

# MASTER OF MISTMERE

By

Fiona Neal

© copyright October 2004, Carolyn Rickenbaker

Cover Art by Eliza Black

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

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

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

## Chapter One

"Isn't this exciting? We're actually going to a Halloween party in a real English castle, and one that's supposed to have a sexy ghost, too," Tessa Collins whispered, her dark eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"They all have ghosts, Tessa. It's a gimmick to entertain us tourists," Joanna Fleming murmured back as the tour guide led their group beneath the arch of the gatehouse.

"The castle is amazing," Tessa added, peering at the stone structure looming in front of them. "And the Elizabethan wing, with all those leaded glass casements, is spectacular."

"I'd appreciate all of this better if I weren't still recovering from jetlag," Joanna remarked, sighing.

"How can you still have jetlag?" Tessa asked as they approached the entrance of the Elizabethan section. "We've been in England three days."

"But I haven't been able to sleep because of that weird dream that keeps recurring," Joanna answered, her footsteps crunching on the pea gravel path.

"The one about the handsome, sexy knight?" Tessa asked, brushing her black wind-tousled hair from her face.

"Yes, I've had it every night since we've been in England, and it's so real, that even after I've been awake for a few minutes, I still think I'm dreaming. Besides that, we've been working non-stop, buying those antiques to ship back to the States," Joanna replied.

Their purchases would really sell in the shop in Charleston, where she and Tessa worked, but somehow, Joanna's home in South Carolina seemed a very long way off just now. Strangely, this castle seemed more genuine to her.

"That's why I booked this short tour," Tessa drawled in her musical low-country accent. "You need a rest, girl."

"I do, but a tour isn't really rest--it's recreation. I think I'd rather stay in bed for the next twenty-four hours."

"That's not a bad idea if you'd be between the sheets with a hot partner." Tessa giggled.

"That's still recreation, not rest," Joanna replied. "And we'd better be quiet, or we'll miss what our guide has to say. After all, you're the one who wanted to come on this excursion."

"Well, it's better than staying in our hotel room in London for the weekend and watching you mope," Tessa retorted. "This trip was supposed to be work and pleasure. Besides, I want to meet some really hot Brit, like I've read about in my romance novels. I need some fun and excitement in my life and so do you."

"Can you stop thinking about men for five minutes?" Joanna pushed back the flyaway strands of auburn hair that the cool October winds were whipping across her face.

"I might be able to stop talking about them for five minutes." Tessa smiled mischievously. "After that, my mind just wanders back to the opposite sex like a compass needle pointing north."

"No kidding." Joanna rolled her eyes.

The middle-aged tour guide, dressed in a tweed suit and ugly shoes, looked more like the dour headmistress of an all girls' private school. A severe expression on her long horse-like face, she shot a baleful stare in their direction.

"We'd better shut up, or Miss Congeniality over there will chew us out," Joanna warned in hushed tones.

Tessa pursed her lips. "Her problem is that she probably needs a good roll in the sack."

Joanna shook her head. "Back to sex again. You're as bad as my brother is. He thinks sex and golf cure everything."

"Don't they?" Tessa asked, mock surprise on her heart-shaped face.

Joanna gave her friend a skeptical look. "Well, you're not going to see much action with this group of elderly couples, Tessa. Excluding us, the average age of this crowd must be sixty-five."

"No problem. I plan on looking around and letting the local color rub off on me--literally, that is." Tessa chuckled wickedly. "I'm sure some cute guys work here. We're bound to meet some of them tonight at the Halloween Ball."

"If I don't fall down from exhaustion first," Joanna answered, sighing.

Their footfalls echoing on the marble floor tiles, they entered the enormous paneled foyer in the Elizabethan wing of the building, and a tall dark-haired man came out of the room on their right.

"This is Garret, Lord Easton, your host and master of Mistmere Manor," Miss Congeniality announced, finally smiling. "He'll conduct the rest of the tour and take care of you. I will say good-bye and return to London, but I know that I am leaving you in good hands."

"I'd volunteer to be in those hands anytime," Tessa remarked. "His bed would be even better," she added, turning to Joanna. "See what I mean about local color? And he's a lord and owns this whole place!"

Joanna just stared at him, unable to move. The man had the face of a movie star, the body of an athlete in prime condition, and he had a dark brooding air about him that made him devastatingly attractive.

Furthermore, there was something more about him that positively stunned her. Joanna had the strangest impression that she knew him--knew him well.

Moreover, she forgot about her fatigue as desire engulfed her like a sphere of flames. She stood still, immobilized by the intensity of the feeling and drew in a deep breath.

This is absolutely insane, Joanna. This guy could be a real creep.

Nevertheless, reason drowned in a sea of longing. Besides, she told herself, he could also be a nice guy.

But he's probably married.

He looked about thirty years old, and Brits with titles usually married by that time because providing heirs was very important to members of the nobility.

Craning her neck, Joanna looked to see if he was wearing a ring. A feeling of relief swept over her when she saw he wasn't ... until she realized that some men took off their rings if it suited their purpose.

But why did she feel she knew him--and so intimately? She had never seen this guy in her life.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," he began.

The timbre of his voice was so sexy Joanna thought she would swoon.

"I think it would be wise to tour the gardens first, while it's still light outside," he continued. "After that, we'll take a walk about the inside of the castle, and we'll conclude with high tea in the great hall."

"I could go for a cup right now," Tessa divulged. "I love scones and clotted cream really is yummy."

"I thought you wanted to lose ten pounds," Joanna answered.

A sheepish look flickered over Tessa's face. "Well, I've lost five. I can afford to ease up on myself."

"If you will just follow me, we'll stop at the Elizabethan knot garden first, then we'll go down to where our resident ghost likes to make an occasional appearance," Garret, Lord Easton instructed.

They followed the tall gorgeous specimen of British manhood out the front door again and took the gravel path to the left.

A combination of boxwoods and other evergreen shrubs appeared to be braided in a circle around a sundial that indicated it was close to four p.m.

They left the area and descended to the formal terraced gardens at the back of the stately home. The lowest level served as a bank for the large lake, its most conspicuous feature being a whirlpool swirling vigorously in its middle.

Joanna shivered. She had always had an unexplainable fear of drowning, and this place just reinforced her apprehension-- tremendously.

"And this lake is Mistmere, the place from where the estate takes its name and the legend began," Garret, Lord Easton announced. "On this very spot, almost a thousand years ago, the wicked witch, Lillas, put a

curse on my forebear and namesake, the first Garret, Lord Easton, and separated him from the love of his life. At certain times of the year, like Midsummer's Eve and Halloween, he sometimes makes an appearance here."

"Why did the witch put a curse on him?" Tessa asked.

"Because he wouldn't succumb to her seduction. He loved his wife."

"Hell hath no fury, huh?" Tessa poked her elbow into Joanna's ribs.

"Apparently not," he answered.

Suddenly, his gaze locked with Joanna's so intensely she felt as if it burned into hers. That wasn't all. The notion that she knew this man became even more powerful. She felt certain that they shared a deep bond--a carnal one. That idea caused desire to flare and sweep over her again. Beneath her bra, her nipples drew into tight buds.

Get a grip, girl.

"How romantic and how sad for the poor couple," one of the elderly women remarked.

Joanna couldn't look away from him. His dark eyes mesmerized her, and another wave of hot need crashed over her, while strong spasms of pleasure clenched in her lower abdomen.

You have to stop this. With your track record for having your heart broken, you should be in the Guinness Book of World Records.

"In most legends, there is usually a way to break the spell," an older man with a Midwestern American accent commented.

Clearing his throat, Garret broke eye contact with Joanna. "Well, according to the legend, there are several nearly impossible conditions that would have to take place. The first is that Lord Garret and his wife would have to be reincarnated and meet in the same time frame. The second is that he must retrieve Osric's Eye from Mistmere."

"What's that?" another elderly woman asked.

"The large emerald that Liliast hurled into the depths of the lake when Lord Garret spurned her," he answered. "She stole it from Osric, the mightiest wizard in the world. Supposedly, you could see the future when you looked into the gem."

"Then why did this witch offer it to the first Lord Garret?" another woman asked.

"As a bribe, to leave his wife and marry Lilius. When he refused her, the witch became quite mad and threw it in the lake," Lord Garret explained.

"The first condition of the curse is impossible, but retrieving the emerald should be feasible with modern diving equipment," Tessa proposed. "The water is very clear, too. How come no one has gotten it?"

"The task isn't as easy as one would think," Lord Garret revealed. "There's the whirlpool, as you can see, and it's extremely dangerous. The emerald is supposed to be at the bottom."

"Just another story," someone said. "There is no emerald."

"Perhaps not," Lord Garret replied, the wind ruffling his luxuriant black mane. "But since my ancestor died trying to retrieve the emerald, a number of divers have drowned over the centuries. Even the ones with modern equipment have failed. A horrible accident always befalls them."

"This is getting weirder and weirder," a guy with a New England twang scoffed.

"What's the third condition?" a tall, thin lady asked.

"That one is the most difficult condition to achieve of all. Lord Garret and his wife will be able to recover the stone only when time stands still yet runs in both directions," Garret answered.

Comments of skepticism rumbled through the crowd.

"I don't believe in legends," someone remarked. "Besides, time waits for no one. It just keeps ticking away."

"I don't believe anything I can't touch," the man from New England answered.

"It is a little farfetched," Tessa whispered.

But somehow, Joanna felt that the legend was true. To her, it seemed so real that it frightened her.

"Well, I can understand your skepticism," Lord Garret replied. "However, one man, whose dive I refused to authorize, went ahead and attempted to reclaim the stone anyway, and he was found dead just last month."

A chorus of gasps erupted as a gust of cold wind blasted them.

"But enough dreary stories for today." Lord Garret smiled, obviously trying to break the dismal ambiance. "I think it's time to finish the tour and have our tea. Then you'll have a chance to rest before dinner and the Halloween Ball tonight."

Joanna was glad to be going inside, for dusk had finally fallen over the landscape like a brooding dove, and Mistmere's gloomy atmosphere gave her the shivers.

\* \* \* \*

Garret sipped his cup of tea, trying to keep from staring at the beautiful redheaded woman. Somehow, he had the feeling that he knew her. It was more than just a matter of her face looking familiar. He had the distinct impression that they shared something--something very passionate--and his body responded to hers with that familiar tug in his lower belly.

He must be going daft. Having shared something with her was impossible. He'd never seen her before. Besides, he'd overheard her say that she'd never traveled out of South Carolina before coming to the United Kingdom. He'd certainly visited the States, but had not toured the American South. Yet, he couldn't shake the feeling in his gut, nor could he dispel the strong attraction that seemed to blaze like a torch when he looked into her sparkling, hypnotic green gaze.

She certainly possessed a natural sort of loveliness.

In fact, during the tour, he had gotten close enough to see the freckles covering her small straight nose. She was tall, too. He estimated her height to be at least 5 feet 9 inches. He liked that and the fact that she had curves. Those anorexic model types turned him off.

Well, he had mused about the woman long enough. He had to get his mind on his work. He should be mingling with the tourists and checking on any problems they might have. So Garret dutifully stopped at each table and inquired, leaving Joanna Fleming and her friend, Tessa Collins, for the last.

Approaching them, he asked, "I hope you're finding everything to your satisfaction."

"Oh, yes." Grinning widely, Tessa nodded her approval. "I'm certainly having a wonderful time."

"Your home and gardens are quite charming," Joanna answered, smiling.

He returned her smile, loving her southern accent. He found it torrid and sexy. "Good. I hope you really enjoy the dinner and the ball tonight. We're having a real medieval feast."

"Will we be eating venison then?" Tessa asked. "My brother is a hunter, and he brings venison home all the time. Deer season goes from August to December in South Carolina."

"Yes, as a matter of fact. We also have a choice of roast pork with spiced wine, salmon with wine sauce, roasted pheasant, mushroom pasties, an assortment of vegetables, and golden steamed custard. The first course is lamb stew served in a trencher. And you'll have an assortment of wines from which to choose," he answered, unable to keep from looking at Joanna.

"It sounds delicious," Tessa answered.

"I hope you'll find it so," he replied, so enthralled by Joanna that he could hardly think straight. Why was this woman having such a profound effect on him? How could he be so certain he knew her when he was just as sure that they'd never met before?

"This is a costume party, right?" Tessa asked.

"Correct," he answered. "If you don't own one, though, we have some available that you can rent for the occasion."

"We brought our own," Tessa announced.

"We did?" Joanna asked, a surprised expression on her lovely face.

Looking mischievous, Tessa confessed, "When I found out we'd be coming to England, I got on the Internet and looked up tours. Joanna and I decided we wanted to go on this one. I read that you had a medieval banquet, so I made costumes for it. I did some more research and even ordered special patterns from a company that specializes in historical clothes.

"I love history," Tessa continued. "My family and I take part in Civil and Revolutionary War reenactments in South Carolina. There's a Revolutionary War museum in Camden. That's where the British army spent a year during the eighteenth Century. According to the stories I've heard, y'all weren't too happy there. But I guess I've told you more than you want to know."

"Not at all," Garret chuckled.

"Will you be in costume?" Joanna asked.

"Yes." He nodded, feeling as if he were drowning in the green sea of her eyes.

Joanna both stirred and disturbed him. He needed to get away from her and try to get a perspective on

this. Besides, he had a lot to do before the feast and ball tonight.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your tea," he said.

Leaving their table, Garret headed to see if his manager had taken an inventory of the shipment of wines that had arrived earlier. Sometimes, his supplier made an error, and this was a business where details were important.

The tours and turning part of his home into a hotel required a lot of attention, but the venture brought in the funds he needed to keep the estate running.

Garret had an ancient title, but he was not rich, and it took a tremendous amount of money to keep the stately home in good condition.

Running an operation of this size would never be easy, even if he had not inherited his father's tremendous debts. Making the property turn a profit had proven to be a daunting task. Because Mistmere was entailed, he couldn't sell any parcels of land and put the proceeds of the sales toward improvements

Things had always been difficult for the family. Some of his ancestors blamed the curse. Others scoffed at the idea, saying they had managed to survive and hang on to their property through famines, plagues, and wars, when other families lost their fortunes or no longer even existed.

But Garret believed in the curse. While the family existed, it had never really prospered. Furthermore, from the time he was a small boy, he'd felt that the legend was true. At times, he had a strange sense about it, as if he'd lived through it with someone. He also seemed to know things about the castle that no one else did.

When they undertook a restoration on the keep a few years ago, he intuitively knew where to find an original entrance that had been blocked off for centuries.

Now, with the appearance of this beautiful redhead, the intuition seemed all the more powerful and vivid. And wasn't it a coincidence that the first Lord Garret's wife's name was also Joanna?

Well, he had no time to think about that now. He had a banquet to put on.

\* \* \* \*

"That green over-gown looks gorgeous on you," Tessa said as Joanna looked into the long pier glass on the paneled wall.

The costume Tessa had fashioned had required a lot of work. It consisted of a floor-length shift of yellow silk with long tight sleeves Over this, Joanna wore an over-tunic of moss green damask. Its wide sleeves, neckline, and hem were embroidered in gold. A gold sash completed the picture.

Tessa, wearing a similar costume of red that complemented her dark hair and eyes, beamed. "Thanks."

"I really appreciate your surprising me with this costume, Tessa, but I wish you would at least let me pay you for the cloth," Joanna offered.

"Not a chance." Tessa shook her head. "You've always been there for me, especially after my mom died. While I can't ever really thank you enough for that, this is my way of telling you that I think you're special."

"You've been a good friend, too, Tessa, sticking with me when those guys dumped me."

"Speaking of guys, I think that Lord Garret has a thing for you"

"I thought you were interested in him," Joanna answered. "I mean you keep saying how gorgeous he is."

"Well, you know me, I don't pursue a man if he doesn't seem interested in me, and that stud couldn't keep his eyes off of you. Furthermore, I think he could hardly restrain himself from keeping his hands off you, too." Tessa smiled and bobbed her brows. "If I'm not mistaken, I'd say the feeling is mutual."

Joanna felt her face burning. "Well, I can't lie about it, even though I said I wouldn't date for a while after that last fiasco. I have to admit I'm attracted to him."

"Ah-ha! Just as I thought. You go, girl."

"I think I'll let him make the first move, Tessa."

"Don't worry, he will."

\* \* \* \*

But Lord Garret did not come near her during the feast or the little concert of medieval music they had following dinner. He looked so handsome in his tunic and tight hose. The clothes really showed off his wonderful physique. Maybe at the ball, he would approach her.

If her stamina lasted that long, Joanna thought. She wished she didn't feel so tired. Right now, with all the candles and torches burning away the oxygen, she desperately needed a breath of fresh air.

She wanted to tell Tessa she was stepping out for a moment, but the gregarious brunette was across the room, conversing with a very attractive male employee. They seemed deep in discussion, so Joanna decided against interrupting them and quietly slipped away from the feast.

Donning her heavy woolen cape, she made her way down the steps, leaving the building and venturing into the damp chilly night.

Torches, set along the path, lit the way down to the lake. Even though she was afraid of water, Joanna felt compelled to follow the gravel walkway to Mistmere, where vapor rose like steam, hiding the whirlpool.

Instead of making her uneasy, as it had earlier, the lake cast a feeling of serenity over her. She sat on the stone bench by the water as the mist started to thicken. Yawning, she closed her eyes, deciding to rest for a few moments and enjoy the tranquility. All her tension seeped from her like water through a sieve. Even her mind felt relaxed.

Joanna wasn't sure how long she sat there, but she suddenly became aware that the damp autumn air had begun to seep into her bones. She stood, intending to return to her room when Lord Garret appeared from out of the mist.

The torchlight allowed her to see the worried look on his face.

During this tour, the guides and hosts always seemed to be taking head counts. After a shopping trip, Miss Congeniality had given her and Tessa a lecture about coming back to the bus on time.

Poor man, Joanna thought. He has probably been trying to find me. Moreover, he would surely assume she was crazy to be wandering in the cold fog at this time of night.

"Did you think you'd lost me?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered gravely, walking to her.

"I'm sorry if I've caused any problems," she apologized.

He loomed over her, his great height dwarfing her. Every inch a nobleman, his presence swamped her senses and raw sexual need gripped her.

"You've never been any trouble, Joanna. You are the promise of my salvation."

What did he mean by that? They'd just met! Boy, did he have a line, or what? She should call him on that, but the effect he had on her was so strong she wasn't sure if he had spoken or if she'd read his thoughts. This situation was becoming stranger by the minute, and she had the sensation that she was floating. Well, he excited her so much that she was probably dizzy from lust.

Mesmerized, she felt her heart thrashing against her ribs as he took her into his arms, holding her tightly. She shouldn't allow him to make this kind of advance so quickly, but Joanna had never experienced an embrace quite like this before-- or had she?

Something about his caress seemed so familiar, perhaps because she had dreamed about it so often.

"After all this time, I finally have hope, Joanna." He kissed her hair then drew back, his gaze fusing longingly with hers.

His dark eyes reflected the torch flames, and the play of shadow and light did wonderful things to his handsome features. All at once, she realized that they had known each other-- intimately and passionately.

But how could they?

Suddenly, it didn't matter. All she wanted was to renew that experience.

The notion caused her nipples to tighten even more and her thighs became moist as spasms of hot, relentless desire contracted in her pelvic area.

"Hope?" she asked, her voice emerging in a breathy whisper.

"Yes, wife. Perhaps together, we can break Lili's curse, and we can be together at last."

Wife! When had they married?

Joanna suddenly understood everything.

I'm dreaming again. That legend has really made an impression on me.

She often had these strange experiences where she was actually aware that she was dreaming. Yes, she'd awaken soon in her nice comfortable room in the hotel and find this was all a figment of her overactive imagination. After all, she'd dreamt about this many times before.

Still, her previous dreams weren't quite as vivid or detailed.

"Let's go inside the castle, Joanna. It's cold and you'll catch a chill."

This time, she was sure he transmitted his thoughts without speaking. If she didn't know he was a creation of her subconscious, she would be petrified.

"All right, Garret."

His arm about her waist, they ambled toward the castle. His nearness and warmth were wreaking havoc on her senses.

Sometimes, the dreams would turn hot and erotic and she would wake up breathless and exhausted from multiple orgasms. Other times, they turned nightmarish. She hoped for the former. Because of all the eerie things that were happening, Joanna was certain of one fact. She wanted this man in a way that she had never desired anyone.

As they proceeded, she peered into the fog, thinking that she would be able to see the Elizabethan wing, but she couldn't even discern the outline of the building, for a thick haze obliterated it.

He led her beneath the portcullis and into the inner bailey. They crossed it and entered the large tower. She didn't recognize any of the castle's employees, though she'd seen quite a few of them earlier in the day. Furthermore, the ones she saw now were really acting in a bizarre fashion. They behaved very obsequiously, bowing and touching their forelocks. Some of them addressed him in Norman French and others in Old English, but she could understand them!

Well, this was a dream, wasn't it?

As they mounted the great staircase, his arm tightened around her. Her anticipation hit fever pitch. Was he as excited as she was?

Torches illuminating the way to his suite, he stopped in front of the arched door. The thick oaken barrier flung open as if by magic and he swept her inside the room and into his arms.

He must have kicked the door shut, for Joanna heard its slam reverberate off the stone walls.

Then the chamber spun in a whirl of rosy firelight and long dark shadows as he strode to the hearth and set her on her feet.

"Do you remember how much we enjoyed making love by the firelight, wife?" he whispered, holding her close, nuzzling her neck.

"Yes," she answered, for she did remember.

They had been married and had spent endless hours making love, but then something terrible happened, something she couldn't recall. Joanna also knew that she didn't want to recollect the sad event.

Right now, she just yearned to re-experience the intense passion that they had once shared.

## Chapter Two

"Oh, Joanna, I can hardly wait to make love to you again," he murmured as they stood on the warm flagstones of the hearth.

"You don't have to wait. I'm your wife, I'm here, and I want you as much as you want me."

Between hot kisses they divested each other of their garb until they stood naked.

Joanna couldn't get enough of the sight of his strong muscular body and long powerful limbs. He was an exquisite example of manhood.

His male member jutted forward, reaching for union with her, a merger that Joanna longed for with every fiber of her being.

He enfolded her tenderly. "You are a miracle, Joanna." He kissed her gently, then he became more demanding, deepening the kiss, his eager tongue cavorting with hers.

His lips tasted of fine wine, and Joanna became even more intoxicated on their heady flavor.

Her desire became molten, like shimmering gold, especially when he cupped her buttocks and pressed her loins against his huge arousal. She wanted his hands and lips on her everywhere at the same time. Breaking the kiss, she cried, "Oh, Garret, you make me so hot!"

He began dropping light, soft kisses down her neck and along her collarbone. When he finally fastened

his mouth on her nipple, teasing the other with his deft fingers, her need vaulted. She began moaning and writhing, cupping his head, holding him closer to her breast, never wanting the pleasure to end.

Releasing her nipples, he lifted her in his arms and placed her on the large bed. Nestling beside her, he continued to kiss her lovingly, passionately as his fingers charted a course over her ribs, down her stomach, and stopped at the juncture of her thighs. He gently caressed her copiously wet folds, finding her pleasure spot. Using just the right touch and tempo, he sent her senses reeling.

"Garret," she cried, the sexual tension mounting exponentially.

She raised her hips, pressing against his magic fingers as the sublime pleasure hovered just out of her reach. She began to rock against his hand, striving, longing, and impatiently laboring to the culmination she so desperately sought.

He probed her cleft, yet continued his delicate ministrations to her pleasure spot.

"Your body is flowing with desire, Joanna."

"Yes," she gasped out.

Finally, she felt satisfaction swooping nearer as the hot tingling sensation began. Gratification was inevitable now, and she worked harder, faster, desperately. At last, release exploded from her and her body convulsed with racking shudders.

When the sweetness ebbed, she said, "Now, I'd like you to take your pleasure, darling. I want to feel you coming inside of me. I want to hold your life essence in my womb."

"Your words inflame me even more, Joanna," he rasped out straddling her thighs.

"Good. I want you as wild and as eager as a rutting stag."

"That will come later. First, I want to savor every moment of togetherness with you and every inch of your body."

He continued his expert foreplay, fanning the flames of her consuming passion a second time.

Finally, he took his possession slowly, sinking to his hilt and expanding within her. How lovely it felt to be united with him. At last they were one, and Joanna found that she had become part of him, and he of her, the sacred union of a man and a woman joined in the act of love. And in that fusion of body and soul, they transcended their individual beings and transformed into something finer, stronger, and nobler.

Garret withdrew almost entirely then thrust forward, and the exquisite sensation electrified her and took away her breath.

"How have I survived so long without you, Joanna?"

"I don't know!" she exclaimed, gasping with pleasure. "But I never want to be separated from you again."

She clung to him desperately as he plunged to her depths again, and they established an erotic rhythm. As he delved forward, she relaxed her muscles, and as he drew back she contracted them, increasing the friction. On and on, he continued, his hard sinews bulging and glistening with sweat, as he advanced and retreated, besieging the citadel of their pleasure with the strength and persistence of a battering ram.

The enjoyment mounted, but so did the tension, stretching her nerves like a hide over a drumhead. They began panting, moaning, and finally yelling as their bodies clamored for release.

Her fingers splayed out across his buttocks, Joanna pulled him forward as she raised her hips and moved against him. Finally, she elevated her legs, allowing him the deepest penetration. Garret doubled his tempo, and as an unbelievably strong climax grasped her, she felt him shudder and come as well

Exhausted, he fell upon her, his face against her neck, his breath fanning her heated flesh.

"I love you, Joanna, and I'll love you through all eternity, even if I should lose you again."

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, Garret gazed at Joanna, still amazed that he had finally found her. How beautiful his wife looked, her fine oval face in repose, her long silky red hair fanned out on the pillow. Her body was the loveliest feminine form he had ever seen. Her bounteous breasts and lovely torso descended into a narrow waist, full hips, firm thighs, and long, long shapely legs. How he loved lying between them.

He wanted to make love to her again, but Joanna was probably still tired after their incredible episode of lovemaking. How could she provoke his need so soon again, even though she had fully satisfied him?

Would he lose her once more? How many times through the centuries had he searched for her?

Joanna turned to him and smiled.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Our lovemaking was quite ... vigorous, shall we say?"

"Yes, we definitely could call it that, and in answer to your question, I'm fine," she whispered. "In fact, I feel positively wonderful."

"Would you like a little wine instead of ale? There's a new vintage from Burgundy in the flagon on the table."

Suddenly, she had a flash of insight, a vague memory of how they had used wine in their lovemaking in the dim and distant past. As she searched the depths of his eyes, she knew he remembered it, too. How could she have such memories? So much about their encounter seemed so unexplainable.

Yet, the anticipation of making love with him again aroused her so intensely, she couldn't think beyond it. All she wanted at this moment was to have him inside her again, flooding her womb with his pearly essence

"Are you game, Joanna?"

"Yes," she communicated, but this time she didn't have to use words either.

He went to the table and poured the wine in a goblet, bringing it to her.

She sipped the luscious vintage first and he followed her lead.

"Lie down, Joanna," he ordered.

"If I remember correctly, Garret, it's my turn to pleasure you."

"I'll not dispute that." Smiling, he reclined, and she spilled a few drops of wine on his neck and licked the luscious liquid from his flesh. Then she repeated the maneuver on his chest, concentrating on his nipples. She worked her way down his torso, then splashed a dose on his erect phallus. She swirled her tongue over his sacs and up his erection, giving special attention to its delicate helm

Eyes squeezed shut, fists clenched, Garret groaned. Yet, she continued, licking and sucking, feeling his sacs contract as she caressed them. Knowing that she was arousing him gave her pleasure and excited her even more.

Finally, she sat astride his thighs and assumed him into her core. She felt his length penetrating her deeply, completely. She rocked against him, slowly at first, then leaned forward, her hair flying, breasts bouncing.

Garret caught first one delicious nipple then the other in his mouth and sucked gently. He had forgotten how skillfully his wife could please him. She set his whole body aflame with need. Moreover, her endurance amazed him as she lunged and retreated, teasing, inciting, and tantalizing him. Garret felt his seed filling his loins to the bursting point.

Joanna now stretched out full length atop him, yet she continued to swivel her hips.

He reveled in the satiny texture of her body as she brought him closer, ever closer to culmination. Soon it would happen, for he felt the sweet ecstasy bearing down on him, ready to overtake him like a team of runaway horses.

Suddenly, she cried out, and he felt her muscles contracting around him. At the same time, her hand cupped his sacs, and he felt his semen spurting from him in long, hard, pulses.

She lay sprawled on him, her breathing heavy, her breast pressed into his.

Garret treasured the moment. He and Joanna had miraculously found each other again, after almost a thousand years. Would they be able to break the spell and stay together?

\* \* \* \*

Joanna felt herself slowly waking. What a glorious dream, she thought as she stirred, stretched, and smiled. She would have to tell Tessa about this one. In fact, it was so vivid she still seemed to feel Garret's arms around her. Too bad that kind of lovemaking didn't exist in real life.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Good morning, Joanna."

"Well, I guess I'm still dreaming, but that's all right with me," she answered, stroking his face.

However, the stubble from his beard seemed real enough, and for some reason, a feeling of unease rippled through her.

"No, darling." He shook his head. "You're not dreaming."

She frowned. "Of course I am."

"No, Joanna. We've finally found one another again, and we've been sent back in time."

"People don't get transported back in time," she answered, apprehension knotting her stomach.

Okay, any minute now, I'm going to wake up and find myself in my room, or did I fall asleep on that bench by the lake?

"Please, Joanna. We have a chance to be together again, to finish living our lives. They were cut short last time."

She jerked away from him, shaking as she slipped from the bed. Why did these dreams always start out so beautifully and end up so nightmarishly?

"Listen, love, let me explain."

"There's nothing to clarify, Garret. I'm having a bad dream. I just wish I could wake up and find myself in my nice comfortable bed in my room."

"You can't."

"And why not?"

"Your room doesn't exist." He walked toward her. "It was in the Elizabethan section of the building, but because we've traveled back in time, it hasn't been constructed yet. You won't find Tessa either because she hasn't been born yet. You're awake, Joanna, and I can prove it."

"How?" she challenged.

"Go to that window and look out."

Naked and trembling with fear, Joanna flew to the window and he came up behind her. She didn't see the Elizabethan wing of the building. Men in armor were patrolling the battlements, too, and the castle walls also looked a lot newer. The red ivy that had been growing up its stone walls wasn't there anymore, and several newly harvested fields occupied the land where a patchwork of meadows and sheepfolds had existed when she arrived at Mistmere. Moreover, a cluster of thatched cottages stood where the parking lot should have been.

As she looked around his suite in the cold light of day, her apprehension increased, for it didn't look like a restoration. Rushes were strewn on the floor, and she saw no signs of modernization, like electrical fixtures or heating ducts. The place would certainly have to be equipped with those things if this bedroom existed in the twenty-first century.

Frantically trying to control her panic, she ran, looking for a modern bathroom. She opened the old creaking door and discovered a rather primitive privy. The stream that spilled from the lake rushed under it and tumbled out to sea as the sound of rushing water echoed through the cold, small chamber.

She turned abruptly and looked up at him, terror nauseating her. "I'm psychotic and I'm having hallucinations. Call a doctor."

He shook his head. "No, Joanna, you are perfectly sane."

"How can I be? This whole thing defies logic. It's crazy, I tell you," she sputtered out frantically. "How can we have gone back in time?"

"It's a miracle that fulfills one of the conditions of the curse. I know time marches forward. However, if something is on a continuum, then why should it be impossible to travel back on it, the way a motorboat moves upstream against the current?"

Put that way, she could understand the concept better. "So what force propelled us against the flow of time, Garret?"

"There are powers in the universe that modern man has forgotten or discarded in his quest for a life of ease. Nevertheless, the powers exist, and at certain times of the year, the barriers to the past and future become easier to penetrate."

"Like drawing back a theatre curtain or opening a door?" she asked.

"Yes, darling."

"So ... we really have traveled back?"

"Yes, Joanna."

"And are we really married?"

He took her hand. "Yes, but don't you remember anything about our marriage or the love we once shared?" He looked at her with such profound sadness that her heart nearly broke. "What we had was so incredibly intense, so passionate that I find it hard to fathom that you lost all memory of it. Last night, you told me you recalled it. I believed you. You made love as if you remembered everything."

She did recollect some things, but she could never quite make sense of them until now. They had been buried deeply somewhere in her subconscious, except for the dreams she had experienced since puberty. Furthermore, from the moment she saw him, she felt that they had experienced something extraordinary.

"I did have vague memories and dreams, Garret, and at times I saw sudden, fleeting flashes of past events, but I just chalked them up to having an over-active imagination."

"But now they make sense," he said.

"Yes. So what happens now, Garret?"

"We've been given another chance to break the curse--the final one, I'm afraid. If I don't succeed this time, we'll never be together."

"What do you mean?" She moved into his embrace. The notion of being separated from him forever appalled her, for the passion they'd shared last night had awakened her long-dormant love for him.

"Over the centuries, we've both come back at various times, but we've never met before. Now, we have the opportunity to break the curse that separated us. If I manage to shatter the spell, we'll go forward to our own time, and we'll be together and live normal lives with our families and friends. It's our chance for real happiness together."

"What happens if you don't get Osric's Eye? Do we stay in this time period forever?"

"No. We'll be transported back to our own time, but death will soon separate us. We'll continue to be reincarnated, but we'll never find each other and our subsequent lives will be void of love forever. It's virtual damnation, Joanna."

"So how long will we stay here, Garret, and how long will you have to get Osric's Eye?"

He drew away. "This is the part of the curse where time will stand still for us, but it will last only one day. It's as if we're in a bubble that is traveling through the air. Time is marching forward and stretching backward in the rest of the universe. I must succeed by tomorrow, which is November second, All Souls Day." Again, he enfolded her in his arms. "Now that I've found you again, Joanna, I have to succeed. I just can't lose you again."

"And I can't lose you either," she asserted, clinging to him. "We must ensure you succeed this time, darling."

"The curse has awesome power, love," he murmured, kissing her temple

"It could not be stronger than the bond we share, Garret. Our love has lasted nearly a thousand years, and it will continue, even if we're reincarnated a thousand times--no, a million times."

"Oh, Joanna." He kissed her deeply, longingly, tenderly.

Joanna's heart soared, realizing that she had loved him for nearly a millennium, and she would continue to love him throughout eternity.

She couldn't lose him again—she just couldn't. Together they would find a way to lift the curse. They must.

His kiss became hotter, hungrier, and it fueled her ardor. She needed him with an intensity that was born of the knowledge that she might soon have to forfeit his love. The notion made her desperate. Her heart a cyclone of emotions, she reciprocated his kiss.

"Garret, let's make the most of the time we have."

"Yes, love."

Their embrace became frantic, and he lifted her in his arms again and carried her to the bed, setting her aglow with hot unrelenting need.

He lay at her side, kissing her, caressing her, sucking her nipples, dropping a trail of hot kisses over her belly and down to her folds.

"Garret," she moaned urgently.

Suddenly, he sat up, urging her to drop her legs over the edge of the bed. Kneeling, he began kissing her toes and working his way up each leg until he reached her thighs.

She was whimpering with expectation as he began deftly plucking at her nether lips, outlining them with the tip of his finger, and grazing her pleasure spot. She gasped as jolts of pleasure charged through her, making her quiver with need. He continued until her hips began to swivel, and her breathing accelerated into deep heavy pants.

He knelt closer, his member probing her tentatively, superficially, tempting and tantalizing her, making her mad with need. Then he thrust deeply just once and resumed his teasing again.

"You are making me crazy," she groaned out, for the angle of their contact produced a novel and incredibly intense stimulation.

Yet, he carried on, dipping slightly, penetrating only occasionally.

Unable to endure the tension another second, Joanna sat up. Her hands on his shoulders, she wrapped her legs around him, and ground against his loins wildly and frenetically.

Following her lead, Garret pulled her close and rocked his hips, delving the depths of her, filling her void, sending her desire vaulting still higher

Her blood pounded and her body throbbed with need as animal-like sounds emerged involuntarily from her throat.

Would she ever get enough of this man? The more they made love, the more she needed him ... and, oh, so desperately, so intensely, and so insatiably.

Lights, like flashbulbs exploding, suddenly ignited behind her closed eyelids and the sweet, hot rush of ecstatic pleasure began throbbing in her pelvic area and spread out, warming her to the tips of her fingers and toes.

"Joanna," he cried, as his seed spilled into her.

They remained engaged for a long time, holding each other and gasping in wonder at the power of their love--a love so strong it defied the order of the universe and the mists of time.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime later, they sat at the long table in the great hall, eating a breakfast of bread, cheese, and ale. The fresh herbs scattered among the rushes on the floor scented the air pleasantly, and the huge fire in the hearth kept the November chill at bay.

The atmosphere seemed pleasant instead of gloomy, Joanna mused. One would never know that she and Garret lived under the threat of a terrible curse.

"We need to discuss a strategy to break the spell, Garret."

"There is no strategy, Joanna. Tomorrow, I shall have to dive into Mistmere's center and retrieve Osric's Eye."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"Yes." A grave expression in his dark eyes, he nodded. "I saw it in my past life when Liliias offered it to me. It's almost as big as my fist, and it is the clearest emerald I have ever seen, and the deepest green except for the color of your eyes, that is."

She felt her face flush at his compliment. "How will you find it, Garret?"

"It's the source of the whirlpool. It's right at its bottom."

"Right, you did say that," Joanna answered.

She frowned and leaned forward on the table. "If we've come back, is Liliias still here, or has she been reincarnated in some other time?"

"No. Osric was so angry that she stole the jewel he conjured a lightning bolt and cremated her alive on the spot. He also cast a spell so that her soul can never re-enter anything, living or non-living. There's no way she can return to hurt us or anyone else, thank heaven."

"Does the stone really have the power to show us the past and future?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Why didn't Osric reverse the spell she put on you?"

"No one can do that except me, Joanna. I have to find a way to survive the sucking action of the swirling eddy. It's like a vortex. It just drags you under and pulls you out into the underground caverns that lead to the sea. If we were back in the twenty-first century, weights and diving equipment might be some help."

"But you said some divers have tried and drowned."

He nodded. "Yes, something unforeseen always happened, like aqua lungs malfunctioning. Lightning struck one poor soul, just as it did Liliias. Most were swept out to sea through."

She took hold of his hand. "I know darling, but we have to come up with a plan to defeat this curse."

"No argument there, but divers in our own time with the best technology failed."

She frowned. "True, but maybe together, we'll come up with a solution. By the way, how come I never helped you in the past?"

"You did." The glimmer of tears shone in his dark eyes. "You drowned trying to save me."

His emotion touched her as well, and she swallowed the lump expanding in her throat. "That explains my fear of swimming, I guess."

"We left our son an orphan."

"We had a son?" she asked, horrified that she couldn't remember her own child.

"Yes. He was a year old when Liliast cast the spell."

"Why don't I remember him, and how come your memories of these events are complete when mine are so shadowy? I mean, I have episodic, incomplete flashes of insight and some intuitions, but you have total recall of it all."

"I don't know. Before last night when we met, I didn't remember much either. Still, I've always carried around a feeling of tremendous loss and grief, and all my romantic encounters ended painfully."

Joanna had the same experience.

"Furthermore," he continued, "I instinctively knew things about the castle. Then, when I saw you sitting by Mistmere in the fog, suddenly all the pieces of the puzzle really started to snap into place. Maybe I also was born with the collective memories of some of my ancestors."

"That could explain it, Garret."

"Perhaps," he answered, his hand tightening over hers.

"But why weren't you frightened when you realized that we'd gone back in time?"

"Because I saw it as an opportunity to break the spell and to be with the woman I've loved through the ages. Now we have a chance to share our future together, love."

"Yes, darling," she answered.

## Chapter Three

The wind hissed through the dry leaves on the forest floor, scattering them hither and yon. Their bright autumn color had faded to a drab brown, and their texture had become friable to the touch.

Joanna and Garret were riding through the wooded area, now nude of foliage except for the occasional holly or yew. High in the bare branches of one huge oak, a clump of mistletoe nestled luxuriantly.

A few pigs, set out to mast, routed about for acorns. On Martinmas, the eleventh day of November, the animals would be butchered and salted for winter, Garret thought.

Would he be dead again by that time?

He hated to even consider that, for he dreaded leaving Joanna even more than he feared dying. The magnitude of his love for her seemed infinite.

They reined in their animals. After dismounting, he helped her down and tethered their horses to the branches of a nearby bush. Their arms around each other's waists, they ambled to the boulder bordering the stream that flowed into Mistmere.

Pulling her woolen green cape closer, she said, "I've been thinking about what we have to do tomorrow, Garret, and as I understand it, there are several obstacles we must surmount, drowning being the main one. However, there is also the danger of hypothermia."

He nodded. "Mistmere is extremely cold, but this time of year, with the wind whipping over it, the water is really frigid."

"And we don't have wetsuits," she remarked, sitting on the rock

"Furthermore, wet clothing will drag me down, as it did on the last venture." He sat by her, putting his arm around her. "So I'll be diving naked, even though it's nearly winter."

"I guess there isn't too much we can do about that. However, if we tie a rope around your waist and secure the other end to a stout tree, that will provide you with a mooring line. That way, you won't be pulled into one of those underwater caverns you mentioned."

"That's an excellent idea. We should have done that the first time," Garret replied.

"Why didn't we?"

He took her hand. "I misjudged the strength of the whirlpool. It doesn't look very powerful, but its appearance deceived me. I found its strength awesome."

"If only we had some way of getting air to you, like a long rubber or plastic tube that we could secure to the tree, too."

"I know, but rubbers and plastics hoses haven't been invented yet, Joanna. We can't use those reeds that grow at the edge of the lake because they aren't nearly long enough," he answered.

"Besides, they're much too thin and fragile to splice and seal together with oakum and tar, the way shipwrights do to make their vessels watertight."

"I'll just have to rely on my lung capacity and luck, but I haven't ruled out meeting with an accident. There have been quite a few over the centuries." He smiled poignantly.

"I have every faith in you, Garret, and I think you'll succeed this time."

He took her in his arms. "Do you?"

"Yes. After almost a thousand years, we found each other and were transported back in time, which is standing still just for us."

"I suppose compared to those miracles, regaining Osric's Eye should be easy," he answered.

"So why should we doubt that you'll break the spell?"

"We have to face that possibility, Joanna," he said, looking deeply into her eyes. "I'm not a superman. I failed once."

"But this time, you know what to expect, and your body looks and feels like you're in top physical condition." She slid her hand to his biceps and gave his upper arm a little squeeze.

"Joanna," he murmured, realizing that this time tomorrow he might be dead. "We have so little time, and I need you so badly."

"Then let's make use of the hours we have." She snuggled closer to him.

"It's too cold here, sweetheart, and I don't want to make love to you on the ground."

"Then let's hurry back to the castle, Garret."

\* \* \* \*

Later, they stood naked on the warm stones of the hearth in his bedchamber, the roaring fire's radiance bathing them in a rosy glow.

Garret had previously put the feather ticking over the mattress before the flames, ensuring their comfort.

"I want this time together to be the most wonderful we've ever known, Joanna, for it might be the la--"

"No!" she said emphatically, putting her hand to his mouth. "I won't consider anything but your success."

He kissed the palm of her hand, and then her wrist, the crook of her arm, her shoulder, her neck, her forehead, and finally her lips.

He seemed to be taking his time with her, holding his own desire at bay to give her the most exquisite, languorous experience, and Joanna loved him all the more for it.

She held him closer, rubbing her nipples on his chest, feeling the jolts of pleasure surging through her.

"Vixen," he murmured.

He kissed her deeply, leisurely, letting his tongue dance with hers. She caught it and began sucking it gently, eagerly, tasting its sweetness and texture.

He tightened his hold on her, stroking her back, molding her body to his.

Love overflowed Joanna's heart. She wanted to give him everything, hold back nothing.

Breaking the kiss, he turned her back to him, molding her against his chest and tenderly massaging her breasts. She gasped as he teased her nipples and kissed the nape of her neck.

Dew sprang between her thighs, and she parted them, allowing his member between them.

As he continued his kisses and caresses, she dropped her hands to his engorged phallus, stroking his length, feeling it pulse beneath her touch.

He groaned and his breath quickened as her fingers began frolicking over his aroused flesh. His hand slipped down her torso and belly to her folds.

She moaned when he found her pleasure spot, and her heart began to drum, not only with eagerness, but also with tenderness for him. Garret was a considerate lover, an unselfish man. Tears of appreciation filled her eyes as he began his ministrations, slowly at first, and increasing his speed as he sensed her ever-mounting fervor.

"Oh, it's happening," she cried.

Her knees buckled as pleasure throbbed through her, and her body jerked as powerful spasms contracted deep in her belly.

He laid her on the mattress, holding her close, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her nose, and culminating with her lips.

Then he urged her to her knees and took possession from a rear position, adding to the siege on her senses by caressing her drenched sex.

Again desire detonated in a series of wild, dazzling explosions She collapsed into the feather ticking, and he toppled on her, flooding her with his seed. Then he rolled from her and they spooned together.

"We should sleep, darling," she murmured, caressing his cheek. "You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

"Yes," he answered.

"Are you nervous?"

"I'm more afraid of losing you than dying," he answered, holding her close.

"Oh, Garret!" She burst into tears. "I love you so much."

"Don't cry, sweetheart. With you by my side, I'll make it this time."

\* \* \* \*

The next day, dark clouds scowled above, blanketing the whole celestial dome in gloom. Worse, a strong wind was howling like a pack of hungry wolves and ripping the last of the dried foliage from the trees.

Looking out the window, Garret's heart sunk. How much worse could the weather get?

It was a question he wished he hadn't asked, for suddenly conditions deteriorated. The heavens delivered the promised precipitation and a mix of ice and rain poured down.

Joanna came up behind him, pressing her delectable nude body against his naked back and twining her

arms around his middle. He welcomed her warmth, for the room was cold, the flagstone floor like ice beneath the soles of his feet. Still, he must accustom himself to the merciless temperature if he hoped to survive.

"Perhaps we should wait until later, love," she whispered. Maybe the weather will improve."

"We can't, Joanna. The terms of the curse demand that I must dive at noon."

"Then so be it. Let's get ready."

\* \* \* \*

They rode in silence, there being nothing more either he or Joanna could say, but his wife's pale beautiful face eloquently proclaimed her apprehension.

By the time they came to the great oak, ice glazed its thick limbs, and the huge tree resembled a glass sculpture.

Freezing rain also encrusted their fur mantles, making them heavier, and Garret was glad that their animals wore their protective colorful trappers.

No haze rose from Mistmere. Its usual cool green color, a refection of the holly and larch trees bordering it, had disappeared. Now, it mirrored the dark sky and looked almost like a cauldron of boiling ink as the fierce winds whipped its surface. Worse, the whirlpool seemed to swirl faster than ever.

Could he fight the paralyzing cold, the sucking pull of the water, and the lack of air?

This was a true trial by ordeal, he thought. His future and that of his wife hung in the balance, not only for this lifetime, but also for every subsequent incarnation throughout eternity.

They dismounted and tethered the horses on the low branch of a holly tree. He stripped off his clothes, and Joanna wrapped them in an animal skin to keep them dry, along with the other supplies she had brought.

The sleet struck his naked flesh like icy needles as he tied one end of the long rope around his waist, and she secured the other to the tree. She handed him a leather pouch and he fastened its thongs to the cord at his middle.

Then he pulled his wife into his arms in one last desperate embrace and he kissed her quickly. "No matter what happens, Joanna, remember that I love you."

"And I love you," she answered, her green eyes brilliant with tears. Breaking away, she admonished, "Go quickly, love. The longer you wait, the more this cold will sap your energy, and you need every ounce of strength."

He turned from her and ran into the water. Its frigid temperature made him gasp as he immersed himself.

Keep moving. You must keep moving.

As he made his way further, he felt the tug of the whirlpool pulling him toward the center of the lake and sucking him under. Filling his lungs, he allowed it to tow him down, working with the current, saving his energy as the vortex captured him.

He descended. Reaching bottom, he saw the glitter of green in the sand. He lunged with the whirl of the water and clutched the huge stone from its hiding place. His body clamoring for air, he quickly placed the gem in his pouch and propelled himself upward. As he broke the surface, he gulped in a large breath of cold air and began working his way along the lifeline, pulling himself, hand over hand, to the bank of the lake.

Nevertheless, the cold made his limbs feel as heavy as rocks, and the merciless waters continued to drag against him. Garret felt his strength ebbing like blood from a hemorrhaging man.

He saw Joanna, standing on the bank, her red hair flying, and that rallied his flagging strength somewhat. With that encouragement, he continued, his arms screaming for rest, his body crying for warmth, and he prayed his muscles wouldn't cramp. He labored agonizingly toward shore, but he didn't seem to be making any headway.

"Garret," Joanna yelled, but her voice was hardly audible, for the tempestuous winds screeched through the trees.

He began to feel pain in his extremities now, and the paralyzing ache would soon travel upward and inward to his vital organs. Would the cold kill him, even as he had Osric's eye in his possession?

Furthermore, he was not the only one in danger. Joanna stood close to the oak, which the wind was shaking. The massive glazed branches could snap off and fall on her, killing her.

Suddenly, a sense of panic caused a surge of adrenaline to pour into his blood. He tried to shout a warning to her, but the noise of the wind pushed the sound back toward him.

He concentrated, trying to transmit his thoughts to her, as he had done before. For some strange reason, that didn't seem to be working.

A sharp crack, almost like the shot of a rifle, cut through the howling wind. A branch had fallen. Though it landed away from Joanna, the tumbling debris spooked the horses. His charger reared, pulling the small holly out of the ground, galloping away with it still tied to its reins.

He heard Joanna's scream penetrate the din of the storm. Garret fought to get to her, but fatigue and cold were fast overcoming him. The bank of the river seemed a hundred miles away. He stopped trying to move for a moment and a second branch fell.

Terrified, Joanna turned from the sight of her struggling husband, and ran toward her palfrey, trying to calm the animal.

She must get away from the tree. It could topple on her at any second. She'd seen oaks as big as this uprooted in hurricanes in South Carolina.

Worse, if the tree went down, Garret's cord could be severed, and as she looked out toward him, he didn't appear to be making any progress.

She must help him!

Of course, why didn't she think of that solution before? Taking the knife she brought with her other supplies, she hurried back to the oak and slashed the lifeline from it, lashing it to her wrist.

The gale force winds, the tug of the whirlpool, and her husband's weight almost dragged her into the lake. Grappling desperately with the line, she skidded in the mud. However, she managed to loop the rope around the high roll-topped saddle and urged her mare to tow her exhausted, shivering husband up on the muddy bank.

She ran to him. "Oh, darling!" she exclaimed, tears streaming down her face, wet hair flying wildly. Had he gotten the stone, or had he given up?

He was gasping, and his flesh looked a frightening bluish white. She knelt by him, rubbing him with the drying linen she had packed and wrapping the mantle and other furs around him.

She'd turned to the skin of wine she had packed. Propping him up, she squirted the red liquid in his mouth.

Shivering fiercely, he drank it, and then she cushioned his head with another fur. She stood, and turned toward the horse, drawing a heated stone, which she had wrapped in a thick blanket, from the leather saddlebag.

But suddenly, she didn't need it. The storm had ceased and the sun came out. Garret was still shivering somewhat, but his physical condition seemed much improved.

"It's all right, Joanna," he said, teeth chattering. "I've got the stone in the pouch. We're back in the twenty-first century."

Joanna clutched the purse, feeling something hard within it. Then she looked up. Straight ahead, the Elizabethan addition, its leaded casements gleaming in the sun, presided elegantly by the more ancient keep. As she gazed out on Mistmere, she inhaled a sharp breath. Its green waters now looked as smooth as a millpond, for the whirlpool had disappeared. Furthermore, the thatched cottages vanished, replaced by a parking lot full of cars. The old battlements had no men patrolling, and the red ivy climbed the castle walls.

"Oh, Garret, we're home--we're really home!"

"Yes, darling," he answered, pulling her into his arms. "I never could have done it without you."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence, but I think you should put on your clothes." She chuckled. "You're still shivering."

"You'll get no argument from me on that score. First, though, I want to do this." Garret leaned forward and kissed her soundly.

Joanna broke the kiss. "If you keep doing that, we'll get too motivated and we'll never get back inside."

He laughed. "I guess it won't do for a peer of the realm to shock his guests."

She giggled. "Or get arrested for indecent exposure."

She held up the fur around him while he quickly donned his clothes.

"Let's go home and party," Joanna suggested.

"Our whole lives will be one long celebration from now on Joanna. We've earned it, but a special private fete is definitely in order."

## Chapter Four

As they entered the castle, Tessa hurried toward them.

"Where the heck have you been, Joanna? I've been worried sick. I was about to call the police and report you both as missing persons. Do you know what you two have put me through? In fact, this whole place has been in an uproar. You could have at least called me, you know."

Tessa stopped for a moment, and she stared at them. "Why the heck are you both in your Halloween costumes? That was two days ago, and you look as if you've both been rolling in mud. Yuck! And your hair is soaking wet."

"It's a rather long story, and we'll explain later." Garret put his arm around Joanna. "Right now, we have something we want to celebrate, so if you'll excuse us, we'll get on with it."

"Oh, it's like that, is it? Rolling in the mud, huh? I never figured the two of you for being kinky, but whatever floats your boat." She smirked at Joanna. "In that case, you're forgiven, but just don't ever put me through anything like that again."

"We never will," Garret assured her.

Tessa looked away, smiled, and waved at the same man Joanna had seen her conversing with on the night of the party. "See you guys later," she said, walking to the man.

"She'll never believe what happened," Joanna whispered as they headed away. "Neither will anyone else."

"Somehow, I don't think she'll even remember to ask." Garret chuckled, watching her leave with the young man.

"I believe you're right," Joanna added.

"As for the others, it's all in how we explain the incident to them," he answered, as they made their way up the steps.

"Oh?" She gave him a sidelong glance.

"We'll say we met outside and decided to take a walk in the fog and time seemed to get away from us. That's the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that time did get away from us."

"But I don't think anyone will have the nerve to ask for an explanation, Joanna, though they'll wonder why the whirlpool disappeared."

They stopped in her room to get some fresh clothes then continued on to his suite.

"This is quite different from the last time I saw it," she observed as they entered his quarters.

He chuckled. "Yes, it's a little more comfortable than a medieval bedchamber."

"I suppose there's something to be said for electric lamps and central heating. Still, I wouldn't trade a moment of the time we spent there for anything in the world."

"Neither would I, Joanna." He took her into his arms, kissing her.

As he pulled her closer, something pressed into her, and she moved back a bit breaking the kiss. "Osric's Eye is pushing into me."

"Oh, sorry."

"What will you do with it?"

"I don't know." Garret shook his head. "It's a sacred relic, so I can't really sell it. That would be a desecration, even though I could definitely use the cash."

"You're a lord. Why do you need money?"

"It's a long story. I'm not poverty stricken, but I'm not wealthy. Are you disappointed, Joanna? We'll have a few lean years, but I'm making headway."

"I think we're fabulously wealthy, Garret. We have each other and we have what we need. As for Osric's Eye, I would just keep it, but I wouldn't let anyone know anything about it, or every thief and shady antiquities collector in the world will be after it. Besides, I have a feeling that it'll bring us good luck."

"I think you're right, love. I'll just put it in the safe." He walked to a portrait on the wall, which was really a door that concealed the vault, and after turning the dial in several different directions, he opened the safe.

Taking the shimmering green gem from the pouch, he looked at it and smiled. "Oh, that's interesting, very interesting, indeed."

"What's so intriguing?" she asked.

"I'll tell you later." He slipped the jewel in the pouch and placed it in the safe, locking it away.

"I think I have a right to know. After all, I did my part to help you get back the stone."

"Patience, my sweet."

"You're a terrible tease."

He arched his dark brow and shot her smoldering look. "You seemed to like it."

She smiled. "I can't argue that. Do you plan to make that part of the celebration?"

He chuckled. "What do you think?"

"I'd say we're both in for quite a festive afternoon, but I would like to freshen up a bit first."

"First? I thought we'd include our ablutions in our foreplay." He took her hand and led her to the most impressive bathroom she ever seen in her life.

"Well, in addition to modern lighting and heating, there's also something to recommend state-of-the-art plumbing, too. How gorgeous is that blue marble tub? And it's a sunken one, at that," Joanna said. "Of course the shower looks tempting, too." She also thought the rose towels and face cloths, or as the English called them, face flannels, were a perfect accent.

"We'll try both of them, but let's get out of these clothes."

They doffed their soiled costumes, stuffing them in the nearby hamper.

"Well, what's your pleasure, tub or shower?"

"Let's save a leisurely soak for later," she suggested. "I can't wait to get rid of this mud."

"And get warm," he added, walking to the shower and turning on the faucet. "I've never felt that cold and I hope I never come close to feeling anything like it again."

"Your muscles must be sore, too, poor darling." She walked to him. "Maybe I can give you a massage and ease all the aches away in the steam shower," she suggested, taking two face cloths from the towel rack.

"Hmm. That's an interesting proposition." He stepped inside and pulled her in with him, kissing her ravenously as the warm water rained down on them.

Breaking the kiss, but not the embrace, she whispered, "I thought you wanted a massage."

"I do, Joanna, but I intend to give as generously as I get."

She reached for the bar of soap and lathered it on her wash cloth and he did the same. Then they stroked and scrubbed, leisurely, taking their time, stoking the flames of their desire slowly, deliberately, deliciously.

Then he began to give special attention to her breasts, using the mild lather as a lubricant. He caressed them in tender circular motions, and then delicately tweaked her nipples.

Joanna groaned as he worked his way down, over her ribs and belly. Changing direction, he slid his sudsy palms to her buttocks, cupping them. The pleasure he evinced from her made her breath short and her heart break into a gallop.

"My turn," she whispered, following his example, but after she kneaded his derriere, she urged him against the marble wall and began to stroke the length of his phallus.

Finally, he said, "I want you awfully, Joanna, and my endurance has its limits."

He pulled her into his arms and turned her, so her back now rested against the wall. "Part your thighs, love."

She readily complied, happy to welcome him and guided him home.

"I can't believe my luck at finding you again," he whispered, sinking to his hilt.

"I thought I was going to lose you when the branch dropped," she replied. "I don't know when I've ever been so desperate. I was so afraid it would snap your lifeline."

"Our love has defeated death, Joanna."

Then he began thrusting, and retreating, slipping against her wet aroused flesh and the familiar quest toward gratification began to build in intensity. Her body responded to his commands, and she

relinquished all control of it to him. He became her master and her lord as she yielded to the siege he was making on her senses.

"Oh, Joanna, it seems that I've wanted you forever, and an eternity of having you will never be enough."

"I feel the same way, Garret."

She now realized that she had waited for him for almost a millennium, and had lived many lives, desperately wanting, needing, and longing for his touch, his scent, and his taste throughout all that time.

Her body began to beg for release, and Garret seemed to know what she needed.

She moved her hips, meeting his every thrust and grinding her loins against his. She grasped him more firmly, scraping her nipples against the rough mat of dark hair on his chest as she labored, becoming almost crazed with need.

And then the power of it seized her, lifted her, carried her on its crest, and her climax came upon her with incredible shattering force.

A primordial sound ripped from her throat as he pressed her to the wall, holding her tightly as the sensation quaked through her, but he continued to thrust as her body clenched around him.

Finally, she felt his release pouring into her, and she thought of the child that she had once had and lost in another life. Would she have the chance to love another?

\* \* \* \*

Later, they lounged on his sofa in his sitting room, drinking champagne, and toasting their triumphant reunion.

"You still haven't told me, Garret."

"What, sweetheart?"

"About what you saw in Osric's Eye."

He smiled mischievously. "Oh, that."

"You're not going to renege on your promise, are you?"

"No." He set down his glass on the coffee table.

"And that is?"

"A wedding in the very near future and two children, a girl and a boy, in the next few years."

Her eyes widened. "You actually saw that? You're not just kidding?"

He nodded. "I actually saw it. The stone is called Osric's Eye for a reason, you know."

"And the wedding was between you and me?" she asked.

He laughed heartily. "Of course, love. Whom else would we be marrying?"

"I really would like it if you asked me, though, Garret. I'm a little old fashioned that way."

"I have some fairly traditional values, too." He leaned forward, taking her into his arms. "Would you marry me, Joanna? Would you be Mistress of Mistmere?"

Tears of joy filled her eyes and she moved into his arms. "Yes, darling, yes."

The End