

Seasonal Winds:

SPRING WIND

By

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Chapter One

"Fucking cops," Striker grumbled as he increased his footsteps. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his scrub pants and his shoulders were hunched defensively. A scowl drew his features taut, making his eyes appear smaller than normal.

"Just keep walking," the woman at his side said in a low voice. "Don't give them any reason to suspect us."

"I hate fucking cops," Striker stated.

"Well, none of my best friends are cops, either," Bailey MacKenna said. She gave Striker a quick glance. "You look guilty, Nate. At least wipe that expression off your face."

Making an attempt to relax, Striker carefully watched the two policemen strolling along the sidewalk across the avenue. So far, neither of them had looked Striker's way. In his position as diener--the person responsible for handling, moving, and cleaning the bodies at the morgue--he rarely came into contact with the authorities and he wanted to keep it that way. He especially disliked the Portal Patrols who maintained the exits points on Vardar-7.

"Uh, oh," Bailey MacKenna whispered.

Striker looked to where she was staring and felt the blood drain from his face. "I knew it,"

he said. "I knew we were going to get caught." He lowered his voice. "I told you we were going to get caught!"

The tall man walking toward the policemen wore the dreaded steel gray uniform of the Modartha, the ultra-secret police responsible for the Slándáil Phoiblí, the National Security. The people of her world were terrified of the Modartha for the elite law enforcement officers were not only deadly assassins but during full moons, changed into gray wolves--the most dangerous of their kind.

"We're going to hang," Striker said with a moan. "Sure as shit, we're going to hang."

"Shut the hell up, Nate!" Bailey said. So far the Modartha agent had not looked their way. He had stopped to speak to the policemen who appeared as rattled by his appearance as did Striker.

"We're going to end up in the Doinsiún hanging by our thumbs," Striker muttered.

"We're not going to the Dungeon," Bailey hissed at him. "We've done nothing wrong."

"You don't think providing aid to the Resistance is doing anything wrong?" Striker demanded. "Bailey, if we are caught, we'll be jailed and I've no desire to be some bull's cow!"

Bailey rolled her eyes. "We haven't been aiding the Resistance and we haven't done anything to warrant being sent to the Dungeon. We've simply been attending their secret rallies just as hundreds of other people have. If every curious citizen was jailed, there wouldn't be anyone left to do their everyday jobs. There is nothing with which the Modartha could charge us."

"Not yet," Striker reminded her. "You know what they say about curiosity and the cat."

It was at that moment the Modartha agent turned his head and looked right at Bailey. She could feel her stomach do an odd little flip and she drew in a breath. Quickly, she looked away from his probing stare, lowering her head with the proper respect one showed a man of his position.

"Oh, Sweet Morrigunia, Bailey," Striker whimpered. "He's crossing the street and coming straight at us."

"Keep walking," Bailey told him. Sweat was gathering in her palms, her heart was thundering--blood pounding--and a cold finger of dread was scratching down her spine.

"Halt!"

Immediately both Bailey and Striker did as they were ordered. They stood stock still, waiting for the Modartha to reach them. With heads down, eyes on the sidewalk, they assumed the required position of hands clasped behind their backs in an attitude of

subservience.

"Identify yourselves," the Modartha demanded. He came to stand directly behind Bailey and it was she who spoke first, the senior of the two.

"Cróinéir Second Class Bailey MacKenna, Milord," she said.

"Diener Class Nathan Striker, Milord," Striker replied.

"A coroner," the Modartha said with a snort. "Not a typical feminine occupation."

Bailey said nothing for she'd not been asked a direct question.

"Do you enjoy playing with dead things, wench?" he queried.

"It is my job, Milord," she answered.

"Assigned?"

"Yes, Milord." She drew in a breath for he was so close to her she could feel his breath on the nape of her neck and his body warmth radiating toward hers.

"Don't you like playing with live men?"

She didn't know how to answer that. Her knees felt as though they would give out beneath her at any moment and she was trembling violently beneath his scrutiny.

"Do you prefer playing with live women, then?"

Bailey closed her eyes. "No, Milord. I am not of that bent."

His voice was low, a sultry caress but steel-hard as she felt his lips against the column of her neck. His body made contact with hers. "Step into the alley, wench," he ordered her. He gave Striker a nasty look. "You stay right where you are, diener."

Striker was trembling too, but he managed to bob his head. "Yes, M...milord," he stammered. He was breathing heavily and perspiring copiously with sweat glistening on his pale face. He kept his eyes squeezed tightly shut as he sensed Bailey moving away from him.

Terrified of the man behind her, Bailey walked the few feet into the shadowy alleyway that ran between two tall buildings. She stopped.

"I didn't tell you to stop, wench. Keep walking," he told her in a gruff voice.

Her mouth dry and her palms slick, she continued deeper into the alleyway until he bid her

stop.

"Turn and face the wall," he said.

Bailey faced the wall.

"Put your hands above your head--palms flat to the stone, fingers spread--then lean into the wall."

She obeyed him, wincing at the cold and slimy feel of the wall.

"Spread your legs."

Her bottom lip trembling, she did as he ordered and when she felt his hands on her hips she flinched. He used his foot to move her legs further apart, his fingers tightening on her hips then put his right foot in front of hers making ankle-to-ankle contact.

Standing so his chest touched her back, he put his hands over her hands and ran his fingers between hers. His palms were dry and warm as they slowly moved down the backs of her hands and onto her wrists. He encircled those wrists for a moment then released them, dragging his palms down her forearms, over the insides of her elbows, along her upper arms then turned his hands so his fingers dipped into her armpits. He did not just pat the material covering her, he crushed it so she felt his fingers exploring under her arm.

"You're sweating," he said quietly. "I wonder why?"

His hands slid slowly down her sides then moved toward one another at her waist. The sides of his thumbs grazed the undersides of her breasts with just enough force to draw the globes together and lift them. When the base of each of his hands pivoted on her lower chest and his hands turned, she knew he was about to cup her. She bit her lip to keep from making a sound. With his palms hefting her flesh, he moved his hands back and forth under her breasts several times--his thumbs not touching her. He squeezed her breasts together--held them that way for a moment or two--then ran his thumbs down her nipples.

"Oh," Bailey said, unable to keep the groan from escaping.

"You like that, wench?" he whispered, his lips at her ear. He pushed against her and she felt the hard bulge at the front of his uniform trousers.

"Milord, please," she said, tears forming.

Through the thin material of her red government-issued thigh-high gown, he rolled her nipples between his thumbs and index fingers, grinding his erection across her buttocks.

"Do you know what they do to prime sweetness like you at the Doinsiún, wench?" he asked and clamped his teeth onto her earlobe.

Bailey shuddered and sucked in a startled breath.

"Every man there gets a good, long taste of the women brought to that hellish place." He swirled his tongue into the spiral of her ear. "A good...long...taste that can last for hours."

Tears were sliding down Bailey's cheeks.

He pinched her nipples just hard enough to make her cry out then slid his hands down over her abdomen and ran them down her hips. He hunkered down behind her to move his palms down the outsides of her legs. Bringing his left hand to join his right, he hooked his hands around her ankle then slowly brought them up her leg.

Bailey tensed, knowing he was going to touch her intimately, shamefully, and she bit her lip hard enough to taste blood but he stopped just short of the junction between her legs and moved his hands to her other leg to repeat the procedure. His hands were warm and calloused as he dragged them along her flesh. As he once again neared her privates, he stopped with his hands circling her upper thigh. She could feel him looking up at her.

"Right now, there are thirty-seven men incarcerated at the Doinsíún," he told her then released her thigh. He stood up and put his hands to her hips again. "Those aren't good odds for a soft piece of fluff like you."

The moment his hands cupped her ass, Bailey quivered from head to toe. He was kneading her, crushing her flesh in his strong hands.

"You know what those men do when they get a fresh piece of cunt, wench?" he purred into her ear. He tugged up the skirt of her short gown and insinuated his fingers into the leg band of her panties. "They fuck them until they can't walk."

He touched her and Bailey thought she would scream. No man had ever touched her there and his fingers were sliding over her folds, swirling into the pubic curls, grazing something that made her jump.

"Are you virgin, little coroner?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said. Her voice broke and she whimpered.

"Then they would hurt you badly," he said. "They would thrust into you..."

His fingers slid into her so quickly, so unexpectedly she jerked against him and tried to break away, but he pushed forward, jamming his body into hers to press her tightly to the wall. He went deep inside her, his fingers twisting gently but insistently. "They'll fall on you like a hoard of ravaging dogs, baby," he said, his voice gruff and hard. "Your sweet little body will tear beneath that assault." He moved his fingers in and out of her. "They'll thrust and thrust and..." He slid a finger into her anus. "Stop!" she pleaded. "Please don't do this!"

His tone turned harder still. "Do you think they'll listen to you when you beg them to stop, Bailey?" he snarled. "You'd be down on that dirty floor with your arms and legs spread wide while man after man after man falls on you and stabs his dirty, diseased cock inside you."

"Please," she whined.

He pushed as deep into her as his finger would go. "And if you survive the fucking that night, the chances are good you might survive the next night and the next but then again, you might not."

Bailey was gasping for breath and when he snatched his finger out of her, she thought he was finished but he touched something else between her legs, plucked at something there that made her knees go weak and caused her womb to flutter.

"You won't like the Dungeon, baby," he said, worrying that part of her that was doing strange things to her insides. "By the gods you are wet! I could fuck you right here."

It was that last comment that snapped her eyes open and she twisted violently in his arms, bringing her hands up to rake his face but he moved quicker than she could have anticipated and she was slammed back against the wall, his knee wedged painfully and tightly between her thighs.

"Please, Milord, let go of me!" she said, her eyes wild now and her lips skinned back from her clenched teeth.

His body was crushing hers, his hands on her wrists as he pinned her arms above her head. The slow, merciless smile that tugged at his lips sent waves of fury through Bailey but she stamped down on that anger, knowing he could--and most likely would--hurt her badly if she fought him.

"Stay away from the shapeshifter Kona Doyle, little coroner," he said, staring into her eyes. "If you don't, you'll wind up having your sweet little cunt and your virginal little asshole stretched by men a lot less gentle than me."

He released her wrists and moved back. With one upward flick of his dark left eyebrow, he pivoted on his heel and walked casually out of the alley.

Bailey slid to the wet pavement in a heap and buried her face in her hands, sobbing hysterically. She barely felt Striker's arm around her and only dimly heard his soothing words as he tried to comfort her.

* * * *

Crevan Byrne--better known to his friends and enemies alike as Van--barely glanced at the Senator who had joined him on the park bench. The Modartha agent's long legs were stretched out and crossed at the ankle. His arms were folded over his chest as he lounged

there beneath the sweeping shade of an elm tree.

"I came as soon as my assistant said you'd called, Milord," Senator Earnon Flynn said, taking a seat. "All went well, I hope."

"I believe so. I scared the hell out of your niece, Senator," Van replied. "I don't believe she'll be tempted to attend another Resistance rally."

Flynn breathed a loud sigh of relief. "Thank the gods. I worry about Bailey," he said. "I've been her guardian since her parents were killed and sometimes she's a bit hard to handle. She is such a headstrong girl."

Van snorted. "She's no girl, Senator. Your niece is a woman."

"She's twenty-three years old, Milord and has shown no interest in boys. She..."

"It isn't a boy she needs," Van interrupted. "She needs a man."

Sweeping his gaze surreptitiously over the commander of the Modartha, Flynn knew he could do worse for his beloved charge. Byrne was the kind of man women found appealing. His physique was superb. He had power and authority. He was well-respected.

"What would it take for you to be that man?" the Senator inquired.

Van was staring across the park at the pond where black swans were gliding. It was a warm spring day and the wool fabric of his dark colored uniform felt oppressive. He wished he could be swimming alongside the waterfowl.

"Milord?" Flynn nudged.

"I heard you," Van replied. He reached up to scratch his lean jaw. "Are you offering her to me?"

"I understand you do not have a woman of your own," the Senator commented.

"I've never wanted one," he snapped. "What are you proposing?"

"I would, of course, provide a very handsome dowry for her," Flynn told him.

"Money means nothing to me, Senator," Van stated. "I have more than I'll ever need."

"Property, perhaps?" Flynn inquired. "I have several estates from which you could choose."

Van grunted. "I have property. I don't need any more gods-be-damned property to have to look after."

Flynn's forehead furrowed. "Then what can I offer to tempt you to court my niece?"

A chuckle erupted from the Modartha's chest. "I'm not about to court her, Senator," he said then turned his head so he was looking directly at Flynn. "I'll ask you again. Are you offering her to me?"

Flynn nodded. "Yes, Milord, I am."

Van looked away. He thought of the woman he'd encountered the day before and unconsciously rubbed his fingers together. He could almost feel the warmth and wetness of her and it made his groin clench.

He had undertaken the assignment asked of him by Senator Flynn and had gone to confront the man's niece whom the Senator suspected was getting involved with the Resistance. Stunned to find Bailey MacKenna was startlingly beautiful with silky light brown hair and large green eyes that pulled him down into their bright depths, he had been immediately drawn to her. Full coral lips, high cheekbones, and a lush figure had only added to her allure. Possessive instincts he didn't even know he had had coursed through him the moment he touched her and the thought of other men putting hands to her drove an arrow of intense jealousy straight through him. Against his will, some wayward part of him reached out to stake claim to her. Fear of something happening to her, of her being sent to jail, had caused him to behave in a way completely out of character for him and--to a degree--he felt shame at what he'd done.

"Will you at least think of my proposal, Milord?" he heard Flynn ask.

Van smiled to himself. He'd done nothing but think of Bailey MacKenna. Last night, even his dreams had been about her. He had awakened with one hell of a hard on. As he'd showered that morning, his hand had strayed to his cock as memories of Bailey had loomed out of the steam from the hot water. At the moment he had climaxed, he'd been shocked to hear her name tumble from his lips. He had leaned against the shower wall, trembling from the depth of his release, as the water beat down on his shoulders and her lovely face had drifted sweetly behind his closed lids. All morning, his thoughts had been about her. He couldn't get her out of his mind.

"Milord?"

"All right," he said. He unfolded his arms and uncrossed his long legs, drew them in and stood up. He held his hand out to the Senator. "I accept."

The Senator got hastily to his feet and clasped the Modartha's hand. "You won't regret it, Milord. She will make you a good wife."

Van frowned, his silver eyes narrowed.

Flynn felt the weight of that canescent glare. "Y...you will make her your bride, won't

you?" he asked, hope filling his face.

"We'll see," Van replied. He let go of the other man's hand. "But say nothing of this to her. Do you understand me, Senator?"

"I do, Milord," Flynn said.

Without another word, Van strolled off. He knew more about Senator Flynn's motives than the senator realized. Flynn had found a very rich woman he wished to take to wife but the woman didn't want the added baggage of a niece tagging along to complicate matters. Before he could ask for the woman's hand, the senator needed to find a man--and find him quickly--who he could both trust and respect to take Bailey off his hands.

Van chuckled. Even before Flynn had come to request his help, the senator had done a thorough background check on him. Flynn knew the kind of man the Modartha was and the senator also knew gods-be-damned well Crevan Byrne would never take a woman as his own without the sanctity of Joining.

It was closing in on noon and the park was filling with people. He noticed them moving out of his way, ducking their heads, looking down at the ground as he passed. It was one of the things he hated about being a Modartha. The populace trembled in fear of him and his men. Although he knew it was because of the job, because the Modartha possessed almost unlimited power within the Slándáil Phoiblí, he tended to take it personally when people shunned him though rationally, he knew he shouldn't. Having people scurry away from him as though he had some communicable disease just simply made his hackles rise. It made him feel like an outcast.

And it made him feel mean. He wanted to shout at them that the full moon was another day away and unless they really pissed him off, he would shift into his lupine form right then and come scurrying after them.

That thought made him laugh and those who heard that evil laugh, protectively crossed themselves.

As he walked--or as his handler had once remarked, strutted--across the park, there were other eyes that watched him with absolutely no fear. Those eyes were filled with loathing and fury and they followed his every move.

"He is heading south on the causeway," the owner of those dark blue eyes said into the Vid-Com badge hidden beneath the lapel of the owner's coat.

"I see him. I'll take over from this side of the causeway, sir," was the reply from the V-C.

As he walked Van Byrne's mind had gone once more to Bailey MacKenna. She was proving to be a distraction he could not shake. He frowned, unable to dislodge the image of her frightened eyes staring up at him as he mauled her.

He stopped walking and just stood there with his hands on his hips. He had come to a halt in the middle of the cobblestone pathway that arched over the Eala Dibh River and was looking out over the bridge rails at the sparkles of sunlight on the fast-moving water. Closing his eyes, he could still see her face and the look his vulgar actions had placed upon it.

"Fuck!" he snarled beneath his breath. "Why can't I get her out of my mind?"

He knew why. The woman had gotten under his skin and even though she was unaware of it, she was slowly and methodically altering his carefully arranged life. For all intents and purposes she now belonged to him and he had the right to do with her as he wished but the memory of her stricken look would not leave him.

Annoyed with himself, he shoved his hands into his pockets and continued walking. The black scowl on his face made him that much more intimidating to those he passed and they couldn't scramble out of his path fast enough.

Chapter Two

Since her encounter with the Modartha, Bailey had been uncharacteristically quiet as she went about her duties at the state-run morgue. Striker kept his distance, picking up on her mood, and did not tell her Kona Doyle had stopped by earlier to speak to her.

"Tell her I'll be waiting for her when she gets off work," Doyle had stated.

"The Modartha stopped us yesterday," Striker told the Resistance leader.

"So I heard," Doyle snapped. "That makes it even more urgent that I speak with Bailey."

"They could be watching us," Striker warned.

"Let them."

"That Modartha agent scared her pretty bad," Striker said. "He..."

"I know what the bastard did," Doyle interrupted. "That's being handled."

At the end of the day, Striker was still hesitant to tell Bailey about Doyle. He waited until she had finished with her paperwork before approaching her.

"Doyle was here," he said.

Bailey flinched. "What did he want?"

"To talk to you."

She shook her head. "I don't think either of us should be seen with him, Nate."

"I agree." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Maybe you should go out the back way."

"I will." She smiled at Striker but the gesture didn't reach her eyes. They appeared wounded, haunted.

Watching her leave, Striker cursed the Modartha who had dampened Bailey's spirit.

There was a nip to the air when Bailey opened the rear door of the morgue and stepped out into the late afternoon sun. Shielding her eyes against the glare, she headed out across the loading ramp where bodies were brought into the building. Carefully making her way down the ramp, she had just reached the bottom when a hand snaked out to grab her forearm.

Letting out a piercing shriek, Bailey fought the hold on her arm until she realized it was Kona Doyle who held her. She stopped, her heart pounding so fiercely she thought she might pass out.

"It's me, Bailey," Doyle said, putting his arms around her. "It's just me."

She was trembling so violently her teeth were chattering and she was rigid in his embrace as he stroked her hair and crooned softly to her.

"It's all right. I didn't mean to scare you," he said in a soothing voice.

She thought it was the Modartha who had accosted her and was ashamed of the light trickle of urine that was seeping down her thigh. Her nerves had been on edge all day as she'd tried to force the humiliating scene from the day before out of her mind.

"He'll pay for having hurt you, Sweeting," Doyle said. "I promise you he will. **When the Resistance overthrows the government and puts our men in positions of power, the Modartha will be disbanded and men like the one who abused you will be incarcerated in the Dungeon until they rot!**"

Bailey finally managed to get her emotions under control and pushed against Doyle's muscular chest. She stepped back, sweeping a hand over her face. "They could be watching us right now, Kona," she said, casting a fearful look around them. **When she'd first become involved with the handsome shapeshifter, she'd thought Doyle was exciting, being with him a forbidden thrill that helped to alleviate the monotony of her day to day life. But now--after her run-in with the Modartha--she wasn't quite as enamored of the outlaw and the danger he posed for her. She was afraid even being near him would bring about her arrest.**

"He's on the other side of the village and his every step is being dogged. You don't have to worry about Byrne."

At hearing who it was who had detained her, Bailey's face turned chalk white. "C...colonel Crevan Byrne?" she whispered.

"Yes, the commander of that evil den," Doyle replied. "We believe your uncle set him on you."

Feeling even more unnerved now that she knew the identity of the man who had waylaid her, Bailey felt her knees weakening. "I can't do this, Doyle," she said, taking another step back.

"Do you think I'd let that bastard hurt you?" Doyle asked. He reached out for her but she eluded his hand. "Bailey, I'm a were-beast, too."

"A were-fox," she said. "You are no match for a Modartha, Kona."

"I can keep you safe," Doyle insisted.

Bailey kept moving away from him, shaking her head in denial. "No, you can't. I don't want to go to prison, Kona."

With an exasperated hiss, Doyle rushed toward her and grabbed her, bringing her against him once again. "You don't have to worry. That won't happen. I will protect you."

It was on the tip of her tongue that he hadn't protected her the night before but she didn't get the chance for he lowered his head and slanted his mouth across hers. He was pressing himself against her and she could not keep from comparing his body with that of the man from the day before. Thoughts of his hard physique straining against hers all but erased the feel of Doyle's fevered clench. She jerked away.

Doyle's lips tightened and his eyes flashed blue fire at her. "What's the matter?" he asked and his tone was a bit too harsh for her liking.

"I'm tired of being manhandled in public," she said, wiping the back of her hand across her lips. "Twice in that many days is more than enough."

Though he stiffened at seeing her wiping away his kiss, Doyle nodded. "I understand."

She held up a hand when he reached out to her again. "I need to get home before curfew," she said and didn't wait for him to reply. She turned and hurried away.

She did not see the fury that flashed across Kona Doyle's face.

Not bothering to take the public transportation line that ran past the morgue and up to the apartment complex where she lived, she wrapped her arms around her--drawing in on her nervousness--and set out at a fast pace. She ignored everyone she passed and kept her head down. The last thing she wanted was to encounter someone she knew. All she needed was the quiet safety and perfect protection of her home.

It took Bailey less than half an hour to make it to the bottom of the steps that led up to the

government-owned complex and the apartment she'd been assigned. She took the steps two at a time and once at the main door, leaned forward for the iris scanner to read the unique random patterns of her iris. When the door cycled open, she hurried inside, disdaining the use of the elevator and practically running up the three flights to her apartment. Once at her door, she slapped her palm against the scanner there and the pneumatic door slid silently open.

The interior of her apartment was cool, as she preferred it, and it was dark since she had pulled the drapes closed before leaving that morning. Though she was not required to pay for the utilities, she nevertheless tried to conserve as much energy as possible.

"Lights, on," she said quietly. She was photo-phobic and bright lights bothered her so she had programmed the lights in her apartment to come up slowly in brightness. Turning down the short hallway to her left that led to her bedchamber, she saw the lights in her bedchamber come on. Behind her, the lights in the living area came on as well.

Kicking her shoes off, Bailey pulled the short gown over her head and laid it on the bed. It wasn't dirty and could be worn again the next day. In only her panties and bra, she went into the bathing chamber, opened the shower door, and turned on the water that was preset to the very warm temperature. She shut the shower door, removed the rest of her clothing and tossed it into the hamper. With the steam already forming inside the shower, she opened the shower door and quickly stepped inside, sighing as the water cascaded over her tired body.

Showers were a luxury for Bailey. More than a bath, they were a way she recharged her internal battery and as the water swirled down the drain, she let the daily annoyances, and disappointments flow with it.

She bathed, shaved her legs and underarms, mentally making note of how much she now had in discretionary savings accumulating toward the rather expensive laser hair removal treatments for her arms and legs that she longed to have. She looked down at the wiry triangle at the apex of her thighs and tallied the cost of visiting the laserologist.

She sighed. "You're a vain woman, Bailey MacKenna," she said. "Who's going to see you down there?"

The gray eyes of the Modartha flitted across her mind and she drew in a breath. She hastily turned off the water as though it had suddenly scalded her and stood there with chills bumps forming on her arms.

"Why can't you stop thinking about that horrible man?" she asked herself. With teeth clenched, she pushed open the shower door, snatched a towel off the wall bar, and wrapped the terry-cloth around her, angrily tucking the end between her breasts. She unclipped the twist of hair on her head and ran her fingers through it, shaking it out so the light brown tresses lay on her wet shoulders.

Her stomach growling, she shoved her feet into a pair of slippers and padded out of the bathing chamber, through her bedchamber, down the hall and started toward the kitchen when something caught her attention in the living area. She turned her head and froze like a deer in headlights.

He was sitting in her favorite chair with his right leg crossed over the left at the ankle. His hands were clamped on the curved arms of the chair and he was looking right at her. Gone was his uniform, replaced with a white silk shirt the arms of which were rolled halfway up his powerful forearms and charcoal gray slacks and black boots. In his left ear, he wore a silver hoop that caught the flare of the lamp beside the chair.

Bailey couldn't move. Her green eyes were like saucers as she stared at him. For a brief moment she wondered how he could have gained access to her quarters but realized that as a Modartha--and the commander of that elite band--he could go wherever he liked with ease.

"Come here," he said. His voice was deep, husky and had about it a tone that did not permit denial of his wishes.

Having to force one foot ahead of the other, Bailey walked toward him, hearing the blood rushing through her ears. When she was about two feet away from him, she stopped.

He tilted his head to one side. "Did I say stop, wench?"

Breath coming in ragged inhalations, Bailey came closer until she was practically knee to knee with him. She could not look away from the silver glints in his unblinking gaze.

He uncrossed his leg and spread his knees wide. "Kneel down." It was said softly but it carried a weight of demand with it.

Clutching the towel at her breasts, Bailey dropped as gracefully as she could to her knees. She fastened her attention on the sharp crease that ran along his pant leg.

"Look at me."

Slowly, reluctantly, she lifted her eyes to his. What she saw made her chin tremble. His face was expressionless but there was anger in the depths of the gray orbs looking back at her.

For a long time he said nothing, just stared at her. It was unnerving and her heart was slamming against her ribcage. She feared what he would do, what he would make her do. When he finally spoke, she flinched as though he had lifted a hand to hit her.

"Did you enjoy his kiss, wench?"

Terror flooded Bailey's soul at those words. He knew she had been with Doyle, that the Resistance leader had kissed her.

"H...how did you know he...?"

"Answer me," he snapped, his eyes flaring.

She shook her head. "No, Milord."

"No you didn't enjoy it, or no you didn't allow that scum-bag to put his mouth on yours?"

There was in his question absolute fury but it seemed to be firmly in check. Though the words were harsh, they had been spoken quietly. She watched something dark, lethal, flare in his gaze.

"Answer me, wench!"

"I did not enjoy his kiss, Milord," she replied quickly, fearing his wrath.

He leaned forward and snaked out his hands to grab her shoulders and pull her toward him. She had no choice but to hobble on her knees as close to the chair as possible, feeling trapped between his spread legs.

"Put yours hand up on my thighs," he ordered.

She obeyed, all too aware that his face was just inches from hers. When he leaned back, she let out a wavering breath.

"Since Doyle was lying in wait for you I can not blame you for what the bastard did," he said softly. "However had you told me you enjoyed it, I might well have taken a blade to him before the day was out and spilled his worthless guts for the buzzards to peck at."

Her heart seemed to stop beating at the callous way in which he'd made that statement. Without realizing it, her hands tightened on his thighs.

He looked down at her hands, at her thumb digging into the insides of his thighs but made no comment. Instead, he put a hand to her cheek and gently cupped her face, ignoring the wince that creased her lovely face.

"You asked how I knew he'd kissed you," he said. "I have men watching you for me. That's how I knew."

"I haven't done anything," she said, trembling. "I swear I haven't."

"I know you haven't."

"Then why are you having me followed?" she asked and winced at her temerity.

"Because you belong to me," he said and as her green eyes widened, he nodded slowly.

"Your uncle has handed you into my keeping."

"No, Milord," she said. "He..."

He rubbed the pad of his thumb over her lips, cutting off what she had been about to say. "You are mine," he stated. "Accept it for that isn't going to change."

"But why?" she asked, her fear of him intensifying to make her voice break.

"Why did he give you to me?" he asked, caressing her cheek. A faint smile tugged at his lips. "Because I wanted you." He leaned forward. "Without a dowry of any kind."

That stunned her. What man could possibly want her without the money and land that should have accompanied the deal? In her world, a woman was worth only what could be offered her betrothed to take her off her parents' or guardian's hands. It was unheard of for a man to accept a female without due compensation unless...

The blood drained from Bailey's face. "You want me for your whore," she said, her lips quivering. "Not as your wife, but as your..."

He once again stopped what she'd been about to say but it was not with his thumb. This time it was with his lips. He took her mouth firmly, expertly, and it was the most soul-shattering experience of her life. He tasted of sweet wine and his tongue was a wicked tease that flicked across her lips and thrust knowingly into her the warm recess of her mouth. He took her breath away with that kiss and when it ended, she stared into silver eyes hot with passion.

"I want you, wench," he said. "It's as simple as that."

He gave her no chance to reply to that declaration. He swept his arm around her back, bent forward, and twisted so he could hook his other arm under her knees and lifted her as easily as if she had been a toddler. She had no choice but to put her arms around his brawny neck. With purposeful steps he carried her from the living area down the hallway and into her bedchamber.

It was happening so fast Bailey's mind could not comprehend it. She felt his arms around her, his hard chest, his warm breath fanning across her chest where the towel did not reach. She had a sense of his alluring male smell that befuddled her senses and sent waves of something heavy to pool between her legs. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tingling, swelling, and moisture was gathering in the folds of her vagina.

Striding to her bed, he placed her on the coverlet then straightened up. His hands went to the buckle of his black leather belt and Bailey began to tremble. She watched with stricken eyes and quivering lips as the belt came off and he began to tug the silk shirt from the waistband of his pants.

She knew it would do no good to plead with him. Neither women nor men ever denied a Modartha what he desired. It was a deadly thing to even contemplate. What he wanted, he would get and to fight him would be suicide. All she could do was lie there--rigid and trembling--as the shirttail came out of the pants and he began unbuttoning it.

He surprised her when he smiled for his entire face changed. For the first time she realized how devastatingly handsome he was when he wasn't scowling.

"You look like a sacrificial lamb lying there, wench," he said as he shrugged the shirt from his shoulders.

His chest was sculpted with pectoral muscles that looked as though a master sculptor had cast them. Likewise his abdominal muscles were ridged, chiseled from the same tawny stone. A thick matting of hair spread across his upper chest and tapered down to a thin, tantalizing line that disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants. He unhooked his fly and eased the zipper down before turning and sitting down on her bed to pull off his boots, dropping them to the floor.

With his back to her, Bailey saw the infamous tattoo that all Modartha had emblazoned on their bodies. Reaching from his left collarbone to the flange of his right hip, the large black tat was a stylized whorl of a dragon in flight, fire flaming from its open mouth, its leathery wing-tips stretching from shoulder to shoulder, the spiked tail curving around his hip, the end of it hidden by the front of his pants. It must have taken the tattoo artist hours to do the intricate swirls and knots that constituted the complex drawing and much of it--she knew--had been done on sensitive parts of his flesh. When he stood up to push his pants from his hips, she blushed to see the dragon's claws cupped his buttocks, the wicked talons seemingly digging into his flesh. As he turned around, she looked quickly away for the dragon's tail flanged down and around his hip to curl suggestively around his penis, the barbed tip drawn on the soft head.

"That must have hurt," she said before she thought.

"Like a motherfucker," he replied with a snort. "It hurt to pee for days."

She instinctively moved over to allow him to stretch out beside her. Very conscious that the only thing between her naked body and his was the towel wrapped around her, she kept very still.

"You won't be my whore, wench," he said. He had one leg crooked as he laid there, one arm over his chest and the other lying between her and him.

"Then what will I be, Milord?" she risked asking him as she felt him reach for her hand and then thread his fingers through hers.

"My wife," he said. "There was never any doubt of that."

She turned her head to look at him. "What?"

He shrugged. "Unless you prefer being my whore," he replied.

"No, Milord!" she said and felt her face burn with heat.

"You could do worse," he said and shifted so he was lying on his side facing her. He propped his head on his hand. "Being the lady of a Modartha does have its perks."

Bailey had never wanted to marry. She enjoyed her freedom too much to be at the beck-and-call of any man. The few stolen kisses and quick feels she'd had in her secondary years at school had been unfulfilling and simply underscored the notion that males wanted one thing and one thing only from females. She reasoned she could do without the sex, and having children was not something she even contemplated for she didn't believe she'd make a good mother.

She hadn't counted on her uncle wanting to get rid of her bad enough that he would hand her over to a licensed killer.

"What worries you, wench?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he slid his free arm over her belly and tugged at the towel. "You can talk freely to me."

Talking freely to a Modartha was something she knew could be dangerous. Though his voice was soft and his fingers were lightly squeezing hers, she could sense the coiled menace lurking just beneath his civilized exterior.

"You hurt me, Milord," she said and could have bitten her tongue off for voicing such a thing to him. Modartha were above the law and he had every right to do whatever he felt like to her.

Van Byrne winced. She was looking at him with reproach, with apprehension that had settled deep in her pretty green eyes. Like everyone else, she was in mortal fear of him and he could sense that--almost smell it on her.

"Wench," he said. "I'm going to do something I've never done before in my life." He held her reluctant gaze. "I wish to apologize to you for what I did in the alley."

Bailey blinked, amazed at what he was saying. Modartha never showed contrition, never asked for forgiveness, or expressed regret at anything they did. To hear him apologize shocked her. When he continued, all she could do was stare wide eyed at him, her lips parted in amazement. What he was doing was completely unheard of.

"It was wrong what I did and my only explanation was that I was attempting to frighten you into staying away from Doyle and his merry band of conspirators. The man is dangerous and, sooner rather than later, he will hang for his crimes. What I told you about the dungeon was true. I wasn't exaggerating. Such things would have happened to you had you been

caught in the net waiting to snare Kona Doyle." He lowered his head. "I am sorry."

Stunned, Bailey just shook her head. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. Tears filled her eyes. "It isn't right."

Van drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly before answering. "I was assigned to do a job for Senator Flynn and I did it." He cocked one shoulder. "I didn't count on that assignment backfiring on me."

Her forehead crinkled. "I don't understand."

He had not been looking at her but at her bedspread--thinking how pretty it was--but he lifted his head at her question. "I couldn't get you out of my mind. I had your scent on my uniform and it beckoned to me all evening. I deliberately didn't wash my hand so I could smell your scent clinging to my fingers."

Bailey's face burned so hot at his unseemly words that she felt her ears tingle.

"I thought about you all night, all the next morning. When I met with your uncle and he offered you to me, I jumped at the chance to have you for my own. If he hadn't offered you to me, I would have informed him I was taking you anyway."

Unease flowed through Bailey but she knew there was nothing that could undo what her uncle had set into motion. She now belonged to the Modartha whether she liked it or not. She was his chattel, his property, his possession. That thought made her groan.

"I will be good to you," she heard him say and for the first time saw a flicker of uncertainty in his silver gaze. She also thought she detected a trace of vulnerability and that surprised her even more.

"I won't ever hurt you and I won't allow anyone else to hurt you," he said.

If she had to be married, she supposed being Joined to a man as powerful and influential as a Modartha would have its perks as he'd said. Without realizing it, she looked around her cramped bedroom with its institutional beige walls she was not allowed to paint, at the beige drapes she'd not been allowed to change. The only true mark of her own personal taste was in the vibrant mauve, teal green and rose coverlet she had purchased to add a touch of color to the otherwise bland room.

He saw where she was looking and reached out a hand to cup her cheek. "Whatever you wish to do to my quarters, I will allow for it will be your quarters, too. I will not gainsay you, wench. I..."

"Bailey," she said softly, searching his handsome face for a touch of gentleness. "My name is Bailey."

He almost smiled. "Bailey," he repeated and her name on his lips sent a chill down her spine.

She knew she had no choice and what she did from that moment forward would determine what her life with the Modartha would be like. Dredging up all the courage she had, resolved that she would be more than just his plaything, she lifted her hand and laid her palm over his hand that still cupped her cheek.

Her touch was like liquid lightning flowing up his arm and it was all he could do not to throw himself upon her and claim what was rightfully his. He had to stamp down the desire that was raging at him to take her. He knew she was a virgin, had never lain with a man, and he wanted her first time to be a memory she would not regret. Along with that reflection was the recollection of how he had shamed her in the alley.

"You hurt me," she had said.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "For humiliating you as I did."

It wasn't just shock at his words that made Bailey stop breathing. It was the look on his face. His gaze was searching hers for that absolution he sought. Men like him did not do this. They did not seek pardon for their transgression. That he did unnerved her. It somehow made him more human in her eyes.

"We won't speak of it again," she said, not knowing what else to say.

He nodded and his hand slid from her cheek to the top of the towel tucked in at her breast but before he tugged at it, he lifted his gaze to hers as though seeking permission. That, too, completely astonished her and all she could do was nod. She lowered her arm to her side--completely aware that his right hand still clutched hers between them and that he was half-lying on their arms.

Very gently he pulled at the terry-cloth material until the tuck came undone. He tugged the material toward him then carefully reached between her side and his to pluck at the edge of the towel that hid her breasts from his view. He laid it aside to entirely reveal her lush beauty.

Self-conscious at a man seeing her unclothed for the first time in her life, Bailey turned her head away from him to stare blindly at the drapery clad windows. She felt his fingers tense on hers as he put his free hand to her neck, spanning it with his warm, calloused palm. She tensed, going as rigid as stone.

"Relax," he whispered. His hand was stroking the column of her neck softly.

His attention was on her perfect breasts that were rising and falling with each ragged intake of breath. When she still lay there unyielding to his gentle touch, he bid her look at him.

Bailey moved her head on the pillow to do as he ordered and when their eyes met, she found herself drawn into the silvery maelstrom swirling there. For just a split second she had seen something dark and lethal then it had dissolved and what she watched as his face came closer to hers was something she could not identify.

It was desire--stark and driving and undeniable--as Van lowered his lips to hers and took possession of her mouth. He swept over her and pressed his chest upon her bare breasts. The tickle of his chest hair abraded her nipples and sent wave after wave of intense longing through her body. His tongue was dueling with hers and pulling her down into the abyss from which there would be no return. He nibbled on her lower lip, swept his tongue across her upper teeth, and thrust that wicked muscle deep into her mouth.

She could feel his knees nudging hers apart and she obeyed his silent demand, shifting her thighs so his lower body could rest heatedly between them. She shivered as he casually threw one leg over hers and rubbed the hardness of his male member against her inner thigh.

He lifted the hand he held above her head and took hold of her other hand--lacing his fingers through hers to bring it up to join its mate. His arms pinned her to the bed as he writhed atop her, grounding himself upon her untried flesh. Releasing her mouth, he asked if his kiss had been better than Doyle's.

"Yes, Milord," Bailey whispered. His kiss had been sheer delight and her lips were still tingling from the taste of his.

Unhooking the fingers of his right hand from hers, he trailed it down her upraised arm and shifted so he could mold his palm to her left breast. At her gasp, he gently massaged her, running the pad of his thumb over her suddenly hard and straining nipple.

"You are so beautiful," he told her. "The most beautiful woman I've ever known."

Bailey doubted that, but it was nice to hear and it helped to ease the anxiety that was rippling through her system. She knew what to expect. She knew him taking her would be painful. She just didn't know what to expect when the pain ended.

His hand left her breast and moved down her bare side and along her hip. He felt her stiffen and knew she was remembering his assault in the alley. Before she could dwell too long on that bad time, he swooped down and captured her lips again, thrusting his tongue between her soft lips to taste the honey of her mouth.

The Modartha's hand had shifted between their bodies and she was aware that he was holding his penis. She could feel a slight dampness where the tip of it touched her between the legs. She expected him to thrust into her but he was apparently only moving himself to a more comfortable position for he slid his hand over her hip to cup her buttock as his lips left hers to trail hungry kisses down her neck and onto the aching plain of her breast.

Bailey cried out as his mouth settled over her nipple and he swirled his tongue over that rock-hard little pebble. Tingles spread like fiery tentacles over her sides and down her legs as he drew upon her breast--licking and grazing, suckling and nibbling. She wriggled beneath him without conscious thought, her panting breath sounding harsh in the still room. She was aware that he had let go of her other hand and now had both her buttocks clutched in his hands as he suckled her. Not even realizing she did so, she lowered her hands from beside her head and spiked her fingers through his dark hair, anchoring his head to her as his lips drew upon her flesh. She was vaguely aware of him shifting his body once again and that something hard and warm was paused at the entrance to her vagina.

Van knew she was lost in the unexpected pleasure he was giving her. Her body was craving his. He didn't want to hurt her, knew he would when he broached her membrane. In counterpoint to doing just that, he clamped his teeth down a bit harder on her nipple than he had before and she shrieked. He took that moment to slide into her--stretching, filling, going deep--and he didn't think she'd even noticed the slight discomfort of his impalement.

It was the most delicious feeling in the world to feel him seated within her. His cock was steel sheathed in velvet. His weight upon her was sublime and she thrilled to that heavy pressure, folding her arms around his shoulder, instinctively arching her hips up to meet his slow and well-timed thrusts.

"That's it, baby," he whispered against her breast. He slid his body upward so his lips were at her ear. "Feel me in you, Bailey. Feel me wanting you." He swept his tongue into her ear and felt her shudder.

Something truly strange was happening deep within her. She felt an itch that, no matter how she moved, only seemed to intensify. It was a feeling that was claiming her and drawing her toward a sensation she could not name. Her insides felt heated and there was a faint tickling, pulsing awareness that had her body held in thrall to it. She squirmed beneath him and pushed herself harder on his stiff shaft. He obliged by thrusting faster and deeper into her, his short nails digging into the flesh of her buttocks.

Van felt her striving to reach that mysterious place, rushing headlong toward the culmination she most likely had never felt. She was writhing under him and her arms and legs were clamped around him. She had abandoned all semblance of fear for him and was taking what he offered and reveling in it. When that first faint vibration spiraled through her sheath, he pushed harder, faster, deeper until it mushroomed into a vortex of feeling.

The pulsations that were ripping through her cunt surprised Bailey and she grunted with the sheer force of their stimulus. Quivering like a bowstring she pressed herself tightly to the Modartha and offered him the sacrifice of her body. She clashed against him as their bodies slapping together, and clung to him as wave after wave of intense pleasure shot through her.

His own climax was rising like magma in a volcano and he didn't attempt to hold it back or delay it. He felt his cum spurt and he held himself still within her so she could experience

the spilling of his seed intensely, completely. He ground his teeth together to keep silent and simply poured himself into her, gaining his own exquisite pleasure that threatened to rip him apart.

Spent, he collapsed atop her. Their breathing was harsh and in counterpoise to one another. Her hands were buried in his thick hair and his fingernails were gripping her ass. He shuddered one final time then rolled off her, pulling himself free of her tight sheath to crash to his back with one arm thrown over his eyes as he gasped for breath.

Bailey could not have imagined what making love with a man had held in store for her. Had she known such pleasure existed, she would have given up her maidenhead long ago. She lay there staring unblinkingly at the ceiling and basking in the warm, delicious feeling that ached between her thighs. Even though the Modartha's juices dripped down beneath her, she could not move--would not move--to break the enchantment under which she'd fallen.

"Did I hurt you?" she heard him ask.

"No, Milord," she replied.

"Van," he said. "My name is Van."

"V..van," she repeated.

He said nothing more and soon she realized he was sleeping. She turned her head to look at him and was amazed that she belonged to this gorgeous man. She was shocked to realize her fear of him had all but gone and in its place had come utter contentment at her situation.

Moving closer to him, she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Before too long, she, too, was sound asleep.

Chapter Three

They were waiting for him when he came out of her apartment complex and they made the mistake of attacking instead of leaving him be. It was a decision that cost both men their lives and made one Modartha commander madder than a sore-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. His roar startled those who were out and about at that early time of the morning and those who were still asleep in their beds hastily dragged the covers over their heads and hid quivering there.

"Sons of bitches!" Van snarled as he ripped the throat from one man and pounced on the other to twist the assailant's head almost all the way off. He stared down at the destruction he had wrought and cursed the dead men again.

There was no doubt in his mind who had planned this little foray into madness. He knew Doyle had thought the men who had been trailing him the day before had done so without detection, but that had been far from the truth. The Modartha had been aware of every step

his trackers had made. He also knew Doyle had been one of the men trailing him and that Doyle wanted him dead.

"No more than I want you dead, you treasonous viper," Van muttered as he kicked at the boot of one of the dead men.

He could feel her eyes on him and glanced up at her building. She was standing at her living area window with the drape pushed aside. He hoped she hadn't seen him dispatching the men who'd been sent after him but he also knew it might well be her who helped do the autopsies on the men.

She held his stare for a moment then left the drape fall back into place, cutting her off from his view.

It was more personal now, he thought as he struck out for the street where he had parked his turbo-powered motorcycle. Doyle wanted Bailey and that just made the hackles rise on Van's back. Throwing a long leg over the seat, he turned on the bike and revved it up, disregarding the early hour and the pedestrians who covered their ears with their hands. He heeled the kick-stand up, gave the machine gas, and peeled out of the parking spot as the meat wagon arrived to clean up the mess he left behind.

* * * *

Bailey looked down at the two bodies passing on the gurneys and knew they were the ones who had met their ends at the hands of her Modartha. That she could think of him in that way surprised her.

"Witnesses said they jumped him outside your building and he dispatched them without breaking a sweat," Striker said. "I gotta ask, Bailes..."

"Don't," she said, knowing he wanted to find out why the Modartha was at her complex.

Striker shrugged, holding up his hands. "Okay. I'm copasetic."

For the rest of the day, she did her job and at the end of the shift, she turned to find her supervisor, Ian Dougherty, standing in the doorway. He motioned her to follow him. Wondering what she'd done now to incur Dougherty's displeasure, she took off her leather apron and followed him down the corridor to his office.

"Shut the door," he ordered before seating himself in the chair behind his desk.

Bailey eased the door closed then turned to face him. Dougherty was a misanthrope. He much preferred the dead to the living, for the dead did not cause him grief. He especially didn't like women and thought they had no place in the forensic science field.

"I understand congratulations are in order," Dougherty said though an expression of such an

emotion did not reach his black eyes.

"He was here?" she asked, a muscle flexing in her jaw.

Dougherty leaned back in his chair. "One of his men came by with the news. The colonel was otherwise occupied. If you will clean out your locker, we can finalize your employment. I will, of course, have your last pay credits forwarded to your banking institution."

It wasn't that she liked her job all that much. It was simply a way to make money and it was better than the other jobs her uncle had acquired for her over the years. She knew she would never have to work another day in her life if that was what she wanted. Modartha pay scales were off the radar.

"That will be fine. I'll come back tomorrow with a box to get my stuff," she managed to say and stood up. She realized that Dougherty was acting uncharacteristically polite to her. Normally, he would be growling at her. The perks of which Byrne spoke were already manifesting themselves. "Is that all?"

Dougherty nodded. "You've been a good employee and your work will be missed," he told her, unable to look up at her now.

"Thank you, Supervisor Dougherty," she said and left his office. As she shut the door, she felt a giddy elation she thought might well be freedom. It was so foreign, she had a hard time adjusting to it.

Doyle was waiting outside the building for her again and Bailey came to a stop, staring at him with fear. She looked around--expecting the Modartha to step out of the lengthening shadows of the nearby building.

"I need to talk to you, Bailey," Doyle said.

"You shouldn't be here," she said and hurried down the ramp way.

"It won't take long," the Resistance leader said.

"Just like it won't take you long to die."

Bailey jumped and snapped her head around. Her eyes widened for the Modartha was standing directly behind Doyle and there was murderous rage in the man's silvery glare.

Doyle spun around, his hand going to the dagger at his hip. He slashed out with the blade but the Modartha stepped back casually and a lethal smile formed on his lips. He drew his own weapon from the black leather sheath strapped to his thigh and for the first time Bailey realized Van Byrne was left-handed.

"You want to play, Doyle," Van said, giving the Resistance leader a come-on gesture with

index and middle fingers of his right hand. "Let's do it." He crouched and when Doyle sprang at him again, the Modartha blocked the jab then Byrne's blade flashed, slicing a long line across Doyle's tan shirt and drawing blood.

Bailey had backed up against the wall as she watched the two men fighting. It was obvious from the start who would win the duel. Van moved gracefully, easily, and he parried the wild, undisciplined sweeps Doyle sent his way with offhand skill. As the men circled one another--looking for an opening--she became aware of people having stopped to watch the fight. The public transportation bus had stopped at the curb and its riders were pressed against the large windows. On the morgue's loading ramp, employees were gathered. Two Portal Police cruisers had arrived and the drivers were standing together with their arms crossed.

Doyle leapt toward his opponent and the Modartha stepped out of the way, bringing the edge of his right hand down hard on Doyle's wrist. Doyle's web fell out of his numb hand and before he could go after it, the Modartha had backhanded him viciously across the face. Stumbling, Doyle went down hard, skidding on the pavement, and a collective gasp rang out from the watchers. Before the Resistance leader could scramble to his feet, his opponent whirled around behind him, reached down to grab a handful of Doyle's sandy brown hair and then drew Doyle's head back, obsidian blade placed at the defeated man's throat.

"No!" Bailey shouted. She rushed forward. "Milord, please, don't!"

Van turned his head slowly to look at her. She could see the bloodlust on his hard face. He growled at her with his lips peeled back from his teeth. His hand tightened in Doyle's hair.

"Please?" she beseeched him, hand out in pleading.

The Modartha hesitated. He glanced down at his opponent then back up at Bailey. He was barely breathing hard but Doyle was dragging harsh gulps of air into his lungs.

Bailey ventured a step closer. "Please," she said softly.

With a snarl of disgust, Van released his grip on Doyle's hair and stepped back. He nodded at the Portal Police who rushed forward to arrest the Resistance leader. Taking hold of Doyle's arms, they dragged him toward one of the cruisers. The other policeman began ordering the onlookers to be about their business.

"There's nothing else to see," the Portal Policeman snapped. "Move on."

The transportation bus released its brakes and slowly pulled away from the curb. The morgue's evening employees went back inside the forbidding building. Pedestrians who had stopped scurried away, not even bothering to glance behind them.

Watching Doyle being shoved into the back of a cruiser, Bailey knew the man was as good as dead. The Slándáil Phoiblí would issue his death warrant and before the week was out,

Kona Doyle would be hanged in the Central Plaza. She saw him looking at her with hopelessness from the cruiser's window as it drove away.

"It's a full moon tonight," he said as he re-sheathed his blade. "I won't come to you again until the danger has passed."

"I understand," she said and wondered why she ached to sweep the dark hair back from his forehead. By rights, she should be fearful of him but she realized her unease was slowly evaporating.

"I would like the Joining to be the seventeenth of this month, at midnight, of course." For the first time, he looked at her with just a trace of uncertainty. "Is that all right with you?"

She nodded. "I've no problem with that, Milord."

"Van," he said a little too quickly.

"Van," she said and looked down at the pavement.

He cleared his throat. "Attendants?" he queried and when she lifted her head, he shrugged. "Guests?"

"My uncle and my co-worker Nate Striker," she said. "I would like them to be there."

"Striker?" he repeated with his eyes narrowed. "The half-man?"

"Striker, my friend," she corrected, chin raised.

His lips twitched. "Will he be your maid-of-honor, then?"

Bailey started to protest his insult, but realized he was teasing her and that surprised her. She saw glints of humor in his silver eyes. A faint smile pulled at her mouth. "He will be my only attendant," she stated. "My uncle will give me away. Who will be your best man?"

He thought about that for a moment. "My little brother Patrick."

"All right," she agreed.

"That was easy to settle," he said, blowing out a breath.

"Did you think it wouldn't be?" she countered.

"I really didn't know what to think," he replied. "This is all new to me."

"Just as it's new to me," she said.

“Then we’ll learn together,” he prophesied. He reached down and took her hand. “My bike is around the corner. I’ll give you a lift home.”

She didn’t protest that she wanted to walk, even though she did. She’d seen him riding hell-out on his motorcycle and wasn’t that keen on climbing aboard the dangerous looking machine. When she saw it up close, she was even less inclined to want to take a ride on the powerful thing.

“I don’t know,” she said without thinking.

“I’ll go slowly,” he said.

“Can it *go* slow?” she countered as he helped her to sit on the steel gray motorcycle.

“It’s like me and doesn’t like to, but when needed, it can go very slow,” he said in a husky voice that sent shivers into her lower body. He put his leg over the tank then took his seat. “Put your arms around me, wench.”

“Bailey,” she automatically corrected and slid her arms around his lean waist.

“I rather like calling you wench,” he said as he turned on the potent machine nestled between his long legs.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she said.

He shrugged and leaned back so their bodies were pressed closer together. He released the clutch and the engine shot away from the curb like a rocket.

“Van!” she shouted, burying her cheek against his back and squeezing her eyes shut. “That’s not slow!”

She felt the rumble of his laughter coming from his back rather than heard it. She listened as the machine went through its gears then when it was at what she reasoned must be its cruising speed she felt his left hand cover hers where they rested on his belly. He caressed her fingers gently for a moment then returned his hand as he banked the bike around a corner.

There was power between her legs that she could feel and it was doing strange things to her body. With her cheek pressed to her Modartha’s back, she could think of him in no other way now, she could sense the coiled power of him. His back was strong and as he breathed, she could feel the ridged muscles of his belly. The two stimuli were playing havoc with her libido.

She eased back from him so she could see where they were. He disdained the use of a helmet and his dark hair fluttered in the wind, a few strands flying back to tickle her cheek as she leaned her chin on his shoulder. They were only a few hundred yards from her

apartment complex and she sighed, wishing the ride could last longer. Almost as though he could hear her wayward thoughts, he caressed her hands again and increased the speed of the bike, shooting past the entrance to the complex.

“Where are we going?” she yelled at him.

“You’ll see,” he yelled back, his voice caught by the wind to rush past her ear.

He took a road that led out into the countryside and opened the throttle so the powerful cycle sped along with blurring speed. The road was paved but there were cracks in it that caused Bailey’s rear end to bounce on the seat. Before long, she was praying for the ride to end instead of continuing. Her hair was whipping about her face and was bound to be so tangled she’d never get it unsnarled.

Van was following a little stream that led to the farmland he had purchased years before. It was here he came when the moon turned full and it was into the forest beyond where he roamed in his wolf form. The land was rich and lush and offered a sanctuary for him beyond the concrete jungle in which he was forced to live and work. One day, he hoped to retire to the farm. Nearing the unpaved road that led out to his land, he slowed the machine down. A wide iron gate blocked off entry to the road but he flicked a control on the handlebar of his bike and the gate slowly swung open so that by the time he turned onto the graveled roadway, he easily maneuvered the bike through the opening then flicked the control to shut it behind him.

It was to a small pond he took her and when he braked the motorcycle on a little rise that overlooked the tranquil water, he heard Bailey draw in a quick breath.

“Do you own this?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, shutting off the engine. He sat there with his legs spread wide on the ground, his hands on the handlebars. “What do you think?”

Her arms were still around his waist. “It is beautiful.”

“Hop off,” he told her.

Swinging her leg over the back of the motorcycle, she did as he ordered, smoothing down the hem of her short gown. She walked closer to the edge of the rise and looked over. It was a gentle slope that led from the rise to the pond and she knew it wouldn’t take much to venture down to the inviting water.

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, laying his chin on her shoulder. “I’ve always thought this would be the perfect place for a house,” he said.

“It would,” she agreed. The vista spread out below her was filled with mature trees and bushes, thick green grass studded with red clover. The air smelled of honeysuckle and

banana vine.

“Would you like to live here?” he asked softly.

She thought of the cramped apartment, the restrictions on not being able to paint the bland beige walls, the restrictions on not changing the drapes or the carpeting or not hanging art or decorations on the walls.

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

“Then this is where we’ll build our home,” he said and turned her in his arms. He put his crooked index finger under her chin. “A home you can have exactly as you wish it.”

She closed her eyes as he lowered his lips to hers. His kiss was soft, fleeting, and when she opened her eyes, he was looking down at her with a tender, gentle look that made her insides quiver.

“I want to taste you once more before I’m forced to spend the next three days howling at the moon and missing you,” he said and with his arm around her shoulder, led her down the gentle slope toward the pond.

“Do you really howl at the moon?” she asked.

“Not usually, but I’ve a feeling I’ll be doing it this time,” he answered.

“You won’t do something bad will you?” she asked.

“I might be tempted to lick myself but that’s about as bad as I’ll get,” he said and laughed at the heated blush that spread over her face.

“You are terrible,” she chastised him.

“But I’m all yours, little coroner,” he said with a wink.

Bailey discovered she had lost all fear of this man. He had drawn her to his side and held her there with such strength, such authority that she felt safe and protected. The soft mat of grass to which he took her was inviting and it smelled heavenly as he knelt down with her.

“I realized something today,” he said as he slipped his hands around her waist. “You have come to mean a great deal to me.” He pulled her gown over her head. “I would have fought an entire regiment to keep you.”

“I realized something, too,” she said shyly.

“That being?” he prompted.

“I was proud that you won.”

He stilled with her gown crushed in his hand. “Truly?”

“Truly,” she replied and with trembling fingers, she put her hands to his uniform jacket and began unbuttoning the double-breasted gray wool garment. Cut short in the waist with no external pockets, the jacket fit him as though he’d been poured into it. She peeled back the front panel and unbuttoned the inner, pushing it down over his shoulders to reveal his brawny chest. She sucked in her breath.

“Are you afraid of me, little one?” he asked, his forehead crinkling with concern.

She shook her head and reached for his belt. “Not any more,” she replied. She unbuckled his belt and then unhooked the clasp at his fly. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to his. “Are you afraid of me?”

He smiled with his eyes bright and it transformed his face from being merely handsome to being breathtakingly gorgeous. “By the gods, I’m terrified of you, Sweeting,” he answered.

She tugged his zipper down. “You should be,” she said and reached inside to wrap her fingers around his cock. “I’m the mere human who will tame your beastly heart.”

“Think you can tame me, do you?” he queried.

She smiled at him. “I can try,” she answered and slid the tip of her finger over the slit of his cock.

Van shivered at her touch and moved his legs further apart as he knelt there. She was on her knees before him and as she fondled him, he lowered his head to steal a kiss from her tempting mouth. His arms went around her to bring her against him and he fell backwards, drawing her with him so she landed on top of him, her hand still clutching his shaft.

“You are entirely too impatient,” she said. She pushed herself up and turned so she could pull his boots off. That done, she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his uniform pants and drew them over his hips and down his legs, hissing when the garment resisted.

“Now who’s being impatient?” he quipped.

She knelt there between his legs and looked at him. From wide, muscled chest to long, powerful legs, he was a perfect specimen and he was hers.

“All yours,” he said as though he’d read her mind again.

Bending over, she took him into her mouth and smiled when he drew in a ragged, loud gasp. She felt his hands in her hair as she suckled him and watched his legs tense as he lifted his hips up to her in offering. Swirling her tongue around the head of his shaft, she could taste

the saltiness of him and wondered if she tasted the same to him.

“No, wench,” he said. “You taste like honey.”

Laving him from tip to base, lapping around his thick circumference, delving her tongue into the oozing slit, she drew his scent and taste deep into her soul. His cock was hard as steel but his flesh was warm and soft, like silk as she licked him.

“Bailey,” he groaned and she looked up to see his eyes closed, his lips open, and his tongue flicking across his upper lip. When she took him deep into the moist cavern of her mouth, she heard him draw in a shuddery breath and her name on his tongue was like a prayer.

She suckled him, reveling in his body quivering now and again as she gently cupped his balls, ran the tip of her finger experimentally along the tight little pucker of his ass and along the rigid length of him.

“Bailey...” he said and she heard the warning note in his voice.

Clad only in her bra and panties, Bailey straightened up and reached behind her to free her breasts. The moment they were unbound, her lover put his palms to them to heft their weight and run this thumb over her nipples. When she would have moved so she could take off her panties, he saved her the trouble by snaring the thin material with the fingers of his left hand and ripping them from her.

“Van!” she complained, the sound of the material tearing sending a tingle down her spine.

“I’ll buy you a thousand pairs of those skimpy things,” he promised then took her hips in his hands and lifted her, settling her down upon his rigid cock and sighing as she gripped him with her warm, moist channel.

“So impatient,” she said.

She rode him gently--rocking back and forth--until she saw the fine beading of sweat on his brow and upper lip. “Am I hurting you?” she asked.

“You are killing me here, Bailey,” he said through clenched teeth. “If you don’t come for me, baby, I’m going to leave you behind in the dust!”

She cocked her head to one side. “Why didn’t you say this was a race?” she asked. She clamped her knees to his sides and increased her rhythm but it wasn’t enough for him. He dug his fingers into her hips.

“Let me show you how it’s done,” he growled.

Easily lifting and lowering her upon his cock, he settled into a tempo that soon had her panting with pleasure.

“Come for me, Bailey. Come for your Modartha!” he demanded.

Bailey cried out and when he felt her delicious sheath beginning to pulse, he drove into her harder, faster, increasing the depth of his thrusts until she was bursting all around him like a dandelion drifting on the wind.

“Van!” she shouted and her vagina oozed warm juices down his straining shaft. Her entire body quivered with the force of her climax.

He pulled her down hard on him one last time then spilled himself into her, straining so she could feel every last spurt, every last convulsion of his rod as it claimed her.

Bailey groaned as the final quiver of his cock stilled inside her and she stretched out atop him with her head on his thundering chest.

“On second thought I think it’s more than just wanting you,” she heard him say as he cradled her against him. “By the gods, I think it’s far more than that.”

“I know,” she said.

The sun was slipping low on the horizon and night would be coming soon and with it the full moon that would signal a great change in the wondrous man lying beneath her. Reluctantly, she got to her feet and held out a hand to help her lover stand. When he was standing before her, she laid her palm against his cheek.

“It is growing late, my Modartha,” she said softly.

He eyed the setting sun and sighed. “I wish we had more time.”

“We will,” she said.

He reached out to gently cup her cheek. “Have you tamed me, wench?” he asked softly.

“Have you conquered me, Modartha?” she queried.

He drew her to him for one last kiss. His lips were gentle upon hers, tender, and when he moved back and smiled at her. He shook his head. “No, I didn’t conquer you. That wasn’t my intention.”

“And what exactly was your intention?” she asked.

“To win your heart.”

“I believe you might be well on your way to doing just that,” she told him.

He searched her eyes. “Could you give your heart to me, Bailey MacKenna?”

“Could you give me yours, Crevan Byrne?”

He nodded slowly. “Aye, wench. I believe I already have.”

The End