



Unholy Vows

CIAR CULLEN

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Chapter One

“Do you have any good books on voodoo? I’m branching out a little and...”

“Nope. No voodoo. Not a single voodoo doll, voodoo pin, voodoo book, nothing.” Jennifer tapped a newly manicured fingernail on the glass case in annoyance. Tory, was that her name? The young woman wore attention-grabbing black clothes, heavy, dark makeup and hair dyed coal-black. Jennifer’s shop attracted the Goth kids like flies.

I’d like to cast a spell on you, young lady. “Anything else I can help you with?” Jennifer prompted, less polite than she would have managed on a different day.

Tory looked a little hurt as she caressed a fanciful statue of a dragon. Jennifer was about to ask her to put the fragile porcelain figurine down, but didn’t have the heart to hurt her further.

“Hun, I need to close a little early today, maybe you could stop back tomorrow?” Jennifer glanced at her watch—he’d be there any minute. Damn it, her stomach was tied in knots.

“Oh, but the units are leaving Long Beach Island tomorrow, this is my last day.”

“The units?”

“The parental units.”

“I see. Don’t forget you can shop the Raven’s Cave online now—I’ll ship anything to your home.” She extracted the hundred-dollar dragon from Tory’s hands and put it back on the shelf.

“Oh, cool. Do you have a blog or something? Are you on MySpace? I could put a link to your shop on my paranormal website...”

Jennifer glanced again at her watch. She wanted to reach across the counter and strangle the girl, but the truth was that she had been a great customer all summer long, buying pendants, crystals, rune stones, and books on Druids. Her parents no doubt had money to burn, as did anyone who could afford a house on the island for the summer. Besides, she saw a bit of herself in the girl—a bit of a loner, searching to fit in somewhere.

Jennifer didn't have the heart to tell Tory she didn't believe in the supernatural powers of the trinkets she hawked in the Raven's Cave—the crystals, pungent incense, soaps, New Age books and Wiccan jewelry. Nevertheless, she was damned proud of every sale, of every precious piece of merchandise covering her display shelves. She'd bought the shop from a widow anxious to retire, and had slaved to breathe new life into the dreary place. Light-catching crystals hanging in the window, small fountains with wood nymphs, fairies, and angels, and light Celtic music combined to relax and intrigue her customers. Freshly baked scones and aromatic teas and coffees were free for the taking.

She'd turned the place around within a year, and it was now a gold mine. Jennifer had worked night and day during that year to turn a profit so she could keep the modest beach house she had once shared with the monster—the label she'd tagged her ex with. And she had done it *alone*. The success of proving to herself she had the business smarts, the guts, and the ability to launch a successful career had filled her with pride. But the success of the shop had come at a price—she'd thrown herself into her work, rarely taking the time to visit with friends, and certainly not venturing out to meet men.

Now that she was a success, she had no one to celebrate with, no one who understood or cared about her accomplishment. *Shawn will care, won't he? And he'll be here soon.*

"Tory, I'd love to chat about my website, but I have to go into the back and take care of a few things. If anyone comes in, say a man and a woman in their late twenties, you'll let me know, right? Keep an eye on any other customers, too?"

"Sure." Tory beamed at the vote of confidence.

Jennifer ran into the back room and slammed the stockroom door. She could barely catch her breath, her heart raced and her hands shook. *Get a grip, Jen. This is pathetic, you should be way past these adolescent nerves.*

She'd been through it all—a brutal divorce from a man who had abused her, a miscarriage, the death of both parents, and renting out her own home during the summer and living in the carriage house. Instead of feeling like a survivor, she'd grown exhausted, too exhausted to consider dating again.

Jennifer smirked at herself in the mirror. "Liar. Admit it—you're fixated on one man, and you're not willing to bother with anyone else."

The only problem, of course, was that Shawn was *young*, and he probably still thought of her as his sister-in-law, even though she and the monster had been apart for

years. Still, Shawn and his sister Dana had disowned their brutal foster brother, and kept in close touch with Jennifer, visiting every year, propping her up with their support and encouragement, emailing her weekly.

More and more, Jennifer had come to live for Shawn's emails, rereading them for any hint at his personal life, at any interest in her. She'd come close to pouring her heart out to him several times, but had never found the nerve to ask the question that haunted her for years—"What do you think of me? Would you ever consider...?"

Jen cursed as she pulled her mascara out of her makeup bag. It would have been a hell of a lot easier to test the waters via email than in person. Maybe this year Shawn wouldn't be as friendly, or supportive, or *hot*. She'd watched him grow from a nerdy, shy college student to a stunning man in what seemed like the space of a few years. And no doubt, if he thought of her at all, he'd watched her age, put on a few pounds, form a few crow's feet around her eyes from too much sun and too much worry.

What the hell are you thinking? You can't do this!

The monster's damned words haunted her, the ones he'd used to ease his own guilt as he tried to explain the bimbo in *her bed*, with *her husband*. "Come on, Jen," Frank had slurred through the drug and alcohol haze that dominated his life in the last year of their marriage. "Men aren't cut out for monogamy, especially as the woman gets older." It wouldn't have slipped Shawn's notice that Jennifer had aged, would it? No doubt he had a string of coeds lining up outside his office at the college every day.

A bead of perspiration rolled down her neck. She rummaged for her lipstick and blush—anything that would hide about five years. She straightened her little tank top and shorts and brushed her long, dark hair until it gleamed. Cursing as she tried to wave away the cloud of perfume she had, spritzed on, she stopped cold and stared in the mirror.

"What the hell are you doing, Jen?" she asked her image. *You've known him since he was a teenager. He knows what you look like. It's too late now.*

The bell on the shop door clanged and her nerve endings caught fire. Perhaps it would be different this year, she thought for the hundredth time. Perhaps Shawn wouldn't look good, perfect, unattainable.

With one last look in the mirror, she took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face. She pushed open the door and froze. Nothing had changed, except that Shawn was a year older, and even more compelling because of it. He sported a new, sexy little mustache and goatee. He wore his thick black hair a little longer, reaching beyond his collar. But nothing had changed about that body or those *eyes*.

You idiot. He's brilliant and gorgeous and kind and sexy...and completely unavailable. He could have anyone he wants, and he'll want someone his own age. You'll never be anything to him but a friend.

Jennifer suppressed a groan and ran to Dana, her former sister-in-law. "Look what the cat dragged in!"

Dana giggled and kissed her cheek. "Jen, how the hell do you manage to look better every time we see you? It's sick. You've made a pact with Satan, using this stuff, right?" Dana pointed to a cheap pentagram pendant. Jennifer smirked at the cute blonde and looked past to Shawn, who leaned on the counter, looking a bit uncomfortable. Tory stared at him with an open mouth, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Hey, Shawn."

"Hey, Jen. Good to see you. You look...the place looks great." Jen felt her frozen smile tighten and she tried to look more natural, but her lips wouldn't move. *Come on, Jen.*

"Tory, honey, I have to close up now." Tory nodded glumly but perked up a bit when Jennifer hugged her. "You'll be back next summer, right?"

"Yep. Don't forget, if you need any help in the shop...?"

"You will be the first person I call, I promise. Don't forget to visit me online, and maybe we'll see about trading links, okay?" She smiled and waved Tory out the door, groaning once she left.

Dana laughed. "Another fan who wants to be like the Mistress of the Raven's Cave? She has a long way to go, poor thing."

"She's harmless, simply a little lost. All right! I got my house back from the tourists yesterday and am all ready for you. Let's get you two settled in and then maybe go to Charlie's for lobster, my treat."

Shawn shook his head. "My treat." His quiet voice carried an intensity she hadn't heard from him before, and she tried to look nonchalant as she examined him. She moved to grab her purse, but Shawn caught her and held her in a light hug, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

"Good to see you, Jen. You look great." His amazing emerald eyes drilled into her as he held her close for a moment, a moment that seemed an eternity. Electricity rushed through her body at the pressure of his arm around her waist.

“You...you look good too, Shawn. I like the new look.” She reached towards his chin, dying to stroke the smooth dark hair, but pulled back. *Oh my God, you look amazing. And that’s the first time you’ve touched me in all these years.*

They regarded one another in silence, and Jen pulled away awkwardly. Shawn ran his hand through his thick black hair and glanced around the shop. Jen searched frantically for something to say, but Dana’s giggle broke the spell.

“What’s funny?”

“Oh, nothing important.” Dana rolled her eyes innocently.

After Jen locked up the shop, the trio took to the boardwalk. Shawn breathed the salt air in deeply as he stared out at the beach and retreating tide. “I love this place, especially at this time of year. Want to finish teaching the semester for me, Jen, and I’ll take over the shop for you?”

“That’s not a good idea. I’m sure the shop would turn a profit, even if you don’t quite look like a purveyor of fine New Age paraphernalia. But I’m pretty sure I couldn’t teach microbiology.”

“Molecular biology,” he corrected. “I wouldn’t put it past you. I don’t think there’s anything you can’t do.”

Dana followed behind, snickering.

“*What* is your problem?” Jennifer chided her friend. Dana shrugged, tongue in cheek.

Shawn tried to keep the excitement of being in Jen’s company off his face through dinner. The sight of her floored him—long, dark hair hanging to her waist, amazing legs in tiny shorts, fantastic breasts pushing at her tight tank top, and the winning smile of a movie star. She could fucking stop traffic, and probably did, regularly. How the hell could she be thirty-five? She got sexier every time he saw her. And what the hell had his brother Frank been thinking, screwing up that marriage?

She was hot, funny, intelligent, and a solid friend. Frank had to be the ultimate moron. Shawn longed for a chance with her, just one night with her. No, that’s not what he wanted. He wanted enough one nights strung together to make up years. Or was it simply because she made him feel special, less of a geek?

Jennifer had always sought him out, always asked about his studies, his hobbies, his travels, and listened, *really listened*, as if she cared. As if he counted. But she was just being kind to her brother-in-law, the boring scientist.

Shawn glanced at Jennifer again and pushed away an image of her naked, under him, telling him—no, begging him—to take her. *Go ahead, asshole, torture yourself some more. It's going to be a long two weeks.*

“Right, Shawn?” Dana waved her fork at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, sorry, thinking about work. What were you saying?”

“How great it is Jen’s kids’ books are starting to sell. When’s the next one coming out?”

“Weeell, actually, the next one is a little different.” Jen cleared her throat and Shawn watched color flush her cheeks. “It’s a romance.”

“Ugh.” Shawn laughed and dipped a chunk of lobster into butter. Dana punched her brother in the arm.

“Ooooh, goody! What made you decide to do that? What’s it about?”

“Been thinking about it for a long time. It’s...it’s the hot kind. You know, a little steamy. Oh, you may as well know, it’s erotic—tons and tons of hot sex.”

Shawn’s hand stopped in midair, lobster dangling and dripping. His centerfold fantasy wrote porn. His brain turned to Jell-O.

Dana mouthed a silent “Oh,” and turned to Shawn. “Shawn, did you hear that? Tons of hot sex.”

“I heard it all right. Would you mind saying that a few more times, Jen, maybe kind of slowly? We biologists don’t get out much.”

“Wouldn’t biologists pretty much know everything about sex?” Jennifer smirked.

“Think mice. Lots and lots of mice. They don’t have hot, wild, all-night-long, mind-blowing sex. Actually, humans are the only animals who...” he trailed off and pushed the lobster in his mouth.

Dana and Jennifer both looked at him in surprise. Shawn’s cheeks heated up and he wondered if he was blushing. He looked at Dana, begging for a rescue.

Dana winked at her brother. “Jen, are we going to get to read this erotic...”

“Romance.”

“Riiiiiight. Do we get a copy?”

Jennifer shifted her weight and leaned her chin on one palm. She looked straight into Shawn’s eyes. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for Shawn to be reading things like that. He

might think I'm some kind of nymphomaniac. It's pretty graphic. People tend to think that what you've written is what you've done...or would like to do."

Shawn dropped his fork and pushed away from the table. "Which is it? The hot sex? What you've done? Or what you want to do?"

Jennifer laughed and toasted him with her beer bottle. "That's for me to know..."

"I want my copy *now*." Dana laughed.

"I haven't quite put the finishing touches on it. Give me a few days and I'll let you read it."

Shawn glanced at his sister, knowing she would pry the thing out of Jen in the next few hours, and he'd pry it right out of Dana's hands just as quickly. Because nothing on Earth was going to stop him from finding out what kind of hot sex Jen liked.

He toasted Jen back with his own beer, proud he was able to hold her gaze. Was he imagining that she studied him carefully? Something had changed in the past year, or was his fantasy getting the best of him?

Chapter Two

Four hours later, Dana and Shawn snuck onto Jen's porch, manuscript in hand. Dana put on her glasses.

"It's called *The Monk*. Hmnn. Okay, here we go..."

* * *

Simon watched her from beneath his dark hood, knowing the grey wall and bleak night hid him from human vision. There was no doubt she intended to repeat the rituals he'd witnessed on the night of the full moon, three months in a row. The tall, buxom beauty intoned strange words, as if speaking to the trees and herbs and the moon itself. She would lean to the ground to pull plants, roots and all, and place them in a rough basket. At one point, she spun in a circle, arms flying and dress swinging, as she laughed and sang in an odd tongue. And then the inevitable sight—the one he waited breathlessly for. She pulled off her cloak, unbuttoned her simple dress, and stepped into the stream, naked except for a medallion hanging between her full breasts.

The sight of her beauty shattered him each time. For years, this perfect woman had taunted him with her appearance, her intelligence, her kindness, her humor. And yet, she knew nothing of her effect on him.

The nest of black curls between her creamy thighs, her dark nipples puckered in the cold night air, her long, black hair brushing perfect buttocks—all pulled at his soul. Each time he spied on her, Simon ran his hand down his hard shaft, pretending it was her hand, her hot mouth taking him in. Her hand caressing the crease beneath, her tongue licking and teasing all of him. He would bite his lip raw to stop from crying out as he spilled hot liquid.

Then he would wander the seven miles back to the monastery, straining to remember every detail of her, burning the vision of her into his brain so he could repeat his release again and again before morning.

By nightfall the next day, he would confess and be forgiven. Simon wondered if Brother Adrian laughed at him, ridiculed him for his obsession with the Raven, as he nicknamed her. If only Adrian knew she was a witch, how the laughter would cease. Simon wondered how much longer his confessor would be willing to keep the secret of the master of Castle Carnoor. Did the holy man know the Raven's true identity?

Gwyneth smiled as she crossed the tiny footbridge and took the twisting, stony path up the hill towards her cottage. Perhaps the next time she would make the pathetic monk cry out for her. She would caress herself in plain view, show him her wet folds, pinch her hard nipples, and rub herself to ecstasy. It had been too long since she'd felt a man's hardness fill her, pound into her, give her the release she missed. The release she couldn't match by her own hand. One of the brothers would be safe enough. No chance of marriage. The Grey Cloak would care not that she could not bear him a child.

Gwyneth sighed. If only her brother-in-law Simon did not need an heir. And did not hate her, she mused sadly. She would pursue him wantonly, be his whore willingly. The familiar shiver of dread and excitement filled her at the thought of her dark, brooding brother-in-law. His eyes were the color of green leaves in the fall when the sun begins to infuse them with gold. A thin, pale scar cut across the edge of his chin, the result of a wound Gwyneth had inflicted herself years before in youthful play. Simon's black hair was full, falling in waves to well beneath his collar, his body was hard and lean. Six years younger than his brother, four years younger than her.

How many times had she watched him in swordplay, half-dressed, sweat glistening on his bronze skin, and muscles bulging? How many times had she shut her eyes against the sight of her husband, Lester, pretending that Simon hovered over her instead? How long had she craved the touch of the wrong man? She counted off the years—since Simon was but sixteen.

And how many times in the last year had she pleaded with Simon to believe in her innocence?

"I did not kill your brother, Simon. But I know who did," she muttered to the night air, whispering a quick prayer for the soul of her lost husband. He had been a brutal master, and he needed all the prayers living souls could offer. No doubt the prayers were

wasted, and Lester rotted in Hell with his kind. But she would keep the secret, go to her grave letting Simon believe she was guilty, lest more pain come to the murderer. No, Simon Malstron Carnoor would never be hers, and that fact would plague her heart and soul for all eternity.

Gwyneth sighed again in resignation. Of course, it didn't mean she couldn't bed the foolish monk who hid behind the ancient wall. He would appear again in a month, would he not?

* * *

Shawn pushed his hand through his dark hair and shook his head. "What the...? Monks jerking off in the woods, witches and murderers...this is a romance? Is this the kind of stuff you read?"

"That's the beginning. I'm not sure I can read the rest out loud. I mean, you know."

"Yes, I *do* know, trust me. I *do not* want my sister reading porn to me. You used to read Dr. Seuss to me. That's about all I can handle."

Dana threw her head back and laughed. "Yeah, you already look a little pale. Here, I'll finish it later. Take it."

Pale? Shawn shifted on the couch, horrified his sister might suspect the effect Jen's story was having on him. He might well be pale, all the blood having rushed to his cock. He had to get away from Dana.

Shawn held up his hand. "Look, Jen told you to wait until she finished it. And if I want porn, I'll watch it at my condo, thank you very much."

"This isn't the same, is it, bro? It's Jen's writing. Not some anonymous bimbo faking it for the camera."

"It's still fiction! Ridiculous stuff."

"There's fiction and there's meaningful fiction. I *really* think you need to read this."

"Meaningful fiction? You're talking in riddles. I intend to read it, trust me, but..."

"I think it's a letter." Dana winked and handed him the manuscript. She tilted her head to one side and stared at him. "She got it right. Your eyes are the color of green leaves, but with a glimmer of gold."

"A letter? To whom?"

“You’re not very bright, for a professor. Can’t you see the sexy Master is based on you? Come on, I know you’re dense about women, but even you have to admit...”

“No way.” He pushed his hand through his hair. “Really?”

“Really.” Dana stood and stretched, and leaned in to kiss Shawn’s cheek. “Sleep tight. If you sleep at all.”

Shawn snatched the manuscript up and rolled it, tucking it under his arm, hidden in a newspaper. *Jennifer*? The centerfold? The New Age goddess? The older woman who had fueled his fantasies since high school? The woman who made him feel special simply by talking with him? No, Dana had it wrong, *had* to have it wrong.

Shawn slapped the papers on his forehead. “In your dreams. Forget about it, asshole.” But it wouldn’t hurt to read a little more of her story. He took the stairs to his room two at a time, locked the door behind him, and settled on the bed to read Jen’s masterpiece.

Chapter Three

“*The Monk*,” Shawn muttered in disdain. Ridiculous stuff, he thought. He reread the description of the hero, Simon.

“Is that how she sees me?” he wondered in shock. Shawn squeezed his eyes shut and let a wave of lust sweep through him. She was older. Yep. He was the brother-in-law. Yep. Ex-husband a brutal master? He thought of Frank. Yes, that pretty much summed up his brother. And handsome, with a hard, lean body? He’d certainly been working out, but shaking off the old picture of the skinny science nerd still took some work. Of course, the dating scene grew more promising all the time, and he didn’t have trouble getting around...but Jen? No, she was way out of his league.

“She would caress herself in plain view, show him her wet folds, pinch her hard nipples, and rub herself into ecstasy. It had been too long since she’d felt a man’s hardness fill her, pound into her, give her the release she missed. The release she couldn’t match by her own hand.”

Shawn reached to ease the ache a few dozen words had caused. “I’ll give you the release you crave, Jen.” He caressed his swollen cock in long strokes, imagining that her hand squeezed and tortured, teased the moist head, brought release. Shawn bit his lip to stifle a moan as he came. How many times, after all these years, had he jerked off to thoughts of Jen? Too many to count, even when she’d been married to Frank. Even when Shawn had been with his ex-girlfriend Morgan, he’d always imagined Jen at the moment when his world slipped away in ecstasy.

“Oh shit!” Shawn grabbed a towel to wipe the bit of evidence of his release off the manuscript page. He reached for his beer and propped himself up, ready to read more.

* * *

Gwyneth read the note again, laboring over each word, working very hard to ensure she had the meaning correct. She ran her fingers across the precious parchment, repeating the message aloud. Her French was poor, and she knew not a word of Latin. Fortunately, this note was written in English, the only language she could read.

Simon had secretly taught her to read, despite the threats Lester had repeated against the training. It was extraordinary enough that the brothers could read. It was sinful that Simon had taught his sister and sister-in-law what he knew. Had Simon himself penned the note? The thought made Gwyneth run her hand across the page again, as if she would feel something of his skin, his touch, by doing so.

Simon Malstron, Lord of Carnoor, requires your presence at a dinner to celebrate the natal anniversary of his beloved sister, Cecelia.

Impossible. Simon had banned her from Carnoor for a year, and now he invited her to his sister's birthday celebration? Gwyneth sighed and shook her head in confusion. What should she do? Hurt the only woman who had ever treated her with kindness, the woman to whom she was bonded in a way only women can be? The woman who knew her darkest secrets? Had Simon actually given his permission, or was Cecelia plotting behind his back?

In a week, she could lay eyes on him again. And he would still hate her. But for young Cecelia...there was nothing she would deny her.

The youth cleared his throat. "Madam, I am to wait for your response. I can tell you what is contained there. I have committed it to memory." The scruffy young man pointed to the invitation.

"No, no, I understand well enough, lad." She closed her eyes. Her heart lurched at her own words. "Please convey to your Lord that I would be honored to attend the celebration."

The boy nodded, mounted his horse, and rode down the path as if he fled the Devil himself.

Even the lad thinks you're a witch. No one understood the old ways, the healing arts. Fools. They came to her door for cures but ran from her in fear as she walked through the winding village streets. At least the Brothers at Cloores respected her art, although she knew they turned the other way when she muttered the ancient tongue to aide in her cures.

Gwyneth pulled her cloak around her and slung her heavy woven bag over her shoulder. Vials clanked against one another as she began the long trek to Cloores Abbey.

It had been nearly three months since she had looked in on the aging Grey Cloaks. She hoped all fared well, but she would assist where she could.

“I give up, Adrian. The woman shows nary a sign of having a lover. I have sat on the cold, wet ground outside her cottage night after night. A witch? Perhaps. A wanton woman—it hardly seems likely to me now. If a lover was party to Lester’s murder, he seems long gone.” Simon groaned and pushed his hand through his thick hair.

The older man threw back his hood and turned his face to the weak fall sunshine. He took in a deep breath and then, as if he just remembered he was not alone, regarded Simon and patted him on the back.

“I did tell you, my Lord, did I not? She is not the wanton murderess of your brother. It is out of character for the lady.”

Brother Adrian stopped and placed his hands on the young man’s shoulders.

“Pay heed, Simon. I am your confessor, but more, I am your friend. May I call you such?”

“Aye, and I fear I know what counsel will come from the lips of my friend.”

“Aye, I believe you do. Your repeated confessions of lust for the woman are becoming somewhat tiresome. May you and God both forgive me for saying so?” He muttered a prayer in Latin and smirked at Simon. “I do not want to turn you away from the confessional, my son, but I think instead we might discuss this matter man to man. At least, that is what I believe the Lord would want me to do.” Adrian tilted his head forward and narrowed his eyes. Simon squirmed a bit under the close examination, which seemed to amuse Adrian.

“Come, lad, must you always be serious? Ah, I believe the climate here has soured the temperament of your people.”

Simon glared at the rotund Brother as he pushed his hand through his thick dark hair. He opened his mouth to argue, but laughed instead.

“You believe, although I claim to come to cleanse my soul, I want instead to chat like a young girl about a secret romance? Perhaps you are right, Adrian.”

Brother Adrian led their stroll along the grassy slope of the lazy stream that no longer fed the silent, motionless mill.

“Already the chill of winter insinuates itself into the air. Ah, my son, you should see Rome at this time of year. I will return before too long, should the Archbishop grant my request to finish my years in the land of my birth.

“But enough of my woes. In youth, one is more able to keep to the subject.” Adrian rubbed his hands together and turned his rheumy eyes to Simon.

“Your problem, sir, is that you lie to yourself, to me, and to the Raven, as you call her. I believe that is a bigger sin than your attraction to the woman. After all, she is a widow, and available. By the way, the Raven will visit Cloores this very day.”

Simon stopped dead in his tracks. “Pardon me, Adrian? I mistook you for saying that the Raven would come to Cloores.”

“Indeed. Your sister-in-law, Gwyneth. She is the woman in question, of course.” He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture and looked at Simon’s shocked expression.

“Oh, please do not feign surprise, Simon. Surely you confided in me hoping I would guess the secret of the seductress. Gwyneth is a modest healer, a grower of herbs and such. Our aging Brother Fadrius cannot fathom her success and welcomes her counsel. Every three months or thereabouts she comes all the way for one night, sometimes two, if one of the brothers is ill. She replenishes our stock of cures and sees to particular problems. Surely you knew of her skill—she lived under your roof for years.”

“A healer? A witch, you mean.” Simon made the sign of the cross. “And yet, you let her stay at the Abbey, under the holy roof? Impossible.”

“Your obsession with the woman has clouded your vision. I have been a man of God, albeit frail and flawed, for many years now, my friend. I know the difference between an unholy demon worshipper and a maker of healing potions. She is a good woman, Simon. She is no longer a child. Are we so pure as to judge her in this fashion? She is odd, perhaps, but who of us can claim not to be?”

Simon walked silently, weighing his options. It seemed all his plotting, hiding, and spying had brought him nothing but embarrassment in front of a holy man and a few nights of unquenchable lust. Enough! He might never learn who had plunged the knife into the back of his brother. It was time to return to his sister Cecelia and the management of Carnoor. No doubt the party preparations were already underway. He groaned aloud and Adrian looked at him in question.

“Oh, it is nothing, Adrian. My young sister likely has Carnoor turned on its rafters in preparation for her celebration. She turns sixteen and considers herself a grand lady of the keep. In fact, she has nearly become so. No doubt the entire town will receive invitations.

I cannot believe I left it to her. I was...yes, Adrian, obsessed. You chose the word correctly. But not with the woman—with finding my brother's murderer."

"Ah, if it helps you to believe that, sir, I will not argue the point." Adrian patted Simon on the back again. "Only midway through your third decade, is that not so? You have done well. Not many men your age could run a keep alone in quite the fashion you have, as well as raise a lovely and devout young sister. Cloores also owes you great fealty for your constant generosity."

"It is out of friendship and devotion."

Adrian clapped his hands and rubbed them vigorously. "Your charade is over? Ordained a monk and excommunicated in the space of a few months?" Adrian laughed. "Perhaps you would like to stay one more night? I doubt, however, that your Raven will strip naked on the grounds of the monastery."

"I do not suppose you would like to make a wager on that? One last thing, Adrian? Please do not reveal my stay here. On the odd chance the witch spied my vigil of her cottage, of her...I prefer she not know it was I. For Cecelia's sake, of course."

"Of course." Brother Adrian nodded.

Simon knew Adrian didn't believe him. He turned his face to the weak sun, feeling a heat that came from inside sweep through his body at the thought of seeing Gwyneth again. Could Adrian be right? Was Gwyneth truly a healer, not a witch at all? But what of her rituals?

More importantly, Adrian had laughed at the notion Gwyneth was capable of killing Lester. Why, Simon, why did you accuse her? Did you ever believe the woman capable of such an act? No, you needed to distance her, to keep her far from your own desires. For who would take his brother's wife to bed? Did you persecute a woman because you did not trust yourself?

Simon laughed at his own ego. What guarantee did he have that Gwyneth would take him? He was nothing like Lester, the brother she'd taken as husband. No doubt any affection she had for her younger brother-in-law was long since replaced with loathing. He had certainly earned her hatred.

Chapter Four

Jennifer paced quietly in the hallway, stopping each time she reached Shawn's door, struggling for the nerve to tap. She heard the faint voices of a movie in the background and wondered if he was awake, or if he was reading her book. Perhaps he'd read a few pages and cast it aside, thinking it was silly women's stuff. What if he'd read it and understood he was the hero? Her heart pounded as she imagined his reaction.

Dana had finally admitted to stealing the manuscript and handing it off to her brother. Now Jen felt foolish for chastising her good friend. Her plan had worked so far, and she had no right giving Dana a hard time for falling into the trap.

Why are you torturing yourself like this? Knock on the door and get it over with. You wanted him to read the story. Suck it up and see if you got your wish.

She put her ear to the door and raised her hand to knock, then finally lost nerve. With a deep sigh, she wandered onto the wraparound porch of the second storey. A half-moon cast silver on the dark waves, and she sat in a lounge chair, at the same time longing and afraid to see Shawn.

The sound of the sliding glass door made her nearly jump, but she kept still in the shadows as Shawn peered out at the ocean and stretched. *Here's your chance, Jen. He's standing right there!* But the moment was lost as he turned from the window and shut off the television. She heard him open a beer bottle and rustle through papers. On tiptoe, nerves jangling, she peeked into the room to see Shawn lying in bed in his briefs, beer bottle in one hand and her manuscript in the other. She watched, transfixed, wondering how far he'd read.

* * *

The Raven swept into the monastery garden suddenly, and Simon hurried away, down the path towards the stream, pulling his hood up. He sat on a bench and feigned

prayer while watching her from a distance as she washed her face and hands in the cold fountain. The sun was nearly set behind the dark forest trees and a misty grey turned to near blackness in the space of minutes.

Why are you doing this, Simon? Reveal yourself, and be done with it. Or go home, and forget she ever existed. His heart fell at his choices. He had tortured Gwyneth with his accusations for a year, relegated her to a tiny cottage on the edge of the manor holdings to make it clear to all that he held her in contempt. He had once been very sure of her guilt, that the woman had found Lester odious, that they had shared a loveless marriage. Who would not want to rid herself of his torture? For indeed, Simon knew how dark Lester had been. Never faithful to his stunning wife. But that was the way of marriages. *How could someone go to another with Gwyneth waiting willingly in bed? Never, if she were mine.*

Now fairly convinced of her innocence, he felt terrible shame at his treatment of her. His heart beat wildly as he saw Gwyneth make her way down the path towards him. She approached on tiptoe, evidently unwilling to disturb a prayerful Brother.

Show her! Tell her now, apologize to her, and stop your deceit! But Simon knew she would flee at the sight of her enemy, her persecutor. And he could not bear to let her go, not yet.

“Brother?” Her question was a mere whisper.

“Yes, Milady?” Simon whispered as well, pulling his hood close around his face and turning slightly away.

“I am sorry to disturb your prayers. Would you have time to counsel a troubled woman? I have no confessor, and my questions burn in my heart. Oh, I am bold, let me seek out another who knows me...”

“No, wait, child. I am willing to listen. Let us walk a bit.”

“You are Italian, Brother? May I ask your name?”

Simon groaned inwardly at his own foolish imitation of Adrian’s accent.

“I am Gabriel, from Firenze. I visit for a short while. Please tell me your concern, my child. Your words are safe with me.” *Say anything, Gwyneth. I crave the sound of your voice, your nearness, knowing what you look like under that cloak and dress. Dance and laugh and arch your naked breasts to the sky.* He shuddered at the thought and chastised himself, knowing he’d be the laughing stock of the village if she told of his deception.

“It is a difficult subject for me to discuss, Brother.”

“Indeed? You may speak on of any subject, my dear, and God will listen.”

“Will He forgive my wanton lust for one of the Grey Cloaks? For one of your own? Nay, I think not.”

Simon took a quick breath and had to stop himself from turning to her and looking into her eyes.

Gwyneth smiled, sensing his shock, knowing she’d hit the mark, her arrow true. She had spotted the man immediately. His height, his broad shoulders, a lock of dark hair escaping from his hood. She had watched him in the corner at supper, sneaking peeks at her as she spoke with Brother Adrian concerning the health and wellbeing of the aging monks. And she resolved to amuse herself with him this evening, to give the monk what he surely craved.

No, to give herself what she craved—to release all of her passion anonymously with this one tall stranger.

His soul was the one at greater risk, she thought. At least she had never vowed to be chaste. Of course, most of the brothers took lovers now and again, within the walls of the monastery, with each other, or beyond, with women like her.

“I am truly sorry, Brother Gabriel. I seem to have upset you, and I will now withdraw to join the rest of your brethren in prayer.”

Gwyneth turned to walk back up the path to the monastery, but a strong hand gripped her shoulder. She stood still and smiled to herself, her back to the Brother.

“No! You are welcome to speak with me. You see, in Italia, these matters are tolerated. Of course, your soul may be in serious jeopardy, but I am the ideal confessor for you, my dear. Please, go on. Your passion for a Grey Cloak? Have you...”

“Indulged myself with this holy man? Oh, no. May we rest, Brother? I am afraid this confession may make me swoon in shame.”

“You may lean on me, my dear. Let us rest here.” He led her to a low wall, one of a thousand ruined pieces of antiquity littering the countryside.

“Ah, Brother, your people built this very wall. Does that not make you proud—to know their hands reach across hundreds of years to provide a place for you to rest?”

“I do not understand.”

“Is it not a Roman marker?”

“Ah, yes, Roman, that is very true. Indeed, I am descended from the ancient ones, no doubt.”

Gwyneth heard his low groan and wondered why he disguised his voice and feigned a terrible Italian accent. Terrified of being exposed as a lecher?

“Brother, I have sinned terribly and no less than three times. Many more times, if you count the moments alone, in my bed...” Gwyneth smiled again to herself as she heard his intake of breath. *No doubt, it was him.*

“Each month I must take to the woods near my home, to gather the herbs that heal—the herbs I bring to the brothers or sell to the villagers to help pay for my meager needs. I follow the waxing and waning of the moon, which guides my rituals.”

“That is admirable, my dear. But I fear for you, your mention of the moon. You do not refer to the Pagan worship?”

“Oh, Brother, indeed no! I am baptized by Father Martius. Brother Adrian himself was a witness, you may ask him. No, I am a believer in the True Cross! My art is simple and my chants in the old tongue are a reminder of the ancient wisdom—where to pick, at what time...” she lied. *You believe in Christ and you believe in the Goddess. And no one shall ever know the truth of that contradiction.*

“Go on, then.” His voice sounded impatient.

“As I perform my duties in the woods, I have noticed one of your holy brothers very near, watching me. He does not know I see him.”

The man’s silent shock was palpable.

“My healing arts have made me very sensitive to the presence—the sight and smell and sound of others. In any case, Brother Gabriel, this man, as I said, watches my movements. As part of the ancient ritual, I am allowed to strip off my clothing and worship God in that state.” *Worship the Goddess, you mean.*

“I know that the Brother watches me. And, I know that he derives pleasure from watching me. Do you understand, Brother?”

“No. How do you know what he feels?”

“Oh, not what he *feels*, but what he *does*. He *touches* himself in an unholy way.” She shook her head and tried her best to make tears fall down her cheeks. *Damnation. Nothing.* Gwyneth tried not to laugh at her own poor performance.

“How terrible! You do nothing to stop this behavior? That is the same as blessing his actions!”

“It is worse than that, Brother. I live for these nights. I relish my time before him, the thought of his hand and what it does to him, what I do to seek my release when I am alone, afterwards. I can think of little else, save what it would be like if we could come together, rut like lowly animals in the woods.”

“And...and what do you do? When you are alone?” He squirmed a bit and stood and Gwyneth decided to act.

“Why, I start by touching myself, here.” She pulled her cloak away and rubbed her hand on the cloth covering her breasts. She pinched her nipples through the fabric.

He didn’t move.

Unlacing the ribbon of her dress, she pulled open the fabric. He moaned as she brought her hands onto her bare nipples, squeezing and teasing the hard nubs in the cool night air.

“Then, Brother, I carry the sin further.” Gwyneth propped a leg up on the low wall and pushed her skirts aside. She ran her hand up her inner thigh in languid circles, pulling the fabric high to show him her mound. She pushed her fingers into her soaked hot folds and began the motion that would bring her to release. She moaned and offered her fingers before his face as evidence of her passion. The moisture gleamed.

His voice was barely audible. “You do not join with another? Do you lie to me?”

“No, not since the death of my husband. This Brother is the focus of my passion, but he knows not that I see him, that I want him, want to touch him, want to welcome him into my hot, wet skin.”

“Oh!” He looked as if he would fall to his knees. “Oh, my dear.” The words rushed out in a heavy breath. “This is not...you should not...”

“Is it not what you want, Brother? These three months I have seen you! It is time for your confession, is it not?”

“Damnation, woman! I...Oh my sweet God...” He quivered as she stood before him and pushed her hand against the fabric of his robe, feeling the huge, hard shaft that betrayed him.

“Oh my sweet God, indeed, Brother.” She rubbed his shaft against the fabric and led him to the wall, where she fell on her knees.

“What? Oh, you cannot mean to...”

“It is your choice. And, good Brother, if you are from Florence, I am from that farthest twinkling body.” She nodded towards the heavens. “What is your answer,

Brother? I would like to satisfy such a loyal audience.” She laughed and he grabbed her head and pulled her in. He pushed up his robe and she gasped at the glorious sight of him. Never in her wildest fantasies had the man—any man—looked like this. The head of his thick, hard cock was coated with a tear of moisture. *How would she take a man that large into her mouth? How would he feel in her body?* Less involved in torturing him now and more caught in her own lust, she reached towards his velvety flesh.

“God help me.” She smiled up at him, unable to see his eyes.

Simon’s mind barely functioned. His body floated, burned, ached at her touch. He had known many women, but this one woman’s lustful smile made him forget it was not his first time. How could she have this effect on him? The thrill of the look on her face at the sight of him—he nearly came undone.

He longed to kiss her, to pull her in and take her, to make her scream...*his* name alone. *You want her for your own! It cannot be! Not Gwyneth!*

All clear thought fell away as she ran her hand down the length of his shaft and licked at the slippery head. Simon grabbed her and caressed her hair, groaning in delight as she intensified her sweet torture, bringing her full lips onto the head of his shaft and grasping harder as she moved back and forth on the tip. In a moment that seemed at once an eternity and a second, he cursed and poured into her mouth, onto her exposed breasts, onto her chin as she moved the shaft to cover herself with his seed.

He longed to pull her to his chest, to hold her, rock her while he returned to his senses. Biting his lip to refrain from calling her name, he simply caressed her hair and cheek. Her sly smile crept into his heart and the heat grew again, the need to have her overwhelming.

“It seems we both enjoy our sins. Is it not so, Brother?” She began her torture again, caressing his sack, running her hands along the ridge of tender flesh that led to his muscled buttocks. She pushed her hands up to his chest and pinched his nipples. He was as stiff as lumber again.

“And now, having sinned, should we stop and repent? Or...” She lifted her skirts and bent over the wall, exposing her white flesh and wet folds for his pleasure.

Panting, sweating in the cool night air, burning with lust, Simon wasted no time in pushing his fingers into her. She cried out at his harsh touch, and moved in a primal rhythm against his hand. She clenched at his fingers as she arched and cried out again. He

pushed the tip of his hard shaft into her. She clenched tighter and Simon pushed deeper, filling her.

“Dear Brother.” She moaned and cried and cursed and called on God as he thrust in and out of her tight heat, her lips squeezing and straining against his shaft with each push. And when he exploded inside of her, pounding as he pulled her hips to meet his, he knew his fate was sealed. She would be his, forever. And from far away, as his world spun out of existence, he heard her muffled cry.

If only you did not hate me, Raven. I would give you my passion every night. I would worship you, if you would only worship me in kind. Please forgive me.

She turned and he pulled her into his arms, smelling the scent of her sex, of their lovemaking. She cried and Simon pushed her away in surprise. She looked up to his face and he turned away, unwilling to have her hate him more for his deception.

“Do not fear, Brother. I am fine.” She brushed away her tears. “You are troubled? For your sin? Surely you know that many of your fellow brothers are not celibate?”

“Nay, I am not troubled over that...”

“Then what?”

“Perhaps I grieve that my time with you is over.”

“And may it never happen again? Is that what you intend? You will not visit me? You will not reveal yourself to me?”

“Nay, I will not reveal myself to you. But, lady...trust me, you are etched onto my soul for all eternity.”

He smoothed her luxurious hair and turned away, not knowing what to do but abandon her, lest he fall to his knees in confession before her, begging her for forgiveness, telling her he believed her, asking her to be his.

Chapter Five

Shawn took his coffee onto the crow's nest and settled into a lounge chair. He looked out at the crashing Atlantic and the few die-hard vacationers and locals who hadn't left the island after Labor Day. He sipped at the strong black brew, hoping to erase the fuzziness from his brain. He had read for a few hours the night before, stopping at intervals to rub his cock, which seemed to have an unquenchable passion for Jen's writing and a mind of its own. Finally, exhausted, he had fallen into half-sleep, dreaming of the Raven, naked, pleasuring him.

The warm sun didn't help to wake him, and he closed his eyes, wondering drowsily if Dana could be right. Could Jen have actually modeled a sexy hero after him? Of course, it didn't mean anything—perhaps she simply needed a character, and any guy would do. No, it wasn't a letter to him, as Dana insisted. It was fiction, designed to titillate—and it had, he thought wryly.

“Ahem!”

Shawn nearly jumped out of his skin, nerve endings on fire as adrenaline rushed through his limbs. Caught red-handed.

Shawn tried to slide the manuscript under the paper and laughed at himself as he saw how useless it was. He waved the papers in front of her. “Something to swat at flies with.”

“Spectacular.” Jen crossed her arms and tapped her bare foot in annoyance.

“I thought you were on the beach with Dana. Change of plans?”

He took in her smirk and let his eyes drop to her sinful body, barely covered in what he supposed counted as a bathing suit—tiny triangles of shimmering black fabric, soft rounded stomach and hips, long, toned legs, full breasts, the body of a real woman...

Jen pulled her long black hair back into a ponytail, nonchalantly pulling up a chair to sit next to him.

“Your sister takes forever to get ready. I see you’ve settled in. Anything I can get you? A beer? A Mai-Tai? Sex on the Beach? Maybe iced tea? Oh, I see you’re still on coffee. Some *reading material*, perhaps? You already have a fly swatter...”

“It’s Dana’s fault. She found it.” He flashed a grin he’d been told was charming, boyish, and watched her face relax and a smile creep to her lips.

“People will read it eventually, at least I hope they do. I didn’t intend for you to see it. You know, with all that *hot sex*.” She drew the words out slowly, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. She ran her gaze down his chest to his shorts and back up to his face, lingering on his lips. Then she met his gaze and held it, and a glimmer of awareness passed between them. Shawn felt as if he were falling into an abyss.

She’s flirting with you. Oh. My. God.

“Tell me again that you didn’t mean for me to see the book. You’re lying.”

Jennifer popped out of the chair and backed away from him, opening and closing her mouth as if to protest, but saying nothing.

“Well? Never knew you to be a liar, my dear sister-in-law.”

“Ex-sister-in-law. Don’t forget it.”

“Trust me, I haven’t. Admit you want me to read your book. I suppose you want a guy’s opinion for some reason?”

“All right, what’s your opinion?”

“I’ll tell you when I finish.”

“Fine, whatever. I don’t care.”

“You look like you care. I’m a scientist, Jen. I observe various phenomena and draw conclusions based on what I see.” Shawn took his time sweeping his gaze down her body, head to toe, lingering on her breasts and finishing at her mouth.

“Stop that. Stop it right now!” Jennifer turned on her heel and scurried down the stairs. He stood, breathless, excited, and watched her disappear.

“Nymphomaniac!” he called after her, and heard her muffled giggle from the bottom of the stairs.

Shawn lay back in the lounge chair and grinned. “I’ll be damned.”

Jennifer squirted a stream of water onto Dana's back.

"Hey!" Dana rolled over and saw the anger in Jen's eyes. "Uh oh. You're still mad?"

"Mnnn hmnn. Rummaging around for something to read today? Hope you finished it, because Shawn's settled in with it now."

"I'm sorry, I should have asked. It was out in plain view, well, pretty much in plain view. All right, I couldn't resist. That's pretty hot stuff, hun. Didn't know you had it in you. Are you ready for your family and friends to read it?"

"What family? You and Shawn are my only friends, anyway. Of course, Mrs. Jenkinson—the woman who sold me the Raven's Cave—she'd probably have a coronary. Maybe I need a pen name. Hmnn. Oh, never mind that now. I knew you'd find it. To be honest, I wanted you to find it. I mean, for feedback." Jennifer spread out her blanket and began her ritual beach setup—suntan lotion, thermos, book, spray bottle. She looked up over her dark glasses at a handful of surfers and fishermen. The usual suspects—old Charlie, hoping for some stripers and a bit of company. Young men with sun-kissed hair, catching the last waves of the season.

"Jen, thanks again for having us down here. I love Long Beach Island after Labor Day. It's like a private getaway."

"You know you're always welcome here. I look forward to your visit all year. And I love moving back into my own house. No, get that look off your face. Half of Long Beach Islanders rent out their homes during high season. I'm not a charity case, Dana, it's simply helped since the divorce. The Raven's Cave is doing great. It never ceases to amaze me what people will buy when they're on vacation. And, then I'm trying the *writing*..."

"Oh, you're dying to tell me about the book, aren't you? Go ahead. Is it him?" Dana propped herself up and eagerly looked over her sunglasses.

Jennifer avoided her friend's innocent blue eyes. "Is what him? I don't know what you're talking about."

"I mean, *really*. *My baby brother. Your brother-in-law*." Dana giggled.

"Ex-brother-in-law. Oh, you think the character Simon is like Shawn? How funny! All my characters look like someone, Dana. Dark hair, green eyes, big deal."

"Come on now. It's *me*. I'm not buying this. Mnnn, I like that Simon. Sexy, sexy guy. I guess I never thought of Shawn that way, which I suppose is normal." Dana laughed. "But women do drool over him. He used to not notice, buried in his work. I

guess with the line of female students trying to get into his office—well, trying to get into his pants, actually—he’s taken notice.”

“Yep, he seems to be catching on a little.” Jennifer was still rattled from his sensuous stare, his teasing. “But your brother and I haven’t shared more than a meal and some mindless chitchat since he was a teenager and I married Frank. Unless you know something I don’t...?”

“You want me to tell you whether or not Shawn likes you? Honey, we’re not thirteen. You can’t figure that one out for yourself?”

Jennifer ran her fingertips through the warm sand, thinking about the expression on Shawn’s face as he stared at her body. Lust. Pure lust.

“What’s he like these days, Dana? I mean, he seems different somehow. Like a...”

“Like a man, you mean? Like a man who might want something from you? What do you want to know?”

“He’s a friend, that’s all. I care about him. Is he happy? Seeing anyone?”

Dana laughed. “Man, I can see where this visit’s going. Okay, I’ll play along. No, he’s not seeing anyone. Yes, he’s more confident—I think partly from teaching, publishing his papers, buying his own place. And yes, I think he likes you.” Dana batted her eyelashes. “Would you like me to pass him a note in study hall? His room is down the hall from yours—why don’t you walk in on him tonight while he’s reading your book. See how shy he really is?”

“Shut up. It’s not like that. Sorry I asked.” Jen leaned back in her beach chair and opened her book, her eyes squeezed shut beneath her dark glasses. *What does he think? Is he reading it all? Oh God, what the hell were you thinking? You underestimated him. He’ll laugh at you, maybe even pity you.*

“Jen.”

“Hmnn?”

“Your book is upside down.”

“Shut up and get a tan.”

Dana giggled. Jen threw the book at her and rolled onto her stomach. The warmth of the weak fall sun soaked away some of the tension in her shoulders, the rhythmic crashing of the waves lulled her into near sleep, but each time she started to drift, the picture of Shawn, shirtless, sprawled out on her deck chair intruded. Her heart would beat

quickly and she'd imagine him pulling her down to him, looking into her eyes, kissing her, telling her wonderful things about love and forever...

Forever? My God, is that what you want?

Jennifer bolted up, brushing the sand off her hands. She turned her back to Dana and stared out at the surf.

You're in love with him. A fist gripped at her heart and squeezed. That ache—she hadn't felt it in years. *And you've left him with a silly book that's going to make him think you're a...a wanton older woman, throwing yourself at him.* Jennifer wanted her manuscript back, and quickly.

"Rats, looks like we might get the tail end of that hurricane after all." Jennifer brushed off her feet and pointed to the grey clouds, looking more threatening by the minute. "Let's hurry inside, Dana, before it comes through. We can have an early dinner, maybe take in Atlantic City?"

"Now, you know I don't gamble, except for the slots." Dana gathered her things and ran her hand through her short hair.

"Your brother does that a lot. You two are alike." Jen studied her.

"Does what? Plays slots?"

"No, I meant pushes his hand through his hair like that."

Dana laughed and shook her head. They walked up the slope to the path to the beach house.

"What's funny?"

Dana stopped and turned to face her friend. "Jen, you're full of shit. You have it so bad for Shawn...I bet if he tapped on your door tonight you'd be on all fours so quickly..."

"Dana! I can't believe you!" Jennifer pushed her up the sand embankment and kept cursing.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"So I think your brother is cute. Big deal, sue me."

"Just cute?"

"Well, hot, okay? And nice. And brilliant, and really, really kind. And did I say he's hot?" Jennifer stopped and Dana turned around.

“Uh-oh.” Dana looked over her sunglasses. “And you’ve written a book about him, hoping to let him know how you feel?”

“Something like that. Shit, he’s going to think I’m the biggest loser...”

“Jen, stop it. Don’t do that to yourself. That’s Frank talking. Not Shawn. Shawn worships the ground you walk on. Everyone he’s dated in the last four years has been a pathetic imitation of you. Give him a chance. Just take it slowly, okay? Or *he* might have a coronary.” Dana turned back towards the boardwalk. “Unless he already has. We’d better go check on him. He’s probably finished the book by now.” She giggled.

They reached the house and kicked off their flip-flops, dropped their towels and chairs, and pushed through the kitchen door together. Jennifer’s heart fluttered in nervousness as Dana called upstairs to her brother.

“Shawn!” Dana called in a singsong voice. “Guess what I found out?”

Jennifer widened her eyes in panic, shook her head, and put her hand over Dana’s mouth. Shawn wandered into the kitchen to find the women locked in that position. Jennifer kicked Dana’s ankle, and she nipped at Jennifer’s hand with her teeth.

“What’s gotten into the two of you?” Shawn pushed his hand through his hair. He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head as he stared at them.

The two women burst into laughter at the gesture.

“I found out we’re going to Atlantic City tonight, isn’t that right, Jen?”

“I thought you said it was a dump? A hellhole? That you’d never put money into the Mob’s pockets. That there was no such thing as a winner...”

“Shut up and shower, Shawn.” Dana patted her brother’s cheek and ran out of the kitchen.

As Jennifer stood still and held Shawn’s gaze for a moment, his nerves caught fire and his heart pounded as if it would leap from his chest. He had never wanted anything more in his life than to kiss this beautiful woman.

Instead he tried to look and sound nonchalant. “Ready for my feedback on your writing?”

She turned her back and grabbed a soda from the fridge and threw it to him. “You’re burnt, Shawn. Gotta watch it, even in September.”

“Nah, I’ll be tan by tomorrow. I got the Black Irish part. Dana got Mom’s coloring.”

“Oh, uh-huh.”

“I asked you a question. Want to hear it again? Actually, I have a few questions.”

Shawn saw her take in a deep breath. She opened her mouth to speak, then shook her head. “Let it go, Shawn. Every character has to look like someone.”

“That’s what I told myself at first. Do you like your hero, Jen?”

“Like him? Sure, you have to like your hero. What’s not to like, anyway? He’s gorgeous, young, sexy...”

“Right. I guess you don’t know anyone like that. I’ve been told I’m handsome under the right light, maybe if you squint. I am a few years younger than you. Maybe I have to work on sexy, though. What do you think?”

“Yeah, work on that.” Jen’s sarcasm and smirk thrilled Shawn, and he moved a few steps towards her.

“I wonder why you wrote a story about brothers? Married to one, in love with the other. Well, in lust at least.”

“Would you like to be him, Shawn?” Jennifer bit at her lip and he took another step towards her. *Is she serious? Is this serious?*

When he didn’t answer, she shrugged, picked up her things, and headed towards the stairs. She turned and nearly whispered, “I see. That’s a damn shame, Shawn. Because I thought of you every moment I wrote the thing. Hey, at least I finished my romance.” She ran up the stairs and Shawn stood in shock, listening to her slam the door to her room. He ran up the stairs and banged on her door.

“What? I’m getting into the shower,” she called out.

“Yes! The answer is *yes*. Do you hear me? Jen? I want to be him! I am him, aren’t I? Damn it, open the door!” He leaned his head against the door and groaned. “What a fucking idiot,” he mumbled as he made his way down the hall, and turned when he heard her door open. Jennifer peered around the corner of the door.

“Really?”

He managed a breathless nod.

Jennifer smiled more broadly, puckered a kiss at him, and dangled a towel in front of the door. Giggling like a young girl, she slammed the door shut again.

Shawn pounded on the door and struggled with the locked handle.

“Open up! Damn it, Jen!”

“Ahem.” Dana opened her door and leaned against the frame, arms across her chest, grinning broadly. “This is amusing.”

“Not now, Dana. Go away. Far away.” He tried the handle again and then put his ear to the door, and heard the shower running. “Shit.” He turned to Dana, who was laughing, one hand covering her mouth. “Our sister-in-law is a fucking tease.”

“Ex-sister-in-law. This is so damned *cute*.” She coughed dramatically. “You know, Shawn, I’m not feeling well. I may be coming down with a bad cold. Here, feel my head.” She coughed more dramatically. “I don’t think I can join the two of you for dinner. Darn. I think I’ll take a little nap. Have fun without me.” She winked.

“You’re a terrible actress.”

“I know.”

She turned to her room and Shawn put his hand on her shoulder. “Dana?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“What’s going on here? I mean, am I imagining all this?” He leaned against the wall and blew out a deep breath. “I’ve wanted her so long...even when Frank...”

“I know, honey. I know.”

“Frank! My God, what the hell would he say if I hit on his ex-wife?”

“He lost the right to say anything when he cheated on her, robbed her and the rest of the family blind to support his habit, and then turned his back on our offer to get him help.”

“I don’t know. You don’t think she’s looking for another Frank? We look a little alike...”

“You don’t look anything alike and you’re asking the wrong woman. For once in your life, Shawn, why don’t go after what you want. The worst that can happen is you can say you tried. Who knows, you might get lucky in Atlantic City.”

Dana looked at Shawn seriously as she grabbed his hand and kissed his cheek.

“Shawn, have I ever told you that you’re really, really handsome and that women like Jen fantasize about men like you? No? Don’t expect me to ever say it again. Have a great night. I love you.”

“Me too.” Shawn ran to his room and grabbed the pages of Jen’s manuscript, desperate to ensure he hadn’t missed a clue, anything that would tell him what she wanted.

Chapter Six

Simon nodded absently to Cecelia's young friend—what was her name? Esmeralda? The girl put her hand on his arm and did her best to push her small breasts upwards by arching her back. The whole damned county had designs on his holdings, and Esmeralda's father was no exception, now offering his third daughter as chattel. Esmeralda was fair but insipid, and she paled in comparison to Gwyneth, the Raven, a grown woman with a brain and breasts to feed on and secrets between her thighs begging to be uncovered.

He had quenched his passion only a few times in the last year, and only with whores he knew would never lay a claim to becoming mistress of Carnoor.

Simon bowed politely and extracted himself from Esmeralda's flirtations. He made his way to the serving table to down more hearty wine, to push away thoughts of Gwyneth, of their one night of passion. What should he do—reveal himself and hope that the night had held magic for her as well? Or keep his deception a secret, and apologize for his suspicions, his behavior. He felt foolish. The woman had no lover, Adrian had confirmed it.

"Oh, damn you to hell," he chastised himself. He wondered how he could have punished an innocent woman.

He looked at the door each time a new guest arrived. Couples danced to the pipes and drums that grew louder with each tune. The cackling laughter of matrons grated on his nerves, as if they laughed at his childish crush. Simon wanted to throw his goblet against the wall and frighten the guests into leaving his home.

He had sent the carriage to Gwyneth's door, but the coachman had returned to say the lady was not at home. Surely she hadn't walked several miles to the manor? She would not arrive, and Cecelia would be crushed. And Simon would toss and turn in his bed again until he was forced to find his release alone, finally admitting that the Raven

would fear him forever, forgive him never. Her touch would grow into a bittersweet memory.

When he heard Cecelia's excited squeal, his heart missed a beat. *Gwyneth!* He looked to the doorway and saw a flash of deep red fabric as she removed her heavy black cloak. Simon moved subtly to get a better view. Her cheeks were flushed—perhaps she had walked after all. Her gown was simple and stunning, her full breasts threatening to escape their tentative prison, her full hips making the fabric of her dress swish as she scampered to her dear young friend. Gwyneth's black hair was piled into ribbons of midnight velvet, some escaping the arrangement to caress her white skin.

This is the woman who used her tongue and lips to bring you to incredible bliss. Who bent over a low wall to let you fill her, pound her with your need. Who opened her legs to wantonly display her precious folds, to caress herself for your pleasure...no, for the monk's pleasure.

He watched Gwyneth scan the room and, as her gaze fell on him, his heart flopped a second time. *Why, you fool! Weakling! One night of coupling and you are at her mercy?*

"Raven," he muttered under his breath. Her name was enough to bring him to his knees.

Gwyneth tried to pull away from Simon's burning gaze to attend to the chatter of her diminutive friend. She looked into Cecelia's loving eyes, feeling both pity and love for the young woman.

"Oh, Gwyn, I simply love the gift, I knew you would come, I told Simon you could never stay away, that you would be... Why, attend to me, sister, what is the matter?"

Cecelia narrowed her pale blue eyes and followed Gwyneth's gaze to see her brother's rude stare.

"Do not trouble yourself over Simon, Gwyneth. He gave permission for you to attend. He seemed rather happy at the idea—you have nothing to fear! He will not insult you on my special day."

"It is not fear, Cec."

Gwyneth breathed in and pulled her gaze back to her friend to break Simon's hold. But his image burned into her brain—his stunningly handsome face, deep rich hair that brushed his rough-hewn white shirt, tight leggings that revealed muscles and contours that spoke to her core. He'd looked nearly the same since he was a very young man, but

now, all the qualities had intensified. Even his tiny scar stirred her. How could a flaw look so perfect, so compelling?

Gwyneth shook her head in amazement at her own revelation. Had she acquiesced to her father's wish for her to marry Lester simply to be near the youth who sent her senses reeling? And now, in his full manhood, how could she not crave him? *Oh Simon, if only you had been born first, I could have been your wife. These years, would they have been as I imagined? Would I have been enough for you?*

"And may I be introduced to this lady, young Cecelia?"

Gwyneth looked up into the eyes of a handsome young man of no more than twenty years. His dark golden hair fell over deep blue eyes. His sly smile extended to his eyes as he took Gwyneth's hand and pressed his lips against her skin. She felt a chill as he turned her hand over and pressed a kiss into her palm.

"Sir! This is my sister-in-law, the Lady of Carnoor, Lester's widow. Do not take such liberties!"

"Oh, Cecelia, always the proper girl! Must we ship you off to a nunnery? If you will not have me, must I join the monastery as well?"

Cecelia groaned in frustration and shook her head and wagged her finger at the man. "Gwyneth, this is the insufferable oaf you no doubt heard of from Lester. My second cousin Patric, the blackest sheep ever sired."

"Oh, indeed! You were but a lad when I saw you last, Patric!"

"And have I grown sufficiently in your eyes, Lady Gwyneth?" His smirk made her laugh. He was, indeed, quite compelling.

"You have grown indeed, as has your ego, I see!"

A strong hand pressed her arm. Simon pulled her around to face him. Gwyneth's heart raced as she met Simon's stormy stare.

"I hate to interrupt this charming reunion, but I would have a word with Gwyneth alone." Simon did not hide his fury at Patric, who arched a brow and smirked.

Simon pulled Gwyneth out of the room and up the sweeping stairs to the dark second storey. Cecelia called to him, but he did not stop.

Gwyneth tried as hard as she could to keep up with Simon and not trip on her long gown as he made a blistering pace up the stairs and down the hall. He grabbed a torch from a sconce on the wall and pulled her into a dark room, kicking the door closed behind her.

Finally, he released her arm and stood back from her. Gwyneth's legs trembled at being in Simon's private chambers, alone with him at last. The sconce he placed on the wall cast shadows about the room, revealing little, but Gwyneth remembered the details well. It was once her room, as the former Mistress of Carnoor.

"Sir, I was an invited guest. Did I not receive an invitation written in your own hand?"

"Indeed, who else would have written it?"

"As I recall, your sister has some knowledge of the learned arts. Or have you punished her in the last year as well? Turned your back on your own philosophy? I once admired your concern for Cecelia and your certainty that a woman could be a worthy pupil. Now I see you have grown to match your deceased brother in temperament."

Simon turned away with a clenched fist. When he turned back, he pounded his fist on the table so that it shook. "Damn you to hell, woman. Do not fight with me!"

"You are the one who dragged me away from the party to abuse me!"

"You have not begun to take the abuse you will receive, Gwyneth, if you do not attend to me. I am angry at myself as well as at you. If you would be quiet for one moment, you would understand!"

Simon watched as Gwyneth's tears welled up and flowed over her cheeks, wetting her black lashes. *I would sell my soul to kiss you now.*

"I did not kill your brother!"

"I know. Did you hear me, Gwyneth? I know now you did not kill Lester. I know not who did. Perhaps you keep that secret. But I no longer believe you had a hand in his murder."

"Why?" Her voice was a whisper. "Why, Simon?"

"It does not matter why. I was wrong, and I wronged you. I will see that you regain your reputation and hope that, in time, you will learn to forgive, perhaps to forget."

"I do not understand."

Simon sat on a low bench and covered his face with his hands.

Gwyneth sighed. "Ah, you have suffered grievously since you were but a lad. Beloved parents taken by the Black Death, beloved brother taken by a murderer, raising a young girl alone, no wife to..."

Simon looked up and she recoiled in horror at his angry expression. "I hated Lester, and was glad to see his blood on your bedroom floor. I am happy my parents did not live

to see the kind of man he became. He intended to drive the Brothers from Cloores, to turn our keep into a brothel, to..."

"Go on."

He shook his head and looked up at her.

"Do you feel guilty, Simon? For wanting to rid the world of a demon? Someone did the deed for you, but it was not I."

"Aye. This brings me to the point of this conversation." He stood again and approached her. "I am concerned for Cecelia. She is sixteen, and yet, she does not have the maturity she should. I am responsible for seeing her married, but I fear she is not ready to manage the affairs of a household. I also believe her to be a maiden still, at least that is her claim. Would you agree?"

"Aye, sir. I love your sister, but she is young for her years. No doubt, the death of your mother..."

He nodded. "I trust no woman with her. Because..."

"Because all the women want to wed you. Why not simply choose a wife, Simon? It is long past time, and a wife could help to educate Cec."

"I have not yet found the suitable girl."

Her heart dropped at his words. "Girl." *Yes, he wants a lovely young lady to bear him many sons, not a mature widow.*

"Indeed? No doubt in time you will. Now, Simon, I should return to Cecelia and you should attend to your guests."

"Ah, and now you give the orders?" He arched a dark brow and his green eyes came to life in amusement.

Gwyneth smiled and he returned the expression.

She tilted her head. "We were friends, once, brother."

"No, Gwyn. We were never friends. We pretended to be, though, did we not? It does not matter. All that matters is that you will move into the keep and be mother to my sister. Prepare her for the marriage bed, for life in a way I cannot. I will send the carriage tomorrow. Ready your belongings."

He strode out of the room.

Gwyneth dropped to the bench and stared at the open door.

“No, I cannot,” she whispered aloud. *Torture. It would be torture under his roof. We would share meals, exchange stories, pass one another in the gardens, perhaps go riding. Torture.* And ultimately, she knew, she would throw herself at Simon, begging him, just once, to quench the thirst of years before he married another. *No, I won’t do it.*

She hurried into the main hall and scanned the crowd for Simon. Cecelia scampered up to her and took her hand.

“Sister! How exciting! I am beside myself with joy. Think of the time we will spend together—like the old days, only...”

“Only Lester is dead, Cec. And I do not belong here.”

Cecelia squinted and tilted her head. “What did the brute say to you? You are family! It was his idea.”

“Aye. But perhaps his idea is a bad one, Cec. Try to understand.” Gwyneth pulled her friend into a corner and spoke in a low tone. “I will tell you something now and you must swear on your future husband’s life that you will never repeat my words.”

“Oh, Gwyn, I swear. On the True Cross, I swear.”

“Tsk. You are not to swear on the Cross, Cec! In any case, the problem is not Simon’s, it is mine.”

“Is there a man, then, you have not discussed? Oooh, tell me, tell me now! Is he, do you...”

“Oh, there is someone, but he is not the problem. The issue is Simon. I am not...comfortable...around him. Do you understand?”

“No. He has wronged you, I understand you have forgiven him, and there can be no problems between you.”

“I do not belong here, Cec. I am not the mistress of Carnoor. There will be another, and soon, I believe. I will not stay to watch that. Do you take my meaning?”

Gwyneth watched understanding slowly fill Cecelia’s young mind.

“Oh. Oh, my. Simon? You care for him!”

“Shush.”

“Then who is this other man?”

“That was a very brief encounter.” Gwyneth’s sly smile brought a gasp and a giggle to the younger woman. “Tell me where I can find your brother. I will tell him tonight that I will not be reinstated in Carnoor Manor House.”

“He has retired. You will go to his room again?” Cecelia’s blue eyes widened and she burst into full laughter. “You will not emerge ’til morning then!”

“Oh, you have grown a bit in the last year after all!” Gwyneth laughed with her. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.” Cecelia kissed her on the cheek.

Gwyneth took in a deep breath and moved up the wide staircase to the room she had shared with Lester. Her heart lurched at the thought of the last time she had been in this room as the mistress of the keep, watching Lester, knife plunged deep into his back, life flowing onto the floor, his murderer hovering over him. Courage, she thought. Nothing could be worse than that night.

She tapped lightly at the door.

“Enter.” Simon’s voice was dark. She opened the door carefully. He sat, shirtless, in a chair near the newly lit fire, goblet of blood-red wine glowing in the reflection. He rose and widened his eyes.

“Gwyneth? This is unexpected.”

She could barely take her eyes off his chest and stomach and trail of dark hair leading to his pants. She forced herself to look into his deep green eyes. Her speech froze in her throat and she felt foolish beyond belief.

Simon reached to a table for a second goblet and poured wine for Gwyneth. He approached her and handed it to her. Her hand shook as she took it.

“I am sorry, Simon. I will leave you. I have made a mistake...”

“Why are you here?” He moved in closer and she watched as his gaze swept across her breasts and back up to her face, resting on her lips. She thought her knees would buckle. *No! He is simply drunk. He does not want me.*

“I came to tell you that I cannot live here. I am...pleased...that you now believe in my innocence, but I cannot stay. I would, however, like to visit Cecelia more regularly, with your permission.”

“As you wish.” He turned his back on her and stared into the fire.

“Oh, Simon, why are you angry with me? Please, this should not go on, for Cec’s sake if nothing else.”

He turned slowly.

“Dear sister-in-law, you will not forgive my error?”

"It is forgiven. Simon..." She set her goblet on a table and reached out to draw him in.

"What? Tell me, Gwyn. Is there a man, is that the reason you will not move back in? You have a lover and will not leave him?" His eyes burned into her.

"Yes, that is it. There has been one since Lester's death."

He threw his glass into the fireplace with a curse and Gwyneth backed up, reaching behind her for the door handle.

"Leave. And never come back."

He cares? "One thing, Simon, I beg of you. Please do not reveal that I have a lover. The man in question must keep his identity secret."

"I will keep your secret if you reveal the man." He pointed one finger at her in a threatening gesture.

"That is a poor bargain. All right, he is one of the Grey Cloaks. An Italian Brother, from Florence." Gwyneth bit her lip, hoping the half-lie was not etched across her face.

Simon first looked shocked, then burst into loud laughter and moved towards her. He pushed Gwyneth against the door and grabbed her bare shoulders with his warm hands. *He is going to kiss me!*

"Simon?"

He laced his fingers in her hair and pressed his lips to hers as he crushed her against the door, setting all of her nerve endings on fire with the contact of his bare chest, his groin, his legs, and muscled arms.

Gwyneth finally allowed herself to believe it was happening, allowed herself to feel his tongue press between her lips, feel his hot breath on her skin, his hardness pushing into her belly. She moaned and he joined her as he deepened the kiss, bit her lips and neck, groaned and nipped at her earlobes.

And then she kissed him back. Years of longing for this one moment flooded through her. She clutched his thick hair in her fist and pulled him deeper into her mouth. She drank him in until they were both breathless.

Then he spoke in a harsh whisper, hot breath stirring her soul. "Does your monk kiss you like that, sister?"

"No," she stuttered, reaching up to bring him back to her mouth. But he pushed her away. His bare chest was heaving and she could see his huge erection pushing against his thin pants. He stared at her from beneath a dark lock of hair that had fallen into his face.

A lock of hair just as she had seen fall forward a few nights earlier, in the monastery garden... A feeling of dread crept into her heart. She took in the full measure of the man—his height, the breadth of his shoulders, the rich color of his hair. And the size of the enormous shaft straining to break free from his leggings. She pushed Simon further away. He arched a brow and fury came back to his eyes.

“My kiss does not satisfy you? Go to your Brother Gabriel, then, and taste his seed, if that is what you crave. Choose wisely, Gwyneth. I offer you this one chance.”

He may as well have slapped her. Gwyneth nearly fell, her knees giving out. Her voice was a mere whisper. “I did not tell you his name, Simon.”

Gwyneth staggered to a chair and slid into it, covering her face with her hands.

Simon? Her Grey Cloak! She peered at him from between her fingers, trying desperately to sort through the revelation.

He sat again, tilted his head forward, and regarded Gwyneth from beneath his brows, dark strands of hair slipping into his green eyes. He did not speak, but stared in arrogant challenge.

What was she to say? What was she to feel? A dozen shocking questions rolled through her brain in waves. Another sensation crept through her entire being—excitement.

Why, what’s wrong with you? He spied on you, repeatedly, pleased himself at the sight of you. And...he had you... The rush of excitement spread further as she remembered the night, the quick coupling, the sight of his manhood, the feel of the man, pulsing and pushing, pleasuring her to senselessness...

“Simon?” Gwyneth sat up straight and folded her hands on her lap. He arched one brow, picked up the jug of wine, and took a hefty swig. The light from the fireplace made shadows dance across his chest, brought a glow to his bare skin.

Simon shrugged, but Gwyneth thought she saw a quick hint of embarrassment cross his face. *Why, he waits for you to lash out at him.* Gwyneth smiled inwardly, wondering if she had the upper hand with the Master of Carnoor for the first time in her life.

“I believe you owe me an explanation.” She rose and walked to him slowly, taking the jug from his hand and drinking from it herself. He snickered in surprise at the gesture and stared carefully at her.

“I owe you nothing.” His voice was dark, guttural, and dismissive.

“I beg to differ.”

“You may beg all you like, milady. In fact, I quite like the sound of it.”

Gwyneth had to suppress the smile that threatened to betray her. The excitement of the memory, his nearness, his arrogant flirtation made Gwyneth’s heart race...could he truly want her?

“At least an explanation of that horrendous Italian accent is in order.”

Amusement crossed his face and his eyes lit up. He let out a huge sigh and laced his hands behind his neck, leaning back in his chair.

“I have yet to visit Italy for the proper training.”

“You spied on me, to try to catch me with a man, is that it?” Simon did not reply and she nodded, affirming she was correct. “And when you caught me not, you continued your charade. You are a bit of a voyeur, are you not, my Lord?”

A sharp intake of breath and a flush of quick color betrayed him.

“Aye, you answered my question with that look. I wonder how far that appetite extends. You will not answer, then? Perhaps you are the ogre your brother was.” Gwyneth shuddered at the thought that Simon could be as brutal as Lester.

“No!” He stood suddenly, horror replacing amusement on his face. “I would not hurt you...that is, a woman. I have no need to inflict pain.”

“There are many kinds of pain, Simon. Some are not of the body.”

“I am no child, Gwyn, and no stranger to the human heart simply because I am a man. I know Lester wounded you with his whoring.”

“He made me watch,” she whispered and, without warning, an ache wrapped around her heart and squeezed tightly until tears flowed.

Simon was at her side in a few strides, pulling her into his arms. He held her firmly and caressed her hair, whispering as if to a child.

“I am not Lester. I am only interested in your... in a woman’s pleasure. I...I,” he stammered and backed away. “My only sin is my desire to watch that pleasure unfold. Do you understand? To see you...to see a woman pleasure herself, without knowing I watch...or for her to be pleased by another, without knowing...” He shook his head in frustration. “I am vile.”

Gwyneth brushed away her tears and laughed very lightly. “Sir, you may be many things, but you are not vile. You are far too compelling to be vile. And your...interests, shall we call them?”

Simon groaned.

“Your interests do not strike me as vile. In fact, sir, I did not think it possible to desire you more than I have since you were but a very young man. But now I find that desire paling rather quickly against what I feel for you this night.”

“Gwyn? Speak again!”

She shook her head and backed up towards the door, still wiping tears.

“I demand it! My ears were not wrong! Oh, tell me again...” He looked anguished.

“I will not be your whore, Simon. At one time that would have been enough. But I realize now the depth...” She shook her head. “It matters not. I cannot bear you a child. That is one reason Lester was brutal to me. I am barren. I know you do not want me as a wife, but I will love you for the rest of my life.”

Gwyneth turned on her heels and ran down the hallway, holding her skirts up so as not to trip. Cecelia called out to her and the guests turned and chattered as she ran towards the door. The coachman offered his arm and she pushed it away and hurried down the huge stone steps into the courtyard. She had almost reached the outer gate when a strong hand clutched at her shoulder.

She struggled as Simon tore the fabric of her dress in an effort to control her. He grabbed both of her hands with one of his and crushed them together. With the other arm, he picked her up and threw her over his bare shoulder, like a sack of grain.

“Cease struggling and this will be much more enjoyable for the both of us,” he muttered as he walked into the great hall.

“This is humiliating. You are an animal,” she hissed as he pushed through the crowd. Cecelia ran after the couple but stopped in mid-stride when her brother turned and pointed a finger at her.

“Child, pick out a husband, and do it quickly. You are to bear the heir to Carnoor.” He looked around at the stunned guests and announced loudly with a smile, “My sister’s party is now over. Thank you very much for attending.”

Gradually, the men laughed and clapped and the women chuckled and clucked in whispers. With a final smile, Simon turned and strode down the hallway, kicking open the door to his bedroom and kicking it closed again behind him. He threw Gwyneth face down onto the bed, and returned to the door, locking it. Simon turned to her and smirked.

“Now. Try that again, and it will be less pleasant, I promise you. Where did we leave off? Oh yes, you were telling me of your undying love for me, your passion...”

“Go to the devil!”

“That is most likely. But in the meantime, you will make it worth my while.”

He pulled off his boots and, in an instant, ripped through the lacings of his leggings and pulled them off.

For a moment, Gwyneth closed her eyes against the wonderful sight of him.

“Oh, Brother Gabriel, how I delight at seeing you again.”

Simon grinned happily, a rare sight. He strode to the bed and pulled Gwyneth to her feet. Grabbing her by the hair with one hand, he ripped the fabric of her dress away from her breasts. He stood back for a moment and stared at her. Then he moved to her again and ripped the rest of the fabric away from her body, shredding her dress, tearing away her undergarments, leaving her completely bare.

“Shall I teach you some Italian, my dear?”

“Teach me anything, Simon, anything at all. I fear, brother-in-law, I am completely at your mercy, in every way imaginable.”

“Raven, come here.” Simon’s eyes burned and he moved his hand slowly down his flat belly to grasp his enormous erection.

“Raven? What odd name is that?” Gwyneth could barely hear her own voice. All these years, this one man had dominated all of her fantasies, all of her longing, all of her passion. She feared she would wake up from the dream before she could touch him again.

“Your black hair and mysterious ways remind me of the foreboding birds.”

“That is not quite what a lady craves to hear, sir.”

Simon did not speak but moved to the bed. Gwyneth moved slowly towards him and he pulled her down next to him, then rolled her onto her back and fell onto her with a force that took her breath away. His kiss erased all thought, the taste of wine and the smell of leather and the feel of his skin and hands sending her into oblivion.

Simon pinned her arms over her head and whispered into her ear. “Gwyneth, tell me you want this. Tell me you want me, alone. I have been waiting to hear you say it for these eight years. In my dreams, in my waking dreams.”

Gwyneth arched her body towards his, every inch of her screaming for his warm skin, the pressure of his manhood, his hot wet kisses.

“No, my dear, I will not touch you until you tell me.”

“Simon, I have wanted you these eight years, since you were but a youth. You are perfection.”

He propped himself up on one elbow and smiled as he ran his hand along one breast and tweaked a nipple teasingly. Gwyneth squirmed, looking from his incredible face to his incredible manhood.

He again pinched one nipple and then the other playfully, and then pulled away. She arched again towards his hand and reached to touch his huge member, now swollen fully and glistening with moisture.

“Tell me more, Gwyneth, beg me.” He narrowed his eyes to deep emerald slits and bit on his lip. Pushing his sex against her leg, he leaned in and suckled on her breasts slowly and thoroughly.

Gwyneth cried out and reached for him. “Tell me,” he mumbled as he went back to her hard, dark nipples. Waves of heat pounded through her body and she thought she might come undone from his mouth alone.

“I used to pretend it was you, Simon. That is how I survived my marriage. I would watch you train and ride and...oooh...” She broke off in a moan as he brought his hand down on her wet mound. He pushed his fingers into her folds and she cried his name. He began a constant rhythm of fingers in and out, his thumb circling her sensitive peak. Gwyneth was gone, lost floating in a sea of sensations more intense than any she had ever known.

Because it was Simon.

She opened her eyes suddenly and pushed his hand away and held his face with both hands.

“This cannot be happening. I am dreaming. You will take me one night and then toss me out like the remnants of an old meal for the swine to devour. And I will die.”

“Aye, Raven, it is a dream for me as well. When we wake, you will once again be the mistress of Carnoor. But this time,” he bit at her neck more harshly than she would have thought she could endure, “you will marry the right brother.” He grinned again and Gwyneth cried openly.

As he kissed her neck where he had before bitten, she heard his low voice. It sounded as if it came from miles away.

“I have loved you, woman, since the day you rode to Carnoor, since I was sixteen. I have never loved another. And I never will.”

Gwyneth’s heart broke with overwhelming joy. Simon kissed her tears away and fell onto her mouth. When she forgot her tears, lost in his hot lips and tongue, he spoke again.

“I need to hear it again, Raven.” He moved down the bed and flicked his tongue on her velvet folds. Electricity circled her body and flowed to her core and a wave of pleasure threatened to drown her at that one lick. “Tell me again that you want me. Do not lie to me.” He licked again and again and she grabbed his silken hair and pulled his head in closer.

“Simon, I am your slave. And by God, you will be mine.”

She pulled away and pushed him back on the bed.

Simon cried out as Gwyneth captured his painfully swollen member in her mouth, pressing hard on the smooth, soaked head with her lips and rubbing the length with both hands.

“My Lord, you are endowed beyond my wildest dreams. Indeed, you are matched only by one other in my experience...one of the Grey Cloaks.”

She glanced at his face and he moaned and touched his hand to himself, rubbing his thumb over the tip and arching with need.

“Oh, do not stop, I am begging you, Raven. Give me what you gave the good brother.”

And she did. And he fell apart as she rubbed the length of his huge dark shaft while she sucked and glided her tongue into the wet crease at the tip. Simon shook and clutched at Gwyneth’s long hair. When he shuddered, close to his release, she moved her hand to the crease between his muscled buttocks and pressed a finger into the edge of his sensitive opening, twisting gently while she massaged his sack and continued sucking.

Simon called out to God as his seed pulsed into her mouth. She sucked and drank while he shook in pleasure. Simon pulled her onto his chest and rocked back and forth, squeezing her tightly. He finally opened his eyes and looked into hers. “I am sorry, woman. It seems I have the fortitude of a boy in your company.” She grinned and kissed him, pinching his nipples playfully. He shuddered and laughed and kissed her gently.

“I can taste my seed in your mouth.” He reached down the length of her body and pressed his fingers against her folds, covering his hand with her juices. “Aye, I think I would like a good taste myself now.”

“No, Simon, there is something more urgent. I am empty without you.”

“We have all the time in creation, woman.”

“I do not. I need you now!”

And when she pushed him back this time, she straddled his body and rubbed her mound on his growing erection, until he was swollen again and groaning in pleasure. Gwyneth lowered herself onto him and cried out as he filled her.

“Lord, you are so large, I fear too large a beast for me to ride.” She grinned and he reached up to pinch her nipples and pull them down to his mouth.

“Ah, woman, let up. We will have this my way.” He pulled out of her, leaving her empty, frantic to feel him inside again. Simon lifted her from the bed and carried her to the fur rug spread before the fire, where he pushed her to the floor and onto all fours.

“Hold on to that chair, my love.” Gwyneth looked back over her shoulder as she clutched at the legs of his heavy chair and saw near madness etched across his face.

Simon pushed into her so hard, so completely, that she screamed out.

“Now, woman, touch yourself with one hand.”

“Yes, sirrah.” She circled her fingers on her nub and he pounded into her with fierce thrusts. He squeezed her nipples from behind and moaned as she repeated his name. He pushed and pushed, slowly, then quickly, against one side and against the other. He pulled the tip slowly out and Gwyneth tried to capture it by squeezing tightly, only to be rewarded by another teasing thrust.

“Simon, I cannot take more. I will die.” He laughed and squeezed harder on her nipples, continuing to tease and work his magic inside of her.

“Eight years I’ve waited. What torture...” He moaned loudly as his world fell away and the seed poured from him. Clutching her tightly to his chest, he whispered in her ear, “Tell me now, Raven. Will you be my wife?”

“Aye, master. In my heart, I always have been.”

Simon carried her to bed and held her tightly, whispering endearments and rubbing her back and touching her face. She returned his caresses in wonder.

They spoke through the night of eight years of unfulfilled desire. And when their kisses and secret desires aroused them again, they satisfied one another as a betrothed couple in love. Nothing would tear them apart.

They watched the morning light slice through an opening in the heavy curtains and Simon sighed. “Raven, tell me who killed my brother.”

Gwyneth squeezed her eyes shut and pain flooded her soul. He would reject her if she kept this secret.

Chapter Seven

Shawn ran his hand through his hair and tried not to stare at Jennifer's breasts as she leaned over to pick up her napkin. *Don't let her know you want her so badly you could scream. Drag this torture out as long as possible. Don't screw up. Say something intelligent, for crissake.*

Jennifer took a final sip of wine. "How about some dessert? Share a slice of cheesecake?" She smiled and Shawn brushed his hair back again.

"Sure." He signaled to the waiter and gave the order. *How can I make this night go on forever? What could I possibly do to stop time?*

"You know, Shawn, I haven't had this much fun in a long time. I don't date much anymore."

Shawn nearly choked on his wine. He coughed and held his napkin over his mouth.

"Are you okay?" Jennifer looked concerned.

"Went down the wrong way." *Very suave, asshole.*

"Hey, and I'm two-hundred dollars richer! I told you that machine was a winner. Great dinner." She looked down at the cheesecake as the waiter put it on the table. "Good company. Best date in a long time."

"Uh-huh. Um..." *Oh no, here you go again. Reduced to a teenager. What the hell is wrong with you?*

"How far did you get in the book? Not your thing, I'm sure."

"Actually, I'm pretty far into it. Enjoying it. Immensely." He laughed and shook his head.

Jennifer looked at him quizzically. "What are you enjoying about it, Shawn?"

"I got as far as the part where she...what's her name...finds out he's the guy she fucked. Sorry, that slipped out."

"I've never heard you talk like that."

“Hey, you wrote it.”

They locked gazes and he put down his fork with a clank.

“I give up. You have to help me here, Jen.”

“What’s wrong? I thought we were having fun?”

“I’m having too much fun.” He looked away, examining a nondescript painting on a far wall, taking in nothing.

“Shawn.”

He turned back to her and pushed on his hair. “I’m not a kid anymore, Jen. Don’t try to screw with my head. The book, that come hither bit with the towel...what’s going on here? If you were anyone else, it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“But it’s an issue because...?”

“You’re my sister-in-law!”

“Ex. Does that bother you? I mean, Frank? Maybe the age difference between us?”

“I don’t care about that! I don’t know how to hit on you. Or if you want me to. Jesus, this is torture.”

“Shawn. Stop.” Jennifer put her hand on his and he forced himself not to jump. When she didn’t move, he grabbed her hand, and rubbed her fingers, lacing them in his. He closed his eyes, savoring their first real touch. How could holding her hand make him feel this way?

Because you’ve been in love with her your whole adult life.

“Shawn, look at me. Please.” He opened his eyes. She was smiling.

“Is this a date, Jen?” He looked away again, hoping the casino restaurant, all of Atlantic City, would swallow him whole for sounding like a dork.

“If you want it to be. I want it to be. I’ve wanted it to be for a long time.”

Shawn looked at her carefully. Her smile extended to her exquisite deep brown eyes. She positively beamed.

“Oh my God, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“You are very slow, Shawn. And I love that about you.” Jennifer put her napkin on the table and folded her hands. “Now, tell me what you don’t like about the book so far.”

“Not enough sex.”

“Not enough sex is a bad thing. I’ll have to fix that.”

“Need any help?” He sighed and finally let himself look at her amazing body, let his eyes fall on her full breasts, her hard nipples showing through the thin bra and top, her lips curving up. “Jesus, you’re beautiful. Fucking amazing.”

“What kind of sex would you recommend I add? Anything in particular? Something you’d especially like reading about? I’m all ears.” She ran her tongue along her teeth slowly and recrossed her legs in a way that should have been illegal. Shawn was hard in an instant.

This can’t be happening. “Let me think. Another wall scene.”

“Wall scene?”

“Yeah, where she bends over the wall at the monastery and shows him her wet pussy and acts like a complete whore and he’s huge and fucks the living daylights out of her. I liked that part. A *lot*. As a matter of fact, I liked it so much...” Jen’s eyes grew wide. “God, was that out loud?”

“Uh-huh. You liked it so much...continue...”

“I liked it so much I jerked off, okay? Satisfied?”

“Not yet. Any other part catch your fancy?” Jennifer ran her hand up his arm and played with his bicep with her fingertips.

“I liked it when he had her hang onto a chair while he pounded her from behind.” He laughed nervously. “I guess that’s two from behind scenes, huh?”

“Is that your favorite position, Shawn? Any others?” She shifted her weight and Shawn wondered if she was getting hot and wet. He was in agony.

“All of them.” He laughed. “I like sex, what guy doesn’t? I just don’t get enough of it.”

“How the hell can a guy who looks like you have trouble getting women to sleep with him? That’s not possible. You’re fishing for compliments.”

Shawn’s heart raced. “What do I look like, Jen? Yeah, I’m fishing, I know.”

“You’re a male centerfold, and you know it. There isn’t a woman alive who wouldn’t want to get her hands on you.”

“I do okay, but there’s a problem.”

“What?”

“I’m not interested in every woman alive. I’m interested in one.”

Jennifer smiled and pulled her chair close to his. And in the middle of a crowded restaurant, full of middle-aged low-rollers, she brushed his lips with hers, and leaned back in for a harder kiss, pushing her tongue between his lips as if she were tasting dessert. Shawn was ready to kiss back when she broke off the kiss. When he was finally able to open his eyes, Jen was standing, pulling her purse onto her shoulder.

“Take me home, big boy.”

Shawn knew he wore a goofy grin that wouldn’t disappear, no matter how hard he tried.

Shawn shook his head in self-loathing and peeked up at Dana.

“You did what!” Dana flopped onto the couch and rubbed her temples. “You shook her hand?”

“For crissake, keep your voice down. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“Let’s back up here, bro. The woman of your dreams tells you that you’re on a date, that she’s having a great time. Right so far? She talks about sex, tells you that you’re hot, *kisses you*, and tells you to bring her home. And so, instead of going to her room, you *shake her hand* and part ways. Have I basically got it right?”

“Shoot me now, okay? I’m tempted to drive back to the University tonight so I don’t have to face her. Look, you don’t understand, and you’re my sister, it’s a little hard to explain.”

“Try me anyway.”

Shawn sighed and pushed his hand through his hair impatiently. “I’ve been reading that stupid book of hers...”

“You’re an idiot. That stuff is *fantasy*, Shawn. She doesn’t expect a porn star. She wants *you*. She’s practically written it out for you, don’t you get it? The younger brother-in-law she’s wanted for years? God, what a moron.”

“But, I’m *not* him. I’m not the Master of wherever, Mr. Lord of the Manor, whoring my way through the world, throwing gorgeous women over my shoulder, with a cock the size of a telephone pole.”

“Thank God.”

Shawn groaned at Jennifer's voice and covered his face with his hands.

Dana shook her head and looked at her friend. "Shit, Jen, cut him a break. It wasn't right to eavesdrop."

"I was getting some herbal tea. And it's my house!" She ran her fingers through her long, dark hair and glanced at Shawn.

Their eyes met and she smiled briefly. Shawn's heart raced. *It's over. You'll never know if you had a shot. Deal with it.*

"You know, Shawn, it was a good handshake. As a matter of fact, I haven't felt a handshake quite like that before. If you ever want to go out again, let me know. Anytime." She winked and walked towards the kitchen.

"Now."

Dana jumped at his harsh tone and Jennifer turned around quickly.

"Excuse me?" She arched a brow and looked at Dana for help.

"Now. You said anytime." Shawn pointed at her. His heart beat wildly in anger and fear.

"Where are we going to go this time of night?" Jennifer laughed nervously. "LBI shuts down..."

"Goodnight, Dana. See you in the morning." Shawn nodded to his sister and she scurried up the stairs with a snicker. "We're not going anywhere, and you know it. Time to put up or shut up. Jen, which is it going to be?"

"Go to hell, Shawn, this isn't prom night."

"You go to hell. You're a tease, and not the good kind. I'm not some guy you just met in a bar, for crissake. You're enjoying watching me squirm, aren't you? Some way to treat a friend. What's up with you, anyway? If you wanted me, you could have said something, without writing a whole damned book about it. What's it going to be? Because I'll be damned if I'll let you play me like this. I've loved you for too long..." He froze. How was it possible that the tongue-tied dork had finally managed to speak? And when he finally did... *Oh no. Oh, God help me, no.*

"You've what?" she whispered. She closed her eyes and held onto the table for support. "Say that again."

"Shut up. I'm not feeding your ego anymore—is that what this is about? Got to prove you still have it, so you flirt with someone you know has had it bad for you half his life? No way, find another sucker." Shawn drained his beer and walked by her without a

glance, taking the stairs two at a time to his room. Jennifer was behind him in a flash and followed him into his room, shutting the door behind her.

“I’m sorry, Shawn. I didn’t know how else to try to get your interest, to...let you know that I...”

Shawn stared at her, fury still etched across his face. His eyes flashed and he pushed away the thick dark hair as it fell into his eyes.

He sat on the bed and watched as Jen reached into the nightstand and pulled out a pack of matches. She lit every candle in the room, at least a dozen, and threw open the window so that the salty night breeze blew the curtains and made the candles flicker. She turned the light off and turned to Shawn.

His expression had changed to one of shock and wonder. Jen walked towards him and sat close by on the bed, holding his gaze.

“I’m not looking for a lord of the manor or a sexual god, Shawn. I’m a grown woman, a homeowner, a business owner, a divorcee. After Frank went to prison, I didn’t want to get involved with anyone.”

Shawn nodded in understanding. Jen nodded back. “I don’t want to insult your family, but you know how bad it was between us, right?”

Shawn reached out and brushed the single tear that trickled down her face. “I knew about the drugs and the women. But he hurt you, didn’t he, Jen? Like in the book. That’s what you wanted to tell us.”

“That’s not the point.” She took in a deep breath. “The point is I didn’t feel anything sexual until I saw you again last summer. And...”

“Don’t lie to me. Please don’t do it, Jen.” Hope welled up in his chest.

“And I realized that I’ve wanted you longer than you can imagine. While Frank and I were separated. Maybe before...”

She looked back into his eyes. “I know I’m older and you’ve just started a spectacular teaching job and all. Oh shit, now here I go. You’re right, this feels bad. Help me out here, Shawn. Throw me a freaking bone, okay?”

“I’d like to throw you a bone.” He grinned and examined her head to toe, his gaze finally lingering on her lips.

“Are you going to kiss me, Shawn?” she asked breathlessly.

“Oh, yeah, I’m going to kiss you. Are you going to kiss me back?”

“Uh-huh.”

Jen's words were cut off by the gentlest brush of his lips, so light that it nearly tickled. He looked into her eyes and kissed her a little more firmly, his full lips pulling at hers a bit this time. The third time he leaned in, he bit at her lip and she moaned low in her throat. He pushed his tongue slowly into her mouth and explored her, savored her. Then he pulled away.

"Raven, I'm going to kiss you now. Please don't push me away. If you do, I'll die, I swear."

Jen shuddered as he put both his hands on her cheeks and plundered her mouth with such fierceness she gasped. He sucked at her lips and tongue and she responded by grabbing his hair and pulling him in tighter. Heat tore through her body as the taste and smell and sensations of him filled her. "Oh my God, Shawn."

He pushed her back onto the bed and crushed her with his body, kissing her face and ears and neck and mouth repeatedly until she was lost in him, lost in a world that was spinning away. He finally sat up and smiled at her shocked expression, her swollen lips. He peeled off his T-shirt and pulled her up to peel off her tank top. He held her up and rubbed her breasts harshly, squeezing her nipples until she cried out.

"You're fucking beautiful. Damn, Jen."

"So are you." She arched to let him pull off her shorts, leaving her in a tiny patch of red silk. Shawn pushed the silk aside and gasped.

"Oh...my...God."

"I shave."

"I noticed." He was panting heavily as he pulled off his shorts and underwear in a single motion.

Jennifer squeezed her eyes shut, feeling as if she might come at the sight of him. She wanted to laugh. What had made this amazing man insecure? He was exquisite.

"Shawn?"

"Oh, no, what's wrong?"

"My God, Shawn, do you know how gorgeous you are?"

He grinned and pulled off her thong and ran his fingertips along the folds of her pussy. She arched and cried out and he moved to his knees to feast. He licked slowly, and a wave of tension pounded through her with each caress of his hot tongue.

He rifled through his pants pocket and pulled out a condom. "Ever hopeful." He arched a brow and handed it to Jen, who tore open the package and rolled the condom down his cock, panting.

He moved up her body, spread her pussy lips and pushed into her as he leaned in and kissed her neck and mouth. Within moments, he was pounding as if his life depended on it, building an instant fire inside her.

"Oh God. My God." Jen cursed and cried as he intensified his thrusts. Shawn lifted her ass and kneeled to angle into her. Jen screamed out when the release flushed her whole body. From a great distance, she heard Shawn's gratified sigh.

My God, he's not close to coming! Shawn rolled her over and pushed her onto her knees at the edge of the bed. He stood behind and thrust into her again, pounding, pushing, moaning. "Come again for me, Jen. Come on, honey. Oh, you feel incredible." He moaned louder.

"Please, Shawn, please don't stop."

And, as if she had never stopped coming, the wave hit again and she fell forward onto the bed, darkness littered with stars filling her vision.

Shawn rolled her onto her back and she looked down to see him running his hand along his huge shaft. He arched back and squeezed his eyes shut at the pleasure of his own touch. "Come here, Jen."

Shawn gently rolled her onto her back and held onto one of her legs as he angled his cock into her. "I need to see you. Tell me again...that you want me..." He pushed and pulled, never taking his eyes off her face, except to squeeze them tight when he finally throbbed in release. He collapsed by her side and pulled her in tightly, kissing her neck and lavishing her face with short kisses.

Finally he rested and pulled her into the crook of his arm. She rubbed his stomach with her palm and played with the feather-soft dark hair. "Phew. Where the hell did that come from, Shawn?"

"That was waaaay too fast. I'm sorry, you're amazing, feel amazing. I don't do anything kinky, have any fetishes or anything. I mean, if you do, I'm willing to try."

Jennifer burst out laughing. "You're fine, trust me. If I think of anything, I'll ask."

Shawn smiled and kissed Jennifer on the forehead. "Jen?"

"Hmnn?" She ran a finger along his chest.

"I've been in love with you my whole life."

“You did *what*?”

“I asked her to marry me.” Shawn grinned and Dana stared at him open-mouthed.

“And what the hell did she say?”

“She said she’d think about it. In the meantime, we’re pretty much seeing one another.”

“One night? In one night?”

“It was a pretty good night.”

“Geesh, get that look off your face. I get the idea.”

Jennifer waltzed into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee, pecking Shawn on the cheek as she passed by. Shawn pulled her in for a passionate kiss and released her as quickly. She stood with her eyes closed for a second, then opened them to see Dana staring at her in shock.

“What are *you* staring at, Dana?”

“Sweet Mother of...”

Shawn pushed his hand through his hair and the two women laughed. “What’s funny?”

They laughed harder. Jennifer leaned back against the counter and sipped at her coffee, pausing briefly to look at Shawn. “Yes.”

“Hmnn?”

“I said yes. That is, if the offer still stands.”

He slid into a chair and put his hands over his face.

“Gosh. Dana, does that mean he’s happy or upset?”

Dana pulled away one of his hands to see a tear slip down his cheek. “Oh, he’s okay with it.”

Chapter Eight

Simon felt betrayed by Gwyneth's reticence, she was sure.

"In good time, then," he had said when she refused to reveal Lester's killer. But the tension grew between them during the morning, bleeding the joy from their newfound love.

Cecelia was thrilled at her brother's announcement of their betrothal at breakfast and spoke endlessly of the forthcoming arrangements.

"Enough," he said harshly. "I am traveling to Cloores to speak with Adrian. A moment alone, Gwyneth."

He nodded curtly to Cecelia and she left the table. Simon took Gwyneth's hand and squeezed it, holding it to his cheek.

"You would leave me so soon, Simon?"

"I will return at dusk. I would like to be married soon, Gwyneth. Indeed, tomorrow if you will have it. I go to fetch Adrian and the Father."

She sighed and smiled.

"You were worried that I was untruthful? I intend to have you forever."

"Aye, I was worried."

Simon pulled his chair in close to hers.

"Dear, we spoke last night of how vile I am."

"Indeed, we spoke of how delightful you are. Ah, I see. Then a special request comes already? I am to be watched this evening, then, is that it?"

"You are quick. What say you? Just once, as a wedding gift?" He smirked and his eyes flashed dark and threatening. She shuddered at the intensity in his voice and nodded.

"But you would not ask me to be party to whoring such as with my former husband?"

“You will not mind this spectacle, I believe. But you may stop at any point. I would not hurt you.” His voice turned to a shy whisper. “Once, Gwyneth. I will never ask you again. Indeed, I want no one to touch you but your husband after tomorrow. At least, unless I am party to the act...”

“You speak of another?”

“Aye.” He shook his head and smiled. “Not a whore from the town, my dear.” He leaned in and whispered hotly into her ear. “My cousin, Patric. What say you?”

“You and Patric? Sir! What is between you?”

“Nay, nay. Shush. Keep your voice down. Not between *us*. For *you*. For your pleasure.”

“Aaah. While you watch?” Gwyneth took in a quick breath. “You would watch me couple with the young man, and enjoy it? Patric?”

“Aye.” A glimmer of mischief came to his eyes. “Why, Gwyneth, you blush as you say his name! Do you fancy him?”

“He is comely enough, of course. I am not blind. I am... Why, do you mean to take me at the same time, my Lord?” Gwyneth felt her cheeks flush at the mention of her common fantasy. Could he mean it?

He nodded and color rushed to his cheeks as well. “Please, and I will give you something you desire in return.”

Gwyneth held her hand to his cheek. “Then, vile one, I ask that you release me from suspicion.”

“Why, I no longer suspect you of Lester’s murder, you know that!”

“Do not ask again who killed him. I am not able to say. Please, Lord, that is all I ask of you.”

Simon stood suddenly and sighed. “This is a poor bargain, Gwyneth. You will enjoy both sides of the dealing. But I love you and trust that you have a good reason before Almighty God for your silence. I accept the bargain.”

“Then I will be ready tonight, Lord, for whatever you plan for me.”

He winked. “This one time only. That is, unless you find it enjoyable...” He leaned in and kissed her quickly and strode out of Carnoor Manor House.

“God help me,” Gwyneth muttered. “How could I not enjoy it?”

“Let me sit, young man, my heart is not what it once was. Can you repeat that?”

Simon laughed and patted his friend on the back. “You will come to the wedding, Brother Adrian? Indeed, all of Cloores is invited. I ride to town now to see if I cannot find a fine dress already made and some jewels and such.”

“My head swims! You must tell me the tale.” The Brother smiled. “And please, by the look on your face, I believe I would like to hear *every one of the details*.” Adrian laughed heartily at his own expense and beamed jovially.

Simon regaled the man with the story of their monastery assignation, Gwyneth’s discovery of his true identity, and their subsequent nocturnal adventures.

“Ah, child, God will forgive this old man for enjoying such a tale. But you must let me hear your Italian! I have no doubt she did not like your imitation of her good friend Adrian!”

“Good friend?”

“Aye, if I may be bold enough to believe her to be. And her confessor, as well, of course.”

Simon turned to the man quickly and grabbed him by the cloak. His face was anguished.

“Ah, then here comes the question finally.” Adrian patted the bench next to him and Simon sat.

“Did Gwyneth tell you who killed Lester, Brother? Please, I must know. I love the woman, and I do believe her...”

“However, doubt lingers.”

“Only the tiniest doubt, Adrian. I would not marry her otherwise. I have desired her for so long, perhaps I would forgive her even that sin?” He arched a brow at the Brother.

“The one thing you do poorly, lad, is lie. You cannot trick me into betraying one of the flock. You know the sanctity of the confessional. I am good-natured, but I am not a fool.”

“Aye. I will live with that tiny doubt then. She is a good woman, you said so yourself. After what she went through with Lester, she deserves good treatment. She will receive such from me. I will let it drop. Indeed, whoever killed Lester did us all a goodly favor.”

Adrian pulled at his frazzled grey hair for a moment and reached into his cassock, clutching at a cross.

“Simon, I will now tell you a story, and you will keep your silence until I am finished, is that understood?”

Simon nodded and looked at the Brother curiously.

“When you were at Castle Combe for those many months, settling the affairs of your aunt and uncle after the Black Death took them, well...things were at their worst at Carnoor.”

“What do you mean?”

Adrian held up his hand in a call for silence.

“One night, a cold, windy night mind you, your sister rode to Cloores, alone. I was woken by old Fastius, telling me the girl was near exhaustion and hysterical.” Adrian peeked at Simon’s horrified expression and continued. “It seems that Lester was especially in his cups, and had been for days. He was becoming more brutal to his poor wife. At one point, he had no less than four women roaming the house, taking over, doing his pleasure. He threatened Cecelia with his advances as well.”

Simon gasped and grabbed the Brother by the arm. He ignored Simon and went on. “It was clear Cecelia had nowhere else to turn, unable to reach you, unable to betray Lester to another outsider. I rode with her the few miles to Carnoor, only to hear screaming from your betrothed. Aye, the brute was beating fair Gwyneth.”

“Cecelia, in her youth, took the stairs more quickly than my old legs could manage. I saw her grab your ancestral short sword from the wall and, as I entered the room, she had already plunged the blade deep into Lester’s back as he raised his hand to strike his cowering wife.”

“May God forgive me, I counseled the women to silence, to tell of a stranger who entered and killed the man. Perhaps a cuckolded husband, I suggested.”

“No one would have blamed them, Adrian.” Simon whispered in horror, “I had no idea. My dear Cecelia.”

“Everyone would have blamed them, young man. A wife against her husband simply because he whored around and raised his hand? She would have been in shackles in no time. And the girl, she was not willing to speak of Lester’s advances to anyone, save me.”

“He never actually forced himself on Cec...?”

“No, thank God.” Adrian stood and brushed his cloak straight. “There is your tale, Simon, the one that has haunted you for all these days. Can you now forgive your new wife?”

“Why did they not think they could confide in me? I would not have blamed them. Does Cecelia not trust me?”

“You do not quite yet understand the way of women, Simon. You are her brother. To tell you of such things...” He shook his head. “And of course, you can blame me. For I held the lie, kept the secret. And there is more.”

“How could there be?”

“Lester had threatened to close the doors of Cloores Abbey. He had no use for our ways, of course, and he wanted this pitiful piece of rocky land back. It is nearly useless, but he wanted it out of spite, to dishonor the Church.”

“Never, not in five hundred years, not in a thousand more! Our family has long supported Cloores!”

“Aye. You see, I held no love for Lester. I have spoken of my hatred for the man to my own confessor. And I have held another secret from you.”

“Indeed? Could it be harsher than this one?” Simon sighed. “What now?”

“You will have to ask your new wife to tell you again what she does each month at the full moon. Do not make a mistake, Simon. She is a good woman.”

“You are telling me she is a Pagan? A witch? I thought as much. This is sad, Adrian, that there are many secrets between the woman and me. She is dear to me. What should I do?”

“Tell her your own secrets, Simon. All of them.”

“What do you mean? I hold nothing back.”

“No? Then we are finished here and I will come on the morrow to partake of your wedding feast. I am happy for you both. More than I can express.” Adrian smiled but looked tired as he left Simon in the garden to take in his words.

Gwyneth paced the length of Simon’s bedroom, sorting through the dresses that Cecelia had laid out for her early in the day. It was close to sundown and Simon had not

returned. And she saw no sign of Patric, or Cecelia. Servants bustled to and fro through the entire manor house, cooking and cleaning in preparation for the next day's festivities.

Fear crept into Gwyneth's heart and her most joyful day was becoming one of dread. Simon would not be able to keep the bargain, she was sure. It would plague their marriage. She resolved to tell him about Lester's death, but she first needed to speak with Cecelia. Perhaps she should be the one to tell Simon? And what of Adrian? Would he not forgive her? He had always encouraged her to guard her own interests in this matter, but wasn't that what she was doing now? Wasn't her marriage the most important thing in her life?

Simon entered the room suddenly and threw huge sacks down on the bed. His eyes looked tired but he smiled.

"For you. I do not know which of these will suit."

Gwyneth opened the bags curiously to find a half-dozen gowns of different styles and fabrics.

"Oh, my, Simon." Tears welled up and she rose to kiss his cheek. "I have nothing to give you."

"You have given me everything I need."

Dread built and tears poured down her cheeks. "Simon, you are good and I love you. I will not marry you without telling you what you wish to know. Only promise me one thing."

"Yes?" He sat and looked stunned.

"Promise me, on your love for me, on the souls of your dear parents, that you will not hate me."

"I killed Lester." She held out her hand as he took in his breath. "I did not plunge the blade into his back, but I am the cause of his death. I should have come to you, to another, or fled the countryside rather than stay with him. But others killed him to save me from his beatings. I cannot say who it was, but I am sure you should forgive them and blame me."

"I blame myself, Raven." Simon took her hand. "I should have protected you from harm. I did not know, perhaps did not want to know. I certainly had no idea that Cecelia was also a victim of the man. I spoke with Adrian today. I know the truth of the matter. We will not speak of it again, unless you would like to tell me more. Cecelia may also

speak of it to me if she needs to, and I will listen. But there is no blame except on Lester's soul."

Gwyneth fell to her knees before her love. "You are a good man, Simon."

"I am vile." He snickered. "Let us change the subject to happier ones. I have thought throughout the day of our times together. I thought of the times we shall have, starting with this night."

"Ah, yes, there is that. And I will uphold my end of the bargain." She found herself giggling nervously, in relief that she had shared the truth with her betrothed, and in anticipation of satisfying his request.

"Good, then. Go to the cellar in an hour. We will have our fun, will we not, Gwyn? You must see me at my vilest before you marry me. Adrian advised me so." He looked at her slyly and winked.

"The cellar, sir? Is that necessary?"

He merely smiled and left her to gaze upon a mound of silk and velvet dresses.

An hour later, heart beating and perspiration beading on her lip, Gwyneth made her way carefully down the slippery steps to the cellar that had served as a dungeon in olden days. She heard the murmur of male voices and dropped her candle, cursing.

From the darkness, she heard Simon's voice. "You are on time."

"Aye, it seems you've chosen well, Simon. Beautiful *and* prompt." Patric's boyish laughter filled the dank darkness.

"Step out of your clothing, Lady," Patric ordered.

"Simon?" she asked. There was no answer.

She pulled off her shoes and stepped onto the cold stone floor, feeling chills and wondering if hideous creatures would nibble at her toes. She pulled down her dress and chemise and stood naked and fearful in the dark.

The sound of flint on stone echoed lightly. A torch flared to life. Shadows bounced off the wet grey walls and she saw only Patric, golden curls shimmering in the flickering light, blue eyes dancing in amusement.

"So very beautiful." Patric motioned her to the wall. Gwyneth pulled back at the sight of shackles and chains.

"No, no, Lady! That is my game, not your good Lord's. If you would like a taste of that kind of pleasure... I hope Cecelia will enjoy that game, for she is to be mine."

“Ahem.” Simon cleared his throat in warning from the darkness.

“With her brother’s permission, of course,” he added jovially. “Come, come, now, you are older and wiser, what frightens you about this? Am I not comely?”

“Quite comely, sir. Indeed, I quite enjoy the idea of this adventure.” Gwyneth suddenly felt quite shy, unsure what Simon expected of her.

“Oh, Simon, she thinks me quite comely.”

Simon’s deep voice echoed through the room. “Aye, she has said that more than once today. It is becoming a bit irksome.”

“I must see if I am able to convince the woman to comment on all of my charms. Let us irk your betrothed a bit, shall we, Lady?”

He pulled off his cloak and threw it across a rough stone table. Patric gestured for Gwyneth. She moved slowly and he helped her onto the table.

“I am quite cold, sir.”

“We can see that, my Lady. And we will surely change that quickly.”

Patric bent over Gwyneth and she saw his blue eyes glimmer in the low light. He *was* comely. Young and strong and full of life and mischief.

“Will you kiss me, Raven—is that not what he calls you?”

“I will not kiss you, sir. That is the one thing I will not do. Only the man who has my heart may kiss me.”

“Hmnn. This is a sorry state of affairs then. Simon, she will not kiss me,” Patric complained.

Gwyneth heard Simon’s low chuckle and she relaxed a little.

“May I touch you, Raven? How do you like to be touched?”

“I like to be touched by my master’s hand. He alone knows how to touch me.” This brought a louder chuckle from Simon.

Patric stripped off his britches, exposing a hard shaft ready for plundering.

Heat rushed to her core at the sight of him and she squirmed on the table. He was magnificent, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to have him take her while her love watched.

“Aha! It seems, Simon, that the lady simply needs a little prompting. Not quite as shy as she pretends.”

“You will find me quite dry, sir, I assure you.” Moisture poured from her folds at the closeness and sight of him, at her fantasy of both men, within her at once...

“Shall we test that? Simon, what do you think?” There was no answer. Patric climbed onto the table and straddled Gwyneth, bringing his mouth down onto her breasts, suckling and nibbling, sending heat through her. She shuddered in ecstasy and fear. *Did Simon truly want her to enjoy this? Or would he be angry?*

It was impossible not to respond to Patric’s expert attentions. He licked his way down her belly and brought his mouth to her folds, licking and nibbling and sucking until she cried out.

“Not dry after all, Simon!” Patric knelt on the table, pulling Gwyneth’s buttocks high into the air with his strong arms.

“Enough!” Simon’s harsh voice echoed off the stone walls and Patric pulled away. He looked at Simon and laughed lightly, shaking his head.

“I thought so, cousin. I take it that my services are no longer needed? Pity, that.”

“Oh, go find my sister. I know where the two of you have been all day.” He pushed at Patric’s chest and growled, “You are treating Cecelia well, are you not? Others in my family have not been kind. I will kill you without a moment’s hesitation if you hurt her in any way, body or heart.”

“Aye, I would feel the same about my sister. Time will give you your answer, cousin. You will see.” Patric laced up his britches and made a sweeping bow to Gwyneth, who lay stunned and cold on the table. “Madam, if you ever find that your husband does not service you properly...” Patric then took the stairs quickly.

“Simon?” She shuddered at the look on his face. He threw his heavy cloak around her and leaned in to kiss her gently.

Gwyneth caught her breath and her heart stopped for a second at the look in his eyes, the gentleness of his lips, the emotion pouring from him. *He’s in love with me!*

“If you ever touch another man, I will...” He didn’t finish, but clenched his hands into fists.

“This was your idea, sirrah. Simon, I am quite confused by this game of yours. Was it a test? Did I pass or fail? I want only you.”

“You felt nothing for Patric?”

“I felt something indeed, and that you witnessed.”

“Is he a better lover? Do you want him?”

“Oh, Simon, you are sweetness itself! You have nothing to fear. For you are not only the champion of lovers, you are the love of my life. The combination of the two...” She smiled. “Relax, I have no need for another. Although, I must thank you for this little game. I may blush when I see Patric again.”

Simon grumbled. He was quiet for a moment and nodded. “Are you a witch, Gwyn?”

She reached up and caressed his cheek, ran her thumb along the scar that looked perfect.

“Aye, but not in the way you think. Oh, Simon, I love you. I simply practice some of the old ways. Why, how can you be so harsh!”

“Oh, love, are you sure you didn’t want my cousin?”

She laughed. “Oh, you don’t care about my arts at all, only that you can best your cousin.”

Simon climbed on top of her and loosened his pants, suddenly pushing into her in a possessive frenzy. Ripples of heat swept across her skin.

Simon bit at Gwyneth’s ear and whispered darkly, “I do not enjoy watching another pleasure you, I have found. In fact, I rather detest it. I never want to see another touch you again. It made my heart ache in a way I have never felt. I am shocked by it. I do not understand how you have changed this...interest of mine, witch. Is it one of your spells?” He pushed hard again and moaned in pleasure.

“No spell, Simon. I believe it simply means you are a man in love. At least, that is what I choose to believe. Or perhaps you are a jealous madman. In any case, I am pleased.”

“I am not especially pleased that you practice the dark arts, Raven. But, if you will, dance for me in the moonlight each month?” He shuddered and cried out, pouring into her.

“And will you wear a grey cloak and spy on me from behind a tree? Touch yourself in an unholy way?” She panted into his ear.

“Why, you will simply have to wonder and find out, will you not?” Simon bent and kissed her again, then whispered something in Italian she could not understand. She only knew it sounded wonderful, despite his terrible accent.

* * *

“Honey, come here.” Shawn pushed his hand through his hair and put the book down on the table.

“Where did you find that?” Jennifer laughed.

“I realized I never finished reading it.”

“What’s the final verdict?”

“I loved it. But it’s not quite as exciting as the real deal.” Shawn pulled her into his lap and kissed her thoroughly. “But what’s this stuff about a threesome? You never told me you were into that kind of stuff? This is not the sort of thing a man should find out *after* the wedding.” He arched a brow.

“Oh, Shawn, it’s only a book. A fantasy. Not necessarily *my* fantasy.”

“There’s always Peter in the Chemistry Department,” he whispered into her ear.

“You’d *never*!”

“Sure I would. Up to a point. Hmnn, not sure what that point is, actually...”

Jennifer looked at him in shock. “You’re messing with me.”

“Not really.” He shrugged. “Maybe once. Your choice. I’m simply here to please.”

Jennifer tilted her head and brushed her palm along his cheek. “You’re something else. I may take you up on that someday. But only after the baby comes.”

“Okay.”

Jennifer stood and walked towards the kitchen. She turned around when he yelped.

“Baby!” He ran to her and she nodded. Shawn pulled her into his arms and looked closely into her eyes.

“But I thought you couldn’t have a baby. The woman in the book couldn’t have a baby...”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Shawn, that’s only a book. Do you mean you married me thinking we couldn’t have children?”

“Sure. I would have married you no matter what.”

Jennifer smiled and led him back to the chair and sat on his lap, arms around his neck. Shawn kissed her head as he stared out at the crashing Atlantic. He wondered if Simon and the Raven ended up as happy.

About the Author

To learn more about Ciar Cullen, please visit www.ciarcullen.com. Send an email to Ciar at ciar@ciarcullen.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Ciar. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CiarCullen>.

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Can a friendship of three survive the trials of love and war?

Modus Vivendi

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Aidan Morrison, Virgil Craig and Drea Samuels have rarely been separated during their decade-long friendship. While war rages in Europe in the summer of 1917, two young men prepare to face the unknown. Leaving the girl they grew up with drives one man to propose to Drea and the other to seduce her. To complicate matters, the men share a secret relationship of their own.

Life on the home front is no less perilous than the front lines as Drea must face a personal tragedy alone while her friends try to survive the brutalities of war.

After more than a year away, first Aidan and then Virgil return. Their unresolved issues reemerge and long-kept secrets are revealed. Can Aidan, Virgil and Drea find a way through the confusion, misunderstanding and undeniable attraction each of them feels for the others? Or will they have to accept that the ties they formed as children are not meant to last into adulthood?

Book 1 in The Affairs of Morton's Pointe series.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Modus Vivendi*:

Skimming his hands down Drea's calves, Virgil slipped his fingers under the barrier of her woolen socks and pushed them to bunch around her ankles. He focused his attention on her right foot first, lifting it and tugging the sock off by the toes, slowly uncovering the pale skin beneath. Next came the left, which he continued to hold long after he tossed the sock aside, studying the callus under her middle toe and the way her arch curved just so. He was pulled back to the present by an impatient wiggling of Drea's toes.

"Is my foot really that fascinating?" she asked, amusement evident.

"You didn't know Virgil had a foot fetish?" Aidan sounded so serious that Virgil had to look at him to know that he was joking.

“Watch it, Morrison,” he warned as he abandoned Drea’s foot to the floor. He let his hands trail up her legs to where her skirt lay rolled and resting on her knees. “Or I can let you figure out how to do this yourself.”

Aidan was unfazed. “Something tells me I could manage.”

“He has really good instincts.” Drea’s voice was low and enticing.

Virgil’s cock responded to both comment and voice. Aidan did indeed have good instincts, instincts that had taken over when Madam Violet’s teachings hadn’t been enough. And Drea, God, it was fortunate she didn’t sound like that all the time when she talked, or he’d never leave her alone.

“How come I get ganged up on here?” he protested as he inched Drea’s skirt higher until the bottoms of her drawers were visible.

“Because you’re taking your sweet time,” she replied.

“And it’s fun,” Aidan chimed in.

“Just once,” Virgil said as he brought the hem of Drea’s skirt to rest at her waist and reached up to tug the tie on her drawers free, “it would be nice for one of you to side with me.” He tugged the cotton down, revealing the soft, white expanse of her stomach. He worked the material as low as was physically possible before continuing. “Or maybe help me out from time to time? A man can’t do *everything* by himself.”

“Aidan may have instincts, but you’re pretty creative. I’m sure you could think of some way to help yourself if you had to.” Drea’s eyes danced.

“I could, but I really don’t want to right now.” The last part he said with only a faint hint of levity.

Bracing herself on the arms of the chair, Drea lifted her rear from the seat enough so he could slip her drawers the rest of the way off. For all the teasing, it was obvious she was still uncertain from the slight tremor in her stomach and the way her legs pressed closer together to retain a little modesty once she sat back down. Confronted with her laid bare before him, Virgil realized how terrified *he* was to be doing this. He had been anxious before, but it hadn’t been so very real until now. Christ, he was going to eat Drea out in front of Aidan and, while they were also nervous, they didn’t seem to be afraid of forging ahead.

He brought his hands to rest on Drea’s knees. All joking was laid aside when he spoke. “Are you absolutely certain you’re okay with me doing this now?”

She was silent before she replied quietly, “Yes, Virgil, I am.”

He looked to Aidan, but the other man beat him to the punch. “Yes, Virgil, I’m all right with this.”

“Fuck,” he exhaled. They were good and he was, well mostly good. So what was he waiting for?

Slowly, he prized Drea’s legs open, amazed that she didn’t resist him at all. The white flesh of her thighs parted, gradually revealing the entirety of her coppery curls and the sensitive pink flesh normally carefully hidden but now displayed, glistening slightly with her arousal. He was a very fortunate man.

He ran his palms up along the soft skin of her inner thighs, feeling every goose bump that his touch elicited. Up he went until there was no farther to go. Fingers splayed, middle fingers nudging her hipbones, his thumbs hovered over her pussy, waiting the barest of moments before making contact. First his left then right thumb traced down her slit, skating over the slick, satiny flesh begging to be touched. He pushed apart her labia, baring the delicacies of her sex completely unhindered to his hungry gaze. Without further thought, Virgil bowed worshipfully, bringing his mouth achingly close to his target. He blew lightly over the flesh just to hear Drea’s sharp intake of breath at the teasing contact before his tongue darted out and he ran it flat and firm over the swollen flesh to take the first taste of her. It was a heady flavor, mostly salty and a little sweet with something indescribable that made him crave more. So more he took. He explored every fold and ridge, savoring what he had been unable to in his determination last night to show Drea what she had no idea of. He held her hips firmly grounded to the chair as she tried to rise up. Her body was his. All his for just this moment. Every gasp and moan, the flood of juices that coated his tongue as he licked and probed.

“God...Virgil...I don’t think...I...oh, fuck...” Her choked exclamations barely filtered over the rush of blood in his ears, of the desire driving him. He could push her over so easily. But he’d already had that surrender from her once and, while he desperately wanted to drive her to it again, that wasn’t his goal.

He tore himself away, sat back on his heels and took in her shock at being abandoned so abruptly.

Aidan spoke up. “Virgil, what are you—”

Virgil wrapped a hand behind Aidan’s neck and pulled him forward, cutting off the words as Aidan’s lips touched his own. Aidan made as if to draw back, but Virgil held him there, forcing Aidan to open to him. The low groan Aidan gave as he accepted the assault was almost more satisfying than Drea’s gasping pleas. But even that wasn’t as

good as when Aidan took control of the kiss, pulling Virgil close as his tongue darted in and out and around Virgil's mouth, tasting the rewards of Virgil's labors.

"Delicious, isn't she?" Virgil asked, his voice gone rough.

"Jesus." It was said with absolute wonder. "It's kind of like how you taste, but..."

"Better?" Virgil grinned.

"Different. Good different. But not better or worse," Aidan replied softly. His head turned toward Drea. "I don't think you can compare it."

Drea looked slightly bemused. "I'll take your word on that."

Aidan then asked her, "Would you mind if I tried?"

Her cheeks grew pinker, but her voice was steady when she replied. "If you want to."

"Virgil?"

"That's why I stopped, Aidan. Drea's willing and waiting." He pointedly moved to the side, leaving the way open.

Aidan blushed as he moved to kneel between Drea's legs. He glanced sheepishly at Virgil. "How do I do this?"

"Go slow and easy. The terrain's a bit different, but the idea's the same."

"Right." Aidan's brow furrowed as he swallowed hard. Then he faced Drea. "You all right?"

"I will be when one of you decides to do something for me." The words were pointed but gentle.

As Aidan leaned down to taste Drea directly for the first time, Virgil realized that compared to Aidan, he hadn't been nervous at all. Aidan's uncertainty was clear in the stiff set of his shoulders, the tension visible in the tight muscles of his neck.

"Just remember our first time together," Drea murmured to Aidan, running her right hand lightly through his hair. "It took some trial and error, but we soon figured out what to do, right?"

Virgil saw Aidan's shoulders relax slightly as he finally committed to action. He must have found a sensitive place because Drea gasped sharply. He started to pull back, but she held him in place, murmuring for him to keep on. It was no small amount of jealousy that Virgil felt watching Drea and Aidan together. They had shared something that Virgil wasn't a part of, couldn't be a part of. And then again, he couldn't begrudge them the connection, either. They each had their connections with one or the other that

the third could never quite share. It was why they had become friends to begin with. No one of them had everything the others needed. Like here, Drea and Aidan had their inexperience in common, but Virgil had enough insight to guide them when needed. The flare of jealousy quickly ceded to fascination. It was beautiful watching them together.

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