

The Widow's Bargain

*Juliet
Landon*

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Juliet Landon

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A pound of flesh for his protection... When he ancestral home was beset by a dangerous band of reivers, Lady Ebony Moffat feared for her young son's safety. In a blind moment of frenzy the widow struck a bargain with the man's leader—her body for her child's life. Unbeknownst to Lady Ebony, Sir Alex Somers had raided Castle Kells seeking out traitors at the behest of the King of Scotland. And though he'd never harm her son, Alex couldn't help but be drawn to the raven-haired beauty's all-too-tempting offer. Still, Alex instinctively knew making love to Ebony would never be enough—unless she gave him both her body and soul!

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Juliet Landon
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Chapter One

Galloway, Scotland. 1319

The dry forest floor muffled any sound made by feet that for the last hour had rested on stirrups to reach Castle Kells by sunrise. Last night, Sir Alex Somers and his men had seen the castle from across the other side of the loch, glowing pink and orange on its high throne and looking down a sheer cliff into the mirrored surface below. Built on a spur, it was effectively sealed off on two sides while, at its back, mountains and forests cloaked it against the north winds. Further along the glen, the land sloped into green pastures where dark ponies grazed and blue smoke rose vertically from a cluster of thatched bothies. Now they viewed it within hailing distance, but well hidden, with a burn beside them that tumbled its way through the boulders into a deep pool some twenty feet below, roaring softly in tune with the pines.

‘We can bide here a while,’ said Sir Alex to his companion, ‘if we keep well back into the trees. I don’t suppose it’ll be long before he returns.’ His soft Lowland accent made his words sound more like an observation than a threat.

The companion, Hugh of Leyland, not quite so tall, not so broad or brawny but as agile as a polecat, brushed a crumb off his doublet of faded brown and unhitched a leather bottle from his belt. He accepted the strategy without question, but there were details that could do to be aired before the action began.

He took a swig of water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘He has a son, do you say?’

‘Had,’ said Sir Alex, cryptically. ‘Killed in a raid a few years ago. He has a wee grandson, though.’

‘Living here, with Sir Joseph?’

‘I believe so.’ The blue eyes searched as he spoke, eager for any sign of movement near the gatehouse or along the track that led to the distant woodland.

They made an impressive-looking twosome, like a pair of tawny lions who knew each other’s ways, who were not averse to a friendly scrap in an overflow of excess energy but who would have defended the other to the death, as would the men who waited silently behind them. In his prime, at thirty-one, Sir Alex Somers was physically robust, wide-shouldered, deep of chest, and possessed of a face that invaded women’s dreams in situations where neither of them had any business to be. The colour of dark hazelnuts, his thick hair bounced in uncontrollable spikes that touched his forehead and curled over the scarf around his well-muscled neck. But it was his eyes that turned female knees to water, for they were the same intense blue as a cloudless summer sky, and far less innocent.

‘That might be useful to us,’ said Hugh, his second-in-command. ‘We take the wee laddie and use him as bait, ransom, whatever. A squawking bairn will always get his grandpa’s breeks in a twist. Does the bairn have a ma?’

‘They usually do, Hugh.’

‘I’ll find out. Leave it to me.’

Sir Alex found no amusement in Hugh of Leyland’s predictable efficiency in finding a woman. They were both adept at that. But there were some, like Sir Joseph Moffat of Castle Kells in Galloway, for instance, who would think little of sacrificing their own kin, if need be. They had heard enough about the man to make them think so, a local Justice of the Peace, landowner, horse breeder, raider, rogue and thief, and those were the more honourable aspects of his character. Sir Joseph would not be kept awake at night by his conscience. ‘Best not to depend on it, though,’ he warned. ‘It’ll take a fair bit to put the scarers on a man like Moffat. He’s had more years of practice than most in these parts, Hugh.’

Hugh leaned against a tree and watched his friend saunter forward like a large cat, as at ease out of doors as in the finest halls of Europe. Hugh had been with him for nine years, as long as any other man in the hundred-strong company. He was two years younger, a paler tawny, curly-haired man, built like a wiry athlete, merry-eyed and unashamedly thankful for the women who threw themselves under his feet just as willingly as they did under Alex's.

Sir Alex squatted down upon his haunches and peered over the steep rocky precipice ahead of him, beckoning Hugh to come and see, to keep down and be quiet.

Hugh crawled forward, intrigued. 'What?' he whispered.

The burn hurtled and splashed between mossy boulders and leapt over a shining brown ledge into a secluded pool, foaming inside a dark circle. A neat pile of clothes lay over on the dry rocks, and a shriek of laughter rose above the clatter of the water, drawing grins from both men.

'A lassie!' Alex said.

'Two lassies. Look...see! We're in luck.'

As he spoke, two pairs of shining pink arms came into view upon one of the flat rocks, then two dark heads with helmets of wet hair followed by glistening shoulders, backs and haunches. Heaving themselves upwards, they shed water like otters, twisting to sit upon the rock and kick at the swirling ripples around their ankles. Their hands twisted at dripping ropes of hair to wring out the water, throwing handfuls of it over their shoulders, revealing every curve of their slippery torsos now highlighted by the new sun. Gold and pink and sleek, they preened like mermaids in their sheltered lair.

'Now that,' said Alex, 'is worth riding all this way to see. Are they castle lassies, d'ye think?'

'Sure to be,' Hugh said. 'Hell, Alex. Do we have time for it?'

'Silly sod. You know we haven't. And we have to stay hidden. Will ye take a look at the black-haired one, though? She's a stunner, Hugh. Wheew!' He blew between his teeth softly. 'What a body. And a face to go with it.'

'I'm looking at the shorter one, like a little ripe berry. They're too good to be village lassies and too happy to be laundry-maids. They'll be seamstresses, that's what.' They fell into a stunned silence, noting from the cover of a convenient hart's-tongue fern every perfect detail of the glorious scene. And when they felt a movement at their backs, they found that a small crowd of their followers had also wormed their way forward, their eyes staring out of their sockets at the sight.

The women stood to collect their clothes, moving into a position where, with one glance up at the rock-face, the silent audience would be revealed. Quickly, Alex, Hugh and every man withdrew like a collective shadow back to the horses, almost too overcome to speak.

'Well,' said Sir Alex at last, 'that was an interesting start to the day. Think you'll be able to keep your mind on the job?'

Hugh grinned. 'Maybe we'll be able to weed them out when we get inside the castle.'

'There'll not be time for that, lad. The men will likely keep the women out of the way. Still, I'd like to take another wee look at the black-haired one, dressed or undressed. We'll see.' He glanced at the streaks of light that had begun to filter through the trees where they hid. 'Move the men back into the shadows now, Hugh. And keep a man posted over there to watch the track and the gatehouse. The rest of us had better mount up. We all know what's to be done, eh?'

'Oh, yes,' Hugh said, placing a foot in the stirrup. 'Tis a lovely morning to be raiding a castle.'

From Lady Ebony Moffat's chamber on the topmost floor of Castle Kells, the views across the loch were to the south and east through groups of windows that were little more than slits in the eight-foot-thick stone walls. The apertures widened into wedge shapes with built-in stone benches on three sides, deeply cushioned. One such space in the corner had been curtained off to create a garderobe in the thickness of the wall, and in another corner was a door that led spirally downwards to the next level.

The cushions had not, of course, been made for young Sam Moffat to jump up and down on in excitement, nor had the windows been made just that size for him to squeeze his head through to look sideways towards the woodland path. Consequently, when a man's shout was heard from the stairway to say that Master Sam's grandpa was coming in. Sam found that it was more difficult to reverse into the room as easily as it had been to go out of it. For a moment, there was panic in his little breast. 'Mama!' he yelled. 'I'm stuck again!'

Tempted to use the next half-minute to teach him a lesson, after the hundredth time of telling, Lady Ebony lifted her faded blue wool surcoat off the bed and slipped it over her head. After seven years, it still fitted like a glove over her linen bliaud. Her sister-in-law Meg was already making her way to the door. 'I'll follow you when I've freed him,' Ebony called. 'You do on down.'

'Are you sure?' said Meg. She had seen it before. It was his ears.

Ebony smiled, adjusting the surcoat across her shoulders. 'As Sir Joseph's daughter, love, you must be there or he'll want to know why. You go and show an interest. I'll bring Sam down in a moment.'

It didn't take as long as usual to free him, for now he had learnt how to press his ears flat and twist. Nor did he have time today for the soothing noises from his mother when his Grandpa Moffat would surely have brought something back for him from his night raid which, to Sam, was as innocent as a trip to the market. He skipped off, reddened about his six-year-old ears, his eyes as grey as granite, blond-haired, slight-framed, bursting with an unpredictable primitive energy. After three years, Sam rarely asked about the father he so closely resembled.

It did no good for his mother to protest at Sir Joseph's frequent gifts to his only grandson, a pony that no one had taught him to ride, money that he was not allowed to spend, clothes from another child's back, toys and trinkets salvaged from someone's home. Her initial objections had been disregarded, and she could not bring herself to tell her child that his grandpa gleaned other people's property by force, mostly at night, plundering across the Scottish-English border to torch houses, kill the men, lift the cattle and bring them up on to Scottish pasture. There was only so much one could expect a child to understand at six years old, and as long as they were obliged to live under Sir Joseph's protection, Sam must be taught, first and foremost, to respect his elders.

His cries of excitement could be heard echoing down the stairway and disappearing into the maze of chambers, halls, stairs and passageways that was now his world; hers and Meg's too. It was unsafe for them to venture out when raiders passed so frequently in both directions, perpetuating feuds that had escalated alarmingly in the five years since the Scottish victory at the Bannockburn. Now, there was not a household, large or small, that did not fear the raids, though these would be fewer now that the hours of darkness were less. Perhaps this would also be Sir Joseph's last raid till the autumn, when they might begin to live more normally than this.

Sharing none of her son's urgency, she sat on the window-cushion and rested her head against the wooden shutter, her eyes scanning the pattern of massive oak beams that supported the roof. Woollen tapestries clad the walls with colour and warmth. Polished stools, a table, chests, and a canopied bed provided every comfort, and a fire at one end was protected by a hooded chimney with the Moffat coat of arms carved into it. The castle was cool at all times of the year, and this chamber was one of the most private in a place where privacy was at a premium. She had no cause to bewail a lack of comfort, and her inclination was to stay up here well out of the way rather than to be seen condoning her father-in-law's lawlessness.

Not wishing to let Sam out of her sight for too long, she relented at last, taking up a piece of damp linen and spreading it over a chest to dry before removing from it a strand of moss that had caught in its fibres. Still damp, her hair was hurriedly bundled into a caul of gold net and pinned carelessly on top of her head in a style unknown to fashion. At Castle Kells, what did it matter how one looked and, in Scotland, who except the nobility cared a damn about fashion in these uncertain

times? She took a quick look round and went down, descending the steps slowly with her skirts held up. It would take her quite some time to reach the great hall.

The unusual absence of men made Ebony wonder if Sir Joseph's return was in some way out of the ordinary. She quickened her step. He had taken about thirty men with him, this time, but still she would normally have encountered members of the household at every turn, as she had done earlier that morning. The guard who always stood in the window niche overlooking the courtyard was missing. She peeped through the arrow-slit, but it was set too high to show her more than the gatehouse on the opposite side and yet, even as she watched, an archer on top of the tower took aim at something below him. Before he could complete the draw, however, his arms went up and he fell backwards with an arrow in his throat.

'Reivers!' Ebony whispered. 'It's the reivers! God have mercy on us.' Reivers. Border raiders. Murderers and thieves. Merciless destroyers. How had they got in? And where was Sam, her precious child? Panic rose in her breast like a sickness. Men such as this had killed her Robbie three years ago; she could not let them take Sam, too.

Picking up her skirts, she ran like a hare, flying through arches and open doorways, leaping down steps to reach the great hall on the first floor. Breathless, her heart pounding with fear at what she might find, she threw open the door at the side of the high table where covers had already been laid, silver trays, spoons and knives set, but no more than that. People were everywhere, huddled in groups guarded by men whose assortment of weaponry was fearsome, their expressions menacing.

With her mind set on only one goal, she barged her way past them. 'Let me through!' she yelled. 'Let me through, damn you! Sam! Where is my child? Sam!' Distraught, and screaming his name, her calls cut across the hall already bristling with tension and fear. Hitting out at the barriers of arms and bodies, kicking and elbowing men aside like skittles, she searched for a sign of Biddie, Sam's young nursemaid, in a congregation of unknown and familiar faces and a terrified crowd of household servants, cooks, grooms, pages and all.

At the far end of the hall near the great chimney-piece stood another group of strangers who had turned at her noisy entrance. Biddie's white wimple was easy to spot, her face contorted and pleading. Her loud cry held all the anguish and terror of one who has failed in her duty. 'Mistress!'

Ebony charged towards her but, even in her panic, was no match for the man who caught her and swung her hard against him, catching at one arm and hand. Before he could capture the other, she swung it back and threw her force behind a blow to his head, the sound of the impact cracking through the hall like the snap of a whip. 'Let go of me, you churl!' she shrieked. 'My child... where is he?'

Ahead of her, the group parted to let Biddie through. A large and powerfully built man followed close behind, his eyes opening wide with surprise before quickly narrowing again, concealing their bright blueness. 'Not exactly the reception we'd hoped for, Hugh,' he said quietly to the man with the reddening cheek, 'but it's an interesting start, eh?'

Ebony heard none of this exchange as she took Biddie's plump arms and shook her. 'Where is he?' she said, her voice on the edge of tears. 'What have they done with him? And Meg?'

Biddie's mouth twisted. She was barely twenty years old, but dependable and devoted to Sam. 'Nothing... I don't think,' she whispered. Her large liquid eyes glanced across at the door. 'They took him into the courtyard. He'll be all right, mistress.'

But the enraged lioness was not prepared to accept that, hurling herself bodily into the group of men who, by chance, stood between her and the courtyard door. No time for asking, pleading or remonstrating; her only thought was to reach Sam before he was harmed.

Intrigued, and astonished to find a clothed version of the black-haired mermaid they had carried in their minds since sunrise, the men allowed her to get as far as the door, which was guarded. She turned like a creature at bay, her eyes both tearful and blazing with fury, her hands ready to claw at the man who faced her. 'I want my child,' she croaked. 'I want him. Let me go to him.' Her voice shook, almost running out of air.

‘The fair-haired wee laddie is yours?’ the man said in surprise. ‘And you are...?’

‘I am Sir Joseph Moffat’s daughter-in-law,’ she snapped. ‘And who the devil are you, sir? Do reivers admit their names these days, and do they still terrorise women and children like the cowards they are?’

‘You’re a Sassenach!’ he said, ignoring the questions. ‘This gets more interesting by the minute. What’s an Englishwoman doing in this den of thieves?’

‘Never mind the courtesies. Get my child here to me now, if you please. What have you done with him?’

‘Nothing. Yet.’

The courtyard door opened to admit two people, one above the other, the uppermost one bending his little head to duck beneath the point of the arch, his little hands clutching at the white hair of a gaunt and elderly man clad in padded waistcoat strapped with baldric and sword-belt. Sam’s legs straddled the man’s neck and dangled on to his shoulders. He was giggling.

He caught sight of his mother at once. ‘Mama!’ he called. ‘I’m riding Josh. Look at me! I’m going to show him my pony.’

She would have flown to him and dragged him bodily into her arms, but she was caught back by the tall man and held with such force that she was unable to escape him, and such was Sam’s excitement that his attention had gone from her in the blink of an eye. While she was never able to remember exactly what the man said to her at that moment, she understood that she must not show Sam her distress. ‘Yes, love,’ she called. ‘Don’t be too long, will you?’

With a merry wave and a grin, Sam was jogged through the company and out at the other side of the hall in the direction of the stable yard, while tears of relief and dread filled Ebony’s eyes. ‘Don’t take him away,’ she gasped. ‘Let me go to him.’ She tried to shake off the restraint of the man’s hands but to no avail, and the outer door was closed with a terrifying finality as Sam’s head ducked once more.

‘Now, my lady. You’ve had one answer. It’s time I had some.’ The man had scarcely taken his eyes from her, but now he allowed her to distance herself from him, bristling like a wildcat. ‘Give me your name,’ he said, harshly.

‘My name, sir, is Lady Ebony Moffat,’ she replied, angrily brushing a tear away from her chin. ‘Reivers don’t usually—’

‘And your man? Where is he?’

‘My man was killed by the likes of you.’

‘When?’

‘Three years,’ she whispered, hanging her head. Her hair had fallen into a black silken bundle at the nape of her neck, and damp strands still clung to her throat. Her grey eyes, black-lashed and almond-shaped, were set in a perfectly oval frame, high-cheeked and fine-boned, like an elf, and now her pale full lips trembled with distress. ‘My father-in-law has had us live here since then. Where is he? Where’s Meg?’ She saw the man’s eyes link with those of the man she had struck, then return to hers, showing her a flash of blue that she could only liken to steel. The man was obviously the leader of this mob, yet his manner was soldierly, his men disciplined, their actions ruthless, but nothing like the murderous rabble who had raided her home and burned it down. They were, she supposed, all different in their methods, even if their aims were the same.

‘Sir Joseph is wounded,’ he said with a distinct lack of concern, ‘and your sister-in-law is tending him.’ Sidestepping, he barred her way as she made for the stairway. ‘You’ll not find him there. And she’s perfectly safe.’

Fiercely, she tried to push him away as if he were a youth. ‘You’ve wounded him? So who’s to be next? Damn you...take what you want and go! Leave us in peace! What is it you want...food...cattle...?’

He held her back again with infuriating ease. 'No great hurry,' he said. 'No one is going to ride off to get help. No one is in a position to resist, and Sir Joseph is hardly going to defend anything for a while. We shall take the men and hostages away, and the castle is in our hands for as long as we need it. We'll leave when we're ready.'

'Not my son,' she pleaded. 'You'll not take him away?'

The man she had struck was not inclined to negotiate. 'He's the old man's grandson,' he said from behind her, 'and grandsons make useful hostages. The old devil will be more inclined to cooperate when he knows we have his wee bairn, won't he?'

She whirled round to face him as the last words left his lips, hurling herself at him in a frenzy of rage. 'Lout!' she screamed. 'Murderous, thieving lout!'

But before her nails could reach their target, the man who had recently held her fast did so again, and she was pulled hard against his chest, lifted off her feet, and thrown over one broad shoulder like a sack of oats, then carried, squirming, shrieking with rage and beating at his back, towards the small door at the dais end of the hall where the white covers were still untouched on the table. One of his men, grinning, opened the door and closed it behind them and, with the sound of its slam against the frame, Ebony knew that, once again, her worst nightmares had returned.

Her strongest instinct was to give in to the blind panic that engulfed her, to scream, bite, kick and fight against the overwhelming fear of losing her child. Utterly consumed by a nameless black terror that saturated her limbs with the strength of ten, she lashed out like one demented. Even so, her efforts made very little impression upon the solid bulk of the man who held her painfully hard against the stone wall of the deserted passageway with his hands, body and legs, keeping his head out of range of her only free weapon.

He let her fury subside and gradually wind down to a standstill, and she knew at the back of her tormented mind that the time had come for something other than mere appeals to their better natures, for they were not in the business of concessions. Tears streamed down her face and neck, sticking her loosened hair to her skin, and her head dropped forward onto his padded doublet, too heavy for her to hold up. 'My son...my son...' was all she had breath to say. 'I cannot lose him.'

At last, she became aware of his body pressing against hers, and perhaps it was that that helped to remind her that she had hardly looked at this man, would hardly have recognised him if she were to see him again. Now, she raised her head and saw through her tears that he was clean-shaven, that he was regarding her impassively, that his mouth was well formed and unsmiling, and that his air of healthy virility might have had something to do with his white teeth, which showed as he spoke to her.

'Steady,' he said. 'Steady now. Your son's safe enough, but I need a hostage. He need not be gone for ever.'

She shook her head wildly. 'No, not him! He's all I've got.'

'He's the only grandson?'

'Yes,' she wailed, 'and he's my only child, too. If you must take him, then take me with him. He cannot do without me, nor can I do without him.'

'I don't take women.' His tone was brutally uncompromising.

Then what would he take? Could she bribe him? Shame him? The master-at-arms had shown her once how to use a dagger, but today she had seen no need to wear one. She would not make that mistake again. Sardonicly, he had also advised her that, if ever the need arose, she should offer reivers anything she possessed to buy herself time, or life. Any currency, he had stressed. Bargain with them. Life is more important, he'd told her, not needing to explain what life was more important than. His advice at the time had seemed to be a particularly masculine way of looking at things, though now the gravity of what she knew she must offer seemed trifling in comparison to her need. 'Please... please, you must,' she whispered, forcing herself to look at his eyes to show him what she was saying.

'Must?' he said. 'What are you saying, exactly?'

'I'm saying,' she said, looking away, 'that you can...'

‘Can what?’

‘...can have me...whatever you will...if you’ll only let me go with him, or leave him here with me. I beg you not to take him from me.’ The words sounded as foreign to her as if coming from someone else’s lips, and he was silent for so long that she began to wonder if indeed she had said them. Yet it needed an effort of will, after that, to look into his eyes. ‘Unless...unless there is something else?’ she ventured, hearing the absurdity of her question. What else did she have that such a man could possibly make use of?

The pressure on her wrists was suddenly released and her hands, freed of his cruel grip, fell numb to her sides. His body arched away from her as he leaned with his hands on the wall at each side of her head, making a barrier too large and powerful to evade, though it seemed likely that her offer had now passed the stage of evasions.

She noticed how fine lines scored the corners of his mouth—made, she supposed, by commands and a life out of doors—and she had little doubt that, if he had indeed understood the nature of the bargain, he would be weighing up the implications, for there was a wealth of experience in the eyes that roamed leisurely over her face and figure. If there was triumph or greed in his expression, then he was hiding it well. Nevertheless, his hesitation mortified her.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘So we are bargaining, are we?’ His eyes rested upon hers at last, searching behind the tears.

She resolved to have strong words with the master-at-arms for initiating this charade. ‘Yes,’ she whispered, looking away. ‘It’s all I have. It’s worthless compared to my bairn’s life, but it’s yours if you want it. You see, I have lost my shame.’ Which was a lie he would hardly recognise.

‘Your bairn’s life is not at stake, lady. He’s a surety against reprisals. Quite a prize. So have you been used to offering yourself—’ his words were interrupted as her hands came up between them to rake savagely at his face, but her wrists were caught again and twisted away behind her back ‘—to reivers?’ he finished.

‘No, sir!’ she snarled, glaring up at his laughing eyes and incensed by the insult. ‘The gift I kept for my late husband will always be his, no matter who else must be paid off. You could have claimed to be the first, for all the good it would do you, but I’ll not offer it again to have its value questioned so. You are a reiver and not worth the breath it takes, nor will you ever know what it has cost me to offer my body to a common thief and murderer. Forget it! I did it for my child, not for your amusement.’

‘Yet only just now you told me it was worth little,’ he said, softly, holding her close to him. ‘Is there some confusion here, perhaps?’

‘Not to a woman. Worth and cost are not the same thing, but that’s not something a man like you would understand too easily.’

‘That’s as may be. Yet I am inclined to accept the offer. Does it still stand?’

Now it was her turn to hesitate as the enormity of the bargain began to grow and fill her with dread. She would have to go to bed with this stranger, or to allow him some appalling intimacy here in the passageway, whichever he had more time for. The consequences could well be disastrous, too awful to think about. She had been near no man except Robbie, for three years remaining completely uninterested in any man’s arms except during the darkest hours of the night when she wept into the pillow. This man would care as little for her lost experience as for her conscience, her reputation, or the long-term effects.

‘Well?’ he said.

She took a deep breath, closing her mind to everything except the need to be with her child. ‘You will allow Sam and me to stay together? Wherever you take us?’

‘The safety of your child and your access to him will depend entirely on my access to you. At all times. Do you understand me, my lady?’

Shocked, she looked up to search for a trace of the laughter that would explain his demand. But there was no laughter, only the hard blue steel. ‘At all times? Not...not just once?’

‘Not once, no. For as long as I want you. Is your son worth that to you?’

The breath left her lungs in a shudder, leaving her cold and numb. Put like that, she had little choice but to accept that, if she wanted Sam at her side, she must stay by this man’s side, literally, and without argument. ‘Yes, he is!’ she said. ‘And you, sir, are a devil!’

‘Then we have a bargain, do we?’

With her teeth clenched, she tried to push herself out of his arms as a picture of dear Robbie appeared before her like a reproach. ‘Yes, we do. And now do I get to know the name of the man to whom I’ve just sold myself?’

But her struggle was ill timed as his arms moved across her back, tipping her head sideways into the crook of one shoulder where her cheek came to rest on his quilted doublet. He gave her no other warning of the depth of his hunger and, as his lips closed over hers with their bargain still upon them, she braced herself for the sudden and inevitable roughness, the display of lust that she had occasionally caught in men’s eyes. Prepared to be hurt, she held her breath during the first tender exploration by his mouth, the tasting, savouring, the incredible gentleness of his dominance until it became clear that pain was not his intention, nor were her initial fears borne out. She had expected brevity, too, while his men waited upon his reappearance, but his kisses were unhurried and in no respect perfunctory, nor were they in any way comparable to the gentle kisses that Robbie had taken or offered her. And when he released her at last, she discovered that her eyes had been closed and that there were fresh tears upon her lashes.

‘My name,’ he said, ‘is Somers. Alex Somers at your service, my lady.’ There was no ambiguity in his meaning.

‘Master Somers,’ she said, finding her voice far away down some rusty channel, ‘you are—’

‘I am Sir Alex,’ he corrected her.

‘I see. And I suppose that was a prelude, was it? Are you about to take me here against the wall, or do we have to...?’

His teeth showed evenly as he laughed and pulled her back to him, halting her supposition before it staggered to an embarrassing conclusion. ‘Here? Now? Is that what you want, lady?’

Oaf! Lout! ‘I do not want you at all, sir. I want my child,’ she snarled.

‘And I would prefer a more comfortable setting,’ he said, pressing his nose close to hers, ‘where we could take a more sedate approach to the matter. Your chamber will do well enough, when things have settled.’

‘How knightly. How chivalrous. I should have known.’

‘That I don’t take half a bargain when I can have it all? Yes, lady, you should. You will come to know me better than that, in time. Now I suggest you take a filial interest in your wounded father-in-law.’ He released her from his embrace, pointing down the passageway. ‘Second left.’

‘That’s the steward’s office,’ she said, wiping her damp cheeks.

‘Yes. That’s where Sir Joseph is. He’d have been dead by the time they’d carried him up to his chamber.’

‘And you didn’t want that?’

‘Not particularly. He has information I need.’

‘Then why wound him?’

‘He came back wounded from his raiding, lady.’

‘You lie!’

‘No. Go and see for yourself. His wounds are hours’ old.’

For a moment, she stared at him. ‘And what about my child?’

‘He’s having the time of his life. He’ll come to no harm.’

‘How can I be sure of that?’

In one swift and practised movement, his fingers pulled the net off her bundle of hair, spilling it in a black glossy tide over her shoulder. She saw his eyes darken suddenly and once more she found

herself in his arms with neither the time nor the wit to protest. His hand buried itself deep in her hair as his second assertion of authority came fierce enough to take her breath away, making her cling to him for support.

His reply was breathless and husky, as if he was fighting for control. 'Until our bargain is sealed, my lady, you can't be sure, can you?' he said. 'So don't go where I can't find you.'

Chapter Two

Even as the door closed behind him, the relief of being allowed to stay by her child's side was being eroded by doubts that her bargain with such a man could be the action of a sane and intelligent woman. During the most humiliating and degrading conversation of her twenty-three years, Ebony's mind had been crystal clear in obtaining one thing at any price. Now, she found that a cold fear was setting in like a Scottish mist, chilling her to the bone and waking her to the significance of her first bid and of his raised stakes, resulting in an abominable bargain that could tie her to his side indefinitely unless she took prompt action to release herself and Sam. Escape? Yes, there were ways out of the castle other than the gatehouse. She had not fled from one mob of reivers simply to be caught up in this devil's crowd, and nine years was not too long for her to forget her way home.

At fourteen, Ebony had been more than eager for a new life in Scotland. Coming from Carlisle, just over on the English side of the border, to Galloway's glorious mountains and lochs had meant a complete break from her widowed mother, Lady Jean Nevildestowe, who had willingly accepted an olive branch from a Scot to cement a prestigious family connection. Sir Joseph had no problem, he had said, with the idea of an aristocratic Englishwoman for his newly knighted only son Robert. And though the two countries had not been on the best of terms in 1310, it was not so uncommon for the English and Scots to unite at board and bed, ignoring dissenters whom Sir Joseph could stare down with his pale prominent eyes.

So she had gone to live with the Moffats of Castle Kells to prepare for the time when she would wed Sir Robert, and by the age of seventeen she had been deemed old enough to accept him as her husband and to bear him a son almost immediately. Tragically, their idyll lasted only three years, their manor being in the path of English reivers during one of their raids from across the Solway Firth. The last image Ebony had had of her dear one was silhouetted against the roaring flames as he pushed her, Sam and Biddie out of a low upstairs window. The house and its contents had burned to the ground with Robbie in it while the three survivors had fled to the nearby woodland where the thick bracken had hidden them all night. At daybreak, trembling with shock and cold, they had set off in their shifts along the loch side to the castle. Sir Joseph had found them, the man who last night had been inflicting the same fate on someone else as she and Sam slept safely. Had he found the culprits at last and taken revenge for his son's life? And were his wounds the result?

Since that appalling event, her main concern had been to keep her small son safe from further harm and to find ways of redirecting his cries for the father he adored. Lately, he had stopped asking for him, but his nightmares continued to be fuelled by his insensitive grandfather who saw no harm in nightly warnings that, if he didn't go straight to sleep, the reivers would come and get him. Needless to say, he rarely did fall asleep quickly, and never alone, and now he was in the very hands of those ghouls who were cleverly disguising themselves as his friends. Whatever bargain she had made with them, she saw no dishonour in making an effort to outbid Sir Alex which he, no doubt, would call going back on her word.

As far as she knew, this was the first time that Castle Kells had suffered a raid. She had begun to think it would never happen, being so well fortified and protected by the loch and the mountains, and Sir Joseph a reiver himself and more than able to look after his own. Now that he was out of action, she had not for three years felt so vulnerable or so out of her depth.

Stuffing the caul from her hair into the pouch at her girdle, she forced her shaking legs to move reluctantly down the stone-flagged passageway to where the laird of Kells was apparently suffering a dose of his own medicine. Believing Sir Alex to have been exaggerating the seriousness of Sir Joseph's injuries, she was unprepared for the ravaged body that lay motionless and grotesquely spread out upon the trestle table in the steward's confined office where his rolls of parchment were squashed beneath tatters of burnt clothing.

‘Meg...oh, Meg!’ she whispered. ‘Dearest. I’m so sorry.’

Meg’s fresh, smooth face was almost as white as her father’s, her blue long-lashed eyes sorrowing at the plight of her disabled protector. ‘The first day of May, Ebbie,’ she said, quietly, ‘and this is what we get. Who would have thought, this morning, when we...?’ Her voice broke, her arms opened and dropped helplessly to her sides. Always so tidy and prim with the air of an efficient red squirrel, Meg at twenty-four years old was not one to break easily. With a father as difficult to please as hers, and a life constrained by her environment, her natural stoicism had been honed to perfection, a barrier against melodrama in any form. This was one of the few times that Ebony had seen her distraught.

She held out her arms and took Meg into them, rocking her. ‘Shh, love,’ she crooned. ‘Hush, then. ’Tis all right. We’ll get through this.’ She caught Brother Walter’s dour expression over Meg’s shoulder as he shook his head and frowned as usual, which was his habit whether he had good reason or not. As Sir Joseph’s chaplain and physician, this was probably the only time he had tended his obstreperous master without having to fight him about the treatment.

His pessimism appeared to have affected the usually buoyant Meg. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘but Father won’t. Just take a look at him.’

The terrible wounds were much worse than Ebony had supposed and now she understood Sir Alex’s wry comment about carrying him up flights of stairs. He was badly burned, and unconscious.

Brother Walter surveyed the mountainous, hairy, scorched body, then offered his verdict. ‘Nay, but I dinna ken when I’ve seen worse na this, m’lady. ’Tis bad. Verra bad, I tell thee. Clotted him across his back, it did.’

‘What did?’ Ebony said.

‘Flaming timbers, m’lady. His back’s worse na his front, ye see.’

Instead, Ebony saw only the irony of Sir Joseph’s timing after the numerous occasions she had wished him to hell without the slightest hope that he would ever oblige.

‘But what I dinna ken either,’ Brother Walter grumbled as he carefully peeled away a charred sleeve off one arm, ‘is why that crood shoulda come here, of all places. I ken Scots raid their own side when it suits ’em, but na-body’ll traipse all the way up this glen unless there’s a ver’ guid reason. If they hoped to kill the maister while they were about it, then they must be wearisome glad the noo.’

‘I believe they may not be,’ Ebony said, rolling her sleeves up. ‘It’s information they’re after.’

There was the sound of muffled sobbing from the corner where Meg’s maid, Dame Janet, stirred a pot of lotion, hardly daring, even now, to come too close to the man who cared not for too many females in his household.

Meg stared at Ebony, seeing for the first time the streaks of tears that had left their mark upon her cheeks, the disordered hair, the swollen lips that had howled and pleaded and been ruthlessly kissed. ‘Ebbie! You’ve been weeping! Oh, my goodness...what happened? Did they harm you, pet?’ She took her sister-in-law’s hands in hers. ‘Tell me!’

‘No, nothing,’ Ebony said. ‘I was bothered about Sam, that’s all.’

‘And you found him? He’s safe? And Biddie?’

‘Quite safe, love.’ Her eyes held less than the truth, and Meg was quick to see it.

‘You mean, safe at the moment? What, Ebbie? You must tell me. D’ye mean they’re going to take him?’ She shook Ebony’s hands.

Tears welled up again as the words were forced out angrily. ‘Sam and me. I made them promise not to take him without me. I believe they’re planning to stay till tomorrow so they can get Sir Joseph to speak.’ She glanced again at the blistered skin and the blood-soaked rags, not daring to say what was in her heart. ‘But heaven knows where they’ll take us.’

‘Then you must take Sam away,’ Meg insisted. ‘Now. This minute.’

‘How can I do that? I cannot leave you like this, Meg, when you need me more than you’ve ever done. What d’ye think they’ll do to you when they find I’ve taken Sam off? They’ll kill you.’

'They won't!' Meg shook the hands again, harder, her tone as decisive as ever. 'Course they won't. And I can cope on my own, anyway. If they were going to strip the place and fire it, and kill all the men, they'd have done it by now and gone. But you must get away, Ebbie, and take Sam to safety down the glen. You know what my father would say if he could hear.'

Neither of them was prepared for the shock of Sir Joseph's touch upon Meg's skirt, the fumbling clench of his fingers over the woollen fabric, the tug as her hand claimed his. 'Father,' she whispered. 'What is it?'

The swollen cracked lips breathed a command. 'Take...Sam!'

'Yes, Father. Ebony will take him, I promise. Are you...?' But the effort was too much for him to sustain and he relapsed into his dark agony-free world once more, leaving his daughter speechless with his pain. 'He heard us. You heard him,' she said at last. 'Now you have to go. I promised him.' There were tears on her lashes.

'When it gets dark,' said Ebony. 'Then we'll go. Now, Dame Janet, do we have any of that fern-root salve for these burns? What's in that jar you have there?'

Dame Janet handed it to her. 'Fern-root and butter, m'lady,' she said, pulling the linen cover off. 'It's as good as anything, but we need more bandages.' Her head shook, sadly.

'I'll go and find something,' Meg said.

'No,' said Ebony. 'I know where the oldest sheets are. You stay and plaster him with this.' Stay where it's safe, was what she meant.

It was a great pity, she thought as she closed the door, that Meg's mother was not here to help. In 1317, the terrible year that followed Robbie's murder, Sir Joseph's wife went to heaven with a broken heart. And who was to blame her? Life with her boorish husband would be no picnic without her beloved son to take her part. Sir Robert Moffat had never approved of his father's unlawful activities, but had been in no position to prevent them when almost every sheriff, governor, warden and assistant warden, keeper and laird was open to bribery, blackmail and treachery of every kind. The years since the battle at Bannockburn had been lean ones, floods, crop failure, famine and disease had been nationwide, and raiding had become an accepted way of staying fed. Robbie would never have abducted a child or bargained with a woman's honour.

He and Ebony had been friends as well as husband and wife, with never a word of conflict between them, and only Biddie and Meg knew of the bitter tears she shed at night, longing for the courteous comfort of his arms. That morning at daybreak, she and Meg had gone down to bathe under the waterfall, Meg insisting that, on this of all days, they must look into a still pool to see the reflections of the men they would marry. None of the pools had been still enough and they had given up, laughing at their distorted faces. But Ebony had been glad not to see, for it might have shown her Davy Moffat's face, Meg's cousin.

Taking care to evade Sir Alex, Ebony took a longer route through the maze of passageways to reach the stable yard via a door in the kitchen-garden wall, which she and Meg used to take them along their path to the waterfall. She picked up a basketful of beets and cabbages left by the garden lad in his panic, passing the men and grooms who tended the beasts that seemed to have multiplied with alarming speed since the morning. Sam was with Biddie and the grandfatherly Joshua and, though he spared his mother time for a quick hug, he was not inclined to be diverted from learning how to pick his pony's hooves clean and to brush his fetlocks.

Still distinctly on edge after her earlier conflict, Biddie was eager to comfort her mistress with the whispered information that Sam believed the reivers to be the king's troops who had come to demand Sir Joseph's men for another battle against the English. A muster, they called it, at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. 'Which is why they're so fierce,' she said, round-eyed with the well-rehearsed innocence she used to sweeten the truth.

'King's troops!' Ebony scoffed. 'And he believes it, of course.' She took Biddie's arm and led her away from Joshua's sharp ears.

Biddie tipped her white-wimpled head towards the yard. 'Course he does. They've just marched the men away who went raiding with Sir Joseph last night as well as those who didn't. Sam watched them go. Well,' she said, noting Ebony's disdainful expression, 'he's better off believing that than the truth, isn't he? We can do without the extra nightmares. And look at him now. No one's ever bothered to show him how to do that before.'

They watched the man called Joshua, gnarled like an oak, brown-armed, white-haired as a prophet and as fit as any of the younger men, though he must have been the oldest. His face was a weathered parchment, his eyes a lively brown, his mouth ready to smile. Biddie's attention was riveted equally upon the two pals as she monitored their new relationship.

Ebony turned her back on the two of them. 'We've got to get him away from here,' she said, keeping her voice low.

The large eyes swivelled in her direction at last. 'Escape, you mean? Before they take Sam with them? Are they really going to do that?'

There was no question of telling either Biddie or Meg of the bargain. 'Yes,' Ebony said, looking away. 'As soon as it gets dark, we have to take him down to the waterfall and into the boat. It was there this morning when Mistress Meg and I bathed.'

'And what about Mistress Meg and Sir Joseph?'

'They say we must take him. Both of them. If we go before dark, we chance being seen. If we delay, they may find the boat and take it away. It's got to be tonight, Biddie. I have to go and help with Sir Joseph now, and you must go up, if they'll let you, and gather together what Sam will need to keep warm, and some food. Hide it in the stair-passage so that we can collect it once we're out of sight.'

Loyal to the roots of her hair, Biddie would never have questioned her mistress's motives and, if she secretly wondered when Ebony had last shown a streak of indifference to Mistress Meg's needs, she was hard-pressed to remember. After all, Sam's safety came first, and time was not on the side of heroism. 'If they take Sam,' she said stoutly, 'they'll have to take me too. But I could go on my own, you know, and get help from further down the glen. They could be here by daybreak tomorrow.'

'You can't go in daylight, Biddie. You'd not stand a chance.'

Biddie pulled her wimple down, leaving it in white folds around her neck as a nest for her brown curls. 'Not even if I take this off?'

'No, love,' Ebony smiled. 'We cannot spare you.'

Bandaged around the laird's wounds, the strips of torn linen sheeting did little for him except to make him more decent. As the task continued, Ebony's conviction that she could not leave Meg one moment before she must increase with each passing hour. Meg had lost her mother and brother in the space of one year. Her father was strong but, even if he survived, would likely be disabled and she would be left behind at the castle with only a skeleton staff of household servants and no defence. Even her father's retainers had been marched away, and though he and Meg had insisted and Meg had promised, Ebony knew that her premature departure would be heartless. She went about her business, saying nothing of her doubts, and Meg fell silent with foreboding.

There were other men who needed Ebony's care, men whose injuries were too severe to make the journey with the others, and although she caught sight of Sir Alex on several occasions, she avoided his company at the mid-morning meal that was served later than usual. She, Sam and Biddie ate alone. She was torn by conflict and indecision, burdened by the price she had agreed to pay for a place at Sam's side, yet telling herself that it was nothing compared to the thought of losing him. Women had done more than that in the past. Much more.

Usually loud with laughter and shouting, the crashing of doors and the excited baying of hounds, the castle was now eerily quiet under the new command of competent men formidable behind flint-hard expressions that watched from every vantage point, every door and arrow-slit window. Still

puzzled by their restraint, she went from office to store, from treasury to muniment-room, from chapel to kitchen to stable to see what, if anything, they were preparing to take away on the morrow, but saw only the evidence of their thorough examinations, nothing of looting or destruction. It was as he had said: they were taking their time.

The situation showed no improvement on Sam's noisy return to his mother and nurse after almost the whole day in Joshua's care. He had, he told them in non-stop breathless chatter, been allowed to help the bowman to make him a small bow and then the fletcher to make him arrows. Then they had sat him upon Josh's great horse while it was being groomed, and someone had fashioned a small sword for him to wave. None of which impressed his safety-conscious mother.

'Have they no thought for the danger, for pity's sake? What on earth are they thinking of?' she scolded. 'Is that their idea of how to look after a child of six? I should never have allowed him near them. Idiots!' They were in the kitchen and heads had begun to turn at the unusual spectacle of Lady Ebony in a fret. 'What would your Grandpa Moffat say to that, I wonder?' she went on, preparing a dish of chicken pieces and cold stuffing for Meg and Brother Walter.

'He'd say they were clout-headed bastards, Mama,' Sam chirped, helping himself to the crust of the bannock on the tray. 'But Josh doesn't have a cloth head. He's nice.'

It was not so much the sentiments that Ebony deplored, but the fact that he was able to voice them with such pride in his vocabulary. Her eyes met Biddie's in astonishment. 'We have no way of knowing,' she said in unmistakable reproof, 'whether their parents were married or not, so it's best not to use that word until we can be sure, Sam Moffat.'

Unabashed, Sam broke another piece off the bannock and popped it into his mouth. 'Will they tell us, then?'

'Probably not. And it would not be polite to ask them. Now, leave that alone. You've had your supper. Come with me upstairs.'

'May I not go and see Grandpa and Aunt Meg now?'

'Not at the moment. He's sleeping. Biddie will take this to Aunt Meg.' Sam was hauled away, protesting, but still full of excitement about the usually banned activities he had shared with the men, an enthusiasm his protective mother could not recall him ever showing in Sir Joseph's forbidding company. He was also utterly exhausted and, by the time they had reached the upper chamber, his remaining energy took him only as far as the bed where he flopped, one gangling arm and one leg barely making it to the surface.

Ebony sat by him, holding back the natural impulse to undress him and tuck him into the bed where he slept with her and Biddie each night. He would need to be dressed if they were to go within hours. 'Sam,' she said, stroking his soft hair. Sleepily, he crawled over the coverlet and snuggled into her embrace and, while she deliberated what to tell him or indeed whether she could bring herself to leave Meg in such a sorry plight, his eyes closed, the light began to fade, and it was time to light the candles.

Her torment was resolved as Biddie reappeared. 'Biddie,' she said. 'We're not going.'

The young nursemaid looked as if she had mis-heard. 'Not...?' she said.

'Not,' said Ebony. 'I can't leave Meg tonight. It wouldn't be right. She needs us.'

Biddie came further into the room and sat on a stool by the side of the chest from which their clothes had been taken. 'But they're to take you and Sam tomorrow, anyway,' she said. 'Aren't they? And didn't Mistress Meg say you should make a run for it? You're thinking it's too dangerous?'

'It's not the danger, Biddie. It's Meg, mostly.'

'Mostly.' The maid recognised uncertainty as well as anyone. 'And Sam?' she said.

‘Well, look at him. We’ll never get him moving again after the day he’s had. He went out like a light with not even a story to soothe him.’ Sam had not moved, his long slender legs dangling like ropes off her lap, his little toes pointing inwards, his thumb nowhere near his mouth, so far.

‘But the bag of food and clothes is on the stairway to the kitchen-garden door,’ said Biddie. ‘I hid it behind the empty baskets. If you’re sure we’re not going, I’d better go and bring it back before anyone finds it. Besides, we’ll need it for tomorrow.’

‘I think it’s for the best. And when Sam’s in bed, I’ll go down and tell Meg we’re staying. She’s as exhausted as the rest of us, poor lass. Light some candles before you go.’ Ebony looked down at her sleeping child, sure that she had done the right thing, but aware of some uncertainty about the reasons she had given to her maid. Were there others that she could not interpret? Was her decision entirely unselfish? Did it matter, after all?

In the soft dancing glow of candlelight, the large chamber was redefined, restoring muted colour to the wall-hangings and darkening the lancets of sky beyond the windows. Suspended over the bed, the canopied tester almost dissolved into the low beams above, and the pale blue bedcurtains had now changed to the deep aquamarine of an evening sky, her linen pillows the cream of beestings, the cow’s first milk. Carved roundels stood out sharply on the sides of her prie-dieu, and tomorrow she would have to leave it all behind for a new life with a mob of thieves. But tonight, she must allow Sam and Biddie to sleep in peace.

The opening of the door came fast upon a peremptory knock, making both Ebony and Biddie jump with fright. ‘You!’ Ebony snapped, angered by the uncomfortable lurch behind her breastbone.

Sir Alex stepped inside and swung the heavy door closed behind him, sending a rush of fear through Ebony’s arms, making them tighten upon Sam’s heavy form. It was the first time she had seen him at a distance, time to notice his long legs and well-muscled thighs encased in leather chausses, his wide shoulders and the haughty set of his head, the sheer power of him as he stared her down even from yards away. ‘Well?’ she said, though her voice had suddenly lost its cutting edge as he approached the bed, holding up the linen parcel of clothes and food that Biddie had supposedly hidden.

‘Well indeed,’ he said, companionably, placing himself on the bed by her side. He laid the parcel between them and undid the knot with strong workmanlike fingers, laying it open to reveal Sam’s small-clothes and extra shoes, a woollen blanket, a shawl, two bannocks, half a chicken, a wedge of cheese and three apples. ‘You’ll not get far on this, will you?’ he said. ‘Not with his appetite.’ He glanced at the sleeping child with a smile. ‘And you’ll break both your necks carrying him down those stairs in the dark.’ He tipped his head towards the doorway.

The clothes and food were, she knew, totally inadequate, but it was all they could carry. And now, with Sam still clothed, she would never be able to convince her captor that they had decided against escape. ‘We weren’t going to,’ she said. ‘We were not going anywhere.’ She could see in his dismissive glance that he did not believe her.

‘No,’ he said, reminding her of a condescending uncle, ‘it was never a possibility, was it, with so many hawk-eyed men around? They don’t miss anything, you see, nor was I fooled by your agreement. You’re not the kind to stick to a bargain if you can see a better one ahead, are you, m’lady?’

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that all’s fair in love and war, but she dared not lay herself open to more of his scorn, knowing the adage not to be true. ‘I have no place for luxuries like honour where my son’s life is concerned, sir. That’s for men, not for mothers. And if you can behave without it, then so can I. We’re even.’

His eyes were deeply shadowed; she could not tell what impact her fighting words had made upon him, but she was glad to see that he did not find her amusing. ‘The lad’s life is not in danger, my lady. I’ve already told you that. The issue is one of access, as you well know, but it was not very bright of you to gamble with that, after the skirmish we had earlier.’

‘Well, a man like you would think so, wouldn’t he? You probably thought I was eager to pay without trying to find another alternative.’

He did find that amusing. 'There was a point, I must admit, when I wondered if—'

'Get out!' she snarled. 'And get off my bed. You can stop wondering, sir. There will never be a time when I shall want you within a lance-length of me. Never. And tell your man Joshua to cease from playing games with my son's safety. He is not allowed to use bows and arrows, nor to sit upon a horse by himself. He could have broken his neck on that, too.'

'You can tell Josh yourself tomorrow. As the father of fourteen bairns and grandfather of nine, he'll be interested in your theory. This wee lad has been cooped up like a prize chicken, lady. Never allowed to run wild as lads do. It's time he was let out to see the world. See the smile on his chops? That speaks for itself.'

'That, sir, is because he's here with me.'

Even in shadow, the level gaze of his blue mind-reading eyes made her wish she had not said that. But even as she struggled to form added words of astringency, he leaned towards her like a knight seeing an opening for his sword. 'No one would argue with that, Lady Ebony Moffat, but don't try to get away from me again or it may be some time before you see his smile, sleeping or otherwise. And you may rail all you wish about bargains and honour and such, but don't lose sight of the one we agreed earlier, will you? It's the only one you offered, and I shall keep you to it no matter how many alternatives you can devise. Now, lady,' he stood up, pulling at the short brown tunic that skimmed his buttocks, 'I shall send an escort to take you down to Sir Joseph and to bring you back up here afterwards. He will have orders to lock you in...' he patted the leather pouch at his belt '... and to return the key to me. Your freedom has already begun to shrink a little.' He walked over to the dying fire, picked up a log and tossed it into the embers, pushing at it with his toe as the sparks flew upwards. 'That will help to take the chill out of the air.'

Suddenly enraged by the man's monstrous arrogance, she grabbed at one of the bannocks that lay in the bundle beside her and hurled it at him, wheeling it like a discus across the room.

As if she had meant it as a gift, he caught it with supreme nonchalance, took a bite and returned it exactly to her side in the same manner. 'Au revoir,' he said, munching. 'Better close the shutters too, Mistress Biddie. There'll be no moon tonight.'

In the silence that followed his departure, Ebony could hear her heart pounding as if she had run upstairs, and when Biddie asked her if she should indeed close the shutters, she could find no virulent gems of abuse to throw after him, only a shake of her head. Picking up the flat breadcake that he had bitten, she studied it abstractedly before putting it back in the linen where it would be needed for their journey tomorrow.

'He's a fine figure of a man, though,' Biddie murmured, finding a return of her natural charity. 'What was it he said about bargains?' She pulled out the truckle-bed from beneath Ebony's and drew it across the rush matting to a place near the fire.

'Nothing that makes any sense.' Ebony rose at last and lay Sam upon the covers, slipping off his muddy shoes. 'Get Sam into here while I go down and take a look at Sir Joseph, Biddie,' she said. 'And I doubt we shall need this any more where we're going.' The knot that tied the bedcurtains to the wall held a sprig of May-blossom that Meg had stuck there that morning and, rather than throw it out of the window, Ebony placed it on the stool where Biddie had been sitting. How useless these old traditions were. If she'd had the slightest interest in remarriage, she certainly wouldn't rely on May-blossom and reflections to help her. 'What are you doing with that?' she asked, staring crossly at Biddie's removal of the little bed. 'Sam's sleeping here with me.'

'Yes, but I'm not,' said Biddie, shaking out the feather mattress. 'I nearly landed on the floor last night.'

Watching his men make preparations for the night, Sir Alex Somers received the congratulations of his friend and second-in-command with his usual wariness. 'Yes, Hugh,' he said.

‘As you say, so far so good, but this is only the beginning and the next bit’s going to be much trickier. Save the compliments till we’re through.’

‘And the lady?’ Hugh said, predictably. ‘She looks like trouble, Alex. Certainly not as carefree as she had us believe earlier, is she? Did you get what you were after?’

Alex was used to such teasing. ‘Do I look as if I’ve been mauled by a wildcat, Hugh?’

‘Think you can handle her, then?’

There was no bragging affirmation, but Alex’s laugh was almost soundless, softening into a smile that needed no words to explain it. He stuck his thumbs into his belt.

‘I see,’ said Hugh. ‘But she’s a widow, don’t forget. That’s something you hadn’t bargained for. Hadn’t you better be a bit careful?’ His eyes strayed to the corner of the shadowy hall where a beautiful black cat crouched on top of a trestle-table, her green eyes blazing at Alex’s shaggy deerhound below.

‘That, my friend, is a general misconception.’

‘What is?’

‘That one needs to be especially careful with widows. You’re getting confused with virgins.’

‘Mark my words,’ Hugh said, ‘I know about these things. Widows are not like the others, you know, in spite of your superior knowledge. They’ve had experience, it’s true, but when a widow’s actually loved her husband, she doesn’t find it easy to let him go. It’s as if he was still with her. They’re funny like that. Loyal creatures, even after death.’ When Alex made no comment, Hugh continued, ‘That doesn’t seem to stop them wanting, mind you, but they don’t admit it. Takes ages to convince them that it’s all right to start again.’

‘Yes, well thank you, Hugh, but I haven’t got ages and I’m perfectly aware of the confusion. I’d have to be extremely dim not to be, wouldn’t I? And now I think you should go and mind your own damn business and leave me to get on with mine.’

‘All right. But you’ll be wanting my help before long.’

‘Possibly. That’s what you’re being paid for, so have aid ready.’

Hugh’s eyes widened. ‘That bad?’ He watched the cat stand and arch its back, holding its tail vertically like a flagpole. The deerhound stood motionless, debating the outcome.

‘Oh, yes, certainly that bad. Go on, I give you permission to laugh when you see the blood.’

‘Whose?’

‘Anybody’s.’

Left alone, Alex understood only too well the reasons for Hugh’s concern, neither of them having anticipated the dire condition of Sir Joseph Moffat that day, nor could they have known the connection between his grandson and the two stunningly beautiful women who had taken their breath away earlier.

They had known that the grandson would be a precious weapon to use against old man Moffat, a sure way of extracting the information they needed, but now the situation had changed and was likely to do so even more, by the look of things, and, try as one might, it would be difficult to keep a cool head with those two ferocious beauties in opposition, one protecting her son and the other her father.

Nevertheless, Hugh’s observation had not gone to waste. It was inconceivable that the old man had not already made plans to marry them both off to local lairds or to noblemen, and Alex could not help wondering if she had already been promised to one of them. Not that it made any difference: she had made him an offer and that was a prize not to be rejected for the sake of such niceties. A widow she might be, desolate, loyal and chaste, but he would not deny her the satisfaction of becoming a martyr for the child, since that’s what she seemed intent on. The fun would begin when she discovered that it was all quite unnecessary.

The hollow click-clack of the key was the last humiliating blow at the end of an unforgettably harrowing day. Ebony had pleaded to be allowed to stay with Meg in the claustrophobic steward’s office that had begun to reek of Sir Joseph’s sweaty bulk and the unguents they had plastered over

him. But her dour escort had not been open to bribery and she had been obliged to leave before she had had time to fully explain why her plan to escape had gone wrong. Meg had assured her that she understood, but Ebony knew she didn't. How could she? Almost in tears, she hit out at the door, but not so hard as to wake Biddie and Sam.

Biddie's hope of more sleeping-space appeared to have misfired, for now Sam's fair head was on the pillow next to her dark curls, their faces inches from each other in sleep, and Ebony could guess how Biddie had relented after only one small wheedle.

Tiptoeing across to the unshuttered window, she looked out into the darkness, just able to make out the shining black loch below, the black line of forest on the far shore, the ragged outline of mountains against the clear starlit sky. He was wrong about there being no moon, she thought; the silver crescent hung like a fine sickle that the men used to cut the hay. No light, but a slim signal of hope, focussing her thoughts.

In many ways she would find it hard to leave the place that had been her home for three years as a maid and three as a widow, though regret did not accurately describe the fear that she could now admit with no act of bravado to maintain. Sir Joseph had kept her and her child safe from harm and hunger during the terrible years of famine that had affected the whole of Europe. At the time she had paid scant attention to the itinerant merchants' tales of rotting crops and drowned livestock, of starving villagers eating rats and dogs and worse, and of salt costing as much as gold, of the murrain that affected herds of cattle, the shortage of wool, the closure of markets, the ruin of tracks, roads and bridges. She had had her own losses to contend with, a terrified child, her own black despair. Who could lose more than that?

Sir Joseph's stores had not suffered; he had money and a large castle sited well above the flooded glens. His fields were between wooded slopes, well drained and safe enough for his precious herds of pure-bred Galloway ponies. He had contacts in every town and port, and what he lacked he gained by raiding, as others did. His cellars had never been empty of expensive wines.

That, of course, was only part of the story, for to raid consistently and indiscriminately, as he did, one must needs be ruthless to a degree, unprincipled, brutal, and without a shred of compassion. In these traits, no one surpassed Sir Joseph Moffat. His name inspired fear in men, his reputation for hard-dealing was legendary, and Ebony was afraid of what he was doing to his grandson. The only ones who had not feared him were Robbie and Meg and, perhaps, his nephew. Now Sir Joseph was immobilised, and Ebony had exchanged that fear for another kind, though of an equally ruthless nature.

She could have borne her incarceration at Castle Kells with a better grace if Sir Joseph had been less of a tyrant, living only for what he could get and who he could subdue to get it. His conduct was the opposite of that which she wanted Sam to emulate, yet keeping a six-year-old out of his grandparent's way was not easily done, even in a castle of this size, and the child had already begun to absorb the horror stories that Sir Joseph in his wisdom believed would make a man of him. He was never on hand to soothe away Sam's shrieks of terror at night, to take him hot possets and sleeping-draughts, or to show him the gentler intellectual skills. That, he said, was what the women were for.

There had been many times when she had longed to escape from Galloway, from Sir Joseph's crudeness, his swearing and unacceptable bad manners, his rough friends who overstayed their welcome. She had asked to be allowed to go, many times, and had been refused permission. Where would she go to? Sir Joseph had bellowed at her. Who indeed? Lady Jean Nevillestowe, her mother, had disappeared in the same year as Sir Joseph's wife, though her destination had been harder to place. Two years ago, Scottish reivers had broken into her beautiful home in Carlisle, terrorised her servants, stolen everything they could carry and abducted her, too. After which there had been conflicting accounts of Lady Jean's willingness or unwillingness to be abducted, though only the most ungenerous critic could blame her, an extremely attractive and wealthy widow. The fact that no ransom had been demanded for her release suggested that whoever was holding her had no intention of selling her back.

Ebony had worried constantly, but Sir Joseph would not allow her to take Sam to Carlisle, and she dared not go without him. Since 1317 she had had no word of her mother or her whereabouts, and the guilt of not being able to communicate weighed as much as death itself.

Pushing herself away from the cool draughts of night air, she closed the shutters at last, drawing her mind back to more immediate dangers. She had made constant enquiries about who these raiders could be, where they had come from, who had seen them arrive, but the wounded men knew nothing of any consequence apart from agreeing that they certainly knew what they were doing. More non-committal replies came from the household servants who seemed too relieved to venture any curses upon them. Her main concerns, however, were for Meg in a lonely vigil with only her maid and chaplain to aid her. Had she herself not been involved in this foolish talk of escapes, she would have been free to offer her comfort.

As she undressed, thoughts of the day's happenings jostled through her mind, reminding her of the shameful things she had hoped to suppress. She slipped her small dagger under her pillow and, so that she would be able to locate it accurately, she sent her hand several times to seek it in the dark, just in case.

Being deserted by both Biddie and Sam at the same time took some getting used to, and for a long time she lay exhausted but too concerned to sleep as she listened to Biddie's gentle snores, to the hoots of an owl and its mate. There were still nights when she longed for Robbie's arms, yet there was self-reproach too that her yearning ought to have endured longer, been more loyal, more specific. Lately, she had begun to question whether their loving had contained all the ingredients of a lasting passion, and why, if she craved his loving warmth, was she unable to recall the details of his body or remember how she felt at the moment of his release.

At first, he had been before her whether waking or sleeping, always gently adoring. More recently, her need for a man's arms and kisses was so strong that she could scarcely tell whether it was Robbie who called to her or whether it was her own body crying out to be reminded of what it was missing, some of which she had never experienced. No man had held her since her loss, except for today, nor had she wanted one to except in the deepest seclusion of the night when the vibrations came silently to overpower her with a craving that left her trembling, ashamed and weeping.

Her first half-sleep was broken and confused by a blur of remorseless questions without answers, most of them concerning a large and commanding figure that stalked into each jumbled scene, restraining her, taking her offer with a staggering self-assurance. It would mean no more to him than some light relief on his journey, a trophy to flaunt after a successful raid. But vague notions of what this threatened intimacy would mean to her were, in the darkness of her longings, not as clear-cut as she had made them sound at the time of her bargaining, and then there was little more than a token sign of those sacred memories of Robbie as they became alarmingly confused with indecent curiosity.

Barely inside the boundaries of sleep, a warmth spread comfortingly across her back. Was it Sam? Or Biddie? Or Robbie? His knees tucked beneath hers, curving her into his lap and cradling her into a deeper sleep. Later, she turned and felt her head being lifted gently to rest in the crook of his shoulder, pulled closer to his body, enfolded by his warm arms with her naked breasts against his chest, her hair lifted away, her forehead brushed by his lips. As it had so often done, her leg moved over to rest on top of his, and she heard her breathing change to the ragged gasps of craving that invariably left her desolate, alone, and whimpering in her sleep. This time, however, his comfort stayed with her until a peace came to replace the dream without waking her.

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