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Amorous Passageways - The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus: Tapestry of Wonders Copyright © 2005 Raleigh Kincaid ISBN: 1-55410-620-6 Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya
Publications, 2005
Look for us online at:
www.zumayapublications.com
www.extasybooks.com

# FORWARD: THE ORIGINS OF THE WONDERS BY CIAR CULLEN

Psychology, the occult and numerology aside, we can possibly blame the ancient Greek mathematician Pythagoras for some of this affinity for things in quantities of seven, the prime number he favored and considered 'not too big and not too small'. The number was firmly established in Greek literature by the time the historian Herodotus (484 BC-425 BC) listed seven great ancient 'sites' in his *magnum opus*. (Some scholars attribute this list to a mechanic named Philo of Byzantium.).

So what's so wonderful about these wonders? Did they all really exist? Who built them, and why? For one thing, all seven wonders are big—really big by ancient standards—and opulent, each requiring years, even decades of labor and unfathomable financial resources. Thus they represent the pinnacle of human achievement at the time Herodotus listed them.

Two are tombs, two are statues of gods, one is a temple, one a lighthouse and finally, a fantastic garden. Two are in Egypt, two in modern Turkey, two in Greece, and one in modern Iraq. Ironically, the oldest of the wonders—the Great Pyramid of Giza—is the sole survivor of the ages. But researchers have

unearthed fairly convincing evidence for the rest of the structures either in ancient literature or through archaeological investigations. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon remain the most shrouded in mystery.

One interesting note: the oldest, the Great Pyramid, was already about two thousand years old when the next oldest (likely the Temple of Artemis) was erected, and already nearly three thousand years old at the birth of Christ. The Pharos Lighthouse was constructed not much longer ago than two thousand years. The wonder, magnificence, mystery and sheer romance of these great works of art and architecture increase with each passing century.

Within this series are seven tales of love and wonder. Perhaps by reading these stories you'll now be able to remember the names of the wonders, and become a believer in the magical power of the number seven. If you still have trouble, try this visualization: You are an ancient sailor, traveling the Mediterranean. You spot a lighthouse (1) and head for port. You steer your ship between the legs of the great Colossus of Rhodes (2). You disembark and head down the paved road. You are flanked by two tombs—a great mausoleum on the left (3) and a huge pyramid (4) on the right. You proceed up the hill and encounter two gods. On the left, Artemis (5) resides in her temple. On your right is a massive enthroned Zeus in his temple (6). You rest from your long hike under a flowering fig tree in the luxurious gardens of Babylon (7), where you await the arrival of your true love.

# THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD - THE MAUSOLEUM AT HALICARNASSUS

King Mausollus of Caria ruled a parcel of what is now modern Turkey from 377 to 353 BC. His life may have been interesting, but not much detail remains about the man and his rule. His tomb, however, completed three years after his death, marks a pinnacle in mortuary architecture. Completely unlike its far more ancient counterpart, the Great Pyramid, Mausollus' tomb was square and heavily decorated with statues, including a horse-drawn chariot on the roof. Rising nearly one hundred and forty feet including the base, the massive structure stood in good condition until the Crusades, when the Knights of St. John of Malta used the marble stones to help build a huge castle in the area. Some of the sculpture from the tomb survive and are displayed in the British Museum. Perhaps the most last contribution Mausollus made was lending his name to mortuary architecture: mausoleums.

# **DEDICATION:**

For Keith.

Special thanks to the Ladies of Romancing History. Huge hugs for Tracy Cooper-Posey for her endless insight.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BODRUM, OITOMAN EMPIRE, IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD, FOURTEEN HUNDRED FIFTY AND THREE

The dream came again. Distant, but real. Everard D'Auvay, the fourth Earl of Devonshire, squeezed his eyes closed in sleep but the images still came, one atop the other, in an onslaught of temptation and depravity.

The same woman came to him in the dreams each time. He'd never known her name. Only that she loved him. The part of him that realized he but dreamed tried to push her away, but the other part of him forever welcomed her caresses like a lover well accustomed to a woman's touch.

This night was no different.

Silver moonlight draped her in a soft, iridescent glow. It shimmered off her naked flesh, calling to him to take what she so willingly offered.

Long, black hair fell over her shoulders and hid her breasts. His fingers itched to cup them in his palms, to taste the salt of the dark flesh at the tips. He licked his lips in anticipation. The man he became in the dreams loved this woman. She was a part of him.

Finally, she reached his side. She brushed his shoulder, and shivers cascaded over his flesh. The night air tempered the oppressive heat of summer, but did little to soothe the burning desire that brought his shaft to full wakefulness. Who was this woman who possessed his mind so thoroughly, night after restless night? He sucked in a breath as her tender fingertips crept across his chest, between the muscles and over his taut belly.

When her slender fingers grasped his shaft, his insides leapt, stealing what little air remained in his lungs. Her lips came within a hair's breadth of his own. Her scent was that of honey and lilacs. Unable to refuse the sweet gift, he pulled her against him and devoured her mouth, his tongue waging a battle with hers.

It was wrong. He didn't belong here, with her. If his father discovered how much he loved her, she could be put to death. But he couldn't stop. Not when she loved him so thoroughly.

She dropped to her knees, her gaze trained on his eyes as if some unseen force connected them. He didn't need to see the bonds to know what they were.

Love.

The kind of love that could bind a man and woman together in a spiritual realm of their own, the kind of

love that only exists when two people share a soul.

Her lips found his shaft, kissing the swollen tip so gently it made his heart weep and his knees weak. Her mouth was hot, wet. He threw his head back and gritted his teeth against the delicious torment.

A moment later, she took his manhood into her mouth, caressing it with her tongue in long, slow waves. She suckled him deeper, slow inch by slow inch. Both of her hands steadied the pulsing rhythm on the base of his shaft while she pulled him free of her lips. Immediately, she plunged his entire length back into her mouth. Once more, she released him, only to continue the splendid torture over and over again.

Faster.

Deeper.

His shaft grew harder, wetter. Slicker with the first droplets of his seed.

His stomach clenched even as his knees threatened to buckle. He pulled himself away from her attentions to keep from losing control.

It was too soon.

Despite the guilt that washed over him with increasing awareness, he couldn't let the passion end so quickly. Vaguely conscious of his trembling limbs, he brought her to her feet, lifted her in his arms and carried her to the edge of the tiled courtyard where a soft patch of grass bordered the cliffs. Far below them, the sea crashed against the rocks, pulled to the shore through the power of the moon.

Perhaps it was the moon that bade him come to her

each night. A powerful and bewitching thing, the moon.

He didn't care. Not now. Not when he was so close to finding release in the love of this woman with the black hair of a witch and the soul of an angel.

He laid her in the grass and her legs opened for him. The strands of her hair fell away to reveal the even roundness of her bosom. Dark nipples hardened beneath his stare, begging for attention. He joined her on the soft, damp lawn. Eager to become lost in this entity of lust, he jerked with remembered passion. He would have her soon.

He pulled the peak of one breast between his teeth, flicking it with his tongue. She arched her back, a low growl emanating from her throat. Her hands crept around his head; her fingers tangling in the long, unkempt strands of his hair. She guided his mouth to her other breast and whispered a name to the moon.

"Percicus."

The name filled him with pride. Only he could elicit such passion from this woman. Only he could make her cry into the night, like a goddess in the throes of something so basic it defined purity.

He trailed his mouth over the mound of her belly, inhaling the rich musk of her sex, until he reached the pod of her being. Creamy thighs brushed his cheeks a moment before they fell wider, granting him access to her most intimate core. He licked the full, rounded nub and her cries reverberated off the starlit ceiling, echoing with the crashing waves. Surely the wine of the gods couldn't be as sweet.

Everard lapped at the sweet juices until her body tensed, her legs closing around his head, and she wept. His body demanded the same heavenly fulfillment and he mounted her like an animal possessed of one goal. Total domination. Total consummation.

They would be one in this as in all things.

Quickly, he guided her to her hands and knees. She glanced at him over her shoulder, wearing a delightful smile full of anticipation and lust. His lover made fists in the soft grass, her back glistening in the moonlight while her hair tumbled wildly about her shoulders. He leaned forward and placed a hot, openmouthed kiss on the back of her neck. In response, she ground her hips against his member.

Entering her with a full, single thrust, he buried his shaft inside her, arching his back to gain the deepest part of her womanhood. He filled her as much as she filled him. Completely. Heat engrossed his limbs with molten pulses of light, driving him into her farther with each swift lunge of his hips.

At once, something miraculous formed in the pit of his stomach, spreading its wings through his body until at last the demanding pressure caused him to expel a long-held breath. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and thrust one last time, spilling himself into to her womb. Her shout of final ecstasy mingled with his.

Exhausted, he fell to the earth beside her. When she slipped into his arms, she sighed. What amazing delights this woman wrought within him. He felt like

a king.

When his breathing finally returned to normal, he opened his eyes, and tried to find her face. It would be so beautiful in the moonlight with her dark orbs reflecting the silvery beams, her body still wrapped his in a cocoon of pure, perfect bliss...

But her face was a blur. Unidentifiable in the darkness. Worse, he could remember nothing of her features. With the unceasing power of a storm at sea, devastating winds pounded the back of his mind. Where her beauty had been, a blank, bottomless void formed. What did she look like? What color were her eyes? Had he ever seen her face, or had he imagined it? If he'd imagined it, why couldn't he bring that simple joy again?

Panic sank jagged teeth into his heart, tearing him away from her. "No!" he cried against the beast that stole her from him. "You can't have her! Not again!"

Everard woke instantly. His cabin aboard the ship that brought him to his new home was still dark for the most part, though a sliver of morning sunlight broke through the curtains over the single porthole. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and he wiped it away with a shaking hand. His abdomen bore the evidence of his impassioned dream. He found a cloth and cleaned himself before tossing the cloth into a receptacle beside his desk. "Damn her for tempting me so."

He pushed away the partial image of twisting limbs and heated passion even as he fought against the storm for a glimpse of his lover. He knew her.

He knew her, damn it.

Yet every morning it was the same. Longing in his loins. Remembered salt on his tongue. The feeling of unrequited destiny.

It was ridiculous. Boyish fantasies which had no place in his life. He forced his breath to an even pace, brushed away the thin blanket, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Naked, his shaft still half-swollen, he crossed the room and pushed the curtain away from the porthole.

Land.

A grin formed despite his still-weakened state. 'Twas what he needed, at last.

A new home. A new purpose. Finally, he could dedicate himself to that for which he'd been born.

A huge castle rose above a rocky island in a sound of choppy, white-capped waves. A land bridge joined the island to the mainland and even from this distance, the large number of travelers between the two was obvious.

A bustling city. A hint of danger.

Let the mysterious woman with no face seduce him again! She would not succeed.

A knock at Everard's cabin door broke his musings and he turned just as the door slid open on well-oiled hinges. The captain's own boy peered around the corner. "Greetings, Father D'Auvey. We've arrived at the Castle of St. Peter. Your master has sent a skiff to bring you ashore."

\* \* \* \*

"Get out of bed, precious child," a deep voice hovered on the edges of Alara's mind. "Tis time to wake!"

A blast of white light turned the back of her eyelids bright red and she threw an arm over them. "Too early," she moaned, abandoning her forearm and choosing instead to turn her face into the silk and feather pillow.

Her father was undeterred. "Mayhap if you spent fewer hours staring at the stars and more hours abed, you would be more accustomed to morning, hmm?"

"I'm awake." Arguing served no purpose. It never had. Her father, though kind and thoughtful, was firm when it came to all things business. She would have to rise and take her place at the loom or debate her habit of visiting the ruins with him for half the day.

"The Christians expect their rugs no later than their midday meal, and you must go with Brutus and Argomen to deliver them."

"Is that today?" she groaned. "I didn't realize."

"Yes, 'tis to be done this day and no other. Now, climb from the comfort of your bed and dress. The sun has risen well above the horizon."

Finally, she forced herself to open her eyes and look at her father. A tall man with black hair when he failed to shave it, he bore his responsibilities on wide, strong shoulders. He was a brilliant merchant and artisan. He provided the finest carpets in all of the empire. Akmehd Usulu's designs graced many estates—from Jerusalem to the far away land of

England, where a ruthless king planned his pillages while he paced on one. Yet he'd still managed to raise five daughters and four sons with no wife to share in the joy or pain of it all.

And here *she* sat, lazing in her bed when the others had more than likely risen hours ago. "I am truly an ungrateful child," she sighed.

"'Tis true. You are ungrateful, but my love for you never falters because you have your mother's eyes." He smiled against a tiny speck of sadness in his eyes. "Up."

He slapped the side of her thigh with gentle playfulness and she laughed. "I am risen!"

After he left the room, she made truth of her words and scampered out of bed. At the window, she lifted a clay jar and poured water into a bowl. She scrubbed her face free of sleep, splashed the lukewarm liquid over her breasts and torso, then donned her leggings. It took her a moment to find her robe, but when she finally located it beneath her bed, she pulled it over her head and tossed her hair out of the linen collar. Her shoes were in front of a chair, where she'd carefully placed them upon her barefooted return the night before. She slipped them on and stood to leave her room.

Something flashed in the distance and she turned back to the window. A massive ship with billowing white sails sliced across the harbor in front of the Christians' huge fortifications. Men scurried about the deck like little blue ants, pulling the sails from their rigging. Short, clipped orders carried over the water

and through her window. They must have arrived only a few moments before she woke.

One of the sails snapped in a sudden gust. Centered on the stark field of white, a red cross with elaborately pointed flourishes on each point announced the arrival of more Christian knights. Despite her appreciation for the impressive vessel, the reminder brought with it a frown.

If the fighting priests insisted on increasing their forces, then her father's fears must be true. War stalked their homeland like a tiger on a hare.

"Are you coming to work, or are you not?" an irritated and impatient voice came from behind her.

Kendra, her older sister by two years, stood in the doorway tapping her slippered toes on the tile with a quick slap, slap, slap. Her hands rested on her hips in a motherly pose.

"I'm coming. But not because you told me to!" Alara dashed past her sister and ran to the looming chamber, Kendra following closely behind.

\* \* \* \*

Once they sat behind their looms, Kendra tilted her head and pretended to muse over some unanswerable question. Clicking her teeth, she ultimately turned to Alara and shook her head. "You know, Father was awake when you came home last night. He'd been pacing for more than half the night, looking out the window every few minutes just to see if you were coming down the hill."

"He worries too often." Alara slammed a row of linen into place with the lever and prepared to string another row of the same golden hue.

"No. You worry him too often."

"He would worry about me even if I clung to him like a vine of grapes. I can help that not."

"What do you do up there, by the way? 'Tis dirty and the rocky earth ruins your slippers. Not to mention, what if someone found you there, alone and vulnerable. I shudder to think."

"No one goes to the ruins but me, Kendra. 'Tis perfectly safe."

"I simply can understand not one thing that would interest you in such a place. You do realize, 'tis a grave." Kendra trembled visibly, as if someone walked across her own final resting place.

"Yes, I know. But the view of the stars over the sea is amazing. I find myself better able to think when I'm there than anywhere else in the whole world."

"You haven't seen the whole world, Sister. So how can you know that?"

The censure in Kendra's voice told Alara all she needed to know about how well Kendra might understand her reasons. The truth was, she was comfortable there. Certainly, even she could admit the strangeness of it—feeling more comfortable in a place where not only one man was buried, but others had died when the stone temple fell. Perhaps it was the fact the old temple had been a testament to a love that wouldn't die. Old King Mausolus's wife had spent years on the building after her husband's death.

Once, it had been beautiful with huge sculptures and gigantic columns. What kind of love brought with it such dedication? She sighed. It couldn't be helped.

She liked it, and she would continue to spend as much time there as she could, regardless of the wishes of her family. Besides, what else should she do? Fret over her robes, dab kohl around her eyes and blink furiously at any man who would look at her?

No. She would leave such nonsense to her sisters. She much preferred the stars.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the ship weighed its anchor, the sun had crossed its zenith and inhuman heat poured onto the deck. Everard wiped the sweat from his eyes and concentrated on the milling shoreline. The skiff his master had sent for him had been too small for his horse. Everard would not leave the ship without Cadence, his constant companion since Jerusalem. He'd taken the light horse home with him after the Order had released him for a sabbatical that had culminated five-year absence. in а companionship he enjoyed with the animal had eased him through his father's passing, and the hard rides over the English countryside surrounding his estates had eased him through the ensuing loneliness.

He would not leave the animal's well-being to a crew of lackadaisical Romans.

Once the anchor had been set and a larger skiff had been sent to greet him, he and his horse left the ship.

When they finally set their feet on the rocky beachhead, Cadence released a whinny of appreciation and wobbled up the bank. Behind him, the rest of his party boarded a series of boats to take them to shore, as well.

In all, they were forty knights. He was their captain, a job he took seriously in light of what they may face in a few months' time. The Order of St. John had but one use for a priest of his ilk.

By the light of heaven, he was more a warring angel than a priest! Everyone knew it, and Everard had come to terms with it long ago. The Order served primarily as a hospice for the ill and infirm of any faith. Most of the Chaplains were capable nurses, surgeons, or simple healers. They tended to the needy with patience, and the loving, guiding hand of Christ.

Everard's hands were more suited to the sword. So, he'd determined it was only a matter of time before the castle they'd named for Saint Peter would fall under siege. They would summon him for no other reason.

Rather than face such an end for themselves, they'd sent for their personal Michael, warring angel extraordinaire.

'Twas fine by him. He'd spent the last few years fighting a different kind of battle. One of self-awareness versus duty. The blessing of the past five years had been the lack of dreams. But now that he'd returned to the East, the dreams had returned. Just like before. Erotic heat rushed to his crotch and he gritted his teeth against it.

Perhaps, a stirring conflict would chase the demons away.

For the moment, he tossed the dreams away and turned to the last of his men who waded out of the surf. "Tis a fair ride to the castle via yonder land bridge. With luck, we shall find ourselves sleeping in warm, soft beds this night." He smiled, clicked Cadence into a trot and pointed his garrison in the direction of their new home.

Or their deaths.

'Twas a sobering thought. The Emperor of this heathen land bore his cloak of power like a crown of thorns. Yet, unlike the King of Kings, the Emperor forever waged war on his own land.

If it weren't for the endless bitterness between their sects, Everard could live the remainder of his days in peace. But someone had to take up the sword against tyranny. Such fell to him and his warrior brothers. They would fight to defend these people—and their God—against such wickedness. He would willingly die for it.

Around him, the citizens of this land hurried along dusty streets. They wore long, flowing robes the color of earth and sand. The men covered their heads with wrapped linen, but surprisingly, the women wore no coverings on their hair or their faces.

As the riders approached the center of town, the crowds parted to allow the column of armored horses to pass. Rich, spicy scents wafted from open windows and doors, and from carts in the merchant district. Strains of music floated on the air, only to be

squashed by the constant creak of leather, the thunder of heavy hooves, and jingle of harnesses. The town bustled around him in a fervor of activity.

A woman dressed in a purple gown—silk, from the manner in which it flowed around her ankles—exited a merchant's shop. She wore jeweled rings on her fingers and earlobes and dark lines circled her massive brown eyes, making them appear much larger than they really were. Her hair, black and straight, hung to her waist and bore a golden circlet from which hung several beads in gold, purple and rose hues.

Claude, his most trusted knight and a friend since childhood, pushed his horse forward to join Everard at the head of the column. "She appraises you worthy, my lord," he chuckled.

A slice of something that might have been desire cut him deeply at the words. "She is a married woman, Claude. Do you not see the man who follows her? A husband, no doubt."

"As if that would stop most women. They see what they like and they take it. Freely."

"You travel in the wrong circles, my friend," Everard chided with a slight grin.

"You forget, I am no priest."

"You forget that I am."

"Tis no fault of mine you turned your back on the world to hide behind your cloth. Memory serves that you are no virgin priest, besides."

He leveled a short glare at his friend. The truth of his words stung, especially since the reoccurrence of

the erotic dreams that had plagued him since his first visit to the Holy Land. "Mind your tongue, Claude. Some things are best left alone."

"No offense meant, my lord. 'Tis only the fact remains. That woman appraised you not as a priest, but as a man, even though you bear the shield and standard of your Order for the world to see. She does so because she, like all women, knows a man when she sees one."

"I notice, then, she looked not at you."

Claude feigned an aghast expression and placed one gloved hand over his heart. "I'm wounded. And yet, when you bed yourself down with your brothers after prayers this eventide, 'tis I who shall find that woman and appease her every need."

Before Everard could respond, the column reached the wide bridge of land, which connected the mainland to the rocky island home of the Castle of St. Peter. The structure was still under construction, but from this distance the fortifications looked to be in place. From the letters he'd received from his master, only the details needed completion; those intricate interior elements that would speak to the holy nature of the building. The niceties that some priests expected as their due.

A sigh caught in his throat. It mattered little to him if some loved their comforts more than their cause. His duty was to defend them, and defend them he would.

Once the column negotiated the entrance to the bridge, Everard continued his conversation with

Claude. Although, there was little he could preach to his friend. Not so long ago they had shared their ale, their women and any number of vices. Still, was he not a priest, even if he did carry a sword instead of a scepter? "You would risk your soul for pleasures of the flesh?"

"Gladly. And you would, too. You have, in fact. Therefore, I find the only thing you wait for is the right woman."

"I wait for no woman." That wasn't true. Even though he knew they were only dreams, a part of him waited for the unknown woman to appear in the light. Not that he'd know her. Even now, as he struggled, he couldn't remember her face. Only the warm glow of passion as it ripped his heart from his chest and his seed from his soul.

He was torn from his self-deprecating musings when his horse balked, then reared on its hind legs. He cursed, pulling on the reins in an attempt to gain control. Cadence screeched, his forelegs pawing wildly at empty space.

"'Ware!"

Everard spun in the direction of the harried voice. To his left, he spied a young woman, little more than a girl, dashing toward him. Behind her, several men followed, their long beards flying in the ocean breeze.

Without so much as a moment's consideration for her safety, she bolted beneath Cadence's raised hoofs. There, she disappeared.

"Be you daft?" he shouted, still struggling with the reins, the frantic horse and his temper.

A moment later, Cadence's hooves slammed to the packed, dry earth. The solid thud indicated he'd landed on the ground and not on the woman's broken, bleeding body.

Thank God.

She suddenly appeared at the side of his mount, her eyes blazing while the wind blew loose strands of her hair over her mouth like a veil. In her arms, she held a squirming bundle roughly the size of a small dog.

He frowned, but couldn't pull his attention from her wide, fiery eyes. His blood ran cold, as though rivers of ice had invaded each of his veins.

"Do you often ignore your surroundings, my lord? It seems your horse has better eyes than you!"

"Who are you?" His voice was barely a whisper, yet resounded in his ears like cannon.

"You could have killed him, riding through these people as if you owned the entire world. You should pay more attention." She opened her arms to adjust her grip on the dog when the blanket fell apart to reveal frightened black eyes, a tuft of wispy, black hair and the pursed lips of a boy no more than two years of age.

Everard swallowed hard as the boy held up a small wooden ball.

"What happened here?"

"Berk ran in front of your mount while you prattled on with your friend like an old woman. If not for your horse's good sense, you would have plowed over him and never looked back."

Dismounting, he stared the woman down. Upon closer inspection, very little of her person reminded him of a girl. Full, high breasts and a narrow waist spoke to him of a woman grown, not to mention the brazen manner in which she dressed him with her outspoken tongue. When he crossed to her, she backed away a step and held the child closer.

"You have no reason to fear me, my lady. I wish only to verify your son is well."

Lips the color of ripened fruit parted, but she didn't speak. Instead, she nodded slightly and allowed him to examine her child. Color blushed the toddler's cheeks, and he seemed to possess no fear. "He is well enough."

"Yes. Though he is not my son."

Everard glanced at the gathered crowd, ignoring the knowing look on Claude's face. "I see not his mother, then."

"I'll see to him, Sir..."

"Everard." In his limbs and his stomach, swirling heat spun out of control. The woman was more beautiful than any he'd ever seen in this part of the world where the female population seemed ever more exotic, nor in any other region through which he'd traveled. The loose robe she wore to her calves did little to hide the exquisite form beneath. The child on her hip revealed the shape of that hip and the narrowness of her waist. The palms of his hands itched and he fisted them.

"Be you more careful in the future, Sir Everard." She turned away, taking the child with her.

More, in less time than it would take a man to blink, she had stolen a piece of his heart.

# **CHAPTER TWO**

The first thing Everard noticed when he entered the master's chambers was how drastically Jean de Lastic had aged in the six years since he'd taken the office. Deep lines carved his face into a mask of worry and his hair had turned gray. When he raised his face to the door where Everard stood, he broke into a haggard smile.

"My son. At last you have returned to us."

"I came as soon as I could, Father."

"Come, come. Let me see you more clearly. My old eyes have weakened, I fear."

Everard entered a chamber far more elegant than he would have expected from Jean. A large bed, canopied with rich, embroidered fabric, occupied the farthest wall. Four chairs upholstered in a matching scarlet color sat around a table in the center. Jean sat at a desk carved with intricate scrollwork. On the floor, a bright carpet, elaborately detailed and finely crafted, offered warmth and comfort. Goldenthreaded fringe fell neatly away from the edges. The artisan obviously took pride in his work.

"You appreciate my newest luxury, I see."

"'Tis lovely."

"I fear the spoilings of my youth have found their way to me in my final years." As an afterthought, he added, "I shall provide you with the artist's name so you might commission one for your father's estate."

A breath of silence followed the statement, drawing Everard's attention back to Jean. If it were possible, he appeared even more tired than he had a moment before.

"I was saddened to learn of his passing. Your father was a good man. A strong Christian. He rests in paradise with our Lord."

Jean rose and shuffled to one of the chairs at the table. Taking the closest for himself, he offered the opposite to Everard.

Everard took it and reclined with his arms folded over his chest. Jean was right. His father had been a good, decent man. Kind to a fault, charitable, and honorable. It had plagued Everard for most of his life that his father had borne a son far less worthy than he'd deserved.

"I am well pleased you agreed to come back to us, my son. The Order needs you more now than ever."

"I go where I'm told. I had little choice in the matter."

"Would you have preferred not to come?" Jean's brow furrowed.

"Not at all. I only wish I could have come sooner, but my father's affairs kept me longer than I would have liked."

"I see." Jean's bent fingers tapped the table in a thoughtful rhythm.

"Is aught amiss? Other than an impending war, that is."

After a pause, during which the old man shifted his position twice, he finally released a sigh. "You are aware of the rumors that have followed you for so many years."

So, the stories had resurfaced. "I am," he replied flatly, hiding behind his stiffened muscles and a mask of indifference that had served him well.

"It has been reported that you engaged in...certain activities during your absence. These reports have reached the ears of the Pope, who personally requested that you return to the fold as quickly as possible."

"And I thought perhaps my skills with the sword had brought me to this stronghold. That perhaps my abilities as a soldier for God would outweigh the lies that have plagued me these many years." Everard pushed out of his chair and stalked to the window. The rays of the setting sun cast a red haze over the city, and a hillside covered in stone ruins beyond. It was as though the twilight of his soul beckoned him to admit his frailties. He pushed a hand through his hair and closed his eyes.

"Lies, my son?"

"Lies. All of them. You have my word. I know before I met you that day in the desert near death dead already save the expelling of my final breath—I was not a good man. I know this as certainly as I

know my own name. But that was a long time ago, Father. I've changed."

"I never said I believed the rumors. I know how strong you are. How dedicated to our cause. But not every man is meant to be a priest."

He spun at that. "I am meant to be, Father. I know what I've done. I am not proud. But those days are gone. I have been ever loyal to my vows and my God."

Jean seemed to study him for more than a moment, then sighed. "We shall ignore the rumors, then. Concentrate on our defenses for now, Everard. The peace of your calling will be revealed in God's own time."

An hour later, Everard stood on the ramparts and gazed over the small inlet to the hillside he'd noticed from Jean's window. A huge structure had stood there once. Massive, judging from the remains that fell in clumped piles that reached the cliff. It reminded him of his own crumbling soul.

He'd lied to his master, and to himself. Not lied, exactly. The rumors had always been there. Before he'd joined the Order, first as a lay soldier and later as a priest, he'd spent many a night in the arms of physical pleasure. He'd gambled, coveted the wives of his fellow knights, stolen their daughters' innocence and waged a war on God. But, as he'd told Jean, that was long time ago. In the ten-and-two years since he'd made his vow, he'd been as chaste as the driven snow.

At least, outside of his own mind.

Inside his mind, his heart and his soul, he still lusted. He still craved the glory of a woman's body. His heart still wanted the love of a woman for him alone. So, he'd lied. He'd lied to Jean and he'd lied to himself. He would continue to lie for as long as he could. He knew that.

But at some point, he would be forced to admit to himself and to others that he was far too weak for the duties of his office. It was only a matter of time before he fell short of his lofty aspirations and allowed his dreams to become reality.

With any luck, he would die in battle long before the sins of the flesh claimed his soul.

\* \* \* \*

Alara wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. Behind her, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus spread its rocky tentacles over the remains of a massive courtyard. She'd climbed over the stones that remained after several hundred years of pillaging for the building of other structures until she'd reached the flat, slanted stone upon which she sat each night. Now she gazed at the harbor with its fleet of tall-masted ships circling the giant castle where the priests lived.

Priests and knights.

The man she'd met on the bridge after she'd delivered her rug to the master of the castle floated in her thoughts as well. In retrospect, she'd been rather hard on him. But he'd almost killed young Berk!

What if she hadn't seen him dash after his toy, heedless of the consequences of running in front of a column of warriors?

Still, the man – Everard – had been repentant about it.

Her sister would have enjoyed Alara's reaction to him, certainly. Never in her twenty years had she seen such a beautiful man. That was the only way to describe the knight. He wasn't only handsome, but classically beautiful. The way he'd looked at her, studying her as if she were some sort of anomaly, but in a good way, still made her heart pound.

A smile curved her lips. She'd studied him, too. Memorized his strong, regal features. After all, as a soldier, he wouldn't live at the castle forever. He came to wage his war and then he would leave, if he even survived. That sudden realization pinched her stomach and she frowned. It would be a pity for such a splendid example of a man to be lost to the violence of war.

She turned at the sound of a loud grunt coming from behind her. Her best friend Zakariyya cursed between clenched teeth.

"What's wrong?"

Cursing again, he answered, "I don't know why you insist on spending your free time in a graveyard."

"It's not really a graveyard. Only one person was actually buried here."

"That makes it a cemetery, you dolt." He laughed and rubbed his leg where he'd obviously hit it against one of the ruin's broken columns. "Your father will be

angry if you fall asleep here again."

"So be it. I don't feel like going home, yet."

"He sent me to find you and now I've broken my leg. Are you happy?"

Alara couldn't help but laugh at Zak's exaggeration. "A bit."

He settled into place beside her and draped his arm over her shoulder. "You are a strange girl."

"I know."

"Did you see the soldiers arrive today?"

"I met them, actually. Well, one of them. A handsome knight named Everard. I think that is a French name. Someday, I will travel to France where there is no dust and no weaving looms for thousands of miles."

"They have looms in France, I'm sure. But you're probably right about the dust." He paused and turned his attention to the sea. "Mayhap your knight will take you away with him."

"He isn't my knight. And if tying myself to man is the price I must pay to see parts of the world other than ours, I'll stay here, I think."

"You are a strange girl."

"I know."

\* \* \* \*

The following afternoon brought with it a gusting wind from the sea. The heated breath of the ocean touched her cheeks and blew strands of hair across her eyes. Brushing them away with hasty movements,

Alara fastened her eyes on young Berk again. At two years of age, the boy still wavered occasionally on his tiny feet and she smiled when he tilted first one direction, then the other, finally tumbling onto his backside. Berk might have cried his misfortune, but Alara raced to his side and hoisted him into the air. "That will teach you to run away from me."

When Berk smiled, large dimples formed in his cheeks. "Run. Run."

"Yes. We'll run soon." Alara tucked Berk onto her hip and kissed his cheek.

Only a few more streets and they would reach the edge of town where the road led to the old Mausoleum. As much as she would like to escape to her ruins, the destroyed stones posed too great a danger for the boy. They would have to appease themselves in the open fields instead. Berk wouldn't mind. Any time he could spend outside the city, away from the noise and bustle that meant he couldn't run on his own, was time he enjoyed.

It was time Alara enjoyed as well. The city was simply too crowded for her tastes. Not that it mattered. She would spend the rest of her life confined within the walls of her father's looming chamber, confined within the narrow city streets...confined within her own, wistful dreams.

The hard impact of something on her left side brought her attention back to the very crowd she longed to ignore. She stumbled, almost colliding with the rough wall that divided the street from the public bathhouse. In fact, she would have been thrown into

the chest-high wall had it not been for the large, firm hands which grabbed her and pulled her back.

"Pardon me, lady —"

The voice was slow and rich, and sent a familiar shiver over her spine. Glancing up, she found bright green eyes surrounded by a mane of dark hair. The concerned expression on the man's full lips broke into a wide smile.

"'Tis you." Everard released a feigned sigh of exasperation. "Will I forever suffer running over you?"

Warm delight brought heat to her cheeks and a slight tremble to her limbs. She laughed and shook her head. "Will you forever suffer the inability to watch where it is you go?"

"Touche', my lady. Yet you seem to ever be in my path, as well." He paused, then cast his attention to Berk. "I see the child bears no lingering harm from our meeting yesterday."

"He is well. I am taking him to play. His mother has enough to do tending to her elder children. 'Tis how he managed to escape her watchful eyes and find himself on the bridge alone."

"I see."

Alara suddenly realized Everard had yet to remove his grip from her arms. His touch burned her in the most pleasant way a woman could be burned and she wished he would never release her. But it was far from appropriate, and she found herself glancing at his left hand before raising her eyes to his once more.

Instantly, the hands left her and disappeared

behind his back. He rocked slightly on his booted heels and grinned. "My apologies, again. I shall leave you to your playtime."

For a long moment, she simply looked at him. His long, thickly muscled legs were encased in tight leggings in a deep red. The tunic he wore matched the leggings perfectly, as though they'd been cut from the same cloth. The garment beneath the tunic hung open at the neck, as though he'd yet to grow accustomed to the heat and he'd untied the neckline seeking relief.

"What are you doing?" she breathed at once. Immediately embarrassed by her outburst, she cast her eyes downward.

"Pardon?" He ducked until he caught her eyes with his and raised her chin with the tip of one finger. "Never look away. Only honor can befall the man who is fortunate enough to receive even a single glance from eyes as beautiful as yours."

Fresh heat rose to her cheeks and she looked away again. If the tenor of his voice had made her bones liquid before, hearing such words turned them into the very air that carried the birds to heaven. "You shouldn't say such things."

"I speak only the truth."

She couldn't find her voice. She couldn't find her heartbeat, or even her breath.

"You asked me something."

"I asked if you were doing anything at the moment. Perhaps you could join Berk and me? Have you the time?"

Everard's smile rivaled the great wonders of the

world. Had there ever been a more handsome man born? He nodded, and a tuft of hair fell in a curl over his forehead. "I have the time."

Together, they left the city and Alara directed them to the city gates. Once outside, she placed a squirming Berk on the road and watched him race to the field. In the center, the old well cast a long shadow. Apparently enthralled, Berk ran along the edges until it grew narrow enough for him to leap across in a single, awkward bound.

"You will make a good mother someday."

"Perhaps. Someday."

"You don't wish to have a family?"

"Oh, I do, I suppose. As much as any woman. 'Tis the marriage that leads to the children I am uncertain about."

Everard leaned into her, lowered his mouth to her ear, and whispered, "Marriage doesn't make babes."

Her womb leapt. "'Tis not the point I wished to make, my lord. Nay, I meant only that I wish to travel. To see things other than a dusty city and my beloved ruins. Someday, I should like to visit France. Is that where you hail from?"

"Nay. I live in England, when I don't live elsewhere. My mother, God rest her soul, was French."

Everard wanted nothing more than to stare at the woman for the rest of his life. No, that wasn't true. Given his choice, he would do far more than look at her. Something about her was so familiar, he strained against his memory to place her somewhere else, in

another time in his life. She was too young to have been one of his many lovers before he spoke his vows. And her demeanor spoke of a woman who had never left the great city of Bodrum in her short, sheltered life. Still, he...knew her.

"Do you miss it?"

"Look at me!" Berk's voice intruded somewhere in the back of his mind.

"I miss some things. I miss the green of the hillside outside my chamber window and the way the morning light reflects off the dew. And I miss the winters, when the snow falls in a gentle breeze and turns the whole world white." What would Alara look like with tiny, frozen bits of white caught in her hair; landing on cheeks reddened by the crisp, chilling air?

"Watch me! Watch me!" Berk's voice grew insistent and demanding.

Regretfully, he pulled his eyes away from Alara. She, too, glanced in the child's direction.

"Berk! No!" Alara screamed, her voice broken and frantic.

Everard followed the direction of her panic. Berk stood on the crumbling wall of an old well, balancing with both slim arms out to his sides. A lump formed in Everard's throat. He bolted in the child's direction.

The distance between himself and Berk seemed to grow longer with each stride. Beside him, Alara ran with both hands caught in her robe, lifting the light blue muslin above her knees. Berk stopped his circular trek along the well's dangerous wall and

frowned. "What's wrong?"

The sounds of panic formed behind him. Apparently, Alara's scream had reached the other side of the city gates and dozens of citizens gathered on the road.

Just as Everard reached forward to grasp the boy's tunic, Berk stepped backward and disappeared over the edge.

"No!"

Lunging, Everard dove over the edge of the wall. Darkness loomed below in the blackened, bottomless pit. Still, he reached, his fingers poised to sweep the child from certain death, a prayer on his lips.

When his hand captured something solid, he grabbed and pulled. Throwing himself backward, he landed with a breath-stealing thud.

The crowd that had formed at the city gates reached them. They swarmed and undulated with leaps and jumps, their voices shouting and laughing in the waning light.

Alara appeared on her knees beside him. "Are you well?"

She didn't speak to him, but to the boy who clutched Everard's chest with both hands.

Berk nodded. "Again."

Everard laughed. "Nay. Not again."

A half-frown, half-grin formed on Alara's sweet lips. "Most certainly not." Turning the glory of her black eyes on him, she continued. "And you, my lord? Have you been harmed?"

If she would look at him like she did now-as

though he were her personal hero and he could do nothing wrong—for the remainder of his days, he would be.

He nodded. "Tis no wonder his mother worries herself to exhaustion. This child has no fear." He gained his feet, turned the boy over to Alara and accepted several hearty slaps to his back, which ached from having landed on a rather large rock.

"Have *you* any fear?" Alara called to him over the noise of cheering natives.

Did he have fear? Of course he did. He feared the time he would spend in hell if he didn't get this girl out of his head before he did something they would regret.

\* \* \* \*

The mid-morning streets teemed with people going about their daily lives. If any of them were aware of an impending war, they showed few signs of it. Trade blossomed as merchants bartered loudly with their customers, children ran free while they chased one another through the thick crowd, shoving at legs and dodging the hands that tried to capture or beat them. He glanced at the slip of parchment Jean had given him after morning prayers, insisting that he commission a rug for himself.

He finally agreed to have one made and shipped home to his estates in England. He would live up to that promise if only he could find the bloody shop.

"'Tis this way, I believe," Claude called from the

entrance of an alley between a casbah and a jeweler's cart.

Everard craned his neck and found a door ajar roughly halfway through the narrow passage. Together, they maneuvered around the jeweler who shouted for them to buy his rings. Once they reached the door, the rush of several swiftly-working looms sounded from within. They entered and a well-formed man in a beige turban and robe greeted them.

"Greetings, fine warriors," he cried with jolly exuberance. "A fine morning, is it not?"

"Aye," Everard replied. That man's cheerfulness was catching. He smiled. "I understand you design quality goods here, master weaver, and I'd be interested in..."

The words died in his throat.

Sitting behind the first loom through a wide doorway was Alara. Her slender arms worked the machine with easy, quick movements; threading the twisted cords and setting them in place with strong thrusts. She concentrated on her work, the lines in her forehead attesting to the fact.

Then, almost as though she could feel his gaze on her, she looked up and caught him staring. Unlike many maidens caught in a heady perusal, she didn't turn away. She didn't blush and she didn't bat her eyelashes. Instead, she focused on him as though he were a child caught stealing a treat from the kitchens.

"You were saying, my lord?" the merchant urged.

"A rug. My friend wants to purchase a rug." Claude elbowed him in the ribs, and Everard

whipped his gaze away from the girl.

"Aye. I've seen your work and would like a large piece for my home abroad."

"We are pleased to assist you, sir. My children are the finest weavers in all of the Empire." He beamed with pride, like any father.

So, the girl was his daughter. Did she live here with him? She wasn't married, and it seemed likely. What did she look like beneath the flowing blue robes? A familiar image flashed.

Alara—her naked body highlighted with silvery-blue moonlight.

He choked inwardly. The last thing he needed to think of was what her body would look like—feel like—pressed naked and glistening against his. He'd had the dream again last night and woken this morning with a swelling of his loins that he'd been forced to relieve. Just looking at the girl brought the dream back, hardening his shaft and clenching his gut.

"I'd like to speak with your daughter, there. She delivered one of your rugs to the castle yesterday."

"Alara," the shopkeeper called over his shoulder. "She does fine work, Sir Everard. She will please you, I think."

Claude coughed, covering his mouth with one hand.

How well his friend knew him. Even better than he knew himself. It mattered little to him who produced his rug. He shouldn't go out of his way to see the girl. He knew it, but only a small trickle of guilt whispered

for him to step away; to leave the shop and forget the rug. And her.

To save them both from his lust and weakness.

Yet, he couldn't do it. Something in the back of his mind, housed in the same place the empty blackness of memory lived, forced him to stay and speak with her. Surely, there could be little harm in talking to her.

"Sir Everard." She nodded her head in greeting and folded her hands in front of her narrow waist.

Mentally, he measured the distance across her waist, wondering if he could span it with his hands. In his mind, she writhed beneath him like the girl in his dreams, begging him to love her more thoroughly, more completely, more fully. He swallowed the image, forcing his mind away from the swelling in his breeches.

The shopkeeper coughed. "You know this man, daughter?"

"We met when he arrived with his soldiers yesterday. 'Twas he who pulled young Berk from the well."

The shopkeeper's thick eyebrows rose. "In that case, we will be certain your carpet is the best we have ever produced, my lord, for one so brave as you."

"It was nothing, I assure you," he replied, heat filling his cheeks. To Alara, he continued, "I'd like to speak with you about my rug. Will you be making it?"

She nodded. "'Tis possible."

"Will you step outside with me, so that we might

discuss it without the shout of the looms?"

Alara crossed in front of him and stepped into the alley. The scent of woman encompassed him as she passed. His shaft responded.

"What is it you do, my lord?" Claude chastised in a voice barely above a whisper.

It was a very good question. Any fool could see the raging heat that passed from him regarding the weaver's daughter. Even her father must have recognized the appreciative glances he drew over her body. It shamed him that her father would allow her to leave with him, even for a moment, and that given the chance Everard would...

No. He would not.

But how he wanted to.

\* \* \* \*

Alara flattened both of her hands over her belly to still the wild flutter of a million tiny wings that had taken up residence there. She felt like her sister, all insipid and starry-eyed. This wasn't like her. She didn't tease or giggle or walk alone with a strange man

Zak was different. He'd been her best friend since they were born, just hours apart.

But, this man was not Zak. He wasn't like any man she'd ever seen, in fact.

"You create beautiful work, Alara."

Heat stole into her cheeks. "Thank you."

"No need for thanks. I speak only the truth. I

admired them even before I knew 'twas you who made the rugs I'd seen. Of course, you are beautiful as well, so it only stands to reason your work would be so."

His voice was like cream. It washed over her in a wave of sweet thickness. Weak knees forced her to lean against the exterior of her father's shop. A moment later, he joined her there, his lean, muscular body inches from hers. Temptation to touch his arms, to test their solidity, grew strong, so she pressed her palms against the wall behind her and leaned on the backs of her hands.

The other knight, a man with young eyes and light hair, cleared his throat and glanced at his boots. "Everard, we should return to the castle. Soon. Now."

"Enough, Claude. Return if you must. I need no tending from you."

Everard's voice was harsh and he'd failed to remove his gaze from Alara's face when he spoke. The two men shared a communication she didn't understand, silently yet their eyes shouted.

After a pause, the man he'd called Claude released a heavy sigh. "Do it not, my friend." Then he strode down the alley. Matilda, the jeweler's consort, waved a chain in front of him, but he ignored her before disappearing around the corner.

"Your friend is upset with you."

"Aye." Everard frowned, but seemed to shake off whatever morose feeling had swept over him with a forced smile. "He'll recover soon enough."

"Is something wrong?"

The knight fell silent, staring at her with those watery green eyes. He absorbed her with them, as if she were food and he were a starving man. "You are exceptionally beautiful," he breathed. "'Tis odd, but I feel as though we've met somewhere before."

Alara tried to banish the heat of her blush. "Unlikely, my lord. I have never left this village. Though, I have longed to."

"The world is a frightening place, Alara."

"I am a brave woman."

"I believe you are." He inched closer. "How brave are you, Alara?"

So close, she could smell the honey he'd consumed to break his fast. Her pulse raced in her neck and her breath hitched. What would his lips feel like pressed against hers? Would he also taste of honey?

Something dangerous and forbidding hovered around him, making her want those wicked things she'd never before craved. She felt hollow inside, and he was the only man in the world who could fill her. She wanted to bathe in the glory of his body inside of hers. Never before had she craved anything so basic; so elemental.

If she allowed him to act on the lust she read in his eyes, would he break her heart? Probably, her mind answered. But she didn't care. The deepest part of her soul cried out to grant him whatever he desired.

Suddenly, her lips were dry and when she moistened them with the tip of her tongue, Everard released a low groan.

Slowly, calculating every blessed fragment of

distance between them, he lowered his mouth toward hers.

When their mouths joined, all pretense and insecurities fled. He pressed her against the wall with his huge frame. His chest heaved against hers. The hard evidence of his desire burned against her belly, stirring her entire body into a single, rising flame. She opened her mouth, a gasp caught in her throat. His tongue delved inside, teasing and tasting her with a florid, hasty dance. She played against him, tilting her head and lifting her hands so her fingers could find the silken strands of his hair.

Heavier still, he thrust his body into hers. Mimicking the act of consummate love, he bent his knees and rubbed his shaft between her legs. That hollow place in her belly begged for more. Wanted. Craved.

This was wrong, her mind rebelled. She didn't even know him! Yet nothing had ever felt more right. When his hand fell from the wall beside her ear to gently knead her breast, her heart exploded and her body trembled. Fiery bolts of lightning pierced her mind and traveled through her limbs.

All too soon, he tore his mouth from hers with a desperation that matched his desire. He ripped his hand from her breast, took a drunken step away from her and ran both hands through his hair. "Dear God," he breathed, his chest rising and falling in uneven waves. "What have I done?"

"Father D'Auvay! There you are!" *Father*?

The sound of several soldiers moved swiftly down the alley, their swords clattering against their legs. Everard dropped his hands, stabbed her with a look filled with longing and regret, then met the soldiers before they could reach her.

"What is it, Munro?" His voice cracked and he coughed.

"Claude said you had need of us."

Alara's stomach flipped in a sickening dance. Ashamed, she glanced at the pebbled earth.

No! She had nothing to be ashamed about! Instead, she raised her gaze to puncture Everard in the back of his head. The man called Munro peered over his master's shoulder. He frowned, but said nothing to her. Instead, he turned his attention back to Everard and grinned. "Too bad you're a priest, eh?"

Everard stiffened. Finally, he turned to look at her, his eyes solemn and full of tangible contrition. "Aye."

"If you wish to commission a rug, you may do so at any number of weavers. Do it not here, and come here no more." Alara wished she had the strength to shout at him, this priest who had kissed her. Worse than a kiss, he'd all but made love to her! But the words came out in a hoarse, ragged whisper.

She wasn't as brave as she'd thought, apparently. But then, Everard had known that when he'd challenged her—when he'd invited her to feel his body against her own.

Rushing back into her father's shop, she threw herself behind her loom and forced the next thread into place. She slammed the loom home with more

exuberance than necessary.

How dare he? The man was a priest! He'd let her think he was a warrior. He'd wanted her to think it. He'd tried to seduce her not a stone's throw from her own father, and she'd let him!

"What's wrong with you?" Kendra worked her loom with practiced ease while she glanced at Alara with a wrinkled brow.

"How do you do it? What is it that makes you attracted to a different man every second day?"

"What?" her sister laughed and rolled her eyes. "I am not that fickle."

"How many times have you been kissed?"

Kendra's eyes flew wide open and she made a circle with her mouth before she snapped it closed and whispered, "Be quiet! Father will hear you."

"He will not. Answer me," Alara whispered as well. "How many times?"

"Enough to know the good from the not-so-good. Why?"

"That knight who just came in—"

"Did he kiss you, sister?" Kendra's face lit up like moonbeams on the choppy waters of the inlet. "Was it good?" She looked thoughtful for a moment, answering her own question with, "Of course, you wouldn't know, would you? But a man with his power and—"

"No, he kissed me not," Alara lied. Why, she couldn't be certain. To protect him? To protect herself?

Kendra's shoulders fell a notch. "Then what are we

talking about?"

"You must promise to stay away from him, Kendra."

Her sister raised an eyebrow.

"Listen to me. Loving him will bring only ruin to you and our family. Not to mention condemn him to the fires of hell."

"I seriously doubt that."

If only Alara could believe in that doubt. If only she didn't already feel dirty for having tempted him. "He is a priest."

"Oh," Kendra replied. Then she shrugged. "What difference does that make?"

Alara gasped. "He is a man of God. How can you ask such a thing?"

"He is a man first. A very handsome man."

A slight tremor wound its way through her stomach to settle in her womb. That was the problem. He was a handsome man. The first man who had shown such interest in her. The first man who made her feel like a desirable woman. And despite the fact he was a priest and a liar, she still wanted him.

# **CHAPTER THREE**

Purious with himself, Everard slammed his fist against the wall of his cell within the great castle. What had come over him? Given another few moments, he would have captured the woman, thrown her over his shoulder like some heathen, and dragged her away for the ravishing.

He'd known he would fall from grace someday, but he hadn't expected it to be so bloody soon.

"You know I have only the deepest respect for you." Claude sauntered into the chamber and reclined on the bed, one leg bent at the knee. "I knew you'd only blame yourself even more if I hadn't sent the others for you."

Everard ran a hand through his hair. "As always, you have the right of it." Let the others think they'd rescued him. It didn't change the fact he had found the very means of his own destruction.

"You must leave the Order."

"Do you think I know that not? I have dreaded this day for so long, I'd begun to hope it would never come." He sulked into a chair placed before a seldom-

used brazier.

"Your intentions were honorable. You owed Jean a debt of gratitude you knew not how to repay. 'Tisn't your fault."

"Nay. 'Tis more. I honestly believed I belonged here. 'Tis something my father would have done, given the opportunity in his youth. But that wasn't the only reason. A part of me has never believed I deserved to share my life with a woman. What better place to avoid sullying them with my wastrel presence than in a religious order?"

"Sully them? God, man," Claude laughed, derisively. "Listen to yourself."

"Pathetic, I know."

"March to Jean's chamber and tell him now. Tell him you renounce your vows and be done with it. God knows the Pope would grant dispensation. The man despises you."

Everard glared at his friend. The fact he was correct only intensified the sting of his words.

Unwilling to relieve the pain, he clenched his jaw. "'Tis not so simple. If only it were."

"So what will you do? You've involved me now, and I can leave you alone not once for fear you shall find the weaver's daughter and...sully her."

Mayhap, that was the answer. Everard stared into the cold brazier. It might as well be his heart for all the good the cold stones did him. But, if he could stay far away from Alara, mayhap he would no longer face the temptation of a real woman. Mayhap the dreams that tormented his manhood on a nightly

basis were meant to satisfy the carnal side of his nature, so his body, at the very least, could remain pure.

Immediately, the thought of never seeing Alara again cut him as surely as any blade.

Which was more than absurd. He'd only just met the wench! Why did he feel as though he'd known her for more than his lifetime, as if he'd loved her before? He had no trouble imagining what she looked like beneath her robes. He somehow knew it. He knew the curve of her hip intimately. She bore a mark of beauty in the shape of a pomegranate just above her right hipbone. He knew exactly what she'd taste like when he finally pressed his tongue against the sensitive flesh between her legs.

How did he know these things? How was it possible? Closing his eyes against the image of her naked, writing body, he searched for the woman in his dreams. Could it be?

Deep inside, he knew it didn't matter. Not when he could taste Alara, even now, though she sat more than a league away from him.

He inhaled and her scent flowed through him. Sex and woman.

"Did you hear me, my lord?"

Everard snapped his attention to the door. A novice stood in the opening; a boy of no more than twelve years. "What?"

"The master wishes an audience, Father. In his chamber."

A lump formed in the back of Everard's throat.

Had his soldiers seen him kissing Alara? Worse, had they already sold his soul for him? "I'll be there presently."

The novice nodded and scurried away.

"What will you do?" Claude folded his arms in a gesture that meant the time for debate had ended. Decisions needed making.

"What can I do?"

"You could renounce your vows for the mistake they were. You can return to England and live your days in the luxury that is your due."

"My due? Christ, Claude. You make it sound as though I wandered into the wrong tavern, and I have only to turn around and all amends are made!"

If only it were that simple. Everard's heart ached for something he could never have, something whole and pure and right. But wasn't that exactly what he'd been seeking when he joined the order to begin with? How had it gone so wrong in so short a time?

Not that it mattered. Not really. What mattered was Alara and the insatiable lust that drove him to her, regardless of the consequences.

No, his men hadn't sold his soul. He'd done that for himself.

"When I've finished with Jean—rather, when he's finished with me—I'll be in the chapel for the remainder of the night."

Claude pushed off the bed, shaking his head. "Dear Everard, my brother. Prayers will do you little good."

After a few quick breaths to steel nerves that no

longer existed, Everard followed Claude out of the chamber and made his way to Jean. To his reckoning.

He found the old priest in his chamber, lying amid a pile of bedclothes. Wan and pale, he huddled beneath them as if he rested in a bed of ice. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his cheeks above the ragged line of his beard.

"Ah, Eve."

"You're ill." The words were simple and obvious, but he could think of nothing else to say. He'd never seen Jean looking so forlorn, so...weak. Jean had always been a warrior in form and spirit despite his outward calling. He was the true warrior for God.

"I will recover. I always do. But we have more pressing matters to attend."

The lump returned. He swallowed against it, but it did little good. "I know," he choked.

"You know the seriousness of this. The outcome will effect many lives."

None more than his own. And Alara's. But there were others as well. Jean. Everard's soldiers. Not that they cared where they fought; for God or for King. Or both. But there seemed something meaningful in bearing the red cross of St. John before their forces. He would do even them a disservice if he took them away from God, wouldn't he? "Aye, I am aware."

"What are your plans, then? As leader of your men, of our forces, this is something only you can prepare for."

"I will finish my duties. I will honor my commitment here, and if God sees fit to continue my

life, I will leave the Order."

Closing his eyes against the censure he knew would come, Everard fisted his hands and waited. Yet, only silence followed. Would this be his punishment? Would he lose even the ability to speak with his dear, old friend? Would he be closed out of Jean's life, already?

Finally, he opened his eyes. When he forced himself to face Jean, relief mixed with his dread. The old gaze that washed over him held no despair; no abhorrent grief.

Instead, Jean struggled to rise slightly against his pillows. He stretched a bent, wrinkled hand from beneath the coverlet.

Everard took it. The skin felt more like parchment than living flesh. Then he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Have you sinned, my son?"

"Nearly. I have lusted. I have fought the demons for so long, I thought I could best them. But this woman—"

"You think I can't understand, is that it?" Jean chuckled. "You think my eyes are so old, or so weak, that I can not see and appreciate beauty?"

Everard frowned, staring at the elaborate coverlet. Immediately, he recognized Alara's hands in the threads.

"You were never meant to be a priest, Everard. I knew it even as I stood beside you the day you spoke your vow. But there was no talking you out of it. You were singularly determined."

"I don't understand. I wanted to do something

purely good with my life."

"And you have. You have been God's vengeance and defeated His enemies. But, perhaps there was another reason our paths crossed." A coughing spasm seized Jean's thin frame. Finally, he drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. "We are not meant to understand."

"You speak plainly, as always. But how is one to know what God wants of him?"

"Faith, my son."

"I have little left, I fear."

"I doubt that. Now, as for why I summoned you. 'Twould seem that war is, indeed, imminent, my friend. And God has need of your sword more now than ever."

\* \* \* \*

The column of two hundred heavy horses and infantry clamored over the dust-laden road that led out of the city. Everard spied them more than a mile ahead of him, and urged Cadence into a run to catch up. He'd spent too long with Jean reviewing the strategy for the coming war and the men had left the castle without him.

On his right, the sea rolled without any concern for what might come, or the blood that might spill into it in the coming weeks. The road climbed the edge of the cliff until it traversed a ledge higher than the gulls flew.

For the past month, he'd been locked away inside

the castle walls. Training when he had to, searching his soul for God's desires the rest of the time. He'd spent so much time in the chapel, he'd memorized every crack in the stone walls, every carved line in the image of Christ above the altar. Still, God had refused to speak to him.

His will had been made clear, and Everard had done the only thing he could do.

As the column passed the ancient ruins, something on the side of the road caught his attention. The closer he came to it, the more he was able to identify it as two people, sitting on a stone.

When he finally reached the end of his column, he glanced at the woman. Though he couldn't see her clearly from his position, he recognized her at once.

Alara.

She and her companion watched the soldiers pass, tossing the occasional wave.

It was the companion who garnered most of his attention, suddenly. A man. A man who wasn't a priest.

An unexplainable fury fell over him; gripping his insides with fists of steel, it strangled all reason. It had been more than four long weeks since he'd kissed her. Four long, agonizing weeks he'd spent trying to forget. Had he expected that she would cease to exist because he was promised to another life? What was this feeling that she somehow belonged to him? It made no sense.

He certainly didn't deserve her. He definitely didn't own her.

When he rode past Alara and her...friend, he couldn't take his eyes off her. She turned and a wisp of hair fell over her cheek. Slender fingers brushed the strands away and tucked them behind her ear. When she met his gaze, she held it. Her lips parted as though she held her breath and sighed at the same time.

Had she thought of him in the weeks since their kiss? Had she lain awake as many nights as he? Had she dreamed of him?

When he could no longer hold her gaze without turning in his saddle, he broke the invisible bond, grimacing and cursing himself for a fool. The road turned inland on the far side of the ruins. Before he made the last bend, he allowed himself one final glance. The man had left the stone; left her alone on her perch by the cliffs. Scanning the horizon, he found the man climbing over a series of broken columns, heading inland.

Instantly, he spun Cadence in a sharp arc, then kicked him to a gallop in her direction.

Alara watched him and when she realized his intentions, she rushed to her feet, climbed off the stone and hurried away from him. No match for his horse, she shouldn't have bothered. He reached her in mere blinks of time.

"What do you think you're doing?" He pulled Cadence to sharp halt and leapt from the saddle in almost one movement. Grasping her arm, he spun her to face him.

Her eyes were wide, shimmering a deep, rich

brown. His fingers burned where they made contact with her arm.

"Release me. Father."

"Call me that not, woman. I am no father of yours."

"You tricked me! You made me believe..."

"I used no trickery. The day we met, I wore the emblem of my station clearly."

"You never told me you were a priest!"

"I am a man," he growled, tightening his grip. "Who was that man who claims your attention instead of me?"

She glanced to the ruins and frowned, the lines of her forehead furrowing with curiosity. "Zak?"

"Aye, Zak. Who is he to you?"

"Release me! You're hurting me!"

"Who is he?"

She pulled out of his grasp. "That is none of your concern."

"The hell it isn't! Jesu, is he simple? Does he have no concern for the danger that might befall a woman, alone, in these times? And if he understands not the evil that at this very moment might lay less than a day's march from these city walls, I would have expected that you would."

"I can take care of myself. I need neither you, nor anyone else, to protect me from my own people."

"You have no idea of the kind of people they are, Alara. They will take you, use you and leave you bloody and broken for the vultures. And then they will sleep."

Her bottom lip quivered slightly and she tried to

speak. When the words wouldn't come, she tried to march away from him, as disciplined as any of his soldiers.

She would not leave him so quickly!

He took her shoulders and pulled her back against his chest. He could easily slide his hands over her trembling frame and cup the weight of her breasts. Temptation to do so waged a battle of monumental proportions in his conscience. Temptation won.

Slowly, deliberately, he allowed his hands to fall from her shoulders to her waist. Once there, he brushed them over her abdomen, then traced the line of her ribs. When he reached her breasts, he covered them with his palms. Almost at once, tiny pebbles caressed his hard flesh and she shivered. Her head fell back into his chest. His shaft swelled against the small of her back.

Lowering his mouth to her ear, he bit the tender flesh before he asked, "Does he make you tremble as I do?"

"He is my...friend."

"He wants you."

"Nay."

Everard snorted, turning her in his arms so the tips of her breasts brushed against his leather hauberk. Still, he knew what she would feel like against his chest. Somehow, he...knew. "A man knows these things, and regardless of my office, I am very much a man."

"You are a priest. And a liar."

The absolute possession he'd been fighting ever

since the first time he'd seen her kicked him in the gut with the force of a thousand war horses. He tugged her shoulders and brought her body fully against his. Descending on her like a demon, he captured her lips, forcing her mouth open and punishing her with his. Fire raced to his loins, bringing to ever more rampant life that part of him he'd wished was dead for more years than he could remember.

It was different than the first time. Richer, more powerful. Demanding and possessive, he swept through her mouth, tasting every recess she exposed to him. Her hands shot over his chest to his neck before she finally slipped her fingers into the long strands of his hair. Her nails scraped his scalp as she tugged, seemingly pulling him closer, urging him to explore her more fully.

Too soon, she turned her head, forcing their lips apart. Thankfully, she didn't back away from his embrace. At least, not yet. He should let her go. He should order her to leave, but he couldn't bring himself to release her. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps.

As did his own.

"This is wrong," she breathed. "Allah will forgive us not."

"How can it be wrong? I feel as though I've loved you forever."

Her face snapped in his direction and she ripped out of his arms. "You must not say such things, Everard. You must go. Now."

"Do you think I haven't tried? I cannot. God

forgive me, you're in my blood."

The distant thud of horses' hooves shook the earth. Or mayhap 'twas the beat of his heart. Only when Alara turned toward the sound, did he know it was real. Shattering, his heart matched the rhythm.

"My lord. Sir Claude sent us to find you." *Of course he did.* 

" Is aught amiss?" the lead man continued.

"Nay," he croaked. "All is well. I but see to the lady's welfare."

"If you wish, we can escort her home and return to the march presently," offered one of the soldiers.

"Aye." He gritted his teeth against the throbbing in his loins. "Deliver her to her father and explain the dangers to a young woman left alone in these uncertain times."

He wanted to laugh. The greatest thing she had to fear was him.

\* \* \* \*

Desperate to remain awake, Alara forced her eyes open. She stared at her ceiling, afraid of the dark almost as much as she feared her dreams. In the nights since Everard had kissed her for the second time, she'd been plagued with dreams of him that left her hot with wanting and cold with dread. If she didn't sleep, she couldn't dream.

Lying beside her, Kendra's steady breaths announced her peaceful slumber. Combined with the drifting moonlight, sheer exhaustion and the absolute

silence of the deadened streets, the rhythm played like a lullaby. Against her wishes, Alara drifted into another world.

As if she hadn't fallen asleep but been somehow whisked into another place and time, Alara opened her eyes against the bright sunlight of a summer's day. She stood on the cliffs by the ruins, a brisk wind blowing in from the sea. The island where the priests had built their castle bore smaller fortifications around a shining palace. Somehow, this didn't surprise her, but seemed just as it should be.

She turned around and glanced at the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus. Glorious, the tall pillars and peaked roof contrasted with a blue sky devoid of clouds. On separate terraces surrounding the temple, life-sized or larger statues of horses, soldiers, lions and other animals stood endless guard. Even the pyramidial roof supported the incredible statues. Inside the temple, encased behind long ionic columns, the remains of King Maussollus rested in an alabaster crypt coated in solid gold.

A smile brushed her lips and she hurried to their secret meeting place.

She was surprised to find Percicus already there. With his back facing her, she appreciated the solid muscles that rippled beneath bronzed flesh. He'd removed his linen tunic and draped it over the stone bench next to a cistern. Cupping his hands, he dipped them in the water, filled them, then tossed the water over his bare shoulders. He bathed quickly, finishing with a few splashes of water over his long, ebony

hair. Droplets glistened like diamonds while he moved with the grace of a cat; liquid and a little mysterious. The droplets ran in haphazard rivulets until they met the waistband of his leggings, set low on his narrow hips. When he heard her approach, he turned in her direction and his full, soft lips spread into a welcoming smile.

She adored his smile. It was wide and genuine. He didn't look at her as if she were any less valuable than he was. The fact he didn't care she was merely a handmaiden, born of lowly circumstances and not fit to love him, shone in the appreciative glances he'd passed her since the day they'd met. That day, six years before, when she'd been selected to tend his mother.

Happiness cascaded over her flesh with tiny kisses, raising bumps of anticipation. Percicus loved her. And she loved him.

"I feared I wouldn't be able to get away," he explained. "So I invented an excuse before my father could find some other political rant with which to trap the council for another half-day."

He took her in his arms, pressing his lips against hers in what might have been a chaste kiss. Except, it changed almost as soon as they touched. The fire that burned between them leapt and danced at the first hint of contact. Her body turned from flesh and bone to uncut wine in a matter of seconds. Percicus's hands found their way down her back, tracing an inferno over her spine, until they cupped her bottom and pulled her hips against the raging heat of his shaft.

Only two thin layers of summer linen separated their bodies from the waist down. Only one barred her breasts from joining with the muscles of his chest. On the far side of the bench, a soft field of cultured grass lay empty in the shadow of the temple. He led her there, and eliminated the barriers between them.

Lying naked on the fragrant earth, she watched him remove the last of his clothing. He had to have been born of the gods. No mortal man could be so perfect. Smooth skin reflected the beams of sunlight that splintered through the columns of the temple. His waist was narrow, his hips as well. He wore the body of a warrior lord easily, as he should. Long, lean and powerful enough to love her, even though it could cost them both their lives.

But that didn't matter when he knelt at her feet, took her right ankle in his battle-roughened hands and gently placed a kiss in the small, tender recess just behind the bone. From there, he trailed his lips over the inside of her calf, pausing at her knee to administer to the soft flesh at the back. Finally, he reached the sensitive area inside her thigh. He languished there not at all before placing his mouth over the very center of her soul. That part of her that he knew would delight in his attentions until the floodgates of passion took her to another level of existence.

Her stomach clenched while he tasted her. Over and over he paid homage to the nub of her desire, drawing his tongue over her opening to trace heat back to where he'd started. Sweat tempered by the

ocean breeze formed on her face, her chest and the area just below her ribs. She floated on his embrace even as his hands crept over her belly to settle on her breasts. While his mouth plundered and delighted between her legs, his fingers pulled and teased her nipples. Hands over her head, trying to find purchase on the wispy blades of grass, she hovered on the edge of reality.

And then he pushed her over the edge. The world exploded in light and color, the sun bowed to their love, and the earth shook with the force of their passion.

Still panting in the aftermath of overwhelming bliss, she welcomed Percicus when he positioned himself above her. He kissed her mouth, sharing the sweet nectar of her own lust. Rolling onto his back, he brought her with him. Instantly, she impaled herself on the hard shaft; long, firm and wide. He spread her body deliciously and well, touching places that had no name.

Slowly, gaining strength, she shifted her hips forward and back. The tip of his member teased a secret place inside of her that only she knew. Faster, she rocked. Bracing her hands against the mounds of his chest, she allowed her body to control her mind. Nothing mattered when they were like this. So long as they could have these stolen moments, she would live forever on a cloud of happiness.

It was enough.

At last, the familiar heat wound through her limbs. Like a thief, it stole her ability to reason. Only desire,

only their love controlled her now. She tossed her head backward, arched her back to grant him further access to her core when he raised his hips at just the right moment. Again, and again.

She wanted only one thing. That this moment might last forever.

\* \* \* \*

Everard's loins throbbed and his stomach ached. There was something different about the dream this time. Something even more familiar and powerful. She writhed atop his shaft, impaled. Her moans came faster, keeping time with the swift dance of her body on his. Scratches formed on his chest where her nails embedded in the hard flesh. Any moment, he would lose himself to the desire she wrought within him. He licked his lips, savoring the lingering taste of her sex.

He wanted to watch her pleasure in the lines of her face, but the struggle to control himself became too great. He squeezed his eyes closed and gritted his teeth to give her even a few more moments during which she might continue her ultimate release.

The love that poured out of her hands and her heart wrapped him in a glorious prison. A prison from which he never wanted to escape.

For the first time since she'd begun her nightly visits, he knew her name. Bethany.

She was a servant girl. If they'd been merely lovers, there would have been no danger. He had every right to touch her. No, the problem came in the depth of his

feelings for this woman. He loved her more than he loved his position or his power.

Of course, he had no right to expect her to love him, yet he knew she did. Despite the danger to herself should his mother and father discover their lust, she loved him.

A well of something stronger than himself, stronger than the wind, and stronger than the will of the gods—or his mother—built in the core of his being. Unable to resist, he arched his hips one last time, thrusting himself deeper inside Bethany's taut frame and poured his love into her. She screamed his name and shuttered one last time. Sweet evidence of her passion drenched his abdomen and coated his shaft when she finally pulled away, her head falling to his chest.

"I will never abandon you, my sweet Bethany. I will love you forever."

Something wet fell to his chest. A tear.

It singed his skin like fire and ice at once.

And the world shook again.

Everard came instantly awake. As always, his shaft burned with unspent passion, hard and aching. He ignored it under the weight of his discovery. Tossing the covers aside, he bolted from his bed in the castle, where he'd returned during the night before, after two long, exhausting weeks setting up the base camps outside of Bodrum. He found his bowl of water in the dark, splashed the tepid water over his face and allowed it to drip onto his chest.

The droplets stung his chest—a waking reminder

of a single tear. He winced at the unexpected sensation.

He had to get that woman out of his head. How long would she plague him? Would he be doomed to spend the rest of his life fighting this apparition?

No, not an apparition. She was as real as he was.

He sat on the edge of the bed and ran both hands through his damp hair. Closing his eyes, he did something he'd never been able to do before. He pictured her face. Soft. Beautiful. Large, brown eyes bottomless in their wisdom and love. She was a part of him. A part of his soul. Why would God do this to him? Why would he, a simple soldier, hear the calling only to be faced with the likeness of his own ruination night after endless, passionate night?

He lay awake in his bed until morning. Finally, the sun's glow crept over the small window above his head. It touched him with gentle warmth, like her. He glanced down, following the rays' paths across his chest and frowned.

His heart stopped.

# CHAPTER FOUR

"What in the name of bloody Hell?" Everard leapt out of his bed as if the very fires of hell lapped at his soul.

Rushing into the full streams of sunlight pouring through the window, he examined his chest the best he could, given the awkward angle. In four even rows, beginning in the center of his chest, just below the cross-shaped pendant Jean had given him when he'd been ordained and extending in equal-length, red and irritated lines—deep scratches—marred his skin.

His fingers found their way to the beginning points on each side of his chest, lining up perfectly with the marks.

Fingernails. It was the only explanation.

But it made no sense. They were dreams.

They were only dreams!

Running both hands through his hair in an attempt to still the riot that had become his mind, he paced to the center of the small chamber. How could this have happened?

What were those damned dreams? What did they have to do with Alara? Why did he suddenly see *her* face when they made love?

No, that wasn't true. He had always seen her face, only now he remembered it.

Fisting his hands in his hair, he forced a breath into his tight, pain-filled lungs. After he calmed himself, he dressed and headed to the armory. The only way to get her out of his mind, out of his soul, for at least a few hours would be to train. To train as if his sanity, and not just his life, depended on it.

By the time he donned his hauberk and entered the tiltyard, Claude and several of his knights had already gathered. He stalked to the center, lifted his sword from its sheath and pointed the unwavering tip in Claude's direction. "You."

Claude raised both eyebrows and offered a half-grin. "Very well."

When Everard reached the center of the yard, he turned and immediately attacked his friend. Claude was prepared, however, and deflected the overhead blow before bringing his sword around and countering the attack. Steel rung through the courtyard with chilling clarity. Blow after blow reverberated through his body, ringing in his ears and deafening the cries of pleasure that still echoed there.

"You seem troubled, my lord." Claude countered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Aye. Do you think?" Everard attacked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;The girl?" Claude attacked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What else?" Everard countered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Seek her out and do what you must, my friend. I

wash my hands of trying to save you from yourself."

The world turned a violent shade of red. Everard's vision blurred and he lunged forward, a battle cry on his lips burning his throat. Claude stumbled backward, then fell in a clattering heap. Before Everard realized what he was about, he crouched over his friend with the tip of his sword at Claude's throat. So close, when Claude swallowed beneath wide, expressive eyes, the blade moved.

Still, Everard couldn't withdraw.

"Eve. You must do something. You are of no use to any of us if you insist upon killing your friends. Or yourself."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Everard knelt in the chapel. Alone.

Was it a sin that he was so tired of being alone? Of being lonely? He made the sign of the cross over his chest and pushed himself away from the altar.

Whether there was sin or not eluded him while he strode to the back of the sanctuary and exited through the wide doors. Years ago, he'd made the choice to be alone. He'd made many choices. What was done, was done. Sin or no sin.

Outside, the sun rose high in the clear, brilliant sky. Lifting his gaze, he watched a pair of gulls dance on the winds. Free, they seemed to laugh with each other as they dove and swept. Would he ever be that free?

He ignored the voice that made such wishes and chose a path that led along the Eastern wall. He had

no desire to return to his chamber. Only the memory of Alara's passion resided there.

More than halfway down the long, curving curtain wall, his attention fell on a stone different from the rest. Instead of the dull gray of the others, it bore a much lighter hue. Almost white. In fact, it looked as though it had been white at one time. More varied, still, it was carved with distinct shapes. People. Horses. Odd symbols.

He knelt in front of it. The size of a small horse, the stone seemed to tell a story of sorts. A battle raged on the surface. Weapons drawn in defense. A godlike entity shone from the top of the scene, casting either his wrath or his benevolence on the warriors. Everard couldn't tell which.

Nearly mesmerized, he lifted one shaking finger to trace the image of a female warrior in the thick of the battle.

The moment he touched the rock, his finger burned. His arm developed a severe pain an instant before numbness stole the pain away.

Light flashed.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden agony, and when he opened them again, he no longer knelt in front of a wall. Instead, he stood in an open, fragrant garden. Squat fruit trees lined a bricked pathway. All around him, the world seemed far more than perfect. It was idyllic. Like a poem.

He wasn't alone.

"What do you think of, my lord?" The voice was soft and distinctly feminine. He'd heard it before.

Glancing to his right, Alara strolled at his side. Nay, not Alara.

Bethany.

"I think of my love for you, as I always do." It was his voice. But even in his dreams, he'd never spoken those words to anyone.

"And I love you, but you mustn't dwell on such things."

"I will have you, Bethany. You belong to me."

"No, my lord." She stopped. "I belong to your father. I am a servant in his house. You," she released on a heavy breath. "You are a future king. Someday soon, you will marry your queen and I will leave the palace."

"I don't want to be king. I want to love you."

"You can love me now, my Percicus." Bethany smiled.

Everard fell onto his knees, the hard stones biting into the bone. He ignored the sting and pulled her lower belly against his cheek. "Tonight. At the temple," Everard insisted.

"Tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Alara waited outside the courtyard. In the distance, kneeling before one of the stones the knights had taken from the ruins to build their massive castle, Everard shuddered.

She wanted to race to him, but forced herself to remain where she was. Gripping her robe with fists

that seemed to belong to someone else, she bit her bottom lip. And waited.

Finally, Everard shook his head, rose from his knees and turned.

As if she'd called to him, his gaze fastened on her. When he walked in her direction, he did so with a determined stride that cried out with distant and impossible memory.

He walked like a king.

Alara's stomach clenched with other, more carnal memories. By the time he reached her, her body begged for his touch.

"Why have you come here?" Everard's clipped tone matched the distraught shadow in his eyes.

"What's wrong? You look...odd."

He bowed his head, stole a breath and then locked his gaze on hers again. "Pardon, my lady. I have been unwell."

"But you are well, now?"

"As well as can be expected."

"You haven't been hurt?"

His eyes clouded for a moment, but he shook his head. "Nay."

"That is good." Enough. Speak what you must and be gone from this place, she chastised herself. Squaring her shoulders, she forced the words to come. "I can see you no more, Everard. You must not seek me out."

The words were simple, yet ripped her heart from her chest with the claws of an angry tiger, dripping with blood. She spun away, knowing the sooner she

could be rid of this place, the sooner she could give herself quarter to crumble.

His strong, passionate hand caught her shoulder, refusing to let go even when she struggled. "You sought me out, little one. Or did you forget?"

"To tell you that only."

"Nay, there is more. I can see it in the tremble of your lips and the sadness in your eyes. What? Tell me."

"I fear for you, my lord. I fear for us." Tears burned her eyes. "Last night, the gods visited me in a dream. A dream full of things I have never before known, yet knew with you."

She couldn't look at him. How could she confess this to him, a priest? The most honored and holy of his people?

"A dream," he whispered.

A sob finally broke free, tearing her throat. "But it was real, I swear it. I became a woman I am not. And you another man, but the same. I fear that I am bewitched. If you continue to pursue me, your soul is damned to the fires of hell. I can live with that not."

"If I do not pursue you, I am in hell already."

Such sincerity, honesty and love filled his voice, it made her search his face for any hint of uncertainty. His cheeks had lost their color. His chest rose and fell with ragged breaths, as though he'd run a great distance without rest.

"In this dream," he continued, "what did you do?"

"We, my lord. We loved one another."

"And at the end of the dream, before we woke, you

lost yourself in passion, like a wild bloom covered with morning dew."

"Nay, I did not. I couldn't have. It was a dream!" She wasn't sure who she tried to convince – herself or her dream lover.

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her gently. "Then why did you come here? You know 'tis real. You know it, Alara!"

Slowly, his hands lifted to the neck of his tunic. Pausing, he glanced behind him and finally led her to an alcove shaded by the great curtain wall. There, he turned his back and stripped the tunic over his massive shoulders. The muscles in his back rippled and turned on each other beneath skin the color of baked almonds. The movements were familiar.

When he turned to face her, she gasped. The scratches. She'd left them on his chest in the throes of her passion last night.

But it wasn't possible. She stepped forward and brushed her fingertip over the tender wounds. "It was a dream."

"No, Alara. It was no dream. I know not how, nor why, but we *have* loved."

Her gaze shot to his face. "I have loved no man."

"You have loved me!"

Everard took her into his arms and crushed her against his bare chest. The scent of his sweat filled her nostrils, musky and masculine. It made her stomach clench before his mouth assaulted hers with the same fiery passion that he'd unleashed on her the night before.

Unable to control the war in her veins, she kissed him back. Powerful and knowing, they battled even as they loved.

Breathless, he pulled away. "I must see you again. You can not deny me."

She nodded. "Tonight. At the ruins." "Tonight."

\* \* \* \*

She must be out of her mind, she thought. But while Alara picked her way through a night as dark as any she had ever seen, she couldn't stop herself from meeting Everard. Even if she'd wanted to.

No moon guided her way. Only a few twinkling stars shone through a heavy blanket of clouds. It was as if the gods turned their backs on the world and granted this one night for Alara and Everard to love each other without the fear of reprisals. At least, that's what she told herself as she arrived at the ruins.

Everard had already arrived, waiting for her near the large, flat stone where she usually sat alone or with Zak. What little light broke through the clouds revealed the worried lines of his face, the strong slant of his jaw. His shoulders squared beneath a long, black cloak. An ocean breeze caught and lifted his hair off his shoulders, spreading the strands like a standard.

Her heart raced at the sight. He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen and tonight, he would belong to her.

Tracing familiar steps through the ruins, she approached Everard. When he saw her, his full, soft lips spread into a knowing smile. Still, there was something dark in his eyes.

The night itself seemed to hold its breath.

She opened her mouth to speak, but his fingers brushed her lips, insisting upon her silence. Then he took her hand and led her to the stone. Once there, he stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers before following the path with his mouth. Shivers fell away from the point of contact like rivulets of molten energy and she sighed.

When his lips found hers, the kiss was gentle, probing. He tasted of promises, sunlight and mead. Strong fingers tugged at her robe, lifting it. Cool night air caressed her stomach when the garment bunched beneath her breasts. Suddenly frantic, Everard broke the kiss and pulled her tunic over her head. He fell to his knees and kissed her belly while he pulled her leggings over her hips. Holding his head, entwining her fingers in the luscious fall of his hair, she stepped out of the final remains of her clothing.

His touch was hot, demanding. His tongue laved her navel while he squeezed her hips, her backside, then found that insistent place between her legs. She moaned, almost losing her balance when he delved and probed the hollow of her soul.

At once he was on his feet, his hands capturing her wrists to bring her arms behind her back where one hand was enough to hold her firmly. Her chest jutted forward, open to his caress.

Everard's body trembled against hers. His eyes pierced hers with relentless desire. "Are you certain? There will be no going back."

She could only nod, her voice lost somewhere between time and the shadowed moon. He dove on her breasts, suckling them, biting and nipping until she thought her skin might burst into flames. He lifted her with seemingly little effort and placed her gently on the stone. She leaned on her hands while he spread her legs.

She'd never been with a man. She'd never known the insistent pleasure of physical love, yet she knew...she knew...exactly what he wanted.

What they both needed.

Her hips thrust forward, inviting his touch. When his tongue licked the aching nub, the earth shuddered.

Arching her neck, she closed her eyes to the black night and reveled in the light and color his touch wrought within her. It was right and good. Pure ecstasy. Harder and faster, his mouth worked her to the heights of a frenzy she'd never known, but one that seemed more than familiar. As if he could read her body as easily as his own thoughts, he pushed his fingers inside of her tight, throbbing center. A shock of delight poured warmth through her limbs. Her breaths came closer to together. Her breasts ached. Unable to resist the tenacious call, she shifted her weight to one hand and used the other to pull on her turgid, hardened nipples, each in turn.

More. She wanted so much more.

She collapsed to the stone, her back scraping on the rough surface. The stone slanted down and away from her. Blood rushed to her head. She touched herself again, bringing the power of Everard's lovemaking to a pinnacle she couldn't quite reach.

More. More.

Everard lifted his head, trailing a kiss over the soft flesh of her thigh. "Touch yourself for me," he demanded.

Immediately, her fingers replaced his lips and she stroked herself, fanning the flames he'd ignited. She felt gloriously wanton and shameless. So endlessly free.

A moment later, Everard moved her hand and replaced it with his own.

And then he entered her in a single, hard thrust that filled her with equal parts lust, glory and pain. He grunted between gritted teeth while he backed away and thrust into her again. And again.

Hard as the steel of his great sword, his shaft destroyed her maidenhead and left her shattered and spent, only to work her senses into another fury of desire.

His hands gripped the sides of the stone, his arms straight and his back arched. Harder and faster, he loved her. With each glorious lunge, he drove into her with more passion, more heat. It seemed as if even her blood sang in her veins, crying to the heavens for something she couldn't name.

"Alara!" One final plunge and he granted them both the release she'd sought.

Her mind ascended to a place above heaven where there was only peace and light. Her body exploded in a thousand fragments of the woman she'd been and would never be again.

He'd said there would be no going back, and he'd been right. Slowly, like a feather drifting on a soft, summer wind, she descended. Everard's head rested on her breasts, his hot, moist breath kissing her sensitive flesh.

The magic that had enthroned her splintered, then vanished. The night was no longer a harbinger of peace and love, but a reminder of the evil that lurked in her soul.

She sucked in a breath and stifled a scream. "Allah be merciful, what have we done?"

\* \* \* \*

"We have loved, little one." Everard glanced at Alara's face, her cheeks still pink from exertion and passion. But fear and shame resided in her eyes.

He stood, pulled his breeches over his spent shaft, tied them closed and donned his sword belt, then sat on the edge of the stone. Alara righted herself as well, hugging her tunic to her breasts without dressing.

"I have ruined you," she whispered.

"Of what nonsense do you speak?" Everard gathered her slender shoulders and brought her against him. "You have done no such thing."

"I have tempted you and damned you in a single breath." Her voice cracked, sending a rift through his

heart. Gentle fingers touched the cut gems in the hilt of his dagger.

"Nay, Alara. I have damned myself."

She slid the dagger from its housing and tilted it against a silvery shaft of moonlight that peeked through the night sky. It winked at him before a tear fell on the blade.

"I shouldn't have come."

"I'm glad you came."

Leaping away from him, she dropped her tunic and stood before him naked and resplendent. "Don't you understand?" she screamed. "I have ruined you!"

Sobs cut the night air where passionate cries had reigned only moments before. She lifted the dagger in both hands, her intentions horrifyingly clear.

Like a lion on a gazelle, Everard lunged for her with his heart in his throat. "Cease!" Furious, he grabbed her hands and stopped the blade from finding a deadly home in her belly. "You can't leave me! It is my sin! Mine! You must not blame yourself!"

She struggled with him, desperately trying to drive in the blade. He easily overpowered her and threw the knife away. It clattered against the littered remains of columns some distance away. Holding her in an iron grip, he hugged her until her sobs calmed to quiet, sniffling cries against his bare chest.

"Make me the promise you will never try to harm yourself again."

When she didn't respond, he stroked her hair and repeated the plea. Finally, she nodded.

"Alara, it is my sin and my damnation. I can't take

it back, nor do I wish to. I will leave the Order, little one, and take you to England with me. We need only each other, my sweeting. My love."

Her frame tensed. "Nay."

His mouth pulled into a frown. "Aye."

She sniffled and gently extracted herself from his embrace. It was as if the sun itself had abandoned him. Only freezing darkness remained.

"I can't allow you to do this. I can't be the reason for your damnation, Everard. You must promise now. You must promise you will forget about me, and never seek me again."

"I can not."

"A promise for a promise, my love," she replied, the bargain evident in her sad, black eyes.

How could he make a promise 'twould be impossible to keep?

\* \* \* \*

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Everard picked up a rock and tossed it over the edge of the cliffs near the ruins. Claude dismounted his horse and dropped the reins before joining him.

"You don't know that, brother. I have a great capacity for believing that which is the truth."

Everard tossed another rock then brushed the dust off his hands. "Very well. Do you remember the dreams I used to have when we first joined the crusades? Before we found the Order?"

Claude frowned. "Vaguely."

"They were hot and passionate, but more like memories than dreams."

"I remember."

"They stopped when I went home five years ago, but returned on the voyage here. They weren't dreams, but premonitions of a sort, I think. Or true memories. It confuses even me."

"You speak of the devil's work."

"I'm not certain of that. I only know that the woman in the dreams is Alara, and I fear what it might mean. Something in the dreams is missing."

"Clothing?" Claude quipped.

Everard glared at him, crossing his arms. "Nay. The life we shared in the dreams was real, but I fear it ended tragically. 'Tis a feeling I have, here, in my gut. If I stay here, I believe Alara will die."

"Die?" Claude repeated, raising one eyebrow. "I didn't realize you were that powerful."

"'Tis not I, but the will of God. Why else would I find her again?"

"If what you say is true, if you knew Alara once before, perhaps you have been sent to make things right."

"Nay. Everything is the same as it was before. I wasn't supposed to love her then, either. My love killed her then, and it will kill her now."

"Is that why you haven't been with her?"

Cringing, Everard lied. "Aye." It wasn't completely a lie, however. Truth, he had kept his promise to stay away from her, but only because of the dreams. Because he didn't know how or why they had been

torn from each other in the past, he couldn't be certain he wouldn't repeat the same deadly mistakes. He stayed away from her to save her. It was his only means to protect her from himself.

But it hurt. Every night, the visitations from the past tormented his flesh and his heart. He fell more deeply in love with Alara as she was now every time his former self welcomed her into his bed. How long could it go on before his sanity shattered?

And hers.

Something in his soul told him she was plagued by the same dreams as he. When they made love in that other world, they felt it in this one.

"Father Everard! Lord Claude!" someone called from the road some distance away.

Both Everard and Claude turned in the direction of the city gate. Four mounted knights from the castle rode hard toward them, their horses' manes and tails flying behind.

When the riders reached them, they pulled hard on the reins and the horses slid to a halt, tossing pebbles across the dusty earth. "The bastard has mounted his forces and will arrive within days."

War.

Chilling fingers crept over his spine. He ignored it, stalked to his horse and mounted. "Spread the word in the city, bring all who will come into the castle walls and prepare for a siege. Claude, alert the men and prepare to ride. We'll leave for the Northern outposts at dawn."

He pushed his horse to a run and made for

Bodrum, not bothering to wait for either Claude or the messengers.

# CHAPTER FIVE

The loom creaked every time Alara pushed the threads into place and shoved them home. Her heart creaked every time she breathed.

Ever since she'd made love with Everard, she'd been tormented with dreams and memories. It seemed as if she couldn't even think of him without ghostly passion clenching her insides or bringing her to the brink of ecstasy. Even now, her womb leapt.

As much as she regretted being the cause of Everard's fall from grace, she couldn't ignore the odd feeling that what they'd shared was pure and right. It was only her conscious mind that heaved the guilt and shame onto her slender shoulders.

"What's that noise?" her sister asked, letting go of her loom and gaining her feet. "Did you hear something?"

"What?" Alara stood as well, listening for whatever her sister might have heard.

The doors to her father's shop burst open, crashing against the walls. Everard stormed into the workshop, and the air charged around him. "Alara!" He found her behind her loom and strode to her like a man who owned his world.

Like a king.

"Pack your things," he ordered. Then he glanced over his shoulder. "All of you, gather what you must and go to the castle. Now."

"What is the meaning of this?" Alara's father hurried to her side. "What is happening?"

"The Turkish army is only days from mounting a full siege on the city. We'll do our best to keep them away, but if they break through our lines, they will come through the city walls and destroy all they find. You must seek shelter within the castle. And you must hurry."

"I don't understand," she countered. "You said they are days away. Surely, we can—"

"Alara, the castle will not house the entire city. Already, my soldiers gather as many as they can to move within. You must go now," he whispered. "This is a wicked force that descends upon us."

Something in Everard's eyes told her what he couldn't. The look he gave her spoke of what this army would do to any unguarded women it found. The blood froze in her veins. "You came for me."

"I had to."

"Daughters, collect your personal items, only what you can carry. Thank you, priest, for your concern. I will have my family ensconced by nightfall."

Kendra hurried out of the looming chamber, followed by the other workers and finally her father. Still, Alara couldn't force her feet to move. Everard held her attention and her heart in capable, protective hands.

"You will fight them, won't you?" she asked, her heart skipping a beat in fear of his answer.

"I will defeat them, little one. No harm will come to you while there is life in my body."

Not this time.

\* \* \* \*

Chaos ruled inside the courtyard of the Castle of St. Peter. Hundreds of men, women and children scurried about, searching for their families, begging the knights for protection. She found Berk wandering alone, picked him up and searched for his mother.

After more than an hour, she found her, sitting with her other children against the stairs that climbed to the ramparts.

"My thanks, Alara. He is ever running off and I haven't the strength to chase him anymore."

"You must watch him more carefully. The danger has increased, now."

Fear shot through the older woman's eyes, turning them from bronze to a smoky gray. "Do you think they will find us? I'm so frightened. My children are frightened, as well. All except for Berk."

"Berk is too young to understand the threat. But fear not. The Empire is strong, but the priests' warriors are equally so. Or stronger."

"At least we were able to find solace here. So many did not."

More people than Alara could possibly count milled in the courtyard and even more had gone

farther in to the inner bailey. It was a wonder anyone could breathe. Thankfully, Everard had escorted her family to his private chamber. It was cramped, but at least it was quiet and eliminated prying eyes.

A horn blasted from the high curtain wall. Instantly, the crowds around her parted, like the fabled Red Sea, and a column of horses cantered into view. The soldiers wore their colors, dressed with scarlet capes, proudly, their bearing strong and sound. Early morning sunlight gleamed off polished shields that bore the red cross of their devotion.

In the front of the column, Everard. Instead of his Arabian mount, he sat astride a huge black beast with stamping hooves and, if she hadn't known better, a snarl on his lips. Each of the horses wore iron plates on its head, neck and chest, and red blankets over its flanks. Massive, wire-haired dogs circled in and out of the horses legs, their ferocious expressions marking them as soldiers, too.

The column moved past her with deafening thunder. Everard turned his gaze on her, sending tangible love through time and space to reside in the hollow of her chest.

He would not return. Somehow, she knew it. The thought scared her more than the prospect of an eternity in hell. A lifetime without Everard would be worse.

The warriors disappeared through the portal. She climbed to the ramparts, ignoring the guard's cries to remain below, so she could watch them traverse the land bridge and city streets. She stayed on the wall

until the last horse, a tiny red dot, rounded the curves on the far side of the ruins.

She would wait until nightfall. Then she would follow and find him. She couldn't lose him again.

\* \* \* \*

The horrific sound of clashing metal echoed all around him. Everard dispatched one opponent only to turn and find three more bearing down on him with raised swords and devil eyes.

He ducked beneath the first blow, using the decrease in height to plunge his blade into the rotund belly of the second attacker. Spinning, he withdrew his bloodied sword and brought it down with swift justice. The severed head of the unfortunate Turk it met landed silently on the packed earth. The third enemy released a guttural cry as a disembodied blade exited through his chest, dripping blood that had been in his beating heart. The blade withdrew. The Turk fell. Behind the fallen man, Claude grinned through the blood and grime that coated his face. "Happy to be of service, my lord."

A sharp, bright light swooped over Everard's immediate surroundings, then the world went black.

\* \* \* \*

"No, Father. You have no say in this!" Everard stormed out of the palace. Warm sunlight kissed his bare legs and arms and he ran both hands through his hair.

A ring of something metal touched his fingers and he grasped it. Frowning, he stared at the golden crown fashioned to resemble entwined olive branches. He threw it away. It represented everything he didn't want. Everything he couldn't have. Everything he was.

"Percicus," the King barked. "Never walk away from me, you insolent, ungrateful child."

He spun to face his father. "I am not a child!"

"You have responsibilities. Do you not see that? Men like you and I have difficult choices to make every day. Choices upon which hang the balance of men's lives. You have no right to want anything for yourself."

"I love her. I will have her as my wife. There is nothing you, nor anyone else, can do about that, Father. Not you, and not the gods."

The earth roared. Beneath his feet, the ground shook and rolled like an undulating sea. The nearby trees swayed and the palace walls crumbled. A statue of Zeus fell from its perch near the golden doors. The sculpted columns cracked and splintered. Dust rose like a great, yellow wave of doom.

For more than a minute, chaos screamed. Percicus grabbed his father and pulled him away from the crumbling building a second before a portion of the roof shattered the place where they had been standing.

When the gods' wrath completed its destructive display, the world stood so quiet, even the gulls ceased their call.

His father's eyes grew round and large while he stared at the ruins of his home. "Your mother..."

"I'm sorry, Father. I have to go to the Mausoleum."

His feet grew wings. He leapt over fallen trees, climbed through the remains of the palace's curtain wall and gasped when he saw what the gods had done to his father's golden

city. Everywhere he looked, Halicarnassus lay in shattered ruins. Clouds of dust blackened the sky. A child covered in dust and blood wandered, crying, in what was left of the streets.

Still he ran.

When he reached the city walls, he gazed at the magnificent Mausoleum. At least, he looked to where it should have been. The huge structure had been laid to ruins by the wrath of the gods.

It was his fault.

Gods, but he never should have questioned them!

As though Hades himself chased him over the uneven terrain, he raced up the broken hillside until he arrived at the crumbled mass of bricks and stones. The glorious statuary lay in pieces. He climbed over the remains of a great stone lion.

"Bethany! Bethany!"

She didn't answer.

But they'd planned to meet. Here. Now. He'd been on his way to their tryst when his father had caught him. If he hadn't argued with his father about her, he would have been here when the earth shook.

He should have been here!

"Bethany!" he called again. His throat ached and he coughed against the lingering dust.

A soft whimper floated to him on the renewed breeze. He struggled toward the sound. When it came again, he recognized not only her voice, but the pain that strained it.

There, between two massive stones...

A bloody hand.

He lunged for it, took the frail fingers in his and searched within the rubble for her face. When he found it,

he brushed away several pieces of chalky stone. Blood poured from her nose and one eye. The largest of the blocks rested squarely on her chest.

"I'm here. I'll get you out. I'll get you out, Bethany. Don't leave me!"

"Too...late."

"No! Don't say that."

"I will love you forever, my beautiful Percicus. I will love you for all time."

Her fingers fell limp in his hand.

"No!"

Pain like none he'd ever known ripped through his soul, crying for vengeance. He tore himself away from his lover's lifeless body and screamed to whichever of gods had done this. "You have no right to her! You have no right, do you hear? She is mine. I will have her back and rest not until I find her again! You can not have her!"

He raced to the edge of the cliffs, his heartbeat loud in his ears. The sky was blue. The ocean was choppy with white foam and tepid waters. Several gulls cried their displeasure. The world had begun to breathe again.

He threw himself over the edge.

\* \* \* \*

Everard woke with a start. He tried to focus, but the world was too black, too void.

But, suddenly everything made sense. The dreams. The feeling of having known Alara before. Hell, he'd not only known her before, he'd loved Alara before, in another time, another life. That's why he'd become

a priest. For no other reason than to bring him to this place. To *find* her. To fulfill the promise he'd made centuries before.

"He wakes, Master Jean."

Footfalls shuffled over the stone floor. The room came into focus. He was in his cell at the castle. "Alara," he whispered.

"You must not try to speak, my son."

"Where is she?"

"You were injured in the battle. Claude brought you back to us after fighting over your body for hours. The Turks have made camp outside the city walls." Jean's voice faded. "We are under siege."

"Where...is she?"

Something was wrong. He read it in his master's eyes, dark and moist.

Claude appeared at his bedside as Jean shuffled away. "We know not, my lord. She was no longer in residence when we returned."

He pushed himself onto the pillows, ignoring the lingering pain in his head. "The ruins."

"I thought as much as well, but..."

"My sword." Everard swung his legs over the bed and stood, taking a moment to gain his balance before reaching for his garments hanging on a nearby hook.

"Tis impossible, Eve. The Turks have made their camp all around the ruins. If she was there when they gained that ground, she can't have survived."

"Nay!" Rage stole control of his body. He grabbed Claude by the throat and shoved him against the far wall. "I have lost her once. I will not do so again!"

He released his friend. Throwing on his breeches and tunic, he spun a circle looking for his sword. He found it leaning against the chest at the foot of his bed. Donning it, he marched from the chamber.

In a matter of minutes, he sat astride Cadence and raced from the castle. Beneath the cover of a black, moonless night, he approached the ruins. Small campfires dotted the landscape. The number of Turks was astounding. But something told him Alara lived.

He knew not for how long.

Leaving Cadence a fair distance from the encampment, he stole around the outskirts on foot. Crouched low, he studied each of the fires for any sign of Alara's face. Finally, he reached the ruins, praying to the very God he'd betrayed that she had found somewhere among the rocks to hide.

He dared not call to her for fear the Turks would hear him, so he climbed over a fallen column as silently as he could. He found the stone upon which they'd made love, the same stone that had taken her life so many centuries before, but she wasn't there. Something caught his attention in the crack, however, and he grasped it. It was a piece of her tunic.

She'd been here, at least. She'd hidden in this very spot.

But where, dear God, was she now?

Then she screamed. A shrieking, horrible sound born of terror and fear. He turned and hurried in the direction from which the sound had come. "Alara!"

"Everard! I'm here!" The words ended in another screech of terror.

On the far side of a massive, cracked column, he found her fighting a boorish Turk. He struggled to hold her, but she fought with valiant desperation. The Turk held her waist. She managed to turn around so her back faced him. She lunged forward, clawing at the stones in front of her with bloodied fingertips.

Everard climbed the column and slid down the other side. A desperate force drove him onward. The need to finally realize their love was a powerful spur in his soul. He would not lose her again. He drew his sword.

At last, he reached them. "Release her, heathen. She belongs to me!"

The Turk laughed. "By morning she will warm my bed, and you will chill your grave!"

Alara threw herself upright, spun to face the Turk, and struck him in the neck. The Turk's eyes bulged. His hands dropped.

Alara backed quickly away, stumbling over the ragged stones.

Blood poured out of the Turk's throat, around the hilt of Everard's jeweled dagger.

Everard sheathed his sword and caught Alara as she fell. "I have loved you my entire life," he breathed against her cheek. "I will love you until the end of time."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please, never leave me again." Alara threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest.

"Never, little one. I swear it."

War erupted around them. Everard gathered her in

his arms and together they climbed the ruins. Spread across the fields from the edge of the old Mausoleum to the well, the Knights of St. John battled the Turks. Caught off-guard in the dead of night, the Turks were unprepared for such an onslaught. The battle raged for less than an hour, ending just as the morning dawned.

When it was safe, Everard escorted Alara back to the castle with Claude and several knights. The castle roared with cheers as the news of their victory spread like a brush fire through the frightened masses.

Still, Everard's war was far from over.

But regardless of Jean's position or opinions, Everard would fight for his love; for his life. He would have peace for himself and for Alara. He would make her his wife no matter what Jean believed.

God had brought him to this point. It was his due.

Jean met them at the gateway to the inner bailey. He raised his hand, indicating the weary soldiers should stop and dismount. They did.

"You have found her safe, I see."

"Aye, Master. I have found her and I claim her as my own." Everard waited for the older priest to declare his blasphemy.

It didn't come. Instead, Jean smiled, laid a hand on his shoulder, and replied, "I thought, mayhap, 'twould be your choice."

"Father, it is my fault. I am ashamed, but I also love him," Alara interrupted.

"Hush, child. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"But he is a priest. I have readied a path to hell for him."

"He is no priest."

Everard shook his head to clear his ears. "Come again?"

"You asked for dispensation, do you not remember? You asked to be released from your vows. Weeks ago."

"Aye, but you said—"

"I said I would have to write the Pope, and write to the Pope I did. He granted your request upon my recommendation. As I expected he would considering he has always disliked you immensely."

Claude laughed. "I told you!"

Jean continued. "You have not been a priest for quite some time."

"I'm not a priest."

"No, my son. I fully expect we should prepare a wedding feast. What say you, my lady?"

Alara threw herself into Everard's arms, kissing his lips, his cheek, and his neck. "I say we should, Father!"

Everard kissed her in return, then broke away to search his old friend's face for any signs of disappointment or censure. He found none, but still asked, "My penance?"

Jean laughed. "Spending the rest of your life surrounded by a nagging woman, the rules of marriage and screaming bratlings will be penance enough."

'Twas a penance he couldn't wait to pay.

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Paleigh Kincaid lives in the Intermountain West of the United States where she is currently raising two horses, two South African Boerboel Mastiffs, two daughters, too many cats and one husband. She writes for the love of it and hopes you enjoy reading for the same reason.