MILLS & BOON

Lord Sebastian's Wife

Katy Cooper

Vintage Historical

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“I do not hate you,” he said.

“Liar,” she said softly. Her mouth trembled as though she might start crying, but her eyes were cold, colder than he had ever seen them. Their chill bit through him.

“I do not hate you,” he said again. He was angry with her, angrier than he had yet been, and he did not know why. “I despise you.”

The words hung in the air—he could not snatch them back. She caught her breath and then nodded. “So.” She opened her hand, and rose petals fell to the ground like snow. “We are good company after all. You cannot despise me as much as I despise myself.”

Without curtsying, without asking for leave, she turned and walked away.

“Beatrice.” He had not meant to say he despised her. That was too simple a name for what he felt…!

Praise for Katy Cooper's first book

PRINCE OF HEARTS

"With a rare magic and grace, Katy Cooper creates a vivid world of history and passion that readers are bound to adore. An unforgettable debut!"

—bestselling author Miranda Jarrett

"This is a powerful, captivating novel…. Ms. Cooper carves out a slice of history, mixes it with matters of the heart, and emerges triumphant."

—Rendezvous

Lord Sebastian's Wife
Katy Cooper

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To the Hussies, for prayers, hugs, CBs, warmth, generosity and a place to hide when it gets really rough out there.

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Chapter One

London

July 1521

W hen Sebastian Benbury stepped onto the water stairs at the Earl of Wednesfield's London residence and began walking through the garden toward the riverside door, there was nothing about Coleville House to indicate that disaster lurked within its walls.

Golden in the July sunlight, the house appeared as it always had, its hundred windows glittering, its roofs reaching heavenward. As he walked the winding path through knots of herbs and flowers, as he crossed the threshold into a screens passage that was blind-dark after the brilliant light outside, Sebastian had no sense that his life was about to be irrevocably changed.

He paused in the passage, blinking his eyes to clear his vision. Out of the darkness an usher murmured, asking him if he wished to be announced. Sebastian shook his head and waved the usher away. Since giving up his post at Court, he had been a guest here, enjoying the Earl of Wednesfield's gracious hospitality. He did not need to be announced.

As Sebastian's vision cleared, a man spoke in the hall. "Why are you in black, Bea?"

The voice was strange yet recognition tickled on the edges of

Sebastian's awareness, as if he knew the speaker. But how? He did not know anyone close enough to Beatrice Coleville Manners to call her by her pet name who was not also aware that she had recently been widowed.

"My husband died a fortnight ago. God rest his soul," Beatrice replied in her low, soft voice. The sound of it awoke tangled emotions in Sebastian's chest, pain and anger so mixed that he did not know how to separate them. Instead he swallowed them both, forcing them down beyond awareness with the skill of practice.

In the hall, there was a splatter, as if someone had spilled wine on the flagstone floor. The stranger said, "Then Sebastian Benbury is dead."

Dead? Who was this stranger who assumed that if Beatrice was a widow, Sebastian must be the husband she had lost? Crossing himself against the ill chance raised by the stranger's remark, Sebastian walked through the gap in the screens that led to the hall. "I am alive as anyone in this room. Who says I am dead?"

His glance flicked over Beatrice's sister, Cecilia, and the strange man and woman at her side before going to Beatrice, cool and distant in her widow's black. Beatrice, whom he had once loved.

"John does," Cecilia said.

Sebastian brought his gaze back to the strange man. His heart began to pound as if his body recognized the nearly familiar stranger before his eyes did, and then his eyes knew. The stranger

was Beatrice's brother, John Coleville. He had left England five years ago, so long ago that he could not know of Beatrice's marriage to Thomas Manners. That was why he had made the mistake about Beatrice's late husband.

John is home. The impact of it struck him all at once and delighted laughter bubbled up, drowning everything but joy in its flood. John had been companion, friend, everything Sebastian had imagined a brother would be. Sebastian rushed forward to embrace him, to confirm the truth of this homecoming with the certainty of touch.

"Thank God! Thank God for it!" he cried, the words hardly serving to convey his pleasure.

His happiness was so intense that it took him a moment to realize that John was neither laughing nor returning his embrace. Sebastian's laughter died. He loosened his grip.

"You do not seem happy to see me, my friend. What ails you?"

"I am glad, more glad than you can know, to see you," John said grimly, reaching up to grasp Sebastian's wrists.

"You look it," Sebastian said, and pulled free of John's hands. "It cannot be grief for poor Thomas Manners that makes you look so black. You never knew the man. Come, tell me, tell us all. Why the long face?"

"Because Bea says she is the widow of a man she cannot have married."

Sebastian stared at him, the back of his neck prickling as if at the rumor of catastrophe. "I witnessed their marriage and Ceci

attended her. Do you tell us we were not there, that it was all a dream?"

"No. I am sure there was a wedding. I am telling you that the marriage was invalid."

"Invalid? On what grounds?"

"That she was promised to another man," John said. "Promised in a binding betrothal."

"Another man?" he asked, disbelieving. His heart pounded, loud in his ears, hard against his breastbone. He had thought he knew the worst Beatrice could do. His sense of approaching disaster deepened. "Are you saying she has known yet another man?"

"Another man? What are you babbling about?" John asked, frowning, and shook his head. "She is betrothed to you, Sebastian."

"To me?" The pounding of his heart was swallowed by a vast silence, a numbed stillness.

Beatrice cried, "Are you mad? We are no more betrothed than…than… We are not betrothed. Do you think I could make such a mistake?"

"Or I?" Sebastian demanded. "This is not funny, John."

"It is not jest, Sebastian, and I do not think it funny. Do you not remember that Twelfth Night when you and your family joined us at Wednesfield? I filched a ewer of mead and the three of us drank it in the old tower. You and Beatrice promised to marry when you were grown and then we all laughed and drank some

more."

"Oh, blessed Virgin," Beatrice said, closing her eyes.

"I do not re—" But he did remember, no matter how he tried to forget. Details he had wanted to bury rose up from the depths of his mind. Words, the words of a vow… "Yes, now I do! What foolishness is this? We made no promises that bound." Promises to break, yes, not promises to bind.

"That is not what I remember, Sebastian. Think. Think what you said, the words you used. The promises you made bind you."

Beatrice clenched her hands into fists as if she might batter her way out of this. "You are no churchman. How can you know for certain?"

In a distant corner of his mind Sebastian wondered if perhaps he slept and John's appalling announcement was a part of a nightmare from which he would soon awaken. Surely this madness was the stuff of dreams. Otherwise his life had been disordered beyond recognition in the space of five minutes.

"Do you not remember? You promised to have Sebastian as your husband and he promised to have you as his wife. Both of you promised without conditions. You made a binding marriage between you," John said. "I have lived among churchmen for the last three years, Bea. Canon law fills the air in Rome. A man who has ears to hear cannot help learning a little."

Sebastian knew a little canon law, as well. Enough, he had thought, to keep himself from doing just what John claimed they had done. "We did not lie together. It cannot be binding."

“That does not matter in this case. If you never lie with her, she will still be your wife before God,” John said gently.

“I cannot believe this,” Beatrice said. She went to sit on one of the benches pushed against the wall and leaned her head back, her hands lying slack on her lap. For a moment Sebastian wanted to go sit beside her, companions in calamity. But he could not, not when she had betrayed him, not when she had abandoned honor as easily and thoughtlessly as she might discard a gown that no longer fit.

He had to do something, anything, to avert this disaster.

“I am betrothed to Cecilia,” he said.

“You cannot be,” John said.

At the same moment Cecilia said, “Do not lie, Sebastian. It will only confuse matters.”

“We can pretend it never happened. If no one knows…”

His voice slowed. Truth was sinking into him, the awareness that he would not awaken from this nightmare slowly breaking over him. No matter how he might wish it otherwise, his betrothal to Beatrice was real, as unbreakable and real as marriage. He could behave like a fool and a child, and fight it for a time, but to what end? Damage to his soul, damage to his honor, and marriage to Beatrice at the end of it anyway.

But, God help him, he wished it were not true.

“You will know, Sebastian. And God will know. Can you take another woman to wife, knowing you make a concubine of her? And if you do not marry, who will your heirs be?” John asked.

“How do I get out of this?” Beatrice asked, her voice flat, bled of expression.

Sebastian glanced at her. Against the black of her hood and bodice, her pallor was stark, the color leached even from her down-turned mouth. She looked weary and sad, a woman alone despite the company of her kinsmen. Pity moved in him, pity she did not deserve, pity he refused to feel. Balling his hands into fists, he turned away and walked to the opposite side of the room. He leaned against the wall and pressed his forehead against its cool stone. Behind him, the others continued as if he were still in their midst, while slowly he tried to absorb the shocks of the afternoon— John’s unexpected homecoming, his disastrous announcement.

“Ceci, why do they fight this? What has happened while I have been away?” John asked.

“I do not know, John. I do not now nor have I ever understood why they are at odds.”

“It avails you nothing to do this!” Beatrice cried. “You will do most good by telling me how I may escape!”

“There is no way. You are married to Sebastian,” John said.

“If I deny it? What then, O brother?”

“Sebastian can sue you to live with him.”

“And how many witnesses will he need? Is one enough? And will you oppose me in this, my brother?” The fraying edge of Beatrice’s temper rang clearly in the sharpness of her tone.

“It takes two witnesses to make a case, but if you marry

another man, you will be committing bigamy and your children will be bastards," John said.

"I do not intend to marry again. Once was enough to last me a lifetime."

"Bea, you know you are married," Cecilia said.

"There are no witnesses!"

"I will be a witness to your admission of the promise," Cecilia said, her voice firm. "With John, that is two witnesses."

"A pox on you!" Beatrice's voice caught on the last word.

Sebastian lifted his head. The moment had come for him to put an end to her bootless protests. He and Beatrice must face what they had done—it was past time to honor a promise that should not have been forgotten in the first place. This marriage was calamitous, but they had sown its seeds themselves. Who better to reap the bitter crop? He turned and crossed the hall, joining them by the hearth once more. He faced Beatrice, forced himself to confront her beauty, to meet her clear blue eyes steadily and to hold his simmering anger in check.

"I cannot marry another woman, knowing the marriage is a lie. I cannot let her risk her life to bear me a son, knowing that son is a bastard. You are my wife, as much as I wish it otherwise, Beatrice, and if you have a particle of honor left, you will come live with me as my wife."

"I will not. I will not be wife to a man who scorns me as you do," Beatrice said, glaring at him as if this garboil was entirely his fault, as if she had not made the same witless promises as he.

His anger flared. “I do not desire to be married to a woman so stupid with pride she will ruin herself rather than yield, but unfortunately, I am betrothed to one and have no choice. In law, Beatrice, you are already my wife and as such you owe me obedience.”

“How dare you!”

John went to sit beside her and laid a hand over hers. “Beatrice, be sensible. You cannot win, not if Ceci and I both bear witness against you. Nor can you wish to spend the rest of your life in limbo, neither wife nor widow nor maid. I do not know what has happened to estrange you from Sebastian nor do I understand why the pair of you are behaving as if we were all back in the nursery, but surely neither of you is foolish enough to ruin your lives.”

Beatrice turned her head and stared at John for a long moment, her free hand gripping the front of the bench with such force her knuckles whitened. “This means I am trapped.”

“We both are,” Sebastian said. Stubborn jade, could she not see that?

“Yes, you are,” John said gently, “but only so long as you both see it so.”

Beatrice slipped her hand free of John’s and pressed it to her temple. “My head aches. I cannot listen to another moment of this. You will please excuse me.” She stood, sketched a stiff curtsy at Sebastian, and left the hall without a backward glance.

Sebastian watched her go, his hands still fisted. Then he

turned on John, resentment clenching into a hard knot in the middle of his chest, impossible to swallow or ignore. If John had remained in exile, painting pictures like a merchant's son… "Why did you come back now? Why could you not stay in Rome?"

"I wanted to come home." John's voice was soft. He nodded toward his companion. "I wanted to bring Lucia, my wife, home."

Sebastian's face burned. If all his dreams and hopes were in ruins now, it was not because John had come home. It was because he had once been a fool for love.

John went on, his voice hard. "I will not apologize for this, Sebastian. I had no way to know you and Beatrice were not married and raising a handful of yellow-headed babies."

"I know, I know. Forgive me, I beg of you." He sighed and put his cap on. "What an accursed garboil this is. I must go to my lawyer and I must find your father. There are contracts to amend."

He crossed the hall to Cecilia. "Ceci, I am sorry. What will become of you now?" He had thought to marry her, clever and calm. Unlike her sister, she had been a sensible choice.

She took his hand and squeezed it. "Dear Sebastian, do not worry about me. All will be well."

"I cannot help worrying," he said. "I have loved you for a long time."

"As I love you and my sister. If you wish to do anything for me, mend this rift with Beatrice."

“I cannot,” he said, his voice low as if to conceal what he admitted. “I cannot help thinking of her with Conyers and then I am so angry I cannot see anything.”

Her brows quirked together over her short nose. “She does not love him, Sebastian.”

“Then it is worse than I thought.” He sighed. “Leave it be, Ceci. You cannot make it right.” He kissed her forehead, and then stepped beyond her and embraced John. “I am glad you are home, John. I could wish you had not had such news to bring with you, but I am glad you came before Ceci was utterly ruined. Your parents have kindly given me leave to stay here while I am in London, so I shall see you again later.” He bowed to John’s wife, still silent at his side, then turned and left the hall, walking behind the screen without a backward glance.

The ordeal of facing the earl awaited.

Only the busk in her pair-of-bodies kept Beatrice from hunching over to soothe the pain slashing across her abdomen. This could not be happening to her, not after everything else.

Pushing away from her bedchamber door, she crossed the room to kneel at the prie-dieu against the far wall. What shall I pray for? Shall I pray for mercy, for aid? Or shall I pray for answers, answers that will not come?

She could find no peace, no matter where she turned. Instead she found despair, as if her heart were under a cold, steady rain. Despair was a sin and she was weary of sin. Would it never end? Was this awful grayness clouding her heart never to be lifted,

even if she did all her duty? She gripped the railing of the prie-dieu and leaned her forehead against her knotted hands.

She feared that she would spend her life struggling to do right, only to find that she had failed despite all her effort. She was weary, so tired of fighting for peace and a clean heart that sometimes she half wished the sweating sickness would swoop down and carry her away. But her wish was not much better than self-destruction, blackening her soul with yet another sin.

And now this. Trapped in another marriage, once more at the mercy of a man who would have none. Were her sins so terrible they warranted such punishment? She had done penance for the sins of the past year. Surely that had been enough…

Someone tapped on the door and opened it, the hinges creaking.

"Leave me be," Beatrice said without looking to see who it was. She could not bear company, did not have the strength to pretend a calm she did not feel.

"It is I, Beatrice," Cecilia said.

Beatrice lifted her head and stared at her across the width of the room. Cecilia gasped at whatever she saw in Beatrice's face, slipping into the room and closing the door behind her.

"I do not want your pity," Beatrice said. Her voice, in the quiet room, was harsh and unwelcoming. Please do not go, do not leave me. "I said, leave me be. Do as I bid you."

"I shall not." Cecilia sat down on the chest at the end of the bed and folded her hands in her lap.

How obstinate they were as a family, how determined, each of them, to have his or her will. Beatrice did not have the strength to fight her sister. Marriage to Manners had stripped her of stubbornness, leaving her as passive as a feeble-minded nun.

"I am trying to pray," she said.

"Only trying?"

Beatrice's breath caught. "I cannot pray if you watch me."

"I worry about you," Cecilia said.

"Do not. There is no need." I do not deserve it.

"I do not like to see you and Sebastian at such odds. And now that you are married—"

"Do not speak of it!" She could not talk about it, not to anyone. "It would be better for everyone if he married you—"

"Not for me, Beatrice, never for me," Cecilia said, stiffening. "Do not think that."

"Why not? You have always been good friends, much at ease with one another. You would deal well together and both of you could do worse." It was easier to talk of Cecilia's problems and heart than of her own.

"I cannot marry Sebastian. I was wrong to think I could." Cecilia clamped her mouth shut.

What now? Beatrice rubbed the shelf. The kneeler had no cushion and was hard even through the layers of her petticoats. The window above the prie-dieu was open to the July afternoon. Below, in the garden, men murmured together and then laughed. The sound was loud in the silence between her and Cecilia and

made her think of gardens and gardeners. Would Sebastian let her tend his gardens, or would he forbid it, as Thomas had done? I will not think of it. She dared not hope.

She opened her mouth to ask Cecilia to leave. “Do you ever pray and think God and the saints are not listening?” Tears came out of nowhere and filled her eyes; her heart felt as though the words had been torn out of it.

“No,” Cecilia whispered. “Do you feel so alone?”

“Yes.” Beatrice put her head down on her hands and wept.

Her sister was beside her in a moment, strong arms wrapped tightly around her as if she would hold all the demons at bay.

“Hush, my honey, hush. Hush, dearling.”

Beatrice rested against her, sobs shaking her. She was weary of this, as well, the tears that brought no relief. Finally the weeping subsided, leaving her with swollen eyes and an aching head.

“I have no more strength left, Ceci,” she murmured. “I have no strength to be married.”

“You will not need strength, lovedy,” Cecilia replied, rubbing Beatrice’s back with long, firm strokes. “Sebastian will care for you.”

If only she could believe that. He had never harmed her, but she had never been in his power before. I cannot endure any more. It will kill me.

“Will he?” she mumbled. “He hates me.”

“He loves you,” Cecilia said. “Let me unlace you and then you

lie down and rest. Anyone who thinks God does not listen when she prays is too weary to think clearly. You will be better for sleep, I promise you."

Beatrice straightened, laughing without amusement. "But I do not sleep, Ceci. I have not slept in years."

Cecilia stiffened, as if Beatrice had surprised her, then rose her feet. She took Beatrice's hands and pulled her up. "That does not mean you will not sleep now. Shall I play for you? It will only take a moment to bring my lute from the solar."

"No. I thank you, no. I shall lie down, as you bid me, but only if you leave me in peace."

Cecilia frowned. "Are you certain of this?"

"Yes. Grant me peace, I beg of you."

"Very well. I do not like it, but if that is what you want." She still frowned, eyes sharp with worry.

"It is. Go, Ceci. Please."

After unlacing Beatrice, Ceci left. Beatrice lifted the edge of her bodice and untied her busk lace. She pulled the busk out and laid it beside her on the bed. It was a good one, made of ivory and carved with saints and animals, flowers and plants. Thomas had given it to her; she hated it.

She rolled away from it and curled herself into a ball, letting the tears fall once more.

Chapter Two

T he Earl and Countess of Wednesfield had left for Coleville House by the time Sebastian reached Westminster. Cursing his luck under his breath, he dropped a few coins into the usher's outstretched hand and returned to the water stairs. Please God the tide had not turned. Otherwise he would be trapped here for an hour or more, if not all night.

"My lord is in a great hurry," his gentleman, Ned, observed.

"Hold your tongue and find me a boatman," Sebastian said, frowning at him. The last thing he wanted or needed was a clack-tongued fool yammering in his ear.

Muttering, Ned shoved his way through the crowd at the bottom of the stairs. He disappeared for a moment and then reappeared, bounding like hound to Sebastian's side. "I have found the man, my lord. But it will cost you."

"Everything costs me," Sebastian said. "Lead on."

The tide was with them, lending speed to the return journey. Pulling his short gown around him, Sebastian slouched in his end of the boat, listening with half an ear to the boatman's shouts and curses, and to the abuse offered in reply. He hated London —hated the river, hated Court, hated the filthy, crowded streets. With the whole of his soul, he wanted to be home at Benbury, quietly filling his empty coffers by enlarging his flocks of sheep. But it was not the latent wealth of Benbury's fields he longed for;

it was for the house itself, set behind its low walls, girdled by green gardens, a place of peace.

He scowled and the boatman rowed harder. There had never been peace where Beatrice was; Benbury would not be the sanctuary he had longed for.

The trip back to Coleville House was shorter than the trip away, and not only because he had been driven by the tide. He dreaded the coming interview with Lord Wednesfield, knowing that the earl would be displeased at the change in plans—if he was not outright angry. And what to tell him? That his elder daughter, in defiance of everything she had been taught, had made a marriage for herself the instant she crossed the threshold into womanhood? The earl would knock the teeth out of Sebastian's head for his presumption. And Sebastian would deserve it.

The boat pulled up at the landing by Coleville House. Climbing out, Sebastian mounted the steps that led into the garden, his thoughts still turning like a whirligig. Could he not simply say he preferred Beatrice to Cecilia? It had once been true enough.

The slap of Ned's shoes on the stone-flagged path disrupted Sebastian's thoughts. "He took all my money, my lord. I shall need more," Ned said at his shoulder.

He did not turn to look at Ned. "Not one penny more. You will not need it at Benbury."

"Benbury, my lord? We are leaving London?"

“Tomorrow or the day after. Friday at the latest. You will need to make the arrangements.”

“Aye, my lord. As you wish.”

In the hall, the steward told Sebastian that the earl and countess had withdrawn to the solar above when they returned to Coleville House. Brushing off the man’s offer to announce him, Sebastian crossed the hall to the stairs behind the dais that led to the solar. Though he dreaded the coming interview with the earl, he dreaded waiting for it more. He took the stairs two at a time. Once he set things in motion, they would be beyond his power to stop.

In the solar, the earl and countess sat side by side in the heavy chairs set beside open windows. The countess was busy with stitchery while the earl sat with his chin sunk on his breast and his hands folded on his stomach, apparently lost in thought and far from the room.

Sebastian bowed and said, “My lord, I should like to speak to you. For your ears alone.”

The earl lifted his head and looked at Sebastian, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. His stare lasted only a moment, but it was long enough to make Sebastian feel as if the old man had seen into the dark depths of his soul. He repressed the urge to look away, the stronger urge to squirm like a boy. At the edge of his vision, the countess set down her needlework and frowned at him.

“Do you wish this audience now?” the earl asked, his hands still folded over his stomach.

Sebastian swallowed. “Yes, my lord, an it please you.”

“This is in aid of what?”

“My betrothal to your daughter.”

The earl’s eyes opened at that, his face smoothing into the mask of amiable neutrality that he wore at Court. Did he suspect what was afoot? How could he? Yet he clearly thought something was odd.

“Walk with me.” The earl stood and put his hand on Sebastian’s shoulder, as full of vigor as he had been full of lassitude only a moment before. His fingers gripped Sebastian, the pressure uncomfortable through the thick layers of gown, doublet and shirt. Without the padding those fingers would have bruised him. Was the earl reminding him not to displease him? Or was this his ordinary response to dread? Sebastian had known the earl his whole life, but he could not answer his own questions.

He waited to speak until they were in the garden, filled to the tops of its walls with the long golden light of late afternoon. The gray shadows of oncoming dusk gathered softly under the plants that stood in solitary knots. None too soon, the endless day moved toward its close.

“What of your betrothal to my daughter?” the earl asked, releasing his shoulder.

Sebastian turned to face him. “I wish to marry your daughter Beatrice, not your daughter Cecilia.”

The earl’s brows lifted. “What is this?”

“I prefer Beatrice to Cecilia. Now that she is a widow, I am

free to follow that preference."

Without so much as a flicker of change in his expression, the earl clouted Sebastian in the ear. Sebastian staggered, more from surprise than from the strength of the blow, though it still made his head ring.

"My lord?"

"That is for taking me for a fool."

Sebastian rubbed his ear. "I do not understand, my lord."

The earl cuffed him again, the harder blow knocking Sebastian back a step. Anger shot him forward, but he caught himself before he raised a hand against Wednesfield. Not only did the earl outrank him, but he had acted as a father to Sebastian for many years. He had earned the right to chastise Sebastian, even if it was with his hands.

"My lord! I have not deserved this."

"For lying to me, you deserve it. For telling me stupid lies, you deserve it more," the earl said, his mouth hard. "Now, tell me the truth and have done with this foolishness."

He should have known he would not escape without confessing the true story of the betrothal. "I beg of you, my lord, do not strike me again until you have heard the whole of it."

The earl nodded, his mouth a white-edged line, his brows pulled down over the bridge of his nose in a frown. He was not angry, not yet. Sebastian said a quick prayer for forgiveness, and then explained what had happened on that long ago Twelfth Night.

“Why do I only learn of this now?” the earl asked softly.

“My lord, when we made the promise, I did not think it a binding one. John has shown me it does bind us both.” As it always had. But he could not say that to the earl. “When you betrothed Beatrice to Lord Manners, I knew it could not be.” When Beatrice had told him Manners had offered for her, he had known the Twelfth Night promise had meant nothing to her. She would never have let a man go so far as to offer for her if she had considered herself promised. And he had also known that he meant nothing to her. “We were foolish children.”

“Not children enough,” the earl said shortly. He sighed. “Are you certain of this?”

“My lord, I am not certain of anything. But I now believe we made a binding promise and because of that, Beatrice is my wife in the eyes of canon law.”

“What, then, do you need of me? She is your wife, with or without my blessing.” The earl’s voice was flat with displeasure.

“But not in the eyes of the world. I do not want to do anything that will shame either of us. For that, we must have a betrothal and a wedding, as if we are not married at all. And witnesses to our marriage will ease my mind.”

“And if I have no care for the easiness of your mind? What will you do then?”

“I shall take Beatrice to live with me at Benbury, as my wife, with you or without you, my lord. She will have no dower rights nor will she have a jointure. Should I die before her, she will be

left penniless, but so be it. I cannot fight you." He clamped his mouth shut, waiting for the storm to break over his head.

Sebastian met the earl's cold, black stare steadily, his stomach churning.

Wednesfield nodded, the confrontation of his gaze easing into thoughtfulness. "I shall tell you something I have never told another man. If you speak of this, I will deny it." He looked past Sebastian, his mouth turning down at the corners. "I did not want to give Beatrice to Manners, but I could think of no reason to refuse him. When she asked for the marriage, I permitted it. After it was done and—I learned more truly what kind of man Manners was, I swore that I would never again allow a daughter of mine to marry a man I did not trust." His gaze sharpened and returned to Sebastian. "You think me a softhearted fool for that, I doubt me not. Marriage is about alliances, you will say."

"My lord, I have confessed that I pledged myself to your daughter for no better reason than affection. How shall I call you softhearted?"

"A neat answer," Wednesfield said, his grin flashing briefly. "But think on this. Why should I trust a man as an ally when I will not trust him as a son-in-law? But that is not my point." He reached out and gripped the collar of Sebastian's short gown. "I have known you from a pup, Benbury, but if you had not outfaced me as you did just now, I should not allow you to take Beatrice away. I should not think you man enough to marry her." He let go of Sebastian's gown.

And if Wednesfield had refused him, he would be free. No, the voice deep in his mind said with hard certainty. Regardless of what anyone said or did, he and Beatrice had yoked themselves together for life. In ignorance, he had abjured that promise once. He could not do it a second time.

The earl smiled, cold yielding to his customary warmth. “However, I do not oppose you, so there is no need to pursue this. I give you my blessing right gladly. But I will not discuss the legalities tonight.” His smile widened. “See me tomorrow, before noon, and we will hammer out a contract to please us both.”

At some sodden point Beatrice’s tears became sleep. Sleep led to dreams that made her jerk awake, sitting up in bed. Her hands were cold and shaking, but when she raised them to her face, she was sweating. The dream tried to return to her; she caught a glimpse of hands and thought she smelled cloves and decay. She crossed herself to ward off the nightmare and climbed down from the bed. Maybe the dream clung to the coverlet; maybe if she prayed, she would be safe.

She did not kneel. Even if prayer would wipe her mind clean of every memory of Thomas, she could not pray. Her heart turned to stone, her soul was as dry as the desert. She was lost, far beyond the reach of God’s love, if not his wrath.

Besides, it grew late. Soon the family would come together to sup in the solar. If she wanted to eat before dawn, she must join them. Her eyes were gritty and swollen from her weeping. She needed to bathe them to ease the swelling and soothe the

soreness. Evidence of tears would make her mother curious; curiosity would lead to sharp questions, though the questions would be meant kindly. Her heart and soul were too raw to endure much probing.

There was a ewer of water and a bowl on the table against the wall. Had Cecilia done this? Perhaps. Beatrice filled the bowl half-full of water and bent to rinse her face and eyes. The water, smelling faintly of lavender and roses, was cool on her hot skin and the scent, evoking memories of happier days in the garden at Wednesfield, eased her wounded soul. She dipped her hands into the water over and over again, splashing her face until she could smell nothing else.

Please, sweet Mary, let me be happy again. Blessed Jesú, grant me the strength to survive my trials and let me know peace.

The prayer was over before she recognized she was praying. She straightened slowly, waiting for the renewal of desolation that always followed her attempts to pray. Water dripped on her bosom, startling her. She felt no better for having prayed, but she felt no worse. Could that be an answer? She did not know and had no time to ponder the mystery. If she did not hurry she would be the last to arrive.

When she entered the solar, it appeared at first glance that her family had gathered around Sebastian. He sat near her father, watching John as he talked, the corners of his mouth quivering as if he were about to smile. Her heart hurt to see him so nearly happy, knowing that she could no longer bring him what had once

been a simple gift. He would no longer smile when he saw her, for he despised her—rightfully so.

Cecilia rose from her corner to one side of the men and came forward. “Come sit with me,” she said quietly. “I shall play for you.”

For so long she had been unable to feel much more than pain and shame; other emotions had to force themselves past the darkness in her soul. Now the anxiety Cecilia hid behind her quiet solicitude pressed against Beatrice, demanding a response, crying out for reassurance she could not give. “I should like that,” she said, taking her sister’s hand. Cecilia squeezed her hand gently, her fingers firm and warm.

Crossing the room drew Sebastian’s eyes to her. His shadow smile vanished as all the muscles in his face stiffened, his eyes as black in the candlelight as holes punched in a mask. John leaned close and said something in Sebastian’s ear; Sebastian looked away, a muscle jumping in the angle of his jaw. Her heart pattered against her ribs like a trapped thing, suffocating her. She was alive today because she had learned in a hard school how to read a husband’s tiniest flicker of expression, yet she could not interpret Sebastian’s with any certainty. If she could not read him, how was she to survive?

A little voice in the back of her head whispered, Sebastian has never harmed you.

Sebastian had never had power over her. Thomas had been all that was kind and courteous before she’d married him; afterward

— She flinched. She never remembered afterward if she could help it.

She settled herself on the bench beside Cecilia, arranging her skirts until she remembered that no one here would care if they were not just so. How long before she stopped trying to please Thomas? She folded her hands in her lap to still them and then, unable to prevent herself, she glanced out of the corner of her eye at Sebastian. He grinned at John. One corner of his mouth lifted higher than the other when he smiled; the unevenness made his smile mischievous. The pattering of her heart was submerged in a wave of longing and pain that made her breath hitch.

Smile at me the way you used to. While he still loved her, he had tempted her into more than one act of harmless folly with the wayward charm of that grin. She would have done anything for him.

I loved you so.

She swallowed and dropped her gaze to her hands, clenched in an angry, white-knuckled knot. She had thrown him away because she was a coward. Worse, because she had been a coward choked with vanity and pride.

"What shall I play for you, sister mine?" Ceci asked quietly.

"Can you play the songs Mistress Emma sang to us when we were children?" Let me be a child again, if only in memory. Let me return to the time before I threw Sebastian away.

"If you wish it, dearling, I can."

Out of the lute's strings flowed a simple round Mistress Emma

had used to sing when she was mending and teaching Beatrice and Cecilia to mind their needles. Beatrice had loved needlework from her first stitch, while her sister had fought the cloth, needles and thread as if they were her mortal enemies. Insubstantial memories came on a wave of peace, as if the mellowness of innumerable afternoons mingled with the song flowing into the room. The tumult churning in Beatrice's breast slowed, smoothed and finally faded, ugly memory giving way to gentle recollection.

She remembered sitting beside Ceci on a bench in the old solar at Wednesfield, trying to smock a shirt for her father while Ceci, muttering curses and whining in frustration, wrestled with hemstitches that would not feather neatly. She could not recall a time when she and her sister had sewn together that did not feature an irritable, sweaty Ceci smudging her linen and knotting her thread.

The music shifted and changed to another of Mistress Emma's sewing songs, and Beatrice's recollections shifted with it. Now she was sewing alone, hiding in the old tower so no one might see the herons she stitched in elaborate blackwork on a linen shirt. Benbury herons…a shirt for Sebastian. How old had she been? Fourteen, perhaps? He had promised her he would always keep it.

"Play something else, Ceci," John said.

Cecilia looked at her, eyebrows raised in a question. Shall I?

Warmth stole over Beatrice. Growing up, John's word had been law to Ceci, never questioned. Now her sister held him at

bay for Beatrice. “Play what you wish,” she said, the warmth overflowing in a smile.

The darkness inside her did not lift so much as it crumbled, like a wall collapsing after it had been undermined. Little things chipped away at it, from the thoughtfulness of lavender and roses in her washing water to the way her sister seemed determined to please her. Smiling seemed to damage the darkness still further. Could blessings, not blows, fall down on her?

Ceci grinned back at her. “I shall play to please myself then.” She frowned thoughtfully. “I had just learned this for the queen when I left Court, so have patience. I am not well practiced.”

She launched into a lively tune, playing with no missed note that Beatrice could hear. After playing the melody once, she began to sing in her silver-pure voice. The words of the song were a little bawdy, as Court songs usually were; the chorus was plain nonsense. “And a hey nonny, hey nonny nonny no!”

The third time Cecilia began to sing the chorus, John joined in, the darkness of his deeper voice shading the bright clarity of hers. Beatrice listened, wishing she did not croak like a rook and could join in, as well. The rollicking rhythm of the tune set her toes to tapping and when John began to clap his hands in time she joined in helplessly. Lucia, sitting on John’s other side, followed suit, laughing as she did so. John had said she barely knew any English, but she seemed to understand English music well enough.

Her father joined Cecilia in singing the fourth verse. Here was

the source of Ceci's music; her father's voice was as smooth and golden as honey in the comb. Beside him, her mother clapped her hands, her face shining in the candlelight. Her voice had no more beauty in it than Beatrice's but, like Beatrice, she loved music.

"And a hey nonny, hey nonny nonny no!"

Beatrice would have known Sebastian's voice if he sang with the choir at Westminster. Not as dark as John's nor as honeyed as her father's, it had the golden-brown clarity of water slipping over stones. Certain he would not be looking at her, she stole a glance at him.

She was wrong.

Even at this distance, the cornflower-blue of his eyes glowed. Surely those were the bluest eyes in England. She waited for his mask to clamp down, for the shifting, unreadable expression on his face to disappear, frozen into frightening stillness. Instead his expression coalesced into a scowl as he stared at her through narrowed eyes. An hour ago that frown would have unnerved her. Now, after Ceci's kindness and the joyous sound of "Hey nonny no!" she had a small store of courage to spend.

She lifted her chin and held his stare. It took every ounce of will not to look away; it had been far too long since she had tried to stare anyone down. A chill prickled her when she remembered that within weeks she would be entirely in his power, to use as he pleased, but a portion of Coleville obstinacy had come with the courage and she could not yield to him. She would have to have faith in the small voice that had said Sebastian would not

harm her.

Sebastian looked away.

Beatrice sank back against the wall as if he had unhanded her. She had not outfaced anyone since marrying Thomas. How long had it been? Three years, four? She could not remember, not exactly, only that it seemed like a lifetime.

Her heart, which had lain quietly while she confronted Sebastian, took up a fierce battering against her breastbone, as if to register its protest, and she could not quite seem to catch her breath. How had she dared? Why had she been such a fool? He would be furious and rightly so. Worse, however much she hated and feared the knowledge, he was her husband, with the right to correct her with his hands. She ought to be terrified; surely the pounding of her heart was fear?

No, what she felt was not fear. Fear did not rush, sparkling, through her veins; fear did not make her sit straighter on the bench beside Ceci. The emotion driving her heart and catching her breath was excitement, excitement that was familiar and alien at once.

Why? Why was she excited when she should be afraid?

Through a supper of duck and goose, good English beef and capon, she puzzled over it. She knew her family spoke to her and she answered at random, absorbed in trying to penetrate the gray wall of empty knowledge. She could not remember why her act of daring felt familiar, nor understand why it did not leave her cold with terror. Could it be that Sebastian was not Thomas?

She looked down the table at him, sitting just beyond John on her father's side. Candlelight glinted gold and honey-brown in his waving hair, limned the lean line of his cheek and glittered in the faint stubble of his beard. He seemed almost to have been washed in gold himself, even to the tawny orange of his short gown and brocaded doublet. Like a saint in a manuscript.

No, he was nothing like Thomas, least of all to look at.

Servants came to remove the cloths from the table and to lay out the cheese and fruit. Beatrice selected an apple and began cutting the peel off with her eating knife. She had always loved apples, especially when they were new, their flesh firm and full of juice. This one was particularly juicy; her hands were damp and sticky with it. She carved a sliver of apple and slid it into her mouth, nibbling it between her teeth.

She glanced at Sebastian. He stared at her, his mouth a thin, hard line, and then turned his head away from her, one more move in their dance of looking and looking away. How he must hate the thought of marrying her.

She could not blame him for wishing for another wife than she. What man would want a woman with a soul as black as hers, even if she had tried to clean the stains with confession and penance? She sighed and set the apple down. What either of them wanted had become meaningless. Without list or leave, they were married, bound together in the sight of God if not yet in the sight of man.

If she could not undo this madness, she could try to be the wife

he must want. Meek, obedient, scrupulously honorable. How meek would he expect her to be? Would she need to be obedient only to spoken desires, or would she once again have to obey commands unspoken, and suffer the punishments for unwitting disobedience?

She glanced at Sebastian's end of the table again. Her father had claimed his attention. Sebastian frowned as he nodded while her father spoke, but he did not look angry, merely intent on her father. But anger did not matter, did it? A man might pretend to anger, so poorly she knew it for mummery, and still inflict bruises big and black as plums. A blow given with a cold heart hurt just as deeply as one given in heat.

She would drive herself mad if she stayed here, unable to keep from looking at Sebastian even when the sight of him sent her thoughts into places she did not want to go. He was a wound she could not help prodding. She would have time enough to prod it once she began to live with him as his wife, but not now.

She rose. All heads at the table swiveled to face her. Her mother looked irritated at this breach of manners, Ceci worried, John thoughtful. Sebastian's fist curled on the table as her father turned toward her, but that was all he revealed. His composure let nothing else escape.

Her father rose to his feet, as well. "Well, mistress?" he asked quietly.

"I beg your leave to retire, sir," she said softly.

He eyed her thoughtfully, the silence in the room stretching

tightly. Her father could reprimand her, deny her permission to go, humiliate her before Sebastian and her family. She had acted without thinking.

He shoved his chair aside, creating space between his chair and her mother's. "Come here."

She went to him and knelt at his feet. Even if he shamed her, it would be nothing to her other humiliations. She had endured so much already; she could surely endure a little more. He surprised her by laying his hand on her forehead in a blessing, then, when she rose, saying, "Come closer, puss." She stepped closer, her forehead still warm where his hand had been. He kissed her cheek, patting the other with a gentle hand at the same time. He had kissed her that way when she was a tiny girl. She pressed her cheek against his rough one.

I wish I were the woman you raised me to be.

"You have my leave to go."

Her mother said in a very soft voice, "My lord."

Her father put his hand on her mother's shoulder. "No, Pippa."

Her mother sat back. They never quarreled in public nor before their children. Whether they quarreled at all had been a favorite topic of speculation for their children while Beatrice was growing up.

"Go, child," her father said.

She took a candle to light her way to her bedchamber, but it cast more shadows than light, and the dark quivered as if full of demons. No, not demons; she saw the shadows cast by her

jumbled, unruly thoughts.

She stopped outside the door of the bedchamber, unable to lift the latch. Today had been the one of longest days of her life but she was not weary. A fretful energy twitched in her limbs, the kind of energy she had used to absorb with riding and walking at Wednesfield. She could not go walking or riding now, in the dangerous, deadly dark. Nor could she be still. Where to go? Where might she find a haven, a sanctuary against her fears and the demons within?

Sanctuary…

Blowing out her candle, unwilling to be accompanied by its unsettling shadows, she turned on her heel and began walking to the chapel at the other end of the house.

Chapter Three

S hortly after Beatrice left the solar, Sebastian rose and made his bows to the earl and countess. With Beatrice gone, all who remained in the solar—John and his wife, the earl and countess, even Cecilia—reminded him of what he would never have: a sweet, serene married life. The reminder was more than he could endure.

From the solar, he went down to the great hall. Night had fallen and it was past time to go to bed, but he was too edgy to sleep. If he returned to his chamber, he would lie awake, unable to stop thinking about wool prices, his rents, income that covered less and less of his expenses…and Beatrice.

Around him the house was silent, as if all its occupants, even those he had just left, slept without dreams. He envied them. He remembered how heedless he had once been, assuming that because no harm had ever come to him or his, no harm ever would. If it had not been for his uncle's aid, he might well have lost everything. Since then, he had taken fear for Benbury's future to bed with him.

At the far end of the hall a white blur moved into sight, gleaming faintly in the low light cast by the fire-place to one side. Sebastian stepped deeper into the shadows. Who was this creeping through the hall when most of the household had retired? And why did he only see the white oval of a face?

She came closer and firelight glittered on her jet ornaments, smoldered on the velvet of her skirts. Dressed in widow's black, she had melted into the shadows, barely discernible even to his sharp eyes.

Beatrice.

She passed him without seeing him—or at least without betraying that she had seen him—and slipped through the arch that led to the chapel stairs. He crept after her, wondering why she went to the chapel at this hour, and hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. She had to have gone to the chapel; there was nowhere else. But why? Of all her family, she was the least pious, not the kind of woman to pray in the middle of the night.

Intrigued, and more than willing to let curiosity distract him from the weary round of worry, he followed her up the stairs.

The chapel was located at the top of the stairs. Faint light from within the room revealed that the door was half open. Resting a hand on its panel, he paused to reconsider entering. If Beatrice was praying, he could only be an unwelcome intrusion—and no matter what she did within, he would have to speak to her if he joined her. He had nothing to say, nothing that he dared say.

He imagined himself turning and going back down the stairs, crossing the hall and seeking his bed. Rest would only aid him in his meeting with the earl; staying here with Beatrice was folly. The days when he could follow every impulse were long past.

He pushed the door open.

The chapel was dim, illuminated only by the sanctuary light, a

brave, weak show against the blackness of night. Beatrice knelt in the middle of the chapel floor, her head bent over folded hands. The gabled hood she wore concealed her face, but even if he had not seen her climb the stairs, he would have known her by the graceful bend of her long neck. In truth, he would know her anywhere, under any circumstance. When he had discovered her with Conyers, he had recognized her even though she had been enveloped in Conyers's arms.

Tension tightened his shoulders, the too-vivid memory of Beatrice embracing George Conyers sparking fury as if he faced it anew. He fought both anger and memory, pushing them down, beyond reach, and swung the door shut. It slipped from his hand to bang softly against the frame, the latch rattling.

Beatrice jerked around, her mouth open, her hands flying up to her breastbone. Then she saw him and the expression left her face.

"My lord, you startled me," she murmured as she rose to her feet.

"I did not intend to." He moved deeper into the chapel, drawn unwillingly closer. Then, because he could not help himself, because he could not reconcile her apparent piety with what he knew of her, he asked, "Why are you here?"

She blinked as if the question surprised her. "I came to pray."

"At this hour? When the household sleeps?"

She lifted her chin, her eyes wide and wary as if she did not know whether or not he mocked her. "Why does the hour

matter?"

"I should have thought you would seek the comfort of your bed."

She was silent for so long he thought she would not reply. She lowered her chin. "Prayer is good for the soul. If I did not know it before, I know it now."

Because of your sins. Again anger rose in him; again he pushed it down. He had not followed her to abuse her about the unchangeable past. Or had he? Fool that he was, he did not know why he had followed her, except that he could not stop himself.

"Do you pray to be delivered from our marriage?" He spoke without thinking and immediately wished he had said nothing.

Her face shuttered. "There is no deliverance."

He had thought her furious refusal to accept the betrothal earlier in the day had been shock. The way she had looked at him again and again at supper had given him hope that she would not go into the marriage furious and cold. Her bleakness now withered that hope.

"How can you know?"

"Because you are not pleased. If we were delivered, you would be happy."

That surprised him. He had not thought she would interpret his behavior so. "Do you think I should be pleased to be delivered?"

A frown creased her brow. "How not? You would be free of me then, free to marry Cecilia."

He did not want to marry Cecilia. He might not trust Beatrice,

but he would not choose her sister over her. The realization was another surprise, as were the words that spilled from his mouth.

"You are not a bad bargain, Beatrice."

Her frown deepened and she dropped her gaze from his. "You do not know that."

"I know."

She smoothed her hands over her skirt, talking to the floor. "You cannot."

She spoke so softly he had to move closer. He stopped when the hem of her skirt brushed the wide toe of his shoe. "You are wellborn, well dowered. And you have been a wife before. None of marriage will be strange to you."

She looked up at that, speculation in her eyes as they searched his face. He waited for her to find what she sought.

"I have not been your wife nor do I think my dead lord's ways are your ways."

Pain sparked at the reminder. Just as he did not want to remember her dalliance with Conyers, neither did he want to think of her life with Manners. "I am a man, as he was. How different can we be?"

Some bleak memory stirred; he could see its shadow in her face before she turned away. "Not all men are the same," she murmured.

As you well know, a voice whispered in the back of his mind. He clamped his mouth shut lest he speak the words aloud. Despite the anger that would not remain at bay, he would not

fling accusations at her, chastising her for sins he imagined, all of them greater than the one he had witnessed.

When he did not reply, she turned back to him, the question in her expression fading as her gaze traveled over his face. Understanding flickered in her eyes as if she saw what he wished to hide and then it was only the candlelight gleaming in their blue-gray depths while her face smoothed to blankness. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. Beatrice had somehow vanished, leaving her body to face him.

Come back to me.

"Beatrice," he said softly.

"My lord?"

Do not hide from me and name me as if I am a stranger to you. You know I am not.

"Call me by my name."

Her eyes met his and in their depths he saw Beatrice return, the distance between them melting like spring snow. She searched his face as if she had never seen him before.

"What do you want of me, Sebastian?"

"Nothing," he said. He could not say what he wanted. All he knew was that she could not give it to him.

She folded her hands. "I do not believe you."

He crossed his arms. "Does it matter?"

"I wish to know what you desire, so I may prepare myself to provide it."

"Do you think I will ask anything you do not know how to

give?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why? What have I ever done that you should think that?"

"You are a man. That is all you need."

"Do you think so ill of men?"

"Think ill of them? No, Sebastian, I do not. Men are what they are, not to be ill or well thought of for it. I only ask so I may be all you desire in a wife."

"It does not matter. You can never be all I desire in a wife." You lost that ability when you let George Conyers into your bed. He clamped his jaw shut before he could speak the words. Anger ached in his chest, burned in his throat. If he was not careful, he would begin to curse her and there would never be peace between them.

In a quiet voice she asked, "If I can never be the wife you desire, Sebastian, will you not tell me what I can do to make the best of this bad bargain?"

"Anything you do will be well enough." Anything she did would have to be enough. They were knotted, not to be parted in this life.

She sighed and lowered her eyes. "I do not believe you."

"We cannot undo the past, Beatrice. You cannot undo your dalliance with Conyers and I cannot undo what I have said about it. From now, all I need is your obedience, and I do not doubt I shall have it." That much, at least, was true. He would make certain of it.

"If we cannot undo the past, I at least am willing to let it rest." She looked up at him, her clear eyes catching the candlelight. "Can you say the same?"

He eased his gaze away from hers, unable to withstand her scrutiny. "I do not care about the past."

"Do you not? You cannot leave it behind. I have done penance for my sins and promised never to commit them again. For my immortal soul, I will not so dishonor myself. You can neither forget nor forgive. How shall we ever live together, Sebastian?"

"We will because we must," he said.

She walked away from him, toward the altar. He followed.

"What do you want of me, Beatrice?" he asked.

She crossed herself and knelt, folding her hands. He knelt beside her.

"Tell me what you want."

Looking at the rood screen, she said, "I want to be at peace."

"I cannot give that to you."

"I know. No man can."

No man? Memories danced before his mind's eye: Conyers with his hands on her, Conyers with his mouth on her. And Beatrice allowing it all.

"Did Conyers?" he asked, his voice harsh and flat in the silence.

She closed her eyes, her mouth flattening, and then said in a weary voice, "Sir George Conyers wanted nothing more than an hour or two of pleasure."

“And you gave it to him.” He did not want to talk about Conyers, but he could not stop prodding her. What ailed him?

She shook her head and opened her eyes, staring up at the rood screen once more. “I do not think so.”

“Are you saying I was mistaken in what I saw?”

“What did you see?”

“I saw him touch you where no man but your husband should.” The muscles in his arms and shoulders tightened, and behind his anger was pain, so fierce it did not seem a memory but agony renewed.

She murmured something, her voice too low to be heard, then said, “You are not mistaken in what you saw.”

“You speak in riddles, Beatrice. You deny you gave him pleasure yet you admit you lay with him.”

“I admit nothing.”

“Did you lie with him? Was I mistaken?” The echoes of his cry clanged against the walls of the chapel, his fury escaping into the open at last.

She turned to face him, her eyes wary. He had a brief, bitter memory of her as a girl, as easy to read as a primer. Now he could no more decipher her expressions than he could translate Greek.

“It does not matter whether I lay with him or not. I will be faithful to you. I would promise it if you asked it of me, but a promise does not matter. I will never betray you because I refuse to risk my immortal soul to give any man living a moment’s ease.”

She looked away and stood. “Let us talk no more, Sebastian. I

am weary and say what I ought not. If you will excuse me, I shall retire now." She walked toward the door.

His anger died as if it could not survive her absence. He scrambled to his feet and followed her. "Do not go, Beatrice."

She turned to face him. "Why not? We only brangle whenever we meet. Perhaps, given time, we shall be able to live together without quarrel. But that time has not come."

He held out his hand, no longer clenched in a fist. "I do not want us to part like this."

She sighed. "Nor I, but I do not see how else we may part."

He moved closer to her, his hand still outstretched. "If I say I believe you…"

"Do not lie for so small a reason, Sebastian. It does not matter enough."

His hand dropped; the two feet that separated them might have been twenty. "You are changed."

Her chin went up. "Perhaps I was never who you thought I was. Perhaps what you see now is the truth."

"Is it?"

Her mouth curled in a bitter smile. "You cannot leave anything alone. I cannot answer that question, I cannot allay your fears. I can offer you no comfort. This is what we suffer for our sins." She turned away from him and crossed the distance to the door. Opening it, she turned to face him. "Good night and God be with you." She disappeared, shutting the door behind her.

Without her, the chapel walls crowded around him, the air

chilly and damp. The light on the altar flickered and danced, spilling shadows and golden light against the dark stone walls. Sebastian returned to the altar and knelt, casting about in his empty mind for a prayer, any prayer.

If he could, he would release Beatrice from this marriage. Not because he wished to marry any woman but her, but because she was right when she said they did nothing but brangle when they met. He did not want a turbulent marriage. Like Beatrice, he wanted peace, but when he was with her he could not find it for himself nor would he leave her be to discover it for herself.

Yet however much he wished otherwise, he could not be free, nor could Beatrice. They were bound to one another, tied before God. Some men might, for expedience, discard their wives like outworn shoes, discovering a convenient precontract or fortuitously remembered consanguinity. Unlike them, Sebastian would not dishonor himself, even to undo this marriage. Whether he wished for it or not, in a way he would never have chosen or imagined, he must marry the woman he had loved since childhood.

God help them both.

Chapter Four

B eatrice closed the chapel door and leaned against its panels, waiting for her heart to still its riotous hammering. The encounter with Sebastian ought to have alarmed her, proving as it had that she would not find the peace she sought as Sebastian's wife, but instead of dismay, there was exhilaration. Against all sense and wisdom, the same rushing excitement that had surged through her when she had faced down Sebastian's stare drove her heart now. Why was that so? What ailed her that she did not fear to meet or to defy him?

She straightened. She could not linger here, outside the chapel, while she puzzled it out. She hurried through the dark house to her bedchamber. After the waiting maidservant had helped her out of her clothes and into her night rail, she dismissed the girl, unwilling to have company while her thoughts churned and bubbled as if her head were a cauldron. Alone, she paced the room, too restless to be still.

Something had changed this night. Before Sebastian disturbed her she had been praying, mere hours after telling Ceci she no longer could. How had that happened? What had opened the stops in her soul?

Growing up at Wednesfield, she had often imagined that in early spring she could feel the earth quicken to life long before the green shoots thrust into sight, as if the sap moving once more

in the trees moved through her, as well. That tingling awareness flooded her now, the sensation of sleeping things stirring awake. Somehow that feeling had to do with Sebastian and this garboil she found herself in.

She shook her head. Fear stirred, murmuring, If you trust this feeling it will be the worse for you. Fear? Or plain sense? She had thought she could trust Thomas and he had proven her wrong. So, for that matter, had Sebastian and George Conyers. No, better she should keep her counsel and bend herself to being a perfectly submissive, perfectly obedient wife. Tonight was the last time she would come so close to quarreling with Sebastian.

The door creaked open. Beatrice turned her head in time to see Ceci, holding her lute, slip into the room and check on the threshold as she saw that Beatrice was alone.

"Where is Mary? Edith?" Ceci asked.

"Mary was not here. I dismissed Edith."

Ceci's eyes narrowed briefly, but all she said was, "Will you attend me then?"

"Gladly."

They did not speak while Beatrice helped Ceci as the maid had helped her, but she was aware of her sister watching her, those dark eyes no doubt seeing more than Ceci let show. Beatrice knew she was no fool, but when she compared her wit to her sister's cleverness, she felt like one.

While Ceci braided her hair and put on her nightcap, Beatrice sat down. She ought to plait her own hair, but she did not want

to. Not yet.

Ceci tied the strings of her cap. “Are you going to go to bed like that? Your hair will be a tangle in the morning.”

“I cannot seem to find the will,” Beatrice confessed. “Today is a day I should want to leave behind, but I fear tomorrow will be worse.”

“Let me.”

Beatrice nodded and drew the stool away from the wall. Ceci picked up the comb from atop the bed where she had put it and went to stand behind Beatrice. Her fingers threaded through Beatrice’s hair, their touch light. Pleasure, or the anticipation of pleasure, washed over Beatrice. She had always loved it when Ceci or Mistress Emma combed her hair; both had the kind of touch that soothed.

A waving strand of hair drifted over her shoulder, glittering gold in the candlelight as it moved into her line of sight. Ceci’s hand, lute-string calluses on the pads of the fingertips, reached forward and drew the strand back.

“I always wished I had hair like yours,” Ceci said, and drew the comb through Beatrice’s hair from hairline to the ends brushing the small of Beatrice’s back.

The touch of the comb loosened every remaining knot of tension in Beatrice’s body. It took her a moment to form the words to reply.

“Because it is fair?”

“And curly.”

“But you have hair like satin!” True, Ceci was dark, but her hair was heavy and glossy, cool and silky to the touch. “I always wanted hair like yours.”

Ceci chuckled. “You cannot have wanted to be a sparrow like me.”

“Papa has dark hair.”

“Ah.”

As Ceci had always been closer to their mother, so had Beatrice been the light of their father’s eyes. Beatrice sighed, closing her eyes. Those days seemed now to have been lived by another woman.

The comb passed through her hair and passed again in a slow, drowsy rhythm. Into the silence Beatrice said, “I spoke to Sebastian.”

The comb stroking her scalp paused. “When?”

Beatrice opened her eyes. “An hour ago, perhaps. After I left the solar.”

The comb resumed its long caress. “What did you say to him?”

No words came back to her, only the memory of Sebastian’s eyes, blue as flame as they stared into her own. He had been angry at one point, angry enough to make her flinch to see it, but she had not feared him. However wise fearing him might be, she could not seem to do it.

“Beatrice, what did you say to him?”

“I cannot remember.” Her mind emptied of everything but brilliant blue eyes.

"What did he say to you?"

"He talked about Sir George." Talked? He had shouted at her. And still she had not feared him.

"And how did you reply?" Ceci's steady combing never faltered, her voice as calm as if they discussed the weather.

"I told him I will not sin for any man's pleasure." Or displeasure. Within days of Thomas's death, Sir George Conyers had sent her a note, entreating her to meet him. She had sent that note, and the others that followed, back to him, unanswered. She was done with him and everything he had meant in her life.

"What did he say to that?" Ceci asked as calmly as before, her voice betraying nothing other than a passionless interest. How easy it was to answer someone who seemed unlikely to be upset by anything one said.

Was that the secret of Ceci's skill as a listener? That nothing said disturbed or agitated her? Talking to her was like confession but without the burden of remorse or the price of penance. Everything Beatrice had kept to herself pressed against her, a heavy weight, so heavy she did not know how to begin unloading it. But Ceci would know, and Ceci would help her. She knew that as certainly as she knew the sun would rise in the morning, the first good thing she had trusted since her marriage.

"He said I was changed." She leaned forward, putting her face in her uplifted hands. Through her fingers, she said, "We shall be wed in no more than a month. How shall we learn not to quarrel in that time?"

"I think the wedding will not happen until Michaelmas, Beatrice," Ceci said.

Beatrice straightened. "The end of September? Why so long?" Despite knowing that she and Sebastian needed time to find a way to rub along comfortably, she did not want to have to wait at all, much less wait two months. She was not free, would never be free, and wanted no time to begin to imagine what it would like to be unmarried.

"You are newly widowed. Enough time must pass to show you are not with child."

Beatrice whirled on the stool to face Ceci. "You know I am not with child," she said, her heart fluttering. It was hard to speak of her childlessness.

"I do—"

"And Sebastian will know as soon he lies with me." If he lies with me. She pushed the thought away, refusing it room in her mind.

"—but the world must know," Ceci said. "You know as well as I that the show of truth is more valuable than the truth itself." She gripped Beatrice's shoulders and shook her gently. "If the truth alone mattered, you could join Sebastian at Benbury tomorrow."

"I cannot wait so long," Beatrice whispered.

"Are you so eager?" Ceci asked, her eyebrows lifting.

"Eager? No, I am no more eager to be Sebastian's wife than a condemned man is for the hangman. But I would rather not wait, day in and day out, for the rope."

"It will not be so ill, Beatrice, I swear it."

"I cannot keep a still tongue in my head when I am with him! I carp and complain as no proper wife should ever do. He will lesson me, Ceci, if not with a switch, then with the flat of his hand, and I do not know that I can endure any more of it. What shall I do?"

"Be still, dearling, hush." Ceci knelt and, setting the comb aside, took Beatrice's hands in her own, squeezing them gently. "However angry Sebastian may be with you—and he is angry, though I think him a fool for it—he is also a good and kind man. He is not Thomas Manners and he will not use you as Manners did."

"How can you know that? How?"

"How can you not? Sebastian does not beat his horses or his hounds. Why should he beat his wife?"

There was truth in what Ceci said. Sebastian was not given to harming those in his care, more than could ever have been said of Thomas Manners. Seeing that was one thing, trusting it another. She could not take that step. She whispered, "I am sore afraid." As senseless as it seemed, she did not fear Sebastian himself. She only feared to marry him.

"I know, dearling, I know." Ceci let go of Beatrice's hands to wrap her arms around her. Beatrice rested her head on her sister's shoulder, while Ceci rubbed her back as Mistress Emma used to when they were small girls. Ceci's cleverness had not made her cold or uncaring, nor had she forgotten how to love. Beatrice felt

strength flowing into her as if it came from her sister.

"I am so glad you will be with us at Wednesfield," she said.

The hands on her back stilled, but Ceci did not speak. Beatrice lifted her head to face her sister. Her mouth was turned down, her eyes shadowed by her lashes. Beatrice's heart chilled.

"You are not coming home." She did not need to ask, not when she already knew the answer.

Ceci's lashes lifted, revealing sadness and excitement mingled. "If the queen gives me leave, I shall return to my post as maid of honor."

"Why?" Why do you go? Why do you leave me when I need you? "For the family's benefit? We do not need it. For love of the life at Court? You do not love Court, I have seen it in your face." She was bereft, betrayed, wanting to hold Ceci to her with both hands and angry at the knowledge that nothing could hold her sister back.

Ceci released Beatrice and sat back on her heels. "No," she said softly. "I do not love Court." She sighed. "I do not want to leave you at all, but there are things…people…one man I must face before I do anything else."

"Who? Who must you see? And why?" Who is so important you can abandon me? Beatrice pushed the thought aside. I will not feel sorry for myself. Pity, from whatever source, was worthless.

Ceci swallowed. "I loved a man." She picked up the comb and ran her fingertip along its teeth, the faint rattle of her fingertip's

passage loud. “I thought he loved me.” She laid the comb in her lap. “I need to know the truth. I need to know how he feels.”

“Who is he?” Rumors returned to her, tales half heard because no one would tell her outright. Disbelief spread silence through her mind. “Not the Duke of—”

“Do not say his name!” Ceci cried, reaching up to put her fingers over Beatrice’s mouth. “I cannot listen to it.”

“There were rumors—” Beatrice said against her sister’s hand.

Ceci nodded. “There is some truth to them.” Her hand dropped away. “If he does not love me, I must know. And the only way is to see him again.”

Her sister’s courage stole the breath from Beatrice’s throat. To confront the man she loved simply to know with certainty that he no longer loved her. The one time circumstance had demanded like courage from Beatrice, she had fled behind the barrier of pride, afraid to risk a little wound, a little pain. Ceci’s risk seemed so much greater.

“And if he does love you?” she asked. She had to know, as if the knowledge might answer some question she had not faced, resolve some dilemma she had not acknowledged. “You cannot marry him.”

“I know I cannot marry him. But if he loves me, I will know all I have done has not been a mistake.” Ceci’s eyes were unfocused, as if she gazed on memory and no longer saw the narrow, candlelit bedchamber.

“What did you do?” What could her good, clever sister have

done that the knowledge a man loved her would transmute mistakes?

Ceci's attention returned and as it did, something in her face closed. "Turn. Let me comb your hair."

Beatrice turned her back on her sister. Even if the look on Ceci's face had not warned her, she would never pry into another's secrets. Too many fingers had poked at hers.

Yellow candlelight and gray shadows bounced off the flaws in the wall before her. The patterns of illumination and obscurity shifted as the candle flame bobbed, jerked by the drafts creeping underneath the door. Almost speaking to the play of light and dark before her, Beatrice said, "It will not be the same at Wednesfield without you."

Common sense reminded her she had not needed Ceci in years, so it should not matter that her sister would not be at the castle. Yet the forlorn voice she thought she had quelled asked, Who will be my companion now?

"It was not the same when you left," Ceci replied. She lifted Beatrice's hair off her neck a moment before the comb resumed its gentle tug. "I shall return when you marry Sebastian."

Beatrice nodded. What shall I do until then?

Chapter Five

"M ichaelmas?" Sebastian asked, certain he had misheard the earl. Surely Lord Wednesfield could not expect him to wait almost two months to claim Beatrice. "I do not see the need to put the wedding off."

The earl's stare reminded Sebastian of the days of his boyhood when the earl had treated him almost as one of his own sons, teaching him how to be a gentleman and landowner even as he taught his sons Jasper and John. That same expression had been the earl's response to foolish questions; seeing it now, Sebastian frowned. What was wrong with what he had just said? There could be no reason to delay the wedding.

The earl shook his head, the stare turning to a look of disgust. "No, there is no need. It does not matter that when your son is born men will count on their fingers and say the boy is of Thomas Manners's getting. So long as you claim him, what does it matter that men call him bastard behind his back?"

The earl's quiet, thoughtful tone annoyed Sebastian, all the more so because he deserved the earl's scorn. He had made foolish assumptions. Still, two months? "Why so long, my lord? Beatrice has been a widow for over a fortnight."

"Are you so eager?" the earl asked, his eyebrows lifting.

Something the dark depths of the earl's eyes made Sebastian wary, wary enough to hold his tongue. "No, my lord, I am

surprised. But I see your point. Michaelmas it is."

The earl smiled. "That was simple enough, lad." The smile deepened. "I do not think the rest will pass so easily." He raised his mug of ale to his mouth and drank deeply.

The apprehension tightening Sebastian's muscles eased. The drink was an old trick of the earl's, meant to make the man on the other side of the table believe he was gathering his thoughts when, in truth, he had already carefully considered everything he meant to say. Affection and admiration, so much a part of his relationship with the earl he could not remember a time when he had not felt them, surged through Sebastian.

The earl lowered the mug and sighed, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "It is not right of me to criticize the dead, nor should I speak ill of his father to any man."

What had this to do with Beatrice and him, with their marriage? Sebastian said nothing, waiting for the earl's apparently idle remarks to become his opening move.

"I have told you this a hundred times—land is the only wealth."

A hundred times? The earl had said that to him a thousand times. Every time his father had sold another farm, another parcel of acreage, he had heard the earl's words in his mind. And faced with what his father had left of Benbury, he had recalled the earl's words with bitter regret. If land was the only wealth, Lord Lionel Benbury had left his son nearly destitute. Thank God and the saints for his shrewd uncle Henry Isham.

“So when your father came to me to offer me the manor at Herron, I tried to persuade him not to sell it. He would not listen to me, Sebastian, so in the end I bought the land from him. I thought that if I had it, someday you might be able to buy it back from me.”

“Perhaps, my lord.”

He had been born at Herron, snug and sweet in the center of its fields; it had been the manor he had loved best, mourned the most when it was sold. Fat when his father had lost it, Herron had surely grown fatter with the earl’s management, putting it far beyond the reach of his purse for some time to come.

“I do not think Herron was the only land your father sold. Forgive me, but your father was a fool.”

He was, my lord. Sebastian could not say it, however true it might be.

“I cannot restore everything he sold, but this I can do. Herron is Beatrice’s dowry.”

“Herron, my lord?” Had he heard aright? His heart pounded heavily against his breastbone.

“There is one condition,” the earl said, “and on that I will not yield. Herron will revert to me or my heirs if Beatrice dies childless.”

“My lord, how is this? Your daughter may well be barren. It is certain she bore her late lord no children.” God help him if she were—he could not afford a childless wife.

The earl scowled at him. “You married her out of hand some

years ago, Benbury. Do you dare to complain of her dowry now? I owe you nothing."

Sebastian spread his hands. "Then give me nothing. At least then all I have shall be mine, not liable to be snatched away because my wife cannot bear a son."

"I said Beatrice must bear you a child, not a son." The earl held his scowl for a moment more. "Blessed Jesú, Herron can be yours by midsummer next year if you do your work well."

He wanted Herron more than he could say, yet he feared to take it. How could he hold it? How could he bear to let it go?

I would rather have half its worth in gold, my lord, or a quarter's worth, than have that land slip through my fingers once more.

He could not say that to the earl.

"Very well, my lord. Herron Manor is Beatrice's dowry. I think it a far too generous dowry, but I am not fool enough to quarrel with you. You have my gratitude."

The earl snorted. "Never tell a man he has given you too much. He might believe you." He glanced at Sebastian. "Now, as to Beatrice's dower property, I think a jointure would be proper."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. Give control of Benbury into Beatrice's hands if she outlived him? "No, my lord."

"No? After I have given Herron for her dowry?"

For a moment Sebastian was tempted to tell the earl to keep Herron if that was its price. Another idea occurred to him. "Let her have Herron for her dower. No less, since it is such a rich

property. And no more, so that my son can manage his lands even as she lives."

The earl opened his mouth as if to argue and then grinned. "Herron it is." He leaned forward, the grin deepening until he looked like a small boy contemplating a raid on the buttery. "Let us see if we can come to blows over the details."

Three hours later, wrung out from the effort of keeping his wits sharp enough to bargain with the wily earl and then to keep the lawyers from further entangling a tangled agreement, Sebastian signed his name to his marriage contract. The settlement was not as bad as it might have been, had the earl been inclined to take advantage of the situation Sebastian found himself in. If the terms did nothing to ease his worries, at least they did nothing to worsen them.

"All that remains are the banns and the wedding," the earl said in a satisfied voice. "Afterward—will you keep your post at Court? Shall I see what I may do to obtain some favors for Beatrice?"

Beatrice at Court, where she could attract admirers as venal as Conyers? No, Beatrice would spend the rest of her life safely locked away at Benbury, no matter how she wept and pled. As for him, if he never returned to Court he would die a happy man. His father had insisted the only way a man could make his fortune was to orbit the king as the sun orbited the earth. Perhaps that was true, but it was also true, that there were few swifter ways to lose a fortune. Had he loved the intrigue and glamour of Court,

he would still leave it; he could not afford its demands.

"No, my lord. We shall live at Benbury."

"You will lose many chances at preferment," the earl said, his brows drawing together over his nose.

Sebastian looked down at his hands. The earl was right; Court was the only place to dip into the largesse that flowed from the king like a river. Perhaps with time, Beatrice…

…Beatrice, a honey pot that attracted the worst kind of flies.

He raised his head and met the earl's eyes. "Court life eats up everything my lands produce. I cannot afford it."

The earl's eyebrows rose. "Not even now, when you will have Herron…"

"Every year it costs more to live. You called my father a fool for selling his land. He sold his land because his expenses were greater than his income. I will not make the same mistake."

"So be it. For myself, I shall be glad to have a man of your good sense in the county." The earl rose. "And I have no doubt that my lady wife will be pleased to have Beatrice so close. Come, let us find them both and give them the happy news."

In the hall a servant told them the countess, her daughters and their women had gone into the garden to enjoy a break in the morning's rain. At the end of the passageway that led to the garden, the door stood open, a rectangle of blue-and-green light that dazzled after the dimness of the hall and passage. Following the earl, Sebastian passed under the lintel into the damp, bright garden.

The wet leaves glittered and the stones of the pathway steamed gently in the sunshine. The smell of earth, brown and rich, rose to his nostrils. To his left, Ceci walked arm-in-arm with her mother, their maids trailing behind. On his right, Beatrice walked alone, twirling a rose in her hands, her head bent. He wished he might turn toward Ceci; after last night's puzzling and difficult encounter with Beatrice, he was not sure he was ready to face her again.

He rolled his shoulders to loosen them and straightened his back. Only a coward would run from a woman and surely he could rein in his anger enough not to berate her again. He turned to the earl and asked leave to go to Beatrice. A wave of the earl's hand dismissed him. Moving quickly to outstrip his worries, he strode down the path toward Beatrice.

She looked up as he approached, the rose in her hand no longer spinning. He stopped five feet away from her, halted by her wary, somber look. Violet smudges underneath her eyes turned them gray, the marks dark against her pale skin. She looked like a woman who had not slept in a year.

His jaw tightened and unnamable emotion moved in his chest. Did she hate the thought of marrying him so much? He smoothed the furred collar of his gown. Her happiness with the match did not, could not, matter. They were married, and had no choice but to make the best of it.

He said, "It is done."

"How long?" she asked.

He frowned. “How long?” How long had it taken to come to an agreement? How long until they married? She could mean anything.

“How long until I must live with you as your wife?” she asked. In her hand, the rose shook and a petal dropped off, drifting against her skirt. He stepped closer.

“Two months. The wedding will be at Michaelmas.”

She nodded. “Ceci said it would be so.”

“She knew?”

“I do not believe she knew. I think she guessed or reasoned it out. I must show I do not bear Thomas Manners’s child.”

“Do you?” he asked. For the first time he wondered. What would befall them if she was with child?

“I carry no child, of that I am certain,” she replied, staring past him. Her tone was flat, yet full of meaning, meaning he could not begin to interpret.

More than any other woman he knew, she was a mystery to him. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes met his, a question in their depths. He held his breath until she found her answer. He could see, as clearly as if she spoke the words aloud, the moment when she decided not to tell him what she knew.

“I know as any woman does. My courses have not failed me.” She blushed as she spoke, but whether it was because she lied or because she was embarrassed to speak of such intimate matters to him, he could not tell. “But the truth does not matter. It is what

men believe is the truth that counts."

He thought of what he had once believed of her, and what he had learned. Conyers's arms around her, Conyers's hands on her breast… In defiance of his good intentions, his mingled hurt and anger spoke. "So a woman may betray her promises and it counts for nothing if no one knows."

"Or a man," she said sharply, anger flashing like lightning. And, like lightning, it was gone almost more quickly than his eye could see. She sighed and lowered her head. "Is this how you intend to use me? To remind me at every turn of my sins?" Her voice was weary and her mouth, half hidden by the turn of her head, curled down at the corner.

"No," he said. "It is not what I intend."

"Can we not make peace between us, Sebastian?" She raised her head and looked into his eyes. "I do not want to quarrel with you."

"Nor I with you. But I do not see how we may avoid it." Not when she said things that provoked him to unkindness, provoked his unruly, cutting tongue to mischief.

She lifted the rose to her face, brushing its petals against the tip of her nose, but he did not think she smelled its sweetness, not with the distance in her eyes.

"Ceci has courage," she said.

"She does." He frowned. On the face of it, her remark had nothing to do with his statement, but he did not think them unrelated. He waited for Beatrice to reveal the connection.

“She dares to do things I never dreamed,” she went on, “and in doing so, she fires my courage.”

Courage to do what? He wanted to ask, but something, some angel or demon, held his tongue still.

She looked up at him, her eyes searching his face. Once again, he saw the thoughts moving in her eyes, calculating, weighing him. When she looked away, he knew she had once more chosen to hide her thoughts from him. The morning, the afternoon, the rest of his life darkened; there would always be silence, things unspoken, between them.

“Forgive me, Sebastian.” Her voice was harsh, as if she forced the words out. His jaw clamped shut and his mouth tightened. What new game was this? What if it was not a game? He could not think, could not gauge her honesty. “Forgive me for Conyers and forgive me for betraying my husband by intention if not by action.”

Her offenses were not against him and not for him to pardon even if he could. The man who could pardon her lay in his tomb. “Do not ask this of me.”

“You cannot forgive me?” she cried, crumpling the rose in her hand. Its scent, heavy and piercingly sweet, clogged the air.

He spoke through teeth that would not unclench. “I have nothing to forgive. You did me no harm.”

“If I did you no harm, then why are you so angry with me? Why do you hate me so?” Her face between the dark folds of her hood was stark pale, whiter than it had been before, her lips

colorless.

"I do not hate you," he said.

"Liar," she said softly. Her mouth trembled as though she might start crying, but her eyes were cold, colder than he had ever seen them. Their chill bit through him.

"I do not hate you," he said again. He was angry with her, angrier than he had yet been, and he did not know why. "I despise you."

The words hung in the air; he could not snatch them back. She caught her breath and then nodded. "So." She opened her hand and rose petals fell to the ground like snow. "We are good company, after all. You cannot despise me as much as I despise myself."

Without curtsying, without asking for leave, she turned and walked away.

"Beatrice." He had not meant to say he despised her; that was too simple a name for what he felt.

He did not know what had driven her attempted apology—did she try to cozen him, or had she simply wanted to have done with her past?—but in spurning it he had also refused the chance to alter their demeanor toward one another. And he had spurned it in the harshest manner he knew how.

If he had simply accepted her apology, could he have put an end to their endless quarreling? He did not know, but perhaps it was not too late.

There was only one way to find out. "Beatrice!"

Chapter Six

H urrying down the path toward the river's edge, Beatrice clenched her fists, trying by force of will to stop trembling. She did not know if she shook with anger, fear or hurt; it was all the same to her. Emotion caught her up and carried her away, a flood smashing through the barriers she had built to protect her heart.

"Oh, God, what shall I do?" she whispered. Her hard-won control was gone.

She had tried to make peace between them, but Sebastian had wanted none of it, throwing her effort to ease his fury back in her face. If he would not make peace with her, she could see no help for them. They would live and die at odds.

When Thomas had died, she had felt as if the walls of her prison had fallen down, releasing her from darkness into the light of day. She had not cared how she would live the rest of her life, only glad she would never again wait with one ear cocked for the sound of his curses, one eye open for his oncoming fist. Then, just as she was ready to begin considering the rest of her life, John had come home and this new disaster had overtaken her.

"Beatrice!" Sebastian shouted.

She knew she ought to turn—no doubt he would be angry if she did not—but she could not make herself stop and face him. Not while she fought to calm her turbulent soul.

"Beatrice!"

A few of the men working in the beds along the riverbank straightened and stared. Behind her, she heard swift footsteps on the path. A hand grabbed her arm and swung her around.

"Beatrice, did—"

She flinched, head jerking back, muscles tensing as she braced herself, arm flying up to protect her face. It happened so quickly, she did not have time to stop herself.

Sebastian's fingers on her arm loosened but did not let go. "Beatrice!"

She lowered her arm, her cheeks hot. Why had she reacted so? She knew Thomas was dead, his senseless blows in the grave with him. She had nothing to fear while in her father's house, so why had she revealed so much to Sebastian?

"Did you think I would strike you?"

Her heart slammed against her ribs, her breath shallow. She could not speak of this, not to Sebastian. I will master myself.

"No, I did not," she gasped, unable to catch her breath. All the air in England, sweet and foul alike, would not be enough to fill her.

"I do not believe you," he said, drawing his brows together.

Her head spun.

"You flinched. I saw it," he said gently.

Darkness swirled before her eyes. In the dimness she saw Sebastian's lips move and heard his voice, but she understood nothing. I am going to swoon, she thought, and grabbed Sebastian's sleeve to slow her fall.

Serpent-quick, his free arm shot around her waist, dragging her against him to support her weight. “Breathe slowly,” he said.

She rested against his strength, aware of his forearm pressing against the small of her back, his legs and hips pushing her skirt and underskirt against her. The feel of him ought to dismay her. Instead her breath calmed, the whirling blackness in her head cleared; her heart quieted. And all her tumult settled into something warm and dark.

For a moment she rested against him.

“Beatrice.” Sebastian’s voice was low, soft against her ears like the touch of velvet.

She looked up and met his eyes. The garden around her, the murmuring river at its edge, the chatter of the workmen, her father’s booming laugh all faded, obscured by the darkened blue of Sebastian’s eyes. His arm shifted, pulling her more tightly against him. Surely he could feel her tremble. Curiously she did not mind.

“Why did you flinch?”

“I—” Her voice deserted her and she could not catch her breath. How could she have forgotten how long and curly his eyelashes were or how gold their ends? “I did—” She could not tell him she had not heard him. Through her stiff skirts the strength in his long legs was unmistakable. This moment had to end; she wanted it to last forever. Longing stirred, strangely welcome. “I did not see you clearly.”

He looked at her for a long moment as if waiting for her to

say more, to offer further explanation. She thought, I shall tell him everything, everything about Thomas. But her lips would not part, the words clogged somewhere in her throat. Sebastian despised her; how could she leave her soul naked to his scorn?

"I see," he said, and released her. When he stepped away, it was like being thrust out of a warm, well-lit room into the dark, cold night. She clasped her hands at her waist. Worse, it was like stepping into the night because she feared what would befall her in the room. If she had not lied, he would still hold her. What a fool she was.

"I misspoke when I told you I despise you," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

She looked away. "Why should you not despise me, Sebastian? I did not lie to you when I said I despise myself." If she could not tell him about Thomas, she could confess this much.

Silence answered her. She looked up to find Sebastian staring down at her through narrowed eyes. She waited for him to speak or to look away. He did neither, watching her as if trying to value what he saw.

Goaded by his silence and the pressure of his stare, she cried, "Do you not believe me?"

He looked at her for a moment longer and shook his head. "No. I believe you. But I do not know why."

"How should I not scorn myself?" she cried. "I have done things that shame me."

"You said yourself you have done penance for your sins," he

said irritably, unfolding his arms and planting fists on hips. He was tall and strong, his shoulders broad against the sunny summer sky.

Longing stirred again, making her aware of her body, her skin suddenly alive to the brush of sleeves and skirts, the constraint of her pair-of-bodies, the breeze lifting the lappets of her hood to tickle the back of her neck. And her distress, the moil of emotion churning in her heart, only heightened her awareness, made its tooth sharper. If he had not held her, would she feel this now? It did not matter.

"I am still ashamed," she said. The more shamed now because she had not let George Conyers handle and caress and kiss her out of desire for him. No, wearying of Thomas's accusations of infidelity, she had finally given in to the impulse to be as black as her husband painted her, to taste the pleasure of sin since she got no pleasure from goodness. In the end, she had not found pleasure anywhere.

"I cannot help you," Sebastian said.

"I do not ask it of you."

"My lady Manners!" An usher trotted along the path toward her, a square of white in his hand. Joining them, he bowed and offered her the square. "This arrived for you."

Beatrice took it and turned it over, revealing the crest pressed into the wax sealing it closed. The Manners arms. The last time she had seen the ring that made this mark, it had been on Thomas's hand. She shivered. Oh, for the day when she would

be shut of the whole house of Manners.

"What is it?" Sebastian asked.

"A letter from my stepson by the look of it," she said, and broke the seal.

Unlike her sister, she did not read easily, so it took her a few minutes to understand what the letter said. Even after reading it a second time, she could not believe the contents. The strutting lickspittle thought to deny her right to her own things. Anger, banked but not dead, flared up. Surely he would not dare.

She held the letter out to Sebastian. "Please, if you will, read this and tell me what it says." Her voice was milder than she had thought it would be. So all the hard lessons Thomas had taught her were not lost; she could sound placid as a milch cow while resentment and annoyance curdled beneath her breastbone.

He took the letter and quickly scanned it. "It says the jewels you demand belong to the Manners family. You have no valid claim on them."

I will flay him for this.

She took a deep, calming breath. "That is what I feared it said."

I will crush his bones to powder.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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