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PRIDE'S CHILDREN

*A novel of obsession, betrayal, and
love*

**ALICIA BUTCHER
EHRHARDT**



DEDICATION

For Bill, Life Companion,
without whose constant support
none of this
would have happened.

BOOK ONE

PURGATORY

*Purgatory is where you pay for your
sins*

DISCLAIMER

PRIDE'S CHILDREN is FICTION

With one exception*, any resemblance of CHARACTER NAMES to names of actual persons is purely coincidental.

LOCATIONS may be real; no attempt has been made to ensure they are accurate.

The PLOT is my own invention, based on real life and tabloid stories.

PUBLICATIONS quoted are either fictional, or used in a fictional manner.

*Wayne Blackburn has graciously allowed me to name one of the villains after him. He is NOT the character.

∞ PROTHALAMION ∞

DEPARTMENT OF CELEBRITIES

OCTOBER 23, 2006

MIXED-UP MARRIAGE?

BY D. LIEBJA HUNTER

Schadenfreude: knickers in a twist—publicly?

The world was shocked, nay, stunned, by the recent revelation that, even as his pregnant fiancée, America's Sweetheart Bianca Doyle, lay supine in a hospital bed at the California Regional Women's Hospital in Burbank, on complete bed-rest to forestall the premature birth of his twin daughters, Irish Megastar Andrew O'Connell, seen last March dedicating his winning statuette at the Academy Awards to Ms. Doyle, was secretly married to best-selling author K. Beth Winter, many years his senior.

The happy couple met in February 2005 here in New York on the set of *Night Talk*, with Dana...

THE NEW YORKER

❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

To ride the fickle horse of fame

...the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away;
blessed be the name of the LORD.

Job 1:21, KJV

“... guests tomorrow will be actor Andrew O’Connell, star of the blockbuster medieval epic *Roland*, and best-selling author of *Prairie Fires* K. Beth Winter. So—that’s it for today. Good night, New York!”

Dana Lewiston, *Night Talk*, 2/24/05

KARY

New York City; February 25, 2005; 11 P.M.

I, KARENNA ELIZABETH Ashe, being of sound mind, do... *But that’s it, isn’t it? Being here proves I am not of sound mind.* She wished, for the nth time, she had not agreed to tonight’s interview. *They have Laura Hillenbrand—isn’t that enough?* But, “...we need more people like you”—meaning ‘damaged like you’—“to speak up...” The handwritten note from *Night Talk*’s host put the burden of duty on psyche and skeleton held together by spider’s silk. Dana didn’t know what she asked for. *But I know. Winter dies tonight. Of exposure.*

“Kary? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Why?” Kary felt like her own straitjacket, hugging herself tightly with goose-bumped arms.

“You seemed alarmed.” Elise’s face was a study in tact. “Then you went further into that head of yours.”

Dear Elise, worrying about her difficult hermit author. Kind Elise, who hadn’t demanded tiresome explanations: Why not a suburban book signing? Why national television? *And why now?* As

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response, Kary nodded toward the plate-glass window separating WMRC-NY's third-floor greenroom from the clear New York night, where streetlights battled the erratic illumination of neon signs under an almost-full moon.

Elise joined her, gazed warily at the skyline. "What?"

It was automatic, halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century. "No. Down." Below, across the avenue, a knot of pedestrians encircled a figure in a puffy red parka whose arm was being held and dusted off by a second figure in a Navy peacoat. "Must be black ice." Kary pointed. "The red one fell. He hit his head. He lay so still for so long I thought he was dead. I would've called 911—" She shrugged. "But then people got to him, and he came back to life, so I started drafting a new will—"

Elise made a sound of disbelief. "A will?"

"Death? Resurrection? Life changes? Wills?" Logical train of thought? *Am I going to be this incoherent tonight? Oh, God.*

"Ah. Perfect sense. Of course." Elise glanced up to where the ticking wall clock's minute hand jerked to 11:10. "Aren't you hungry?" She gestured with a mug of decaf at the spread of pastries, square blue Fiji water bottles, and the ubiquitous coffeepot.

Hollow, yes. Hungry, no. The acrid aroma of coffee nauseated Kary. Elise had insisted on picking her up at the airport, getting her settled at the hotel, and taking her out. They had chatted desultorily in the taxicab. *I should try harder to be polite—I come so infrequently.* "Dinner's still with me. I'm fine."

"Makeup okay? I told them not too much."

Kary's hand started toward her cheek; she restrained herself. "It's fine. Thanks."

"This show is way too late—" Elise's head snapped round at sudden music.

Kary heard the faint tinny sound of Beethoven. *Für Elise.* 'If composers write for you, what you gonna do?' was the agent's standard joke about her ringtone. As Elise went to dig out the devil's communication device from her gargantuan handbag, Kary turned back to the window, but the sidewalk Samaritans had dispersed.

"What? I told you not to call—" Elise took her cellphone conflict to the far corner.

Kary caught muted acrimony, but not the words. Then placation, promise, a hang-up snap.

"Kary..." Elise was back.

Kary braced herself, drew the half-smile on her lips. *Here it comes.*

“I know I promised to take you back to the hotel...”

“But something’s wrong.”

“My daughter’s been in an accident—minor,” Elise hastened. “She couldn’t track her dad down, she’s all shook up— She just got her license—”

“You have to go. Of course.”

“I hate to leave you. If it were anything less—”

She touched Elise’s arm in reassurance. “Family comes first.” A stab of envy that Elise had a teenager and a husband to go home to. “I’m already here. What can go wrong?” *Don’t worry; I won’t bolt—I gave my word.*

The vertical worry-lines in Elise’s forehead relaxed. “I’ll arrange with the staff to take you—”

“I’ll get a cab, Elise. I’m a grown woman. Go!” Kary kept her tone light. “It was very sweet of you to come with me.” She helped Elise with her coat, bundled her out, clicked the door shut.

She leaned both palms on the door’s cool steel, exhaled. She ordered her fingers not to go for the doorknob. Her forearm nerves fizzled with electricity. *I have no right to feel abandoned.*

Quiet. The ritual would help. She stood straight, took three deliberate breaths, centered herself. *Light, sound.* She located the switch, cut the buzzing overhead fluorescents that overpowered the table lamps’ gentle glow. The remaining soft sibilance of too-dry air through ductwork, she reclassified to white noise. Better. She suppressed the urge to flee, folded herself into the pearl-gray velveteen armchair cube in the expensively noncommittal room.

She focused her mind on the clock, instructed tension to ratchet down as every tock marked the death of a second. *You’ve lectured to auditoria full of med students—how can this be worse?* But that was years ago...

She closed her eyes and expanded her quiet zone, attending to each extraneous stimulus before consigning it to oblivion. Relax. Breathe. Release. Breath *in*, adrenaline metabolites *out* with the cleansing flow. Breath *in*...

Kary startled as the door banged open.

The producer, a pixie of a young woman with cropped black hair held back by her headset, wafted in, hovering inches above the floor. Her gaze flickered around. “Ms. Carter...?”

“Family emergency. Problems?”

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"It's always frantic before live TV." The producer snorted delicately. "Listen, I'm sorry it's short notice, but will you mind terribly being first?"

Kary's stomach muscles clenched. "No. Of course not," she lied. Will you mind being executed a half-hour earlier? What was the producer's name? *Damn this brain.*

"Andrew O'Connell's late." The producer tapped her wristwatch. "He can't possibly make it—it's eleven twenty."

"Already...?" Icy roads? Accident? What if he doesn't show and I have to be coherent for a whole hour? *The outcome will be the same.* Shh. *Quiet.* Panic never went far. *Silly Panic.*

The producer's head swiveled at the sound of footsteps and voices from the hallway.

"Your missing guest?" *Salvation?*

The producer darted to the door. "Phew! Now you won't have to rush." Quick peek at her watch, head shake. "Cutting it awfully close. I gotta run." Hesitation. "Is there anything you need? Dana insisted—"

A last meal? Final cigarette? Eleventh hour reprieve? "I'm fine. Go."

"Can I flip the monitor on for you?" The producer flitted toward the plasma screen TV, reached for the ON switch.

"No!" Too sharp? *Quiet.* "Thanks. I'll just rest till you want me."

The producer nodded and whizzed out, leaving the door open again. *Rats.* Melly! *That* was the producer's name.

So much energy so lavishly squandered. Kary's lips compressed a smile. Well—I know where *I* am in the pecking order. She lowered her eyelids, breathed out a molecule at a time.

Remember: you're not here for you.

ANDREW

ANDREW O'CONNELL scrambled after the WMRC-NY staffer, entourage at his heels. Damn meetings. Damn slippery night traffic. Last time he trusted someone else's estimates of travel time. He was acutely aware the show had started. No way around that. Unprofessional, being late and not warmed up. *A reputation I do not need.*

The corridor's chessboard pattern—man-size black and white squares—keyed the memories of his other visit. Greenroom? To his left? There. Sharp girl, Dana, but fair, if memory served him. *Will she treat me the same?* The corner of his mouth curled. *Cynic.*

“We’re ready for you, Mr. O’Connell,” the producer greeted him, peeling him away from his escort. She stole a quick glance at her watch. “Five minutes.”

He heard relief underlying briskness. Little bit of a thing. Wedding ring. Pity. New? *Promised I’d be here, didn’t I?* He knew that was dangerously disingenuous. “Ye’ll be wanting me in there?” He gestured toward the doorway. Wouldn’t do to worry about the lads—George’s bailiwick.

“Too late. Dana needs you in the wings,” she said, as she hurried him past, down the short corridor to stage left. He caught a passing glimpse of a straight-backed woman, legs tucked under her in an armchair, her eyes closed. Short pale hair and soft gray top, flowered skirt wrapped about her. Dana’s other guest, the mysterious writer?

The producer hustled him toward a chair at curtain’s edge.

“Thanks. I’d rather be standing.” A knight on the back rank, surrounded by purposeful chaos: he liked having these few moments to himself. Anticipation tingled the backs of his hands, and his fingers itched to light a fag. *Americans and their damned regulations.* Maybe he’d quit when there was no stress in his life.

The producer deserted him without a word, scurried into the fray. The smallish studio thrummed. Five tiers, sixty, a hundred people? College students, middle-aged couples, retirees. Packed house. *All mine.*

The usual painful Klieg lights spotlighted the magnificent Dana, in full monologue, striding about for the audience, milking them for delighted groans. Black lamé slit to the thigh and impossibly high heels, with one arm covered to the wrist and the other naked. No jewelry he could see, except for sparkles at her ears. *Ah, Dana.* Stunning—and aware of it. Too bad she was off-limits—a long-time live-in boyfriend. Now that he had more currency, he asked George to check; George gave him the look, said, in the irritating manner of nailed-down men, ‘Ye’ll only be in New York for one night, lad.’ *So I should spend it alone?*

Dana must like living on the edge—*Night Talk* was one of a tiny minority of shows that didn’t pre-tape at a reasonable hour. Which wasn’t an excuse. He caught the exact moment she *knew* he was there—she drew herself taller, squared her shoulders. If she played hardball later, well, he deserved it. *Her show, boyo.*

His attention was distracted by a mouse of a hair-and-makeup girl apologetically interrupting him to dull whatever shine there might

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be on his face—he wished he'd had time to shower and shave: scruffy was accidental, unless ye believed the yellow sheets—and to run a comb through what Bridget used to call his 'shaggy blond mess.' He wouldn't find Bridget in the audience—*Slash that line of thought off at the root.*

Makeup girl was followed by an equally meek microphone tech; by the time he looked up Dana dominated center stage, going to commercial with a mite of a lead-in: "Don't go away—when we come back—*Andrew O'Connell.*"

Dana's gorgeous closeup was replaced on the studio monitor by a commercial plugging a cruise line. Without even a glance in his direction, Dana strode to the dais, assumed her throne, and, while worker bees surrounded her, crossed her lovely leg toward him as high as TV allowed. Curious how most male talk show hosts hid behind desks. The women universally flaunted themselves.

He found himself evaluating the scene as a set before "Action!" *Hell, still plenty of time.* This was his first chance for a direct comparison of 'before' and 'now.' Devil of a trick figuring out what had changed. Fifteen months ago, almost to the day, he'd been here doing promos for FAL, a week before its opening. Before the harrowing period for award nominations, small victories, smashed hopes. By industry reckoning, it was a reasonable success—and vanished, as most did. But there was camaraderie, a we're-all-in-this-together feeling from staff on the TV shows where he plugged the film.

They would never have left me alone before, put up with me being late. No, the producer wasn't new—but her deference was. *Shite.* Same for makeup girl and mike tech. Now they wore masks. *Shite.* He'd been kicked upstairs. He craved fame—and the universe was slapping his face with it.

His heart rate, which had been settling, ticked into high gear. It meant, subtly or no, that he'd lost the ability to take people at face value, trust his intuition. And it put the earlier meeting with the record label execs in a different light, their CD deal, the offered tour. He knew they were interested in the band only because of him and his sudden notoriety, but he thought the execs sincere about the music: his lyrics, his and George's quirky melodies, the band's complex rhythms. *So be it.* The music came first. He'd take one, then, for the band, for them tolerating his 'day job.' If suckers came because of *him*—and stayed for the sound, good enough.

Now Dana was back from the break, and he readied himself. He willed his pulse, if not slow, somehow voluntary. He fisted his

hands, then stretched his fingers as far back as they would go, twisted the signet on his right ring finger around and settled it, expelled all the air from his lungs. *They want entertainment?* Well, he'd have to provide, wouldn't he?

A few more jokes, and then Dana clipped the arm of her chair with the edge of her hand, rose pneumatically, pivoted, and to rising applause and catcalls, gave them what they wanted. "Here he is—" dragged-out pause, "Andrew O'Connell!"

Hell, it's still good. He stopped trying not to grin, gathered himself up, launched himself across the stage. The audience went wild. He chose two red-headed women in the second row, waved. As he neared Dana, a wicked idea grew. Last time she'd granted him a no-fuss, no-muss air-kiss. *Well, we'll be seeing about that.* He calculated angles to the TV cameras, bet himself she tangoed. Dana extended a welcoming hand.

To hell with safe choices. He closed two steps, grasped her hand, pulled it up and around her to twirl her into the crook of his arm in a swirl of cooperative skirt. He bent her way back, leaned down to soft lips and a hint of ...Shalimar? An infinite second; he reversed, spun her upright, steadied her. When he released her, the crowd erupted.

"Hey! *I* thought we were just *friends!*" Dana said, eyebrows raised, industrial-strength lipstick unsmearred. She patted her mane back into perfection.

Good girl; it'd take more than that to rattle *her*. Shame the hair was so stiff. "That *was* just friends, luv." He achieved the precise aggrieved hurt tone he was aiming for, pouted his bottom lip. Couldn't *possibly* compromise her ratings.

Her gaze assessed his measure. She gave him three slow claps. "*You* get the reputation you deserve." She shook her head and chuckled, took her seat.

He dropped into the guest chair, mugged for a front row bevy of college blondes in tight turtlenecks, let the moment stretch. Then he turned his attention to the host of *Night Talk*.

Good enough for ye? "Grandmother O'Connell says I never get a lick amiss."

BIANCA

Hollywood Hills, California; 8:45 P.M. PST

"YOU OKAY, BABE? YOU haven't said a word."

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“Look, Michael, I’m going to get screwed again—can we not talk about it?” Bianca Doyle gazed out the side window of the limo, but her focus was not on the occasional streetlights nor the well-set mansions lining Alameda East up towards The Hills. She reviewed the meeting mercilessly. She *hadn’t* done anything wrong.

True, Thomas Pentell had insisted on an early dinner at *Les Clés*, almost too early for this Dior—she lengthened her neck, lifted her chin—cleavage only worked if you showed it. Cleavage, and the cosmetics to make her black eyes, hair, and lashes prove her one of the most beautiful women in the world.

Pentell’d made her wait until they were finished. ‘Sorry, my sweet.’ He lit up one of his awful cigars, finally got it puffing foul smoke, his excuse for choosing the private club. ‘The studio just won’t go for it: you have no directing experience, the script is a patchwork, and you know after the last two...’

He knew perfectly well you did what you got—Hollywood was hell on women—if they sent you crap, you acted the crap out of it.

If the studio’d put *any* money behind distribution... Before that they couldn’t get enough of me, *America’s Sweetheart*, remember?

She probed the exchange seared into her memory: ‘It’s high concept, Tom. Francis is working on it—’

‘People don’t want to see a movie about a pervert. C’mon. Nude photos of children?’

‘Even if he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*?’

‘Biopics are dead. And, by the way, they hate the title.’

‘*Dodgson*? It’s a working title for God’s sake, Tom.’ Charles Lutwidge *Dodgson*? Lewis *Carroll*? *Hello*?

She *knew* Pentell wouldn’t be meeting with her if he wasn’t interested. ‘But the *angle*, Tom. Did he tell stories to the Liddell girls to cover his affair with their governess, did he go after Miss Prickett to hide a thing for little girls, or—’

‘Or was he just too innocent? Tell me something I *don’t* know.’

She hadn’t gotten through to Pentell until she played her hole card. If—

“C’mon, Bi,” Michael interrupted her replay again. “He said ‘yes.’ Pentell is going to get the studio execs to let you direct.”

Were you even there, Michael? “*If*, Michael. If. If I get O’Connell. If I get that dumb-ass Francis to get off his butt and finish the script. If I produce it for peanuts.” She turned away in disgust.

“But you said you had O’Connell—”

For someone claiming to run a production company, Michael was as dumb as a rock. What had she ever seen in him? “What I *said* was that he was *interested* in the *part*. Which isn’t the same as having signed on the dotted line.” And if the damn Branford Studios hadn’t dragged its heels, it would have been a done deal last year at the Academy Awards dinner, when she’d had five minutes to pitch Andrew O’Connell right when he was smarting from being gracious about *First at Lies* losing every award but cinematography. “Now, after *Roland*, he’ll be completely out of reach.”

“But *Roland* was released too late for consideration for this year’s awards.”

“Thank God for small favors!” Huge favors. What were its producers thinking when they couldn’t manage to edit *Roland* in time for a limited release before New Year’s? Idiots. By *next* year, no one would remember, not the Academy anyway.

“You’ll have plenty of time to talk to O’Connell up in Maine next month.”

“New Hampshire.” Is it really that hard, Michael, to remember where my next movie is? *Men are fools. Damn fools. All of them.*

“Whatever—you can do it.”

One chance—the boonies—closed set— She had a mountain of work ahead of her. O’Connell had been alone at the Academy ceremonies—no ‘significant other’? *Be damned if he’s not eating out of my hand by the time New Hampshire’s a wrap.*

The limousine whispered on, usually the most calming of sounds, windshield wipers whisking away the beginnings of a light winter mist. She forced herself to relax into the soothing leather with its faint aroma of saddle soap, but they were already turning into their cul-de-sac.

Then everything went horribly wrong: the limo turned on its approach, and, through the rain-dribbled side window, her gaze locked onto her mansion, a floating wraith pale and insubstantial at the end of the drive. She gripped the armrest as warmth drained from her body. A ghost house. *Everything I’ve worked for is a dream.*

“Bianca? What is it?”

A switch somewhere activated. The long line of Mission California arches sprang to life. She blinked.

“Nothing.” She shuddered, pulled the shawl closer. “Turn up the heat.”

“But we’re almost home—”

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She glared at him. “And get that timer fixed. Immediately.” She never again wanted the illusion of a dead set.

Michael shrugged, adjusted the heat. He checked the security system, clicked the remote in his pocket; the gate swung open. Thankfully, he kept his mouth shut.

The driver pulled up to the front steps, stopped. He came round to open the door. Michael stepped out, carefully scanning the area around the brilliantly-lit entrance before opening the umbrella and offering her his hand.

She quashed the tiny fear. Michael was good at this now. No fans here—though there had been a small crowd outside *Les Clés*, if not fans, then gawky tourists who would settle for any celebrity.

Leaving the club, Michael had known to allow just a few autographs—napkins, maps, even an actual autograph book—and a couple snapshots, before motioning the limousine forwards for her gracious escape. Fans didn't argue with Michael Hendricks; even in Armani something about his bearing screamed ‘ex action star.’ Here, home, safe—but she leaned lightly on his hand and made the effort graceful, gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you, Michael.” Too bad there were no cameras.

She inhaled the heavy fragrance of massed night-blooming *huele-de-noche* flanking the entrance. *This is mine—my Tara—whatever it takes.*

“Bi? You're getting wet.” Michael had dismissed car and driver; he waited, annoyance evident in the pointed way he held the umbrella.

She let him guide her up the steps to where, on cue, the door opened. She said ‘*Buenas noches*’ to whichever uniformed maid had evening duty, handed the girl her wrap. “Don't be too long,” she threw back over her shoulder as she strode away. She could hear Michael ordering ice for a nightcap. Which irritated her all over again. Must he drink every night? Her Papi had *his* every single night—and look where that landed him. *Men*. Would it be too much to hope that the damned Irishman O'Connell didn't drink?

For that was where the solution lay; she could visualize him and that sandy hair so clearly in the scenes Francis had finished. Lewis Carroll: the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, writer, cleric—*and what else?*

ANDREW

Night Talk, New York City

“...THEN YOU PLAYED A gay prep-school math teacher accused of propositioning a student. *First at Lies* for director Don Neils-son.” Dana recrossed her leg. “Bit of a stretch for you?” The proffered thigh was tan, firm.

“Aye, that ’twas.” Andrew gnawed at a fingernail, waited for the chuckles to subside.

“Because you’re straight?” She leaned in close, her manner inviting confidences.

The audience rustled forward in their seats.

“No.” He knew what she wanted. *Ham*. “Because I’m god-awful at maths.”

Open laughter.

She straightened, serious now. “I thought you deserved the Oscar.”

“It was a great role, and an incredible honor to be nominated.” The loser’s obligatory reply. *Can we not go down that path, luv?*

“Speaking of great roles...” Dana grinned.

“Aye...?” He couldn’t help himself—his smile widened of its own volition.

A swell of cheering.

Dana held off for the sound to die down, spoke to the TV viewers at home. “If you haven’t been to the movies recently—you have a very special treat in store.” She shifted her gaze back to him. “*Roland* has been out...?”

“Four weeks.” Four unreal, heart-stopping weeks in which he hadn’t slept twice in the same bed.

“Rumor is you almost didn’t take the role. What changed your mind?”

“The period ones—when they’re bad...” He shrugged. “Norm—our director Norm Endleson—he swore he wouldn’t let them cut corners.”

Dana faced the center camera which obediently went to closeup. “For the two people in the universe who don’t know the plot—one’s a guy who thinks it’s a chick flick, the other’s a girl who hates blood-and-guts macho movies—*Roland* is based on the French epic poem *The Song of Roland*.”

“It’s a *chanson de geste*.” The dialect of Bagnères-de-Bigorre brought a sharp pang of loss to his tongue.

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"Hey, pretty good French for an Irishman."

"If ye tongue can twist about the Gaelic, *French* is a snap."

"Twisting tongue, eh...?" Her tone carried a full load of innuendo. She rocked her body suggestively, Groucho Marx'd her eyebrows.

Laughter rippled through the studio.

Dana waved in the general direction of her audience. "We did it in high school—the poem's *unbelievably* boring."

"Ah—it's a bit stylized—"

"*Bor—ing.*"

Have it yer way, woman. He sipped his coffee, set the mug back down. "There were no *talk* shows back then."

Appreciative chuckles.

Dana conceded that one, settled in. "Eleventh century, right?"

"Well, the *chanson* is, but Roland's campaign was before Charlemagne's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor at Christmas 800 A. D."

"So the actual legend had centuries to develop." She nodded, gestured with an open hand for him to continue. "Roland's a French knight—"

"—sent to accept the Moors' surrender at Zaragoza in Spain."

"A cocky bastard." Dana's glance was pointed.

Titters.

He accepted the compliment with a shrug. "Aye. But loyal. He's betrayed and ambushed escorting the Moors' tribute through the Pyrenees—"

"The critics complain it's gory."

"Some of the blood's mine." That odd moment when ye *know* ye've been cut...

"Didn't someone get the sack for slashing your arm open?"

"Well, now, there's how the rumors get started. Josh—that's our weapons trainer—was working me, the ground was a wee bit mucky and I slipped, and, well, me arm and his sword decided to occupy the same piece of space."

"He was fired?"

Andrew shook his head. "The papers, they made it out so. *I* think the lad was feeling bad enough about it: he chewed me out royally while they sewed me up like a quilt. Are ye wanting to see the scar?"

Dana leered. "Too bad it's only your arm."

"I've better scars—" He jumped up, setting the coffee mug awobble. He reached one hand for the bottom edge of his sweater, the other for the waistband of his jeans.

Dana shot out a warding hand. "Decent?"

"Ah. No." He plopped back into the chair.

The crowd sniggered.

Dana rolled her eyes. "What was it like, working with Richard D'Anzio as Charlemagne and Peter Hyland as the Saracen chief?"

"I followed around after them like a puppy, ye know? It was heady breathing the same air."

"The testosterone must have been thick."

"Clouds of it. Peter's sixty but ye must be watching him every second or he's lopping yer head off *and* stealing the scene. No, really, they're so professional it raises the level of the whole shoot. They cut though the bull—" he caught himself, decided what the hell, "the bullshite that bedevils some projects."

"The film's texture's incredibly rich, down to the tiniest details."

"Norm had the castle ready when we got there. He's a perfectionist—don't think he slept for six months."

"The credits listed a gigantic crew."

"Thousands, not counting extras." *Everyone of them family.* "But I was the one having the most fun." Something cold surrounded his heart.

"*If* you call months of sword fighting, hard riding, and hand-to-hand combat, fun. And that's *before* the shooting started. Endleson put you through hell, didn't he?" Dana's tone was envy, regret, longing. "Living in a castle, using a privy in *winter*...?"

How did she, of all the interviewers, know? *It doesn't exist any more, the tent city gone, the stables empty once more.* He dragged himself back. He sensed the absence of sound that meant an audience in rapt attention. "It's—" he cleared his throat, "it's about keeping the anachronisms from creeping in. Ye'd be thinking the feudal lords had it good—but those castles are *cold*. Still find myself adjusting me codpiece—" He started to reach, made eye contact with the middle of the third row. "Ah. Can't be doing that on national telly, can we now?"

Laughter.

Dana interlaced her fingers around her knee, smiled. "It's the role of a lifetime, isn't it?"

"Have pity on me—I'm but five-and-thirty."

"You know what I mean."

Pride's Children: PURGATORY

He leaned forward and for one brief shining moment felt against his skin coarse wool; under his palm cool chainmail, sweaty leather; beneath him the great black stallion. His hand clutched ghost reins. "I would have traded in me children after me for it."

Thick silence—as if they were separated from the expectant rows by solid glass.

A camera zoomed in shattering the spell. Dana's head went up as she seemed to catch a signal. "More later, but you brought us a clip, didn't you?"

Catcalls and whistles.

The clip screen whirred up.

Andrew blinked eyes suddenly gritty. *Careful, boyo, ye're getting tired. Ye let her in much too close.* He checked the screen. "Roland's off to Spain, pledging to bring Aude's brother Oliver back in one piece."

Foot soldiers. Archers. King. Knights, horses, squires. Martial score. The camera went long, dwelling on the army filling the castle courtyard...

...Oliver standing in his stirrups, impatient...

...Aude's face full of foreboding...

...Roland mounting, slipping her token into the neck of his tunic.

Long shot pull back: the traitor Ganelon watching from a tower window as the army streamed out of the courtyard.

Music swelling...

The clip ended, the screen sank behind them.

Applause rose, subsided.

Dana's gaze was on him again. "His lady, Aude, avenges him—in a love story without Roland being alone with her once."

He picked up the coffee cup to give his hands something to control. "They managed."

"Aude is played by the astonishingly medieval Allison Ryers."

"Aye." Fierce Aude in the snowy garden, her duenna discreet by the ice-covered fountain. *Ye'll never see her again.* His breath came rough. He heard Peter Hyland's dry steady voice in his mind: '*Get a grip, man.*' "Norm extracted her bodily from a tapestry at the Louvre." The Pyrenees faded into shadows. He raised the cup to his lips.

“Did you have an affair with your co-star?”

Andrew choked on his coffee. *Come again?* “Ah...?”

“The tabloids said—”

“She’s married, for Christ’s sake!”

“You’ve been joined in print to every actress you’ve shared a screen with.”

“It sells papers.” He made his inflection flat, let his gaze caress from breast to thigh to high-heels and slowly back to her delighted face. “I like beautiful women. Sometimes they like me.”

From the far side of the stage where his band lounged, George squawked the bass.

Laughter and applause.

“Any plans to take one home?”

He widened his eyes, dropped his jaw. “Ye offerin’?” He knew the camera focus was so short the folks at home could count pores, gave it full value: he narrowed his eyes, paused long, tilted his head, raised his lashes, let the corner of his mouth curl. “This Brian of yers—he any good with a sword?”

KARY

“MS. WINTER, IT’S TIME.”

Karena Ashe couldn’t trust her voice. She nodded, obediently got to her feet. She clutched *Yorktown Harbor* for a shield. Was this how Marie Antoinette felt when the jailer came for her? *I can’t do this. God, I’m so tired.*

Something slowed the nerve impulses to her legs; she followed Melly by remote control until Melly stopped before a chair in the wings. Kary caught her first sight of the packed auditorium. This was how the crowd waited for the queen’s head. *Millions of people will watch this. Live.*

The single canvas-backed chair stood in a little circle of parquet. Rushing air overcooled her skin, muffled the sound from the audience, the speakers. A dead spot. *Intentional?*

Out on stage, the host of *Night Talk* bantered with the actor, who lounged with his arm over the back of the chair as relaxed and confident as a Serengeti lion. She wondered what his movie was about. Obviously successful. Or was it an act? *I can’t follow that—I’ll be as stiff as a stick.*

The follicles on Kary’s forearms contracted, making each little hair stand straight up. She dissociated, monitoring, from a place outside herself, her more gruesome physiological reactions to panic.

Pride's Children: PURGATORY

She contemplated the third response possibility: not fight or flight—invisibility. *Authors are people whose prose flows like warmed honey, not impostors like me who struggle with every word.*

Melly looked concerned. “Do you want me to stay?”

Kary heard herself say, “No. Thanks.” She knew her smile stank. And that the producer couldn’t afford to take notice. *I’ll come across as an idiot.*

“Back in a sec then.”

Kary saw, rather than heard, the audience laughing—something the actor said?

What would happen if I walked away, grabbed my coat, took the elevator down, hailed a taxi? *Nothing.* They’d manage: Dana would keep the actor talking—the audience’d like that, he already had them eating out of his hand. Elise would spin it, probably get better publicity. No one will know what I look like, no one will ask me again to do the impossible.

Impossible? *You are incredibly self-indulgent.* And what’s worse, you’re a coward. Exhaustion hasn’t kept you secluded; fear has. Ordinary—common—Fear.

Her knees turned to quicksand; she was grateful for the chair.

The fear-beast crouched at her feet, clinging monkey-child, its claws embedded in her flesh. She stroked its head. Face the fear, reassure it. Dance with the fear. Surely Dana has plenty of tricks for inarticulate guests—I can’t be the first. You should never meet the author, anyway: it ruins the book.

She bowed her head, closed her eyes. The eight-hundred-page brick weighed her solidly in place.

Fear is for children.