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#### **BESIEGING HIS LADY**

by

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#### **Chapter 1**

Martin burst out of the forest and into a small clearing on the top of a hill. Below him lay the road he sought, in the distance the cursed convent, and in between, his quarry. With a shout of triumph, he jabbed his spurs into his destrier's sides, urging the huge horse down the hillside with abandon. He reached the road.

The fading sounds of hoof beats told him his two companions had fallen far behind, but he knew he would need no help subduing the two women and one un-armored man in the party ahead. Lady Gwyneth was indeed foolish to travel so unprotected with an iron bound treasure chest strapped to a packhorse for all to see.

She glanced over her shoulder, and spurred her palfrey in a desperate attempt to reach the convent gates. More foolish yet, to think she could escape him. With a roar of indignation he sped past her servants, pulled even with her horse, and reached for its bridle. Yanking on the leather strap with one hand and his own reins with the other, he brought the two animals to skittering stops as he shouted, "Hold Madam. Your bridegroom cometh."

The hood of her cloak had fallen back revealing golden hair and dainty features. Martin breathed a sigh of relief. At least his heiress wasn't a hag. After the sorry state in which he'd found Blackstone Castle and the small village huddled around it, he'd fully expected the woman to be a gray haired crone with a wart on her nose. Then he noticed her narrowed eyes,

compressed lips, and flared nostrils. Was she frightened or angry?

"Fear not, Lady Gwyneth. I am Martin le Werre. You received the King's decree concerning our marriage, did you not?"

"I am only recently widowed, and I choose to enter a convent, not remarry."

"The choice is not yours to make. You are the King's ward, and he wants your lands under the control of a man he trusts."

"Have the lands and the title, I want nothing but to enter the church." She yanked on her reins, trying to break his grip on her bridle.

Martin ruthlessly pulled the hapless palfrey's head closer, so he could lean over and glare into her eyes. Aware of the gawking servants and his own guards, who had just arrived, he lowered his voice into a feral growl. "And what of the gold and jewels from Baron Rupert's treasury? Am I welcome to that?"

Her eyes widened. "I was married to the old baron for seven years. Surely I deserve something for my—my service."

"You do not deserve to beggar the barony or flaunt the King's decree."

She turned her head and looked toward the convent with such evident longing that he knew she had not yet surrendered her intentions. "Do you really think the abbess would bring the King's wrath down on her order by sheltering you?" he asked.

Her head and shoulders drooped. She looked so forlorn that he felt a twinge of pity, but he quickly brushed it aside. If he must marry an unwilling woman to finally secure land he had so long coveted, so be it. Gentling his hold on the palfrey, he slowly turned both horses away from the convent.

The lady did not resist.

"Let us return to the castle. I brought both wedding party and priest with me."

She blinked several times, and he thought her about to cry. Then her chin and her back stiffened. He released her bridle, and with her hand and foot, she signaled her horse to move forward. Her lips remained pinched but her head high as she rode in the direction from which she had come, more like a queen than a backcountry baron's widow.

After making sure the attendants and pack animals were trailing after him, Martin sighed wearily and relaxed into his saddle. Would his life never become easy? After years on battlefields where he fought not only to survive but also to win the notice that would carry him above the status of an ordinary knight, he'd been promoted to the King's personal guard. At court he had mastered the sly, knife-in-the-back fighting of courtiers, finally receiving his reward, land, a title, and a wife of his own.

He had thought success was his; that he could live out his life in ease. Then, after spending half of his life's savings so he could arrive at his holding in a style commiserate with his new station, he discovered a rundown castle and a runaway bride.

The news that his bride-to-be was a widow had pleased him, thinking he'd not have to waste time playing the silly games some untried girl would demand. Hearing that her husband had been much older, he'd expected the woman to be grateful to receive a man still in his prime. Looking at Lady Gwyneth's stiff back it was plain to see she was anything but pleased.

What had the steward at Blackstone Castle said after telling Martin of her flight? "The lady is willful." An obvious understatement. With her youth and beauty, she'd undoubtedly led her elderly husband around by the nose. Well, she wouldn't be married to a sickly old man this time. Martin would quickly teach her who was master in his castle.

\* \* \* \*

It took all of Gwyneth's self-control to suppress a groan when Blackstone Castle came into view. The late afternoon sun outlined the castle's silhouette, blotting out all detail and making it look like a black mouth waiting to swallow any who came too near. The first time she approached Blackstone it had been this same time of day, but she hadn't realized how fitting the ominous appearance was. Would this man be as cruel as the last?

The new baron was more frightening than Lord Rupert, for he was hale and hearty and angry with her even before the marriage began. Fleeing to the convent had been a great mistake, ruining any chance she might have had to win some sort of accommodation from her new master. Why had she

thought God would shelter her? Hadn't He ignored all her past prayers for mercy?

She glanced at the scowling man riding beside her. The shadows cast on his face by his helm were heightened by a day's growth of dark beard. He had come for her wearing armor. Had he been wearing it when he arrived and learned she was missing, or had he donned it afterward, determined to win back the baron's wealth, even if he must slaughter innocents to do so? A shiver ran down her spine. How fitting that a black knight had come to be the lord of Blackstone Castle.

Could she bear such a harsh master? With him there would be no hope of an early release through his death—at least, not from the effects of old age. She stared at the tower rising above the walls of the castle, and once again thought of flinging herself from it. But doing that would condemn her to eternal torment.

She closed her eyes to block the threatening tears. Whatever she did, she must not let him see her fear. Men fed on fear. As the horse's hooves clip-clopped on the cobble stones of the entry bridge, Gwyneth opened her eyes, squared her shoulders, and took the deep breaths that always calmed her.

The usually sleepy courtyard of the bailey was alive with activity. Horses and baggage told of many recent arrivals, and servants she had never seen before bustled among them. The arrival of their party added to the confusion as grooms ran forward to hold the horse's heads and well-dressed men strolled from the keep and laughingly called out compliments

to le Werre for "catching his prize." A quick glance at him told her he was not amused. She feared the remarks added to his anger at her.

Then she saw Harold, the castle steward, hurrying toward her and braced herself for yet another wave of anger. He had surely realized she'd drugged his wine so that she could steal the treasure room key. She watched him with such dread that she didn't notice her husband-to-be approaching from the other direction until his heavy, gloved hands fell around her waist. She gasped in surprise as he effortlessly lifted her from the saddle. Not accustomed to riding for long hours, her legs felt like rope as her feet touched the ground. She started to crumble and her cheek banged against his breastplate.

He instantly slipped one arm around her back and steadied her with a hand against her chest. "Are you all right?"

She felt as though he were pressing the breath from her, but she fought against his heavy hand until she drew several gasping breaths and her legs stiffened enough to support her body. Then she nodded. He released her slowly, apparently wanting to make sure she could stand on her own.

Harold had reached them. Facing le Werre, he bobbed his rounded shoulders up and down and gave one of his toadeater smiles. "So glad you found her unharmed, milord."

"Yes, thanks to that trail though the forest you told me about."

So Harold was already serving this new master as he had the last. Gwyneth silently cursed herself for lacking the courage to cut the man's throat when he had lain in a drunken stupor before her.

As le Werre turned to acknowledge greetings from some of his friends, Harold looked at her and grinned evilly. Once again he had triumphed. She looked away from him, forcing all emotion from her face and her mind.

After removing his gauntlets, le Werre cupped her elbow and ushered her forward. She followed his lead, nodding absentmindedly as he introduced his friends. When they entered the gray hall, a wave of vibrant colors jolted her into awareness. Ladies clad in rich fabrics and bedecked with jewels and filmy veils strolled about chatting merrily. Servants rushed to and fro serving ale and setting up tables for the evening meal. Gwyneth could not remember so much activity in this hall.

As le Werre introduced the women, they smiled sweetly at her and then eyed her in such a way as to make her painfully aware of her own dull and dated costume. Aside from nodding and murmuring, "How do you do," she could think of nothing to say to any of them.

Finally le Werre said, "Lady Gwyneth is obviously fatigued from her travels. I'm sure you ladies will excuse her. She needs her rest to prepare for tomorrow."

Several of the women chuckled and gave le Werre knowing looks. Gwyneth supposed that meant the wedding would take place on the morrow. At least she'd have one more night of peace.

Still gripping her elbow like it was the rudder on a boat, le Werre steered her toward the stairs. The omnipresent Harold appeared. "Would you like for me to see the lady safely to her room, milord?"

Releasing her elbow, le Werre said, "That won't be necessary, Harold. Just send a maid to see to her needs." After a brief pause, he added, "But make sure she isn't disturbed during the night."

The two men exchanged meaningful glances and Gwyneth knew a guard would be placed at her door.

\* \* \* \*

The maid, who had been sent the night before, arrived early the next morning to help Gwyneth dress for the coming ceremony. Gwyneth wondered what had happened to Anna who had accompanied her on the disastrous flight to the convent. Of course, Gwyneth really didn't know her well as Harold constantly shifted the servants assigned to her. The poor woman had only obeyed Gwyneth's orders because Harold had not been around to countermand them. She hoped Harold hadn't punished her.

Would he be able to maintain his control of the household under Martin le Werre as he had under Lord Rupert? Probably. Like most men le Werre would be happy as long as the household ran smoothly and his desires were fulfilled. Harold, the perfect steward, would do anything to please his master. Besides he had been in charge of Blackstone Castle for so long, who could wrest control from him? She certainly had not been able to.

Gwyneth was surprised when servants bearing a large brass tub and buckets of hot water arrived. At least she would have the luxury of an all over bath before being forced to wed. After getting into the tub, she had the maid undo her

heavy braids and soap and rinse her hair. Then she thoroughly scrubbed her body. A fire was required to dry her hair, and Gwyneth wrapped herself in a linen sheet and sat on a small stool near the fireplace as the maid raked through her hair with a large-toothed comb.

She found this treatment so pleasant that for a few moments she forgot its purpose—to prepare her for another marriage. Sighing as reality returned, she told herself she had no choice but to go through with the wedding. But she need not lose hope. After all, she had eventually triumphed over the old bastard. If her new husband proved too barbaric, she would find a way to stop him as well.

She told the maid to get out her light blue gown and give it a thorough brushing. It wasn't as grand as the gowns the women guests had worn yesterday, but it was the newest one she had and the most colorful. Lord Rupert had not believed in wasting his wealth on fancy clothing.

Gwyneth had just donned her thin under-tunic when her door opened and Harold entered the room. His eyes raked her up and down, and he smiled slyly as he said, "Lord Martin bade me bring you this, milady." He held out a velvet pouch closed with a drawstring.

Gwyneth turned her back to him and gestured at the maid to take the offered pouch.

"He also wants to know when you will be ready." Harold said.

Gwyneth wanted to reprimand him for entering her room without knocking, but Harold knew her secrets. "I shall be there within the hour."

"You should hurry. The guests are assembled," he added, never missing an opportunity to flaunt his control.

She held her back stiff and remained silent until she heard the door close. Then she slumped in relief. Taking the velvet pouch from the maid, Gwyneth fumbled with the strings until she could slide out a gold headband studded with shiny red stones.

Had le Werre brought this as a wedding gift, or had he taken it from Lord Rupert's treasure chest after being shamed by his new wife's plainness? She didn't care. At least she wouldn't feel quite like a barnyard fowl among those peacocks waiting to observe her wedding.

She ordered the maid to braid her hair and work blue threads that matched her gown into each one. Then she donned the gown and her sheerest veil and clamped the gold circle down over it. Not having a mirror, she wiped the steam from the sides of the brass tub and squatted until she could see her yellowed image. By turning her head, she caught glimpses of shiny gold and red. Somehow those flashes of brightness gave her courage. Standing, she squared her shoulders and resolutely walked toward her fate.

\* \* \* \*

Martin glanced toward the stone staircase and wondered if his belligerent bride intended to make him look like a fool once again. He had thought bringing quests from court would show his new wife he was a man of substance. Thinking of the stories about his runaway bride those guests would carry back to court made him heartily regret that decision.

She appeared on the landing, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he went to the bottom of the stairs to await her. She moved toward him slowly, barely sparing him a glance. He tugged at his very expensive tunic and stood a little taller. Some of the great beauties of realm had lusted after him, who was she to turn up her nose?

She reached his side, and he extended his arm. She lightly laid her hand on it and looked up at him. "Thank you for the headband."

Her large eyes were the color of spring lilacs and her complexion as white and smooth as polished ivory. He glanced down at full breasts, a slim waist and gently flaring hips. When he'd seen her in her traveling cloak, covered in road dust, he'd been relieved to see she was not old or ugly. Now he realized she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. He suddenly felt much better about the stories his friends would carry back to court.

He remembered to respond to her. "You're welcome. I'm glad to see you wearing it today." Then he noticed that the gold, ruby encrusted headband was the only decoration she wore. Didn't she like jewelry? The old lord had enough stones in his treasury to deck her out regally. Perhaps she had not been as spoiled as he'd thought.

With a sweeping gesture to the onlookers, Martin loudly announced, "Let us make haste to the chapel." He and Gwyneth led the guests into the courtyard where the castle servants and the sullen residents of the squalid village waited. No cheers or good wishes came from the crowd as the

wedding party passed through them toward the small stone sanctuary abutting the castle wall.

As Martin approached the priest, waiting before the chapel doors, he eyed the cloudy sky with a worried frown. A sudden downpour would put the final curse on this misbegotten marriage.

Apparently the priest also worried about the weather for he hurried through the vows, said a quick benediction, and finally, "You may kiss the bride."

Martin lowered his head toward her, but she did not raise hers, so he had to twist awkwardly to plant a quick kiss on one corner of her mouth. Then he took her arm and led her back toward the keep.

The watching villagers at last made cheerful noises, but Martin suspected they were inspired more by the tapping of the ale barrel than by good wishes for their new lord.

Once inside the hall, wine was served to all the guests, some of whom properly toasted the newly married couple. The feast that followed barely deserved the name feast. Harold had warned that it would be difficult to prepare an elegant repast on such short notice, but Martin had not wanted to give his bride more time to agonize over her predicament.

He was surprised at how calmly she accepted her fate today. Although her vows had been spoken in a barely audible voice, she looked as though she hadn't a worry in the world—or perhaps a thought in her head. Her features wore the serene remoteness of a marble statue, but her iciness, rather

than discouraging him, increased his desire to bed her and see her melting with the passion he would inspire.

Fortunately one of his wedding gifts had been a minstrel to perform at the festivities and the man earned his coins this day, entertaining with songs while the guests ate and then playing lively airs on his lute so the guests could dance. Gwyneth refused Martin's invitation to dance with a firm shake of her head. After watching others laughing as they romped through sprightly country dances, he saw no need to deny himself and left her sitting alone at the head table while he danced with his friend's wives.

Glancing her way from time to time, he saw no sign of jealously or envy on her face as she watched the dancers. In fact, her main interest seemed to be in watching their footwork. Perhaps, she didn't know how to dance. This grim old castle did not look like a place where much revelry had occurred. Some of the husbands of the women he danced with went to chat with Gwyneth, but she barely spared them a glance or a nod. Soon everyone left her alone and Martin felt duty-bound to return to her side.

Not wanting to sit there until he had drunk himself into a stupor, Martin ordered his guests to continue celebrating and led his bride up the stairs to his bedchamber. At the doorway, she stopped, looked toward him, but not directly at him. "I have my own room. I'll prepare there and come to you."

"Not tonight, my lady." He clasped her hand more firmly and pulled her across the threshold. He doubted she'd be so foolish as to try and evade her wifely responsibilities, but with

a castle full of guests, he didn't want to take a chance on having to search the place to find her.

"But my maid and my bedclothes—" she protested.

"You won't need either tonight."

Although she dutifully followed him into the room, her features changed from marble to granite. He smiled, hoping to put her more at ease. "Surely, you're not frightened to enter the marriage chamber. As a widow, you know what to expect."

"Yes," she said in a flat voice, "I know what to expect." She pulled her hand from his and turned her back to him. "Since you have denied me a maid, your must untie my laces."

"Gladly." He pulled apart the bow that rested on the flat of her back and loosened laces.

"That's enough," she snapped, stepped away from him, and began to pull up her gown.

He unbuckled his ceremonial sword and laid it aside, and then watched in fascination as she neatly folded her gown and placed it on a nearby stool. She removed her under-tunic in the same manner, without once looking at him. Obviously, she was not attempting to be seductive, merely accomplishing a chore.

He grew perplexed over her strange mood. He would have understood shyness or fear at the prospect of going to bed with a stranger and tried to cajole her out of it. He would have quickly squelched anger or petulance over being forced into this marriage. But how should he deal with this unfeeling creature who was matter-of-factly revealing gently tapering

legs, smoothly curved hips, a full round bottom, a flat belly, and firm, high breasts?

When she was completely naked, she looked over at him with a hostile glare. "Aren't you going to remove your clothing?"

"Why—of course." Realizing he had been staring at her with his mouth agape, he started pulling up his tunic. Unfortunately, having his clothes tailored to best display his manly physique made them difficult to remove. Accustomed to having his squire assist him, he fumbled as he dragged the tight-fitting garment upward.

"Sit on the bed and I'll help you," she said.

He obeyed her command, but the bed was so high, that even with him sitting, she had difficulty stripping the tunic from his body. For a moment, his head was engulfed in fabric, and when he could see again, he found one of her breasts very near his face as she still yanked the tunic along his upraised arms. Her exertions caused the rosy nipple to dance just inches from his mouth. The temptation proved too great. He stuck his tongue out and flicked it back and forth across the center nubbin.

The raspy, wet stroke across her nipple made Gwyneth gasp and jump away from the contact. She stared at Martin with shock, wondering why he had done such a thing.

He only chuckled and finished pulling the tunic away from his arms. "Sorry if I surprised you, but you shouldn't place such a tasty morsel so close to a hungry man's mouth."

What did he mean by that? He'd certainly eaten his fill at the banquet table. Then she noticed the muscles that swelled

his chest and upper arms and knew he must be incredibly strong. If he did the same things the old bastard had done, how could she bear it?

He removed his boots while still sitting on the bed and then stood, displaying an ominous bulge in the front of his braies. His movements became jerky as though he were suddenly in a great hurry. After loosening his tapes, he shoved his hose and braies down and stepped out of them. His man-thing leaped out like an angry spear. It was huge. Gwyneth's fear congealed like a mass of cold grease in pit of her stomach. A roaring started in her ears and all her senses told her to flee.

Then she realized Martin was staring back at her with a frown and warned herself to be careful. It was her duty as his wife to endure whatever he chose to do to her, and she must hide her fear. Hadn't that been the way she had defeated the old bastard? Taking a deep breath, she schooled her features, willing away any sign of her apprehension.

He smiled and held out his hand, inviting her to come to him.

Gwyneth ignored his hand, fastened her gaze on the bed, and walked past him as quickly as her terror-stiffened muscles would allow. When the front of her thighs brushed against the side of the mattress, she placed her hands on the bed and slowly lowered herself face down, bracing her toes against the floor. She hated the feeling of helpless exposure this position gave her, but told herself it would be better to go ahead and get it over with.

"What are you doing?" Lord Martin asked.

She had to knot her hands into fists before she could force out any words. "How do you want me?"

"I want you *on* the bed."

She swallowed a curse. In this position the mattress would absorb some of the punishment. Slowly, she forced herself up and crawled onto the top of the bed. For a moment, she sat back on her heels and struggled with her fear. Despite her best efforts to prevent it, a shudder ran through her body. After taking several calming breaths, she positioned herself on her hands and knees and waited.

It was a long, silent wait. She wondered what he as doing, but feared to look back at him. Finally, in a soft voice, he said, "Lie down, please."

She sighed in relief at being allowed the support of the mattress and quickly stretched out, keeping her face turned away from him to hide her dread. She felt the bed give. Something touched her back and she flinched before realizing it was only his hand. Only his hand? The skin was rough and calloused, and his fingers spread over half of her upper back. It was the hand of a trained soldier, one accustomed to inflicting pain.

He began to rub gently, moving his hand only between her shoulders and waist. What was he up to? Did he think he could lull her and then suddenly change and shock her into revealing her fear. If so, he would be sorely disappointed for the old bastard had taught her all of those tricks.

"You have a lovely back." His voice was soft, almost crooning, hardly that of a warrior. "Your skin is smooth and soft, but I'd like for you to turn over."

That shocked her. "Won't my face bother you?"

He gripped one of her shoulders, gently urging her to turn. She complied, wondering what he meant to do.

When she was on her back, he cupped her cheek. "Why would such a lovely face bother me?"

Did he really think her face lovely? "He—he said it distracted him."

He looked down at her as though he were having difficulty understanding her words, although she was sure she had spoken loudly enough for him to hear her. "I'm sure your beauty will inspire me."

Inspire him to what? She suddenly realized that the most sensitive areas of her body now lay open to him. She couldn't stop herself from asking, "What—what are you going to do?"

He lightly squeezed her cheek; his touch burned her skin. "What would you like for me to do?" he asked in that strange cooing voice.

He was a fiend to draw out her torture so, but if he were truly giving her a choice, she would be a fool not to take it. "I-I'd rather be spanked on my bottom."

His mouth dropped open and he frowned. "You like to be spanked?"

"No! But he always did it."

He pulled his hand away from her cheek and looked down at her with shock and perhaps pity. "Always?"

"Almost."

Tightness formed in the center of Martin's chest. His new wife was afraid of him and with good reason. The old master of Blackstone Castle apparently had peculiar sexual

preferences. This left Martin in an uncomfortable position. He normally did not bed women who were unwilling, but this woman was his wife, and he had to consummate their marriage to insure his rights to Blackstone Castle.

He needed to make physical contact with her, but she lay as stiff as a board with her eyes downcast. Rather than pounce on her, he sat up and slowly gathered her in his arms. As he lifted her toward his lap, a look of alarm came over her face and she raised her hands as if to repel him. Then her expression changed to one of resignation, and she let him have his way.

She sat across his thighs with her shoulders hunched and her head down. He pushed a heavy golden braid over her shoulder so he could fully see her face. He stroked her unblemished, downy cheek. Her only wrinkles seemed to come from her frown. "How old are you, Gwyneth?"

"Twenty-one."

"And you were married for seven years?"

"My father was anxious to form an alliance with the old baron, and the baron wanted an heir."

Martin knew such marriages were often arranged within the nobility, but bartering a fourteen-year-old girl to an elderly lecher seemed extreme. He huffed indignantly, and the sound caused Gwyneth's shoulders to grow more hunched and the lines around her mouth tightened.

Hoping to reassure her, he rubbed her upper arm. "You need not fear that I'll treat you as he did. I derive no pleasure from inflicting pain."

"But you're a knight."

"Even so, I gain no satisfaction from violence." Some of the stiffness ebbed from her body.

He tried to think of more ways to reassure her. "You and I had to marry for reasons of state, but this marriage can be beneficial to both of us. Now that I have a home, I need a wife, and a wealthy widow needs a strong man to protect her."

His last statement evidently impressed her, for she looked him in the eye for the first time. He brushed his lips against her cheek and was relieved that she did not cringe. He wondered if it would be better to delay the bedding, give her time to grow accustomed to him. The lush weight of her thigh pressing against his cock and the sight of her breast so near his hand convinced him it would be best to put her fears to rest by showing her that he wanted no more from her than any normal man would.

He slowly brought his hand up until the weight of her breast rested on it. She shifted her gaze to nothingness and stretched her neck like a deer that had just heard the hunter's footfall. He removed his other arm from around her body, giving her a chance to bolt if she so desired.

For a moment she was perfectly still. Then she took a deep breath. Did that mean she had decided to accept him?

He moved his thumb up to her nipple. She glanced down as if startled but did not move to stop him. He rubbed the pad of his thumb back and forth. She shifted her hips just enough to encourage his growing cock. Was she seeking a more comfortable position or becoming aroused?

He placed a light kiss on her shoulder and then kissed his way up her neck. When his lips reached her ear, he whispered, "A man and woman should couple for mutual pleasure. Let me show you that way."

She did not say no. Moving slowly, he put her down in the center of the bed so he could stretch out beside her.

Gwyneth focused on the overhead bed hangings, and concentrated on taking deep, measured breaths. Even though he had said he wouldn't hurt her, previous experience had taught her that men always caused pain. As he hovered over her, so large and menacing, she knew she had no choice but to submit and steeled her resolve to show no fear. His head came down and his lips pressed against hers. Softly, he kissed and then nibbled at her lower lip. Thinking he intended to bite that tender flesh, she tried to pull her lip away, unwittingly opening her mouth.

His tongue suddenly touched hers as his lips pressed more firmly, as though he sought to fuse himself to her. Did he intend to smother her? No, she could still breath through her nose. She must concentrate on her breathing and ignore the sensation of his large, hot, and incessantly moving tongue.

His hand began to roam over her body, the calloused palm alternately scratching and tickling. Then he cupped a breast and began a soft kneading motion. He seemed obsessed with her breasts. Rupert had often said she was growing into a cow—a useless cow. Why was this man taking so long, couldn't he do it either? He rolled her nipple between his thumb and fingertip. That hurt. Well, it didn't exactly hurt, but it made her feel strange—achy.

She signed in relief when his tongue finally came out of her mouth, but he kissed his way down to her breasts. Oh, no! His mouth clamped down on her nipple, he actually sucked on it as a babe might. What sort of torture was this? Don't think about it. *Breathe. Breathe*.

He moved downward again, kissing and licking her body. Why would anyone want to do such a thing? His fingers began to probe between her legs. He seemed to be feeling for that strange wetness that sometimes formed there. He ran his fingers back and forth, making the slickness even worse.

"I think you're ready," he said and she became aware of his rapid breathing.

He moved to go between her legs, and she made room for him, knowing her ordeal would be over quickly once he entered her. Then she caught sight of his cock, and a small cry of alarm escaped her lips. It had grown into a veritable battering ram. Surely, he would rend her asunder.

Holding himself with one hand, he moved hesitantly against her opening. Did he realize he wouldn't fit? No, he pushed further. Oh, God, he stretched her, filled her until she thought she would scream from the—the—not pain—but an overpowering fullness.

Then he started to move in and out, up and down. His head came just above hers. His gasping breaths blew on her cheeks and thundered in her ears. The hairs on his chest scratched her tender breasts and his hips pum pumped into her with increasing vigor. His face pumped into her with increasing vigor. His face twisted into the fierce grimace of a wild man. Dear God, he intended to crush her with his body.

Helplessly she watched his storm intensify until his thrusts were punctuated by loud grunts and his teeth were bared like a snarling beast's. He made a mighty thrust and something hot exploded inside her body. Then he collapsed on top of her.

He was heavy, and she had a little trouble drawing breath, but he didn't crush her. She supposed the give of the feather mattress saved her. With a groan, he bestirred himself and rolled off.

Was that all he was going to do? His relaxed posture said it was. She breathed a sign of relief and said a small prayer of thanks. While his first bedding had been frightening, he had done her no real harm. Of course, he'd displayed a capacity for violence unlike any she'd seen before. Apparently, he'd controlled himself somewhat, but his grimaces had shown how difficult it had been for him to do so. She hated to think what such a strong man might do if he gave full rein to such a violent nature.

She noticed him watching her with a slight frown. "I-I guess I was a bit fast for you. It's been a while since ... I'll control myself better next time."

Just as she'd thought, he did have trouble controlling himself. She would have to be very careful, especially in the bedroom, not to do anything that might excite him beyond his ability to control himself. She smiled sweetly. "You did nothing wrong."

His frown increased. "But you didn't—ah—feel your pleasure, did you?"

She continued to smile, even though she didn't know what he meant. "It was fine, just fine."

His lips quirked to one side, and he slipped an arm under her and pulled her against the side of his body. "It will take time for us to learn each other's ways, but if there's something you want me to do, don't hesitate to ask."

She curled her arms against her chest, trying to look contented in his embrace and wondered what he would say if she told him to never touch her again?

Thankfully, he asked no more questions. In fact, he seemed to be going to sleep, but he kept his arms around her, making it impossible for her to get out of his bed. She told herself to wait until he was snoring. Then she could slip from his embrace and return to her own room. But it had been a difficult day for her. Having all those strangers about and dreading what was to come in her new husband's bedroom had been draining. Relieved that she had survived her first night with him, she relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Gwyneth awoke as the first light of dawn touched the narrow window facing the bed. Good heavens, she had spent the entire night in Lord Martin's room. Because Lord Rupert had been prone to send for her whenever he couldn't sleep, she had trained herself to sleep lightly and move often between the empty rooms in the castle. Apparently she'd gotten lax since his death.

She needed to find a hiding place before the castle swarmed with the guests Martin had brought, but his hand

rested lightly on her stomach. Moving in inches, Gwyneth edged from under it and hurried to the stool where she'd left her clothes. She'd just slipping her under tunic over her head, when Lord Martin asked, "Why are you up so early?"

Taking a calming breath, she turned to face him. He had folded one arm under his head and was watching her through half-closed eyes. "I need to return to my room before the guests are about."

He rolled onto his back and stretched, displaying the black curly hair in the center of his chest. "After last night's celebration, I doubt any of them will be about before midday."

Picking up her dress, she held it out for him to see. "This is what I wore yesterday. I need something fresh."

"Don't you keep any clothing in here?"

She shook her head. "I never come to this room unless sent for."

He frowned at her. "I'll want you to sleep here from now on."

A jolt of fear caused Gwyneth to blurt out, "Why?"

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Martin sat up, scratched his scalp, and then brushed his dark hair back from his face. "Because that's what married people do—normally."

She supposed that last word implied she was not normal, but she didn't want to give up the privacy a separate bedroom provided her. Gesturing at the trunks and chests that lined the walls of the room, she said. "There's no room for my things in here."

He looked about as if just noticing the crowded conditions. "Most of this isn't mine. Get rid of it, or store it, but *you* move into this room."

His tone told her she dared not argue more. Trying to keep the resentment from her face, she nodded.

"Now come and give me a good morning kiss," he said.

She noticed his cock sitting up in his lap and realized why he wanted her in his room all the time. Evidently younger men got that way a lot more often than old ones. With a sigh, she moved in front of him.

He just sat there, looking at her. Did he expect her to kiss him? In the early days of her first marriage, she had occasionally brushed the old bastard's dry lips with her own, but those kisses were nothing like the lip-smashing, tongue-rubbing kisses Martin had given her last night. She leaned in, having to brace herself by placing a hand on his bare shoulder, and pressed her lips firmly, but dryly, against his. Pulling her head back, she asked, "Was that what you wanted?"

He grinned. "I've had better, but due to my current need of the garterobe, I'll have to delay kissing lessons."

She jumped out of his way, and he laughed as he grabbed up a fur-trimmed robe and strode out of the room. She hurriedly returned to her clothing, threw her gown on and managed to leave the room before he returned.

In her own room, she changed into one of her russet day gowns that looked much like what the female servants of the castle wore. Finally she donned an apron with large pockets and hurried off to the kitchen. There she managed to steal

bread and cheese without being noticed by the sleepy servants who had just begun to stir the fires. She passed up the cozy nook behind the flour barrels where she often had breakfast and went looking for a more secluded hiding place.

Making her way up a back staircase, she moved into an attic that had been formed when an earlier baron added a wing onto the original tower. Climbing through a maze of support timbers, she came to the spot where the original stonewall had been breeched and cracks in the timbers would allowed her to look down into the hall.

She settled on a beam and munched on a chunk of crusty bread while she watched sleepy servants being ordered about by Harold. As her nemesis snapped and growled at the hapless servants, she realized Martin's arrival with so many guests had placed quite a strain on the steward. Not only had his workload increased, but he also had to be feeling insecure. Good. She hoped these new worries would keep his attention well away from her.

But suppose he tried to work his way into his new master's favor by telling him what Gwyneth had done to Lord Rupert? Currying favor through damaging stories on others was Harold's specialty. Would Lord Martin believe him, and if so, would he decide to punish her? She wasn't quite sure what to make of her new husband. Last night had been so different. He seemed almost—well—kind.

But that wasn't a normal characteristic of a knight, one so favored that he'd been sent to represent the crown in a section of the kingdom noted for its independent barons. To be so favored, Martin must be a fierce warrior. Then what had

he been about last night? She recalled some of the ballads the minstrel had sung during the wedding feast, songs of knights pining for their lady's favor. Could Martin believe in chivalry? He'd shown no signs of such softness on the road to Our Lady of Light Convent.

The subject of her thoughts appeared in the hall below. As he walked toward the eating tables, strength radiated from his tall figure. This impression came not only from his height and breadth but also from the confidence of his carriage. He greeted the few guests who had wandered into the hall with easy assurance and soon had them gathered around the main table enjoying their simple meal.

Much of the conversation below her was inaudible, but Gwyneth did hear Martin suggest going hunting, and enthusiasm for the idea quickly grew. Two of the women even wanted to be included in the party. Gwyneth, who had seldom been allowed to leave either her father or husband's keeps, could not imagine such a thing.

Martin, much to her delight, bellowed orders at Harold to see to the preparations. He also looked around the hall with a frown as if searching for something—or someone.

As the hunters prepared to leave, one of the women who would be left behind loudly wondered what they should do with their day. After again searching the hall with his eyes, Martin suggested that they might like to retire to the solar.

Gwyneth grinned with satisfaction. There was a peephole into the solar that would allow her to hear as well as see. Perhaps learning more about her new husband's friends would help her understand him.

\* \* \* \*

Martin returned to the castle late in the afternoon from the hunt he'd hastily organized to entertain his guests. The discovery of a boar that had led them a merry chase before turning to dispatch a few hounds and give the hunters a clear target had made the hunt a resounding success. But now Martin was hot and sweaty and wanted a bath. Where was his wife?

When she had disappeared that morning, he'd assumed she'd rushed off to care for their guests. Now he saw no sign of her among the bored looking women in the solar. Hearing the jingle of keys, Martin turned, saw the steward rushing across the hall, and beckoned to him.

The man changed his course and rushed up, slightly out of breath. "Yes, milord? I've sent servants with your bath water."

"What of Lady Gwyneth? Where she is?"

Harold hung his balding head in a gesture of humility that seemed odd on such a burly fellow. "I'm sorry, milord, I haven't seen her today."

Martin wondered if she'd disappeared to avoid moving into his room. "Didn't she say anything to you about clearing the old baron's belongings out of my room?"

Harold looked even more distressed. "No, milord. I'm sorry I didn't think of that myself." He looked over his shoulder as another servant came into the hall carrying two buckets of steaming water. Then he looked back at Martin with an apologetic grimace. "Why don't you have your bath while the

water is hot? Many of the other gentlemen are requesting baths also. As soon as all of them are settled, I'll come to your room and find out what you want removed."

"Very good, Harold. See to our guests."

The man hurried away and Martin was thankful that at least one person in this mad house seemed eager to please the master. As he climbed the stairs, he hoped Gwyneth would be in his chamber so she could wash his back. Only his squire, Alan, waited in his chamber.

By the time Martin finished his bath, and the servants removed the tub, he had grown increasingly irritated with his missing wife. When the steward arrived, Martin asked, "Do you have any idea where Lady Gwyneth might be?"

Harold looked genuinely embarrassed as he said, "The lady is quite clever at hiding herself."

Did that mean she had done this sort of thing before? "Why would she hide in her own home?"

Looking as though he really didn't want to answer the question, Harold finally said, "Lady Gwyneth came to Blackstone at too early an age to know how to serve as a proper mistress. Rather than learn her responsibilities, she chose to hide from them."

Martin couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You mean she does this regularly?"

Harold nodded. "The old baron was a fine man, but he did not manage her well."

Martin knew more about what had gone on between the old baron and his young wife than the steward, but of course, he couldn't say anything about that. "I hope to change a

number of things around here, Harold, including Lady Gwyneth's attitude toward her responsibilities. I trust I can count on your help."

The man's expression brightened. "Yes, milord, anything I can do. Anything at all."

"For starters, let's see what's in some of these old chests."
Harold obligingly opened the largest one. "These are Lord
Rupert's clothes. He was a plain man, not much interested in
finery."

After a cursory glance, Martin said, "Are there any relatives who might be interested in keepsakes?"

"The poor man outlived all his immediate family."

"Well, get rid of all his clothing. Give it away or store it."

"Don't you want to look for any valuables?"

Martin knew he really should, but the thought of having to handle the belongings of his predecessor made his flesh crawl. "I'll trust your judgment on the clothing, Harold. What's in some of these smaller chests?"

Harold quickly showed him a chest containing a rusted sword, of questionable quality, and a few brooches and belts decorated with semi-precious stones. Nothing in it compared to the jewels Martin had found mixed among the gold coins in the chest he recovered with Gwyneth. Evidently the old man had been a miser who preferred to hoard his wealth rather than display it. A fact Martin greatly appreciated for he now had the fortune it would take to bring this rundown castle up to acceptable standards.

He passed judgment on the contents of several more chests, before Harold knelt beside the bed, reached under it,

and pulled out an ornately carved box. "There is one other," he said. Still on his knees, he opened the box with a small key from the ring he carried on his belt.

Martin looked and stepped closer to look again. "What in the devil is that?"

The steward lifted a cluster of leather strips. Then Martin saw the handle and realized it was a small whip. "What's that for?"

"The master sometimes punished female servants who misbehaved."

The more he heard about the old baron, the more Martin thought the man a monster. "He beat women with a cat-o'-nine-tails?"

Harold stood and extended the whip so Martin could see it more clearly. "The leather strips are wide and tanned to softness. They seldom cut the skin."

The way the man tenderly cradled the whip in his outstretched hands and looked down at it almost lovingly, made Martin's mouth go suddenly dry. Seeing something else in the box, he reached for one of several coils and pulled up the end of a rope made from plaited strips of linen. He glared his question at Harold.

"Sometimes they had to be restrained. The master demanded obedience, but he was not a cruel man. He did not want to scar them."

Servants being whipped for misbehavior had to take the beating or lose their positions, and life as a castle servant was far easier than that of the average peasant. Martin didn't think these linen ropes had been for kitchen maids, and

Harold had the key to the box. He began to feel sick to his stomach. "Wasn't the baron nearly seventy when he died?"

"Yes, and in poor health for a number of years before," Harold said in a voice that dripped sympathy.

Martin managed to keep his voice even as he asked, "Then who did all the whipping for him?"

Harold blinked a few times before saying, "In his later years, I administered the punishments."

"And what of his young wife?" Martin asked though clenched teeth.

Harold apparently realized his peril for he broke eye contact with Martin. "At first she obeyed, but as she got older she began to run and hide. He ordered me to fetch her. I had to do it," he added hurriedly.

Martin shook the piece of linen rope under Harold's quivering nose before dropping it in disgust. "And restrain her?"

Harold dropped the whip into the box and used his foot to shove it back under the bed, apparently hoping once it was out of sight, Martin would forget his anger. "She wouldn't submit to her lord and master. A wife must submit."

Martin couldn't believe that a nobleman—a supposed nobleman—would let a servant manhandle his wife. "You dragged her in here and tied her down for the old man, didn't you?"

Gwyneth appeared in the doorway carrying an armload of clothing. Her eyes darted between the Martin and Harold, as all color drained from her face. "What is he telling you?"

Martin just stared at her, his mounting fury making it difficult for him to think.

She glanced down, apparently seeing a corner of the box that extended from under the bed for a flush came to her cheeks. "He's lying. Whatever he says, he's lying. He lies about everything." A hysterical note had crept into her voice.

The idea that a servant might have taken liberties with the woman who was now his wife cut deeply into Martin's pride.

Harold shook his head. "I would never lie to my master. I am here only to serve you."

"Shut up, Harold," Martin said and turned back to Gwyneth. "He just told me that your former husband liked to punish anyone who disobeyed him by lashing them. Is that true?"

She compressed her lips but nodded.

"And as Lord Rupert got older and more infirm, he had his trustworthy steward bind the miscreants until they were helpless and then lash them."

She dropped her head as tears began to course down her cheeks.

"And you were also treated in this manner."

She raised her arms, bringing the clothing she carried up so she could bury her face in it.

"I don't blame you for being ashamed, Gwyneth. But you must answer one more question. Did Harold do anything else to you?"

Her head came up, her eyes wide.

"No! No!" Harold squealed.

Grabbing a handful of Harold's loose tunic with one hand, Martin pulled his hunting knife from its scabbard with the other. "If he defiled your body, I'll kill him here and now."

Emotions flashed across her face, surprise, elation, and finally a fierce anger that curled her lips away from her tightly clenched teeth.

Harold reached out to her with a large beefy hand. "Please, Lady Gwyneth. Don't cause my death with a lie. I only did what my master ordered me to do."

Martin waited, suddenly wondering if she would lie to avenge herself.

She shook her head several times, seemingly more to clear her thoughts than to reply. Finally she took a deep breath and exhaled some of her anger. "He stripped me, strung me up to the bed frame and lashed me while the old man watched."

Unbelievably, Harold glared angrily at Gwyneth. "I didn't want to do it. It was your fault. You would not obey. A good wife should always obey."

Martin dropped his knife so he could tighten his fist and bring it crashing into Harold's face. The man yelped from the pain, and as Martin released his tunic, crumbled to the floor.

Tossing the clothing aside, Gwyneth ran to the downed man and kicked his leg. "Now you're the one being hurt." She kicked him several more times.

Although her soft slippers could do little real damage, Harold curled into a ball trying to protect himself from her fury.

Martin suddenly became aware of the open doorway and remembered all their guests. He didn't want one of them to

come along and see his wife acting like a mad woman. Grabbing her from behind, he lifted her feet off the floor as he pulled her away from the fallen steward. Her heels cracked against Martin's shins several times before she regained her senses and hung limply in his arms, gasping for breath.

Pounding footsteps sounded at the doorway, and his squire ran into the room. "Milord?"

"Close the door," Martin ordered. "I have a chore for you." Alan instantly obeyed.

The steward had rolled over and was looking up at Martin with a tear-streaked face. "Please, milord, I only obeyed my master."

His pleading only added to Martin's disgust. He eased Gwyneth's feet back to the floor but kept an arm around her just in case. "That's the only reason I don't kill you. Remove the key ring from your belt."

Harold scrambled to his knees and raised his hands in a pray-like stance. "I've been here twenty years, these keys are my life. Please don't take them from me."

Martin felt no pity for him. "You're lucky to be leaving Blackstone with your life. Now my squire will go with you to collect your belongings—and only your belongings. Then he will escort you to the gates and tell the guards that you are never to enter this castle again."

For a moment, Harold stared up at him as though dumbstruck. Then he lunged toward the floor. Martin thought he was collapsing with emotion until he saw the man's hand reach for the knife Martin had dropped. Then Harold surged

up like an enraged bull, screaming, "Witch, murdering witch," and raised the knife above Gwyneth's chest.

In such close confines, Martin could only wrap both arms around Gwyneth and turn so that his body shielded her from the approaching knife. He braced himself for the searing pain he expected. Instead he heard a massive groan and turned to see Harold slumped at his feet with Alan's short practice sword jutting from his chest.

Releasing Gwyneth, Martin slapped Alan on the back. "God's teeth, boy, you've earned your spurs today."

Alan looked down at the motionless steward with a stunned expression, and Martin remembered how shocked he had been after killing his first man.

"Is he dead?" Gwyneth asked. "Is he really dead?"

She stared down at the body with such wild-eyed amazement that Martin feared what might come out of her mouth next. He gripped Alan's shoulder firmly and said, "Get someone to remove this body." Another look at his trembling wife, prompted him to add, "And ask one of the older ladies to attend Lady Gwyneth."

\* \* \* \*

Of course, it was impossible to remove a dead body from the Lord of the manor's bedchamber without attracting considerable attention. Gwyneth soon found herself surrounded by consoling women while Martin regaled the men with a flamboyant story about Harold trying to murder him after Martin accused him of stealing. Young Alan was hailed by one and all as a hero.

Gwyneth wanted everyone to know that Martin was a hero too. "Lord de Werre shielded me. He stepped in front of me."

One of the women patted her shoulder, "Of course he did. It's a man's duty to protect the women of his household."

The woman's words only added to Gwyneth's befuddlement. Before Martin, she had needed protection *from* the men in her household.

Even though two yeomen had already carried Harold's body from the room, the jingling of keys caused her to tense and look around fearfully. Alan held the ring out toward Martin. "We took these off the body, milord. What shall I do with them?"

Martin looked at the keys and then at Gwyneth, and she realized he expected her to take them. Those keys controlled all the valuable commodities in the castle. Whoever carried them had great power. Hadn't Harold been willing to die before giving them up? They also bestowed many responsibilities. If she took them, her time would no longer be her own. But after the great risk Martin had taken for her, she knew she could not refuse his silent request.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, Martin climbed the stairs toward his chamber with flagging steps. He should be a contented man. His hopes for land and a wife and the money to support them had all been realized. And since Harold's death, his reluctant wife had become his willing slave.

She worked from dawn to dusk, making the creaky old castle more comfortable. She watched his every move for

signs that he needed or wanted something. Even in bed, as she lay under him, she watched, obviously feeling nothing.

Had Rupert's rein of terror deadened her to the feelings of a true woman or was she naturally that way? Rupert had desperately wanted an heir. If he believed what many said about a cold woman being unable to conceive, that could have driven him to beat her.

The possibility of not having an heir struck Martin like a blow to his gut. His whole life had been dedicated toward not being like his father, a landless knight, who had waited until nearly fifty to marry. Even then, his father had been hard-pressed to feed his wife and only child. Martin now had land, but would he be able to fill his new home with the laughing children he'd also seen in his dreams?

Oh, what difference did it make? Even if she never had children, there were ways he could make a bastard his heir. Undoubtedly, she would have no objections to him begetting any number of those if he'd leave her alone. Still he wanted her to be more to him than just a dutiful wife. What? He was no callow youth who believed all the foolish love stories the minstrels sang.

He suddenly thought of his father and mother, and realized his father had possessed one thing Martin envied, his mother's unfailing support. No matter how bent the old knight's back became or how low his head hung, his lady was always by his side whispering words of encouragement.

Martin had once happened upon his parents as his father actually wept over another failure. Martin had quickly turned away, shamed by his father's weakness, but his mother had

remained and somehow given her husband fresh courage to go out and face the world again.

What a great gift it would be to trust someone so much that he could dare to cry in front of them. But how could a man ever be open with a woman who always hid her own feelings?

\* \* \* \*

Lying under Martin, Gwyneth mentally and physically braced herself as she saw the violence building in him. As always he'd started with gentle kisses and soft touches, but his kisses had become rougher and more demanding. Now, after entering her, his labored breath roared in her ears, and his body pounded against hers in an ever-quickening tempo.

She tried to remain calm, reminding herself that he never really hurt her, but she watched in growing apprehension as his large body grew more agitated and a fierce grimace twisted his features. Yes, he had risked his own life to protect her, but that had happened only moments after he'd threatened to slay Harold. Martin was a violent man.

His frenzy reached its peak and with harsh grunts and several deep thrusts his juices filled her. Then he collapsed on top of her. After taking a few ragged breaths, he levered himself onto his back. He was silent for so long that she thought he'd drifted off to sleep.

The sudden sound of his voice startled her. "You didn't feel anything at all, did you?"

"I felt you. You were very ... vigorous."

"But did I pleasure you?" He sounded disappointed, almost sad.

She glanced over at him, trying to read his expression for some clue on how to answer him. Now that he was calm again, she certainly didn't want to say anything that might make him angry. "You—you were very good."

He tilted his head and looked at her with narrowed eyes. "In what way?"

"Ah—well—you didn't hurt me."

A definite frown puckered his brow. "Did you fear I would?"

"Ah—ah—" She couldn't admit her fear of him, that would seem ungrateful after what he'd done for her, but how could she not be afraid of a man as physically powerful as Martin?

He slipped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. "I'm not like Rupert, Gwyneth. Can't you understand that? I would never treat you like he did."

He sounded so sincere that she knew he believed what he said. Unfortunately, she had seen the same wild look on his face while he pumped into her as Rupert had sometimes worn while watching her writhe from the bite of the whip.

Apparently, sex brought out the violence in all men.

Of course, she couldn't tell Martin that, so she ran her fingers through the coarse curls that covered his chest. "You give me pleasure. I-I'm pleased you are my husband."

He sighed and said no more.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, as Gwyneth went about her chores, she could not help worrying about Martin's apparent discontent.

In many ways, he was a kind and generous man, and she wanted to make him happy, but what more could she do to please him?

She had taken on the duties of the steward and rushed about from morning to night keeping the household running. She realized Blackstone Castle lacked the luxuries and conveniences he had enjoyed at court, and was doing her best to make it more comfortable, but the castle had been allowed to rundown for a number of years.

She had a niggling suspicion, however, that much of his discontent came from her performance in the bedroom. While she willingly allowed him full liberty with her body, he kept demanding to know how she felt about the things he did, and seemed displeased with her answers.

Why was life so difficult? She'd finally been married off to a man she could be content with, but he apparently was not happy with her. Would Martin desert her for his former life at court? Was it possible that the old bastard and Harold been right? Was she an unfit wife?

Tonight she'd try harder to please him.

\* \* \* \*

After the servants had left their bedchamber, Gwyneth nervously watched her husband sitting on the side of the bed and staring down at the floor. She walked over to him, noticing how his loose robe fell open, casually revealing his naked body. Her robe opened as his did, and it surprised her to realize she felt no shame or apprehension over their shared

nudity. Without thinking she reached to trail her fingertips across the coarse hair that covered his chest.

His body started. She pulled her fingers away "Are my hands cold? I'm sorry."

He caught her hand, interlocking her cold fingers with his warm ones. "You never touch me first."

She supposed that was true. "Does that bother you?"

"A man likes to think his woman wants him."

Gwyneth chuckled at the absurdity of his comment. "How can you doubt that I want you? You know what a terrible husband Rupert was. You treat me so much better—"

He placed his fingers over her lips, stopping her words. "I want you to want me as a man, not just a husband."

Well, that made no sense at all. "But you are my husband and I'm glad you are. You're kind and considerate and courageous."

He made a hissing sound of impatience. "Have you never looked at a man—at his body—and wanted him?"

"You mean wanted to lie with him?"

He didn't answer.

"You want something more from me in bed, don't you? Tell me what you want?"

He shook his head as he stared at her with a hopeless expression.

Apparently, he'd already grown bored with her. She wracked her brain for some way to please him. Finally, she placed her hand on his thigh and knelt in front of him. "Would you like for me to take your cock into my mouth?"

His eyes opened widely and then narrowed into a frown. "Did you do that for him?"

Suddenly embarrassed, she shook her head.

"Then how do you know of it?"

Regretting her boldness, she sighed. "One of my favorite hiding places was behind the flour barrels in the kitchen storage room. A scullery maid and a groom slipped into the room once, and she did that to him."

Looking as though he smelled something unpleasant, Martin asked, "And you watched them?"

"I couldn't let them know I was there. They might have given me up to Harold."

He leaned toward her. "Did you feel anything while you watched?"

Feelings again! "I thought it rather disgusting."

"So why do you offer to do it to me?"

"The groom seemed to greatly enjoy it, and I want to make you happy."

"Why?" Would the man never run out of questions?

"Because you are kind to me."

"Gratitude?" His voice was getting louder. "Is that all you feel toward me?"

"I feel—why do you keep asking about my feelings?"

"I want to know if you have any."

"Of course I do. I feel hot or cold or soft or hard." She realized she'd raised her own voice and told herself not to do that again.

Martin suddenly grabbed her arms and pulled her to her feet, so he could glare directly into her face. "No! You're not going to hide from me this time."

"What are you talking about? I never hide from you."

"In your mind you do. I see it in your eyes."

Instinctively, she turned her head to shield her eyes.

He shook her, rocking her head back to look at him in shock and a little fear. "What do you want from me?" she asked.

He studied her for a moment as though she were some exotic bug. "Tell me about the beatings."

"No!"

"Why did he beat you?"

"He said I wasn't a good wife."

"Because you didn't have a baby?"

"At first it was that. Later it was because he couldn't get inside of me."

He looked at her with disbelief. "Then how could he expect you to have a baby?"

Her shame was so great that she could no longer look him in the eye, but she went on speaking, thinking if he knew the full story, he'd leave her alone. "At first he could only do it after spanking me. Then he couldn't do it at all. He said that was my fault, that I was cold and unwomanly."

Remembering the unfairness of the situation she'd been trapped in made her raise her head and glare back at Martin. "But I found out he'd had two wives before me, so not having an heir wasn't my fault."

The breath went out of him with an audible huff and his hands fell away from her arms. With a look of immense regret, he said, "Perhaps it was."

She couldn't believe he was agreeing with the old bastard. "You have no trouble getting inside of me," she said in an accusing tone.

"That's because I'm a younger man and your beauty is enough for me—now. But your coldness is unwoman—"

"Don't say that!" Realizing she was losing control of herself, Gwyneth began to take deep breaths.

She's doing it again. Martin saw her chest slowly rising and falling and the far-away look glazing her eyes. He jumped to his feet, determined to stop her from retreating into her secret self. "Why can't I say it, Gwyneth? Why can't I say the truth?" he yelled down at her.

Her rate of breathing increased. "Please don't be angry with me, Martin."

He leaned over her. "I can't control my emotions like you do. I'm made of flesh and blood. What are you made of?"

She tried to back away from him, but he stepped in front of her and forced her back against the side of the bed. She held up one hand as if to ward him off. "No, no, you said you wouldn't hurt me."

"I said I wouldn't hurt you for my pleasure. Perhaps pain brings you pleasure."

The horrified look that came over her face made him regret those words. "I'm sorry, Gwyneth." He embraced her.

She pushed against his chest with both hands and twisted her body, trying to escape him. "Leave me alone."

He continued to struggle with her, determined to prove he meant her no harm. His bare toe stubbed painfully against something under the bed, and he remembered the box Harold had shown him and a desperate idea sprang from his frustration. "I'm going to prove that you can trust me."

He picked her up and threw her onto the bed. Then he dived down and pulled out the box. When she saw him rising with coils of the linen rope in his hand, she lunged for the far side of the bed. He grabbed one of her ankles and as she thrashed, trying to kick him with her free leg, he secured the captured ankle to the bedpost. He had to crawl onto the bed to get the other ankle, and she sat up and pounded her fists against his shoulder and back.

"No!" she screamed, "Liar! Liar!"

When her legs were secured to opposite bedposts, he turned and faced her blows, ignoring the stinging pain until he had her wrists trapped in one hand. She stopped struggling, and lay motionlessly even when he released one wrist to bind the other to the bedpost. By the time both wrists were tied, tears streamed down her cheeks, but he saw her efforts to compose herself, the deep gasping breaths, the un-focusing of her eyes. Would his rough treatment make her slip even farther from him?

He cupped her cheek and forced her to face him. "I won't hurt you. Even though you're completely at my mercy, I won't hurt you."

Gwyneth closed her eyes, desperate to shut him out. She knew he was about to reveal the full violence of his nature. Somehow she had to find the strength to endure his

punishments, but the trust that had slowly been building in her seemed to have sapped her courage. His betrayal hurt more than any other.

Cool air touched the front of her body as Martin brushed her robe aside. Something light, almost feathery touched her belly. She opened her eyes and was horrified to see Martin dangled the whip over her until the ends of the leather strips just touched her flesh. How could he be so cruel?

"You think this whip can only cause pain, but it can cause pleasure too." He danced the leather strips up her body until they reached her breasts. Then he made short brush strokes across her nipples. She knew he was merely taunting her with this gentle sensation to make the shock of pain even worse.

As he moved leather tips around on her breast, some of them dipped under her arm and she involuntarily twitched.

"Ticklish, are you?"

He dangled the whip directly over her armpit, and Gwyneth could not control her movements even when she bit down hard on her lower lip. He dragged the tips down the side of her body and up again, making her whole torso undulate. She pulled both lips between her teeth to fight against threatening laughter. The last thing she wanted to do was give the impression that she enjoyed what he did.

Just when she thought she could no longer bear this torment, he laid the leather strips flat against her body and made long strokes, moving from her shoulders to her hips, over and over. The soft leather strips rippled across her like heavy ribbons. They did not tickle, but started tingling

sensations in her flesh. She closed her eyes again, but found it necessary to part her lips and breathe in short gasps.

He traced over the front of her legs and then the insides of her thighs, letting the leather strips caress the exposed area at the apex of her legs, making her aware of the growing wetness there. When he stopped touching her, she opened her eyes to see what he was doing.

He seemed to be examining the leather bound handle of the whip. "I don't know what else I can do the with the whipping end. Maybe I can do something with—"

Horrified at the thought of what he might do, she shook her head and said. "No, Martin. Please don't do that."

The fiend smiled teasingly. "The handle's covered with soft leather but it's also hard and stiff. What do you think I'm going to do, Gwyneth?"

He moved across the bed until he knelt between her legs. The thought of having her body invaded by the unyielding handle filled her with such terror that she began to fight against the ropes that held her in place. "No, Martin. No."

He did not insert the handle, but rather laid it against her flesh, twisting it slightly to work it between her nether lips and bringing it firmly against the highly sensitive area between her legs. Then he rubbed the handle against her with small up and down strokes. The leather tugged at her flesh.

The vague stirrings she had felt in her belly before now became a giant gnawing, causing her to groan. "Oh, Martin."

When he stopped moving the handle and just held it in place, her need was so great that she had no choice but to create her own friction by pumping her hips. He began to

knead her breasts with his free hand, and her need spiraled upward until she felt close to screaming. Indeed, she did utter a high-pitched cry.

Cold air shocked the moist flesh between her legs. He had removed the handle. She whimpered a protest at this most cruel punishment. Then she felt the nudging of his cock and eagerly welcomed it. He sank into her but remained motionless, leaving her only partially fulfilled. She strained to bring her body closer to his, but the ankle bonds denied her purchase. She grew more frantic as she felt him moving away from her, but before their bodies separated completely, one and then the other of her ankles were free and she could bend her knees and press with her feet and thrust against him, filling herself with fiery pleasure.

Then he pulled her legs around his hips and began to move with her and the fire consumed her. She screamed as though in agony, but then floated away from herself in a mist of contentment. She did not know or care what had happened to her.

On another level, she heard Martin rasp out, "Just a bit more, sweeting." Still firm and hard inside her, he began to pump with vigor. She was too relaxed to become frightened by his building violence. Or perhaps, it wasn't violence at all, but the strange euphoria she had just experienced. She relaxed under him, and much to her surprise, his friction awakened her flesh with renewed longing. Her muscles tightened around him.

He must have felt her reaction for a pleased looked came over his face, despite his grimaces. With only a slight

reduction in his thrusts, he stretched toward the bedposts, undoing the knots that secured her wrists with two quick yanks. Without a thought, she instantly wrapped her arms around his body. As a new firestorm grew within her, she dug her nails into his back, and was dimly aware of his triumphant cry.

\* \* \* \*

Gwyneth tried to turn over, but something held her in place. Barely awake, it took a few moments for her to realize she still wore her sleeveless robe and that Martin lay on part of it, trapping her in place once again. She looked over at her sleeping husband. The room was in semi-darkness, but she could make out the slash of black eyebrows, the bold nose, and the strong jaw. Appropriate features for a warrior, but in repose he looked peaceful, even kind.

And that had been his greatest weapon against her. He had done with kindness what Rupert and Harold could not do with viciousness. He had stolen her will, her very soul.

She fought down the sob that threatened to erupt from her throat, and took several deep breaths, but her anxiety did not go away. She wanted to flee this dark knight and at the same time to take him in her arms and cling to him forever. She thought of her father's hunting falcons that became so attached to human masters that they would not claim their freedom even when the hood was pulled from their eyes and they were allowed to fly. Was she like those birds now, surrendering control of her life for the wonderful things he did to her body?

Not wonderful, terrible because they made her his slave. She carefully eased her arms out of the robe and slid off the bed. Even though it was late spring the night's chill hung in the air, and she shivered as she slipped on her under tunic. Martin stirred, making her think he was waking. She was so determined to have time to think before she had to face him again that she grabbed her gown and hurried from the room.

Pausing in the hallway just long enough to slip on the gown, she then fled down the stairs in her bare feet. Servants still slept on pallets in the great hall, but no one stirred as she passed them. Without thinking about it, Gwyneth headed directly for her favorite hiding place, the kitchen storeroom. The wall behind the flour barrels backed the kitchen ovens, so she knew her little hidey-hole would be comfortably warm.

The only light in the pantry came from two small air holes near the ceiling, so the room was quite dark, but Gwyneth easily felt her way into the familiar space. She sat on the floor, wrapped her arms around her legs as she recalled what had happened the night before, how she had completely lost control of herself and felt wonderful while doing it. Those moments of pleasure had been unlike anything she's ever felt before. Just the memory of those feelings started a tingling between her legs. Clearly sex was dangerous. Men undoubtedly used it to make women their slaves, for what woman would defy a man who could give her such bliss?

She rested her head on her knees as she tried to think of some way she could keep Martin from completely destroying her will. No answers came. He seemed to have all the advantages. She drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Gwyneth, are you in here?"

The sound of Martin's voice caused her to jerk her head up in a state of confusion. Then she remembered where she was and inhaled deeply, intending to hold her breath until he went away. Unfortunately flour dust went up her nose, and she sneezed.

"Come out of there," Martin said in a stern voice.

"Go away. I don't want to talk to you."

"God's teeth, what's wrong now?" He sounded truly irritated.

"I want to be alone for a while."

"Well, you don't have to hide in a storeroom to do that. Come out of there before I start knocking barrels over to get you out."

Once again she had no choice. Slowly getting to her feet, she walked out into the light. Her husband waited with his arms crossed over his chest. "If you truly wanted to hide from me, why did you pick the same place you told me about last night?"

Had she done that? Perhaps she was already too far under his spell to save herself. Determined not to let him know the great power he now held over her, she looked him in the eye and said, "It's warm there."

He glanced down at her bare feet. "If you had taken the time to dress properly, you wouldn't be cold."

"I was in a hurry," she muttered, noting his state of dress. While he had put on boots, his hose and a loose undershirt had obviously been donned in haste.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk about it now."

"You're right. We can talk more freely in our chamber."

He took her arm and pushed her ahead of him. As soon as the bedchamber door closed behind them, he said, "Now, please explain why you felt the need to flee our bed at first light and hide yourself in a storeroom?"

She walked to the far side of the room. "I-I needed time to think."

"About what?"

"About—what you did to me last night."

He cocked his eyebrows. "Did *to* you? I thought I did *for* you."

His smug look angered her. "You forced me," she said in an accusing tone.

He exhaled through his mouth. "This is about tying you up, isn't it? I did that because whenever I made love to you, you seemed to shield yourself from me. I hoped you'd get over that once you saw I wouldn't harm you even when you were completely helpless."

"You stole my will," she said angrily.

"You were willing yourself to be cold and unfeeling. I wanted you to know the full joy of being a woman."

"Of being your slave, you mean."

"I freed you from the bonds before I finished."

"By then it didn't matter. I had lost all control of myself."

"Just as I had lost mine."

She stared at him with a suspicious frown. "What difference does that make?"

"Surely you can see I'm as much—no more—under your spell than you are under mine."

"But you control what happens."

"You could easily do the same."

"Huh, you're too strong. You could always overpower me."

"Would you like to have me at your mercy—to know what it feels to have total power over another?"

Did he hope to shame her with such a suggestion? She glared at him defiantly. "Yes, I would, but that isn't possible."

He gestured toward the linen cords still lying in tangled masses on the rumbled bed.

As his meaning became clear to her, the incredible idea of having him under her control made her smile. "Would you really let me tie you to the bed?"

A rakish grin twisted his lips. "It would be a first for me, but I might enjoy it."

She didn't believe he'd really go through with it, but she still asked, "What if I used the whip on you?"

His smile broadened as though he thought the idea a huge joke. "I used it on you didn't I?"

"But I might choose to truly beat you with it."

He shrugged. "I've plenty of past sins to atone for."

The more he joked, the more serious she became. "I'd want you stripped naked before you're tied down."

His eyebrows went up, but he chuckled. "I wouldn't want it any other way." Then he sobered at bit. "I do have one request."

"What?"

"Bar the door before you tie me down. Although it's still quite early, I wouldn't want Alan barging in and seeing me in such an unmanly situation."

"Do you mean we'd do it now?"

"I not going to spend the day worrying about the dire punishments you might inflict on me."

The smirk on his face told her he really wasn't worried. Deciding to at least make him back down, she went to the door and pushed the bar into its bracket. When she turned back, she was surprised to see him removing his clothing. Completely naked, he crawled onto the bed, lay down, and stretched his limbs toward the four corners. "Your slave awaits, milady."

She knew as soon as she got close enough, he'd grab her and probably make her take his place, but a strange excitement had begun to build in her and she couldn't ignore his challenge. She went to the head of the bed, grabbed the cord that was still around that corner post and quickly wrapped it around his wrist. He didn't move, but as she tied the knot, he said, "If you make that like a half-bow it's much easier to untie."

"I don't want it to be easy." She made double knots, and then ran round the bed to tie his other wrist. When she finished, she crawled up on the bed and leaned over him to check both knots. Realizing what she was doing, he jerked

against the bonds several times to show her they would not give.

She looked down at him and smiled maliciously. "You aren't so strong now, are you?"

"I still have use of my legs. I could do you a lot of harm with a few kicks."

That was true. She looked at the thick muscles that lined his thighs and calves and feared to approach them. But she'd come too far to stop now. Edging across the bed to his right ankle, she hesitantly reached for the linen cord. Then she quickly wrapped it twice around his thick ankle and hurriedly tied it. She started to crawl over that leg to get to the next, but the long skirt of her gown got in her way, so she pulled it over her head and cast it on the floor. In nothing but her under tunic, she crawled over his leg.

"Aren't you going to take that off too?" he asked.

"No!" she snapped as she bound the last ankle.

"Oh, you really are being cruel."

He wasn't taking this seriously at all. Where was that whip? She started to scan the bed, but her gaze fastened on her husband's body. The powerful legs, the broad chest and shoulders, and his cock resting in its black nest were there for her to examine at her leisure. She ran her hand along the outside of his thigh, noting the hardness of the muscle and coarseness of the thick hair. His cock stiffened a bit. She couldn't suppress a smile.

When she glanced up at Martin's face, he smiled back. "See what you do to me?"

She realized she was doing this wrong. Martin wasn't supposed to enjoy himself, not at first anyway. She wanted him to know what it felt like to be frightened and helpless, to be totally in the hands of another. Seeing the whip near the far side of the bed, she crawled over and retrieve it.

Martin watched her with a little half-smile.

The handle still bore traces of her body. She gripped it gingerly and lightly slapped the leather strips against Martin's chest.

"Don't worry about hurting me, Gwyneth. I doubt that little whip can."

She remembered the last time she had been whipped, how her flesh had burned from her shoulders to her knees. Thinking the thick hair on his chest shielded him, she aimed for the smoother flesh over his stomach and brought the straps down with a loud plop. Martin sucked in his breath. Then she remembered how Harold had snapped the whip, making its bite even sharper. She brought the whip down and jerked it back so that only the ends of the leather strips hit him.

Small red whelps appeared just above his bellybutton. That had to hurt, even though he had made no sound. She touched the little spots with her fingertips, and then brought her palm down and began to massage, hoping to make the spots disappear.

Unable to look him in the eye, she turned her head and noticed that his cock had wilted a bit. As she continued to stare at that part of him, he said, "Ah—Gwyneth, I know I

said that whip couldn't hurt me, but some parts of my body are more sensitive than others."

For the first time, she heard uncertainty in his voice. The great warrior wasn't invincible after all. A mischievous smiled pulled at her lips. "Do you mean—" She held the whip out, letting the leather strips lightly touch his cock.

"Don't do it," his said in a threatening voice.

"You said I could do anything I wanted to." She danced the leather tips along the length of his cock, which responded by growing more upright. Then she dangled the leather strips down over the cock, turning the handle so the strips wrapped around and caressed this flesh.

"Oh, that is cruel," Martin groaned but obviously not from pain.

Gwyneth threw the whip aside and moved between his legs. "I've always wanted to see this part of you more closely."

He raised his head and looked down at her. "Feel free to touch as well as look."

She accepted his invitation, tracing his length, circling the tip, and fingering the loose sacks beneath. He threw his head back and breathed loudly.

"Does that hurt?"

"Will you stop if I say no?"

She caught his rod in one hand and toyed with the little sacks with the other, and his groans and the rippling muscles of his abdomen answered her question. He had often spoken of wanting to give her pleasure and now she understood why

that was important to him. The knowledge that she caused his pleasure gave her great satisfaction.

Remembering the scullery maid and the groom, she leaned closer and lightly circled the tip of his cock with her tongue. His body went rigid. Tentatively, she took the tip in her mouth, savoring the smoothness of the flesh and the slightly salty taste. She could tell by the rumbling noises he made that he enjoyed this as much as the groom had. She took more of him in her mouth and began to suck. His noises and the jerking of his body showed his pleasure increasing.

"Stop!"

She raised her head in alarm, thinking she must have hurt him. His face did seem to be twisted in pain, but his body continued the little twitching jerks. "I can't control myself much longer, Gwyneth."

"But I want you to loose control." She wrapped both her hands around his cock and began to rapidly massage with the same up and down movements he'd used when he had the whip handle between her legs. Martin made sounds somewhere between grunts and sighs. She felt his cock pulse and had to snap her head back as the first spurt of white cream shot up, but she continued milking him as streams of fluid flew into the air and then fell over her hands and knees.

She was amazed. While she had felt strange sensations when he was inside her and had wiped away fluid afterward, she'd never realized how completely he lost control of himself when he did this. The way his chest now heaved for breath and the sleepy look on his face, told her he had not grimaced

and grunted from suppressed violence, but rather from the same pleasure she had experienced the night before.

As she puzzled over these new revelations, she looked in dismay at the sticky mess his juices had made. Pulling off her under tunic, she used it to wipe away the fluid from her hands and arms. When she started wiping it from his body, Martin looked at her with heavy-lidded eyes and a crooked smile. "Too late to take off all your clothes now, milady. This knight is spent."

She held his cock up and watched it wobble to one side when she released it. "How long will it take you to get over that?"

"Oh, that'll depend on what you do in the meantime. If you untie these ropes and give me a chance to get my hands on that sweet body of yours, it might speed up my recovery."

"Are the bonds uncomfortable?"

"Truth to tell, I haven't thought of them for the last few minutes."

Although she was quite pleased with herself, Gwyneth tried to make her face look stern as she said, "I'm not ready to release you. I don't think you've suffered enough."

He chuckled. "You're probably suffering a lot more than I am right now."

"You'd like to think that, I'm sure. But I can control myself better than you obviously can."

"Oh, really? Are you telling me you aren't feeling a big itch in your belly, and that moisture isn't gathering between your legs?"

She started to deny his allegations but suddenly rejoiced at the thought that her body—her normal woman's body—did feel all the things he said. So she just smiled at him.

"Untie me, and I'll do something for that itch."

She reached over and tapped his limber cock to one side. "What can you do?"

He stuck out his tongue and flicked the tip of it at her.

For a moment she stared at the pink, twitching muscle in surprise. Then she began crawling up his body. "You can do that without being untied." When her knees were on either side of his waist, she leaned over and plastered her lips over his. His tongue surged into her mouth. She sucked on it while grinding her breasts against his chest. Rather than assuage her hunger, these actions increased it.

When she pulled away from his mouth to catch her breath, he said, "That wasn't what I intended to kiss. Come higher, Gwyneth. Put you knees on either side of my head."

As his meaning became clear, she stared at him in surprise, but the yearning that now ran through her body made the mental pictures running through her mind incredibly appealing. It took a bit of doing to get her knees over his shoulders without putting all her weight down on him, but finally she was in place and waited breathlessly for his caress.

"Not so high, go back a bit," he said in a husky voice.
"Now use your hands to pull the flesh back."

The first touch of his tongue to the little nubbin above her opening sent scalding chills through her body. His isolated touch on this one very sensitive spot concentrated the intensity of her feelings until she thought she's surely faint

from the pleasure. She had to drop her hands down beside his head and brace her arms to keep from falling as a giant wave of heat surged though her and left her limp.

With her bottom resting on his chest, and her forearms on the bed, she rested her forehead against his and tried to catch her breath and recover her sanity. Her first thought was to untie him, but in her present state of exhaustion, reaching the bedposts seemed a horrendous chore. Stretching one leg back, part of her body came in contact with his and felt so comforted that she forced her other leg back until she lay on top of him.

His chest moved as he chuckled. "Are you all right?" "Tired."

"Untie me before you fall asleep."

"I'm not going to fall asleep," she said and meant it. The earthy smell that now surround them, the feel of his chest against her breasts, her belly against his, their legs intertwined had somehow changed from being exciting to being incredibly soothing. She nuzzled his neck, wanting to cling to this feeling and savor it for as long as possible.

"Sharing this pleasure is what makes a real marriage, isn't it?" she asked.

He was silent for a moment as though carefully considering his answer. "Any two people can share their bodies. It takes trust to make a good marriage."

Gwyneth raised herself, so she could look down at Martin. She cared for him in a way she had never cared for any other, but did she trust him? Could she ever trust anyone after all

the betrayal she had known? She hated to think she would spend the rest of her life hiding in dark corners.

Suppose she told Martin her darkest secret and he turned from her in horror. That would break her heart, but what would keeping the secret from him do to their life together? Better to know the truth now, than to build castles made of smoke. Slowly, she slid off of him and knelt by his chest. When she could clearly see his face and any reactions that would cross it, she softly said, "Harold claimed I killed Lord Rupert."

Martin became completely still, his expression thoughtful. Finally he said, "Did you?"

"I-I caused his death, but I didn't intentionally kill him, but I wasn't sorry either."

He looked her levelly in the eye, his expression telling her nothing. "Exactly what happened?"

"Rupert was always mean, but once he realized he would be the last of his line he grew increasingly bitter. I guess it was easier for him to blame me than to accept his own failure. At first I thought it was my duty to let him treat me as he did, but finally I came to hate the injustice of his accusations. One night I just jumped out of his bed and ran. He was too feeble to catch me. That's when he sent Harold to find me. When I refused to submit even when locked in the bedroom with Rupert, he had Harold bind me.

"After he became too weak to punish me himself, he ordered Harold to do it. I learned that writhing and begging his forgiveness would bring the punishments to an end more quickly, and for a while I did that. It was almost like Harold

and I played a game, he didn't apply the lash with real vigor, while I pretended to be in great pain.

"But I hated doing it, and I hated both men for making me do it. I found a new hiding place in the wool shed and evaded Harold for five days. By the time he found me, both of them were furious. But I made up my mind that I would no longer allow them to humble me. I took deep breaths and made my muscles relax, accepting the blows without winching or crying out. The old bastard yelled at Harold, 'Harder, harder. Make Satan's daughter dance for her sins'.

"I couldn't see Rupert, but Harold began to sweat and a worried look came into his eyes, and I promised myself I would let him beat me to death before I cried for mercy. Then the old man made choking sounds, and Harold dropped the whip and ran to him. When Harold finally came back and untied me, I fell to the floor, and he stood over me and said my lord and master was dead, and I had killed him with my obstinacy.

"Before he summoned the servants to attend to the master's body, he had to wrap me in a sheet and carry me back to my room because I couldn't walk. Once I was in my bed, he told me I was probably a witch and should be reported to the church, but he hated to do that and sully Lord Rupert and my father's reputations."

She stopped speaking and blinked back tears as she waited for Martin's reaction.

"And that's why you let Harold go on running things here?"

She could see distaste on his face, and thinking it was

meant for her, dropped her head in shame. His body shifted,

causing her to glance up and see the muscles in his arms stiffen, the biceps bulge. With one pop after another, he snapped the bonds that held his wrists and brought his arms up to enfold her body and pull her down against his chest.

"The only person responsible for Rupert's death was Rupert. Don't let him do you anymore harm, Gwyneth. I love you, and I think we can build a good life together."

"You love me? After what I just told you, you love me?"

"I love you more because of what you just told me. I love your courage, your strength, and your will. Undoubtedly, we'll have disagreements in the future. I'll insist on doing things my way and make you angry, but I know you have what it takes to put up with a strong-willed man like me. We can build Blackstone Castle into a true home."

"What if I don't bear—"

His fingers silenced her lips. "You will. But if I'm not fertile, we'll gather orphans and fill this keep with children's laughter. There isn't anything you and I can't overcome together."

She twisted until she could see his dear face. Stroking his bristled cheek, she said, "I thank God for sending you to me."

He grinned. "God didn't send me, the King did."

"Then I suppose I should write the King a letter and thank him."

"You can thank him in person when we visit court."

She gasped in surprise. "Will you take me to court?"

"Of course. When they see my beautiful wife, I'll be the envy of every man there."

She kissed him soundly on the lips, but hurriedly pulled back before he could deepen the kiss. "I'll need new clothes, and jewelry."

He laughed, obviously enjoying her excitement. "But before you start planning your wardrobe, would you attack those devilish knots you made to secure my ankles?"

She sat up, ran her fingers through the crisp hairs on his chest. "Can't a big strong man like you snap those flimsy ropes?"

"I probably can, but I'd rather save my strength for other activities."

She looked at him with mock surprise. "Oh, really?" Then she turned her head until she could see that he was, in fact, recovering from his recent eruption. With a broad smile, she said, "I have so much to thank the King for, but how can I put it all into words?"

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sarah Winn left a career in scientific research to concentrate on writing. She has written novels of historical romance, time/travel romance, and science fiction romance. Beseiging His Lady is her first plunge into both medievals and short fiction. She found the writing experience so enjoyable that she'll surely repeat it.

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