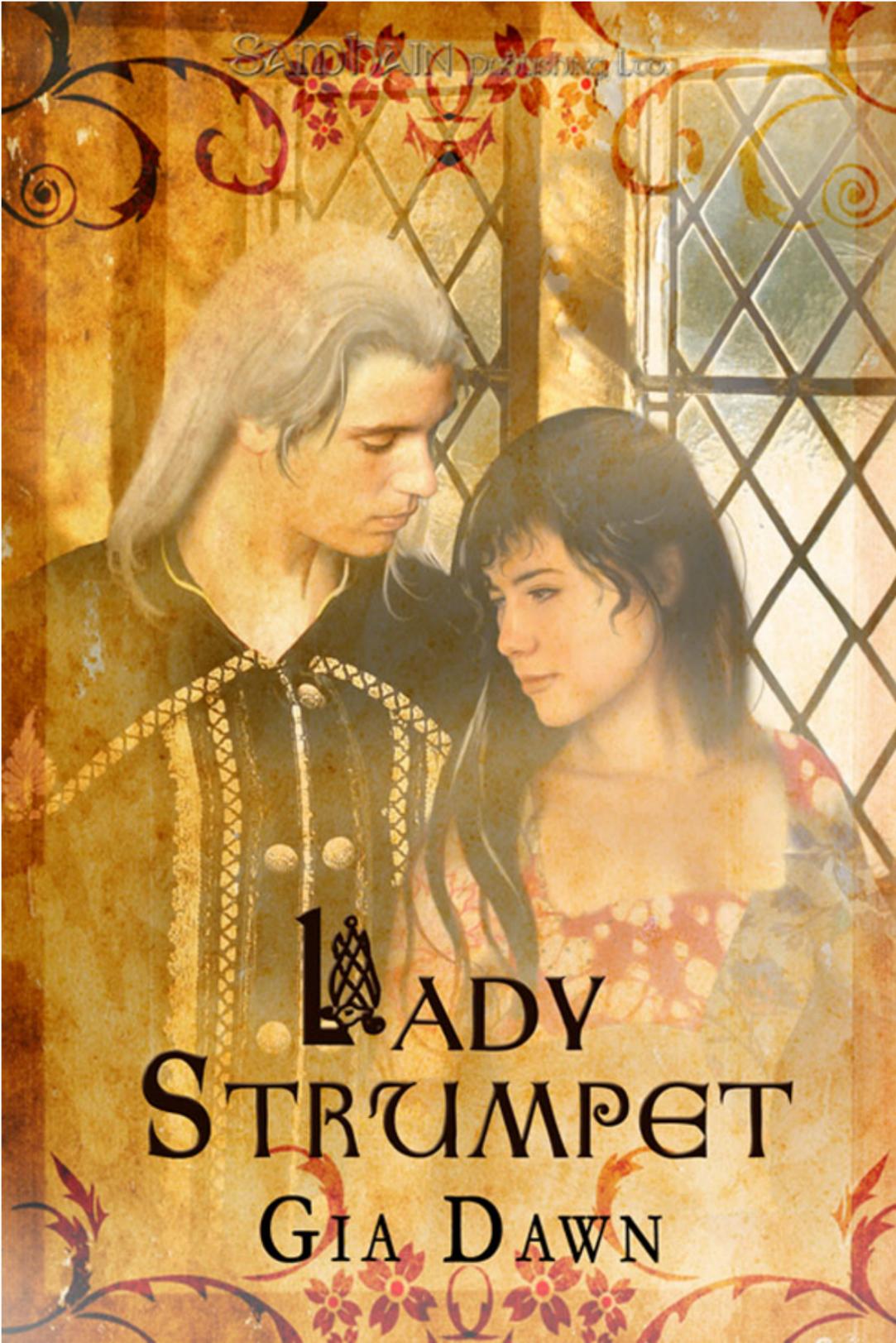


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LADY
STRUMPET
GIA DAWN

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Lady Strumpet

Demons of Dunmore 2

Gia Dawn

Dedication

For Bob, he would have appreciated the notoriety. And with special thanks to all the members of the Ohio Valley Romance Writers of America—you all totally rock!!

Prologue

"Oh, dear." Rose read the letter quickly.

Snapdragon winked one eye open. "No you don't. I am just getting my nap in. We have weeks before we're supposed to work again. I plan on sleeping straight through."

Even Pansy nodded. "It's in the Fairy Employment Contract. No assignments back to back. Mage War Clause. We all needed a few decades sleep after that." She leaned back in her rocking chair and propped her feet on a flying cushion.

"Nevertheless, we have new orders." Rose moved to the scrying pool.

Snapdragon reached out her hand. "Give me that."

Rose floated the letter across the room. "It won't say anything different to you."

"This isn't fair," Snapdragon complained. "How come we get all the tough jobs?"

Pansy stood and smoothed out her dress. "Send it back, Rose, I'll go look up the proper notations."

Snapdragon grinned wickedly. "That is a wonderful idea."

Rose was already swirling her hand in the water. "Whatever you think best. In the meantime, I plan on doing my job. It's not fair for them to suffer while we bicker among ourselves. Go on," she added as the scene solidified and took shape. "I'll get started just in case." She smiled as she bent her head over the bowl.

Snapdragon hesitated. "Maybe we should have a little peek first." She peered over Rose's shoulder. "Oh, he's very different, isn't he?"

"And she is quite...unique," Pansy added from the other side of the pool.

Gia Dawn

They all giggled and settled down to watch with rapt attention.

Chapter One

“You cannot be serious, my liege.” Wynn gazed in horrid fascination at the worst-dressed female he had ever seen. “Marry *her*?”

Even from this far across the great ballroom, her dress stood out in a nightmare of mismatched colors. The skirt was green, the bodice red, and the kirtle underneath was the brightest pink Wynn had ever seen. It hurt his eyes just to look at it, and offended sensibilities he didn’t know he had.

King Edred smiled. The expression was not meant to comfort. “Lovely, isn’t she, the new Lady of Seville? It will take some training in proper etiquette—and a new seamstress—but she could be a great asset to a man...especially a man such as yourself.”

Wynn faked nonchalance while his brain scrambled frantically to follow the king’s line of thought. “Why would a-man-such-as-myself need her for a wife?”

“She has a title, Master Builder.”

“We’ve been through this before, my king.” Wynn tried hard to control his expression. “No noble family will let one of their daughters marry me. They fear a child would be born with my particular affliction.”

“Ah, but the beauty of it is, this lady has no family. Have you not heard her story?” Edred was watching Wynn closely.

“You know I pay little attention to court gossip.”

“Her family was tried and executed during the Marshton witch trials. I was recently given documentation proving those accusations were false. Richard Nolan and Peter Marshton—pious man of the church he was—conspired to amass a considerable fortune by the torture and murder of

several prominent families. This woman is the only living relative to come forward so far.”

“You believed her?” Wynn could not keep the skepticism from his tone.

Edred scratched his crotch. “I truly don’t care who she is. I restored her title and lands. Now you will make the best of it.”

Wynn kept his anger in check. While Edred was an amiable and generous king, there were times when he refused to take no for an answer. Wynn was certain this was just such a time.

“Have you informed her of this?” Wynn’s eyes remained riveted on the garish sight the woman made. “She may not like the husband you have chosen.”

Edred motioned for a passing servant to bring them two goblets of wine. “She was brought to us by the Dunmore family. Use your influence.”

Wynn jerked his eyes from the woman and fastened them on the king instead. “Ladies Finella and Samantha are involved?”

Edred grinned wolfishly. “Up to their meddling eyebrows. Your surrogate mothers have put pressure on me every step of the way. Seems they feel somewhat responsible for the girl. She is a friend of Lord Dunmore and his new bride.” Edred nodded to several nobles who stopped to bow as they passed. They did not so much as glance at Wynn. Wynn gritted his teeth, feeling the muscle pulse in his jaw.

“By the way, there is something else you should know.” Edred’s grin grew.

“What is that, Your Majesty?”

“She was a whore.”

Wynn refused to choke on the sip of wine he was trying to swallow when the king hit him with that bit of information.

“I won’t bother to lie,” Edred continued without pause, “the match would be good for both of you.”

“Because in my own way I am as outcast as she?”

Edred shrugged. "Marry her and become Lord Seville. She gains the protection and money you can offer, you gain her family title and all that goes with it. Only a nobleman can be made Lord High Mason."

Wynn's heart started to pound. Edred was offering him the one position he had always desired and a fairly easy way to achieve it. Marry the lady as ordered. A simple, uncomplicated business arrangement that would suit both their needs. Surely she would see the wisdom in the match. He knew Edred saw the hope that flashed across his face, but for once Wynn did not bother to hide it. "To marriage," he said, raising his glass for a toast.

Edred did not repeat the gesture. "The Chamber of Lords will meet in four weeks to decide the new appointments. Lord High Mason is a lifetime position—you won't have another chance at it. I suggest you woo the lady quickly." The king inclined his head to where several young lordlings had surrounded the woman's small form. "The pack is already closing in."

Wynn bowed. He had been dismissed. Blending into the shadows at the edges of the room, he made his way to where she stood. Her gown acted like a beacon, its clashing colors keeping her in sight as Wynn strode slowly toward her.

As he moved, he planned his attack. His appearance had forced him to become a master at perfection. Every word, every gesture, elegant and controlled. He would make his proposition to the lady with poise and grace. He could mold the homely country bumpkin into a cultured lady of court, offer his experience in exchange for her bloodline.

A perfect opportunity for both of them.

Approaching cautiously, Wynn stared down the simpering lordlings one by one. He paid no attention to the disdain that filled their eyes. He had seen it all before, and cared less for them than the mangy dogs that skulked the palace grounds, tails tucked hard between their legs.

When he was close enough to make out her features, Wynn stared at the lady in silent surprise. With hair the color of the midnight sky, a black so dark it was almost blue, and dusky skin that gleamed in the

glow of the thousand candles that lit the room, she was without a doubt the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He thought her head would barely clear his shoulders, and the curves filling out that ghastly gown made him unable to peel his eyes away.

Wynn froze, hesitant to speak, his newly made plans melting like shadows from his mind. Instead, he pictured that mane of glorious hair draping over his stomach as she moved her mouth to take him. He saw her beautiful breasts captured in his hands, heard her cries of surrender as he plucked their knotted tips. He smelled the musk of her desire, sweet and pungent on his flesh. His cock roused, ready and eager for the hunt.

With effort, he willed the want away. Emotion brought complications. Wynn refused to let complications stand in the way of his ambition.

“Good evening,” he managed at last, bowing before her.

The woman did not bother to even glance his way. “Are you another lord come to whimper for my favor?” Her full ruby mouth twisted in mockery. “They crawl out of the woodwork like roaches.”

“I am not a lord.”

“Good for you.” She reached beneath the green skirt to pull off one pink shoe. “Damn, these are the most uncomfortable things I have ever been cursed to wear.”

Wynn groaned inwardly. She not only dressed like a strumpet, she swore like one too. He had his work cut out for him. “Perhaps my lady would let me find her a chair.” He offered her his arm. She remained bent over, tugging at her other shoe, giving him a mesmerizing look down her bodice. He took full advantage of the view.

“I’ve been told ‘tis rude to stare.” When she finally tilted up her head to look at him, her eyes grew wide and her mouth gaped open.

Wynn frowned. While he had been prepared for her reaction, it angered him anyway. He knew what she had seen, his too pale skin and hair of white that would be more appropriate on a man three times his age.

Outcast. Unclean.

He tried to control the tic that pulsed in the muscle of his jaw. Tried to keep his voice light and unconcerned. But the years of rejection had taken their toll and he failed miserably at both.

“’Tis rude to stare,” he gritted out from between clenched teeth. Wynn bent and pressed his nose close to hers. If she was going to gape at him like a freak show attraction, then she might as well get her money’s worth. He tucked a finger beneath her chin and snapped her mouth shut. “Can you see well enough,” he demanded, “or should I pull a candle closer?”

Chapter Two

Jane gazed in stunned amazement at the most unusual man she had ever seen. Long white hair hung past his shoulders. His skin was nearly that same hue, and his eyes were the color of the sky in winter, a blue so pale they seemed to be made of ice. Dressed in unrelieved black—shirt, doublet, and breeches—the stark color only served to intensify his unnatural pallor.

“You are *albhus*.” The words came out before she could stop them. Jane had heard stories of the white ones. Some said they were fairy folk trapped in human form, others that they were living ghosts, or demons sent to steal the souls of men.

He glared down at her from his regal height, his silvered eyes harsh and uncompromising, and Jane began to believe the tales were true.

“I did not mean to insult you.” She smiled when he said nothing, hoping she hadn’t really offended him. She seemed to have offended everyone of late. The last three weeks of her life had been harder than she expected as she tried her best to fit in at the palace, despite the fact that everyone she met would have much preferred she crawl back into whatever tavern she’d crawled out of.

“Of course not.” His voice was as frigid as his expression.

Jane felt her temper rise a few degrees and struggled desperately to squelch the emotion. Ladies of court did not curse, they did not yell, and they most certainly did not behave improperly at all. So she’d been told over and over and over again. “If I did, I apologize,” she bit out as sweetly as she could.

“Accepted.” His tone had not softened one tiny bit.

“Are you always this disagreeable, or are you just trying to impress me?” Jane gave him her best I-think-you’re-a-wanker smile, finally having enough of being ridiculed and talked down to. She thought if one more pompous man tried to lord it over her and then claim to be so smitten by her beauty he had to have her for his wife, she would fly into a rage the likes of which they had never seen, to hell with being a lady or not!

He stared at her in silence for several long seconds, and Jane began to wonder if she had really stirred his wrath. Then one corner of his perfect mouth twisted into the semblance of a smile. “Feisty little beauty, hmmm?” His eyes turned a softer shade of blue and the muscle in his jaw relaxed. “I am Wynn, Master Builder of Westmyre.”

He held out his hand, waiting, and when Jane copied the gesture he wrapped his fingers over hers and brought her hand to his lips. His touch sent a chill racing along her spine. While she had thought his skin might feel as cold as the glitter in his eyes, his hand was warm and strong, enveloping hers completely.

Her skin prickled, her breasts tightening to rub their peaks against the material of her gown. She knew he must have noticed when he let his gaze drop to her chest. Refusing to cower from his appraisal, Jane kept her shoulders held proudly back and let him look his fill.

He gave her a slow smile that sent blood racing to her cheeks. How on earth could she blush? She’d had more experience with men than she cared to remember, and he was a man like any other.

No, not like any other. He was different.

She could see it in the way he held himself so stiffly as if afraid of letting any emotion show. She could feel it in the way he touched her, daring her not to shy away. She thought of all the ways she could please him. Ways she could make him beg. Ways she could make him scream. She shivered as an unfamiliar ache settled between her thighs and she pressed her legs together, hoping to stem the tide of desire, unwilling to let him see how he moved her.

“And you are lady...lady who?” He continued to hold her hand long after it was proper to do so.

“Jane. Just Jane.” Her title was useless against him.

One pale brow arched.

Her hand trembled.

He let it go.

The room grew cold as he stepped away, and Jane fought the urge to grab his hand and curl it again over hers, needing a friend, needing someone to help her through this maze of solitude she was lost in. She sighed and rubbed her neck. It had grown stiff from staring up at him for so long.

“Um...well, nice to meet you,” she said awkwardly, bringing one thumb to her mouth. She chewed unconsciously on the nail until he reached out and pulled her hand away, tucking it into the crook of his arm.

Jane’s desire built anew.

“Dine with me.”

“This late?”

“My work keeps me away all day. ‘Tis rare I get a chance to be with such a beautiful woman. Humor me,” he added when she opened her mouth to refuse.

Some magic arced between them, a bond that could not be denied. She wanted him—wanted everything about him, despite his hard and stern exterior. Without thinking, Jane reached up to finger a strand of hair that had fallen across his shoulder. She felt him fight the urge to shrink from the touch of her hand.

“’Tis softer than mine,” she said gently, “and has no curl at all. Has it always been this color, from the day you were born?”

“To the best of my knowledge.” It surprised her when he bent his head, letting her study the stark white strands. Temptation made her bold. She captured a thick lock in her hand and let it slide across her skin. He stood utterly still, giving nothing of his mood away.

“Is that a yes?” he finally asked, a dark light simmering in his eyes.

Jane blushed again and glanced at the shoes that dangled from her other hand. “I guess I should put them back on?”

“Leave them off if you want, my room is not far.”

Jane breathed a sigh of relief. “I really hate these new shoes. They are too pointy in the toes. But the color is amazing, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely.” His lips twitched.

“And they look so nice with the rest of this outfit. I put it together myself.”

He actually managed a grin. “I never would have guessed.”

After giving curt instructions to a servant passing by, Wynn led her from the crowded room. Solitude cloaked them as they walked the empty halls. When she shivered, he gathered her close. For some reason Jane felt protected by this strange man, as if nothing could ever harm her again while he was walking by her side.

She fought off the feeling. She was on her own, she always had been. Whatever comfort she might pretend he offered was only the foolish longing of her mind. This powerful man at court could have no lasting interest in a woman with a history like hers—unless he was the same as the others, seeking a title and the privilege that came with it.

She groaned when they turned down another hall and passed the door to her chamber. Baskets of flowers stood piled on top of boxes of food and bottles of wine. Perfumed napkins stank up the air and cheap painted plates littered the floor.

Jane threw down her shoes and poked through the wreckage. “Can I interest you in some wine...food...horrible perfume?”

“This is your room?” He plucked a single rose from the mass of drooping foliage.

“I’m afraid so. I’ve gotten over twenty proposals of marriage since yesterday. Funny how money and a title bring out a man’s undying love.” She frowned. “You aren’t in the market for marriage are you?”

He touched one elegant finger to her cheek “If I were, what would it take to win you?”

Jane stepped away. “I will never marry.” Was it a trick of the light that caused a shadow to flicker in his eyes? “I have seen firsthand how most men treat their wives, both highborn and not. I may be untutored, but I am not a fool, Master Builder.”

“Wynn,” he said, tucking the rose into her hair. “Just Wynn. My room is the next door down. Come.” He unlocked the door and stepped aside.

Jane tried to calm the nervous beat of her heart as she walked into the Master Builder’s chamber. She looked around curiously. It was as stark as the man himself—grey marble floors and black velvet curtains hung in marked contrast against pure-white paneled walls. Compared to the other rooms Jane had seen, Wynn’s was small, with only a black-draped alcove to hide the bed in the corner, and a table with two chairs placed next to the fireplace. The most prominent feature was a workbench that took up one entire wall. It was covered with sheets of paper, stacks of wood and various metals, and piles of broken charcoal sticks. He obviously used this room more for business than pleasure.

That thought appealed to her more than it should have.

“Do you stay here often?” She ran one hand down a heavy velvet curtain.

“Yes. I had it decorated to suit my taste.”

“I can see that.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” There was a tense edge to his voice.

Jane turned to study the room in all directions. “There’s no color.”

“Of course there’s color. ‘Tis a study in shadow and light, contrasts, opposition.”

“You speak as if it is at war with itself. There is no joy, no—

“No what?” He stepped close and Jane could feel the warmth of his body where it reached out to hers. Despite the icy front he put on for the world, she knew he must be lonely.

She was familiar with lonely, she had studied it all her life.

“Heart...it has no heart. Do you?” She turned and placed her hand against his chest. She could feel the steady pumping of his blood.

Already she grew damp with desire. She wanted to peel his shirt away and touch his skin, trace the pattern of muscle that rippled over his shoulders, run her hand down his stomach and hear him groan her name. It stunned her that she could need so much. In the past, she’d shut herself off from the men who came to use her. It meant nothing, she felt nothing, dreaming of another life while she pocketed the coin they paid. Never had she lain with such a proud and elegant man. Never had her body ached in this desperate arousal. Never had she felt the urge to plead for a single touch.

One slick of his hand across her breast. One thrust of his fingers inside her, high, deep, while she whimpered in his arms. She would sob for him. Scream for him. Cry out in bliss as her body swallowed the length of his cock. She wanted to have him take his tongue and taste her as no man had done before.

Their eyes locked and held.

“My heart is the same as other men’s,” he replied in a dangerous tone. “My blood still runs red. I hunger and thirst, feel pain, desire. Does that satisfy your curiosity, or should I strip for closer inspection?” He took off his doublet and placed it on a chair.

Jane refused to lower her eyes. “Why do you feel the need to twist each word I say? If you are looking for insult, I can make your dreams come true. What do you prefer, something simple like bastard? Or how about a longer taunt, oh-great-arrogant-snob-with-his-head-stuck-up-his-ass? Strip that perfect body down, I cannot wait to see it!” She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot on the floor. She didn’t know why she felt the need to goad him. But something about his chilly pride had her picking and probing for any chinks in his armor, looking for a way to peel off his mask and find the truth of the man beneath.

“Most other ladies would have run screaming out the door by now.” There was some grudging admiration in his words.

“Most other ladies didn’t grow up in a tavern.”

“No, they didn’t.” Did he actually smile?

The mood was broken by a sharp knock at the door. When Wynn opened it, a line of servants marched in with trays of food and drink. The smell was heavenly. Jane watched as two places were set at the table, each with a tall stack of plates and too many pieces of silver to count.

“I promised you food.” He held out a chair at the table.

“I will stay on one condition.”

“Please don’t tell me I really have to strip.”

Jane shot him a wicked look. “Was that a joke?”

He lifted one broad shoulder. “Sit.”

“Do you promise to be nice?”

“As nice as I can be. Please,” he added in a softer tone.

Jane sat and stared in dismay at the stack of plates and unfamiliar eating tools. “What is all of this?”

“The queen’s new passion. They were introduced by a merchant from the Northlands last year. She insists everyone learn to use them. You haven’t dined with the royals?”

Jane shook her head, refusing to admit she’d been too embarrassed to accept any invitation—for this very reason.

He sat across from her, picked up a soft cloth of linen and placed it on his lap, watching her curiously. “’Tis called a napkin.”

“’Tis called the silliest thing I ever saw.” Nevertheless, Jane followed suit, willing herself not to blush again. “And this?” She picked up a spoon with holes in the bottom.

“For berries and nuts.”

Jane snorted. “What’s wrong with using your fingers?” She picked up a sugared date and tried to bite into the fruit, but Wynn captured her wrist in his hand, slowly brought it to his mouth, and sucked the bit from her fingers. Jane felt his heat all the way up her arm. Her breath stopped as the fire blossomed between her thighs, taunting, mocking,

daring her to deny the affect he had on her. His eyes held hers as he continued his feast of her skin.

When she thought she could take no more, he released her. "While I appreciate the finer points of eating from your hand," he said, his voice thick and heady, "it cannot be done in company. Use the berry spoon." He piled several pieces of fruit on his plate.

Jane deliberately used her fingers again, and smiled sweetly when he glowered. "Do you have a favorite dish?" she asked, breaking off a piece of bread and dipping it in butter.

"I eat what is placed in front of me. For butter." He held up a round-bladed knife.

Jane sighed and reached for hers. "What are all these plates for?"

"The small one on top is for salad—"

"Salad?"

Wynn pointed to a bowl filled with leafy lettuces and green onions. Jane shuddered.

"I will not eat that."

Wynn graced her with a half-smile. "Not my favorite either."

"Ah ha, so you do like some things more than others." Jane pointed at him with a two-pronged something.

"Fork," he supplied, using it to stab at a piece of salad. It took several tries before the leaf stuck.

Jane gave him a gloating smile and took a leaf in her fingers. "This is much easier."

"Easy is not the point. Fancy, elegant and easy do not always go together. This is the way things are done at court. You don't have any other option. They will eat you alive, lady, if you do not learn to fit in. You have no idea how cruel this place can be." His silvery brows drew together in a frown and his jaw locked, erasing any glimpse of the smile he had shown before.

"I know." Jane pushed her plates away. "I truly hate it here, I plan to leave tomorrow."

“Where will you go, to your estate?”

Jane tried to stab a piece of ham with her fork. After several failed attempts, she threw the utensil across the table in disgust. “No. I intend to sell.” Her appetite vanished as unwelcome memories tried to surface. She reached for a goblet of wine, instead. “Interested? I promise it will go cheap.”

“Have you even seen what you are giving up?” He bit into a hunk of cheese.

“I don’t want to see it. Not now, not ever. Name any price, I won’t argue.” Suddenly restless, Jane stood and paced across the chamber, taking deep drinks of the sweet red wine. Music drifted up from the palace grounds as she moved to the velvet-draped window and drew the curtain aside, leaning her head against the cool leaded glass, willing the pain and loss to leave her in peace again. She swayed unconsciously to the music, picturing the couples swirling across the ballroom floor.

“Do you dance?” Wynn watched her through heavy-lidded eyes.

Jane laughed, a brittle sound. “Only for money.” She stared back at him in defiance. “My dances were quite different from those you must be used to.”

“But far more interesting, I suspect. Dance for me now.” He poured a glass of wine and sat back in the chair, his legs spread wide apart.

“To prove what a tramp I am? We both know the truth, like it or not.” She walked back to the table and poured another drink. The music had lost all its appeal.

“Then tell me about your family, instead.”

Jane’s hand clenched around the wineglass. “You first.” She sat on the edge of the table, uncaring that a platter of bread went crashing to the floor.

“I don’t have one.” Wynn didn’t even blink an eye.

“Me neither, end of discussion.”

“How much do you remember about the witch trials? Do you know any of the details, read the court records?”

"I said, end of discussion." Jane had had enough. She had never talked to anyone about her past, and she wasn't going to start now—especially now, when she wanted to so desperately. She stood and started for the door. "I am done. Goodnight, Master Builder."

Wynn moved quickly and reached the door first, blocking her exit. "You cannot run from the past forever."

She stood for long minutes with her hand on the latch, struggling for control. When she finally looked up, her face had become as expressionless as his. "What do you want to know? How the soldiers burst into our home that night? My mother was sewing, I can still see the red embroidery she was adding to my dress. My father tried to stand, but they held him with a sword to his throat. My mother screamed...they came for her...and they...they used her while my father watched...and then they came for me...and I couldn't hide...I couldn't get away—" She drew in a shaky breath and bit hard on her lip. The pain pulled her back to the present. "After that night, I never saw them again. Satisfied, or do you want more of the bloody details?"

Some long lost part of Wynn wanted to hold her, protect her, whisper words of comfort while she trembled in his arms. He didn't even raise a finger to her cheek. "I am truly sorry."

"I stopped grieving long ago for a life I could not have." Her voice held so much bitterness, Wynn could almost feel it. "You should know as well as I the cost of wanting too much."

"Why? Because of this?" Wynn stripped back the sleeve of his shirt, baring his pale arm all the way to the elbow. He held it next to hers, staring at the brutal contrasts of their skin. "I have everything I desire. Money. Power—"

"Do you?" She knocked his arm away and turned back to face the room. "And what do you do with your vast wealth? How do you enjoy it? Here, locked in this stuffy room after working well into the night? You don't take pleasure in what you wear. You don't care what you eat. Hell, you're more of a pauper than I ever was."

Wynn felt his temper take hold. “How dare you insult me, you little wh—”

Her eyes blazed as hot as his. “Say it, you pompous snob, say the word just once and see how it feels!”

Chapter Three

“*Shite.*” Wynn thrust a hand through his hair. This was not going at all according to his plan. He’d never met a more unusual woman in his life. One minute she had him so angry he could gladly wring her neck, and in the very next instant she made him want to beg for her affection.

She flaunted proper etiquette like the trollop she was, and yet every gesture and move she made was elegant and refined. Her clothes were a jumbled confusion of colors, but somehow she actually made the madness work. He was fascinated by her smile, and even more intrigued by her sudden fits of temper.

Before she could say another word, he did the only thing he could think of—he wrapped one hand around her nape and smothered her mouth with his. She struggled, even managing to cuff his ear, but when Wynn gentled the pressure of his mouth, she sighed and molded her body to his.

He burned. The fire between them was immediate and wild. For years Wynn had kept his emotions locked deep below the surface. Now he let the need run free. He didn’t try to hide it. He didn’t try to push it away. No matter if he never touched her again, he intended to savor every last taste of her—just this once, just this night.

She trembled when he drove his tongue between her lips. She whimpered when his hand cupped her breast. Already her nipple was stiff and hard, begging him to take it. He slid one knee between her thighs and rubbed it against her mound, dreaming of a time when he might thrust his fingers deep into the heart of her.

She felt small and fragile in his arms. If he hadn’t already had a glimpse of her fiery spirit, he would have been afraid to hold too tight,

lest she break like glass and shatter into dust. The kiss lingered, lengthened, took on a new and fierce desire. Wynn pulled back, uncertain and unsteady.

She touched her lips with shaking fingers and then reached out to touch his. Her eyes were glazed and her skin was flushed. Wynn had never wanted a woman so much in his entire life. “Most men don’t...I mean I’m not used to...” Wynn watched her bring her thumb to her mouth. “I don’t get kissed very often,” she finally said in a soft and breathless voice. “Do you think we could do it again?”

Wynn groaned when she moved her lips to his. They slid to the floor in a tangle, breath and bodies fused as one. Wynn’s cock pulsed and thickened, demanding to be sated. His heart skipped its beat, demanding more than a tumble on the floor.

And still she remained eager and trembling in his arms, making no move to pull away or break their tenuous contact. The world stilled and ground to a stop as they explored each other in deep and heady silence.

She broke the kiss at last and tucked her head into his shoulder. “I didn’t know my parents had been killed until many years later.” Her voice was so soft he could barely catch the words. “I was passed from house to house. Man to man. I thought I was being punished for my parents’ crimes. No one would talk about it for many years.”

Wynn found his own walls crumbling and surprised himself by returning her honesty. He never talked about his past. It was mired in as much pain as hers. “When I was very small, I wandered starving into Dunmore Keep. I remember nothing of my life before. I apprenticed to the mason’s guild at twelve—I had to fight my way in. Do the worst jobs. The hardest labor. I clawed my way to where I am now, step by difficult step.”

Jane glanced up at him. “Do you ever get curious about your family? Wonder where you came from, who might have loved you and mourned your loss?”

Wynn let his head fall back against the door. “I doubt I was too badly missed. More likely, I was left on the side of the road to spare my parents having to claim me.”

"Tis hard to be alone." Jane smoothed her hand down his stomach. Wynn moaned as blood raced to his cock once more. "Has it been so long for you?" Her fingers drifted to his thigh. "I can ease you in some small way."

Wynn tensed as her hand slid to his groin. It would be so easy to have her touch him. So easy to have her fill his needs—just like every other man she had known. He could not afford to be lumped in with all the others, not if he wanted to succeed in winning her hand in marriage...and the title that came with it.

He took her hand instead and brought her palm to his lips. "Not tonight, my lady. You should sleep. 'Tis a long journey tomorrow." He stood, bringing her up with him, his regret almost a living thing. "I am interested in buying the estate. I will travel with you tomorrow and we can examine it together." He could afford the property. He could afford more than that if it kept him in her company and kept his plans alive.

Already she was shaking her head. "See it if you want to, but I won't go. There are too many ghosts waiting for me there. I will go on to Dunmore Keep." The defiant gleam returned to her eyes.

Wynn held back a grin. "As you wish. Then I will escort you to Dunmore Keep before looking at it on my own. We should leave early."

"How early?" She demanded, opening the door. "I don't do early."

"You will tomorrow. Just past daybreak."

"Ugh. One hour later, that's all I ask." She fled before he could tell her no.

Wynn turned to face his chamber. He looked at the platter that had fallen to the floor and the pieces of cutlery thrown across the table. And he realized, as he moved to clean up the mess, he had enjoyed every single minute of the war.

Jane refused to sleep. She wanted to stay up all night to relive every kiss and touch of Wynn's hand. She ached in ways she never had before, her mouth longed for him, her breasts cried out for him, and the fire between her legs was almost more than she could stand. How had she managed to live so many years without anyone tempting her the way he did? What would it be like to feel him high inside her, hard and strong as she rode him in the night?

What would it be like to have him hold her while she slept, her cheek pressed to the warmth of his chest, his fingers tangled in her hair? To have him beside her each and every day, his too stern stare daring anyone to mock her? To bear his children—

She forced the dream aside. She wanted too much. Needed too much. He was not meant for her. He was meant for some elegant lady with perfect manners from a perfect home, who didn't curse and call him names. And Jane had sworn she would not change, no matter what it cost her. She was who she was, despite her new nobility. Take her or leave her.

She didn't want Wynn to leave her.

Damn. Hell. Shite.

Jane found some small comfort in the curses as she undressed for bed.

She heard a soft knock at the door. Thinking it might be Wynn—hoping it might be Wynn, she shrugged into a robe and rushed to open it, only to find Allard Dunmore standing nervously in the hall. His black hair hung in tangles over his shoulders and his deep blue eyes stared into hers.

"Hi, Jane." He smiled, showing straight white teeth. He was just as handsome as his other two brothers, Graham and Llewellyn.

"Allard." She'd known him for a long time. He had once been a favored client.

"Can I come in? I won't stay long, but this is important." He kicked a pile of gifts out of the way. "I see you've made quite an impression with the groveling nobles.

Jane snorted. "Toadies, the lot of them. You know I'm leaving tomorrow?"

"Uh...about that." Allard ran his hand through his hair. "Jane, I've been thinking. We're friends right? Had some good times together in the past?"

Jane didn't like where she suddenly thought this was going. "In the past. Those days are over now."

"That's just my point, they don't have to be." Allard dropped to one knee. "Marry me, Jane. It's the perfect arrangement for both of us." His face was so in earnest, Jane found it hard to form a reply. Of all the people in the world she didn't want to offend, Allard was at the very top of her list.

She chose her words carefully. "I know you want what your brother has found. And the truth is, I want that, too. But...you don't look at me the way Llewellyn looks at Jess. You don't love me the way he loves her."

"What's love got to do with it?" Allard rose to stand over her. "You can't rely on love."

"I won't marry you. I'm sorry."

His face grew harsh. "You'd better take a long hard look at your current situation." He waved his hand toward the door. "Do you really think any one of those stupid presents has anything to do with love?"

He turned to stare at the bed. "We were good together. We could be that again."

Jane felt her stomach clench. "Is that why you're here? To work your way back between my legs? Go to hell!" She flung the door back open. "You should leave before either of us says something we regret."

"I didn't mean it like you made it sound."

"Oh? How did you mean it? Like a business arrangement? Some second-rate life that neither of us wants? Damn, Allard, when did you get to be such a bastard?"

His eyes flashed fire. "The same day you got to be noble born. They will never accept you. No matter what you do or who you know, you will always be a former whore."

Wynn opened his door at that very instant. "Allard." His voice was deceptively soft.

"Wynn." Allard's tone was just as cold.

"Is there some problem?" Wynn's eyes locked with Jane's.

Allard pierced them both with an overly sharp glance. "No. No problem." Then he turned and stormed down the hall.

"Will I still see you in the morning?" An unreadable expression chased across Wynn's face, and Jane wondered just how much he had heard.

"Yes. I am more than ready to leave. Goodnight." She closed the door behind her, refusing to let him see her shame.

* * *

"That was just plain mean." Pansy stirred the water and the image disappeared from view. "If he wasn't next on our list, I'd be tempted to—" She broke off hastily.

Snapdragon wasn't fooled. "Tempted to what?" She shook her finger beneath Pansy's nose and cackled gleefully. "Break one of those precious rules of yours?"

"I swear I'll ask for a transfer," Pansy said, smacking the other fairy's hand away. "If you don't stop your constant arguing, I will file the papers."

Rose chuckled. "You've been going to file those papers for at least a hundred years. I'll believe it when I see it. Are we finished for tonight?"

With a yawn, Snapdragon settled into her chair.

Pansy stretched.

An affectionate grin tugged at Rose's lips. "I thought you were going to send the letter back and not take this assignment?"

Snapdragon had already drifted half to sleep. "Maybe tomorrow," she mumbled, letting her eyes snap shut.

* * *

Wynn knocked and tried his best not to chuckle when Jane opened the door. Her cloak was of soft blue wool, her gown was burgundy, and her kirtle was yellow. In truth, it wasn't nearly as awful as he had expected—until she pulled on a pair of glaring green riding gloves.

"I think I'm ready." She glanced nervously at the chests on the floor. "Are you sure these will be all right?"

"I promise. My men will deliver them to Dunmore Keep before the end of the day. They will be waiting for you when we arrive." He spied a pair of blue gloves that matched her cloak perfectly. "Wouldn't you rather wear these?" He held them up for her appraisal.

She giggled. "No, silly, those go with another outfit." Before he could stop her, Jane knelt beside one of the chests and pulled out a bright orange cloak. "But I could put this on if you like."

Wynn coughed. She was so in earnest he had to cover his smile with a hand clamped over his mouth. Her eyes were filled with concern as she rose to pat him on the back.

"My apologies," Wynn said, still trying desperately not to chuckle. "What you have on will do nicely."

Jane gave him a brilliant smile and twirled for his inspection. He marveled again at how gracefully she moved, every gesture and step in perfect harmony with each other—a marked contrast to the clash of her clothes.

She tucked the horrid cloak away with the gloves and secured the chest once more. He watched her bring her thumb to her mouth as she studied the room again. "I think I'm ready."

Wynn studied her face. "Are you certain you want to sell? You haven't even seen your property. 'Tis your history, your heritage. You may change your mind."

Jane's chin rose an inch. "No, I won't. It doesn't mean a thing to me now." She opened the door and glowered at the fresh pile of gifts. "Can your men take these to the back gate? There are people who would love to have a taste of this luxury."

"It will be done." Wynn held out his arm and she curled her tiny hand around his elbow. He could see down the bodice of her gown, her luscious breasts an overly tempting sight. He felt his breeches shrink as his cock thickened, but he was beginning to enjoy the dark desire that rose whenever Jane was near.

Wynn could not resist touching the skin of her neck as he pretended to smooth her cloak in place. A flush of color crept into her cheeks, and he imagined that same rush of blood swelling the lips of her sex as she writhed in his arms, her whimpers of pleasure soft in his ear.

Wynn bit back a groan as his own flesh surged in newfound need. "Ready?" His voice was rough with unspoken emotion.

They didn't pass many people this early in the morning—most of the courtiers refused to rise before the noon meal was served. While an occasional servant hurried by, the palace remained comfortably silent. At least until they reached the great hall. Wynn frowned at the gang of minor nobles still stupidly drunk from the night before.

"Tis the master demon and his trollop," snickered one as they approached.

"Lady Strumpet and the monster," added a second.

"Her r-royal h—h—whoreness," slurred a third.

Jane gave them a brilliant smile. "And good morrow to you, my lord asses. How utterly loathful to see you today."

The youth who was obviously their leader grabbed Jane's arm. His face was red and puffy, and Wynn saw the anger that simmered at the surface. Jane tried to get away, but the lord snagged a handful of her gown and dragged her toward him, his other hand digging deep into her bodice.

"Give us a little feel...*my lady*." He made the title sound more like a curse.

“Get off me, damn your mangy hide!” Jane slapped him hard across the mouth.

The youth cursed and drew back his arm to strike, but Wynn caught the blow, his fist locking around the lordling’s hand like a vice. “Let the lady go,” he whispered. “Now.”

Wynn let his expression freeze. His jaw locked and his eyes narrowed in fury. None of the drunken idiots realized his intention until it was too late. When the first one set Jane free, Wynn slammed him against the wall. He fisted his other hand around the neck of a second and dragged the man’s face to within inches of his.

The others moved several steps away. Wynn tried to hold his anger in check, to keep the emotion from owning him completely, but his control began to slip. His vision blurred and his body shook.

For years he’d let their insults slide easily from his back. He’d bowed at their criticisms and smiled at their curses. He knew how to play their games, how to ignore their words as he stuffed piles of their gold into his coffers. He was mostly immune.

His lovely Jane, however, was not. Despite her flippant tone and smile, he’d seen the shame that lurked in her eyes. The shame of being less than the others, of living on the outside while helplessly looking in.

“You may insult me as you will,” he said in a too-calm tone. “But if you say another word against Lady Seville, I will kill you.” He enunciated each word clearly so they could not mistake his meaning. “Do. You. Understand?”

Defy me, fools. Just this once, let me wring your weak little necks. For her he would face whatever punishment they demanded. For her he would gladly set aside his life.

Shock raced through his system. He fought to regain control. What was he thinking? Was he willing to throw everything away for a woman he barely knew? A lifetime of backbreaking work and labor sacrificed for a stranger’s honor?

A soft voice startled him from behind as a small hand curled upon his shoulder. “Enough, Wynn. Leave be. Words are not arrows, they

cannot mortally wound. I am not worth the price they would claim. We all know the law.”

He was common, they were noble. If he harmed even one of them he would be locked away in the nearest prison, despite any favor he had earned from the king.

“I have no honor to defend,” she added. The truth could not be denied. He wouldn’t disrespect her by pretending otherwise.

He unclenched his hands and the two men fell to the floor. Jane curled her arm around his once more and they walked away without a backward glance. The sun was already angled in the sky when they stepped into the day. Wynn squinted. A headache began to throb at the base of his skull.

“Your eyes are sensitive to the light.” She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes.

Wynn gritted his teeth so hard he thought they might actually break.

“I mean no insult, silly.” Jane fingered the muscle that jumped in his jaw.

“None taken.” He uncurled her hand from his arm.

“Uh huh.” She stood on her toes to better look him in the eye. “If you cannot lie any better than that, you should learn to keep your mouth shut.”

Wynn gaped at her in absolute astonishment. He had been ready to give up his freedom for her and this was how she repaid him? By pouring vinegar into his already stinging pride?

When he opened his mouth, she grinned. When he snapped it shut again, she winked.

“I’ll buy you a hat on our way out of the city. I know the perfect place. What color would you like? Crimson or gold?” She brushed the hair back from his cheek.

Wynn’s anger dropped to its usual simmer, calmed by the stroke of her fingers on his skin. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You don’t suppose they might have one in black?”

Chapter Four

“What are you doing?” Pansy frowned when Snapdragon jumped, jostling the scrying bowl. Water dripped to puddle on the floor.

“Now, look what you’ve done.” Snapdragon raised a hand and caught the mop that came sailing across the room.

Pansy shook her head, undistracted by the other’s energetic clean-up. “You can’t fool me, you silly fairy. I know you’re up to something.” She bent low over the bowl. “Were you meddling?”

Snapdragon sighed and let the mop finish sopping up the mess on its own. “He really hated that hat, you know.”

“Who hated what hat?” Rose poked her head around the corner.

The water finally cleared and Pansy chuckled. “Snapdragon’s got a soft spot for our newest charge.”

“He’s been wearing that awful thing all day, Rose,” Snapdragon complained, pushing Pansy out of her way.

Rose moved in between them and laughed. “I see what you mean. Those pink feathers just aren’t his style.” She glanced at Pansy out of the corner of her eye. “Surely there’s not a ruling against blowing someone’s hat off...it wasn’t more than a simple breeze.”

The scowl that crossed Pansy’s face was comical...at least until they all looked into the water again.

“Uh oh,” Snapdragon muttered.

* * *

They were accosted just outside the small village of Tipwich.

The feathered and frilled monstrosity Jane had bought Wynn that morning caught a gust of wind and blew off his head as a group of field hands came walking toward them. The sun was still bright enough the crowd of workers could not mistake the color of his skin and hair. He stiffened in the saddle, all his senses alert and on guard.

One man deliberately stood in the center of the road, his scythe held high in warning. "Who've we got 'ere? See what 'e is?" He pointed an accusing finger at Wynn. "The lot of 'em's cursed, everyone knows it."

A crowd gathered. People spit at Wynn's feet, one even managing to land a glob on his boots. Whispers carried shrill in the air, talk of devils and other evil things.

"E'll bring the plague down on us all," another voice rang out from the crowd.

"The crops'll rot and the cows' milk'll sour," muttered another.

"I seen it happen," agreed one more.

"Me cousin's priest says the only way to stop the curse is to spread their blood over the fields. They 'ad to do it in Raemyn last summer."

Wynn remembered the episode. An entire family had been butchered when the wheat had molded from too much rain—a family that had lived in the town for over three generations, all because one of their children had been born with the same coloring as his.

It had served to remind him that no matter what he did in life, or how successful he became at his work, an accusation could pull him down in an instant. Superstition and fear were still too easily believed.

Jane leaned over her saddle. "Tom, I know you. 'Tis Jane. Step aside and let us pass."

The man hesitated. "Go on, girl, we 'ave no quarrel wit' ye." He grabbed the reins of her horse and tried to pull her mount behind him. Jane hit his hand with the leather. He cursed and jerked away. Another man sidled up beside her.

If he touched her, Wynn would see him hanged on the highest gallows. "This is Lady Seville."

The man burst out laughing. "Lady? Jane? 'Tis the best joke I've 'eard all week."

"He is my personal guard," Jane replied, pointing at Wynn. "Bound to me by the king himself. Leave be, or you will face King Edred's wrath." She slid a knife from her belt. "Habit," she said when Wynn gaped at her in astonishment.

A clump of dirt hit Wynn's horse on the neck. The great beast shied, snorted and pawed at the earth. If this kept up, his mount would bolt for certain. When another mass landed on his shoulder, Wynn's patience began to thin.

A brawny young man picked up a massive rock and held it over his head. Jane's knife flew from her hand and sliced through the sleeve of his shirt. The youth howled when he dropped the rock and it fell with a thud on his foot.

"Stop." An old woman elbowed her way through the crowd. "*The albhus* is right. I worked fer her parents years ago...before the witch-seekers came. Remember the fires and the screaming? Leave the lady alone—she can 'ave ye arrested. The gallows grows hungry of late."

The men muttered amongst themselves as their callused hands rubbed at their necks. Heads bobbed and feet kicked at the dirt. But one by one, they turned and walked away.

Wynn bowed to the old woman. "I will see your family rewarded for your trouble."

She glared up at him through rheumy eyes. "I want nothing from ye. Begone, demon!"

"Watch your words," Jane said to the woman, her eyes alive with anger. "False accusations are false accusations, no matter who they're meant for." She slid from the saddle and retrieved her knife.

Wynn dropped to the ground beside her.

"I'm sorry." Jane's hand brushed over his shoulder. "I've known those people most of my life. I never dreamed they could act like such asses."

Wynn tried his best to relax. "Now you have defended my honor."

"We are a pair, aren't we?" Jane picked up the trampled hat. She sighed and tried to straighten out the feathers. "'Tis ruined. But don't worry I can get you another one." She gave him a shaky smile.

Wynn did not return the expression. He swallowed down the lump of his pride, helped her back onto her mount and rode in forced silence beside her. This day had not worked to his favor. He feared he might be running out of time.

When they reached Dunmore Keep, he bid her a stiff goodnight, leading the horses down to the stables while she went inside and prepared for sleep. He watched the candlelight gleam in her window until it was finally extinguished and all was dark and silent.

Only then did he make his way into the great hall to sit in solitude and curse the night.

Jane could not sleep. She tossed and turned on the bed, cursing every lump of hay. If she were honest with herself she would have admitted that her discomfort had as much to do with Wynn as it did with the straw-filled mattress.

Her thoughts returned to him time after time, reliving the feel of his hand on hers, the touch of his finger down her cheek, the strength of his arms as he held her. She could still see the icy blue of his eyes, the jaw that clenched too easily, and the half-smile on his lips that he let her see so rarely.

A throaty moan from the next room caused her to pace across the floor. Jessaline Dunmore cried out, muffled a scream and sobbed her husband's name in delight. Lord Llewellyn added his voice to hers and the sounds of their lovemaking rang wildly through the air.

They had invited her to join them once, after Jane had moved to Dunmore Keep. Jane had felt an attraction for the beautiful Jess that she had felt for no other woman, but in the end, she refused to join

them. She would have been an intruder, a participant in body but not in heart. She had been that too many times before. It was a thing she had sworn never to do again.

Jane grew surly as the noise continued. Her own body throbbed with a longing she'd never believed possible, her pulse raced and her stomach clenched. Tonight, with her breasts full and ready to be touched, her mouth desperate to be kissed, and the wet already dripping between her thighs, Jane was ready to pound on the door and plead to be let inside.

But not Llew and Jess's door, she realized. *Wynn's door*. His room was on the other side of hers, barely a breath away.

Llew growled again, and this time Jessaline's laughter broke the quiet. Jane had had enough. Not even bothering to pull a robe over her chemise, she stormed into the hallway and down the stairs. If all else failed, she would drink herself into a stupor. Dull the desire. Wipe out the want. Find some way to sweep away the sculpted face lingering in her mind, forget the silky white hair and marbled body she wanted to touch so desperately.

Damn the man anyway.

A mostly full pitcher of ale sat on the table in the great hall, along with a mostly empty cup. A single candle still burned on the ashes in the fireplace. Jane tossed out the dregs and refilled the cup with determination. When Jessaline screamed once more, Jane downed a good portion of the drink. She filled her cup again without bothering to drink the rest.

"The lord rides his lady well."

Jane jumped when he spoke. She could not see him in the dark, but she knew the sound of his voice. Wynn. He moved from the shadows to sit beside her, reaching out to down his share of ale when the screams began again.

She refilled the cup, grateful he could not possibly see the shaking of her hands. "The first time I heard them," she confessed, "I thought he was beating her. I did not know a woman could find such pleasure with—" Her words faltered. "I mean...I know how men find

release...but...*shite*, I don't know what I mean." She didn't care that she cursed, let him think what he would. She was far too miserable to worry one way or another.

She could feel the pull of him in the night, the need to let him draw her close and do with her as he pleased, however he pleased, if he would only find some way to soothe this ache and give her peace. What would he do if she leaned over and kissed him, twined her fingers in his hair and covered his mouth with hers?

They both reached for the cup at once. When he touched her, Jane trembled, too aware of how good he felt, too overwhelmed by her own emotions to stop the sigh that shuddered from her lips.

"Do you mean to tell me you have never felt pleasure with a man?" His voice was soft, almost a caress.

She shrugged. "You know what I was—" there, she'd said it, "—my pleasure was never the issue." She waited for his response. His hand continued to stroke hers for several long moments. He neither made any move to deepen the contact or withdraw his touch. Jane became more confused than ever.

When she thought she could stand the silence no longer, he brought her palm to his lips. "We could pretend, here in the dark, that I am a man like any other. You have seen what I am..." His voice grew tired as if he had said the words too many times before. "Do you think you could desire me, lady, let me show you the pleasure you have missed?"

"Would it be so hard to touch me in the light?" Her voice was as tentative as his.

He stood and strode to the fireplace. His hair glinted like molten silver in the flickering light, and Jane thought he could be one of the otherworldly creatures he was called. He picked up the candle and sat it on the table, making certain it was close enough they could see each other's expressions.

"Does it bother you that I know your past?" His eyes were gentle in the small flame's glow, his jaw not so tightly clenched, his mouth not so thinly drawn.

She tried to smile, make some trite comment that would break through her discomfort and put her in control again. But his expression dared her to truth, a truth she wanted to give him freely. "I will not apologize for what I have done, at least not to you. I have only myself to forgive. Does that make any sense?" She frowned, turning her gaze to the flickering flame. Then she locked her eyes onto his. "But, yes, I wish I could come to a man without the burden of so many who came before. That I was the lady I am called."

He tucked a hand under her chin, his thumb stroking the line of her jaw. "And I wish I was some mighty lord vying for your favors." A sad smile played on his mouth. His thumb traced her lower lip in deliberate seduction. Jane nuzzled her cheek into his palm, and gave a soft cry when he wrapped his fingers around her nape and drew her face toward his. Close, they were so close, the briefest of breaths away, but he left her waiting for his kiss, restless, uncertain.

Her body trembled in longing, the ache spreading from her thighs to roll across her stomach, up and over the tips of her breasts, and into the emptiness of her mouth. Desire such as she had never felt before. It both fascinated and frightened her, this ragged mix of emotions.

He smiled, a sinful look that would have made the devil proud. He let his fingers trail across her neck. "I could make you scream my name into the night."

Jane snorted.

One silver brow arched regally.

Jane tried to take another drink, but he plucked the cup from her hand and drank the rest himself. The sounds of lovemaking from above drifted across the hall. "Not again," Jane muttered.

Wynn chuckled, grasped her face in both his hands and brought her lips to his. He moved his mouth deliberately over hers, his tongue darting between her lips as she opened her mouth to protest—a protest silenced by a soft lick of his tongue. He tasted of ale and honey, cool and controlled, each move he made meant to drive her heat higher. He pulled her closer as his tongue thrust deeper.

He let the kiss lighten, pulling his tongue away to nip her bottom lip between his teeth as he lifted her easily from the chair and sat her on the edge of the table. One hand tangled in her hair while the other traced the line of her throat, drifting lower and lower until it whispered over the side of one breast to curl around her waist. Jane cried out in frustration, but he swallowed the whimper as it left her lips by driving his tongue back into her mouth. Even had she wanted to, she could not have broken the kiss, not with the taste of him so new and heavy on her tongue, and his lips dancing in wild abandon over hers.

She could have gladly drowned in the dark, kissed him endlessly until she vanished and became the briefest flicker of a shadow, lost to a need she had never known before.

His hand slipped over the curve of her hip before moving to rest at the juncture of her thighs. "What do you need of me?" Wynn whispered against her lips. "Tell me what you desire."

She hurt in so many places she didn't know where to start. Her nipples had beaded and begged for his touch. Tight to the point of almost pain, they scraped against the material of her chemise. And her sex throbbed with a need that stunned her. Swollen, wet, she knew if he took her now she would feel a greater joy than she had ever known before.

"I am ready," she said, trying to pull his mouth back to hers. "Please," she added when he still resisted.

Lifting her gown all the way to her stomach, Jane spread her thighs to accept him. Wynn stepped between her legs, cupped her hips in his hands, and dragged her against the length of him where he strained against his breeches.

He was hard, rigid, as aroused as she, and Jane felt a rush of pride that she could take him easily and without hesitation. She placed her hand upon his cock, tracing every inch of him as she searched for the lacings that would set him spilling free.

He moaned against her throat, dragging his mouth back up to hers. This time the kiss was raw, fierce and hungry as he poured his need into

her, whispering his desire in broken phrases, piercing her mouth again with his tongue until Jane thought she would melt from the fire of it.

But just when she thought he would take her at her word, he pulled back and stared deep into her eyes. "Oh, no, my beauty, not yet," he said raggedly. "We have not even begun this night."

Jane fought him as he tried to move away, wrapping her legs around his hips to hold him against her. For some strange reason she feared that if she let him go, he would not find his way back, and she would remain here in the night forever, waiting for the touch that never came again.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, careless that she was acting like some simpering maid who could not let him go. "I will give you everything," she mouthed against his neck. "Take me. Now."

Wynn fought to keep control. It was too soon for her, even though she didn't know it. She would let him bury himself deep into her cunt, take him willingly, and still not realize all that she had missed. And he hadn't even touched her yet. Not like he intended to touch her. To make her sob. To make her beg.

He was thrilled that she responded to him so readily. He could see the need that flushed her skin. But this was a place she had been before. It was familiar, easy, her desperation had not even begun. He smiled into her storm-tossed eyes and pried her legs from his hips.

"Come to my bed," he said.

He could hear her try to catch her breath, feel the heat of her skin. She was everything he had imagined, everything he had hoped. Beautiful, so beautiful.

He grabbed the candle and practically dragged her upstairs. He had a plan. A plan to plant himself so deep in her heart, she could never think of another. Neither of them would reach completion. He fully intended to take Jane to the very edge and leave her there, let her spend the rest of the night aching for his touch. He wanted her to know how it felt to truly need...and he wanted her to see his face whenever that need returned.

He would be the man who stood out in her mind. And when she'd longed for him enough, when she'd ached and wanted and cried out in frustration, he would be the man to set her passion free. But he didn't know how he was going to survive the night. If she was left hurting, he would hurt, too.

After he opened the door and led her inside, he dropped her hand and lit every candle he could find, bathing the chamber in golden light so he could see each emotion that played across her face. She reached to undo the lacings of her chemise, but he stopped her, pulling her back into his arms and locking her tight against his groin.

Then he very deliberately dropped to his knees. She trembled when he pressed his face into her stomach. She whimpered when he curled his hand around her mound, working his fingers between her thighs to feel the wet that spilled onto her gown.

"Spread your legs for me," he ordered, looking up at her face.

Her shaking grew anew as she shifted her thighs apart. He kept his eyes locked with hers as he slipped his fingers against her, pressing through the wet linen to find the swollen hill of her clit. Jane gasped as he worked her, her hands tightening on his shoulders, her legs shaking even more. He could feel her try to lock her knees to keep from falling, and when he knew she had lost the battle, he stood, swept her into his arms, and laid her on his bed.

Her eyes were drowsy with desire as he kissed her once again. This time he teased, pulling back when she tried to draw him deeper. She whimpered and twisted in his arms, her legs snaking around his, her hands reaching again for his cock.

He circled her wrist with his fingers and drew her hand away, holding it above her head as his other hand reached to pluck the tip of one rounded breast. Jane gasped and arched against him, pressing harder against his fingers.

"More?" He nuzzled her neck.

"Yes!" Her voice was tainted with desire, and Wynn thrilled at the sound of it. He pinched her nipple harder, rolling it between his fingers,

pulling until it knotted and swelled, before he moved to take it in his mouth. Jane squirmed as he laved her with his tongue until her gown grew so wet it became transparent.

"'Tis too much," she protested, trying to release her hand to push his mouth away.

"No, lady," he assured her solemnly, "'tis but a small sampling of the pleasures yet to come.

She whimpered. "Wynn, I swear I cannot stand it. *Please!*"

Ah, so she was beginning to beg. This was a very good sign of things to come. But he bit back a groan of agony as she shifted her legs and ran one thigh over his throbbing cock. He loosened the lacings of his breeches to give his length some relief. This time he was the one to curse when he felt the ache settling deep into his balls.

She would surely kill him. But what a way to die, he admitted, gritting his teeth against the pain as he let his hand slide down to pull her knees apart. He rolled to pin her thigh beneath his leg, trying to regain a measure of control. She stilled and turned her face into his shoulder.

"Enough, Wynn. It is enough." Her breath was harsh, her words broken.

"Kiss me," he ordered as he thrust his fingers between her thighs and rubbed at the heavy wet of her slit.

Jane tried to speak as his fingers worked their madness. Tried to find some remnant of reason as she felt the fire lick along her cunt. In near desperation she did as he demanded, lifting her face to touch his lips with hers. She gasped into his mouth when he thrust his fingers deeper, exploring her through her gown, sliding across the wet material to rub the pearl of flesh that gave her so much pleasure.

In truth she had not known it could be like this. No man had ever held her this way, touched her this way, kissed her this way. He pinched and rolled her clit between his fingers, easing the pressure only to deepen it again, his tongue moving against her mouth in rhythm with his

hand. She tried to arch against him, to intensify his touch, but he had her legs trapped securely and her strength was no match for his.

She was reaching for something, some place beyond her grasp, falling, falling into the hunger that made her tremble like grass in the wind, and she was almost there, almost flying, almost letting the pleasure break free, when he jerked his hand away, leaving her waiting, wanting, unable to find release.

“What are you doing?” She could hear the desperation in her tone. “Wynn?”

“Shhh.” His breath was as ragged as hers. “Not tonight,” he whispered into her hair. “I want you to remember how this feels, this need, and I want you to remember I am the one who makes your body ache this way.”

He wasn’t serious. He could not be serious! “You plan to leave me like this?” Jane’s voice rose shrilly as she realized that’s exactly what he planned.

She fought him like a madwoman. She hit. She kicked. She turned and bit hard into his arm, smiling when he cursed in pain. “Let me up, damn you,” she ordered, yanking a fistful of his hair. She landed a well-placed knee to his cock. He curled up in a spasm of agony, finally setting her free.

“Did you enjoy that, you bastard?” Her fury knew no bounds. “Enjoy making me look and act the fool? Never once have I ever—ever—treated anyone the way you have treated me tonight!” She rolled off the other side of the bed and picked up the nearest thing she could reach, a half-full bottle of wine on the floor.

She hurled it at his head, smiling when he raised his arms too late and the bottle hit its mark, stale wine spewing over his face.

“Jane, wait—” He tried to speak, but she had already found one of his leather boots. She aimed this one at his groin and gave a snort of satisfaction when it landed between his thighs.

“You *are* a monster,” she raged, heading for the door. “Do not ever—ever—touch me again!” She fled to her own chamber and slammed the

door behind her, turning the key in the lock as she heard Wynn pounding to be let in.

Chapter Five

“Damn it, woman,” he thundered, “open up and let me explain!”

“When hell freezes over.” She turned her back to the door and slid to the floor, curling into a ball as if she were a child, trying to find some relief from the emotions assailing her.

She had thought he was different, that he really cared for how she felt, but she realized he was no better than any of the others, seeking to control her, manipulate her, use her for his own gains. Oh, he was more subtle about it, she admitted, his soft words and gentle hands a temptation she’d never felt before.

Which made the disappointment all the more painful.

Wynn continued to knock, and Jane heard Llewellyn’s voice demanding to know what was the matter. Let him explain that, she thought happily until she heard Llew’s chuckle and Wynn’s answering growl. And when Jess’s soft giggle was added to the mix, Jane thought she would die of embarrassment.

She rocked slowly back and forth, her arms locked around her knees, her body still on fire from all the things he’d done. Her head hurt, her eyes stung, and she still wanted him with a fever that astounded her.

Llew and Jess went back to bed, the night settled, and Jane continued to sit in silent tears. She thought Wynn must have left, as well, and was stunned when she heard his voice calling her again.

“Little beauty, I did not mean for things to go so far. I am sorry. Open the door and let me in, I promise I will soothe you. Please...let me make this right.”

“No.” Her own voice was heavy with regret, although she tried desperately to hide it, not wanting him to know how much she had been hurt.

“I am not leaving until you let me in. I can sit here for days, waiting.” His words were laced with guilt.

Let him be guilty. Let him stay guilty. She had no reason to take away his blame. And if he did not leave her door, well, she would find another way out. She crawled to the window, looked down and frowned. It was too far to jump. Nothing to hold onto should she try to climb. She would just have to wait him out. He couldn't possibly stay there forever...could he?

Wynn sat on the floor and slammed his head against the door. Hard. He did it again when the pain was not enough to ease his remorse. What the hell had he been thinking? What had he been trying to prove? Other than he was a complete and total ass.

He'd wanted to show her the pleasures they could find together, what it was like to be with someone who understood and accepted the past. Instead, he'd given her more of what she'd always had—frustration, disappointment—another idiot so caught up in his own needs he had completely overlooked hers.

He should have held her and gentled her to her passion, letting her come at her own time and leisure, instead of demanding she come at his command.

“Jane.” He tried again to make her listen. “Please open the door.”

Her continued silence was his only answer.

He longed for her with a hunger he had never known for anyone. His head was on fire. His heart was on fire. His cock had entered a state of pain he hadn't known existed. And still she stayed sealed within her room, no sigh or whisper to show that she had heard.

Dawn came as it always did. Wynn's eyes were red and scratchy from lack of sleep. His stomach growled from lack of food, and he was still alone, empty and hollow inside.

Then he thought of something he could do. Even if she never let him in her sight again, he would have given her something worth the keeping—and one that might show her how he really felt. He could give her back her past. He could give her back her home.

He shook his head to clear away the sleep, stood and placed his palm against the door. “Soon, my Jane,” he whispered, acknowledging his heart. “I will love you.” The thought did not scare him as it should have. As it might have on another day or dream. With Jane it was right. With her, it was real. Even the promise of the king had faded from his mind. Ambition was useless without someone to share it.

After grabbing a quick meal, he saddled his horse and rode out into the morning.

Three hours later he stared at the decaying manor house. The door had fallen down, the window panes were broken, and vines grew so high they curled up over the old thatched roof. The inside was just as bad. The floors were rotted away in places, shelves empty and covered in dust. A huge oak table sat in the center of the room, its elegant carved surface covered with debris and the abandoned nests of birds. The hearth was filled with more rubble and brambles, and the entire place smelled of mildew and decay.

Wynn spied a small rocking chair lying broken on the floor. He knelt beside it and thought of the innocent little girl ripped so horribly from everyone she had loved. He ran his hands through the rubbish, searching for some proof that the story Jane told was true. He finally found what he was looking for. The scrap of material was so tattered he could barely tell what it had been, but he could still make out the pattern of the faded red thread.

He stood and tucked the material close to his heart. He would have his men here to work by tomorrow afternoon.

Jane opened her door slowly and peeked into the hall. It was empty, silent. Despite his fine words and protest to the contrary, Wynn was gone, left like all the others before the too harsh light of day.

She blinked against a new rush of tears. She wouldn't cry for him again—he was not worth the effort. But she still remembered the way she'd trembled in his arms, the way he'd touched her and made her come alive. Alive and furious and heady with desire.

No wonder Jess watched her husband with such huge and adoring eyes. If Wynn—anyone, she corrected—made her scream with such pleasure in the dark, she would look at him with the same love and affection.

Love.

Jane frowned. Dreams of nothing. Men did not fall in love with women like her. They loved beautiful virgins like Jess, who didn't have a past. She plaited her hair, not caring that it hung in a knot over her shoulder. She didn't even bother to check the color of her gown as she pulled it over her head and tightened the lacings on the side. She did not need to be beautiful, not for Wynn, and certainly not for anyone else.

She slipped down the stairs and into the kitchen, secretly hoping to run into him somewhere in the keep. He was not there. She poked her head out the door and looked to the stables. He wasn't there either. Finally, she grabbed a piece of bread and cheese and strolled calmly through the great hall—deliberately not looking at the table where he had seduced her—and stepped into the bailey. It was empty, also.

When Jane returned to the castle, Llew was sitting at the table, rubbing his day-old beard. He gave her a smile that would have beguiled an angel.

"Wynn left early this morning," Llew said.

Jane felt her heart sink. "Oh." She sat across from him and laid her head on her arms.

Jessaline swept from the kitchen with a platter of fried eggs which she sat in front of Llew. He smiled and pulled her gently onto his lap, careful not to jostle her shoulder.

"Oh, Jess, I am sorry." Jane looked at her friend in shame. "Was it so very awful?" This was the first time she'd had a chance to talk to Jess

since her father had kidnapped her and tried to kill her before Llew brought her home.

Jess's face fell. "It was. But I am here, with my husband, and healing very well. Especially since Llew is fulfilling his duties again. Do you know he refused to make love to me for days after I got home?" Jess gave the beautiful man a singularly adoring smile and Jane felt her mood darken even more.

"Is something wrong?" Jess patted Jane's arm. "Wynn didn't hurt you did he?" There was true concern in her voice.

Jane shook her head and picked at a bite of egg. She wasn't hungry in the least, she realized when she could not swallow the tiniest bit.

Llew turned his smile toward Jane. He really was gorgeous, she acknowledged, watching the dimples flash in his cheeks. All the Dunmore brothers were handsome, but her Wynn had something more. He was the same as she, someone on the fringe always looking in.

"Have you decided what to do with your estate?" Llew sat back and curled Jessaline against his chest. "I would be willing to buy if you wanted to sell. Name a price and the deal is done. Or I can loan you livestock, food, men to settle you in for the winter."

"I thought Wynn was going to make me an offer." Jane pouted. "But he is off this morn, and I have no idea where he's gone. Ass," she added in spite.

Llew scratched his chest. "He's probably gone to look at the estate. Wynn always has to check and double check before making any decision. He's never been the spontaneous sort."

"Gone to see the estate." Jane could not hide the frustration in her voice. "Of course."

She hated him anyway.

* * *

"Well, we are making some progress." Rose smiled in encouragement.

Snapdragon frowned. "Progress? He hasn't even bedded her yet, and she gets madder by the day. A good old-fashioned lust spell would move things right along."

Pansy sniffed. "No more lust. It's clouding their judgment already."

When Rose nodded, Snapdragon pursed her lips. "Then what would you suggest?"

"Let him work," Rose said. "Then we'll see."

Snapdragon stormed off, not convinced in the least.

* * *

Jane hated Wynn even more four days later when he still had not returned from wherever he had gone. It didn't take that much time to look over property. She had barely eaten, had slept even worse, and refused to look at herself in the mirror to see the dark shadows blossoming under her eyes.

This madness had to stop. She managed to make it through the days fairly easily, but the nights had become absolute torture. Her thoughts turned to him as soon as the sun went down. Her breasts swelled in longing, her cunt throbbed so badly she could barely stand the pain, and the nights bore down relentlessly as she tossed and turned on the bed, seeing Wynn's face in her dreams, imagining the taste of his mouth on hers and the thrust of his fingers—

"Ugh!" Jane paced across her chamber, torn between rage and desperation. So many times she started to touch herself the way Wynn had touched her, but it seemed too sad to pleasure herself, too empty a release without him. At least the first time. She wanted the first time to be with him. Stupid as that sounded.

As evening crouched behind another day, Jane called for the maids to bring her water for a bath. She twisted her hair and knotted it high on her head, stripped down and sank into the water, hoping to ease the heat that already thrummed between her legs.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would have to make a decision about what she wanted to do with her life. Despite Llew and Jess's hospitality, she could not stay here forever. If Wynn did not buy the estate, she would find someone who would.

She could move to Lynden, perhaps, although the city would never feel like home. Maybe she could buy her own tavern. She knew the business, she could make it work. She could travel. See the ocean. Settle somewhere no one knew her past. Somewhere she could be a lady. Somewhere without Wynn.

The thought of him set her blood on fire. She smacked her hand into the water and kicked uselessly at the wood. She was about to vent her frustration on the tub once more when the door to her chamber burst open and Wynn strode purposefully inside.

He stopped short when he saw her in the bath, a languid smile tipping his mouth. "This is much better than I had hoped." He crossed the room in three long strides to stand staring at her with his hands planted regally on his hips.

Jane froze at the sight of him. He was as beautiful as she remembered, his white hair hanging over his shoulders like a cloud, his steel blue eyes crinkled in amusement at the corners. She trembled when she pictured that mouth sliding across her flesh and those long, tapered fingers searching out her most intimate spots.

Prickles traced her skin, and she knew her breasts had swollen and beaded at the tips. She knew he saw it too by the way his eyes dropped and turned a stormy grey. She was so glad to see him, so ready to accept him, she had to press her knees together to try and still the shaking of her legs.

"Get the hell out," she ordered, crossing her arms over her breasts. If he thought she would spread herself out for him and say thank you for coming, he was dead wrong.

He rolled up his sleeves and knelt by the tub instead.

"Did you hear me?" she demanded, sinking lower into the water, hoping he would not see the flush of need that washed across her skin.

"I heard, little beauty." He gave her the most wicked grin she had ever seen. "And I will leave...if that is what you truly wish." He cupped her chin in his hand and raised her face to his, frowning when he touched the shadow beneath her eye.

"Has it been so bad?" His thumb traced her bottom lip. "Did you not—" He shook his head in astonishment. "Did you spend this entire week without any small release?"

Jane tried to turn her face away so he couldn't see her hunger. Wynn looked as if he hadn't lost a moment's sleep, or suffered any at all while he had been away. She wondered if he'd found some pretty peasant to satisfy his needs. The thought caused her heart to clench with a brutal stab of jealousy.

"You seem to be quite well. You must have found someone to keep you sated at night," she said childishly. "Now get the hell out."

He sighed and trailed his hand over her arm, letting it come to rest where her elbow crossed her breast. One finger nudged at the begging nipple beneath. Jane bit her lip to keep from crying out at even that tiny touch.

"I have burnt with need for you every night," he said. "Alone." Jane marked the muscle that ticced in his jaw, noticing for the first time how rigidly he held himself, as if afraid she really would send him away.

That made her feel the slightest bit better.

"Stand up so I can see you." He rose and held out his hands.

Jane hesitated, ridiculously shy. What if he did not like what he saw?

"Let me love you, lady," he whispered, the longing in his voice so obvious she could not turn him down.

She held up her hands and let him draw her out of the water, not once taking her gaze from his face as his eyes drifted over her like moonlight and mist. He reached up to pull the pins from her hair and it tumbled around her in midnight waves, dropping nearly to her waist. He tangled a chunk of it in his fist and pulled her face to his. Wynn's mouth sealed over hers in satisfaction. His tongue spread her lips apart and

speared deep into her mouth. He groaned when she opened to receive him, an urgent sound that rumbled in his throat.

Jane laced her arms around his neck, tilting her head to accept him even more. There was little tenderness to the kiss. He did not offer it and Jane did not demand it, wanting no more than this desperate passion that rocked her heart and soul.

He grabbed her legs and locked them around his hips, heedless of the water soaking into his clothing as he pressed her to the turgid length of his cock. He carried her to the bed and laid her down beneath him, never once breaking the burning pressure of his mouth upon hers.

Jane was lost in an agony of desire. "Promise me you will not stop," she whimpered when he moved his mouth to scrape against her shoulder.

"Not until you scream my name. I swear it." He thrust his groin between her thighs, and Jane cried out when his length rubbed against the growing torment of her clit. He growled and cupped her breast in one hand, palming her tender nipple until it beaded so hard Jane had to bury her face in his neck to keep from sobbing her need.

And when he pinched it between his fingers, she bit into his skin, holding back the cry threatening to escape her.

She would scream for him, scream loud and long, but not until he had taken her to the place she'd only dreamed of.

He chuckled and let his hand drift lower, wedging it between their bodies. He reached back and pulled one of her ankles free, pushing her knee onto the mattress. He did the same with her other leg, spreading her wide as he ran his hands up the inside of her thighs.

Jane moaned as his mouth wrapped over her breast and he sucked it deep into his mouth, tonguing the nipple until she could barely breathe.

His hand finally reached her slit, slipping into her heat and wet with a sureness that nearly broke her down. Deep, deeper, he sank into her, pushing two thick fingers high into her sex. His thumb pressed hard against the knot of her clit, circling and circling as his fingers plunged again. Over and over he touched her, driving his hand as far as it would

go, murmuring whispered words against her lips as he loved her, until with a last quick twist of his fingers, he held her pinned to the bed, writhing in wonder as his mouth captured hers again.

“Scream for me,” he ordered, rasping his thumb against her clit as he snaked his tongue into her mouth. Jane felt every muscle stiffen in anticipation. Her legs shuddered and her back arched as waves of fire ripped through her stomach, blasted down her legs, and she shook with a pleasure so intense, she screamed and cried his name until she thought the walls would fall down around them.

And still the throbs of need continued, building to a smaller crest that left her too weak to move, unable to do anything but cling to Wynn in utter surrender. She could barely breathe, she knew she could not stand, and when she heard the moan of satisfaction he nuzzled against her ear, she thought her heart would break in two.

“Hold me.” She felt him move, thinking he might pull away, but he merely rolled over and pulled her on top of his chest, stroking her hair away from her cheek.

For a long time she stayed curled tight upon him, fingers trailing over his chest, occasionally rubbing across the peak of one of his nipples. He would give a low rumble in his throat and wiggle beneath her, but made no effort to push her to further explorations.

At least not for a while. Eventually, his hips jerked more insistently on the bed and his hands tangled with greater urgency in her hair. “Jane,” he growled in her ear. “Jane?”

She smiled and looked up at him through her lashes. He really was more than beautiful, and the need that rode deep in his eyes caused her to gasp as an answering want stabbed once more between her legs.

She let her hand brush lightly across his groin. His cock was still turgid and hard. He sucked in his breath and held it as her fingers traced him through his breeches. She wanted him desperately again—almost as desperately as he wanted her—but then she remembered the days he had left her alone with her misery.

“Wynn.” She undid the lacings of his breeches and slipped her hand inside, crying out in amazement as she felt the smooth hot thickness of him. He groaned and shuddered, his hips rolling up with each stroke of her caress.

“*Jane!*” There was madness in his voice.

“You must bathe.” She nodded toward the tub, landing one last kiss on his mouth before she stood and held out her hands.

He gave her a half-embarrassed smile before he sighed and ducked his head. “I know. Sorry.”

He stood in one fluid motion and dropped his breeches to the ground. Then he peeled off his sticky shirt and Jane let her eyes wander over the most amazing male form she had ever seen.

His skin was as taut and smooth as marble, each tendon and muscle corded and strong. No hair covered his chest or the flat angle of his stomach, but the base of his cock was ringed with fine white down. She reached out to curl her fingers in it, giggling when he groaned and pressed her hand against him.

Stone leapt to warm life beneath her fingers, growing to even more impressive proportions as she watched. Wynn tried to catch her in his arms, but Jane slipped from his grip and nodded again toward the tub.

He groaned like a boy, shaking his head in disbelief as he realized she was serious. Then he sank down into the water, one lazy arm hanging over the side. “Will you wash me?” he asked, winking one blue eye open.

But Jane had already grabbed her robe and headed for the door. “Sleep well, Wynn.”

She heard his roar of fury as he shot from the tub and tried to catch her before she locked herself in the other room, and she laughed at her sport when she heard him pound like a madman on the door.

Chapter Six

“Damn it, woman, what do you play at?” Wynn could not believe she had fled his grasp once more. His thoughts darkened as he realized she planned to leave him in his desperate state all night.

Shite. She didn’t understand, didn’t know what torture he had already been through these last few days without her. He thumped his fists on the door again and snarled at Llew and Jessaline when they came down the hall.

Llewellyn looked at Wynn’s stiff prick, shook his head and clapped Wynn on the shoulder. “I do not envy you tonight, my friend.” He tried hard not to smile.

Jessaline giggled. “He has a horn to rival any Dunmore’s,” she said in fascination.

“Is that right?” A new light gleamed in Llewellyn’s eyes. “We shall see about that, my love,” he stated, taking her by the hand and pulling her to their chamber. “Sleep well, Wynn,” he mocked over his shoulder.

Wynn cursed his friend to seven different hells, especially when he heard Jess squeal in delight a very few moments later. He turned again to the solid oak door and knew that he was lost. Oh hell, he thought, banging his head against it several times. When Jane still did not respond, he slunk back to his own room and sat on the floor by the wall.

“I know you can hear me,” he called. “The walls are thin. Do you feel how much I need you? How much I ache for you?”

He clasped one hand over his cock, groaning when he felt its swollen length. He stroked himself a couple of times before realizing it was

useless. “Jane,” he said again. “I cannot come without you. Not since that first night I touched you.”

He cursed when she made no answer. The sounds of Lord and Lady Dunmore’s lovemaking echoed down the hall. Wynn picked up a cup he found on the floor and hurled it against the far wall.

He would hurt again tomorrow, ache so badly he could barely walk. Not that he blamed her. He grimaced when he thought of how cleverly she had tricked him. His lady had fire enough to scorch them both.

His lady? Would that it were so.

Growing cold and tired on the wood floor, Wynn heaved himself up to sit gingerly on the edge of the bed. He planted one elbow on his thigh and dropped his head onto his hands in true and utter defeat. His contrary flesh remained swollen and engorged. Even the smell of her that lingered on the bed sent him drowning in need again. But she had screamed, he remembered with pride. She had bucked and writhed beneath him, her sex pulsing tight around his fingers as she came for the first time in her life. He had known her passion would be glorious. He had known he was the man to set her free.

His cock throbbed again as he imagined thrusting it high into Jane’s cunt. “Damn.” He hissed when he felt the drop of liquid that beaded from its tip. He would never get to sleep.

He had just decided to go downstairs and drink his pain away when he heard his door squeak open.

Jane gazed in open delight at the sight of Wynn sitting dejectedly on the bed. His head was bowed, his hair hung down to cover one side of his face, and his beautiful cock rose high against his stomach.

Long, thick, like a pillar of marble carved by an artist’s hand, his flesh still stood rigid and hard. He lifted his head and watched her through heavy-lidded eyes. He didn’t move or say a word as she walked slowly toward the bed.

She didn’t know where to touch him first. In another time she would have reached straight for the length of him, quickly and efficiently

stroking him to completion. Or she would lay passive on the bed while he mounted her hard and fast.

But she wanted this to be different with Wynn.

“How can I please you?” She heard the tremor in her voice as she reached out to slip her fingers in his hair.

He shook his head. “I do not expect you to ease me. ‘Twas not my intent.”

“I know.” She stood before him and stripped off her robe.

A single muscle pulsed in his jaw and Jane caressed it with her fingers. He parted his legs and she stepped between them, cradling his head against her neck. His hips jerked as his arms curled around her. But he did nothing more than press his lips against her cheek. Jane let her hand trail down his stomach, feeling his intake of breath as she curled her fingers around his length.

A great shudder rushed over him and his thighs shook upon the bed. “Please,” he whispered as she ran her thumb over the fluid that spilled from his flesh. He groaned when she intensified the pressure.

She stroked him, marveling at how he could feel like silk and steel. He jumped beneath her fingers, growing even more until she could sense his coming release. Then, before he could prevent her, she dropped to her knees and lapped him with her tongue.

His reaction was immediate. His hips arched, he twisted his fingers in her hair, and Jane allowed herself a small and satisfied smile before taking all of him in her mouth.

Wynn could not even remember to breathe as Jane’s soft lips closed over his flesh. One hand curled tight around the root of him, another cupped his balls, and her hair spread out across his thighs like a stark and moonless night.

She sucked him slowly, tenderly, inch by agonizing inch. He wanted to scream at her to speed up, he wanted to cry for her to slow down, he wanted both to prolong the pleasure and satisfy the too harsh need.

He gritted his teeth against the mounting tide, unable to relax, still unable to let go. She sighed and stood, gazing at him with concern in her

eyes. "Am I doing something wrong?" A frown creased her brows as she studied his tormented face.

He didn't know what to say. How could he explain that he needed to assure her pleasure first? That he had to hear her cries of release before he could come to his own?

"If you do not let this happen," she whispered against his cheek, "you will feel much pain come morning."

He wanted to tear the room apart in frustration. Instead he pulled her down onto the bed. She straddled him on the mattress, locking her mouth against his as she grasped his cock and guided it into her.

She was hot, wet, all he had ever dreamed of. But he still needed to know her pleasure would equal his own. He found her clit as she rode him, rasping his fingers over the swollen bud, circling the nub of flesh until he felt her cry into his mouth.

She trembled, her back arched, and she rose to sit up on his hips. Now he could see every line of her beautiful body, admire the contrast of her skin against his, watch as he slipped in and out of her, feel her muscles quiver around his cock until she threw her head back and moaned as she came.

Her body tightened, the swollen lips of her milking him with every contraction, and at long last, Wynn felt his own bliss rise up to meet her. He clamped his hands around her hips, thrust high into her still-throbbing sex, and finally dropped over the edge, knowing she was waiting for him there.

She fell onto his chest, wrapping her legs around him as he drove into her one deep and final time, groaning her name as the flames washed over him. They came down slowly, contentedly folded in each other's arms.

"Jane," Wynn whispered as he felt her breath grow steady.

"Mmmm?"

"I have to leave again on the morrow, there is more work I have to do."

"That's nice," she mouthed against his skin, nuzzling even closer.

Wynn smiled and ran his fingers through her hair, knowing she hadn't heard a single word he said.

Wynn jumped off his horse and looked at his project with pride. Everything was coming along nicely. His men had arrived, cleared out the debris and had already done most of the repair work. By the end of the week, he should be able to show Jane his gift of love to her.

And it was love, he admitted. Honest, true, heart-aching love for his beautiful Lady Jane.

He thought after this past night's passion, she might also feel the same for him. If not the same, maybe her heart was at least headed in the right direction.

He smiled at the world, hummed a happy tune, rolled up his sleeves and began to work with unquenchable enthusiasm. He set up a tent on the lawn, and the great oak table was brought out and placed inside. This would be his special project. Wynn ran a hand over the weather-worn wood. Someone had done an excellent job in crafting the piece. It would only take some elbow grease to restore it to its original beauty.

This was different than anything he had ever done. The huge public edifices he usually designed were impersonal, stark, meant to impress rather than comfort. This place had to suit the amazing Jane. Her passion. Her joy. Even thinking of her sent him into a rage of longing. He gritted his teeth against the ache in his crotch and tried to loosen his breeches.

To no avail. Just picturing her loveliness spread out beneath him drove him to even greater heights of need. It was going to be a long week.

* * *

Wynn remained absent for several more long days. Jane paced the keep like some caged beast, surly, on edge, ready to vent her frustration on whoever happened to stumble by.

Jessaline treated her with a patience that was remarkable, but Llew began to avoid her at all cost. Jane interrogated him for information at every possible opportunity, and her friend's husband was doing his best not to give away any of Wynn's secret plans.

But Jane had had enough. Putting on one of her favorite outfits, she accosted Llew just outside the stables. "I need some money."

His expression remained unreadable. "How much?"

"Enough to buy Tipwich Tavern."

Llew chewed calmly on a piece of straw. "I didn't know it was for sale."

"Neither do they." Jane smiled. "Give me a writ for what you think it might be worth. I'll pay you back when Wynn buys my estate...if he ever decides to buy."

Now Llew frowned. "Don't you think you should talk it over with him first?"

"What in the hell for? He's not my lord and master. If he doesn't buy the estate, I'll give it to you. Call it a trade." When Llew still hesitated, Jane continued. "If you don't, I'll bargain it to the innkeeper. He'll get the better part of the deal."

Llew continued to stare at her in silence and Jane felt her temper rise.

"I have to do something with my life," she stated, stamping her foot. "I will not wait forever for the perfect Wynn to make up his damned mind!"

"Just give him another day or two before you do anything foolish." Llew reached out and patted her shoulder before walking calmly back to the bailey.

"Foolish?" Jane tossed her head. "I'll show them foolish. Just watch this, you bastards." She motioned to a passing stable hand. "You, there, saddle my horse. I have to be in Tipwich by noon."

* * *

“Now what?” Pansy caught Snapdragon’s urgent expression.

“Come here,” the other whispered, “and don’t wake up Rose.”

Pansy tiptoed across the room.

“She’s going to do something stupid.” Snapdragon pointed into the pool. “I know there must be some law preventing stupid stuff.”

Pansy watched in silence for several minutes before a huge book appeared in her hands. “Seven Thousand Simply Stunning Solutions. I wrote this myself,” she added with pride.

“Of course you did.”

Pansy glared at Snapdragon. “What was that supposed to mean?”

“Anyone else would have stopped at seventy...or even seven hundred. But you had to come up with seven thousand. I’m surprised you stopped there. Why not seven hundred thousand?”

“Do you want my help or not?” Pansy demanded, narrowing her eyes. “I have better things to do today.”

“Writing a sequel?” Snapdragon glared back.

A wave of blood flooded Pansy’s cheeks. “Actually, it’s more like an addendum.”

Snapdragon’s laughter rolled off the walls, and Rose’s voice drifted sleepily into the room.

“What are you two arguing about now?”

“Uh, nothing. Go back to sleep.” Snapdragon lowered her voice to a whisper. “Pick something...hurry.”

“How many do you think we’ll need?” Pansy thumbed through the book while Snapdragon studied the image in the water.

“She looks pretty determined. Maybe we should have a few in mind.”

Pansy’s fingers barely brushed the surface of the water.

“Oh, marvelous,” Snapdragon gushed, watching the changing scene. “I couldn’t have done better myself.”

* * *

Jane stormed back into Dunmore Keep, holding the skirt of her dress together. The sun was setting, and a thick bank of clouds rolled in from the west. She was beyond her breaking point.

She’d tried to ride into Tipwich two days in row, but each time she was stopped short just outside the Dunmore estate. The first day her horse threw a shoe, and just now, she’d caught her gown on a nail and ripped out the entire seam.

When she finally saw Wynn’s horse ride into the courtyard, she didn’t know whether to smile and run to welcome him, or plant a knife into his back.

He made the decision for her. He handed his steed to one of the stable hands, swung her up into his arms, and strode without a word across the great hall and up the stairs to her bedchamber.

“Strip,” he ordered when he lowered her to her feet. *“Now.”*

Jane caught her breath at the hunger that shone in his silvered eyes. Her body hummed in instant arousal. “As you wish,” she whispered, untying the lacings of her gown one at a time.

He watched her through hooded eyes, stalking her across the room until her back was pressed against the wall. “If this is how you want it to be.” He untied the lacings of his breeches and let his glorious cock break free.

Jane’s need rose to epic proportions, but still she teased him by delaying their delight. She shuddered when he shrugged and knelt at her feet, dragging the hem of her gown up her legs. Her breath shortened to helpless gasps when he finally had the skirts pushed above her waist. He slipped his fingers deep between her thighs. She knew she was already wet, she could smell the desire that drifted between them.

He groaned and nuzzled his face into the thick curls that covered her mound. His breath blew hot on her sensitive skin as he spread her flesh until he could taste her with his tongue. Jane gasped at the feel of his mouth as it slid across her slit, his tongue searching for the pearl of her clit. It throbbed desperately in answer.

“*Oh, hell,*” Jane whispered as the waves of sensation rolled up her spine. Her legs spread of their own accord, her thighs moving apart to give him greater access.

“Hold up your gown. I need both hands to love you.”

Jane whimpered, but she wrapped her fists over the material, keeping it high around her waist. Wynn pushed both hands between her thighs and ate at her again. She trembled as he tongued her, the slippery muscle rasping over her swelling clit in ever growing intention. She bit her lip to keep from crying her need when he snugged two fingers high into the heart of her, driving, piercing, demanding that she take him.

“*Ahhhhh!*” The sound escaped her as he worked his tongue harder, his fingers moving faster as he urged her to completion.

It wasn’t taking long. Jane felt the tingle curl up from her toes, the tremor of her legs growing with every second. “Wynn...I can’t stop—” she tried to say as another shock of passion ripped along her sex.

Suddenly Wynn dipped another finger into her wet, slid it back along the crease of her bottom, and plunged it without warning into the tiny opening of her ass. Jane screamed at the shock of the invasion, tried to slide her hips away, but Wynn pressed ruthlessly deeper.

“Don’t fight me,” he said, briefly pulling his mouth away. He wiggled his finger higher into her ass, the sting of pain sparking a pleasure greater than Jane had known before. She cried out again as Wynn filled her completely with his expert touch.

She arched her hips against him, opened to take as much of him as she could, her body clamping tight around his fingers as if unwilling to let him go. And still he worked her, thrusting, tonguing, wringing every last drop of bliss from her flesh as she came in a rush of overwhelming emotion.

Then he stood and pulled her legs around him, slamming her into the wall as he speared her with his cock. His mouth covered hers and Jane could taste her juice upon his lips. She slid her tongue into his mouth, swallowing his moans, taking everything he gave her until he shuddered in her arms and found his own release.

He held her while his breathing steadied, as if she weighed no more than a wisp of eiderdown. Jane continued to whimper against his mouth as he carried her to the bed.

“Would you like to undress now?” he mocked, making no effort to release her. “Or shall I do it for you?”

Fire smoldered between them.

“Whatever you think best,” Jane answered, too happy to protest his overbearing tone—at least for a little while.

“Then I suggest you pull your gown over your head.” His teeth scraped across her neck and Jane felt him grow hard again inside her.

Jane smiled as he laid her on the bed. “Did I tell you I am buying Tipwich Tavern?”

“No, you’re not,” he said, kissing her quickly before she could manage another word.

Chapter Seven

Wynn tugged Jane's hair. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

Jane snuggled deeper into his arms. "The sun has not yet risen," she complained, running her hand across his stomach. "'Tis still night, time to stay and sleep some more."

He chuckled when her fingers closed around his cock. It was as hard and ready for her as it always was. "Sleep is not what you have in mind." He threw off the covers and rose, carrying her with him.

Jane shivered in the early air. "What could possibly be more important than staying in bed with me?" She stamped her foot in frustration when Wynn set her down.

Wynn laughed before bending close to give her a hard and lingering kiss. "Not a thing I can think of...besides this."

Jane sucked in a deep breath of air. After that kiss she could deny him nothing—and he knew it, the elegant bastard. "How long will we be gone?" She bent over in the pretense of looking for her gown, giving him a delicious view of her backside. He smacked it soundly and Jane threw a boot at his head.

He caught it as he pulled on his breeches. "Move, woman." He had already slipped on his shirt and the one boot. "Thank you," he said when Jane lobbed the other one at him.

"Where are we going?"

"To the Seville estate. Your home." Wynn watched her warily as he spoke.

Jane stubbornly shook her head. "We've already discussed this." She sat on the bed and stared out the window to where the first pink tint of morning traced across the sky. Shadows and screams played across her mind; pain and loss and lingering sorrow.

Wynn sat beside her, tucked a finger beneath her chin, and turned her face to his. "Just this one time. If you still want to sell, I will pay whatever price you ask." His eyes pleaded.

Jane tucked her cheek into his palm. "No."

"You have to face it sometime. 'Tis not fair to your family's memory, and I do not believe 'tis what they would want."

"How the hell would you know?"

"Think, Jane. If you had a child lost for years, would you not want her to come home? Safe and whole and ready to live again? Nothing was your fault...nothing. You don't have to be afraid."

Still she hesitated, her need to reclaim herself warring with her need to forget the past. She finally sighed in resignation. If he wanted her to go, she would. "Just this once, Wynn...just this once."

His smile was immediate. "What will you wear today?"

"You're trying to change the subject."

"Is it working?"

"Of course." Jane chewed the corner of her thumb. "The orange cloak, blue gloves, pink kirtle and burgundy gown?" she asked hopefully.

"How about the yellow kirtle, red bodice and green skirt. Then you'll have all the colors of the rainbow."

Jane did not miss the amusement in his voice. "Don't make fun of me." She smacked him on the shoulder. "When I was little I would watch the ladies in their beautiful gowns whenever they rode through town. I swore if I ever had enough money, I would buy myself all the colors I could find. I dreamt of warm cloaks and soft leather boots when I walked barefoot through the snow."

Wynn swept her into his arms and ran his fingers through her hair. "I love your outfits, Jane, and I would not change a one of them. Ever."

“Do you really mean that?” Jane smiled.

“On my honor,” he answered, dumping her onto the floor. “But you don’t have much time to decide.”

Jane dressed quickly, and Wynn held her hand when they made their way downstairs to sneak like thieves into the still-cold kitchen. They took a loaf of yesterday’s bread, a wheel of cheese, and poured a skin full of ale for the journey. Once in the stables, Wynn saddled his strong black steed and a smaller mare for Jane. Within minutes they were riding across the damp and misty countryside.

Wynn grinned and whistled a languid tune. Jane tried to relax, but found her thoughts drawn again and again to the home she had thought lost forever.

The longer they rode the more silent she became.

Wynn stopped beside the forest track that led to the Seville estate. He helped her down and spread the food and ale on his cloak, urging her to break her fast. Jane tried to eat, but every bite seemed to lodge in her throat and at last she threw down the bread in disgust.

“Give me the ale.” When Wynn handed it to her she took a long drink. And another. And another, until Wynn pried the ale-skin from her hands. He held out a piece of cheese instead.

Jane stubbornly shook her head. Wynn shrugged and ate the bite himself.

“I promise you won’t regret this.” He placed one warm hand over hers. Jane was surprised at how cold she had grown, despite the rising warmth of the day.

When Wynn felt her shiver, he drew her close against his chest. Jane calmed instantly. With Wynn it was always so. Well, except for when the need hit hard, as it was already starting to do.

She nuzzled his neck.

He stroked her breast.

She whimpered.

He stood and dumped her on the ground.

“Ready?” He held out his hand.

“*Shite*.” Jane stood on her own, shot him a grumpy glare, and hauled herself back into the saddle. “Come on, then,” she grumbled, kicking her mount into a steady trot.

Wynn caught up with her easily and they continued the journey in silence. The forest path was wide, the grass beaten down as if it had been regularly traveled. She glanced at Wynn curiously, but his profile gave nothing away.

Just as the trail made a last turn toward the manor, Wynn pulled in front of Jane’s horse and stopped dead in the middle of the path. He swung down and tied his steed to a nearby tree, before tying Jane’s mare up beside him.

“Close your eyes,” he said, pulling her to the ground.

“You are joking,” Jane replied, balling her fists on her hips.

“Your choice.” With a swift movement, Wynn pulled a piece of cloth from his belt, slipped behind her and tied the material over Jane’s eyes. She yelped and tried to swipe the cloth away, but he held her arms firmly as he led her down the track.

“Just shut up and trust me,” he hissed when she managed to land a kick to his shin. “’Tis not like I’m going turn you over to the enemy, or drop you down a cliff. ’Tis a surprise, Jane, so damn it, play along and be surprised.”

She giggled at the exasperation in his voice. She loved the sound of his frustration—in and out of bed. In fact, she thrived on it so much, she vowed to keep him frustrated on a fairly regular basis. She stopped fighting, suddenly curious. Was this where he had been spending all his time of late?

“Ready?” He stopped, hesitated for an instant, then ripped the cloth away.

Jane stared in utter fascination at the scene that met her eyes.

Her childhood home stood perfect and proud on its hill overlooking the river. The roof was freshly thatched, the door and shutters were brand new, and the mellow stone walls shone warm in the sun. Even the

grounds had been cleaned and weeded, with the help of the sheep she could see herded in a small enclosure.

“Did you do all this?” Her voice cracked, she couldn’t help it when she saw the look of absolute pleasure he had glowing from his eyes.

“Let me show you the inside.” He squeezed her hand and led her to the door. It swung open with barely a squeak as Jane stepped over the threshold, all her earlier hesitation forgotten.

It was the warmest and most inviting room she had ever seen. The sun shone in thick beams from the windows, gleaming off the newly polished wood floor. The fireplace had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life, and a fresh pile of wood lay ready to light in the hearth. Two cozy chairs had been placed on either side of the mantle, and Jane could picture sitting there with Wynn by her side on a dark and cold winter night.

And just when she thought nothing could be any more perfect, she spotted the table. It sat in sunlight at the far end of the room, waxed to a sheen, as proud and lovely as it had ever been before.

“My grandfather made this table. My parents were so proud to have it in their home.” Jane choked back a sob as she moved to run her fingers over the newly smoothed wood. Family secrets had been shared over its length, and laughter had rolled like honey across its well-used top.

Jane’s tears now christened it anew as she bent her head to peer at the carvings traced around the table’s edge. “Wynn,” she whispered, afraid that any louder sound would be lost in the closing of her throat, “I don’t know what to say. I have no way to thank you for this, no way to repay you for your kindness.”

She raised her eyes to his, dark and light connecting as if it had always been so, and Jane realized the truth of him.

He was a part of her heart she had thought forsaken long ago. A piece of her lost in the years of solitude and sorrow. His gift to her was more than he knew. In this one single moment he had given her back the family she had never ceased to mourn.

She imagined them now, crowded around the table and sitting at the fireplace, smiling their approval as they praised his loving labor. They swirled around her with sighs of peace before they vanished once again into shards of morning mist.

And Jane knew, as she watched the dust glimmer and fade away, that their ghosts had at last been made silent. Wynn had found them and set them free. Wynn had calmed them and sent them home.

Jane crossed to where he stood and traced trembling fingers down his cheek. "I love you," she said. "I don't know what I have done to deserve you, but I am so grateful to have you in my life." Still, she could not stop the frown of puzzlement that drew her brows together. "Why would you do this for me?"

"I asked you once, my lady, if you saw the thing I was. My...condition, for lack of a better word." He held his arm next to hers as he had done before, letting both of them see the contrast of their skin. "You never let it come between us. I could offer no less to you. I am not like other men and we both know it, but for the very first time in my life, I can honestly say I am content. You have made me so. 'Tis enough." He bowed low over her hand, the gesture both simple and grand.

When he raised his head again, mischief glittered in his pale blue eyes. "Let me show you the bedchamber." His smile could have melted the most frozen of hearts, and Jane had no will to resist his charm.

"Lead on," she said, waving him toward the iron stairway that circled up the far wall.

He grasped her hand again and practically dragged her up the stairs. "Ready?" he demanded when they were almost at the top. Wynn moved to block the door. "Will you promise not to laugh?" he asked seriously. "I tried very hard to make this room special, but I may have gone too far."

"I promise," Jane intoned obediently, but she giggled despite herself as she tried to peek around him.

Stepping aside, he gave Jane full access to the room. It glowed with every hue imaginable as the sun shimmered through the newly painted window glass. Each small panel had been tinted a different color, red,

blue, gold and green. The combined affect was a patchwork of light that reminded Jane of the ethereal rainbows that appeared after a storm, proof the sun would shine again once the violence had passed. The curtains draping the bed were also a chaotic clash of colors, tatters of material meshed into a wild and lovely whole.

“I found a chest in the corner,” Wynn explained. “Many of the dresses had been ruined, but much of the cloth was salvageable.”

“What are you talking about?” Jane fingered a swath of velvet in the curtain.

“These are from your mother’s gowns,” Wynn explained, curling his fingers over hers. “Although there might be a shirt or two of your father’s thrown in.”

“You did this for me?” Jane asked again. “Why?” She turned to Wynn and froze when she saw the aloofness that suddenly shuttered his gaze.

Chapter Eight

The unmistakable sound of men and horses rang out across the day. Their jingles and shouts grew closer by the minute. Wynn stared out the window for long moments before moving to kneel at her feet.

“We need to talk.” His voice was flat.

Jane felt her throat grow tight. “About what?”

Just then Allard Dunmore stepped into the room, his mouth drawn and harsh. “About the fact the king suggested he make a bid for your hand. Did he forget to tell you that?” Bitterness laced every word. “Did he also forget to tell you about the position he was promised at court when he finally gained your title? Lord High Mason—you note the Lord part comes first.” He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

Wynn balled his hands into fists. The muscle pulsed in his jaw. “How do you know that?”

Allard twisted his mouth in the semblance of a smile. “Ah, you may not listen to court gossip, but I do. In fact, that’s all I’ve done these past few days. The king has made no secret of his plans for his court jester.”

Wynn jerked to his feet just as Samantha Sturbridge popped her head into the room. Short, with black hair and blue eyes, she was Allard’s birth mother. “Allard! Apologize to Wynn.”

Allard ground his teeth. “I don’t think so, Mother, not this time.” He spun and left the room, refusing to even glance at Samantha.

Jane swore her heart stopped beating, the betrayal too much for it to take. “This was all to gain my title? Everything...all the times we...when you touched me...you were scheming to marry me all this while?” She

pressed a hand to her temple where a major headache had already begun to take hold.

Wynn swore as Finella Ross entered. A head taller than her partner, Samantha, Finella had given birth to Llewellyn. "Ah, here you are." She strode regally into the chamber and presented her cheek for Wynn's kiss.

"My lady." Although his smile was forced, he performed the obligatory gesture.

"Jane." Finella nodded briskly in her direction. "So nice to see you again."

Samantha paced nervously, watching Finella scan the room. "We should go downstairs, dear, so Wynn and Jane can talk."

Finella's brows shot up.

Samantha explained. "Allard told Jane of Edred's plans for Wynn. Then he called Wynn the king's court jester."

Finella's lips thinned as she patted Wynn's arm. "He didn't mean it. He's still upset Jane turned his proposal down."

Jane jerked up her head in time to see the shock that crossed Wynn's face. He masked it too quickly, leaving Jane to wonder if she had seen the hurt at all. Her head throbbed in earnest as Wynn continued to regard her through eyes as cold as fallen snow.

"I did not know Allard proposed."

Finella swore. "Don't you two talk at all?"

A rush of color flooded Wynn's cheeks.

Samantha smiled. "I think they have spent their time otherwise engaged."

Finella's mouth turned down. "Then they had better get disengaged and straighten this mess out."

The room grew too quiet.

"It doesn't matter, anyway." Jane moved to the door, deliberately keeping her eyes on the floor. "The estate belongs to Wynn. I'll have Allard draw up the papers. I never wanted any of this in the first place." If her tone grew bitter at the end, there was nothing she could do to stop

it. "I will see to the other guests," she added lamely, before finally fleeing down the stairs.

What a fool she had been to think Wynn had done all that work out of love for her. She should have known no man could ever love her—not after what she had been. But Jane had conveniently forgotten her past in the pleasure of Wynn's strong arms. In the dark of the night when he held her close and she cried his name in abandon.

She clamped her eyes shut, but could not stop the tears from trickling down her cheek. Why had she thought he might care for her? He was a man like any other, interested only in the pleasures of her body. Except now she had money and a title. Too many variables to add to the bargain. Too many things a man might crave other than her love.

She had never felt more abandoned in her life—not since the day her family had been taken away. As a child she had not fully understood the magnitude of her loss. As a woman she knew her heart would never heal.

After many minutes, she took a deep breath and wiped her face clean and dry. There was nothing she could do but play this last day out. She would not die from a broken heart, even if she might have wished it. Squaring her shoulders, she strode back to the manor, running into Graham along the way.

Graham, the youngest and largest Dunmore brother, grinned at her from his towering height and wrapped her in a suffocating hug. "Lady Jane Seville," he said, planting a sloppy kiss on her forehead.

Jane gave him a watery smile in return. He dropped her to the ground as Llew and Jess approached. She smiled hollowly and bid them welcome.

This was supposed to be a celebration, only Jane took no pleasure in the day.

Wynn watched Jane all night, hoping she would move from where she sat between Jess and Llew, or at least look in his direction. She avoided him expertly.

The fire burned low and the night grew chill. Tents were set up around the yard and one by one the others made their way to bed. Stars winked at him mockingly overhead and Wynn swore they saw what a true and utter idiot he had been.

He should have made it clear from the start what the king had suggested he do. Instead, he had bumbled around in secret, acting like some love-starved boy trying to bribe his way into her arms—arms he wanted to be held in now, hearing her cry his name in need, feeling her body tremble beneath his.

He looked again to where she sat, ethereal in the firelight, beautiful, aloof. His body throbbed in expected desire and longing, and his heart leapt when he saw her bid her companions good night. Perhaps he could catch her now, beg her to forgive him and let him start again.

He followed her into the house, only to be stopped by a burly guard seated calmly at the bottom of the stairs.

“My lady is not to be disturbed.” The man crossed his arms over his chest.

“Who are you?” Wynn demanded.

“Jack.” He was alert and ready to do his duty.

Wynn scowled. The look would have cowed a lesser man. Jack did not even blink an eye. Wynn slid up his sleeves, ready to push the man aside, but was stopped short by the sound of Llewellyn Dunmore’s voice from behind.

“I would not try that if it were me. Jack has even bested Graham on occasion.”

Wynn frowned deeper. “Tell him to step aside, Llew, I need to speak with Jane.”

Llew nodded amiably to Jack before slapping Wynn hard on the shoulder. “Not tonight. Whatever you did must have pissed her off to no end. Care to talk about it over a glass of wine? Or we could duke it out if

you prefer,” he added when Wynn raised a fist. “I swear Jessaline has made me crazy enough to thrash someone on occasion.”

Although Llew’s tone was light, Wynn knew his friend was concerned. And it helped that even a married man could be driven to madness by the woman he loved. Wynn glanced at Jack who had settled into his chair once more. A buxom brunette came and stood hesitantly at his side.

“Alice,” Llew greeted. “I am sorry Jack has been called to work tonight, but I know you understand.”

Alice smiled shyly.

Wynn ground his teeth in frustration.

Llew threw one arm over his shoulder and led Wynn back into the night. “Drink heavily. Pass out quickly. ’Tis the only way to sleep without her.” Llew winked and went to bed with Jess.

Wynn plopped to the ground beside Graham.

“Oh, hell.” Graham shook his shaggy blond head. “Another man lost to the lunacy of love.” He poured ale into a glass from a pitcher and handed it to Wynn.

Wynn reached for the pitcher instead.

Graham laughed as Allard came to join them.

“Say one word and I will kill you,” Wynn warned.

“She got to you, too, did she?” Allard’s eyes were shadowed.

Wynn glared at him in silence, daring him to say something stupid.

Allard didn’t let him down. “Looks like you didn’t do so good.” There was a satisfied smugness to his voice that made Wynn want to slug him. He thought he might after a few more glasses of beer. He knew he would when Allard continued. “She’s made many a man scream his love for her. Of course, that was her job—”

Wynn threw the pitcher at Allard’s head and tackled him to the ground. They rolled in a grunt of tangled arms and legs, both men throwing punches and kicks at any place they could reach.

Allard snarled when Wynn landed a blow to his cheek, splitting the skin just below his eye. Blood trickled down his chin, but Allard ignored it as he slammed his knee into Wynn's groin. Wynn retched as Allard stood and aimed another kick at his head. This time Wynn caught the blow and jerked Allard off balance. He landed on the ground again with a steady stream of curses.

Graham smiled serenely and poured himself another drink.

Wynn elbowed Allard in the side and rammed the other man's face into the dirt. Allard twisted fluidly and slammed his palm into Wynn's chin. Wynn bit through his lip and the metallic taste of blood flooded his mouth. He spit it out on Allard's shirt. Allard smiled wickedly and spit in Wynn's face. Wynn had just drawn back to land another blow when Finella's voice pierced the cool night air.

"You will both stop this at once." She cuffed Graham upside the head.

"Hey," he protested, "why hit me?"

"Because you sat there in complete amusement watching them act like idiots. I raised you boys better than that." She turned somber eyes to Wynn and Allard. "You two have been friends for years. Allard, Wynn loves Jane, you don't. Get over it and let them both be happy. Now stand up and apologize like grown men."

She crossed her arms over her chest, daring them to refuse. Slowly Wynn and Allard stood, their looks growing wary and embarrassed.

Allard wiped blood from his cheek. "I am sorry, Wynn," he muttered. "Do you truly love her, or is this just a way to further your ambition?"

Finella cocked her head, listening for his answer.

Wynn cleared his throat. "I have spent my whole life waiting for a chance like this. To prove—"

"To prove what?" Finella demanded. "That you are worthy of respect, honor? You have proven that a hundred times over. Let it be enough. Don't spend the rest of your life trying to live up to your own foolish expectations."

Graham grinned. "She's right. Be more like me, I don't live up to anyone's expectations."

Finella frowned at the blond giant. "We will work on that soon, little one," she promised before turning again to Wynn. "Do you love the girl? If you do, find a way to woo her. Love does not come around that often. For any of us," she added, touching a lock of Wynn's hair before turning to smile at Allard. "Your time will come, my son." She patted him on the cheek. "Goodnight, boys."

After Finella was well out of earshot, Allard proposed the toast. "To all wretched women. May they rot while waiting for us to love them."

Graham watched Wynn drink a lot in a very short period of time. And the more he drank the more stupid he became, until he finally grabbed his cup and stood below the open windows that led to Jane's bedchamber.

"Lady," he bellowed, swaying alarmingly as he tried to look up at the second story. "Wake up."

"Oh ho, this ought to be good," Graham said to Allard. "Want to go watch?"

"Hell, no." Allard curled deeper into his cloak spread on the ground. "Let him make an ass of himself in private."

"Spoilsport." Graham looked to where Wynn continued to rock unsteadily on his feet.

"Jane!" Wynn shouted again. "I d-deman' that you—" His words were cut short by a pitcher of water dumped from the window above.

At least Graham hoped it was water. He chuckled and settled down to enjoy the show. Wynn sputtered as the cold liquid poured down upon his head. Jane must be well and truly pissed, Graham realized, when she hurled the pitcher down, too.

Wynn tried to duck, but he was so thoroughly deep in his cups he moved too slowly to avoid the object. It caught him on the shoulder and spun him half around. "Thast not verrry nice," he muttered, not even

realizing he was facing the other way. "I means it," he ordered the forest. "Come here!"

"What the hell?" Llew poked his head out of his tent and glared at Graham in disgust. "Go get him, you big lug. If she—uh oh—"

Both men watched the pewter tray fall menacingly to the ground. Luckily, Wynn had stumbled two feet to his left, and the missile buried itself in the spot behind him.

Graham snickered, but his older brother's face was bleak. "All right, all right."

Wynn swung when Graham tried to herd him back toward the fire. He missed by a mile. His other fist, however, caught Graham below the eye.

"*Shite!*" Graham fingered the bruise. "I've had enough of this. Sorry, my friend." He punched Wynn squarely on the jaw, threw him over his shoulder and carried him well out of Jane's target range.

"If I ever fall in love," Graham said to no one at all as he let Wynn's limp body slide to the ground, "promise to kill me quickly and painlessly." He poured another glass of ale, listening to Wynn and Allard snore drunkenly by the fire.

"Are you just going to walk away?" Finella strode into the bedchamber early the next morning.

Jane remained sullenly silent.

Finella walked to the bed and fingered the drapes that fell in brilliant color to the floor. "Did you see any of Wynn's work in Lynden?"

Jane nodded but refused to meet the other woman's gaze.

Finella continued undaunted. "He built the new ballroom at the palace, the twin spires of Kedryn Abbey, and the Blue River Bridge—greatest wonder of the modern world."

Jane felt her heart sink even farther. Why did she ever think a man like Wynn would be contented to remain with a woman like her, on a tiny country manor that had practically fallen to the ground?

She heard the bed rustle as Finella sat down. "Do you know what every one of those grand projects has in common? They are beautiful, mind you, beautiful beyond description, but they are cold, stark, barren. Much like Wynn, himself," Finella added, "until he met you."

Jane turned in surprise to find Finella smiling softly.

"And this," Lady Ross waved her hand around the room, "this is like nothing he has ever done before. There is love in this design, whether he has admitted it or not. Come, girl." Finella patted the bed beside her, and Jane grudgingly complied. "Wynn has spent his entire life alone. Even with us, he always felt the outsider. You are the one person who could possibly understand that. His heart will be yours forever...if you let him give it to you."

Jane studied the colored panes of glass in the windows. "How do I know he really wants me and not just the title I can bring him?"

"Do you love him?"

"Yes." Jane had already admitted her feelings to Wynn. She had no reason to lie to Finella.

"Then why would you deny him the gift of your name? He will never hurt you, never make you feel less than adored. What more could any woman ask for?"

Jane finally looked Finella dead square in the eyes. "You are right." She was finding new hope in the older woman's words. "I don't know how to thank you, and Jess, and your sons, for all that you have done for me these last few weeks."

"Wynn is family, too," Finella replied. "His happiness is important."

Jane gave Finella a quick hug. "What should I tell him?"

"The truth, child." Finella straightened the neckline of Jane's gown. "Now go. Shoo. Time does not wait while we sit here and chat."

With a glorious smile, Jane flew down the stairs to where Wynn sat slumped on the lawn, his head cradled in his hands.

He glared at her when she sat beside him, the frost in his eyes unmistakable. "What do you want?" His voice slid like ice across the day, and Jane reveled in the sound of it. If he was this surly, he must really want her back.

That would suit her just fine.

She jutted out her chin, noticing for the first time the bruise that purpled his jaw. "Were you fighting again for my honor?" She reached out to slide her finger over the wound, blinking against the hot sting of tears. "No one but you has ever done that. No one else thought I had any honor to lose." She watched the storm of emotions that swept across his face. He brought them back under control with a desperate clench of his jaw.

But he remained stubbornly quiet.

"I have decided to marry you," Jane stated, pleased her voice did not betray the nervousness of her thoughts.

"You what?" Wynn's tone rose half an octave as he regarded her incredulously. "Oh, no, you made it perfectly clear how you felt last night."

Jane flipped her hair back over her shoulders. "I've changed my mind since then," she said. "You need me, and I can't have you moping about, unable to work, dying of love. Besides," she leaned close to whisper in his ear, uneasiness finally getting the better of her, "would it really be so bad to be married to me? You would, of course, have to accept that dreadful position the king promised. Lord High...*ass* was it?"

She kissed his neck softly and let her breath out in a sigh when she felt him tremble at her touch. His eyes closed. His features slowly relaxed. When he looked at her again, his mouth had tilted up in that half-smile she had grown to treasure.

"I don't care about the position, not like I did before." He curled his fingers in her hair.

Jane's smile widened. "Of course you do. But you'll have to buy me a few new gowns, to liven things up at court. I had my eye on this lovely green and orange striped—" A laugh rumbled from his chest, surprising Jane completely. She had never heard him laugh before.

"Many, many gowns...and maybe another hat for me?" He pulled back to study her again. "I have nothing to offer you. No family. No name. Are you certain you want me?" There was worry on his face. Did he think he was giving her a new reason to leave?

"Silly," she said, her own eyes mirroring his earnestness. "Wynn, I have a name and no one to share it with. Take my title, and let us make a lineage to be reckoned with. Lord Wynn Seville, how does that sound?"

His smile was a wonder to behold. "It sounds most excellent, my love."

He had almost trapped her lips with his when a shadow fell across the day. For the briefest of instants, the wind died, the birds grew silent, and a wintry chill swept over the land.

"Did you see that?" Jane creased her brows and stared at the sky. "Like something slithered across the sun."

Wynn shook his head. "I can't see anything but you," he said, finally capturing her mouth with his. Jane whimpered as the need took hold, all other things forgotten in the pleasure of his kiss.

Epilogue

“Did you see that?” Snapdragon bent low over the scrying bowl.

“See what, dear?” Rose didn’t look up as she finished filling out the last of the forms before handing the entire lot to Pansy. “I think I have them all.”

Pansy smiled at the thick stack of paperwork. “I’ll look them over just to make sure.”

Snapdragon continued to frown at the image. Then she shook her head and stood. “Nothing. I must be getting old. I’m starting to see things.”

“Then you’ve been ancient forever,” Pansy shot back, walking to stand beside Snapdragon, nonetheless. “I don’t see anything.”

Rose moved to clear the vision. But her hand stilled over the water, and her brows drew together as something shifted just outside her view. She finally shrugged and stirred the water. “Let’s see who we have next.”

Pansy clucked in horrified delight. “Absolutely not...we’ll never manage to pull this one off.”

About the Author

To learn more about Gia Dawn, please visit www.giadawn.com. Send an email to info@giadawn.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Gia Dawn! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/giadawn>

Gia Dawn has been a Massage Therapist, Bookstore Owner, and Bartender—obviously having problems deciding what to do with her life. But she has always loved romance, from the very first books she snuck into church as a girl—much to the chagrin of her pious grandmother. She is happily married to her college sweetheart and has two mostly grown sons. She loves her cats—all black, of course, and anything mystical or magical.

Look for these titles by Gia Dawn

Now Available:

Demons of Dunmore 1: Lord Demon's Delight

Sacred, worshiped...hunted.

Goddess of the Grove

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Book two from the *Sacred Places* series.

All Korey O'Caha wants in his immortal life is to keep evil at bay, protect the witches he was destined to teach and to bed as many women as possible. He doesn't want love but he didn't plan on Gigi. Her very presence calls all he vowed sacred in life into question. She quickly becomes his reason for existing but can she ever fully accept him and who he is—a seven hundred year old immortal druid sorcerer? Will the secrets she's hiding be his undoing?

Gigi, the daughter of a great god, could not stand idly by and allow innocent druid children to be slaughtered. She intervened, placing them under her protection. In the end she was imprisoned in a place where time moved differently than here on earth. That was almost seven hundred years ago. Once freed, she ran as far from the old country as she could. Never did she expect to find ties to the land, let alone a man who stirs her blood the way Korey does.

As shadows from the past resurface, bringing news of an uprising, truth and passion ignite, leaving Gigi at the mercy of Korey.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Goddess of the Grove*:

Korey rubbed his jawline as tension threatened to make it lock. "I willnae calm down."

Coyle made another attempt to come towards him and Korey's power prickled, warning he wasn't safe to be near. "Dammit, cousin, do you wish to bring the gods to Gigi's doorstep?"

"No." What he wanted to do was toss Gigi over his shoulder and run for the hills with her, never allowing anyone to harm her. The moment her *precious* Parth dropped his spell, Gigi went about her business as if nothing had happened. Korey was impressed with how easily she'd learned to hide who she truly was from everyone but was hurt she chose to do so with him.

You hide from her.

He balked at his inner voice for daring to point out the irony in the situation. He'd spent years pining after a woman he thought wouldn't understand who and what he was only to find she more than knew of their kind.

"If you do nae calm yerself, cousin, I will be forced to knock you out with my power. I do nae think you wish to be unconscious if the dark sorcerer returns." Coyle went to his office door and peeked out. "Gigi still acts as if nothing occurred. Can you believe she's the woman who saved our village? How did we nae recognize her?"

"What?" He gawked at his cousin in disbelief.

Coyle centered an amused look on him. "You do nae remember?" A sly grin spread over Coyle's face. "Och, Korey, how can you forget the first woman you ever gave flowers to?"

He opened his mouth to protest but stopped the minute he thought back to his childhood. Seven hundred plus years ago there had been a woman—a beautiful one at that—who stormed into his village, blanketing them in her power. He had weak memories of exactly what she looked like but knew enough to know she was breathtaking.

Korey's mind drifted to Parth's behavior when asking Gigi what was so special about the little boy who had given her the flowers.

Had I known giving you flowers would win yer hand in marriage, I would have done so myself.

Suddenly, it felt as if he'd been struck in the midriff. Korey went forward, putting his hands on his knees and breathing hard. Coyle clapped him on the back of the neck, chuckling slightly. "'Tis a bitch when the love bug nae only bites you in the arse, but does so without you knowing the lil' bastard was there to begin with."

Korey rubbed his stomach and shook his head. "Gigi cannae be the...Coyle, she...it would mean she's my..."

Coyle drew upon his power and in a split second was holding a bucket before Korey's face. "Here, cousin. I've no wish to see you throw up on my office floor."

Pushing the bucket away, Korey narrowed his gaze on Coyle. "How can you joke at a time like this? I just found out the love of my immortally long life was

tortured on account of us and is in danger still. Nae only that but she isnae in any hurry to fess up to—”

Coyle tapped Korey’s head. “Nae to interrupt your tangent but you do realize you admitted to loving her, right?”

“I did no such...” He paused and then pulled the bucket back towards his face. “Och. ’Tis a horrible bug indeed.”

His cousin’s laughter grated on his nerves but Korey held his tongue, too worried about the goddess who graced their presence.

“Breathe.” Coyle rubbed Korey’s shoulder. “That’s it. In and out. Are you better now? You know, I felt the verra same way when I realized Deri was my mate. I felt as though someone had run me down and then backed over me for good measure. ’Tis common, I expect, for us to fall hard when we finally do get around to falling.”

The door to the office opened and Gigi entered. She took one look at Korey and arched a brow. “Drink too much again?”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Aye, something like that.”

When she bargained with the devil of her dreams, they both found their heart's delight.

Lord Demon's Delight

© 2007 Gia Dawn

Lady Jessaline Nolan is as stubborn as her fiery red hair implies; thwarting her father's wishes every chance she gets. The day of her impending forced marriage proves no exception. She swears she would rather marry a Demon of Dunmore than the man her father has chosen.

Lord Llewellyn Dunmore is happily unwed, as the men in his lineage have remained for generations. It's become a family tradition. But he is drawn to the beautiful damsel in distress and agrees to save her on one condition—that she willingly succumb to his every sensual demand. To his utter surprise, she agrees.

While Jessaline's father schemes to bring her back by any means necessary, Jessaline and Llewellyn spend their nights in decadent delight and three rather cranky fairy-godmothers lend their magical help to the lovers.

Darker secrets lurk, however, as well as a shadowy past that Jessaline is unaware of. Can the new love between Jessaline and Llewellyn survive when confronted with hidden truths?

First book in the Demons of Dunmore Series

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Lord Demon's Delight*:

Jessaline hesitated just outside the door. Her fingers shook and she was more nervous than she cared to admit. She had no doubt he would claim his portion of the bargain—no doubt he was more than capable of demanding his husbandly rights. She had seen and felt the proof of that more than once this day.

But he was *huge*, so long and broad she did not know how she would manage to fit him all inside her. Despite his words to the contrary, she was

afraid he would hurt her. The goblets on the tray tinkled as her hands trembled again, and the newly familiar ache shuddered up from between her thighs.

Anticipation. Desire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That, too."

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

He chuckled, a purr that sent ripples of anticipation across her skin. "Oh, no. I intend to touch, stroke, explore and plunder every inch of your perfect flesh." He straightened in his chair and leaned toward her, his smile one that would make the devil proud. "But first I want to look at you. All of you."

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

"The kirtle," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that the game you wish to play?”

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

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

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

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

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

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