

The Heir's Beloved

ELLA

I WON'T LIVE TO SEE TOMORROW. The black thought circled Ella's head like a ravenous buzzard as Sergeant Drake bellowed his rage. Her ears still burned from the immoral suggestion he'd made, but perhaps she shouldn't have slapped his face. *Mama told me someday I'd learn to think before I act.* That day might never come.

The sergeant rose to his impressive height and flipped a nearby pony cart as if it weighed naught. His menacing bulk overshadowed the marketplace as his waves of anger roiled the air.

Ella dropped her basket of vegetables and scrambled toward the nearest alley, heedless to cook's need for them, but Drake's cohorts formed an impenetrable ring of muscle. She tripped on a loose cobblestone, fell, and gagged at the stench—horse dung and rotted food scraps cast into the street from the kitchen of the Mace & Hammer tavern.

One man snatched her cap, and a curtain of curls tumbled free. Ella had overslept that morning, so it wasn't secured in a braid. She peeked through the locks that obscured her face. Alas, the rest of her was in plain sight.

Drake massaged his red cheek. Whoops echoed off the nearby buildings as his men gave the sergeant room to maneuver. One man offered a gummy grin. "Go on, Drake. She's earned it. Give the lass a good beating!"

"Now, you little tart, I'll teach you what happens when you slap Lord Fenwick's sergeant-at-arms." Drake seized Ella by an arm and attempted to lift her to her feet.

Ella refused to stand, quaking but not screaming, not wanting the knave to enjoy her terror. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . ." She whispered the prayer, and the familiar words brought comfort.

"And she's a papist! Maybe she needs to spend time in the stocks till she comes to her senses." A man bared his blackened teeth.

Another man, short and skinny, crowed like a banty rooster. "She oughta pray with what's coming to the likes of her." Drake's men guffawed while their leader slipped his hand beneath the shoulder strap of her apron.

Ella switched to an Anglican prayer lest she be beaten to death. "Our God, in whom we trust: Strengthen us not to regard overmuch who is for us or who is against us, but to see to it that we be with You in everything we do . . ." Ella furtively sought a path of escape. There was none.

"Amen." Ella's breaths slowed. A mysterious calm enveloped her in a comforting embrace. She allowed Drake to haul her to her feet, faced her nemesis, and lifted her chin. Glaring into Drake's eyes, she leaned forward. "You deserved it."

Drake roared, formed a fist, and drew back his beefy arm. Ella closed her eyes and prayed the first blow would knock her unconscious.

A manly grunt followed a loud thump, but Ella remained upright. The catcalls ceased. She opened one eyelid and gasped at the unexpected sight.

A stranger had blocked Drake's punch and encompassed the sergeant's fist with his gigantic fingers. The man towered over Drake, and his mass outmatched Ella's tormentor. His blond hair grazed the bottom edge of the low-hanging Mace & Hammer sign, and his dominance made the air hard to breathe.

"Ye'll not strike a woman in my presence." Although the outsider spoke at normal volume, no one missed his threat.

The cold fear that squeezed Ella's heart eased somewhat. She tried to sidle away, but the men wouldn't part. Battle would soon

commence, and nothing frail would remain undamaged, certainly not a slip of a woman.

One man drew a dagger to defend the sergeant against the blatant challenge.

“No,” Drake commanded. “My fists alone are enough to whip this pup.”

Men placed wagers on the outcome. They widened the ring, but it still trapped Ella.

Drake guarded his face with his fists. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. “Now, you oaf, I’ll show you who’s in charge of Ravenwood.”

A cultured voice penetrated the chaos. “And who does rule Ravenwood, Drake?”

Lord Fenwick. Goosebumps raised on Ella’s forearms. She’d have preferred the stocks.

Shouts dwindled to silence, broken only by murmurs of onlookers, both shoppers and merchants. Though dwarfed by the combatants’ height, Lord Fenwick strolled into the ring as lesser men cleared a path.

Drake stroked back his greasy, salt-and-pepper hair and bowed like a courtier. “Everyone knows Ravenwood is under your rule as a benevolent steward, Lord Fenwick.”

What a groveling cur.

“Yes, I am benevolent.” Fenwick’s manicured fingers brushed imaginary lint from his silk doublet. “But I’m also curious. Here I am, shopping among the vendors in my eminently peaceful village, when I hear an unholy ruckus.” He assessed the stranger as if buying horseflesh. “Drake, why are you about to launch an ill-advised attack on this beast? I never place a bet I can’t win, and I’d wager this behemoth could kill you with his bare hands.”

“He prevented me from giving this girl her punishment.” Drake whined notwithstanding his size and station.

Lord Fenwick’s soulless gaze pinned Ella. “Would this child be the reason there is a handprint on your cheek?”

She lowered her lashes. Maybe it would help her escape unwanted attention.

Fenwick lifted her to her feet and took her chin between his fingers. The aroma of musk and sandalwood fragrancd the air. "Look at me, girl."

Mama said Ella's beauty was a rare, divine gift. But Ella would have refused it if the Almighty had given her the choice. Looking men in the eye caused nothing but trouble. But how could she refuse? Ella complied.

Fenwick's lips parted, and his pupils dilated. "Violet eyes. Most unusual, wouldn't you say, Drake?" The sergeant grunted. Fenwick's hand slipped into Ella's hair to roll a single curl around his forefinger. He leaned closer, and Ella whiffed a hint of spearmint on his breath. "What did my man do to warrant an assault?"

Ella cleared her throat and commanded her voice not to quaver. "He ..." She struggled for an acceptable word to describe what Drake did. "... *suggested* something."

The shame of Drake's proposition lingered, and embarrassment flamed her cheeks. Other servants welcomed inappropriate attention from men, but she would never stoop so far. Ella cast a surreptitious glance at the stranger. He regarded her evenly, his face set in stone.

"A *suggestion*?" Fenwick's lips hitched up at one corner, and his eyes gleamed. "Drake. You scoundrel. Can't you see this child is unspoiled? An innocent ..." The steward's words trailed away as he stroked Ella's cheek with the back of his fingers. His smile waned. He lifted his walking stick and pointed it at the newcomer. "Brute. What's your name?"

"Liam." The man stood as still as one of the statues in Ravenwood Abbey. His sonorous voice swathed Ella in a cocoon of masculine strength.

"Where are you from, and what are you doing in my town?" The steward reigned in Ravenwood as more than a king. He was a god.

"I arrived a week ago from Roxburghshire, where I served Laird Greysen of Clan Kerr. I'm your blacksmith's new apprentice."

The men muttered at the burr in the stranger's speech, and Fenwick smacked a nearby wagon with his stick. "Quiet!" The nobleman waited for silence. "John told me he needed a new man. I see he wasted no time in hiring a Scotsman since it's brawn he needs, not brains."

The men rumbled their approval.

Liam offered a cold gaze but didn't respond.

If he did, he'd bleed.