”

Agnes sat straight up with her hands folded in her lap, ready to listen.

“First, I expect the kitchen to be clean at all times. The help you have can be of your own choice, or I can select ones to help. I also want you to be able to take care of any problem that is not major. If you are low in something, then get it. You need not ask me to replace any mandatory item.”

Rebecca paused to study Agnes.

“Once a month,” she continued, “I will go over the accounts with you on how you are managing the staples, meat, and such. If I see a problem, then I will discuss it with you. Unless you want me to, you may choose the meals. If there is an item I wish to be served, I will inform you of it.”

She watched Agnes, who was nodding her head as she spoke. “Do you still want to work inside?”

“I am sure Tom will be pleased to accept.”

“Well, maybe I can get Tom to do some work.”

“He will enjoy doing work inside again.”

“Again? What kind of work did he do?”

“He built large tables for the hall. But then Lord and Lady Hughes were killed.” Agnes looked off into the distance. “It did not seem proper to bother milord when he finally returned home, not with all the work he had to do.”

Rebecca was remembering the scarred and charred furniture in the hall now. “How far along was Tom on the tables?”

“Oh, my Tom had the tables and chairs already done.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “What did he do with them?”

Agnes looked toward the back door. “Tom and my boys put them in the shed. They were heavy, so Tom made them in pieces so they could be carried easier. We just never bothered with them after milord came home.”

Rebecca swiftly rose from the chair. “Well, let us see what shape they are in. There is a great need for replacing

the old tables in the hall now.”

Agnes was a soldier when she was at work, issuing crisp orders to the servants who quickly obeyed. She knew exactly what she wanted after Rebecca had shown her the kitchen.

Her boys were just as hard working as their mother, but Tom was the strength behind the family. It was evident that Agnes was his life and the boys were his pride and joy.

To Rebecca’s delight, the tables he had built years ago were still in fine shape. He had also built two large chairs, obviously for Rainier’s father and mother, then smaller ones for around one of the tables. There were benches that went around the other tables, seating almost double what was in the hall now.

She could not wait till Rainier came home. She had a plan.

Two men met in secret at an inn just outside of Dougal Castle.

“She is gone,” the thin man announced without preamble.

The larger man looked up, his ale forgotten. “Gone? When?”

“A few days ago.”

“Why was I not informed her uncle moved her?”

The thin man shook his head as he heard the barely concealed anger. “She did not leave with her uncle.”

“Then where did he send her?”

“He did not send her anywhere. She left with her cousin without telling anyone.”

The larger man looked surprised. “She ran away?”

“That is what the villagers are saying. Her Uncle has been looking for them.”

The larger man looked at the thin man, his eyes almost black pools of death. "I thought you were watching her at all times!" he challenged.

The thin man shifted slightly in his chair. "We were."

"Then how did she leave without you knowing it?"

The thin man looked down at his cup of ale, the cup still full. "The men had been watching the castle for months, and they were bored. They went into town for a little...diversion."

The larger man tilted his head. "So, while the men I am paying to watch her take a tumble between sheets, the one person I am interested in manages to simply walk by unnoticed?"

The thin man wisely made no comment.

The larger man gave a heavy sigh. "How can she just disappear? I need to find her."

"I have my men looking in all directions."

The larger man took several deep breaths, his brows furrowed. "Do you know how long I searched for her before I found her at her uncle's?"

The thin man nodded his head. He had been with the larger man since the beginning of his quest.

"I will not rest until she is found *again*," he almost spat the last word. "Get rid of the men who failed me."

The thin man nodded his head again.

"I will send you more men," the larger man continued as he rose from his chair, their clandestine meeting over. "I want her found. Alive!"

Chapter 9

The evening meal proved to be almost beyond Rebecca's limits. Agnes was not in the kitchen yet, so Harry was still cooking. The meal was good, but the manners of the men were beyond explanation. They kept throwing the bones over their shoulders after they chewed all the meat off. And this was not something the men only did because Rainier was not here. They did it then too!

She even brought it to their attention.

"Why do you men throw the bones on the floor?"

Miles looked up. "Why not?"

This was going to be harder than she expected.

"Tis just a floor," another man offered.

"But it is *my* floor. And I have to clean it every night after you men finish eating," she reasoned.

"And the servants throw them on the dirt floor outside," another man retorted. "A floor is a floor. Any floor will do."

"We always do this," another boasted as he threw another bone over his shoulder, with the other men laughing along.

"Ned!" Sinclair warned as the mood began to get

rowdy.

The men stopped their laughing and bent their heads to continue eating, the bones continuing to fly over shoulders onto the hall floor.

If the men had been looking, they would have seen a sly look cross over Rebecca's face. A look that promised recompense.

That night, she had the servants collect all the bones in the hall, which filled two large baskets.

"Shall we throw these outside?" Etta asked.

"No. Not yet. I have a plan."

The next day she continued visiting the various homes asking for items for Simon. The people today were more favorably inclined this day. Almost everyone agreed to her plan almost before she could voice it.

She could not imagine why the change of heart. But, she was thinking positively.

Simon was mending fine, and within a week, he would be able to travel. Aaron promised the wagon within the next three days, both the blacksmith and tanner working together.

All in all, she was pleased with her work.

If it were not for her garden, she would have been singing with pleasure.

Her garden was dying.

She watered the plants, made sure the weeds were removed, moved the soil around like she had seen other farmers do. But the plants were not responding.

She spent the evening before dinner crying in her room. She was so sure that this garden was going to be a fresh start for her, a new beginning.

What was wrong with her?

Why did everything die?

At dinner, she focused her anger from her garden towards the men downstairs. She would make them obey

her.

She would!

The meal proceeded as usual. The men loudly ate, belched, drank and spilt ale everywhere.

And threw the bones onto the floor.

Again, she asked the question: "why?"

And she received the same answers:

"Why not?"

"Tis just a floor."

"A floor is a floor."

"We always do this."

As she watched the blatant refusal of her request, she looked up to Ruth, a new hall servant, and slightly nodded her head.

She noticed the smile appear on Ruth's face before the servant dashed from the hall.

When the meal was over, the men sat around doing and saying the things they usually did. It was another hour before the men began to retire.

Rebecca stayed seated in her chair, the one Tom had made for Rainier's mother. For some reason, the chair gave her courage. She noticed several of the servants were taking an extremely long time in cleaning up after the meal, taking extra care in wiping the tables down. She inwardly smiled. She knew what they were waiting for.

She waited for half an hour before the first bellow shouted through the hall. Ned came running down the stairs.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded as he held up several bones.

Another shout from down the hall joined with another.

Soon, all the men were back in the hall, their state of undress in varying degrees, each holding bones in their hands.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ned repeated, his anger

making his face red.

"Ned, back down," Sinclair warned as he stood between Ned and Rebecca.

"But she—"

"She is still Lord Hughes wife. Do you want me to explain to him how you raised your voice at her?"

Ned lowered his eyes, knowing Sinclair was right, but he was still angry.

"Sinclair, it is fine if the men shout. I would, if I found what they did!"

"You see," Ned's voice rose again. "She admits to doing it!"

"Of course I admit to it. But in truth, you told me to."

The men became silent as they searched their memories. "We did not!"

"Oh, yes you did. You sat right there and told me that a floor was a floor, that any floor would do."

"So why did you put the bones in our rooms?" another man asked.

"I cut my foot when I stepped on the bone," someone in the back voiced.

"So did I," someone in the back of the shouted.

"And the servants and I cut our feet and shoes every night walking on them in the hall," Rebecca voiced back. She pointed toward her feet. "These slippers are not thick. We can feel the sharp points too. You men at least have leather shoes and boots."

Rebecca sat up straight, trying to look as confident as she could. "From now on, there are going to be new rules."

"What?" several men grumbled.

"New rules," she continued. "If you men prefer to throw the bones on the floor, making the servants pick them up and throw them somewhere else, they will *always* find their way to your rooms. And I would be careful, if I were you. Bones attract rats."

The men grumbled, talking with themselves, trying to figure a solution to this problem.

"I am willing to overlook your belching, and spilling of ale. But I will not tolerate throwing the bones on the floor. In the future, there will be a bowl for you to place the bones in, which the servants will discard properly. You can be assured, though, if *any* bones end up on the floor, they will also end up in *all* your rooms!"

The hall was silent as each man made a decision.

"What about the bones in our rooms now?" someone cried out.

"New rules," Rebecca repeated. "You throw bones on the floor, they end up in your rooms. If you want them removed tonight, I suggest you sweep them in a pile and dispose of them at your earliest convenience. We will see how tomorrow night goes after dinner."

The men looked at each other, some still grumbling about how unfair it was. After all, it was the job of the servants to clean things.

"Alright, men," Sinclair raised his voice. "Back to your rooms. NOW!"

The men grudgingly left. When the last one left, Sinclair turned around. "That could have gone a different way," he observed.

"I knew you would be here. Why do you think there were no bones in your room?"

Sinclair's brows rose.

"Like you said, Rainier wants to make sure!"

Rainier returned late three nights later. Sinclair met him in the stables as he and his men were dismounting.

"I see you found them," Sinclair observed as he saw the two men bound on their horses.

“They were not trying to cover their tracks,” Rainier replied. “We found them two days from here in a tavern.”

Sinclair looked at the two young men as they were pulled off their horses. “Did they admit to the attack?”

“They denied it at first, but eventually admitted to attacking the merchant and destroying his wagon.”

“Guess they thought they got away. What are you going to do with them?”

Rainier looked at the two men as he ran his hands through his hair. “Right now, I do not know. I will think on it later.” He grabbed a brush and began brushing his horse. “Until then, put them in the prison tower.”

Sinclair watched as Duncan and Lyle led the two men away. “I will have Etta get you and the men something to eat.”

“Fine.”

Sinclair’s eyes followed Duncan and Lyle as they climbed the steps to the hall, their prisoners between them. “You know, housing them in the prison tower will not necessarily teach them a lesson.”

Rainier looked at his guard. “What?”

“I mean, I think your lady wife would have a more useful job for them.”

Rainier stopped brushing his horse. “What are you talking about?”

“Your wife, Lady Rebecca. She has been visiting the villagers, and I think she would know exactly where to put those two.” Sinclair turned to the hall. “Ask her.”

Rainier watched his friend quickly climb the steps two at a time into the hall. He was still wondering what Rebecca had to do with the two prisoners.

The next morning, he asked her himself.

“They are the two who attacked Simon?” she asked. “So that is where you went. How did you find them?”

“I tracked them.”

Rebecca was laying out fresh clothes for him. "But the attack was several weeks ago."

"The tracks are there if you know where to look."

Rebecca stopped and looked up. "You mean, if I were to leave Kensington, you would be able to track me, even if I left several weeks ago?"

Rainier raised his right brow. "Are you planning on leaving?"

She shook her head. "Of course not! I just find it difficult to believe that you can track someone after so long a time."

"And yet, I found the men."

She continued laying out the clothes. "Yes, you did." She paused. "But, maybe you just *stumbled* upon them."

Rainier saw the sparkle in her eyes. He smiled at her playful tone as he walked up behind her, lifted her up and fell back on the bed with her still in his arms. Rebecca was laughing as he began to tickle her sides. He liked hearing her laugh. He was not sure, but he thought she had been crying the night before. If he looked close, he could just see red around her eyes.

He began nibbling on her ear, making her giggle.

"Rainier, I have things I must do today."

"I agree," he said as he began nibbling on her other ear. "And we can do all those things, here in bed."

Laying in bed and holding Rebecca, Rainier smiled, thinking how easy it was to distract his wife. He was thinking he would need to do this more mornings.

"Now, tell me why Sinclair thinks you can find a more useful job for my two criminals."

Rebecca became still, then she sat straight up.

"Yes, I can!" she exclaimed as she crawled out of bed

for the second time that morning and quickly put on her inner-tunic.

“You can, what?”

“Use them.” She belted her tunic then grabbed her outer-gown. “Rainier, may I have them?”

Rainier’s look became serious as he watched his wife readjust her clothes. “Why do you want them? Have you forgotten they attacked the merchant and destroyed his wagon?”

“Yes, I know, but I have found someone who needs workers, and there are none available before the harvest starts. Do you think they would work in the field?” She looked for and found her slippers.

“They will work where I say they work,” he returned gruffly. “Who is this person in need?”

“Matthew and Tessa. He broke his leg and is unable to harvest his field in a week.” She quickly brushed her hair, then quickly began braiding it. “Their children are still babes, so he has no one to help. And the neighbors have their own fields to harvest and would not be able to help. I have asked all around.”

Rainier looked surprised. “You asked other villagers for help for one man?”

“Yes. If he cannot harvest his field, he is not the only one who loses. You lose the portion as rent, and he loses the seed for the next harvest. And he will be unable to feed his family for the next year, whereas you will have to provide for him until his next harvest, and provide his seed.”

Rainier had to agree. “It would work. They would be working for their debt instead of sitting in the prison tower.”

Rebecca smiled as she turned back to him, looking like she had only an hour ago. “Then I can have them?”

“I will have Sinclair bring the men down, then I will deliver them to Matthew.”

Rebecca laid out his clothes again on the bed. "Oh, there is no need for that. I know you go to the field with your men for training."

Rainier had to smile. His wife was a feisty one when she wanted to be.

Rebecca noticed the pause. "You do not think they will escape from me, do you?"

Rainier watched as she headed toward the door. "I will talk with them first," he assured her. "After I take them to Simon to apologize for what they did."

"Oh yes, he will like that. And remind them that if they do escape, even if it takes several weeks, you will be able to track them, again."

She darted through the door before he could comment.

Feisty indeed!

When he finished getting dressed for the day, he found Sinclair and had him escort the two prisoners with Rebecca to Matthew's field.

After he had a talk with them.

Sinclair led the two men through the hall where Rebecca was waiting.

"This is Deron," Sinclair pointed to the smaller one, "and this is Frederick," Sinclair pointed to the other one.

"My name is Rebecca Hughes. Has my husband explained about you helping harvest a field?"

The men nodded their heads.

"Good. Shall we go?"

She led the three men to Matthew's cottage. Tessa was hanging newly washed clothes.

"Tessa, is Matthew awake?"

Tessa looked at the two men, then at Sinclair. "Yes."

"These two men are here to help with Matthew's

harvest.”

Tessa’s eyes widened, the rest of the clothes forgotten as she headed inside her cottage. “Come inside.”

Sinclair waited outside. Matthew was still laying on the bed, but Rebecca noticed his leg was propped up on several pillows.

“How are you feeling today?” Rebecca asked.

“Wanting to get out of bed,” he grumbled, then sat up when he saw the two men behind her.

“Matthew, this is Deron and Frederick. They are here to help you with your harvest.”

Matthew looked as surprised as his wife as he looked from her to the two men. “To help me?”

Deron stepped forward first. “We are hard workers, Frederick and me.”

“Have you ever worked on a farm?” Matthew asked as he adjusted himself better on the bed.

Rebecca turned to Tessa while Matthew talked with the two men. “Do you have a place for them to sleep?”

“They can sleep in the shed. There is plenty of space there.”

Rebecca looked around. “Do you have enough bedding and blankets for them?”

Tessa shook her head. “No, I have only what I need for us.”

“I will send someone over with some blankets for them. And I will also send some extra food for the next month or so.”

Tessa looked relieved. “That would be helpful.”

“I understand suddenly having two extra mouths to feed can be quite overwhelming. Will you need any help?”

Tessa shook her head. “I was raised with six brothers and two sisters. I can do that.”

“Good. If you have any problems, any at all, please let me know. I will try to come back and check on you and

Matthew.”

Tessa nodded her head. “Thank you.”

Rebecca stepped outside where Sinclair was waiting for her.

“All settled in?” he asked.

“I think so. I need to bring a few things back here.”

“Let me know and I will have some of the men deliver whatever you need.”

Chapter 10

It was a standoff, Rebecca standing alone against all the men.

Rebecca faced the angry men, a look of determination on her face. Across from her stood the small army of tense and angry men, the majority of them clenching and unclenching their fists at their sides. There was much shouting going on, some to each other, but mostly at her. The tension in the hall was so great, the servants were unwilling to come out until summoned.

Rebecca had Rainier's mother's best gown on. Right now she needed all the courage she could muster facing all of Rainier's angry men, some who had returned late yesterday.

Angry, but hungry, she corrected herself. Nathan was the first one bold enough to step forward.

"We want to eat, now!" he shouted to make himself heard over the shouts of the other men. The rest of the men growled their support.

Rebecca nodded her head. "Of course, as soon as you have done what I have asked you to do."

That brought a fresh round of grumbling from the men.

“What is she talking about—”

“—never had to before—”

“—cannot do this—”

“—what does Rainier say—”

She heard bits and pieces, but shook her head as another came around to stand next to Nathan.

“Where is Rainier? We want to talk with him.” She heard the rest of the men roar their support.

“My husband,” she raised her voice to be heard above the shouting, “your lord and liege, is upstairs now cleaning and changing for dinner.”

Since the kitchen was too far away for her plan, she had Agnes and the servants move the meal into a room just beyond the hall. At her signal, the door to this room opened. The men could see the activity in the room, could even see the food piled up, but no one was bringing any of it out to the tables. Rebecca could tell precisely when the men became aware of the change.

She and Agnes had prepared for this for two days. Agnes had roasted beef with onions and mushrooms with rich dark gravy, along with roasted goose and heron. There were potatoes and a variety of vegetables seasoned with herbs. Sugared nuts, fresh made cinnamon figs, peach pies, and apples filled with cinnamon and raisins would finish out the meal.

She had watched, horrified, at each meal as the men sat down to eat, no matter how dirty they were, many times right after training or after whatever work they were doing. Many times, someone had come straight from the stables. She understood that the men were unaware of the odor they sometimes had, but she noticed it on her first day here.

The men were going to learn to be clean for the meals, or not eat here. It was as simple as that.

“On the far table are basins of warm water, plenty of towels and soap. I expect you to wash your face, hands, and

arms before sitting down to eat. And since most of your tunics are dirty from training and such, there are also various ones available on the table. If you wish to eat here, then you will first be clean.”

“And if we do not?” someone challenged.

Rebecca could not see the individual, but she knew the men were weakening. She had Pierce open the hall door slightly, just enough to cause a slight breeze to carry the aroma through the hall and to the men. She smiled, knowing what she said next would really create a stir.

“If you choose not, then I will simply have the servants throw the food out to the swine. After all, the servants have already eaten their share.”

She was having a difficult time hiding her amused smile while she observed the open mouths and wide eyes on the men's faces when they heard this. Feeding the servants first was never done. And throwing the food to the swine!

“What?” many were muttering in the crowd.

She opened her eyes wide, trying to look as innocent as she could. “You would not want me to punish the servants because of what *you* did, now would you?”

She waited for a few minutes while the men continued to grumble.

“Very well. Good day, men.”

She turned to leave when in unison the men yelled, “NO!”

Rebecca stopped, her back toward the men and a big smile on her face.

She had them!

She glanced into the next room to see Agnes patiently watching the scene from behind the door. Both women gave a nod to each other.

As she straightened her shoulders, Rebecca forced the smile from her face, a stern look replacing it as she slowly turned around. When she saw the men, she signaled the

servants to begin bringing out the food.

Rainier silently watched from the top of the stairs as this one woman held back a hall full of men, fighting men no less. He had to admit his wife was brave and determined.

When he returned late last night, he had been too preoccupied to notice the changes in the keep.

But throughout the day, he noticed little things. It started when he saw the clean clothing Rebecca had laid out for him in the morning. Then when he returned from the training field with his men later this afternoon, he found warm water waiting for him in their room. He forgot how good it felt to have clean clothes after a hard day of training.

This morning, as he sat down in the hall, he noticed the new tables, chairs, and benches. He still was not sure how she had them made in the short period of time that he was gone. He never realized how scarred and beat up the old furniture was, until now.

He almost laughed aloud when she threatened to throw the food out. Knowing how hungry the men were and smelling for himself the aroma coming from the food, he could almost understand their revolt.

As he came down the steps still shaking with laughter, he saw his grumbling men move as one toward the basins against the wall.

She had won her small victory!

Tonight, though, he was going to learn just how much of a victory she had won.

He knew something was up when, during the meal, some of the men were glaring at others around the table.

Duncan looked up when Ned nudged his shoulder.

“What?” Duncan asked.

“You threw the bone on the floor,” Ned replied.

Duncan waited for more to be said. “So?” he finally responded.

“You have to go get it and put it in the bowl.”

Duncan looked at Ned like he had grown two heads. “Are you joking?”

Duncan looked over at Sinclair and the other men, thinking this was a fine joke, but the men were not smiling. In fact, they were glaring at him.

“You have to go get it,” another voiced. “Or else,” he whispered.

“Or else what?” Duncan challenged back.

“You will not like it,” Ned offered. “Believe me.”

Duncan pushed Ned back. “You have been drinking too much ale.”

“You have to get the bone,” Sinclair repeated as he dropped the bone in his hand into a bowl, then reached for another piece of meat. “New rules.”

“New rules?” Lyle asked as he glanced at Rainier, then back to the men. “What new rules?”

“You have to put the bones in the bowls,” another man offered, again.

Rainier watched the scene with interest. He had himself almost thrown the bone he had in his hand over to the hall floor, but he stopped himself when this particular conversation started. He noticed some of his men kept glancing at Rebecca, as if she held the answers. At the mention of the bowl, Rainier noticed there were several empty bowls, and several bowls with bones discarded in them. He turned to Rebecca, looking for an answer, but she was busy eating.

New rules? He thought to himself. Well, he could live with this new rule.

He reached over and dropped his bone into an empty bowl, the lone sound echoing through the hall. He looked at

Duncan and smiled as he shrugged his shoulders. "New rules," he agreed.

The next day, Rainier entered the hall and discovered the tables piled high with various items.

"Sinclair," Rainier shouted as he looked through the items.

Sinclair came around the corner, a chicken leg in his hand, his mouth still chewing.

Rainier spread his hands over the items. "What is all this?"

"This is Simon's."

"Simon?" Rainier thought for a moment. "The merchant?"

"His wagon is all ready, and Lady Rebecca wanted him to go through this stuff."

"What wagon? His was destroyed."

"Lady Rebecca had a new one built for him."

"A new one?"

"Aaron finished it yesterday."

"Why did she have a new one built?"

"She was concerned that he would have no way to continue his trade, so he asked the blacksmith and tanner to make him another one."

Rainier looked from Sinclair back to the table. "But, what is this stuff?"

"Oh, this is the stuff Lady Rebecca asked people to contribute for him to sell."

Rainier looked confused. "Rebecca asked the people to contribute things?"

"The first day was a little rough, but I think word got around and by the second day, people knew what she was asking and why and everyone just agreed."

Rainier looked the items over. Some were not of the finest quality, but most of what was on the table could be resold. He was amazed that the people responded to her request to help someone else.

“Rainier,” Rebecca called from the top of the stairs as she quickly descended. “I will be back in a moment.”

Rainier looked from the hallway under the stairs where she disappeared to the table of items.

“You should see the wagon,” Sinclair offered. “Aaron did a fine job.”

Simon’s expression when he saw the items and the wagon was worth the four days walking from hut to hut asking for things. Simon looked through the items and was amazed that people gave not only new items, but quality items. There were even several tools to trade with. When he saw the wagon, he almost broke into tears. The blacksmith and tanner were both pleased that he liked their work.

Rebecca helped Simon to load the items. Rainier shook his head, wondering how his wife managed to get so many people to help. It became apparent that Rebecca did not consider a means to pull the wagon, so he offered one of the plow mares for him to use. Rebecca smiled at him for his thoughtfulness. He thought her smile was thanks enough.

By late morning, Simon was ready and packed. He was eager to be on his way, to continue his trade.

“I will be by again, I promise, with something exceptional,” he promised.

Rebecca gave the merchant a hug. “Just be safe.”

“Please, tell all the ones responsible how thankful I am.”

As he passed through the courtyard, he waved to all he could, crying out “Thank you, thank you.” Most of the

villagers smiled as they waved in return.

Rebecca watched as he left Kensington, his waving and crying “Thank you, Thank you,” slowly fading into the distance.

Marcus watched the merchant leave with his new wagon. He had followed Lady Rebecca from a distance as she went from hut to hut, talking to everyone and asking for items for the merchant.

“Does she know?” Tad asked beside him.

Marcus shook his head. “No. But we need to be careful from now on.”

Tad looked at the retreating wagon, then at Lady Rebecca standing, watching it go also. “She seems nice.”

Marcus turned around. “We stay away from her, you hear?”

Tad’s eyes looked confused.

“No one can know,” Marcus whispered. “We made a promise.”

“But she helped the merchant, and Matthew.”

“No,” Marcus repeated. “We stay away.” He looked at Lady Rebecca as she turned and headed back to the hall. “Especially from her.”

Chapter 11

Rainier's men immediately lined the walls with their longbows when they heard the watchman call out the alarm.

A large army was approaching.

At the lead were three rows of men, followed by several wagons with several dozen riders along each side. As the army came closer, Rainier identified the banners.

Lord Brocksworth had finally arrived.

Rainier visibly relaxed when he noticed the men were not dressed for battle. He had heard many things about Lord Brocksworth, knew him to be both vicious and cunning in battle. If Rainier was to be on the field with him, he preferred them being on the same side.

He turned when he heard his men approaching, Sinclair in the lead.

"Bring Rebecca. She most likely will be in the garden," he yelled when he noticed Sinclair turning toward the hall. "Covered with mud again," he said under his breath as he slightly shook his head. He could not seem to keep her out of it. She felt as if the garden was her personal fight.

He smiled at that thought. He had noticed she had been

crying for several nights, yet she refused to tell him what the problem was. It was not until he passed the window directly above his mother's garden that he heard her. When he looked through the window, he saw that her garden was indeed dying, if not dead already.

He knew how hard she tried, but for some reason, the plants were not responding. Rainier had Miles get James, one of the farmer's sons, and had him brought to his room.

James was nervous, wondering what he had possibly done wrong. But Rainier reassured him that he was fine.

"I want you to join my wife in her garden. I know that at this stage, most of the plants might be dead. But try to help her with what she has left. I want you to visit her every day to help her. Give her any excuse, but make sure that her garden does well."

"Very well," James nodded, surprised at the request. He was a natural with plants, so helping Lady Hughes should not be a problem at all.

"Remember, she is not to know that I asked you to help."

James nodded again, then left in search of the devastated garden.

It had taken a week, but already, Rebecca was seeing results.

She was smiling again.

He gave the order for the drawbridge to be lowered and the gate to be opened. As the Brocksworth's party entered, Rainier stood on the lower steps of the keep and waited.

Brocksworth was about the same size as Rainier, with gray speckled in his hair at his temples. He sat in the saddle as if it were home to him.

"You are Lord Hughes, husband to my niece, Rebecca?" he called across the steps.

Rainier nodded his head.

"I have come to see for myself that you are still among

the living.”

Rainier cocked his head to one side, noticing the smile on Brocksworth's face. “Why would you worry about my being alive?”

Brocksworth shook his head as he laughed out loud. “If you knew Rebecca well, you would not need to ask me that.”

Rainier grasped his hands behind his back as he stood tall. “You should have asked how my men are, instead.”

Brocksworth laughed louder, a bellow of delight and mischief. “Aye, you may be right.”

Rainier allowed a smile to cross his face.

“My wife is readying herself for your visit. Come inside.”

Lifting her gown, Rebecca came running across the courtyard, her cry of delight reaching both men as they climbed the steps.

Brocksworth easily lifted Rebecca, the familiar squeeze around his neck making his heart skip a beat. With a quick kiss on her cheek, he gently set her back down, stroking her hair and pulling it out of her face. The look he gave her told Rainier that Brocksworth had been deeply worried about her.

“You gave me quite a scare, daughter. A man my age cannot take much of that these days.”

“You are as strong as an ox, and well you know it.” She jabbed him in the shoulder with a finger before resting her cheek on his chest. “But, 'tis still good to see you.”

Brocksworth held Rebecca away and noticed the dirt smudges on her gown, face, and arms. “I would say you have found another garden to work in.”

“Yes I have.”

“I never could keep you out of the garden back home.”

Brocksworth frowned. It broke his heart to see how upset she got when the plants died, but she never gave up. Each year she started anew, and each year he hoped would

be different, that she would not get too discouraged. It never seemed to have any effect. They all died all the same.

Rebecca saw the frown on her uncle's face. "I am sorry for worrying you."

"You are too independent by far, Rebecca," he said, bringing his mind to the present. "You need someone to take you in hand." He looked up at Rainier. "You have your work cut out for you, young man, mark my words. When she wants something, not even the powers of heaven can stop her."

Rainier raised his brows. He saw Rebecca straighten up as her eyes silently berated her uncle for talking about her so. "She will do what I say," he confidently spoke.

Brocksworth shook his head as he smiled. "May God grant you patience. Lord knows I lacked it many times these past few years."

Rebecca raised her head, a defiant look in her eyes. "If you two are through talking about me like a common wench in front of all your men, we can go inside."

Rainier watched Rebecca leave, her hips smoothly swaying as she walked. He dragged his gaze away, noticing Brocksworth intently watching him. "You called her daughter?"

"I got tired of calling one daughter and the other niece," he said as he shrugged his large shoulders. "It was simpler to call them both daughter." He clasped his hands behind his back as he walked alongside Rainier. "In truth, she is no blood relation to me at all. Her mother was already carrying her when she married my brother. But she feels like my own daughter, just like Ailene."

Rainier nodded his head in understanding.

Lord Brocksworth closely studied Rebecca's husband as they walked together. What he saw as he studied the man before him reassured him.

"Do I measure up?" Rainier asked as he turned around.

Brocksworth looked into hazel eyes that seemed to pierce through a man's defense, eyes that were hardened with years of experience. *So this is the man Henry's men nicknamed The Wolf. This man would be able to keep what was his. He would be able to protect Rebecca.*

"I have heard much about you over the years. I wanted to assure myself that what I heard and what I saw were the same."

Rainier kept his gaze on the older man, trying to decide what he was not telling him. He knew Brocksworth was concerned with Rebecca's welfare. But Rainier sensed there was something else.

As he started walking again, he looked at the wagons. "I gather you received my message."

"After I spent a full day in search of them. I need not tell you of the frantic state I was in when I realized the girls had slipped out."

"But they had Jeremy!"

Brocksworth gave a snort. "Do not get me started with that lad. By the way, I assume he is here and not with Ailene."

"He is here."

"Good. I will take him back with me."

Rainier nodded his head. "Very well."

Brocksworth continued to walk. "After the first day, I received a ransom demand."

"I was hoping they had not sent one yet."

"Yes, well, they were eager to increase their purse weight. I do believe the men have given up their old trade, at least for awhile."

Rainier looked at Rebecca's uncle and saw the faint smile on his face. He smiled in return, knowing Gerald Brocksworth had dealt with the men.

"You should have seen their faces when we arrived and the women were not there," he continued. "They were still

searching the forest for them, believing they could not have gotten far away. I realized that someone had aided them when I found their tracks and yours, but I lost the tracks after a half-days ride.”

Gerald looked up in time to see Rebecca walk through the door into the hall. “I assume you got the full story from her?”

Rainier gave a deep sigh. “Yes.”

Gerald turned toward Rainier, his eyes twinkling again with silent mirth. “You will learn she has a habit of acting before she thinks.” His chest shook from his laughter as he noticed Rainier rolling his eyes. He clapped his hand across Rainier's shoulders, both men again walking toward the hall. “Do not worry, son. You will get use to it.”

Rainier paused in his walking as he looked at Lord Brocksworth. “Did you?”

“Lord no! Why do you think I have all this gray hair at my age?”

Both men were laughing as they followed Rebecca inside.

Uncle Gerald was at his best when he was telling a story, and right now he had a captive audience. “I tell you, the King himself kept me up over half the night discussing a problem with the clerks about a new reform he was trying to put together.”

“But you are usually up late at night anyway, telling tales with your men.” Rebecca smiled at her uncle, knowing this story by heart.

“Ah, yes. This is true. And normally I would not have minded this night, except that King Henry had roused us all out of bed before dawn and had us all day long on a hunt. I do not know what keeps that man going sometimes,” he

said as he shook his head. "Wish I had the energy and strength he has."

"Looks like you survived," Sinclair observed with a smile.

"Yes, I survived. But I was so tired, that even to this day I am not sure exactly what I had agreed to that night. I still live in fear of having to deliver or do something I cannot remember promising."

While the men laughed with each other, Gerald gave a contented smile as he leaned back against his chair. "I must complement your staff on an excellent meal, Rainier."

Rainier glanced around at his men, noticing the clean shirts, as well as clean hands, arms, and faces. And floor.

"I am just learning myself of the power a decent meal has. How long can you stay?"

"I need to leave in the morning. I have Ailene's things I need to deliver."

Gerald saw the silent signal Rainier gave to Rebecca, and how without hesitation, she turned her back toward him as she lowered herself beside his chair.

As the men continued talking, Rainier untied her braid and ran his fingers through her hair like he did many nights, combing it back with his fingers.

Rainier could never remember doing this simple act with another woman. Nor could he have ever imagined gaining as much satisfaction or being so contented from such a small deed.

Rebecca was no longer listening to the men as she leaned her head back. She only wanted to enjoy the sensation of Rainier's fingers as he gently massaged her scalp.

Gerald watched the scene with interest. Rebecca would now be safe. Rainier would make sure of it.

He knew Kyle was worried about his sister. He was sure this arranged marriage was the result of Kyle's visit to

court. Kyle did not know, but he also had been keeping account of the Castelle family. Individually, the accidents could have been just that, accidents. But when looked at all together, something was not right. Rebecca's late-husband's family had been systematically eliminated, he was sure of it.

As Kyle was.

But there was more. When Rebecca suddenly appeared after Quintin's death, he knew something else was wrong. He waited for Rebecca to tell him, but she had remained quiet. He had even asked Ailene if she had been confided in.

Ailene had assured him she knew nothing of what had happened.

But something did happen.

He had let the matter drop, feeling that Rebecca's safety was more important. And he had hoped that, in time, she would tell him, confide in him.

As he looked at Rebecca's new husband, he was sure that she had not yet told him of her secret, whatever it was. He could not imagine what it was that Rebecca was running from, what secret she was hiding.

He only hoped when Rainier found out, that she would continue to be safe.

Chapter 12

Rebecca was more than pleased with the items Uncle Gerald had sent.

Twelve large chests and boxes and eleven bundles of tapestries were piled into a spare room across the hall, along with several pieces of furniture. The tapestries were mostly from her mother, but a few were from Quintin's estate.

Opening each chest, she began moving items to her bedroom. All around, her personal items now mingled with her husband's: her brush, mirror, her bedspread, and heavy rugs around the bed and by the window. She exchanged one of the larger chests with Rainier's mother's chest. She would get one of Rainier's men to move it later. She liked the way the small table fit next to the window. She found a small chair in one of the rooms across the hall, so she dragged it to their room and set it next to the table.

Yes, their room was looking just fine.

Next came the tapestries.

She already knew which ones she wanted to place in the hall. She called Agnes's boys and had them scrub the two main walls that she was interested in while she had Tom

draped the tapestries on a rope so she and Ruth could beat the dust out of them. Then she had Tom and his boys hang up the largest of her tapestries on the largest wall.

Rebecca stood back and observed with satisfaction how the hall was coming along.

Her bedroom was looking more like hers and Rainier's instead of Rainier's and his mother's.

And the Hall was looking warmer and more inviting.

Oh yes, Kensington was starting to feel like home.

The evenings proved to be a time for the men to relax, some telling stories, as Nathan and Sinclair were doing. Rebecca smiled as she listened to Nathan. No matter what the subject, it appeared that Sinclair automatically took the opposite view of the matter.

Rebecca scanned the room and noticed many of the men doing various things. She realized there were many of Rainier's men she still did not know.

One man was patiently whittling on a piece of wood as he sat in a corner. She remembered seeing various figurines around the castle. Agnes had a wooden figure of a stallion rearing up on his hind legs. Agnes told her one of the guards had given it to Pierce a year ago. Rebecca had noticed the detail in the carving, and was greatly impressed with the work. She was sure this man was responsible.

Rebecca was relaxed as she sat by the fire with her sewing, watching several of the men play chess.

Every other night, when they were younger, both her and her brother would sit before the fireplace with the chessboard between them, engaged in the silent battle sometimes deep into the night.

Kyle had played for years with their uncle and anyone who would take him up on his challenge. She could not

remember the last time he had lost a game. As they grew older, Kyle's strategy was to checkmate her in fewer moves than the last game.

Defeat was hard to swallow, especially when you never seemed to experience the delight of victory. Eventually, Rebecca played less and less. After all, a person had only so much pride. But watching the men play brought back memories.

Miles was trying his hardest to keep his bishop from being taken by Duncan's knight, but he seemed to be boxed in. Every move he made, Duncan would block another one of his pieces. Poor Miles was quickly losing.

Rebecca kept looking over her sewing, watching the moves, thinking what moves she would have made.

Miles was going to move his knight, which would put his king in jeopardy.

"I would not," Rebecca whispered to herself. She had not known she would be heard.

Miles looked at her in disbelief. "Why not?" he asked, looking back at the board, scanning it.

Rebecca lowered her sewing. "Because Duncan's bishop will take your knight, leaving your king unprotected. All his bishop has to do then is take your pawn, then checkmate."

Rebecca could see Miles follow the moves she voiced on the board.

"You are right. That would make the game." So he moved his pawn instead. That allowed Miles eight more moves before he was eventually checkmated.

Miles rose from the chair, stretching his long form from sitting so long while Duncan automatically reset the board.

"Play a game with me," Duncan suggested to Rebecca.

Rebecca smiled, remembering that Kyle also asked her to play with that same smooth tone of voice before his pieces pounced upon her king.

She shook her head as she pushed her needle through

the material in her hand. "I play very little. My brother taught me the game, but I never developed the strategy enough to be a very good player."

Duncan just smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "Still, I would enjoy just one game. Please." He pointed to the board, which was already set up again.

Rebecca hesitated. It had been a long time. Setting aside her sewing, she headed for the chair vacated by Miles.

The pieces were in place. Duncan let her start.

She moved a pawn, then a bishop, all the time taking note of where Duncan's pieces were and what threat they posed. She took longer than she liked to move each piece, yet Duncan seemed not to mind at all. Each move was viewed and reviewed to see whether any of his pieces could capture it, or if the move left another piece unprotected.

Twenty minutes went by.

One by one, she started to collect Duncan's pieces, first a knight, then a pawn, bishop, and another pawn. She felt they were worth the two pawns she had lost, or sacrificed. A few times she moved her pieces further out on the board, but always to return them back, closer to home ground.

Duncan watched as Rebecca systematically captured his other knight. He at first played easy, so as to let her gain her footing and feel somewhat confident.

What he was not prepared for was defending himself so much. He was still trying to recover from losing his second bishop when she went and captured his rook. He was sure they had been safe, but their swift capture showed he had left them unprotected, somehow.

Ten minutes later, Rebecca was pleased when Duncan's king was moving around the board with only a few pawns to help. She had felt Rainier's presence shortly before, which made her more nervous. Yet she still kept her mind on the game, taking Duncan's pieces one by one until she had finally cornered and checkmated him.

Duncan spread his arms wide, a look of bewilderment on his face. "Looks like the game is yours."

"Thank you." Rebecca smiled at Duncan, pleased with herself. She only wished Kyle had seen her.

Rainier slowly picked up each of Duncan's men that she had captured, carefully studying each one before putting them back in their proper places on the board.

"I believe 'tis my turn," Rainier said as she started to leave.

"One game is usually my limit."

"The winner usually plays the next one in line. And that is me."

Rainier's grin was infectious. She smiled back as she sat back down.

Twenty minutes later, Rainier was not smiling.

"Now, why did you move that?" Rainier asked, again.

He could not figure out her strategy. He had quickly set his pieces in place on the board as he usually did, places that gave him a measure of control. She managed a few moves that forced him to move some of those pieces, but he still could not figure out her strategy.

She was not playing like any of his men.

Each time he moved a piece, it was with the thought of how she would, or rather, should respond. Each move should have had a correct reaction.

She was not reacting right!

Rebecca was very cautious in moving her pieces, noticing how swiftly Rainier placed his pieces in key positions. Rainier was obviously a better player than Miles or Duncan. In fact, it was almost like playing Kyle again, which made her concentrate more, determined to stay alive as long as possible.

She moved her bishop up a few places, then crossed over to capture one of his knights. She had already lost one of her knights, but she kept her men close to the king, ever

protective. At one time, she ventured her queen out, but in a few moves, pulled her back when she felt threatened.

After about thirty minutes, Rebecca had three pawns, both bishops, one knight, and one rook. Rainier had captured one knight, two pawns and one rook. She had been playing protectively, moving only needed pieces to capture and then quickly return to place.

When she had enough of Rainier's pieces, she ventured out further onto the board with her queen, rook and bishop, forging ahead ever so slowly toward his king.

It was while she was debating whether or not to move her queen's bishop and take his other rook that she saw an opening on the board. If she could only get her rook over there, then his king would be trapped. She looked for a way to move the rook and saw that she only needed to capture another pawn, then put her rook in place. Her queen could then checkmate him.

Rebecca looked at the board again. Yes, she had almost missed it!

She moved her rook.

When Rebecca moved her rook into place, he realized his king was in serious trouble. When he moved it over closer toward his rook, her queen settled in place and calmly checkmated him.

He studied the board again, wondering how she did it.

He had been playing with his men for years, and never had he seen moves like hers. Why she moved the pieces when she did, he had no clue.

He looked at his wife, who was smiling. She deserved that smile. He had not lost a game in almost a year. "How did you do that?" he asked incredulously.

Rebecca only shrugged her shoulders, her smile still in place.

Rainier had moved his pieces out in an aggressive manner, moving his men into attack position.

Her pieces had constantly surrounded her king, seldom leaving once put into position. Yet every now and then, when one of his pieces would get within range, her piece would dart out and capture, then quickly return to its position.

He wondered how he failed to see it before. He would not make that mistake again.

Today, her strategy had won the game. But there was always another tomorrow.

“Very nicely done, wife,” Rainier said with a smile.

“Thank you very much, husband.”

Rainier stood up, stretched, and then held his hand out to hers. As her hand settled into his, he quickly scanned the room with his men seated about. He gave final instructions, then led his wife upstairs to their room.

Chapter 13

Rainier awoke immediately when he heard it.

His hand went to his sword laying beside the bed as he quickly landed on his feet, his mind instantly clearing of sleep.

With his feet braced apart and his sword tilted up, he quickly scanned the room. There was just enough moonlight through the window to see the faint images of the furniture in the room. Then he heard the cry again.

Rebecca was standing on the bed with both her back and her palms laid flat against the wall. She was looking down at the end of the bed, trying to back up into the wall, if she could.

He looked at the bed, noticing nothing unusual. He looked back up at her, her eyes becoming larger as she shook her head back and forth.

Something was amiss. "Rebecca," he whispered.

She did not appear to hear him. He quickly scanned the room again.

"Rebecca, what is it?"

At that, she swiftly turned around, clutching the tapestry hanging on the wall and mumbling something he

could not understand. His free hand ran through his hair as he looked between his wife and the bed. Leaning over, he swiftly ran his free hand across the bed and rumbled blankets looking for something that would frighten her so.

Nothing that he could see, or feel. He looked at Rebecca again, her face pressing into the tapestry. He was afraid she would pull the thing down if he did not get her to release it soon.

With another look around the room to make sure there was no threat he could see, he lowered his sword and reached over to the candle, forgetting that it was out. Walking across the room, he opened the door and entered the hall, totally unmindful of his naked state. Taking one of the candles from the wall, he reentered his room, closing the door behind him.

He carefully placed the candle in the holder, then approached Rebecca again. She was still tightly clutching the tapestry. He noticed how pale her face was, even in the moonlight and candlelight. She was truly frightened of something. Now that he was listening, he could hear her more clearly.

"No, no. Go away," she pleaded in a low voice. "You cannot make me. I will not! Go away!"

Rainier wondered if she was even awake. He had heard of people who had dreams while they looked awake, although he had never seen one.

He touched Rebecca's arm, trying to get her to look at him.

She jerked her head around to face him, her large eyes not really seeing him. "Too high. 'Tis too high. I cannot. Please do not make me. 'Tis too high."

She turned around then, looking down at the bed. Her face suddenly took on a puzzled look.

"What happened to it?"

"To what?" he asked as he also glanced down the length

of the bed.

She pointed toward the end of the bed, still not moving her feet. "The wall. Where did the wall go?"

Rainier looked at the bed, then back at Rebecca. "There is no wall there, Rebecca," he softly assured her.

She looked at him, confused. Slowly, she ventured to the edge of the bed, pointing to where the bed ended. "But, there was a wall here, and it went straight down." Content that the room held no immediate threat, she got out of bed, went to the foot of the bed and stared at it.

Rainier was watching her, wondering what woke her up. He had brought a candle in. Maybe with the added light, she was able to see past her dark nightmare.

Rebecca was still staring at the foot of the bed. "I was sure I saw a wall here. A very tall wall. And someone was trying to get me to come down."

Rainier went to hold his wife and felt her body tremble against his own.

Knowing that to her the wall was real only a moment ago, he leaned his head down, bringing his lips close to her ear and whispered, "The wall is gone now. You have no need to fear it anymore." As he rubbed her cold arms, she turned to look at him, uncertainty deep in her eyes.

"I do not understand."

"You were having a nightmare." He could tell she was not sure about that. "Do you remember ever having them before?"

She thought for a moment, then her eyes widened in fright. "Have I ever talked in my sleep?"

Rainier narrowed his eyes, wondering what was behind the question. "No, not that I remember."

He saw her body relax. She took another look at the foot of the bed, then slowly allowed Rainier to lead her back to bed.

"It was just a nightmare," he repeated. "This one is

over, and you are safe.”

It took her awhile to go back to sleep. He noticed she would glance down the bed every now and then, just to make sure. When he heard her even breathing, he knew she finally let sleep overtake her.

He wondered about her nightmare again as he blew out the candle. Every day, it seemed he learned something more about Rebecca.

Tonight he learned she had a great fear of heights.

The large man was again meeting with the thin man at a tavern.

“I found her!” the thin man announced as he sat down, then signaled to the owner for a cup of ale.

The large man was not patient. “Where?”

“Kensington.”

The large man frowned as he thought of who lived there. “Rainier Hughes?” he finally asked.

The thin man nodded his head. “Seems she married the man after escaping from her captors.”

The large man almost choked on his ale. “Married? Again?”

“Seems he had an order from King Henry.”

The thin man ignored the angry look coming from his accomplice.

“How did you find her?” the large man asked.

“I followed her uncle. I was sure he would eventually find both girls, so I waited.”

“Good. How well is she protected?”

“You will have a difficult time getting her from there. Lord Hughes is not a man you want to anger.”

“Do you think I am afraid of one man?”

“This one man will not be easy to evade.”

“It merely takes planning, and patience. Both of which I have plenty of.”

“She is the last one?”

The larger man’s eyes took on a faraway look. “Yes. All the others have fallen just as I had planned. She will complete my task.”

“Well, what do we do now?”

The larger man’s eyes refocused. “We plan, and wait.” He turned to the thin man. “Have your men watch her. I want to know her routine, where she goes or visits. Also, watch the husband. It would be best if he were away, but if not, he will just have to suffer the same fate at her.”

Chapter 14

Rainier received a message from his friend Roger, inviting him and Rebecca to visit. Rainier had not seen his friend in many months, and Rebecca had yet to meet any of their neighbors. This visit would take care of both problems.

Rebecca was excited about leaving Kensington and visiting someone else. Rainier made the plans and by the end of the week they set out early in the morning. The trip was long, but she enjoyed looking at the scenery around her. Spring was such a beautiful time of the year.

A few hours later, they came into view of Red Grove. It was a beautiful sight, the towers of Red Grove tall with the banners flying. They rode briskly as they entered the gates and into the courtyard, Rainier's men flanking them as Rainier helped Rebecca down.

"I hope the ride was not too much," he asked as she straightened her gown.

"I may not be running up and down the steps for a few days, but I enjoyed getting out," she reassured him.

Rainier looked around as one of Roger's men approached them. He directed them to the hall, then led the

horses to the stables. Sinclair and Nathan walked with Rainier as the other seven men walked around the courtyard. Rebecca heard Duncan call to someone.

As they entered the hall, they heard a man and woman arguing.

Rebecca hesitated, not wanting to interrupt a private moment. Rainier smiled as he took her hand and pulled her forward.

As they entered the hall, the woman saw them first. She turned her attention away from the man and gracefully walked to Rainier.

“Cinthia,” Rainier cried out, a smile spreading across his face as he walked toward the woman. The woman smiled at Rainier as he wrapped his arms around her small frame. “Tis good to see you again.”

Rainier’s pleasure at seeing the woman was obvious in his tone of voice. Rebecca could not help notice a certain fondness between the two of them.

Rainier had said they were close friends. She had never considered just how close they could have been. For some reason, that disturbed her.

“There had better be a good reason for you holding my wife like that.”

Even though the words he just spoke were harsh, there was a smile on his face and laughter in his eyes as the man approached Rainier.

“Roger.” Rainier reached over to shake Roger’s hand.

“We have been waiting for you,” Roger returned with laugh.

“I heard,” Rainier replied, laughter in his eyes.

Roger noticed Rebecca’s expression, almost glaring at his wife. “I would suggest you introduce us to your new wife, Rainier,” he whispered loud enough for all to hear.

Cinthia slowly approached, the smile on her face warm and friendly.

"I am Cinthia, and this is my husband Roger," she announced as she gestured to her husband. "Welcome to Red Grove."

Rebecca saw the genuine smile on Cinthia. There was something about the woman's openness that made her relax.

Both men silently watched their wives as they sat down together at a nearby table.

"I was afraid I would have to pull your new wife off my Cinthia."

Rainier was clearly confused about Rebecca's behavior. "She looked like a mother bear whose cub was threatened."

Roger turned to look at his friend, then back at his wife. "Or, her mate," Roger quietly added.

Rainier quickly looked back at Roger and noticed the smile on his face. "I would rather tangle with a pack of wolves than with you."

"Glad to hear that, friend!" Cinthia was very possessive and he rather liked it. It appeared that Rainier's new wife was going to be the same way.

Roger's smile broadened. Rainier was going to have to learn the hard way, Roger thought. Just like he had.

As the two men sat at another table, they both glanced again at their wives across the hall, deep in conversation.

A servant came with bread and cheese for all, cups of wine for the women, and cups of ale for the men.

Cinthia was telling Rebecca about her son. "Robert's favorite toy is a wooden horse with small teeth marks around its nose and head. Closer observation, though, will reveal one ear missing and half of its tail chewed off."

"And how old is he?"

"Almost two. Since he learned that his legs can carry him places, he is constantly on the move. When he wants something, it is amazing how fast he can move."

Rebecca smiled. "I forgot how innocent children can

be.”

“He is napping now. But he will be up shortly.”

“I would enjoy seeing him.”

Rebecca liked Cinthia's straightforwardness. She looked over at her husband still talking with Roger, both men deep in conversation about something.

“I am sorry we barged in on your, discussion,” Rebecca tactfully said.

Cinthia made an unladylike sound. “We were discussing the difference between questioning an order and asking for an explanation.”

Rebecca looked at her husband. “Rainier thinks there is no difference between the two.”

Cinthia turned toward Rebecca. “’Tis exactly what Roger also says!”

The laughter from the wives across the room brought the men's attention to them. “They seem to be getting along fine, now,” Roger noted.

“What do you suppose they are laughing at so hard?” Rainier asked as both wives erupted into another fit of laughter.

Roger was shaking his head. “Not what,” he stated. “Who. Our wives are probably laughing at us.” He almost laughed out loud as well when he saw Rainier's expression.

Oh yes, Rainier would have to learn the hard way. Roger decided he would have to visit more often just to see how his friend was doing. Knowing Rainier, these might prove to be very interesting visits.

It was not long before Robert came running from his nap, straight for his father.

Robert held his son between his legs. “Do you remember Rainier? Say hello.”

Robert gave a toothy grin. “Ello. My ‘orse,” he claimed as he shoved the wooden toy at Rainier.

“And a fine horse it is,” Rainier commented as the boy

struggled out of his father's embrace and headed toward his mother. "He has grown."

Roger watched as his son ran into the open arms of his mother. "'Tis hard to believe he came to us not quite two years ago."

Rebecca watched the young child, the favorite toy held in his chubby hands. Cinthia introduced Rebecca, and Rebecca was surprised when the child climbed from his mother's lap and onto hers. He shoved the toy into her face, and saw the small teeth marks around its nose and head. As she looked closely, she noticed indeed one ear missing and half of its tail chewed off.

"Does your horse have a name?" she asked.

"No," the boy said as he examined his toy. Robert proceeded to tell her all about the baby horse in the stables, where his favorite rock was, and where his favorite hiding place was.

Rebecca smiled as a woman came to take young Robert away.

"Time for your meal," she sang as she led the young child away, chewed toy in hand.

"He is precious," Rebecca commented as she watched the child leave.

Cinthia watched her son disappear into the kitchen, a smile on her face. "I think so too."

They stayed for an early meal, Cinthia talking about what she still wanted to do at Red Grove. Rebecca told of what she had done at Kensington.

Roger asked Rainier about the land, how the crops were doing, and the various problems they had been dealing with.

Roger then took Rainier to look at some new horses he had purchased.

They were able to stay for only a few hours, needing to return home before nightfall, their nine guards already

lined up, waiting to start on the return trip.

"We will visit you, soon," Cinthia promised Rebecca, Robert resting sleepily on her hip.

"I look forward to it."

With a final wave, the small party was on their way, Cinthia and Roger both standing on the steps watching them as they slowly disappeared.

"I like them," Rebecca commented as their party slowly moved on. "How long have you known them?"

"I have known Roger most of my life. We grew up together. We met Cinthia several years ago in London."

"She is nice."

Rainier smiled. "Yes, she is."

Rebecca could again hear the fondness in his voice. "You like her too, I think."

He looked at his wife, then shrugged his shoulders. "There was a time when I thought I might marry her, but something held me back. Roger wasted no time in declaring his feelings, and now they are married."

Rebecca thought for a moment. "Do you ever regret your decision?"

Rainier immediately shook his head. "Roger and Cinthia belong together. I realized that when they married. I found I was actually happy for them, not jealous at all."

He turned to her, leaned over his saddle and gently grasped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Are you satisfied?"

She started to pretend she did not know what he was talking about, but realized he somehow knew exactly what she had been thinking.

"Actually, I am," she finally admitted.

She had to hold on to the saddle as she was twisted around, her face still held by her husband. With each step of the horse, she had to make a mental effort to stay on and not fall off. It appeared he had no difficulty twisting and

leaning in his saddle.

He then surprised her further by leaning over and kissing her.

“Good,” he replied as he released her.

Rainier was thinking of his wife. He had been very surprised when he saw the jealousy on her face when he embraced Cinthia. Cinthia was only a dear friend and he had never considered any attachment to her since her marriage to Roger. He had been truthful when he said he was happy for them. He was not sure why, but for some reason, he was a little bit pleased at her jealousy.

They spent the rest of the journey talking of friends they both knew and where they lived now.

When they arrived home, Lyle met the party and reported to Rainier about the day. As Rebecca listened to the two men, she saw Harry outside the stable, the leg of a gelding between his knees as he was cleaning the hoof. He was whistling, obviously more content in the stables and fresh air than in the kitchen.

She saw the children playing in the field, enjoying the last rays of the sun. Mentally, she named each child and matched them with their parents. There were a few she could not recall their names, and a few she could not recall at all, but she knew she would eventually remember them.

She looked off to the west where the fields of wheat and oats were. She could see Royce cutting the wheat stalks down on his own, and next to his field she saw Matthew's field, Deron and Frederick busy bundling stalks of wheat.

She smiled. Matthew was getting his field harvested.

Tad was watching from the corner of the building. Marcus told him to stay out of sight when Lady Rebecca was around. But he liked to watch her. She smiled a lot. She

made him think of his mother and he wonder if she had smiled a lot too.

Tad was waiting for Marcus to return. The sun was setting and it was time to return home.

Tad looked at Lady Rebecca and watched her look all around. He moved closer behind the building when she looked in his direction. Eventually she returned to the keep.

Tad looked at the keep, then at his home he shared with Marcus. Marcus would take care of him. He always did.

Marcus knew best.

Chapter 15

Rebecca was heading toward the courtyard when Nathan entered the hall, a pouch in his hand.

“A message arrived for Rainier.”

Rebecca stopped and turned toward the hallway under the stairs. “I think he went to the armory room.”

Nathan nodded and hurried down the hallway.

Rebecca watched Nathan disappear, wondering who sent Rainier a message when she heard Agnes’ irritated voice from the kitchen. She decided what she had planned in the courtyard could wait. She turned and headed toward the kitchen.

Agnes was indeed irritated. With a large spoon in her hand, she was waving it around as she threatened some unseen person.

“Agnes?”

Agnes abruptly stopped in mid sentence and turned around, the blush on her face rising at her embarrassment at being caught.

“Aye, milady. Can I get ya something?”

“No. I just wanted to make sure you were fine.”

She gave a snort, then placed her hands on her hips. “I

am not the one ya should be asking.”

“Oh?”

“Aye.” She pointed her large spoon at the end of the table where four cooked pies were placed. “Ya see that?”

Rebecca walked over to inspect the pies. She slightly bent and took a deep breath. “Ah, meat pies. They look delicious.”

“There were six of ‘em.”

She saw the space where two more pies could have been sitting. “Seems someone else appreciates your cooking too.”

“My boys know better. I have told ‘em this is no longer their place to grab and take as they please.”

Rebecca stood up. “But it is their place.”

Agnes looked from the pies to Rebecca.

Rebecca gestured to the pies. “What is the difference if they eat the pies now, or later? They will eventually eat them, right?”

“Well, I guess,” Agnes reluctantly confessed. “But they need to learn. Tom and me taught ‘em better manners.”

“I am sure you and Tom will sort this out. But for now, do not worry. At least they did not go to waste.”

Agnes gave another snort. “Food in my family never gets that far.”

Rebecca looked around, remembering helping in Uncle Gerald’s kitchen with the cook. “When I was younger, there was a recipe the cook let me help with. We never could keep enough for the men.” Rebecca looked around. “I think I remember seeing a basket of apples the day before.”

“Are ya wanting to make apple tarts?”

“Yes, but a little differently.”

Agnes placed her spoon on the table, then turned and headed into the pantry. “I saw the apples in here.”

Rebecca smiled. Agnes momentarily forgot about the missing meat pies.

Mission accomplished!

Rainier was searching again for his wife. He was to leave soon and wanted to see her before he left.

"Rebecca?" he called out as he walked toward the doors leading to the courtyard. "Rebecca?"

"Did you call me?"

He turned to see his wife walking toward him from the kitchen area. He wondered if she was aware that she was covered with flour. She had flour in her hair and on her tunic, not to mention smudges on her cheek and above one eye.

He waited until she was standing in front of him looking up with a puzzled expression in her beautiful brown eyes. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. She smelled of freshly baked bread. Her image and fresh baked bread would forever be linked together.

He was getting addled in the head, for sure. "What were you doing?"

"There was a special recipe I wanted Agnes to make." She arched one brow at him, the one with the flour above it. "I think you will especially enjoy it."

"And why is that, wife?" He noticed the twinkle in her eyes.

She closed the gap between them, putting her arms around his waist as she looked up. "You will have to taste it first, husband."

He gave a deep sigh.

Rebecca felt it from his body to hers. When she entered the hall, she knew something was wrong. Rainier was dressed for traveling, yet he had mentioned nothing while they ate their morning meal. She wondered if this had anything to do with the message.

“Is something wrong?”

He let her arms run through his hands as she pulled away. “I have to leave immediately. King Henry sent word that a problem is developing with some marauders on the edge of Roger’s land.”

“Are you meeting Roger?”

Rainier nodded his head. “Sinclair is readying the men even now.”

“And how long will you be gone?”

He touched her cheeks, allowing his fingers to stroke her hair. He loved touching her hair. “A few weeks, maybe more. I will take Sinclair and Ned with me.” He knew she was unaware of the amount of flour on her face, gown and in her hair. But to him, she looked beautiful.

Seeing Sinclair standing in the hall, he gave his wife a quick kiss and headed toward the courtyard.

“Try not to find any trouble while I am away,” he called as he slipped past the door.

Rebecca tapped her foot. As if trouble comes looking for me!

“I am afraid that will not work?”

“Why not?”

“Because it would take too much work.”

Rebecca looked at the drawing on the table before her. She wanted to expand the storehouse to be able to stock more supplies for the winter. Nathan kept shaking his head every time she made a suggestion.

Rebecca leaned over the drawing as she tapped her fingers on the table. “Well, there must be some way to increase the size.”

“Not that I can see.”

Glancing at the drawing again, she pointed to another

room located near the storehouse. "How about that room?"

Nathan shook his head again. "That will not work either."

"What will not work?"

Nathan looked up as Miles walked into the room. "She wants to expand the storehouse."

"We need the room," Rebecca explained as Miles leaned over the table to see the plans. She was somehow not surprised when Miles also shook his head.

"It will not work," he echoed Nathan's words.

"Well, we need to do something."

"You should have heard her other idea."

Miles looked up at Nathan. "What idea?"

"Nathan—!"

Nathan ignored Rebecca's warning tone. "She wanted to build a bridge."

"A bridge?"

Nathan smiled as he nodded his head.

"Where?"

"Nathan—!"

"Through the east wall."

Miles' eyes widened. "What is wrong with the bridge we have?"

"Nothing."

"Then why replace it?"

"Nathan—!"

"She did not want to replace it. She wanted another one."

"NATHAN—!"

"Another what?" Duncan asked as he walked into the room. All three turned around at his approach.

"Another bridge."

Duncan looked at Miles. "What is wrong with the one we have."

"She thought we should have another one."

Duncan looked at Rebecca. "Another one? Why?"

"I was just—"

"To make it easier to get across the field."

Rebecca turned a murderous glare at Nathan. About to tell him what she thought of his rude behavior, Miles forestalled her by asking another question.

"Have you talked to Rainier about this?"

"I was just thinking out loud," she defended herself as she looked back at the plans on the table, trying to discretely change the subject.

"Thinking out loud about what?" Lyle asked as he also approached the table. Nobody heard the groan from Rebecca as all three men began to explain.

"She wanted to build more bridges..."

"Bridges?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Through the east wall."

"The east wall? But we already have a bridge. What is wrong with it?"

"Nothing. She just wanted another one."

"Another one? Why?"

"To make it easier to cross over."

Four men turned around when Rebecca rose from the bench, deliberately scrapping the legs on the stone floor. Two of them wisely stepped back when they saw the expression on her face.

"It seemed like a reasonable idea," she forced between clenched teeth.

The four men looked at each other. "That explains why we never thought of it," Nathan thought out loud.

When the men suddenly burst out in laughter, Rebecca decided it was time to leave the men to themselves. "If you will excuse me."

Rebecca went where she knew she was needed. For the

next hour, she tended to her herb garden, weeding out the few weeds that attempted to grow among her precious plants.

“Oh, you are here,” James said as he came around the corner. “I was thinking of bringing some water for the plants. I know how heavy the buckets can get.”

“That will be fine, James. These are doing so well, I can hardly believe it.”

“They are growing nicely.”

“Within a few weeks, we will be able to pick some of the herbs to begin drying.”

With a smile on her face, she headed back toward the hall. The sound of men laughing made her grit her teeth together, especially when she heard Nathan reply:

“Why not just put up a banner that reads: ‘For your raiding convenience, please use other bridge.’”

Chapter 16

Nathan watched four days later as the lone knight approached. He could see no army behind him or beyond in the forest. Still, one never knew. Kensington was still in his charge until Rainier returned. He silently waited.

Nathan signaled another guard to take his place as he descended the wall to meet the newcomer. As the knight rode through the gates, Nathan gave a signal. The knight halted as he looked around.

“I am Kyle Davitan, brother to Lady Rebecca Hughes. I wish to see my sister.”

Brother? How much trouble could one brother cause?

Rebecca was in her garden when Ruth approached, telling of a single rider entering Kensington.

“Is he a traveling musician?” she asked as she pulled at another weed. The herbs were coming along fine. With James’ help, they were able to collect quite a bit since clearing the weeds out. The sun was hitting the garden just right. Rainier’s mother surely knew what she was doing.

“I am not sure. Nathan asked if you would come to the gate, immediately,” she added the last word as an afterthought.

Rebecca stopped again and looked up at the servant.

"All right." She rose from the garden, wiping her hands and gown to remove as much of the loose dirt as possible. If Nathan felt the matter was that important, she was sure she had no time to clean herself and change.

Nathan watched as she made her way across the courtyard, brushing the dirt off her gown. He saw her look up, surprise in her eyes.

"Kyle?" she asked excitedly as she ran toward man.

Nathan did not need to ask if the man was who he claimed to be. It was evident on her face.

Kyle had barely dismounted and turned toward her when she threw herself at him.

Kyle was a big man, taller and heavier than Rainier. He had no trouble catching her as she sailed through the air into his arms. It was like the years had melted between them, him protecting his little sister from any harm.

Rebecca looked into eyes that were an exact copy of her own. Kyle was her anchor in a troubled sea almost three years ago. He was a rock when she felt thrown about. He was family.

"Kyle, where have you been? What are you doing? How did you find me? How long are you staying?"

"Slow down, sis, slow down." He was openly laughing at her now. "Let me just look at you." He held her back, inspecting her from head to toe. "I hear congratulations are in order."

"You heard right. I am married now for over three months. Also cousin Ailene for the same time. Have you seen her yet?"

"No. I only just heard about you from a priest in Gloucester while I was passing through. He had a rather interesting story to tell." He watched as a slight blush covered her neck and face.

"I am sure that as a priest, he would not divulge

information that would be considered gossip.” She had turned toward the steps, pulling Kyle along.

“Of course not.” Kyle was still laughing.

He looked at her closely, looking for any signs of misuse or abuse. Marriage or not, he would not allow Rebecca to be harmed again.

He was here to satisfy himself about her welfare.

Kyle had been with Rebecca for the past week, walking with her, and playing chess with her and her men.

As he looked around, he could see Rebecca's handiwork everywhere.

The sun was setting and they had finished their evening meal. He followed her to her garden and helped when she began to pull weeds.

“Your garden is, very nice,” Kyle complimented as he looked around.

Rebecca smiled. “Thank you.”

He pulled another few weeds that were trying to take root. “I must say, this is the first time I can remember when your garden,” he paused, looking for the right word.

“Did not die?” she finished.

Kyle looked like he had been caught in a lie. “Well, usually your gardens do not thrive as this one is doing.”

Rebecca was still smiling as she pinched off a few dead leaves. “In truth, this one was not doing so well when I first started. But, it finally began to respond to my care.”

Kyle looked up when he heard someone running towards them. A young boy came around the corner, then stopped suddenly when he saw them.

“Milady, I, uh, I did not know, uh” he looked from one to the other, “you would, uh, be here,” his words stumbled out.

“James, do not worry. This is my brother Kyle.” Rebecca moved to another patch of garden. “James has been helping me with the garden when he can.”

Kyle looked up at the young lad, his eyes narrowing as he looked from the boy to the garden to his sister to the boy again. He noticed the boy watching what Rebecca was doing, almost calculating how to fix it later.

He immediately knew James was the reason for the garden thriving like it was. He wondered if Rebecca’s husband was somehow responsible for sending him.

He had to smile. She finally got a garden to grow!

“I guess you, uh, do not need me,” James eventually acknowledged.

“Thank you, James.” She looked up. “I will see you tomorrow?”

James nodded his head, again looking at what was being done. “Good night.”

Kyle watched as the boy reluctantly left.

“He has been a great help,” Rebecca confessed as she gathered her small pile of weeds, then looked at the results.

Kyle leaned his back against the garden wall, watching his sister. The daylight was fading, people were returning to their homes.

“Rebecca, have you been practicing?” he asked in a whisper.

Rebecca paused as she looked down at the pile of weeds. “Rainier is very protective. He will not allow me out of the keep without a guard present.”

“That is wise of him. You never know what kind of people you will meet out there.”

She rolled her eyes, remembering a few months ago. “Oh, I can imagine.”

Kyle briefly narrowed his eyes. “When did you meet Rainier?”

He watched as Rebecca hesitated, knowing she was

deciding how much to tell him. He already knew about the King's order of marriage. But that was all. He wanted to know it all.

Rebecca looked around, noticing the silence surrounding them, then sat facing him. "He was traveling with Gaylon when Ailene and I met him."

After some coaxing, she finally explained about her and Ailene running away, and how Gaylon and Rainier had rescued them. When she noticed Kyle's frown, she tried to intercept the lecture she was sure was to follow.

"I used the techniques you showed me and they worked, to a point. Rainier was rather difficult to control at the time."

"You should count yourself lucky. If he were anyone else, you would probably be in more serious trouble than you had been." He shook his head. "Lord, what possessed you and Ailene to do a dumb thing like that?"

"Kyle, please."

Kyle kept silent. He realized now why the guards were so protective of her. Rainier was probably afraid of her going out with some half-baked scheme again without thinking. And knowing Rebecca as he did, she would if she felt the need to. For a woman as giving as his sister, many times she let her heart rule her actions instead of thinking them through. Which was why she got into so much trouble.

Which was why he had to make sure she was able to protect herself.

He would talk to the guards about her training. Maybe Nathan would allow it.

Nathan would not.
At least, not at first.

Nathan observed Rebecca as she limped toward the table at mealtime, obviously sore all over from the tumbles on the stone floor in her room. But she never complained.

So Nathan allowed the training outside, but there was little room to practice where they were unobserved, for she did not want anyone to know what she was doing. This was between her and Kyle, and now Nathan. Nathan thought it rather meaningless. Every man around recognized the signs and soreness of training.

Nathan was aware that Kyle was known among the men even though he never overly talked about his accomplishments. When he first arrived, many of the men whispered among themselves, recalling the feats of this man.

Kyle had been in battle while still a young squire, coming to the rescue of his lord when he was severely wounded. Kyle had taken the heavy sword laying next to his lord and used it to protect him until his knights returned. He also had been one of the youngest knights at the tournaments years ago and was practically undefeated in the events he partook in. Kyle had been awarded a grand stallion, a saddle, and golden spurs from the King himself. That he was capable of protecting his sister, Nathan had no doubt.

So Nathan finally allowed the two to go toward the forest where there was a small clearing. There he allowed brother and sister to train privately.

Just her and Kyle and Nathan.

And ten other guards.

The men were wanting out of their guard duty.

Every afternoon, Kyle and Rebecca would ride out to the forest where the men had checked to make sure no one

was around. The men had developed a new respect for their mistress. She was trying to learn to defend herself. Those who had wives and daughters were thinking that maybe they should also learn some techniques.

She was getting better, the men agreed among themselves. She almost never limped anymore. And each time they returned, she had a bigger smile on her face, one that said she was more confident with herself, that she was better than the day before.

But after the first few days in the forest, the men were asking to be assigned to another duty. When Nathan asked the men why, they looked around, embarrassed. Duncan finally explained.

“You should see the beating she takes during this training.” He ran his hand through his hair, causing the strands to stand upright. “I am not sure we train with as much intensity as she does.”

Nathan looked at Duncan with alarm. “He does not harm her, does he?”

“No, no,” Duncan quickly reassured Nathan. “He uses enough strength to fell a tree, but he always cushions her fall at the last moment. No matter how rough he is with her, he always makes sure she is not injured too much.”

Nathan looked confused. “Then why do the men want out of guard duty?”

Duncan looked more uncomfortable, if possible. “’Tis rather embarrassing to watch as he pushes her so hard in her training and know there is nothing for us to do.”

Nathan was beginning to understand.

Duncan continued. “I know it sounds crazy, but it almost seems like a private matter, like we should not be there witnessing it.”

Nathan nodded his head, he understood.

So he ordered the men to go out a few miles in each direction to make sure the area was secure. He decided to

Secrets

give brother and sister some private time alone.

He only hoped Rainier would understand if he ever found out.

Chapter 17

Rainier's heart almost stopped when he saw them.

He had come home a few days early, eager to see Kensington and Rebecca. He had honestly admitted to himself that she was fast becoming very important to him. At night, he would dream about her, running from one person in need to another. He was even wondering how her garden was doing!

He shook his head to clear it. He was sounding like a love struck lad still wet behind the ears. God, how he hated it when men continually talked and thought about a woman. And here he was, doing just that.

He crested the rise and saw Kensington nestled well within the valley. It seemed so peaceful now.

Descending the hill with his men, he heard the faint sound in the distance. Curious, he signaled his men for quiet.

He heard it again.

Rainier knew the sound, as did his men. He absently noticed his men from the corner of his eye, their swords silently sliding out of their scabbards to lay quietly across their laps as they made their way toward the sound. Rainier

was wondering who would dare to attack someone on his land this close to the keep. Word had already spread about what happened to the men that had attacked Simon.

Someone was very desperate.

He came to what he remembered to be a clearing. Signaling his men to dismount and circle the clearing, Rainier slowly made his way toward the sounds, Ned beside him.

Mentally he noticed where each of his men was positioned.

In the middle of the clearing he saw two people engaged in battle, neither that he recognized. One was a small giant, the other was simply small.

The smaller one had on chain mail covering his upper body, arms and head. The giant was dressed more casually, a sleeveless tunic with no protective clothing at all. It appeared the giant was having fun with the smaller one.

Even though they heard swords when they first came over the ridge, the two before him each had a staff. He noticed the swords a short distance from both of them.

They were circling each other, the giant taunting the smaller one. Rainier knew what he was about. When your opponent was angry, he no longer fought with discipline. One made more mistakes when discipline was gone, something he was constantly teaching his men.

He watched as the smaller one thrust out his staff, trying to find an opening to knock his opponent down. Rainier had to admit that what the smaller one lacked in size and strength, he made up for in cunning, nimbleness and speed. He was impressed.

As he was directing Sinclair to close the gap, the smaller one lost his staff. One moment the smaller one was without weapons, then suddenly he held a small dagger in his hand.

"Where did that come from?" Sinclair whispered, as

surprised as Rainier was about the speed of the little one.

“I never even saw it on him.” Rainier was thinking that maybe the match was not so uneven after all. Anyone who could move that fast would be able to protect himself.

Then Rainier heard it.

The larger one lunged forward, attempting to disarm the smaller one, when the smaller one quickly ducked toward the right. As he made a dash for the swords, the smaller one gave a cry.

Rainier's heart seemed to stop along with his breathing as his lungs suddenly filled with a gasp of air. He felt the blood leave his face. He knew that cry. But it could not be. He eased back down again, watching with renewed interest.

Yes, the smaller one was the size of Rebecca, and if he watched closely he could slightly see womanly curves beneath the chain mail. They were too far away to see faces, but he could almost see strands of her brown hair escaping from the mail covering her head. But who would the giant be?

And what was his wife doing in the middle of the clearing in the first place? Where were Nathan and his men?

The giant suddenly leaped toward Rebecca again, for he was sure it was her. She had managed to get her hand again on a sword, sheathing the dagger on her belt. Now that he was looking, he saw where she kept it.

Rainier knew he had to act quickly, yet quietly. He did not want the giant to realize his audience until Rainier had the upper hand.

He signaled to his men again, quietly closing the circle.

Kyle was watching Rebecca move around the clearing. She was still light on her feet, still agile as a cat. But he wanted to test her further, test her limits.

Her strongest area would be with the staff and the dagger, both being lighter and more maneuverable for her.

He demonstrated how to hold the sword and be ready for a blow from any direction. He parried with her, stopping every now and then to show her a stance, or how to move the heavy sword to her advantage.

Rebecca was starting to breathe heavier as she swung the heavy sword. She kept watching Kyle, noticing his moves, trying to copy them. He kept encouraging her when she did something right, correcting her when she did something wrong. The past few days, the encouragements were far outweighing the corrections. That made her smile. Then Kyle landed a blow with his sword that made her arms hurt.

He noticed her distraction and took advantage of it.

Correction time!

When the sword became too heavy, she dropped it and quickly ran to get the staff.

Kyle noticed she had a good eye for working with the staff. When she wanted to hit something, she usually did. And she was learning how to be quick, how to fake your opponent, and how to cause damage, if needed. She was still having trouble showing what she was thinking with her eyes, though, giving away her moves. He decided their next training would focus on that.

Time to see if he could get her to lose her composure. He started out with small taunts.

“Maybe you need a larger target—” He jumped back as her staff came swinging by, “like a wagon,” he added.

While she was trying her best to trip him, she failed to notice his sideways swing, which caused the staff to fly from her hands. Automatically, her hand went to her dagger.

This was the one area she had practiced the most, till it became automatic, without thought. Kyle had stressed that point countless times. “Seconds could make the difference,” he would often repeat to her.

With her dagger out, she circled her brother,

wondering where she would strike, if she could, if it were anyone but Kyle. She had yet to pin Kyle down, but she was optimistic. There was always a first time.

Kyle was having no problem keeping up with her as she changed from one weapon to another. He was pleased that she had obviously practiced with the dagger he gave her two years ago. Her movements were fluid, graceful, and quick.

He could tell by her stance that her arms were rested and was not surprised when she made a dash for the swords again. She was determined to be better with that particular weapon. Why, he could not imagine.

Kyle became instantly aware when they were no longer alone in the clearing. He knew it was not Nathan and his men. They would not approach with such stealth, keeping in hiding.

While keeping Rebecca busy with the swordplay, he glanced around quickly, noticing movement just beyond the clearing. They were cautiously closing in.

Kyle was thinking quickly of the best move to make. He knew Nathan's men had checked the area fully and that most people knew whose land this was. He had to decide how to best protect Rebecca first, then deal with the men later.

He purposely swung his sword with enough force that Rebecca was forced backwards. He needed to get her out of the way without letting the intruders know he was aware of them. Neither noticed the exposed tree root. When she tripped as she backed up, he instinctively reached out to her.

Kyle broke into a cold sweat when he felt the tip of a sword blade pressed against the back of his neck.

"I believe I will relieve you of your partner."

Kyle turned to face the voice, noticing a smaller man than himself. Wide shoulders and cold hazel eyes stared back. This man was use to people obeying when he spoke.

Trying to keep Rebecca behind him, Kyle noticed the men circling them and silently cursed himself again for letting this happen. Alone, he could handle most of these men, but he had to protect Rebecca first. That was going to hinder him.

He felt Rebecca as she moved behind him and swiftly stepped in front of her. For some reason, that angered the man before him more.

"I will not ask again!"

Rebecca recognized the raw anger in her husband's voice, recognized the alert stance of her brother. These two men were sizing each other up. *'Please do not let them kill each other,'* she silently prayed.

"Please!" she cried out loud.

Kyle heard the fear in his sister's voice, fear of what would happen if he failed to protect her.

Rainier heard her plea for him to rescue and protect her from this giant.

Then she did what Rainier least expected.

She forced Kyle aside, then quickly stood in front of him. But before she could speak, Kyle grabbed her.

She was behind him, again.

Rebecca had had enough. "Kyle, will you please step aside before *my husband* kills you, and Rainier, will you please lower your sword before *my brother* does the same?"

Both men held each other's gaze for another moment.

Kyle quickly thought of what Rebecca's husband must have seen and realized what he was thinking.

He stepped forward, offering his hand. "Kyle Davitan."

Rainier was slower in responding, which Kyle expected. The hand that eventually clasped his had strength behind it.

"Rainier Hughes, Rebecca's husband," he finally responded.

Rainier was still angry at what he thought was happening. He faced Rebecca's brother, his hand still

clasped in a firm handshake. He had not known of a brother.

His men were starting to shuffle around.

“Sinclair, take the men back to the keep.”

Kyle hesitated, knowing that now was not the best time to speak. But he did not want to leave Rebecca without knowing she was going to be fine.

He stepped in front of Rainier, demanding his attention.

He got it.

Hard hazel eyes stared up at him. A lesser man would have cowered away. “She was never in danger, Lord Hughes. Never.”

As Rainier looked Kyle over, he could almost believe he meant what he said. Rainier honestly admitted to himself that he would have had a hard time bringing this man down.

He watched Rebecca peek around her brother's right side. Looking at them together, he could see the resemblance. Their eyes were exact copies of each other. But while hers were clouded in concern and confusion, his were open and direct.

Kyle continued when Rainier remained silent. “Two years past, I started this at our uncle's estate. I wanted Rebecca to be able to defend herself, so I trained her myself. At no time was she in any danger from any of the weapons.”

In the midst of Rainier's anger and confusion, he remembered his first meeting with Rebecca. “You are responsible for her skills?” he finally spoke.

“Yes.”

Rainier looked at his wife again, whose face was almost white with fear.

Kyle saw the anger leave Rainier's eyes. He turned toward his sister, kissed her on the forehead, then turned

and walked away. He was sure Rainier wanted to talk with Rebecca alone.

He would, if it had been his wife.

Sinclair and Nathan stood on the wall side by side, watching the people in the courtyard and fields milling about. Two hours later, Sinclair nudged Nathan in the ribs. Following his gaze, Nathan spotted the two riders.

“I really do not like to admit it,” Nathan spoke as he continued to watch the two riders approach, “but I am glad Rainier is back.”

Sinclair turned to his friend. “Oh?”

Nathan gave a heavy sigh. “Have you ever noticed that watching over Lady Rebecca is like—” Nathan paused, looking for the right words.

“Trying to hold water in your hand,” Sinclair finished for him.

Nathan nodded his head. “Yea. Despite your best efforts to close your fingers as tightly as possible, the water still managed to escape.”

Kyle left three days later.

“But you just got here,” Rebecca complained when he informed her as he shared the morning meal with her.

“I have been here for over two weeks. I have commitments I must take care of.” He reached for her hands across the table, rubbing her knuckles.

“I was just hoping it would not be until much later.”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “I gather Rainier does not know about Quintin yet.”

Rebecca darted a quick glance toward the courtyard.

Kyle took a deep breath, her reaction silently answering his question. “Rebecca, I do not want to tell you how to run your life, but you really should not keep this from him.”

"I know, Kyle. But there is a part of me that is afraid to tell him." She slowly looked up. "I almost told him on the day of our marriage."

"Why did not you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I did not really know him then."

"So why have you not told him now?"

Rebecca slowly pulled her hands free of his grasp, placing them in her lap. "'Tis just that Rainier is so different from Quintin. I do not want him looking at me with horror once he learns of it."

"He is a soldier. He would understand, believe me."

Rebecca refused to look up.

"Would you rather he heard it from someone who would twist the truth?"

Rebecca's head snapped up. "Who would possibly tell him?"

"I know not. But the truth has a way of sneaking around until found."

Rebecca nodded her head as she looked down at her hands again.

"Do you trust him, Rebecca?"

After a short pause, Rebecca looked into her brother's eyes. "Yes, I do."

"Then tell him before he learns it from someone else."

Knowing that the final decision was hers to make, Kyle rose and went out to the courtyard. Rainier was already there talking with Lyle as Harry led Kyle's horse from the stable into the courtyard.

After checking everything, he spoke a few words to Rainier, then grasped his brother-in-law's hand in a firm shake.

Kyle then turned again toward Rebecca. She walked the few feet to him.

"I will miss you, squirt."

She felt the mist of tears behind her eyes. He had not called her that since they were at home. "And I will miss you too."

"Promise that you will consider my words," he whispered as he leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"I promise."

With a final hug and a kiss on her forehead, Kyle mounted his horse.

"Kensington's gates are always open to you," Rainier called out.

Rebecca stood at the open gate and watched as her brother left, knowing he could not stay forever. As he finally disappeared from sight, she decided to check on Matthew.

Tessa had Matthew's leg elevated on a pillow.

"He feels better with his leg up," Tessa said.

Rebecca looked at Matthew. "You look comfortable," she observed.

"Leg itches something fierce," he replied.

"That is good. It means the blood is flowing."

Matthew grunted, obviously not sure if that was true. Tessa smiled, pleased that her husband was on the mend.

"And how are your workers doing?"

"They are doing fine. They are both hard workers."

Rebecca glanced outside. She was not sure if they were working hard because of their character, or because of what Rainier might have told them before they were delivered here.

"I am glad they are working out. Do you have enough extra food for them?"

"Oh, we have plenty. And thank you for giving us the extra."

"Well, two grown men can eat quite a lot, especially when they are working hard."

"Gives them no reason to steal my mutton," Matthew called out.

Rebecca turned toward Matthew. "They stole your mutton?"

"They did not steal it," Tessa corrected as she made sure Matthew was comfortable. "They work hard, and they get hungry."

"They can wait for mealtime, just like us," Matthew snapped back.

"They know they eat with us. If they see the food, they have no reason not to take it."

"But I was looking forward to that mutton this evening!"

"I will make you another one tomorrow. Lady Rebecca has generously given us plenty of food."

"If you need more—" Rebecca started.

"Oh, no. We are just not used to the food disappearing like it has been lately. Our little ones eat very little, and like you said, grown men can eat a lot. I already made some stew."

"Well, I am glad the men are able to help you," Rebecca tactfully changed the subject. Please let me know if you need anything."

"I will. And thank you again."

Rebecca said good-bye and headed outside.

Royce was just coming in from his field.

"Good evening milady," he greeted.

"Good evening, Royce. And how is your field doing?"

Royce turned around and looked at his field and the remaining wheat that still needed to be harvested. "Sometimes, I think the field gets bigger each year."

Rebecca understood. Almost all the other families had other family members to help, children in particular. Royce was alone.

Rebecca turned when Deron and Frederick approached the cottage.

"Lady Rebecca," Deron greeted her.

“Hello Deron, Frederick. How are you faring?”

The men looked at each other, then back at her. “Quite well. I forgot how much I enjoyed working the land,” Deron replied.

“Your father was a farmer?” she asked.

“I spent many years helping him gather the barley.”

“No wonder you seem so at ease with the tools. And you Frederick. Did you grow up on a farm also?”

Frederick smiled. “My father’s farm was next to Deron’s.”

Rebecca looked at the two men. “Childhood friends. So you grew up together.”

Deron made a face. “In more ways than one.” He shuffled his feet a few times. “I wanted to apologize again for what we did to that merchant. My father would have tanned my hide if he knew what I did.”

Rebecca smiled. “Apology accepted. I think Tessa has your dinner ready inside.”

Frederick’s face perked up. “Good. I am starving.”

Rebecca watched as both men wiped their hands before heading inside. She shook her head wondering where the men put the food.

First a whole mutton, and now stew.”

Chapter 18

Miles and Lyle were at their wits end.

It all started with the message Rainier received that morning, informing him that Aunt Katie was coming for a visit, which always lasted for two or three months. Rainier was pleased that his only aunt was finally coming to visit. It had been too long since her last visit and he was glad that she would finally meet Rebecca.

Learning of their visitor, Rebecca wasted no time. She planned what room would be best for her, what furniture would be need, and then proceeded to gather enough servants to thoroughly clean the room.

Rainier decided to head where it was safer. He and Sinclair quickly left for the training field.

He returned a few hours later to find her in a downstairs room.

“What are you doing?”

“Planning on where to move this furniture to make this room more appealing.”

Rainier folded his arms across his chest, then leaned his shoulder against the wall, his legs crossed at the ankles.

“The furniture is far too heavy.” He looked around the

room. "Why do you want to move it, anyway?"

"You told me that your aunt is getting up in years, and that she has trouble walking sometimes. I thought we would put her on the ground floor in this room."

She turned to look out the window for a moment. "It has such a nice view, and the morning sun is beautiful to watch as it climbs the sky."

Rainier looked out the window from where he stood. He was trying to remember the last time he laid in bed and watched the sun as it slowly climbed upward. He was usually already up and in the field, hard at work with his men, or doing some other task that needed to be done by the time the sun made its early appearance.

Rebecca turned back to Rainier. "If we organize this room just right, she would not have to leave it very often, except when she wanted to. She would be more self-sufficient."

As she looked around the room, he could see her envisioning where all the furniture would be to make Aunt Katie most comfortable.

He had to admit he could see her logic, and Rebecca was probably right. Aunt Katie would appreciate and enjoy the room as Rebecca described it.

But he did not want her moving the furniture by herself. So he assigned Miles and Lyle to help.

As the two men went through the hall heading for Aunt Katie's new room, thinking they were practically getting a day off, he had no idea that the smiles on their faces would be the last he would see on them for a long time.

With two strong men now helping, Rebecca was trying to make the room as cheerful as possible.

The problem was the bed. It was so big that it dominated the whole room. She was determined to make the room a combination sitting room, dining room, bedroom, and parlor.

She had Miles and Lyle move the bed over toward the north wall, placing the writing table and chair against the west wall. The chest for clothing was positioned under the window against the east wall, putting the lounging chairs closer to the south wall. That was all fine, except the wardrobe would fit nowhere.

So she had the men move the bed under the window, the wardrobe against the south wall, chair and writing table against the west wall, and the chest against the north. Now that left no room for the lounge chairs.

She moved the furniture again and again.

The room, unfortunately, was long and narrow, with two walls almost useless because of the door in the middle of one and a window in the middle of the other. With the bed positioned long ways, it left little room against either of the long walls and she was determined to fit the chairs in. She wanted Rainier's Aunt Katie to be able to have people sit comfortably with her anytime that she wanted. That meant that she needed to have the chairs.

Miles and Lyle were tired and sore. It would have been far easier to stay on the field and let the men use them for target practice than to move this heavy furniture around.

But Lady Rebecca would not leave the furniture alone. Every time they moved it, she found a reason why it would not work. So the furniture was shuffled around again, and again, and again, each piece going someplace else.

They would never have imagined there were so many different ways to fix a room. To them, it did not matter where the bed was.

They had been moving the same furniture around for close to three hours when suddenly Rebecca's face lit up.

"I have it!" she exclaimed as she clasped her hands together.

Miles and Lyle looked at each other, both rolling their eyes upward. How many times had they heard *that* in the

last few hours?

“All we have to do is put the chest next to the door and leave the bed against that wall. That will give the chairs plenty of room for when she has guests.”

As she spoke, she was directing the men to move the chest. “That chest, though, is really too big for that wall,” she observed.

Miles was wondering if she was going to have them take it apart, cut it down to size, and then reassemble it, just so it would fit properly.

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “Why not just move the chest out of the room. The wardrobe should be plenty big enough for her.” Her gaze swept toward the wardrobe, noticing the huge size of it for the first time. “Why did not we think of it before?”

She smiled at that. As the men removed the chest, the room obviously pleased her.

Finally! the men thought.

As Rainier entered the room, he noticed how pleased his wife looked.

“How is it going?”

Rebecca looked up as he entered the room, both Miles and Lyle stepping aside. She smiled, opening her arms wide as she turned in a wide circle. “How do you like it?” she asked with excitement dancing in her eyes.

Rainier looked around, frowned, then looked around again. He was not sure but the room looked very much like it did when he left hours ago. Had she decided not to rearrange the room after all?

He looked at his wife and yes, she seemed pleased with her work.

He looked at his men.

They looked like they had been in a battle for two days.

If the three of them did not have so much dirt, sweat, and dust on them, he would have wondered if they had

done any work at all.

Deciding to please his wife, he smiled and assured her that the room would be just perfect for Aunt Katie.

Both Miles and Lyle groaned when the message came the next day informing Rainier that Aunt Katie had unexpected guests that would probably stay for some duration, and would it be all right to postpone her trip until later in the year.

Company did come in another form, a week later.

Roger and Cinthia were on their way to Tewkesbury where a small gaming tournament was being held at a friend of both Roger and Rainier. Cinthia was excited about being out again, checking out the latest fashions and renewing distant friendships.

“It will not be a full tournament,” Roger explained. “Not with King Henry’s orders. But the games will be challenging, and only a few families have been invited. Why not come with us?” Roger was looking between Rainier and Rebecca.

Rainier seemed to be considering it. His men had trained hard and it was time that Rebecca had some time outside of Kensington.

Rebecca, however, was the hesitant one. “There would not be enough time to pack what would be needed.”

Cinthia walked back in the room, a squirming Robert in her arms. “I already have much packed for the both of us.”

Roger tilted his head toward Rainier, as if confiding a royal secret. “We were hoping you would join us.”

“But still,” Rebecca started, only to be interrupted by Cinthia.

“We have a few days before we would have to leave. I would be happy to help you get ready.”

Rainier glanced around the hall at the expectant faces of his men. There was no doubt by their expressions that they wanted to go.

He looked back at Rebecca, judging her reaction. The trip would create much work for her. But she was already talking with Cinthia about what would be needed that they could bring.

Cinthia obviously concluded that they were coming.

“We could start packing the tents and clothes today.” As both women started to leave the room, Roger started laughing.

“My Cinthia does not take no for an answer when she wants something.”

“In that, I think our wives have much in common.”

Each man smiled to the other, each thinking of his own wife.

“Then to Tewkesbury we go.” Rainier raised his mug and as one, all the men in the hall raised their cups and drank their ale.

As the women were deciding what to pack, the rain that was threatening all week finally decided to fall.

“I am glad it finally rained,” Cinthia commented as she helped Rebecca finish folding the sheets and towels they would take. “We have needed it desperately.”

Rebecca looked out the window to the newly harvested fields just outside the wall.

“It appears the villagers got their fields harvested just in time,” she observed, thinking of Royce and Matthew. “I always loved the smell of rain.”

“Looks like it will rain for a good two or three days.”

Rebecca frowned. “That will slow the wagons.”

“Why do you suppose we arrived so early? The tournament is not for another seventeen days.”

Rebecca gasped. “Seventeen days?”

Cinthia was nodding her head as young Robert came

bolting through the door.

“Mommy,” he cried.

“Not now, dear,” Cinthia answered as she headed for Rebecca's wardrobe.

“Seventeen days,” Rebecca repeated to herself as she followed Cinthia and opened her wardrobe. She looked at her gowns as they were being separated, Cinthia absently choosing the ones to pack.

“Now I wish Simon was back with that material he promised,” Rebecca thought out loud as she looked closely at her gowns.

“Mommy...”

“Who is Simon?” Cinthia asked as she discarded Rebecca's pale green gown, with Robert pulling on her gown from behind.

“A merchant who was badly injured when attacked awhile back. He stayed here for almost a month while recovering. When he left, he promised to bring back some material he told me about.”

“Mommy. Mommy!”

“I wanted to make Rainier a new tunic with a matching surcoat for me,” Rebecca continued. “The color he described sounded so beautiful, I asked him to bring me some when he was back this way again.”

“Mommy!”

“Is your needlework good?” Cinthia asked.

“More passable than good. My cousin is the skilled one with the needle.” She noticed Cinthia discarding her ruby red gown as well. “But still, it would have been nice to surprise Rainier with the shirt, since we are heading to Tewkesbury.”

“Mommy!”

Cinthia turned to her son. “What, dear?”

Robert pulled on his mother's hand as he gave her a look only a mother could interpret.

Cynthia looked up. "Will you excuse us for a moment?"

"Of course."

As Cynthia and Robert's voices faded down the hallway, Rebecca again went to the window, watching the people outside trying to keep dry.

"Seventeen days!" she whispered.

As they traveled in their caravan, Cynthia was telling Rebecca all about court life and how she was glad to be back with Roger.

"Do not get me wrong," Cynthia started. "Court life is very exciting, being around King Henry and his wife Eleanor, seeing the latest fashions, and seeing people you have not seen in ages. But after awhile, you miss your regular routine of home life."

Cynthia looked ahead at her husband riding beside Rainier. "But most importantly, I missed Roger very much."

Rebecca nodded her head. "I can understand. Rainier leaves every now and then for a week or two at a time. The first few days he is gone, I get more accomplished around the keep without him underfoot. But after a few days, I start to miss him around." Rebecca took a deep breath as she also looked ahead at her husband riding beside Roger. "But I always miss him at night."

"I know what you mean."

Rainier halted the group about a hundred feet from the river. Roger and Rainier were in discussion as the rest of the company took the opportunity to stretch their legs and care for any necessary business while they had stopped.

Little Robert was restless from sitting for so long.

"Down, mommy, down," Robert cried as his small body tried to melt through her hold to the ground below.

Rebecca decided this was the time to make a dash to

the trees herself.

Rainier stood beside Roger as they both watched the river.

“River is swollen and fast.”

Rainier nodded his head in agreement. “‘Tis not very deep, but the current is still too swift and strong for crossing.”

“There are two bridges, one up river and one down.”

Cinthia nudged her husband as she handed over their son. “I will be only a few minutes.” Cinthia hurried toward a clump of trees that Rebecca was just emerging from.

“Where would you suggest we cross?” Rainier asked as Robert squealed in delight when a butterfly landed on his chubby hand.

Roger put his son down in front of him to glance at the map Rainier held.

Neither man noticed the little boy trying in vain to catch the elusive dancing butterfly.

Rebecca’s eyes widened as she realized the boy was headed toward the edge of the river. She intercepted him a few feet from the edge. She meant to gently scold him about playing by the river when he gave her a big smile.

How did you scold one that looked like that?

“Butterfwy,” he kept saying as he turned in her arms, pointing toward the orange and black insect that finally landed on the nearby log, its large wings slowly opening and closing.

She squeezed him in an affectionate hug and started to walk back toward the horses when she felt the earth tremble. She instinctively hugged Robert tighter when she felt the ground start to shift underneath her.

Then she heard a woman scream.

Chapter 19

Rainier's sword was already halfway out as he quickly turned around. Time almost stood still as he watched the bank collapse, pitching both Rebecca and Robert into the freezing river.

Rebecca momentarily lost her breath when she fell into the icy water.

She struggled to hold Robert's head up out of the water with her right arm, keeping her left arm free to grab the first thing she could find, anything!

Rainier helplessly watched from the bank as Rebecca tried to gain her footing, only to have her feet swept out from under her each time. He knew how strong these currents were, especially after heavy rains.

He turned to quickly mount his horse, resheathing his sword as he ran. Any help would have to come from downstream.

But first, he had to get ahead of them.

Rebecca tightened her hold on Robert, who was coughing and spitting up the water he kept swallowing.

She kept trying to get her footing on the river bottom, but each time she would lose it and plunge the both of them

under the water again. Staying afloat seemed to be less taxing on her strength.

She glanced at Robert and noticed his trembling lips were turning blue. The water was so cold that her fingers were fast becoming numb and useless.

How far had they come down river?

As she twisted in the water to look around, she noticed a fallen tree almost a foot above the water. She would have to stretch with everything she had.

She started to move them in line with the tree. She was going to have only one try and it looked like the tree was approaching faster than she could get over there.

Rainier and his horse raced the river, trying to not only catch up with Rebecca and Robert, but to get ahead of them as well. Unfortunately, the vegetation proved to be thick, causing him to lose precious time darting in and out. He could still see them ahead, their two heads bobbing in the river.

He noticed she was slowly getting closer to the bank when he saw what she must have seen ahead of her. He prayed that she saw the log and that she would be able to grab hold. All he needed was a few moments and he could haul them both out to safety.

He needed to be there.

He urged his horse faster.

"Hold on tight," Rebecca shouted.

Robert did not move. Rebecca felt a surge of panic quickly sweep through her again. They were *not* going to die! They *were* going to make it!

"ROBERT!" she shouted when she came up from under the water again. "Hold on tight!" she yelled a second time.

She felt the small arms tighten slightly around her neck.

With forced strength she positioned them just to the right of the log. As the log approached, she used her feet to

push her up, her left hand snaking out toward the log.

When she felt the limb touch her palm, she quickly closed her hand around the branch. She felt her hold slip as the river continued to pull her. With determination, she gritted her teeth and tightened her feeble hold against the current.

Rainier lowered himself on his horse, leaning forward to whisper encouraging words in the horse's ear to get all the speed he could.

When he was close enough, he leaped off the saddle at a full gallop, fell once, but rolled and was on his feet instantly, never stopping.

Every second was vital.

He ran over to the log and reached down for Robert, noticing the weak grip his wife had on the log.

Robert proved to be as dead weight and it took both of his arms to lift the child up from the river. He felt Rebecca give the child a push.

As he grabbed the boy and hoisted him up to himself, he heard Roger behind him. He was just getting ready to turn and hand the boy to Roger when he saw Rebecca lose her grip.

"NO!" Rainier made a quick reach for Rebecca. But he was hampered by the weight of the child, and by then she had already gone too far to reach.

"REBECCA," he shouted as she quickly floated downstream. Handing Robert to his father, he leaped upon his horse, again following the course of the river, and his wife.

Rebecca tried to swim toward shore now that her limbs were free, but she was so cold and so tired.

Her legs were numb and she knew there would be scratches on them from scraping along the bottom of the river.

Farther ahead she spied another large log that had

fallen. It appeared to be a good two or three feet wide, too large to grab. But it had fallen in almost to the middle of the river.

It was worth a try.

Rebecca managed to maneuver herself to pass just under the log. There appeared to be a few branches coming from the log. If she could just reach out and grab one of them.

Rainier was following his wife as she was swiftly being carried downstream. He knew she had to be both tired and cold. Robert had felt like ice while in his arms. His horse seemed to sense the urgency of the situation because he gave Rainier more speed than Rainier thought possible.

He was wondering how far away that bridge was. If he could get ahead of her and on the bridge, then maybe he could lower a rope for her to grab as she went by. Had he already passed the bridge?

He was just ahead of her when he cut across the field where the river went around the bend. That would put him way ahead of her.

He urged his mount a few more feet to be sure, then quickly dismounted, grabbing the rope on his saddle at the same time. When she came down, he would throw the rope out to her. He could not wait for the bridge.

He looked around, but could not find Rebecca anywhere. Rainier knew a sense of dread.

Where is she?

At that moment Sinclair, Nathan, and Duncan dismounted. They stood beside Rainier, each looking up and down the river.

Something was wrong.

She should be here by now.

Rainier looked upstream to make sure she was not on her way. He was positive she could not have overtaken him.

He slowly looked downstream again. He had to make

the right decision. Time was against him and right now every moment counted.

Again, he looked up the river. He was sure she could not have passed him by.

"Sinclair, Duncan," Rainier called over his shoulder, "head downstream just in case she passed us."

Both men immediately turned to head downstream while Rainier started up, praying that he was right. Nathan silently followed as they quickly traveled up river, scanning the river for Rebecca.

As he came around the bend, he was almost where he last saw her. *Where was she?* He stood by the bank, a feeling of unease growing in his chest. *Where was Rebecca?*

Then he saw the log. It was large, just resting in the middle of the river. There did not seem to be anything that one could hold on to, but he had a feeling. He started to run toward the log, Nathan following behind.

As he got closer, he saw her gown in the water. As he climbed the log and walked the length of it over the river, he could see that she was under it, somehow.

He knelt on the log and tried to reach for her, but the log proved to be too large around. He looked over the other side, but could not see her head. Somehow she was holding on to something under the log.

"Rebecca, can you hear me?" he called out.

No answer.

"Rebecca?"

The only way to get to her was to get in the water with her and pull her out. But Rainier knew he also would get pulled into the current. Returning to the bank and taking off his sword, he grabbed the rope Nathan had already tied to a nearby tree and secured the rope around himself. When he gave the command, Nathan was to pull both him and Rebecca out.

He then quickly walked into the water, pausing only for

a moment at the initial shock of the cold water. His body physically reacted when he felt how cold the water was.

And Rebecca was still in it!

Rebecca tried again to get her wrist free, but it would not budge. When she had reached for the branch with her right hand, she had missed and her wrist had become wedged between the branch and the log itself. She had tried to turn around, but that would put her face in the water. As it was, she was just able to keep her face above the raging current in a small pocket of air. Her shoulder felt like it was being pulled out of its socket. She would wait for a few moments, take a few breaths, and then try again.

She felt something touch her left shoulder, then travel down her arm. Her first thought was a snake. She hated snakes! As she jumped, she realized it could not be a snake. What would a snake be doing in a river like this, unless it too fell into the river? If that were true, then it was just trying to get out just like she was.

It was as the touch traveled up to her shoulder and head that she realized it was a hand.

Rainier! Rainier had come.

She could feel the hand trying to pull her out, which only twisted her right hand more in the branch. She started to struggle, using her free hand to push him away.

His hand gently felt up and down her side, then followed her right arm up toward the branch that held her tight.

Even though the water was only up to his chest, Rainier had difficulty keeping his balance and footing. Because the current was so strong, he could not pull her forward enough to get her loose.

He tried to break the branch, but the branch was too thick. He signaled to Nathan to pull him out, noticing Sinclair and Duncan standing next to Nathan.

“Her hand is wedged on a branch under the water.”

Sinclair already had another rope tied around his waist and secured to the same tree. With sword in hand, he joined Rainier back into the river. As Sinclair placed the sword just above Rebecca's wrist, Rainier grabbed her right arm. When Rainier gave a signal, Sinclair pulled the sword with all his might, trying to break the branch.

It did not budge.

With his left hand holding Rebecca's wrist, Rainier grabbed the sword handle with his right hand. They tried again, but the branch continued to hold his wife below.

With his eyes closed and all his thoughts focused on the sword and the branch, Rainier kept pulling and pulling.

Then he felt the first crack. Rainier took another deep breath as he and Sinclair pulled again with all the strength they had. This time, the branch finally gave way. As soon as it did, he felt Rebecca's body as it lurched forward, the river trying again to reclaim her.

But Rainier held a firm grip on his wife.

He was not letting go.

When they reached the bank, Rainier took a good look at her as he laid her upon the ground. Her lips were blue and her face was pale. But there was life in her eyes, breath in her body, and a trembling smile trying to form on her blue lips.

He had Rebecca back.

Rebecca's teeth threatened to crack from their sudden chattering. She tried to wrap her arms around herself to keep what warmth she had, but her arms would not move.

Never had she felt so cold.

Rainier felt her chilled body shudder.

"Rebecca, you are fine. Do you hear me? You are going to be fine." Rainier kept up a steady stream of talk while he tried to warm his wife, rubbing her arms to get the circulation going again.

He was worried at how cold Rebecca was. A blanket

from his men was quickly wrapped around her. He handed her to Nathan while he mounted his horse. When Rainier got Rebecca settled in his lap, he headed for camp.

“Rrr-rob-b-b-ert?” she stuttered.

“He is fine. He is with Roger and Cinthia even now.”

She seemed to relax more when she heard that Robert was okay.

“My God, Rebecca. I thought I had lost you,” he told her as he kept rubbing his hands up and down her arms. He was holding her tightly as they rode toward the camp, her shivering increasing.

The men at camp had a fire going outside along with a few tents put up.

“Make a hot broth from some of the dried meat we brought,” Rainier yelled as he headed for his tent that had been readied.

Rebecca’s lips were slowly losing their blue tint while the color was returning to her cheeks. Her shivering was not as violent, but she was still visibly shaking.

After removing her wet clothing, he bundled her up with the blankets already piled up inside, still briskly rubbing her arms and legs.

Not satisfied that she was getting warm fast enough, he quickly removed his own clothing, unwrapped Rebecca, and brought her cold body next to his. After his initial quick indrawn breath, he quickly wrapped them both up completely, trying to absorb her chills with his own body heat.

“Just relax and think of a *big* fire,” he teased when his own teeth stopped chattering.

He noticed her trying to smile. Good, she was still with him.

He held Rebecca tightly, briskly rubbing her back. He reached around her to grab another blanket, the smallest one he could find, and wrapped her wet hair in it to keep it

off her shoulder.

“Rr-rrr-Rob-b-b-b-rt?” she asked again.

“Robert is being cuddled and warmed by both his doting parents, thanks to you.”

He lowered her head onto his shoulder. “You gave me quite a fright, Rebecca. I am sure I aged at least thirty years when you lifted Robert to me, then lost your grip.”

He paused, the mental image making him hold her tightly within his arms, safe again. “I am not sure I will ever get that scene out of my head, you being thrown into the river like that.” He moved his feet up and down her cold legs. “I never want to ever go through something like that again. Do you hear me, Rebecca? I am sure I could not survive it.”

He looked down at her face when she did not respond. She was sound asleep.

Rainier hugged his wife tighter, trying to cover every inch of her skin with his own warm touch. He had been so terrified. His heart was still racing, but he had Rebecca back. He had not lost her. He gave a silent prayer of thanks for her safe return.

He shuddered again, this time not from the cold, but from the thought of his life without Rebecca. Strange how just a short while ago he had not even known her. Yet to think of Kensington without her humming and smiling, he could not imagine it.

“I have you back!” he whispered against her damp cheek. “I will never let you go, Rebecca. Never!” he vowed.

Chapter 20

“Why not have our own tournament?”

Rainier, along with the other men at the table, all turned their attention to Rebecca.

“What?” Miles was asking.

“We never had one here before,” Lyle thought out loud.

Nathan was shaking his head. “It would not be the same.”

“Why not?” she asked as she watched each of the men. “Now that the harvest is done, you could use the field outside near the west wall.”

She looked over at Rainier who looked thoughtful at her idea. Since the accident at the river, both Rainier and Roger had returned to their homes instead of continuing. Rebecca had noticed that many of the men were missing the challenge that a tournament gave.

“In fact, everyone could have a few days off. We could make it like a festival. All the women could cook enough the week before.” She looked around, noticing that a few of the men were warming up to her idea.

“But we would be competing with each other,” Nathan confessed.

Rebecca shook her head. "Not necessarily." She leaned forward. "We could invite neighbors to join us and make teams."

Rainier did not miss the longing in Rebecca's voice. He knew she longed for a visit with her cousin.

"With only a few people participating, we already know who will win certain events," Duncan thought out loud.

"If Roger's men come, we know who will win the axes," Miles added.

"Orrin," Nathan confirmed out loud.

Duncan nodded his head. "With no one to really challenge him, it will be an easy victory."

"And Graham will undoubtedly win the rings," Lyle added.

"Then change the games!"

All eyes turned to Rebecca.

"What do you mean, 'change the games'?" Rainier asked.

"Since this is not an official tournament, but one of our making, then I would think we would not be obligated to follow the official rules, so to speak." She looked around at the men. "Make the games more challenging."

All the men looked at one another, smiles slowly appearing on each face.

Sinclair was rubbing his chin. "When I was in France, one of the things I remember was shooting an arrow through several small rings before hitting the target."

"I heard of that," Nathan exclaimed. "But that would not necessarily be more difficult."

"Unless," Miles thought out loud, "We made the target moving."

Duncan clapped his hands together. "And I have an idea for the rings!"

"We could even have some games so the younger ones could be involved too."

When she noticed the look of astonishment on a few of Rainier's men, Rebecca rushed on.

"All the children would love a chance to be a part of it. You see them all the time, squires and the younger ones with their wooden swords practicing, charging at the quintain while trying not to get knocked off their horse. Why not have some part of the tournament for them? Have them compete and show what they have learned as well."

There was a hush in the hall as the men considered what she said.

"We could do the same events as at court for the younger ones," Rainier thought out loud.

The idea of having their own tournament here at Kensington was starting to appeal to him. Not only would he not have to travel as long, but it would also give the men a chance to try their skill against someone else.

And the idea of including the younger ones, he liked that. He knew how hard the young squires trained, watching his men and trying to imitate them.

Yes, the idea had merit.

One month later, Kensington officially had its first four-day tournament.

Everyone was involved with the planning and building for the tournament. Rebecca was more excited when they received a message from Ailene and Gaylon informing them that they would be pleased to participate in the event.

A week and a half after they returned from the river, Simon returned from court, his wagon loaded with precious materials, notions, and other wares.

"I was able to get another bolt of material like I promised," Simon whispered to Rebecca as the women crowded around his wagon to search the contents for

something new.

"I was hoping you would." She watched as Simon opened a small door at the front of his wagon, then pulled out a long bolt covered in muslin to protect the cloth. As he pulled the muslin aside, Rebecca could already tell she was going to love the material.

Simon held the bolt while he unfolded the material at the corner, allowing Rebecca to see and feel for herself the quality of the piece.

Rebecca touched the fine cloth, feeling its thickness and mentally noting how long the material would wear.

"Tis a beautiful color," she observed as she rubbed the material through her fingers, "the clear blue color of an unclouded sky."

"I have only had one other bolt of this color besides the one that was stolen. So, you would have no fear of many other ladies wearing the same."

Rebecca smiled. Simon knew how to sell his wares. When women bought material for attending special events, it was not uncommon for others attending to be wearing gowns and tunics of the same material and color. It was always likely that someone else had selected the same material you had chosen, most likely from the same merchant.

"How much?" Rebecca asked, knowing the cost would reflect the high quality of the material. She was visualizing the expression on Wil's face when given the receipt. But she still wanted the material.

Simon pulled the material from Rebecca's fingers and wrapped the unfolded material back around the bolt. He then covered the bolt with the muslin again and handed the bolt to Rebecca.

"No charge."

"But this material must have cost you a small fortune," she argued, even though she was peeling back a piece of the

muslin to look again at the material.

“For your help and hospitality when I needed it.”

Rebecca looked sternly at Simon.

Simon shook his head. “Most people meet me outside the keep,” he continued, “or on the road. After they get what they want, they leave.” Simon looked up into Rebecca's face. “No one has ever thought about where I sleep, or what I do when the rains fall, where I cook my meals, or even what I eat.” He glanced around at the walls of Kensington, the people milling about. “This was the first place that did.”

Rebecca knew that what he spoke of was true. How many times had she met the traveling merchant, purchased what she needed, then left, not to see him again until he came by next year? How many times did she ever wonder about his welfare?

“But when I was here,” Simon continued, “I was treated differently, like a real person that someone was interested in.” He turned and looked directly at her. “And no one has ever gone out of their way to help me like you did.”

Rebecca felt the blush in her cheeks. “Well, the villagers were happy to help out.”

“Yes, but I know it was because you went to everyone and asked them.”

A smile broke across Rebecca's face as she continued to look at the material. “If you are sure about the material,” she hesitantly asked, wondering if he would change his mind.

“Oh yes, it is yours.”

Rebecca looked again at the material and knew it would make a beautiful tunic for Rainier, along with a matching gown for herself.

“Thank you Simon. ‘Tis more than you led me to believe.”

She wanted to start right away with her sewing, but

there were still many things to do for the upcoming tournament. Leaving the material in her trunk in her room, she headed down the stairs, a satisfied smile on her face.

Rainier would have a new tunic! She would start this evening before retiring for bed.

Marcus watched as the activity in Kensington increased. Everyone was aware of the gaming tournament planned within the week.

“Marcus, there are going to be a lot of people here.”

“I know, Tad. But it will be easier to not be seen then. We can move more freely.”

“I think I saw something over at the kitchen. The new cook is really good.”

“What did I tell you about visiting the same place too often?”

Tad looked down. “I know. But she is good.”

“I know. I remember too. But we have to be careful. I think I saw something at Stol’s cottage.”

Tad gave a longing look at the keep, then reluctantly followed Marcus.

Rebecca was talking with the blacksmith about the extra benches and stages needed.

She looked over across the courtyard and saw the same two boys she had seen several times before.

“Aaron, who are those two boys?” she asked.

Aaron stopped his work and looked up, locating the two boys. “Oh, those two are Marcus and Thaddeus.”

“Marcus and Thaddeus,” she mumbled to herself. “I do not recall to which family they belong.”

“Their parents were Rayden and Alise. They died back when Kensington was attacked several years ago.”

“Five years ago? *That* attack?”

“Aye. It would be about that time.”

“If their parents died, who is taking care of them now?”

Aaron paused, his eyes shifting, trying to remember. “I am not sure. At that time, there were so many children left without parents, Lord Hughes put all of them with other families.”

Rebecca’s brows came together. “How many children were there to be placed in other homes?”

Aaron thought again. “I guess there were about a dozen families lost...”

“And if each family had two or three children, then that would mean about...thirty children suddenly homeless?”

Aaron nodded his head. “That sounds about right.”

Rebecca looked around at the families about. “I never knew some of these children were adopted.”

Aaron smiled. “Timothy is one of them.”

Rebecca looked surprised. “He is?”

“Aye. And I could not be more proud of him if he were my own flesh and blood.”

Rebecca looked again at the two boys leaving the courtyard. “So who took Marcus and Thaddeus?”

Aaron shook his head. “I do not know. I see them around all the time, but I guess I never questioned who they live with. I just, see them around.”

Suddenly, many things were falling into place: the missing roasted chicken, the missing meat pies, the missing mutton.

“Excuse me,” she said as she began to follow the boys. She saw them dart around one cottage, then head toward another. As she came around the second cottage, she saw the older boy reach inside the window and take out a pan of bread. The younger boy turned around and saw her.

“Marcus?” he cried out as he stepped closer to his brother.

Marcus looked up and saw her watching them. Both

boys took off running.

“Oh no, you are not getting away,” she said to herself as she lifted her skirt and ran after the boys. They boys were fast, but she had been raised with a brother herself.

She saw them head around another cottage. She cut across in front of it and practically ran into them. She grabbed the older boy’s shirt and held on as they both fell to the ground and rolled several times. The boy was twisting and flaying his arms, trying to get away, but Rebecca held on tight.

“Hold on, I just want to talk,” she tried to reassure the boy, but he was not hearing her.

The younger boy grabbed his brother and tried to pull him away from her. “Let ‘em go!” he kept crying out.

Rebecca held on, then reached up and grabbed the younger boy too. She was glad her training with Kyle was finally being used.

“Hold on,” she repeated. “I just want to talk.”

Both boys finally stopped struggling. “We did nothing wrong,” the younger boy cried.

She looked at the younger boy and noticed the ill-fitting clothes. She guessed they not only stole food, but also clothing when needed. “You must be Thaddeus?”

He nodded his head. “Ma called me Tad.”

“Tad.” She turned to the older boy. “Any you are Marcus.”

“What are you going to do with us?” Marcus asked as he sat up.

“Do not make me chase you again.” Rebecca let the boys go. She figured if they ran away again, she now knew who they were. The three of them were still sitting in the dirt.

“Now, I do believe you are the ones responsible for the many items of food disappearing. Am I right?”

The boys were silent. Tad was starting to cry.

“Where are you living?”

Again, silence.

“Boys, I can stay here all day and keep asking until you tell me. Or until I follow you and find out myself.”

Marcus looked at her. “And who are you going to tell?”

“Me!” a deep voice spoke from behind them.

All three of them suddenly turned around.

“Rainier,” Rebecca quickly stood up. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching you chase these two boys.”

Rebecca looked back at the boys, who also stood up. Tad was standing behind his brother, who looked defeated.

Rainier looked angry. “Explain!”

“Well, I saw the boys—”

“Not you.” He looked directly at Marcus. “Explain.”

Marcus looked like he wanted the earth to open up and swallow him.”

“Rainier, the boys were only trying to survive.”

“Survive? Their family is supposed to provide for them.”

“They have not had a family for the past five years!”

Surprised, Rainier looked at his wife. “What?”

“It appears that you missed these two when you were placing all the homeless children with families five years ago.”

Rainier looked at Marcus, then at Tad. “Who were your parents?”

Marcus looked up. “Rayden and Alise. They worked the barley field.”

Rainier narrowed his eyes. “I remember them. You were not placed with another family?”

“No.”

“Why did you not speak out?”

“I did not want to be separated from my brother. I promised my mother before she died.”

Rainier looked from Marcus to his younger brother. "I would have kept you together."

"I was afraid you would not be able to."

Rainier looked around. "So you have been stealing food, for five years?"

Marcus looked down. Tad looked around his brother. "We only stole what we needed," Marcus whispered.

"But you still stole!"

"Rainier," Rebecca gently whispered. "You cannot blame them for doing what was needed in their situation."

Rainier looked at her. "I cannot have them continuing to steal." He turned back to Marcus. "Where have you been living?"

Marcus pointed to the stables. "There is a hole in one of the walls."

Rainier looked at the stables, then back at Marcus. "And you were living there during the winter?" he asked, slightly alarmed at the boys being in the wintry elements without the benefit of a warm fire.

"We found blankets."

Rainier looked sharply at Marcus. "Found?"

Marcus looked down at his feet, as if suddenly interested in the ground. "I only took from those who had extras."

Rainier took several deep breaths. "I will find you a home."

"I can take care of Tad myself," Marcus claimed as he looked back up.

"And do what? Continue to steal?"

Marcus was silent.

Rebecca leaned into her husband. "Rainier, I have an idea. I think I know a family that will take them both." She turned to Marcus. "If you could stay together, would you go to a family that would want you?"

"Who?" Rainier asked.

“Royce and Blanche. They have no children, and I believe they would be more than happy to have two young boys.”

Rainier looked from Rebecca to Marcus. “Royce is a good man. He would provide well for you.”

“And if you stay with Royce,” Rebecca added, “you will no longer need to hide, and therefore you will be able to fully enjoy the coming tournament, together.”

Marcus looked at his brother.

“A bed would be nice,” Tad commented.

“Good. Let us go and see Royce right now!” Rebecca wanted to get the boys settled before Rainier changed his mind.

Chapter 21

Ailene and Gaylon arrived with their men three days before the tournament.

“We came early so I could help,” Ailene offered as she glanced around.

Rebecca gave her cousin a smile. There was color in her face and a certain sparkle in her eyes.

She looks happy and content.

“Actually, I am glad you came early. I really could use your help.”

Gaylon and Rainier watched their wives as they quickly ascended the stairs, whispering between themselves.

“I guess I should have brought her over sooner to visit,” Gaylon quietly observed.

“I was thinking the same thing.” Both men watched the women turn down the hall at the top of the stairs.

Gaylon looked around. “What can I do to help?”

“The men and I could use another archer. Tomorrow we go hunting to help feed this crowd.”

Gaylon raised his right brow. “I think you just want to see the competition.”

Rainier cocked his head to the side. “That has occurred

to me.”

Both men smiled as Rainier slapped his friend on the back. “Come and see the field.”

Rebecca was pulling Ailene down the hall, eager for the help she desperately needed. Once inside her room, Rebecca opened the heavy trunk lid. “I have been working on something and came upon a problem.”

Ailene watched Rebecca unfold the material. “’Tis beautiful! With your coloring and eyes, this will look exquisite on you!”

Ailene examined the tunic, noting the image of the gray wolf sewn with delicate stitches across the front. The gown had a smaller yet identical image across the front of it. Ailene's expert eyes quickly saw where Rebecca was having the problem.

“You have done a wonderful job so far, Rebecca. I can tell you have been more patient with this than with any other piece you have tried.”

“I wanted to surprise Rainier with this after the tournament, but I cannot seem to get the head just right.”

Ailene's fingers lightly traced the needlework. “It should only take a few days to finish,” Ailene assured her as she held the tunic up to inspect it more closely.

“I have a few things that I must return to,” Rebecca claimed, obviously disappointed she could not immediately help Ailene on her project.

“If you have extra needle and thread, I will get started.”

Rebecca smiled, grateful for the help. “Let me show you to your room.”

Ailene followed her cousin to the room across the hall.

“I will finish as quickly as I can,” Rebecca promised as she left Ailene sitting in the chair by the window threading a needle, the material already spread across her lap.

After the evening meal, Rainier was not surprised when both women quickly left the hall, climbing the stairs as they

did earlier in the day.

“Must be important,” Rainier whispered as he leaned toward his friend.

Gaylon watched the scene with interest. “Hmm.”

On the first day of the tournament, the ring spearing and wrestling events were scheduled. All the men had already signed up for the events they wanted to compete in the next four days.

Rebecca scanned the field, pleased with the results. As she looked through the crowd, her gaze rested on Royce and Blanche standing on the other side of the field. Standing next to Royce stood Marcus and Tad. She noticed Blanche was smiling, her hand held by her husband. It would take time, but she hoped that Marcus and Tad would give them a chance. She could already see how much happier Royce and Blanche were. Time would tell.

Rebecca excitedly watched as the men were readying for the first event. Each man dressed for the tournament as though they were at court. Their tunics and shields all displayed the men's coat of arms. Rainier's men wore the Hughes design of an eagle head in profile with a white rose in its beak on a dark gray background.

Because of the events selected, armor would not be needed, only their shields during the swords. The weather proved to be cooperative by shining brightly for the events. Many of the men, therefore, wore sleeveless shirts like Rainier, leaving their arms bare.

Sinclair was walking next to Rainier, his arm resembling a rainbow. She counted five ribbons and scarves tied about his arm. She smiled, wondering which women the favors belonged to.

She found Miles further behind Rainier with a single

yellow ribbon tied to his arm. Nathan was directly in front of Sinclair with two favors on his arm, a green scarf and a pale yellow ribbon. She noticed Gaylon's men also had favors around their arms, Gaylon himself wearing Ailene's color on his arm. The bright red ribbon around Roger's arm matched the gown Cinthia was now wearing.

Rebecca looked back at Rainier and noticed his arms were bare. She looked down at her waist, noticing the small piece of material hanging off her belt.

She had totally forgotten.

"What is the matter?" Cinthia questioned as Rebecca suddenly stood up, a look of panic across her face.

"Rainier," Rebecca softly whispered to herself.

Ailene looked out to see Rainier heading toward the tent. "He looks fine to me. What is wrong?"

Rebecca was looking around, trying to find a way to get Rainier back before the events started. "I have to get to Rainier."

"The men are about to start," Cinthia observed.

"You will see him after the games," Ailene said.

"No! That will be too late." She was wringing her hands together, clutching the material she had placed that morning around her belt. "I need to do something."

Rebecca quickly left the stands in search of her husband. Ailene watched her quickly descend the steps of the stage they were on, then decided to join her. Behind her, Cinthia shook her head as she also joined her new friends.

Rebecca headed toward the large tent behind the field where she saw Rainier heading. She stopped to look around and saw Ailene on her right, Cinthia on her left.

"Where is he?" Ailene asked.

Rebecca scanned the area. "I cannot tell. There are so many men here."

"And we cannot see over their heads," Cinthia

observed.

Rebecca glanced around again, then continued forward.

The men were enjoying themselves, drinking ale and slapping each other, as friends were reacquainted. The men were loud as they yelled at each other. She stopped and stepped back as one man fell in front of her, laughing as the one who punched him held his arm out and helped him up.

The man rising glanced toward Rebecca and smiled. "Well, what a pretty thing you are—" He stopped when his gaze rested on Cinthia, the smile vanishing from his face. "Milady—" he stuttered as he looked from one woman to the other.

Cinthia smiled. "It looks like you are having a fine time, Orrin."

The man stood to his full height, embarrassment evident in his face as he looked again from Cinthia to Rebecca. "I am sorry."

"We are looking for Lord Hughes," Cinthia clarified as she looked around. Orrin turned around, found Rainier, then turned back to the women. "Over there." He pointed.

"Thank you, Orrin. And I hope you do well this day."

The man smiled as the three women made their way forward. One by one, the men around them became aware there were ladies walking among them. They stepped aside as the women walked on.

Rainier was talking with Sinclair and Gaylon when he noticed the silence descending upon the crowd. Wondering at the cause, he looked around and saw his wife walking toward him, with Roger and Gaylon's wives behind her. As his wife approached, she gave a quick curtsy, then looked up at him. He saw how flushed her face was, almost as if she was embarrassed.

"Rainier, I am sorry to disturb you just now," she whispered. "I know you are preparing for the events and all,

but—”

He watched as she silently tied the small piece of fabric she had tucked in her belt around his arm, just above his elbow. He had wondered if she had remembered or not. Several women had offered their favors, but he had declined them all. He knew he would only wear Rebecca's favor if she offered.

And she had! He felt such pride over the simple act.

Before she turned to leave, he cupped her face in one hand, then leaned down and kissed her, in front of all the men.

Remembering they had a vast audience, he reluctantly pulled away, pleased to see her eyes turning that smoky shade of brown again.

Rebecca was so embarrassed she wanted to dissolve into the ground. With as much dignity as she could muster with the crowd of men watching, her back straight and her head held high, she turned and joined her two friends.

“He has his favor now,” she defended in a whisper.

Cynthia looked ahead. “Is that what you gave him?” she whispered back.

“Of course!”

“Of course.”

Rebecca stood still until the men parted again for them. Then, the three women walked back to the stands.

Rainier felt Roger and Gaylon stand beside him, each watching their wife, each thinking how beautiful their wife was.

When the women disappeared from sight, Roger looked at Rainier, and saw the look of pride on his face.

And love.

It was so obvious to Roger that Rainier was in love with his wife. He wondered if his friend was even aware of it yet.

Rebecca watched as the men lined up to take their turn at the rings, the squires lined up beside them holding the lances until needed.

Hanging from a beam with twine, ten rings of varying sizes were suspended. Usually during tournaments, the rings were all of the same size and level with one another. Sinclair had the idea of making some of the rings higher than others, some lower. Miles added the idea of varying the ring sizes.

These changes forced the rider to not only hold his lance steady and more accurately, but to also adjust for the varying heights.

At first, the men thought the game the same as at the tournaments, until the first man tried it. When he only managed to spear one ring, the next one claimed he could do better with a blindfold. He soon learned how difficult the game was. Eventually, the men were more determined to master the game than to win. Even when the game was over and a winner declared, many of the men wanted 'just one more try.'

The men were more evenly matched in wrestling. Rebecca learned that sheer size alone did not automatically determine the winner.

Gaylon was locked in a larger man's embrace. But with a twist of his body and leaning into his opponent with his shoulder, Gaylon maneuvered himself around, and suddenly had the bigger man in a similar lock. When the bigger man made a move to his left, trying to dislodge Gaylon, Gaylon moved in the same direction, effectively bringing the man to the ground. Rebecca heard the pent up sigh of relief from Ailene as Gaylon stood amid the cheers from the crowds.

Rainier's turn came next. Rebecca watched as he circled Lucas, one of Roger's men. She saw the

concentration on Rainier's face as he tested the skill and agility of his opponent. With arms locked around each other, she heard each grunt and groan as arms and shoulders flexed and bulged.

When Rainier finally held Lucas down, he stood up then stepped back, the crowd cheering again. Rainier reached down to help Lucas up, a smile on both faces.

Everyone was having a good time.

Rebecca could not see the greedy pair of eyes that watched from across the field, eyes that recognized, eyes that were planning.

Chapter 22

Rainier was about to enter through the slightly opened door of his bedroom when he heard a man's voice inside threatening Rebecca.

Rainier had been with his men during the fourth and last day of the tournament. After each of the four days, there had been special games designed for the younger ones. All the older ones stayed to watch and encourage them, cheering them on with as much enthusiasm as the men received.

On this last day, Rebecca had planned a contest with equal men on each side of a mud pit, a rope held between them. In front of the men were the smaller ones who wanted to participate.

Rainier had thought this a silly game of no benefit, but his wife was determined to involve everyone, together. There were a total of six men each from Gaylon's, Roger's, and his camp, all eager to show off for the crowd. So, with Nathan and Miles on his side, the contest began.

He was surprised at how much he enjoyed it. The desire to keep oneself from being pulled into the mud was enough to cause the men to double their strength, their arms

straining on the rope.

He could hear his grunts mingle with the men around him. The younger ones in front were not really of any help. They just wanted to be a part of the game and get in the mud.

But the men were taking this particular game seriously. His side pulled and pulled, then began to lose ground as the other side pulled them closer and closer to the pit.

The crowd was cheering for the side with their friend or favorite knight on it. On and on, they kept it up. Rainier was near the front on his side. He watched as the pit kept getting closer and closer. With strength renewed by desperation, he called to his side, getting them to pull in unison.

He watched the other side, Duncan, Sinclair and Lyle directly across from him. He noticed their neck muscles standing out, their teeth grinding, trying to pull against them.

The crowds cheered as Rainier's side suddenly gained momentum, pulling until Duncan fell face down in the mud. As the other side lost their first man in the pit, the pulling was made easier until all Duncan's side was in the mud pit together. The crowd cheered more when it was over.

Rainier flexed his shoulders as he approached his opponents, laughing along with them. He offered a hand toward Sinclair to pull him out. Instead, Sinclair pulled him in, laughing as Rainier landed in an ungraceful heap beside him. It was difficult to distinguish one man from another in the mud.

Rainier could not remember when he had as much fun and laughed so much. He went to the water trough to rinse himself off, then decided to change out of his wet clothes before the evening meal.

He realized Rebecca was not alone when he heard a

man's voice in their room. He was about to charge through the door when the man's words caused Rainier to stop.

"And just what do you think your husband will do when he finds out?" Rainier could almost visualize a sneer on the man's face.

"I expect my husband to believe me." Rainier could picture her lifting her chin with that challenge.

"Do you really believe he will ever trust you again after learning of it?"

"My husband would always take my word."

"Are you willing to put it to the test?"

There was a pause. He could hear Rebecca moving around the room, her gown brushing against the floor. Rainier was curious. What were they discussing? What did he not know of?

Rebecca had come to her room to lay out the tunic she had made for Rainier, knowing he would come upstairs before the meal. The embroidered gray wolf leaping in the air stood out on the azure color, just as she imagined it would. She had worked long hours with Ailene to complete her surcoat to match his. Yesterday, Ailene had put the final touches on it for her while she was preparing for today.

She was unaware of the silent figure following her up the stairs, then down the hallway. It was when her bedroom door shut behind her that she turned and faced Warren, Quintin's steward.

She already knew what he wanted. "What are you doing here?" she asked anyway.

Warren was looking around as he stepped further into the room, measuring the worth. "I would have thought you would be pleased to see a dear old friend."

Her eyes became hard. "The words 'pleased', 'dear', or 'friend' are not words I would associate with you." She was pleased to see his head snap toward her, eyes narrowing with hate.

"I believe we can be of some benefit to each other."

Rebecca walked past him and opened the door. "Leave now!"

"It would be a shame to lose all of this, unnecessarily," he continued.

Rebecca turned around. "Leave," she repeated, "before I call the guards and have you thrown out."

"And let them hear your secret as well?" He walked around the room, dragging his fingers across the furniture. "And just what do you think your husband will do when he finds out?"

Warren watched as she lifted her chin.

"I expect my husband to believe me."

"Do you really believe he will ever trust you again after learning of it?"

"My husband would always take my word."

"Are you willing to put it to the test?"

"I trust my husband. And he trusts me. No matter what you said, he would trust me."

Warren was looking around again. "As you wish. But I have an offer, so that you would not have to put your husband to the test." He looked up to see her response.

She was standing in the middle of the room with her arms across her chest. She looked bored.

"I am not asking for very much," he continued. "I have such . . . small needs."

"I remember how small." Rebecca had been shocked to discover that Quintin's steward was stealing. The amounts, she discovered, were staggering. When Rebecca brought it to Quintin's attention, Warren was questioned.

But Warren was a survivor. He already had an explanation ready. Quintin, being the generous man he was, decided to let him stay. Rebecca, though, never trusted him again. Even now!

"I understand that your dowry was rather handsome."

He walked toward the writing table, fingering the wood. "Combined with your husband's funds already, I would say that he would never notice, say, five thousand coins missing."

Rebecca gasped. "Five thousand. Why you arrogant little toad. You truly expect me to pay you five thousand coins?"

Warren's face turned blotchy at her insult. He let his fingers slide against the table one last time before turning to face her.

"I would think it a small price to pay for your happiness. After all, if you were so sure of your husband's response, then why have you not told him already?"

Rebecca decided to not answer him.

"I will let you think about it for, let us say, the next few hours. I will be downstairs, waiting. If you bring the coins before the evening meal, then *our little secret* will remain such. If not," he shrugged his shoulders, "then I will be forced to announce to your husband, in front of all the people present, what you did."

He walked toward the door. "I can wait," he called over his shoulder.

"Get out."

As he opened the door, he turned his head and repeated, "I can wait."

Rainier darted into the room directly opposite of theirs. With his door slightly opened, he got a good look at the one threatening his wife. He was slim with thin brown hair, a few inches taller than Rebecca was. His walk spoke of confidence.

He considered what he had heard, then decided to see how much Rebecca would tell him. He waited for another minute or two, then left his hiding place and entered his room.

Rebecca stood in front of the window, deep in thought.

When he closed the door, she quickly turned her head, obviously expecting the other man again.

He saw her look at the door and knew she was wondering if he had heard anything. He chose to play ignorant.

"I was wondering where you were. You are missing all the fun."

Rebecca looked out the window again. When she did not speak, he tried again.

"The people are really enjoying themselves. This was a grand idea you had."

She still looked out the window. Rainier decided to be more direct.

"Rebecca, is something wrong?"

Rebecca turned to look at him, blinked a few times, then returned her gaze back toward the window. "Rainier, the money you give me monthly. Is it mine to use any way I choose?"

Rainier watched his wife's straight back, knowing what she was thinking. "Yes."

Silence enveloped the room while Rebecca thought, and Rainier waited.

Rebecca broke the silence, still looking out the window. "If I had need of additional coins, could I have them?"

Rainier walked over to the chair beside the empty fireplace and sat down. He weighed his words carefully before he answered.

"So far, I have seen the thrift you use in running Kensington. If you need more, then ask Wil."

She turned her head, looking intently at him. "You would not ask questions?"

Putting his elbows on the armrests, he slightly leaned forward as he watched his two hands come together, fingertips touching each other. "Is there a need to ask?" he softly asked.

Her eyes searched his for answers. "In truth, I am not sure." She looked out the window again. He was wondering if she would ever think of talking to him about this problem.

Rebecca had tried to come up with a plan. Warren would never know how close to the truth he was when he mentioned that she had never told Rainier about Quintin.

But how to handle the situation now, that was the immediate problem. Was it not better to tell Rainier now than for him to find out some other way, like Kyle said? Would that not be in her favor? Would he see it that way?

She was just not sure.

Warren believed her to be a fool. If she did pay him, then *she* would be the fool and would never be rid of him. He would constantly hold it over her head.

With a loud sigh, she turned and faced Rainier. "I am not sure that all problems have a solution," she thought out loud as she looked around the room.

He lowered his hands on his lap and leaned back into the chair. "I would hope, by now, you knew there is nothing you could not ask or tell me, Rebecca."

With her mind made up, she turned to face her husband. If he sent her away, then at least she tried.

"Someone is threatening to tell you about something in my past if I do not pay him a large amount of coins."

Rainier appeared to give the matter some thought, even though he already knew this.

"Whatever the problem, I promise I will help you."

With a last look at her husband, Rebecca finally made her decision.

"I killed my first husband!"

Chapter 23

Rainier was glad he was already sitting down.

He could not help the startled look that crossed his face at her announcement. She had said it with such calmness and conviction. But he knew Rebecca. She was such a giving person. She would never do such a thing, at least not intentionally. He would stake his life on that.

There were only two questions he could think of asking. "Why?" was the first one.

She looked surprised that he asked the question. "I did not mean to."

After a moment of silence, he asked the second question, still confused.

"How?"

"How?" she repeated. "Because he could not take the news when Warren told him about me."

"Told him what?"

She lowered her head and whispered. "That I was unfaithful."

Rainier was so perplexed by what she said that he was not even trying to hide his confusion. "Why would Quintin believe you were unfaithful?"

“Because of what Warren saw,” she whispered softly.

Rainier waited as she moved to sit down on the bed. When she continued silent, he pressed on. “Who is Warren and what exactly did he see.”

“Warren was Quintin’s steward.”

A pause.

“And what did Warren see?”

“I would rather not say.”

“I would rather you did, Rebecca. What did Warren see?” he pried gently.

She had the utter look of defeat in her eyes when she finally answered. “There was, another man in my bed,” she barely whispered.

Rainier was speechless for a few minutes as he digested what she had said. He had to have heard wrong. “What did you say?”

Rebecca’s face turned a darker shade of red from her neck to her hairline. “He found me with another man in my bed.”

That was what he thought she had said.

Rainier shook his head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. He went to the window that she had just vacated and looked out just as she had when he entered the room. Holding two fingers against the bridge of his nose to stop the ache he was beginning to feel in his head, he turned around.

“Rebecca, exactly what was this man doing in your bed?” Something was not right and he was going to find out what it was.

If possible, Rebecca’s face turned redder.

“Rebecca, why was he in your bed?” he repeated.

“I did not invite him,” she almost shouted. “He was in the room when I came in. He grabbed me from behind when I shut the door, and I screamed.” Rebecca began to wring her hands together. “He pushed me against the door.

I fought him, but he just, laughed.”

Rebecca took a deep breath as she relived the scene.

“He laughed! I kept screaming, but it made no difference. I struggled with him and he ripped my gown. I remember he just kept laughing at me, telling me how easy it had been. Then he threw me on the bed, and, and then Warren opened the door and saw us.”

“Where were Quintin’s men?”

Rebecca looked up, confused. “His men?”

“I am sure Quintin had men posted all around, like I do.”

Rebecca nodded her head. “He did. He was getting frail and was afraid he would fall or hurt himself. He always had extra men posted in case he needed them.”

“Then, where were they when you screamed?”

Rebecca thought, her brows creasing together. “I guess they did not hear me.”

Rainier shook his head. “Any guard can recognize a cry of distress”

Rebecca shook her head. “The door was closed.”

“Even through these doors, the guards should have heard you.”

Rebecca looked to the closed door, then back to her husband. “Then I do not know.”

Rainier considered the information and drew his own conclusions. “What did Warren do?”

Rebecca walked around in a small circle. “He ran to Quintin and told him what he saw.”

Rainier watched as his wife paused and took several deep breaths. “Then what happened,” he continued, bringing her back to the present.

“It was too late.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper again.

“What was too late?”

She shrugged her shoulders, as if it did not matter now.

“Rebecca,” he repeated, “what was too late?”

She looked up, huge tears in her eyes. “Quintin died. I killed him.”

Rainier reached out and pulled her toward him, but she twisted away.

“Do not touch me,” she hissed as she backed away. “I killed my husband. Does that not bother you?” she shouted. “What kind of a man are you to just let that pass?”

“Rebecca—”

“I told you when you married me that you would regret this marriage. I told you.”

He reached for her again, holding her tight when she tried to break free. When her struggles finally ceased, he wrapped his arms around her as she cried.

“I killed him,” she whispered against his shoulder with disgust. “He was just laying there, a look of shock on his face. Warren pointed his finger at me and called me a, a whore,” she gasped at the memory, “and a murderer. And then he left to get the guards.” Rebecca sniffled. “I knew I needed to leave, but I went to Quintin, to explain. But he could not hear me. His hand was so cold I wanted to light the fireplace. I wanted so much to tell him my side of the story, but he never got to hear it.”

Rainier’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but before he could question Rebecca, she continued.

“What hurt the most was that Quintin would never hear my side of the story. He would always think me unfaithful and ungrateful for all he had done for me. I wanted so much to hear him tell me that he believed me, but I would never hear those words. I wanted to hold his hand one last time, but he would not let me.”

She sniffled again. “I knew I needed to leave, so I went back to my room and collected only a few things, then went to the courtyard and took a horse. I rode for several days till I arrived at Uncle Gerald’s.”

He waited for her to calm down, keeping her head against his shoulder as he leaned against the window ledge again. When she was no longer rambling, he finally spoke.

"What did you mean 'he would not let you hold his hand'?"

She wiped her nose on her sleeve and tried to push away, but Rainier would not allow her to leave. She finally gave up, resting her head back on his shoulder as she considered his question.

"Quintin always liked to link our fingers together when we held hands. But that night, he held his fist tightly closed. I tried to pry his fingers loose, but he would not let me. Even in death, he was angry at me."

Rainier held his wife as he considered what she had told him. It did not take long for him to realize some of the truth. "Rebecca, I want you to listen to me, and listen good." He paused as he stroked her hair. "Are you listening?" He waited till she barely shook her head.

"You did not kill him."

He waited for her to hear those words. When she did, she spoke up. "Then why was Quintin dead?"

She wiggled back enough to look up at him. There was anger in her voice now, anger for what she felt she had done.

"And how would you know?" she challenged. "You were not there. You did not see the shock on Warren's face." With her bottom lip quivering, tears started to form in her eyes again. "You did not see Quintin, dead."

"Rebecca, take my hand. Go ahead, take it. What do you feel?"

Rebecca looked at the larger hand in her own, felt the calluses from years of training.

"What do you feel?" he repeated.

"I feel your hand."

"Does it feel hot or cold?"

Rebecca pressed more of her hand into his. "It feels warm."

"And would you say my hand is limber or stiff?"

She moved his wrist, then his fingers. "Limber."

He wrapped his hands around her wrists and gently brought her hands to his chest, forcing her to look up at him. "You said that Quintin's body was both cold and stiff. A body does not get that way until several hours after death. Any knight will tell you that. You did not kill Quintin!"

She was quiet for several moments, wanting so badly to believe in this flicker of hope. "I did not kill Quintin?"

"No. Did you tell your uncle about this?"

Alarm returned to her face. "Never! Uncle Gerald never knew of the reason I returned. Only that Quintin died."

"But you told your brother."

"Yes. I was ashamed of how easily someone could overpower me. I asked Kyle to teach me to defend myself. He wanted to know why the sudden interest, and I had to tell him."

"Did you tell him what you just told me about Quintin's body?"

Rebecca narrowed her eyes, thinking of the past. "I do not know. I would think so." Rebecca looked at his hand again, trying to put it all together. "I do not understand. If I did not kill Quintin, then what happened?"

"That is a question I also want to know. But first," he raised his hand to gently stroke her hair, "I will deal with Warren."

"Warren!" she shouted, her confused eyes widening in alarm as she considered her enemy again. "I had forgotten about him. What am I going to do?"

"I will deal with Warren."

"You do not understand. He has threatened to announce to everyone this evening what I have done. Think of what will happen to your name."

“Trust me.”

“But—”

“Rebecca, trust me.”

When Rainier entered the hall an hour later, he had already planned what to do with Warren.

He found Sinclair talking with one of the servants, smiling his devilishly charming smile at her. Rainier wondered if she was the owner of one of the favors Sinclair had worn.

Sinclair saw Rainier approach, and with a final smile, turned his full attention to Rainier.

“I need to find a man lurking around here somewhere.”

Sinclair was instantly intrigued by the harsh tone Rainier used.

“His name is Warren. He is slim with brown hair, about seven inches shorter than you.”

“And when we find this 'Warren'?”

“Take him to the prison tower. I will meet you there within the hour.”

“The prison tower?” Sinclair asked in mild surprise. At Rainier's expression, he nodded, turning to leave. “The prison tower, it is.”

Rainier next went looking for Miles.

Miles was playing with some of the younger children in the courtyard. At Rainier's call, he quickly left them. As he approached, he noticed Rainier's stance. Something was up!

“I need you to travel to Worcester and ask Kyle Davitan to return.”

“Worcester?”

“If he is not there, find out where he went and follow.”

“And if he asks why you wish him to return?”

Rainier thought for only a moment. "Tell him Warren arrived."

Miles was definitely confused about that message. *Who was Warren?* Within ten minutes, Miles had left Kensington in search of Rebecca's brother.

Sinclair located Warren in the stables looking at Rainier's prize stallion. Sinclair silently watched him for a few minutes from the doorway, seeing the greed in his eyes.

Taking him to the prison tower was no trouble at all. At one point, Sinclair was almost persuaded to knock that smile from his face, he seemed so sure of himself, so cocky.

As they turned down the hall toward the tower, Warren began to wonder where they were headed. When he began to struggle, Sinclair simply grabbed Warren by the neck and walked the sputtering man into the tower room to wait for Rainier.

Warren did not have long to wait.

Rainier looked closely at the man who just recently threatened his wife with lies, no doubt.

At closer inspection, Warren appeared to be someone who could easily get lost in a crowd. His eyes were large right now because of his fear. But Warren was a coward, and a lazy one at that.

Rainier already knew as much as he wanted to know about him from overhearing his conversation with Rebecca and what Rebecca had finally told him.

"I wanted to have a private talk with you, Warren." Rainier walked around the small room as if pondering a serious thought. "And since the keep is filled with people, this was the only place I could think of."

Warren knew this was Rebecca's husband. He was also aware that there were plenty of rooms they could have used. She must have told him. He decided to make his stand first.

"If this has anything to do with what your wife has told you, I can assure you that 'tis untrue. I am sure that—"

Warren suddenly felt the wall behind him as he was slammed into it, his feet dangling several inches above the floor with Rainier's hands clutching his tunic, thereby holding him up.

"Are you calling my wife a liar?" Rainier calmly asked when their faces were mere inches apart.

Warren recognized his mistake instantly. "Of course not. No, no. I did not mean that. Only that she might have misunderstood."

Warren was starting to have trouble breathing. Rainier's hold on him had the neckline of his tunic pulled tight against his throat.

"Really?" Rainier slowly lowered him a few inches, his feet still dangling mere inches above the floor.

"Yes, really. I was only having a friendly chat with your wife, about old times." Warren's already red face was becoming redder.

"I would be interested in what you, *chatted* about. In fact, I would be very interested in what *really* happened that night."

Rainier could feel Warren trying to swallow.

"I already know that you are trying to blackmail her. I also know that you are somehow responsible for the events that happened that night. I am just not sure, yet, if you are the one responsible for Quintin's death."

Rainier watched as Warren's face changed from red to white within a matter of moments.

Half-an-hour later, Rainier stepped outside the room and noticed Sinclair leaning against the door. It was evident by Sinclair's face that he had heard everything Warren said.

The two men did not need to say anything. Rainier gave a nod and Sinclair gave a nod in return.

Laying within the warm circle of Rainier's arms with their feet tangled together and her head laying on his chest, Rebecca finally felt at peace.

She had refused to go down for the evening meal, knowing that Warren would be there. Rainier though had insisted she accompany him, since the contests were her idea in the first place.

While she was listing all the reasons she should quietly stay upstairs, he was helping her put on her camise, shift, her new surcoat, her belt with her dagger, then her slippers. While Ruth combed her hair and braided it, she kept up a steady stream of words, insisting she was better off here, in their room.

Before she knew it, she was walking beside Rainier with her arm firmly tucked under his arm.

When Rebecca and Rainier appeared at the top of the stairs, a sudden hush fell over the hall. Glancing quickly at her husband, she was about to start all over again when he gently put a finger to her lips, effectively silencing her.

"Trust me," was all he said.

She noticed the smile in his eyes. He did not seem to be worried that his name was about to be dragged through the mud and the mire.

Yet with all the trembling fear inside her, the shame and the remorse, she did trust her husband.

She spent the first fifteen minutes of the meal ignoring almost everyone. But when nothing happened, she spent the next ten minutes looking for Warren.

He was nowhere.

"I told you to trust me," Rainier smiled as he handed her his cup of wine. He saw how pale her face had become when she finally looked up, felt the slight tremble in her hand as she took his cup of wine.

"But—"

“Let it be, Rebecca. All is taken care of.”

She watched his smile reach his eyes. It was warm and inviting, and it looked good on him.

She made another sweep through the room with her eyes. Warren was definitely not here. Smiling back at her husband, she started to relax and enjoy the evening meal.

Rainier saw the pride in Rebecca’s expression when she finally noticed him wearing the tunic she had lovingly made. He remembered how pleased he was when he found it laying on the chest. He had carefully examined it, noticing the fine needlework. She had somehow captured the strength of the wolf while not forgetting its cunningness. Laying next to it was the matching gown she was now wearing.

He watched as Rebecca listened to the men recount their wins, their ever-faithful friends adding in the losses they conveniently forgot. All in all, everyone had a great time.

When they retired, Rainier barred the door to their room, then picked her up and carried her to their bed.

Afterwards, while laying in each other's arms, Rainier let his hand rub up and down her back.

He knew how traumatic events like this can affect different people. Right now, Rebecca was concentrating on the death of her first husband. The more she thought and dwelt on it, the easier it would be to recall.

He wanted her to remember the better times.

“Tell me about Quintin.”

Ten miles from Kensington in the forest, two men were crouched together, deep in conversation.

“Are you sure he will believe it?” the thin man asked.

“When the time comes, he will be gone along with most

of his men,” the large man responded. “With only a few men left behind, my men should have no problem with the women.” He then eyed the thin man with a stare. “Are you sure you will be able to open the gate?”

The thin man looked up. “When you give the signal, I will have the gate open.”

The large man gave a grunt of approval with a quick nod of his head. Standing up, he looked down at the thin man.

“I will be in the forest beyond Kensington two weeks from tonight.”

Chapter 24

With Nathan's help, Rebecca rearranged the tables in the hall to their former places. It had been four days since the games ended and the last of their visitors had left this morning.

"Those extra tables and benches made the hall quite crowded," Nathan commented as he moved a bench against the wall.

"And noisy," she agreed. "The place almost sounds silent since everyone returned to their normal routine."

Nathan pushed the large table back into place. "It does seem quieter." He looked up and noticed her smiling. "Thinking of someone?"

"Just thinking of my time with Ailene."

"You had a good visit with your cousin," he stated.

Her smile broadened. "I did. She appears happy with Gaylon."

"And Gaylon seems happy with her."

Rebecca looked up at Nathan, surprised that he had noticed. "He does."

"Like you are happy with Rainier," he observed further as he pushed the larger chairs back into place.

Rebecca stood with her hands on her hips. "Is it that obvious?"

Nathan smiled back. "Only to everyone here." He looked around. "If you have no further need of me, I will take the benches back into storage."

"Thank you for your help." As he carried the last of the benches outside to the courtyard, she looked at the two chairs Tom had built for Rainier's parents, now for Rainier and herself.

Like you are happy with Rainier, Nathan had said.

She smiled again. Kyle and been right. Rainier had understood when she finally told him her secret. He believed her. He had been patient as she told her story, even asking questions.

She pushed a stray bench into place then stood to examine the results, satisfied that it was as it should be. Duncan walked by, probably on his way to the training field.

She looked around and saw Miles in the kitchen, a piece of meat in his hand as he talked with Tom.

She remembered that Rainier had questioned about Quintin's guards. Should they have heard her when she screamed that night? All this time, she had thought no one could hear her. But Rainier seemed so sure that if they were where they were supposed to be, they should have heard her.

It made her wonder—

She looked up at the stairs leading to the many rooms at Kensington. She looked at where Duncan had passed by, then glanced at Miles still talking with Tom, another piece of meat in his hand.

Decision made, she silently made her way to the second floor. She entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Now that she was in the room, she was unsure whether or not to proceed. But she needed to know. She needed to

be sure.

She walked to the other side of the bed, then took another moment to convince herself again that what she was going to do was fine.

She stood tall, clasped her hands in front of her, took a deep breath, then screamed.

Miles came running down the hallway, throwing the door open, his dagger drawn, his stance alert. He looked around the room, looking for the threat.

He saw Lady Rebecca calmly standing on the other side of the bed. He looked again around the room, saw no reason for alarm and looked again at the woman.

“What happened?” he asked as he stepped into the room, still looking around as Tom finally caught up with him.

He was confused when Lady Rebecca just looked him over, smiled, then walked around the bed and toward the door.

“Thank you,” she said as she passed by his shoulder.

Both men were quiet as she walked back down the hall.

“What happened?” Tom asked as he looked inside the room, expecting to find at least a snake. Agnes hated snakes.

Miles watched her turn the corner, still confused as to why she screamed. “It must be a woman thing!”

The next day, Duncan was in the hall when he heard the scream. He grabbed his sword and ran along the first floor hallway to the only room that was closed. The door was unlocked, so he pushed it open so hard, it bounced back after hitting the wall. He blocked the door from hitting him as he looked around the room.

Lady Rebecca was standing in the middle of the empty

room, her head cocked to the side as she began to smile. She walked to the doorway and paused as she stopped next to him.

"Thank you," she said as she touched his arm, then left the room.

"For what?" he asked to the empty room.

Two days later, Miles and Lyle were sitting in the hall when they heard the now familiar scream. Neither man was surprised as each looked at the other.

Miles raised his cup. "Your turn."

Several days later, Rainier was on the training field with his men. At the moment, he was engaged in swordplay with Sinclair. Sinclair blocked his blow, but left his right side open. Rainier stepped in and landed a blow to his side. Sinclair doubled over as he leaned on his sword.

"Your mind is elsewhere, my friend," Rainier observed as he helped him up.

Sinclair smiled. "I guess it is."

"Usually a woman."

Sinclair's smile faltered. "It is," he agreed.

"You need to keep your mind focused. You know better than that!"

Sinclair looked around at the other men training, then turned back to Rainier. "May I ask you a question?"

"If it will help you keep your mind on training."

Sinclair took a deep breath. "What is wrong with Lady Rebecca?"

Rainier looked up, surprised. "Wrong?"

"Are you having a problem, with her?"

Rainier heard his hesitation. "What?"

Sinclair placed his hands on his hips. "The men have been going crazy this past week."

Rainier looked from Sinclair to the other men, then back to Sinclair. "What are you talking about?"

"Lady Rebecca! Almost every day, she goes into a different room, shuts the door, then screams for no reason."

Rainier listened. "And what do the men see when they find her?"

"She just stands there. Then she smiles, says *thank you*, and then leaves. No explanation."

Rainier nodded, remembering his conversation with her about Quintin. He smiled. "Good."

Sinclair looked confused. "Good? That she is screaming?"

Rainier shook his head. "No, good that she is feeling safe." He rolled his shoulders as he held his sword up. "I am sure she will no longer be screaming for no reason."

Sinclair gave a heavy sigh as he resumed his attacking stance. "I would appreciate that."

Miles returned with Kyle three days later. Rebecca was pleased that her brother returned so soon after his previous visit. No one, though, told her why.

Kyle accompanied Rainier as they walked alone on the hill where he normally trained his men. Kyle, aware of Warren's appearance, was sure he knew what his brother-in-law wanted to know.

"What did Warren want?" Kyle asked.

"He was trying to blackmail Rebecca, coins in exchange for not revealing what happened that night."

Kyle came to a sudden stop. Rainier watched his face reveal the anger he was feeling, listened to the harsh words spoken just under his breath.

"Where is he?" Kyle asked, his voice evidence of his controlled rage.

"Warren is no longer a threat," Rainier confessed.

Kyle looked up and understood.

Rainier continued walking, Kyle following beside him. "There are still parts of the story that make no sense. How much of it do you know?"

Kyle took a deep breath, clearing his mind. "A month after Quintin died, I came to visit Rebecca. When I found out about the attempted rape, I knew she would run to Uncle Gerald's. I tried to find the man, but he disappeared."

Rainier nodded in understanding. "I do not think the man intended to rape her."

Kyle came to another stop. "What?"

"Oh, she believed he meant to, and probably would have if Warren had not entered her room when he did."

Kyle thought on that. "Then why did he attack her?"

"Because Quintin was already dead, and Warren wanted Rebecca to feel responsible for his death."

Kyle looked confused. "Warren told you Rebecca did not kill Quintin?"

"Yes, but I already knew that."

"You did? How?"

"Did Rebecca tell you how long it took after Warren found her that she went to Quintin's room?"

"I thought she went immediately. She was able to push the man off and ran to Quintin's room."

"That is what she said to me. Did she mention that when she reached his room, when she touched him, his hand was cold?"

Kyle considered the implication of the words, his brows creased together. "He was cold?"

Rainier nodded. "Not only that, but she remembers that he was also very stiff."

Kyle took only a moment to process the information. "You are right. She did not kill him!"

Rainier nodded his head again. "Warren admitted that Quintin had died several hours earlier."

Kyle thought. "What about the man who attacked Rebecca?"

"The man planned the attack. Her gown was torn but she was fully clothed, enough to run to Quintin's room."

Kyle remembered her story. "But, why?"

"Did you also know that Quintin's guards were nowhere to be found that night?"

Kyle shook his head. "It appears I did not ask enough questions."

"She was probably so shaken that night, it was good she remembered what she did."

"So, where were the guards?"

Rainier hesitated, knowing what he said next would upset Kyle. It had upset him.

"Warren sent them away that night."

Kyle played the scene in his head. "So no one would hear her scream."

Rainier watched as Kyle clenched and unclenched his fists, thinking of his sister being attacked and crying out for help, only to have no one hear her.

Kyle took another deep breath. He shook his head, trying to refocus. "So, Warren runs to Quintin's room, already knowing that he was dead." Kyle was trying to piece it all together. "How did Warren explain his death?"

"Warren believed that, because of Quintin's age, he died a natural death. But he schemed a way to make Rebecca feel she was responsible. Learning about your wife's unfaithfulness, if you were old and had a weak heart anyway, would seem the natural reason for death."

Kyle was rubbing his neck muscles. "But, why?"

"He wanted to get rid of Rebecca so he would have total control of the estates," Rainier explained. "I have already sent Wil, my steward, over to make an accounting of all that has happened in the past few years."

Kyle looked at Rainier. "Do you believe that Quintin

died a natural death?”

Rainier shook his head. “No. The man who attacked Rebecca obviously knew about Quintin’s death as well. He planned with Warren and staged the attempted rape.”

Kyle narrowed his eyes at a thought. “You think the man was responsible.”

“I think it is very likely. Although I cannot reason why.”

Kyle considered all that had been said, then made a mental decision.

“I think I need to tell you something else about Rebecca, something that she does not know.”

Rainier looked up, a silent message to continue.

Kyle told of the Castelle family and his belief that someone was trying to eliminate them for some reason. He told of his fear that Rebecca might be included because of her marriage to Quintin, and for that reason, he had asked King Henry to make sure she was protected.

“So you think an attempt on her life is possible?” Rainier asked.

“Possible. But now that she is married to you, she no longer has the Castelle name. I meant to have her protected.” Kyle started walking again. “She was upset that someone was able to take advantage of her and wanted to know how to defend herself.”

“So you started training her in defense.”

Kyle nodded his head. “At first it was simple moves to discourage men. Then she wanted to learn how to use the dagger I gave her more effectively. Next thing I knew, I was training her with the staff and sword.” He stopped to look at Rebecca’s husband. “I wanted her to be able to stand on her own.”

Rainier clapped a hand across Kyle’s shoulder. “I thank you for that. I can attest that she had practiced. I had a hard time controlling her when we first met.”

Kyle smiled. “She said almost the exact same thing

about you.”

Rainier smiled as they continued to walk.

“How long can you stay?” Rainier asked.

“I need to leave immediately. I have an order to be in court before King Henry within the week. Miles happened to run into me on my way there.”

“Be careful. The last time I went to court, I ended up married to your sister.” He thought, then added, “Of course, in truth I cannot complain. With all her crazy ways, I am more than pleased with her.”

“I believe I will be able to journey now without worrying so much about her and the trouble she can get herself into,” Kyle added with a grin. “Besides, you seem up to the task.”

Rainier grinned also. “Still, it would be nice if I could get through one week without her getting into some trouble.”

Chapter 25

Gaylon Wellington stood on Fallon's wall and silently watched the large army approach.

Gaylon was baffled. What was Rainier doing?

He could think of no reason why his friend would show up outside his walls, battle ready. Unless he thought to attack him. But there was no reason for that. No, something was amiss.

He climbed down the wall, ordered his horse ready and decided to meet his friend half way. He was sure of his friend, but just in case, he had his men stand ready.

On the edge of the field, Rainier sat atop his horse and looked over the area. Rainier was very confused. Gaylon's keep looked fine. He could see no evidence of battle. He briefly wondered if Gaylon had already taken care of the brigands.

Rainier was downwind of Gaylon's keep now, yet he noticed no smell of a battle. Death usually lingered in the air days after until all the dead were buried.

He sniffed again. No, no smell of death at all.

He watched as the gate opened, recognizing Gaylon riding toward him. Ordering his men to stand ready, he

rode out alone to meet his friend.

"Are we at war?" Gaylon asked as both men faced each other.

"What are you talking about? I thought you needed my help."

Gaylon shook his head. "I am fine. I thought you were readying to attack me."

Rainier paused. "A messenger, presumably from you, arrived early this morning and said you were under siege and needing reinforcements."

"I sent no message, nor was I under any attack."

Rainier looked around. "I can see that. Which means someone went to much trouble to get me here."

Gaylon thought a moment. "Or, wanted you away from Kensington."

"I left plenty of guards behind." Rainier signaled to his men.

"Why would someone want you here?"

Rainier shook his head. "I should be getting back. Things just do not feel right."

"Agreed. But at least let me get you some food to take with you. My men and I will join you."

Rainier turned to look at Sinclair and Miles as they approached. "We leave within the hour."

The women and children were huddled in one of the upper rooms, listening to the fighting in the courtyard and hall below. Rebecca was still wondering how the men had entered Kensington in the first place.

Nathan had come running through the hall with his sword drawn and an anxious expression on his face.

"Lock yourselves in one of the rooms upstairs, quickly!"

Rebecca did not question his order, but instantly

obeyed, gathering the women and children as she went.

He watched as she ran up the stairs, many of the servants behind her. When she turned the corner, Nathan turned to face the attackers as they entered the hall.

Once inside, the women put the large board across the door, then gathered together in the center of the room, listening to the men fighting outside while mothers tried to comfort their confused and frightened children inside.

They waited.

Rebecca finally heard men in the hallway as they searched the rooms. She walked toward the door, thinking Nathan was looking for them. She heard the men approached the door, but Nathan did not call out to her. Instead, she heard a deep voice order his men to break the door down. Rebecca stepped back. Where were Rainier's men?

The first ram on the door brought Rebecca out of her thoughts, as well as everyone else.

"They mean to kill us," someone wailed.

Rebecca turned around. "No. No matter what happens, we hold on till Rainier and his men return. No matter what happens. Understood?" She looked around the room at all the women, willing them to be strong.

Agnes, sensing the danger, ran up to Rebecca and pulled her into the middle of the crowd. "You need to be where we can protect you."

Rebecca looked at the face that had become dear to her. "I appreciate that, I truly do, but—"

The door suddenly splintered into dozens of pieces. Three men holding a battering ram stepped back as six men dressed in armor walked in, swords drawn.

The first one scanned the room, looking at each woman.

"Lady Rebecca?" he spoke to the group of women.

He waited. There was silence except for the occasional

whimper from one of the women or children.

The man was getting visibly angry at the silence. Glancing around again, he repeated his demand. "I do not have all day."

Rebecca was afraid he would harm someone soon, so she started to rise. Agnes yanked her back down as she rose herself.

"I am Lady Rebecca."

The man's eyes bore into Agnes's. While Rebecca was wondering what got into Agnes, Ruth stood up from the edge of the crowd.

"No, I am Lady Rebecca."

The man's head mirrored Rebecca's as he quickly turned to identify the new voice. He looked back at Agnes, standing tall and erect, then to Ruth. At that moment, another woman from the opposite side rose, declaring the same thing.

Rebecca was stunned. In less than one minute, five women were standing tall and proud, each claiming to be her. She knew what they were doing. Rainier's people were trying to protect her.

The man's face suddenly turned ugly. Looking at each woman, he called to one of his men. "Charles."

The man closest to the door approached.

The leader looked among the crowd one more time.

"It appears we will be here for some." He glanced back toward the crowd, pointing to Mary, the young daughter of Cecilia, one of the villagers. "Until then, take that young girl for the men to keep them entertained. When they tire of her, come back and get another one."

Cecilia gave a sharp cry. "She be only a baby. You cannot take her."

The woman's cries, though, made no difference to Charles as he pulled Mary away.

"Momma? Momma?" a confused Mary was calling.

All the men silently watched as Rebecca stood up with all the command and bearing of her station. As she approached Charles, she gently yet firmly unclasped his hand wrapped around Mary's wrist. Charles was obviously so surprised that he allowed Rebecca to unhand Mary.

When Mary was released, she ran back into her mother's waiting arms. Rebecca then turned her full attention to the leader.

"I am Lady Rebecca Hughes."

The man looked at her for another moment, then smiled.

Rebecca did not like the look of triumph in his eyes. "What is it that you want?"

The man's smile widened at her question. After a mock bow, he answered. "Why, Lady Rebecca, 'tis not *what* I want, but *who*." He leaned slightly forward. "I want you!"

Rebecca just stared at the man, wondering what he meant when she heard a voice behind him.

A voice she had heard several years ago.

A voice that had laughed at her.

"Rebecca. I had such a merry time finding you."

She turned her gaze to the man who entered the room. He walked up to her, held her chin to force her gaze upwards.

"You were supposed to be dead!" he almost snarled. "But you left."

Rebecca could not form any words, she was so confused and terrified.

"What? No answer?" He shook his head. "It took me over a year to find you. Imagine how surprised I was when I discovered you at your Uncle's."

Rebecca remained silent.

"But alas, your uncle kept you very well guarded. There were only a few times I *could* have taken you, but then I would have had to take your cousin as well."

Rebecca tried to keep her nerves calm. He obviously was not interested in Ailene.

“But the moments passed and I had to continue waiting. And I am very good at waiting!”

He paused as he looked her face over, settling back on her eyes.

“But now, I have you!”

Rainier came across the rise viewing Kensington as he had so many times before. Only this time, his heart was not calmed. This time, he was afraid.

He descended the hill with Gaylon beside him, both their men following behind at a brisk ride. A band of men came from the east as he approached the gate. His men stopped and automatically assumed a line of defense.

Rainier recognized Nathan in the lead. What was Nathan doing outside the keep with the men? Something was definitely not right.

As Nathan rode in, Rainier saw the harrowed look of his guard. Then, without preamble, Nathan informed him, “Lady Rebecca has been taken.”

After the initial shock, the men returned inside the courtyard in silence. Rainier knew if Rebecca was close, Nathan would have stayed with her and the party she was with, sending a messenger back with news. He would not have left her.

Rainier, Gaylon, Sinclair and Nathan sat around the table in the hall and slowly pieced the events together.

“When we saw the deer at the edge of the forest,” Nathan started, “Lady Rebecca was concerned about Lord Wellington's people needing food after their attack. So I sent out a party to hunt.”

Nathan looked like his world had come to an end.

“Do not feel bad,” Rainier said after a heavy sigh. “I was also lured away.”

Nathan's head snapped up. “Lured?”

“There was no attack on my holding,” Gaylon replied.

Rainier rolled his shoulders, trying to work out the tension as he watched Nathan's brows come together in a frown.

Gaylon spoke after taking a drink of ale. “Someone has gone to much trouble making sure the keep had as few guards as possible.”

“Duncan was posted at the gate,” Nathan informed them. “When I awoke, I found him crumpled on the ground beside the wall. Someone had come from behind and then opened the gate. I heard the men already in the courtyard while I was in the stables, then ran to warn the women, sending them upstairs.”

“Most likely, the messenger was the one to open the gate,” Rainier thought out loud.

“That was my conclusion also, since he also is missing.”

“Did you recognize the other men?” Gaylon asked Nathan.

“No. Their arms and banners were unknown.” He looked directly at Rainier. “I was holding them off when someone hit me from behind. The next thing I knew, Ruth was fussing over me.” With that thought, he rubbed the back of his head where a large knot had already formed.

“How many men were there?” Rainier asked Nathan, already dismissing the messenger from his mind, clearing it so he could make plans on getting Rebecca back.

“From the men I saw inside, and from the tracks we followed, I would say around two to three dozen men.”

“How far had you tracked them?” Rainier's mind was already thinking ahead.

“As far as the river.”

“Did the trail lead any further?”

“It led further east, but I did not have enough men to continue. As it was, I left Kensington unprotected.”

“But they left a trail. Maybe they were in such a hurry that they failed to cover their tracks.”

“Or,” Gaylon thought out loud, “they want you to follow them.”

Rainier lowered his head and said a silent prayer that Rebecca was unhurt.

Nathan cleared his throat. “I think you need to talk to Agnes.” Nathan turned and signaled to the guard standing at the doorway.

“Agnes?” Rainier asked, confused.

“Yes. She heard something that I did not understand. Maybe it will make sense to you.”

Agnes arrived with her husband Tom. The guard allowed Tom inside the room but indicated he should remain by the door. He complied, never taking his eyes off his wife.

Agnes repeated the words the last man had said to Lady Rebecca. She tried to keep the tears from falling, but one slid down her cheek when she repeated his words: “Now I have you.”

Rainier was digesting the words, remembering what Kyle had told him. He was sure it was the same man.

He looked up and signaled Tom to come forward.

The man practically ran to stand beside his wife, his hands resting on her shoulders.

“Tom, is the rest of your family alright?”

Tom nodded. “Aye.”

“Good.” Then he turned back to Agnes. “And thank you, Agnes. What you heard was very important.”

As the couple left the room, Rainier turned and began to explain all he knew.

Chapter 26

Rebecca glared at the man across the table from her. He was as tall as Rainier, with lighter hair and cold gray eyes. His hair was longer than before, brushing his shoulders as his head moved around.

For three days they had quickly traveled across rough terrain before stopping here where she had been kept a prisoner. The first night, she had been locked up in a room in one of the towers. For the rest of the week, she had seen no one except the servant girl Lucy. Lucy was about the same age as Rebecca, with wide innocent blue eyes and hair as black as a raven. She took great pride in taking care of Rebecca, making sure her needs were taken care of.

All except for escaping.

"Can you tell me the name of the man who kidnapped me?" Rebecca asked the first night in the tower.

"His name is Sir Lionel."

"Lionel," Rebecca repeated. The name meant nothing to her. "Do you know why he took me?"

Lucy shook her head. "No one is saying anything in the kitchen. And the guards are silent too."

Rebecca pushed her hair out of her face.

“I have another brush that I can bring to you,” Lucy offered. “If you want, I will brush your hair before you sleep.”

Rebecca watched the young girl. “That would be nice, Lucy.”

The next day, Lucy brought the promised brush. Every night since, Lucy would brush out Rebecca’s long hair.

During the first week, Rebecca awoke with a sickness that threatened to tear her insides out. Afraid it was something she ate, she ate only fruit, bread and a few vegetables that evening. But it seemed to make no difference. The next morning she was sick again.

Lucy noticed the smell of sickness when she entered the room.

“Are you not feeling well?” she asked with concern in her voice as she noticed the chamber pot.

“It must have been something I ate. It does not seem to agree with me.”

Lucy’s sharp eyes noticed the shadows under Rebecca’s eyes. She moved the pan outside to clean when she left, then reentered the room. “How long have you been sick?” she asked as she poured water into a cup for Rebecca to drink.

Rebecca gave a heavy sigh. “Only the past few days. It will pass, when the food gets better, I hope. Thank you,” she said as she was handed the cup of water.

“Do you get sick at night?”

Rebecca thought. “No. I feel fine at night.”

Lucy managed a wide smile while Rebecca took a drink.

Rebecca noticed it and lowered the glass. “I fail to see why my sickness has made you happy.”

“Do you not know?” Lucy was smiling even more, if that were possible.

Rebecca’s face showed her agitation. “Know what?”

Lucy knelt before Rebecca. “Milady, you carry a child.”

After considering Lucy's words, Rebecca realized she was right. She was carrying Rainier's child.

That night, she lay with her hands covering her flat stomach, whispering to the small life forming within, reassuring him that Rainier would soon be there and that she would protect him until Rainier came.

Rainier's child!

She tried to visualize what he would look like. Over the next few days, she had decided it would be a boy. Would he have brown or black hair, hazel or brown eyes, tall like his father with his wide shoulders? She could see him as he grew up, Rainier teaching him all the things he needed to know to lead his people, to protect and guide them.

Tonight, Lionel was back. And she had yet to learn why he took her.

Rebecca watched as the servants hurriedly cleared the table of food and dishes. She reached for her cup and took another drink of the weak wine.

"I am sorry I had to leave you for so long," he finally spoke, "but I had to make sure we were not followed."

"I would think your men could have done that for you," she responded.

"Some things you want to make sure of yourself, do you not agree?"

She watched as Lionel sat back against his chair, taking another drink of wine. He looked pleased about what he had done so far.

"My dear, you do not look well. Have my servants not been feeding you while I have been gone?"

"I have been fed just fine."

He rose, his chair scraping the floor as he signaled to one of the guards.

"I think you need to rest. Tomorrow we will talk."

Rebecca needed no second invitation to leave. She rose, then walked past the guard to her room.

She wondered how long she could possibly keep her condition a secret.

“There was a time whenever King Henry had a pressing problem, he always asked his advisor. Do you know who that was, my dear?” Lionel asked several days later.

Rebecca shook her head. “How would I know?”

“Yes, how indeed. But still, King Henry always trusted William Marcus. They met in England. Henry was helping to defend his mother’s claim to the disputed throne of Stephen at the time. William and he forged a close friendship.”

Lionel took another drink of ale.

Rebecca could think of nothing to say, so she remained silent.

“And when Henry was crowned King, William Marcus continued to be a sound advisor. To be so closely linked to the King of England, well, imagine what that can do for a man? But, Eric Castelle took that all away,” he sneered.

Rebecca looked up at the mention of the Castelle name. “I do not know Eric Castelle.”

“But you knew Quintin Castelle.”

“Of course. You know I was married to him.”

Lionel looked up at the ceiling. “Eric was Quintin’s nephew. Did you know Eric had three brothers?”

Rebecca shook her head.

“King Henry knew Eric from when they were younger. He came visiting one time when Henry was conferring with William. Eric heard the discussion and offered a different plan from William’s.” Lionel laughed. “Henry listened to Eric instead,” he said in disbelief. “Eric, who was a nobody! Why would he do that!?”

Lionel looked at Rebecca, clearly expecting a response.

"Many people seek multiple counselors," she offered. "Sometimes it is a wise decision."

Ignoring her comment, Lionel took a deep drink. "And then, Henry began asking Eric to join him at his counseling table. Just like that!" Lionel snapped his fingers. "And William began to be pushed out. The Marcus family was no longer the trusted advisor. Castelle now took that position!" Lionel shouted as he slammed his cup on the table, splashing ale everywhere. "The Castelle family took what was rightfully mine,"

His eyes took a faraway look for a moment, then focused back on Rebecca. "But I took care of that."

Rebecca slightly tilted her head. "You did?"

"Yes. Eric met an untimely death," Lionel said in a soft voice. "As did the rest of his family."

Rebecca's eyes narrowed at the confession. "*You* killed Quintin?"

"He really did not offer much resistance, he was so old and frail."

Rebecca rose from her seat. "*You* killed Quintin?" she asked again. "Why?"

"Why?" he asked surprised. "Castelle ruined my family's name. I only returned the favor."

Rebecca was speechless. This man was responsible for killing Quintin.

"What did you do with Quintin's guards in the hall?"

Lionel's eyes widened. "Oh, I see you figured that out." He shrugged his shoulders. "It was simple for Warren to remove them for the night. When Quintin was found dead, you were supposed to be blamed for his death."

Rebecca thought of the attack, of Warren entering in her room, then rushing to tell Quintin.

"You planned the attack on me."

"Yes, and you put up quite a fight. It was rather...

invigorating.”

“And you planned for Warren to come into my room at just that time.”

Lionel smiled. “His timing was perfect.”

“But Quintin was already dead!”

He raised his right brow. “You figured that out too. I am impressed. Yes, Quintin died earlier that evening.”

“By your hands.”

Lionel smiled again. “By my hands.”

“How did you get Warren to work with you?”

“Warren?” Lionel laughed. “Warren was interested in Quintin’s estate and wanted you removed. I merely suggested a way to blame you for your husband’s death. You were supposed to be hung for his murder. But Warren let you escape,” he almost spat. “You are the last Castelle I need to get rid of.”

Lionel looked Rebecca over. “But you have now presented me with a delicate problem.”

Rebecca watched as his eyes lowered to her stomach. Her hands automatically went to cover the small life, to protect it.

“Yes, what to do about you and the child. You seem surprised that I know, my dear.” He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, his chin cradled in his palm. “Do you think much goes on here that I am not aware of? How long do you think you could have kept your condition a secret from me?”

Rebecca remained quiet.

“Had you not run away, then the guards would have arrested you, and you most likely would have been hung for murdering your husband, and I would have been free.”

“But I did not murder him.”

“But no one else knew that, except Warren. And Warren was easy to use. But now I need to decide what to do with you.”

He stood and stretched his arms above him.

"I need to think about this. You may return to your room."

For the next week, she listened every night to Lionel lament the position that should have been his, how his family was ousted from court by Eric Castelle and his family, and how he had avenged his family name, all but her.

She was beginning to understand just how much Lionel hated the Castelle family name.

She refused to ask or comment on anything he said. She already knew the story, knew he was to blame for Quintin's death, not her. That was all she needed to know. But after several more evenings, she noticed his tone began to change, his focus on revenge was beginning to alter. He was no longer thinking of ways to get rid of her.

"Yes, I can see your new husband right now, wondering where his precious wife is," he would think out loud. "Wondering what evils you are living through." Lionel leaned back in his chair. "A desperate mind can imagine horrible things."

Rebecca remained silent.

"And, when I do release you, *if* I release you," he corrected, "he will wonder all the time if you were faithful." He smiled at Rebecca's expression. "After all, you have been my guest for over three weeks now. He will remember the accusation of your unfaithfulness to Quintin and naturally assume the same thing here."

Rebecca rose, glaring at her captor. "My husband would believe me, no matter what you said."

"Really?"

"I know my husband. And my husband knows and trusts me."

Lionel cocked his head. "So you say now. But as your child grows, notice the searching glances he continually

gives to it, secretly wondering if it belongs to him, or me.”

Rebecca took a step back at his implication.

“My husband would believe me, not a coward like you.”

Lionel rose quickly, knocking the chair behind him over. He seemed to be trying to hold onto his temper. With controlled effort he turned, righted the chair, and then sat back down. He indicated for her to do likewise.

Rebecca hesitated.

“I SAID SIT!” he shouted.

Rebecca quickly sat, not wanting to anger him further. When she looked back up at him, he was smiling that smile she was learning to hate.

“You will change your mind when he gets himself a mistress.”

At her shocked face, he laughed out loud, genuinely pleased with the turn of events.

“You really do not think he will still want to bed you when you are as large as a cow, now do you? Your husband is a young and vibrant man, my dear.”

With a long sigh, he drank the last of the wine in his cup. “Oh, being a man of honor, he probably would not have his mistress right there in front of you. Oh no. She would be hidden away, or,” he started to look at his fingernails, drawing out the thought. “Or, it might be someone you know, right under your very pretty nose.”

Rebecca took a small drink from her cup while Lionel continued. He sounded extremely pleased with his ideas.

“But you will not be the only one who knows of his mistress. All his men will be aware of her too. If they are loyal to you, they will look at you with pity behind your back. The others will simply whisper about you.”

Rebecca rose to leave. She had heard enough.

“I do not recall giving you permission to leave, my dear,” he called across the hall.

Rebecca turned to glare at him, letting him hear the

contempt in her voice. "May I have your permission to leave, milord?"

He smiled again, pleased at her remark. "Of course, my dear. Till tomorrow evening."

Rainier stood just inside the forest, looking over the clearing around the keep just ahead.

Rebecca was inside. He was sure of it.

Rainier had tracked the men for over a week. He had visited every village, asking for any information about a large party of around thirty. The tracks led to a village two hours from here. Three weeks ago, he had learned of a large party that had left during the night, and returned the following week. No one remembered seeing Rebecca. Of course, they had kept her well hidden.

He had pieced together enough information that led him here to Dougal Castle.

As he leaned his shoulder against the nearby tree, he looked back at the castle that was holding his wife and the man who took her.

The innkeeper at the local village down the road had told him a few things that made Rainier uneasy.

"Most everyone here stays away from Lord Lionel, they do." The innkeeper wiped off a table a few patrons had just vacated. "Never know when he gets that funny look in his eyes."

"What does he do when he gets this look?" Rainier had sat down at one of the clean tables, placing a coin on top.

"Oh, he has a frightful temper." The innkeeper noticed the coin, then turned to get a mug of ale. "My woman, she served him some ale when he came in one time. Threw the cup clear across the room. Said it tasted sour." He set the mug down in front of Rainier.

“Was there anything wrong with it?”

“We had just served another company, a young man and his lady from the same keg. After Lionel left, I checked the ale myself. He was just in a foul temper.”

Rainier circled the top edge of the cup before him with his right forefinger. “How many men does he usually have inside?”

The innkeeper stood to his full height as he looked at his new customer, eyeing Rainier suspiciously. “Now, why would you be wanting to know that? Why not just ride in and find out for yourself?”

Rainier lifted the mug, taking a long drink before answering. “I have my reasons.”

The innkeeper's shrewd eyes never left Rainier's. “I think you are looking for something.” He paused. “Or someone.”

“Could be Lionel has what I am looking for.”

The innkeeper smiled. “I would not be surprised if he did. But be careful if you meet him. He once cut off a man's hand. Said the man was slow serving him, so he gave him a reason for being slow.”

Rainier still shivered when he thought about what the innkeeper told him. Deciding to scout around the castle, he dropped another coin on the table as he left.

He rode all around it, keeping out of sight of the guards on the top of the walls, noticing where the weak spots seemed to be, where he would attack when he was ready.

But first, he somehow had to get Rebecca out, before Lionel could hurt her.

After a final look around, he gave a silent promise that he would get her back, then turned and mounted his horse. His men were camped a few hours away, awaiting his signal to move. Gaylon and Roger, each with a small company of men, had joined him. While he traveled toward his camp, he began to make plans.

One for getting Rebecca out.
And one for Lionel.

Rebecca knew she had to escape, and soon.

Lionel was becoming more and more unstable.

Rebecca watched as he held a goblet in his hand, examining it with infinite care as he turned it around by the stem. Lionel's eyes became glassy as he considered some plan. Rebecca started to feel uneasy.

"I wonder," he began. "To keep you till your full term will take many more months. I am not sure I want to wait that long."

He gave a laugh as he watched Rebecca's face whiten.

"I am told that just a few herbs mixed the right way, and you would be free," he flicked his wrist. He seemed happy of the thought.

Rebecca stood and backed away from the table. Her voice that was weak before now was maternally stronger. "No, I will not allow it."

"YOU WILL NOT ALLOW IT?" he bellowed. He rose with agitation, the servants in the hall all leaving through the nearest door. "You forget who the prisoner is. And as for the child you already carry," he shrugged his shoulders, a calmness suddenly crossing his face, "you cannot tell if I have already given you the drink to rid you of the brat. Can you?"

Rebecca instantly looked down at the cup she had drunk from, real fear enveloping her heart. Her left hand went to her stomach, covering her right hand protectively.

"You would not! That would be murder!"

"To some, it would. To others, no. Even the church cannot really decide."

Rebecca backed away, her eyes on the cup that she had

drank from. She turned and fled to her room, hearing his laughter echo off the wall.

Rainier had his men camp just beyond the forest next to Lionel's castle, making sure his men were concealed. With guards posted all along the forest, he was aware of every move Lionel made. He questioned travelers who had been inside, getting as many details as he could.

By the end of six days, he was sure he knew where Rebecca was being held. He also knew the size of Lionel's army, the number of horses, and the amount of food and water available.

He was ready.

The door to Rebecca's room slowly opened as Lucy entered the small room as she had every day. Today, Lucy wore a squire's outfit under her gown. She carried extra blankets over her shoulder to cover her bulkiness.

Over the past few days, Lucy had been bringing different lengths of rope to Rebecca's room while she was dining with Lionel. With the guards gone, it was easy to slip in and hide the rope under the cot. She now had enough to lower Rebecca from the window in her room.

"When the time comes, you will need to have something to wear," she said, as she peeled the hose off her legs. Lucy never seemed to notice the pallor of Rebecca's face when she was discussing climbing down the rope.

Lucy went to the window and leaned out. "The window is narrow, but plenty big enough for you to crawl through. 'Tis a good thing Sir Lionel put you in this room and not the prison tower." She turned to see Rebecca's face whiten. "Are

you going to be sick?" She reached for the pan, thinking it was caused by the pregnancy.

"No, no. I am fine." Rebecca sat down on her cot, looking with fear at the window.

"Margaret, the kitchen maid, says that you need to eat some toasted bread when your stomach turns like that."

Rebecca looked up at Lucy and gave her a tender smile. "Thank you, I will remember that."

Lucy smiled back. Then looked down at the clothes she had sneaked in.

"Tomorrow, before the sun rises, some of the servants and I will make sure that the guards on the wall are not watching as you cross the clearing. We would do it at night, but you are unfamiliar with the forest, and would need the daylight to make your way. I will come by as usual, and let the guards believe you are still here. No one should know you are gone until the evening meal."

Rebecca squeezed her new friend's hands. "You take a big risk for me."

"Remember me," Lucy whispered.

"I will never be able to forget."

The two women hugged each other, each drawing strength from the other for what needed to be done tomorrow morning.

Chapter 27

Rainier, Gaylon, Roger and Duncan were looking at a sketched map of the inside of the castle when Sinclair stuck his head in the tent.

“You had better come out here.”

Rainier looked up. “What is it?”

Even as he spoke, he was following Sinclair to the edge of their camp. The sun was still behind the mountain, the dawn light just making its way around the camp. As the castle came into view, Sinclair pointed to the west tower.

Five men stared at the rope dangling from the top window.

“Do you think she was able to get a rope and is trying to escape?” Duncan thought out loud.

“How did she get a rope in the first place?” Roger answered instead.

Sinclair cocked his head to one side. “Why is she not coming down, if it is her?”

Rainier looked up at the window again, then shook his head as he headed back toward his tent for his gloves. “If it is Rebecca, she will not be coming down that rope alone of her own free will.”

Four men turned to look at him.

"We need to take advantage of this situation. Duncan, you are with me. Sinclair, you and the rest of the men wait here and keep an eye on the front gate in case Lionel decides to leave."

"If it is her, why not wait for her to come down?" Sinclair asked as Duncan went to get his gloves.

"Rebecca has a fear of heights."

Sinclair gave a whistle. "Then you are right. There is no way she is coming down that rope by herself."

"Duncan can help with Rebecca if we have to bring her down unconscious. Although I am hoping we will not have to."

"Even then, you do not know for sure who is in that room, or if someone was to come in while you are up there."

"Either way, the extra help is going to be needed."

When Rainier and Duncan reached the bottom of the tower, both men stayed close to the wall, each watching the rope as it gently swayed in the breeze. After quickly putting on his gloves, Rainier stepped out and captured the rope, giving it a firm tug to make sure it was secured at the top.

Rainier was first to climb, with Duncan about ten feet behind him. He kept his climb at a steady pace, pulling his weight easily up the rope.

When he was within about five feet of the window, he heard a voice through it.

Rainier gritted his teeth as he signaled to Duncan. He was listening carefully to hear who was with Rebecca, for it was Rebecca's voice that he heard. She seemed to be arguing with someone.

Out of desperation, Rebecca's arguments were coming quickly and naturally to her. She had an obligation, as a

prisoner, to escape at the first available opportunity. She also needed to protect her child.

"I cannot do it. I just cannot," Rebecca claimed, shaking her head for emphasis.

"How many times does a prisoner get the chance to escape right under her captor's nose? Not many, I would say."

"But look at the risk." Rebecca was rubbing her forehead with her right hand, a headache slowly starting to form. Then she had a thought. "What if I was to just stay here until Rainier comes. He should be here fairly soon. It has only been about," Rebecca looked up at the ceiling as she counted, "five weeks."

A month!

"Courage is what you are lacking," was the quick reply.

"Courage is not needed to step off a window ledge and jump out." She pointed to the offensive hole in the wall. "Of what benefit will I be to Rainier if I am dead," she countered quickly.

"But you are obligated to try. How is Rainier going to feel about you if you let yourself be kept here when you have a means of escape? Are you not being just a little bit selfish, thinking only of your own life?"

"But 'tis not just my own life. I have to consider the babe." Rebecca let both her hands cover her belly, protecting what was nestled deep within. "I would do anything to protect this small part of Rainier."

She walked toward the door, still arguing.

When she turned around, she was shocked and surprised to see Rainier standing there. She blinked a few times.

He was still there. He stood there smiling, then opened his arms.

Rainier knew that Rebecca was fine when he heard her trying to talk herself into climbing down the rope.

He was also pleased to hear about their babe.

She looked tired. With dark circles under her eyes, he wondered when she had slept last.

But she looked good, even if she was dressed like a squire. The hose she wore brought his attention to her legs. He smiled, then remembered Duncan on his way up and frowned. Nothing to do about it now. The tunic she wore would make it easier to climb down.

Rebecca gave a squeal of delight as she ran into his arms. She kissed him, and felt a moment of relief when he kissed her back. He was no dream!

Duncan appeared only moments later in the window.

"Yes, yes, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she kept repeating as she clutched her hands together, then tightly hugged Rainier again.

Rainier held her away to get a good look at her. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice low so the guard would not hear.

"Yes, oh yes. Fine. Especially now that you are here. Both of you," she corrected as she looked at Duncan again.

Rainier stroked her hair as he smiled down at her, letting her know with his smile and eyes how much she meant to him.

"I knew you would come." She turned in Rainier's arms to look at Duncan. "And now that you both are here, all we have to do is eliminate the guard, who is probably sleeping down at the end of the hall. Then we can leave." She smiled at them both, obviously pleased that freedom was so close.

Freedom through the front door.

She sounded so sure of herself.

He looked up at Duncan, who was leaning against the door with his arms across his chest. Rainier knew he was listening for any movement outside the door while trying not to laugh at her absurd idea.

"Rebecca," Rainier turned her around to face him.

“Duncan and I would never be able to get ourselves, much less with you, out that way.”

Rebecca’s smile faltered. “Then, how do you plan to get us out?”

Rainier did not have to answer. He knew from her expression when she understood.

Rebecca looked at Rainier, then at Duncan.

“No,” she whispered as she started to push herself away. “I cannot go down that way.” He heard the panic start in her voice.

“Rebecca, you *can* do it, and I will be with you all the way,” he calmly whispered.

She backed further away, pointing toward the window. “Do you think I would still be here if I *could* go out that way?”

She was beginning to breathe faster.

“I cannot. *I just cannot*,” she forcefully whispered as she shook of her head. “Please Rainier, do not make me.”

As she tightly wrung her hands together, Rainier gave her shoulders a shake. “Rebecca, look at me. Look at me,” he demanded.

Her eyes were huge and moist, her fear making them unusually bright.

“I know you are frightened, Rebecca. But do you trust me?”

Her face made a slight frown, vaguely remembering him asking her the same thing sometime before. “Of course I do, but—”

“Do you trust me?”

She looked at him, at Duncan who was silently watching them both, then back at Rainier. “Yes.”

“Good, because I *am* going to get us down, together and in one piece. All you need to do is trust me.”

“But—”

“No, I can take care of this.”

Tears started to pool in her large eyes as she looked at the window again. But Rainier blocked her view with his body.

"Rebecca," he whispered. "I am right here beside you." He gently stroked her cheek. "We *will* make it. I promise. Do you trust me?"

Rebecca looked up at her husband and knew that somehow he would take care of everything. All she had to do was lean on him. She knew he was strong enough to take care of them both if she just let him.

She slowly nodded her head. Rainier smiled as he squeezed her shoulders, then quickly went to the window.

Rebecca was terrified. If this tower had reached to the clouds, it would not be further away from the ground than it was right now.

She looked at the two men in her small room, Rainier poised on the window while Duncan remained by the door.

She did trust Rainier. He seemed so sure of himself, so confident. If only she was as sure.

Rainier turned to look at her. "Ready?"

NO, her mind screamed.

Her throat wanted to swallow something, but it was suddenly dry. She used her tongue to wet her dry lips, not that it helped.

Speaking seemed to be too big an obstacle, so she nervously nodded her head. She did not want to approach the window. Her stomach was already twisting in knots. If she made it without getting sick, well, she was sure Rainier would appreciate it.

"I know this is going to be difficult for you, but I want you to do exactly what I tell you." He put his hand under her chin to raise her face to him, his expression a silent question.

She saw understanding in his hazel eyes. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath then let it out. As she opened her

eyes, Rainier filled her vision. She thought again of the babe she carried. Yes, he would take care of them.

“Yes.”

He smiled at her. “Good,” then quickly kissed her.

Lowering himself, she followed his instructions as she climbed on his back, linking her hands together around his neck while her feet wrapped around his waist. He readjusted her left arm to link under his left arm to prevent her from choking him.

She refused to look down, not because Rainier told her not to, but because self-preservation was taking over. Looking down meant certain death. Looking straight ahead meant, well, it meant not looking down.

She closed her eyes as he climbed onto the window ledge, then decided to keep them closed the whole time. She felt the edge of the window scrape her thighs as he wiggled through the narrow window.

For a moment, she entertained the thought of letting go and crawling back inside her cell. He must have read her mind because he reached down with his hand and gently stroked her calves hugging his waist. He turned his head and whispered, “Keep a firm hold.”

Rainier smiled when her arms and legs tightened around him. He knew she was terrified and probably thinking of crawling back right about now.

“Hold on!”

Rebecca felt herself pitch forward when he launched himself out the window, then swung abruptly around. She knew he had positioned himself so that his feet were now against the wall. Her already swiftly beating heart began beating faster. She had her jaw locked, her teeth clamped together to keep from screaming in his ear.

She could feel the muscles in his arms and shoulders flex with each move. She gently swayed to the right, then the left, right, left, each time he shifted hands. She squeezed

her hold, making sure she would not slip.

He felt her grip tighten, her gasping breath with each move he made. He decided to get her mind off their descent.

“Where did you get the rope?”

When she did not answer, Rainier asked again.

“Rope?” she barely managed to whisper.

“Yes, where did you get it?”

Rebecca had to think a moment. “Lucy.”

“Lucy?”

“Uh-huh.”

Rainier felt rather than heard her answer. “And who is Lucy?”

Another pause.

“Rebecca, who is Lucy?”

A shorter pause. “Servant.”

“Did she also get the clothes for you?”

He felt a slight nod of her head.

“How did she get the rope past the guards?”

Another pause. “Under her gown.”

“Under her gown?”

He felt Rebecca nod her head.

“Smart girl. How did you hide the rope from the guards?”

The pause was shorter this time. “Under the cot.”

“And the clothing?” He already figured out how Lucy got the clothes past the guard, but wanted to keep Rebecca talking, keep her mind off what they were doing.

“Wore them under her gown.”

He noticed her answers were longer. She was starting to think of something else. “How long have you two been planning this escape?”

He felt Rebecca take a deep breath. “Almost a week.”

“How many different guards did you have?”

“Three.” Another pause. “I was afraid the guards would

notice the rope and clothes under my cot.”

“You must have hidden it well.”

“I stayed up at night in case they came inside and searched my room.”

Rainier paused on the wall. “When was the last time you slept?”

Another pause.

“Rebecca?”

“About, three days.”

Rainier mentally cursed Lionel for causing his wife such discomfort before resuming their descent. A quick glance told him they were almost halfway down.

“But I knew you would come.”

Rainier’s quick smile disappeared with her next words.

“Even though Lionel said you would not.”

Rebecca felt Rainier stop, his muscles tightening as he held both their weight on the rope.

“He said that?”

Rainier felt rather than heard her agreement.

“Why?” Rainier began his decent again.

“Because of your mistress.”

Rainier came to another stop. “What mistress?”

“The one you have at Kensington.”

A pause. He started to count to ten, but then remembered it did not help last time. “Rebecca, there is no mistress at Kensington, except you.”

He felt her smile. “I know. He said you would not want me.”

Rainier felt his anger for this man building. But instead of asking Rebecca to explain, she continued herself.

“Said I would be ugly, and that you would forever question whether the babe was yours, or his.”

Rebecca could not hear the words her husband whispered to himself.

“But I told him you trusted me, and that I trusted you.”

She said it with such confidence, Rainier wanted to turn around right then and kiss his wife. Then he felt her shudder as she squeezed her arms and legs tighter. Something had frightened her.

He tried to keep his voice calm. They were almost at the bottom. "What else did he say?"

Rebecca was silent, but he felt her head turn away.

"Rebecca, what else did he say?"

Her first words were muffled in his tunic. "....something that would make me lose the babe."

Rainier came to another stop. "Did he give you something?"

"No. But he said he might. I was scared."

He was going to enjoy watching Lionel struggle for life after he was done. When they reached the bottom, Rainier gave a sigh of relief.

"We are down," he said, looking up to see Duncan descending at a quicker rate now that they were on the ground.

When Rebecca's feet touch the ground, she almost gave way to tears. Opening her eyes, she looked up to see how far they had come.

"I did not realize it was that high!" she whispered to herself.

Rainier hugged his wife as Duncan also reached the ground. Quickly they made their way to the camp.

He knew his wife was tired, and that her mind was probably numb from climbing down the tower. But before he left with his men, he needed to reassure her.

He took her inside his tent. Hugging her at that moment, he felt like he never wanted to let her go. "Rebecca, I promise that as long as we are married, you will be the *only* mistress at Kensington." He placed his large, rough hand upon her still flat stomach with such a gentle touch.

“And every time I look at you as *our* child grows, I will know ‘tis because you carry *our* child, that we both made.”

Rebecca began to cry as she rested her head on his shoulder, her hand covering his.

“I am looking forward to watching my son grow within you. I want to put my hands on you and feel him when he moves. I want to talk to him during these months so that my voice will not be strange to him.” He paused. “I want him to be greeted by two parents when he enters this world.”

Rainier lifted her face, his eyes locking with hers.

“I want him to trust us, as much as you have trusted me.”

Rebecca smiled. “I told him you would believe me.”

“Always, my love.” The kiss he gave her told her how much he had missed her, how pleased he was about the babe, and how much he loved her. When he felt her tears, he simply held her in the circle of his strong arms while she cried tears of relief.

As he held her, he sat down by the blankets, rocking his wife. Soon, she was fast asleep.

He gently laid her down and covered her with a blanket. He watched her for several minutes while she slept. She looked so young.

She looked at peace.

She looked tired.

She looked beautiful.

She had trusted him!

As he left the tent, his smile disappeared.

Lionel would pay for trying to make her doubt him. He would pay dearly for all the damage he had done.

He gathered his men, making his final plans.

Rainier divided his men into three parts, Roger and Gaylon each taking a third, and leaving a handful of men behind to guard the camp. Lionel was still inside the keep,

since no one had seen him leave yet.

As he put on his armor, he was thinking of his plan of attack.

Lionel was going to pay!

Chapter 28

Rebecca was awakened by Sinclair shouting at her. When she opened her eyes, he was running through the tent, gathering what weapons he could. She was trying to focus on his words as he hauled her up. She was having trouble hearing what he was telling her because of all the noise outside, especially Nathan screaming at Sinclair from the other side of the tent. Sinclair seemed to be in a hurry.

Cutting the rear tent wall with his dagger, he pulled her through the opening.

Outside the tent, the noise level grew. She heard metal clashing against metal, men shouting and screaming.

The camp was under attack!

As they went through the brush, she could just glimpse the men in the camp. It appeared that Lionel's men had Rainier's men greatly outnumbered. She could see Nathan holding off several men from the front of her tent. She was fully awake now.

Where was Rainier? She did not see him anywhere. And where was Sinclair taking her?

They started to climb the hillside, the noise of the battle fading in the background. Sinclair did not let up the pace,

but continued to pull her along.

Sinclair stopped to look back at the camp. He was torn between his desire to help the men and his duty to protect Lady Rebecca. His duty won out. No matter what happened, keeping her safe was his first responsibility.

Rebecca leaned against a tree, trying to catch her breath. As she looked down, she noticed that she was still wearing the tunic and hose from the tower. She must have fallen asleep before changing.

"What happened? Where is Rainier?"

"Lionel's men attacked while Rainier was down at the keep with most of his men. He must have a hidden exit." Sinclair handed his dagger to Rebecca. "Put this on, just in case you need it."

Rebecca put the belt around her waist, then positioned the dagger so that her hand could grab it with ease.

Sinclair suddenly froze, then pushed Rebecca under a bush. Both were on their bellies as the men approach.

There were six of them talking among themselves as they scoured the hillside.

"I will be glad when this is all over," the first one spoke. "I for one am more than ready to go home,"

"I agree," the second one answered. "Lionel has driven his men to their limit with this obsession."

The third one grumbled, obviously very displeased.

"Well, we can forget about going home until we find that girl," the second one spoke again. "He wants her back, alive!"

Rebecca looked at Sinclair, but he was intent on watching the men as they walked by.

They were just getting out of earshot when the first one continued. "Lionel will never rest until she is found."

Sinclair watched the backs of the men until they disappeared from sight.

Rainier had no trouble entering the keep. With Gaylon and Rogan's men circling the castle, it took no time to scale the walls and open the gates. The men inside were no match for his trained men. The air filled with the sound of swords clanging, men grunting with exertion, men screaming out in pain. It took less than an hour before he had taken possession of Dougal Castle. He took a moment to calm his breathing. Still holding his sword and shield, he quickly inspected the remains. With only a few skirmishes remaining, he scanned the area, looking for Lionel. He had his description from the innkeeper.

A man rushed him, his sword held high as he attempted to strike Rainier down.

Rainier raised his shield, easily deflecting the blow, then swung one time across the man's body.

The man crumpled to the ground, his body shuddering in agonizing pain. Rainier recognized the false messenger sent to lure him away from Kensington. The man turned his head to glimpse at Rainier standing above him.

He knew he was dying. He saw the cold hatred in Rainier's eyes and understood when Rainier spat upon him. The man thought about all he wanted to do over the next few decades. These were his last thoughts as Rainier's face blurred into blackness.

Rainier watched as the man took his final breath, no longer hearing the noise around him. He took another deep breath to clear his mind. One never escaped the realities of war.

Rainier suddenly saw Lionel. Cutting across the courtyard, Rainier met him outside the blacksmith's door, blocking his path.

Lionel looked momentarily surprised.

He already knew the answer, but Rainier asked anyway.

He needed to hear the answer from him. "Why did you take Rebecca?"

"Ah! You must be Rebecca's new husband," he guessed. Lionel felt the power emanating from this man. He noticed how easily he held his sword and shield. This man would be ruthless, single-minded in his quest. "I must admit I rather enjoyed having your wife's company this past month."

Rainier merely narrowed his eyes, his head tipping just a bit.

"I was surprised anyone would marry her again, after the awful situation with her first husband."

"She was not to blame." Rainier paused. "But then, you already knew that."

Lionel shrugged his shoulders as he began to slowly circle Rainier, making sure his sword was always between them.

"Why did you take her," Rainier asked again, watching as Lionel tried to maneuver into a better position. Rainier himself began to circle, keeping the advantage he already had.

"Your wife is rather pretty," he began as he looked at his position. "I can see why you wanted her yourself."

Rainier remained silent.

"She was with me for a considerable time. I rather enjoyed her company. I suppose you know she is now carrying a child."

Rainier knew the man was trying to bait him.

"I wonder who the child will favor. You, or me?"

The implication was clear. "Rebecca was already carrying *my* child when you took her."

"But, who is to say that she lost the child, and then became with child again?"

Rainier was calm. "She never lost it."

Lionel realized that Rebecca's husband was not going to be easily deceived. He shrugged his shoulders again like

he cared not. "It matters not. I know she already escaped. I am sure you somehow helped. But she will be returned to me. I have waited this long, and I will not fail now."

Rainier narrowed his eyes slightly, wondering if Lionel had another plan. "You already have failed." With his sword he pointed all around. "Your men are gone. There is nothing left."

Lionel looked around. "These men may be gone, but I already sent another party out to retrieve her. I would not be surprised if they have not already taken her, again."

"She is safe from you."

"Is she?" Lionel asked. "With most of your men here, I am sure you only left a handful back at your camp. And when my men return her to me, I can assure you, she will face the same fate as the others!"

Lionel rushed toward Rainier. He raised his sword, slashing at Rainier, who raised his own sword to block the blows. Lionel's sword kept slicing through the air, hitting the shield and sword Rainier always kept up. Lionel dodged to the right when Rainier lunged forward, giving Lionel enough time to turn and run for the wall.

Rainier followed him as he climbed the steps leading to the walkway on top of the wall.

After reaching the top, Lionel turned around.

Rainier approached Lionel with deliberate steps.

Rainier noticed a wildness in Lionel's eyes. "What do you really want, Lionel?"

"I want what is rightfully mine," he shouted as he charged Rainier again, his sword high as he swung again and again, each time Rainier easily held him off. Lionel's face turned red with rage. "She carried the Castelle name!"

"Not now," Rainier calmly responded.

Lionel's eyes narrowed. "But she did. And for that alone, she will die."

The two men circled each other as each deflected the

blows from their opponent's sword. Rainier felt the edge of the walkway under his feet as he stepped back, his shield held high as Lionel swung with all his might.

Lionel suddenly lunged again. Rainier quickly stepped to the side and watched as Lionel propelled himself forward. For a moment, Lionel teetered on his toes as he tried to regain his balance on the edge of the walkway, but his momentum was too much.

He turned slightly as he felt the emptiness beneath him. He knew his death was only moments away. *This was not how it was supposed to end.* He gave a short laugh as he realized, too late, that he had failed, just like his father.

His cry of disbelief was only heard by Rainier as he lost his footing, his hands grabbing at empty air as he fell to his death.

Rainier looked down at the twisted form of the man.

It was over.

As he climbed down, Duncan stood beside him. "Was that Lionel?" Duncan asked.

"It was." Rainier shook his head, looking up and around the courtyard, taking a deep cleansing breath. "Did any of his men leave?"

Duncan shook his head. "No one has left. Gaylon's men are blocking the gate."

Rainier looked toward the gate, noticing several men standing guard. He nodded in understanding. He turned around, noticing the servants gathering around. He scanned the faces.

"I am looking for Lucy," he called out in a loud voice.

A timid girl with dark black hair slowly approached. Rainier saw the fear in her wide blue eyes.

He gave her a smile. "I am indebted to you for helping my wife."

Lucy's eyes softened as she gave a beautiful smile along with a quick curtsy.

"You are welcome at Kensington, if you wish."

"Yes, thank you, milord." As Rainier turned to walk away, she reached out and gently touched his arm. Startled, Rainier looked down into Lucy's face.

"I was with her the whole time. He never touched her."

"I know." Rainier smiled at Rebecca's new friend. "She told me."

He turned to leave but stopped when she touched him again. "There is something else you need to know!"

They were hiding behind a clump of trees, taking a break from the frantic pace Sinclair had set for them. Rebecca was still numb from lack of sleep.

Sinclair was deciding what to do and where to go when he heard the hiss of an arrow in flight. A second later, Sinclair fell, holding the arrow above his chest near his shoulder.

The man responsible appeared, his longbow in one hand, the other holding the bush he was hiding behind to one side. Sinclair was trying to rise to meet the enemy, but he could not manage to move.

Rebecca knew that unless she helped stop the bleeding, Sinclair would be dead in no time.

Lionel's man approached Sinclair, saw he was no threat anymore, then turned toward Rebecca.

"Run," Sinclair cried out in a whispered voice.

Rebecca was torn between saving herself and her child, and helping Sinclair. It was this indecision that allowed Lionel's man to approach so quickly. He reached for her, but she had turned to flee at the last moment. She felt him grab a handful of hair and jerk her backward, causing her to cry out in pain and stumble.

Without thinking, she grabbed the dagger at her side.

As her arm sliced through the air, the dagger made contact with his flesh. He let go of her hair as he clutched his shoulder, bright red blood spilling over his hand. She watched his gaze turn to her, unadulterated hatred showing. Orders or not, she knew he was going to kill her!

He brought his sword up, ready to strike, when his eyes widened. His mouth opened to scream, but no noise came out. Rebecca rolled away as he fell to his knees, still holding his sword high above his head. He then relaxed his hold, letting the sword fall. As he fell on his face, Sinclair fell to his knees behind him, his own sword falling heavily to the ground.

Rebecca jumped up and ran toward Sinclair, stepping over the dead man. She was trying to look at the wound, but Sinclair would have none of it.

“We need to keep moving.”

“You cannot keep going, Sinclair. You are wounded. Here, let me take a look at it first.” She was trying to tear the tunic when Sinclair pushed her hands away.

“No, we keep moving. Still too dangerous here.” He reached up and grabbed the arrow protruding from his shoulder. With a quick snap and a wince of pain on his face, he threw the broken half of the arrow down on the ground.

“We need to be away, now,” he said between gritted teeth. With that, he started again for the brush, one hand holding his side, the other his sword. A very frightened Rebecca was following behind.

They had traveled for almost an hour when Sinclair finally passed out. Leaning heavily on Rebecca for the last half-hour, her tunic was caked with Sinclair's blood.

She tried to drag Sinclair to a better hiding place, but the big man was too heavy for her. At least he was still, finally.

She opened his shirt and looked at the damage. After inspecting it, she was sure it looked worse than it was. Her

big concern was the amount of blood he had lost. She took off his shirt and carefully prodded with her fingers around the exposed area. Gently rolling Sinclair over on his side, she felt the back of his shoulder where the arrow was resting just under the skin.

Sure now that no bone was hit, she prepared to push the remaining arrow through his shoulder. She closely examined the broken end, making sure no piece of the arrow would break free and stay in his shoulder. She then tore a piece of cloth from his saturated shirt and wrapped it around the broken end of the arrow.

Looking at Sinclair's face, she could see the pain he was in, even though he was unconscious.

Closing her eyes, she gave a silent prayer. Before she could change her mind, she quickly gave a sharp push on the arrow shaft, feeling it pierce the skin in his back. Sinclair groaned, then became silent again. Leaning over him, she grabbed the broken arrow just below the sharp head, quickly pulling it through. She heard another groan from Sinclair, then silence.

With the arrow out, the bleeding increased. She folded the shirt to use for padding against the wound, using pressure on both ends to stop the flow of blood. She then took his sword off his belt, using the wide belt to hold the padding in place. She wished she had some water to clean it, but when you had nothing, you did the best you could.

When she had finished, she dug her hands into some loose dirt, rubbing it around her hands to remove as much of the blood as she could.

Satisfied there was nothing else she could do to help Sinclair without water or her herbs, she looked around the forest. She noticed that Sinclair's body was in plain view. Quickly she got some brush to cover him. Leaves and a few branches were all she could manage.

While sitting there, she wondered what she should do

now.

This was all Lionel's fault. He started this. He caused this. Right now, she had to take care of Sinclair, but Lionel would get what was due him.

She was so tired. Closing her eyes, she tried to put together a plan. While thinking of ways to eliminate Lionel, she suddenly opened her eyes.

She heard voices.

Lionel's men were closing in on them. And Sinclair was totally defenseless. She looked at Sinclair's motionless body still buried beneath the brush, then grabbed his sword. She checked to make sure her dagger was still in place.

With both weapons, Rebecca moved toward the rise on the other side of the path, away from Sinclair. There she would wait for Lionel's men. Maybe she would not get Lionel today, but she would get some of the men responsible for Rainier's men death back in camp.

The voices got louder.

The men came closer.

Rebecca waited!

Chapter 29

Rainier had come back to the camp to find it in a shambles. A few of his men along with Lionel's men were laying around the camp, dead. The remainder of his men were trying to put the camp aright. He noticed that his men appeared to have been outnumbered by about five to one. He quickly noted which of his men were dead.

The fight in the keep was over rather quickly. Once Lionel was dead, the rest of his men seemed to lose the desire to keep fighting.

It was from Lucy that he learned of a tunnel that led beyond the trees and into the forest.

When Rainier heard this, he quickly reorganized his men, leaving enough to take care of Lionel's men, the rest mounting quickly to return to his camp.

As he quickly scanned the camp, he noticed the tent that Rebecca was in. It was collapsed on one side. Nathan's body was partially laying on the tent, four of Lionel's men laying dead around him.

Fear gripped Rainier's heart.

As he raised the tent and looked around, he let out his breath.

She was not here.

Then he noticed the tear in the rear of the tent. Somehow she had gotten out.

Or someone had gotten in.

Rainier was on one knee looking past the tear and on the ground, reading the signs in the dirt. "Someone was with her," he said to no one in particular. He heard one of his men approach.

He turned his head and saw Lyle. "Yes."

"It appears Lionel's men tried to catch the camp by surprise, but it looks like the camp was prepared, which is why only a few of our men are dead."

Rainier nodded his head as his gaze swept back to Nathan's body.

"Sinclair is also missing," Lyle added.

Sinclair? Sinclair!

Rainier was looking again at the footprints past the tent, leading into the dense forest. "His must be the other set of footprints with Rebecca." So she was not abducted again, but rather Sinclair was protecting her, getting her away from harm. He analyzed the camp and knew that Nathan had held off the four men while Sinclair obviously got Rebecca out.

He would not let Nathan's death be for nothing!

Leaving the others to tend to the camp and the wounded, Rainier selected ten of his men and started to follow the path that Sinclair and Rebecca took.

A mile away they found one of Lionel's men dead. Rainier noticed the wound and figured Sinclair had eliminated him. He also noticed the amount of blood on the ground. A quick look around revealed half an arrow.

His first thought was that Rebecca might be injured. He knew Sinclair would protect her with his life. But was she the one hurt? If he were the enemy in hiding, he would eliminate the knight first. He gave a silent prayer that both

she and Sinclair were fine, and that the babe was unharmed.

With the possibility that some of Lionel's men were still around, he split his men up to cover more ground.

Miles and three of his men went to the right while Duncan took three others and went to the left. Rainier and the last two kept heading straight. The thickness of the brush caused him and his men to dismount, tying their horses and continuing on foot.

Rainier and his men had traveled for just under twenty minutes when he faintly heard a familiar sound, the sound of swords drawn in battle.

Rainier and his men turned toward the sound. He hoped his men would not kill Lionel's men yet. He needed to know where Rebecca and Sinclair were.

What he expected to see as he reached the clearing was not what met his eyes.

One of Lionel's men was holding his hand over his chest, trying to stop the rapid flow of blood from the deep cut he had. The other two men had their swords drawn, defending themselves from the lone figure who was wielding his sword with such vengeance.

As he looked at the lone fighter, Rainier's look of confusion turned to astonishment.

Rainier watched as Rebecca tried to hit one of the remaining men. It was obvious the men were trying to not hurt her but to take her alive.

Rainier saw the blood on her tunic and wondered where she was hurt. Wherever it was, she was still able to swing that sword. And where was Sinclair? He signaled to his men, each one moving in the opposite direction. He knew if Lionel's men saw them, they would rush and take Rebecca, regardless of whether she was injured or not.

Rainier heard a groan of pain. He quickly looked to the source of the sound, noticing that Lionel's men also heard

the sound.

The mound of leaves and brush started moving, revealing a hand and a shoulder. Recognizing the danger, Lionel's two remaining men quickly moved around Rebecca and headed for Sinclair.

Rebecca, though, was quicker. She lifted the sword and ran to intercept the men.

"NO," she shouted.

She stood in front of Sinclair with her legs braced apart, her arms holding the heavy sword, challenging anyone to come closer.

As the men tried to circle Rebecca and Sinclair, Rainier was thinking of the best way to approach this situation. He knew the sword had to be getting heavy. But when she thought Sinclair was threatened, he saw renewed strength envelop her limbs. He saw it in the way she held the sword and in the confidence she had in her stance. She was no longer protecting herself. She was also protecting Sinclair!

She lunged forward, her sword aiming at the closest man.

The man effectively blocked each of her swings.

Rainier was surprised at her ability to move around with the sword. As heavy as the sword was, she swung it with precision. The soldier in him noticed her movements were controlled. He knew of the beating she was taking, and that her arms had to be hurting by now. Not only was the sword heavy, but the vibration caused by the clashing swords would be going through her arms and her shoulders.

The second man made an attempt to get behind her, but Rebecca noticed and backed up closer to Sinclair, keeping the two men in front of her.

Rainier positioned himself behind Rebecca while Lyle and Ned moved on either side of the two men.

Rebecca was getting tired. The sword was heavy and

her arms were sore. She was not sure how much longer she could keep the men away from Sinclair. She heard a sound behind her and was about to turn around when she noticed the faces of the two men before her. They looked surprised as they looked behind her, then back at her. She saw their faces change as they made a frantic rush toward her. She raised her sword at the same time someone grabbed her from behind. Before she could turn around, she saw two more men rush from the bushes.

She was confused, but reacted to the strong arms taking the sword from her hands.

Rainier grabbed her arms, keeping the sword from flying backwards. As he slightly loosened his grip on her wrists, what he feared most, happened.

Somehow she had one hand free, and before he could really see her do it, she had the dagger out.

He held on to the one wrist and quickly blocked the swing, trying to grab the dagger out of her hand. Feeling the nick of the blade on his arm, he felt the flow of warm blood down his arm.

“No,” she kept screaming while she fiercely struggled. “No!”

“Rebecca, calm down,” he whispered over her shoulder as he held her secure to prevent her from moving at all. He felt her breath catch as she turned her head slightly.

She went totally still. Then she blinked a few times.

“Rainier?” she asked weakly as she turned around in her husband’s arms. Confused, she turned to see, not more of Lionel’s men, but Ned and Lyle walking toward them. Lionel’s three men were dead.

She turned again toward her husband. “How did you find me?”

Rainier managed to smile. “You have to ask?”

She weakly smiled back. “I forgot about your tracking skills.” She looked him over and noticed his arm bleeding.

“You are hurt!” Then she remembered Sinclair. “Sinclair has been hurt!”

She turned around and saw Ned and Lyle gently carrying him.

“What about Lionel?”

“Lionel has been dealt with. It is over.” His eyes quickly scanned her blood-soaked tunic. “Where are you hurt?”

“Hurt? I am not hurt.”

Even while she spoke, Rainier was running his hands around her body. Rebecca was more tired than embarrassed. She closed her eyes as her husband’s hands gently probed around her. He finally concluded that the blood on her was from Sinclair.

When he grabbed her and hugged her tight, she felt the tears begin to fall.

It was over!

Epilogue

Rebecca clutched her stomach as another pain gripped her body. With her teeth clenched, she tried to keep the cry within her as she waited for the pain to pass.

They were coming closer together.

Rainier's son was determined to enter this world today, and not wait another three weeks, like he was supposed to.

Not even born yet, and already bossing people around, and getting his way. He was Rainier's son, no doubt about it.

As she looked around, she realized that Kensington was too far away. She was never going to make it.

Aunt Katie had finally arrived last month, leaving her guests when she learned of Rebecca's pregnancy.

"We will have to move the bed again," Rebecca said to no one in particular when she saw the many loaded wagons Aunt Katie had trailing behind her. She did not hear Miles and Lyle behind her as they each gave an audible groan.

But Katie was a tremendous help. She kept Kensington running smoothly when Rebecca needed to rest. Katie and Agnes would sit for hours talking by the kitchen fire. It was obvious that Rainier himself was pleased that Katie finally

came for a visit.

She turned around to face her husband who was sleeping on the ground beside her. Rainier had taken the afternoon off to spend some time with her. Now she wished there were people about.

Another pain suddenly grabbed her, causing her to cry out loud.

Rainier came awake instantly, reaching for his sword laying alongside him. He saw the look on his wife's face and immediately knew what was happening.

"Why did you not tell me?" He looked her up and down, making sure she was unhurt anywhere else. He rose quickly, reaching down to help his wife up.

Rebecca was shaking her head as she held on to her swollen belly. "I will not make it, Rainier. The babe is determined to come, now." The last word came out in a strangled voice as another pain claimed her attention.

Rainier's face turned white. "Now?!" He looked around as Rebecca leaned forward to try to minimize the pain. "But Aunt Katie is not here. You will just have to wait." He reached down again to lift her up.

Rebecca shook her head again as she tried to smile. Rainier was use to giving orders and having them carried out without question. It was apparent he felt this situation was no different.

"I am afraid he will not wait." Rebecca started breathing fast as the last pain finally subsided.

"When did the pains start?" he asked as he knelt beside his wife, holding her hand while rubbing her shoulder with his other hand.

She looked up, an apology in her eyes. "I thought the morning meal was not sitting well with me."

Rainier looked down at Kensington, knowing his wife was probably right. They would not make it. He thought of riding for help, but he would not leave her alone like this.

Rebecca's face contorted as another pain gripped her. Rainier knew he was going to have nail marks on his arm when this was over. Her strength surprised him. These same hands that gently caressed his skin at night were locked in such a grip, he thought his bones would surely break. When the pain passed, she eased her hold, taking deep breaths.

Then her water broke.

He gave one more longing look toward Kensington, then back to his wife. His decision was made.

He would have to help deliver his son.

He was prayerfully hoping this was not going to be much different from when a foal is born.

Rebecca watched as Rainier held their son in his large hands. He held up each tiny hand, checking the fingers, then the toes. As the little fingers clamped onto his finger, Rainier grinned.

His son!

He was still in awe that he helped make this perfect little bit of life he held in his arms, both he and Rebecca. He was so tiny, this son of theirs.

He brought their son back to his wife, who was smiling as she watched them together.

He bent down and kissed Rebecca on the forehead, then on her lips.

"Thank you, for our son."

"He is precious, is he not?"

"He is beautiful, just like his mother."

Rebecca looked at her son. "What shall we name him?"

Rainier did not hesitate. "Jonathan."

Rebecca smiled as she nodded her head, her hand caressing the infant's cheeks. "One day," she softly

whispered to her son, "I will tell you about Nathan and how he bravely gave his life protecting you." She looked up at her husband. "Jonathan it is."

He helped clean Rebecca up as well as possible. After lifting her onto his horse, he handed their son up to her. For a moment, he just stood there and watched while Rebecca held their son.

Rainier smiled with pure male pride as he mounted the horse and sat behind his wife, wrapping his arms protectively around both her and their son.

As he came across the rise to see Kensington, he felt calm and content.

All because of Rebecca.

There was nothing else in life he could wish for at this moment that he did not already have. Rebecca had come into his life like a whirlwind and helped him to find his own life.

As they slowly rode back toward Kensington, he looked at all he had. If he lost Kensington and all the holdings around about, he knew he would still be happy and content, so long as Rebecca was by his side. He wondered if his parents were this happy, this content. He truly hoped so.

At the small cry from his son, he looked over Rebecca's shoulder to see his son safely cradled within her arms, smiling at her as she gently touched him with her finger.

The small, happy family entered through the gate of Kensington to be welcomed by their people.

A Note From the Author

Thank you for downloading this story. I enjoyed writing it, envisioning each scene as if it were a movie. Several scenes I laughed while writing, some I cried. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I would love to hear from you, to hear what your favorite part was.

I would welcome any and all comments. You can log back on to www.obooko.com and leave a review, or you can write to me directly at charmaincallaway@yahoo.com.

Again, thank you,

Charmain



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