

...Her breath hitched and her heart beat wildly in her chest. Blinking hard, she rubbed the heels of her palms against her eyes, then opened them once more. The view hadn't changed.

The man who'd carried her, whose body she'd been pressed up against for the past twenty minutes, was remarkably, unabashedly, naked.

The lean lines of his deeply tanned body made her mouth go dry. She could still feel the lingering heat everywhere his solid flesh had touched her.

He looked like he'd been sculpted in the image of a Greek god, all firm planes and solid muscle, each dip and valley a work of art in its own right. She knew she should look away, but she couldn't. Her gaze was irrevocably drawn to his comfortable, slightly spread-legged stance, to the dark patch of hair at the apex of his thighs, to the erect cock jutting upward from the mass of dark curls.

Sharp pressure mounted the entrance to her cunt, making her inner walls press tightly together. God, but he was gorgeous. *It* was gorgeous, she corrected herself. His rod, long and thick, thrust out boldly in front of his flat stomach. Blue veins snaked along the pale shaft, toward the shiny, dusky tip. Before she could catch herself, she licked her lips, the urge to bend down and taste it almost too much to bear.

It took all the self-control she didn't know she possessed to tear her gaze away from the magnificent display of masculinity he offered her. Fighting against the blush she knew had to be turning her cheeks a very unflattering shade of crimson, she gave him a shaky smile. "I think it's about time you told me your name, don't you?"

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Copyright © 2006 by Lacey Savage ISBN-10 1-59279-640-0 ISBN-13 978-1-59279-640-3 Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This one is for my readers.

A huge thank you goes out to every one of you for believing in the power of love as much as I do, and for liking it as steamy as it gets.

She lay upon the clear blue ocean, like a string of pearls on a silk azure sheet. And like the pearls she awaited the pleasure of those who sought her out. For one thing that could never be denied, when you visited Desirata you definitely got what you needed...not necessarily what you wanted.

CHAPTER 1

Sunlight refracted off the calm turquoise surface of the ocean, blinding in its intensity, but the stinging ache piercing Amy Conrad's eyes was no more than a slight nuisance when compared to the breathtaking agony wracking her body.

"Oh, shit, not now," Amy murmured, doubling over as she clutched her stomach. The effort was futile. The pain was nowhere and everywhere all at once, flooding her nerve endings, making her muscles clench in torment.

Gritting her teeth, she fumbled for her purse. The zipper gaped open, and she slid her hand inside. A sigh escaped her lips as her nails grazed the plastic container that would hold the misery at bay for just a little while longer.

A few more days. That's all she needed.

With trembling fingers, she popped the lid, slid out two pills the size of her thumb pad, and swallowed them dry. She'd been doing it for

years. The fact that the capsules were large enough to stick in her throat and choke her no longer even registered.

She curled up in a ball on the floor of the rental boat and waited for the suffering to pass. Her wide-brimmed straw hat shielded her face from the relentless rays of the sun, but the teeny two-piece bikini she'd picked up at the airport did little to protect the rest of her body from the unmerciful heat.

That didn't matter, either. Soon enough, she'd never see sunlight again. What difference would it make if she added a sunburn to an already dire prognosis?

When the haze of pain lifted, Amy took a long swig from her water bottle and rose to her knees. Around her, the ocean stretched out in an endless sprawl of misty green, infinite and immortal. A smile curved her lips at her curious choice of words.

Immortal. If only.

She slid her sunglasses on and took a deep breath, reveling in the stunning solitude. Overhead, a seagull crowed a high-pitched greeting. Small, delicate waves crashed against the side of her boat, rocking it slightly. She sighed in private contentment and trailed her fingertips over the blunt handle of one oar.

She could have rented any type of boat. The thin, animated man behind the rental kiosk had tried to convince her to take a yacht, or at least a small sailboat. Not knowing how to sail, she'd wanted neither, preferring solitude to the constant chatter of a tour guide. The ocean and its billions of little creatures that went about their daily lives unaware of the turmoil above would be all the company she needed.

She'd chosen instead to rent a coble, an open-decked fishing boat not much longer than her own five feet six inches. Its flat bottom was great for launching from and landing on shallow beaches, though she was warned against exploring any of the nearby islands. The Desirata chain of islands had a reputation for being mysterious and dangerous

for tourists who strayed from the well-trod path, but Amy didn't put much stock in superstitious ramblings.

The man had also warned her against drifting too far from shore, but she hadn't listened to that bit of advice, either. Fog hung around the edges of the ocean, making it seems as though she was the only person out here. Which was fine by her. There were too many other boats drifting around the shore of the main island, too many people. She'd heard enough gregarious laughter and loud gossip on the cruise she'd taken to reach Desirata to last her a lifetime.

Or at least, what she had left of one.

Out here, she could finally be left alone. There was no one to remind her she'd lost her job and used up the last of her savings on this impulsive vacation. No one to point out that she couldn't afford any more medicine once this last dose ran out. No one to kindly suggest that since she only had a few weeks to live, she should be in a hospital somewhere, surrounded by men and women in long white coats who'd calmly purse their lips and shake their heads in impotent grief.

Well, that wasn't how she wanted to go. When her time came, she'd rather be here, on this damn boat, surrounded by fish and gently lapping waves.

Amy stretched her arms over her head, the move sending a bolt of pain up her spine. She recoiled instinctively and drew her feet up from the floor, but not before her toes grazed something sharp beneath the bench. Curious, she leaned down and found the castaway sharing her space on her boat.

A conch, slightly bigger than her palm, had been carelessly tossed aside. It had slid to a stop against the wooden sideboard beneath the bench. Lying in shadow, it looked almost fluorescent.

Amy picked it up. She cradled it in her hand and lifted it to eye level, marveling at the way the sunlight bounced off its smooth golden exterior. It glittered brightly as Amy turned it over, trailing her fingertip

over the jagged edge that had scratched her toe.

A low, feral sound echoed from the depth of the spiral shell.

Startled, Amy peered at the conch intently. She'd heard people claim they could hear the ocean inside one of these, but she was already *on* the ocean. What more would she be able to hear?

Puzzled, she raised the shell and pressed it against her ear.

"He needs you."

The voice that echoed from inside its depths was crystal clear, the words perfectly enunciated. Amy yanked her hand away as if she'd been burned.

Swallowing hard, she pressed the straw hat tighter on her head. The sun had to be getting to her more than she'd thought, and she hadn't even been out here all that long.

What she'd heard was impossible. The conch didn't just speak to her. It couldn't have.

Determined to prove she wasn't hearing voices echoing from harmless ocean fauna, she slowly moved to the other side of the coble, then dipped the shell into the water. Rinsing out whatever had jiggled in there and had caused her to think she was hearing actual words would ensure it didn't happen again.

Taking a deep breath, she tightened her grasp on the conch, embedded her teeth in her lower lip, squeezed her eyelid shut, and positioned the shell against her ear.

"Oh, for the love of Jupiter, Christabel, it's been eight hundred years. How much longer do you think Simon is going to wait for you?"

Amy opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, a steady force pressed against her chest, determined and insistent. Her upper body teetered on the brink of losing balance and she grasped for the edges of the boat, but it was too late. Her stomach gave a sickening lurch.

The conch fell out of her nerveless fingers and hit the water with a

splash a moment before she did.

CHAPTER 2

England, 1202 A.D.

"Take me back, you coward. If you do not, I cannot promise my betrothed will be merciful when he hunts you down. He will not rest until you have been brought to justice before the King himself."

Justice. Now there was a useless concept, Simon Whittington thought as he tightened his hold on the squirming woman riding astride in front of him. Thick rope bound her wrists in front of her, yet she still managed to wriggle and flounder as though she would prefer to toss herself from the moving horse and take her chances with the ground rushing up to meet her than to be saddled with him for a moment longer.

Simon couldn't blame her, he supposed, but he wished she'd stop writhing. Her lithe body and smooth limbs pressed against his chest and stomach with each motion, making his rod stiffen in his breeches.

As though the situation wasn't difficult enough without his body betraying him.

"I appreciate your candor, M'Lady," Simon said between gritted teeth. "And I've no doubt you speak the truth."

He bent his head a moment too late as the horse galloped beneath low-hanging branches. He felt a pull of pain as a sharp stick dug into his cheek. Before him, Christabel Foxe seemed oblivious to the sprigs clawing at her face.

A hint of admiration swept through Simon's body, but he squelched it before it could become something more, something that would interfere with his plan. Granted, it had not been an exceptionally well thought out plan, but at the time it had seemed like the only option.

Now, though, after having been awake for the better part of two days, the brash decision that had led to having this woman in his arms no longer seemed like such a good idea when viewed through bleary, aching eyes.

"Why then have you taken me? And on the day I'm to be wed! Is it money you want? If so, His Royal Highness Duke Foxe, my esteemed father, will pay generously for the safe return of his only daughter."

Simon's harsh laugh held no humor. He thought of his sister, Brownyn, of the last time he'd bent to kiss her forehead before riding off to do his sworn duty as one of King John's personal guards. A fortnight later, Bronwyn was dead. His little sister, as full of life as any maiden, had been brutally violated and left for dead.

Someone would pay for her murder. He knew the culprit, but the King wouldn't hear of accusing one of his own of such a heinous act. Well, Simon had had enough of the King's brand of justice. The time had come to take matters into his own hands. Having never been a man to hesitate, Simon had recognized his opportunity when the criminal's lovely bride-to-be had left her home unescorted. Not hesitating for a moment longer than necessary to ensure she was alone, he'd grabbed

with both hands the gift fate had offered him.

Henry Caxton, Earl of Stowbridge, thought life was expendable, did he? He believed he could get away with using young women as his personal pleasure puppets before discarding them like bathwater by the side of the road. Fine, then. If human life meant so little to him, he wouldn't miss his blushing bride.

"Do not mock me. I asked you a question and I expect an answer." Christabel turned to peer at him over her shoulder. Wind whipped her loose, dark tresses back to brush his cheek. She smelled of honey blossoms and dried roses, the scent sending another unwelcome jolt of heat into Simon's groin, reminding him it had been much too long since he'd lain with a woman.

Yes, that's all it was, he told himself. The urge to nuzzle Christabel's neck and inhale deeply was due to his long bout of abstinence, and nothing else. If he wanted to wrap his arms around her middle and feel her soft body pressed tightly against his, it was only so she'd stop squirming, and not so he could delight in her unmistakable curves, the long, smooth limbs hidden beneath her long skirts.

"Take a good look at me," Simon said, fighting to keep his voice calm even as his hands tensed on the reins. "Do I look as though I need your father's charity?"

She did as he commanded, her earth-brown eyes brazenly sweeping over as much of him as she could easily make out from her position. Recognition flickered in her gaze as she took in his armor, his heraldic signet, the symbol of his role at court. She swallowed hard, and for the first time since he'd taken her almost a half day earlier, fear swept over her silken features.

"If not for coin, why then?" Her voice trembled, and something hitched in Simon's chest, something that told him he should have thought this bold act through before giving in to his rage.

How could he have thought for even a moment of hurting this

lovely creature? Of punishing her for her betrothed's dark deeds? His scowl softened, and he reached out to brush a strand of hair away from her face. She recoiled from his touch, the gesture wounding him more because he knew he deserved the hatred glistening in her dark eyes.

"Answer me, Sir Knight." She used his formal title, and the agitation in her tone clawed at Simon's heart. "Please. What do you mean to do with me?"

* * *

Simon came awake slowly, his mind filled with images of Christabel. It had been centuries since he'd last held her, yet in that magical state between sleep and wakefulness, he could make her out clearly. Her tousled mane framed a heart-shaped face, and her lips, full and rosy, curved upward for him.

Only for him.

In those brief moments, it felt as though time and space folded in on itself, no longer separating them. He'd spent many men's lifetimes trying to atone for his misdeeds, but his prayers hadn't been answered. He hadn't been given the chance to make things right.

Sometimes, late at night, he thought he could hear Christabel's terrified cries, and with them always her accusing voice.

"You did this to me. You."

And other times... Oh, Lord, other nights he could taste the sweetness of her lips. He could feel the soft mounds of her breasts press against his chest as her arms twined around his neck. He'd trail his fingertips over her smooth stomach and inhale the musky scent of her arousal. He remembered what it felt like to touch the soft, womanly flesh between her legs, to delight in its moisture as her thighs parted for him.

He wished those nights would never end, and he did everything in his power to ensure the dream haze lasted just a little while longer before his eyelids drifted open and he was forced to face another day

without her.

She haunted him tonight, teasing him with her sweet, enticing scent. He allowed her aroma to envelop him, to seep into his senses as his palm drifted down to cup his sac and squeeze the tender flesh. A jolt of excitement stirred his blood.

In his fantasy, she was as he always imagined her, stunningly beautiful, her bare skin glistening in the faint glow of moonlight playing across her nakedness. The pink tips of her nipples tightened under his scrutiny, and she giggled shyly, crossing her arms over her breasts.

"You should not look at me like that," Christabel whispered. "I am to be married."

Simon's growl echoed from deep within his throat, and he spanked the downy crease of her bottom. She yelped in response, but the sound was filled with playful laughter.

"Do not anger me, woman," he warned her. "You are mine. You always have been."

He lowered his head and kissed her breasts, his tongue lapping at the tight buds. She tasted like honey, sweet and tempting. He never could get enough of her, and that hadn't changed. He didn't think it ever would.

Circling his erection with his fingers, Simon took his cock in hand and pumped the long, thick shaft with firm, decisive movements.

Christabel's supple body fit perfectly against his. Darkness swirled around them, wrapping them in dream shadows. Nestled in his arms, Christabel emanated warmth and pure feminine passion, light radiating from her every nerve ending. Her bottom lifted and fell as she positioned herself over him, the walls of her vagina tightening around the tip of his cock. Slowly, she lowered herself on his length, her pussy enclosing his manhood as though it had been made for him.

While she arched her back and thrust her breasts forward to bounce

a tongue's swipe away from his mouth, she was his again. In his arms, on his cock, she was *alive*.

He pumped harder, faster, and imagined it was the soft caress of Christabel's perfect sex squeezing his rod. Her wet passage slicked his cock as she slid sensuously up and down the hard length of his erection.

Simon's phallus strained and pulsed, need building to completion in a frenzy of thrusts and groans, of fevered hand motions that were so much more than simple self gratification. As always, he wanted this moment to last an eternity. If he'd still been mortal, he'd have gladly given his life to spend his last second on earth with his cock buried deep inside the relentless grip of her hot pussy.

When he came, he heard her own cry of release, the raw desire in her voice accentuating his climax. His cream shot out in quick spurts, flooding his hand, dripping over his stomach, sticky and wet.

Sometimes, he'd end his fantasy by imagining Christabel positioned between his legs, her tongue gently lapping the spilled seed, her eyes wide as she looked into his while performing the sordid and oh-soarousing act of cleaning him after they'd made love.

His softening cock stirred at the bold image. He could almost feel the soft swipe of Christabel's tongue as it nudged his testicles, slid over the crease of his inner thigh, dipped inside the slit of his cock head.

"Are you done pleasuring yourself yet? You've slept much too long, and there's work to be done."

Simon groaned and blinked his eyelids open against the sunlight that poured into his private space and dappled the silk coverlet draping his bed. The scent of salty ocean and wet animal fur surrounded him. He turned his head and his gaze fell on the image of Christabel.

He'd carved her likeness from palm tree bark, and he kept the dark sculpture by his bed as a permanent reminder of what he'd had, and what he'd lost. Her face was the last image he saw before drifting off to sleep, and the first thing he saw when he awoke.

Unless it was Alric's furry face that blocked his immediate view.

"Why are you up so early?" Simon asked, wiping his wet hand on the bedspread.

"It's nearly midday. You should have been up hours ago."

"Well, I'm up now." Simon rose, his head still reeling with the force of his orgasm. He peered at the small creature standing on two feet by the side of his bed. "What have I told you about respecting my privacy?"

Alric snorted and gave Simon a toothy grin. "That there is no such thing as privacy on this forsaken island, and in eight hundred years, I've seen you do things to yourself that were much more embarrassing than what you've just done."

Simon rolled his eyes. He should know better than to try arguing with a monkey. Standing at just about half Simon's height, Alric was the first and only primate Simon had ever seen. If they were all as talkative as this one, he knew he'd been blessed by not running into an entire tribe of them on one of his campaigns.

Simon's brows furrowed as he studied the creature. Alric's pale yellow coat accentuated the dark, glossy fur covering his face and the top of his head. When asked, he referred to himself as an Old Soul, whatever that meant. To Simon, he'd always been a Godsend. If not for Alric as his constant companion, Simon feared he'd have lost his wits long ago.

"All right, all right. I'll get to work. Just what is so important that it couldn't wait until I finished?"

Alric aimed a pointed look at Simon's crotch, which came even with the monkey's face. "I'd say you'd finished."

Simon fought the sudden urge to stick out his tongue. There was something irritating about the animal, something Simon couldn't put his finger on. It was as though Alric possessed a wealth of hidden knowledge he refused to share. Simon had often wondered whether

Alric had a past, too. For all his innocence, those wide brown eyes and pink-tipped nose hid secrets Simon could only guess at.

For one, he knew too much about the outside world. Even his method of speech had changed as the centuries passed, and by default, so had Simon's. He'd begun using contractions before he realized what he was doing, and he'd learned a myriad of new words thanks to the blessed creature.

Stretching out the sore muscles of his back, Simon made his way to a washbasin that stood at the edge of the room. The structure he'd built almost six centuries ago had no walls, just a thatched roof that kept the glare of the sun and the occasional storm at bay. It was sparsely decorated, mostly with items Simon had crafted himself, though he also used some of the materials that drifted in from a nearby wreckage from time to time. The silk bedspread was his favorite luxury item. He had no idea how he'd been able to sleep before the container of silks landed on shore.

Running his wet fingers through his disheveled hair, Simon turned back to Alric. "Well? You still haven't told me what it is you want me to do."

The monkey assessed him shrewdly, his dark, beady eyes narrowing to slits. "We have a guest."

For a moment, Simon's heart stopped beating. His stomach muscles clenched and a lump formed at the back of his throat.

"Christabel," he breathed.

CHAPTER 3

"What a trip."

The low, muttered words slipped out from between Amy's dry lips before she could stop them. Her eyes were closed and she kept them that way, not yet ready to subject herself to the bright beams of sunlight warming her skin, or to the intense pain that would surely follow.

The world swayed suddenly and her body tilted at an odd angle. Instinctively, Amy tightened her grip on the hard, lean flesh coiling beneath her fingertips.

Prickles of awareness raised goose bumps on her bare arms. Her breath caught in her throat. Pulse thundering in her ears, she steadied her nerves for whatever she was about to face, then opened one eye slowly, cautiously.

"Holy hell," she whispered at the sight of soft, infinitely kissable lips, the sharp line of a blunt nose, the hint of stubble marring a perfectly square masculine jaw.

The man pressed her closer to his chest and quickened his stride. He held her like she weighed nothing at all, which she supposed was dangerously close to the truth. She swallowed hard, determined not to think about her illness. At least, not for as long as this man's strong arms enclosed her in warm heat and solid comfort.

His dark eyebrows slashed down over impossibly green eyes as he stared at her, something akin to wonder on his handsome features.

"Christabel," he said.

The name resonated with familiarity and longing, sending a rush of heat to pool low in her belly. *Damn*. His voice was low and silky, the kind of voice made for whispering sweet nothings in a girl's ear as his body pressed down on top of hers, his fingers touching every inch of bare flesh, his cock—

God.

She stopped herself before that particular fantasy could get her into way more trouble than she was obviously already in. But oh, how she wished it had been her name he'd murmured with such reverence.

Amy cleared her throat. Her tongue snaked out to wet her parched lips, and she saw his gaze follow the movement. A blush snaked up her cheeks. "Err... look, I don't know who you think I am, or where we are, but you must have me confused with someone else."

His brows furrowed. "You do not know who you are?" There was no hint of mockery in his slightly accented voice, just a startling concern.

She laughed, a high pitched giggle that sounded forced, even to her. "I know exactly who I am. My name is Amy Conrad. I'm here on vacation." She lifted her head from where it rested on his shoulder and peered around her. This wasn't the island where she'd rented her small coble. The long dock that had lined the edge of shore was missing, and the merchants and throngs of overexcited tourists were also conspicuously absent. "Wherever *here* is."

"I do not know the true name of this island, but you are home."

She took in the long stretch of golden sand, the palm trees gently swaying in the breeze, the endless span of turquoise ocean. "This is your home?" she asked, unable to disguise the wonder in her voice. "You live here?"

"For now." She thought he'd say more, so she listened to the sound of his footsteps falling on the soft sand as silence stretched between them.

Then, when it became clear he had no intention of either explaining how she got here or putting her down, she tried again. "You don't have to carry me."

To demonstrate, she wriggled in his grasp, hoping his grip would slip and he'd place her on her feet. Instead, his fingers dug into her skin and he only held her closer to his firm, muscular chest.

His very bare chest.

That realization made a tiny whimper slip out between her lips. Ripples of sublime longing made her tremble. She clamped her mouth shut firmly, hoping he hadn't heard.

"Same Christabel." The strange statement gave no indication whether or not he was aware of her lapse in judgment. "Less clothes, but definitely the same Christabel. Still squirming and fighting to get free."

"Yeah, well, I can walk on my own."

"You always could."

She blew out a deep breath, considering his words. She could detect no obvious sarcasm in his tone. "You still don't seem to understand. I'm not who you think I am."

His full lips quirked upward in a teasing smile. "Perhaps you're not who you think you are."

She opened her mouth to reply, then closed it again. The man was clearly not all there. He spoke in oddly accented English, and the

cadence of his words was slow and rich, as though infused with endless patience.

In fact, everything about him, everything about this place, made her think that she'd stepped into another universe, one where the past and the future collided, where time stood still and she no longer had to race against the clock with every breath.

Amy gritted her teeth, trying to rid herself of that wildly romantic notion. What had gotten into her? Before she'd embarked on this adventure, she'd been practical, rational. Yet ever since she'd booked the ticket for the cruise, every logical, level-headed impulse she possessed seemed to fly out the window along with the last of her savings.

She looked up. The man hadn't taken his eyes from hers. She dropped her gaze to his luscious mouth, noticing it was only a feather's breadth away. So close, in fact, that if she'd as much as extended her tongue, she could sweep it across his bottom lip and taste the silky smooth surface of his mouth.

Ah, what the hell. If she was going to give in to her base urges and wild flights of fancy in the time she had left, she was going to do it all the way.

Without giving the tempestuous compulsion another thought, she wrapped her hand around the man's neck, pulled him down to her and lifted her head to meet his mouth halfway.

Their lips brushed against each other, a mere whisper of a touch, and for a moment, time and space really did stand still. Amy's heart beat fast and the soft roar of the ocean rumbled in her ears, but she could feel nothing aside from the intense heat emanating from the man holding her.

His muscles coiled, tensing at the contact she'd initiated. As she opened her mouth and allowed her tongue to delve between his lips, she briefly wondered whether he'd respond in kind, or if he'd simply drop

her to the ground. He hadn't made a move to reciprocate. Embarrassment swept through her. She was a heartbeat away from pulling back and attempting to apologize when he groaned into her mouth and yanked her hard against him.

His mouth opened to hers and his tongue thrust deep inside, seeking, searching, tasting. Relaxing into the deep, endless kiss, she tangled her fingers in the soft curls at the nape of his neck. The strength of his body awed her, and the intensity in his kiss sent her thoughts reeling.

Cream flooded her pussy at the wave after wave of arousal the swipe of his tongue against hers sent into her body. He smelled like the sea, slightly salty, musky and natural. His warm, intoxicating mouth tasted the same way. She couldn't get enough.

He broke away first. Somehow, she'd known he would.

Amy let out an involuntary sigh and gathered her courage to look at him. She wouldn't apologize for what had just happened. Sure, she'd only just met him, but there was nothing forbidden about what they'd shared unless he was married, or engaged, or otherwise spoken for. She bit her lower lip and closed her eyes, feeling foolish.

His sigh seemed to carry a lifetime's worth of pent-up frustration. "Christabel."

There it was again, that name she couldn't seem to escape. She'd first heard it on the coble, just before she'd plunged into the icy depths of the ocean.

The coble!

She sat up in his arms, suddenly alert. This time she must have squirmed a little harder than she'd intended, because she felt her heel connect with something soft. He grunted and loosened his hold, and she slid out of his arms to land on her feet.

"I'm sorry," she stammered, lifting her hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun and stare out at the shoreline. "I had a little coble.

Where is it?"

"A what?"

"A boat. The last thing I remember is being in it. Well, I was...and then I wasn't." She clenched her fists at her sides, knowing how stupid that sounded and unable to do any better.

She hesitated, then turned back to him. Her breath hitched and her heart beat wildly in her chest. Blinking hard, she rubbed the heels of her palms against her eyes, then opened them once more. The view hadn't changed.

The man who'd carried her, whose body she'd been pressed up against for the past twenty minutes, was remarkably, unabashedly, naked.

The lean lines of his deeply tanned body made her mouth go dry. She could still feel the lingering heat everywhere his solid flesh had touched her.

He looked like he'd been sculpted in the image of a Greek god, all firm planes and solid muscle, each dip and valley a work of art in its own right. She knew she should look away, but she couldn't. Her gaze was irrevocably drawn to his comfortable, slightly spread-legged stance, to the dark patch of hair at the apex of his thighs, to the erect cock jutting upward from the mass of dark curls.

Sharp pressure mounted the entrance to her cunt, making her inner walls press tightly together. God, but he was gorgeous. *It* was gorgeous, she corrected herself. His rod, long and thick, thrust out boldly in front of his flat stomach. Blue veins snaked along the pale shaft, toward the shiny, dusky tip. Before she could catch herself, she licked her lips, the urge to bend down and taste it almost too much to bear.

It took all the self-control she didn't know she possessed to tear her gaze away from the magnificent display of masculinity he offered her. Fighting against the blush she knew had to be turning her cheeks a very

unflattering shade of crimson, she gave him a shaky smile. "I think it's about time you told me your name, don't you?"

He frowned. "You do not know me."

It wasn't a question, but she felt compelled to answer it anyway. "Despite what happened a few minutes ago, we only just met. I've never seen you before in my life."

He squared his broad shoulders, looking like he was about to argue, then seemed to think better of it. "I'm—"

Simon.

"Simon Whittington." The smile he gave her didn't quite reach his eyes.

Amy groaned, realizing he'd said his name a split-second after the answer had already rung so clearly through her mind.

Unnerved, she wrapped her arms around her body as though to shield herself against the wispy breeze floating in from the sea. Or perhaps to protect herself from the man standing two feet away.

The weather was relatively calm, but chaos reigned inside her mind.

This trip had seemed like such a good idea when she'd booked it. After all, what did she have to lose?

But nothing about this place, about this man, had been on the brochure the travel agent had so cheerfully handed her. The woman had been polite, but insistent. "Desirata is one of those places you have to see before you die," she'd told Amy.

What she'd taken for a sign at the time now sounded like an auspicious omen.

How had she gotten here? And just what, exactly, had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER 4

England, 1202 A.D.

"May I ask you something?"

Christabel's soft whisper traveled on the night breeze through the darkness, her silky voice sending a shiver of awareness down Simon's spine. He'd thought her asleep, and had been listening to her rhythmic breathing for the past hour, letting the calm sounds soothe his raw nerves.

"Speak." The word came out harsher than he'd intended, and he instantly regretted it.

If he'd startled her, she gave no indication. Instead, she turned to face him, a dark shape among darker shadows. Only her eyes glittered in the soft beams of moonlight drifting down through the trees.

"Why do you hate him so?"

He didn't have to ask who she meant. "He took something from me.

Something very precious.

"Something, or someone?" she asked softly.

Simon closed his eyes. Damn the woman for being so perceptive.

She'd been his prisoner for weeks, and if he'd thought the situation would become more bearable as time passed, he'd been sorely mistaken. He'd had no real plan when he'd kidnapped her, but Simon prided himself on his intellect more than his brawn. He knew he'd come up with a suitable tactic, and he'd even managed to convince himself he wouldn't be deterred by her fluttering eyelashes or innocent smile.

Yet so far, the only thing he'd managed to accomplish was to make Christabel Foxe the object of his every thought, his every desire. In the beginning, she'd fought him at each turn, her sharp wit and sharper tongue scathing him with countless wry retorts. Then, as the days turned into weeks, something changed. A companionable camaraderie gave way to a grudging friendship. Christabel's eyes no longer glowed with hatred when she looked at him, and that unsettled him more than her fear, or her well-placed scorn.

As they traveled through winding back roads and kept away from civilization, Simon had freed her from her constraints. Though she'd had plenty of opportunity to run, especially in the black of night, she'd never attempted to do so. That puzzled and confused Simon more than anything else she'd done.

And she'd done plenty. From cooking their meals, such as they were, to washing his clothes in a river as they passed its shallow banks, every kind gesture made her that much harder to understand. If she'd meant to throw him off guard with her behavior, she'd certainly succeeded. Simon was used to being in control of every situation, but with Christabel, he was completely off balance, out of his element. He never knew what to expect from one moment to the next, and he feared his growing feelings for her more than he feared the earl's men, who

were always one step behind them.

Henry Caxton had wasted no time mounting a rescue party after he'd discovered his future bride missing. He'd sent a handful of men to seek Christabel out, and Simon had no doubt he'd given them orders to kill her kidnaper on sight.

"Someone," he admitted at last, scrubbing his hand over his face. "My sister."

"What happened?"

Simon gritted his teeth. He hadn't mentioned Bronwyn to Christabel before. Not once. He wasn't sure he ever wanted to.

"What do you know of the earl?" he asked instead, bringing the focus back to Christabel.

"My father knows more of him than I do. They were childhood friends. I was promised as his bride the day I was born."

A muscle twitched in Simon's jaw. "You could have said no."

She laughed, the silvery sound drifting through the quiet woods. "Could I have? Truly?"

He thought about the women at the king's court, about the way their fathers possessed their minds, bodies and souls only to hand them over to their husbands when they reached marrying age. "Perhaps not," he admitted grudgingly. Still, the thought of the earl's hands all over Christabel's nubile, naked body revolted him and awakened every possessive instinct in him.

He raised his head and propped it on his hand, balancing his weight on his elbow. He couldn't make her out clearly in the dark shadows, but he knew she watched him as intently as he watched her.

"Brownyn had only seen sixteen summers when the earl became obsessed with her. I knew of him, having seen him at court. I had even seen him watching her a time or two, but thought nothing of it. I should have. If I had..."

Christabel laid her hand gently on his arm. "Your sister?"

Simon nodded, though he knew she couldn't see him. "He followed her, night after night. She told our mother that someone had been trailing her footsteps, but no one listened. Many people wandered through town as she did, going about their business. And then, after weeks of pursuing her, he caught her." A lump formed in his throat, and he swallowed it down before continuing. "He took her somewhere, I do not know where, though I doubt he would have taken her to his home. Somewhere dark, Bronywn told our mother. There, he violated her for hours, again and again. She screamed, but no one came." This time, his voice broke, and he didn't try to stop it. "No one came," he repeated, as much to himself as to Christabel.

"I am so sorry," she whispered, her voice shaking with the same emotion resonating in his own. "I did not know."

"How could you have?" Simon let his head fall back. He stared up at the thick foliage above, not really seeing it. "I should have been there, but I was away, on a campaign at the king's side. When Bronwyn returned home that morning, bloody and broken, barely able to walk, our mother sent word to me. I came as quickly as I could. By the time I arrived home, Bronwyn was dead. She died of grief, of shame, of desperation. She refused to eat or drink. She only slept...until one morning, she didn't wake again."

"But the king must have—"

"What? Renounce the Earl of Stowbridge because of one dying girl's fevered mumblings?"

"Surely," she continued, intense and unrelenting, "you must have told him she had named her attacker."

Simon's harsh laugh held no humor. "I did. And the king graciously granted me leave to return home and mourn my sister."

Silence stretched on between them, heavy with grief. Simon heard Christabel rise from her pallet and walk over to him, her footsteps crunching softly on dried leaves. When she lowered herself at his side

and pressed the length of her body against his, Simon stiffened.

"So you took me. For revenge." Her words held no accusation, no hint of recrimination. Just quiet understanding.

Her fingertips floated over his cheek, his jaw, her delicate caress making his breath catch in his throat. He captured her wrist in his hand and held it aloft, away from his skin. "What I did was wrong. I should never have involved you."

"What you did was brave, though I admit, more than a little foolish." Her teasing tone lightened her harsh words. "The earl will surely kill you when he finds you."

"Stealing a woman on the eve of her wedding is not brave. It is cowardly. I should have faced the earl on the battlefield, sword in hand."

"The earl is an excellent swordsman," she countered. "He would surely have killed you."

Simon snorted. "I appreciate the vote of confidence, M'Lady."

He could almost see the rosy blush creeping up her cheeks as she ducked her head slightly. The scent of honey blossoms that still clung to her floated to his nostrils, hardening his shaft.

"I have never seen you fight, but I have seen the earl in battle. He is most remarkable to watch."

"Nevertheless, I now know what I must do. Once you have been safely returned to your father's home, I shall challenge the earl—"

"You mean to return me?" she asked, interrupting him. Was that apprehension he heard in her voice?

Simon swallowed hard. A vision slammed into his mind, a clear image of Christabel, naked, arms stretched out in welcome as she drew him into her sweet, warm body. He shook his head to clear the passionate figment of his imagination, but the thought lingered, as did her scent, conspiring to make him lose control. What was it about Christabel Foxe that got under his skin, inside his thoughts, into his

most intimate fantasies?

"I intend to make sure you are safe where you belong," he said.

She rose quickly, and before he could comprehend what she was doing, she tossed a leg on either side of his waist and straddled him, her dark eyes boring down into hers. "I belong right here."

Simon groaned. Instinctively, his body arched upward, his cock seeking the intimate flesh at the apex of her thighs through the thick layers of her long skirts.

"You do not know of what you speak. I am not-"

She silenced him by pressing a finger to his lips. "If you mean to return me, I have no more time to waste. I know you, Simon Whittington. I know your soul. It is pure and righteous, driven to madness by the actions of a demon. A demon I am to wed. I do not want him in my bed. I want you. Only you."

Her words shattered his heart, slamming into his groin with a desperate, potent power that drove his arousal to a heightened state of sensation. And then there were no more words, there was nothing to describe how he felt. The lingering doubts fled his mind, as did his protests.

With trembling fingers, she reached for his shirt and lifted it over his head. He helped her by lifting himself off the pallet, then pulled the material of her heavy skirts aside. She shook her head. "Let me."

He watched as she climbed to her feet and shed her clothes. In moments, the rapid motions of her hands flying over her body to discard the thick material from her body left her bare to his sight. As though even the moon intended to watch, it ducked out from beneath a cloud. Christabel's pale skin gleamed like porcelain under the bright shaft of moonlight, and he couldn't help but drink in the sight of her.

His gaze raked over her small breasts and the pink-tipped nipples that hardened under his scrutiny. Her waist was narrow, her belly flat, her hips slightly flared. She covered her mound with her hand,

suddenly shy, but he could still see the dark thatch of hair that hid the intimate secrets of her body. His rod pounded and pulsed with barely contained arousal.

In a flash, Simon tossed his breeches to the side, allowing his cock to spring free from its constraints. A sticky bead of wetness dripped from the tip, landing on his stomach and making him shiver.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

She didn't hesitate. "Oh, yes."

"Straddle me again," he instructed. When she crouched over his shaft, he stopped her. "No, on your feet. Like so."

He showed her how to stand so her wet, fragrant sex was in line with his mouth as he sat on the pallet. She trembled as she positioned herself just as he'd asked. Her scent was intoxicating, female and naturally musky. It made it impossible to think.

Thought be damned.

He allowed his instincts to lead, and he reached between her legs with both hands, dislodging her fingers from her mound, baring her lush, pink inner lips to his eyes, his hands, his tongue.

The first intimate taste was exhilarating. He lapped at the moist juices that drenched her core, holding her sex lips apart with one hand while two fingers of the other probed her pussy. She wriggled as though to escape the intrusion, but he held her firmly as he buried his tongue in her depths. He never wanted to stop licking her, tasting her, feeling her.

Christabel moaned and tangled her fingers in his hair, holding him tightly to her body as he sucked deeply and thrust his tongue inside her sweet passage. He alternated his speed, fast and slow, hard and gentle, until he thought of nothing but giving her pleasure, making her come.

When she bucked against him and cried out, he knew she'd reached the pinnacle of ecstasy, and his heart swelled with masculine pride.

His shaft threatened to burst and spill his seed, but before he could

take himself in hand, Christabel freed herself from his grasp. Her breath came in harsh pants and she swayed slightly on her feet.

"No more," she said. "No more."

Simon shook his head, dismayed. "I am sorry if I hurt you."

"No." She smiled, and the brilliance of her grin made his breath catch in his throat. "That is not what I meant."

Before he could ask her to clarify, she squatted down and reached for his throbbing cock. Her slender fingers wrapped around it, and the sensation streaming through his body nearly made him come. Gritting his teeth, he willed his weak flesh to obey, but he wasn't sure just how long he'd be able to hold out.

He needn't have worried. She guided him inside her with an expert touch, and for a moment, he feared she'd done this before. Many, many times before.

And then he felt it. The barrier of tissue that proved she'd been with no other. It impeded his progress and he clenched his teeth until his jaw hurt, forcing himself to slow. His shaft broke through the obstacle and he pressed his mouth to hers, hard, capturing her startled cry inside.

I am sorry. Oh, God, I am so sorry.

He repeated the words in his head like a mantra, as though she could hear him and understand his apology was meant for everything he'd put her through. He never wanted to cause her pain again. Never for as long as he lived.

He waited while she adjusted to the feel of him inside her, his tongue delving into her mouth with gentle strokes. She sat motionless for a heartbeat, and then her hips shifted slightly and she responded to the kiss with a deep, soulful swipe of her own tongue.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes."

She set the rhythm, faster than he expected as she impaled herself on his cock again and again. Her cream and virgin blood coated his shaft, lubricating it, allowing her to slide up and down with firm

strokes.

She arched her back, her mass of dark hair tumbling down over her graceful shoulders in cascading waves. She looked like a goddess.

His goddess.

Blood raced through his head, pounded in his cock. Consumed by the urgency of the moment, he relinquished the tenuous grip he had on his control. With one last trembling thrust, he spilled himself inside her, his release thrumming through his veins with the force of a summer storm, frantic and relentless. Christabel joined him, her own climax ripping another cry from her throat, clenching her muscles, making her inner walls squeeze down on his spasming shaft.

Tremors shook her body as she collapsed against him, her arms wrapped around him, her nails gently raking his back. "I love you, Simon Whittington. Forever and ever. You will never be rid of me."

His heart clenched in protest, knowing she was wrong. Tomorrow, he'd make sure she was returned to her family where she belonged.

As though sensing his thoughts, she cupped his face in her hands and pressed a warm, desperate kiss to his lips.

"Never," she whispered fervently. "Never."

CHAPTER 5

Through a fog of dreamy arousal, Amy felt the man's mouth reaching for the swollen flesh between her legs. The swipe of his tongue made her knees buckle, and she clamped her hands tightly against his head, fighting to keep her limbs from giving way under her.

The man gave no sign of slowing. His lips, tongue and fingers worked their sensual magic on her pussy, taking her closer and closer to the edge of ecstasy with every stroke.

He didn't just lick her. He bit, nuzzled and sucked on her swollen labia, then inserted two fingers inside her tight channel and filled her cunt, thrusting inside again and again and again, until the sweet torture he inflicted on her body became a dizzying blur of sensation.

And then, just when she thought she'd begin to sob from the pleasure, he sent her crashing in a spiraling wave of release that wrought the breath from her lungs and left her panting. Swat soaked her skin and her muscles continued to spasm while the pulsing, frenzied

furor of her bliss slowly drowned out the last remnants of her dream.

Sunlight danced over Amy's face, its bright beams not yet powerful enough first thing in the morning to leave a scorching impression on her fair skin.

She blinked her eyes open and stretched languorously. Her sated body responded, pliant and yielding, without any of the bone-shattering pain that usually came with such flexible movements.

It was the fresh air, she told herself, not for the first time since arriving on the island. The salty ocean breeze and the lack of carcinogens in the atmosphere agreed with her. It was a convenient excuse, and one that didn't hold up under close scrutiny, but she refused to analyze her newfound form to any greater depth.

She preferred to analyze her dream, instead. Although she could only remember small details and vague images alongside the overwhelming resonance of her orgasm, she knew Simon had been in it.

If she hadn't felt his dream hands and mouth on her, she might have thought she'd only pictured him naked again and had come simply from the sheer breathtaking sight alone.

The fact that he'd been naked in her fantasy didn't surprise her, considering that the man seemed to own no clothes at all. Yesterday, after Amy had miraculously arrived on *his* island, as Simon insisted on calling it, he'd shown her around, pointing out natural fauna and even a shipwreck off the coast, while Amy did everything in her power to admire the gorgeous natural scenery he indicated instead of the most stunning example of a male specimen she'd ever laid eyes on.

She supposed she really shouldn't have been surprised that her imagination had taken such a sexy turn. The sight of him had aroused her beyond belief, and it had taken all her willpower to keep from throwing herself at him, ripping off the tiny white bikini she wore, and impaling herself on his luscious cock.

But somehow, she'd resisted. As evening fell, he'd taken her back to his shelter, a place that looked more like a cottage than the makeshift Survivor-like habitat she'd expected, and had tucked her into a silk-draped bed before kissing her chastely on the forehead and wishing her a good night.

How could any woman dream about orchids and ladybugs after a day like that?

Amy bit her lower lip, remembering the way she'd taken pleasure in stripping for him in her intimate fantasy. She'd stepped out of her long, flowing skirts and unlaced a tight, dark bodice before slipping the thick garments off her body.

She shook her head. The wispy bits and pieces of her recollection made no sense at all. Why would she dream about such strange clothes? She didn't even own a long skirt, much less one as voluminous as that one had been. And the last time she'd laced up a corset of any kind had been in her last year of high school, when she'd played Juliet for the drama class play.

Amy sat up and ran a hand through her disheveled mass of hair, trying to smooth down some of the more unruly clumps while attempting to make sense of the remaining hazy images.

There'd been a forest. And moonlight streaming through trees to illuminate the sleek lines of Simon's taut muscles, his flat abs, his firm, thick cock. Heat settled in her pussy, pounding incessantly as the delectable image swept through her mind.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the headboard. Made of solid wood, it supported her weight, creaking only slightly when she pressed up against it. She remembered what it had felt like to touch Simon's cock in her dream. Her fingers had curved around the thick shaft. The weight of it had throbbed in her palm, hot and hard and sleek, demanding her complete attention.

"Thinking of me, I hope."

Amy sat up abruptly and instinctively crossed her arms over her chest to hide the firm peaks of her beaded nipples.

"I—I didn't hear you come in," she stammered. "You really need to install a door."

He leaned against a thick wooden post that held up the gracefully sweeping arch of the thatched roof and appeared to think about her suggestion for a moment, then shook his head. "That would require walls, and I rather like the view." He narrowed his eyes, his gaze sweeping over her. "It's breathtaking."

Heat crept up Amy's cheeks, and she knew her face had to be bright as a summer tomato. She ducked her head, allowing her thick mass of hair to hide at least some of her embarrassment from view. "Clothes, too. You could use some clothes."

Simon lifted a broad shoulder. "I have clothes. I just see no use for them."

She gaped at him, all pretense forgotten. "What about modesty? That's a useful trait, you know."

He grinned, showing perfect white teeth. The scruffy layer of stubble almost hid the dimple in his right cheek.

Almost, but not quite.

Amy nearly groaned. He was too gorgeous, too incredibly sexy to be real. Men like him didn't simply hang out on deserted islands. They cruised down highways in their fancy sports cars with the top down and made regular appearances at the hottest night clubs in big cities, going home with a different woman every night of the week. And they definitely didn't look at *her* that way.

"Maybe where you come from," he said slowly, taking a step closer to the bed, the only piece of furniture dominating the large room. A hand-carved desk and a number of wooden sculptures—including one that resembled Amy to a disturbing degree—stood about the place, glowing in the abundance of natural light. "But here," he continued, "in

the middle of nowhere, with just the ocean and a monkey for company, clothes only tend to get in the way."

He stood close enough to touch. She'd have only to reach out her hand and she could brush her fingertips over the six-pack ripple of his abs, and lower still, through the irresistible curls that so perfectly displayed the hard length of his cock.

Amy swallowed hard, bunching her hands into fists at her sides to keep from touching him. He'd been in a state of almost continual hardness since she'd arrived. Was that because she aroused him, or simply because he hadn't seen a woman in a while? She decided she didn't really want to know.

"A monkey?" she asked, desperately hoping to turn the conversation to a safer subject, one that wouldn't lead them down a sensual path. "There are monkeys here?"

Simon sighed. "Just one. His name is Alric, and he's a loud-mouthed primate. He says he's one of a kind. Honestly, I don't doubt it."

"I see. You have a...talking monkey." She raised an eyebrow, wondering why that didn't sound as absurd as it should have. Ever since arriving here the day before, everything she thought she knew about the way the world worked had been turned upside down.

Frankly, she rather liked it.

"Come with me, Christabel," Simon said, extending a hand. His striking green eyes looked haunted, and there was an edge of torment to his voice that hadn't been there earlier. "There's something I didn't show you yesterday. Something you should see."

Amy eyed him wearily, debating with herself for only a moment before placing her hand in his. Simon's palm was warm, and she wrapped her fingers around it, allowing the jolt of electricity that ran through her bloodstream at the intimate contact to burrow deep inside her pussy and make her inner muscles clench in desperate anticipation.

She still wore her bikini, and the bottoms were damp with her cum. The thin material clung to her pussy lips. The knowledge should have been embarrassing, but it only served to arouse her further. She shot Simon a glance beneath lowered lashes, hoping he'd gaze at the stiff peaks of her nipples and then lower still at the obvious proof of her desire, but he kept his brilliant green eyes fixed firmly on hers.

"My name is not Christabel," she said as they walked out of his cozy shelter. "I tried to tell you that yesterday, but you don't seem to want to listen."

He tightened his grip on her hand. "Maybe it's you who doesn't want to face the truth."

"What truth? That I climbed in a coble, found a conch, and somehow ended up on a deserted island with a man who refuses to wear clothes? Wait, on second thought, if I'm dreaming, don't wake me up. The truth couldn't possibly be this good."

He chuckled, the warm, sensual sound sliding over her skin, making her shiver despite the pleasant heat of the sun on her back. "You will understand. When you're ready."

She expected him to say more, but he pressed his lips together and left those cryptic words hanging in the air between them. Amy glanced at his sharply defined cheeks, the straight line of his arrogant nose, the firm angle of his jaw, and felt her breath hitch in her throat. If this entire experience wasn't so surreal, she might give in to more than her urge to kiss him.

Maybe it's exactly because this whole thing is so surreal that I should... What do I have to lose?

Amy stumbled, the thought taking her completely by surprise. It made so much sense, she couldn't image why she didn't put things into perspective sooner. She was on a deserted island with the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. For the past twenty-four hours, she'd suffered none of the usual agonizing pain that came with her condition. And the

man beside her refused to tuck that gorgeous cock into any kind of polite, modest covering!

What more did she need? A glowing neon sign with an arrow pointing straight to Simon's crotch?

"Wait," she said, digging her heels into the sand before she could change her mind. "Before we go any farther, there's something I really need to do."

"What-"

She stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his, hard, cutting off the rest of his words. He groaned into her mouth and murmured something that sounded like *Christabel*, but Amy ignored it. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer, pressing her body against his, rubbing her breasts against his chest. Her nipples beaded and rasped against the material of her bikini.

Suddenly, she needed to be free of the constraint, yearned to be as naked as he was. Unwinding her arms from his neck for only a moment, she reached behind her and unclasped the bra, letting its straps fall down her arms. Her swimsuit bottoms quickly followed, leaving her as naked as he was.

Her mouth never left his. Instead, she deepened the kiss, plunging her tongue inside his warm, willing mouth, taking what she'd so desperately wanted since the moment she'd laid eyes on him.

"More," she whispered when he broke away.

"You're sure?" he asked, bending his head to nuzzle at her throat. "I have waited for you for so long, I can wait longer if you need time..."

"Time?" An almost hysterical laugh burst forth from her lips. Oh, if he only knew how little precious time she actually had. "No, I need no more time."

She closed her fingers around his cock and he shuddered beneath her touch, arching his hips so the tip of his rod prodded her belly. A slick, wet drop of pre-cum slid over her skin, and she smeared it over

her stomach using the head of his shaft.

"You have learned a thing or two," he whispered in her ear, his cock pulsing in her hand, "since the last time."

"There's been no other time," she corrected him. "You must be thinking of the last woman to land on the island."

His tongue followed its own path down the side of her throat and into the valley between her bare breasts. He paused to suck at a beaded nipple before replying. "There has never been anyone else, Christabel. Only you. Always you. Even in my dreams, those long nights I waited for you to come back to me, to forgive me. It's always been you."

Amy moaned as a shiver of sensation swirled low in her belly, sending another jolt of heat to flood her pussy. She needed his cock deep inside her, sliding between the swollen folds of her labia to fill her channel and take her over the edge into ecstasy as only he could.

It wasn't as though he needed to be sane to provide a great orgasm, she thought as she arched her back and allowed him greater access to her sensitive nipples. He could call her anything he wanted, just as long as he kept touching her that way.

Even as she thought it, she knew it wasn't true. It made no sense, but she wanted Simon to want her, Amy Conrad, not some fantasy woman he dreamed about in the wee hours of the night while stroking his cock. She wanted to be the cause of his every moan, every pleasant twitch of his cock as he came, not some faceless girl who'd probably broken his heart long ago.

"No more talking, okay?" Amy said softly. "Just let me feel you. I need you inside me."

Simon's smile broadened. His hand quested between her thighs, spreading them open as he flicked the hard nub of her clit with his thumb. Her knees buckled at the intense pleasure streaming through her body.

"Anything you want," he promised.

She slid her hand down and cupped his testicles, feeling the weight of his sac as she cradled the sensitive flesh in her hand and squeezed lightly. He sucked in a breath and clamped his mouth around a nipple. His fingers found the entrance to her pussy and delved inside, teasing, nudging, flicking, until she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Please," she whimpered, hating the desperate edge in her voice. "Now."

He stepped back and Amy allowed herself one more lingering look at his proud shaft. It was hard and ready, as ready as it had been since the moment she'd first seen it. The foreskin was retracted, bearing the shiny head in silent invitation.

Before she could ask again, Simon lifted her off her feet in one sudden motion. Instinctively, she spread her thighs on either side of him.. He cupped her ass and guided her gently where he wanted her, positioning the entrance of her pussy gently against the swollen tip of his cock.

Simon leaned back against the sturdy trunk of a palm tree and she wrapped herself around him before plunging down on the thick length of his solid rod.

She gasped as he entered her, the intrusion filling her, stretching her, satisfying her with a potent completion she'd never thought possible. His cock was hard and hot, throbbing inside her, and as she began to glide up and down the shaft, Simon pressed kisses to the top of her breasts, worshipping the mounds with his mouth, tongue and teeth.

Amy clung to him. Shivering with delight, she answered his movements with frenzied motions of her own. His fingers dug into her ass, pulling her closer. "Christabel," he breathed, and she gritted her teeth, determined to drown out his voice and lose herself in the feel of his cock inside her willing, eager pussy.

He drew back, then plunged into her, gently at first, then harder and

faster. Amy bit down on his shoulder, so hard she could see the imprint of teeth when she drew back.

"You like that?" he asked, and she grunted her approval, not trusting herself to utter a coherent sentence.

He fucked her thoroughly, mercilessly, devouring her body and soul with every thrust of his thick shaft, pulling and pushing inside her until she could no longer tell where he ended and she began. Their lovemaking turned fierce, culminating in wild cries and fast, aching motions that left them both panting and clingingly desperately to one another.

When Simon lost control, Amy went with him. He came in swift, sudden spurts, his seed coating her pussy even as her inner muscles clenched around him while she keened her pleasure into the warm morning air. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, leaving sharp streaks down his skin. She came with great, heaving gasps. Tears stung the back of her eyes, though why she should cry at a time like this, she didn't know...

They held each other for a long time, Amy resting her head in the hollow between his throat and collarbone until her legs stiffened and she could no longer feel her toes. At long last, Simon lowered her to the ground. Without a word, he pressed another heartbreakingly gentle kiss to her forehead, took her hand, and led her down the long stretch of beach.

She swallowed hard, her head reeling from the strength of her orgasm. Biting down on her lower lip, she snuck another glance at his magnificent body. He had a new bruise on his shoulder where she'd bitten him, and a slick sheen of sweat glistened off his broad chest.

Even flaccid, his cock was long and thick, bouncing with each one of his long strides. Amy wet her suddenly dry lips with the tip of her tongue, her pussy fluttering in pure female recognition.

"I had to show you this." His voice jolted her out of her sensual

thoughts, and she looked up, grateful for the interruption. She'd been moments away from dropping to her knees and taking his cock in her mouth.

"What?" She angled her head for a better look, but she could see nothing but the infinite golden sand and the turquoise ocean stretched out around them.

Simon placed both hands on her shoulders and turned her slightly so she faced north. She began to shrug, still not spotting anything out of the ordinary, until he pointed to the far end of the beach. She followed the direction he indicated, and her heart skipped a beat.

There, dragged up on shore, was her coble, looking as small and shabby as it had when she'd first rented it.

"My boat," she said, still not quite able to believe her eyes. "How did it get here?"

Simon sighed. "I do not know. Nor do I understand the implications of its presence. But I had to show you, because I swore to allow you to make your own choices...a long time ago." She heard the tremor in his voice, felt him stiffen behind her.

"Don't go," he said, the raw need in each word tearing at her heart. "Don't go where I can't follow."

CHAPTER 6

England, 1202 A.D.

Every moment that passed since Simon had spilled himself inside Christabel's sweet feminine warmth was excruciating agony. It felt as though divine forces conspired to punish him for his many sins, not least of all the sin of lust, of taking a maiden's innocence outside the protective sanctity of marriage.

And still, even knowing he'd sentenced his soul to eternal damnation, and hers too, he couldn't bring himself to regret what had happened between them.

Yet what could Simon offer a woman like Christabel Foxe? She, the daughter of a duke held in high esteem by the king, and he, a fallen knight no better than the lowest criminal. What kind of life would she have by his side? He could picture her now, running barefoot through the woods after him while he foraged and hunted for their next meal,

her clothes tattered and torn, her belly swelled ripe with his child.

Simon sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. It was ludicrous to even entertain the absurd idea. Christabel deserved all the wealth and comfort he couldn't give her.

Even if that wealth and comfort comes at the generous hand of the Earl of Stowbridge?

The voice in his head mocked him, sneering at his impotence to avenge his sister's needless death. Whatever happened, Christabel would not meet Bronywn's fate. Unlike Simon's sister, Christabel had been promised to Henry in holy matrimony, the arrangement blessed by King John himself. The worst her destiny had in store for her was a lifetime of cold nights at her vile husband's side.

He shuddered with revulsion at the thought of Henry's hands on Christabel's smooth skin, his fingers digging into her flesh, his cock—

"You are not asleep," Christabel said, burrowing closer to him under the blanket he'd draped over them in the night. "I can almost hear the thoughts churning in your mind."

"This day holds new beginnings for us," he told her, trying hard to resist the urge to drape his arm over her naked body, cup her breast and pull her closer to him.

"I thought we did that last night. Created a new beginning, I mean." She stirred against him, her soft curves reawakening sensual, forbidden longings deep in his groin.

Simon gritted his teeth. "What happened by the light of the moon cannot be allowed to happen again."

She chuckled, the silvery, seductive sound making him tremble with barely contained arousal. Damn the woman for having such a soulstirring effect on him. It would make what he needed to do much harder than it had to be.

"Fine, then," she said, teasing him as much with her playful words as with the way her bottom wriggled against his rapidly stiffening cock.

"No more lovemaking until the moon shows its face again. But once that happens, Sir Knight, you are mine, and no force in England can stop me from ravishing you."

Simon groaned, summoned up every ounce of willpower he possessed, and leapt up from the warm comfort of the makeshift pallet and the carnal delights Christabel offered. He reached for his breeches and pulled them on, grateful for a way to contain the stiff proof of his excitement.

"Enough banter. It is past mid-morning. We must be going."

Christabel raised herself to a sitting position. Her dark, sleepmussed hair tumbled over her shoulders. She pulled the blanket over her chest, covering the luscious mounds of her breasts. He deserved that, he knew, yet he couldn't help the pang of regret that swept through him at her scowl.

"And just what has gotten into you so early this day? I have never known you to be so scathing before you have had your morning meal."

Just then, his stomach rumbled, reminding him that last night's efforts had not gone unnoticed by any part of his body. He crossed the distance to a nearby copse of trees where he'd harnessed his mount the night before. The horse neighed its displeasure as Simon approached, and he soothed it with a quick pat on the rump before rummaging through his sacks.

He found a hard piece of bread, checked it for mold, and, when he found none, tossed it to Christabel. She caught it in one hand as she smoothed down her skirts. The garment had begun to fray at the edges, Simon noted with a frown, and stains marred its surface, turning the pale green a muddy moss color.

"Eat," he commanded. "We must move on."

"You have already said that," she reminded him as she gathered up the bedclothes, rolled them up and placed them in one of the sacks. "But you have yet to tell me where we are going."

"Not far." He glanced through the trees at the barely visible road in the distance. "Not far at all."

Foggy daylight flittered through the overhead canopy. Morning dew clung to Simon's leather shoes. He'd long ago abandoned his chain mail surcoat in favor of a dark linen tunic that would allow him to blend with the surrounding woods, but he refused to part with the heavy sword hanging from his belt, and the weapon clanked with each step.

Christabel walked a few steps behind him, sullenly keeping quiet. He preferred it that way, he told himself as they neared the road. He'd grown tired of her voice, so upbeat and cheerfully resonant at all hours of the day and night. Blessed silence would be preferable to her chatter.

He clenched his fists at his sides, fighting to ignore the voice in his head that screamed he was being foolish. He needed no such lectures today. Not when he knew exactly what he had to do to make things right.

"You will go no farther," he told her when they reached the road. At this hour, it was still clear, but it would not stay that way for long. He'd known Henry's men had been close behind them almost since the beginning of this forsaken journey. Now, the voyage had come to an end. Christabel would be returned to her father, where she belonged.

And to her betrothed.

Simon refused to think about that. He untied the bag holding the remainder of their food and the water canteen and placed it beside Christabel's feet. She still hadn't said a word.

"Well," he snapped, his patience growing thinner with each passing moment. "You understand you are to go back."

"I understand you have grown tired of me." Her tone held no inflection, no anger or hurt or confusion, but her eyes—oh, Lord—her eyes glistened with all the recrimination he could handle, and more.

"It is not like that."

"What is it like, then? Tell me, because I cannot understand. Last

night, what we shared meant more to me than any moment in my entire life. Feeling you move inside me..." Her eyebrows furrowed, as though she searched for the right words to explain how she felt, but she didn't have to. He'd felt it, too, and that sensation alone scared him half to death.

He'd never been scared of anything. He'd fought battles for his king, he'd seen men sliced open on the end of his sword, he'd ducked killing blows that would have ended his life if he'd been half a moment slower...and he'd never been afraid of any of those things.

But his feelings for her, and Christabel's for him, sent a chilling terror into his limbs that turned his blood to ice.

He shook his head, knowing he could never put his own emotions into words, either. Besides, what would it matter what she thought of him? He would never see her again. With any luck, no babe grew in her belly. Soon, she'd forget him entirely.

That was what he wanted, wasn't it? So then why did the pain in her gaze slice straight to his heart?

"Right, then." He mounted his horse before he could take leave of his senses, gather her up in his arms, and sweep her away for an eternity of lovemaking; honor and proper behavior be damned.

He pressed his lips together and turned his steed away without another glance at Christabel's flushed face. One more look would undo him. If he gazed into those dark eyes and saw the agony gathered there, he'd never be able to leave her standing by the edge of the road.

"You know I'm to marry him," she shouted in his wake, her voice taking on a slightly hysterical edge. "Henry is to be my husband. My lover."

If she meant to wound him, she succeeded. Her words hit home, summoning image after image of Christabel's flexible limbs wrapped around his enemy's waist, her head thrown back in ecstasy, a soundless gasp drifting from her lips while he rammed his manhood deep inside

her tight channel.

Simon slammed his ankles into his horse's belly harder than he'd intended. The creature neighed and galloped into a fierce run. The world turned to a blur around him as he sped past trees lined like sentinels along both sides of the road.

He didn't abandon Christabel, he told himself, his hands clenched so tightly around the reins that his knuckles turned white. Her future husband—her *lover*—would come upon her. He'd followed their trail all this time. Simon had no reason to doubt his enemy would find Christabel, find her and take her as his own.

Because she was his. She always had been. In Simon's arms, she'd simply spent her passion in the absence of her true betrothed, the man she'd been promised to since childhood. Her destiny had been ordained, and it hadn't been to become the wife of Simon Whittington, Knight fallen from grace by his own making. It had always been to lie with a beast, a man who took his pleasure with young girls and left them for dead.

Simon clenched his teeth. Hot tears burned the back of his eyes. Bile rose in his throat and he forced it down. It slid back with a rasping pain, as though he'd gulped a mouthful of broken glass.

He would make Lady Foxe a widow if it was the last thing he did.

* * *

Simon didn't know how long he'd been riding. He knew only that his horse had slowed to a trot, refusing to move any faster despite the gentle and not-so-gentle encouragement Simon applied as he grew increasingly more frustrated.

Something about the entire situation didn't feel right. He'd known what he had to do. There'd never been any doubt in his mind that taking Christabel by force was against every principle he'd ever believed in. Returning her to her family, to her life, had been the right thing to do.

So then why did an unsettling feeling of foreboding clench his stomach to knots? It was because he'd bedded her, he tried to convince himself. If he hadn't had his cock buried to the hilt in her moist, hot sheath, he never would have wondered as to her well being. She was probably fine, wrapped in the earl's arms at this very moment. Gratefully kissing his lips and swearing her undying love.

Simon shook his head. That's the way it all should be, but something was wrong, and it wasn't just the disgust that rattled his soul when he thought of Christabel in that monster's arms. No, it was a deeper, growing sense of unease that drove him to ride hard to the place where he'd left her. He could feel the disquiet burrowing deep in his bones. Apprehension shifted to dread, the feeling turning his insides to ice.

The sun had passed its mid point in the sky, and the scorching heat beat down on Simon's neck with a heavy, insistent pressure that only added to his discomfort. He urged his horse on, and despite the neigh of protest, the beast obeyed. In the morning, the road had been deserted. Now, hoof marks marred the dust. A group of them, at least ten horses, perhaps more.

The earl's men had been here. They'd found Christabel. She was on her way to London right now, ready to be reunited with her family, no doubt telling the earl of her adventures with the criminal who'd robbed her of her rightful wedding night.

A torn shred of moss-green garment caught his eye first. Not quite understanding what he was looking at, Simon allowed his gaze to slide upward, to the pool of blood congealing in the dust. And then, at last, he saw *her*.

He leapt from his horse like a man possessed, landing hard on the ground with a jolt of pain that slammed into his knees. He didn't even allow himself the luxury of stumbling. He simply pressed on, seeing nothing, *feeling* nothing, until he reached her side.

And then the onslaught of emotion poured out of him in a flood, a never-ending stream of pain that started low in his gut and threatened to choke him. Tears flowed freely down his face as he frantically gathered her small, frail body in his arms and clutched her to his chest. She stared up at him, her sightless eyes no longer seeing, no longer able to look at him in either hatred or passion, agony or heart-breaking love.

Blood soaked through his tunic. It dripped from her body in a gush. Too much blood. So much it could only mean she'd been split open with no thought or remorse. He refused to look. He kept his gaze fixed firmly on her beautiful face and ran the tip of his thumb over her cold lips, letting the smooth texture of her mouth give him strength.

He didn't know how long he kneeled there, holding her, tears mingling with her blood to form a pool of sticky substance around his feet. It didn't matter. The man who had done this to her would pay.

There was no rush. Not anymore.

"No force in England can stop me from avenging you," he promised, using her words as he made the oath. "My love. My life. My Christabel"

* * *

It was almost nightfall when Simon came upon the earl's camp, his hand tightly wrapped around his sword hilt. Henry's men gathered around a fire in a small clearing, laughing and talking in loud, gregarious voices as though celebrating the victorious return from battle rather than the slaying of a defenseless woman.

The earl sat back against a rock, picking his teeth. He brought a canteen to his lips and took a long swig, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was a tall man, nearing his sixth decade of life. His hair had turned white, but his build spoke of a man accustomed to combat.

Simon wasn't concerned with the earl's prowess or expertise. He moved swiftly, his aim sure. He didn't hesitate as he drew his long

blade from its sheath and swung it down in an arc. The first man's head came clear off his shoulders and landed in the fire with a sickening, sizzling snap before his companions even knew what happened. The smell of blood and charred flesh exploded through the meadow, a sweet, cloying stench.

"What on the Lord's—" The second man never had a chance to finish his sentence. A gurgle and a muffled cry later, he was slumped on the ground, his blood seeping into the grass beneath him.

"One of you has taken a maiden's life," Simon roared, holding the hilt of his sword in both hands and turning in a slow circle. The men reached for their weapons but eyed him warily, as though trying to gauge just how insane he really was. "The others stood by and watched as it happened. Now you will all pay."

"Ah, Christabel's captor, no doubt," the earl said, drawing his own sword from his belt. Despite the drink in which he'd been indulging, his grip was solid and sure, and the weapon didn't quiver in his hand.

"That's right. And Bronwyn's brother. The man who will make you answer for your sins."

The earl's harsh laugh echoed through the forest. "Interesting boast. But it wasn't I who killed Christabel." He stepped forward, and motioned to his men to move back and give them room. They obeyed. "It was you. If you hadn't taken her from me, if you hadn't ravaged her womanly flesh, she would still be alive. Oh yes, I know you didn't leave her as pure as you found her. I could see it in her lust-glazed eyes. Her wanton ways were written so clearly on her face when I came upon her, I knew she hadn't escaped you of her own desire. If it had been up to her, she'd have whored herself to you for all eternity." He spat on the ground, his eyes never leaving Simon's. "So you see, it is you who killed her. You know that, and the king will know it, too, especially when I tell him you confessed of tiring of her body just before you died."

"You are insane," Simon murmured.

As the words left his mouth, the earl lunged. Simon parried, a moment too late. Ice-cold pain sliced across his right arm. Blood gushed down his wrist, slicking his grip on his sword.

"And you are a dead man," the earl vowed, coming around for another strike.

This time, Simon was ready for him. He dodged the second blow and circled around for an attack of his own, one the earl easily avoided. Their swords met, clanged in a fury of metal, the sounds of their battle ringing through the clearing. The men gathered around them made no move to interfere, but Simon knew that even if he succeeded in slaying Christabel's killer, the earl was right. He *was* a dead man.

He didn't care. His life had ended the moment he'd found Christabel's body crumpled in a heap at the edge of the road. Because the earl had been correct in his assessment of one other thing: Simon had killed her as surely as if he'd slammed the blade home himself.

Hatred twisted the earl's face, and Simon was sure the man's scowl mirrored his own. He had every reason to see his enemy fall at his feet, and he intended to do everything in his power to make sure that happened, even if it was the last thing he did before he drew his last dying breath.

Gradually, after a series of thrusts and parries, blows and dodges, they settled into a frenzied rhythm, one that had both men pressing for an advantage, an opening that neither would allow. Grunts filled the air along with the ringing crash of metal. Night fell in full, the blazing orange glow of the fire glinting off the glowing swords and the determined, steely gazes of the combatants.

The earl pushed, kicked, thrust and cut, relentless. For his part, Simon was equally tireless. He launched counter-attacks of his own, drawing on the memory of Christabel's kiss, of her pure, cheerful smile, of her soft body pressed against him to sustain him.

His opening came in a flash, so rapid he'd have missed it if not for the surge of adrenaline that guided his sword arm. Pain flared in his wounded flesh, but he ignored it. His blade streaked downward in a sharp, clean arc that slapped the sword out of his opponent's hand, then slammed upward to thrust solidly into the earl's gut.

The man blinked, confusion playing over his features. "This is not...not the way it is supposed to happen," he said. He stood perfectly still for a long moment, staring deep into Simon's eyes before slumping to the ground.

Simon had no time to celebrate his success. He'd expected the force of the blade that slammed between his shoulders, and when it came, he welcomed it.

He died with Christabel's name on his lips.

* * *

He awoke staring into the face of a demon.

A furry face, with a snout, sharp teeth, and small, beady black eyes that regarded him coolly. A breeze danced over his bare skin, and water lapped at his ankles. The merciless sun bore down on him, blinding in its intensity.

"Welcome to eternity," the demon said.

Simon blinked and shielded his eyes from the glaring brightness. "What... How..." He cleared his throat before trying again. "I am dead, then. This is hell."

The creature shook its head. It leaned two paws on a gnarled wooden staff, one end of which had been thrust into the sand. "Not hell. Not heaven, either. Desirata is what you make of it. But it is to be your home for as long as necessary."

Simon licked his suddenly dry lips and rose to a sitting position. His head spun, and the ache between his shoulder blades spoke of a phantom weapon lodged there. "Necessary for what?"

"For you to make things right."

Understanding dawned swiftly. He stood, turned in a wide circle, and assessed his surroundings. On one side, the largest body of water he'd ever seen stretched into eternity. On the other, lush vegetation grew around a long stretch of sand. "Christabel. She is here?"

"No."

"I must find her." Without stopping to think his actions through, Simon rushed into the water. He didn't know what he intended. He was driven only by the need to wrap his arms around her, to spend the rest of his days apologizing for what he'd done.

Sudden, unexpected pain blinded him and sent him crashing to his knees in the surf. He fought for breath and gagged as air entered his burning lungs. "What happened?" he rasped.

"You wouldn't let me finish." The creature shook its head and made a tsking sound of admonishment. "You cannot leave this island. You cannot pass that point." He stretched out a gnarled brown finger in the direction of the barrier that had stopped Simon a moment earlier. "Your Christabel is not here. Not yet. But she will be... Eventually. Until then, you and I are going to get to know each other."

"When?" Simon asked, thoroughly defeated. He couldn't find the strength to lift his limbs, and the warm surf crashed gently around his thighs. "When will she come?"

"That I cannot say, but I doubt it will be soon. This place is as much a sanctuary as it is a release. Wait for her. She will find you."

Simon let his head drop into his hands. He prayed the demon was right.

CHAPTER 7

Oh, for Pete's sake, Amy, just do it! Get up, get in that damn boat, and row away.

Despite the irritated voice in her head urging her on, Amy couldn't move a muscle. The man lying beside her held her captive as surely as if he'd tied her to one of the wooden posts that propped up the cozy thatched roof of the makeshift cottage.

The feel of his solid, warm back pressed against her breasts, his ass firm against her pubic bone, kept her glued to his side. Worse, she feared she'd stay this way for all eternity if she had any say in the matter, unwilling to move, unable to do anything but make insane, passionate love to him every moment of every day.

His slow, steady breathing and occasional gruff sigh told her he was fast asleep. This was her chance. Her opportunity to make a clean getaway before he awoke and she had to face the hurt and recrimination in his striking emerald gaze. If she left now, by the time he woke and

found her missing, she and her coble would be long gone, swallowed by the endless vastness of the ocean.

If she let him, his power over her would keep her here forever. She'd already been on the island for six weeks. Six amazing, incredible, *miraculous* weeks. In all that time, there hadn't been even as much as a hint of pain.

At least, none that hadn't been self inflicted.

Every time she thought about tossing one leg, then the other, into the boat, sitting on the bench, closing her hand around the paddle and rowing away, her heart felt like it would shatter in a million pieces. When she actually carried the fantasy through to the end and saw herself lying in a hospital bed surrounded by pitying eyes of well-meaning family members and perfect strangers, agony sliced through her, so acute it hurt to breathe.

She'd known about her illness since she was twelve. A rare blood disorder made it so an overabundance of protein caused her own blood cells to turn against her, attacking healthy cells with a savage viciousness that couldn't be stopped.. Only one person in five hundred thousand were ever diagnosed with the disorder, but Amy's mother had always told her she was special. She just hadn't warned her she'd die from being *too* special.

Acute Hemophilia, the doctors called the disease. Amy called it Hell, with a capital H.

The first time she'd required the fresh frozen plasma infusion followed by a total blood transfusion, she'd believed she was going to die. Why else would her body feel like it had been lit on fire from the inside? There had been moments—long, agonizing, terrifying moments—she knew she couldn't possibly survive the pain. And every time she saw the doctor's tentative smile, she knew it was only a matter of time until the end caught up with her.

The last episode triggered an aneurism, the doctor had said. The

sudden starburst of blood had left permanent scarring on her brain. He'd given her three weeks to live. A day later, Amy had quit her job, emptied her savings account, stocked up on pills and headed for the open ocean. It had seemed like the thing to do at the time.

Who knew she'd find paradise, and not just a brief escape from her inevitable, fast demise?

But that was exactly what she'd found. Paradise. With a capital P.

And now she had to leave it. One more day at Simon's side, one more moment holding him close as he entered her, and she knew she'd lose her nerve. Somehow, the disease had afforded her a reprieve. Just long enough for her to lose her heart to a man she barely knew, a man who claimed to live here on a deserted island with a monkey she'd never even seen.

If Simon was insane, then she was, too. After all, terminal illnesses didn't just disappear at the snap of a finger, no matter how fervently you wished them away.

That's why she had to leave. Soon, the fate she'd avoided for the past six weeks would catch up with her. She knew it would. She could feel her tainted blood cells swirling in her veins, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to scorch her skin and twist her insides until she crumbled to the ground, unable to do anything but wait for the moment that would end her life.

When that happened, she'd be damned if she'd breathe her last on this island, in Simon's arms. She'd left her family behind because she didn't want to put them through the pain of watching her die. She sure as hell wouldn't put the man she loved through that same agony.

It took every ounce of fortitude she possessed, but Amy wrenched herself out of bed. Tears swam in her eyes when she glanced down at Simon's sleeping form. His shoulder rose and fell with the steady rhythm of his even breathing. She wished she could see his eyes, but had to content herself with the line of his strong cheekbone, the edge of

his nose, the dark brow furrowed in the midst of a dream.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she struggled to make her lungs work again. She had to get moving.

With one last lingering look at Simon, she edged out of the cabin on tiptoe. He'd built the structure with his bare hands, he'd told her, adding some nonsense about having gotten good at carpentry in eight hundred years.

Pausing just long enough to slip into her rarely-worn bikini, Amy shook her head as her bare feet touched the hot sand. The man had clearly lost his marbles, yet she didn't find that discomforting in the least. It was endearing, in a way, that he cared enough about her to make up outrageous stories.

Though she wished he'd stopped calling her Christabel. Just once, she wanted to hear her own name on his lips, not someone else's. It seemed like such a trivial thing now, looking back on how much of himself he'd shared with her over the past six weeks. Still...just once.

She slid through the thick foliage surrounding the cabin. Palm trees swayed, rustling uneasily in a sudden gust of wind, their leaves slamming together with great whooshing sounds. Prickly apprehension ran down her arms, raising goose bumps on her flesh. She quickened her stride. Her feet left soft, hollow imprints in the sand as she began to run, sinking a little deeper with each pounding step.

Something—someone—was chasing her.

She swallowed down the copper tang of fear that stuck in her throat and shook her head to clear the absurd thought. She and Simon had been alone on the island all this time. It wasn't a large island, and she'd traversed it end to end at least a dozen times. There was no one else here, and Simon wouldn't try to frighten her, even if he did wake up and find her gone.

Despite her logical reasoning, Amy turned her head and glanced behind her, pulse thundering in her temples, her nape prickling with the

sense of unseen danger.

Just as she'd expected, there was no one there. The long stretch of beach lay deserted, spreading out in a fanned shape into the ocean.

The stiff breeze coming off the water tossed golden specks of sand up toward her face. Amy grimaced and wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she hadn't listened to Simon's eager reasons for not wearing clothes. She'd even given up on her white bikini a few days into her stay on the island. She'd put it on today knowing she couldn't face civilization wearing nothing but a smile, no matter how appropriate that attire had been here, in her own private piece of heaven. Since her arrival, she'd acquired an all-over even tan that would be the envy of any Hollywood starlet.

She pressed on, grateful when she reached the place where she knew her coble would be waiting. She'd come out here every day, just to reassure herself that it was still there, and each day Simon had asked her to stay. She couldn't deny him anything. The agreement was instinctual, overwhelming. All he had to do was look at her with that intense, piercing gaze, one side of his mouth quirking upward in a sensual smile, and her limbs would melt along with her willpower.

But Simon wasn't here now.

And neither was the coble.

Frantic, she lifted a hand to her brow to block out the sun and scanned the edge of the horizon. When she spotted it, at long last, relief slammed into her breastbone. It was her only way to get off this island. Her only way to spare Simon the pain of watching her die, of having to hold her lifeless body in his arms.

She didn't know why, but the more time she spent with him, the more important that became. No matter what else happened, he would not, *could* not, watch her die.

The coble had drifted out to sea. It wasn't far, perhaps ten feet into the ocean. Close enough to reach. It swayed gently on the surf, its

wooden sides bobbing up and down with the movement of the waves.

Amy took a step forward. Her feet hit the water with a splash. To her surprise, the ocean was warm, almost inviting. Boldly, she strode in deeper, as quickly as she could. She hadn't been able to shake the feeling of being followed, of destiny eagerly rushing to catch up with her.

The pain hit when she reached the coble. It came swiftly, unmercifully, slamming into her gut with the raw, primal power of a beast possessed. It tore at her insides, slashed into her belly with a savage, downward slicing motion that made her lose her footing. She gasped and instinctively reached for the coble to steady herself. The shoddy boat was the only thing that kept her from going under, from embracing the darkness of the bottom of the ocean for all eternity.

Images swam behind her eyelids. Simon on a horse, dressed in old-fashioned armor, and Amy standing by the edge of a dirt road, reaching out to him, begging him not to leave her. Except the words never left her mouth.

The pictures flashed by in quick succession, illuminated by an unnatural brightness that could only be the great beyond beckoning, calling her home. Simon again, lying on his back, moonlight casting silvery shadows in his dark hair. Amy straddled him, her head tossed back, her hips pressed forward, her pussy clenching his cock inside her body and riding it as though that was the only thing that mattered in the entire world. And it was.

Then the scenery changed. The dirt road was back, and she was alone. Hooves beat a frantic rhythm in her ears and she flinched back from the wave of men who rode to surround her. Amy barely had time to see the sword being raised before it came down in a solid arc, catching her low in the belly and sliding upwards, making a clean, if messy, cut.

She gasped a strangled cry and fell to her knees, too stunned to do

anything else. The men rode off, and when Simon approached on his horse, his features set in the grim lines of determination and self loathing she'd seen on his face so often when she'd looked at him, she begged him, silently, to go back. An icy shiver flew down her spine. She didn't want him seeing her like this.

Oh, God. Not like this.

"Christabel."

Amy clutched her stomach. A coughing fit clutched her in its grip, bringing her back to reality, making her entire body quiver. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and when she looked at her skin, it was covered with hot, crimson blood.

If only she'd had a few more hours, she thought as wetness glossed her cheeks. Ocean water? Tears? Blood? She didn't know.

It probably didn't even matter. At the very least, she'd die here, in the ocean. The current already tugged at her legs, beckoning to her to let go of the boat and give in to the gentle tug.

With any luck, the waves would carry her off. Simon would never see her body.

She blinked, then wiped a soaked strand of hair from her forehead. Her fingers began to loosen from the edge of the coble. She gazed one last time at the island that had been her home, that had given her more happiness than she ever thought possible.

The dark, inquisitive gaze that met hers was foreign and unsettling at once.

Alric stood on the shore, leaning against a gnarled staff. His dark, beady primate eyes regarded her with a furious intensity. His lips were drawn back from white, sharp-edged teeth.

In his hand, he held up a smooth, golden conch.

"Amy!" Simon's agonized scream tore through her, more painful than the torture wracking her body. "Don't you dare go where I can't follow!"

He ran toward her, shouting her name. Her *current* name, now, when Amy knew so clearly who she was. The irony of it slammed into her gut. Dry, coughing sobs wracked her body. Tears ran unheeded down her face, dripping down her cheeks and into the ocean.

She tried to wave him back, but her arm wouldn't obey. The force of the current had increased, tugging mercilessly at her limbs.

Simon took one step into the water, then another and another. And then he slammed against a force so powerful and so sudden, it knocked him off his feet and made him crumple to the ground.

The last thing Amy saw before the tide took her was Alric bringing the conch up to his ear and sagely nodding his small, furry head.

CHAPTER 8

The jolt of the jarring, blunt impact of the energy barrier slamming against his flesh knocked the air from Simon's lungs and shoved him to the ground. Leaping to his feet after the massive blow made him dizzy, but he fought to keep from stumbling, his gaze fixed on Amy's rapidly disappearing dark tresses and the waves that tugged at her.

Her rapid descent to the bottom of the ocean meant he had no time to lose. He gritted his teeth and tried jumping through the blockade again, leading with his shoulder this time. The pain that zinged through his arm momentarily made him lose his balance, and he found himself on his back, the sun casting mercilessly bright rays into his eyes.

Despite his best efforts at getting off this island over the past eight centuries, he'd learned that the energy field was impenetrable, and merciless in its fury when Simon attempted to pass. He knew he was being punished, held prisoner the same way he'd held Christabel against her will. For centuries, he'd grown to believe he'd accepted his

fate, knowing he deserved the providence he'd brought upon himself.

He rose to his feet, gritting his teeth through the pain. Standing on the shore, waves lapping gently at his ankles, fists clenched impotently at his sides, he could no longer understand the motives of a higher power that would deliver his beloved to him, give him a chance to make things right, only to tear her from his arms and force him to watch her die.

Again.

"Enough!" His hoarse bellow rended the air. A gust of wind picked up his shout and carried it, amplifying the urgency in his voice. "I will not be a captive any longer. I refuse to do your bidding! Let me save her, or kill me, but I will no longer play these games."

"You think this is a game?" Alric voice startled Simon. He'd been so absorbed in saving Amy, he hadn't noticed the creature standing beside him. Since Amy had arrived on the island, he hadn't seen Alric for more than a few moments here and there, always when he was alone. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought the little beast wasn't comfortable around strangers, but the prickling awareness running down his spine told him something of greater importance had been going on.

"No. I think the only woman I've ever loved is dying out there!" "Look again."

Alric swept out his right arm. He held a golden conch in his right hand and his wooden staff in his left, but he lifted an index finger and pointed in the direction of Amy's body. For a moment, Simon's heart stopped beating. Wretched with fear and anguish, he expected to see nothing but the slow ripple of the ocean as it covered the spot where she'd drifted down into oblivion.

Instead, the sight before him made tears clog his throat. He couldn't make out her slender body, but he could see her arm, draping past the edge of the small boat. She was lying inside, safe from the deadly force

of the ocean.

"Is she alive?" he asked, unable to tear his gaze away.

"That is entirely up to you."

A brutal rage seized Simon, swirling through his body and forcing him to lunge before he could think better of the sudden action. A moment later his hands were wrapped around the devil's throat as the guilt and grief he'd been carrying for eight centuries spilled out of him in violent, jerky movements.

Alric's pupils dilated, and he responded with more strength than Simon would have expected from such a small being. He still held his staff in his hands and he brought it up with a shove. As Simon flew backwards through the air, he had the distinct impression that the resulting crack of the staff connecting with his jaw must have resonated through the entire island.

It certainly rang loudly in his head.

For the second time in as many minutes, he found himself on his back, squinting against the brilliant golden light of the sun.

"When you came to me, I promised you that your beloved would come." Alric's voice was gentle, but his cunning eyes boring down into Simon's warned him of trying such a move again. That, and the butt of the staff that pressed down on his chest.

"I waited," Simon said between gritted teeth. "Just as you said."

"I didn't know it would take so long. My mission was to watch over you, to assess your ability to move past the desire for revenge and learn what it meant to truly give your heart to someone who's given all of herself to you. Only when you were ready could you be reunited with her."

Simon fisted his hands in the sand. Tiny specks drifted through his clenched fingers. "You've had the power to bring her here all along?"

Alric tilted his head and regarded him coolly. "No. If I had, I would have done it long ago." His eyes softened. "You're a good man, Simon

Whittington. A good, misguided man, who sometimes leads with his base emotions rather than his head." He rubbed a furry paw along his throat to emphasize his point.

A surge of shame washed through Simon. "This was a test, then. Chrys—Amy is fine."

Even as the words left his mouth, he knew they weren't true. Alric shook his head slowly, confirming his fears.

"Amy is ill. She has a terminal disease that would have ended her days if she hadn't come to this island when she did."

"Then you did bring her here. To save her life."

The corners of Alric's mouth turned upward in a sad smile. "I don't have as much power as you give me credit for. I couldn't bring her somewhere she chose not to go. She had to find her way on her own. But once she was near, I could feel her, and then all I had to do was give her a gentle nudge and show her the way."

Simon blew out a breath between pursed lips. "There is no cure for her illness, then? Am I doomed to watch her perish no matter what I do?"

"As I said, that's up to you."

Simon scowled and pushed the staff off his chest with the back of his hand before rising. "Explain."

Alric waved the golden conch in the direction of the ocean. The barrier crackled with an electric charge, becoming visible for only a moment. It sparkled with vivid colors, blue and red and silver, before dissipating altogether.

"You're a free man, Simon. But even freedom comes with a price. You must make a choice."

Hope leapt through him, zinging down his veins with an excitement he hadn't allowed himself to feel in centuries. He could finally get off this island, leave behind the sand and sun-lit palm trees and face the real world, with his beloved at his side. "I'll pay it. Gladly. Just tell me

how to save Amy."

"You know better than anyone the properties of this island. Eternal life. Eternal happiness, if you desire it. Amy's body cannot be ravaged from the inside as long as she's here."

Comprehension began to dawn. Simon spun on his heel and faced Alric. "You mean to say she's stuck here, just like me?"

"You're no longer bound to this place. As for her...I have a feeling she'll willingly spend eternity in your arms, if you'll have her."

Simon's heart clenched. "This choice you mentioned. What is it?"

"You abandoned her once. You left her there, by the side of the road, when she wanted nothing more than to be with you, regardless of the consequences. You ripped that choice from her, believing instead you knew better. You have that same opportunity now. Amy must stay on the island, but you don't have to. There will be an ocean liner coming through here in a few minutes." He peered out toward the ocean, as if already catching sight of the large ship. "It can take you from here. It can take her, too, if you take that decision from her again. But make no mistake, Simon, she will die out there. And she will live forever here, with or without you. Whether you would doom her to a lonely eternal existence is your decision."

He needed no time to decide. Driven by instinct and lifetimes of desire, he tore through the place where the barrier had been, passing through it easily. He swam toward the coble, letting Amy's smooth, pale hand be his beacon of light in a world that had been shrouded in darkness until this moment, the moment he learned the truth about his fate.

And hers.

"Come on sweetheart," he soothed gently when he reached her side. "Let's go home."

Her eyes were closed, pinched tightly as though a war waged inside her. Her shallow breath came out harshly between slightly parted lips.

Agony thrummed through Simon. He hated seeing her this way, but at least this time he could save her.

Scooping her in his arms, her small, fragile body feeling almost weightless as he pressed her against his chest, Simon set out for the shore. He watched as Alric grinned at them, his furry face splitting with approval. A moment later, the creature brought the conch to his ear and seemed to listen intently, his brow furrowing with concentration.

He nodded, once, then tossed the conch into the air. Simon's gaze followed it as it twirled, end over end, casting a spray of golden sparkles over Alric. The creature tilted his head back and opened his arms, allowing the spray of brilliant dust to cover him from head to foot.

As Simon watched, Alric began to transform. His small body lengthened, bringing him almost to Simon's height. His shoulders broadened and the rest of him followed, lean muscles filling out the places where sinewy flesh had been. The fur receded, revealing smooth skin and a corded, athletic body. Brown hair reached down to his shoulders. Full lips, a firm chin and a strong nose completed the handsome face. Only his eyes, dark and slightly slanted, spoke of the creature who had been Simon's only companion for almost a millennium.

Simon tightened his grip on Amy, still murmuring soothing words in her ear. As he stepped onto the shore, the pain on her features smoothed out and her eyelashes fluttered comfortably, no longer held in the grip of agonizing torture. She sighed and curved herself closer to him, wrapped her arms around his neck, but didn't awaken.

"You are not the devil I thought you were," Simon said when he reached the man's side.

"And you weren't the only one serving a punishment on this island." Alric tossed the conch from one hand to the other, his broad grin familiar and astounding at once.

"You'll be leaving us, then."

"Yes." He looked down at Amy and his smile widened. "You won't be needing me anymore."

Simon shook his head. "Whether I needed you in the first place could be debated. I seem to remember doing more than my share of work around here."

Alric laughed. "You'd be amazed how hard it is to do things when you're only three feet tall." He stretched, his broad back and rippling muscles drawing attention to the fact that the man was definitely no longer half Simon's size.

Unable to resist, Simon's gaze flittered down past Alric's stomach. Nope, there was definitely nothing small about the new Alric. Even flaccid, his long, thick shaft was impressive, resting easily between his legs.

"Why a monkey?" Simon asked, jerking his gaze away from the man's cock. "Couldn't you have just shown up the way you are now?"

Alric shrugged. "We all have lessons to learn. Some just come harder than others."

Simon opened his mouth to tell him that wasn't much of an answer, but the blare of a distant horn echoed behind him, cutting off the rest of his words.

"Have you made your choice?" Alric asked softly. "The rescue party is almost here."

Simon nodded. Happiness swirled through him at the feel of Amy's body pressed against his, at the knowledge that he'd never lose her again. "I have a lot of things to make up for. And thankfully, an eternity in which to do so."

Alric's laugh held no malice, just pure, genuine contentment. "I have a feeling you might need it. Women tend to hold a grudge."

Simon turned and headed toward the palm trees. The ocean liner was still far enough away that no one aboard could have spotted him,

but he had to get moving.

At the edge of the palm trees, Simon halted in mid-stride. "The conch," he called out, half turning. "It's magical, isn't it?"

"Just like the rest of the island," Alric responded. "Unlike the island, though, this belongs to me. The conch and the staff are the only things I'll be taking. The rest can stay here, with you."

"Where will you go?"

A luminous grin spread over Alric's darkly tanned features, glowing with brilliant, powerful joy. He held up the conch. "I've been called home."

EPILOGUE

Amy kept her head lowered as she carried the day's catch across the stretch of beach to Simon's cottage.

To *their* cottage, she corrected herself, a smile tugging at her lips. Their home.

The late afternoon sun speckled the sand a deep orange, and the wide leaves of palm trees cast playful shadows across the beach. Amy breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into the shade and the fine layer of sweat began to dry on her skin.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you." Simon's deep, husky voice made her glance up. Her smile widened to an unrestrained grin when he reached out, wrapped her in his arms and swept her off her feet, twirling her in a smooth circle.

The fishnet dropped from her fingers. She twined her hands in his hair, a bubbling laugh escaping her throat. Her stomach flipped in a raging arc of excitement and anticipation. Heat flooded her pussy, an

instinctual, constant response to being pressed up against his body.

"I missed you," Simon whispered against her lips. His warm breath caressed her mouth in silky invitation.

"I was only gone for a couple of hours." Her fingernails dug into the nape of his neck as she struggled against the fevered desire to hold him there, close enough to taste, for all eternity.

Simon swept the tip of his tongue over her bottom lip. "Too long. Much too long."

She opened to him and their mouths collided in a hungry, primal kiss. Amy fought for possession, but Simon was stronger, pushing his tongue into her mouth. His musky, masculine taste sizzled across her senses. She arched her back, her clit rubbing against his bare skin.

Amy tightened her legs around his waist. With a savage growl, Simon cupped her ass and supported her weight as he stepped over the threshold, carrying her inside the cabin.

She felt the silk beneath her back as he lowered her with a gentleness she hadn't expected judging by his frenzied motions and his quickened breathing. Arching her back, she moaned against his mouth.

The stiff length of his erection bore down on her soft flesh, plunging inside her wet, willing cunt without another moment's hesitation. His pubic bone pressed down on her clit, the raw sensation sending a shudder through her overheated body.

"I like not wearing clothes," she murmured, pausing to nibble at his earlobe.

Simon's chuckle reverberated down her spine. "Sure beats those long flowing skirts you used to wear."

"All that metal that passed for armor those days was no easier to deal with, let me tell you. A girl had no way of telling the size of a man's package when it was hidden beneath layers of chain mail."

Amy wriggled her hips suggestively. Simon's barely controlled laugher made his body spasm and he bore down on her, penetrating her

tight channel with quick, eager, expert strokes. She didn't think she could ever get enough of that—of *him*.

Knowing their past, finally understanding their history, had made so many things click in Amy's mind. When she'd awakened and had found herself back on the island, in Simon's bed, and not walking through the realms of the hereafter, she knew the secret to her miracle cure lay in the island itself. It was everywhere—in the salt-scented air, in the way her feet sank into the silky sand, in the rustle of the palm leaves swaying overhead.

But most of all, it lay in Simon's eyes, in the way his hands clenched her ass as he drove into her, in the timber of his voice as he called her name. Any of her names.

She learned about the sacrifice Simon had made for her that same night. He told her not because he wanted her to feel indebted to him, but because when he'd promised there would be no secrets between them, no more misunderstandings and unspoken truths, he'd meant every word. That knowledge alone caused Amy's heart to swell with more love than she'd ever thought herself capable of feeling.

"I never thought I'd hold you like this." Simon's vivid green eyes bore into hers as his cock swelled to impossible hardness inside her pussy. She squirmed at the potent, heady mix of pleasure and pure elation that swept through her nerve-endings.

"You held me this way last night," she reminded him, arching her spine so her cunt squeezed his rod in a tight, possessive gesture that left no doubt she was enjoying this as much as he. "And this morning. And right after lunch."

The silken arc of his dark eyelashes fell, hiding his gaze. His tongue swept out, moistening his lips. "That's not what I meant." His voice was so tender, so gentle, it made her heart ache.

"I know." Her hoarse whisper matched his. She trailed her palms up and down his strong, muscular arms. "I love you, too."

The sigh that broke free from his throat could have been relief, but Amy knew it had more to do with the fact that he wasn't done punishing himself for his role in Christabel's death. When he was ready to let it go, he would, she told herself, but he was stubborn and unwilling to accept that he'd long ago paid the price for his mistake.

Her hips pumped, the motion snapping him out of his reverie. He flashed her a brilliant grin and she answered in kind. Her vaginal muscles fluttered and clenched, shifting up and down with an increased rhythm.

The first sweet stirring of her impending release sang in her blood. "Simon!" She loved crying out his name at the moment of orgasm, and as her climax burst free, he called hers.

"Amy. Mine."

The rough words that echoed through the cabin were hardly coherent, turning into a deep grown of fulfillment as Simon gave in to his own moment of ecstasy, but Amy understood, and loved him even more for using the name she responded to the most.

A lifetime of being Amy Conrad wouldn't be wiped away overnight, just like eight centuries of grief and regret wouldn't dissipate just because a shape-shifting monkey granted Simon his freedom.

She gasped and trembled as the last remnants of her orgasm drifted through her body, making her quiver. Simon lay on top of her, his weight bearing down, crushing her breasts against his chest. She didn't mind. Feeling him against her like this only reminded her of what it meant to be alive.

Without withdrawing from her depths, Simon pressed a sweet, lingering kiss to her swollen lips. There was no need for either of them to speak. Their bodies communicated perfectly without words, and she let herself melt against him, her curves molding perfectly to his lean, muscular shape. Opening her mouth, Amy forced her tongue between his lips, surprising him, gaining the advantage for only a heartbeat

before he wrestled it away from her, thrusting his tongue past hers in a purely primal, masculine response.

Amy sighed happily, cupping his face in her hands, drawing her thumbs down over the rough stubble on his chin. She returned the succulent kiss, slowly, languidly, their tongues melding, teasing, caressing.

Immortality had never tasted so good.

LACEY SAVAGE

Lacey Savage began her love affair with romance at an early age. In high school, she checked out steamy romance novels from the public library and would often be found reading them in the middle of class.

Lacey still reads more than she cares to admit, and probably more than her husband would like, considering how many books she keeps bringing into the house. Her favorite genres have always been erotica, romance, fantasy, science fiction and mystery, so she tries to incorporate a little of each into her writing.

She initially majored in Marketing, then went back to school to major in English Literature. After earning her degrees, she decided to turn her efforts to her true passion: writing. A hopeless romantic, Lacey loves writing about the intimate, sensual side of relationships.

She currently resides in Ottawa, Canada, with her loving husband and their mischievous cat.

You can learn more about Lacey by visiting her website at www.laceysavage.com and can reach her at laceysavage@rogers.com.

* * *

Don't miss Eat Me, by Lacey Savage, available at AmberHeat.com!

For her thirtieth birthday, pastry chef Michelle Simpson is determined to give herself the gift she's always wanted but could never have: a night of mind-blowing sex with her best friend. Unfortunately, despite myriad (of often desperate) attempts at making Tom realize she's a desirable, sensual woman, he still can't see her as anything more than a friend. Well, she's had it with lusting after him from afar. This year, their mutual birthday celebration will be one neither of them will ever forget.

Of course, she can't expect to suddenly change his mind on her own, so she asks for a little help...from above.

A combination of magical reagents and a few well-spoken words holds the key to unlocking every secret fantasy Michelle has ever had. But she can't simply hand Tom a vial of the resulting potion and expect him to drink it, no questions asked, so she bakes the sweetly aromatic brew into an erotic pastry unlike any other. Then she places the mouthwatering delight in a white cardboard box and scrawls the words "Eat Me" on the lid in black marker.

Now how can any man resist an offer like that?

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