

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*Whither Thou
Goest*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

Uncharacteristically for Maryland, this winter had seen more snow than Alex Graham had ever experienced before. Huge, heavy snowfalls melted into a muddy sludge over a couple of days, and then there was a new blanket of snow, yet more mud.

Today was one of the muddy days. Alex had to tread carefully as she made her way across the yard to the laundry shed with a small bundle of linens under her arm. There could be no major wash until the weather improved, but a couple of shirts, some shifts and her single flannel petticoat she could hang to dry inside the shed, and, while she was at it, she was planning on submerging herself in a tub of hot water as well.

It was the first week of February 1686. The shrubs were beginning to show buds; here and there startling greens adorned the wintry ground. Alex lifted her face to the sky and drew in a deep breath. She could feel it shifting. Winter was waning, and soon it would be brisk winds, leaves on the trees, and weeks of toiling in the fields or the vegetable garden.

“About time,” she muttered, slipped in the mud, took a hasty step forward, and had her clog sink with a squelch into a particularly soft spot. She stood like a one-legged stork, bending down to yank it loose.

“Bloody hell!” she said when she overbalanced and fell forward.

“Aren’t you a wee bit too old to play in the mud?” Matthew grinned at her from some feet away.

Alex scooped up some mud and sent it to land like a starburst on his worn everyday coat. “Oops.” She smiled, feeling a childlike urge to engage in a full-scale mud fight.

“Clean that off,” Matthew mock-threatened, taking a few steps towards her.

“Make me.” She managed to get her clog free, and sprinted like a hare on ice skates towards the laundry shed. Matthew came after, which made her run faster and laugh harder, so that by the time she’d broken the world record on the fifty-yard mud dash, she was gasping for air, her hair had come undone, and her cheeks were very warm.

“Got you.” Matthew pinned her against the wall.

“...” Alex replied, struggling to get some air back down into her lungs. And the stays weren’t exactly helping.

Matthew released his hold. “Hoyden,” he said, rubbing at a streak of mud on her face. “All of fifty-three, and still incapable of keeping yourself neat and clean.”

“You, mister, you’re pushing fifty-six, and look at you! Mud all over the place!” She wiped her hands on his breeches.

Ian walked past leading Aaron, Matthew’s big bay stallion, and shook his head at them. “You’re old,” he said, his lip twitching. “Very old, aye? Grandparents should act with more dignity.”

“Huh, as a matter of fact, I was sedately crossing the yard to do some washing when your father here attacked me.”

“Nay, he didn’t. You fell flat on your face all on your own, Mama. Go and wash,” Ian added before going on his way, clucking to Aaron to come along.

“Go wash, he said. What does he think we are? In our dotage and in need of a father figure?” Alex stuck her tongue out in the general direction of her stepson and pushed the door to the shed open, smiling when she entered this her almost favourite place.

Over the years, what had been a hastily constructed lean-to, meant mainly to house the huge kettle, the rinsing trough and all other paraphernalia associated with the tedious and heavy work of ensuring the laundry got done, had developed into a solidly built little house with soaped floors, broad wall benches and, standing in pride of place, the wooden tub – big enough to seat two. The small space

was at present agreeably warm thanks to the fire Alex had lit earlier, the air suffused with the scents of lavender and crisp mints.

Along the back wall, drying herbs hung in bunches. On a small shelf stood stone jars of oils and salves, pots of soap, and an assortment of lanterns. The only things that were missing, in Alex's opinion, was a tap from which to turn on running water and huge terrycloth towels. Neither of those had been invented yet, as she was prone to reminding herself, just as cars and washing machines and phones were still centuries away from materialising.

"Are you just going to slouch against the wall and look decorative or are you going to help?" she asked Matthew, who had followed her inside.

"Oh, I don't mind looking decorative," he said, but came over to help her with the heavy cauldron. She set the few garments to soak with lye in a bucket, forcefully scrubbed the mud stains off his woollen breeches and coat, and then he helped her do the same with her skirts, stretching the fabric for her.

"I'll never get this off," she grumbled, inspecting the broad kneecaps of mud. "And look at my bodice!" The sleeves were encrusted with mud to halfway up the elbow, and once she had taken that garment off, the chemise beneath was just as dirty. Alex peeled it all off, hung her stays to sway on a hook, dunked the shift and petticoat in with all the other stuff, and found a bristle brush with which to attack the bodice. Matthew sat down on one of the benches and regarded her as she moved around, covered in her shawl and nothing else.

"It's impolite to gawk," Alex said sternly.

"Aye, but you're my wife and I can gawk at you as much as I want."

"Glad you like it." Alex arched her back and winked, making him laugh.

They talked about this and that while she did her washing, Matthew coming over to help her fill buckets with water when she needed it.

“It does him good, these long winters,” Alex said.

“Who?”

“Ian. No limping, no shuffling.” She smiled, thinking that Ian at present moved with the fluidity and ease one could expect of a man just over thirty. Not that it would last, she sighed, because with the advent of spring and summer, his damaged back, in combination with all the work, would at times leave him white-faced with pain, reduced to hobbling round the yard.

“Ah.” Matthew sounded tense – but then he always did when they discussed Ian’s injured back, the consequence of a failed ambush by those accursed Burley brothers. Understandably, her man sounded tense whenever the Burleys were mentioned. He bore scars of his own on account of them, as did their youngest daughter, while one of their sons was dead – all because of Philip and Walter Burley.

Alex concentrated on her scrubbing. They’re gone, she reminded herself, they’re dead by now – or if not dead, almost dead.

Matthew poured a couple of buckets of cold water over her scrubbed clothes, helped her wring them and hang them to dry.

“Look at my hands,” she complained, holding them out to him: bright red, itching all over from the lye.

“Mmm,” Matthew said, eyes glued to one of her breasts, quite visible now that the shawl had slipped. She let the shawl drop entirely, standing very still when his fingers grazed her flesh.

It shouldn’t be this way, not when she was over fifty and had lived with him for almost thirty years, but it was, it still was. A current that surged between them, a heavy warmth spreading through her, breath that became shallow and rapid, knees that somehow lost stability, and all because of him, the man who stood fully dressed before her and ate her with his eyes. She fluffed at her hair, met his hazel eyes, and smiled.

“Da?” Ian’s voice had an edge to it. “Da, are you there?”

“Aye,” Matthew said, the attention he had been focusing on her wavering.

“You’d best come out.”

Matthew threw a rueful look in the direction of Alex. “Stay here,” he suggested, buttoned up his coat, and stepped outside.

“Stay here,” Alex muttered, shivering in the chilly wind that he had let in. From outside came male voices, and from the agitated tone, they weren’t exactly here for a natter and a biscuit. She threw the half-filled tub a longing look and, with a grimace, slid into stays, skirt and the dirty bodice, wrapping the shawl tight before going to join her husband.

Their visitors were still in the yard. Adam, her youngest son, had appeared from the stables to help with the horses, but remained hovering around the men, listening avidly. Alex smiled a greeting at Thomas Leslie, their closest neighbour, before nodding at the Chisholm brothers, also neighbours – a rather strange word to use for people that lived more than an hour’s ride away.

“Scalped, I’m telling you! Not more than some hundred yards from my home!” Martin Chisholm was visibly upset, his normally placid exterior contorted into a hatchet face, small blue eyes staring like flints at his audience. “The poor bastards must have shrieked their heads off, and we didn’t even hear them.”

“Oh,” Matthew said, sharing a worried look with Alex.

“Not Mohawk,” Thomas Leslie hastened to assure them, and Alex’s shoulders dropped an inch or two. Not her son, not his adopted Indian family. Grief rushed through her at the thought of her Samuel. He should be here, with her, not out in the forest with Qaachow and his tribe.

“Bloody nuisance is what they are,” Martin went on, with Robert, his brother, nodding in agreement. “It would be best to enslave them all, put them to work on a plantation where they could be controlled.”

“Maybe they don’t want to.” Alex picked some straw out of Adam’s hair, cuddling him for an instant against her chest. All legs and arms, her not quite ten-year-old scrubbed

his head affectionately against her shawl.

“Want to? What do we care what they want? Heathen is what they are, and to kill...oh, my God! My poor nephew!”

“Your nephew? They scalped a child?” In Alex’s ear, Adam’s tame raven, Hugin, cawed, seemingly as upset as she was.

“No, but he found them.” Martin shifted from foot to foot, looking longingly in the direction of the Graham house, and with an internal sigh, Alex asked them all to come inside. On their way across the yard, Thomas leaned towards Matthew and whispered something, and her gut did a slow flip at the expression of shock that flew across Matthew’s face.

“What?” She grabbed Thomas’ arm.

“What? Oh, that. A matter between men. Nothing to concern you, my dear.”

Alex pursed her mouth, unconvinced by Thomas’ strained smile. “Never mind, I’ll ask Matthew, and he’ll tell me the truth if he knows what’s best for him,” she said, before wobbling off on her mud-caked clogs to ensure the guests were adequately fed.

“Yon men eat like horses,” Mrs Parson said when Alex entered the kitchen. Alex gave the old woman an affectionate look. Mrs Parson was her best friend, an excellent midwife, but first and foremost the closest thing Alex had to a mother, a constant source of comfort and strength when Alex needed it.

“Lucky we have plenty of soup, then,” Naomi said from where she was stirring the pot. Bean soup, from what Alex could make out. Not her favourite, but her daughter-in-law was partial to it, and it did have the benefit of being quite filling.

“I hate bean soup,” Mark muttered from behind her.

Alex turned to flash her eldest son a grin. “Best tell your wife that, not me. She’s the one who keeps on making it.”

“I heard that.” Naomi brandished the wooden spoon in their direction. “And I’ll have you know my father loves it.”

“Great, Thomas can have my share as well,” Alex said,

laughing at Naomi's pretend scowl.

The Chisholms were solid men that took up a lot of room, but after some minutes the household and their guests were settled round the large table, albeit with less elbow room than usual. As always, Matthew sat at the head of the table while Alex had her chair at the other end, within easy reach of the hearth and the workbenches. Whitewashed walls and constant scrubbing of the floor and surfaces, ensured that the kitchen was clean and relatively light, the February sun streaming in through the two windows, both of them with horribly expensive glass panes.

"I had no idea that something so simple could be this good." Robert Chisholm stretched to spear yet another salt-baked beet on his knife, lathered the beet generously with butter, and bit into it.

"And it's good for you, full of vitamins and other stuff," Alex said, busy slicing bread.

"Vitamins?" Martin looked at her.

"That's what my father used to say," she temporised, which wasn't a lie, even if he'd said it in the late 1900s. "Maybe it's a Swedish expression."

Mrs Parson coughed loudly and placed the large pot of soup on the table before sitting down in the armchair reserved for her out of deference for her advanced age. She fiddled with her starched linen cap and turned her black eyes on the Spanish priest who had ridden in with the Chisholms. "Are you planning on staying to officiate at the funerals as well?" she asked, and Robert choked on his ale.

Carlos Muñoz blinked, an elegant hand coming up to smooth at his collar. "What funerals?"

"Well, you've wed most of the younger Chisholms almost two years back, you've baptised all the new weans, and so you can't have much cause to linger much longer, can you? Unless you're counting on them needing you for last rites and such nonsense before they pass on."

"Mrs Parson!" Alex glared at Ian and Mark who seemed to be on the verge of exploding with laughter.

"It is no nonsense, and I'll not have you disparage the

Holy Church,” Carlos replied stiffly. “As to why I am still here, at present I find myself trapped due to inclement weather.” He slid a look up the table to where Sarah usually sat, but now, in her last month of a most unwelcome pregnancy, their youngest daughter shunned the table when there were visitors. Alex stifled a sigh. The young priest had developed quite the crush on Sarah.

“You shouldn’t tease him like that,” Alex remonstrated with Mrs Parson once the men had gone outside to conduct their business, leaving them alone in the kitchen. “We both know why he’s still here.” She inclined her head in the general direction of Sarah’s room. “If it hadn’t been for him...” Alex left the rest unsaid. They both knew it was Carlos who had helped Sarah cope with her situation, chosen by Sarah as her sole confidant. Most unorthodox, given that Carlos was a Catholic priest.

Mrs Parson looked somewhat shamefaced. “He’s a good lad, for all that he’s a papist. But it’s time he leaves, aye? For his sake, Alex. Yon lassie of yours won’t want much to do with him once this is over.”

“You think?” Alex was surprised by this assessment. In her opinion, Sarah was too fond of the priest, and at one point, Alex could have sworn Sarah was in love with him. She threw a distracted look out of the window, eyes lingering on Carlos, who was already mounted on his mule.

“She’ll want to forget, all of this last year she’ll want to bury, and wee Carlos is very much a part of it, no?”

“She can’t forget. There will be a child.” Alex watched the Chisholms and Carlos out of sight up the lane before turning to face Mrs Parson.

“She doesn’t want it. She has said so for the last few months.”

“She might change her mind once she sees it.” Alex was in two minds about this: one part of her hoped Sarah would change her mind, the other couldn’t quite see how a child with Burley blood would fit into the Graham household.

“I think not,” Mrs Parson said. “You must start thinking about finding it a home elsewhere.”

Alex was so busy mulling over her discussion with Mrs Parson, it took her some time to notice her entrance into the little parlour had effectively muted whatever conversation Thomas and Matthew had been having.

She set her tray down, handed them a mug of tea, took her own, and went to sit by the fire. First, she studied Thomas. Under her inspection, he fidgeted but by busying himself with his pipe, managed to avoid her eyes. Then she turned her attention to Matthew, and he calmly looked back, but she knew him too well, saw how his little finger twitched, how still he held his head, and the hair along her back began to rise.

“Something’s wrong.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement, directed at them both.

“We don’t know,” Matthew said.

Thomas gave him a sidelong glance, and sucked on the carved stem of his pipe, holding his tongue.

“What is it you don’t know?” Alex asked, but there was a hollow feeling in her chest at the look that flared in her husband’s eyes.

The men exchanged a look. Matthew sighed, beckoning that she should come over. She knew it was bad when he sat her on his lap, despite being in company, one strong arm encircling her waist.

“Philip Burley,” he said.

“Oh, Jesus.” The mug she was holding in her hands slid through numbed fingers to hit the floor.

Chapter 2

Alex paced their bedroom like a caged tiger, her hands twisting together.

“How?” she said, wheeling to face Matthew where he sat on the bed.

“I have no idea.” He had thought them finally rid of the Burleys, that those days last May when they’d abducted their daughter, murdered his son, and almost killed him was the last time they’d ever hear of them. God, that he hadn’t ensured they were dead! But he had been more dead than alive when the Indians saved him, and so the two surviving Burley brothers had been turned over to Qaachow and his Indian tribe for punishment.

“And where? Is he here?” She threw a wild look out of the window at the pitch-black night outside.

“Nay, not as far as we know.” He concentrated on tracing the intricate woodwork with which he had decorated their bedstead, noting with detachment that his fingers trembled. “He was coming to tell us, Thomas, when he rode into the Chisholms. Thomas had it off one of his daughters’ husbands, how a man in Virginia was attacked some weeks ago, his horse stolen from him. His attacker stabbed him and left him to die in the snow, but fortunately a trapper found him and managed to stem the blood flow. He insists he was attacked by a man with black hair and the light eyes of a wolf, a man whose face was grossly disfigured. And he couldn’t talk properly...there was no tongue.”

Alex moved her mouth soundlessly. Fingers tore at the fringes of her shawl, and even from here he could see the pulse at the hollow of her throat.

“But he’s alone,” she said, “and one Burley we can handle, right?”

“One Burley, aye.” But Philip Burley – or it could be Walter, not that it made much of a difference – would never attempt full-fledged revenge on his own, and the woods were full of misfits, desperate men who would sell their souls for gold.

His brain grappled with this new, horrifying threat to his family. Thomas had suggested he turn to Qaachow for help, and mayhap that was not a bad idea, but how was he to find the Indian chief, his son’s adopted father? He looked at his wife and attempted a smile. “He isn’t at our door this minute, Alex.”

But he would be. If Burley was alive, it was but a matter of time before he came here, and then what?

“No,” she breathed, coming over to sit beside Matthew on the bed. He held out his hand and she rested hers in his, squeezing back with surprising strength when he closed his fingers over hers. In silence, they sat and held hands, both of them staring at absolutely nothing.

Finally, Alex turned towards him. “We can’t tell Sarah.”

“Nay, that we can’t.” If the notion of Burley made his guts twist and freeze, what would it do to his daughter? He pulled off his stockings and sat looking down at the gap in his left foot where the fourth toe should have been.

“He won’t hurt you again,” Alex said, following his thoughts.

Matthew smiled wryly. He hoped not. His back was criss-crossed by scars, on his buttock flamed a permanent brand, and his foot...

“He won’t,” Alex repeated, sounding very determined.

Come morning, Matthew had decided that his only option was to try and locate Qaachow.

“I think that’s an excellent idea.” Alex set down a bowl of porridge before him. He stretched himself for the butter and watched the knob melt into a puddle streaked with honey before beginning to eat. “After all,” Alex continued, “Qaachow won’t be thrilled to hear he’s back either, will he?” Nay, probably not. The Burley band had been

a scourge on the Indian communities as well.

“But as yet we don’t know that he is – back, I mean,” Matthew said.

“No,” she nodded, eyes lightening with hope.

“But if he’s alive, he’ll come here,” Mrs Parson put in, throwing a look at the door.

“Yes,” Alex moaned, “he will.” She averted her face for an instant. “So when do we set out?”

“We?” Matthew regarded her with some surprise. “You won’t be coming with me.”

“Oh yes, I will.”

“You stay here,” he insisted, but she shook her head.

“And if you get lost? If you never come back, or get eaten by a bear or fall into a precipice, how am I to live not knowing what has befallen you?”

“And is it better that we both get eaten by a bear?” he said with a slight smile.

“Yes,” she replied and swallowed. “Yes, it is. I can’t live without you anyway.” And in her eyes stood a naked fear, a constant shadow ever since those days last May when she had watched him being dragged away by the Burleys to what she – and he as well – had assumed would be a long, protracted death.

“Ah, lass...” He collected her to him and kissed her unruly hair. “Bears hibernate.”

“I was citing examples,” she said, “and wolves don’t, do they?”

“You can’t leave Sarah,” he tried, throwing in one last desperate card. “She can’t, can she?” he asked, directing himself to Mrs Parson.

“She isn’t due quite yet, and I don’t think she’ll be birthing before her time. The babe is far too restless, not at all settled.” Mrs Parson narrowed her eyes at them. “But what will you tell her? That you just fancied a jaunt out into the unknown?”

“We’ll tell her I have a need to assure myself Samuel is safe,” Alex answered, “what with the dead Indians and all that.”

“White Bear,” Mrs Parson corrected, “that’s his name now.”

“Samuel,” Matthew and Alex bit back instantly.

“Aye, Samuel,” Mrs Parson said, looking sad. “Try to make it back within a week.”

They left early next morning, leaving an upset and confused Sarah behind.

“Why now?” she’d demanded of Mama. “Why can’t you wait another week or so, ’til after...”

“It may be three weeks more before the baby comes,” Mama had said, “and I just have to make sure your brother’s alright.”

Sarah had stalked out, slammed the door to her room, and refused to speak to either of them throughout the evening. But in the morning she had come and hugged them both, clinging like a limpet to Mama.

“You won’t leave me to do this on my own, will you?” she asked.

“I’ll be back in time,” Mama promised, kissing her brow before shoving her gently in the direction of Ian.

Sarah watched them ride away, biting her lip. Something was not right – she could see it in the way Ian and Mark followed their parents out of sight. She returned to the kitchen and sat down, regarding Mrs Parson sharply. She knew as well, Sarah could tell, even if the old woman tried to avoid her eyes by concentrating on the ubiquitous knitting that grew at a surprising speed from her hands. Sarah’s whole belly moved, a series of bulges that came and went, and Sarah sat very still.

“A healthy babe,” Mrs Parson commented.

“A Burley,” Sarah hissed. For some months of her pregnancy, she had thought she might be able to forgive the child for its fathers, but these last few weeks had made it all so much worse, the child an invasive presence that she could never avoid, a constant reminder of what had been done to her under a canopy of green, sunlit trees. She ran her hands up and down her arms in a comforting gesture

and turned towards Mrs Parson.

“Should I be loading the flintlock?”

“Whatever for?”

Sarah’s body relaxed. “I’m going for a walk.”

“You do that,” Mrs Parson nodded, just as unperturbed. Sarah looked at her for some moments and then fetched her cloak. If it had been really bad, they would have stopped her going out.

It was a day of constant dripping, the heavy snow melting away under the rays of a brilliant spring sun. Matthew picked his way through the trees, trusting the mare he was riding to be sure-footed enough not to step into a crack or slip on a patch of ice. Alex was on one of their mules, a biddable beast that trotted along obediently.

Everywhere was the sound of water, from the drops that fell from melting snow overhead to the whispering little rivulets where water collected to run off dwindling drifts into creeks and hollows. Birds rustled in the undergrowth, here the flashing red of cardinals, there the more homely brown of a sparrow, and on a branch a cocky blackbird called that it was spring, and he was here and where were all the bonny lasses?

If it hadn’t been for the purpose of their excursion, Matthew would have enjoyed every step of the way, but as it was he was concerned for Sarah, worried that they might be set upon by Indians once they ventured beyond the established borders, or, worst of all, suddenly turn the corner to find themselves face to face with Burley himself.

“Magnus would have enjoyed this.” Alex broke their silence, gesturing at the surrounding forest, at the stands of as yet bare chestnuts that rose majestically sixty, eighty feet up in the air, interspersed with maples and sycamores and here and there groups of pine.

“Aye, he was mightily fond of trees,” Matthew said, smiling at the memory of his father-in-law.

“Well, he would be. He was a trained botanist.” She shook her head. “Actually quite a bad career choice in the

future. No one really cares all that much about flowers and trees in the twentieth century.”

“Mmm,” Matthew grunted. He was never comfortable when they discussed her future life, the skin along his spine tingling every time he was reminded of the fact that his dear, very present wife was as yet not born. She wouldn’t be, not for another three hundred years or so, and still here she was, riding by his side with her skirts tucked tight around her legs, her nose reddening with cold.

Alex must have seen something of this on his face, laughing as she rode up close enough to pat his leg. “I don’t bite, and I’m very, very real.”

He smiled back at her and craned his head back to look up at the distant, pale blue sky. “No thunderstorms brewing, no perfect right-angle crossroads. You’re safe with me.” He regretted his flippant remark the moment it was out of his mouth, seeing her face pinch together in real fear.

“Not funny,” she said, and urged her mule past his mare.

He sighed. She’d been thrown from her time to this time in a gigantic thunderstorm, making her an impossibility, a person yanked out of one time to land in another, and he well knew that her constant fear was that one day time would yawn open and attempt to reclaim her.

Matthew put a hand on her reins and drew her mount to a stop. “I’ve told you. You belong with me. God meant for you to come tumbling down to me. He won’t take you away from me.”

“Huh,” she said, “it would seem He has tried now and then.”

“Or not. He’s ensured I’ve been on hand every time.” That was the right thing to say, he could see, almost smiling at how she relaxed.

“Yes, He has, hasn’t He?”

They turned to other subjects, conversing about Daniel, their minister son in Boston, and their eldest married daughter, Ruth, in Providence.

“It’s somehow so sad, isn’t it?” Alex said. “One of our

girls lives through a pregnancy in constant terror, the other blooms with expectation.”

“Life isn’t fair,” he reminded her. “God ordains.”

“Sometimes He does a very crap job out of it, if you ask me.”

“He does as well as He can, I reckon.”

“You think?” She seemed about to say something more, but Matthew waved her silent. He held in his horse and looked about.

“This was as far as I came with them, back in January,” he said, looking to where the river rushed to their right. “They forded the water here and rode off due north-west.”

“Ford that?” Alex eyed the water dubiously.

“It isn’t deep, it just runs swiftly.”

“You can say that again,” Alex said. “White-water rafting comes to mind.”

He nudged his horse down towards the shore. It did look rather higher than he remembered it. He frowned, looking across the flowing, white capped water to the distant shore. “Flush with melting snow.”

“I can see that,” Alex said, “and I suppose that means it will be bloody cold.”

It was – cold and fast, but also quite shallow – and a few hours later they were far into the western woods, with Matthew notching trees on a regular basis.

“What?” she teased. “You don’t trust your inner compass?”

“Well enough, but why not take precautions if you can?” He glanced over at her and smiled. “If wee Hansel had done this instead of dropping breadcrumbs, they wouldn’t have ended up with the witch.”

“And God, what a boring tale that would have made,” Alex said, making him laugh.

Chapter 3

There were serious drawbacks to travelling through the woods in late February, the main one being that it was cold and damp, with not an inn in sight. It was almost dusk by the time Matthew decided to stop for the day, and after some scouting, he found a huge hemlock under which they made uncomfortable camp.

Alex slept badly and woke with a start to find Matthew already awake.

“We have company,” he said. Sure enough, the moment they stepped out from under the tree, they were surrounded by a group of Indians who regarded them with cautious reserve. Alex pressed closer to Matthew, but attempted a smile.

“Greetings,” Matthew said in hesitant Indian speech, “I am White Bear’s father.”

The name obviously meant something to them because the whole group relaxed. One of the men said something to Matthew who held up his hands in an apologetic gesture.

“I don’t know enough of your language,” he said in English, “but I must see Qaachow.” That name commanded respect, Alex saw, and after some moments of low-voiced debate amongst themselves, the apparent leader used his head to indicate they should follow them.

Several hours later, Alex was red with exertion, wet well above her ankles from walking in slush. The mule and horse were being led, and by her side walked Matthew, musket in one hand, her hand in the other.

“Bloody skirts,” Alex said, hoisting them up to wade over yet another spontaneous little burbling stream. “My toes are freezing.”

Matthew just grunted, his eyes flying from one side of the path to the other.

“What?” she asked.

“I can’t very well go notching trees now, can I?”

“Oh.” Alex scanned the endless forests that surrounded them looking for any kind of landmarks. A huge dead oak, there a boulder, trees, trees, trees...

She slipped in the mud up a steep incline, was steadied by Matthew, and together they crested the little hill that was the southern entry point to Qaachow’s village.

There was smoke coming out of the two longhouses, children were playing among the trees, and a band of dogs came to bark at them. Alex nodded a greeting at an Indian woman with thick long braids who nodded back, she smiled at three little girls that had come rushing at the sound of the dogs, and then she saw her son, tall and loud among the other boys.

Samuel was a foot or two in the air when he noticed them. The ball dropped to the ground, her son landed in a crouch, and instead of hurrying over to greet them as she’d expected him to, he disappeared into the protective shadow of the longhouse. It cut straight through her, a final rejection that she wasn’t sure quite how to handle. He’s mine, goddamn you, she thought angrily when she saw Qaachow making his way towards them, mine and you’ve stolen him.

She greeted her son’s adopted father politely enough and stood back a step to allow Matthew to talk to him alone. Not because Matthew expected her to, but because she had to collect her feelings. She peeked in the direction of the longhouse and there was Samuel, his hazel eyes seeking and finding hers. This time he smiled, a slow smile so like his father’s, and someone pushed at him from behind, saying something that made him blush before beginning to move in her direction.

White Bear was shocked to see his birth parents here, in his village. It was one thing to go and see them and for some days or weeks step into being Samuel again, a totally different thing to have them encroaching here, where he was only White Bear and nothing else. It somehow made

him ashamed, not wanting his new family and friends to see these awkward white people, so obviously not at home in the wilderness.

Da, with his hair tied back, his patched winter coat and dark breeches, looked surprisingly ineffectual here, while at Graham's Garden he was the undisputable master of it all. And Mama...well, she was pretty enough, even if she was much older than Thistledown, but her skirts were muddied to the knee, her thick winter cloak making her look fat and clumsy in comparison with his Indian mother.

She must have seen what he was thinking because he saw her look away, her hands smoothing back the hood and linen cap to uncover her thick dark hair, tied back in a soft bun. White Bear knew exactly how her hair would smell: of herbs and calendula, and if he were to rest his cheek against hers, her skin would release the scents of lemon and lavender. Soft, white skin, and hands that would rise to tousle his hair, the back of her fingers caressing his face.

"Mama." He stood before her, but instead of giving him the expected hug, she clasped her hands together. He gave her a wary look. What was the matter with her?

"Son," she replied with a careful smile. But she made no move to touch him, and he was strangely disappointed and secretly relieved, because he wasn't sure he wanted Little Bear and all the others see her make a fuss over him. Indian mothers were conscious of their sons' budding male pride in a way Mama had never been, hugging all her sons, no matter age, and kissing them as well. Still, it tore at him, this distanced greeting. Mayhap she no longer cared for him, he thought, and that made him reel with loss.

"Why are you here?" White Bear asked, and it came out like an accusation. He flinched at the hurt look in her eyes. He hadn't meant it that way, he tried to show her, stepping even closer. She backed away, and Samuel groaned into life inside of him, because he didn't want Mama to shrink from him, he wanted her to hug him.

"Your father has business to conduct with Qaachow," she replied formally. White Bear threw Da a look, noting how

serious he was as he stood talking intently with Qaachow.

“Bad business?” he asked.

Alex sighed and nodded. “You could say that again.” She gave him a flashing blue look. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have come,” she said with a biting edge.

White Bear had no idea what to do. He mumbled something about being needed elsewhere, and loped back towards the longhouse.

Alex watched him go, already regretting that she hadn’t pulled him into her arms, hugged and kissed him as much as she wanted to. Her son ducked out of sight behind one of the buildings, and Alex wanted to scream his name, call him back to her, but she didn’t.

Instead, she fell into step with her husband, following Qaachow towards the closest longhouse. After the chilly air outside, it was comfortably warm if rather smoky inside, and Alex stared curiously at the long row of raised sleeping platforms that lined the wall, divided into several compartments by woven mats. A discreet count made it six compartments on either side, several hearths down the middle, and right at the bottom what seemed to be a communal area. It was all very neat, bedrolls stacked to one side, pelts for comfort and insulation on the platforms, and the space below them used for storage. Her stomach grumbled loudly at the smells of corn bread and squash soup, and Matthew smiled down at her.

“Hungry?”

“A bit,” Alex said in a voice too low for Qaachow to catch. After all, she didn’t want to force him to invite them to eat.

In the event, they were asked to sit down, close to the hearth, and bowls of fragrant, deep orange soup were brought to them. Alex stretched her feet as close to the fire as she could without actually setting her soles on fire, and her toes uncurled slowly from their frozen state. She saw Samuel again, standing with his Indian brother to the side, and in his arms he held a baby that she assumed to be Qaachow’s latest child.

Bitterly, she regretted having let Qaachow take her son to begin with. Even more bitterly she regretted not having forced Samuel to stay with them when he came back after his one year with Qaachow, and now it was too late. It was them, Matthew and herself, that were the interlopers in his life now, and it showed plainly in how Samuel held himself, close to his Indian family rather than by their side. But what were they to do? Qaachow had demanded Samuel's fosterage in lieu of ensuring their home was kept safe from marauding Indians and the accursed Burleys. Alex sighed. It went back even further than that. She allowed her eyes to rest for an instant on Little Bear, the Indian boy she'd saved from imminent starvation by nursing him side by side with her own Samuel. To the Indians, this made them foster brothers, and watching them together she found it difficult to say which one of them was Indian and which one of them was white. She snuck her hand into Matthew's, and he squeezed before letting go to accept the pipe that Qaachow handed him.

"I don't smoke," he said some minutes later, still bright red from his coughing attack.

"I can see that," Qaachow replied with a smile in his voice, "but at least you tried.

"So," Qaachow settled back against the wall. "Philip Burley is still alive, you say."

"Either him or Walter," Matthew said. "And if he is, well then, it is but a matter of time before he returns here."

"Here?" Qaachow sucked at the pipe. "No, here I don't think he will return. Not unless he plans on bringing a great number of men."

"I meant here like my home," Matthew said, "and he will bring men with him."

Qaachow studied them both. "It was your daughter's wish that they not be killed."

"Aye," Matthew said, "and so she has nightmares every night where they return for her."

"And you?" Qaachow asked. "Do you have nightmares?"

"It happens," Matthew said in a casual voice. It did? Alex

gave her husband a long look, casting her mind back over the recent months. On occasion, she'd woken to find his half of the bed empty, but when she'd asked he had muttered something about having been thirsty, no more.

Qaachow smiled up at Thistledown when she came to serve him more to eat, a smile reciprocated in her dark eyes. Alex looked enviously at her clothes. A skirt ending mid-calf, leggings, moccasins and an elongated tunic in a darker shade than the skirt – all of it in deerskin, none of it muddy and torn after a day's hiking through the woods. She looked over to where her son stood, in a deerskin shirt, leggings and breechcloth. Samuel shifted under her eyes, said something in a low voice to his Indian brother, and sidled over to stand by Thistledown. Alex swallowed and swallowed to clear her throat of the sudden lump.

With difficulty, she returned her attention to the conversation where Matthew and Qaachow were now discussing different tactics to handle the Burley threat.

"...we will of course help you," Qaachow was saying. "Burley is an enemy of my people as well." He spat into the fire. "Far too many of our women has he stolen from us, selling them to white men far away from here."

"Aye," Matthew said. "He and his brothers enriched themselves on other people's misery – born warped, the four of them."

Qaachow nodded. "Only one left."

"Which is one too many," Alex muttered. One Burley intent on revenge. Oh God. Not here, he isn't here, she thought, and for all you know, Alex Graham, he might be dead in a drift of snow, or have stuck his foot in a bear trap, or maybe walked off a cliff in the dark.

She took a long, shuddering breath, took two, and to distract herself, she concentrated on the Indians around them, taking in the excellent needlework of their clothes, the beading that decorated sashes and moccasins, and the tattoos sported by the younger men. One of the braves grew irritated by her inspection and said something to Qaachow who raised a brow and turned to Alex.

“Is it not impolite among your people to stare?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “It’s just that I’m so impressed by your clothes.”

“And the tattoos.” Qaachow smiled.

“Well...” Alex said, “I’m not sure I’m impressed by them, but they are quite eye-catching. It seems to be a relatively new fashion, though.”

“Fashion?” Qaachow’s brows rose.

“You don’t have them, nor do the other men of your age,” Alex said.

“Susquehannock men were not tattooed as part of their coming of age, but Mohawk men are. And we are Mohawk now.” Qaachow sounded curt.

Alex’s eyes flew to where Samuel was listening.

“All Mohawk men are tattooed,” Qaachow said, following her look.

This time it was Matthew’s hand that snuck into hers.

White Bear nodded obediently at what his father said and went over to his birth parents.

“Are you tired?” he asked, kneeling down before them.

“A bit.” Mama yawned.

“My fath—” he broke off, aware not only of their eyes but of Qaachow’s eyes on him. He started anew. “My father says I am to show you where to sleep and stay with you that we may talk.”

Da’s brows pulled together. “I am your father, lad. It’s from my seed that you spring. Don’t forget that.”

White Bear shifted on his knees, threw a helpless look in the direction of his Indian father who gave him a little smile.

“You’re my Da,” White Bear said at last, “and aye, you’re my birth father. But I have two fathers now.”

He rose to his feet, waited as they got up, and led them over to one of the sleeping compartments. On one side was a larger platform, covered in hides, on the other nothing but a woven mattress and a decorated quilt. White Bear sank down to sit cross-legged on the thin mattress and, now that

it was only them and him, he could allow himself to be simply Samuel, bombarding them with questions about his brothers and sisters.

He crept successively closer, and finally snuggled up to them, his face rubbing affectionately at Da's chest. And when Mama at last hugged him and kissed him, he made a contented sound, relishing her fingers through his long hair, allowing himself to drift off into sleep in her arms, like a wee bairn.

"Maybe we did wrong," Alex said to Matthew as she kneeled to tuck the thick quilt closer round her sleeping son's body. "Maybe we should have refused to let him go."

Matthew stroked back a lock of her hair. "I don't know, lass. But when he's home, he's restless and edgy, wishing himself here, and, watching him tonight, I don't think he wishes himself with us when he's here. Not anymore."

"No, not anymore. But once he did." And maybe one day he will again, she hoped.

"Why haven't you told me?" Alex asked once they were snugly encased in a combination of pelts and quilts.

"Told you what?" Matthew yawned.

"About your dreams, the nightmares." She raised herself on her elbow to look down at him.

"I don't want to talk about them," he said, closing his eyes.

"But if you're having nightmares..." Alex rested her hand against his cheek, "...maybe I can help."

"Not with these," he told her in a definite tone.

Alex looked down at him a little while longer. She had a pretty good idea what it was he was dreaming about, having been an unwilling witness to the final degradation the Burleys submitted him to when they raped him. "At least I can warm you some milk."

His mouth twisted into a sad smile. "Aye, that you could do." He rolled her over on her side, spooned himself around her and kissed her nape. "Sleep, aye?"

"Sleep," she agreed.