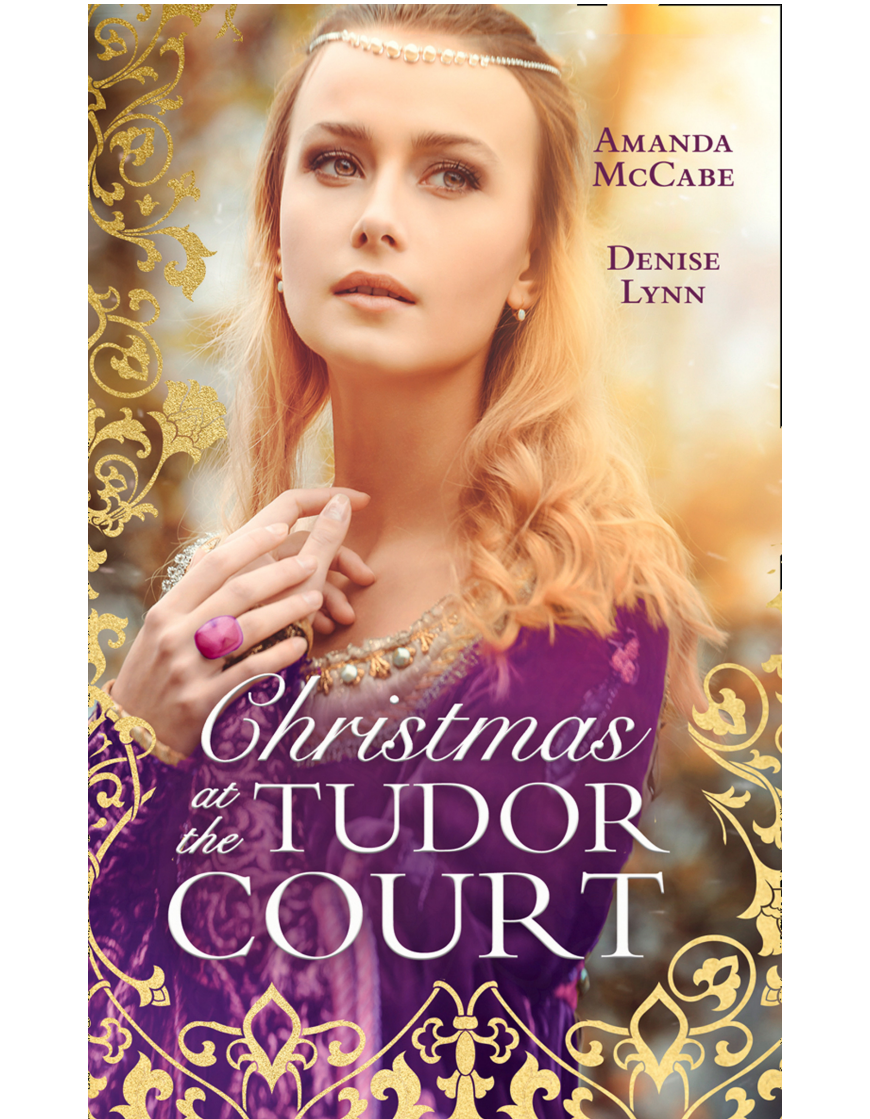




AMANDA
McCABE

DENISE
LYNN

Christmas
at the TUDOR
COURT

Amanda McCabe
Denise Lynn
Christmas At The Tudor Court
Серия «Mills & Boon M&B»

Аннотация

The lure if of the glittering Royal Court is impossible to resist! When Lady Alys Drury falls for a handsome man amid the splendour of Queen Elizabeth's Christmas court, he reveals himself to be Spanish sailor Juan posing as courtier John Hunt-ley, and an undercover spy for the crown! Amid the murky machinations of the court, can their love still bloom? * Isabella of Warehaven is the key to revenge that Richard of Dunstan craves. And now he has her securely in his arms, he won't let her go. Unable to deny the stirrings of a dangerous attraction, can Isabella ease this fierce warrior's torment?

Содержание

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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About the Authors

AMANDA MCCABE wrote her first romance at the age of sixteen—a vast epic, starring all her friends as the characters, written secretly during algebra class. She's never since used algebra, but her books have been nominated for many awards, including the RITA, Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award, the Booksellers' Best, the National Readers' Choice Award, and the Holt Medallion. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, one dog and one cat.

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Christmas at the Tudor Court

The Queen's Christmas Summons

Amanda McCabe

The Warrior's Winter Bride

Denise Lynn

MILLS & BOON

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[The Queen's Christmas Summons](#)

Amanda McCabe

“Royal courts are glittering places. But there can be many dangers there.”

The words of Juan, the shipwrecked Spanish sailor Lady Alys Drury nursed back to health, echo in her mind as she puts on

another courtly smile.

Then Alys locks eyes with a handsome man amid the splendor of Queen Elizabeth's Christmas court—Juan is posing as courtier John Huntley! Alys is hurt at Juan's deception until she learns he's an undercover spy for the crown... Amid the murky machinations of the court, can true love still conquer all?

For Kyle, for 3 lovely years-so far

Prologue

Richmond Palace—1576

‘You must stay right here, Alys, and not move. Do you understand?’

Lady Alys Drury stared up at her father. Usually, around her, he was always smiling, always gentle, but today he looked most stern. In fact, she did not understand. In all her eight years, her father had never seemed so grave. The man who was always laughing and boisterous, ready to sweep her up in his arms and twirl her around, could not be seen. Ever since they journeyed here, to this strange place, a royal palace, her parents had been silent.

After long days on a boat and more hours on bumpy horseback, riding pillion with her mother, they had arrived here. Alys wasn't sure what was happening, but she knew she did not like this place, with its soaring towers and many windows, which seemed to conceal hundreds of eyes looking down at her.

‘Yes, Papa, I understand,’ she answered. ‘Will we be able to go home soon?’

He gave her a strained smile. 'God willing, my little butterfly.' He quickly kissed her brow and turned to hurry away up a flight of stone steps. He vanished through a doorway, guarded by men in green velvet embroidered with sparkling gold and bearing swords. Alys was left alone in the sunny, strange garden.

She turned in a slow circle, taking in her fantastical surroundings. It was like something in the fairy stories her nursemaid liked to tell, with tall hedge walls surrounding secret outdoor chambers and strictly square beds of flowers and herbs.

And the garden was not the only strange thing about the day. Alys's new gown, a stiff creation of tawny-and-black satin, rustled around her every time she moved and the halo-shaped headdress on her long, dark hair pinched.

She kicked at the gravelled pathway with her new black-leather shoe. She wished so much she was at home, where she could run free, and where her parents did not speak in angry whispers and worried murmurs.

She tipped back her head to watch as a flock of birds soared into the cloudy sky. It was a warm day, if overcast and grey, and if she was at home she could climb trees or run along the cliffs. How she missed all that.

A burst of laughter caught her attention and she whirled around to see a group of boys a bit older than herself running across a meadow just beyond the formal knot garden. They wore just shirts and breeches, and kicked a large brown-leather ball between them.

Alys longed to move closer, to see what game they played. It didn't look like any she had seen before. She glanced back at the doorway where her father vanished, but he hadn't returned. Surely she could be gone for just a moment?

She lifted the hem of her skirt and crept nearer to the game, watching as the boys kicked it between themselves. As an only child, with no brothers to play with, the games of other children fascinated her.

One of the boys was taller than the others, with overly long dark hair flopping across his brow as he ran. He moved more easily, more gracefully than the boys around him. Alys was so fascinated by him that she didn't see the ball flying towards her. It hit her hard on the brow, knocking her new headdress askew and pushing her back. For an instant, there was only cold shock, then a rush of pain. Tears sprang to her eyes as she pressed her hand to her throbbing head.

'Watch where you're going, then!' one of the boys shouted. He was a thin child, freckled, not at all like the tall one, and he pushed her as he snatched back the ball. 'Stupid girls, they have no place here. Go back to your needlework!'

Alys struggled not to cry, both at the pain in her brow and at his cruel words. 'I am not a stupid girl! You—you hedgepig.'

'What did you call me, wench?' The boy took a menacing step towards her.

'Enough!' The tall boy stepped forward to pull her would-be attacker back. He shoved the mean boy away and turned to

Alys with a gentle smile. She noticed his eyes were green, an extraordinary pale green sea-colour she had never seen before. 'You are the one at fault here, George. Do not be ungallant. Apologise to the lady.'

'Lady?' George sneered. 'She is obviously no more a lady than you are a true gentleman, Huntley. With your drunken father...'

The tall boy grew obviously angry at those words, a red flush spreading on his high, sharp cheekbones. His hands curled into fists—and then he stepped back, his hand loosening, a smile touching his lips. Alys forgot her pain as she watched him in fascination.

'It seems you must be the one who took a blow to the head, George,' Huntley said. 'You are clearly out of your wits. Now, apologise.'

'Nay, I shall not...' George gasped as Huntley suddenly reached out, quick as a snake striking, and seized his arm. It looked like a most effortless movement, but George turned pale. 'Forgive me, my lady.'

'That is better.' Huntley pushed the bully away and turned away from him without another glance. He came to Alys and held out his hand.

He smiled gently and Alys was dazzled by it.

'My lady,' he said. 'Let me assist you to return to the palace.'

'Th...thank you,' she whispered. She took his arm, just like a grown-up lady, and walked with him back to the steps.

'Are you badly hurt?' he asked softly.

Alys suddenly realised her head did still hurt. She had quite forgotten everything else when she saw him. It was most strange. ‘Just a bit of a headache. My mother will have herbs for it in her medicine chest.’

‘Where is your mother? I’ll take you to her.’

Alys shook her head. Her mother had stayed at the inn, pleading illness, so her father had taken Alys away with him. She didn’t know how to get back to the inn at all. ‘She is in the village. My father...’

‘Has he come here to see the Queen?’

The Queen? No wonder this place was so grand, if it was a queen’s home. But why was her father to see her? She felt more confused than ever. ‘I was not supposed to move from the steps until he returns. I’ll be in such trouble!’

‘Nay, I will stay with you, my lady, and explain to your father when he returns.’

Alys studied him doubtfully. ‘Surely you have more important things you must be doing.’

His smile widened. ‘Nothing more important, I promise you.’

He led her back to the top of the stone steps where her father left her and helped her sit down. He sat beside her and gently examined her forehead. ‘It is rather darkening, I’m afraid. I hope your mother has an herb to cure bruising.’

‘Oh, no!’ She clapped her hand over her brow, feeling herself blush hotly that he should see her like that. ‘She does have ointments for such, but it must be hideous.’

He smiled, his lovely green eyes crinkling at the corners. 'It is a badge of honour from battle. You are fortunate to have a caring mother.'

'Does your mother not have medicines for you when you're ill?' Alys asked, thinking of all her mother's potions and creams that soothed fevers and pains, just as her own cool hands did when Alys was fretful.

He looked away. 'My mother died long ago.'

'Oh! I am sorry,' she cried, feeling such pain for him not to have a mother. 'But have you a father? Siblings?' She remembered the vile George's taunt, of Huntley's 'drunken father', and wished she had not said anything.

'I seldom see my father. My godfather arranges for my education. No siblings. What of you, my lady?'

'I have no siblings, either. I wish I did. It gets very quiet at home sometimes.'

'Is that why you came to look at our game?'

'Aye. It sounded very merry. I wondered what it was.'

'Have you never played at football?'

'I've never even heard of it. I have seen tennis, but few other ball games.'

'It's the most wonderful game! You start like this...' He leaped up to demonstrate, running back and forth as he told her of scoring and penalties. He threw up his arms in imagined triumph as he explained how the game was won.

Caught up in his enthusiasm, Alys clapped her hands and

laughed. He gave her a bow.

‘How marvellous,’ she said. ‘I do wish I had someone at home to play such games with like that.’

‘What do you play at home, then?’ he asked. He tossed her the ball. She instinctively caught it and threw it back.

‘I read, mostly, and walk. I have a doll and I tell her things sometimes. There isn’t much I can do alone, I’m afraid.’

‘I quite understand. Before I went to school, I was often alone myself.’ His expression looked wistful, as if his thoughts were far away, and Alys found herself intensely curious about him, who he was and what he did.

‘Alys! What are you doing?’ she heard her father shout.

She spun around and saw him hurrying towards her, frowning fearsomely. ‘Papa! I am sorry, I just...’

‘I fear your daughter took a bit of a fall here, my lord,’ her new friend said, stepping close to her side. She felt safer with him there. ‘I saw her, and I...’

‘And he came to help me, most gallantly,’ Alys said.

Her father’s frown softened. ‘Did you indeed? Good lad. I owe you many thanks.’

‘Your daughter is a fine lady indeed, my lord,’ Huntley said. ‘I am glad to have met her today.’

Her father softened even more and reached into his purse to offer the boy a coin. Huntley shook his head and her father said, ‘My thanks again. We bid you good day, lad, and good fortune to you.’ He swung Alys up into his arms and walked away from

the grand palace.

Alys glanced back over her shoulder for one last glimpse of her friend. He smiled at her and waved, and she waved back until he was out of sight. She thought surely she would never forget him, her new friend and gallant rescuer.

Chapter One

Dunboyton Castle, Galway, Ireland—1578

‘And this one, *niña querida*? What is this one? What does it do?’

Lady Alys Drury, aged ten and a half and now expected to learn to run a household, leaned close to the tray her mother held out and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. Despite the icy wind that beat at the stout stone walls of Dunboyton, she could smell green sunshine from the dried herbs. Flowers and trees and clover, all the things she loved about summer.

But not as much as she loved her mother and their days here in the stillroom, the long, narrow chamber hung with bundles of herbs and with bottles of oils and pots of balms lining the shelves. It was always warm there, always bright and full of wonderful smells. A sanctuary in the constant rush and noise of the castle corridors, which were the realm of her father and his men.

Here in the stillroom, it was just Alys and her mother. For all her ten years, for as long as she could remember, this had been her favourite place. She could imagine nowhere finer.

She inhaled again, pushing a loose lock of her brown hair back from her brow. She caught a hint of something else beneath the

green—a bit of sweet wine, mayhap?

‘Querida?’ her mother urged.

Alys opened her eyes and glanced up into her mother’s face. Elena Drury’s dark eyes crinkled at the edges as she smiled. She wore black and white, starkly tailored and elegant, as she often did, to remind her of the fashions of her Spanish homeland, but there was nothing dark or dour about her merry smile.

‘Is it—is it lemon balm, mi madre?’ Alys said.

‘Very good, Alys!’ her mother said, clapping her hands. ‘Sí, it is melissa officinalis. An excellent aid for melancholy, when the grey winter has gone on too long.’

Alys giggled. ‘But it is always grey here, Madre!’ Every day seemed grey, not like the sunlit memories of her one day at a royal court. Sometimes she was sure that had all been a dream, especially the handsome boy she had seen that day. This was the only reality now.

Her mother laughed, too, and carefully stirred the dried lemon balm into a boiling pot of water. ‘Only here in Galway. In some places, it is warm and sunny all the time.’

‘Such as where you were born?’ Alys had heard the tales many times, but she always longed to hear them again. The white walls of Granada, where her mother was born, the red-tiled roofs baking in the sun, the sound of guitar music and singing on the warm breeze.

Elena smiled sadly. ‘Such as where I was born, in Granada. There is no place like it, querida.’

Alys glanced out the narrow window of the stillroom. The rain had turned to icy sleet, which hit the old glass like the patter of needles as the wind howled out its mournful cries. ‘Why would your mother leave such a place?’

‘Because she loved my father and followed him to England when his work brought him here. It was her duty to be by his side.’

‘As it is yours to be with Father?’

‘Of course. A wife must always be a good helpmeet to her husband. It is her first duty in life.’

‘And because you love him.’ This was another tale she had heard often. The tale of how her father had seen her mother, the most beautiful woman in the world, at a banquet and would marry no other, even against the wishes of his family. Alys knew her parents had not regretted choosing each other; she had often caught them secretly kissing, seen them laughing together, their heads bent close.

Her mother laughed and tucked Alys’s wayward lock of hair back into her little cap. ‘And that, too, though you are much too young to think of such things yet.’

‘Will I have a husband as kind as Father?’

Her mother’s smile faded and she bent her head over the tea she stirred. Her veil fell forward to hide her expression. ‘There are few men like your father, I fear, and you are only ten. You needn’t think about it for so long. Marriages are made for many reasons—family security, wealth, land, even affection sometimes. But

I promise, no matter who you marry, he will be a good man, a strong one. You will not be here in Ireland for ever.'

Alys had heard such things so often. Ireland was not really their home; her father only did his duty here to the Queen for a time. One day they would have a real home, in England, and she would have a place at court. Perhaps she would even serve the Queen herself, and marry a man handsome and strong. But she could conceive of little beyond Dunboyton's walls, the cliffs and wild sea that surrounded them. There had only been that one small glimpse of the royal court, the boys playing at football, and then it was gone.

'Now, querida, what is this one?' her mother asked as she held out a small bottle.

Alys smelled a green sharpness, something like citrus beneath. 'Marjoram!'

'Exactly. To spice your father's wine tonight and help with his stomach troubles.'

'Is Father ill?'

Elena's smile flickered. 'Not at all. Too many rich sauces with his meat, I have warned him over and over. Ah, well. Here, niña, I have something for you.'

Alys jumped up on her stool, clapping her hands in delight. 'A present, Madre?'

'Sí, a rare one.' She reached into one of her carved boxes, all of them darkened with age and infused with the scent of all the herbs they had held over the years. Her mother removed a tiny

muslin-wrapped bundle. She laid it carefully on Alys's trembling palm.

Alys unwrapped it to find a few tiny, perfect curls of bright yellow candied lemon peels. The yellow was sun-brilliant, sprinkled with sugar like snowflakes. 'Candied lemon!'

Her favourite treat. It tasted just like the sunshine Alys always longed for. She couldn't resist; she popped a piece on to her tongue and let it melt into sticky sweetness.

Her mother laughed. 'My darling daughter, always so impetuous! My brother could only send a few things from Spain this time.' She gave a sigh as she poured off the new tisane of lemon balm. 'The weather has kept so many of the ships away.'

Alys glanced at the icy window again. It was true, there had been few ships in port of late. Usually they saw many arrivals from Spain and the Low Countries, bringing rare luxuries and even rarer news of home to her mother.

There was the sudden heavy tread of boots up the winding stairs to the stillroom. The door opened and Alys's father, Sir William Drury, stood there. He was a tall man, broad of shoulder, with light brown hair trimmed short in the new fashion and a short beard. But of late, there were more flecks of grey in his beard than usual, more of a stoop to his shoulders. Alys remembered what her mother had said about his stomach troubles.

But he always smiled when he saw them, as he did now, a wide, bright grin.

‘Father!’ Alys cried happily and jumped up to run to him. He hugged her close, as he always did, but she sensed that he was somehow distant from her, distracted.

Alys drew back and peered up at him. She had to look far, for he was so very much taller than she. He did smile, but his eyes looked sad. He held something in his hand, half-hidden behind his back.

‘William,’ she heard her mother say. There was a soft rustle of silk, the touch of her mother’s hand on her shoulder. ‘The letter...’

‘Aye, Elena,’ he answered, his voice tired. ‘Tis from London.’

‘Alys,’ her mother said gently. ‘Why don’t you go to the kitchen and see if our dinner will soon be ready? Give this to the cooks for the stew.’

She pressed a sachet of dried parsley and rosemary into Alys’s hand and gently urged her through the door.

Bewildered, Alys glanced back before the door could close behind her. Her father went to the window, staring out at the rain beyond with his back to her, his hand clasped before him. Her mother went to him, leaning against his shoulder. Alys dared to hold the door open a mere inch, lingering so she could find out what was happening. Otherwise they would never tell her at all.

‘There is still no place for you at court?’ Alys heard her mother say. Elena’s voice was still soft, kind, but it sounded as if she might start to cry.

‘Nay, not yet, or so my uncle writes. I am needed here for a time longer, considering the uprisings have just been put down.

Here! In this godforsaken place where I can do nothing!’ His fist came down on the table with a sudden crash, rattling the bottles.

‘Because of me,’ her mother whispered. ‘Madre de Dios, but if not for me, for us, you would have your rightful place.’

‘Elena, you and Alys are everything to me. You would be a grace to the royal court, to anywhere you chose to be. They are fools they cannot see that.’

‘Because I am a Lorca-Ramirez. I should not have married you, mi corazón. I have brought you nothing. If you had a proper English wife—if I was gone...’

‘Nay, Elena, you must never say that. You are all to me. I would rather be here at the end of the world with you and Alys than be a king in a London palace.’

Alys peeked carefully through the crack in the door and watched as her father took her mother tightly into his arms as she sobbed on his shoulder. Her father’s expression when he thought his wife could not see was fierce, furious.

Alys tiptoed down the stillroom stairs, careful to make no sound. She felt somehow cold and fearful. Her father was almost never angry, yet there was something about that moment, the look on his face, the sadness that hung so heavy about her mother, that made her want to run away.

Yet she also wanted to run to her parents, to wrap her arms around them and banish anything that would dare hurt them.

She made her way to the bustling kitchen to leave the herbs with the cook, hurrying around the soldiers who cleaned their

swords by the fire, the maids who scurried around with pots and bowls. London. It was there that lurked whatever had angered her father. She knew where London was, of course, far away over the sea in England. It was home, or so her father sometimes said, but she couldn't quite fathom it.

When he showed her drawings of London, pointing out churches and bridges and palaces, she was amazed by the thought of so many people in such grand dwellings. The largest place she knew was Galway City. When she went to market there with her mother, Father said London was like twenty Galways.

London was also where Queen Elizabeth lived. The Queen, who was so grand and glittering and beautiful, who held all of England safe in her jewelled hand. Was it the Queen who angered him now? Who slighted her mother?

Her fists clenched in anger at the thought of it as Alys stomped across the kitchen. How dared the Queen, how dared anyone, do such a thing to her parents? It was not fair. She didn't care where she lived, whether Galway or London, but she did care if her father was denied his true place.

'How now, Lady Alys, and what has you in such a temper?' one of the cooks called out. 'Have the fairies stolen away your sugar and left salt instead?'

Alys had to laugh at the teasing. 'Nay, I merely came to give you some of my mother's herbs. 'Tis the cold day has me in a mood, I think.'

'It's never cold down here with all these fires. Here, I need a

spot of mint from the garden and I think a hardy bunch still has some green near the wall. Will you fetch it for me? Some fresh air might do you some good, my lady.'

Alys nodded, glad of an errand, and quickly found her cloak before she slipped out into the walled kitchen garden.

The wind was chilly as she made her way to the covered herb beds at the back of the garden, but she didn't care. It brought with it the salt tang of the sea and whenever she felt sad or confused the sea would calm her again.

She climbed up to the top of the stone wall and perched there for a glimpse of the sea. The outbuildings of the castle, the dairy and butcher's shop and stables, blocked most of the view of the cliffs, but she could see a sliver of the grey waves beyond.

That sea could take her to London, she thought, and she would fix whatever there had hurt her family. She would tell the Queen all about it herself. And maybe, just maybe, she would see that handsome boy again...

'Alys! You will catch the ague out here,' she heard her father shout.

She glanced back to see him striding down the garden path, no cloak or hat against the cold wind, though he seemed not to notice. His attention was only on her.

'Father, how far is London?'

He scowled. 'Oh, so you heard that, did you? It is much farther than you could fly, my little butterfly.' He lifted her down from the wall, spinning her around to make her giggle before he braced

her against his shoulder. 'Mayhap one day you will go there and see it for yourself.'

'Will I see the Queen?'

'Only if she is very lucky.'

'But what if she does not want to see me? Because I am yours and Mother's?'

Her father hugged her tightly. 'You must not think such things, Alys. You are a Drury. Your great-grandmother served Elizabeth of York, and your grandmother served Katherine of Aragon. Our family goes back hundreds of years and your mother's even more. The Lorca-Ramirez are a ducal family and there are no dukes at all in England now. You would be the grandest lady at court.'

Alys wasn't so sure of that. Her mother and nursemaid were always telling her no lady would climb walls and swim in the sea as she did. But London—it sounded most intriguing. And if she truly was a lady and served the Queen well, the Drurys would have their due at long last.

She glanced back at the roiling sea as her father carried her into the house. One day, yes, that sea would take her to England and she would see its splendours for herself.

* * *

'That lying whore! She has been dead for years and still she dares to thwart me.' A crash exploded through the house as Edward Huntley threw his pottery plate against the fireplace and it shattered. It was followed by a splintering sound, as if a footstool was kicked to pieces.

John Huntley heard a maidservant shriek and he was sure she must be new to the household. Everyone else was accustomed to his father's rages and went about their business with their heads down.

John himself would scarcely have noticed at all, especially as he was hidden in his small attic space high above the ancient great hall of Huntleyburg Abbey. It was the one place where his father could never find him, as no one else but the ghosts of the old banished monks seemed to know it was there. When he was forced to return to Huntleyburg at his school's recess, he would spend his days outdoors hunting and his evenings in this hiding place, studying his Latin and Greek in the attic eyrie. Making plans for the wondrous day he would be free of his father at last.

He was nearly fourteen now. Surely that day would be soon.

Edward let out another great bellow. John wouldn't have listened to the rantings at all, except that something unusual had happened that morning. A visitor had arrived at Huntleyburg.

And not just any visitor. John's godfather, Sir Matthew Morgan, had galloped up the drive unannounced soon after breakfast, when John's father was just beginning the day's drinking of strong claret. When John heard of Sir Matthew's arrival, he started to run down the stairs. It had been months since he heard from Sir Matthew, who was his father's cousin but had a very different life from the Huntleys, a life at the royal court.

Yet something had held him back, some tension in the air as the servants rushed to attend on Sir Matthew. John had always

been able to sense tiny shifts in the mood of the people around him, sense when secrets were being held. Secrets could so seldom be kept from him. His father used to rage that John was an unnatural child, that he inherited some Spanish witchcraft from his cursed mother and would try to beat it out of him. Until John learned to hide it.

It was secrets he felt hanging in the air that morning. Secrets that made him wait and watch, which seemed the better course for the moment. A fight always went better when he had gathered as much information as possible. Why was Sir Matthew there? He had only been at the Abbey for an hour and he already had John's father cursing his mother's memory.

And it had to be his mother Edward was shouting about now. Maria-Caterina was always The Spanish Whore to her husband, even though she had been dead for twelve years.

John glanced at the portrait hung in the shadowed corner of his hiding place. A lovely lady with red-gold hair glimpsed under a lacy mantilla, her hands folded against the stiff white-and-silver skirt of her satin gown, her green eyes smiling down at him. On her finger was a gold ring: the same one John now wore on his littlest finger.

One side of the canvas was slashed, the frame cracked, from one of Edward's rages, but John had saved her and brought her to safety. He only wished he could have done the same in real life. To honour her, he tried to help those more helpless any time he could. As he had with that tiny, pretty girl once, when she was

hit in the head with the football. He sometimes wondered where she was now.

He heard the echo of voices, the calm, slow tones of his godfather, a sob from his father. If Edward had already turned to tears from rage, John thought it was time for him to appear.

He unfolded his long legs from the bench and made his way out of the attic, ducking his head beneath the old rafters. He had had a growth spurt in his last term at school and soon he would need a larger hiding place. But soon, very soon by the grace of his mother's saints, he would be gone from the Abbey for good.

He made his way down the ladder that led into the great hall. It had been a grand space when his great-grandfather bought the property from King Henry, bright with painted murals and with rich carpets and tapestries to warm the lofty walls and vaulted ceilings, but all of that had been gone for years. Now, it was a faded, dusty, empty room.

At the far end of the hall, his father sat slumped in his chair by the fire. He had spilled wine on his old fur-trimmed robe and his long, grey-flecked dark hair and beard were tangled. The shattered pottery remains were scattered on the floor, amid splashes of blood-red wine, but no one ventured near to clean it up.

Sir Matthew stood a few feet away, his arms crossed over his chest as he dispassionately surveyed the scene. Unlike Edward, he was still lean and fit, his sombre dark grey travelling clothes not elaborate, but perfectly cut from the finest wool and velvet.

With his sword strapped to his side, he looked ready to ride out and fight for his Queen at any moment, despite his age.

What had brought such a man to such a pitiful place as Huntleyburg?

Sir Matthew glanced up and saw John there in the shadows. 'Ah, John, my dear lad, there you are. 'Tis most splendid to see you again. How you have grown!'

Before John could answer, his father turned his bleary gaze to him, his face twisted in fury. 'She has cursed me again,' he shouted. 'You and your mother have ruined my life! I am still not allowed at court.'

Sir Matthew pressed Edward back into his chair with a firm yet unobtrusive hand to his shoulder. 'You know the reason you are not allowed at court has nothing to do with Maria-Caterina. In fact, she is the only reason your whole roof did not come crashing down on your head years ago.'

John looked up at the great hall's ceiling, at the ancient, stained rafters patched with newer plaster. It was true his mother had been an heiress. But that money was long gone now.

'She cursed me,' Edward said pitifully. 'She said the monks who once lived here would take their rightful home back and I would have naught.'

Sir Matthew gave him a distasteful glance. He poured out another goblet of wine and pressed it into Edward's hand, smiling grimly as he gulped it down.

'We have more serious matters to discuss now, Edward,' Sir

Matthew said. 'Maria-Caterina is long gone and you have tossed away any chance you may have had. But it is not too late for John.'

'John? What can he possibly do?' Edward said contemptuously, without even looking at his son.

'He can do much indeed. I hear from your tutors that you are most adept, John, especially at languages,' Sir Matthew said, turning away from Edward and beckoning John closer. 'That you should be sent to Cambridge next term. Do you enjoy your studies?'

Somewhere deep inside of John, in a spot he had thought long numbed, hope stirred. 'Very much, my lord. I know my Greek and Latin quite well now, as well as French and Spanish, and some Italian.'

'And your skills with the bow and the sword? How are they?'

John thought of the stag he had brought down for the supper table, one clean arrow shot. 'Not bad, I think. You can ask the sword master at my school, I work with him every week.'

'Hmm.' Sir Matthew studied John closely, tapping his fingers against his sleeve. 'And you are handsome, too.'

'He gets it from his cursed mother,' Edward muttered. 'Those eyes...'

Sir Matthew peered closer. 'Aye, you do have a dark Spanish look about you, John.' He poured out even more wine and handed it to Edward without another glance. 'Come, John, let us walk outside for a time. I haven't long before I must ride back.'

John followed his godfather into the abbey garden. Like the

house, they had once been a grand showplace, filled with the colour and scent of rare roses, the splash of fountains. Now it was brown and dead. But John felt more hope than he had in a long while. School had been an escape from home, a place where he knew he had to work hard. Was that hard work finally going to reward him? And with what?

‘You said I might be able to do much indeed, my lord,’ he said, trying not to appear too eager. To seem sophisticated enough for Cambridge and a career beyond. Maybe even something at court. ‘I hope that may be true. I wish to serve the Queen in any way I am able.’ And maybe to redeem the Huntley name, as well, if it was not lost for good. To bring honour to his family again would mean his life had a meaning.

Sir Matthew smiled. ‘Most admirable, John. The Queen is in great need of talented and loyal men like you, now more than ever. I fear dark days lie ahead for England.’

Darker days than now, with Spain and France crowding close on all sides, and Mary of Scotland lurking in the background at every moment? ‘My lord?’

‘The Queen has always had many enemies, but now they will grow ever bolder. I hope to raise a regiment to take to the Low Countries soon.’

‘Truly?’ John said in growing excitement. To be a soldier, to win glory on the battlefield—sure that would save the name of Huntley. ‘Might there be a place for me in your household there, my lord?’

Sir Matthew's smile turned wry. 'Perhaps one day, John. But you must finish your studies first. A mind like yours, adept at languages, will be of great use to you.'

John hid his flash of disappointment. 'What sort of place might there be for me, then?'

'Perhaps...' Sir Matthew seemed to hesitate before he said, 'Perhaps you have heard of my friend Sir Francis Walsingham?'

Of course John had heard of Walsingham. He was the Queen's most trusted secretary, the keeper of many secrets, many dangers. 'Aye, I know of him.'

'He recently asked me about your progress. If matters do come to war with Spain, a man with connections and skills such as yours would be most valuable.'

John's thoughts raced, a dizzying tidal pool of what a man like Walsingham might ask of him. 'Because I am half-Spanish?'

'That, of course, and because of your intelligence. Your—intuition, perhaps. I noticed it in you when you were a boy, that watchfulness, that—that knowledge. It is still there. Properly honed and directed, it will take you far.'

'You think there will be danger from Spain soon? Is that why you are going to the Low Countries to fight them there?'

'There will always be danger from Spain, my dear lad. Who knows what will happen in a few years, when you have finished your studies? Now, why don't you tell me more of your schooling? What have you learned of mathematics there, of astronomy?'

John walked with Sir Matthew around the gardens back to the drive at the front of the house, where a servant waited with his horse. He told him about his schooling and asked a few questions about court, which Sir Matthew answered lightly.

‘Keep up with your studies, John, and do not worry about your father. I will see he comes to no harm,’ Sir Matthew said as he swung himself up into his saddle. ‘I must go now, but you will think about what I have said?’

‘Of course, my lord.’ John was sure he would think of little else. He bowed, and watched his godfather gallop away.

John looked back at the house. In the fading sunlight, Huntleyburg Abbey looked better than usual, its patches and cracks disguised. He would so love to restore it, to see its beauty come back to life, but he had never known how he would do that. Mayhap he could do it with secrets—Walsingham’s secrets, England’s secrets. But what would that be like? What path would his life follow? He wasn’t sure.

But he knew that if it took spy craft, working in the shadows, living half a life to restore the Huntley name his father had so squandered, he would do it. He would do anything, make any sacrifice, to bring back their honour. He vowed it then and there, to himself and his family. That would be his life.

Chapter Two

Galway—early summer 1588

Alys, carrying a basket of linen to the laundry above the kitchens of Dunboyton Castle, heard an all-too-familiar sound

floating up the stone stairs—the wailing sobs of some of the younger maidservants. Their panic had been hanging like a dark cloud over Dunboyton for days.

Not that she could blame them. She herself felt constantly as if she walked the sharp edge of a sword, about to fall one way or the other, but always caught in the horrible uncertainty of the middle. They said the Spanish Armada had left its port in Lisbon and was on its way to England, to conquer the island nation and all her holdings, including Ireland. Hundreds of ships, filled with thousands of men, coming to wage war.

She wished she could somehow banish the rumours that flew like dark ghosts down the castle corridors. It made her want to scream out in frustration.

Yet she could not. She was the lady of the castle now, as she had been in the nine years since her mother had died. She had to set an example of calm and fortitude.

She stepped into the laundry, and put down her basket with the others. She saw that the day's work was not even half-finished, with linens left to boil unsupervised in the cauldrons, the air filled with lavender-scented steam so thick she could barely see through it.

‘Oh, my lady!’ one of the maids, young Molly, wailed when she saw Alys. ‘They do say that when the Spanish come, we will all be horribly tortured! That in their ships they carry whips and nooses, and brands to mark all the babies.’

‘I did hear that, too,’ another maid said, her voice full of

doomed resignation. 'That all the older children will be killed and the babies marked so after all might know their shame of being conquered.'

'Don't be silly,' the old head laundress said heartily. 'We will all be run through with swords and tossed over the walls into the sea before we can be branded.'

'They say the Dutch in Leiden burned their own city to the ground before they let it fall into Spanish hands,' another said. 'We shall have to do the same.'

'Enough!' Alys said sternly. If she heard once more about the rumoured cruelties of the Spanish, people who were nowhere near Ireland, she would scream. What would her mother have said about it all? 'If they are sailing at all, they are headed to England, not here, and they shall be turned back before they even get near. We are in no danger.'

'Then why are all the soldiers marching into Fort Hill?' Molly asked. 'And why is Sir Richard Bingham riding out from Galway City to inspect the fortifications?'

Alys wished she knew that herself. Bingham had a cruel reputation after so bloodily putting down the chieftains' rebellions years before; having him roaming the countryside could mean nothing good. But she couldn't let the maids see that. 'We are in more danger of a shortage of clean linen than anything else,' she said, tossing a pile of laundry at Molly. 'We must finish the day's work now, Armada or not.'

The maids all grumbled but set about their scrubbing and

stirring. As Alys turned to leave, she heard the whispers rustle up again. Whips and brands...

The stone walls felt as if they were pressing down on her. The fear and uncertainty all around her for so many days was making her feel ill. She—who prided herself on a sturdy spirit and practicality! A person had to be sturdy to live in such a place as Dunboyton. The cold winds that always swept off the sea, the monotony of seeing the same faces every day, the strangeness of the land itself, it had all surely driven many people mad.

Alys didn't mind the life of Dunboyton now. Even if she sometimes dreamed of seeing other lands, the sparkle of a royal court or the sunshine of her mother's Granada, she knew she had to be content with her father and her duties at the castle. It was her life and dreaming could not change it.

But now—now she felt as if she was caught in a confusing, upside-down nightmare she couldn't wake from at all.

She had other tasks waiting, but she had to get away for just a few moments, to breathe some fresh air and clear away the miasma of fear the maids' gossip had woven. She snatched a woollen cloak from the hook by the kitchen door and made her way outside.

A cold wind whipped around the castle walls, catching at her hair and her skirts. She hurried through the kitchen garden and scrambled over the rough stone wall into the wilder fields beyond, as she had done so often ever since she was a child. After her mother died, she would often escape for long rambles along the

shore and up to the ruins of the abbey, and she would see no one at all for hours.

That was not true today. She followed the narrow path that led down from Dunboyton's perch on the cliffs down to the bay. The spots that were usually deserted were today filled with people, hurrying on errands that she couldn't identify, but which they seemed to think were quite vital. Soldiers both from her father's castle regiment and sent from Galway City and the fort swarmed in a mass of blue-and-grey wool over the rocky beach.

Alys paused halfway along the path to peer down at them as they marched back and forth. Everyone said the Spanish were sweeping ever closer to England in their invincible ships and would never come this far north, but obviously precautions were still being taken, enough to frighten the maids. They said the Spanish had come here before, to try to help the chieftains defeat the English rulers, but they had been driven away then. Why would now be any different?

Whips and brands...hangings. Alys shivered and pulled her cloak closer around her. She remembered her mother's tales of Spain, the way the candied lemons and oranges sent from her uncles in Andalusia would melt on her tongue like sunshine, and she could not reconcile the two images at all. Could the same people who had produced her lovely, gentle mother be so barbarous? And if so, what lay deep inside herself?

Her father was banished from the royal court, sent to be governor in this distant place because of her mother's birthplace.

What would happen to them now?

‘Alys!’ she heard her father call. ‘It is much too cold today for you to be here.’

She turned to see him hurrying up the pathway, the wind catching at his cloak and cap, a spyglass in his hand. He looked so much older suddenly, his beard turned grey, lines etched on his face, as if this new worry had aged him.

‘I won’t stay out long,’ she said. ‘I just couldn’t listen to the maids a moment longer.’

He nodded grimly. ‘I can imagine. Spreading panic now will help no one.’

‘Is there any word yet from England?’

‘Only that the ships have been gathering in Portsmouth and Plymouth, and militias organised along the coast. Nothing established as of yet. There have been no signal fires from Dublin.’

Alys gestured towards the activity on the beach. ‘Bingham is taking no chances, I see.’

‘Aye, the man does love a fight. He has been idle too long, since the rebellions were put down. I fear he will be in for a sharp disappointment when no Spaniard shows up for battle.’

Or if England was overrun and conquered before Ireland even had a chance to fight. But she could not say that aloud. She would start to wail like the maids.

Alys borrowed her father’s spyglass and used it to scan the horizon. The water was dark grey, choppy as the wind whipped

up, and she could see no vessels but a few local fishing boats. It had been thus for weeks, the weather unseasonably cold, storm-ridden and unpredictable. This was usually the best time of the year to set sail, but not now. The Spanish would be foolhardy to try to land in such an inhospitable place, for so many reasons.

But faint hearts had not conquered the New World, or overrun and mastered the Low Countries. Anything could happen in such a world.

‘They say Medina-Sidonia is ordered to bring Parma’s land forces from the coast of the Netherlands to overrun England,’ her father said. ‘Why would they come here?’

‘They won’t,’ Alys said with more confidence than she felt. ‘This shall be a tale you tell your grandchildren by the fire one day, Father. The salvation of England by a great miracle.’ She handed him the spyglass and took his arm to go back up the path towards the castle.

‘If I have a grandchild,’ he said in a teasing grumble. They had bantered about such things many times before, his need for a grandchild to dandle on his lap. ‘I fear there are no proper gentlemen for you to marry here, my Alys, unless you take one of Bingham’s men down there.’

Alys glanced back at the soldiers, all of them alike in their helmets. ‘Nay, I thank you. If that is my choice, I shall end a spinster, keeping house here for you.’

Her father frowned. ‘My poor Alys. ’Tis true no one here is worthy of you. If you could but go to court...’

Alys had heard such things before, but she had long ago given up hope of such a grand adventure. ‘I admit I should like the fine gowns I would have to wear at court and learning the newest dances and songs, but I fear I should be the veriest country mouse and bring shame to you,’ she said lightly. ‘Besides, surely I am safer here.’

He patted her hand. ‘For now, mayhap. But not for ever.’

They made their way back into the castle, into the midst of the bustle and noise of everyday life. Nothing ever seemed to change at Dunboyton. Yet she could still hear the clang of battle preparations just outside her door.

Chapter Three

Lisbon—April 1588

‘King Philip will hear Mass at St Paul’s by October, I vow,’ Lord Westmoreland, an English Catholic exile who had lived under King Philip’s sponsorship for many months, declared stoutly. He waved towards the grand procession making its way past his rented window, through the old, winding cobblestone streets of Lisbon. ‘And I have been promised the return of my estates as soon as he does.’

His friend and fellow English exile Lord Paget gave a wry smile. ‘He will have to get there first.’ And that was the challenge. The Armada was now assembled, hundreds of ships strong, but after much delay, bad weather, spoiled provisions and a rash of desertions.

‘How can you doubt he will? Look at the might of his

kingdom!’ Lord Westmoreland cried.

John Huntley joined the others in peering out Lord Westmoreland’s window. It was an impressive sight, he had to admit. King Philip’s commander of his great Armada, the mighty Duke of Medina-Sidonia, rode at the head of a great procession from the royal palace to the cathedral, resplendent in a polished silver breastplate etched with his family seal and a blue-satin cloak lined with glossy sable. Beside him rode the Cardinal Archduke, his robes as red as blood against the whitewashed houses, and behind them was a long, winding train of sparkling nobility, riding four abreast. The colours of their family banners snapped in the wind, golds and reds and blues. The sun gleamed on polished armour and turned the bright satins and silks into a rippling rainbow.

There followed ladies in brocade litters, peering shyly from beneath their cobweb-fine mantillas at the crowds, and then humble priests and friars on foot. Their black-and-brown robes were a sombre note, one lost in the waves of cheers from the Spanish crowds. The conquered Portuguese stayed behind their window shutters.

Just out of sight, the ships moored in the Tagus River let off a deafening volley from their guns. The last time Spanish ships had sailed up that river, it had been to conquer and subjugate Portugal. Now they sailed out to overrun new lands, to make all the world Spanish.

But John knew there was more, much more, behind this

glittering display of power. The Armada had been delayed for so long, their supplies ran desperately short even now, before leaving port. Sailors had been deserting and Spanish gangs roamed the streets of Lisbon, pressing men to replace them.

He had to find out more of the truth of the Armada's situation, the certainty of her plans, so he could pass on the word before they sailed out of Lisbon. After that, unless they found a friendly port, he could send no more messages until he arrived in England, one way or another. All the long months of careful planning, all the puzzle pieces he had been painstakingly sliding into place, would have to be carried to their endgame now.

England's future, the lives of its people, were at stake.

'What think you, Master Kelsey?' Lord Westmoreland asked John, using the pseudonym that had been his for years, ever since he 'deserted' the Queen's armies in Antwerp and carried information to the Spanish. It had followed him now to Lisbon and beyond. 'Shall we regain our English estates and see the people returned to the true church before year's end?'

'I pray so, my lord,' John answered. 'With God's will, we cannot be thwarted. I long for my own home again, as we all do, after the injustices the false Queen has inflicted on my family. My Spanish mother would rejoice if she could see this day.'

'Well said, Master Kelsey,' Lord Paget said. 'We will bring honour and justice back to our homeland at last.'

'And we shall avenge the sacrifice of Queen Mary of Scotland,' Lord Percy said. He spoke softly, but everyone

gathered around him looked at him in surprise. Percy obviously burned with zeal for his cause, praying in the church of the Ascension near his home for hours at a time, but he seldom spoke.

‘Aye, the poor, martyred Queen,’ Westmoreland said uncertainly.

‘She was the first of us to truly witness the great cruelty of the heretic Elizabeth,’ Percy said. ‘The tears of Catholic widows, the poor children torn from their families and raised to damnation in the false church. I know how they suffer; I have seen their words in my letters from England.’

John wished he, too, could see those letters; the information they would contain about traitors to England, the aid they gave to the Queen’s enemies, would be invaluable. Who knew what their true plans were once they landed in England? But thus far, though Westmoreland was careless with his words and his correspondence, Percy was not.

John laid a gentle hand on Percy’s tense shoulder. The gold ring that had once been his mother’s, the ring he never took off, gleamed. ‘You shall see your family again soon.’

Percy glanced at John, a wild, desperate light in his eyes. ‘I pray so. You will help us, Master Kelsey. You understand and you shall be there when the ships land while we wait and pray here.’

Aye, John thought, he did understand. Though not in the way poor Percy thought. He knew that England had to remain free of Spain at all costs, that the cruelty and bloodshed he had seen in

the Low Countries could not be carried to English shores.

‘We should leave soon, gentlemen,’ Westmoreland said. ‘We must take our places in the cathedral to see the Duke take up the sacred standard.’

A murmur went through the crowd, wine goblets were drained and everyone took up their fine cloaks and plumed caps.

‘I must join you later,’ John said. ‘I have an appointment first.’

‘With a fair lady of Lisbon, I dare say!’ Paget said with a hearty laugh.

John did not deny it, only grinned and shook his head, and took their ribald teasing. A sacred day for them it might be, but they would never eschew gossip about pretty women. He made his way out of the house and through a winding maze of the steep, old streets with their uneven cobbles and close-packed white houses. The crowd had dispersed as the procession made its way to the cathedral and most of the houses were shuttered again, as if nothing had happened.

He could hear the toll of the church bells in the distance, could smell the bitter whiff of smoke from the ships’ guns lingering in the air, but there were none to block his path. No one seemed to pay him any attention at all as he passed, despite the richness of his black-velvet mantel embroidered with gold and silver and his fine red-satin doublet.

Nonetheless, he took a most circuitous path, careful to be sure he was not trailed. He had been trained to be most observant for many years, ever since his godfather introduced

him to Walsingham and his shadowy world. He had learned code-breaking along with languages at Cambridge, along with swordplay, firearms and the surreptitious use of needle-thin Italian daggers. He had honed those skills fighting in the Low Countries, then making his way at the Spanish court under Westmoreland's patronage. He was never followed—unless he meant to be.

Now, all those years of work were coming to fruition. The danger England had long feared from Spain was imminent, ready to sail at any moment. He had to be doubly careful now.

There was a sudden soft burst of laughter and his hand went automatically to the hilt of his dagger, but when he peered around the corner of a narrow alleyway he saw it was only a young couple, wrapped in each other's arms, their heads bent close together. The girl whispered something that made the man smile and their lips met in a gentle kiss.

John moved on, pushing down a most unwelcome feeling that rose up inside of him unbidden—a cold pang of loneliness. There was no time for such things in his life, no place for tenderness.

After the Armada was defeated and England was safe, after his task was done—mayhap then there could be such moments...

John gave a rueful laugh at himself. After that, if he even survived, which was unlikely, there would be another task, and another. Maybe one day he could restore Huntleyburg, even find a wife, but not for a long time. By then, he would be a veritable greybeard and beyond any mortal help from any lady. His father's

bitter ghost would have taken him over. But he could redeem his family's honour, restore their good name and that had to be enough.

He finally found his destination, a public house at the crest of a steep lane. Its doorway and grimy windows looked over the red-tile roofs to the forest of ships' masts that crowded the river port. It was an impressive sight—or would be if anyone in the dim, low-ceilinged, smoke-stained public room looked outside. It was not crowded, but there were enough people at the scarred tables for the middle of a day and they mostly seemed slumped in drunken stupors on their benches. The room had the sour smell of cheap ale and the illness that came from drinking too much of such ale.

John found his contact in a small private chamber beyond the main room, hidden behind a warren of narrow corridors. Its one window looked out on to an alleyway, perfect for an escape if needed. The man was small and nondescript, clad in plain brown wool with a black cap pulled over his wispy brown hair. He was someone that no one would look at twice on the street—his real strength. John hadn't seen him since Antwerp.

'The day draws nigh at last,' he said as John drew up a stool and reached for the pitcher of ale.

'Tis not the best kept secret in Europe,' John said. He had known this man for a long time and trusted him as much as he was able, which was not a great deal.

'King Philip is not a man to make up his mind quickly. But

now that he is ready to strike, even the Duke of Medina-Sidonia cannot warn him away.'

John thought of the Duke's well-known qualms, the way he had first tried to turn down the 'honour' of the command, his worries about the lack of supplies, the poor weather. 'And the Queen? Is she ready to strike in return?'

The man shrugged. 'The English militias are woefully under-trained and lack arms, but the rumours of Spanish evils have spread quickly and they are ready to fight to the death if need be. If an army can be landed, that is.'

'But England has greater defences than any land army.'

The man looked surprised John knew such a thing. 'How many ships does King Philip command now?'

'It is hard to say precisely. Ten galleons from the Indian Guard, nine of the Portuguese navy, plus four galleasses and forty merchant ships. That is only of the first and second lines. Thirty-four pinnaces to serve as scouts. Perhaps one hundred and thirty in all.'

'Her Majesty has thirty-four galleons in her fleet, but Captain Hawkins has overseen their redesign most admirably,' the man said. John nodded. Everyone knew that Hawkins, as Treasurer of Marine Causes and an experienced mariner, had been most insistent over vociferous protests that the Queen's navy had to be modernised. 'They are longer in keel and narrower in beam, much sleeker now that the large fighting castles were removed. They're fast and slower to take on water. They can come about

and fire on the old Spanish ships four times before they can even turn once.'

John absorbed this image as he sipped at the ale. 'A ship of six hundred tons will carry as good ordnance as one of twelve hundred.'

'Indeed. And Her Majesty's guns, though fewer than King Philip's, are newer. They have four-wheeled carriages, with longer barrels, and Hawkins's new ships have a new continuous gun deck which can hold near forty-three guns.'

John nodded grimly. The San Lorenzo, Spain's greatest galleon, held forty, but sixteen of them were small minions. Spain was indeed not prepared when it came to actual sea battle with England's modern navy. But Spain was counting on land war with Parma's superior forces, if they could be landed. 'England is ready for sea battle.'

'More than Spain could ever know or predict, I dare say.'

'Spain sails knowing God will send them a miracle.'

'So they will need it. Sailing with such an unwieldy, unprepared force can have no good end. Medina-Sidonia knows that.' The man gave him a long, dark look. 'To be on these ships is a dangerous proposition for any man.'

'I do know it well, too. But information obtained from inside the ships could be of much use later.'

'And once a path is decided upon, 'tis impossible to turn back. I know that well.' He finished his goblet of ale and rose to his feet. 'God's fortune to you, sir. I travel now to Portsmouth, one

way or another, and will send your message to our mutual friend from there.'

John nodded and waited several minutes before following his contact from the ale house. He made his way back to his lodgings through streets turned empty and ghostly after the pageantry of the procession. The shutters were closed on the houses and everything seemed to hold its breath to see what would happen next.

John had been working towards this moment for so very long and, now that it was upon him, now that he was actually about to embark, he felt numb, distant from it all. He knew Sir Matthew would make sure his family's name was restored if he died on the voyage and he himself could bring new glory to the Huntleys if he survived. It was what he had worked for, but at the moment it all seemed strangely hollow.

He found the house where he had lodgings, near the river wharves, and made his way up the staircase at the back of the building. It was noisier there; the dock workers did not have the luxury of locking themselves away until the Armada had sailed. They had to prepare the ships for the long voyage, and quickly. The sounds of shouts, of creaking ropes and snapping sails, floated over the crooked rooftops.

He could hear it even in his rooms, the small, bare, rented space that was exactly the same sort of place where he had lived for years. He barely remembered what being in one place was like, having a home to belong to. He unbuckled his sword and

draped the belt over a stool, unfastening his doublet as he poured out a measure of wine.

But he was not alone. He could feel the presence of someone else, hear the soft scratching of a pen across parchment. He followed the sound to his small sitting room and found Peter de Vargas at his desk, the man's pale head bent over a letter he was feverishly penning, as if time was running out. As it was for the men who were to sail at least.

John felt no alarm. Peter often borrowed his rooms, saying they were quieter than his family's lodgings, and Peter seemed to have much to accomplish, though John had not yet deciphered what that was. He was a strange man, was Peter. Half-English, but fervent in the Catholic cause. He had befriended John when they first met in Madrid, and was a source of much information from the inner circle of the King's court. John couldn't help but pity him, though; Peter was a pale, sickly young man, but afire with zeal for his cause and eager to bring others into its work when he could.

He glanced up at John and his pale blue eyes were red-rimmed, bright as if with fever. 'I did not see you at the cathedral,' he said.

'Nay, I could not find a place there, it was so crowded,' John answered. 'I watched from the street.'

'Glorious, was it not? The cheers as the Duke raised the sacred standard were most heartening. God will surely bring us a miracle.'

It would take God to do so, John thought wryly, considering that poor preparations of the Spanish king. ‘Have you eaten?’

‘It is a fasting day,’ Peter answered. ‘I took a little wine. I need to send these letters before we sail.’

‘Who do you write to?’ John asked. ‘Your mother?’

‘Among others. I want them to know the glory of this cause.’ He glanced down at the letter he was working on. ‘This one—I do not know if it will reach its goal. I pray it must, for if anyone has to know all...’

‘It is this person?’ John said. Peter had often spoken of some mysterious correspondent, someone whose rare letters he treasured, someone who must know everything. Thus far John had had little luck finding out who it was. He thought it might be someone in England, a contact of Peter’s. He would soon find out who it was. Peter was a fool, dedicated to a cause that cared naught for him and would wreak destruction on half the world if it could. They had to be stopped and John would do whatever he had to in order to accomplish that.

If time did not run out for them all.

Chapter Four

Galway—September

Alys could not sleep, despite the great lateness of the hour. The icy wind, which had been gathering off the sea all day, had grown into a howling gale, beating against the stone walls of the castle as if demons demanded entrance. The rain that had pounded down for days had become freezing sleet, always

pattering at her window.

Every time she managed to doze off for a little while, strange dreams pulled her back into wakefulness. Fire-breathing dragons chased her, or the castle was turned into an icy fortress with everyone inside frozen. The long days of not knowing what would happen next, of waiting for messengers on the long journey from Dublin.

They said the Armada had been driven from England, defeated by Queen Elizabeth's superior modern ships in battle at Gravelines, pushed back by great winds sent from God, but ships had been sighted wrecking in the storms off Ireland as they tried to flee along the coast and then towards home in Spain. They broke apart on the treacherous rocks, drowning hundreds, or the men straggled ashore to be robbed and killed.

Yet there were also tales, wilder tales, of armies storming ashore to burn Irish houses and take the plunder denied them in England. Or of Irish armies slaughtering any Spanish survivor who dared stagger on to land, mobs tearing them apart. The uncertainty was the worst and in the dark night nothing could distract her from her churning thoughts.

Alys finally pushed back the heavy tangle of blankets and slid down from her bed. The fire had died down to mere embers, leaving the chamber freezing cold. She quickly wrapped her fur-lined bed robe over her chemise and stirred the flames back to life before she went to peer out the window.

She could see little. During the day, her chamber looked down

on to the front courtyard of the castle, where guests arrived and her father gathered his men when they had to ride out. Beyond the gates was a glimpse of the cliffs, the sea beyond. Tonight, the moon was hidden by the boiling dark clouds and the sky and the stormy sea melded into one. Only the churning white foam of the waves breaking on the rocks cast any light. It was a perilous night indeed. Any ship out there would be drowned.

Alys shivered and drew back from the cold wind howling past the fragile old glass. She had rarely been at sea, but she did remember the voyage that had brought her family to Ireland when she was a child. The coldness, the waves that tossed everything around, making her stomach cramp. The fear of the grey clouds suddenly whipping into a storm. How much worse it must be for men, weakened by battle and long weeks at sea, so far from their sunny homes.

She pushed her feet into her boots and slipped out of her chamber, unable to bear being alone any longer. Despite the late hour, the torches were still lit in their iron sconces along the corridor and the stairway, smoking and flickering. She couldn't see anyone, all the servants were surely long retired, but she could hear the echo of angry voices coming from the great hall below.

Messengers had been riding in and out of Dunboyton all day to meet with her father. She had seen little of them, for her father had sent her out of the hall to see to the wine and meat and bread being served, but the snatches she heard of their worried conversations was enough to worry her as well. What was left of

the Armada was indeed sailing along the Irish coast, putting into ports where they could, but what would happen next, whether they would fight or surrender or how many there were, no one seemed to know.

The rumours that raced through the kitchens and the laundry were even wilder, and it took all her time to calm the servants and keep the household running. Invasion or not, they still needed bread baked, cheese strained and linen washed.

She tiptoed to the end of the corridor, where she could hear her father's weary voice, too low to make out any words, and the angry tone of his newest visitors. When they arrived after dinner, mud-splashed though they were, Alys saw they wore the livery of Sir William Fitzwilliam, Deputy of Ireland. Sir William had once savagely put down the Spanish and Papal troops who helped the Irish chieftains to rebel at Smerwick near ten years ago and vowed to do the same to any Armada survivors now, with the help of his brutal agent Richard Bingham.

Already stories flew that, farther south, soldiers and scavengers scoured the coast, robbing corpses and stealing the very clothes off the weak survivors, killing them or leaving them to die of the cold.

Alys could hear drifts of their words now, caught in the cold draught of the corridor.

'...must be found wherever they land. The Irish people are easily led astray by foreign designs against the Queen's realm,' the deputy's man said, punctuated by the splash of wine. They

would have to order more casks very soon. ‘If the old chieftains join them...’

‘We have not seen a hint of rebellion in years,’ her father answered. ‘The Spanish will never make it as far as Galway.’

‘Ships have already been sighted from the fort. Sir William only has twelve hundred men in the field now. He has sent messages to all the Queen’s governors along the coast to pass on his orders.’

‘And what orders would those be?’ her father asked wearily.

‘That any Spaniard daring to come ashore shall be apprehended, questioned thoroughly, and executed forthwith by whatever means necessary.’

Alys, horrified, backed away from those cold, cruel voices, their terrible words. She spun around and hurried towards the winding stairs that led up to the walkway of the old tower. Men always kept watch on those parapets, which had a view of the sea and the roads all around, and tonight the guards were tripled. Torches lit up the night, flickering wildly in the wind and reflecting on the men’s armour. The wind snatched at her cloak, but she held it close.

‘Lady Alys!’ one of the men cried. ‘You shouldn’t be out here in such cold.’

‘I won’t stay long,’ she said. ‘I just—I couldn’t stay inside. I thought if I could just see...’

He gave an understanding nod. ‘I know, my lady. Imagining can be worse than anything. My wife is sure we will be stabbed

through in our beds with Spanish swords, she hasn't slept in days.'

Alys shivered. 'And shall we?'

He frowned fiercely. 'Not tonight, my lady. 'Tis quiet out there. Only a fool would brave the sea on a night like this.'

A fool—or a poor devil with no choice, whose wounded ship had been blown far off course. Alys did have fears, aye, just like this soldier's wife. Terrible things had happened in other lands conquered by the Spanish. But they were defeated now, beaten down and far from home. And how many of the men in those ships had been there of their own free will? Her fear warred with her pity.

She saw her father's spyglass abandoned on a parapet, and took it up to peer out at the night. She could see nothing but the dark sea, the moonlight struggling to break through. Then, for an instant, she thought she saw a pinprick of light bobbing far out to sea. She gasped and peered closer. Perhaps it was there, but then it vanished again.

Alys sighed. Now she was imagining things, just like everyone else at Dunboyton. She tucked the spyglass into the folds of her cloak and made her way back inside to try to sleep again.

* * *

The Concepción had become a floating hell, carrying its cargo of the damned farther from any hope at every moment.

John felt strangely dispassionate and numb as he studied the scene around him, as if he looked at it through a dream.

The Concepción had sustained a few blows at Gravelines,

wounds that had been hastily patched, and her mainsail was shredded in the storm that blew them off course and pushed them far to the north of the Irish coast, out of sight of the other ships. But she had managed to limp along, praying that a clear course would open up and push them up and over the tip of the island and on a course for Scotland, where friendly Frenchmen might be found.

Yet the weather had only grown worse and worse, a howling gale that blew the vessel around haplessly, destroying what sails they had left and battering her decks with constant rain that leaked to the decks below. There were too many weak men and too few to raise the sails or steer. Salt was caked on the masts like frost.

Even if the skies did clear, the men were too ill to do much about it. They were like a ghost ship, tossed around by the towering waves.

John propped himself up by his elbow on his bunk to study the scene around him. The partitions that had been put up in Lisbon to separate the noble officers from the mere sailors had been torn down, leaving everyone in the same half-gloom, the same reeking mess. Everything was sodden, clothes, blankets, water seeping up from the floorboards and dripping on to their heads, but not a drop to drink except what rain could be caught. The ship's stores were long gone, except for a bit of crumbling, wormy biscuit. The smells of so many people packed into so small a space were overwhelming.

So many were starving, ill of ship's fever and scurvy, and could only lie in their bunks, moaning softly.

John wanted to shout with it all, but he feared he too lacked the energy to even say a word. There was little sleep to be had, with the constant pounding of the waves against the wounded hull, the whine of the pumps that couldn't keep up with the rising water, the groans of the men, the occasional sudden cries of ladies' names, ladies who would probably never be seen again.

John spent much time thinking over every minute that had happened since he left Lisbon, since he left England, really. All he had done to try to redeem his family's name, his own honour, all he had done thinking it would keep England safe. Surely he had given all he could, all his strength? What waited now? Perhaps the ease of death. But something told him he was not yet done with his earthly mission. More awaited him beyond these hellish decks.

He felt the press of his papers tucked beneath his shirt, carefully wrapped in oilskin to protect them. Would he ever have the chance to deliver them, to see the green fields of England he had fought so hard to protect? He could barely remember what Huntleyburg looked like. Perhaps he had lived a lie for too long now—it would be better if he died in it, too.

He heard a deep, rasping cough and looked to the next bunk where Peter de Vargas lay. Peter's greatest desire was to see England Catholic again; he spoke of it all the time. John found him innocent, if very foolish and fanatical, and willing to spill

any secrets he had.

But now Peter burned with fever, as he had for days, and was too weakened to fight it away. At night, John heard him cry out to someone in his nightmares, his voice full of yearning. John gave him what water and food could be found, but he feared little could be done for the young man now.

Yet it seemed now Peter had summoned up a burst of strength and he sat up writing frantically with a stub of pencil. His golden hair, matted with salt, clung to his damp brow, and his eyes burned brightly.

‘Peter, you should be resting,’ John said. He climbed out of his own bunk, wincing as the salt sludge of the floor washed over his bare, bleeding feet. He was trying to save what was left of his boots, though he was not quite sure why now. He pulled them on. He wrapped the ragged edges of his blanket around Peter’s thin shoulders.

‘Nay, nay,’ Peter muttered, still writing. ‘I haven’t much time. I must finish this. They must see...’

‘See what?’ John asked. He glanced at the slip of paper and could only glimpse a word or two, but mayhap it was of some import? Maybe Peter wrote to English relatives meant to help him, or secrets to send back to Spain. Even in the midst of floating hell, John’s mind turned on what information could be useful to Walsingham and the Queen.

‘The truth, of course. The truth of what I did. Love will come then. It must. It was promised.’

‘Love?’ John asked, puzzled. ‘Who do you write to, Peter?’

‘To England, of course. They are there. I think—yes, it must be...’ His words faded into muttered incoherence, a mix of English and Spanish.

‘Who in England? How shall you deliver it?’ He studied the paper over Peter’s shoulder again. The words were scribbled, smudged with salt water, with strange drawings in the margins. A code?

‘It will find its way. It always does.’ He looked up into John’s eyes, his face taut with longing and fear, his eyes burning bright. ‘You must deliver it.’

John was shocked. Peter knew naught of his true work aboard the Concepción, no one could. But Peter was nodding confidently. ‘Me, Peter? Why?’

‘Because you are the strongest man left. You can make it ashore. You can carry this for me when we are all in the grave.’

‘Where shall I deliver it?’

‘They will know.’

‘Who will know?’

‘They know all.’

There was no time to say more. A peal of thunder, louder than any of the guns of battle, cracked overhead and there was a splintering crash. The mast that still stood had been split by lightning and a dagger-sharp spear of it drove into the deck below. The sea rushed in, a cold, killing wave that overwhelmed everything and swept wounded, weakly crying men out to sea.

‘Take it!’ Peter screamed, and stuffed his crumpled paper into John’s hand.

John tucked it inside his doublet and shirt with the other papers he carried and grabbed Peter’s arm just as the ship tilted on a wild roll. There was a massive creaking noise, as if something strained past the breaking point, and the ship split in two. More water rushed in, as cold as hundreds of needles driving into bare skin. John swam upward, dragging Peter with him.

The freezing water stole his breath and numbed his whole body. He could barely feel his legs as he forced himself to keep kicking, keep moving. A wild animal instinct to live drove him ever forward and he dug deep within himself to find a raw, powerful strength he didn’t realise he possessed. A sharp splinter drove itself into his shoulder, but he pulled it out and kept moving.

He surfaced to find a world gone insane, filled with the howl of the wind, rain beating down on the churning waves. The great Concepción was breaking into pieces behind him and he could see men’s heads bobbing in the sea all around.

John’s shoulder crashed into something, sending sharp pain through his whole body, and he realised it was a wooden plank from the deck. He shoved Peter up on to it and clung to its splintered side as he kept kicking. He could see little in the driving silver sheets of rain, but he thought he glimpsed dots of light somewhere in the distance, a bobbing line like torches on shore. He feared it could be merely a mirage, the cold and

hunger making him see such things, but he kicked towards it. There seemed no choice.

* * *

At last, after swimming until his legs felt they would fall off, his feet felt something beneath them, the shift of sand and rocks. The tide tried to push him back away from that tiny security, but he fought to regain it. With a great surge of a wave, they washed on to a rocky beach.

John collapsed on to his back, staring up into the boiling, stormy sky. He had never felt such pain in his life, even when he was stabbed through the thigh at Leiden or hit over the head with a chamber pot in a public-house brawl in Madrid, but mostly he felt—alive. The wind was cold on his face, as if giving him new breath, and even the pain sustained him because it meant he was still on earth.

‘Peter,’ he gasped. ‘We’re on land.’ He turned his head and saw what he had feared all along—making land would not help poor, idealistic Peter now, for he was dead.

Dead, as John himself would surely be soon if he did not find a way out of the storm. He forced himself to stagger to his feet, even as stabbing, dagger-like pains shot through his body. He gritted his teeth, ignored it and kept moving forward. Always forward.

He came to a stand of boulders, which blocked the small spit of rocky land where he had washed up from a larger beachhead. He peered around the rocks to see a scene out of a poem.

Towering cliffs, pale in the storm, rose to meet a castle at its crest, a strong, fortified crenelated building of dark grey stone, surrounded by tiny whitewashed cottages. That was where he had seen the light, a bobbing line of torches making their way down a steep set of stairs cut in the cliffs.

He opened his mouth to shout out, but some instinct held back his words. He could not know who these people were, friends or foes. They could not know who he was, either. If they were loyal Englishmen, they would consider him a Spanish enemy.

For a few moments, he watched as they moved closer and he glimpsed the gleam of torchlight on armoured breastplates. Soldiers, then.

He pushed back the waves of pain and managed to stagger up a sloping hill to a stand of boulders, half-hidden in reeds. He collapsed to his knees just as he heard the first screams, the first clash of blades.

‘Nay...’ he gasped, but the pain had dug its claws into him again. He collapsed and darkness closed in around him.

Chapter Five

Alys couldn’t bear the shouting another minute.

She sat very still on the edge of her bed, trying to breathe, to turn her thoughts away from what she knew was happening outside, to pretend she was somewhere, anywhere else. When she was a child and her father often rode out to track down rebels and criminals, her mother would hold her all night and whisper tales of faraway Spain into her ear, tales of sunshine and strange

music, to calm her and distract them both.

It wasn't working now.

It had come at dinner, when the household was eating their tense, silent meal in the great hall. Her father had tried to smile at her, to pretend naught was amiss. But she had seen the mud-splashed messengers hurrying in and out of the castle, had glimpsed rows of soldiers marching out from Galway City and the fort. Rumours had flown like sparks that Sir Richard Bingham, the lieutenant of Fitzwilliam who had so brutally put down the chieftains' rebellion, had been marching up the coast towards them, hunting for the shipwrecks. He had already taken and summarily executed dozens of shipwrecked Spanish sailors, and was marching now towards Galway.

Alys's father had sent her to her chamber, but she could still hear the panic of the castle outside. The servants were rushing around the corridors and stairs of Dunboyton, panic-stricken, and the great storm that had swept suddenly over the skies only added to the confusion and terror. The thunder pounded overhead and icy rain beat at her window.

Alys jumped down from her bed, unable to sit still any longer and let the not knowing sow fear in her mind. Facing a danger and fighting it was always better than endless waiting.

The corridor outside her chamber was empty, but she could still hear voices, fierce, low murmurs and high-pitched shrieks, coming from below. She followed the sound down the stairs to the great hall.

There she found a few of the servants gathered around the fire, whispering and talking together, their faces white with fear. A few soldiers who had already been out patrolling the ramparts were slumped on the benches in their wet clothes, gulping down hot spiced cider. Their unfinished supper still littered the tables, with her father's dogs fighting over a few bits of chicken and pork pies.

Alys caught a pageboy who was rushing past. 'Have you seen my father?'

He shook his head frantically, his eyes wide. 'Nay, Lady Alys. They say his lordship rode out hours ago.'

'Did they say where?'

'Nay, my lady.' The boy practically trembled with fear and excitement.

Alys knew he could tell her nothing. Likely no one could—or would. Not if Bingham was abroad. They said he enjoyed torturing his prisoners before he killed them, making them die slowly after he had robbed them of whatever they had. She hoped her father had not been summoned to his regiments.

She spun around and ran up the twisting stairs to the ramparts of the tower. She caught up her cloak from its hook and wrapped it over her woollen gown. The freezing rain beat at her hood and the howling, whipping wind caught at her skirts, but she barely noticed. She took up the spyglass and turned it on to the beach below.

What she saw made a cry escape her lips. Surely it was a

nightmare. She was asleep in her bed, seeing phantoms conjured by all the fear around her.

She lowered the spyglass, closed her eyes, and shook her head. But when she looked again, it was still there.

Out to sea, vanishing and reappearing in the surging waves, were two ships, breaking apart in the storm. Chunks of wood and furls of sail bobbed in the foaming waves. And on the beach was a straggling group of men, thin, barely clothed in rags, swaying on their feet, collapsing to the sand.

It seemed Bingham had already arrived, for soldiers in helmets and breastplates that gleamed in the glow of the lightning moved among the prisoners. As they passed them, the captives would collapse to the ground. As Alys watched, frozen and horror-stricken, a sword flashed out and one of the sailors fell to the rocky sand, his head rolling free. Weak screams were carried to her on the wind.

The Spanish had come to Galway, but certainly not as the maids had feared, as conquerors. They were now pitiful victims.

‘Nay,’ she cried out. This could not be happening, not here at her own home. She had heard the terrible tales of the rebellions, the murders and pillaging, but this was the first time she had seen such things and she found she could not bear it. Those men down there were obviously defeated and beaten, and they were her mother’s fellow Spaniards.

She whirled around and ran as fast as she could back to the great hall. She had no clear thought now; she moved on pure

instinct. No one seemed to pay her any attention as she ran out the door and across the bridge that led from the castle to the gardens and the cliff steps. It was meant to be guarded, but she saw no one there now. No doubt they had run to the beach for their share of the excitement and of any Spanish treasure that could wash ashore.

The steps cut into the cliffside, steps she had run up and down ever since she was a child, were slippery and perilous in the storm. Alys almost fell several times, but she pushed herself up and struggled onward. She didn't know where she was going, or what she would do once she got there, she only knew she had to try to stop some of that horror.

Once she reached the beach, the straggling group of half-drowned sailors was still far away, but she could see more. And she wished she could not. One of the starving sailors dropped to his knees, snatches of a prayer in Spanish carried to her on the wind. A soldier drove his sword through the man, then yanked a gold chain from his neck.

A surge of bitter sickness rose up at the back of Alys's throat, choking her. She clapped her hand over her mouth to hold it back. She didn't even like to see a cook kill a chicken for the pie pot. How could she bear such wanton cruelty?

She took a blind, lunging step forward and a hard hand caught her arm. She screamed at the cold jolt of surprise and spun around to find a soldier standing there. She could see little of his face beneath his helmet, just the hard set of his jaw.

‘You should not be here, my lady,’ he said. ‘Tis not safe.’

‘I see that.’ She glanced back at the beach to see a clutch of people in cloaks and mantles, villagers, searching the beach for anything that might have washed ashore. ‘Those men are no better than scarecrows now! Surely they are no threat. Perhaps they have information, or could be ransomed...’

‘They are rabid Spanish dogs, my lady, and would have slaughtered us all if they could,’ the man answered. ‘This is war.’

Alys looked back to the beach and felt that bitter tang of sickness at the back of her throat again. ‘This does not look like war.’ It looked like wanton slaughter.

‘Go back to the safety of the castle, my lady—now,’ the soldier said, as implacable as stone.

‘My father shall hear of this,’ Alys said, though she feared he must already know. She marched away, leaving those horrors behind her, but she did not go back to the cliff steps. She made her way around through the sand dunes and the sodden reeds, hoping the rain would wash away her fury over what she had seen, her rage at her own helplessness.

Suddenly, above the whine of the wind, she heard a groan. She stopped, her senses on alert, half-fearful, half-hoping she was not alone. Yet it seemed it had been her imagination.

She started forward again. ‘Please!’ a hoarse voice called from the reeds. ‘Please.’

She knew she had not imagined that. It was definitely a person, someone in trouble. She ran to the reeds, which were higher than

her waist, and searched through them.

‘Please,’ the voice came again, weaker this time, fading.

In the blinding curtain of rain, Alys tripped over him before she saw him. She stumbled over a booted foot and nearly tumbled to the marshy ground.

Cautiously, she leaned closer to study him. He was a tall man, probably once with powerfully broad shoulders and long, muscled legs. He wore what she could tell had once been very fine clothes, a velvet-and-leather doublet with gold embroidery on the high collar and expensive, well-wrought soft leather boots. But they were sodden and caked in mud and sea salt now, hanging loose off his thin figure.

Alys glanced up at his face. His hair, over-long and trailing like seaweed, and his beard were dark, his skin brown from the sun and weather of a long sea voyage. She could make out little of his features, but suddenly his eyes opened and focused directly on her. They were the brightest, clearest emerald green and they seemed to see deep into her very heart. She felt sure she knew those eyes.

‘Please, mistress,’ he said hoarsely, slowly, as if each letter was dragged painfully from a raw throat. ‘I must go—I have messages...’

He had no hint of a Spanish accent, but then Alys’s mother’s words had not either. Was he Spanish, a noble soldier, or mayhap one of the English exiles they said sailed with the Armada, hoping to regain their lost estates? Either way, his life was in the

gravest danger from that barbarity on the beach.

‘Help me,’ he said. ‘I must deliver these.’ He reached for her hand. His fingers, roughened, torn and bloodied, barely touched her, but she felt a jolt of heat from his skin to hers, something that startled her and made her draw back. She saw a glint of gold on his hand, a ring on his smallest finger.

She glanced back frantically over her shoulder. She could see nothing from the reeds that closed around them, but she could hear the screams from the beach. She thought of her mother, of her dark Spanish eyes, her wistful smile, and Alys was completely torn.

Aye, this man could be the enemy and if she helped him she could find herself in much trouble. But as she looked into this man’s eyes, practicality and danger gave way to human feeling. He was a person, a human being, and deserved a chance to tell his tale before he died, to deliver these messages that seemed so important to him. She thought of the men being killed so wantonly on the beach and she shuddered.

How could she ever face her mother in heaven if she did not help him?

She thought quickly and prayed she had enough strength to carry out such a wild plan. ‘It is well now,’ she said soothingly. ‘I know where we can go. You can trust me. Confía en mí, señor.’

His eyes widened in surprise at her words in Spanish, and he nodded. ‘Gracias.’

‘Can you stand at all? We must hurry.’ The screams on the

beach were growing louder and soon the looters would spread out in their search.

He nodded again, but Alys wasn't sure. He did look very pale, almost grey beneath his sun-brown. She slid her arm around his shoulders and helped him to sit. He was very lean, but she could feel the strength of his muscles beneath his sodden clothes. He must have been no idle nobleman. His jaw set in a grim line, and his skin went even paler, but he was able to push himself to his feet. He swayed there precariously and Alys braced her shoulder against his ribs to help hold him up.

She was not a tall woman and had inherited her mother's small-boned, delicate build, but carrying around baskets of laundry and digging in the kitchen garden had not been in vain. Between the two of them, he soon had his balance again.

'We must hurry,' she said. 'Follow me.'

They made their way through the sand dunes, crouching low to avoid being seen. The rain had slowed down and the clouds slid back and away from the moon, which was good and bad. She could see her way a bit clearer, but that meant so could the soldiers on the beach. She found the second set of stairs etched into the cliff, around the curve of the beach and more hidden. The steps went only up to the old abbey and were seldom used.

'Can you climb here?' she said. She looked up at him and saw that his face, starkly carved like an old Roman statue, was set in lines of determination. He nodded and closely followed her as she climbed the stairs. He swayed dangerously at one point,

almost falling backward, and Alys caught his arm and pulled him up with her.

At last they reached their destination, the ruins of the ancient abbey. Alys had gone there often when she was a child, sneaking away from her nursemaids to pick flowers and just lie in the grass, staring up at the sky through the crumbling old stone arches. Sometimes her mother would take her there, too, for picnics and games.

It felt like another world to her from that of the crowded castle, a world of peace and beauty. But sometimes the sight of the abandoned cloisters seemed to make her mother sad. What had once been a grand and glorious place, with a soaring church and dozens of monks and priests, was abandoned and silent.

Alys had never seen it quite like this, with rain pounding down on the old stones, lightning casting an eerie glow through the empty window frames. The wind, howling around the collapsed vaults of the roof, sounded like the cries of the banished monks.

If they were there now, watching with ghostly eyes, Alys begged them for their help. She wanted to cry, to scream, but she knew she couldn't. She needed all her strength now.

She took a deep breath of the heavy, cold air and made herself focus carefully on what she was doing. The wounded man had walked so bravely up the stone steps and along the overgrown path to the abbey, though she could tell it pained him greatly. He held himself very stiffly, placing his steps carefully, and once or twice she heard a muffled moan. She gently touched his cheek

and found it burning hot. He needed rest.

‘Almost there now,’ she said encouragingly, trying to smile.

‘You should leave me here,’ he answered. ‘I am away from the soldiers, I can hide from them on my own.’

‘You certainly cannot! You can’t even walk on your own. I have taken too much trouble over you to abandon you now.’ Alys thought of the terrible scene on the beach, the helpless, half-drowned men just cut down, and she shuddered. No one deserved such an end. Treating helpless prisoners thus cruelly made the English no better than the Spanish devils the maidservants had feared so much.

And this man did not seem to be a cruel demon, come to garrotte and brand English children. There was a kindness in his eyes, beneath the wariness.

She led him into what had once been the dairy for the abbey. It was one of the only buildings still mostly intact, with its roof and door. It was windowless and cool, the thick walls lined with shelves that still held buckets for milk and covered containers for butter and cheese. There was a hearth where cream would be stirred.

‘Wait here,’ she told him, propping him against the wall. A ghost of a smile flickered across his lips beneath his beard, as if her bossiness amused him. She hurried to find a pile of old canvas sacking, which she used to make an improvised pallet bed by the hearth. There was a bit of wood left in a basket by the fireplace, along with a flint and some twigs for kindling. It was

a bit damp, but she managed to get an ember to catch.

She turned back to the man, whose tall body sagged against the wall. His eyes were closed, his skin very pale. Alys hurried to his side and slid her arm around him again. He was so very tall and she couldn't reach around his chest. Surely he would soon regain his health and be a fine figure of a man again.

'Come, sit down by the fire,' she said, trying to keep her voice calm, to hide her fear. 'It isn't much, but at least it's out of the rain. You can rest quietly.'

She helped him to lie down on the improvised mattress. He fell back to the sacking with a suppressed, painful sigh. He made no protest as she unfastened the buttons of his ruined doublet. The fine fabric was sodden and crusted with salt, but she saw that the buttons were silver and there were traces of metallic embroidery on the collar.

Who was he? She was greatly intrigued by the mystery of him and how he came to be on that ship. But her curiosity would have to wait.

As she peeled away the doublet to find a bloodstain on the torn shoulder of his fine linen shirt, a small packet of letters fell out. Alys reached for it, but despite his wounds he was faster. He snatched it away, holding it tightly in his long, elegant fingers. His gold ring glinted.

'Don't let these be lost,' he gasped. 'They must stay with me.'
'Of course,' Alys said gently, even as she burned with curiosity to know what those letters held. Her rescued sailor became ever

more intriguing. ‘Be easy, señor. They will go nowhere.’

He studied her closely with those otherworldly green eyes, until she felt her cheeks burn hot with a blush. At last, he nodded and laid back down again. When Alys was satisfied he rested calmly, she hurried back outside to find the cistern near the old refectory. She dipped him a pottery goblet of the clean water, and went back to kneel at his side. His eyes were still closed, but she could see the lines of pain etched around his mouth.

‘Here, drink a bit of this,’ she said. ‘I need to look at your shoulder. I’ll have to fetch some food and medicine for you from the castle and I should see what exactly I will need.’

He nodded and laid very still as she eased the salt-stiff shirt away from his shoulder. His chest was smoothly muscled, with pale brown hair lightening the sun-browned skin. But that perfect expanse of skin was marred with a deep gash at his shoulder, apparently from a dagger-like splinter.

Alys ripped a bit of canvas from the sacking and dipped it into the clean water to dab at the wound. As she cleaned away the crusted blood, she saw that it was a long cut, but not terribly deep. She would need pincers to clear away the smaller splinters.

As she worked, she tried to focus only on her task, not on him, his breath as he moved against her, his eyes that watched her so closely. She had tended wounded men before, but somehow it had never felt quite like—this.

‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked. The sudden sound of his voice, so deep and dark, startled her and she glanced up at him.

He still watched her and the glow of his green eyes made her somehow want to fall into them, to drown in their jewel-like colour and never leave him. ‘I must be your enemy.’

Alys looked back to her work. ‘If you are indeed an enemy, you must be honourably imprisoned and questioned, perhaps ransomed back to your family. You would surely fetch a fine price, to judge by your clothes and your fine manners.’

A wry smile touched his lips. ‘You know the procedures to follow battle, then?’

‘My father has been governor of Dunboyton Castle since I was a child and has fought to help put down many rebellions against the Queen. I have learned a thing or two.’ She ripped another piece of canvas into a long strip for a bandage. ‘And I know that what was happening there on the beach had naught to do with honourable battle. I am sure Queen Elizabeth would be appalled to have such barbarity done in her name.’

She could still feel him looking at her, that burning sensation she felt deep inside of herself. ‘Is that all?’

Alys hesitated to say more. ‘My—my mother was Spanish. She often told me about her home, her family and brothers. We are not monsters, even if we come from different countries. We are all people. If they...’

She couldn’t say anything else, as tears choked her throat.

‘I will help you to recover, if I can,’ she said.

‘Then send me to your father?’

Alys had not thought that far ahead. She could only think of

getting food and medicine for him, of which herbs she would need. 'You can't stay in here for ever.' She tied off the end of the makeshift bandage and pushed herself to her feet. 'I will be back. I have to find you some food, some dry clothes and blankets. I won't be gone long.'

He reached out his hand, his fingers brushing hers and leaving a trail of tingling fire behind. 'May I at least know the name of my saviour?'

She looked down at him, and the firelight limned him in gold. Beneath the wild hair, the paleness of his illness, he was extraordinarily handsome. The most handsome man she had ever seen. Surely such allure made him doubly dangerous. 'I am Alys.'

'Alys,' he said and the word sounded like honeyed wine in his dark voice. 'I am—Juan.'

Alys tried to smile at him. 'I will be back, Juan. You rest now. You should be safe enough here.'

She hurried out of the small building, back out into the storm. Even the cold rain and howling wind could not frighten her. Only the emotions she had thought long buried inside of her, emotions this strange man was bringing out, could frighten her now.

* * *

He had been saved, snatched from the sea and the murderous soldiers, by an angel.

John laughed as he laid back against the rough canvas of his new bed. He would never have thought heaven would send him such a rescuer. He had done too many bad things in his life, had

killed, cheated, stolen, to deserve it.

Yet, just when he thought death had come to claim him, he had opened his eyes and seen her. His angel. Alys.

She was so small, so frail-looking, with her long, rain-soaked dark hair and her pale, elfin face, yet she had the strength and determination of a warrior. So calm, so steady and unafraid. When he looked into her dark eyes, he forgot the pain, forgot the duty that had brought him to this place, forgot—everything. Because of her, he had a chance to finish his mission. He couldn't let his angel's sacrifice be in vain. He owed her so much.

John pushed away the waves of pain and crippling exhaustion that threatened to push him down and made himself sit up. Grimacing, he pulled off his ruined boots and stretched his freezing feet towards the fire. The warmth was something he barely remembered after months at sea and it was delicious. Almost as wondrous as Aly's touch on his hand.

He reached for the packet of papers. Their oilskin pouch had kept them relatively intact, their coded symbols and words still legible. He could recreate them before he delivered them to Walsingham. But Peter's letter had not fared quite as well. He could see it was in Spanish and could make out a few words. Perhaps it would be easier when it was light.

It had been so important to Peter that it be delivered, but to whom? Peter had often spoken of some friend, someone in England, who would know what to do when he found them. John would have to track them down now.

Another wave of crushing dizziness washed over him and he couldn't quite resist it this time. He hid the packet under the edge of the canvas bedding and laid back down. The ceiling above him was painted with a scene of angels peering down from the shelter of fluffy white clouds, an unexpected scene of beauty in such a strange place. John studied them as sleep overtook him, and he noticed that one of them had large brown eyes and a wary smile. Just like an angel named Alys...

Chapter Six

'What are you looking for, my lady?'

Alys spun around, startled by the sound of a maidservant's voice in the doorway of the stillroom. She was filling her baskets with the herbs she needed, along with clean linen bandages and some wine, and was so absorbed in her own thoughts she heard little beyond the empty chamber.

'Some of the men are in need of healing poultices and tisanes after—after what happened last night,' she said. She remembered all too well the terrible scene on the beach and swallowed her fear to try and smile.

She knew she was not the only one affected by what had happened. The maid's eyes were red-rimmed, her apron askew. 'Oh, my lady, 'twas terrible! Will there be more of them, do you think? Will they reach the castle?'

Alys saw a flashing image in her mind, a scene of mayhem as soldiers stormed through the corridors of Dunboyton, tearing her life apart. Nay—she would never let such a thing happen. 'I'm

sure Bingham's men have moved on to seek new prey. There will be little here for them and we will soon be as quiet as usual.'

'But the Spanish...'

'The Armada is destroyed!' Alys cried, thinking of those poor, starving wretches cut down on the beach. Of Juan, his beautiful eyes and his wounded body. 'They could not hurt even a seagull now. We must go about our tasks as always. Is my father's dinner ready?'

'I don't know, my lady.'

'Well, go see about it, please. Here is some mint for the lamb stew. Perhaps that will tempt his appetite a bit. I must go see to the garden.'

Alys took up her basket and hurried out of the stillroom. She could tell that most of the servants were trying to go about their tasks as always, but there were still soldiers loitering in the gardens and the great room, and the air seemed heavy and oppressive. She went to fetch her parcel of clothes and linens, and made her way towards the garden, avoiding anyone's gaze.

She caught a glimpse of her father in the great hall and despite her worries the sight of him made her pause. He sat slumped in his chair near the fire, his head resting on his hand, and he looked so tired. So—old, suddenly. She left her baskets near the door, out of sight, and made her way to his side.

'Father?' she said and at first she feared he didn't hear her. He shook his head and slowly looked up at her. 'Father, are you unwell?'

‘Nay, Alys my butterfly, I am well enough,’ he answered, his voice tired and weak.

‘Is your stomach aching again? I can mix you a tisane...’ She had become used to mixing the certain combination of herbs that sometimes soothed him, as he had been plagued with illness ever since her mother died.

‘It is no worse than usual.’ He gave a deep sigh and stared back into the fire. ‘I have grown useless, Alys. I could not even do anything to stop that wanton slaughter last night.’

Alys’s heart ached at his words. She knelt down beside his chair and pressed her hand to his trembling arm. ‘Oh, Father. They say Bingham carried a royal order from Fitzwilliam, you could not go against that.’

‘Royal order,’ he snorted. ‘Men like that follow no order but their own. Ransoms could have been made, perhaps, or valuable information obtained from those men. All for naught.’

Alys thought of Juan. Once he was recovered, what information could he give them? Perhaps if he could tell her father...

She shook her head. That had to be a secret for now, her secret, until Bingham’s men were truly gone and she had found out what she could from Juan herself. ‘Terrible things do happen in battle.’

‘That was no battle, it was a slaughter of starving men who were defeated weeks ago. Thank the stars your mother was not here to see such wickedness. And I pray that you will never see such again, either. That you never see true battle.’

‘That seems unlikely, Father. I am no warrior, am I?’ She kissed his cheek and made herself give him a bright smile. ‘I am sure Dunboyton will be as isolated as ever now that the ships have gone. I’ll finish my tasks and dine with you this evening. There is lamb stew and a new apple pie.’

Her father patted her hand, but she could tell he was far away from her again, staring into the fire as if he could see images in the flames no one else glimpsed. She wondered if he saw her mother there, her Spanish mother.

Alys quickly fetched her baskets and hurried out of the castle. Juan had been alone for hours now and she worried what she would find at the abbey. Perhaps he had become feverish, or mayhap wandered away and was captured. She knew she should not be so worried for a man she did not know, a man who could bring much danger on to her, but still she hurried her steps towards him.

It was still cold and windy, but the rain had gone. She avoided the beach. They said the villagers had pillaged what they could from the sailors’ bodies and from the cargo that had washed ashore from the ships, and the bodies were buried in the dunes. The English regiments had moved on along the coast, but she couldn’t bear to see the place where she had witnessed such horrors. If she could help Juan, even though he was only one man...

Well, it was all she could do for some atonement, something for her mother.

As she came over the top of the cliffs, the ruins of the abbey came into view. The spires still reached towards the slate-grey skies, even though their walls were crumbling, one tiny spot of beauty left out of ruin. The empty windows and old walkways seemed as empty as always.

What would she find when she went to search for Juan?

The door to the old dairy was closed and no smoke curled from the chimney. It looked as abandoned as the rest of the cloisters.

Alys slowly pushed the door open. She held her breath, listening for any sign of life, but there was not even a rustle of noise. ‘Holà...’ she called tentatively. Her words ended on a scream as her arm was suddenly grabbed and she was dragged into the room.

A hard, strong hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off her words and her breath. Cold terror washed over her. She twisted frantically against her bonds, driving her elbow into her captor’s ribs. She must have inadvertently hit a wound, for she was suddenly free and her captor stumbled back a step.

Alys whirled around, and saw it was Juan who had grabbed her. His face was grey, streaked with sweat, and his eyes were filled with a wild glow, like an animal cornered. Anger replaced her fear. Had she not done all she could to help him, despite everything? How dare he frighten her so!

‘I am trying to help you, at great risk, and this is the thanks I get!’ she cried. She scooped up some of the tumbled linen that had fallen from her basket when she dropped it and tossed it at

his head. She knew she should still be scared; she had seen men in the aftershocks of battle before, they didn't always know where they were. And Juan was much larger and stronger than she was. But somehow, her fear was gone.

He caught the linen in one hand and the wild light in his eyes faded. A look of horror flashed across his face. 'Forgive me, señorita. I didn't realise it was you, I thought—it was most ungentlemanly. I...' His face went very white and he sagged against the wall.

Alys remembered his wounded shoulder, all he had been through, and she felt terrible for shouting at him, deserved or not. She rushed to his side and took his arm. He felt much too warm, as if his fever had not abated. 'Of course. I could have been one of Bingham's soldiers, though I dare say they would have made much more noise. Here, sit down, you are feverish still. I'll build up the fire.'

He went with her, though she sensed he went most reluctantly, trying to hold back, as if ashamed of his behaviour, his loss of control. 'Why have you not summoned the soldiers yourself?' he asked.

Alys shrugged, concentrating on stoking the fire. 'I do not like Bingham and his barbaric methods. He is a brute, who does not follow the proper procedures for battle. He just enjoys a bloodbath.' She sat back on her heels and watched as the flames caught and crackled, sending out their warmth into the cold, stone room. She nodded, as if she had decided on something.

‘And my mother...’

‘Ah, yes, you said she was Spanish,’ he said. ‘So was mine.’

She turned to look at him, wondering that there was someone else there like her, someone who might understand what it felt to be caught ever between two worlds. ‘And your father?’

His jaw tightened. ‘He was English.’

‘Is that why you were with the Armada? For your mother?’

He was silent for a long moment, until she was sure he would not answer her. He looked like a rock, a cave made of stone she could not penetrate. ‘I was there for many reasons. You would find my tale dull.’

Alys thought of his hidden packet of papers, that strange jumble of letters and symbols she had glimpsed for only an instant before he hid it again. She was sure the very last word to describe him would be dull. But she could tell he should not talk more today, the effort of holding his secrets had made him pale again and he shivered. She would have to discover more later.

Once the fire was blazing again, she gathered up her tumbled supplies and went to kneel beside him. He gave her a wary glance.

‘I brought you some proper blankets and pillows, not much like a real bed, but better than that old canvas,’ she said. ‘Also, a clean shirt, and some bandages and healing herbs from my stillroom. Oh, and wine and bread, a bit of cheese and smoked fish. You look as if you haven’t had a real meal in some time, so you must eat very slowly.’

He examined the supplies she laid out with a strange look on

his face, almost a wonder, as if she had brought an array of gold and rubies. ‘Where did you get all of this?’

‘I told you, the herbs came from my stillroom and the food from the kitchen, of course. No one saw me gather it.’ She measured out a mixture of feverfew and rosemary, carefully crushing them together and mixing them into some wine.

‘You stole this? For me?’

Alys laughed. ‘Certainly not. They are mine to take, since my father is governor of the castle. Except for the shirt. I did take that from him, but I will sew him a new one.’

‘Then where am I, exactly?’

Alys glanced up from her herbs and saw a frown on his face. ‘Dunboyton Castle in Galway. Did you not know?’

He shook his head. ‘Our pilot died days ago and much of our navigational equipment was damaged. No one was well enough to steer, so we just—drifted. Until we followed another ship into a bay, trying to shelter from the gale.’

Alys tried to remember all the jumbled stories that had flown around when the ships were sighted. ‘Aye, they did say there were two that went down, but there seems no sign of the other.’

‘There were no survivors, then?’

Alys went back to her mixture, making a new one for the poultices. She did not want to tell him too much yet, not when he was still ill. ‘I don’t know. If there were, they weren’t brought to the castle. Here, let me see to your shoulder. The bandages will need changing. Drink this.’

Juan drew back, glaring suspiciously at her array of herbs. ‘What is that?’

‘Merely feverfew, some yarrow, a bit of valerian, things of that sort,’ she answered. ‘It will help the fever and aid your blood in healing itself. I will make you a tea of chamomile later, to help you sleep. It is not poison, I promise. Why would I go to so much trouble to bring you here if I was just going to poison you?’

He laughed, and it sounded as if he had not done so in a long time. It was like drawing back a shutter and letting the light and warmth in again. ‘A fine point, señorita.’

‘You’ll have to take off your shirt.’

To her amusement, his cheeks actually turned a bit red and he turned his back to strip off the torn, stained shirt. For a moment she could only stare, amazed, at the beauty of his sun-darkened skin lightly touched with the pink of those incongruous blushes. Her giggles faded when she saw the way he winced in pain at the movement and she hurried over to touch his arm.

‘Here, sit down, Juan, let me look at your shoulder,’ she said.

She could tell he was still wary, holding himself stiff under her touch, but he slowly sat down on the blankets she had arranged by the fire. He held his back very straight as she leaned closer to study the gash on his shoulder.

The wound was not as angrily red as it had been, but she saw she did need to remove the rest of the splinters and dress it with the poultice if it was not to poison his blood. She also realised he must have found the water cistern and bathed, for his gold-

touched skin was clean and smooth to her touch, and he smelled of sweet rainwater with a hint of citrus.

He was really very, very handsome, with his sharply carved features, his strong jaw and blade-straight nose, and those sea-green eyes. His body, too, was tall and leanly muscled, like that of an ancient warrior.

Alys shook away the strange spell being close to him seemed to weave around her. She could not afford such distractions now. She quickly rinsed a rag in clean water and carefully dabbed at the dried blood that had seeped around his wound.

‘What is this place?’ he asked. ‘Part of the castle?’

‘Nay, it is the old abbey. It was abandoned long ago, in King Henry’s time, and most of it is in ruins. It was dark when we came here, I am sure you couldn’t see it well.’

‘An abbey?’

‘This was the old dairy and somehow it has survived with its roof intact. I think the shepherds use it sometimes, when they drive their flocks towards Galway City.’

‘How do you know about it?’

Alys carefully dabbed her paste of herbs on the cleaned wound. His shoulder tensed under her touch and his skin felt like steel under silk. Distracting again. ‘I came here with my mother when I was a child. The monks had large herb gardens and we would gather some of the remains, or we would sit on the old walls and she would tell me tales.’

‘Tales of Spain?’

Alys thought of those sunny spring days, with the light flooding through the empty windows and the scent of mint on the air. ‘Sometimes. She said it was always sunny and warm there, most unlike Ireland. Mostly fairy stories, or tales of old kings and warriors, though.’

‘Will she find you here?’

Alys bit her lip as she wound the bandage tighter. ‘Nay. She died many years ago.’

Juan reached up and gently touched her hand, making her skin turn warm at his touch. ‘I am sorry.’

‘It—it was a long time ago,’ Alys stammered, confused at the feelings his touch awoke. ‘Though I fear my father still mourns her greatly.’ She slid her hand away to tie off the bandage. ‘Some of the stories she did tell me were ghost tales. She loved those. I always wondered if the Spanish had such drama in their blood.’

‘Ghost tales?’

‘Of the monks who once lived here. On some nights, when the moon is bright, they go in procession, chanting through the old cloisters. Some of the maids say they have even seen lights up here, moving along the cliffs.’

‘Have you ever seen them?’

Alys shook her head as she finished her nursing ministrations. ‘Never. My mother said I was too practical to see the world beneath our own, that I was too concentrated on my everyday tasks.’

He smiled at her, and it was meltingly beautiful. ‘And are you?’

Practical, Alys?’

Alys smiled back. She couldn’t seem to stop herself. His smile looked like something she had been waiting to see all her life and she wanted to fall into it and be lost. ‘I suppose I am, though I don’t mind a pretty song or two when the jongleurs come to Dunboyton.’ She offered him the clean shirt. ‘Did the ghosts come to visit you last night?’

‘Not yet, but I have no fear of them. I grew up in my father’s house, which was also once an abbey, and there were ghosts aplenty there. Here cannot be much different.’

He tried to slip the shirt over his head, but he was still moving stiffly and the sleeve caught. Alys moved to help him and felt the soft brush of his hair, the warmth of his body against her. ‘Have you been to many places since you left your father’s house?’

He smiled up at her again, but now it was rueful. ‘Many lands indeed. The Low Countries, France, Portugal...’

‘I fear I have never left here. My father was sent here as governor when I was a child. Dunboyton is beautiful, but rather small, I fear, and my knowledge of the world must come from books and the stories of visitors.’

He looked into the fire as he tied the laces of the shirt, a wistful frown replacing his smile. ‘I would have liked a real home, I think.’

‘And I think I would have liked a bit of adventure.’ Alys took up the wine and food from the basket and held out the loaf of bread. ‘In exchange for my help, Señor Juan, I insist you tell me

all about Lisbon and Paris. What they wear there, what they eat, their buildings and shops...'

Juan laughed. 'So tales are your price, my rescuer? One story for every bite of cheese?'

'If they are good stories, I may even bring you a pie or two. But you must still eat slowly and carefully. I don't want my efforts to come to nothing if you become ill again.'

'I am quite sure I will find my health quickly again, thanks to you.' He peered at her curiously as he sliced off a bit of cheese and slid it past his sensual lips. 'You are surely an angel.'

Alys turned away, flustered. 'I am sure my household would disagree with you. They say I am too bossy.' In fact, it would soon be time for her to oversee dinner. She poured out a measure of wine and mixed in a spoonful of valerian to help him rest. 'Here, you should drink this. I have to go now and see to my father's dinner, or I shall be missed. But I will be back later to see if you are well.'

'And to claim your first story?'

Alys laughed. 'And that. It had best be an amusing one.'

She gathered up her baskets and hurried out of the old dairy, making sure the door was firmly shut and no one watched her. It was quiet on the path along the cliffs that led back to Dunboyton, giving Alys too much time to think about Juan. About how shockingly handsome he was beneath the beard and sun-brown of his time at sea, like no one else she had ever seen in real life. He was like a hero or ancient warrior in a sonnet, all elegant,

quiet strength. He spoke very well, too, his words polished and educated, his accent fine. She couldn't help but wonder more about his past. Where had he really come from? What had driven him on to those ships? He held many, many secrets, she was sure of that.

She knew she should be frightened of him. Certainly she should tell her father about him immediately. But something, some part of a fairy instinct her mother had claimed she lacked, told her that his secrets were not evil ones. He was a complicated man, yes, but not a wicked one.

At least she hoped he was not, that her trust in him was not misplaced. And he had called her his angel, in a sweet, wondering tone she had never heard before. She liked him thinking of her in that way. The memory of it made her laugh and then blush when she thought of how warm and smooth his bare skin was when she touched it. Aye, she was in danger of being overtaken by her emotions, for the first time in her life, and she could not let that happen. She had to be very careful, indeed, and find out for sure what Juan's true purpose was there. She prayed with all her might it was a good one. It looked as if her whole future depended on it.

* * *

When Alys was gone, the small room, which had felt so warm and welcoming while she was there, seemed to close around him. Yet he dared not go outside, not until he was strong enough to face any foe again.

John opened the door a crack and stared out into the night,

and somehow its starlit beauty, its silence, made him recall too sharply the scenes of the past weeks. The bloody battles, the freezing, starving days on the ships, watching poor Peter—and so many other men—die. If not for Alys, he would be among them. He would be mouldering in a hastily dug grave on the beach and his quest to restore the Huntley name would be at a terrible end.

Aye, he owed her so very much. She declared she was not an angel, but he knew differently. When he had opened his eyes to see her face, to look into her dark eyes and hear her low, sweet, reassuring voice, it was like being raised into the bright light once more. He had a new chance at life, if he could make it safely to court, and he owed it all to her.

He thought of the way she took such care of his wounds, her cool, calm demeanour, her gentle smile. She had saved a man, a stranger, and taken care of him with no sign of fear. Such remarkable courage and kindness, such as he had never seen before in either woman or man. Aye, of course she was an angel.

He thought of foolish Peter and the letters he had written so fervently, even in his final days. John wondered if it was a woman Peter wrote to, a woman who had stolen his heart, who shared the cause that made a martyr of him. It would explain his worshipful expression, his adamant insistence that he would see the person he wrote to once more.

Aye—perhaps a woman had once helped Peter, as Alys had helped him. The thought gave him pause. He knew he could not lose his heart so fervently, or at all. His work was still incomplete.

But he did want Alys to know how she had helped him. How she had changed him.

He reached for a small block of wood from the stack of fuel for the fireplace, and studied its angles and shape carefully. He had once spent long hours waiting for battle, or aboard ship, in carving, he was sure he could remember how to do it now. This piece of wood would work, and it would definitely help pass the time as he recovered his full strength and plotted his return to court.

It would also remind him of Alys in the long, quiet hours until then.

Chapter Seven

Alys made her way along the path to the abbey the next morning, carrying a large hamper of fresh supplies. No one had noticed her slipping out of the castle not long after first light. Bingham's men had all marched off to find more shipwrecked sailors further down the coast and all seemed quiet again. But Dunboyton was not yet quite back to normal. Everyone was still too unsettled, too excited by the violent interruption to their daily routines. The maids still cried into their aprons, the pages still carried around kitchen knives 'just in case' and everyone jumped at the merest loud noise.

The maids would no doubt be relieved not to have their lady watching them as they whispered together over their kettles and dusting cloths instead of working. And she had not seen her father all night or morning, he was shut up in his library with his

steward and the captain of his guards. There was no one to see her pack up wine and food, gather up bandages and herbs from the stillroom. At least she truly hoped no one had.

Alys glanced over her shoulder and saw nothing but the sweep of the empty meadows down to the cliffs and the sea beyond. The great gale that wrecked the ships had blown away, but there was still a chill to the wind and there were no fishing boats putting out to sea. Most of the villagers, along with Dunboyton's household, stayed behind their locked doors for the time being.

She hoisted her basket higher in her arms and turned towards the path to the abbey. Once again, like old friends, the spires against the grey sky greeted her. A warm sense of anticipation rose up in her at the sight. She looked forward to seeing Juan, to checking that her nursing skills were working, to see if she could coax more stories from him. He owed her a few more tales; after all, that was their bargain.

And, if she was honest, it was not just the prospect of nursing that made her steps grow quicker as she reached the edge of the crumbling cloister wall. She looked forward to seeing him again, to hearing the secret smile in his voice as he talked to her, the way his green eyes glowed.

Life at Dunboyton was not a bad existence, but Alys admitted it was a quiet one. The same people, the same tasks, every day. Juan was like no one else she had ever met. He was a complete puzzle, one she wanted to fit together so very much. She wanted to know more about his Spanish mother, whether she had told

him tales of her homeland as Alys's had to her. The feeling of belonging to two different worlds was one they shared. Alys could not see things as everyone else did, as English and Spanish and thus different, for she knew they were not. Did Juan feel the same?

And, if she was being doubly honest with herself, she had to admit that she was deeply attracted to her shipwrecked sailor. The thought of giggling over something so frivolous in the midst of such a terrible time made her chide herself, laugh at herself for her silliness. Who would have thought dull, practical Alys could sigh so over a pair of lovely green eyes.

She hurried through the open, sky-lit sanctuary and found the dairy. She was almost afraid he would have gone, but then she saw the silvery smoke snaking from the chimney. She knocked carefully at the door, and called out, "Tis Lady Alys." As much as she wanted to see him, she wanted no repeat of yesterday's rough greeting when she surprised him.

The door cracked open and he stood before her. He smiled, making his eyes crinkle most invitingly, and held out his hand. She could tell with a glance that he looked better, his skin not so pale and his figure standing straighter, taller. 'Lady Alys. I was afraid you might not come today. I have been watching for you.'

He had been watching for her? Did he...want to see her, as she wanted to see him? She felt her cheeks turn warm at the thought and she set quickly about her tasks to hide her confusion. 'I had to make sure breakfast was prepared for the household. They are

so disordered, nothing seems to be getting done at all. I am sorry, you must be hungry.'

'You did promise me a pie,' he said teasingly. 'I have been trying to come up with a story fine enough to deserve it.'

Alys brushed by him to the fireplace and he followed her. She was achingly aware of the heat of him, his tall strength right behind her. Pretending nothing was amiss, she knelt beside the hearth and started to unpack her basket. Beside her was his makeshift bed, a nest of tumbled blankets and pillows, and she tried not to imagine what he looked like lying there, at his ease beside the fire as the flames turned his bare skin to pure gold...

Silly girl, she chided herself. Her hands shook as she measured out her packets of herbs.

'I am very comfortable here,' he said. 'In fact, I do not think I have ever been in such a comfortable place. The silence and peace all to myself is most wondrous.'

'I am sure being packed into a ship for months at a time cannot provide much silence at all,' she answered, handing him a serving of bread and cheese and pouring out some wine. She wondered where he had been before that ship, what kinds of lodgings he had known in Paris and Antwerp and Lisbon. Surely he was only being polite now; a makeshift pallet on a stone floor could not compare to fine Parisian chambers. Though he had made it cosy for himself. Besides the bed, there was a small milking stool he had found somewhere and the canvas sacking formed into draperies to soften the cold walls. There was also a small block

of wood on the stool along with a fruit knife, it looked as if he was carving something.

‘What are you working on there?’ she asked.

He gave her a sheepish smile and swept the wooden object and its shavings under the edge of a blanket. ‘Tis nothing. A bit of nonsense to pass the time. My carving skills are grown rusty, I fear.’

‘So you are an artist as well as a sailor?’ As well as a spy, mayhap? Her curiosity about him grew every time she saw him, discovered yet another half-hidden facet of this gorgeous man.

He laughed and his eyes crinkled again. It made him look so much younger, so much freer and happier. Alys found she longed to make him smile again, would do anything to see that facet of Juan once more. ‘I am neither artist nor sailor.’

‘Are you not? Then what are you?’

His laughter faded in an instant, faster than that storm blowing up from the sea. His changeableness was startling, almost frightening. He looked down to tear open the loaf of bread. ‘I am nothing at all, I suppose. A wanderer. A seeker.’

A seeker. Alys knew how that felt, even though she could seek only in books. To see, to know—it was tempting indeed. Perhaps that was what had drawn him to the ships, the need for adventure. She poured out more wine, including some for herself. ‘I suppose I could call myself a seeker, as well, though I cannot look for what I desire in the world as you can. I can only read of it. I envy you.’

He sat down beside her, their backs to the fire. Once again,

he studied her closely with those brilliant eyes that seemed to mesmerise and capture, as if he sought out her secrets just as she sought his. He was much too easy to talk to, she knew she would have to carefully guard her words when he looked at her like that. ‘What do you seek in your books?’

Alys hesitated a moment before she spoke. ‘I’m not sure. I suppose I want to know what the world is really like beyond Dunboyton and the only way to find that is in books, and the tales my mother used to tell me. I want to see London, the churches and shops and palaces, but I would also like to know what the sea looks like beyond our bay. I’d like to see Spain, taste real oranges there, feel the sun on my face. And Paris—’ She broke off with a little laugh. ‘It must seem silly to you, who have actually seen all those things.’

He gave her a gentle smile. ‘The world outside this place does hold many beauties,’ he said. ‘But it can also be a cruel and ugly place, and it is lonely to see it by oneself.’ He reached out to softly touch a strand of loose dark hair that had fallen from its pins. Alys held her breath at his nearness, the warmth of his hand so close to her cheek. ‘I can see why your family would want to protect you, to keep that—that sweetness in your eyes.’

Alys swallowed hard and leaned away from his touch. She feared if she stayed there, looking into those eyes of his, she would lean into him instead and kiss him. She ached to know what his lips might feel like on her own and that was one thing she should never try. She turned away to unroll a pile of bandages

and then roll them again. ‘Even Dunboyton can be filled with cruelty, as we saw all too clearly only days ago. If I knew more of the world—of how to shield myself—’ She broke off, overcome by the memory of those poor men on the beach. By how easily Juan could have been one of them.

He laid his hand against her arm, lightly, as if he feared she would break away. She did not. ‘Of course. It was most hideous. I didn’t mean to imply you were some sort of swooning maiden in a tower. You are obviously very brave, as well as kind. See how you help a stranger, at peril to yourself.’

Ah, but Juan was not just any stranger. Alys came to see that, fear that, more and more as she knew him. ‘You said you grew up in an English abbey.’

He looked surprised at the sudden change in topic, but he recovered quickly and smiled. She thought she glimpsed something in his eyes behind that smile, a flash of wariness. ‘So I did. My father’s estate. His grandfather bought it from King Henry.’

‘But you did not stay there.’

‘Nay, I left to study at Cambridge and then went to the Netherlands in a company of soldiers with my godfather.’

He fought for the English in the Netherlands? Alys wondered if her suspicions were right and he was a spy. But for whom? ‘And from there you went to Spain? To find your mother’s family, mayhap?’

He looked down, hiding those eyes from her as he crumbled

the remains of the bread. 'I have never known anything about my Spanish family. My understanding is that I have no living Spanish kin.'

It sounded unbearably sad, a tiny child left without his mother, without even a sense of where she came from or what kind of person she was. At least Alys had known and loved her mother, known something of Spain. 'I am sorry. I am glad I did know my mother and stories about her family. I could imagine what it was like, even here in Ireland, though I will never see it for myself.' She laughed. 'I will probably never even see London, let alone Madrid! You are lucky in your travels.'

He flashed her a smile, but it looked sad. 'I have never felt so fortunate. Always being in a different place is a very lonely life indeed.'

'But an endlessly fascinating one, I am sure.'

'I did say I would tell you some tales of my travels.' He stared up at the painted ceiling for a moment. 'Amsterdam, for instance. It is a city built on water, as Venice is, but the two are very different despite their canals. Venice is old, full of crumbling stones and ancient bridges, of mysterious eyes peering from behind shuttered windows. Amsterdam is clean and orderly, with barges going about their marketing business and tall, painted houses along every walkway. And Portugal...'

'Is it as sunny as everyone says?'

'It might be, but it's hard to know, since the houses are built so close together. Their roofs almost touch on the streets overhead,

blocking the light, until one comes to the river. Then, all the lanes open up on to wide wharfs and ships bound for every port wait at anchor to set sail for the New World, or mayhap for India.'

'India.' Alys sighed, thinking of silks and spices, and warm sunshine. She did have dreams of the royal court at London, which sometimes seemed as distant as India could be, but she thought there were more worlds to be seen than anyone could ever dream of. Amsterdam, Venice, Paris...

'How many adventures you must have had,' she said sadly.

He knelt down beside her next to the fire, watching her closely. He seemed to hide nothing from her now, his eyes clear, speaking of a sadness she could barely fathom.

'Lady Alys,' he said softly. 'There were many reasons I was on that ship, but I am bound by my honour not to speak of them. I only want you to know that you and your father's household have naught to fear from me. I will do nothing to harm you and never would have.'

Alys studied him very closely for a long, tensely silent moment. For that time, they seemed bound close together with shimmering, invisible cords that could not break. Their breath, their very heartbeats, seemed as one. 'I—I think I always did know that. We do live in such a world of secrets, and as I said I know little of the lands beyond Dunboyton. But I do know that the Queen's throne is not a steady one and she needs help from the shadows.'

He suddenly leaned back, away from her, and she glimpsed the

surprise and suspicion on his face. Had she found out something, then? Guessed correctly about his work?

She quickly turned away. He still needed his bandages changed and she mixed up her herbal poultice with trembling hands. ‘How will you find your way to where you are going? After you have recovered your strength, of course.’

‘I will find some way, Lady Alys, never fear. And I will not burden you with my presence here long at all, I promise. I think I am strong enough to move now, thanks to you.’

She glanced back at him and saw that even sitting there talking to her, holding tight to his secrets, had tired him. His skin was pale again, his eyes dark-shadowed. ‘I vow you are not! You need more rest and good food. Here, sit here and let me look at your bandages, then you must have some of this spiced wine. It does strengthen the blood.’ Alys busied herself with those familiar tasks, the herbs and the bandages, to try to force away one desolate thought—Dunboyton would be even lonelier, even more dull, when he was gone.

He sat down on the stool near the fire and went very still as she eased back the laces of his borrowed shirt and unwound the old dressings. He was warm now, but from the fire and not fever, and his skin was so deliciously golden she longed to touch it, to feel the silken heat of him under her fingers. If she closed her eyes, she could picture exactly what it would be like to do, to breathe in the scent of him, and lean closer and closer until...

Nay! She had to focus on her tasks, not on things that were

impossible.

‘Tell me of your days here,’ he said quietly.

Alys smiled. His wound was healing well, no streaks of reddened infection at all. She smoothed on the new poultice, trying not to linger. ‘They are dull indeed, especially compared to what you must have known in your travels. Sometimes, when my father has visitors, I must play hostess to them in the great hall, but that is not often. I go to market in the village, I oversee the laundry and the kitchens, I work in my stillroom...’

‘Where you learned your great knowledge of healing herbs?’

‘My mother taught me. The stillroom is my little sanctuary.’

‘Your sanctuary from what?’

Alys shook her head. ‘I should have not said that. Dunboyton is not so terrible as all that. But sometimes I have to escape the quarrels of the maidservants. They do find an extraordinary number of things to disagree about. Or escape from doing the same things every day. The stillroom is always quiet and it smells lovely...’

‘So that is where you get it.’

She looked up at him, confused, and found him smiling down at her. ‘Get...what?’

‘You smell so lovely, Lady Alys. Like a meadow in the summertime.’ He caught up her loosened strand of hair and lifted it to his nose to smell it. It was as if he inhaled all of her, all she was and knew.

She felt her cheeks turn warm and pulled away. Her hair slid

between his fingers. "Tis lavender and rosewater.'

'Is that what you are using to heal me, too?' he said, gesturing to the herbs in her basket.

Alys was most glad of the change of subject. 'I doubt rosewater would help you, though a rosehip syrup couldn't hurt. This is feverfew and yarrow, to bring down your fever. And I will give you some valerian for your wine for tonight, to help you sleep and purify your blood.'

He was silent for a moment, studying the dried and powdered herbs as she pointed to them. 'So when do you read, if you are so busy gathering your herbs and physicking everyone? When you walk here to the abbey?'

'Sometimes. The abbey is a bit like the stillroom—an escape. It isn't often we get new books here and I like to savour them with no one to interrupt me.'

'And what do you read? Poetry? History?'

Alys bit her lip, afraid he would think her rather—unfeminine. 'Whatever I can find. I read my prayer books, of course, and histories of England. I do love poetry, tales of adventure and romance. When we receive French volumes, they are the best, but that's a rare treat. And I like reading of courtly life. I want to...'

His head tilted as he studied her. 'Want to what?'

'Well, imagine what life is like there, I suppose, at the Queen's court. What it would be like to meet her, serve her, see people from foreign lands. The fashions, the music. My father often

shows me drawings of London and I would like to see it for myself.'

'Will he send you to court as a Maid of Honour, perhaps?'

Alys thought of all the letters that had come to her father, all the messages refusing to summon him to court because of his Spanish wife. She feared a palace life could never be hers. 'Perhaps one day.'

'I am surprised you are not yet married.'

His voice sounded tight when he said the words and she glanced up to see a flash of something like jealousy cross his face. Or perhaps that was her wishful imagining. 'I have not thought about it. I think I would rather go to court for a time before I must go from managing Dunboyton to another household just like it. I am not so very old as that yet.' Though it was true many girls younger than she were wed here in Ireland, she had met no one she would even consider as husband.

She feared no man would measure up to Juan now, either. It was a great pity.

He laughed. 'You are not so old at all, Lady Alys. And I do understand your wishes.'

She thought of all the places he had been, all his adventures. She could not picture him quiet by his own hearth. 'I am sure you do, or surely you would not have gone on such dangerous travels.' Or put himself so near death. She shivered at the thought of how close he had come.

'Royal courts are glittering places indeed,' he said. 'But a lady

such as you should never stay there long. There can be many dangers there.'

Alys laughed. 'I told you, Juan—I am no delicate angel. I am sure that, given time and instruction, I could find my way.'

'I am sure you could do anything you set your mind to, Lady Alys. But I must disagree with one thing. You are most assuredly an angel.'

He reached for her hand, raising it to his lips for a gentle kiss as courtly as any she could imagine receiving in a palace. His lips were soft against her skin, and lingered in a sweet caress. Alys leaned closer, drawn to him as she would be to a fire on a cold night, as if his touch was necessary to her very breath. He looked up at her, his eyes so very, very green...

And suddenly something dropped down from the thatched roof above them, something long and horribly shimmering. It landed on Juan's shoulder and fell to the ground, rearing up to bare sharp, needle-like fangs.

'A snake!' Alys cried. How was that possible? She had never even seen a snake at Dunboyton and here was one right at her feet, about to strike. She felt paralysed, staring down at it, as if time had slowed to a terrible crawl.

But it never struck. Juan tossed a dagger at it, quick as flash of lightning and with unerring aim. The blade sank deep in the viper's neck and it fell to the dirt floor with a hiss.

Juan sucked in a deep breath. 'You did not warn me I shared my accommodations.'

Alys swallowed hard, trying to find her voice. 'I—I have never seen such a thing here before. They say St Patrick drove all snakes away from here.'

'He obviously missed some.'

Alys choked on a laugh, even as she shivered with a sudden fear. Was the snake a terrible sign? A warning?

What evils would befall her, and Dunboyton, if she did not heed it?

* * *

Alys ran up the path towards the gates of Dunboyton, as fast as if even more snakes chased at the hem of her skirts. She was so distracted when she returned to the castle that she didn't notice the servants and her father's soldiers hurrying past, didn't notice the usual clamour and bustle that always surrounded mealtimes. She didn't notice the wind that cut through her cloak as it swept around the courtyard.

All she could see in her mind was Juan, the tenderness of his touch as he reached for her hair, the sweetness of his kiss on her hand. The fierce, quick strength when he killed the snake. The glow of his beautiful eyes.

At the foot of the stone steps that led to the inner door, she did notice something out of place—a fine grey horse that did not belong to the Dunboyton stable. It stood at attention, the centre of a circle of gaping grooms, its silver-and-green velvet trappings shimmering. It was too fine for anyone Alys knew nearby. Could it be that Bingham or even Fitzwilliam had returned, searching

for Juan?

Pushing down her fear, she ran into the house and, after she hid her baskets and cloak in the stillroom, went to find her father in the great hall. She had been worried about him of late, worried about how tired he seemed, but now he was talking with great animation, even a smile, to the man who sat next to him beside the fireplace.

She didn't know the man, but she could tell at a glance he must be someone of some consequence. He was tall and lean, with the erect bearing of a soldier, his thick iron-grey hair brushed back from austere, hawk-like features. He wore travelling clothes of the finest grey wool and velvet, a cloak of green velvet that matched the horse's trappings spread before the fire to dry.

'Oh, Alys, there you are,' her father called. 'A guest has just arrived this afternoon.'

Alys made her way forward as their visitor rose and gave her a bow. Standing, he was even taller, more imposing, even while dressed so simply and sombrely. He seemed to notice everything around him in one quick glance with his grey eyes and Alys was suddenly aware of how windblown and flustered she must look. She pushed the loose lock of hair back into its pins and smoothed her red-wool skirts.

'I am sorry I wasn't here to greet you, sir,' she said. 'I had some tasks in the outbuildings and did not know anyone was expected.'

'Tis of no matter, my lady,' he answered, his tone perfectly civil and soft. 'I did not expect to stop here on my journey. I have

spent a most pleasant hour with Sir William, hearing all about this most intriguing place.'

'Alys, my dear, this is Sir Matthew Morgan, an agent from the Queen's court. We knew each other long ago, when I was at Cambridge, and it's an unexpected pleasure to see him again. Sir Matthew, this is my daughter, Lady Alys.'

The Queen's agent? Would they send someone like this to track down fleeing Spanish sailors? Alys could think of no other reason he would be there and knew she had to warn Juan. But for now, faced with those sombre grey eyes that seemed to see too much, she had to stay calm and polite. To give nothing away.

'I am most pleased to meet you, Sir Matthew. My father often speaks so fondly of his days at Cambridge, and to see a new face at Dunboyton is always most welcome, though I fear you will find us much less than "intriguing". Our days are usually quite dull.' She gestured to one of the servants to bring more wine, and sat down on the cushioned stool next to her father. Their guest resumed his seat across from them, smiling pleasantly. But Alys could not quite shake away that lingering fear.

'Not dull in recent days, I fear,' Sir Matthew said.

'Unfortunately not,' her father answered. 'I much prefer my quiet routine. But Bingham has taken his men off along the coast now, he won't come back here any time soon. We saw only two ships break up in the bay below our cliffs and he dragged away the few survivors.'

'Is it Bingham you seek, then, Sir Matthew?' Alys asked,

pouring out the fresh wine.

‘I would like to speak with him, of course,’ Sir Matthew said. ‘He has much to answer for to the Queen. My task now is to make some sense of what has happened here for an account to Her Majesty. She wishes to be sure any valuable survivors are questioned by her own men and kept here in honourable imprisonment until they can be ransomed back to Spain. They say there were many men of the most noble families in Spain and Portugal aboard these ships. England cannot face such an invasion again, but neither can she be seen to be unmerciful.’

Alys bit her lip, thinking of how she had found Juan, ill and injured, freezing in the reeds. And he was the fortunate one. She couldn’t let him be found now.

‘I am afraid we can be of little help to you here, Matthew,’ her father said. ‘Bingham did not linger here long and, as far as I know, he took only one valuable prisoner, a nobleman named Perez. Many were killed and my men could not stop it, I am ashamed to say.’

Sir Matthew took a slow sip of the wine, his austere face completely unreadable. ‘One of the ships that went down near here was called the Concepción, I believe. A valuable galleon of the Biscay Squadron.’

‘Aye, they did say that was one. The other is yet unknown,’ her father said.

‘I would like to question your household, with your permission,’ Sir Matthew said. ‘Many times people witness

something of great import and do not even realise it. I must be as thorough as I can in my report, not an easy task after time has gone past.'

'Of course,' her father answered, though his expression looked rather reluctant. He had been governor of Dunboyton for many years and Alys knew how protective he was of all his household.

'I shall not be more than a day or two, William, and will go gently,' Sir Matthew said.

'You must stay with us, then,' Alys said. 'I will have the maids air the chamber here above the great hall—I fear it is seldom used. There is a sitting room, too, which you can use for your enquiries.'

'I am most grateful for the hospitality, Lady Alys,' Sir Matthew said. 'I have been sleeping in the saddle for too many days now.'

'Then, over dinner, you must tell me all about the Queen's court,' Alys said with a smile. Perhaps she could lure a titbit of information from him, if she was careful. Something that might tell her what he really sought at Dunboyton. 'I am so eager to hear all about it all! It must be so magical.'

Her father chuckled. 'Alys is quite obsessed with the latest fashions and dances.'

Sir Matthew smiled indulgently. 'I fear I am not a dancing man myself, but I will tell you all I can remember from the royal banquets. I have the feeling, though, that ruffs and sleeves are not quite all that interests you, Lady Alys.'

Alys tried to cover her surprise with a quick smile of her own.

‘If you know anything of new embroidery patterns at all...’

He laughed and held out his goblet for more wine. ‘Now there, I would be of no help at all.’

‘Well, your company is welcome none the less, Sir Matthew,’ Alys said and rose to her feet as slowly as she could. She couldn’t go running away now. ‘If you will excuse me, I shall see to your chamber.’

As she made her way out of the great hall, she heard her father say, ‘My poor daughter. It is a lonely life here at Dunboyton. I have been trying to secure a place for her at court for some time.’

‘She would grace it with her presence, she is quite pretty,’ Sir Matthew answered. ‘And with all your services to the Queen, especially of late, there should be no difficulty. Any who have aided in the defeat of the Armada will be rewarded. Perhaps I could be of some help?’

Alys hurried away before she could hear her father’s answer. A bribe of sorts, to find information from her father? Alys did not quite trust Sir Matthew, despite his polite smiles. She had to make her way back to Juan soon and warn him the Queen’s men were here. He deserved the chance to go to them himself and tell them his tale, if her suspicions of his spying activity were correct.

And if she was wrong about him, about everything—she was in too much trouble for even a position at the Queen’s court to fix.

Chapter Eight

‘There. What do you think?’ Alys asked, balancing carefully on the stool as she tied the painted cloth to the wall of the old

dairy. The bright colours of the scene seemed to make the dim, dank little room a bit more vivid, a bit less dreary. ‘I don’t think anyone could recover their health in such darkness, with nothing pretty to look at.’

Juan laughed. ‘I have recovered my health completely, thanks to my ministering angel. And you have made a cosy little home here in such little time. I’ve never lived anywhere so comfortable.’

Alys studied the room, which she had tidied and feathered with new cushions, blankets and the cloth. It was rather cosy, she thought, and not a bad place to recover a measure of health, but she doubted it was the best place he had ever lived, not after being in so many fine cities. ‘I don’t think that can be true—have you not visited palaces and such?’

‘Oh, nay, I assure you—it is by far the best.’ He took her hand to help her down from the stool and his touch was warm on her skin. She hated to let him go. They sat down together on the newly cushioned stools, near the teetering stacks of books she had loaned him to pass the time. ‘Palaces, though certainly grand in their state rooms, are small, cramped and damp in their accommodations. They are old places, by and large, and cold even in summer. Not to mention crowded and smelly. Here I have this space all to myself and may read and think all day. I can’t remember ever having such luxuries.’

‘I think I should still like to see a palace, even if they’re cold and cramped!’ Alys said. ‘Dunboyton is very old and often dank, and always crowded, but we have no marble pillars and fine

carpets to look at, such as the Queen must possess. There must be amusements there we don't have, as well.'

'There are amusements, true,' Juan said. 'Banquets and dancing almost every night, and in the summer there are often river pageants and picnics, hunts, ceremonies to welcome foreign ambassadors, always music and fine food.'

Alys sighed happily to envision it, a crowd of velvet-clad courtiers dancing under gilded ceilings. 'It would be lovely to see new people sometimes, not always the same faces all the time.'

'You must have gatherings here? Dancing and music?'

'We do dance here, especially at Christmas,' she said. 'But I am sure it can't be nearly as elegant as the courtly dances.'

'Well, shall we compare them?' Juan said. He rose to his feet and offered her his hand as he gave a bow.

Alys laughed at the contrast between his elaborate bow, low over his outstretched leg, and his rough borrowed clothes, their simple surroundings. 'Compare?'

'Aye. You must imagine you are in the Queen's own hall. There is the dais where sits her velvet-and-gilt throne, an embroidered canopy of state over it. And there are the carved panels of the wall, the cabinet piled high with glittering gold-and-silver plate. The musicians are in their gallery above our heads, playing a royal galliard on their lutes and drums. All the courtiers are taking their places. Now, my lady, will you honour me with this dance?'

Alys dipped into a low curtsy. 'I shall, kind sir.'

He took her hand in his and led her to the empty centre of their little room. His touch was warm on her fingers, slightly rough from his work on the ships, and for a moment she imagined they were in a palace. That she was surrounded by velvet and satin gowns, tapestries sparkling with gold thread, the scent of rich, flowery perfumes. That she herself wore bright silk and flashing jewels.

‘Now, imagine the music like this,’ Juan said, and hummed a few bars. ‘One, two, one, two, three, three. Right, left, right, left and jump, landing with one leg ahead of the other. Like so.’

He showed her the patterns slowly at first, then quicker as she followed, his movements as lithe as a mountain lynx. Alys saw it was not so very different from their Dunboyton dances, and she copied him, landing with a little twirl. She hoped against hope he thought she was almost as graceful as those court ladies.

‘Very good,’ he said with a laugh. ‘Are you sure you have not done courtly dances before?’

‘You must be a fine teacher,’ she answered with a teasing smile.

‘We shall see when you dance before the Queen,’ he said, holding her hand up as she made another little twirl. ‘Now, let go of my hand and face me, like this.’

She came to a stop close to him, mere inches from his shoulder. She didn’t dare to look up at him, into those magical eyes. The warmth of his nearness made her breath catch. ‘Now—now what?’

‘I put my hand on your waist, like this,’ he answered hoarsely as his hand landed lightly on her waist. ‘You touch my shoulder and we turn.’

They spun around each other, slowly at first, their steps twining around each other, perfectly matched, as if they had always danced just like that. Alys held on to his strong shoulder, letting him guide her, trusting him.

But then she got ahead of him and his leg tangled in her skirt. She felt herself tip off balance, toppling towards the floor. She caught at his shoulders, her stomach lurching, and he swung her up high in the air.

Alys laughed, her head floating giddily. ‘Is this part of the dance?’

‘It is now! Our own new step.’ He twirled her around and around, as if she was a mere feather, and indeed she felt like one. Like she floated free high above the world.

She laughed helplessly until her sides ached and tears prickled at her eyes. She couldn’t remember ever laughing so much, or ever being with anyone who made her feel as Juan did—free and light, as if she could be herself for a moment. Their strange, rough little refuge seemed changed entirely to a fairyland.

‘Oh, stop, stop!’ she cried, her feelings overwhelming her.

He lowered her slowly to her feet, but it still felt as if the room spun around them. She clung to him, gasping with laughter. She hadn’t felt so free since she was a child!

‘I think we could start a new fashion in dancing,’ he said, his

voice thick with his own laughter.

For an instant, Alys imagined what it might be like to be at court with him. Walking on his arm past those crowds of richly clad people, knowing he was hers and she his. Shyly, she glanced up at him and she was shocked to see he had dropped his careful mask. She glimpsed a stark, naked longing in his eyes, a haunted pain.

Then it was gone, banished behind laughter. He stepped away and bowed again.

Alys fell back a step and rubbed at her arms, suddenly cold again.

‘Thank you for the dance, my lady,’ he said. ‘I think you are quite ready to impress the Queen.’

‘I do doubt it,’ she murmured. She turned away from him, flustered. ‘It—it is cold in here, is it not? I shall bring more blankets when I come back.’

‘I am perfectly comfortable here, Lady Alys,’ he said. ‘You have made it like a true home.’

She glanced around and found that everything did look different than it had only days before, a new place of colour and interest. He made it so; he made the world look different, made her imagine different things, a different life. If only it could be so.

‘I must go now, or I’ll be missed,’ she said. ‘But I will return later.’

He reached for her hand, holding it lightly balanced on his palm as he raised it to his lips. His kiss was warm, soft and light

as a cloud and it made her tremble. ‘Thank you, my fair rescuer,’ he whispered.

Alys couldn’t answer. She spun around and hurried out of the room, catching up her shawl to wrap it tightly around her shoulders. The wind outside was chilly, but she welcomed its cold brush against her face. It helped steady her, helped wash away the clouds of dreams that had dared to come into her mind. Dreams of court life, of romance, of dances and kisses. With Juan.

‘Don’t be so silly,’ she told herself as she hurried along the cliffs towards home. Those moments with Juan were only that, dreams, and soon enough they would be gone. But she knew, deep inside, that she herself would never be quite the same again.

Chapter Nine

Alys tiptoed out of the castle, holding a basket of fresh supplies on her hip. It was growing late, the servants were at their own supper in the kitchens, her father was in his chamber and she had not seen their mysterious guest since their own dinner. It seemed a good time to go to Juan, with the risen moon lighting her path.

She felt a fizzing excitement as she made her way towards the abbey and it made her want to laugh and cry all at the same time. Looking forward to seeing him made her feel alive, in a way she never had before. She dreaded what it would be like when he left again, as he surely would very soon. Dunboyton would be quiet once more, her days filled with her household routines.

Yet she would have memories of him to go over in years to

come. That would be enough. It had to be enough.

Alys paused at the top of the cliff steps to shift her basket. It had grown heavier with the climb. The moon shimmered with a silvery glow on the old stones of the abbey, turning their ruin into something jewel-like and magical. It seemed like a night when fairies might appear, when anything could happen.

For an instant, she thought she heard something, a rustle or a footstep.

She whirled around, her heart pounding. Was it the ghosts of the monks, gathering for their prayers under the moon? Or mayhap a far more corporeal danger. There was no guarantee that all Bingham's men had left the area.

And then there had been the snake. Surely it had not just come out of nowhere, as a sign or a warning. Her old nursemaid would have said it was a demon.

Yet she saw nothing now. She was alone, except for the brush of the wind through the trees.

'Don't be so silly,' she told herself sternly and turned to make her way towards the dairy.

As always when she came to Juan, for a moment she feared he would be gone already, that she would find the old building deserted. She knocked quickly. "Tis me—Alys," she called softly.

The door swung open and Juan stood there. He looked almost as if he had been sleeping, his dark hair tousled, his shirt lacings loosened to reveal a vee of golden skin. A smile broke over his sensual lips, wide and delighted, bright as the sun of a summer

day, and it made her smile, too. 'I feared I wouldn't see you tonight,' he said as he took the basket from her.

'Our evening meal took longer than usual,' she answered. 'My father has had guests for a couple of days now.'

'Guests?' He knelt down to stir the fire, making the flames leap higher. The light gilded his skin, making him seem like a golden god.

To distract herself, Alys started unpacking the food and wine from the basket, laying it out on a blanket as a makeshift table. 'Not to worry, it wasn't Bingham's soldiers returning. I brought you some of the beef and chicken pies that were left, and some of the cook's fine honey cakes. She doesn't make them very often.'

'Then I am most grateful to your guests. I confess I have a terrible sweet tooth.' He popped one of the small cakes into his mouth and grinned, making Alys laugh.

'Have you been too bored today?' Alys asked, pouring herself some wine.

'Not at all. I read some of the fine books you brought and watched the birds among the ruins. I don't think I have ever felt so very peaceful in a long time. Maybe never. There truly is a magic in this place.'

Alys remembered when she would come to the abbey with her mother, climbing over the stones, lying in the meadows with the sun on her face. The way it had sheltered her after she lost her mother. 'It brings me great peace, as well. My nursemaid used to tell me there were fairies living here.'

‘That reminds me, fair Alys—you do owe me a story still. Remember our bargain?’

Alys laughed. ‘I can’t think of any good tales now.’

‘Certainly you can. What of those fairies? Come, entertain me while I eat. I have been alone all day, after all.’ He gave her an exaggerated sad look that made her laugh again.

‘There is a tale I loved as a child,’ she said. ‘It rather reminds me of you.’

‘Of me?’ he said with a laugh.

‘Aye. There are many fairies who live near us and they watch what we do even as we have no awareness of them. Some of them wish evil on humans; some are only mischievous. And some do love us, in their own way, even though their fairy love can destroy us as easily as the illness-causing evil fairies.’

‘Am I an evil fairy, then?’

Alys studied him carefully, his easy smile, his beautiful eyes. ‘Nay. You are the sort who draw unwary mortals closer and closer, until they long for the fairy realm and forget their own homes. Just as the tale my old nurse told me, about a fairy king who sought to wed a human princess. She was betrothed to another prince, but when she saw the fairy king, he mesmerised her with his eyes, and drew her to him, until she vanished to her family and fiancé.’

‘He had magical eyes?’

‘Aye. A beautiful emerald-green, like your own, if I remember the story right.’

Juan gave a sad sigh. ‘But alas, I have found no princess to love me.’

Alys laughed. ‘You just have not looked close enough, I would wager. I am sure princesses from Antwerp to Lisbon have looked into your eyes and been lost. Mayhap your mother was not Spanish after all, but fey folk...’ Emerald-green eyes. Alys smiled as she thought of their rare beauty and felt the deepest sympathy for the lost human princess. They were mesmerising indeed. Just like...

Like the green eyes of the boy who had once saved her and soothed her tears away.

Startled by her own memory, she looked up at Juan and saw there the boy. The green-eyed boy with the floppy dark hair and sweet smile. He had come back to her now, when she had thought never to see him again.

Flustered, she looked away. ‘I should look at your shoulder and make sure it is healing properly before I go,’ she said. ‘Does it give you any pain?’

He rolled his shoulder with seeming ease. ‘Not at all. You have worked miracles. A healing angel.’

Alys felt her cheeks turn warm with a pleased blush. ‘Nay, not I, it’s just the herbs. My mother used to say any wound could heal, if kept clean and dosed with the right herbs. The earth knows what is needed.’

‘Then she was a most wise woman. I’m fortunate she had such a daughter.’

Alys smiled and tentatively eased back his shirt. The linen was warm from his body and when she was so close to him it was hard to remain sensible. She forced herself to concentrate only on his wound, not on the way he smelled, the smooth, hot satin of his skin.

She turned back the bandage and saw that the poultice was doing its work. She reached for the new mixture of herbs from the basket and wound a fresh bandage around his shoulder. The familiar work distracted her from old memories.

‘Do you remember anything at all of your own mother?’ she asked.

‘Very little. She died when I was very young. I think I recall the way her perfume smelled, of summer roses, and her smile, which was sad and sweet. After she was gone, I fear our house was not a home at all. The buildings began crumbling, a wreck just like my father turned into.’

Alys felt a pang of sadness for him as a little boy, left alone to face a cold world. ‘I am sorry. Dunboyton might be dull and chilly, but it is never cruel. The home my mother tried to make is still here.’

‘Is it your home, Alys?’

She thought about that carefully. ‘Not the castle, no. But my memories, the people I love—that makes it home, I suppose.’

‘Will you miss it when you marry and leave?’ he said tightly.

Alys peeked up at him and found he watched her carefully, his bright eyes narrowed. ‘Of course. But thanks to my mother,

I will know how to make a new home. What of you, Juan? Will you find a fine lady to marry and make a new home?’

He gave a bark of laughter. ‘Nay, I would not know how to do that. I have never known a home.’

‘But would you like to?’

He was quiet for a long moment. ‘I think I might. A home—it does sound like a fine thing.’

There was a note of sadness in his voice that made Alys’s heart ache all over again. She rested her hands on his shoulders and leaned against him, longing to bring him comfort. To bring that to herself.

Suddenly, the air between them seemed to change, growing charged as the sky was just before a lightning strike. She could hardly breathe, especially when he reached for her and drew her closer. She had never been so close to a man. How dizzying it was! All her senses tilted and whirled, and all she knew in that moment was him. The way he felt under her touch, so alive and strong and warm.

‘Alys...’ he said hoarsely.

‘I—I am here,’ she whispered.

As if in a hazy dream, far away, yet more immediate and real than anything she had ever known before, his head tilted down towards her and he kissed her.

The brush of his lips was so soft at first, like warm velvet, pressing softly once, twice, as if he expected her to run. But Alys could not have moved away from him. As she moved up to meet

him, his kiss deepened. It became hotter, more urgent—the most urgent, hungry thing she had ever known.

Something deep inside her heart responded to that urgency, a rough excitement that grew and grew until she thought she would burst from it. She moaned, parting her lips to the shocking feel of his tongue seeking entrance, sliding over hers. There was only him, not the world outside, only him and that one perfect moment.

But the outside world insisted on breaking into her dream. A sound like a branch falling against the roof shocked her, making her fall back from him. She jumped to her feet, her whole body shaking. She longed to jump back into his arms, yet she knew she could not. If she did, she might never free herself again.

‘Alys, I am so very sorry...’ he said, his sea-green eyes grown dark.

‘Nay. Please don’t say you are sorry for what happened,’ she gasped. ‘I could not bear it. I just—I must go now.’

She whirled around and ran out of the dairy, hearing him call after her. She couldn’t stop, though. She hurried out of the abbey’s ruins as if the ghosts were indeed running after her. She didn’t feel the cold wind, even though she had left her shawl behind, and she could hear nothing at all but the wild beat of her heart in her ears.

She paused at the kitchen-garden wall to try to catch her breath. If her father was awake, she knew she could not let him see her in such a state. But as she studied the castle, she saw

that no windows were alight, except the one in the guest chamber of the tower. The one where Sir Matthew stayed. She felt as if someone watched from behind those blank windows, someone who sought all her secrets.

Chapter Ten

He was not alone in his hiding place. John could sense it. And whoever lurked outside, it was not Alys. She would have dashed inside, her basket in her arms, and lit up the darkness with her smile.

John's extensive training during his work with Walsingham had sharpened his sixth sense to an exceptional degree. He always knew when he was being followed, being watched. It had served him well in the palace corridors of Madrid and Paris, and the back alleys of Lisbon. Last night, when he was alone after Alys left, he felt the sharp prickle of that sense. He had tried to shrug it away, to attribute it to the darkness of the sky and Alys's tales of ghostly monks and fairies. Now he saw how foolish shrugging it away had been.

John held the hilt of the only weapon he now had, the eating knife, lightly on his palm and stepped silently to the half-open door.

He could feel whoever it was moving closer, like the slow slide of a length of silk over his skin, barely a whisper.

Then he heard it. The merest crackle of a fallen leaf on the old, cracked flagstones. It could have merely been blown by the wind, but he knew it wasn't. He heard another sound, the brush

of wool against the wall, and he lunged out the door, his dagger raised. His other hand shot out towards a shadow looming in the darkness and caught a fistful of that woollen cloak.

The figure inside the cloak was too tall, too muscular to be petite Alys. He shoved the man against the wall, into the ray of light coming out of the door, and pressed his knife to a throat, just at the vulnerable spot beneath the chin. Before he could drive the blade home, the cloak's hood fell back and he saw the man's face.

It was as familiar to him as his own in its sharp, hawk-like angles, in the wry smile that curved the lips. 'I see I taught you well enough, John,' Sir Matthew Morgan said, his smile growing.

John drew back the blade. Shock and happiness shot through him at the sight of his godfather. It had been too long since he had seen anything familiar, had felt close to home again. Whatever home was. 'Sir Matthew! What are you doing here?'

'Whatever do you think I would be doing in the wilds of Ireland? Looking for you, of course.'

Looking for him? He had always known Matthew was good at his job, but perhaps now he had some second sight. Or perhaps the Queen's astrologer, John Dee, had led him. 'How did you find me?'

Matthew shrugged. 'Perhaps we would be more comfortable talking inside?'

John nodded and led the way back into his little sanctuary. Matthew took it in with a flicker of a glance. 'You have found

a fine nest. I suppose the pretty Lady Alys made it so, since I remember the squalor of your Cambridge lodgings. You never had a talent for housekeeping.'

At the mention of Alys, John turned wary, his senses heightened in that prickling, warning way again. He closed the door softly behind them and leaned against it with his arms crossed. No one could be permitted to harm Alys, even his godfather, even if she was, technically speaking, a traitor to the crown. She had been moved by humanity alone to save his life and he would die to keep her from being punished for it. 'Is that how you found me? Through her?'

'In a way, though I must say she was remarkably careful for a lady with no experience as an intelligencer. She made sure she was followed by no servants or soldiers from the castle and gave no clue even to her father. Perhaps Walsingham could recruit her?'

John shook his head in anger. His gentle Alys, subjected to the things he had seen and done in Walsingham's service? He regretted nothing; it had been done to protect the Queen and the peace of England. But Alys could never know those horrors. 'Don't you dare approach her, Sir Matthew. She may be careful, but she is also an innocent.'

Matthew glanced at John, his brow raised in an expression of curiosity. 'Indeed? 'Tis a pity. We could use her. We have few men here in this part of the world. Even spies can't stomach it.'

'You must have a few, though, to have found me so quickly.'

Matthew turned to the fire, his back to John as he held his hands closer to the flames. 'We have been carefully tracking all the Armada ships that escaped from Gravelines. We heard the Concepción had been blown this way in the storm and I set off as soon as I heard. The Queen's pinnaces are much faster and safer than your clumsy Spanish galleons. I prayed you had survived.'

'And so I did. But how did you know I was here? Bingham's soldiers were killing anyone they could find on sight.'

'Surely you must know I have my own men with Bingham? They have sharp eyes and knew the right questions to ask, even in the midst of such chaos. They had not seen you. And I took shelter at Dunboyton. Sir William Drury is an old friend of mine and a smart man. I hoped he could help in some way.'

'So you found Alys there.'

'Alys, is it? Aye, so I did. Sir William had no knowledge of you, nor of any Englishman seeking shelter, and I could tell he was not lying. His daughter, on the other hand...'

'You did not question her, did you?' John asked sharply, that cold fear returning.

Matthew frowned. 'Certainly not. As I said, for a civilian and a sheltered lady she was not a bad liar. She hid her fears well enough and was quite gracious. But she was not quite good enough. I could tell she was hiding something and when I saw her slip out of the castle with a rather large basket, I was sure of it. I followed her, simple as that.'

'How did you know she was coming to me?'

‘I did not, of course. It could have been anyone she was helping, but I had a sense.’ A smile flickered on his face. ‘I do know the effect you have on fair ladies, John. It has served you well with the French mademoiselles and Spanish doñas, I trust.’

John shook his head. Aye, he had done things in the past he was not proud of, flirted with ladies of every age and station, coaxed secrets from them. But Alys—she was different. Different from every other lady he had ever known, with her sweetness and her laughter, even with her sensible help when he was injured. Aye, Alys was different. ‘I did not seduce her into helping me, Sir Matthew. She has a good, kind heart and it was wounded seeing Bingham’s brutality.’

For an instant, Matthew looked surprised. ‘I am sure she was.’ That unguarded expression was gone as fast as it was there, hidden behind that small smile. ‘I knew Sir William when we were young and I remember Elena Lorca, who became Elena Drury. She was a gentle beauty as well and Sir William thought her love worthy of exile from court. Her daughter looks much like her.’

‘Are you saying you think I am considering staying here?’ John asked. He had not thought of such a thing before, but now that it had occurred to him it seemed—alluring. A home, a hearth of his own, with a lady like Alys by his side. No more wandering, no more lies.

It was alluring indeed, but he knew it could never be. His past made him unworthy of someone like Alys and his duty was to

his work still. He shook away the brief image of a life of his own and faced his godfather again with a scowl.

Matthew shrugged. 'The life of an intelligencer is a difficult one, even as necessary as it is, and most men do not last in it as many years as I have. It can grow most wearisome.'

John nodded. Wearisome indeed. He had craved adventure, sought it, and it had come to him in spades. Yet he had not done what he wanted the most—to retrieve the honour of his family name from the depths his father had dragged it to, to restore Huntleyburg. He still had much work to do and sweet Alys could be no part of it.

'I have been injured, true,' John said. 'But I am regaining my health. I still have services I can perform for the Queen. And Alys—she deserves better than I could give her. She deserves a husband with a calm disposition and a fine estate.'

Matthew studied him for a long, tense moment and finally nodded. 'As you say, there is still much you can do for Queen Elizabeth, for England. You have already done far more than even I could have imagined. As for Lady Alys...'

'She must not be harmed!'

'Never. She shall be rewarded in some way for her bravery in saving your life, I shall see to that. Perhaps a rich marriage? Some titled gentleman from the court?' Matthew smiled at John's involuntary scoffing sound. 'You do not like that idea, I see, John. Well, we shall think of something for her later. For now, we must be gone. We sail on the dawn tide.'

‘So soon?’ John asked, startled.

‘We must return to the Queen as soon as possible. We have much to tell her of what has happened here and the danger from Spain has not passed. They say some of the ships have regrouped at Ostend and may yet connect with Parma’s army. And there are rumours that some of the English Catholic exiles have already secretly reached England’s shores. I do not want Sir William or any of the men here to know such things. Also, most importantly, the spy who was in contact with Peter de Vargas is still at the Queen’s court and we do not know who it is. They must be found and you are the only one who can do it.’

‘But I must thank Alys for all she has done. She...’ She had done everything. She had summoned him back to life, both his body and soul, when he had been on the edge of surrendering it. She was a flash of light and joy in darkness. How could he give that up now, now that he had seen what could be? Yet he knew he had to. For her sake. Especially if Peter’s spy was still at court. Matthew was right—the danger was not past. It was never past.

Matthew came to John and laid his hands gently on his shoulders, looking into his eyes most solemnly. ‘I know how it is. I know the longings in a lonely heart. But you have chosen a different path in life, a dark and rocky one, and you must see it to its close. Lady Alys is gentle and beautiful, as her mother was. Do you not want to spare her such dangers?’

‘Of course I do.’ John was sure of that. He did care about Alys too much, owed her too much, to expose her to the dangers of

his own life. 'Very well.'

Matthew nodded. 'I do know how it feels. I had to make such choices myself, in my youth, and I watched the lady I loved have a better life for it. Lady Alys will be well, I promise you.'

Lady Alys would be well. John nodded, but he could not answer. His throat was tight with all the feelings his heart dared not admit.

'Now, we must be going,' Matthew said briskly. He re-tied his cloak and turned for the door.

John quickly gathered up his few possessions. He knew well that this was for the best, that it was necessary, but still he felt he had to say farewell to Alys in some way, to let her know she would never be forgotten by him. As he piled his shirts into a bundle, he saw the block of wood he had been carving to pass the hours, an almost completed angel with delicate wings and a soft smile. He had thought of Alys as he carved it, for he would always think of her as his angel.

As Matthew put out the fire, John carefully placed the angel where Alys would find her. He hoped she saw the message of it. The dying light of the flames caught on the ring he always wore, the ring carved with arms of his mother's families, and impulsively he tugged it off his finger and left it caught on the tip of the angel's wing. The ring had helped keep him safe on his travels; now he hoped it would do the same for Alys.

As he closed the door behind him, John paused for one glance back. He had never been sorry to leave a place before. Temporary

lodgings in Antwerp or Paris or Lisbon never felt like home and he was always glad to see the last of them, to go on to the next adventure. But this place, this makeshift dairy chamber...

He knew he would always remember it. The sweetness he had known for those few moments with Alys, the forgetfulness he found in her kiss, the laughter, he had never known such things before. He hoped with all he had that somehow she would know the great gift she had given him, that she would remember him for the man he wished he could be, not the wandering deceiver he was.

But Matthew was right. Alys was too good for the life he led, the man he had to be. She had been a gift to him, one he had to let go of now for her own happiness.

He followed Matthew to the cliff steps. He glimpsed a ship below, a small, sleek pinnacle riding the waves, waiting to shoot out of the bay and into the sea beyond. He glanced back at the castle and saw a few lights at the windows, pinpricks in the pre-dawn gloom. And beyond...

In the sky beyond there was a strange, pinkish glow. A suspicious light.

Matthew looked back as if to see that John still followed and his expression shifted as he, too, glimpsed the glow in the sky. His mouth hardened.

‘Not everyone here, it seems, is as loyal as William Drury and his daughter,’ Matthew said.

John remembered Bingham, the killing in the name of the

Queen. He remembered other towns in the Low Countries and Portugal, burned for harbouring fugitives, for keeping secrets. ‘What have you done here?’

‘What you yourself have done many times, John. What we all must do to keep Queen Elizabeth safe. That village was disloyal. Now, we must go or we shall miss the tide.’

John turned to run back to the castle, to shout the warnings, but Matthew seized his arm in a hard grasp. ‘Remember your vows, your work, John. If you do not leave with me now, it shall go worse for everyone here. If it is thought Lady Alys helped a suspected Spanish spy, what will happen to her? Come now. The Queen is waiting.’

John stared at his godfather for a long moment and in those cold grey eyes he saw his own soul, his own past. His own future. It was a bleak one, but it was the one he had chosen. He had to protect Alys now by leaving her behind. He nodded and followed Matthew to the ship, not looking back again.

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