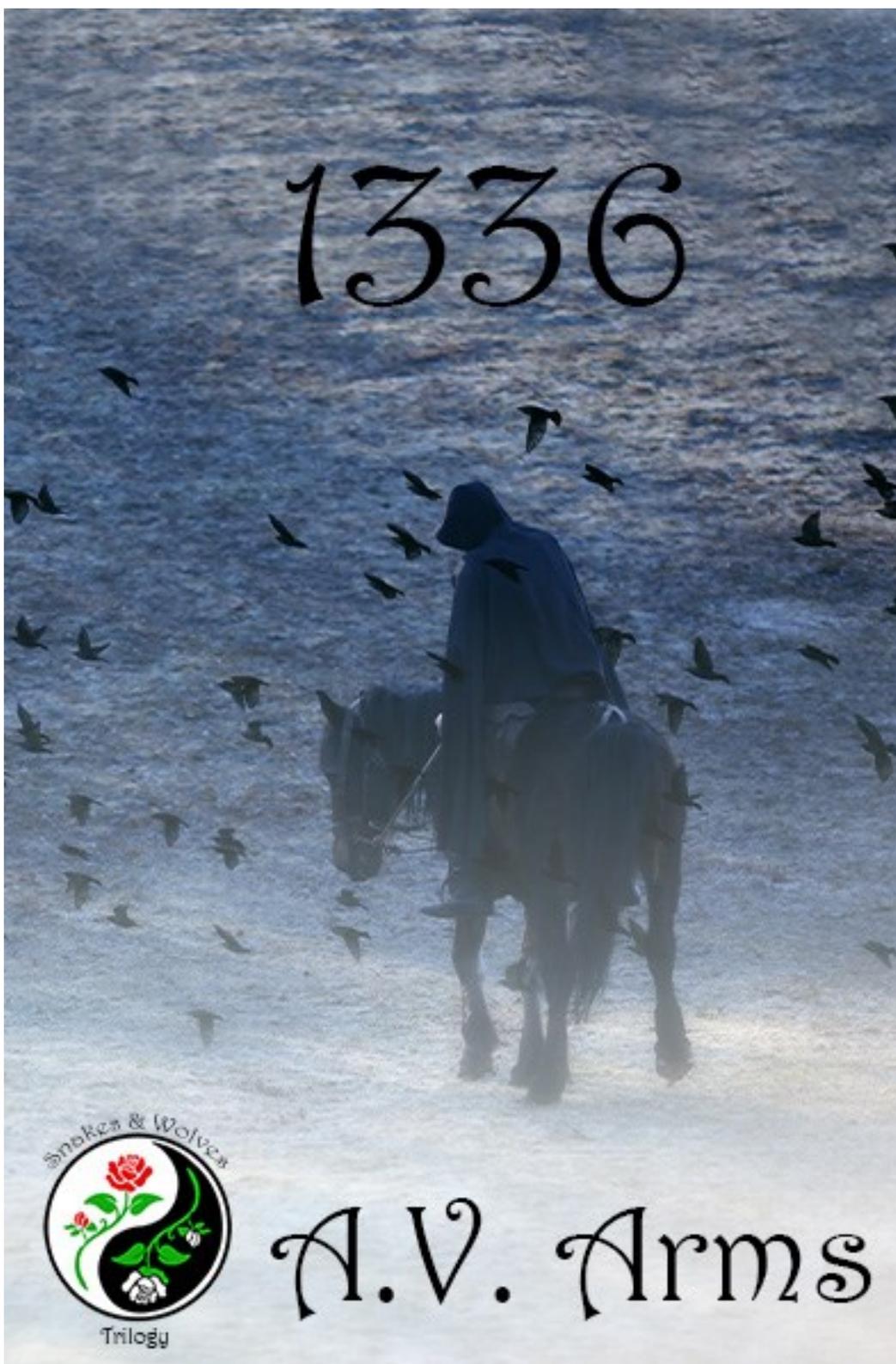


1336



A.V. Arms



Chapter 10

April 20, 1336, Ravenshill, England

Shadows ran across the bailey, chasing after the fast-moving clouds as they were swept along the deep blue sky. The white clouds raced ahead of the coming storm. Rose Elliot paused to breathe deeply of the scent of the approaching fury of spring. Her skin prickled, and her leaves would eagerly turn up to the sky if she were a tree.

The light fled the approaching darkness. She prayed it would be the darkest yet. Prayed for the wind to descend upon Ravenshill with the ferocity to take down its walls. She wanted the rain to fall with violence that would shatter the stones and bury Ravenshill with its rubble. Could a spring storm have enough power to wash it from its hill and into the river below? Of course not. Not these Norman walls. How long had they stood thus far? More than two hundred years with the weather and enemies trying to bring them down. And yet, they still stood.

Rose touched a gentle finger to her swelling lip. Her uncle, Lord Benjamin, had hit her before but never two strikes in succession. The two blows to her head were more brutal than ever before. Her head now hurt to the point it made her queasy. Her jaw hurt, and moving her eye and blinking made her feel the heat of her swelling eye. Her spine had been knocked loose from the base of her skull.

The heavy wooden gates stood open. Each time a gust of wind snaked its way over the walls and across the main gate's threshold, the tarnished brass ring that was the handle on one of the gates clacked against the wood, but the gate itself did not budge. She moved forward. The road disappeared not far ahead, and beyond River North Tyne wound its way unheard from the keep's place above it. One of her uncle's men gave her a nod as she passed from the safety of the walls.

The blood had been removed from the walls and ground around it a few months before. If Rose did not hate Benjamin Elliott before because of all his abuses, she did after he took Ravenshill from the Kirkhams. Rose did not understand the reasoning of men. She thought all the Elliots should be content with their neighboring property of Lidell. They were Scottish, after all, and should be on Scottish soil. But the Elliots wanted a foothold in England, and the Kirkhams fought for a foothold in Scotland. It was a feud that turned bloody through the centuries. Sometimes it subsided, and the neighboring clans were almost at peace. But at other times, it raged and consumed both sides to near extinction.

Rose's father died in one of those battles, and with her mother already dead, she went to Benjamin and his wife, Leah. As far as her aunt was concerned, she might as well not even have been her ward. She had her own daughters and a son to dote over. The son was a sickly infant that most speculated would not survive. The two girls were cruel, spoiled creatures, making her stay nearly as unbearable as her uncle. The girls saw how Benjamin screamed and hit her and felt it was their right to do so too. They were never corrected. Only Rose, when she fought back, should one of the other girls get a scratch or bruise.

Rose's stride was slow, and her head still pounded. She wanted the river. The shadows of its surrounding forest wiped out the glare of the sun and the chill waters that would ease her throbbing head. Rose was allowed to come and go, but Benjamin's daughters could not for fear the Kirkhams still lurked close by. Obviously, he could not care less if his niece was killed in retaliation. Rose wondered if any Kirkhams survived that battle. As the oldest, Mitch Kirkham was the lord of Ravenshill. His body was found after the battle by her uncle's men. The bodies of his brothers Payton and Evander and their young sister Lilly. The last brother Torrence was not among the fallen, nor was Evander's son, Reid. That day the rain fell, and the chill drove some guards on the Ravenshill walls inside. Benjamin had struck them hard and was in the gates before they could be fully closed.

Those who escaped were the lucky ones. Those left behind were slaughtered. And now, this was where her uncle called home and dragged her with them.

Her step picked up as she descended the hill and stepped into the cool forest. The wind whispered through the leaves and whistled when it gusted through the branches. The trees swayed and groaned.

She stopped to give her head a chance to stop swimming. She made it to the river, climbing down the bank of rich earth, its scent mixing with that of the river. She eased herself to her knees at the water's edge. The water soothed her ears, flowing and tumbling on its journey. She cupped the frigid water in her hands and eased it up to dip her swollen eye. The coolness of it eased the throbbing. When it warmed, she cupped fresh over it until she felt she could bring no more relief. She did the same for her lip, bathed her face, and placed her cold hands on the back of her neck. They eased the tension for the moment they remained cold against her sensitive skin.

Rose climbed back up the bank and eased herself onto the forest floor. She stretched out on her back and stared up through the swaying trees. The movement made her feel queasy, so she closed her eyes. She exhaled slowly, soaking in the quiet peace that lulled her to sleep.

She did not know how long she slept, but she awoke, her heart thumping and her ears straining to hear what woke her. She did not move. She feared to move because the pain that had settled in made her want to scream with the slightest movement. Her eye was swollen closed, and her lip burned. She swallowed. Her fear made it difficult.

The sound came again, a cautious step and then another. It could only be heard in the slightest crush of leaves. Barely discernable above the wind in the trees and her pounding head. She rolled with a gasp of pain. She had only gained her hands and knees when her lunch spewed onto the ground before her. It made the drumming inside her skull bring another wave of nausea.

Through one eye, she saw the toes on a pair of boots. Slowly and with great agony, Rose lifted her head to see the man who stood in front of her. To call him a man was generous, although a boy would be an insult. He was of an age he could either be smothered with love from his mother or thrust onto a bloody battlefield. He was handsome enough with the lightest blonde hair Rose ever saw on a man and crystal blue eyes that were hard. He was not a boy, still coddled by his mother.

"You do not look well," the boy finally said. He took two steps forward and gripped her by her upper arms with gentleness as he urged her to sit. Then, the boy crouched next to her, put a finger beneath her chin, and lifted it so he could see her. His eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched as he took in the damage to her face.

"Who did this to you, and did you deserve it?"

"My uncle," Rose said. But, though he was handling her gently, she sensed he might not always be so. "I never do."

The boy exhaled and moved his hand away from her face. "What is your name?"

"Rose."

"Did you come from the keep?"

Rose began to nod, thought better of it, and said, "Yes."

"Are you one of Benjamin's daughters?"

"I am his niece."

The implication that Benjamin was the man who hit her took a moment to settle on him. "So you are an Elliot?"

"Yes. Who may I ask who you are lurking in our forest?"

The boy's face transformed from something akin to hard and angry. "It is my forest. Ravenshill is my keep." The hand reached for her again, threatening to grab her roughly by the chin, but the hand dropped away.

"Reid." His name came from her lips in a whisper.

"Why have you left Ravenshill?" His voice sounded angry, and she fought not to cry. Too much was clamoring for attention in the chaos of her skull cracking from within.

"The river," she sniffed, fighting for bravery when all she wanted to do was curl back onto the ground to wait for her head to stop its calamity.

"It's okay," Reid said, sidling his way back to her. "I promise I will not hurt you and let you go your way. It is obvious Benjamin Elliot has no love for you." Reid pulled a dried leaf from her hair, tossing it away. "But tell me, do his daughters or wife go about unattended?" The young man sat beside her, resting his forearms on his knees.

"They do not leave the keep," Rose whispered, unable to look at him.

"Can you bring them outside the walls to me?"

"Why would I do that?" Rose felt herself shudder as Reid moved closer, pressing his side against hers.

"Why would you not?"

"They are my people," she said, taking the pain to turn to look at him.

"My people do not do this to the ones they love." His finger was light as a feather as it trailed down her bruising eye to her swollen lip before dropping away. "I will find a place for you if you help me."

"And if I don't?"

Reid sighed and leaned away from her. He looked across the river as he spoke. "If you do not, I will one day have enough men to come for it. Then, when I do, and we make it through those gates as your uncle did, I will spill blood for blood." From the corner of her eye, she saw him looking at her again. "Blood for blood Rose. Your blood."

"I am no traitor."

"Nor are you a fighter, or does your uncle now have only one eye and a broken nose to match your busted lip."

"He doesn't."

"It would be my guess not a scratch or word spoken was made in protest. Not from you or any of your people."

"that does not matter."

Reid shrugged. "Have it your way. You help me, and I can free you. But you don't, and I will not hesitate to kill you."

Reid climbed to his feet with one smooth motion. "I will give you a chance to think about this. Then, if you wish to help, come here, and I will find you. If not, I suggest you remain hidden behind the walls until I come for you."

Rose began to cry as soon as he disappeared among the trees.



Chapter 2

“Benjamin has called for you.” Shawntez was a big man, always at her uncle’s shoulder. He was his guardian and executioner. Looking at the man with his fierce expression personified by his wide nose and broad brow made her shudder. He looked much like a bull and very much as violent.

For a moment, she thought to ask why her uncle sought her at such a time of evening. But she did not want to pose such a question to this man. Such a thing would only prolong her time spent in his company, so she fell into step beside him. Her nerves were spiking, her heart hammering, and her skin clammy with apprehension as they climbed the spiraling stairs to the lord’s chamber on the third floor.

Shawntez followed close behind, his body pressed her beyond the wall separating the landing from the chamber. As soon as she came within sight of her uncle, Shawntez disappeared back down the steps.

“My lovely niece,” Benjamin said, stepping toward her.

Rose’s throat felt dry, and she couldn’t swallow her fear. She wanted to back away, but she was only a couple steps from the wall at her back or a tumble down the steps.

“What might I do for you, uncle?” Rose croaked. She wanted to snatch it back because it sounded far too weak.

The last light disappeared from the window, and the room was lit by a small scattering of flickering candles. Benjamin’s face was darkened by the room’s shadows as he came to stand over her. “I am tired of feeding you when you provide nothing. It is time we change that. What do you say?”

He picked up a strand of her hair and let it slide through her fingers until he reached the end, but he did not let it go. Instead, he stared at her for a frightening time before saying, “You will pay for every dime I spent filling your belly.”

He yanked the strand of hair he held, ripping her from the shock of his words. At first, she didn’t understand them, but even her naïve mind pieced them together. His fingers were biting into the back of her skull. He propelled her toward the bed and tripped her to land face down. He held her on her stomach, reaching beneath her tunic, and ripped her underwear from between her legs. She screamed into the feather mattress, nearly choking on the linens she sucked into her mouth with her struggle.

“Hold still,” Benjamin snapped at her as he hefted her, flipping her onto her back. As soon as her back came into contact with the mattress, she sprung up but got

only one lurch backward before he planted a hand on the center of her chest and gave her a hard shove. Her head struck the headboard hard, and then Benjamin was on top of her.

The thought of Reid and his words came to mind. Her fight renewed, and she aimed for Benjamin's eye, cheek, lips, throat, and ears, but he was strong, and she could not get her nails close enough to rip at any of them. She began to scream but Benjamin's fist slamming into the side of her face silenced it.

Her head rocked to the side, and her eyes fell to the window. The horn window showed the hint of the bright moon rising. It fought to shine its way through the strips of flattened horn that created the barrier between horror and freedom.

"Be still he growled at her. Who do you think will come to your aid?" he laughed cruelly at her.

She turned her head to look up at him. He concentrated on her open legs, and she tried to scramble away. He grabbed her shoulder and yanked her down against his exposed groin.

"It won't be my wife. It was her suggestion. One less girl in the way of our daughter's finding a good match. She did want me to give you to Shawntez so you can thank me for that."

His fingers were touching her where they shouldn't. She let out a sob and tried to push his hand away.

Benjamin paused and looked at her. "You can scream if you want, but none of my men will come unless it is to watch. So lie still and pay what you owe."

"No," she sobbed, trying to push him away as another piece of him touched her opening.

He hit her again, and then she felt the pressure of the man forcing himself into her. There was a pain deep inside that created a cramp that seemed to intensify as he thrust.

"No," she screamed, trying to wiggle from beneath her.

He grabbed her chin, his fingers biting it, making her bruised jaw ache. "Shutup. You are ruined now, and this is your only worth to me now. If you do not lie meekly beneath me, you will get no more from me."

Rose heard and felt every moment he kept her pinned beneath him, but her mind was outside the keep. She was at the river, and Reid was coming to her. "I will bring them to you," she told him. "I will bring them to you, and you can have your blood for blood."



Chapter 3

Rose stumbled on the branch that lay in her path. Her hips hurt, her head, her entire body. The hour was early, close to dawn, when Benjamin finally slept, and she could slip from his bed. She did not seek out her own but waited until the guards had their backs turned, then she went through the sally port.

She cried all the way to the forest below, making her way into the darkness with the shimmering strip of silver shining between the trees ahead. She felt the blood caked to her thighs, and her face was swelling. Her shaking legs threatened to give out before she could reach the healing waters. When she came to the river, she stumbled down the bank. She kicked off her slippers, pulled the hem of her gown up, and entered the frigid water. She went as deep as her thighs, then set to work scrubbing the blood and semen from herself. Her hands shook, and she sniffed and sobbed while doing so.

A sound that wasn't a noise made her aware she was not alone. It could have been a sound, a breath, or just another heart beating in the forest with her. She turned to the bank in time to see Reid step into the water, boots, and britches, and move toward her.

"What has happened, Rose?" he asked her, but he knew. The anger in his eyes told her that he knew what had happened to her this night.

"I want you to kill them," she whispered. She stood still and shivering in front of him. She hated herself for wanting to shed her family's blood, but her uncle had shed hers tonight. Blood for blood. Reid had the right of it.

Reid's arm was around her, warm against her frigid skin. He walked with her back out of the water and guided her to a fallen tree, where they settled.

"I have to gather men. I can get enough to take back Ravenshill with your help."

"Tell me," she said quickly before she lost her courage and changed her mind.

"I need three nights to gather men. Then we will hide in wait until the next night storm. Then, when the storm comes, unbolt the sally port. After that, my men and I can do the rest."

"What do I do then?"

Reid thought a moment. "Wait until the Lord's solar empties and then bar yourself there. I will tell my men to leave the tower's top floor to me. Do not unbar that door until you hear my voice. My men will not know you for a friend."

Rose nodded. "What will become of me then?"

“What do you mean?” Reid asked, rising to stand above her. Even in the dark, with his shadowed features, he lingered between man and boy.

“I will have no home. I will not even gain a husband.”

“You will. Help me take back Ravenshill, and I will marry you.”

Rose gave half a shake of her head, then stopped. Why wouldn't Reid Kirkham make a good husband? He was handsome in a dangerous kind of way. He also seemed angry when she spoke of what her uncle did to her. He would likely not lay a fist on her or force her to bed, even if she was his wife.

She looked up at him, and now in the shadows, he was a man. He was a man going to battle, a man who was to marry, and a man who could be her hero. She nodded the slightest.

“Did you fight?”

“I tried. But he is too strong, and no one will ever come to my aid.”

“Do not tell lies,” Reid said softly. “I will.”

A sound akin to a sob fell from her lips. Was it relief, fear, or appreciation that made it escape? She did not know.

“Do you think your uncle will touch you again?”

Rose could not meet his eyes and dropped hers to look at the ground. “Be brave. I will come, and he will die. If you wish it of me, I will cut his manhood from him and force it into the socket of the eye I will cut from him for my father. Think of that image when he touches you, and let it bring you joy.”

His words did not bring joy when her uncle called for her two nights later. She took herself away, where the walls to her soul were impenetrable. But later, as she stared at the ceiling over her bed, a smile crept onto her lips. Soon Reid would return with his army.



Chapter 4

It was a week before a storm gathered on the horizon. Despite the normally turbulent spring rains, the storm drifted away to disappear before reaching Ravenshill. Another evening a drizzle came and went without diminishing the guards on the night watch. Then, two weeks after Reid said he would have his troops, the sky began to fill with racing clouds. The thunderclouds came on their trail, chasing like a pack of hounds after a rabbit. Great mountains of blackness bore down upon the keep's walls snuffing out the light of the setting sun. This storm did not disappear over the horizon but hit the keep atop its knoll with a force that shook its foundations.

This was the night, there was no doubt. The lighting and driving rain forced the men from the walls. Her heart beat erratically all evening as the downpour began. She could not make a move until the household slept. And then Shawtez appeared, and Rose's heart sank. She was marched to her uncle's chamber, and inside she was as biddable as she could be, hoping he would finish with her sooner. It seemed an eternity, far longer than the eternities she had already spent under him. What if Reid came and went, and the door had not been opened? What if the storm subsided before she could get away? But the storm continued to rage, beating against the dark window, and finally, Benjamin slept.

She slipped from his bed and, on silent feet, made her way down the steps. The twisting staircase grew hundreds of more steps as she moved cautiously down them. The storm was loud, even through the stone walls. It might muffle her progress but likewise would conceal anyone climbing them. It wasn't as if she couldn't move about the keep freely, but her fear would give her guilt of something away.

No souls moved in the tower as she crossed the lord's hall and slipped the door open. The iron hinges creaked a protest but were swallowed in the storm's rage. She stepped onto the small footbridge that carried her over the ditch filling with the pouring rain. It drained well. Its only purpose when the tower was built without its protective walls. The ditch was the first defense making ladders difficult at best to place across the ditch. Her uncle and his men didn't give the Kirkham's a chance to draw the bridge up and bar the tower door. Once the walls were breached, the fight that barely began ended.

The wood beneath her bare feet was slick, and she grasped the rope as the rain soaked her within seconds. The driving force whipped it into her eyes, blinding her and the gusts of winds threatened to send her toppling. Not likely to kill her, the fall

could break a leg or an arm, but time had filled the ditch, so it was no longer the threat it once was.

Her feet landed in the bailey. Despite the roof that connected the old tower to the newer hall, water flooded across it. The dirt was hard-packed, but she could still feel mud squish between her toes. Her feet slapped through the standing water as lightning streaked across the sky, and a blast of thunder shook the ground. Behind the animal pens, she ran to the small door in the wall, designed to let sorties out without risking opening the main gates during an attack.

She thought when this moment would come, she would hesitate to hand over Ravenshill to Reid, but she did not. Instead, she grabbed the heavy iron bolt with both hands and gave a hard yank. It slid through its shaft with a loud clang that did not carry. She stared at it for a moment with the rain thundering onto the slate roof.

“God be with you,” she whispered for Reid and his men. Then she turned and raced back to her chamber. She stripped from her soaked nightgown in the dark, listening to her cousin’s snores and steady breaths. She fumbled for the gown laid out for her for the following day. Her hands shook, and her teeth chattered. She went to her pallet and slipped beneath the covers. She trembled and tucked her head beneath the covers, cocooning herself, hoping her warm breath trapped would help warm her. Despite everything, she dozed.

Noises woke her, and she had forgotten for a fraction of a second. The storm still raged, but another sound rose to compete. Screams. Rose sprang to her feet and looked at her sisters, who still slept. The sound of steps racing to the third floor rolled with the thunder. Rose hurried closer to the door and waited. Cries came from below, echoing from the bailey through the door she knew was open by the sound of the rain falling and splattering on the ground she had run across earlier.

Benjamin came stumbling down the steps behind the man who retrieved him, and Rose raced up the steps. The door was heavy, and she shoved it with all her might to get it closed. The iron bar slid easily into place, and she sank to the floor with her back against it. She heard the sounds of death coming closer and closer. Terrible screams echoed, and then someone was outside the door. Finding it bared against them, they pounded. “Let us in!” her aunt screamed from the other side.

“They are in the tower. Let us in.”

“I will break this door down.” This from Shawntez, “Open it now,” he screamed. Rose shoved her fingers in her ears, cutting herself tight, trying to shut out the demands to open the door. But she did not have long to suffer, nor did those gathered outside the chamber. She heard the cries of pain and death, the calls of Reid’s men as they grew triumphant with the Elliots’ blood within Ravenshill’s tower.

What followed was a quiet that rang above the driving rain and the clap of thunder moving away. She sat up and turned to stare at the door, and then there was movement again on the other side.

She pressed her ear to it and heard muffled voices, but no one came near the door again. It was Reid’s men, yet she trembled in fear as the storm rolled away and the silence within the tower and outside it crept on. Finally, a knock sounded on the door, and Rose shot to her feet.

“Rose, it’s Reid. You can come out now.”

Rose hesitated with her hand on the bolt. Several “what ifs” clambered for recognition. She did not know this man, who she realized had not been a boy since her uncle pushed him out of Ravenshill’s walls. She would never know the boy, but she hoped he was a man of his word.

She slung the bolt loose, and slowly Reid pushed the door open. He had blood on him, stark in his blonde hair, and his blue eyes burned with the fire of battle. “It is done. Ravenshill belongs again to the Kirkhams.”

“My uncle?”

“He is dead. I took his life myself.” He held his hands out to show the blood caked on them. “I took his eye, but he died before we completed your task.”

Rose felt herself grow pale. Suddenly she feared he was a man of his word. He had cut a man’s eye from him while he lived and then tried to cut his penis, balls, or both. She did not know the pain it caused him. The eye was for his father, his genitals for her. She felt like retching and screaming her relief at once.

“Ready yourself. A feast of celebration is being prepared, and I will introduce my wife to my people.”