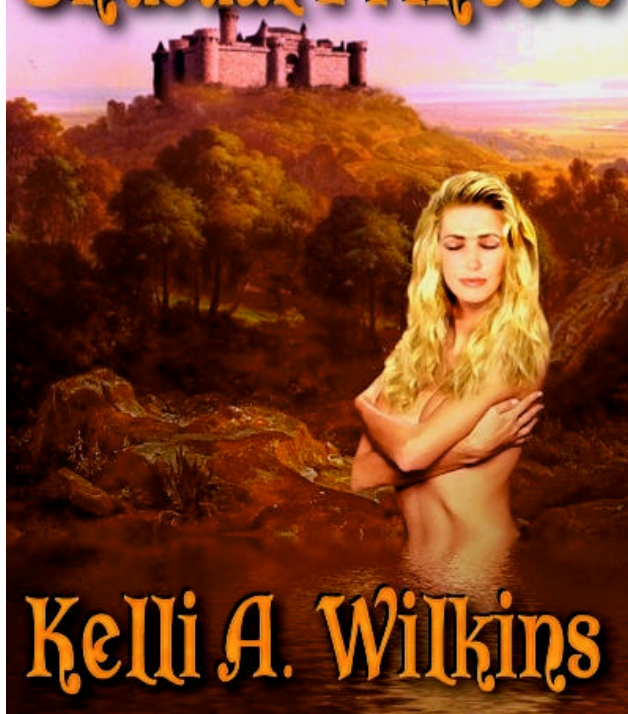


A Most Unusual Princess



Kelli A. Wilkins

A MOST UNUSUAL PRINCESS

Dalton rode across the sunlit meadow. The sound of rushing water caught his attention, and he stopped his horse and dismounted. A refreshing drink was just what he needed after a long day's ride. He pushed through a ring of shrubbery and stopped. The sight before him took his breath away.

A golden-haired maiden stood washing herself in a small bathing pool. The sunlight sparkled off her long, wavy locks as she moved. He grinned and ducked behind a tree to watch. His appointment with King Maxwell could wait; this rosy-skinned naked woman was much more interesting.

The curvy young woman splashed water on her chest, and her nipples perked to attention. She dipped a bar of soap into the water, then began lathering her breasts.

He swallowed hard as she tweaked her soapy right nipple, then toyed with the other one. Who was this girl? Had she no shame?

A stirring in his loins caused him to clasp the branch in front of him. After his last emotionally disastrous relationship, he had taken a vow of abstinence until he found a woman worthy to be his bride. But seeing this nubile girl sparked his lust. He closed his eyes and tried to calm his racing heart. The noble action would be to let her bathe in private, but what harm could come from peeking a little?

ALSO BY KELLI A. WILKINS

The Dark Lord
The Sexy Stranger

A MOST UNUSUAL PRINCESS

BY

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He heard a low moan and opened his eyes. Now the girl was washing her lower half. He scowled. She was not washing, she was...

He licked his lips as she slid her hands between her parted thighs. He watched, mesmerized, as she teased her fingers in and around her delicate area, working her hand in small circles. Her eyes were closed, and she had a look of pure elation on her round face. He leaned closer, eager to see more, and accidentally snapped the tree branch in his hand.

The young woman's eyes flew open, and she ducked into the water. "Who's there? Answer me!"

He groaned. Dammit! He hadn't intended to get caught. "I mean you no harm."

"Beast!" She covered her breasts with her hands. "How dare you lurk in the bushes and watch me bathe!"

"Bathe?" He stepped from behind the tree. "You were doing more than bathing." He chuckled. "I did not mean to interrupt. Please continue."

She narrowed her green eyes to slits. "Pig! Leave before I shout for help!"

"And bring hordes of men to your rescue?" The girl knew she had been caught pleasuring herself, and he reasoned she would not do anything to draw attention to it. "I'll wager that they would enjoy watching as well. Are you coming out of there or shall I go in after you?"

"Touch me and I'll scream!"

"I bet." He smirked. "If I'd left you alone long enough, you would

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have screamed from your own naughty pleasure.” The look of shock on her pretty face amused him, and he continued teasing her. “You seem practiced. Do you bathe yourself in that manner often?”

“Fiend!” She splashed him with water and dashed to the edge of the bathing pool. He blocked her path and dragged her from the water.

“Let me go! I’ll have your head for this!”

As he pulled her to his chest, her hard nipples pressing against his velvet jacket, he saw a flicker of fear in her eyes.

“Do not hurt me,” she whispered.

“It’s lucky for you I’m not the type of man who takes liberties with women. If another man had found you like this...” He held her away from him and studied her. She was curvy in all the right places, and the sight of her nakedness made his member stiffen. “...you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

She swallowed hard. “I’ll leave, right now. Please—”

He shook his head. “You’ve stirred my lust. I deserve a reward for showing restraint and not throwing you down and sating myself inside you.” He cupped her breast and tweaked her left nipple with his thumb. To his surprise, she moaned. “You want more?”

She bowed her head.

“Finish what you started,” he whispered. “If you do not, you’ll be in a state of arousal for the remainder of the day. I won’t mind watching you writhe and moan.”

She snapped her head up. “Wretch!” She lashed out to slap him, and he caught her wrist.

He swatted her wet buttocks and she squealed. “You will not strike me!” He yanked her over to a tree, where her clothing lay in a pile, and released her. “Dress yourself and go home like a good girl.”

She clutched her dress in front of her nude body.

“Thank your lucky stars I’m a decent man and can restrain myself. There are horrible men in the world who would not be so gallant,” he

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said, watching her scramble into her clothes.

* * *

Dalton bowed low before the high-backed gold throne. He had never met King Maxwell before and was surprised to find that the monarch was a middle-aged man with flaming red hair. "I apologize for my delay, your Majesty. I had to stop and rest my horse."

He scolded himself inwardly. He had only been in the palace for a few moments and had already lied to the king. Yet what other excuse could he give for his tardiness? He did not dare confess that he had tarried to watch a nude girl touching herself. But that was not the reason he was late. After she'd dressed and hurried off, he'd snuck behind the bushes and pleased himself, all the while envisioning the beautiful maiden.

"No matter. We have time to talk. My daughter should have arrived by now, but Elara is notorious for doing whatever she pleases. That is why you're here."

"I see. My uncle asked that I come here as a favor and serve as a guard. I'm not sure why you—"

"Not for me. For Elara." King Maxwell shook his head. "I have arranged a courting ritual for her. I invited all the noblemen of the kingdom to visit. Elara needs to choose a husband. I want someone to watch over her every moment while her suitors are here. Elara's not your typical princess. She's very..." He paused and scratched his red beard. "...headstrong."

Dalton frowned. "I'm to chaperone her? Perhaps a lady-in-waiting would—"

"A lady-in-waiting?" King Maxwell rolled his eyes. "Not for Elara. She needs a firm hand, someone who will not be intimidated by her behavior. Your uncle thought you would be a suitable choice."

"I see." He sighed. What kind of princess was she? For his uncle's sake, he would make the best of the situation, no matter how

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unattractive or ill-mannered the girl was. "I shall do as you request, your Majesty. Where is Princess Elara? Shall I—"

A loud bang from the outer hall interrupted his words.

"That's her," King Maxwell muttered.

Dalton bowed low as the door opened. A fair-haired young woman in a blue dress strode into the throne room straight past him.

"Father! What is the meaning of having me hauled in here like a commoner? I was—"

Dalton shook his head. That voice! It couldn't be!

"Your private guard has arrived," the king said.

The girl turned to him, and her mouth dropped open. "Dear Lord," she whispered as she fell forward.

* * *

Elara blinked several times. Strong arms held her up.

"My dear, are you all right?" her father asked.

She looked up at the dark-haired man from the bathing pool. "Oh, no!"

"No? Shall I summon the physician?"

"No! I'm fine." She could not help but notice the smirk on the stranger's face. Of all the people! He'd seen her... She pulled from his grip. "How dare you put your hands on me!"

"Forgive me. Perhaps I should keep my hands to myself," he said, helping her regain her balance. "I'm Dalton. Your guard."

"My what?"

"Your guard," her father answered. "Where have you been, Elara? You knew—"

"I went riding," she growled. "I saw no need to rush back here and dine with boring men that you've sent to court me. I do not need a man—"

Dalton cleared his throat loudly, and she glared at him. "I do not need a husband, and I certainly do not need a brutish guard watching

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me.”

He grinned. “Nothing would please me more than to watch you.”

She shot him a steely stare. He was mocking her! She’d been so startled when he’d discovered her at the pond that she’d overlooked his handsome features. Although he appeared to be a few years older than she, his good looks took her breath away. His wavy dark hair hung to his white ruffled shirt collar, and his blue eyes twinkled behind long lashes.

She hadn’t overlooked the thrill she’d gotten when Dalton had pinched her nipple, however. His bold touch had sent sparks through her, and she’d felt a tingle of excitement when he’d swatted her buttocks. In her aroused state, she’d nearly begged him to—

“Show him to your rooms, Elara,” her father said.

She snapped from her fantasy. “What? For what purpose?”

“So I may watch over you,” Dalton answered.

She looked at her father. “He’s going to be with me all the time?”

“Yes. He shan’t leave your side. You’re too wild, Elara. You need a man to look after you and settle you down.”

“Settle me down?” She folded her arms across her chest. Right now, all she wanted was a few moments to settle *herself* down. She glared at Dalton. Damn him for interrupting her at the pond! Her body still throbbed and ached for release. Now she would be forced to sit through dinner before she could slip into her bed and—

“I’ll be by your side constantly, starting now.” Dalton smiled. “I’m most eager to share your company, your Highness.”

* * *

Dalton followed Elara into her sitting room and braced himself for the coming tirade. Elara slammed the heavy wooden door and whirled to face him.

“If I tell my father what you’ve done, he’ll have your head on a pike!”

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He ignored her threat and looked around the large room. A daybed rested under a set of high windows, and a seating area took up one corner of the room.

Elara stood before him with her hands on her hips, glaring up at him.

“Be quiet, little princess.”

“How dare you address me in—”

“Now I know why your father hired me to look after you. Do you have any idea what could have happened to you at the pond? A princess should not run away from the palace unattended, strip down in the nearest puddle, and touch—”

“Shut up!” She shoved him hard in the chest with both hands. “Do not say another word! If you ever mention that again, I’ll—”

“What? Scream? Tell your father?” He arched an eyebrow. “Fine, let’s go tell your father that you wish me dismissed because I saw you naked and—”

“Washing myself.”

He smirked. “Yes, washing between your legs with both hands. Gently bathing your tender pink—”

“Bastard!” She reached up to slap him, and he grabbed her arm.

“What did I tell you before? You will not strike me! Hurl all the words you wish, but never hit me, little princess. I’ll not have it.” He released her arm and she kicked over a footstool.

“Go on, abuse the furniture. Get it out of your system,” he said. “You *did* get it out of your system, didn’t you?”

“Shut up!” She stomped her boot on the blue carpet.

“You did as I suggested and completed the act, did you not? You’re not still...unfinished?”

Her green eyes blazed. “How am I to do anything if I’m never left alone? The moment I arrived, stablehands and maids-in-waiting surrounded me, then I was taken to my father. Now you’re here. When

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am I ever alone? Why do you think I elude my guards and throw my maidservants out?"

He suppressed a laugh. "For that?"

"And other things," she grumbled, then flopped into a cushioned chair. "I do not wish to be hounded. Every day instructors teach me piano, dance, or sewing. I'm whisked off to dinners and forced to meet dreadful men I cannot stand!"

"You're frustrated. That's what happens if you get interrupted and cannot relieve the pressure. If it continues for too long, it turns into the most uncomfortable ache. Soon you can think of nothing else."

She looked at him. "How do you know? Are you an expert on the subject?"

He shrugged. "I'm a man. We have needs, and so do women, it seems."

"What do you know of women? You get your thrills peeking—" A knock on the door interrupted her. "Come in, dammit!"

A maid entered and curtsied. "Your Highness, the ladies are here to dress you for dinner. Shall I send them in?"

"Now?"

The maid nodded. "Yes, his Majesty said the guests will be arriving in an hour. That's barely time to dress you."

"Very well, if you must," she grumbled and glanced at him. "See? I get no peace."

Moments later, a flurry of women entered the room and whisked Elara into her bedchamber.

Dalton paced around the sitting room, his head buzzing from all the excitement. Why had King Maxwell assigned him to watch over Elara? What was he supposed to do with her? She was certainly a handful.

"Do not touch me!" Elara shouted through the closed door.

"Your bosom seems sensitive today, your Highness."

"Shut up about my bosom or I'll strike you!"

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Dalton settled into a chair and grinned. Now he understood why Elara was in such a foul mood; she hadn't been able to sate herself. No wonder her father wanted her married. Whether Elara knew it or not, a man would quench her desires.

Nearly an hour later, the bedchamber door opened. Elara stepped out wearing a low-cut emerald green dress. Her long, golden hair hung to her shoulders and shimmered in the light. The ladies quickly hustled out the door.

He took a deep breath and detected the sweet scent of roses. "You look beautiful," he said, bowing to her.

"I'm going to die." She turned away and leaned against the table, her chest heaving.

"What's wrong?" He hurried to her side. "Are you ill?"

"No." She shook her head, and the pearls weaved into her hair rattled. "They were touching me everywhere; stroking my legs as they put on my stockings, rubbing creams all over me, and powdering my breasts." She closed her eyes. "I'm ready to burst, and now I must attend a dinner and entertain fifty men."

"Fifty in one night? That will keep you busy."

She opened her eyes. "Very funny. My father insists I marry one of the fools he's invited here."

"Marriage will be good for you. It will soothe your needs," he teased.

"Quiet! I do not need you here."

"No, but you do need to settle yourself. Go into your bedchamber and finish."

Her mouth dropped open. "What? I cannot do that!"

"Why not? You weren't shy about it at the pond."

"I was alone...or so I thought," she growled. "I cannot do that with you out here. You'll listen."

He shook his head. "If you go downstairs so highly aroused, I'll

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have to beat those men away with a club. Your chest is heaving, your skin is flushed, and I imagine every heartbeat sends a surge of blood to your lower parts.”

“I ache,” she whispered. “Why didn’t you let me finish at the pond?”

“I wanted to. If you hadn’t discovered me, I would have let you continue all day. I wanted to watch,” he admitted. He was enjoying this honest conversation. Elara certainly was peculiar. No other woman would have allowed him to speak to her in such a blunt manner.

She glanced at him, then turned away. “You do not think it vulgar of me to...*bathe* myself?”

“Not at all. I never knew women did such things, but I’m grateful to have witnessed it.”

To his surprise, she laughed. “And what of men? Do they...” She gave him a knowing look.

“Oh yes. All the time.” He leaned closer. “In fact, after you left, I had to tend to my own...” He cleared his throat. “...*bathing* needs.”

Her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth with her gloved hand. “You mean you—”

“Yes, the sight of you touching yourself drove me to it. I was overcome.” He looked into her eyes. “You are a beautiful young woman. Any man would be lucky to have you for a bride.”

“Do you mean it?” She cocked her head to one side. “I made you want to...? You had to...?” She giggled. “But that still leaves me...”

“Go.” He gestured toward her bedroom. “Lift your skirts and finish with yourself. You’ll suffer all through dinner if you do not.” He grinned. Would she really do it?

“You won’t tell? Or peek?”

“No.”

She cast him a sideways glance. “Very well then. I shan’t be but a moment or two,” she said as she hurried into her room and closed the

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door.

He pulled a chair up to the door and sat down. "I'll stand guard so you will not be disturbed."

"Fine. Just leave me alone," she called out.

"As you wish, Princess. Do you need anything?"

"Only some quiet!"

He leaned his head back against the door. At first he heard nothing, but then a faint moan came from Elara's bedchamber.

"Yes, ohhh, yes," Elara whispered.

After a few moments, he heard a series of muffled squeals and deep sighs. He chuckled. Elara was a most unusual princess.

* * *

Elara sat in her chair staring off into space. Only three hours into her evening with her suitors and she was ready to scream. Each potential mate was granted ten minutes of her time. At the end of the evening, she would make a list of the men she wished to visit with tomorrow. Her father had designed this ridiculous system so she could meet as many noblemen as possible and choose a husband quickly.

She sighed. Why did she need a husband? Just hours ago, she'd proven yet again that she did not need a man to satisfy her needs.

She caught Dalton's gaze and smiled. He had been standing several feet off to her side all night, watching her intently and pretending not to listen to her conversations.

Dalton had been right...she never would have been able to sit through dinner in her previous state. He must have heard her cries of pleasure through the door, but he hadn't teased her about what she'd done. Too bad he was not a suitor; she found him much more interesting than any of the men here.

She tuned back into the suitor's droning voice.

"Collecting coins is very entertaining. I have a rare one from Micosia. If you'd like to see it, I can bring it to your room later

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tonight,” he said, stroking the back of her gloved hand.

Elara recoiled. “Get your hands off me!” She looked up as Dalton appeared at her side. “Take him away.”

Dalton escorted the protesting man out of the sitting room and returned to her table a moment later. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“No. I’m bored to death. Can we say that I’ve fainted from all the attention, and send them home? I do not need a husband.”

“I know. I hear you can take care of yourself.” He winked.

“Oh, shut up! You weren’t supposed to listen!”

She looked away. She was slightly embarrassed about what she’d done, but overall, she felt so relieved that it did not matter. What Dalton could never know was that she had imagined his strong hands slipping between her legs and stroking her into a frenzy. In the few hours since she’d met him, he had seen her touching herself, tweaked her nipple, and slapped her bare behind. What difference did it make if he heard her moans of ecstasy?

“How could I not listen? Such sweet cries are music to my ears,” Dalton whispered, then gestured toward the door as another suitor entered. “Your latest victim, my princess.”

* * *

Dalton followed Elara as she hurried down the wide corridor. “Taxes, treaties, coins! Bah!” She flung open her door and stepped into the room. “I’ve never suffered through more boring conversations in my life! How are men trained to be so dull?”

He closed the door. “Perhaps they were nervous. You intimidate men. They’re not certain how to speak to you.”

She pulled off her gloves. “You do not have that problem. You speak plainly and have no qualms about getting on *my* nerves. You even were so bold as to swat my bottom!”

“And I’d do it again.”

Their gazes locked, and she swallowed hard. “With or without my

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dress on?"

He grinned. "Your choice. Merely let me know when you'd like it."

She giggled. "That's what I mean. You're lively, you have character. Those men, bah! They just sit there like lumps." She sighed. "They're not interested in me. They just came to court me in the hope I'd marry them. I have quite a dowry, you know."

"I can imagine. The only daughter of a powerful king must attract treasure seekers. Now you know why your father asked me to guard you."

She kicked off her shoes. "You may go now. I'll send for you in the morning."

He shook his head. "I'm not leaving."

"What? You're going to stay here all night? I do not need you lurking about! I shall send for my father, he'll—"

"He'll tell you that I'll be sleeping there." He pointed at the daybed.

"I do not want you here! There are no dragons beneath my bed!"

"Regardless of what you want..." He arched an eyebrow. "...I'm staying."

"Oh! Will I ever be rid of you?"

He smiled as she stormed into her bedroom. He'd suspected that she'd want to toy with herself again at bedtime, and her urgency to throw him out proved it. He pulled the coverlet down on the daybed. Elara was unabashed, yet—

A blood-curdling scream broke through his thoughts, and he raced toward Elara's bedchamber. Elara collided with him as she came running out.

"In there!"

He bolted into the room and caught a man stumbling out of a large wardrobe. Dalton tackled him to the ground and punched him hard in the jaw. The man struggled, and he hit him again, knocking him out cold.

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When he looked up, Elara was standing in the doorway, wide-eyed. He rushed to her side. "Are you hurt? Did he touch you?"

"No." She curled against his chest, her entire body shaking. "I was sitting at the dressing table taking off my necklace. I glanced into the looking glass and saw the wardrobe door open. Then a hand came out! I screamed." She pointed at the prone figure lying on the floor. "That man! He's the one who touched me earlier tonight!"

"Shh, I'm here. I will not let anything happen to you." He wrapped his arm around Elara's trembling shoulders and led her into the outer corridor. "Go to your father's rooms and tell him to summon the guards."

He waited until Elara was gone, then reentered her room. She was right; the intruder was the same man who had touched her earlier. He picked up a dirty burlap sack lying near the bed and opened it. It contained a sharp hunting knife and four lengths of stout rope.

"Sick bastard!" He kicked the unconscious man in the ribs and tossed the sack onto his chest. Protecting Elara was no longer a game.

* * *

Elara nudged Dalton's shoulder again, harder this time. "Dalton, wake up."

He blinked a few times and sat up. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No." She bit her bottom lip. How could she tell him? Would he laugh at her? She glanced over her shoulder at her bedroom door. Even though the royal guards had taken that dreadful man to the dungeon hours ago, she still felt scared.

After all the commotion, she had gone to bed and fallen into a fitful sleep, only to wake from a nightmare. In her dream, the man from the wardrobe had come across her at the pond. He'd been trying to molest her when Dalton arrived and saved her.

"I cannot sleep. May I stay here with you?"

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He nodded. "I'll move to the floor. You—"

"No, I mean...with you." She gazed into his eyes. "I'd feel safer if you could hold me."

He frowned, then pulled back the satin coverlet. "Climb in. There isn't much room for two."

She slid into the daybed and cuddled against him. Dalton smelled like spicy cologne. The scent had a calming effect on her. "I do not wish to be alone. When I think about what might have—"

"Shh, do not dwell on it. It's over." He tucked the bedcovers around her. "I told you you'd be grateful for my protection. It seems I was right."

"Yes. You were right about a lot today. Thank you for saving me." She kissed his stubbled cheek, and a tingle shot through her lower body. It was the first time she had ever kissed anyone, and she liked it.

Dalton licked his lips. "Fear not, he will never get near you again."

"Not with you here," she said, wriggling a little closer and pressing her breasts against Dalton's chest. A warm pulsating sensation built deep inside her, and she longed to feel Dalton's touch again. Would he understand her growing need and hold her? "You saved me."

"I'd protect you with my life."

"Because I'm a princess?"

He looked into her eyes. "Because I've grown fond of your complaining...and I like the way you bathe," he teased.

She smiled. "You deserve a reward. If he had attacked when I was in bed—"

"Do not think about that." He stroked her cheek. "What reward are you offering?"

"I'll let you kiss me as much as you like."

"Elara!"

"Nobody's ever kissed me. You'd be the first. Would you like to?"

"Very much."

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“Good. Go ahead.” She closed her eyes, anticipating the pressure of Dalton’s mouth on hers. What would it feel like? Would she know what to do?

“But I won’t.”

She opened her eyes. “Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be proper.” He inched away from her. “You curling up next to me isn’t proper, either. You should be in your own bed.”

She pouted. “All alone? What if I get scared in the dark?”

“Light a candle.”

She slid her hand under the coverlet. “I’ve never been in bed with anyone before. Have you?”

“Yes.”

She thought for a moment. Dalton intrigued her. She wanted to know all about him. Why didn’t he want to kiss her? She wouldn’t tell anyone. After what they had shared today, it hardly seemed inappropriate. Perhaps he was nervous because of her status. She reached out and touched his thick chest muscles with her fingertips. “Have you ever had a lover?”

He grinned. “Several.”

“Did you pleasure them?”

“Yes. They were quite satisfied.” He paused. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m curious about such things,” she said, running her fingers through his coarse chest hair.

“Are you? I could not tell. From the way you’re acting, I thought you were terribly shy.”

“Do not mock me.” She inched closer and flattened her breasts against his chest. Her nipples hardened, and she let out a little moan. “I was wondering...would you like to go to the pond tomorrow?”

“For what? Fishing?”

“No, silly.” She stroked his chest again. Dalton’s skin was hot, and the hard, manly feel of him made her body tingle. “I do not wish to stay

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here all day. I'd rather go riding or something..." she trailed off, hoping he'd understand.

"Fine. I'll see that one of your father's guards accompanies you."

"My father's guards? I do not want them anywhere near me!" She touched him again. "I want you."

"I've been sent here to guard you while you are courting. If you are not going to meet those men, then I will go home and resume pleasuring all my lovers," he quipped, and rolled away from her.

"Bah!" She shoved his shoulder. "Why do I allow you to stay here?"

He chuckled. "Because I do not fall for your trickery, little princess." He looked at her over his shoulder. "And that makes me a challenge. You may be used to getting your way all the time, but I am not impressed with your wealth or status." He adjusted his pillow. "Get a good night's rest. You'll want to look refreshed for your suitors in the morning."

* * *

Dalton sat at the marble side table, eating his afternoon meal. Elara was giving her father an earful about meeting with the remaining suitors.

"I strolled in the gardens with Harry, David, and George. Dull, duller, and dullest! One of them talked to me about hats! Hats!" She threw a buttered roll across the table. "Am I diseased that no charming man in the kingdom has come to court me?"

"What about Sir Richard of Ashby? He has big brown eyes," the king said.

"So does my horse!"

Dalton smirked and sipped his lemon tea. He had to agree with Elara; listening to the suitors' banal chatter was grating on his nerves as well. Elara was cordial to the men, but they were no matches for a woman like her. Her situation reminded him of his own failed

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experiences with matchmaking at home. The women in Lerwick were meek and would be perfect for Elara's soft suitors.

"And after what happened last night, you expect me to talk pleasantly to these men? You should cancel this charade! I was nearly beset upon! If it weren't for Dalton saving me—"

Dalton suppressed a grin. Elara certainly was skilled at manipulating people. She had almost gotten to him last night. Her tender touches had sparked a fire in his loins, and he had lain there, hard as a rock and suffering, while she tormented him. It was all he could do to act obnoxious and hope she would leave him before he went mad from lust.

After Elara realized she was not going to get her way, she had stomped into her bedroom and slammed the door. A few moments later, he'd slipped his hand into his breeches and fondled himself, envisioning Elara's hand stroking him. He'd climaxed quickly and stifled his grunts and moans in the satin pillow.

What would the king think of him if he knew what he'd done?

"I'm glad you think Dalton is doing a good job," King Maxwell said.

"Yes! Without him I'd be kidnapped, or worse! This morning one of the men tried to bribe him into leaving us alone so he could put his hands on me," she said, glancing at him.

Dalton met Elara's gaze and winked. That was true. A lord had offered him a great deal of money to leave him alone with Elara for an hour. He had wilted the pathetic man with one look, then called the royal guards to dispose of him.

"These men have come a long way to see you, Elara. Be polite and—"

"Polite! Bah! The men you've chosen are boring and feeble-brained!"

"Your brothers are married."

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“Good for them! They’ve had adventures and done interesting things. What have I done? Nothing! I’m forced to rot here and learn dancing and needlepoint and discuss different patterns of lace with dressmakers. I want to travel. I deserve to see exciting things—”

“I paid your tutors a great deal to teach you how to act gentle and kind. Try being more ladylike,” the king said. “Be more receptive. Do not be so quick to judge your suitors. They’re all noblemen who desire a wife.”

“Yes, and any wealthy woman will do. They do not love me; they want my dowry. All they are concerned with is securing their riches on the wedding night!”

Dalton heard a pang of sincerity in her voice. Despite her brash ways, Elara *was* vulnerable. She had been terrified of the intruder last night, and he recalled the fearful look in her eyes when he had grabbed her at the pond. Deep down, was she afraid of giving herself to a man? Is that why she refused to marry?

“That’s enough! You are going to conduct your evening meetings with your suitors!” King Maxwell stood and strode to the door.

Elara opened her mouth to protest.

“Not another word, Elara!”

The moment the king left the room, Elara hurled a pitcher of honey at the door. The gold-rimmed container shattered into bits. “I hate this!”

Dalton cleared his throat. “I may have a solution to your problem.”

She glared at him. “If you suggest I go upstairs and—”

“No, no, not that.” He approached her table and sat down. “Do you want to waste your time talking to these men, or would you like a faster way to screen them?”

“The sooner I’m rid of them, the better.” She grinned. “What must I do?”

* * *

“They are all fools!” Elara shouted, and crumpled up a sheet of

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paper. "Some idea you had." She threw the paper at Dalton's head.

"It is faster though, is it not?"

"It's far better than having my feet trampled by clumsy oafs!" She kicked off her black shoes and flopped onto the daybed. Today had been another waste of a day. Her entire evening had been spent entertaining the remaining fifteen suitors with dancing and conversation. "I think a few of my toes are still unbroken."

She glanced at Dalton and was pleased to see he was coming to her side. She pouted up at him and wriggled her toes.

"Would you like to soak your feet in a hot bath? Or would you rather I rub them?"

She giggled. "Rub me, please?"

Her heart thundered as Dalton clasped her left foot and started massaging it. She let out a soft sigh and relaxed against the back of the daybed.

"Read me a question," he said.

She shuffled the stack of papers in her hands. Dalton had come up with the brilliant idea of having her suitors answer questions as a way to screen them. It was an easy means to determine who had the same interests she did. So far, only three men had given her enough acceptable answers to earn a meeting with her tomorrow.

"The lady of the house has gone to tea with friends and returns three hours later than she was expected. What action should her husband take?"

She looked at Dalton. He was focused on her foot. His strong hands moved in slow circles, working out the tension in her arch. She imagined the feel of his powerful hands stroking and caressing other parts of her body.

"He meets her at the door and takes her to bed immediately," he answered.

"What? He puts her to bed like a child? That's—"

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“Not what I said.” He leaned over the daybed, and his hot breath tickled the side of her neck. “He *takes* her to bed. That’s quite different from *putting* her to bed.”

“How so?”

“He takes her to bed and makes love to her all night. His wife is so pleased, she makes it a habit to come home on time for fear she’ll miss more of his affections.” He grinned. “Is that the correct answer?”

She swallowed hard and gazed into Dalton’s eyes. It was not the answer she had devised, but it certainly sounded good. Part of her longed for the courage to reach out and pull Dalton to her—and then what? She had offered him kisses last night, but he had turned her down. Perhaps this teasing was merely a game to him.

“I like your answer. None of the other men thought of that. They all said to punish her by not allowing her to leave the house without his supervision, and other nonsense.” She stared down at the paper in front of her and wished for the hundredth time that Dalton was one of her suitors. She wouldn’t have the slightest hesitation about marrying him.

“Ask me something else. A hard one.”

“Only if you keep rubbing my feet. I like the way you do that. It feels good.”

“It’s my pleasure to make you feel good.” He winked. “Anything else you’d like rubbed?”

“Not now, but when I do, I’ll let you know.” She laughed, then cleared her throat. “A lady has been captured by an undesirable and is given a choice to earn her freedom. She either must run through a burning room or walk through a chamber containing wolves that have not been fed in two months. Which does she choose?”

Dalton furrowed his brows for a moment. “Is she a clever lady or a dimwitted girl?”

She tossed her head back. “What do you think?”

He began massaging her right foot. “I think she’s such a clever lady

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that she strolls through the room filled with wolves without a care.”

“Why?”

He leaned closer. “If they haven’t been fed in two months, they’re dead.”

“Very good! I should have given you the test!”

Dalton smiled, then a serious expression crossed his face. “Your future husband should be chosen on more than these questions, Elara. You must take your feelings for him into consideration. How does he make you feel? Are you excited to see him? Does he spark your lust when you think of him? A man who can do all that should be your mate.”

“But I feel none of that toward any of these fools.”

“Not even Baron Varney?”

She pulled her foot from Dalton’s hands. The baron! He was charming and handsome and had written down acceptable answers to her questions. Out of all the noblemen she had met, he seemed the most likely to earn her favors. He had lavished her with attention while dancing with her tonight, but he did not spark the hot, lustful feelings in her that Dalton did.

“Possibly,” she said, then rose and walked to the windows. She could not face Dalton. It broke her heart to think that someone she liked so much was merely a guard. Her father would never allow her to marry a commoner.

“Ah! So the baron will be the lucky man.”

“I’m not discussing it.” She turned to him. “I wish to go to bed now. Do you insist on searching my room?”

“Of course. I’d be remiss in my duty if I didn’t.”

Dalton walked past her and entered her bedchamber. She stood in the doorway while he searched the wardrobes and looked under the bed. After last night’s fright, she was taking no chances.

“There’s nothing...a-ha! What’s this?” He pulled a white silk

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stocking out from under the bed and waved it in the air.

“Put that down!” She raced into the room and lunged for the stocking. Dalton held it over his head. “Is this what a princess wears beneath her dress?”

“Give that to me!” She knocked him backward onto the bed and pounced on him.

“This would make a nice souvenir.”

“Beast!” She squirmed as they playfully struggled for the stocking. A moment later, Dalton turned his head and his lips brushed against hers.

She gasped. Dalton had stopped laughing and was staring up at her. She closed her eyes and felt his finger caress her cheek.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered.

The next thing she knew, Dalton’s mouth covered hers. The feel of his warm, moist lips sent a searing heat through her. After a few seconds of heaven, he pulled away.

“I should not have done that.”

She gazed down at him and licked her lips. “I’m glad you did. It was nice.” She swallowed hard. Her heart hammered out of control, and her lower body throbbed. This was the feeling she was supposed to have when she met with her suitors. “Kiss me again.”

“With pleasure.”

Dalton wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her down onto him. His mouth moved against hers, and a spark of fire flashed between her legs. She kissed him, tentatively at first, then with more passion as she was swept away by desire.

He slid his hands across her back and down to her buttocks. She moaned as he squeezed her through her dress. Was this what it felt like to have a man make love to her? Every night should be like this.

She ignored a faint rapping on the sitting room door. Was that a lady-in-waiting coming to undress her for bed? She needed no help

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with her clothes. Dalton was here, he could remove her dress and then...

“Elara?”

Dalton broke the kiss and sat up quickly. “It’s your father!”

Elara yelped as she tumbled onto the carpet.

Dalton stood and pulled his green tunic down over his breeches. She rose to her knees just as her father stepped into her bedchamber.

“What’s happening here? Elara, why are you on the floor?” Her father scowled at Dalton. “Why are you holding one of my daughter’s stockings?”

She ducked behind the bed and pulled off her right earring. “I dropped my earring on the floor.” She stood and held her hand out. “See? I found that stocking under the bed.”

Dalton nodded. “The man from last night must have been trying to steal it. It was overlooked in all the confusion.”

Her father arched an eyebrow. “I see. Go to bed, Elara. You have a long day tomorrow. I wish to speak with Dalton for a moment.”

Dalton handed her the stocking. Her body quivered as their fingers touched. Their gazes locked, and she licked her lips.

“Good night, Princess. Sleep well,” Dalton said, then followed her father out of the room.

* * *

Dalton entered Elara’s sitting room and flopped onto the powder blue settee. He leaned his head back on the cushion and closed his eyes. Although his meeting with King Maxwell had been short, it had left him feeling guilt-ridden and depressed.

The king had questioned him about Elara. He wanted to know how well they were getting along and asked if her brazen behavior had soured his opinion of her. He had assured King Maxwell that he and Elara had grown accustomed to each other and added that Elara’s lively personality made her quite interesting.

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“Good. I’m happy to hear that she’s not run you off. It’s rare that she gets on well with anyone...especially a man. I’m glad you’re here, Dalton. You have proven that you are trustworthy. There’s no one else I’d rather have guarding my only daughter.”

He had thanked the king for his kind words and hurried from his private chambers as soon as he could.

Dalton let out a long sigh as another flood of guilt washed over him. How could he act like such a scoundrel? It was not like him at all. He was supposed to be noble and dignified, not behave like a lust-crazed fiend. Elara was his charge. He had no right to kiss and grope her, even if she did enjoy it. What would the king have done if he’d caught them in the throes of that passionate embrace? He shook his head in disgust. What would have happened if the king *hadn’t* interrupted them?

Elara was a passionate young woman, and although he was falling for her, they could never be together. She was too young for him, and his duties in Lerwick kept him busy. Elara needed to find a husband her age and forget about him. Besides, he reasoned, they had only known each other for two days; in time, her infatuation with him would fade and...

He heard Elara’s bedchamber door squeak, and he opened his eyes. Elara was walking toward him wearing a sheer lavender dressing gown. He swallowed hard. She was naked beneath the robe, and her pale skin shone through the thin material. He could see her pink nipples, the curve of her hips, and the dark triangle of hair between her legs.

“Elara! Go put something on.”

She grinned and twirled in front of him. The faint scent of roses wafted to his nostrils. “I do have something on. Do you like it?”

“No,” he croaked. For the sake of propriety, he had to spurn Elara’s advances. She was innocent and did not understand what her teasing would do to him.

She pouted. “Why not? I thought you would.”

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"I can see your..." He looked away. "...everything."

"I know." She walked to the settee and leaned over him. "You saw everything at the pond, too. You even touched me, remember?" She straddled his legs and sat in his lap.

He groaned as a rush of blood surged to his groin. What had come over her? Had his kisses sparked these wanton feelings? "You should go to bed."

She giggled and pressed her breasts against his chest. "That's a good idea. Would you like to come with me?" she whispered in his ear.

He closed his eyes and listened to his heart hammering in his chest. Elara adjusted her weight on his lap and leaned closer. His member stiffened and strained against his breeches. He wanted Elara more than he had ever wanted any other woman, but he could not have her. He glanced into her eyes. "No. Leave me alone."

"Why? You kissed me tonight. We could—"

"That was a horrible mistake," he blurted out. "Now get off me."

She pulled away. "What? How can you say that? It was wonderful, magical. I've never felt—"

"I regret ever having done it. It was a dreadful—"

"Dreadful?" Elara climbed off his lap. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm dreadful and horrible?" She glared at him. "How dare you! You touched me first! You kissed me, and suddenly I'm not worthy?"

He glanced down. It pained him to act mean toward her, but it was for the best. He could only resist her advances for so long. Although it was cruel, he needed to push her away. "You'll get over it," he snapped.

Her mouth dropped open. "You bastard! You tricked me into liking you! How could I ever have trusted you?" She folded her arms across her heaving chest. "I'm horrible, am I? Well, I'll show you! I'll prove to you that I can make a man want me! You'll see!" She rushed into her

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bedroom and slammed the door.

* * *

“Still angry with me, Elara?”

Elara turned in the saddle and glared at him. “Address me as Princess Elara. You are a commoner, and nothing more than my hired guard,” she snarled, and nudged her white horse forward.

Dalton followed Elara across the grassy field. She was furious with him for rejecting her last night, and she had insulted him all day. To make matters worse, she flirted with Baron Varney at every turn. She had insisted the baron be seated next to her at the morning meal, and had allowed him to give her a leg up onto her horse. The baron was taking advantage of the situation and spared no opportunity to flatter her.

Dalton shook his head and gazed up into the cloudless sky. Despite the beautiful spring day, he felt ill at ease. Elara had no romantic feelings toward the baron; she was merely acting this way to prove a point and to make him jealous. Unfortunately, her scheme was working all too well. His blood boiled each time Elara showered the baron with attention.

He caught up with the group of riders near a grove of elms and dismounted. Even though Elara was angry with him, he still intended to keep watch over her. If she thought her rude behavior would chase him away, she was wrong. He stepped into a ring of trees and stopped when he heard a familiar voice.

“It’s nonsense, making us compete like dogs for her scraps of attention. She’s a terror. No man would even come to court her if she did not have a royal dowry.”

Dalton cocked his head to one side. That was the baron! He was talking to his manservant while he relieved himself.

“Once we’re wed, she’ll learn who’s in charge. I’ll tear into her so hard on our wedding night she’ll beg me for mercy. She’ll cry and

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bleed until she agrees to obey me. I'll—"

Dalton lunged out from behind the tree and slammed his fist into Baron Varney's jaw. The baron fell through the shrubbery and out onto the field.

"You son of a bitch!" Dalton kicked the baron in the ribs. "Cry and bleed? I'll show you what it means to—"

"Dalton! Stop!" Elara shouted. "What are you doing to him?"

"That bastard deserved it, and more. He's lucky I—"

"Enough!" Elara dismounted and stood between him and the baron. "Go back to the palace and wait for me in the main drawing room." She squared her shoulders and glared into his eyes. "Now."

* * *

Dalton paced back and forth in the drawing room. How could he explain what happened? He did not want to hurt her feelings, but he had to make Elara understand the baron was only after her dowry.

"How dare you!" The door slammed, and he turned to face Elara. She looked ready to kill.

"Elara, let me—"

She slapped him hard across the face. "You were instructed to address me in the proper manner! You are a lowly guard my father hired to watch over me—"

He clasped her wrist as she raised her hand to slap him again. "I was."

"How? By assaulting the baron? Do you realize he can have you thrown in irons for what you did?" Her green eyes narrowed to slits. "Are you so jealous that you—"

"Jealous? I hit him because he deserved it! He was speaking ill of you. I defended your honor."

Elara yanked from his grip. "I can defend my own honor! What did he say that was so terrible you felt the need to pummel him?"

He shook his head. "I will not repeat it."

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“Oh yes you will!” She rested her hands on her hips. “You will tell me now, or else!”

“Or else what? You cannot dismiss me. Only your father can and he’s away for the rest of the day.” He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Why did everything have to be a battle with her? Couldn’t she see he was trying to protect her?

She poked him in the chest with her finger. “I do not believe the baron said anything wrong. I think you were angry with me and took it out on him. You beat him because you were jealous; jealous because I’m going to marry him!”

“Like hell! You do not know what he’s like—”

“Then tell me.” She smirked. “If he truly said something, then tell me. Otherwise I must believe that you attacked him for no reason.”

He shook his head. “No.”

Elara stomped her foot on the carpet. “I order you to tell me!”

“It’s cruel and it will make you cry.”

She glared at him. “Words have not yet been invented that can make me cry. Now tell me!”

“Fine. If you must know.” He repeated the baron’s words verbatim. Elara’s eyes widened, and she turned away. She was quiet for a moment, then cleared her throat.

“Is that possible?”

“What?”

She looked at him, and he saw tears welling in her eyes. “I’m familiar with my own body, but I know nothing of men.” Her voice cracked. “Could a man hurt a woman that way?”

He nodded. “Yes. Lovemaking can be tender or terrible, depending on how the man treats the woman.”

She bowed her head. “I see.”

“He acts innocent, but Baron Varney is after your dowry. I admit, I lost control.” He touched her shoulder. “But I could not stand by and

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allow him to speak of you that way. You deserve better.”

He held his breath as Elara pulled away and marched to the door.

“Guards!”

Seconds later, two royal guards appeared in the doorway.

“Find Baron Varney and his manservant and remove them from the grounds immediately,” she ordered.

Elara turned from the door and looked at him over her shoulder. “Tell the remaining suitors to leave. My courting is over. I’m going upstairs.” A tear dripped down her cheek, and she wiped it away with her gloved hand. “I wish to be left alone,” she said as she hurried from the drawing room.

* * *

Dalton knocked on Elara’s door and waited. It was almost nine o’clock. She had not come out of her chambers all day and had refused the dinner he’d had sent to her room.

He opened the door and peeked inside. Elara was standing near a tall cabinet, holding a glass of liquor. “May I come in?”

She frowned. “I suppose.”

He entered the room and closed the door behind him. “What are you doing?”

“Getting drunk.” She downed the amber beverage in two gulps. “Are they gone?”

“Yes. Why are you drinking?”

“I may as well.” She refilled the glass. “I’m done courting, forever!” She scowled. “What is wrong with me? Why can’t I find anyone?”

“You will. Give it time. You’re young and—”

“Like hell.” She drained the glass. “I’m nearly 23 years old.”

“You are?” He walked toward her. “I thought you were 17, at most.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why do you think my father so urgently

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wishes me to marry? I'm an old crone."

He smiled. "You're far from a crone. I'm 26 and I'm not married."

"So? Why should *you* marry? You're content to travel the land and watch naked girls in bathing pools. You've had lovers to sate your needs. What do I get? A few passionate kisses and then..." She was silent for a minute. "I'm left alone to nurse my broken heart." She paced the room and sipped her drink. "Allan was right."

"Who?"

"My brother. He warned me years ago that men would say and do anything to earn my favors to get my dowry. I could be the ugliest hag in the land and men would flatter me to get wealthy. Why should I marry a man I do not love? On my wedding night, shall I part my legs and lie there, enjoying nothing while my new husband has his fill of me? Once he's taken that precious ruby between my legs—"

"Elara!" Her crude words shocked him. "That's enough." He took the glass from her hand and set it on the oak table. "You're drunk and upset. Sit down."

She flopped onto the daybed. "All men think I'm horrible."

He sat down next to her. "That's not true."

She nodded. "Even you think so. Last night—"

"Last night I acted like an ass," he blurted out. "I had just come from a meeting with your father. He told me how much he trusted me. I felt guilty betraying that trust. I was trying to resist you, even though I wanted nothing more than to gather you into my arms and kiss you all night."

Elara bowed her head. "I behaved like a fool. Throwing myself at you like that was ridiculous. You must think I'm dreadful."

"No. On the contrary, I liked your little show," he admitted. "At the time, I thought you were much too young for me. We're closer in age than I suspected, and that's a good thing." He wrapped his arm around Elara's shoulders and squeezed her tight. "You're a beautiful,

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intelligent woman. Where I come from, the women are boring. They would never dream of ‘bathing’ in a sunlit pool of water or wearing a sheer dressing gown with nothing beneath it.”

She giggled and rested her head against his shoulder. “You’re so good to me, Dalton. Out of all the men I’ve met in the last few days, you’re the only one who understands me. Everyone caters to me but you. We argue, and no matter what I say or do, you stay by my side. You defended me.” She sighed. “You kissed me.”

“And I’d do it again in an instant.”

She raised her head and gazed into his eyes. “Then do.”

He cupped her chin and angled her head toward his. Their lips met, and he kissed Elara down to her soul. She clutched his shoulders as he parted her lips and eased his tongue into her mouth. His head swam, and he felt a familiar stirring in his loins. Elara teased him with her tongue, long and slow, before she broke the embrace.

“Wait here a moment,” she whispered.

“Why? Where are you going?”

“You’ll see,” she said, as she hurried into her bedchamber.

He closed his eyes and listened to his heart thundering in his ears. Elara was not the innocent child he had thought she was. Knowing that changed everything between them.

“Dalton, please come in here,” she called out.

His thoughts swirled as he rose from the daybed and pulled his tunic down over his bulging breeches. He knew he shouldn’t go into her bedchamber, but he felt powerless to resist her tonight. He’d kiss Elara for a few moments, then break away to sate himself. Tomorrow morning he’d have a word with the king and make arrangements to—

He opened Elara’s door. Moonlight filtering in through the sheer curtains bathed the room in shadows. “Where are you?”

“Over here,” she called out from the bed.

“Elara, what are—”

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“Shh, don’t talk, just come here.”

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw Elara sitting up in bed. She extended her hand to him, and he clasped it. “Strip down and get in.”

He shook his head. “Elara...”

She pulled his hand under the rose-colored coverlet. The heavy weight of her breast filled his palm. She moved his hand back and forth. His thumb grazed her hardened nipple.

“You know you want to,” she said.

“It’s not proper. I—”

“I want you, Dalton.” She slid his hand down to her upper thigh. He groaned as his swollen member strained against his breeches. “Let’s make each other happy, just for tonight.”

His resolve faded in an instant. “As you wish, my princess.”

* * *

Elara closed her eyes as Dalton stripped out of his clothes. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she took a deep, calming breath. Despite her increasing nervousness, her lust was too great to ignore. Deep down, she knew she was hopelessly in love with him; he was the only man she wanted.

Dalton eased into bed and rolled onto his side to face her. “What shall I do?”

“Kiss me.”

When his mouth covered hers, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. The kisses were heavenly, but she needed more. She broke the embrace and inched the coverlet down to her waist. “Touch me.”

Dalton slid his hands to her breasts. She moaned as he squeezed her. He tweaked her nipples, sending a flash of desire through her privates.

“That feels good, but it’s not enough.” She parted her legs beneath

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the bedclothes. “Go lower.”

“As you wish.”

Dalton slipped a hand between her thighs. She gasped as his fingers grazed her intimate area. Although she had touched herself many times, Dalton’s hand was wider and felt different on her body. “Pleasure me,” she begged.

He wiggled his fingers against her. “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” She kissed his cheek. “Then show me what I must do for you.”

He guided her hand under the sheets. Something hard and thick poked her. “Oh! Is that your...?”

“Yes. Now wrap your hand around it gently.”

She encircled him with her hand, and his manhood jutted forward. “It feels odd.”

“Grip harder and slide your hand back and forth a bit,” he instructed.

“I do not wish to hurt you. What if I break it?”

He chuckled. “You won’t. Trust me, Elara, I’ve pulled on it so hard I thought I’d tear it off.” He kissed her. “You do that, while I do this.” He fingered the hard nub between her legs.

“Oh! You know just where to touch.”

Dalton thrust his hips forward, and his penis came to life in her hand. “We’ll pleasure each other this way. Keep your hand moving, and I’ll guarantee you’ll see stars.”

She stroked him as he explored her. His fingers twirled her sensitive rosebud, sending shockwaves up her spine. She squeezed his thick organ and moved her hand faster.

He moaned. “Do it like that. I like it.”

“I wish you were one of my suitors,” she whispered.

“Me too. I’ve wanted to touch you since the moment I saw you at the pond,” he confessed.

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She arched her hips up just as Dalton moved his hand down. His finger entered her partway, and she cried out in delight. “Oh, Dalton!”

He tickled her with his finger. “Like that?”

“Yes, it feels good!” She bucked her hips higher as he toyed with her. “More, please!”

Dalton slid another finger inside her, then worked them in and out in a steady rhythm. “That’s what it feels like, Elara. Imagine what’s in your hand filling you up inside.”

She rubbed him in time with his fingers moving inside her. Her hips rocked up and down with a will of their own, and the bed began bouncing under their movements. She opened her legs wider. “Keep going!” she begged.

“Oh, God!” Dalton exclaimed. “I’m going to explode.”

They moved their hands faster, straining and groaning in unison. She squealed loudly as she erupted in an orgasmic frenzy. Seconds later, Dalton’s manhood jerked hard against her hand. Something warm and wet spurted onto her upper thigh as he sighed and trembled next to her.

A moment later, Dalton withdrew his fingers and kissed her. She opened her eyes. He was smiling down at her.

“Satisfied, my princess?”

She rolled onto her side and curled against his wide chest. “I love you, Dalton.” She kissed his chest muscles as he wrapped his arms around her. “This was the best night of my life.”

He pulled her close. “Mine too. I wouldn’t trade this for anything.” He kissed her forehead. “Rest, my love. I’ve exhausted you.”

* * *

Elara rolled over and yawned. Sunlight streamed into her bedroom. She blinked a few times, then recalled the wonderful dream she’d had last night. Dalton had come into her bed and— That was no dream!

She sat up and looked around. Where was Dalton? The space in the

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bed next to her was empty. Dalton's clothes were not on the floor. "Perhaps he's on the daybed," she muttered.

She pulled on a nightdress and hurried into the sitting room. "Dalton?" She stopped and leaned against the doorjamb. He wasn't there.

* * *

"Answer me!" Elara banged her fist on her father's desk again. "Where is Dalton?"

King Maxwell glanced up from a stack of papers and scowled at her. "It's nearly midday and you've just woken up? Why aren't you dressed?"

"Never mind that." She folded her arms across her chest. For a moment, she wondered if her father knew what had happened last night. Even though she was still a virgin, she had taken a man into her bed and done unladylike things with him. "Where is Dalton?"

"He's gone. He had other business to attend to."

"Gone?" She reeled back and clasped the edge of the carved mahogany desk for support. Dalton was gone? How could he leave her after what they had shared last night?

"You no longer need a guard. Dalton was hired to stay on while you were entertaining suitors. You dismissed all of them yesterday. Dalton left this early morning."

Tears filled her eyes. Dalton was the one man she loved, and now she would never see him again. "But father—"

"I still insist that you get married, Elara. This morning I made arrangements for you to wed a duke from Lerwick."

"You cannot do that!" She pounded on the desk. "I refuse!"

Her father peered at her over the rim of his gold spectacles. "He'll be arriving today with his uncle, the king."

"But I—"

"No arguing. I expect you to act on your best behavior. No tantrums

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or fits of shouting.” He waved her off and gestured toward the door. “Go upstairs and get dressed. You should be happy. Today is the day you’ll meet your future husband.”

Elara burst into tears and bolted from the room.

* * *

Elara stood outside the drawing room door. Her stomach churned at the thought of stepping inside. King Tristan and his nephew had arrived an hour ago and were having drinks with her father. She had spent the day crying her heart out over losing Dalton. Only a few moments ago had she reluctantly allowed the ladies to dress her for dinner.

The last thing she wanted was to meet the duke. Her father could arrange all the marriages he wished; she would never be wed. Even if the duke was the kindest man in the world, she would still reject him. Dalton was the only man she would ever allow near her.

She smoothed the skirt of her yellow dress and reached for the doorhandle. To her surprise, the door opened inward. She looked up. Dalton stood in the doorway.

“You’re late as usual, Elara.”

“Dalton!” She threw herself into his arms. “You came back! When I woke up and saw that you weren’t in bed next to me, I—”

He covered her mouth with his hand. “Shh, your father’s right inside.” He pulled her into the drawing room and she looked around. Her father stood near the fireplace talking to an older man she had never seen before.

“This is his Royal Majesty, King Tristan of Lerwick,” Dalton said.

She curtsied at the king, then turned to Dalton. “We’ve got to run off together, now,” she whispered. “My father has arranged for me to marry the king’s nephew. We must leave before that wretched duke gets here.”

Dalton burst out laughing.

She slapped him on the shoulder. “This isn’t funny!”

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Dalton grinned. "Elara, I am the wretched duke."

She stared up at him, stunned. "What?"

"My uncle asked that I come here and perform a favor for your father. When I arrived, I learned that I was to be your guard." He rolled his eyes in the direction of the smirking kings. "Little did I know these two were secretly plotting to bring us together."

Her mouth dropped open. "Everything was a trick?"

"Not everything," her father answered. "Your suitors were sincere. But really, Elara, do you honestly think I'd leave you alone with a male guard I'd just hired?" He chuckled.

King Tristan stepped toward her. "I asked Dalton to come here, but instructed him not to tell anyone who he really was."

"But I knew, of course," King Maxwell said. "Think about it, Elara. If we had introduced the two of you in a formal setting, you never would have gotten along. But forcing you on each other seems to have worked. We thought this scheme was a clever way of finding out if you two were compatible."

Dalton arched an eyebrow and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Do you think we're compatible, Elara?"

Her mind flashed back to last night. She recalled the feel of Dalton's fingers slipping inside her, the low grunts and groans he made as she stroked his thick member, and the explosion as they climaxed together. A quiver ran through her lower body, and she grinned.

"Absolutely." She sighed and rested her head against Dalton's chest. "How soon before we're married, father? I'm suddenly eager to take a husband."

KELLI A. WILKINS

Kelli A. Wilkins is a freelance writer who has published dozens of short stories in a variety of genres, including romance, horror, and science fiction. She has also completed four full-length romance novels (as yet unpublished). Her contemporary novel, *A Perfect Match*, was one of ten finalists in the 2004 “American Title” book contest. In addition to her fiction, Kelli has written three non-fiction pet care books.

* * *

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