

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*The
Prodigal
Son*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

Four shadows rose out of the darkness of the moor, darting from patch to patch of vegetation. Here and there they found cover behind a boulder, now and then they huddled together under a stunted tree, gliding noiselessly due north. It was too early for birds, so when a sharp whistle cut through the air, the leading shadow set off at speed, his companions slinking after him towards a protective outcrop of stone.

“Hush!” Matthew Graham sank down, the three men accompanying him doing the same. He pointed to where a group of six riders were making slow progress on a marshy stretch of ground. “More soldiers,” he said, his voice a low hum.

“And here was I thinking they were but angels of deliverance,” the man sitting closest to him said, and despite their situation Matthew smiled. The speaker moved closer to Matthew, his mouth a scant inch from Matthew’s ear. “They won’t find us.”

“You think not?” Matthew tried to sound unconcerned, but his eyes were stuck on the approaching group of soldiers, his brain scrambling to find a way out of this neat little corner. Summer dawn was only hours away, and no matter that he and his companions were all cloaked and hooded in dark colours somewhere between brown and grey, they would be visible the moment they stood to run.

“Nay,” Minister Peden replied comfortably. “They may look, but they won’t see.” With a slight nod he indicated the strands of fog that were multiplying over the wetter ground. Days of insistent heat had dried out the moor, resulting in clouds of evaporated water that reverted to fog and mist when night was at its coolest.

“At least the weather is with us,” another of the men commented in a low voice.

“God, my friend,” Sandy Peden corrected. “God is with us, and this is yet another sign that He hasn’t forgotten us.” Without another word he moved off, and one by one the others followed him, shrouded in the early morning mist.

“That way,” Matthew said a bit later. “If you keep to the left of yon trees, you’ll find a passable path that will lead you all the way to Kilmarnock.”

“Thank you,” the tallest of the three men said. “And be sure to convey my gratitude to your wife as well.”

“Aye,” Sandy grinned. “Please tell Alex how appreciative we are of your hospitality.”

“Umm,” Matthew said. Alex wasn’t quite as enthusiastic about extending help to their Presbyterian brethren as he was. Even if she cooked and packed baskets with food, sending along blankets when she could, he knew she didn’t like it, in particular not now, not since the last few arrests that had dragged at least one of their neighbours before the court to answer to charges of treasonous activities. The man had been flogged publicly.

“Truly,” Sandy said, and now there was no laughter in his grey eyes. “Do thank her, Matthew. I know it costs her in fears.” With that he was off, taking the lead as the three ministers made for the depths of the moor. Not until they’d dropped out of sight did Matthew set off for home.

“Where have you been?”

Matthew started when his brother-in-law popped up to block his path. “Out.”

“I gather that.” Simon Melville frowned, taking in the sword and pistol, the long cloak that was now bundled over an arm. “This is no game.”

“Hmm?”

“Never mind.” Simon gestured in the direction of the yard. “You have visitors.”

“Visitors? At this hour?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Simon said with a certain edge. “They’re not soldiers here to drag you off for questioning – not this time. It’s your ex-wife, no less.”

“Margaret?” Matthew came to a halt. “What might she be doing here?”

“I have no idea; mayhap she’s hankering for long morning walks over the foggy moor.”

“I’m doing what I must, Simon, you know that.”

“What you must? You’re helping them break the law! They’ve been ousted as ministers, they’re not allowed to preach or teach, they may not perform any types of rites, and to aid and abet them is to risk the full displeasure of the powers that be.”

Matthew just shrugged.

“Oh well,” Simon sighed. “You’ll do as you please.”

“Aye.”

Simon threw him a sidelong look. “She brought Ian with her.”

“Ian?” Matthew increased his pace.

“She’s in the yard. I don’t think Alex intends to invite her inside, and even if she did, I doubt Margaret would enter. She insists she’ll wait outside until she can talk with you.” Simon’s face broke out in a wide grin. “I don’t think she helped herself by reminding Alex that any decisions are yours to take anyway, so why waste breath telling Alex what she will then have to repeat to you?”

“Nay,” Matthew said, smiling faintly. “I reckon Alex didn’t like that.”

The two women turned towards them when they entered the yard. Of similar height and colouring, with dark well-defined brows, high cheekbones and shapely necks, at a distance they could be taken for sisters. But where Margaret was all willowy grace, Alex was rounder of breasts and hips – assets presently accentuated by her very trim waist. She must have tightened the stays a notch or two before going out to receive their visitors. He studied his wife; silent, arms crossed over her chest and dark blue eyes never leaving Margaret or the half-grown lad beside her, Alex looked icily impressive – and displeased. With an inward sigh, Matthew went over to greet his guests.

★

Alex watched Matthew come towards them, long legs striding at such speed Simon was jogging to keep up. She gave her husband a thoughtful look; yet another morning waking to an empty bed, and she had a pretty good idea of what he'd been doing. It was a constant source of contention between them, his insistence that he had to help his brethren, her loud protests that it might come at too high a price. Bloody stubborn man! She gnawed at her lip and frowned.

Having Margaret show up with Ian in tow hadn't exactly improved her mood, nor did the fact that Margaret, as always, looked gorgeous. No practical skirts in brown for Margaret, oh no; dear Margaret sported a gown in a vibrant blue that complemented her eyes, her neckline was adorned by Brussels lace, and on her head she wore a rakish hat of the same hue as her dress, with glistening, black hair falling in arranged ringlets well down her back. Long riding gloves in soft red leather completed the outfit, although on a day as hot as this, Alex suspected they were quite uncomfortable to wear.

"Mama?" Mark tugged at her skirts. "Who's that?"

Alex smiled and brushed his hair back from his brow. Nearly six, Mark was normally his father's shadow, but the tension in the air had made him gravitate towards his mother, with his two siblings in tow.

"That's your cousin, Ian."

She was convinced Mark had forgotten the events surrounding the last time he'd seen his cousin, almost two years ago, but from the wary look in Ian's eyes she could see that he had not – and nor had any of the adults presently in the yard. Not that she blamed them – two grown men, brothers, fighting with deadly intent until their respective wives managed to step between them.

"He's my son," Matthew had said on that occasion, pointing at the then nine-year-old Ian. "My son, and you know it, Luke Graham."

Alex threw a quick look in the direction of Ian; still a startling copy not only of Matthew but also of Mark – same

dark hair highlighted by chestnut strands, same hazel eyes fringed by thick dark lashes. The resemblance as such was not all that much of an issue, given that Luke and Matthew were brothers – or it wouldn't have been if it hadn't been for Matthew's angry outburst. Why have you brought him back, Alex thought, throwing eyebolts at Margaret. Why couldn't you stay well away from me and mine?

"I have nowhere else to go." Margaret kept round, imploring eyes on Matthew as she spoke.

Smart move, Alex fumed, because for some inexplicable reason, Matthew had a soft spot the size of an elephant when it came to his ex-wife. Totally incomprehensible, given how the woman had behaved – married to the one brother while betraying him with the other.

"And I had to get away. People are dying like flies, and I hope you'll allow me the use of the wee cottage yet again."

"What?" Alex took a hurried step back. "The plague? You've brought the plague?" Even this far north, they'd heard of how London and the villages around it were suffering a virulent outbreak of the Black Death.

"Nay, of course not," Margaret said. "We haven't been in London proper for months. But what with the heat of the summer and the increasing number of deaths, I thought it safer to repair even further north. I can't risk my son."

Matthew's eyes strayed to Ian and Alex sighed. She could commiserate, to a point, with his feelings for the boy that should have been his but no longer was – due to Margaret's lying insistence that Luke had fathered her child – but Matthew's statement almost two years ago could put her children's inheritance at risk, and there were days when she had problems forgiving him for that.

Alex's eyes fluttered over to Simon Melville, who winked at her. She stuck her tongue out, making Simon grin. A thousand times he'd told her not to worry, that there was no way Ian had a claim to Hillview, not now that he was the recognised son of Luke. Besides, he'd said rather smugly, he'd drafted the documents himself, and so he could assure her there were no loopholes, none at all.

“You may stay,” Matthew said, and Alex glowered at him. He should at least discuss it with her first. At times Matthew was a bloody old-fashioned man – to be expected, given that this was in fact the seventeenth century, and the odd one out was she, born in 1976.

Not that it showed, she reflected, throwing a quick glance down her body. In skirts and bodice, her head neatly capped and a clean apron covering the dark material of her skirts, she was undistinguishable from most of the women of the here and now. All in all a good thing, because to shout to the world that she was from a future time, would be the equivalent of tying a noose and placing it around her neck. Witches hang, and no one would listen to her protestations that she’d done nothing to transport herself from modern day Scotland to here, that it had all been due to the thunderstorm.

Her eyes flitted to the sky and she almost laughed at herself. No storm brewing, and besides, it had to be a once in a lifetime experience to live through a thunderstorm so gigantic it caused a rift in time. Once in a lifetime? It should be impossible, and yet here she was, a living breathing example of the fact that sometimes impossible things happened – as they had done to her seven years ago, when time was torn apart at her feet.

Alex returned her attention to Margaret, who was beaming at Matthew. To Alex’s huge irritation, Matthew smiled back.

“Thank you.” Margaret dismissed the hired grooms who’d escorted them, and set off in the direction of the cottage, her son at her heels.

“You’ll stay away for the first few weeks,” Matthew said. “As a precaution.”

“Aye, a precaution. I see.” Margaret paled, looking so frightened that Alex felt sorry for her.

“I’ll send up Sarah later, you’ll need food and such, right?” she said.

Margaret gave her a grateful look and hefted the rather insignificant bundle she was carrying.

“Aye, we left in haste.”

“I can imagine.” An instant of shared motherhood flew between them.

“That was generous,” Simon muttered to Matthew as Alex strode away to arrange for a basket to be taken to the cottage. Matthew nodded. Not that it surprised him, because this wife of his might on occasion blow both hot and cold, but was mostly a temperate warm, being in general kind and cheerful. He put out a hand to stop Rachel from whacking Jacob over the head with her wooden doll.

“Nay, Rachel! You mustn’t fight with your wee brother. It’s unseemly.”

“He pushed me.”

“He did no such thing,” Matthew said, sinking down onto his haunches to give her the full benefit of his stare. “If you hit him, then you mustn’t be surprised when he hits you back.”

Rachel gave her baby brother a sly look. At almost three, Rachel was tall and sturdy for her age and topped Jacob by a head. Let him try, her face told Matthew, let him try and I’ll send him flying.

“One day he’ll be taller and stronger than you, and you won’t want him hitting you then.” He sincerely hoped his children had grown out of squabbles by the time Jacob overtopped Rachel, but eyed his daughter doubtfully. He adjusted her cap and gave her a gentle shove in the direction of Mark.

“Keep an eye on your sister,” he said. Mark’s face clouded and Matthew beckoned him over. “And you won’t go near the cottage.” Mark looked crestfallen. “You can help me carry up the basket later, but only if you watch Rachel first.”

Mark sighed but took Rachel’s hand, wandering off in the direction of the swing Matthew had made them.

“And you make sure she stays with you, all the time,” Matthew called, receiving a despairing look in return that made Matthew smother a smile. Where Rachel got her boundless energy from was an open question, although

Matthew insisted he had been a most biddable child – at least until the age of seven – so therefore it had to come from her mother.

“For my sins,” Alex would sigh every now and then, making Matthew laugh out loud. Even worse, wee Rachel had her brothers firmly in hand, and showed hair-raising creativity when it came to new activities, leaving a wake of destruction behind her.

“Come, you,” Matthew said to Jacob and swung him up to sit on his arm. “Let’s find your mama.” He kissed the hair of his youngest before going off in search of his disgruntled wife.

“I couldn’t do otherwise,” Matthew said to Alex’s back.

“Of course not,” she replied, a trifle too coolly to sound sincere. She put a loaf of dark bread into the basket, added eggs, cheese, a flask of beer, half a pie, and as an afterthought a piece of currant cake. Jacob smacked his lips, waving a chubby hand in the direction of the cake.

“After dinner,” Alex said. “And only if you eat all your greens.”

Matthew made a face. Obligated to act the role model, these days he found himself eating large quantities of uncooked vegetables, his muttered protests along the lines that he was no cow ignored by his wife, who insisted it was good for him.

“I can carry the basket,” Matthew offered once she’d finished loading it.

“I have no doubts whatsoever on that score, but you’re not. Sarah will take it.”

“I’ve promised Mark he can go with me,” Matthew said, receiving a long look in return.

“Neither of you will, and both of you will stay well away from them, at least to begin with. Make sure Mark knows that as well.”

Matthew frowned at her peremptory tone. “You can’t stop me from seeing them. I have to help them settle in.”

“You go up there, Matthew Graham, and you’ll be sleeping very alone at night, in the hayloft. Your choice.”

She hefted the heavy basket off the table and went to find Sarah.

Matthew considered chasing her up the stairs for a serious one on one conversation regarding her duties and roles as a wife, but decided to save it for later. Much later, and possibly in the hayloft...

Halfway through the afternoon, Alex decided to escape the heat by settling herself under the large ash that stood on the further side of the stables. A quick look in the direction of her youngest children showed her they were muddy and happy by the trough, and Mark would be with Matthew somewhere. She reclined against the trunk, produced her work, and with a little sigh set to.

“You don’t need to worry.” Simon flopped down in the shade beside Alex, his light blue eyes intent on her.

“Worry about what?” Alex held up the boy’s shirt she was sewing against the light. The hemline was uneven, but she decided it would do. She was sick of sewing and mending, sometimes she longed for a shopping centre with one shop after the other; GAP, H&M, M&S. She sighed and picked up the next garment in her basket. An impossible dream, given that this was 1665.

“About her, Margaret.”

“I know I don’t,” she said. “But as to Ian...he eats him with his eyes!”

Simon hemmed in agreement.

“And it must be difficult for him – for Ian. I wonder what they’ve told him to explain that sorry mess two years ago. It’s not as if they can wave a paternity test at him.”

Simon sat up, eyes bright with curiosity. Of a need he knew her background, and he was always pestering her for details about life in the future.

“Paternity tests?”

“They take blood from the baby, the mother and the father, and then they can see if it all matches.” She smiled and beckoned him closer. “They say that on average, one child in four is a cuckoo,” she confided, grinning at his horrified

expression. "I dare say it's more or less the same now."

"No!" Simon shook his head. "You can't think that married women would do something like that!"

"Have sex? Or have sex with someone other than their husband?" She laughed, her sewing forgotten in her lap.

"Hmph!" Simon lay back and stared up at the sky through the rustling leaves of the tree. "A man never knows, he never knows for sure if it's his child or not."

"No, and that's the starting point of all this sorry mess with Ian, isn't it?"

"Did he tell you?" she asked a bit later.

"No," Simon said. "But it doesn't take a genius to work out where he's been."

Alex hugged her knees. "I don't like it. From being the occasional meal, the odd night's lodging, now it's Matthew guiding them across the moor, helping them find other hideouts." She leaned her cheek against her skirts.

"I'm sure he's careful."

"Of course he is," Alex agreed, mainly to convince herself. She smiled down at Simon and poked him in the gut. "That wasn't very nice of you, to leave poor Joan all alone with your Aunt Judith." She'd only met Judith Melville once, a quarrelsome woman with no similarities whatsoever to Simon. Matthew's sister Joan, on the other hand, was one of the sweetest people she knew.

"Joan doesn't mind, I think she even likes the old bat. Anyway, she'll be here tomorrow."

Someone called for the mistress, and Alex got to her feet.

"Now what?"

She slowed her steps halfway across the yard. "Who are they?" she asked Simon.

"Dragoons," he said, frowning. He buttoned up his coat as he walked, and brushed his collar into place. By the time they were at the door, Simon Melville was all lawyer, joviality wiped from his face. He expanded his considerable girth, nodded at the officer, and placed a hand at Alex's waist.

“Mistress,” the officer said.

“Captain,” Alex curtsied.

“We will not importune you for long,” the officer continued, jerking his head in the direction of the stables. Alex’s heart nosedived at the sight of her man being marched across the yard. He was struggling, his arms held in a tight grip by the two soldiers flanking him.

“What on earth...” Alex gasped, wheeling to face the officer. Behind her Matthew cursed, his voice loud in anger. Oh God; someone had seen him on the moor last night, and now they’d cart him off and flog him for it.

“We are taking him in for questioning,” the officer said.

“Questioning? About what?” She turned, eyes flying until they found Matthew’s. He was not only angry, he was afraid, she could see that. Calm down, she tried to tell him telepathically, furrowing her brow in concentration. Okay, so she seriously doubted she was a new Mr Spock, but he did stop struggling, informing the soldiers he wasn’t about to run anywhere, so they could unhand him.

“Now, now, Mistress Graham. Surely you’ve heard. Fugitive preachers abound all around, and to aid them...” the officer’s voice tailed off.

She widened her eyes. “Matthew? When? How?”

“Last night. We had them surrounded, three of them, and out of nowhere appeared a man.” He glared in the direction of Matthew. “A capable swordsman at that, leaving one of my men badly wounded.”

What? Alex forced herself not to look at Matthew. To wound a soldier...they might hang him! Her throat tightened and it took considerable effort to turn to the officer and give him a little smile.

“Well, I can assure you it wasn’t him,” Alex said. “He was snoring his head off in bed, with me.”

“If so a spot of questioning will do no harm, will it?” the officer shrugged, clearly not believing her.

“I’m going with him,” Simon said.

The officer raised a brow. “I think not.”

“I think aye. I’m his lawyer.”

That didn't please the officer, narrow face pinching together into a frown. But he acquiesced, muttering something under his breath. Simon scurried off to see to his horse and Alex moved close enough to touch Matthew's hand, a light graze no more.

"It'll be alright," Matthew said, swinging himself up into the saddle. She heard it in his voice, how he was struggling to sound matter-of-fact. Alex wanted to say something reassuring, but her vocal cords had somehow gone numb, leaving her mute. Instead she stood beside his horse, holding on to his leg. Matthew leaned towards her, eyes lightening into a greyish green.

"I love you," he said in an undertone, which only increased her anxiety, because he rarely said such things to her. Alex managed a wobbly smile and stood on her toes to caress his cheek.

"And I you," she said.

Her husband nodded and at the officer's command followed him up the lane, with Simon in his wake. Not once did he look back, but Alex stood rooted to the ground for as long as she could see him.

Chapter 2

They manhandled Matthew into an unfurnished room, with Simon trotting behind him. The commanding officer was sitting in the single chair, to his right stood a troop of soldiers, tired grimy men that looked as if they'd gone far too long without sleep. Mayhap they had, because it came to Matthew that these must in fact be the soldiers he'd so neatly evaded last night. He hunched together somewhat, legs bending ever so slightly in an attempt to reduce his height.

The seated officer – a chit of a lad, with fair curling hair down to his shoulders and a most impressive jaw – looked him up and down and twisted in his seat to stare at Simon, who just stared back.

“Stand up straight!” the officer barked, motioning at Matthew.

“I already am,” Matthew retorted, glad of the wide breeches. He was made to turn to face the troop of soldiers.

“Is it him?” the officer asked. One of the men tilted his head to the side, frowning.

“It could be,” he said, “although...”

“Could be?” Simon pounced. “Well, it could be anyone.”

The soldier shuffled on his feet. “There is a likeness.”

“A likeness?” Simon laughed out loud. “How?”

One of the younger soldiers took a step forward. “He’s tall and the man we saw was tall – that we know for sure.”

“Ah,” Simon nodded. “And did he have dark hair?”

“I don’t know,” the young man said.

“No? Why not?”

“He was wearing a cloak.”

Simon rolled his eyes, smoothed at his coat. “Not much to go on,” he said to the officer, who shifted on his seat.

“Tall, a competent swordsman – and we know Mr Graham has a past as a soldier – who else could it be?” The officer scowled at Matthew.

“You?” Simon said.

The officer flew to his feet. “What?”

“Well why not? You’re of a size, and in a cloak, well—”

“What is it you’re implying?” the officer barked.

“I am but making the point that it does not suffice, does it? Mr Graham insists he was at home last night, and this is corroborated by his wife, who—”

“His wife? And what else would she say?”

“Well no; there you have me,” Simon conceded with a little bow. “But it is still a fact that if all your men saw was a hooded tall man on the moor, it is not enough to place Matthew Graham there, is it?”

The officer wheeled, glared at his men, at Matthew, and at his toes. “This is a serious matter. We are no longer talking of the occasional meal, are we?” The officer came close enough that his nose brushed against Matthew’s. “This time someone has taken steel to my men, even wounded one of them.”

A wee gash, Matthew was on the point of saying, but bit his tongue at the last moment. Instead he blinked, attempting to look as dense as possible.

The officer frowned, dashing a long strand of fair hair from his face. “Take him away, lock him up for the night. Who knows, it might jog his memory.” He smiled – a cold smile that made Matthew shiver inside. They were going to hurt him.

Simon protested loudly. The officer stood his ground, repeating that he had to ascertain once and for all that Mr Graham was no threat to law and order. A shove, yet another shove, and Matthew was dragged from the room.

Merciful Lord! He gasped as yet another bucket of ice-cold water was poured over him. Hands pulled him to stand, he tried to see through his swollen eye. A fist drove into his gut, another in his kidneys. Small bursts of pain all over his

upper body, a fist in his face, and Matthew was unable to defend himself, could not do anything to deflect the blows, what with the two men holding him upright.

“Admit it, man,” the lieutenant in charge said, leaning in to stare Matthew in his one good eye. “Admit it was you and this will stop.”

Matthew just shook his head. The responding clap to his head had his brain ringing, a high-pitched sound that made it difficult to hear what the man was saying, although he assumed it was yet another repeated ‘admit it’.

After hours of this physical interrogation, Matthew was weaving on his feet. He pretended to faint time and time again, gaining himself a few minutes of precious reprieve while the soldiers set to reviving him. He let his head loll back and groaned. The lieutenant made a disgusted snort.

“For all his size he’s quite the weakling,” the wee officer said.

Matthew almost smiled; he could beat the lieutenant one-handed should he need to.

“No,” the lieutenant decided, clapping himself on his thighs. “We’re done with him.” A booted toe prodded at Matthew. He slumped, an unconscious mollusc on the floor.

Except that he wasn’t, and the moment the door grated shut behind his tormentors, he moved over to sit with his back against the furthest wall. No broken bones, no serious damage, just one bruised aching body, a split lip, a swollen eye and a burst eyebrow. Very much on purpose, he concluded. This was merely the soldiers giving him a warning, a gentle reminder of what was in store for men who flaunted the law. He laughed hollowly; not all that gentle.

Simon must have been up with the sun. Even in his shivering, dozing state Matthew recognised his friend’s voice, a loud constant haranguing as he followed whoever was guiding him across the garrison yard. The door swung open, a shaft of light made Matthew squint, and Simon rounded on the lieutenant, near on spitting with anger.

“Simon,” Matthew croaked, wincing when his lip

split open. “It’s no great matter. Just get me out of here.” From the way the lieutenant was eyeing Simon, he was considering whether to lock him up as well rather than releasing Matthew.

“No great matter? Have you any notion—” Simon rushed over to steady him. “Sweetest Lord, what will Alex say?”

Matthew attempted a shrug. “Mayhap I should clean up some.”

“Aye, that would be wise,” Simon said. “I’ll have the innkeeper heat you some water. A few hours’ sleep, I think, before we ride back home.” Matthew stifled a gasp when Simon’s arm came round his middle, but he walked as straight as he could through the yard.

A mere half-hour later he felt much better; hot food in his belly, his bruised body washed and inspected by the innkeeper’s wife, a pretty lass with a gentle touch and an endless supply of herbal ointments. He was in a hurry to get back home, knowing that Alex would be worried by his continued absence, but at the mulish look on Simon’s face he crawled into bed. A wee nap, no more. He yawned, closed his eyes and dropped off.

Alex was too distraught to give Joan much of a welcome when she arrived around noon. In fact, she was so immersed in her worries for Matthew, it wasn’t until Joan took off her cloak that Alex noticed her sister-in-law was pregnant.

“Why haven’t you told me?”

“I wanted you to see for yourself,” Joan said. “But I dare say today is not the best of days to impart such news, is it?”

Alex shook her head, eyes flying to the lane. “Not really.” She made a huge effort and turned to face Joan. “But I’m so very glad for you.”

Joan smiled down at her. At almost six feet, she was uncommonly tall, and in general so thin as to look fragile. Now, there was a sizeable bump on her, and her normally flat chest had upgraded itself to something resembling a timid B-cup.

Alex frowned. “You don’t look too well.” That was an

understatement. Joan was pale to the point of looking ashen, with her beautiful grey eyes sunk into deep purple hollows.

“I’m tired, that’s all. You shouldn’t mind me, not all bloom like you do with the bairns.”

“Have you been eating?”

Joan looked away. “I’m greensick all the time.”

“No wonder you’re the colour of a sheet. I’ll fix you something with plenty of honey and eggs in it.” With that Alex propelled Joan in the direction of the house.

“No word?” Joan sipped at the posset Alex set before her.

“No. But there wouldn’t be, right? It was afternoon when they rode off.”

“Mayhap.” Joan drank, wiped at her mouth. “Was he? Out on the moors?”

Alex threw a wary look round the kitchen. Neither Sarah nor Janey were in sight. She nodded, irritated by the admiring look in Joan’s face.

“It’s dangerous! What if they—” She broke off when Mark came rushing through the door.

“They’re back! Da’s back!”

“Well, thank heavens for that.” Alex leapt to her feet.

Joan grabbed at her hand, met her eyes. “He does as he has to, Alex. Remember that, aye?”

“It’s a risk, an unnecessary risk.”

“To you, mayhap. To Matthew it’s a matter of conscience and faith.”

Alex came to a stop at the sight of Matthew. He gave her a rueful smile, fingers flying to his swollen face. Dear God! She moved closer, all of her itching with the need to drag him off to a secluded corner for a detailed inspection.

“They couldn’t identify him,” Simon said. “All they could say was that the man had been tall and shrouded in a long cloak.”

“Ah. So that was it?” Obviously not, judging from Matthew’s face.

“Nay.” Matthew looked grim. “They locked me up overnight and...” He winced when he moved his arms.

“It could have been worse.” Simon slid off his horse. “Much, much worse.”

“Oh, well; that’s a comfort,” Alex said. But Simon was right. Matthew might look as if he’d been trampled by the cows, but he’d suffered no serious damage – made very apparent by the fact that the first thing he did once he was off the horse was scan the skies.

“Tomorrow. We start the harvest tomorrow.”

Her hands flew down his arms, his back. There were bruises everywhere; peeking from the neckline of his shirt, all over his face, on what she could see of his arms, and when she touched his lower back, he inhaled, twisting out of reach.

“Are you sure? Shouldn’t you take it easy for some—”

“Tomorrow; and I’m perfectly hale.”

“Well, sorry for asking.”

“I’m fine, lass; truly.” He smiled, a somewhat strained smile, and raised his hand to her cheek. “I dare not wait any longer, because if it rains now...” He shook his head.

Alex nodded her agreement, raising her eyes to the unclouded summer sky. All summer, the sun had blazed down on them, and the barley looked starved for rain, as did the rye and the oats. But it was ripe, however puny, standing man-high in the elongated fields.

“So, tomorrow.” Without any further comments as to the events in Cumnock, Matthew set off towards the barn. Alex sighed. Sometimes this silent male thing was bloody enervating.

A fortnight or so later, Alex was so tired she considered hiding in the hayloft for the day. Instead, she was up at dawn to feed the men and then extended before her yet another stretch of never-ending work.

“You must work in the field today,” Matthew told her over breakfast, “you and all the lasses.” He threw his head in the direction of the skies. “It’ll break. I can smell it.”

So could Alex, a heavy smell of brine. It made her mouth dry up, and she studied the darkening horizon repeatedly

during the day, lifting her face from the sheaves before going back to her work.

Sweat formed like dewdrops along her hairline, ran down her face and into her eyes. It trickled down her back and dampened the insides of her thighs, making every single piece of clothing she had on stick to her skin.

The clouds sank even closer to the ground, and Matthew yelled at them to hurry up, they had to get as many of the half-dried sheaves as possible inside. Alex's back screeched in protest, her arms trembled, and still she lifted, throwing sheaves into the flat carts. Men picked up sheaves and ran towards the barn and Alex tried to do the same, but the stupid thing kept slipping through her arms, the drying stalks scratching at her face.

Overhead, the skies had begun to growl, a distant rumbling that made Alex want to rush and hide. But she didn't, of course she didn't. She wiped her brow and went back to wrestling with the recalcitrant sheave.

"Here." Matthew appeared by her side. Together, they lugged the sheave to the closest cart, and Matthew slapped the horse on its rump, shouting to Gavin to drive as fast as possible for the barn.

Overhead the skies exploded into a firework of lightning. Alex grabbed hold of Matthew's arm, sinking her fingers into his flesh.

"It won't happen again," he said with a small smile. "Once was improbable enough."

"You think?" she stuttered, eyes darting from him to the threatening sky and back again.

"Aye, I do; you won't be knocked from this time to another, I won't allow it."

"Good to know," she said, leaning against his solid frame. "But it almost did," she added, thinking back to an incident some years ago.

"And I stopped it from happening, didn't I?" He smiled down at her. "I'll not let you go, Alex. Ever."

The skies opened, rain fell like a sheet of water, flattening the un-harvested barley. Matthew took hold of her hand and ran for the house.

After a whole night's rain, the next day dawned a sullen, drizzling grey. Matthew wolfed down breakfast and rushed outside to inspect his ruined fields, although to what purpose Alex had no idea. Simon went with him, and once Alex had set Sarah and Janey to work in the kitchen, she followed Joan to the parlour. She rarely sat here during daytime, preferring the warmth of the kitchen, but given the peaceful quiet of the little room, maybe she should use it more often. Dark wooden floors contrasted nicely with the lighter walls, the few pieces of furniture were decorated with the odd embroidered cushion, and on one of the tables stood Matthew's precious chess set, each piece a little work of art that had taken him months to complete.

"It never looks that way when I do it," Alex said, rooting around in her basket for her present work in progress.

"Aye, well, years and years of practise," Joan shrugged, not even looking at the knitted blanket that flowered from her hands. She stopped and bent her head in the direction of Alex's half-finished stocking. "Alex! You can't go about in something like that!" She snatched the stocking from Alex's hands and proceeded to tear up most of it.

"That took me ages! And who cares, anyway? It's not as if anyone ever sees my stockings, is it?" She began rewinding the dark wool, throwing murderous looks in the direction of Joan.

"So you never wear stockings then? In your time?"

"Of course we do. But we just pop into a shop and buy them. Three for the price of two or something." Alex sighed and studied the remainder of her massacred stocking. Joan was right; she couldn't really walk around in something as badly knitted as this.

"Do you ever wish you could go back?" Joan's needles clicked on at amazing speed.

"No. Never." Alex underlined her statement with an affronted tone.

"But—" Whatever Joan had planned on saying, was interrupted by a series of loud, high-pitched screams.

“Rachel,” Alex and Joan said simultaneously, both of them hurrying out into the yard.

Pandemonium reigned. Simon was chasing the billy goat with Mark whooping at his heels. Old Samuel was stopping the other goats from escaping their paddock, Gavin was shooing at the interested hens that seemed to be everywhere, and Matthew was holding a bawling, muddled Rachel in his arms.

“Be quiet,” Alex told Rachel. “It’s your own fault, isn’t it?” She wrinkled her nose in distaste at the smell that emanated from her daughter. “I told you, Rachel Graham. How many times have I told you, he’ll butt you if you don’t let him be?”

Rachel snivelled. She was fascinated by the billy goat, standing for hours by his enclosure, sometimes to feed him apples, but far more often to throw things at him and make him bleat. Today she’d apparently decided to open the gate for him so as to properly make his acquaintance, which had ended with the goat sending her flying face first into the adjacent pile of manure – and serve the little missy right.

“Phew, you really stink!” Alex led Rachel towards the little river that bisected their property on its way to join the Lugar Water. “And you.” She pointed at Matthew. “You stink too. So you best come along.”

“Nay, I don’t, I only picked her up.”

“And held her in your arms, and there’s something sticking to your hair.”

“You best do as she says,” Simon said, tongue-in-cheek. “She sounds very determined.” He fell in step with them, humming something under his breath.

“And as for you, Simon Melville, you’re not coming inside until you’ve washed,” Alex said over her shoulder, already busy at the water’s edge with a squirming Rachel.

“Me?” Simon made huge eyes. “Why me?”

“You caught the goat – and, let me tell you, it shows.”

Simon looked down at his mud spattered shirt and grinned. “You’re just wishing to see me in all my glory, Mrs Graham. You must be hungering for a peek at a real man.”

“I’ll give you real man,” Matthew growled, stretching himself to his full six feet plus two. “Come here, you wee twat and let me show you.”

Simon laughed and charged, sending both men to fall fully clothed into the water.

“Idiots,” Alex said, before going back to scrubbing her daughter.

An hour or so later, all the Graham children were clean and playing by the water’s edge. Alex regarded them with pride; Mark and Rachel were small clones of their father, with the same somewhat olive skin, the same dark hair and the same eyes, shifting from muddy green to bright emerald depending on their mood. Jacob, however, was a throw back on his maternal grandfather, a thick thatch of blond hair topping an oval face with a skin tone just like hers – pale with pink in winter, tawny gold in summer. But his eyes were the same magical hazel as his siblings’.

“They’re so beautiful,” Alex said, slipping her hand into Matthew’s.

“Very.”

“This is where you’re supposed to say they all take after their mother,” Simon laughed from behind them.

“But then he’d be lying,” Alex said, squeezing Matthew’s hand once before letting it go. “All of them look like their father – gorgeous.”

“Besotted,” Simon sighed as Alex moved away. “I don’t know how you do it, but you’ve turned that poor woman’s head.”

“I heard you,” Alex called back over her shoulder. “Supper soon – your favourite, Simon; spinach soup.”

“Ugh,” Simon muttered.

Supper was a loud and cramped affair, the entire household squeezed together round the kitchen table. As always, Matthew sat at the head of the table, even if he did offer Simon the single chair with a rather rude referral to Simon’s overall size. Not that Simon seemed bothered, calmly sliding in to sit on one of the benches.

“Girth has nothing to do with grace,” he said, winking at Alex. “I dare say I can still best you on the dance floor, Matthew Graham.”

Most probably, Alex grinned, because for all his general resemblance to an apple on legs, Simon was by far the most graceful and tenacious dancer she’d ever seen.

Alex liked her kitchen – especially on occasions such as these, when it was full of talking, laughing people. Over the last few years she’d implemented quite a few changes, starting with how clean she kept things. The previously dark and sooty walls now received regular scrubblings, the floors were swept on a daily basis, and once a week she had Sarah and Janey on their knees with a bristle brush. The small window allowed some daylight even in winter, but now, in full summer, the kitchen door was always kept propped open, and on an evening as light as this one, there was no need to use the tallow candles that stood on the table, daylight spilling in through the open door.

For all that they all looked rather depressed at the sight of the dark green soup, in a remarkably short time the bowls were emptied, her family cheering up at the sight of the pie she had Janey fetch from the pantry.

“Chess?” Matthew stood, brushed some pie crumbs off his shirt and jerked his head in the direction of the parlour.

“By all means,” Simon said, “and this time...”

“When pigs fly,” Matthew snorted, “but it’s good that you try.” He kissed Alex on his way out, murmuring that he didn’t think the spinach soup had gone down well – with anyone.

“Too bad, I have enough left for dinner tomorrow.” Alex laughed at his grimace, shooing him off before going over to inspect the leftovers and set the oats to soak for tomorrow’s breakfast.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” Simon was saying when Alex entered the parlour. The chess board had been shoved to the side, with both men sitting staring into the fire.

“Aye, it is.” Matthew sighed and extended his long legs in front of him. “They’re raising an army, Sandy says – he

had it from yon Carstairs – an army that has as its single purpose to root out every single Covenanter here in the southwest.”

“Good luck to them,” Alex said. “That would mean more or less everyone living here.” This was Presbyterian land – from here all the way to Ayr and up to Lanark.

“We’ll see; it may be they’ve taken on more than they bargained for,” Matthew said, an edge of steel to his voice.

Alex frowned. Over her husband’s head, she met Simon’s concerned eyes and made a helpless gesture. Matthew Graham was a very stubborn man and there were some principles he wasn’t about to compromise on, foremost amongst them his right to hold to his faith.

Two days later, Simon kissed Joan, promised to be back in three or four weeks to see how she was faring, and sat up on his placid gelding.

“You’ll take care of her?” he asked Alex.

“Of course we will, she’s much better off here than in Edinburgh, isn’t she?” She made a slight face: Edinburgh was not a place she had any particular fondness for – at least not in its present state. Dark and damp, overcrowded and shrouded in the haze of peat smoke, it wasn’t the most welcoming of cities.

“Aye, if nothing else it smells less,” Joan interjected from behind her. She walked over to the horse and patted Simon on the leg. “Go. I’ll be fine, and so will he.” She placed a hand on her belly.

“He?” Alex asked.

“Aye, a lad,” Simon grinned, “the first of many.”

“As many as the good Lord gives us,” Joan smiled back. Alex shook her head in exasperation and went off to find her man.

Chapter 3

Alex woke abruptly and for a couple of minutes she blinked at her surroundings, trying to recall where she was. The dream had been vivid, and it took time to adapt to the fact that she was at home, in her bed, rather than in a berth on a small ship halfway across the Atlantic.

She stretched lazily. More than two years they'd been back home after their travels overseas, a long roll of days punctuated by the birth of Jacob, the day the new bull made a brave rush for freedom only to sink into the swampy ground of the farthest meadow, and the not so long ago afternoon when Rachel decided she could fly, leaping out of the hayloft to land stunned and with a broken arm.

Sometimes, Alex yearned for the years she'd spent looking for her abducted husband, a period in her life that at the time had seemed a nightmare, but which in retrospect had acquired a nimbus of adventure and holiday. She knew Matthew wouldn't agree. He kept the memories of those long months of slavery on the plantation Suffolk Rose in Virginia safely locked away, but even now, more than three years since Alex had found him and bought him free, there were still nights when he woke them both with his nightmares, raging in hatred at the man who had done this to him – his own brother.

She heard her daughter's demanding voice floating up from below. Alex could imagine exactly what she was on about – too much on Mark's plate, too little on her own. That girl could eat a horse for breakfast and still complain about being hungry before dinner. No wonder she ran all of them ragged.

When Alex turned to look at her husband, she found him already awake, his eyes resting on her half-naked body

in a way that left no doubt as to how this Sunday morning would begin. Except that she wasn't really in the mood, she was irascible this morning – over tender somehow – so she grunted and rolled away from him, only to be pulled back against his warm chest.

“You know I don't like it when you do that.” Matthew bit her earlobe and trailed his tongue down her exposed neck.

“I just don't feel like it,” she said, knowing that would only make him more insistent. This was one of their more complicated games; the wife being taught that the husband would not be denied and that she must subjugate herself to him. It was a game they both played with enthusiasm, and by the time Matthew used his knees to spread her thighs open to him, she was tugging at him, telling him to hurry, please hurry.

“You're a very stubborn man at times,” she said some minutes later, picking at his hair.

“And you must repeatedly be reminded of your wifely duties,” he mock sighed, kissing her on the cheek.

“Do you think it will be today?” Alex asked, getting out of bed as naked as the day she was born. “She looks positively huge.” She caught his grin and had to smile. Compared to her in the advanced stages of pregnancy, Joan looked like an underfed waif. She rolled her eyes at him, making him laugh as he settled back to watch her wash and dress.

He had once confided to her just how much he enjoyed these long Sunday mornings, looking endearingly embarrassed when he told her he collected these images of her in her morning disarray, all wild hair and nothing else. So she took her time, washing slowly, brushing her hair with long strokes – well, in general giving him ample opportunity to gawk and compliment. Except that today he didn't, his eyes on the ceiling rather than on her, a concerned little wrinkle between his brows. He shifted from side to side, gnawed at his lip, and threw her a look.

“What?” She met his eyes.

“I spoke to Margaret.”

Alex pulled on her shift. “Really? And what did she say?” She settled the linen cap atop her head, ensuring most of her hair was tucked out of sight.

“She has to hurry back to Luke.”

She relaxed, focusing on the stone jars in which she kept some of her oils.

“Oh good,” Alex muttered. “About time those star crossed lovers were reunited.” She dipped her finger into her homemade rose scented cream and rubbed it into her hands and up her arms.

“He’s written to her on several occasions,” he went on, indirectly admitting that he had been talking to Margaret of other things beside leaking roofs and draughts. She sent him a dark look.

“I’ve met her occasionally in the woods.”

Alex nodded, but she didn’t believe him.

She returned her attention to her hands, doing a primitive manicure while keeping her face hidden from him. Stockings and garters, petticoats and skirts, and she swished across the room to retrieve her bodice.

“When will they set out?” Alex asked, attempting to lace the dark green bodice. It strained over her chest, and a sudden insight flew across her mind. Another one! And Jacob not yet two...

“She rides out tomorrow.”

It took some time for Alex to react, busy as she was with counting days, but once she did she raised his face to his.

“She?”

“Aye, I’ve promised to keep Ian here, for now.”

Without a word she retrieved her shawl and left the room.

The night had been cold and wet. Everything glittered in the weak September sun, sheer veils of fog clinging to the long grasses that bordered the little river. Alex hurried towards the woods and the long incline that led to her favourite thinking place, the bare hilltop from which she could see her whole orderly world. She brushed against berry laden brambles

and ducked under the branches of an elm, breathing deeply when she stepped into the stillness among the trees.

Behind her, the household would be coming in to sit in the kitchen to listen to Matthew read them yet another passage from the Bible, his dark rich voice explaining the lessons to be learnt. He'd be pissed at her not being there, but frankly she didn't care. He should have asked her, he knew she found it difficult to have Ian around, even at a once remove in the little cottage. Now he was going to live in their house, with her children.

She burst into a run, stopping only when she could taste blood in her mouth, which was far too soon. She was woefully out of shape – at least compared to what she once had been. The daily karate workouts in her former life had become the occasional kata exercise, sneaking away to do it alone in the woods. And now another child... More walks, she decided, long walks.

Alex picked leaves as she ambled up the hillside, filling her apron with the yellow fronds of rowan, the muted green of oak leaves and the occasional bright red of a clambering vine. She had mingled feelings regarding a new pregnancy, but reminded herself that you reap as you sow, and they were always very keen on the sowing part, she and Matthew. Well, she had no intention of telling him her news, he didn't deserve to know, at least not today. She went on with her dark, mental grumblings, and the touch of a hand on her arm so surprised her she jumped, releasing her hold on her apron so that the leaves fluttered to the ground.

"Fantastic," she said once she recognised Margaret. "The one person I really, really want to see."

"You do?" Margaret sounded surprised.

Alex sighed; sarcasm wasn't quite as widespread in this day and age as it had been in the life she came from.

"No, but it doesn't seem I have a choice, does it?"

She hadn't met Margaret properly in the two months she'd been staying here, being far too busy with the hectic days of harvest to find the time to take her rambling walks up and down the hillsides. In all honesty, she hadn't wanted

to see her, hating the fact that the sheer presence of Margaret made her feel diminished, a bad copy of a glorious original. Superficially, they were very alike, with similar features and colouring. Except that where Alex's hair was a normal if curly brown, Margaret's hair shone like black satin, and where Alex had a tell-tale thickening across the bridge of her nose, Margaret's was elegant and narrow. Everything about her was perfect, from those wide blue eyes to that pointed little chin.

Margaret returned her inspection, eyes travelling down Alex's body and back up again. The morning light struck Margaret in the face, and Alex felt a flash of satisfaction when she saw that the skin was dry and flaky, with a discernible web of shallow wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. The grooves on either side of her mouth would with time give Margaret the depressed expression of a disgruntled pike.

"I'm glad that I have the opportunity to talk to you," Margaret said, stepping out of the ray of sun.

"I'm afraid the feeling isn't mutual," Alex bent down to retrieve some of the spilled leaves.

"Nay, I know that." Margaret was wearing an embroidered shawl over skirts in deep green, and from below the hem peeked what must be boots in red Moroccan leather. Alex eyed them enviously – her footwear was nowhere near as elegant.

"I don't like leaving Ian here, but I have no choice. You understand, don't you?" She looked at Alex with beseeching eyes, and Alex gave her a curt nod. Margaret had no other family, Luke definitely didn't, and so, by default, they were the only kin Ian had – them and Joan.

"What will Luke think?" Alex asked, feeling an uncharitable spurt of glee at the discomfiture on Margaret's face.

"He won't like it, but I can't risk taking him back, not yet."

"You could stay a bit longer and then go. Last we heard, the number of deaths was sinking rapidly."

"You don't understand, I must go. Luke is ill."

Alex straightened up, further irritated with Matthew for not giving her the full picture.

“With the plague?”

“Nay of course not! Then he’d be dead by now.”

Too bad; the world would be a much fairer place without Luke Graham in it.

Margaret’s lip lifted. “You needn’t worry. He won’t die, I hope, but thank you for your concern.”

“In that case, why not take Ian with you? If there’s no risk—”

“I didn’t say that, did I? Luke has the smallpox.” Margaret slipped her arms tight around herself and closed her eyes briefly. “It seems the worst has passed – the physician no longer fears for his life – but he’s weak, and possibly contagious. I can’t very well leave him to lie alone, can I?”

Alex considered this in silence. Luke was in Oxford, now that the king had retired out of London to avoid the plague, and Alex suspected that very little TLC would be wasted on a sick man who could infect the court with something as disfiguring and as potentially lethal as smallpox. She almost felt sorry for him, ‘almost’ being the key word.

“What have you told Ian?”

Margaret looked confused. “That his father is ill and he must remain here until we send for him.”

“Not about that. About Matthew.”

“Oh.” Margaret studied the bright red fringe of her shawl intently for some minutes. “He’s ours. Ian is mine and Luke’s – not Matthew’s.” She caught Alex’s eye and her mouth curved into an infinitesimal smile. “You like it that way, don’t you?”

Alex most certainly did. Matthew had other children, her children, to look out for.

“But he must have asked...after what Matthew said.”

“Aye, he did; for months and months he did, and Luke would sit him down and tell him how he was his son, Luke’s lad, and that wasn’t it Luke that had the rearing of him? Matthew had thrown him out, disowned him, so how could Ian possibly think Matthew was his father?”

Once the boy began shaving, it would be enough just to see himself in the mirror to think that, Alex reflected.

“Oh, so you painted Matthew as the unfeeling ogre. Did you perhaps include some context as well?”

Margaret obviously didn't understand the word context, but she got the overall meaning and her face washed bright red.

“Nay we didn't, and for now it's best he doesn't know – it won't help him, will it?”

Alex totally agreed. What boy of eleven needed to know his mother had been a two-timing bitch, married to one brother while screwing the other?

“Matthew and I are in agreement on this.”

“Oh, you are?” Alex said, cursing Matthew to hell. “And is this something you've been discussing a lot?”

“Quite often lately. Just Matthew and me.” It came out in a purr, Margaret's mouth settling into a pouty smile. It made Alex seethe; damn man!

As Alex turned to leave, Margaret crouched and picked up a rowan frond, extending it to Alex.

“Here, you like bitty leaves.” She hung back, brows pulled together in a frown. “Matthew is playing with fire. Aiding the evicted ministers will sooner or later lead to him being hanged or deported.”

Alex didn't know what to say.

Margaret put a hand on her sleeve. “Luke knows, he has ears and eyes everywhere, and if he can, he'll use it to bring Matthew down.” She sighed and looked away. “He will neither forgive nor forget.”

“Nor will Matthew.” Alex tried to sound calm, but she could feel her lower lip begin to wobble and bit down hard.

“Nay, but it's Luke that has the ear of the king, and Matthew is a fool if he lets that slip his mind. There is only so much I can do, aye? When it comes to his brother, Luke is difficult to reason with. So you must make Matthew see sense – if you can. Stubborn all of them, the Graham men.” Halfway to the cottage Margaret turned once more. “Will you care for my son?”

Alex nodded, shook her apron free of leaves she no longer wanted, and made for home.

Matthew was irked by Alex's behaviour; run off to the woods like an irresponsible lassie, and not come back in time for the Bible reading. He saw his own irritation mirrored exponentially in her face when he stepped out to block her way as she reappeared from among the trees.

"Where have you been?"

"Walking." She attempted to sidestep him, but was snared by his arm.

"I'm talking to you."

"I'm not talking to you," she retorted, pulling herself free. "But hey, I have a suggestion, go up and have a cosy little chat with Margaret. You know, you can sit there together and reminisce about how wonderful life was when you were newlyweds. Especially for her – after all she had variation in her bed. One day you, the other Luke."

He nearly slapped her. His hand was already flying towards her when he brought himself under control. Instead, he shoved her in the direction of the house and stalked off towards the stable.

He should have told her, he knew that, but Alex was oversensitive to the issue of Margaret, and so he'd chosen not to. Several times over the last few weeks, he had walked with Margaret, talking for hours with her, hours when they had found their way back to some element of respect and basic liking. They had even been able to talk about Luke and his obsessive hatred of Matthew, with Margaret admitting that here, if in nothing else, Luke was somewhat warped.

One afternoon he'd worked up the nerve to ask the one question he had so often wondered about.

"Did you...did you ever love me?"

Margaret had met his eyes and shaken her head. "Not like I love Luke. And that was wrong of me, but I was but a child, and you were kind and bonny to look at, and I thought Luke would never come back to me, so..." She had shrugged and smiled at him. "But you're loved now, aren't you?"

At the moment he wasn't so certain, he thought blackly, stamping up the ladder to the hayloft. At the moment he wasn't all that sure that he loved Alex either, and he sank the pitchfork into the hay, working off the dangerous edge of his anger. Another gift from his beloved brother, this rage that he sometimes could barely contain. It bubbled out of him like black tar, smearing itself over his life, a residue of experienced fears and helpless anger during the long hellish months in Virginia, months when he was at times certain he would die without seeing either wife or son again.

"I'm sorry." Alex's head popped up, hovering above the hayloft floor. She pulled herself up and came over to where he was working. "I can't help it, just the thought of you spending any time with her makes me sick."

He threw the pitchfork to clatter against the floor and turned to face her.

"Why? Have I ever let you think she matters to me?"

"Well, yes – quite often actually. And she does, doesn't she?" She butted him in his chest with her head. "Of course she matters to you. And rationally I don't feel threatened, but emotionally I do. And before you tell me what a wee daftie I'm being, I know, okay?"

"You are a wee daftie," he said tenderly, placing his arms around her. "And I'm a big one for not telling you – and for not asking you about the lad beforehand. I know you find it difficult with Ian, but surely we can offer him a home for some weeks?"

"The nursery will be a bit crowded and I hope he doesn't mind that Jacob farts in his sleep."

"All lads fart in their sleep," Matthew laughed. "And by the way, so do you."

"Huh," Alex said, "look who's talking."

Much later, the house properly locked down and the bairns fast asleep, Matthew undressed and slid into their bed. He yawned and snuggled down beside Alex, thinking that this new concoction of hers had a most pleasing fragrance – roses and mints with a whiff of raspberries.

“Matthew?” She rolled over to face him.

“Mmm?”

“You’re not doing anything stupid, are you?”

“How stupid?” In the weak light all he could see were the whites of her eyes.

“You know.”

“Alex,” Matthew sighed, “you can’t expect me not to help.”

“It might be dangerous – for you, for us.”

“They need me.” If it hadn’t been for him and his fighting skills, two preachers would have been dangling in a noose by now, but he decided not to share that with Alex, suspecting she’d be worried rather than impressed if he told her of last week’s little adventure.

“But still—”

“I help them over the moss, I feed them, harbour them for a night or two. And I will continue doing it – it’s the least I can do.”

“And if someone finds them here?”

“They won’t.”

“But if they do, then what?” she insisted.

“Then...” Matthew propped himself up on an elbow and looked down at her. “They won’t.”

“That bad, huh?” she said, her hands closing on the linen of his shirt.

“Alex...” He brushed his nose a couple of times against hers. “I’m careful, very careful.”

“Luke knows.”

“He does?” Matthew tried to sound unconcerned.

“That’s what Margaret said.”

“There’s nothing he can do to harm me – he’s in Oxford.”

“He might tip them off,” Alex said. “Who knows what contacts Luke has in the army?”

“Unless someone finds Sandy or one of the other preachers here, on my land, what can they prove? Nothing.”

“Hmm.” Alex sounded anything but convinced. “I don’t like it.”

“I know you don’t.” He flopped down to lie on his back, eyes on the wall.

“And?” Alex prompted.

“And that doesn’t change a thing. I’ll continue helping my ministers as much as I can.”

Alex rolled over to face the other way.

“Alex,” he tried.

She didn’t reply, stiff as a board under his touch.