

Ransom Chapter 2

Chapter Two

England, in the reign of King John

He was hanging by a thread. In his desperation to hide from his enemy, the little boy had wrapped the old discarded rope he'd found in the corner of the stables around and around the jagged boulder, then tied a tight triple knot the way his Uncle Ennis had taught him to do, and quickly, before he became plagued with second thoughts, slithered over the lip of the canyon on his belly with the rope twined around his left arm. Too late, he remembered he should have looped the rope around his waist and used his feet to brace himself the way he'd seen the seasoned warriors do when they worked their way down Huntley Cliffs to their favored fishing spot.

The boy was in too much of a hurry to climb back up and start all over again. The rocks were as sharp as needles against his tender skin, and his chest and stomach were soon scraped raw and bleeding. He was sure that he would end up with scars, which would make him a real warrior, and while he thought that was a very good thing for a boy of his age to accomplish, he wished it didn't have to hurt so much.

He wouldn't cry though, no matter how fierce the sting became. He could see speckles of bright red blood dotting the rocks he'd already squirmed over, and that scared him almost as much as his precarious position. If his papa could see him now, he'd surely ask him if he'd gone and lost his senses, and he might even shake his head in disappointment, but he'd also be hauling him up and making everything all right and safe too, and... oh, Papa, I wish you were here now. Tears came into his eyes then, and he knew he was going to forget his own promise and cry like a baby.

He wanted to go home and sit on his mama's lap and let her muss his hair and hold him close and make a fuss over him. She'd help him find his senses too—whatever those were—and then Papa wouldn't get upset.

Thinking about his parents made him so homesick he began to whimper. His fingers dug into the rope until they, too, were raw and bleeding, making his grip less sure. His arm ached, his fingers throbbed, and his belly burned, but he tried to ignore the pain, for panic had taken hold and all he could think about was getting away before the devil discovered he was missing.

Lowering himself into the gorge was much more difficult than he'd supposed it would be, but he continued on, not daring to look into the yawning mouth of the abyss that was surely as deep as purgatory. He tried to pretend he was climbing down from one of the big old trees back home, because he was a good, nimble tree climber, even better than his older brother. His papa had told him so.

Exhausted, he stopped to rest. He looked up and was surprised at how far he'd come, and for an instant he felt pride over his achievement. But then his lifeline began to unravel. His pride turned to terror and he burst into tears. He was certain that he would never see his mama and papa again.

By the time Lady Gillian caught up with the boy, her chest felt as though it were on fire, and she could barely catch her breath. She had followed his trail through the thick forest, running as fast as her legs would carry her, and when at last she reached the cliffs and heard the child crying, she collapsed to her knees in acute relief. The little boy was still alive, thank God.

Her joy was short-lived however, for when she reached for his rope to pull him up to safety, she saw how threadbare it was and knew it was only a matter of minutes before the unraveling threads completely disintegrated. She was afraid even to touch the

rope. If she dared pull on it, the threads would rub against the rocks and shred more quickly.

Shouting the order for him to stay completely still, she stretched out on her stomach and forced herself to look over the edge. Heights terrified her and she felt a wave of nausea as she looked down into the chasm below. How in God's name was she going to get him? It would take too long to retrace her steps to fetch a good sturdy rope, and her chances of being spotted by one of Alford's soldiers were too great to risk. There were jagged stones jutting out from the rock, and she knew that a more experienced man or woman might be able to climb down.

But she wasn't experienced—or nimble. Looking down made her dizzy, but, dear God, she couldn't leave him, and time was critical. The rope would soon snap, and the child would plunge to his death.

There wasn't any choice, and so she said a frantic prayer to God to give her courage. Don't look down, she silently chanted as she turned and cautiously scooted over the edge on her stomach. Don't look down.

Gillian cried out with joy each time her foot touched one of the protruding stones. Just like stairs, she pretended. When at last she was level with the boy, she leaned her forehead against the cold rock, closed her eyes, and thanked God for letting her get this far without breaking her neck.

She slowly turned toward the child. He couldn't be more than five or six years old, and he was desperately trying to be brave and bold at the same time. He had been clinging to the rope for several minutes now, holding tight with one hand and clutching a dagger—her dagger—in his other hand. His eyes were wide with terror, but she could see the tears there as well, and, oh, how her heart ached for him.

She was his only hope for survival, but he was stubbornly afraid to trust her. Defiant, foolishly so, he would neither speak to her nor look at her, and each time she tried to

grab hold of him, he thrust the dagger, slicing her arm with each jab. She wouldn't give up though, even if it meant she died trying.

"Stop this nonsense and let me help you," she demanded. "I swear to heaven, you don't have any sense at all. Can't you see your rope is tearing?"

The sharpness in her tone jarred the boy, and he was able to shake himself out of his terror. He stared at the blood dripping down her fingertips, suddenly realized what he had done to her, and threw the dagger away.

"I'm sorry, lady," he cried out in Gaelic. "I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to hurt ladies, not ever."

He'd spoken so quickly and his words were so garbled with his brogue, she barely caught what he said.

"Will you let me help you?" She hoped he understood her but wasn't sure if she'd used the correct words, for she only had a rudimentary knowledge of Gaelic.

Before he could answer, she cried out, "Don't wiggle like that, the rope will snap. Let me reach for you."

"Hurry, lady," he whispered, though this time he spoke her language.

Gillian edged close, held on to the indentation in the rock above her head with one hand to balance herself, and then reached out for him. She had just wrapped her bloody arm around his waist and was pulling him onto the ledge with her when the rope snapped.

If the child hadn't already had one foot securely on the rock ledge, they both would have fallen backward. She squeezed him against her and let out a loud sigh of relief.

"You were just in time," he told her as he uncoiled the rope from his wrist and tossed it down into the chasm. He wanted to watch it land, but when he tried to turn around, she tightened her hold and ordered him to stay perfectly still.

"We've made it this far," she said so weakly she doubted he heard her. "Now for the difficult part."

He heard the shiver in her voice. "Are you scared, lady?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm scared. I'm going to let go of you now. Lean against the rock and don't move. I'm going to start climbing back up and..."

"But we got to go down, not up."

"Please don't shout," she said. "We can't possibly climb all the way down. There aren't enough footholds. Can't you see the rock is sheared smooth?"

"Maybe if you went and got a good rope, we could—"

She cut him off. "It's out of the question."

Both of her hands gripped the edge of the tiny crevice above her head and she searched for a way to lift herself. The strength seemed to have gone out of her and, though she gave it a valiant try, she couldn't climb back up.

"You know what, lady?"

"Hush," she whispered as she said a silent prayer for strength and made another attempt.

"But you know what?"

"No, what?" she asked as she rested against the rock and tried to calm her racing heartbeat.

"There's a real big ledge down under us. I saw it. We could jump down. Look down, lady, and you can see for yourself. It isn't far."

"I don't want to look down."

"But you got to look so you can see where it is. Then maybe we can crawl along—"

"No!" she shouted as she again tried to raise herself to the next foothold. If she could only accomplish that little feat, she could surely figure out a way to reach down and pull the little boy up too.

The child watched her struggle. "Are you too puny to climb back up?"

"I suppose I am."

"Can I help?"

"No, just stand perfectly still."

Once again she tried to climb, but it was a futile effort at best. She was in such a panic inside, she could barely draw a decent breath. Dear Lord, she didn't think she had ever been this afraid in all her life.

"You know what, lady?"

The little boy was relentless, and she gave up trying to quiet him. "No, what?"

"We got to go down, not up."

"We're going up."

"Then how come we aren't moving?"

"Try to be patient," she ordered. "I can't seem to get a proper hold. Give me a minute and I'll try again."

"You can't climb up 'cause I hurt you. You got blood all over your clothes. I cut you bad. I'm awful sorry, lady, but I got scared."

He sounded on the verge of tears. She quickly tried to calm him. "Don't fret about it," she said as she made one more attempt. With a groan of frustration, she finally gave up. "I think you're right. We're going to have to go down."

Ever so slowly she turned around on the narrow ledge, and with her back pressed against the rock, she sat down. The child watched her, then spun around and plopped down beside her.

The quickness in his action nearly gave her heart palpitations, and she grabbed hold of his arm.

"Can we jump now?" he asked eagerly.

The boy really didn't have a lick of sense. "No, we aren't going to jump. We're going to ease our way down. Take hold of my hand and hold tight."

"But you got blood on your hand."

She quickly wiped the blood on her skirt, then took hold of his hand. Together they peered over the side. Gillian had to look to make certain the ledge was wide enough. She had to say a prayer too, and after she was finished, she held her breath and scooted off the ledge.

The distance wasn't all that far, but still, the impact jarred her. The little boy lost his balance as they landed, and she jerked him back just in time. He threw himself into her arms, pitching her hard against the rock wall, then buried his face in her shoulder and trembled violently.

"I almost kept going."

"Yes, you did," she agreed. "But we're safe now."

"Aren't we going to go down more?"

"No. We're going to stay here."

They huddled together for several minutes on the rock plate that protruded from the canyon wall before the boy was able to let go of her. He recovered from his near brush with death quickly, though, and after another minute or two, he crawled away from her side to reach the wider section of rock that had been hidden by a thick overhang.

Looking as pleased as could be, he folded his legs underneath him and motioned for her to come forward.

She shook her head. "I'm fine where I am."

"It's gonna rain and you'll get all wet. It isn't hard. Just don't look down."

As if to underscore his prediction, a clap of thunder rumbled in the distance.

Ever so slowly she scooted toward him. Her heart was pounding like a drum, and she was so scared she thought she might throw up. The child, it seemed, had more courage than she did.

"How come you don't like looking down?" he asked as he crawled forward to peer into the chasm.

He was dangerously close to the edge, and she frantically grabbed hold of his ankles and pulled him back. "Don't do that."

"But I want to spit down and see where it lands."

"Sit beside me and be quiet for a moment. I have to think what to do."

"But how come you don't like looking down?"

"I just don't."

"Maybe it makes you sick. Your face got real green. Were you gonna puke?"

"No," she answered wearily.

"Does it scare you to look down?"

He was relentless. "Why do you ask so many questions?"

He lifted his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. "I don't know; I just do."

"And I don't know why it scares me to look down; it just does. I don't even like looking out of my bedroom window because it's up so high. It makes me dizzy."

"Are all English ladies like you?"

"No, I don't suppose they are."

"Most are puny," he announced authoritatively. "My Uncle Ennis told me so."

"Your uncle's wrong. Most ladies are not puny. They can do anything a man can do."

The child must have thought her remark was hilarious because he laughed so forcefully his shoulders shook. She found herself wondering how in heaven's name a boy so young could be so arrogant.

He turned her attention with yet another question. "What's your name, lady?"

"Gillian."

He waited for her to ask him his name, and when she didn't, he nudged her. "Don't you want to know my name?"

"I already know your name. I heard the soldiers talking about you. You're Michael and you belong to a clan led by a man named Laird Ramsey. You're his brother."

The boy was vehemently shaking his head. "No, Michael isn't my real name," he said. He cuddled up next to her and took hold of her hand. "We were playing a trick when the men came and grabbed me. They put me in a wheat sack."

"That must have been very frightening for you," she said.

"What kind of a trick were you playing?" Before he could answer her, she asked, "Why didn't you wait for me in the stables? It could have been so easy to get away if

you had only done what I told you to do. And why did you stab my arm? You knew I was your friend. I unlocked the door for you, didn't I? If only you had trusted me..."

"I'm not supposed to trust the English. Everyone knows that."

"Did your Uncle Ennis tell you that?"

"No, my Uncle Brodick did," he explained. "But I already knew."

"Do you trust me?"

"Maybe I do," he answered. "I didn't mean to cut you. Does it hurt fierce?"

It hurt like hell, but she wasn't going to admit it because of the anxiety she saw in his eyes. The little boy had enough worries on his mind, and she wasn't going to add to them.

"It'll be fine," she insisted. "I suppose I should do something about the bleeding though."

While he watched, she tore a strip from her underskirt and wrapped it around and around her arm. The boy tied the knot for her at her wrist. Then she tugged her torn, bloody sleeve back down over the bandage.

"There, I'm as fit as new."

"You know what?"

She let out a sigh. "No, what?"

"I hurt my fingers." He sounded as if he were boasting of an incredible feat and smiled when he held his hand up for her to see. "Now I can't do nothing to help us, 'cause my fingers burn."

"I imagine they do."

His face lit up. He was a beautiful little boy, with dark curls and the most beguiling gray eyes she'd ever seen. His nose and cheeks were covered with freckles.

He scooted away from her and pulled his tunic up so she could see his chest and stomach. "I'm gonna get scars."

"No, I don't think you will," she began, but then she noticed his crestfallen expression. "Then again, I do suppose you'll have some. You do want them, don't you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

"All warriors have scars. They're marks of valor."

He was so serious she didn't dare laugh. "Do you know what valor is?"

He shook his head. "I know it's good."

"Yes," she agreed. "Valor is courage, and that is very good indeed. I imagine those cuts sting," she added as she leaned forward to pull his tunic down over his belly. "When we're taken back to the holding, I'll ask one of the servants to put some salve on your fingers and chest and stomach, and then you'll feel much better. Some of the older women remember me," she added. "They'll help us."

"But we can't go back," he cried out.

The change in him was so abrupt it startled her. "Try to understand," she said. "We're trapped here. This ledge doesn't go anywhere."

"I could crawl to the end and see if—"

"No," she interrupted. "The rock might not be sturdy enough to hold your weight. Can't you see how it thins out near the curve?"

"But I could—"

"I cannot let you take such a chance."

Tears came into his eyes. "I don't want to go back. I want to go home."

She nodded in sympathy. "I know you do and I want to help you get back home. I'll find a way," she promised. "I give you my word." He didn't seem convinced. He relaxed against her and yawned loudly. "Do you know what my Uncle Ennis says? If an Englishman gives you his word, you'll come away with nothing."

"I really must meet this uncle of yours one day and set him straight about a few matters."

He snorted. "He wouldn't talk to you," he said. "Leastways I don't think he would. Gillian?" he asked then. "I know I was supposed to wait in the stables for you, but then that man came inside and I got scared and ran."

"Do you mean the baron went into the stables?"

"The ugly man with the red beard."

"That's the baron," she said. "Did he see you?"

"No, I don't think so. When I was hiding in the trees, I seen him leave with two other men. Maybe they won't ever come back."

"Oh, they'll come back all right," she said, for she didn't want to give the boy false hope. "If not tomorrow, then the day after."

The child's wrinkled brow made him seem too wise for his young years, and that saddened her. Little boys should be outside running and laughing and playing silly tricks with their friends. This little one had been plucked away from his family to be used as a pawn in Baron Alford's scheme. The child had to feel as though he'd been dropped into the middle of a nightmare.

"Are you still afraid, Gillian?"

"No."

"I never get afraid," he boasted.

"You don't?"

"Almost never," he corrected.

"How old are you?"

"Almost seven."

"Almost?"

"I will be pretty soon."

"You're a very brave boy."

"I know," he said very matter-of-factly. "How come those men stole me away from the festival? It was the first one I ever got to go to, and I was having a fine time. Was it because me and my friend was playing a trick on our families?"

"No," she assured him. "That wasn't the reason why."

"Did I do something... bad?"

"Oh, no, you didn't do anything bad. None of this is your fault. You've just been caught in the middle, that's all. The baron wants something from me, but he hasn't told me what it is yet, and you're somehow involved."

"I know what it is," he boasted. "And you know what? The baron's gonna go to hell 'cause my papa will send him there. I miss my mama and papa," he admitted forlornly, his voice cracking on a sob.

"Yes, of course you do. They must be frantic, searching for you".

"No, they aren't, 'cause you know why? They think I'm dead."

"Why would they think such a thing?"

"I heard the baron talking to his friends."

"Then you do know what the baron's plans are?" she asked sharply.

"Maybe I do," he said. "The men who took me made it look like I hit my head on the rocks and fell in the falls and drowned. That's what I heard them saying. I'll bet my mama's crying all the time."

"That poor woman..."

"She's missing me fierce."

"Of course she is. But think how overjoyed she'll be to have you back home again. Now tell me, please, what else you heard the baron say to his friends," she asked, trying to sound as though the question wasn't terribly important so that he wouldn't become fretful.

"I heard everything they said 'cause you know why? I played a trick. The baron didn't know I understood 'cause I didn't talk, not even Gaelic, in front of him or the others."

"That was very clever of you." She could tell her praise pleased him. He grinned up at her while he laced his fingers through hers. "Tell me everything you heard, and please take your time so you won't leave anything out."

"The baron lost a box a long time ago, but now he thinks he knows where it is. A man told him."

"What man? Did the baron say his name?"

"No, but the man was dying when he told him. The box had a funny name too, but I can't remember it now."

She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She understood now why Alford had forced her back to Dunhanshire, and as the ramifications struck her full force, her eyes stung with tears.

"Arianna," she whispered. "He called it Arianna's box, didn't he?"

"Yes," he said excitedly. "How come you knew the name?"

She didn't answer him. Her mind was racing with questions. Oh, God, had Alford found Christen?

"How come you speak Gaelic?"

"What?" she asked sharply, startled by the abrupt change in topics.

He repeated the question. "Are you mad at me 'cause I asked?"

She could see the anxiety in his eyes. "No, no, I'm not mad," she assured him. "I learned to speak Gaelic because my sister, Christen, lives in the Highlands and I—"

He interrupted her. "Where in the Highlands?"

"I'm not exactly sure—"

"But—"

She wouldn't let him interrupt her again. "When I find out exactly where she is, I'm going to go see her and I want to be able to speak to her in Gaelic."

"How come she's got a clan and gets to live in the Highlands and you don't?"

"Because I got caught," she answered. "A long time ago, when I was just a little girl, the baron and his soldiers seized Dunhanshire. My father tried to get my sister and me to safety, but in the chaos, Christen and I were separated."

"Is your sister lost?"

"No, she isn't lost. She was taken north into the Lowlands by one of my father's loyal men. My Uncle Morgan went to great lengths to find out exactly where she was, but she had vanished into the Highlands. I'm not sure where she is now, but I hope one day I will find her."

"Do you miss her?"

"Yes, I do. I haven't seen Christen in a long time though. I don't think I'll even recognize her. Uncle Morgan told me the family who took her might have changed her name to keep her safe."

"From the baron?"

"Yes," she replied. "Still, she'll remember me."

"But what if she doesn't?"

"She will," she insisted.

A long peaceful minute passed in silence before he spoke again. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I can speak your language real good 'cause my mama taught me how to talk to the English even though Papa didn't want her to and my papa only talks Gaelic to me. I don't even remember learning how. I just did."

"You're a very smart boy."

"That's what my mama says. Some Gaelic's hard to talk," he continued, " 'cause clans got their own way of saying things and it takes a long time to learn all the different words. When Uncle Brodick talks to me, he has to talk my Gaelic or I wouldn't know what he was saying, but it wouldn't matter if you could understand what they were saying 'cause you know why? They wouldn't talk to you unless my uncle told them to."

"Why wouldn't they talk to me?"

He gave her a look that suggested she was just plain stupid. He was such an adorable little boy she had to fight the urge to hug him.

"'Cause you're English," he explained in exasperation. "It's gonna get dark," he worried out loud. "Are you gonna be afraid of the dark the way you were afraid of looking down?"

"No, I won't be afraid."

He was trying to get her to put her arm around his shoulders but she wasn't taking the hint, and in frustration, he finally grabbed hold of her hand and did it for her.

"You smell like my mama."

"And how's that?"

"Good."

His voice cracked on the word, and she surmised he was getting homesick again.

"Maybe the baron won't find us."

"His soldiers will see the rope tied around the boulder," she gently reminded him.

"I don't want to go back."

He burst into tears. She leaned over him and brushed his curls out of his eyes and kissed his forehead. "Hush now, it's going to be all right. I promise you, I'm going to find a way to get you back home."

"But you're just a lady," he wailed.

She tried to think of something to ease his mind and give him hope. His sobs were breaking her heart, and in desperation, she blurted out, "You know what a protector is, don't you?"

He hiccuped while he answered. "It's the same as a champion." He sat up and mopped the tears away from his cheeks with his fists. "I had me a protector, and then I got another one. The day I was born I got one 'cause every bairn born in our clan gets to have one. He's supposed to look out for the boy or girl all his life long to make sure nothing bad ever happens to him. Angus used to be my champion, but then he died."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "I'm sure Angus was a fine protector."

She was getting weary, and it was difficult to keep up with the idle chatter. Her arm was throbbing and felt as though it had been held over a flaming torch. As exhausted as she was from the long trip back to Dunhanshire, she still was determined to keep the boy occupied with conversation until he became too sleepy to worry.

"I just got me a new champion," he told her. "Papa had to ponder it a long time 'cause he wanted to make sure he picked the right one for me. He told me he wanted me to have a champion as strong and fierce as Graham's."

"Who is Graham?" she asked.

"My brother," he answered.

"And who did your father choose for you?"

"His friend," he answered. "He's a fierce warrior, an important laird too, and you know what?"

She smiled. "What?"

"He's awful mean. That's the best part. Papa says he'll make a fine champion."

"Because he's mean?"

"And 'cause he's strong," he explained. "He can split a tree in half just by glaring at it. Uncle Ennis told me so. He's only mean when he's got to be."

"Your champion isn't your Uncle Ennis, is he?"

"No," he answered. "Uncle Ennis wouldn't do. He's too nice."

She laughed. "And it wouldn't do to have a nice protector?" She could tell he thought she'd asked a stupid question.

"No, you got to be mean to your enemies, not nice. That's why Papa asked Uncle Brodick. He's my new champion, and he's not ever nice. You know what?"

Those three words were beginning to drive her to distraction. "No, what?" she asked.

"Brodick's probably spitting fire now 'cause he told Papa not to let me go to the festival, but Mama had her way, and Papa gave in."

"Did your Uncle Brodick attend the festival?"

"No, he'd never go to one 'cause there's too many Englishmen there. I'll bet he doesn't think I'm dead. He's the new laird over all the Buchanans, and everyone knows how stubborn the Buchanans are. Now that he's my protector, I get to call him Uncle. Maybe he's gonna come here and find me before my papa does."

"Maybe he will," she agreed to placate him. "Why don't you put your head down in my lap and close your eyes. Rest for a little while."

"You won't leave while I'm sleeping, will you?"

"Where would I go?"

He smiled when he realized how foolish his worry was. "I'm gonna be scared when you have to go away. I heard the baron tell his friends you got to go get your sister. He's gonna be mad when he finds out you lost her."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I forgot."

"What else did he say?" she implored. "I need to know everything."

"I remember he said your king's looking for the box too, but the baron's got to find it first. I don't know why. I don't remember anything else," he ended on a wail. "I want my papa to come and get me now."

"Please don't cry," she pleaded. She hugged him close. "A boy who has three protectors should be smiling, not crying."

"I don't have three. I only got one."

"Yes, you do too have three. Your father's one, Brodick is two, and I'm your third protector. I'll be your champion until the day I get you safely home."

"But ladies can't be champions."

"Of course they can."

He puzzled over the possibility a long minute and then nodded. "All right," he agreed. "But you got to give me something then."

"I do?"

He nodded again. "A protector always gives something important to the boy or girl he's supposed to watch out for," he explained. "You got to give me something of yours."

"Did your Uncle Brodick give you something important?"

"Yes," he answered. "He gave Papa his best dagger to give to me. It has his crest on the hilt. Papa made a leather sheath for it, and he let me take it to the festival. Now it's gone."

"What happened to it?"

"One of the baron's soldiers grabbed it from me. I saw him throw it on the chest in the great hall."

"We'll find a way to get it back," she promised.

"But what are you gonna give me?" he asked again.

She held up her hand. "Do you see this ring I'm wearing? I treasure it above all things."

In the dying light it was difficult to see the ring clearly. He pulled her hand toward him and squinted down at it. "It's pretty."

"It belonged to my grandmother. My uncle Morgan gave it to me on my last birthday. I'll loop it through my ribbon and tie it around your neck. You'll wear it under your tunic so the baron won't see it."

"Can I keep it forever?"

"No, you can't," she said. "After I've kept my promise to you and gotten you safely home, you'll give the ring back to me. Now close your eyes and try to sleep. Why don't you think about how happy your parents are going to be when they see you again."

"Mama will cry 'cause she'll be so happy, and Papa will be happy too, but he won't cry 'cause warriors never cry. He won't be happy very long, though, 'cause I'm gonna have to tell him I disobeyed him."

"How did you disobey him?"

"He told me not to go near the waterfall. He said it was too dangerous for a boy to play there 'cause the rocks were slippery, but I went anyway with my friend, and when I tell Papa, he's gonna be mad at me."

"Are you afraid of your father?"

He snickered. "I could never be afraid of my papa."

"Then why are you so worried?"

"'Cause he'll make me take a walk with him, that's why, and then he'll make me think about what I did and tell him why it was wrong, and then he'll punish me."

"What will he do?"

"He maybe won't let me go riding with him for a spell... that would be the worst punishment 'cause I really like to ride on his lap. Papa lets me hold the reins."

She rubbed his back and suggested he not worry about it now. He wasn't through confessing his sins. "But that's not all I got to tell him," he said. "I got to tell him what me and Michael did."

"Your friend's name is also Michael?"

"My friend is Michael," he said. "I told you, we were playing a trick."

"Don't fret about it now. Your father isn't going to care about a game you and your friend were playing."

"But..."

"Sleep," she ordered.

He quieted down and was silent for several minutes. She thought he'd finally fallen asleep, and she turned her thoughts to more urgent matters.

"You know what?"

She sighed. "No, what?"

"I like you, but I don't like most of the English. Uncle Ennis hates them all. He told me so. He says if you shake an Englishman's hand, you'll come away without your fingers, but that isn't true, is it?"

"No, that isn't true."

"Are you sorry you have to be English?"

"No, I'm just sorry Alford is."

"He's ignorant. You know why?"

She had the feeling he wouldn't let up until he had told her what was on his mind. "No, why?" she dutifully asked.

"'Cause he thinks I'm Michael."

She stopped rubbing his back and went completely still. "You aren't Michael?"

He rolled onto his back and then sat up to face her. "No, my friend's Michael. That's what I've been trying to tell you. The stupid baron thinks I'm Laird Ramsey's brother, but I'm not. Michael is. That's the trick we were playing. We changed plaids, and we were gonna see how long it took for anyone to notice. When it got dark, I was gonna go to Michael's tent and he was gonna go to mine."

"Oh, dear God," she whispered, so stunned she could barely catch her breath. The innocent little boy didn't have any idea of the significance of what he had just told her, and all he was worried about was his father's reaction when he found out about a silly game his son was playing with his friend. It was only a matter of time before Alford would discover the truth, and when he did, this child's fate would be doomed.

She grabbed hold of his shoulders and pulled him close. "Listen to me," she whispered urgently. "You must never tell anyone what you've just told me. Promise me."

"I promise."

There were only a few flashes of distant lightning to illuminate the gray stones of the canyon, and it was difficult for her to see his face clearly. She pulled him close, searching his eyes, and whispered, "Who are you?"

"Alec."

Her hands dropped into her lap and she leaned back against the wall. "You're Alec," she repeated. She couldn't get over her surprise, but the boy didn't seem to notice her stunned reaction.

He grinned at her and said, "Do you see? The baron is too ignorant 'cause he captured the wrong boy."

"Yes, I see. Alec, did your friend see Alford's men take you away from the festival?"

He held his lower lip between his teeth while he thought about what had happened. "No," he answered. "Michael went back to his tent to get his bow and arrows 'cause we wanted to shoot them over the falls, and that's when the men came and grabbed me. You know what? I don't think the men were the baron's soldiers 'cause they were wearing plaids."

"How many were there?"

"I don't know... maybe three."

"If they're Highlanders, they're traitors then in league with the baron," she muttered as she threaded her fingers through her hair in agitation. "What a mess this is."

"But what if the baron finds out I'm not Michael? He's gonna be mad, isn't he? Maybe he'll make the traitors go and get my friend then. I hope they don't put Michael in a wheat sack. It's scary."

"We're going to have to find a way to warn Michael's family of the danger."

Her mind was racing from one thought to another as she tried to understand the twisted game Alford was playing.

"Alec, if you both changed clothes and Michael was wearing your plaid, wouldn't his clan notice? Surely he'd tell one of them about the trick you were playing."

"Maybe he'd be too scared to tell."

"How old is Michael?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe he's almost my age. You know what? Maybe he took my plaid off is what he did. That's what I'd do if I got real scared, and he'd be afraid to make his brother mad 'cause he doesn't know his brother very good at all since he only just came back home to be laird. Michael was kind of scared to play the trick too 'cause he didn't want to get in trouble. It's my fault," he cried out, "'cause I made him do it."

"I want you to stop worrying that you did anything wrong. No one's going to blame you. You were just playing a harmless game, that's all. Why don't you put your head down in my lap and be real quiet for a few minutes so I can think."

She closed her eyes then to discourage him from asking any more questions.

He wasn't going to cooperate. "You know what?" When she didn't answer him, he began to tug on her sleeve. "You know what?"

She gave up. "What?"

"My tooth is loose." To prove he was telling the truth, he grabbed her hand and made her touch one of his front teeth with the tip of her finger. "See how it wiggles back and forth when you touch it? Maybe it'll come out tomorrow."

The eagerness in his voice as he told her his important news was a jolting reminder of how very young he was. Losing his tooth obviously thrilled him.

"Papa was gonna pull it out for me, but then he said I had to wait until it got good and loose."

With a loud yawn, he put his head in her lap and patiently waited for her to rub his back again.

"I was gonna ask Papa to pull my tooth out at the festival 'cause Michael wanted to watch. Michael belongs to Ramsey," he added just in case she'd forgotten.

"And who do you belong to, Alec?"

He puffed up with importance. "I'm Iain Maitland's son."