

# **SECRETS OF THE WIND**

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

## Chapter One

Major Chastain Neff was tired, hungry and covered with a thick layer of mud. She was hunkered down beside a dead body watching a fourth-class medical examiner's mate doing his thing. The sight of the yawning body cavity where once a chest had been didn't faze Neff, but the smell of burnt flesh from the phosphorus blast that had taken out that chest made her a bit queasy.

"Is he Storian?" she asked.

"Well," the fourth-class med ex drawled, "I don't see any markings to say he was, but until I get him back to the shop, I won't know for sure."

"Sure as hell fought like one," Chastain remarked. She ran the back of her dirty forearm under her chin to catch the drop of sweat that had been hanging there precariously.

"He stinks like one," Chastain's immediate superior Colonel Brock commented.

Chastain got wearily to her feet. "How's the target doing?"

Brock looked around. "Still puking," he replied with a snort. "I don't think he's accustomed to someone getting ventilated."

"That's understandable."

"By the way, the general would like to see you," Brock told Chastain.

Chas frowned. "Don't tell me he's got another assignment for me this quick," she said and winced at the whine of complaint she could hear in her voice.

"We're down two operatives," Brock reminded her. "We do what we have to, Neff."

Sighing heavily, Chas hung her head. Her hands were on her hips as she shook her head. "I am due for leave, Colonel. I *need* some leave."

"Everyone is overworked, Neff," Brock reprimanded her. "I'm sure the general will give you extra time off after the next one."

Knowing it would do her no good to argue, Chastain lifted her head. She looked over at the target for a long moment then walked over to where he was sitting.

"Can we get you anything else, Councilman Jost?" a med-tech asked the shivering man as Chastain joined them.

Councilman Jost pulled the thick wool blanket tighter around his shoulders and could barely speak for his teeth were clicking together. "N-no. I'll b-be all right." He glanced up at Chastain. "Thank you, Major. If it hadn't been for you..."

"There's no need to thank me, Sir," Chas told him. "I'm just glad everything turned out okay."

"If I hadn't hired you to protect me, if you hadn't been with m-me..."

"Another Guardian would have been, Sir," Chas cut him off. She could tell the man was going into shock and caught the eye of the med-tech.

"He was going to kill me, wasn't he?" the councilman asked, his teeth chattering.

"Aye, Sir, he was. He would have taken your money then he would have taken your life. You were wise to get us involved in this extortion plot, Sir."

"Let's get you to the clinic, Councilman Jost," the med-tech suggested. "We've put in a call to your family and they'll join us there."

Chas stepped aside as the med-tech helped the councilman to his feet. She nodded at his grateful look and gave him a tired smile. "Take care, Sir," she said as the shivering man was led away.

"Go get cleaned up and get something to eat, Neff," Colonel Brock ordered. "I'll let the general know you'll be in his office first thing this afternoon."

"Aye, Sir," Chas replied.

Walking back to the runabout in which she had brought Councilman Jost to the place where he had been meant to die, Chas felt a brief respite from the bodily aches and pains she knew would be ten times worse when she turned in that night. She always felt a rush of healing adrenalin course through her body when she'd performed her job well and the target lived.

The Storian—if indeed the assassin had been of that nationality—had fought well. He had gotten in a few lucky punches and even one well-timed kick before going for his phospho firearm. That he might have had the weapon turned on him, and his massive chest blown apart in the ensuing struggle, had more than likely never occurred to him. Then again, he had not counted on his opponent being a Riezell Guardian, either.

Going through the start-up procedures without thinking much about it, Chas settled back in the form-fitting command chair as the mighty engine roared to life. She sat there feeling the runabout vibrating beneath her rump and smiled at the nearly silent power encased in the titanium hull.

The runabout belonged entirely to Chas. It had been awarded to her a year earlier by a grateful target and his family. Top of the line, state-of-the-art, the runabout was one of the most sought-after models at Tappa Industries. Only a handful of high-ranking officials within the Riezell Conclave could afford a Fiach model runabout. Not even General Siri, head of Fleet Command, had such a sweet machine at his disposal, for the retail price of the craft was upwards of one-point-five million credits.

Buckling herself in the command chair, Chas tightened the safety harness, took a look at the proximity screen to make sure no unsuspecting body happened to be within range of the propulsion tubes and engaged the throttle to twenty percent. Beneath her, the runabout lifted with a wash of thick white clay dust spiraling up from beneath the sleek black matte belly of the craft.

Those at the crime scene shielded their eyes as the runabout climbed fifty feet into the late-morning sun, nosed to starboard—the propulsion engine heat pointed away from any humans on the ground—then took off like a rock from a slingshot.

“That’s one awesome piece of work,” the fourth-class med ex said with a sigh.

Colonel Brock nodded as the runabout disappeared from view. “Aye,” he replied. “She is, and one of our best operatives. If I needed protection, Chastain Neff would be the RG I’d want assigned to my ass.”

It was obvious the med ex had been commenting on the expensive piece of machinery that was transporting the Riezell Guardian, but he made no comment to the colonel’s remark. Everyone there knew how the colonel felt about his operative.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bath had cleansed away the dirt and a twenty-minute power nap had cleared away the fog that had permeated Chas’ tired brain. After a bowl of high-protein chips and an energy shake, she dressed in the silver-gray uniform with its bright copper anchor insignia on the shirt collar that marked her as a Principle Riezell Guardian. Checking one last time to make sure she was properly attired, she left her quarters and took the elevator to the eighteenth floor of Command Central.

The guards at the door to the general’s complex snapped to attention as she passed, the bases of their phospho lances thumping in unison upon the polished marble floor.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Chas said as she entered the door they were securing. Immediately, the guards shifted their legs apart in parade rest.

“He’s expecting you, Major,” the general’s secretary told Chas.

“Any news yet?” Chas inquired.

The secretary shook her head. “No, Ma’am. Not yet.”

“No news is good news or so they say,” Chas reminded the young woman.

“So they say,” the secretary echoed.

“I’ll light a candle for his safe return.”

Miriam Quillan smiled. “Thank you, Major. I appreciate it.”

Chas tapped twice with the back of her index finger knuckle upon the wall beside the general’s open door and smiled as she entered the man’s office. “You wanted to see me, Sir?” she inquired.

“Aye,” the great man answered. “Close the door, Major.”

Chas’ left eyebrow arched upward at the order but she made no comment as she did as she was told. When she turned around, the general told her to take a seat.

“They’ve found him?” she asked softly as she sat.

“About half an hour ago,” the general replied. “At least what was left of him. I just haven’t had the heart to tell her.”

Chas felt a tug at her heartstrings, and she asked if the general would like her to inform Miriam that her husband of less than a year would not be returning.

"No, I'll tell her," the general said. "I just have to find a gentle way in which to do it."

"This internecine war has destroyed many a life, hasn't it, Sir?"

"Too many, Major. Far too many."

There was a long moment of silence then the general leaned back in his chair. "I was very pleased to hear the Jost situation has been successfully resolved. Good work, Chastain."

"Thank you, Sir. I wish we could have taken the Storian captive, but one less rebel assassin is better than nothing."

"It is definite, then? He was Storian?"

"I had a message on my Vid-Mem when I returned to my quarters. He had the mark on the sole of his left foot."

The general winced. "A primary," he noted. "Thank the Goddess you were able to take him out."

"He could have given us much-needed information had I been able to capture him alive, but he didn't give me any choice," Chas confessed.

"Well, at least you survived the contact." He eyed her carefully. "A few bruises and a scrape or two seems to be the extent of your injuries."

"I was lucky," Chas maintained.

The general waved away her modesty. "Luck had nothing to do with it, Major. You are good at what you do."

Chastain smiled, the compliment being one that was rarely extended to an RG. "I take it you have a new mission for me?"

A dark scowl spread over the general's face. "One demanded of us by the Caitliceachs."

Chas' eyes widened and General Alphon Morrison grinned mirthlessly. "Surprises you too, eh? I never thought the Council of Cosaint would ask for our help, did you?"

"No, Sir. Never in a millennia," Chas said slowly. "What do they want us to do?"

"Keep the heir-apparent from being assassinated," the general said.

Chas frowned. "That's Prince Ruan, isn't it?"

"The one and the same," her superior officer replied.

"Don't they call him the Wraith?"

"Aye, he is high up in the Order of Taibhse. Supposedly, he is one helluva warrior and if his documented kills are any indication, I can see where he's earned his nickname."

The frown on Chas' face deepened. "I am Protastnúach so I have never understood the Caitliceachs, Sir. The whole idea of a race of people governed by a ruling family is

anathema to the way I was brought up. Anything that smacks of kingship and all that folderol just irks me," Chas remarked.

"It bothers me too, so I wasn't keen on the idea of us providing protection for one of King Declan Cosaint's brats."

"Then why are we?"

"Orders came directly from the Tribunal to us, Major. We didn't have any say in the matter. Despite our differences, the Caitliceachs are our allies."

"His people can't protect the heir-apparent?"

"Not as sufficiently as they would like. He's a handful, I hear."

"Aye, well, from what I've heard of Prince Ruan, he won't appreciate us providing protection for him. Isn't that what his surname means? Protection?"

"Aye, but protection of his people, not of himself," the general explained. "I'm told he tends to be rather careless of his own safety and his mother nudged the king into having their son placed under safeguard."

"Nevertheless, he might balk at me shadowing him."

General Morrison leaned forward and braced his elbows on his desk. "That's why he isn't to know who or what you are, Major."

Chas' eyebrows drew toward one another. "I'm not to tell him I'm an RG?"

"By all means, no, you aren't!" the general exclaimed. "The king's attaché was adamant about that."

"Then how in the blue blazes am I to protect him?"

"Stealth, my dear Major," the general said with a chuckle. "By using stealth!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The prisoner slumped against the heavy chains weighing down his arms. It was hard for him to sign his name on the paper that had been thrust under his nose, but he would have done anything for a chance to have his life sentence put aside.

"The policy to grant clemency to prisoners capable of defeating one of our Riezell Guardians came from the governor himself. He thought it would be a good way to keep the RG on their toes if they knew assassins might be out there after their hides. You understand that you might die?" the warden inquired.

Shrugging as he let the quill drop from his fingers, the prisoner straightened as best he could. "You won't put me back in prison if I succeed will you?" he asked.

The warden snorted. "The chances of you taking out a Riezell Guardian are very unlikely but as long as you realize that going into the situation, that's all that matters."

"I've never been bested by a damned female and I'm not likely to start now," the prisoner boasted. He shook his wrists as the fetters were removed and contemplated strangling the guard who had squatted down to unlock the prisoner's ankle restraints. But the look on the warden's face and the scowling disapproval on the faces of the other

five guards standing watch nearby was a very good deterrent for the prisoner not to act upon his natural proclivity.

"You'll be given a new set of clothing, identity papers and a weapon of your choice," the warden said. "Until you make contact with Major Neff, you will be required to wear the tracking device being applied now."

The prisoner glared down at the guard who had removed the shackles from his legs only to slip a tracking anklet in place before he got to his feet. The anklet was tight against his skin and he could feel a slight vibration from the transmitter.

"If you manage to take out Major Neff, the anklet will be removed, and you will be allowed to meld into the crowd and go your way," the warden reminded the prisoner.

"And not have you hunting me, right?"

"That's correct. You will be a free man," the warden agreed. "Until you commit your next crime and end up right back here."

"Won't happen," the prisoner protested.

"We'll see."

\* \* \* \* \*

"The heir-apparent, huh?" Colonel Daniel Brock questioned as he scored the remainder of the thick steak on his trencher. "That should make an interesting assignment."

"I've learned a lot about Ruan Cosaint since this afternoon," Chas said. "I'm not sure interesting is the right word."

"He's a bad-ass," Daniel remarked. "Met him once."

Chas looked up from her trencher. "When was this?"

"Right after the war started. I was sent to Sciath to deliver a message from the Tribunal to King Declan." He stabbed a chunk of steak and popped it into his mouth, speaking around the obstruction. "I remember thinking it was the most beautiful palace I'd ever seen."

"Beautiful or not, I was looking forward to a little R & R," Chas pouted.

Daniel took a swallow of his Francach brandy. "When this assignment is over, I'll book a passage to that little *an Ghréig* island that you like so well. We can just lie around on the beach and soak up the old rays then take a dip in those beautiful turquoise waters. How's that?"

"It sounds heavenly," Chas admitted. "To just laze around with nothing to do in paradise..." She sighed.

Daniel took up his napkin and blotted his lips then neatly folded the linen and tucked it beneath the edge of his trencher. "Ready for dessert?" he inquired.

"I don't think I could eat another thing," she replied, repeating his action.

"Well, I'm still starving but it isn't for food," he told her quietly.

For the last four years, she and Daniel Brock had been lovers. It was an easy situation for the both of them since it involved little other than the satisfaction of physical needs. Neither had any desire for permanent bonds or joining or making their relationship mutually exclusive. Daniel took his pleasures where he would, and she made sure her options were always open.

"I might have room for something salty," she said with a grin.

Daniel got up from the table, walked to her and held her chair as she rose. Taking her hand, he led her to the shadowy confines of his bachelor sleeping room, turning her to face him so he could slowly undo the buttons of her blouse.

"I have been waiting all day for this," he said in a smoky voice. His fingers were sure on the pearl buttons, his knuckles grazing her breasts as he worked his way down the bodice.

"Be gentle with me, Danny. I am starting to feel that Storian's love taps," she said as he pulled the tail of her blouse from her skirt.

"It'll be worse tomorrow and tomorrow night," he warned as he slid his hands along her rib cage and pulled her to him, flattening her lace-covered breasts against his chest. He bent his head to nuzzle her neck.

Chas had always enjoyed the foreplay Daniel instigated, though it was always the same each time. The man was very good at foreplay. He had an iron will, it seemed, and could go for an hour merely teasing and stroking her before feeling the need to stretch out atop her and take her in his slow, lazy way. Sometimes his restraint tried her nerves and she'd have much preferred for him to ravage her like a barbarian, but tonight she was glad for his self-control.

"You smell wonderful," he said, lapping at the tendon along the side of her neck as his hands smoothed up and down her back under the blouse.

"It's the gardenia perfume you brought back from *an Domhan* your last time out."

"I'll buy you a keg of it next time. I love the scent."

He eased her back from him and slipped the blouse from her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor behind her. Turning his right hand so the fingernails were against the hollow of her throat, he ran them down to the front closure of her bra and with practiced ease, flicked the hook apart with his index finger and thumb. As the garment separated, he hooked both hands in the straps and eased it from her body.

Chas had always been proud of her large breasts. They fit snugly in Daniel's large hands and the prominence of her rosy nipples scraped along his palm as he gently massaged the ivory globes.

"You have the most beautiful breasts of any woman I know," Daniel said a moment before he lowered his mouth to the turgid points.

Their lovemaking was slow—almost choreographed—and while enjoyable, Chas could never call it spontaneous or exciting. There was never any deviation from one

bout of sex to the next. She could almost count the exact steps that led to Daniel's oversized bed.

Unbutton the blouse, nibble the neck, remove the blouse.

Remove the bra, nibble the nipples then run the tongue over them.

Continue lathing the nipples, squeezing the breasts before sliding a hand down to the waistband of her skirt or slacks and cupping her sex through the fabric.

From there things heated up a bit, but they still went entirely too slow and too methodical to be anything other than pleasantly enjoyable. There was never any wild passion to claim either of them. There were no squeals of unbridled fulfillment or bellows of satisfied lust.

As he removed her skirt and panties, she threaded her fingers through his thick salt-and-pepper hair and held on as he went to his knees to worship at the juncture of her thighs.

Breathe lightly against the pubes and flick the tongue to the clitoris.

Part the lips with sure fingers and run the tongue along the folds, ending with a soft suckle at the core of her pleasure.

Insinuate a finger into her rectum, and pull her closer so his warm mouth could latch onto her sex like a giant leech.

That particular visualization never failed to bother Chas. She would squirm as the notion entered her head, and could have sworn she felt slimy *down there*. While his ministrations were highly pleasurable and always culminated in her being hot and ready to be impaled on his stiff cock, the routine of the lovemaking, the predictability of it, no longer brought the enjoyment it once did.

Lying beneath Daniel as he slipped into her, she stared up at the ceiling and tried to imagine being plundered by a brazen corsair from the barbaric coast of *an Tuirc*. She envisioned herself aboard that pirate's fast caramusal, its four sails snapping in the wind, eluding the blazing guns of the patrol boats as he carried her farther away from her home and deep along the wild shores of his. His hard body weighing hers down upon his bunk, his slick, hot cock buried deep in the honeyed folds of her cunt, he would ride her, ravaging her exquisitely until she would release a scream of sheer delight as their sweating bodies climaxed together. Thrilled by the howl of possessiveness that roared from his throat as he marked her his own, she would know true fulfillment.

"I love you, Chas."

Daniel's voice brought Chas back from the misty, foggy barbaric lands to the same old, same old trickle of pleasure that invaded her body as she came. It was a ho-hum release but it helped to soothe her aching body and as Daniel settled down beside her, his back to her, his snoring almost automatic as sleep claimed him, Chas lay awake and stared at the ceiling.

To fantasize of a bold pirate who could take her far beyond herself.

## Chapter Two

Ruan Cosaint was scowling darkly as he stood in the open-air market at Gaillimh Bay. The sounds of the merchants hawking their wares had given him a brutal headache while the smell of animal feces from the pens caused hot bile to rise up in his gullet. He ignored the lovely woman standing beside him as she prattled on about this rug or that bolt of material, having stopped at numerous stalls to inspect the garish merchandise from time to time.

"Don't you think this velvet brings out the blue in our eyes, Ruan?"

"If you say so," he said through clenched teeth. The phrase had become a mantra to him over the course of the last three hours he had been forced to traipse alongside the latest simpering candidate his mother had foisted off on him.

"Just last week, I added several gowns in a variety of blue colors to my dowry, but none of them are this rich a hue," she continued, oblivious to his answer. "Don't you love the way the material shimmers beneath the sunlight?"

Ruan growled his answer and dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand. He'd like nothing better than to throw the bitch down, hoist up her skirts, fuck the hell out of her then get up and walk away. He had a feeling she would keep up a running commentary throughout the rape and never miss a beat. The thought made him grin savagely.

"I also have several silk scarves that would make a lovely sash for any gown made from this material. I will take eight yards, Citizen," she demanded of the merchant.

"Don't you think you've made enough purchases for one day?" Ruan snapped.

"Only a few more stops," she said and moved on, not bothering to see if he was following. She twirled the white lace parasol she carried to shade her from the hot Gaelachuan sun.

Rolling his eyes skyward, Ruan fell into step behind her and glared at the shapely bottom swinging from side to side in front of him. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his britches, his shoulders hunched with annoyance and his eyes narrowed. He was as miserable as he could ever remember being, and his only desire was to either hit or kill something, or ravage the nearest willing body. He wasn't particular which he did first.

Although of late, his conquests—entirely too numerous and all too predictable—had left him with a need he could not identify. It wasn't satiation, for all his partners managed to drain his cock. It was his soul that needed draining and not a one of the willing maids or horny ladies-in-waiting at his mother's court had been able to do that for many years. Not since he had been a randy fifteen year old had he known the kind

of fulfillment he desired. If only he could find a woman who would reawaken the juices that flowed through his hard body...

It wasn't the scream cut-off in mid-vibrato that alerted Ruan to possible danger. The scream had been low enough to be ignored by most of the shoppers around him. It had been just loud enough to make the Gaelachuan prince turn and look to his right. What garnered his immediate attention was the flash of a blade in the morning light as it struck downward in the deep shadows of the alley beyond.

"I believe I like this corduroy much better for the settee. Don't you, Ruan?" Lady Siobhan Prentice-Hall inquired as she fingered the rich, nubby burgundy of the material. When no answer met her query, she turned to see the man she considered her soon-to-be-betrothed walking away, his back to her.

"Ruan?" she called out, standing on her tiptoes to try to see around the broad shoulders of the guards left behind to protect her. "Ruan, where are you going?"

Once more, the flash of deadly steel attracted Ruan's interest and the sound of scuffling in the alley made him increase his step. His hand went to the hilt of the razor sword strapped to his hip, and he closed his fingers around the grip.

From the corner of her eye, Chastain Neff saw a man hurrying toward them. From the Vid-Photo she'd downloaded that morning, she recognized him as being the heir-apparent to the Gaelachuan throne and moved back farther into the alley. The man hired to try to take her out was advancing, thick boning knife raised over his head.

"I'm going to gut you, bitch!" the man who had recently been released from the Riezell prison snarled. He slashed downward once more with the large knife.

"No. All you're going to do is go to hell," Chas said softly.

Though she had no weapon, Chas knew she didn't need one to protect herself against the threat of the prisoner advancing on her. Her hands were registered as lethal weapons with the Fleet Command and she knew her feet to be nearly as quick—and deadly—as her hands. There was no doubt of the outcome of the attack coming her way.

"I ain't going back," the prisoner snarled, and stabbed once more with the boning knife. He was hacking at the air, driving the blade downward with strokes meant to terrify his intended victim. "I've had enough prison life to last me."

"You've got that half-right. You have had enough life, that's for sure," Chas told him. Although she disapproved of Command's policy of giving a prisoner a chance to have his sentence put aside if he could take out a RG, she knew it wasn't ever going to happen. No criminal alive was as well trained as a Riezell Guardian. The outcome was never in doubt.

One moment Chas was pressed to the rough wooden wall of a building and the next, she was staring wide-eyed at the headless corpse tumbling toward her. So quick had been the blade that had lopped the attacker's head from his body, she had not seen it slice through flesh, tendon, cartilage and bone. No blood spurted from the deadly

wound for the weapon that had taken the prisoner's head had seared the arteries and veins upon contact.

*The swords wielded by members of the Order of Taibhse are razor-thin. The blade of that weapon is so thin and so sharp it cannot be seen by the naked eye. Upon contact with living matter, an electrical current is generated and the edge of the blade will cauterize nerve endings and blood vessels instantly. We're talking bloodless killing here,* one of her instructors at the Academy had lectured.

As the body collapsed at her feet, Chas moved aside.

"Are you all right?"

It was a deep, husky voice that asked and it was strong, powerful hands that closed around her upper arms. The charge from that contact went all the way down her arm and spiraled into her belly, eliciting an unexpected gasp as he dragged her toward him. She felt as though she were drowning, being dragged down into a lightless, limitless maelstrom and she tried to jerk out of his grip only to be pulled up against a chest as solid as granite.

"Did he hurt you, lass?" that deep voice demanded, and when Chas did not answer, those powerful hands shook her lightly. "Listen to me – are you hurt?"

Chas looked up into dark blue eyes that seemed to be delving into her very soul. The closeness of the man's hard body, the uncanny electrical current passing from his palms to the nether regions of her body, an intoxicating smell of leather and cinnamon overpowered her and she sagged in his hands, unable to assimilate logically the sensations bombarding her.

Before she could protest, her would-be rescuer released his hold on her and swept her into his arms, holding her against him as though she were a child.

"Honestly, Your Grace!" The querulous inquiry was high-pitched and filled with annoyance. "Please do not run off like that. You know your mother..."

"Get the hell out of my way, Lincoln," Ruan snarled and swung around so that Chas' feet hit whoever had been speaking and knocked the speaker aside.

Chas had no choice but to put her arms around Prince Ruan's neck. His long-legged stride was churning up distance as he carried her along. All she could see was the underside of his lean jaw and was surprised to see a white anger line tight against his tanned flesh.

"Your Grace, really!" Lincoln protested. "Must you be so rough?"

"You ain't seen rough, yet, Lincoln," Ruan muttered.

Hurrying alongside the man he had been ordered to stay as close to as the Prince would allow, Lincoln ducked his head and tried to get a look at the woman in the Prince's arms. "Are you all right, milady?" he asked.

"I believe so," Chas replied.

Ruan carried her out into the bright sunlight and yelled at a merchant to vacate the upholstered bench upon which he had perched his enormous butt. The merchant

struggled to his feet—helped by two of Ruan’s personal guards—and stood fanning himself excitedly with a palm-frond fan.

Laid gently upon the thickly padded horsehair bench, Chas felt anew all the aches and pains she had developed from her last assignment. Unconsciously, she moaned as the strong arms were withdrawn from under her knees and shoulders.

“You are hurt,” Ruan said, and before she could deny the statement, he was examining her arms.

“No, Your Grace. I’m just sore, that’s all,” she assured him.

He had hold of her hand and that strange tingling sensation was traveling up her arm and into her breasts, the peaks of which were straining against the fabric of her velvet gown.

“Why was he trying to kill you, lass?” Ruan asked, his sapphire-blue eyes locked on hers.

She stared up into a face she had long heard was the most handsome in the galaxy and added her own vote to that assessment. The man bent over her had the face of a god. A thick mane of midnight-black hair framed a swarthy complexion, the color of which set off a truly remarkable blue gaze.

“Enlil?” she asked and winced, wondering where the hell that had come from.

“Who?” Ruan queried.

Chas shook her head. “Black Gaelachuan,” she whispered and could have kicked herself if she hadn’t been lying flat on her back, her hand possessively held in his.

The right side of Ruan Cosaint’s mouth lifted slightly. “Aye, that I am, lass. You are from Bhreatain?”

“Meiriceánach,” she corrected, and watched his left eyebrow crook apparently with surprise.

“Meiriceánach? I like that answer better than Bhreatain,” he quipped. “What are you doing at Gaillimh Bay?”

“I am to be Lord Hurlburt’s new secretary. I stopped by the market to purchase my lunch and that is when that man...” She trailed off, turning her head away. “He said he was going to...”

Ruan tightened his hold on her hand and reached out to grip her chin and turn her face toward him. He wanted to groan when he saw the tears in her striking green eyes. “Try not to think about it, lass. Just put it behind you. You’re safe now.”

“Ruan! Whatever are you doing with that wench?”

Chas watched the handsome face hovering above her turn dark with anger. The finely chiseled lips hardened into a thin, uncompromising straight line and the warm blue eyes became as bright and brittle as shards of ice. When he turned to face the woman who had spoken, she could see a muscle working in his lean jaw.

“Have you finished your shopping, Maeve?”

Chas saw the woman stiffen and had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at the affronted expression on the dark-haired woman's pretty face.

"My name is Siobhan," she said, her chin going in the air.

"Whatever," Ruan said. "If you've finished, Lincoln will take you back to the keep."

Lady Siobhan Prentice-Hall's eyes widened. "You will not be taking me back to Sciath yourself?" she questioned in a disbelieving tone.

"No, I won't be," Ruan replied.

"Well, I never!" Siobhan stated and spun on her heel to flounce away.

Alistair Lincoln sighed deeply and hurried after the woman. "Stay right with him!" he told the guards. "Watch him every moment!"

Chas watched the Gaelachuan prince drop his head and shake it. His grip on her hand tightened almost to the point of being uncomfortable then he lifted his head and looked at the tallest of the four guards surrounding him. "Put a few yards distance between us, O'Malley," he ordered.

"Your Grace..." the man began, but his prince narrowed his eyes and the guard obeyed instantly, shooing the other men back.

"I think the lady is upset with you, milord," Chas said.

"She can go scratch her mad place," Ruan said with a snort. He helped her to sit up, frowning as she winced. "Are you sure you are all right? Should I fetch a dochtúir?"

She smiled. "I don't need a healer, but thank you for offering."

He moved back as she swung her legs from the bench, but kept possession of her hand as she stood because she wavered a little with the blood rushing to her head. He quickly put his arm around her shoulders.

The electrical current from that light embrace traveled all the way down her spine, fanned out like phantom fingers to delve through the crisp hairs at the apex of her thighs to touch her love-bud.

"Oh, my Goddess!" she heard herself gasp and her legs threatened to buckle beneath her.

"That's it!" he said, once more sweeping her into his brawny arms. "I'm taking you to a dochtúir!"

She could not seem to find her voice as he set off with her held protectively against him. She heard him speaking to the men flanking him in High Gaelachuan but only knew a smattering of the complicated language. She believed he had ordered one to run ahead and find a healer, telling him to make sure the place was clean.

All around them, people were moving out of the way, bowing to the prince as he passed. He nodded to a few who greeted him but kept glancing down at her, his dark blue gaze roaming over her as though he expected bloody stains to appear upon her person.

"This way, Your Grace! Here!"

He carried her beneath a wide awning and had to duck his head as he passed beneath a low doorway and into a cool, dark room that smelled pleasantly of roses.

"Lay her down here, Your Grace," someone said.

"Truly, Your Grace, I am..." she began but Ruan cut her off.

"Let him take a look at you." He slipped his arms from beneath her then reached out to gently cup her cheek. "I won't be far away."

The next person who entered her line of vision was an elderly man with a shock of wild white hair that haloed his wrinkled face like fluff from a dandelion stalk. He was smiling gently, and she recognized him as one of the healers from the Riezell Guardian HQ. She opened her mouth to greet him but he placed a finger to his lips and shook his head slightly.

"What are you doing here, Kaspar?" she hissed in a low voice.

"The general set it up," the Healer replied. "I am to do this."

It wasn't much of a cut but it stung just enough for Chas to draw in her breath and hand at the same time with every intention of hitting the elderly man for all she was worth. But her arm fell uselessly to the pillow and her eyes glazed as some potent drug took immediate effect.

"Don't worry, Major," Kaspar whispered. "It is only pairilis, one of the few Gaelachuan drugs they ever perfected. You'll sleep for about four hours then awake refreshed but in the safe arms of your target." The old man laughed. "And what a pair of arms to awake in, eh?"

"W...wha...?" was all Chas could manage before her world began to dim and shut down.

"Sweet dreams, beautiful Guardian," Kaspar said, patting her arm.

As darkness fell over Chas' eyes, she felt the healer's hands upon her clothing and would have protested had night not put out its leg to trip her.

Outside the healer's medical hut, Ruan shot up from the chair upon which he had been perched and rushed toward the healer as soon as he opened the door. "How is she?"

"Know you of a drug called pairilis, Your Grace?" Kaspar asked.

"Aye," Ruan snarled, his eyes burning like blue coal. "If you gave her that shit..."

"No, Your Grace, but apparently the man who stabbed her had coated his blade with it. No doubt it was meant to disable her so he could be about his perfidy."

The color drained from the Gaelachuan prince's face. "Stabbed? Where? I saw no blood!"

"Come," the healer coaxed and stepped back inside the medical hut. He led Ruan to the bed upon which Chas lay unconscious. "You could not see the blood for all the fabric surrounding her hips but he cut her here." He pulled the covers from his patient.

Ruan swallowed like an untried youth seeing his first naked woman. He barely noticed the shallow cut the healer showed him for his excited gaze was too busy crawling over the beauty that lay bare from the neck to hip, the blanket precariously covering the triangle between her legs.

"Lovely, isn't she?" the healer asked quietly.

"Magnificent," Ruan replied and felt sweat breaking out on his upper lip and under his arms. His palms itched to touch that flawless skin revealed to him. His manhood stirred, striving to raise its head to get a look as well. He had waited all his life for a woman who could cause such strong emotions in him, and this one was not only setting his juices to flowing but giving a tug to his heart, as well.

"Such a woman should be cosseted—do you not think so, Your Grace?" Kaspar inquired.

"Aye," Ruan whispered.

"Damn me if I would allow her to be out and about working for a man like Lord Hulbert. Why, the man is nothing but a lecherous libertine who would soon have this lovely maiden groveling in the street for a few coppers."

Ruan wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch the silky sheen of pale blonde hair that spread out over the pillow. He wanted to feel its soft texture between his fingers, to lift the strands to his face and experience the intoxicating scent he had only caught a fleeting whiff of when he had been carrying her.

"No real damage was done but it was a good thing you happened by else that miscreant would have brutalized her then, my guess, cut her throat to keep her from identifying him or else sold her to a brothel."

With passion-glazed eyes, Ruan looked over at the healer. The repercussion of what would have happened had he not come to her rescue did not bear thought.

"I am sure I can find her a much better position here at Gaillimh Bay, Your Grace. If you could see your way to giving her a few coppers to tide her over until then, I am sure she would be very appreciative."

Shaking his head, Ruan refused the offer. "She will be going with me," he managed to say.

"With you?" Kaspar asked.

"With me," Ruan stated firmly. He laid the backs of his fingers against her cheek and frowned when he felt warmth he thought too high.

"The pairilis is causing her a slight fever, but other than the cut on her hip, she is in very good health. She should be up and about in a day or two."

Nodding, Ruan stepped up to the bed and pulled the blanket over the sleeping beauty on the healer's cot. He tucked the coarse wool around her, flinching at the feel of it. Nothing, he thought, save silks and satins should touch this flawless flesh. Gently, he picked up his burden and held her high against his chest.

“Let my man know your fee, dochtúir. There will be a bonus for you. You have my gratitude for taking such good care of my lady.”

Kaspar smiled and inclined his head. When the prince had left and his guard deposited a hefty sack of sterlings in the healer’s hand, Kaspar chuckled aloud. “My lady, eh?” he repeated, tossing the sack of coins into the air and catching it. “Well, now. That bodes well for our little Riezell Guardian, it does!”

## Chapter Three

Chas opened her eyes to find her bold corsair sitting astride a chair beside her bed, his arms braced along the chair's back. Her right hand was being held in both of his and his lips were placing the softest of kisses upon her fingertips. As he looked up at her through the falling sweep of a thick lock of his dark hair, his eyes shone with a light that took her breath away.

"I was beginning to worry," he said, and reached out to smooth the hair back from her forehead.

"What time is it?" she asked, for the room was dark with shadows.

"Nearly ten of the evening," he replied, and rested his palm on her head. "Your fever is gone."

"Thirsty," she said, and realized her voice was scratchy.

He was quick to release her hand and stand, swinging the chair aside. He took up a carafe and filled a goblet. "I have had them bring in iced water every half hour in anticipation of your awakening," he said, and stepped up to the bed. Gently, he slid his left hand under her neck and lifted her head, placing the rim of the golden goblet to her lips.

Chas drank greedily for her mouth felt encased in cotton. She closed her eyes as she swallowed the icy water. When she had taken her fill, she grunted and he removed the goblet, lowering her head once more to the pillow.

"Are you hungry?"

"No," she whispered, and drew in a long breath. The mattress beneath her gave her the impression that she was floating on a cloud, so soft was it. The sheet covering her was silk and the gown touching her body was of the softest muslin.

She frowned and opened her eyes. "Who dressed me?" she asked, looking up into his hooded eyes.

"A maid, although I swear to you I was this close..." He held up his hand with thumb and index finger only a fraction apart. "...to doing it myself, lass."

"For shame, Your Grace," she said, making herself blush on cue as she had been taught at the Academy.

"I am a man first, lass, and a prince second," he admitted.

"And a very inappropriate prince at that!"

The middle-aged woman who came striding into the room was beautiful, but her face was set in a disapproving frown. Two other women—equally strict in appearance—who were obviously her ladies-in-waiting accompanied her.

"You are well, young woman?" the older lady asked.

"I am, Your Majesty," Chas said and tried to rise, but neither mother nor son would allow it. The son stepped toward her only to have the mother push him aside. "Make yourself scarce, Ruan," she ordered.

"Mother, I..."

"Go!" his mother commanded. "This is woman's work and you will only be in the way!"

Grumbling to himself, the prince shoved his hands into the pockets of his britches and sauntered lazily from the room. His attitude was one that his mother was apparently accustomed to for she made no further demands on him but rather bade one of her ladies to shut the door behind him.

"And lock the damned thing," the queen snapped. "I would not put it past that poggleheaded son of mine to eavesdrop!"

Chas threw aside the covers and would have stood but the queen narrowed her eyes at her.

"And just where do you think you are going?" the queen asked.

"It is unseemly for me to be abed in the presence of..."

"Your employer?" the queen cut her off.

Brought back to why she was there, Chas settled back against the head of the bed.

"My son is a very brave man," the queen began as she took the seat Ruan had vacated. "But he is also a stubborn man." She lowered her voice and leaned forward. "Far too much like his father, I fear."

Chas smiled, but had no comment to make to that statement.

"I have been parading females before that boy for three years now and he has disdained every last one of them," the queen continued. "He says he will never marry but that is ridiculous and well he knows it. He is the heir-apparent and, as such, must marry and produce little Ruans to sit upon my knee. Do you not agree, Major Neff?"

"If that is what he wants, Your Majesty," she replied cautiously.

"Doesn't matter what the boy wants!" the queen disagreed. "He has obligations. He must marry and reproduce. That's all there is to it!"

"But he has yet to find a woman he would be comfortable with?" Chas questioned.

The queen flung out a negligent hand. "They have all been ninnies," she declared. "Knew them to be when I put them before him, but where was I to find the kind of woman he prefers? I certainly cannot be expected to traipse around the kingdom inspecting all the harlots that boy pumps, now can I?"

Chas did not need to practice the art of blushing for deep color came to her cheeks at such an unseemly remark by the queen.

"A strong woman, he tells me," the queen went on as though she had not seen Chas' embarrassment. "According to my son, he wants a woman who can hold her own

against him in a horserace or on a chessboard. He desires one who isn't afraid of her own shadow and has no great desire to own every gown ever created. He certainly doesn't want one who will spend his money as though water through a sieve and neither does he want one who is so meek she can't ask for what she wants or needs. In other words, he wants a woman who will give as good as she gets, or so he challenged me. Where was I to find such a woman, eh?"

A shrug was all Chas could display, for she had glimpsed the merry twinkle in the Gaelachuan queen's eye and realized the woman was baiting her.

"And while I am guarding him, you want me to help you find such a paragon, Your Majesty?" Chas asked.

"Oh, I've found her already!" the queen stated. "Had a hell of a time doing it, too!"

"Then you want me to watch her," Chas suggested. "To make sure she is the right mate for him."

"Oh, she's the right mate, I've no doubt! I had the runes cast over a month ago and that is when we learned who she is. Twice more the runes were cast, but on the third casting? The third shocked even the mystic, for it told us this woman had been my son's mate many times over the millennia. Do you understand?"

Chas shook her head. "I know little about divination, Your Majesty, and I don't put any store in the old ways." She raised an eyebrow. "Does not the Caitliceachs' hierarchy teach such things are wrong?"

"As though we women would listen to a bunch of prattle from hateful old men who have never married nor are likely to!" the queen said, settling back in the chair. "We women hold to the old ways even while we smile and nod at the priests and pretend we accept their restrictions on our lives. What they don't know won't annoy us!"

Chas smiled. "And is this woman you have found for the prince a woman who won't buckle under to your priests?"

"Damned right, she won't!" the queen stated. "She's her own woman, she is!"

"And the mystics say she is the right one?"

"Lass, I am not a woman to leave things to chance. I believe in the old ways, but sometimes the mystics read the runes incorrectly. So I have had the woman investigated left to right, north to south, upside, downside and inside out. There is nothing I don't know about her and I—as well as my husband—have come to the conclusion that she will suit him admirably."

"So the runes were read correctly."

"You be the judge," the queen offered. "The first time the runes were thrown, two oak trees came up. That signifies what is. We knew we'd found the woman for him—strong like an oak just as he is. The second time the runes were cast, two mirrors came up."

"Doesn't that mean what was?"

"Aye, that it does. It means my son knew her in the past. According to the mystic, such castings are very rare where after two passes identical stones are thrown in the same positions."

"Then they should get along very well, don't you think?"

"One hopes so but..." The queen leaned forward, her face intent. "When the runes were cast the third time—and that's the charm or so they say—the mirrors came up again signifying what was to be. That casting astonished the mystic, let me tell you!"

Chas shook her head. "I don't understand."

"What do you see when you look into a mirror that is in front of another mirror, lass?"

The Riezell Guardian thought about it for a moment then nodded. "A multitude of reflections," Chas said. "To signify that there will be numerous reincarnations of them both and will always find one another."

"Precisely!" the queen said.

Chas held up her hands. "How do I fit into this, Your Majesty? I was told I was to guard him against a potential assassin. Is there really an assassin or am I here to help you procure this woman for your son?"

"Oh, the threat to Ruan is real enough, lass," the queen said, sobering. "There are those among the Order of Taibhse who would like to see my son in an early grave so they can be about their own wicked agenda."

"Which is what, Your Majesty?"

"Forming an alliance with the Storians to overthrow the Court of Cosaint and put a despot upon the throne instead."

"It wouldn't be the first time the Storians have tried something like that," Chas said.

"Well, it won't happen here and it certainly won't happen to Ruan! He is a prince, aye, but he is a warrior well-trained."

"I saw that today," Chas said quietly, remembering the headless corpse at the open-air market.

"When he slips into the wraith persona, Ruan is a man with whom to reckon and I have no fear for him. It is when he is being careless of his life that another score of gray hair shoots up from my scalp!"

"Every mother's worry," Chas said.

"Remind me of that when *you* have a passel of his brats tugging at your skirt hem, lass!"

Chas' mouth dropped open. She could only stare at the queen.

"Have I shocked you, lass?"

It took effort for Chas to clamp her mouth shut and even more effort to speak.

"You think I am this woman of whom the mystics speak?"

"I know you are. Your name was spelled out to us upon the fourth casting done at midnight under the dark of the moon. It was but a matter of finding the woman who possessed the name."

"Your Majesty, I am a commoner. How could you possibly expect your Tribunal or your son..."

"You were adopted at birth by a Meiriceánach family though you were born in *an Ghréig*," the queen said as she folded her arms over her chest.

"How do you know that?" Chas gasped, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"The Court of Cosaint has access to all the data contained in Tribunal records, lass. It was not hard to learn who your real parents were."

A deep chill went down Chas' spine. All her adult life, she had tried to discover her heritage but had been blocked by bureaucratic red tape at every turn. The laws that should have been changed centuries earlier had kept her from learning her true identity. She had long since given up trying to discover her roots.

"Well? Do you want to know?" Queen Annalyn asked.

"Who am I?" Chas whispered, afraid of what she'd learn.

"You are Gréagach. Your Gréagach name was Mylena Kolovos," the queen stated. "Your father was a prominent member of the Gréagach Tribunal. Lord Mykos Kolovos, I believe was his name. He and your mother, Katelina, were killed in a boating accident off Aegia while on holiday. The captain of the boat managed to save you though your twin brothers drowned with your parents."

"Captain Charlton Neff," Chas provided, seeing her long-dead adoptive father in her mind's eye.

"The captain's wife was infertile and they had long wanted a child. Rather than turn you over to Tribunal to be sent to a nunnery until you were of age, they left *an Ghréig* and immigrated to Meiriceán. Both were vehemently opposed to the Caitliceachs, the True Faith, so they saw no harm in stealing you away and letting your distant relatives think you had drowned with your parents."

"But I am Protastnúach," Chas protested. "Surely your Court will not..."

"Captain Neff was of the Protastnúach faith and brought you up with those beliefs, but you are of Eastern Caitliceachs heritage. You were baptized in our mutual Faith. Once baptized Caitliceachs, always a Caitliceachs, lass. As such, my Court has no objections to a Joining between you and my son. As a matter of fact, we were able to trace your maternal lineage back to Queen Medea, and that was enough to sway even the most virulent of my councilors."

Chas narrowed her eyes. "Gréagach royalty? You can't be serious," she managed to say.

"I am quite serious." The queen cocked her head to one side. "You are very lovely, so that will suit Ruan's desire for a pretty wife. The boy can't have a hag for the mother of his brats. You are shapely with a very fine bust, so that will soothe his baser needs

and keep his hands otherwise occupied and off a sword hilt. You are well trained in combat and can hold your own against even a Storian primary assassin, so you won't be afraid of his quick temper when Ruan feels the urge to display it. That should fulfill my son's requirement to have a woman who can give as good as she takes."

"Your Majesty, I have..."

"An assignment that I believe will be both to your advantage as well as my son's," the queen asserted. "As a Riezell Guardian, you must carry out the assignment you were given. Am I correct?"

"Aye, but..."

"And the contract says the assignment must be finished to an end your employer stipulates."

Chas pursed her lips. There was no need for her to answer for obviously the queen and her councilors would have inspected the contract inside and out.

"I particularly like the motto of the Riezell Guardians—'To protect and serve with disregard to personal feelings or beliefs. To give my all, even should it be my life.'" The queen sighed. "That is so terribly romantic, don't you think?"

"And when he finds out what you are about?" Chas challenged. "Just how angry do you think he will be? With you? With me?"

"Oh, pooh!" the queen dismissed. "Let him bluster all he wants, but one bat of those pretty green eyes of yours and a hand placed in a strategic place should calm him down quickly enough."

The deep color returned to Chas' cheeks and she covered her face with her hands. "This can't be happening!"

"Do you find Ruan unattractive?" the queen demanded, her chin rising.

"No, of course not, but..."

"Do you find him offensive in manner?"

"Your Majesty, no, but..."

"Do you prefer Daniel Brock to Ruan Cosaint?"

Chas shuddered. "No, not at all, yet..."

"We have your psychological profile."

The paleness that washed over Chas' face made her head spin. "You what?" she asked through the slits of her fingers.

"I believe you made the statement to your analyst that you desired a man not unlike the corsairs of old." Queen Annalyn grimaced. "That hardly seems to suit the image I have of Daniel Brock."

"Your Majesty, you should not have..."

"Do you not," the queen said, coming to sit on the side of Chas' bed, "wish for a real man to warm you of a night, Chastain Neff?"

Chas could only gape at the older woman.

"Do you not want a man who will make your blood boil one moment, and then make it flow like hot molasses in the next as his fingers ply your flesh? Do you not desire a man who will take you soaring to the highest mountains then cradle you gently in his arms as he settles you back to earth?"

"Your Majesty," Chas protested, her voice a whine of complaint.

"I am told that when he laid hands to you in the marketplace, you were seen to shudder as though a lightning bolt had traveled the length of you. Is that correct?"

"While it is true I felt a charge from his touch, I..."

"Did you not call him Enlil?"

"Aye, but I don't have any idea..."

"Enlil," the queen said, "was the Lord High God of the Winds in ancient *an Iaráin*. His wife was Ninlil. That phantom woman you were in the distant past called out to her lover."

"That is only speculation," Chas denied.

"Had you heard the name before? Is it one you commonly use?"

Chas groaned with frustration. "No, Your Majesty. The name was new to me."

"No, it was love calling to love, Chastain. Ruan Cosaint is the reincarnation of an old, old love and he is the man for you, lass," the queen said, her statement brooking no argument. "And you are the woman for him! You were meant to be together! The mystic says so!"

"But when he finds out you hired me to..."

"Don't let him!" the queen snapped and rose from the bed. She smoothed the skirt of her gown. "Men don't need to know everything a woman does, lass. The sooner you learn *that* lesson, the better off you'll be!"

When Queen Annalyn left her, Chas went over the information regarding her heritage and realized she was crying. She had been trying for so long to find out who she had been, who her parents were, the reason Charlton Neff and his wife, Catherine, had adopted her, it was a relief to finally have answers. To learn she had been of noble blood? Unexpected and totally surprising. No wonder the Tribunal did not want her to know of her heritage.

As to the Gaelachuan queen's assertion that Chas and Ruan were fated to be mates? Well, she thought as she swiped at her tears, that remained to be seen.

## Chapter Four

"You survived my mother's visit," he said as he stuck his head around the door.

Chas smiled. "It was touch and go but, aye, I managed to get through it."

He came into the room, leaving the door open, as he had no doubt been warned to do, and came to stand by her bed. All available chairs had been removed and Chas could tell he was annoyed.

"She tells me you will be here a few days," he said. "Is that at her direction or because you don't feel well enough to be up?"

"I believe her exact words were—'You will do as I say, lass, and I'll have no argument 'bout it!'"

"Aye," he said with a sigh. "That sounds like my mother. She is a formidable old biddy." He rested his hands on the footboard of the bed. "When I asked her what your name was, she ordered me to find out for myself."

"I am Chastain Neff, Your Grace," she introduced herself.

"Chastain," he said and the name on his tongue sounded sensual. "I am Ruan."

"Your Grace..." she began but he held up a hand.

"No, not Ruan Your Grace. Just Ruan," he corrected.

"I would not dare to..."

"My exact words are—'You will do as I say, lass, and I'll have no argument 'bout it!'"

Chas laughed for his tone and inflection mimicked his mother perfectly. Combined with the waggle of eyebrows and a forbidding glower lurking behind the sparkle in his blue eyes, his mimicry put her at ease.

"So," he said, leaning his elbows on the footboard and clasping his hands. "My mother and I have decided you will not be working for Lord Piss-On but..."

"Who?" Chas asked, her eyebrows rose.

"Pierceson Hurlburt," Ruan informed her. "He's nothing more than a cock with legs. You'd be compromised within half an hour of being in the same room with him."

"But I need a job," Chas protested. "I..."

"I need a personal secretary," the handsome prince interrupted.

She stared at him. "Don't you already have a personal secretary?"

He shrugged. "Alistair is more nag than secretary and besides, he hates the title. Too effeminate, he says. He'd much rather be training troops than attending me."

Chas looked down at her hands. "But you know nothing of me or my abilities, Your Grace." She looked up. "I might be a terrible secretary."

He cocked a brow. "Can you write?"

"Aye."

"Cipher?"

"Aye, Your Grace, but..."

"Then you're hired." He pushed back from the footboard. "You can start as soon as my mother decrees you able enough to leave that bed."

Chas watched Ruan walked to the door and she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. Her sources had told her he was a brooding, no-nonsense man with a thick chip upon his broad shoulder. So far, she had not seen that side of him, but there was something in the purposeful way he walked that bespoke not only authority but also arrogant power. Ruan turned around at the door. "Any questions?"

She shook her head. "No, Your Grace, I don't think so."

"Good, then if the sergeant-major allows it, you can accompany me to Viridian tomorrow. I have business there. I'm sure she will see to having a portmanteau packed for you."

"The sergeant-major?" she questioned.

Ruan snorted. "My interfering mother who has decided you are to be the next wench she's going to throw at me. If royalty fails, look for a gently bred commoner whom she can train to be a noble."

With that said, he ambled from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ruan tossed and turned in his lonely bed, his thoughts on the beautiful woman two floors below his chamber. He kicked at the covers, pulled them over him, sat up and punched his pillow, dropped his head to it and then kicked the covers entirely from the bed. Next to be flung to the floor was the pillow, followed closely by another. Finally sitting up, the prince ran his hands through his hair and tugged viciously.

"Argh!" he snarled and swung his legs from the bed and sat there on the edge, glaring at the carpet.

The trouble was Chastain, he thought. Aye, that was who was causing his sleeplessness.

While it was true he had never seen a more beautiful woman, he knew this one had somehow gotten under his skin. That his mother had given her sanction of some sort bothered him, but then again, the old woman only had his best interests at heart.

Chastain.

Even the name filled his soul with vibrant images—blonde hair—long and silky, and curling to just above shapely hips that flared out at a perfect angle from a tiny waist

and flat belly. Beautiful green eyes, the color of the early corn shoots in the late spring. Lush breasts that caused a man's eyes to go to them like an arrow to a bull's-eye. Long legs that curved sweetly to a nicely turned rump, slender arms, swanlike neck. And her face?

Ruan sucked in his breath as he raised his head and stared unseeingly at the wall before him.

*Such a face she had*, he thought. Smooth forehead framed by lustrous golden hair, a slight tilt to those glorious eyes, a pert upturned nose, lush lips that invited a man to taste their sweetness, a cute little chin graced with a seductive dimple.

Ruan shuddered and stood up. Padding barefoot to the window, he shoved the draperies aside and glared down into the moonlit courtyard. The fragrance of late roses filled the air and vied with the faint tang of salt that floated on midnight waves from the Northern Sea. If he listened closely, he could hear the roar of the ocean and...

Giggling?

He frowned and opened the window wider, poking his head out until the sound that had caught his attention made sense to him.

"Daval," he said, naming his youngest brother.

And Daval it was, running through the darkened courtyard behind one of the serving wenches. Both were as naked as the day they were born.

"You little bastard," Ruan chuckled and hunkered down so that his elbows were braced on the windowsill and he could spy upon his younger sibling.

The girl was much older than Daval and—as Ruan knew all too well—extremely educated when it came to sexual play. She was leading the young prince deeper into the garden, unmindful of any eyes that could be watching their frolicking and oblivious to the bright moon overhead that cast its light upon them like a beacon. Her naked rump jiggled in the moon glow and washed over her shapely body as though attempting to clothe her in its rays.

And Daval? The little son of a bitch was rollicking along the pathway with no care in the world. His wiggly was bouncing from side to side and—in imitation of their father—he patted his belly in anticipation of the feast he was no doubt contemplating.

Ruan couldn't help but chuckle as the young man rubbed his nearly hairless chest then reached down to grasp his cock to keep it from flopping so painfully.

Daval glanced back once at the keep then shrugged, picking up speed as he ran after the wench, still holding his shaft. The two were being uncommonly quiet so as not to rouse those within the keep, but now and again a giggle would erupt from the maze of shrubs through which the couple was running.

"I hope you get a briar up your toenail, you little fuck," Ruan whispered. "Or in your teeny, tiny prick!"

The couple stopped beside the fountain where bubbling water cascaded down from a tall statue of St. Padris. Stretching out along the fountain's wide rim, the wench lay there with one leg crooked at the knee, her arms held out for her young lover.

"Under the statue of a saint?" Ruan asked and whistled. "You'll go to hell for sure, Daval Cosaint!"

But what his young brother did next so shocked Ruan that his mouth sagged open, and he could not have torn his eyes from the scene under penalty of torture.

Daval had dropped to his knees beside the fountain and had buried his beardless face in the wench's lap, his actions leaving nothing to the imagination. The girl's hands were in the young man's hair, holding his head to the juncture of her thighs, and one of Daval's hands was squeezing the girl's breast as though testing a melon for ripeness.

"By the Goddess," Ruan whispered and realized the girl—what the hell was her name again?—was staring straight up at him, a knowing smile stretched across her practiced mouth.

As he watched, the girl put one hand to her free breast and circled the nipple with her index finger. She plucked at the stiff nubbin then put the finger to her mouth to wet it before returning it to her breast.

Ruan felt his groin tighten and wasn't even aware that he had put a hand to the thick bulge between his thighs.

Daval was showering kisses up and down the wench's thighs and up her belly. His lips locked onto one dark nipple and seemed to stay there an inordinately long time as the girl lowered her hand to her cunt and played with herself there.

Ruan groaned. Her eyes were on him, but her hand was between her legs, her hips arched upward as Daval kept on suckling her breasts—first one, then the other.

Watching the wench lowering and raising her hips, catching his breath as Daval reached down a hand to place his fingers where hers had been, Ruan began to breathe so quickly, so shallowly, he began to feel light-headed. The pressure of his own hand against his cock had increased and at some point, he had wrapped his fingers around the throbbing head.

He stared into the brazen hussy's eyes, yet he did not see the jaded, older-than-the-ages smirk that steamed from the wench's gaze. Instead, he saw Chastain's lovely green orbs looking back at him with hunger.

He increased the speed of his hand, tightening and relaxing only a little, tightening and relaxing even less as he pulled upon his shaft. The friction had brought sweat to his brow.

"Chastain," he whispered, feeling the itch beginning deep inside his belly and spreading downward through his cock.

The wench opened her mouth and ran her tongue over her lips, wetting them as Daval flung himself over her and rammed his young shaft to the hilt inside her. Even

from the distance from which he watched them, Ruan could hear the grunt of satisfaction from the girl and the moan of pleasure from Daval.

Rocking the wench back and forth as he strove for his climax, Daval was unaware his oldest brother was watching him rutting like a stag in heat. Nor was he aware that with every stroke he took, Ruan took one in harmony.

Shifting his gaze from the wench – what the hell *was* her name? – Ruan stared at his little brother's ass. The muscles contracting and expanding as he pumped away at his midnight lover. He knew the exact moment Daval delivered his release for Ruan's was close behind. So violent and so unsatisfying, it brought tears to the heir-apparent's eyes.

For over an hour Ruan sat slumped at the window. Masturbation was frowned on by the priests, and though he had done it far too many times as a youth, he had not indulged that wickedness for several years. A warrior had no need to take matters into his own hand when there were numerous wenches about with greedy hands and even greedier lips.

*It was Chastain*, he thought, as he finally pushed himself up and staggered to the bed. It was the thought of her luscious body that had driven him to such shamefulness and he knew – one way or another – he would have to satisfy the lust that roiled within him each time he thought of her.

## Chapter Five

"He knows what you are about, Your Majesty," Chas warned as she was being dressed by the queen's ladies-in-waiting the next morning.

"Oh, he thinks he does, but when you slap him silly for attempting to seduce you this afternoon in Viridian, he will be beset with confusion," the queen replied.

"Slap him?" Chas gasped. "Milady, I could not..."

"Oh, hell, yes you can! The boy is accustomed to having any woman with whom he comes into contact jump into his bed the moment he grins at them. They throw themselves at him whether he appears interested or not. To my knowledge, Ruan has never been turned down. He's had more bed partners than his four brothers combined! Now a woman who makes him work for it will garner his interest quicker than one who simply splays herself down for his taking."

Chas winced at the image. "So I am to push him away when he tries to..."

"No," the queen drawled. "You are to slap him as hard as you can. Believe me when I tell you he will take that as a challenge and come after you with all his ammunition. It's time he did the hunting instead of having the bird dropped in his lap!"

Long after the queen and her ladies-in-waiting had left her room, Chas stood at the window and stared down into the opulent courtyard of Sciath Keep. Danny Brock had told her the palace was magnificent, but his description paled in comparison to the reality.

"A copper for your thoughts."

Chas turned at the sound of Ruan's voice and smiled demurely at him. "I was thinking how lovely your home is," she told him.

He came to stand beside her, looking past her. "My mother orders her gardens like she orders her children. One blade of grass, one twig or burgeoning shoot that does not conform to her sense of arrangement will be cut, or plucked or bent until it does."

"Are her children so easily bent?" she asked softly.

Ruan turned to her and reached out to drag the backs of his fingers down her cheek. "This one isn't," he answered and lowered his head toward her, but Chas stepped back, putting space between them.

"Have you been outside today, Your Grace?" she asked, going to the bed to take up the shawl that had been left for her use. "Will I need this?"

The heir-apparent shrugged. "Viridian is on the coast so it might be wise to take it," he answered. "My mother picked out your horse and the clothes you are to wear in Viridian."

Chas swirled the shawl around her shoulders and reached for her reticule. "I am ready, then, Your Grace."

He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes slightly narrowed, then walked to the door. "I'll meet you in the bailey," he said. "You do ride?"

"Aye, Your Grace, I do," she said. She wanted to ask why they would not be taking a shuttle, for Viridian was a good twenty miles from Sciath Keep, but he was already through the door, his boot heels ringing on the polished marble of the corridor.

Ruan shoved his hands into the pockets of his britches as he stomped down the hall. So, he thought, a muscle working in his jaw, *the chit was going to play hard to get*. Well, that was something new. But it certainly hadn't been in his plans for the day. Just staring at her had given him a rock-hard erection that needed easing and he had no intention of riding all the way to Viridian in that condition.

Lucia, the Spáinneach maid who at that moment was cleaning his quarters, had offered herself earlier. If she was still there, he knew relief was but a fumble away.

And the dusky, doe-eyed beauty was still in his quarters, her shapely rump in prominent view as she bent over his bed, rearranging the coverlet. She glanced around as he came into the room, kicking the door shut behind him.

Ruan's hands were already on the buttons of his fly, working through them with speed and purposefulness. Lucia smiled at him and turned her back, bracing her hands on the side of his bed as he stepped up to her, pushing her down over the edge of the bed with one hand as he continued to work his fly with the other.

Pushing the skirts of the servant's gown up her back, Ruan freed his cock from the restraints of his britches even as he nudged Lucia's feet farther apart with his booted feet.

With the Spáinneach beauty's rounded ass in the air, Ruan shoved his cock into her cunt with more force than he intended, for she cried out. He mumbled an apology – which surprised him since such behavior was not normal for him – then slid one hand up her back to grip her shoulder as he began thrusting into her.

Closing his eyes to the ebony hair of the woman rocking beneath him, Ruan replaced it with the pale gold of Chastain Neff's long braid. Instead of the scent of harsh soap and furniture polish that clung to the servant, he imagined the delicate scent of gardenia that he had smelled on Chastain. Instead of the guttural grunts coming from the body under him, he replayed the soft sighs that had issued from Chastain's lips as she lay unconscious after he had brought her to Sciath.

Ramming himself into Lucia's willing body had always satisfied him, but at the moment, he was straining to come and having a problem doing so. She was tight enough still to give him pleasure and accommodating enough that he had nothing more to do than smile at her for her to drop to her knees before him. Well-trained in the arts of a whore, Lucia's lips were talented and her mouth was a wet, warm cavern that suckled better than any he'd ever known. Perhaps it was that muscle rather than the nether one he needed.

He pulled out of her and stepped back. "Suck me," he ordered.

Lucia didn't question his command but sank to her knees and turned around to face him. She reached for him and took him into her mouth. Wrapping her lips over the throbbing head of his cock, she looked up at him through her lashes as her experienced tongue lathed his straining flesh.

It was pale hair he wrapped the fingers of his hands into. He rocked his hips against questing lips that were not painted scarlet red but rather tinted a sweet shade of coral that needed no artifice to make them delectable. His hands moved through coarse strands of hair, but in his imagination that hair was silky soft.

The servant drew Ruan's cock down her throat until the tip of him could feel the slight protrusion of her uvula scraping along the frenulum. His breathing was harsh, quick, but the satiation he sought seemed just out of his reach. He groaned, needing something he wasn't getting and not understanding why.

Lucia reached between Ruan's spread legs and cupped his balls, working them gently. Tugging lightly, cupping then releasing, she slid her middle finger to the slight indentation at the base of his cock and pressed upward.

Ruan had started to sweat, beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead and upper lip. He felt overheated, in need of a bath, but he kept at it, striving for a release he'd never had trouble having before now.

It wasn't until Lucia slipped her finger into his ass that he exploded in her mouth. But the satisfaction he normally felt was not there, and when he pulled away from her, he hung his head, drawing in shallow, unfulfilled breaths.

Lucia never seemed to mind not receiving her own satisfaction. She swallowed his cum and turned her head to wipe her lips on the shoulder of her gown. Remaining where she was, she looked up at the prince, awaiting his orders.

Ruan gazed into the servant's black eyes and knew a moment of shame that was so unlike him he flinched. He could not stuff himself back into his britches quickly enough, his fingers flying over the buttons. Turning his back on the kneeling girl, he hurried to the door and yanked it open with enough force to wrench his right wrist. Cursing at the sharp pain, he nearly ran down the corridor, walking so quickly he stumbled a few times.

Chas looked up to see the Gaelach prince striding toward her. His eyes were cold, his jaw set, and when he passed her without a greeting, her eyebrows shot up. She knew rage when she saw it, and the man who grabbed the pommel of his saddle and vaulted atop the prancing stallion's back was bristling with that raw emotion.

"Milady," the head groomsman said, offering Chas a hand up.

Frowning, for she would be required to ride sidesaddle—a position she neither enjoyed nor looked forward to—she accepted the groomsman's hand and put her foot in the stirrup, clumsily propelling herself up into the saddle and hooking her right leg between the pommels on either side of the seat and balancing herself, centering her weight through the right thigh.

"You don't like riding sidesaddle," Ruan snapped.

"I prefer not to," Chas replied.

"You want to ride like a man," the prince taunted, "but that's rather hard to do in a frilly skirt like that, eh?"

Chas lifted her chin. "I'll do well enough with the sidesaddle, Your Grace."

"If you fall your ass off, don't expect me to stop and pick you up," he told her and kicked his mount into motion.

Chas sat where she was for a moment, and then looked across to where a horse awaited a rider. She pointed to the stallion. "Is that horse prepared for someone?"

The groomsman frowned. "It is one of Prince Ruan's horses. We never know which one he will prefer to ride and..."

Before the groomsman completed his explanation, Chas was off her horse and striding purposefully toward the prince's roan stallion.

"Milady!" the head groomsman complained as he watched in disbelief while Chas reached up, grasped the pommel and pulled herself into the saddle. Without giving the groomsman another look, she clucked to the stallion and set it racing after its master, who had a fair-size lead.

Ruan glanced to the side as the thundering hooves overtook him. He blinked—recognizing his own beast—then looked up into the steady eyes of the woman sitting astride it, the skirts of her gown tucked up so a goodly portion of her shapely legs were showing. He arched an eyebrow at her but said nothing, merely kicking his mount lightly in the ribs to make it go faster.

But the woman riding beside him—leaning forward over her mount's neck—kept pace with him, their horses matching one another stride for stride as the miles disappeared behind them. By the time the signpost announcing Viridian came into view, the two riders were galloping along in tandem, neither looking at the other.

Chas could sense the anger roiling in Ruan Cosaint's brawny body. A white line streaked alongside his mouth and his eyes were narrowed. Although his hands were loose on the reins, she could see the coiled tension that had him sitting straight as an arrow in the saddle.

Slowing her pace as they entered the coastal village, Chas took a deep breath of the salt-sprayed air. Unlike Gaillimh Bay with its heavy scent of marine life, Viridian had a pleasant scent and the waters beyond were a lush turquoise blue. Beside her, the prince had reined his mount to a light canter and it was then she realized they had outdistanced his guards, leaving them far behind. Looking back, she saw the five-man escort bearing down on them, dust flying.

"Are you always so disdainful of your safety, Your Grace?" she asked, but received only an ugly snort for an answer.

Ruan led her to the inn where they would be staying the night. He halted his mount then flung a leg over the horse's head, sliding down with a gracefulness Chas could not

help but admire. She dismounted before he had a chance to help her, and when she stood facing him—for he had come around his mount to assist her—she saw his lips twitch. Whether it was in amusement or annoyance she couldn't tell for his blue eyes were hooded as he spun around and headed to the inn.

The guard arrived as Chas reached the inn's door, frowning when she realized he was not going to hold the portal open for her. It had already closed behind his entry. She entered the establishment in time to hear the prince ordering two adjoining rooms.

He ignored her as she joined him at the innkeeper's desk. She could feel the stares of those sitting about the common room and heard a smattering of whispers that included the word doxy among them. Apparently, Ruan had heard the snide label as well, for he turned to survey the room with ill-disguised contempt.

"The lady accompanying me is of the royal house of Cosaint. Is there one among you who would like to repeat your insult aloud so I might deal with it?"

Shocked silence greeted the prince's challenge and eyes were cast down as faces turned red or white...depending upon the sex of the gossip. When no one spoke, Ruan Cosaint nodded, his eyes narrowed into thin slits of coldness.

"I thought not," he said and turned around to spear the innkeeper with a stony glower. "See to the lady's bath then prepare one for me. We wish to dine alone, so if you have guests who wish to use the dining room this eve, I suggest you discourage them."

"At your command, Your Grace," the innkeeper agreed, his head bobbing up and down as he twisted his hands before him.

Ruan spoke to the guards who had entered right behind them. "Contact Mayor Cronin and tell him we will meet with him at nine of the clock tomorrow. I expect a hearty breakfast be waiting when we rise. Is that clear?"

The Chief Guard clutched his fist and struck his chest over his heart. "At your command, Your Grace," he too, agreed.

"T-This way, milady," the innkeeper offered as he skirted the desk and held out a hand to show the way.

Chas glanced back as she followed the innkeeper up the stairs and saw Ruan entering what she knew must be the taproom. She frowned, for it was far too early in the day to partake of strong beverages. One sweep of her well-trained eyes around the room found no glaring threat to the target to whom she had been assigned and she relaxed somewhat, knowing his guards would bar entrance to the taproom and see to his safety while she washed off the road dust.

It was while she was lathering her long hair in the wide, deep copper bathtub that the door to her room crashed open and she gasped to find the prince standing in the opening, his white lawn shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest. Standing beside him under the draped protection of his arm was a woman any reasonable person could see was nothing more than a common trollop.

"Chastain, meet Chastity," Ruan said, his words slurred. He grinned and lifted the bottle he had in his free hand to his lips and took a long pull.

"I doubt the name is fitting, milord," Chas replied. She locked eyes with the strumpet.

"Me name's Charity," the girl corrected.

"Help and assistance to those in need," Chas defined the name. "That fits, I imagine."

"I do what I can," the girl said with a giggle, and threw back her head as the prince's hand molded over her breast to fondle her.

Continuing to lather her hair, Chas ignored the duo in the doorway. The lush suds from the bubble bath hid her from the shoulders down, and unless Ruan came right up to the tub, he could see nothing more than her slender arms.

"How do you feel about a threesome, Chas?" the prince inquired with a leer.

"I prefer my men one-on-one, Your Grace," Chas replied. "Send the whore away and we'll discuss the matter."

"Look here!" Charity hissed. "Who you calling a whore?"

"Either take her to your room and hump her, Your Grace, or send her on her way. I don't share my body even for a Caitliceachs prince."

Ruan was well on his way to being rip-roaring drunk, but he wasn't drunk enough yet not to grasp the challenge in Chas' light tone. He cocked his head to one side and though the tub swam as though sitting under water, he screwed up one eye and studied the lovely woman reclining amidst the foamy bubbles. She was ignoring him and when she slid down into the tub to rinse her hair, he felt his cock go rigid with need.

"Go find my Chief Guard and tell him to pay you well for this afternoon, Chastity," Ruan said, sliding his arm from the strumpet's shoulders. He slapped her playfully – though a mite too hard – on her ample rear then left her standing in the doorway, her mouth a round "O" of surprise as he kicked the portal shut in her face.

Chas' head came up from beneath the water along with her shoulders and a goodly amount of creamy white bosom, the nipples barely hidden below the suds. "Her name is Charity," she said, not looking around at him as he staggered to the tub.

Ruan hunkered down beside the copper vessel and wrapped his hands over the curled rim. He lowered his chin to the back of his right hand and stared at her as Chas soaped a fleece rag and ran it down the length of her arm.

"You are beautiful," the prince whispered as he tried to see beneath the foamy bubbles.

"Thank you for the compliment, Your Grace," she said, casting him a quick look. She didn't like what she saw, for his eyes were red-rimmed with a sheen of sweat dotting his upper lip.

"I want to fuck you," he said.

"I don't like that kind of language," she informed him and when he snaked his hand out to grasp her wrist—belying the condition of his reflexes—she felt the strength in his grip and her heart thudded, for drunken men could be hard to control.

"Now, wench," he stressed, and tried to pull her toward him.

The slap was loud in the room and made even more so by the wetness slicking Chas' palm. There was enough power behind the hit to knock Ruan off center and he crashed backward to land partially on his ass and partially on the wrist he had wrenched earlier that day. He yelped, grabbing his arm as tears of pain flooded his eyes.

"No one manhandles me, Your Grace," Chas said between clenched teeth. "No one! Not even you!"

He stared at her, unable to speak as she rose from the water to stand over him. Dripping from head to toe, patches of foamy suds clinging to her lush form, she was an embodiment of the goddess rising from the sea. With her long golden hair curled around her shapely hips, her green eyes flashing, she was a sight to behold.

"I...I'm sorry," he heard himself say and the words surprised him, for apologies did not come naturally to Gaelachuan men, and especially not to members of the royal family.

She lifted one long, perfectly formed leg and stepped out of the tub, sloshing water on his legs. Standing over him, she locked her stormy gaze with his astonished one.

"If you want to make love to me, you ask and you ask in a gentlemanly fashion. I will not be spoken to like a common tramp, and I detest the word you used to describe the interaction with which you would like to engage my person. Never, *ever* use that word to me again. Is that clear?"

He could do no more than nod, for his attention was glued to the triangular patch of crisp golden curls at the juncture of her thighs. Tapered as though it were a silken arrow pointing to that part of her he desired the most, it beckoned him like a siren's call. He longed to reach out and touch it, but he feared she'd break his hand if he tried.

Though Chas was trembling from head to toe, she refused to allow him to see her condition. She walked elegantly past him, trailing soapsuds as she trod. Her bare feet slapped lightly against the wooden planking as she lifted her dressing gown from a peg and wrapped it around her, belting it about her slender waist.

Ruan managed to push himself up with the elbow of his left arm for he was cradling his right wrist in his left hand. He sat there with his knees raised and gawked at her.

"I want a man who will court me, not rape me," he heard her say and lifted his gaze to her beautiful face. She was standing there now with her arms at her sides, the lush, round globes of her breasts outlined against the pale green silk. The gown clung to her wet body and the prominence of her nipples made his mouth water. "I may not be of Gaelach royalty as you told the people in the common room but I have pride in myself, Your Grace. I know my own worth."

He ached to take her into his arms and hold her. He was shivering with the need of it, and the erection that had plagued him for most of the day was back in stony form. His palms itched to touch her. He wanted to kiss her until she swooned into his arms and then he wanted to...

"Perhaps you should leave now, Your Grace," she recommended. When he hesitated, she reiterated her suggestion.

It was difficult to get to his feet but he was able to do so with only a slight groan. His wrist was throbbing almost as much as his cock, but at least she wasn't looking at that stalwart soldier waving his bayonet at her. Her scrutiny was fused with his bewildered stare. Though his cheek stung and his tailbone ached from the hard landing he'd taken on it, he felt the pain of his embarrassment more than any other discomfort.

"I had too much to drink," he said and could have screamed as he staggered like an untried youth.

"Aye, Your Grace, that you did," she agreed as she walked to the door and opened it.

"Forgive me," he mumbled as he passed her on his way out.

"I already have, Your Grace. Have someone see to your hand," she said.

He turned once he gained the corridor and opened his mouth to say something else, but she shut the door in his face.

Ruan stood there and stared at the door as though it were an object he'd never encountered before. No one—not even his virago of a mother—had ever shut a door in his face. No woman had ever turned him down before. So completely beyond his normal experience with women, this episode felt as though he had fallen through a black hole and into a strange new universe.

He walked down the hall shaking his head.

## Chapter Six

Chas was fully dressed when the light knock came at her door later that evening. It was time for supper and she was famished. Delightful smells had been wafting up to her from below stairs for the last few hours and her stomach was rumbling, her mouth watering at the succulent scents weaving their way through her nostrils.

It was the chief guard who stood at her door, preparing to knock again, when she opened it. The man's face was carefully blank but she fancied she saw a gleam in the pale gray depths.

"Prince Ruan sends his regards, milady, and bids you sup with him," the man said.

"Do I need my shawl?" she asked.

"Begging your leave, milady, but I don't believe you will. The dining room is quite warm, at the prince's request."

Chas carried on a light conversation with the chief guard whose name she found out was Patrick Murphy. He had been Prince Ruan's primary protector since the heir-apparent turned eight years of age.

"A handful, was he?" she inquired of the man who appeared to be at least a full score older than his charge.

"Still runs me a merry race, he does," Patrick admitted. "It was a relief when the queen decided to go before the Tribunal and hire you."

Chas stopped. Her eyes were wide as she stared at the chief guard. "You know what I am?"

Patrick nodded. "I have the queen's ear, I do, since it has been my duty to protect Prince Ruan. She went over your qualifications with me and asked if I thought you'd suit." He grinned. "In more ways than just job-related, I'd say."

Squinting, Chas asked him what that meant.

"The queen thinks you'd make a grand daughter-in-law. The mystic thinks so too, and Queen Annalyn puts great store in the throwing of the runes."

"And if I am not interested in being Prince Ruan's consort?" she asked, her jaw tight.

The chief guard actually laughed before coughing away his merriment. "That's your decision, milady," he finally said, and his tone left no doubt in Chas' mind that he thought she was pulling his leg. He opened the door to the dining room for her.

Mouthwatering smells enveloped Chas like a lover's embrace as she walked into the room. Prince Ruan was standing at the head of a long table sagging beneath dish after dish, the aromas of which made Chas giddy with hunger.

"My mother says these are all your favorites. How she finds out such things is beyond me but..." Ruan said, sweeping a hand over the steaming bowls. He stepped around to the right side of the table and pulled out a chair.

She went to him and took the seat he offered. As he pushed her chair up the table, she felt his fingers grazing the backs of her shoulders, and once more, that electric current passed through her body. She turned her head to watch him take his own seat.

"I dismissed the servants so we will have to serve ourselves," he said. "I hope the wine is to your taste."

Quietly—with no discussion of what had transpired between them earlier—they passed one another the bowls and platters of food. The conversation was light and pertained only to such mundane topics as the unseasonable coolness of late and the overabundance of crops that had not ripened sufficiently to allow the farmers to make money. When the last forkful of succulent beef had been consumed and dessert passed up by each of them, Ruan stood and held her chair for her.

"I am told the gardens here are quite lovely in the evening. Would you like to take a stroll?" he asked.

"I think I should fetch my shawl," she said, but he was shaking his head. He went to a side table, and took up a package and brought it back to her. "I took the liberty of procuring this for you."

Chas had no way of knowing the prince had spent the afternoon searching the markets of Viridian looking for something to give her as a peace offering. Neither did she know that such presents were never given by Ruan Cosaint, except to his mother or sisters. When she opened the tissue paper and discovered the lovely woolen shawl fashioned in an intricate Gaelachuan pattern of knots, her face brightened and she looked up at him.

"It is lovely!" she proclaimed.

"Not as lovely as the woman who will be wearing it," he said in a soft voice.

Chas draped the ivory shawl with its pale rose knot work around her shoulders then took the arm Ruan offered. She walked with him to the wide Francach doors and then out into the cool mist of the evening.

They did not speak as they walked through the sweet-scented garden. His free hand covered hers and she did not think he realized he was caressing her fingers. Overhead, the moon was full and heavy with a golden hue that softly lit the cobblestone pathway between the flowerbeds. When they reached the end of the cobblestones, they were standing at a wrought iron gate beyond which the waves of the Northern Sea crashed delicately against moonlit cliffs. She unhooked her arms from his and reached out to curl her fingers around the coolness of the wrought iron.

"I have never been this far north," she said.

He stood behind her, his body lightly touching hers. "I trained near here," he told her. "I've not been back since, but always thought I'd like to have a summer place in this county."

The heat from his body was intoxicating and she leaned back against him, closing her eyes as he put his hands to either side of hers, enclosing her so that she was pressed between his solid body and the wrought iron sea gate.

"Do you mean your training with the Order of Taibhse?" she asked.

"Aye. It was similar, I think, to your training."

Chas tensed. "My training?" she said.

He put his chin on her shoulder. "Think you I am not privy to the doings of my mother and her band of merry councilors?" he asked. He slid his hands over her arms and drew her closer to him. "I make it my business to know what that interfering old biddy is up to."

She tried to turn around but his hold tightened. "If you've known all along what I am..."

"I only found out this afternoon when I returned from the market," he said and she detected a note of coldness in his tone. "It took my spies that long to glean the information."

She wanted to face him, to see his eyes as he spoke. Even in the bright moonlight, she thought she could garner his feelings if she could but look into his face.

"So how much are you willing to do, little Riezell Guardian, to fulfill your contract to my mother and her pesky court of jesters?"

There was no mistaking the coldness now. His voice had turned hard and brittle, and there was rigidity to his embrace that suggested he had put some distance between them, though his body was still pressed close to hers.

"There have been attempts on your life and the queen thought..."

"She knows damned well I can look after myself!" he said, releasing her and stepping back.

When Chas turned, he was standing there with his hands shoved into the pockets of his britches—a defensive posture. He was not looking at her, but rather at the moonlight-laced surface of the sea.

"Is it that your mother thinks you need more protection or that it was a woman she chose to provide that protection?" Chas asked.

He turned his head and speared her with a hard look that sent a shiver down her spine. "My mother has been trying to foist this woman and that woman off on me since I gained my majority. The plethora of idjuts she's offered would fill a good-size mental institution. I told her I would choose my own wife, but does she listen?"

"And you are furious that she chose me to offer to you?" she said, hurt niggling at her heart.

"Oh, you'll suit me well enough," he said, turning away from her again. "With your training, you won't be a clinging vine twining around me to choke the very life from me."

"But you are still angry that..."

She got no farther for he snatched his left hand out of his pocket and reached out to grab her. He drew her to him so quickly, she had no time to react and when she found herself tight against him, the hardness of his erection made her knees weak.

"How far would you have gone in your charade, Chastain Neff?" he asked, putting his lips to her ear as he spoke.

The warmth of his breath sent a quickening of pleasure into her womb. He smelled of cinnamon and the heady wine they had consumed.

"I was drunk as a pissant as I wandered through that damned noisy market this afternoon. I could barely put one foot ahead of the other but I wanted to find that shawl for you so I could give it to you as a peace offering."

"I am grateful..."

"I felt bad, wench," he said through clenched teeth, "that I had acted like a randy youth and I wanted to apologize."

"It wasn't..."

"Imagine my shock to learn you had been hired to seduce me for my mother. I could have strangled you then!"

His hands went around her throat but Chas made no move to block him. Though her highly specialized training would have made it relatively easy to break his hold, she went limp against him, offering her neck as a sacrifice.

He looked down into her half-closed eyes—her slightly parted coral lips and lost himself. Swooping down, he captured her mouth with his and thrust his tongue past her lips to taste the sweetness.

Chas' arms went around his waist, pulling him to her as his hands slid up to her cheeks. He held her head steady, cocked slightly to the left as he claimed her mouth.

No eyes saw the prince and the Riezell Guardian slip to the night-misted grass that drew along the perimeter of the sea gate. No one saw them stretch out—he atop her. No one heard the soft gasps of pleasure as hands insinuated themselves beneath layers of skirt and inside the crisp lawn of a white shirt.

Ruan's fingers went unerringly to Chas' soft thigh and he caressed her, running his nails lightly along her flesh. Her fingers were entwined in the thick pelt of hair between his breastbones—her hands captured between their bodies.

"I knew the moment I laid eyes on you that you were the one," he said as he slid his lips down her chin and to the hollow of her throat. "The Goddess help me, but you are the one I have wanted and needed."

She pulled her hands from between them and encircled his waist, delighting in the feel of his weight lying upon her. His hand was between her thighs, the warmth of his palm pressed against the core of her through her panties as his fingertips probed at her anus through the fabric.

"Your touch electrifies me," she whispered and gently sank her teeth into the strong column of his throat.

"And yours me," he acknowledged.

Once more, he captured her mouth and as he did, his fingers slid under the leg band of her panties and into her.

Chas groaned beneath the imprisonment of his sweet mouth. His fingers delved lightly inside her—first one, then two. His thumb stroked sensually against her clitoris until she could do nothing more than wrap her legs around his hips, mutely beseeching him to thrust deeper.

Chas was no stranger to sex but everything this gorgeous man was doing to her senses was a new and delightful discovery. There was nothing bland about his possessive lovemaking. His fingers were knowledgeable and when they went deeper inside her, Chas felt as though she would explode into a million pieces. When he quickly withdrew those fingers, she shouted her protest.

"Easy, lass," Ruan said, his voice urgent. "I'll not leave you wanting."

Where Daniel Brock's limited imagination left off, Ruan Cosaint's was just revving up. His fingers closed around the leg band of Chas' panties and jerked, tearing the silk fabric as easily as though it were paper.

*Here was her bold corsair!* Chas thought as she felt Ruan fumbling with the closure of his britches. His hard tumescence had been pressing almost painfully against her right thigh, a slight dampness letting her know he was as primed as she.

He had pushed her skirts up above her waist and now the night air washed over her bare hips and thighs with a coolness that pebbled her flesh. The back of his hand was hot against her and when he moved it from between them, she sucked in her breath at the velvet smoothness of cock poking at her core.

"I want you," he said and took her mouth once more, his teeth nibbling at her bottom lip.

Chas arched her hips up to him. "Then take me!" she demanded.

Ruan's low chuckle was underlined with the heat of his hand positioning his staff at the entrance to her vagina. When he slipped that steely muscle inside her then pushed deep and hard and held it, she clawed at his back, rending the delicate lawn of his shirt.

His thrusts were as purposeful and authoritative as the man himself. That sensual probing left nothing wanting for his cock was rock-hard, sliding into her with sureness, with a command that had Chas panting with desire. He filled her to the brim and pressed his advantage deeper and deeper.

She clung to his shoulder, digging her nails into his back as he rode her. His pounding echoed in the night as he slapped his body against hers in a frenzy that left them both straining for that elusive climax each knew would be unlike anything either had experienced until now.

And when that climax came—his warm hand slipped inside her bodice to mold around her naked breast, and her legs wrapped so tightly around him his piston action could barely thrust—they exploded with a chorus of keening pleasure that was in

harmony. Ruan's head was thrown back as he announced to the world his possession of this woman.

As the last tremor, the last squeezing of muscles, the last pulsation of sperm had subsided, Ruan lay collapsed atop her, spent and shaken to the very nucleus of himself.

*Here, he thought as he rolled off her and gathered her into his arms, was the woman he had been searching for all his life.* Here was the temptress who would make damned sure there would never be a need to stray. Here was the woman who could hold her own against his formidable temper.

Here was his Lady and there was no doubt in his mind.

## Chapter Seven

Morning found the lovers lying side by side in Ruan's bed. Their fingers were entwined upon his bare chest, her head upon his shoulder, her leg thrown possessively over his.

"As much as I hate to admit my mother was right, this time she was," he said yawning, for there had been no sleep for either the night past.

"I questioned it myself, but there is no mistaking we were meant for one another," she admitted. "I believe I knew the moment you first touched me."

Neither heard the stealthy click of the lock for they were talking quietly, making plans for a life they were eager to share with one another. The soft snick of a booted foot against the carpet was lost upon the lovers.

The assassin was on them before Ruan could react. The prince's sword—that lethal weapon that could take the head off an opponent in a bloodless moment, was across the room and out of reach.

Chas' eyes widened as the shadow of the killer fell across the bed. She moved like a cat, throwing herself over Ruan as the assassin's blade struck downward, stabbing into her right shoulder instead of the prince's heart.

Ruan stared up into the eyes of his would-be killer and slid quickly out of the bed. As the man jerked his weapon from Chas' body, the prince was already in possession of his own blade and lunged forward, parrying the threat that thrust at him.

Struggling to push herself up, Chas groaned at the fierce pain enveloping her. The right side of her body was on fire and she was amazed that her blood was not spreading in a thick puddle beneath her. She could barely draw breath so knew her right lung had collapsed. She could hear the spark of blades clashing but could not seem to turn over. As the thunder of running feet broke through the agony engulfing her, she closed her eyes and sank into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She will not die, Your Grace," the mystic said, throwing the runes once more at the insistence of his prince. "You were meant to be together, fated as King of Gaelach and his Lady-Wife."

"Then why doesn't she wake?" Ruan demanded as he plowed a hand through his already tousled hair. He paused in his pacing to look at the mystic. "It has been over a week and she is no better!"

"She is healing, Ruan," his mother reminded him. "The dochtúirs have told you as much."

Ruan covered his face with his fingers. "I can't bear this!"

"She is resting quietly, lad," King Declan told his son. "There is no fever and no infection in the wound."

"Thanks be to the Goddess that the assassin used a Taibhsean sword," Queen Annalyn remarked. "At least the wound was cauterized and she lost no blood."

"And I am to be grateful that the bastard used a weapon of my Order against the woman I love?" Ruan barked.

The king and queen exchanged a look. It was the first mention of the word *love* their son had used. Though he had been at Chastain Neff's bedside from morning 'til night—even unrolling a pallet to place beside her bed and refusing to be cast from the room—he had not declared his affection for the unconscious woman.

"If the blade that struck her had been of ordinary steel, Ruan," his father said, "she could have bled to death."

Ruan slumped with his back against the wall. "I cannot bear the thought of losing her," he said.

"You won't, Your Grace," the mystic assured him. "On my honor as a prime mystic, I swear to you that your lady will be at your side for many decades to come."

Long into the night Ruan sat beside Chas' bed and held her pale hand within his. He stroked her long, delicate fingers and brought the tips to his mouth to kiss them softly. He spoke to her in the Old Tongue, crooning in a very pleasant voice, singing to her the legends of his ancestral home. His clothing was disheveled for he had slept in them for two nights now. Only once in the week since he had brought Chas back to Sciath had he allowed his mother to bully him to take a bath. Even he could smell his own ripeness, else he would not have given in to the demand. Now, he could smell the sourness of his sweat and though it annoyed and embarrassed him, he was loath to leave the room where his lady lay so quietly and still.

He stretched out his long legs parallel to the bed and with his elbow on the mattress, his hand holding Chas', he thought back to the man he had dispatched with such fierceness it frightened even him. He had been like one of the berserkers of old—slashing and thrusting with a steely purpose that carved limbs from his opponent in a frenzy of death-wielding that left body parts cluttering the floor.

Vaguely he remembered seeing the horror on the faces of Patrick Murphy and his fellow guards as Ruan carved Chas' attacker into nothing more than sections of singed meat. Repeatedly he had sliced at the body, cleaving head from torso, leg from trunk, arm from chest then scattering the pieces like confetti at a wedding. So furious, so enraged had his attack been, it had taken Patrick and two of his men to subdue their maddened prince, bringing him down to the floor like a stag to ground. Though he bellowed his rage, threatened bodily harm and eternal imprisonment, they had managed to bring him back to some degree of sanity.

Rushing to the bed, finding Chas comatose and laboring for breath, Ruan had thrown back his head and bellowed like his ancestors of old. He had not even felt the hilt of Patrick's sword crashing against his skull to render him unconscious.

Ruan had learned that Patrick had taken charge, sending for a dochtúir to treat Chas. It had been Patrick who had arranged the ship back to Sciath, taking a wild chance that the longer route would not be the death of the young woman. Patrick, it was, who had insisted the dochtúir administer a sleeping draught to the young prince to keep him out during the journey.

And it was Patrick, himself, who even now stood guard outside Chas' door to make sure no harm befell the woman his prince had claimed as his own.

As day broke over Sciath on the ninth day of Chastain Neff's convalescence, lightning flared in the distance and the ominous rumble of thunder shook the stone walls. A light mist of rain was already scratching at the windows, asking to be allowed in. It was the bright flash of a nearby lightning strike that woke Ruan.

He sat up in the chair, every muscle in his body aching from the cramped position in which he'd been reclining. He ran a hand over his whiskered chin and winced at his own body odor. He hated being unkempt—though he rather liked the scratchiness of the beard he'd never been allowed to grow. Turning his eyes to Chas, he saw that she was still sleeping and he sighed. Patting her hand, he drew in a long breath, exhaled slowly and then released her hand to stand. He put his hands to the small of his back and stretched backwards, feeling the muscles protest. He sighed again and walked to the window where lightning was now streaking across the heavens with increasing rapidity. Thunder boomed in answer to the loud crack of the lightning as he pushed aside the heavy drapes with the back of his hand.

The day was dreary and gray as befitted a wild storm—not untypical of Gaelach at this time of year. The fields—or so it was said—had forty shades of greenness because of these seasonal rains. Despite the fact that lethal storms roared along the coastline, the Gaelachians loved their rain and reveled in the wild tempests that could turn so quickly to claim a life.

Reaching up to push the draperies back from the window so he could get a better view of the thunderstorm, Ruan cracked the window just enough to feel the delicious coolness of the rain against his face. He closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of spent ozone and the dusty smell of rain-washed fertile land.

He hung his head, the flash of the turbulent storm lighting him in relief from mussed dark hair to the soiled shirt he wore hanging loose from his britches. His bare feet were turning cold for he was standing in a small puddle of rainwater that was dripping from the windowsill, but he didn't care. There could be nothing colder than his heart as he strove not to think of losing Chastain.

She was meant to be his, he thought as rain fell on his hair and dripped from an errant lock that had fallen over his forehead. He braced his hands to either side of the window and barely acknowledged the moisture soaking him.

"In another life," the mystic had told him, "you were gods to your people. Where you went, your lady followed, even into the Abyss of Hell, *Itself*, she tracked you. A child—your child—grew in her belly and she wished for you to see its birth."

*Old legends*, Ruan thought as he opened his eyes and lifted his head. The mystic had spun images of legends so ancient they had become all but lost except in the mist-filled minds of the Ancients. He had regaled his prince with tales spun from strange fabric, from lands with Araibis names that rolled from the tongue like clattering pebbles down a mountainside.

"She will always be yours and you will always be hers. Your lives will always be intertwined and from one generation to the next, she will guard you as diligently as you will love her."

Ruan felt a hand upon his shoulder and his heart soared. There was no need for him to look around to know it was his lady's light touch that had asked for his attention. He reached his right hand across his chest to lay it atop hers and squeezed gently.

"How is your wrist, milord?" she asked, and he could hear the weakness in her sweet voice.

"It throbs a bit with this rain but otherwise it is fine," he replied, reveling in being able to speak to her again and knowing everything would be fine from then on. "My tailbone is sore, though."

He turned to her, his eyes traveling over her pale features, skipping past the pain in her pretty green eyes for he was the cause of that and it hurt him deeply. There were light splashes of color to her cheeks but that was good, he thought. No fever brightened her pretty flesh. He put the back of his fingers against her face.

"How do *you* feel, milady?" he asked quietly.

"Sore but well enough, milord," she replied, turning her face so she could kiss his hand.

Gently—and with infinite care—he put his arms around her and brought her to him. His heart was thundering in his chest to match the cadence of the turbulent storm outside.

"Had I lost you..." he began only to feel tears closing his throat.

"I am here, beloved," she replied. "Where I was meant to be."

He dipped his knees and swung her up into his arms to carry her to the bed. Putting a knee to the mattress, he lay her down gently atop the covers then stretched out beside her.

Outside the storm grew louder and rain lashed against the windows. The room had grown hot and stuffy so he sat up just long enough to peel the shirt over his head and toss it to the floor. He lay back down and for a long time he simply held her, feeling her fragile body pressed close to his. There was iron strength in this woman, but she was

his to protect—to keep safe, warm and content. To rock their bantlings in her slender arms.

“Ruan?” Chas asked softly.

“Aye.”

“I feel I am in need of a good fucking.”

The prince lifted his head and stared down at his lady. He narrowed his eyes. “I thought you didn’t like that word.”

Chas shrugged. “I don’t,” she said, “but sometimes it’s what a woman needs.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “Are you well enough for such cavorting, milady?”

“I am.” She ran her finger from his bare hairy chest down to his navel, circled the deep indentation with a fingertip and then slipped her hand under the waistband of his britches to thread her fingers through the crisp, wiry curls above his shaft.

Ruan shuddered as her fingers wrapped around him.

“Fucking, eh?” he queried, and glanced down to where his soldier was moving from parade rest to attention.

“A good fucking is what I believe I said,” Chas stressed. “In the manner of a corsair of old.”

Ruan’s left eyebrow shot up. “A corsair?”

“Aye,” Chas answered with a sigh. “A bold and brazen corsair who has captured me and taken me aboard his ship. There to be ravished and ravaged and masterfully satiated.”

“I’m not so sure ravishing and ravaging are such a good idea, wench,” he said.

“Well, if you don’t feel up to the challenge...”

He reared up and pushed her flat on her back, trapping her hand over his rising staff. “Be careful with your taunts, lass,” he warned.

Chas pretended to shudder. “Oh, please, Captain!” she gasped. “I am but an untried maiden. I have never known a man. Please, I am saving myself for my betrothed, Lord Rufus.”

“Rufus?” Ruan asked with a snort. “Some lover that fool would make.”

Chas pushed weakly at the broad chest above her with one hand while the other closed around the prince’s hard cock. “Please do not rape me, Captain. Please!”

Ruan’s lips twitched. “Ah, but there is rape and then there is rape, wench,” he said in a gruff voice. “Before all is said and done, I will have you begging for quarter!”

Reaching down to drag her hand from between their bodies, Ruan spread her arms wide, pinning them down to either side of her head. He swooped down and claimed her lips roughly, thrusting his tongue deep inside the sweet cavern of her mouth.

Chas wriggled beneath him, making sure her thigh rubbed against his rock-hard erection. When his lips slid from her to shower hot kisses down her throat, she turned her head away.

"Woe is me!" she cried. "Oh, woe is me! I am being violated!"

Ruan threw back his head and gave an eerie rendition of a villain's evil laugh before sliding his body down hers until he could press his mouth over the peak of one dusky nipple hidden behind the soft lawn of her nightgown. Sucking on the erect nubbin through the fabric, he gently closed his teeth around the protrusion.

Chas bucked beneath him, pressing her breast closer to his mouth. The sensation of wet fabric and the pressure of his teeth were sending shivers through her body. As his tongue flicked out to stab at the tender peak, she could not keep the groan of delight from escaping.

Ruan let go of her arms and sat up, straddling her. He put his hands to the bodice of her gown and ripped the fabric from neckline to waist, freeing her lush breasts.

"Oh!" Chas cried out and put her hands to his broad shoulders in an attempt to push him away. "Unhand me, you monster!"

Ruan moved off her just long enough to rend the gown all the way to the hem then jerked it out from beneath her.

Chas lay there with her eyes hot and filled with hunger as her lover tore the gown into strips. She put out her tongue to wet her lips, and as she did, she heard Ruan's low growl, for his gaze was locked on her mouth.

First, the right wrist was looped with a strip of torn gown. Stretching his lady's arm to the top of the bed, he tied the strip to the headboard.

"No, no!" Chas protested, weakly hitting him on his right biceps with her balled fist, but he captured her hand and before she could utter another denial had tied her left wrist to the headboard.

Feebly she kicked out at him as he made quick work of her ankles. She thrashed her head back and forth on the pillow, moaning and pretending to sob.

"Rufus, eh?" Ruan snarled as his hands went to the buttons of his fly.

"He will avenge me!" Chas pronounced.

"How, when the fop has no knowledge of which end of a blade to wield?" her ravager inquired with an evil smirk.

Peeling the britches from his hips, he stepped out of them, presenting the bold thrust of his erection to the wide eyes of his lady. "Now *this* is a sword, wench!" he bragged.

Slowly—very slowly—he put his knee on the bed and threw a leg over Chas' hips. He sat down gently—his cock stretched out along her lower belly and oozed a bead of love juice upon her flesh.

Chas shut her eyes and turned her head away. She struggled against the bonds holding her wrists, writhing sensually upon the tousled sheets.

Ruan leaned forward to put his hands on her breasts and began to knead them firmly. He ran his thumbs over the straining peaks then flicked the nails of his index fingers over the pebbled surfaces before lightly pinching the sensitive nubs, rolling them between his thumbs and fingers.

"No, please!" Chas begged.

"One more word out of you, wench, and I'll throw you to my men when I am finished with you," Ruan warned in a gruff voice. He sat up. "They want you as it is!"

Chas drew her lower lip between her teeth and shivered.

His hands spread over her rib cage and down until one hand—the heel just touching her pubic hair—was pressing firmly on her belly, one finger dipping into her navel. He smiled at Chas' moan and pressed a bit harder. As he did, he lowered his free hand to the spread V of her thighs and—turning his hand palm upward—slipped his index and middle fingers deep into her cunt. His thumb grazed her clitoris and when she cried out, he grinned mercilessly.

"I'll make you forget Lord Rufus No-nuts," he swore and moved his fingers in and out of her with a sure stroke.

"Lord who?" she asked with a giggle.

"Shush or I'll turn you over to my crew, wench!"

His fingers were easing in and out of her with a rhythm that had Chas squirming. She wriggled her hips, and her heels were digging into the mattress as she sought to elevate her lower body to the luscious torment he wrought.

"I'll tie you to the mast and let every man on board suckle your tits," he said and leaned down to capture a hard nipple between his lips, sucking the sensitive peak into his hot mouth as his stiff cock dragged along her thigh.

Chas was rapidly losing herself to the delicious pressure inside her cunt. His fingers were plying her as a master musician with his instrument, but she wanted something harder, something longer than those knowledgeable digits sliding in and out of her.

Ruan sensed his lady's need and pulled his fingers out of her. "You want me, wench?" he asked in a low, gruff snarl. "You want my stiff cock inside you?"

"Aye, milord!" Chas panted.

"Well, you'll have to wait," he snapped.

Chas started to protest, but her lover slid down in the bed, loomed over her and where his fingers had been ravaging, she felt his lips and tongue invading. She groaned as the hot moistness of that little muscle stabbed repeatedly at her clit.

"Ruan!" she cried.

He raised his head. "You dare to call another lover while I am fucking you, wench?"

"Nay," she said. "It is just that I..."

"Shut your mouth or I will gag you!" he cautioned. "A woman's mouth is good for only one thing and we'll get to that soon enough!"

A shiver of delight rippled down Chas' body, and it was all she could do not to make a sound as he continued to suckle her cunt and ply her vagina and ass with stone-hard fingers.

Ruan knew his lady was nearing a point where he could not control the sensations rippling through her. He snatched his fingers from her and stretched out atop her, settling his cock between her legs.

"I am going to fuck you, wench!" he chortled.

He was in her quickly, his throbbing shaft probing deep. His hands were on her hips, lifting her for his hard thrusts into her wetness. Fingers digging lightly into her rump, he brought her to him in lightning jabs that rocked her.

Chas felt the itch beginning deep inside her and arched her head back, giving herself up to the sensations between her legs. His cock was as hard as tempered steel and her warrior was wielding that delectable weapon with the expertise of a master.

As her climax shot over her in a rosy heat that made her release a soft scream of fulfillment, she felt him come. Long, hard and copious, the culmination of his lovemaking seemed to jerk inside her forever until he fell limp upon her, his face buried in the crook of her damp neck.

They lay there panting, trying to calm their heaving chests. The fingers of Ruan's right hand were on her left arm, gently stroking the underside from elbow to underarm in a lazy figure eight.

"Will you still turn me over to your crew, Captain Brazen?" she asked gently.

"Nay, wench," he denied. "No man will ride you save this corsair."

Chas closed her eyes and rested her chin on the back of his head, and sighed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you think of a springtime Joining?" he asked.

"They are nice. Do you know someone who will be Joined in the spring?" she countered.

"I thought perhaps you and me."

She pushed back from him a little and looked up into his tender eyes. "Well, if it is our Joining of which you speak, I would prefer summer," she admitted, "upon the Solstice."

He nodded. "Sounds like an auspicious time to me."

"There are, however, a few minor things that may prevent such a Joining," she said.

Ruan frowned. "And those are what, exactly?"

"No enjoying the honeymoon before the Joining," she said firmly.

The prince groaned but he nodded his reluctant agreement. "What else?"

"The groom has not asked the bride to be his mate. Don't you think he should?"

A slow smile dimpled Ruan Cosaint's handsome face and he released his lady. With manly grace, he went to one knee before her, took her hand in his, kissed it cavalierly and then placed the palm against his heart.

"Milady Chastain," he said, his eyes locking with hers. "Would you do me the honor of becoming my bride?"

"It would be my honor, Milord Ruan."

"Good then..."

Chas placed the palm of her free hand against his cheek. "There is one more condition, one of utmost importance at this precise moment."

The frown returned to the prince's rugged face. "That being what, milady?"

"You take a long, hot bath," she said, wrinkling her nose. "You stink!"

Ruan lowered her hand to the bulge in his britches. "Methinks I'd do better with a long, cold one, don't you?"

Chas grinned. "Perhaps, as long as you save the long, hot one for me!"

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 39 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing houseslave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlotte welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1337 Commerce Drive, #13, Stow, OH 44224.

## **Also by Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails I anthology

WindWorld: Desire's Sirocco

WindWorld: Longing's Levant

WindWorld: Rapture's Etesian



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)