

“Balm of Gilead.” He extended the small earthen pot so that she could smell the aromatic salve and understand his purpose. “Your wounds need tending.”

He settled on the edge of the bed. His closeness enveloped her like an embrace. The warmth of his body radiated around her, oddly calming. His scent, deep and pleasing, wafted over her senses like the soothing balm. Yet she stiffened in anticipation of his touch.

He paused. “I’m sorry, but I need to...” Gently, he pulled down the blankets.

She flinched.

He withdrew his hands.

Willing herself to remain still, she closed her eyes and waited for him to continue. He swept her hair away from her back so that it fell over one shoulder and across her breast. Then he carefully removed the bandage.

He caught his breath. “Good Lord! Someone ought to give that man a hiding! I’m afraid this is going to hurt.”

She heard the sound of water being wrung from the towel and splashing into the basin. The wet cloth on her back cooled the fire in her wounds. And he patted them dry with the same firm but gentle touch.

Talking quietly as he worked, he soon dispelled the coldest of her misgivings. “But how white you are!” he whispered, his voice tinged with surprise. The air tingled around her, his breath rustling like a warm breeze on the back of her neck. “White as a lily, soft as silk...”

He spread the ointment over her wounds, his fingers light and skillful on her raw skin. Even as he mollified the stinging pain, the feel of his large, strong hands, the deep, rich quality of his voice, and his warm closeness silenced the deepest of her fears. The tension drained from her body, as she surrendered herself to his ministrations.

She heard him tear the linen into strips, then sensed him hesitate before reaching around her to pass the bandage across her chest. “I need to...” In an awkward move, his fingers brushed the tip of her breast.

A fiery tingle spiraled through her, and she gasped at the pleasure in his touch.

“Forgive me.” His whispered words fluttered with butterfly lightness on her skin. As he finished tying off the ends, she felt him tremble.

The fire sputtered and hissed, weaving patterns of light and dark across the ceiling. His shadow on the wall melded with hers, and, in the intermittent flicker, she saw by their shadows that a stillness had overtaken him. His hands lay motionless on her shoulders, and a sudden, inexplicable pang pulsed between her thighs, sending a flash of heat coursing through her.

She turned her head to him. She could not help herself. The tone of his voice, deep and gentle, had moved her with its sincerity. Far more than his voice, his face pleased her, and she derived a curious satisfaction in the simple act of looking at him. An uncontrollable urge rose inside her to touch his mouth with her fingertips, to trace his lips. She wanted to run her hand across the sculpted contours of his cheek and brow, to weave her fingers through his hair.

His dark eyes sparkled with warmth and tenderness, urging her to trust him.

She needed to trust. The need hung like a weight upon her heart, exhorting her to open herself to him, to expose her fears and her wants. She needed to feel secure, wanted. But at what cost?

He met her gaze with a steady look of patient longing, as if he understood her need and waited for her to unburden herself, as if waiting for an invitation to take her into his arms and satisfy her yearning and alleviate her doubts.

It took only a slight effort for her to turn away again, pretending that his voice and his closeness and his scent had not affected her.