

1216





Chapter 10

June 5, 1216, Ravenshill, England

“You may be frightened, but keep your head up.”

“Don’t slouch.”

“Smile.”

“Do not forget to nod to the high lords and ladies as you pass.”

Millie rolled her eyes at the servants preparing Lady Emma for her wedding to Millie’s brother-in-law. Millie’s sister-in-law, Baroness Ruth Kirkham, noticed the younger woman’s displeasure and stood from the settee. “Everyone out,” Ruth ordered them, and the servants immediately dispersed.

When the door closed on the last one, Millie and Ruth advanced on the frightened young woman. Millie moved to stand behind Emma and began adjusting the sash the servants cinched far too tightly. Both women knew the young Emma would not care how she carried herself. She had the day and night to get through.

Ruth could relate well with Emma. Her marriage to the oldest Kirkham son was arranged. So she traveled to Ravenshill with only her cousin Millie and a few servants. She had never met any of the Kirkhams until the evening she arrived.

Due to unforeseen delays, they arrived late the night before the wedding, having passed through the dark to arrive on time. Ruth went immediately to the chapel and spent the rest of the night on her knees praying. She could recall what she prayed for—a kind husband.

Ruth could not say Alexander was a kind man, but she could not say he was unkind. Seven years after wedding Alexander, Ruth couldn’t say she didn’t know her husband at all. At court, he always claimed his position on the king’s council was vital to the success of the realm.

Once a year, like clockwork, Alexander would return to Ravenshill. He always arrived just after dawn and met most of the day with the steward, sheriff, and garrison commander, taking him meals with them. Then, sometime in the darkness of night, the tapestry would be swept back then she would hear her husband’s heavy boots come across the floor. He would sweep the covers off her and order her on her back. He would pull her nightgown up to her hips before the bed dipped beneath his weight.

Her husband would settle between her thighs, enter her, and within a few strokes, planted his seed. Then he would climb from his bed and place himself back into his trousers. Then she would hear his boots retreating across the floor, never taking them off. By the following day, he would be gone again.

Millie, however, fell in love with the second Kirkham son Gabriel. Six years later, they still held smiles of love for one another. Ruth was glad for them and a bit envious.

Ruth gave Alexander two sons. The oldest, William, was conceived on one of Alexander's two nights in her bed after they were wed. Daniel was conceived on Alexander's yearly visit six years later. By then, William had died of a fever while in Alexander's care. Her eldest son was buried in some place in Spain, known only by Alexander and the men who buried him. She lost Daniel at age two. No one could say what took her last child. One day she had a healthy son. The next day, he was lethargic, and within a month, he was dead.

It was a year after that her husband returned, out of his mind. He had no mind at all. Her husband had been to battle, led a small army, and governed the land surrounding Ravenshill but was felled by a stone slung by a child. The men who returned her husband assured her the child suffered in its death. It was then she realized she hated her husband, his absences, and for her son's death. She hated him because a child thought he had to defend his family with a rock and a thin arm to throw it. The stone struck Alexander in the temple, and he fell from his horse. She supposed Alexander's humiliation at being brought down by a child prompted his anger and the child's death.

Her husband reportedly showed no further signs of injury for the rest of the day. By the next morning, he was suffering seizures. He had them often now, but he no longer knew words to speak but emitted groans and grunts. He spent most of his days in the garden. Once filled with intelligence, his simple mind now contented itself with the colors of the family's private garden. On rainy days, he cried for the garden; in winter, he played in the snow.

The garden was positioned at the back of the keep. It could only be accessed by the steep stairs that came down from the tower's third floor. The curtain walls sheltered it and her husband from the outside world. He had tumbled down those stairs once, and she found herself praying for seconds after that he would die at the bottom. But the child-man was unscathed.

Ruth's hopes of another child grew a little dimmer each year. Finally, age pressed in on her, but her husband's simple mind condemned her to only birth two sons. Two sons she wished were at her side and not an invalid husband.

After six years of marriage, Millie was yet to produce a child. Ruth knew she had sought the help of anyone who might have some knowledge of fertility, and she listened to them all, even the insane. And yet she remained without a child. There was a third and fourth Kirkham son. Joseph, the third son, swore he would never marry even if Ravenshill depended on his seed. He was too fond of women in general and drinking to make a good husband. Unless Gabriel fathered a son on Millie, the fate of the Kirkham name lay with John, the fourth son, and Emma.

"John is a good man," Millie assured her.

"He is comely to look at," Ruth added.

Emma burst into tears. "It's not that," she confessed, "I love another."

Ruth's lips pressed tightly together.

"Who is this man?" Millie asked. She was far more sympathetic to matters of the heart than her cousin.

"He is a knight. But I cannot say who."

“Why? Because he is married?” Ruth meant the question in jest, but Emma stiffened. “did you all have sex?” she asked the girl.

“No. But he was willing to take my maidenhead. He said John would not want me then.”

Both women burst into laughter. When they settled, Millie said, “It was very noble of him to come to your rescue.”

“What happened when you did not take him up on his offer?”

Emma looked embarrassed and guilty. Ruth scowled. “I did not give him an answer. I went in search of him the morning I was to leave. But I could not find him.”

“No doubt chivalrously relieving another girl of her virginity,” Ruth said.

“Out of the kindness of his heart,” Millie said, and both women broke off into titters.

“Put the thought of him behind you,” Ruth said. She stood above the girl. Her position as lady of Ravenshill showed in her rigid shoulders and stern face. “he was only using you to take what should only be given to a husband.”

“Absolutely,” Millie agreed. Then Millie smiled while her cousin continued to look at the girl with severity. “You are positively stunning,” Millie declared.

“John will adore you.”

“Do you think so?”

Ruth could tell Emma was trying to process her knight’s intent and that she needed to overcome her grief and step into a different life in hours.



Five years later

Millie’s horse ate up the distance, outracing Ruth’s. Both women felt themselves growing frailer every day but, at the same time, still appreciated competition. Finally, reaching the base of the hill, Mille drew up her winded horse.

“You win again,” Ruth said with pink cheeks and eyes dancing.

“I always win,” Millie said, nudging her horse up the hill.

“Only because you make it to the stable first.”

“Of course, I do. How else can I get the fastest horse?” both women knew Ruth could declare any horse in the stable hers to ride, but she didn’t exercise rights like those.

Ruth laughed as they crested the hill. She turned to Millie to retort when Millie drew up short and gasped. Ruth spun her horse and looked to the road below.

Immediately she dug her heels into the mare viciously. The two women bore down on the small caravan they had left earlier. To Ruth, it only seemed like minutes, but she was mistaken. What lay ahead of the racing horses could not have happened in a few minutes.

The driver of the cart was slumped over its seat, motionless, the omen of what lay ahead. Millie reached the bodies in the road and was on the ground before her horse stopped.

She ran to the prone form of little Sophie. The three-year-old lay on her side. Millie lay a hand on her shoulder, and a sob filled her chest when she saw the little

girl's face. Sightless blue eyes looked at nothing. But Millie did not linger. Surely someone had survived.

Ruth dismounted and ran to her brother-in-law John lying face down. Ruth touched his head and said his name. He didn't respond, but Ruth already knew he wouldn't. Blood soaked the ground beneath him. A short trail lay behind his corpse. An arrow in his back had knocked him down, and he dragged himself before someone came behind him and slit his throat. His sword was gone. Ruth did not know if his prized weapon was taken from his hand or its scabbard.

Emma lay halfway on the road. Millie saw the look of horror frozen on her friend's face and a deep sword wound in her side. She had been fleeing the people who did this with two-month-old Evie clutched to her chest. Evie lay an arm's length from her mother, and Millie wondered if the same sword that had killed Emma had also been driven into her daughter's chest. Did she know one of her other daughters had already died behind her? Had John told her to run?

"Emily," Millie called.

Ruth's head raised from Emma's corpse and her eyes scanned the scene of carnage for John and Emma's oldest daughter, five-year-old Emily. Millie called again.

"Quiet," Ruth snapped at her. she moved closer to her cousin. "Whoever did this could not have made it far. Look for Emily, and then we need to get to Ravenshill."

Millie nodded, her eyes darting about not only for the missing child but the danger lurking nearby, dark enough to lay a scene such as this before God. They found Emily some distance into the treeline face down with an arrow in her neck sticking entirely through. Terror was still frozen on the child's face. The two women mounted and fled back to the keep and the safety behind its walls.



Chapter 2

Millie watched her husband pacing. Gabriel had lost weight in the month since the slaughter of his brother and his family. Ravenshill was locked tight, but sorties would go out for hunting, gathering, and vengeance. The Kirkhams had killed three grown Elliots compared to the five of the Kirkhams, primarily children. She did not think the number of fighting men lost on either side was significant in the raging blood feud.

The most recent sortie had not arrived yesterday. Joseph had led the group of ten on the hunt. It could be up to a three-day hunt, depending on how far afield they had to go. After three days, they were to return by nightfall. Five days had passed, and no party member had returned or sent a message. So now Gabriel was tasked with the decision of sending more men to find his brother or if he should send all his men to destroy the Elliots. At the moment, Millie thought he might sacrifice all that was left, his family included, to rid himself of the plague called Elliot.

“It is late,” Millie reminded him.

“I know,” he said with irritation but looked immediately contrite.

“Come, sit,” she said gently.

Gabriel did as she said and sat on the edge of the bed. Millie moved to kneel at his broad back and began rubbing his shoulders. “I am sure Joseph and his men are fine.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

Millie did not recall a time she had lied to Gabriel, and she wasn’t going to start now. “No,” she said.

“He is either dead, or the Elliots took him.” She heard the distaste in his voice for what Joseph might be going through at the hands of Rafferty. But, unless asked, she would not point out that Rafferty would have no reason to keep Joseph alive.

“Have you let Joanna know about John and Emma?”

Gabriel shook his head and promptly said, “I know what you’re going to say, but I do not know how to start that letter. If this was not happening, I would go to her and tell her in person.”

“I think a messenger is better than nothing. Of course, it will be difficult for her, but she is nearly an adult now.”

Joanna was the youngest sibling, fostering in London, she would soon be ready to return home. So many times, they thanked God she was spared the current uprising between the two families.

“Would a messenger even get through?”

“I don’t know.” Millie felt Gabriel’s shoulder warming beneath her skin as she rubbed.

“We will get news to her soon. Tomorrow I will take a party in the direction Joseph went. I will at least find his body to bring back.”

“Can’t you send men? Surely they don’t need you to find him.”

“It is okay,” Gabriel said, patting Millie’s hand over his shoulder. “I have survived many clashes with these Elliots and greater men than they.”

Millie wanted to protest and try to reason with him. But no reason she would give would outweigh his need to find his brother.

But the news Gabriel returned to Ravenshill with was not good. Millie greeted her husband in the hall, whose face was tear-stained and bloodshot eyes. Behind him came a cart, and she knew it held his brother’s body.

Gabriel dismounted and walked to Millie, wrapping her in his arms, tucking her head into his chest, swallowing her, and then he cried. “I should have sent word,” Gabriel whispered.

Millie stood still because his words of grief made no sense. “I should have sent word the day you all found John. I should never have waited. She should have sent a message she was returning so soon.”

Oh God, Millie thought. The body in the cart was not Joseph’s but Joanna’s. Millie gave Gabriel time to babble with guilt until he finally loosened his grip.

“What happened?”

Gabriel shrugged, looking toward the cart closer to the tower and the chapel inside. “Joanna came home. I thought she would not be released for another six months, but I found her on the road. There were four men and one woman with her. All dead. The rest are being brought.”

Gabriel almost broke down again, but he drew a long breath and gathered himself as the Ravenshill baron. “Tomorrow, I take my men to slaughter every last Elliot.”

“Is that...”

The look Gabriel gave her made her fall silent. He knew she was going to question whether his decision was wise. He knew as well as she that it wasn’t. But he felt it was necessary.

“I’m going to gather the men. We leave at first light.” Gabriel swept away from her and felt sickened by what was coming.



Chapter 3

The wailing echoed up and down the tower, reverberating like cannon fire. Gabriel lay in the chapel, and Millie screamed her grief as she clung to his body. Ruth wanted her to stop. She wanted to be able to approach the altar and pray for them all. The only Kirkham left was her husband, who was useless to them. Soon the Elliots would come, and Ravenshill would quickly fall. They had lost too many men to hold it when there was no heir the king might support.

Her guilty mind flitted back to Gabriel. She was thinking of herself and her future when Gabriel's head arrived at Ravenshill a full day before his body was sent back. But she couldn't help but wonder what they would do. If one of her sons had lived, she could hold Ravenshill for him. Even a king would stand behind it. But the only ones left were an invalid husband and two wives. What did they have to offer to the realm now and in the future?

Tomorrow they would bury Gabriel. After that, who knew what would happen. Either Rafferty Elliot would come with his army or the king. Either way, someone would be coming to give Ravenshill away. Two wives, one of which could be pregnant. Nine months could be spared to see if a child conceived could be a male heir. It would put the mother's life in danger, but they were all in danger. But Millie wasn't pregnant and never had been. The fault could be hers or Gabriel's. Either way, one of them needed to have a babe growing in their womb.

Her mind went to her husband, who was now oblivious in the garden behind the tower. When he heard Millie shrieking, he had covered his ears but never asked what was causing his sister-in-law to scream that way. But she did know he still got aroused. Despite his mind being a child's, he still had the apparent drive of a man trapped inside it. Alexander did not understand his hardons or what to do with them. But they had had a child before, and it could happen again. She was not too old.



Chapter 4

Millie stared at Ruth. “I will not lay with another man.”

Ruth’s lips twisted into a grimace. “What plan do you have then? Nunnery? Brothel?”

“We just buried Gabriel. You may not love Alexander, but I love Gabriel, and I cannot dishonor him in such a way.” Seeing her cousin’s downfallen expression, Millie said, “Besides, I have never conceived before. I have no faith I can within the month it will take to convince someone the child I carry is Gabriel’s. We need to find another way.”

Ruth nodded, but she looked a little desperate for an answer to the question that had been eating at her, how could they stay at Ravenshill.

“I’m sorry, Ruth.” Despite being appalled at the proposal Ruth brought to her, she felt guilty that she could not sleep with another man. She didn’t think she would ever want a close relationship with anyone but Gabriel. Three days after he was buried was most definitely too soon.

“I understand,” Ruth said.

But Millie knew she did not understand because she had not loved her husband. She never had.

“We’ll find another way,” Ruth mumbled, and Millie knew her mind was churning for the other way. Millie could almost feel the intensity of her thoughts as she walked away.

Millie climbed the stairs to the chambers on the second floor. she stood in the room’s doorway, divided from others by a light wooden frame covered by tapestries for privacy. Immediately tears sprang to her eyes looking at the bed she had shared with Gabriel. Ravenshill was full of memories with him that knifed through her heart when they flashed through her mind.

She imagined taking another man to her bed. She immediately stepped back from her room as if the thought had tainted the space. She turned away and made her way to the third floor. This had been the lord and lady’s chamber, a floor to themselves leading into the garden below. It was decorated with vibrant colors that helped lighten the room from the arrow slits and murder holes. This was where Ruth now resided alone. Alexander had been moved to the hall and the chamber off the kitchen. A lock had been placed outside to keep the man in and safe during the nighttime hours. Alexander might not have much of a mind left, but apparently, his mind did not rest even in ignorance. He would wander the keep all night or venture beyond its walls if

left alone. Millie can't say she was sad for him. When he did sleep, he inevitably woke screaming. Screams from a man of such strong prowess made her blood curdle with anxiety.

Millie moved deeper into the room and sat on the edge of Ruth's bed. She moved a hand over the coverlet, wondering what a cold marriage bed was like. The thought made her shudder that Ruth had lain beneath Alexander here with no passion and desire. Despite her age, she had confided in Millie that she had looked forward to her marriage. After all, they had been inundated with fairytales about being ladies, duty-bound to be swept off their feet by powerful and wealthy husbands. Millie had been fortunate to be swept off her feet. But Ruth was dropped promptly on the floor and left there throughout the years of her marriage.

And yet, Ruth had two children with Alexander. Would it be wrong if she did not share a passion with a man but only used him for breeding? A son would ease several problems they faced. But daughters were more prominent than sons, and there was no guarantee she would have a son. If it was a daughter, she would probably face a life of resentment from Millie because she couldn't imagine making the sacrifice for nothing. She felt guilty for the thought that a daughter would be nothing. If it was Alexander's daughter, she would never think such a thing. But that opportunity had passed.



Chapter 5

Ruth paced in front of her husband. He sat on the edge of his bed, staring blankly at him. He was easily controlled. To have been once a fighter, he was now a meek man, doing what he was bid to do. He now waited for her as she paced. She was angry at herself for coming to her husband's room. She was mad at Millie and envious that she had loved her husband. Perhaps if she had ever loved Alexander, this would be easier or harder because she knew Alexander's brain could not comprehend what was about to happen.

Ruth lifted her shift over her head and dropped it across the table where Alexander usually took his meals. She stood before him naked, and he stared at her with no reaction. Desperation had sent her here to lay with her imbecile husband. Though he knew little, his body still worked like a man's, and Alexander would become aroused over what Ruth could not begin to guess from time to time.

She moved to his bed. "Lie down," she ordered him. He did as she said, and Ruth hated him a little more because it was as if she was getting ready to rape a child.

She used her hands to ready him. It did not take much. She was thankful, and then she climbed on top of him. It took longer than she imagined it would for him to climax. He lay on the bed beneath her, staring past her. He gazed at the ceiling or something she did not know in his mind. When he finally released himself, it was with a nearly imperceptible grunt. A far cry from the noises he used to make when he was on top of her.

She climbed off him, redressed, and left the room. She learned it was all the same whether she just hiked up her skirt or undressed. She would get Alexander ready for her and then climb on top. She made nightly visits, gathering herself outside his door each time before opening the lock and sweeping in. It was always the same, which eased her guilt none at all.

"What are you doing?"

Millie's voice behind her made her jump as she locked Alexander's door back. Ruth spun and scowled before she felt her face want to crumble. "What I must."

"But Ruth," Millie began to protest. "He is not capable of understanding."

Her judgment angered Ruth, and she snapped. "I didn't understand the first time he climbed on top of me. I got no soothing words or gentle kisses. He took it from me. Why can I not take from him?"

"It's not the...."

Ruth held up a hand. “No, Millie, it is not the same. That is a full-grown man who lies in there. A man who has killed countless people, some I have no doubt, in cold blood. He has raided, and he has raped. I have heard his men talk, and he was never the man your husband was. Your husband would never take a child’s body as his right as a man. So this is our keep now, Millie, our rules, at least for the small amount of time left to us.”

Millie had grown pale. She cleared her throat and said, “I know he was not a good man. But I did not know he raped innocent women.”

Ruth’s bitter laugh escaped. “What is more innocent than a twelve-year-old wife? He was old enough to be my father. My tears never turned him away, never even made him hesitate. He took me the same the first time as every other time, with no regard, no compassion. I was nothing beneath him, and at least Alexander is more than that when I climb onto him.”

“How?” Millie asked.

“How? Millie, he is now my savior. If he can give me another son, I will be grateful. My boys were the only thing that made it worthwhile.”

“I’m sorry,” Millie said.

Ruth did not know what she was apologizing for, but she offered her a nod before she walked away.



Chapter 6

Millie's knees ached, yet she was unwilling to stand from the altar. She had cried every last tear she had to shed and pleaded for forgiveness with every breath. Yet, she knew she would not receive confirmation of her forgiveness. She needed it to be washed from her heart, yet she did not want her own forgiveness. That would be an extra betrayal to Gabriel.

After catching Ruth coming from Alexander's room, the fog lifted from her brain. They were in serious trouble if they could not stay at Ravenshill. It could be possible Ruth could stay on as the dowager, but more likely, the king would want his border protected by a strong presence, not one held by a woman. She spent the night in turmoil and guilt. After overcoming her sorrow for the very thought of lying with another man, Millie added another layer of guilt to herself. It came with a sliver of hope that Gabriel was the impotent one and she could still have a child.

When Sir John had walked into the hall that morning and cast his eyes on Millie, she made up her mind. John was a young knight when he returned from France with Alexander. He had seen and done things that did not haunt him or that he felt guilt over. All the infractions Ruth said of Alexander were also Sir John's. But John was a handsome man, a big man who looked like he could father strong sons. John was a closed-off man, and Millie recognized he only showed people what they wanted to see. He was a man who held his secrets well. She knew he would say nothing if they were to have sex because it was no one else's business.

"My apologies," Millie said as she stepped into the armory, but she wasn't. She had seen him enter after waiting to find him alone all day. "I just wanted to...." Her voice trailed off as she took two more steps into the room. Then, finally, the door gently closed of its own accord behind her.

John watched her from the table where a crossbow lay, half assembled.

"Gabriel spent a lot of time here," she said sadly as she continued her approach to run a finger across the surface of the table. When she looked up at him, she shed a real tear. "I would find him here often."

Millie moved closer. "He liked bows better than swords," she said though she had no idea if that was true.

John grunted, which told Millie he did not know either.

She touched the bow gently, reverently, sliding the loose string through her fingers. "He tried to teach me once. He was so patient," she said with a laugh. Tears and a smile greeted him when he finally looked at her. She dropped her head. "I

always pictured him teaching our son.” She shook her head, and tears fell because it was a thought she had had on many occasions. She placed a hand on her stomach. “Now, this child I carry will never know its father.” She burst into tears then.

Millie knew there was less than a fifty percent chance John would just stand there and let her have her cry, or depending on his level of coldness, he might even leave the room. He did not seem to be the type to be swayed by a woman’s tears. But he took half a step closer, and she was surprised when his arm raised and hesitated before settling across her shoulders. His touch felt so timid, a far cry from what she expected of this man. He drew her closer until she stood wrapped in his arms. And he held her gently while she was racked with sobs because she found comfort where she least expected to.

When she lifted her head, she stared at John, who stared back. It was not until she moved onto tiptoes that he took the liberty to kiss her. It had been surprisingly gentle, as was his entire handling of her. He had been so compassionate with his gentleness that she found his touch arousing. That was what sent her fleeing for the chapel. Before John could finish replacing his clothes, she was flying from the armory.

Suddenly there was a presence in the room behind her, and she heard the heavy tread of a man, and somehow she knew it was John. He came to stand beside her and then dropped to his knees. He lowered his head and remained beside her until she stood, and he stood with her. Together they walked from the chapel, and he slipped his hand into hers. Millie returned to John’s arms again and again. Two things drew her, desperation and desire. The desire for a child and the desire for a man. A man who hid himself so well she would never dream he was gentle and even loving.



Chapter 7

“I’m pregnant.”

The news slammed into Ruth with surprise that raced to relief and on to irritation.

“How...?” Ruth trailed off.

“I heard what you said, and I know Gabriel would want me to do what I can to survive. So I took the chance Gabriel could not sire a child, and it seems he was.”

“Who...?” again, Ruth stopped the question. The one that burned strongest and might consume the keep if she found the answer was how long Millie had been trying to have a child. Was it with a man who gave her pleasure? A man who would hold her in his arms? Because she had been molesting a man who was no better off than a toddler. If she had known Millie was doing that, she would not have been going to Alexander’s room every night.”

“It does not matter,” Millie said. “He thought I was already pregnant.”

“Who?” Ruth demanded. It seemed a vital question regardless.

“John.”

Ruth began to open her mouth to speak but closed it. Of all the men at Ravenshill, she had not expected that name to come from Millie. John was more like Alexander than Gabriel, and she could not imagine pleasure could have come from their joining.

Ruth smiled at her. “We will announce so all the land will hold their breath with us for a son.”

Millie smiled back. “If it is not a son, I will marry John, and we will try for a legitimate son.”

Ruth felt the smile fall from her face. “But it will not be a Kirkham.”

“If we do not have a Kirkham, we cannot continue the line for them. So there is one chance left for this to remain in that family’s name. It should not even concern you at this point because it is out of our hands. At least if John gets Ravenshill, we can stay.”

Ruth didn’t have the heart to tell Millie that John would never be granted Ravenshill. He was the bastard son of a close council member of France’s King Phillip and would never be given anything on English soil. She imagined that was one of John’s secrets he never brought up to Millie while he used her. A small smile quirked her lips, thinking how she would like him to know it was he who had been used. But men likely could not understand the concept of a woman besting them.

“You are right, of course,” she said. “I would like to honor my marriage responsibility to keep the Kirkham name going, but if it’s not meant to be, it’s not meant to be.”

“But we will pray for a son,” Millie said with a smile.

Ruth reached for Millie and clutched her hand, “Yes, let’s pray for a son.”

The title 'Epilogue' is written in a black, elegant, gothic-style font. It is flanked by two decorative floral elements. On the left, a red rose with green leaves and a smaller bud is positioned above the 'E'. On the right, a purple rose with green leaves and a smaller bud is positioned above the 'e'.

Epilogue

Baron Gabe Kirkham was born. He came a little early, though healthy. Soon after, the body of Alexander was found at the bottom of the tower steps. One of the chambermaids was sent away for leaving his door unlocked after taking him his meal. An accusation she vehemently denied.

Millie continued the relationship with John until Gabe was old enough to resemble him. Then, when the knight pieced it together, he fled in anger and was never heard from again. Ruth saw Millie's anguish, but she and Ruth had a child, and together they raised him to be a better man than his father and uncle.