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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Morgan, Kathleen, date.

Embrace the dawn / Kathleen Morgan.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8423-4097-1

1. Scotland—History—17th century—Fiction. 2. Highlands (Scotland)—Fiction. 3. Mothers and sons—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.O8647 E48 2002

813'.54—dc21

2002000070

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 02

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Central Highlands, Scotland

SEPTEMBER 1691

OUTSIDE the old fortified castle a fierce storm raged.

Sheets of water pelted the long, leaded windows. Flashes of lightning illuminated the curtain of darkness, revealing glimpses of wind-swept trees and sodden landscape. Blasts of frigid air seeped through crumbling chinks in the ancient edifice, intensifying the stone-damp chill.

A spray of gooseflesh tightened the skin of Killian Campbell's lower arms. She clasped them more tightly to her, crushing the black velvet bodice of her gown, and shivered. Quickening her pace, she drew alongside Adam Campbell.

The laird of Castle Achallader glanced over as he led her up the winding stone staircase, a wry grin teasing the corners of his mouth. "A bit cool for yer blood tonight, is it, lass? Bear with it a moment more and we'll be in the library. The fire burning there will warm ye."

She smiled back at him. Dressed in a fine, white, lace-trimmed shirt and a blue-and-green plaid—which was little more than a length of tartan fabric gathered into a skirt, belted, and the rest slung across his shoulder and fastened with a large, silver brooch—the handsome, raven-haired man had been more than kind this evening. At Killian's express request, he had willingly slipped away from hosting a grand ball to personally escort her to the library.

"You'd think," she said, "after all these months in Scotland I'd have grown used to the dampness."

Adam chuckled. “Ye don’t grow so much used to it as learn to ignore it. And even that takes years of living with the wind and rain. A mere six months here, after the warmth of yer home in the Colonies, are but a wee taste of things to come.”

Killian gripped the oak balustrade. The time-smoothed wood felt solid, substantial, and even strangely comforting. Far more solid than the seven years of marriage she had worked so hard to save and now realized was beyond salvaging. Far more comforting than this strange, savage land her husband had insisted on dragging her and their son to in the hopes of mending their crumbling marriage. And certainly far more substantial than her self-confidence, battered from years of Alexander’s extreme possessiveness, a possessiveness that had gradually disintegrated into constant suspicion and periodic beatings.

She sighed, casting the pointless regrets aside. She was, after all, her husband’s property. Few would sympathize, much less care, and especially none of these brutish Highlanders.

“I don’t know if I could ever adapt to this climate. Though it is similar to where I grew up as a child in Massachusetts, I’m afraid I’ve long ago come to love the warmth of Alexander’s and my home in Virginia.”

“Aye, lass.” Adam paused at the head of the stairs, swung open the door before them, then motioned her forward. “I can well understand.”

Killian stepped inside. The library was dimly lit, the fire blazing in the huge stone fireplace the only source of light. She glanced around, her perception one of shadowy furniture and stale air, tinged with the pungent scent of woodsmoke. Adam closed the door, then strode to two high-backed, heavily scrolled walnut armchairs with red-and-blue-brocaded, upholstered seats set before the hearth.

“Would ye care to sit?” He indicated a chair. “Rest yer bones a bit?”

“No, thank you. I’d rather stand.”

Killian walked to one set of tall, dark walnut shelves covering three walls of the room. All were filled with books, many with the thick leather bindings and gilt overlay of volumes dearly bought.

Tentatively, reverently, she touched them, running her fingers down the spines of several finely wrought tomes. The raised leather-

work felt opulent; the feel of fine craftsmanship sent ripples of appreciative awareness coursing through her.

She pulled a volume from its niche on the shelf, turning it to cradle the spine in the curve of her palm. She thumbed through the pages, admiring the elegant print, the occasional hand-drawn illustration. Here and there a word caught her eye, then a phrase, a paragraph.

Killian closed the volume and replaced it on the shelf. For one last, lingering moment her fingers traced the line of books, savoring their texture, their haunting promise of secrets untold—and the brief respite they seemed to offer from the brutal reality that was now her life.

Then she turned back to Adam. “I want to thank you for coming up here with me. I know you’re Alexander’s cousin—however distant—but at this moment you’re the closest thing I have to kin.” She smiled ruefully. “Especially now, so far from home.”

He said nothing, eyeing her with quiet intensity.

“It’s . . . it’s about Alexander,” Killian forced herself to continue. “I think it’s best I take Gavin and return home . . . back to Virginia . . . without him.”

Adam’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “But Alexander announced this verra night ye all, yer son included, were staying with us until spring. I dinna understand.”

She wet her lips, considering then discarding myriad ways in which to broach this delicate subject. How *did* one explain that one’s husband—a man she had once adored and would’ve done anything to please—had become a monster? Indeed, who’d believe it of the affable, generous Alexander Campbell? Only his wife and son ever saw his dark side.

“My marriage to Alexander is over, Adam.” As if the failure was all hers, Killian blushed furiously. After the years of insults and degradation, she almost believed it herself. *Almost*.

“This trip to Scotland was Alexander’s idea. I’d no say in the matter. But this isn’t—and never will be—my home. With or without Alexander, I mean to leave.”

“So, ye came all the way to the Highlands because yer husband wished it, did ye? Yet what could ye possibly find here that’d mend it better than yer fine life on yer tobacco plantation in Virginia?”

Though she knew she shouldn't let it, Adam's skeptical query stung. "He claimed a visit back to his home and blood kin would help him set his mind aright."

"And ye, being the devoted wife that ye are, were willing to give him even that." Adam stroked his chin in thought. "What do ye want of me, lass?"

Her pulse quickening, she met his somber gaze. "A loan. A loan to cover the expense of obtaining passage back home."

"And how will ye repay me? Yer husband's tobacco plantation is held in his name, is it not? Do ye mean to hurry home and try to sell it behind his back?"

"No." Fiercely, Killian denied his accusation. "I can legally put claim to my dowry. I'll pay you out of that."

"And then what will ye do?"

She glanced toward the leaded window overlooking the huge forest only yards from Achallader's outer wall. Outside, the heavens continued to weep, the darkness punctuated by abrupt flashes of lightning. Funny how the weather mirrored her life of late. The sky poured out its sorrow, interspersed with bouts of frustrated, if impotent, anger.

"I don't know." The prospects for a divorced woman were dismal. Just not *quite* as dismal as her life as Alexander's wife. "Go home to my aunt and uncle, if they'll have me, I suppose. My uncle's shipping business is thriving. He may well need another clerk."

Killian turned back to Adam. "Before I wed Alexander, I kept all my uncle's books and was quite adept at it. Even after all these years, his letters still assure me he has yet to find another clerk as exacting as I."

Adam rose from his chair and walked over to stare into the fire. After a long moment, he looked up at her. "I feel for yer plight, lass. Truly I do. But Alexander's a fine, braw lad, and what ye ask of me goes against my sense of kinship with him. Mayhap ye don't understand how deeply a Highlander's—"

"I've an inkling, thank you." In spite of her best efforts to hide her disappointment, Killian knew there was an edge to her voice.

As courteously as possible, Adam had just refused to help her. She wasn't surprised. He was Alexander's blood kin, after all. Yet, without Adam's help, what was she to do?

From some place far away, a passing roll of thunder muted the pounding clamor of her heart. In one, dizzying rush all her tightly strung control, all her remaining strength, fled. Killian's knees buckled. She grasped frantically at the chair.

"Are ye all right, lass?" A look of concern tautened Adam's chiseled features. "Ye're white as a ghost. Do ye need to sit for a spell?"

"N-no, that won't be necessary." With an impassioned shake of her head, Killian flung the unsettling sensations aside. "I-I'm fine. All I need is some food. I was so worried and overwrought today, wondering how to approach you about my problem, that I haven't had much appetite." She managed a weak smile. "That's all it is. Just a little light-headedness."

Adam grasped her elbow to steady her. "Then a bit of hearty Scots food is what ye're needing. Ye're such a wee slip of a thing to go without eating all day. It's no surprise ye're so unwell." He tugged gently on her arm. "Come, we both should be returning to the Lion's Hall and the ball."

The big Highlander had been her one chance of help. Killian dragged in a deep, steadying breath. Surely, though, another opportunity would eventually come her way. In the meantime, all she had to do was not provoke her husband's violent temper and avoid him as much as possible whenever he became intoxicated. All she had to do was stay alive.

"Ah, yes, the ball." She met Adam's gaze, her pride refusing to allow her to weep or beg. "I've been selfish keeping you so long from your other guests. I beg pardon."

"Och, it was a pleasure, and no mistake. How often does one get the chance to have a bonny lassie all to oneself?"

"The pleasure was all mine."

A flicker of guilt, regret even, passed across Adam's face. He offered her his arm. "Shall we go?"

"Yes." She accepted his arm, then hesitated. "One thing more, if you please."

"Aye, lass?"

"If I could impose on you not to mention our little talk to my husband . . . well, I'd be most grateful."

Adam nodded. "It's best, I think, I not involve myself in yer marital difficulties. In *any* way, if ye get my meaning?"

She dragged in a relieved breath. “Thank you. Thank you ever so much.”

“Come along, then. I wouldn’t want ye missing the bagpipes at midnight,” he said as he began to lead Killian from the room. “I found some sheet music that must have been hidden away for years. One song’s particularly lovely and addresses some daft old prophecy about Glencoe. It’s called ‘Glen of Weeping,’ and the pipers will be playing it. . . .”

The sound of laughter and happy voices engulfed them as they headed down the stairs and entered the lavishly decorated Lion’s Hall. In spite of the gaiety, Killian felt removed, distant—as if she were viewing the scene from afar. Adam deposited her at a long table laden with food, filled her a plate, then grinned apologetically, mumbling something about other guests.

She turned numbly to her food. The meat and vegetables swam before her until they resembled a churning mass of color. Killian felt ill.

Quickly setting the plate aside, she hurried to the punch bowl. With trembling hands, she ladled herself a cupful of mulled cider. Its sweet, spice-scented aroma steadied her. She inhaled deeply.

The cup was warm in her hands. Killian clasped it to her. *This* was reality. This room, these people, this drink. The future—a future that held only two choices: continued suffering or escape—didn’t matter tonight. On the morrow she’d face the dilemma anew, but not tonight.

She sipped the steaming cider carefully, praying its tart sweetness would soothe her stomach. Try as she might, though, she could barely taste it.

A hand settled suddenly around her arm, squeezing hard. Killian jumped. The cider sloshed over the sides of her cup, drenching her hand with its sticky sweetness.

“And where have ye been the past hour?” her husband, bending close, asked. “The dancing has begun—” he made a sharp, sweeping gesture— “and several folk commented on yer conspicuous absence.”

Killian followed the direction of Alexander’s hand. The hall was jammed with people. Some moved to the gay twanging of fiddle music floating down from the minstrel’s gallery overlooking the room. Others stood about in groups, laughing and talking.

Alexander tugged on her arm. “Come along. I’ve told several of the nobles, the notable Sir John Campbell, Earl of Breadalbane, and Captain Robert Campbell of Glenlyon among them, all about my lovely young wife. If we don’t hurry, they’ll begin to wonder if ye’re not avoiding them.”

“No. Please, not now.”

Killian dug in her heels. As unwise as it might ultimately be to refuse her husband, to be paraded tonight before strange men like some prize mare was more than she could endure.

“In a little while, perhaps,” she pleaded. “I don’t feel up to meeting anyone just now.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are ye ill, then?”

“No. I’m fine. Just fine.”

A muscle began to tick near Alexander’s left cheekbone. “Have it yer way. Compose yerself, then come to me. Don’t tarry overlong, though, or I won’t be happy.”

With that he strode off, disappearing in the press of bodies. Besides his voluminous belted plaid, Alexander, like many of the other men there, sported weaponry at even as innocuous an event as a ball. In addition to the ceremonial smallsword, he wore a small dagger known as a *sgian dubh* shoved into his knee-high stockings, and a flintlock pistol slipped in the back of his belt. But then Alexander had always possessed a fascination with weapons—a fascination, Killian now realized, shared by many others of his clan.

It seemed an integral part of the Scottish and, particularly, the Highland heritage. A heritage she had foolishly married into when, as an idealistic, overly romantic girl of seventeen, she had allowed the dashing and already tobacco-wealthy Alexander Campbell to sweep her off her feet.

But then, after the loss of her parents at an early age, and life with her father’s dour brother and equally dreary wife, Alexander didn’t have to press very hard to win Killian’s consent. Killian had long dreamt of a happier life. Alexander Campbell seemed to promise that in every way.

If only she had known then of the fierce emotions and single-minded devotion of the Scots. Of their simple, direct way of dealing with anger and frustration, utilizing savage methods that usually culminated in violence and, frequently, even death.

She'd had more than her fill of Scottish ways just living with her husband. The increasingly brutal tactics he used to control and intimidate had only grown worse over the years.

Yet as hard as it would be for her to walk away from their marriage, as severely as church and society would chastise her for such scandalous behavior, Killian knew now she had little other choice. If she valued her life, and perhaps even that of their son, time had run out. Whether she wished to or not, she *must* begin anew or the choice might permanently—and fatally—be taken from her.

"A toast," Adam Campbell's deep burr reverberated from across the room. "A toast to commemorate this glorious eve!"

Save for the rustle of satin and stiff petticoats, the faint clink of metal swords, the room went quiet. Adam glanced around, then lifted his cup. "Here's to the heath, the hill, and the heather; the bonnet, the plaid, the kilt, and the feather!"

At the beloved Highland toast, all gathered returned the salute, then drank. Once more, Adam lifted high his cup. "Tonight, much will be decided to the mutual benefit of both Scotland and England. Plans will be made, pacts sealed that, thanks to the courage of these brave lads here, will draw Clan Campbell yet closer to the seat of British power. I give ye, lads and lassies, a night that'll grant us all our hearts' desires!"

With that, Adam downed his punch.

"To our hearts' desires!" the gathering cried, following his lead.

Her heart's desires . . .

As she again raised her cup, a shiver rippled down Killian's spine. She had thought she had put such aspirations aside forever, burying them along with all her other shattered dreams.

Yet still, Adam's words as he proposed the toast had touched some chord deep within her. Perhaps it was but a bitter reminder of hopes long dead, crushed beneath the unrelenting brutality of marital life gone awry. Or perhaps it was something more. A pang of envy for what others had always known, and she—miserable failure that she was—never would.

Whatever the source of her sudden, renewed attack of distress, Killian couldn't bear to remain in the Lion's Hall a moment longer. She hurried to the food table, flung down her cup of cider, and fled.

†

MINUTES later, Killian shut the bedchamber door quietly behind her. Her five-year-old son, Gavin, was sound asleep on his little pallet in the corner near the head of the massive, four-poster tester bed. Killian tiptoed to him.

Not that he'd have heard her approach if she had ridden in clad in full armor on some warhorse, she thought wryly as thunder boomed yet again overhead. Gavin could sleep through anything. She knelt beside him and brushed a wayward lock of blond hair—hair the exact shade as her own tumble of long, pale gold tresses—off his forehead, then kissed him tenderly.

He was her life, the only reality that mattered anymore. He was the reason she had finally made up her mind to leave Alexander, when her husband's violent outbursts had not only escalated to dangerous levels in the past year, but had even begun to involve their son. A son Alexander had once admitted he had never even wanted.

Yet still a sense of sadness engulfed her. She had so wanted to preserve the marriage—their family—hoping against hope she'd eventually be able to help Alexander—to save him. Ah, if only she could've loved him enough!

If it had only been her, despite the personal danger, Killian thought she might have persevered. She was a grown woman. She had sworn before God and man to uphold her marriage vows through good times and bad. And her love of the Lord still remained, even if her love for the man Alexander had become had long ago died. Gavin, however, didn't deserve to live with that decision or its consequences.

Soon now, all she'd have left was her faith in God, her love for her son, and the promise of a fresh start, if only she could return to the relative safety of her aunt and uncle's home in Massachusetts. She had learned a lot in the past seven years of marriage. Learned she couldn't depend on life to be everything she had always thought it should be.

And learned, though it had been the most difficult lesson of all, to follow her head rather than her heart. Some dreams died hard, but die they must. Especially the dream of ever finding her heart's desire in the arms of another man.

Gavin shifted in his sleep, mumbled a few incoherent words, then quieted.

Killian smiled with grim resolve. Whatever it took, she would ensure a safe, stable existence for the both of them. After what they had been through, they deserved a little security, a little peace and happiness. There was no place in her life for anything more, though. The scars, the doubts and fears, ran far, far too deep.

She rose, turned from Gavin's bed, and began to remove her pearl earrings and necklace. Lightning flashed just outside, illuminating the room. Almost instantly, it was followed by a deafening thunder-clap.

The building shook; the floor trembled beneath her feet. She jumped, dropping the necklace. With a crack the long strand hit the aged wooden planks and broke, scattering pearls everywhere. Killian barely noticed.

Someone had entered the bedchamber. Someone stood there in the shadows, watching, waiting.

Her heartbeat faltered.

"I told ye to come to me and not tarry," Alexander said, "or I wouldn't be happy."

With a strangled cry, Killian leaped back. She knew that tone of voice. It always precluded a vicious attack. She shuddered, her palms damp, her mouth gone dry. Not now. Not again. God help her, but she couldn't bear it again!

"I-I looked for you." She cast about frantically for something—anything—to appease him. "I just f-felt too ill to be pleasant company, so I decided to r-retire for the eve." Try as she might, Killian couldn't hide the quaver in her voice.

"And did I give ye leave to depart? Do ye realize what a laughing-stock ye made of me before my friends? Do ye, wench?" Hands fisted at his sides, Alexander stepped from the shadows and advanced on her. "Ye've been a naughty lass to disappoint me so. Ye must now take yer punishment."

Grim satisfaction mixed with a rising slur in her husband's voice. Terror vibrated through Killian. Alexander was at his most dangerous when drunk.

What am I to do, dear Lord? He's going to beat me.

Her mind raced for a way out of the terrible dilemma she had

suddenly been thrust into. Insulated behind these thick, stone walls and muted by the revelry below, no one would hear or come to her aid.

“Why don’t you return to your friends and explain that I took ill?” Killian fought to gain control of her rising panic. “Then, on the morrow, I’ll personally tender each and every man my abject apology. We can just as easily set everything aright on the morrow.”

“On the morrow, ye’ll be in no condition to set aught aright.” A fist raised, Alexander lurched toward her.

With a gasp, Killian sprang aside. Propelled by the momentum of his greater weight and liquor-dulled reflexes, Alexander couldn’t halt his forward momentum. He crashed into a bedpost, slipped, and fell, slamming his head on the wooden floor.

Her breath in her throat, Killian waited for her husband to rise. When he didn’t, she gulped in a chestful of air and bent toward him. Was he alive, or had the blow to his head killed him?

Alexander moaned, began to stir. Killian hesitated but an instant longer before running around the bed and waking Gavin. She shoved his shoes on his feet and draped him in the thick plaid that had covered him. Then, grabbing her cloak hanging by the door, Killian all but dragged her son from the bedchamber.

†

“**HURRY, SWEETING.** We’ve got to hurry!”

The long corridor leading to the staircase and the castle’s entry hall seemed endless. To quicken his pace, Killian pulled a little harder on Gavin’s hand.

“M-Mama!”

She glanced back at her son. Gavin’s short little legs churned furiously. The plaid and his white nightshirt flapped about him. His big blue eyes were round with fear.

Remorse flooded Killian. Her actions of the past minutes had frightened her child. She forced her steps to slow. “It’s all right, sweeting. Mama was just upset and in a hurry to leave. We’ll walk slower.”

“It’s all right, Mama. I l-like to run.”

Killian smiled at his childish attempt to support her. Gavin had

always been like that—gentle and thoughtful, protective. As if he knew instinctively she needed the nurturance even more than he.

Guilt plucked at her. Once again she had allowed her emotions to cloud what truly mattered—Gavin and his sense of security, his happiness. Her responsibilities as his mother.

She slowed her pace even more. “You know, sweeting, I like to run, too. But I think we’ve done enough for one night. Are you ready to play a little game?”

Gavin nodded eagerly.

Killian paused at the head of the stairs leading to the entry hall. Just then, a furious curse emanated down the hall from where they had come. She froze.

“Woman, hie yer perfidious self to me! Now, I say. *Now!*” Alexander’s voice, hoarse with anger, rose above the din of the storm.

Horror filled Killian. Her husband’s mood had escalated to one of his rare, murderous rages. There was no telling what he might do. And if Gavin should inadvertently get in his way . . .

She turned back to the hallway. Already, Alexander’s forward progress blocked any hope of escape down the stairs, where they might find refuge in the press of revelers in the Great Hall. The door to the chapel, however, inset in its carved stone arch, lay just a short distance farther down the corridor. If she and Gavin could make it to the chapel, then bolt themselves in for the night, perhaps, on the morrow, Alexander would’ve forgotten the reason for his fury.

Killian stooped and took her son by his shoulders. “We’re going to play a little game with Papa. We’re going to run away and hide.”

Gavin’s eyes brightened with excitement. “What fun, Mama!”

She shot one last, furtive look over her shoulder. Already, Alexander staggered down the corridor toward them. She pulled Gavin up into her arms. “Hold on tight, sweeting. It’s time to go.”

He nodded, wrapped his arms tightly around her neck, and clenched shut his eyes.

Killian sprinted for the chapel, reached it and, setting Gavin down, shoved open its stout wooden portal. It swung wide at her slightest touch, opening onto a long, dimly lit room.

A blast of chill, turbulent air swirled about her. The rain clattered against the tall, stained-glass panes. The wind howled outside.

Hazy candlelight from the altar at the far end of the room cast

shadows that stretched across the floor and ensnared the stone pillars just inside the door. Wooden pews stood aligned in neat rows on either side of the aisle. Off to one side in a stone niche, votive candles flickered in their diminutive, colored-glass containers.

She hesitated. Perhaps it'd be best not to bring her troubles into such a holy place.

Then the sound of Alexander's footsteps sealed her resolve. Killian motioned Gavin in and closed the door. As she began to slide the wooden crossbar in place, however, someone pushed hard from the other side.

Killian toppled backward, striking the last row of pews. She grasped at the wooden bench and righted herself. Arms flailing, Alexander all but sailed into the chapel and plummeted to the stone floor.

For an instant, sheer terror paralyzed her. There was no way to escape her husband now that he had gotten into the chapel. As drunk as he was, Alexander was still capable of moving quickly when he wanted to. Even if she carried Gavin, Killian knew she'd not be able to slip past her husband.

She pressed her hand to her breast, suddenly remembering the bodice knife she kept hidden there. Briefly, Killian considered withdrawing it and using it to defend herself. Then her hand fell away. She could never harm her husband, not even to save her own life.

Ah, how she wished now she had immediately sought out Adam and the ball! It was too late, though, to regret her earlier actions. All she could do was find some way—besides the front door—to flee the chapel.

She spied a smaller wooden portal in the wall to the right of the altar. Killian pointed toward it. "Gavin, the door! Run ahead and open it for us!"

Her son clutched his plaid to himself and hurried down the aisle. "This is fun, Mama," he called from over his shoulder. "I like this game."

He reached the door, grasped the handle, and pulled down. Despite his best efforts, the door wouldn't budge. Killian shot Alexander, who was slowly climbing to his feet, one agonized glance, then sprinted after her son. Reaching him, she jerked down on the door handle and shoved.

The outer door swung open onto a scene of pouring rain, a dark

castle courtyard, and a tall stone wall. She choked back a swell of despair. They were trapped. There was nowhere else to run.

Behind Killian, pews clattered together as her husband made his lumbering way up the aisle. “Ye won’t . . . ye won’t escape yer just punishment,” he roared. “Best ye turn back now . . . before ye make it all the worse.”

Lightning flashed overhead. Thunder reverberated. And, in that brief instant of illumination, Killian saw another door across the courtyard in the castle wall.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck. An eerie presentiment prickled down her spine. Somehow, Killian knew freedom lay on the other side of that door. Freedom . . . and something more. But could she reach it and make it through in time?

Alexander’s hoarse pants drew ever nearer. Killian stooped and pulled her son back into her arms.

“We’re going out to play in the rain for a bit, sweeting.” She wrapped the plaid snugly around him, then tucked him beneath her cloak.

Gavin looked up at her, trust shining in his eyes. “Yes, Mama.”

A pang of remorse shot through her, but she swiftly squelched it. She had no other choice. She was alone and at her husband’s mercy.

A quick lifting of her chin, a sharp intake of breath, and Killian raced out into the rain. Only when she reached the little door inset into the wall did she finally glance back. At that moment her husband stumbled from the chapel, slipped, and went sprawling on the slick cobblestones.

Killian set Gavin down, uttered a quick prayer that the iron bolt would slide, then grasped it with both hands and tried to pull it free. It wouldn’t budge. Once more she tried with all her might, but to no avail.

Cursing foully, Alexander climbed to his feet and staggered toward them.

A sense of hopeless resignation swamped her. It was over then. She was at his mercy, and no one—not even God now, it seemed—cared.

In that terror-stricken moment, though, the shredded remnants of her pride no longer mattered. Lifting her eyes to the rain-drenched

sky, Killian screamed out her frustration and fear. “Save us! Oh, please, sweet Jesus, *save us!*”

Once more Alexander slipped and fell, this time only yards away. Killian turned her back on her husband, unwilling to face the crazed fury she knew burned in his eyes. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

She had lost.

Her desperate gaze fell on the iron bolt. That same desperation made her try one last time. Almost of their own accord, her hands rose, gripped the bolt, tugged. Tugged hard, jerking repeatedly over and over and over.

For long, sickening seconds the bolt seemed sealed in place. Then, with a grating sound, it finally slipped free.

With all her strength, Killian shoved at the door. The hinges creaked and groaned. The portal swung open.

She lifted Gavin back into her arms. Claspng him beneath her cloak, she fled into the storm-tossed night. Fled toward the forest.

Toward freedom.