

Bonus scene, *A Rip in the Veil*, in which Alex meets Sandy Peden and visits Edinburgh.

Late September, 1660

"He'll survive a few hours in Mrs Gordon's care," Matthew said, taking Alex by the hand.

"He's not well," she said, frowning at her son.

"The fever is gone. He has a runny nose, Alex. It will not kill him, aye?"

"You're sure?" She stroked Mark over his brow, and he gave her a huge toothless smile, decorated by two thick strings of yellow snot that hung from his nose.

"Eeuw." Alex found a handkerchief and wiped him clean.

"Go on," Mrs Gordon said. "Off with you, aye? I'll see to the laddie, and it'll be a right relief not to have her under my feet."

"Under your feet?" Alex was quite affronted. She definitely pulled her weight in the household these days.

Mrs Gordon just grinned at her and shooed her outside, saying that unless the mistress took one of her long walks to work off the energy she was presently expending on fussing over her son or meddling in the preserving, Mrs Gordon might be right tempted to whack her over the head with her broom.

"Huh," Alex said as she followed Matthew outside. "Is she really supposed to talk to me like that?"

"As long as you let her, she will," Matthew said, chuckling softly. He took her hand and steered them in the direction of the moor. "It's because she cares for you."

"Duh," Alex said. She knew the old, enervating woman liked her – just as much as she liked Mrs Gordon. She drew in a long breath of crisp, cold air. Being outside was a welcome change after the last few days spent cooped up with her son. Yes, she knew he only had a cold, but in an age so devoid of any kind of medical resources should things go nasty, she constantly worried that the cold might become an ear infection, or pneumonia, or tuberculosis, or ...

Resolutely she cleared her head of ridiculous images of a dying Mark and concentrated on her surroundings. Early autumn and the air glittered with that hazy golden light that you only get for a couple of weeks around the autumn equinox, starlings flew in flocks from one denuded field to the other, and already the leaves were beginning to shift. The sky was cartoon blue, and as a finishing touch a couple of white, fluffy clouds hung just to the right of the sun, still an hour or so away from its zenith.

They paused for a while at the millpond, Alex to throw sticks in the water and Matthew to converse with the miller. Gorgeous Andrew, the miller's son, appeared for an instant in the entrance and waved, and Alex waved back, thinking that it was nice God had compensated Andrew for his lack of brains with a physique that would have most women drooling. Hair hung in golden curls down to his broad shoulders, a magnificent torso tapered down to narrow hips, a very nice butt and long, long legs, for the day encased in breeches that were far too short and tight, revealing a sizeable bulge at groin level.

"He's a lad," Matthew said, making her jump.

"Nice to look at," she said, waving yet again before setting off up the last incline.

"You shouldn't gawk at other men," Matthew said when he caught up with her.

“Not a man, remember? A boy.”

“A young male. And I don’t like it when you eat him with your eyes.”

“I do no such thing!” Andrew might be restful on the eyes, but exuded about as much sex appeal as a white bunny. She said as much, making Matthew laugh.

“You don’t like bunnies?”

“Not in bed,” she said. “In bed I like ...” She gave him a wink. It felt like ages since they’d had a long, uninterrupted session in bed, and from the way he was eyeing her breasts it would seem he agreed.

They reached the moor, and for the coming hour or so they just walked, neither of them saying all that much. But they held hands, and his fingers traced circles over her skin, soft tickling insinuations that made her breath hitch. He dropped her hand, and she was faintly disappointed, but instead he slipped an arm round her waist and pulled her close, shortening his stride to match hers.

“We can’t walk like this here,” she said after she stumbled over yet another hidden stone. “It’s not exactly High Street, is it?”

“We can’t walk like this down High Street either,” he said, “right indecent it would be, for you to rub yourself against me like a cat in heat.”

“Me rub myself against you?” She shoved at him, tried to disengage herself from one arm that suddenly was two, drawing her impossibly close.

“Aye, look at you,” he murmured. “Begging for it.”

“Most certainly not!” She threw a quick look around. Not a soul in sight, but the moss was full of hollows and well-trodden paths, and it had happened on more than one occasion that she’d been scared more or less out of her skin by a person appearing as if by magic before her eyes. Besides, it had rained for the last few days, and here and there the ground squelched under her feet. She wiggled out of his hold and increased her pace.

“A walk, Mr Graham, nothing more, nothing less.”

“That’s not for you to decide, is it?” he said, catching up with her. There was a huskiness to his voice that made her want to giggle with nerves.

“Of course it is,” she said, leaping to the side to evade his hands.

“My wife does as I please,” he told her, and all of her tingled with anticipation. He charged, she flew – but not for long. Arms pinned to her side, she was pushed up against a mossy boulder and kissed.

“Matthew!” she protested when he shoved her skirts upwards.

“What?” He looked down at her, pupils distended into inky pools.

“We can’t, what if ...”

“We will. I want it – now.” Well yes, she could feel he did, and she did too, and what the heck, it wasn’t as if they were doing anything wrong, what with them being married and all that. She grabbed him by the ears and kissed him. Hands on her thighs, sliding over her rump, and she was lifted to half sit on the stone behind them, with his crotch pressing hard into hers. He nibbled her neck, she shivered. She pulled at his shirt, tried to get at the lacings of his breeches, but he slapped her hand away.

“Not yet,” he said. “It is me that decides.” He tugged her bodice open, her shift, and the cool air made her nipples harden into pebbles. The damp from the moss was seeping through her skirts and petticoats, but she didn’t care, not when he was kissing her and stroking her, not when his voice told her just how much he loved her, when his groin undulated in slow, strong strokes against her.

“Matthew Graham? Is that you?” The voice came from mere yards away, and Matthew stiffened – and softened.

“Make yourself decent,” he said, helping smooth her clothes back down over her legs.

Only when she was adequately covered did he turn to face the speaker. Alex thought it was bloody rude of someone to barge in on what so obviously was a private moment and then hang around. Anyone normal would have backed away and left them to it.

“Well if it isn’t Sandy Peden,” Matthew said, and to Alex’ surprise, he sounded totally thrilled, not even a tinge of irritation to his tone. She was even more surprised when the two men embraced. Matthew was not given to hugging random men, and Alex regarded this Sandy character with curiosity.

He studied her as openly as she studied him, this man of middling height with lank hair that he wore far too long, and who was rather thin with pronounced cheekbones and grey eyes.

“So this is your foreign wife, is it?” Sandy said.

“Impressive,” Alex said, “you see us entangled on a rock and jump to the conclusion we’re married.”

Matthew frowned at her. “Aye, this is my wife – Alex Graham. And this is Sandy Peden, a much respected minister.” He said this with a lot of emphasis on the last word, giving Alex a demanding look.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, inclining her head. Clearly not good enough – at least not to judge from the expression on Matthew’s face.

“Likewise,” Sandy said, bowing ever so slightly before turning his back on Alex and focusing his attention on Matthew.

She still had problems following when people spoke broad brogue, and in a matter of minutes Sandy and Matthew were embroiled in an incomprehensible conversation, punctuated here and there by a short laugh or a gesture. After a further few minutes, Alex began to fidget, put out by this exclusion.

“We’d best get back,” she said.

“You go,” Matthew said. “I’ll come along later, aye?”

Great; and here she was thinking this was Matthew and her time. She gave him a dark look and set off in the direction of home.

“Sandy Peden, aye?” Mrs Gordon squinted in the direction of the two men making their way down the hill. “Well, well, imagine that.”

“What’s so special about him?” Alex said.

“He’s a minister, no? And a right good one as well. Quite the preacher he is.”

“Ah.” Alex was less than enchanted, and her irritation mounted when Rosie came rushing into the kitchen.

“Master Peden,” she gasped. “It’s Master Peden!”

Someone out in the yard took up the call, and when Matthew and Sandy entered the yard the whole household was waiting – well, with the exception of Alex who was watching from the kitchen door with Mrs Gordon at her side.

“What? They expect him to perform miracles?” Alex said.

“He’s much loved in these parts,” Mrs Gordon said, “and it would seem by your husband as well, no?”

Matthew was more animated than he'd been in weeks, flushed and bright-eyed he sat in their little parlour until late in the evening, talking incessantly with Sandy. Long conversations about Kirk and faith, about what might happen now that Charles Stuart was back on the throne, and Alex didn't like it, how uncompromising Sandy was in his views.

"We'll never bow to the Anglican Church," he said. "We mustn't, we can't, aye? Bishops and such are not for us, not for men of faith who congregate to speak directly to our Lord."

"It will surely not come to that," Matthew said.

"You think not? Well, mayhap you're right – I hope you are. But here ..." Sandy clapped himself on his chest. "... here I'm not so sure."

"Why on earth would the king care?" Alex said, making both men look at her. "He can do his faith thing down in London and leave you to do yours."

"You to do yours?" Sandy echoed. "Are you not of the faith?" He made it sound as if she had a contagious disease.

"I'm Swedish," she shrugged.

"Ah. But Christian, I assume."

"Of course," she said, not at all liking how he was looking at her. He made a dismissive gesture and turned to face Matthew.

"She must be brought to the kirk," he said. "You can't have your bairns raised outside the kirk."

"I hate it when people talk in third person about me when I'm in the room," Alex said, getting to her feet.

Sandy just looked at her. "I was talking to your husband, not you."

"Just like you've been doing all evening, a little cosy one-on-one, for all the world as if I wasn't here." She folded together her work and replaced it in her sewing basket. "Where I come from that's considered rude."

"We haven't seen each other in years," Matthew protested, "so aye, we got a bit carried away."

"There was no intention to affront you," Sandy said, "but the matters we discussed were not of any interest to you."

Matthew had the grace to wince at that.

"No? How would you know?" Alex got to her feet and bid them goodnight.

Sandy was still there next morning – and the next, and the next. When he wasn't talking to Matthew, he was visiting with the tenants, or sermonising in the kitchen, and he was an interesting man to listen to, helped along by a melodious voice.

Alex liked the way he spoke of God, an intensely personal God with whom he seemed on first name basis, a God who had advice on everything from toothache to matrimonial issues. A somewhat chauvinistic God, Alex decided after hearing Sandy tell Rosie in a stern voice that of course the husband knew best, and as a good wife Rosie should meekly do as she was bid.

What she didn't like was that Sandy made it very clear already the first morning that she was now his special charge. For a couple of hours he interrogated her on her religious knowledge, after which he sat back and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"How can it be? Who has been so remiss in your upbringing? A bairn of ten knows more than you do!"

"Maybe my parents thought other things were more important," she said.

"More important? Nothing is more important than this!"

Alex decided to hold her tongue. Besides, how was she to adequately explain the fact that she had never read the Bible, didn't know the Catechism? It wasn't as if she could tell him that she'd been born in a time where science and languages were considered far more valuable.

But she complained loudly to Mrs Gordon – Matthew was in yet another little conference with Sandy – as to the texts she'd been set to study.

"It'll do you no harm," Mrs Gordon said. "A grown woman – a mother – must know her Bible."

"I have other things to do!"

"So you'll do this on top of them." Mrs Gordon gave her a little shake. "He's doing it out of the kindness of his heart, aye? Your immortal soul deserves it. It's nice he's taking you on, half heathen that you are."

"I am not heathen."

"Och aye? And can you quote me the ten commandments then? Can you list me sons of Noah, can you tell me the sad fate of Absalom?"

No she couldn't – well, the ten commandments almost.

Mrs Gordon laughed and shoed her off to read, telling her it was best she knew the texts by heart come tomorrow.

"What's he doing here?" Simon asked when he rode in on the Sunday. He nodded in the direction of Sandy who was greeting Joan.

"Staying," Alex sighed. "He's been here all week, and now Matthew says he's riding with us to Edinburgh as well."

"It makes sense," Matthew said, "A larger party is not a bad thing in these restless times." He smiled at Simon. "And I enjoy discoursing with him. It's right invigorating."

"Really? I haven't noticed," Alex muttered. Her husband stayed up well into the night, tumbled into bed and slept like the dead until dawn.

Matthew gave her a cool look and steered Simon off to greet Sandy.

For weeks – no, months – Alex had looked forward to this promised trip to Edinburgh. Since being dragged through time two years ago, she'd spent most of her time in the country with the odd excursion into Cumnock, and she longed to see a city. Some of the lustre went out of the trip when she'd learnt that Sandy was coming along, and on the day of their departure she realised it wasn't only Sandy, no it was two more ministers and a faraway neighbour called John Brown that stuck to the men of God like a burr to a donkey's tail.

Fortunately, Simon was coming along as well, and for the three day ride it was mostly Alex and Simon riding side by side, while the other five men rode in constant discussion with each other.

"One could think him in love with Sandy," Alex said in an undertone, nodding to where her husband was leaning towards Sandy to properly hear what the minister might be saying.

Simon laughed. "You don't need to look at the wee minister like that. He's a man, not a woman attempting to seduce Matthew to her bed."

"You think? There's seduction and seduction, you know." She lowered her voice further. "I don't like it Simon. It's all so ... inflammatory, so unbending. The Kirk must be defended at all costs, men of the faith must be willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs, bla, bla, bla. And sometimes I think Matthew agrees with him – it scares me."

Simon held in his horse. "He does agree with him. Of course he does."

"He does?" Alex shook her head. "Maybe in theory."

“Matthew was raised a Covenanter by his Da. He fought for the Commonwealth, spent years and years in the company of men with strong principles of faith. His Mam was a second cousin to Jenny Geddes and a right firebrand when it comes to religion. He’ll not stand by and watch if his kirk is threatened.”

“Oh.” Alex took a deep breath. “Well, let’s hope nothing happens then.”

“Aye,” Simon said, “and at present the king has enough to occupy him down south.”

“Mistresses, primarily,” Alex said.

“That too,” Simon laughed. “Not a bad thing though, to have a king with strong carnal desires. Such men rarely push the issues of faith, do they?”

“No,” Alex said, feeling relieved.

Late that same afternoon, Matthew held in Samson to ride with Alex for a while.

“Alright then?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“Alex,” he sighed.

“What? For over a week you’ve exchanged at most six words in a row with me, and now you expect me to fall over myself with joy because you suddenly remember you have a wife who might enjoy your company as well?”

“How can you begrudge me these days of company with men I like? A week, mayhap two, when I talk less with you and more with them, does it truly matter? I ... I’ve missed it, to discuss matters of faith with men of similar leanings as myself.”

“You’re excluding me. You talk to Sandy and his companions, but you don’t tell me what you’re talking about, you don’t even attempt to include me in the conversation. Thank heavens I have Simon to keep me company, because otherwise I’d have been riding very much on my own these last few days.”

“Nay you wouldn’t,” he said. “I would have ridden with you – I’m riding with you now.”

“Whoopee; fifteen minutes in three days. Should I get off my horse and curtsy, thank my dear husband for expending so much valuable time on me, simple woman that I am?”

He darkened. “I’ve never called you a simple woman.”

“No, but your boon companions definitely think I am. And seeing as you prefer their company to mine, well ...” she hitched her shoulder.

“Matthew?” Sandy called, and Matthew turned towards him, turned back to face Alex.

“Matthew? We need your opinion.” The minister beckoned with his hand.

“Go on; can’t keep dear Sandy waiting, can we?” Alex said.

“We’ll talk later,” he said, and she wasn’t sure he meant it as a promise or a threat.

One of the horses went lame an hour or so later, and after inspecting the animal’s hoof, Matthew and John came to the joint conclusion that the beast needed to rest, and that they did best in setting up camp here on the moor rather than pressing on the last few miles to Edinburgh.

After a chilly evening around the fire, Alex retired early. In all her clothes, with two blankets and her thick winter cloak on top, she was drifting off when Matthew came to join her, snuggling up as close as he could to her.

“Mmm,” he said, a hand wiggling in under all those layers to lie uncomfortably cold on her skin.

“Take your hand away. It’s too cold.”

“But you’re nice and warm,” he said, “very nice and warm.” He spooned himself tighter around her, his hand travelled downwards and was hindered by her waistband. He tugged at the laces.

"Leave off!" she hissed.

"No one will notice," he murmured.

"I don't care, I don't want to."

"But I do."

"Really? Then why don't you bed down with dear old Sandy instead?"

"He's not my wife, is he? And besides, it's you I want to swive, not him. You and your round arse, your soft breasts."

"I'll scream," she warned, when his fingers reached their target.

"Nay you won't." He wiggled his finger, sliding it into her, and she widened her legs to allow him better access. He laughed into her hair. "My place," he murmured, "warm and moist, my secret place."

He knew exactly what he was doing, and her head filled with the rushing of her blood, her heart picked up pace, her sex screamed for him to take her, fill her, do something and do it fast. There was a rustling sound and he was on top of her. He covered her mouth with his hand, whispered in her ear that she had to be quiet, oh, so quiet.

He moved. He held still. He moved again, and she was helpless under his weight, swaddled in too much cloth to be able to do more than lie still. Yet another thrust, another unbearable pause. He chuckled in her ear, kissed her cheek, her nose.

Slow, grinding movements with his hips, and she quivered, from her toes to the tip of her ears. A couple of strong strokes, and she hung on the brink, a heavy pulsating feeling spreading in concentric circles from her groin through her limbs. Alex sank her teeth into his shoulder when she came.

Afterwards, he ordered her clothes, rolled her over on her side and pulled combined blankets and cloaks into a common protective mound over them both.

"You're right," he said to her nape. "I've been excluding you. It won't happen again."

Alex smiled into the night.

He kept his word. All next morning he rode beside Alex, pointing out this or that as they covered the last few miles to Edinburgh. They rode in from the south, and as they crested the last hill, Alex held in her horse.

To her left rose the castle, a brooding presence that soared above the town. The sheerness of the cliffs, the walls that bordered the keep were clearly visible, even from this distance. To her right she could make out Holyrood Palace, straight before her in the distance rose a hill that she realized with some surprise was Calton Hill, and in the far background was the Firth of Forth. It looked depressingly small, not at all the bustling city she'd been envisioning in her mind.

As they got closer, she was impressed by the city walls and the number of people presently entering through the gates. They rode slowly up Candlemaker's row, and Alex had to suppress the urge to knuckle her eyes. So different from the modern city she'd grown up in, and yet the overall layout was scarily intact. They rode by Greyfriar's and halted for a moment at Grassmarket. Alex looked up at the surrounding buildings, at the expanse of open ground to her left, bordered by even more houses, and it was like one of those nightmares where you come home, open the door to the house you know you live in, and nothing inside is the way it should be.

"What?" Matthew said, leaning towards her.

"Nothing; it's just ..." She lowered her voice. "Well, it's disconcerting. It looks almost like it should, but not quite."

“Like it should?”

“You know; in my time ...” she broke off when Sandy approached them to bid them farewell.

It took Matthew some time to find them somewhere to stay, and by the time they made it up to the garret room, Alex was too eager to explore the town to really bother with the standard of their lodgings. At least the sheets were clean and once she'd managed to open the grimy little window, she had a spectacular view over line upon line of gabled roofs. Matthew helped her replace the yellowed skin that went for a windowpane and a few minutes later they were outside.

It struck her full in the face when they turned into Lawnmarket. Bloody hell! Alex gagged on the stench.

“What is that smell?” she said to Matthew.

“The Nor Loch,” Matthew said.

“The Nor Loch?”

In reply, he led her up Castlehill, and right at the top there was a stretch of parapet that gave to the north. Alex peered down at the marsh below.

“It's like a sewer,” she said.

“Aye; and with the odd dead body or so as well,” Matthew said.

“You think?”

“I do.”

One gets used to smells. One gets used to being jostled by people, to being shoved in one direction or the other. One does not get used to the sight of body parts on spikes. Or of people being hanged and left to swing on their rope. Alex had no appetite left when Matthew suggested they enter a small taproom for something to eat, but was glad to sit down, still rather shaken by the human exhibits that decorated the Tolbooth.

A very fat man sat down beside them, wheezing with the effort of accommodating his frame on the small stool. Over a beer or two, Matthew and the man found they had acquaintances in common, and seeing as Matthew showed no inclination of leaving his beer and his newfound companion, Alex told him she needed to do some shopping and took off.

It fascinated her, this bustling, dirty, smelly city. For a couple of hours she wandered back and forth, looking more at people and buildings than at the wares being sold in the stalls that bordered the thoroughfare. In particular she looked at the women; either they were very young or they were very old, there didn't seem to be a middle age. In dark clothes, with heads covered by caps or hats, women hurried by in all direction, and only from the age of the children that now and then tagged along could Alex hazard a guess at their ages. It was quite depressing, and Alex tightened the shawl round her shoulders and straightened her back.

She was strolling down Canongate when she saw a group of riders approaching from the direction of Holyrood Palace. In silks and bright colours, with short cloaks that fluttered in the wind and hats decorated with feathers and badges, they drew the eye as they trotted up the street. It was only when they came abreast that she recognized him. Dark red hair hung in coiffed curls to his shoulders, vivid green eyes stared from above the sheer piece of cloth he'd used to cover his lower face.

Alex swallowed. What on earth was Luke doing here? She shrank back against the closest wall, averted her face and pretended an interest in a spot on her skirts, but to her consternation she heard her brother-in-law call a halt, and here came his horse, large hoofs moving restlessly back and forth over the cobbles.

“Raise your face,” Luke said, and in her peripheral vision she could see an uncovered sword’s blade. The cool steel nudged at her chin, and she didn’t have much choice, so she turned to face him.

“Well, well,” Luke said. “And does this mean I might have the pleasure of finding my brother here? Mayhap repay him in full for what he’s done to me?”

“What are you doing here?” she said. “You’re supposed to be in London.”

“Where I go is none of your concern, is it? At present, my liege requests my services here, and so here I am. Not for long, thank the Lord.” He returned the sword to its scabbard and dismounted. Alex wanted to run, flee like a hare, but she was effectively cornered, with him forcing her back against the wall. She dug into the slit in her skirts, fingers closing on the comforting weight of her knife.

“Step away from me,” she said, and to her relief Luke did, creating a gap of a yard or so.

“So, is he here?”

“No. I’m here with Simon,” Alex said.

Luke laughed, shaking his head so that the thin cloth billowed round his face.

“I think not. Dear Matthew would not allow his precious wife to travel unprotected.”

“Who says I’m unprotected?” Alex bit back.

“I do. I could take you now, and who would stop me?” He made as if to grab her arm, and Alex pulled her knife.

“Try and I’ll stick your eyes out.”

“Need help?” one of Luke’s companions drawled. Some of the men laughed, making Luke turn towards them and scowl. Just the opening she needed. Alex kicked him just behind the knee, followed up with a shove and off she went, dashing back the way she’d come.

Where before the press of people had been an irritant, now they were a blessing, because while Alex on foot could weave in and out of the crowd, her pursuers on horseback were slowed – at least initially. She dove into the protective darkness of a close, skidded in something soft and smelly but regained her balance in time to avoid falling down the steep slope.

She ran all the way back to the inn, she leapt up the stairs and crashed into their room, and at the sight of Matthew stretched out on the bed her knees gave way and she collapsed in a panting, sweating heap.

“Alex?” Matthew sounded disoriented, blinking at her from eyes still half asleep.

“Quick, we must go,” she said. “We have to leave, now.”

“Leave? But we’ve just arrived.”

“Luke,” she said, already throwing their few belongings together.

“Luke?”

“He’s here! Him and a gang of friends, and he saw me, and I kicked him, and I ran, and he’s still mad at you, and he’ll come looking, and then he’ll ...”

“Shush, lass. Take it from the beginning, aye?”

What didn’t he understand? Luke was here! Luke!

“We have to go,” she said. “He’ll turn Edinburgh upside down looking for you, and if he finds you, he’ll...” She choked.

“I have matters to attend to here,” he said.

“Some other time, not now. Or let Simon handle it for you, but we have to go. Now!”

“I can handle my brother,” Matthew said.

“Yes, yes, of course you can! But your brother and a dozen of friends? Your brother and the city guard?”

"I'll not be run out of town by my miscreant of a brother," he said, setting his jaws.

Alex opened her mouth to argue with him, but was interrupted by Simon who fell through the door.

"Luke!" he gasped.

"I know," Matthew said.

"So go, aye?" Simon said. "He's set the guards to looking for you."

"I can't ..." Matthew began.

"Aye you can – you must. Leave, now."

"He can't have me killed! It would cost him his own life!"

"Mayhap; but that won't do you much good, will it? Or your wife, your son. "

"Yeah," Alex agreed shakily. "Too late by then."

There was a tumult from below. Loud voices, a shriek and a crash.

"Sweetest Lord, they're here," Simon said, pushing Matthew in the direction of the window.

"On the roof with you, hide somewhere."

Booted feet were stamping up the wooden treads, doors were flung open, children screamed, male voices yelled, and Alex watched Matthew slide through the small aperture onto the slippery, sloping roof. If he fell off, he'd die, and how on earth was he to find purchase on the slate tiles?

"His boots," Simon barked, and Alex threw herself across the room, grabbed hold of Matthew's discarded boots and shoved them under the mattress.

The door opened and four men entered the room. Simon puffed up, set his hands at his waist and glared at them.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"We're looking for a dangerous criminal," one of the men said, sauntering over to the window. He leaned out, hung half in, half out for what seemed like an eternity before sliding back to stand on the floor.

"Not there," he said to his companions.

"Nor here," one of the other men said. And just like that they were off, stamping loudly down the stairs. Alex hurried over to the window, but Simon shook his head.

"A trap," he whispered.

"Oh." Alex looked about the small room, sat down on the stool and scraped it hard over the floorboards. The door crashed open and two of the men from before jumped into the room.

"Now what?" Alex said.

One of the men muttered an apology and they left.

Three times Simon checked that they weren't loitering about in the narrow passageway or on the stairs before allowing Alex to call softly for Matthew. No reply. She called again. No reply. She leaned out as far as she dared, trying to catch a glimpse of him, but nowhere did she see anything resembling a hiding man.

"He's not there!" Oh God, he must have plummeted to his death, was now lying in a broken, bleeding heap six storeys down.

It was well after nightfall before Matthew returned. By then Alex had ascertained he wasn't lying broken in the street below, but that didn't help much as she imagined one scenario after the other, all of them ending with a very dead Matthew.

He was limping, his bare feet left bloodied streaks on the floorboards, and from the state of his shirt one could have suspected he'd been in a fight with a pig. Not far wrong as it happened, with Matthew recounting how he'd clambered over the roof to the next window in line, pulled himself

inside and descended to the street only to run into the four men coming out from the inn. A chase had ensued, and only by vaulting a wall and crawling in to hide beneath a privy had Matthew succeeded in evading his pursuers. He was shivering, he was dirty, but he was whole and no longer at all opposed to leaving – now. The question was how.

“How can he do this?” Alex asked early next morning. “How come Luke can commandeer the whole city guard to look for my husband?”

“Mighty friends,” Simon said with a little sigh. He sucked in his lip and gave her a serious look. “Kings are right handy to have on your side.”

They led the horses through a relatively silent Edinburgh, and exited through the Leith gate. Two guards looked them over and stood to the side. Out of the corner of her eye, Alex saw a dash of colour.

“Someone’s hiding behind that shed,” she said to Simon.

“Aye,” Simon nodded, “one of Luke’s friends, I’d reckon.” He helped her mount and slowly, very slowly they plodded on towards Leith – slow enough to ensure their little tail of well-dressed rogues could clearly see where they were headed.

“Will this work?” Alex whispered as she turned Samson to the left, riding along Nor Loch’s northern banks.

Simon grinned. “I paid yon man well. I dare say he’s done a good job of slinking down towards the Nor Loch, skulking as if he wanted to avoid being seen. And in cloak and hat it’s difficult to tell one tall man from another.”

“Rather him than me,” Alex said, wrinkling her nose at the thought of wading through the disgusting slurry that went for water in the shallow marsh. Her stomach knotted. Matthew had slipped out of their room well before dawn and she had no way of knowing whether their little plan had worked or not, even if Sandy had assured her not even a guard would insist on opening a coffin, not when it was accompanied by four well known ministers.

Halfway along the shoreline was a stand of trees, and as they passed it Luke rode out from under the shadows, and with him were four of his friends.

“And what might you be doing?” he said.

“None of your business,” Alex replied, glad of the two men Simon had insisted on hiring.

“You’ll not mind if we accompany you for a while?”

“Actually yes, I do. I don’t feel comfortable speaking to treacherous bastards.”

“Mind your tongue, woman,” Luke flared. Alex just stared straight through him.

They ambled on, the original party of four now close to a dozen, and for all that Alex knew it wasn’t Matthew who was hiding just beyond the western point of the marsh, she worried that this might become a nasty little incident, because Luke in a rage was a most unpredictable quantity.

She was very surprised when a group of black clad men came riding towards them from the other end of the loch, and even more surprised when she recognised the two men heading the little cavalcade as Sandy Peden and John Brown.

“Ah, Mistress Graham,” Sandy said, sounding delighted. “Imagine finding you here!”

Yeah, imagine that. And who was the man riding right at the back, hat pulled down so low his whole face was cast in shadow? Alex cursed inside, and Simon muttered something rather foul. Stupid, stupid man! She slid Luke a look; her brother-in-law was staring at Sandy, thank heavens, what little she could see of his face mottling into a dull red shade. Luke rode closer, eyes darting from Simon to Alex and back again.

"A ruse," he said, "this is some sort of ruse."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Alex said. "I'm taking a ride, that's all."

"Don't play with me, woman," Luke said, spurring his horse towards her. Minister Peden urged his mount between them.

"Luke Graham, is it not?" he said.

"Aye," Luke said.

"What has happened to your face?" Sandy continued, leaning towards Luke. "Leprosy?"

"My brother happened to my face," Luke said in a tight voice. The man in the hat straightened out of his slouch and for an instant Alex saw Matthew's eyes before he dipped his head.

"Ah yes; just like you happened to your brother." Sandy's voice had gone so cold Alex could see the icicles.

"Get out of my way, preacher," Luke said.

"I think not," Sandy said, "over my dead body do you harm Mistress Graham again. Once is quite enough." Sandy's voice rose, carrying like a trumpet. "To do such to a woman, for shame, Luke Graham. A spineless cur, that's what you are, you hear?"

Luke roared and pulled his sword. John Brown yelled, Matthew started, and for an everlasting second Alex feared he'd charge his brother and thereby reveal himself. Sandy sat his horse, as immobile as a pillar of salt. Not one fluttering eyelid, not one nervous twitch to his mouth – Alex was very impressed by how Sandy neither budged nor cringed. So, apparently, was Luke. The sword wavered, throwing reflections of light in all directions.

"Luke," one of his companions said. "You can't go threatening a minister like that!" He rode forward and took hold of Luke's arm. "Your brother; that's why we're here."

"And a right wild goose chase that is," Luke said. He scowled at Alex. "He's already safely away, is he not?"

"Well he most certainly isn't in Edinburgh," Alex said, "but I told you that already yesterday." She gave him a sweet smile. There was a soft snorting sound cut abruptly short, and Alex seethed inside when she realised it was Matthew suppressing a laugh. Idiot! He should have been waiting in Currie as they'd decided.

"And you lied," Luke said.

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't," Alex said. "And now, if you excuse me, I have other things to do."

Just in case, Luke and his companions rode with them all the way to the Castle Rock. A man rose out of a stand of reeds at their approach, and at a distance there was a vague similarity to Matthew in build and height, enough that Luke should stand in his stirrups and shade his eyes.

"A decoy," he spat. He cursed and wheeled his horse. "It's not over. Tell my brother that one day he'll pay – I swear it." With that parting shot he was off.

Alex drew in a long, unsteady breath and turned to glare at her husband. Beside her, Simon did the same.

"Well, he's gone back to London by now," Simon said several weeks later. He served himself yet another slice of pie – his fourth – and beamed at Joan before settling back on the chair. The wood creaked in protest. "As I hear it, he is mostly at court – the king holds him in high regard and prefers to have him on hand."

"Lucky us," Alex said.

“Aye,” Simon said. He licked his spoon, looked longingly at the pie, but Joan pulled it out of reach. “He won’t be back – not now that Lauderdale is firmly in place. Our new governor prefers it if his royal master keeps his lapdogs far away.”

“Lapdog? Luke?” Alex laughed.

“Kept on a short leash, I’d reckon. And besides, there’s a certain likeness between him and those wee dogs the king so favours. No nose.”

“Simon!” Matthew and Alex said in unison.