

The a regency romance
MASKED
BARON



Anneka R. Walker

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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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*To my dad and brothers—
Because guys can like Regency romance too.*

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CHAPTER 1

Corbridge, England, 1813

ANDALIN STARED AT THE SKETCH of the Dark Rider. Papa had bought it for five pence on one of his trips and pinned it to the shelf of their small lending library. All those who frequented their shop stopped and commented on the crude image of the infamous baron turned highwayman. Andalin memorized all the tidbits they shared. Then the customers left like always, on to exciting places Andalin could only dream about.

She picked up her duster, knowing work still needed to be done, and trailed it along the few ribbons and things purchased from a haberdashery at the nearby market town only to be resold here. Various sizes of salt-glazed vases lined one wall, opposite the odds and ends. Instead of giving her pride in Papa's trade, they seemed to press against her, trapping her in the small room for yet another day.

Andalin's senses dulled, and her mind wandered to the stories of the Dark Rider. The man terrorized the villages of Northumberland, so she should certainly be grateful Corbridge had been spared thus far. She imagined the Dark Rider storming Papa's shop and stealing her away, only for a rich duke to swoop in and rescue her. Of course, love would spiral from the heroic act, but the greater good would surely be in saving Papa from insolvency.

A heavy sigh escaped her lungs, only to catch on her lips when a shadow passed outside the door. It was silly for her to jump to conclusions, but suddenly she wished Mr. Young, Papa's elderly assistant, was not absent—especially with Papa out peddling his wares in a nearby town.

The door swung open, and Mr. Crow sauntered in. He was not as intimidating as the Dark Rider was presumed to be, but Mr. Crow carried an air of domineering importance. Andalin was never easy in his presence.

“Good afternoon,” Mr. Crow said, dipping his head as if she were some great lady. He wore his new suit, she noticed—

one of several he'd gone all the way to London to have made and fitted. He looked the part of a real gentleman, and despite what others whispered about him, he acted the part too.

She released her pent-up breath, but her muscles remained tense. "Is there anything in particular you came to purchase, sir?"

"I'm here for a pleasure call," Mr. Crow said, oblivious to Andalin's wary posture.

In the back of her mind she heard the voices of her neighbors contradicting Papa's opinions and urging her to encourage Mr. Crow's attentions. "Oh?"

"You must have heard I've a second carriage now, Miss Durante. My pub here and my new inn in Tyndale are thriving."

"Yes, I heard." Andalin busied herself with dusting again, intrigued despite her better judgment. Mr. Crow was tall, broad, and generally considered handsome. He wore his wavy curls combed forward, with long sideburns, in the Titus fashion he said was all the rage amongst high Society.

Mr. Crow cleared his throat and checked the door again to ensure they were alone. "I'm looking to buy an estate, and I need a wife to help me maneuver through the social circles. I could have anyone, anyone at all. Do you take my meaning?"

Andalin's heart pounded both from nerves and disbelief, but she kept her face impassive. "You require a wife."

"Yes." Mr. Crow's lips curled with pleasure. "I am a generous man, willing to condescend for the right woman. Miss Durante, I'd like to offer for your hand."

Andalin lowered her gaze and fingered the handle on her feather duster. She did not love Mr. Crow, but he was the most important man she knew, and he flattered her vanity. Marrying him meant a life outside the store and a new world of possibilities. If she wanted to leave the store, marriage seemed the only solution. "My father would not like it."

"Your father is an imbecile."

Andalin could not hold back her annoyance. “My father is nothing of the sort.” Papa always cautioned her to hold her tongue, but surely she must defend his name. “He doesn’t care for you, and that is all.”

“Forget him. I will speak to him. I only wanted you to adjust to the idea before our wedding.”

She did not like how he assumed there would be a wedding. At the same time, she could hardly believe he would choose her for his wife. Indeed, if the thought did not turn her stomach, she might consider it. “You don’t want me. I am a lowly tradesman’s daughter, a nothing in this world.”

“That may be true now, but I *shall* have you.” His tone changed from persuasive to forceful. “You are too refined for this life, and I shall show you off as the prize you were meant to be. I will buy you gowns and jewels, and every man will look at me with envy.”

Andalin took a step back against several bolts of cloth. Mr. Crow’s eyes gleamed with insatiable hunger. Entertaining any thought of accepting such a proposal now seemed ludicrous. She remembered Mr. Young saying he would return from his deliveries before dinner, but that was a few hours away yet. Mrs. Young usually looked in on Andalin, but the woman was feeling poorly today. To be alone with Mr. Crow now seemed as formidable as any highwayman.

Mr. Crow closed the gap between them and then lifted his large hand to her face. She held her breath as he ran his thick fingers against her cheek. “Soon, my little dove, I will take you away from all of this.”

Greenhead Village, Northumberland, England

Ellison watched from his place on the main floor through an open window smeared with dust as Hezekiah Durante rode up to Thirlwall Castle. The middle-aged man wore plain clothes rumpled from travel, and the hair beneath his hat was peppered with gray. He tied up his horse and lifted his hand to knock when the rotting door of Thirlwall swung in on its own.

Ellison's lips twitched in humor.

Lord Kerrigan's generosity in temporarily extending the use of his castle did not include the upkeep of the place. Apparently, his friend possessed too many holdings to oversee all of them with equal attention. Traces of vermin and decaying masonry testified that a vacant house never fared well. Even Ellison's own neglected home, Braitwood Hall, had not fallen into such extensive disrepair. However, he would not complain about the conditions of Thirlwall Castle when it provided the ideal secluded meeting place.

Ellison closed the glass pane and made his way to his guest. He'd spent many years tracking down Mr. Durante, and finally he would have answers. He noiselessly stepped into the foyer, startling the poor tradesman when he turned and saw Ellison.

Mr. Durante's eyes widened. "The Dark Rider," he said breathlessly.

Ellison smiled menacingly. He hated that name. "One and the same. And I am to assume you are Mr. Durante?"

The man removed his hat and gave a curt bow. Oddly enough, his face did not register fear—just wariness. Everyone in England believed Ellison to be the baron-turned-villain. "I am surprised, even impressed, you came."

Mr. Durante's grim expression did not falter. "Your business proposal interested me."

"As it should, if you have any love for money. Follow me, and we shall discuss the details." Ellison led the way to the earl's table, where he'd brought fare from the local inn for them to dine on. "Please, you've had a hard ride. Eat while we talk."

Mr. Durante's eyes gave him away—he couldn't believe Ellison did not just strike him a blow and rob him for all he had, which wasn't much, based on Ellison's inquiries. He could have laughed, but he needed to lure Mr. Durante into a feeling of security. The man watched Ellison sit before taking a seat himself. Ellison pushed over the plate of battered

chicken legs and a bottle of Madeira brandy-wine.

“I am serious about wanting to invest in your salt-glazed stoneware. Your designs are unique and beautiful. I heard the Duke of Northumberland has several of your vases on display at his home in Alnwick.”

“A craftsman must know his market.”

“And a good craftsman knows that in a rural location with little resources, a deal with me could set him up for the rest of his life.”

Mr. Durante picked at the food, clearly wanting to expedite his business. “I don’t have a love for money like you’ve suggested. It’s a necessity.”

“Oh? Beyond just bread and a roof overhead?”

“My family—”

“Oh yes, your daughter is quite the beauty, I hear.”

Mr. Durante’s calm demeanor faltered, and he clenched his jaw. “How did you hear of my daughter?”

Ellison’s patience waned, and he yearned to pelt the man with all the questions he’d collected for the last decade. He pulled out his knife and sharpener from his boot and began pushing the blade against the stone. He’d found this activity aided him when bargaining. And while he did not want to overly intimidate Mr. Durante, he did want the man to respect the power that came from Ellison’s position.

“I didn’t plan to share all my cards, Mr. Durante, but you must understand I know everything there is to know about you. I know your circumstances are drastically reduced from the inheritance you would have received had you not abandoned your family.” The color drained from Mr. Durante’s face, but Ellison pressed on. “I know your daughter is all you have left and you would do anything to give her the life you once had. Oh, you’ve tried well enough. She’s as well-read as a Cambridge graduate, and her speech is as refined as that of the gentry, but she’s still a poor little tradesman’s daughter without a dowry or a future.”

“What do you want from me?” Mr. Durante asked, pushing to his feet.

Ellison touched the blade of his knife gently with his hand, testing its sharpness. A trickle of blood was enough to satisfy him. “Believe it or not, I am the kind of man you want on your side. This”—Ellison held up the knife—“is a harmless tactic to uphold my reputation and no more. If you are capable of trusting me, we can help each other.” He flipped the knife around so the handle faced Mr. Durante. “Here. If you agree to work with me, you must be on your guard.”

Mr. Durante stared at him for a long moment, not moving to accept the proffered gift. “You are not the only one who did his research before this meeting. Your knowledge of Andalin surprised me, but only that. I could share a few secrets of yours, if I was so inclined.”

Ellison raised his brow with impressed wonder. “Excellent. I think this equal footing will serve us well.”

Mr. Durante’s lips turned up into a half smile, and he finally accepted the knife. “What are your terms?”

CHAPTER 2

On the road northwest of Corbridge

PAPA HAD RETURNED FROM HIS trip only to tell Andalin he was leaving once more—this time with her. There had been no explanation, no questions asked—only time enough to pack her few possessions and absolutely no books. Their destination was Braitwood Hall, the lair of the infamous Dark Rider. Something awful must have happened to cause Papa to act so out of character.

They fled like wanted criminals in the dim light of the late evening in a wagon rattling from their hurried pace.

The small village of Corbridge, which functioned as a simple midpoint on the map for travelers, was the only home Andalin had ever known. All the memories of her mother pulled her back, while the dream of setting course to a new, exciting place beckoned her forward. Never had she been invited on a single trip. Never had she left Corbridge.

She had no reason to fear she would not return. Papa traveled a great deal, usually leaving her in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Young. However, Papa's odd behavior told Andalin this trip would be different than she imagined. This was likely not the best time to bring up the proposal she'd received from Mr. Crow.

“Oh, look. The ocean. I have always wanted to see it,” Andalin said in jest, pointing to the River Tyne flowing near the section of road they traveled. Papa's mouth did not so much as twitch in humor. He radiated tension, which pained her more than the jolts in the road. Only after many hours spent bouncing along in their wagon did Papa begin to relax and desire conversation.

“Would you like to be a lady, Andalin?” Papa took in her profile and then turned his attention back to driving the horses.

The question seemed rather peculiar. Andalin wrinkled her nose at the image her mind conjured. “A lady would not appreciate the finer points of travel by wagon.”

Still no smile.

“Very well,” Andalin said. “I will admit I sometimes dream of being a fine lady with fancy dresses and food I do not prepare myself.”

Papa was a hard worker and was ambitious. She was proud of the way he provided for her and for Mama, when she was alive.

“I have always wanted more for my girl.” He finally smiled at her, softening the worry lines on his tanned face for a moment.

She smiled back, hoping to warm his mood. “Lest you think I am unhappy, let me assure you that as a shopkeeper’s daughter, I have plenty of prospects. I am a bookkeeper, maid, cook, and a well-read student of history, geography, and”—Andalin gave a laugh—“gothic novels. A lady could never have the diverse opportunities I do.” She gave Papa a sidelong glance. “Why would you ask such a silly question?”

“Oh, no matter. I started thinking on it when I arranged my meeting with Lord Cadogen.”

Andalin shivered. “The highwayman, you mean. I hardly think *he* should be our destination.”

Papa seemed vexed. “He is hardly a criminal.”

“Do not pretend you are unaware of the rumors,” Andalin argued. “It’s enough to cause Marybeth’s father to hide their valuables in a different place every night. And Edith’s parents refuse to travel the main road out of town. Why, even children like Saber and Lily know the stories of the Dark Rider.” Andalin had often been amused by the little ones who shadowed her around the store, talking of the Dark Rider and playacting the stories they’d heard.

“We talked about that name.” Papa shook his head. “It is not proper. He is a baron and deserves to be called by his title. You are not like the other girls from Corbridge. You were raised with better manners.”

She knew she was different only because her mother had been a fine lady before marrying Papa. Her mama had insisted

against the slang of the lower class and encouraged Andalin's studies. "I promise I will use the utmost deference when we are in his presence. I only seek to caution you and beg you reconsider selling your wares to a man who feels he is above the law. It is not safe."

Papa paused before finally admitting, "When I met Lord Cadogen, he offered me an arrangement I cannot ignore." He turned and glanced behind him as if he could see some evil force all the way back in Corbridge. "Now, more than ever, it's important I take him up on it."

She waited for him to explain their hurried escape, but when he didn't, her mind conjured up several plausible reasons—their lack of money the most likely motivator.

A rock in the road caused her to bounce and come down hard. She wondered what it would be like to travel in a comfortable closed carriage. Her underside was sore, and each dip in the road jarred her bones. She shoved her loose black curls back inside her mobcap and tied her bonnet tighter.

Papa took his eyes off the dirt road to see how she managed. "We'll be there soon enough."

Squinting at the endless path, Andalin shook her head. "You must be mistaken. Thornton Way is a full day ahead of us. Did you not see the sign for the town?"

Papa wiped his sweaty brow beneath his cap with a handkerchief before returning it to his pocket. "We're taking the shortcut through the Black Forest."

Fear broke her composure. "It'll be dark soon! There are thieves and murderers who lurk in the trees. You cannot be serious!" A quick nod of his head doubled the panic she felt. It was the final straw. "You drag me from my home with nary a word, you insist on meeting the Dark Rider, and now we must endanger ourselves in the forest. What is going on?"

Papa gave her a stern look. "I told you not to ask."

Andalin tried to swallow, but the dirt the wheels kicked up made her throat feel dry and scratchy. "I'm afraid, Papa. I hoped you were running toward something, but now I know

you must be running away.”

Papa surprised her by pulling the reins back, slowly bringing them to a stop. He turned to face her. “Not from something—from someone.”

Shivers ran down her back. “Who?”

“I dare not tell you until after I speak with Lord Cadogen. Please do not keep asking. I know how uncommonly curious you are, but I must insist on this.”

A million questions froze on her lips. If it was hard to remain silent on the subject before, now it was nearly impossible.

Time seemed to crawl, though Papa kept a brisk pace. A subtle fork in the road loomed ahead. As they drew closer, she saw the right was undoubtedly the preferred route. It was wider, smoother, and strangely brighter. The left choice resembled more of a path carved through the forest with a blunt knife. Papa hesitated for only a moment before pulling his wagon hard to the left and into the thick trees.

Andalin gave her papa another sideways glance. “Papa, the sign said *Beware*.”

Papa’s face told her he wasn’t ignorant to the possibility of danger. “I thought my Andalin wanted adventure.”

She knew the choice of direction had nothing to do with her whims. Though, she could not deny the stories she often read fed her desire to see the world and experience new things. Perhaps she should clarify that she wanted a *safe* adventure.

As they traveled deeper into the Black Forest, the road became treacherous with tree roots snaking near the surface and ruts that caused their wagon to pitch this way and that. She held tightly to her seat, her knuckles white from her fierce grip. She worried for their precious glassware in the wagon bed, protected only by straw and the thin wood of the crates.

The shades of dusk seemed to melt into the trees. “How much longer?”

Papa didn’t take his eyes from the road. “Don’t know,

exactly.”

“Have you never been this way, then?”

Papa adjusted his hat. “I’m not one to believe old wives’ tales, but the Black Forest is thick enough for all sorts of mischief. I’ve avoided it until now. But it’s the quickest way, and that is necessary for this trip. I wouldn’t chance the safety of my daughter or my wares otherwise.”

Andalin laughed and then choked on the dust the horses kicked up. “Thank you for putting me before your wares when you listed us together. Corbridge will never question our bravery or adventurous spirit after this!”

“Never mind,” Papa replied. “It’s a risk, plain and simple.”

“Indeed. The shadows are certainly eerie, aren’t they?” There was nothing between the thick trees but the last glimpse of daylight.

“Tell me one of your stories,” Papa urged. “The children seem to gather like hens to hear you spin a tale.”

“These days they’re all stories about the Dark Rider. I’ve collected quite a few from travelers. Everyone coming from Thornton Way, or near to it, seems to have heard this or that about the man.”

“Lies and gossip,” Papa said.

Andalin pursed her lips. “Maybe, but you must agree they’re fascinating. Did you hear the latest about Sir John Peltier, who was found unconscious on the ground with the Dark Rider standing over him? He was just about to finish Sir Peltier off when the men at the local tavern rode by, causing him to flee.”

“Sir John Peltier?” Papa chuckled. “You speak of him as if you know him. I’d wager you’ve never even heard his name before nor since.”

Andalin furrowed her brow. “No, but that really is not the point. I know you have an agreement with Lord Cadogen, but there are obvious reasons to avoid him. They say he killed his

own family. He's known far and wide to be the most skilled swordsman in all of England, and his skill is not just for sport like a true gentleman's is. He carries a short sword with him everywhere, though he is no soldier. Truly, I'm surprised his peers haven't revoked his title and shipped him off to New South Wales with the rest of the criminals."

"If you think the working class is entertained by such stories, then I imagine the upper crust is too."

"His stories are exciting. Most of the intrigue is about what's under his mask. People speculate whether he's hiding scars or burns or some deformation. I've even heard tell he's part animal."

"Enough." Papa shook his head. "I agree there is something very strange about him, but he's only a man."

"All right, but the stories I tell are even more fantastical, so you had best think of another topic of conversation."

"Very well," Papa said. "I've been meaning to discuss your future. It's time you found a husband."

Andalin shook her head and whispered, feeling like the trees had ears. "Might we continue to discuss the Dark Rider instead?" She'd rather speak of him in the growing dark in the middle of a thief-infested forest than of marriage. Thoughts of Mr. Crow's vile touch haunted her memory. No, she was not prepared for such a commitment.

"You're of age now."

Andalin turned her head away from her father. "Yes, but you need me in the store." She reached for her garnet necklace, gifted to her by her mama, and covered the gem with her hand. Holding it usually comforted her, but the last thing she wanted was to be parted from Papa.

Papa patted his daughter's knee. "You're a beautiful woman now. I have done my best to protect you, but I am getting on in years—"

"You don't have enough years under your belt to consider yourself old, so that won't convince me in the slightest."

At five and forty, her Papa was as spry as any younger man. She could not bear to think of him coming home from work to an empty house and a cold hearth. The loneliness would age him faster than the years would.

“This might not be the place to speak of it, but I feel the time will approach faster than you are ready. You’ll have to do your best to prepare yourself.” Papa’s words drifted on the breeze and seemed to be carried away into the thick darkness that surrounded the trees. Andalin wanted to call them back and wish them unsaid. Papa was right; whenever the time came for her to marry, it would be too soon.

Any desire Andalin had for travel quickly waned as the woods seemed to enclose upon them. The forest’s name seemed fitting yesterday, but today it felt even more foreboding to her imagination. Andalin thought she saw someone’s face between two trees, but when she looked again, there was nothing.

She had the sensation of being watched, and her breathing quickened. She searched the tree line and saw no proof of anyone else on the road. But no matter how she tried to push it from her mind, the feeling that they were not alone remained.

After a few minutes she sensed her papa’s discomfort as well. Her nerves were taut, so she attempted to tell Papa another story. This one was about the Dark Rider and a pirate. But for once, talking did not distract her from her worries.

When a soft sprinkle of stars appeared between the trees, Papa stopped to light a lantern and attach it to their wagon. It put off enough light for them to continue traveling, but at a much slower pace. Soon Andalin’s arms became tired of their fierce grip on her seat, but the fear of falling overcame her desire to rest her arms. An owl hooted, startling her.

“Andalin,” Papa said, barely loud enough to be heard over the horses. “If anything happens, I have an extra knife under the seat.”

“You think we will be attacked, then?” she whispered back.

Papa's eyes did not leave their diligent watch on the path. "The cover of darkness and a generally empty road make us a vulnerable target. But fear can play all sorts of tricks on the mind. It could be nothing." He rolled his shoulders as if shaking the tension from his body.

She wanted to believe Papa could protect them, but she sent up a silent plea to heaven anyway. One of her hands reached for her necklace again out of habit, and she tried to remember her earliest memories of her mama to keep her mind clear.

The first howl of a wolf was not as alarming as the several that chimed in afterward. The howls seemed to last a full minute, and then suddenly there was silence. Papa brought the reins down hard and hollered at the horses, causing them to bolt down the road. Andalin's bonnet flew off, and she held on with all the strength she possessed. The path took a wide turn, but at the speed they were going in the dark, neither of them saw the tree down over the path until they were nearly upon it.

Papa pulled back hard on the reins, but the wagon tilted severely, and he slid right off and tumbled onto the forest floor. Andalin's body flew in the same direction, but her hold on her seat kept her from falling too. She grabbed at the reins just before they slipped out of her reach as the wagon righted itself. She pulled back with all her might, and before they hit the fallen tree, the wagon miraculously stopped.

Andalin's panic did not, however. Several musket blasts, men's voices, and a commotion she could not see commenced behind them in the near distance.

"Papa!" Andalin yelled.

"I'm just here. Stay where you are; I will come to you."

Their lantern had been extinguished but still hung from the hook, despite their wild ride. Thinking quickly, Andalin lifted the wagon seat and fumbled around for the flint box. It took a few hurried attempts, but she finally managed to light the lantern again.

When she held the lantern up to find Papa, the sight

before her drew an unnatural scream from her mouth. A large black stallion reared up on its back legs; the rider, clad in black, with a mask covering the top half of his face, held on and fought for control of his beast.

“The reins!” Papa called, his voice now close as he reached the side of the wagon. Their team lurched, but Papa raced forward and grabbed the harness of the horse nearest him. Andalin frantically reached for the reins with the hand not holding the lantern. As fast as it happened, it was over. The log blocking their path now aided in keeping their horses contained.

The Dark Rider—it had to be him, for he fit the description perfectly—sat astride his grand horse, looming over them.

Flustered and trembling, Andalin turned away from his intimidating form and called out to Papa, “Are you hurt?”

“Knocked around a bit, but I am well enough.”

The Dark Rider directed his horse closer to her. “Do you need assistance, miss?” His kind voice belied his frightening appearance.

Andalin found she could not speak.

Papa limped forward, his words soothing Andalin’s shock and fear. “We are safe now, dear. You can come down.”

Andalin let out her breath. She was not a coward. She ungracefully swung herself down from the wagon seat, causing her thick curly hair to cover her face in a tangled web. She batted the hair away from her eyes and pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, wondering if she’d lost her mobcap with her bonnet and whether it was worth looking for in the dark. She moved to stand beside her papa.

“How can we repay your kindness?” Papa asked with a solemn bow to the stranger.

Andalin grimaced at her papa’s gratitude toward a man who had done nothing but frighten them.

“It was not hard to chase them away,” the Dark Rider

said, his voice absent of any hostility.

Andalin's eyebrows lifted, and she was curious as to what exactly he'd protected them from. "Wolves?"

"Men," he said, turning to answer her, "with wolves." He dismounted then and, with Papa's help, easily cleared the fallen tree from the path.

She shivered thinking of what could have transpired without the Dark Rider's surprise arrival, though that wasn't to say they were any safer with his company than without. She moved to climb back into the wagon but gasped when a strong arm lifted her up from behind. The masked man stood near enough to the hanging lantern that when she turned, she met his unnerving gaze. She sat down hard in her seat, her heart racing.

The Dark Rider remounted. "These woods hold dangers greater than those we've witnessed tonight. You had best get a move on."

Andalin finally found her voice. "We thought we were being followed." Though, as she said it, she wondered if it were the highwayman himself after them. "How much farther until we leave the forest?"

"It's a good hour's ride, and then the road will fork again. Hold to the left, and another mile will bring you to my home, where someone can tend to your wounds and you can have lodging for the night. I will make sure no one else passes this way."

By the way her papa held himself as he climbed into the carriage, she could sense his pain. But he graciously bowed his head and said, "Thank you, your lordship. We will gladly sleep indoors after such a night."

The strange man urged his horse back into the woods and disappeared, gone as suddenly as he had arrived.

Andalin pulled a blanket from under the canvas of the wagon and placed the folded mass behind the small of Papa's back. She cringed when she noticed the tear on his sleeve and saw the torn flesh, some parts clear to the bone. She

swallowed back the bile rising in her throat. She reached across and took the reins from his fingers. He groaned but did not resist. She drove the team the rest of the way, growing more tired than she had ever been in her life.

CHAPTER 3

ELLISON STEERED HIS HORSE THROUGH the trees alongside the dirt road, where he could follow it back a few miles and stay unseen. His trained ears listened for anything beyond the usual night sounds. He'd grown up near the Black Forest and spent much of the past ten years learning its secrets. So far there was no more sign of wolves or people.

It was rare that anyone was brave enough to take the road through the Black Forest. And why would they? The rumors were nearly as ugly as the truth. He hadn't meant to trail the Durantes all evening, but he'd been intrigued by the lady's voice. It was unusual enough for a man to take this road, but a young lady never did so. Mr. Durante was a fool to bring his daughter through the forest.

Finally, Ellison turned his horse back around toward his home. His mind conjured up a mess of black curls waiting there. He could still hear the timbre of her voice passing through the trees, while she'd told her father a silly story about pirates. From his viewpoint, he would have pegged them as farmers, but her speech was refined; it was clear she had been educated. It was just as Mr. Durante and Ellison's own sources had promised.

As he drew closer to his home, he thought once more about the girl with wild hair, porcelain skin, and rosebud lips. His frown deepened. For the first time, he questioned his brilliant plan. Beauty had always been a curse to him.

Braitwood Hall, Thornton Way, England

Andalin stared up at the manor house with its tall turrets and flying buttresses. They pierced through the darkness and seemed to comb the sky. The large front door pushed open before she and Papa could climb down from their wagon. A middle-aged man and woman, most likely the butler and the housekeeper, rushed toward them to help them inside.

"Mr. Durante?" the butler asked.

“Yes, and this is my daughter.”

“His lordship let us know you might come. Your rooms are ready for you.”

They dragged their feet up the dark staircase, following the housekeeper’s candlelight. She directed Andalin to her room first, but Andalin resisted.

“My father has been injured. I must help him.”

“Your father will sleep a few doors down, and I promise his wounds will be cleaned and wrapped immediately. Now rest, child.”

Andalin’s eyes blurred from fatigue, and she easily agreed, bidding her father good night. She did not even undress before she collapsed onto the feather-soft bed and fell into a deep sleep.

When she awoke the next morning, the sun was midway in the sky. The luxury of her guest room exceeded her imagination. Her four-poster bed was draped in a lavender canopy and matching quilt. There was even fresh lavender in a vase on her wash table. The Dark Rider lived like a king.

Andalin crawled out of bed, washed her face, and tried to push the wrinkles from her gown. It was no use. She needed a bath and a change of clothes. She spied her travel bag by the door, which seemed too providential since she had not brought it up with her the night before.

She had one other dress to her name now, and thankfully it was a sight cleaner. She brushed at her long, thick curls, trying desperately to bring some semblance of order. She tied them back with a ribbon from her bag but wished she had her cap. Papa always insisted she hide her hair because it caused the men at the store to stare at her. Whether for modesty or because it was often unruly, today she did not care to wonder.

Eager to see her father, she rushed from her room only to look in either direction, unsure which way to go. She reached forward to touch the ornately carved wood paneling along the wall. A woman she vaguely recognized from the night before exited a room a few doors down.

“Good day, Miss Durante,” the older woman greeted cheerfully. “I am Mrs. Lewis, the housekeeper. You met me last night, but you were awfully tired; I doubt you remember. Come. You must be starved!” Mrs. Lewis’s smile was wide against her thick cheeks. She was middle-aged, though her hair had kept most of its chestnut coloring, and she appeared to be a no-fuss, friendly woman.

Andalin remembered her manners only after a moment. “Thank you for your help last night. Might I check on my father?”

She smiled with understanding. “He’s downstairs. He’s already had his breakfast and is meeting with his lordship just now.”

“Oh,” Andalin began. “Where can I find them?”

Mrs. Lewis patted her hand. “We’d best feed you a bit and let the men alone to their business. He’ll be through soon enough.”

Andalin reluctantly agreed. “How is my father’s arm faring? And I saw him limping as well, so his leg might have been injured.”

“Not to worry, child. My husband knows the best medicinal herbs and tended to him last night. Your father’s forearm required some stitching, but the rest was mostly surface wounds. He’s up and moving around, which is comforting.”

Andalin sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Lewis patted her arm. “It’s fortunate his lordship discovered you before those wolves devoured you both.”

Andalin shuddered. Dare she mention the men who had supposedly accompanied the animals? “Yes, indeed.”

“Let’s not think on it again,” Mrs. Lewis said firmly. “What you need is a good breakfast. I can feel your bones right through your sleeve. You need fattening up!”

After a large breakfast in which Andalin felt obligated to eat enormous portions, she was more eager than ever to see

her father. Mrs. Lewis left her alone at the table, assuring her that she would be back by the time Andalin's plate was emptied. Andalin did not wait for her to return.

She quietly slipped from her chair and left the dining room. She weaved around the corridors until she found herself in the front foyer of the house. She was about to walk one direction when she heard voices. She followed the sound to a large oak door down a side passage. The words were unclear until she pressed her head to the door. She identified the tone of her papa's voice. She smoothed her dress and gathered her courage to knock.

The voices stopped, and after a moment the door opened to reveal her father's weary face. His injured arm was now bandaged, and he held it tight to his side.

"Andalin, you are awake."

Andalin lifted up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Good morning, Papa."

He smiled and then looked hesitantly behind him. "May she join us?"

Andalin looked past her father and saw the Dark Rider with his mask firmly in place. She took a step backward.

"Yes, I think we are in agreement on the terms. Send your daughter in, and we will apprise her of the situation."

"Andalin," Papa began, "let me introduce you to Lord Cadogen."

Andalin curtsied as respectfully as she could, despite her wariness. "Your lordship."

Lord Cadogen motioned for her to enter and be seated. "It looks like your daughter has heard of me."

Papa led Andalin to a seat next to his. Lord Cadogen sat back in a much larger chair behind a desk that separated them. He stretched out his long legs to the side of the desk, looking completely comfortable. Her father, on the other hand, lowered himself carefully into his seat. It wasn't pain she saw on his face though; it was uncertainty.

Clearing his throat, Papa said, “Yes, my daughter knows of you. I informed her of my intention to sell my wares to you.”

Lord Cadogen smiled grimly. “It is not for that reason she knows my name.”

Papa looked at Andalin, but she remained silent. “She is a smart girl. She will form her own judgments, whatever they may be.”

Lord Cadogen observed Andalin, and she lifted her chin in response. In tending to her papa’s shop, she’d dealt with many strange and fearsome individuals. She would not cower to this man, whoever he was.

“You are a smart girl, then? Well, we shan’t have a problem finding a place for you.”

Andalin’s eyes darted to her father. What did Lord Cadogen mean? Papa nodded as if to assure Andalin everything would be all right.

“Do you mind elaborating, Lord Cadogen?” Andalin asked.

A slight smile crept up on Lord Cadogen’s face, as if he was surprised Andalin would address him. “It would be my pleasure. Your father has agreed to leave you in my care.”

The blood drained from her face. She must have misunderstood. “Forgive me, but you intend to employ me as a servant?”

Lord Cadogen folded his arms. “I intend to make you my ward. The lord chancellor must approve, but he owes me a favor. I do not foresee any problems since you come to me penniless. Your father has signed a will bequeathing you into my care. He, of course, is dead in the eyes of the world. You will keep your family name, as the Durante name is of good blood. I will provide for all of your needs. I’ll even find you a husband when the time comes. Of course, with an impressive dowry at my expense.

“This sort of thing takes time to become perfectly legal, so your father and I have set up a trial period. If, in time, I find

you meet my expectations, then Braitwood Hall will be yours to inherit upon my death. I have never married and have no living relatives. As a result, I have no heir.”

Lord Cadogen did not need to remove his mask for Andalin to discern that he was relatively young. There was still a strong chance of him fathering children, and yet, he was ready and eager to have her as a ward. Andalin needed days or weeks, perhaps, to take this in. The last thing she wanted was to live there, even if the manor house resembled a castle. She wanted to be with her father. They were all each other had.

Andalin’s gaze darted to her father, who sat as stoically as a martyr. Her mind screamed for an explanation. “May I know the terms?”

Lord Cadogen turned to Papa and asked, “Is she always this forthright?” Then he faced her again and answered, “The terms are not to be disclosed to you at this time. Your father and I will be in correspondence with each other, and he will be made aware if the agreement is not to my liking.”

Andalin shot to her feet. “I would like to speak to my father privately, if you will.”

Lord Cadogen did not move from his seat but motioned them to the door. Papa led his daughter to the foyer, and then Andalin pointed to the empty dining room.

Once the door was shut she blurted, “Papa, you cannot be serious. I cannot stay here with him. You cannot leave without me!”

Papa sank into one of the dining chairs, his pale face a mixture of pain and exhaustion. “Andalin, I told you the time would soon come when you would need to prepare yourself to live without me. This will take you a step closer to finding a husband worthy of you. I owe this man my life—your life. I would not have picked this scenario for you, but the more I think on it, the surer I am this is right. It is better than I could ever have done for you myself.”

“No!” Andalin shook her head furiously. “You are the only family I have. You cannot desert me. You know I care not

for a fine house or a fine life. We need each other.”

Papa smiled tenderly, his eyes settling on a potted tree in the corner of the room instead of on her. He suddenly looked old. He had never looked old to her before. “Dearest, this is not an easy choice. But you will be protected and cared for.”

Tears slid down her face. “He’s the *Dark Rider!*”

Papa shook his head. “I warned you not to listen to such nonsense. You are more intelligent than that. Lord Cadogen has proved himself to be a very generous man. I will be able to return home to Corbridge, sell the store, and live very comfortably.”

“But what about that ‘someone’ you spoke of earlier? Is it safe to return just yet?”

Papa stared at her for a moment and nodded. “It would only be unsafe if you were with me.”

Andalin shook her head, confused.

“Mr. Crow asked for your hand.”

A shiver ran down her back, and she lowered her gaze. “I know.” She saw their situation with perfect clarity now. Mr. Crow had bullied her father to get to her. Mr. Crow’s fierce determination had led him to many successful investments, but this same strength was also his failing. Andalin should have known his ruthless resolve in business would apply to his personal life as well. She remembered the gleam in his eyes, and her stomach dropped.

“He’s a rake, Andalin. He’s ruined many a virtuous woman. He threatened to devastate me financially when I said no,” Papa explained. “He would have taken everything, including your happiness. He’s an unfeeling, stubborn man. I didn’t have another choice. I had to get you away while I still could. Lord Cadogen’s money will protect me from Mr. Crow, and this new situation will protect you.”

“How can you be sure he won’t find me here? He could have followed us.” Andalin pointed to the door.

“His influence does not extend to these parts. He’s a self-

made man and has yet to make many connections. You'll be safe here. But you mustn't write to me. You must put your old life behind you."

Andalin sank down on the floor and put her head in Papa's lap. "Could you not sell your shop there and come to Thornton Way?"

Papa put his uninjured hand on her head and stroked her hair. "It's against the terms. You must separate yourself from me and start a new life here. You cannot be a baron's ward and be connected to a poor craftsman and merchant, not unless you want to scare off all the best suitors."

Andalin brought her gaze up to meet his, her head reeling and tears stinging her eyes. "And you are in agreement with this?"

"Things may change. Be what he asks of you—always honorable, always attentive. Do not let stories, fear, or loneliness chase away this opportunity." Andalin shook her head, and Papa stopped her. "If not for yourself, do it for me—for your mother and me. You were meant for more than I can give you."

Andalin cried into her hands. Papa held her close, and they stayed that way for the better part of an hour.

"Andalin, my flower, it is time for me to say goodbye."

Andalin sobbed. "No, you've not healed enough to travel."

Papa shook his head. "Lord Cadogen has arranged for a guard to escort me home. I will ride in a carriage, where I can rest."

"Why is he being so kind? I do not understand. What are his motives?" The uncertainty Andalin had seen in Papa's face when they had spoken with Lord Cadogen was back. Andalin sighed. Her fate was in Lord Cadogen's hands now—for better or worse.

CHAPTER 4

ELLISON'S DRIVEN NATURE PREPARED HIM more for dealing with men than emotional young ladies. Miss Durante had shut herself in her room and had not yet emerged. Clearly, she was afraid of seeing him—afraid of what the future would bring for her. He guessed she would not be content closing herself away for long after living in a busy shop, but he would not begrudge her the time to accustom herself to her new situation.

He had grown used to using the main staircase, so it was by coincidence he walked by Miss Durante's room just before her door cracked open. Ellison tucked himself behind a corner and waited. He needed to be able to trust the girl with everything he had, and a few harmless observations would, hopefully, tell him all he needed to know.

When Miss Durante finally ventured into the passageway, Ellison saw his house through her eyes. There were several wide corridors filled with rows of doors, and she was drawn to each one of them. She opened the doors and peered inside, only to find each room lifeless. It seemed she was as curious to learn about the highwayman as he was about her. He wondered if she was surprised to find his house shut up from the world. The silence must have bored through her deeply to cause her to jump when Hannah came up behind her.

“Pardon me, miss,” the older woman's words were brisk and her manner abrupt. She was the only servant who had not warmed to the idea of having Miss Durante in Ellison's house. “I'm Hannah, yer maid.” She was tall, with stooped shoulders and a gray bun at the nape of her neck. “I'll be the one to help ye dress and put your room to rights. The master says yer never to come downstairs without pinnin' up your hair tight, but it looks decent enough to me. Mrs. Lewis is belowstairs waitin' for ye.”

Miss Durante nodded, wide-eyed. She fingered her hair, probably wondering about his strange request and, no doubt, relieved her hideous mobcap was no longer needed.

Ellison followed discreetly as Miss Durante moved to

search for the housekeeper. Luckily, Mrs. Lewis was dusting the banister, stepping in as a second maid, and was not too hard for Miss Durante to find. The girl would learn the layout of the house soon enough.

“You were looking for me?” Miss Durante’s voice echoed back to him.

“Yes, miss,” Mrs. Lewis replied. “His lordship requests we begin a series of lessons to teach you to be a lady. Now, don’t you fret. We’ll go at your own pace, and I daresay you’ll take to it with ease.”

Miss Durante twisted her hands behind her. “And his lordship expects . . .”

She was intimidated by what Ellison asked of her. But with her apparent beauty and grace, she would take naturally to being the ward of a baron. If only money and privilege could change a person into someone who could be trusted. Only time would assure him of that.

“His lordship is often away from home,” Mrs. Lewis said. “You needn’t worry about him looking over our shoulders and measuring your abilities.”

He smirked at the irony behind Mrs. Lewis’s words. He would agree with her, but his hidden stance said otherwise. From now on he would use the private staircase.

Miss Durante turned, and he could see the palpable relief in her porcelain profile, along with a lingering trace of fear. She was concerned about her safety. While he would do everything in his power to protect her, he realized she’d never adjust to her home with him there. This benefitted him, since he was driven to solve the mystery behind his family at all costs and was in no mood to play the role of host. The roots from the forest’s trees might as well have wrapped themselves around his feet, pulling him back to the woods. It was time to ride again.

A fortnight passed without Andalin seeing a single glimpse of Lord Cadogen. At this she began to breathe easier.

She wasn't as frightened when she turned a corner or walked through the corridors in the late evenings by candlelight. It was a strange existence, to live in a home with someone she never saw.

Mrs. Lewis had said Lord Cadogen preferred to be alone when he was home. Andalin had also been told that many large homes retained a family wing so they might maintain privacy from their guests. She gave Lord Cadogen's family rooms a wide berth. She could imagine they lived in two different houses, but she knew better. She was always alone and, then again, never truly alone.

Andalin remained in the lavender room, and five lovely new gowns were added to her wardrobe. Instead of having a tailor as she had expected the rich to have, the gowns were brought to her and altered by the maid Hannah, who seemed irritated by everything. Wearing fine clothes was something Andalin could grow accustomed to. The colors and feeling of the fabric were new sensations, and Andalin was reminded of petals on flowers.

Eating alone was harder to adjust to. After another dinner by herself, she retreated to the sitting room. Someone had forgotten to light the candles again. The dark bothered her, but the soft, overstuffed furniture beckoned her inside. She sat on a settee with large scrolled mahogany arms and clawed feet, near the end of the room, appreciating the luxurious seat of the noblemen.

The wind moaned outside the closed window, and the ghosts from the manor's past seemed to file in around her. A light appeared in the doorway, and in a panic she dove off the settee and onto the floor. She cringed at the thought of crushing such an expensive dress. One glance at the door told her it was none other than the Dark Rider, and he was enough to motivate her to crawl behind a nearby chair.

"Miss Durante? What are you doing there on the floor?"

He had seen her. Andalin's heart stopped, and her next breath did not come. She was paralyzed.

"Miss Durante? Are you looking for something?"

Seconds ticked by, and finally the surprise of the moment passed, and Andalin was able to find her mobility. She stood up behind the chair and gripped it like a shield. She was too rattled to be embarrassed.

“I was looking for the door,” she said.

“Wouldn’t it be better done on your feet?” Lord Cadogen had the gall to sound amused.

“Yes, so I will take my leave now.” Andalin peeled herself from behind the protection of the chair. He shifted his body, and she froze. “Don’t you dare take another step closer!”

“Do I look like I’m moving?”

She eyed him. He had not moved an inch. “You cannot fool me. I know exactly what kind of behavior you are capable of.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

“Well, I know all about Sir John Peltier.”

“The man who fell off his horse last month? He was completely foxed. I am surprised with whom you keep company.” Lord Cadogen scoffed. “The nearby inn claimed they had to throw him out, despite the late hour, because he was disturbing their guests. That was Falcon Inn of Thornton Way if you would like to inquire for yourself.”

“Drunk?” Andalin did not want to believe Lord Cadogen, but it sounded plausible. Confusion clouded her judgment, but she reminded herself he was not to be trusted.

“For shame, Miss Durante; your claim was false. You don’t know everything. It seems all of England wants to blame every misfortune or mistake on the Dark Rider. They are incapable of taking responsibility for themselves. Perhaps it helps them sleep better to believe they are without guile, but I cannot pretend to understand.”

Andalin refused to believe him. Even rumors stemmed from at least a shred of truth.

“The door,” Lord Cadogen said, “is here.” He motioned directly to his left. Andalin would have to pass by him to

escape. She lifted her chin. She had survived the Black Forest, had she not? She strutted to the door, avoiding Lord Cadogen's eyes, and marched right past him. It could have been her imagination, but the man seemed to radiate heat. She didn't have to touch him to know how near he had been to her. A true gentleman would have moved aside.

Andalin made it to her room unscathed and locked herself inside. She would be braver next time. Truly, when she saw him again, she would demand answers. Why must she have someone to dress her when she was perfectly capable? Why did ladies always have to act demurely? Why was the staff so small when the manor was so big? Why were the servants all so very old? And why could she not even write to Papa? Yes, she required answers.

Andalin attempted to entertain herself with needlework, writing letters to her father she knew she could not send, and long walks in the garden. Her heart ached for the sight of her papa, and no matter what she did to distract herself, his face was always in her mind.

The manor's large library became her place of solace. The hundreds of books made her giddy, and she had already devoured one row of the first bookshelf. It would take a lifetime to read them all, but at the rate of activity at Braitwood Hall, she might just have the time for it.

It was in the library late one night when Andalin met Lord Cadogen again.

“Good evening.”

Andalin nearly threw the book she was reading out of surprise. A touch of fear followed, racing up and down her back. She was wearing her nightgown and robe and had curled up on one of the armchairs to pass the last hour before bed.

Lord Cadogen stood there watching her—how long he'd been there she did not know. His leather mask covered most of his face, but his exposed eyes seemed to pierce her with their intensity. To say she felt extremely vulnerable in her state of

undress and current company was an understatement, but she managed to sputter, “Good evening, your lordship.”

“Ellis,” was Lord Cadogen’s only response.

Andalin did not remember him having a lisp. “Ellis, sir?”

He sat down in the seat across from her. “Ellison is my given name. You will address me as Ellis.”

Not a lisp, then. She did not want to address the Dark Rider as anything but *the Dark Rider*. Even though she had strong feelings against using his proper name, his words weren’t a question as much as they were an order. She feared his rumored temper, so she would appease him, but only to his face. Around others he would be Lord Cadogen.

“Have you found your stay comfortable?” Ellis asked, his tone almost amiable.

Andalin frowned, finding courage to beseech him with her plight. “I am not useful to anyone. I cannot stray beyond the garden. I cannot keep company, though I don’t know anyone as it is. I find my comfort does not depend on the finer aspects Braitwood Hall affords. Perhaps a visit with my father . . .”

Ellis flipped his gloves absently against the chair. “Your father made you aware that was impossible.”

“He did. But I do not know if you are a man to be reasoned with, if you have a hidden sympathetic nature.”

“You are right.” The edge to his voice was back. “You do not know me outside the rumors you’ve heard in your remote village. I will clarify for you so we understand one another. I am not a man to be reasoned with. Believe it or not, I am capable of sympathy, but I rarely practice it.”

Andalin closed her book. She had lost all desire to keep reading. Instead she wanted to focus on the disgust and dread she felt for the man before her. How could he keep her from her only family? It was not right.

Gripping the chair near him, Ellis appeared to be battling for patience. “You might choose to hate me. Most do. But it

will not change your circumstances or the freedom you are given.”

Andalin set the book on the end table beside her chair and folded her arms. Her fear was slowly being replaced with anger. “And if I choose to like you, or like these terms that have shackled me to you, does it mean I have greater freedom? Or is my lot to always be thus?”

Ellis smirked and leaned toward her. “Is *my* lot to always be thus? Do *you* care for others? Are *you* capable of sympathy? Life isn’t easy for any of us.”

Andalin huffed. “Was this your real reason for enslaving me? So you could have someone to feel sorry for you?”

“No,” Ellis said, his voice more subdued, “it stemmed from a moment of weakness. Your father played a part, as did your enchanting voice, though your appearance nearly caused me to change my mind.”

Andalin couldn’t restrain her gasp. He might be a gentleman by title, but he certainly was not by character. How dare he insult her looks!

“I must want someone to feel sorry for me,” Ellis said. “Perhaps you could marry me and spend the rest of your life reforming me into someone good and kind.”

She glowered at him. So this was his true purpose. Papa had been made a fool. And he, the wisest man she had ever known.

A dark laugh burst from Ellis. “I am disappointed you do not have a sense of humor. It would make our time together more bearable.”

She lifted her chin and breathed in short bursts through her nose. Marriage to him was not something to make light of. “I find your sense of humor offends me.”

“Most do,” Ellis said. “But do not fret, young Annie, I shall see that you spend more time with me so you do not have the excuse of not knowing my quirks of personality. Then, when you have a question for me, you’ll be able to guess the answer for yourself.”

Andalin shrank back, too intimidated to correct her name. Her questions had provoked this outcome, and she hoped she had learned her lesson. Indeed, her fortnight of loneliness was preferable to any time in Ellis's company. She did not politely excuse herself as her lessons required of her, nor did she wish Ellis a good night. She would not sleep well, and she did not wish Ellis to sleep well either. That is, if the Dark Rider slept at all.

The next morning was uneventful, and the cold, dreary house drove Andalin outside. All its sophistication could not make up for the solitude the very walls seemed to breed. Mr. Birks was the stablemaster and gardener, but he preferred to be called simply Birks. He usually did his rounds during breakfast, leaving her to feel isolated even when she was out of doors. The grounds held great potential for beauty. One caretaker was clearly not sufficient help for the large estate, as most of it was overgrown and covered with weeds.

Andalin began her exercise, choosing a different direction than she had taken the day before. She imagined various routes of escape, but the reality of such a thought was futile. How could a young woman care for herself without means or protection? She needed to bide her time until she could discover a way to communicate with her father and beg him to return.

She chose to make her way toward a small orchard on the other side of the pasture. As it was early fall now, the fruit weighed heavily on the branches. Scattered throughout the grounds and trees were large areas of grass. Several paths weaved around the trees, and here and there were oversized bushes trimmed just enough that they did not hang over the walkways.

Perhaps one of these would make a good hiding place if the Dark Rider decided to hunt her down for her sulky behavior the night before. She had gone out of her way to avoid the library that morning in case of any chance encounters.

After a lengthy walk she lost track of time. When she checked the dining room, it was empty. Her stomach rumbled, urging her toward the kitchen for a bite to eat. When she opened the kitchen door, she blanched at the sight of Ellis making himself a sandwich. He, a baron who lived in the grandest home she had ever seen, was preparing his own food. Instead of turning around and excusing herself, once again her body went immobile. All this time she'd managed to avoid him, and now she had seen him two days in a row. It was vastly disheartening.

His fitted mask sank low on his cheekbones and reached over his nose and halfway up his forehead. The only part of his face left uncovered was a strong, defined jaw, full lips, and piercing blue eyes. Though she could not see his eyes from his profile, she remembered the way they had bored into her only the night before. Ellis's sandy-blond hair fell over the top of his mask and hung long on the back of his neck and collar.

If the rest of his face matched what she saw, then Ellis would be a very handsome man. She wondered how terrible his scars were and what incident had caused them. But if she had had any reservations about Ellis being a monster and not a man, they were gone now. Somehow, seeing him in the light procured a more ordinary image, one far less frightening.

“Are you done staring?”

She gulped. “Pardon me. How do you do, your lordship?”

Ellis didn't smile or return her greeting. He acknowledged her with a bob of his head and motioned for her to sit on a tall stool by the counter. She hesitated at first, but with a sigh of resignation she crossed the room and sat on the stool.

“It appears you took me up on my offer to get to know me better. Very well.” He cut his sandwich in half and handed one side to Andalin.

She dared not try to deny his comment. Surely it was more of his strange humor. She looked at the sandwich, no longer feeling even the least bit hungry. Somehow she managed to choke down a morsel.

Ellis finished his sandwich off in a few quick bites. He took a long drink from his glass before speaking to her again. “What would you like to know, Annie?”

He had done it again. He’d shortened her name like she was his pet instead of a near stranger. It disgusted her! And dare she ask a question? The last thing she wanted was to encourage friendliness between them. She didn’t want to trust him. She feared that in separating her from Papa, Ellis had committed the unforgivable.

Ellis’s lips quirked upward. “I will take your silence as an invitation to share something of my choosing. This is more to my liking anyway. I will start with my childhood. My mother was a very wise and beautiful woman. Many would say a lovelier woman could not be found in all of England. My father matched her beauty with his honorable ways and ruggedly handsome features. They were the perfect match. Can you imagine?”

“I have an excellent imagination, your lordship.” Her words sounded more defensive than she intended.

“I am sure you do,” Ellis remarked, his eyes sparking with amusement. He continued with his story. “Many hearts were broken the day my parents wed—one in particular, but that is a story for another day. I was born just a year later. I had a blessedly happy childhood. I was the center of my parents’ world, and they were mine. My mother never let the governess take me from her sight. She wouldn’t be parted from me. As a teenager, my father—a soldier at heart—trained me to fight, be as quiet as the night, and be the ears of the forest. The memories, the love, the training, have carried me through these many years.”

Andalin hung on Ellis’s every word. Why was he confiding in her after he had avoided her for so long? His tale was a strange one, to be sure. She never would have guessed his happy beginning in life. It meant the scars behind his mask had not come until a later date. What could have happened to mar his face so very badly? What had happened to his parents? And how could someone with such an inherently good parentage turn so ugly and apparently on purpose? If only she

had the courage to ask.

Ellis stared at her, and she looked down uncomfortably.

“Now it is your turn. Tell me a story of your childhood.”

Slightly impressed with the depth and honesty from Ellis, Andalin decided it would not hurt to do the same. “My parents had an arranged marriage. My mother came from an obscure background with some distinction and money. I think the arrangement came with certain stipulations, because my father agreed to forsake his family for the union. It worked out for the best in the end, because they came to love each other. My father does not like to speak of his relations, and he always claimed the sacrifice worth making for my mother.

“My parents were fortunate love came easy to them. My father had his business robbed and was left with nothing when I was only a baby. The only reason we had food to put on the table was because of what was left of my mother’s dowry. The only thing they did not invest was this.” Andalin took the garnet necklace from under her dress and showed it to Ellis. His eyes froze on the necklace.

He blinked and the look was gone. Andalin continued with her story. “It took years for my father to rebuild his business, but while money was hard to come by, we were still happy. My mother told stories every night before bed. Then, later, when we had money again, books were purchased and my mother taught me to read. I consider books to be my dearest friends and my greatest adventures.”

“You are fortunate to have been educated, then.”

“Not formally,” Andalin said. “But my parents were educated and taught me what they knew. The store provided a decent lending library.”

Ellis frowned deeply. “And how old were you when your mother died?”

Andalin never liked talking about Mama’s death, but this she could answer. “I was twelve.”

Ellis’s blue eyes turned to steel. “My mother and father were taken from me when I was sixteen.”

Andalin looked down at her half-eaten sandwich. She didn't want to feel sorry for him, but she did. Losing both parents must have been terrible.

“Enough for now. As my ward, you must keep our conversations between the two of us. My servants are faithful, but I want your word just the same.”

His tone was soft and unexpected. Andalin nodded, silently agreeing to keep his confidences, and then watched Ellis leave. She sighed heavily and buried her head in her arms. Ellis was supposed to be an animal and not capable of such depth of character. She could not make sense of him.

CHAPTER 5

ELLIS SPENT THE BETTER PART of the month in the Black Forest tracking a wolf pack and setting traps. The safety of his home remained of the utmost importance to him. Normally, the wolves were farther north and a rare sight. The sheep farmers up and down the country kept the wolf numbers down the best they could. He'd guess these had been transplanted by the same men who had trailed the Durantes upon their arrival. He was pleased with the progress he made but not so pleased with the direction of his thoughts.

Conversing with Annie did not reveal anything he didn't already know, but he had not expected to be so amused by her. His lips lifted in the corners just thinking about her hiding behind the chair. She didn't appreciate his dark humor, but part of him enjoyed riling her. Her every emotion intrigued him, but that was no excuse for his behavior. He could not afford distractions, and yet he couldn't remember wanting to be anywhere but the Black Forest until now.

While making his way back, Ellis stumbled onto a small section of the forest he'd not noticed before, and adrenaline thrummed inside him. After all these years, the secret behind the Cadogen mystery could be his!

On the opposite side of the forest from his home, along the Scotland border, a small section of the ground sloped downward, creating an imperceptible but decent crevice. The area was covered with thick foliage; Ellis had passed by several times without seeing the hidden view. Crawling was an option but not one he fancied. It took a full day to chop back the overgrown, thorny branches to make passable room to walk. He hadn't been able to drag himself away. Somehow he knew he was close. The air was tangible enough to make his skin tingle and the flesh of his back crawl. He had felt it before—many years before. After all this time of chasing down one dead end after another, he might finally be getting somewhere.

Time passed too quickly and without the results he wanted. His dwindling supplies and his responsibilities pulled him home.

Once there, he was eager to return to the same spot in the woods—knowing he had been close. He picked up a worn pamphlet, a near-permanent fixture on his desk, and carelessly tossed it aside. He had scoured the booklet from cover to cover, and he was sure there weren't any clues he could have missed. Would he ever have all the pieces he needed? So much did not add up.

As much as he wanted to lose himself in his search again, one single conflicting desire kept his feet rooted to the floor. It was strange coming home to someone else living in his house. There was a feeling like the one he'd had in the woods, something tangible in the air, and yet, a much more peaceful sensation.

He sat at his desk and studied his hand-drawn map of the Black Forest. His eyes followed the road that crossed the south side to the spot where he had saved Annie and her father. He was fooling himself. There was more than one reason he wanted Annie to stay.

Her stories, her boldness, her wild, flowing hair—he appreciated all of those things. Strangely enough, he was most attracted to the girl's loyalty to her father. Ellison felt the same strong tie to his family. He knew it was wrong to ask Annie to give up her father, but he also knew it was the only way.

He would continue with the plan to make her his ward and nothing else. It was all he could ask of her. He smiled ruefully; she hated him after all. She was no different from the others who couldn't seem to look past his mask. It was better this way. His heart was not whole even if someone was willing to take it.

The next morning after breakfast Andalin retreated to the garden for her morning walk. Mrs. Lewis came to find her before she had wandered too far.

“Miss Durante, his lordship asked me to tell you that he will be away for a few days. While he is gone, Lord Cadogen wants you to start riding lessons. An accomplished young lady needs a good seat on a horse. Birks is a fine horseman and will

help instruct you.”

Andalin found herself smiling for the first time in a month. She didn't care what twisted motives were behind the Dark Rider's generosity. She had always wanted to learn to ride. She could drive a wagon but had never been in a saddle before. Papa's team was for work, not pleasure.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lewis, I will enjoy the opportunity immensely. Though, I do wonder why Lord Cadogen would feel the need to tell me he will be away when he has never done so before.”

Mrs. Lewis gave her a soft smile. “I am sure the master has his reasons. You'll find a riding habit hanging with your other wardrobe things.”

Andalin frowned. The staff consistently remained secretive whenever Ellis was brought into the conversation. They either deliberately dropped the subject or changed it before any information ever passed. It had never bothered her before, but now she found it very vexing. She said goodbye to Mrs. Lewis and left directly to change before heading for the stables.

Her first lesson was extremely diverting. When Birks insisted an hour was sufficient, she dismounted, and her muscles revolted with tight awkwardness. Accomplishing something worthwhile for the first time since her arrival eased her discomfort.

After changing back into her day gown, Andalin went to the sitting room to meet with Mrs. Lewis. She had been progressing quickly through the housekeeper's “lady lessons,” as Andalin liked to call them. She had learned how to comport herself in company, from her posture to where to put her hands while she sat to how to serve tea. It was like playacting and often felt rather silly, but she found herself taking to the challenge.

“How was your first riding lesson?” Mrs. Lewis asked in her usual cheerful voice.

“My entire body aches,” Andalin said.

“Your smile tells me any pain was worth the experience.”

Andalin agreed. “What will it be today?” she asked. She hoped it was something about the history of Braitwood. It was a tomb of secrets she was anxious to know about. Mrs. Lewis handed her a basket containing a rainbow of embroidery threads.

“Embroidery? I am more than adequate with a needle.”

“Excellent. I am glad to hear it. But, truly, besides passing on the supplies, the lesson is more about what a lady is expected to do in her free time. We mustn’t have idle hands. A lady tries to improve herself in whatever way she can.”

“Thank you for the thread. I have never had so much variety at my disposal before.” The threads Papa stocked were not for her personal use. Andalin pulled out a few earthy tones, immediately thinking of Ginger, the horse she had ridden that day.

“We all want you to feel happy here. Let me know if you think of anything else that might please you.” Mrs. Lewis left her alone with the basket on her lap.

“Happy?” Andalin said out loud to herself. Was a prisoner supposed to be happy? The riding lesson had lifted her spirits and now the gift of sewing supplies. But she wondered if she really could ever be happy without at least the occasional company of her father. She missed him fiercely.

After the second day’s riding lesson, Andalin decided to pick apples and make a pie to go with dinner. No one seemed interested in harvesting the fruit off the trees. With Ellis gone, she hoped she would get away with doing some additional productive tasks.

Pleased to be useful once more, she hummed all the way to the overgrown fruit trees. She found a discarded basket against a tree and began filling it with the low-hanging apples. A twig snapped behind her. Startled, she whipped around to ascertain the source, scratching her cheek on a tree branch as she did so. Her hand flew to her cheek as her eyes settled on a

man standing on the edge of the Black Forest. He was perhaps thirty and seemed harmless enough as he crossed quickly toward her.

“Don’t run, miss,” the man said, holding his hands up in a gesture of peace. “I just have a few questions for you, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“The name is Mr. Brennan. I hail from Thornton Way. I’m merely here to ask a few questions about Lord Cadogen, and then I’ll leave directly.”

Andalin studied the man and his average appearance. Nothing of her subconscious screamed for her to run or hide. And while she figured she was the least-informative person to answer the man’s enquiries, her curiosity got the better of her. “What sorts of questions?”

“Well, some of the townsmen got wind of a young lady staying at Braitwood Hall. Were you kidnapped, then?”

She didn’t like the idea of people talking about her. “No, Mr. Brennan, I was not kidnapped.”

“He takes a trip every full moon. Is it true he turns into a werewolf?”

Andalin smirked. “I hate to disappoint you, but if I have learned anything about Lord Cadogen since I arrived, it is that he is only a man.”

Mr. Brennan shrugged. “Perhaps you would know what is behind his mask?”

This man was impertinent. “Mr. Brennan, have you come here to squelch rumors or to ignite more?”

“Miss, Thornton is a flourishing town. Many of the established businessmen say it’s Lord Cadogen’s money that fuels it, but I have my doubts. It’s been a long spell since he did anything to benefit the place. We all know there are few left who are loyal to him. Anyone who still speaks of him with any shred of respect does it because they were friends with his parents, not because of anything Lord Cadogen has ever done.

The real problem is he has only a few tenants even though he owns many parcels of land. He's hoarding his lands, miss, and our town would be better off without him scaring everyone away."

She could see through the young man now. It was clear he had a personal agenda. "You do not seek truth, Mr. Brennan. You seek to destroy a man who merely enjoys his privacy, for your own benefit. Now, I'll ask you to leave this very minute and not come back again."

The young man eyed her for a moment, and then, with a perturbed grunt, he turned and left. Andalin's empowerment for managing the situation disappeared with the sting on her cheek, reminding her she had scratched herself. She picked a few more apples and then hauled them to the kitchen, where she could wash her face and begin cooking.

A thought came to her as she approached the door to go inside. She had stood up for Ellis! She had admitted to Brennan, as well as herself, that he was merely a man and deserved to have his privacy. She had always enjoyed a good story, and she had been no better than Brennan by spouting tales of the Dark Rider like the rest of the town circulators. This poor man had suffered some sort of tragedy and deserved sympathy. Ironic. Sympathy was the one thing she had demanded of Ellis not many nights previously but had been unwilling to give herself. While she still did not like him, she could now conclude she no longer despised him, though he had taken her father and her freedom—she was probably being too generous in her opinion of him.

Matilda, the cook and oldest occupant of Braitwood, was already in the kitchen preparing for the next meal when Andalin entered. Matilda was Andalin's favorite to visit with, although Mrs. Lewis had said in one of her lady lessons that consorting with the servants was most improper.

"Land's sake, child! What did ye do to yer face?"

Andalin lifted a hand to her cheek. "'Tis only a little scratch from a branch."

Matilda plucked up a clean napkin and blotted Andalin's

face. “His lordship will be outraged when he hears of this. Ye’d better hope it heals by the time he returns.”

Andalin wondered if such a concern could stem from Ellis’s scars. “Really, Matilda. I was just a little clumsy.”

Matilda shook her head when she saw the basketful of apples. “And working too! We’ll all be put to shame when we tell him.”

“Honestly, there is no reason for Lord Cadogen to know how I spend every minute of my day. Besides, the fruit is being put to waste, and I thought I could make an apple pie for dessert tonight.”

Matilda set her napkin down. Her wrinkled eyes were full of kindness as she shook her head again. “Miss, ye are his lordship’s ward now. That means ye must live the life of a lady. Ye will have responsibilities, but they’ll be different from the ones ye had before ye came here.”

Andalin sat down on the same kitchen stool she had occupied when she shared a sandwich with Ellis. “Tell me, then, what sort of responsibilities do I have? It seems all I do is let others wait on me. I’m useless to everyone.”

Matilda took the apples and began to wash and peel them. “Well, after ye have become accustomed to the ways of a lady, then ye will be introduced into Society. A husband will be found for ye, and then ye will have the responsibility of running a house. There will be social engagements, picking the menu, charity baskets—all sorts of duties.”

This was a battle Andalin could not win, but she couldn’t help pressing just the same. “Until I am married, can I help in the kitchen?”

Matilda laughed, making her wrinkles press together. “What about sewing? That is befitting a lady.”

Andalin frowned. “Sewing is one thing, but needlework is another. It seems all real sewing duties have been taken from me.”

Matilda tapped her chin. “I have an idea. Mrs. Lewis’s husband bought some handkerchiefs the other day for the

master. Ye can monogram them for me. My hands are too shaky to make fine stitches anymore, and Hannah and Mrs. Lewis are up to their ears in housework.”

Andalin sighed. “Certainly. It’ll distract me for a day or so. For now, I could make the pie crusts while you cut the apples.”

Matilda shook her head. “A lady instructs, but she does not bake.”

Andalin folded her arms in exasperation. “Very well. You win.” Her eyes drifted to the small kitchen window, and thoughts of her conversation with Mr. Brennan came to mind. “Can you tell me something I’ve been wondering about? Where does Lord Cadogen go when he leaves here?”

Matilda shrugged. “Oh, lots of places. He has a dear friend a day’s ride from here. And then sometimes he visits . . . he visits the place where his parents are buried. He does a fair bit of traveling, but only to the places where he knows others will trust him. A masked man can create quite a stir, ye know.”

Finally, someone had not skirted Andalin’s questions about Ellis! She pressed her luck and asked another. “Have you worked here long?”

Matilda set aside the peeled apples to cut later and began mixing up a dough. “Thirty-four years. I came here shortly after my two children married. I was widowed at a young age and needed the money, but the busyness of the manor life kept me from my loneliness.”

Andalin wondered how this house would keep anyone from being lonely. “Then, you knew Lord Cadogen’s parents?”

“Yes,” Matilda said, “and I miss them dearly.”

Strange. Andalin never saw any pictures of the family anywhere in the house. Perhaps they were all locked up in Lord Cadogen’s private family rooms. “Thank you, Matilda, for telling me.” She left Matilda to bake *her* pie and retreated to the library.

After selecting a travel book to read about the maritime provinces, primarily Nova Scotia, Andalin relaxed in a chair.

She had read only a few pages when her mind went back to puzzling out the information she had gathered. Matilda, Mrs. Lewis, Mr. Lewis, Birks, and Hannah were all the same in a few ways. They were old. Well, old enough to have been employed when Ellis's parents were alive. They showed no fear of Ellis, only loyalty and deep respect.

The house was large enough to require more servants to run adequately. Apparently, Ellis had never hired any new help. The alternative was that no one else would work for him. This was equally likely since he was extremely intimidating, even to Andalin.

Mr. Brennan's visit had put her in a speculating mood. What *was* behind Ellis's mask? If only it were an acceptable question to ask the servants. There was no animal in Ellis, or the servants would have left him long ago. It was almost laughable that people could think him a werewolf. Mr. Brennan had said something about Ellis leaving every full moon. She remembered hearing the same thing from the travelers coming through Papa's shop. How very odd.

CHAPTER 6

WITH NOTHING BETTER TO DO, Andalin started counting the doors on the third floor. She was craving good conversation. The staff hadn't said more than two words to her in the last three days. Mrs. Lewis hadn't even had time for the usual lady lessons. Andalin couldn't understand how they could possibly be so busy when they had only her to care for.

She peeked in each door as she counted, but she never found anything incriminating Lord Cadogen as a highwayman or anything villainous. The number of bedrooms always astonished her compared to her two-bedroom home above the store. Several of the doors were locked, and the open ones were ghost rooms with the furniture and wall hangings shrouded in Holland covers to keep the dust away. When was the last time the rooms had been used? The large house practically begged for a house party. She imagined inviting Marybeth and Edith from Corbridge and realized they would feel even more out of place than Andalin did; though, she did recall Matilda saying Ellis had at least one friend.

Ironically, the abundance of space only made Andalin feel increasingly isolated and lonely. She'd been remiss in wanting more in life than she already had. She smiled sadly, thinking of how she'd volunteered to make the local deliveries so Papa could spend more time with his salt-glazing. She missed him—positively craved the sound of his voice. She shook her head. She had to stop thinking about him. It made her stomach hurt and her eyes water.

Andalin reached a turn in the corridor and stopped. This was Ellis's wing. She had never been down this way. It had a separate staircase, so it seemed almost like a separate house altogether. She took a long glance down the passageway and saw more doors. She dared not take a step farther. She was curious to find pictures of Ellis's family since there were none to be had elsewhere in the house, but that was as far as her interest went. She didn't care to know any more of Ellis. He was the cause of her long days and the aching in her heart.

She had one more handkerchief left to embroider for

Matilda, and now was as good a time as any to do it. After returning to her room and finishing the handkerchiefs, she folded them and put them back into their box. She had just replaced the lid when she heard something from downstairs.

She raced to the door and held her ear there. She heard muffled noises. Voices! She pushed an unruly curl out of her face so she could think. It would be unwise to rush downstairs if it was Ellis. But what if it was someone else? She would be glad to see anyone, even if it was the obnoxious Mr. Brennan.

The opportunity was too great to resist. She crept out of her room and down the corridor, where she could peek down the staircase. She did not recognize the man. He was wearing a traveling coat and was giving his hat to Mr. Lewis. While Mr. Lewis helped him remove his coat, Andalin observed his handsome face. He was tall and thin, and he flashed a charming smile to Mrs. Lewis as she came to greet him. Andalin smoothed her dress and was about to descend the stairs when Hannah's firm voice startled her from behind.

"Dinner won't be served for another hour."

Andalin groaned. "Yes, Hannah, but I want to meet the guest."

Hannah shook her head. "You will meet him at dinner, where you will have a proper introduction."

Andalin glanced back down toward the foyer, which was now empty. She reluctantly answered, "Very well. I'll meet him at dinner."

"Come. Ye must change, and I need to fix yer hair again."

"But why? This dress is beautiful, and my curls have stayed in their pins—well, mostly." She batted back a few loose tendrils.

Hannah shook her head. "Haven't ye learned the difference between an evenin' and a day gown yet? Ye must always dress before dinner."

"But we haven't done so before," Andalin complained.

Fatigue lined Hannah's eyes. "I'm up to me ears in work.

If ye have any complaints, ye can take it up with Mrs. Lewis.”

Finally, it was after eight and time to go down for dinner. Andalin glanced in the mirror before exiting. There was no mistaking Hannah had tamed her wild hair into a beautiful arrangement. Her butter-yellow dress was the finest she had worn yet, and the long white gloves were ever so elegant.

A knock on the door interrupted her musing. Andalin opened the door, and the sight of Ellis made her swallow her voice.

“Good evening,” Ellis said. His voice was soft as he studied her. She remembered clearly the night in the library when he’d told her that her appearance offended him. She found herself evaluating him as well. He was wearing his typical black, but this time it was in the form of a sleek evening jacket, gray waistcoat, white shirt, and cravat. His light hair was combed neatly, and he was almost smiling.

Andalin nodded when she couldn’t think of anything to say. Was this the Dark Rider so many feared? All the villains she imagined possessed dark hair. Ellis’s light coloring made him look friendly, even approachable. It was a trick of the light, to be sure. She blinked, and suddenly Ellis was all business.

“I will escort you to dinner tonight, and you will sit on my right. I have an important introduction to make.”

Having never dined formally with Ellis, she hoped he would not make a habit of it. “Are you sure you want me to eat at the same table with you both?”

Ellis gave her a curt nod.

“I can hardly dine with a baron and his guest.”

Ellis’s brow rose. “Is your father not a gentleman?”

Andalin raised her chin proudly. “He is a gentleman in character but not in station.”

Ellis shook his head. “I disagree. He is a landowner, once had substantial wealth, and married a woman of high-standing birth. Regardless of others’ opinion of his social standing, I am

entitled to claim any gentleman's daughter of my choosing a right at my table. To say it plainly, I would like you, as resident of my house, to accompany me to dinner."

Andalin hesitated. His logic was almost kind. She managed to take his arm while maintaining as much distance as possible. She would accompany him to dinner, but only because he had championed Papa. She could almost like him for it. Of course, she also wanted to meet the handsome stranger downstairs and enjoy all the hard work Hannah had put into her appearance.

The staircase felt longer than it had ever been. With each step she thought about the man next to her. Was this the same person who had supposedly killed enough men to make up a small army? She should be cowering in fear. But it wasn't fear that occupied her mind. It was something different, something she did not quite understand.

"Are you staring at me because you're afraid I bite?"

Andalin gasped and flicked her gaze forward. "I . . . I was admiring the wood paneling."

"You were admiring the walls?" Ellis asked.

"I find walls most delightful." Andalin's face burned all the way to her ears. Did she really just say that?

"Then, you must love Braitwood Hall and its large sum of walls."

"Ah, yes . . ." Andalin said, wishing the heat would leave her face.

Ellis paused for a moment at the bottom of the stairs. In a lowered voice he said, "After dinner I have important business to discuss with Lord Kerrigan. If you are up to it, I would like to discuss some arrangements with you as well. Say, ten o'clock in the library?"

Andalin found herself agreeing, though she didn't know to what exactly. His close proximity intimidated her. Mrs. Lewis had mentioned a long list of "improper" behavior for a lady, and she knew this would be at the top. Mr. Lewis opened the dining room door for them, and Ellis brought Andalin to

the table.

Lord Kerrigan pushed back his chair and stood. “Lord Cadogen, this must be your new ward.”

Andalin met his appraising gaze and averted her eyes. All the pretense made her feel like a fool. The dress, the hair—neither could hide who she really was.

Ellis gave a long nod. “Miss Durante, this is Lord Kerrigan, my most trusted friend.”

After curtsying exactly as she’d been taught, they were seated. Lord Kerrigan was even more handsome up close. Andalin snuck a glance at Ellis. He would have been just as handsome, if not more so, she was sure of it. Her breath caught, and she quickly looked down at her soup. Why would she ever spare a thought like that for *Ellis*? She was getting mixed up being in close vicinity to two distinguished men.

“Miss Durante, Lord Cadogen tells me you have started riding lessons. Does the pastime agree with you?”

Andalin smiled, excited to be included in the conversation. “I like it very much. I’ve always wanted to learn, and I’m afraid I make an overeager student.”

Ellis looked pleased. A man of his reputation wasn’t supposed to be pleasant in company.

Lord Kerrigan chuckled. “Wonderful! I must take you on a ride tomorrow to Terrence Hill. It has a great view of Thornton Way. Have you seen it?”

Andalin shook her head. “No, but it sounds lovely.” Ellis nodded his approval, and Andalin’s jaw almost dropped. She never thought her prison guard would let her go, not after over a month of feeling like she was under lock and key.

Lord Kerrigan held up his glass. “Then, it is all arranged. Mr. Birks could come as a chaperone. We shall leave after breakfast.”

The rest of dinner passed quickly. Andalin actually enjoyed herself. Thanks to one of Mrs. Lewis’s many lessons, she remembered to remove her gloves and set them on her lap.

She laid her napkin over her gloves and ate the several courses at a polite and steady pace. Not sure if her presence was desired in the sitting room after dinner, she returned to her room. Surprisingly, a little of the ache in her heart had lifted. Even with Ellis and his ever-present mask there at dinner, she had found the night relaxing.

Lord Kerrigan's company added to the mystery surrounding Ellis. His comfort around the Dark Rider surprised her. Lord Kerrigan was surely the epitome of a gentleman. Andalin not only trusted the idea of being with him for the horse ride in the morning but looked forward to it. Terrence Hill was going to look like heaven after her time at Braitwood Hall.

Remembering her appointment with Ellis, Andalin dismissed Hannah when she came to undress her. Hannah readily agreed and did not even question how Andalin would untie her stays by herself. Despite the maid's gruffness, Hannah did not deserve to be pushed to exhaustion with all the extra housework. The staff's busyness now made sense. They had been preparing for company. Andalin wondered why no one had apprised her of the situation.

The small timepiece Mrs. Lewis had left for her on her desk registered a few minutes to ten. If Andalin wasn't so curious, she would pretend she had forgotten. With her candle in hand, she quietly slipped down the corridor toward the library. Ellis was waiting for her in an armchair, reading. She didn't know the ladylike way to let him know she was there, so she loudly cleared her throat like a customer would at her father's store.

Ellis stood and motioned for her to enter. She crossed the room to a chair a respectable distance away, and they both sat.

"How did you enjoy dinner?" Ellis asked.

She couldn't match his affable tone, so she offered a vague answer. "Dinner was appetizing, thank you."

Ellis rephrased the question. "And how did you enjoy my guest?"

She answered this a bit more honestly. “I find you are a much more relaxed person in his company.”

“Lord Kerrigan took a great liking to you. You made an excellent first impression on him.”

Andalin tried to hide her smile. “Will he be visiting for long?”

Ellis sighed. “That all depends.”

“On what?” Andalin asked.

“On you.”

“Why is that?” Andalin tried to connect the dots, but she was confused on the association Ellis was trying to draw between her and Lord Kerrigan.

“Come now, it is obvious I am not one to frequent Society. As my ward, I want you to have full opportunity of circulating in respectable social circles. But that seems unlikely when you reside with me. I trust Lord Kerrigan completely. He will be in charge of escorting you to what functions meet my approval. That is all I can offer you at this time.”

Andalin tried to digest it all. “How do you know Lord Kerrigan?”

“Childhood friend.” A small smile slid onto his face.

She felt sorry for him. All of his happiness stemmed from his youth. From the little she knew about Ellis, it had been years since he had known any new happiness.

“And what will my responsibilities be? What am I trying to achieve, running in these so-called respectable social circles?”

Ellis’s eyes gleamed with a hint of amusement. “The point of a young lady being introduced to Society is to find a husband.”

Andalin’s eyes widened, and her temper flared. “I think not!” She’d known this topic would come up again, and she’d been preparing an argument.

“Pardon me?”

Andalin stood and straightened her gown. “How presumptuous of you to think I would willingly masquerade as a lady to find myself a husband. It’s utterly and completely dishonest. I will not do it.”

Ellis was clearly surprised by her adamant refusal. “How else do you plan to find a husband? Staying locked in Braitwood Hall will not find you a suitor . . . any suitable suitor, that is.”

Andalin scowled and put her hands on her hips. “Lord Cadogen!”

“Ellis.”

“*Ellis*, while I am ready to leave this house, ready to be around people, ready and eager for friendship, I am not ready to be married.” Andalin practically spat out the word *married*.

Ellis chuckled, and then his mouth erupted into a large smile and he laughed rather boisterously.

Andalin froze. It was the first time she had seen his smile stretch across his face. The first time she had heard him laugh. It was so human and almost attractive. She blinked rapidly to clear her mind.

“My lady, your father was already searching for a man for you. It’s the natural thing for a woman to do at your age. You of all people should understand, since your parents had an arranged marriage. I’m giving you the chance to win a match of your own. That should please you.”

Andalin crossed her arms in front of her. She was losing the battle, but she wasn’t ready to give in. “And you? Aren’t you of respectable age? Why are you not marrying yourself off? I was content looking after my father until you so rudely interrupted our lives. This has nothing to do with me. This is all about your benefit. You’re selfish and cruel.”

The amusement in Ellis’s eyes fled, and his jaw tightened. “You are excused.”

The curt dismissal only outraged Andalin all the more.

She would not leave yet. “No! If I am to play your game, I demand to be heard.”

Ellis stood, and when he did, his height and appearance forced Andalin to take a step back. But she refused to cower. She lifted her chin stubbornly.

He growled. “I know a witch who collects beautiful things. Be careful, or I’ll be tempted to take you to her.”

Andalin sucked in her breath. That he would allude to her being at all beautiful stunned her, and yet his threat was far from a compliment. “What a horrible thing to say!”

“You are tired, Andalin. As am I. Go to bed.” It wasn’t a suggestion. But at least he had gotten her name right.

A pout formed on her mouth, the pout Papa had told her was extremely unbecoming. She rarely adopted it, but suddenly she felt very childish, and deservedly so. Her whole life was being directed by a stranger. She would not be paraded around like a puppet and spend the rest of her life with the first man willing to take her. She might as well go home and marry the wretched Mr. Crow.

“Very well,” she finally said, backing down. “But this conversation is not finished.”

Ellis shook his head. “This conversation *is* over.”

The steam that had been forming inside Andalin for the last month was ready to blow. Good riddance to Mrs. Lewis’s rule of a lady not speaking unless spoken to. Andalin was *not* a lady. “Lord Kerrigan can escort Hannah or Matilda, but he will not be escorting me until it is agreed that I marry when I’m ready.”

Ellis rolled his eyes. “You are the most exasperating young lady I have ever met!” He huffed and then with force muttered, “Take it as fear or motivation, but perhaps this will convince you that I mean what I say. If a year passes and you are not married to someone else, then the ward will marry her guardian. Good night.”

Andalin’s glare changed to surprise and then disgust. Fire raged in her heart and in her cheeks, and she whirled around.

That was the second insinuation of marriage between the two of them, and it repulsed her. She wanted to stomp all the way to her room and slam her door. But she knew that really was childish, and she tried to control herself until she was safely inside her bedroom.

She threw herself onto her bed and sobbed. Her bed would soon float away with all the tears that must have soaked its feathers since she had arrived. Papa had always told her emotion was better released as tears, not anger, but anger always seemed to come first with her. At least this time she could appreciate that quality. She would have hated to cry in front of Ellis. Oh, she strongly disliked that man!

She wanted to go home. She needed Papa's comfort and wisdom. What would he say? She sighed. She knew what he would say. He would say, "Ellis is right. You need a husband."

Andalin rolled over. Maybe she did need a husband—someone who could take her away from Braitwood Hall forever.

Ellis regretted his quip to Andalin about marriage. Strange thoughts and ideas had entered his head since her arrival. No, not Andalin. She would be Annie to him, and he would be Ellis to her. No one had ever called him that, and for some irrational reason he wanted to be someone different. After all this time, being the Dark Rider was becoming tiresome. He wanted something that did not remind him of the burden he carried. He was using Annie in more ways than one.

She was an attractive young lady, and her naivety refreshed him. He, on the other hand, was his usual beastly self. He had sent her running from the library, full of hatred for him. He tended to have that effect on people.

He had let her go and then, after a few minutes, walked in the direction of her room. Why Mrs. Lewis had made up this particular room for her was beyond him. Outside the door he could make out the muffled sounds of her crying; the depth of her sorrow reminded him of her first day at the manor. Deep inside his hardened heart, he felt a tug of sympathy. The last

thing he wanted to do was to add to the list of people he made unhappy. It was getting too long. Would it never end?

Late the next morning Ellis went to check on Annie. She had cried for hours the night before. Hannah had made excuses for her at breakfast, saying she was ill. Ellis had fallen asleep outside her door, more worried than he cared to admit. When he'd awoken, he'd dragged himself to finish the night in his bed. When she hadn't come to breakfast, he knew he had better check on her to ascertain whether a doctor was needed.

He knocked softly, ready to swallow his pride and apologize if that was the only way to put her at ease. He couldn't remember the last time he had done something even slightly redeeming, for anyone. It was necessary for him to get on Annie's good side. His plan was rolling forward rather nicely. If only he could keep from upsetting the girl.

When Annie didn't answer after several repeated efforts, he turned the handle on the door and cracked it open. What he saw reassured him. He could see a form bundled in bed, sleeping deeply. She was doll-like in her sleep, peace evident in her features. She would recover. She might not forgive him, and he could not blame her. He did not forgive easily either.

Andalin woke with a terrible headache, but the cleansing cry had made her stronger inside. She was ready to face Ellis. Ready to let Lord Kerrigan escort her to the wolves. She could do this. She glanced out the window, but her thoughts obscured her view. Did her mother once experience the same resolve before she met Andalin's father?

Seeing she had slept late into the morning, Andalin dragged herself from bed. She spent the rest of the afternoon writing a letter to Papa he likely would never get.

Hannah knocked on the door just as she finished. "Are you well, miss?"

"Better, thank you. I am feeling like myself again." She blotted the ink of her letter and blew it dry.

“I’ll be bringin’ yer dinner tray up for ye tonight,” Hannah said.

“That’s not necessary. I don’t mind going downstairs.”

Hannah shook her head, causing her mobcap to come askew. “The master insists. He wants ye to keep yer strength up.”

Andalin had already denied herself the company of Lord Kerrigan this morning. Now she would have to miss seeing him tonight too. She sighed. “Very well.”

Hannah left, and by the time she came back an hour later, Andalin had finally removed her hairpins from the night before and now paced in her room.

“Ye must be starved. Matilda made some nourishin’ stew for ye and plenty of rolls.”

“Thank you, Hannah.” Hannah’s smile was more generous and warmer than usual, and she left Andalin to her stew.

Andalin finished her meal and resumed her pacing. She felt caged. To be in her room all day with no real tasks might be all right for a real lady but not for an industrious girl like herself. She glanced at the box of handkerchiefs and wondered if she dared sneak them into Ellis’s room as an excuse to get out. She drummed her fingers. She didn’t feel brave enough to venture into his private quarters.

There was a knock on her door. Hannah must have come back for Andalin’s tray. Andalin was on her feet already, so she pulled the door open for Hannah. Except it wasn’t Hannah. It was Ellis.

“Good evening,” Andalin sputtered.

Ellis tipped his head. “Good evening.”

Andalin clutched her robe, bringing it tightly around her neck. Her hair was undone and in utter disarray all the way down to her waist. She used the door to shield herself and her embarrassment.

Ellis stretched his hand out. “I brought you a book, in

case you need something to pass the time while you recover.”

Andalin glanced at the paper-covered book he had in his hand—a chapbook, no doubt, a popular, cheap source of information or frivolous entertainment. There were several just like it in their lending library in the shop. It was almost thoughtful. No, it was very thoughtful. And it was just what she needed.

“Thank you, your lordship.” She took the book from his hand and held it to her chest.

Ellis took a step back. “Rest well, then.”

“Wait!” Andalin said. “I have something that belongs to you.”

She went to the writing desk, set the book down, and exchanged it for the handkerchiefs. She returned to the door and handed them to Ellis.

“I needed a task, and Matilda let me embroider these for you.”

Ellis removed the lid and pulled out a white handkerchief. He fingered the embroidery, and then, to Andalin’s shock, he lifted the handkerchief to his nose and took a deep breath.

“It smells like you.”

Andalin swallowed, her face and neck hot with embarrassment. “I wasn’t aware I had a smell. But I’m sure they can be washed.”

Ellis shook his head, his voice soft. “No, I prefer them like this. Good night.”

Andalin quickly shut the door and put her hands on her hot cheeks. That man said the most outrageous things.

She walked to her writing desk and picked up the book. It was titled, *The Witch of Baltar*. She set it aside. Ellis had told her the night before that he knew a witch who collected beautiful things. And here she thought he was trying to be nice again. Well, he couldn’t scare her that easily.

CHAPTER 7

ANDALIN WAS EAGER TO GET down to breakfast the next morning. There was still a guest in the house, which meant her day had plenty of potential. She was the first one to the dining room, so she ate her food very slowly so as not to miss eating with Lord Kerrigan.

She was not disappointed when the man finally entered wearing a broad smile.

“Good morning!” Lord Kerrigan called cheerfully, heading to the sideboard to fill his plate with food. “Are you feeling better?”

Andalin grinned. “Yes, thank you.” She hoped the invitation to Terrence Hill would be brought up before breakfast was over, but she needed to ease it into their conversation. She searched her mind for proper conversation topics. “Lord Kerrigan, do you have family close?”

He sat across from her and tucked his napkin into his collar. “My younger sister is married and lives on the other side of Thornton. My mother stays with me a few months of the year, but to be honest, I think she prefers the company of my sister.”

“I should have liked to have had a sister. Are you close?”

Lord Kerrigan shrugged. “As close as a brother and sister could be. I’ve always fancied I would have liked a brother. Lord Cadogen has done his best to fill that role over the years.”

Andalin glanced at the closed door before she trusted herself to speak. “Is he as violent as people say he is?”

Lord Kerrigan held back a laugh with his fist. “He is the finest swordsman in the country. But do not mistake it. He might look fierce, but he has had a gentleman’s upbringing.”

Andalin put her fork down and scowled. “I have had a deprived upbringing by contrast. What does it mean? Does it mean that one of us is more honest, more charitable than the

other?”

Lord Kerrigan’s eyes widened, and he shook his head. “You’ve made a good point. If Cadogen is violent, it is only with just cause. Does that clarify my blunder of words?”

Andalin studied his sincere expression. “I only ask because I have not known him long. I would like to ascertain his true character.” A thousand questions about Ellis bounced in her head, but she needed to tread lightly if she wanted to befriend Lord Kerrigan. “How long do you think you will be at Braitwood Hall?”

“I leave the day after tomorrow to attend to business. I will return in two weeks to escort you to your first ball.” He gave her a disarming smile. Andalin tried to imagine what her first ball would be like. She didn’t even know how to dance. “How about that ride to Terrence Hill today?”

Now it was her turn to smile. “I would enjoy nothing more. I will go upstairs and change into my habit straightaway.”

Lord Kerrigan stood. “Excellent. And I will inform Cadogen of our plans.”

As hinted earlier, Birks was asked to be their chaperone, seeing as none of the women knew how to ride and Andalin had never seen Ellis venture outside in daylight. It seemed some parts of the stories of the Dark Rider were true.

While they rode, Birks kept his distance, allowing Lord Kerrigan and Andalin to converse freely. Andalin peppered her companion with questions about his life. And in return for his openness, she shared some of her background with him.

It took an hour’s leisurely ride to get to Terrence Hill, but not nearly as long to ascend to the top. The magnificent view of grassy knolls dotted with sheep seemed to breathe into Andalin new perspective. She could barely see Braitwood Hall; the gray stone blended right into the tall trees of the Black Forest. Her new home radiated with age and unique history. She had to pull her eyes away, feeling a strange sense of belonging she was not ready to accept. Opposite of the

manor, directly below them, lay Thornton Way. It was larger than she imagined, and she wondered if any of the stores carried Papa's glassware.

"Can we ride into town?" Andalin asked hopefully.

"No, Cadogen would have my head," Lord Kerrigan said. "Your safety is of utmost importance."

It was wishful thinking on her part. She cast one last look at the town, which appeared to be quite normal. "Would I truly be unsafe?"

Lord Kerrigan pointed to the rooftops in the distance. "There are few gentlemen who reside in town. I assure you, Thornton Way is not the friendliest place. There are too many taverns and not enough churches, if you know what I mean."

"And too many who think of Lord Cadogen as the Dark Rider," Andalin blurted. She covered her mouth. "I hope I did not cause any offense." Lord Kerrigan's face bore an unreadable expression, but Andalin wondered if there was a touch of sadness in his eyes.

"Miss Durante, masks bother people. They do not like what they cannot see. If you wore a mask, I daresay stories would circulate about you. As a society, we are afraid of people who are different from us. Cadogen is different, so they target him."

"But you trust him?"

Lord Kerrigan straightened his hat. "I trust him. But I don't think you do."

Andalin looked away, pretending to study the scenery. Her conscience was pricked, but how could she trust him? She realized she didn't fear him like she had initially. Although he was still intimidating in his own right, there were still things about him she yearned to understand.

Was it just the mask? It separated them in more than just a physical sense. He seemed to be hiding more behind his mask than just scars. He was elusive. Of course people would be afraid of someone who hid away and only came out at night.

“Like I said this morning, I am trying to understand him. I don’t think I can trust him until I know more of his character.”

Lord Kerrigan shifted in his saddle. “Yes, I think I might be the same way if I had not known him for so long. Just be careful with how much you delve into his life. There are some things better left buried.”

Too much was left unsaid in his warning. It was just another Cadogen secret to drive her mad. She nodded when he looked at her, despite her misgivings.

“I approve of Cadogen’s plan to help you make a good life. He has a good heart, and this will help him to get his mind off the past. Try to be patient with him.”

Andalin thought about Ellis’s threats of what would happen if she did not find a husband in a year’s time. It had bothered her in the moment, but she was beginning to think his threats were all a bluff. “Will Lord Cadogen ever marry?”

Lord Kerrigan shrugged. “If he were to fall passionately in love, which is possible but unlikely. He keeps his heart guarded under lock and key.”

This proved Ellis’s threats to marry her had not been serious, thank heavens. “Has he ever come close to falling in love?”

Lord Kerrigan laughed and shook his head. “You are full of questions. I think I have already betrayed too much about my dear friend. You must interrogate him yourself. I’m afraid my tongue has been too loose in your company. Cadogen will start wondering whether he should trust *me*.”

Andalin bit her lip. “I’m sorry. My father says I am curious by nature. As far as Lord Cadogen is concerned, he has a very loyal friend in you. I am sure he would not be disappointed in anything you have said.”

On the ride home their conversation lulled into a comfortable silence. Her freedom from the manor had invigorated her. The trees had never felt so alive and the color more vibrant. The early fall leaves were beginning to change,

turning into a mix of green, gold, purple, and red. Andalin would have to beg Lord Kerrigan to take her again when he returned to Braitwood Hall. Two more weeks and there would be even more color about.

Birks took the horses and left them to walk inside together. Andalin's heart sped up as she realized how few times she had been in a man's company outside the store. She could almost pretend Lord Kerrigan was her beau. If she were a fine lady, he would be just what she was interested in. She recalled her nightly chore of scrubbing the mud tracked in by customers back at Papa's shop. She was meant to serve gentlemen, not marry them. When a person lived her entire life one way, it was difficult to imagine otherwise. She admitted it was growing easier to fancy herself living this way, but would it always feel like a game of pretend?

Ellis waited for Annie to open her bedroom door so he might walk her down to dinner. It was entirely unnecessary, and likely improper, but it was his way of trying to form a friendship with his new ward. Perhaps, if nothing else, he could offer her the lifestyle he himself could not enjoy.

She seemed less surprised this time when she opened the door and found him standing there. She wore a peach gown with her hair pulled back tight, with only a few loose tendrils to line her face. He preferred her wild curls, but they did dangerous things to his mind. His assessment of her caused her to lean back into the doorway.

“What's the matter?” Annie asked.

“Nothing.” She surely thought he found fault in her, but the opposite was true. Her quirks of character, based on her unique upbringing, refreshed him. Every time she let down her guard even a little, Ellis felt his own walls lowering. She was a breath of fresh air to his rather stale life, not that she needed to know how he felt. “How was your ride?”

“The scenery was magnificent,” Annie answered. “Fall has always been my favorite season. I'm sure I'll be walking like a monkey tomorrow from riding, but the horse and I got

along fine.”

Ellis chuckled and held his arm out for her to take. “And did you get along with Lord Kerrigan?”

She blushed a soft pink. “Lord Kerrigan was an ideal companion. I think I will miss him when he leaves tomorrow.”

A small tightening in his gut surprised him, but he promptly dismissed it. How fortunate Kerrigan had nothing in his past tying him down. Ellis envied him that. Annie might be socially beneath his friend, but Kerrigan could afford to make a lesser match. And Ellis would do all he could to elevate Annie if such a union became desirable.

“I shall urge him to return soon, then.”

Finally—a smile just for him.

“I should like that.”

Andalin opened her eyes to discover a glimpse of light shining through her window. She hurried toward it to enjoy the sunrise and saw Ellis and Lord Kerrigan on horseback, going down the road. Sagging against the glass, she sighed. Ellis might not have the manners to say goodbye, but she thought Lord Kerrigan would have waited for her.

She no longer had anything to look forward to in her day. Even breakfast was ages away. She glanced around her lavender room to find something to occupy her. Her eyes fell on the book Ellis had left a few days back. She had not opened it before because she thought it was Ellis’s bad idea of a joke. She picked it up and began to skim the first page. The paper hadn’t yellowed with age, but the corners were dog-eared from use. By the third page, she was hooked and no longer skimming. The story fascinated her.

The witch of Baltar’s real name was Sephira. She was raised in a middle-class family, with an uneventful upbringing. Her family lived on the outskirts of the Black Forest, and she spent hours alone in the woods each day, fantasizing about the perfect life. But that was not what made her famous.

The tale of her extreme beauty carried from town to town, and by the time she was of age, suitors came from all over to seek her hand. The more attention she was given for her beauty, the more she craved it. She was ever elusive to her suitors, declaring none handsome enough to tempt her. She kept them at bay, only speaking to her callers through an upstairs window.

The men would not be put off, so Sephira proclaimed the one who brought her the most beautiful gift would be the one she'd marry. Her collection of expensive jewels and finery accumulated until Sephira became exceedingly wealthy. Men of all stations were eager to give up their dearest treasures in order to win Sephira's love. Sephira collected their things, but she never chose a husband for herself.

The years began to pass, and many found it odd her beauty and youthfulness did not fade. Rumors started about Sephira using sorcery to keep her beauty. The rumors ripened, and many soon believed Sephira bewitched.

One day a man named Sultare, a longtime suitor of Sephira's, followed her deep into the forest, but Sephira disappeared. Sultare waited several days before attempting to follow Sephira once more. But again Sephira evaded him in the most mysterious way. He would not be put off. He spent years trying to convince Sephira to marry him, and he was determined to find out what lured her to the woods. He wondered about a liaison with another man or if, truly, her beauty was only a mirage.

On the fourth try he discovered Sephira's secret. There was a door hidden between a tree and a rock, leading to a deep cave. Inside she kept the treasures collected from her suitors. Strings of pearls lined the ceiling above a bed of silk with diamond-encrusted pillows. Among the finery Sultare found Sephira chanting and rubbing a strange gem.

Sultare approached her and demanded to know if she was involved with sorcery. She laughed and told him that the rock of Baltar was nothing evil—just a relic passed down in her family for generations. She showed him the rock, but Sultare would not touch it.

He accused her of being a witch and demanded to know if her beauty was the result of a spell. This enraged Saphira, and she screamed that her beauty was real. The months of rumors about her appearance had only fueled her anger. She demanded Sultare take back his accusations, but he would not. Her horde of treasures disgusted him. He declared that her selfishness had spoiled her perfect face. When she heard this, she ripped her cloak and snarled like a mad dog. She held the stone up in the air and cast a spell on Sultare, telling him that his cruelty would cause his heart to burst before the next full moon.

It was three days before the full moon, and Sultare spent those hours spreading the story of Saphira. He called her the witch of Baltar. On the night of the full moon, Sultare's death proclaimed the truthfulness of his story. He had been a well-respected man in town, and his friends took up a hunt against Saphira. But no matter how hard they searched, they could not find her.

Andalin shut the book with a shudder. The story of Saphira and Sultare was a tragedy she had not heard before. It had been set around the Black Forest, so it was possible there were shreds of truth to the story. The question was why did Ellis want her to read it?

After a brisk knock, Hannah entered to help Andalin dress for breakfast. As Hannah pinned up her hair, she wondered what kind of ladies Lord Kerrigan courted. Andalin missed their easy conversation—not that she imagined herself his equal.

She was going to have to come up with something to get her mind off him, or the two weeks until he returned would be trying indeed. She would put more effort into her riding lessons and read something scholarly that would make for good conversation when Lord Kerrigan returned. Andalin's eyes fell on the worn book on her bedside table. And maybe she could do some digging about the story of Saphira. There was no more opportune time than the present.

“Hannah?” Andalin asked. Hannah had too many pins in her mouth to respond. “Have you ever heard of the witch of

Baltar?”

Hannah coughed, causing several pins to fly from her lips. “Where did ye hear of her?”

Andalin wondered whether she should tell Hannah about the book, considering the maid’s wide eyes and slackened jaw. Such a fright could kill a woman of Hannah’s age. Instead Andalin lied. “Oh, we used to tell stories about her back home.”

A guttural sound erupted from Hannah’s lips. “We don’t talk about that wicked woman in this house! Now I know why. Just the mention of her brings me temper to a boil.”

Andalin had to know more. “This witch . . . you knew her?”

Hannah shuddered. “Knew her? She’s the devil herself! Why she’s the one . . .” Hannah’s voice trailed off. She shifted uncomfortably. “We don’t talk about her in this house!”

The warning in her voice was clear. Andalin dropped the subject and held still while Hannah finished her hair.

Andalin met Hannah’s eyes before she went down for breakfast. “Thank you. My hair always looks lovely after you pin it up like this.”

The tension eased with Hannah’s smile. “It doesn’t take much talent to make hair as soft and full as yers look nice.”

Andalin made her way to the dining room. Something in this house was connected to the witch of Baltar—a story Andalin would have otherwise reasoned to be fiction. She’d heard of people playing with sorcery, but in the past a rumored witch was a dead witch. It seemed unlikely a woman would go to so much fuss just to be beautiful. But then again, didn’t every young lady desire beauty?

A woman accused of using her powers to change her appearance to trick away innocent men’s wealth was somehow connected to the manor house. And not to be forgotten, this witch had protected herself by killing a man who had once begged to marry her. It was Andalin’s turn to shudder. Hannah knew more than she was willing to divulge.

CHAPTER 8

AFTER A FEW DAYS AND several tedious lessons on the proper way to pour and serve tea, the language of the fan, and the precise facial expressions acceptable in public, Andalin was ready to sneak into Ellis's wing. She needed answers to her questions, and Ellis's prolonged absence felt like an invitation. She noiselessly opened her bedroom door and peered down both sides of the passageway. When she saw nothing, she listened for another moment until she was completely satisfied no one could see her. She slipped the door closed and silently crept down the corridor.

The act of espionage suppressed her nerves and filled her with excitement. Andalin took one last glance behind her before turning down the corridor separating Ellis's family rooms from the rest of the house. Her footsteps slowed. She peered into the first room and then the second, but both had furniture and wall hangings covered in white sheets. Andalin reached for the handle of the third door, but it was locked. Two more doors to go. The next was a linen closet. But the last was what she had been looking for—Ellis's room.

The heavy drapes over the window and bed were dark and masculine. Everything about the room seemed big: the bed, the oversized mahogany desk, the bookshelf on the wall, the bear rug on the floor. She had hoped to see proof of his beastlike tendencies, but the room was relatively tidy. Deep down, she knew Ellis was not the rumored wild man, but part of her still wanted to believe he was awful. It made it easier to justify the emotional distance between them.

Not a single family portrait hung on his walls. It was all so very strange. She had peeked under many white sheets in the house, only to find landscapes. She'd been sure if there were any portraits to be found, they would be here. Were they taken down on purpose to avoid the pain of the past? The alternative of there not being any at all seemed too sad to comprehend—especially for a family wealthy enough to hire an artist.

Andalin moved to the desk and saw a large hand-drawn

map spread across the top. It was absent of words and labels. There were mostly trees, a few clearings, and several faint straggly lines. The only dark line led across the bottom of the map, almost to the end, where it forked. The right fork ran off the bottom of the page, but the left scrawled upward to a box. Andalin's breath caught. The dark line represented the road through the Black Forest. The box was Braitwood Hall. The map had to be of the Black Forest.

Ellis had spent enough time in the Forest to have been able to draw a map of it! Why would anyone want to spend time in such a dark, foreboding place? And for what reason did Ellis need to make a study of it?

A chill ran down Andalin's spine. She stepped away from the desk and toward the bookshelf. She pulled a few interesting titles out and set them on the desk. Then she noticed a folded paper on the highest shelf. She stood on her tiptoes and snatched it down. She unfolded a pencil drawing of a tree with a large diamond-shaped hole on the base. Lost in thought at what it could mean, she became distracted by the window.

She set the paper on the books to bring back to her room to study and then crossed to the window. She pulled back the curtain and stared at the beautiful spread of trees. Ellis clearly had the best view of the estate. What would it be like to see all this rich land and to know it was yours?

“What are you doing in here?”

Andalin whirled around to see Ellis standing in the threshold of the room, his eyes narrowed and his mouth drawn tight.

Andalin's heart raced as she searched for an excuse. “I was, ah, looking for you.”

Ellis folded his arms, clearly unconvinced. His muscles made the fabric of his shirt taut, and she took an intimidated step back toward the window.

“I wanted to tell you I finished the book you lent me. I had a few questions about it, actually.”

Ellis continued to stare hard at her, and she squirmed beneath his gaze. He could see through her lies.

Andalin hurried to explain herself. “I wanted to know if the story was true or not.”

After an uncomfortable moment, Ellis’s hands slid down to his hips. “I have been gone for several days only to return to find my ward breaching my privacy. I find myself equally astonished you cannot even honestly admit what you are doing here. Snooping, no doubt.”

Andalin bit her lower lip, ignoring his implications. “When I asked Hannah about the witch, she acted as if she knew her. As if . . . as if . . . the witch was connected to Braitwood Hall.”

Ellis did not look pleased by her attempt to continue with her cover story. “You are not a child, Annie. A woman does not enter a man’s room, nor does she receive a child’s punishment for tantrums, lies, or gossip. I have now seen all of this behavior from you and wonder if you are ready to be taken out into Society.”

Andalin’s mouth fell open. Tantrums? Surely he did not mean her reaction to being ripped away from her papa and entombed in an empty house. Lies? She hadn’t lied. She had merely avoided confrontation. And gossip? With whom would she gossip? The horses?

“Explain your accusations!” Andalin demanded.

“I, explain?” Ellis pursed his lips. “Please, ladies first. I would like to know why you feel so inclined to riffle through my things.” His hand motioned to his desk and the stack of books with the pencil drawing that lay open on top of them.

Andalin stared guiltily at the items. She had never been in such an incriminating situation. Before, she had been a typical respected and well-behaved village girl—with the exception of the times she’d eavesdropped on conversations about the Dark Rider. Ellis was right. She had breached his privacy. He had every reason to be angry, but she could argue she had just as many reasons herself. This is what she had truly wanted after

all—a way to strike back at him.

Andalin pinched her lips together. “I will not explain. If you truly regard me as a lady, then you will let me retire to my room without further inquiry.”

Ellis surprised her by turning around and shutting the door. He grabbed the desk chair, blocked the door with it, and firmly sat down. His black riding pants and shirt were covered in dirt, as if he had been rolling in it. Whatever had caused his rough appearance had not displaced his mask. It was ever present on his face—always a barrier between them.

Andalin’s voice sounded shrill even to her. “What, might I ask, are you doing?”

Ellis smiled a small, calm smile. “If my ward is going to act like a spoiled child, then she will be treated as such. If you want me to treat you as a lady, then you must first act like one.”

Andalin folded her arms across her chest. “I would prefer if the rest of your house treated me as if I were *not* a lady.”

Ellis sighed and rubbed his temples with one hand. “Your resentment toward me is starting to wear on my nerves. One minute you are charming, and the next you are explosive. Nevertheless, I cannot abide a breach of trust.

“You were made aware that this wing is my private solace. I have given you a nice room, more comfortable than you have ever known, new dresses, riding lessons, a chance to marry a respectable nobleman who could give you and your future children a secure and happy home. All this and I find you still despise me. You cannot get past the ugly gossip circulated about me. Nor can you forgive me for sending your father away, when he himself agreed to the idea.”

Andalin found herself humbled by his words. It seemed Ellis truly wanted to understand her. “I can see why you think I am a spoiled child. Though, I have been spoiled not by your fancy dresses or future prospects for me; I have been spoiled by the love and attention of my father. I miss it. I crave it. You are the only thing separating me from him.”

“Your father told me he was hoping to secure you a husband and had been seeking reputable names before his venture here. Your distance from your father was inevitable.”

Andalin cast her gaze to the floor. Papa had tried to broach the subject several times with her, but she had childishly chased away any chance of discussion. Ellis was right. She was disgusted with herself. A single humiliating tear slid down her cheek, but she angrily swiped it away. She could feel Ellis’s eyes on her, and she yearned to run and hide. Her tears were damming up and ready to burst.

After a few moments of silence, Ellis cleared his throat. “I think it would be better if we saved the rest of this discussion for another time. I will not detain you here any longer. I only hope you will respect my privacy in the future.”

Ellis moved his chair and opened the door. Andalin gratefully took the chance to escape. As she passed by him, he caught her elbow. Her heart thudded in her chest.

“The story,” Ellis whispered, “is rooted in truth.”

Andalin stared in surprise, then pulled away. She bolted back to her room, feelings of self-loathing pushing her there. How could he tell her something so personal and frightening when he clearly despised her?

At dinner Andalin claimed a headache so she could remain alone. She cried and pouted for several hours until finally, she was ready to put her past life behind her. She went to her writing desk and took out a sheet of paper. She wrote a long letter to Papa confessing her heartache. When three sheets were filled, Andalin put her pen down and flexed and rubbed her tired hand. Her eyes were now dry, but Andalin still felt embarrassed and a bit sorry for herself.

Blaming Ellis for her circumstances would not do. It had been all too easy to find fault with her life at Braitwood Hall simply because she could not be with Papa. Realizing this was what Papa wanted helped her let go of the malice in her heart.

All along she’d seen signs of Ellis’s true character. His

servants were loyal, and Lord Kerrigan loved him. She had not once seen Ellis angry with anyone besides her, and that was with good reason. Despite a myriad of stories about the Dark Rider, Ellis had not once shown proof of any violent tendencies. He was strange, to be sure, but not wicked.

From now on she would cast aside her childish ways and learn to enjoy her new life as she had not fully allowed herself to do before. The most immediate course of action was to find a place for Papa's letters. She would not write them simply to keep burning the more personal ones. It was the only connection she had to him, even if it was one-sided. Andalin ran her hand along the shelves in her writing desk, searching for a place to conceal not just one letter but hopefully dozens. Almost by accident she pushed on a corner slat and caused a false drawer to pop out under the desk. Andalin gasped and pulled the drawer out farther. It was empty, except for a plain blue book.

She wanted to leave it alone, but it was against her nature. She picked it up and fingered its dark spine before opening it, revealing the lined pages of a diary. It belonged to Eliana Cadogen. Andalin cast a glance behind her at her closed door. Dare she read it?

Andalin shoved Papa's letter into the secret drawer and shut it. Then she crawled into her bed with the diary. Would Ellis think it impertinent for her to read about his relative? She stared at the book for a moment and then set it down next to her and crossed her arms. Surely it could not be betraying Ellis's confidence if the journal did not belong to him. And if it was at all special to the owner, it would have been collected by now.

It wouldn't do. It was too much of a coincidence for her to find it in the first place. She picked it up again; she was meant to read it.

A few hours later Andalin finally hid the diary beneath her pillow, blew out her lamp, and sank down onto her pillow to sleep. Her mind would not succumb to rest. Too many thoughts about Eliana spun around in her head.

Ellis had a sister.

Andalin squeezed her eyes shut. She was only halfway through the diary, but her emotions had exhausted her. She would have to wait to discover hints of what had happened until the morrow. For now it was enough to disrupt her sleep to know Ellis had lost not only his parents and his face but a sister too. Shame burned inside Andalin for her judgmental ways.

Eliana had described her family as nearly perfect, with the exception of her jealousy of her brother. As the eldest and a boy, it seemed their parents had favored Ellison. Eliana had been much like Andalin, blind to the good intentions and sacrifices of her parents.

The day-to-day journaling of Eliana made her come alive in Andalin's mind. Eliana had fears about taking her bows and experiencing her first social Season. Often those concerns were about her looks, though she felt inadequate in other areas as well. Eliana had dreams and passions too. She had a love for painting and drawing. Sketches of things she had seen or experienced that day decorated the margins and several full pages.

Andalin knew eventually she would have to give the diary to Ellis. He deserved to have a part of his sister. Andalin also knew she would not be able to relinquish it until she read every page. She wanted so badly to know the secrets of Braitwood Hall, what had happened to Eliana and her parents, and why Ellis wore a mask. This was her chance to discover the answers.

Andalin tossed and turned for another few minutes before she was able to fall asleep. The last thought on her mind was if she would ever see her own dear father again.

The next morning at breakfast Andalin wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed when she did not cross paths with Ellis. She wondered if she would have been able to look him in the eye. She felt repentant for her harsh judgments of him. After reading the diary, she also felt somehow as if she

understood him better. She wanted her fresh start to begin with a civil morning greeting—a smile, a *how do you do*, and a promise for only pleasing conversation.

Andalin's morning ride passed quickly with her anticipation to finish the diary. She found a quiet, secluded part of the grounds where she wouldn't be seen from the house. She eagerly brought out the diary from where she'd hidden it under her cloak and began to pore through the pages.

Andalin read about Eliana's first ball and how nervous she had been until she was finally asked to dance. She had even included a sketch of the dress and jewelry she had worn. Andalin laughed when she read about Eliana's attempts to flirt with a young gentleman named James. His name slowly became Eliana's favorite subject. Braitwood Hall had a great deal more life in those days, it seemed.

Andalin was a quarter from the end when she came upon a different sort of entry. Eliana had been out picking strawberries by herself when a beautiful young woman had come out of nowhere. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Eliana wrote how strange it was that when the woman had left, she hadn't taken the road. She'd disappeared right into the forest.

A few entries later the woman returned while Eliana was painting the trees in the orchard. The young woman seemed even more beautiful to her than she had during their first encounter and introduced herself as Serenity. She confessed to living in the forest, where her loneliness had led her to Braitwood Hall. Eliana envied Serenity's appearance, for such beauty would easily win her James's love. Eliana noted several more encounters, but the specifics were not included. She had few close friends and was truly happier from having made this strange and secreted friendship. A few entries later Eliana invited Serenity to come to a lawn party. Serenity said she would consider it and then disappeared into the trees again.

Andalin quickly flipped to the next page, only to learn that Serenity had not come to the party and how acutely it disappointed Eliana. After the lawn party Eliana concealed herself in the orchard. It was while sketching in her journal

that Serenity finally came to Eliana. Eliana questioned her about not coming to the party, and Serenity replied that she rarely frequented social gatherings because she did not like the attention. Their mutual loneliness bonded them to each other. Eliana promised Serenity she would visit her in the forest.

Andalin turned the page, and her breath caught. The next page was empty. She thumbed through the rest of the book, but it was all empty. What had happened? Had Eliana gone into the forest? Had she been devoured by wolves?

Andalin closed the book and attempted to digest the facts. A strange woman had come from the forest, and a mere two weeks later Eliana was no longer writing in her journal. It was time to find Ellis. Andalin needed to know what had happened to Eliana.

CHAPTER 9

AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE manor house, Mr. Lewis informed Andalin dinner was ready. She hadn't realized how much time had passed while she had been reading. She looked down at her hands and dress—a newly formed habit. Sighing, she realized she would have to wash before getting her questions answered.

She hurried upstairs and found Hannah waiting impatiently to help her.

“There ye are! Mr. Lewis has been all over the house and grounds searching for ye. Yer dinner will be cold before ye have yer first bite.”

Andalin grimaced when Hannah insisted she not only wash but change clothes before returning downstairs. “I’m sorry. I was simply enjoying the last warm days of the season. I honestly didn’t notice the lateness of the hour.”

Hannah seemed to be having an internal struggle of whether or not to stay angry. “Yer right about the weather. Won’t be too many more nice days left. Still, ye should be more considerate of the help. We aren’t young enough to be chasin’ around lookin’ for ye.”

Andalin didn’t argue. “I apologize again. It was senseless of me.” When it seemed her appearance appeased Hannah, Andalin bolted out of her bedroom.

She was nearly out of breath from her race down the stairs when she stumbled into the dining room. She sighed heavily when she saw the empty room. She didn’t know why she’d ever tried avoiding Ellis; he did enough avoiding for the both of them.

Andalin didn’t enjoy her dinner. She was too annoyed at Ellis. Here she had made all these resolutions to be better, and he wasn’t letting her have the chance to prove herself. In addition, she felt a keen urgency to talk to him about Eliana’s journal.

After dinner Andalin took the journal and planted herself

in the library. She wanted to see if Ellis was in his room, but after the last encounter, she dared not look there. She would simply have to sit and wait in the library and hope Ellis would find her instead.

When two hours passed, Andalin finally gave up. She snatched the journal and marched out of the room, right smack into Ellis's chest.

"Ouch!" Andalin groaned.

Ellis reached out to steady her. "Pardon me. Did I hurt you?"

Warmth from his touch radiated through her shoulders. Reluctantly, she took a step back, out of his arms, hiding the diary behind her, and rubbed her nose. "Never mind. I was just coming to find you."

"You missed my company. I knew you'd come around."

Andalin glared before she realized what she was doing. She swallowed back her retort. She was supposed to be proving herself. "There is a very important matter I would like to discuss with you."

Ellis folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "Go ahead."

Andalin took a deep breath. "This might be taken better sitting down."

His frown deepened, but he obeyed and accompanied her back into the library, taking a seat in an armchair. When Andalin sat down, she carefully kept the diary hidden beneath the extra fabric of her skirt.

"Thank you," Andalin began, attempting to start on a gracious note. "First, I would like to apologize for breaching your privacy. I have acted abominably on numerous occasions during my stay here. I will do my best to improve my behavior, I assure you."

Ellis shifted in his seat like the topic made him uncomfortable. Andalin didn't wait for him to accept her apology; instead she charged on. "In the desk in my room I

stumbled upon something I think might be of value to you.”

“Snooping again, were we?” Thankfully, his tone was more teasing than angry.

Andalin lifted up the blue book as her answer. At first Ellis looked confused, but she saw recognition slowly cross into his eyes.

“May I?” Ellis asked reverently.

“Of course.” She handed him the book. A lump formed in her throat as she watched Ellis gently stroke the cover. He slowly opened it and took a deep breath of the scent left on the pages. Andalin hadn’t noticed any distinct smell when she had read it, but it was clear Ellis had only to draw on his memory to recreate a bit of the life he had once known.

Guilt plagued her soul. She had been eager to throw question after question Ellis’s way and demand the story behind the Cadogen secrets. Seeing Ellis with the diary felt like an intrusion.

Ellis began reading as if Andalin weren’t even there. She was encroaching on his privacy once more, and it was time for her to leave. She quietly stood and walked past him toward the door. He grabbed her hand to stop her.

“Thank you,” Ellis whispered. He brought her hand to his mouth, paused to meet her gaze, and then pressed his lips against her skin.

The whole world seemed to stop moving. He slowly released her hand, but his eyes did not leave hers. Her skin burned where he had kissed it, and her arms erupted in gooseflesh. She took one last glance at the diary and left him alone.

Hannah was sitting at Andalin’s desk, knitting a scarf, when Andalin opened her bedroom door. “Please, make yourself at home,” she joked, still not used to someone waiting on her.

Hannah grunted, stood, and tossed her sewing into her large apron pocket. “I didn’t want to waste me time while I waited for ye to be ready for bed.”

Andalin's laugh came out louder than she intended, her emotions still piqued from Ellis's touch. "Are all servants like you?"

Hannah put her hands on her hips and scowled. "What do ye mean?"

"It's not an insult," Andalin said, grateful for a distraction from her thoughts of Ellis. "We've only ever employed a boy or two to help with my father's shop, and while our neighbors helped a great deal, servants still feel like a foreign concept. I'll never adjust to needing someone to help dress me."

"I'm too old for this," Hannah muttered.

Suppressing a giggle, Andalin said, "It appears as if neither of us is happy with the situation. Next time I see Lord Cadogen, I will speak to him about employing a young lady's maid. If he refuses, I will demand to wear plain clothes without as many buttons."

Hannah started unhooking the long line of buttons down the back of Andalin's gown and undoing her stays. "I don't think his lordship will agree, but he's a sight more likely to listen to ye than he is to me."

"I highly doubt that," Andalin said. "However, I can be very assertive if I want to be."

Hannah chortled. "You're cheeky."

Andalin climbed out of her dress and sighed. "I would normally be affronted by such a comment, but since I am trying to act more ladylike, I will let it pass."

"Nay," Hannah countered, "yer spirited side is what endears me to ye. Can't endure life at Braitwood Hall without it."

Andalin turned to face Hannah, a little taken back. Did this normally gruff woman actually like her? A feeling of kinship flooded her heart. She thought about all the residents at Braitwood Hall. They were hardworking, but she would never have thought about Mr. Lewis or Mrs. Lewis as spirited. Each of them had an inner strength despite the loneliness and seclusion Braitwood Hall seemed to breed. They all seemed to

belong, but did she?

Andalin found herself alone the next morning at breakfast. For many weeks she would have preferred to dine alone rather than eat with Ellis. But today she was eager to hear his thoughts about the journal and about Eliana. The journal had altered Ellis from just a distant, troubled man into someone real, with strengths and weaknesses. It was another character witness she'd been searching for.

She was on her way out for her riding lesson when she heard a noise come from Ellis's study. The room was so seldom employed; she wondered if she'd imagined it. As she came closer, she noticed the door slightly ajar. Her curiosity took over. She peered through the crack before she could think to do otherwise. The sight surprised and angered her. She swung the door open wide.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Brennan?" She demanded in her most authoritative voice.

Mr. Brennan, the very man who had come snooping in the gardens weeks before, had returned. This time he was not a casual passerby, but he had invaded the house. Andalin instantly lost all respect for him.

Mr. Brennan dropped the papers he was holding onto the desk in surprise. "Miss, please understand. I was searching for signs of treasure a highwayman might collect before I rescued you. Though, I don't require any more incriminating evidence once I have you."

Andalin folded her arms across her chest and raised her eyebrow. "Pardon me, but do you hear me calling for help? Would a damsel in distress be on her way out for a riding lesson where she could easily steal a horse and ride in any direction she wanted?" Even as Andalin said it she realized all along she had been perfectly capable of escaping on horseback and yet never had. The reality stunned her, and for a second her thoughts strayed from Mr. Brennan and to what caused her to stay.

Mr. Brennan didn't let her think for long. He marched toward her and grabbed her arm. "You don't have to play pretend with me, miss. He's either made vile threats about what he'd do to you if you left, or you're his light-skirts here for blunt. Doesn't matter which—you're still coming with me."

Andalin shrieked, but Mr. Brennan's grip only tightened. She struggled against him. "Stop! You don't even know him!"

Mr. Brennan wrestled her toward the front door. "Know him? He cut off my brother's right hand. He's been terrorizing the people of Thornton Way for the last decade. I'm not going to stand by while another innocent is victimized."

"I demand you release me!" Andalin kicked at his legs, but her efforts were useless. "The only harm I'm under is because of you! Let me go!"

Ignoring her pleas, Mr. Brennan led her out the door to a horse he had hidden in the nearby trees. Andalin silently cursed the lack of servants they had at Braitwood Hall. It was terrible to think such a person could ride up without being seen and waltz right through the front door.

Mr. Brennan pinned her arms to her side in order to lift her onto his horse. The moment he released her, she gave him a swift kick to his chest. With one hand on her, he pulled a rope from his saddlebags.

"Lay another finger on that woman and I will skewer you with my sword and feed you to the wolves!" Ellis's raised voice penetrated the cool morning air. Mr. Brennan froze, fear evident on his face. He put his hands up and slowly turned toward Ellis, who was running toward them with his sword extended.

Andalin didn't wait for an invitation to put some distance between her and Mr. Brennan. She slid off the horse and dashed from Mr. Brennan's reach. She stopped only when she was safely behind Ellis.

Mr. Brennan growled. "Fool woman. It's your own shame for staying if anything happens to you."

Ellis motioned toward the house with his head. “Go inside, Annie. Stay there until I come for you.”

Andalin wanted to know what Ellis would do to Mr. Brennan. She had a feeling it would tell her a great deal about Ellis. But his words were full of angry undertones, and she didn’t dare question his order. After fleeing to the house, she left the front door partially open so she could still hear and see what was happening. She held her breath as Ellis brought the tip of his sword to Mr. Brennan’s throat.

“Miss Durante,” a sharp voice behind her called.

Andalin lurched in surprise and turned to see Mrs. Lewis motioning her to come away. Andalin reluctantly shut the door and followed Mrs. Lewis to the kitchen, where Matilda insisted she drink a whole glass of warm milk to settle her nerves.

“Honestly, I am well,” Andalin said. “I’m only eager to know what happened and why it happened.”

Mrs. Lewis shushed her. “It’s not a woman’s business. There is nothing his lordship cannot handle. He is a fine protector, is he not?”

Andalin nearly rolled her eyes. Mr. Brennan could have left with all the silver in the house and no one would have been the wiser.

“I hope he cuts his spleen out,” Matilda said.

Mrs. Lewis let out a small gasp. “Matilda! Not in front of the girl.”

“I’m getting old,” Matilda said. “I need a little action to keep me going.”

Andalin covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

Mrs. Lewis, on the other hand, shook her head and muttered something under her breath.

The three of them sat in silence, waiting for Ellis to return. Mrs. Lewis and Matilda both seemed to be under the assumption he would come to look for them in the kitchen, as if it was their usual meeting place. In Andalin’s opinion, a

distinguished nobleman did not rendezvous in the kitchen with his servants. Braitwood was a different cup of tea, where the sitting rooms were rarely frequented but the kitchen was full of life.

Just as predicted, after a quarter of an hour, Ellis returned. He went directly to Andalin. “Are you injured in any way?” He gently placed his hands on either of her forearms, giving her comfort she’d not realized she needed.

“No.” She blinked at the intense stare permeating from Ellis’s eyes behind his mask.

“Are you sure? Because if that blackguard so much as bruised you, I’ll—”

“I promise I am well,” Andalin said, cutting off his threat. Now she understood why Matilda had worried over Ellis’s response to the scratch on Andalin’s cheek, which, thankfully, had healed without consequence. “Did he hurt you?”

He shook his head and released her. Turning back to the door, he dropped his cloak on a hook and pushed both his hands through his hair. “Mrs. Lewis, see that your husband brings home a brood of dogs the next time he is in town.”

“Dogs? We haven’t had dogs since . . .” Matilda’s voice trailed off.

“I know, but I will not have people sneaking up on us while Miss Durante is here.”

Mrs. Lewis stood to obey. “I shall tell him right away. He needs to stop at the smithy this afternoon anyway.” Mrs. Lewis excused herself to find her husband.

The room was silent for several minutes except for the sound of Ellis’s boots pacing on the stone floor. Matilda cleared her throat loudly and made an excuse to tend to the garden.

Andalin moved to follow her out, but Ellis blocked her path.

“What happened?”

Andalin sighed and returned to her stool. “I was on my

way out for my morning ride when I heard a noise in the study. I thought it was you, but when I opened the door, I saw Mr. Brennan . . . ah, that man, pilfering through your papers. The next thing I knew, he was dragging me out the front door, insisting I needed rescuing.”

Ellis’s eyebrows lowered, disappearing behind his mask, and he put his hands on his hips. “Mr. Brennan?”

Why did she have to blurt out his name? Ellis was not going to like her explanation. “Yes, Mr. Brennan. From town.”

“From town?” His eyes sparked with anger. “When were you in town?”

Ellis would make an excellent general. One look from him would make an entire assemblage of soldiers cower. She was no exception.

“Never, of course. He was here a few weeks back asking questions. I sent him away. I didn’t think it was of any importance or that he would ever return.”

Ellis put his hands on his temples and rubbed them. Then he blew out his breath. “You probably want to know about his accusation against me. The part where I cut off his brother’s hand.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Andalin said, adamantly shaking her head.

“I wish I could take credit for it. He was caught thieving, and I generously gave him a second chance. The next time it happened, I cornered him at the mill. While he was fighting me, he stumbled and his hand got caught. I will spare you the details, but needless to say, he received his comeuppance. My attempts to bring order to Thornton Way always does more trouble than good. The people fear me but do not respect me. They blame me for all of their problems.”

Andalin looked at her lap. She had not been prepared for this sort of voluntary explanation. Ellis started pacing again, and she felt the need to offer him encouragement—to give him peace of mind. After all, she should have told someone about Mr. Brennan’s trespassing in the orchard.

“The people cannot respect someone they do not know. Perhaps I could tell them—”

“No!” Ellis barked, coming to stand in front of her. “Did Mr. Brennan listen to you? No. No, it is too late. I have chosen a life of seclusion, and I prefer it this way.”

Andalin glanced at the mask. The townspeople were under the same misconceptions about Ellis as she had been. They held the same fear and the same anger.

“You have to know I was not afraid of Mr. Brennan.”

“Afraid?” Ellis questioned fiercely. “You should have been *very* afraid. Mr. Brennan is capable of all sorts of vile behavior. I would have run him through had he not lit off like a coward. You cannot trust a man who sneaks into another man’s house and then forcefully drags a lady away against her will.”

Andalin surprised herself by not reacting to his anger. She calmly and bravely placed her hand on his forearm. “Ellis, I was not afraid because I knew you would come for me.” She added lightly, “Your reputation as swordsman is as strong as your nickname.”

Ellis blew out his anger in a long breath. “I prefer the boomerang.”

Andalin gave a short laugh, dropping her hand. “Wonderful! Then, you can play fetch with your new dogs. Maybe their company will pry you from this life of seclusion you have chosen for yourself.”

Ellis didn’t laugh with her. Instead he looked away.

Andalin was worried she had offended him when he suddenly asked, “What did you want to speak to me about this morning?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Ellis frowned. “You were coming to see me in my study when you found Mr. Brennan. Were you not?”

Andalin gave a small nod, afraid to broach the topic now. “Yes, but it can hold for another time.”

Ellis sat down hard on a stool next to her. “This is as good a time as any.”

This really wasn't as good a time as any. Ellis's eyes were narrowed and stormy. Andalin was afraid lightning would strike if she touched any sensitive topics of conversation, so she went another route. “Well, I was thinking about Lord Kerrigan.”

Ellis's eyes changed to reflect a pensive state. “Lord Kerrigan?”

“Yes, it was suggested that upon his return he would accompany me to a ball. I know several country dances, but I assure you they are a far cry from Society dancing.”

Ellis could no doubt see through her attempt to discuss something lighter, but he didn't try to force the subject. “When Lord Kerrigan returns, I will see that he teaches you to dance.”

“How mortifying!” Andalin said, shaking her head. “I would be far more comfortable learning from Mr. or Mrs. Lewis. Or maybe you could hire someone from town. Which reminds me, Hannah is getting on in years and it's hard for her to help me in the evenings. Could we find a younger dress maid, by chance? We could hire out for a dance instructor and a maid at the same time.”

Ellis shook his head. “I'm afraid the answer is no on both counts. I don't want anyone getting ideas that my ward is not of high blood. Your reputation as a lady is crucial if you are to have Braitwood Hall someday. I don't want the people to have any reason to disrespect you. There are dangers enough for you simply because of the company you keep.”

Andalin didn't see any danger in a dance instructor. Ellis was overly cautious. “And what of a dress maid?”

Ellis rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “I've never been very trustful of strangers. I wouldn't want anyone spreading stories through town.”

No wonder Hannah complained. The poor woman would never be allowed to retire at this rate. “What of Lord Kerrigan?”

“You want him to be your dress maid?”

Andalin rolled her eyes. “Heavens, no. Surely he has to have servants he trusts. What if he were to recommend someone? Or even to loan us someone from his household until . . .”

“Until?”

“Until you’ve married me off to the highest bidder.” Andalin practically spat out the words.

Ellis grinned. “You have such a gentle look about you. I am always surprised how bold you can be.”

Andalin folded her arms across her chest. “Speak for yourself. You have the looks of a lion lurking in the shadows but then act like we should all treat you like every other normal person.”

The large grin slipped from his face and settled into a small smile. “Then we are agreed—looks can be deceiving.”

Andalin broke her gaze away from his. “Yes, we are agreed.”

“Good,” Ellis said, pushing himself to his feet. “Then, you won’t question my warning. If ever there is to be another stranger at Braitwood Hall, no matter how harmless they may appear, do not speak with them. Come find me immediately.”

Andalin thought of Eliana and wondered if she had told anyone of her stranger. “And if you are not here?”

Ellis opened the door to leave. “Then, find Mr. Lewis or Birks. Don’t trust anyone else.”

Of course. Don’t trust anyone, but trust the Dark Rider. The irony almost made her smile. Surprisingly, she did trust Ellis. And even more startling was the fact that she was starting to think of him as a friend.

CHAPTER 10

WHILE BIRKS SADDLED HIS BLACK Turk stallion, Ellis pulled his short sword out and decapitated a wildflower barely visible in the evening glow. First, Annie had rifled through his things and now this Brennan business. He did not know what annoyed him more, the fact that he believed Annie had been softening toward him or that he'd softened too much toward her. Either way, he'd allowed her to distract him. Worse even, he'd nearly let Mr. Brennan abduct Annie by bringing her to live at Braitwood Hall in the first place. Now his enemies would be her enemies. The thought made his blood run cold.

He resheathed his sword and swung up onto his saddle. His only lingering comfort was that Annie had yet to learn to dance. He knew he'd hate watching Kerrigan teach her, but at least it would give him more time. There could be no thinking of himself until he found his sister, but there was still the hope Annie could help him. She'd brought him Eliana's journal, hadn't she? All he needed was a few more well-placed signs to lead him in the right direction. He kicked his heel, and his horse leapt forward. The night air exhilarated him, clearing Annie's image from his mind and helping him focus once more.

Andalin heard the dogs barking in the night but did not see them until the next morning on her way out for her riding lesson. Mr. Lewis approached her as she crossed to the stables, while gripping the leashes to three excited young Great Danes.

"Those are fine-looking creatures," Andalin said by way of a greeting.

Mr. Lewis grinned from ear to ear, making him look a sight younger. "I've forgotten how much I missed havin' dogs around the place. It'll take a bit to train them up, but they're a fine, healthy bunch."

Andalin peeled off her riding gloves and scratched behind the ears of a dog as black as midnight. His body nearly reached her waist. He rubbed against her riding skirt as if they

had known each other for years. “They’re big, but can they be intimidating?”

“Oh, well, they’re big, but they’re still young—practically pups. Once they get a feel for the land and the household, they’ll be a protective bunch. Dogs are extremely loyal.”

“It’s my fault such measures have to be taken in the first place.” If only she had told someone about Mr. Brennan’s first visit, all this could have been avoided.

“Where a female is, trouble ain’t far behind.” Mr. Lewis said with a grin. “This mess started a long time ago. Unfortunately, as long as ye live at Braitwood Hall, yer a part of it.”

Sometimes Mr. Lewis reminded her of Papa. Not in appearance, but in the soft way he imparted his wisdom. She thought about the extra work Mr. Lewis would have with the dogs to attend to and sighed.

“Ye shouldn’t have had such a scare yesterday. It’s a real shame.”

Andalin shook her head but could think of nothing to say. She followed Mr. Lewis to the stables just as a horse and rider came in fast from out of the woods.

“That’ll be his lordship. He’s been out riding all night.”

Ellis puzzled her. What sort of man rode all night through the Black Forest without good cause? Shouldn’t a man who professed to know the dangers of the forest at least venture to ride in the daylight?

Ellis reined in his horse and dismounted a few feet from them. Both rider and horse were drenched in sweat.

Mr. Lewis grumbled. “Birks will be none too happy. You’ve worn the poor creature out again, milord.”

Ellis gave a crooked smile. “My horse knows when I need a hard ride. He hasn’t failed me yet.”

Ellis removed his hat and then ran his hand through his wet hair. He tipped his head to Andalin. “Good morning.”

She hadn't known a sweaty man could look handsome. She realized her mouth was open, and she presently shut it. "Good morning."

Ellis swatted his stallion into the stable. Then he took the dog's leashes from their trainer so Mr. Lewis could tend to the horse.

"Magnificent dogs, wouldn't you agree?" Ellis asked her.

"Yes, maybe you should take them with you on your next night ride."

"I prefer being alone." Ellis knelt on the damp grass and rubbed the dogs, alternating between each one. "These beauties are for *your* protection. It would be good for you to let them be around you as much as possible when you are outside. In fact, I insist Mr. Lewis and the dogs accompany you on your walks."

Andalin rolled her eyes. "What if I prefer to be alone?"

Ellis glanced up and saw her annoyance. "After yesterday, and after the journal, I am wary to let you outside at all."

Andalin folded her arms. "Don't make me regret giving the journal to you." She saw the sad look in Ellis's eyes, and remorse stung her. "Forgive me. I never could have kept such a treasure from you. But please remember, I'm not a real lady. I've had a great deal of conversations with men who are rough around the edges. I'm probably more at ease with them than I am with those of your class."

Ellis stood and brushed off his breeches. "I know you have your reservations about Braitwood Hall, and about me, but you must learn to trust me. I have written to Lord Kerrigan and requested he bring a few of his staff with him when he returns at the end of the week. Because of your revelation about dancing, I fear you will not be ready for the ball.

"Instead of attending the ball, Lord Kerrigan will bring his sister and mother out for a visit. They will be your first test. We will gauge your social skills and manners and begin the dancing lessons, and then we will see about your next

opportunity to be introduced into Society. Until then I need you to be on your guard. It will be a few days yet until they arrive, and you must stay out of mischief.”

“I don’t know whether to be offended or to thank you,” Andalin said. “You have a way of making me feel like a foolish child.”

After unleashing the dogs, Ellis sent them running across the wide lawn. “I find myself talking to you as if you were Eliana. I have never been very good with words.” Ellis put his hands on his hips and stared off toward the forest. “It will be good for you to have some female company.”

“If you think it’s best,” she said, her mind already turning over his words. He compared her to his sister. A compliment, really. She should be worried about the visitors, not what Ellis thought about her. They would be ladies, not the friendly, neighborly gossips she was used to back home. She didn’t like the idea of being tested before being introduced to Society. She would rather put the whole thing behind her. Dare she suggest Ellis forget his grand plans and let Lord Kerrigan marry her?

Ellis put his hat back on his head and nodded goodbye before retreating to the house. It dawned on her that she had missed yet another opportunity to drill him about the secrets.

Andalin’s riding lesson wasn’t as enjoyable as she imagined it would be. Her mind circulated around her concern for what the Kerrigan family would think of her. She didn’t want to disappoint anyone or make a fool of herself. After her lesson she decided to seek Mrs. Lewis out. She found her dusting in the sitting room off the dining hall.

“Mrs. Lewis, if it’s not too much trouble, may I speak with you for a moment?”

Mrs. Lewis gave an inviting smile and set her duster down. “Please, join me. I need a sit-down anyway.”

Andalin sank into the sofa seat and pulled a pillow onto her lap. “Has Lord Cadogen mentioned Lord Kerrigan’s mother and sister visiting?”

“Yes. In fact, it was my idea. You have proved yourself ready for this next step.”

Andalin’s eyes widened. “Then, you think it is a good idea?”

Mrs. Lewis’s eyes went soft and motherly. “Of course! It will do you a world of good to have a small taste of Society before being thrown to the wolves. Oh, forgive me. That wasn’t a very tasteful comparison after what you and your father went through. But, never you mind, the Kerrigan ladies are charming.”

“What are they like? How do I go about conversing with them?”

Mrs. Lewis thought for a moment. “Mrs. Trenton is a few years older than you, newly married, and very friendly. Lady Kerrigan, Lord Kerrigan’s mother, can be aloof, but she has a kind heart. Both are fiercely loyal to his lordship and will be instrumental in preparing you for your coming-out. They’re employing Mrs. Trenton’s dressmaker, and you’ll have the latest fashions. It’s all very exciting!”

It was worse than Andalin had imagined. She would be a project. “Do they know my working-class origin?”

Mrs. Lewis frowned. “They’ll only know what Lord Cadogen tells them. Since he usually says very little, I imagine they know just enough to help get you ready for your debut.”

Andalin chewed her lower lip. “I think I prefer it that way. Though, I’m not too sure I can pretend for long.”

“There is no reason to pretend,” Mrs. Lewis said with an encouraging smile. “Just be yourself. You picked up just fine on dining manners. We haven’t needed a tutor for your speech because of your parentage and how well-read you are. As far as being refined in your appearance, just let Hannah pick out your dresses each night for dinner and see to your hair. There really isn’t much else to it. I’d say all you need is to observe a few elegant ladies, and you will be ready.”

Andalin appreciated Mrs. Lewis’s confidence in her. “I don’t think Lord Cadogen would agree I am as ready as you

think. This is a test. He knows I will not meet his expectations, and I find myself agreeing with him. I have a hard time desiring the confinements being a lady brings. On the inside I'm ever a tradesman's daughter."

"Nonsense! A gentleman will be lucky to secure a singular girl such as yourself."

Andalin giggled. "More odd than remarkable, I daresay. But I shall do my best. Though, my motivation is purely to keep from further injuring my pride."

Mrs. Lewis patted her knee. "Wonderful. Now, I'm going to finish up in here. Why don't you go put in a request for peach pie tonight. Matilda would love an excuse to make one."

Andalin went to her window and pried it open. The night air sent a chill down her arms, but she didn't mind. She wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders and leaned over the sill. The stars glowed, bright and crisp, and the moon hung like a shiny silver coin in the sky. She wished tonight she was under the same sky many miles away. The feeling of homesickness had waned with each passing day, but tonight she felt it acutely.

The first full moon in September was always Corbridge's harvest festival. The town celebrated with a picnic dinner, children's games, and after the sun went down, dancing. She had many fond memories made arm-in-arm with Marybeth and Edith, and even the Youngs, who worked with her father. Though she might miss them, she did not miss having to avoid Mr. Crow last year and the possessive way he'd danced with her. Andalin shuddered. She had almost forgotten the man had asked Papa for her hand. He would have been relentless at the dance this year—perhaps with the claim as her husband. She gripped her mother's necklace and sighed.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a rider disappear into the woods. Ellis again! What was he up to? It *was* a full moon. Nonsense; Ellis was not a werewolf. But he was up to something. Andalin pulled her window closed, followed by the drapes. She sat down at her writing desk and drummed her

fingers on the wood.

She wasn't going to be able to sleep now. She pulled on her robe and slippers, determined not to come back to her room until she begged some answers. No distractions this time.

Andalin hurried down the stairs toward the kitchen in search of Matilda—the only one likely to tell her anything. She hoped Matilda might still be up washing dishes. Andalin pushed the kitchen door open and let out a happy sigh. “I’m ever so glad you are still awake!”

Matilda was busy darning stockings at the table. “Won’t be much longer. These old bones have a hard time getting up before the sun if I stay up too late.”

Sitting next to Matilda, Andalin watched her for a moment before her tongue practically leapt from her mouth. “I need to know about Eliana.”

Matilda’s beady eyes jumped to meet hers. “Eliana? What are ye doing thinking about her?”

Andalin shrugged, which Mrs. Lewis repeatedly told her was unladylike. “You can tell me about her, can’t you? Why all the secrets? Why does Lord Cadogen ride out every full moon?”

Matilda put her hand up to stop the questions. “Maybe ye should be asking Mrs. Lewis or Hannah about these things.”

“Mrs. Lewis is masterful about skirting any unfavorable topics. Hannah seems to think a ghost will spring up around the corner if she even mentions the past. Matilda, I’m going positively insane cooped up in this house full of secrets. Will no one tell me?”

Matilda eyed her warily and then went back to darning her stockings.

“Not you too!”

Matilda chuckled and tsked her tongue. “Child, ye don’t want to get mixed up in our troubles.”

Andalin folded her arms defiantly. “As Mr. Lewis told me

only this morning, living here makes these my troubles too. I'm right in the middle of it without the advantage of knowing why. My heart is telling me to trust Lord Cadogen, but my mind is still wary."

Matilda put her sewing back in a small basket beside her. "Part of me wants to tell ye, but it isn't my story to tell. I suggest ye ask the master. He'll not mince words."

Andalin rested her chin in her hand. "He drops bits of information here and there, but he's terribly elusive. I hardly know if the day will pass and I even set eyes on him."

Matilda chuckled again. "That's a man for ye. If I were as young and headstrong as ye, I'd just follow him and see for myself."

Andalin blanched. "You cannot be serious. Into the Black Forest? In the dead of night?"

"Ye're right. 'Twould be a foolish errand." A wry smile crossed Matilda's face.

"I wouldn't be able to catch him tonight anyway," Andalin said.

Matilda nodded, pulling herself to her feet. "Yes, but he'll ride again tomorrow night."

"How do you know?"

Matilda picked up her things. "He's more a creature of habit than ye realize. Once ye've been around as long as I have, ye get to know a person."

"Yes, and I am beginning to get to know you. You are as mischievous as a black cat."

Matilda shuffled toward the door. "And that's exactly why I'm going to tell ye I hid the last slice of pie in the back of the bread box. Good night, luv."

Pie wouldn't solve any of her problems. Just the same, Andalin crossed to the bread box and pushed aside the contents until she pulled out the leftover pie. She placed a bite in her mouth and smiled. Maybe she was wrong about the pie. Anything this divine had to help.

CHAPTER 11

THERE WERE FEW THINGS ANDALIN detested, but darkness, cold, and wolves were amongst them. It rattled her to think she was planning on riding out into the Black Forest, where all her passionate dislikes were in one location.

Considering her narrow window of time, her flawed plan would have to suffice. She managed to convince Hannah she was tired and wanted to go to bed directly after dinner. Hannah helped her out of her cumbersome evening dress, which Andalin quickly switched for her riding habit as soon as Hannah left the room. After pinning her shawl around her shoulders, Andalin selected her warmest cloak and pulled on her riding gloves.

She couldn't believe she was taking Matilda's advice.

Andalin slipped out of the house while the servants gathered for their late dinner. When the dogs barked happily at her heels, wanting to follow her, Andalin was ready. She threw her meat scraps from dinner toward them, and they were immediately distracted. She slipped into the stables unnoticed.

This was a small triumph since saddling Ginger proved a difficult feat. She had watched it done several times but had never attempted it herself. The seconds flashed by in her mind, and she urged her fingers to move more quickly. Every rustle and creak had her whipping her head behind her in fear of discovery. When Ginger was ready, she ducked down in the stall and waited.

Rubbing Ginger's neck, she attempted to wait patiently for Ellis. After a good half hour, both she and Ginger were anxious. Andalin bounced on the balls of her feet to keep her legs warm.

Finally, she heard Ellis enter the stable and after a few minutes spied him leaving, leading his horse behind him. Andalin unlatched Ginger's stall door and followed, mounting only when she thought Ellis was far enough ahead not to notice. The proximity of the forest loomed before her. From where she stood, she could count hundreds of hiding places for

evil. Were her shivers from the night air or the fear settling on her shoulders? Her resolve was beginning to weaken.

This had better bring answers.

It wasn't long before she was quietly tailing Ellis through the Black Forest. The night noises were loud and frightening, but they helped mask the sound of Ginger's hooves. It calmed her to be within sight and sound of Ellis. Just the same, she steeled herself for a glimpse of wolves or, worse, ghosts of Ellis's past.

They avoided the main road, following either a path forged by Ellis or a deer trail. Twice she lost sight of him in the thick trees, but Ginger led her back to him again. They weren't moving too quickly, which surprised Andalin after learning Ellis preferred a bruising ride.

The night waned, and she lost track of time. Surely hours had passed. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she felt herself drifting in the saddle. The cold nipped at her, bringing her conscious again. She was miserably uncomfortable and had yet to discover any answers. Sometime later she finally fell asleep. She woke with a jolt of pain. She opened her eyes, but everything was a dark, dizzy blur.

"Annie?"

Andalin blinked; she knew that voice. She closed her eyes again.

"Annie, look at me."

Andalin opened her eyes, and this time there was less spinning. She focused in on Ellis's dark shape. "Blast!" Andalin grumbled, her mind clearing. She must've fallen off her horse and now would pay for it with pain and embarrassment. "I've been caught."

"Yes, I would say you are right about that." Ellis helped Andalin slowly sit up on the hard ground. "Are you hurt?"

"No. Was I unconscious long?"

"Only a moment."

"Well?" Andalin asked as she rubbed the knot at the back

of her head. "Aren't you going to reprimand me?"

"I think you've punished yourself enough tonight." His voice was full of sympathy.

Andalin swallowed an urge to cry. "Indeed, I have. I wasted a perfectly good night of rest. My nerves won't be the same for weeks after venturing into these haunted woods, and I'm no closer to solving the Cadogen family mystery than when I started. I give up. You can keep your peculiar habits and your secretive ways. I'm done with trying to help. Good riddance to the whole lot of you!"

Andalin wasn't surprised when Ellis didn't answer right away. She wanted him to argue with her, but he didn't. He just looked at her.

She heaved a sigh. The fight seeped out of her like water from a broken vase. It was obvious she was the one in the wrong. *She* was the one intruding. Again.

"Oh, I always seem to be apologizing for my hasty words. I'm sorry I followed you. I knew it was wrong, and I did it anyway."

"Do you think you can stand?" Ellis reached for her.

Andalin nodded her sore head. She was angry with herself and a little angry Ellis wasn't saying anything. He didn't release her hand either. He held it securely and then draped his other arm around her to support her back. He was treating her like a child again, but she was so tired and cold she didn't mind. She melted into the crook of his arm and let him escort her back to Ginger. Fortunately, the horse had stayed by Ellis's stallion instead of bolting off.

Ellis helped Andalin mount but didn't release her reins. "I'm not sure your riding home in this state is such a good idea."

"I promise not to cry until I'm alone in my room," Andalin said with a scowl. "Does that suffice?"

"It's kind of you, but I was referring to how tired you are. A second whack on the head might not be as forgiving as the first."

Andalin had no desire to humiliate herself a second time. “I will ride ahead of you. You can holler at me if you see me dozing.”

Ellis laughed. “I thought I would be able to warn you the first time, but you were asleep and off the horse before I could *holler* anything.”

Andalin gasped. “The first time? You mean you knew I was following you all along and you never let on?”

Ellis pulled a mirror out of his cloak pocket. He handed it to Andalin. “I learned long ago not to trust anything about the Black Forest. The mirror only really works when the moon is brightest and between the gaps in the trees. It’s one of the reasons I wait until the full moon to come out here. I didn’t know what your motives were in following me, so I decided to continue with my rounds and keep you in sight.”

“What do you mean by your rounds?” she asked, handing the mirror back.

Ellis pocketed it and raised his masked face to Andalin. “Every month, and occasionally more often, I ride some of the perimeter of the forest. I check for any irregularities, any signs of people. I have stumbled across more than one ‘Mr. Durante and Andalin’ in harm’s way than one might imagine. I have my personal reasons as well.”

“Yes,” Andalin said. “Reasons connected to the alleged mystery that seems to follow you around more than I do.”

“It follows me every waking moment,” Ellis replied. “I cannot free myself from it. You were a much more pleasant alternative, I assure you. Unfortunately, since the prior was here first, it is dangerous for you to involve yourself.”

Impatience nagged at her tired mind. She slid back off her horse, where she could see Ellis better in the dark.

“Everyone keeps reminding me of this danger. The minute I arrived at Braitwood Hall I became part of this. I want to know what it is I should be hiding from. If I am married off at the end of the Season, I might agree it was best you kept me in the dark. But can that be guaranteed? Until

then my curiosity could lead to even more danger, preventable only by the information you could have revealed.”

“I thought you said you were done with the Cadogen mystery.”

Andalin huffed. “You’re right. I need to be. Especially since I’m dealing with the most unbelievably tight-lipped people.”

“You’re tired,” Ellis said, shaking his head. “You’re talking in circles. We have a two-hour ride back to the manor house. You’re riding with me on my horse so you can sleep.”

Ellis missed Andalin’s look of alarm. He had regained her hand and was dragging her toward his stallion. He lifted Andalin effortlessly onto his large saddle and then returned for Ginger’s reins. Once he had the mare tied to his horse, he slid up behind Andalin. Her back warmed, and her heart raced. She had never been this close to a man before.

Ellis halted his horse before they had taken more than a few steps. “You’re freezing.”

Because of her sudden rise in pulse, Andalin didn’t notice the cold. Ellis unlatched his cloak and pulled it around the both of them. His left arm held it in place around her stomach.

Andalin felt not only warmer but extremely conscious of Ellis. Her heart was beating hard in her chest, and she wondered if it was possible for him to hear it. It seemed deafening to her.

Nevertheless, against her will, fatigue battled to consume her. Her eyelids felt as heavy as paperweights, and slowly she relaxed against Ellis. She let herself fall into a bouncy yet comfortable sleep.

CHAPTER 12

“ANNIE.” A HAND SHOOK HER gently. “Annie, wake up.” The voice was quiet but urgent. She squirmed. She didn’t want to wake up. She was so tired. “Annie, I need your attention.”

Squinting one eye open, she saw Ellis’s masked face very, very near to hers. Her eyes flew open. She was practically being cradled in Ellis’s arms. In shock she immediately pushed against him with her arms, but he only tightened his grip. One hand snaked over her mouth so she couldn’t call out.

“Hush!” Ellis whispered fiercely. “I saw something in the trees, and I need to investigate. You need to stay awake and watchful until I return.”

Andalin was completely awake now. She nodded. Ellis released her and slid down from behind. He reached over and pressed the mirror and a small dagger into her hands before wordlessly slipping into the shadows.

She heard an owl behind her, and her back bristled. She tightened her right hand around the handle of the dagger and with her left hand raised the mirror to see behind her. There was nothing but blackness because the moon was blocked by tree cover. She scanned in front of her and turned from one side to the next. Her breathing became rapid, and she fought to control herself. Ginger whinnied, and Andalin jumped, causing the stallion to take a few steps forward. In panic Andalin grabbed at the reins, dropping her mirror in the process.

No! She needed the mirror. She swung off the saddle and stumbled on the ground. Where was Ellis? Did she dare call him back? Each creak of the trees and rustle from the wind caused her head to whip around in every direction. But there was no one.

A loud, croaking voice penetrated the night, causing Andalin’s hair to curl at the back of her neck.

“Leave! Leave my forest! A curse be on you for every minute you remain near. Leave, and never return!”

The voice, clearly female, seemed to circle around her, echoing off every tree. Andalin scanned the dark shapes of the forest but couldn't identify anything, anyone. The darkness pressed into her, and she felt like she would drown in it. She screamed before she knew she'd opened her mouth, and the horse reared behind her.

“Annie!” Ellis called. “Annie, I'm here!”

Andalin panted for air. Relief surged through her exhausted body at the sight of him. “The mirror. I dropped it.”

Ellis saw it right off, lying innocently in the growth by his boot. He swiped it up and put it away. Then he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close to him.

“There, there. All is well.” Ellis tried to soothe her, but Andalin's body convulsed in fear.

“A voice . . . I heard a voice.”

Ellis laid his head on hers. “Shh, I know. I heard it too. After all these years, I have finally found her. Don't worry; she won't harm you while I am here. But it's not safe to stay out here. I will get you home as fast as I can.”

If possible, Andalin had more questions than ever. She didn't dare speak them out loud until they were out of the forest. In fact, she did not want to broach the topic until daylight, when she could see everything around her. She had never been so terrified in her life. Even wolves seemed like better company than the eerie voice and the consuming darkness.

Andalin buried her face against Ellis's arm as they rode home, hoping to hide her tears. She didn't want to ever see the inside of the Black Forest again.

When Andalin awoke, she was in her own bed. Beams of sunlight burst through her window, making her aware she had slept until nearly noon. Andalin sat up and rubbed her eyes. She was still in her riding habit. Memories of the night before flooded into her mind and caused her to take an unsteady breath. Sneaking into the forest had been a foolish idea indeed.

She would pay for her behavior by the haunting reminder of the voice she had heard. She had not been thrown into the Cadogen mystery; she had forced herself into it. Her curiosity was going to be the death of her.

Andalin padded over to her wash table. She splashed cold water onto her face, but her thoughts wouldn't wash away so easily. Ellis had been doing more than playing the honorable hero in the Black Forest every month. He had been searching for a woman, the same one who had spoken to them last night.

Sephira. There was no doubt the witch of Baltar was connected to the loss of Ellis's family. He had given her a clue when he had lent her his book.

Andalin dressed herself in a simple day gown with far fewer buttons than one Hannah would have chosen. Then she brushed her hair and braided it down her back. A few wild curls escaped by her ears as proof of how unrefined she truly was. She smoothed at the hair, but it was futile. Forgetting her hair, she hurried down to the kitchen. Food was more important than secrets at the moment.

Hannah and Matilda were whispering to each other in the kitchen when Andalin entered. Hannah's eyebrows lifted and, without even commenting on the unflattering state of Andalin's hair and dress, promptly excused herself.

"Hungry?" Matilda asked.

"Starved."

Matilda pushed a plate of pancakes sprinkled with sugar and squeezed lemon toward her.

Andalin slipped onto a stool and almost swallowed an entire pancake whole.

"Ye just missed his lordship. He was as hungry as ye look."

Andalin lifted her eyes from her plate to meet Matilda's. Did she know about last night?

Matilda studied her back. "Strange you slept so late. But his lordship insisted ye were not to be awoken this morning."

So she didn't know. Or maybe Ellis had told her about the witch without including her in the story.

"I did sleep rather late."

"Yes, that much is clear," Matilda said. "Ye went to bed early, if I recall. Mr. Lewis also said Ginger was acting funny this morning. Said to make sure ye didn't come out for a ride today. Ginger isn't as young as she used to be. Can't be ridden all night and not need a good resting up." Matilda's words hung in the air, and she looked at Andalin for an explanation.

Andalin swallowed guiltily. "Come now. You can't put ideas into my head and then criticize my methods for carrying them out."

Matilda shook her head, but a chuckle escaped. "I warned ye it was foolish. I bet ye had the master as riled as can be."

Andalin dropped her fork and glowered. "Your intention was for me to make him angry? I don't have to chase him into the Black Forest in the middle of the night to accomplish that!"

"Nay, but it's been too long since I've seen a good lover's quarrel."

Andalin had just put a bite into her mouth, and she nearly choked. She swallowed it down and coughed. "You've been cooped up in the kitchen for too many years. Lord Cadogen is the man who is keeping me from my father; he is not my beau." Even as Andalin said it she knew Ellis had not been her enemy for some time. He was a friend. Someone she wanted to help. "Last night was about trying to discover a story deliberately hidden from me and everyone else who hasn't lived here for the last ten years."

Matilda nodded in a placating way. "And? Did ye learn what ye set out for?"

Andalin paused. She didn't want to admit to Matilda what she had learned after being teased so. Matilda would surely misinterpret the details to confirm her own theory about Andalin and Ellis.

"I learned the secret lies in the Black Forest. And I hope

it stays there.”

Matilda’s mirthful expression slowly melted from her face. “He told ye?”

“No, he didn’t have to. I have come to the conclusion it’s as everyone said; I am better off not knowing.”

Matilda shook her head in a determined way. “I don’t know about that anymore. Just a few days ago I would have agreed with ye. Now I am not so sure.”

“What if I’m too afraid to know?” Andalin pushed her last bite around with her fork. She was so very afraid.

“Fear is natural. But ye shouldn’t dwell on it. It can be consuming. It’s better to look for solutions, for peace, for answers. Ye seem like someone who would want answers.”

Andalin raised her gaze to meet Matilda’s. “I have been seeking answers. But it isn’t just an old story I can unbury; it’s a living force that can still affect and change. It takes more than curiosity. It takes courage.”

Matilda ran her washrag against the counter and then rinsed it off in a bucket of water. Then she leaned heavily on the counter, letting her already stooped neck lower to meet Andalin’s gaze straight on.

“Aye, there is truth to what ye say. Ye have more pluck than ye give yerself credit for. Give it some time before ye close yer mind to the idea. The master could use a distraction. If I’m right, it might just lead him to what he’s searching for.”

Biting her lip, Andalin surprised herself by nodding. Last night she had not only distracted Ellis but inadvertently led him to the witch. No doubt tonight he would search for her again, but this time Andalin would be safely in her bed. She would not be the next Braitwood Hall victim.

Thanking Matilda for her breakfast, she dismissed herself and hurried to the library. She hadn’t any riding lessons to rush off to and wasn’t eager to ask Mr. Lewis to escort her on a walk. A lighthearted book was just the distraction she needed.

After an hour of reading, Mrs. Lewis interrupted her. “I

thought now would be a good time to start preparing for our guests next week.”

Andalin set her book aside. “Where would you like me to start? I could help turn out a few of the spare bedrooms or help launder sheets.”

Mrs. Lewis smiled sympathetically. “Not exactly what I had in mind.”

Andalin gave her a coy smile. “I thought it was at least worth a try. Very well. What would you like me to do?”

“As the lady of the house, I would like your opinion on the menu. I know you’re not experienced at what to serve at dinner parties, but this is the perfect time to learn. Then we could go over possible topics of conversation, daytime activities, and perhaps—”

Andalin held up her hand for Mrs. Lewis to stop. “Please, let’s just begin with the menu and work down the list.”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Lewis said, pulling out a small sheet of parchment. “I have it right here.”

Together they discussed Mrs. Lewis’s suggestions. Andalin didn’t change a single thing, except for a dessert or two, and only because they were more to her preference. After they hashed out every meal for the next week, Mrs. Lewis moved to possible dinner conversations.

“I don’t think it would be wise to mention anything involving the past here at Braitwood Hall,” Mrs. Lewis said. “I know you are very fond of the topic, but it would not be appropriate for this sort of company.”

Andalin squirmed. “Oh yes. I will refrain, of course.”

Mrs. Lewis smiled in return. “Wonderful. Now, current events are appropriate for the men but not always well received amongst the ladies.”

Andalin didn’t understand how she could talk about current events when she wasn’t even privy to the events of the manor house.

“Gentler topics for the gentler sex,” Mrs. Lewis finished.

Andalin pretended to understand. “So, what *should* I talk about?”

Mrs. Lewis’s eye twinkled. “You’re such a lively one. I’m sure you won’t lack for conversation. But, just in case, you can always discuss fashion. Types of fabric, place of purchase, that sort of thing.”

Andalin sat back in her seat and groaned. “Well, that ought to go well. I could tell them how to dye cotton or how to make a feed sack into a dress, shirt, or rag.”

Mrs. Lewis folded her hands patiently across her lap. “You do not have to be an expert to discuss fashion. Merely ask questions, compliment, and nod your head. It’s very simple.”

“Fair enough.” Andalin sighed. “What else?”

Mrs. Lewis went on to list subjects such as the latest balls, who was traveling in what circles, and a few other subjects Andalin had absolutely no experience with. She was beginning to dread the idea of talking to Lady Kerrigan and her daughter at all. She would have to pretend she was either shy or mute.

A few minor activities like cards and croquet were planned for entertainment. In the end they both agreed to ask Ellis for input before they planned any further.

Hannah came to retrieve Andalin to dress for dinner. “I’ll pick out the dress this time.”

Andalin moaned. “I spend half the day dressing and undressing.”

“For a young lady with her pick of as many gowns as ye have, ye sure don’t appreciate them,” Hannah muttered.

“They are quite lovely. But even if I did feel comfortable dressing above my station, which I don’t, I couldn’t put any of them on myself.”

Hannah chuckled. “Seems we have this conversation on the regular.”

Andalin changed into the same gown she’d worn when

meeting Lord Kerrigan. It was the most elegant she owned. Hannah finished styling an elegant tight twist on top of her head just as someone knocked on the door. Andalin had wondered if Ellis would put the practice of meeting her at her door aside since it was hardly proper. And after last night . . .

Hannah pulled the door open to reveal Ellis. So he wasn't going to avoid her after all. Strange; it seemed to be how they played things after any sort of awkward moment crossed between them. And her following him in the dead of the night most certainly counted as awkward. However, seeing him now did not feel that way at all. She smiled shyly.

“Good evening,” Ellis said with a bow of his head. “May I?”

Ellis held his arm up, and Andalin quietly accepted it. As soon as she touched him, a thrill raced down her spine. She stole a glance up at his masked face to see if he noticed her reaction.

He was staring at her. The moment their eyes connected, all the senses in her body came alive. Suddenly unsure of herself, she pulled her gaze away.

“Don't worry,” he said quietly. “I'm merely admiring the walls.”

Andalin bit her lip to keep from laughing. But his words had done the trick, and she relaxed.

After being served dinner, they were left alone in the dining hall.

“Did you sleep well last night after I left you?” Ellis asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Andalin said, removing her napkin from her lap. “Though, I'm not accustomed to your strange hours.”

Ellis sat back in his seat and folded his arms across his chest. “I was worried your sleep would be restless. You had a terrible scare.”

Andalin remembered the way she had cried on the ride

home. She *had* been scared. The woods had been so black, and yet every so often the moon would cast the most horrible shadows. They'd loom out as if to grab at them and pull them into the night. She shuddered, eager to forget the memory. "I regret my decision to follow you last night, if that is what you mean."

"No, I mean to ask if you are feeling calmer today. I do not want you to be afraid while you are here. The woman from the woods . . . she—"

"Please!" Andalin said louder than she intended to. "I don't want to know."

Ellis leaned forward in his seat. "But you have harassed my staff and myself for information on the subject almost from the moment you arrived."

"I was naive," Andalin said, dropping her eyes humbly to her plate. "I think I know enough now. The woman in the forest is the witch of Baltar . . . Sephira. She is the one who is somehow responsible for the death of your family. And now . . . well, now you have found she is still there waiting in the forest. Probably waiting to finish off the family line, for who knows what reason. I have suddenly discovered the idea of a witch is far from my comfort zone."

Ellis gave Andalin a small, comforting smile. "Your conclusion is rather close to the truth. Sephira, Sephany, Serenity, Seraph, Sherity are all the names given to the witch over the years. Yes, it is she whom you heard in the woods last night. Wicked, yes, but I wouldn't fear her if I were you. She is afraid of me. She has been hiding from me for years."

"Hiding from you?" Andalin fingered the tablecloth, angry she could not keep from prying for more answers.

"Yes," Ellis said. "Hiding from me. Afraid of what I might do to her if I find her."

"Shouldn't you be afraid of her after whatever she did to your family?"

"What she did to my family was cowardly. If I have learned anything about this woman, in the many stories I have

collected about her over the years, she is extremely cowardly. Driven by jealousy, fear, and starvation for attention. But she has been weakened since I have hunted her. It has forced her to remain in hiding for years on end. I think the only reason she called out last night is because she saw two horses instead of one. She saw a female instead of a male. She never would have dared call out if she had known I was with you.”

“But a witch . . .” Andalin argued.

“You are a God-fearing woman, are you not?”

Andalin nodded without hesitation.

Ellis reached his hand across the table toward her, almost as if he was attempting to extend her comfort. “Then, you and I know she can have no control over us. Sorcery has power only over those who believe in it. I tell you she is mad and nothing more.”

He knew Andalin needed his reassurance, and her eyes watered involuntarily. “What does this mean for you? What will you do now?”

Ellis shrugged. “I will bide my time. I have waited a long time just to find her. And now, thanks to you, I have proof she is still alive and not just in my imagination. I have narrowed down the part of the woods where she likely resides. She will be brought to justice; there is no doubt in my mind. My first responsibility lies with you. I want to ensure your safety. I have guests arriving soon, and I must also see to a few of the tasks on the land that fall to a baron.”

“I don’t believe you.” Andalin shook her head. “You are too driven and obsessed with this to just lie low. You are telling me this to put my mind at ease . . . to help me sleep tonight. Well, you can forget about any chance of me trying to follow you again. I learned my lesson.”

Ellis eyed her and then slowly blew out a long breath. “I did plan on taking one last ride tonight and being back before breakfast.”

“Why can you not bide your time like you said? Surely you can wait until Lord Kerrigan can go with you. He has in

the past, has he not?"

"Yes, he has come with me in the past," Ellis said, frowning. "He, like you, understands I am fixated on bringing this woman to justice. I simply cannot wait a week. I don't want her to try to find a new place to hide or have time to plot and scheme against me."

Andalin quickly stood and crossed to Ellis's side. If she was truly his friend, then she had to stop him. She knelt by him and pulled his arm toward her. "Please, don't go. She will be waiting for you tonight. The wisest choice is to catch her off guard. Go in daylight, and bring Lord Kerrigan and Mr. Lewis with you. Birks can stay here with the rest of us. The witch will be expecting you to play the brave knight and go alone. Do not play into her hands."

Ellis looked down at Andalin's grip on his arm, but Andalin did not remove it. She meant what she said, and she had to prove it.

"How can you know what she will expect?" He shook his head. "I don't even know what she will expect, and I have spent the last ten years trying to learn everything about her."

"You said Sephira and Serenity were the same person. It means your sister was tricked by that woman. She came to her alone, just like Sultare was cursed when he was alone. The one quality you said she owns is cowardice. She will not be brave enough to act in the daylight with so many onlookers. You can play off her fear. She is human, is she not?"

Ellis didn't blink. He stared at Andalin in a completely unnerving way.

"Yes," Ellis admitted. "She is human."

Andalin stood, almost regretting the crush lines on the fine fabric of her dress. "Then, why not take my advice and wait? You can further discuss the matter with Lord Kerrigan when he arrives. There is no need to be hasty and ruin ten years' worth of work."

"I did not know you could be sensible," Ellis joked.

"I think I used to be very sensible. Ever since I arrived

here, I have not even known myself. I want to blame you, but I blame you for everything else, so you might as well be free from this one.”

Ellis gave a low chuckle. “I feel I have found more of myself since you have arrived than I have in years. Your presence settles me.”

His mask did not keep Andalin from admiring the gentle way he looked at her. “I’ve been such trouble for you!” she said with a laugh. “I surely drive you to the Black Forest more than I help. But it cannot be this time.” She couldn’t offer the same protection he could offer her, but she felt the need to help him. It was hard to bear the thought of him returning to the Black Forest, though she could not explain why. When had she begun caring for the Dark Rider? “Ellis, please don’t go back tonight.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I must.”

“What of a bargain?” she countered, feeling desperate. “Hannah said Mr. Lewis predicted it would rain tonight.”

Ellis put his hands out. “So if it rains, I stay, but if it does not, I go? I’m not worried whether or not the rain is perilous to my health.”

Andalin’s gaze dropped. “Humor me. For the sake of knowing I will sleep so much better if I know you are here protecting me.” Andalin felt her cheeks burn at her admission, and she could not meet his eyes.

Ellis dropped his napkin on his plate and stood, closing the gap between them. He lifted Andalin’s chin up with his finger. “Very well. If it rains before midnight, then I will wait another day.”

Relief stole through her body. Hannah had told her Mr. Lewis was always right about rainstorms since the extra moisture in the air gave him rheumatism in his shoulder. But would it come before midnight? She would just have to pray for a miracle. Ellis didn’t need to join his parents and sister in the graveyard.

“Thank you.” Andalin gave him a genuine smile.

Ellis reached over and somberly squeezed Andalin's hand. "It is not a matter I can put off for long."

Andalin knew he was right. Perhaps he kept holding her hand because he knew it rendered her speechless, keeping her from arguing.

CHAPTER 13

ANDALIN WOKE TO THE SOUND of dogs barking. The noise ripped her from her dreams. They hadn't been the most pleasant, so she silently thanked the loud, furry creatures.

Her eyes suddenly lit with full wakefulness. If the dogs were barking, was it because of Ellis? Had he gone into the forest after all? She had spent the hour leading up to midnight on her knees pleading for rain. A drought could not have made her prayers more earnest. Only minutes before midnight she finally heard the first drops that soon brought on torrents of rain against her window.

She peered out her curtains. The overcast sky, now absent of rain, hid much of the sunrise. She glanced down at the courtyard, but it was still too dark to make anything out. Andalin pulled her riding boots on under her nightgown and then added her robe and shawl to her attire. She crept quietly out of her room, down the staircase, and out the front door. She peered toward the stables, wondering if she could make out if someone was there from where she stood on the steps.

She heard the dogs barking again and realized the sound came from the direction of the stables. She shivered. Her fear abated only by the need to reassure herself Ellis was safe.

The question she should be asking herself was not about the fear she felt, for truly, she had earned the right to feel a bit of anxiety after all the frightening experiences she'd had since arriving. What she didn't understand was her acute concern for the welfare of Ellison Cadogen. She had thought on it several times since dinner the night before. Was she so lonely she had forged a friendship based on circumstance?

No. Ellis had been kind to her. He had been patient and forgiving. It was right for her to be concerned for him. He needed her to keep him from letting his past consume him. She had to be brave.

Andalin gathered her courage, climbed down from the steps, and hurried toward the stables. She did her best to avoid conjuring up images of strange witches jumping out at her

from inside the stables. The dogs ran and greeted her before she made it to her destination. She welcomed their company and hoped they'd bonded enough to protect her had she any need of them.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Ellis exited the stables in search of the source of the commotion.

He put his hands on his hips. "For heaven's sake! What are you doing out here at this hour and in such a state of undress? I thought I instructed you to come outside only in Mr. Lewis's company."

The cold at least prevented her cheeks from warming at the harsh tone of Ellis's voice. She had not been prepared for his reaction. She decided to play innocent. "But you are here. Aren't you as capable as Mr. Lewis?"

Ellis folded his arms firmly across his broad chest. "So which is it? You felt the need for some fresh air? You were so anxious to see me again that you couldn't sleep? Or you are intent to follow me again, despite the scare you've had and the promise you made?"

Andalin rubbed the head of the dog nearest to her as she searched for an answer. If she admitted she couldn't sleep any longer because she was anxious to see him again, then she would sound like a lovesick calf. She had merely been concerned. It was the truth, since her mind had summoned the same word moments ago when she had been on the steps.

"Well?" Ellis demanded.

Andalin tried to shrug off her blush by answering in a nonchalant tone. "I wanted fresh air. And yourself? Are you coming or going?"

Ellis dropped his arms in frustration. "I kept my bargain to you, if that is what you are asking. I am going. Now. I told you this could not wait."

Andalin bit her bottom lip. Ellis was riding off emotion, and he was liable to throw himself into harm's way. Certainly he was a great fighter, but he wasn't facing a man; he was facing a woman. Andalin tried to think fast. She was a woman.

What were women capable of? Well, for one, they could be persuasive. There was no better time like the present to put those skills into practice.

“Ellis,” she hedged, making her voice sound softer. “I wonder if you might consider taking me along again. It would throw Sephira off. We could collect nuts . . . or something. Mr. Lewis could chaperone. It would be the perfect distraction. She can’t watch all three of us at once. I promise I am far braver in the day than I am in the night.” She gave a small smile.

“Absolutely not. I forbid you to enter those woods again.” Ellis’s tone rang with finality, and Andalin’s smile faltered. Apparently, she didn’t have the persuasive powers some women did. He looked fierce and unbendable, and Andalin remembered why she found him so intimidating. She took a step back and held her shawl a bit tighter to keep out the cool morning air.

“Very well. I wish you luck.”

Ellis nodded curtly and returned to the stable for his horse.

Andalin didn’t have the desire to watch him ride off into harm’s way, so she hurried back to the house with the dogs at her heels. She went straight to the kitchen to wait for the few occupants of the household to awaken. She needed a distraction, and being alone would not suffice. After a quarter of an hour the sun started to creep into the sky. Matilda made the first appearance and was shortly joined by Mrs. Lewis and Mr. Lewis. The last to arrive was Hannah.

“Are ye going to tell us what gives ye such an eager face this morning, child?” Matilda asked as she whisked some eggs and poured the mixture into a pan to cook for breakfast.

Andalin absently scratched at a dip in the grain along the counter’s surface. “Just feeling a bit out of sorts is all.” It wasn’t far from the truth either. The thought of Ellis alone with a crazed witch left her feeling ill.

Mr. Lewis kicked his long legs out in front of him and

stretched back in his chair. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with the determined way his lordship rode out of here this morning, would it?”

Explaining would only worry them. They were like family to Ellis and quickly becoming just as endearing to her.

“It ain’t healthy for him to take off like that. Too much alone time ain’t good for a person,” Hannah stated, taking the plates off the shelf to set the table.

Matilda added the cooked eggs to the spread of hash, plum cake, and kidneys on the table before sitting down herself. “He’s a man now, and he has a right to go where he pleases.”

Hannah ignored Matilda and looked at Andalin. “He’s broodin’.”

Matilda tsked her tongue. “His soul is tormented. He has to do what he has to do to put it to rest. I don’t agree with his ways, but I can’t argue with someone trying to follow his heart.”

Hannah disagreed. “It’s bitterness that’s eatin’ at him. How is this to bring him any sort of peace?”

Perhaps company wasn’t the best idea after all. They weren’t supposed to be talking about the same thing eating at Andalin’s conscience.

Mrs. Lewis cleared her throat. “Look how uncomfortable you’re making our lady! You both should be ashamed of yourselves.” Mrs. Lewis reached over and squeezed Andalin’s hand. Andalin gave her a small smile of gratitude.

Mr. Lewis didn’t seem to hear his wife. “I think we ought to talk to him. This has been goin’ on long enough. It’s time he focused on turnin’ this place around.”

“Mr. Lewis,” Mrs. Lewis started, “can’t we discuss this another time?”

“We’re all here now, aren’t we? What better time to discuss it than the present?” Mr. Lewis asked. He stabbed a forkful of cake and shoved it between his whiskers and into his

mouth.

Matilda folded her arms, seemingly disinterested in eating. “I think we’re all agreed. It’s past time for his lordship to be done grieving; only, his acceptance isn’t going to come just because we want it to.”

Mrs. Lewis looked embarrassed on Andalin’s behalf. “Are you sure we should discuss this in front of . . . ?” Her voice carried off when the others glared at her.

“Sweetheart, Miss Durante is one of us now,” Mr. Lewis said. “She knows well enough about what goes on around here. She has every right to participate in this discussion.”

Andalin squirmed. She should be grateful she didn’t have to pry for an explanation; instead she felt guilty she wasn’t sharing with them in return. There was far more at stake on this particular forest ride than on past trips. Should she tell them? The last thing she wanted was to breach Ellis’s trust and cause more problems for him.

Matilda caught her eye. “What is it, child? Ye look like yer stewing over something.”

Andalin bit her bottom lip. “I’m just worried what Lord Cadogen might do to himself.”

Everyone around the small kitchen table nodded their heads in agreement.

“So what do we do about it?” Hannah demanded.

Mrs. Lewis looked positively flustered. “Lady Kerrigan will be here in two days hence! We can’t worry about this right now!”

Hannah thumped her finger on the table. “There ain’t a better time than before the guests arrive. Why, I’d wager if he got himself to some social functions, it’d pry him away from his melancholy. I could resign and move in with my sister in Yorkshire.”

“It would be nice if his lordship could find himself a wife and settle down,” Matilda said wistfully. “The hole in his heart cannot be filled by revenge. Only love can fill a hole that big.”

Mrs. Lewis held out her hands. “It’s one thing to discuss how we feel about the situation, but it isn’t our place to meddle in the master’s affairs. The only action we can take is to make the upcoming visit go as splendidly as possible and stir his memory of better times.”

Mr. Lewis pushed his chair back and reached down to tie his boots. “It’s a nice thought, sweetheart, but we’re the only family he has now. If someone is going to help him see reason, then it will have to be us.”

“It won’t be me! I can’t persuade his lordship to do anythin’,” Hannah said.

Matilda shrugged. “He just laughs at my suggestions.”

Andalin looked at Mrs. Lewis, who obviously was not going to be a willing party to any of it.

Mr. Lewis sighed. “I guess that leaves one of us. Miss Durante?”

Andalin’s startled gaze flew to meet Mr. Lewis’s.

“Well?” Mr. Lewis asked.

Andalin had listened quietly to the discussion, not believing she was truly part of it. Only yesterday no one would answer her questions. Now she was privy to more information than she knew how to handle. “I have voiced my opinion, but he continues to follow his former life with little regard to my concerns about his welfare. He is stubborn.”

Mr. Lewis chuckled and scratched his whiskers. “It looks like we all fall short of having the ability to change his mind. We will have to stand together.”

“Splendid idea! A group effort would be just the thing. Let’s act on it the moment he returns,” Matilda concluded.

Everyone nodded in agreement, and the discussion closed. Andalin left the kitchens with a little bit of hope in her belly. Breakfast had fed her in a different way. For the first time, she belonged, really belonged at Braitwood Hall. It touched her to be part of a small group of people who wanted to bring peace to someone they cared for. Hopefully, Ellis

would survive long enough to hear what they had to say. If he realized how much they all wanted him to be happy, maybe he would see his strange ways were hurting those who cared most for him.

Ellis took a seat at the long dining table and then stood again. How could he sit with such aggressive feelings coursing through his body? He was hungry. Where was the food? And where was Annie? He refused to escort her down to dinner. They weren't married, after all. She was capable of walking down the stairs without his guidance. Besides, before long she'd attract every suitor in the country and thoughts of her would cease to plague him.

Mr. Lewis pushed the door open to the dining room, and he and his wife entered with trays heaped with hot, savory food. Ellis sat again, and his anger diminished for a moment, seeing the couple doing the work five servants would do in any other household, and bringing his favorite soup, no less.

Just after they left, Annie walked in. She stopped short, surprise evident on her face. He pushed to his feet and bowed his head as she approached the seat to his right. She performed a quick curtsy and hurried to sit. It was plain she did not think he'd return so quickly from his ride. The smart girl noticed the tense set of his shoulders and the grim lines around his mouth and, thankfully, formed her own conclusion about his endeavors in the forest and held her tongue.

Their soup bowls were emptied, and still not a word passed between them. Apparently, Annie's silence could only extend for so long.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ellis clanged his spoon down. “No. But I'm sure I will not have any peace until your curious mind is satisfied.”

Clearly chagrined, Annie looked away and blinked back a hint of moisture.

Ellis sighed, regretting his inability to shake off his emotions at the door. Part of him wanted to show Annie he

was right and she was wrong, but he could not bear to hurt her. “I apologize. That was unkind. I should not have taken my anger out on you.” Seeing her upset made him want to pull her close and comfort her. He remembered how it felt to hold her in his arms—how he had enjoyed it far more than he should have on their midnight ride. “I am not used to having someone I can confide in.”

Annie risked a quick glance, softening him further. “I am not the only one in this house who wants you to be at peace.”

Ellis looked at the door, where they both knew either Mr. or Mrs. Lewis was waiting on the other side in case their service was needed. “Perhaps I should have let myself be more open with them over the years. Surely you understand why this is different.” Ellis leaned toward Annie and rested his head on his hand, ready to unburden himself with the weight of his discovery. “I found the witch’s home today.”

Andalin covered her open mouth with her hand. “But you seemed so put out, like you were disappointed in your day’s labor.”

“The place was deserted,” Ellis said with a disgusted frown. “It was a small hovel in the side of a hill. The door was behind a tree.” He should have seen it before. “Inside I found three pallets. *Three*. So strange for one witch to have three different beds. And yet I always wondered. Hoped, really. But never mind. Today I did not find the answers I sought. I blame myself for being persuaded by you to wait to seek her out.”

“Oh, Ellis,” Annie said, her voice thick with sorrow.

“Do not dwell on it, Annie. I’m not angry with you. Leastwise, not anymore. How could I be when you sit there so prettily and with such eagerness to be my friend?”

Andalin ducked her head. “I am glad to hear it. I would not want you to stay angry with me. You were sorely disappointed today, and I am sorry.”

“Forget about today. It’s rather nice knowing someone cares for my welfare and whether or not I return home.”

There, her soft smile returned, and with it, he found a hint

of his own. “Tell me more about Annie as a child. Were you as careful about your father’s whereabouts as you are mine?”

“You would not believe me if I told you,” Annie said with a laugh.

“I could believe you capable of all sorts of mischief,” Ellis teased.

“As you know, my father makes and sells beautiful salt-glazed stoneware and vases.”

“Yes, I made a rather large order as a Christmas present to myself.”

Annie grinned. “Well then, you will soon learn his pottery is wrapped carefully and cushioned with hay before it is transported in his wagon. I thought it a rather cunning idea to wrap myself in burlap and hide in the hay. Papa never once took me along on his deliveries, and I dearly wanted to see all the places he spoke of.”

“Did it work?”

“No. My father had just returned and had no intention of leaving, unbeknownst to me. I slept fitfully all night in the wagon, itching from head to toe from the burlap and bugs.”

Ellis cringed. “You were determined—a character trait I see stuck with you.”

“Is that a compliment or a criticism?” The candlelight danced in her eyes, charming away the last of his ill humor.

“Both,” he said. His lips twitched into a near laugh. “After all, you have survived another night in the Dark Rider’s company—a fate far worse than burlap and bugs.”

“Comparable, I would say.” Annie said in mock-seriousness. “But I do have better examples of my determination depicting me in a more favorable light.”

“Really? Pray tell.”

Ellis let Annie distract him with stories about her youth. After a while the conversation turned, and Ellis learned they both shared the same love for history and geography. Ellis

even confessed he only carried a sword when he went out because his father had done the same. It kept his father's memory close.

Hours passed like mere moments, and Ellis reveled in their newfound companionship. There had been so much fear, intimidation, and hesitancy on Annie's part, but none of that was apparent now. Despite their blustery beginnings, she wanted to be there for him. He could hardly fathom it. Finally recognizing he wanted her friendship, wanted her presence, too, was like feeling a wall between them crumbling down.

It made finding her a husband hard but ever more important. Annie deserved better than a lonely life at Braitwood Hall.

CHAPTER 14

“LORD KERRIGAN’S FAMILY HAS ARRIVED,” Hannah said. “Ye’re to greet them as soon as I fix yer hair.”

Last night Andalin’s lingering worries had lessened, and she was almost content. Now she sat at the dressing table while anxiety built beneath her skin. By the time she was ready to leave her room, her nerves were pulled as tightly as her hair. Ellis met Andalin at the bottom of the staircase, and his presence eased her nerves enough to allow her to breathe freely again.

“There you are,” he said, reaching for her hand.

She placed her hand in his, and he squeezed it gently. Did he know she needed his touch just now?

“Will they like me?” she asked, eager for him to reassure her.

His eyes softened behind his mask, which was a familiar sight now. What was underneath was beginning to not matter like it had before. His penetrating gaze and gentle smile were all she saw anymore. “They are not as frightening as wolves, though you wouldn’t know it to look at you. I daresay you will charm them the same way you have my staff.”

Many aspects of the Cadogens were still a great mystery to her, like the way Ellis was appraising her face and hair just now. It filled her senses, distracting her from her fears. “I believe that is yet another compliment. Careful, or your reputation will soften.”

“I’m not sure I am the one who is softening,” Ellis said, the corner of his mouth creeping up into a mischievous smile.

Andalin was enjoying the changes in her relationship with Ellis and the rest of the household. She hoped their guests would not shake the stability she’d gained.

Ellis pulled her hand through his arm and escorted her into the drawing room, where their guests waited. Andalin saw Lord Kerrigan’s mother first. Her gown was finer than Andalin

could have conjured with her imagination. Covered in delicate black lace with intricate beading on the bodice, her dress radiated opulence. Her daughter, Mrs. Trenton, stood with natural grace and joined her mother. She could not have been much older than Andalin, and her beauty was daunting. They both floated over to her with airs of superiority and position. Andalin fought the temptation to shrink back and hide behind Ellis.

She mentally instructed herself to smile and not gape.

“Might I introduce Miss Durante?” Ellis asked.

Names were exchanged, and Andalin curtsied with great care. They each took a seat, and Andalin breathed out in relief when Ellis chose a chair next to the sofa where she sat, hardly a foot away.

He sat back, utterly at ease, and asked his guests, “How did you find your journey?”

Andalin could have choked at the amiable and social tones coming from Ellis’s mouth. He seemed almost cheerful.

“Long but not tedious,” Mrs. Trenton replied sweetly.

Lady Kerrigan did not agree. “I felt every bump and bustle. I hope your beds are as soft as I remember. My daughter and I will retire early tonight, or we’ll never recover.”

Lord Kerrigan chuckled. “It wasn’t all miserable, Mama. You haven’t told Lord Cadogen how much you admired the grounds.”

Lady Kerrigan’s frown softened a notch. “Make no mistake; it isn’t what it was when your mother was alive. Braitwood Hall always had a rustic charm, which makes its remote location more appealing.”

Lady Kerrigan and her son moved to the window, where they began pointing out their favorite features of the grounds, and Mrs. Trenton stood and moved to the other side of the sofa next to Andalin.

“Miss Durante,” Mrs. Trenton began, “how have you

gotten along here at Braitwood?”

Andalin clasped her hands to hide the small tremble. She wasn't sure what was more intimidating: Ellis's nearness or the beautiful, refined Mrs. Trenton.

“Please do not harass my protégé, Mrs. Trenton,” Ellis said. “It's taken months to get her to put her guard down, and after a few moments in your company, I can see it going back up.”

Mrs. Trenton's affronted expression eased into an impish smile. “You interrupted before Miss Durante could give me an honest answer to my innocent and extremely polite inquiry of her well-being while living here. If she is feeling anxious in any way, it is surely your presence to blame, not mine. Doesn't my brother have conversation he would like to make with you?”

Andalin had to pinch her lips together to keep from laughing. Perhaps it would not be so hard to be herself in Mrs. Trenton's company after all. Andalin had never heard anyone speak so forthrightly to Ellis before. Well, she had talked to him that way. But she had never heard anyone else do so.

“Hmm,” Ellis mumbled. “It looks like you two will be quite the pair. I am beginning to regret your invitation already.”

“Lord Cadogen!” Andalin quietly reprimanded, and Ellis actually looked sheepish for a moment.

This time it was Mrs. Trenton's turn to laugh. “It looks like Miss Durante hasn't had any problems getting along here. She already knows how to put you in your place, which is more than any of us have ever managed.”

“She's not a haughty aristocrat, so I can actually stomach her conversation. I've had to come to accept my staff, who practically raised me, would rather she was in charge than I.” Andalin tried to mutter an objection, but Ellis didn't pause. “She has some good sense in her, and I don't perceive any problems in her introductions to Society. She'll no doubt secure a husband by the New Year.”

Ellis turned and smiled fondly at Andalin. Her heart skipped a beat at the innocent gesture but simultaneously sank at his suggestion to marry her off.

Mrs. Trenton gave Andalin an amused look. Then she turned to Ellis and asked, “And this will secure your happiness?”

Ellis’s eyes clouded. “Happiness is not on my agenda.” He stood suddenly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I will let you ladies do whatever it is you do, and I will go exercise my horse.”

“How very, very odd,” Mrs. Trenton voiced quietly as she watched Ellis retreat from the room.

“What do you mean?”

Mrs. Trenton gave a nearly imperceptible shrug, and Andalin wondered how she could ever comport herself with such obvious gentility.

“Lord Cadogen seemed almost sociable.”

“And it amuses you?” Andalin asked. Though, she too had been startled by his amicable behavior.

“If you had known him in his former life, then after this much time in his company you would have been drowned by love for the man. He was charming, handsome, gregarious. And then, all of a sudden, the light was out. It’s been more than two years since my last visit, and nearly as long between then and the time before. Once I realized there was nothing I could do to shake him from his melancholy or temper, there was little reason to keep coming back.”

Andalin tried to process what Mrs. Trenton was saying. Had she hoped to change him because of their friendship, or had there been more to their relationship? Mrs. Trenton had nearly admitted everyone who knew him was bound to love him—which included herself—and Andalin could see why. Even when he was brooding, Andalin had been drawn to him. Mrs. Trenton was married now, so it didn’t really matter. Andalin would have to wait until they were better friends before she dared ask about it.

“You must have your opinion,” Andalin said. “This idea about me becoming his ward.”

“I have accustomed myself to the idea since I was first told the situation. Of course, if Lord Cadogen dies before marrying, most everything would fall to your husband, but there are ways to ensure you inherit certain holdings. Lord Cadogen will see that you are legally cared for with enough pocket money to live, travel, and spend what you’d like.”

Andalin did not want to think about future circumstances.

Mrs. Trenton leaned closer. “I am not supposed to be privy to many details, but my brother assures me everything is in order. Strange how not even a distant cousin could be found to inherit. I guess Lord Cadogen needs a woman to bait a good man in. We women must do our part. I gather he feels once things are settled, he’ll be free of the manor house.”

“How interesting.” So Andalin’s role was to find a man worthy of inheriting. And she, along with the estate, were to be this lucky man’s prize. How cozy the deal sounded when painted that way. Andalin conjured up Papa’s face before he’d left, in order to hide the disgust she suddenly felt. Ellis should not have to leave his home to find peace.

“Don’t fret. Underneath his wretched mask, Lord Cadogen is a good man. He wouldn’t have picked just anyone to take over his beloved home, despite what you might think.”

“I didn’t have much of a say in the matter, but I’m here now, so I’ll try to learn and act my part.”

Mrs. Trenton’s brows rose in surprise, but she must have recognized the closed look on Andalin’s face and didn’t pry. “Never mind all that. Your measurements were sent out to my dressmaker by your housekeeper weeks ago, and I was able to bring with me several dresses for you to try on. She was booked solid for the Season, so the rest of the wardrobe should arrive in a fortnight.”

“Dresses, you say?” Andalin gaped. She already felt like she had enough gowns to clothe an entire village.

Mrs. Trenton giggled. “It is considered proper for a girl to

wear one, and regularly too.”

Andalin grimaced. “I’m sure they are quite lovely, but I haven’t the need for any more of them.”

“It can seem a bit excessive sometimes, but Lord Cadogen has no better use for his money than to spoil you.”

“I could think of more than a hundred better uses to begin with.”

Mrs. Trenton held up her hand. “Very well. But let’s go up and air them out so you can at least see them. There is surely one or two you will not be able to refuse.”

Andalin reluctantly followed Mrs. Trenton up to her lavender bedroom. As they climbed the stairs, Andalin thought about how easily conversation had come between her and their new guest, despite the underlying currents about Andalin’s situation. It had surprised her how Mrs. Trenton had closed the gap of stranger and class in a mere few moments. Had Andalin sufficiently fooled her? Andalin hoped it was possible for them to be friends. She found she was eager for companionship with another young lady after all.

Mrs. Trenton interrupted her thoughts. “Lord Cadogen seems at ease with you. He acts as if he’s almost . . . almost . . .”

“Almost what?” Andalin asked.

Mrs. Trenton looked thoughtful as she reached for the door handle. “I’m not sure yet. But I will let you know when I put my finger on it.”

When they opened the door, they found Hannah unfolding items from a large trunk.

“Good heavens,” Andalin said. Hannah unveiled a white gown with a scarlet ribbon across its empire waistline. A silky shawl and slippers matched the dark red of the ribbon. “This looks fine enough for the queen. There must be some mistake.”

Mrs. Trenton fingered the silky material. “It is a real beauty. You will look stunning when you wear it to your first

ball.”

Andalin squirmed, releasing her own touch on the gown. “I don’t think I am ready. I’m having doubts. Seeing this dress, and seeing you before me, makes it perfectly clear. I’m much too simple. I won’t fool anyone.”

“If you are saying every member of the upper class behaves as well as they dress, then you are perfectly wrong,” Mrs. Trenton said. “There are many of us who are untalented, ordinary, and without style, wit, beauty, or even moral character. The only thing really setting us apart is our money and birth. I wish I could say our privileges and education did more for us, but there are many tradesmen and servicemen with more manners than some in our closest circles.”

“Then, I will need as much of your advice as you can spare. You have motivated me to keep trying, if only so I can try on the dress.”

Mrs. Trenton looked pleased. She reached over and squeezed Andalin’s hand. “I will be perfectly generous with my advice after we try on the dress.”

The next day Lady Kerrigan insisted Andalin and her daughter take in some fresh air. Andalin had been hoping for some time to talk with Mrs. Trenton again privately, and the weather was holding, so a walk around the grounds seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Mrs. Trenton linked arms with Andalin, taking her off guard. She directed Andalin toward an overgrown grassy knoll opposite the orchard. “This place makes me sad.”

“Oh?” Andalin frowned “Why?”

Mrs. Trenton sighed. “I used to play here with Eliana. I suppose you have heard her sad tale?”

Andalin nodded. Sympathy for Mrs. Trenton and all those who ever knew and loved the Cadogen family crept into her heart. Andalin fingered her necklace, which always reminded her she knew what it was like to lose someone so beloved. “I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be. I have many happy memories to think on, and that is what matters now.”

Andalin leaned down and plucked a long string of grass gone to seed. She pulled at the top and scattered the seeds into the soft wind. “You have dealt with your grief well—not even a hint of bitterness.”

Mrs. Trenton followed Andalin’s suit and plucked her own strand of grass to play with. “Don’t be too hard on Lord Cadogen. He is loyal to his memory. It must be difficult to be here all the time and be forced to relive all that horridness.”

Andalin’s curiosity burned inside of her. She wanted to know what had happened. She wanted to know the whole of it, including what had happened to Ellis’s face. She bit her tongue and forced herself to ask after something safer. “Is it hard for you to be here? I mean, after being so recently married? Are you homesick yet?”

Mrs. Trenton blushed. “No, it isn’t hard to be here, at least anymore. Being married and so completely in love has made this trip easier. I am a bit homesick for my husband, but he had to make a trip to London for business, and I would rather not be alone at home. Seeing him again will be even sweeter after some time apart, though I am truly much happier when we are together.”

Andalin was about to ask after her new home when Mrs. Trenton interrupted her thoughts.

“I have a confession to make.”

Andalin could not completely hide her surprise. Confession? Such a word was too full of intrigue to resist. “Yes?”

“I used to be quite enraptured with Lord Cadogen.”

Andalin nearly laughed. “I thought you were going to admit to something shocking. I had guessed as much during our conversation yesterday.”

Mrs. Trenton grinned. “Am I so easy to read? I guess I am. I’m a very open person. I wondered if Lord Cadogen had mentioned it to you before.”

Andalin shook her head. “No, he’s never mentioned it. Are you sure he knew? He is easily preoccupied.”

“I chased after him from the time I was ten years old. There was a time I thought we loved each other. But then, after his family was torn from him, our relationship never rekindled. Of course, we were very young. Only sixteen. Try as I might to get his attention, it seemed his heart was never to be given to anyone again.”

Andalin recalled the few looks and flirtatious words passed between her and Ellis. She knew he was not serious, but his easy manner toward her of late sparked her interest. His heart seemed so completely bound to his past, and she was so completely beneath him that she dared not even hope. She would do better to keep an open mind for the time she was introduced into Society.

Mrs. Trenton brushed the grass from her hand and off her dress. Then the two of them began walking toward the gardens.

“I don’t know why I felt you needed to know all this.” Mrs. Trenton blew out her breath. “I was utterly astonished he brought you here. I couldn’t help but wonder if something in him had changed and maybe you were the reason. Initially only my mother was invited, and I wormed my way into coming along. I wanted to see for myself if Lord Cadogen’s heart had finally returned to him.”

Mrs. Trenton’s revelation surprised Andalin. Well, now Mrs. Trenton could see Ellis was not altered. He was still obtuse and untouchable. And it seemed Andalin was at risk of falling into the same rut Mrs. Trenton had just escaped from—loving Ellis from afar. She would need to guard herself.

“You are so quiet. I hope you do not think badly of me. I assure you I am completely devoted to my husband. Lord Cadogen is a dear, dear friend and has been just that for some time. I am truly happy he has you.” Mrs. Trenton was digging for a confession from Andalin now.

“You misunderstand,” Andalin assured her. “There is nothing between us of that nature. I am finally accepting my

role here, but it is only a means to an end. No, I'm not being completely honest. We have become friends. I drive him mad anytime I open my mouth, but he generally takes it with patience.”

Mrs. Trenton giggled. “Then you are good for him, even if you are only his friend. He is in need of those too.” Mrs. Trenton linked arms with Andalin again and said, “While it's true he has neglected his social duties and done nothing about the hideous rumors spread about him, he really is a good man. Doesn't his mission for justice speak of his high moral character?”

Andalin wasn't sure she agreed with his mission for justice. But she could argue he held to a high moral standard. He had always been a gentleman in her company. His staff loved him as family. Lord Kerrigan vouched for him. And he was devoted to his sister and parents, which spoke volumes of his capacity to love.

“He doesn't scare you, does he?”

Andalin smirked. “The Dark Rider? He might have killed ten men with his eyes covered and his sword hand tied behind his back, but he can't scare me!”

Mrs. Trenton put her hand to her heart. “Oh, brave words! I can't believe I dared think otherwise.”

Andalin laughed. “No, you are very right. I was terrified when I first came here. He would just appear in the cover of darkness, as if from thin air. When he walks, his feet make no noise, so he is constantly surprising me. His voice pierces me to the core without him even yelling. I swear he can see what I am thinking before I even speak. I won't even mention his mask! The man is an anomaly.”

Mrs. Trenton nearly doubled over with laughter. “Oh, Miss Durante! We must be good friends. You have to agree to it this very instant. No one else outside of my family can understand this sordid situation.”

“Yes, please,” Andalin said, brushing her hand over some of the wildflowers growing in their unkept garden. “I've had

so few opportunities for friends that I don't think anything could keep me from refusing."

"Wonderful; it's settled, then! You will call me Katrina, as if we have been friends since childhood."

"Then, you must call me Andalin"—she paused—"but are you sure? You are so far above me . . ."

"Quite the judgment, but I forgive you. Most of my friends are very much spoiled and rude, but I shan't be that way with you."

Andalin exchanged relief for joy. "I was so worried the only thing you would want to talk about was the latest fashions. I have thought of a hundred questions, from laces to buttons."

Katrina put her hand to her throat. "Oh now, I would have plenty to say about lace but nothing to say about buttons. Then again, my mother is a different story. She can be nearly as intimidating as the Dark Rider. When you start feeling speechless around her, then you can rely on those prepared questions on fashion."

Andalin filed the advice away for later. Speaking with Lady Kerrigan was inevitable.

Katrina grinned. "Of course, I won't tell Lord Cadogen what you have said about him. We wouldn't want to provoke his temper."

"I am fairly certain he already knows exactly how I feel. My mouth seems to think on its own accord some days," Andalin said.

"Come," Katrina begged, "now that you are in good humor, we must get you back to start your final dress fittings. My brother sent for the tailor from Thornton Way, as there isn't a dressmaker for miles, and he should be here by now. I insist those dresses fit just right so they properly show off what Braitwood Hall has to offer."

"All right," Andalin said with a grimace, "but it is all too much."

When Andalin and Katrina reentered the house, it was to find Lord Kerrigan and Ellis in the corridor, arguing with Mr. Lewis.

“What in heaven’s name is wrong?” Katrina asked. Andalin appreciated her forthrightness, since she was just as interested to know.

Mr. Lewis looked away, embarrassed. Andalin glanced at the men to see Ellis’s mouth form an angry line and Lord Kerrigan attempt to placate him.

When no one answered, Lord Kerrigan stepped forward. “It seems the local tailor refused to come.”

“He was too cowardly to set his foot in my house,” Ellis growled. “Good riddance!”

Katrina was not to be put off. She folded her arms to match Ellis’s stubbornness. “Andalin is in need of at least one decent fitting. Can’t you make him come?”

“I’m tempted. We have a bunch of milksops in Thornton Way. They need to be taught a lesson.”

Lord Kerrigan clearly disagreed with both of them. “It won’t solve your problems in town or lessen the rumors.”

“No,” Ellis agreed. “You’re right, even if it would bring me the greatest satisfaction. His father was our tailor and probably his father’s father. The Cadogen money paid for the very house he lives in. The man disgusts me.”

Andalin found the whole scene a bit comical. In her mind the tailor was looking out for his best interests—his very life!

Ellis dug his hands into his pockets and admitted, “I haven’t needed a tailor’s service for some time. Between Hannah, Mrs. Lewis, and Matilda, I’ve all the seamstresses I’ve needed.”

“Yes,” Lord Kerrigan added, “and it’s not as if you’ve attended many social gatherings in the past several years either.”

Ellis chuckled and then turned somber as he addressed Andalin. “I am sorry if this disappoints you, Andalin.”

Andalin blushed at such a personal address in public. However, she did have a fairly obvious solution. So obvious, in fact, that it made her giggle.

“Are you laughing?” Katrina asked, bewildered.

Ellis narrowed his eyes as he observed her. “I think she is!”

Andalin dropped her hand. “I’m sorry, but you cannot blame the man.”

Ellis rolled his eyes. “Of course you’d side with him. So you still think I’m some monster who should be feared by all mankind?”

Andalin could see the hurt in Ellis’s eyes, but she refused to play to his sympathies. Instead she rolled her eyes back in a very unladylike, exaggerated way. “Certainly not, but you can’t be surprised he refused to come. After all the stories circulated about you, he’s probably afraid if he makes a mistake, his children will be fatherless before the sun sets.”

Katrina frowned prettily. “And this amuses you? We are in need of a tailor’s services, and Thornton Way only employs one tailor!”

Andalin smiled at her new friend. “Sewing dresses might not seem like an ideal accomplishment for a young lady of the upper crust; nevertheless, it is a skill I own. Between myself and the other household seamstresses, we should manage very well.”

Lord Kerrigan sighed in relief. “Well, this seems to have solved itself. I was afraid I was going to have to hide your sword again.”

Ellis whipped his head to face his friend. “That was you?”

CHAPTER 15

ANDALIN'S FINGERS HURT AFTER SHORTENING the hem of one very full skirt. It was getting late, and she was eager to sneak down to the kitchen before the staff retired for the night. She slipped as noiselessly from her room as she could, priding herself for being nearly as quiet as Ellis was. When she reached the kitchen door, she heard voices just inside. She hesitated when she heard Hannah mention her name. She bit her lip and leaned against the door to listen.

"She has to look just right, or no one will marry her," Hannah said.

"Nonsense," Matilda countered. "She'll have a sizable dowry to entice any man."

"Yes, but she'll have the reputation of Braitwood Hall along with it. No one in their right mind will want to be attached to the Dark Rider."

"Hannah!" Matilda said in a shocking tone. "I won't have ye call our boy that name! He's done right by us for plenty of years. He doesn't deserve that kind of talk."

"Oh, I know. I didn't mean anythin' by it. Only that Andalin will have to look and act her very best. She'll have to fool a lot of people into believin' she's a real lady."

Hannah was right. How could the daughter of a merchant possibly turn into a lady? Everyone was counting on her, and suddenly the pressure overwhelmed Andalin. An urge to sneak back to Corbridge, or maybe a different place altogether, tempted her. But no. She'd promised herself she would try, and try she would.

Andalin braced herself and entered the kitchen.

"Oh, Andalin, come in, child," Matilda invited cheerfully. "Come and eat a slice of pie. I know ye like my berry pie the best."

Andalin glanced at Hannah, who sat at the table, knitting. Hannah nodded her head in her typical stoic manner.

After accepting the pie, Andalin sat in what was quickly becoming her stool. Ignoring what had just transpired, she focused on her reason for coming to the kitchen in the first place. “I know I’ve been busy with our guests the last few days, but I haven’t forgotten about wanting to help Lord Cadogen. Has anyone come up with a plan?”

Matilda glanced at Hannah before smiling uncertainly. “Well,” Matilda said, “we did have one idea we’ve been thinking on.”

“It was my idea,” Hannah corrected.

“Yes, but all of us were thinkin’ it,” Matilda muttered.

“But I was the first to say it,” Hannah added.

Matilda rolled her eyes. “The point is it ain’t somethin’ that can be taken care of right away, so we’ll just bide our time some.”

Matilda turned and started mixing something in a bowl as if the conversation were finished. Andalin glanced at Hannah to see if she would reveal any more on the subject, but she was knitting away as if Andalin weren’t even in the room.

“Aren’t you going to tell me the idea?” Andalin asked, her impatience showing in her tone.

Neither answered. They passed a look between them, sending Andalin back to the days when she was an outsider. The sudden feeling of rejection pushed her to her feet. “Very well,” she said, her voicing wavering, “I am tired, so I will say good night.”

Matilda must have noticed her discomfort. “Oh, child! It’s not like that. We’ll tell ye when the time is right. Ye are a crucial part of the plan. I promise! We just have to do a little groundwork to make sure everythin’ falls into place.”

Andalin didn’t know if she should believe Matilda. She wasn’t a child who could be so easily tricked by her mother into thinking one thing when it was really another. She wasn’t going to beg either.

She put on a tight smile. “I understand.”

Andalin left the kitchen and returned to her bedroom. She saw the white ball gown lying across her chair and remembered her father's question: "Andalin, would you like to be a lady?" If she were a true lady, a ball would be the loveliest thing she could ever imagine. It was easy to picture herself dancing in the arms of a strong and handsome young man. She closed her eyes and swayed back and forth. He would have steely blue eyes and flaxen hair just like—

Andalin stopped. She was beginning to fantasize about Ellis. She'd hardly spoken to him since the Kerrigan family arrived. Instead of rejoicing in her newfound friendship with Katrina, she found herself missing her private conversations with Ellis. It was easier when she'd fancied herself with Lord Kerrigan, because her feelings there were based on pure fantasy and no foundation. Now she finally felt ready to search for a husband, and she had found herself the worst candidate possible.

A few days later Andalin found herself at a quiet breakfast with only Lord Kerrigan and Katrina.

"I heard your dancing lessons are going well," Katrina said, passing a dish of orange marmalade to Andalin.

Andalin glanced at Lord Kerrigan, who smiled warmly in reply. "Yes, Lord Kerrigan has been assisting in my learning. Your brother is an excellent teacher."

He returned the compliment. "And you are an excellent student. I am looking forward to opening the first dance with you at the ball next week. Suitors will flock to your side when they see how you float across the floor." The warm smile he offered in her direction did not affect her as it once did.

The affectionate smile did not escape Katrina's attention, and she winked conspiratorially in Andalin's direction. Andalin's knife paused in the air between the marmalade and her toast.

The past few days had accelerated her friendship with Lord Kerrigan. They were constantly in each other's company,

even though Katrina often dominated the conversation. Andalin noticed Lord Kerrigan was becoming increasingly attentive to her. His ready smile seemed directed her way more than before.

But it wasn't until this moment that she put together what it could all mean. Had Ellis noticed? Would he even care? No, of course he would not want his best friend to fall for a simple country girl disguised as a lady. They were supposed to fool some other unsuspecting gentleman.

Ellis chose that moment to join them. Her heart lurched with pleasure.

"Excuse my tardiness," Ellis said, as he took the empty chair beside Andalin.

She was conscious of her appearance and worried her hair might not be to his liking. He *had* mentioned it a time or two. She tried to act as though his arrival was nothing and continued working on her toast.

"I had no idea you liked marmalade so much." He pointed to her toast.

She looked down to see there was twice as much jelly as bread. Smiling, she took a large bite to prove she had done it on purpose. She coughed once and then gagged down the overly sweet bite.

"I, too, love orange marmalade," Lord Kerrigan said in a chipper voice.

Ellis looked at him strangely, and Andalin prayed he would be blind to what was happening.

Breakfast dragged. Katrina was the only one sensible enough to eat and move on. Andalin, on the other hand, ate as slowly as possible in anticipation of securing a private word with Ellis. She wanted to know why he was late and if he had spent his night combing the trees of the Black Forest for signs of the witch.

Unfortunately, Lord Kerrigan seemed content to sit at the table until noon. Ellis finished his breakfast, looked at the both of them suspiciously, and then excused himself. Andalin

sighed inwardly. There went her chance.

With a gleam of anticipation in his eye, Lord Kerrigan leaned across the table to speak with her. “Do you remember the hill overlooking Thornton Way?”

Andalin nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“What think you of an open carriage ride there tomorrow? I know it’s a bit chilly, but we would dress appropriately and bring blankets. It’s not fair if the gentlemen are the only ones who get outside.”

“What a lovely idea,” Andalin said. Her outings were too few and far between, and because of the change in season and the cold weather, Ellis had put an end to her daily horse riding. “If Lord Cadogen approves, of course.”

Lord Kerrigan grinned triumphantly and jumped to his feet. “I will ask him immediately. I will take leave of you, but we shall meet after teatime for our next dance lesson.”

Andalin pushed her plate away. At times like this, when her mind could not sort itself out, a girl required a very good book.

CHAPTER 16

SLIPPING AWAY TO THE LIBRARY, Andalin soon found herself happily thumbing through a book that caught her eye.

“I didn’t know you were interested in sailing.”

Andalin looked up to see Ellis watching her quietly from the door. “Forgive me. I did not hear you come in.” She made to stand, but he put up his hand to insist she stay seated.

“I have learned two things about you this morning. First, marmalade and now sailing.”

Andalin took in the sketch of a large warship before closing the book. “I know little of sailing, which is why this title so appealed to me. Have you been to the sea before?”

Ellis nodded, folding his arms comfortably across his chest. “Many times.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the ocean. Did you ever fight pirates?”

“Yes, actually,” Ellis said with a small laugh. “Why would you ask?”

Andalin remembered the last story she had told Saber and Lily, the children from Corbridge who loved hearing her stories. “Did you know a man named Red Beard?”

Ellis’s eyes turned playful. “The best swordsman of the sea?”

Andalin gaped. “Then, it’s true!”

“I don’t know of what you’re speaking, so I can’t confirm.”

Andalin waved him into the room and was pleased when he sat on the small settee by her under the window. “The way the story goes, you fought the dreaded pirate Red Beard to avenge your darling, Winifred. You fooled him by pretending to be his friend, and when you had learned his weakness with the sword, you finally attacked. After beating him soundly, he called for mercy, and you relented. You stole back your

ladylove, and poor Red Beard was so angry he ripped his beard clean off his chin.”

She waited while he finished laughing. “Well?” Andalin asked impatiently. “Is any of it true?”

Ellis wiped a tear from his eye. “Sometimes I truly forget myself when you are around. It will be a hard day for all of Braitwood Hall when we marry you off.”

Did he wish she would stay? She suppressed her feelings, remembering he had not answered her question, and tried again. “I must know if there is even a shred of truth about the story.”

Ellis gave her half a smile. “I hate to take away all the mystery of the Dark Rider. It seems to be all the self-respect I own.”

“Please,” Andalin said with a touch of sarcasm. “It’s entirely your own fault!” Then she took her book and rapped it none too lightly on his leg. “But is it true?”

Ellis stole the book from her. “Patience. If I’m going to reveal any secrets, it isn’t going to be to a woman who beats it from me.”

Andalin laughed. For once their conversation was not so serious. “All right, but I really must know.”

“Why?”

Andalin told him about the children. “Saber especially loved to hear stories about you. His father ran off, and his poor mother is forced to work long hours doing laundry and sewing to provide for her little ones. The tales of the Dark Rider are a good distraction from his sad reality.”

Ellis’s smile grew soft as he spoke. It was rare to see him so relaxed and carefree, and she very much preferred it.

“It’s true I’ve fought pirates. Not because I was ever a real sailor but because I was unlucky enough to be on board when we were attacked. Any skill I have with the sword must be credited to my father. I’m not the best, by any means. Men mostly duel with pistols these days, for good reason.”

“And Winifred?” Andalin did not know why she was asking. If Ellis hadn’t fallen for the beautiful and caring Katrina, then no amount of Winifreds could have turned his head.

“Winifred? No, I don’t think I have ever met a woman with that name.” Ellis looked sideways at her. “Are you disappointed? I know how young ladies adore stories of unrequited love.”

Andalin giggled and then covered her mouth. “I hate to admit it, but we do. Saber didn’t care much for them, so he won’t mind. I hope someday to tell him all the stories I know about you. The real ones.”

Ellis looked appreciatively at her. He sank deeply into his seat and closed his eyes.

“Ellis?” Andalin asked.

Ellis didn’t open his eyes—just mumbled, “Hmm?”

“Were you out last night?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Andalin grabbed her book from his relaxed hands and thumped him again on his leg. He opened his eyes for a moment and laughed but then closed them again and resumed his relaxed state.

It pleased her to see him so comfortable in her company. She opened her book and started to read. When she told her story to Saber, she would also include a few details about ships. The boy would most likely never have a book on ships to learn for himself, and he had a great sense of adventure. She only hoped she would get a chance to see him again.

Andalin read several pages before she heard a soft snore come from Ellis. It felt natural sitting next to him. She was glad he’d sought her out. She craved time with just him. Truly, she believed it would steady her nerves as she spent the next week preparing for her very first ball.

Instead of reading, she found herself staring at Ellis. From the strong lines of his jaw to his prominent Adam’s

apple, she memorized every detail. She noticed the way the tuft of blond hair on top curled slightly as it fell over his forehead and the top of his mask.

That dratted mask.

It ruined the perfect image she had in her mind of what Ellis should look like. She wanted to know every part of his face. A desire like she had never felt before took over her, and she reached over to his mask to lift it up.

She froze, her fingers mere inches from his face. What was she doing? Even if she wanted to see the scars beneath his mask, she could never simply peek. It was too fitted to his face. She would have to untie it from the back. His head was smashing the part tying it anyway, and it would be impossible to remove.

As if she had commanded him with her thoughts, Ellis turned his head. The strings of his mask were staring her right in the face. Andalin carefully closed her book and removed it from her lap. Was she really, *really* ready? Her curiosity pushed her to act, but she had to be sure she was prepared for what she would see. She thought about how much her feelings had changed for Ellis. If she were honest with herself, then she would admit she felt the closest she had ever felt to loving a man. Never had she worried and hoped for someone like she did for Ellis. Never had she desired someone's smile or approval so much either.

If she truly loved him, then his scars would not make any difference to her. She would love him still. While she might recoil at first, she would get used to seeing them. She would have to, if they were ever to . . .

Andalin couldn't finish her train of thought. She had to see first, and then she would know if it was even a possibility. But how to remove the mask? She could untie the strings and loosen it enough to peek. Then she could retie it and act as if she had never seen anything. When he awoke, she would chat politely with him and he'd never be the wiser.

Her heart raced. An opportunity like this might never present itself again. It was now or never. Her hands shook as

she raised them to the strings at the back of his head. She brought one knee up on the couch, where she would have a better view of the top of his face. She peered down at him and ever so carefully pulled at the strings. Her breath stilled in her throat. The knot slowly came undone. She swallowed and released the tension in the mask until she could see the first part of his forehead.

An arm snaked around her waist, dropping her across Ellis's lap in one fluid motion. He pulled her to him, smashing her face against his. Her head became the leverage he needed to keep his mask in place while he used his other hand to wind the string until it was tight again. He must have shoved the string into his tight collar, because he suddenly had another arm around Andalin. He turned her face so their lips met.

Andalin was completely taken back with Ellis's fiery kiss. Time stopped, and the rest of the world ceased to exist. Her lips burned when he finally released her. Dazed, she could not remember anything for a moment. Only that she had experienced the sweetest moment of her life. Then suddenly she realized she was sitting on Ellis's lap and looking into a pair of very angry eyes.

Andalin's eyes widened in return, and she peeled herself from his lap and back to her seat on the settee.

Ellis stood and retied his mask properly. His hands fell to his hips. "That was a dirty trick."

She was speechless. What was she supposed to do, agree? Embarrassment burned her cheeks like hot irons.

Ellis tore his gaze away from her to the window, his heavy breathing making it hard for her to discern how angry he really was.

Andalin curled up on the couch, her hands clasped together in what felt like an extremely guilty position.

"Someday I hope to not have to wear this mask. But that day is not today." Andalin whipped her head upward. His voice wasn't angry at all. It was calm, almost regretful.

"Are your scars so very bad?"

Ellis nodded. “I’m afraid my scars are of the worst kind. They are worse than ugly.”

Andalin stood. “You are considerate to keep others from being uncomfortable at the sight of them. But we are good friends now. At least, I hope you feel we are. I can get used to seeing you without your mask. I know I can. You deserve to be free of that contraption, at least in your own home.”

Ellis stared at her but did not respond right away. Finally, he said, “I thank you, Annie. For looking past my mask and seeing me as I really am.”

Andalin’s breath caught. She loved him. She knew it in that very instant, and the thought filled her entire being. She did see past his mask. She saw the caring, loyal man from inside. She stepped toward him.

“Please”—he held up his hand—“be still for a minute. I need to distance myself from you, but I have not said what I came to the library to say.”

Ellis was a greater gentleman than she had given him credit for. Andalin took her seat again, her mind racing in a million directions. Was he going to tell her he felt the same way? Dare she hope?

“This might come as a surprise to you, but—”

“Lord Cadogen?” Katrina interrupted from the doorway. Andalin released the breath she was unaware she’d still been holding.

“Yes?” Ellis said as he turned to face Katrina.

“I was wondering if I might have a word with you in private.”

Ellis looked at Andalin and then reluctantly nodded to Katrina. Andalin waved her in. “If you will excuse me, I have the book I want.”

After leaving the two alone with the door wide open, Andalin went to find a quiet spot to read in the main floor sitting room. Well, the only sitting room without Holland covers draped over the sofas.

As she settled herself into a secluded chair by a corner window, she wondered what Katrina and Ellis could be talking about. How many times had she wanted to speak with Ellis alone? Was it truly as simple as asking like Katrina had?

Andalin opened her book so anyone passing by would think she was reading. And then she closed her eyes and replayed Ellis's kiss in her mind. Her cheeks warmed, and she hid her grin behind the pages. Eventually she gave up after reading the first two sentences over and over again and closed the book.

A preoccupation with thoughts of Ellis would never do. The likelihood of him confessing his undying love, or even feeling such depth of emotion for her, was laughable. He never would have kissed her had she acted like a decent young lady. Whether he reciprocated her feelings or not, she would always have the sweet memory of their kiss.

CHAPTER 17

LADY KERRIGAN, LIKE HER DAUGHTER, had requested a private moment with Ellis. She, too, needed to speak with him. He'd wager it was about the same thing: her son and Annie. Kerrigan was a grown man and could make his own decisions. They should be speaking to him, not Ellis.

Ellis went to his room first and collected his riding cloak and gloves. After he spoke with Lady Kerrigan, he was going for a ride. There were too many women in his house. Mrs. Trenton had only voiced what he had already concluded only hours before. But something more agitated him. Kerrigan's feelings aside, Ellis had kissed Annie. He slapped his riding gloves against his leg.

Unintentional or not, it had happened. Certainly he thought about it a time or ten, but he had maintained control. She was such a curious filly. What would she think of him when she discovered what he was hiding? He thought his heart impenetrable, but Annie had changed everything. She was in his mind all day, every day. Her feelings now dictated many of his choices. There was no denying it; he was not immune to falling in love.

Ellis found Lady Kerrigan waiting patiently for him in the drawing room. He remembered her sitting in the same upright chair when she'd come to visit his mother. At least this memory of his past was a pleasant one.

His mother had been just a little younger than Lady Kerrigan, but he imagined today she would have looked similar, each of them with streaks of gray and small lines of age around their eyes and mouth. Ellis observed Lady Kerrigan while she read from a book in her lap. She was elegant and refined, just like his mother had been. Now it was Lady Kerrigan whom he looked to for advice.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked. "I heard you wanted to speak with me."

Lady Kerrigan smiled up at him and motioned to the chair next to her. "Sit with me for a moment."

Ellis dropped his gloves onto the small table next to him, making sure Lady Kerrigan saw the gloves, and hoped she would be brief. He relaxed back into his chair. Lady Kerrigan took her role as surrogate mother a little too seriously.

“I have been watching your ward.”

“Oh?” Ellis wasn’t sure he wanted to hear her disapproval.

“She is very beautiful. Does it not worry you?”

Ellis had questioned the fact himself in the beginning, but after a decade he was beginning to think it didn’t matter anymore . . . any of it. “Mrs. Trenton is lovely too, but you never forbade her from being here.”

“I am not going to argue with you, Lord Cadogen. I think she is very fine. I was worried about your plan, but her speech and manners are more than passable. She has a certain charm about her. You chose well.”

Ellis waited for Lady Kerrigan to bring up her son, but she did not. She must have been the only one to miss the obvious affection Kerrigan had for Annie. Ellis was relieved he did not have to discuss it again. “I am grateful for your approval.”

“You have it,” Lady Kerrigan said without batting an eyelash. “But there is something particular about her, isn’t there?”

Ellis kept his face impassive. Today was not the day to reveal his secrets to anyone. “I did not make this decision lightly.”

Lady Kerrigan lifted her chin and studied him carefully. “I see.”

The white ball gown transformed Andalin into a fairy tale the moment she put it on. The lady’s maid attending her pinned several large curls on the back of her head. Then she gathered the remaining ringlets into a matching ribbon and pulled them over Andalin’s shoulder. The final touch was her

mother's necklace. The elegant neckline of her dress framed the jewel, with the garnet's color matching the sash on her dress as if they were made for each other. Never had Andalin felt more beautiful. She relished her appearance for a moment and tried to still the butterflies in her stomach threatening to make her sick.

Strangely, the hardest part of the night would be Ellis's absence. She, Lord Kerrigan, Katrina, and their mother had joined a small house party in Newcastle. Andalin would stay on as a guest for two weeks and practice her newfound social skills on their hosts, Mr. and Mrs. White, who were Lady Kerrigan's brother and his wife. Without any children to call their own, they doted on Katrina and Lord Kerrigan.

Tonight was the first of the two balls Andalin would be attending. She looked at the door again. Lord Kerrigan would escort her to the carriage ten minutes before eight, where they would make the short ride to the home of Lord Gent, who was a viscount or something. Andalin frowned. She could not remember his rank. She forced herself to take deep breaths. Ladies did not sweat, but merchant's daughters were not so fortunate.

Andalin made her way to the foyer. There Lord Kerrigan waited for her. His eyes met hers, and his smile froze. "Miss Durante, you took my breath away."

Lord Kerrigan cut a dashing figure himself with his formal dress clothes and a certain distinguished air. He was much too handsome for her.

"I assure you it is your sister's selection of this dress, not me. Her taste is exquisite." Andalin felt her cheeks warm as she tried to return the compliment. "And you look . . ."

"Sharp?" Lord Kerrigan filled in for her. They laughed together, she with trepidation and he with a glint of something more.

"I apologize." Andalin shook her head. "I am quite undone tonight. I know the moment I walk into the ballroom I will be found out."

“I shall be right here to thwart any prying questions. My mother has exercised her influence by speaking in your behalf to all the right sources. I do not expect anything even remotely uncomfortable for you. No doubt your beauty will speak for itself, which will not help my desire to keep you all to myself.” Lord Kerrigan reached for her hand and placed it on his arm. He was warm and secure and without a troubled past to cumber him.

Lord Kerrigan’s appreciative gaze troubled and pleased her simultaneously. His attentions had only increased since they had left Braitwood Hall. If her heart had not already committed itself to Ellis, she would have wanted Lord Kerrigan to have it. He seemed a more eager recipient, and she did like him a great deal. But logic had little effect on the heart.

Moments later they climbed into the carriage with Mr. White and his wife. Lady Kerrigan excused herself to be with her convalescing niece, a daughter of the late Lord Kerrigan’s sister who resided nearby, and Katrina was to join them later at the ball. Her husband had arrived shortly before, and Andalin was to meet him at the ball. Somehow, in Katrina’s absence, Andalin’s confidence waned.

They arrived before she was ready. And there, in the shadow of the grand house, she remembered all too clearly her true nature. She was just a lowly peasant girl in disguise, so very far from home and everything she knew. Lord Kerrigan assisted her down and escorted her to the house. She hoped he did not notice the way her hand trembled on his arm.

“What do you think of the place?” Lord Kerrigan asked, pulling her through the colonnaded entrance. Exquisite statues and potted plants greeted them just inside. Lord Kerrigan chuckled at her astonishment. He led her through the introductions to their hosts and then into the ballroom. Andalin did not even hear her own name announced. She was too overcome with the number of dazzling people visiting in small groups around the room. The murals on the ceiling along with thousands of bright candles left Andalin breathless.

She let Lord Kerrigan guide her to a chair along the side.

“Here, sit before you are so overcome you fall over.”

“Am I so transparent?” Andalin gracefully moved her dress to the side like she’d been taught and took her seat.

“Everything is more elegant than I ever imagined!”

“If you leave your mouth hanging open for a moment longer, someone might ask you to sing,” Lord Kerrigan said with an indulgent smile and sat in the chair next to hers.

Andalin pinched her lips closed and returned his smile.

“Might I claim the first set of dances?” Lord Kerrigan asked. “If I wait to ask, I might lose my chance to be your partner.”

“I don’t imagine any competition . . .” The end of Andalin’s sentence dropped off when three gentlemen surrounded them.

“Please introduce us, Lord Kerrigan,” a younger man begged. He was the shortest but not any less handsome than the other two.

Andalin looked to Lord Kerrigan. He stood and helped her to her feet.

“This is Miss Durante, of Thornton Way.”

Andalin curtsied while feeling quite conspicuous.

“Miss Durante,” Lord Kerrigan continued. “Meet Mr. Underwood, recently moved to the neighborhood.”

“Charmed,” Mr. Underwood said. “And these are my friends Mr. Higgins and Mr. Johnson.”

They bowed, and Andalin curtsied again. Mr. Underwood bore an easy smile. “If you are not otherwise engaged, miss, might I partner you in the next dance?”

“After mine,” Lord Kerrigan said. The other two claimed their places in the lineup, and Andalin realized she would not be sitting the entire night. She was at a loss for words, which was not like her at all. She was quite afraid of sounding like a country bumpkin.

“I’m very glad I asked first,” Lord Kerrigan said with a

gleam in his eye, once the others excused themselves. Andalin smiled, still taken back. She cast a glance around at the other ladies. Their stations vastly exceeded hers; all had beauty, grace, and accomplishments to recommend them. And yet, she was so readily accepted, at least by the gentlemen. A thrill raced up her spine. Perhaps one night of pretense could be excused.

When the music started, Lord Kerrigan swept her onto the dance floor for the first set. She wouldn't have wanted to open the night with anyone else. Dancing with her teacher helped alleviate her fears.

"Your feet are hardly touching the floor," he said. "The mark of a great dancer, you know."

"It isn't my skill for dancing but my happiness making me float."

Lord Kerrigan stared deeply into her eyes. "Are you really happy?"

Andalin did not know if she should read more into his question. "Yes," Andalin assured him. "I feel like a princess."

After their dance ended, she was quickly caught up by Mr. Underwood. Her new partner gave her little chance to think, let alone speak. He talked as fast as a pecking chicken, and before the song ended, she knew his entire life history.

Mr. Higgins claimed her for a quadrille. That particular dance made it harder to converse, but she earned herself plenty of eyebrow wagging and flirtatious glances from her partner. She was just about to sit down when a man grabbed her roughly by the arm and yanked her to face him.

"I knew I recognized you."

Andalin gaped at the dark eyes staring back at her. Several people turned to watch and listen. It was Mr. Crow, from Corbridge.

Shock kept Andalin from acting. Should she deny the obvious? Or should she try to avoid further disruption from Mr. Crow?

“I would appreciate it if you would unhand the lady,” Lord Kerrigan interrupted.

Mr. Crow reluctantly released her gloved arm, and it ached where his grip had pressed into her skin. She quickly stepped behind Lord Kerrigan’s protective stance.

“I know this girl, and she is no lady,” Mr. Crow accused. His large shoulders and broad body made for an intimidating opponent.

Andalin’s stomach flipped. She never thought something besides her own stupidity would make her stand out at the ball. Never in her wildest dreams did she ever imagine running into Mr. Crow again.

“You are wrong,” Lord Kerrigan said, his voice low and heated. He leaned toward Mr. Crow, daring him to say something. “I suggest you apologize and leave before I have you thrown out.”

Lord Kerrigan’s bravery quite amazed Andalin. Mr. Crow was not a man to be trifled with.

“No, you are in the wrong,” Mr. Crow snarled. “I have a claim on this woman, and I can tell you she is dressed far above her station.”

Their argument was gaining a small audience. Lord Kerrigan lowered his voice even more. “Careful with your choice of words, lest you utter what cannot be forgiven. Let us speak of this as gentlemen, outside.”

It was with great relief when Mr. Crow followed behind Lord Kerrigan to the door. Tempers flared between the men as they waited for a servant to fetch their coats and Andalin’s wrap. As they pulled open the door, they found Katrina and her husband ready to come in.

“Katrina!” Tears welled up in Andalin’s eyes, and she threw herself into her friend’s embrace.

“Dear heavens!” Katrina exclaimed. “What has happened?”

Andalin wiped at the moisture under her eyes and

attempted to hold the rest of her tears at bay. Lord Kerrigan motioned for Mr. Crow to pass in front of him onto the veranda. “Follow the path to the side of the house, where we’ll be out of sight.”

Mr. Crow grumbled, but he did as Lord Kerrigan said.

“Looks like you need a hand,” Mr. Trenton remarked.

“In this case, two of us will be better than one,” Lord Kerrigan muttered.

Mr. Trenton possessed dark features and a boyish face. But it was his small frame that captured Andalin’s attention. He would be little help to Lord Kerrigan. Katrina’s apprehensive expression matched her own as the three men disappeared around the corner to a side lawn.

Without a word passing between Andalin and Katrina, they darted after the men. Katrina held Andalin back before they, too, rounded the corner.

“You cannot let them know we are watching,” Katrina whispered. “Dueling is against the law. We will have to close our eyes before anything happens so we can honestly say we didn’t witness anything.”

“They aren’t going to duel, are they?” Andalin shook her head. “Not about me! My pretentious reputation is not worth anyone’s death!”

“Your reputation? How vexing. Well, my brother will know what to do. Most likely nothing untoward will happen here. Likely they will just set up a time and a place for later. I heard that is how it is done.”

They crawled behind the bush bordering the house, careful not to snag their dresses, and peered around the corner. Hanging lanterns glowed from strategic parts of the lawn to show off the attractiveness of the house; they gave just enough light for Andalin to see how dire the situation truly was.

“There aren’t any women watching now,” Mr. Crow said, “so I can tell you and your friend to hand over the girl.”

“There’s nothing to tell us, unless it’s an apology.” Lord

Kerrigan took a firm stance, refusing to back down. Either he was very brave or very foolish. It was clear Mr. Crow was broader and stronger, but Andalin could always hope Lord Kerrigan knew how to defend himself.

“Not on your life!” Mr. Crow argued. “I will set the terms here. That woman might have come with you, but she’s leaving with me!”

Andalin moaned. “He’ll kill them. They need to let me go with Mr. Crow.” Katrina grabbed her hand and squeezed it. With all her brave declarations, Andalin’s feet were cemented to the ground. Mr. Crow was about as welcoming to her right now as the witch from the Black Forest.

“You can huff all you want, old man, but your ticket home will now not only be an apology but a promise to never seek out Miss Durante again.”

Andalin’s mouth dropped open. She wanted to see the chivalrousness in all of this, but how could she, when Lord Kerrigan was digging his own grave?

Mr. Crow gave a low chuckle. “Does the dandiprat have a weapon to back up his words? Because from where I stand, I’m the bigger man. You wouldn’t stand a chance against me in fisticuffs. And”—Mr. Crow paused as he reached inside of his dress coat—“it looks like I’m the only one who came prepared.”

Andalin heard Katrina gasp, but it took her a second to see what Mr. Crow was holding. The vile man moved, and light reflected off the short blade of a knife.

Katrina’s husband pulled Lord Kerrigan back a step. Lord Kerrigan held up his hands in front of him. “You’re not a fair fighter. Shame.”

Mr. Crow snorted. “Me? Not likely. Now, the three of us are going to walk quietly back to the front of the house, where you’re going to send that pretty girl home with me.”

CHAPTER 18

IT WAS ALL OVER. ANDALIN'S fairy tale would have a tragic ending. Her heart sank, and her throat tightened in fear.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Lord Kerrigan told Mr. Crow, his voice unwavering and his feet unmoving, "but I'm not the dolt you take me for. I've got a wild card you haven't thought of."

"What?" Mr. Crow spat.

Andalin saw Mr. Crow freeze, and then his face grew tight and unnatural. Andalin nearly stumbled onto the lawn with the effort of craning her head to see. There was a man behind Mr. Crow who held the tip of a sword to Mr. Crow's back.

Ellis! Only he could sneak up on a man like that. But what was he doing here?

"Drop it, or I'll run you through."

Mr. Crow obeyed, dropping his knife. He turned slowly to address his captor. "The Dark Rider!"

Ellis nodded.

"Why, the Knight of the Road is merely a man with a mask. I'm not afraid of you."

"But you are. The Dark Rider has a keen sense of smell, and you reek with fear."

"You can put the sword down. I was just having a bit of fun."

Ellis shrugged. "I enjoy cutting off the limbs of imbeciles." Andalin choked. Was he serious? With a flick of Ellis's wrist the man's jacket buttons were cut off. "You had your chance to leave peaceably. You also had your chance for a fair fight. I will leave nothing else to chance. Swear you will leave this instant and never seek out Miss Durante again, and I will only cut off your arms."

Mr. Crow sputtered, his fear now very evident. "My

arms? Listen, I swear I'll never go near her again, but don't cut off my arms. As one gentleman to another, I've got a business to run. A man needs his arms!"

"You are not a gentleman, whatever title you own or clothes you wear. I'm not even sure you are a man. Half a man would not dare dishonor a lady like you tried to do tonight. Why would I show you any mercy when you would not show my friends any?"

Andalin did not know her feet were moving until she was right next to Lord Kerrigan. "Please! No bloodshed!" She begged. She wouldn't have Ellis's reputation further ruined because of her.

"Hold her back!" Ellis ordered sharply. Lord Kerrigan grabbed both of Andalin's shoulders in a firm grip.

Mr. Crow glanced back at Andalin. "Listen to the lady. Have mercy!"

Ellis looked from Mr. Crow to Andalin. "Nay, this scoundrel deserves a consequence."

Andalin knew she could appeal to the real Ellis, but right now it seemed the Dark Rider was the one standing in front of her. His words were tight and angry, his sword hand unflinching.

"Can't he give up his money instead?" Andalin asked. The faces of Saber and Lily came to her mind. "Yes, make him build a school for the poor in Corbridge and pay a teacher's salary. You can do whatever you want if you hear he has gone back on his word."

Ellis did not speak right away. "Very well. The lady's terms will stand. Corbridge is too small of a place for you to hide, and if you go back on your word tonight and seek out Miss Durante again, then it won't be just your arms you will be missing."

Mr. Crow nodded again and again. He backed away slowly until he was five feet from Ellis and then turned and ran.

"Coward," Lord Kerrigan muttered. He released Andalin.

She stood there, unsure of what to do. She stared at Ellis as he came to her. She was half-surprised, half-not when he put his arms gently around her. She flung herself at him, and her whole body started shaking.

“There, there,” Ellis said, rubbing her back comfortingly. “It’s just the shock. You will be well in a moment.”

“You were going to cut off his arms!” Andalin accused, refusing to enjoy the proximity or Ellis’s gentle touch.

“No, I was not.” Ellis chuckled.

Andalin turned her head upward. “You weren’t?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t want to dirty my sword on the blood of such a waste of a man.”

Andalin felt her trembling slowly disperse. “That is a relief.”

Ellis released her but kept her tucked under his arm. “I think you’ve had enough entertainment for one night.”

Andalin turned to see Katrina clinging to the arm of her husband, and Lord Kerrigan looking extremely amused.

“You were a little slow in turning up, don’t you think?” Lord Kerrigan pointed at Ellis.

“You weren’t worried, were you?” Ellis countered.

“I do not know about the rest of you,” Katrina said, putting her hands on her hips, “but I certainly was!”

“The important thing is no one was hurt,” Mr. Trenton said.

“Oh!” Katrina suddenly turned to Andalin. “You haven’t been introduced to my husband.”

“Yes, we forgot that little detail,” Lord Kerrigan added. “This is Mr. Trenton. Trenton, meet Lord Cadogen’s ward, Miss Durante.”

Andalin curtsied politely, and Mr. Trenton bowed his head in return. There was respect in his eyes, in all of their eyes. She had passed an unspoken test, it appeared, and she

felt for the first time like a gentle-bred lady.

Mr. Trenton cleared his throat. “Now that we’re friends, maybe someone would explain what this was about.”

Lord Kerrigan straightened his dress coat. “You sure picked a devil of a man for an enemy, Miss Durante.”

Andalin owed them an explanation after the trouble she’d caused. “Mr. Crow is from Corbridge. With his newest business acquisition, he came into a great deal of money. I had no idea his circle of acquaintances extended this far, but I am not surprised. He can be very intimidating when he wants to be.”

Ellis nodded like he understood her meaning. “I think we can all imagine why he was after you.”

Andalin shivered. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think he would be able to find me.”

“I doubt he’ll receive many more invitations in Society,” Lord Kerrigan remarked. “Such behavior won’t go unnoticed. It smears the hosts’ reputations right along with the rabble-rouser.”

“Will that happen here?” Andalin asked carefully. She couldn’t bear the thought of dragging anyone else into this mess.

Lord Kerrigan shook his head. “It takes more than a scuffle to damage the reputation of a viscount. Our host tonight is a good friend of mine, and he can be very understanding. Others, though, will be on their guard where Mr. Crow is concerned.”

“Thank you. I apologize for everything.” Andalin’s head was starting to hurt. She lifted her hand to her temple.

Ellis wrapped her hand around his arm. “If you are in agreement, I think we should return you to the Whites’.”

Andalin focused on the warmth from Ellis’s arm and his hand on hers. She was grateful for his understanding. “Yes, please. I couldn’t go back to the ball. And, really, all this excitement has worn me out.”

The group started walking to the front of the home toward their carriages. She relished the comfort of Ellis's touch. He helped her into a carriage, and then he stood outside, speaking with the others. Andalin pulled the lap blanket over her dress and felt the immediate warmth of a hot brick placed on the floor for their feet. There were definite advantages to being a member of the upper class. She rested her head against the seat and yawned. Her first ball, the pressure to be at her best, Mr. Crow's sudden appearance, and then Ellis's timely arrival had exhausted her. She couldn't wait to be back at the Whites' and in her bed.

She was surprised when Ellis climbed into the coach and shut the door behind him. He took the seat across from her.

"Don't worry; I don't think anyone saw me join you in here. I wouldn't risk your reputation at all if I were not so concerned for your safety."

"Are you replacing Lord Kerrigan as my escort home?" Andalin asked.

"I think under the circumstances it would be best," Ellis answered.

Andalin was too tired to sort it out in her mind. "Why?"

"He can explain to the others how Mr. Crow was out of line and tell them you have been sent home with a headache. Everyone will understand you were upset, but they won't think on your reputation a minute longer once Kerrigan vouches for you. He is a powerful man in reputation and position."

"Oh," Andalin said. She was relieved everything could be smoothed over. The carriage started rolling forward. There was one more thing she needed to know. "Ellis?"

"Hmm?"

"How is it you were here the moment we needed you?" She had dearly wanted Ellis to see her dressed up, and now, after the tumult of events, her wish was coming true.

"I have been in town all along. Lord Kerrigan and I thought it best I kept an eye out for you. As my ward, you will find my enemies could easily become yours."

Andalin thought of Ellis's threats toward Mr. Crow. It was no wonder people were afraid of him.

"Then, were you waiting outside when we came out?"

Ellis stared at her. She squirmed under his intense gaze. What was he thinking? It seemed like eons before he answered, and when he did, it was with a question of his own.

"How do you feel about Kerrigan?"

Andalin clenched her hands together in her lap. "I don't know." She wanted to be honest with him, to tell him she was confused with the way Lord Kerrigan acted. She wanted to assure Ellis she was devoted to *him* and no one else. But she didn't have the courage to be so forward without any hints of his regard for her.

"I want to tell you . . ." Ellis didn't finish.

"What?" Andalin wanted to know. She needed to know.

"There is more to this than meets the eye. More to me. I just don't know if this is the time to tell you."

Andalin stared across the seat at Ellis—his calm demeanor, his ever-present mask separated him from her. What did he mean? "Why would now *not* be the time?"

Ellis shrugged. Then suddenly he said, "You look very beautiful tonight."

She blushed and wondered if her cheeks now matched the rest of her. "You are avoiding my question."

Ellis shook his head. "I might be the Dark Rider, but I am a man first."

Andalin turned to look out of the window, frustrated. He was speaking in riddles, and she was too tired to make any sense of them.

Ellis reached over and took her hands in his. She turned back to face him, her mind full of questions.

"If Kerrigan offered for your hand, would you want me to give him permission?"

“He would never—”

Ellis stopped her. “This is what we have planned for.”

Andalin cast her gaze down to their hands. His large warm hands encircled her much smaller ones. She felt safe. She felt at home. She did not want Lord Kerrigan to offer for her.

“Mrs. Trenton and I have both seen signs he might be attached to you. That day in the library, she came to speak to me about it. I was hoping you would confide in me if there has been some sort of development between you. If you don’t care to break any confidences, I understand.”

Andalin bit her lower lip. “You know as much as I do. But surely you wouldn’t want your best friend connected to me. Not when you know better than anyone of my upbringing.”

Ellis rubbed his thumb against her fingers. “You are my ward and a lady. Lord Kerrigan would be lucky to have such a sensible woman by his side.”

Andalin softly giggled. “Sensible?”

Ellis smiled. “I thought your idea tonight of a school ingenious. Though, if I were to tell Kerrigan your curiosity and temper has given you the mark of a troublemaker, he might just rescind his offer before it’s been properly made.”

This drew a real laugh. She didn’t laugh like this with Lord Kerrigan. And yet, Lord Kerrigan hadn’t an ugly past or a desire for vengeance so strong it monopolized his thoughts. It would be much better for her if she did love Lord Kerrigan.

Andalin grew serious. “Since we aren’t yet certain of Lord Kerrigan’s feelings, let’s not speak of it. It might never come to pass.”

Ellis gave her a small smile and nodded in agreement. He released her hands and sat back in his seat.

“Ellis?”

“Yes, sweet Annie.”

Andalin's arms tingled at the low tone of his voice. The recent memory of him kissing her flashed through her mind. "I hope you will be ready to tell me soon what has been on your mind."

"So do I."

When the carriage stopped, Ellis brought Annie into the house. The butler nodded a quiet welcome, which must have surprised Annie. Then Ellis escorted her up the stairs and stopped in front of her room.

"How did you know this was my door?" Annie asked.

Ellis stared at the painting on the wall next to her. He wasn't afraid; he was just careful. "I'm very protective of the people I care about," he explained.

Annie's beauty tonight made speaking around her more difficult than normal.

Her long eyelashes batted in concern. "You can't help everyone. Bad things happen."

Ellis knew this, but he also knew he would never be able to live through the loss of another loved one. He wanted to be the Dark Rider tonight. He wanted to keep Mr. Crow and anyone else who threatened Annie on the other end of his sword.

"Where will you stay tonight?" Annie asked.

Ellis felt sheepish. He hated keeping so much from her. "I'll stay here."

Annie's brow furrowed as if she was trying to piece together the little information he was giving her. "Do the Whites know?"

Ellis grinned. "Yes, they know. I have my secrets, but I am more honest than I look."

Annie's lips quirked. "Yes, it's the mask."

Ellis rarely felt the mask on his face anymore. He had worn it for so many years. Even so, it was a constant reminder

to him of what he had lost. He hated it. “Does it really change things?”

Annie shrugged her dainty shoulders. “If you’re asking if it helps fuel the wicked rumors about you, then yes. Maybe if it were pink, it wouldn’t be so fearsome.”

Ellis chuckled. “I will have one made up. I will wear it when we dine together at home.”

Annie scrunched her nose. “I don’t know if I could keep a straight face.”

“Nor I. You do have a way of making me laugh.” Ellis hadn’t had a reason to laugh or be happy for such a long time. He wasn’t ready for Annie to leave him. And if she did marry Kerrigan, he would be forced to see her often. It would be a punishment every time he did, knowing she was not his.

“Good night, then, sweet Annie.” Ellis reluctantly relinquished her hand. He watched her enter her room and close the door behind her, and he clenched his fists. What was he playing at? He was vying for her affections when it was completely impossible for them to be together. At least, it would be when he finally told her everything.

Ellis made his way to the dark corner bedroom that was usually his when he stayed at the Whites’ house and entered. He locked the door behind him so there wouldn’t be any surprises while he slept. He didn’t know the Whites’ staff as well as he did Kerrigan’s, and he didn’t want to kill anyone by accident.

The Whites’ place had been a safe house to him on several occasions over the years. This room was rarely used. It was on the bottom level, and the window made for an easy entrance and exit when he needed it. As much as he despised his mask, he hated the constant sneaking around even more. He’d spent his adult life playing spy, and he desired nothing better than to settle with a wife and children like the rest of the male population his age.

Ellis kicked off his boots and threw his dress coat onto the chair by his bed. Then he untied the mask from his face

and flung it onto the pillow opposite him. He fell into his bed, fully clothed. The one luxury of not having a wife or a mother was there was no one to nag him about whether or not he was ruining his clothes. He massaged his eyes and tried to relax. Thankfully, thoughts of bitterness did not keep him from falling asleep. He slept for maybe a half hour when he woke up coughing. His throat was dry, and his eyes burned. A light flickered in the corner of his room. Ellis leapt from his bed. Through the smoke he could see the outer wall of his room was on fire!

CHAPTER 19

ANNIE! ELLIS HAD TO GET to her. Her room was right above his, an accommodation he had insisted upon. He didn't trust anyone anymore, and he had a feeling tonight was going to feed those misgivings even more.

He ripped the bolt from its slot and threw the door open hard enough to knock it off one of its hinges. At the top of his lungs he yelled, "FIRE!" and then pounded on each door he passed.

As he ran down the long corridor, he counted in his mind. It was a tactic for coping he had learned long ago. He still had time, and there wasn't reason to panic yet. The staircase seemed longer than usual, and the run back down the passage took more precious seconds than he had to spare.

He reached for Annie's bedroom door and threw it open. It was unlocked. He would have to kiss her later for her foolishness.

"Annie!" he yelled. He could see flames through her window, but her wall was still intact. He had no idea if the floor would hold long or if his room had been swallowed up in the fire yet.

Annie stirred, but she was still asleep when he reached her. "Annie! Wake up!" He shook her as gently as he could under the circumstances.

Annie's eyelids fluttered open, but she didn't really see him.

"Oh, it's you." She smiled and then closed her eyes again.

Ellis groaned and scooped her into his arms along with the blanket she was wrapped in. It was a blessing they both had not been sleeping as deeply as she was now. He kicked her door open wider and raced back down the corridor and stairs. He threw open the front door and did not stop running until he was a hundred feet from the house.

The jostling had awakened Annie. Panting hard, he set

her down on a large rock so he could catch his breath. He collapsed on the dew-glossed grass next to her and wiped the sweat from his brow. He watched his friends' house as the side of it was quickly encased with flames. The servants were across the lawn trying to douse the building with puny buckets of water, but there was nothing to be done now unless the heavens decided to open up and rain. He was about to run to their aid when he felt Annie's eyes on him. She'd had quite a night.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. Her small fingers always felt so comfortable in his. She was in her nightdress, with her silly necklace ever present around her neck, but at least the blanket from her bed would keep her from catching cold.

"The Whites will feel it keenly when they see their beloved home for generations gone overnight."

Annie didn't comment. She was staring at him in a strange way.

"Are you well?" Ellis asked. An intense desire to see Annie's smile overcame him. Her happiness was beginning to be his first priority. He couldn't bear to see her upset again.

"Ellis?" she asked, her voice betraying how dazed and confused she was.

Ellis frowned, still short of breath. "You aren't still asleep, are you? I've heard of sleepwalkers, but I've never seen one who looked as awake as you do now."

Annie did not answer. Instead she reached her hand out toward him. He got on his knees to steady her in case she suddenly fell back asleep. He wasn't experienced in the ways of sleepwalking, and the last thing he needed tonight was for her to fall off the rock and get hurt.

"It is you!" she exclaimed. Her hand finally reached Ellis's face. She stroked the skin around his right eye and down his cheek, and realization hit him with a sickening thud. He'd taken his mask off before he had fallen asleep. It was probably being burnt to a crisp at that very moment.

“Yes,” Ellis answered airily. “You have found me out.”

Annie shook her head, her face so full of shock her skin matched the color of her nightdress. “But it cannot be.”

Ellis had wanted her to know, but this wasn’t the way, nor the time. He had wanted to explain first. “I hope that wild imagination of yours isn’t too disappointed. You’ll have nothing to be curious about now.”

Ellis’s attempt at humor fell flat. It was as if Annie had not heard him at all.

“Your skin . . . it’s . . . it’s . . .”

“It’s not as horrific as you had hoped,” Ellis finished for her. She had seemed to have a great love for the distasteful rumors about him. But, honestly, he was pleased she finally knew. He felt freed in a way he hadn’t for the longest time. Now he might have a chance against Kerrigan.

Annie shook her head. She dropped her hand from his face to wipe a tear that had escaped down her cheek. “I’m not disappointed. Relieved, really. Though, I think I could summon up some anger if I thought on it a bit. Right now, though, I am just so very happy for you.”

Ellis’s own eyes filled with moisture. He had once thought his heart dead, but now, seeing Annie this way made it felt very much alive. “I’m glad. Glad you aren’t yelling . . . yet. And glad you’re safe.”

“But why? Why would you wear a mask when there isn’t anything to hide?”

Many times Ellis had answered this question in his mind, preparing himself for the day he would have to explain. Now, though, it seemed he couldn’t find the words to justify his actions.

Annie bit her lower lip—she was so adorable when she did that. “Was this what you wanted to tell me?”

Ellis ran his hand through his hair and looked at the mess behind him. The flames were starting to wane, and he knew he needed to go help while there was a chance at preventing any

more destruction. “No, but I did want to tell you this too— eventually. I want to explain, but this is not the time. I need to try to help save what I can for the Whites. I am sorry you had to find out this way.”

Annie nodded as she seemed to see the house fire for the first time.

“I have a spare mask in my saddlebags. Will you be all right here while I run to retrieve it?”

When Annie nodded mutely, he bolted to the stables. A gate blocked the service entrance and the stables. As he reached to pull it open, he was knocked flat on his back. A rider on a horse pushed through the other side of the gate at just the same moment. The rider didn’t see Ellis, but Ellis got a clear look at him. It was Annie’s old friend Mr. Crow.

The scoundrel! And Ellis had generously let him go.

It wasn’t difficult for Ellis to put together the pieces. Mr. Crow had followed them home and started the fire. He had somehow discovered what side of the house to target. Seeing as Mr. Crow had come from the servants’ entrance, it was likely one of the Whites’ staff was involved as well. The man would regret the day he was born when Ellis was through with him. It would have been better for everyone if Ellis had cut the man’s arms off like he had threatened.

With the distraction of the fire, Ellis was able to retrieve and replace his mask without anyone else being the wiser. If he could do one thing right, it was to get around without being heard or seen. He returned to the action and helped beat the flames with a wet towel a servant handed to him.

After what seemed like hours, they were able to make some headway. A few servants carried furniture from the house, while others continued to douse and pound out the fire. Someone had been sent to bring the Whites home from the ball. The whole right side of the house and some of the back had been destroyed, but at least the Whites were not completely homeless. The house was large enough for them to live in the one side while the other was repaired.

The dying embers still put off plenty of smoke, and Ellis coughed along with everyone else. He caught sight of two carriages coming fast down the lane. It was about time they returned.

Ellis found Annie with the blanket tied around her waist. She was ringing rags in a bucket and handing them to the servants to wrap around their faces. Most ladies would have either been weeping out of despair or needed fainting salts to get them through such a horrifying experience, but not Annie. She was a doer, and it was an admirable quality. She caught him smiling at her, and she smiled shyly back.

As much as he wanted to pretend nothing had changed between them, it most certainly had. There wouldn't be the same barriers between them as in the past. And there would be even less so when he finally explained everything. It was what he had yet to tell her that really worried him. He could only hope she would be so forgiving twice.

CHAPTER 20

THE NEXT MORNING, BREAKFAST WAS served quite late. It had been close to four in the morning before they had managed to retire. Kerrigan had taken the Trentons to a nearby inn. The Whites, on the other hand, had insisted on staying in their home, even though the undamaged rooms smelled strongly of smoke. Without any children to call their own, their house was their greatest treasure. The destruction had devastated them.

Ellis wanted Annie to go with Mrs. Trenton, but she'd insisted on staying with the Whites. Ellis wondered if she felt responsible. He hadn't much appetite and pushed around the eggs on his plate. He knew he would be restless until he heard of Mr. Crow's whereabouts. He had wanted to search for the blackguard himself the night before, but he couldn't leave Annie unprotected, so he'd turned the task over to the local authorities.

Mr. White pushed his plate away, food uneaten, and stood to leave. "If you'll excuse me, my steward and I are going to ride over to the lumberyard and see if we can't secure the wood needed for repairs."

Mrs. White stood as well. "I need to make sure all the rooms are being properly aired out." Turning to her husband, she said, "Do be sure to employ the craftsman Lady Margaret used to repair her cottage. He'll charge a fair bit, but at least we know he will do an excellent job."

Once they were alone, Ellis looked over at Annie's untouched plate. "I don't think the cook will be happy when all the plates are returned with the food still on them."

Annie sighed. "You are right. Better to eat a little so as not to cause more grief."

Ellis forced himself to eat his eggs. He would eat, if only to encourage Annie to do the same.

"What are our plans now?" Annie asked.

Ellis pointed to her food. "Do not get distracted. Finish, and then we will go for a walk and take some fresh air." The

exercise might prevent Ellis from going mad wondering about Mr. Crow.

Dutifully, Annie finished her food, and then the two of them set out for a walk. Ellis steered her away from the damaged end of the house.

“When do we return home?”

He liked the way Annie referred to Braitwood Hall as home. He also liked how her curiosity never left her quiet for long. Since she had entered his life, her constant chatter had snapped him back into reality—even if their conversations weren’t always friendly.

“I think it would be best if we leave soon,” he finally answered. “I wouldn’t want to impose on anyone else on such short notice. I’m sorry if it means you will miss another ball.”

Annie glanced sideways at him. “How do you have all of these friends and connections when I was so sure everyone besides the Kerrigan family and your staff feared you?”

Ellis knew the conversation would turn to him before long. It was one of the purposes of their walk. He had some explaining to do. “You are not the only one who has seen me without my mask. The decision to wear it was not even my own, really. It was Lady Kerrigan’s.” Ellis pointed to the churchyard, and they began walking there. “I know I’ve been aloof about the death of my parents. I’ve told you who was responsible, and I’m sure your imagination filled in the rest of the details. I want you to know the whole story, in hopes you will forgive my deception. Do you remember the book I gave you about the witch Sephira?”

Annie nodded, her eyes downcast.

Ellis grimaced. “She is the devil.”

“That’s the only part of the story I ever hear.”

Ellis sighed. “I know. It is the only part I dwell on. While you may give me little credit, it does cost me to repeat this. After the death of my parents, Lady Kerrigan put together the pieces faster than the rest of us. She told me what she knew of the connection between my parents and Sephira. When my

parents were courting, Sephira—or Miss Hasting, as my father knew her—fell in love with him. He was the richest man for miles, and titled. It was the end of Sephira’s reign, so to speak. People were wary of her, and she was more witch than beloved debutante. She swore she could have any man she wanted, but when the great Lord Cadogen took a different bride, Sephira was outraged. It was rumored she’d sworn revenge on my mother, but I’m not sure my parents or Lady Kerrigan even knew if it was true.”

“How did *you* know, then?” Annie interjected.

“Never mind. We’ll get to my sources later. Let me finish. Sephira seemed to disappear within a month or so after my parents’ wedding, and then she returned around the time of our sixteenth birthday. We had a party—”

Annie gasped. “Wait! *Our* birthday?”

Ellis opened the gate to the small cemetery next to the churchyard and nodded solemnly. “Yes, Eliana and I are twins.”

Annie shook her head in disbelief. “It makes sense now, but I didn’t see it before.”

“She disappeared sometime between luncheon and dinner that day. We split into several search parties to comb the forest and house for her. When I returned, it was to find my parents dead. Poisoned.”

“I’m so sorry.” Annie’s sincerity touched Ellis. He reached for her hand and enveloped it in his.

“Come, let’s sit on this bench and rest awhile. I know neither of us slept much, and I don’t want to tire you out.” Ellis directed Annie to the bench overlooking several graves belonging to the same local family. “There was a note. It said, *While there is beauty still left at Braitwood Hall, your darling girl will never return.*”

Annie shook her head. “The woman sounds mad.”

Ellis agreed. “That is why I have spent so long searching for her. An unknown woman matching Sephira’s description was seen by the stables on the return of the first search party.

They had no reason to stop her. At the time, they did not yet know about my parents' death and did not see a connection to my sister. My obsession is only half-vengeful. Honestly, while Sephira is still alive, no one is truly safe. But I have been searching for my sister.”

Annie bit her lip.

Ellis reached over and rubbed his finger against her cold pink lips. “You tend to chew on your lip when you are deep in thought. I adore it.”

Annie blushed, and he turned his head, knowing he had embarrassed her. “About the mask. You know Lady Kerrigan has been like a second mother to me, and Kerrigan like a brother. I treasure my relationship with them. It was Lady Kerrigan who suggested I wear a mask. I never thought much about my appearance, but Lady Kerrigan insisted the resemblance between my father and me was too great to be insignificant. She was sure any reminder to the witch would be like a death wish for my sister . . . if she was still alive.

“When you are dealing with someone as mentally unsound as Sephira, you have to imagine how she would think, and act accordingly. So I removed all the pictures of my family and hid them. I dismissed most of the servants, except for the ones who refused to leave, those who were the most loyal to my family. I let the grounds fall into disrepair so that between my mask, the rumors, and the shabbiness of the manor, there was not any beauty to be found. And I did not have to sacrifice my life to do so, though the alternative did cross my mind.”

Annie squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, Ellis could see the pain his story brought her. She put her hand briefly on his arm. “You make it sound like you took the easy way out. But what you did was brave.”

Ellis wanted to admit to being the honorable man Annie now thought he was. It was a nice change from the reactions he got being the Dark Rider all the time. But he could admit to no such thing. “No. I am a coward. I took up the mask because I wanted to live. Maybe it was selfish, but I saw myself as the

last of the Cadogen line. I wanted to carry the name on. My father would have wanted it. But as the years have passed, I have never been sure my heart was soft enough to marry anyway.”

They were silent for a moment. It was strange how easy it was for him to share the feelings of guilt and wretchedness that had tormented him for so long. What was it about Annie that made him suddenly want to bare all his secrets?

“When did the rumors start?” Her expression was free from the harsh judgments he’d received for so long.

Ellis folded his arms across his chest. “Almost immediately. Our closest friends encouraged the rumors as part of the plan to erase my goodness and intimidate the witch.”

“No.” Annie shook her head, clearly wanting to disbelieve that his friends would help mar his name.

“It got out of hand. Those who respected my parents weren’t so loyal in their thoughts toward me. I started getting blamed for everything wrong. Some even said it was I who had killed my parents. The stories of the witch were soon replaced with the stories of the Dark Rider. I probably could tell you more than you could tell me—none of them true. Well, a few have traces of truth to them, but they are twisted and much uglier than the actual events.”

“Did it even make a difference? How did you come to learn of everything about Sephira?”

Ellis blew out his breath. “Ten years of detective work, seeking out old gardeners, family members, family friends. None of them agree on her story. I’ve never believed in magic, but how can a woman stay young for a half a century? And why did this vain man-hater suddenly go into hiding after the death of my parents? It’s maddening having all the questions I do and never finding answers.”

Annie’s gaze lowered, and he wished she did not have to bear the weight of his story. Her long eyelashes distracted him for a moment until she asked, “Will you ever get to the point

when you can decide the search is over?”

Ellis’s words slipped vehemently from his lips. “When I know what happened to my sister and I know Sephira is brought to justice, then it will be over.”

She stared at him, and he could only guess at what she was thinking. He needed her to know he meant to see this through.

“When you found the three cots in the woods . . .” Annie’s expression became bright with understanding. “You were excited at the possibility of your sister being with the witch!”

Ellis nodded. “Yes. But it is not proof that she is still alive. And why three beds and not just two?”

“I wish I had the answers you seek. Your search for your sister is an admirable thing. And I am glad to hear there is something else driving your obsession, besides just revenge.”

“Revenge,” Ellis muttered. “It sounds so wrong. But is it really black and white? Where does justice fall? Because it *is* justice I seek, though I can’t deny the hatred I have for the woman who destroyed my family.” He tipped his head to the side to gauge Annie’s reaction. She turned to him, and their eyes connected. Hers were full of compassion, though he did not deserve it.

“The hatred is the real Dark Rider. Not you,” Annie said. “You were able to pull yourself away long enough to be here now. That is worth something.”

Ellis felt something dig into his gut. Guilt. A strong, overcoming wave of guilt, ready to bury him alive. He had let hatred flow through his veins for too long, scarring his soul. “I do try to make my sister the focus of my efforts. There have been many times when I felt close to some discovery. I am learning that the woods and their secrets will still be there when I get back.”

Annie seemed to understand his meaning and smiled softly. Then she pointed to his mask. “When we’re alone, do you still have to wear that?”

Ellis feigned offense. “Why? Don’t you like it?”

Annie smirked. “I fear it was a bit anticlimactic to know your face was not marred and ugly, but it’s safe to say I prefer you without it.” Her voice grew soft, and she blushed prettily.

“It’s nice to know you prefer me at all,” Ellis teased, reaching forward and tucking a curl behind her ear.

Annie shook her head in mock exasperation. “Does that mean yes or no?”

Ellis put his face close to Annie’s, causing her blush to burn brighter. “We’re not supposed to be alone.”

Annie bit her lip again, but she must have remembered what he had said earlier about the habit. Her eyes grew wide, and she visibly forced herself to relax her mouth.

Ellis gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. “Yes, I will keep wearing the mask. Originally we had only intended I wear it for a few weeks until we could secure Eliana. When we didn’t find her right away, the weeks faded into months and then years. Now it is practically who I am. I am happy to say there have been other small uses for the mask that brought out some good in all this. I have been able to act as a spy and messenger for the Crown on several occasions.”

Annie’s eyes lit with curiosity. “Can you tell me someday?”

His amusement erased the fatigue he felt. “Gladly. As soon as the Duke of Wellington gives his permission.”

She grinned, and they held each other’s gaze. He wanted to kiss her so badly his chest ached. After a moment she dipped her head shyly.

“Thank you for coming,” she said quietly. “You saved my life twice last night. I know it was a sacrifice for you to leave your search. I can only hope the distance from your home has been good for you.”

Ellis was indebted to Annie, not the other way around. Getting to know her was like waking up after a very bad dream; less and less was he thinking about his miserable lot.

Beauty hadn't been the curse on Braitwood Hall, but the cure. His wounds of anger and guilt were finally starting to heal. Maybe, someday, he could even forgive.

"Annie, I chose this life ten years ago. I will see it through to the end." He needed her to know before anything else could be discussed. "When we return home, I will go back to the Black Forest to search. Nothing has changed, except now you know why I must return."

Annie's eyes betrayed her emotion. She was sad. Whether she was sad for him or for what might have been, Ellis did not know. He often wondered which direction her affections lay. As much as he wanted to kiss her again and confess the longings in his heart, she was better off with Kerrigan. Besides, Kerrigan would never forgive him for taking liberties. Ellis was torn between Annie, his best friend, and his past.

Annie pulled her cloak closer around her. Ellis hadn't noticed the cool air. He should return her back to the house. "Come, let's start our walk back."

The small church behind them offered a peaceful backdrop, but grave markers had always been a haunting reminder of what he had lost.

"Ellis?" Annie hesitated before leaving the cemetery. "Do you think your parents would be happy if they looked down and saw you now?"

The question caught him off guard. He had often thought his parents would be proud of the way he had searched so diligently for Eliana. It stung, though, to think about what they would say about him hiding behind a mask and turning the town against the house of Cadogen. "I've had to make many difficult decisions. They might not be happy, but I think they would understand."

Rain began to speckle the ground and spot their cheeks. The weather saved him from his last confession. He had waited this long; why not wait a little longer?

CHAPTER 21

MR. CROW HAD BEEN CAUGHT and would stand trial.

Although they'd received the news before the carriage ride home, Andalin's mind still spun over the events on the night of the ball. On her first morning back at Braitwood Hall, Andalin wished Ellis would find her and remind her not to fret.

She already missed Katrina and even Lord Kerrigan. The latter had promised to come see them in a few weeks, and bring a chaperone, to escort Andalin back to the city for another string of balls. She looked forward to his arrival, especially now that she knew how much she liked to dance—though she envisioned Ellis as her partner and no one else.

She needed a distraction. The weather had stayed nice for much longer than it did in a normal fall season, but now the cold had found them. The sharp wind whistled at the window, telling her it was here to stay for some time. Andalin resigned herself to stay indoors, immediately thinking of the warmth and company in the kitchen.

Matilda was kneading dough when she entered. A rush of peace flooded over Andalin. She was home.

“Oh, Matilda! How I missed you.” She put her arm around the older woman and hugged her from the side.

“Careful ye don't get flour on yer nice gown, or I'll be in the briars!” Matilda dusted her hands off and gave Andalin a warm smile. “It's good to have ye home again.”

Andalin slipped onto her stool and rested her head on her hand. “Any news while we were gone?”

Matilda dug her knuckles into the dough while she spoke. “Ye shouldn't be spending yer free time consorting with the servants. But since this house is unusual, I will tell ye everything I remember. Hannah and I put together peach preserves, pickles, and beets. Mr. Lewis filled the cellar with potatoes. Hmm, I guess ye weren't gone too long.”

Andalin grinned. “It felt like ages.”

“Because ye’re young,” Matilda said with a wry laugh. “How was the ball?”

Andalin told Matilda about her dress, the dancing, and then about Mr. Crow and the Whites’ house. “I cannot feel sad about losing the beautiful ball gown in the fire, not after what the Whites endured. I am heartily ashamed to be connected to Mr. Crow in any way. It makes me ill to think on it. I don’t know how I can ever repay the Whites.”

“The master will take care of all the details, ye can be sure. It’s a good thing he’s on yer side. Mr. Crow will get what’s been coming to him.”

The situation felt impossible to fix. Andalin knew she wasn’t directly responsible, but it would take time before she fully forgave herself. If only she had missed the ball or agreed to leave with Mr. Crow—though she shivered to consider that option—or even been more aware of her surroundings that night and avoided the man. So many of her decisions could have changed the course of the night.

Andalin shuddered. “Lord Cadogen said the law sentenced Mr. Crow, as well as the Whites’ servant he had bribed, and I will never have to see the vile man again. If my father had not risked his situation, I would still be in Corbridge as Mr. Crow’s wife.” She pressed her eyelids together to remove the horrifying image from her mind.

“The Good Lord watches over his sheep. Don’t feel too badly about the Whites’ house. That Mr. Crow was wicked, and ye need to focus on the fact that ye’re safe. That’s what matters now.”

Andalin tried to believe what Matilda said. She needed to believe it. If not for Ellis, she would be dead or, worse, the property of Mr. Crow.

“Did Lord Cadogen come to get anything to eat before he went out this morning?” Andalin asked.

Matilda put her dough into a pan and wiped the flour off her hands onto her apron. “Hard to know. He’s usually up well

before the sun unless he's been out all night. I try and leave a few things out for him just in case he stops in. I used to fuss more, but now that ye're here, it seems I've relaxed a bit."

"Because now you have to fuss over me?"

"It's because now I'm not so worried about our young lord." Her eyes sparked with a mischievous glint. "Mrs. Lewis heard him whistling last night in his study after ye had gone to bed. I can't tell ye how long it's been since we've heard that carefree noise."

"Why would you assume it has to do with me? I think the break from here refreshed him is all," Andalin said. "Even so, considering the circumstances, I can't see why anyone would want to whistle."

Andalin picked at a bit of dough left on the counter and squashed it between her fingers. "It's strange how people change. But then again, nothing's really changed."

"Come again?" Matilda asked.

The desire to tell someone the confusing feelings tumbling around inside of her piqued. It wasn't as simple as discussing the weather. She didn't know what to say or if she should say anything at all. Thoughts of Ellis consumed her. The quick kiss they had shared, his dark past, the secret behind his mask.

She wanted to love him and help him through his grief, but he had assured her nothing had changed. He was still a man driven with anger, and it bothered her greatly. Where was Papa when she needed his wisdom and guidance?

She dropped the dough and dusted off her fingers. "How is your plan coming along?"

"Plan?" Matilda scrunched her nose. "Oh, *that* plan. Yes, it's coming along marvelously. I'd say Hannah was really onto something this time."

Andalin quirked her brows with intrigue. "Can I help yet?"

"Soon, sweet child. Soon."

Andalin pricked her forefinger for the third time and mumbled under her breath.

“Muttering are we?” Ellis said, poking his head into the sitting room. “It looks like I’m not the only one who has a touch of madness.”

Her heart lifted as she anxiously met his gaze. He leaned casually against the doorway, though she hoped he’d come in and sit awhile.

She lifted the pillow she was embroidering. “Mrs. Lewis has found a way for me to be useful.”

Ellis crossed the room and took the pillow from her hand. He studied the image she had started. It was the head of a horse. “You are very good.”

Andalin tilted her head to the side as she examined it. “If horses have two eyes on one side of their head. Never mind; tell me what has occupied you.”

Ellis sat down beside her and propped one foot up on his other knee. “I had a letter from Kerrigan. He will be able to get away sooner than he thought. He hopes to come the day after tomorrow.”

Andalin’s smile stretched across her face. “That is good news.” She wouldn’t be stuck spending three hours a day embroidering if she had more company.

Ellis studied her face for a moment before continuing. “He must be eager to have resolved his business so quickly.”

She foresaw too much needlework in her near future to complain about Lord Kerrigan’s change of plans. Not to mention that if he was around, then Ellis would be too. Only, the way Ellis picked at a thread on the hem of his breeches made it seem like he might not agree with her assessment of the situation.

“Does it not make you happy to have him come so soon?” Andalin asked.

“Nonsense. I always enjoy Kerrigan’s company,” Ellis

remarked, though he changed the subject rather quickly. “Did you notice the fine weather outside? I think the sunshine will hold through tomorrow as well.”

“Yes, it’s comforting to know,” Andalin said, wondering where the conversation was going.

Ellis cleared his throat. “I thought it would be a good opportunity, if your schedule is free of course, for you to accompany me on a short ride.”

“My pillow here has quite demanded all my free time, but I do think I could squeeze in a ride.” Andalin refrained from squealing with excitement.

“Excellent,” Ellis said, his eyes taking on a merry glint. “I thought I would have Matilda pack us a basket. There is a small waterfall a short distance from here that would make a nice place for a picnic.” Ellis held her eyes with his, and her stomach flipped.

“Picnic?”

Ellis picked at the thread again. “Yes, that is what they call eating out of doors.”

She laughed, tired of being serious. “A picnic sounds very fine.” It didn’t matter to her if they took a turn around the dining room, so long as she was with him. Ellis’s comments to her at the cemetery about nothing changing had squelched her hopes almost entirely. Now, in one invitation, she found them soaring again.

“Good. I have business and will be away during dinner, so I will see you in the morning for our outing.”

Andalin watched Ellis leave. Maybe there truly was room in his heart for her.

Ellis’s absence at breakfast fueled Andalin’s anticipation for their outing together. She was sitting impatiently in the window seat of the drawing room when Ellis came for her. She was already in her riding habit and practically jumped from her seat with eagerness.

“Good morning,” Ellis said cheerfully. “You have color in your cheeks. You must be well.”

If she wasn't blushing before, she was now. “Are we set, then?”

Ellis gave her a quick nod and offered her his hand. A thrill went up her arm as she accepted it.

Once at the stables, Ellis helped her mount Ginger. She followed close behind him on a small trail, with Birks trailing behind them. They circled to the back of the house and came up along the outside of the Black Forest. They traveled on the perimeter for a good hour in contented silence. For once, no questions, no mystery, no matters of circumstance or rank of her birth seemed to distract her. She allowed herself to just be with Ellis.

When Ellis veered his horse into the trees, Andalin nudged Ginger to follow suit. They crossed a small stream and started to follow along the banks.

“This is where Birks leaves us to check on a tenant. I'm afraid it cannot be helped, but I promise I will be on my best behavior. It's not much farther. Are you warm enough?”

Andalin nodded, relieved they would have some privacy. “It is a bit cooler in the shade of the trees, but I assure you I am sufficiently warm.”

“Good. Tell me if you start to feel too cold, and we can turn around.”

“The weather could not be better for this time of year,” she said, though a snowstorm would not convince her to give up her picnic.

Ellis smiled and then turned back to direct the way as Birks left in another direction.

The path was a little rocky in places, but Andalin found she didn't mind. The forest was different in the daytime and almost beautiful. It would be more so if she could forget her last experience, or even her first. Here the trees were not as thick, and the moss crawling up the rocks and on the sides of the trees gave the forest a soft look. Birds chirped cheerfully,

and the warm streams of light encouraged her to give the forest a second chance.

Andalin heard the waterfall before she saw it. It was not very large, but its beauty was enough to leave a lasting impression. It fell twenty or more feet to a small pond at the head of the stream. The setting was serene, with its muted colors of brown, gold, and green. Ellis helped Andalin dismount and led her to a large fallen log situated so perfectly along the bank it was hard to believe it hadn't been placed there by the Creator Himself.

Ellis took out a small blanket from his saddlebag and laid it on the log to keep away any dampness so they could sit comfortably. "Well, what do you think?"

Andalin nodded slowly, unsure she had words to describe how she felt.

Ellis's smile only complemented her view. "My Annie, speechless? I can hardly believe it."

His Annie? Andalin could only nod again.

Ellis chuckled. "Maybe if I feed you, we can fuel that mouth of yours enough to produce words again." While Ellis pulled out their food, Andalin admired the quaint pond before her. It was like something out of a story—not just the pond but she and Ellis being together.

"Do you come here often?" Andalin asked as she sat and removed her gloves. Ellis draped a second blanket over her lap and handed her a sandwich.

"Ah, she speaks again." Ellis took a seat beside her. "I come here occasionally to clear my head. It doesn't have the same effect it did when I was younger. My memories became tainted after everything that happened, and nothing really brought me peace again. Well, almost nothing."

Ellis turned and looked into Andalin's eyes. Did he mean her? Did she bring him a measure of peace? She wanted to believe she was capable of comforting him.

"I must thank you for sharing it with me."

“You are most welcome. Now, eat so I won’t have to answer to Matilda.”

Andalin hardly tasted her food. All she could think about was her nearness to Ellis. They ate in comfortable silence, enjoying the view before them. “Will you bring me here again?” It was terribly forward of her, but the question parted from her lips almost as soon as she thought it.

Ellis tucked the remains of their food away and dusted off his lap. “Kerrigan arrives tomorrow. Things could change. Things *will* change.”

Andalin turned away from Ellis. It was not what she had wanted him to say, but she should have expected it. “Are you trying to comfort me or confuse me?”

“I have never tried to be vague about my plans. I have told you from the beginning your goal is to secure a husband, and my goal is to spend the duration of my life here . . . in this deceptively beautiful and cursed forest.”

Disgust filled her in the form of tears. She faced the water with the pretense of admiring it. She did know all those things. She also knew her heart had bound itself to Ellis. Thinking he could so easily say goodbye to her caused her chest to tighten and ache.

“Are you ready, then?” Ellis asked, standing to leave.

Andalin took a deep breath to clear her emotions. She stood, avoiding Ellis’s eyes.

“Wait.” Ellis came close to her and tipped her chin up with his finger. “Are you crying?”

“I am not crying.” She brushed past Ellis, intent on her horse. The man was insufferable. He was clueless in his power to affect her. He could brood his life away, and she would find happiness with someone else, just like he planned. Her disappointment battled with her temper. Distance was the only solution.

In her eagerness to flee she didn’t see the tree root in her path. She tripped and sprawled on her stomach.

Ellis was beside her in an instant. “Dash it all! Are you hurt?” Ellis pulled her into a sitting position and stared into her eyes, searching for signs of pain or injury.

The embarrassment and disappointment were too great to bear. Tears streamed down her face, and she quickly covered them with her dirt-stained hands.

“Annie, darling, what’s wrong? Is it your ankle? Your head?”

Andalin just sobbed harder. She ignored the frustrated concerns pouring from Ellis’s mouth and let herself cry.

After a few moments Ellis swooped her into his arms and carried her back to the fallen log. He carefully pulled her hands away from her face, and she found she could not avert her eyes from him.

“Breathe deeply,” he instructed, then cleaned her hands with a napkin.

Andalin took several long breaths, and it helped calm her. She wiped her eyes. “Better.”

“Good,” Ellis said. “Are you hurt?”

Andalin nodded. She was hurt.

“Where?”

Andalin bit her lip. “I’m well enough to ride.”

“Where, Annie?”

Andalin’s lower lip trembled. “My heart.” A sob escaped her throat following her confession. She covered her eyes again with her hands as the tears renewed themselves. She was so thoroughly humiliated. She wanted nothing more than to be away, anywhere other than next to Ellis.

Ellis didn’t bother trying to remove Andalin’s hands again. Instead he just wrapped his arms around her and held her while she cried. He softly stroked her hair and then laid his head on top of hers. They sat like that for some time. Andalin’s tears finally ran dry, and she hiccupped a few times and then relaxed into Ellis’s arms.

“It’s getting late, dearest,” Ellis said into her hair. “I don’t want you to be out here once the sun goes down. The temperature will drop considerably, amongst other reasons.” Ellis released her, and she kept her head down. He pulled her to her feet and led her to Ginger. She grabbed at the saddle to mount, but Ellis pulled her back toward him.

“I have a confession, and it cannot wait.” Andalin knew her face was smudged with dirt and blotches of red, but Ellis had her complete attention. “It’s about your father.”

Andalin’s heart sank again. It was too much. “Please, another day. I cannot bear it.”

Ellis put his hands on his hips and sighed. “Very well.”

Fatigue settled on Andalin’s shoulders, and she was eager to return home. She turned to mount, but Ellis stopped her again.

“Please, Annie, do not be angry with me. I only want your happiness.”

Andalin shook her head. “That’s a lie. You don’t care about my happiness. Not as much as you care about feeding the serpent of hate coiled around your unfeeling heart. Why can’t you love me like I love you? That is what would make me happy!”

Ellis looked like he had been slapped in the face. He took a step back. His voice was louder than a whisper but soft and sincere. “Are you in earnest?”

Andalin just stared back at him. Weren’t the tears proof enough?

Ellis closed the gap between them and cupped Andalin’s face in his hands. “May I kiss you?”

This was not the time to ask questions. She gave an almost imperceptible nod, and Ellis did not hesitate to act. He captured her lips with his own. Warmth exploded inside of her, and she melted against him. She kissed him back with all the longing in her heart.

When he pulled away, his eyes locked with hers. He lifted

his thumb and caressed her cheek. “I do so love you, my sweet Annie. Is it possible to have you while the rest of my life is such a nightmare?”

Andalin reached up and took Ellis’s hands in her own. “It has to be possible. Please don’t make me marry Lord Kerrigan. I want to stay with you.”

Ellis let his breath out slowly. “Your presence is like a balm to me. I could never wish it away.”

Ellis kissed her again. This time when he pulled away, he let his forehead rest against hers.

Andalin suddenly felt conscious of her red-rimmed eyes and her hair sticking out of her braid and falling into her face. She started to fuss with her hair and dust at the dirt on the shoulder of her cloak, when Ellis grabbed her hand to stop her. “Please, leave it. You have never looked more beautiful.”

“Have I secured your affections, then?” Andalin asked.

Ellis smiled down at her. “You managed that some time ago.”

“Good, because I have some conditions.”

Ellis threw back his head and laughed. “You would! Very well, let’s hear them.”

“Well, I am not sure quite yet. I will have to think on the particulars. I would like to discuss that mask of yours, for starters, and then . . .” Andalin’s voice caught when she saw something out of the corner of her eye just behind Ellis. She leaned forward, peering into the trees, where so clearly stood a woman.

CHAPTER 22

“I WOULD GLADLY TAKE MY mask off right now if it pleases you,” Ellis teased. His unencumbered smile would have normally made her heart race, if it had not already been racing for another reason. The unfamiliar woman, half-concealed behind a tree and its leafy foliage, was watching them. Andalin ignored Ellis’s comment and wrapped her arms around him so she might whisper into his ear.

“Ellis,” she whispered, “don’t move. There is a woman behind you in the trees.” Ellis froze, and she continued. “She watches us and is not yet aware I have discovered her.”

Ellis whispered back, “Describe her to me.”

“She has lighter coloring and is very slender.”

“Eliana!” he whispered fiercely. He did not move but said again, “Describe her!”

“She is too far away for me to ascertain any other details, and it is growing dark.”

“I must go to her!”

Andalin didn’t have sufficient strength to hold Ellis back, but with all her might she clung to him. “No, you will scare her and lose her in the cover of the coming darkness. Let us announce loudly that we will return tomorrow. I will watch to see which way she leaves. Then, tomorrow, she might come again, and we can follow her in the light of day.”

“This is against my better judgment,” Ellis whispered, his breath coming in short spurts. Andalin kissed the leather that covered the top of his cheek. She felt him swallow hard, and then he pulled her back to him. All the while she kept her eyes glued on the woman.

“Tomorrow,” Ellis announced loudly, “we will come back one last time before the weather and chance of snow make it impossible to do so.”

Andalin smiled widely and as sincerely as possible under the duress of the moment. “How utterly marvelous!”

Ellis reached past her and walked Ginger around so the horse was facing the opposite direction and Andalin could mount without breaking her view of their guest. Ellis helped her up and then mounted his stallion.

Andalin hadn't been on the horse for more than a moment when the woman slipped from her sight and disappeared around the other side of the rock wall.

Andalin turned Ginger and pulled her up against the great black horse. "She went behind the rock," Andalin whispered.

Ellis was unsettled and edgy. "Can you make it back without me?"

"I think so. I take the stream to the edge of the forest and then follow the tree line back to the house."

Ellis reached his hand out and wrapped it tightly around hers. "Do I dare leave you and search? I can't risk losing you too."

Andalin gave him a half smile. "What would anyone want with me? Go. I will be well."

Ellis ran his hand through his hair. "No, I have waited this long. You are thinking more clearly than I am about this. I will wait so I have less of a chance at losing her. If I scare her now, I might lose all hope." Andalin's eyes mirrored the sadness she saw in Ellis. "And I do not want you to be alone. I have wreaked enough havoc inside of you today to give me cause to repent for the next ten years."

Andalin smiled shyly. "At first, yes. But then you managed to make up for it."

The profound sadness in Ellis's eyes softened, though he did not smile any longer. "Come, let's get home. When we get to the tree line, can you run Ginger?"

"Yes, I think so," Andalin said, though she wasn't sure how long she could hold on for.

They started back, weaving their way through the forest along the stream's edge. Once they reached the tree line, Ginger easily followed the stallion's fast gait. After a wild and

hard ride, they were finally home.

Ellis disappeared to go over his map and make plans for the following day. Andalin wanted to race down to the kitchen and speak with the others, but she did not know if Ellis would appreciate it. Instead she retired to her room and wrote Papa another letter.

Ellis could not fall asleep. Despite all his frailties of character, Annie loved him. He had wanted it to be so and thought he had imagined the signs several times. She was too wonderful, too good. But it was not just an elusive hope now; it was true. And equally wonderful, he was close to being reunited with his sister.

If it hadn't been for Annie, he would not have been at the waterfall at all. Between basking in his newfound relationship with her and the near discovery of his beloved Eliana, sleep eluded him.

He got up and composed a letter. He marked it urgent. Then he spent a good hour reading verses of scripture to calm his troubled mind. When that didn't knock him out, he tossed and turned while plotting ideas and dreaming about kissing Annie again.

When dawn inevitably arrived, Ellis woke with a start. It was a wonder he had succumbed to slumber at all, and a needed blessing. Today he required his wits about him.

Ellis dressed quickly, donning his mask for what he hoped was the last time. He thought about the locked doors in his secluded wing of the house. Should he have Mrs. Lewis and Hannah air them out? Would Eliana be sleeping there tonight? They had once been like two halves of the same person. They could read each other's thoughts and sense each other's presence. They had been as close as any brother and sister could have been.

Ellis reached for the jacket he had laid on the back of his desk chair the night before. His eye caught on Eliana's journal. It had been more revealing than he had expected. Instead of

rejoicing in the lost part of his sister, it had brought him guilt and self-revelation. They had been close siblings, but the last year or so before Eliana disappeared, their relationship had changed. He had been in denial about it until he read her words.

He should have known she was upset. Mother had sent him to school that year, and when he had returned on summer holiday, she had done nothing but praise his efforts and stature. He had been worse, constantly bragging about his adventures with Kerrigan and his other schoolmates. And then there was Katrina; she had captured his attentions, and poor Eliana must have felt like she had been cast aside from everyone's notice.

Even if she would have told him her thoughts, as it was clear he had not sensed them, there had been no chance to remedy his mistakes. No one could have predicted a madwoman would be capable of destroying their family's happiness so completely. He was unable to say goodbye—to any of them. It haunted him.

Ellis pulled his arms into his jacket and straightened his collar. Today, with Annie by his side, he would finally have peace again in his heart. He was determined.

Ellis went to the kitchen first. Matilda was measuring porridge into serving bowls to be sent up for breakfast.

“Will ye be eating in here this morning?” Matilda asked cheerfully.

Ellis slipped onto a stool. “I will be joining Miss Durante in the dining room. I just wanted to ask if you would pack another picnic today for the two of us.”

“Certainly.” Matilda looked very, very pleased.

Ellis didn't want to gratify her with explanations, but the smile that escaped at the thought of spending more time alone with his ward gave him away.

Matilda wagged a finger at him. “It's not wise for ye to keep taking Miss Durante out without a chaperone. I heard Birks simply took off yesterday. Even a capable and intelligent young man like yerself must be on his guard. Forgive me for

speaking so candidly, but yer reputation has already been sullied; hers has not.”

Ellis gently pushed down Matilda’s bony hand pointed so accusingly in his face and said, “You needn’t worry—”

Matilda interrupted him. “I know I’m just the help, but I haven’t been down in this kitchen so long I’ve forgotten what happens between a man and a woman.”

Ellis chuckled. “I was just going to add that after today, we will follow strict social protocols. Today, however, it cannot be helped.”

Matilda seemed satisfied, because she went back to spooning porridge.

Ellis stood to leave but turned around to say one last thing. “I hope you know you have always been more than ‘just the help.’ It would grieve me if you did not know how much I have appreciated your loyalty these last ten years.”

Matilda winked at him. “Ye were a good boy and have been a good master. I wouldn’t speak up to ye like I did just now if I loved ye any less.”

Ellis felt a prick in his heart, and gratitude filled him. Once in the passageway he wondered why he suddenly felt so happy. He didn’t even have Eliana home yet. Was it the idea of it being so soon in his future? Or because he was finally capable of caring about more than just the lost memory of his family?

He needed to find his sweet Annie. He strode the distance of the house to the dining room as quickly as he could. He had only begun to tell her all the things in his heart the afternoon before. While it would take time to be able to express many of his feelings, he was anxious to have Annie in his arms again to at least show her what he felt. Now that he was sure she returned his affections, he was finally free to do so. He was ever hopeful she’d forgive him for his last secret.

Ellis entered the dining room with a grin the size of a schoolboy’s only to have it immediately flee and be replaced with a scowl. Kerrigan had arrived without him knowing. He

was sitting next to Annie, holding her hands. Annie pulled back the moment she saw Ellis in the doorway. Kerrigan followed her line of vision and promptly stood.

“Morning, Cadogen. It looks as if you have overslept.” Kerrigan gave him a nod and then sat down at the table.

“I did not oversleep, and neither, by the looks of it, did you,” Ellis said grumpily. He filled his plate at the sideboard and then sat at the head of the table.

“I was earlier than even I expected,” Kerrigan began as he unfolded his napkin. “I arrived late last night and slept in the inn in town so as not to interrupt the household. I was anxious to be here early so I could tell you firsthand that my mother, as well as my sister and her husband, are to join us tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Ellis asked, surprised. “Well, they are always welcome in this home.”

Kerrigan took a long drink. “They were confident you would feel that way, so they hurried me ahead to prepare you for their arrival. It seems my sister cannot be without her new friend, Miss Durante, for long.” Kerrigan turned and grinned at Annie before continuing. Annie’s gaze flicked to meet Ellis’s. She was clearly pleading for his understanding. He lost himself for a moment in her eyes. She loved him, not Kerrigan. She blushed deeper, which only assured him the more.

Kerrigan, oblivious to their shared look, added, “Mrs. Trenton has some great news, and she won’t breathe a word of it until we are all together.”

“I will let Mrs. Lewis know they are coming,” Annie suggested, “if you will excuse me.”

Ellis grabbed her hand to stop her. It was as good a reason to touch her as he could think of. “It can wait until you finish your breakfast.”

She gave the smallest hint of a smile and slipped back into her seat.

Ellis ate silently for a moment and then dabbed his

napkin over his mouth. “Kerrigan, there have been some new developments since we last saw you.”

Annie’s eyes grew wide, and he wanted to laugh. She must have thought he was going to share their confessions of love. It would be nice to have Kerrigan know he needed to keep his distance, but he wouldn’t dare announce anything without discussing it first with Annie. He gave her his own look, hoping she would take his meaning.

“Yesterday Miss Durante and I were riding by the waterfall when Miss Durante saw a woman watching us.”

Kerrigan sat back in his seat. “Sephira?”

Ellis shook his head. “All the descriptions of the witch have noted her illustrious dark hair. This woman was fair.”

“Did you see her for yourself?”

“I did not have to, for after a moment, I could sense her.”

Kerrigan shook his head. “Ellis, you are being foolhardy. It could have been someone else. A village woman hiding from her husband or, at the rarest possibility, the witch, finally gone gray. You are so desperate your mind is leaping to possibilities before you have sufficient proof.”

Ellis gritted his teeth. Kerrigan was right. He had been rash. But his gut told him to proceed as if it was truly Eliana and have hope. “You have never believed Eliana could still be alive. But there have been times in the woods I have felt her. Felt her, Kerrigan. You know we always had a connection.”

Kerrigan was clearly struggling with his impatience. “I have not had the faith you have had, but I always hoped you were right. But see reason. It was Miss Durante who saw her, and you did not. How can you be sure *this* woman is Eliana?”

Ellis sighed. He looked to Annie for strength. She had been silently watching them, but he knew she supported him. “Miss Durante and I are riding out there again today. We are hoping Eliana will return to watch us again, and we hope to call her to us. If she runs, I will follow her. At least then we will know. My conscience will not allow me to do less than this.”

Kerrigan folded his arms pensively. “I agree you will not be easy until you have investigated this development thoroughly. I only ask that once my sister arrives, you give her the attention she requires. She deserves as much from you.”

“I will do my best,” he uttered. It was hard to commit to pleasing Katrina when he was being pulled in another direction.

“Good,” Kerrigan said. Then, in a much lighter tone, he asked, “How can I be of assistance?”

Ellis wanted to tell him to go back to the inn, but Annie chirped in. “I don’t think Eliana will come close if there are more than just the two of us. Her chances of being found out are too great. She is probably frightened after what she’s no doubt endured. But if you and Birks or Mr. Lewis could ride some distance behind and await some sort of signal, then you can help if we need it.”

Ellis drummed his fingers on the table. “It will be important to give Eliana every reason to believe she can approach us without fear. But if it comes down to tracking her into the night, Miss Durante will be far safer with you at Braitwood Hall.”

“I agree. When do we leave?” Kerrigan asked.

“If Miss Durante will let Mrs. Lewis know about your family, then you and I can find Mr. Lewis and see to the horses. I want you to carry extra supplies—lanterns and such.”

After Annie excused herself, he and Kerrigan crossed to the front door of the house.

“It will be like old times,” Kerrigan noted.

Ellis agreed, though he hoped it was the last time. He opened the door to step outside, but Kerrigan put his hand up to stop him. “I might not always agree with you, friend, but you know I will always fight your battles with you.”

Ellis had wanted Kerrigan out of his house the minute he had seen him bent toward Annie in the dining room. Only two days ago Ellis had been prepared to hand her over in marriage to the man. Kerrigan was not his enemy. He was a true friend.

“Just see that you take care of Miss Durante if it comes to it.” It pained Ellis to ask, but he knew he couldn’t trust anyone to do so better than Kerrigan.

“I will.”

CHAPTER 23

ANDALIN CURBED HER HOPE WITH a decent amount of caution. Ellis was quite preoccupied, and his disappointment would be acute if all did not go according to plan. After so many years, his sister could be within his grasp. It meant so much to him and, in turn, would mean a great deal to the both of them and their future together.

They approached the stream leading to the waterfall, and Andalin remained ever watchful. She shuddered from the chill in the air and her nerves; the forest brought back both wonderful and horrible memories. She knew what she wanted to happen today. Despite having never believed in magic, her imagination seemed capable of conjuring up as many frightful things as easily as the fanciful.

Ellis held back to allow her to catch up and then proceeded into the forest.

Once again the sound of the waterfall greeted them. It was as beautiful and as unchanged as the day before. But somehow the air was different. Ellis was not as relaxed. He dismounted and came to help her as well. His eyes darted this way and that as they walked to their spot by the waterfall.

He helped her sit on the log before gently tucking the lap blanket over her. Andalin caught his arm and his attention for what seemed like the first time since they had left the house.

“Why don’t we sit for a moment before you see to our picnic,” Andalin suggested.

Ellis gave her a small smile. “Gladly.”

“Nothing may come of this,” Andalin whispered to him. “And she certainly won’t come close if you are staring about like a spooked deer.”

Ellis visibly relaxed his shoulders. “You are right. Tell me what you and Kerrigan were speaking about before breakfast.”

“Is this an order?” Andalin asked, her brow raised.

Ellis kicked a pebble with his toe, causing it to bounce

into the pond. “Maybe.” He turned and smiled teasingly at Andalin. “Unless you think it will throw me into a jealous fit and distract me from my purpose.”

Andalin put her hands in her lap. “Kerrigan and I were just—”

“Just Kerrigan, is it?” Ellis looked affronted.

Andalin pressed her lips together to hide her smile. “My apologies—*Lord* Kerrigan.”

“You are toying with me. Yesterday you were spouting your affections for me, and as soon as Kerrigan arrives, I am cast aside like an old shoe.”

“I am surprised at your reaction since it was you who insisted he be my dance teacher and escort.”

“A privilege I could not accept myself. Can you imagine me at a ball? With the people cowering instead of dancing? Besides, it’s been so long since I’ve danced, I’m not sure I could remember the steps. It’s no wonder you find Kerrigan to be such an attentive swain. He holds the trump card.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it at first, but Lord Kerrigan is right. You do jump to conclusions.”

Ellis went from amused to annoyed. She bit her lip. She hadn’t meant to vex him—only goad him a bit. “Come now, he is your dearest friend.”

“I know,” Ellis admitted. “I have been trying to remind myself all morning.”

“Let us speak of something else.”

Ellis looked sideways at her. “You are avoiding telling me what Kerrigan spoke to you about.”

Andalin remained silent. It wouldn’t do any good to repeat the compliments Kerrigan had paid her, especially now, when Ellis was acting so sensitive and on edge.

“Very well, we can speak of something else.”

“Good. What would you like to talk about, then?”

Ellis reached over and unclasped Andalin's hands with his own and held them. "There is something I have been meaning to explain."

Andalin felt the blood wash out of her face. Not ten yards behind them was a set of eyes staring directly at her. But this time the hair was not golden; it was dark.

"Ellis." Andalin's frightened whisper captured his attention. "Ellis, come kneel before me like you have something important to say, and then turn your head to see the woman not far behind you."

Ellis's jaw went tight. He smoothly slipped to one knee, rotating his position so he was now directly in front of Andalin. He kept her hand in his and then, without speaking, lifted his face to kiss her cheek. While he did so, he turned his head so he could see the woman in the shadows. His careful, measured movements made the time slow almost to a stop.

A yell came from Ellis's lips so full of rage Andalin nearly lost her seat. He leapt to his feet and bounded over the log as if it was not even there. Andalin whirled around in time to see the witch bolt. Ellis was just a few strides behind and moving faster than Andalin thought possible. When he was within reaching distance, Ellis dove and tackled the woman to the ground. An unearthly scream pilfered through the woods, and Andalin jumped to her feet and ran toward them.

"Ellis!" Andalin yelled as she came nearer. "You must not hurt her!"

Ellis flipped the woman around so her face was in the dirt. He grabbed her arms and pulled them none too gently behind her so she could not escape.

"Grab the rope from my bag!" Ellis huffed, his breath hard and short.

Andalin lifted her skirts and ran back to the horses. She grabbed the rope and raced back to Ellis.

He took it and bound the witch's hands behind her. Then he half-dragged her to his horse, where he tied the other end of the rope to his saddle.

“My horse obeys only me, so don’t get any ideas.” The woman would not look at them, but there was panic evident on her features. “Where is my sister? I know you have her!”

The woman’s face crumbled, and she started to cry.

“Tell me!” Ellis yelled, shaking the witch as he did. The woman remained silent; her head cowered, so they could not see her eyes.

Andalin felt helpless. She did not like the seething anger she saw in Ellis. Even though she loved him deeply, the emotion frightened her. She looked around them, hoping Lord Kerrigan and Mr. Lewis would show up any moment. But they did not.

As her gaze swept around, she froze. It was Eliana, or at least she thought it was. The woman was the same fair-headed one she had seen yesterday.

“Ellis!” Andalin cried. “Look!”

Ellis’s head whipped around. His eyes arrested on the woman.

“Eliana?” he breathed.

His sister slowly moved toward them. As she drew closer, Andalin could see the resemblance between her and her brother. Their coloring was identical. She too was tall, but her figure was lean and willowy. Her clothes, like that of the witch’s, were worn thin and had streaks of dirt on every side.

“Eliana!” Ellis said again, this time much louder and more assuredly. Andalin felt her throat catch. He had found his sister.

Eliana did not yell back, nor did she mirror her brother’s excited demeanor. It was almost as if she was wary about a reunion.

Moving away from the witch, Ellis crossed to meet his sister. She allowed herself to be swallowed in his embrace, and from Andalin’s perspective, returned his hug only tentatively at first. Then, with a cry of anguish, Eliana wrapped her arms the rest of the way around her brother and sobbed.

Ellis wept openly, and Andalin found tears streaming down her face as well. She covered her mouth with her hand. Finally, his nightmare would be over.

After some time, Ellis pulled back from his sister and held her at arms' length. Her spencer jacket and dress were worn and her fair curls were mussed, but she was in one piece. She was alive. "My dear sister! You are not the young girl I have been envisioning. You are so beautiful! A sight for sore eyes. Oh, how I have missed you."

Eliana's smile faltered, and she bent her head to see the witch.

Ellis pulled her to him again. "Do not fear. I will not let her near you again." Then, after releasing Eliana, he unsheathed his sword and crossed to the witch.

The witch's eyes darted from Ellis to Eliana. Just like from the stories she possessed an unearthly beauty paralyzed from age. She was a mature woman, but not a wrinkle showed the years that had passed. It was not possible, and yet the proof was before him.

"No, wait!" Eliana began. "She is my friend."

Ellis shook his head furiously. "She has deceived you. This same woman killed our parents, kidnapped you, and hid you away from me for the last ten years. She is no friend!"

The strange woman stilled Eliana's argument with a quick shake of her head and then turned to face Ellis, whose sword threatened her. "I can explain."

"By all means," Ellis growled.

The woman straightened; her empty, dark eyes penetrated his. "The person you refer to is my mother, Mrs. Sephira Dubois. It was she who killed your parents, though she was not responsible for Eliana disappearing. 'Twas I."

Ellis flicked his sword to the woman's throat. No one would deceive him. "And who are you?"

"My name is Sephany Dubois."

“Miss Dubois, where is your mother so she might confess to prove your innocence?”

Miss Dubois’s gaze fell to her feet. “She died a few years ago. I can show you where we have buried her.”

Ellis turned to Eliana. “Is this true?”

“Miss Dubois’s mother is the one responsible for our parents’ deaths,” Eliana said solemnly. “It is also true she is dead now.”

“The witch. She has been dead for several years?” Ellis asked, disbelief clouding his vision.

“She was never a witch. The story is false, or at least an illusion,” Miss Dubois said, her eyes pleading to be understood. “My grandmother, when she was young and beautiful, made up the idea her family had eternal youthfulness, in order to attract suitors for herself and later her daughters.”

“But why?” Annie asked, stepping nearer. Ellis put out his arm to keep her back. He did not trust this woman, not yet.

“My grandfather lost all their money in the gambling hells before he passed away,” Sephany answered. “They were left destitute. They needed money to save their home and reputation. As the years passed, things got out of hand. My mother took my grandmother’s place. The pressure became too much. She became obsessed with her appearance, which led to a sickness of the mind. She believed herself to possess powers beyond her ability.”

Ellis dropped his sword to his side but did not resheath it. “Where do you come into the story?”

Eliana crossed to Miss Dubois and put a protective arm around her. It seemed to give Miss Dubois the courage she needed to continue. “My mother fell in love. My grandmother refused to let her marry because they needed the rich gifts the suitors brought. I think the disappointment only increased her sickness. She became fanatical until she believed she would only be beautiful if she carried a certain stone in her possession.

“After some time, she married in secret and became pregnant with me. Her younger sister became the new beauty, and the stone was passed down. The deception continued. For a time, life improved for my mother, but my grandmother told me my mother was never the same after my birth. She became depressed and violent. My father left her when she tried to kill him. I was very young when we moved back in with my grandmother. I later learned my mother never told my father the truth of the family charade.”

Ellis’s frown deepened. His mind whirled with all this information, but he needed to know more. “Then what?”

“I do not remember the particulars,” Miss Dubois answered, “but the whole family went into hiding. People were no longer attracted to the idea of a woman who stayed young and beautiful forever. Instead they became fearful of the idea of witchcraft and sorcery. Mother often became confused about what was truth and what was not.”

Ellis looked from Miss Dubois to Eliana and knew it was true. “I believe your story. Many of the facts connect with pieces I unearthed myself. But you have told me only half the tale. I want to know how you came to be involved with my family.”

“My grandmother and aunt could not keep my mother under control, and it was decided the charade must end, and we were all to go into hiding.” Miss Dubois’s face held a measure of regret and sadness, but she pushed through. “My mother went long periods during which she was normal, but inevitably she would become sick and throw fits. I hid from her when I was younger. I did not understand then what was happening.”

“Your grandmother and aunt did not try to stop her?” Ellis asked, struggling to make sense of the story.

Miss Dubois shook her head. “My grandmother wanted to protect herself and her younger daughter. It was decided the safest route was for us all to separate. My grandmother found us a place in the forest while she looked for new housing for her and my aunt, but they never returned. We had no one for

company but each other for many years, so on occasion we would come watch the comings and goings at the manor house.

“My mother once told me from the first time she saw Lady Cadogen, she was jealous of her beauty. She would often talk about it, especially when she was in her other world. She became convinced Lady Cadogen possessed the magic stone, even though she told me my grandmother had taken it years before. She . . . she later killed your parents. In her mind, she thought she was doing right.” Miss Dubois’s lip trembled. Eliana rubbed her arm to comfort her.

His sister. His very own sister stood in front of him.

“Did she ever know my father?” Ellis asked, his voice subdued.

“I do not know,” Miss Dubois answered, her voice a little shaky. “She grew up in Thornton Way, so it is very possible.”

Ellis slashed at a low-hanging branch nearby. “I have been told she did, but it doesn’t seem to matter now whether or not he was a factor. Her mind was clearly unsound.” Ellis finally put his sword away, which seemed to please Eliana. Ellis motioned to the two of them. “You became friends. Miss Dubois came to see you the night of our birthday, did she not?”

“Yes, she did,” Eliana said. “We were both upset. Her mother had disappeared and was having one of her fits. I promised I would help her find her. I did not realize she would go to the manor house after our parents.” Eliana turned away. “It’s my fault. They are dead because of me.”

“Eliana, no, you are no more to blame than I am.” Even as Ellis said it, he knew he’d always carry the weight of his own guilt.

Eliana shook her head as a tear silently dripped down her face. “I am to blame. If everyone would have remained at the manor house, then our parents would not have been alone waiting for me. Miss Dubois will tell you she persuaded me to stay with her, but in all honesty, I did not want to go back. I

started to after dark, but then I realized everyone was looking for me, and I was afraid. I could not face our parents or the rest of the guests. I was too embarrassed.

“I thought the situation could not get any worse, but then, while Miss Dubois was spying on the house for me, she overheard some of our servants talking about how the witch had killed the baron and baroness. I was devastated. I knew then and there I could never go back. I watched the funeral from a distance. We knew it was no longer safe for us to stay in the forest. It was only a matter of time before you found us. We fled to Scotland and found employment as maids, taking turns caring for Miss Dubois’s mother in the rooms we rented. A few times we made the trip back through the Black Forest so I could be here, closer to home.”

Ellis stared, dumbfounded. His emotions made a quick succession from shock and dismay to anger. Eliana had never been kidnapped at all. He raked his hand through his hair, but he couldn’t truly process Eliana’s revelation.

“You would choose to live with a madwoman over me? Am I so very terrible a brother you would let me believe you dead—lost from me forever? Did you never hear or see me all these ten years? You could have left a letter explaining. Anything!” Ellis’s voice had begun calm but rose by several degrees by the time he finished.

Eliana became defensive, folding her arms across her chest and matching his stance. “It wasn’t just about me. Miss Dubois needed a friend. I could not let her lose her mother like I did.”

Ellis rubbed his jaw and huffed. “It is not the same, and you know it.”

“I was angry and hateful too at first,” Eliana argued. “I knew from the beginning Sephira did not really know what she was about. She could not even remember it the next day. She was like a child, never again the same.”

Ellis shook his head. “That does not explain ten years of absence.”

Eliana looked at her feet sheepishly. “I was plagued with guilt. I wasn’t sure if you would forgive me. You changed, Ellison. You became this masked man. There wasn’t a passerby who didn’t have the fear of you on his breath. You spent days on end on a death hunt for Miss Dubois’s mother.”

Ellis’s jaw went slack. He reached back and ripped the mask from his face. Anger seethed from his lips. “I wore this for ten years because her wretched, murderous mother said it would keep you alive.” He tossed it bitterly to the ground. “I ruined my reputation, lost almost all of my friends, and lived a life completely different from the one I’d intended. I did it all for you. And you tell me you have been out here all this time of your own accord?”

Annie reached for Ellis and took his arm, pulling him to look at her. He knew his eyes were filled with unfettered emotion. “Ellis, you have found your sister, who was lost to you, and that is all that matters now. Rejoice in your reunion. Do not let the bitterness of the past leave no room for reconciliation.”

Ellis squeezed her hand on his arm and then pulled away. He walked to the pond and put his hands on his hips as he silently stared into the waters. He knew the others were hurting too, but he needed time. Ironic, since he’d had years of waiting for this moment.

After several drawn-out moments of silence, he slowly turned. “I cannot pretend I am the same Ellison you left, but I am still your brother. Let us be done with this. Let us return home and put the past behind us.”

There was clear sorrow in Eliana’s eyes. She shook her head. “It cannot be.”

Ellis spread his arms open wide and yelled, “Why not? There is no need to protect that madwoman from my temper. She is already dead.”

“Please, don’t judge her,” Miss Dubois pleaded. “Don’t condemn her. She was so very ill.”

“How can I not condemn her?” Ellis gave a short laugh.

“She has taken the lives of my beloved parents and deprived me of ten years the comfort and companionship of my sister. I could never forgive her.”

He heard Annie’s small gasp. “Ellis, please, think this through.”

It had taken months for her to break down the tight wall around his heart, and now, at the moment of truth, Ellis could not let go. He tightened his grip on his sword, wishing he could offer her more. His stubbornness was matched in Eliana, and he feared his sister would not be convinced to return with them. He turned back to the water, saying a silent prayer.

He heard small footsteps, and then Annie was beside him. “The only person you will hurt by not forgiving is yourself,” she whispered. “Your parents did not raise you to be a hateful man. You told me they were always loving and selfless.”

Ellis did not bother hiding his annoyance. “And yet you ask me to forgive the woman who took their lives?”

“I am asking you to be the man they would be proud of.”

Ellis’s mouth constricted as he tried to swallow back the brimming emotion from years of pain and hurt. Annie held his gaze with her own, pleading silently for him to choose to let go. His fists trembled with fury at the very thought of his sister’s betrayal, but Annie reached out and set one of her hands on his. Her touch was a balm and soothed him. Slowly the fight left him and he could breathe again.

“Oh, my Annie,” he whispered back. His other hand covered hers and he squeezed her fingers like a lifeline. “I want to let go, truly I do. I know you are right. This is not me. This has never been me. I need to thank God for reuniting me with my sister.”

The hurt remained, but the anger did not. Annie nodded encouragingly, compassion filling her features. His heart would take time to heal, but this was a step in the right direction.

He threaded his fingers with hers and then pulled her to his sister. With his free hand he reached toward Eliana. She

hesitated, and then with a small smile, she came to him.

“This is a moment for celebration, not anger,” Ellis said. “I need some time to accustom myself is all. Please, come home with me.” His words were spoken carefully, and he hoped they conveyed the earnestness in his heart.

Eliana hesitated. Instead of answering, she looked to Miss Dubois, still tied to the horse. “May I?”

“No,” Ellis said. “It was my doing. Let me release her.” He undid the knots and apologized for the raw skin around her wrists.

Eliana embraced Miss Dubois and then turned to Ellis. “We have ointments to ease this sort of discomfort. I will take care of her. You two must get back before dark. I have seen signs of wolves.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “Matilda has several good ointments. Mr. Lewis is quite a medicinal man when he wants to be. Do not think it necessary to stay out here one more night.”

Eliana avoided her brother’s gaze. “Miss Dubois is like a sister to me now. I cannot simply walk away from her.”

“What?” Ellis asked, completely baffled.

Annie stepped forward to intervene once more. “I am sure your brother would not mind if Miss Dubois came to Braitwood Hall.” Annie turned to Ellis. “Would you?”

“Certainly not. Why would I mind?”

“See?” Annie finished.

Ellis cleared his throat to try again with a more gentlemanly tone. “Your presence would be most welcome.”

Miss Dubois hesitated for a moment, stole a look at Eliana, and then finally agreed.

Annie put on her cheeriest smile. “I promise you Ellis is not the beast everyone says he is. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

Ellis rolled his eyes. “I am a beast. She is blinded by

love.”

Annie waved them to the horses. “Come. I am anxious to see what has kept the others.”

Ellis started. “You are right. They should have been here long ago.” Ellis pulled Ginger to Eliana. “Since you and Miss Dubois are inseparable, you won’t mind doubling up, will you?”

“No, of course not,” Eliana replied.

“Good. Annie can ride with me. Something must have happened to detain the others, and we had better not delay.”

CHAPTER 24

ELLIS MADE AN EXECUTIVE DECISION to bring the ladies home before any search for Kerrigan and Mr. Lewis was to be made. The whole ride home he reveled in having his heart back. Eliana was finally in his life again, and Annie loved him. He still wondered if it could truly be possible.

First, he needed to fully reconcile things between him and his sister. Eliana's confusion about his nature and feelings hurt him deeply. Then he needed to have a talk with Annie. It pained him to think of hurting her again. Why did it seem he was forever hurting everyone? But he couldn't live with the secrets any longer. He would not let anything get in the way again of him telling her. He would plead for her forgiveness like she had on his sister's behalf.

Ellis led the ladies into the corridor, where he watched as Mrs. Lewis went from shock to celebration and back to her role as housekeeper. She ushered them into the sitting room and hurried to take everyone's cloaks. Feeling urgent to look for the others, Ellis made to excuse himself but was cut short when Miss Dubois emitted a sharp gasp.

Her jaw dropped, and she pointed accusingly at Annie. "The stone of Baltar!"

Annie's brow furrowed in confusion, and Eliana's hand flew to her mouth.

Ellis groaned inwardly.

"You are wearing my mother's stone!"

Annie looked down at her necklace and touched it tenderly. "You are mistaken. This was my mother's and was bestowed to me upon her death."

Miss Dubois shook her head. "No, I would know it anywhere. I was eight when I saw it last. And as surely as I stand here, that is the stone of Baltar!"

Annie fingered the stone. "I don't understand." She looked to Ellis for help. He pressed his lips thin,

contemplating how to respond. This was not how he had wanted Annie to find out. He needed to explain but didn't know where to begin.

“You . . . you knew?” Despair laced Annie's expression.

Ellis swallowed hard and nodded regretfully.

“But my mother never had any connection with the Dubois family!”

Ellis did not have to see all three women to know they were staring at him. He could feel their eyes boring into him, demanding an explanation.

He pulled at his cravat and sank into a chair. There was no escaping now. “Your mother was Sephira's sister and apparently Miss Dubois's aunt. You two are cousins. From what I gather, your grandmother was a shrewd businesswoman but not the most loving or compassionate toward her daughters. She practically sold her youngest daughter to the first man she could find—Annie's father. Oh, she made sure the particulars were met. He was a gentleman and from a reputable family. But in order to marry your mother, he had to live in a remote location and never disclose her daughter's surname. And he had to pay his mother-in-law a small fortune.”

He stood and stepped nearer to Annie. “It wasn't your mother's dowry keeping your family afloat; it was your father's income, inherited from his own family. It was love at first sight for your father, and he gladly gave up his life to be married to your mother. Your none-too-generous grandmother disappeared and died shortly later. She is buried in a small cemetery not fifty miles from here.

“We can't fault her altogether. I can see now she felt she was doing both of her girls a favor. She removed the stone from Sephira that seemed to bring on her mental spells. And she found a home where her younger daughter was loved and cherished by first your father and then you.”

The disbelief and hurt on Annie's face caused his heart to sink.

“No . . . it couldn’t be,” she said, her cheeks absent of color.

“I should have told you sooner. I traced a few leads until I found your father. He was able to affirm the name and relation to your grandmother. I bought his wares as a trade for information. I had to ensure he was telling me everything, and that was where you came into the picture.

“I was fortunate your father was eager to find a suitable husband for you and that I was able to convince him of my financial backing and connections. It was an exchange completely to my benefit, though he seemed relieved you would have a chance to marry into a station more fitting to your birthright. Your father was and still is a mystery to me. I do not know why he would trust you to me. You are obviously his brightest treasure.”

Her eyes were far away, and he knew her mind was whirling like his had been after what Eliana had revealed.

She finally blinked and exhaled audibly. “When you discovered I knew nothing, why did you not throw me out?”

Ellis wanted to go to her. He wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her. But he could not. He felt his betrayal completely. He had used Annie; it was true. “I did not know then that your mother, aunt, and grandmother had all taken turns playing the witch. In my mind, your family were as much victims of the witch’s cruelty as my parents were. I felt sympathetic to your cause and was determined that making you my ward would right an evil. As far as what knowledge you could offer me, I discovered early on you were as innocent in your awareness of your parents’ true background as your father had said. But I was ever hopeful a story or a clue would reveal something to me.”

A tear trailed down her cheek, and Annie wiped it away in one hurried motion. “Our conversations—they were only to satisfy your obsession.” Annie seemed to break out of some trance. She turned as if noticing for the first time Eliana and Miss Dubois watching and listening silently beside her. “Excuse me, please. I need to be alone to think.” She reached

up, unlatched her necklace, and shoved it into Ellis's hands as she left the room, leaving a heavy feeling in the air behind her.

Ellis took a deep breath. He was no one's favorite person right now. "I must search for the others before dark. Mrs. Lewis will see that you get dinner, baths, clothes—whatever you need. Please do not hesitate to make this your home again."

Eliana and Miss Dubois nodded, but their expressions were as solemn as he felt. He was loath to leave, but there was nothing else to be done.

Somehow Ellis mounted his horse without realizing it. He smothered his heartache from hurting Annie and started using his head to find his friends.

CHAPTER 25

ANDALIN WATCHED OUT HER WINDOW as Ellis rode off on his horse and disappeared into the forest. She was heartbroken. She had found love yesterday, and today it was as if it had never existed. When Ellis confessed his feelings at the waterfall, she thought happiness could never taste so sweet. Now the bitterness of his deception nearly choked her.

She closed her eyes and saw the smooth contours of his face. Perhaps it would be easier to hate him if he did not look like Adonis without his mask. Turning from the window, she crossed to her desk. She wiped the tears from her eyes and sniffed a few times. She pulled out a piece of parchment and dipped her quill in ink.

Dear Papa,

I am terribly confused about you and Mama. I cannot stay here any longer. I have fallen in love with Lord Cadogen. I thought he loved me back, but then I discovered I was a pawn he could use and discard at will. Today he found his sister. He will not have need of me any longer. His sister will comfort him, and I will return to Corbridge.

I cannot forgive him . . .

Andalin stopped writing. She could not forgive him? She had seen the way anger had destroyed Ellis. Of course she could forgive him. She loved him! She could choose to be angry, but then happiness would always evade her.

She knew Ellis possessed goodness. In his presence she was safe, her words and opinions were of worth, and he treated her with respect far above her true station. She wanted to believe his feelings for her had changed like Andalin's had during their time together. She could not deny herself the chance of a relationship with the person she cared about most, even if nothing came of it.

Thinking of Papa and the secrets he had kept did not change her perception of her happy childhood. But Corbridge

would never feel like home again—not without Ellis. It was time for her to make her own life. Ellis might have deceived her, but his declarations must have been sincere. Yesterday had been far too real. If only she could erase the hurt he had caused.

She crumpled up the letter and threw it into the fireplace. Some time ago she had promised herself to not act rashly. A decision did not need to be made this minute. If Ellis wanted to ask her to leave when he returned, then she would leave. Until then, she would try to help Eliana and Miss Dubois feel comfortable. Her heart might ache for all eternity from unrequited love, but there was finally a worthwhile task for her to do. And she would do it.

Ellis pulled the reins toward the path leading to the waterfall. What could have happened to them? Wolves? He thought he'd managed to clear the area, but there was always the possibility of a hungry pack travelling through. He studied the ground for tracks. He'd not ridden far when he saw two horses out of the corners of his eyes. He turned his head, and relief poured through him. He nudged his horse in their direction.

“Cadogen, your mask!” Kerrigan called as they got closer. “This must mean . . .”

Ellis felt the sides of his lips pull upward. “She is home.”

Kerrigan’s mouth opened as wide as a fish’s. “Home? You found her?”

Ellis laughed. “Yes.” He told them a shortened version of the scene at the waterfall.

Mr. Lewis threw his hat into the air and hollered a triumphant cheer.

Ellis had to know. “What happened to you two?”

“Lord Kerrigan’s horse threw a shoe,” Mr. Lewis said.

“We returned and switched horses,” Lord Kerrigan began, “then decided to take a shortcut to make up time.”

“Might have taken a wrong turn somewhere,” Mr. Lewis said, tugging his hat down lower, no doubt to warm him from the oncoming evening chill.

“You were lost?”

“Well, we found our way eventually,” Kerrigan said, chagrined. “But what are we doing talking here? Let’s get back!” Then, with a slow grin, Kerrigan kicked his horse into a hard gallop. Ellis and Mr. Lewis followed in fast pursuit. The men agreed to wash up before springing themselves on the women. Ellis’s clothes were covered in dirt and needles from tackling poor Miss Dubois.

Ellis hurried to change as quickly as he could, eager to resolve things with Annie. He was also keen to reacquaint himself with his sister. With his heart equally full of dread and hope, he went first to Annie’s room. When he found the bedroom empty, he hurried to her second place of retreat, the library. She wasn’t there either. His gut clenched. He had seen Ginger in the stables, so she couldn’t have left. He took the stairs two at a time to the sitting room, where he could ask the others if they knew where he would find her.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw his Annie with a small smile, visiting with his sister and Miss Dubois. The latter two were dressed in gowns far nicer than the ones they had arrived in. He observed his sister before entering; oh, how she had changed. Her hair was a shade darker, her face leaner, and her freckles all but gone. All three were beautiful, but his eyes were only for Annie. She wasn’t the young, naive girl who had joined them so many months before. She carried herself with elegance and maturity, and more importantly to Ellis, she seemed at home at Braitwood Hall. It was as it should be. She would be the lady of his house. It would be their home forevermore.

Feeling brave at the smile he saw on Annie’s face, he proceeded into the room. His heart fell when Annie’s smile disappeared at the sight of him. Her eyes drifted to her teacup, and at once there was tension in the room.

Eliana gave him an encouraging look and pulled Miss

Dubois to her feet. "I insist on giving you a tour this minute. I cannot wait a second longer to see everything again myself. Will you excuse us, please?" Eliana pulled Miss Dubois along before she could respond.

Ellis stopped them at the door. "I am afraid the house will not be what you remember. I hope it does not disappoint you too much."

Eliana's solemn gaze spoke volumes. "Time has a way of changing everything. It is to be expected."

As her skirts swished past him, he made a note to thank Eliana later for perceiving his need to be alone with Annie.

Annie would not meet his eyes, even when he sat down beside her. When she did not move away, he took it as a sign she was at least willing to hear him out.

He leaned his head near hers. "Annie," he began awkwardly, "I apologize for . . . for everything." She did not so much as look up. He felt like an adolescent in love and afraid to act. He tentatively put his hand on hers. "Can you forgive me?"

She sniffed. Oh no. She was crying. He could not hate himself more.

"I'm trying."

She spoke without inflection; her heart must not be convinced yet. He needed to assure her. "You must! I cannot tread these new waters with my sister without your help. Remember how you saved me today?"

She shook her head.

"Yes, you saved my relationship with my sister! I am forever in your debt! I know this means things will be different now, but Annie, I—"

Lord Kerrigan walked in, effectively cutting him off. Ellis removed his hand from Annie's as subtly as possible.

"I met your sister in the corridor," Kerrigan said sheepishly. "I thought I imagined our reunion a hundred times, but none included me tripping on my own feet and

slaughtering my words.” Kerrigan shook his head and grinned. “I daresay I gave those two something to laugh about.”

Ellis smiled but couldn't bring himself to laugh. There was a great deal to celebrate, but he needed Annie's complete forgiveness first. His joy was dependent on hers.

CHAPTER 26

ANDALIN WELCOMED THE DAWN. LAST night had exhausted her. Ellis had apologized, but he had not renewed his declarations of love. He'd mentioned her staying to help smooth the way for him and his sister, but for how long? And when he said things would be different now—what had he meant? Unencumbered by his past, Ellis was free to live any way he pleased. She dared not presume to be included in his new life. His need for a ward was obsolete, and without a mask, his opportunities for love were so much greater.

She crawled out of bed and pulled open her curtains to see a sunrise more vibrant and beautiful than any she'd ever seen. For so long her bedroom window had mocked her with the unattainable view outside her prison, but now it painted a beautiful vista she would not exchange for any other. It filled her heart with a longing for a home that could never be hers. Dew glistened everywhere, and she could not resist pushing open the glass pane. The cool wind whipped at her hair, swirling thoughts of an unknown future through her mind. She pulled her robe tighter around her and let the crisp air dry any chance of tears.

Hannah came in a few minutes later to help her dress. Andalin regretted the need to close the window on her newest and greatest dream. How long would she have to wait until Ellis sent her back to her father?

“Hannah, are you humming?”

“His lordship is a mite handsomer than I remember.”

“Hannah!” Andalin said, in mock reproach.

“Don't tell me ye haven't noticed. I wouldn't believe it if ye did.”

Andalin held out her hairpins. “I think you had better focus on finishing my hair.”

Hannah's tall form shook with laughter, but she twisted Andalin's hair up without any more comments. Andalin thought she imagined the knock on her door.

“I’ll get it,” Hannah said.

Andalin held her breath and straightened her already-neat skirt. What did Ellis want? Her gut clenched in anticipation as Hannah pulled the door open.

It wasn’t Ellis, but Miss Dubois.

“Pardon me,” Miss Dubois said. “Might I speak with you for a moment?”

Andalin nodded, and Hannah excused herself. “Please, come in.”

Miss Dubois hesitated but then stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “I wanted to return this to you.” She extended her hand, revealing the garnet necklace.

Andalin swallowed uncomfortably and shook her head. “I cannot wear it knowing the painful memories it must resurrect for you.”

Miss Dubois stepped closer. “Please, take it. I asked Lord Cadogen if I might return it to you. I’ve had many years to deal with my past, and I promise it shall not bother me. I often wear a brooch my mama loved, to remember the good times by. This necklace is a treasured tie to your mother. It doesn’t bring them back, I know. But it’s a little comfort.”

Andalin accepted the necklace, and hot tears stung her eyes. She’d missed it. “Thank you.”

Miss Dubois left the room with a pleased smile. Andalin watched her go, feeling a new connection to her cousin with Miss Dubois’s offering of kindness. Andalin fingered the smooth stone, thinking of all it represented. Did the good outweigh the bad? Closing her eyes, she pictured her mama sitting close as they read a book together, the necklace touching Andalin’s face as she leaned in close when the story excited her. Dozens of memories of her mother were tucked away in Andalin’s heart, and the necklace was a constant in each.

It took a little courage, but she undid the clasp and linked the delicate chain around her neck. The stone rested below her throat, and a measure of peace fell upon her. Her anger toward

her mother slipped away, replaced with memories of better times.

She was ready now to face the unknown and go down for breakfast. As she neared the staircase, she heard a conversation at the bottom of the stairs. She hesitated when she recognized the voices. They belonged to Lord Kerrigan and Eliana.

“You do remember me, do you not?” Lord Kerrigan asked.

“Only every other childhood memory includes you.”

“I thought I would never see you again,” Lord Kerrigan said, his voice low. Andalin drew back. This was not something she wanted to interrupt.

“You have stayed by my brother all these years. Your friendship is admirable.”

“I spent years searching for you by your brother’s side. You can’t believe I did it all for him.”

“James—forgive me, Lord Kerrigan.”

“No, please, I haven’t heard anyone call me James since I inherited my title from my father.”

Eliana ducked her head. “It’s hard for me to talk about the past. I would prefer to begin again, if we could.”

“Of course.”

Andalin felt a tap on her shoulder. She froze.

“Eavesdropping now, are we?” Ellis asked.

She blinked several times, unsure of how to act around him. “I . . . I just discovered a great secret.”

Ellis craned his neck in the same fashion as she. “Since this is my house, I ought to be privy to all its secrets.”

“You already know,” Andalin said. “It is only news to me. Lord Kerrigan is the one Eliana wrote about in her journal—the man she adored so many years ago. And by the sounds of Lord Kerrigan’s voice, he is very pleased to have your sister

back in his life.”

Ellis smiled devilishly, and her knees weakened at the sight. “And you have just learned he no longer holds a torch for you. This isn’t a great secret; it is the *best!*” Ellis lifted her hand and kissed it before bringing it to rest on his arm.

Her heart soared, but pretending he loved her wasn’t healthy. She told herself Ellis’s relief was for Lord Kerrigan. It meant less hurt feelings when she was sent away. She wanted to hate him for giving her false hope, and she should not encourage him either. She pulled her hand off his arm and pretended to fuss with her gown. Their game of pretend was over.

The noon hour brought Mr. Trenton, Katrina, and Lady Kerrigan to the house. Initially, there was a great deal of spent tears. Mrs. Lewis passed around handkerchiefs to all the ladies. The afternoon transitioned to a very merry one, outside of Lady Kerrigan, who could not contain her emotions. For hours she kept hugging Eliana and even an unsuspecting Miss Dubois. When Lady Kerrigan was not hugging them, she was touching Ellis’s face and expressing her regrets. Andalin related to Mr. Trenton, having not spent the last ten years caught up in the situation, and was a bystander to the reunion. More than an afternoon was needed to heal from the past, but at least with the death of the witch, the return of Eliana, and the unmasking of the Dark Rider, closure would come.

Lord Kerrigan came and sat by Andalin. Despite the conversation she had overheard, Lord Kerrigan had not relinquished an ounce of his attention toward her. She’d caught him staring at her throughout the day.

“Have I told you how lovely your hair is today?” Lord Kerrigan asked.

Hannah had left more curls free around her face than normal. In truth, it made her feel self-conscious. She did her best to thank him politely without encouraging him. It was hard to act normal when inside she was bursting to resolve things with Ellis.

She turned her body subtly away from Lord Kerrigan in time to see Ellis try to start a conversation with his sister, but Eliana brushed him off and hurried away. Eliana greeted everyone with a far warmer reception than she gave her own brother. Andalin could tell there was still something holding Eliana back from mending things with Ellis. She sensed Ellis's frustration from across the room. His eyes caught hers. She had become accustomed to reading his feelings through his eyes, and they were speaking volumes from the way he kept glaring at her and Lord Kerrigan.

When dinner was announced, Ellis did not come retrieve her but led Lady Kerrigan into the dining room as protocol demanded. It still felt like a slight. Andalin followed behind on Lord Kerrigan's arm. When they were all seated, Mr. Trenton stood on ceremony.

"My wife and I are pleased to be here for such a blessed occasion," Mr. Trenton began. "We hope our news will add to the joyous atmosphere." Mr. Trenton moved to stand behind his wife and put his hands on Katrina's shoulders. They smiled at each other, sharing a private look.

"Well?" Ellis asked.

Katrina took a deep breath and blurted, "We're increasing!" She glowed as those around the table clapped for her.

A baby! Andalin was thrilled for her friend. She turned to gauge Ellis's reaction, but he was already looking at her. She gave him a tentative smile, but his stern gaze bored through her. There was something on his mind—something truly bothering him. Did he finally realize that without his mask, he could marry anyone now? The future mother of his children would surely be someone far better than Andalin. After all, a titled man should marry someone more befitting his station. Her throat tightened with a rush of disappointment, and she did her best not to gaze his way again.

After dinner Lady Kerrigan pulled her daughter into a deep conversation on the best time and places to convalesce. Lord Kerrigan retrieved a poetry book he'd brought with him

and took a seat beside her again. He started discussing his favorite selections, and she feigned interest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ellis speaking with Miss Dubois. Eliana's mouth was tight, and Andalin wanted to go to her but couldn't think of an immediate way to end the poetry session.

She forced herself to pay attention, though her mind was too preoccupied to properly discuss the delicacies of verse.

"Kerrigan," Ellis interrupted, "when you are finished with that nonsense, I was hoping I could update you on the latest news from town." Andalin sighed internally when the poetry book was set aside and the two gentlemen left the room. It had been a timely reprieve because Eliana had taken the same moment to take a different exit.

Andalin stood and followed after her.

She quietly shadowed Eliana down an out-of-use corridor and stopped at the doorway of a sitting room. Holland covers hid the furniture and wall hangings. The large bay window emitted the only light in the otherwise dark room. Eliana sank into a seat by the window, her blonde hair bathed in bright moonlight, and cried into her hands.

Unsure whether she should intrude or quietly retreat back to the others, Andalin hesitated. When the sobs escalated, Andalin made a quick decision and crossed to Eliana. She put her hand on her shoulder in an awkward attempt to comfort her.

After a few moments Eliana wiped the last of her tears away and took a deep breath. Andalin waited, not knowing if she should say anything but hoping Eliana would be willing to confide in her if needed.

"I don't remember the last time I cried so hard." Eliana's voice was barely audible.

Andalin gave her a small smile and risked taking a seat beside her.

"Thank you for following me. My life has provided ample opportunities to be alone, but doing so causes my feelings to prey on me."

“I am glad you do not find my presence an imposition. I have sensed off and on since you arrived that something is upsetting you.”

“Yes,” Eliana said, staring at her clasped hands in her lap. “Ellis thinks he is the only one who learned from my father how to move and hide in the forest. Unfortunately, I have never been good at hiding my emotions.”

“You are wrong,” Andalin said. “When you left here, it was a great surprise to everyone. Your brother never knew you were unhappy here.”

“I was unhappy, but seeing the injustice of Miss Dubois’s life motivated me to act. And I, who had no purpose at Braitwood Hall, suddenly seemed to be needed. I wouldn’t have had the courage to leave otherwise.”

Andalin could relate, not knowing her own purpose while at Braitwood Hall. Being a lady provided certain privileges, but it also meant stifling parameters and tedious day-to-day living.

Andalin hoped to encourage Eliana and lift her spirits. “You have been fiercely loyal to your friend.”

“I believe I have been.”

“You and your brother are alike in that way.”

“Ellison?”

“Yes. He, too, has been fiercely loyal but toward a different cause. He has been loyal to the memory of your parents and to you.”

Eliana looked at her feet. “You think his cause is greater than mine? Because I don’t see it that way.”

Andalin could feel the tension from Eliana. She was ready for an argument, and Andalin did not want to rise to the occasion. “I am only saying the fervor of emotions is the same.”

“I do not want to be the same as my brother.”

Andalin blew her breath out in frustration. Speaking with

Eliana was like trying to talk Ellis out of one of his midnight hunts. “You might share the same coloring as your brother and a few similar traits, but none of us is the same. And I think I speak for everyone when I say no one compares you to him. What I mean to say is your loyalty has great merit, but it has caused harm as well.”

Eliana met her eyes, but Andalin could see her guard was still up. She would have to tread lightly if she wanted to prevent an even greater rift. “Can I tell you something about myself?” Eliana shrugged, and Andalin took it as a yes. “I have always had a great fondness for stories. I came from a very small town, and for lack of better entertainment, we gossiped quite a bit. I cringe to admit how I regularly passed on tales of the Dark Rider. The children would beg to hear them, and I thoughtlessly provided them. I was wrong. Your brother is not a highwayman. He is a man who has dedicated his life to justice. He has sacrificed nearly everything, humbling himself to the dust, all while I smeared his reputation along with every other careless tongue.”

Finally, Andalin could see an emotion in Eliana’s eyes besides anger. “You couldn’t have known! Even I thought he possessed a wicked streak. Though, I can see now I wanted to believe him wicked. It somehow made me feel better.”

Andalin put her hand lightly on Eliana’s arm. “It is true I could not have known. But you see, I never sought the truth. I only sought to gratify myself and others at someone else’s expense. I was very wrong. My virtue of bringing happiness to others with my stories turned out to be a vice of spreading vicious rumors. It brought one person, whom I now love dearly, great pain.”

The two were quiet for a moment, digesting their own faults.

“I understand what you are trying to tell me.” Eliana cast her gaze down once more. “I gave up my family for friendship.” Andalin made a face to disagree, but Eliana interrupted. “No, it is true. With my parents’ death, I abandoned Ellison. I have been wrong, yet again. I will never be as good as my brother.”

“He is not immortal,” Andalin said with a smile. “He is every bit as human as you, which means he has plenty of frailties of his own. It took quite a bit of time for me to see past his faults.”

Eliana smiled then too. “You do love him, don’t you?”

Andalin nodded, though the admission came with a little pain of its own.

“I love him too,” Eliana said. “I know I shouldn’t compare myself to him. It was easier for me to feel of worth when I was not living here. Coming home has been like inviting all these horrible, jealous feelings back into my heart. It is nearly impossible for me to shut them out.”

“I can’t pretend to know how you feel, but I hope those feelings will soon pass.”

Eliana sighed. “I do as well. I don’t think I could convince you now, but I am not generally such a bitter person.”

“I don’t think Miss Dubois would be as close to you if you were.”

“I tried to replace my brother with Miss Dubois, but family ties are permanent. No matter how much I try to hide from my past, I cannot sever such an important relationship. Not without us both suffering. I have missed him, and I want to heal the rift.”

Andalin put her hand on Eliana’s arm once again. “I know Ellison would appreciate knowing you do not despise him.”

Eliana wiped at her eyes one more time. “Yes, I owe him that. Thank you.”

“Shall we return to the others before they start to worry?” Andalin linked her arm with Eliana’s, and the two left the dark room. Eliana stopped her before they rejoined the others. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I hope we can be friends.”

“It is one of my greatest wishes.” Andalin hugged Eliana

before Eliana returned to the sitting room but found she could not rejoin the others just yet. Instead she made her way to the kitchen.

“What are ye doing down here? Ye should be up visiting with the others!” Matilda said after Andalin claimed her stool.

“I can’t bring myself to return,” Andalin said, relieved the other servants were busy with their duties so she could speak freely. The heaviness of Eliana’s emotions seemed to now rest on Andalin’s shoulders.

“Oh? Why not?”

“I’m not one of them. I can’t explain it, but I am not sure I have a place here any longer.”

“Remember our plan?” Matilda asked.

“The plan you never told me about?” Andalin answered.

Matilda came and took a stool by her. “Ye were the plan, sweet.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Miss Durante. And it worked splendidly. Have ye never wondered why ye were put in Miss Eliana’s room? We had hopes from the beginning it would help his lordship put his past behind him. The three of us womenfolk stayed up several nights to sew dresses that would flatter ye. But I’m still repenting for encouraging the foolish idea for ye to go traipsing through the forest.”

Andalin could not believe her ears. But Matilda was not done.

“There were more subtle things too. We prepared his lordship’s favorite foods when he dined with ye and stayed out of sight whenever there was a chance ye two might cross paths. Mrs. Lewis even urged Lord Cadogen to invite Lady Kerrigan and her daughter to visit to remind his lordship of better times. It might not sound like much, but we did the best we could with the resources we had. But truly, our plan never would have succeeded without yer goodness.”

Andalin did not agree. It was not *splendid*, as Matilda had

called it, if Andalin was simply a convenient tool to fix other's problems at her own expense. She had needs of her own. "On second thought, I might return to the others after all."

Matilda's eyes blinked rapidly. "Well, ye were easier to convince than I thought ye would be."

Andalin put her arms around Matilda. "At least I shall always know you love me."

Instead of returning like Andalin had said she would, she fetched her cloak and slipped out the front door. It wasn't Eliana who did not belong. It was Andalin. She would speak with Ellison, but right now she needed space to breathe and think. She went straight to the stables to visit Ginger and the dogs. But she never made it. A hand snaked over her mouth, and her world went dark.

CHAPTER 27

“SO WHAT IS THE NEWS? Is Thornton Way’s tailor still hiding out at his neighbor’s?” Kerrigan joked.

Ellis rolled his eyes and shut his study door behind them. “No doubt he fled to Scotland. Good riddance. The town is ever as it was. They loathe me and likely will even without my mask.”

Kerrigan eyed him. “You could have told me this in the other room. What do you really want to talk to me about?”

Ellis folded his arms across his chest. “Your love life.”

Kerrigan smirked. “This should be entertaining.” Kerrigan took a seat across from Ellis’s large desk and propped his feet up on the wood. “The social reprobate has come to counsel me on my modes of wooing a lady. You might not like poetry, but most women do.”

Ellis shook his head. “Not how to woo but whom to woo.”

Kerrigan eyed him suspiciously. “Go ahead.”

“First,” Ellis said, leaning forward across his desk, “might I ask what your feelings are toward my sister?”

Kerrigan chuckled. “She is home a little more than a day, and you are already acting the role of the protective older brother.”

Ellis rolled his eyes. “You’re monopolizing Miss Durante’s attention and flirting with my sister on the side.”

Kerrigan hesitated. He picked at a chip on the arm of his chair. “I’m still trying to sort things out myself. You know how it was when we were younger.”

“You were never shy until my sister was around, and then you’d get tongue-tied and stumble all over yourself.”

Kerrigan slowly shook his head. “I was an idiot. I always regretted not telling Eliana how I felt then. I hoped and prayed for years you would succeed and I would get my chance. I

finally came to terms that it would never happen. You can't blame me for being confused with Eliana's return."

Ellis loved Kerrigan like a brother. It was hard to imagine ruining his happiness at the same time as securing his own. He felt a little guilty, but he had fully intended to punch Kerrigan in the nose as soon as he was out of view from the others.

"I can't force you to care for someone or not care for someone. You have been a companion and family to me for so long, and I feel like a heel for pressing you like this. The problem is I cannot let you continue your attentions toward Miss Durante. Eliana, on the other hand, I fully encourage."

Kerrigan dropped his feet to the ground. "Is it because of her family? With Mr. Crow out of the picture, your plan is perfect. No one need know of her father's fall from Society, and we both know her blood is good, not that I care an ounce. And, need I remind you, neither do you."

"No, it isn't that." Ellis took a deep breath. "It's because I want to marry her myself."

"I don't believe it," Kerrigan said, gawking at him. "Just weeks ago you were throwing us together every chance you had. You said yourself you aren't a dictator of hearts. You can't encourage one relationship and then demand I drop it and start another. We're the closest of friends, but this is going a bit too far even for you. I hope this isn't because you suddenly have a boost of confidence without that dratted mask. Does Miss Durante even have a say in this?"

Ellis ran his hand through his hair. This was a mess. "Of course she does. I admit I never thought myself worthy of her, mask or no mask, but she has had my heart for some time."

Silence fell between them for a few moments. Ellis knew his friend was angry with him, and he could only imagine he would feel even more betrayed when he and Annie announced their engagement.

Kerrigan ground his teeth together and then blew out his pent-up breath. "I want to stay angry with you, but I cannot. You have pricked my conscience for loving two women at the

same time.”

“I beg you to think in Eliana’s direction,” Ellis said. “I know she once cared for you a great deal, and I am confident the feelings renewed in your heart are for a reason.”

Kerrigan rolled his eyes. “Do you know something I don’t? Because she seems awfully on edge for someone interested in me.”

Ellis shrugged. “She can hardly stand to speak with me, so I can’t claim to guess her feelings on anything. But would you regret not acting on the possibility of something happening between the two of you?”

Kerrigan thought about it. “It’s been so long, and we have both changed a great deal. The idea of something might be more appealing than the reality.”

“And could you be all right with the idea of Annie and me?”

Kerrigan gave half a smile. “Annie, is it? And all this time I thought you cared for her as a sister.”

“I often treated her as one, so I am not surprised you thought it. But no, my feelings for her are anything but brotherly.”

“If there is love between the two of you, then I would have to be all right with it, wouldn’t I?”

Ellis eyed his friend, trying to gauge his true feelings. “Good, because I can’t stand to see you read poetry to my future wife.”

Kerrigan’s chuckle turned into an outright laugh. He slapped his knee with amusement. “It wasn’t working anyway.”

“I won’t try it myself, then,” Ellis added.

“No, but she does enjoy dancing.”

Ellis grimaced. “Poetry might be a wiser alternative for me.”

Kerrigan smiled, stood, and then slapped his friend across

the back. "It's good to see you looking forward for a change."

Ellis put his hand on Kerrigan's shoulder. "You have stood by me for a long time."

"We can weather a few problems with the ladies after what we've been through."

Ellis hoped Kerrigan would be as understanding when he learned how serious he was about marrying his Annie. After Kerrigan left to join the others, Ellis sank into his chair, relieved. The worst was over. Now he could continue with his plans to fix everything with Annie. He slipped down to the kitchen to make a few surprise arrangements with Mrs. Lewis and Matilda before anyone could miss him.

"The room's been prepared. It's all in order," Matilda explained. "Ye're not to worry about a thing."

"Excellent," Ellis said, blowing out his breath.

"I thought you came in here chasing after Miss Durante."

"Miss Durante? Was she here?"

"Just missed her."

"I wonder why she left the party." Ellis had removed Lord Kerrigan from the room, so why else would she need to sneak away?

"If you ask me, she's feeling a little out of sorts."

Ellis sighed. "I don't doubt it. There is a great deal to adjust to."

"It's not my place to advise . . ."

"Come now, Matilda. If you have something to say, say it."

"Miss Durante needs reassuring now. Time is not going to heal what's hurting her tonight."

Ellis did not need to be told twice. He'd not had more than a moment alone with her, and he knew she must be vulnerable after his hurried apology. He left the kitchen and went toward the drawing room.

“Your lordship,” Mr. Lewis said from the direction of his study.

“Yes?”

“I saw Miss Durante slip outside a few moments ago. I almost followed her but then decided to check with ye first. I hope I did right.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lewis. I shall go myself.”

Not bothering to don an overcoat, he hurried out. It was late afternoon, and the sky was overcast and looking to rain. He went to the stables first, hoping Annie had chosen a reprieve with a roof. He pulled the stable door open, and he noticed the strange absence of barking dogs. Once inside, he saw Birks sprawled on the ground, with red oozing from the back of his head.

Ellis dropped to his knees and turned Birks over. “Come on! Wake up!” He checked for a pulse. Still alive! The man needed a heavy bandage. Ellis saw a scarf, no doubt knitted by Hannah, hanging by the door. He grabbed it and did his best to slow the bleeding with the knotted fabric, all while his mind raced.

One thing he knew for certain: this was not done by a witch.

“My lord,” Birks whispered. His eyes started to pull open, but he was still dazed.

Ellis grabbed some water and hurried back to help Birks take a drink. “Stay with me, man.” After two short sips, Birks turned his head away, exhausted.

“The owner came back for . . . the dogs,” Birks whispered. “Men . . . they attacked me from behind.”

“I am going to fetch Mr. Lewis,” Ellis said. “But first, I have to know. Did you see Miss Durante?”

Birks’s heavy eyelids remained open long enough for him to say, “Never saw her.”

“I’ll be back. You rest.” Ellis raced back to the house and alerted Mr. Lewis, who was waiting by the entrance of the

manor. The two of them sprinted back to the stables. Mr. Lewis took over caring for Birks while Ellis saddled his horse. As an afterthought, Ellis pulled on Birks's old cloak in case Annie had need of it.

His heart pounded inside him with the force of a hundred galloping horses. He couldn't ride fast, because he did not know which way to go. The Black Forest was the most likely destination. The kidnappers would need a quick place to lose themselves. His mind conjured up the faces of all the men who despised him. Who could have done this? Could Mr. Crow have escaped? Did he have friends loyal to him, anxious for revenge? Ellis was reliving the nightmare from ten years ago. Only, this time he could not fail.

CHAPTER 28

AT THE FOREST EDGE HE found a trail. He dropped from his horse to examine the ground and scratched at the scruff on his jaw, completely baffled. Were these from yesterday? He did not know which direction Kerrigan and Mr. Lewis had taken for their so-called shortcut. But it was the only lead he had, so he mounted again and pushed forward into the trees.

Ellis led his horse at a painfully slow pace, searching for recent signs of disturbance. He had traveled this way himself often enough that the ground cover was worn down, long ago trampled into a dirt path.

“Who are you?”

Ellis whirled around to see Mr. Brennan; his brother, Mr. David Brennan; and two others from town he barely recognized. The elder Mr. Brennan put his hands on his hips and stared expectantly at Ellis. They must’ve had their horses stashed somewhere else and doubled back. They had caught him completely unaware.

These men had had a vendetta against Ellis since he had maimed Mr. David Brennan a few years back. But they clearly did not recognize him without his mask and wearing Birks’s worn cloak. He tried to disguise his voice as he answered, “I am the new footman, gone to search for a woman missing from the great house.”

“What are you thinking, working for such a monster? I would think twice about going back if I were you. Look what he did to my little brother just because David was better looking.” Mr. Brennan held up his brother’s stump, but David pulled back, annoyed. “That man can’t stand anyone who looks half decent because it reminds him of how hideous his own face is.”

Ellis ground his teeth together. He wanted nothing better than to wield his sword and fight the conceited imbecile, but he had to keep his head. “Have you seen a missing woman?”

“Aren’t you listening?” Mr. Brennan spat on the ground.

“Apparently, you care more for money than having a reputable master.”

Ellis shrugged, falling back into the years of playacting as the Dark Rider. “Everyone has to eat.”

Mr. Brennan growled. “Tell that no-good beast to come look for his friends himself. We’ll be waiting right here for him when he does.”

Ellis looked back at the house. He needed to hurry this charade up before the sun went down and the rain started. “I don’t know. I think you might have something there about my master. He can be quite fierce. I wouldn’t want my face marred or worse. I’ve got a lady friend I want to marry. How about you let me work for you instead?”

Mr. Brennan folded his arms across his chest. “You do look strong enough to take care of yourself. You could undoubtedly take on the Dark Rider better than any of us.” Mr. Brennan’s tongue rolled around in his mouth. “That is, if you have the courage to back up your muscle.”

Ellis tried his best to appear sheepish. “I’m just a footman.”

One of the men Ellis couldn’t name tapped Mr. Brennan on the shoulder and whispered something into his ear.

Mr. Brennan huffed. “It seems Hans here recognizes his lordship’s blood horse. He never goes anywhere without him. Explain yourself.”

Ellis thought quickly. “I’m new here. I didn’t know it was the Dark Rider’s horse. I liked the looks of this one, so I took him. Not to worry, because I have an idea. What say you take the horse instead of the woman? I’ve heard the Dark Rider doesn’t care for anyone but himself. On the other hand, it sounds like he likes this horse a great deal. He’d probably be more riled up about the horse than a useless person.”

David elbowed his brother. “Footman’s probably right. His horse has got to be mighty valuable to him.”

“Shut your mouth! I told you I was making the decisions here.” Mr. Brennan dug his foot into the ground. “All right. I’ll

take his horse from you. Maybe when he sees I have his lady friend *and* his horse, he'll see reason."

Ellis was realizing too late that he had underestimated Mr. Brennan. The man was smarter than Ellis had figured him to be. He had, after all, managed to sneak into the manor house, nearly kill Birks, and kidnap Annie.

"What do you mean *reason*? What exactly do you want from his lordship?"

Mr. Brennan frowned. "Did I say it was any of your business?"

Ellis shrugged again, trying to keep his nonchalant act going. "No, but I do not want to hand over this nice piece of horseflesh for nothing."

"You want to know so badly? I will tell you. I want his blasted money, I want his lands, and by George, I wouldn't mind his title. He didn't just maim my brother; he embarrassed him. He humiliated my whole family. My own mother can't bear to go to church.

"And after I take all his worldly possessions from him, I will rip his dignity from him too. I will tear his mask from his face and make him live the rest of his miserable existence out in shame. Then, just maybe, I'll feel we are even." Mr. Brennan was breathing heavily by the time he was done speaking. He yanked his head backward and yelled, "Someone had better gag the girl before I knock her out again. I can hear her coming to."

Hans turned to do Mr. Brennan's bidding. David walked a few paces back with him but then stopped, likely not wanting to miss out on the fun. That left three men, but only two were close enough for Ellis to fight. He had what he wanted to know—Annie was alive and hidden not too far off. He gauged the position and physique of each man he faced. The Brennans were trim, but the third was short and pudgy. He had fought in more-difficult situations before, only this time more was at stake than just *his* life. He couldn't help but think of Annie before he pulled out his sword.

The blade seemed to whisper through the air as he charged Mr. Brennan's back. He was close enough to cut at his belt before Mr. Brennan was completely aware of what was happening. The belt held a pistol, and before Mr. Brennan could reach for it, Ellis used the end of his sword to pick the belt up and swing it high, where it landed in a branch, far from reach. Ellis noted movement in his peripheral vision—David, rearing his arm back to throw something. Ellis sensed the knife without actually seeing it and ducked. He said a silent prayer of gratitude as he heard it sink into the tree behind him with a whack. That was close . . . much too close.

Ellis received a swift kick from Mr. Brennan, which sent him sprawling backward to the ground. He managed to keep hold of his sword, which was fortunate since the third man charged at him with a heavy stick while he was still down. Ellis jumped to his feet and sparred with him, keeping the shorter man between himself and the Brennans so they could not surround Ellis. It was nothing like fencing. He knocked the stick from the man's hand and, with the butt of his sword, rendered the man unconscious.

When the shorter man fell, Ellis saw David aiming a blunderbuss—an ugly gun Ellis preferred not to be shot with—at his chest. The weapon made it necessary for David to get closer for a deadly shot. Mr. Brennan yelled at him to stand back, but David was incensed, as men often got in the heat of battle. Ellis recognized this as his chance to change the cards to his favor.

He made a show of moving as though putting his sword away.

“See? I told you I had him,” David gloated.

When David relaxed his posture, Ellis jumped slightly to the right to avoid getting shot and used his sword to knock the blunderbuss from David's hand. He sliced at David's good wrist, and the weapon dropped. David shouted and curled up in pain. Ellis lunged forward and wrapped an arm tightly around David's neck, his sword hand keeping the weapon's edge to David's throat. With panting breaths, Ellis demanded, “Your brother's life for the woman you hold captive. Now!”

Mr. Brennan's shock dissipated quickly, and his panic-stricken face turned to one of action. He yelled to Hans and half stumbled into the forest. David squirmed, and Ellis tightened his hold. He could feel David struggling for breath and relaxed his grip.

Time dragged before Mr. Brennan finally returned with Annie. Her cloak bore streaks of dirt and her curls were coming loose, but she seemed to be in one piece and more alert than Ellis had expected—praise the Lord. He heard horses behind him, and Lord Kerrigan and Mr. Lewis rode up. Lord Kerrigan brandished a pistol.

“Impeccable timing,” Ellis said, relieved.

“And we managed to not get lost this time,” Lord Kerrigan said, swinging down off his horse to assist Ellis.

“There will be time enough for celebrating your sense of direction,” Ellis said with a chuckle. “Help me with these men.” He used his head to point to David, whom he still held tightly.

“Right.” Kerrigan picked up the blunderbuss off the ground and handed it to Mr. Lewis. Mr. Lewis aimed at Mr. Brennan, who was trying to back silently away.

“Well, Cadogen,” Kerrigan began, “do you think Thornton's constable could handle these three?”

Ellis looked to Mr. Lewis, who nodded. “I would say so. There will be a simple customary trial for all of them, and then they will be lucky if their sentence is just life in prison.”

Kerrigan nodded in agreement. “Let's tie them up, and Mr. Lewis and I can ride them into town. You can take Miss Durante home.”

When the men were bound and secured, Ellis waved Lord Kerrigan on. Finally, he was free to go to Annie. He did not hesitate to pull her to him. “Are you hurt?”

“My head aches, but I find I can tolerate it.”

He put his hand on her head and fingered the curly mass, searching for a wound. “This thick hair of yours no doubt

cushioned the blow.”

“You never liked my hair.”

“Never liked it? Your father urged me to have you continue to wear your mobcap to protect your virtue, but I could not condone such a monstrosity. When your hair is down you become a goddess. These curls intoxicate me.”

Annie’s cheeks flamed. She was lovely. He could have never endured life if anything more serious had happened.

“Please forgive me,” Ellis pleaded, cupping his hands around her shoulders. “I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Marry me, Annie.”

Annie stepped back. “Marry you?”

Ellis swallowed. He knew marriage to him wasn’t the most desirable thing for any woman. He had to convince her he was different now. She inspired him. “Please, I will never be complete without you.”

Annie sighed. “You were meant to marry someone better. Someone of your own class, with a dowry and connections.”

“I have already ruined Society’s good opinion of me,” Ellis said. “You cannot think I am worried about my reputation. Besides, after our wedding, you shall have all the rights and privileges of a baroness. There will be no distinction of rank between us then.”

Annie studied him. “Does this mean you will neglect every other part of your existence and spend the next ten years dedicated to seeking my love?”

“What?”

Annie barely held back her smile. “Oh, Ellis. Your deceit hurt me. I wish you could undo it, for I don’t like to think those precious moments with you were all just a pretense.”

A wedge lodged in his throat. “My head told me getting to know you was for practical reasons, but my heart always knew otherwise. I haven’t been the same since I saw you that first night in the woods. I was afraid to have someone so beautiful in my house. But truly, you enchanted me from the

moment I heard your voice telling your father stories. Matilda has been harassing me for months about acting differently. You have to see the way I fold for you. I can't seem to get anything done when you are around."

Did she believe him?

Annie pursed her lips. "Telling me I drive you to distraction is not exactly romantic."

"You are right," Ellis grinned, relieved to hear her teasing words. "You drive me to the brink of insanity. Is that better?" Ellis paused to watch Annie's eyes widen, followed by her smile finally emerging with a laugh, before he continued. "I am a mess when I think you are angry with me. And I have been a mess the last month thinking you were in love with Kerrigan. Please marry me so I no longer have to share you with my best friend. I do not like watching through windows as you dance with other men."

It felt like heaven when Annie leaned into him. "Now you are just being possessive."

Ellis sighed, tenderly wrapping his arms around her. "Unromantic and possessive. Very well, marry me for you. Marry me because despite all my character flaws, you want my money and dashing good looks for your children."

Annie giggled. "Now you tempt me."

Ellis pulled her back and looked into Annie's eyes. "Well? Are you never to forgive me? Why won't you accept?"

Annie bit her lip.

"Don't do that. You know I can't resist it."

She grinned. "Very well, you can have me."

Ellis smiled widely, brought his head down, and took an excited breath. Then he captured Annie's mouth with his own, thoroughly kissing her. His fingers reached for the dark curls at the back of her neck as he tasted her sweetness. She was his, and he was hers. When he finally pulled back, he looked at the sky and laughed with sheer joy.

Annie giggled, but he silenced her with another kiss, this

one tender and slow, sparking a fire inside of him.

He took a step back. “Come, let’s tell Eliana. Let’s tell everyone!” He could hardly restrain his happiness. It was as if he had smothered the emotion for so long he had no idea how overpowering it could be.

Annie put her hand on his chest. “Can it not wait until morning? We should let Eliana have the attention tonight, and Mrs. Trenton with her news of the baby. We can take our turn tomorrow.”

“Your selfless foresight is impressive.” Ellis leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “None of this has been easy for you, love. You will forgive me, won’t you?”

“I will forgive you,” Annie assured him, curling against him and resting her head on his chest. “And the more you tell me and show me you love me, the easier it will be for me to forget.”

Ellis sensed her fatigue and scooped her up in his arms. “I promise to do so. For the rest of forever, you shall have all of my heart.”

CHAPTER 29

ANDALIN FELL ASLEEP TO A soft rainfall out her window and a smile on her face, only to be awakened some time later, in the dead of night, to a faint pounding. She rolled over and groaned, fatigue pulling at her consciousness. She heard the pounding again, and this time her eyes opened. She kicked off her covers and pulled on her robe, tying the sash at the waist. The pounding, though faint, was coming from downstairs and becoming more persistent.

When she opened the door, she saw Mr. Trenton and Katrina both in their robes at the head of the stairs. They each held a flickering candle. Miss Dubois stuck her head out her doorway with an expression of concern.

Andalin hurried to Katrina. “Where is Mr. Lewis?”

Katrina shrugged. “Probably fast asleep like the rest of us should be. Who would come here in the middle of the night?”

Mr. Trenton answered. “Only someone seeking trouble or reporting it. Here is Lord Cadogen now.”

Ellis had taken the time to dress, though his shirttails were sticking out, and he was still buttoning the top of his shirt. “No one has beaten me to the door yet, I see.”

“We’re not as brave as the Dark Rider,” Lord Kerrigan joked as he stepped into the passageway—he had just thrown his clothes on as well.

Ellis started down the stairs. “I should have grabbed my mask. I don’t feel presentable for guests without it.”

“Wait.” Lord Kerrigan tossed Ellis a gun. “It could be the rest of the Brennan clan, up to no good. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Ellis nodded and slipped the revolver into his breeches.

Andalin’s heart raced at the thought of the Brennans. She pulled her robe closed at her throat and shuddered. Mr. Trenton had been right; no one would come in the night unless there was trouble.

Lord Kerrigan and Mr. Trenton followed closely behind Ellis to the door, and the ladies trailed along too but at a distance. Mr. Lewis stumbled into the room with his lantern right as Ellis put his hand on the door. Ellis motioned for him to stand back. Andalin closed her eyes. Why did he have to be the brave one?

Ellis opened the door a crack, peered into the night, and yelled, “Who goes there?”

Andalin did not hear the visitor’s reply, but Ellis turned around and held up his hand. “All is well. It’s a friend.”

Ellis stepped aside, and a man entered. His coat was dripping with rainwater, his boots were thick with mud, and his hat was pulled low over his face. Ellis shut the door behind the man and then put his hand on the stranger’s shoulder.

“Everyone, we have an addition to our party.” Ellis turned to the man. “I didn’t expect you until morning.”

“Lord Cadogen, is it? I wouldn’t have known you without your mask. I made good time and thought I’d come early but then got stuck in the storm.”

Andalin tilted her head to hear better. She recognized his voice. She hurried forward.

The man took his hat off, and Andalin gasped. She was right. “Papa!”

His eyes sought hers, and then his arms opened to catch her as she threw herself into them. Papa lifted her from the ground as he squeezed her tightly. She laughed and kissed his wet cheek.

When he set her down, her smile stretched from ear to ear. “This is most astonishing! I thought . . . I just never imagined.”

Papa motioned to Ellis. “Lord Cadogen sent for me. When the carriage arrived, I told the driver to please not spare the horses.”

Andalin wiped at the sudden moisture leaking from her eyes. “I’m ever so glad. This is the best surprise!” She turned

and grabbed Ellis's hand. "Thank you!"

His hair was disheveled and his clothes wrinkled, but Ellis had never looked more handsome to her. It was clear he had done this for her.

"Everyone, meet Mr. Durante, Miss Durante's father." Ellis moved aside as, one by one, introductions were made.

Mrs. Lewis stepped forward and draped a blanket around Andalin and her father. She had not realized how damp she'd become from hugging him. "Thank you. I am sure Braitwood Hall has the wisest housekeeper."

Mrs. Lewis batted her hand. "It isn't work when you're serving people you care for."

Andalin knew at that moment she belonged at Braitwood Hall—a home fortified with love. She turned back to her father, and her smile stretched even more. "I have a dozen letters for you."

"I promise to read every one." Papa pulled Andalin under one strong arm. "We will have time to catch up in the morning, but I have to say, you are a sight for sore eyes." Then he looked at Ellis. "I didn't realize the house would be full of guests, or I wouldn't have barged in at such an hour. I hope it isn't too much trouble."

"Nonsense," Ellis said, nonplussed. "I think Miss Durante would agree it was a welcome interruption. My housekeeper has already prepared your room. I will have her show you there so you can rest."

Papa pushed down his damp hair. "That would be very good of you."

Ellis held Andalin back while everyone else filed off to their beds. "Are you happy, Annie?"

Andalin leaned into him. "You planned this?"

"Yes," he said, his voice soft and husky.

"There is nothing kinder you could have done for me."

Ellis caressed her long, unruly curls.

“I’m sorry, my hair . . .”

He grinned. “Yes, it is a temptation I must resist.” He lost his hand in her curls and his eyes sparked with longing. “But are you happy?”

Andalin leaned up and kissed him softly on the cheek. Her lips tingled from the scruff on his unshaved face. “I am very happy.”

Ellis stared at her mouth. “Good. Then, once I beg your father’s permission to marry you, might we announce our engagement in the morning?”

“Yes.” Andalin laughed softly. “I daresay he will be surprised. Then you can tell the entire world, if it pleases you.”

“Wonderful. Then I, too, will be happy.”

They said good night, and Andalin walked away with a light heart.

She overslept the next morning. The whole house seemed to have the same idea, and everyone was served a late breakfast, which Mrs. Lewis said was fashionable in London during the Season. When Andalin had finished with her morning toilette and come downstairs to join them all, it was to hear Lord Kerrigan telling his mother about their midnight guest. Lady Kerrigan was the only one who had managed to sleep through the night’s happenings.

Before Andalin could fill a plate with food, she heard a noise behind her and turned to see Papa enter the room with Ellis. Her cheeks warmed when she saw them together, sensing she had been the topic of their discussion. Silent prayers raced through her mind almost as fast as her heart rate. They both found her with their eyes. By the affectionate way they both looked at her, she knew Papa’s answer.

Everyone was gathered. It was time. She held her breath when Ellis came to stand near her. He put his hands together and clapped loudly a few times.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?”

The clanging of silverware and dishes and the chatter of

voices ceased.

Ellis took a deep breath. “I would like to say a few things. First, I don’t think we’ve had a house party of this size for a very long time at Braitwood Hall, and it brings back wonderful memories. It means a great deal to come down to breakfast and see my dear sister here again.” Andalin observed how Eliana returned his sincere smile.

“Second, I am happy, as always, to have the Kerrigan clan with us. And to share with them the happy news that they are extending. Nothing is more important than family. But you dear friends—the Kerrigans, the Trentons, Miss Dubois, and now the Durantes—are like family to us. No one but family could be as patient with a man as lost as I was. But, as you can tell by this extremely long and sappy speech, I have been rescued.”

Ellis suddenly grabbed Andalin’s hand and held it up. “This angel has agreed to marry me.”

Andalin took in the surprised faces around them and could not help herself. She laughed. Ellis pulled her to him and kissed her soundly on the mouth. His kisses were the stuff of magic, and she could not resist him, even with an audience. She melted against him, kissing him back. She heard the others cheering and pulled away, her cheeks burning.

Papa was the first to congratulate her, as he was the closest. He put his strong, craft-worn hands around her and enveloped her in a warm, familiar hug. Then he said, “The moment I met your Dark Rider, I knew there was more to him than first appeared. I have never been so relieved I trusted my instincts.”

“You saw more than I did,” Andalin replied. “Even though I was slow to come around, I have no regrets. Learning to love Lord Cadogen was the adventure I wanted.”

Papa laughed. “I hope you are very happy, then, sweet girl.”

Andalin grinned. “I will be, sir.”

Papa leaned closer. “We will see each other more often

now that circumstances have changed.”

“I should like that.” Her smile nearly reached her ears as she thought of a life with both Papa and Ellis in it.

Papa stepped aside so Katrina might embrace Andalin. “I had hoped for this, but truly, I had no idea of either of you being in love with the other. It is too wonderful!”

“It is wonderful, Katrina.” Andalin beamed. “I hope to have a marriage as happy as the one you share with Mr. Trenton.”

She felt Ellis’s hand on the small of her back. He leaned over and interjected, “Ours will be happier.”

“Ellison!” Andalin chided, his given name slipping easily from her lips.

“Everyone feels that way in the beginning,” Lady Kerrigan said from behind Katrina. “I wish your mother was here to see this day, Lord Cadogen, but since she cannot be, I hope you will accept my blessing in her place.”

Ellis tenderly pulled Lady Kerrigan into his arms. “It means a great deal to have your approval. Thank you.”

Lady Kerrigan sniffed back tears and moved aside to make room for her son.

“Kerrigan.” Ellis put his hand out. This was the exchange Andalin had dreaded most.

Lord Kerrigan’s serious expression eased into a grin. He pulled Ellis into a strong hug. “My bachelor friend no more. I hope you two will be very happy together. Though, I cannot see why she would think you were more handsome than I am.”

Andalin’s smile was filled with relief and pleasure. She put her hands out and Kerrigan covered them with his.

“Miss Durante, I hope you use your power of influence to persuade Lord Cadogen to let you both come stay with me after you are married.”

“I am sure we would both love to.”

Ellis nodded, his eyes holding a measure of gratitude for

his selfless friend.

Miss Dubois and Eliana made their way to see them.

“It appears we were the only ones who knew there was something between you two,” Miss Dubois said.

“The only thing you can claim is you make very good spies,” Ellis joked.

Eliana put her hand up to hide her laugh. “We were completely innocent on the first occasion. We just happened to be at the waterfall at the same time as your romantic rendezvous. The second time, we can hardly pretend to be good spies when you clearly caught us in the act.”

Ellis’s expression turned solemn. “It was a blessing we discovered you.”

Eliana glanced at Lord Kerrigan and then back to Ellis. “I admit I didn’t think so in the beginning. I guess we Cadogens can be a bit hardheaded.”

“Yes, I believe we can be.” Ellis chuckled.

Eliana grabbed both of their hands. “Seeing you and Andalin together makes it conceivable that good can come from all of this. I can feel my faith returning.”

Miss Dubois put her hand on top of Eliana’s and Andalin’s. “Mine as well. There isn’t the fear and hatred I expected to come from either of you.”

Andalin beamed. “Miss Dubois, now that I know you are my cousin, you will not be able to leave here.”

“She speaks as if she is already the lady of the house, does she not?” Ellis grinned proudly. “Which, of course, is one of the reasons I need her. And we will need both of you to care for Braitwood Hall while Annie and I travel for our honeymoon.”

Andalin blinked. “Travel?”

Ellis tipped her chin up with his finger and leaned down and kissed her nose. “I’ve seen the way you pore over your books. I think it’s time you see some of those places for

yourself.”

Andalin put her arm through Ellis’s. “Last night when I said I was happy, I did not realize it was possible to be happier, but I am.”

Ellis leaned down and pressed his warm lips against hers, sharing a part of him with his gentle kiss. When he pulled back, his blue eyes held hers, and he said softly, “Just wait. This is only the beginning.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

HIGHWAYMEN MIGHT HAVE LIVED A life of crime, but they were famous. Their stories entertained many, and their hangings were well attended. With the transition to cars and trains, highwaymen ceased to exist. In books they were memorialized and, apparently, still are!

The Black Forest is roughly set in today's Kielder Forest, which did not exist during the Regency period and was actually man-made in the 1920s. The town of Thornton Way was created for the author's purposes. All characters in this story are fictional and not meant to resemble anyone in history. Although there was a Cadogan line in the peerage, our dear Lord Cadogen is completely unrelated.

And witches, you ask? What was their role in the 1800s? The belief in witchcraft was not as common during the Prince Regent's reign, but it still existed. Their punishments, thankfully, were not as brutal as they were in the previous centuries. However, unlawful crimes were committed by both believers and nonbelievers alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANNEKA WALKER IS AN AWARD-WINNING author raised by a librarian and an English-teacher-turned-judge. After being fed a steady diet of books, she decided to learn about writing. The result was a bachelor's degree in English and history. When she isn't dreaming up a happy ending for a story, she's busy living her own, together with her husband and adorable children.

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