

Ransom Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Alford liked to play games. He was especially partial to any game that involved cruelty.

He was having a fine time now, though in fact his day hadn't started out well at all. He'd returned to Dunhanshire at midday on Sunday soaked through and chilled to the bone because of an unexpected and torrential downpour that had caught him unaware en route, and feeling quite miserable, he certainly wasn't in the mood to hear that Lady Gillian had tried to help the boy escape. Before he could work himself up into a good rage—he'd already killed the soldier who had imparted the unpleasant news—Gillian and the boy were located and brought back to the castle, and they now stood before him, waiting to hear their punishment.

Anticipation heightened Alford's pleasure. He wanted them to wallow in their own fears, and making them guess what torture he had in mind for them was all part of Alford's game. The boy, the simpleton brother of Laird Ramsey, was too stupid to understand or speak, but Alford could tell he was frightened because of the way he kept trying to edge closer to Gillian. She, on the other hand, was proving to be quite a disappointment, and if he hadn't known better, he would have thought she was deliberately trying to ruin his fun. She didn't appear to be the least bit concerned about her fate. He couldn't discern any fear at all in her.

The bitch still had the power to spook him, and he silently cursed himself for his own cowardice because he couldn't hold her gaze long. Save me from the righteous, he thought to himself. Going into battle against a league of soldiers was far less intimidating than this mere slip of a girl, and although he reminded himself that he was the one with the power and that he could order her death by simply uttering a quick command, in his mind she still had the upper hand. He'd never forgotten how she had looked at him when he'd ordered her brought before him after the massacre. She had been a little girl then, but the memory still made him inwardly flinch. He knew she had seen him kill her father, but he'd believed that in time the memory would fade from her mind. Now he wasn't so certain. What else did she remember? Had she heard him confessing his sins to her father before he gutted him? The question brought chills to Alford's spine. Gillian's hatred frightened him, weakened him, made his skin crawl.

His hand shook as he reached for his goblet of wine, and he diligently tried to shrug off his fears and get down to the business at hand. He knew that his mind wasn't sharp now, but dull and muddled. It was unusual for him to become this inebriated in front of his friends. He'd been a heavy drinker for years because the memories wouldn't let

him rest. But he'd always been careful to drink when he was alone. Today he'd made an exception to his own rule because the wine helped ease his anger. He didn't want to do anything he might later regret, and though he had considered waiting until tomorrow to deal with Gillian's defiance, he decided that he was still clearheaded enough to get the chore over and done with so he and his companions could continue their celebration.

Alford stared at Gillian through bleary, bloodshot eyes. He sat at the center of the long table and was flanked by his constant companions, Baron Hugh of Barlowe and Baron Edwin the Bald. He rarely went anywhere without his friends, as they were his most appreciative audience. They so enjoyed his games that they often begged to join in, and Alford never had to worry that either one of them would ever betray him, for they were just as culpable in their past transgressions as he was.

Gillian and the boy hadn't eaten since early morning the day before, and Alford assumed both would be ravenous by now, so he forced them to watch while he and his friends dined on a feast worthy of kings and discussed various punishments. The table was heavily laden with pheasant, rabbit, peacock and pigeon, yellow wedges of cheese, chunks of coarse black bread with jam and honey, and sweet blackberry tarts. Servants rushed back and forth with widemouthed jugs of dark red wine and additional breaded trenchers piled high with more offerings to tempt their gluttonous appetites.

There was enough food on the table to feed an army. Watching the three of them eat was such a disgusting sight to Gillian that her hunger pains quickly vanished. She couldn't make up her mind which one was the most foul. Hugh, with his big protruding ears and pointed chin, kept making grunting noises while he ate, and Edwin, with his triple chins and beady red eyes, had worked himself into a sweat as he frantically shoved fistfuls of greasy meat into his mouth. He acted as though he thought the food would disappear before he could fill his enormous belly, and by the time he paused for air, his face glistened with beads of oily perspiration.

All three of them were drunk. While she stood there watching, they downed the contents of six jugs of wine and were now waiting while the servant poured more.

They were like pigs at the trough, but Alford, she decided, was by far the worst offender. Strands of pigeon skin dangled from his lips, and when he shoved a full, plump tart into his cavernous mouth, blackberry juice squirted down on both sides of his chin, staining his red beard black. Too drunk to care about his manners or appearance, he eagerly reached for another.

Alec stood on her left, near the hearth, watching the spectacle without making a sound. Every now and then his hand would touch hers. As much as she longed to comfort him, she didn't dare even look at him because Alford was watching her

closely. If she showed any concern or affection for the little boy, he'd have a weapon to use against her.

She had tried to prepare Alec as best she could by warning him that it would get worse before it was over, and she had also made him promise that no matter what happened, he would remain silent. As long as Alford believed the child didn't understand what he was saying, he would hopefully continue to speak freely in front of him and perhaps say something that would explain his purpose in stealing the boy.

When she couldn't stomach watching the animals eat any longer, she turned toward the entrance. She knew she must have played in this hall when she was a little girl, but she didn't have any memories at all. There was an old chest against the wall near the steps, and she wondered if it had belonged to her parents or if Alford had brought it with him. The top of the chest was cluttered with maps and rolls of parchment, but near the edge was a dagger. Alec had told her the soldier had taken one from him and tossed it on the chest. It was still there. She could see the unusual, intricate design on the handle and was strangely comforted by it. The dagger had been a gift from Alec's protector, Brodick.

Alford drew her attention when he let out a loud belch. She watched him wipe his face on the sleeve of his velvet tunic, then lean back in his chair. He seemed to be having difficulty keeping his eyes open, and his voice was heavily slurred when he spoke to her. "What am I going to do with you, Gillian? You've resisted me at every turn. Don't you realize I only have your best interests at heart?"

Edwin burst into raucous laughter. Hugh chuckled as he reached for his goblet again.

"You've been quite a nuisance," Alford continued. "I've been very accommodating to you. Didn't I leave you alone all the while you were growing up? I'll admit I was shocked to see what a beautiful woman you've become. You were such a homely, unappealing child, the transformation is really quite amazing. You have value now, my dear. I could sell you to the highest bidder and make a pretty fortune. Does that possibility frighten you?"

"She's looking bored, not frightened," Edwin remarked.

Alford shrugged indifference. "Are you aware, Gillian, that it took a full unit of soldiers to pry you away from your sainted relative? I heard that your Uncle Morgan

put up quite a fight, which I find quite amusing considering the fact that he's such an old, feeble man. Do you know I believe it would be an act of mercy on my part to put him out of his misery. I'm sure he'd appreciate a quick death in lieu of lingering on and on."

"My uncle is neither old nor feeble," she told him.

Edwin laughed. Gillian fought the almost irresistible urge to strike him. Dear God, how she wished she were stronger. She hated feeling so powerless and afraid.

"You will leave my uncle alone, Alford," she demanded. "He cannot hurt you."

He acted as though she hadn't spoken. "He's become a doting parent, hasn't he? Morgan wouldn't have fought so to keep you if he didn't love you like a father. Aye, he was defiant on your behalf, damn his hide," he added with a sneer. "I was also displeased to hear about your defiance. It was embarrassing, really. I expected you to immediately obey my summons. I am your guardian, after all, and you should have come running to me. I simply don't understand your resistance. No, I don't," he said. He paused to shake his head before resuming. "This is your home, is it not? I would think you would be eager to return. King John has decreed Dunhanshire will remain yours until you're wed. Then, of course, your husband will rule on your behalf."

"As it should be," Hugh interjected.

"You haven't weasled Dunhanshire away from the king yet?" Gillian couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice.

"I haven't asked for it," he muttered. "Why should I? It belongs to me all the same, for I am your guardian and therefore control all that is yours."

"Did John appoint you my guardian?" She asked the question to irritate him, for she knew the king had not granted Alford that right.

Alford's face turned red with anger, and he scowled at her while he adjusted his ill-fitted tunic and took another drink of wine. "You're so unimportant to our king that he's all but forgotten about you. I have said that I am your guardian, and that makes it so."

"No, it does not make it so."

"Alford is our king's most trusted confidant," Edwin shouted. "How dare you speak to him in such an insolent tone."

"She is insolent, isn't she?" Alford remarked. "Like it or not, Gillian, I am your guardian and your fate is in my hands. I shall personally choose your husband. As to that, I might wed you myself," he added offhandedly.

She wouldn't allow herself to think about such a repulsive possibility and continued to stare at Alford without reacting to his threat.

"You've promised her to your cousin," Hugh reminded him. "I've heard that Clifford is already making grand plans."

"Yes, I know what I promised, but when have you ever known me to keep my word?" Alford asked with a grin.

Hugh and Edwin laughed until tears streamed down their faces. Alford finally demanded silence with a wave of his hand.

"You've made me lose track of what I was saying."

"You were telling Gillian how displeased you were with her defiance," Edwin reminded him.

"Yes, so I was," he said. "It simply cannot go on, Gillian. I'm a forgiving man—a flaw really—and I can't help pitying the less fortunate, so I let your uncle's outrageous

behavior go unpunished. I also forgave you your resistance to my summons to come home."

He took another long swallow from his goblet before continuing. "And how do you repay me for my kindness? You try to help the little savage escape. As your guardian; I simply cannot allow your disobedience to go unpunished. It's time for you and the boy to learn a lesson in humility."

"If you beat her, Alford, she'll need time to recover before she goes on your important quest," Edwin cautioned.

Alford drained the rest of the wine, then motioned for the servant to refill his goblet. "I'm aware of that possibility," he said. "Have you noticed, Edwin, how the boy has attached himself to Gillian? He must foolishly believe she'll protect him from harm. Shall we prove to him how mistaken he is? Hugh, since you so enjoy your work, you can beat the boy."

"You will not touch him." Gillian made the statement very softly. It was far more effective than shouting, and she could tell from Alford's puzzled expression that she had caught him off guard.

"I won't?"

"No, you won't."

He drummed his fingertips on the table. "Pain will convince the boy how futile it is to try to escape. Besides, you have both inconvenienced me and I really can't disappoint Hugh. He so wants to hurt one of you." Alford turned to his friend. "Try not to kill the boy. If Gillian fails me, I'll have need of him."

"You will not touch the child," Gillian said again, though this time her voice was hard, emphatic.

"Are you willing to take his beating?" Alford asked.

"Yes."

Alford was stunned by her quick agreement and infuriated because she didn't look at all frightened. Courage was a foreign concept, and he had never been able to figure out why some men and women exhibited this strange phenomenon, while others did not. The trait had eluded him, and though he had certainly never felt the need to try to be courageous, those who did enraged him. What he lacked in his own character he detested in others.

"I will do whatever pleases me, Gillian, and you cannot stop me. I just might decide to kill you."

She shrugged. "Yes, you're right. You could kill me and I couldn't stop you."

He raised an eyebrow and studied her. It was difficult to concentrate, for the wine had made him quite sleepy and all he wanted to do was close his eyes for a few minutes. He took another drink instead.

"You're up to something," he said. "What is it, Gillian? What game do you dare play with the master?"

"No games," she answered. "Kill me if that is your inclination. I'm sure you'll come up with an adequate explanation to give our king. However, as you have just said, you have left me alone all these many years and then suddenly you force me to come back here. You obviously want something from me, and if you kill me—"

"Yes," he interrupted, "I do want something from you." He straightened up in his chair and looked triumphant when he continued, "I have joyous news. After years of searching, I have finally found your sister. I know where Christen hides from me." He watched Gillian closely and was disappointed because she didn't respond to his announcement. Rolling the goblet between his fingertips, he smirked. "I even know the name of the clan protecting her. It's MacPherson, but I don't know the name she

uses now. One sister will surely recognize another, and that is why I want you to go and fetch her for me."

"Why don't you send your soldiers to get her?" she asked.

"I cannot send my troops into the thick of the Highlands, and that is where she hides from me. Those savages would slaughter my men. I could, of course, gain King John's blessing for this undertaking, and I'm certain he would give me additional soldiers, but I don't want to involve him in a family matter. Besides, I have you to do this errand for me."

"The soldiers wouldn't know which woman she is, and the heathens certainly wouldn't tell. They protect their own at all costs," Hugh interjected.

"And if I refuse to go?" she asked.

"Someone else can bring Christen to me," he bluffed. "It would just be less complicated if you were to fetch her."

"And would this someone else be able to recognize her?"

"The Highlander who gave us this information knows the name Christen uses," Edwin reminded Alford. "You could force him to tell you."

"For all we know the Highlander could be bringing Christen with him tomorrow," Hugh said. "The message he sent indicated there was a problem—"

"An urgent problem," Edwin interjected. "And it isn't for certain that he will arrive tomorrow. It could be the day after."

"I don't doubt the problem is urgent." Hugh leaned forward in his chair so he could see around Alford. "The traitor wouldn't take the chance of coming all this way if it weren't an urgent matter. He stands the risk of being seen."

Edwin rubbed his triple chins. "If you beat the boy, Hugh, the Highlander might be displeased and demand his gold back."

Hugh laughed. "He wants the boy killed, you old fool. You were too drunk at the time to pay attention to the conversation. Suffice it to say that a bargain was struck between the Highlander and Alford. As you know, every so often a new rumor surfaces that the golden box has been seen, and every time King John hears of it, he sends troops to scour the kingdom. His desire to find the culprit who killed his Arianna and get his treasure back has not dampened over the years."

"Some say his fervor has increased tenfold," Edwin remarked. "The king has even sent troops into the Lowlands looking for information."

Hugh nodded. "And while John searches for his treasure, Alford searches for Christen because he believes she knows where the box is hidden. He means to prove her father stole it. Alford has also sent inquiries over the years to all the clans asking about Christen..."

"But none of his inquiries were ever answered."

"That is true," Hugh agreed. "No one would admit he knew anything about her... until the Highlander arrived."

"But what of the bargain struck between this traitor and our Alford?"

Hugh looked at the baron, waiting for him to answer the question, but Alford's eyes were closed and his head drooped down on his chest. He appeared to be dozing.

"I've never seen the baron so drunk," Hugh whispered loudly to his friend. "Look how the wine has lulled him to sleep."

Edwin shrugged. "And the bargain?" he nagged.

"The baron agreed to hold the boy captive to draw out his brother, Laird Ramsey Sinclair, so that the Highlander could kill him. The child's simply a pawn, and when the game is over and Ramsey is killed..."

"The boy no longer serves any purpose."

"Exactly," Hugh agreed. "So you see, beating him will not concern the Highlander at all."

"What did the baron get out of this bargain?"

"The Highlander gave him gold and something more," he said. "I will leave that for Alford to explain. If he wants you to know, he'll tell you."

Edwin was incensed to be left out. He shoved his elbow hard into Alford's side. The baron jerked upright and muttered a blasphemy.

Edwin then demanded to know the particulars of the bargain. Alford took a drink before answering.

"The traitor gave me information more important than gold."

"What could be more important?" Edwin asked.

Alford smiled. "I told you he gave me the name of the clan Christen hides in, and when he has gotten what he wants, he vows to tell me the name she uses now. So you see, if Gillian should fail me, the Highlander will come to my aid."

"Why won't he tell you now? It would make it so much easier if you knew..."

"He doesn't trust our baron," Hugh chuckled. "This Ramsey must die first. Then he swears he'll give us her name."

Gillian couldn't believe the three of them were talking so freely in front of her. They were all too drunk to be cautious, and she doubted that any of them would remember a word he said come tomorrow morning.

Edwin and Hugh seemed to think Alford was going to be given a reward by the king, and they were now discussing what he would do with it. She was blessedly thankful for their inattention, for when she had heard that the Highlander would soon arrive at Dunhanshire, she felt as though the floor had just dropped away. Inwardly reeling, her stomach lurched with her panic and she swayed on her feet. Fortunately, Alford appeared oblivious to her distress.

She knew why the traitor was coming, of course. He was going to tell Alford that the wrong boy had been taken, and God help Alec then. Time was about to run out.

Alford yawned loudly and squinted at her. "Ah, Gillian, I forgot you were standing there. Now what were we discussing? Oh, yes," he said as he turned to Hugh. "Since Gillian has so graciously offered to take the boy's beating for him, you may accommodate her. Don't touch her face," he warned. "I've learned from experience that the bones in the face take much longer to heal, and I do so want to send her on my errand as soon as possible."

"And the boy?" Hugh asked.

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Alford sneered at Gillian when he answered. "I want him beaten too."

She pushed Alec behind her. "You'll have to kill me first, Alford. I'm not going to let you touch him."

"But I don't want to kill you, Gillian. I want you to bring your sister to me."

The mockery in his voice was deliberate, for he wanted her to know he was laughing at her pitiful attempts to protect the child. Did she really believe her wants mattered to him? And how dare she give him orders, telling him what he could and could not do.

He would get his way, of course, but also teach her a valuable lesson at the same time. She would learn once and for all how insignificant she was.

"I swear to you, if you harm the boy, I won't bring Christen to you."

"Yes, yes, I know." Alford sounded bored. "You've already made that empty threat."

Hugh pushed his chair back and struggled to stand. Gillian frantically tried to think of something she could do or say that would stop the atrocity.

"You don't really want Christen back, do you?"

Alford tilted his head toward Gillian. "Of course I want her back. I have grand plans for her."

Deliberately trying to incite his wrath to take his attention away from the child, she laughed. "Oh, I know all about your grand plans. You want King John's precious box, and you think Christen has it, don't you? That's what you really want, and you think that if she's forced back here, she'll bring the treasure with her. You want to prove that my father murdered the king's lover and stole the box. Then you think you'll win the prize and Dunhanshire land. Isn't that your grand plan?"

Alford reacted as though she had just thrown boiling oil in his face. Howling in rage, he leapt to his feet. His chair flew backward, crashing into the wall.

"You do remember the box," he bellowed as he rushed around the corner of the table toward her, shoving Hugh out of his path. "And you know where it's hidden."

"Of course I know," she lied.

Another unearthly howl filled the hall as Alford ran to her. "Tell me where it is," he demanded. "Christen does have it, doesn't she? I knew... I knew she had taken it... that crazy Ector told me her father gave it to her. Your sister stole it from me, and you've known... all this time that I've been out of my mind searching... you knew... all this time you knew."

His temper exploded and he slammed his fist into her jaw, knocking her to the floor.

He was beyond reason now. His leather boot slammed into her tender skin. He viciously kicked her again and again, determined to make her scream in agony, to make her sorry that she had dared to keep the truth hidden from him. She had known all this time that the box could destroy her father's name and win Dunhanshire and the King's reward. All these years the bitch had deliberately tormented him.

"I will give the box to the king... and I alone," he railed, panting from exertion. "The reward will be mine... mine... mine."

Reeling from the blow to her face, Gillian was too dazed to fight back. Yet she had enough presence of mind to roll to her side and try to protect her head with her arms. Her back and legs took most of the pounding, but ironically the pain wasn't as terrible

as Alford wanted it to be, for in her nearly unconscious state, she barely felt the blows from his booted foot.

She became fully alert when Alec threw himself on top of her. Hysterical, he screamed at the top of his lungs as she pushed him away from Alford. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tight, trying to shield him, and then she grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed, hoping he would understand she wanted him to be silent. Alford's rage was fully directed on her now, and she was terrified that the boy's interference would draw his wrath.

Spittle ran down the sides of Alford's face with each obscenity he shouted as he continued to inflict his punishment. Quickly exhausted, he lost his balance and staggered backward. The sight so amused Hugh, he was overcome with laughter. Edwin didn't want the entertainment to stop and shouted encouragement to spur Alford on. Gillian's ears rang from the deafening noise, and the room swirled around her in a hazy blur, but she desperately tried to focus on the terrified little boy.

"Hush," she whispered. "Hush now."

As though someone had cupped a hand over his mouth to silence him, Alec stopped screaming in mid wail. Only inches away from her face, his eyes wide with fear, he gave her a quick nod to let her know he would be quiet. She was so pleased with him, she forced a weak smile.

"Get hold of yourself, Alford," Hugh shouted between gales of laughter. He brushed the tears away from his cheeks before adding, "She won't be able to go anywhere if you kill her."

Alford stumbled back against the table. "Yes, yes," he panted. "I must control myself."

He wiped the sweat from his brow, shoved the boy away from Gillian, and jerked her to her feet. Blood trickled down the side of her mouth, and he smugly nodded in satisfaction, for he could see the glazed look in her eyes and knew he had caused her considerable pain.

"You dare to make me lose my temper," he muttered. "You have no one to blame but yourself for your pain. I'll allow you two days' time to recover, and then you will leave Dunhanshire and go to that godforsaken land called the Highlands. Your sister hides with the clan MacPherson. Find her," he ordered, "and bring her and the box to me."

He adjusted his tunic as he staggered back to the table, angrily motioning for the servant to pick up his chair. Once he had resumed his seat, he mopped his brow with his sleeve and downed a full goblet of wine.

"If you fail me, Gillian, the man you hold so dear will suffer the consequences. Your uncle will die a slow, agonizing death. I swear to you that I will make him beg me to put him out of his misery. The boy should also be killed," he added almost as an afterthought. "But when you bring Christen and the box to me, I give you my word I will let the child live in spite of my promise to the Highland traitor."

"But what if she can only bring one back and not the other?" Hugh asked.

Edwin had also considered the question. "Which is more important to you, Baron, Christen or the king's box?"

"The box, of course," Alford answered. "But I want both, and if Gillian brings only one, her uncle dies."

Hugh swaggered around the table to face Gillian. The lust she saw in his eyes made her inwardly cringe.

He kept his gaze on her when he spoke to Alford. "You and I have been friends a long time," he reminded the baron. "And I have never asked for anything... until now. Give me Gillian."

Alford was surprised and amused by Hugh's request. "You would take a witch to your bed?"

"She's a lioness, and I would tame her," he boasted, obscenely licking his lips over the fantasy.

"She would cut your throat while you slept," Edwin called out.

Hugh snorted. "With Gillian in my bed, I assure you I wouldn't be sleeping."

He reached out to stroke her, but she shoved his hand away and took a step back. Hugh glanced down at the boy clinging to Gillian. She quickly forced him to look at her again and forget about the child when she said, "You are most foul, Hugh, and such a weakling, I almost pity you."

Shocked by the venom in her voice, he slapped her with the back of his hand.

She retaliated by smiling.

"Leave her be," Alford demanded impatiently when Hugh raised his hand to strike her again.

He leered at her for several seconds, then leaned forward and whispered, "I will have you, bitch." He turned around then and went back to his place at the table. "Give her to me," he nagged Alford. "I can teach her to be obedient."

Alford smiled. "I shall consider your request," he promised.

Edwin wasn't about to be left out. "If you give Gillian to him, then I must have Christen."

"She has already been promised," Alford said.

"You want her for yourself," Edwin accused.

"I don't want her, but I have promised her to another."

"Who did you promise?" Edwin asked.

Hugh laughed. "Does it matter, Edwin? Alford has never kept his word."

"Never," Alford snickered. "But there is always a first time."

Edwin grinned, for he was placated now and foolishly believed he still had a chance of winning Christen's hand. "If she is half as beautiful as Gillian, then I will be well-served."

"How long will you give Gillian to complete her errand?" Hugh asked.

"She must return to me before the celebration of the harvest begins."

"But that is not nearly long enough," Edwin protested. "Why, it will take her a full week, maybe two, just to get to her destination, and if there are any problems along the way or if she cannot find Christen..."

Alford raised his hand for silence. "Your prattle of worries on the bitch's behalf make my head spin. Hold your tongue while I explain the details to my ward. Gillian? Should you think to find sympathetic Highlanders to help you save your dear uncle, know this. A full contingent of my soldiers have surrounded his home, and if so much as one Highland warrior steps foot into the holding, Morgan will be killed. I will hold him ransom until you return. Do I make myself clear?"

"What if she tells Ramsey that his brother didn't drown and that you have him?" Hugh asked.

"She will not tell," Alford replied. "She holds the boy's life with her silence. Enough of your questions," he added. "I wish to talk about more amusing matters now, such as how I will spend the king's reward when I give the box to him. I have already suggested more than once that it was Gillian and Christen's father who stole the box and killed Arianna, and when the King finds out that Christen has had the treasure all this time, he will be convinced."

He motioned to the two sentries at the entrance to come forward. "The dear lady can barely stand up. See how she sways on her feet? Take her and the boy upstairs. Put her in her old room. See how thoughtful I can be, Gillian? I'm going to let you sleep in your own bed."

"And the boy, milord?" one of the soldiers inquired.

"Put him in the room next to hers," he said. "He can listen to her weep during the night."

The soldiers rushed forward to do their lord's bidding. One took hold of Alec's arm and the other reached for Gillian. She jerked away, steadied herself, and slowly, painfully, straightened up. Head erect, she held on to the edge of the table until she gained the strength in her legs, then took careful, measured steps. When she was close to the doors, she swayed and collapsed against the chest.

The soldier pulled her upright and dragged her the rest of the way to the stairs. Gillian folded her arms across her battered ribs and hunched over, and Alec held on to her skirt as they started up the steps. She stumbled twice before her legs gave out on her altogether. Making a tisking sound, the soldier lifted her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way.

The pain in her back became excruciating, and she fainted before they reached her door. The soldier dropped her on the bed and turned to grab hold of the boy, but Alec refused to leave. He bit and scratched and kicked the man who was trying to pry him away from Gillian.

"Leave him be," his friend suggested. "If we keep the two of them in the same room, we'll only have to post a guard in front of one door tonight. The boy can sleep on the floor."

The two men left the chamber then, locking the door behind them. Alec climbed up on the bed next to Gillian and held on to her. Terrified that she would die and leave him all alone, he sobbed uncontrollably.

A long while passed before she finally awakened. The pain pulsating through her body was so intense, tears flooded into her eyes. She waited until the room stopped spinning, then tried to sit up, but the pain was unbearable, and she collapsed against the bedcovers, feeling helpless and defeated.

Alec whispered her name.

"It's all right now. The worst is over, Alec. Please don't cry."

"But you're crying."

"I'll stop," she promised.

"Are you going to die?" he asked worriedly.

"No," she whispered.

"Do you hurt real bad?"

"I'm already feeling much better," she lied. "And at least we're safe now."

"No, we're not," he argued. "Tomorrow is gonna be—"

"Much better," she interrupted. "It's dark in here, isn't it? Why don't you tie the tapestry back from the window so we can have some light."

"The light's almost gone," he told her as he jumped off the bed and ran to the window to do as she had requested.

Golden ribbons of sunlight streamed into the room and, like silken banners, floated in the gentle summer breeze. They danced along the stone floor. She could see particles of dust in the air, could smell the musty scent of mildew in the bedcovers, and wondered how long the room had been closed. Had she been the last to sleep in this bed? It was unlikely. Alford liked to entertain, and he had surely had a multitude of guests at Dunhanshire since she had been banished.

Alec climbed back in bed with her and took hold of her hand. "The sun's going down. You slept an awful long time, and I couldn't get you to wake up. I got scared," he admitted. "And you know what?"

"No, what?"

"It is too gonna get worse 'cause I heard what the baron said. The Highlander's coming here."

"Yes, I heard what he said." She put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. She said a quick prayer that God would help her get her strength back—and soon—for time was critical.

"The Highlander will be here tomorrow or the day after." Alec became agitated. "If he sees me, he's gonna know I'm not Michael. Then maybe he'll tell on me."

While she once again struggled to sit up, she addressed his worry. "I'm sure he already knows you're not Michael. That's probably the urgent news he wishes to tell the baron."

He frowned intently, until the freckles on his nose blended together. "Maybe he wants to tell him something else."

"I don't think so."

"I don't want you to leave me."

"I'm not going to leave you," she promised.

"But the baron's gonna send you away."

"Yes," she agreed. "But I'm going to take you with me." He didn't look as if he believed her. She patted his hand and forced a smile. "It doesn't matter to us if the Highlander comes here or not, though in truth I would like to get a good look at him."

"Cause he's a traitor?"

"Yes."

"And then you can tell my papa and Brodick and even Ramsey what the traitor looks like?"

Alec was looking happy now, and so she quickly agreed. "Yes, that's exactly right. I would tell your father what he looks like."

"And Brodick and even Ramsey too?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what would happen? They'd make him sorry he was a traitor."

"Yes, I'm sure they would."

"How come we don't care if the Highlander comes here or not?"

"We don't care because we're leaving tonight."

His eyes widened in surprise. "In the dark?"

"In the dark. Hopefully the moon will guide us."

His eagerness was almost uncontainable, and he bounced on the bed. "But how are we going to do that? I heard the soldier lock the door when he left, and I think maybe there's a guard outside in the hall. That's how come I'm whispering 'cause I don't want him to hear me."

"We're still going to leave," she said.

"But how?"

She pointed to the opposite end of the room. "You and I are going to walk right through that wall."

His smile vanished. "I don't think we can do that."

He sounded so forlorn she felt like laughing. She realized then that in spite of her pain, she was actually feeling euphoric because she wasn't going to have to leave the little boy in Alford's lair. It had been a wonderful piece of luck that Alford hadn't hidden the child away from her, and she planned to take full advantage of his error in judgment.

She couldn't resist pulling Alec into her arms and hugging him. "Oh, Alec, God is surely watching over us."

He let her kiss his forehead and brush his hair out of his eyes before he squirmed out of her embrace. "How come you think God's watching out for us?" He was too impatient to wait for her answer. "Is God gonna help us walk through the wall?"

"Yes," she replied.

He shook his head. "I think maybe the baron made you daft when he hit you."

"No, he didn't make me daft. He made me angry, very, very angry."

"But, Gillian, people can't walk through walls."

"We're going to open a secret door. This used to be my bedroom when I was a little girl," she told him. "My sister's room was right next to mine, and whenever I got scared or lonely, I would open the passageway and run into her room. My father would become very upset with me."

"How come?"

"Because the passage was only to be used in dire circumstances, and he didn't want anyone to know about it, not even his faithful servants. My lady's maid, Liese, knew about the doorway though, and she used to tell me that most mornings she would find my bed empty. Liese figured out there had to be a hidden door because she knew I was afraid of the dark and wouldn't have ventured out into the hall during the night. Do you see that chest in front of the wall? My father put it there to discourage me. He knew the chest was too heavy for me to move, but Liese told me that I used to squeeze behind it to get to the door."

His eyes grew wide. "You disobeyed your papa."

"It seems I did," she answered.

He found her admission extremely funny and laughed until tears came into his eyes. Concerned the guard would hear the noise, she put her finger over her mouth as a sign for him to quiet down.

"But if the door goes to your sister's room," he whispered loudly, "how will we get out of there?"

"The passage also leads to the staircase that goes down into the tunnels below the castle. If it hasn't been sealed, it will take us outside the walls."

"Then can we leave now? Please?" he asked.

She shook her head. "We must wait until the baron has gone to bed. He's had so much wine to drink he'll pass out soon. Besides, he might send one of the servants to check on us before nightfall, and if we aren't here, she'll sound the alarm."

He slipped his fingers through hers and held tight, all the while staring at the wall, trying to figure out where the door was. When he turned back to Gillian, he was frowning again. "What if the baron sealed it?"

"Then we'll figure out another way to leave."

"But how?"

She didn't have the faintest idea, but she did know that she had to get Alec out of Dunhanshire before the Highlander arrived. "We could trick the guard into coming inside—"

In his excitement he interrupted her. "And I could hit him on his head and knock him down," he said, acting out his plan by pounding the bed with his fists. "I'd make him bleed," he assured her. "And if I stood on top of the chest, I could maybe even grab his sword, and then you know what? I could slice him up and make him cry something fierce. I'm very strong," he ended with a boast.

She had to resist the urge to hug him again, and she didn't dare smile because he might think she was laughing at him. "Yes, I can see how strong you are," she said.

He grinned with pleasure over her compliment and lifted his shoulders as he nodded.

Were all little boys as bloodthirsty in their fantasies as this one? she wondered. One minute he was crying and clinging to her and the next he was gleefully planning gruesome revenge. She didn't have any experience with children—Alec was the first she had been around for any length of time—and she felt thoroughly inadequate, yet at the same time, she also felt tremendously protective. She was all the little boy had separating him from disaster, and in her mind that meant Alec was still in danger.

"Does it hurt?"

She blinked. "Does what hurt?"

"Your face," he answered as he reached up to touch the side of her cheek. "It's swelling."

"It stings a little, that's all."

"How come you got a scar under your chin?"

"I fell down the steps. It happened a long time ago."

She patted the bed beside her and said, "Why don't you stretch out beside me and try to get some sleep."

"But it isn't night yet."

"Yes, I know, but we're going to be up all night walking," she explained. "You should try to rest now."

He scooted up close to her and put his head down on her shoulder. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I'm hungry."

"We'll find something to eat later."

"Will we have to steal food?"

From his exuberance she assumed he was looking forward to the possibility. "Stealing is a sin."

"That's what my mama says."

"And she's right. We won't steal anything. We'll just borrow what we need."

"Can we borrow horses?"

"If we're lucky enough to find a sturdy one and no one's around to stop us, then yes, we'll borrow a horse."

"You could get yourself hanged for stealing a horse."

"That's the least of my worries," she said as she shifted in the bed. Every inch of her body throbbed, and there simply was no comfortable position. She moved her bandaged arm down to her side and felt a prick, and only then remembered the surprise she had for Alec.

"I have something for you," she said. "Close your eyes tight."

He bolted upright onto his knees and squeezed his eyes shut. "What is it?"

She held up the dagger. She didn't have to tell him to look, for he was already peeking. The joy in his eyes made her feel like weeping.

"Brodick's dagger," he whispered in awe. "How did you find it?"

"You told me where it was," she reminded him. "I grabbed it from the chest on the way out of the hall. Keep it inside the leather sheath so you won't accidentally cut yourself."

He was so happy to have his treasure back, he threw his arms around her neck and kissed her swollen cheek. "I love you, Gillian."

"I love you too, Alec."

"Now I can protect you 'cause I got my knife back."

She smiled. "Are you going to be my champion, then?"

"No," he giggled, drawing out the word.

"Why not?"

He pulled back and told her what he thought should have been obvious. "'Cause I'm just a little boy. But you know what?"

"No, what?"

"We got to find you one."

"A champion?"

He nodded solemnly.

She shook her head. "I don't need a protector," she assured him.

"But you got to have one. Maybe we can ask Brodick."

"The mean one?" she teased. He nodded again.

She laughed softly. "I don't think..."

"We'll ask Brodick," he said, sounding very grown up. "'Cause you know why?"

"No, why?"

"You need him."

