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The Scottish Prisoner

Written by Diana Gabaldon

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DIANA GABALDON

The Scottish Prisoner

A Novel



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Preface



Chronology of the Novels: When to Read What?

The Lord John novellas and novels* are sequential, but are built to stand alone; you don't need to read them in order.

In terms of their relationship to the larger Outlander novels: These books are part of the overall series, but are focused for the most part on those times in Lord John's life

*There are also a couple of short stories—and will eventually be more—dealing with minor events, minor characters, and/or lacunae in the main books. These are presently published in various anthologies, but will eventually be collected in book form.

"A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows" appears in the anthology *Songs of Love and Death* (edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois). This is a short story set in WWII that tells the story of what *really* happened to Roger MacKenzie's parents, Jerry and Dolly.

"The Space Between" is a novella that will appear in an anthology titled *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (edited by John Joseph Adams), which will likely appear sometime in 2012. This story is set mostly in Paris and involves Joan McKimmie (Marsali's younger sister), Michael Murray (Young Ian's older brother), the Comte St. Germain (no, of course he's not dead, don't be silly), and Mother Hildegarde.

when he's not "onstage" in the main novels. This particular book focuses also on a part of Jamie Fraser's life not covered in the main novels.

All of the Lord John novels take place between 1756 and 1766—this one is set in 1760—and in terms of the overall Outlander novels/timeline, they thus occur more or less in the middle of *Voyager.* So you can read any of them, in any order, once you've read *Voyager,* without getting lost.

Prologue



If you deal in death routinely, there are two paths. Either it becomes routine, in which case ye risk killing for nothing and thus lose your soul—for if the lives ye take are worth nothing, neither is yours.

Or you become that much more aware of the value of a life and that much more reluctant to take one without the direst necessity. That way you risk losing your own life—there are the quick and there are the dead, and I do not mean what St. Paul meant about that—but not your soul.

Soldiers manage by dividing themselves. They're one man in the killing, another at home, and the man that dandles his bairn on his knee has nothing to do wi' the man who crushed his enemy's throat with his boot. So he tells himself, sometimes successfully.

But it marks you, killing. No matter why it's done.

It's a brand upon your heart, and while it may heal, the mark canna be removed, save by a blade. All ye can hope for is a cleaner scar.

SECTION I



The Fate of Fuses

1



April Fool

Helwater, the Lake District
April 1, 1760

IT WAS SO COLD OUT, HE THOUGHT HIS COCK MIGHT BREAK off in his hand—if he could find it. The thought passed through his sleep-mazed mind like one of the small, icy drafts that darted through the loft, making him open his eyes.

He could find it now; had waked with his fist wrapped round it and desire shuddering and twitching over his skin like a cloud of midges. The dream was wrapped just as tightly round his mind, but he knew it would fray in seconds, shredded by the snores and farts of the other grooms. He needed her, needed to spill himself with the feel of her touch still on him.

Hanks stirred in his sleep, chuckled loudly, said something incoherent, and fell back into the void, murmuring, "Bugger, bugger, bugger . . ."

Jamie said something similar under his breath in the Gaelic and flung back his blanket. Damn the cold.

He made his way down the ladder into the half-warm, horse-smelling fug of the barn, nearly falling in his haste, ignoring a

splinter in his bare foot. He hesitated in the dark, still urgent. The horses wouldn't care, but if they noticed him, they'd make enough noise, perhaps, to wake the others.

Wind struck the barn and went booming round the roof. A strong chilly draft with a scent of snow stirred the somnolence, and two or three of the horses shifted, grunting and whickering. Overhead, a murmured "'ugger" drifted down, accompanied by the sound of someone turning over and pulling the blanket up round his ears, defying reality.

Claire was still with him, vivid in his mind, solid in his hands. He could imagine that he smelled her hair in the scent of fresh hay. The memory of her mouth, those sharp white teeth . . . He rubbed his nipple, hard and itching beneath his shirt, and swallowed.

His eyes were long accustomed to the dark; he found the vacant loose box at the end of the row and leaned against its boards, cock already in his fist, body and mind yearning for his lost wife.

He'd have made it last if he could, but he was fearful lest the dream go altogether, and he surged into the memory, groaning. His knees gave way in the aftermath and he slid slowly down the boards of the box into the loose piled hay, shirt rucked round his thighs and his heart pounding like a kettledrum.

Lord, that she might be safe was his last conscious thought. *She and the child.*



HE PLUNGED at once into a sleep so deep and luxurious that when a hand shook him by the shoulder, he didn't spring to his feet but merely stirred sluggishly, momentarily befuddled by the prickle of hay on his bare legs. His instincts came back to life in sudden alarm and he flung himself over, getting his feet under

him in the same motion that put his back against the wall of the loose box.

There was a gasp from the small form in the shadows before him, and he classified it as feminine just in time to restrain himself from reflexive violence.

"Who's that?" he demanded. He spoke low, his voice hoarse with sleep, and the form swayed back a little farther, exhibiting dubiousness.

He was in no mood for foolishness and shot out a hand, grabbing her by the arm. She squealed like a pig and he let go as though she were red-hot, cursing himself mentally as he heard the startled grunts and rustlings of his fellow grooms overhead.

"What the devil's that?" Crusoe demanded, in a voice like a clogged pipe. Jamie heard him clear his throat and spit thickly into his half-filled pot, then bellow down the ladder, "Who's there?"

The shadowy form was making wild motions, beseeching him to be silent. The horses were half awake, snorting with mild confusion but not panicked; they were used to Crusoe shouting in the night. He did it whenever he had the money to buy drink, waking from nightmares in a cold sweat, shrieking at his demons.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, trying to think. If Crusoe and Hanks didn't already know he was gone, they'd notice in the next few seconds.

"Rats in the feed," he shouted up. "I killed one." It was a feeble story; there were always rats in the feed, and no one would have stirred a finger to investigate their noises in the dead of night, let alone hunt them in the dark.

Hanks made a sound of disgust, rustling his bedclothes. "The Scotchman's buggering the horses again," he said conversationally to Crusoe, though clearly speaking loud enough to be heard below. "Ought to speak to his lordship about it."

Crusoe grunted angrily. "Well, whatever the fuck you're doin', MacKenzie, be quiet about it!" he shouted, and flung himself over on his pallet in a flurry of bother.

Jamie's heart was pounding again, with annoyed agitation. He reached for the young woman—no auld crone squealed like that—but slowly this time, and she made no demur when he took her by the arm. He led her down the stone-flagged aisle between the stalls and outside, shoving the sliding door to behind them with a rumble.

It was cold enough out to make him gasp, an icy wind flattening his shirt to his body and stealing his breath. The moon was obscured by racing cloud, but enough glow came from the sky for him to make out the identity of his intruder.

"What the *devil* d'ye want?" he snapped. "And how did ye ken where I was?" It had dawned on him that she hadn't just stumbled over him in the hay, for why would a lady's maid be poking about the stables at night? She'd come looking for him.

Betty lifted her chin.

"There's a man what wants to talk to you. He sent me to say. And I saw you come down from the loft."

That last sentence floated in the air between them, charged like a Leyden jar. Touch it, and there'd be a spark that would stand his hair on end. Christ. Did she have any notion what it *was* he'd been doing?

He caught the hint of a smirk on her face before a cloud shadow obscured it, and his ears went suddenly hot with rising blood.

"What man?" he said. "Where?"

"An Irishman," she said. "But a gentleman. He says to tell you the green branch will flower. And to meet him on the fells, where the old shepherd's hut is."

The shock of it nearly made him forget the cold, though the

wind was ripping through the linen of his shirt and he was shivering so hard that he found it hard to speak without his voice shaking. And *that* wouldn't do.

"I've nothing to do wi' any Irishmen," he snapped. "And if he comes back, ye may tell him so." He put a hand on the door, turning to go in. "I'm going to my bed. Good night to ye."

A light hand ran down his back and stopped just above his buttocks. He could feel the hair there bristle like a badger's, and not from the cold.

"Your bed'll be cold as death by now." She'd stepped close; he could feel the slight warmth of her body behind him, the heat of her breath through his shirt. And she still had her hand on him. Lower now. "Mine's a good deal warmer."

Holy Lord. Arse clenched, he moved deliberately away from her and pushed the door open.

"Good night," he said, without turning round, and stepped into the rustling, inquisitive dark of the stable. He saw her for an instant as he turned to shut the door, caught in the flickering moonlight, her eyes narrowed like an angry cat's.

HE MADE NO EFFORT to be quiet, climbing the ladder back to the loft. Hanks and Crusoe were pointedly silent, though he thought neither one was asleep. God knew what they'd say about tonight's incident, but he wasn't disposed to be worrit over that pair. He'd enough else to think on.

Betty, for one. For if anyone on Helwater estate knew his great secret, it was she. Betty had been Geneva Dunsany's lady's maid before becoming maid to her sister after Geneva's death. How much of a confidante had she been, though?

He could still feel the pressure of her hand on his backside and squirmed his arse irritably into his pallet, the straw under

his blanket poking him. Damn the woman. She'd given him an eye when he'd first come to Helwater from Ardsmuir prison three years before, a paroled Jacobite traitor, but a lady's maid had little to do with a groom, and it was easy enough not to see her long-eyed glances when she came to tell him that Lady Geneva wanted her horse. Not so easy to avoid Lady Geneva.

He grimaced in the dark at thought of Geneva. He wasn't feeling charitable at the moment but crossed himself nonetheless and said a brief prayer for the repose of her soul, as he did whenever she came into his mind. He owed her that much, poor lass, no matter what she'd done to him.

But why the devil was Betty playing the loon now? Geneva had been dead more than two years, and Betty herself had come back to Helwater soon after her mistress's death in childbirth. She'd not spoken a word to him in the last six months; why go to the risk of coming to the stable at night—and, come to that, what had the silly wee bitch intended? Climbing the creaking ladder and sliding into his bed unannounced, with Hanks and Crusoe curled under their blankets six feet away, their great ears flapping? Sneaking him into the servants' attic?

She couldn't have meant to wait below for him; she hadn't known he'd come down. For that matter . . . she said she'd seen him descend the ladder, but she hadn't come to him then. Why not?

The logical answer presented itself, with a small jolt to the pit of his stomach. She hadn't been looking for him at all.

He sat bolt upright before the train of his thought had entirely finished, his body grasping the point at once. She'd come to meet someone else, and that meeting had been interrupted by his own inopportune appearance.

An intruder couldn't have hidden in an occupied stall or anywhere else . . . save the vacant loose box near the door.

And that's why she woke me, he thought, hands clenching on the blanket. *She had to draw me away, so the fellow could get out. Christ, he was in there with me!* His skin prickled with mingled embarrassment and fury. The notion that . . . could it be possible . . . surely he would have sensed someone . . . ?

But he wouldn't. He'd been so desperate to find solitude in which to reach Claire for that one necessary moment that he wouldn't have noticed a bear lurking in the shadows, provided it hadn't tried to interrupt him.

One of the cocks in the hen coop crowed, two more on its heels. A sleepy "Oh, fuuuck" came from a nearby pallet. A loud rustle of someone sitting up, and the hawking and snorting started. Hanks smoked heavily—when he could afford it—and took a good quarter hour to start breathing in the morning.

Jamie breathed deep himself, thinking. Then flung back his blanket and rose to meet what was likely to be an interesting day.

2



Erse

London
Argus House, residence of Harold,
Duke of Pardloe

LORD JOHN GREY EYED THE RIBBON-TIED PACKET ON HIS KNEE as though it were a bomb. In fact, it couldn't have been more explosive had it been filled with black powder and equipped with a fuse.

His attitude as he handed it to his brother must have reflected this knowledge, for Hal fixed him with a gimlet eye and raised one brow. He said nothing, though, flicking loose both ribbon and wrapping with an impatient gesture and bending his head at once over the thick sheaf of densely written sheets that emerged.

Grey couldn't stand to watch him read through Charles Carruthers's postmortem denunciation, recalling each damning page as Hal read it. He stood up and went to the window of the library that looked out into the back garden of Argus House, ignoring the swish of turning pages and the occasional blasphemous mutterings behind him.

Hal's three boys were playing a game of tigers and hunters,

leaping out at one another from behind the shrubbery with shrill roars, followed by shrieks of delight and yells of "Bang! Take that, you striped son of a bitch!"

The nurse seated on the edge of the fish pool, keeping a tight grip on baby Dottie's gown, looked up at this but merely rolled her eyes with a martyred expression. *Flesh and blood has its limits,* her expression said clearly, and she resumed paddling a hand in the water, luring one of the big goldfish close so that Dottie could drop bits of bread to it.

John longed to be down there with them. It was a rare day for early April, and he felt the pulse of it in his blood, urging him to be outside, running barefoot through young grass. *Running naked down into the water . . .* The sun was high, flooding warm through the glass of the French windows, and he closed his eyes and turned his face up to it.

Siverly. The name floated in the darkness behind his eyes, pasted across the blank face of an imagined cartoon major, drawn in uniform, an outsize sword brandished in his hand and bags of money stuffed into the back of his breeches, obscene bulges under the skirt of his coat. One or two had fallen to the ground, bursting open so that you could see the contents—coin in one, the other filled with what looked like poppets, small wooden doll-like things. Each one with a tiny knife through its heart.

Hal swore in German behind him. He must have reached the part about the rifles; German oaths were reserved for the most stringent occasions, French being used for minor things like a burnt dinner, and Latin for formal insults committed to paper. Minnie wouldn't let either Hal or John swear in English in the house, not wanting the boys to acquire low habits. John could have told her it was too late for such caution but didn't.

He turned round to see Hal on his feet, pale with rage, a sheet of paper crumpled in one hand.

"How dare he? How *dare* he?"

A small knot he hadn't known was there dissolved under John's ribs. His brother had built his own regiment, the 46th, out of his own blood and bones; no one was less likely to overlook or condone military malfeasance. Still, Hal's response reassured him.

"You believe Carruthers, then?"

Hal glared at him.

"Don't you? You knew the man."

He *had* known Charles Carruthers—in more than one sense.

"Yes, I believed him when he told me about Siverly in Canada, and *that*"—he nodded at the papers, thrown in a sprawl across Hal's desk—"is even more convincing. You'd think he'd been a lawyer."

He could still see Carruthers's face, pale in the dimness of his attic room in the little garrison town of Gareon, drawn with ill health but set with grim determination to live long enough to see justice done. Charlie hadn't lived that long, but long enough to write down every detail of the case against Major Gerald Siverly and to entrust it to Grey.

He was the fuse that would detonate this particular bomb. And he was all too familiar with what happened to fuses, once lit.



"WHAT IS THIS?" Hal was frowning at one of the papers. Grey put down the book in his hand and came to look. The paper was in Carruthers's handwriting, as painstakingly executed as the rest; Carruthers had known he was setting down evidence for a court-martial and had done his best to make it legible.

It *was* legible—insofar as Grey could make out the various let-

ters that composed the words. But the words themselves looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

Éistigí, Fir na dtrí náisiún.
Éistigí, le glór na hadhairc ag caoineadh san goath.
Ag teácht as an oiche.

Tá sí ag teacht.
Tá an Banrion ag teacht.
Sé na deonaigh, le gruaig agus súil in bhfiainne,
Ag leanúint lucht mhóir an Bhanríon.

It looked like the sheerest gibberish. At the same time, there was something . . . civilized—was that the word?—in its appearance. The words bore all manner of strange accents and looked like no language with which Grey was familiar, and yet the text was punctuated in what seemed a logical fashion. It was laid out upon the page in the style of verse, with evident stanzas and what certainly looked like a repeated refrain—perhaps it was the text of a song?

"Have you ever seen anything like that before?" he asked Hal. His brother shook his head, still frowning.

"No. It looks vaguely as though someone had made an effort to transliterate Greek, using the Roman alphabet—but the words certainly aren't Greek."

"Nor Hebrew," Grey said, peering at the first line. "Russian, perhaps? Turkish?"

"Perhaps," Hal said dubiously. "But why, for God's sake?"

Grey ran through in his mind what he knew of Carruthers's career but turned up no particular connections with exotic languages. Neither had Charlie ever struck him as being remarkably

well educated; he was always getting into a muddle over his bills when Grey first knew him, through simple inability to add, and his French was fluent but uncouth.

"Everything else in the packet pertains to Siverly and his misdeeds. So logically this must, too."

"Was Carruthers particularly logical?" Hal eyed the stack of papers. "He's legible, I'll give him that. You knew him a great deal better than I, though—what d'you think?"

Grey thought a lot of things, most of which he didn't intend to speak out loud. He had known Charlie Carruthers fairly well—in the Biblical sense, among others—though for only a short time and that time, more than ten years ago. Their meeting in Canada the year before had been brief—but Charlie had known Grey very well, too. He'd known who to trust with his inflammatory legacy.

"Not particularly logical, no," he answered slowly. "Rather determined, though. Once he'd made up his mind to something, he'd see it through."

And he nearly had. In spite of a failing heart, Carruthers had clung to life stubbornly, compiling this damning mass of testimony, determined to bring Major Gerald Siverly to justice.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice," he had whispered in John's ear, during their last meeting. Grey picked up the little stack of papers and shuffled them neatly into order, smelling in memory the scent of that attic room in Gareon, near Quebec. Pine boards, hot with a stifling turpentine perfume. Soured milk and the moldy sweetness of mouse droppings. The scent of Charlie's skin, sweating with heat and with illness. The touch of his deformed hand on Grey's face, a light touch but strong with the force of memory.

"I hunger, John," he'd said, his breath heavy with approaching death. "And you thirst. You won't fail me."

Grey didn't intend to. With slow deliberation, he tapped the papers on the table, squaring them, and set them neatly down.

"Is there enough here, do you think?" he asked his brother. Enough to cause a general court-martial to be called, he meant—enough to convict Siverly of corruption, of abuse of his office. Of misconduct amounting to the murder of his own men. Siverly did not belong to Hal's regiment, but he did belong to the army to which Hal—and Grey himself, come to that—had given most of their lives.

"More than enough," Hal said, rubbing a hand over his chin. It was late in the day; the bristles of his beard made a tiny rasping sound. "If the witnesses can be found. If they'll speak." He spoke abstractedly, though, still puzzling over the mysterious sheet.

Do chuir siad na Róisíní Bhán ar an bealach go bua.
Agus iad toilteannach agus buail le híobáirt an teannta ifrinn.
Iad ag leanúint le bealach glór an Bhanríon.

"Do choo-ir see-ad na Royseence . . ." he read aloud, slowly. "Is it a cipher, do you suppose? Or a code?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes, there is," Hal said absently. He held it up to the light from the window, presumably to see if anything showed through, then bent and held it over the fire.

Grey stopped his involuntary move to snatch the paper; there were ways of doing secret writing, and most of those showed up with heat. Though why one would add an overtly mysterious code to a paper with hidden writing, thus drawing attention to it . . .

The paper was beginning to scorch and curl at the edges, but

nothing was showing up save the original words, cryptic as ever. Hal pulled it back and dropped it smoking on the desk, shaking his fingers.

"For what the observation is worth," Grey said, gingerly picking up the hot sheet, "I don't see why Carruthers would trouble himself with encoding this particular document. Given the rest of it, I mean."

Hal compressed his lips but nodded. "The rest of it" included specific denunciations of a number of men—some of them powerful—who had been involved in Siverly's defalcations. If Carruthers trusted Grey to handle such incendiary stuff, what might he have balked at?

"Besides, Charlie knew he was dying," Grey said more quietly. He laid the sheet on top of the others and again began to tidy them into a square. "He left this packet addressed to me. He expected me to use it. Why would he have tried to conceal some part of the information from me?"

Hal shrugged, acknowledging the argument.

"Then why is it here? Included by mistake?" Even as he suggested this, he was shaking his head. The packet itself had been meticulously assembled, with documents in chronological order. Some of the papers were Carruthers's own testimony; some were statements signed by other witnesses; some were original army documents—or perhaps copies made by a clerk. It was impossible to tell, unless the original had borne a stamp. The whole bundle spoke of care, precision—and the passion that had driven Carruthers past his own weakness in order to accomplish Siverly's destruction.

"It is Carruthers's hand?" Unable to let a puzzle alone, Hal reached out and took the sheet of gibberish from the top of the stack.

"Yes," Grey said, though that much was obvious. Carruthers wrote a clear, slanted hand, with oddly curled tails on the descending letters. He came to look over Hal's shoulder, trying to see if the paper provided any clue they could have missed.

"It's laid out like verse," he observed, and, with the observation, something fluttered uneasily at the back of his mind. But what? He tried to catch a glimpse of it, but the thought skittered away like a spider under a stone.

"Yes." Hal drew a finger down the page, slowly. "But look at how these words are repeated. I think it might be a cipher, after all—if that were the case, you might be picking a different set of letters out of each line, even though the lines look much the same in themselves." He straightened up, shaking his head. "I don't know. It could be a cipher that Carruthers stumbled onto in Siverly's papers but to which he hadn't the key—and so he merely copied it and passed it on in hopes that you might discover the key yourself."

"That makes some sense." John rocked back on his heels, narrowing his eyes at his brother. "How do you come to know so much about ciphers and secret writings?"

Hal hesitated, but then smiled. Hal smiled rarely, but it transformed his face when he did.

"Minnie," he said.

"What?" Grey said, uncomprehending. His sister-in-law was a kind, pretty woman, who managed his difficult brother with great aplomb, but what—

"My secret weapon," Hal admitted, still smiling at whatever thought amused him. "Her father was Raphael Wattiswade."

"I've never heard of Raphael Wattiswade."

"You weren't meant to," his brother assured him, "and neither was anyone else. Wattiswade was a dealer in rare books—traveled

to and from the Continent regularly, under the name Andrew Rennie. He was also a dealer in intelligence. A spymaster . . . who had no sons."

Grey looked at his brother for a moment.

"Tell me," he begged, "that her father did not employ Minnie as a spy."

"He did, the scrofulous old bugger," Hal replied briefly. "I caught her in my study one night during a party, magicking the locked drawer of my desk. That's how I met her."

Grey didn't bother asking what had been in the drawer. He smiled himself and picked up the decanter of sherry from the tea tray, unstoppering it.

"I gather you did not immediately have her arrested and taken before a magistrate?"

Hal took a sherry glass and held it out.

"No. I had her on the hearth rug."

The decanter slipped from Grey's fingers, and he caught it again by pure luck, splashing only a little.

"Did you, indeed?" he managed.

"Give me that, butterfingers." Hal took the decanter from him, and poured carefully, eyes fixed on the rising amber liquid. "And, yes, I did."

Grey wondered, reeling, whether Minnie had been a virgin and decided instantly not to ask.

"Then I put her into a coach, made her tell me her address, and said I would call on her in the morning, to ask after her welfare," Hal said offhandedly, and passed John a glass. "Here. Hang on to it this time. You look as though you need it."

He did, and drank off the sherry—which wasn't bad—in a couple of gulps.

"She didn't . . . actually give you her address, did she?" he

asked, and cleared his throat, trying not to glance at the hearth rug. It had been there for years and years, a very worn small carpet with the family crest woven into it, much pocked with burn marks and the edge of it scorched. He thought it had been a wedding present from Hal's first wife, Esmé, to her husband.

Hal laughed.

"No, of course not. Neither did she tell it to the coachman—persuaded him to let her out at Kettrick's Eel-Pye House, then legged it down the alley and disappeared. Took me nearly six months to find her."

Hal disposed of his own sherry with dispatch, then plucked the questionable sheet off the desk again.

"Let me show her this. She's not had much opportunity to practice of late, but she might be able at least to tell us if it is encoded."

Left alone with the decanter and the hearth rug, Grey poured another drink and went back to the balcony. The garden was quiet now; the sky had clouded over and the boys had gone in for their tea—he could hear them rumpusing in the nursery overhead. Dottie and her nurse were both sound asleep on the grass by the fish pool, Dottie's gown still firmly in the nurse's grasp.

He wasn't quite sure whether Hal's story had shocked him or not. Hal made his own rules; John had long been aware of that. And if he'd temporarily had the upper hand of Minerva Wattiswade, he'd long since lost it—Hal himself knew that.

He glanced up at the ceiling, the recipient of a loud crash as a chair was overturned, shrill voices rising in the aftermath. How old was his nephew Benjamin? He glanced at the hearth rug. He'd been abroad when Benjamin was born, but his mother had written to apprise him of the event—he remembered reading the letter in a tent, with rain pattering on the canvas overhead. He'd

lost three men the day before and was suffering some depression of spirit; news of the child's birth had comforted him.

He imagined it had comforted Hal, too. Grey had learned—recently, and quite by accident—that Hal's first wife, Esmé, who had died in childbirth and the child with her, had been seduced by one of Hal's friends, Nathaniel Twelvetrees, and that Hal had subsequently killed Twelvetrees in a duel. He thought that his brother had likely been quite insane at the time. How long after that had he met Minnie?

A flash of white showed at the door of the conservatory, on the far side of the garden. Minnie herself, and he drew back instinctively, though she couldn't see him. She looked up calculatingly at the sky, then glanced at the house. It wasn't raining yet, though, and she went back into the conservatory. A moment later, Hal appeared from the kitchen door and went in after her, paper in hand.

He was deeply startled at what Hal had told him—but not, on consideration, all that surprised that Hal *had* told him. His brother was secretive and self-controlled to a fault, but a tight-closed kettle will spurt steam when it reaches the boiling point. To Grey's knowledge, Hal had only three people in whom he would confide—his own mother not being among them.

The three were Grey himself, Harry Quarry—one of the regimental colonels—and Minnie.

So what, he wondered, was presently boiling under Hal? Something to do with Minnie? But Grey had spoken to her when he came in, and she'd given no indication that anything was wrong.

A spatter of rain on the window and shrieks from below made him look; a sudden shower had floated over the garden, and the nursemaid was dashing for the house, Dottie crowing in delight

at the raindrops and waving her arms. He put his head out, to feel the rain himself, and smiled at the fragrant freshness of the air and the splash of rain on his skin. He closed his eyes, abandoning all thought, speculation, and worry in the momentary pleasure of breathing.

"What the devil are you doing, John?"

He withdrew his head reluctantly, drew the window to, and blinked water from his lashes. Hal was staring at him in disapproval, page in hand. There was a dark pink camellia in his buttonhole, leaning drunkenly.

"Enjoying the rain." He wiped a hand over his face and shook himself a little; his hair was damp, as was his collar and the shoulders of his coat. "Was Minnie able to be of help?"

"Yes." Hal sounded surprised at the admission. "She says it's neither a code nor a cipher."

"That's helpful? What is it, if it's neither code nor cipher?"

"She says it's Erse."



ERSE. THE WORD GAVE Grey a very odd sensation. Erse was what folk spoke in the Scottish Highlands. It sounded like no other language he'd ever heard—and, barbarous as it was, he was rather surprised to learn that it existed in a written form.

Hal was looking at him speculatively. "You must have heard it fairly often, at Ardsmuir?"

"Heard it, yes. Almost all the prisoners spoke it." Grey had been governor of Ardsmuir prison for a brief period; as much exile as appointment, in the wake of a near scandal. He disliked thinking about that period of his life, for assorted reasons.

"Did Fraser speak it?"

Oh, God, Grey thought. *Not that. Anything but that.*

"Yes," he said, though. He had often overheard James Fraser speaking in his native tongue to the other prisoners, the words mysterious and flowing.

"When did you see him last?"

"Not for some time." Grey spoke briefly, his voice careful. He hadn't spoken to the man in more than a year.

Not careful enough; Hal came round in front of him, examining him at close range, as though he might be an unusual sort of Chinese jug.

"He is still at Helwater, is he not? Will you go and ask him about Siverly?" Hal said mildly.

"No."

"No?"

"I would not piss on him was he burning in the flames of hell," Grey said politely.

One of Hal's brows flicked upward, but only momentarily.

"Just so," he said dryly. "The question, though, is whether Fraser might be inclined to perform a similar service for you."

Grey placed his cup carefully in the center of the desk.

"Only if he thought I might drown," he said, and went out.