HISTORICAL

Blythe Gifford

HIS BORDER BRIDE

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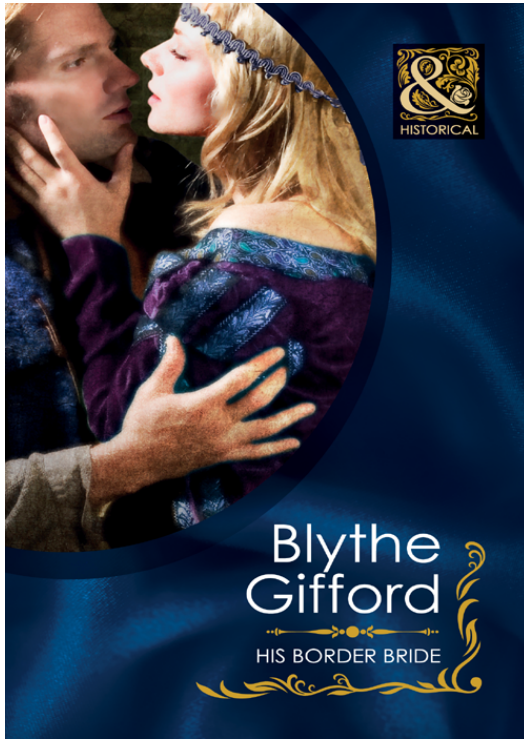
His Border Bride

Аннотация

Indulge your fantasies of delicious Regency Rakes, fierce Viking warriors and rugged Highlanders. Be swept away into a world of intense passion, lavish settings and romance that burns brightly through the centuriesROYAL ROGUE, INNOCENT LADYGavin Fitzjohn is the illegitimate son of an English prince and a Scotswoman. A rebel without a country, he has darkness in his soul. Clare Carr, daughter of a Scottish border lord, can recite the laws of chivalry, and knows Gavin has broken every one.Clare is gripped by desire for this royal rogue – could he be the one to unleash everything she has tried so hard to hide? Those persuasive urges have stayed safely dormant – until now…

Содержание

The woman was nothing to him. Nor could she be. 7
About the Author 9
Chapter One 11
Chapter Two 30
Chapter Three 46
Chapter Four 62
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 76



Praise for Blythe Gifford

HIS BORDER BRIDE

‘Using falcons as metaphors, Blythe Gifford has successfully soared with this Highland romance.’

—*Fresh Fiction*

IN THE MASTER’S BED

‘… expertly crafted … fascinating historical details … give this sexy historical a richness and depth.’

—*Booklist*

‘… excellent … Blythe Gifford is the true Master.’

—*Cataromance*

INNOCENCE UNVEILED

‘Blythe Gifford takes a refreshingly different setting and adds a plot brimming with dangerous secrets and deadly intrigue to create a richly detailed and completely compelling medieval romance.’

—*Chicago Tribune*

THE HARLOT’S DAUGHTER

‘Blythe Gifford finds the perfect balance between history and romance in THE HARLOT’S DAUGHTER as she expertly blends a fascinating setting and beautifully nuanced characters into a captivating love story.’

—*Chicago Tribune*

‘Gifford has chosen a time period that is filled with kings, kingmakers and treachery. Although there is plenty of fodder for turbulence, the author uses that to move her hero and heroine together on a discovery of love. She proves that love through the ages doesn’t always run smoothly, be it between nobles or commoners.’

—*RT Book Reviews*

THE KNAVE AND THE MAIDEN

‘This debut novel by a new voice in medieval romance was for

me … pure poetry! The sweetness of the ending will have you running for your tissues. Oh, yes, this is a new star on the horizon and I certainly hope to see much more from her!'

—*Historical Romance Writers*

The woman was nothing to him. Nor could she be.

Gavin pulled his gaze away. What was it about Clare that called to him? Strong, yes. But, like her bird, alert, expecting danger any minute. Her strength was a shield. He wondered what it hid.

She acted as if she'd never been tempted, let alone succumbed.

He'd like to see it happen.

He'd like to help.

The vision filled him. Clare. Naked. Tight braid undone. Hair tumbling across her shoulders. Eyes soft, lips yielding with want.

He downed the rest of his drink. If she knew what he was thinking it would confirm everything she believed of him.

And she'd be right.

AUTHOR NOTE

This book represents a 'border crossing' for me. It is my first to be set on the Scottish side of the line. As I wrote, one of my touchstones was an old Kris Kristofferson song called 'Border Lord'. The mournful lyrics tell of a man about to cross the line, both literally and figuratively. They seemed to sum up my hero perfectly—a man who cares little for rules, boundaries, and the opinions of others. What kind of woman would be a match for

such a man? A woman who has lived her life prescribed by all of these. I hope you enjoy their story.

About the Author

After a career in public relations, advertising and marketing, **BLYTHE GIFFORD** returned to her first love: writing historical romance. Now her characters grapple with questions about love, work, and the meaning of life, and always find the right answers. She strives to deliver intensely emotional, compelling stories set in a vivid, authentic world. She was a finalist in the Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart™ Award competition for her debut novel, THE KNAVE AND THE MAIDEN. She feeds her muse with music, art, history, walks and good friends. You can reach her via her website: www.BlytheGifford.com

Previous novels by the same author:
THE KNAVE AND THE MAIDEN
THE HARLOT'S DAUGHTER
INNOCENCE UNVEILED
IN THE MASTER'S BED

HIS BORDER BRIDE
Blythe Gifford

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Dedication

To all our parents, and their secrets.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jody Allen

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Chapter One

Haddington, Scotland—February 1356

After ten years away, he had come home.

War had come with him.

Fog, cold and damp, darkened the fading light of a February day and crept around the corners of the church before them. The iron links of his chainmail chilled the back of his neck and the English knights by his side shivered on their mounts.

Winter was no time for a war.

Gavin Fitzjohn looked over at his uncle, King Edward, proud lion at the peak of his prowess. More than twenty years ago, this king led the English on a similar charge into Scotland.

That time, the King's brother had left behind a bastard son of a Scottish mother.

Today, that son, Gavin, rode beside his uncle, just as he had done for the last year in France. There, they had wreaked havoc on soldiers and villagers alike without a qualm until the smell of blood and smoke permeated his dreams. But he had done it because he was a knight in war.

Now, the King assumed Fitzjohn was fully his.

But this was not France. Now, Edward had brought the

scorched earth home. In the fortnight since they had retaken Berwick, his army had slashed and burned what little the retreating Scots army had left standing.

Gavin's horse shifted, restless. Through the windows of the church, the choir where services were sung glowed like a beckoning lamp, light and lovely as any church he had seen across the Channel.

The villagers huddled before their spiritual home, uncertain of what was to come. Gavin watched a man at the crowd's edge, hands clasped, eyes closed, lips moving in prayer.

The man's eyes opened and met Gavin's.

Fear. Strong enough to taste.

His stomach rebelled. He was sick to death of killing.

A squire ran up to the King, carrying a torch. In the darkening twilight, the shifting flames cast unearthly light and shade across the mud-splattered surcoats and armour.

He looked at his uncle. No more, he thought, the words a wish.

But anger, not mercy, gripped Edward's face. The Scots had talked truce only to gain time to prepare for war. So, when Lord Douglas finally rejected the English offer of peace, Edward vowed to give them the war they wanted.

The King motioned the squire towards Gavin.

'Take the torch,' he said. The fire flickered between them like Satan's flames. He nodded towards the church. 'Burn it.'

The squire shoved the torch into Gavin's outstretched hand. He took it, as he had so many times before, but his grip was

unsteady and the firebrand trembled. Or was that just a trick of the wavering light?

The villagers' wary glances shifted from him to the church. What would happen to them if they lost their link to God?

A baby's wail bounced off the church's stone walls.

He shoved the torch at the squire, trying to give back the flames.

'What are you waiting for?' Edward roared, releasing all the frustration of a failed campaign. Storms had sunk his ships. There would be no new supplies and nothing left to do but retreat. He meant to leave destruction behind him.

'Leave it. They never warred on us.'

'They laid waste to their own lands, so we'd have no cattle to eat nor ale to drink.'

Edward's knights grumbled their agreement. Hungry bellies made vicious warriors.

Gavin looked from the torch to the church. Stone walls were no protection. He knew that. He had lit fires large and small from Picardy to Artois. Heard the crackle of the roof catch fire, seen the timbers crash to the floor and ignite wooden altars, felt the heat sear his chest through his breastplate. Cinder burns pitted the gold lions and lilies on his surcoat.

But this was different and had been from the moment they crossed the border. He had breathed the familiar smell of the earth, felt the gentle slope of the hills rise below his stallion's hooves, looked up at the perpetual grey mist of the sky. And

knew.

No matter how long he had been away, where, or with whom, this was home.

'What's the matter, Fitzjohn?' the King yelled. 'Is your Scottish whore's blood holding you back, boy?'

His mother was no whore. But the King had never forgiven Gavin's father for his sin, even after death. 'There's no reason for this,' he answered. 'These folk fight us no more.'

'Your father would have done it!'

His father had done worse.

But Gavin no longer could.

He dropped the torch and heard it sizzle as it hit the soggy ground. Then, he pulled off the red, gold and blue surcoat bearing his father's arms and held it over the sputtering flame until it was ablaze.

'My father might have done it. But I will not.'

He grabbed the reins and turned his horse away to ride into the darkness alone.

He was not the man his father had been.

Or so he prayed.

A few weeks later, in the Cheviot Hills

The falcon paced on her perch that morning, pecking at her jesses, on edge even after Clare slipped the hood over her head to cover her eyes. Strange. Typically, she feared nothing when she could see nothing.

'What's the matter, Wee One?' Clare crooned, as she closed

the door and motioned the falconer away. She pretended the birds were part of her duties as mistress of Carr's Tower, but the falconer was rewarded, and well, to tend to their constant needs. She simply preferred to do it herself, particularly with this one. 'Don't you want to take a morning flight?'

She stroked the striped feathers of the bird's breast, talking nonsense until Wee One recognised her voice and stilled her wings. Clare held out a titbit and the bird nipped it from her fingers.

'Ye're spoilin' the bird, Mistress Clare,' the old falconer said. His grey-tinged brows nearly met as he frowned. 'She'll nae hunt if she's nae hungry.'

'It's no more than a crumb.' A bribe was more the truth, something to fool herself into believing the bird cared about her instead of only the food she brought.

She checked to be sure the jesses on the falcon's talons had not come loose. 'I think it does her good to have a treat from time to time.'

Neil shook his head. 'Ye won't think so when ye lose her. If she ever discovers she can eat her fill without our help, she'll nae return to your fist again.'

He had grumbled the same thing to her for years. But except for this small infraction, Clare had studied all the rules and followed every one when she trained Wee One.

She pulled on a thick leather glove and held out her left hand. The bird hopped on to her wrist and Clare swept out of the mews

and into the barmkin where young Angus awaited her.

The page, on the edge of squirehood, had been left behind when her father took most of the men to war, so he viewed himself as protector of the ladies left in the tower.

'Get my horse and the dog, Angus.'

He hesitated. 'Ye shouldna go out alone, Mistress Clare.'

She knew that, but she had picked the boy because he would not refuse her. 'Both the bird and I need exercise. And my father sent word. He'll be home soon. The Inglis are halfway to Carlisle by now.'

In truth, the Inglis might be as close as Melrose, but she was tired of hiding, tired of winter, tired of being caged like the birds. Besides, the wild hills surrounding their border castle offered as much protection as an army. The 'Great Waste', some called it. No one would come here unless he wanted to escape the civilised world.

Angus brought her hound and horse and held the falcon as she mounted. Then, sitting proudly on top of his pony, he rode beside her. As they left the shadow of the tower's wall, she took her first deep breath and looked up at the blue, cloudless sky. They had not seen the like for months.

'Clare! Wait!'

She turned to see Euphemia, daughter of the widow Murine, galloping after her. Clare stifled a sigh for the loss of her private moment with the falcon and freedom.

She held her horse to let the girl catch up. Far from looking

ready to hunt, Euphemia, on the edge of womanhood, looked as if she were ready to fall into bed with the next man she stumbled across. Not because of her clothes—her dress was as temperate as Clare's—but even at sixteen, the slant of her smile and the flutter of her eyelashes put men in mind of night pleasures.

Just as her mother's did.

'I had to come,' the girl said, as she caught them. 'We may not see another day so warm 'til June.' A flush touched her cheek and her dark hair tumbled across her shoulders.

Clare's tight braid insured her hair would never fly loose, even after a day on horseback. 'You may join me, but stay close. She's not been out for days and I intend to be sure she has a good flight.'

She gazed at the sky, looking for potential prey. Instead, she heard the flapping wings of another falcon. Wee One, hooded, swivelled her head, as if searching for the sound.

'What's that?' Euphemia asked.

Clare peered at the bird—male, she thought, from his smaller size. He flew back and forth across their path, fierce, dark, yellow-rimmed eyes glaring as if he wanted them to stop.

'I don't know.' She frowned, suddenly afraid the strange bird might tempt Wee One to freedom. Thinking to escape him, she urged the horse into a gallop, not stopping until she was halfway up the ridge and the tercel was no longer in sight. Waiting for the others, she felt the south-west wind nudge her back.

Maybe summer would come early.

'Look!' Angus whispered as the hound pointed.

A few yards away, a fat partridge huddled under a bush. She would be easy to flush into flight, the perfect quarry for a falcon.

Clare glanced over her shoulder to be sure they had lost the tercel. Then she removed Wee One's hood, struggling to hold on to the leather jesses as the wind nearly jerked them out of her fingers. She raised her arm and Wee One took off, wings flapping, until she was just a speck overhead. There, she would wait, as she had been trained to do, until the humans sent her prey skywards.

Angus set the dog towards the bush, scaring the partridge into flight, where the bird expected to be away from danger, but the small dot in the sky dived for her prey, falling faster than a horse could gallop.

They stirred their horses and gave chase.

They were halfway down the valley by mid-afternoon. The bird had worked, tireless, through the day. She had several fine stoops, killing three fowl. Each time, Clare rewarded her with a taste of the flesh. Then, she whisked the prey into the sack for Angus to carry.

Food rewarded the falcon for a successful flight, but the bird was never allowed to eat without her master's help. Otherwise, she would learn that she did not need the help of humans after all.

The last partridge escaped. Clare called her falcon with a shrieking whistle and smiled as Wee One swooped on to her fist, obedient.

This bird would return to her. Always.

At the thought, the list of duties left undone rushed back, sweeping away the freedom of the day.

She turned her horse around, motioning to Angus and Euphemia to follow her. The morning's warmth had ebbed, and a chilly mist huddled in the valley and obscured the hills, reminding her of the dangers that lurked all around. The Inglis army might be far away, but the Inglis border was not.

That was her last thought before he rose out of the fog, a golden man on a black horse, like a spirit emerging from the mist.

A man without a banner.

A man without allegiance.

The hound barked, once, then growled, as if cowed.

The man's eyes grabbed hers. Blue they were, shading as a sky does in summer from pale to deepest azure. And behind the blue, something hot, like the sun.

Like fire.

Any words she might have said stuck in her throat.

Next to her, Euphemia gasped, then giggled. 'Where are you going, good sir?'

Clare glared at her. The girl was hopeless. They'd be lucky to get her married before she was with child.

'Anywhere that will have me,' he answered Euphemia, but his eyes touched Clare.

Her cheeks burned.

Beside her, young Angus drew his dagger, the only weapon he was allowed. 'I will defend the ladies.'

‘I’m sure you will.’ The stranger’s smile, slow, insolent, was at odds with the intensity in his eyes. ‘That’s a handsome dirk and I’m sure you could wield it well against me, but I would ask that you not harm my horse.’

His tone was oddly gentle. Where was his own squire? ‘Who’s with you?’

‘No one.’

‘A dangerous practice.’ Did he lie? An army could hide behind him in this mist. Her fault. She had ridden out alone and unarmed and put them all at risk. ‘Don’t you know Edward’s army still rides?’

He frowned. ‘Do they?’

His accent confused her. It held the burr of the land closer to the sea, but there was something else about it, difficult to place. Yet over the hill, in the next valley, each family’s speech was different. He might be a Robson from the other side of the hill, scouting for one last raid before the spring, or loyal to one of the Teviotdale men who had thrown their lot in with Edward. ‘You’re not an Inglisman, are you?’

‘I have blood as Scots as yours.’

‘And how do you know how Scots my blood is?’

‘By the way you asked the question.’

Did her speech sound so provincial to Alain? She winced. She wanted to impress the visiting French knight, not embarrass him. ‘What’s your name, Scotsman?’

‘Gavin.’ He paused. ‘Gavin Fitzjohn.’

Some John's bastard, then. Even a bastard bore his father's arms, but this man carried no clue to his birth. No device on his shield, no surcoat. Just that unkempt armour that, without a squire's care, had darkened with rust spots.

No arms, no squire. Not of birth noble enough for true knighthood, then.

'Are you a renegade?' On her wrist, Wee One bated, wings flapping wildly. Clare touched her fingers to the bird's soft breast feathers, seeking to calm them both.

His slow smile never wavered. 'Just a tired and hungry man who needs a friendly bed.' His eyes travelled over her, as if he were wondering how friendly her bed might be.

'Well, you'll not find one with us.'

'I didn't ask. Yet.'

Did he think she'd offer to be his bedmate? She should not be talking to such a man at all. 'Well, if you do, I'll say you nae.'

'I don't ask before I know whether I'm speaking to a friend or an enemy.'

'And I don't answer before I know the same.' Her voice had a wobble she had not intended.

'Are you a woman with enemies?'

'Three kings claim this land. We have more enemies than friends.'

'Aye,' he said, nodding, a frown carving lines in his face. He flexed his hand as if it itched to reach for his sword. 'Who are yours?'

Her eyes clashed with his. She should have asked him first. Where was his loyalty? To the de Baliol pretender, recently dethroned? To David the Bruce, still held for ransom by the Inglis Edward? Perhaps he had lied about his blood and was Edward's man himself.

Next to her, the young girl sighed. 'This is Mistress Clare and I'm Euphemia and I have nae enemies.'

'Euphemia!' Was she batting her lashes? Yes, she was. 'Do you want us to be killed?'

'He wouldn't do that. A knight is sworn to protect ladies, aren't you?' She fluttered her eyelashes at him again, then turned to Clare. 'Don't treat him as an unfriend.'

'If I do, it's because I have a brain in my head.'

If she kicked the horse into a gallop, could she outrun the man? Not with Angus and Euphemia in tow and Wee One on her wrist.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'He looks like a dangerous ruffian, not a knight. He carries no markings and he's wearing dirty armour with rust spots!' The man, if he knew the maxims of chivalry, cared little for them.

Euphemia shrugged and turned to the man. 'You're not dangerous and dirty, are you?'

Something darkened his face before a smile waved it away. 'Well, that may depend on how you mean the words, but I'd say Mistress Clare has a gift for judging character.'

He said it with no sense of outrage. No knight would allow his

honour to be so challenged. Certainly Alain, epitome of French chivalry, would never let such a slight pass.

'On whose lands do I ride, Mistress Euphemia?' he asked.

'Not Mistress. Just Euphemia,' Clare said, refusing to elaborate. Disgrace enough that her father had shamed her dead mother by taking up with the widow Murine. Worse that he'd treated another man's by-blow as his daughter. 'And you're on Carr lands.'

'Held of who?'

'Douglas,' she answered. There, that declared their loyalties, but if she hadn't told him, the girl would have.

She thought his shoulders relaxed, but she must have been mistaken. 'It's difficult *not* to be on Douglas lands in the Middle March, isn't it?' His slow nod revealed nothing of his thoughts. 'Are *you* loyal to the Bruce?'

'You ask that when the heart of a Bruce adorns Lord Douglas's shield?' In her surprise, her tongue forgot its courtly inflection. 'Are ye daft?'

'Nae, but Carr men have been known to lapse in loyalty to an absent king.'

King David the Bruce had been England's captive for half her life, it seemed. In his absence, a Douglas and a Steward ruled Scotland in his name. 'Does that make you an enemy of Douglas and Carr, Gavin Fitzjohn?'

'Not as long as they are no enemy of mine.'

His eyes met hers and they took each other's measure in

silence. On the Border, an allegiance could be as strong as the relentless wind. And as variable.

'See, Clare? He's no enemy and we should all go home. I, for one, am chilled to the skin and ready to sit by the fire.' Euphemia kicked her horse into a trot and the stranger fell in behind her.

Clare handed Wee One to Angus, then hurried to catch up, letting the squire and the hound follow.

She brought her horse beside Euphemia and the stranger dropped further back, complimenting young Angus on his mount.

'You're leading him straight home!'

Euphemia shrugged. 'Why are you so worried? There's one of him and three of us.'

'And he's the only one carrying a sword.'

A few men still manned the tower, but if he was scouting for raiders, they were leading him straight to what he wanted. Still, she would feel safer, she decided, home in the castle, where he would be outnumbered by her men-at-arms.

At the silence, the stranger moved closer. 'Angus tells me your falcon killed three today that were twice her size. That's a bird with courage.'

'Well that you say so.' Euphemia smiled. 'Wee One is Clare's favourite.'

'Then it seems your sister is as good a judge of bird flesh as she is of men.'

She glanced at him without turning her head, still puzzling him

out. He'd displayed none of the courtly respect a knight should, yet he controlled his destrier with a warrior's ease, confident of his strength.

He caught her studying him and she snapped her gaze away, gritting her teeth at his laugh. 'It's too late to flatter me, Fitzjohn.'

'Oh, Mistress Clare,' he began, his voice still edged with humour, 'no man who was any judge of character would try flattery on you.'

'But a true and noble knight would always speak sweetly to a lady,' she countered. Alain always did. 'That must mean you are not a true knight.'

'Or that you are not a true lady.'

She stiffened. What gave her away? 'I am certainly a truer lady than you are a noble knight.'

He cocked his head. 'Perhaps, Mistress Clare, it may be too early to come to that conclusion.'

She gulped against his gentle rebuke. A lady would never have made such a statement. In this wild land, it was hard to cling to the courtly graces she had learned as a child in France.

In sight of the tower, she was relieved of the need to answer, and waved to the guard standing on the wall to open the gate. 'Who's with you, mistress?'

The man beside her called out without waiting for her answer. 'A hungry, tired man looking for a warm bed and a hot meal.'

The guard waited for her sign. She nodded. 'Open the gate.'

They rode into the barmkin and she handed the sack of game

to the falconer, closing her ears to his complaints. She started to dismount, expecting young Angus to help her off her horse, but instead, she faced the stranger.

He appeared before she saw him move, fast as a falcon diving for its prey.

He reached to help her down. She hesitated. Somehow, his hand offered an invitation to touch more than fingers.

Without waiting for her to accept, he grabbed her waist, lifting her off the saddle. She had no choice but to slide down into his arms.

He held her too tightly. As she stretched her toes towards the ground, she felt her breasts press against his chest. Something like the stroke of a bird's feather rippled across her skin. She held her face away from him, but his lips, sharp and chiselled, hovered too close to hers.

Her feet hit the earth.

Standing, he was a full head taller than she. Though journey dust clung to him, he carried his own scent, complex and dangerous, like a fire of oak and pine, smouldering at the end of a long night.

His smile didn't waver. Nor did his eyes. Blue, startlingly so, and framed by strong brows, they held her gaze strongly as his arms held her body.

'I'm ready to dismount.' Euphemia's pout was audible.

And just like that, he was gone.

Clare sagged against her horse, realising she had held her

breath the entire time he touched her. This was no perfect knight, but a dangerous man. Anyone who trusted him would find herself abandoned and alone.

Or worse.

She forced herself to walk away, ignoring the tug of his eyes on her back. The cook and the steward approached, stern looks on their faces. She hoped fresh fowl would soothe their anger at her for avoiding her day's duties.

'Mistress Clare.' The man's words were a command.

She turned at her name, hating herself for doing it and him for making her. 'If it is food you want, the evening meal will be served shortly.'

'What I want is to see the Carr in charge.'

Now she was the one who smiled, long and slow and she watched his face, savouring the moment. 'You've seen her.'

And when she turned to the steward, the smile lingered on her lips.

Gavin watched the woman turn her back on him, never losing her smile.

You've seen her.

And he had. With her fair hair pulled into an immovable braid, suspicious grey-green eyes and straight brows, hers was not a perfect face. But she had the air of a woman accustomed to being obeyed, and he could well believe she was the castle's mistress while her father or her husband was at war.

He had made no friend of her yet, he was certain, but he must

try to do so now. He strode over and interrupted her conversation. 'Then you're the one I want to see. I want to join your men.'

The quiver on her lips might have been irritation or fear. Should she discover who he was, it would certainly be fear. Eventually, there would be no way to hide it. She had not recognised his name, but even the smallest band of warriors seemed to know it now.

Yet he refused to cower behind a lie. Men would think what they would. He had learned not to care.

'No. You cannot.' Her tone brooked no opposition.

'Why not?' Most of the castle's men were, no doubt, harrying Edward all the way back to England. 'An extra man-at-arms should be welcome.'

'Oh, we'll have men enough, just as soon as they capture Edward and come home.'

He stamped on a pang of regret. He had known his decision would mean abandoning the man who had brought him to knighthood, but he had hoped not to care so much. 'Well, until they do, I've a sword to offer in your service.'

'Do you always march in, demand what you want, and expect to get it?'

What he wanted was an end to endless war. That, he did not expect. Or even hope for. 'I only expect that, as a knight, my duty is to fight.'

She studied his face until he feared she would see the English blood in it. 'So you truly *are* a knight?' The wonder in her voice

implied that a knight was a special soul instead of a man trained, like her hawk, to kill on command.

'Aye,' he answered, the Scottish accent of his childhood remembered on his tongue. 'I'm as true a knight as you'll see.'

He watched her turn over his answer before she spoke again.

'My answer is still no. If you're hungry, fill your belly at the evening table. If you're weary, sleep in the hall tonight. But tomorrow, I want you out of the place.'

He bowed as she left him, grateful, at least, for one night under a roof.

Fuelled by anger and desperation, he'd spent the last few weeks hiding in these desolate hills, avoiding both the Scots and the English. Just to the south, near the peaks, lay the border that two kings had drawn more than one hundred years ago.

Now, he had chosen his side.

And lonely and bleak as it was, Mistress Clare, by all that was holy, was going to let him live on it.

Chapter Two

Euphemia ran after her as Clare entered the hall. 'No wonder you're still unmarried. A braw man appears and you do nothing but insult him.'

'Euphemia, you talk as if I should open my skirts to anything with a pillicock.' Of course, the girl's mother did, so she knew no better.

The girl shrugged. She knew who, and what, she was. Her mother might have been the baron's companion for ten years, but she would never be his wife. 'What's the harm?'

'He's someone's bastard son, attached to no lord. He may have been banished from his fellows. We'll be lucky if he doesn't murder us in our beds.' And if he did, the fault would be hers.

'Well, I'll be friendly, if you won't.'

'No, you won't. I don't want to see his bastard in your belly after he's gone. Now go and find out whether cook needs help with those fowl.'

The girl smiled and left, without answering yea or nae.

Clare gritted her teeth. She had tried to bring order to this place, but France and all she'd learned there was far away. The wildness of these untamed hills crept into everything and

everyone. Even *she* had mornings, like this one, when nothing would soothe her but watching the falcon soar and taking pleasure in its kill.

She glanced up. Fitzjohn was still regarding her. He smiled, as if sensing her unruly urges.

She turned her back on him. Let the man fill his belly and be gone.

She tried to ignore him when he appeared in the Great Hall for the evening meal, sitting far below the salt. He seemed at ease there, among the men-at-arms, yet something set him apart, as well.

Euphemia leaned over to serve him soup, her breast pressing close to his shoulder. Clare clenched her fists.

He caught her looking at him and his eyes, in turn, travelled over her as if he saw not just under her clothes, but under her skin.

She looked away. He was not worthy of a lady's attention. She rested her gaze, instead, on the small tapestry banker, a gift from Alain.

Alain, Comte de Garencieres, had come to Scotland a year ago with soldiers and money to aid, or more precisely, to rekindle the Scots' war on England. He had brought with him the reminder of all she had left behind when she had returned two years ago after years of being fostered in France.

The banker, in threads of red, white and gold, depicted a man and woman, arms outstretched, about to reunite. On the woman's

shoulder perched the falcon who had already returned to her.

It was too beautiful to sit on, though it was designed as a bench cover. Instead, she had draped it over a chest beside the great hearth where she could see it.

Alain's gift was a reminder of a better world, one where grace and chivalry reigned. And as soon as the fighting was over, they would be married. She would return to France as the *comte's* lady, far from this crude and brutal land of her birth.

She glanced at Fitzjohn through her eyelashes without raising her head. A boorish Scot, like the rest. Interested only in fighting, eating and women.

He had left her thoughts by the time the evening meal was finished and she started up the spiralling stairs to her bedchamber. But as she reached the third level, Fitzjohn loomed before her, just beyond her candle's glow.

The flame trembled. 'This is the family floor. What are you doing here?'

'Looking for a bed.'

She glanced towards her door, still closed. Had he dared look inside? 'I told you to sleep in the Hall with the rest.' She took the final step up to the floor, yet still he towered over her.

'You might at least offer me a blanket and pillow.'

'I've offered you a roof.' And it was more than she should have. 'Don't make me regret it.'

'A lady's hospitality normally includes something more comfortable.'

Comfortable carried the lilt of an insult, but the words raised her guilt. A lady *should* show more hospitality. Yet his behaviour didn't befit a knight, so she had trouble remembering to act as a lady.

'I have given you the same welcome that I would give any other fighting man. If that is unacceptable, then you won't be sorry to leave tomorrow. Now stand aside so I can reach my chamber.'

He didn't move, yet something crept over her skin, as if he had touched her. She started around him, but the space was narrow and she bumped against him, stumbled and lost her grip on the candlestick.

He caught her with one arm before she hit the floor and when she looked up, she saw the candle, straight and steady, in his other hand.

Knees bent, she tried to stand, but only fell against his chest. Embarrassed, she had to cling to his shoulders as he straightened, giving her back her stance, and then her candle.

She backed away, her forearm branded with his palm, her breasts still feeling the press of his chest, held just a moment too long, against hers.

'Dream well, Mistress Clare.'

She reached behind her and pushed her door open, afraid to look away for fear he'd follow. But he didn't move, and as she took the light with her his smile faded into the darkness.

She shut the door and leaned against it, shaking.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would be gone.

As she slammed the door against him, Gavin struggled to subdue his anger. Her disdain was sparked by such small trespasses, things that reflected none of the darkness he concealed. If she was so concerned about the shine of his armour, what would she think if he broke down her door and forced himself into the comfort of her bed?

He'd seen men do worse. He had ridden away from the English because their war had made it too easy to act on such dark visions. As easy as it had been for his father to seduce a Scots lady and leave her with a child forced to fight the heritage of his blended blood.

He was weary of war—the one on the field and the one in his soul.

He descended the stone stairs into the hall. A few men still gambled in the corner. The rest had curled up for the night. The fire had burned to embers and his small bedroll offered little cushion from the unforgiving floor. For weeks, he had braved cold and rain, staying clear of Lord Douglas's men as they chased Edward's troops. Grass and dirt had been his bed. He ached for a moment of comfort.

Stretching out close to the hearth, he saw the tapestry banker covering the chest beside it, keeping the wood warm when a man was cold.

He reached over, pulled it off and rolled up in it. The memory of her fingers caressing it when she thought no one was looking warmed him more than the wool.

Clare smiled as she entered the Hall the next morning and went over to pat the banker covering the chest. It had become a daily rite, reminding her of Alain's expectation that she be a lady, cleaving to the ways his mother had taught her.

Her smile faded as she came closer. Black and grey smudges marred the red-and-gold wool.

She knelt beside the tapestry, anger mixing with a sick feeling in her stomach. What would Alain think when he saw what had happened to his beautiful gift?

She looked around the Hall. None of her men would have dared touch it. It must have been the stranger.

Fury swamped the anguish. First, fury with herself for being so foolish as to let him into her home. Then, fury at him.

She folded the tapestry carefully, exposing a back as neatly finished as the front. He had done it deliberately, she was sure—tried to destroy something precious to her.

She carried the folded fabric as reverently as an altar cloth, the pounding in her ears growing with each step. A lady must never show anger. A lady must be ever temperate. Yet rage pounded against her temples. She struggled to subdue it, blaming him for raising her temper. The strength of it frightened her nearly as much as the other feelings he'd raised.

The ones that had kept her awake last night.

She found him in the stable, kneeling before his horse, testing the animal's fetlock. At least the man had the wisdom to look after the beast, a possession no doubt more valuable than he

deserved.

She wondered whether he had killed the knight who owned it.

Angus sat in the straw at his feet, head bent over the chainmail, patiently polishing an individual iron link.

'Angus!' Her voice was sharp. 'Ask the falconer if he needs help in the mews.'

'That's nae work for a squire.'

It was the first time the boy had ever crossed her and she added it to Fitzjohn's list of sins. 'And if you do not do as you're told, you'll never *be* a squire.'

Fitzjohn motioned his head towards the door. The boy put down the brush and hurried out.

'Blame me, if you must,' he said. 'Not the boy.'

'I do.'

The morning sunlight streamed through the stable door and poured over him, picking up streaks of gold in his hair. He did not wear his smile this morning. Instead, the light carved sharp shadows around his nose and mouth. He looked as fierce as a golden eagle. Powerful, graceful, beautiful.

Deadly.

Such a bird could pluck Wee One out of the sky without ruffling his own feathers.

She lifted the cloth in an accusation. 'This was a beautiful tapestry.' She swallowed, trying to clear the fury fighting to escape her throat. 'It came all the way from France.'

She held it out, but he didn't take it.

His wry look returned, masking the danger. 'That's a long trip.'

'You ruined it. Deliberately.' Her voice shook and she hated the power he had to upset her.

'Now that's a harsh accusation. You sent me to sleep in the hall without so much as a blanket. I wrapped myself up in it and it fell into the ashes during the night.' He shrugged, his expression holding no remorse. 'That's what it's made for. To ward off the cold.'

'To ward off the chill when one is sitting on the bench.'

His smile widened, slowly. 'But your bottom wasn't on the bench last night, so I didn't think you'd mind.'

He was savouring her anger. His very smile seemed to say I know what you are. You are not the lady you pretend to be.

She dropped it in the straw at his feet, releasing a puff of dust. 'You dirtied it. Clean it before you leave.'

He looked down at the banker, then back at her, half-smile still in place. 'That's a lot of fuss to be making about a spot of dirt on a piece of cloth.'

'It's a tapestry, not just a piece of cloth.' She bit her cheek to stop the tears. 'From Arras. It was a gift.'

'Are you sure that's really what's disturbing you?'

'What else would I be distressed about?'

'Me.'

'You?' The word fell from her lips as quickly as if he had slapped her. How did he know? His very presence violated the natural order. Knights were supposed to be noble, honourable

and kind to women. He was the opposite and worse, he delighted in it.

'That's right. I think I just roil you inside.'

He did. In places she had never felt before.

'Yes, Sir Gavin, if you are a "sir." You do.' She lifted her chin and lowered her shoulders, trying to regain a lady's calm. 'But do not smile with pleasure at the thought. You "roil" me because you deliberately flout the laws of chivalry.'

'Chivalry?' His mocking tone had a dark echo.

'Yes. You must have heard the word.'

Gratified, she saw his easy smile vanish. His blue eyes turned hard and he stepped closer, forcing her to retreat. But she could not move far enough away. He still stole her breath.

'Oh, I've heard of it. But I've been fighting in a war, not a tournament to entertain the ladies. You may not believe this, Mistress Clare, but we don't see much chivalry in war, so forgive me if I've forgotten how to bow and scrape and bend my knee. In a real war, we don't wave a lance and a lady's scarf in hopes of winning a silk purse. In a real war, when someone loses, they die. And sometimes, the victor even enjoys the killing.'

She shuddered. Had *he* enjoyed killing?

A momentary vision of Wee One, catching her prey, flashed before her. But that was not the same. Not the same at all. 'Christian knights do not kill one another. The code of honour requires a fellow knight to be spared, else war would be nothing but brutal murder.'

‘War *is* nothing but brutal murder.’

What kind of man was this? Whose war had he fought and what demons had he seen there?

‘I do not know where you’ve been, but you’re in a civilised household now, where everything is done *to then anes,* which means to its proper purpose, though I don’t expect you know that. I suggest you learn.’

The smiling mask returned, wiping the darkness from his face. *‘Mais oui, demoiselle.’*

His French stunned her.

It was smoother than hers.

And his half-smile had grown large enough that she noticed, for the first time, a dimple on his right cheek.

Gavin’s smile faded as he wrestled with the tapestry, a small, poor thing compared to those he’d seen in Edward’s palaces. First, he shook it, hoping the ashes would fly free. Then, he tried brushing the smudges away, but that only dirtied the rest of the cloth and his fingers.

He knew nothing of how to put things right, only how to destroy them.

And somehow, Mistress Clare had known. Even without knowing his name, she treated him like the deserter he was. Like a man who had stood outside a church holding a torch.

And carried the blood of a father who would have burned it.

If it showed so clearly in his face, he was right not to lie about his name. People would judge him without caring that the truth

wasn't as bad as they thought.

Nor as good as it should be.

And Mistress Clare, mired in her fantasies, was very, very good at judgements.

Blind to the crude tower and the rough life that surrounded her, she acted as if she wandered Windsor Palace.

Her illusions reminded him of King Edward. A few years ago, the King had gathered his friends at a round table and dubbed them Knights of the Garter: the garter of a woman the King had raped, if the rumours were true.

Mistress Clare wouldn't like that part of the story. It would violate all her illusions about chivalry, making her angry. Anger would bring colour to her cheeks and warmth to those stony, grey-green eyes. That, he would enjoy seeing. He had the feeling Mistress Clare didn't let her emotions show if she could help it.

A woman like that, well, it would be a pleasure to turn her inside out and force her to feel the passion she disdained. He would unravel her braid, so tight it smoothed her brow, and make her whimper with feelings the woman didn't know she had.

Or didn't want to know.

He looked back at the tapestry. It showed a man, arms outstretched, flying towards a woman and about to embrace her. One hand hovered behind her head. His face was near her breast. The other arm was reached around her hip.

He wondered whether Mistress Clare knew how sensual a piece it was.

He stopped his thoughts from going further. He had to keep his feelings in check. He'd heard from the men that her father was fighting with Lord Douglas and would soon be home. Gavin must humour her until Baron Carr returned. That man would know that a knight's value was in his sword, not his manners. Surely Carr would let him stay on, hidden, in this god-forsaken corner of the Border.

He looked at the tapestry again and sighed. To clean his body, he dunked it in water. Perhaps he should do the same with this.

He headed for the spring with a leery feeling neither one of them would like the outcome.

Fitzjohn, Clare noticed, missed the midday meal. She didn't observe it because she wanted to see him again, but only because she was eager to have her tapestry back. He needed only to hang it on a line, beat it from the back, then brush the front with a small broom. Simple task.

But as her fury faded, doubts crept in. Simple for her, but she had foolishly assumed he would know what to do. She should have never let it out of her sight without giving him thorough and precise instructions.

As the sun reached its zenith, she ignored the rest of her duties to search for him. Finally, outside near the mews, she caught a glimpse of red.

Draped across a rope was the wet, limp banker, no longer a beautiful depiction of courtly lovers, but a rumpled, sodden wad of cloth.

She closed her eyes against quick tears. How would she explain this to Alain?

Fitzjohn, apparently realising his mistake too late, was pulling on one end of the piece. Euphemia held the other as they tried to stretch it back into shape. The sight of Murine's girl helping him angered her as much as anything he had done.

'Euphemia! Get inside.'

'You're nae my mither.'

Did they all think to defy her once tainted by Fitzjohn? 'No, but I, not your mother, am mistress of this castle.' And yet she continued to make mistakes. Mistakes she would never have made if *her* mother had been alive to teach her. 'Now go!'

Euphemia did, throwing Fitzjohn a sunny smile as she left.

Clare stepped closer, torn between wanting to hit him and cry. Two things a lady must never do.

'Are you always so harsh?' he said.

'Not nearly so harsh as I'm going to be with you. You've ruined it!' The words tumbled out in a rush.

He shrugged, but said nothing. She had wanted an apology and expected an argument. Her father would have yelled back. But this man absorbed abuse and returned it with a half-smile, as some men would take a blow, roll over and leap to their feet again. He left her with nothing to do but get angrier or to give up.

She was not ready to give up.

'You've destroyed something valuable and precious. I expect payment.'

‘Payment?’ He raised his brows. ‘I’ve seen warriors dead on the ground with no payment for their loss. I cannot mourn woven wool.’ His words were mocking, bitter.

Dead on the ground.

She choked back her fear. *Not Da.* The phrase like a prayer. *Not Alain.*

Sometimes, the only thing a woman could do to hold back the dangers of the world was to maintain order in the small corner of it that was hers.

She looked back at the tapestry. ‘I don’t know what I was thinking, to expect a warrior to know how to treat such a treasure.’

This time, a trace of compassion touched his smile, as if he knew what was happening to her men, things she couldn’t possibly imagine and didn’t want to.

‘It’s not something that I was trained to do.’

For once, he made her smile, a rueful hiccup of laughter clearing the tears from her throat. She must take the first blame. Perhaps if she stretched it on the tapestry frame she might salvage it.

She stroked the damp cloth with her fingers and ventured a smile. A knight’s lessons would never be so domestic. ‘What are you trained to do?’

‘Kill.’

She snatched back her hand. ‘You have an ignoble view of war. A knight should be thinking of noble quests, of honour.’

‘You talk as if King Arthur’s knights still ride. Now we quest for land and ransom, not for the Holy Grail.’

She had been weak enough to share a momentary smile and in return, he’d thrown his brutal view of the world in her face. But there was something more in his eyes. An unaccustomed challenge. An unwelcome lure.

‘If you do not seek the Holy Grail, have you at least had the honour to fulfil a lady’s request?’ It was one of the sacred tenants of chivalry, to honour a lady’s wish.

The wind swirled around the edge of her skirt, blowing it towards his boot.

His smile, taunting, returned. ‘Generally, what they’ve desired of me has not included holy objects.’

She grabbed her skirt back from the breeze. ‘Neither does what I desire. I’d like you to clean the mews. Make it spotless.’

Here was a man who treated chivalry with disdain. Would he honour her request? Or, better, would he find the task so demeaning that he would, finally, ride away?

The harsh lines of his face eased, his smile suddenly genuine. ‘I’ve spent more time with falcons than with fabric. I will certainly do my best to fulfil your wish, no matter how hard the work.’

‘Good.’

The vision of him on hands and knees scrubbing gave her some satisfaction.

‘And no matter how long it takes.’ His smile took on a wicked edge. ‘Even if it takes all night and all day tomorrow.’

She gritted her teeth, realising he had turned her demeaning request into his victory.

‘One more night then. But no longer.’

She had judged him unworthy as a fighting man, but she must not underestimate his prowess in verbal battle again.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Neil accosted her, brows creased, complaining that she'd sent a stranger to meddle in his mews.

Clare sighed and went to face Fitzjohn, wary of the next trick he might try in order to extend his stay. As she opened the door to the mews, a shaft of light cleaved the dimness and found his bare back. He turned from his raking and she swallowed. His chest, broad, seemed strong enough to need no armour.

'Mistress Clare,' he said, shielding his eyes as he looked towards her, standing in the open doorway. 'I hope you will find that I scrubbed the falcons' mute to your satisfaction.'

She forced her eyes to meet his. 'The falconer has some complaints.'

'He's a good man. But wedded to old ways.'

He spoke as if he knew falconry.

All the birds were leashed, so she left the door open to allow the light in. The gravel crunched beneath her feet as she inspected his work. Of course, there had been little for him to do but rake the droppings from the stones. The falconer was scrupulous about daily cleaning.

'Is everything to your satisfaction, Mistress Clare?'

Closer now, she could see sweat dampening his hair and the hose clinging to his legs. She peered at the falcons' blocks, surprised to see he had even scrubbed away the whitish mute smears from the side of Wee One's perch. 'You've taken great care.'

He shrugged. 'You've more blocks than birds.'

It was a pitiful mews, by most standards, she knew. Most of the birds there now belonged to the visitors, only temporary residents. 'We had more, once. But birds and war are both costly. War has won.'

She pulled on her glove and held out her wrist. Wee One hopped on the fist, fluttering her feathers in delight. Clare rubbed her throat feathers gently, noting her crop was almost empty. She might be hungry enough to fly again tomorrow.

'That's the bird you were flying in the hills,' he said.

'I've had this one since she was just a brancher. She's my favourite of all I've flown. Of course, I've never had one of the really fine birds from the cliffs near the sea.'

'The best I've flown were northern birds, captured in the Low Countries.'

She assessed him anew. She had heard of such birds, but she'd never seen them and couldn't have afforded them if a falcon dealer had brought them. If he had hawked with birds like that, he must be of better birth than she'd believed. 'Those would be worthy of kings.'

He shrugged. 'Origin means little. I've seen gyrfalcons refuse

to fly and sparrowhawks take on rabbits three times their size. Did you train her yourself?'

She nodded. 'I'm all she knows. She'll not leave me.'

'You cannot keep her on a creance and practise the art. Each flight is a risk. Each return a choice.'

She clutched the leather jesses tight between her gloved fingers. 'This one will always come back.'

Behind her, she heard the flapping of wings. As she turned, a bird swooped down, talons nearly tangling in her hair. Then, he soared towards the ceiling directly above Wee One's perch, performing an ecstasy of swoops and turns.

'Stop him!' Impossible. Accustomed to the entire sky, the bird hurtled dangerously close to the wall. A crash would mean a broken wing.

'I think,' Fitzjohn said, with awe in his voice she had never heard, 'that he's doing it for her.'

Wee One's head followed his flight. Clare peered up through the dim light. It was hard to be sure, but the stripes under his wings and the ermine look of the feathers under his throat reminded her of the tercel she had seen two days ago.

She cupped her palm against Wee One's breast, reassured that the bird had not tried to fly. 'Please. I want him gone.'

Fitzjohn waved his arms and yelled at the bird.

As he widened his flight, the strange bird seemed to realise he was trapped. He flew towards the light from the window high in the wall, but the slats, designed to keep the birds inside, were

too small for him to escape.

'Open the door wider,' Fitzjohn said.

She did, then stepped away to give the bird a clear path to freedom. The tercel made a final swoop and roll, then, close enough to the door to see his escape, flew through it and disappeared.

She released a breath, still shaking. 'Thank you,' she said. 'I was afraid he would hurt himself. He must have been wild and mad.'

'He knew exactly what he was doing.'

Surprised, she turned to him, expecting a cynical expression. 'What?'

'Trying to get her attention.'

'Why?'

'For the usual reasons a male wants a female to notice him. He wants to mate.'

Heat touched her cheeks and she looked away. 'I doubt that.' His bare chest was within reach of her fingers. Close enough to touch. Close enough to kiss—

'Where do you think falcons come from?'

Perhaps he didn't know falcons as well as he implied. 'The falcon dealer has brought most of these, but I caught Wee One near Hen Hole just east of here.'

His laugh cascaded over her. 'Before that, I mean.'

She flushed. 'Well, from eggs, of course.' Could the tercel mean to mate with Wee One? 'But a mews is not a nursery.' She

had never seen an egg laid in the mews. Was that even possible?

'They mate for life, you know.' His words were husky.

'Unless one of them dies.' And when her mother had died, her father had not hesitated to take another.

She turned away and tied Wee One safely back on her perch.

'If the mews is cleaned to your satisfaction, I await your pleasure,' he said, his voice caressing her back. 'I offer again to put my sword in your service.'

'My father will be home soon,' she said, abruptly, not looking at him. Like the wild tercel, Fitzjohn had flown into her mews by accident, and now seemed trapped and out of place. Did he long for freedom? Or did he need a safe haven? 'He'll be the one to decide your fate.' She felt she owed him that, though she did not know why.

'Thank you, Mistress Clare.'

She started out of the mews, then turned. 'I've an extra blanket, Fitzjohn. It will be yours tonight.'

He bowed, with a courtier's grace. 'I'm truly grateful, my lady.'

And for the first time since she'd met him, she truly felt like a lady.

The tercel returned a few days later.

She saw him in the weathering yard, where the birds had been taken outside for exercise, hoods off, but still tethered. This time, the male bird swooped down and joined Wee One on her perch. They bowed to each other, heads bobbing up and down like overactive courtiers.

She laughed and Fitzjohn, crossing the bailey, joined in.

'They look so funny,' she said.

'They are courting.'

'What?'

'Now she'll try to fly. Watch.'

Wee One rose, swooping with the strange bird in a sky dance, tugging against her leash as if wanting to escape.

Clare rushed over, clapping to scare the male away. Wee One tried to follow.

Clare pulled on the leather leash, drawing her falcon back until the bird was again within reach of her hand. This one, she must not lose.

She had already lost too much that she cared for.

'Mistress Clare!' The call came from the barmkin wall.

She looked up at the man. 'What is it?'

'Your father approaches.'

Home. Safe. Relief left her limp.

The roar of his voice reached her before she saw him. 'We've run the Inglis back across the border. Now where are my girls?'

Euphemia had already run to him, oblivious of the cold that had followed their few blessed days of spring.

And when Clare saw who was with her father, she ran, too.

Alain was home.

She slowed her steps before he saw her, remembering she must walk as a lady instead of running like a child or, worse, an over-eager lover. A lady worthy of her knight's devotion must set an

example.

But she could not slow her heart. How brave he looked, the French *comte* on his horse! Straight, dark, strong. The epitome of knighthood.

And she felt a moment's gratitude that she had managed to stretch and shape the banker after Fitzjohn's abuse. Alain would barely notice the damage.

Her father swirled Euphemia as if she were ten instead of sixteen summers, their breath making clouds in the air. Then, he turned his eye to Clare.

'Da.' Her word was a breath of joy. He enfolded her in his arms and she snuggled against him like a child, safe, for the moment, back in his arms.

Then, she leaned away to look at him. New lines weighed the corners of his eyes. 'Ye broke nae rules, did ye?' She asked in the Scots way, as she did every time he returned. It was her prayer of thanks.

'None I'll tell ye about,' he answered, as he always did.

She shook her head. She refused to think of the dangers of war when he was away, telling herself the rules of chivalry would protect him. Even when he was safely beside her again, she could barely admit to herself he risked death every time he faced the enemy. 'I'm glad you're home.'

'Ye may not be so glad when I start pestering ye again. I've a new reason to want ye married, daughter.' He said it in his best Border burr, knowing it would irk her.

‘I know the old ones well enough.’ He wanted grandsons, that she knew. Well, the time had come to make plans with Alain.

‘Ah, Demoiselle Clare.’

She turned to him, beaming, and extended her hand, as she had learned to do. He took her fingers and brushed his lips near them, his moustache tickling her knuckles.

‘I wish I had known you would return today,’ she said. ‘I would have prepared a meal in your honour and worn my finest gown.’

He dropped her hand and she smoothed the wool of her shirt. It was cheap, local cloth, woven of wool not fine enough to send to the Low Countries.

‘Ridicule! You are a lovely flower in this wasteland, as always.’

‘Prepare what food we have.’ Her father’s voice boomed. ‘I’ve a hunger a whole deer couldn’t fill.’ He had his arm around Euphemia again, as if she were a real daughter. ‘Where’s Murine?’

‘Here!’

Her father’s lover ran out of the tower and into his arms. Clare turned away, refusing to witness their embrace. This woman had moved into his bed after Clare’s mother had died. Not lady enough to be a wife, she had been his companion ever since.

Murine had tried to mother his daughter, too, but when Clare was fostered in France, she had seen women who looked like her memory of her own mother, women who wore silk gowns and spoke with sweet scented breath. Murine would never be one of those. Gradually, she stopped trying.

Now, they stayed out of each other's way.

Clare moved closer to Alain and turned him towards the tower to shield him from their display. The *comte* knew the code. And held to it.

Unlike the stranger.

'Ah, *demoiselle,* what a breath of fresh air you are amidst the stench of Scotland.'

He offered her his arm and she saw dried blood on his sleeve. 'You're wounded!' Fear shook her again.

'It is but a scratch. But your touch makes it feel *comme neuf.'*

'Let me see.' She pushed up the sleeve, gently, and ran her fingers over the skin of his arm. An unwelcome memory of Fitzjohn's bare chest made her hand tremble.

Alain was right. The wound did not look serious. 'Come. I'll clean and bandage it for you.'

She revelled in the words. They sounded like something a wife might say.

He gently put her hand aside, holding her fingers no longer than propriety dictated. 'You are kind.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Murine pull her father towards the tower. 'Food first,' she said, laughing, removing his hand from her breast.

Clare knew what would happen next. After the midday meal, she would not see them for hours.

Embarrassed, she turned back to Alain. 'I'm glad you are safe. Tell me of your battles.'

‘Battles? Ah, I wish we had seen battles! Edward is a monster, but Douglas is a coward.’

‘A coward?’ No Scot would call Lord Douglas a coward. Not if he wanted to live.

‘Instead of forcing a fight, Douglas kept us always away from the English. Then, by God’s mercy, Edward’s ships were destroyed.’ He crossed himself with muttered thanks to the Blessed Virgin. ‘He had no supplies. He had to retreat. But still Lord Douglas would not fight, only chased him, like a dog after the deer, instead of confronting him on an open field of battle. We could have delivered the *coup de grâce.’*

She murmured a supportive sound. Douglas would take the field with the bravest, but when a Scot waged war, he thought only of the end, not of the proper way to reach it. ‘So they are gone now, the Inglis?’

He nodded. ‘And left the land laid waste, just as they did in France. Burning, looting, even during the holy day of Candlemas. And it was not just the rabble. The worst was the King’s bastard nephew. He burned the monastery church in Haddington to the ground, full of innocents who had sought sanctuary.’

Stunned, she crossed herself. ‘I did not think the Inglis so devoid of honour.’ Murder. Sacrilege. No knight would commit such acts.

Alain offered his arm as they walked towards the keep. ‘Alas, it is so. I was told the man who held the torch was the son of John of Eltham, who did the very same twenty years ago. And

the Edward who rules today was so angry when he heard of it that he killed him. His own brother.' He shook his head. 'Such murderous blood, the English. This Edward must kill for pleasure alone if he would murder a man and then encourage his son to commit the same sacrilege.'

She glanced across the yard to find Fitzjohn's eyes on them. *We don't see much chivalry in war,* he had said. As if he had seen such acts.

As if he could have committed them.

She stepped closer to Alain. Her men were home and safe. Fitzjohn could answer to her father now.

After he had eaten his fill, her father spent the afternoon in Murine's cottage. Clare closed her eyes to what the two of them did there.

Late in the day, he emerged to sit with her by the fire in the Hall, his third cup of brogat cradled in his palms, asking of all that had happened while he was gone.

He said little of the campaign. Edward had retreated, yes, but he had burned everything in his path. In the end, it seemed, both sides had lost.

'I saw a strange face on the barmkin,' he said, finally. 'Who is he?'

'A knight separated from his fellows.' Did she sound unconcerned? 'I gave him a meal and a roof and work to do. He wants to stay on, but I told him you would have to decide.'

Her father's eyes narrowed. 'We lost James in a skirmish last

month. I could use a new man.'

'He's said little of himself. I'm not sure of the nobility of his line.'

'That's nae something to bother a Scot.'

She wondered why she was holding her breath. 'And he hasn't the *comte's* sense of chivalry.'

Her father's lips twisted into something between a scowl and a laugh. 'Few do. I'll judge him meself, daughter. What's his name?'

'Fitzjohn.' She said the name as if unsure of it.

Her father sat bolt upright, nearly dropping his cup. 'What did you say?'

'Fitzjohn.' She wondered at his response. 'Gavin, I think.'

Her father rose from his chair, towering over her. 'What have ye done, girl?'

Why had she ignored her misgivings about this man? Her mother would never have made that mistake. 'Tell me. What have I done besides get a clean mews and a dirty banker?'

'Ye've brought the murdering fire-raiser who torched half of Lothian into our hall.' His bluster flagged, replaced by the same haunted look she'd seen in Fitzjohn's eyes. 'We called it Burnt Candlemas. And he carried the torch.'

She cursed herself with words a lady should not know. If they woke with the roof in flames over their heads it would be her fault. 'Forgive me. I didn't know.'

He reached for his sword and started to buckle it on. 'I'll deal

with him.'

'Wait.' She rose and touched his shoulder, moving him gently back in the chair. 'I was the one who let him in. I'll go.' Did she hope somehow he would deny what she'd suspected all along? 'Let me be sure he is the same man.'

'Not alone, daughter.'

'I won't be alone.' She patted the sheath holding her dagger. Since that day in the hills, it had never left her side, another reluctant concession to this lawless land. 'Not as long as I have this.'

'Ah, daughter. I wish ye were as determined to give me grandsons as ye are to do things your own way.'

She shook her head. Not her way, but the right way, something her father neither appreciated nor understood. 'Give me just a little time. Then, come and do with him what you will.'

She swung out of the hall and up the stairs, skirt swishing between her legs, uncertain whether anger, fear, or shame drove her. She found him on the tower's wall walk, staring towards the snow-covered mountains, stark against the sunset-yellow sky.

'Fitzjohn!' she called, her dagger at the ready.

He turned, slowly, his face shadowed by the light of the fading sun. 'That's what I'm called. Why the blade?'

'You're also called a fire-raiser.'

Pain and anger mixed in his gaze. Did she even see a pleading look there? No mind. This man had shown no mercy. Neither would she.

‘I’m called many things.’ The words came slowly, as if by speaking he had been forced to crack a stone.

‘That’s no answer.’

‘What kind of answer would you like, Mistress Clare?’

‘One that’s true.’

‘Ah, then you’re bound to be disappointed in life. People will say what they will, true or false.’

Always, he turned aside a question instead of answering it. ‘They say you burned a church full of innocent people.’

He turned his head, quick and sharp as a falcon spotting its prey. ‘Is that the tale now?’ The words carved deep lines around his lips, yet unhurried they came as if he truly did not care what was said of him.

‘Is it true?’

‘What do you think?’

His shadowed eyes had witnessed acts no man should know and no knight should commit. But had he done them, too?

She didn’t believe it. Or didn’t want to.

She dropped her weapon and shook her head.

‘I thank you, then, for that.’ His voice held an echo of soft gratitude. ‘May I stay, then?’

‘My Da is coming. The decision will be his.’

‘I understand.’

She struggled to join her father’s words and the *comte*’s story. ‘Does that mean your father was the son of a king?’

He nodded.

‘And brother to another?’

His sideways smile showed no pride, yet she felt her knees begin to dip, as if to make her curtsy before him.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Royal blood in his veins, even though Inglis, yet she had suggested he was no better than a peasant. He must think her a barbarian.

‘Would you have let me in if I had?’

‘No, but you lied. You told me you were Scots.’

‘My mother was a MacGuffin. She gave me as much Scots blood as English. So tell me where that puts the Border in my body.’ He grabbed her hand, the one holding the dagger, and stroked the blade across his waist. ‘Here? Is the Scots half below the belt and the English above? Or is the heart Scottish and the baws English?’

She tugged against him, but his stronger hold was the invisible one. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Or maybe it’s this way.’ Fingers locked around her wrist, he made her wave the dagger from the top of his head down the centre of his nose, then along his torso until she feared he might slash his chest open. ‘Right? Left? Which side shall we throw across the hills into Northumberland? And which side would you deem worthy to keep?’

He twisted her wrist and the blade fell away. His move bent her elbow, pulling her so close that the rise and fall of his chest brushed hers.

Dark fire, hot and dangerous, coiled inside her, rising from a

place she'd long forgotten, if she ever knew. She swallowed. 'Do you mean to burn us in our beds, Fitzjohn?'

At first, he let the wind answer. Then he retrieved his smile and relaxed his grip. 'Would you like to be burning in your bed, Mistress Clare?'

She stepped back, knowing she should fear him, but fearing herself instead. 'If I do, Fitzjohn, it won't be you I'll be asking for help.'

He raised his brows and cocked his head. His fingers still circled her wrist, but the grip became a caress. 'I don't think your Frenchman can strike that kind of flint.'

Over his shoulder, she saw her father draw his sword and touch Fitzjohn's back. 'Let go of my daughter, you bastard, before I run this sword through you.'

Chapter Four

Gavin let go of her wrist, resisting the feeling of loss. He wondered how much the man had seen.

And heard.

Well, death might be a welcome escape.

'Now raise your hands and turn around.'

Slowly, Gavin did, assessing the man up close for the first time. The baron was broad and gnarled and lean with years of work and war.

'Am I speaking to another Carr?'

'You're speaking to *the* Carr,' he snarled.

He was careful with his smile, but he looked over at her, gratified to see she was flushed. 'I thought Clare was a Carr.'

'Out of my loins.'

He caught the hint of pride. 'Well, Mistress Clare invited me in.'

'And tell me why I should let you stay.'

'Is your daughter's word not reason enough?'

'I gave you no promise. I said—'

'Quiet, daughter.' His sword never wavered. 'She let you in, but you didn't tell her the whole truth about yourself.' The man's

sword touched his throat. Gavin swallowed, feeling the cold point against his skin. One quick thrust and he'd be a dead man.

'I told her I had Scots blood. If you know my story, you know that's true.'

'Would you swear you didn't kill those people?' Clare asked.

He hesitated. Men would think what they liked of him. He had learned long ago not to care and no longer wasted breath trying to change their minds. Now, this woman, like all the rest, seemed to believe the worst.

Only this time, it mattered.

'I would.' He started to lower his arms.

'Keep your hands up,' she said. 'Swear you won't harm us?'

Did she really think he'd set fire to the place? 'I swear.'

'And that you won't open our doors to the Inglis,' her father added.

'I swear it.'

'On a knight's honour?' she prodded, not trusting him even now.

'On my knight's honour.' Words that meant much to her and nothing to him.

Carr lowered his sword, though his suspicious stare didn't ease. Gavin let his hands drop, slowly. 'So I can stay?'

'I'm still thinking on it,' the man replied sharply. 'What do you want and why are you here?'

To find peace, he thought. Vain hope. There was no truce for the war within. 'I'm just a poor knight between wars, seeking

shelter and a lord to serve.'

'A few weeks ago you served the King of the Inglis. Why should I trust you to fight with the Scots?'

'Half my blood's as Scottish as yours.'

'And the other half is as Inglis as Edward's.'

Her voice came from beside him. 'And which is the stronger?'

He wished he knew. Sometimes, he felt as if blood was at war with blood, tainted by his father's sins. 'As long as I serve you, it's my Scots blood that will be speaking.'

'Be sure of it.' The baron stepped closer and Gavin caught a whiff of a warm hearth and a welcome pint. Things he hadn't seen for a long time.

'Aye. You have my word.'

'And why,' she asked, 'should we trust your word?'

Silent, he gave no answer. Trust could only be earned, not promised.

The baron squinted at him and motioned Clare to the stairs. 'Leave us, daughter.'

'But, Da—'

'You asked for time alone. Give me the same.'

He wondered, as she picked up her dagger and turned towards the stairs, what she'd wanted from those moments alone with him. And whether she'd got it.

Carr leaned against the stone wall, his eyes searching the dark hillside. 'Why are you here, Fitzjohn? The truth.'

'I was born here. And now I've come home.' Or at least, he'd

come looking for home again. 'England wasn't …' He let the word drift, then shrugged. 'It wasn't that.'

An owl hooted and then was silent, giving its prey no more warning.

'If I let you stay, Fitzjohn, you must know that if anything suspicious, anything at all, happens while you're here, I won't ask any questions. I'll just kill you.'

That was progress, Gavin decided. 'Do I scare you that much?'

'You don't scare me at all.'

'No?' He scared the daughter, though she tried not to show it. 'I've a dangerous reputation.'

The old man gave a snort. 'Well, so have I. And I've had longer to earn mine.'

They both grinned then. And he felt a kinship with the man, something he'd never felt on either side of the border. He wondered what his life might have been like, if he'd had such a father.

'Well, if you're as clever as you are dangerous, you'll put me to work doing something more than sweeping the mews and hooting at owls.' He watched the man's face for clues and saw none. 'You could use a seasoned man.'

'You think so?' He looked as if he didn't care what Fitzjohn thought.

'Well, at least you could use one who understands that you don't meet an army in the field when you can defeat them in the woods.' The *comte* had spent the afternoon whining

about Douglas's tactics, as if how the war was fought was more important than whether it was won or lost.

The old man's grin split his face. 'He's a pompous, puffed-up idiot, the Frenchman. You said it sure.' He studied Gavin's face. 'I'll think on what you said.'

'Dangerous men don't need to think long.'

'What's the hurry?'

He couldn't escape war here. But maybe he could hide from it long enough to stitch up the worst of his wounds. The ones people couldn't see. 'I've been away ten years. It's time I reclaimed my Scots side.' When he had left this land, he had lost a piece of himself. Now, he hoped it was still here where he could find it.

'Can you live up to it?'

'Do I have to kill someone to prove it?'

The man stared at Gavin a long time without a word.

'Not yet,' the old man said, finally. The determination in his eyes matched his daughter's. Gavin hoped the old man would come to a better conclusion than she had. 'But there's six red cattle on the other side of the hill on Robson land that used to live in the pen leaning up against our wall. If they were to come home, you and I might have more to talk about. A lot more.'

And their shared smile was as strong as a handshake.

As the men in the corner of the Hall rolled their dice, Clare rearranged her patterns one more time, trying to fit a new hood, jesses, and bewits for Wee One's bells on her last piece of Flanders leather. When she heard her father's step, she

abandoned the effort. 'Did you send him away?'

He looked at her, something like a smile tugging at the wrinkled corners of his mouth. 'No.'

'Why not?' She fought her feeling of relief.

'I don't have to explain my decisions to you, me girl.' He shook his head when the gamblers waved him over. 'Pour me another brogat and come upstairs. There are things I need to tell you.'

He said it in his most stubborn tone, so she did as he said, and followed him to the next floor.

In his chamber, she perched on the small stool, leaving the chair for her father. He settled in with a comfort able sigh.

'What did you want to talk about, Da?' she asked the question, even though she knew what he would say.

'How old are you, daughter?'

'Can't you even remember that about me?'

'Are you tryin' to avoid the question?'

'You know I'm eighteen.' Seven more years and she would have lived longer than her mother.

'Your mother was sixteen when I married her. It's time you married, daughter.'

'I know, Da.' Did he think she did not? She longed for Alain, children and their home in France a dozen times a day.

'Without your mother …' He sighed and took a sip. 'I'm no good with these things. After you came back, I was content just to have you home.' He put his gnarled hand on hers.

She did not return his squeeze. When her mother had died, he

had sent her away to be fostered in France with a family of Lord Douglas's choosing. While she was gone, he had taken Murine to his bed and Euphemia to his knee. After, it seemed, he had taken no more interest in her until she had been trained to run his house and bear his grandchildren. By then, both he and Scotland were strangers to her and Alain's family closer to her than her own.

Now, she searched the cold, barren room in vain for any sign that her mother had ever slept within these walls.

'Alain is back now,' she said. 'We'll be able to resolve our future.'

Only the war had kept him from asking for her. She was certain.

Her father tossed back the rest of his drink. 'Well, if it's the lily-livered Frenchman you want, I won't stop you.'

'Alain was the one who wanted to fight the English honourably, by the rules of chivalry, as war should be fought.'

'Daughter, we've chased Edward back over the Border, whether Alain likes the way we did it or not. The enemy is out of the country. But you need t'know something. I made an agreement with Lord Douglas.'

The set of his chin made her uneasy. 'What kind of agreement?'

'Something that will secure Carr's Tower for my grandchildren.'

'What's that?' She cared nothing for the tower and the lands. While as the only child, she might hold them after her father's

death, she had assumed that once she left for France, Lord Douglas would award them to some distant cousin of the clan.

'Well, it began the night we almost captured Edward near Melrose.' He sat forwards, launching into a tale. 'We had the trap all set. We would have caught him, too, if William Douglas had listened to me. I told him not to wait for better weather, but he was listening to no man and—'

'Da! What have you done?'

'Well, we broke into the ale and I got William good and bungfued and reminded him of the promise he made to your mother as she lay dying on her bed.'

'What promise?' Her father was well on his way to being bungfued himself. 'You've never said a word of this before.'

'He promised that her wee daughter, only child of my poor darlin' wife, could keep Carr's Tower when she married and that I could choose the man.' He leaned back, a satisfied smile on his face. 'I've got William's word, and witnesses.'

She blinked, searching for her tongue. Difficult to imagine her French-born mother forcing such a promise. 'I'm sure Alain will be glad of that.' He would appreciate the income, at least, meagre as it might be. A steward could see to things. 'We'll certainly visit every few years.'

'No! Ye canna protect the border from France! If it's Alain ye want and who wants ye, you'll have to stay here, or I'll not approve the match.'

'But he has his own lands, his own responsibilities.'

‘So do you. Your husband must be here to hold it. Himself.’

She closed her eyes in dread. Surely her mother, no lover of Scotland, had not foreseen this. ‘I’m sure Mother never meant to tie me here.’

‘Ye don’t know everything, daughter. She trusted me to do what was best for you *and* for Carr’s Tower.’

Clare bit back further protest. If Lord Douglas had made a promise to her mother and her stubborn father had his way, her wishes would have little sway. She must think of one thing at a time. First, Alain must speak for her. Then, she would raise the conditions with him, and find a solution.

But now, the one thing she craved from this marriage appeared to be the one thing she could not have. Instead of leaving this place behind, she’d be trapped here for ever. She tried to picture sitting with Alain in front of the tower’s hearth instead of in the chateau’s hall. Suddenly, her life with him looked strangely different.

And not nearly so appealing.

As word of his identity emerged, Gavin’s easy camaraderie with his fellows evaporated.

Men who had shared a trencher with him only a day before shunned him. He sat alone at meals. Spent his days in silence.

A few nights later, Gavin approached two of them after dinner in the hall and held out his dice. ‘A wager?’

Dark eyes, sullen, met his. *Inglis. Fire-raiser.* The man did not have to speak it. ‘You’ve nothing I want to win.’

‘If I lose, I’ll take your duty while you take your ease.’

‘And if you win?’

‘You’ll come with me on a trip across the top. There are cattle that need help to find their way home.’

The suspicion on their faces melted just enough for him to sit down and trace a circle for the dice.

He did not intend to lose.

Several nights later, Clare lay restless and warm in her bed. Alain had not yet spoken of their future. She tried to imagine it, what he might say. How he might ask.

How a lady might raise the question if he didn’t.

Instead, Fitzjohn crowded her thoughts. The twist of his smile. The darkness behind his eyes. The fire he had raised in her body.

Would you like to be burning in your bed?

She flopped from one side to the other. It should be Alain that filled her dreams.

She threw back the covers and went to the narrow opening in the tower wall, letting the damp breeze cool her face. Drizzly darkness hid the moon. The hills, one softly nestled against the next, offered only shades of black, this one tinged with green, that with blue, the next shading to grey.

A sound, subtle as the shadings of black on the hills. Muffled.

A man on a horse.

Fear stopping her breath, she stared into the darkness. It was late in the season for a raid, but the Robsons never cared much for the calendar.

No. Not horses coming. Someone *leaving*.

She strained her eyes and saw the dark outline of a man, cloaked. He rode a small, black horse with blanketed feet, stepping as quietly as if the mount could see the loose stones and avoid them.

She recognised the man. His height, his shape, the way he sat.

Fitzjohn.

He had sworn on his knight's honour not to harm them, yet he crept away in darkness. To rendezvous with the Inglis? She turned away from the window. She must tell her father, raise the men, stop him.

The tread of a second horse drew her back. Another man.

Finally, a third.

Silent, she watched the darkness swallow them as they rode towards the hills. A smile tickled her lips.

Perhaps Fitzjohn was a Scottis man after all.

The baron flopped over in bed, snoring like the devil.

Murine sat up. 'Wake up, ye piece of horseflesh. I hear something.'

He snorted. Murine sighed. He could be a lout, but she loved him, for all the good it would ever do her.

She shook him. 'Ralph! Wake up and listen.'

He snorted awake then, and closed his mouth to let his ears work.

'It's a horse.' She didn't wait for him, but left her bed and went to the window of her small cottage. 'No. Three of them. Someone

is leaving.'

He didn't bother to get up. 'Come back to bed, Murine. It's the boy.'

She turned. 'The boy? Fitzjohn? How can ye be sure?'

He turned on his side and patted the mattress for her to come back. 'Because I sent him. Thought he would take the bait. Three horses, ye say?' He nodded, smiling. 'He's done well already.'

She put her hands on her hips, bigger now than those years ago, when he had first taken her to his bed. 'Ye're a thieving rascal. Did ye send him after the Robson's cattle?'

He grinned, eyes still closed. 'Well, if I did, I wouldn't tell ye, would I? Now come back to this bed and keep me warm, woman.'

She laughed. And did.

Over the next week, Clare's father smiled like a man with a secret.

She refused to ask where Fitzjohn and the others had gone, for fear it would sound as though she cared. Alain commented they were well rid of the man, but her father said nothing.

Proof he knew more than he said.

Well, better, she thought, not to be distracted by Fitzjohn when Alain should be first in her thoughts. They needed time together, she thought, time alone. Perhaps hawking.

'Splendid!' he said, when she suggested it. 'You can fly my merlin.'

'I would rather take Wee One,' she said.

'Why do you persist in hunting with that bird?' he asked. 'She

has even scratched you.'

She hid her hand in her skirt.

Alain, already on his way to the mews, did not wait for her answer.

She sighed and followed.

Conferring with the falconer, Alain selected birds for the rest of his party. Neil, pleased to be restored to his rightful place, rode with them. The cadger carried the hooded birds, bouncing on the wooden frame hung from his shoulders. Two dogs and three of the *comte's* knights joined them.

With a silent apology to Wee One, she held her tongue and mounted to ride. She and Alain had rarely been hawking together. She had forgotten that an outing with him shared little with her wild escapes.

This hunt seemed to be as much about the conversation as the chase. Alain and his men discussed the history of each bird with the falconer, then debated which should fly first, second and last. Alain's bird looked large enough to bring down a heron, yet he never attempted it. For all the discussion, his birds seemed to be ornaments, chosen for looks instead of for heart.

The sun climbed higher. The sacks remained empty.

Finally, one of the hawks ran a rabbit to ground. Alain's falcon gave good chase, but failed to catch a pigeon. The merlin, smaller even than Wee One, tail-chased two larks without success before snapping up a large insect.

'I don't know why she's so sluggish today,' Alain said. 'Perhaps

she is not accustomed to you.'

Clare held her tongue. Any serious falconer knew that a merlin was only good for one season. Keeping the bird over the winter was a waste of food. But she did not want to criticise Alain in front of the others, and there was no way to exchange a word without being overheard. The two of them had no more time alone than if they were riding in a royal procession.

She finally blurted out a question as he helped her dismount at the end of the day. 'When do you return to France?'

She wanted to say 'when do *we* return?', but that seemed presumptuous.

'Lord Douglas plans a pilgrimage in grateful thanks for his victory. I shall travel with him.'

'To the Holy Land?' Her hands grew cold. He had mentioned nothing of this before. Such a trip would take at least a year.

'Not so far. Amiens.'

The French cathedral housed the head of St John the Baptist. It would be natural for Alain to travel with the group back to France. 'When?'

He shrugged. 'Arrangements must be made. By summer. Sooner, I pray. I can't wait to leave this cold, damp place.'

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