

A tall figure stood darkly against the afterglow, the firelight dancing in red sparks over his mail. He came slowly into the room, kicking the door shut behind him.

Through the turmoil that swirled in her mind Rowan found her voice. "You come to Langerly dressed for battle?"

"I knew not if I would find a warm welcome."

The sound of his voice, deep and sensual, sent her emotions into a tailspin. "If you are here to see my father—"

"I am not here to see Lord Cedric." He unbuckled his swordbelt and set the weapon aside.

The fragrance of burning applewood was lost in the scent of horse and leather that clung to his skin. A wild yearning seized Rowan. She wanted to run to him and submit herself to his kiss and his touch. With a pang she remained motionless, gathering her strength for the terrible task that lay ahead. She struggled for breath beneath the weight of his stare. She looked around, feeling helpless and trapped.

He stepped forward. "Why are you making this marriage to Wulfric?"

There was a plea for understanding in his voice.

Rowan's anger flared out of necessity. "You dare question my motives when you deceived me?"

There was a look of pained shock on his face. "I thought we settled that."

"I have had time to think about it, and the matter seems far from settled to me."

"Rowan." His voice cracked. He paused and began again. "I will ask you again. Why are you marrying Wulfric?"

"Why should I not marry Wulfric?"

"Because you do not love him."

"Love. 'Tis much overrated. And besides, a woman cannot always choose her way in life."

He scrutinized her with wolf-like intensity. "Did you not once claim that you would not be handed over with a parcel of land to some hairy lout?"

Her fingers pulled nervously at her skirt. "If you had any honor in you, you would not toss my words back at me. And if you had any understanding of women, you would know that 'tis a peculiar trait of ours to change our minds."

"I do not excuse myself for misleading you," Gareth said. "But surely that cannot be the reason for this turnabout. What can there be for you in this marriage? Wulfric is marrying you only for what he stands to gain. What do you gain, Rowan?"

She felt the stones shifting beneath her feet. "I will be mistress of Thornby."

"Not if I claim it for my own," he said tersely.

Trying bravely to ignore that possibility, she said absently, "In time I am sure Wulfric and I will come to an understanding as husband and wife."

Gareth replied flatly, "You will never be mistress of Thornby. Matilda will never relinquish that role. She will always come first with Wulfric. You are nothing but chattel to them. A means to an end. And do not delude yourself into thinking that any child you bear will be safe. Remember what she did to me when I was a babe."

Rowan gasped and drew back in horror, the blood draining from her face, leaving it the hue of tallow.

"I see you had not thought of that," Gareth said.

*She hates me, flashed through Rowan's mind. Why did I not see how this would be? When Langerly is theirs, will she kill me then? And what of my babe, if there be one? She felt herself drowning in regret. Tell him. Tell him now before this poison seeps any further.*

But she could not. So deeply did she love him that perfidy seemed a small price to pay to keep him safe. Summoning all her courage, she met his gaze. "I will make this marriage."

He drew in a long breath. "As you wish, my lady." His voice sounded hollow, neither angry nor sad, and it was impossible to tell from the look on his face what he was feeling. A horrid hush filled the chamber during which his dark eyes tore into her like hungry wolves. In the rushlight the scar on his cheek took on an ominous look, and the face that stared back at her bore a harsh resemblance to Kenric, numbing her to the bone. His strain was visible in the rigid way he reached for his swordbelt and strapped it back on.

"Your words of love were false then," he said.

"I—I was confused."

"Were your eyes confused when they looked upon me with love in the tower? The way they look upon me now?"

"My eyes betray me when they are weary," she said absently.

"And if I were to take you now, right here on the floor of your chamber, would your body betray you?"

Rowan struggled to maintain her composure. The dangerous look on his handsome face told her he might make good on it and, God help her, she would have let him. She longed for the sensation of his hands on her skin, the touch of his lips, to bury her face in his long, tangled hair and feel the weight of his body pressing down on hers. The green scent of the midnight woodlands beyond the window was lost in the hot, vibrant scent of him. The blood pounded through her veins, causing a deafening roar in her ears.

But it was more than that which caused Rowan to back slowly away from him. His eyes darkened like storm clouds and there was a look in them that she had never seen before, a sulfurous, mutinous look, and she knew with cold certainty that if she were to give herself to him now, there would be no tenderness in their coupling.

"I—I have something for you," she said nervously. She picked up the clothes and held them out to him.

He cast a disdainful look at them and said, "Wulfric is about my size. Give them to your husband."

Rowan bit back her tears. "As you wish."

Gareth turned to go. At the door he paused to aim a contemptuous look back at her. The rushlights cast an ominous glow over him, causing his mail to sparkle with a sinister light and his face to take on the look of a stranger's. "I wonder. On your wedding night, when Wulfric takes you to his bed, will it be his name you call in your heart...or mine?"

She stood there for a long time after he left, the garments she had made for him dangling from her hands. White hot rage gripped her. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she was forced to throw it away. Nothing mattered now. Nothing.

Gradually, she became aware of her surroundings. She cast a dispassionate look down at the garments hanging limp in her hands. Then, with an anguished cry she twisted them in her fingers and rent the delicate stitches, snapping the threads and tearing the fabric apart with a viciousness borne of heartache and despair.