

An Interrupted Tapestry

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One



Giselle had ample time to practice swallowing her pride.

She spent most of the afternoon doing so, while she paced Andreas von Bremen's luxurious hall. She came to know his carved furniture very well and memorized every image in the four tapestries adorning his walls.

Occasionally, she paused to gaze through the unshuttered windows at the yard surrounded by stables and storage buildings. Wagons kept arriving from the docks, carrying the products that secured Andreas's wealth. As a member of the Hanseatic League, the network of Germanic traders whose famous cogs plied the northern seas, Andreas von Bremen was no ordinary merchant.

Which was why she had come.

She strove to quell not only her pride but her growing resentment. In a way, it was Andreas's fault that she was here at all. For that reason alone, he might be more gracious and not keep her waiting so long. They had an old friendship, too. That should count for something, even if they had not spoken in four years.

Irritation spiked again, colored by disappointment and hurt. She itched to stride right out of this house.

She didn't. A deeper emotion kept her waiting.

Fear.

She had to see this through. Andreas was her only hope. If he refused her, she had nowhere else to turn, and her brother would be lost to her.

Boot steps on the stairs and voices speaking lowly penetrated the noise rolling in from the yard.

She swung around. Two men's bodies lowered into view as they descended from the upper level of the house.

The short one of middle years, the one wearing a richly tucked and embroidered robe and a hat festooned with drapery, did not interest her. The other one, the young one of commanding height and lean strength, with thick dark hair and beautiful blue eyes, riveted her attention.

Other than distant glimpses in the city, she had not seen him in a long time. She had forgotten how easy it

was to smile whenever he arrived. Even now, despite her worries and pique, the old joy sparkled through her.

As he escorted his guest through the hall, Andreas became aware of her. He glanced over and the light of recognition flared.

Snatches of the men's low conversation reached her ears. They did not speak in English, or French, or even Andreas's language.

She suddenly realized who the other man was. The Venetian galleys had arrived in London a few days ago, and he must be one of the powerful traders from that city.

The Venetian took his leave. Andreas stood at the threshold, watching until the horse trotted through the gate.

He turned his attention to her.

"Giselle."

He did not say anything else, but just looked at her with those blue eyes. The lights of his youth still sparked in them, but other, deeper ones did, too. At twenty Andreas had possessed good humor despite his natural reserve. Now, ten years later, his silence had grown more complex.

And dangerous. It made no sense, but she could not escape the sensation. As the pause stretched, she grew increasingly unsettled.

"My apologies, Giselle. My man said that a woman was here. He did not explain that it was you."

"You are very busy when you visit London. You could hardly ask your guest to wait while you spoke to me."

"That would have been difficult to explain, I will admit."

He smiled with wry amusement as he said it. Giselle realized that she had arrived during some very special trading.

It was rumored that Andreas had come to London to negotiate a new marriage. Not with an English family, it appeared. He was looking for a more ambitious match than that and had timed his visit to coincide with the galleys from Venice.

Years ago he had confided to her a mad dream of linking his family's network to that of a Venetian's. It appeared he was about to make the dream a reality.

Small wonder he had kept her waiting.

He moved two chairs to the windows on the side of the hall that faced the garden. He came back to her. "Please sit. I am happy to see you. It has been too long."

She hesitated. Something in his manner made her want to make a quick retreat. This was the Andreas she had known so well, but also an Andreas she had never met.

His hand almost touched her back as the other gestured to the chairs. With a phantom embrace, he guided her to the window.

A prickle of excitement and caution scurried up her spine.

They sat facing each other, their knees separated by an arm's span. Soft northern light gently illuminated the face that she knew well. Many times she had admired at close range the square jaw and straight, feathering eyebrows. None of the details had changed, but the countenance had. Youthful softness used to mute its chiseled severity but no longer did. Mature precision revealed the intelligent, shrewd mind of the man who owned it.

Despite the change, for an instant it was like old times. They might have been sitting together in her own home, by her windows, during one of his visits to the city. When he was younger and his trading brought him to London, he did not live in this grand house, but in hers, as a guest and friend of her brother, Reginald.

The joy sparkled again, reminding her of how much she had enjoyed his company back then.

It had been thus from the first time Reginald brought him home and announced that he would use the tiny, spare chamber that jutted out over the street. She had looked at Andreas's astonishingly handsome face that day and immediately seen warmth in his eyes despite his cool manner. They had formed a quick bond during that first visit. Over the years the connection had grown deep and steady and full of unspoken understanding.

And then, abruptly, four years ago, Andreas had severed the link to Reginald, the house, and her.

Remembering that insult made the joy disappear.

"You are looking well, Giselle. You are as beautiful as ever."

The Andreas she had known had never flattered her. It appeared that with his success and wealth he had assumed courtly airs.

It did not help that at twenty-eight she was no longer as beautiful as ever. The first bloom of youth had passed, and she knew it.

"It is kind of you to say so. You also appear well, and happy in your success. I always knew that you would rise high in the Hanse." She could not keep her gaze from drifting over the deep green garment he wore. Its cut and fabric spoke of his ascending status, just as her worn, mended blue gown revealed how debased her own had become.

Her gaze moved back up and met his. Her breath caught as the years fell away. She might have been seeing him at her threshold, so familiar was what passed between them. The instant bond, the promise of a quiet intimacy—it flashed through her with an intense, vital reality, just as it had when they had been friends.

No, it was not quite the same. Those reunions had never made her uncomfortable, and this one did. Something new simmered in the familiarity. As if a gauzy veil had been lifted, certain aspects of her reaction sharpened and demanded her attention. A sly, alluring disturbance wound its way around her other emotions.

She had intended to beg for his help, but his manner provoked her, and she decided to change her approach. There was no point in pleading in the name of a dead friendship. She would speak in a language he would understand and respect.

"I have not only come to visit, Andreas."

"No, I expect that you have not."

He sounded resigned. She thought that took some gall. After all, *she* had not dropped *his* friendship.

"I am in need of money. I will repay it," she said.

His gaze shifted to the garden out the window. The old Andreas completely disappeared. Suddenly she was speaking with a stranger who had heard petitions like hers before. Too often.

The humiliation of what she was doing overwhelmed her. She gritted her teeth and forged on.

"I need one hundred pounds."

He kept looking at the garden. "Your brother sent you, didn't he? It was cowardly of him not to come himself and to use you in this way."

"He did not send me. This was my decision."

"The hell it was." His gaze snapped back to her. "Since this is about trade, I must respond as a trader. I regret to say that I must refuse you. There is no way that this loan will be repaid, and I would be a fool to make it."

His abrupt denial astonished her. Her heart wanted to sink down to her toes.

"It will be repaid. If you doubt my word—"

"One hundred pounds is a great sum. You have not seen that much in the last five years combined. You may promise to repay it with an honest heart, but your brother never will."

"It is my promise, not my brother's. I will pledge property as surety. Our house is not worth that much, but there is also a small farm in Sussex, and together they should secure this debt."

A bit of curiosity passed in the gaze piercing her. "Are you saying that the farm and the house are chartered to you?"

"No, but—"

"Then they are not yours to pledge and of no value to this discussion."

She could not believe his cold indifference. Panic began beating in her heart. She was going to fail. She would not be able to save Reginald.

Andreas appeared angry with her. That made her own ire spike. He had probably agreed to such things often before and with people he knew less well. And if not for him, she would not be in this situation.

"Since you are convinced that my word will not do and that my brother will not honor my pledge of the property, let us make this an outright sale. I see that your love of tapestries has not abated." She gestured to the rich hangings adorning the hall's walls. "I still have mine. You often admired it and told me yourself that it was worth at least a hundred pounds. I will sell it to you now."

It sickened her to say it. That tapestry, woven of silk and brought back from a crusade by an ancestor, was the only thing of value that she owned.

It would break her heart to give it up. Losing it would finally obliterate her small hold on a life she had once led. She would never let go of it to save herself, but now, faced with the need to save her brother, she had no choice.

She thought that she saw Andreas's expression soften. She was sure that he would agree. Instead, he turned his attention once more to the garden.

"I cannot buy it, Giselle."

"My attachment to it is long over, if that is your concern."

"A man does not buy what he already owns. Reginald pledged that tapestry as surety against a loan years ago. The loan was not repaid."

Shock numbed her for a ten count. Then fury crashed into her stunned mind—fury at Reginald and fury at this man sitting here in his damnable self-possession.

How dare her brother pledge her property. Bad enough that Reginald had depleted their meager wealth with ventures always ruined by unforeseen misfortune. Bad enough that he had left tallies all over London to pay for garments he could not afford and wine long ago drunk. To have procured coin by using the tapestry was an inexcusable betrayal of their heritage.

Andreas knew what that weaving meant. He should have never agreed to such a thing. He only had because he coveted the tapestry.

She rose, barely controlling the anger trembling through her. "I can see that I have wasted my time and yours. I have nothing else to sell except my virtue, and I am sure that a great man like you will not consider that worth one hundred pounds." She almost spit the words and did not care that her tone sounded bitter and sarcastic and imperious.

His gaze, full of sharp alertness, swung to her. The old warmth and connection entered it, along with that other, frightening intensity that had so unsettled her today.

She had intended to make a grand retreat, but suddenly she could not move.

"Actually, Giselle, the pledge of your virtue is the only one that I might consider."

"You insult me, Andreas."

"You raised the possibility, my lady. Not I."

She dragged the remnants of her dignity around her like a shredded cloak. "I apologize for intruding on your household. It was a mistake. I knew that my brother and I were no longer of use to you, but I had

not realized just how proud and arrogant you had become. I see now that you despise us. Good day to you."

Somehow she tore herself away from his blue eyes and his irritating, compelling presence and retreated with all of the nobility that she could muster.

Andreas threw open the window shutters beside his bed. His chamber was at the top of the tall house, under the steep pitch of the roof. It was neither the largest nor the most comfortable chamber, but it was the one he had chosen for himself. From this window he could look down on the rooftops of London and peer into gardens and streets.

He peered now and saw the small blue dot moving on the lane alongside the house next to his. Giselle's stride spoke of her indignation even at this distance. He watched as she turned onto a lane parallel to his, and he waited each time she disappeared behind a house for her to show again.

It had been a surprise to see her in the hall. A wonderful surprise. It had been all he could do not to drag Signore Alberti out to his horse and send him off at once.

He smiled ruefully at his reaction. So much for time dulling a youthful fascination.

Giselle's tiny figure finally became obscured. Andreas pictured her entering the house that her brother could no longer afford to maintain, and moving around the furnishings that were remnants of a life much grander than they now lived. On the wall across from the hearth the silk tapestry would be hanging, a banner of Giselle's belief that their lost nobility would one day be restored.

Every year that passed made that less likely. Andreas knew their current situation very well. He might have ceased visiting that house, but he had never lost sight of Giselle.

He fixed his gaze on a spot of distant garden visible between the edges of two buildings. He waited for the blue dot to appear there. The wind was right, and if she played her lute he would hear it today.

"Did Signore Alberti still appear amenable?"

Andreas glanced back to his youngest brother, who also served as his clerk and assistant. Stefan was meticulously unpacking parchments from a wooden chest. "Yes, he did, Stefan."

"It will be a great alliance, and I hear that his daughter is most lovely."

"So it is said."

"It is an ambitious plan for you to attempt to join the power of the Hanse with that of Venice."

It *was* ambitious, but if it worked his family and the Alberti would form a trading network more vast than any ever known. The entire world, from Eire to the Far East, would know their names.

He had first gotten a glimmer of the possibilities of this union when he was no more than a youth. With the death of his father, who did not trust Venetians, he had begun considering it more seriously. When his wife passed away three years ago, the means to achieve it had been placed in his hands. Signore Alberti was also an ambitious man, but would only form the alliance if the head of Andreas's family bound himself, literally, to the Alberti and Venice.

"Some say it is too bold and contrary to tradition," Stefan said.

"Tradition can be a cage. If some men do not reach between the bars, nothing ever changes."

Andreas kept his sight on that bit of garden, waiting, suddenly not caring much about Signore Alberti and this bold, ambitious dream.

When he had seen Giselle in the hall, he had briefly, stupidly, let himself think that she had understood after all. That she had come because she understood. He had assumed that they would talk of it, finally, and—and what? He wasn't really sure.

Instead, she had been distant and officious and spoken only of money and loans. He had barely contained his disappointment and sense of insult. In his vexation, he had given back what he got.

He had imagined a reunion with her many times, but never the one that they had just had.

"Should I be drawing up a preliminary contract?" Stefan asked. "Obviously, there will be many changes and negotiations, but if we make the first document it will be to your advantage."

"Yes, you should probably do that."

He pictured her sitting in his hall, the sunlight glowing off the coppery tones of her deep red hair. She had been so close and so beautiful that it made him ache. She had appeared unsettled and embarrassed, and he had thought—well, he had thought wrong.

Of course he had. He had never revealed his hunger for her. Until today. That had been clumsy and hard and an impulsive reaction to her haughty manner.

He kept watching for her, regretting what he had said, how he had said it, and how he had treated the whole episode.

Finally, the blue dot appeared. It sat on a bench under a tree. Moments later, the vague trickling of a lute's notes rose and receded on the capricious breeze.

Images of their meeting moved through his mind. He forced himself to see them without the rancor he had felt in the hall.

If she had come to him at all, she must need the money very badly. If she had offered to sell the tapestry, she must be desperate.

"Stefan, carry a message to Alberti. Tell him that a sudden matter of trade means that I cannot visit him tomorrow, but that I will contact him when I am again available, and well before the galley leaves."

"Are you sure? He might misunderstand."

"Bring the amber and gold necklace I bought in Novgorod. Say it is for his daughter. He will know its value and will not misunderstand. Beneath all of his silk and Venetian superiority, he is a merchant."

Two



Shortly after dawn the next day, Andreas walked down the lane toward Giselle's house. Tucked in his tunic were the pledges that Reginald had made. They were his excuse to go and see her, but he hoped that they would speak of other things.

It had been years since he had trod this street, but the old emotions assaulted him all the same, like spiritual echoes from his youth. The joy and expectation. The promise of peace and serenity. As a young man he only visited London for several months in any year, but the walks from the docks to this house had been full of anticipation, such as a man feels when returning home.

Peace and serenity did not wait for him this time. Noise and confusion poured out of Giselle's home. Neighbors loitered by their doors and hung out windows to watch the spectacle unfolding on her doorstep.

As Andreas walked toward the disturbance, two local tailors passed him, carrying a long, heavy bench. With an adroit step, he blocked their path.

"Why are you taking that?"

The men set down their burden. One pulled a tally out of his tunic. "There's four rich garments Reginald owes us for. This is hardly compensation, but one gets what one can at such times."

Andreas looked down the lane to Giselle's house. A crowd of merchants and craftsmen surrounded the entrance, pushing and jostling to get in.

"Return the bench," he said.

"We are within our rights."

"That remains to be seen. Return the bench, or no member of the Hanse will patronize your shop."

Andreas continued to the house. The tailors began shuffling after him, hauling the bench back.

He waited patiently at the edge of the crowd. Eventually, he was noticed. Men moved aside. Some did because they knew him and wanted to stay in his good graces. Others did, he knew, because of his garments and size. London was a city that respected wealth and strength, in that order.

He stepped into the crowded hall. An amazing sight waited for him.

Waving tallies and pledges, men shouted demands for payment. Others had taken matters into their own hands and were stripping the house of its possessions. Loud thumps on the stairs heralded a bed board being dragged down from an upper chamber. Two merchants of high standing were bickering over the few pieces of silver plate propped on a high shelf.

Giselle stood near the wall that displayed the silk tapestry, looking like a warrior maiden from the old myths. Her red hair streamed down her body, and her blue eyes flared a deadly challenge. She clasped her brother's sword high by her shoulder, ready to bring it down on any man who approached.

Andreas walked over to her. "Do you plan to kill them all?"

"Only the ones who try to steal what is mine."

"What has caused this?"

"They claim to have tallies from Reginald."

"Your brother has been leaving such things with merchants for years. Why are they all here to collect today?"

She kept her fierce gaze on a knot of men who were waiting for her to weary so they could claim the prize that she guarded. "My brother has disappeared. His long absence has been noticed."

That would do it. Fearing no payment at all, every tradesman to whom Reginald owed money would try to grab something before nothing was left. Since Reginald had been liberal in his pledges and miserly in his payments, half of London would arrive before evening.

Andreas stepped between Giselle and the agitated merchants. They all immediately shifted their attention from her to him.

Reaching into his tunic, he retrieved a stack of parchments and held them high.

"I have pledges from the owner of this property that are more than four years in the waiting. If any man has an older claim, present it now. Otherwise, mine take precedence, and I doubt that there is anything in this house that these parchments do not cover."

An outburst of objections greeted his announcement. He threw the pledges on the hall's long table and allowed the others to paw through them to check his claims. A few men held older documents, and Andreas spent the next hour negotiating which of the house's furnishings they could take in payment.

Finally, the little swarm drifted away. Andreas watched as the long bench departed once again, only this time with two representatives of the Templars. Their claim had not been older than his, but a wise man did not argue such details with those particular money lenders.

A hollow silence fell on the house. Andreas gazed around the hall where he had spent many contented days as a young man. He had served as his father's clerk, just as Stefan now served as his, and his father had insisted that he take his board at an English home when trading brought them here. On his first visit he had met Reginald at a tavern, and decided that living with a young nobleman would be more fun than staying with an old merchant. It had been a good way to learn the language and the customs and to form friendships based on more than coin.

There were objects missing from the house that had not been taken today. Over the last four years, many things had been sold. Barely enough remained to give the impression of aristocratic status.

The tapestry made all the difference. It was a hanging such as a king might own. Covered with vines and flowers and woven of red and gold silken threads, it glowed on its wall. Even its flaw, where a subtle change in colors indicated the weaving had been interrupted near the top, did not detract from its glory.

He remembered Giselle telling him the story behind that interruption. Supposedly, the woman who made

it had been given in marriage to a man she did not love, and thus had been separated for years from the man she wanted. Later, when the first husband died, she had returned to both the weaving and the lover of her youth.

Giselle still stood in front of the tapestry, and her eyes still blazed. Now the anger was directed at only one person. Him.

She let the sword fall. It clattered to the plank floor as she bore down on the table. One by one, she lifted the pledges and examined them. As the last fell from her hand, she shot him a look of scathing disdain.

"Damn you, Andreas."

She could not believe her brother's recklessness. She had known that he borrowed money, but he had never told her how precarious their situation was.

She stared in fury at the pledges Andreas had brought.

The loans had been made in the customary way. Reginald had sold items at one price and promised to buy them back at a higher one. If the surety was not rebought, it was forfeit.

Andreas owned everything. The furniture. The house itself. Reginald had even pledged their father's ring. One parchment indeed included her tapestry.

"I thought you were his friend." She grabbed some pledges and threw them at him. They floated through the air. "A friend does not do this. A friend does not lure a man onto the path to ruin."

"I lured him nowhere."

"You had him join you in that first scheme. You showed him the riches to be gained. You—"

"He begged to be included in that trading venture, and he saw good profit. If he had not gotten greedy and assumed that he was shrewder than any other man, if he had known his limitations in such things and not decided to instigate his own plans—"

"His ideas were good. Bad luck haunted him, that is all."

"There is always the chance of bad luck. Reginald never thought of the risks and was too quick to gamble everything. He had no head for trade. I told him that, Giselle, many times."

"Did you tell him that as he signed away this house to you? My father's ring?"

He just looked at her, completely unmoved.

She forced some composure on her livid indignation. Reginald had left her in a dreadful place. She needed coin for his sake, and now she had discovered that she possessed almost nothing to sell in order to get it.

"There is the property in Sussex at least," she muttered, more to herself than Andreas.

"He sold that. Years ago."

Her breath left her. She thought she would faint. That poor farm had been the only land left to them after their father was disseised for joining Simon de Montfort's rebellion. It had been Reginald's hold on the past, just as the tapestry had been hers.

What had her brother been thinking?

She knew the answer to that. He had explained it often enough. Just one big success was all it would take. One investment in one major trading venture and they would have the wealth and the means to reestablish themselves.

Only the grand plans always hit snags. Bad weather, bad timing, bad goods—bad luck, as Reginald would later explain.

She sank down on the bench beside the table. The only bench, since the other had been taken by the Templars. Discouragement spread from her heart to her whole being, making her unbearably weary.

"So, you have come with your pledges, too, Andreas. Just like the other vultures. You are a shrewd merchant indeed to make these loans to my brother. It is all yours. I will arrange to vacate the house by evening."

"If my goal had been to see you homeless, I would have taken the property years ago. I do not require that you leave this house."

"I will not accept anyone's charity. I will not be an object of pity."

"It is not charity to receive help from a friend."

She glanced at the pledges littering the floor. "I can see the sort of help that you give friends."

He bent down and collected the parchments. "I broke with your brother for good reason. That my friendship with you ended, too, was an unfortunate consequence. You came asking for my help yesterday, so there is no reason to refuse it today."

He sat beside her on the bench. He set the pledges aside in a neat stack. "As to these debts, we will find a way to settle them that does not leave you impoverished."

Her gaze snapped to the strong hand resting atop the pledges. Her spirit jolted out of its numbness. She instantly became very aware of his size and masculinity. His presence warmed her shoulder. It seemed as though she could feel his breath on her hair.

"Have you come to buy the tapestry?"

"I will not buy it, nor is it yours to sell. We will find another way."

She had no other way. She had nothing else of value to give him. Except, as she had said at their meeting yesterday, her virtue.

She remembered his response to that. That must be the other way he alluded to.

She stared at the table, mortified. Not only by the implications, but also by the fact that the notion did not entirely disgust her.

That dismayed her. She could not look at him.

"You used to offer me ale as soon as I entered this house, Giselle. Am I no longer worthy of your hospitality?"

He spoke quietly, in the voice that she knew from their past. A strange excitement thickened her throat, and she had difficulty responding.

"Those men drank the ale and ate what food was here. I have nothing to offer you."

She felt his attention on her, as if he studied her very closely. It made the odd spell he cast get heavier.

"Then let us go to the tavern at the crossroads. We can discuss your situation while we have some food and drink."

She agreed with relief. She wanted to have other people around, and the tavern would be crowded. Maybe if they sat across from each other at a table, instead of side-by-side like this, almost touching, she would not find herself so confused and alert, as if a hidden part of her was waiting for something to happen.

The serving girl brought tumblers of ale and a stack of small meat pies. Giselle eyed the food with the greedy glint of someone who had not eaten her fill in a long time.

Andreas subtly pushed the pies toward her. He turned his gaze on the noisy men at the next table so that she would not be embarrassed by having him notice her hunger.

It knotted his heart to see that glint. She was his lady, and he did not like seeing her suffering such base needs.

He would kill Reginald this time.

He knew when the pies had dulled the worst of it. He turned his attention back to her just as she brushed her hands of crumbs.

"You are enjoying your visit to London, Andreas? It has been profitable?"

"Profitable enough."

"Your reserve always masked deeper thoughts, and I can see that has not changed. That was a Venetian merchant at your house yesterday, wasn't it?"

"I often trade with them."

She smiled slyly. "Do you plan a very special trade this time?"

He did not respond to that.

"Always quiet. Always discreet. That is you, Andreas. I remember you once telling me of your ideas about the Hanse and Venice. So, now you have built your family's power enough to make it true. It sounded like a boy's mad dream, but maybe I always knew that you would make it happen."

Her courteous banter irritated him. He did not want to talk about this. "Where is your brother?"

Her face fell, and she hesitated before answering. "I do not know. He has left before. Normally, he tells me where he is going, but he did not this time. It has been ten days."

"Do you think he fled the realm? It is not unusual when borrowing from Peter to pay Paul brings a man to ruin."

"My brother would never run away from his debts and leave me to reckon with the consequences."

The hell he wouldn't.

His expression must have spoken the silent words, because her eyes glinted with belligerent lights.

"He has not left the realm, I tell you. In fact, a messenger came from him two days ago."

"Then where is he? What message did he send you?"

She bit her lower lip and occupied her hands with brushing pie crumbs into a little pile. "The message was not exactly from him."

Andreas knew her expressions very well. He had learned to read her moods and worries years ago. He had memorized the nuances that revealed joy and sadness, dreams and disillusionments. Rarely, however, had he seen what he saw now.

She was afraid.

"Tell me, Giselle."

"A man came. Reginald is being held by brigands, who will kill him if I do not pay a ransom. I asked where Reginald is now, but he refused to say. I am to have the coin in five days, when the man will come for it or send word of where to bring it." She blurted the explanation with annoyance and, it seemed to Andreas, also a bit of relief.

"Am I correct that the amount he demanded was one hundred pounds?"

She nodded. "It is such a huge sum. I tried to get it from some merchants who Reginald knows, but they would not help me. Small wonder. They were there today, with their tallies and pledges. In seeking that coin, I brought all of London down on our heads."

"Your brother's extravagance and carelessness brought the city down on you."

"Stop blaming him. He is in danger. He might be killed. I will not sit here and listen to you speak badly of him." She scooted to the end of the bench and began to rise.

Andreas caught her wrist.

She resisted his hold, but he did not let go. He was not about to let her face this alone, but he also held on because the feel of her frail bones and warm skin entranced him.

He had never before touched her.

He knew that for a fact, because he had wanted to—ached to—many times.

Her indignant gaze met his. Her vexation slipped away, and astonishment took its place. They stayed like that for a long count, her half risen and him grasping, keeping her in place. During that deep pause the noise of the tavern was obscured by a spiritual silence in which all that existed was their connected flesh and gazes.

He would have gladly spent eternity in that stillness.

It affected her as much as him. He knew it as he looked into her eyes. This touch had been too long in coming. Too long denied.

The silent admission of that seemed to surprise her.

"Sit, Giselle."

Flustered, she obeyed. He reluctantly released her. She tightened herself into a noble, formal column and kept her gaze on the table.

"You said that the man gave you five days. How many has it been thus far?"

"This is the third. It took one to learn that no London lender would help me, and I wasted yesterday at your house."

"I think that we should try to find your brother. He may even be in the city."

"If we do find him, then what? We attack with swords and lances and rescue him?"

"I do not think it will come to that."

He suspected they would find Reginald hale and fit and not in danger at all.

This story sounded like a ploy. Reginald had finally come to the end of the rope he had been climbing down for years. No one would lend to him, but they might take pity on a desperate, beautiful sister trying to save his life.

"I will look for Reginald, Giselle. If he is truly in danger, or if I cannot find him by the fifth day, I will give you the money to pay the ransom."

She appeared to agree to it. At least, she did not disagree. She just sat there, staring at the table planks, distraught and resigned and vulnerable. And afraid.

Her fear was not just for Reginald. Her quick glances said that their reaction to that touch occupied her concerns now, too.

He pushed the last meat pie closer to her and called for more ale.

Maybe he would not kill Reginald. Perhaps he would thank him.

Three



"If I knew where he was, I'd be taking what he owes me out of his hide, not settling for a few bits of bent, pitted plate."

John Hastings pointed his greasy, fat finger derisively at the two cups lying on the scales in his counting room. As one of the few merchants with a pledge older than Andreas's, John had been allowed to remove the cups from Giselle's house.

He went back to tearing the flesh off the joint of lamb in front of him. His hat formed a long beak in front, and its tip kept touching the meat. The table groaned with an abundance of food. He appeared intent on consuming it all.

Giselle fumed at the way he dismissed the remaining pieces of plate that she had carried from her ancestral home. "The silver exceeded the amount of the tally," she reminded him. "Your own scale proves it."

John shot Andreas an exasperated glance with his pale, owl eyes. It was obvious that he resented having a woman participating in this conversation.

Giselle did not care that one of London's leading citizens found her too outspoken. This was the fifth merchant they had visited today, and it appeared he would be no more help than the others. One of her precious five days was leaching away, and she was getting more worried by the minute.

"She is correct, John. You can have no complaints on the payment."

"You know damn well I am not speaking of that measly old tally, Andreas. Reginald cost me ten times that silver, and I'll never see it now. There should be laws against such things."

"There are," Giselle snapped. "Usury is a sin, and you have now reaped the rewards."

The owl eyes pierced her. "I do not speak of tallies and pledges. I was stupid enough to join your brother in a partnership to bring in timber from Norway. Four years ago, it was, and I've not seen a stick of wood nor a bit of coin from it yet." He turned his annoyance on Andreas. "I only agreed because he said you were behind it. We all knew how you lived in that house back then—"

Andreas interrupted. "Do you have any ideas of who might know what has become of him?"

John pondered that while he clawed at the meat. "About a year ago he got involved with a trader from Genoa who came to London, a bastard son of the Comini family. Sandro, his name was. I never learned for sure what they cooked up. If Reginald crossed one of those traders from the south, he is probably at the bottom of the sea."

"Is this Sandro still in London?"

John scoffed. "He left after two months and never came back. However, since the galleys are here, you might ask the Venetian, Narni, about him. Narni's nephew married a woman of the Comini, so he might know about Sandro. You waste your efforts, though. I still say the knave just ran away."

"My brother is no knave, you gluttonous, discourteous—"

Andreas cut her off with polite farewells. Taking her arm, he hauled her out to the lane.

"We had better speak with this Narni," she said.

"I will. You are going home."

"I told you in the tavern that I am coming with you. He is *my* brother."

Anns crossed over his chest, he assumed a pose of displeasure. "You did not tell me that you intended to insult every man we spoke with."

"I only gave back what I got."

"You have been getting the truth, which is why I did not want you with me. I will take you home now, so that you do not have to hear more of it."

"I am not going home. I am going to find out if this Narni knows who holds my brother."

"Then behave yourself, or I will turn you over my knee later. I trade with these men, and if you speak to Narni the way you just did to John, it will take me years to regain his favor."

The walk to the galleys was a long one. Andreas kept touching her as he guided her through the crowds. His hand took her arm when the bodies got thick. His fingers occasionally tapped her shoulder to remind her it was time to turn down another lane. Courteous and protective, there was nothing insinuating about any of it.

She noticed every single time, however. The warm pressure would jolt her out of her worries. For an instant she would be totally alive and vividly aware of the handsome man at her side.

The long walk gave her time to think about what she had learned today. No one could say where Reginald was, but all those merchants had known her brother very well—better than she had. The image they had revealed was not a good one.

She had been blind to her brother's faults and had found excuses for his behavior. She debated whether she had done that because she wanted to believe his dreams.

They were hers, too, after all.

People and wagons crowded the area by the docks. The visits by the Venetian galleys always created a mercantile chaos. Workers swarmed everywhere, unloading the holds of their wares. Vendors of food and drink added to the confusion.

Lost in her reflections about Reginald, Giselle absorbed the noise through a daze. Wagons rolled past, people shouted, and the smells of food and dung filled the breeze.

Suddenly, almost everything on the street froze. The head of a horse came toward her, growing quickly in size. The sounds of wheels penetrated her ears and then those of shouts.

The world swirled. Colors flashed. She flew.

She found herself up against a shed, surrounded by a masculine wall. She peered out of her sanctuary and saw a wagon hurtling past while its driver fought to regain control over the galloping horse that pulled it.

The sanctuary tightened. The scent of the man who held her filled her head, and the comforting warmth of his protection absorbed her shock.

She looked up.

Andreas's face was very close to hers. The earlier annoyance was gone from his expression. All the warmth of their past was in the way he looked down at her, and the old joy sparkled in response. The dangerous intensity of the last two days was there, too, however.

He appeared very handsome. Compellingly so. He had the kind of face that one stared at. She never had before, but when he had sat in her house or garden, she could look all she wanted and not even notice that she did so.

Without any movement, his protective hold became an embrace. She could not find the voice to object. It felt good being in his arms. Safe and deliciously risky, all at once.

"That was close," he said.

His quiet voice, so close that his breath warmed her cheek, made her skin tingle from her scalp to her breasts. "Thank you. If you had not grabbed me, I would have been trampled. I was lost in my thoughts and did not see the danger until it was too late."

He broke the embrace but not the touch. With his arm resting along the back of her waist, as if it had a right to now, he guided her toward one of the largest galleys.

"He used you, didn't he? Reginald used your name, without your permission, to lend legitimacy to his plans. That is what John meant, and that first merchant we spoke with, Harold, alluded to that, too."

She voiced the suspicions that had been distracting her. The intimacy that the danger had created permitted such frankness. There had been so much of the old Andreas in the way he held her, even if the physical connections were completely new.

He did not respond. She guessed that doing so would reflect badly on her brother. It touched her that he wanted to spare her.

"It was terrible of Reginald to do that. Small wonder that you broke with him upon hearing of it."

"That is one of the reasons."

"There are others? Tell me now, so that I do not receive more sad surprises as I listen to these men."

"No man whom we will meet knows the rest of it." He began handing her up the gangway to the long, sleek ship. "Do not speak when we are with Narni, Giselle. He will accept your presence because these Venetians understand family bonds very well, but he will find any intrusion on your part impertinent."

Andreas did not have to wait like the other merchants crowding the galley's deck. A clerk recognized him, rattled out an effusive greeting in his foreign tongue, and disappeared into the cabin.

It had been thus with every man today. They had been received because of Andreas's power, not her aristocratic blood. The English merchants had tripped over themselves to make Andreas happy. Giselle had almost heard their minds calculating their good fortune that a powerful member of the Hanseatic League had decided to visit, ask a favor, and thus place himself in their debt.

It seemed that even the richest Venetian traders regarded Andreas the same way. Signore Alberti wanted a marriage alliance and, as the clerk soon announced, Signore Narni would see them at once.

Signore Narni was as skinny as John had been fat. Short and wizened, with closely cropped white hair under his satin scull cap, he appeared far too old to be making long journeys on his galley. Despite his small stature, however, danger emanated from him. The eyes of a hawk peered out from his wrinkled face.

Giselle thought of John's words, about a man who crossed these traders ending up at the bottom of the sea.

Andreas donned armor of inscrutable reserve as soon as they entered the cabin. Neither merchant displayed deference in their greetings, but both showed respect. Andreas spoke in Narni's language, and Narni responded in Andreas's.

Andreas introduced her, and Narni switched to English out of courtesy for her. "I did not expect you for two days, Andreas."

"I will be back then. This visit is on another matter."

"So long as the salt in your ship's hold is still mine and not diverted to Alberti to win his daughter's hand, I can wait two days."

He bid them sit in lovely, carved chairs and arranged his sapphire brocade robe into satin folds as he settled into a third one. He offered wine poured by his servant into bejewelled silver cups. Another servant passed a plate of dried figs and nuts.

Giselle barely managed not to gawk. This merchant lived more luxuriously in his galley's cabin than most barons did in their castles.

"What is this other matter?" Narni asked.

"Lady Giselle's brother, Reginald, is missing. We have been told that a year ago he had some dealings with Sandro Comini. We are wondering if you know about this?"

"I can tell you about Sandro. An impatient young man and a great trial to his father. He got it into his head to form a *commenda* contract. No man in Genoa would back him, so he decided to look farther afield. He came here."

Andreas must have noticed her curiosity. "A *commenda* is a way of financing trade, Giselle. The project is backed by a man of wealth, and another makes the journey. It is common south of the Alps."

"Except that no man south of the Alps would risk his coin on Sandro's plan," Narni explained. "Furs from Russia and the Baltic, I think it was. He had a ship, but he had never sailed those waters and knew no traders in Novgorod or Riga." He smiled knowingly at Andreas. "Nor would the Hanse appreciate such incursions in their arena. So, Sandro came to London to find his *commenda*. It was said that he paired up with a wealthy young nobleman, who brought together several other barons to provide the money. The lady's brother, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Andreas said. "When did Sandro return to Genoa?"

"Never. Perhaps his ship wrecked. Or maybe those Baltic pagans sold him into slavery. His father prays for his return, but without much hope."

"Did you hear any name attached to this venture?"

Narni's eyes narrowed to slits as he searched his memory. Giselle did not doubt that if any name had been given, at any time, this man would remember it.

"Does the name Wolford mean anything to you? I recall hearing it amidst the talk about Sandro, and it sounds English."

Giselle's heart flipped, and not with relief. She had been desperate for any tidbit of information, but she could have done without hearing this morsel.

If Reginald was mixed up with Wolford, he might be dead already.

Four



It was a long walk back to the house. Andreas revelled in every moment of it.

It did not matter that a worried frown marred Giselle's forehead. He took ridiculous joy in merely walking beside her and shameful pleasure that her distraction gave him excuses to touch her shoulder or arm as he guided her through the lanes.

He bought some food on the way so she would feel obliged to invite him to share it with her, and thus prolong the day. When they arrived at her house in the early evening, she seemed to accept that he would not leave and went up to her chamber to wash.

A low, weary groan drifted down to him, followed by a barely muffled curse.

He went up to see what the problem was.

Giselle stood in her little chamber. The boards and ropes of her bed lay strewn on the floor. An upturned bucket rested in a damp corner.

"I had forgotten that those men took apart the bed," she muttered, giving one of the boards a little frustrated kick.

Come sleep at my house. He almost said it. God knew he wanted to. Over the years he had learned to forget how much he wanted her, but this day had unleashed the old desire. It burned low in his awareness, constantly, a fierce point of heat in danger of roaring out of control and consuming him. *Come sleep at my house, with me. Let me hold you all night.*

Somehow he swallowed the impulse to blurt it, but he admitted that soon it would be said anyway. He was not a youth anymore. He no longer had the time or patience for hopeless fascinations and half measures.

Giselle picked up the pail. "I must go and get some water, since they spilled that, too. I will return soon."

"I will rebuild the bed while you are gone."

He worked at it while she went to fetch water at the city fountain. As he set the boards together with their pegs, he remembered that during his first visit to this house there had been a woman servant who did chores like hauling water. By his third visit, however, she was gone.

Giselle returned just as he was tightening the bed's ropes. He heard her enter the other chamber and then come back out and into her own.

"At least the straw did not get wet," she said, feeling the stuffed cloth heaped near the corner.

He helped her set the mattress on the ropes.

She began to pour water from the pail into a chipped crockery bowl set on a tiny table. "Thank you for your help, Andreas. I put some water in your chamber, if you want to wash."

His chamber. He did want to wash, since the day had been warm and busy, but he wasn't sure that he wanted to do it there.

He walked the few steps into the house's other upper room, the one Reginald used, and crossed to the tiny addition on its far end where space had been stolen over the street.

Giselle had opened the shutters that looked out on the lane, and the muted sounds of families joining for meals wafted in. It still contained the simple bed and the wide shelf set on stacked stones that served as a table. There was not much room for anything else.

Except dreams. Glorious dreams of riches and of daring trading schemes. Hot dreams of carnal sensuality, in which Giselle always appeared.

How often had he laid on this bed in the still of the night and listened to the sounds of the house, stretching to hear her breathing beneath Reginald's snores?

He stripped off his tunic and undergarment. He sloshed water over his shoulders and torso to cool his body of all the heat that the day and his thoughts had raised.

He heard her breathing, and for a moment he assumed that a nostalgic memory from his nights here had

entered his head. Then he realized that the sound was real and nearby.

Turning his head, he saw her at the low, narrow doorway to Reginald's room. The moisture of her own washing still dampened her brow, and some wet hairs clung to the sides of her face.

She did not realize that his attention was on her. He caught the way she observed him, how her gaze slowly traveled over his nakedness. Four years ago she would have quickly retreated if she came upon him wearing nothing but hose and boots, but she had not this time.

The appreciative, womanly lights in her eyes sent his desire flaring.

She realized he had noticed her watching him and flustered. Blushing, she looked in his eyes and opened her mouth to speak.

He looked straight back, and her words died.

A heavy silence stretched with them standing there, watching each other. Each moment pounded with the mutual acknowledgment they had established in the tavern, that he was a man and she was a woman and something other than friendship now drew them together.

It could no longer be denied. He would not *let* it be denied. The power of what pulled between them set his teeth on edge. He barely resisted striding across the small space and grabbing her.

She held a small linen cloth, old but clean and neatly mended. He reached out his hand to her. Her eyes widened, and she stepped back, as if she feared he was beckoning her to come to him.

He let her know that was exactly what he was doing.

She averted her gaze and blushed deeper yet. "I forgot to leave a linen for you." She threw the towel at him, as if she dared not take the step necessary to place it in his hand. "I will go down and prepare the meal. The evening is fair, and we can eat in the garden."

"You are very quiet, Giselle."

Andreas did not worry that she would take the observation as a rebuke for being discourteous. Giselle had never required chatter of him, nor he of her. Some of their most pleasant hours together had been spent in silence.

She picked at the cooked fowl that he had bought on their way back from the galley. Sweet smells of flowers and herbs filled the air of her garden, and the gentle light of evening played off the dark golds and coppers of her hair.

He had not really minded her silence or her continued distraction. It had meant that he had lots of time to just look at her. A few of her glances suggested that what had happened upstairs occupied part of her mind, but he knew that bigger worries preyed on her.

"What are we going to do now?" she finally asked. "If Wolford is involved—"

"If he is, at least we know where we stand. Where is this Wolford to be found?"

"His castle is south, near the coast, but he has a small manor in Essex, not far from London."

"If he has your brother, it is probably close by. I will ride to his manor in Essex tomorrow and learn if Reginald is there."

"You cannot ride into Woford's gate and accuse him of abducting Reginald. If you anger him, your body will never be found. He and his brothers are little more than thieves. Everyone knows that their men openly rob travelers. They probably took my brother off the road and think there is a rich family to pay a ransom."

Andreas doubted the explanation would be such simple brigandage. "I will not accuse Woford of anything. I will offer to sell him goods and then learn what I need to know. If he has Reginald, he will be glad to hear that the ransom will be paid."

She shrugged her acceptance of the plan, but her distraction did not lift.

"I blame myself. I should have seen where Reginald was headed and said something. Instead, I just trusted and believed."

"He was your brother. That is normal."

She shook her head. "I saw the furnishings sold. I knew that every month there were more grocers and food stalls where I was not welcome. I kept excusing the evidence. I did not want to accept that no great plan would reverse things and that our fall was permanent. Reginald has been deceiving himself about the truth of that, and I gladly joined in."

He would have given anything not to see her face that. The quiet dignity with which she let her illusions die touched him more than any outpouring of tears could.

The admission appeared to lighten her mood, however. She looked at him and smiled with warm familiarity. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

He joined her as she strolled over to the tree in the garden's near corner. The bench where she sometimes played her lute was under it. She sat down and patted the place beside her in invitation.

"Look there. Between those two roofs. That is the top of your house there. It is three lanes over, but from this spot in the garden, it is visible."

"So it is."

"I was surprised that you bought one in this ward. Normally members of the Hanse live in that enclave near the river, near where the Hanse stores its staples. But then you always said that a trader should live among the people in the city where he made his second home."

"I found this ward familiar, and I liked the house."

She cocked her head and peered toward the distant roof. "I always knew when you came to London, because that window up there would open only then. There was that long period three years ago when it stayed closed, and I thought perhaps you would never return. But then, one day, the shutters were flung wide once more."

"That was after my wife died. There were many matters to settle in Bremen, and I did not make long journeys for a long time."

"I was sorry to hear about your loss. When I visited yesterday, I should have asked you about it, instead of thinking only of my own troubles."

"It was three years ago. What grief there was is long past."

"I still should have asked. Tell me what happened."

"She died in childbirth. The babe was dead in her womb."

"Oh, Andreas, I am so sorry. To have finally been blessed with a child, and then to lose them both—"

"The child was not mine, Giselle."

She leaned back against the tree trunk behind the bench. He could not see her face with her angled away like that, but he felt her as if he embraced her, as he had near the galleys.

A long pause beat between them. Not a peaceful, contented silence. He sensed her studying him and heard questions forming.

"Why did you stop coming here, Andreas? That you bought your own house made sense. It was long overdue. But why did you not even visit?"

There was no easy answer to that, so he said nothing.

"You said today that there were other reasons, besides my brother using your name in his ventures. I want to know what they were."

"No, you do not. Trust me on this."

"I do want to know. I remember the last night you spent in this house. I could tell that you were angry with Reginald, but we also spoke more honestly that night than ever before. Do you remember telling me about your wife? You had been married for three years, but that was the first time you ever spoke to me about her. I felt very close to you and went to sleep knowing that I had a true friend in you. And then you left the next morning, and I never spoke with you again. It hurt me deeply that you would discard my friendship so easily."

He turned to see her. She looked like a flaming flower glowing in the shadowed twilight under the leaves. "Not so easily. Do not accuse me of such callousness."

"Then why?"

He debated whether to tell her. If he didn't, what pulsed between them would never be more than a tantalizing possibility, because she would continue blaming him for the last four years.

"Did you not think it odd that Reginald was not with us that night, Giselle?"

"He sometimes went away from the house when you visited. And, as I said, I suspected that you were angry with him."

"But this time he did not return until morning."

"He said that he got besotted and fell asleep in a tavern."

"He lied. He left you alone with me on purpose."

She went very still. "What are you saying?"

"When I arrived in London that time, Reginald was desperate for money. He had committed to some venture that would make his fortune, he was sure, but did not have the silver he had promised. He asked it of me, but he had come to me too often, and it already strained our friendship. I could see he was on the path to ruin, and this venture was no sounder than the others."

"So you refused him? Did you assume that I would hold that against you? You should have known that I would have understood."

"Giselle, when I refused him, he offered to sell the only thing of value he had left."

"What was that?"

He saw her suspecting the answer before he spoke it. "You."

Five



"He offered you as my leman, Giselle."

Her hands flew to her face. She covered her mouth and closed her eyes to try to contain her shock.

When that did not help, she jumped up and ran away into the garden.

Seeking its farthest corner, she leaned against the wall. Holding herself with crossed arms, she tried to calm a shame and humiliation so devastating that she shook.

It had been a day of disheartening revelations, but this was the worst.

The danger that Reginald faced from whomever held him would be nothing compared to what waited for him with her. When she got her hands on him—

And Andreas—saints, she would never be able to look at him again.

Boot steps approached. Horrified, she turned to face the wall.

"I told you that you would not want to hear it, Giselle."

"You should have said that you had grown bored with us. You should have said that our foolish grasping at past glory was pitiful, and you could no longer bear such pretense."

"It has become clear that you concluded I thought those things. I decided that I did not want you thinking of me that way any longer."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"I don't. Your lying would have spared my hearing that my brother tried to make me a whore—and to a man who did not even want one." Acknowledging *that* part of it made her face burn. "Small wonder that you broke the friendship and never came back here after Reginald insulted you like that."

He came up behind her. She could feel him all along her back.

His hands closed on both of her shoulders, and he turned her around.

"You misunderstand. Reginald did not insult me. He tempted me."

She felt her face burn hotter. She kept her gaze on the ground while she tried to reconcile what he was saying with what she remembered of that night. There had been new colors to their friendship. New tones. A heightened intimacy. The air had contained a heavy anticipation, and their bond a luring excitement.

In fact, she had felt much the same as she had since she visited him yesterday. That night, however, she had not comprehended the reason for the changes.

Then again, perhaps she had but denied it. Andreas had been a married man, and she was saving her virtue for a knight or lord, for a marriage that would help them regain their place.

"Are you saying that you made this bargain with Reginald?"

"I refused his offer. But when he left that night, I knew that he was counting on desire vanquishing my honor, since I knew he would not object. I should have left, too, but I could not. Perhaps I was secretly hoping for a sign from you that you were agreeable. More likely I foresaw that those would be the last hours I would spend with you and could not give them up."

She could not ignore what he was saying. If she had been agreeable, he might not have been so honorable, despite his intentions. He was speaking frankly of what he had been broaching all day with those touches and looks. "My ignorance of Reginald's offer must have been awkward for you."

"Torturous would be a better word."

That made her laugh. It dulled her embarrassment enough that she ceased wanting to be swallowed by the ground. "More bad luck for Reginald. He betrayed his honor and mine, lost a good friend, and did not even get the money."

No, not bad luck. Bad judgment.

"The next day, I gave him the money. But I also told him we would not meet again. I suspected that he would try to coerce you the next time he was in trouble. I ended our friendship to preserve my honor and your dignity."

She did not want to believe this of her brother, but she could imagine it all happening. She could see Reginald, smiling and charming, suggesting this bargain to Andreas, convincing himself that it was not so shameful as it seemed.

"My brother is such a fool. I have been learning that to my sorrow today, but this story—he did not know you well, despite the years of friendship."

The last of twilight was fading, but she saw the slow way he smiled. She saw the way he looked at her, with all of the warmth of the old Andreas, but also the exciting danger of the new one.

He laid his palm on her face and stroked his fingers into the hair behind her ear. Her cheek and neck and scalp tingled from his firm touch. He tilted her face so that he could see it and so she had to see his.

"You keep misunderstanding. He knew me very well, Giselle. My marriage was not a warm one and was typical of the family alliances that traders make. When my wife died, I mourned her. I even mourned the child. But mostly I felt anger that being faithful to her and my honor had kept me from having the woman I wanted."

His expression mesmerized her. It was that of a man who had decided not to make the same sacrifice again. The veils of his reserve had been falling since she met with him yesterday, and now they were all gone.

His confidences made everything very clear. She understood the new intensity now. He had wanted her back then, and he was helping her now because he wanted her still. And she had agreed to certain things in accepting his aid.

She realized that she did not mind that obligation. His touch had her weak-kneed, and the way he looked at her left her breathless.

He stroked her lips with his fingertips, and she could not control her reactions. They streaked through her, shamelessly out of control. Her heart filled with the joy he had so often inspired. Her spirit yearned for the special intimacy they had once shared. Her body responded forcefully, suddenly eager for more of the touches and embraces that he had given her today.

He kissed her, and there was no part of her left to object.

The kiss left her helpless. She had never guessed that such a small physical connection could create such sweetness, such thrilling excitement. She did not want it to end.

It didn't. It went on and on, the one kiss becoming many. Delicious, stimulating sensations slid through her whole body, awakening a determined craving that obscured every other thought. He pulled her into a tight embrace, and she held him too, so grateful for the closeness that her heart ached, so desperate for more connection that she grew frantic.

Kisses on her ear, her neck, the skin above her gown. Luring kisses, possessive ones. Kisses full of breath that titillated her skin. Masterful kisses that demanded abandon.

Finally, a new kiss. A nip on her lip, requesting something. A quiet, verbal command to open her mouth when she did not understand.

The invasive tenderness shocked her. Undid her. It changed her responses from pleasure to need. It insinuated rights to other invasions and other possessions.

His embrace did, too. Supportive and gentle, it was still an embrace of power. With firm caresses, he touched her in ways that left her gasping and pressing against him and hoping for more.

His kiss returned to her ear while his hand caressed the front of her waist, rising in seductive strokes to the base of her breasts.

"Tell me that you want this, Giselle," he said lowly. "Promise me that you do."

She could barely talk at all.

"Tell me."

"I want this, Andreas."

He responded with a new kiss, fevered, and hard. A new caress, as his hand rose to her breast. A new closeness, as his knee pushed between her thighs, to press the moisture and ache torturing her.

The way that he touched her breasts raised unbearable pleasure. She lost awareness of everything except an intensifying hunger. She wanted him to kiss her harder, touch her more, tease her forever.

A sound abruptly disturbed the frantic bliss. A noise broke through her besotted senses.

A voice called Andreas's name.

They froze and turned their heads toward the sound. A man stood at the doorway to the house. He quietly called for Andreas again.

"*Ich bin hier*," Andreas called back.

His embrace loosened. He brushed her lips with his and glanced to the man again. "That is my brother, Stefan. He knew that I came here this morning."

"You should find out why he is looking for you."

"I suppose I must."

As they walked to the house, Andreas's arm slid down her back and across her waist until, when they approached Stefan, he was not touching her at all.

They spoke in their native tongue, and she understood none of it. She heard the name *Alberti*, however.

Andreas sent Stefan away and pulled her back into his arms. "I must go. A trader's clerk has arrived at my house with a gift, and I should see him."

She accepted it with a calm that surprised her. Her heart fell a little, and the joy dimmed a bit, but not enough to make her regret what had just happened.

Of course the negotiations with Signore Alberti would continue. It was the way of such things. She had

no illusions that she could hold on to Andreas. But in this garden he had been hers alone, as he had been years ago.

"I will come and see you tomorrow before I go to Essex," he said, giving her a final kiss.

"I will be ready to ride when you come."

"I must refuse to let you accompany me this time, Giselle. From what you have said, Woford is no John Hastings."

"I will not enter his manor, but I am coming to Essex. If something has happened to Reginald already, I want to know at once. If he is safe, I want to know that, too. I will not wait here in London while this unfolds."

Giselle lingered in the garden after Andreas left. She did not contemplate what had happened but simply basked in the magical mood that their embrace had created. She marvelled at the way her whole being remained flushed with wonder and surprise long after his departure.

Finally, regretfully, she relinquished her hold on the spell, and its on her, and entered the house.

Only moonlight guided her, but its eerie glow showed the table and bench in the hall, and the one remaining stool. The shelf that once displayed the silver plate formed a harsh, black gash on the white wall. The whole chamber appeared as so many voids, all lacking the objects that held memories and made a home. The house had been reduced over the years to little more than a structure, and this morning's losses had stripped it further.

At least the tapestry remained. It burned like a brilliant flower in a barren wasteland. Its reds and golds absorbed the vague light and then threw it back, increased a hundredfold. The flowing, organic vines defied the rest of the chamber's angular practicality.

Normally, the sight of it gave her comfort, but not tonight. It was no longer hers, for one thing. She also knew now that the tapestry would never serve the purpose in her life that she had assumed.

In her youth it had hung in her family's hall, and as a girl she learned the story of how it had come to them, its ancient age, and the story attached to its flaw. It had moved her profoundly when, on her fifteenth birthday, her father said it was hers, to be brought to her new home when she married the lord he had just chosen for her.

There had been no marriage, of course. The rebellion against King Henry had interrupted those plans. When the war was over her father was dead, and she and Reginald lost their patrimony. The man who had taken their home had been kinder than necessary and accepted her word that the tapestry was hers. He had allowed them to remove a few other things, too.

Things like the plate and the iron candleholders—none of which remained.

The tapestry had hung here for ten years, waiting to be the great luxury that set her dowry apart when Reginald found the coin to arrange a marriage for her. That had been the goal of all his grand plans, or so he had always explained. A marriage to a landed lord was the surest way to begin reestablishing the family. She had wasted the best years of her life sitting in this house, believing it would happen.

From what Andreas had said, however, it appeared that Reginald had given up on that idea long ago.

She had been slowly accepting reality all day, and now she swallowed the bitter conclusion. There would be no dowry. Ever. No husband at all, let alone a landed lord. No secure place.

The cold truth of that lodged in her soul like a lump of lead. Her eyes began misting, but she wiped them furiously with her hand. She would not weep over her stupidity.

Her strength cracked despite her efforts. The tears flowed faster than she could brush them away.

What a foolish dreamer she had been, living in a cloud. She was lucky that the whole city had not laughed at her outright when she walked down the lanes.

Suddenly, the tapestry struck her as ugly. Its vines appeared ensnaring, and its flowers monstrous.

She turned to the stairs, feeling old and painfully wise.

She wished that she were back in the garden, in Andreas's arms, where for a lovely few moments she had tasted what it meant to be young and beautiful and desired. She wished that he was here to hold her, as he had near the docks, in an embrace of protection and friendship.

Six



"If I have not returned by today's nightfall, do not grow concerned."

"And if you have not returned by tomorrow's nightfall?"

"In that event, you might call for the sheriff."

Andreas's light tone did not mask the dark implications of what he said. Confronting Woford would be dangerous. Even if that knave did not hold Reginald, he might decide that Andreas von Bremen would make an attractive hostage.

Giselle watched as Andreas removed Reginald's sword from its scabbard and tested its weight and feel. She had insisted on bringing it with them, but its glinting edge and point only sharpened her worry.

"Have you used one before?"

"Of course."

"Are you skilled with it?"

He shrugged.

"Then perhaps you should not take it."

"If I look too much a merchant, they may not see a man, but a chicken to be plucked."

She turned away from the hard image Andreas cut as he raised and lowered the sword to accustom himself to it.

She looked out the window of her chamber. Andreas had taken two of them on the top level of the inn. From here she could see most of the little town and the fields beyond that stretched to the horizon.

The journey here had been pleasant and happy. Andreas had brought an extra horse for her, and they had ridden side-by-side through the beautiful summer morning. They had spoken of many things, but not the ones that mattered.

There had been no mention of Reginald or of the ordeal waiting. Nor had there been conversation about last night or what had occurred in the garden. That passion might have never happened.

Except that thoughts of it had never left her mind. Or his, she suspected. The memories existed in the looks he gave her and the gentle protection he showed. There was no mistaking that their friendship and bond had changed—forever.

The sound of steel on steel made her turn. Andreas was returning the sword to its scabbard. He reached into a bag that he had carried up from his horse and withdrew a small purse. "There is coin in here for your meals, and if you need it for anything else."

He began to throw it toward the bed but stopped, and dropped it on the hearthstone instead.

"You are leaving now?"

He nodded.

She branded her mind with the sight of him, standing tall and strong, clasping the sword in his hand. Of course he would be safe. He was twice as clever as any brigand and, she suspected, twice as dangerous when he chose to be. A man did not rise in the Hanse if he was stupid or careless or weak.

"I find myself regretting that I involved you in this, Andreas. It was not fair to you."

"You have honored me by asking for my help, Giselle."

"No, I have endangered you."

"There will be little danger, I am sure."

She wasn't sure at all. Her stomach churned, and her mind filled with images of violence.

He must have seen her worry. He laid the sword on the bed and extended his arm to her.

She ran to the sanctuary of his embrace.

"Kiss me, my lady, so that I know you do not regret what started between us last night."

Started. That implied a finish. After this day her debt to him would be much greater than any loan made thus far.

The warmth of his arms made that obligation insignificant. The subtle excitement that had stirred in her all night and all morning spun a little faster. She wished that he was not leaving and that she could nestle in this security for hours.

Even if there were no debts, no danger, and no need for his help, she would want a finish. She had made that decision last night while she laid on her bed in the silent house, thinking about him.

She raised her head and kissed him, so he would know that there were no regrets.

The promise of what waited for them was in that kiss, in his embrace, and in the look he gave her as he left the chamber.

"I do not understand why Woford was so accommodating, but I am glad that he was. The chamber he gave me was very small and barely fit for a servant. And his board is not to my liking, either. Too much fish and his wine was sour."

Reginald waited until they were out of sight of Woford's manor before speaking. He rode the extra horse that Andreas had optimistically brought and appeared none the worse for his imprisonment. His rich garments were soiled, but their gold embroidery and his blond hair sparkled so brilliantly in the light of the evening sun that a bit of dirt hardly mattered.

"He was agreeable because I promised to come back with the money within three days," Andreas said.

"I had made the same promise, but he was not agreeable with *me*."

"The difference may be that he believes I will indeed bring it."

Reginald's brow puckered. "A fine thing, when a man accepts a merchant's word over a fellow knight's."

Andreas barely resisted the urge to wipe Reginald's frown away with his fist. Reginald kept missing life's lessons, even to the point of death.

The frown left of its own accord, and Reginald's easy smile returned. "This is my sister's doing, isn't it? Your being here."

"You left her nowhere else to turn. There is hell to pay back in London, Reginald. If fate had not brought me to England now, Woford would be eating you for dinner tomorrow."

"He never would have killed me. It was just a ruse on his part to get the money."

Andreas thought of the swarthy, angry lord with whom he had just negotiated. Reginald would have probably been laughing and joking to the end and been astonished as hell when the sword actually fell.

As they rode back to the town, they spoke of old times and pointless things. Andreas could see private worries growing in Reginald's mind despite their aimless conversation. They were reflected in his blue eyes and on his precise features and in the way he kept scratching the scalp beneath his golden hair.

"I am thinking that I should not return to London right away," he said as they entered the town. "It would make more sense for me to go elsewhere and procure the coin to pay those tradesmen."

"How would you do that?"

"I have a few plans afoot. Once they come together—"

"And your sister? Will you take her with you?"

"I would like to, but I don't see as I can. She will be better contented in London anyway."

"How will she eat? Where will she live?"

"Everyone likes her, and once she explains that I will return soon and pay the tallies, no one will put her out or let her starve. You can explain that to her when you are back in London, and she will understand."

"Well, she is here in this town, so *you* can explain it to her."

Reginald's face fell. "It will embarrass her to see me. I can guess the bargain she made with you, and—"

"Do not insult her. Do not forget that I am the one who still has the sword."

Andreas led the way to the inn and around the back to its stables.

"It would be best if I just leave," Reginald explained. "I do not care for long farewells. Women always weep so."

"Get off the horse, Reginald."

"I truly think that it would be better—"

"Off."

Looking too much like a petulant youth, Reginald dismounted. Andreas gestured him into the long shadow beneath the stable's eaves.

"If you are determined to leave, so be it. There is a ship's master in the Cinque Ports named Paul Knowles. He is always looking for swords to guard his cargo."

Reginald laughed indulgently. "Hardly fitting for me, Andreas. The lowest man at arms can do that duty."

"It is an honest living, but choose as you prefer. There are two other things that I want to settle with you, however. You have given Giselle the fright of her life, forced her to beg for money to save you, and now you intend to leave her to fend for herself. You will go up to her, and you will apologize for all of it."

None too happy, Reginald nodded his agreement on that part. "What is the second thing?"

"This."

Andreas swung his fist and crashed it into Reginald's charming, perfect face.

When Giselle saw Andreas and Reginald ride down the lane together, her heart lifted with relief that bordered on ecstasy.

She watched them from her window until they disappeared around the inn. She was grateful that Reginald was safe, but it was Andreas who absorbed her attention.

It took them a long time to come up to her. She paced impatiently, until finally she heard boots trudging up the wooden steps.

Reginald entered, smiling, confident, and handsome. His manner both reassured and irked her. He might be returning from a night at a tavern. Except for a new swelling under one eye, he appeared hale and fit.

Before he closed the door, she saw Andreas entering the chamber across the landing.

She joined her brother in an embrace. "Thank the saints that you are unharmed."

"It was churlish of Woford to play such a game and give you such distress."

"The whole world knows that Woford is a knave, so his demanding this ransom could not have surprised you."

"He and I got along well before. I thought he favored me and am disappointed in him."

"There are limits to any man's favor, Reginald."

"Still, I will never forgive him for making you humble yourself to procure the coin."

She did not miss that Reginald was making this Woford's fault alone. It had always been thus with him, and probably always would be.

She looked up at the brother who had been the champion of her childhood and the measure of men in her youth. She saw him very clearly, for the first time. She envied him his childish belief in the future and in his rights. She would always love him, but she could never lie to herself about him again.

She told him what had transpired at the house. "What do we do now, Reginald?"

He gently extricated himself from her arms. "I must leave and make my fortune, Giselle. If I return to London I might be imprisoned, and how can I make it right if that happens?"

"You will take service and live by your sword?" That was something, at least. He had always resisted that option.

"It would be humiliating to do so, as I have often told you. I should be giving service, not taking it. However, if it isn't England... Flanders, perhaps..."

A shadow slid into her heart.

"It won't be for long, Giselle. You will see. I will be back before winter and make things right. Those pledges and tallies will wait until then."

They wouldn't wait. She had just explained that.

"Of course, if it is the only way, brother, that is how it must be."

"If I cannot return soon, I will send for you."

"I will come when you do."

He took her hands in his. Squeezing them, he smiled so warmly that she almost believed in him again. "I should go at once, while there is still light. Andreas will get you back to London. He will take care of you."

He appeared a tad sly as he said the last part.

She narrowed her eyes on him. "I will take care of myself while you are gone, Reginald."

He released her and patted her cheek. "Of course you will. You are a good girl."

She wanted to smack him. She itched to upbraid him for the bargain he had once offered Andreas and for assuming she had struck a similar one now.

Except that, in a way, she had.

Gazing at him, it did not matter. Reginald was leaving her. Suddenly, the years of love meant more than the recent discoveries. Nostalgic memories saddened her more than the truths she had learned.

She would let the old illusions live for a few more moments, until she gave them up forever.

Taking his face in her hands, she filled her memory with the sight of him and let her heart cry.

His smile cracked. His face fell. Swallowing hard, he stepped back. "I should be going."

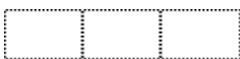
Her eyes misted as he walked to the door.

He stopped. He stood there, with his back to her.

"I am sorry, Giselle."

He left.

Seven



She waited by the window for Reginald to appear on his horse down below. She stayed there, in the creeping silence and shadows of the night, as he rode away. From her high position she was able to keep him in sight as he galloped over the fields.

Finally, the deepening dusk absorbed him.

She blinked, and he disappeared completely.

She did not turn away from the window, but she knew she was not alone in the chamber. She had not heard Andreas enter, but she felt him behind her, close enough to offer invisible support.

"How did you get him out?"

"I convinced Wolford that I would bring the money in three days. It was not a ransom, but the amount Reginald had convinced him to invest in Sandro's scheme. Reginald had neglected to explain that the chance for great profit also meant the chance for great loss."

She narrowed her eyes on the distant spot where she had last seen her brother. "I am never going to see him again, am I?"

"I think you will find him on your threshold someday. He always relied on you more than you did him."

"So, you bought his life. One hundred pounds is a large sum, even for you."

"It is a gift, and not to you, but to Reginald." He reached around and placed the stack of pledges on the sill. "However, the previous debts must be settled now."

She looked down at his hand lying upon those parchments. He was very close now, warming her shoulder and back.

Didn't he know that she was his even without those pledges? That settling them had little to do with what would happen?

"I want to burn these, Giselle. I do not want these debts standing between us. I do not want you obligated to me."

She smiled. It seemed he did know, after all. "Burn them, then."

"If I do, others will make claims on the house and property. You will lose it all."

"I have already lost it all."

"You must know that I would never actually take the house."

"I do know that, but I would prefer that notions of charity and debt not shadow our friendship. Burn them. If you are willing to take the loss, so am I."

He moved away, and she turned to see him bending to the low fire that had been lit to remove the evening chill. The parchments joined the flame, making it rise.

Andreas watched the debts disappear. He continued gazing into the hearth long after the fire had died back down.

She went over to him and saw his pensive expression. "What are you thinking?"

His arm embraced her shoulders then slid down to hold her more closely. "I am thinking that a good man would leave now and use the other chamber tonight."

A good woman would insist that he use the other chamber. She had no obligations to him now. No

excuses.

But his embrace already had her blood pulsing faster and her body warming. Memories of last night, of the incredible physical pleasure, swam through her head until the pleasure returned as a real sensation.

He turned so that they faced each other, and the embrace pressed her to him. "I am also thinking that I am tired of being good where you are concerned. I desire you too much."

She was tired of being good, too. Tired of saving herself for the husband who would never come and for the future that had been a girlish dream. Her past had just disappeared on the horizon, and her future was for tomorrow. The present was here and now. For the next few hours this chamber and Andreas were her whole world.

His gaze and touch stirred delicious excitements, and she did not want to fight them. She did not care about anything but holding this man who made her feel alive and beautiful and safe. The warmth of his embrace dulled the heartache about Reginald and obscured her fears about the new life waiting in London.

Even the knowledge that she could not hold onto him became insignificant as the desire poured out of them both, changing the air. If anything, knowing that she could not have him forever made her want this even more.

The first kiss came slowly. Too slowly. He gave her time to change her mind. Impatiently, she rose on her toes and met him halfway, so the kiss was as much hers as his.

The new Andreas kissed her, but so did the old one. The way his mouth took hers, gently but demanding, and the way his arms dominated her, totally but carefully, contained the friendship of years and the passion of last night. He made her feel precious, something that he valued highly but was determined to possess.

Their bodies pressed so closely that they could not get closer. Kisses, wonderful kisses, heated her lips and skin and neck. Like a spiral of magic, the desire tightened and rose, pulling her to its center, making her senses swirl. She lost hold on her restraint and spun, spun, in the heady excitement.

She loved the way he held her. Touched her. His rough palm, warm and male and careful, on her face. His controlling arm across her back. His claiming caresses through her garments, pressing her hip and waist and thighs and back. She loved the gentle intimacy of his breath on her skin and hair and the alarming intimacy of his invasive kiss. Her body and soul wanted more of both, and the impatience returned. Their closeness wasn't enough; their kisses weren't enough.

Soundlessly, she cried her acceptance of the ascending madness. *Yes*, her mind chanted. *Yes*, her body demanded. *Yes*, her heart sang.

"Yes," her voice whispered when he held her head with both of his hands and asked a question with his eyes that needed no words.

He lifted her and carried her to the bed. Thrills of desire and fear slid down her body in tantalizing streaks.

He sat on the edge of the bed and began undressing her. "You should not be afraid. I know that you are still a maid. I am not going to hurt you."

Small pauses interrupted his words, as if he had to think to find the right ones in English. It reminded her of how he spoke the language when she first met him. The evidence that he had lost his smooth command of his English sent tenderness streaming out of her heart.

"I am not afraid." That was a lie. A delicious fear trembled through her, made more exciting by the closeness of his hands. He dragged the lacing of her gown down her body, level by level, until the narrow cloth of her robe parted to her hips, revealing her shift.

He laid his palm flat on her stomach. Its rough warmth seemed to permeate all through her loins, as if he touched her womb. His caress rose up her body, creating a path of arousal. When it passed over her breast, her heart rose to her throat.

"I saw your body once. The second time I stayed at your house. I passed your little chamber while you were washing, and the door was ajar. I wanted you so much that I could not move."

His memory provoked one of her own. One of her standing by her washstand years ago, with her shift falling around her hips, and the strong sense that someone had paused by her door. A shocking excitement had pounded through her, and she also had been unable to move.

"I knew you were there, I think. I wanted you to look at me like that, I think."

What else had she wanted? What else had she pretended did not exist?

She looked at his face, handsome and shadowed in the dim light. For ten years her heart had filled with sweet longing as it did now whenever she saw him or thought of him.

She had called it friendship.

His hand covered her breast, gently but possessively. It was a claim of sorts. His expression hardened subtly. She knew there was no turning back.

She welcomed the kiss that demanded new rights. Caresses on her breast teased her toward abandon. He laid beside her, so that the intimacy of their embrace extended their whole lengths. A wonderful madness took possession of her, so that she knew only gratitude when he slid off her garments and exalted in a shocking glory when he looked at her naked body.

Desperate hunger and incredible sensations ruled her. She wanted... everything. A closeness that even his hand on her body did not satisfy. An entwining that surpassed their long embrace.

With fingers that would not obey her, she fumbled at his garments, eager to feel the body under them. He broke their eternal kiss long enough to strip them off. The intimacy of holding him then, of having his naked warmth sealing her side and his skin beneath her hands, left her breathless.

That strong, wonderful hand stroked her whole body while he looked at her and kissed her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. He spoke lowly in his native tongue, but she understood the meaning if not the words. Desire and praise and tenderness were in his tone and his touch, and her own arousal developed layers of emotion in response.

He licked the tip of one breast. An arrow of amazing pleasure shot completely through her, making her arch in surprise. He used his mouth to transform that one arrow into a stream of sensation that flowed to

a new hunger and desperation low and deep in her body. He slowly panned the other breast, and she grew more frantic.

He spoke again, a quiet command, but it was his caress on her thighs that told her what he wanted. She parted her legs, and the vulnerable act alone jolted her passion to new heights. His touch sent her reeling. The pleasure became crazed and furious and centered on the soft, hidden place that he stroked and probed.

When he moved on top of her she clutched him to her, embracing him with her arms and thighs, holding his strength to her entire body. She did not mind the gentle pain at first and only gasped in shock when a sharper one brought an onslaught of glaring clarity.

She blinked and looked up at the face and shoulders above her and absorbed the profound sensation of being connected in ways that nothing could ever undo.

The tightness of his muscles and expression revealed his forced control. Passion lit his eyes, but so did a beautiful warmth. He kissed her carefully and spoke quietly in her ear.

He gazed down and must have seen her incomprehension. "I said that..." He paused, searching for his English amidst his body's distractions. "I said that I have wanted you from the first time I saw you."

He moved, and she did not mind the pain. It became submerged in a fullness of pleasure and joy that her heart could barely contain. The passion found her again, too, richer than before, deeper and drenched with happiness. When their joining turned less careful and then furious, she opened to the power of it all, holding him to her breast as his thrusts touched her womb and her soul.

He did not leave the bed afterward. The second chamber remained unused. He tucked her under the sheet and into his embrace and fell asleep beside her.

She stared at the night through the window, unable to sleep herself. This new experience, of lying beside him for hours, moved her in new ways. When they made love she had wanted to sing. Now she wanted to weep.

They had called it friendship for years, and tonight he had called it desire. She now knew the real name of the emotion in her own heart, however.

Love.

She was glad that she admitted that. It made the joy bittersweet, but wonderfully so. She was grateful that she had been given the gift of loving a man.

She would lose everything else, even him, but this love was hers to keep forever. She would never be impoverished.

Eight



"I will need a fresh horse, Stefan. Also, take this to the counting house and retrieve one hundred

pounds from the trading account that they hold for me."

Stefan's mouth pursed as he accepted the note. "Can I assume that these funds do not go to Alberti?"

"You can assume what you like."

"You must go and see him today. You said that you would two nights ago, and he expects you. You cannot leave the city again and have him wondering... that is, he may have heard about this woman of yours."

Andreas pulled on his boots and swallowed his inclination to remind Stefan of his place. The disadvantage of having a brother as your clerk was that he felt free to speak boldly. "Whatever he has heard, he will not care. Our arrangements are really about a trading network, not a marriage. He understands that. Everyone understands that."

Even Giselle understood that. Not once had she mentioned his marriage negotiations, although surely she knew of them. All of London probably knew, and Narni had referred to it in her presence.

Of course she had not spoken of it. What could she say? What could either of them say? It was the way of the world. If she had married, it would have been about land, not ships, but it would have been the same.

As he finished dressing in clean garments, he thought about the years ahead, when he would be bound to one woman but hungering for another. He had already lived that life once. It appeared that it was to be his fate forever.

He went to the window and looked down on the city. He peered at the spot of garden several lanes over. The next time he came to London she would not be sitting there. The breeze would not carry the sounds of her lute.

Where would she be instead? Her future was precarious. Burning those pledges had been a gallant but selfish gesture. A necessary one, however, for both their sakes. He had not wanted her owing him anything, least of all her body.

Thoughts of that body, of her warmth and beauty, filled his head. He closed his eyes and experienced again the raging desire and delirious pleasure. But the memory that had stayed with him ever since, that he could not get out of his mind, was the way she looked as she woke in the morning, and the burst of joy that had saturated him when she smiled and snuggled closer.

He would take care of her. He would buy her a different house and arrange an income for her. He would explain it was not payment, that he was not keeping her. He would make her understand that he could not leave her destitute, in the name of their old friendship and not because of last night.

And whenever he visited London, he would once more walk down a lane with the heart of a man who was truly coming home.

"I will return for the coin soon, Stefan. You had better pay two swordsmen to accompany me as well. With that much money, I may need some protection on the road."

He found Giselle in her ball, standing on a stool in front of the tapestry.

"Help me get this down."

"Why?"

"You burned the pledge that included it, and no one else had one on it. That means it is still mine. I want you to sell it for me, so that I can give you the money to bring Wolford."

"I said that will be a gift to Reginald."

She began heaving the iron bar from the wall. He reached up to take its weight in his own hands.

"I know you said that, but in truth the gift is to me. One more debt. One more obligation." She busied herself with sliding the tapestry's looped braids off the bar. "I would prefer to pay the sum myself. I gave myself to you with a pure heart, and I am glad I did. However, after you marry again, my memory of that bed will be all that I keep of you. I do not want what happened to be tainted in the years ahead by any thoughts that I... whored. Can you understand that?"

He could, too well.

"Do you know someone who will buy it and give me what it is worth?"

He rolled the tapestry and folded it into thirds. Made of silk as it was, it easily formed a compact bundle. "I know of a man who will be happy to buy it."

"Not you, Andreas. Please, do not—"

"Not me."

He kissed her, then carried the tapestry out of the house. Giselle's resolve to sell it had told him everything he needed to know.

She had told him that last night had been all that he thought it had been, and that she wanted to preserve its memory.

She had told him that she would not lie with him in adultery.

Of course she wouldn't.

She had also told him that she would face the future on her own. She was not going to let him take care of her.

"*One hundred pounds? You are a madman, or else you think I am England's biggest fool.*" John Hastings struck an insulted pose, crossing his thick arms over his chest. He nodded toward the tapestry spread out on his table. "Without the flaw, maybe thirty pounds, but with that interruption you will be lucky to see half that much."

"There is a poignant story attached to that flaw. The woman who wove it was given in marriage to a man she did not love. The weaving remained unfinished until her husband died and she returned to her girlhood love."

"Oh, horses' turds. Traders always come up with sweet tales to explain bad goods. I'll give you twenty, and only because you are a friend."

"The lady who owns it was told it is worth a hundred, so that is the price."

"What idiot told her such a thing?"

An idiot who wanted her to believe she owned something of great value so that she would think she had some security. Andreas began folding the tapestry. "A pity that you do not favor it. I will find another merchant who appreciates its age and quality."

"I hope you are not angry, Andreas. It is very lovely, just not worth such a high sum. Surely you know that."

"I am not angry at all. Our friendship will continue as before. When I next visit London, I will be sure to come see you. I should be back before winter. I expect to bring in a shipment of flax soon, as well as some furs."

John's lids lowered. His mouth twitched. "What kind of furs?"

"Sables from the Rus. They are rare and fetch astonishing prices with the nobility."

"That is what I heard that worthless fool Reginald was going to bring in with Sandro. No one ever saw a single pelt."

"I am not Reginald."

Andreas continued slowly folding the tapestry. John uncrossed his arms and casually paced around the table.

"Have you arranged the sale of these furs?"

Andreas lifted the tapestry and shook it in front of John's face to remove the wrinkles.

He laid it down on the table and smoothed it with his hand.

"I have been so occupied that I have not had time to strike a bargain with any London merchant yet. Well, it can wait until I come back. There are many men who will want such a cargo."

He began to roll up the tapestry.

John's hand descended to stroke the silk, stopping him.

"It really is a very lovely weaving," John said. "Most artful. Very unique. I find myself growing fond of it."

"Did I mention the story attached to the interruption?"

"Yes. Touching. I am so moved that I might buy it for myself. How much did you say?"

"One hundred pounds. If you keep it yourself, I might offer to buy it back from you someday. That is

how much I favor it, and I am pleased to see that you appreciate its beauty."

"It is really magnificent. I must have it. Of course, if you should ever want to buy it back, I would be hard-pressed to refuse a good friend. I would be even harder-pressed to refuse a partner in a fur trade."

Andreas smiled. "It sounds as though the bargain is struck, John."

He waited while John retrieved the silver from the hiding places where he kept his coin. A long time later Andreas tied the heavy chest to the back of his horse.

He sent word to Giselle that he would leave at once to deliver the money.

From his place in the saddle, he could see some of the masts of the ships at the docks. Moored among them would be the long, low, sleek galleys of the Venetians.

He gazed in that direction, not moving his horse.

A future he had planned and built for years waited on one of those galleys. A dream beckoned that he had constructed as a youth and then pursued as a man. It was a magnificent dream, in which wealth was the least of the rewards. The achievement itself would be the true prize, and the fame would be the enduring legacy.

The chest pressed against his back, reminding him of Giselle. Memories of their lovemaking flooded his mind. The image of her face, aglow with trusting passion, hung in front of him.

He turned his horse, fully aware of what he would be giving up.

Before he returned to his house to fetch the fresh mount and the guards, he stopped at a Venetian galley moored at the docks, in order to finally visit with Signore Alberti.

Nine



Giselle sat on the carved bench with her back pressed to the edge of the table behind her. She gazed at the wall across the chamber. The tapestry had hung there for so long that now, even after three days, it startled her to see only plaster and timbers instead of silken vines of red and gold.

She was not thinking about the tapestry, however. Her eyes might fix on that wall, but her head was elsewhere, in a different chamber. She was looking up at the face of a man she had known for years, as passion stripped her heart and laid bare a hidden love.

Andreas had filled her thoughts since he walked out of the house carrying the tapestry. Filled her soul. The warmest happiness accompanied those images and memories, but a poignant nostalgia was creeping in already.

He absorbed her so completely that it did not startle her to find him standing at the threshold. She had not heard his steps approach. He was simply there suddenly, and it was right and natural that he should be.

The joy sparkled, as it had so many times. Only now she understood what it meant.

He came over and sat beside her, so that the two of them faced the blank wall.

"It is done?" she asked.

"Wolford is appeased. We even dined together. Reginald was right. His wine is sour." He gestured to the wall. "You should not have sold it. It was not necessary, and I know what it meant to you."

It *had* been necessary. "I find that I do not miss it. In fact, I think I am glad that it is gone. I have been sitting here, waiting to be sad, but instead whenever I see that empty spot my heart rises instead of falls. It is the oddest reaction. Almost triumphant."

"It is a very odd reaction. That tapestry wove you to your heritage and place. It was a banner proclaiming who you should be."

"I never thought of it that way, but perhaps you saw more clearly than I did. Maybe I thought of that interruption as the years I lived here in London and of the continuation as the future when my family would be restored. I know that will never happen now, and I am glad to let that expectation die. It feels good to be free of it."

He took her hand in his. "I am relieved if you do not grieve for it."

"The tapestry?"

"The expectation."

"I grieve for nothing. I should, but I don't. I should be afraid, too, but I'm not." She turned her attention from the wall to him. His own gaze rested on their hands, but his handsome profile attracted hers. "I have been thinking these last two days about what I will do now. I have realized that I have several choices and that my situation is not very dire at all."

"It will be some months before the others realize I will not be taking the property. It will not be until I return that anyone demands to see the pledges, to learn if they still stand. You do not have to do anything right away."

"All the same, I must consider my future."

"What choices do you see?"

She crooked her leg up on the bench so she faced him and could enjoy watching his thoughtful gaze resting on their connected hands. "Well, I have a kinsman in the north, east of York, who is my father's cousin. They broke with each other because of the rebellion, but I can go there. I am his blood, and he would give me a place, I'm sure."

"I do not like that choice. This kinsman will marry you off to some small landowner to be free of the cost of you. Also, York is far from London, or any port."

Far from the England that he visited was what he meant. It touched her that it mattered to him, but in the years ahead it no longer would. She suspected that desire faded quickly once fulfilled. He had wanted

her for ten years, but two years hence he probably would not think of her much anymore.

She would be the one who remembered.

"There also is Lady Agatha. She spends many months here in her London house and has always been a friend to me. She guessed my situation, I think, and has several times asked me to join her household to help educate her daughters."

"You mean that she has asked you to be a servant."

"Not truly a servant."

"Most *truly* a servant, no matter where you sleep or if you take your board at her high table. But without the freedom of a servant, since you will be tied to that hearth by your blood and need. Better to go serve in a tavern, where the pay is in coin and your life is your own."

His reaction annoyed her. These choices she had discovered during the last days' contemplation had given her hope and confidence. Andreas appeared determined to belittle them.

"I do not approve of these options that you have found," he said.

"That is obvious."

"You must find another."

"There is no other."

His head turned. The way he looked at her made her heart flutter.

She knew what he was thinking.

"At least, there is no other that is respectable," she said quietly.

He reached out, and with great care slowly brushed some errant hairs away from the sides of her face. "That is not true. There is one other choice that is respectable enough. You could marry me."

His words stunned her. She could not move, not even to blink. She just stared at him as his hands gently grazed her cheeks.

It was an astonishing proposal. Tempting and mesmerizing. Reckless and impossible. In the silence of her daze, her heart filled with the purest, lovely emotion and then fell with excruciating pain, all in one instant.

He was being as impractical and foolish as Reginald.

"Signore Alberti..."

"I have told him that my marriage to his daughter will not happen."

"But the trading alliance..."

"It was too ambitious. My pride wanted it, and for all the wrong reasons. Alberti and I will continue to be friends and to enrich each other."

This new proposal of marriage was being made for all the wrong reasons, too. She turned her face away from his gaze and touch.

"Look what I have done. I came to you with my problem, and now you feel obligated enough that you will put aside an alliance that you have been planning for years. This is very kind of you, Andreas, but you do not have to do it. I knew in that chamber that a marriage was impossible, and I did not give myself with that expectation."

"I am not being kind. I am being selfish. I want you for myself. I do not make this offer under obligation, but with the excitement of a boy. I do not want you living with some kinsman and maybe given to some other man. I do not want you with Lady Agatha, at a house where I am not welcome because my trade is scorned as base. I want you in my home in Bremen and with me on my ship when I journey back here. When I walk down a lane to my house, I want your arms and body waiting for me, and your eyes filling with their warm lights when I enter through the threshold. All the Venetian gold in the world cannot purchase any of that, Giselle."

"The excitement of a boy quickly dims, Andreas. The luster of Venetian gold never does."

His fingers closed on her chin and turned her face back so she had to look at him. "I could have settled the marriage negotiations with Alberti months ago, Giselle. His agent was in Hamburg, and it could have all been done there, by proxy. I insisted on coming here to meet with him personally, however. I think my heart secretly knew what it really wanted and was hoping that something would happen to bring you and me together again before I committed myself. And something did. I will thank God for Reginald's recklessness until the day I die."

He stunned her again. Aching hope almost left her speechless. Her love wanted to grab hold of a future with him. If she had still been a girl, ignorant of the world, she would gladly surrender to that emotion. Her heart wanted to. Cried to.

"Your family will hate me. I am impoverished."

"There are many ways to be impoverished, and lacking property and coin is only one of them."

"It is the one that matters in marriage. I have nothing to bring you."

"You bring me the woman whom I have loved for years. If you also bring me the chance that I will have your love in return, that is enough."

Love. He had been alluding to that, but there it was, casually stated, as if they had spoken of it many times before.

Maybe they had. Not in words, but in the joy that accompanied his returns and in the quiet hours by the hearth or in her garden. And in the soulful passion that they had shared in that Essex bed.

His gaze mesmerized her. Lights of warmth and passion, of the old Andreas and the new, burned in them. So did the determination of a man who had decided to take what he wanted.

Her heart was so full she thought it would burst "You already have my love in return, Andreas. And not

only the love of a friend."

He pulled her into his arms, surrounding her, claiming her.

She had not been doing well keeping her hope contained, and now it overflowed. He kissed her and it became a flood, carrying away her misgivings.

His embrace warmed her like a toasty hearth on a winter day. She shed her worries and fears like so many garments that had protected her from the chill. His kisses gave excitement and love and safety all at once. The bliss filled her so completely that tears blurred her eyes.

He noticed and kissed at a line of wetness on her cheek. "What is this?"

"Happiness. Joy at learning that you love me as I love you."

"I told you that night that I have loved and wanted you since the first time I saw you."

"You said nothing of love."

"Didn't I? Well, I discovered that my English is not so good at such moments. I have had little practice in speaking of love in any language, and I was very distracted that night." He rose and held out his hand. "Come up to bed with me. I promise to speak the words correctly this time."

She took his hand and rose on her toes to kiss him. "If I am to live in Bremen, maybe you should teach them to me in your language."

He caressed her face. "*Ich liebe dich*. I love you."

"*Ich liebe dich*."

"*Meine Liebe*. My love." He kissed her cheek. "*Meine Freundin*."

"*Meine Freundin*?"

"My friend."

As Andreas led her to the stairs, he looked to the wall where the tapestry used to hang. Giselle had said that she was glad it was gone, but that would pass. She would not mind when he bought it back from John Hastings. He had planned to do that anyway, but it would be essential now.

The tapestry with the interrupted weaving belonged in their home.