

EXCERPT FROM *RAVENWOOD: DESTINY DELAYED*

By Rhonda Dragomir

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 wagon 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 the groceries, 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 off 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 the sergeant of Lord Fenwick's troops." Drake seized Ella by an arm and tugged.

Ella refused to stand, quaking but not screaming, not wanting the knave to enjoy her terror. "We sinners beseech you to hear us, Lord Christ: That it may please you to deliver the

soul of your servant from the power of evil . . .” She whispered the familiar prayer which brought comfort this time.

“Maybe she needs to spend time in the stocks till she comes to her senses.” A sneer bared the agitator’s 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.

“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 low-hanging rafters, 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 its grip. 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 forward on 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 just who does rule Ravenwood, Drake?"

Lord Fenwick.

A chill skittered down Ella's spine. She'd have preferred the stocks.

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

Drake smoothed 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 velvet 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.

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

She kept her head bowed. 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 had 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. Still, in this case, how could she refuse? Ella complied.

Fenwick’s lips parted, and his pupils dilated. “Violet eyes. Most unusual, wouldn’t you say, Drake?” The constable 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 sergeant 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 sent flames to her cheeks. Other female servants welcomed inappropriate attention from amorous men, but she would never stoop so far, regardless of Mabel’s thoughts on keeping one’s virtue. Ella cast a surreptitious glance at the stranger. He regarded her evenly, his face set in stone.

“He made 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. Fenwick 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 an apprentice to your blacksmith."

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

The men rumbled their approval.

Liam glowered but didn't respond.

Fenwick sauntered around the man who stood motionless under his appraisal. When he resumed his stance in front of Liam, Fenwick's head barely reached the mammoth man's shoulder. "Why defend this girl? Do you know her?"

Liam regarded Ella with a tender expression that caused a strange flutter in her midsection. What would life be like under the protection of such a man? She'd never know.

"Nae. But I'll not stand idle while a wee lassie is insulted." His countenance hardened, and he scowled at Drake. "She is nae a trollop, and the man kens it."

“This grows tiresome.” Fenwick sniffed and slapped a kidskin glove against his thigh. “Drake, tell your men this child is to remain unmolested. Anyone who lays a hand on her—” Fenwick tossed a meaningful look at Liam. “—*anyone*, will incur my wrath. Understood?”

Ella exhaled, but found it difficult to pull in another breath.

Uncle Hugh chose that moment to trundle down the street, wheezing from exertion. He wiped sweat from his forehead with a stained kerchief and took in the scene. Face reddening, he clomped to Ella’s side and clutched her elbow. “Ella, what trouble have you stirred now?” Hugh turned pleading eyes on Fenwick. “Milord, I apologize. My niece is most impertinent at times and has an unruly tongue. She will be severely disciplined.”

Ella bit back a ready retort. Any comment would be rewarded with more stripes on her back.

“No need. I find the girl pleasant enough.” Fenwick’s conciliatory tone might calm Hugh even though he never spared him a glance. “Ella, is it? I like a woman with spirit.” Ella’s corset pinched, but Ella resisted the urge to adjust it.

“It’s been a long time since you graced my table with your exalted presence, milord. I’d like to extend you another invitation to dine at Skelton House.” Hugh affected a deep bow.

Ella hoped he would split his breeches, which were obviously under a strain.

“I might be inclined to accept.” Fenwick scrutinized Ella again. “Will this lovely woman be one of my dinner companions?”

“Yes, milord.” Ella dropped a simple curtsy.

“I’ll have the baroness arrange it with your man, Lord Fenwick.” Hugh simpered, mindless of a bit of parsley stuck in his teeth.

“I seldom dine apart from my own home.” Fenwick fetched his spotless, embroidered handkerchief from his vest pocket and brushed it beneath his nose. “But I’m sure I may expect the cleanliness I’m accustomed to, correct?”

“Most certainly, milord.” Uncle Hugh practically fawned. “Nothing but the best for the Steward of Ravenwood.”

With a fleeting smile, Lord Fenwick turned and strode toward the carriage awaiting him. “Come along, Drake, and bring your men.”

Drake passed Liam, bumping his shoulder. Ella couldn’t distinguish which man growled. Liam lingered for a moment after the men departed.

“Thank you,” Ella mouthed, as villeins exclaimed over the confrontation and the surprise appearance of Lord Fenwick.

Liam offered a curt nod and disappeared amidst the throng of people in the street. Ella picked up her basket and started regathering the vegetables she’d bought.

Crisis averted, thank God.

“EIII-laaa?” Aunt Mabel’s screech might have awakened the corpses buried in the graveyard. She stalked down the street with a dark grimace punctuating her pinched features.

“What have you done now, you little fool?”

Or not.