

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*Like
Chaff in
the
Wind*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

Matthew Graham congratulated himself yet again on not having brought his wife Alex or wee Mark along to Edinburgh. Not a welcoming city at its best, Edinburgh was cold and dreary in the icy January winds, the tall tenement buildings hunching under clouds the colour of pewter.

The city swarmed with people; in every window, in every narrow close, spectators crowded together, and for all that Matthew was both tall and broad he had to constantly use elbows and feet to avoid being trodden on. He shivered and pressed his hat down harder on his head in a feeble attempt to keep his ears from falling off with cold. His brother-in-law, Simon Melville, laughed and mock punched him.

“It sticks in your craw, doesn’t it? To be obliged to witness the proud occasion of the laying to rest of the Marquis of Montrose.”

Matthew didn’t reply. He had nothing against James Graham, a noble man and a warrior of great talent and bravery, and he had not liked it that he was hanged several years ago, victim to the double dealing of Charles the Second. He did, however, resent being forced to pay his dues at this mockery of a burial where the Marquis, ten years after his death, was brought to lie in state at Holyrood Palace, at the say so of the king who had so cruelly betrayed him.

He shifted on his feet in a vain attempt to escape the pressure of the sharp stone ledge digging into his back. Slowly, the sumptuous coffin made its way down from the direction of St Giles, preceded by banners and blaring trumpets as if it were indeed a whole man lying there, instead of all the bits and pieces that had been brought back to be interred together. The bleached skull had been lifted off its spike on the Tolbooth only this morning, and

Matthew doubted if anybody knew whether the body parts now lumped together did in fact belong to the same man.

“Do you think he cares?” Simon asked him.

“Who?”

“Montrose. Do you think it matters to him, all this?”

Matthew pursed his lips. “He might be laughing some. But nay, I don’t think it much matters to him how he’s buried.” He indicated the procession with his head. “It may matter to his wife, though. And his son.”

Matthew smiled at the thought of his own son, safe at Hillview – a lad who with every day grew more and more like his sire, from his hazel eyes to the dark hair that fell in soft wisps to frame his face. He stretched as well as he could in his cramped space, and closed his eyes, seeing first Mark as he had seen him last, fast asleep in his trundle bed, then his wife.

His wife; just thinking of Alex sent spurts of heat rippling through him. He had woken her in the dark pre-dawn the day he set out, and she had been a sinuous warmth under him. When he got out of bed, she had propped herself up on one elbow to look at him, hair escaping in curls from her thick night braid. His woman, his heart...

“Look!” Simon hissed.

Matthew opened his eyes only to meet those of his brother. Wearing a splendid fur-lined cloak, Luke Graham sat astride a fiery chestnut mare. The rings on his hands, the golden collar round his neck, and the royal badge decorating his hat, screamed to the world that this was a man high in the king’s favour, an impression further underlined by the fact that he was riding side by side with the Governor. Where Matthew had expected to see a disfigured nose, he saw instead an elegant silver covering that elicited surprised murmurs from the crowd.

Luke set a finger to the gleaming metal, letting Matthew know that he well remembered who it was that had so damaged him and had not forgiven, nor ever would. He narrowed his eyes, made a slitting motion over his throat, and spurred his horse on, all the while turning to stare

at Matthew who stood unmoving until horse and rider disappeared.

“The sooner we leave the better,” Simon muttered as they hurried away from the crowds. They took a sharp left, having to lean backwards so as not to topple down the slippery, steep close that led into Cowgate. Matthew agreed, still shaken by the naked hatred that shone out of Luke’s eyes.

“I want you to do something for me.”

Simon looked at him with a certain caution but nodded.

“I want you to draw up a document, today, that makes you the guardian of Mark should anything happen to me.”

“Nothing will happen to you.”

“Mayhap not,” Matthew shrugged. “But unless I draw up such a deed, then both Mark and Alex may find themselves in the not so tender care of my brother. After all, Luke’s my closest male relative – unfortunately.” Matthew’s gut twisted at the thought and it was apparent wee Simon agreed, an uncharacteristic scowl settling on his round face.

“I’ll do it when we get back to our room, and you can sign it and have it witnessed by the landlord.”

When Matthew prepared to leave for the evening, Simon frowned.

“Should you go abroad alone? What with Luke being here...”

“I’m invited to dine with Minister Crombie and his brother,” Matthew said. “I don’t think I’ll be in any danger there.”

Simon grunted. “Not there, no. But in the going and the coming you might be.”

Matthew strapped on his sword. “I’ll be careful.” And damn if his brother was going to stop him from partaking of the company of men he respected and liked.

It was a long evening, an evening of discussion and far too much wine, and Matthew felt comfortably mellow when he made his way back to the inn. Tomorrow he’d be on his way home, rid of this damp, dark and teeming city, and soon he’d be at Hillview, with wife and bairn around him.

Something clattered against the cobbles and he threw a look over his shoulder, squinting through the dark. He frowned and blinded his lantern, standing very still as he listened. Soft rustling noises and a cat ran across the narrow close.

Matthew wanted to laugh out loud with relief. Still, he chose to not unblind his lantern and increased his pace. His skin prickled, his pulse thudded loudly. You're being fanciful, he berated himself, it was just a cat, aye? There was a sound behind him and he wheeled, a hand on his sword. He never managed to pull it free. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something and then his head exploded with pain.

Alex woke with a gasp, convinced that something had happened to Mark. From his trundle bed came snuffling noises, and she sank back against the pillows, trying to bring her heart rate under control. For some reason she was still agitated, and after an hour of turning in bed she gave up on sleep. It was just some silly dream, she told herself, running a hand over Matthew's pillow before rising to pace up and down the room. She stood by the window and stared out into the dark, arms coming up to cross her chest. Something was very wrong and she had no idea what it was, but her whole body was clanging with alarms.

"Bad night?" Joan, her sister-in-law, asked next morning.

Alex yawned and handed over Mark into Joan's waiting arms. "I couldn't sleep." She nodded a good morning to their housekeeper, Mrs Gordon, but shook her head at the bowl of porridge. Her insides were clenched tight around a pebble of nagging concern, and just the thought of food made her queasy.

With each passing day, Alex grew more nervous, making both Joan and Mrs Gordon jumpy as well. He should be back by now, and Alex spent far too many hours with her eyes glued to the lane. When she finally heard the sound of horses, she dropped the basket she was carrying, bunched up her skirts, and flew up the lane to meet him.

She saw Samson riderless and turned, bewildered, to Simon. Her heart came to a screeching halt before it started up again, and she moved towards the horse, her hands stretched out to touch the man who wasn't there.

"Matthew?" Her eyes nailed themselves to Simon's and the expression she saw in them turned the air in her lungs to lead, a dragging weight that threatened to suffocate her. He was dead, her Matthew was dead, and oh my God, how was she to go on without him? "Matthew?" she repeated, hoping that there was another explanation for the haunted look on Simon's face.

"Ah, Alex," Simon said in a choked voice. "I'm so sorry, lass."

She shook her head; she didn't want him to be sorry, please don't let him be sorry. The household congregated around them; Joan and Mrs Gordon, Rosie with Mark in arms as well as Sam, Gavin and Robbie. She didn't see them, she saw only the empty saddle where Matthew should have been, and all she wanted was to die.

"What?" She cleared her thickening throat. "What has happened to him, where is he?" Simon dismounted and Alex flew at him.

"Answer me! Where's my husband? Why isn't he here, with you?"

"He's gone," Simon said, grabbing at her flailing arms. "Dearest Lord, he's gone." He began to cry. Alex was taken over by a slow seeping cold, a thickening of her blood that began at her feet and worked itself upwards.

"No!" She tore herself free from Simon's hands. "No! No!" She wheeled and fled, because maybe if she ran fast enough and far enough, none of this would be true.

It was dark when she came back. Without a word, she swept a fretting Mark into her arms and shushed him to sleep. She sat in silence for a long time before meeting Simon's eyes.

"Tell me. What happened? And why have you not brought him back? He would want to lie here, you know that." She closed her eyes and opened them slowly again.

She'd been doing that all afternoon, hoping that next time she opened her eyes it would be to a reality where Matthew still existed. Belatedly, she noticed that Simon hadn't replied to her question, instead he was regarding her with so much pity she wanted to punch him.

"He isn't dead," he said.

Alex did yet another exaggerated blink; apparently it did help.

"But mayhap it would be better if he were."

"He's alive?" Alex said, latching on to the single relevant piece of information. "He's not dead?"

Simon shook his head. No, he told her, as far as he knew Matthew wasn't dead. "He was assaulted on the street returning to the inn." Simon went on to describe how the innkeeper had come to wake him, gabbling on about how Mr Graham had been struck down just at the corner and dragged away.

Simon had rushed out half-dressed, and in the company of the innkeeper's lad he had walked up and down the darkened closes, searching for Matthew, but not finding as much as a hair. Finally, at the coming of dawn, he had stumbled across a baker's lad who'd told him how he'd seen two men load a protesting third into a cart.

"They clobbered him to shut him up," Simon said. "Then they drove off in the direction of the port."

Simon had never run so fast in all his life, his legs like lark wings as he rushed to fetch his horse and ride hell for leather to Leith. Too late he had stormed out onto the quays, only to see the high stern of a ship disappear into the fog, and he knew, beyond any doubt, that his friend was aboard. He'd gone to the harbourmaster and found out the ship was bound for Plymouth, there to wait for some weeks before setting off across the sea.

"But then Matthew can just get off in Plymouth, right?" Alex said, feeling her shoulders relax. Alive; he was alive!

Simon shook his head. "He's been indentured."

Alex was confused. Indentured people were criminals, convicted of crimes. Simon sighed and rubbed his hands hard across his face.

“He’s been set up. The harbourmaster admitted that he had thought it strange that a lone man should be loaded so late, but the captain of the *Henriette Marie* insisted that he was waiting for one more.”

“But he can tell them,” Alex said. “He just has to talk to someone in authority and they can verify that he’s an innocent man.”

“They won’t let him off the boat. He’ll be kept under lock and key until there is no chance of him escaping.”

“How do you know?”

“I found the go-between,” Simon said, caressing his bruised knuckles. “And I beat it out of him. He’s been sold into slavery by that misbegotten cur, his brother, and according to the go-between the amount that changed hands was substantial enough to ensure Matthew didn’t set foot on land this side of the Atlantic.” Simon crouched down and stroked Mark over his head. “Poor wee lad, no father.”

“He has a father,” Alex said, slapping his hand away. “And now you’re going to explain exactly what all this means so that I can decide what to do.” She handed Mark to Joan and glared at Simon. “If nothing else, once he gets to where he’s going he can tell them.”

“They won’t care,” Joan said. “They will have no reason to believe him.”

Alex looked from one to the other, hating them both for already having given up. “And what will happen to him?”

“They’ll sell him off upon arrival and then he’ll be set to work, a slave that is owned by the man who holds his indenture. They will work him to the bone, and if he dies, well, then so be it.” Simon sounded very bleak, and Alex felt the ice cold numbness of before return. She twisted her hands around each other, trying hard to think.

“I’m going after him,” she declared a few minutes later. “I’ll find him and somehow get him home.”

“You can’t do that!” Simon said.

“Watch me.” Alex gnawed at her lip and threw a discreet look in the direction of the kitchen hearth. Not that they were in any way rich, but if she sold everything they

had hidden, it should be enough to finance both the passage and whatever she might need to buy him free. And they wouldn't charge her for Mark, he could sleep in her berth, not taking up any room of his own.

"And Mark?" Joan asked.

Alex raised her brows. "I'll take him with me."

"A wee lad? Nay, I think not. He might sicken and die."

Simon sounded very disapproving.

"He's my son, so if I'm going so is he."

"Nay, he's not. I can't let you take him and risk his life," Simon said.

"You can't stop me!" She was on her feet, nose only inches from his.

"Aye I can. Matthew has appointed me guardian of the lad."

"I'm his guardian! I'm his mother, for God's sake!"

"You're a woman. You can't be responsible for a child's welfare." Simon blocked the enraged slap and took a firm hold of Alex's hands. "I can stop you from going as well, but that I won't do. The lad, however, stays here. He's the new master of Hillview should Matthew not return. If Mark dies Hillview comes to Luke. Do you think Matthew would want that?"

Alex slumped into her seat. Simon was right. Matthew would never want his son to be put at unnecessary risk. Matthew...where was he now? Had they put him in chains, beaten him? Alex encircled her wrist and squeezed down hard. He would panic at finding himself once again in manacles. Without a further word she retrieved her son and stumbled up the stairs to the haven of her bed.

She didn't sleep. She tossed and turned, she hung for hours over Mark's bed, drinking in his presence, every detail of his solid little body that slept, froglike, on his front. Her baby... Her hand came down over her wedding ring and she turned it round her finger. Her man... Oh God! Her man, her son, her Matthew, Mark – through the dark hours they stalked her head. Alex emitted a strangled sound and fell back against the pillows, her face hidden in her hands.

Daybreak found Alex in the kitchen, her lap filled with their few pieces of jewellery and what seemed to her a very insignificant pile of coins. Mrs Gordon gave her a quick look and busied herself with breakfast, nodding a good morning to a yawning Joan who appeared in the doorway.

“What am I to do?” Alex said to no one in particular. “How can I leave Mark to go to Matthew, but how can I not go after Matthew?”

Mrs Gordon patted her on the shoulder. “You know what you must do, no?”

Alex nodded; there was no choice but it was tearing her apart. “I lost a child once,” she said, ignoring the surprised look on Joan’s face. “My little Isaac...but I found Matthew instead and it was enough. Now I have to leave a second child behind.”

She stared vacantly into the hearth. Very rarely did she allow herself to think about the stranger aspects of her life, and as a consequence she generally kept her vague memories of Isaac well at bay. He would be almost six by now, and she hoped he was safe and well cared for, living a normal life in 2005. Oh God; her gut tightened. She shouldn’t be here, she was an impossibility, a freak, and should anyone find out she came from a future time, they’d lash her to a stake and set her on fire as some sort of witch. It wasn’t as if she’d actively done anything, it had just sort of happened.

The fine hairs on her nape bristled upright at the memories of that awful, spinning drop through time. Two years and counting, since a freak lightning storm tore the weave of time apart and sent her flying to land here, in Matthew’s time, now the year of our Lord 1661. Matthew... She bit back on a sob and manhandled it down her throat.

Mrs Gordon placed a mug of heated cider in front of her. “Your son will be well cared for here, you know that.”

Alex sipped her cider in silence. Joan and Simon doted on Mark, and they’d love him as if he were their own. And Mark would forget her, not recognise her when she returned, shrinking back to hide behind Joan’s skirts. It cut her just to

think it. Mrs Gordon levelled her black eyes at her.

“Your son has others, lass. Your man has only you.”

“Mrs Gordon...” Joan protested.

“I know.” Alex picked at the valuables in her lap and swept them back into their pouch. “I’m going after him. I have to.”

Mrs Gordon nodded her agreement. “I’ll go with you. You can’t be travelling on your own.”

Alex gave her a grateful smile and got to her feet. “We’d better start packing, right?”

Chapter 2

It was a glorious spring day, the day Alex rode out of Hillview in search of her abducted husband. The trees stood in bright new leaf, robins and blackbirds chirped loudly in the shrubs, and high against the pale blue sky hung a single lark. The tilled fields filled the air with the scent of warm moist earth, and in the kitchen garden pale shoots stood timid and fresh in their well-tended beds.

Not that Alex noticed; all her attention was on her son. Fourteen months old, Mark sat in the arms of his aunt. He cooed and laughed, a high bubbling sound, when his mother first kissed him, then blew in his ear, and he jumped up and down in the restraining arms, hands extended towards Alex.

“Love him for me as well,” Alex said, leaning forward to kiss Mark’s brow. “Love him for me and for Matthew.”

Joan just nodded, eyes grey streaks in a red and bloated face. Alex gave her a wobbly smile and then she just had to hug her son one last time, bury her nose in his hair and draw in the scent of him, so uniquely his own she could find him in the dark. Mark chortled, but protested when Joan took him back, small starfish hands waving in the direction of his mother. He stretched himself towards Alex when she sat up on the horse. When she turned the horse and clucked it into a walk, Mark began to cry.

By the time Alex, Mrs Gordon and Simon crested the hill, the air rang with Mark’s high voice. Alex could barely see through her tears.

“What am I doing? How can I leave my son behind?”

“You have to,” Mrs Gordon said from where she sat pillion behind Alex. “You know that, no?”



Simon held his silence. He was still not convinced that letting Alex loose on the world in a desperate attempt to find Matthew was the right thing to do. Mayhap he should have insisted that she stay at home, safe. Ever since the day he rode back heavyhearted from Edinburgh to tell Alex that Matthew was gone, he'd tried to make her see reason; there was nothing she could do, and Matthew wouldn't expect it of her.

"Well I expect it of myself," she'd said, dark blue eyes narrowing. "What do you suggest I do? Sit here and ignore the fact that somewhere someone is harming the man I love, starving him and using him like a beast? Will I be able to live with myself, knowing he's dying a slow death, if I don't try?"

Simon had not known what to say and had promised that he would help her as well as he could.

He twisted in his saddle to study Alex. She rode Samson far more competently than he'd thought she would, remembering a day not quite three years ago when he'd seen her eye the huge roan with apprehension, all of her indicating that she'd never been this close to a horse before.

He pursed his lips. The story of how Matthew had found her wandering the moors after a freak thunderstorm still sniffed of subterfuge, and he recalled the first time he saw her, hair a short cap of bright brown curls around her head, barefoot and with an air of strangeness around her. Mayhap because she was Swedish, aye, but he wasn't entirely sure.

A year ago, he'd come upon her in the woods, and she'd been dancing, swinging a burbling Mark around her while she sang a most peculiar song about heaven being on fire. No, there was more to Alex than met the eye... And what was this about a lost child? Joan had attempted to raise the subject of this unknown Isaac, but had been so rudely rebuffed she had confided to Simon that she would never, ever ask again.

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“Six weeks,” Alex said, breaking almost an hour of silence. “We’ve lost six weeks!”

Now that they were firmly on their way towards Edinburgh, she had managed to banish the thought of a distraught Mark from her mind, focusing instead on the task at hand – to find Matthew.

“Nay we haven’t,” Mrs Gordon replied. “You know there are no crossings during winter. And the boat with the master will still be in Plymouth, no?”

Alex gave Simon a dark look. She’d repeatedly argued that they should ride down to Plymouth and there get Matthew freed, but Simon had told her that he didn’t think it possible, that the captain would make it difficult for anyone to come on board, and that anyway he could wave a very formal document of indenture in their faces.

“But it’s false!” she’d said.

“Aye, but it’s up to us to prove it is. Besides,” he’d added darkly, “what’s to stop yon captain from heaving Matthew overboard should he feel threatened?”

Samson took a sudden step to the right, forcing Alex’s attention back to the present.

“Do you think he’s still alive?” she said. For weeks, she’d had a recurring nightmare of Matthew dying due to the wounds he’d received when he was abducted, courtesy of his evil, nose-less brother.

Mrs Gordon slapped her hard on her thigh. “Silent, lass! Do you not feel him still?”

Every night she felt him, rolling in the direction of where he should be lying only to discover his half of the bed empty and cold. And now, when she turned inward she was sure; a flutter in the pit of her stomach told her that yes, he was still alive.

“They’ll keep them alive on the crossing,” Simon put in. “There’s no value to a dead man, is there?”

Alex threw yet another black look in his direction. To be kept alive to be sold off as a slave, what would that do to him?

“Bend,” she whispered to the wind. “Don’t let them

break you.” Not like they had done in prison, where he’d not known how to submit, fighting in rage at the injustice of it all.

“He’ll live lass,” Mrs Gordon said. “He’ll do what he must to stay alive. He owes it to you and your wee lad.”

Four days later they rode into Edinburgh. The wind blew from the firth, carrying the unappetizing stench of the Nor Loch before it. Actually, even without that open cesspit perfuming the air, Edinburgh was a palette of nasty smells, far too many people, stray dogs and the occasional gaggle of fowl. It took them ages to thread their way up past Greyfriars’ to the small inn off Cowgate, and for all that it was neither particularly clean nor particularly light, the room they were to share seemed a haven of peace after the ruckus of the city outside.

Alex opened the window to let in some air, called for the maid to come and change the sheets – no way was she sleeping in linen grey with use – and after a quick wash she took Samson’s reins in a firm grip and led him off to Grassmarket to sell him. What was she to do? She needed every penny she could get and Samson was a magnificent horse, eliciting interested looks from a number of men. Still, she felt as if she was selling off a family member. Alex sniffed and blew her nose before giving Samson one last parting pat.

“You’re not ugly,” she told the broad-backed stallion. “And you’re a very nice horse. I hope you’ll find a good home and someone who’ll love you as much as Matthew has.”

“It’s just a horse,” Mrs Gordon said, sounding somewhere between amused and worried. “No point in weeping over a beast, is there?”

“I’ll cry if I want to, okay? I didn’t cry when I kissed Mark good bye, I didn’t cry when I saw Hillview disappear behind me – well, not much – and as God is my witness I haven’t cried for Matthew except for that first day. So if I feel like crying my eyes out over Samson, I’ll do it and you

can just stuff it.” Alex felt somewhat ashamed at venting all this on Mrs Gordon, but she seemed quite unperturbed.

“Stuff it,” Mrs Gordon repeated with a faint smile. “Stuff it. I like that, aye?” She slipped her hand in under Alex’s arm and squeezed. “You do cry for the master, every night, no?”

“Yes, but never when I’m awake.”

“Why not?”

Alex hitched her shoulders and pushed a strand of hair off her face. “I’ve promised myself I won’t. Not until I find him.” She kept on glancing at the men that surrounded them. It was market day and Grassmarket was heaving with people come in to town from the outlying farms.

“Who are you looking for?” Mrs Gordon raised her stout frame on tiptoe and scanned the crowds.

“Luke.” Should she see him... Her hands fisted when in the distance she saw a tall man. Was that him? She half ran in the direction of the man, Mrs Gordon puffing in her wake. The man turned, Alex came to a halt. Not her damned brother-in-law.

“And what would you do if you found him?” Mrs Gordon panted, holding a hand to her side.

Alex let her eyes travel the crowd, looking for Luke’s distinctive red hair. “Brain him, or even better, tear his balls off and have him eat them.”

“Sounds like a very good idea,” Mrs Gordon nodded. “I can sit on him, aye?” Her eyes shone jet black as she took Alex’s hand. “First things first, lass; you need to find your husband and bring him home. But then you and I can do some ball-cutting. With a very blunt knife...”

Despite her misery, Alex burst out laughing and hugged Mrs Gordon hard.

On their last night in Edinburgh there was a discreet knock on the door of their room and Simon strode over to open it, dirk in hand. He fell back in surprise.

“Margaret! What are you doing here?”

A hooded shape glided into the room, and with one

person more the cramped space became positively crowded, what with Simon's pallet bed, the four-poster Alex shared with Mrs Graham, the table and the few stools.

"Come to gloat?" Alex very much wanted to throw something in the face of this woman, once Matthew's wife, but first and foremost Luke's lover and now spouse. "Happy now that your bastard husband has succeeded in his attempt to have Matthew disappear from Scotland?"

"I swear I didn't know," Margaret said. "I swear..." Her voice shook, eyes huge in the pale oval of her face.

Yeah; right. "Just like you didn't know when Luke falsely accused Matthew of treason, huh?" To Alex's satisfaction, Margaret looked very ashamed – but then she should, shouldn't she? Alex cleared her throat of a wad of rage. "This is all your fault, if you hadn't told Luke all those terrible lies about Matthew, then none of this would have happened."

"Lies? What lies?"

"Come off it! We both know, don't we? How you let Luke believe Matthew had forced you into marriage, while it was you – yes, you, goddamn it – who seduced him."

"Well, he didn't say no, did he?" Margaret flashed back, straightening up to glare at Alex. "In fact," she added with a smirk, "he was most eager, he was."

If Simon hadn't stepped between them, Alex would have hit her. Instead she retreated and drew in a couple of breaths, eyes never leaving Margaret. Bloody woman! Alex hated it that they were so alike, and even more did she hate the fact that the drop-dead gorgeous one was Margaret, not her.

In deep red silk that shimmered in the candle light, a daring neckline edged with lace and linen of the highest quality, Margaret looked every inch the courtier's wife, all the way from the peeping toes of her silk slippers to the fashionable black ringlets that adorned her head. Alex twitched at her simple green bodice and fiddled with her lace cap; all home made by yours truly, well sewn and neat, but with none of the flair of Margaret's clothes.

"I did not come to discuss the past," Margaret said with

some dignity, placing a velvet pouch on the table. "Here."

Simon nudged it with a finger, making the contents clink. "What's this?"

"Thirty silver pieces," Margaret replied with a wry smile. "It should be enough to buy him free if you find him."

"Not if, when," Alex corrected sharply.

Margaret looked at her and ducked her head. "I hope you do. He didn't deserve this." She pulled the hood of her cloak back up, her features swallowed into shadow. "You have to make haste. Luke says the indentures die like flies."

"All part of his nasty little plan," Alex said.

Margaret shrugged, gloved hands fidgeting with the decorated clasps of her cloak.

"Aye, it most likely is."

"If he dies, I'll..." Alex choked on a bitter combination of fear and rage.

Margaret just nodded and left.

Alex waited until the door had closed before moving over to pick up the pouch. It weighed heavily in her hand, and she opened it to see that not only did it contain several coins, but also a collection of small valuables; earrings, a ring set with a dark red stone, one huge baroque pearl in a silver pendant...

"Generous," Simon said. "Margaret's raided her own little chest, hasn't she?"

Mrs Gordon picked up a golden bracelet and weighed it in her hand.

"This is a right fortune, it is. Yon Luke will be enraged when he hears what she's done."

"He won't," Alex said, "she isn't about to tell him, is she?"

"You think not?" Mrs Gordon touched the large pearl. "And when he asks her to put this on, what will she say?"

"I'm sure she'll lie convincingly," Alex said. "After all, we all know Margaret is good at lying." Well she was, wasn't she? To her great irritation, Alex felt herself blushing under their reproving looks.

“Alex,” Simon admonished, “that was unkind. And no matter that Luke loves her, she’ll pay dearly when he finds out, you know that.”

Alex squirmed; it went against the grain of her to concede any good qualities to Margaret, but reluctantly she agreed it must have taken courage to do this.

After a last restless night on land, they made their way down to Leith and the wharves early next morning. Alex took in the wooden, insubstantial vessel with scepticism. Cross the Atlantic in that? She laughed at her disappointment. What had she been expecting, a twentieth century cruise ship? Actually; yes. She paced up and down, calculating that at most it was thirty metres from stern to bow. One major storm and the whole thing would probably capsize, she concluded, knotting her hands into the woollen material of her skirts.

“She’s crossed several times,” Simon said in a reassuring tone. “The captain’s an experienced man.” Alex nodded and went back to studying the line of people making their way up the gangway, small bundles pressed to their chest.

“They’re all women,” Alex said.

“Aye, wives for the colonists. They go in the hold, I reckon.”

“Wives? They have husbands waiting for them?”

“Well...” Simon looked uncomfortable. “Not as such. They’ll meet them there, and their future husband will reimburse the captain for the passage.”

“Ah,” Alex nodded.

Mrs Gordon held Alex’s arm in a tight grip all the way up the gangway, and once on board they tread with caution over the wooden deck, having to negotiate coils of ropes, several barrels, and a small pen with goats. Alex followed Simon into the little cabin below quarterdeck that would be her home for the coming months, and allowed him to make a thorough inspection of the closet size space, grunting when he found things to be as promised.

Together they took a turn around the deck and then it

was time for Simon to leave. She didn't want him to; she wanted to grab hold of his coat and beg him to come with her. But she didn't, of course. Instead, she cleared her throat and tried to smile.

"My son is in your keeping, my son and my home."

"They'll be there when you come for them. I swear to you I'll keep them safe."

"I know," Alex said, "otherwise how could I have left?"

Simon swept her into an embrace. "Find him, lass. Find our Matthew and bring him back. You can do it. You will do it."

"Of course I will," she said, injecting her voice with as much conviction as she could muster. She kissed him, watched him make his way back down to land, and went to stand by the railings, waving for as long as she could see the shrinking point of brown that she knew to be Simon.

Simon stood rooted until the ship disappeared from sight. He rubbed a hand through his sparse hair, produced a handkerchief from his sleeve, blew his nose and wiped his face. Such a little thing on all that water, totally in the hands of our Lord, blown hither and thither like a chaff in the wind. He sighed and pressed his hat down on his head.

"Dear Lord, hold Your hand over them and keep them safe," he prayed. "Turn the light of Your countenance unto them and guide them back home."

Chapter 3

Matthew woke to hammering pain and the unwelcome realisation that the floor below him was moving, rolling from side to side. He tried to sit up and knew himself to be in irons, fettered like a beast. He groaned as he levered himself upright.

“So you’re awake then?” a voice said by his ear. Matthew jerked and the voice laughed. “I don’t mean you any harm, lad, none of us do.”

“Where am I?” Matthew asked, trying to make out his surroundings.

“On the *Henriette Marie* – we sailed at daybreak, bound for the colonies.”

“The colonies!” Matthew attempted to stand, only to fall at the next rolling of the ship. “I have to get off! I have a family to get back to.”

“We all do,” the voice beside him said. “But unless you’re planning on swimming, chains and all, you won’t be getting off this ship until we arrive at Jamestown.”

Matthew struggled back to sit. In the light that filtered down from the barred hatches, he saw several men, grey shapes that sat or lay in silence all around. The air stank of vomit and excrement, and from himself came the distinct smell of dried piss. He studied his soiled breeches with disgust. Alex wouldn’t be glad to see the state of them. Alex!

Matthew slumped back against the planking and closed his eyes. This couldn’t be happening to him, no, it was just a dream, and if he allowed himself to drift off to sleep, he’d wake to the dark dawn of a winter morning at Hillview, Alex snoring softly by his side. The screeching noise of the hatches recalled him brutally to this new reality, and he crossed his arms in a self-hug, trying to stop himself from trembling.

“Don’t fret, lad,” the unknown voice said. “It is just them coming down with food and water.”

Matthew nodded and sat immobile until the hatches were back in place.

“Here.” A piece of bread was placed in his hand and a strong hand on his nape supported him while he drank. “You have a nasty bump to your head.”

Matthew raised a shaking hand to his head and winced. “They clobbered me! I was walking back to the inn and...” He frowned with the effort to remember; low voices arguing over his head as they dragged him along, another painful clap to his head, a creaking cart, someone holding him down while his wrists were fitted with chains, and then nothing.

“I’ve been abducted,” he said, a surge of anger rippling through him. Luke! This was the work of his hell-spawn of a brother and now, oh dearest Lord, now there was no one there to protect his wife and son!

He twisted his head to the side and threw up the half-masticated bread. The man beside him patted his shoulder, and to his embarrassment Matthew felt his eyes fill up with tears.

“It’s no shame,” the man said, “we all weep.”

“I have to get back, if not he’ll destroy them.”

“Who?”

“My brother, God curse his soul,” Matthew said.

He must have talked for nigh on an hour, as he told this stranger of the hatred and rivalry that existed between him and his brother. He described finding his first wife, Margaret, in bed with Luke and how his brother had connived to have him accused of treason. Several years later, when Matthew finally returned home with his new wife, Luke had in a fit of rage beaten Alex so badly she lost the bairn she was carrying. His newfound acquaintance made a disgusted sound at this.

“A year later he threatened her again, and I should have killed him then as I should have killed him so many times before. Instead I sliced off his nose.” And now...Matthew

studied his surroundings and the chains around his hands. “What has he done to me?”

The man sat back on his heels. “He’s sold you into indenture, I reckon. All of us are going as indentured to Virginia, being the beneficiaries of the good king’s mercy.” He spat as he said that. “I’m James McLean - condemned to hang for preaching that all men are equal. I dare say they begrudged me the length of rope required, and so I’m here instead.” He sighed and shuffled his feet. “I won’t be preaching much where we’re going. I won’t be preaching much at all for the rest of my days.” A flicker of despair flew through his brown eyes and Matthew pressed his hand.

“Of course you will.”

James shook his head. “Seven years, aye? And I am three and fifty...”

Over the coming days, Matthew listened to the stories of the men around him, in many cases heartbreakingly similar, tales of hunger and of being driven from their homes for not keeping up with rents and taxes. Tales of how they were forced to steal to feed their families, and of how they’d been arrested and condemned to hang for their theft, only to have the sentences commuted to years of servitude somewhere far across the sea.

He could see it in their eyes; the resignation, the lack of hope. None of these men expected to ever make it home again, supposing they would either be worked to death or find themselves too poor to ever pay the passage back to wife and bairns. Not me, he promised himself, I won’t die far from home, I’ll somehow make it home to Alex and to Mark.

One night as he lay unable to sleep, drowning in worry for his son and wife, Matthew recalled that he had in fact left them some protection. Simon would take care of them, and Matthew thanked the Lord for having signed a deed of guardianship, stating clearly that in the event of his demise it was Simon, not Luke, who was to stand as father to Mark.

It almost made him laugh to think of Alex’s reaction at not being considered an adequate guardian. His peculiar,

God-given wife would argue that she was fully capable of defending her son, and he could see her eyes slitting into flashing sapphires as she remonstrated with Simon. He shifted on the hard boards, attempting to shut out the sound of the chains. His wife... He ran his hand up and down his forearm, pretending it was her caress he felt. It made him weaken with longing for her.

“Alex.” He smiled when he said her name, struck by the certainty of what she would do. She’d come after him, find him, and in his gut a flower of hope grew. If anyone could do such, it would be her, but it would cost her, because Simon would never let her take Mark with her – nor should he. He rolled over on his side. Poor Alex; to be torn from another son, just as she’d lost Isaac to the vagaries of time. But deep inside, he was dizzyingly happy as the conviction in him grew, that no matter the cost to her, she would come for him.

It was difficult to hold on to that ray of hope over the weeks that followed. For a month they lay at anchor in Plymouth, and while the other in the hold were allowed out on deck to take air, Matthew was kept sitting in the dark, the captain making a point of informing him that he would be given no chance to escape. Matthew raged in his chains and on one occasion lost his temper completely, which resulted in him crawling in pain as the cudgels rained over his shoulders and back.

“You mustn’t provoke them,” James chided him. “You must keep your head down.” But it was too late, and the guards found one reason after the other to taunt and manhandle Matthew. Bend, he told himself, bend Matthew Graham or they will break you. Mostly he did, but sometimes the injustice of it all was too much, and that was how he came to be chained to the main mast in nothing but his shirt, unable to escape the biting iciness of the March wind, as the *Henriette Marie* began her long journey across the open sea.

To distract himself from his helpless shivering and the way his fingers and toes ached with cold, he thought

about the day he'd found Alex, a strangely dressed lass lying sprawled face down on a hillside. He stretched his chapped lips in a weak smile as he recalled those odd breeches – djeens, she'd called them – and her short hair. And he'd known, already then, that this lass was somehow meant for him, a gift from God no less, for how else to explain the propitious coincidence that had him on the moor just when she came tumbling through time? He laughed; Alex was somewhat more sceptical to this whole divine intervention, voicing that it was all due to the fluke lightning storm, a freak misalignment in time.

When he was brought back down into the hold, he was unconscious with fever, small bubbles of lucidity popping through his brain. At times he recognised the man who sat by his side, and he'd make an effort to smile at this familiar person before being dragged under yet again.

James' face was the first thing Matthew saw when the fever finally broke, and he slumped into a deep dejection. In his delirious dreams he'd been home, wandering green fields and wide woods, laughing as he chased Alex up the slope, holding his wee son in his arms. Now he woke to chains and creaking boards, to men who coughed and farted in their sleep, and the despairing insight that mayhap he wouldn't make it, maybe he would die without ever seeing her again.

They all thought they would die some weeks later when the *Henriette Marie* was tossed from wave to wave, all of her protesting when the sea slammed into her creaking sides. For days the storm raged, sweeping anything not securely lashed to the deck overboard. In the hold they sat in ice cold water as huge waves broke above them, sea water cascading through the hatches. It was a relief to see a pale spring sun filter through, and James led them in grateful prayer that this, at least, they had survived.

All of them were allowed out on deck to dry themselves and the hold was mopped up as well as could be done. The captain even accorded them a tot of brandy, muttering something about them being worth nothing to him dead, before ordering

them back down into their dark damp quarters.

Three men died; one of what James said was the ague, shivering to death, two of consumption, coughing their lungs apart. Where the other men drew back, afraid of catching these deadly diseases, James sat with them, talking to them and soothing them as best he could.

“Are you not afraid then?” Matthew said.

James just shrugged. “If I die, I die.”

“But...don’t you want to live, to return to your family?”

James sighed and picked a weevil or two out of the bread. “I’ll not be going back, Matthew. I feel it in my bones.”

“Of course you will, we’ll help each other.”

James didn’t reply, his eyes misting over. “We’ll help each other,” he said after a while. “And mayhap one of us will make it home.”

“Both of us,” Matthew insisted, making James give him an exasperated look.

“You don’t know, do you? Most of us will die before our years of service are up, treated like beasts of burden on endless fields.”

“Not me.”

James gave him a sad little smile. “Nay, lad, not you.”

Matthew shivered at his tone and threw a look down his own tall frame. It would be just like it had been in gaol, with him singled out for the heaviest work on account of his size and strength. He’d spend never ending days in back-breaking labour – yet again – and a frightened voice in the pit of his stomach wondered how long it would take before he began to wear down. Matthew shook himself. He was here wrongfully, and once they’d landed he’d find someone he could complain to. But even as he thought it, he knew it wouldn’t help. Who would listen? Who would care? He leaned back against the planking and sighed.

“She’ll come, my Alex will come.” His woman; she’d come for him.

“Of course she will,” James said. Matthew closed his eyes. He could hear it in James’ voice, that he didn’t believe she would.



The day the ship anchored in the James River, the men in the hold sighed in relief. Land, soon there would be land beneath their feet, and nothing could possibly be as bad as the sea crossing, could it? A low buzz of excitement spread, the younger men surreptitiously inspecting their wasted bodies. Did they look healthy enough? Only James sat in silence.

To Matthew, the heat came as a shock. It was May, and the humidity hung like a drenched blanket around him, making it an effort even to breathe. He stared at the buildings huddled together on the swampy island, and up his spine snaked a tendril of fear. What kind of land was this? Everything was green, a heavy, smothering green, and just moving made him perspire, sticking his worn and grimy linen shirt to his skin. He couldn't breathe, his throat closing up in protest at this hot, wet air. How could anyone work in this?

He was manhandled into a boat and rowed across, and the following minutes he spent in a daze. Only vaguely did he understand he was being sold, and when he tried to object that he was not an indenture, that he was a kidnapped man, he was laughed in the face. Had he not been in chains he would have struck the huge man in front of him, but now he just gritted his teeth and swore that someday that bastard would choke on his contemptuous laughter.

He saw James disappear from him, tried to call his name and assure him they would meet again, but a hard hand wrenched him off in another direction, shoving him and six others from his ship towards a waiting cart. Chains were struck off to be replaced by ropes, they were tied to the tailgate like dumb animals and the huge overseer, Jones, gave Matthew a taunting smile, all the while fingering the strop he carried. Matthew broke eye contact and stared down at his feet.

Much later they were finally allowed to stop. Chests were heaving with the unfamiliar humidity and their clothing hung damp and uncomfortable. None of them

had said a word, concentrating on keeping up with the cart. Jones ignored them, leaving them to stand, still tied, and said something in a low voice to the two drovers. They all laughed, eyes slinking in the direction of the new men.

“Three years,” Matthew heard one of them say. “No more than that.” With a sinking feeling, he understood they were betting on their survival. It made his stomach turn itself inside out.