

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*A Newfoundland
Land*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

The household was still asleep when Alex Graham snuck out of bed. Matthew grumbled, half opened an eye, and subsided back into sleep. On tiptoe, Alex traversed the room, stepping over one sleeping shape after the other. No more, she sang inside, throwing a look at the furthest wall and the as yet boarded up doorways. Matthew had promised he'd finish the extension today, and tonight they'd sleep in their new bedroom, an oasis of privacy after years living as cramped as salted herrings in a barrel.

Alex stuck her feet into her clogs, grabbed the little basket that contained her soap and oils, and stepped outside. The sun was no more than a promise on the eastern rim, the stands of grasses to her right sparkled with dew, and just by the door her precious rose was setting buds. This was their new home, a small pocket of domesticity in a wilderness that at times she found most intimidating. Not that she felt particularly threatened by the miles and miles of uninterrupted forest that surrounded her, but should anything happen they were very alone, their closest neighbours well over an hour's ride away.

When they had first arrived in 1668, not yet four years ago, this had been virgin forest, a gently sloping clearing with man-high grass and not much else. Now they had managed to carve out several sizeable fields and pastures, a respectable kitchen garden, as well as the yard she was now crossing on her way to the river. She turned to look back at the small house. The elongated wooden building with its shingled roof was already beginning to grey, acquiring an air of permanence that Alex found comforting. It spoke of roots – as yet shallow, even extremely shallow – but still, roots.

The water numbed her toes in a matter of minutes, but Alex didn't mind. She enjoyed these early morning outings, moments when she was alone with only her thoughts for company. A brisk wash, a couple of muttered curses at just how bloody cold the water was, and she was back on the bank, dressing quickly before settling down to comb her wet hair.

In the nearby shrubs, a couple of thrushes squabbled. The sun had risen enough to send a ray or two her way, and on the opposite bank a couple of deer came down to drink. So peaceful – until she became aware of the eyes. Strange that: there were eyes all over the place, but somehow one knew when another human being was gawking at you – in this case someone who was doing his or her best to stay hidden.

She returned her comb to the basket and groped until she found the knife. A sidelong glance revealed someone sitting just behind the closest stand of trees. Alex loitered, humming casually while straining her ears. Someone whispered, was hushed. She did a double take: women, not men. Without stopping to think overmuch – one of her major faults according to Matthew – she rushed for the trees.

One of the women squeaked. The other tried to run, slipped and fell.

“Sit,” Alex said, waving her knife at them. They complied, huddling together under the oak. They looked bedraggled, caps askew, one with tears in her apron, both quite dirty. Escaped bond servants, Alex guessed, and she recognised the monogram on one of the aprons.

“You've run away,” she said.

“Please, mistress, please don't tell.” The eldest – or at least the biggest – of the girls placed a protective arm round her companion, a thin little thing with tendrils of red hair peeking from under her dirty cap.

Hmm. Alex was no major fan of indentured servants, but her Leslie neighbours had paid good money for these two, and would be pissed off if they weren't returned.

“He hit us,” the girl continued. “Belted us, he did.”

“He did? For what?”

The younger girl hunched over, dark eyes never leaving Alex. “We stole.”

“Stole?” The other girl sniffed. “I didn’t steal. I took payment.”

“Payment?” Alex echoed.

The girl gave her a condescending look. “He helped himself.”

“Ah.” Alex was somewhat taken aback. She’d never have taken Peter Leslie for the lecherous type. “And now you’re planning to do what?”

“Walk.” The girl shrugged, sounding confident. Her red-haired friend nodded.

“To Providence?” Alex shook her head. That was well over a week’s walk, and the two girls seemed to have no sense of direction as they’d walked north from the Leslie settlement, rather than south.

“No, to St Mary’s City,” the younger girl said. Good luck to them. That was almost twice as far.

“You’re Catholic,” Alex said. No other reason to go that far – unless they’d done more than steal.

The elder girl glared at her. “And what if we are?”

“I couldn’t care less,” Alex told her with a little smile. “But it’s a very long walk – that way.” She pointed south. “How are you to survive, all on your own?”

“I have a knife.”

“Whoopee,” Alex muttered. She should send them straight back to the Leslies’, but she already knew she wouldn’t. Matthew wouldn’t like it, but on the other hand, why tell him? She gnawed her lip. “I’ll see what I can find. You’ll need food and a blanket or two.”

The youngest girl burst into tears and clutched at Alex’s skirts.

“Yes, yes,” Alex said, rather embarrassed by all this. She gestured into the deeper forest to their right. “Hide in there, somewhere. You’ll have to stay put until you hear me whistle for you.” She shoed them off, admonishing them to keep well out of sight, and set off up the incline.

★

She was almost back at the house when her three youngest children ambushed her.

“Ouff!” Alex said when Sarah barrelled into her. Her daughter grabbed at Alex’s legs and rubbed her head against Alex’s skirts, dislodging what little remained of her night braid. The fair hair fell in soft waves around Sarah’s face, making her look like a sweet angel – which she definitely was not.

“Where have you been?” Matthew said from behind her.

“I went for a swim.”

“A swim?” Sarah’s reproachful blue eyes stared up at her. “Without us?”

“Aye, why didn’t you say?” Ruth asked.

Because I wanted to go alone, Alex thought, smiling at her little redhead. Ruth smiled back, the hazel eyes she shared with her father and most of her siblings shifting into a light greyish green.

“We can go later,” Alex said. “I probably need to give all three of you a proper scrub.”

“Not me,” Daniel muttered, shoving his dark hair off his brow. “I’m clean, very clean.”

Alex looked at the trio; three children in three years, but since then Matthew and she had been very careful, even if at times both of them were left extremely frustrated by this. Her eyes slid over to rest on her man. Alex fluffed at her hair, catching Matthew’s interested look. As far as she was concerned, five children – six, counting Ian, her stepson – were quite enough, but she wasn’t sure Matthew agreed. What the hell; she wanted to have wild and uninhibited sex with him, and damn the consequences. She saw his mouth curve and felt the blood rush up her cheeks, making him smile even wider.

“Right, you,” she said to her children. “You all have chores to do.”

Daniel made a face but at Matthew’s nod he and Ruth hurried off. Sarah loitered, throwing Alex a hopeful look. You wish, Alex thought, handing her three-year-old the egg basket.

“You look thoroughly,” she said. “Now that they’re back to laying properly, I want them all.”

Sarah set her mouth in a sulk and dragged her feet on her way to the stables.

Matthew took Alex’s hand and squeezed it. She knew exactly what he was thinking: that their youngest daughter was in many ways a throwback to their eldest girl, Rachel, and both of them were very relieved that in looks Sarah did not take after their dead daughter – that would have been a bit too much.

“She’ll drive her future husband to the edge of despair,” Matthew said in an undertone.

She chortled. “Let’s hope she calms down a bit.”

They walked across the yard, him shortening his stride to match hers.

“I don’t like it, that you go about alone,” he said.

“I was just down there.” Alex gestured in the direction of the river.

“Still, I don’t like it.”

Alex chose not to reply, studying her house – well, cabin – instead. Two chimneys, one sticking up from the new extension, and several windows, four with horribly expensive glass panes that Matthew had transported up here piece by careful piece, swaddled as if they were priceless porcelain.

According to dear Elizabeth Leslie, window glass was an unnecessary luxury, but Alex didn’t care about her opinion, thrilled to have light streaming into her kitchen and front room, and now into her bedroom as well. Elizabeth... Alex threw Matthew a look. She should tell him about the girls; he didn’t like it when she kept things from him. On the other hand, it made her shudder just to imagine how Elizabeth would punish her two servants for running away. Bread and water for a month, and no doubt a severe beating with that cane Elizabeth always kept close at hand.

“What is it?” Matthew said, placing a hand on her arm to draw her to a stop when they reached the house.

“Nothing.”

He turned her to face him. "What?"

Alex sighed. This man of hers read her like an open book, no matter how much she tried to dissimulate. Briefly, she told him of her encounter with the girls, shifting on her feet under his eyes.

"But I don't want to force them to go back," she finished. "Can you imagine how angry the Leslies will be?"

"Escaped servants must be returned. You know I don't much hold with it," he said, swinging her hand as they covered the last few yards to the door. "It sticks in my craw, it does, to hold a fellow man as a slave, however temporarily. But that's how things are ordained here, and Peter Leslie paid good money for them. Besides, two lasses on their own in all that..." He waved a hand at the woods.

"So what do we do?"

Matthew opened the door for her and gave Fiona, their maid, a curt nod before replying. "For now we do nowt." He leaned close enough that his breath tickled her ear. "But if they come looking, we tell them."

Alex nodded; a fair compromise and hopefully Peter would expend his efforts to the south.

The small kitchen filled with people: Mark and Jacob came from the direction of the stable, Sarah danced in to show them just how many eggs she'd found, and Daniel and Ruth were sent off to wash when they appeared dirty at the door. Eggs, ham, porridge and thick slices of rye bread were set down on the table. From the yard came Jonah, their second indenture, and after a hastily said grace everyone threw themselves at the food.

"And Ian?" Alex looked at Mark.

"I don't know," Mark said. "He may have gone hunting."

"Or fishing," Jacob suggested through his full mouth. Alex smoothed at his thick, blond hair.

"Maybe." She shrugged. Ian was old enough to take care of himself.

No sooner was the table cleared than Fiona begged to be excused, whispering something about her monthlies. Alex

just nodded. The last few weeks, Fiona was forever begging to be let off for one reason or the other, and this latest excuse was wearing a bit thin. Still; mostly she did what she was told to do, and if Fiona found some sort of relief by wandering the nearby woods, so be it.

Matthew sat for a while longer at the table, conversing with her as Alex went about the dinner preparations. She still had days when it shocked her just how much time she spent on something as simple as cooking. In the here and now, there were no electric cookers, no microwaves; it was all open fire and heavy pots. Alex wiped her hands on her apron and leaned against the workbench.

She rarely thought about the life she'd left behind – given the circumstances, she preferred not to – but every now and then she was swept with a wave of longing for her people, lost somewhere in the future. Isaac, her son, he'd be sixteen by now, and she wondered if he'd be taller than her and if he still wore his hair short. And Magnus, now pushing seventy...she couldn't quite see her father as old – to her he was an eternally middle-aged, tall, blond man with eyes as blue as hers.

She counted in her head: it was 2016 there in the future. Almost fourteen years ago since fate and a gigantic bolt of lightning combined to throw her more than three hundred years backwards to land stunned at Matthew's feet. Alex twisted at her wedding ring. Should she ever be yanked back she was certain she'd die, of something as hackneyed as a broken heart.

She started when Matthew covered her hands with his.

"Alright?" he asked, kissing her brow.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just had one of those flashbacks."

"Ah."

She eyed him from under her lashes. Matthew was never comfortable discussing her strange – impossible – fall from one time to the other. Heck, neither was she. It made her hair bristle. Just as she'd expected, he changed the subject.

"This afternoon I'll finish the house. Tomorrow I start with the barn," Matthew said in a resigned tone, looking at

what was presently a roof on stilts. He studied his calloused hands and muttered that he was always one step behind, whether in the building or in the tilling. But at least there was a stable, and an assorted number of small sheds, including a well sized laundry shed with a large wooden bathtub.

“No hurry, is there? After all, there’s nothing to fill it with as yet.”

“There will be. This year the crops will be good.” With that very confident statement, Matthew grabbed his hat and went outside, telling Alex that he’d be taking Mark and Jacob with him to clear the new field.

The boys came rushing when he called for them. Mark was already shooting up in height while eight-year-old Jacob was still very much a child, all downy cheeks and knobby knees. So young, Alex reflected, watching her sons fall into step beside their father, and already most of their days were spent working side by side with Matthew. Not that they seemed to mind, both of them inflating with pride when Matthew praised them for their hard work – which he did quite often.

Alex packed her basket with some food, found a blanket in the laundry shed, draped it over her arm and made for the woods. Late April in Maryland was like a warm summer day in Scotland, and Alex adjusted her straw hat as she went, before beginning her customary scanning of the ground for anything green and edible. She was sick to death of the few sad onions in the root cellar. She wanted huge salads, ripe tomatoes, and while she was at it, why not a chocolate bar or two... Boy, was she in a maudlin mood! She slowed her pace and ducked into the shade of the closest trees.

It was strange that the few times she was truly homesick it wasn’t for her life in the twenty-first century: it was for Hillview, the small manor in Ayrshire that they’d left one cold and drizzly March day four years ago. She’d spent weeks saying goodbye, walking for hours through the woods, standing silent by the edge of the moss. Worst of all had been the last time she and Matthew had stood together in front of Rachel’s grave, bowing with the pain of forever leaving

behind this one tangible reminder of their daughter's brief time on Earth.

"Rachel," she said out loud. She did that sometimes: she called her dead daughter, and just by saying her name she was making sure she wasn't forgotten. Now she closed her eyes and Rachel sprang to the forefront of her mind, her hair a messy tangle down her back – just like she'd been the last day of her life, her little face contorted with fury as she flew to the defence of her beloved Da.

"Mama?" Ian materialised beside her and Alex turned away. "Are you alright?"

Alex nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand before facing him.

"One of those moments." She suspected Ian had quite a few such moments himself, but he chose to keep them to himself. Alex stood on her toes and pulled out a couple of cockleburs from his hair.

"You're too tall," she grumbled, and Ian grinned and sat down, crossing his legs. Alex knelt behind him and extracted her comb from her apron pocket to comb his hair free of debris. "Where have you been? Chasing deer through the undergrowth?"

Ian mumbled something unintelligible in reply.

Alex smiled down at the back of his head and went on with what she was doing. They sank into a companionable silence, broken every now and then by the loud calling of a bird or the rustling of something moving through the forest that surrounded them.

"There." Alex sank back on her heels and returned her comb to its keeping place. "You're so like him," she said, studying her teenaged stepson, who had now gotten to his feet. A younger version of her Matthew, tall and well-built with the same hazel eyes, the same dark hair that went chestnut under the summer sun, and the same generous mouth.

"Is that good or bad?" Ian teased, helping her to stand.

"Good, obviously." She bent to pick up her basket. A flurry of movement made her rear back as something mid-size and grey rushed by her.

“A wolf?” she asked tremulously.

Ian laughed, shaking his head. “Raccoon. Curious as to what’s in yon basket.”

“Nettle shoots – will make us all a very nice soup.” She was very happy with her find, thinking that she’d poach some eggs to go with it.

Ian eyed the contents with a decided lack of enthusiasm. “Eat nettles? Won’t it blister our mouths?”

“Of course it will. It will make all of you shut up for days and days.” Alex elbowed him hard. “Idiot,” she added, making him laugh.

“What happened to your promise to fix the hen coop?” Alex took hold of Ian’s hand when they clambered over a mossy trunk.

“I’ll do it now,” he said, his cheeks staining a suspicious red.

Alex studied him narrowly: grasses and leaves all over his clothes, all that stuff he’d had in his hair... She smiled and hefted her basket higher onto her arm. Apparently young master Graham was discovering the pleasures of the opposite sex. She wondered if it was Jenny he’d met up in the woods – she sincerely hoped it was Jenny Leslie, given that Matthew and the girl’s father were very much in agreement regarding the desirability of such a match.

Ian turned towards the house. Alex dithered; she had to find the girls.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

“Soon, I..well, I need some more nettles.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

He shook his head. “I’ll come, aye?” Great, absolutely marvellous. Those protective genes so prominent in his father had made it down to the next generation unscathed. From the way Ian’s mouth set into a line, she knew there was no point in arguing and, anyway, what did it matter if he saw the girls – he’d never tell.

“Da said you’ll be staying with the Leslies when we ride down to Providence,” Ian said.

Alex made a face. She was fond of both Thomas and Peter Leslie – although she should probably revise her opinion of Peter given what those girls had told her – but Mary Leslie, Thomas’ wife, had the intellect of a dormouse, and as to Elizabeth...

“Aye,” Ian said, following the train of her thoughts. “She is a bit much at times.”

“Very,” Alex agreed, thinking that Elizabeth Leslie must be an awful cross to carry for a man as mild-tempered as Peter.

A high wail had Alex almost jumping out of her skin. “What was that?” She stooped to pick up the nettles she’d scattered all over the ground.

“I don’t know.” Ian frowned.

Yet another shriek, and now there was no doubt – this was a human voice, raised in fear and pain. The girls! Oh my God, and now they were being eaten alive by a bear, or were surrounded by wolves, or... Alex flew down the slope, making for the terrified sounds. Another voice: low, male. Someone laughed, harness jangled, and Alex faltered. Could it be one of the Leslie brothers?

“No, please! No—” The sound was cut short.

Ian’s hand closed on Alex’s arm, bringing her to a halt. They crouched behind a screen of bushes, silent spectators to what was happening in the small clearing. Three men, unrecognisable in broad-brimmed hats, and then there were the two girls, one of them fighting like a hellcat, while the other was gagged and hogtied, squirming like a caterpillar where she’d been thrown across a horse. To the side stood yet another man, eyes trained on the surrounding woods and musket held at the ready. Alex did a double take; she knew this man from somewhere. Thinning hair, a long narrow face with a rather prominent mouth, and dark eyes sunk into deep hollows. Yes, she had definitely seen him before, but when? Where?

“We must do something. Those poor girls!” She made as if to stand but was arrested by Ian’s hold on her hand.

“Nay,” he whispered, “there’s nothing we can do – not the two of us against them.”

However much she hated admitting it, Ian was right.

In the clearing, the screaming girl was slapped – repeatedly. The last slap was so hard her head snapped back. The man who had hit her laughed, watching as his companions wrenched her hands behind her back and tied them, before sauntering over to the sentry, saying something in a low voice. He took off his hat, releasing black hair to fall like overlong bangs over one side of his face. A handsome man, his face a collection of sharp planes and angles, complemented by a square chin and a chiselled mouth. A cruel face, Alex decided – or maybe that had more to do with what she'd just witnessed. His eyes wandered over the closest bushes and Alex had never before seen eyes so disconcerting. Irises so light as to look almost white, the pupils like black, miniature well shafts. For some reason, Alex knotted her hands together and held her breath – anything to make sure he wouldn't discover her.

The man took a step or two to the side, unlaced himself and pissed, talking with his companions over his shoulder. It was evident he was the leader, the sentry nodding at whatever it was he was saying. Alex caught the word *Virginia* a couple of times and focused her attention on the sentry. Why did he seem so familiar, all the way from his obsequious grin to how he stood, slightly pigeon-toed? There was a flurry of movement, the men sat up, and then they were gone, horses whipped into a canter as they set off towards the south.

Chapter 2

Matthew didn't like this: four men, riding through his lands, and on top of that they had the temerity to abduct two lasses. Thank the Lord Ian had been with Alex, because God knows what his temperamental wife might have done had she been alone – attempted to intercede, no doubt.

Even more, it concerned him that Alex insisted she'd recognised one of them, although she could put neither name nor place to him. He set his jaw. Peter Leslie would be most upset, and as to the two lasses, there'd be days when they wished themselves back under Elizabeth's stern care.

He dispatched Ian to ride with the news to the Leslies, and walked over to inspect the small clearing but gleaned nothing from the trampled ground. What would those men be doing here in the first place? He backtracked them and concluded that they'd ridden in from a north-westerly direction. Traders or trappers, mayhap the kind of white men that dealt regularly with the Indians. But still, to ride through claimed land and not come by the main house. And it wasn't as if they wouldn't have noticed this was settled land, because through the screen of trees the house was visible, however distant.

“What will happen to them, do you think?” Alex asked later that afternoon, trailing Matthew on his way to the river.

“No major change: they'll sell them as labour to someone else.” He shed his clothes and, with a few hissed expletives, submerged himself in the cold water.

Alex threw him the pot of soap and sat on the bank to watch him. “Do you think they'll be back?”

“Who? The men? Nay, I think them opportunists, no

more. They recognised the lasses for what they were – bond servants – and stole them.”

“Will the girls mind?”

“Mind? Of course they will, and I dare say they’ve been badly frightened.” And hurt, and probably raped, but he didn’t tell her that.

She moved over to him as he came out of the chilly waters, laughing when he grabbed her by the waist and gathered her close.

“Nice,” she murmured when he released her lips, her hands moving down his back to give his buttocks an appreciative squeeze.

“But now you’re all wet, far too wet to walk back like that. You might catch a cold.”

“And I won’t if you undress me here?” she said, trying to help him with her laces. He batted away her hands, took his time undoing knots, sliding fabric down her hips, off her arms.

“Nay, I’ll warm you up soon enough.”

Matthew enjoyed loving his wife outdoors, finding more privacy here than in the house. A stand of shrubs afforded some protection against prying eyes – not that they needed it, because his elder sons knew better than to disturb them when Matthew took their mother with him down to the river.

He ran a finger over Alex’s lips, over her cheek to circle her ear, and up to draw the high arc of her brows. He kissed her, one hand drifting down to stroke her breast through the damp material of her shift, and she stretched like a cat, a low, humming noise deep in her throat. His arms were full of her, of warm flesh and soft curves, of strong muscles and soft skin.

“Here.” He spread her skirts as a makeshift blanket and eased her down on her back. She was right bonny, his wife, all pink skin and a cloud of curling hair. Matthew sat back on his heels to properly savour the sight of her, sprawled half-naked on the ground. “Beautiful,” he murmured, walking his fingers up her legs. Her toes curled and she held out her

arms, making him smile; impatient as always, his Alex.

She moaned when he entered her, her legs coming up to cradle him. He pushed deeper, and she tilted her hips so that their pubic bones pressed together. Again, and she breathed his name, her lips kissing his neck. His woman... This time she was going to conceive, or at the very least they were going to begin trying for yet another child. One, perhaps two more bairns, he thought fuzzily, concentrating on the sensations that settled round his cock.

He slid a hand in under her bottom and lifted her closer. She made a breathless noise and for an instant was absolutely still, eyes the colour of budding bluebells locked into his. Matthew brushed his nose against hers and began to move, a steady coming and going that increased in pace and intensity until he voided himself inside of her. He didn't move for some time, relishing being where he was. Under his hand he could feel the beating of her heart.

He lifted his head and met her eyes. There was a slight frown on her face, something dark shading the bottom of her eyes.

"It's not a safe day," she said.

He almost smiled. He knew that – he always knew. He rolled off her, lying naked on his back beside her. He fumbled for her hand and raised it to his lips. "Do you mind?"

"A bit late to ask."

"It's just..." He picked at her hair, curling and uncurling a long lock round his finger. "I like it when you grow all rosy and round, and it's with my seed, my bairn..." He felt terribly embarrassed admitting this, but it was clearly the right thing to say.

His wife smiled and kissed his cheek. "Well, if we're going to go for yet another kid, we might just as well enjoy the making. And personally I hope it takes months."

"I always enjoy it." He tightened his hold on her hand.

"So do I," she replied, just as solemnly.

Next morning Alex was returning from inspecting her potato patch when Mark's voice made her come to an

abrupt stop behind an overgrown bramble.

“Do you think it will be the same?” Mark said.

“Will what be the same?” Ian’s voice said.

“For you, with Jenny.”

There was an irritated snort from Ian. “The same like what?”

Mark sighed loudly. “Like with Da and Mama.”

Alex sank down on her haunches. This was a conversation she intended to eavesdrop on.

“I want my wife to be like Mama,” Mark went on. “I want her to smile at me like she does at Da.”

Ian made a sound of grousing agreement.

“So?” Mark asked again. “Will it, do you think? Be the same for you and Jenny?”

“No,” Ian snapped, “on account of me not loving her. Or her me.”

A stone whistled through the air and landed with a soft thud at Alex’s feet.

“Come on then,” Ian said. “Da’s waiting.”

Alex remained where she was, thinking: first of all of how to tell Matthew Jenny might not be an adequate match for Ian, and secondly about who the girl might be Ian was meeting in secret in the woods.

She didn’t have much time to think about this girl over the coming days, her waking time spent preparing for Matthew’s trip to Providence. Pelts were packed in neat rolls; smoked trout were wrapped and stacked in the pannier baskets; Alex wrote list after list of things she wanted, crossed them out and wrote lists of things she needed instead. Spices and salt, some precious sugar, perhaps some tea – but only if the money was enough – bolts of linen and serge, needles and thread... On top of that, she packed clothes for Matthew, Mark and Ian, prepared food for them to take along, and worried about Fiona and Jonah: would they cope all alone? Matthew assured her that they would, helped her with the last of the packing, and one early morning they set off, one long caravan making for the Leslie home.

A couple of hours later, Alex and her younger children were installed at Leslie's Crossing. She trailed Matthew out to the yard, at present a somewhat chaotic place what with all the horses and the loaded mules. Ian and Mark were already astride, eager to be off.

"Will you be alright?" Matthew kissed Alex on her brow.

"I'm not entirely sure," she stage-whispered. "Ten days with Elizabeth may impair my mental capacities."

He laughed into her hair. "Behave. Be sure you're a credit to your husband – meek and demure."

"When pigs fly. And whatever you may call Elizabeth, paragon of womanly virtues that she is, it is neither meek nor demure."

"Nay," Matthew whispered into her ear. "She's a right dragon."

"Yeah, the fire breathing kind." Alex took a step back. "Like mother, like daughter, Matthew," she said, seeing his brow crease in confusion.

She watched him ride off, flanked by his sons and Thomas Leslie, before turning to smile at her hostess.

"So, aren't you going to show me your new dairy shed?" If she didn't ask, she'd be dragged there anyway. Since they'd gotten here, Elizabeth hadn't stopped talking about it. To be fair, Elizabeth was an excellent cheese maker and had sent off several rounds of well-aged, pale yellow cheese with Thomas to be sold at the market.

"It brings in money," Elizabeth said as they walked across the yard. "God knows very little else does." She broke off to offer a hasty apology for using the Lord's name in vain before ushering Alex into her little kingdom.

Three girls were working in the dairy. One of them was cutting up the stomach of a recently slaughtered calf and putting it to soak to make rennet, while the two others were busy cutting the latest batch of curd into small cubes.

"I haven't seen two of those girls before," Alex commented on their way back to the main house.

“They came in on the first ship this season.” Elizabeth went on to add that her husband had acquired not only two maids but three field hands, and had in the process also received a further five hundred acres in headright – as yet uncleared land, but all in all Peter Leslie had a sizeable tract of land under his name, coming close to eight thousand acres.

“Ah.” Alex tried to look suitably impressed. Matthew had bought two thousand acres at a nominal price upon arriving and had since then acquired three hundred acres more, for Fiona, Jonah and Paul, who drowned the same winter he came out. More land than he could have dreamt of back home, he said to Alex, but he wasn’t comfortable with taking indentures, no matter that both Jonah and Fiona were voluntary bondsmen, escaping from hardship back home.

“But now we’ll need more, what with those two silly girls letting themselves be abducted. No great loss, either of them, and one of them was pregnant.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “These Catholic girls, brought up without strong moral values.”

Alex eyed her with dislike. “She may have been abused.”

Elizabeth snorted. “Not she. I saw the way she looked at my Nathan, all doe’s eyes and pouting mouth.” She threw a fond look at her eldest son, reclining in the shade of an impressive chestnut tree. “Fortunately we’ve found him a wife, a sweet girl from a good Puritan family.”

“How nice,” Alex said. “And do they like each other?”

“They haven’t met. How can they, when she’s down south? Peter and Nathan will be riding down for her sometime in June.”

“They’re getting married now?” Alex swung to look at Nathan.

“He’s eighteen, an adequate age.”

“And the girl?”

“Of an age,” Elizabeth replied with a shrug, and rushed over with surprising speed to stop her youngest, James, from throwing himself in the trough. Ten live children, Alex thought with a slight shudder as Elizabeth bundled James

into a firm grip and carried him off in the direction of the house. Ten ranging in age from twenty-nine to three, and as she understood it there had been five others as well.

It always made Alex grin to see Peter and Elizabeth Leslie together. When Peter strode into the kitchen, she surreptitiously studied them both. Elizabeth was a broad, strong woman, of a height with Alex and with hips the width of a cow's according to Matthew. And that he meant as a compliment... Her grey hair was wound into a tight bun and covered by a cap, and in her face a plump and soft mouth was disconcertingly offset by a rather bulbous nose.

Peter, on the other hand, was tall and willowy, with an impressive head of curling blond hair and a receding chin that gave him a false air of malleability. In reality, Peter was as hard-headed and stubborn as his wife, and together they made an impressive couple with an eye out for any opportunity of advancement for their children, which was why Jenny Leslie was proposed as a wife for Ian, the match ensuring Jenny would in time be mistress over a sizeable property as well as staying close to home.

"Alex." Peter Leslie smiled a bit too widely, making Elizabeth glower.

"Peter." Alex twisted her face to receive his kiss on the cheek, not on the mouth as intended.

"Have you seen the new dairy?" Peter said.

"Yes, quite impressive, and the cheese is delicious." She nodded in greeting at Jenny, who had trailed her father into the kitchen, and received a quick curtsey in reply before the girl set down the basket of folded linen on the table.

"It's hot," Jenny said.

"Yes, most unseasonal." Peter smiled at his wife, accepting a brimming mug of beer. "Somewhat of a shock for the new men. One of them just sat down and refused to work during the midday hours, complaining that the sun was making him ill." He shook his head. "I don't much like it, but I fear that one will need to be punished."

"Which one is that?" Jenny asked with a gleam of

interest in her pale blue eyes. “The one with the dark hair, the fair one, or the one with no hair at all?”

“They have names, I assume,” Alex cut in, making all three turn to look at her.

“They do,” Peter said, “but I won’t have my daughters on first-name basis with them. The less they see of each other the better.”

Well, that clearly wasn’t working, Alex thought, giving Jenny a curious look. The girl met her eyes for an instant and went over to sit by her mother.

Jenny was a pretty enough girl, with the complexion of a dewy rose. Her dark hair was mostly covered by her cap, but here and there a strand had escaped to hang in a soft curl. As Alex recalled she was nineteen, two years older than Ian. Maybe that was why she was more interested in her father’s indentures than in Ian. The girl leaned closer to her mother and murmured something which made Elizabeth nod, one capped head very close to the other.

“So when will you hold the wedding?” Alex asked over supper.

“The contracts have already been signed, and there will be a wedding at her home when we come for her.” Peter grinned slyly at his son. “And a wedding night.”

Nathan nodded, looking rather unenthusiastic, and served himself a large helping of stew.

“And will you live here?” Alex asked Nathan.

“There’s plenty of room,” Elizabeth said, “so of course they will. And I can do with an extra pair of hands to help in the household now that Amy and Martha have both been wed. Besides, all this will one day come to Nathan. It’s important his wife learns to run it properly.”

Poor unknown girl; she was going to be at the beck and call of her domineering mother-in-law.

The evening was spent in the front room. Three times the size of Alex’s own little parlour, it was furnished with an odd assortment of chairs, a desk and a couple of tables. There was a lute that was so dusty Alex concluded it was

more for show than use, and a beautiful tapestry that had come from Elizabeth's mother hung on one of the walls. In pride of place stood Peter's armchair, a throne-like thing in dark wood, with carved lion paws decorating its feet and armrests. With a happy little grunt, Peter subsided to sit and closed his eyes. Elizabeth worked on her accounts, while Alex and Mary busied themselves with their sewing.

After a while, Elizabeth closed the heavy ledger and stood up, sauntering over to Alex and Mary.

"You did this?" Elizabeth inspected the embroidered flowers that decorated the pillowcase.

"Yes," Alex said, "to remind me of summer in winter."

Elizabeth ran a hand over it. "You should embroider and sell."

"Do you think anyone would want to buy?"

"Oh yes," Elizabeth said, "there is always a market for frippery."

Bitch. Alex met the cool look in Elizabeth's eyes with a glacial one of her own. Elizabeth broke eye contact first, muttering something about putting more wood on the fire.

"She's just jealous," Mary whispered after ascertaining Elizabeth was out of range. "She can't do much more than hem herself."

"No, I see that," Alex murmured, holding up a small boy's shirt. They shared a smile, in Mary's case quickly suppressed when Elizabeth came over to join them, sinking down with a sigh.

"Is she pretty?" Alex asked to break the silence.

"Who?" Elizabeth enquired.

"The girl – Nathan's bride-to-be."

"I have no idea," Elizabeth replied. "I haven't met her. Peter says she's comely and quiet."

"Maybe it would be easier for her if she got to know Nathan before they were wed," Alex said. "It must be a daunting experience to meet your husband on the day of your wedding and be expected to bed with him that same night."

Elizabeth raised her brows. "She might just as well get

used to it. I'm sure she'll do her duty."

"Her duty?" Alex gave her a surprised look.

Elizabeth shrugged. "I've taught all my girls that in bed they must be submissive and do as their husband wishes. It's quicker that way."

Alex swallowed down on an urge to guffaw. Elizabeth submissive? It was a mind-boggling concept.

"So you don't...err...you don't like bedding with Peter?"

Elizabeth looked at her as if she were insane. "I can bide with it. The good Lord has made it that way: that the woman must subject herself and procreate as her husband wishes. It's not precisely unpleasant, but it's somewhat of a relief now that I'm of a certain age to have left that part of my life behind."

Alex looked over to where Peter was fast asleep in his armchair, snoring loudly.

"Left that part of your life behind?" she echoed.

Elizabeth eyed her askance. "It isn't seemly, for a wife to display inappropriate affection for her husband – particularly after a certain age."

"Really? Well, I don't agree with you," Alex said, "and my husband rather enjoys my inappropriate affection."

Elizabeth acquired the hue of a ripe plum. "Man and woman are made husband and wife to procreate. Anything else is sin."

"And your husband?" Alex asked. "What about him? His needs?"

Elizabeth waved her hand dismissively. "I'm not sure I want to know."

But if an indentured maid gets pregnant because your husband has urges, all you do is extend the poor girl's contract and call her a whore, Alex thought angrily.

"And you?" Alex said to Mary, who had sat silent throughout the exchange, her concentration on the shirt she was making for her husband.

"Me what?" Mary dimpled, looking much younger than her fifty-two years. In fact, it was difficult to believe that Mary was the elder of the sisters-in-law, just as Thomas was

the eldest of the Leslie brothers, even if only by a year.

“Do you...you know?”

Mary blushed a delicate pink and bent her head to her sewing. “On occasion, he still wants to, and so do I.”

Elizabeth produced a sound that conveyed just how close to the brink of eternal damnation Mary hovered and left the room.

Chapter 3

The room was stuffy and dark, inadequately lit by a number of lanterns that hung from the beams. It was also crowded, every table occupied by men who drank and ate – well, mostly drank. The taproom smelled of spilled beer and spicy stews, of lavender perfume and of tobacco.

Matthew shoved his cleaned plate to the side and burped discreetly into the crook of his arm. The lamb shank had been delicious, cooked to the point where the meat fell off the bone, and a mug or two of beer had him in a mellow enough mood, an interested spectator to the steady flow of business in the little inn. The stairs to his left led to the upper floor and, as the evening progressed, one man after the other trooped off with one of the bonny whores, was gone for a half-hour or so before reappearing at the top of the stairs. The whores rarely lost times between customers; no sooner were they done with one but they were leading the next one up the stairs.

Matthew called for some more beer and let his eyes wander the room. Many of the men he knew; a few of them were even elders. The door opened, there was a rush of cold air, and for some moments Matthew was convinced his heart had stopped. He blinked, settled back on the bench and stared at the man who'd just entered the busy room.

Jones! Dominic Jones, here! Matthew was surprised to hear his own harsh breathing and wiped a sweaty hand down his breeches. He leaned further into the protective shadow of his corner, throwing an irritated look up the stairs. Where was Thomas? How long could it take to conclude his business with the little whore?

Where before his heart had come to a standstill, now his pulse was thundering, leaving him weak-kneed and covered

with a cold sweat. He gripped his dirk, unsheathed it. To sink it into Jones... He snuck another look at the hulk of a man, now standing only some feet away, demanding beer and company. As big as ever, Jones was also very well off, at least to judge from the resplendent coat and matching waistcoat. The hands were as huge as Matthew remembered them, but otherwise Jones had aged badly. The light from one of the lanterns illuminated his face, revealing skin that was criss-crossed by a network of broken veins, and his small, displeased mouth had all but disappeared into his heavy jowls.

Jones turned in the direction of the proprietress and crossed the floor in a couple of strides – still as graceful as a lethal serpent, moving that mountain of flesh effortlessly and swiftly. Matthew shrank back, watching as Jones pulled off his wig, scratched at his bald pate and replaced the curling hairpiece, all the while in an intense discussion with Mrs Malone.

Matthew was drowning in hatred, in remembered pain and humiliation. Oh God! Their first meeting: him being forced to stand straight while Jones, overseer at the plantation Suffolk Rose, walked round him, using his short riding crop to prod Matthew as he inspected his latest human beast of burden. The beating administered when Matthew refused to take his clothes off, the other time when Jones whipped him until Matthew brokenly admitted he was a slave... He still bore the scars on his skin. Until his dying day, he'd carry the reminders of those terrible months when he was nothing but an expendable resource to be worked until he died.

Jones laughed, draped an arm around Mrs Malone and inspected the paraded girls. A respected and valuable customer, Matthew concluded, irritated by how the whores were fawning on Jones. The large man had by now made his choice: a pretty lass with red hair and a neckline that left very little to the imagination. Jones patted the girl on her behind and steered her towards the stairs.

Halfway across the floor, Jones saw Matthew and came

to an abrupt standstill. His small eyes narrowed and he stood staring for some moments before he paled, taking a few stumbling steps backwards. After a couple of heartbeats, he nodded, once. Matthew just stared him in the eyes, and then Thomas was there, clapping him on the shoulder and asking him if he wanted yet another beer. Matthew shook his head in a no. All he wanted was to leave Providence – but he couldn't do that, what with the market tomorrow.

Matthew was almost at the door when Jones stepped forward to block his path. As if by chance, the meaty hand dropped to rest on the hilt of the dirk he was carrying.

“Move, Graham,” Jones said.

“I think not. You stood to block my way; you move.” Matthew met Jones' eyes and took another step towards him, rising on his feet to stare the somewhat taller man straight in the eyes.

“Dominic?” The red-headed girl popped up beside them. “Who's this?” She smiled at Matthew, both arms wound tight round Jones' arm.

“No one, a nobody, my dear.” Jones smirked at Matthew and brushed at his waistcoat, straining over an impressive gut. He took a step towards Matthew, stopped when Matthew stood still as a rock, not about to give an inch.

“Dominic!” The girl pouted, tugging at his arm. With one last look at Matthew, Jones allowed the whore to drag him off.

“Who's that?” Thomas asked.

“An old acquaintance,” Matthew said.

“Not a cordial relation, I take it,” Thomas said.

“Nay, rather the reverse.”

Thomas ran his eyes up and down Jones a couple of times, did the same with Matthew. “My money's on you should it come to a fight.”

“Why thank you,” Matthew said, “but I think it best for both of us if it never comes to an open confrontation.”

Matthew weighed his pouch, thinking that the pelts had brought in much more than he'd expected. He left Ian to

oversee the sale of the smoked trout and spent the following hour wandering the market, now and then making a purchase or two. The marketplace was crowded, the stalls set up in makeshift narrow rows that left thoroughfares at most three feet across. People thronged; there was a pleasant smell of barbecued meat and mulled wine, and from the livestock pens came a constant cackling, now and then interspersed with an indignant squeal. In a big stall standing by itself, old Mrs Redit was peddling spices – peppercorn, nutmeg and ginger, cinnamon sticks and cloves. She even had limes, and a few minutes later Matthew had concluded his business with her.

He was running late for his meeting with the new minister and extended his stride, but when he turned into the alley that led to the main street he came to an abrupt stop. The alley was short, steep and dank. Coming the other way was Jones, accompanied by three men who effectively blocked the whole passage. There was no way round him, and damned if Matthew intended to retreat.

“Mr Graham.” Jones inclined his head. He was as resplendent as yesterday, his linen newly changed, his black broadcloth breeches and matching coat of an elegant cut.

“Mr Jones.”

They both fell silent. Jones regarded Matthew, eyes resting for an instant on Matthew’s various parcels.

“I must be on my way.” Matthew tried to sidle past one of Jones’ men. An arm shot out, hindering him.

“Now, now, Mr Graham, why the hurry?” Jones nodded at his men, and in a matter of seconds Matthew was surrounded. Matthew wet his lips. He was only yards away from the main street, bustling with people, and should he need to he’d yell.

“It’s a pity you didn’t die back in Virginia,” Jones said. “As it is, I am not much pleased to find you here, in my new home.”

“Mine before it was yours,” Matthew said. “And I had hoped that by now someone would have rid the world of you, scavenging bastard that you are.”

“Tut-tut, Graham, I am not impervious to insult. You’d best be careful; I might feel obliged to defend my honour.”

“Honour? You?” Matthew took a step towards him, having the distinct pleasure of seeing Jones back off. “I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back.”

Jones chuckled. “Maybe you could, Mr Graham. But I would never be fool enough to challenge you outright, would I?” He leaned forward. “I rid my life of enemies discreetly – best you remember that.”

“A threat, Mr Jones? I wonder what the elders will say when I recount this to them.”

“I will deny it.” Jones tugged at his waistcoat, his fat hand caressing the wooden butt of the pistol that he carried stuck in his belt. “Stay away from me and mine, Graham. Let things lie, as they say, and I will do the same for you.”

“And if I don’t?”

Jones smiled – a nasty, cold grimace. “You have sons. Who knows what might happen to them, eh?”

Matthew dropped his purchases, grabbed Jones by the collar and shoved him back against the nearby wooden wall. “How dare you,” he hissed.

“Take your hands off me,” Jones said. “Do it now, or I swear I’ll have my men gut you like a fish.”

Something prodded Matthew’s side and, reluctantly, he released his hold. Jones smoothed his collar back into place and bent to retrieve his hat.

“This is my town now.” Jones straightened up. “Keep that in mind, Graham.”

For the few remaining days in Providence, Matthew was constantly on his guard. Twice he saw Jones, twice he turned and hurried away, sons in tow.

“Da?” Ian said. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Matthew replied, yet again casting a look in the direction of where Dominic was standing, surrounded by a group of other merchants.

Ian followed his eyes. “Is it that man?”

“Aye.” Matthew did not want to discuss this.

“Why?”

“It’s just...” Matthew shook his head. “Salt,” he said instead, “we must buy salt, aye? And if they have it, buy a half-pound of tea – that will make your mama happy.”

It was drizzling the day they were to set off for home, but no matter that Thomas suggested they remain one more day, hoping for better weather, Matthew refused. He was leaving now, his horses were saddled, the panniers packed, and he had no intention of biding one more night here. Ian gave him an odd look, Mark grimaced at the rain but said nothing, and Thomas sighed, muttering something about the stubbornness of Scotsmen.

Matthew was astride the ugly gelding, leading the cavalcade out of town, when someone hailed him in a loud voice that even now, a decade and more since his days as indentured labour, made his insides clench. Out of the rain loomed Jones, four men at his heels. One of them Matthew recognised as Sykes – a much older Sykes, but unmistakably him, narrow-faced like a horse and with dark, sunken eyes. Sykes smirked and sketched Matthew a bow. Matthew suppressed the urge to spit this constant shadow to Jones in the face.

“Leaving?” Jones asked.

Matthew saw no reason to reply, or even halt his horse.

Jones laughed. “Please convey my regards to Mrs Graham. Is she still as...?” He mimed a swelling chest.

Matthew wheeled his mount, sword at the ready.

“No, he’s just trying to provoke you.” Thomas spurred his horse forward, blocking Matthew. “Ride on.”

Matthew sheathed his sword and kicked his horse into a gallop, leaving sons and friend to follow as best they could.

Late in the afternoon a couple of days later, they rode into Leslie’s Crossing.

“Thank heavens!” Alex threw her arms round Matthew’s neck. “One more night and I might have buried a knife in her back.”

Matthew set her back on her feet, smiling at the way her

greeting had unfastened her hair, spilling curls from under her cap. “That bad?”

“Well, no, except for when she gets started on my moral lassitude.”

“Moral lassitude?” He nodded seriously. “It’s a bit of a concern. You’re somewhat remiss when it comes to matters spiritual.”

“Oh, really? And would you prefer it if I prayed instead of joining you in bed? That’s what she does apparently.”

“You can pray in bed – before and after.” He grinned.

“Huh,” Alex snorted and moved aside to allow his children to rush him.

“What’s the matter?” she said a bit later, hoisting Sarah up to sit in front of him. Ruth was already perched behind him.

“Later,” he mouthed, ducking his head to evade her eyes.

Homecoming was a bustling, noisy affair, and it was well after dark before Matthew and Alex retired to their bedchamber. Around them, the house was going silent, even if Fiona could still be heard in the kitchen, laughing at something Ian was saying.

“Did you know Providence has a new establishment?” Matthew sat down on the bed. “A brothel, no less.”

“A whorehouse? No!” Alex sounded sarcastic. “In a place so full of moral rectitude?” She sat at the wee table he’d made her, busying herself with her face and her teeth.

“Where there’s a town, there are whores.” He peeled off his dirty stockings and, after a tentative sniff, decided the shirt was ripe for laundry as well.

“Must be a tough business climate, in view of it only being Catholics and amoral Anglicans who fall for the carnal itch.”

“Alex! Do you want me to tell you or not?” He shoved a pillow under his head and suppressed a yawn.

“By all means do.” She braided her hair and came over to join him in bed.

“It’s a discreet establishment, standing somewhat south of the town proper but close to the docks.”

“Ah,” Alex nodded, “sailors...”

“...and the odd God-fearing merchant, an assortment of clerks and tradesmen, even Mr Farrell.”

“Mr Farrell? In a brothel?” She shook her head. “But he’s an elder of the congregation!” Her eyes narrowed. “Anyhow, how would you know?”

“Thomas suggested we go there on account of the food being particularly good.”

“The food?” It came out very clipped.

“Aye. Mrs Malone is a canny businesswoman. Men come there for food and beer – excellent beer, she’s Irish – and stay to partake of other pleasures.”

“But you didn’t,” she stated in a dangerous tone.

Matthew was hugely offended. “Of course not! I have no need to.”

“And if you did? If your wife was sickly or denied you her bed or just generally disliked having sex?”

Matthew smiled. “But that isn’t the case, is it?” He slid his hand up and down her thigh, over her hip. “Should I find myself entirely alone, then I might. After all, I have done so before – in my wild youth...”

“And the boys? Did they come along?”

Matthew sat up and stared down at her. “My sons? In a bawdy house? What do you take me for?”

Alex grinned up at him. “Well, Ian is in his wild youth by now, right?”

Matthew sank back down with a muttered comment that such things were best handled by the young man in question on his own.

“Oh, I’m sure it is.” Alex’s brow furrowed for an instant.

“Will you let me get to the point of my tale?” Matthew said, somewhat irritated.

Alex nodded.

“Thomas didn’t go there for the food alone.” He sighed and shook his head. “She’s a pretty enough lass, and she knew him from before.”

“Poor Mary, she’s still in love with him.”

“Aye well, it isn’t that Thomas doesn’t love his wife. It’s just...”

“That he thinks her too old,” Alex finished. “It’s not as if he’s God’s gift to womankind, is it?”

Matthew chuckled. Thomas was a nondescript man, leaving behind a vague impression of grey and more grey. Grey eyes, grey hair, grey clothes and grey stockings, Thomas very much melted into the background unless he set out on purpose not to. Always had, he reflected, recalling the first time he saw him, back in 1659 in Scotland.

“But I didn’t tell you this to have you revise your impression of poor Thomas,” Matthew continued. “I told you because, as I sat waiting, I happened to see a former acquaintance.” He almost spat out the words. “Jones, Dominic Jones.”

“Ah.” Alex scooted closer to him. “That must have been difficult.”

Matthew stretched out one arm and clenched and unclenched his fist repeatedly. Difficult? Aye, that it had been.

“Did he recognise you?” Alex fiddled with his chest hair.

“Aye,” Matthew replied with a short laugh. “When he stood to go upstairs he saw me sitting in the corner, and it took some time for him to make the connection, but finally he did.” It still pleased him that Jones had looked as aghast as Matthew felt.

He shifted in bed. All of him was drowning in remembered blackness and despair, and with a strangled moan he turned to face her. He wouldn’t be here if it hadn’t been for Alex and her determination to find him and take him home, saving him from an existence that would have ended far too quickly in an anonymous grave on a Virginia plantation.

“That was a long time ago,” Alex soothed. “Ten years ago, more or less.”

Aye, very long ago and since then they’d had five bairns, lost one, been forced to leave their home and cross the sea once again to come here, to Maryland. And yet it could have been yesterday when he woke to find himself in chains, sold by his damned brother Luke into indentured labour on a Virginia tobacco farm.

“I’d totally forgotten about him.” Alex stroked Matthew’s hair. “I wonder if people here know he left Virginia under something of a cloud.”

“Nay, I would think not. Being suspected of murdering your employer is not something you would share with all and sundry, is it? I must be a very unwelcome reminder of his past.” He frowned at that. “He recently moved up from the south of the colony; I found that out the next day. He has a plantation just outside of Providence. Numerous children, I heard. And slaves. He trades in them – well, it would seem he trades in everything.” Matthew pillowed his head as close as he could to her heart, closing his eyes to concentrate on the steady thudding of her pulse. In through his ear, down through his spine, into his bloodstream and up to his heart... Her rhythm wove itself tight around his own strong beat, a familiar sound that lulled him to sleep.

Next afternoon Alex went to find Ian, and as they worked in the root cellar she gave him a brief recap of Matthew’s time in Virginia.

“We think – well, Matthew insists he knows – that Jones killed Fairfax, the plantation owner down in Virginia. Remember I told you about that? How your father almost was hanged for a crime he hadn’t committed? Strangely enough, Jones inherited Fairfax’s estate – as per a will dated the day Fairfax died.” Alex shook her head. “Too much of a coincidence, according to your sleuth of a father.”

Ian held out his hand for yet another plank, hammering it into place with a couple of strokes.

“He was very upset.” Ian stood back to admire his handiwork: a much improved door to the root cellar. “He kept on scanning the crowds for him. Difficult to miss, yon Jones, what with him being the size of an ox.”

“He has reason not to trust Jones,” Alex said.

“But they won’t run into each other much, will they?”

“No, I suppose not – a three-day ride makes it highly unlikely. Still, it’s good that you know, just in case.” She

almost smiled at how Ian puffed up, chest expanding with pride at her confidence in him.

He tucked the hammer into his belt, grabbed the wooden spade and turned to her with a smile. "Shall we plant your bitty trees, then?"

Alex jumped up. "You dig and I'll fetch water. And maybe come autumn we can bake one apple pie."

"I don't think so." Ian laughed, prodding the little saplings.

An hour later, Alex sat back on her heels. "There." She patted the slender little trunk. "Grow and grow quickly, okay?" She sighed, her shoulders falling together. "Pathetic," she muttered, running a finger up and down the smooth dark grey bark. "It'll take years and years before they come even close to the trees back home."

"But someday they will." Ian dropped to one knee beside her. "And your grandchildren will bake pies and thank the Lord they had a grandmama wise enough to plant a tree – for them."

"It's always the worst this time of the year." Alex craned her head back to look at the sky. "I miss the twilights, those long, blue hours where nothing is either light or dark, but something just in between."

"We have twilights here," Ian said. "This is twilight."

"But it isn't the same. They're never as long, never as magical as they were up there, in the north. For him, the worst part comes later." She crumbled a clod of earth between her fingers.

"Aye, for Da it's harvest time."

"And you? Do you miss it?"

"Not as much as I thought I would; this is home now. All of this is home." He opened his arms wide, indicating their surroundings. "It is easier for us bairns: we have you to make us a home, wherever we go." He kissed her brow. "It's enough to have someone who kisses you and wishes you goodnight and know she loves you."

"Most of the time," she said in a dry tone, trying to disguise how touched she was.

“All the time,” he contradicted her with conviction.

Alex laughed. “Yes, you’re right; all of the time. But I don’t always like you.” As if on cue, an angry shriek flew through the air, followed by some heavy thumps, and suddenly there were two voices shrieking in unison.

“Sisterly love.” Alex got to her feet, tilted her head in the direction of the noise, listened for some time, and shrugged. “They’re too small to kill each other – yet. Let’s go and see if Matthew and the boys have caught any fish.

“Was there a letter from your mother?” Alex asked as they made their way down to the river.

“Aye. She’s breeding again. It’s all she seems to do, lie in bed and rest her way through pregnancy after pregnancy.”

“Well, five pregnancies in six years is pretty impressive,” Alex said. Luke and Margaret were definitely making up for lost time. Quite the strain on Margaret, and the late miscarriage last year must have been a painful experience. “Is she alright?”

Ian dug into his breeches and produced the letter. “You can read it yourself.”

Alex unfolded it and looked down at the spidery, unformed handwriting that crawled its way across the thick paper. Margaret spent a lot of time describing her three babies, two boys named Charles and James respectively after their father’s royal patrons, and one girl named Marie – and now mayhap yet another son, but it was early days yet; the babe was not due until early October. Luke was mentioned in passing, the odd dropped hint that he was continuing to do very well, how he had commissioned their portraits from Peter Lely himself, and how Margaret had spent hours choosing what to wear for the sitting.

“Well, of course she would,” Alex muttered, inundated by that childish jealousy she always felt when thinking about Margaret – Ian’s mother, Matthew’s first wife. The wife who had cuckolded him with his own brother, lied to retain custody of Matthew’s son, Ian, and stood by and allowed Luke to falsely accuse Matthew of treason. Not – in brief – Alex’s favourite person, and it didn’t exactly help

that she was startlingly good-looking to boot.

“I suppose Luke must be very proud.” Alex refolded the letter and handed it back to Ian. Right at the end there was a cramped effort trying to put into words how much Margaret missed her firstborn, but otherwise the letter was one long gushing exposé over a life that no longer included Ian.

“Aye.” Ian came to a halt and turned towards her, eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Her loss, Ian, her very big loss, and our gain. Our eldest son, and look at you. What parents wouldn’t be proud of a boy – no, man – like you?” She grinned at him. “Even if you can’t hold a tune and still complain when I serve you vegetables.”

Ian burst out laughing and gave her a quick hug.

“All of us complain. Even Da complains. If we were meant to eat so much green...”

“I know, I know, you would’ve been born a cow.”

After supper, the younger bairns were sent to bed. Ian took Mark with him to see to the beasts, and Matthew and Alex retired to the parlour.

“Have you read the letter from Simon?” Matthew caressed Alex’s cheek in passing and went to sit in his chair, facing hers in front of the fire.

“Yes, although I’m not entirely sure if I understood it all. Simon’s handwriting is at times atrocious.”

“It seems all is well with them, even though Simon does complain that life is a trifle difficult.”

Alex shook out Sarah’s mended smock. “What was it he said? Thousands of Highlander soldiers let loose on Ayrshire?”

“Aye, and they have no reason to love us, do they?” He pursed his lips, washed by a wave of concern for his sister, Joan, and Simon, his brother-in-law.

“Well no, given the way the Covenanter armies acted in the Highlands. Bloody religion,” she said, making Matthew raise a disapproving brow. “Well, it is, isn’t it? Making Scots turn upon Scots, English upon English...and at the end

of the day for what? For the right to proclaim your own interpretation of the Bible as being the valid one? God must roll His eyes in desperation at times.”

“Aye,” Matthew sighed. “He must. But it isn’t His fault, and as for the Bible, it’s all there. You don’t need an interpretation; you must but read it and reflect on it.”

“Not according to some of the ministers. Some ministers are of the firm opinion that it is them that can interpret, and we must but listen and obey – especially us featherbrained women.”

Matthew laughed and raised his foot to rest in her lap. “Obedience is an attractive quality in a woman, one unfortunately very lacking in you.”

“Watch it,” she mumbled, brandishing her needle. “You don’t want me to run this through your toe, do you?”

He laughed again and sat back with his pewter mug of whisky in his hands to look at her. In the glow from the fire and the light of the candle by her side, all of her was haloed, her dark hair throwing off glints of bronze and even gold. Not much grey in it, just the odd hair here and there and the little patch just off her right temple, creating an interesting streak of light in all that dark.

For almost fourteen years she had been in his life, and there were still days when he would give silent and fervent thanks for having her with him, for that random and miraculous occurrence a day in August that had thrown her from her time into his. 1658, he mused, on a Scottish moor, and he had found her after a terrifying thunderstorm, badly burnt and concussed, wearing the strangest garments he had ever seen. Breeches on a woman... And what breeches, narrow and blue they hugged her so close it had been like seeing her naked, her rounded arse straining against the tight cloth.

Now her bottom was hidden beneath modest skirts, her hair was no longer a wild short cap but fell to well below her shoulder blades. And only he saw her fully; she was for his eyes only when the hair tumbled in wild disarray, when her limbs were uncovered to lie pale against the sheets. Only

his... He stood up and waited until she met his eyes. A small movement of his head, and she folded her work together and doused the candle with her fingers before moving in the direction of their bedchamber. He banked the fire and followed, his bare feet silent on the wooden boards.