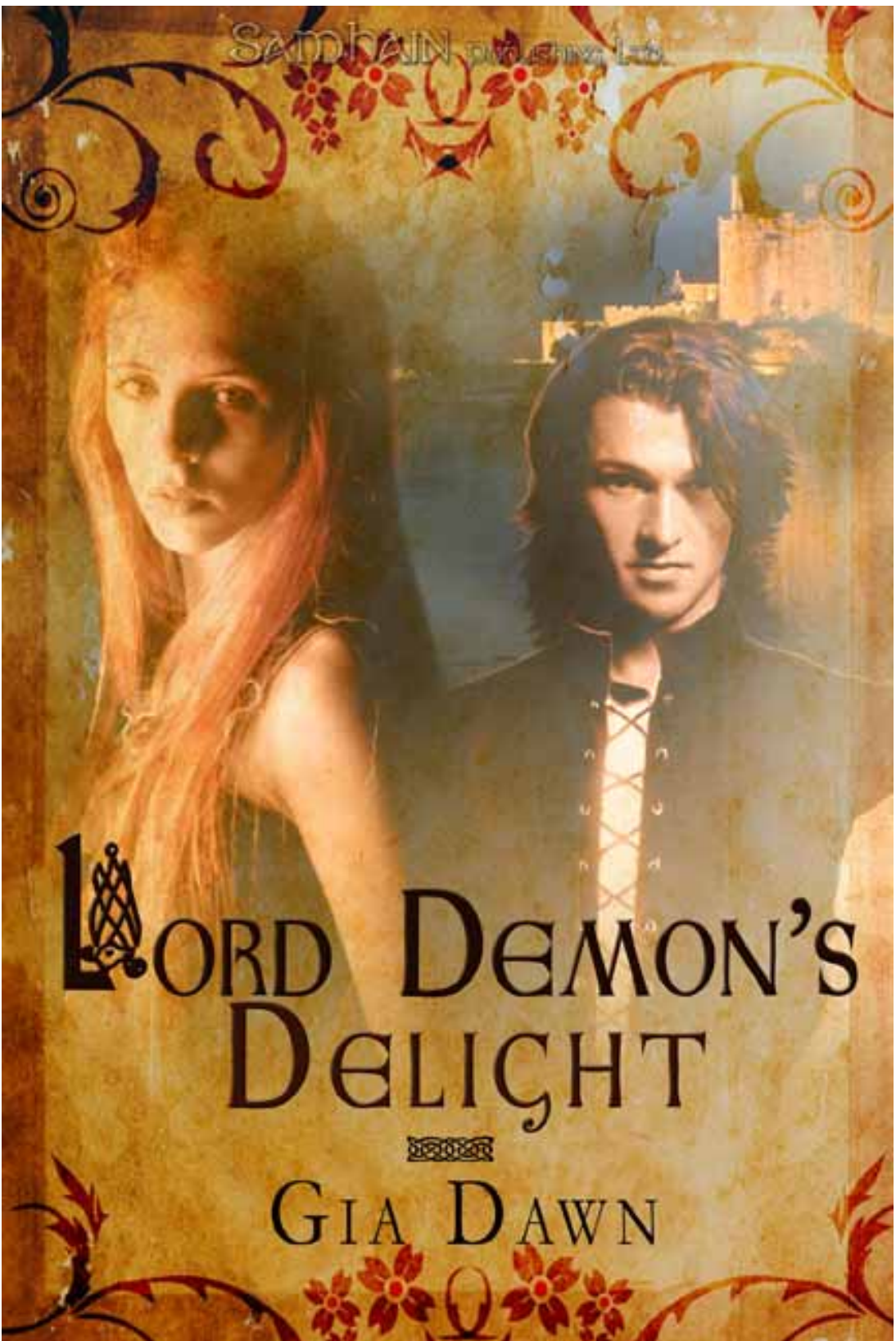


SAMHAIN Publishing Ltd



LORD DEMON'S DELIGHT

GIA DAWN

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Lord Demon's Delight

Gia Dawn

Dedication

For Joe, who has always let me follow my dreams.

Prologue

"Is that her?" Snapdragon asked.

Three heads bent low over the still pool of water.

"Yes," answered Rose.

"She's lovely."

"Can't be her," Pansy butted in. "She's got red hair. I know for a fact he can't stand red hair. You'll have to find another one."

Rose frowned and glared at Pansy. "It's her."

"She's scrawny," Pansy stated, leaning back and balling her hands on her hips. "He doesn't like scrawny."

"I don't care what he likes." Rose looked back into the water. "This is the right one."

All three heads bent down again to study the scene. The young woman stood with her face against the wall while her father whipped her with a length of willow stick.

"What's that nasty man doing?" Snapdragon demanded. "Is he beating her?"

"Yes." Rose sighed.

"Why, I'll..." Snapdragon raised her hand and started to plunge it into the pool.

Pansy smacked the other's hand away "You can't do that! It's in the Charter. Number 75. 'No blasting, blazing or bolting unless in danger of death or dismemberment'."

"Who made you in charge of the rules? Too many damned rules, I say." Snapdragon kept her eyes glued to the pool. "Can't I at least singe him a little?"

The man continued to strike the lovely red-haired girl. She stood utterly still, defiant, refusing to run or cower.

"Maybe just a bit," Rose agreed, turning to look at Snapdragon. "But nothing fancy. Not like the last time. It took us five generations to straighten that one out."

"All right, all right." Snapdragon rolled up her sleeves and smiled delightedly. "What shall it be? Seizures? Convulsions? Plague?"

"Plague?" Pansy glared at Rose. "See what you've done? She can't do anything small...has to be death and destruction all the time."

"Enough!" Rose's yell instantly silenced the others. "Give him a headache, boils or a good case of some stomach nasty and be done with it."

"Can I give him all three?"

"If you must."

"Oh, good." Snapdragon raised her hand again, wiggled her fingers and sank them into the water to close around the figure of the man. He immediately slapped a hand to his head and doubled over to vomit on the floor.

"Nice work," Pansy grudgingly conceded, watching as the girl took advantage of the situation and stumbled hastily from the room. "That ought to last him a few days at the least. Are you sure she's the one?" she asked again. "He really doesn't like red hair, you know."

"I know, dear, I know." Rose stirred the water into a frenzy and the scene disappeared from view.

Chapter One

One grand morning—in the perhaps not so grand kingdom of Westmyre—Lord Llewellyn Dunmore rode through the gates of Marshton under the misguided assumption that this would be another ordinary day in another wretchedly ordinary town.

The sun shone warm on his shoulders, the wind blew cool on his face and the villagers stopped whatever they were doing, spit superstitiously on the ground as he passed and made the sign of the cross to ward off his evil presence. Llew paid them not the slightest bit of attention. His mind was on more important matters.

He scratched his balls beneath his breeches, their heavy weight a painful reminder of why he had ridden so far from home—food, drink and several nights of pleasure wrapped in the arms of his very favorite whore. He smiled in anticipation, the vulgar grin sending another peasant fleeing to the opposite side of the street.

He had almost made it past the church when he heard voices raised in anger.

“I will not marry him!” The woman shouted from the other side of the open door. “I would rather marry a Demon of Dunmore.”

Llew sighed and turned his mount around. If the woman was so determined to summon him, it was the least he could do to answer.

“You will obey your father, Jessaline!” An older woman’s voice shouted even louder than the first. Her words were followed by the sound of a slap and the shuffle of movement across the floor.

Llew frowned as he tied up his mount and scratched the beast behind the ears. “Wait here, I’ll be right back,” he promised, bolting up the stone steps to lean against the doorway and survey the scene inside.

The reticent bride stood stiffly, one hand pressed to the side of her face where an angry welt was already beginning to appear.

Llew thought it must be her mother who stood and wagged a finger before the younger woman’s nose. “The Dunmores are a thrice cursed lot who never marry, and this latest lord is bastard born just like all the others.”

“So is Timon,” Jessaline replied, “or have you all forgotten his father is *the bishop*.”

When the old woman raised her hand again, Llew stepped from the shadows. “At your service, Jessaline,” he said, striding into the room. “You called?”

There was absolute silence in the church as both women gaped at him in astonishment. The mother moved to cower behind the priest, a look of horror etched upon her face. The fat priest genuflected hastily. Only Jessaline stood firm, gazing at him in open awe as he knelt and took her hand.

“Are you really a demon of Dunmore?” Llew marveled at the woman’s audacity. She had no right to sound so skeptical. After all, he was here at her bequest.

“Llewellyn Dunmore, at your service.” He rose and studied her. It didn’t take him long to notice she wasn’t right for him at all. She was tall, he preferred petite. Her haunches were long and lean, while he liked short and plump—more flesh to hold on to when the ride got rough and bumpy.

And her hair—*shite*—her hair was red, that most blighted of all colors. Flaming red, silken red that fell in a rope across one shoulder. He should have known it when he first heard her speak. Obstinate. Stubborn. Qualities he avoided in women at all cost.

He let his gaze roam lower and realized the hair that covered her mound would be red, as well. A sudden picture of those ruby curls

tangled with his black ones set his balls aflame and a shock of blood racing to his cock.

He knew she saw the bulge in his crotch by the way her eyes widened and a blush rose to stain the apples of her cheeks. "So, lady, what do you have to offer me in marriage?" He rested his hands low on his hips.

Her eyes never left the juncture of his thighs. "I have money, a decent dowry...land."

"I have no use for money or land, I have them all in abundance." On impulse he stepped closer and brought his mouth to her ear. His next words were soft, meant for her alone. "What I want is a woman who will let me bed her every night and will ride my cock with her tight little cunt until we both scream to the heavens."

Llew meant to be crude, to be obscene, to shock her out of her hasty words and end this as quickly as he could. He let his hand slide to her hip and smooth across her bottom. It was wider than he had first assumed, the muscle tight and firm to the touch. Desire struck him again as she trembled and bit hard on her lip.

He smiled, making the expression as lewd as possible. That should finish things, he thought in satisfaction, turning to walk away. He was stopped short by the shiver of her fingers as they wrapped around his wrist. When he turned back to face her, he was startled to find her dark green eyes fixed solidly on his own.

"If I promise to do all that you ask, will you swear never to beat me like a dog, or raise hand to me in anger?"

The flippant reply that sprung to his lips was silenced by her expression. For the very first time, he felt her desperation; the tremors that threatened to break her down, the glint of tears that welled up in those magnificent emerald eyes.

Damn. *Damn, damn, damn!* Not tears. He couldn't resist tears.

He traced a finger down her cheek and tucked it under her chin. "I would promise you that," he heard himself reply before he could stop the words from spilling out of his mouth. What the hell was he thinking?

“Then take me, my lord,” she whispered. “Please, take me away. And we must hurry, Timon and my father will be here soon.”

Llew considered for a moment, wondering if there was any way he could possibly back out now. She continued to regard him with her clear and earnest gaze, their guileless depths moving him more than any words she might have spoken. A man could find himself in those eyes—find pieces torn away and left forgotten long ago. He didn’t know if he was comforted or terrified by the thought, he only knew he could not say no to those glorious green-hued orbs.

He turned to the priest. “Read the vows, Father,” he ordered. “Do it now,” he added, “before I change my mind.”

The priest coughed, cleared his throat and coughed again, wasting precious time. Llew decided to take matters into his own hands. Pulling the bible from the dumbstruck priest, Llew read the proper passage. “Say yes, my lady,” he added at the end.

“Yes.”

Now it was the other woman’s turn to protest. “This marriage will be annulled by morning,” she warned.

“Not if I have properly bedded my wife before then,” Llew replied. But the woman had given him a new idea. He could collect the lady’s dowry, give it back, send her off to wherever she wanted and have the marriage annulled. He would have saved her from her fate, and his life could go on just as he had planned.

Alone, happily, with as many whores as he could afford to keep his cock well sated.

His world had been righted.

He pulled his new wife into his arms, content with his newly made plans—and completely unprepared for the way her body melted into his. She fit him in every way. Each curve, each inch, each line of her figure, found a welcoming match in the line of his own. Her wide green eyes stared directly into his, throwing him off balance by the trust in their clear expression.

He bent his head and kissed her, wanting the briefest taste, but when she opened her lips to his invading tongue as if she had been born to kiss him, Llew felt his composure start to slip. She tasted of mulled wine, spice and berry, of every fantasy he had ever had. He drove into her with his tongue, demanding that she answer. When she moaned softly into his mouth, he thought he would spend where he stood.

His hand slid to her hips and hauled her against his groin, feeling her move to meet him, her legs and arms wrapping around him like the finest of spun linen.

Frustrated, too aroused, he pushed her away and glared at the play of shadows that filtered through her eyes. "Do you want me to take your maidenhead right here in the church?"

She smiled, although her mouth trembled, and touched a finger to his swollen lips. "Is that what you wish?" Her voice was thick with her own desire. "We have yet to sign the writ, my lord. We are not man and wife."

"You would hold me to that minor point?" He tried to lighten his tone. Tried to shake off the need of her.

She smiled even more, her teeth peeking out so he could see they were straight and white. He wanted to run his tongue across their edges and feel them nip at the tender skin on the underside of his balls.

"You drive a hard bargain, wife." Nonetheless, he forced the priest to write out the proper letter.

Llew and Jessaline wrote their names beneath. After a quick coating of powder to seal the ink, Llew rolled the parchment and stuffed it in his breeches, grimacing when he had to adjust his still solid erection.

"My dowry is in that chest on the floor." Jessaline pointed and Llew retrieved the box. It was heavier than he'd expected. He gave her a curious look.

"You have married well, Lord Dunmore. I am Jessaline of the House of Nolan."

Llew stared hard at his bride. What had he gotten himself into? The Nolans were a family even more powerful than his own. This unsanctioned alliance could turn uglier than he had imagined.

But his brothers would appreciate it. It had always been said that if a Dunmore ever married, the gates of hell would open wide in welcome. It seemed that Llew had just announced himself and knocked.

The sound of horses and men carried in from the doorway and the older woman ran screaming to meet them.

“Time to go.” Llew grabbed his wife by the hand and pulled her along behind him. He lifted her and set her upon the saddle of his horse, tucking the chest into her arms. He hauled himself up behind her and urged Broch into a gallop.



Jess held tight as her new husband rode like a demon out of town. Not demon, she amended, feeling the strength of his arms around her and his muscled body pressed close. Dark angel, or Seraph fallen to earth were far more accurate descriptions.

The taste of him still lingered on her lips, fermented honey, wild and strong. She said a grateful thank you to whatever god had sent him—god or devil, she did not truly care, not if they had answered with such quick and fierce abandon. Jessaline had no regrets, not when she thought of the magnificent man she now could claim as her husband.

The very thought of him sent a shiver across her breasts, tightening their tender tips where they rubbed against her gown. What would his fingers feel like, brushing across her skin? A myriad of new sensations coursed through her body, centering in the juncture of her thighs as she was jostled and jerked by the horse’s furious gallop.

She closed her eyes and rode the sensation, picturing the man behind her. Beautiful. He was simply the most beautiful man she had ever seen. With chestnut hair that hung over his shoulders, smoky

brown eyes and dimples that flashed whenever he smiled, he was everything she had ever dreamed of.

He was crude, she admitted, remembering the words he had used. She also remembered the way those words had made her feel, delightfully sinful and wickedly pleased. She had never met a man who stirred her the way he did, creating in her a feral desire she had never believed existed.

This Demon of Dunmore had changed everything. With one simple kiss he had driven her nearly mad with desire. Even now, knowing her father raced to catch them, she would gladly jump from the saddle of the horse to lay with him on the soft spring grass.

She had seen the great lump that swelled beneath his breeches; seen and marveled at the size of what was hidden there. Would he be gentle—take her easily until she grew used to the mass of him, or drive into her with no restraint, tearing away the mark of her girlhood to leave her sobbing his name while he whispered words of comfort?

She would take either, she acknowledged. Do whatever he asked, whatever he demanded if he spared her from the wrath of her father and the life of misery her family had planned.

They rode for what seemed like an eternity, skirting the main roads to make their way along less well known and traveled paths. At last they slowed and Llewellyn turned the horse onto a faint track that led deep into the forest. The trees closed in a whisper behind them and soon they were alone in the shadows and the leaves.

Jess trembled when his hand cupped the fullness of her breast. She held her breath, hoping he would not hear the whimper of desire that welled up in her throat.

Their bodies began to rock in unison as he reined their mount to a walk. His hips thrust against hers, sliding her mound into the pommel of the saddle, building the throb of need again. Would he take her now? Pull her onto the leaf covered ground and spread her legs to embrace him?

He chuckled, a husky sound that purred against her neck. "Do you feel it, too, my lady, this arc of fire between us?"

He rubbed his hand over her gown until he found what he was after. Jess bit back another cry as he flicked his thumb over her nipple, teasing the peak into a hard and aching knot.

She gave in to the urge to lean her head against his chest, completely unprepared for the way he shifted his arms to hold her. However he tried to hide it, there was comfort in his touch. Comfort and a security she had never known before.

"So," he continued, pinching harder on her nipple, "are you ready to fulfill your end of the bargain?" He reined his horse to a stop, dismounted, and pulled her down beside him. All bravado and swaggering pride, he licked his tongue up her cheek, cupped both hands beneath her hips and ground her close against him. Jess could already feel the thickening of his cock.

She wanted him, arrogance and all.

Her eyes searched for the truth of him, for the heart of the man beneath the mantle of conceit. As a child she had learned to gauge the moods of others. It was a trait that had served her well in the past, and she prayed it would not desert her now. "If that is what you wish, my lord."

For long moments he held her gaze. Jess let out a breath she didn't know she was holding when he moved to lean against a tree, legs spread wide and lips curled into a smirk. If he had planned on taking her by force he would have already done so.

Instead, he held out his hand. When Jess took it, he crushed her close. "Would you rather have a nice soft bed and sheets of the most expensive silk?"

She knew he mocked her. "If I said yes, would you grant my request?" She didn't let her gaze falter, not even for an instant.

He finally nodded, his eyes darkening intently. "Would you settle for linen? My supply of silk is running low." There was amusement in his smoky look.

"Linen it is." Jessaline allowed herself a tenuous smile. She was still uncertain of him. Still unsure of this whole new situation.

He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips, then turned her palm up and trailed his tongue across the sensitive skin. Jess shivered, wanting more; wanting things she could not even put a name to.

"Will you let me run my tongue across all of you? Taste of that alabaster skin wherever I may please?" His smile had grown shadowed, and he let his eyes drift lower to stare at her breasts, and lower still to stare where his other hand rested at the top of her thigh.

"Will you ask the same of me? Am I expected to taste of you, as well?" Jessaline could not believe it was her own voice speaking. Something about this beautiful stranger made her bold, gave her the courage to question him without fear of repercussions.

He sucked in his breath, his grin now growing dangerously seductive. "Oh, yes. That will be part of our agreement."

"But you will never force me against my will?" She heard the thread of fear that trickled into her tone. She did not try to hide it. "Never hurt me? That was your part of the bargain."

Llewellyn pressed her hand to his chest. His heart beat strong and steady. "Never, lady, will I ever force you or do anything that would hurt you. But there are many things I will demand. If you don't care to finalize this arrangement, we can have the marriage rescinded."

Now the fear rose fast and hard. To have to go back...face her father's wrath...marry Timon. He must have seen her look of panic, for he pulled her close and buried her face into his shoulder.

"Shhhhh," he whispered. "Whatever happens, I will not send you back to them."

He held her for long minutes, not pressing her to anything more. Jessaline could feel the rigid length of him thrusting against her stomach. Her fears calmed, as if her body knew how well he would touch her, even if her mind did not. Birdsong whistled from the trees as a stiff breeze stirred the leaves to motion.

Sunlight shadowed, broke out, shadowed again. Llew pushed her slowly away and looked up. A fat raindrop splashed down into one brown eye. He squinted it shut, and Jessaline giggled at the exasperated expression that twisted his mouth.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "If you need to relieve yourself, I suggest you do it now. I'll be right back." He strode behind a tree, leaving Jessaline to scramble around another one, hoping to be finished before he could see her squatting with her skirts hiked up.

The rain fell harder, heavy drops that soaked instantly into wherever they landed. Jess's gown grew damp and her hair formed wet tendrils that wrapped around her neck.

"Jessaline."

She rose hastily and brushed her skirts down. When she returned, he lifted her high upon his horse, this time swinging up in front of her.

"Hold tight," he commanded. "We're in for a cold, wet ride."

Chapter Two

"What are you doing?" Pansy leaned over Rose's shoulder.

"Her father is coming," Rose answered calmly. "We have to create a distraction."

Pansy frowned. "There is a ruling on this. Number 123, section 18. 'No storm summoning where outsiders might be involved'."

"It's not a storm, really," Rose said in exasperation. "Just think of it more like a nice spring rain...to help the crops grow and feed the riverbeds."

Snapdragon pushed Pansy aside and stuck her own head over the basin. "Storm? Do we need a storm? I can make a nice big one with lots of wind and great bolts of—"

"No storms!" Pansy wasn't the least bit amused. "And I already warned you about the lightning bolts."

Snapdragon pressed her lips together and glared menacingly at Pansy. "Is there a rule against blasting you? Because I'm just about ready to let you have it good."

"Shhhh! Both of you." Rose frowned and scooted over so all of them had a clear view of the scene being played out in the water. "Her father is coming and we have to cover their tracks. Do you want to botch this up already?"

"No, no, of course not." Pansy had the decency to sound contrite. "But there are guidelines. I, for one, don't want to have to spend the next century or two explaining things to the council." She glared at Snapdragon, who eyed her with the same amount of animosity.

Rose continued her work, paying the other two not the slightest bit more attention. In the pool she could see the rain pour down in thick driving sheets. "Ride fast, my little ones," she murmured, before slicing her hand through the water. The vision disappeared into waves that circled and spread out from the center.



Llewellyn rode like wind through the sleeting rain. He was wet, cold, his balls were on fire from their lack of release, and he was having the time of his life. Gritting his teeth against the elements, feeling Jessaline hold tighter to his waist, he pictured himself a hero of legend who saved the maiden from the evil that stalked her and earned his reward in the silk of her virgin cunt.

His vision was made all the more magnificent by the knowledge it wasn't too far from the truth. Picturing Jess, with her hair slicked down from the rain and her gown plastered wetly to her bountiful breasts and hips, sent his cock pulsing once again. He reveled in his desire. He lifted his face to the weeping sky and drank deep of the rain on his lips.

Life didn't get much better than this. Even if his stomach grumbled continuously from its lack of food and his fingers grew numb where they clenched around the icy leather of the reins.

The temperature dipped lower as the storm blew on. It would grow even colder once nightfall descended. The spring was too new to fight off the north winds that came to keep company with the rain.

He felt his wife burrow deeper into his back, and realized that if he was feeling the effects of the storm, she must be more than miserable. She made not one sound of complaint. Llew's opinion of her rose with every passing mile. But he would have to find shelter soon. His family owned a small manor not far from Marsh-ton. He hadn't visited it in years, but his brother made use of the secluded homestead and kept a staff on the premises. By Llew's estimation they were only a couple of

miles from the place—if he could see the turnoff in the falling dusk. A mist rose from the ground to further obscure the trail ahead.

He slowed his mount and called to Jessaline over the pounding rain. “Soon, lady, we will be fed and dry and warming ourselves by a blazing fire. Hold on a little bit longer.”

He felt her nod against his back and smiled to himself. She was surprisingly strong and courageous. If she proved as daring in bed, he would have found a woman worth the keeping. But then, he reminded himself with a frown, he was not going to keep her. That thought wasn't pleasant. The day grew suddenly bleaker and the storm raged fiercer overhead.

When he thought they might wander the woods forever without any sign of the cottage, Llew spotted light in the darkness ahead. Broch covered the distance quickly and Llew reined them to a halt outside a small but well built manor.

He jumped from the saddle and pulled Jessaline into his arms. Then he thundered on the door, pounding with all his might until it opened and two fearful figures peered out from within.

“Who's there?” demanded the man. Llew heard the sound of a sword sliding quietly from its sheath.

“Llewellyn Dunmore,” he answered. The door was opened immediately.

“My lord! We did not expect...come in, come in.”

“Is my brother here?” Llew shouldered past the entryway and peered into the great room.

“No, my lord. Master Allard is at Dunmore Keep with Master Graham.”

“We need dry clothes and food. My lady wife is wet, cold and has not eaten all day.” He strode across the room, heedless of the water they trailed over the polished wood floor.

He sat Jess down in a chair by the hearth before adding more fuel to the fire, stoking it into blazing new life. She still looked beautiful, he

thought, even with her lips turning blue from the cold and her hair a wet cloak around her shoulders.

He smiled encouragement, took her hands in his and chafed them vigorously. “Not the wedding you had planned? To be tired, starved and half drowned in the rain?”

She looked at him through a tangle of hair. “Is this how you pictured your bride on your wedding night? Not bathed and perfumed, and waiting warm in your bed?” Her eyes danced impishly in the flickering light. Llew felt a weight of satisfaction settle on his chest.

She was amazing.

“My lady!” The steward’s wife bustled into the room, carrying a load of clean linen. A younger girl followed and set up a folding wooden screen in one corner. “If you will go upstairs, my lord, you have fresh clothing waiting in your brother’s room. Annie and I will take care of your lady.” When it looked as if Llew had no intention of leaving, the older woman glared at him. “Now, my lord, if you please.”

Her tone brooked no argument. Knowing Jessaline was safe in the hands of the competent servants; Llew gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and went to change. By the time he returned, Jess was wrapped in a thicket of woolen coverlets with her feet encased in soft fur slippers. The younger girl was carefully combing his wife’s hair.

The steward’s wife returned with two pewter cups of wine. She pulled a poker from the fire, rinsed it off in a pot of water, and placed the still red-hot tip into each cup in turn. Seconds later, Llew and Jessaline each held a steaming cup of wine.

“My compliments,” Llew said. “What is your name?”

“Bethy, Lord Llewellyn.”

“So, Bethy, what have you managed to scrounge us up for food?”

“If my lord will give me but a few more minutes, I will have fried eggs with onions and cheese, and a nice plate of bread with butter.”

“Do you have any honey cakes? They are a special favorite of mine.” His voice had dropped to a wistful whisper, and Bethy blushed when he gave her a lazy wink.

When Jessaline giggled, Llew gave her an overly innocent look. "What?"

"You could charm the angels themselves," she said with a shake of her head. "Have them dropping from heaven to obey your every whim and command."

"Only the female ones." Llew stretched out across the hearth on a thick boar's fur rug and gave the young maid another idle wink. She dropped the comb on the floor, blushed and hastily bent to retrieve it. He let his face grow serious as he turned his gaze back to Jessaline. She looked so small and fragile wrapped in the mound of blankets. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and draw her down beside him, stripping off the thick covers to warm her with the heat of his own body. His eyes must have given his thoughts away, for her eyes darkened with a strange new light.

"Are you well, my lady wife?" he asked.

Jessaline opened her mouth to answer but was stopped short by the grumble of protest from her stomach. It was answered with a matching growl from Llewellyn's. Llew grinned, his dimples flashing in the firelight. Jessaline's embarrassment faded as she watched his transformation.

He was a temptation no matter what his mood.

Her mouth watered when the smell of frying eggs and onion drifted into the room. She had never been so hungry in her life. When her stomach growled again, Llew chuckled. He was still stretched out at her feet. His shirt was untied, falling open to reveal a broad chest with a dusting of dark curly hair. She trailed her eyes down his stomach to where the hair dipped beneath his breeches. Warmth flowed into her flesh when she remembered how it felt to be held close with her husband's great length pressing into her stomach.

When she had finished her inspection, she let her gaze drift back to his face. He was watching her with a mixture of amusement and darker desires.

She wondered if he would demand she fulfill her marriage promise this night. Strangely, the thought did not alarm her. It brought a brand new rush of satisfaction, instead, as if all that had been wrong in her world had now righted itself again.

The maid gave a last comb of Jessaline's hair and began to twist the damp locks into a braid, but Llewellyn stopped her with an easy smile.

"It would please me to have my lady's hair left loose." He rose to tug teasingly at a strand that curled against her cheek.

The girl stammered a reply and fled from the room just as Bethy returned with a huge tray of food. She placed it on a small table in the corner and brought Jessaline a steaming platter of eggs and bread. She gave Llew an even larger platter then handed them both a freshly warmed drink.

Jess dug into the meal with abandon, downing every last morsel before polishing off a third glass of wine. Her shivering stopped and she sat in lazy contentment watching the fire die down into a glow of embers and dancing flames.

Llew finished his own meal with just as much enthusiasm, praising Bethy outrageously when she presented him with a smaller tray of sweets.

"You are like a boy," Jess told him after he had gobbled several of the honeyed morsels. "Did you sneak into the kitchens at night and steal the sugar from the shelves?"

Llew laughed, the sound rich and sensuous. "Many times. My mother threatened to beat me every time I did."

Jessaline's smile faltered. "She didn't really beat you, did she?"

Llew shook his head. "No. Never. My mother's nagging was always the worst of the punishment." He finished his wine and stood. Jessaline thought he would take her to his bedchamber, but he bent down and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek.

"I must check on Broch. Make sure he's been fed and brushed. He rode hard and served us well today."

"He is a magnificent horse," Jessaline replied. She wondered at the weight of the words on her tongue.

"Tis said he is descended from the Aughisky, fairy steeds. They must never be allowed to see the ocean lest they gallop wildly into the waves and vanish from the land."

"You jest." She bit back a giggle when Llew nuzzled his face into her neck. Her skin prickled and she could feel her breasts swell beneath the heavy woolen covers.

As if reading her thoughts, Llew slipped one hand between the folds of material. Jessaline gasped when his fingers met the bare flesh of her shoulder. He smiled in satisfaction, letting his fingers roam lower to brush the curve of her breasts. She found herself sinking deeper into the chair, her legs parting of their own accord. Her body, it seemed, was desperate for his touch.

"I will return with much haste, lady wife," he promised before giving her neck another brush of his lips and disappearing into the kitchen.

Jessaline let her gaze wander around the room. While it was small by city standards, the floor was of the finest oak and the large fireplace large was set with riverstone. Several cabinets fronted with glass stood against the walls, filled with books and papers of every sort imaginable. It was the home of a scholar, and Jess wondered if Llew was fascinated by the words and diagrams, or if they belonged to his brother.

As the long minutes rolled by, Jessaline felt her lids grow heavy. She tried her best to keep them from trapping her eyes in slumber, but in the end she lost the battle. Warm, safe and completely overcome with weariness, Jess let the darkness drape softly around her.

Llew whistled contentedly to himself as he strode back to the manor house. The steward had seen to Broch with a skilled efficiency, and his horse was stabled nearly as well as he could have done it himself. Now he could concentrate on the night of decadence he had planned.

No, he would not take the lady's maidenhead—he fully intended on annulling the marriage—but he would most definitely be rewarded for his

services. The thought of her hands gripping and pumping his cock, and then her mouth performing that exact same function set his body on fire again. He thought if he looked, his balls would be four times their normal size from the constant state of arousal he had found himself in all day.

He reached down and adjusted himself in his breeches, proud of the rigid flesh he would soon present to his wife. He thought of the weight of her breasts beneath her gown and imagined sliding himself back and forth between their silken mounds until he spent in a gush of hot, wet seed as she thanked him for his services.

Then he would kiss those same sweet hills, his teeth nipping hard at her nipples while his fingers strayed to bury themselves in the honey of her cunt. He would tease her until she begged for release, flicking a thumb across her clit before dipping his head to pierce her with his tongue.

When she blushed and begged him to stop, he would gently remind her of the promise she had made and continue to drive his tongue high inside her. She would whimper when he pushed her knees apart to give himself more room to play, snugging first one, and then two thick fingers deep inside her body, carefully leaving her maidenhead intact. She would drip her wet all over his hands, her rich smell of woman driving him to even greater heights of arousal.

He pictured those ruby lips sucking at his fingers, tugging them deeper and deeper into her core. His tongue would tease the nub of her clit, snaking around the hill of her desire as it grew and hardened until she cried out, pleading with him for the rapture of release that only he could give. And when at last he let her come, made her tremble and writhe in ecstasy, she would scream his name in glorious abandon.

The idea of being the very first man to touch her, to taste her—Llew tripped over a stone and cursed when his balls were jarred against his leg and the unyielding flesh of his cock was crushed in his woolen breeches.

Despite the discomfort, he was still smiling when he returned to the hall, only to find the lady of his fantasy snoring softly in her cocoon of covers.

Damn. Damn, damn and double damn! His heart sank as he saw her sleeping so soundly by the fire. He dropped to his knees and thunked his head on the arm of the chair, hoping the pain would take his mind off the unrelenting ache in his groin.

He could wake her. Wake her and demand payment. And in all honesty, he knew she would respond. She had proven herself most agreeable to his touch several times already this day. Yet he had never been a man who enjoyed his pleasure at another's discomfort; even his whores had all been willing and well paid. Jessaline was his *wife*, and as long as she held that title he would treat her with the respect due her station, even if it meant for a cold and dreary night alone.

She sighed and shifted in her sleep, the covers parting to reveal a swath of creamy pale skin. Llew couldn't resist—just a peek, a little look to see if her breasts were as round and beautiful as he imagined. Letting his hands slip stealthily between the folds of material, he slid the wool off her shoulders and gazed in true appreciation at the most magnificent pair of breasts he swore he had ever seen. Perky, full, no sag or droop to the skin, with proud coral nipples that hardened even as he watched.

He had to touch, to see if those tightened tips felt like knotted silk. His fingers strayed over her flesh and her nipples hardened even more. Jessaline moaned in her sleep and arched toward him, moving to press herself more firmly in his hands.

"Llew," she whispered.

It stunned him to hear his name on her lips, that she knew him even in her sleep after they had been together for such a short time. He smiled quietly, tucked the covers back over her shoulders and carried her to the bedchamber. After settling her on the mattress and pulling another cover over himself, Llew begged his balls to forgive him for another night of pain and warned his cock to behave and be still.

When they steadfastly refused to listen, he returned to the great room, sat in the chair by the fire, and poured another glass of wine. But just the thought of the beauty sleeping in the other room was enough to send another jolt of discomfort shooting from his groin.

With a sigh, he undid the lacings of his breeches and let his growing cock spill free. He gritted his teeth and slid his hand around its length, intending to relieve himself hard and fast.

A soft voice interrupted him from the shadows. "My lord?"

He turned, a wicked smile tilting up one corner of his mouth. It quickly dissipated when he saw the young maid, Annie, standing hesitant in the doorway.

She licked her lips slowly. Llew knew that with just one word from him, she would kneel willingly between his legs, wrap her mouth around his flesh and suck until he spilled down her throat.

She was a pretty thing, he realized. But her hair was an average shade of brown and she was not Jess, the beautiful woman who claimed his every thought.

"I do not need you," he said, his voice gravelly. He turned his head as she made to step closer. "Go to bed," he ordered, refusing to look at her again. "And tell no one else to disturb me this night." He heard her walk slowly away, knowing she watched him all the while, hoping he might change his mind.

When he was alone again he closed his eyes and pictured Jessaline kneeling before him, her flaming red hair spread like silk across his thighs, his hands caressing the softness of her cheeks as he guided her lips down to slide across his cock.

He saw those beautiful eyes watching him through her lashes, encouraging him to find his pleasure as she took him deep inside her mouth, letting him lead her with the pressure of his hands until his balls clenched tight, his hips arched against her, and he screamed her name when he—

"Ahhh, ahhhh, Jess!" He did cry out when he came into his hand—called her name without any conscious thought, and when he opened his eyes to find himself alone, disappointment weighed heavily upon him.

"Damn the woman, anyway," he muttered to himself. She should have been the one to take care of his needs. That was the bargain. That was what he expected for his troubles.

He took another swallow of wine and frowned at the stone hearth where he planned to sleep. It looked less inviting by the minute, even now that his body's hunger had been somewhat slaked. Only somewhat, he realized, when the thought of snuggling next to his wife in the bed sent his cock struggling back to life.

Shite. She would be the death of him yet.

Jessaline's first muffled sobs reached him just as he'd finished lacing his breeches. He could hear her writhing upon the bed, tossing and turning, locked in some nightmare that held her prisoner in the dark.

He hurriedly ran to kneel beside her and place a hand upon her shoulder. She pulled away from his touch, cowering deeper into the covers as she continued to struggle, beating his hands away each time he tried to hold her.

"Jessaline, *Jessaline!*" He clamped both hands around her arms, finally managing to wake her from the dream.

He could hear her try to catch her breath, feel her confusion as the nightmare receded. Her fingers reached out to trail across his cheek, and she choked back her cries as she tried to regain control.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry...so sorry," she whispered. "I did not mean to wake you. Please don't..."

He could feel her shrink away, pull back into herself as if she feared he would strike her in anger. She flinched when he raised his hand to her face, ducking her chin, trying to dodge the blow she expected. Llew felt his anger surge to the surface. What had happened to her in her past?

Despite her continued efforts to evade him, he managed to pull her into his arms and cradle her head against his chest. "Shhhh," he

whispered, stroking his fingers through her hair. “You are with me, your husband.”

She finally ceased her struggles and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face even deeper against his skin. Where desire had owned him before, unfamiliar emotions now settled over him. New urges to hold her, comfort her, protect her while she slept.

He refused to acknowledge the turning of his heart, to realize how quickly she’d begun to tame him. The Dunmore wanderlust was notorious. His father had spent his entire life running from one woman to the next. Llew had always wondered what his father had been so intent on running from—and why he followed so closely in his father’s wayward path.

Perhaps peace could be found wrapped in his new wife’s arms. Sleep came slowly as his thoughts rolled on through the dark.

Chapter Three

They left the manor after a hearty breakfast of bacon and beans. Jess found a fresh gown and kirtle laid out at the end of the bed. Bethy explained it belonged to Llew's mother. Although out of fashion it fit her remarkably well, and Jessaline found herself wondering about her husband's family. What had his father been like? Why had he and Llew's mother never married, and how did Llew's two brothers fit in to the picture?

She watched him thank Bethy and the steward for their excellent accommodations, assuring them that Allard would hear of their hard work. Then Llewelyn sat her atop his freshly saddled steed, hauled himself up behind her, and they rode out into a clear and crisp cool morning.

The storm had vanished as if it had never been, only the puddles of water in the grass and the droplets still clinging to the leaves of the trees bore witness to its passing. The sun kept a steady watch as they traveled north toward Dunmore Keep.

Llew had been quiet all morning and Jessaline began to worry. She knew she'd had the nightmares last night. Despite the heavy glasses of wine, the fear still reached out to claim her. She remembered Llew's strong arms holding her in the dark, his heart beating steady beneath her hands. He had asked nothing, demanded nothing, made no mention of their bargain as he'd lain calm and comforting beside her.

It had felt like heaven to have his arms around her then, and it felt even better to have them around her now. The first stirrings of need already surged between her thighs. Her breath quickened. She gave in to

the urge to lean back against his chest. He tightened his embrace and Jess marked how his hands clenched harder around the reins.

Still he sat in his cloud of quiet, as if his thoughts were on anything but her.

“Do I need to apologize?” she finally asked when she could no longer stand the silence. “I know last night did not meet your expectations.”

He grunted.

She sighed.

He grunted again.

This time Jessaline giggled.

Llew leaned in to nuzzle at her ear. “I am still in need from the top of my head to the very tip of my toes, and every growing inch of me in between.” He shifted behind her, giving Jessaline a feel of his burgeoning erection. Jess breathed her delight. He still desired her. He still intended to bed her.

And she still had every intention of surrendering willingly to his seduction. As soon as he asked her. As soon as she had her linen sheets.

One broad hand now moved to cup her breast, the thumb smoothing lazily across its tip. “Do you want to talk about it?” His voice was as seductive as his touch, rolling over her like a hot summer breeze.

“About what?” Jessaline snuggled deeper into his embrace.

“Whatever comes to plague you in the night.”

She stiffened and tried to sit up, but his hand on her breast kept her locked in his arms. “They are dreams, nothing more. I have had them all my life.” She shrugged, hoping he would press her no farther.

Jessaline could still feel the dark that closed in around her so thick it smothered any breath she took. Shadows and pain and nameless fears that rose up to swallow her when she was not aware. She rubbed at her shoulder. For some strange reason it always ached after she’d spent a night trapped in the visions.

“When I came to you, you flinched from my touch.”

"I am sorry." Did he think she had rejected him? Is that why he had been so guarded with her all morning? "I won't let it happen again."

"What haunts you?" His voice was still that calm and even tone. His fingers still whispered over her heart, urging her to trust him. But she'd never trusted easily. She had been let down too many times before.

"I do not have them so often now," she hastened to assure. "It was most likely just the storm, and all the excitement of yesterday. I don't want to trouble you with foolish matters from the past."

He took a long breath and let it out slowly. "If they come again, will you tell me what you dream?"

"Does it matter? They are imaginings, stupid cloudings of the mind." Bad blood, her father had told her with every blow of his hand. A taint that had to be beaten away, until Jess had been more terrified of waking to him than any dream or shadow.

"Are you this stubborn with everyone, or am I just getting special treatment?" He dropped his hand and smacked the side of her thigh. It was such an exasperated gesture it made Jess smile.

"You will always get the special treatment," she promised with a giggle.

His arm snaked back around her waist. "I insist on it."

They rode into the small village of Tipwich as the sun hit its zenith. The day had warmed dramatically. Jessaline began to sweat beneath the heavy gown and kirtle. It pooled beneath her breasts, sticking her hair to her cheeks and neck.

They left the shelter of the forest to travel along a narrow but well used track. By the time they reached the outskirts of the village, Jessaline was more than ready to retreat again into the shade of the trees. Llew dismounted and walked along the narrow streets, stretching his strong lean legs while giving Jess some space to cool off.

A startled villager crossed their path, stopped short at the sight of Llewellyn, spit hastily on the ground and ran to the other side of the street.

Jess saw the look of frustration on Llew's face and couldn't resist asking, "What was that all about?"

"Don't you know?" He cocked a brow in her direction. "I am a Demon of Dunmore." Now he smiled in earnest.

"You mean 'tis true? People really do think you're a demon?"

"One of the worst, especially here in Tipwich." He chuckled as he looked up at her.

A second villager turned the corner from a side street and spun quickly around without a single pause in his stride. Jess found it hard to believe Llew caused this sort of commotion just by riding into town.

"Have you not heard the story, lady?" His smile had taken on a wicked twist and Jessaline's heart jumped in answer. He was truly the handsomest of devils.

"What did you do?" She expected to hear some tale of how he bedded the sheriff's wife or started a drunken brawl in the tavern.

He watched carefully for her reaction. "The entire Dunmore family has been banned from the church. We have been for over four generations."

Jess had not been prepared for so serious a declaration. *Excommunicated*. It sent a shiver of apprehension down her spine. Did she imagine the shadow that passed across the day? "Why?"

Llew stopped walking and helped Jessaline slide down beside him. He held her long moments before tracing a finger along the crease of worry between her brows. "I will not hold you to this marriage should you desire otherwise. We can find another way to protect you from your father's plans."

"Is the story of your family so horrid? Are you haunted by the ghosts of former wives and enemies?" She tried hard to make her voice light and unconcerned. She succeeded to a certain degree, but thought Llew saw too near the truth. She didn't really know a thing about him or his lineage. Despite her instinctive trust of him, he was still a stranger and could be hiding any number of monstrous crimes in his past.

"It was just after the last great plague," Llew said in a quiet voice, taking her hand and resuming his casual walk down the street. "Tipwich had been hit hard. Over half of the town was already dead or dying. Few crops had been planted that year. There was no one to work the fields. No one to tend to the livestock. The priest claimed God had spoken to him in a vision, and that if the townspeople helped build a new and bigger church, all their sins would be forgiven. God would spare them and the death would pass over. He demanded everyone give him whatever monies or goods they owned. He wanted food, wine, silver and gold. It didn't matter there would be nothing to feed them or keep them warm during the coming winter. The church demanded everything."

Llew took a long breath before he continued. "My great-grandfather refused to relinquish his stores of food or livestock. He also refused to pay any tithe at all. He said it was more important to live through the winter than build a better church."

"It sounds like your great-grandfather was a most intelligent man."

"He thought so, but the villagers saw it differently. When a last tide of plague swept through the town, the priest blamed every death on my great-grandfather's stubbornness, swearing that my family had been sent by the Devil himself to test the souls of the living. Winter hit hard that year, and there were families who chose to die rather than accept our offer of food."

"Surely there were those who chose to live?" But Jessaline knew first hand the hypocrisy of the church. She had watched her father and the other minions of the bishop use the power of the church for their personal gain. She never had seen much of God's good graces in any of their actions.

"Many came to us for aid. Their families still live at Dunmore Keep. Any left in the town have long declared themselves our enemies." Llew raised a hand in salute as a man and woman strolled past, hands interlocked in a lover's caress. Although they did not return the gesture, they did not run away. One side of his mouth turned up. "See, after almost a hundred years we are making progress."

They were now directly in front of the church. Jessaline admired the old stone walls that stood warm in the sun and noticed the neatly kept garden of early herbs and flowers. She was shocked when a burly priest bustled from the doorway and greeted Llewellyn warmly.

"My Lord Dunmore," he said, smiling broadly, "how nice to see you again."

"Father." Llew nodded in reply.

Jessaline gaped at them both.

"Forgive me," Llew continued, "I am amiss in my manners. Father Thomas, may I present my new bride, Lady Jessaline."

"Well, well, well. A Dunmore married at last. Blessed be to God, you have finally seen the error of your ways." He winked conspiratorially. "I will add this to the letter I am writing to the bishop. How the sins of the fathers should not be vested upon...you know how the story goes." Father Thomas reached out to give Jessaline's hand a warm shake.

"The good father is trying to restore the Dunmore name," Llew stated.

"Is that letter going to the Bishop of Marsh-ton?" Jessaline could not suppress a giggle when the priest nodded vigorously, the fat beneath his chin wobbling with a life of its own.

"The very same. What an auspicious day for us all."

Now it was Llew's turn to smile. "Maybe not, Father. You see, I happened to steal my bride from her betrothed—the bishop's bastard son."

Thomas's smile never faltered. "Then I shall address my letter to the Archbishop at Kedryn Abbey. I have always liked him better, anyway."

Llew laughed out loud and Jessaline thought she had never heard a more marvelous sound. It was deep and throaty, echoing off the walls of the church to chase away the last of her doubts.

The priest also laughed before giving Llew a more serious look. "Do you have the proper papers? If not, I would be happy to perform the ceremony here, my friend."

Llew clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry. It was all done legally and binding—almost," he added with another grin.

"We have the writ, Father," Jessaline said when the priest's face clouded. "I made certain of that."

"Good, good." Father Thomas blew out a heavy breath. "Then I shall say my prayers in celebration."

"Thank you." Jessaline felt immensely grateful that at least someone wished them well.

"Your brothers were in town two days ago, my lord. They made a very generous contribution to the church."

Llew seemed more amused than ever. "Did they ask for letters of dispensation?"

Father Thomas shrugged. "More like payment for damage to the tavern. I heard there was some nasty incident with the innkeeper's daughters."

"Those lovely—" Llew cupped his hands over his chest like he was holding a massive pair of breasts.

"The very same." Thomas glanced toward the village, pursed his lips, and drew his brows together. "Considering the circumstances, perhaps you and your lady wife should rest while I go buy you food and drink. Find a shady spot by the river. I will meet you there shortly."

Llew reached to give the priest a silver coin, but the other man shook his head. "Your brothers left more than enough. They must be feeling very guilty for their many sins."

"I have my doubts," Llew replied.

"So do I," said Thomas with a sigh. Waving them in the opposite direction, he hurried off on his mission.

Jessaline was happy to wander along a dappled path that led them to the river's edge. The shallow expanse of water more closely resembled a stream or brook, but it splashed merrily along its rocky course as it wove around the outskirts of the town. She could just make out the mill in the distance, and she swore she could smell fresh baked bread.

Llew led Broch to the water's edge and let the horse take a long drink. Then he tethered his mount to a low tree branch so the horse could nibble at the new spring grass. At last he settled himself on the ground, arms stretched high above his head. He looked up through the leaves to the sky.

"Would you care to join me?" His voice was easy, soft, but Jessaline did not miss the thread of seduction that ran through it.

"Am I not to get my linen sheets?" She grinned and sat primly down beside him.

He chewed at a corner of his lip. "Would you at least let me rest my head in your lap? I am finding this whole abduction and marriage thing most exhausting."

Jessaline laughed. "You are not! You're just trying to find some way to work around your bargain."

"Ah, so you picked up on that, did you?" He slid closer, still not touching any part of her. Even with no physical contact, Jessaline felt the desire that sizzled between them. Llew's eyes took on a darkling glow and Jess wondered if her own gaze mirrored the growing storm in his.

"Will you always answer me with the truth?"

The question surprised her, his sudden intensity did not.

"Always, my lord."

"If any other woman gave me that answer, I would be inclined to doubt. But you are not like other women." He sat up abruptly and raised a finger to her cheek. "Tell me—if not for our bargain, if we had met some other way—would you want to be here with me now? Still desire the touch of my hand? The taste of my lips on yours?"

He bent his head nearer until Jess could feel the warmth of his breath. He did not touch. Did not move to close the last distance between them. He waited until Jessaline thought she would crumple from the need.

"Marriage or not," she whispered back. "From the very first moment I saw you stride into the church, I knew I had to stay with you." Her brows creased in confusion. "Is that the strangest thing you've ever heard?"

His simple answer stunned her. "No. It was the same with me."

He still hesitated, and Jessaline knew he wanted her to make the next move. Was it a test? A way to prove she was capable of all that he demanded? She shifted her weight forward and bent to kiss him, swallowing back her uncertainty as she pushed him upon the ground. Her fingers threaded in his hair as his hands curled loosely around her waist.

And then she kissed him, the wind and shadow witness to their tryst upon the grass.

Llew let her take the lead. He remained pliant as Jessaline explored, letting her lips graze softly over his until she finally grew bold and slipped her tongue inside his mouth. He trembled and opened willingly to receive her.

She pulled slightly away. "Am I doing this right?" she asked with a sudden touch of shyness.

He answered her with a groan, one hand now wrapped around her nape as he pulled her mouth back to his. This time he was the aggressor. His teeth nibbled easily at her lips before his tongue speared hot between them.

Visions of sin flashed in her mind as his knees nudged her legs apart and he pressed her hips to his groin. He moved beneath her, thrusting his body hard against hers. His hands slid across her bottom, urging her even closer. His mouth continued its dance with hers, his tongue thrusting in rhythm with his hips. When he slid one hand to curl around her breast, Jess whimpered, pressing herself closer into his palm.

"Ahem." The cough caught them both off guard. Llew was the first to recover, burying Jess's face into his neck as he turned to face Father Thomas.

"Back so soon?" He asked nonchalantly. The priest would never know how she felt his legs tremble, or how he swallowed to clear the roughness from his voice.

"Soon enough," the priest answered. "I hope I am not interrupting too much." His tone was amused.

Llew's voice had steadied. "Not at all, Father. I have promised my wife a soft bed and clean sheets. You have just kept me to my agreement."

"Then my work today is done." Father Thomas laid a basket on the ground. "Go with God, my children," he said before leaving as quietly as he had come.

Jessaline couldn't resist the smell of food wafting in the air. She rolled off Llewellyn with a sigh of regret before digging into the basket to pull out two freshly baked meat pasties and a bowl of dried fruit with honey.

"No ale?" Llew sounded disappointed. He brightened, however, when he saw the honeyed fruit.

"We will have to drink from the river." Jessaline broke one of the pasties in half and bit in greedily. Sauce dribbled down her chin and she wiped it away with her hand.

Llew smiled and started with dessert.

Jessaline watched in fascination as he munched his way through almost all of the fruit. His fingers dripped with honey. He stuck them into his mouth, licking off the sticky glaze. He smiled when she snuck her hand into the bowl and grabbed the last few pieces of fruit.

"I was planning to share," he said, picking up his pasty. His dimpled grin and the glint in his eye said otherwise.

"I never doubted you for an instant, my lord." Jessaline popped one of the morsels in her mouth. The honey clung to her fingers, and she was just about to wipe them on the hem of her gown when Llew shook his head.

"Let me," he purred, taking her hand and drawing one finger deep into his mouth. He watched her with a predatory expression as he sucked her fingers one by one.

Jessaline's hand shook when he was finished. Her nipples had peaked again and her body ached anew. To hide her sudden shyness, she rose and walked to the water's edge. "I will be back soon," she said, looking over one shoulder. She felt his eyes following her as she moved—hot, heavy, as if they actually touched her skin.

She knelt on a rock, cupped her hands and drank. She splashed the cool water over her neck, longing for a bath to wash away the dust of the road. Ducks floated by on the bubbling stream and she could see tiny fish darting among the rocks. It was a wonderful to be someplace new and completely unknown. Jessaline reveled in the freedom. She had always been banned from exploring her family's large estates, forced to remain inside, spinning, embroidering, hidden away as she waited to be married off to enhance the Nolan fortune.

Although Jessaline had broken the rules on numerous occasions, she had never managed to get far on foot. Only once had she gotten her hands on a horse. When her father had finished his punishment, she hadn't been able to sit for days. It was a memory best left in the past.

A whisper of sound broke into her musings. She gave in to her curiosity and crept closer, ducking beneath branches and skirting thickets of brambles. She finally stumbled into a clearing and stared in fascination at the couple on the ground.

Jessaline watched as the man reached down to undo the lacings of the woman's bodice. She giggled and slapped his hands away, but he persisted, tugging at the stubborn material until the gown draped open and her plump breasts spilled out into his hands. He ran his thumbs across the nipples, plucking them again and again until they swelled into tight round nubs.

The woman moaned and closed her eyes as the man moved his head to take a nipple into his mouth. He pulled at it with his lips and nibbled with his teeth.

Jess felt her own breasts swell with need. The ache pooled hard between her legs as she watched the couple on the grass. What would it be like to have Llew do all those things to her?

The man slid his hand lower, inching up the hem of his partner's skirt to expose white thighs with a dark triangle of hair between. Slowly he worked his hand across her mound, fingers probing deep between her thighs.

Jess was fascinated by the play of his hand. It eased in and out of the woman's sex, first showing wetly in the sun, then buried back inside the darkness.

"What are you thinking, sweet wife?"

She jumped at Llew's voice, the blood rising hot to her cheeks as he stepped close behind her. One muscled arm snaked around her waist and pulled her against him, the entire length of his body molding into hers.

"Are you wondering what it will feel like to have my hands cupped around your breasts? My fingers slick with your need, thrust deep into your cunt?" His voice wrapped thick around her, promising all manner of dark and forbidden things.

She nodded, unable to lie, unable to even speak as his thumb moved to trace the swell of her breast beneath her gown, searching for the sensitive peak. She sucked in her breath when he found the spot he sought. Her nipple grew hard and tight beneath his touch. When he tugged at it again, a line of fire shot between her legs. His other hand dropped to the juncture of her thighs. At first he stroked only lightly across her skirt, but then he pressed more insistently against the soft mound of her sex.

An unwilling moan escaped her throat as he worked his hand between her legs, easing one thigh away from the other to give him greater access. The couple heard the sound. The man stopped and glanced warily over his shoulder.

"Please, continue." Llew said. "We enjoy watching your pleasure." He settled back against the tree with Jessaline so they were partially hidden in the shadow.

The man smiled, nodded his agreement and attacked his lady with renewed interest. He hooked his arm around one of her knees and spread it wide, exposing the swollen lips of her pussy so they might better see her. The woman gave them barely a blink before she drew his mouth back to her breast and pumped her hips against his hand. She sobbed her pleasure as the man drove two thick fingers inside her,

twisting them in and out while he continued to suck at her dusky nipples.

Llew continued his play between Jess's legs, teasing, tormenting, searching through the folds of her skirt to explore the flesh beneath. She trembled as the shock of desire raced through her again. Her husband chuckled softly and thrust one knee between her legs as if knowing they could no longer hold her weight. She could feel the proof of his own need grow stiff and long against her back. "Watch, now," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear. "See how she screams when he stabs her with his cock."

And the woman did scream, a throaty sound as the man rolled on top of her and pushed the rounded head of his prick into her glistening cunt. Jess watched in fascination as inch by inch, those swollen lips swallowed the rod of hardened flesh. He pumped her slowly at first, then with greater urgency as the woman bucked and panted beneath him. The man put his hand back between his partner's legs, rubbing fast and hard across the flesh.

"Do you know what he touches there, my beautiful one? Let me show you, let me stroke your sweet little clit and make you scream for me."

His fingers dug deeper between her legs until he found the spot he was after. With agonizing slowness he let his thumb circle the hard knot of tissue. Jess gasped and instinctively moved away from his hand, protecting herself from the invasion.

"Please, not here," she begged, her own voice sounding too tenuous, too uncertain. "I would not want others to see." She tried to get her desire back under her control. She thought if he insisted, she would let him take her there, push her skirt up around her hips and treat her like the serving girl who writhed before them on the ground.

Llew took a shuddering breath behind her. When he finally turned Jess to face him, his eyes were dark and heavy with want. She wondered if he saw that same bleak hunger mirrored in her gaze, and whether it would please him to know how much his touch had stirred her. She felt

the blood rush hot into her cheeks as he raised a hand to stroke her neck before letting it delve softly into the hollow between her breasts.

“No,” he agreed. “I promised you soft linen.” His hand slipped behind her neck, drawing her toward him as his mouth moved to hers.

She expected the kiss to be rough, demanding, as forceful as his words, but his lips were soft as they melted onto hers, lingering light upon her skin. His tongue was gentle as it slid into her mouth. It was his gentleness that disarmed her completely. Her desire took on a new flavor, seductive in its sweetness, a heady weakening of all her defenses.

She moaned when he deepened the pressure, encircling her with his arms as her legs finally gave out. He was dangerously tempting, and Jess began to fully understand the bargain she had made.

She would never have guessed how easily he would seduce her, how a quick thrust of his tongue could thrill her beyond all reason. She was wet, drenched in the spill of her own desire. He continued to eat at the softness of her mouth, a rumble of want sounding deep within his throat.

It was too much. Jess could no longer stem the need that rose to match his. She pressed her hips to his cock where it surged against her thighs. His hand moved once more to the bud of her nipple and he pinched the tip between his fingers, harder now as she cried her pleasure into his mouth. The world faded. There was only the feel of his fingers tormenting her body and the taste of his lips where they bruised her own.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, wondering what it would be like to feel his mouth wrapped around her breasts, suckling at her nipples while his fingers continued to play in the hollow of her thighs. And what it would be like to lay stripped and naked in his arms.

At that instant, she surrendered completely. Whatever he demanded, whatever he desired, she would give without reservation. Lost in him, she would finally find herself.

Chapter Four

"*Shite!*" Llew cursed, dragged his lips away and buried Jessaline's face in the hollow of his neck. He had not meant to push himself this far, had not known such a simple kiss could have him ready to come where he stood. His cock rode high against his stomach, rigid, swollen like it had never been before. He could not remember a time when he'd been so desperately aroused. Not even the first time he'd felt a woman's lips slide like silk around his length.

Breathing raggedly, he caught the amused glances of the couple who were now watching him with the same concentration he had given them before. Llew reached into his pocket to pull out a coin and cursed again when his fingers brushed against his erection. After he tossed the piece of silver, the other man stared at it in astonishment. It was an exorbitant sum and both of them knew it.

"My thanks," Llew managed to mutter as the couple stood and walked away.

Jess trembled, sagged against him, and Llew's aching member jumped again. He had meant only to tease her, to have her blush and turn away, refusing to watch the erotic show. Any other lady would have been offended. Any other lady would have begged him not to stay.

But any other lady would not have bargained with the devil, he reminded himself, threading his fingers through Jessaline's silky hair. He brushed a strand from her cheek. It came away sticky and wet with sweat. It pleased him that she sweated, and he wondered what it would be like to lick the moisture from her breasts, and thrust his fingers into her—

Hell. He tried to get his thoughts into some reasonable order. He could not go walking through the town with his cock a good league in the lead. He was thirsty, needed a drink, needed anything to get his mind off the juice she had to offer.

“Lady,” he said, trying to ease some space between them. “We are but a short while from my keep. Are you ready to ride again?” Now that didn’t come out like he’d intended. “I mean, can you mount? *Shite*,” he muttered when he heard her giggle. “Wait here, I’ll go and get Broch.”

By the time Llew returned, Jess had managed to compose herself, although the ache still rode rough in the cauldron of her cunt and her nipples still grieved from where he’d pulled his hands away. She had never equated agony with desire, but her husband was stirring in her all manner of new and needful things.

He didn’t smile when he lifted her up into the saddle. His eyes were still shadowed, his mouth still sober. Jess saw his hands clench tight around reins as he guided the horse along the narrow forest path and out into open country beyond.

The day was bright, Jess realized in wonder as they left the trees to travel the open road. The sun had already begun to hang low, wallowing in the western sky, too lazy to even slip to sleep behind the clouds that lined the horizon. She wrapped her arms around Llew’s waist as he urged his steed into a gallop, the great beast swallowing the ground in long and easy strides.

She let her hands roam the outline of his stomach where the muscles bunched and tightened as he moved. She rested her cheek against his shoulder as she dreamt of the way he would touch her in the night. Without thinking, she dropped one hand to linger on his thigh, feeling the play of sinew beneath the skin, tracing the line of muscle to where it connected with his groin.

He growled low in his throat. She marveled at the sound, rich and thick where it vibrated against her ear. “Jessaline,” he warned, trapping her hand beneath his, “if you continue to torment me, I will stop, here

and now, spread your sweet cunt to the sky and bury myself in you as far as I will go.” He took her hand and pressed it to the length of him, already aroused and ready for the task.

Jess felt a thrill of fear as she realized he was serious. He was rigid and straining against her hand, his own hand clenching hers in quiet desperation. She did not protest when he moved her hand to his chest.

They barreled along the empty road and Jessaline laughed as the wind tugged rough across her skin. Freedom held a sweet seduction of its own. Her hair blew behind her like a banner, refusing to remain trapped in its usual tidy braid. Dirt flew up to coat her lips and eyes. The discomfort was minimal, the adventure divine.

At last, Llew pointed to a stark stone tower that rose up in the distance. “We are almost there,” he shouted over his shoulder. He pulled Broch to a standstill as they crested the last hill. “Welcome to your new home.” He waved his hand to the dirtiest castle Jess had ever seen.

She plastered a smile on her face as they rode closer. Piles of refuse baked in the day and thick clay mud stuck to everything. It stank with an odor Jess could barely stomach—and her husband seemed to revel in every foul breath he took.

He was grinning from ear to ear as he slid from the saddle, holding out his arms to help Jessaline do the same. She, however, would have much preferred to remain on the horse, high away from the rank smelling ground beneath them.

She wrinkled her nose and tried to look pleased, but it proved almost impossible when a herd of piglets rushed squealing across her path. They were followed by an even dirtier boy who took great pride in badgering them at the top of his youthful lungs.

Jess contemplated the keep. Jess cursed the keep. Jess swore she would clean and clear out the keep.

Llew smiled and wiped a splatter of mud from his chin before taking Jessaline’s hand to lead her inside the tall stone building.

The great hall wasn’t in much better shape. Granted the huge oaken table was beautifully carved and designed—at least what Jess could see

of it beneath the stacks of unwashed platters. The massive fireplace boasted slabs of polished marble, and there were tapestries of brocade and velvet hung high upon the walls. Well, Jess thought they might be velvet. It was hard to see through the layers of cobwebs that draped them.

She looked down at the floor and quickly looked back up. She was sure there were any number of vermin hiding there she didn't care to know about right now.

A fat serving woman struggled to drag a cask of ale in from the mud and Llew rushed to help her, smacking her hard on the bottom as she turned to give him a wink. "Glad yer back, my lord," she greeted.

Llew hauled the cask easily onto one shoulder. Jess watched in admiration as the corded muscles of his arms bunched and strained as he carried the ale through a door that Jess assumed led to the kitchens. With great trepidation she followed. What new level of filth would she find there?

In all actuality, the kitchen fared much better than the rest of the keep. While there were several rusted pots hanging in the cold fireplace, the table was clean and polished, and the jars and pots that lined the shelves were free from dust or mold. Jess nodded her satisfaction, rested her hands on her hips, and surveyed the situation.

"My lady wife, Jessaline Dunmore," Llew said to the other woman. He turned to Jess. "This is Margaret. She has served my family for many years."

Margaret gave Jess a brief curtsy and smiled. "Welcome, my lady, it'll be nice havin' a woman's touch around the keep. My lords Dunmore are difficult for one old woman to handle."

Jessaline decided she liked Margaret. "Do you have no help?"

The older woman cleared her throat. "My lords usually have other uses for the girls."

Llew at least had the decency to duck his head.

"How many lords of Dunmore are there?" Jessaline asked him.

"Uh...only three of us live here."

Jessaline was not amused. It wasn't the serving wenches' primary job to entertain the masters of the keep. At least not in her keep. "All men?"

"Yes." Llew raised his head and tried to stare her down. Jess held his gaze until he took her hand and led her from the kitchen. "Let me show you to our chamber." His eyes took on a wicked intensity. Now it was Jessaline who found herself tempted to turn away.

He led her back through the great hall and up a stone stairway that spiraled along one wall. The second story had three rooms that opened off a single hallway. Llew led her to the very end of the hall and threw open a wooden door before he picked her up and carried her across the threshold.

The instant he touched her, Jessaline melted. Whatever faults the man possessed fled like mist beneath the heat of his sun. The smile he gave her could have tempted even a saint, and Jess's pulse rose again as he cradled her to his chest.

Then she made the mistake of looking at her surroundings.

Jessaline stared around the bedchamber in absolute horror. It was by far the filthiest room she had seen today. "Do you actually sleep here?" she asked Llew incredulously.

"Uh, no...not really. At least I haven't in a long time." He flushed beneath her astonished gaze.

"Then, where do you sleep?"

"I usually just pass out with my brothers downstairs," he answered, gifting her with a sheepish grin. "When I am home at all."

As Jessaline examined the room again, she found herself speechless for the first time in her life.

The bed smelled so strong of mildew and mold, she could barely stand to breathe. She knew the straw-stuffed mattress had rotted completely through, and the coverlet was stained so badly it would never come clean. She would have to hand it down to one of the kitchen maids. She refused to dwell on what the stains might be. His past was his past, his future was with her.

She moved to the single window and tore down the tattered tapestry. It landed on the floor in a cloud of dust, and Jess coughed when the air grew dim and thick around her. At least the window had glass, she noticed in satisfaction. The lock was stuck, however, and she had to ask Llew to pry the stubborn pane open.

“Well, then,” he said, too brightly. “I’ll leave you to it, shall I?” He backed up several steps before running out the door. “Call if you need anything,” he mouthed over one shoulder as he vanished down the hall. His footsteps faded quickly on the narrow stone steps.

Jessaline stood in stunned silence for several more moments before she allowed herself to move cautiously across the floor. Sunlight streamed through the open window where a clean breeze was beginning to blow in. Since this room opened onto the rear of the keep, the stench of the front courtyard was blessedly absent.

Jessaline peeked out the window and smiled at the grassy slopes that dipped to the river behind them. She could just make out the spire of Tipwich church in the distance, with the forest dark and shadowed beyond.

It could be a beautiful room, she realized, turning to eye the iron railings of the bed. She would have a new mattress sewn and stuffed for the night, and would commission a flocked mattress filled with cotton as soon as she was able.

The fireplace was of the same warm stone as below, and there was even a stout oaken bathtub sitting in one corner. With a hard bit of scrubbing—a lot of hard scrubbing—it would serve nicely. Especially when her magnificent husband was waiting stiff and ready in their bed.

She felt the blood rise high in her cheeks when she thought of the night to come. Her body began to hum as it always did when she pictured Llew’s hands skimming over her naked skin.

Choking back a squeal of delight, she ran to the door and yelled briskly for Margaret. “Send me two serving girls!” she ordered, folding up the sleeves of her kirtle. “I also need water and soap.” Lots and lots of soap, she added to herself, turning back to face the dirt and rot. But she

would have it cleaned by nightfall. Cleaned and ready for whatever Llew had planned.



"You did *what*?" The two Dunmore brothers shook their heads in disbelief.

"Dunmores do not marry," stated Allard. He had been born only a few days later than Llew, but had black hair and blue eyes like his Pictish mother.

"Dunmores never marry!" added Graham, who was just a few months younger than Allard. Bastards, the lot of them, just like their father, and his father before him, and so forth and so on.

"'Tis tradition."

"'Tis in the rules."

"What rules?" Llew demanded, more irritated than he cared to admit. "There are no damned rules!"

He plopped himself in his favorite chair by the hearth and stared at the dying fire. He downed another glass of ale in the hopes it would soothe his aching balls, before realizing there was not enough ale in the world to calm his wayward cock.

"And a Nolan, to boot." Allard propped his feet on the long wooden table, knocking an empty plate to the floor. None of them bothered to pick it up.

"Did you bed her yet?" Graham picked up a half-eaten round of cheese and sniffed suspiciously before biting off a chunk.

"What do you think?" Allard said with a laugh. "Do you see the size of his prick? I'll bet 'tis been that way all day."

"Can a man actually die of a permanent stiff?" Graham seemed entirely too amused. "We'll bury him six feet down, and still be seein' that mighty wanker sticking out from the dirt."

"I don't intend to bed her," Llew said calmly.

The other two stared at him in absolute horror.

“Have you lost your mind?” Graham shook his shaggy blonde head in amazement. His mother had been a noblewoman of Northern blood.

Allard’s face grew serious. “Not to mention the fact that if you don’t bed her, her family will be wantin’ her back. There’s quite a sum of gold in that dowry chest of hers.”

“And quite a sum of treasure in between her pretty thighs.”

Llew gave Graham a quelling glare. “Her thighs are none of your business, brother,” he warned.

“No, but if her family decides to take her back by force, you’ll need all the help you can get. I have to have some reason to put my life on the line.”

Llew slumped even farther down in his chair. “I don’t plan to bed her, and I don’t intend to give her back.”

Allard snorted, finally setting down the book he’d been trying to read. “So what do you plan to do with her? If you’re giving her away, I’ll be more than willing to take her.”

“That’s what brothers are for,” Graham agreed. “Share and share alike. Just like the old days.”

Llew had had enough. “If her family comes, I’ll just pretend to have topped her.”

Both his brothers howled gleefully.

“They will have to accept the marriage. Then I’ll buy her a nice estate in the country and be done with it. She’s terrified of them,” he added. “No matter what, I will protect her—and both of you will help me.” The last was not a request. No matter how close their ages, Llew was still the eldest and his word was law.

When Graham stomped on a roach that scuttled across the floor, Llew looked around the dingy hall, noticing for the first time how dirty it had become. He hadn’t spent much time at home these past few years, he and his brothers had been too busy whoring all over the countryside. They had reputations to live up to, after all.

He thought of the chamber upstairs and wondered how he could have left Jessaline alone with the unused bed and tattered linens. Then they all heard the unmistakable sound of his new wife's voice, demanding that the room be cleaned and fresh water heated for her bath.

"Red hair," Allard commented.

"Should've known better," Graham agreed as a pile of stale straw was thrown down the stairs. He yawned and scratched his crotch. "Time for me to head to town, brother. I, at least, plan to get my cock some relief."

"Sleep well, Llew." Allard rose to follow Graham. "You'll probably have to take matters into your own hand before this night is through."

"Not if I can help it," Llew muttered under his breath. He did have plans for his lady wife, even if he didn't top her. There were other ways a man and woman could find pleasure with each other. Other ways to make her scream. Other ways to ease his need. And if she didn't want to play, he had an easy way out of their bargain. He would push her and see how far he got.

He listened as the servants grumbled and complained, but not one of them spoke out of turn, and Llew was happy to know they did whatever Jess commanded. When the work was finally finished and the manor quiet again, Llew took himself upstairs and knocked on their bedchamber door.

Jess answered, her hair loose and long about her shoulders, damp from her recent bath. She smelled of cinnamon and honey and her cheeks were flushed from the heat of the water. Llew felt his cock start to stir again.

"Come in." She stepped aside as Llew strode into the room. He was amazed at the transformation. The floor had been swept, the tapestries dusted and clean linens were spread over the newly stuffed bed. The tub of water still steamed in one corner.

"Do you feel better?" He smiled when she nodded, noticing she had put back on his mother's gown. "I will have the seamstress come tomorrow and make you some new clothes. I'm sorry I had nothing here for you to wear."

"I'm glad you did not. I wouldn't like to wear a gown some other woman of yours had worn before." She looked at him through her lashes as if gauging his response.

Llew chuckled and slipped an arm around her waist. She tensed, but did not pull away.

"Perhaps, my lord, you would care to bathe? The water is still hot."

"Do I smell that bad?" He sniffed his armpit and realized he did. He pulled off his shirt and tugged at the lacings of his breeches, watching Jessaline for any sign of reaction. Her beautiful green eyes strayed over his chest and arms, finally resting on the still growing bulge on his groin.

Smiling wickedly, he tugged his breeches off his hips and let them fall to the floor. Jess nipped her bottom lip between her teeth, and Llew thought he had never seen a more desirable woman. His cock stood at full mast now, but he could smell the days of sweat upon his skin.

Shite. He turned and slid into the bath, sighing in pleasure as the water covered him.

"I will be back with wine and sweetcakes," Jessaline said before practically bolting from the room.

Llew looked at the tip of his prick where it stuck out from the water, cursing his brother Allard as he closed his fist around the rigid length. He thought of Jess lying in this same tub with her long legs tucked up and her knees spread wide.

His hand clenched harder around his erection as he imagined slipping it into his wife's tender slit, all moist and open from her bath. He gritted his teeth as his thighs and ass clenched and his balls tightened against the root of his cock, but he did not pump himself to release. His wife would take care of that soon enough.

Finally, he took the bar of soap and rubbed it across his skin. By the time Jessaline returned, he was ready and waiting, naked in the great chair by the hearth, a cover thrown carelessly beneath him.

Jessaline hesitated just outside the door. Her fingers shook and she was more nervous than she cared to admit. She had no doubt he would

claim his portion of the bargain—no doubt he was more than capable of demanding his husbandly rights. She had seen and felt the proof of that more than once this day.

But he was *huge*, so long and broad she did not know how she would manage to fit him all inside her. Despite his words to the contrary, she was afraid he would hurt her. The goblets on the tray tinkled as her hands trembled again, and the newly familiar ache shuddered up from between her thighs.

Anticipation. Desire.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open—and almost dropped the tray in shock when she saw him sitting naked by the fire.

His hair was wet from where he had washed it, rivulets of water dripped down his neck. His chest was broad, smooth, a few faint scars from battle traced across the skin. She let her gaze roam lower, past the tensed muscles of his stomach, along the line of chestnut hair, to stare again at his heavy cock, watching in wonder as it moved beneath her gaze.

He shifted in his chair, stroked a hand across his balls, and adjusted the now rigid length of flesh so it rose up to lie across his stomach.

The glass chimed again as Jess's hands began to shake in earnest.

Chapter Five

“Are you afraid?” His question surprised her. She dragged her gaze back to his face. He studied her from beneath his lashes. “I have promised not to hurt you.” So soft, his voice, soft and beguiling. “Put down the wine and come to me.”

It was a command Jessaline could not refuse. Her heart pounded too fast as she placed the tray on the floor. She longed for a glass of wine to calm the sudden rush of her breath and steady the shaking of her fingers so he would not see her discomfort.

He held out his hand and motioned her forward. Jess stepped closer, wishing she had some easy words to lessen her growing nervousness. She swallowed, her throat gone suddenly dry as she moved to stand before him.

“Take off your gown, lady.” His voice was still soft, but Jess heard how it had deepened and grown thick with his own dark emotion.

She lifted the hem and began to pull the heavy garment up her legs, knowing he watched her every move. She slid it across her breasts, feeling her nipples tighten as the rough wool scraped over them. She let the gown drop to the floor and stood draped in only her linen kirtle.

“That, too.”

Jess jutted out her chin and gave him her best glare. “Are you just going to watch me all night?” She needed him to touch her, to know whether his hands would prove as soft as his voice.

He chuckled, a purr that sent ripples of anticipation across her skin. “Oh, no. I intend to touch, stroke, explore and plunder every inch of your perfect flesh.” He straightened in his chair and leaned toward her, his

smile one that would make the devil proud. "But first I want to look at you. All of you."

Again that shock of fire quivered between her thighs. Jess tried to press her legs together, hoping to ease the throb radiating from their depths. He saw her squirm and his smile grew broader.

"The kirtle," he said.

In a last spark of bravado, Jess tore the laces apart at the neck and shrugged the garment to the floor. Her skin tingled in the sudden chill, the goose bumps puckering her nipples even more. She felt wanton standing naked in the night, her husband's hungry gaze traveling the length of her.

"*You are beautiful,*" he whispered. Jess was pleased to hear a tremor in his voice. For the first time she thought of herself as wanted, desirable, someone more than just her father's pawn.

"Come." He held out his hand and sat back in the chair.

Jess placed her fingers in his, feeling the faint tremor that shook them. He drew her down onto his lap, her back turned toward him and pressed against his chest. She felt her body shiver as he tucked her into his warmth, and sucked in her breath as the mass of him settled between the cheeks of her bottom.

He wrapped one strong arm around her, gathered her close, and let his other hand tangle in her hair. Jess could not stop her trembling as he nuzzled his face into her neck and let his lips trail across the sensitive skin to nibble at her earlobe.

Jess sucked in her breath as the delicious feelings washed over her. Now his hand swept through her hair to brush the outside of her breast. He hesitated, teasing her skin before closing his palm over its weight.

"*Ahhh!*" The sound escaped her as he found her nipple and let it slide between his fingers. He pressed harder and Jess had to bite her lip to keep from crying out again. She held her breath, tried to think, made a last effort to keep control as he took her nipple and pinched, firmer, rougher, while Jess twisted on his lap, trying to find some relief from the unbearable need that blasted down her stomach.

She heard his own intake of breath as her wiggling jostled his stiffened cock. Now his hand dropped to fall heavy on her thigh. Jess tensed when his fingers inched their way up her leg.

“Tell me to stop,” he said. His hand stayed motionless at the very top of her thigh. “Just say the word and we can come to an amicable parting.”

No, she would not let him send her back. Whatever he asked of her would be better than that.

She shook her head and settled harder on his lap. Some wicked part of her she did not know she possessed urged her to wiggle once more against his turgid length. She could hear the amusement in his voice when he whispered in her ear.

“Is that the game you wish to play?”

His other hand fell to her opposite thigh and he slid both hands toward her knees. In one swift movement he spread her legs wide, holding them open with his thighs. Jess shivered when she felt the air hit the moisture of her open cunt. She felt exposed and unprotected—but she could not deny that she enjoyed the position she was in.

Slowly, he slid his hands up toward her mound, stretching her legs wider. Jess heard her breath grow heavy and hesitant, the anticipation almost more than she could take.

When he finally brought one hand across her tangle of curls, Jess felt her body jump to meet him. One finger rubbed into her slit, slowly moving back and forth as he spread the wet of her to make the passage smoother.

Jess moaned, the ache of need almost more than she could stand. “Please,” she whimpered, turning her head to nestle against his neck.

“Open for me,” Llew replied. “Let me touch inside you.”

“*Oh, God.*” Jess could not stop her cry of pleasure when he slid one long finger into her. It was thick, smooth and stretched her open...open...like nothing had done before. He pumped it out and back in again, each thrust burrowing deeper and deeper, until her entire body burned with fever. But it was not enough. She wanted more of him, more

of his touch. "Please," she cried again, trying to take him even farther inside.

In response, he turned her sideways on his lap and pulled one leg over the arm of the chair. Her other leg still touched the floor and she was spread even more for his tender assault.

His other hand wrapped around her nape and brought her mouth to his. The kiss was strong, urgent, and Jess became aware of her husband's arousal. He twisted her hair, drawing her head back as he thrust his tongue between her lips. At the same time, he plunged his finger back into her slit, this time burying it farther than it had ever gone before. When he added a second finger to the first, Jess cried out again and tried to tense away. She was stretched too far and she could feel herself clench against his fingers.

"Shhhh." He pulled away from the kiss and whispered into her hair. "I know what you want, my beautiful one. I know what you need. And I will give it to you, but you have to trust me." Now he gazed at her with eyes as dark as a moonless night. "Trust me, Jessaline. Put your arms around my neck, hold on to me, and let me teach you."

Llew felt her hesitation. Felt how tight she was where her body clamped around his fingers. He also felt how wet and swollen she'd already become. He could smell her desire, sweet like honey on his skin.

She did not look away. It thrilled him immensely that she met him eye for eye, not cowering in false modesty like so many he had known. No, Jessaline would never cower. Not even when he finally slammed his length into the very heart of her would she refuse to meet his gaze. But that was for another time and place.

She did not take her eyes from him when he slid his fingers home again. He watched in fascination as they turned a deeper shade of green and halfway closed as he began to circle her clit with his thumb. Faster and faster he worked his hand, feeling her lips swell and open as he fingered deep, deeper still, unable to tear his eyes from her face. He took

her with his fingers, feeling the silken walls of her sex begin to clench anew.

“Ahh...Llew please!”

Her breath came in short and ragged breaths, and when her tongue snaked out to flick across her lips, Llew could no longer stand it. He pulled her back to kiss him and sucked her tongue deep into his mouth. She shook as she came, arching up against his hand. Llew changed the pressure of his kiss, letting his tongue pierce her mouth. He swallowed her screams as she trembled in his arms, marveling at the way her body clamped around his fingers, spilling her liquid over his hand. And he wanted, with every piece of his heart, to take her to the bed and truly make her his wife.

Shite! He could feel his body tense, his own need more than he could control. Now it was his turn to beg, as her shudders subsided and she quieted in his arms.

“Lady, I need...” He slid his fingers from her and rubbed the wet onto his cock. The smell of her washed over him, driving him to even an even greater arousal. He took her hand and placed it under his, gliding it over his swollen length. He tried, he really tried to keep his eyes locked on hers as he came to his own release. But in the end he let his eyes drift shut, drowning in the sensation of her hand slipping over his flesh.

He urged her harder, showing how he wanted her to touch him, and when he pulled his hand away, she continued to pump him, moving to rasp her teeth against his neck. He threw his head back against the chair, baring his neck even more for her kiss. When she grew bolder, letting her lips graze his chin and nibble at the corner of his mouth, he gave a great shout and practically heaved up out of the chair, shooting his seed in thick, hot spurts high upon his chest. He thought it might be a personal best.

She smiled when he winked an eye open. Smiled and let her fingers play along his still stiff cock. He sighed and pulled her in for another kiss, this one easy and full of appreciation. She had won this round, he

realized, more than fulfilling her part of the bargain. But there would be other times to test her resolve. He had just started in his temptations.

He tucked her close and pulled the cover around them. The fire popped in the sudden silence.

"Would you like some wine?" She snuggled into his arms.

"Not if you have to leave me to get it. I am content, Jess."

Surprisingly, he was. Tomorrow would bring its own struggles, tomorrow would bring its own demands. He would deal with them when he had to. For now, his eyes were growing heavy and his body was at peace—well, mostly at peace he realized with chagrin as Jessaline wiggled and he hardened in response.

"Leave be," Llew warned, slapping her lightly on the thigh.

She giggled, held still for barely an instant, and started to wiggle again.

"Enough!" Llew growled. He nuzzled his face into her neck, sending Jess into a fit of laughter again before he stood with her still wrapped in his arms, strode across the room, and dumped her unceremoniously on the bed.

Then he picked up the tray of wine and poured a glass of the ruby liquid. He smiled when he saw the honey cakes she had brought, stuffing two in his mouth and chewing in rapture as she watched him from where she lay curled on the mattress.

At last, having all of his needs filled to perfection, Llew lay down next to his wife and pulled the cover over them.

She squirmed, quieted, squirmed again. Llew watched in amusement as she twisted and turned upon the mattress, every movement brushing her beautiful body closer to his. She sighed, a sound of complete exasperation, and wiggled once more, this time turning onto her stomach before rolling back over again.

"What in heaven's name are you doing?" He grunted when her elbow rammed into his chin.

“Sorry.” She twisted another direction, this time digging a toenail into his shin.

“Damn it, wife, be still.” As she grew more and more restless, he grew less and less amused.

She sat up and brushed a thick swath of hair from her face. She bit her lip and offered him a weary smile. “I don’t mean to be rude, really I don’t. But I can’t...I mean...I just *hate* sleeping on straw.”

Now Llew felt his contentment come back in full force. “Then sleep on me,” he purred, pulling her to lie on top of him.

She snuggled for another moment or two, tucked her head into his neck, and let out a soft whisper of ease. Llew fell asleep before her sighs had even settled.

No unwelcome dreams disturbed them that night.



When Llew rode out to inspect his property the next morning, Jess set to work cleaning out the kitchen and buttery. Both were beyond filthy. The brothers Dunmore had tapped seven different barrels of ale and opened four separate casks of wine. The wine had mostly gone to vinegar, so she had it hauled to the courtyard for the soldiers and the servants. The ale was stale, but still drinkable. She tied her hair back with a piece of ribbon, rolled up the sleeves of her gown, and took to cleaning with a passion.

She couldn’t keep the smile off her face, and even the knowing stares of the kitchen maids couldn’t dampen her joyful mood.

Her body still trembled whenever she thought of Llew’s touch the night before, and her body ached with anticipation when she thought of the night to come. Surely tonight he would take her maidenhead and finally make their marriage valid. Her father would come soon, she knew, and she wanted to give him no reason to be able to take her back.

After scouring the iron pots left rusting in the fireplace, Jessaline began to root through the pantry to see what she could make for their afternoon meal. There wasn't much. A few onions, some cheese that had hardened on the edges and a couple of bags of flour that didn't look too bug infested. She also found a stash of nuts and oats, as well as several varieties of dried beans and lentils.

She sent some men to the river to fish, then set about baking fresh loaves of bread. By the time Llew and his brothers returned, she had a hot meal waiting in the great hall, which had been strewn with fresh herbs and hay.

"Well, well, well," Allard commented, sitting down and propping his feet on the table. Jess stared at him until he sighed and put them back on the floor.

Graham laughed and elbowed Allard in the side, managing to knock an entire pitcher of ale onto Jess's newly cleaned floor. "Sorry," he muttered when Allard cuffed him upside the head.

Llew chuckled and held out a large pile of brightly colored cloth. "I do not know your size, but the seamstress will be here later. Pick whatever you want and have some new clothes made." When he bent to brush his lips across hers, Jess felt her cheeks flame as she thought again of all the ways he had touched her in the night.

Llew took the bolts of cloth and tossed them in the corner before dragging Jess into a tight embrace. He slipped a hand down her hips and pressed her to his groin. Already he grew stiff and hungry.

"Take it upstairs," Graham muttered, reaching for another pitcher of ale.

Allard smiled and broke off a piece of bread. "Our brother didn't have a good night in town," he commented, dipping the bread in a bowl of butter. "His favorite had already been taken for the night. By the time he found another, he was too deep in his cups to be of very much use."

Graham growled and downed his drink.

“And if he keeps this up today, he won’t get stiff tonight, either.” Allard reached for the platter of fish, but Graham beat him to it, shoveling the vast portion of the food onto his own plate.

Llew led Jess to the head of the table, sat down and pulled her onto his lap. “I will have no trouble with a bit of stiff for you,” he whispered in her ear. One hand dove between her thighs, slipping her legs apart to curl across her mound.

Jess sucked in her breath and squeezed her knees together, but Llew stopped her with another murmur in her ear. “We have a bargain.”

She gaped at him in wide eyed astonishment. Surely he did not mean to...not here at the table with his brothers watching.

It seemed that he did. “Pour me ale, Jess.” he said. His fingers spread her flesh beneath the material of her gown to rub across her clit, slowly drawing back and forth until Jess had to grit her teeth to keep from crying out her pleasure.

If either of the other men noticed they gave no sign, digging heartily into the meal, only occasionally shoving each other.

Unable to stand the ache any longer, Jess slapped Llew’s hand away and moved to another chair. He grinned at her with no hint of remorse, his dark eyes dancing merrily. She handed him the last of the fish and blushed with pleasure when he said it was the best he had ever tasted.

“Do you know why they call us the Demons of Dunmore?” Graham suddenly asked.

Jess nodded. “Llew told me how your family was excommunicated by the church.” She made her words as gentle as possible. “I think it was very noble.”

Graham choked on his ale while Allard howled in amusement.

“Is that what he told you?”

“Yes.” Jess blinked as the brothers continued to laugh, glancing at Llew in concern.

He shook his head and glared at the other two who chose to ignore him completely.

"No, 'tis because of our horns, lady," Allard finally managed.

Graham nodded enthusiastically. "We have great horns."

"Massive horns."

"Legendary horns."

"There are tales told about our horns to frighten virgins in the night."

Allard leaned close and gave Jess a sly wink.

Llew buried his head in his hands as his brothers showed no signs of ceasing.

"'Tis said the devil was so jealous of the first Dunmore horn, he left heaven just to see it."

"It was the eighth wonder of the world."

"Pilgrims came from lands afar to marvel at its vastness."

"It could span the Blue River," Allard assured her, propping his feet back on the table.

By now Jess was giggling so hard, she did not bother to correct him. Graham took advantage and stretched his own legs out across the wood. Llew continued to glare at them both, but Jess could see the grin that simmered just below the surface.

"And our poor brother..." They both looked mournfully at Llew.

"A shame, really," Graham stated.

"Especially since he is the lord and all," Allard agreed.

"Sad—"

"Not to be believed—"

"You see, my lady—" Graham said with relish.

"'Tis a well known fact—" Allard chimed in.

"Llew has the smallest horn of the lot!" They finished almost in unison.

"Ha, ha, ha," Llew finally muttered, sending them all into fits of laughter again.

Jess rubbed at the tears streaming down her cheeks as she continued to giggle outrageously. There had never been such laughter in her house. Never such affection between members of her family.

Llew threw a hunk of bread across the table. It hit Graham in the face. He retaliated with a piece of cheese. Before Jessaline could protest, the great hall was filled with flying bits of food and pieces of cutlery. She ducked a spoon that came precariously near her head and took aim at Llew with a bite of bread she snagged from Allard's plate.

Graham flung the last drops of ale from his glass in his older brother's direction. Llew snorted when it splashed across his cheek.

"Stop!" Jess commanded when Allard picked up a pitcher and looked mischievously inside. "I have enough to do to clean up this mess already." She shook her finger at them all. "If you behave, I'm planning almond pudding for this evening's meal." She hoped the other brothers had as big a passion for sweets as Llew. She knew she was right when they slid their trenchers under the edge of the table and began to brush off the crumbs.

"Yes, my lady." Graham bowed his head humbly.

"Ass," Allard muttered. But Jessaline noticed he cleaned up his share of the mess.

Llew rose and stretched, his dimples clearly visible. "And now for dessert." Grabbing Jessaline around the waist, he bent her over one strong arm and kissed her with abandon.

"Show off," Graham stated as he and Allard made their way to the door. "Come on, before he takes her here on the table."

"Jealous?" Allard asked.

Jessaline did not hear the answer as Llew's mouth moved with a purpose over hers. She whimpered when his fingers tugged at one nipple until it swelled against her woolen gown. It amazed her that she responded so easily to him, that despite having known him for only a brief few days, already her world was overflowing with his presence. His touch, his taste, his smell. The way he held her in the night and filled her thoughts whenever he was away.

She shuddered when his tongue slid between her lips. She could feel him tremble when she sucked him deeper into her mouth. There was power in desire, she realized with a start—power a woman could use as easily as a man. If he could make her beg for his touch, she could also make him beg for hers.

A soft caress down his stomach was all it took to have him tremble in her arms again. One light nip of her teeth on his lip caused him to growl in need and pull her even tighter to him.

“You learn quickly,” he said, drawing back to stare hard into her eyes. She could see the uncertainty he tried to hide—confusion that his desire for her was stronger than he cared to acknowledge.

“I have the best of teachers.” Her hand traced the length of him through his breeches. He growled roughly before pulling her hand away and raising her fingers to his lips.

“Tonight,” he promised, turning up her palm to press a last kiss into her hand before following his brothers out into the day.

After the men had gone and her great hall was swept clean again, Jessaline looked at the piles of cloth Llew had thrown negligently in the corner. There was a bolt of dark green wool, several more of different hued linens, a rust colored brocade—and tucked beneath, where she could barely see it, a small swath of the softest yellow silk she had ever seen. As she contemplated the cloth, one of the kitchen girls came in and curtsied.

“M'lady, the seamstress is here.”

“Send her in,” Jess replied.

The girl hurried out and an older woman swept pleasantly into the room. “My Lady Dunmore,” she greeted with a smile. “I am Cathryn Trent. May I say how honored I am to be here.” She studied Jessaline with a practiced eye. “Lord Llewellyn picked all the cloth himself,” she said, moving to the table where Jessaline still fingered the saffron silk. “He particularly liked that piece.”

Jessaline's cheeks warmed beneath the woman's watchful gaze. She drew back her shoulders and tried to compose her features.

“I must say,” Cathryn continued, picking up the edges of several different materials, “he did a most excellent job of choosing the colors. These will all be beautiful on you. Especially the silk. It will make a lovely night dress.”

Jess blushed in earnest, but Cathryn continued without seeming to notice. “Let us measure you, my lady, and decide what you need.”

“Can I offer you wine, or cake?” Jessaline motioned to the kitchen.

Oh, no.” Cathryn shook her head. “I am here to work. Now hold out your arm.”

By the time the seamstress left, Jessaline was thrilled with the afternoon’s progress. She had ordered three gowns, several more linen kirtles to wear underneath, had been measured for a pair of new leather boots, and had watched in amazement as Cathryn draped the silk around her and designed a chemise that would fit her to perfection and leave nothing to her husband’s imagination.

She had been promised the first of the gowns by the next afternoon, and Jessaline could hardly wait to get the new clothes—most especially the saffron silk. She smiled, thinking of how it would feel against her skin, and how it would feel to have her husband strip it from her. In fact, she grinned unceasingly all the rest of the day, picturing herself wrapped in Llew’s arms while night draped over the land.

She thought the day would never end as she oversaw the preparations for the evening meal.

Chapter Six

Jessaline did make almond pudding for supper, and the brothers ate the entire dish before even starting on the stew. Afterwards, Allard and Graham went to wash in the kitchen—Jessaline gave them strict orders to keep their hands off the serving girls—and she and Llew shared a glass of wine together.

“Come ride with me.” Llew held out his hand and led Jessaline into the lengthening evening shadows. “We have time before nightfall. I would show you some of my estate.”

Jessaline picked her way across the courtyard, pleased that much of the refuse had already been cleared out. The air smelled fresher and the keep felt more like a home she could come to be proud of.

Llew chewed a piece of straw as he led her down to the stables. Jessaline’s heart lifted even more when he opened the heavy wooden doors and ushered her inside. The earthy smell of hay and horse greeted them as they made their way down the row of stalls where the horses snorted and stamped. Jess stared at a red-brown mare who gazed back at her with the same fascination.

“Her name is Meadow,” Llew said, leaning lazily against the railing.

“Meadow,” Jess repeated softly. “May I touch her?”

“Of course.” Llew plucked a dried apple from an oak storage bin. “Give her this.”

He placed the shriveled fruit in her hand, and Jessaline stiffly held out the offering. She squealed when Meadow sniffed at her fingers before nibbling down the treat. A warm nose pressed into her arm had Jess

giggling like a girl. She could feel Llew's amusement as he watched her through half closed eyes.

"My father did not let me near the stables," Jess explained. "I was only allowed in the carriages. My father made it very clear that women did not ride."

"Tis a good thing your father was never introduced to my mother. She had special riding skirts made so she could sit in the saddle like a man."

"Really?" Jess was fascinated by this. "Your mother rode?"

Llew smiled. "She still does. 'Tis one of her favorite entertainments."

Jessaline's heart began to beat in earnest. "Would you...I mean, would it be possible..." She frowned as she found herself stumbling on the words. If he said no... "Would you teach me to ride?" she finally blurted out. When Llew hesitated she tried to cover up her disappointment. "Of course, you don't have to. 'Tis not necessary for me to ride alone. I will do quite well with you, or in a carriage, or—"

"Jessaline," Llew broke in quietly. "I will be happy to teach you to ride. The seamstress made riding skirts for my mother, I will instruct her to make one for you."

Jess could not contain her excitement. She rushed into Llew's arms, almost bouncing from the ground. He caught her with a grunt as she pressed him back against railing, trailing kisses along his jaw.

Disentangling himself from her arms, he gave her a wry grimace. "You can show me your gratitude later," he said, a new and dangerous expression lurking in his eyes.

Desire slammed between them. Expected. Welcomed.

"Now, however," he continued, taking her hand again and leading her to where Broch was stabled, "I want you to ride with me."

Broch whinnied when Llew approached, man and beast greeting each other warmly. When the steed moved to nuzzle Jessaline's hand, she felt a happy kinship settle between them, like she was saying hello to an old and favored friend. Llew saddled the steed with an expert efficiency and soon they rode through the bailey and down a side path, circling around

the keep and across open farmland. Workers already turned up the rich spring soil, digging furrows to be planted later in the season. A large and well tended orchard rose up past the gardens, and Jess could see the first fruits already growing upon the branches. Pear, apple, cherry. They would provide fresh food for the summer and be preserved or honeyed to last the winter through.

"What do you grow there?" Jessaline pointed to acres of bare land in the distance. These had yet to be tilled and showed no signs of being readied for planting.

Llew stopped Broch to survey the scene. "Saffron. Ours is prized as highly as any other. This is one of the few places in Westmyre where the soil is just right. 'Tis a highly paid crop."

Jessaline frowned at the bare ground. "Then should you not be growing it?"

Llew laughed. "We turn the roots up at midsummer and harvest in the fall. These fields will be covered with beautiful silver blue flowers."

"And then what?"

"We pick the dark red stems from the blooms. They are set out to dry over slow burning fires, pressed into cakes, and sold to the highest bidder. My favorite time of year," he admitted with a smile, "is when the traders come to buy. The price goes up with every passing season."

He pointed to several stone buildings lined up next to the fields. "Those are the drying sheds. They have great firepits set into the ground, covered with iron gratings. The fires burn day and night for several weeks. The smell is wonderful, and everyone's hands will be stained from the work."

They continued their slow ride until Llew led them back to the keep again. Jessaline frowned when she saw his brothers were dressed and waiting.

"Ready?" Allard did not even try to meet Jessaline's eyes.

Llew handed her down from the saddle. "I will be home shortly."

"Where do you go so late in the day, my lords?" She stared at each of them in turn, not pleased in the least with this latest turn of events. If

the brothers left that was one thing—but Llew should stay home, with her, whispering his need as his fingers worked their dark magic upon her.

“Tipwich. Don’t worry, I will not stay long.” Llew smiled most beguilingly. She knew his game and swore it wouldn’t work, but he was so absolutely magnificent, Jessaline found herself smiling stupidly back.

They did make an incredibly handsome trio, she admitted to herself as she watched them ride away. A temptation most women would find too hard to resist. And therein lay the heart of the problem. She still did not know if she could trust Llew not to share his favors with another—some special companion he had bedded before.

Jessaline wondered how she would compete with that. How did a man choose one woman over another? What did they desire most?

She chewed her lip thoughtfully as she went to prepare for bed. How could she make her husband want her and only her? She would do whatever it took to keep him. The alternative was unacceptable.

When Llew still had not returned by the time Jessaline finished her bath, she decided to take matters into her own hands. After re-donning her gown and boots, she went to the kitchen and woke Margaret from her sleep.

“Find someone who will ride me into town,” Jess ordered. The woman blinked at her though bloodshot eyes. “*Now.*” Whatever her husband was up to, she would find out—find out and put a stop to. She would not have him jumping into bed with whomever he happened to fancy when she was more than willing to satisfy his every need and desire.

Although Jessaline did not raise her voice, the older woman knew to take her seriously. “I will fetch my husband Tom,” she said, stumbling sleepily into the courtyard. She returned quickly, dragging an even sleepier man behind her.

“My lady,” he cajoled, bowing his head, “if I take you into town at this time of night, Lord Llewellyn’ll have my hide.” He wrung his hands and looked at Margaret for support.

"If you do not take me this instant," Jessaline replied, "you will have to contend with me." She pinned the man beneath her icy stare.

As if deciding her husband would prove the lesser of two evils, Tom nodded curtly and went to saddle a horse.

Margaret gave her a cunning look. "Good for you, my lady. A man has no business cavorting around when his wife is at home waitin' in his bed. Lord or no. Will you be needing food or drink before you leave?" She moved to throw more wood on the fire.

Jess shook her head. "I can buy what I need in town. Go back to bed." That reminded her she had no way of buying anything she might need. But Llew and his brothers would have plenty of coin. They would pay whatever she demanded for this night's amusements.

By the time Tom returned, Jess was waiting in the courtyard. A mostly full moon hung low on the horizon, its light clearly outlining the well traveled road. Tom helped Jess onto the saddle, hesitated, then mounted before her. "Hold, on," he said, muttering under his breath. "My lord will kill me for sure, come morning. What business is this, a lady ridin' out at night with just an old man for protection?"

"I did not ask for your opinion," Jess stated coldly. "Shut up and ride."

Tom wisely remained silent for the rest of the journey.

Far in the distance a string of fairy lights danced across the green, but Jessaline was too wrapped in her thoughts of Llew to fully appreciate the rare and wondrous sight.

What would she say to him? How could she convince him to come home? She was already starting to think of the keep as home, finding a fierce joy in making it a clean and well run household. She was also finding an unexpected camaraderie with Llew's outrageous brothers—if she forgave them for luring her husband out tonight. If she found Llew in the arms of another woman she would gladly skin them all, starting with Llew and working her way past Allard to Graham. Her heart beat faster as her anger rose. Anger was useful, it beat out fear every time.

When they arrived in Tipwich, the town was mostly dark and silent. Jessaline refused to dwell on who or what might be lurking down the deserted streets they passed, focusing instead on the pool of light that spilled from a building just ahead.

"Is that the inn?" she asked. "Take me there," she said when Tom nodded.

He stopped the horse beside the two storied wooden building and Jess slid easily from the saddle. "Wait for me here." She squared her shoulders, took a deep steadying breath, and walked into the inn as if she had done it a thousand times.

Instant silence greeted her appearance.

"Can I help milady?" The woman sidled up to Jess, her smile nothing more than a mocking twist of her lips.

"I am here to find my husband, Lord Dunmore." Jess stared back, undaunted by the other's disrespect.

"Lord Dunmore?" The woman laughed and everyone in the room cackled with her in amusement. "He ain't married. None of 'em ever marry." Her eyes narrowed cruelly. "But there's plenty of men here willin' to play that game with you. Right boys?"

The room erupted into shouts and lewd suggestions.

Jessaline stepped another foot closer to the woman until their faces were almost touching. "If I am who I say I am," she whispered, "do you really wish to face my husband's wrath?"

Now there was appraisal in the woman's eyes. She snorted and turned away. "I'll take you," she said over her shoulder. "Private chamber in the back."

Jess picked her way through the crowded room, ignoring the lascivious stares and calls of the men. She had almost made it across the floor when a filthy hand snaked out to clamp around her wrist.

"What's yer hurry?" The man swayed, tugging Jess toward him. "There's food and drink here. Stay a while."

Out of the corner of her eye, Jess saw another man sneak around behind her. Without hesitation, she rammed her knee hard into the first man's groin. He let her go with a curse, spit flying from his mouth as he clutched at his crotch.

The other man stopped. Jess turned and raised one brow in his direction. "If you prize your jewels," she said, dropping her gaze down and back again, "I suggest you do not detain me."

"We was just havin' a bit of fun." He glared at her in accusation, but moved away, nevertheless.

The woman gave Jess a last furtive look before slinking back into the crowded room. Rubbing her sweating hands down the front of her dress, Jess chewed on her bottom lip. While Llew had sworn never to raise his hand against her, she knew this night might very well test the limits of his patience. She wasn't exactly doing anything he had told her not to, she reasoned, but no man relished the thought of his wife interrupting his other amusements. If he beat her, she could always walk away. Walk away and seek sanctuary in the church.

And face a life without him—and without any of the blissful pleasure she had come to know in his arms. A life as bleak and barren as it had always been. She frowned at the thought, hardening her resolve. She would deal with his anger, find a way to turn it to her advantage. Jessaline knew how to watch and wait until the proper time to act. It was a skill she had relied on many times before, and one she would trust to get her through this now.

She opened the door and slipped cautiously inside.

None of them noticed her right away. Allard and Graham were playing dice, each with a giggling woman on their laps. Llew sat on the other side of the table, wine glass dangling from his fingers as he watched his brothers in amusement. Another woman stood behind him, leaning in occasionally to whisper some comment in his ear, but Llew did not reach to touch her, or respond to whatever she was saying.

"That's two for me!" Graham slammed his pewter mug on the table and raked in the pile of coins before burying his face down the woman's bodice. "C'mon, Llew, your turn next. Allard's lost all his money."

"Haven't," Allard grumbled. "I'm just fattenin' you up for the kill." He tried to slosh more ale into his glass, but found the pitcher empty. "You, there," he motioned to Jessaline who still stood in the shadows, "go fetch us another round."

"Send one of the serving girls instead." Smiling, Jess sat down in an empty chair facing Llew. His eyes darkened dangerously and his hand clenched upon his glass.

"What are you doing here," he asked, "and who do I kill for bringing you?" He moved not one muscle, but Jess could see the rigid set to his jaw. He was not pleased at all.

Jess pointed to the woman who stood behind him. "You, fetch more ale for the lords, and bring me a bottle of wine. Unopened."

The woman frowned and looked at Llew. Jess held her breath. If he denied her authority, she had already lost the battle.

"Do as she commands." When the woman still hesitated, Llew glared at her. The smile froze on her face as she moved to obey. Jess fought down her nerves and settled more comfortably in her chair.

"When you did not return I feared you may have come to some harm." She fluffed her skirts out on the chair. "As a good wife, it is my duty to worry over your safety."

Graham chortled and Allard's face lit up. "This ought to be good," she heard one brother mumble.

"Very," the other agreed.

"I assure you I am well." Llew's voice dropped an octave. "You had no need to seek me here."

Jessaline shivered in both dread and anticipation. His mouth had drawn into a stubborn glower which only served to make her want to kiss the frown away. His fingers toyed easily with the glass he held in his hand, and Jess already imagined the feel of them upon her skin. Dark

desire rose between them. She knew he felt it too by the way his eyes raked over her.

The woman returned and set a bottle of wine in front of Jess. The wax seal had not been broken. Jess breathed a sigh of relief, at least she could drink without fear of catching some pestilence in this awful place. She handed the bottle to Allard, who drew his knife across the wax. She drank directly from the bottle when he handed it back. Llew scowled even more as he slid his glass across the table.

"Pour," he demanded.

Jessaline obeyed, pleased when she didn't spill a drop. "What do you usually do next?" She smiled beatifically at them all.

Allard choked on his drink, but Graham grinned serenely back. "Well, we usually have some of the girls come and dance for us. Right, brother?" He elbowed Allard in the side.

"Uh...right."

"I don't think my wife would care for that particular entertainment." The warning in Llew's voice was unmistakable.

Jessaline opted to ignore the impending danger. "Then dancing we shall have. What is your name?" She waved her hand at the woman standing again behind her husband.

"Jane," came the reply.

"Well, then, Jane, come and dance for me." Jessaline took another long swallow of the wine.

The woman held out her hand. "One silver nugget and I will give you the dance of your life."

Jessaline did not miss the challenge in her eyes. Her own eyes slid to Graham then back to Jane. "Pay her."

"Gladly." He flipped a coin high in the air. Jane caught it easily and slipped it into her gown.

"*Brother.*" Llew's voice was even more frigid than before.

Graham leaned back in his chair and propped one foot on the table. "Bring your drum, love," he whispered to the woman on his lap.

Jess kept her eyes glued on Jane as the woman slid her sleeves down over her shoulders, exposing even more of her rounded chest. She stepped from behind Llew's chair and walked toward Jessaline, stopping to tuck one side of her gown into her belt, baring her leg all the way to the thigh.

The other woman was quite lovely, Jessaline realized as Jane moved toward her. She had raven black hair and eyes just as dark. Her figure was quite appealing from what Jess could see, her skin dusky and unlined. *Gypsy blood.*

When the second woman returned and began a steady beat on her drum, Jane tossed back her head. Her hair flowed in waves that shimmered in the candle's light, and the skin of her throat and shoulders gleamed. Jessaline wondered how often her husband had found pleasure in the dancer's company. She choked at the thought, needing another drink of wine to ease the lump that had jammed in her throat.

One last time, she let her eyes capture Llew's. He had settled back in his chair, his face almost lost in shadow, but Jessaline could see the unnatural way he held totally motionless as he watched this latest turn of events. His eyes locked on hers with a severity he had never shown before, and Jess felt the anger simmering in their depths.

He was furious, she realized. Furious that she'd followed him into town, furious that she was using his family against him, and furious at the growing need that stretched too tight between them.

Jessaline couldn't be more pleased. Tearing her eyes from Llew's, she concentrated on the woman who now swayed gracefully before her. Tension rose higher in the room as all three men stared in rapt fascination at Jessaline and Jane.

Jane whirled behind Jess, bending low to whisper in her ear. "Should I make him desire you above all others?"

Jessaline nodded slowly and ran her tongue over her lips. When Llew shifted in his chair, she bent her head back to gaze up at the dusky skin of Jane's neck.

Despite their different stations—and the woman's history with Llew—Jessaline felt a strange bond rise up between them, the kinship of two who shared the same fate; women struggling to survive in a world that scorned them, each doing whatever they could to ease the sorrow of their lives.

Without conscious thought, Jess reached up to stroke the woman's cheek. Jane flinched and her eyes grew wary, but Jessaline smiled soothingly and touched her cheek again. This time, Jane returned the gesture, running her fingers up Jessaline's throat to tangle in her hair.

Graham gasped.

Allard groaned.

Llew sank even lower into his seat. Jessaline thought if she could see it, his great cock would be swollen and heavy, ready to respond to her touch, ready to grant her every wish.

She felt her own need burning deep between her legs, the sting of desire swiftly rising. She hadn't known such feelings could be shared between two women. She'd never had any experience of life outside her own particular prison. Her thoughts should have made her feel sinful and ashamed, but her bond with the other woman was so instant and complete, Jessaline didn't question the rightness or wrongness of it. "Dance for me," she said to Jane, leaning back into the woman's arms.

Jane slid her hands down Jessaline's shoulders and drew them up over her breasts. Her touch was softer than Llew's, hesitant, uncertain, as if afraid of going too far and suffering the repercussions.

Jessaline sucked in her breath as she felt her nipples bead beneath the woman's fingers. Jane pinched harder and Jess arched into her hands, watching the muscles tick along Llew's tightly clenched jaw.

Allard, Graham and the other women were forgotten. There was only Llew, Jane and the triangle of passion that linked them all together.

Jane swayed to the drumbeat, circling to stand in front of Jess, swaying her hips in time to the rhythm, dipping lower and lower to the ground until she knelt at Jessaline's feet.

Even then she continued her dance upon the floor, stretching back with her knees spread wide, letting her shoulders fall and her stomach undulate.

Her hands drew her skirt high upon her gleaming skin, up and over her thighs until Jess could see the flock of curls peeking out between them.

It was a dance of invitation and both women knew it. Jess had but to say the word and Jane would come willingly into her arms. Rising snakelike from the floor, Jane ran her hands over Jess's legs until they settled just below the juncture of her thighs.

Then, with a sigh of resignation, the dark haired beauty dropped her head onto Jessaline's lap. As she let her fingers slide through the dancer's hair, Jess closed her eyes and willed the pounding of her heart to stop.

For long moments the women remained clasped to each other, until Jane raised her head and Jess could see the sorrow that shuttered her eyes.

"Why do you do this?" Jess bent close and whispered so only Jane could hear.

The other woman's lips twisted. "Some of us have no other choice, lady." Her voice mocked them both.

"There is always a choice," Jess replied, "Come to me and I can help you."

"Promise?" Although the last was said lightly, Jess could hear the thinly veiled hope.

"Promise."

They hugged each other, a last caress before Jane stepped away. This time she stood behind Jessaline's chair.

Chapter Seven

Llew watched the entire show with a wildly rising hunger. To see his Jessaline so entranced by another woman's charms was something he had certainly not considered. He knew he could never share her with another man, but could he share her with Jane?

The possibility excited him immensely. He sat rooted in his chair, afraid the slightest movement would send him spilling into his breeches, and although the idea was not unpleasant, he was determined to only find his release in Jessaline's soft sweet arms.

Willing his need back under control, he clenched his fingers so hard around the glass it shattered into fragments that tumbled to the floor.

"It is time to go home," he gritted at last when he realized no inch of relief was forthcoming. He pulled a money pouch from his shirt and threw it on the table in front of Jane. "You've earned it." The words came out thick with unfulfilled desire.

"Thank you, my lord, my lady," Jane answered, her gaze drawn again to Jessaline's hair.

"Come." Llew rose cautiously and held out his hand to Jess. Although the bulge in his breeches was more than obvious, neither Graham nor Allard commented. They were still too busy trying to control their own wayward pricks.

Jessaline slanted him a glance through partly lowered eyes. "Are you very angry?"

"At what? Your wanton actions with the dancer, or your foolishness in traveling at night alone?" He pulled her back through the crowded main room. This time there were no leers or comments made in her

direction. They obviously knew Llew would have their heads if they so much as looked at her askance.

“Is there a right answer to that question?”

“You push me,” he warned.

Tom flinched when he saw Llew leading Jess from the tavern. “My lord, I had no choice—”

“Trust me, I know. Go home. We will talk tomorrow.” He led Jessaline to where Broch was tethered. “Up you go, and if you so much as blink wrong, I swear I will—”

“Beat me? Whip me?” Jess tossed back her head and glared at him in the moonlight. “We have an arrangement. How dare you seek out the company of a...a...a woman like that when you have a perfectly willing wife at home!”

“I dare what I please, wife or no.” The ice in his voice would have cowed a saner person.

Jessaline, however, seemed madder than most. “You will abide by the rules we agreed on. I have not refused anything you asked. This is a real marriage, and you must learn to behave accordingly.”

“This is *not* a real marriage.” Llew realized his mistake before the words had even left his mouth. Jessaline stepped back as if he had truly slapped her, not just hurt her with his stupid slip of the tongue.

“Not a real marriage? What does that mean?” She had suddenly grown too calm, too controlled.

Llew pushed a frustrated hand through his hair. “Look, let’s talk about this come morning. When we’ve both had a chance to calm down.”

“We will talk about this *now*.” Jessaline’s voice rose in pitch and several people came out to watch the excitement.

“We will not discuss this here, in front of the entire village.” He clenched his jaw so tight he thought his teeth would break. How dare she challenge his authority in front of the commoners of Tipwich. He was a lord, damn it all, and she had better learn just who was master.

"Are we married or not?" Jess demanded, balling her hands on her hips. "And you better think hard about your answer, *husband*, before you demand entry to our chamber this night."

He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her around the side of the building, away from the glances cast their way. "*Jess*," he warned again.

"Yes or no."

Llew's mouth opened, shut, opened again. In truth, he didn't know what to tell her. Explain that it was all a joke, that he planned to play with both her body and emotions, and then send her off to the church when he grew bored of the game. *But I did plan on giving your dowry back*, he could hear himself explain. As if that would make it right.

"Tis a simple question," she added when he still refused to speak. "And if the answer is no, you better have a very good explanation." She stared at him in the moon shadows, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"What the hell do you want me to say?" His own guilt wrapped his words in bitterness. "How happy I am to be saddled with a wife? The daughter of an enemy, no less, who will probably come to take her back by force? This was your idea, not mine. Do not expect me to act like a true and loving husband!"

"Ah."

She stepped toward him until he could see the gleam in her eye was one of utter pigheaded woman. He thought if the light were brighter, he would find her red hair curling into poisonous snakes. His very own Medusa sent to turn him into stone. She had partially succeeded already, he admitted ruefully, feeling his cock surge up once more. He wanted her even now, with her hands clenched hard at her hips, and her mouth pressed into an angry line.

"So you are telling me you do not want to continue with our agreement? That you don't want to touch me, kiss me...that you would rather be with someone who sells herself to anyone who has money enough to pay? You are contented to share with every other man in this town?"

Her voice grew soft as she leaned in to just barely breathe on his neck. Llew knew he was being handled, knew and did not care as the scent of her washed over him. He chuckled, almost admiring her as she ran a finger down his stomach. She was determined to seduce him, cajole him into admitting how much her words rang true.

He did not like to share. He never had. There had been times when the stench of other men's seed had been more than he could stomach, and he'd had to drink himself into a stupor before letting the girl even pleasure him with her hands.

There would never be another man's smell on Jessaline. Never be another man's hands on her body, or another man's cock thrust deep into—jealousy rose swift, just as she'd intended.

Llew pasted on his best evil grin and pressed his face close to hers. He grabbed a handful of her glorious hair and tried to capture her mouth with his. Jessaline evaded his lips, her hand slipping lower across his groin.

"Yes or no," she said again.

"This is blackmail," he stated.

"This is survival," she answered, raising her face to his. "I'm not asking you to love me. I'm not even asking you to pretend that you do. And if at some point in the future you desire me no longer, you can do as you will. That is the way of things. I am not a complete fool." He could hear the tremor in her voice, the disillusionment she could not hide. "But at least give me a chance to try and make you happy."

She let her lips part, accepting, offering, waiting for his decision. No woman had ever driven him to such heights of glory and frustration, and he thought the combination of the two must surely drive him mad.

"Why do I keep letting you talk me into these crazy things?" He rested his forehead against hers. "Is this really so important to you? With your dowry I could buy you a small estate. We could even stay married if you wished, but you would be free to live your life and I would be free to live mine. No rules, no promises."

"No pleasure? Is that really what you want, to send me to some estate far away from you?"

"I want you, damn it...now." Enough of her teasing. He clasped his hand around the nape of her neck and brought her mouth to his. The kiss was hungry, harsh, all his pent up frustrations and desires flowed through the thrust of his tongue and into her parted lips. He gave no ground, and she met him need for need, her want in perfect tune with his, her body in perfect position against him.

He let his other hand cup one breast, his thumb rasping across the nipple. Jessaline moaned into his mouth as that hand dropped lower to dip between her thighs. She cried out again as he found the pearl of her clit and tormented it between his fingers.

She swayed too temptingly against him and Llew felt his flesh thicken even more, straining desperately to break free of the material that held it.

The tavern door opened. Harsh laughter spilled out into the night.

Llew dragged his lips from hers. "*Hell.*" She would have him mounting her in the street for everyone to see. And knowing his Jess, she would not utter one word of complaint as long as she found release, screaming in his arms.

"Up you go." He sat her on Broch and hauled himself up in front of her, needing a decent view of the road since they were traveling at night.

He realized his mistake as soon as she wrapped her arms around his waist and found the tip of his rigid cock. "Careful," he warned, but she paid him no heed at all.

"Did you sleep with the dancer very often?"

"What?" His heart was pounding so hard he could barely hear her words.

"The dancer. Did you bed her?" Jessaline let her fingers stroke lightly over his breeches. His cock surged in answer.

"*God, woman,*" he swore, arching his hips to press himself against her. He swore again when he felt her hands dive down to caress his balls before slipping over him from root to tip and back again.

“Well?” she demanded.

Llew allowed himself the luxury of a smile, knowing she couldn't see it in the dark. So his lovely wife was jealous? He would certainly find a way to use that to his advantage—or maybe not, he corrected as her fingers snugged tight around his already aching member. “I have never bedded the dancer,” he admitted truthfully. “She was always Allard's favorite. But they had some falling out...my guess is that after both your performances this night, my brother won't come home for a few days.” He chuckled when he felt Jessaline sigh into his shoulder. “But if you like, I can arrange to have her come to Dunmore Keep.” He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

“Oh, I already invited her,” Jess replied.

Llew did not know how his breeches kept from splitting at the seams.



She landed on their bed in a heap of ivory skin and tousled ruby hair, and Llew thought he had never seen a more erotic sight in all his life. She blinked at him through a veil of hair that fell across her face as the fire traced shadows over her, illuminating her flesh and setting off sparkles in her tangled locks.

He'd barely had time to hand Broch off to the stable keeper before carrying Jess up the spiral stairs and stripping off her gown and kirtle. Now she sprawled naked before him, an ancient goddess from days of old.

He stripped off his own clothes and joined her, grabbing handfuls of her brilliant hair to spread across his stomach and thighs. Softer than the finest silk it curled around his burgeoning erection, a waterfall of color that bathed him in a cinnamon cloud.

Llew frowned as he caught sight of a faint silver line that traced across her shoulder. “Roll over,” he commanded in a voice harsher than he'd intended.

Jessaline hesitated, the smile fading from her lips and a glimmer of uncertainty shadowing her eyes. She bit her lip and stared at him for long seconds, until Llew brushed a finger down her cheek.

“Roll over,” he said, gentler this time. He wrapped one hand over her shoulder and turned her face down on the bed.

He sucked in his breath when he saw the tiny scars that ran across her skin. She was marked from her shoulders to her thighs, some of the welts across her buttocks still showing an angry red.

Jessaline suddenly realized what had caught his attention and struggled to turn over again to hide the marks from his eyes. “Please, my lord, you do not have to see them. I know how ugly they are.”

“Did they beat you?” Llew held her still with one hand pressed onto her back, and let the fingers of his other hand trace the ridges along her flesh as if his touch could soothe all her hurt away.

“Only when I was a most willful and disobedient daughter.” There was still a spark of rebellion in her voice, and Llew allowed himself a smile.

“I see you were willful and disobedient quite often.”

Jess sighed and looked at him over her shoulder. “Defying my father became the only goal in my life,” she answered honestly. “If you had not come to save me, I would still have refused to marry. I am certain the punishment would have been severe.”

Llew felt a spurt of hatred rise into his heart. Beating women and children were not the actions of a noble man—no matter how well positioned the family. And beating Jessaline... Llew vowed he would kill the man if it ever happened again.

“What about your mother?” he asked, now running his hand along the length of her thigh.

Jessica stifled a soft moan as he let his fingers work between her legs, nudging them apart. Her voice was breathy when she answered. “My mother did whatever he wished. To my knowledge she never once said no to anything he demanded of her.”

Llew bent to kiss where her shoulder met her neck, moving her heavy fall of hair so he could nibble at the skin beneath. He could feel his desire for her already strong and urgent. Her skin prickled, the goose bumps soft beneath his mouth. He knew her nipples would be knotted, hard, and that thought drove him to an even greater want.

He reached down with both hands and spread her legs wide across the bed, kneeling between them to get his first view of her deliciously tender cunt.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Llew rubbed a finger over the growing mound of her clit. He wanted her to talk, wanted to hear her voice when she came in a wet rush on his fingers.

“Um, I have...uh, three, ahhhh, younger brothers.” Her hands clenched tight around the cover, and she could not stay still beneath his touch.

He nudged his finger up into her, reveling in her tight grip around him. He still rasped his thumb over her clit, the knob now swollen as it grew in arousal.

“What is your favorite color?” Llew asked wickedly.

Jessaline’s breath came in short pants now, and her bottom lifted up into his other hand. “G...gr...green,” she managed between whimpers.

“A most noble color,” Llew replied, urging a second finger in with the first. She wiggled even more, and Llew glimpsed a view of the even tighter little hole of her anus. He knew it was forbidden, even between husband and wife, but he could not resist the urge to explore her there, so he rubbed some of her sweet cream up into the crack and teased the puckered opening. He thought she might protest, might jerk away from his touch, but to his astonished surprise, she seemed to arch even more from the bed, and he heard the sob of need she tried to muffle in the mattress.

He bent low and nuzzled his mouth against her ear. “Do you like me to touch your lovely little ass, Jessaline? Like the feel of my finger on your other secret spot?”

He stopped the pressure of his touch, held absolutely still while she made her choice. He didn't have long to wait.

"Yes," she whispered so soft he barely heard. "Yes!"

Jessaline scarcely recognized her own voice as she answered in wicked abandon. If she had thought her pleasure great before, she had just reached a new level of needfulness. He had two thick fingers stuffed into her cunt, his thumb was nudging her clit into a fit of arousal, and now he pressed another finger deep into her ass.

She tried not to tense as he pierced the ring of muscle, but she could not stop a cry of painful pleasure when his finger breeched the tiny opening. The sensation was unlike any she had ever imagined, it burned, ached, pushed too far inside her, yet it brought a wave of arousal that made her want to beg for more. She tried to pull away even as she tried to urge him deeper, torn between the need to stop the throb of soreness, and the need to explore this new and sinful bliss.

"Relax, little one," she heard him mouth against her ear. "I will not hurt you. Never, never that." He licked his tongue across her neck, and stroked his fingers deeper.

He stunned her again when he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her bottom off the bed, sliding his knees beneath her. She was spread open to him as she had never been before, and the thought of his eyes watching his fingers drive into her made Jess's blood rush to her cheeks. She could feel the heat rising, feel how with every stroke of his fingers he entered her even more. Now a jolt of fire began to spread out from her anus, blending with another surge that radiated from her cunt.

Over and over he speared her with his fingers, and even this was not enough, for he suddenly urged a second finger into her tiny ass, the sting of it stretching her tender muscle enough to send Jessaline falling over the edge of reason, into a world of aching bliss she had never known before.

"Scream for me, lady," Llew whispered with a groan as he slid his fingers home as far as they would go.

“Uhhh...mmmm...ahhhhh!” Jessaline did scream, sobbing wildly in the night as her body writhed in release and her muscles pulsed and clenched around his hands. For long moments she rode the waves of pleasure, still feeling every stab of his fingers.

When at long last her trembling subsided, Llew pulled her back into his arms. Jessaline needed him to hold her and she turned to burrow her face into his chest. Llew was taking her to realms of emotions she had never explored before. Being with him was both excruciating in its bliss and frightening in its intensity. She was soaring too far, too fast, and Llew was the anchor she needed to cling to.

She wondered if he would offer her anything besides this wild and uncontrolled passion, if he would stay with her when the dark dreams came and keep the fear at bay.

She slid her arms around him and felt him shudder as if he fought his own battle. And then she realized that while he had satisfied her body’s hunger, his raged on with an unquenched fire.

He made no move to press her, to force her to please him. He held her close—so close—and gulped great breaths of air as he attempted to control his desire.

The fire popped, thunder rumbled low across the sky as another storm called out in warning, and still he sat in silence with her cradled in his arms.

She thought he would wait in that utter calmness for an eternity, unmoving, unflinching against the ache of want he tried to hold away.

His heart beat a steady rhythm, slowing ever so slightly with each breath he took. His hands tucked soft across her hips, they, too, ceasing their wanderings to lay quiet against her skin. And yet, there was a stiffness to his actions, an edge of restraint that kept him locked away from her in a place she could not access.

She moved away to look into eyes, studying the play of emotion that flickered across his face.

“What do you search for, lady, when you stare at me with such seriousness?”

Did she hear some uncertainty in his voice? Was he also treading unfamiliar waters?

"Pieces of your life." She reached out to brush her hand across his cheek. He shuddered at her touch and turned to bury his face in her palm. It was a gesture she had not anticipated, a flash of doubt he had not shown before.

Suddenly, Jess knew with a certainty, he had never been loved by any woman, never truly loved beyond the urgent coupling he had mastered so very well.

"Will you let me soothe you, my husband?" she whispered, brushing her lips ever so softly against his mouth.

He tried to regain control of her, tried to crush her in his embrace and fling them again into the heights of passion he was so secure in, but this time Jessaline refused to allow it.

When he demanded, she pulled away; when he dominated, she withdrew. She could feel his frustration as he battled both her and himself.

Finally, he cupped her face in his hands and glared at her in accusation. She smiled and kissed him soft again. This time she let her tongue trace the outline of his lips, only to snatch it away when he tried to suck it into his mouth.

He gave a great sigh and dropped his head onto her shoulder. His hands were unsteady where they threaded through her hair.

Gently, she laid him back upon the bed, letting her mouth linger in a long and easy kiss. Once more he tried to set the pace, one thumb rasping across her nipple while his other hand reached for the juncture of her thighs.

She bit his lip in protest. He gave a groan of frustration, but his cock rose hard and ready against her leg.

He sighed, a rumbling of his chest, that purr she was beginning to love above all other sounds, and grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her head back to look hesitantly in her face.

“What game do you play?” She could see his vulnerability and it struck home in her heart.

She placed her finger to his lips before uncurling his hand from her breast to tuck it over his head. She thrilled when he found the iron railing and gripped it, the muscles of his arm sleek and taught beneath his skin.

“Both,” she said, and watched in fascinated amusement as he opened his mouth to protest, clamped it shut and fisted his other hand around the metal.

Now it was Jessaline’s turn to purr as she had full and unfettered access to the beautiful man beneath her. He was everything she’d imagined a man could be in those long days when she’d been locked in her room, to suffer her beatings alone and in silence.

Llew had changed all that. She would never again be beaten or abased. He had promised and she believed him—trusted him as she had trusted no one else before.

She needed to touch him again, to somehow show her gratitude; to give him some gift in return for all he had given her. Running her fingers down his chest, she explored his body as he had explored hers. Unable to fully see him before, Jess now let her gaze take in every line and angle of his frame, from the jut of his too proud chin, down the lean lines of his belly to where the muscle tracked into the most massive piece of flesh she had ever been privileged to see.

“You are built like the horses of the Desert Tribes I’ve seen in our stables,” she marveled, letting her fingers smooth up his length.

He growled in answer, his hips shaking in his effort not to move them.

Jess managed to drag her eyes away to look at his face once more. The desire smoldered in his eyes, fierce, raw, and she watched in awe as his hands clenched even harder around the bar. Such power held in her control, such strength contained at her command.

“Is there any place I cannot touch you? Anything not to your liking?”

Jessaline marked again how he tensed beneath her touch.

“No, lady,” he gritted out. “Every place you touch me will be to my liking, but you need to touch me soon or I will die from the want of it.”

Chapter Eight

Llew had never felt such frustration in his life. With any other woman he would have been spent and done by now. With any other woman, he had to admit to himself, he would also not be ready to beg her to continue her gentle method of torture, even if he did die from the longing of it.

She frowned at him then, a subtle crease of her brows, and reached to place her hand over his where he had glued it to the metal. “Relax,” she said. “Why do you fight me so? I promise I will not hurt you.” Giving him a sly grin, she lowered her mouth back to his.

She kissed him slowly, lingering, the taste of her settling like fine wine upon him. Her tongue flicked softly against his lips and he opened himself more deeply to her kiss, still battling the urge to crush her beneath him, still unable to fully let go. But she was merciless in her gentling. The more he surrendered, the deeper she tasted of him.

Her hands once again slid down to his cock, curling around the width of him as she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

He groaned at the feel of himself wrapped in her hand and prayed she would beat him quick and hard until he exploded in a rush of hot, wet seed.

It seemed Jessaline had other plans. She pulled her lips from his and bent down to watch the play of her hands around his rigid flesh. One finger rubbed over the sensitive head where the liquid already attempted to pour forth. The moisture only served to heighten his misery, giving her another thing to play with and tease along his turgid staff.

When she let her hands move to cup the heavy sac of his balls, Llew groaned, the sound almost as loud as the thunder that continued in the background.

He felt another spurt of liquid seep from the tip of his cock.

"Jessaline," he pleaded, but she had already skipped from the bed to disappear behind the screen where she kept the bathtub.

When she returned, she held a vial of oil in her hands. "Shhhhh," she whispered when he thunked his head against the bar. "Soon."

Having no other choice, Llew finally closed his eyes and took a deep and shuddering breath, only to suck it in with a snarl when Jess slicked him with the oil and began a new and treacherous assault.

She stroked him slowly, up and down his entire length, both hands working along his swollen member.

When he lifted his hips to urge her faster, Jessaline stopped until Llew dropped to the bed again.

The pressure grew until he was certain he would die from the pain, but it was as if she knew he was beyond any stopping, for she brought her lips back to his and whispered against his mouth. "Scream for me, my lord."

At the same time she deepened the pressure around him and drove her tongue hard into his mouth. Llew screamed her name. She swallowed his words, draping her legs over his as his cock exploded in a great jolt of pleasure. His hips jerked hard against hers, and he came like he had never done before. He felt his seed land high on his chest, splattering their skin, as Jessaline continued to stroke him until he finally lay spent beneath her.

And still she kissed him, her mouth a sweet and steady joy that guided him back to reason.

He tried to say her name, mumble some well practiced phrase of flattery, but he had no ready words to speak. He tried to unclench his fingers from the bar, but his hands felt made of stone, unwilling to obey him. Only when Jessaline reached out to slide his fingers free, was Llew able to lower his arms and wrap her in a shaky embrace.

A gust of wind blew the tapestries on the wall and the clean smell of rain swept into the room. Llew barely noticed as he returned his lady's kiss with a renewed passion.

When she finally pulled away, his breathing was still harsh and unsteady. She searched his eyes once more and tucked her head onto his shoulder in silent satisfaction, only moving to pull the cover up around them.

They listened to the rain pour down for many minutes before she spoke again. "I have heard it can be...that it might...does it have to be very painful when a man first takes a woman?" Her voice trembled, holding an edge of doubt. He hadn't thought she might be afraid. She had always been so willingly seduced.

"Look at me, Jess." He tucked a finger beneath her chin and raised her face to his. Even though a flush of discomfort rode high on her cheeks, she kept her eyes glued to his in that honesty he was growing so used to.

"I know there can be pain," he answered slowly. "In truth, I have never bedded a maid before."

"Really?" She sounded so surprised he had to smile.

"I have been with many women, but all of them were very knowledgeable." He was telling her things he would never have said to another woman.

There were also issues he did not want to delve into. It was becoming harder and harder to think of sending Jess away even once she was thoroughly protected from her father. Should he consummate the marriage? Or would that deprive Jess of the ability to make a decent match with someone else in the future?

That thought shot a wave of jealousy driving into his gut. To think of his beautiful wife with another man—never, he would never let that happen. Yet he had no right to stop her from living whatever life she chose.

Make her yours, nagged the thought into his mind. Take her, bed her, and no other man will touch her ever again.

His face must have betrayed the battle of his thoughts, for he felt Jess try to pull away.

"Llew?"

He shook his head to clear away his tormented feelings and kissed her lightly on the nose. "There is time, Jess," he finally answered as best he could, knowing he had done nothing to ease her mind.

Feeling for once like the demon he was likened to, Llew pulled Jessaline's head to his chest and pretended to drift off to sleep.

Despite everything she gave him, he still hadn't decided if he really wanted a wife.



"Llew, someone is asking to see you." Allard strode into the stables, running a hand over his day old beard. He and Graham had been in Tipwich again last night.

Llew could not keep the stupid grin from his face as he thought of his lady wife and their activities of the night before. He would wager he'd had even more fun than his brothers.

"Stuff it," Allard grumbled as he saw his brother's look. "Unless you already have, and then do not bore me with all the details. One woman for the rest of time...no, I don't think so." But a shadow hovered in his gaze.

"Who is here?" Llew tossed more hay into Broch's stall.

"What? Oh, someone from Tipwich looking for work. He has a letter of recommendation from Father Thomas." Allard fumbled in his shirt for the wilted piece of paper.

Llew held out his hand. "Let me see." He read the note with interest. "Tell him to wait in the courtyard, I'll see him soon. Has Graham made it home yet?"

Allard shrugged. "The last I saw, he was attempting to bed five wenches at once."

Llew raised a brow. "Five? That would be a family record."

"It would if he succeeded." Allard agreed. "'Tis my guess the wine got to him first. There was a drinking match to start off the evening." He winced when he opened the stable door and stepped back into the sunlight. "Wish I would have had the foresight to pass on that particular bit of fun."

Llew laughed. "Live and learn, brother," he said, filling Broch's water trough. He thought of his siblings' frivolity. Perhaps he should give them each an estate to oversee, teach them some responsibility, respect for their position. He refused to acknowledge that until a few days ago, he had behaved in the exact same manner. It seemed to be so much farther in his past.

With a last rub across the horse's muzzle, Llew made his way to the courtyard and the man the priest had sent to call. As Llew approached, he found himself puzzled by the man's familiarity, as well as that of the woman who waited by his side. They stood hesitantly next to the door, hands intertwined and heads bent close together. The man was tall and broad of shoulder, Llew noted approvingly, and while his clothes had seen better days, they were fairly clean and patched neatly. The woman's gown was patched, also, but she was well groomed with her brunette hair tied back in a heavy braid.

They looked over expectantly as Llew approached, and recognition dawned over all three simultaneously. The woman blushed to the roots of her hair and dropped her gaze to the ground, the man's head jerked up in stunned surprise, and Llew nearly choked on the piece of hay between his teeth.

"M-my Lord Dunmore," the man stammered. To his credit he did not turn his eyes away.

He elbowed his companion in the side and she dropped to a swift curtsy.

"Well," Llew said, a lazy smile working its way across his lips as he thought of where he had seen them before—coupling on the forest floor

while he and Jessaline watched in fascination. "What brings you to Dunmore Keep?"

"My lord, I am Jack...of Mabon, and this is my wife Alice."

When he nudged her again, the woman finally looked up and tried her best to smile, despite the flush that still rode high across her cheeks. "M-my lord," she managed to whisper.

"I've a writ from Father Thomas," Jack continued. "He said you might be lookin' for a master-at-arms, to whip your guardsmen into fighting form."

"And why would I want to do that?" Llew crossed his arms across his chest.

"Tis told you rescued your lady wife from the tortures of her villainous father and that there might be bloodshed between the two families."

Llew felt his jaw clench. "Did Father Thomas tell you that?" he demanded.

"Aye, my lord. 'Tis all in the paper." Jack pointed to the document crumpled in Llew's hand.

Llew had considered the possibility that Lord Nolan might use force to reassert his claim to his daughter, but he hadn't truly given much weight to the thought. That the priest had, made Llew reassess the entire situation.

"What are your credentials?" He looked at Jack again with a practiced soldier's eye, marking the width of the other man's shoulders and the scars that forked over his hands.

"I fought with the Earl of Norwell in the Westmyre wars, but he was killed just before Edred Liester was restored to the throne. His estate passed to his brother. I spent a few years before that in company with the desert nomads, learning smithcraft and weapons design."

Llew nodded. "My brothers and I all did our service to restore Edred's crown. As for me, I hope never to go to war again. I have heard desert swords are most excellently balanced," he said, intrigued. "You have your own tools?"

"Yes, my lord. They are still in Tipwich. "Twould be a long journey to haul them here and back again should you not need my services."

"Very good. Come and show us what you can do."

Allard and a very surly Graham stepped out from the great hall.

"Whatever it is, brother," Graham warned, "I am in no mood for it today." He smelled of stale ale and sweat.

"On the contrary, *brother*," Llew corrected, in a tone that brooked no argument. "This is exactly what you need. Grab your sword and meet us in the bailey. You, too," he added as he saw Allard try to slink away.

"You *are* a demon," Allard muttered, following Graham back into the shade of the hall.

Llew turned to Jack. "Best them if you can," he ordered, "They have been too slovenly of late." Now he glanced at Alice. "Tell me what you are trained in."

"I cook, Lord Dunmore," she replied with a shy smile.

"Not only does she cook," Jack butted in enthusiastically, "she makes the best pies and puddings a man could ask for. Sweet honey sauces for wild fowl and boar, sugar glazed fruit—she learned in the earl's kitchens at Norwell Castle."

"Sold! I will tell my lady wife and have her go over your duties. I also have another proposition to discuss," he added quietly to Jack. "One that could bring you both a bit of extra income. We can talk later," he finished as Allard and Graham returned, swords propped negligently across their shoulders.

"Let's get this over with so I can get some damned sleep before heading back to town," Graham stated, frowning even harder at Llew than he had done before.

"Bet you pass out before I do," Allard challenged, slapping Graham solidly on the back.

Graham hit him with the flat of his blade. Nevertheless, a glint of interest lit up his ice blue eyes. "How much?"

"Remember that nice fur cloak mother gave you last birthday?"

"The one with the sapphire broach?"

Allard nodded.

Graham shook his head.

"How about that hunting knife with the silver handle?" Allard countered.

Graham considered. "And if I win? What do I get?"

"I have that brand new saddle. Even has the family crest tooled into the leather."

Graham laughed. "You never liked that saddle. Oh no, not nearly good enough. But I will take that gold cuff with the garnet stones."

"Agreed."

Well, Llew thought with a scowl. At least they'd found something worth fighting for.



The sound of steel striking steel had Jessaline moving curiously toward the bailey. The noise grew louder as she approached, interspersed with the sound of men cursing beneath their breath and grunting with exertion.

Quite a crowd had gathered, and Jess had to push her way past several guardsmen until she could see the men fighting in a makeshift arena. Llew, Allard, Graham and another man had all stripped to the waist, and the sight of so much muscled male flesh had most of the female servants pressed close to watch the action.

Jess admitted they made a most excellent sight, all slick with sweat and sinewed tight from the exertion of their labors.

"Llew, I plan to kill you in your sleep for this!" Graham poured a ladle of water over his head and shook the excess from his hair. He straightened and glared at his brother before lunging swiftly, sword in hand.

Jessaline gasped as the blade swept close, but Llew dodged it easily.

“Had you not been so damned drunk last night, you might’ve made a better show today. As it is, you’ve sorely let the ladies down.” Llew was smiling as he brought the flat of his sword down across Graham’s shoulders. Graham cursed and spun away, but this time Llew slid the sword beneath his foot and sent him sprawling on the ground.

“Enough!” Graham spit the dirt from his mouth and rose to tower over Llew. This was the first time Jessaline really noticed he stood a good few inches taller than her husband. He was a good few inches broader, as well, but a layer of fat covered his belly, and his face was puffy and red with exhaustion.

“Enough?” Llew’s look was bleak. “Is that what you will say when you go down in combat? I doubt the other warrior will give you time to rest.”

“We are not in combat, nor would we be even considering the possibility had you not brought home a wife who was promised to another.”

Llew’s face grew even darker as he attacked Graham with renewed intensity. This time, Graham parried the blow and brought Llew to his knees with a shot to the stomach.

“You let your anger lead you,” Graham mocked. “How many times have you told me that very same thing.” His smile was nothing more than a feral baring of his teeth.

“You will not bring Jessaline into this.” Llew aimed a thrust at Graham’s thigh.

“Why not? She’s the cause of all this.” He sidestepped, throwing a fist at Llew’s chin. The blow made contact and Llew spit blood.

At the same time Graham looked out at the crowd and saw Jessaline’s stricken face. “*Shite*,” he mumbled, throwing down his sword. “Jessaline...I did not mean...I truly wasn’t...damn it all anyway.” He turned and walked away in disgust as Llew moved to Jess’s side.

“Tis not your fault,” he said softly. “He’s pissed I’m making him get back into shape. Which I should have done anyway.”

Jessaline tried to return his smile. There had always been such affection between Llew and his brothers. She had never meant to cause conflict. She had never intended to drive them apart.

But then, she chided herself, she wasn't thinking of anything but her own dilemma when she made that bargain in the church. She never considered that other lives might be disrupted by her actions. It placed a burden on her heart that had not been there before. Despite Llew's words to the contrary, she could see the concern in his eyes as he watched his brother walk away.

Allard was fighting toe to toe with another man. Jess frowned as she tried to place him. Then Llew motioned a woman forward.

"My lady," he said, watching Jessaline intently. "This is Alice, she is evidently a remarkable cook."

Jessaline turned to the woman and her smile faltered. Alice blushed furiously, and Jess could feel her own cheeks flaming as she finally placed both the girl and the man. Llew was obviously enjoying the show.

The girl bowed her head, refusing to meet Jess's eyes. Jessaline glared at her husband. "Would you kindly explain this to me?" Her voice held just a nip of frost.

"Alice and her *husband*, Jack over there, were sent to us by Father Thomas. How could I possibly turn them away?" Llew folded his arms across his chest.

Jessaline mimicked his gesture, and added a sharp tapping of her toe. Alice ducked her head even lower and shrunk into herself. When she saw the action, Jess realized the other woman was just as distressed as she was.

But why should we be? Why should we be ashamed for each other, when neither of the men seemed affected in the least? She reached out and touched Alice's arm. "I will show you to the kitchen. You will like Margaret, the head cook. Come with me." She smiled softly, saving her smirk to toss to Llew over her shoulder as Alice bobbed her head again.

Jessaline was in for another shock when they made their way back to the kitchen. A beautiful raven-haired woman waited just outside the main door.

“Jane,” Alice greeted enthusiastically.

“Alice?” Jane’s voice was less sure.

“Oh, dear,” Jess mumbled to herself. How in the world was she going to live through this?

“I am sorry, my lady.” Jane had obviously seen her confusion. “I should not have come.” She picked up a battered basket and turned to walk away.

“Jane.” Jessaline placed her hand over the other woman’s. “Of course you should have come. I asked you to.” She glanced at Alice. “How do you know each other?”

“We were friends, my lady, years ago before—“

“Before what?” Jessaline demanded. She refused to let one woman pass judgment on the other.

Alice gave Jane a troubled look. “Before I went with Jack to Norwell Castle,” she said with the briefest of hesitations.

Jessaline stared hard at her. “Is that all?”

Jane sighed and nodded to Alice. “Tis all right, Alice. You don’t need to keep my secrets.” She took a breath and turned to Jessaline. “My lady, we were friends many years ago. Alice’s family was very kind to me, but they could not afford to keep me forever. When Alice married and went with Jack, I went to work at the tavern.”

Alice’s face fell as she watched her friend. “I wanted take you, Jane, I truly did, but—“

“But nothing. You had a husband and life of your own. I am still here, and I will still be your friend...if you let me.”

“I don’t care what you’ve done,” Alice replied.

They both cried and hugged each other as if they would never let go. Jess felt her own eyes rim with tears as she watched them. Friendship

was a thing she had never known. She was just beginning to understand how much she had missed out on in her life.

"How did you lose your family?" Jess's curiosity got the better of her.

She did not expect Jane's reaction. The other woman's lips drew together in a thin line, and her eyes grew shadowed and secretive. "It was long ago," she whispered, "and not a thing I speak of now. Please, leave it at that," she added when Jessaline opened her mouth again.

"Very well." Jess tried to keep the disappointment from her voice. She had hoped—what had she hoped? That by a wave of her magic wand she could right the world again? Or with a simple gesture she could fix Jane's life and make everything perfect and pretty? The world didn't work that way. It never had. But she felt as if a wall had been driven down between them; a friendship cut from the vine before it had a chance to blossom. She knew Jane felt it, too, by the way her eyes stared steadily at the floor.

Silently, she led them through the great hall and to the kitchen. Margaret was on her knees chasing a rat from under a chair.

"Don't be lettin' it get away," she ordered, one hand wrapped around a large meat cleaver. Then she realized it was Jessaline and tried to stand, banging her head on the table in the process.

The rat took advantage of his sudden good fortune and vanished down the hall. It would probably end up in her bedchamber, Jess thought with a shudder. If she was lucky it would go plague one of Llew's brothers instead.

"*Damn.*" Margaret hauled herself to her feet. "My lady."

"Margaret, meet Jane and Alice. They are here to help you, and only you. If either Masters Graham or Allard try to seduce them away, come see me. Alice is married and Jane is under my absolute protection. Is that clear?"

Margaret smiled her satisfaction. "Well, girlyes, let's get to work."

Jessaline started to leave, but Jane stopped her with a light touch on her arm. "Thank you."

That same strange emotion rose up between them. Neither woman looked away.

“I am glad to have you here,” Jessaline answered. “But I’m not certain my husband’s brothers are going to feel the same way.”

Jane smiled. “No. I don’t suppose they will.”

Chapter Nine

"I have a surprise for you." Llew took Jess by the hand and placed a finger to his lips. He smiled when she frowned at him in puzzlement while he led her to the kitchen. Then he scanned the area like a thief to make certain no one else was near before cracking open the heavy wooden door so they could both slip inside.

Jess opened her mouth to ask him what he had planned, but this time he put his finger to her lips as he guided her to a corner across from the fire where the shadows were deep and dark. He leaned against the wall and pulled her back along the length of him. Jess's heart pounded and her mouth grew dry as the ache of desire already hit heavy between her legs. Just to be so near him was a joy she thought she would never grow used to. He wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked his chin down on her head. It was a gentle gesture, one that drew a matching ache to tug at her heart.

Across the room, Jess could see two fat candles burning next to the oaken table that had been draped with a soft eiderdown cover. Two figures stepped into the light. Alice was clothed in a linen kirtle and Jack wore only breeches that rode low on his hips.

As Jack bent his head to kiss his wife, Llew bent his head to whisper in Jessaline's ear. "There are many ways a man and a woman can find pleasure together. Look closely."

"What if someone comes?" Jess glanced nervously at the door. "'Tis not yet night."

Llew chuckled softly. "I gave strict instructions we were not to be disturbed. I do have some small authority."

"A bit," Jess agreed, settling down to watch the spectacle unfold. The couple must have recently bathed, Alice's chestnut hair clung damply to her neck, and Jack's back still shone with a sheen of water. They kissed, long and deep, his fists tangled in her hair, her hands curled around his waist.

Jack stepped away and slipped the thin kirtle from his wife's shoulders before leading her to the edge of the table and pushing her to sit upon the cover. Then he slid his hands under her breasts, lowering his head to take one of her ruby budded nipples into his mouth. Alice moaned and threw back her head, exposing the ivory column of her neck, lifting her breasts to his lips.

Jess felt her own breasts burn with need as she watched Jack lick and tease the pretty orbs presented for his pleasure. And when Llew brushed his hands up to thumb her own nipples through her gown, Jess could not suppress the sob of want that escaped her.

"Would you like to feel my lips closed around your breasts and my tongue lapping at their tips?" Llew tightened the pressure of his fingers on her nipples, pinching and rolling them in his hands.

This time Jess moaned aloud, the image of Llew sucking at her breast a wicked picture that flew into her mind. She felt his chuckle of satisfaction as he increased the pressure even more. But her eyes were still riveted to the couple before them. The master-at-arms lifted his mouth from Alice's breast, stepped between her legs, and with a swift movement, spread her knees apart. Then he eased her to lie down upon the table and tucked a pillow beneath her bottom so her cunt was better presented to their view.

"See where he touches her," Llew commented as the young man's fingers closed upon the woman's mound. "He searches for the core of her desire, her clit, that little hill of pleasure."

This time Alice whimpered her need as Jack stroked the length of her slit. He placed one hand upon her stomach, holding her steady as he drove two fingers deep inside her. Jess bit her lip against another

involuntary cry as Llew slid his hands lower to pull up the hem of her gown, inch by agonizing inch.

When Llew's fingers finally touched her naked skin, Jess's legs grew weak and she sagged against him. He slid his finger between the folds of her own sex, to finally rest on the pearl of her clit. "Oh, yes, my Jess," he mouthed against her neck. "I can feel how you swell against my hand, how you beg to be touched and soothed." He twirled the knob between his fingers, rasping the tender skin with the pad of his thumb, causing a jolt of pleasure so intense it took Jess's breath away.

She wanted to close her eyes, the pain of her need so strong she almost lost control. But Llew seemed to know how close she was to the edge, because he stilled the searching of his fingers, pausing to let her catch her breath.

"Not yet, my wife. There is more for you to see." His own breathing was as harsh as hers and Jess delighted in the knowledge of it. He was no more immune to her than she could ever be to him.

Jess turned her attention back to the couple. Jack knelt between his wife's thighs. He spread her lips for them to see, and Jess was fascinated by the sight. She had never seen a woman so exposed before; the trail of hair that lined each side of the swollen pink flesh between. Jess could see the woman's clit, that ruby nub that looked ready to burst in its struggle to be satisfied. She could feel Alice's longing as if it were her own, and when Jack leaned down to spear Alice with his tongue, Jess felt her own cunt clench in expectation.

Llew fingers began to stir again as the master-at-arms slid his tongue in and out of his partner's slit, now letting it circle around her clit, now thrusting it back inside her. Jess could no longer keep from crying out, especially when Llew whispered again into her ear, "Will you let me taste you? Drive my tongue deep inside you until we both almost die from the need of it?"

"Llew, I cannot... I have to...ahh, ohhhh," Jess felt the sting of need spread up from her toes; a rolling arc of madness that forced her to rear

back against Llew's chest, as Alice shook and cried upon the table, the mingled sounds of their desire loud and desperate in the night.

He was all around her, in her, touching her as no other had ever done, and Jess let herself revel in the fire he sent blazing from her mound. Trembling, needing nothing, and yet needing so much more, Jess turned her face into his neck, and mouthed his name as the heat coursed from her toes, spread out across her thighs, and centered on the thickness of his hand where it spread and pricked her until she was lost to the glory of it.

Llew clamped his arm around her waist and drove his fingers high into her as Jessaline's tender flesh clenched and trembled around them; the wet of her dripping like honey onto his hand. He held her as she continued to arch against him, longer this time, farther than she had gone before. Only when she had finally stilled, did he slip his fingers out and raise them to his mouth.

Heady, sweet, the scent of her reached him, and he could not resist the urge to touch a finger to his lips and taste the essence of her that had spilled onto his hand. His cock throbbed where it was pressed against her back, and he did not know if he could last through the display that was yet to come.

He let her rest but a moment. "Now it is her turn," he said, his fingers twining in her hair, pulling her head into the crook of his shoulder as he urged her to look outward again.

Alice rose from the table to stand before her husband, her thighs slick with her come, her body glistening with sweat. The couple embraced and kissed again before she fell to her knees on the floor before Jack, her hands slipping his breeches from his hips. His cock was already engorged and rigid as the woman took him into her hands. She caressed the length of him, pumped him in her fist, and now it was Llew's turn to moan his need as he watched in urgent fascination.

Jack's legs trembled as he snaked his fingers in his wife's long hair, drawing her face toward his cock until at long last she opened her lips and took him into her mouth. Deep, deeper, she sucked, and Llew

imagined Jess at his feet, her silky lips clamped tight around his own throbbing flesh.

"How does she take so much of him?" Jess asked.

Llew could hear the roughness of his voice as he answered. "She must learn to open her throat, relax the muscles so he can push farther."

The master-at-arms groaned and held Alice's head as he thrust his hips to lodge more deeply into her mouth. In and out, she sucked him, swirling her tongue around the head of his cock before swallowing the full length of him again.

"He will come soon." Llew could barely say the words. "She can pull away if need be, but she can also swallow his seed." *Damn, damn, damn.* He was quickly losing control. He untied the lacings of his breeches, took Jess's hand and curled her fingers around his erection.

Faster and faster he let her stroke him as faster and faster Jack drove into Alice's mouth until, with a final groan of release, he clamped his wife hard to his groin and spent himself in her mouth.

And Llew thought that he would die when Jessaline dropped to her knees in front of him and touched a tentative tongue to his cock.

"*Shite*," he whispered as he felt the wet of her lips on his skin. Her tongue lapped at the head, tasting the fluid Llew knew was already spilling forth. When she let him glide into her mouth, Llew came before he could stop himself. He thought she might pull away when he thrust farther between her lips, but she wrapped her arms around his hips and sucked him easily, smoothly, until he jerked one last time and poured himself down her throat.

She accepted him without hesitation, drank down all of him before finally letting him slip from her mouth as she rested her head against the cradle of his thighs. Jack and Alice had already left as they had been instructed, and Llew let his legs give out to sink down with Jessaline on the floor.

She surprised him as no other woman had ever done, with her open mind and willingness to explore all the pleasures he had to offer. He

pulled her close into his arms, letting his fingers trail across her cheek before tucking them under her chin and raising her face to his kiss.

He had meant to be gentle, easy, and he managed to at least start out that way, but Jessaline led him into a stronger passion, and once again he found his cock stirring to life as she opened her mouth to let his tongue dart between her lips. Without conscious thought, his hand trailed down to wrap around the knot of her nipple, and her moan of pleasure set his heart racing.

The need to taste her became more than he could stand, and Llew stood with her still held tight in his arms, picked her up, and carried her to the table. He sat her down, his lips still nibbling at the delicate curve of her mouth, and untied the lacings of her gown to slide it off her shoulders. Trailing his lips over her neck, he lowered his head to lap at one taut nipple through the thin material of her kirtle. Jess buried her fingers in his hair and pulled his head closer as he sucked more of her breast into his mouth, fingers pinching tight around the other knob where it swelled into his hand.

When he raised his head to look, her green eyes were storm-ridden with desire, her mouth was parted in passion, and her cheeks were flushed in the ruby glow of the candle's flickering light. He thought he had never seen a more beautiful creature in all his days, and he burned with a need of her that he'd never felt before.

Dragging the kirtle off her shoulders, he lowered his head again and sucked her nipple back into his mouth, swirling his tongue around its tip until he felt Jess quiver against him.

"I need..." she bit off her words as Llew moved his mouth's attention to her other breast before he took his hands, spread her knees apart, and moved to stand between them, slowly raising the hem of her gown.

He watched the length of her legs as he pushed the material aside, and stopped just after the damp curls of her mound had at last peeked into view. "What do you need?" he asked, letting one hand barely brush her slit. "Do you need to feel my tongue lick you? My lips suck on your

clit like they have just sucked on your breasts? Say it, Jess, tell me to eat your juicy cunt until you scream with a joy you have never felt before.”

She nodded, hesitating as if she could not say the words, but when Llew let his finger dip farther into her, Jess gave a cry of utter surrender and gazed dreamily into his eyes. *“Please, my husband, I need to feel you kiss me there.”*

Llew could barely contain his urgency. He pushed Jess gently back upon the table and spread her knees as far apart as they would reach. The scent of her rose to greet him. Slipping her gown up to her waist, Llew gazed at the prize now displayed before his eyes. She was wet, swollen, her cunt a dusky rose whose color deepened with every passing moment. He rubbed his thumb over her clit, and smiled when he felt her tremble. He could not resist watching as he pierced her with one finger, the feel of her muscles where they clenched around his finger making his cock spasm in response.

He did not know how he would manage not to top her before this night was through, to deny himself the taking of her maidenhead and making her his forever. *Hell*, he didn't even know how he would manage not to come just by the very thought of it. Then he thought if he let himself come, he wouldn't need to actually top her.

And the sun will not rise tomorrow, or the grass grow, or the birds fly.

“Llew!” Her cry of frustration sent his cock surging again, and Llew bit back his own groan of irritation at his uncontrollable appendage. He slid his finger out and back in again, reveling in the way she wiggled on the table, needing more of him, opening more for him. With one thumb he traced patterns across her clit, while with his other hand, he now drove two fingers into her, careful not to damage the membrane he could feel was still intact.

He knelt between her thighs, as if in supplication to her brilliance, watching in fascination the way she arched against the play of his hands. Unable to resist any longer, Llew kissed a trail up one lovely thigh, to let his tongue graze ever so softly along her turgid slit.

Jess jumped at the touch, unable to comprehend the fresh set of fire he sent racing through her loins. She could not keep her legs from shaking as he let his tongue explore deeper, now twisting into her cunt, then whirling across her clit. She could no longer keep silent, crying out with every stabbing of his tongue, unable to speak, barely able to breathe as he ate her with abandon.

He was her every dark and wild desire rolled into the flesh. Farther and farther he speared his tongue inside her, and when at last he concentrated on lapping at her clit while surging two thick fingers high into her, Jess could no longer control her trembling. She throbbed where he stretched her, wiggling his fingers to probe even deeper into her tender flesh, and she could not catch her breath as he licked her again and again. She bucked involuntarily against his fingers, arching off the table as she screamed his name, feeling her cunt pulse over and over as the wave of ecstasy crashed up to consume her.

“Ohhh...I can’t stop...I...” She writhed against his touch for what seemed like an eternity before the pleasure finally passed. And when at last she had the strength to lift up on her elbows, she saw her husband standing at the end of the table, his great cock held tight in his hand. He pumped it fast and furious, his thick fingers clamped down like a vice around its width, until he called out her name and shot his seed over her belly. With a groan of release, he let himself tumble into her arms.

“Mmmm,” Jessaline murmured, holding him until his own spasms had passed. *“I must be the most blessed woman in all the land.”*

Llew raised his head and gave her a sinful smile. *“You are married to a demon, lady. Blessed is not the word most others would use.”*

“No, I suppose not,” she conceded. *“But if this is hell, I have no desire to see heaven.”* She smiled back, admiring the way the candlelight glittered in his hair, basking in the glow of want still sparkling in his eyes. She was the one who drove this spectacular man to such heights of bliss. It was her name he cried, she remembered. Jessaline, his wife.

A part of her wondered why he had yet to properly bed her. Why she remained a virgin in his arms, but she hurriedly brushed those thoughts

aside. She knew women who had experienced nothing but pain in their marriage beds, and she thought him the most wonderful of men that he would take such care to teach her pleasure first. He would take her in his own good time, and when he did, Jess would be more than ready to receive him.

“Did you enjoy Jack and Alice tonight?”

Jess blushed at the question, but didn't feel the need to lie. Others might think her brazen or shameless, but she knew her husband liked watching as much as she did. “Very much. Will you have them make love for us again? I'm certain there are other things you wish me to learn.”

Llew chuckled, that throaty sound Jess loved so well. It rumbled against her chest, vibrating deep into her heart. She blinked as she realized how much he had come to mean to her, and shivered to think she might never have known his touch.

“Has my father sent any word?” She did not want to ask the question, did not want to think of her life outside this hall. But there were still fears that she could not resolve, the nagging feeling that this happiness would not last.

She believed him when he smoothed a finger down her nose and shook his head in protest. “Whatever happens, Jessaline, I will not let them take you. Do you understand? Never, I swear to you on my heart.” His eyes held only truth, and Jess let her fears fall back to sleep again.

“Come.” He rose and smoothed the skirt of her gown to cover her. He pulled her up when she took his hand, slipping her garments up across her shoulders and tying the lacings back in place again.



“OOoooo. Did he do her yet?” Pansy tried to peer over Rose's shoulder. Rose shook her head and frowned into the water. “Not yet.”

“What’s the matter with him?” Snapdragon wiggled in between the two. “Is he a Dunmore or not? If he doesn’t use that great horn of his, I’ll be happy to...”

Pansy grabbed Snapdragon’s hand as she started to wiggle her fingers. “You can’t blast him, he’s the one we’re looking out for.”

“Oh.” Snapdragon sounded disappointed. “I thought we were looking out for the girl.”

Rose motioned them to quiet. “They are both in our care. But I agree, I don’t know why he doesn’t bed her.”

“It’s that red hair,” Pansy pronounced, inordinately pleased with herself. “I told you about that. Do you think we could change it? I know a great spell for...”

“No spells,” Snapdragon mocked. “It’s in the rules.”

Rose still peered quietly into the pool. “Her father is coming. This is not a good sign. They really should have done it by now. Damn!”

Pansy and Snapdragon gaped at her in surprise.

“What?” Rose demanded. When she saw their shocked expressions she giggled and clamped a hand across her mouth. “Sorry. I’ve been listening to the demons for too long.”

Snapdragon looked curiously at Pansy. “Isn’t there a rule against that?”

“I don’t think so, but I can check.” She snapped her fingers and a tattered roll of parchment appeared in her hand. She opened it carefully and studied it for several minutes. “No rule against swearing.”

“Well there should be,” Snapdragon shot back. “We should send a letter to the council.”

“You want to make another rule? I thought you hated rules.” Pansy flicked her wrist and the parchment disappeared.

Rose glared at them both. “This isn’t helping. What do you think we should do?”

Snapdragon looked into the water again. “Let’s wait. He promised he wouldn’t send her back.”

"They could steal her," Pansy said. "I knew this wasn't going to go as planned, I told you both as much."



"Lord Llewellyn."

Llew arched a brow at his brother. The only time Allard ever called him "lord" was when something serious was at hand.

"Lord Nolan is at the gates with a party of several men. They demand entrance to speak with you."

Llew felt Jess freeze at his side and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Do not worry. I will take care of this. Go upstairs and wait for me in our chamber." He bent and kissed the top of her head. She tried to smile, failed, and nodded to Allard before climbing up the stairway. She gave Llew a last hesitant look and he winked at her wickedly.

"No Nolan can possibly best a demon," he said, and even Allard had to chuckle. "It will be fine. I promise."

"Thank you," Jessaline said, before disappearing up the stairs.

Allard gave Llew a calculating look. "You smell like sex. Did you bed her?"

"None of your business," Llew growled back.

"It may not be any of *my* business, but it will certainly be of interest to her father. Have you made a decision?"

Llew looked his brother squarely in the eye. "I will not send her back."

"What if you have no other choice?" Allard's voice was just as stern. "The Nolans have the ear of the king. They will be powerful enemies."

"Afraid?" Llew mocked.

"Me? We Dunmores fear nothing." Allard smiled broadly. "But I must admit my war skills are a bit rusty. I'd rather be topping a comely wench than getting hacked at in battle."

“Wench? What wench?” Graham strode into the hall, his eyes bright with mischief, and Llew felt a glimmer of relief. He’d been afraid his brother would still be sulking after their fight earlier that day. “I’ll top the wench, if you cannot manage the job.” He smiled innocently at Llew. “Although by the smell of you, you seemed to have done her well enough.”

“*I did not...*” Llew groaned when the two brothers rolled their eyes in disbelief.

“Whether you did or not, my lord, you’d better wash off the scent of her before her father comes to call,” Allard said, and Graham nodded in agreement.

Llew brought his fingers to his nose and sniffed appreciatively. He did not want to wash off the smell of her. In fact, he wanted to roll in the scent of her, never to be free of it again. His brothers watched him in various shades of amusement until Llew at last called for one of the serving girls to bring him a bucket of water.

She gave him a saucy look as she passed and Llew recognized Alice immediately. Both his brothers stared at her in open appreciation.

“Where did she come from?” Graham demanded, winking at her as she passed.

Llew glared. “Leave her alone, brother. She is already taken.”

“By you?”

“Not by me, you idiot. Her husband is the new master-at-arms. If we go to war with the Nolans we need him on our side. Diddling his wife will not help our cause.”

Graham laughed delightedly. “Diddling her will help *my* cause, eh Allard?”

Allard frowned. Graham took nothing seriously. In fact, the more Llew told him not to do a thing, the more Graham seemed bent on the task.

The girl returned and Graham reached out to catch her hand. “What’s your name?” he asked.

"Alice," she replied with a blush.

Graham suddenly dropped her hand. She scurried hastily out of the room. "She smells of sex, as well. Are you bedding her instead of yer wife?" He gave Llew an accusing stare.

"No, damn it, I'm not bedding anyone!" Llew felt his patience beginning to wear thin. He dunked his head in the bucket and scrubbed at his face, swirling a mouthful of water to get the taste of Jess off his tongue. He did not like the sensation. In fact, he swore he would never do it again. After scraping the last of her juice from his hands, Llew drank a glass of stale ale from the pitcher still on the table. Then he smoothed back his hair as best as he could and motioned his brothers nearer.

"Sniff," he ordered. They complied. "Good enough?"

"If you don't stand too close." Graham emptied the pitcher and headed toward the kitchen. "I'll get some fresh ale for our guests."

"Leave Alice alone," Llew commanded, but Graham had already disappeared down the hall.

"Allard, how many men does Nolan have with him?"

"Seven or eight. Unless he has others hidden in the forest."

"Send someone to find out. And have ten of our own guards arm and meet me here in the hall. We must give our guest a proper greeting."

"Yes, my lord."

Llew could hear Allard calling to the guards before he had even left the room. In truth, he was proud of his brothers. They may be bastards, but better bastards never walked the earth. He wondered if Lord Nolan would think the same. It never hurt to be underestimated by the enemy, and the brothers Dunmore had always known how to use that to the best of their advantage.

He sat down by the fire and thought of Jess waiting for him in their chamber. There was not a thing he wanted better than to march up the stairs, spread her lily thighs again, and bury his cock into the heart of her sex. His member roused and Llew gritted his teeth in frustration.

Nothing in this entire situation was turning out as he had planned. Jessaline was proving to be more than willing to keep up her side of the bargain, while Llew found himself less and less willing to annul the marriage and be done with it. He was growing too fond of his wife with her fiery red hair and soft body that opened to accommodate his every need.

His keep had never been so clean, his food had never tasted so good, and his own body had never thrummed with such want and satisfaction. Life was just better with Jess around.

Damn, how he needed her.

Graham sauntered back into the hall with an overly satisfied smile.

"I told you not to touch her," Llew warned as his brother slammed two full pitchers of ale on the table.

"I didn't, brother, on my honor."

Both men turned to look as Alice moved into the room, followed by another buxom brunette beauty.

"Did you know Jane was here?" Graham grinned even broader as the woman leaned over to set a platter of cheese and bread on the table, her ample assets spilling from the top of her bodice.

Allard frowned in total disappointment. "Leave her alone. Jess said so."

"Since when do we do what Jess says?"

"Since I told you to." Llew felt his patience fray.

Alice plopped several tankards next to the platter and nodded a swift curtsy to Llew.

"Thank you," he said before reaching to pour ale. "We will call if we need you." He leaned back in his chair and drank, throwing a thoughtful look at Graham. "What do you know of the Nolans?"

"Not much," Graham answered. "They are from an old noble family. But from what I understand, their coffers were failing until several years ago. Suddenly they had a lot more money."

"Any word on how they got it?"

Graham reached for a slice of bread. "Do you remember the Marshton witch hunts? Seems Lord Nolan turned several families in to the church. A profitable business from what I understand."

Llew remembered. He had ridden with his father through the burned fields and villages when he was a boy. His father had been furious, petitioning the king for months afterwards to arrest Nolan on charges of false witness and thievery.

"He was trying to marry Jess off to one of the bishop's bastard sons," Llew said. "A quick way to gain a noble bloodline. Seems the venture was profitable for all concerned."

"Not for the families he ruined."

"Hmmm. Do they have any relations still living?"

Graham shrugged and gnawed at a piece of cheese. "Tis possible. I could do some asking around."

"That would be most appreciated." Llew smiled. "Perhaps we can uncover some information that might be profitable for *us* this time."

Allard returned with several guards who positioned themselves evenly around the hall.

Llew recognized his new master-at-arms and motioned him forward. "You remember Jack," he said to his brothers.

Jack nodded in acknowledgement. "We have stationed guards along all the battlements, my lord," he said. "I have also sent our best tracker to search the forests. If any men are out there, we'll find them."

"Very well done." Llew motioned to Allard. "Let's greet our guests." He moved to sit in the lord's chair on the dais with his brothers flanking him on either side. Jack was sent to open the wooden doors and show the strangers inside.

Nolan and his men entered with a clanking of armor and the heavy thud of boots. Llew disliked the man on sight. He wore a sharply pointed beard that matched the pinched look of his face. He was dressed like a popinjay in the latest court fashion, his bright red breeches clashing angrily with his purple doublet. Llew refused to be fooled by the tasteless

clothing. He knew the man possessed the shrewd mind of a rat beneath his carefully masked exterior.

“Lord Dunmore,” Nolan said smoothly, barely nodding his head in acknowledgement. “I knew your father well...or at least I knew the previous Lord of Dunmore.”

Llew made to rise at the insult, but Allard gripped his shoulder solidly.

“Get to the point, Nolan. We both know why you’re here.” If Llew hoped his lack of courtesy would catch the other man off guard, he was sorely disappointed.

“There is the somewhat difficult matter of your marriage to my daughter,” Nolan replied. “I gave no consent to the alliance, and therefore the marriage is nullified. If you would be so kind as to bring her to me, I will take her and be gone.” He sat down at the table, sneered at the bread and cheese, but poured a tankard of ale. “You may even keep her dowry for your trouble; ‘tis but a pittance and will not be missed.” He sipped at the ale and grimaced. His men stood silent.

Llew steepled his hands beneath his chin. “I am quite content with my wife. She is most willing in her marriage duties.”

Nolan flushed at the implication, but his congenial tone never faltered. “’Tis no matter to either me or the bishop whether or not she remains a virgin. Such is to be expected from a man...of your blood.”

Now it was Llew’s turn to restrain Graham.

Llew took several breaths before he spoke again. How could a man talk so carelessly of Jess—his own daughter, his family, his flesh and blood? While his father had bred willingly and often, the children had all been well cared for and acknowledged. None forced into the church or to marry against their will. The Dunmores were well known for their lack of concern for society’s restrictions.

“What is in it for me? Her dowry was but a paltry sum—as you so rightfully acknowledged earlier. And I do have the right of possession. You could try to take her—” Llew motioned his guards forward “—but it would cost us both too much time and money. Make me another offer.”

Nolan smiled like a man who had just won the battle as he took another drink of ale. "How much?"

"All of the acreage between here and the Marshton River." Llew smiled grimly.

Nolan choked and spewed ale across the table. "Impossible. No woman is worth that much."

Jessaline was worth all that and more.

"Then we have reached an impasse." Llew stood and made to leave the room, but Nolan's next words stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Ah, then we have a problem. I do have a writ of distraint. Signed by the king. It gives me right to all your lands and assets until this matter is settled to my satisfaction." He reached a hand into his doublet. Llew's men instantly came to attention, as did the other party. Nolan smirked and pulled a parchment from his pocket.

Llew motioned Allard to retrieve it. "You're the lawyer, what does it say?"

Allard frowned as he read the document. "It looks legal, my lord. If you do not hand over Lady Jessaline you will be summoned to court at the King's Bench in Lynden Palace in five days. In the meantime, Nolan is entitled to everything, including Dunmore Keep."

Chapter Ten

“Oooooo, we can’t let that happen.” Snapdragon pulled up her sleeve and wiggled her fingers.

Rose placed a hand on her arm and gave her a stern look. “Nothing fancy, dear. Just do what you did the last time. That worked out very nicely.”

“All three?”

“All three.”

Pansy stared hard at them both, but there was a smile peeking from her eyes. “I know for a fact, he’s not going to like this.”



Llew was just about to give the order to take Nolan and his men hostage, when the lord screamed like a dying man, clamped both hands to his head, and vomited all over the floor.

“The ale’s not that bad,” Graham said, eying the pitcher suspiciously. “I’ve been drinking it all day.”

Llew looked at Nolan’s head guardsman. “Has your lord been ill?” Angry red blotches now puffed out all over Nolan’s face. “Is it catching?” Despite his best effort, Llew found himself backing a step away. Plague was still an ever present fear.

The guard shook his head. “He is prone to fits of this sort every now and again, but no one else is ever affected.” He shrugged and let his hand fall from his weapon. “My Lord Dunmore, my men are tired and

hungry. If you would give us your word of honor no harm will come to Lord Nolan, we would be grateful for food, drink and a place to sleep. If you wish, I will go with one of your men to Lynden Palace on the morrow and explain the situation. I'm certain this can all be settled amicably." He hesitated before adding, "And the Lady Jessaline, is she well?"

Llew could see the concern on the other man's face. "She is most well. I would even go so far as to say she has no desire to be reunited with her family."

The guardsman nodded, but wisely refrained from further comment.

Llew called for Alice and Jane. He motioned to his own men. "See that Lord Nolan's guards are fed and given a place to sleep. They have my word that no harm will come to them, and I have their word they will cause no harm to us. Understood?" All the men grunted in acknowledgement and followed the maids out of the hall. Jack's voice could be heard as he talked easily with the others.

"What should we do with him?" Allard asked. All three brothers looked to where Nolan writhed in agony upon the floor.

"Take him upstairs," Llew said.

"Oh no," Graham protested. "You're not gonna take him to my room." He looked meaningfully at Allard.

"Not mine," Allard was quick to add. "If he spews on the mattress, we'll never get the smell out."

Llew frowned at them both. "Then what do you suggest?"

Nolan groaned and retched again.

"We could put him in that storeroom behind the kitchen," Graham suggested.

Allard nodded swiftly. "Perfect."

"And what will he sleep on?" Llew was growing surlier by the minute. "We have no extra mattress."

Graham shrugged and picked at a bite of bread. When Jessaline's father groaned he threw it down in disgust. "Any ideas, brother?" He glanced hopefully at Allard.

"We could fill a few barley sacks with hay, throw some covers over them, and instant bed. Not that he would ever notice in his condition."

Llew had to agree. They could probably leave him there on the floor and he wouldn't be any the wiser. But he did not want to give Nolan any reason to claim he was treated badly while in their care. If they had to battle this out in court, Llew intended to come out the winner. Too much was at stake.

He found it interesting that his first thought was of his wife, not his property or possessions. If his brothers knew they would think him mad.

"Do it," Llew said. He called for Jack, and the master-at-arms responded quickly. "Find the cook and have her give you any empty sacks she can find. There is fresh hay by the stables. Make certain it is dry. If he catches anything else, we're in trouble."

Allard sat down near a candle and stared hard at the writ. "This is serious, Llew." He stated. "Why don't you send Jess off to Kedryn Abbey? Put her under the protection of the church, annul the marriage and be done with it. She will be safe from her father and so will the Dunmore estates."

"He's got a point," Graham agreed. "You said yourself you didn't plan on keepin' her. This is a perfect solution."

They were right, and Llew knew it. He should have taken her to the abbey immediately and given her over to the nuns' care. That he let his cock make a different decision was deplorable. A woman was a woman, after all, and there were plenty of others to warm his bed at night.

But none of them would smell like Jess, he reminded himself. Or taste like Jess, or have silky red hair that twined around him like a living thing when he was—

Shite. He couldn't let her go. The minute he first stared into her glorious green eyes, he had fallen in love like a fool. *In love. Idiocy. The truth.*

His brothers must have seen the smile that tipped the corners of his mouth when he thought of his beautiful one waiting upstairs. Graham was the first to voice his disapproval.

"Damn it all to hell, Llew, don't tell us you've actually fallen for the girl." He turned to Allard for support. "Tell him, brother. Dunmores don't fall in love, and they don't settle down to a life of misery with just one woman!"

Allard studied the document even more carefully before he answered. "Graham is right. We are from a proud line of bastards. Sort of makes us unique in this world."

"You go be unique," Llew replied, letting one brow drop dangerously low. "I'll work on repairing our family honor."

"Oh ho, so now 'tis a matter of family honor," Graham mocked. "Dunmores have all the honor they ever need. Bastards or no, we take care of our own. That's more than you can say for any other noble line." He poked Nolan with his boot. "Just checking," he said when the man groaned and rolled over, and Llew cuffed Graham upside the head.

It was Allard who surprised them both. "Do you really love her so much you would risk everything for her?" He finally raised his eyes from the writ and stared thoughtfully at Llew. There was a sadness in his look. Some new emotion Llew had never seen before.

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Then I envy you," Allard replied, folding the document carefully. "Graham and I will do everything in our power to make certain she is kept safe." He gave a lopsided grin and slapped Graham on the back. "Then into the gates of hell we ride. And may God have mercy on their souls."

Graham smiled and raised his cup. "Demons of Dunmore forever!" He cheered, slogging down the last of the ale. "I love a good mean fight."

Llew chuckled, not for the first time realizing what amazing allies he had in his two wayward siblings. They would ride with him through the Devil's Halls and back again, all the while complaining that the ale was too weak, the women too scrawny and the weather too damned cold.

A man could do far worse in either this life or the next.

He loved them a bit less, however, when Allard spoke again. "You'll have to tell Sam and Finella."

Graham groaned and sat down heavily. "I will go with you to hell, Llew, but you're on your own with them. A man must know when to draw the line."

Even Allard stepped back when Llew turned pleading eyes to him. "Nope. Not this time. Have you even told them yet?"

Llew shook his head slowly.

"That's what I thought. Finella will not be pleased."

Graham laughed, too loudly. "She will not be pleased at all."

"She has influence with the court." Allard tapped the paper on his chin. "She and Sam used to be very close with the royals. That would certainly be to our advantage."

"What if my mother hates Jess?" Llew's voice grew hesitant. "They both have red hair and the tempers to match."

Allard suddenly gave Llew a wolfish grin. "On second thought, I will go with you. I wouldn't miss this meeting for all the wine in the kingdom."

Llew let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. At least he would have one brother for support.

At that moment the two new maids came back in to clean up the vomit on the floor. Graham smiled at their bottoms while they worked. "I will stay here and protect Dunmore Keep," he announced importantly, puffing out his chest in the girls' direction.

"Oh brother," Llew and Allard mouthed together.

"Then start by taking Nolan to his new chamber." Llew raised a brow in surprise as Graham bent down and hauled Llew's father over one large shoulder.

Both women widened their eyes in admiration. Both men squeezed theirs shut in scorn.

Nolan puked down Graham's shirt.

"Shite!" He bellowed, carrying Nolan to the quickly set up room.

Llew and Allard chuckled as they listened to their brother curse the entire way. By the time he returned, he had peeled off the offending shirt to the delight of the raven-haired maids.

He flexed his arm muscles, strutting like a rooster as he sat down with his brothers again. "So, do we have a master plan?"

Llew had been giving the matter some serious thought. "I think we need to have Father Thomas go to the church at Marshton. See what he can dig up about those witch hunts we were talking about. Allard, ride to Tipwich and fill the good priest in on our plans. Tell him to use his utmost discretion."

"Father Thomas invented discretion," Allard replied, sharing a smug look with Graham.

Llew rolled his eyes. "Graham, you need to stay here and make certain Nolan gets the best care we can offer. And don't let him get to court until the very day of the trial. Escort our gracious guest personally to Lynden. We wouldn't want him to have some mishap on the road while in our care."

Graham nodded in understanding. "He will never be out of my sight."

Llew motioned to Jack who had returned to the hall. "What to you think of Nolan's men? Will they give us any trouble?"

"No, my lord," Jack replied. "I believe they will be cooperative as long as their lord is treated well."

"Have one of his men and one of our men by Nolan's door at all times. His men should always be escorted while they are our guests here at Dunmore Keep."

"It will be done, my lord." Jack bowed and turned to leave the room, but Llew stopped him with gesture.

"Jack, you will help me guard my wife. Sleep outside our door, follow her wherever she goes. If she comes to any harm," Llew lowered his voice to barely a whisper, "I will kill you. Do you understand?" His love for her bled through his words, even though he tried his best to conceal it.

"If any harm comes to your lady wife," Jack replied without blinking an eye, "I will already be dead."

Llew gave a brisk nod and the other man left to attend to his duties.

By now the hall had been cleaned and everything removed except for a final pitcher of ale. The fire burned down to a steady glow, and all the candles had been extinguished.

Llew looked at his brothers one last time. "I thank you both," he said formally before climbing the stairs to where Jess waited in their chamber. Jack was already at his station by the door.

"Good night, my lord," he said as Llew slipped quietly inside.



Jess woke screaming in the darkest hour before dawn. Her hair was plastered to her face with sweat, and her heart beat so fast she feared that it would burst. She pried open her eyes and tried to find some comfort in the room, something that would tell her where she was and who she was with, but the chamber was thick with darkness. It pressed heavy upon her, damp and clinging, sucking her down into its depths until she could barely breathe, and her shoulder throbbed with a sickening intensity.

Hands reached out to close around her arms and she fought madly against the touch, trying desperately to escape from whatever horror held her.

"Jessaline!" Llew's voice reached her through the darkness. She raced toward the sound, finally realizing it was his arms that held her, his body that lay so close and steady in the utter black of the night.

"Oh, God. It was so awful...so awful." She fumbled toward him, grasping to find his face and tuck her head into his shoulder. He lifted her with barely any effort and snuggled her body atop his own.

"Shhhh, sleep. Your father is safely away down stairs, and I have guards posted at every door. He will not reach you here." He rocked her slowly, lips brushing as light as spider silk over her face and hair.

She still trembled, still shuddered, but already the terror was fading in the comfort of Llew's embrace. As long as he was with her, she knew she would come to no harm; even if the devil himself were try to snatch her away. And even as evil as he was, her father was not the devil. He was a man like any other. Her husband could best him with a look.

She slept again, easily and without the slightest doubt.



"You did *what?*" Lady Finella Ross stared at her son in astonishment. "A Dunmore...married! Your father would roll over in his grave if he knew, and I would give anything to see it."

She gave her son a hug and kissed him on the cheek. "So who is she?"

Llew returned his mother's embrace and sat down on the edge of the table. They were in a small solarium at her manor house near the banks of the great Blue River only a few leagues south of Lynden, the capital city of Westmyre. "Jessaline Nolan."

"Nolan?" Her tone was suddenly not so amused. "What on earth possessed you to marry a Nolan? There's bad blood in that family, has been for years."

Llew sighed and plucked a sweet cake from the platter. "It gets better. Her father did not agree to the wedding, and he has given me a writ of destraint. He will seize all Dunmore property if I don't have the marriage dissolved."

Now Finella frowned in earnest. "So why don't you? Is she worth the loss of everything your family owns?" She cut into a thick loaf of fruitbread and dunked it in a glass of milk.

Llew stood and paced the hearth. "You don't understand," he tried to explain. "They beat her; she has scars all over her back and legs."

Finella's eyebrows shot up. "So, you've bedded her then. Nolan shouldn't have any way to force an annulment."

Llew found himself gazing sheepishly at the scuffed toes of his boots. His mother always had a way to make him feel ten years old again. “I haven’t actually bedded her.”

Finella choked on her milk. “Then what have you done?”

“Nothing...I mean not much...damn it, Mother, that’s not the point. I promised her I wouldn’t send her back. They want to marry her to the Bishop of Marsh-ton’s son.”

“So she would get a bastard either way.” Finella looked her son square in the eye. “Then what *do* you plan to do?”

“I thought you might talk to the queen, have her pull some strings?” His tone was hopeful.

Finella smiled. “Oh, I haven’t talked to Mandy in years. She and Edred used to come to the cottage on a regular basis. Beautiful woman.”

“Who was so beautiful?” Finella’s paramour strode into the room and sat on the arm of his mother’s chair.

“Hello, Sam,” Llew greeted, moving to hug the newcomer. “I was just telling mother all about my wedding, and asking for intervention with the queen.”

“Beautiful woman, Queen Amanda,” Sam agreed, kissing Finella’s cheek. “I remember having quite a randy time when the royals came to visit. Of course, we had to make certain Edred was occupied elsewhere. He was as big a spoilsport as your father.”

Llew resisted the urge to roll his eyes at Allard, who had entered just behind Sam.

“Hello, Mother,” Allard said.

Samantha Sturbridge rose in welcome, her black hair and blue eyes the exact match of her son’s. “Allard, how wonderful to see you. But where is Graham?”

“He is at Dunmore Keep,” Llew replied. “But he is well and sends his love.”

Sam smiled delightedly. “You boys have grown to be the handsomest of men. Your father would be so proud.” It was the same thing she said

every time they came to visit. She sat back down on the chair's arm and took Finella's hand. "Lovely. We haven't seen you in ages, have we, my dear?"

Finella patted Sam's hand, smiling at the other woman. "You might change your mind when you hear why they've come. It seems our Llew, here, has managed to abduct Lord Nolan's daughter and marry her. Now Nolan has confiscated all the Dunmore property until Llew agrees to dissolve the marriage. Llew wants us to speak to Mandy, and have her change the king's mind. Does that about cover it?" She glanced pointedly at her son.

Sam, however, seemed even more elated. "That's why we were talking about Amanda! Oh, let's go to Lynden and see her. I am certain we can have this matter settled to our liking." Despite the flippancy of her tone, Llew knew the woman had a mind that could rival any man in Westmyre. If Finella and Sam put their wits to it, there was no one who could stand in their way.

"Where is your wife?" Sam looked around.

"Jack is bringing Jess's chest to her chamber." Allard said. "She should be down shortly."

As if on cue, there was a hesitant knock at the open door. Everyone looked to where Jessaline waited just inside the room.

Finella and Sam exchanged startled glances before Sam chuckled gleefully. "Llew," she said with a grin that would haunt him for weeks, "your lady wife looks just like Finella!"

Llewelyn groaned, Allard choked on a laugh, and Finella nodded her head like she had known it all along.

Sam rose and floated across the room. She embraced Jess and led her by the hand to stand her beside Finella.

The resemblance was remarkable, from the length of red hair each woman possessed, to the assessing looks they bestowed carefully on each other.

"*Hell*," Llew muttered. "I have married my mother."

Finella was the first to speak. “And what is a pretty piece like you worth these days?” She had not taken her eyes from his wife’s face.

Everyone froze—everyone except Jessaline.

“Quite a bit,” she responded and bent to whisper a figure in Finella’s ear.

The older woman raised her eyebrows. “Leave us,” she commanded, waving her hand imperially at her son. “It seems we have some things to discuss.”

“Mother—” Llew began, then shut his mouth instantly when both women turned to gaze at him.

That was probably the only difference between them, Llew realized—the color of their eyes. Jess’s were that clear brilliant green, and his mother’s were the color of fine aged mead, the same golden brown as his.

“We’ll be waiting in the kitchen,” Sam said, shooing the others out of the room.

“Send us in some wine,” Finella commanded. “I’m sure we’re both going to need it.”



Jessaline sat primly and studied Lady Ross in unflinching appraisal. Finella returned her gaze with just as much daring. At long last she chuckled, the same rich sound as her son.

“No wonder he is bewitched with you,” she said. A maid brought in the wine and Finella poured them both a glass.

“Just as Llew’s father was bewitched by you?” Jessaline countered.

Finella laughed. “Llew’s father was bewitched by many women. So far, all his sons have followed in his footsteps.” Her eyes grew somber. “The Dunmore men have never been known for their fidelity. What will you do when his thoughts turn elsewhere?”

Jessaline swallowed, dropping her gaze for the first time, knowing Finella saw the weakness. The thought of her husband with another

woman nearly tore her heart in two. To think of him pleasuring, touching...*loving* someone else the way he did her was a thing Jess had considered many times lately. A thing that hurt her more with every passing day.

Finella obviously saw the truth. "Ah, so you, too, have fallen helplessly under the Dunmore spell." There was a wistfulness to her tone that surprised Jessaline.

"But I was told...you and Samantha—" Jess broke off in confusion.

Finella sipped her wine and sat back in her chair. "Sam is the only one I ever considered sharing my life with—except for Henry Dunmore. We were both completely smitten with him, but he was as much a prude as his sons have turned out to be. Refusing to share." She sighed. "So much the pity. But we did get some fine sons from the old bastard." There was a sadness in her voice, a longing she couldn't quite conceal.

"Yes, you did." Jessaline didn't know what else to say. She thought both Samantha and Finella must have been very much in love with the father of their children. How do you comfort someone who has gone through the very thing you fear the most?

"Llew is a lot like his father," Finella continued. "But he is also a lot like me, and I have been faithful to my Sam for many many years. We've never had a liaison where one of us has been left out. Am I shocking you?"

It was Jessaline's turn to smile. "After several days with your son, lady, I don't think much can shock me anymore."

Finella chuckled and reached over to pat Jessaline's hand. "Do you love him?" Although her tone was light, her eyes searched Jessaline's with an intensity that rivaled Llew's.

"With all my heart." The words slipped out before Jess even knew she spoke, her feelings plain for both of them to see.

It was the truth. Whatever had happened, however it had started, she now loved her husband with a passion she could neither deny nor contain. He was her world, her heart, her soul.

Finella's voice broke into her thoughts. "Hmmm. Sam and I would be glad to have grandchildren to dote on—not that either of us is old enough for that."

"Old enough for what?" Samantha breezed back into the room and sat down by Finella again.

"Grandchildren," Finella snorted.

"Grandchildren! Ohh, are you with child?" Her eyes shone with excitement.

"Not unless it is by immaculate conception," Finella answered. "Seems our son has yet to bed his wife."

"*By all the saints*," Samantha cursed, pouring a glass of wine. "What's the matter with that boy? He doesn't have any trouble with the Dunmore jewels, does he?"

Jessaline flushed until she was certain her face must be the same color as her hair.

"Guess that answers that," Samantha continued as she watched Jessaline's reaction. "So what is his problem?"

Jessaline chewed the corner of her lip before she answered. "Truthfully, I don't know. He has shown me all manner of—" She broke off with a cough. "But he just keeps telling me there is time." She shrugged. "Time for what?"

"Time for him to think about it," Finella said. "Hell, if he thinks about things as long as his father did, he won't bed her until he's too old to manage it." She drew her brows together.

Samantha took a finger and smoothed them back out. "This will never do. You will just have to make him, my dear," she said to Jess.

Jess nodded. "I suppose I will. I just...I was just hoping he would make the decision."

Samantha smiled in understanding. "He's a man. They usually have to be told what they want. Not that they'll ever admit it, or that we ever let them know it was our idea all along."

"She's right," Finella agreed. "But we do have other things to discuss. Tell me about your father's agreement with the bishop's son. What's his name?"

"Timon Walsley. I think my father made arrangements with his family right after I was born."

Samantha looked confused. "Why would he do that? Marry you off to a bastard son?"

Jessaline shrugged, tearing off a small bite of bread. "Knowing my father, there has to be money involved."

"But you had a dowry?" Finella sipped thoughtfully at her wine. "He was paying the bishop for something, not the other way around. Money and marriage into a house of noble blood? Your father must have done some very naughty things in the past. We must make certain to find out what they are."

Llew's voice startled them. "I already have Father Thomas working on that." He smiled and strolled easily to stand behind Jessaline's chair. "Is everything all right here?" He placed one hand protectively on Jess's shoulder and looked meaningfully at both his mothers.

Finella tapped her nails on the wineglass. "Why wouldn't it be? Go away, boy, we are not finished yet."

Jessaline suppressed a giggle. No one else in the world could get by with calling Lord Llewellyn Dunmore, boy.

Samantha patted the chair next to hers. "Sit down, dear, Finella is just trying to sort this whole thing out."

Jessaline felt cold when Llew took his hands away and sat in the proffered spot. But he gave her a calming wink that set her fears aside.

"What do you have this Father Thomas doing, actually?" Finella's other hand drummed on the table. Jessaline got the feeling the woman was a boundless source of energy just waiting for some cause to come her way. Luckily they had a cause that needed all of Lady Ross's concentration.

"Do you remember the Marshton witch hunts?" Llew asked.

All three women nodded.

"You think my father was involved in that?" Jessaline's voice shook. Over a hundred people had been burned at the stake.

Llew's voice was gentle. "He testified at all the church trials, and made quite a fortune in reward money. You didn't know?"

Jessaline's voice was flat. "Father never spoke to me of any public matters. It was not a woman's place to be involved."

Finella snorted loudly. "Typical."

Samantha's eyes hardened. "So you think his testimony was false?"

"I'm certain it was. Do either of you remember any talk of witchcraft before then? Suddenly, everyone that owned land between the Nolan estates and ours was involved in certain witchery. My father never once held any of it to be true."

Samantha spoke. "Henry even went to petition the king for assistance. He was turned away by the church authorities. The family's excommunication barred him from giving any evidence at all."

"There were threats against you boys, as well," Finella added. "We took you to Suttshyre that entire summer and stayed with Sam's family. Do you think there are documents that were hidden?"

Llew shrugged. "Possibly. 'Tis certainly worth the trouble to find out."

"Sam," Finella turned to her partner. "Isn't your cousin a scribe at Kedryn Abbey?"

The other woman's face sparkled. "Yes, indeed. And he would like nothing more than to uncover a good scandal. He's always said the church has become too corrupt, the miserable old codger. This should please him no end. Llew, where is your Father Thomas now?"

"Allard sent him to Marshton. With a quick note from you to your cousin, we can have him at Kedryn by day after tomorrow. But that doesn't give us much time. The trial is only four days away." He picked a raisin from the bread. Finella slapped his hand away.

"We'll do what we can and hope for the best." Samantha beamed at them all. "We still have friends at court. I'll send a note to Mandy and

request a private audience. I've always said that one woman can often accomplish what twenty men cannot. Between Jess, Finella, the queen and me, we have a veritable army."

Llew threw back his head and laughed. "Nolan doesn't have a clue what he's gotten himself into."

Finella smiled thinly. "No, he does not."

Chapter Eleven

Finella met Llew in the stables just before nightfall. He knew she watched him for several long moments before she stepped close and ran her hand across his shoulders. It was a caress they had shared for as long as he could remember. It brought back memories of long afternoons spent riding with her across the hillsides, and dark nights when her face was the last thing he saw before settling down to sleep. He smiled and leaned toward her as she cradled his head against her own.

“Can I ask you something?” He knew that tone of her voice; he had heard it a million times before.

Even his drawn out sigh refuse to sway her. “If you must.”

“Do you love your wife?” She said nothing more as she continued to run her hand through his hair.

Llew drew back and gave her an assessing look. “Is this a trick question?” He grinned from ear to ear.

“Don’t be silly, boy.” She landed a soft blow upside his head. “Do you love her or not?” When Llew still refused to answer, she took him by the hand. “Do you think losing her will be any easier if you don’t admit your feelings? That if you do not make love to her, you could better stand the pain if she was forever gone?” Her eyes were strangely bright as he had not seen in many years.

“Your father,” she continued, rubbing her thumb over his wrist, “lost both parents and all of his brothers and sisters in a pestilence that swept through when he was barely even a boy. He was raised by his grandfather, who never had any other children—or a wife to be mother to

such a sad and lonely child. In the end, they did more damage to each other than good.”

Llew frowned at a spot somewhere over her shoulder. “He never said a word to me.”

“Henry Dunmore was a proud man who did the best he could with what little love he was given. Did you never wonder why he spent so much of his life running? From me, from Sam, from you and your brothers? He thought that if he didn’t care, if somehow he could keep us all distanced from his heart, he wouldn’t have to miss us. He would never have to face such sorrow again, like when he was a boy.”

She shook her head and blinked rapidly. When she continued, her own grief was evident. “But he couldn’t hide from sorrow. After Graham’s mother died your father brought Graham to us and disappeared for almost ten years. Hidden away somewhere trying to forget. You boys were almost men by the time he finally returned. When he came back to us, just before he died, he admitted his mistake—that if he could do it again, he would have chosen a different life for all of us.” She reached over and tucked a finger beneath Llew’s chin, forcing him to meet her eyes. “Life is hard, my son, and full of certain pain. That is the nature of things. But do not make it worse by bringing more upon yourself. Tell Jessaline you love her. Make her yours, and do everything in your power to keep her by your side. In the end, love is all that matters.”

Llew hugged his mother so hard he thought she must surely break, but then he remembered Finella was as sturdy as weathered oak—even if he now felt the sobs she tried to hide. She took several long breaths before she gave a shaky laugh and rubbed quickly at her eyes.

“You will choke me to death,” she admonished with a snuffle. “Go on, now, I have other things to do.” She pushed at his chest.

He kissed her hard on the cheek. “I love you.”

“I know, dear,” she replied, smoothing down her gown and patting her hair back in place. “Now, go and tell that to your wife.”



Llewellyn ran a hand through his hair and tried not to notice that his fingers shook.

She was so beautiful, sitting on the edge of the bed in a chemise of saffron silk. He could see her body through the thin material, every luscious curve and valley he had now memorized by heart.

He would know her from a thousand other women, by touch or taste alone; no other skin had ever slipped so smooth beneath his hand, no other mouth had ever melted like honey against his lips.

She smiled and raised tentative fingers to her hair. "Now it is my turn to ask what you search for with such a stern and serious look."

"I am only bewitched as always by sight of you in my bed." He took a deep breath and crossed the room to kneel at her feet.

Her smile faltered when he made no move to touch her. "Have I displeased you somehow?" Her hands moved to pull the gown's lacings tighter across her neck. "Have you changed your mind about the marriage?" He could hear real fear now in her voice, and he finally reached over to clasp her hands in his.

"Is this really what you want, Jessaline? No," he shook his head when she tried to speak, "listen to me. This is the last chance I will ever give you to say the word and be free to leave. I will protect you from your father all the days of my life, I promise you that, but I will not force you to stay with me."

"If I want to stay?" She bent nearer until he could feel her breath against his cheek. "If I want to stay, will you be content with me?"

"I have been content from the moment I heard your voice in the church, even though it took me some time to know it." A wry grin tilted one corner of his mouth. "But I am not content to have you remain a virgin in my bed. It is time, my beautiful one. I have waited too long for you already."

"Is that why you have waited? To give me a chance to change my mind? I thought..." She sighed and pulled away. "With all the trouble my family could cause you, I wondered if you felt I was not worth the effort."

Not that I would blame you," she added hastily, "I know how difficult this must be for you and your brothers, and Finella, and—"

He cut her off with a finger to her lips, grinning like a fool. "We are agreed then." He reached out to loosen the ties of her chemise and slide it down over her shoulders. It caught on the swell of her breasts and he let his fingers graze across their tips. They were already knotted and begging for his touch.

After helping Jess strip off her chemise, Llew pulled his shirt over his head, pleased when he saw the desire that swept across her face. She nipped her bottom lip between her teeth. He captured it with his own. When he heard her soft moan, he pushed her legs apart and moved in closer, one hand burying itself in the silk of her tumbling hair, the other sliding up the bare length of her thigh.

He kissed her as if for the very first time—slow, seductive, intending to savor every last drop of her pleasure before he finally allowed himself to experience that last guarded treasure that was now his for the taking.

When he drew her to the edge of the bed, she wrapped her legs around his waist, no hesitation in her actions, no false modesty to turn him aside. He cupped her bottom in his hands, grinding her against his stomach, savoring the slick of wet that spread across his skin.

She moaned in protest when he pulled his lips away. "Please...I need nothing more. I am ready to let you claim me for your own."

He hesitated, his need warring with his desire not to hurt her. She took advantage and pulled his mouth back to hers, snaking her tongue between his teeth as her fingers fumbled for the ties of his breeches. He stood when she finally managed to pull the lacings free, picking her up as he climbed on the bed to lay her down beneath him. His breeches fell to the floor in a heap.

And still she kept her legs clamped tight around his hips, as if afraid to let him go for fear that he would leave her.

"Jess." He wrapped his fingers in her hair and pulled her head away. He knew it stung by the way her eyes dampened and darkened a deeper shade of desire. "Is that what you need from me this night?" He frowned,

studying her face in the shadows. He jerked her hips hard against him, gritting his teeth when she ran her nails across his back.

He gripped another handful of her hair and chuckled when he saw the need that smoldered in her eyes. "I promise to give you everything you ask." He bent and mouthed the words into her throat.

Perhaps he could find a way to satisfy both their desires. He let his teeth scrape against her neck. She cried out but drew him even closer.

Growing bolder, he drifted his mouth down across her skin until he found one puckered nipple and pinched it between his lips. Jessaline sobbed and arched against him, gripping his head tighter to her breast as he sucked its tender tip.

He bit down, just enough to make her moan, as he drove one hand between her legs to chafe her swelling clit. He was not gentle, but he was controlled, giving her just the amount of discomfort she craved without ever crossing the line of her trust.

"Spread your legs for me, lady," he said, rasping his fingers down her swollen slit. "*Now*," he commanded when her legs remained locked around him.

With a whimper she let go, and Llew gave her a smoldering glance as he hooked his hands behind her knees and jerked them as far apart as they would go. Her hair spread like wildfire around her, a cloak of embers that blossomed into life. Her mouth was bruised and dark from his kiss, and the smell of her need rose up to taunt him.

If Adam had been even half as tempted by Eve, he thought heretically, no wonder he had succumbed and had them thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

He would gladly walk away from paradise if his love, his wife, was walking at his side.

She pouted when he hesitated, a slight thrust of her bottom lip that made him want to suck on the tender skin.

He decided to eat at her other lips instead, holding her thighs down with his arms as he bent to run his tongue across her clit. She cried out

in frustration as he teased the tender bud, trying to arch her hips up to him, but he held her steady and licked her soft again.

"Damn it, Llew," she muttered, trying to pull his head closer.

He chuckled, thinking it was the first time she had ever cursed him. He nipped the inside of her thigh in response, before finally giving her what she so desperately longed for.

Before she could draw breath again, he speared her with a thrust of his tongue, probing deep into the folds of her flesh as the taste of her settled sweet in his mouth. She cried out, throaty and deep when he drove into her again, raking her nails along his nape.

He licked up along her clit, swirling his tongue around it as he slid two fingers high into her. She bucked at his hand, urging him deeper, matching his rhythm as he took her with his fingers. He knew when she started to come, felt the tensing of her sex, and this time he added a third finger to the others, trying to stretch her as much as he could.

"*Oh God, Llew,*" she whimpered before she writhed in ecstasy beneath him, her cunt viselike around his fingers. He imagined that pressure clamped around his cock, and he almost came himself from the very thought of it.

He kept his tongue stabbed tight against her as his fingers twisted and wiggled in her slit. It took a long time for her to calm, and Llew continued to lap at the cream that spilled down his chin as Jessaline slowly ceased her trembling and sobbed intermittently in the sudden silence of the night.

Sliding up until his hips were aligned with hers, Llew reached between them, adjusting his erection until it lodged just inside the lips of Jessaline's tender core.

He was almost too far over the edge, and his lady wife did not help when she wiggled her hips beneath him, seeking the joining he had yet to give her.

"Cease, love," he admonished, barely holding himself in check. He refused to take her too fast or too soon. It was important to him that he did this right, after all, he would never have another chance to take a

maiden's virtue. But he wanted her with a passion he could not deny. Passion, possession, and every raw emotion that fell between the two.

He stopped, his cock pressing firmly at the entrance to her cunt. He held himself very still as he pulled Jess's face up until there was barely a hair's breadth between them.

"Promise me you will stay with me forever," he demanded, eyes blazing in the candle's glow.

Jessaline answered easily. "I promise."

"Swear that you will never let another man touch you, that you are mine and only mine."

"I swear it." Her breath caught as he pushed the head of his prick just inside her, barely parting the tight ring of muscle.

"Tell me that you love me," he whispered against her mouth.

He felt her lips part in a smile. "I love you," she said softly.

Llew shifted his hips again, until Jess cried out as he met the barrier of her maidenhead.

One of her hands flew down to shove against his hipbone, as if she sought to relieve the building pressure of his stiff and rigid length. Llew grew serious when he drew her hand away and trapped it over her head.

"I cannot stop this now, love," he told her, stroking her cheek with his own. "Scream if you must, bite or claw me if you have to, but do not attempt to push me away."

He wrapped both his arms under her shoulders, drew her face tight to his chest, and shoved the turgid tip of his cock against the too tight flesh of her cunt. She screamed and bit deep into the skin of his shoulder. Her muscles quivered around him as she tried to accommodate this new invasion. He withdrew and drove in again, deeper, higher, growling his need while she trembled in his arms.

She was everything he had imagined, fisting him tighter than any woman had ever done, soft as newly spun silk where she clenched him, swollen and wet with the last of her own desire.

Once more he pulled back before thrusting again, finally lodging his entire length into the heat of her as Jess cried out once more into his shoulder.

His breath rasped in the night as he deliberately waited for Jessaline to signal her readiness. His beauty did not keep him waiting long. Despite the way her body still shook and pulsed around him, she pulled her head from his shoulder and gifted him with a steady gaze that he swore could see his very soul.

A single tear had tumbled down her cheek, and he bent to lick the drop away. Jessaline shuddered, turned to meet his mouth with her own, and he felt her relax at last in his arms.

Her head fell back against the bed, drawing him down into her soft embrace. She let her knees fall apart, opening fully to him as he eased out of her heat and slid home once more. Every time he thrust against her she moaned deep into his mouth, the sound sending him spiraling out of control. He could feel her cunt as it swelled and pulsed, ripples of movement that sucked him, letting him drive even farther into her each time his hips thrust hard against hers.

Now her body moved of its own accord, arching up toward him in a dance of pure seduction.

"Yes, my love," he murmured, drawing back from her kiss to watch the need playing in her eyes. "Yes...yes...yes!" he cried, the words torn from his throat as he felt his balls draw tight.

Jessaline stopped and smiled, locked her legs around his hips and refused to let him pull away. "Tell me you love me," she demanded, eyes the stormy color of the sea.

"*God, woman*, I love you beyond all reason," he gritted out, barely able to mouth the words.

"We are agreed then," she said, as she arched up to meet him once more. She sucked at the sweat trickling down his neck, and Llew exploded in a rush of heat and seed, his cock jerking hard and fast as the night shattered around him.

Jessaline screamed out her own release and the walls of her flesh clamped around him, milking at his still rigid length, prolonging the pleasure, extending the need.

Even when his cock ceased its jerking, Llew did not pull away. He kept himself lodged deep inside her, propping himself up on his elbows as he gazed lovingly at her face. "Did I hurt you?"

"No more than I wanted you to." Her voice trembled as she admitted her daring secret. She smoothed her hand down between them until she felt where his body still joined with hers. "Kiss me again," she whispered. "I need to feel your love."

He bent his head to hers, welcoming the tender touch of her lips. She slipped her tongue into his mouth, the movement as gentle as she had been demanding before. They shared, tasted, traded whispers and declarations, slowly exploring this total surrender.

When Llew felt himself start to stiffen, he made to draw away, not wanting to take her if she was too sore or bruised. But Jessaline whimpered and cried out his name, her hands holding tight around his hips to keep him locked inside her.

"Jess—" he began, but she cut him short with another lingering kiss.

"One more time," she urged against his mouth. "Just once more and I will be content."

He had to chuckle at her stubborn audacity. She defied him at every possible opportunity. "Hold on," he said, rolling over until she was positioned on top.

A naughty smile tilted up the corners of her mouth. "I am in charge?"

His low laughter teased her neck as his hands curled around her waist. "Do I really have to answer that question?"

Jessaline's response was to sit up and settle herself on his newly hardened erection. She sucked in a breath when his hips bucked beneath her, and Llew tried his best to hold perfectly still. But he could not keep his hands quiet. They tried to move her, slide her up and down his length, make her rock and grind upon him.

Jessaline tried to relax around the renewed pressure of her husband's swelling flesh. He filled her fully, and even as she waited, his great cock grew even bigger. There was some pain, she acknowledged, but not nearly as much as she had expected—and the rewards were more than a match for whatever slight discomfort she felt.

It interested her that this new position seemed to lodge him even deeper into her than he had been before. But when his hips jerked hard between her thighs, she could not suppress a moan. "My lord."

He winked one eye open and groaned when he saw her look of exasperation. The candle threw light and shadows around them, but even in the dark, she knew he could read the intent in her expression.

"Oh, no, Jess, not again," he muttered when she pointed to the iron railing at the head of the bed. "Shite," he cursed when she pointed another time.

One shaking hand by one shaking hand, he clamped his fingers around the cold metal bar. Only then did she gift him with a brilliantly satisfied smile.

He pouted back most beautifully. "Will you not even let me touch you?"

"Like this?" Feeling bolder than she ever had before, Jess let her own hands trail across her nipples. She had never touched herself this way, and when she saw her husband's jaw clench and felt how hard he tried to control the thrust of his hips beneath her, she decided she would explore this new torture more often.

"Is this how you would touch me?" Her fingers pinched her nipples, drawing another groan from her husband's throat and sending a wave of desire tumbling down to her toes.

"Come here and let me lick you." This was not a request.

Jess leaned forward until one breast dangled just in front of his mouth. He stuck out his tongue and ran it over the tip, so softly it made Jessaline whimper her frustration. She leaned nearer until he could suck her nipple deep in his mouth.

This time her hips jerked in need.

“Ride me,” Llew begged. “*Please!*”

Jessaline moved slowly against him, feeling the mass of him slide between her thighs. She lowered her lids and watched him through her lashes as she let him fill her completely again.

“Find your clit and strum it between your fingers.” His voice rumbled like thunder.

Jessaline obeyed him without thinking, reaching between their bodies to find the spot of pleasure she had learned to love so well.

“Faster, my love,” he commanded. His body writhed beneath her as he struggled to keep control.

But Jessaline suddenly found herself needing more of him. “Hold me,” she whispered, falling onto his chest, her own arms twining around his neck.

He comforted her instantly. Warm again as he held her, Jessaline continued to pump her hips against him, faster and harder as she felt his legs stiffen. “Come for me, Llew,” she said locking her lips against his mouth, wanting to catch every murmur of pleasure when he drove hard into her one last time and shuddered in her arms.

She had not found her own release, but was happy to let Llew come without her. He, however, was not, for even as Jessaline felt his heartbeat slow, he slipped one hand between them, letting his fingers rub lazily across her clit. He stroked her long and steady, cradling her head on his shoulder. He was still warm and hot inside her, and Jess came easily as he fingered her, crying his name as she felt her cunt pulse and grip around him.

Night closed in quietly...until Jess started to wiggle.



Finella chuckled as Jessaline’s screams echoed down the hallway. “If he wields his horn as well as his father, his wife won’t be able to walk for a week.”

Samantha giggled and snuggled closer to her on the bed. "If he wields his horn as well as his father, she won't care." She sighed and clasped Finella's hand in her own. "I still miss him," she whispered. "Is that so wrong of me?"

Finella smiled sadly and kissed her on the cheek. "I still miss him, too, the damned bastard." She didn't bother to hide the tears that snuck into her eyes.

The women held each other as Jessaline cried out again.



Downstairs, Allard slammed his book shut as he heard his brother groan out his release. He had never once been jealous of Llewellyn, even though the few days difference in their ages meant Llew had inherited most everything of the Dunmore fortune. They had been, and still were, the best of friends. But now his brother had found something Allard could not share. With Jessaline in his life, their relationship would never be the same.

He frowned into the fire, wondering just what it was he so envied. Allard did not want Jessaline personally—he wanted... *Christ almighty*, he wanted to be married and in love with a woman of his own. *Shite*, he cursed himself, another Dunmore willing to walk down the aisle to hell.

Hell must be a most wondrous place, he thought, as the sounds of coupling continued long into the night.



"Well?" Pansy waited while Rose swirled the water. "Have they done it yet?"

"Be patient," Rose shot back. "These things take time."

"What takes time?" Snapdragon roused from her slumber by the fire. "I can change time. That might be fun," she added, now fully awake and

ready to perform. "Remember back when we did that nice spell to slow down—"

"She's doing it again." Pansy gave Rose a mutinous glare.

"Shhhh." Rose hushed them both to silence. "It's coming clearer now."

"Well?" Pansy demanded again.

"Yes." Rose breathed out a heavy sigh. "Look how they've fallen so much in love. Doesn't it make you want to cry?" She swiped at the corner of one eye.

Pansy snorted disdainfully. "I haven't cried since...well since I can remember."

"Which is not that long ago," Snapdragon said spitefully. "Are we finished then? No need to turn her father into a frog or something like that?" She gazed hopefully into the pool. "That's it? We're done?"

Rose splashed the vision away. "Not yet. They still have to go before the king. Do either of you recall what her father did with all the documents he stole during those shameful witch trials?"

"Nasty business that. I would've blasted him then, but she—" Snapdragon shot a dark look at Pansy, "—wouldn't let me do it."

"He took them to Kedryn Abbey. I remember," Pansy's eyes dared Snapdragon to comment, "because we were working with that...what was her name? The one who was mother to the third brother."

"I remember." Even Snapdragon couldn't keep the sorrow from her voice. "We didn't do very well with that one."

Rose clucked her tongue at them both. "We did what we could, given the circumstances."

Pansy sat down and blinked rapidly. "No, it didn't turn out very happily. But the papers are still there."

"That will do nicely," Rose said as she poured them all a cup of wine. "I think that fat priest is about to make a very interesting discovery."

"Can I do it?" Snapdragon pleaded. "I know a marvelous seeking spell."

Rose raised a brow at Pansy, who smiled wickedly.

"Seeking spells are unconditionally acceptable—Number 96, subsection 22, paragraph 8."



Jessaline wiggled her nose and tried to bat the fly away. She was still too tired to move, still too sated from Llew's lovemaking of the night before. The fly tickled her nose again, this time landing atop one tightly shut eyelid. It chuckled when she turned her head and buried it in Llew's shoulder.

"Not now," she mumbled struggling to sleep again. This time the fly dipped beneath the cover to flit across one breast.

Jessaline rolled over, away from the tickling touch, and groaned when she felt the pain shoot up between her legs. Her body ached from head to toe, in places that until last night she hadn't known existed.

She opened her eyes and gazed in absolute adoration at the beautiful man beside her. "I love you," she whispered, raising her face for his kiss, "but if you touch me today, I will kill you where you stand."

The look that crossed his face was so woebegone that Jessaline had to laugh. "I wasn't kidding," she hastened to add when he reached out to cup her breast. "Not today. I don't know how I'm even going to walk downstairs for breakfast."

"Did I hurt you?" The concern in his voice was obvious. His eyes shadowed as he tipped her chin up with a finger.

"No, love. You were perfect." But her smile turned into a grimace when she tried to sit up in bed. "I did not realize there would be after affects. Perhaps I should have stopped you after the third time."

"You didn't want to stop me even then." Llew stretched like a satisfied cat. He reached down to scratch his balls and winced himself. "Okay, maybe just for today."

He slumped and pulled her on top of him. Despite her discomfort, the feel of his body set Jess's heart afire. He was so stunning with his hair

snarled over his shoulders and his eyes still halfway shut in sleep. Irresistible. Decadent. His fingers trailing over her arm sent a shiver across her skin. When she felt him grow hard beneath her, she wiggled, only to groan in frustration when all the muscles of her thighs throbbed in perfect unison.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Come,” Llew commanded.

The girl tried to stifle a giggle as she saw them entwined in the bed. She ducked her head and placed a bucket of steaming water on the floor. Several cloths of cotton were draped over her arm, and she carefully placed these over the foot of the bed. “My ladies Finella and Samantha bid you wash and meet them in the kitchen.” With a last silly grin, she backed out the way she had come.

“Your mothers think of everything.” Jess snuggled even closer to Llew. His cock grew another inch. She reached to take it in her hand, marveling at how it could be so soft and smooth as well as so hard and demanding.

“Trust me when I say that if you do not move your hand right now, you will not move it until I am fully satisfied.” Llew hooked one arm over his head. It made him even more desirable than before.

“If you insist.” Jessaline slid slowly down his body until her mouth hovered just above his well thickened length. And just as he tried to thread his fingers in her hair, she slipped from his grasp and stood—or at least tried to stand. Her legs shook as they fought to bear her weight, and she sat down quickly again. Llew chuckled his satisfaction. “I am warning you...” she said pleasantly.

“I love you,” he answered just as easily. Then he climbed from the bed and knelt at her feet, his head resting in the cradle of her lap. “Lay back and let me wash you.”

Jessaline hesitated. For the very first time she was embarrassed by his request. Llew watched her with a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can do it myself. You don’t have to—“

"Take care of you? That's what people do when they love each other."

Jessaline grew even more uncomfortable.

Llew rose and stretched out across the bed, both hands tucked behind his head. "If it makes you feel better, you can do me first." His expression was completely bland.

"How do you always know just what to do to make me love you even more?" All her earlier confusion vanished beneath the tender expression in his smoky eyes. Jessaline kissed him deeply before taking a cloth and drenching it with the water. She washed his chest and underneath his arms before dragging the cloth low across his stomach. He grimaced as she cleaned between his legs, and she could feel him trying his best not to thrust his hips into her hands.

Oh, hell, she thought, throwing the cloth onto the floor. Her mouth wasn't sore in the least. He trembled and swore his love for her again as she opened her lips and drew him deep inside.

Chapter Twelve

They were late for breakfast. In fact, it was nearly noon by the time Jess and Llew finally presented themselves for Finella's amusement.

"Sleep well?" she asked innocently.

Jess lowered herself tenderly onto a chair. She'd never known wood could be so hard. "Very," she managed with only a slight cough.

Llew obviously could not say a word because his mouth was now perpetually stuck in the silliest smile she had ever seen as he piled sausages and eggs onto a platter. She needed to touch him again, so she snuck her hand under the table and ran it down the side of his thigh.

Finella poured herself a glass of cider. "Good. After you eat something, you will meet me upstairs in my dressing room. Samantha and I are going to alter some of my old gowns to fit you. Not that it will take much," she added in satisfaction. "I was just your size when I was your age."

"And you are that same size now." Jessaline acknowledged.

Finella beamed. "How nice of you to notice, my daughter."

Jessaline froze, the piece of sausage she was about to bite held just below her mouth. She carefully put it back down before she dropped it. By calling her daughter, Finella had finally given her approval of their marriage. Jessaline swallowed down the lump that suddenly lodged in her throat. "You have been so kind to me," she began, coughing again when her chest grew tight. "I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"My son is happy," Finella said. "That is enough." She rose, trailed her hand across Llew's shoulders as she passed, and surprised Jessaline

again when she gave her a quick pat on the cheek. "Do not be long," she ordered as she left.



Three days later they stood in Lynden Palace. It was by far the largest building Jessaline had ever seen. While her father had spent many days here courting the king's favor, she had never been brought along. She stopped in the middle of the room, craning her head to gape at the ceiling of ornate support beams that arched high over head.

Finella came up behind her and stated softly, "Don't stare, dear. It makes you look like country nobility. And while that may be the case, we don't need the entire court to know." She drew herself up to her fullest height and nodded for Jess to do the same.

Samantha winked encouragement and patted her hand. Nevertheless, her back was also ramrod straight as she sashayed down the corridor.

Allard was dressed in his attorney's robes and Jess thought he looked most dignified and distinguished. Only Llew had forgone his mother's advice, and was garbed in his usual breeches and shirt. Today, however, the breeches were supple black leather, and his doublet a midnight blue brocade. His shirt was still undone at the neck, his boots still scuffed from daily wear, and every woman that he passed gazed at him in undisguised admiration.

Jessaline was far too nervous to pay them much attention. But she did feel a rush of pride to know this amazing man was wed to her and no one else. And if she and Finella had anything to say about the matter, he would still be wed to her after this day was over.

Straightening her shoulders and forcing her gaze straight ahead, Jess followed Finella, Samantha, Llew and Allard as they picked their way through the throngs of people to where the day's court was being held. She wore the peach-hued gown as if it had been made for her, the deeper red kirtle peeking out from the bodice and between the deep slits cut up

the outer garment's sides. Dark red ribbon laced up her back, snugging the gown to Jessaline in all the right places. She managed a shaky smile when she caught her husband's eyes upon her. His look was both predatory and protective.

They had spoken with Amanda, the queen, just the night before. Jess had found her rather plain, but she had greeted them warmly and with great enthusiasm. Samantha and Finella had stayed with the queen long into the night, and Jessaline refused to think what the three women might have gotten themselves into. Some things were better left unknown.

The crowd grew larger the nearer they got to the smaller room where the actual court was being held. As the throng thickened, so did the stench. If the palace in springtime smelled this bad, Jessaline refused to think what it would be like in the middle of a full blown Lynden summer. Wherever they went, the scent of unwashed bodies and excrement followed. Jess swore that no matter what happened, she would never set foot in the capital city again.

Llew must have seen the tense look that crossed her face, for he tucked her hand into the curve of his arm and stroked her fingers reassuringly. She was amazed as always, that his simple touch could send her into a spiral of desire. Her husband knew it, too. He gave her a smile of unmatched seduction and let his fingers slip over her hand to trail lightly across the swell of her breast.

"The king is holding a feast tonight," he whispered. "There will be sights such as you have never dreamed of. The gardens will be filled with the screams of coupling, and I fully intend to find a dark and secluded spot and make you add your cries to those of the others."

Jessaline frowned at him. "Is that all you think of? 'Tis possible that tonight I will be handed over to another man, and any screams I make will be the screams of a woman forced against her will."

Llew stopped dead in his tracks, tucked a hand under her chin, and forced her to meet his gaze. It smoldered with a terrible passion. "I swear to you, lady wife, no matter what the king's judgment is today, I will

never turn you over to them. I will flee with you to the ends of the earth and dare them to come find us.” His eyes were as hard as the steel of his sword.

“Promise?” She could not keep the thread of fear from her voice. Despite her husband’s bold and brash words, there was no guarantee they would win this day—and there were grievous consequences to be suffered by those who went against the king’s will.

“Promise.” He pulled her close and bent his head to kiss her.

Fire licked between them as always. Jessaline let him deepen the kiss, met his growing urgency in full and equal measure. The world spun away, leaving her aware of only Llew’s mouth parting her own and his hard body molded to hers.

They were interrupted by a not so discreet cough from Finella. Even Samantha looked askance.

“Not in public, dears,” Llew’s mother commented. “Save it for when we petition the king.”

Allard glowered at them all, clearly not happy about anything. “We are due in chambers now. If we are late, ‘tis an instant forfeiture.”

“Then we’d best hurry.” Finella swept past them all. Samantha followed quickly after.

Allard gave Llew and Jessaline an enigmatic stare. “I hope she is worth all of this, brother,” he said, and Jessaline felt another pang of misgiving.

It had never been her intention to cause a rift between the brothers, or to cost Llew his family’s fortune. If the king ruled against them...if the king ruled against them, Jessaline would not fight it. She had made up her mind the night before. She could not cause Llew such trouble and travail. For his sake, and that of his family, she would abide by the court’s decision.

And when Timon came to claim his bride, Jessaline would seek sanctuary at Kedryn Abbey. She would take the holy vows and spend the rest of her life in the church. She knew in her heart that it was the right choice. It was the only choice.

Llew's eyes held not a hint of doubt. They blazed with defiance, a dark and deadly emotion that sent Jess's heart into a whirl of conflict. Pride that this man claimed her without fear of repercussions, and dread that his stubbornness would be his downfall. If the choice had to be made, Jessaline would have to do it decidedly against her husband's will.

The courtroom itself was spacious, yet seemed small and cramped next to the great hall outside. It was made even smaller by the crush of bodies filling it beyond capacity. If Jess thought the smell repugnant outside, it was even worse in the overcrowded chamber. Llew held her rigidly clasped to his side, and Jessaline was grateful for the support. The closer they got to the hearing, the more her knees began to shake. Taking her cue from Finella, she held her head as high and proud as she could manage, and pretended not to notice the flood of nausea that hit her stomach.

While most of the cases on trial today were being overseen by lesser lords and noblemen, King Edred himself had been persuaded by his wife, Amanda—with a little help from Finella and Samantha—to hear the case himself. Jessaline had yet to meet the king, but she had been grilled on all the rules of conduct and proper behavior.

When their names were finally called, she stepped forward with Llew and dropped gracefully to her knees, head bowed in respect. She could not keep her eyes from looking up at him through her lashes, however, and when Edred saw her stolen glance he winked and smiled, causing Jessaline to blush at being caught in so blatant a disregard of etiquette.

He was a handsome man, with his dark curly hair and rosy cheeks. A circlet of gold sat atop his head, and he was dressed in the latest finery, a crimson doublet with huge puffed sleeves at the top, sleek woolen hose, and shoes with outrageously pointed toes.

He smiled even more when she risked another peek, this time placing a finger in front of his lips to show the secret was just between the two of them. Edred was thought highly of by most of the kingdom. He was considered a jovial and amiable king, and Westmyre had finally set its civil wars aside under this second phase of his reign. Jessaline hoped her battle would fair as well under his law.

"The Lord Richard Nolan," announced the judge, standing at the king's right hand side.

Jessaline flinched as her father stormed up to the dais. His face was nearly black with fury and he held a crumpled document in his hand. He erupted into a tirade of demands and accusations, only to be stopped short by the sight of Edred. "M-my liege," he stammered, belatedly dropping to one knee, "I was not aware that you, yourself, would be privy to these proceedings."

"Rise." The king motioned Nolan forward. "State your case. As the wronged party, you have the right of first hearing."

Nolan drew himself back up to his full height and pointed an accusing finger at Llew. "This man abducted my daughter, forced her into an unsanctioned marriage, and now refuses to dissolve that marriage and let her return to the duty she owes her family."

"Why do you object so strenuously to this alliance?" Edred's voice was calm. "Lord Dunmore is from an illustrious noble family. In fact, his pedigree is greater than your own. It seems to me this is a most beneficial arrangement."

"He is a bastard!" Nolan replied, his eyes riveted on Llew. "His parentage is in the greatest question—"

"I object to that!" Finella stepped forward, her own eyes almost as bleak as the man's. "Llewellyn was claimed by his father, and given the title and all rights to the family estates. And my own lineage is even more regal than the Dunmore bloodline!"

"Let him find fault with that," Llew whispered in Jessaline's ear.

Nolan shook the paper he had crumpled in his hand. "Nevertheless, she was already promised to another. And despite these most indecent of circumstances, he is still willing to fulfill his obligation of marriage."

"Who is this so-willing suitor?" Edred's voice had taken on a mocking tone.

Nolan seemed not to notice. "Timon Walsley."

"Is he here?" Edred motioned the man to come forward.

Jessaline cringed when Timon stepped up to kneel next to her father. "I am, my king," he acknowledged.

Timon was as hateful looking as Jess remembered. As cruel as her father, his ice blue eyes and straw blond hair a handsome facade that hid the true ugliness of his nature. Jess could feel his eyes rake across her skin, and she shivered to think what he might do to her if she was handed over to his care.

"So," Edred pressed. "Why are you determined on having this lady returned? She will be damaged goods by now."

Timon flushed, the angry red stain rising hot to his cheeks. "I place no blame on the Lady Jessaline." His voice was as calm and utterly devoid of emotion as always. "I will treat her with all the *respect* she deserves."

Was Jessaline the only one who heard the thinly veiled threat? She obviously wasn't because she felt Llew stiffen beside her, and when she braved a glance his way, she was stunned by the look of pure hatred etched across his face. Even Timon backed a step away when he saw the grim set of her husband's jaw.

"You are the Bishop of Marshton's son?" Edred's voice was all innocence, but Jessaline noticed Timon hesitated in his answer.

"My father did penance to the church for his transgressions, my liege. And while he is not proud of his past sins, he did acknowledge me and pay for my upbringing."

"As he should have. I can find no fault with that." Edred turned back to Jess's father who was still waving the battered document in his hand. "What do you have there?" he demanded. "Bring it to me."

Nolan glared at the paper as if he had never seen it before, a horrified look creeping over his face. "This is nothing, Your Highness," he said, trying to shove it deep into his doublet.

For the first time, Edred frowned. "Bring me the paper."

When Jess's father still held back, the king motioned two guards forward. Nolan was grabbed from behind by one while the other dug out the document and handed it to Edred.

Long moments went by as the king read. His face grew dark and his brows drew deep into a scowl. At his command another judge joined him and also frowned at the document.

"What is the meaning of this?" Edred's voice was bleak.

Allard cleared his throat. "If I might explain, my king." He stopped in surprise when Edred flashed him a brutal glance. "Uh...that is the writ of distraint Lord Nolan brought against our family."

"Did you read this?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Lord Nolan presented it to us five days ago." Allard seemed more confused by the minute.

"And did you touch this paper? Alter it in any way?" Edred's voice was beyond cold.

"No, my king." Allard threw his shoulders back. "On my honor, the paper was returned to Nolan immediately."

"He lies!" Jess's father stumbled forward. "They stole it from me. They could have done anything with it while I was held prisoner by—"

Llew surged to his feet and took a menacing step toward the other man. "He was *never* held prisoner. I demand—"

Jess's father shook free from the guard. "Don't you dare demand anything you worthless piece of sh—"

"*SILENCE!*" Edred scowled at them all. "This document is a forgery. When I find out who is responsible, I assure you they will be severely punished."

Finella bowed low before the court. "My liege, it was our family who petitioned you to personally hear this case." Her tone was both courteous and curt. "Why would we forge papers against us?"

"Your Highness." Nolan's voice was just as convincing. "I had no knowledge this paper was forged. I was only doing what any father would do to save the honor of my child."

Edred considered. He glanced at Jessaline. Then his eyes turned to stone as he looked back at her father. "Where did you get this?"

"I...I had a friend here at court draw up the papers," Nolan finally admitted, as if realizing a lie could very well send him to the gallows. "I did not think to trouble Your Majesty with so minor a family matter. I humbly beg for royal mercy." He sank to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor.

"Lady Jessaline." Edred's tone lightened. "We have heard from everyone on this matter, but you. What do you wish? Does your lord husband treat you kindly?" His expression hardened as he raked eyes over Llew. "Are you content?"

"I am most content, Your Highness." Jessaline smiled and tucked her arm in Llew's. Her face radiated all her love and joy. "Please, let me stay with him."

"Then it is done. This matter is settled. Lord Nolan, you are fined five hundred silver pieces and one thousand acres of land for daring to present false documents to this court. This will be paid immediately."

Nolan did not even raise his head from the floor. "Yes, my king."

Edred stood and had raised his hand to dismiss the court when a voice called to them from across the hall.

"Your Highness...please...I beg pardon of the court, and ask that another matter be presented."

"Who speaks?" Edred scanned the room.

Father Thomas used his considerable bulk to push his way through the crowd to kneel next to Jess and Llew. He was followed by a very old, very thin man dressed in black from his head to his toes, who knelt, also.

"I am Father Thomas of Tipwich, Your Majesty."

"I am Joseph Sturbridge, head scribe to the archbishop at Kedryn Abbey." The old man rose stiffly. "I have documents that will prove Richard Nolan, acting in company with Peter Walsley, Bishop of Marshton, did conspire to wrongly accuse, convict, and put to death one hundred forty seven people from thirteen families in order to gain their lands and fortunes."

The entire room went silent; only the ragged breathing of Jessaline's father could be heard. Nolan rose unsteadily to his feet, eyes furtively

searching the room for any means of escape. Jess saw him nod to Timon as the scribe strode forward and handed a huge stack of parchments to Edred.

Father Thomas hauled himself to his feet and nodded until all his chins bobbed in unison. "Tis true, my king. There are names of everyone involved, how much land and money was taken from each family, and how it was to be divided up between both Nolan and the bishop." He took a long breath. "It even states that if the Nolan firstborn was a girl, she was to be married to Timon Walsley, to unite the two families."

Jess felt faint. She would have fallen, but Llew clamped his arm around her waist and held her rigid against him.

"Stay with me, Jess," he whispered in her ear. "Do not let them see any weakness. I love you." His last words were all the support she needed. He loved her. Their marriage had already been decided. No matter what happened now, Llew would always be by her side.

Edred sat down again and glanced at both stacks of papers. "Where did you find these?"

The old scribe answered. "One copy was secreted away at Marshton Abbey. The other was at Kedryn. Seems neither man trusted the other. They each kept a set in case their relationship turned sour."

Edred motioned two of his judges to look over the writings.

Father Thomas continued. "We have found a surviving member of one of the families." He shoved his hand behind his back and gestured furiously.

Everyone watched in fascination as Graham shouldered his way forward with a lovely dark-haired woman following close behind. Jessaline gasped when she saw Jane curtsy gracefully at the king's feet.

"Jane Seville," the priest stated. "*Lady Jane Seville.*"

Jessaline's knees threatened to give. Her friend—Lady Jane! She could not imagine what it must have been like for her to have her entire family murdered, all her lands and title stripped from her and be forced to make a living abused in the arms of men.

"I'll be damned," Llew said softly, a grin slowly spreading across his face. "Look at Allard."

Jessaline darted a glance under her lashes. Allard's face had gone a deathly shade of pale, and his mouth dropped open in stunned disbelief as he stared at his former favorite whore.

Jane waited as if made of marble. Not one tremble or shake of her shoulder gave any of her emotions away.

The king looked down at her with a smile. "Lady Jane," he said. Jessaline felt her throat clench at his use of the title. "You will appear before me, here, tomorrow, just past noon supper. I will consult with my advisors, and if all is in order, will grant the return of your lands and estate."

"Th-thank you, my king." Jane's voice faltered ever so slightly.

"Now," Edred continued, "Lord Nolan step forward once again."

All eyes turned to where Jessaline's father and former betrothed had been standing. They were nowhere to be seen. Somehow, while everyone had been watching Jane, they had managed to slip past the king's guard. Edred's lips turned down.

"Find them," he ordered. "Bring them to me. I have had quite enough of this." He looked back at Jess and Llew before turning his gaze to Finella and Samantha. "Ladies, it has been a pleasure, as always. You and your family will join us at the festivities tonight. It is the queen's birthday, and I have planned a very special celebration."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Finella curtsied.

Samantha did the same. "Thank you."

Jess could not contain her excitement as they made their way back out into the daylight. "'Tis really finished. No one can take me away from you now."

"No one could have taken you away from me before," Llew answered with a wry twist of his lips. "But I agree it is comforting to have the approval of the king." He brought her fingers to his mouth. "I told you there would be a great feast tonight. Do you remember what I also promised?"

Jess fought back a blush. He had sworn to take her in the king's gardens, in the moonlight, where dozens of other people might see. The thought set her body on fire. "Whatever you desire, my husband," she said with a smile. "We do have a bargain."



Jessaline marveled at the wonder of the monarch's feast. Everywhere she looked were fantastical costumes of all shapes and colors. All of the guests wore masks; some grim and horrific, others towering so high it seemed they sought to touch the very sky.

Music played from every corner, the minstrels warring to see who could best capture the interest of the king and queen. Jessica stumbled against a juggler throwing fire sticks high in the air and Llew pulled her back protectively in his arms.

She relaxed and sank against him, finally able to let go of her fears and enjoy what the palace had to offer.

She was his wife forever, nothing her father said or did would change that now. Jessaline Dunmore she was, and Jessaline Dunmore she would stay. Her happiness was complete.

"What are you thinking?" Llew bent his head to look at her through his mask, a fiercesome vision of a raven's beak covered with tiny black feathers.

Jessaline's own mask was of a fox's face, with a long pointed snout and outrageous eyelashes framing the openings for her eyes. Llew had loved the mask on sight, claiming she was as elusive and alluring as the vixen she now resembled.

"I am thinking how happy I am this whole day is over. That nothing can part us now."

Llew made no answer. He took her hand and led her through the jostling crowd and into the cool of the night outside.

They strolled through the garden, fingers entwined, admiring the fountains that played in the glow of the lanterns and watching the people in their gaudy costumes eat and drink and disappear into the shadows beyond the flickering light.

Llew pulled her down a small and secluded path that wound behind a thickly leafed hedge. They were hidden and completely alone in the dark of the palace grounds. He didn't say a word, didn't even take off his mask, he simply knelt on the ground at her feet and pressed his face into the warm juncture of her thighs.

He nuzzled between them, the pointy beak of his mask delving farther into her most intimate places.

Jessaline gasped, her knees already starting to shake as Llew began to inch up the hem of her gown. "Here?" she asked in a breathless whisper.

"Here, lady," he murmured back, finally slipping off the mask to drop it on the ground beside him.

His hands slid up her thighs, and he nudged her knees apart with his fingers. "Open for me."

Jessaline widened her stance, placing her hands on his shoulders for support. His fingers teased, rasping softly over her clit before sliding between her lips again.

Jessaline moaned, every part of her on fire from his touch. She was amazed at the power he had to make her want him; the need to feel him on her, in her, stroking her over and over again until she thought she would surely die from desire.

Now he lifted both hands to her, parting her opening ever so slowly, until with a firm and steady thrust, he pierced her with two thick fingers.

"Ahhh, Llew." Jessaline threw her head back and looked at the sky, the stars swimming in her gaze as her husband continued to work her with his hands.

When Jessaline thought she couldn't bear another second, he replaced his fingers with his mouth, his tongue circling over her clit, his

lips plucking at the aching nub sending a fresh shot of fire between her legs.

Now he slipped a finger up into the crease of her bottom, spreading her apart as he worked her wetness around the tiny opening of her ass. Jessaline screamed when he drove his finger in, wiggling it deeper through the tender muscle, pulling it out only to bury it inside her again.

"Llew," she panted, "I can't stand up any longer."

His throaty chuckle vibrated against her clit and Jessaline felt her knees give way.

Llew caught her easily as she fell, but he had to pull his fingers free, and Jessaline cried in loss and frustration.

"Do not worry," Llew said as she slid to her knees beside him. "We are far from finished."

Jessaline reached to take off her mask, needing to kiss him, to taste the wet of her on his lips. He cupped her face with his hands and bent to slant his mouth over hers.

He loved her mouth as he had done her cunt, slowly at first, then with harder thrusts of his tongue. He placed one hand back between her legs, working both sets of her lips at once. He pierced her with his fingers while he took her mouth with his tongue.

He was all around her in the night, warm and solid against the chill, the scent of her mingling with the heavier scent of him until there was no other thing in her world. No thought. No fear. Only Llewellyn.

Her trembling grew. Llew stopped instantly.

"Not yet, my beautiful one," he admonished. "Turn around and place your hands on the ground."

"What?" Jess felt a thrill of apprehension. This was something he had never asked of her before.

"Do it." He nuzzled once more against her neck, then moved away to study her. "Turn around and kneel on all fours. You can lower your head onto your hands if you need too. And you will need to," he added, no teasing in his voice.

Jessaline wanted to deny him, but knew by the look on his face that he would not be swayed. Slowly, glancing back once for confirmation, she turned and put her hands on the ground.

“Drop your head onto your arms,” Llew commanded, and Jessaline bent even farther over, placing her forehead on her crossed arms.

It was not as uncomfortable as she had imagined, but she could not help but worry at what a sight her bottom must look tilted up to the sky. She tried to reason away her embarrassment. It was dark and only Llew could see.

He lifted her skirt up over her hips. Then he slid his hands along the insides of her thighs, pushing her knees farther apart. The night wind slipped into her moistness, raising goose bumps all over her flesh.

An instant later, Jessaline felt his thick cock nudging into her, heating her again as Llew slid the length of him into her trembling cunt.

He entered slowly, but without hesitation, burying himself deeper than he had ever gone, and despite the fact she had taken him before, Jess felt herself tense against the pressure of his flesh. “I—“

“Shhhh,” Llew said, reaching around to flick his fingers across her clit. “I will not hurt you.”

As he rubbed and stroked the hardened little hill, her pleasure began to build anew, and Jessaline relaxed as he pulled out before slipping deep into her again.

He rode her faster now, and Jessaline was glad she had braced herself against her arms. There was nothing she had to do, only enjoy the mounting tide of sensation as Llew rammed himself into her.

She had thought her pleasure could grow no greater, but on his next thrust, Llew snugged his thumb deep into her anus, the added ache of this invasion almost more than Jess could take.

His thumb wiggled into her ass in the same rhythm as his cock pierced her pussy, each stroke a little more than the next, higher, harder, his other hand now pinching her tender clit, and Jess felt the bliss slam into her, take her to the edge of her need and tumble her into an abyss of ecstasy as she heard Llew cry her name to the sky.

She could feel her muscles clamp hard around him, extending his pleasure, sucking on the length of his flesh as he shook with his own release. She trembled like a leaf blown too hard by the wind, tumbling back to earth, battered by the currents.

Llew wrapped his arms around her waist, rolled over on the ground, and pulled her on top of him. Jessaline fumbled at her skirts, drawing them back down her legs. She heard her husband's gentle laughter.

"Such beauty should not be hidden," he said.

"You do not mean that," she answered. "You would be a beast if anyone came to watch."

He chuckled, helping her smooth out her gown. "You may be right. I do not like to share. Not you, not with anyone. Ever."

"And now you will never have to." She rolled over to face him. "What will happen to Jane, do you think?"

"She will regain her land and title, and will be a very wealthy woman who can do whatever she wants."

Jessaline sighed. "It won't be easy for her...her past will always haunt her."

"So it will. But she has a great friend in you, and I will do anything I can to make certain she is protected." He kissed her softly on the tip of her nose.

"And my father? He and Timon still have not been found. Do you think they might try to take me again? "

"Why?"

"To cost you as much as you cost them. My father honors revenge above all things, and Timon has been a most excellent student."

Llew frowned against her neck. "They can't possibly be foolish enough to try anything else. Not with Edred's guards posted at every gate and with this many people here. Let go, love, 'tis all over."

"I suppose you're right." Jessaline wiggled her hips against him. "What will happen to my mother and brothers?" A nag of worry overcame her again.

“If they had no knowledge of Nolan’s actions, they will not be held accountable. I will provide for them, if necessary.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Her heart nearly burst with love for this amazing man who held her. “Have I told you lately that I adore you beyond all reason?”

“I’d rather you showed me,” he replied, pinning her beneath him on the ground again. He smiled wickedly as his lips crushed down on hers.

Jessaline’s fears were swept away as his mouth slid down her neck to her breast.

Chapter Thirteen

"What are you doing? We're going to be late." Pansy pulled on her gloves and glared at Rose, who was still bent over the pool of water.

Rose frowned. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Everything is fine." Pansy poked her head over Rose's shoulder. "See? He's giving her a lovely tumble in the grass."

Snapdragon yelled at them from the doorway. "The meeting starts in half an hour. You know how they get if anyone is late. Remember last time? They shut the gates and refused to let Whippoorwill in. Not that I blamed them. She's always late. If it was me, I'd have blasted her a good one."

Pansy drew her brows together. "If you're not careful, someone's going to blast you. It's none of our business how the council chooses to discipline anyone else. It's just our business to make sure we aren't on the receiving end."

Snapdragon made a last adjustment to her cloak. "I know. Tell Rose she's the one who is going to make us late."

"Come on, Rose," Pansy said, pursing her lips.

Snapdragon smiled. "We're finished. They are all going to live happily ever after. We do pretty good work. I can't wait to tell this to that busybody Buttercup. She thinks she does everything better than the rest of us."

Pansy tried to look in the mirror over Snapdragon's shoulder. "Does this gown make me look fat?"

"No, dear. You look lovely."

"Rose!" they shouted in unison.

Rose gave one last glance into the water before breaking up the image with her hand. "I guess you're right. There's nothing more to do. At least, not until the next one."

"What do you mean—until the next one?" Pansy did not sound enthusiastic.

Rose pinned her cloak over one shoulder. "They sent the letter yesterday. We have been given a new assignment."

Snapdragon shook her head. "New...already? And I was looking forward to having a nice three or four year nap. Pansy, we should bring that up at the meeting. Everyone should have a nice long rest in between cases. Do you think we could have them draft another rule? You'd like that, wouldn't you? Lots of rules. Lots and lots and lots of..." Her voice faded as she drifted out to where their carriage was waiting.

Rose turned one last time, almost walking back to the scrying pool before she shook her head and followed Pansy out the door. Everything was fine, she kept trying to tell herself. Just fine.



Jessaline stood pressed against the wall as she watched the tide of bodies whirl in gay abandon around her. Although well after midnight, the royal ball showed no signs of coming to a close.

Sam and Finella warned her they might dance until the break of day, but Jess was unused to such decadent behavior, and found she quickly tired of the noise and commotion. After the emotion of the day, she wanted nothing more than to retire to her chamber with Llew, have him make love to her one more time, and fall asleep in the safety of his arms—the place she planned to spend every night from now until the end of time.

Her husband had tucked her in a small alcove next to the door, promising to return as soon as he had given his mothers a grateful and heartfelt goodnight.

At first she did not notice the figure draped in black scuttling toward her along the wall. When she finally saw the lurking body, she assumed it was another drunken reveler, weaving his way slowly toward the door. Not even when he tripped and stumbled closer did Jessaline realize he had another purpose altogether.

But when he pressed her back into the alcove and groped for her breast, Jess finally opened her mouth to protest. His hand rammed into her chin, forcibly shutting it as a second figure stole next to her from the opposite side.

Jessaline tried to break away, kicking and scratching at anything she could reach, but when one of the men pulled his mask away and she saw her father, Jessaline felt her heart plummet in a sudden rush of fear.

"If you so much as say one word, I will kill you," Nolan said. Jess saw the wicked gleam of the knife he held to her throat.

He motioned to the other man, who pulled a black mask from beneath his cloak. Jess's father slipped it over her face, never moving the knife an inch.

The second man removed his cloak and tied it around her. When he pulled the hood up over her hair, Jessaline knew Llew would never spot her in the crowd. They bound her hands with a piece of rope, tied another over her mouth, and pushed her down the length of the wall and out the doorway beyond.

Jessaline saw Llew once across the room, his head bowed low as he kissed Finella on the cheek. By the time he knew she was missing, her father would have her secreted away in some unknown place far from the city.

She felt her panic mount. Llewellyn would never find her.

Her father had horses waiting just outside the palace grounds. She was flung across one of the animal's backs, and the second man got on behind her.

"Where are we taking her?" She recognized Timon's voice instantly. It added another layer to her fear. She knew her father's preferred method of punishment. It was nothing she hadn't survived in the past. But

Timon could perform any number of cruelties that her father would never have done.

As they galloped through the back alleys and streets, Jessaline prayed that Llew would somehow find her. She also prayed he would still want her when he did.

Blood rushed to her head, pounding, throbbing, each stride of the horse adding a new layer of pain to the journey. Still, Jessaline tried to think; to remember each and every turn, so that when she finally made her escape, she would be able to find her way back to Llew.

She'd faced pain in the past and she would face it now. She let it settle over her, sink deep into her body, willing her mind to push it aside as she had done so many times before. She tried to calm her breathing, but it was difficult under the mask and hood. The gag tied across her mouth cut off her air flow even more. She grew dizzy, faint, and had to will herself to focus; counting every hoofbeat of the horse, picturing each part of the route in her mind.

Crisp smelling air drifted through her hood, and Jessaline knew they were free of the city. She kept her eyes open and stared at the ground beneath her, hoping to catch some glimmer of the coming day that might tell her which direction they were headed.

But as the hours passed and the night wore on, she found herself slipping in and out of consciousness.

Jessaline was jolted back into full awareness when she was hauled from the horse and thrown on the ground. She bit back the cry that threatened to escape and forced herself to remain utterly still.

"Has she passed out?" Her father asked.

"I will wake her soon enough." She cringed when she heard Timon's harsh laughter.

"I don't care what you do with her," Nolan continued, "but you cannot kill her until after we've been paid the ransom."

"I hadn't planned on killing her." Timon slid one boot across her thighs. "Did you give him the note?"

Jess heard the horses being tethered. "I slid it under the door to their chamber. He will find it."

Timon seemed to hesitate. "Are you sure this is a good idea? If we're caught—"

"If we're caught," Nolan said calmly, "we'll be in no worse circumstances than before. Kidnapping is not a hanging offense. Now pick her up and carry her inside."

Timon bent down and attempted to do just that, but Jessaline forced herself to remain a limp and heavy weight. Timon grunted, swore, could not lift her, and resorted to dragging her into the building.

Despite her dire circumstances, Jess could not suppress a rush of pride. Llew could pick her up as if she weighed no more than a feather. When her husband came for her, Timon wouldn't stand a chance.



Llewellyn stared at the map for the thousandth time. His eyes were gritty from lack of sleep, his stomach rumbled from its lack of food, and his heart ached with an unrelenting need to find his wife and return her safely to his side.

'Tis all your fault. 'Tis all your fault. The words ran over and over in his mind, the truth of them feeding the rage and guilt threatening to eat him alive.

He remembered how easily he'd brushed off Jessaline's fears, his thoughtless words of comfort when she told him of her worry. In his arrogance, he had sent Jack home to Alice, and then left Jess alone by the door while he smiled and chatted and basked in his victory.

His elbow slipped and knocked over a watered down glass of wine. When he saw the liquid pool over the table, he snatched up the glass in a fit of fury and smashed it against the wall.

"Feel better?" Allard raised his head from the ransom note, hoping to find some clue of where Timon and Nolan had taken Jess.

Llew glared at him until he subsided back into silence. “If they hurt her in any way, I will kill them—slowly—without remorse.”

“We will find her.” Graham stretched. His face mirrored the anguish of his brother’s.

“Where could they be?” Llew looked at the map again. It mocked him, refusing to give up its secrets.

“All right.” Allard stood and also bent over the map. “Maybe we’ve been going about this the wrong way.” He picked up a quill and dipped it in ink. “We know he wouldn’t take her to his own estate—that would be too easy.” Allard made a small mark next to the Nolan holdings.

“And he would probably want to keep her as far away from ours as possible,” Graham added. “But we really can’t count on that.” He frowned. “Where are all the properties he acquired in the trials?”

Allard and Llew both pointed to several tracts of land.

“How many of them have buildings that are still standing?” Graham frowned again when his brothers pointed to the same places as before.

They hadn’t narrowed it down very far. Llew gritted his teeth as his emotions fought to swallow him again. “Where do they want us to deliver the money?”

Allard put his finger on the document. “Tis a five or six hour ride from here, but fairly close to both the Hatton and Seville estates.”

“Seville...Jane’s family? Go get her, Allard. See if she can tell us what she remembers of her family’s manor.” Llew motioned toward the door.

Allard nodded. Graham’s stomach growled alarmingly. “Bring us food, Graham,” Llew said. “If we ride, we’ll need something to get us through the day.”

After both his brothers had left, Llew sat and dropped his head on his arms. They were too far away. There were too many places to search. It would be like finding one barley grain in a barrel full of oats. And Llew knew with a certainty that if he actually paid the ransom, he would never see Jessaline again.

He refused to consider that possibility.

His eyes stung and a lump lodged in his throat. “*Help me,*” he whispered to whatever gods would hear him. “*Help me find her.*”



Rose struggled to hear the words that fluttered at the edge of her mind. The council meeting had droned on for hours, and they were just now being given a short break before returning again after sunrise. When they were finally dismissed, she snuck out a side door, not even bothering to find Pansy or Snapdragon. Something was very wrong, and she had no time to listen to them argue.

She hid behind a massive stone column in the Master Gardens and quickly spoke a transport spell, hoping no one would see—spell casting was banned on all council grounds.

The instant she was home, she ran to the scrying pool. As Llew’s grim face came into focus, she knew her instincts were right. A wave of her hand over the water brought Jessaline into view...along with that of the stranger who watched her.

Something terrible had happened in the short time they’d been away—something that had taken Jessaline from Llew and put her in great danger.

“Think, think,” Rose muttered to herself. What could she do without bending too many rules? Just the thought of all the paperwork was enough to give her a headache. She swirled the water and looked back at Llew.

Ah. A broad smile lit up her face as she remembered an earlier conversation—“seeking spells are unconditionally acceptable”.

“Look at the map again,” Rose said, even though she knew he could not hear her. “Look at the map again.”



Llew thought he must be losing his mind as a faint tinkling sound buzzed in his ears. He shook his head and rubbed a hand over his day old beard. *Focus.*

He raised his eyes to study the map once more, frowning when the lines seemed to blur and wiggle before his eyes. He blinked several times to clear his vision and stared at the map again. Nothing had changed. Nothing...*what in the hell?*

A tiny shard of light glowed from the map's surface. The barest prick of illumination, but it was enough to make Llew peer harder at the document. TRENTYN CHAPEL read the script next to the light. He knew he had never read that before, not in the hours he and his brothers had spent pouring over the map.

Trentyn Chapel.

Allard returned with Jane, followed by Graham with a platter of food he had scrounged from the remains of last night's feast.

"Have any of you heard of this place?" Llew pointed.

Allard scowled at the map. "Where did that come from? I swear, brother, I never saw that name before."

Graham shrugged. "Don't look at me." He munched on a leg of poultry.

Jane looked thoughtfully at the map. "When I was a little girl, I remember hearing of a chapel not far from our manor. It was supposedly abandoned during the height of the plague years—the entire town was lost."

"Do you remember where it was? Or the name of the town?" Llew knew he sounded desperate. He didn't bother to hide it.

Jane's lips thinned and she stared more closely at the map. "Is that the Baine River?"

"Yes."

"I think...I think the town sat just past the marshlands, here." She put her finger down at the very edge of the Seville estate. "There was still a path that you could see; about three miles south of our manor house."

Llew grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth. "Thank you, my lady," he said, pulling on his cloak and leather gloves.

Jane gave a hesitant smile at his use of her title. "Bring her home," she called as all three men raced from the room.

Chapter Fourteen

Jessaline squinted at the crack below the door, trying to guess the time of day. She thought it must be nearly dark, she could see no light, but she had no way of knowing how long she had slept. Even now, her head flopped forward and her eyes drooped in weariness.

She forced them open and scanned her surroundings, noting in alarm the bare stone walls and floor. She sat in a rotting chair beside a trestle table covered with mold. Candles burned in a rusted iron holder, casting a sickly glow over the rest of the filth and decay. The stale air burned her nose and throat. Wherever they were, this place had not been used in a long time.

Timon dozed in a chair across from her, but her father was nowhere to be seen. Jessaline tugged at the cords that bound her hands, hoping to find a way to loosen them. She froze when her movements cracked the wood of the aging chair. The sound was loud and Timon woke instantly.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, snapping to attention.

“A drink of water?” Jessaline jerked her chin toward the ale-skin Timon kept by his side.

He grunted and slid it across the table, just barely out of her reach.

“Timon?” Jessaline let her voice soften beguilingly. “Timon, could you untie me please? I can’t reach the water. I promise I will not try to escape.”

The blond man stared at her without saying a word.

Jessaline swallowed and tried again. “I don’t know what my father told you, but he will not give you a penny of the ransom. He will betray you—he betrays everyone.”

Timon smiled, a hateful twist of his lips. "I know. My father warned me long ago. Did you know we were betrothed before you were even born? I was forced to wait for you all these many years." He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. "I could have married a dozen times over, good marriages to women more willing than you!" He spit the last, his lips pulling down in a frown. "But my father insisted. I don't know why." He seemed lost in his own world, dredging up memories of a past that had no bearing on what was happening now.

Jessaline thought she might use that to her advantage. She tried her best to smile. "Tis not too late. Just let me go. No one will know, and you can be free to marry whoever you want." She studied his face carefully, noting the play of emotions that raced over it in quick succession.

Timon stared morosely at the knife he held in his hand. "I wanted you! Tell me, *my lady*, how did it feel when your husband thrust his great horn between your legs? Did you fight for your honor, knowing you were promised to another? Or did you spread out like a whore, rutting willingly beneath him?"

He stood. His chair scraped over the stone floor.

Jessaline watched carefully as he strode around the table.

"You do not answer me." He stopped in front of her. "Look at me, damn you!" He grabbed a handful of hair and jerked her head.

She blinked back the hot sting of tears. "I did what I had to do," she said, "even if it meant defying my father."

"And I didn't?" Timon's voice rose an octave. "Is that it? You think me a coward for obeying my father's wishes?" He slammed her face onto the table.

Jessaline could not suppress a sharp cry of pain.

The sound seemed to enrage him even more. He pulled her upright and ran a hand across her breast. Fear and loathing warred within her. But her voice held not a tremor when she spoke again.

"Is that what you want, Timon? To touch me...have me touch you. I have learned many things these past days. I can show you. Would you like that? Like me to teach you?"

He gaped at her when she pulled back her shoulders, pushing her breasts out toward him. He ran his tongue across his lips and Jessaline could see the lust, stark and hungry in his eyes.

“Why shouldn’t I just take you—throw you on the floor and hump you like the harlot you are?” His fingers pinched at her breast, a fumbling gesture that did not even come close to her nipple.

“Timon,” Jess chided. “I could make it good for you. Better than you can imagine.” She held her bound hands out to him. “But you must release me, I need to touch you.”

Hesitation held him rigid for long moments. Jessaline looked at him through her lashes, hoping her disgust was not noticeable in the shadows. A thin line of spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and Jess prayed he would not lean in to kiss her. She could not handle that.

Luckily his mind had drifted to another part of his body, and he fumbled for the knife at his side. He had almost cut through the thick ropes when Jessaline’s father crashed open the door.

“What is going on here?” Nolan stepped close enough to see what Timon had done. His face showed no emotion as he slipped a knife from his belt and stabbed the younger man in the back.

Timon gaped like a drowning fish as he slid to the floor. Jessaline turned her eyes away and managed to pull the last of the rope free. Before her father could stop her, she knelt beside Timon.

“Is he dead?” Her father’s voice was unconcerned.

Timon moaned when Jess touched him. “He will be.” She looked straight into her father’s eyes as her fingers closed around the knife still clenched in Timon’s hand. She stood, the blade hidden in the folds of her gown.

Her father sat, propped his feet on the table and gave her a calculating glance. “I had high hopes for you, I really did,” he said pleasantly, wiping the blood from his knife’s edge. He used the point to dig the dirt out from beneath one fingernail. “You, of the lot of them, were the only one who ever had the courage to defy me. I admire that, truly.”

He smiled and reached over to pat her hand. Jessaline jerked from his touch and backed a step away.

"See?" He smiled again. "Even now, with your very life in my hands, you continue to oppose me. Why is that, do you think?" His good natured expression never faltered, but Jessaline could see the fury that stabbed from his eyes.

"Perhaps we are too much alike." She let her tone match his, casual and aloof. "What if I told you I have seen the error of my ways, and am now willing to do as you ask?" She kept her gaze glued to his.

Nolan laughed so hard he had to wipe a tear from his eye. Jessaline wasn't fooled; she had seen him play this game before. Her guard never faltered.

"Oh my dear, sweet girl, how easily you lie. I'd admire that, too, if it were directed at someone else." He pursed his lips and gave an overly heavy sigh. "But sadly, this time you have cost me too much." He nodded to where Timon still writhed upon the floor. "I am forced to kill him now. How in heaven's name am I going to explain this to his father?" He shot like lightning from his chair and kicked the other man in the head. Jessaline flinched at the stomach-wrenching sound of breaking bone. Timon stilled instantly.

"I suppose you'll tell the bishop I did it." She backed slowly toward the door.

Nolan gaped at her. "You never fail to surprise me, Jessaline," he said with a paternal nod of his head. "What an absolute delight you could have been. A mind to rival my own. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to you as a child." He frowned, his fingers running absently over the knife's blade. "But, in truth, I never believed a woman's mind could comprehend—well, anything at all."

Jessaline raised an eyebrow. "Was that a compliment, my lord?" She gave a slight curtsy, moving again toward the door.

Nolan dropped into his chair once more. "Come, sit with me," he said mildly as if just noticing how far she had slipped away. "We should

discuss this matter farther. Perhaps we can come to some sort of an arrangement.” He beckoned her with a wave of his hand.

Jessaline shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“This isn’t up for discussion. You will do as I say!” Venom dripped from his words, all of his false humor vanishing like smoke in the wind. Before Jessaline could even blink, he threw the knife. It drove into her shoulder, slicing through the muscle as if it were a slab of butter.

She screamed as her hand went numb. Her knife fell to the floor with a hollow clank of metal. Her father smiled, watching her sink to her knees as blood spilled from the wound.

The world spun dizzily as she fought to keep from fainting. She watched dully as her father rose and picked up the knife she dropped, before yanking her to her feet by her hair. To keep from screaming, she bit her lip until it bled and spit on the tip of Nolan’s boot. He wiped it off on the hem of her gown and threw her onto the table.

She landed on her injured shoulder, jamming the knife even farther into her flesh.

“I shall tell you a secret.” He pushed her face into the rotted wood. “A secret no one else knows, save for the stupid bitch that birthed you.” He spoke so close to her ear she could feel his spit where it dribbled on her neck.

“You are not my daughter by blood. Ah, that got your attention,” he added when she froze beneath him. “She never told a soul about her indiscretion with the stable-keeper. Her parents paid me triple the usual dowry just to take her shame off their hands.”

“You lie.” Jess refused to believe what she was hearing.

“Do I?” He grabbed her hair and forced her to face him. “Did you not ever wonder why you alone, of all the family, have such wretchedly colored hair? Or why you are so much taller than the rest of us?”

Jessaline tried to keep her mind on what he was saying, to think back through the memories of her past to come up with some proof to refute his words. If she was not Nolan’s daughter...she was base born, a commoner, unfit to be Llewellyn’s wife.

"I should have sent you to the stables where you came from, but I swore to your mother's family never to reveal the truth. They threatened to cut me out of their will. And I couldn't have that, not with so much money involved." He ran his hands down Jessaline's back. She could not control the shudder of revulsion that swept over her. "You did turn out to be a pretty little thing," Nolan added, "in a peasant sort of way. And now that you know we are not blood—" He began pulling her skirt up her legs.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening. Jess's thoughts chanted the litany as she struggled to comprehend this new insanity.

His breathing grew heavy and Jess could feel him stroking his cock as he pressed his hips against her. She wanted to vomit, wanted to scream, wanted to take her knife and—the knife! She had a knife! She just had to find a way to reach it.

"Offer me money," she said, choking back her revulsion.

"What?" This time he seemed genuinely surprised.

"I will be a most willing partner." She tried to turn into his embrace, gritting her teeth when the pain threatened to overwhelm her.

He grabbed her shoulder and flipped her the rest of the way around. "What makes you think I want a willing partner?" His knees pressed between hers, trying to force her legs apart. "Oh, no, I want you to scream." He reached out and twisted the knife in her shoulder. The pain was too much. Jessaline cried out as waves of fire shot from her shoulder in all directions. She retched, swallowed back the bile, and spit in Nolan's face.

"Fight me," he whispered, running his tongue across her cheek. "Fight me all you want. It only makes my pleasure greater." He pinned her uninjured arm over her head while his other hand groped with the lacings of his breeches.

Jessaline saw the madness in his eyes, and wondered that no one else had ever noticed. He had spent a lifetime, however, convincing the world he was sane, and he had always been a master at deception.

Think—*think*—she told herself as the darkness threatened to take her. It whispered comfort, peace, a release from all her troubles. She had only to let it take her, follow it down...down...until all was lost in shadow.

Her chest grew heavy. Her breath grew harsh. She could smell the rot and mold, the stale dampness that fought to steal her air. Just like in the dreams.

Just like in the dreams.

Oh, God, this was it! This was the nightmare that had haunted her forever. The end of all light. The end of all things.

Pain seared through her again as her heart pounded in a sudden rush of panic. This could not be the end. Not now, not without Llew. She had to explain to him...at least why she was forced to leave him. She owed him that much. Even if he had their marriage revoked, she would tell him how sorry she was and how much she truly loved him. She would not go without saying goodbye. He had done his best for her and she would do her best for him. Common or not—she still had her pride.

She slumped against the table, limp, lifeless, like a corpse in Nolan's arms. He didn't notice, he was too intent on digging his way through the layers of her gown. Slowly, one tiny movement at a time, Jessaline forced her wounded arm to work, curling it up and back upon itself until she could feel the knife in her shoulder. She tried to grasp the leather hilt slick with her own blood, but her icy fingers refused to tighten around the weapon, slipping uselessly out of her control.

She couldn't do it. No matter how she tried, she could not make her hand obey. But she had promised Llew no other man would touch her. It was a promise she would keep to the last.

Her legs still worked fine. As Nolan fumbled with the lacings of his breeches, Jessaline took a deep breath and rammed her knee into his groin. His bellow echoed around the chamber. Clutching his hands to his injured manhood, he stumbled back from the table, giving Jessaline her chance to escape.

Clenching her teeth against the pain still throbbing in her shoulder, she fled to the other side of the table. With her good hand, she reached

up and drew the knife from the wound, retching when a new shock of agony rippled over her. Blood poured anew, but she refused to look. Her eyes stayed pinned on Lord Nolan as she circled back toward the door.

He coughed, uttered terrible curses beneath his breath, swore to kill her in every way imaginable, but he remained rooted where he stood, unable to move to reach her.

Seizing her only chance for escape, Jessaline raced to the door, struggling frantically to move the heavy lock before he regained control of his legs and made good on his promise to end her life.

Almost...almost...the iron bolt screeched as it slid from its slot. And she had actually pulled the handle free when he grabbed her from behind.

"No!" With a shriek of fear and fury, Jessaline jerked from his grasp with her knife held high.

And the world went black and faded from her view.



Llew pushed his way through the door just as Jessaline slumped to the floor. Blood splattered in a trail from the table to where she lay silent at his feet.

His heart stopped. His chest squeezed so tight he couldn't breathe, couldn't speak—could do nothing but stare at her in helpless shock and desperation.

It wasn't until Nolan dove at him like a maniac that Llew reacted. He stepped to the side and deflected the knife blow as it grazed across his cheek, slamming the other man into the wall. Nolan turned and sliced at Llew's chest. The knife cut a shallow gash across the skin, sending Llew into a red-washed rage.

"If she is dead, I will kill you the slowest way I know how," Llew promised, smashing his elbow hard into Nolan's face. Bone crunched and blood streamed down as Nolan's nose broke beneath the blow.

But still the man refused to stop, shaking his head to clear the blood away before kicking Llew's knee out from under him. Llew fell, cursing Nolan to all the hells he had ever heard of. A brief look to where Jessaline lay fueled his anger even more. He finally reached to draw out his sword.

As Nolan turned to strike again, Llew pulled his blade from the scabbard and brought the edge up in an arc that sliced across the other man's stomach. With a final gurgle of pain, Nolan fell to his knees, clutching at the gash that spread open beneath his shirt. His eyes remained locked in that last amazed expression as he toppled over and pitched face first onto the floor.

By now, both brothers had forced their way through the half-opened door. Allard knelt at Jessaline's side while Graham moved to examine Timon's body.

"Is she dead?" Llew crawled on his knees across the floor to take Jessaline in his arms. "Please, tell me she isn't dead."

If she was lost to him now, after he had tried so hard to find her—if he had failed her in the end—his heart would surely cease to beat, and he would rest still and cold beside her until the end of time. This was why the men of his family never married. It was too certain a pain when death stalked their every waking hour.

"She isn't dead." Allard tore a piece from Llew's already mangled shirt and tied it around Jess's shoulder. "The wound is deep and she has lost blood, but as far as I can tell, it shouldn't prove fatal. But she needs a healer. If the wound gets infected—"

"Agreed." Llew lifted her as carefully as possible, noting with a worried frown how pale her face looked in the flickering light. Dried blood crusted her lower lip, and another bruise was beginning to darken her cheek. But she was still with him, still his beautiful wife; her skin still warm where he touched his lips to hers. "Are both the others dead?" He didn't even glance up as he spoke.

"Yes." Graham clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Father Thomas is the closest. Go, brother, we will meet you in Tipwich."

Without another word, Llew carried Jessaline to where Broch waited patiently in the last pale light of the moon. He wrapped one arm around her waist and hauled them both into the saddle, tucking her safely in his embrace as he reined the horse toward town "Like the wind, my friend," he whispered to his steed before they fled like shadows over the darkened road.



Jessaline opened her eyes with a groan and tried to lick her too dry lips. A slice of sunlight arced across the bed, coming to rest on a tangle of chestnut hair. "Llew?" Her voice was barely a whisper, the weak cry of a child, but his head shot up and he smiled at her through red-rimmed eyes.

"You are awake." He brought her hand to his lips, holding onto it so tightly, Jess whimpered and tried to draw her fingers free. "Sorry...I am so sorry." He lightened his grip, but refused to let go completely.

"Where are we? Are we home?" She turned her head to look around the room. The movement sent a stab of pain shooting down her arm. When she whimpered, Llew's brows drew together in concern.

"Don't move. You've a nasty gash in your shoulder—you might break the wound open again." He smiled and brushed his mouth against hers. "I thought I had lost you," he said. Jess felt the shudder that swept over him. "That I had failed and they had killed you. *Hell*, Jess, 'tis my fault. I didn't take your father seriously enough, and I didn't think for one damned moment that Timon—the *bastard*—would've actually had the guts to go along with him. I have been the most useless of fools."

Jess could see the guilt that lay heavy in his eyes. He wouldn't forgive himself for long time. But it didn't matter to her. None of this was Llew's fault. She would never blame him. "Is...I mean..." She was finding it difficult to actually say the words. "Are they dead?" Her voice trailed off to a whisper.

"Yes. They will never hurt you again."

He tucked a finger beneath her chin when she would have looked away. The tears were too close, too ready to spill. A drop landed on his palm, and immediately Llew climbed on the bed and pulled her close, tucking her head into his chest, careful to keep her injured arm stable.

She cried then, cried as she had never done in her life, harsh sobs that she thought might last forever. Llew said nothing, asked nothing, simply held her as the bitter emotions ran their course. When she grew silent at last, he eased slowly away.

“Drink.” He held a cup of water to her lips.

She drank, only then realizing how very thirsty she was. “How long has it been?” she asked, finally pushing the glass away.

“Two days. I am desperate for you.” Llew tried to grin. It was the saddest expression Jess had ever seen.

“Do you know what happened to the rest of my family?” Despite everything, Jess needed to know they were safe.

“King Edred allowed them to keep the original Nolan lands. I was told your brothers acted like true noblemen when they heard the news. Edred was impressed.”

“Good.” Jess let her head fall back on the pillow. Her eyes were as heavy as sacks of grain, and her head hurt nearly as bad as her shoulder. She had almost fallen back asleep when she remembered what her...what *Lord Nolan* had told her. Her eyes flew open again. “*Oh, God, Llew, I have something I have to tell you.*” She struggled to sit up, crying out in pain when her arm refused to bear her weight.

Llew’s jaw clenched when she fell back on the bed, but his voice was as gentle as before. “What could you possibly need to say that cannot wait? Sleep, my love, we will talk about this later.” He pressed a kiss to her lips.

“No.” She shook her head and tried to push him away. “This can’t wait. He said...my father...no not my father...” The words refused to come as the darkness reached for her again. “Nolan said he was not my father. That I was the daughter of a stable hand!” She searched his face to see that he had heard. When he just shook his head, she continued.

"Don't you see? My mother's family had money but no title. I am not of noble blood. I cannot be your wife."

His eyes turned black. "Why not?"

"I am a bastard child."

Llew's laughter echoed around the chamber. "Jessaline, did you forget? I, too, am bastard born." He gave her the most disarming smile. "Now we are a perfect match."

"Are you certain?" Her fingers wrapped around his. "With my—with both Nolan and Timon gone, I am safe. You don't have to pretend."

"Jessaline, if you don't stop this crazy talk, I will turn you over my knee—as soon as you are well enough. Do you understand?" He brushed a finger down her cheek.

"Where is Jane?" She was changing the subject and they both knew it.

"Jane is with Finella and Sam. They are teaching her how to become Lady Seville."

Jessaline smiled at the thought. "One last question?"

He sighed in exasperation. "One."

"Do you still love me?" Her voice shook, much as she tried to hide it.

"You do not know the half of it," he answered, bringing her hand to his lips. His other hand stroked through her hair, slowly soothing her back to sleep.

Jessaline sighed in contentment as her eyes drifted closed.

Chapter Fifteen

“Llew.” Jessaline wiggled on the mattress. “*Llew.*”

She heard him sigh before he turned over. “What is it now?” The frustration in his voice was evident.

Jessaline’s frustration was even worse. “‘Tis been days!” She reached out to touch him, but he trapped her fingers in his hand.

“We have been over this before,” he said. She knew his jaw was clenched by the strangled sound of the words. “Not until you have healed. Now go back to sleep.” He raised her hand to his lips. She sucked in her breath when he lapped his tongue across her palm.

“That wasn’t fair.” She pouted, trying to pull away. “There are other places you can lick,” she offered slyly, sliding one leg over his. Just the feel of that muscled limb was enough to send her into a greater state of need.

“I will not risk hurting you,” he said—just like every other time she had tried to seduce him.

Jessaline knew it was only his guilt talking. Ever since she had come home, he treated her like a piece of fragile glass. She slid from the bed and fumbled for the candle on the nightstand. Then she padded over to the fire and stuck the wick into the embers.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing? Do you want to fall and injure yourself again?” Llew strode across the room, his anger clearly visible. But that wasn’t all Jessaline saw in the newly lit chamber.

His cock stood stiff between his legs, proud and hungry, eager for her touch.

She ran her tongue over her lips and smiled when he swelled another inch. And then she saw the utter shame that crept into his eyes. "My love, none of this was your fault. Why won't you believe that?"

He knelt beside her and pressed his face into her stomach, his cheek warm against her bare skin. Jessaline whimpered as the ache built anew, the desperate need that he still refused to fill.

He drew back quickly and stared at her in concern. "Where does it hurt?" he asked, one hand reaching up to lightly touch her shoulder.

Jessaline trapped it with her other hand and pulled it between her legs. "Here. It hurts so bad I cannot stand the pain." She arched her hips against his fingers, watching the confusion that swept across his face—his want warring with his need to protect her. When he did not move his hand away, she grew bolder, curling his fingers over her mound.

She knew he could feel the wet that had already gathered there. She held her breath as his fingers moved soft against her sex. She trembled and her knees grew weak. He slowly shook his head.

Jessaline wanted to scream—in more ways than one.

She stormed back to the bed, set down the candle, and struggled to shrug on her robe. Pain lanced through her arm. She stumbled and would have fallen, but Llew's arms closed around her, gently urging her back on the mattress.

"See?" she demanded. "You will cause me greater harm by *not* fulfilling your marriage duties."

Llew banged his head against the iron railing. "Jessaline, you will be the death of me yet."

"I promise not to move," she tried again, letting her foot crawl up his thigh. "I will let you do all the work."

"I get complete control?" His tone grew darkly dangerous.

Jessaline shivered in anticipation.

His eyes blazed. He nodded to the iron railing.

Jessaline frowned. "Surely you cannot mean—" She broke off in surprise when he held up a ribbon she used to tie back her hair.

“Raise your good arm over your head.” There was no compromise in his voice.

Jessaline groaned and wrapped her fingers around the bar. He tied the ribbon loosely around her wrist, just tight enough she would remember it was there. Then he propped her injured shoulder on a pillow.

Jessaline cried out when he reached back between her legs, stroking her like he would not do before. She let her head drop back and her knees fall apart. Llew’s fingers spread her and thrust hard into her cunt. She thought she would faint when the surge of pleasure ripped through her. And when her husband bent his head and let his tongue tease her swollen clit, Jessaline groaned and bucked beneath him.

“Is this what you need?” he asked, moving his mouth away. His grin was sinful.

Jessaline let all her love glow in her eyes. “I just need you, Llew, however you care to give yourself to me.”

He rose to kiss her softly on the mouth. When Jessaline opened her lips to take the full thrust of his tongue, he growled low in his throat and let his fingers wrap around her breast. Jessaline sank into his touch, surrendering without hesitation to whatever he would demand. There was a peace to be found in letting go, she realized, as the flames licked over her wherever Llew moved his hands and mouth.

She let him do everything. Each nip of his teeth, each flick of his tongue, each thrust of his fingers. Shivering and compliant, Jessaline let him take her to the edge and throw her over. Even her cries were soft little moans that barely left her lips. And when he moved at last to lift her legs and spear her with his cock, Jessaline let the waves of pleasure slip like silk around her.

His arms held her close, locking her to him as she shook with her release, the arch of her hips the only movement he allowed. And he was so gentle as he continued to ride her, slow, steady, jerking but once when he came in a burst inside her.

In the end, Jessaline even managed to slip her hand from the ribbon around it and tangle her fingers in his hair. Sated, complete, she held him close and let her eyes drift shut.

"Jessaline?" He blew out the candle and rolled on his back, waiting for Jess to wrap herself around him.

"What, my love," she whispered, curling her leg back over his.

"Did I tell you I spoke to Father Thomas today?" His voice was as sweet as she had ever heard it. "It seems there is just a very small problem with our marriage." He tried to laugh. "A minor snag, nothing you need to worry about. But there is this little detail...something about the whole excommunication thing..."

Jessaline sighed. "You really should pay attention to these matters, husband. If I didn't know better I would think you were trying to find a way out of our marriage. Don't make me have to speak to your mother."

She heard his sharp intake of breath and smiled against his chest.

"I'll take care of it, Jess. No need to get Finella involved." She could swear she felt him shiver.

"We are agreed then," Jessaline said.

He grunted as she settled into a deep and healing sleep.

Epilogue

“See, Rose, I told you there was nothing to worry about.” Pansy smirked into the pool.

Snapdragon nodded agreement. “Fast asleep.” Then she frowned. “Are you sure we don’t need to blast anyone? I thought her father—”

“Her father is taken care of,” Rose answered. She put the final mark on the paperwork, rolled it up and sighed. “Done.”

“So soon?” Pansy sounded skeptical. “Are you sure you filled out all the forms? You better let me check it over—make certain you did it right.” She reached out her hand.

Rose ignored it. The document vanished in a puff of silver smoke.

Snapdragon yawned. “Is it time for a nap yet? You know how much I like a good long nap after we’ve finished.”

“Almost.” Rose moved to the pool and waved her hand over the water. A strange young woman’s face came into view.”

“Is that her?” Pansy demanded.”

“That’s her,” Rose answered.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Pansy clucked. “That can’t be right. I know for a fact he doesn’t like...”

About the Author

To learn more about Gia Dawn, please visit www.giadawn.com. Send an email info@giadawn.com, or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Gia Dawn <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/giadawn>

*He made a promise he didn't keep...now both mortals and immortals alike
will pay the price.*

Realm Immortal: Faery Queen

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Realm Immortal Book Two

*It is ill-advised to incur the wrath of a faery, but it is most foolish to do
so of a faery queen...*

Queen Tania has waited over a year for the Earl of Bellemare. When he left her palace to help blessed King Ean fight a battle to save the earl's sister, she expected him to come back for her when the encounter was over. Instead, he left her, returning to the world of mortals and his precious Bellemare. He made her a promise he didn't keep and now both realms will pay the price for his deceit.

Hugh, Earl of Bellemare, hates the immortal realm. Though it has brought his family blessings, it is now taking everything he holds dear away. Most heartbreaking of all is the sister he was forced to leave behind. Juliana married the unblessed King Merrick, a man who can never love her, and he blames Queen Tania for securing the match. He's spent a year trying to forget the faery queen, but it seems she's not done meddling with his family...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Realm Immortal: Faery Queen*:

A silk blanket covered Hugh's legs and waist, but she knew he was naked beneath. His color was better with the dark tan once more in his muscled flesh. Tania bit her lip, staring at his chest. The last time she'd seen him like this, he'd been shackled to a bed, held her prisoner when

she'd helped Juliana escape. He looked every bit as handsome as he did then. His dark brown hair was longer and there were smudges under his eyes, but she didn't care.

Her stomach tightened, aching terribly. It remembered Lord Bellemare in ways her mind couldn't. He'd kissed her, thought the most deliciously wicked thoughts of her. She knew the first moment he stepped into her hall that she wanted him and that he wanted her. Their minds connected and she'd heard his thoughts—not all, but the ones he had about her. That had never happened to her without the casting of a spell.

Now, Tania's wings fluttered so fast she hovered above his prone form. Her body was slender and she was taller than the rest of the females of her kind, even some of the men. Still, when she was in her larger form and had both feet rooted on the ground, the top of her head only came to the earl's chin. His chest was so broad she would barely be able to wrap her arms around him.

Moisture gathered between her thighs, just as it did whenever she thought of him. But now it was worse because his naked flesh was so close. His smell engulfed her senses, drawing her down to be closer to him.

Over the last year, she'd looked her fill of him, secretly watching from the stone island in the middle of the divination pool as he undressed. It was wrong of her, she knew that, but she was fascinated with watching him pleasure himself, his hand fisting his arousal, his muscled body flexing as he lay on his back, as he braced his hand against a wall, as he bathed, even once in the forest. Such a sexually virile man would unquestionably make for a fine lover. Tania had touched herself as she watched him, but the relief she found was temporary compared to the desperate need to feel his flesh that came over her.

Little sparks of pheromone erupted from her wings, showering over him. She flew down, landing on the bed. Lowering herself so she was on her knees, she knelt beside him on the stuffed mattress. He didn't move.

Tania couldn't stop herself as she touched his chest. Waiting to see what would happen, she was pleased that her contact didn't hurt him like before. He was hot beneath her fingers, his flesh dark compared to hers. She touched a small nipple, watching it bud beneath her fingers. Then, curious, she glanced down to his waist.

Hugh would be asleep awhile longer. He'd been so sick and the healing had taken much out of him and her faeries. What harm was there in a closer inspection? It wasn't as if he'd know.

Tania lifted up off the bed and hovered over his body, drifting down so she was above his legs. Taking the silk covers, she pulled them to the side. His male pride lay soft between his thighs. The faery queen lightly caressed his hip, letting the tips of her fingers dance closer to his member as she gathered her courage. The shaft was softer than she imagined it would be as she took it in her hand.

Tania bit her lip, rubbing him gently before moving to feel his hard, flat stomach. Her hand flush against him, she explored his abdomen, noting little scars along his tight frame. The man was a fighter and his flesh bore the marks of such a life.

Hugh's heat beckoned her and before she realized what she was doing, she'd lowered her legs over his, her knees pressing tight alongside his thighs. The skirt of her gown was loose, allowing room for her to move freely. The material covered his stomach, concealing his shaft.

It was too much to finally have the earl within her grasp. The memory of his kisses was as strong as the day he'd given them to her. Wiggling, she angled her sex to lightly touch his, only to pull back in surprise to feel it was warmer than it had been in her hand. She looked down, lifting her skirt to discover that it had grown in length, hardening like it did when she watched him alone.

Tania hadn't meant to arouse him, not when he was recovering from Lucien's cruelty. But to see his reaction to her, the base desire, she quivered. Her wings fluttered wildly, showering them again in pheromone. Pushing her hands over the firm planes of his chest, she

explored his jaw. It was rough beneath her fingers. A light moan of sheer sexual pleasure escaped her.

Just a kiss. One simple kiss and she would leave him to rest.

Tania leaned down, torn between her anger toward his rejection, the anticipation of his nearness and the fear that she couldn't make him love her. She looked at her hand, seeing the dark lines that had formed. The markings on her flesh had not lessened with his presence.

With her mouth inches from his, she stopped to listen to him breathe. She hesitated and did not move to close the distance. Stolen kisses when he was asleep were not what she brought him here for. She touched his still lips, running her fingers across the firm length. Pulling them away, she pressed her hand to her own lips.

"I waited for you." An ache filled her. Why did she still hurt? He was here, in her grasp. She shouldn't hurt anymore. The pain should have left her. A tear slipped over her cheek as she whispered down to him. "I waited and you never came back like you promised to do. What does Bellemare have that I do not? What pleasure does it offer you that I cannot give to you? What beauty does it hold that I cannot make for you? Am I not beautiful enough for you? Why do not you want me?"

The lines on her body grew, vining across her waist and hip. She could feel them burning as they moved. There was no need to see them to know they were there. Another tear slipped from her eye, falling across his cheek. Hugh jolted beneath her, groaning as he blinked to wakefulness.

Dark brown eyes met hers, filtering with confusion as he looked at her face. Glancing down his body, then again at her, he frowned. Tania waited breathlessly to hear what he would say. It reminded her of the first time she'd detained him in her palace, when she'd had him beneath her just like he was now. Only this time he wasn't bound to the bed. His arms were free and she didn't have the magic in her to restrain him.

A girl...a hitman...a time machine. It's time to get your adventure on.

A Bend in Time

© 2006 Michelle Miles

When hitman Dane Fortune was hired to kill the beautiful and sassy Skye Ransom, he never counted on her leading him on a game of cat and mouse through time...or that he'd just as soon kiss her as kill her.

When Skye Ransom finds her parents murdered, she learns a hit man is responsible and she's his next target. While trying to outrun her would-be murderer, she inadvertently transports herself back in time. Her biggest problem? Sexy Dane Fortune follows her to carry out his hit...or has he?

It's time to get your adventure on.

Enjoy the following excerpt from *A Bend in Time*:

A sudden rumbling of the earth beneath his feet gave Dane pause. He spun where he stood, his breath exhaling in white plumes on the frigid air. With a thunder of heavy hooves, hundreds of horses suddenly crested the nearest ridge, racing toward him. He recognized Nyan in the center, flanked by a riderless horse and Ilsa. His men rode behind them. Nyan came to a stop, his horses' hooves kicking up snow.

"Stranger, you go to save the girl," Nyan said, his gaze focused on Dane. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes." Dane still gripped the sword in his hand, wondering what the chieftain was up to.

"Because you love her?"

Love her? Dane thought. "No," he quickly corrected. "Because I swore to protect her."

He didn't love Skye. True, he thought she was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. True, he felt this inherent and inexplicable need to keep her safe, to defend her from harm, to see her

home once again. True, she had a mouth on her sometimes he could just as soon slap as kiss, but did that mean he *loved* her? Surely not.

"I offer you a truce, then," Nyan said. "Join us. We can help each other."

Dane's gaze flickered between Nyan and his mother. She gave him a nod of approval, her expression urging him to mount the horse.

"We must stop Sovold before he reaches the temple," Nyan said and pointed to the building on top of the mountain.

"If I help you, then you have to agree to free us," Dane said, trying to bargain. "Me and the girl—both of us. We go free when it's over."

"Agreed," Nyan said quickly. He offered Dane the reins of the riderless horse beside him. "Now come."



Sovold shoved Skye to the snowy ground again. She panted, her lungs burning as she tried to catch her breath. He had been dragging her for what seemed like hours. Her legs ached from the exertion.

"Rest," he ordered. He paced back and forth in front of her, carving a rut in the snow. She could see the brown earth emerging beneath the heavy treads of his boots.

"It will do you no good to try and run from me," he told her, just as she'd started to entertain the thought of doing precisely this, of bolting to her feet and scampering back down the hillside in the direction they had just come. Sovold turned, wagging the dagger at her demonstratively. "And I will not hesitate to kill you if you try. There is no escape for you, girl. No rescue. Not even the healer—your precious love—can save you."

"My precious...?" Skye said, and she nearly laughed aloud, despite the circumstances and her shortness of breath. *He thinks Dane and I are in love? Oh, Jesus!*

True, she had thought Dane was quite possibly the sexiest, most attractive man she'd ever seen from the moment she'd first set eyes on

him. True, she had grown to trust him—albeit reluctantly—and depend on him, to feel compassion and camaraderie for him. And true, he had an arrogant, chauvinistic attitude that she could simultaneously loathe and appreciate, but did that mean she *loved* him? Surely not.

“I don’t understand why you just won’t let me go,” she said, her voice weak and weary. She was so very cold. Her teeth chattered. She folded her arms in front of her trying to ward off the frigid air. It was useless, though. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you are the Pure One.” He paused, looking at her with a wicked smile and a frightful gleam in his eyes.

What? she thought, bewildered. *Oh, boy, does this guy not realize what a bottle of Jagermeister will do to me!* “What does that mean?” She breathed the words between her teeth, her breath exhaling on a white plume.

Sovold squatted down in front of her. “I knew it the moment I saw you, when I brought you and your companion to our camp. It was the color of your hair and your eyes that confirmed it.” His hand slipped under her hairline, caressing the nape of her neck. “The prophecy spoke of a copper-haired woman with indigo eyes who would drop from the sky. I sensed something ancient about you. I sensed your pureness.”

She flushed. Her skin tingled where he touched her and she didn’t like it one bit.

“The temple, you see, is where the power lies.” He pointed to the building on the mountain. “The prophecy states the Pure One will harness the power for the one who would proclaim himself leader. That is why we must join together in an ancient ritual at the temple. I had thought to control you with the elixir. It would have been easier for us both. However, you insisted on kicking it from my hand.”

His hand traveled to the nape of her neck. Repulsed by his touch, she felt bile rising in her throat, but she forced it down. He gripped her hair, tilted her head back with a yank and hovered over her. She could see his stumps of yellow teeth as his lips parted and his acrid breath pressed against her face.

Oh, my God, he's going to kiss me, she thought, and nothing she'd suffered to that point—not running away from an armed hit man, traveling through time or finding herself in the middle of not one, but *numerous* major, bloody battles in the span of little more than a week—horried her more than this sudden realization.

Panic seized her. Her hand fumbled against the snowy ground, her fingertips curling about the jagged curve of a loose rock. She swung it in her hand, smashing it into the side of his head.

Sovold screamed, released his hold on her, his hand going to his temple. She was pleased to see she had left a bright red mark and a tiny trickle of blood down the side of his face. She shoved him away from her and scrambled to her feet, starting to run. The snow was thick and deep, however, and her boot soles slipped for clumsy purchase as she plodded forward. She didn't make it five full strides before Sovold caught her again, grabbing her roughly by the elbow. He pointed the dagger at her throat, the tip jabbing her skin.

"I should kill you now," he hissed.

"Go ahead," she taunted. "I dare you."

She was banking on the fact that he needed her alive for when they arrived at the temple. She held her breath, saw the flicker of indecision in his eyes and then he lowered the dagger.

"Another misstep, pretty one, and I will."

And she knew he was telling her the truth.

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