

delicate; the alchemy of emily greyson

A Novel

by
Debi Cimo



In Four Volumes



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along with any other information regarding *Delicate: The Alchemy of Emily Greyson*
or its author, Debi Cimo.

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The English translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "First Elegy" used in this novel is an
original translation by Debi Cimo, with regard to the original German version, first
written in 1912.

All characters are fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely
coincidental; however, true historical events are used.

*F*or those who've learned the art of endurance
through the practice of enduring...
you are stronger than you know.



volume 1

anna

1760-1769



“Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart,...

...hear

the voice of the wind and its unbroken message
created out of silence...”

—from Duino Elegies:

The First Elegy,

Rainer Maria Rilke

Willow

chapter 1

1760: —

"Anna, don't stand up yet. Those horses are skittery."

Skittery, jittery, twittery—like me. I was frantically attempting to disentangle my boot from a ripped braid of fabric that threatened to disassemble me before I could free myself, so thick was the tangle; and it looked like I would need to travel the last leg of my journey bootless. But new brides don't travel bootless, no matter how much I wanted to run free from this cumbersome coach that had me pinned inside for days.

Leve had somehow escaped the ravel that held me prisoner and stood outside, safe on the ground, watching me. Warning me. "Say, Mr. Shaw," my husband called to the driver. "Are your Bretons normally so skittish?"

"Nah," the man called back. "Just here in the Valley. They get a bit stompy before the winds come. 'T's how I know they're comin'. 'T's why I charged you dou...." The driver's voice caught a quick breeze that blew the rest of his words away. The frame of the coach squeaked and groaned in the sudden gusts, rocking slightly forward on its wooden haunches only to settle back down before I stood, finally freed from the gordian knot of the torn upholstery.

"...like that," the driver concluded. "Cursed winds come 'n' go quicker than Ben Baynac vanishing into thin air."

"This isn't the highlands, Mr. Shaw!" my husband retorted. "And I'll thank you to keep your superstitions to yourself!" He muttered under his breath, "Man's rattling the wrong bag of bones. Vanishing ghosts indeed!" Reaching for my hand, he said, "Ekerry's pulling up at the crossroads."

Looking beyond the trees to where Leve pointed, gingerly I took my first step down from the coach. The horses shifted their stance and snorted as I stepped down again, this time with more confidence. Immediately I jerked forward almost losing my balance.

"Mr. Shaw, I charge you to keep your horses still!" Leve admonished the driver, tightening his hold on my arm. "The crossroads are behind those aspen," he said to me, his arm cupping my arm.

"Which aspen?" I looked where he indicated but the myriads of trees blocked my view.

"The aspen trees just beyond that bending alder over there." He cocked his head indicating a grove of trees behind him. "Watch that last step. It's farther than it looks." I half-hopped, half-dropped to the hard-packed road just as the horses skittered again. Leve let go of me to attend the luggage. But I was too close to the wheel to keep my balance as the coach lurched forward.

Closing my eyes I braced myself for a fall, except faster than I could think, a gust of wind swept me up in a velvet-boned embrace, a voice in my ear whispered, "*You're here,*" and set me back to rights on my feet. Yet when I opened my eyes, Leve's attention was turned to Ekerry, his groom, who was making his way toward us.

I shook my head and, blinking, tried to catch the breath that escaped me. "What *was* that?"

Leve arched his eyebrows and looked back to me. "That would be a typical Faeran Valley bluther, AnnaGirl."

"And the voice?" I asked.

"No voice." He shook his head. "Just the gust. Always north of the Elian River. It comes, it goes. A bit of a welcome lasting quick as a wink. A bit singed are you?" And he placed his arm around me. "Ah well. All right now?"

The voice, had I imagined it? Bewildered, still breathless, I nodded.

He winked. "Good then. Come. Ekerry's here."



Every bit the travel-worn dustmonger seated beside Leve, I looked out the window while Ekerry drove us past the crossroads. But it wasn't the tiredness I remember so much during the last few hours of our honeymoon that was finally, now drawing to a close. It was the mellow, subdued light soaking the world outside my window I remember most—and the roadway. Or, more significantly, what lined the roadway. Billows of late spring flowers. Fragrant masses of colored blooms rolled like a still, unmoving tide and framed the raised, hard-packed, dirt road beneath the carriage's wheels.

The combined scents of jasmine, mixed with hyacinth, phlox and pollen swirled in the air and the only thing that kept me from putting my head out the window to smother in their collective balm was the clog of kick-back dirt and equine dust that would have choked out the fragrances and burned my eyes.

A perimeter of young forest clung to the edge of the flowers—white cherries in bloom, aspen, pink crabapple, deep, lithe maple, and dripping, tender oak, all fresh and green with slender trunks. A forest you could get lost in if you knew how. (Or if you didn't.) The rush of unseen water confirmed a river was nearby—the Elian River, Leve said. It sounded like it was surrounding us and, until we turned south and crossed the narrow bridge, there was no way I could tell the river ran parallel to the road. White rapids rushed under the stone bridge, under the clap of the horses' hooves as the carriage wheels clugged on the flat flagstones.

I looked across at Leve, his eyes luminescent in the lengthening afternoon. He winked. "Another hour and we'll be there." His voice was dreamy, drifting, almost drowsy. I was happy, or as close to happy as a new bride who is not in love with her husband could be....

Three months ago I hadn't ever heard of P. Levi Greyson and now this man who dared keep his first name a mystery, sat across from me, grinning absently.

Our whirlwind courtship ended in elaborate nuptials my father justified as being in my best interest. "He can care for you," my mother chimed in with strong undercurrents—meaning, *security*. But I think, for her, it was more about Leve's charm.

Stating the Faeran Valley was not only somewhat secluded but, he'd added, held an enchantment, "if you take to that sort of thing," her eyes had brightened.

"Enchantment?" she asked, intrigued.

"That's the theory," he replied, arching his eyebrow.

She'd giggled as if it were she he was courting, and he completely won her over when he dashed off, "I have these pear trees that produce the finest perry. But personally, that's the only enchantment I've experienced." Winking, he'd raised his glass to my mother. "Perry. The draft of choice in the Faeran Valley. It makes one's eyes sparkle almost as bright as yours, Mrs. Reverend. But a striking woman such as yourself needs no assistance in that department."

That was the moment my fate—at least in my mother's glittering eyes—was sealed....

Now, months later, seated across from my husband who was watching me with a curious look in his eyes, his grin widened, the same grin he wore when his mind was preoccupied with future plans.

Heading south, the landscape opened into the orange light stretching its late afternoon shadows with every pace the horse kept. The sun was just above the horizon in this hill-crested land and the early evening coolness drifted dulcet through the air.

Within the hour we were turning the bend before Cragmoor Hills came in view. Leve's home—my home now. It was on the southeast side of the Faeran Valley, tucked into the heathery base of the hill that formed the bowl-shaped climb out of the Valley.

My husband lifted his eyes out of whatever reverie he was silently holding and fastened them on me. "Close your eyes, Anna," he said, his voice excited. "I don't want you to see it yet."

I did as he said and waited. The echo of the river still surged through my senses, the last rush swelling into the romp and rumble of the Cragmoor vis-à-vis that carried us homeward, turning the last leg of our journey into a winged flight, so much lighter and springier than the earlier coach from which I'd narrowly escaped.

But closing my eyes only brought back that wink-of-an-eye whisper, "*You're here*," clinging to me like a hesitant dance, the distinctive embrace of the remembered wind-gust still throbbing against my temple. Too vivid for dreams, too wayward to trust. I tripped my brain out of its trance and attempted to concentrate instead on Cragmoor Hills.

I had little idea what to expect; Leve had told me only bits and pieces. "Words can't do it justice," he'd said. And then...

"Open your eyes, Anna," he whispered, his hands touching mine, enveloping them in his own. He was right. I caught my breath.

A warm, reddening blanket fell across the trees and sharpened the edges of the wood and stone house. It looked like it had been carved out of the hill, set in such a way as to blend in with the stones that terraced it.

As we curved around the narrow road closing in to the front of the house, the sculpted door and deep window casements came into view. I was speechless.

It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Not overly large, but, like Leve, distinctive in its surroundings. A thing of beauty, of warmth and quality, and it was immediately more home than anywhere I'd ever been.



Leve pulled the bell three times. Three chimes sounded inside the hall as he held the door for me. A short, wood-floored hallway with a carpet the color of burned oranges cushioning an ornate maplewood wardrobe and mirror greeted me as I stepped past my new husband and into his—our—home.

A slip of a woman not much older than me with the pinched face of a matron, scurried up to us. "Nira, this is Mrs. Greyson", Leve said by way of introduction.

She dipped slightly and mumbled, "Pleased, I'm sure," or something along those lines.

"Where are the others?" Leve asked.

"On their way," she replied.

Behind her an ornate boy on the cusp of manhood with doe eyes and darkening whiskers like shadowed peaches came up to me.

"Samuel, Mrs. Greyson," Leve introduced. "He's our wonderboy. Anything we need, he does. Right, Samuel?"

"Yessir. Ma'am," Samuel lowed, his voice mellow as cattle. He looked as if he belonged in a children's story. Shifting his feet, he gave me an apple-cheeked grin and looked down.

"And Dahlia?" Leve asked, looking around.

Nira answered. "In the kitchen. She was saying something about 'tenderizing more than just the lamb'."

"If that woman wasn't the best damn cook around, I'd sack her," Leve said.

"Nira, show Mrs. Greyson upstairs to her room." To Samuel, he ordered, "Her trunk is just outside. Take it up behind them." Then turning to me, he said, "I'll be around in a bit. I want to check on Nells."

"Who?"

"The mare that was due to foal while I was gone. Please excuse me. I'll be back within the hour."

And before I knew what was happening, Nira dipped her leg slightly and eyes down, said, "Come with me, Missus."

She all but fled before me and I almost had to run to keep up with her.

The hall opened into a wide staircase that curved up five steps before splitting like a huge "t", the branches ascending to upper floors—a deviated butterfly staircase. The tip of the "t" spread into an atrium, an interior courtyard with flagstones that mimicked and echoed our steps. Ferns framed an indoor stream no wider than a deep-green sash ribboning through the room before puddling to a washtub-sized pond. I could see white and orange fish moving under the crinkly surface. A small footbridge centered the room, lit from the cut-glass domed ceiling high above, reminding me of the stages traveling players used who frequented my home town in the warmer seasons.

I stopped and marveled but not for more than a moment.

Nira rushed me up through the wing to my left—and we almost ran up the balcony overlooking the floor below. As for the rest of the house, it was a blur as I raced behind this maid-with-wings.

Finally, in my room, the door shut behind me, shoes to the side, I collapsed on the bed. A slight knock with Samuel's voice lowing softly, "Your trunk, Ma'am", interrupted me but after he slid it into a corner and left, I was back to my collapse.

My eyes were heavy, too heavy to fight the sleep I was desperate for, and the last thing I noticed before I fell asleep clothes and all, was the open mud-colored curtains at my windows.



"Anna?" I heard. Then, "Anna." Someone was shaking me and I wanted whoever it was to leave me alone. But, "Anna!" His voice was louder this time.

I cracked my eye open. "Leve," I started.

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping," I murmured.

"You were so still I thought you were ill."

I must've looked a sight. I hadn't bothered to take out the pins from my waist length, dark copper hair and it lay like rancid feathers around me on the bed. The room was dark now, the flicker of candlelight reflected from the windows a multifaceted, diamond-paned onyx keeping the dark at bay. I tried pulling myself up and—O! I was stiff and couldn't move. I'd forgotten—stays. I was going to have to get used to these horrible undergarments my mother had insisted, as a wife now, I should wear. First time (and last, I noted to myself) I'd sleep in them though. No wonder Leve thought I was ill.

He looked at me sideways. "I can have Dahlia send up your dinner."

"Dahlia?"

"She's my cook, remember? You must be tired."

"I'm not really hungry. Could I just have some tea?"

"She prepared a special dinner for your first night here. She would be insulted if you don't take any. Even if you're not hungry. She's kind of touchy about her cooking."

"Will you eat with me then?"

"I always eat downstairs." He paused. "After tonight I'd like you to do the same."



Turned out I was hungry and dinner wasn't just good. It was the best dinner I've ever eaten. Nira rattled off what was on the tray—apple soup, tomatoes with pine nuts, basil-ginger lamb, and some kind of raspberry buttermilk cake.

As if this wasn't enough, she added an afterthought. "Dahlia said there would have been after-dinner cheese and perry, but that's only in the dining room."

"Do we eat like this every night?"

"No, Ma'am. Fruits and nuts are a delicacy. Just because it's your first night here."

I hoped she was right. If she wasn't, I wouldn't fit into my stays for long. Wretched things.

Tomorrow I'd pay my respects to the cook. But that had to wait until I got a good night's sleep. Tonight I could hardly hold my head up long enough to blow out the candle.



Not seconds later it seemed I was being awoken again to the same, "Anna...Anna!" as before. Only this time it was for duties I hadn't the energy to perform.

"Not tonight," I mumbled through my sleep.

"Why not?"

"I need sleep." Still mumbling.

"I need you," Leve insisted.

"Another night, please."

"You owe it to me." Leve's voice sounded urgent and despite my exhaustion, it jarred me awake.

"What?"

"You promised."

"I promised?"

"Your vows... 'All that I have is yours'. Remember?"

I must've looked as perplexed as I felt. I said nothing.

"Your body. It belongs to me," his words were clipped. "And I want it. Now."

"No." I was starting to get possessive. "It isn't yours to do with as you please. I'm going to sleep. You can stay here if you want, but I'm exhausted." And I turned my back to him, closed my eyes and tried to will him away. It was the first time I'd refused him.

But he wasn't done. "You are mine," he whispered.

I said nothing, begging sleep to rescue me from this unfolding nightmare.

Angry now, he shook me. "Did you hear me? I said I want what is mine."

Still, I refused to answer.

He shook me again, this time with both hands. "Anna...you're not asleep!"

Silent still. I kept hoping he would leave.

"Why else do you think I turned down your dowry?"

Did my ears miss something? I snapped, turned over directly into his angry glare. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I knew you weren't sleeping!" His eyes flashed. In a quiet voice that sent an icy fear rippling through my breast, he continued. "You are wholly mine. And you know it. I own you."

There were simply no words. Except it must've been true. I said nothing. What could I say? I knew nothing about the terms of my dowry.

Leve filled in for me. "You don't say 'No' to me."

But I wasn't done either. "I'm not saying 'Yes'." And I turned back over, my spine to him.

"I should make you." His words punctured my bones.

In a burst I asked, "And then what?" then waited. Silence. It would either get worse or he'd give up.

Eventually, in a quieter-if-not-kinder tone, he said, "When then?"

"Maybe tomorrow. If I get enough sleep tonight."

"Fine!" he spat. "But if you say 'No' again, you will regret it!"

I let that go. I hated confrontation even more than I hated my stays. I heard his slippers swush along the floor; the light of his candle dimmed as he walked away. Darkness then and the clank of the door handle as he snapped it closed behind him.

My eyes wouldn't close. Wouldn't blink. My heart pounded like a drum, I was shaking all over. I sat there listening to it, sleepless now though my eyes were burning for rest. What just happened? Did Leve really think he owned me? Is that how it was in marriage? Did I owe it to him?

I willed myself to move. As quietly as I could, I got up and turned the key softly, softly until I heard the lock click. Rushing back to my bed I let the covers sink me deep in their enveloping comfort. And, finally, finally after playing it over and again in my mind, I fell into an exhausted sleep.



That was the first night I dreamed of her.

A small girl twirling in a berry-red, velvet dress. Laughing, working daisies into a chain, into a wreath. Then pulling the petals off one by one. I was standing beyond, watching. In a field of daisies lit bright as day but instead of the golden sun, it was the silvery hue of the moon. She stopped. Stared at me, grey eyes puzzled.

In a flaxen voice, she said, "There you are, Rachel!..."

"Rachel?..."

"Why are you weeping?"

She was looking at me, but did I know her? Her words...she was speaking to me, but looking right through me.

My dream fingers brushed my cheeks. Wet. Was I weeping? She was fading.

"No!" I tried to call but my voice was soundless. She faded into nothingness. "No!" I panicked. "Who are you?"

A hollow ache flooded my chest and I woke, my heart thumping with her loss.

chapter 2

"I want to show you the grange."

Leve sounded excited. It had been almost a week since my first night at Cragmoor Hills. Almost a week since I'd come to define this new berth with my husband as an ongoing but very personal coup d'état. I dreaded nights now, waiting for Leve's knock, waiting for him to enter whether or not I said anything. If I locked my door to him, he'd unlock it with his own key.

This morning I was vainly attempting to rub out the dark smudges the broken night had left under my pale eyes, making them appear less like the lamb's ear that bordered my mother's garden and more like the moon.

"Come with me," Leve said, "I'll show you the herd."

I'd begun to define my desires, not by what I knew I wanted—that was too ambiguous—but by what I knew I didn't want. Not that it mattered. Seeing the grange was neither here nor there. It was something to do and it didn't threaten my ideals, so I agreed.

I followed Leve through the hawthorne hedges that separated our house from the grange. It stood about five-hundred yards from the house but I hadn't seen it yet as it was visible only from the second story windows that faced north and I hadn't made much effort to look, as most of those windows were allocated to the servants' quarters, to which I rarely ventured.

Looking across it now from behind my husband, it looked like a meadow separated into two paddocks by a wooden fence. Leve said there were twenty-three horses in all—thirteen Percherons, ten Andalusians. There were a variety of greys, some with dark manes and tails, but a few were bay. Some had thick, glossy charcoal coats, one was copper, and one looked like a rain cloud.

"How do you tell the difference between the Percherons and the Andalusians?"

Leve held out his hand, his fingers in a slanted "L" shape as if he were framing them. "The Percherons are in the larger paddock—they have thicker legs and stouter bodies. Most of the black ones are Percherons. I've only had two ebony Andalusians."

Leve pointed toward the smaller paddock. "That one over there near the fence," he indicated with a nod. "That's Pathos, my own Andalusian. He's chatting Helen up. I'm hoping to have him sire a foal by her. With his chestnut coat and her dark mane, it'll be a fine horse. And valuable. They're finally warming to each other. Maybe they're compatible after all."

"Does it matter?" I asked.

We were headed toward the stables now. Long, deep stables nestled in next to the hill with fencing blooming out into the greening meadow, a pool of amber-green with wild grasses and alfalfa. We passed a boy with freckles. Leve waved, "Hallo, Monty."

"Mr. Greyson, Ma'am," the boy nodded, then continued on his mission.

"It matters to me," Leve said in answer to my question. "These are two of the best tempered breeds you'll ever come across, so there aren't too many that are incompatible. Once in a while you get a couple that for some reason doesn't click and it makes for a difficult pregnancy and birth. Sometimes the mare won't acknowledge her foal after it's born. That's not often the case though. Usually it's a friendly exchange."

I knew he was talking about horses, but it rang too close to home for me. A wave of aloneness washed over me—self-pity. I shook it off and tried to make sense of this man whose life I now shared.

"See there?" He pointed to a low-roofed cottage on the far side of the stables behind a tangle of ivy, but didn't go near it. "The living quarters."

South of the cottage, south of the stables were fences separating some horses from others. "Why are some of the horses penned off?" I asked.

"They'll eat too much if we let them. So they have designated eating times."

We were at the stables now, Ekerry was crouched outside with a black foal, checking its feet. I smiled at him when he looked up.

"Ma'am," he nodded. "What do you think of the grange?"

"It's really lovely. Especially this little foal. Is this the one who was just born?"

"First week in May," Ekerry said. "Isn't he something?"

"Let me guess...by his black coat, is he a Percheron?"

"Andalusian. The first black one born here. His mother's a bay roan though, so he might not stay black. If he does though, we'll cap a fine lot when he sells. Pardon me, Ma'am."

Leve just looked at Ekerry and laughed. "It's unlikely he'll stay black. But even if he doesn't, he's got good stock. Pathos makes a good sire so this little one may surprise us all. Look at his size already."

Inside the stables, a couple of men were cleaning out some stalls. It smelled sweet with an edgy tang, the tall roof and high beams giving the place an airy feeling. The wood was the same warm maple the house was framed with.

"How do you keep it warm in here during winter?"

"There's a panel we slide across the lower beams to close out the cold. With the hay and proper blankets, it does the job."

"But what did you say—the horses come from Spain or France? That's pretty far south of here. It doesn't get cold there like it does here, does it?"

"Not quite. What made you think of that?"

"I don't know, just thinking," I said. "How do you get them to acclimate?"

"That's the thing that makes a Cragmoor horse so desirable. As they acclimate, they grow heartier. But it's the ones who are born here that are the heartiest. And people want their horses hearty. It's all in the way we handle them."



Like a mantra, Leve's words haunted me, long after their echoes were gone.

"It's all in the way we handle them." Reverberating my dread, I was only his property; did he think he could mold me just like he molded his horses?

"It's all in the way we handle them."

I had to have something to keep my hands busy; my thoughts turned on me, my nemesis threatening to seek meaning into everything that occurred as if it were some kind of symbol now meant to discredit my existence.

Later that evening, alone in my room, I took my needle in my fingers and started a buttonhole stitch—just the flax thread and needle, threading knots, loops and twists into the air, into the amber glow of candlelight and the dark places beyond. I was beginning to define my own desires in those knots and loops and twists, my own secret designs set to the rhythms of unspoken thoughts until a heavy lace began to emerge.

chapter 3

"I'll be going to Spain next year to pick out some new Andalusians. One in particular," Leve said.

He was lying with his head against my shoulder, early morning. Leve in my bed most mornings had been a regular occurrence for the past months. I didn't dare oppose him and it had kept that initial battle we'd had at bay. He was physically stronger than me; not all threats are verbal.

But these were things a woman didn't speak of. For me, it wasn't about love. It was about the lack of love. And the more Leve insisted I do his bidding, the more I inwardly resisted. He wasn't unkind unless I said "No" to anything. And here in the Faeran Valley, without friend or relative, I had only him.

"Spain?" Weeks' journey from here. "How long?"

"Half a year. I'll be leaving when it thaws—end of April at the latest."

I'd have all of summer to myself. Maybe this was my recourse. I almost giggled from relief. Then, "I'd love you to come," he said. My heart sank. "But, if I have my wish—and I always have my wish—I want you to give me a son. Which means you can't go with me."

My mind whirled. "A child, with you gone?"

Not only were friends in short supply, visitors were scarce. The Valley was, as he had said, unlike other places. Secluded and quiet. Leve had told me he preferred I remain south of the Elian River. Most of the enchantments, he said, kept to the north so it was on my behalf he induced the reverend to come to Cragmoor Hills for dinner in exchange for communion. The only regular visitor. And since Leve preferred I didn't gallivant all over the Valley by myself, with the exception of Cragmoor Hills and its surrounding parks, the Faeran Valley was still a stranger to me.

As for that morning in my bed, "No," Leve replied. "Not just a child. A son. We'll acquaint you with Dr. Marsten. He's capable. You'll be in good hands while I'm gone. And I'll make sure to return before our son's born."

"What if something goes wrong?"

"Ekerry's just down the road and Samuel can run for him or the doctor if you need them. Or whatever else you may be needing."

"What if you're delayed and I'm by myself when the baby comes?"

He breathed in, irritated, breathed out. "You won't be. Nira's not much older than you. I know she runs everywhere, but at least you're not alone. And Dahlia's here, too." My eyes spread like green pools of fright.

"If it would make you feel better, we can try to get a girl from the Chrysalis to come live here while I'm gone."

"The Chrysalis?"

"It's beyond the southern hills," Leve answered. "Girls live at the Chrysalis to learn herbals, earth-arts, that sort of thing. I'm sure we can get one of them to come and stay with you. But only if we can get a message through—it's not the most accessible place. Some cloud of mystery surrounding it, I guess."

"But I'm not even expecting yet. I'd rather wait till you return."

"Hopefully my son'll be here soon after I get back and with a capable girl from the Chrysalis for company, you should feel better." He made it clear he wasn't going to relent.



Three days later the doctor paid a call. He was pleasant but it was the kind of visit you want to end before it begins—reassuring but cautious, as I was cautious. His handshake was like milk-toast, the visit reminding me of a gift you opened and nothing was there. The lasting impression I had of him was that he smelled like pepper and the disappointment of having nothing to look forward to the next time he came around. I wrinkled my lip...pepper.

chapter 4

January dawned to a black-frosted earth. A thin, white dusting of snow had fallen during the night and was still dropping its lacy flakes. Wrapped in my thick, ivory shawl, I crossed my arms and tucked my fingers into my sides as I meandered around the conservatory...in winter, my favourite room. It looked out over the inner gardens, gloved now in powdered white. Except for the kitchen, this was the warmest room in the house this time of year as Dahlia grew her culinaries year-round here and preferred to keep the stoves stoked and warm. I liked how the room covered the west side of the house, elliptical, jutting beyond the house and perpendicular to the kitchen. And as the kitchen was separated from the rest of the house by a wide covered breezeway, it formed a type of broken cross to the conservatory and the house.

Dahlia was nowhere in sight. We had a wordless agreement that respected each other's solitude. I had the mornings in the conservatory alone, she the afternoons.

Apple trees grew along the width of the outer walls of the outer rim where they were far enough from the stoves as to get their needed freeze. Toward the inner rim where it was warmer, three ancient-looking pear trees stood. The walls and floors had been built around the trees—berries, herbs, ivies and myriads of other greeneries I had yet to identify filled the length of the perimeter. Iron stoves, fitted into inner coves of the wall that attached the conservatory to the house, kept the room at the temperature Dahlia insisted upon despite its three-sided glass walls and high, almond-shaped ceilings. Scattered winter rugs muffled the stone floor and several small sofas and chairs gave room for amusing one's self among the green.

It was probably the largest room in the house—private by way of the hawthorne bushes that hedged the dormant garden outside, open by way of surrounding glass.

I walked to the old pear trees and fingered the fruit. Fruit in the middle of winter. Red, small, just swollen enough to be soft, ripe. The trees looked like they belonged in some wizened old tale—old men petrified into trees by the curse of some angry wizard perhaps—and, as if it was some kind of forbidden act, before now, I'd never had the courage to pluck a fruit. Feeling daring, I plucked and bit.

"Uah!" I spit it out.

It was here Leve found me. His riding boots clipped the floor where the stone was bare.

"I think that pear tree is bad. Its fruit is bitter."

"Ha—you ate the blood pears? Those're the perry trees, AnnaGirl. The fruit's not bad, just bitter. Perfect for perry but they make for awful eating."

"They're impressive though—looks like they're hundreds of years old."

"That's because they are. Extraordinary aren't they? Never been without fruit." He shook his head. "Look, I'm heading to town. There's a messenger there who can take a letter for me to the Chrysalis. We can see about a girl for you."

I nodded, my eyes still on the trees. "Hundreds of years old? Anything that old has a story."

"I don't really have time for this." He spoke like he was in a hurry, but I looked at him and he said, "All right. The only story I know is that they are the oldest trees in the Valley so I had this room built around them. Now, I must go." He was firm. "I'll be at the grange till late. See you for dinner." Then, "Come here, you." And he pulled me into his arms. "You are some kind of silly girl," he said and kissed me. Then again deeper, longer.



I was living my life in some kind of queue, waiting through the cloudy cold, through the dust-snows that salted the winter landscape. Waiting for an indefinable something, or someone. But there simply was no one. No one but Leve. So I took comfort from a man who didn't care (if he even knew) I didn't love him.

Maybe that's why I liked the conservatory in winter. It reminded me there was life amidst the frost—life amidst the deadness. I made a silent vow to myself that in spring, I would venture farther than the reaches of the gardens, farther than the horse grange. I would see what this land was really about.

My new determination made me itchy for spring. But it was still three months till the thaw, Leve had said. Three months till he was leaving. I had three months to keep myself from carrying a child. But what did women do to keep it from happening? What do you do when you can't say "No"? When the unspoken threat of force screams louder than the undercurrent of refusal? When you knew the next time he wouldn't let you go with just a warning?

But then again, what if I did want a child? A child would make life here worth something. Maybe I wouldn't have to try so hard not to carry. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted one. It would give me someone to love, someone to live for, instead of just wiling away the days. And a small nugget began to grow in me again—the desire to give life.



"The Chrysalis replied. They'll send us a girl when we send word you'll be needing her," Leve said. I set my spoon down and swallowed my mouthful of soup. It had been several weeks since Leve had spoken of the Chrysalis, and I smiled. I was looking forward to the coming of a girl.

I never thought I'd think of a companion as a worthwhile endeavor. But loneliness changes a person not unlike the way a slowly setting sun changes the landscape. And I hoped it wouldn't be long now, till I'd have need of her.

The days were agonizingly slow as I waited. Leve smiled more these days. Of course he smiled more. He hadn't had a reluctant bride lately. I smiled more, too. Surely soon I'd be announcing some news of an impending heir.

But the days were far too uncooperative and my smiles quickly wore off. I grew restless, annoyed. By late February I was grumpy. The snow that came and left, then came again was melting this afternoon and I watched it puddle in the hardened pits of earth left by the horses' hooves.

Leve spoke often of the frozen Elan River and the crack we'd hear resounding throughout the Valley when, near the middle of April, it thawed. After that, he would be going. Just barely two months to get everything in place—if I had reason to need it. I wanted to need it. For weeks now I'd been wanting it and now I was starting to run out of time.

A morning about a month later, I woke feeling strange. Beyond my usual grumpiness, I just felt off. My stays were itchy, my morning tea tasted stale, my whole breakfast smelled like rust. Dahlia was anything but a poor cook, so I knew it was me. Or more to the point, what I was carrying.

"Leve," I said at bed time when he reached for me. "Not tonight. I hurt." Careful not to say "No", I'd been practicing, preparing myself all day for this moment. Was it worth the risk?

"You hurt?" Was that concern I heard in his voice?

"It might be the baby, I don't know."

"Serious?"

I nodded.

"Hell, yes!" He jumped out of bed and ran over to my side. Not the response I expected. Tender now, he touched me. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

He hugged me. "Yes! All right," more to himself. "I'll get Dr. Marsten over here tomorrow, send for the Chrysalis girl...so much to do and..." thumping the side table, "only just less than a month. You've got to sleep." And he left.

It was mid-March. The end of days passing like years. The end of Leve nightly sharing my bed. The end, I hoped, of my loneliness.



Within the span of the next two weeks, the doctor had come and gone leaving adamant concerns and a pepper-scented trail in his wake that made me lose my last meal.

More importantly, Magdala had arrived from the Chrysalis.

Girl she was not. Over twice my age and welcome. O, so welcome, I cried when she came.

Without hesitating a step, she blew right in—a thickish cattail wisp of a thing gliding behind our maid-who-runs (who escaped as quickly as she could), seeing me, meeting me, putting her gloves and cloak on a chair by my settee, and immediately wrapping her arms around me. She sat, I sat together for minutes. Me crying not-so-daintily in her bosom.

"There, there," crooning just like my own mother never had. Then finally, pulling her neck away from my head, she peered down at me. "My, you are a pretty little thing."

And despite my tears, I laughed. "Little? I'm taller than you."

She just looked at me, smiling. "Everyone is. Now, let's have a look at how far along you are."

"Dr. Marsten just examined me last week. He said it looks like I'm about three months or so."

"I thought so."

"How can you tell?"

"It's my job to tell."

"Are you a medic?"

"Midwife. Didn't you know? I thought that was why I'm here. Right now, the only midwife at liberty to come."

"O, that's so much better! Now I don't have to smell that pepper smell that makes me retch when Dr. Marsten comes."

"Pepper," she smirked. "Every time I see that man—and it's usually not on smooth terms—I get a pepper whiff. I think he wears it in his shoes. Ever since we had the conflict."

"The conflict?"

"It's more of a professional disagreement. Birthing is my area; he'd rather the midwives at the Chrysalis stayed at the Chrysalis."

"What does that have to do with pepper?"

She shrugged. "Pepper is said to ward off evil. Maybe he thinks we're malevolent?"

"You?"

She shrugged again.



Magdala moved in, Leve left and I watched it all happen within the week. I was still enslaved to the pepper-scented doctor. Leve wanted him, so he was to be a semi-regular fixture at the Hills until the baby came. Even if Leve was not.

fire,

chapter
5

I heard the knock once but dismissed it thinking it was another door. But at the second knock, "Magdala?" I called. "Come in."

Only, it wasn't Magdala. It was Nira. She handed me a card.

"He said to give this to you, Ma'am." She was her usual brisk self, even her words were rushed.

"He? Who?" Other than the reverend, I didn't know any man here besides Leve, or Ekerry, who hardly ever made an appearance at the house unless he was looking for Leve. And the reverend never left a card.

"The Gentleman." Nira said. "He's *here*."

"Which gentleman would that be?" I asked. Asking Nira for details was like mining for information as one mined for treasure.

"The one from the Lind." She clucked her tongue at me and grimaced in disapproval. "Tch...everyone knows about *him*." She looked me up and down. "Except, maybe you," she added pursing her lips. "You really should get out some."

"That's really neither here nor there, Nira. You may go now." Impertinent girl.

"The card?" She continued. "What'll I tell the Gentleman?"

"Yes, well...just a moment." I looked at the card in my hand. Thick, creamy with dark grey spiral letters announcing his name, "Alexander, Lord Bremistan". Under that, a smaller, straighter script stated, "Bremistan Lind".

"Have him wait in the library," I told Nira. "And serve him some tea."

I left my stitch work on the chair where I'd been sitting, passed through the adjoining door which led to my bedroom chamber, then unfolded my dressing table mirror. His card showed him to be someone of importance and I hesitated associating with gentry. Mingled with my mother's strong-tasting words at the back of my tongue, "First impressions...", I grew anxious.

Who was this Lord Bremistan and what did he want with me? I circled my fingers lightly on my cheeks—I was warm and I hoped, didn't look flushed. Then I took a deep breath, made my way down the steps, turned left through the inner courtyard and opened the paneled doors of the library.

He was standing, tall and straight. I walked toward him. "Lord Bremistan?" I inquired and offered my hand.

He lifted it shoulder height and said, "You must be..."

Nesmerized was the first word that glued itself to my tongue. But I managed, "Mrs. Greyson."

"Yes, I figured that." Speaking, he lingered over each syllable as if he were tasting some rich morsel and finding it delightful. His eyes were grinning. Crinkled and friendly. Grey eyes reflected the grey script on his card. "But you don't look like a missus anything," he observed.

I couldn't resist. I laughed. Lord Bremistan's grin widened into a smile that overtook his face and I relaxed.

"All right. Anna then," I said, dropping my hand across my quickly-disappearing waistline. Inwardly I thanked my mother for supplying me with maternity stays that would hide my condition until a more advanced stage.

"Anna..." he said, trying it on for size. I forgot to breathe, watching him as I did for a couple moments.

Then, "O, please, do sit down..." I invited.

"...do sit down', she said, with an insoluble, sugar-mouth," he returned with a lilt of friendly irony. But he sat and looked. And looked. It wasn't the stare of an awkward man, but one of determined interest. I might have found it impolite but there was something curious about this man and since I didn't know what to do with it, I turned my attention to the teapot. Picking it up with unsteady hands, I poured a steaming cup. Before I could ask him if he'd had some, he spoke. "Forgive me, Anna, but do I seem familiar to you?"

A strange choice of words. How does one respond to such a forward question? I felt like a porcelain doll with her lidless eyes stuck open. "I hardly think so," I said tentatively. "I'm not in the habit of hobnobbing with titled gentry."

"O, that. Don't....please, I beg you," he waved his hand in the air, brushing aside formalities. "It's Alex. Alex to your Anna."

Instantly I was more at ease again. "Better. Alex...you look like an Alex." His brunette hair was clipped close, shorter and more pronounced than Leve's smooth, bronzy mane. Like the tertiary feathers of a crow's wing, only less black with a wave to it and hints of early grey.

"Have you had any tea?" I was finally able to get out.

"No, I was waiting." He had an air of quiet command, a characteristic uncommon in men his age—mid-thirties, I imagined.

I set the cup in his outstretched hand, my hand steadier now in my growing ease, then took my own tea but didn't drink it.

"Now," I said after he'd drained his cup, "what can I do for you?"

"I'd heard Leve took a wife," he said. That took me off guard. Leve had never mentioned Lord Bremistan and yet here he was mentioning Leve's name as if he knew him, and knew him well.

His directness kept me off balance but despite my discomfort, I wanted it no other way just now. I refilled his cup and handed it back to him. This time he set it down on the table beside him and pulled a vial from his interior waistcoat pocket. He pulled the stopper and dabbed his tongue before leaning forward. A sweet scent spiced the air. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"A southern town on the coast three weeks' journey from here. It's called Ashfordshire."

"And you would be the Reverend's daughter."

"Yes. But how could you know that?"

He chuckled. "Your father married my wife and me."

Another surprise. Ashfordshire was known for its healing shores. It was a place visitors came and went, often for private reasons of health, but it was not a large place. Surely the marriage of a titled couple would've hit the gossip vines like wildfire.

"What...you don't believe me?" Lord—er...Alex was asking.

"No, I just don't know how that could've escaped notice." My mother was one of the major culprits in spreading "the news" as she called it. She claimed it was her duty to let the town know intimate details of everyone's life, as far as she knew them. And she brought much of what she knew home to me.

"Your father kept it quiet for us," Alex said, watching me.

Sounded like my father. He kept his tongue just as much as my mother didn't keep hers.

"It was a dozen years ago. You were a girl," Alex said. "I saw you then."

I didn't know if I should ask any questions. Twelve years is a long time. Visiting Ashfordshire was one thing. Getting married in my town was another. And keeping that marriage quiet was a whole different bag of bones. Maybe I shouldn't rattle someone else's bones. So I kept my curiosity to myself.

But Alex wasn't so secretive.

"I saw a girl with a luster in her eye. And then your father held matrimony for Julia and me." He sounded far-off as he spoke. "He thought it prudent for us to marry quietly and quickly. Your father offered us confidentiality. Nothing more."

"I wouldn't know." If there was one thing I wouldn't do, it was to enter into idle speculation about a stranger's life. "If I may be so blunt," irritable suddenly, I shrugged, putting out my best defenses, "I don't wish to intrude." I knew my voice sounded terse as I lied.

Maybe I was just starved for news of the world beyond Cragmoor Hills. Maybe I was homesick for my childhood. I didn't write my mother often. Her letters were full of flowery sentiments of love and devotion that were missing in the reality of our actual history. My father wrote more often. He kept his letters to the point and said everything within a few short paragraphs. Not unkind, but pointed, just like my father. He kept his sentiments unsentimental. I held every word he wrote close to me, reading more than what was written. I hoped he did the same with mine.

So Alex's news was compelling. It broke over me as another facet of my father's careful character. How many other such discretions did my father keep? I realized just how desperately I loved my father and how much I missed him.

Then with a word, a phrase, a carefully threaded observation, I was brought back to the present moment. The sun lingered across the chairs, the sofas, the low-lying tables, the tall, deep cut-glass windows of the library, light warming the waves of rich-textured, floor-to-ceiling books. The room was alive, glowing like embers.

"A lifetime just passed through your eyes," Alex said, his voice a deep, golden liquid. And I found myself looking into the most intense gaze I'd ever seen.



A few seconds passed, neither of us moving. I could hear his breath. I could feel my own, hot and shallow. And then, "Eh' um. Um' hm." Someone was standing in the open doorway, clearing their throat, waiting not so subtly to be acknowledged.

I turned to the figure in the passage. "Yes, Nira, what is it?"

"Uhm, I beg your pardon, Ma'am, but Ekerry's here with the Gentleman's horse."

But instead of letting me answer, "Ekerry can wait," Alex said by way of dismissal. Nira dipped and left.

He took the broken moment and said, "I'm looking over an Andalusian I bought for my son. Leve said it wouldn't be available to see until June. Wasn't even born when I bought it so I haven't seen it yet. Would you like to join me?"

His presence was infectious and I wasn't ready to say good-bye. "You do know he's not here?"

"Who?"

"My husband."

He nodded. "Is he averse to you going outside?"

"No," I smiled. "I thought you might need him to be here?"

He shook his head. "Business is done. Leve's never let me down yet. Now it's time to see what kind of beauty's waiting for us on the other side of these doors." He picked up his hat, its wide, rounded brim was indented in a soft peak near the front, unlike the three-cornered hats I was so used to. Charcoal sueded sheepskin—it suited him.

Outside the gold, earthy day smelled like sunshine. Alex walked behind me under the arched portico and down the simple, wide step which separated the terrace from the drive. Ekerry was brushing a chestnut foal's black mane with steady hands. He was crooning as he brushed and didn't look up until we were next to the foal.

"Mr. Ekerry," Alex said. "I would've met you down at the grange."

"Begging your pardon, Sir," Ekerry said, "but you were here."

"Ah, so the mountain comes to Mohammed," Alex chuckled.

Ekerry looked amused. "Mr. Greyson said gender didn't matter to you, Sir."

"It doesn't. And by the look of this one, she's going to be a fine mare," Alex said. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"How can you tell she's a girl if you've only just seen her?" I asked.

"A man knows," he said with a slow nod.

To Ekerry, he said, "Julian's got some things to undertake before he'll be ready to take care of her, but I expect he'll be ready in another year or two. Can you keep her here till then?"

"Of course." Ekerry shook his head in approval. "She'll be strong enough to seat anyone in a few years' time." He nodded again, "A man with foresight. It's good for a man to know what he wants."

"Even if he can't always get it," Alex replied, flicking his eyes at me.

chapter 6

I swept into Magdala's room, barely knocking, and threw myself on her lounge.
"Did you know about him?"

She was crushing something in a mortar. "Sh," she replied.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"Cardamom," she said without looking up, grinding. She added a second spice. "Cinnamon." Then a third, turning her wrist in a slow, determined movement—a rhythm. "And dried ginger." Finally, she looked up. "Now then, what were you saying? Did I know about whom?"

She was now rolling the herbs together, taking out a pipe.

"Lord Bremistan. He was just here."

"Lord Bremistan...of course. He causes quite a stir wherever he goes." She packed and lit her pipe then took a few puffs while looking at me, frowning. "It looks like he made quite a stir with you, Young Lady. You'd better watch your head."

"It's nothing like that. It's only that I've finally met someone who makes me smile, present company excepted."

"Smile, yes. But for a woman who's expecting, you're smiling for the wrong reasons." Her eyes were a warning. Puff. Puff.

"There's nothing to worry about."

"Even if there isn't, you didn't hear Nira and her whollop tongue. Girl, you have got her buzzing. And Nira isn't a quiet girl. If you don't rein it in, pretty soon the entire Valley'll know how big your smile is...and your expectation." Puff.

"So you're going to rain out my sunshine. On today of all days. The most beautiful day of the year."

"What besides Lord Bremistan makes it the most beautiful? It's as good a day as any. You can't lose your head like this. Look at you—soon to be a mother and yet you blush like a maiden." Puff. "Your husband was right to leave you here in your condition. What might you be like if you were without child?" She clucked her tongue and shook her head. "But, I guess it's to be expected."

"Why is it 'to be expected'?"

She looked at me, pointed the mouth end of her pipe at me and without flinching, said, "You are too beautiful for your own good. And too lonely."

"And you are too bold for yours," I said. "I know I'm married. I know I'm expecting a child. But he knew my father. He knew my home."

"How did that come about?"

"My father married him and his wife in a secret ceremony he never told anyone about. He managed to do that under all of our noses and we knew nothing of it."

"I'd heard he married abroad, but the details were unknown. I suppose it's none of my business but when big events happen to the oldest family in the Valley, everyone takes notice."

"He told me they married quickly and quietly. Nothing mysterious. How did you hear of it? I thought the Chrysalis was 'shrouded in mystery' and all that."

"It is shrouded. Only certain people are permitted through the veil at certain times. But we are not without common knowledge. The entire purpose of the Chrysalis is to be relevant so we can be what we need to be for those who need us. Like you." She pointed at my belly with her pipe. "I stayed at the Lind during Lady Bremistan's pregnancy until after her delivery. The doctor won't set foot on the Lind. So they sent for me."

"You may not know it, but the Bremistans have been in the Faeran Valley for hundreds of years. Their blood is blue." Puff. "Even if Lord Bremistan doesn't act the part, he is an aristocrat. Your husband bought the land he owns—all of Cragmoor Hills—from Lord Bremistan himself." She stood up, walked to the black, gaping hole of the unlit fireplace and tapped the contents of her pipe into the cold hearth. "And that's all you're going to hear today regarding local gossip. Now, shall we dress for dinner?"

"Wait. You said you stayed there. You must've gotten to know them well."

"Not well, no. Lady Bremistan is closed. She's not a person anyone can really know. We didn't speak often. Not like you do with me."

"You must think me so droll and naive."

"Anna, you're young. Much younger than Lady Bremistan. And naive, I'd have to agree with you on that. But you are not droll. It's not everyone who falls into my arms upon first meeting them. Now, we really need to dress for dinner. O, one more thing." She moved her hands over my abdomen. "I want you to stop wearing those stays. It's not good for the baby or you."

They were uncomfortable. And now that my emotions were beginning to settle, I was ready to do away with them.

"Let your rose bloom," Magdala said. "It's not everyone who gets to carry a child. You are blessed, My Sweet."



That night I dreamed of her again. The small girl in the field of daisies. She was crouched, the same velvet dress snuggled across her shoulders and trailed out behind her.

Only this time the sun was golden and shimmery.

It bounced off of her like reflected waves. Because that's what it was. We were near a lake, its water rolling in slight dips. Her dark hair was filled with tiny white flowers—babies' breath—but it was more than that.

I saw they were dancing stars woven in her careless hair. She was cupping the water and bringing it to her lips. Standing, she looked at me, reached out her hand and grasped mine. Her fingers were like blades of wheat as she tugged with a pressure that caught me off guard.

"Rachel, I want to show you something...."

There was no mistaking it, she was speaking to me as if she knew me.

"Come on," and she ran, pulling me along. She stopped at the edge of a cliff and pointed. I looked down. At the bottom of the chasm lay bones bleached from the sun and age. "Rachel, no. Don't look away. They're yours, and mine, too. See?"

Among the bones was a dress, a small, red dress, bleached by the same sun that whitened the bones on which it lay. It was gnawed into tatters.

I woke in a sweat, my ears drumming a dull thud against the greying light outside my window. A mellow ache gripped my reason and I couldn't shake it off.



"Ground-apple. Thank goodness I found you. I hadn't time to plant you here and you, my friend, will be useful." It was one of the many herbs Magdala had collected today and it wasn't the first one she'd spoken to.

It was July and the sun was warm on my face. We were walking, skirting the edges of the forest, following a trail which led to one of the streams that met up somewhere in the distance with the Elian River. Other than her talking to herbs, we were quiet together, Magdala and I.

She was gathering, I was listening to the gurgle, suck and swallow of the stream as we approached, breathing in the rush of water-over-stone while she stooped, then stood, stooped again, then stood, her basket filling slowly. She'd forewarned me that on these slow, waspish days of summer she gathered herbs. She'd been looking forward to catching the wild herbs July through September offered.

"Harvest—my favourite time," she said. I didn't know if she was speaking to me or her herb-friends in her big basket. "When everything is at its peak, life is fullest."

She caught my eye then. "Just like you." She looked at me closer. "Are you all right? You look flushed."

I was warm. I'd been warm since early on, but these summer days were warmer than I was used to. Last year about this time I wasn't so uncomfortable. My face felt hot and the earth started to do a jig in front of my eyes.

"Let's get you sitting down, Girl. Here, take this." And she handed me a wooden cup filled with cool stream water. I dipped my fingers in and patted my face. "It's meant to drink. Not dab."

I took a swallow and felt somewhat better, but still fuzzy. Two cups later, I sat still, finally feeling less like a boiler and more like the future-mother I was.

"Why don't you sit here while I finish up my harvesting. I won't be far and you can call if you need me. You need to rest," Magdala said.

I nodded and thanked her, glad she knew more about what I needed than I did.

"Drink more and drink often. I'm not about to have your little one dry up because his mother won't drink."

"Yes, Ma'am," I said, grateful.

I could hear her as she started on her way, fading as she walked... "Butterbur. Would you look at you. I've never seen you here before. So close to the stream. You with your big, gorgeous leaves..."

And soon I was swallowed up in quiet, the stream an ample-voiced companion to this topsy-turvy afternoon. The thick, green banks I was sitting on were dappled in the trees. Light danced around me in shades, shifting with the wispy, fast-moving clouds high above.

With a start I realized I wasn't alone. The light had dimmed but only slightly and my mouth felt like cotton. I looked around but saw no one. Until she stepped out from behind a tree-oak, I think-and she skirted a large fern. No words. But as she came closer, I swallowed hard. It was she-the girl in the red dress. I waited. What did she want?

With her fingers in the air she drew three circles. "One for him, one for you, one for her," she said, staring straight into my eyes. Then a fourth one. "One for me. Don't lose my story, Rachel."

"How can I lose something I don't have?"

My eyes flew open. I didn't know I'd fallen asleep.

Water. I needed water. Bending down, I filled the cup, took a long swallow and breathed. The woods were empty still, till I heard a snap of a twig to my right.

"Magdala," I called, my voice unsteady in the wake of my unwelcome dream. "Are you finished?"

"I'm not exactly Magdala nor am I finished," came a deep, languid voice that made me grin.

"Alex, I'm glad it's you." Relieved was more like it. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? I'm not the one sitting by the water, alone and...expecting?" He raised his eyebrows and smiled in his slow articulate way. "So unlike the last time we met."

"I was warned about you."

"Am I a danger?"

"Not that kind of warning," I said, amused. "Can you stay for a bit? You're probably needed elsewhere."

"From the way your eyes looked just a second ago, it looks like I'm needed here." He pulled the small, crystal vial filled with a deep copper liquid from his waistcoat, touched it to his tongue and asked, "What were you thinking just before I spoke?" The spice wafted subtly in the air.

"Bad dreams, that's all."

"Resting in the woods by water, hm? Is Magdala close then?"

I nodded. "She's around here somewhere gathering herbs." I held out the cup. "Would you like some? I'm afraid it's all I've got to offer."

"Thanks," and with one hand he took off his hat setting it in the grass at his feet. With the other, he took my cup of water and drank, refilled it and drank some more.

"I was coming to check on my foal. See how the little lady's grown in the last month. But I ducked in here for a breath of shade. Then I found you—a tangent worth pursuing. Or maybe," he added with a breath, "it's just me who needs to be here."

I watched him for a few seconds. The scrunching shades of the forest shifted a shine across his downy, dark hair. "You aren't like anyone I've ever met." I heard the words say themselves, coming from my lips before I could stop them.

He looked at me, his pewter eyes glinting in waves of afternoon dark and light. His gaze was bold.

"Tell me," I requested, "about Bremistan Lind. What's it like?"

"Big," he said. "Marble floors, high ceilings, wide staircases that echo. More rooms than we use."

"Sounds vacant," I said.

"It's not. It's filled with frescoes and paintings, tapestries from the original house. It's got an armory which dates back to the early sixteenth century."

"Now you sound like a typical lord. How long has your family been here?"

"Since 1509 or before. In one form or another. Pope Julius II gave us this land as part of the Borgia treaties. I'll stop there, lest you think me boorish."

"Where is it, the actual house?"

"It's an hour's carriage ride from Cragmoor Hills. Faster by horse. Northeast of Midvale."

"I've never been to Midvale."

"You've never been to Midvale?" He looked at me crooked-faced, like I had said something ludicrous. "You must know where it is."

I shrugged, "I know it's in the middle of the Valley?"

"Yes. Just a town named for its location smack in the middle of the Valley. You can't miss it if you cross the main bridge. You've really never been?"

"No. We didn't take the bridge north. Just south."

He chuckled. "You didn't take the bridge at all, Love. Yours is the Western Gate." I must've been looking lost since he continued, "Do you really not know this? All right, there are three bridges in the Valley." He drew in the dirt with a fallen branch three lines crossing over a larger perpendicular one. "The Western Gate," he pointed out, "your bridge, leads to Cragmoor Hills. You *are* familiar with this one?" I nodded. "Good," he said.

"The Main Bridge is further in." He pointed to the one he had drawn in the dirt. "From your bridge, if you continue straight instead of veering south," he drew another line showing me what he was talking about, "it'll veer east instead of taking you through the southern meadow—to your place. The Main Bridge is here," he repeated, thumping with the branch. "The third bridge takes you north, to the Lind. We call it the Eastern Gate."

He shook his head a bit. "I should take you around and show you what's what. You really should get to know the Valley before your little one comes. It's an incredible place. At the very least, see the town."

"I should at least see the town," I agreed. Leve wasn't here to accompany me and I still wanted to fulfill that promise I made to myself last winter, oncoming child or not. "I'd like to see it with you." I couldn't believe I'd just said that. My face flushed.

Magdala saved me further embarrassment as she came into view across from me on the other side of the stream. When she saw I wasn't alone, she scowled. "I took longer than I expected. But I see you're not hurting for company. I was wondering whose horse I saw. Lord Bremistan," she acknowledged in his direction.

"Magdala," he conceded. "I was just heading over to check on my lady."

"*Your* lady, my Good Sir!" She exclaimed.

"His foal, Magdala," I interjected, humiliated at her outburst. "Just his foal. He ran into me and I gave him water."

Looking at Magdala, he said, "You should know me better than that." Then to me, "I'd better head off, Anna." He picked up his hat and stood, offering me his hand, all the while avoiding Magdala's disapproving glare.

I watched him walk away, wondering when or if I would see him again.