



**Fire-drake
of
Cumberland**

Payton Lee

Firedrake of Cumberland

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either are the product of the author's imagination or are used
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beyond the intent of the author.

I dedicate this book to you, the reader. It is for you I write. My only hope is you enjoy sharing the movies of my mind.

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Chapter 1

“I don’t want to go any further,” Joan complained pulling Judith back with her hand. “Jaclyn didn’t say we could go into the woods.”

“How else are we supposed to find the Mandrake for Papa’s gout? Or the horehound for cook’s headaches, or..”

“You know very well we find all of this out in the fields, not the wooded forest. It’s dark and scary in there,” Joan whined pathetically. She really was afraid of the woods. There were wild animals, wolves especially. Then there were the faeries, elves, goblins, and witches.

“Stop being such a baby,” Judith ordered. “You are nearly seven years old.”

“But cook told us there were goblins and faeries,” Joan replied stubbornly folding her arms across her chest.

“You don’t believe all those stories?” Judith asked indignantly. “It just goes to show that you’re still a baby!”

“I am not a baby. If I’m a baby then you’re a baby. You’re only four and ten,” Joan countered heatedly.

“I’m almost five and ten,” Judith stated impudently. “I’ll be wed soon.”

“Ha!” Joan laughed.

“What do you mean by that?” Judith asked indignantly.

“Jaclyn is eight and ten,” Joan chortled. “She still is not wed.”

“She’s too stubborn. Jaclyn is going to be an old unwed maiden.”

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“Jaclyn is not stubborn. She’s very smart and independent. She intends to be careful about who she weds,” Joan defended.

“Joan! Judith!”

“That’s Jaclyn calling.”

“I know,” Judith pouted. “If you weren’t slow, we’d already have the mandrake.”

“Joan and Judith come here right now! What are you doing over there at the forest edge?” Jaclyn demanded picking up her woven basket of woodland herbs. “I don’t want you two going in the forest. It is a dangerous place.”

“See I told you so,” Joan chided Judith sticking out her tongue.

“I’m not afraid. I’ll just wait for my chance with or without you,” Judith replied triumphantly.

“Joan! Judith!” Jaclyn called once more.

“Coming,” Joan replied. She turned to run to her older sister.

Judith followed begrudgingly holding their basket of herbs they picked earlier under Jaclyn’s instructions.

“If I cannot trust the two of you to stay away from dangerous places, I shall not bring you with me,” Jaclyn reprimanded sternly.

“I’ll be good,” Joan promised taking her eldest sister’s hand. “I like to leave the bailey once and awhile and I’m afraid of that dark old forest anyway.”

“As well you should be,” Jaclyn reminded. “Even I won’t wander into the depths of the forest.” She knew the woods were Riever’s territory. They often hid in the dense forests north of Carlisle Castle and preyed upon noble purses belonging to the English and the Scots travelers. Her sisters were too young to understand the Riever way of life or the danger they presented.

“Why? What is there to be afraid of?” Judith said boldly. “Stories for children?”

“Children?” Jaclyn questioned irritably. “Are you not still a child?”

“No I’m not!” Judith replied defiantly. “In another year or two I will be old enough to wed.”

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“Not if you don’t continue your studies,” Jaclyn reminded. “There is a lot more to running a household than just running your mouth.”

“You are cruel,” Judith pouted.

“You think that I am?” Jaclyn chuckled. “Her sister’s stubbornness was part of Judith she admired. She only wanted to help her learn to control it. “I could be even more cruel by confining you to the weaving room, or perhaps the spindling room.”

“You wouldn’t!” Judith shrieked in horror.

“I may,” Jaclyn warned. “If you wander off like that with your little sister once more. Or if you ignore your instructions from Mistress Blanche.”

Judith choked back her retort. She didn’t want to push her oldest sister too far. She knew better. Instead she remained silent and walked ahead of Jaclyn.

The three young women accompanied by several women of the bailey returned to castle.

“Ulrich de Warre,” the king’s page beckoned.

The tallest knight in the great hall walked away from the hearth to the page. Ulrich was a head taller than every one of the knights currently at court. The women of the court found his strong roman features and strong chin most attractive. The women whispered he must have modeled for the roman god statues. It was not uncommon for the king to call one of his knights to the private chambers of the king for private conversations.

Edward was pacing back and forth in his private library. He had become the hero of England when he removed his mother’s lover, Mortimer from power. He seized the power of king that was rightfully his. Mortimer was imprisoned, tried, judged, drawn and quartered in the new execution site in London, Tyburn.

“My king,” Ulrich addressed bowing deeply with a swoop of his tall muscular frame.

“I’ve received word from my Lord Bonefey of Cumberland,” Edward revealed not stopping his pacing. “It is reported there is trouble with the Scots. I was convinced the agitators had been quieted. I am no longer certain of these things.

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I will send you into the land of the Scots. There you will discern if these rumors are in truth or falsehoods.”

“My Liege,” Ulrich bowed. “When do wish me to begin my journey?”

“On the morrow you will travel with three of my most trusted men in arms,” Edward explicated. “You will take with you Lionel, Henry, and Geoffrey. I know you have allowed your own men at arms to visit their families. I do not wish to waste one moment on this quest. I do not wish to march against the Scots so soon. I will if I must, but I long to be near my queen and our son.” Edward palmed the soft embroidered surcoat he wore.

“The news of your firstborn son has gladdened the hearts of all your devoted knights,” Ulrich complimented.

“Their hearts cannot be as happy as mine. We have named the boy, Edward. He shall be my heir and namesake,” Edward bragged. “Philippa has delivered a strong and healthy son.”

“You make a simple man most envious,” Ulrich said humbly.

“Wish you to see my son?” Edward offered proudly. He didn’t wait for an answer. Instead moving quickly Edward opened the heavy oak door in the castle and motioned Ulrich to follow him down the torch lit castle hall. He opened another door to a brilliantly lit and warm room.

Queen Philippa sat on a chair behind a large wooden framed tapestry circle. She was concentrating on an intricate embroidery pattern placed upon expensive velvet. The finished fabric would be made into clothing for her son. When she looked up to see her husband, Philippa beamed him a broad smile. “Husband.”

The nurse was rocking the cradle Edward IV lay sleeping in.

“Nurse, bring me my son,” Edward ordered.

“Nay,” Philippa countered quickly. “Our son has just eaten and now takes his rest. You will not disturb his slumber.”

“Never argue with a woman,” Edward laughed. “This is the first lesson a man must learn when he weds. The women are smarter than us. You will soon learn.”

“I know not if what you say is true,” Philippa chortled. “I only know your son was colicky and we first have comforted him

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to sleep. You will not disturb his sleep unless you wish to walk and coddle him the rest of the day.”

“You see how intelligent and logical my wife is,” Edward crowed. When he neared the cradle he bent to brush a kiss on Philippa’s cheek. “My queen knows I still have much to do this day. I have to meet with the steward, the marshal of London, and of course the council of Barons. How can I comfort my son?”

Edward motioned Ulrich to come to the now stilled cradle.

Edward’s voice was soft and low. He pointed to the sleeping baby boy. “Is he not the most handsome child you have ever seen?”

“He is indeed,” Ulrich agreed. The sleeping child had blonde hair wisps peeking out from the silken nightcap, rosy pink chubby cheeks, and long blond lashes. The king’s child was a handsome child without doubt.

“Run along husband,” Philippa reprimanded. “Take Ulrich with you. You both have your work to be about.”

“Yes my love and queen,” Edward responded obediently. “Ulrich will ready for his trip and I shall be off to my meeting with the sheriff.” Edward returned to his library offering Ulrich a ‘*God Speed*’.

Ulrich attended morning mass with Lionel, Geoffrey, and Henry. Once they broke the fast the four mounted their steeds. The group headed north to the land of the Scots. This trip was not hampered by the slow wagons that usually accompanied knights. Ulrich and the men at arms did not bring their camps, beds, or servants. They would find shelter and substance at night in other manors on the way to Dumfries. King Edward had sent sealed parchments to Ulrich in the morning before mass.

The troupe rode all day. At sunset they found shelter in a small village. The vassal opened his great hall to the envoys of King Edward for the night. Before the evening meal, Ulrich sat by the hearth and broke the king’s seal on the parchments he was given in the morning. By the light of the hearth Ulrich read the information and instructions the king had given him. He would ride to Dumfries and meet with the Scottish Lord, Robert Jamison. There was word from him and Lord Baldrick Bonefey that there were unusual Riever activities between Scotland and England. Jamison believed it was a rebel group to disrupt the fragile peace

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between David Bruce's protector the Earl of Moray and King Edward III. The King instructed Ulrich to bring back all the information from Lord Jamison to Surrey Court. The king instructed him to follow the Riever trail from Scotland to Carlisle Castle and share this information with Lord Bonefey. Baldric was one of Edward's most trusted Barons. Carlisle Castle was a fortress between Scotland and England. King Edward would only allow a trusted baron to possess those lands.

Baldric Bonefey was one of Edward's father's most loyal vassals. He proved his loyalty many times over in defense of Scottish rebellions. He also assisted Edward in his move to take complete possession of the English throne.

Chapter 2

“We are exhausted,” Lionel complained. “You drive us too hard.”

“Time is crucial,” Ulrich replied. “The king must have this vital information before the next meeting of the king’s council. The Scot rebels are disturbed that the king has an heir. They intend to move before Michaelmas. They want to interfere with King Edward’s reign while it is still young.”

“My stomach is growling more than an angry mongrel,” Geoffrey grumbled adjusting his armored girth on the Destrier saddle. “I don’t think the king’s reign would grow old if we stop for a meal.”

“Penrith Castle is ahead. It is only a few more furlongs,” Ulrich advised. “There will be sustenance and shelter there.”

“You know this area well, Ulrich,” Geoffrey noted. “You must travel these roads for the king’s service often.”

“I have traversed these roads many times,” Ulrich replied. “I was fostered in York. I traversed these roads as a page, a squire, and a knight. I have raised my sword for the king and tournaments with purse.”

“You sound as if you are an ancient man,” Lionel chortled. “You are but a pup of a score and ten.”

“A pup to an old dog of two score,” Geoffrey teased. “An old dog softened by the pleasures and care of a good woman.”

“As if you do not enjoy these same comforts,” Lionel returned quickly with good humor.

“You both are fat and lazy,” Ulrich added.

“Is that why you never married?” Geoffrey joked. “So you would not end up fat and lazy as these old men?”

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“I have yet to meet a woman to interest me,” Ulrich answered.

“You do not find women of interest?” Lionel asked with shock.

“I find their pleasures of interest,” Ulrich laughed. “I do not find them to be of any interest beyond the bed or a night. Their minds focus upon jewelry, clothing, and needlework. The interests of a woman are too limited.”

“I think it is true you have not yet met the right woman,” Lionel countered. “My wife is my truest friend. We discuss everything. In the management of our home, there is none to equal.”

“As is with my wife,” Geoffrey agreed. “You are missing a great deal my young friend.”

“Ah not so young,” Lionel reminded. “Soon you will be too old to enjoy the pleasures of youth. You will not enjoy playing with your offspring.”

“This true. An old goat with gout cannot romp and train his children in the fine arts of sword and hunting,” Geoffrey agreed.

“Perhaps you should have spent more time in training,” Ulrich countered. “Then we would already be well fed and enjoying the warmth of Penrith’s hearth.”

“Here is your broth, Papa,” Jaclyn offered handing her father a cup of hot broth filled with herbs to ease the discomfort of his gout.

“You are an angel to me, my blessed daughter,” Baldric praised. “My Aldith in heaven looks down upon you with great honor and love.”

“I miss Mamma,” Jaclyn sighed. “She taught and loved us so greatly.”

“You look so like her,” Baldric reminisced touching the cheek of his eldest daughter lovingly. “Although your countenance brings tears of memory to my mind, you bring an eternal youth to my heart. Let us speak no more of my Aldith. We must read these parchments from our King Edward.”

Jaclyn sat on the hearthstone near her father’s feet. She broke the seals and began reading. “There is trouble for the

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kingdom. Our king is sending three emissaries to Dumfries to see Lord Jamison. There is talk of rebellion by a small group of Scots. These traitorous fellows have chosen to live as Rievers and have been robbing not only for purse, but documents of the realm.”

“Does our king say who these men are he sends and when they come?” Baldric queried. He would prepare the household for such honored guests of the king.

“King Edward says only that they are two of his most trusted men of arms and the Firedrake.”

“The Firedrake?” Baldric gulped.

“You know this fierce dragon?” Jaclyn chuckled. “What manner of knight is given such a powerful herald as the mythical fire breathing dragon?”

“I fear daughter that I have kept you far too busy at Cumberland and the management of our barony. Perhaps you should have spent more time at court like your sister Judith.”

“I have no desire to be with the serpents of a King’s court. Mama told me of all those court intrigues. That life is not for me, Papa.”

“I agree with you as I did your mother. You are as intelligent as your Mamma. There is not a more talented steward in all of Cumberland than your mother was and as you are. I need you here to manage our lands, vassals, serfs, and freemen. There is none more talented in agriculture and husbandry than you.”

“Papa, you forgot my talents in needlework, medicines, literary, scribing, and..”

“Enough Jaclyn,” Baldric laughed. “I think I’ve created to large a head for such a beautiful young woman. What does the other parchment say?”

“You did not answer my question,” Jaclyn pursued. “Who is this Firedrake?”

“Sir Ulrich de Warre bears the title of Firedrake. He is one of King Edward’s bravest and most fierce knights. He never lost a tournament. He fights not beside the king in battle. The Firedrake fights in front of all troops. I once heard it told that he is violent in battle that men drop in fear as smoke and fire are seen coming from his nostrils,” Baldric elucidated. “He is tall, fair, and beautiful as ancient mythical Roman Gods.”

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“That is quite a story for a knight,” Jaclyn snorted. “Fire breathing!”

“Tis true my daughter,” Baldric replied indignantly.

“You’ve seen this phenomenon?”

“No, but I’ve talked to many a knight that were there in battle with the Firedrake. They told me they saw these things and the smoke from his nostrils,” Baldric replied passionately in belief.

“Papa, in cold weather we all see smoke from our nostrils,” Jaclyn snorted once more. “Still, if he wears the herald of the Firedrake he must me a fierce knight for the king. I shall be careful not to bring out his wrath. Still, if he were to become angry, perhaps cook could use his flames to cook a boar for us.”

Baldric burst out laughing. “Your humor puts a shadow upon court jesters my daughter. Read the other parchment.”

Jaclyn read the next missal but remained silent.

“What does it say?” Baldric pursued.

“It is another writ giving names, estates, and worth of prospects,” Jaclyn sighed resignedly. “Can we do this on the morrow. I feel too weary to discuss this list of potential husbands for this heir to Carlisle Castle.”

“Child, it is time for you to wed. I want grandsons. Let this old man die happy with many heirs to inherit this great barony. I have indulged you far too long,” Baldric said seriously. “I insist that you select your husband this time. Read me the names.”

“Very well Papa,” Jaclyn replied grinding her teeth. “Sir Ernald Dych of Sussex, Sir Griffin Merton of Devon, and yes, would you believe Sir Ulrich de Warre of York?”

“The Firedrake!” Baldric declared. “Our good King Edward honors us. I hope you consider this knight for your husband.”

“Wed a fire breathing dragon?” Jaclyn joked. “I should wake toasted every morning. Think I should consider such? Well yes, mayhap I should especially on cold winter mornings.”

Baldric began to laugh once again, “Enough my daughter. Your wit hurts me for the laughter. I will retire to my chambers. We will look at your future lord in the morning after we break fast.”

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“We must prepare for our guests,” Jaclyn reminded. “At least I will be able to see a suitor for a change. I’ve never had that opportunity before.”

“Perhaps the king is hoping for this match,” Baldric suggested.

“I would be more interested if Queen Philippa were in favor of this match,” Jaclyn responded putting her shoulder as a brace to help her father walk to his chamber. “Queen Philippa is a woman most wise.”

“I like her too,” Baldric guffawed. “Should you choose this Firedrake as a potential suitor, we will ask our queen for her advice.”

“Only if I choose the Firedrake? Would we not seek her counsel on Sir Ernald, Sir Griffin?”

“Enough! I am weary. You have my word that we will seek the Queen’s Counsel on any of your choices,” Baldric conceded. “But this time you will select. I shall make no more excuses to the king. He wants Carlisle protected by blood as I do.”

“Ulrich, I am weary!” Lionel complained. “You drive us too hard!”

“I weary of your complaints. We will soon be at Dumfries and enjoy the hearth of Lord Jamison.”

“Sweet Jesu,” Lionel prayed in supplication to the sky. “We will at least be at rest here a few days.”

“Take your rest,” Ulrich snickered applying his spurs into the Destrier. “Come my Orion, speed us to our rest and warm hearth.”

The trio had ridden hard for the day from Penrith Castle. The king had advised Ulrich to stop at Carlisle Castle on his return from Dumfries and relay all information he obtained from Lord Jamison then. It was not necessary to stop at Carlisle and lose another day in obtaining that information.

“My lord,” a sentinel announced. “There are knights approaching.”

“Can you see the banner?”

“One of them is holding the banner of King Edward of Anjou,” the sentinel responded.

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“Good,” Lord Jamison responded. “Prepare our tables for our guests.” He was pleased the king received his messages. He had seen too much blood lost in battles between the Scots and the English. There was peace at last and he wanted peace for his children and his grandchildren. When he learned of the plans of Laird Mercer to create havoc and mistrust in the truce with Edward and Scotland. Mercer was training an army in the land of the Rievers. Any theft for funding his army would be blamed on the Rievers. Jamison could not tell the Earl of Moray about the plan. He was not favored in the child, David Bruce’s court. He was mistrusted in the Scottish court for his loyalty to Edward and his desire for peace. His enemies often filled Moray’s mind with untruths regarding Lord Jamison. His only recourse had been to relay information secretly to King Edward.

Lord Jamison descended the stairs of the castle and into the open bailey. He would meet the king’s emissaries personally.

“We are honored by your visit,” Robert Jamison greeted. His eyes rounded with awe. “I am pleased King Edward found my humble warning so important he sends his most powerful knight, Firedrake.”

“Your warning to my king is taken most seriously,” Ulrich replied dismounting from Orion. “My mount is in need of food and water. Would your marshal see Orion is also groomed and shod by your smithy?”

“The Firedrake takes better care of his steed than the king’s men,” Lionel chided. “My body is tired and aches. My stomach growls for food.”

“Would the smithy also shod this mouth?” Ulrich joked. They followed Robert Jamison into the castle’s great hall.

“After our feast we will begin in private the scribing of this treacherous doing of Laird Mercer,” Robert said quietly to Ulrich. “I trust only a few even in my own castle. To this day there are whispers of William Wallace as martyr.”

“Understandable. He was a fierce and brave warrior. One cannot admire his love of country. I hold such loyalty to my king and country,” Ulrich remarked. “I think Wallace would choose not to be a martyr, but an icon of warrior for his country.”

“Tis true. I knew Wallace when I was a child. He was traitor to England, but a proud warrior first.” Robert Jamison

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immediately liked this fierce warrior of Edward. It was unique for a warrior to contemplate philosophy.

Baldric took Jaclyn's hand after mass. "After we break fast, you and I will cloister ourselves and discuss the current list of suitors sent by the king."

"Papa," Jaclyn sighed. "Must I wed? Judith is more than anxious to embrace marriage and motherhood. She could provide issue to inherit Carlisle Castle and Cumberland."

Baldric cast his daughter a disapproving glower. "I love all my daughters with full heart, but you Jaclyn are the only child most capable not only to run Cumberland, but train her issue to do the same. Neither Judith nor Joan has these talents. Their lives will be good. We'll see to that, but only you, Jaclyn, are the future of Carlisle. This is not a duty I shall ever allow you to ignore in any way. I have been indulgent, but you must marry and provide issue. Your decision will be made by Michaelmas or I will make it for you. Is this completely understood?"

"Yes Papa," Jaclyn capitulated. "I will not shirk this duty any longer. We will look at these three suitors and decide." She met her father after they broke fast in his library.

The official steward of Carlisle, Odo Mann, met them. Odo had brought many bound parchments with him. He was a meticulous record keeper of King Edward's vassals, lords, and barons. He had records of inherited lands and fiefs. He kept up with all wards and wardships whenever he and Baldric attended court in Westminster.

"I have studied all accounts," Odo stated. "The wealthiest of the three is Ernald Dych of Sussex. He would bring five fiefs to the wealth of Carlisle heirs. Sir Ernald is in possession of great coinage for the Carlisle treasury."

Jaclyn read Sir Ernald's other attributes. "He holds three wards and two wardships consisting of two widows and one child, the wardships consist of four fiefs."

"He would bring a sizeable accounting to the coffers of Carlisle upon sale of these wardships and wards," Baldric noted.

"He would also bring seven children. He would bring these sons battling for his wealth and three daughters demanding a wealthy dowry from the coffers of Carlisle. What of our issue? Would our issue do battle with his sons? This man has outlived

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three wives. I would be the fourth. He is old,” Jaclyn indicated heatedly.

“I have heard it told in court gossip, the Lord Dych of Sussex is lecherous. He visits the bedchambers of the two widowed wards occasionally. He also has five bastard sons fostered in training.”

“He could bring disease to the bed chamber,” Baldric said thoughtfully. “We would demand an examination by physician before the nuptials.”

“And after,” Jaclyn snorted. “Continually!”

Chapter 3

“One would think such an older man would eventually wear out,” Baldric suggested.

“He may wear out, but would think he didn’t,” Jaclyn replied boldly. It was never necessary to be coy in the presence of her father and trusted steward. “If he be worn, how could he provide issue for me? Odo, place down on parchment that my demand of any wedding agreement would be the physical examination by physician as to the ability to provide issue, virility, and freedom of disease.”

“Such a demand could result in such a demand for you, my lady,” Odo reminded.

“I have no fear of such a demand,” Jaclyn replied casually. “Scribe this request. I will not shirk my duty to my family, my king, and my people, but I will protect my person and all that is Cumberland.”

“We never thought other,” Baldric reassured. “Tell us of the next suitor, Odo.”

“Sir Griffin Merton of Devon is not as wealthy as Sir Ernald. He brings in only three fiefs and no wards or wardships. He brings only one vassal, but twenty men at arms and a small coffer,” Odo revealed.

“Three fiefs would not bring in enough to cover expense on twenty men at arms,” Jaclyn analyzed. “He takes more than he gives.”

“Which is why he requested the king to bring him a proper marriage,” Odo shared. “He is not as old Sir Ernald.”

“What advantage would this suitor have to us and Carlisle?” Jaclyn queried. She saw no advantage to this contract.

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“He is considered fair of face. He is virile and already has two bastard sons,” Odo answered quickly raising his hand. “Yes, we have already agreed a physical examination is necessary.”

“Don’t young men have proper morality anymore?” Baldric asked in disgust. “I must agree with Jaclyn. This suitor takes more than he gives.”

“He brings the king’s favor,” Odo suggested. “The gossip at court tells us he is an excellent strategist in battle and fortifications of battle. He brings knowledge to fortify Carlisle in case of siege by Scots.”

“That is something to think about,” Baldric said looking to Jaclyn.

“And the next?” Jaclyn queried. “Is this the great fire breathing knight?”

“He is the poorest of all your suitors,” Odo replied. “Court gossip tells he has no bastards and is most discreet in matters of amour.”

“What does this poor sweet lover bring to Carlisle?” Jaclyn asked.

“He brings a small coffer only, but he is virile and at the perfect age for production of issue that would be tall and strong,” Odo responded. “He is a noted and fierce warrior that would train his sons of issue in protection of Carlisle and Cumberland. He also brings only three men at arms. He is so trusted he holds three wards of York.”

“Who are these wards?” Jaclyn queried. She did not want a husband sleeping with wards and her.

“They are the Lady Clarice, an infant orphaned, Lady Hilary the child heir of two fiefs in York. The child Hilary is the daughter of de Warre’s dearest friend killed in a tournament. Last is the child Mildred. She is heir to three fiefs. Her parents died of ague. It is said the Lady Mildred is of the same age of Judith and near marriageable age,” Odo indicated. “Firedrake has already turned down four offers of betrothal announcing bluntly that Mildred is still but a child and he will not agree to any marriage contract until she reaches at least the age of ten and six. Even then Mildred must be in agreement.”

Jaclyn was surprised by such tender mercies of such a fierce knight. How odd that he would care so tenderly for chattel

such as a woman. “We are grateful to you for your interest and scribing of all court gossip, Odo.”

“For protection of Cumberland, a good ear is most advantageous,” Odo boasted.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Jaclyn laughed. “The problem being I see no point to contract with any of these suitors. Ernald’s wealth brings too many heirs, Griffin brings little more than a mind, and Firedrake brings merely strength of body.”

“Your suitors would be more wealthy, youthful, and strong if you were to leave Cumberland. Those fruits lie in the court of Westminster and open to your sisters,” Odo said frankly. “I fear you must sacrifice for Carlisle and the subjects of Cumberland.”

“I fear you are correct. I will eliminate Ernald on the first. I will not have such promiscuity or heavily numbered heirs in the household of Carlisle. We will continue to study this Firedrake and Sir Griffin Merton,” Jaclyn announced. “Odo, Papa will once again be attending court for another counsel. Accompany my father and listen more to your gossips. I wish to know more about the two suitors of Carlisle.”

“What shall I listen for?” Odo asked. He thought he had given enough information on the suitors.

“This time find out for me their mettle. Good deeds, bad deeds, kindness, cruelty, intellect, success, or failure. Everything that makes them unique,” Jaclyn replied. Inside she admitted she was impressed with Firedrake’s attitude toward the ward Mildred.

“Your obedient servant, my lady,” Odo acknowledged.

Baldric sat back against the chair in the library. “You are agreed to one of these two then?”

“It appears I have little choice in the matter, Papa,” Jaclyn rose from her chair and brushed a kiss across his brow. “I have much work to be about. I will see you for our evening meal.”

Jaclyn’s surcoat of deep blue samite rustled as she went through Carlisle. Her first stop was the kitchens. There she checked on cook and the tally maker. Today’s inventories were already being made with instructions to expect to host three emissaries from the king at any moment. The chambermaids were busy changing rushes in the great hall. The upstairs maids were already taking clothes and bed sheets to the laundress. Judith was taking instruction on embroidery. The spindlier and weavers

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where already preparing fine cloth to trade in London city. Joan was in the buttery learning the accounting of foodstuffs. Candles and soaps were being made in the cellar. Jaclyn had instructed her servants to make and add scented oils to the soaps and candles. Jaclyn entered the chambers used for medicinal herbs. She gathered necessary items and left with her favorite servant, Joy, to the bailey. There were several ill serfs and tradesman that had come down with ague. Jaclyn immediately isolated them in the sick cottage and was bringing more medicines for their care. Jaclyn was afraid of rampant contamination and although many thought her isolation cottage strange, the people of Carlisle agreed it always worked in containing illness.

Jaclyn was so pleased with the isolation cottage she had built. There was one in every village and a capable woman in charge. The cottage matron was paid by the Barony of Cumberland. This woman would see to it that medicinal plants were brought in and in ready for brews, salves, and doses. Illness was limited in these areas and illnesses were contained.

Today Jaclyn and Joy visited the cook's daughter in her cottage. A child was expected any day and to Jaclyn's surprise a child was delivered in the morning. It was a man-child with curly red hair. Jaclyn held the swaddled baby and admitted for the first time that her maternal instincts were growing. She felt a need to have her own child to hold, nourish, and teach. The description of Firedrake raced through her mind and she contemplated holding the son of her and Firedrake's issue. She must stop this thinking. Her contractual marriage was for the benefit of Cumberland and Carlisle Castle. She shouldn't be thinking of her wants. Still an issue was required wasn't it?

"My Lady?" Joy intruded into the deep thoughts of her mistress. She had been Jaclyn's personal servant since she was a baby and knew her mistress well. She had never noticed the firm centered logical eyes of Jaclyn Bonefey mist over into daydream thoughts. Joy smiled. It was time for her mistress to follow her maternal instincts. Indeed a child would be born to the castle soon.

Joy's voice broke into Jaclyn's thoughts. "Tis a beautiful child." Jaclyn cuddled the newborn. "He is strong and handsome. A fine son for you, Mathilda."

✦ Payton Lee

“Thank you my lady,” Mathilda acknowledged. “He is a fine healthy lad.”

Jaclyn returned the boy to his mother. “We must leave and be about our errands. I would like to visit on the morrow if you will allow.”

“Of course my lady. You are always welcome in our humble hovel,” Mathilda invited.

Jaclyn finished her visitations to everyone in the bailey and returned to the castle. Tomorrow she would begin her visits to villages in Cumberland. This time she would allow Judith and Joan to come with her. It was time they experience responsibilities in the running of the Barony. Judith had recently been a dutiful student in the tallies of the household and learning trade from the steward, Odo Mann. Joan needed to see what life was outside the bailey.

“You have all the names and plots that I am aware of,” Robert stated handing the parchments to Ulrich. “Return with these and all we discussed post haste. God Speed.”

Ulrich placed the parchments in his surcoat and mounted Orion. The Scots did take good care of their horses. Orion was prancing and ready to ride. Once outside the castle grounds and into the wooded fields, Ulrich pulled into a secluded copse. “You are rested Lionel?”

“Rested, sated, and ready to return home,” Lionel replied gaily. So far nothing had happened of an unusual or battle type nature. He decided he wished to retire from the menise and stay at home with his wife and family.

Ulrich pulled out the bound parchments from his surcoat and gave them to Lionel. “Here we begin my plan. Laird Jamison told me there are traitors everywhere. We will be followed and beset so these parchments will not reach King Edward. The traitors I’m certain watched me take the parchments. I give them to you now. The traitors will seek me out. You Lionel are to ride full speed straight to King Edward when they attack. Do not look back. Geoffrey and I will lead them away from your path that will be straight past Penrith and straight into York. Do not stop save to eat one meal and rest a few hours. Trust no one. Deliver the parchments to Kind Edward’s hand and no one else.”

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

After handing Lionel the parchments the troupe left the wooded copse.

The group had just left Dumfries and entered English ground when an arrow struck Geoffrey's heart directly through his hauberk. He fell to the ground instantly. His horse reared and began running furiously.

Orion smelled the blood and charged ahead.

"God Speed!" Ulrich shouted to Lionel and directed Orion to the open road.

Lionel spurred his mount and took off to the wooded copse. It would be more difficult for an archer to shoot accurately in the crowded spaces and blockages of a forest. The open road was fool hardy, but Ulrich was right. The Mercer's band followed the Firedrake.

Orion's massive muscles rippled in fluid motion as he raced down the road well ahead of the Rievers. The powerful Destrier proved once again the superiority of a well trained and well kept mount.

One of the Mercer's men realized they would never catch the Firedrake after a chase of two hours. Their horses were near exhaustion. He raised his bow and aimed for the Firedrake. His arrow's target was sure.

Ulrich felt a burning pain run through his shoulder and felt the warm blood ooze down his skin. "Orion, to the woods."

Orion turned immediately and headed into the woods. It slowed his pace, but he also felt the distress of his master and the smell of human blood was strong.

It was a half hour later when Mercer's men caught the Firedrake. A broken branch was wielded and brought down Ulrich. Orion reared in protection of his fallen master.

"Orion, retreat!" Ulrich uttered. He knew the traitors would wound his Destrier to get to him. The pain was excruciating. He lost his wind when the branch threw him to the ground.

Orion reared one more time over his master and went into the woods.

Suddenly Ulrich felt a dirk penetrate his hauberk. Clubs and hands were everywhere. He felt and swallowed his own blood and flesh.

✦ Payton Lee

Somewhere between reality and oblivion Ulrich heard the traitors as they tore his hauberk and surcoat to shreds until he was left only with his chausses, braes, and chemise.

“Where are the posts?”

“I saw him put them in his surcoat.”

“They aren’t here.”

“He must have given them to one of his men at arms.”

“The one that ran into the forests. He must have it.”

“We should make this one tell us.”

“He’s dead.”

“Are you certain?”

“His body is beaten to minced meat. No one could survive. I tell you he’s dead and no longer of any concern. We’ll track down the other rider and check the dead one we left behind.”

Ulrich went into the haven of blackness. His lost consciousness eased his pain. His last thoughts were that Lionel had enough of a head start and was wise enough to cover his trail. Lionel would bring the written treachery to King Edward’s hand. What he learned would die with him. Death would be a blessing in confidence and the abatement of pain.

In the morning light Ulrich woke to that very pain. He focused enough to see his faithful Destrier above him. Since he woke alive to his pain he decided he should continue on until his body gave up its life. “Orion, down.”

The great steed went down on to the ground. The Destrier had been trained well to allow his wounded master to mount.

With great effort and pain, Ulrich slid onto Orion. Once balanced on the Destrier’s back, Orion stood and began walking toward York.

Every step of his horse caused agony. He was getting thirsty for the loss of his blood. “Orion, take me to the river. I thirst.”

Orion came out of the woods and walked slowly to the bank of the river. Orion fell once again to the ground.

Ulrich rolled to the wet bank of the river and slid to the water’s edge. With great effort he took his hand and pulled water to his lips. After several times the effort became too great. Ulrich passed into the blessed oblivion of blackness once more.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♣

“Do not get too close to the river bank,” Jaclyn warned her two younger sisters. “And do not go too deeply into the woods.”

Judith stuck out her tongue at Jaclyn. “Yes we won’t and don’t do this and don’t do that.”

“Our Jaclyn worries for us,” Joan defended. “Besides she’s setting up our camp and I am hungry. I’ll obey so I won’t miss supper.”

“Come along,” Judith encouraged. “Jaclyn won’t know and we won’t wander too far. I just want to peek at the flowers.”

Chapter 4

“Look at these lovely flowers,” Joan indicated pointing to a row of daylilies near the edge of the woods. “They are such pretty red with yellow inside. Let’s pick some for Jaclyn.”

“I think she will like them,” Judith conceded. She did love her older sister. She may defy Jaclyn, but it was mainly for reasons of stubbornness. She adored and admired Jaclyn.

The two girls walked briskly to the flowerbeds.

“Ahhhhh!” Joan shrieked in terror. She began pointing to the area of the flowers. “It’s a monster! It’s a beast! OOOOhhh get Jaclyn.”

“Your imagination is becoming unbearable,” Judith reprimanded. Then she saw the movement near the lilies. “It looks grotesque. Still, it looks like a man.” Judith had more bravery than common sense. She walked toward the filthy damaged body lying by the river’s edge. The body groaned. She heard a say in fluent French a prayer to the Madonna. He was begging forgiveness for his sins and quick merciful death. “It’s a man, he’s wounded most grievously. Joan, run quickly and bring Jaclyn and our men at arms.”

Joan ran to her older sister in terror. “Jaclyn! Jaclyn! Come quickly,” Joan shouted breathlessly.

Jaclyn turned to her baby sister’s frantic calls. She ran to Joan and picked her up in her arms. “What is it? What frightens you so?”

“Judith found an ugly monster by the river. She said to come and get you. He’s hurt. She said bring our men at arms,” Joan answered hysterically. “Hurry! She’s alone with the beast.”

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

Jaclyn beckoned her men at arms, called to Joy to bring her medicines, and instructed Joan to take her to Judith.

When she approached Judith kneeling by some dark form, a magnificent white Destrier appeared from the wooded copse and trotted nervously around Judith.

Jaclyn turned to one of the men at arms behind her and told him to bring the marshal with several grooms. Jaclyn was well aware of the Destrier protection instinct of their masters. This body was obviously a noble knight.

Judith was so absorbed with the body she barely noticed the prancing Destrier.

“Judith, do not move suddenly. Remain still,” Jaclyn warned. “I’m almost there.”

Jaclyn slowed her walk and ordered Joan to stay with Joy. She cautioned her men at arms to stand near, but not approach. She knew the steed would protect his master from strangers walking straight and with swift stride. She slowly approached the steed with head bowed. It was a sign of submission for the horse.

Orion allowed the kneeling stranger and the new stranger to approach his Firedrake. He still pranced nervously around the strangers and his master.

Ulrich rolled over in semi consciousness. He looked up to see the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. They were a soft green with golden flecks. Hair of fire red framed an ivory face perfect of features. “Are you the Madonna?” Ulrich croaked.

“He is delirious with fever,” Jaclyn diagnosed. “This knight is most grievously wounded.”

With the strength Ulrich had left he reached up to the face of the angel. “Am I dead? If I am dead I still hurt painfully. If you are the Madonna, make my agony disappear.”

“You are not dead,” Jaclyn replied softly. “You are seriously hurt. I will have my men build a litter and take you to shelter. There we will nurse you to health.”

Orion responded to his master’s voice and pranced more nervously.

“Can you tell your Destrier to stand down?” Jaclyn asked gently. “My marshal will see to its care.”

✦ Payton Lee

“Orion, be groomed,” Ulrich ordered. His pain was intense, but still he cared for his horse. It was through the veil of pain he remembered his duty. “The king. I must go to the king.”

“You can go nowhere until you heal. Were you beset by Rievers? Did they do this to you?”

“No, my Madonna,” Ulrich croaked pathetically. “I was beset by traitors to the king.”

The marshal approached the Destrier in submission and managed to take control of his bridle. Orion knew this meant he would be groomed and went with the marshal calmly.

When the marshal had control of the Destrier, Jaclyn ordered Judith to open her medicine bag and fill the two silver cups with water. One was for water to help the knight drink. He was feverous and dehydrated for blood loss.

Joy came with cloth to wash the wounds of the knight. While the men at arms built a litter, Jaclyn and Joy worked to clean all the man’s wounds.

He didn’t look much like a man. He looked more like a monster with his swollen eyes, cheeks, and lips. He was complete with cuts from branches, bruises and cuts from a beating, and small dirk wounds.

“We must get him to shelter where we can clean the wounds more thoroughly else they fester,” Jaclyn shared with Joy. “It is amazing to me this knight has survived this long. He has lost a lot of blood. Have you brewed my pain medicine?”

“Here it is. I have just finished it. I made it stronger since this is such a large lad,” Joy replied. She handed the concoction to Jaclyn.

“Judith, help me to get this knight to drink this,” Jaclyn requested of her younger sister.

Judith obeyed lifting the disfigured head onto her lap. She held it high regardless of the knight’s cries of pain.

Jaclyn poured the brew into the knight’s mouth with a stern order to swallow.

Ulrich obeyed. His mouth was so swollen and nearly numb. His nose was nearly shut for the swelling. He had tasted so much blood it didn’t matter what he drank. The drink was warm and soothing to his parched throat. When he had finished drinking

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the entire cup he felt his body relax. He drifted off into a deep painless sleep.

While the men at arms heaved the huge knight onto the litter Jaclyn took Judith's hand. "You were very brave and did well, my little sister. I am very proud of you."

Judith beamed with happiness. "You are proud of me?"

"I am proud of you," Jaclyn repeated. "You did not run in fear from the ugliness or cruelty of man to his fellow man. You offered aide without thought to your person. I am proud of you. I will tell Papa upon our return."

Nothing could have been given to Judith that had more value than her sister's praise. It was like she was all grown up. "I shall stay and take care of him," Judith announced. "I found him so I shall care for him. He shall be my responsibility."

"You are growing up so fast," Jaclyn whispered. "I will stay with you to teach you the healing medicines and then you may take care of your knight."

"You think I can really do it?" Judith asked hesitantly. Her sister's pride and trust meant a lot to her.

"Of course you will do it," Jaclyn assured. "Joy and I must continue on our trek to Cumberland villages. I will leave two men at arms to help you care for this large knight. Sybil and Maud will stay with you to help."

Ulrich went in and out of feverish imaginations. He would often wake to those rich green eyes of the Madonna and think he was dead. He even wondered on occasion if the Madonna had come to earth to nurse him. There was one thing for certain. He was getting better and stronger. He also became aware of a young woman tending him gently, and other women. He also knew he was in some type of cottage. It was warm and cozy. He heard voices of men laughing and an older man discussing his day's work on the farm.

After two weeks of intensive care, Jaclyn determined the knight was recovering enough for her to leave and continue on her journey to small villages of Cumberland. She would cut this journey short because her father would begin his journey to London for the King's Counsel in the next month. He wanted to take Judith with him this time.

✦ Payton Lee

“I will be continuing on, Judith,” Jaclyn announced. “We are delayed for the care of this knight. He is recovering enough that Joy and I may continue on. I shall leave Joan with you. In a few days this knight should be well enough to be moved. Return with him and your sister to Carlisle Castle. Papa wants to take you and Joan to London with him on this trip. This knight should go with you to London. He keep’s talking about his mission for the king.”

“Shouldn’t we all go back to Carlisle?” Judith queried.

“Joy and I must continue. The villagers, serfs, and free men, count on our visits for alms and medicines. I had promised our old horses to several farmers on the last visit. There is too much for me to do. You and Joan will be fine. Remember the knight is your responsibility.”

“I’ve brought you something,” Joan announced happily thrusting the pretty day lilies into Jaclyn’s hand.

“They’re very pretty,” Jaclyn accepted. “Thank you. Where did you get them?”

“By the river, where Judith found her knight,” Joan replied.

Jaclyn’s face showed her concern immediately.

“Don’t worry, Jaclyn. I would never disobey you. Joy took me and helped me to pick them. I brought some for the knight. He was lying so close to them I have decided to let them be his flowers,” Joan responded.

“You decided did you?” Jaclyn raised a brow. “Perhaps the flowers already have a name.”

“Then we shall rename them,” Joan pouted.

Jaclyn didn’t want to spoil her little sister’s happiness so she agreed readily. “Then we shall name them after this knight of Judith’s.”

“I love you,” Joan erupted suddenly and flung her arms around her sister. “Safe journey and come back home soon.”

“I shall my little one,” Jaclyn promised kissing her little sister on the forehead. “Take care of Papa for me. I shall see you when you return from London.”

“We will miss you, Jaclyn,” Joan whimpered.

“And I shall miss you,” Jaclyn returned lovingly. She mounted her palfrey and left the camp with her little sister waving to her until Joan could no longer see her big sister.

“Your face swelling is down. There are only bruises left to heal,” Judith said to the bed-ridden knight. “I do believe when you are healed you would be quite pretty.”

“Some have said so,” Ulrich replied. He had been under the constant care of this precocious young woman and her servants. “I thank you for finding me and nursing me back to health.”

“You aren’t healthy yet,” Judith countered protectively. She was developing a strong attachment to this wounded knight. “Sybil, Maud, and I are agreed that you are strong enough to return home with us. Our men have prepared a space for you in one of carts.”

“I should return to London. I have business with the king,” Ulrich protested.

“You shall return to London soon enough. Papa will be going to London for counsel. You will accompany us,” Judith stated.

Going to London for Counsel. Who was her father? “Who is your Papa?”

“Lord Baldric Bonefey,” Judith announced with pomp and flair.

“Carlisle Castle?”

“Yes.”

Ulrich crossed himself and uttered a pray of thanksgiving. “King Edward told me to seek out Lord Baldric if I were in trouble.”

“And so you have,” Judith bubbled.

Chapter 5

“Lionel?” King Edward declared with surprise at the man at arm’s disheveled appearance.

“My liege and king,” Lionel bowed. “Here are the documents you sent us for. The list of traitors and plans are all scribed here.”

Edward took the bound papers. “What of Geoffrey and Firedrake?” Edward asked worriedly.

“Geoffrey was felled on the first attack. Firedrake led the traitors away from my person and safety of the documents. I have not heard from him since. His instructions were to bring this to you at the cost of my life. I fear the Firedrake is de mort.”

“A tragedy indeed,” King Edward sighed. “Take your leave and obtain food and rest.”

“My king, I wish to march against these traitors who took the life of the Firedrake and my friend, Geoffrey.”

“That time will be soon enough,” King Edward responded. “Go now. Eat, rest, and comfort the widow of Geoffrey. Tell her she shall become my personal ward in respect for the sacrifice of her husband to his king.” Edward always felt grief for the sacrifice of life in the name of the kingdom. He opened the parchments. After spending hours reading the inscriptions he closed the parchments carefully. He had the evidence he needed for the Barony Counsel. He would wait until all the barons had arrived before the Counsel would begin and he would reveal all the traitors and their plans.

Baldric was in the bailey waiting for the entourage to return home. They had been spotted from the lookout tower and he was

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concerned when saw only half of the original entourage returning. He was more alarmed when he saw a large white Destrier prancing along side one of the wagons.

Sybil and Joan were the first to enter the bailey on their palfreys.

“Greetings my child,” Baldric greeted warmly. “Where are your sisters, Joan? And where did that magnificent white steed appear from?”

Joan leaped from her palfrey into her father’s open arms. “Oh Papa, we have had such an adventure. Judith found a wounded knight and has nursed him to health. We found him by the pretty flowers. He was hurt so bad. Orion is his Destrier. Isn’t he beautiful? The steed I mean. Well the knight is pretty too. At least we think he is pretty. Judith says he is pretty. I cannot tell. His face is all cut up and blue. Jaclyn and Joy sewed him up. That’s what Judith said.”

“Enough!” Baldric laughed. “This appears to be a story too long for this open conversation. We will listen to your tale after our evening meal. Run along and clean yourself from this tiresome trip.”

“Yes, Papa,” Joan said obediently.

“Sybil, take my child and bathe her. Put on her fresh clothes. I will see to my Judith properly when she arrives. Ah, there she comes.”

Sybil dismounted from her palfrey and led Joan into Castle Carlisle. The hot bath after the dusty trip sounded magnificent.

Baldric took the bridle of Judith’s horse. “What goes on here? You have brought to our home a wounded knight. Know you who it is. Friend or foe?”

“Papa, Jaclyn has always taught us to help those who need our help. This knight was grievously wounded. I care not if he be friend or foe. He needed help,” Judith responded sternly. She was proud of her aide and her pretty knight.

“Of course,” Baldric agreed. “Your sister has taught you correctly. I just worry for your safety. Where is Jaclyn?”

“She and Joy continued their tour of the countryside. Jaclyn said she must visit all the villages as she had sent her word. They were waiting for her. Duty to Cumberland always comes first,” Judith replied. “She told me to return to Carlisle when the

knight was strong enough. Jaclyn said Joan, I, and the knight should accompany you to London.”

“Your sister is wise,” Baldric confirmed. “Where is this knight?”

Judith let her father help her from the palfrey. “He is in that cart. He still needs care although I have nursed him well.”

“You have nursed him?” Baldric asked skeptically.

“Of course,” Judith replied defensively. “Jaclyn and Maud have taught me well. I am old enough to tend to the sick and wounded. I am near marriageable age. Jaclyn trusted me to do so. Besides, I found the knight. He is my responsibility.”

Baldric put his hands up in defeat. “Of course you are my child. Show me this knight of yours.”

Judith took her father’s hand and triumphantly marched past the white Destrier to the wagon. “Sir Knight, this is my Papa.”

Ulrich extended his hand out with great effort. The dirk wounds to his shoulders and arms were healing but stiff. “My Lord Baldric Bonefey?”

“Welcome to Carlisle Castle,” Baldric greeted. “It appears my daughter Judith found you and nursed you after an attack. Was it Rievers?”

“No, the Rievers did not do this. It was traitors to the Scots and to our good King Edward,” Ulrich replied with effort. “My King told me to seek you out should I find myself in peril.”

“A king’s special emissary is always welcome in my home,” Baldric invited. “What would be your name? My daughter failed to give it to me.”

“I am Ulrich de Warre of York.”

“The Firedrake!” Baldric recognized. He wondered if his daughter Jaclyn knew she had tended one of her suitors. He couldn’t help but chuckle. He had heard the Firedrake was fair of face. The man before him did not look so fair of face and a beard was already covering his face.

“The humor, my lord?” Ulrich asked.

“You are not so pretty as I have heard,” Baldric laughed. “My men will carry you into the hall and a private chamber. It appears my daughter Judith found you and has made you her responsibility. She will see to your care.”

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

“Your daughter Judith has been most kind and gentle. I owe the child my life,” Ulrich said gratefully. “She has cared for my health most judiciously.”

“Can you tell me what has caused this great trouble to beset you?”

“I can and will share with you all I have learned,” Ulrich promised. “The king has told me to confide in you should such ill beset me.”

“I can see you are already weary. My men will carry you now to the chamber. We will send servants to tend to your toiletries and food for you to eat and gain strength,” Baldric promised taking the knight's hand firmly.

“My Orion, my Destrier,” Ulrich said weakly.

“My marshal seems to have taken good care so far,” Baldric said admiringly. “Our grooms will take good care of the steed.”

True to his word, Ulrich was taken to a private chamber in the castle. A warm bath was prepared and men at arms gently administered to the stricken knight. They were well versed in the bathing of men with wounds. The body was cleaned, the scabs softened and cleaned, but not removed. The stitches Jaclyn has so carefully sewn for the longest and deepest wounds were gently removed. The flesh had mended well. After the bath Ulrich sat up for the first time and took solid food with assistance from Judith.

“You are mending quickly,” Judith observed.

“Thanks to you my angel of mercy,” Ulrich appreciated savoring a piece of warm buttered bread in his mouth. “I surely would have perished if you had not found me and ministered to me. What words could cover my gratitude?”

“It is what my elder sister taught me,” Judith bragged.

“You are safe here at Carlisle Castle. Papa will see to it and soon we will all go to London.”

“I will heal quickly, for I must be about the king's business. It is most important,” Ulrich responded. He looked up when the large oaken door opened.

“It is Papa,” Judith identified.

“It is time for vespers, my daughter,” Baldric stated. “Run along to Mistress Sybil. I will talk to the Firedrake.”

✦ Payton Lee

Judith nodded in acknowledgement. She rose and left the chamber. "I shall return on the morrow after I break the fast. I should see to new salves and bandages for your wounds."

"Thank you, little angel," Ulrich acknowledged.

Judith beamed radiantly. She was nearly grown up. Perhaps her father could arrange a marriage contract for her with the Firedrake. He mind began to fantasize how happy she would be as the pretty knight's wife.

Baldric had already decided not to share with Ulrich the king's list of suitors for contract with his eldest daughter, Jaclyn. He was almost certain that Ulrich was not aware of the king's suggestion of his name on the list of suitors. "Do you feel well enough to tell me of this attack upon your person?"

Ulrich nodded and told Baldric everything from leaving London under the king's command to his time with Laird Jamison in Dumfries, the death of Geoffrey, the escape of Lionel, and his attack.

Within a few days Ulrich had recovered enough to visit Orion. A few more days and Ulrich was ready to ride his devoted Destrier with Lord Bonefey.

The time had arrived for the visit to London's court.

After a full seven days of travel Lord Bonefey and the Firedrake arrived in London and rode directly to Westminster.

King Edward allowed both Baldric and Ulrich to enter his private chambers. The king was playing with his new son when they arrived.

Edward stood still holding his child when Baldric and Ulrich entered. "Good news. I was told by Lionel he thought you lost."

The king handed little Edward to the nurse and embraced the Firedrake. "You have done well. I have the parchments."

"Then Lionel is well?"

"Indeed my de Warre," Edward replied. "Lionel is returned to his home in Sussex. He is well."

"We should discuss this with the Counsel and the information de Warre has given to you."

"We will go to the hall chamber," Edward replied.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“I love it at court,” Judith bubbled. Several ladies in waiting to the queen asked her about her nursing of the most handsome and eligible Firedrake. She loved telling the story. Ulrich had been most gracious to her and had her sit by him for the meals in the great hall. She was the envy of all the single women of the court.

“You should,” Joan grumped. “I notice you give no mention of our sister Jaclyn.”

“I found him. I cared for him,” Judith countered defiantly.

“You know very well that Jaclyn’s skill saved him first,” Joan insisted.

“He hasn’t asked about Jaclyn. He is paying attention to me,” Judith boasted. “I do believe Papa will arrange our betrothal. I will be the envy of the court.”

“Humph,” Joan answered pointing her nose to the air. “I think you’re too young for the Firedrake.” Joan stomped off down the halls to her room. “That’s it! I’ll call my new flower Firedrake. The flowers look like fire from a dragon’s mouth.” Joan stopped before entering her room and ran back down the hall to find Maud and tell her the news.

Chapter 6

The Counsel was in complete agreement. The traitors were rounded up immediately and several were already in the tower. Mercer would be dealt with after emissaries to Scotland had counsel with the Earl of Moray. Ulrich was reunited with his men at arms. His closest friend and man at arms, Drogo took care of Ulrich to near perfect health much to Judith's chagrin.

In Judith's mind, she believed that Ulrich belonged to her and pouted when Drogo took over Ulrich's care.

Drogo warned Ulrich that Judith Bonefey had developed a large crush on him.

Ulrich realized he would have to put down his little angel gently. After all, he did owe her his life. He decided to talk to her after the evening meal. In the morning they would return to Carlisle Castle. There they would search the area for the traitors acting as Rievers. The plan was to offer rewards to the Rievers for turning in or information on the men using their disguise for treachery. He had decided to tell Judith that he was in love with another. He was in love with the face of the Madonna and he would not rest or wed until he found the woman of his visions. Although it was improbable to ever find a vision, it would be a gentle way to halt the crush of the young girl.

The king called Ulrich to his chamber in the great hall before the meal began. He was surprised to find Baldric there as well.

"Have a seat," the king beckoned.

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

Ulrich sat next to Baldric. It was obvious to him that Baldric had been in conversation with King Edward for some time. He waited for the king to speak.

“Sir Ulrich. You know I reward my favorite knights most generously. You have served me well. I have submitted your name for one of the highest rewards prior to your mission. Your service has made my decision final,” Edward shared. “Baldric and I are in agreement that you will wed his daughter.”

Ulrich felt the blood drain from his face. How could he defy the king? He had no intention of bedding a child. He would not even allow his own ward to marry until she was four and ten. The thought of creating issue with a child of two and ten he found repulsive.

“There is only one obstacle,” Edward revealed. “Baldric’s daughter wishes to choose her own husband under the auspice of my submissions. She has already chosen you and Sir Griffin Merton. You will both go and I will abide by her choice.”

It was a small relief. He knew Judith had already chosen him, but this was an opportunity to push her into the arms of Merton. A young bride would less repel Sir Merton. His plan to gently put down Judith would be altered. He would sing the praises of Griffin. The knight was closer to her age. He was a score having achieved his spurs only a year ago. Entering the great hall with Baldric and the king he spotted Griffin. Ulrich went to the knight and found a trestle table for them to share. As expected, Judith found him.

“Griffin, have you met the angel who nursed me from the brink of death,” Ulrich introduced. “A man would be fortunate to know a woman of such tender mercies and talents.”

Griffin was immediately taken with the beautiful young girl. Ulrich had guessed correctly. Griffin was closer to Judith’s age and marriage to her would offer him a large and lucrative dower. He already had two bastard sons that would need support. When they were old enough they would be fostered for training as baseborn knights. That would require money and prestige. Griffin was also attracted to the beauty of the blonde haired and blue-eyed young woman.

✦ Payton Lee

Judith found she was attracted to the handsome young knight and appreciated the attention from the two knights. She did indeed love Westminster Court.

King Edward informed Griffin the next day he would be part of the entourage returning to Carlisle Castle. King Edward told him about the suitor submissions. Baldric's daughter would choose her spouse. He was pleased. Griffin immediately put on his best behavior in courtship of Judith.

Both Griffin and Ulrich were under the impression the bride would be Judith. The king and Baldric were under the assumption they knew the bride was Baldric's eldest daughter, Jaclyn.

"It is good to be home," Jaclyn stated soaking in a hot tub of water. Joy was soaping and massaging Jaclyn's aching bones. "I wonder how the knight is doing."

"I would assume quite well under Judith's care," Joy teased. "I do believe the child has developed an attraction for the knight."

"I agree with you," Jaclyn said sinking into the hot fragrant suds. "Perhaps our Papa will wed my younger sister before he weds me to someone."

"If Judith has her way it will be," Joy replied saucily.

"I wonder just who the knight was and why he was beset upon," Jaclyn pondered.

"We shall know soon enough when they return from London Court," Joy responded holding the soft cloth open for Jaclyn to wrap about her body when she emerged from the bath.

"It has been weeks since Papa departed with my sisters. I find I miss my dear Judith and Joan," Jaclyn confessed wrapping her body tightly in the soft cloth. She walked to her chamber closet and waited for Joy to retrieve a soft samite chemise to wear under her damask tunic. Evening meal was about to commence. In the absence of her father, she would host the meal at the great hall for all the household men at arms, knights, and vassals.

"Judith is growing quickly. She will leave this home too soon," Joy reminded. "You know upon her marriage your Papa intends to contract Penrith Castle to her husband."

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

“Penrith Castle is not to far,” Jaclyn stated. “It is still close enough to visit.”

It was a desire realized. The household had just settled down to the evening meal when the entourage of Baldric returned to Carlisle Castle.

Jaclyn raced to the bailey to greet her father with embrace and kisses. “Papa, I’ve missed you.”

Joan ran up to Jaclyn and entwined herself in her sister’s embrace.

“Dearest Joan, I have missed you dreadfully. Have you been good? Did you enjoy your visit to London?” Jaclyn oozed hugging her little sister. “Where is Judith?”

Joan pointed behind her past the castle gate. “She’s with her knights back there!”

Baldric didn’t want Jaclyn to know about Firedrake and Griffin upon their arrival. He was hoping to discuss it privately with her after breaking fast. “Jaclyn, it has been a tiring trek. Would you take your sister to her chambers and see she is fed and prepared for bed?”

Jaclyn smiled an acceptance to her father. She was thrilled to have her little sister back home and in her care. Judith could wait. Jaclyn had agreed with Joy. Judith was determined to become a wife and mother. Unlike Jaclyn, Judith wanted this sooner than later.

Baldric waited for the entire group to arrive. He ushered all the men at arms, knights, Griffin, and Firedrake to the great hall for their meals. After the meal he saw to it that everyone was taken to pallets. Firedrake and Griffin were the honored guests and taken to chambers on the living quarters floor of Carlisle Castle.

Sybil took Judith to her chambers shortly after their arrival by instruction of Baldric. Judith had wanted to spend the evening by Griffin’s side. Her crush on Firedrake had shifted quickly to Griffin when the latter began flourishing attention towards her. He was a young and handsome knight. She learned of his two bastard sons and didn’t mind. After all, the ladies of the court often remarked that a woman enjoyed being a wife more if her husband was experienced in procreation.

✦ Payton Lee

Baldric called Jaclyn to his chamber after mass and before they broke the fast.

“I have something to share with you daughter,” Baldric announced. “Before you left for your appointments in Cumberland we had agreed upon two of your suitors.”

“Yes Papa,” Jaclyn acknowledged. “I do remember this. Is there a need to pursue this so quickly after your return?”

“Indeed there is a need,” Baldric indicated. “Your two suitors are here. The king has decreed that you will choose and wed before the feast of Saint Hypolite.”

“I will not be pushed into marriage,” Jaclyn declared angrily.

“You are incorrect daughter. You are pushed into marriage. This is the king’s decree,” Baldric corrected. “You will not defy the King’s command. The knight you saved sent our king news of treachery alongside the borders of Cumberland and Carlisle Castle. Thus the need for you to wed and provide issue has become a political and urgent matter.”

“What treachery do you speak of,” Jaclyn queried.

“The attack upon the knight you found was not about Rievers. It was about traitors that were attempting to prevent the king’s emissary from reporting the plot of the traitors and the names of the traitors. Our king has finally obtained a tentative peace with the Scots and the protectorate of King David Bruce. There are plots to destroy this delicate truce,” Baldric shared. “Firedrake is here to not only to gather the traitors, but vie his suit for you. Griffin is here only for furthering his suit for you and assist the Firedrake.”

“I see,” Jaclyn concurred. She did understand the need for expediency in her decision. She had to admit holding cook’s new grandson had set her maternal clock ticking. She realized she wanted a child and it was time to take a husband for the protection of Carlisle Castle and Cumberland. Knowing there might be another war between the Scots and English reminded Jaclyn about the importance of Carlisle Castle’s location. It would be a prize for either Scot or English. “I will decide quickly.”

“Both the knights are in the great hall. It appears your sister Judith sits between them during meals,” Baldric informed his eldest daughter.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“Does our Judith desire to wed one of the suitors?”

“There is no doubt in my mind, daughter. You see the knight you and she rescued from death is none other than the Firedrake,” Baldric chortled. “He looks quite different now that he is healed.”

“Then perhaps I should let Judith pick first and I take the remainder,” Jaclyn chuckled. “That would solve the problem of decision.”

Once again Baldric cast his daughter his famous glower of reprimand. “Your sister is still a child. She is not capable of making a decision for the future of Cumberland Barony. Do not push me too far. I will then make your decision for you.”

“I only wish I could have loved a part of this charter,” Jaclyn sighed.

Chapter 7

Ulrich was enjoying his trencher. He had to admit that Judith was bright, entertaining, and good company. If only she wasn't such a child. If he wanted to marry a girl child he could wed his own ward. The thought sent shivers down his spine. When he wed it would be to a woman. She would be a woman of gentleness, kindness, and intelligence. His wife would be the mother of his children. They would have lots of children. The woman he would wed would be the Madonna. How often he thought of the Madonna. The beautiful woman vision he saw while clinging to life. The vision God had sent him to keep him alive.

Judith had become completely absorbed with Griffin. They were laughing, singing, and enjoying each other's company completely.

Ulrich was relieved that Judith no longer had a crush on him, but he secretly wished he could have a loving caring woman at his side. Had the time come for him to take a bride? The thought of Carlisle Castle and Cumberland Barony was a temptation, but not enough to wed a child. He would continue to serve his king.

Jaclyn entered the great hall to break fast. When she entered a subdued hush fell over the hall. Today she wore a deep sapphire blue tunic with white samite surcoat. The trumpet sleeves were lined with fur. She wore a translucent wimple crowned with

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

a golden and jeweled circlet. Her long red hair was perfectly coiffed held by pins. Joy had done wonders this morning in honor of her two suitors.

The knights, men at arms, and generally all the men of Carlisle Castle secretly wished to win the favor of the beautiful Jaclyn.

Ulrich looked up to ponder the silence when he watched the woman enter the room and take a seat next to Lord Baldric at the high dais. "Could this beautiful woman be Baldric's wife?" he uttered quietly. He could not stop staring.

Jaclyn was used to the standard quiet of her entrance into the great hall. She put it to the fact she looked so much like her mother. This time she felt eyes staring at her. She looked about and found the eyes. They were beautiful blue eyes. The knight's face was fair and clean-shaven. He was quite handsome. Jaclyn then noticed her sister. Judith was sitting between the two knights. Jaclyn cast the staring knight a winsome smile and returned her concentration to her father.

"God's teeth!" Ulrich declared. "It is she. It is my Madonna!"

Judith heard Ulrich. "What was that? Madonna?"

Ulrich turned to Judith. "That woman sitting next to your Papa. Would that be your Mama?"

"Everyone says she looks like Mama, but no. That woman you speak of is my sister, Jaclyn."

"You have an older sister?" Ulrich choked.

"Of course, silly," Judith replied and once more turned her attentions to Griffin.

Ulrich barely touched the rest of his trencher. Instead he stared in wonderment at the Lady Jaclyn Bonefey. She was his Madonna. Was there confusion? He had believed Judith was the daughter selected to wed. There was an older sister. Was she the one to be wed? Surely she must be married already, but then a lord was already in place, wasn't he? He tapped Judith on the shoulder. "Your sister Jaclyn, is she betrothed?"

"Not yet. King Edward sends a list of suitors regularly," Judith revealed. "She still has not chosen. Papa is losing patience with her for it."

✦ Payton Lee

That answer pleased Ulrich immensely. Judith continued her conversation with Griffin. Ulrich rose from the trestle table and fell into the shadows of the hall arches. He watched Jaclyn discreetly. He waited for her like waiting for a battle campaign. He would wait until she was alone. His Madonna, he couldn't believe it. His heart was soaring.

After what seemed hours, Jaclyn rose from the table. She would begin her rounds of the castle mistress. Jaclyn walked up the circular staircase toward the spindle room. The Castle Spindlier was busy working flaxen for cloth in trade for other cloth to be used for clothing. Jaclyn would have the cellar prepared for dying vats when there was enough flaxen spindled into thread. The serfs had also sheered the sheep for the summer and the wool was also being prepared.

"My Lady," Ulrich addressed from behind Jaclyn. He had waited for her to leave the great hall and had followed her stealthily.

Jaclyn nearly fell from the stairwell. She hadn't heard anyone follow her and the voice coming suddenly from behind her caused her to jump. "God's teeth! Don't ever do that again!"

"I didn't mean to startle you," Ulrich apologized. He looked into her eyes and found he was lost in a stare.

Bringing her hand to her throat, Jaclyn took a deep breath. "Well you did startle me. You shouldn't sneak up on a lady like that. Who are you?" Those eyes. She had seen those eyes before. They were the eyes of the fallen and wounded knight. The knight she tended when he was near death. This was Firedrake.

"My lady, I am Ulrich de Warre."

"You are the Firedrake," Jaclyn heard herself say in a caught throat.

"That is my heraldry," Ulrich replied. He couldn't stop staring into those beautiful green eyes. "If I may be so bold, you herald the Madonna."

"Madonna?"

"The epitome of femininity and motherhood," Ulrich praised.

Jaclyn was really taken by surprise and wasn't sure what to say or do. Was this knight attempting to woo her? Was this part of the duties of a suitor?

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“Is there something you wish of me?” Jaclyn asked. She was at a loss for words and didn’t know how to act. She was under the impression all that was required of the suitors were acceptance. As a bride, she wouldn’t see the groom until the contractual arrangements had been made by the clerks, and witnessed by the church. After the celebration there would be the bedding. It all seemed simple enough.

“Would you spare me some time,” Ulrich croaked. Never had he been so nervous in his life. Even a battle with the Scots or French seemed so frightful as the need to woo this woman and make her his good wife.

“Of course I can spare you time, Sir Firedrake,” Jaclyn said graciously. “When would you wish to speak with me?”

“This moment,” Ulrich said boldly reaching for Jaclyn’s hand. “Let us walk within the Castle gardens.”

Jaclyn allowed the Firedrake to lead her outside the castle walls and into the garden. Suddenly he stopped leading her and put his arm around her.

“You were the one, my Madonna,” Ulrich whispered.

His warm sweet breath was a caress on her cheek. His lips moved nearer to hers. “I don’t understand,” Jaclyn responded not moving away. She felt good in his arms. She felt protected and surprisingly, comfortable.

“When I lay there dying by the river bank and throughout my hours of my delirium I saw your face. You nursed me,” Ulrich uttered quietly. He moved his lips over Jaclyn’s until they touched. He found he could bend no lower so he lifted Jaclyn to his lips. He cradled her body in his arms and pressed his lips upon hers. “I thought you were a vision of the Madonna. I thought the Madonna had come to lead me to heaven. She has, for it is you.”

Jaclyn opened her mouth to Ulrich’s invading tongue. She found the logical part of her mind had disappeared. Their tongues were dueling in the oldest form of battle. Warmth spread across her body. It was a feeling like she had never felt before. It was euphoric. Her body responded strangely and she opened her mouth more to the deep thrusts of Ulrich de Warre. It was as if she couldn’t open enough for the good feelings running through her body. A strange heat fired between her thighs. A need and a desire ran from her femininity to her brain. This was so strange

and so new. "My lord," Jaclyn managed to breathe out. "I know not of what you speak."

"Where you not with Judith when she found me?" Ulrich asked between breaths. "Did you not stay near my side when I burned mad with fever?"

"Yes," Jaclyn replied. She was getting dizzy. Her world was spinning out of control. Who was this Firedrake that made her quiet, peaceful, and serene world disappear into wanton lusts? She felt his manhood harden and press against her belly. This heat felt wonderful. Her hands pressed his back forcing him closer. She wanted to climb into him. What happened to the cool and logical woman? She was disappearing into the passion of the moment.

Ulrich found he too had lost control. He had never held a woman and desired her this much. His Madonna was his own private miracle. With great effort and restraint he pulled away from Jaclyn's lips. "I wish you to be my wife. I will speak to your Papa," Ulrich decreed brushing soft kisses on Jaclyn's nose, brow, and cheeks. "I will speak to him anon."

Jaclyn was still spinning. "Yes." Had the fates made the decision for her? She had conceded to her father an agreement to marry. There were two suitors. Firedrake was one of them. He appeared in the mud on the riverbank. When Ulrich left her standing in the garden her mind was still clouded. Jaclyn's fingers touched her swollen lips. Then it hit her like a large clay pot upon her head. What would Judith say about this? Her little sister claimed this knight as her own. And what of this Griffin?

Ulrich knew where Baldric would be. He walked into the library boldly.

"What is it Ulrich?" Baldric questioned. "Have you located the traitor, Laird Mercer?"

"Something has occurred that takes precedence over the duty to my king and country," Ulrich replied.

Baldric sat back against his chair in surprise. "What could this be?" He couldn't believe what he just heard. The Firedrake would be discussing something with the Lord of Cumberland that was of greater importance than duty, king, or country?

"I wish to request the hand of your daughter Jaclyn in marriage. I know I am but one of two suitors, but I offer all that I

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

have for the love of your daughter,” Ulrich said quickly before he lost his courage.

“You love my daughter?” Baldric questioned. “When did you meet her? Woo her?”

“She was a vision sent to me, my lord. I will not argue with the fates. I spoke to her in the garden this morn. She has agreed to be my wife. I ask for your consent and blessings,” Ulrich stated.

“I could not be more pleased,” Baldric chuckled. “Indeed I could not be more pleased. You say my Jaclyn has consented?”

Ulrich nodded his head. “When will we have the nuptials?” Already his mind was lost to his manhood. The bedding could not occur soon enough.

“You are in a hurry,” Baldric commented. Perhaps the lad was bewitched. “I shall discuss this with my steward and my daughter. He rose from his desk and called to his clerk, “Fetch Odo and Jaclyn. He motioned for Ulrich to sit. “Chamberlain, bring us drink. Bring our finest wine.” Baldric was in a festive mood.

Odo followed Jaclyn in Baldric’s library. Ulrich rose from his chair took Jaclyn’s hand. He led her to the chair he had been sitting upon and pulled her down upon his knees as he sat. “Your Papa has consented to our betrothal. I wish to be wed anon.”

Jaclyn felt Ulrich’s manhood harden beneath her. In his presence she immediately fell into the wanton as easily.

“Is this your desire, Jaclyn?” Baldric asked his eldest daughter.

Once again Jaclyn’s mind had turned to jelly. She nodded. What magic did this dragon hold over her?

Chapter 8

Baldric did not have time to scribe the betrothal to King Edward or finish the contractual arrangements when he was blessed with another visitor.

“Sir Griffin?”

“A moment, Lord Baldric,” Griffin requested.

“I will make time for my guests,” Baldric allowed. He motioned for the knight to take a chair.

“Lord Baldric, I am here to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Baldric was flustered. He was working on the contractual agreement for Jaclyn’s marriage to de Warre.

“My lord, I know this is sudden, but the time I have spent with your daughter has proven we are destined for each other,” Griffin elucidated. “I wish to begin a contract for marriage. Your daughter knows of all that I have and this is acceptable.”

Baldric’s mouth dropped. What the devil was going on? Jaclyn was just sitting in here with de Warre. A daughter so against marriage now acts like a lovesick puppy with Firedrake and leads another on? This is was impossible. “I must think on this,” Baldric excused.

“We wish to wed soon,” Griffin pushed.

“I said I will think on it,” Baldric blustered.

“I do understand the age, my lord,” Griffin added. “I will be gentle and kind.”

Reminding him of Jaclyn’s age angered Baldric. He rose and with an angry voice roared, “I will think on it.”

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

Griffin bowed and left the room a bit shaken. He thought the Lord of Cumberland would be pleased his daughter had chosen a husband.

Judith was waiting for Griffin when he left the library. “What did Papa say?” she asked eagerly. “Has he agreed?”

“He seems angry and disturbed,” Griffin replied. “Come let us find a quiet place. You must tell me of your Papa. I must learn a way to overcome his wrath and doubt regarding our betrothal.”

“Papa rarely gets angry,” Judith shared. “Something is amiss. It is no matter. Perhaps his gout was bothering him. We will let him calm down. I will take any time to be alone with you.”

“And I with you,” Griffin smiled. He did love Judith’s company.

Baldric sat in his library. He was completely confused. He was thrilled when Jaclyn had chosen the Firedrake. Griffin coming in was a disappointment. His first choice had always been de Warre. Still he promised Jaclyn her choice in the matter. But why did she want both men? Was a Jaclyn playing game with him in retribution for his pushing the nuptials? That was not like his most obedient and intelligent daughter at all. His head began to ache with the questions. This required an outing to clear his mind. “Odo!” Baldric bellowed.

“Jaclyn,” Judith called from behind a curtain in the hall.

“Judith?” Jaclyn returned. She found it unusual for her sister to call to her like that. Judith was always direct in conversation. Even if she wanted to share a secret, Judith merely went to Jaclyn’s bedchamber.

“Jaclyn, what is wrong with Papa? He won’t see me. He won’t see anyone. He didn’t attend the evening meal and he’s called for a hunt on the morrow. Whenever he’s upset he calls for a hunt,” Judith rambled. “What am I to do? I know he’s upset with me.”

“What in the name of heaven have you done, Judith?” Jaclyn asked incredulously. Judith had challenged her on many occasions, but never caused her father a problem.

“Griffin has asked me to wed. I have accepted,” Judith boasted. “Don’t be cross, Jaclyn. We love each other.”

✦ Payton Lee

“Of course Papa is upset,” Jaclyn retorted. “You are still a child.”

“I am not. I am ten and five. Lots of women my age are wed.”

“Not in this household. Papa may allow your betrothal, but you will not wed until you are six and ten. Perhaps he would make you wait until seven and ten.”

“That’s not fair, Jaclyn! Griffin and I care for each other!”

“Did Griffin tell you that he has little for contract and has two bastard sons?” Jaclyn queried irritably.

“He told me,” Judith snapped. Then the thought struck her. “How did you know about all that?”

“King Edward had submitted Sir Griffin as a suitor for my choice.”

Judith’s face turned hard. Her blue eyes were sapphire with anger. “You can’t have my Griffin. He loves me, not you! He belongs to me!”

“I thought Firedrake belongs to you,” Jaclyn returned. What would Judith think of her betrothal to de Warre?

“Firedrake is too old for me,” Judith spat. “Why don’t you take him?”

Jaclyn couldn’t contain herself. She gave her sister a hug and a kiss. “Perhaps I shall.”

The change in her sister’s behavior only caused Judith to become more frustrated. “Just what is going to happen with me and Griffin? You must help me.”

Jaclyn spoke to her sister in a soothing voice, “There is nothing I can do at the moment. You are too young, but after the hunt Papa will calm down. I’ll talk to him then.”

“Will you go on the hunt?”

“Of course. I love the hunt as much as Papa. I shall take my peregrine, Avis,” Jaclyn replied. “I will not speak to Papa until after the hunt.”

“Then I shall not approach Papa either. Griffin and I will join the hunt,” Judith shared. “He’s so wonderful.”

“Then enjoy his company,” Jaclyn suggested. It was a strange feeling. She was a lovesick puppy in the same way as her much younger sister. She had left the arms of Ulrich. If he had not broken off his embrace and kiss she would have found herself

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in his bed. This animal he brought out from her was strange indeed.

Judith was dressed in her finest hunt costume. Beneath her samite yellow fur lined surcoat was her finest samite yellow tunic. To keep warm she wore a second woolen tunic beneath the others. The softest leather boots covered Judith's feet. Her hands were warmed by woolen knitted gloves. Griffin rode by her side throughout the hunt. Joan rode by her father's side.

Baldric spoke only to Odo and his youngest daughter Joan. He was still befuddled by the strange courtship of his Jaclyn and her strange actions. He paid little and no attention to Jaclyn and Judith. If he had, he would have noticed that Griffin was in complete attention to Judith and Ulrich barely took his eyes off Jaclyn.

The hunt was successful in the forest chase on the southern side of the castle. The huntsman with bloodhounds and greyhounds had cleared two large stags. There would be a feast in the castle tonight with plenty of food left over to give to the poor.

Everyone was in a happy mood when they returned to the castle.

Baldric returned to his chambers and ordered Odo to attend him. He also called for the castle cleric to attend.

Jaclyn thought nothing of the meeting. She was certain they would be working on the marriage contract.

"What am I to do?" Baldric complained. "I think Jaclyn be mad or vengeful for this marriage."

Odo was confused. "It was obvious your Jaclyn was agreeable to the pursuit of Firedrake."

"I thought the same until Griffin came to request my daughter's hand. He told me they were in love and she agreeable to the contract," Baldric replied in exasperation.

"That makes no sense," Odo concurred.

"So my quandary is, which contract do I write up?" Baldric complained.

"Have you asked Jaclyn? This is not like the clear minded, capable, and intelligent woman that she is," Odo suggested.

✦ Payton Lee

“I haven’t spoken to her. I was so disturbed by this turn of events I wasn’t certain of my temperament,” Baldric confessed. “I was also afraid that for the first time my precious Jaclyn would play such a wicked game on me.”

“We must put an end to that fear by facing it directly,” Odo advised. He stood and called for a castle guard to fetch Jaclyn.

The guard found Jaclyn with Ulrich. They were embracing.

Jaclyn could not stay away and neither could Ulrich. They were addictions for each other. “I must speak to Papa, he has been upset these two days. I will seek to soothe him. I will then return to you,” Jaclyn promised. She walked briskly to her father’s library.

“Sit down,” Baldric barked at his oldest daughter when she entered.

Jaclyn sat quickly. Her father had never spoken to her like that before. Would he be angry with her because Judith was involved so heavily with a knight at her tender age?

“I will have this settled today,” Baldric grumped. “You will give me your decision on the betrothal with either Ulrich or Griffin.”

“Griffin?” Jaclyn choked. “What causes you to bring his name into the contractual discussion.”

Baldric rose from behind his desk. His face was red with anger at his daughter’s audacity. “Griffin came to me and asked for a betrothal contract of marriage with my daughter who is in love with him and of complete agreement!”

The irony of her father’s anger caused Jaclyn to giggle. The giggle grew from inside to a rumbled laugh and emerged from her mouth as a loud guffaw followed by several laughs. “Oh Papa, how many daughters do you have?”

“Do not vex me daughter!”

“Papa, have you not noticed how Griffin spends his time with our Judith. His eyes are filled with love for her. You have misunderstood his pursuit. He asked for the hand of Judith,” Jaclyn explained through her laughter.

“Preposterous! Judith is but a child!” Baldric blustered defensively. His daughter’s laughter was beginning to affect him contagiously.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“Not so much a child in mind as in body,” Jaclyn suggested.

“You mean Sir Griffin has asked for the hand of my child maid, Judith?” Baldric laughed.

“I heard it from Judith’s very tongue,” Jaclyn verified.

“Odo, take the cleric and write the contract for my Jaclyn and Firedrake,” Baldric ordered. “Jaclyn and I will confer over this request by Griffin for my child maid Judith.”

Odo and the cleric left to begin the proper accounting of goods and dowry of the two participants.

“What shall we do with Griffin and Judith?” Baldric asked his oldest daughter.

“I have watched Griffin and Judith. There is no doubt the two care deeply for each other and are a good match. I do not believe we can deny their request of betrothal. We will never convince Judith she is too young when about us are the marriages of girls her age,” Jaclyn itemized logically.

“Then what are we to do?” Baldric complained.

“All marriage contracts must be approved by the king. This is especially important for contracts under Baronies such as Cumberland,” Jaclyn suggested.

“Ah yes,” Baldric agreed. “We can postpone this marriage contract until our Judith ages a bit more. I’m certain King Edward will agree to our requests. It will also give time to Griffin to prove to me of his true caring for our Judith.”

“Judith isn’t going to like it,” Jaclyn stated. “Our sister is used to having her way.”

“Precisely why you are going to explain to her our decision,” Baldric responded. “You will tell Judith that true love lasts forever. If she has doubts as to Griffin’s faithfulness when not with her, she should not wed the knight. It is also the duty of knights to serve their king. She must acquaint herself with these absences.”

“Why must I?” Jaclyn protested.

“Daughter, it was your idea,” Baldric guffawed.

“You are Judith’s Papa,” Jaclyn countered. This was a battle of wills. Neither wanted to deal with Judith when she didn’t get what she wanted.

“Enough!” Baldric declared. “Go talk with your sister now.”

Jaclyn walked slowly to the weaving chamber. Judith was learning the art. She was much happier and more interested in domesticity since Griffin came into her life. With every step, Jaclyn hoped a crisis would arise that necessitated her immediate attention. It did not happen. Jaclyn opened the weaving chamber door to find four weavers and Judith working studiously. She walked to her sister and sat on the ground next to Judith’s stool. “The cloth is lovely, Judith,” Jaclyn remarked looking at the deep green dyed wool cloth woven with threads of yellow in the pattern of a Griffin.

“It is for Griffin. It is his herald,” Judith bubbled. “Have you talked to Papa yet? Is he calmed?”

“Yes, he is calm,” Jaclyn reassured.

“You are here to tell me that everything will be arranged with Griffin? We will be wed?”

“Yes, everything will follow order,” Jaclyn replied lifting the beautiful fabric.

“Follow order?” Judith questioned putting down her shuttle.

“Marriage contracts are never simple, Judith,” Jaclyn eased slowly. “There are rules, procedures, traditions, laws, and requirements.”

Judith was near exasperation. “I don’t understand, Jaclyn. How long is this going to take? I thought marriage contracts were a simple matter of clerical scribing of property and promise.”

“It is and it isn’t. The more there is to scribe especially with a Barony as wealthy as Cumberland. Of course the king must approve the contract.”

“How long is this going to take?” Judith snapped impatiently.

“I don’t know,” Jaclyn replied picking up Judith’s shuttle. “It could take a complete season or longer.”

“A season or longer!” Judith shrieked. “We cannot wait that long. Griffin and I will go to London and petition King Edward. He will listen to our plea.”

“Judith, do not be silly. You and Griffin, a most noble knight, cannot travel together to petition for marriage. Such a trek

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would cause such scandal. The king would immediately turn down your request for it.”

Judith became quiet. “Jaclyn, what shall I do? I love my Griffin.”

“If this be true love, it will grow stronger for the wait. Remember a knight must often leave to serve his king. You must acquaint yourself with such absence.”

“Absence? What absence are we discussing, now?”

“Papa is having the clerics write the petition. He believes Sir Griffin should deliver it personally to the king’s hand,” Jaclyn answered. “You will remain here and wait the king’s answer. Papa believes the king will honor the petition.”

“What if Griffin finds another?” Judith uttered and then regretted her own doubt.

“There is that,” Jaclyn soothed. “But would it not be better to know thy love’s true heart?”

“It is true,” Judith said defiantly. “Our love is true. We will weather this.” She took her shuttle from Jaclyn’s hand and began weaving the special cloth for Griffin.

Jaclyn was surprised at her sister’s response. She was also proud. Perhaps this was true love between her Judith and Sir Griffin.

Chapter 9

The clerics finished the marriage petition for Griffin and Judith before the nuptial agreement between Ulrich de Warre and Jaclyn Bonefey.

Griffin took the silken scarf from Judith and stole a quick farewell kiss. “I promise to return as quickly as possible my love.”

“I shall be waiting for you my knight,” Judith replied choking back her tears.

Sir Griffin Merton of Devon mounted his Destrier. The caravan left for London. Along with the petition, Baldric had sent fine woven cloths of flax and wool, peas, beans, and cheeses to be sold in the London markets. He had three daughters with two to be wed. He would need trade coins for fine cloths of samite, damask, and velvet for wedding dresses.

Judith watched from the gate as the caravan and her love disappeared into the horizon.

Jaclyn wrapped a warm mantle over her sister’s shoulder so she would not catch a draft. She did not try to encourage Judith to return to the bailey or the castle.

Ulrich appeared behind Jaclyn. “Come Madonna, let us spend time together and let your sister weep. I should hope you would weep the same for me in my absence.”

“I will never allow you to leave my side, sir knight,” Jaclyn retorted. “If you war, I will war.”

“Madonna, you shall be too full with my children to have time to miss me I fear,” Ulrich teased rubbing Jaclyn’s smooth abdomen. He placed his arm around her and led her back into the castle.

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Things were quiet for the next few days. Judith was changing from a precocious child to a demure young woman. Every morning she was early to mass and lit a candle for her Griffin. Judith changed into the perfect student of running a household. The change was amazing to both her father and her two sisters.

Ulrich spent more and more time with Lord Baldric. He was learning about Carlisle Castle's fortifications and strategies. Every day he would ride Orion with a large troop of men at arms and castle knights into a near by village to the north. It was his purpose to locate the traitor, Mercer. Every villager greeted Ulrich warmly. On every trek he would bring alms for the poor, ill, orphaned, and widowed under the direction of Jaclyn his betrothed. The villagers would ask as to the health of Lady Jaclyn Bonefey. It was obvious to the Firedrake the villagers were loyal and faithful to his betrothed. He was indeed fortunate to have such a virtuous woman for a wife. The loyalty to Lady Bonefey and their Lord of Cumberland was powerful. Ulrich knew that Mercer would not dare to stir trouble openly amongst the villages. He also knew the villagers would warn him of any unusual strangers with Scot dress or accent appear in their villages.

The quiet was temporary. Judith received a message from Griffin the same day she learned her sister would marry the Firedrake on the holy day of Saint Hypolite. Flowers were already being gathered for drying. The rushes in the great hall for the nuptial feast would be sweet smelling and clean.

Judith was in a rage. How could this marriage be kept secret from her? Why did she have to wait and Jaclyn would be married in seven days?

Judith stomped into her father's chamber. "What is this? My betrothed is sent to Normandy for a year and my sister suddenly weds the Firedrake?"

"It is not sudden," Baldric tried to soothe. He hated it when any one of his daughters was upset.

"Not sudden? Why is it my betrothed must petition the king and suddenly serve his liege while my sister weds imminently?"

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“You don’t understand, daughter,” Baldric pleaded raising his hands palm up in submission. “Firedrake is here on the king’s order. King Edward submitted de Warre as a proper and petitioned suitor for Jaclyn cycles before.”

“I don’t understand. This is not fair to me and Griffin,” Judith complained.

“Child, the king had already selected de Warre as a suitor for your sister and future Lord of Carlisle. The king decreed so on our last visit to London. All the pre nuptials were already complete,” Baldric explained. “For your sake, the clerics did your petition before they scribed Jaclyn and Ulrich’s nuptial agreements.”

Tears flowed from Judith’s eyes. “Papa, Griffin sent a message to me. He is being sent to Normandy for a season. I will be a withered old maiden when he returns,” Judith sobbed. “My sister takes a husband and has him by her side.”

“Such nonsense. Your Griffin will return long before you wither into an old maiden,” Baldric soothed. “I am preparing a large and comely dower for your Griffin and your patience.”

“Does the Firedrake not go to serve the king in Normandy?”

“Judith, there is the traitor Mercer for the Firedrake to bring to justice. The Mercer is here and a threat to the kingdom of Edward and us. The Firedrake is here fulfilling the king’s service,” Baldric reminded his middle daughter. “Come, be happy and celebrate the nuptials of you sister. Is that not a virtuous woman who keeps her sorrow in her heart to celebrate another’s happiness?”

“Papa,” Judith cried falling into her father’s arms. “I miss my Griffin.”

“Of course you do,” Baldric cooed. “Is it not said that absence makes the heart grow fonder? I am certain your Griffin misses you in like manner. When you are united your joy will be doubled. Go now and be happy for the celebration. Help prepare for this happy day.”

“Yes, Papa. Griffin would want me to do this. Jaclyn will help prepare for our nuptials upon his return.”

“Precisely my daughter,” Baldric stated returning to his parchments. He had sent for Jaclyn. There was an addition to the

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nuptial contract he wasn't sure how she would take it. A smile crossed his face. This change would be most interesting.

Ulrich caught Jaclyn before she entered her father's library. He showed her a wicked grin. "Always be careful for what you ask for. You might receive it."

Jaclyn looked into his twinkling blue eyes. The eyes revealed a mischievous look as if a boy child. "What is the meaning of such words?"

"You will soon find out, Madonna," Ulrich chuckled with a wink. He released her allowing her to continue to her father.

"Enter Jaclyn," Baldric greeted looking up and seeing his eldest daughter.

"I was informed that the nuptial contract is near completion. There is one minor change?"

"Yes. Ulrich has agreed to the examination by physician with one alteration," Baldric snickered holding back his mirth.

"Examination?" Jaclyn questioned.

"Surely you haven't forgotten your demand that your betrothed prove to be free of disease and capable of procreation?" Baldric responded. It was very difficult not to laugh at the preposterous position his daughter had gotten herself into.

"Oh yes, I do remember. Ulrich has agreed to the examination?" Jaclyn choked. She had forgotten that was a demand she had made originally.

"He has," Baldric chortled. "He has agreed on one condition." The bubble of laughter was threatening to choke him.

"The condition?"

"You are to be present during the examination. You will verify the physician's declaration personally," Baldric revealed. He could no longer hold back the guffaw. "Both signatures will verify his disease free constitution and his ability to sire issue."

Jaclyn paled.

Baldric was nearly rolling on the floor with the humor. "Do not look so distressed my child. After all, you will soon be sharing his bed and there will be no secrets between you."

Her father was right. A husband and wife had no secrets. Now she knew what Ulrich had meant when he teased her about being careful what she asked for her. A smile crossed her face. Her future husband was a jester. She would see to it that it would

be an eye for an eye. “When will the physician examine the Firedrake?”

“On the morrow after we break fast. You will accompany the physician to de Warre’s private chamber,” Baldric informed gleefully. He couldn’t help but see the humor in this. Baldric loved his daughter with all his heart, but even he had been embarrassed when the request for examination was spoken of by the clerics when reading the contracts. He couldn’t help but be a bit proud of his future son in law when Ulrich suggested he teach the impetuous maiden a lesson.

“I am happy to find you see much mirth in this simple request,” Jaclyn retorted. She would have to come up with something of equal nature in retribution.

Jaclyn sought out Joy, her faithful servant and friend. Joy had never married, but she was experienced in the art of love.

Joy had numerous affairs with many of the men at arms in the castle. She had made up her own mind she would never marry. She didn’t want her own children since she had seen so many of her female family die in childbirth.

“That is the way of it,” Joy laughed after her explanations. “Your betrothed thinks he is so manly you will faint at the sight of his magnificence. A man’s vanity is far greater than that of a woman.”

“He thinks to embarrass me for the audacity of requesting examination of a man when it is not uncommon to demand examination of a woman to prove virginity.”

“If you wish to squelch his humor and vanity, I suggest the following...” Joy advised.

Jaclyn and the physician walked to the private chamber of the Firedrake. The physician knocked on the door. Drogo opened the large oak door. Standing in the center of the room was Ulrich. He was draped with a linen sheet in Roman toga fashion.

“Good morn physician, wife,” Ulrich greeted. He did not hide his mirth. “Are we prepared for the examination?” When the physician approached Ulrich unwrapped the sheeted toga and let it drop to the floor. He stood before the physician and his future wife in all his naked glory. His eyes never left Jaclyn. Surely she had

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to be pleased with his male magnificence. He was taller, more muscular, and more endowed than other males.

Just as Joy had told her, the man was filled with vanity. This would be the time to seek her jest. “Do tell us physician, is my future husband clear of disease?”

The doctor rose from his knees. “I judge him free of disease or blight.”

“What say you of his ability to provide me issue,” Jaclyn snickered. She looked directly to his manhood. “The male sword looks small and limp to me.”

Ulrich felt his body flush. Such a judgment by a woman much less his future wife was a slap against his masculinity.

Jaclyn had kept her hands behind her back and her emotions well controlled. She would give Joy a large purse for her very accurate assessment of the situation. She would also include extra for such correct information to be used in the jest. “Mayhap the little limp sword only needs a soft touch of encouragement.”

Ulrich looked at Jaclyn suspiciously and with embarrassment. This was not turning out as he planned. He thought Jaclyn would blush and run away in embarrassment. Insisting a man be judged blemish free was the most ridiculous demand of a marriage contract he had ever heard of. His plan was to embarrass his future wife. She did not seem embarrassed at all.

Jaclyn strode lazily up to her naked betrothed. She removed a long plumed feather from behind her back. Sensually she used the feather to stroke Ulrich’s scrotum. “Does my lord function correctly with the correct inducement?” Jaclyn teased seductively.

The touch of the feather and the nearness of Jaclyn aroused him like never before. His masculine sword swelled to full attention.

Jaclyn continued her coy machinations. “I see my future is protected. Please note physician, my future husband seems most capable of procreating issue for us.”

Ulrich had enough. If his Madonna did not stop her teasing he would take her in the presence of the physician and servant. It made no matter to him. Jaclyn was driving him to madness. He grabbed for her hand.

✦ Payton Lee

Jaclyn was prepared and sidestepped Ulrich's lunge. She ran to the door for escape. "Our examination is complete, physician. We will leave anon," Jaclyn announced laughing gaily.

"I will visit retribution upon you for this," Ulrich roared.

Drogo covered his mirth with hand. "My Lord, what is thy desire?"

"Bring back that vexing woman and throw her upon my pallet, or bring me cold water for a comforting bath," Ulrich snapped. He was in dire straights. "And remove that smile from your face before I remove it with my sword."

"Which one?" Drogo snorted and made a dash for the door before Ulrich could reach him.

Ulrich pulled up the fallen sheet from the floor and wrapped it around him once again. "Small and limp sword! Indeed! Wait until I sheathe my sword for the bedding." He realized it was his purpose to embarrass Jaclyn. She had turned the tables and embarrassed him. "What a wife you will be!" Ulrich declared. Laughter bubbled up from his abdomen and ran over like Mount Etna on Pompeii. She would be a most interesting and wonderful wife indeed.

Drogo returned dragging a tub into the room and followed by numerous chamber servants bringing buckets of water. He heard his master's laughter and thought perhaps the woman had driven his master to madness.

"Drogo!" Ulrich addressed. "On the night of the wedding be advised I want several of those plumed feathers within reach of the bed."

"My Lord?"

"The sensation was most pleasant. My wife will be most creative and interesting. I shall experiment with her responses," Ulrich guffawed.

Drogo motioned the servants to begin pouring the water. "Quickly!" he ordered. Perhaps the cold water would rescue his lord from the madness.

Jaclyn ran to her rooms. She couldn't stop laughing. Ulrich de Warre, the Firedrake was putty in her hand. She had successfully turned the tables. Every time she remembered his

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stricken look and his blushed body she erupted in laughter once again.

Joy looked up from the hearth when her mistress returned to her bedchamber. "I take it everything went well?"

"Exactly as you described," Jaclyn replied holding her sides. She laughed so hard her ribs were hurting. "His sword is the most massive I could imagine and stood erect at the touch. Dear sweet Joy, how can such a massive weapon be sheathed into my small body?"

"You need have no fear, my Lady," Joy reassured. "I will continue my instructions."

Chapter 10

Jaclyn paced nervously in her room. Downstairs in her father's library the clerics and stewards were reading the nuptial contract.

"You are the loveliest ever," Judith reassured her elder sister. "Why are you so nervous?"

"You will be just as nervous on your wedding day," Jaclyn grumped. "This is a major adjustment in my life."

"You love him, don't you?" Judith queried.

"He has made me love him," Jaclyn replied. "God's teeth! Is all this real?" She smoothed her green velvet surcoat down over the deep emerald green samite tunic. She wore a golden belt embellished with jewels of rubies, emeralds, topaz, and pearl. A translucent green wimple covered her head and topped with a golden crown of the same-jeweled pattern on her belt.

Joan returned to the chamber with Maud. "These are for you," Joan announced proudly. She had a handful of the day lily she had name Firedrake.

Joan's simple loving gesture brought tears to Jaclyn's eyes. "You are most precious, sister."

Knocking sounds drew everyone's eyes to the oaken door.

Joy opened the door and allowed the two clerics entry.

"The contract has been read. We will go to the parish church in the bailey and the contract will be blessed," the cleric announced.

Joy wrapped her mistress in a fur lined emerald green velvet mantel. She held her mistress' train in hand. Judith and Joan followed their sister down the castle halls and stairwells, out to the open bailey, and then into the parish church.

Ulrich de Warre stood by the altar waiting for his bride. His blonde hair was trimmed and combed topped by a velvet hat with black feather plume. His tunic was deep blue and surcoat of

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matching color and fabric of damask. He wore hosiery of finest silk with soft skin black boots embroidered with gold. His tunic was belted with girdle of gold and precious stones. He beamed Jaclyn a broad smile when she entered. It was that same mischievous little boy smile.

Jaclyn melted into it. Her knees suddenly did not support her. How could a man have such an effect upon her? Truly there was magic to this Firedrake.

No one seemed to notice her temporary paralysis.

Joan ran in front of her carrying a basket of the Firedrake flower petals and started tossing them in the center aisle of the parish church. She stopped by Ulrich and gave a courtesy. "Tis the petals of thy flower, my Lord Firedrake. Sweet, fragrant, and pretty as the beauty of thy wife," Joan proclaimed. She ran to the side where Maud had been waiting for her. "Did I say it right?" Joan asked hopefully.

"Every word was perfect," Maud praised. She took Joan into her arms.

Baldric came to Jaclyn's side. He took her arm and walked toward the altar.

Jaclyn was eternally grateful. Without her father walking her to the Firedrake she would have never managed to move her legs.

"Who brings this woman to the altar of God for recognition of this nuptial service?" the priest asked.

"I do, Lord Baldric Bonefey, Baron of Cumberland and Lord of Carlisle Castle. I bring Jaclyn Bonefey to wed Ulrich de Warre under command of King Edward the III sovereign of England. Ulrich de Warre will retain all rights, honors, and titles of Cumberland with this nuptial."

Jaclyn heard all those words exchanged and responded dutifully as previously instructed, but was in a fog of unbelief. She was becoming the lady of the renowned Firedrake.

The priest blessed the contract and the couple.

Ulrich placed her hand upon his arm and turned to the witnesses of the marriage.

The priest announced the blessing of the church conferred to the Lord and Lady de Warre of Cumberland. From this day forward the new herald of Cumberland would be the Firedrake.

✦ Payton Lee

Outside the parish church a large group of villagers from neighboring parishes had been waiting for the new couple. A roar of cheering rose to deafening sounds when Firedrake and his bride emerged.

The villagers tossed Firedrake petals in the path of the newlyweds.

“The people of this Barony adore you,” Ulrich noted. “As do I, my Madonna.”

“I shall do all I can to be the most beloved and virtuous wife,” Jaclyn replied.

“All?”

Jaclyn looked up to her new husband’s face. Once again she saw those twinkling mischievous eyes. “Of course my lord, all.”

“I shall remember your promise this eve for the bedding,” Ulrich chuckled. He placed his hand upon her hand that rested upon his arm. “My heart is filled with joy, my Madonna. I shall do all I can to be a virtuous and beloved husband.”

This time Jaclyn’s eyes twinkled with good humor. “All, my lord?”

“My promise.”

Unknown to the happy couple and jubilant villagers a pair of menacing eyes were also watching the wedding party return to Carlisle Castle.

“Tis true my Laird. The wench of Cumberland has taken the Firedrake as husband. He is now the Laird of Cumberland and Carlisle Castle.”

“The Firedrake is truly magical to have his life restored after we killed him,” Mercer snarled at Malise Dunbar. “We shall have to take his life once again and make certain no magic wakes him from his permanent sleep. Come. We return to Dumfries and make our plan.”

The festival after the party was of true magnificence. The trestle tables of the great hall opened not only to the castle household, but also food was brought out to the villagers that had come to witness the nuptials of their beloved Lady Jaclyn. The villagers had brought most of the food stuffs for the wedding

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party. They brought cheese, brown bread, boars, sheep, peas, beans, tubular vegetables, ale, and wine.

In the late hours of the evening fireworks from China were sent sailing into the air for beautiful displays.

Jaclyn was still dancing happily in celebration when Ulrich appeared at her side and whispered into her ear.

“Finish this last dance and meet me by the stables. I have a surprise for you.”

Jaclyn couldn't imagine what surprise her new husband would have for her near the stables, but she was feeling a bit giddy from all the wine and ale she had drunk. Although she weaved to the stable she managed to find it. There her husband was waiting with mantle in hand. Drogo was holding Orion's bridle. “A midnight ride, my lord?”

“Most definitely,” Ulrich chuckled wickedly. He had been waiting a long time for this bedding. His plan to sequester his bride privately for the bedding was working perfectly. He would not tolerate any interruptions this night of lovemaking he had planned. Ulrich wrapped his Jaclyn in the mantle and after mounting Orion pulled her onto his lap. “You will expect a long hard ride this eve.”

Jaclyn did not understand his meaning but snuggled into the warmth of her new husband's arms and the sweet manly scent that was Firedrake.

Drogo mounted on a smaller steed led the newlyweds down the path by holding a torch high. Behind Jaclyn and Ulrich were no less than ten men at arms also holding torches.

Mercer reined his Destrier into the forests until the group had passed. “Too many of them, he whispered to Malise Dunbar. Another time, Firedrake.” The two spent the night on the forest grounds. They returned to Dumfries through the Rievers forest trails.

Jaclyn was already sleeping when Ulrich reined Orion into a wooded copse. His pavilion had been set up since yesterday morn. Surrounding the pavilion were smaller tents where the men at arms would take their rest when not on duty guarding the new Baron of Cumberland.

Ulrich ordered Orion to fall to the ground so he could dismount without waking his bride. He carried Jaclyn into the

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pavilion and placed her gently on his pallet. In moments he had undressed himself and now anticipated undressing his new bride. With gentle hands he unfastened the mantle. Gently he removed Jaclyn's surcoat and tunic. The chemise she wore underneath was revealing. Her breasts moved up and down in the rhythm of her sleep. "Oh my Madonna, you are as perfectly formed as I thought." Greedy hands quickly undid the ties of her chemise and his mouth descended upon the rose petal colored nubs hardened from the exposure to the night air.

Jaclyn still in her deep dreams responded sexually to the lips of her lover. Magic consumed her body. The result was a moaning of pleasure. The sounds encouraged Ulrich to seek more pleasure.

Ulrich untied the cords of her braes and pulled them off her slumbering body. He allowed his hands to feel every curve of her smooth body while he suckled her breasts. One of his hands ventured to the thatch of her womanhood. His finger penetrated into its secret depths. To his surprise, Jaclyn moaned and thrust her hips into the probe of his finger. His probing was rewarded with the warm fragrant essence of his Jaclyn. "Forgive me, Madonna," Ulrich uttered apologetically. "I had wanted to make this so pleasurable for you, but I fear I can hold back no longer." He was hard, rigid, and in discomfort.

Jaclyn was hot, wet, and ready for him. In her dreamlike state she was responding in every way to him.

Ulrich raised his body over Jaclyn's and guided his staff into the warm recesses his sword needed for sheathing and shelter. Slowly he probed. Jaclyn responded in small thrusts and little mewling sounds. He pushed the tip of his manly sword in a little deeper. His lips caressed Jaclyn's breasts, her shoulders, her neck, and her lips as he penetrated a little more with each thrust. He felt her maidenhead. He had never taken a virgin before but had been told of its feel and the necessity of breaking it to plant his seed. He had also been told it would be painful for the virgin, but must be done quickly. Bracing himself on his arms and covering Jaclyn's mouth with his own he thrust down into her haven with force. He felt her maidenhead tear and her body tense beneath him. With the force of his tongue he stifled her cry.

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Jaclyn woke from her sexual dream with a start. A sharp pain racked her body for an instant. She opened her eyes to look into the closed eyes of her new husband.

Ulrich felt Jaclyn wake and released her lips. He did not move inside, but raised his body with his arms and looked into Jaclyn's tear filled eyes. "Forgive me. It had to be done. The maidenhead must be broken to fill you with my seed. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you, but it had to be done. I am sorry my wife."

Jaclyn felt his fullness inside her. There was no more pain. Fortunately her indulgence in drinking much wine and ale had dulled the pain. "Is it over?"

"I have pierced your maidenhead, but it is not over my wife. I must still implant my seed," Ulrich explained. "I promise to be gentle." He already felt the warmth of her virgin blood seep into the sheets beneath them.

"Then let it be done, husband," Jaclyn whimpered. "I wish to create issue from thy seed."

"As do I," Ulrich whispered lovingly. He slowly moved inside Jaclyn hoping he would not add more pain.

Strangely to Jaclyn the fullness she felt inside her felt wonderful. She moved her hips into Ulrich's thrusts. A heat built within her that required more and more as if her husband would not penetrate enough. She felt Ulrich grow harder inside her as his movement within her quickened.

Ulrich had never felt such wonder in a mating. His Madonna was made for him. Jaclyn was hot, wet, and comfortingly tight. He swelled with each movement until he could no longer hold back. His body became rigid as wave after wave of muscular explosions released his seeds. Finally with a roar of triumph Ulrich announced the completion of his orgasm.

Beneath him Jaclyn was shaking with tremors of her own orgasm. The feelings of euphoria burst through her the same moment Ulrich had released his roar of triumph.

Drogo heard the triumph roar of his master and smiled. The men at arms standing watch heard the animal sound of triumph also. Grins ran rapidly across the camp. The bedding had taken place and there was a new master for Cumberland. With the

sound of triumph they heard, all were certain the pair would quickly create issue and heir.

Ulrich collapsed upon Jaclyn. His sweaty brow placed upon Jaclyn's forehead. "Woman, never has it been like this. My wife, my love, my Madonna." He placed his lips on her lips and opened her mouth with gentle penetrations similar to their exchange just completed. Before he crushed her he rolled to the side and pulled Jaclyn on top of him. He was still breathing heavily. His fingers ran through Jaclyn's long red hair. "I believe we are quite suited."

"Mmm," Jaclyn agreed lazily. She was feeling quite content. Her fingers traced tiny little patterns on Ulrich's chest.

"Remember you promise?" Ulrich questioned rolling Jaclyn back on to her back.

"Which promise was that?" Jaclyn teased blowing warm puffs on breath against Ulrich's chest.

"You are a vixen," Ulrich choked. He was already hardening. "I shall make you keep your promise to do all to please me since you enjoy making me suffer so."

"I make you suffer?"

"Feel my suffering to enter you once more," Ulrich stated pushing his hardened manhood against her thigh.

"I do not wish you to suffer, my lord," Jaclyn enticed arching her hips into Ulrich's hardened sword.

"Ah but you do, so I shall make you suffer in like manner," Ulrich threatened jokingly. He reached across the bed to retrieve a large plumed feather. "Remember this object of torture?"

Jaclyn bit her lip to hold the laughter and nodded her head.

"Of course you remember this torture my lady," Ulrich snorted. "I shall now make you suffer sorely from the same implement you tortured me with."

"I pray you have mercy my lord," Jaclyn pleaded with jest.

"No, you shall have no more mercy than you allowed me," Ulrich replied. He rolled off Jaclyn. His one arm covered her abdomen to hold her in place. His other hand pushed her legs apart and placed the feather between Jaclyn's thighs. Carefully he stroked the feather close to her haven of femininity.

It tickled and Jaclyn giggled with the strokes. It was torture. It was a sexual torture of delight.

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“Mercy! Mercy my Lord,” Jaclyn gurgled.

“What quarter would you have me give?” Ulrich questioned.

“Give me thy sword and end my misery,” Jaclyn pleaded.

“Strike me with thy swiftest vengeance.”

“Such a beautiful wife and maiden should have swift vengeance,” Ulrich complied. He thrust into her slowly at first. Once more his thrusts became more needful and urgent. Again the two lovers shared their ecstasy in orgasm.

“My lord,” Jaclyn confessed. “I think I enjoy the creation of issue.”

Ulrich threw his head backward and laughed. “I think this a most enjoyable exercise we both share.”

Chapter 11

After the fourth time of love making from her lord, Jaclyn lost count of the times they made love. It was as if the both of them were incapable of being satiated. Jaclyn and Ulrich finally fell asleep after the sun had risen from the horizon.

It was after midday when Manfred Castello questioned Drogo. “Do you think we should wake them?”

“I think not,” Drogo replied. “From the noises emanating from the pavilion last night I am certain they will need a full day to recover.”

“Do you think they are dead?” Manfred laughed.

“I think not,” Drogo snorted. “I’ve never heard of a knight dying from love making.”

Thurston Dych added to the conversation. “We are placing wagers on the birth of issue. Do you wish to wager?”

“If it is within term of breeding from this night,” Drogo chuckled. “There are no odds and too many winners.”

“On that we all agree,” Thurston confirmed. “We are wagering on time of day ten lunar cycles from this day.”

Ulrich woke to the sun hovering over the mid heavens. He looked down upon his sleeping bride and coveted taking her once more. The pool of dried virgin blood beneath her caused him to look upon her blood stained thighs and thatch of pubic hair. He looked to his blood stained thighs and crusted hair. They would bathe together in his large bathing tub. He would wash away their stains. The musk of sex was heavy within the pavilion. How often had he taken his bride last eve? He had lost count.

“My lord?” Jaclyn queried straining to open her eyes.

“Rest my love. I shall send for warm water. We will bathe.”

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Jaclyn rose to her elbows and looked upon her nakedness. She had been told of virgin blood, but she was not prepared for what she saw. “Am I bled to death?”

“I apologize,” Ulrich uttered pathetically. “I was as gentle as I could be. There was more blood than I expected, but I could not curtail my need for you.”

“Nor I you,” Jaclyn replied forgivingly. “I am in need of a warm bath, my lord. I feel quite sensitive.” The area between her thighs was indeed sore.

Ulrich took the coverlet from the foot of his pallet and covered Jaclyn. He did it to cover her nakedness from the eyes of his servant, Drogo, and his own mounting lust for her.

“Drogo!” Ulrich roared covering himself with a warm mantle and walking from the pavilion. “Bring us warm water for bathing.”

“At your service my lord,” Drogo replied. He had prepared for the morning after and had water already heated. Servants and buckets were ready. The large oaken tub was taken into the tent and filled with warm water within minutes. Drogo placed drying clothes upon the chairs and scented soap in the tub. After the lord and lady were in the tub behind the screen, Drogo called for servants to remove the bedding sheets and save them for their return. Clean fresh sheets were spread upon the pallet.

“I hear movement,” Jaclyn commented savoring the gentle massaging hands of the Firedrake washing her hair.

“Tis only Drogo seeing to our comfort,” Ulrich replied. His fingers were wound in her sudsy red hair.

“You see to my comfort,” Jaclyn complimented leaning into her new husband’s chest. He was rinsing her hair of the soap. “I think I shall hire you as my new chambermaid,” Jaclyn purred.

“It is not necessary to hire a slave,” Ulrich replied nuzzling Jaclyn’s wetted throat.

“Careful my lord, you bring out the passion in this humble maiden,” Jaclyn whispered sensually.

Ulrich responded physically. He lifted Jaclyn turning her to face him and place her upon his renewed need. “I told you last eve this would be a long hard ride.”

“And well you meant it,” Jaclyn tantalized. As sore as she was, her body betrayed her in need for more of her husband.

The water was nearly cold when Ulrich and Jaclyn left the tub. They dried each other laughing and teasing each other for their lust.

“My lord, your herald is most accurate. You my dragon breathe magic fire upon this innocent maiden,” Jaclyn teased as she donned her tunic and surcoat.

“You are the Firedrake’s most perfect mate,” Ulrich agreed dressing in his own tunic and surcoat. “Your passion inflames the fire of my magic.”

“We are a sorry lot,” Jaclyn laughed. She placed her arms about Ulrich’s massive frame and laid her head upon his abdomen.

Their reverie was interrupted by the sounds of hooves riding into the copse.

Ulrich dressed quickly.

“Ho there!” Baldric blustered. “We are looking for the Lord and Lady de Warre of Cumberland.”

“Why do you seek them?” Drogo asked in good humor.

“A husband and wife disappear from the nuptial celebration. We from the celebration are concerned for their welfare,” Baldric guffawed. “Would they be here in this pavilion of Firedrake?”

Ulrich emerged from the tent. “My good wife is with me in my pavilion. Who asks about her?”

“Her Papa,” Baldric replied dismounting from his steed. “Have you proof my daughter is now your good wife?”

“Drogo!” Ulrich bellowed. “Produce the bedding sheet.”

Drogo went into a small tent near Firedrake’s pavilion and handed the folded white linen sheet to Ulrich.

Ulrich in turn delivered the folded sheet to Baldric.

Baldric opened the stained sheet and crowed proudly. “Behold villains of Cumberland. The Baron of Cumberland and his Lady Jaclyn de Warre.” The horde cheered wildly when Baldric displayed the sheet. He turned to Ulrich. “Why did you leave Carlisle? You now have the Lord’s chamber. Would you not procreate in the Lord’s bed?”

“I would create issue without disturbance such as this,” Ulrich replied. “Now that my good wife and I are fully acquainted such interference is unlikely.”

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Jaclyn emerged from the pavilion. "Papa?"

"I see you still live," Baldric joked. "We were all concerned when your lord stole you away from Castle Carlisle."

Jaclyn stood by her husband and held his arm. "My lord intended us to enjoy a hard ride."

Ulrich erupted in laughter. "Indeed I did so inform my good wife."

"My good husband kept his word. Our ride was most hard," Jaclyn teased squeezing her husband's arm.

Baldric enjoyed the innuendo of his daughter and son in law. He joined in the fun. "I am confident of heirs born to this hard riding couple of Carlisle Castle." Baldric remounted his horse. "It is time for you to return to your home and begin your duties."

Ulrich once more pinned a mantle on his bride and raised her to seat on his lap. Orion didn't seem to mind the extra burden. It was obvious the Destrier was well trained, well tended, and a devoted servant to the Firedrake. This devotion now included the Firedrake's new wife.

Jaclyn resumed her duties as mistress of the castle and Lady of the Barony.

Ulrich spent time with Baldric and the Steward Odo learning the routine and responsibility of the Lord of Cumberland.

The evening meal was a time to relax after the long day. Ulrich and Jaclyn shared the meal. Everyone noticed the adoration between the two. There was no doubt they enjoyed each other's company. Both laughed happily together at the entertainment after the evening meal.

Judith was even in a lighter mood since she received regular posts from Griffin Merton.

At the end of the day Ulrich led Jaclyn to the Master Bed Chamber where some measure of sleep was obtained on occasion. There was magic with the Lady and Firedrake. They never seemed to get enough of each other.

The servants reveled in the happiness of their lord and lady. Giggles followed Ulrich when on occasion he suddenly grabbed Jaclyn from a duty. He would lift her into his arms and carry her to the bedchamber. They would not emerge again until the

✦ Payton Lee

evening meal and both were constantly smiling. On some hunts, Ulrich and Jaclyn would disappear into the woods and not reappear until near the end of hunt. Jaclyn's gowns were often stained by grass and stuck by twigs. Her perfect wimple would be in disarray. Her lips would be swollen and pink. Everyone knew why she had disappeared with Ulrich and some were envious for the love and attraction this lady enjoyed.

Ulrich massaged his head. Michaelmas was the end of year tallies. He was eating, sleeping, and dreaming numbers.

"Are you well, my liege?" Jaclyn asked with concern. His behavior had been unusual. He was currently rubbing his head as if in pain. The past few nights he had come to the bedchamber so tired he disrobed, crawled into bed, and fell sound asleep instantly. Jaclyn was fearful that he knew she was breeding and was uninterested in her since he planted the seed.

"Do you have the powders for the head that aches, good wife?" Ulrich complained still rubbing his temples. "The Chivalry of Knighthood is far less complicated than running a Barony."

"How so?"

"The king orders you to fight the enemy, you line up, raise your sword and your shield, and go to battle. So simple," Ulrich stated. "In the Barony, there are the tallies, the buttery, the fiefs, the villains, the vassals, the knights, the men at arms, the wardrobe, and it goes on and on."

"My lord and love, it is just Michaelmas. It seems difficult for it is the end of season and tally of taxes for the next year and tithes for the king," Jaclyn reassured. "Odo and Papa tell me you are an adept pupil. Soon this will pass and seem insignificant."

"How do you manage to keep all these things in order?"

Ulrich questioned strewing all the parchments about.

"Tis my training since I left the swaddling," Jaclyn teased.

"It is not so bad, husband."

"Yes it is," Ulrich contradicted sagging into the chair. "Be a good wife and bring to me one of your brews that will make me head stop aching."

"Your desire is my command," Jaclyn replied with a courtesy. She left the library and ran into Odo. "Be gentle with my lord husband. I fear he is overwhelmed with Michaelmas."

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“Not to worry, my lady,” Odo assured. “We are fortunate this year. All is in balance and our stores are sufficiently filling for the cold season. Where are you off?”

“My lord requires a potion for an aching head,” Jaclyn answered with a grin. “I shall make one for him posthaste.”

“Have you told him you are breeding?” Odo inquired.

Jaclyn stopped stone cold. “How do you know of this?”

“My lady, it is the talk of the household,” Odo replied.

“You have turned ravenous, and you have not had your flux in two cycles,” Odo answered knowingly. He was well acquainted with breeding. His wife had delivered him five healthy sons and two daughters. “We are all rejoicing for our good fortune.”

“I haven’t told him. Not yet,” Jaclyn confessed. “He is strained for Michaelmas. I thought it best until he is at ease when the tally is complete.”

“These are the last of the inventories,” Odo announced showing Jaclyn a bindery of parchments. “We shall finish before evening meal.”

“More of a reason to hurry with my remedy,” Jaclyn bubbled walking briskly toward the tower chamber where she kept her herbs. She placed her hand over her still flat abdomen. “Dear issue, did you hear? The barony is happy with your creation. As I am little one.” Jaclyn gathered the herbs she needed and prepared a hot brew with chamomile. A good wife was trained in diagnosing maladies and she knew her husband’s aching head was a result of strain for the numbers and tallies. A strong hot brew of chamomile would relax his body and relieve the ache of head. Swiftly she strode to the kitchens beneath the great hall and took boiling water from the caldron. Jaclyn felt uneasy. It was as if she was being stared at. She thought she could almost smell and sense animosity. She seeped the brew into a large mug and caught the glimpse of an evil stare. It was a man covered with a leather hood. His clothes were that of a Scots. “Who is that man warming by the hearth?” Jaclyn asked the cook. She felt extremely uncomfortable about the stranger for an unknown reason.

“Tis kin to Seward our buttery apprentice. The mon is said to be a trader on a return from London.” Cook explained. “Seward asked if we could spare shelter and food.”

✦ Payton Lee

“You are a good person, Cook,” Jaclyn praised. “We would never close our doors to someone in need of shelter and food.”

“Not to good of person. There is something I do not like about the mon,” Cook groused. “I keep a strong watch upon ‘im.”

Jaclyn’s hand reached out and squeezed cook’s hand. “We agree. There is something about the man I do not like. Should he stay longer than a day or act suspiciously, send word to me.”

“You ‘ave me promise upon that,” Cook vowed. “Do not worry yourself on the matter. My lady is breeding, we would see that you are not troubled.”

“Breeding? How do you know this? Does everyone know this?” Jaclyn questioned. She was genuinely surprised that everyone seemed to know the Firedrake’s issue was growing within her.

“We all know,” Cook replied absently. “Tis no news for thy devoted servants. We’ve been watching, waiting, and praying for issue for thee. Such issue would provide security and ‘appiness for all of us in the Barony. Firedrake is also a good and kind lord, like our lady is good and kind.”

Jaclyn chuckled, “That is the way of it.” She put down the mug of brew and drew a small dirk from her belt. She sliced a small piece of cooked boar and ate it. “The issue is hungry,” Jaclyn joked savoring the roasted meat.

“You bring our issue anytime you are hungry and we will see to it thy son be fed,” Cook returned grinning broadly with a toothy smile. “Would thy issue be hungry for bread?”

“Our issue is hungry for bread,” Jaclyn responded.

Cook sliced a bit of bread and spread fresh cream upon it. She handed the bread to her lady. “Run along, I’ve work to get done.”

Jaclyn took the bread and picked up the mug of brew. She climbed the stairwell until she was on the library floor.

The menacing eyes watched her disappear up the stairwell to the living quarters of the castle.

“What be you staring at mon?” Seward asked Malise. “Tis not good mon fer ye to be starin at the Lady de Warre like that. The people of this castle are protectin and lovin of the lass.”

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“Have ye found out if it be true she be breedin?” Malise questioned anxiously.

“Aye, tis truth me Laird,” Seward replied. “The Lady Firedrake be breedin his issue.”

“Tis time for me to return to Glasgow,” Malise stated. “The winter winds would be blowin soon.”

“Tis good that ye leave soon,” Seward agreed. “The cook be suspicious of ye.”

“Tis good she be. I be taught as a bairn that when ye need ta be hidin things, ye put them in the open,” Malise boasted.

“Why do ye ask me about the Lady Firedrake be breedin?” Seward asked. He was curious as to why Dunbar wanted to know such a personal thing about the lady of the castle.

“Tis part of the Laird’s plan, lad,” Malise chortled. “This early breedin only delays the plan.” With that response Malise dismissed himself from Seward and the castle. He took his mantel, packs, and left for the stable.

Chapter 12

“I’ve brought you the head pain brew, my lord,” Jaclyn announced entering the library.

“Tis in time. My head is great with pain, good wife,” Ulrich greeted with a grin. “Our steward Odo tells me we have finally completed the tallies.”

“That is merry news,” Jaclyn returned offering the cup of medicinal brew to her husband.

“Merry news indeed,” Ulrich responded reaching for Jaclyn’s hand and not the cup. “Still not as good as thy merry news.” He palmed Jaclyn’s abdomen. “I am pleased that you carry my issue this new season of Michaelmas. You will bear me a fine son.”

“Or daughter,” Jaclyn countered. She was surprised and bit irritated that her secret was not a secret. “Is it that everyone in the castle, nay, perhaps all the barony know I carry your issue?”

“You are distraught?” Ulrich recognized.

“I am distraught,” Jaclyn bit. “How is it that everyone knows I am breeding? It is a woman, nay my secret to share.”

“Good wife, you are loved and adored by all in the castle and the barony of Cumberland. Do you not think that I your own good husband, or your devoted servants would not notice your excessive hunger, fluctuating disposition, and lack of flux? Are these not all the signs of breeding? My love, my good wife, we are all jubilant!”

“Hah!” Jaclyn snapped. “Jubilant indeed. Soon I will be fat and waddle like a duck. You will have no interest in me and shall let your eyes wander to lovelier women.” She placed the cup on the table near Ulrich and attempted to wrestle free of his grip.

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Why was she so sensitive? Why was she so irritable? She was even allowing her imagination to run wild like the feeling of evil about the man in the kitchen. Suddenly tears spilled from her eyes. Would her husband stop loving her? He hadn't made love to her in two nights.

"What nonsense is this?" Ulrich queried in concern. Joy had told him that while his wife was breeding she would range a gamut of emotions, but it hurt him when he saw tears. He would not let his wife leave a room in tears. He was too happy with the news of his issue. Ulrich pulled Jaclyn onto his lap. "Tell thy husband what upsets you so?"

"I made the brew, you did not drink it," Jaclyn sobbed hysterically.

"If this distresses you, I will quickly remedy such," Ulrich responded in genuine concern. He took the brew and swallowed it in one breath. "There we have taken thy brew." Ulrich surrounded Jaclyn with his arms. "Why do you still tear, good wife?"

"I do not know," Jaclyn sobbed. "Yes, I do know. You already spurn me. We have not made love in two eves."

"That my good wife will be remedied immediately," Ulrich snorted. He lifted his body from the chair with Jaclyn in his arms. "Odo, we are completed and I have neglected my good wife. We go to our chambers. See to it that we are not disturbed."

Hearing those words made Jaclyn feel better. She took her husband's face in her hands and kissed his lips tenderly.

Ulrich placed his Jaclyn on the bed carefully. He took the time to brush his lips across her brow before he walked to the door of the bedchamber, closed it, and dropped the timber across it creating a deadbolt. Returning to the bed he removed his surcoat and tunic. "See my good wife, I need you more than ever." His manhood was pressing heavily against his braes. "Remove your clothes."

Obediently Jaclyn quickly removed her own clothing. "You still desire me?"

Ulrich smiled and pressed her body against the bed with his large hands. He carefully placed his body over hers and positioned his throbbing heat over the apex of her womanhood. "Does this feel like desire?" Ulrich did not wait for an answer. He placed his lips over hers and began kissing her intensely.

✦ Payton Lee

Jaclyn was enjoying her husband's love and not thinking of anything else except the pleasures he was providing. She was startled when he bent his knees on the bed, placed his arms under her legs and raised her apex to meet his mouth. Pleasure upon intense pleasure rippled through Jaclyn until a cry of orgasm came from her throat and her body trembled uncontrollably. "Firedrake!"

Still keeping his wife's legs under his arms Ulrich sheathed his sword into the dripping ecstasy of Jaclyn's orgasm. The physical copulation had reached uncontrollable urges. He rammed continually into the cone of womanhood as if in a battle frenzy. Finally Ulrich roared in pain and euphoria when his body released his seed into Jaclyn's breeding womb.

Exhausted they lay upon the bed for a long time until their bodies cool down.

Jaclyn rolled over placing her head upon Ulrich's massive rock hard chest. "My lord, I am quite pleased and satisfied."

"I do my best," Ulrich laughed raking her hair with his fingers. "You are my most beloved good wife."

"I am your only good wife," Jaclyn teased.

"But still most beloved," Ulrich returned laughing.

"I was so silly. I thought since I was breeding you would no longer be interested in me," Jaclyn confessed. "I thought you would now seek others to satisfy your need."

"That will not happen," Ulrich said firmly. "I will not seed bastards. My heirs will be church blessed and true as my heart." Ulrich took Jaclyn's hand and placed it upon his heart. "Thus beats only for you."

"Be patient with me my lord," Jaclyn cooed. "I fear this breeding causes changes in my person. Even today I felt uncomfortable for a stranger in our kitchen."

Ulrich sat bolt upright instantly. "What stranger in our kitchen?"

"Cook told me it was some kin of Seward, the apprentice in the buttery," Jaclyn replied in a startled choke. "Tis silly, but I felt as if he stared at me malevolently."

"If you felt so, it was not silly," Ulrich contradicted lovingly. "It is known that you are deeply loved and revered in the Barony. To feel that someone stares at you malevolently is the

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sign of an enemy.” Ulrich rose from the bed and began dressing. “Do you think that stranger is still here?”

“I do not know,” Jaclyn replied suddenly frightened. She hadn’t thought about her safety or that of her issue until Ulrich reacted to her feelings with deep concern. “I left to bring you the brew.”

Ulrich dressed and went to the door, removed the bar and turned to Jaclyn. “Rest my good wife. Give rest to our issue. I will investigate this stranger. Remain safe in our haven and I will return before the evening meal to ravish you once more.” He raised his eyebrows wickedly.

Jaclyn cuddled into the sheets. She was a most fortunate woman to have such a sensuous and loving husband. The wait to marry and scrutinize her options was one of her best decisions. As the lady heir of Cumberland she did not anticipate love in her marriage, but with Ulrich she was blessed to have found it. She did love Ulrich de Warre and believed he loved her. How fortunate could a woman be?

Ulrich went directly to the kitchen.

“Is your head pain better? Or do you need more brew?” Cook greeted merrily. She was feeling better since the stranger had left and nothing made Cook happier than when she was preparing the evening meals. She handled all the scullery maids, like a knight in battle. Everything worked like clockwork.

“My head pain is much better,” Ulrich answered pretending to smell the food boiling in the cauldron. “Ahh that smells delicious.”

“What is the true reason for your visit, my lord?” Cook asked skeptically. “For you smell the clarifying lard like a king’s meal.”

“I should have known better than try to fool you,” Ulrich teased jokingly. “My good wife shared with me an uneasiness for a stranger in your kitchen.”

“Aye, I felt the same,” Cook concurred. “The mon gave me shivers ‘e did. ‘Is eyes were malevolent. He looked about like he were taking in everything. When my lady came for your brew he looked at ‘er wicked ‘e did.”

“Is he still about?” Cook’s response gave him more anxiety. Was there a spy in the castle?

✦ Payton Lee

“Nay, the mon left right after my lady went upstairs to ye,” Cook related. “’e spoke to Seward and then left taking all ‘is things.”

“Where is Seward?” Ulrich questioned looking about the kitchen.

“’e be in the buttery with ‘is master, Llweyn preparing for the evening meal,” Cook answered turning her attention once again to the roasting boar. “’ere, don’t touch that!” Cook scolded when Ulrich used his small dagger to cut a piece of meat. “Wait for your meal, your lordship.”

Ulrich gave Cook a chuckle and headed to the buttery. He believed in trusting your feelings. It had served him well during many battles when he paid attention to those feelings. At the moment his feelings told him something was wrong if his wife felt uncomfortable from a stranger’s stare. “Cook, my good wife is kind. I will not change her commands. We will still allow a haven for weary travelers or those who need help, but henceforth all will be brought to me when they enter for haven.” This would become the law. He needed to inform Odo of the new house law. With the delicate peace between the Scots and realm it was too dangerous to let strangers in the castle. There was also the threat of Laird Mercer and the traitors to Scotland and England. Ulrich walked into the buttery. He saw many servants preparing for the evening meal. Most of them he did not know who they were. He was still too new to being the Lord of Cumberland. He recognized Llweyn handing cloths to servants. “Where is Seward?” he asked Llweyn.

“Over there by the trenchers.”

Seward watched the Firedrake approach. He swallowed his fear. Could the Firedrake truly be mystical? Did he have magical powers? Did he know Seward had sheltered the rogue Malise Dunbar? He had been forced by his clan to seek apprenticeship in Carlisle Castle. Seward had been chosen to become the spy because his sister had married an Englishman and was a chambermaid in service to the Lady of the castle.

“Seward?” Ulrich asked. He was still new to the castle staff and didn’t know exactly who Seward could be.

Seward bowed from the waist. “My Lord Firedrake.”

“Where is the man who is said to be your kin that sought refuge in this castle?” Ulrich demanded.

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“He has left for Dumfries, my lord,” Seward responded nervously.

“When did he leave?” Ulrich barked. His instincts were finely honed and he felt the nervousness of Seward’s response.

Seward began shaking noticeably. “He left awhile ago. I bid him safe journey and he departed. I did not follow him. I have many duties to perform as thy humble buttery apprentice.”

“Who exactly is this man to you and what is his surname?”

“He is a kinsman on my father’s family,” Seward choked out. He couldn’t give him the name of his cousin. He knew his cousin worked for one of the traitor’s the king and Firedrake were seeking. He hesitated a moment to come up with a name by daring to ask Firedrake a question. “Has my cousin committed some crime hidden from my knowledge? Has he offended you, my lord, or any other of the castle?”

Ulrich would not be dissuaded from the questions. Even if Seward’s questions may explain the man’s nervousness, Ulrich glared at the man for an answer. “You will answer my question and not ask any, Seward!”

“My kinsman is Manus Brody,” Seward quickly responded. He remembered the name of his father’s sister’s husband.” He stood shaking in the presence of the Firedrake. What did the Firedrake know or suspect?

“Should he seek haven of this castle again, Seward,” Ulrich stated menacingly. “You will bring him to me before you provide shelter.”

“But my lord,” Seward fumbled in fright. “My lady has always been generous to all who seek shelter and food.”

Ulrich was enraged. How dare this servant challenge his order? This made him more suspicious. “You will obey my command!” Ulrich roared.

Was that fire or steam emitting from the Firedrake’s mouth? Seward cowered into a corner. “Your obedient servant,” Seward whimpered.

“See to it!” Ulrich bellowed impatiently.

Llweyn and all the other servants in the buttery heard the altercation and the anger of the Lord de Warre. He ran to the Lord of Cumberland and his apprentice. “My Lord? Has this apprentice offended you?”

“See to your apprentice and have him learn the proper respect to a the Lord of the Castle Carlisle. In particular he is not to ask questions of the lord,” Ulrich barked irritably. There was something about this man he did not like and his nervousness made him suspect. “Also let it be known that henceforth no one will give shelter or food to travelers, strangers, or kinsman without first bringing them to me for approval,” Ulrich commanded with a voice loud enough for all to hear. Once that order was said Ulrich went to find Odo. His Jaclyn ran this castle and household so efficiently he knew exactly where Odo would be at this time of day.

“My Lord,” Odo greeted brightly rising from his desk. He had been working on the inventory tallies for the evening meal turned into him from Llweyn.

“Sit and be comfortable good friend and servant,” Ulrich said more softly. “I have learned my good wife has allowed all seeking shelter and food to be welcomed into Carlisle Castle.”

“It is the graciousness of hospitality our lady provides,” Odo concurred.

“Call it my instinct, but I fear this has opened our doors to a danger. You must remember our King Edward has a delicate truce with the Scots and there are traitors about that I seek,” Ulrich explained.

Odo had never thought of such treachery to his lady for her kindness. He was noticeably disturbed. “My Lord, think you our castle in danger from such traitors and spies?”

Ulrich stroked his chin. “I do not think there is immediate danger, but such opening of our doors in these times could be dangerous.”

“I will order that no longer will we open our doors!” Odo declared firmly.

“Good friend,” Ulrich said reassuringly. “My good wife is a most blessed woman. I would not counter her orders, but I will revise them.”

“What do you wish of me my lord?” Odo requested.

“Henceforth no one will receive haven or food until they are brought to me and I open the doors for them,” Ulrich replied. “These are the new orders of the castle. See to it that all in our service are informed.”

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“My command,” Odo replied obediently.

“Please send the chamberlain to the lord’s bedchamber. My good wife and I will take our meal in our room’s this eve,” Ulrich ordered about to leave the room.

“Is there danger to my lady?” Odo asked worriedly.

“I do not believe there is imminent danger,” Ulrich reassured. “Still, I would prefer that this eve my good wife be safe in our chambers and my arms.” Since no one had noticed this kin of Seward’s entrance or departure from the castle, he did think it best to keep his Jaclyn safe in his arms this evening. He would also order castle knights to stay guard upon Jaclyn whenever he was not with her. Jaclyn was now carrying his issue and the blood heir to Cumberland Barony and Carlisle Castle. She would need more protection than ever.

Chapter 13

Ulrich spoke to castle knights before he returned to the Lord's bedchamber. He gave instructions to the Carlisle Castle knights that they were to begin a duty watch on Lady Jaclyn. She was never to be alone or unwatched. By the time he arrived at his chamber, the chamberlain had prepared a small table in the room. Odo had sent servants with trenchers, platters, and cutlery for their evening meal. He nearly laughed when he entered to see Jaclyn consuming a large portion of fowl. "Are you hungry, my lady?"

Jaclyn looked up to nod her head in the affirmative, but did not stop her consumption of the duck.

Ulrich sat down to his trencher and reached for boar meat. He was too slow. Jaclyn already had her hand and knife cutting a large portion. "Mayhap I should wait until my lady finishes her meal before I begin mine. I can only hope my good wife leaves me some food to eat."

Jaclyn placed the boar meat in her trencher. "For strange reason I am ravenous, my lord husband."

"Tis not a strange reason good wife. It is told by the mid wife that an issue growing in the womb requires a portion of food of its own. Since you will bear me a strong and large son, he is ravenous and I will wait until he is satiated."

"How is it you know so much, my lord husband, about issue?" Jaclyn asked suspiciously between bites of bread and meat.

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“When I first noticed you missed your first flux I sought knowledge from the bailey mid wife. She is quite informative and I learned a great deal,” Ulrich chuckled smugly.

“I will seek out this mid wife and learn all these wondrous things,” Jaclyn decreed. She would talk to Joy and the mid wife to learn about these strange hunger pangs, cravings, and mood swings she was suffering. It would not prevent them, but she would understand them. For now she merely wanted to take her fill of the meal.

Several minutes later Jaclyn slowed down and Ulrich took portions of the food she had left remaining.

“Is there a purpose for our evening meal in our bedchamber and not the great hall?” Jaclyn inquired taking a sip of ale.

Ulrich looked to his wife and responded with a grin, “Your voracious eating habits are proving to be an embarrassment, good wife.”

Jaclyn dropped her cutlery. Tears formed in the ducts of her eyes. “You are ashamed of me?” This was one of those sudden mood swings. Tears rolled uncontrollably down her cheeks.

Ulrich rose immediately and took Jaclyn in his arms to soothe her. “I meant no cruelty. I was teasing you my good wife. Of course I am not ashamed of you. I adore you.”

Jaclyn rested her head on Ulrich’s strong chest. The food, ale, and emotions lulled her into a sleep.

Ulrich looked down to find his wife was sleeping. He chuckled to himself and lifted her to the bed. There he removed her clothes and covered her body with the sheet and quilt. “I fear my meals will be disturbed for some time, good wife,” He whispered lovingly. Ulrich returned to the small table and finished his meal. It was tasty even though it was now cold. After the meal he sat by the hearth and thought about many things. The most important on his mind was his good wife and issue. The second thoughts were his commands by the king to find Mercer and the traitorous Scots. He had made only simple inquiries while he learned the duties of being the Baron of Cumberland. Michaelmas was over. It was time to seek out Mercer before the winter snows. “Mayhap another den or two,” Ulrich sighed. The idea of leaving his beautiful breeding wife caused a pain to rise in his most

personal areas. They were so perfectly matched. It was as if her sheath had been created for his sword. The exchange of bodily fluids was heavenly pleasant for them both.

Jaclyn woke to kisses and fondling of her now sensitive breasts. Her eyes fluttered open to view the eyes of her husband. He was already implanted in her. The pleasure their coupling brought had to be heaven blessed. She sighed and moaned in ecstasy while she responded in matched movements to her husband's.

Once again his wife savored an orgasm at the exact same moment he did. He realized he would greatly miss his wife if he left to seek out Mercer. He would put it off for just a few more days. After all, he was still a new husband wasn't he? Even if his wife was already breeding, they hadn't been married that long.

Ulrich's hope for a few more days with Jaclyn was ended early in the morning by an anxious chamberlain pounding on the Lord's chamber door.

Stumbling from his bed in the early morning darkness with eyes still blurry from sleep Ulrich found his robe. "Enter Artor."

Artor entered with head bowed. "My Lord Firedrake, a thousand pardons for the disturbance, but there are people in the great hall. They have sought shelter," Artor began explaining.

"You woke us for this?" Ulrich asked irritably. "It is my order to bring them before me, but it could wait."

Jaclyn woke from her sleep. She pulled a sheet to cover her body. "My Lord?"

Ulrich turned to his wife. "Return to your sleep, good wife."

Artor knew that Jaclyn's healing herbs and poultices would be needed. "My Lord, we will need our Lady's assistance."

"What?" Ulrich roared angrily spinning to glare angrily at the chamberlain. How dare this chamberlain interfere not only with his rest, but now his breeding wife's rest?

"Forgiveness my Lord," Artor persisted. "It is King Edward's guardsmen. They are sorely wounded and need our Lady' de Warre's attentions. The guardsmen and knights were bringing in the taxes from Dumfries after Michaelmas. Rievers attacked them. All the tax monies were stolen. Only a few

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survived. They came here for haven. Two knights survived without serious wounds and are on their way to London. Please my Lord. We need help and our Lady's assistance."

"Leave us, Artor," Jaclyn stated calmly. "My husband and I will dress. We will be there anon. Wake Joy. Inform her she must bring my medicinal bags to the great hall."

"The king's guard," Ulrich muttered to himself. This news was quite disturbing.

Artor left the chamber. Ulrich closed the door and began to dress. Jaclyn was already up from the bed and dressing.

"We must hurry," Jaclyn urged donning her surcoat over her tunic.

"Yes good wife, but not at peril to you or my issue," Ulrich warned sternly.

In moments the Lord and Lady of Carlisle were in the great hall. Jaclyn met Joy who had already brought the medicinal bags. Joy was already assessing the wounds and ordering the castle servants to attend to simple cleansings and dressings. Jaclyn went immediately to Joy.

"My Lady, I have separated the most grievously wounded to the place farthest from the hearth. They bleed less if they are cold," Joy shared. "I have our chambermaids, weavers, and spinners attending the simple wounds. Those that must have their wounds sewed, the cook is boiling water for cleaning, thread, and needles. Our castle ladies well versed in tapestry and needlepoint will stitch their wounds."

"You have everything well in hand," Jaclyn praised. Joy had always been able to organize the house, staff, and emergencies. Joy had taught Jaclyn everything she knew. "Let us attend to the grievous wounded."

Ulrich talked with several of the wounded guards. All the time he kept watch on his wife as she tended to the three men that were grievously wounded. One of the three men was a knight that Ulrich knew. Sir Oswin Lovett was an older favorite knight of King Edward. Ulrich rose from a guard's side when he watched Jaclyn wipe a tear from her eye and place a clean sheet over Sir Lovett and assist in the duties honoring the knight's death. His plans changed when he watched a much younger knight, one he

✦ Payton Lee

did not recognize take Jaclyn's hand. He watched her talking to him. His pace quickened when he noticed Jaclyn knelt down at the knight's side. Ulrich nearly ran when the knight placed his head on his wife's breast and she enveloped him with her arms.

Instantly he was at Jaclyn's side. He looked down to find the knight embraced by his wife was crying. Ulrich felt sympathy, but no man's pain would allow placing a head upon his wife's breasts. That was his personal and private territory. As a primitive beast he asserted his authority as alpha male. Ulrich gently pulled his wife from the knight's embrace and into the cavity of his chest and protective arms. "My Lady, is Sir Oswin passed on?"

The knight looked at the large knight before him with eyes swollen red with tears. "You knew Sir Oswin Lovett?"

"We served the king's father when I was but a lad as you," Ulrich answered.

Jaclyn looked up to her husband. She didn't understand the coldness in his voice tones. "My Lord, this young knight is Sir Oswin's son, Thurstan." This introduction Jaclyn hoped would warm her husband's heart. "He watched his father fall and die."

"We will tend to the great knight," Ulrich said authoritatively. He motioned to several castle guards. They would carry the litter holding the body of Sir Lovett to the stone carver of the bailey. The stone carver would prepare the body and the sarcophagus for burial.

"I will tend to Sir Martin and Sir Walter," Jaclyn stated quietly. She began moving toward the other two litters where the seriously wounded knights lie. Joy was still with them. There had been no doubt they would survive if there would be no infections. There was no doubt Sir Lovett would not survive. It was difficult for Thurstan to stay and watch his father die.

Ulrich held her arm. "I forbid it. You must rest."

"I am well. There is so much yet to do," Jaclyn requested softly. "I am needed."

Ulrich softened to his wife's gentle plea. "Finish quickly and return to the chamber for rest."

Jaclyn acknowledged her command with a nod and returned to Joy's side. They would soon be overseeing the feeding of the household and the wounded.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

Once the castle knights lifted Sir Lovett's body taking it to the stone carver, Ulrich and Thurstan followed.

"The Lady Jaclyn is a Madonna," Thurstan commented to Ulrich. "A Madonna most virtuous. How long have you known the Lady Jaclyn?"

"Not nearly as long as I should have," Ulrich replied thoughtfully. He would have sought out Jaclyn sooner for a wife had he known how wonderful being married to her proved to be.

"Then she isn't spoken for," Thurstan said thoughtfully. "I shall speak to the king."

"What?" Ulrich questioned recoiling from the surprise of the young knight's statement. "What would you speak to the king about?"

"I would seek the hand of the Lady Jaclyn," Thurstan replied. "I would press my suit, desire, and love."

"Love!" Ulrich snarled stopping suddenly and turned to face Thurstan. "What is this love you speak of?"

"My love for the Lady Jaclyn. It seems strange even to me, but I saw her and loved her," Thurstan confessed. "It is true to fall in love at first sight. I have experienced this with the virtuous Lady Jaclyn."

"Clear your head of your thoughts," Ulrich warned. "Else I shall have to clear your neck of your head."

Thurstan furrowed his brows in question. "Have you spoken to the king in pursuit of the Lady Jaclyn?"

"There is no need since the Lady Jaclyn has already chosen me as her husband," Ulrich growled menacingly. "And carries my issue!"

Thurstan's sorrowful eyes took on another sorrow. "My Madonna is Lady Jaclyn de Warre?"

"She was my Madonna first. She is my Madonna! She bears the heir of the Cumberland Barony," Ulrich snarled. This jealous rage came up from nowhere. He realized there was no need for jealousy. Thurstan was still a pup, and Jaclyn loved him as much as he loved her. Didn't she?

"Your pardon," Thurstan pleaded. "I did not know the Lady Jaclyn was your good wife. My father spoke of you frequently. He never mentioned you were wed, an issue created, or that you were the Baron of Cumberland."

“These are all recent occurrence,” Ulrich replied more in control of his jealousy. The reminder that his friend and the young knight’s father had just expired put his jealousy in perspective. “Forgive me. Jaclyn is my greatest happiness. I have just found her. I am so jealous for her, I forget the pain and grief you have just suffered.”

“I would also be jealous of such a good wife,” Thurstan agreed. “My father would have loved such a daughter dearly.”

Both men realized the litter bearers had arrived at the stone carver’s cottage.

“Come,” Ulrich invited. “Let us talk to the stone carver. We will have him carve the finest sarcophagus in Christendom.”

It was near the time of the evening meal when Ulrich and Thurstan returned from the stone carver. They entered the great hall together. Numerous servants of the castle were feeding the wounded. The castle knights were also sharing trenchers with some of the wounded.

Ulrich looked around the hall to find his Jaclyn. He hoped she had taken some time to rest. He spotted Joy, her first chambermaid and friend. Then he found his Jaclyn. She was standing nearby Joy.

Jaclyn hadn’t been feeling well. She arched her back in a stretch from sitting too long at the side of a badly wounded knight. She was removing an old poultice and placing a new one upon the wound. She realized she had indeed missed breaking the fast, the noon meal, and was famished. Rising to stretch she suddenly became dizzy and faint. “Joy!”

Joy looked up to see her lady placing one hand upon her forehead and the other over her mouth. In an instant Joy was at Jaclyn’s side as she started to collapse in a faint.

Ulrich was already walking toward Jaclyn when he saw her collapse in Joy’s arms. His speedy gait turned into a full run. He hadn’t noticed that Thurstan was already ahead of him in a dead run.

Thurstan easily lifted Jaclyn into his strong arms. Even for a young man, he was tall, broad, and muscular. “Lead me to her chamber,” Thurstan ordered the frightened Joy.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

Ulrich blocked Thurstan's path. He instantly pulled the unconscious Jaclyn from Thurstan's arms. Without a word he bolted for the staircase and carried his wife up to the third story private chambers. Thurstan and Joy followed. Gently Ulrich placed his wife upon their bed and covered her with their heavy quilt. "Call a physician!"

"I will do no such thing," Joy snapped. "A physician would only bleed her and make her weaker." Joy walked to a table where she poured wine into a goblet. "Lift her head for me," Joy ordered Ulrich.

Carefully Ulrich lifted Jaclyn's head.

"Jaclyn. Jaclyn," Joy repeated until her lady's eyes fluttered open. "Drink this for me."

Jaclyn automatically obeyed Joy. She trusted her chambermaid completely. She wasn't feeling well and knew Joy would help her to feel better. After a few sips of wine, Jaclyn muttered, "Joy, I do not feel well."

"You overworked yourself and did not eat," Joy chided. "I warned you of this. Drink all the wine and I will send food to your bed. You will stay here tonight and rest."

"This is becoming a habit," Jaclyn snickered. "Our eating alone together in the chamber."

"A selfish habit I am enjoying more and more," Ulrich agreed between bites of bread. "My time with you is more precious to me."

Jaclyn ceased eating and cocked her head. "Such a statement. It sounds ominous."

"Jaclyn," Ulrich hesitated. His eyes betrayed his emotions.

Jaclyn became frightened. He had not used her Christian name since their marriage. She reached across the short distance and squeezed Ulrich's hand. "My Lord husband, your words mean something I would not wish to hear."

Ulrich knew this would be the time to tell his beloved wife. "But hear them you will. I must be about the King's business. Some traitorous Scots have challenged our King's realm. Beneath us lie the King's men. They have been wounded in duty. It is time for me to leave and seek out these traitors. I must avenge the death of a most noble knight. I must answer my call to duty."

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Tears began forming in Jaclyn's eyes. She choked them back. Was it only a few months before she had chided her sister Judith to remember a knight was at call to his king? How her very words choked her. How could she have known that she would fall so desperately in love with her husband? Only a few months ago she didn't even want a husband. A thought crossed her mind. "I will start preparing for our journey."

The plural remark didn't miss Ulrich's perception. "Our journey?"

"Of course," Jaclyn replied walking toward the armoire she kept her warm surcoats and tunics. "I can be prepared by the morn. Of course I'll have to talk to Joy and Odo before we prepare for sleep."

Ulrich chuckled rising from the makeshift table walked to Jaclyn. Her back was facing him when he grabbed her from behind and kissed her neck. "I've already spoken with them."

"Good," Jaclyn giggled. The coarse shadow growth on Ulrich's chin tickled her. He always made her feel wonderful and special. "That gives me more time to set things in order." She reached for her heaviest surcoat in the armoire.

Ulrich placed his large hand over her small one. He restrained her from removing the surcoat. "You won't be needing that."

"You will keep me warm in the pallet, but on the ride I will need more than thoughts," Jaclyn teased. It didn't occur to her immediately what Ulrich meant.

"You will keep stoke the fire high in the bedchamber in the eve to keep you warm," Ulrich said softly while nibbling on her neck. "Warm furs will surround you."

Jaclyn struggled to free herself from Ulrich's arms. "You will keep me warm."

Ulrich released Jaclyn and turned her to face him. "You will remain here."

The tears flooded her eyes before her response. "I will not stay here without you. You are my husband. I am to be with you."

"You are with me always," Ulrich replied pointing to his heart. "You are here every moment of every day. God's teeth, I can't stop thinking about you and needing you."

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“Nor I you,” Jaclyn whimpered. “That is why I must go with you.”

“You cannot. You are breeding. It is the heir of Carlisle and my issue you must care for.” Ulrich palmed her rounded belly. “The winter cold is soon upon us. You must be sheltered and kept warm. It is not good to take you and my issue into this weather.”

“Then why must you go?” Jaclyn demanded. How could she be alone now that she had found such happiness in marriage? “Stay until the days warm.”

“You nursed the noble knights and soldiers beneath us,” Ulrich chided. This was hurting him as much as he knew their separation would hurt his Jaclyn. “I cannot delay a day longer. The traitors to the King and realm must be brought to justice and made to pay. You know this.”

“No! I don’t!” Jaclyn screeched defensively. “The King has other knights. Not you!” The choked tears erupted. She began to sob hysterically. Her fingers dug into the cloth of Ulrich’s tunic. “I need you more than the King.”

Ulrich folded Jaclyn into his arms. His fingers combed through her hair lovingly. Tears trickled down his cheeks. He couldn’t speak. He didn’t dare. He couldn’t let Jaclyn know how weak he was and how close he came to forgetting his duty. He loved his wife with all he was. He wanted to be with her every moment and watch his child grow in her womb. He couldn’t let that interfere with his duty. He didn’t dare tell her that if he didn’t go and bring the traitors to justice she and their child might face an even greater danger.

Chapter 14

Jaclyn stood stoically on the stone steps of the keep. Joy, Odo, and Sir Tobias Tyson spoke to Ulrich before he mounted Orion. With the healing knights and men at arms, Ulrich had a force of three hundred men. Wagons, servants, and squires would follow the troupe. The camp women had bundles in their hands and were ready to follow.

Jaclyn noticed several of the camp women were young and beautiful. She wondered if Ulrich would use them to ease his needs. He was so virile. Could she understand if he did? No, the thought of another woman in his arms was more than she could bear. She held her head high and proudly, as a good wife should when her husband mounted his Destrier.

Ulrich saluted her and gave the order to leave the bailey.

Jaclyn left the steps and nearly ran up the steps of the castle to the highest tower on the rampart. She was so quick, Joy searched for an hour before she found her mistress.

Jaclyn remained in the tower chamber until the last wagon disappeared into the horizon. A silken cloth wiped her tears until it was completely saturated.

“Come my lady,” Joy encouraged taking Jaclyn’s hand. She led her down the tower steps.

“Joy, what shall I do without my Ulrich?” Jaclyn sobbed.

“The same as you did before you met him,” Joy reprimanded. “You took care of the castle, the keep, the land, the people.”

Jaclyn looked longing at the horizon one more time before she followed Joy down the stairs. “I shall sleep alone.”

Firedrake of Cumberland ☙

“You did before,” Joy reminded. “I see you are addicted to the marriage bed. It will be a withdrawal, but you will survive.”

“You have an answer for everything,” Jaclyn snapped bitterly.

“No my dear lady,” Joy returned. “It is you and only you that have the answers to you tempers. I know your moods will be erratic for sometime, but don’t try my patience.”

Jaclyn was surprised at Joy’s retort. Her dearest friend, companion, and maidservant had never spoken to her in such a tone before. Defensively Jaclyn shot back, “How would you know my moods would be erratic?”

“Once, a long time ago I carried the issue of my dearest love.”

“You carried issue?” Jaclyn asked in astonishment. “When? I mean you’ve never been seen with child.”

The sad look in Joy’s eyes cut Jaclyn to the quick.

“You were but a child at the time. I wed a man at arms. We loved each other desperately. Your father left with troupe in duty for the King. My husband was killed in battle. I traveled to the battlefield to bring his body back. It was the winter months. I lost our issue on the way.”

Jaclyn put her hand over her mouth. “Dearest Joy, I never knew.”

“You may understand why I agree most heartily with our Lord Firedrake. Why you must remain safe. Why Odo, Tobias, and I were given command over you.”

“Command? Over me?” Jaclyn questioned. She was totally at an emotional loss in losing Ulrich and Joy’s story.

“Lord Firedrake cares for you and his issue with such propensity he has given us the command to make sure you eat, sleep, and work with moderation,” Joy informed. “This is a duty I will personally see to. I could not bear to see you suffer so deeply as I did that day I lost our issue, our life, our love for a futile attempt to be with my love.”

“What if Ulrich were to be slain?” Jaclyn gasped.

“So it would be the will of God,” Joy decreed. “Do not risk the loss of his seed as I so foolishly had done. I regret my foolishness every day. Now, I have you my darling lady. I can share with you the birth of your child and Firedrake’s issue.”

✦ Payton Lee

Jaclyn smiled and touched Joy's cheeks. "We will share this blessing together. I will not be a problem."

"Good!" Joy declared. "Come now, we have our duties to fulfill."

"The King's Pavilion," Ulrich stated bringing Orion to a stop before nearing Penrith Castle. "I can't believe he's here so soon."

"He brought a smaller entourage," Thurstan noticed.

"He travels faster."

"He brought about twenty knights," Ulrich noted. "Come we must make haste." He spurred Orion to full trot.

The watch saw the pennant of the Firedrake and announced the same to Lord Baldric Bonefey.

Baldric put on his warm mantel and met Ulrich at the keep gate. "Have you brought my Jaclyn?"

Ulrich dismounted and extended his arm in greeting. "My good wife is breeding and remains at Carlisle."

The news delighted Baldric. "You are quite virile," he praised.

"And your daughter most fertile," Ulrich chortled. He was happy, proud, and busting with pride.

"This is joyous news. King Edward and Queen Phillippa will be most pleased," Baldric bubbled in happiness. "Our queen has even brought with her Prince Edward."

Ulrich smiled and turned to his trusted friend Coll Skynner. We set camp here for the night. All will accompany King Edward save you, Hubert, and Siward. We will journey to the Riever trails and seek out the lair of Mercer on the morrow."

"I shall come with you," Thurstan dared to state.

"You will return to London with King Edward. You will prepare for the interment of your father at Westminster."

"Dunbar and his traitors murdered my father," Thurstan countered. "I will have my justice."

Ulrich gave Thurstan a cold stare. The dragon's breath of fire showed in the chill of the late afternoon. "We will discuss this with the King." Ulrich plodded toward the keep gate leaving Baldric breathing heavily to keep up with him. Thurstan followed as well.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♦

Ulrich found King Edward in the Great Hall near the Hearth. Queen Phillippa was sitting next to him. Together they played with the young prince.

“Ulrich de Warre,” Edward addressed raising his arm in greeting. “I am told you bring my guards that were wounded. I understand your good wife and her maidservants tended to them. We are grateful.” Edward returned his son to Queen Phillippa’s arms and rose to greet Ulrich. “I am curious by your armed force to bring my twenty men. I was told you brought with you several hundred knights, guards, and men at arms.”

Ulrich took the King’s arm in greeting. “I brought 300 of which 100 will rest tonight and quietly leave in the morning light. They will return to Carlisle individually. Each day my troupe will return separately to Carlisle.”

“Why are you doing this?” King Edward queried quietly.

“I wanted the traitors to believe I am returning to London in force to report to you. Now I will have the traitors believe we are traveling with you.”

“I planned to visit you at Carlisle,” Edward shared. “Our Queen wished to visit with your good wife.”

“I would like our Queen to visit with my Jaclyn. She is breeding and would be of help for my good wife.”

“Breeding? Already? We first received your marriage contracts,” King Edward said in astonishment. “You are most virile my good knight.”

A smile spanned Ulrich lips. He couldn’t help but be a little egotistical about it. “It would be a valid reason to send one hundred more men to accompany the queen.”

King Edward’s brow creased in curiosity. “Tell us why you plan such a thing?”

Ulrich changed to deep seriousness. “I believe there are traitorous eyes always upon Carlisle. At one point I believe they came to spy upon our castle as guests in open hospitality.”

“What say you?” King Edward gasped.

“I have closed such open policy. All guests now must receive my interview before they are allowed entry.”

“I see. These eyes spy upon Carlisle and believe you leave for London before the winter storms. You would leave Carlisle

less defended and perhaps they would be bolder. This would reveal themselves.”

“That is my plan good King,” Ulrich responded. “I would take my three most trusted knights to the Riever trails and wait for their bold folly.”

“Three knights? You should take no less than twenty.”

“The traitors try to hide themselves as Rievers. The Rievers do not appreciate such use. The Rievers are needed to help find the traitors. The Rievers would shun such a mounted force. My aim is to gain their trust,” Ulrich explained.

“I’m not certain I would trust such a lot,” King Edward disagreed.

“It is truly the only way for me to dig out these traitors.”

“I must trust your thoughts on this. If a King does not trust his own knights he would be lost in battle,” Edward conceded. “I will send my entourage with Queen Phillippa to visit the Lady Jaelyn for a short visit. I will wait here with the wounded men. When Phillippa returns we will take all my men to London. The last of your men will return to Carlisle discreetly.”

“Thank you my King,” Ulrich bowed. “My men and I will leave quietly on next morrow’s eve. My pavilion will remain. When you leave for London it will appear to move with you. It will really be returned quietly to Carlisle several days after you depart.”

“I hope this works,” King Edward remarked. “I lost Sir Oswin. His death should be revenged. I lost many men, treasure, and respect. These traitors must be punished.”

“Yes, my King,” Ulrich replied. “It is my duty to bring these traitors to justice. I too was wounded grievously. Yet, the wounding brought me to my good wife. For thus, I am grateful to the Lord God on high.”

King Edward arched a brow. “You are pleased with this marriage?”

“My King, a man could not be more pleased.”

“Unless his good wife is Phillippa,” King Edward snorted. “I never could believe a man could have such pleasures in the bed chambers.”

“As I have discovered,” Ulrich agreed.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

“What secrets do you men carry?” Phillippa addressed when she walked carrying the Prince to his father. “Your son desires you.”

Edward took his son into his arms. The young prince’s pudgy hands grabbed at the King’s mantel. “It is wonderful to see your issue grow strong and handsome. This boy is heir to the realm.”

“I look forward to such pleasures.”

“Is Lady Jaclyn breeding?” Queen Phillippa queried. The delight on her face was a beacon of joy while she watched her son play with his father.

Ulrich grinned broadly.

“This is wonderful. I can hardly wait to visit her,” Phillippa bubbled. “When do we leave for Carlisle?”

“A slight change of plans my dear,” Edward informed. “It seems Ulrich has devised a charade to draw out the traitors.”

“We return to London?” Queen Phillippa questioned dejectedly.

“First you and my young son will visit Lady Jaclyn. I will enjoy the comforts of Lord Baldric. Ulrich will play a ruse of staying here and returning to our court in London.”

“I understand,” Phillippa grinned. “How wise of you to make the traitors think Carlisle is weakened for their attack. You hope to draw them out.”

King Edward started laughing. “You see why I love my good wife. She is even a better strategist than I. I am so fortunate to have her in marriage.”

Ulrich nodded in agreement. “It is the same with my good wife. We are most fortunate men.”

This was Ulrich’s first night away from Jaclyn since their marriage. As a bachelor he never felt alone. As a married man his bed in the pavilion was suddenly a vast lonely cavern. He tossed and turned, but found no sleep. The warm body he had grown accustomed was not there. In the early morning hours, Ulrich’s thoughts were so focused on Jaclyn his need for her became painful. He thought a walk in the cold air would ease his discomfort. He donned his tunic and surcoat and walked outside

his tent. There he stood for a while looking at the flickering campfire.

“You are in discomfort,” Ella commented approaching Ulrich from his side. “I can ease the pain for you.”

Ulrich turned to smile at the camp follower. She once had been his favorite. That was before he married Jaclyn. “I am fully aware that you can, Ella.” He gently rubbed his thumb across her cheek. “I am now married. It would be a sin of adultery to ease my needs.”

“No one would know,” Ella replied. Ulrich had always paid her well. She needed money to keep food on her family’s table.

“I would know. God would know,” Ulrich responded. “I will bear this pain.”

“Your Lady Jaclyn means this much to you?” Ella remarked wistfully.

“She does!” Ulrich declared firmly. “You are a good woman, Ella. I know you do this to feed your family. You will always be allowed to follow the camp, but I would give you missal to become a scullery maid in Carlisle. You will be paid honorably. My good wife would see to it at my request. Return with the queen’s entourage tomorrow with my letter. Wait here. I will write my order and seal it. With the letter I will give you coin for your family.”

“Thank you my Lord,” Ella stated gratefully. “I would be most happy to have a warm hearth for my family every evening.”

“How are your son and mother?” Ulrich queried.

“They are well. On the morrow they will be better,” Ella brightened.

“Stay here,” Ulrich replied grinning. To think of other’s welfare had removed his pain and needs. He returned a few minutes later with a sealed parchment addressed to his wife and a bag of coin. He gave both to Ella. “Give this to Sir Richard Motet. He will see to it that you and your family are taken to my Jaclyn.”

Ella took the parchment and coin purse. “May God bless and keep you.”

“Keep my Jaclyn, Ella. See to her care. She carries my issue and I worry for her,” Ulrich shared emotionally.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♣

“I will care for Lady Jaclyn with my life,” Ella promised. “Someday I would wish I find the great love you and your good wife share.”

“I’m sure you shall,” Ulrich predicted. “Now I find I am fatigued. I must get some rest. I ride this morn.”

Ella did not understand why Ulrich would be leaving the camp this morning. The pavilion and camp wasn’t supposed to be dismantled until tomorrow. They would return to Castle Carlisle tomorrow. She knew better than to ask. There was no need for a camp follower to know the plans of a knight. Should she be captured after a battle, it would be best never to know things.

Chapter 15

“You are being summoned my Lord,” Drogo announced peeking into the pavilion.

“Tell Coll, Hubert, and Siward I am ready to leave,” Ulrich responded adjusting the pin for his mantle. “Drogo, is Orion dressed out?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Drogo answered leaving the pavilion and hurrying to the mounted knights. His palfrey was near Orion. Drogo wanted to be ready when his Lord came from the pavilion.

Ulrich left the pavilion and to everyone’s surprise he wore a simple brown woolen mantel that covered his brown woolen tunic and surcoat. He wore simple woolen chausses.

“What is this?” Coll queried. He was shocked at his Lord’s dress of a lowly baseborn knight.

“A disguise?” Siward asked.

“Firedrake is staying in the pavilion,” Ulrich replied. “If we are to learn anything from the Rievers, I must appear to be a baseborn knight. I doubt they would trust Firedrake.”

“Then we should also have dressed the part,” Hubert stated. “Why did you not tell us of this charade?”

“The Rievers must know we represent Firedrake, the Lord of Carlisle and the Baron of Cumberland, but I don’t believe they would talk to him directly. Therefore, you are his representatives and I a baseborn knight in attendance,” Ulrich explained as he mounted Orion.

“Does a baseborn knight own a Destrier the like of Orion?” Siward teased.

“A baseborn knight could win such a mount in a tournament,” Ulrich retorted.

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

“If you are baseborn,” Hubert commented laughing. “I shall take great pleasure in commanding you.”

“And I,” Coll agreed.

“I shall as well,” Siward concurred. “I do think this will be a most interesting adventure.”

“Watch thy tongues, good knights,” Ulrich warned. “The Firedrake is hidden for a short time. You may yet feel the heat of his breath.”

“We shall be most kind to our baseborn companion,” Siward guffawed. “Most kind indeed.”

Orion turned to see Drogo on his palfrey. “You will not be coming with us Drogo.”

“My Lord, I will not let you leave unattended,” Drogo countered. He was devoted to Ulrich and didn’t understand his Lord’s command.

“We are simple knights on a mission of inquiry,” Ulrich explained. “A servant would antagonize the Rievers. You will return to Carlisle and wait for me there.”

Drogo attempted to speak was silenced by Ulrich’s raised hand. Reluctantly Drogo dismounted and returned to the pavilion. He would begin dismantling Firedrake’s bed and packing his Lord’s personal belongings.

“This will be a rough trip,” Siward commented. “No pavilion, no bed, and no servant.”

“Just like the grand old days,” Coll chortled. “I hope I haven’t grown too soft.”

Ulrich laughed and spurred Orion. “Let’s put ourselves to the trial.”

Two days later a royal entourage approached Carlisle Castle. Joy ran to get Jaclyn.

“My Lady, my Lady,” Joy called after finding Jaclyn in the spinning room. “An entourage approaches. It heralds the banners of King Edward.”

Jaclyn put down her spindle. She went to her chambers to find her warmest mantle. In her heart she hoped Ulrich had come upon King Edward and was returning home. The excitement bubbled inside as she and Joy walked down the castle steps into the bailey. “I don’t see Orion,” Jaclyn said standing on her toes to see

past the many knights surrounding the queen. Beyond her were many wagons. "Ulrich should be near the queen, or the king. Where is King Edward?"

Joy was stretching on her toes like Jaclyn. "It is strange. I see our men, our banners, the queen, her entourage, but I do not see King Edward or our Firedrake."

Jaclyn's joy and hope crashed. She realized as the entourage entered the bailey, Ulrich was not among them.

Queen Phillippa dismounted and first took her baby son in her arms. Prince Edward was a large bundle of furs. She then walked toward Jaclyn. "Greetings Lady Jaclyn."

Jaclyn bowed before the queen. "We welcome your royal person to Carlisle Castle."

"I am pleased to visit," Queen Phillippa acknowledged. "Let us spare the pomp and go to the great hall. It is been a chilly ride and it is near feeding time for my son."

"Of course your Royal Highness," Jaclyn agreed quickly. She led the queen into the castle.

Phillippa was given a large chair closest to the roaring fire.

"This feels wonderful. My toes were nearly numb," Queen Phillippa shivered. She slowly opened the wraps surrounding the sleeping prince.

Jaclyn stared at the baby prince. His cheeks were full and pink. His face was round and cherubic. Small golden curls framed his face. The curls were revealed under a woolen hat with ties under his chin. "He's beautiful," Jaclyn whispered kneeling at the queen's side. Unconsciously Jaclyn slipped the baby's little hand onto her palm. Her fingers stroked the top of Prince Edward's hand.

"I believe our Edward is the handsomest bairn in all of England," Queen Phillippa boasted. "Perhaps the issue of Lady Jaclyn and Firedrake will provide an equally handsome issue."

"You know already," Jaclyn stated as known fact.

"Of course I do," Queen Phillippa chuckled. "Your Firedrake is quite proud and happy."

A tiny grin lifted on the corner of Jaclyn's mouth. "He is quite happy, and protective."

"Would you like to hold him?" Queen Phillippa asked. She saw the longing to do so in Jaclyn's eyes.

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“Oh yes my queen,” Jaclyn returned immediately. She took the prince in her arms. While holding the prince he rolled into her bosom and his little lips made suckling motions. Jaclyn laughed in delight.

Prince Edward didn’t appreciate the humor. When his little lips found cloth instead of nourishment he let out loud angry wails.

Queen Phillippa took Prince Edward back into her arms. She opened her surcoat and tunic allowing her son to suckle. Her ladies in waiting surrounded her and covered her and the Prince with silken cloth allowing for privacy.

Jaclyn couldn’t wait until she could feel the suckling of her own child. Ulrich’s issue was growing in her. Surely his child would be as handsome and perfect.

“My son has a hearty appetite,” Queen Phillippa shared with Jaclyn. “I came here specifically to visit with you. It isn’t often I get to share the happiness of motherhood with someone close to my age.”

Jaclyn was surprised. “I would think the court is filled with young mothers.”

“You don’t come to court very often,” Phillippa chided. “If any Lady breeds she immediately removes her person from the court and goes to the country. The Ladies that stay have no mothering instincts at all. Their minds stay on the court intrigue and power fluctuations.”

Jaclyn blushed. “It is true. I avoid coming to the court because I am uncomfortable with court intrigue.”

“There you have it,” Phillippa laughed. She boosted the little Prince to her shoulder where she lightly patted his back. “I must travel to find women like you for conversation.”

“I beg for your pardon my queen,” Jaclyn replied humbly. “From now on I will journey to London once a year to visit your court.”

Queen Phillippa gently placed a hand upon Jaclyn. “Once every two to three years will be acceptable. I have a feeling Firedrake is going to keep you breeding as my good husband has sworn to keep me.”

Both women laughed.

Prince Edward cooed contentedly in his mother’s arm.

✦ Payton Lee

"It is almost dusk," Coll commented. "Does our baseborn knight have a plan for our rest? I am hungry and tired."

"You've become soft," Ulrich chided.

"I admit it," Coll returned. "A knight in the caravan of Ulrich de Warre, the Firedrake, receives special care from people of the realm. I am used to and like the special treatment."

"You don't intend for us to sleep on the hard cold ground do you?" Hubert asked with concern.

Ulrich guffawed loudly. "No, ahead is a fief. I shall buy for us a soft pallet. I have brought plenty of coin. Here are three bags of coin," Ulrich indicated reaching into his tunic. "One bag for each of you. You of course will pay for me, the baseborn knight."

"A pallet in a hovel or stable might do for a baseborn knight," Siward teased retrieving his bag of coin.

"You will sleep with me in the hay if you do," Ulrich warned light heartedly.

"Since it really is your coin, we shall be most generous to our baseborn knight," Coll volunteered jingling the coin in the leather bag.

"See that you do," Ulrich snickered. "There is the fief. We will go to a hostel."

"Are we near the Riever trail?" Siward queried.

"No, it is another day's ride from here," Ulrich replied. He had learned a great deal on his first travels through this land.

"You needn't play the baseborn then," Coll suggested.

"There are eyes and ears about that are unseen but real," Ulrich enlightened. "Never cease to play the part."

"I shall play the role of your superior with great zeal," Coll chortled.

"Don't over play the part," Ulrich warned. Maybe this wouldn't be such a good idea after all.

The knights soon found themselves enjoying a warm simple meal at a village hostel.

The hostel keeper prepared three straw pallets for the knights to sleep upon.

"It's better than the cold ground," Siward groused.

"Not as good as a wool filled covered matted rest," Coll complained.

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By this time Firedrake was tired of listening to his companions' complaints. He was missing Jaclyn, and that was making him grumpy. He didn't want to listen to any more complaints or he would certainly take out his frustration on them. Ulrich left to take a walk in the cold evening. He was followed.

"You do not care for your companions?" Arthur inquired.

"Not at the moment," Ulrich replied honestly. "They are quite spoiled by a soft life."

"And you are not because you are base born," Arthur stated quietly.

Ulrich grinned. "Actually I am quite spoiled. I have recently married a good wife. She has spoiled me completely and I desire her company." He liked the quiet demeanor of this lowborn serf. At least he was dressed as a serf, but his language was not as rough as it should be. There was obviously more to this man than his appearance. He could be playing a part just as Ulrich.

"Tis good for a man to lust for his wife," Arthur stated. "It shows you are a good man, regardless of being baseborn."

"If lusting for your good wife is the sign of a good man, then I am the best of men," Ulrich jested.

Arthur laughed heartily and joined Ulrich in his walk. "Tell me sir knight, what do your men seek near the Riever's path?"

"You have heard of the ambush of the king's men?" Ulrich queried sensing an opportunity to learn something of the ambush.

"All are talking about it," Arthur returned quickly. "So that is what you seek. You want to find out the perpetrators."

"That is the order of the king. Many fine men were seriously wounded. A good knight died," Ulrich shared sadly. His sorrow was genuine.

Arthur knew Ulrich was stating true feelings. As the head of a Riever clan, he felt the loss of his own fine men on occasion.

"Tis a true sorrow when men of true heart die for treasures of another," Arthur voiced in regrets of his own.

Ulrich stopped in a copse of trees. "Tell me good sir, have you heard which Riever clan stole the king's treasure?"

"I have heard that it was not a Riever clan," Arthur retorted.

"If not a Riever clan, than who?" Ulrich nearly demanded.

✦ Payton Lee

“It is not for me to say,” Arthur clipped. “I only tell you what I have heard. It is told that it was not a Riever’s clan.” Arthur was convinced this was the right man to get the true story to the king. He may be a Riever clan chief, but even a thief had his own honor. He would not allow trouble to the Riever clans for the greed of political power by a renegade Scots Lord.

“Have you heard where we can seek to find the truth of the matter?” Ulrich pushed.

“Perhaps you should follow the path to the borders of Scotland and find answers there,” Arthur answered. “I must leave. My good wife waits my meal. Unlike you, I need not lust for a missing wife.” Arthur gave a curious grin and left Ulrich.

Ulrich returned to the hostel and found his companions preparing to sleep.

“Where have you been?” Coll demanded angrily. He wanted the others to hear his authoritative voice. He quieted quickly and whispered. “Have you learned anything?”

“Good Lord, I took only a short walk,” Ulrich replied normally. He sank to his knees and answered Coll quietly. “I’ve learned only that I was right. It was not Rievers that ambushed the king’s treasury and guard.”

“If not Rievers, then why do we follow their path?” Siward queried.

“The Rievers have a strict code. It will be the Rievers that lead us to the traitors,” Ulrich replied. “I am more convinced than ever this is fact. Why else would a serf come to speak to a baseborn knight? It was obvious to me this serf was not as he seemed, but a Riever chief.”

“What is to follow?” Hubert asked covering the straw with a woolen blanket.

“We continue to follow the Rievers path until we meet more Riever clans and chiefs,” Ulrich explained.

“What is that going to accomplish?” Siward demanded. “We know that is was traitors to the king,” Hubert agreed. “We’ll go to Scotland and bring them back!”

“Find the fox in his own lair?” Ulrich chuckled. “No my good friends. We will need the Rievers to bring them to us.”

“Ulrich’s plan is good,” Coll concurred. “The winter is nearly upon us. We will never be able to hunt the traitors in

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Scotland and bring them back before we are snowed in. If the Rievers cannot deliver them to us, Ulrich has laid the seeds to bring them into capture.”

“Is that truly your plan?” Siward queried his Lord Firedrake.

“It is. Coll is a wise old warrior. He sees the logistics of a plan,” Ulrich bragged for his knight companion.

“If that is what you believe,” Coll guffawed. “Actually I see the desire and need for your beautiful good wife. You will not journey too far and not be able to return to spend the winter sharing your pallet with the warmth of a beautiful wife.”

“As I said, you are a wise warrior with the foresight of logistics,” Ulrich chortled. He laid his head upon the wool blanket covering the straw. Soon he was dreaming of his Jaclyn.

Chapter 16

“Where is Lady Jaclyn?” Queen Phillippa asked Joy.

“In the eastern tower of Carlisle Castle,” Joy announced. “She goes there every day before dusk. She stares out into the great forest looking for her Firedrake to return.”

“Today she will have company,” Phillippa quipped. She turned around and walked to the steps that would lead her to the steps of the tower.

Joy followed. The steps to the tower were narrow. Lord Baldric had placed handholds along the wall, but she wanted to make certain the queen would ascend the stairs safely.

“What do you see in the forest?” Queen Phillippa laughed. “My dear Lady Jaclyn, you are caught in a case of severe melancholies. You know a knight must leave at times and serve our good king.”

“Yes, but not my Firedrake,” Jaclyn sighed. “I had no idea such a separation would be so difficult.”

“You have his issue to keep you company,” Phillippa reminded.

“I don’t even feel like a breeder. I feel no life, no movement,” Jaclyn revealed. “I am frightened.”

Queen Phillippa placed her hand upon Jaclyn’s arm reassuringly. “You will feel life soon. You are past the first trimester. Your belly begins to round. You will feel your issue soon. I promise you.”

Tears poured from Jaclyn’s eyes. “Would I miss my husband so deeply if I did feel my issue?”

“Of course you would, but the child would remind you of his nearness always. The life you created together will be your

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responsibility,” Phillippa replied lovingly stroking Jaclyn’s rounded belly.

“He has been away for two lunar cycles,” Jaclyn stated more to herself than the queen. “The winter winds are cold and fierce. The air smells of a cold and hard snow.”

“Yes, I know,” Queen Phillippa agreed. “This is why I have come here. My husband the king has sent for me. We must return to London before the winter snows prohibit our return.”

“Thank you for staying so long with me,” Jaclyn appreciated taking the queen’s hands. “You helped make the time go by.”

“You gave me great company,” Phillippa grinned. “My husband needed time to discuss many things with Lord Baldric. Some were my projects and others were important for the realm and peace between our kingdom and Scotland. This time gave me opportunity to share motherhood with a good friend.”

“You are indeed a fine friend. I must thank you for everything you taught me. I will follow what you taught me about breeding, partition, and caring for the infant,” Jaclyn acknowledged gratefully. “It is time for the evening meal. We will eat.”

“God’s teeth, I am ravenous,” Phillippa chortled.

“When will you be leaving for Penrith?” Jaclyn asked walking toward the steps with the queen.

“We leave on the morn,” Phillippa replied. “King Edward was most specific. My ladies are already packing for the journey.”

“No one shall find our bodies until spring,” Coll grumbled. “We should have never stayed near Scotland so long.” He was shivering uncontrollably. The winter storm had covered them with ice and snow as they trekked through the forest.

“And we still did not find the bounders,” Siward complained with his teeth chattering.

“I don’t want to freeze to death in a forest,” Hubert whined.

The snowstorm was fierce. The wind was slicing through the three riders like a knife.

“Carlisle Castle is near,” Ulrich promised. “We won’t die. I can’t die. I have my Jaclyn.” The thoughts of his wife kept him going. They had just passed a fief when the snowstorm struck. He

should have stayed there for the night, but Carlisle was close. Jaclyn was close. It was too late to go back to the fief and he knew home was close.

Orion was faithful throughout the onslaught of the icy snow. His instincts told him home was near. He smelled the hay and the mares of the castle. Without spurs or reins, Orion led the other horses toward the castle.

Ulrich was nearly frozen. He had faith in Orion. The forest was familiar, but he wasn't certain how close he was to home. Beneath him, the Destrier seemed to know where he was going. He let Orion take his own head. Suddenly Orion picked up his pace. It was a sudden burst of energy.

The other horses followed suit. The frozen limbs of the knights responded in pain at the increased pace of their mounts.

The storm intensified. They couldn't see four feet ahead.

"Come along," Joy ordered. "It is freezing up here."

"He'll be coming home soon. I just know it," Jaclyn replied pulling her fur-lined mantel about her closer for warmth. Suddenly she felt a flutter. "Oh!"

"What is it?" Joy asked worriedly reaching to hold her lady.

"It is the child! I felt the child!" Jaclyn exclaimed happily. "Queen Phillippa told me it would be like this."

Joy hugged her lady.

At that moment Jaclyn noticed shadows emerging from the forest edge on the east side of the castle. She pulled away from Joy's happy embrace. The four snow encrusted knights slowly took form. She recognized Orion. "My Lord! He's home! Ulrich is home!"

Joy looked through the opening. "It is the Lord Firedrake."

"Set the ladies to prepare hot mead, warm woolen blankets, and raise the hearth fires quickly. Send the chamberlain to put peat pots beneath the pallets," Jaclyn ordered nearly running down the stairs. "Bring fur robes to the great hall."

Joy followed her mistress in the same haste. She was saying prayers to the holy mother for returning the Lord of the Castle safely. More importantly the prayers were for the father of

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the unborn child. She was becoming very concerned about her lady and her depression in her husband's absence.

Jaclyn ran through the castle halls, down the stairs into the bailey and was at the castle gates when Orion brought his nearly frozen master into the keep.

Ulrich saw his Jaclyn and his heart beat faster. He was home at last and he was alive. He was cold, but he was alive. Ulrich managed to halt Orion long enough to slide off.

Jaclyn's arms were waiting for her nearly frozen husband. Fortunately the herald had announced the arrival of the knights. Several of the household servants surrounded the four knights and covered them with fur robes. Others brought out hot mead. The knights took the hot mead gratefully.

Ulrich walked stiffly next to Jaclyn. Unbelievably, as small as she was, Jaclyn carried Ulrich's great weight upon her shoulders. He was so cold he could barely force his legs to walk.

Men at arms also assisted Coll, Siward, and Hubert into the great hall. The hearth was blazing hot. Several chairs were placed in the front of the fire and the four knights were covered with fur robes.

Ulrich drank the hot mead gratefully. He was beginning to feel his arms and legs once more. From beneath the warm fox robes he watched Jaclyn lead the evening meal. She brought trenchers to his knights and sat at his feet. Looking up lovingly into his eyes she fed him with her own hand. Unfortunately he was still shivering even in the warmth.

Jaclyn feared for her husband. There was a great chance her love would catch the winter ague.

"Come to me wife," Ulrich ordered lifting the fox robe. He enjoyed the hot meal and wanted to enjoy the flavor of his Jaclyn.

Obediently Jaclyn crawled into Ulrich's lap. She inhaled his essence. How she missed his special musk and leather aroma. When he bathed he always used sandalwood. She felt his arms enfold her and the fox fall around them. It was a warm and safe cocoon for just them.

Ulrich placed his lips upon Jaclyn.

Jaclyn opened her mouth to Ulrich's invasion in complete surrender. At last she was where she was happiest. As Ulrich placed his lips upon hers Jaclyn realized that he was burning hot,

✦ Payton Lee

but he was shivering violently as if cold. Immediately Jaclyn realized her husband was ill. He would need her care. Pulling away Jaclyn whispered, "Husband, let us go to our bed chambers."

"I'm cold, so very cold," Ulrich returned. "The fire will warm me."

"No, my husband. The fire will not warm you. You are ill and need my attentions," Jaclyn countered. "Come with me to the bed chamber."

"I don't feel well," Ulrich confessed.

"You are ill," Jaclyn soothed. "Come with me and I will minister to you. I will make you well again."

"I trust you with my life," Ulrich murmured. He palmed Jaclyn's rounded abdomen. "Our issue grows within you."

"Our issue leaped for joy when you approached," Jaclyn shared.

"My son knows his father," Ulrich uttered lovingly through his weariness. "You will give me a healthy son."

"Of course," Jaclyn promised. "Now come with me." She removed the fox robe and rose from Ulrich's lap.

Ulrich stood and felt lightheaded. "Hurry, I feel weak kneed."

As quickly as possible Jaclyn led Ulrich to the room. They barely made it to the bed pallet when Ulrich collapsed upon it. Jaclyn called for Drogo and with Joy they managed to undress the knight.

"He's burning up," Joy commented.

"An old woman of knowledge once told me that snow will help bring down the temperature," Jaclyn told Joy. "Send the servants to bring in buckets of snow from outside."

Drogo argued, "He comes nearly frozen and you wish to freeze him again? You will kill him! We should send for a physician and barber to bleed him."

Both Joy and Jaclyn said in unison, "Be Still!"

Joy left the room and soon had many buckets full of snow brought in the chamber.

Jaclyn and Joy continued applying snow throughout the night to keep the fever down. The servants of Carlisle continued to bring fresh snow all night to the bedchamber.

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Coll, Siward, and Hubert also became ill, but theirs was limited to congestion and sneezing.

Jaclyn found out that because they complained so much, Ulrich gave them the extra robes and blankets. He also ate little. When Siward came to visit he informed Jaclyn that Ulrich was always pining for her and had little appetite.

Jaclyn was fearful the next afternoon when Ulrich's temperature still had not broken. Ulrich was delusional and calling her name throughout the night and day. He professed his love for her and his joy at their issue. He relived many battles and Jaclyn learned how he received the many scars on his body. She learned of the battle, the blood, and the revulsion Ulrich felt looking upon the carnage after the battle.

"My lady," Joy interrupted handing her a trencher. "You must eat."

"He is not recovering," Jaclyn cried. "His body still burns to the touch."

"He will be well," Joy reassured. "I know he will. You must eat. If you become ill, Firedrake will be angry with me. I will not have that."

"Joy, what shall I do if I lose him?" Jaclyn queried with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You will not lose him," Joy promised. "He will get better. I know it. Eat!"

Jaclyn ate some meat, potatoes, and vegetables from the trencher. She would have choked on the food for the tears if not for the mead Joy forced her to drink.

When Jaclyn had finished her evening meal she returned to Ulrich's side. He started thrashing about violently in delirium. Jaclyn spoke soothingly to him as Joy ran to get men at arms to hold him down. Several minutes later four men holding Firedrake down allowed Drogo to restrain his master on the pallet with leather strapping.

Jaclyn left the room to regain control of her emotions. She was terrified. She was wondering if the packing of snow on Ulrich was the right thing to do. Could she indeed be killing her husband?

Joy placed her hand on Jaclyn's shoulder. "The burning will cease. I know it."

✦ Payton Lee

Jaclyn collapsed into Joy's arms. She sobbed freely until there were no more tears. Wiping her eyes with the sleeves of her tunic Jaclyn returned to the bedchamber.

Ulrich was quiet, very quiet.

Jaclyn ran to the bedside. She feared the worst. To her surprise Ulrich was breathing more regularly. His rasping breaths had stopped. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow. Jaclyn dug away the applied snow with her hands. She ordered Drogo and the men at arms to remove Ulrich's wet tunic while she and Joy removed the wet sheets and blankets replacing them with warm dry ones.

Soon Ulrich was sweating profusely under covers of woolen blankets and fur robes.

Jaclyn was crying with happiness. Ulrich's fever had finally broken. He would be all right if he didn't get the lung fever. In the hearth Jaclyn ordered a cauldron of hot chicken broth be placed in readiness. Once Ulrich woke, she would see to it that he took the soup. Cold water was on a table next to the bed for him to drink, and Joy had left to prepare teas, potions, and medicines for her lord.

Slowly Ulrich's lashes fluttered until Jaclyn saw his eyes open. His lips moved slowly and his hand reached from under to the robes to his lips. Fever blisters were evident.

"Thirsty," Ulrich croaked.

Jaclyn reached for the cold water and poured some into a goblet. Drogo lifted his master's head and Jaclyn poured a little into Ulrich's mouth. She couldn't allow him to drink too much at a time. It would make him vomit. Every hour for the next day Drogo would lift Ulrich allowing Jaclyn to pour a little water down her husband's throat. In the morning Jaclyn cooled some hot chicken broth and spooned a small amount into Ulrich's mouth with Drogo's assistance.

The two persisted in this care for several days.

Slowly Ulrich started regaining his strength. A week later Ulrich was using the chamber pot without assistance. He was also beginning to eat solid food again.

"I'm ravenous, good wife," Ulrich bellowed. "When are you going to stop feeding me this porridge and bring me mead and a trencher?"

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“My, we are in a foul state this morning,” Jaclyn teased cheerfully. She was thrilled her husband was gaining his strength and would soon be well again.

“You are starving me,” Ulrich complained. “My health would improve in greater haste should I receive a solid meal.”

“Drogo will bring your trencher this morning,” Jaclyn related bending over to kiss her husband’s cheek.

Ulrich took advantage of Jaclyn’s nearness and palmed her rounded belly.

“I was beginning to think you were eating my share of food,” Ulrich laughed. “Your waist grows much wider each day.”

“In truth I must confess I do eat a portion of your allowance,” Jaclyn returned. “For I must eat for the growing and greedy issue of the Firedrake.”

Ulrich pulled Jaclyn until she lay on top of him. “Jaclyn, I love you.”

Jaclyn laid her head upon Ulrich’s chest and sighed contentedly.

Chapter 17

Ulrich looked from the dais to see his Jaclyn entering the great hall. She was so large with his child she waddled like a duck as she walked. There was no doubt in his mind that Jaclyn would bear him a large healthy son. Was there no end to his debt to his wife? She had saved him from death twice and would be giving him an heir. She would suffer great pain to do so. Ulrich had been listening to women talk. He pretended he was watching the men, but while sitting at night in front of the great hearth, he was listening to Joy, and the chambermaids talk to his blessed Jaclyn. Was there any way he could take away the pain from his wife in giving birth? He owed that to her. How could the Lord God Jehovah make a woman as wonderful as his Jaclyn suffer? He took an oath silently to prevent his Jaclyn from suffering in childbirth.

Jaclyn noticed her husband's frown when she came near the dais to be seated next to him for breaking fast. Gently placing her hand upon Ulrich's wrist she asked, "What troubles you so my Lord de Warre? The winds bring us promises of warmer weather as it carries its aromas of newly born flowers."

"That is what troubles me good wife," Ulrich responded pressing his lips to Jaclyn's forehead.

Jaclyn pulled back quickly. "Warmer weather or flowers trouble you?" How could life renewed bother her husband?

"Neither," Ulrich replied sadly. "I worry for the newly born."

Jaclyn was truly confused. "I don't understand?"

Leaning to rest his lips upon Jaclyn's ear, Ulrich answered, "You are nearing partition. I hear the women talking of the travail. I fear for you. I do not want you to suffer in any form."

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“It is the way of birth,” Jaclyn reassured quietly. “I am assured that as soon as the child is born the woman forgets all her pain. Do you remember the pain of your wounds from battle?”

Ulrich’s brow creased. “I do. It was horrible.”

“That was a bad example,” Jaclyn retracted quickly. “A child born is a miracle. We are blessed by forgetfulness.”

“I shall pray at mass every morn that this be so,” Ulrich responded. “I shall also pray that you feel little pain.”

“We must also pray for a healthy child,” Jaclyn reminded lovingly.

“My son is healthy,” Ulrich stated flatly. “He kicks my ribs every night when I try desperately to fold my good wife in my arms.”

“We might have a daughter,” Jaclyn suggested stifling a chuckle at the convictions of her husband.

“A daughter would not kick her father with such force,” Ulrich explained reasonably.

Jaclyn could no longer hold her laughter. “If your daughter is a strong woman she would.”

Ulrich joined in the jest. “If she is a woman of strength like her mother we might indeed breed such a daughter.” Ulrich based his assumptions on the strength of the baby’s movements in Jaclyn’s abdomen. How he adored holding Jaclyn. He loved sharing the movement of his child in her womb. He hadn’t thought of a girl baby in strength, but knowing his wife he had to concede it might be a daughter. It didn’t matter to him if it were male or female. He didn’t want his Jaclyn to suffer.

“I am content you agree,” Jaclyn offered. “What are your plans today my lord?”

“Odo and I must ride on the many fiefs surrounding Carlisle. We must tally the fields and products our serfs are planting,” Ulrich replied. “I will wander no more than a daylight ride. I wish to be near when you deliver our issue.”

Jaclyn gave her husband a loving glance. The fierce Firedrake was a gentle and loving husband. She was happy and content in their marriage. Happiness seemed to bubble up from within. She had a good and loving husband, she would have her own child, and her sisters and father would be visiting soon. Springtime was indeed the renewal of life.

✦ Payton Lee

“The sheep are lambing,” Odo added. “We must keep count and manage the reproductions for inventory.”

Both Jaclyn and Ulrich glared at Odo.

“Thank you for reminding me that birth is inventoried,”

Jaclyn snapped. Odo with his logic and math had spoiled the magic of the moment. She also felt another band round her abdomen. It was mild, but she wondered if the child would be born soon. She had not felt any movement since yesterday and when she placed her hand upon her belly during a binding, it felt hard. This matched the description of childbirth Queen Phillipa had discussed with her. Still she felt no hard pain, so she ignored it.

Ulrich mounted Orion to accompany Odo on the management rounds. He took his favorite companions, Coll, Siward, and Hubert. Ten men at arms also accompanied them on palfreys.

Jaclyn watched Ulrich mount and waved to him from a window in the great hall that over looked the bailey grounds. After he spurred the great Destrier she felt another band. This one lasted longer and seemed to take her breath away.

Joy watched her mistress bend slightly and hold her abdomen.

A minute or so later Jaclyn returned to her duties. She was helping the servants lift the cloths from the tables to wash them for the evening meal.

It was not much later when Joy noticed her mistress once again holding her belly and breathing irregularly. She was concerned. Joy ran to her Jaclyn. “What is it my lady?”

“I don’t know,” Jaclyn replied breathing heavily. I feel banding, but I do not feel any great travail.”

“Come with me to the solar,” Joy commanded. “If nothing else this is a sign you must rest.” Joy led her through the great hall taking her to the woman’s solar. “Lie on the pallet. I will return momentarily. I shall send for the midwives and send word to Firedrake.”

Jaclyn immediately protested, “Do not send for Ulrich. We don’t know what this is. He has his work to do. I will not interfere unless it is necessary. Let the midwives decide what is to be.”

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“I will not send word to Ulrich if you promise you will stay in the solar until I return,” Joy commanded.

“You have my word,” Jaclyn obeyed. “I don’t feel very much like wandering about at the moment.” She was having another band sweep around her.

Joy noticed her mistress and her distress. She decided to run and find the midwives.

In less than an hour, the midwives walked with Joy into the woman’s solar.

Jaclyn turned to look at them with a worried brow. “I am wet. It is water and blood?”

The oldest of the midwives was the first at Jaclyn’s side. “Do not fear my child. It is only your bag of waters that has broken. Your issue is ready to be born. Have you great pain?”

“No, I have no pain at all,” Jaclyn answered worriedly. “Could something be amiss?”

The old midwife patted her hand. “Every bairn comes into the world differently, but some things are the same. Your waters have broken and your banding is hard. You are doing very well. To make sure you are comfortable I have brought tinctures for you to drink to ease any discomfort.

The other midwives helped Jaclyn undress and helped her put on a clean white linen chemise. They washed Jaclyn’s legs preparing her for the birth.

Walking Jaclyn about the old midwife kept her hand upon Jaclyn’s abdomen.

“We should send for Firedrake,” Joy mentioned during the walks.

“How much longer?” Jaclyn asked wearily. She was getting tired.

“From experiences I would say the bairn will be born by evening meal,” the old midwife decreed. “You may rest for awhile.”

“Bless you,” Jaclyn breathed in relief. She sat down to rest on the birthing chair. She still felt no great discomfort, but the reassurances of the midwife calmed her fears.

✦ Payton Lee

“No more,” Ulrich growled. He was bored to tears with the sheep counting. “We must get back to Carlisle. It is not much longer to evening meal.”

“This is the last count,” Odo promised. “We’ll begin the fief of Hill and Montclair on the morrow.”

“Orion is fatigued,” Ulrich informed hoping to hurry Odo’s count.

“And you are bored,” Odo snickered. “The count is complete. The old and new lambs are inventoried. We may return home.”

“With us we bring mutton for next eve’s meal,” Coll announced pointing to one of the men at arms leading a sheep with a rope.

“Where did you get that?” Ulrich demanded.

“A gift from the shepherdess. It seems last lambing she became ill. The Lady Jaclyn came from Carlisle and tended to her. She was recovered in two days and capable to tend the sheep. It is a gift for Lady Jaclyn,” Coll explained.

“Your good wife is well loved in the fiefs of Carlisle,” Siward stated. “We are asked continually from all the serfs regarding the Lady Jaclyn’s health. The all are concerned for her well being and the birth of her issue.”

“My issue,” Ulrich corrected. “Odo, enough! We will return now!” He had promised Jaclyn he would return by evening meal and he intended to keep that promise.

Odo rolled the parchment and placed it in the leather pouch. “We are completed here.”

They group returned at evening meal. Ulrich looked for Jaclyn at the gate. The herald would announce his return and she would be at the gate to meet him. This time she was not. He rode Orion to the stable for the groomsman. Still looking about he did not see Jaclyn. Perhaps she was engaged in her duties because it was evening meal. He ignored the rest of his group and walked briskly across the bailey to the great hall. He shouldn’t worry so much, but when you have a wife as good and as precious as his Jaclyn a man should worry. He looked about the great hall, but still not see her. His worried brow eased when he watched Drogo approach. Surely Drogo would know where Jaclyn was.

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“My Lord Firedrake,” Drogo greeted joyfully. “I wish to be the first to offer my congratulations.”

“Jaclyn?”

“Your heir was born during vespers,” Drogo announced. “I’ve been told he is a fine healthy boy child that looks very much like you?”

Ulrich was dumbfounded. “Why did no one send for me?”

“I do not know,” Drogo replied. “I was first told of the child by Ella who was in attendance. She is as pleased as if it were her own issue.”

Reaching for some logic in his confused mind Ulrich asked, “Where is my Jaclyn?”

“Lady Jaclyn and your son are in the women’s solar,” Drogo replied.

Before Drogo could volunteer to lead Ulrich to the women’s solar he could not find his lord. Ulrich had bounded up the steps.

Ulrich’s heart was racing. He had a son. Jaclyn was up in the solar. Was she all right? He had wanted to be there when his son was born. Did she suffer much pain? He threw the door open and everyone in the solar jumped when the oaken door made a large thud as it hit the stone of the wall. He didn’t wait to be invited in. In one glance he saw Jaclyn sitting upright on the pallet. She looked angelic with her hair flowing down her chemise. Her cheeks were rosy and an almost ethereal glow surrounded her. In her arms was a small swaddling bundle. Instantly Ulrich was kneeling at Jaclyn’s bedside.

“Would you like to see your son and heir?” Jaclyn beamed.

Ulrich placed his hand on Jaclyn’s arm. “Was it difficult? Painful?”

“Jaclyn smiled broadly. “I can assure you if all are similar to the birth of your first son, we shall have many more.”

Ulrich looked doubtful.

“Tis the truth my good husband,” Jaclyn reassured. “Look at your son.” She lifted a swaddling cloth from the newly born. “He looks just like you.”

Ulrich wrinkled his nose. “I look so red and wrinkled?”

Jaclyn laughed, “No my husband, look! He has your nose, eyes, hands, toes, and hair. See?”

✦ Payton Lee

Ulrich's large hand moved the cloth further.

The infant's little hand grasped the finger of his father and held on to it.

Ulrich radiated. "The boy is strong!"

"Would you like to hold your heir?" Jaclyn queried.

Ulrich looked at Jaclyn with almost terror. "The boy is fragile. I could break him. Besides, I don't know how to hold a child. I've never held one before.

Joy came up behind Ulrich and took one arm and cradled the other upon it. "You hold him between."

"Should I? I mean could I?" Ulrich asked hesitantly.

Jaclyn raised her arms lifting the newly born to her husband's arms. "Tis the first time I ever held your son. You should hold him."

Ulrich bent over the bed allowing Jaclyn to place their son in the cradle of his arms. With the baby in his arms he stood straight. The little bundle moved in his arms. Ulrich looked down upon his son and immediately felt a deep love. This was the creation of his love for Jaclyn. Here was a life created by the two of them. His reverie was interrupted when he finally heard Jaclyn's question.

"What shall we name our son?"

"Phillip, for today is the feast of Saint Phillip. Tis a godly name. It is the name of my father," Ulrich replied. "Would you agree?"

"The perfect name," Jaclyn concurred. Secretly she had hoped Phillip would be his name. In a way it honored Queen Phillippa in her mind.

"Does he have everything? I mean, does he have the right number of fingers and toes?" Ulrich queried. He was mesmerized by the little creation. He wondered if this is what King Edward felt when he held his heir, Prince Edward.

"He is perfect in every way," Jaclyn answered. "Just as his father is perfect."

"I must show him. Carlisle Castle will see their new heir," Ulrich bragged.

"Do not keep him too long from his mother," Joy ordered. "Ella, go with our Firedrake and watch out for the bairn."

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Ulrich still holding Phillip walked down the castle stairs to the great hall. When he entered, all the guests rose from their table and meal to cheer exuberantly.

Ulrich announced his son in a thunderous voice, "Phillip Ulrich Baldrick de Warre. Meet the heir to Cumberland, heir to Carlisle Castle, and my issue."

There were more cheers and toasts.

The noise startled the little Phillip and he began to wail. Softly Ulrich spoke to his son and rocked him gently. When Phillip quieted he grinned broadly and addressed Ella. "Being a father is not so hard."

Ella giggled. "It is this easy until your son becomes hungry. Let me take him back to Lady Jaclyn."

"Very well," Ulrich conceded. "Tell my good wife I shall host the evening meal and then return to her side."

Ella took little Phillip. "You are not allowed to spend the night in the woman's solar, my lord. It is not done after the bairn is born. You must allow your good wife to heal."

"No one will keep me from my good wife, my Madonna, my Jaclyn," Ulrich roared causing Phillip to cry once more. Immediately repentant he said softly, "I will bring a pallet and sleep in front of the solar. I will at least be near to my good wife and son. I find my night is fit full if I do not have my Jaclyn at my side."

Ella laughed heartily, "As you wish my lord. We will try not to stumble over you in the morning." She couldn't help but be a little jealous of the love between Jaclyn and Ulrich.

Chapter 18

“What news brings you to my manor?” Mercer roared. Malise had barged into his private study.

Malise had ridden hard to bring the news. He had been at the secret lair waiting word from Seward. Malise was furious when word of the birth had finally reached him. Seward was far more controllable before he met the Lady Ella. This woman had taken control of him and she was devoutly loyal to the Lady Jaclyn. Malise had to convince Seward he was only interested in finding out if an heir would be born. Seward did not send word until two weeks after the birth. Malise was furious. When he rode to Mercer he learned that the news was spread amongst the Rievers almost as soon as the birth occurred. He also learned that there was a devotion to Lady Jaclyn by the Rievers. She had nursed many of their wounds and sent food and clothing to their families during long hard winters. She was a saint to the Rievers.

“The heir of Cumberland has been born,” Malise huffed out.

Mercer sat back against his chair. “It is a male child then.”

“Aye,” Malise concurred. “They gave the child the surname Phillip.”

“How long?” Mercer queried.

“Less than a fortnight,” Malise answered.

“It is time to bring her and the bairn to me,” Mercer stated casually rising from his chair. He wanted two things in life. One was Castle Carlisle and the other was the Lady Jaclyn. She was his greatest obsession. He had spent time as a guest in Castle Carlisle two years ago and offered his pledge to the Lady Jaclyn. He had

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fallen in love with her. She was beautiful, kind, and gentle. Lord Baldrick turned down his offer of marriage. The king would never allow a Scot to be Lord of Cumberland.

"The Lady Jaclyn and the bairn?" Malise asked with great surprise.

"Aye," Mercer replied coolly and with deadly intent. "Bring them both alive to the Gregory fief on the border of Cumberland. Make certain neither is harmed. You may threaten the life of the bairn to control Lady Jaclyn, but do not harm either one."

"It will be difficult to trap them both," Malise replied uncomfortably.

"Get the bairn, the Lady Jaclyn will follow meekly," Mercer commanded. "Use your good wife. Get her to possess the bairn and go from there. I will wait seven den and leave for the fief. Be there when I arrive."

Malise bowed and retreated from the study. How would he handle Meg? His wife would never agree to steal a baby. She had scolded him time and time again that he shouldn't be so greedy going for the gold coin Mercer gave. Instead, he should be content with what they had and enjoy their three children. He never told her he not only liked the gold coin. He was also afraid of Lord Mercer. Perhaps this is the correct time to admit his fear.

"Call the physician!" Ulrich roared loudly. His voice echoing throughout the halls woke nearly everyone from a deep sleep.

Jaclyn woke with a start. Ulrich's voice was tinged with panic. As she focused her eyes she saw Ulrich was pale with fear and holding their son. Panic immediately seized Jaclyn's heart. Was her baby dead? No, the mighty roar of the Firedrake had startled Phillip and he was crying. Pushing her soft quilt aside she rose and ran to her panicked husband. "What is it?"

"My lady, my love, my good wife. I fear our son is ill. Or bewitched," Ulrich replied choking back tears.

"Bewitched?" Jaclyn gasped reaching for her son.

Ulrich pulled the squalling Phillip closer to his chest to prevent Jaclyn from retrieving her son. "No my love. We must have a physician look at our son."

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Jaclyn became furious. She had no idea what was causing Ulrich to behave so strangely. What was he ranting over?

“Give me the child!” Ella commanded her Lord and unafraid of her audacity. “You come in the Ladies Solar in the wee hours of the morning. You bellow like an old boar waking us all. Be shamed Lord of Cumberland. Give me the child. You have frightened the bairn.

Ulrich lowered his head and whispered, “Ella, our son is scaled like a dragon. Our good wife would be frightened. Our son is ill. Bewitched.”

“What?” Ella screeched in disbelief. “Are you daft mon?”

Ulrich creased his brows in anger. “See!” Ulrich roared lifting the cover from little Phillip’s head. “His skin scales like a Firedrake. Our son is bewitched.”

“Scales?” Jaclyn snickered retrieving Phillip from Ulrich. She cuddled her son and cooed to him softly.

Phillip calmed and nestled into his mother’s arms.

The Joy and Ella covered their mouth with hands so they would not laugh too loudly.

Ulrich was furious. He was worried for his son and these women were laughing. “Have all of you become bewitched? Can you not see the skin peeling from our Phillip like scales of a dragon?”

Ella offered the first retort. “In the first place, what are you doing here? Men are not allowed in the Ladies solar when the door is shut for the night. In the second place, there is nothing wrong with your son.”

Joy continued, “If you had calmly asked us about the newborn skin, I would have told you this is quite normal for newly born. The skin they are born with is a special skin while they live in their mother’s waters. Once born they develop a new skin and shed the old.”

“This is normal?” Ulrich gulped.

Jaclyn touched her husband’s arm gently. “Very normal. Do not be upset with yourself. You are a loving and caring sire.” She held back a chuckle. Ulrich really had been frightened even if his fear was silly.

Ulrich sat down in a chair. “Are there other things men do not know about these little beings?”

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“Many things my Lord,” Ella snorted. “If you see something different or unusual, be sure to ask us first.”

“I would feel a great fool, if I were not so relieved our son is well,” Ulrich stated sitting down on a chair.

“We would ready ourselves for morning mass,” Joy announced. “Will you take your leave my Lord?”

This time Ulrich blushed. He rose quickly to leave the room.

Jaclyn walked with Ulrich to the door. She stood on her tiptoes to give Ulrich a loving peck. “You are a wonderful husband and sire. I love you.”

Ulrich encircled Jaclyn with his arms. “I miss holding you the night. How much longer will my thoughts be full and my arms empty?”

Jaclyn leaned her head on Ulrich’s chest. “I am hoping soon my husband, for I miss your embrace and loving. I must have my first mense before I can return to our chamber.”

“Have it soon,” Ulrich whispered longingly. He released his embrace of Jaclyn and returned to their bedchamber where the chamberlain was waiting with readiness for a shave and hot bath.

Meg had managed to work her way up to the Ladies Solar. She heard a voice singing a lullaby. She would never think of doing what had to be done if her husband hadn’t told her that his life was in danger if they didn’t bring this lady and her new bairn to the Lord Mercer. Meg crossed herself. She begged forgiveness from God to forgive her and entered the room.

Joy was bending over the cradle singing a happy little ditty to Phillip. Suddenly there was a thud. Joy felt pain in the back of her head and blackness overtook her. She slumped and fell to the floor.

Meg looked about the room and found a leather bag. She packed it with moss and swaddling. Reaching into the cradle she picked up the cooing and happy little Phillip. Meg smiled at the little boy. “You are a treasure little one. I will be gentle, see to your needs, and take care so no harm comes to you.” Meg placed the note in the cradle. “I’m so sorry little one, but I must protect my mon and the sire of my own children.” Meg covered little Phillip hugging him close to her breast. She bent down to see

where she had placed the piece of paper. The Castle was busy preparing to break fast and she slipped out unnoticed.

“Come to me my little darling,” Jaclyn sang entering the Ladies Solar. She was returning from mass and wanted to change Phillip’s swaddling before going to the great hall to break fast. She stopped short to see Joy on the floor face down next to the cradle. The cradle was empty except for a piece of paper. Jaclyn ran and snatched the paper. Her heart sank when she read the roughly scrawled note. “Keep your head,” Jaclyn cautioned herself. “Think! Think calmly!” She took a deep breath and knelt beside her maid and friend. Joy was alive but unconscious. There was a bump on the back of her head.

“Oohhh,” Joy groaned reaching to the bump on the back of her head. “Who hit me?”

“Or what hit you?” Jaclyn consoled using all her restraint to hide her terror. “I think something may have loosened from the wall and fell on you. Whatever it is, I’m relieved you are all right.”

Joy sat on her haunches and peered into the cradle. “Where is our bairn?” She was suddenly concerned and worried something happened to Phillip.

“We found you on the floor. I instructed Ella to take Phillip outside for some sun and I would tend to you,” Jaclyn lied.

“Well I’m fine. I’ve got work to be done,” Joy grumped rising from the floor.

Jaclyn offered her hand to help Joy stand upright. “I will go to the great hall after I see my husband. There is something I need to do.”

“I’ll see you in the great hall,” Joy responded still rubbing her head. She left the Ladies Solar and started her descent to the kitchens.

Jaclyn choked back her tears and walked briskly to their bedchamber. She was hoping Ulrich had already dressed and was waiting for her in the great hall. Her plan was to slip into their bedchamber, open the chest, and take a pouch full of gold coin as the note instructed. She would return immediately with their child. Deep inside she felt worried that there was danger for her, but brushed it aside. If their baby were taken for money, there

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wouldn't be any amount of money in the castle she wouldn't take to keep her Phillip safe.

"Good wife!" Ulrich greeted happily rising from the bed where he had just tied his chausses. "Come to my arms and give me pleasure from your lips."

Jaclyn once again covered her emotions and nearly ran into Ulrich's embrace. She choked back tears when he pulled her to his chest. She heard the powerful rhythmic beat of his heart. How she missed this security and sense of contentment during her confinement. If only she could tell Ulrich. He would be strong. He would take the entire castle force to retrieve their son. She couldn't tell him. The note said she must bring the money alone or they would kill her baby son. She trembled.

"Good wife, are you ill? You are trembling," Ulrich asked in concern.

Jaclyn drew in a deep breath. She kept her face on Ulrich's chest and placed her hands around his strong abdomen. She knew her eyes would betray her fears. "I tremble to be held by my powerful firedrake. It has been too long since I enjoyed the warm embrace of my husband."

"Ah my Madonna," Ulrich laughed. "I have missed your warm body more than you could imagine. I hope soon to have you in my pallet once more, madam."

Jaclyn sighed, "Soon, very soon." When she said the words a sense of unknown dread took hold.

Ulrich continued to embrace her for several more minutes. "Tell me good wife, is your visit to our bedchamber just to treasure my embrace? Or is there another reason?"

"A moment with you," Jaclyn chortled covering her fears.

"Liar," Ulrich teased. "Tell your servant what purpose is this visit."

"I find I need a few coin for unexpected household expense," Jaclyn explained nervously.

Ulrich did not pick up on Jaclyn's tone. He reached for his short mantel and pinned it. "Odo could handle that."

"Yes of course, but this is a private purchase, selfishly for me," Jaclyn responded quickly.

"Nothing about you is selfish," Ulrich grinned. "Take whatever you need from the chest. You have the key. I will break

✦ Payton Lee

fast and do practice with my knights. I must also ride toward Mardern fief this morn. I will return for the evening meal.”

“I’ll miss you,” Jaclyn replied. How much did she love her Firedrake? She loved him as much as she loved their son, Phillip. Little Phillip was their wonderful creation. She watched Ulrich leave the bedchamber and went directly to the coin chest. Tears misted her eyes causing her to struggle with the lock. Once opened, the chest revealed the gold coins required to save her baby. Her hand slid over the cold gold coin and cupped a handful to place in the leather pouch she had taken from the mantel. Jaclyn added four more handfuls. The leather pouch was filled with the golden coins. She tied and knotted the leather string firmly closing the pouch and protecting the contents.

After Jaclyn checked the hall to make certain no one would see her, she slipped back to the Ladies Solar. There she packed a small bag filling it with fresh swaddling and moss for her little Phillip.

Jaclyn pulled Joy’s hooded robe from the peg on the wall. She pinned the mantel and covered her head with the large hood. Once again Jaclyn peered into the hall to make certain no one would see her. One of her ladies walked past the door and went towards the main staircase. Jaclyn waited until she was past and stealthily found her way to the back stairs of the castle. The stairs were narrow and had little light during this time of the day. Carefully Jaclyn walked down the steps. They ended in the back of the kitchens. There she left through a back and unseen door. Once Jaclyn emerged from the kitchen door she leaned against the outside wall of the Castle. She inhaled deeply. Placing her hand upon her heart she felt it thundering in her chest. *‘Was she doing the right thing?’* The note said to bring a leather pouch full of leather coin to the edge of the forest off the northern wall. At the beginning of the Riever’s trail she would find Phillip. She was to come alone and tell no one. Jaclyn realized she was taking a dangerous course. It was not uncommon in these times for a woman of means to be kidnapped. Her father feared for her safety on many occasion. A woman could be held for ransom, defiled, and forced into marriage. But she was married now. Ulrich was the Firedrake. People feared his power. She was under his protection. This was a simpleton just desperately trying to get

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coin. Never again would she leave her son unprotected. From now on a castle guard would be stationed near her son. Could this have been prevented? Jaclyn was berating herself for being a poor mother. If she had been a better mother little Phillip could never have been taken and Joy would not have been hurt. The walk to the edge of the Riever's trail took nearly an hour. Jaclyn was so intent upon the safety of her son she fell several times when she stumbled on uneven ground.

"Meg, the Lady Jaclyn is coming," Malise whispered as she rocked the sleeping baby. "You've done well and me life is safe."

"Sad life it is, mon. I cannot believe I hurt a lady and stole a child. May God forgive me," Meg complained. "You must promise me to come back to our little hovel and stay away from the Laird Mercer forever, or I'll..."

"What would you do luv?" Malise teased. He may be a form of low life and the idiot of Mercer. He drinks too much and acts the big man way too often, but he did love his Meg and children.

"I'll turn ye in meself!"

"Och, Meg," Malise chortled. "Ye would do nae such thing."

"I would!"

"Ye wont be worrying any longer. I give ye me word on the matter," Malise promised and crossed his chest. "A little reiving, spying, and thievery is alright by me. Taking a bairn and turning the lovely lady over to the laird is foul to me own taste."

Meg looked at her husband hopefully. "Ye mean it mon?"

Malise nodded his head. He meant every word. This was distasteful. Taking a man's wife and child to deliver to another. It had pushed him beyond his sense of loyalty.

"Ye are certain the Laird wishes the lady and bairn no harm?" Meg asked once more.

"Aye. The Laird ordered no harm to come to the lady and the bairn. Tis told he fancies the Lady Jaclyn," Malise replied quickly. "Now go stand where she can see you."

Meg cuddled little Phillip in her arms and walked to the edge of the forest where Jaclyn could see her.

Jaclyn's heart began to race when she saw the woman holding the swaddled baby in her arms. Her legs moved as fast as her heart. Her baby, her son, was only a few yards away.

Meg watched the hooded figure walk faster. She felt the fear and tension of the woman coming toward her. "Tis ye mother, lad. She's come for you. No harm will come to ye. Tis the word of Meg."

Jaclyn stood before the woman and held out the pouch. "Here is the coin. I want my son."

Malise stepped out behind Jaclyn and threw coarse woven linen over Jaclyn. He quickly tied a heavy rope about her tying her hands to her side.

Shock hit Jaclyn as soon as the linen cloth fell over her. The coin pouch fell from her hand. She fought to remain awake as a dark cloud of dizziness came over her. She was being taken prisoner. Everything she had been warned about was happening. Would she ever see her baby again? What would ever happen to him? What would Ulrich do? Shock changed to panic. She began kicking wildly when strong arms picked her up and slung her to his side like a side of baggage.

"Pick up the coin," Malise ordered.

"Are you certain she can breathe?" Meg asked worriedly scooping up the pouch with a free hand. "The bairn will need to nurse soon."

"If she couldn't breathe she couldn't be kicking this hard," Malise grumbled holding Jaclyn's legs down with all his might.

Malise and Meg walked back into the forest. Malise had three palfreys waiting that Laird Mercer had given him to take Jaclyn to the Gregory fief.

Tears were streaming down Jaclyn's cheek. What would she do without Ulrich? Where was Phillip? Did the woman still carry her son? Would they bring Phillip or was he cast upon the forest ground to die? She felt the man beast sit her upon a horse and tie her to the saddle. He tied her feet with rope to each other going under the palfrey's belly. She could no longer kick. Escape was hopeless. Her only prayer was that the woman still held little Phillip and both were being taken hostage. In moments the horses were galloping hard. She was firmly tied to the horse and knew

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the unknown man was holding the reins to the palfrey she was riding.

They rode hard for hours. Jaclyn was relieved when she heard Phillip's cries. He was alive and with them.

"Meg, quiet the bairn!" Malise shouted irritably. He had hoped to ride further than they had.

"The bairn is hungry! Stop now. We must change the swaddling and let him nurse!" Meg shouted in return. She reined her palfrey to a halt to prove to her husband that he must obey her order.

Malise grunted. He stopped the horses, untied Jaclyn, and lifted her from the palfrey. Once Jaclyn was placed on the ground he retied the ropes to her feet. He sat her down on a felled log leaving her to Meg's care. "You cannot run far. If you do try to escape I will hurt the bairn," Malise threatened.

Meg grimaced. She wouldn't let her husband hurt the baby and she didn't believe he would. Sometimes you must do what you must.

Chapter 19

“We have guests,” Siward addressed pointing to distant banners. The knights had spent the afternoon practicing sword thrusts.

Ulrich squinted to focus on the banners. “Tis my Jaclyn’s father. Surely he has come to visit with his daughter and new grandson. We will greet them. The four mounted their Destriers to ride and greet Lord Baldric.

Baldric greeted Ulrich on horseback. He took Ulrich’s arm and grasped it firmly. “Well done, Firedrake! A boy child!”

“A fine healthy son,” Ulrich beamed.

“And my daughter?”

“My good wife is well,” Ulrich announced cheerfully.

“I am told the boy child took your countenance,” Baldric mentioned riding with Ulrich, his entourage, and Ulrich’s knights toward Carlisle Castle.

“Phillip has taken my countenance,” Ulrich confirmed.

“Our next child shall be a daughter and will have the beauty of her mother.”

“Hopefully the beauty and temperament of her mother,” Baldric added. “I must tell you, I am most pleased with my daughter Jaclyn.”

“I am very pleased with Jaclyn,” Ulrich grinned. “A knight could not be more fortunate than I.”

“I am most anxious to see my new grandson. I would have arrived sooner, but Jaclyn’s sisters insisted on visiting. It took awhile to prepare the entourage.”

Ulrich motioned toward the group. “I see you also have Sir Griffin accompanying you.”

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“The lad arrived at Penrith as soon as he had King Edward’s leave,” Baldric explained. “The King has consented to the nuptial of my child maid, Judith. I would prefer to wait until she is six and ten, I have agreed to their nuptial. The two love each other indeed.”

“If he can love Judith in small portion compared to my love for Jaclyn, they shall be happy,” Ulrich bragged.

“Judith insisted on having the nuptials at Carlisle when she heard the news of our Jaclyn giving birth to a man child,” Baldric explained. “The maid believes Carlisle will bring her good fortune and the birth of a man child for her and Griffin.”

“Doesn’t Griffin already have two bastard sons?” Ulrich queried.

“Yes,” Baldric confirmed.

“Then let the maid think as she will. Tis most likely Griffin will provide male issue,” Ulrich joked goodheartedly.

“This old man is most blessed. I have beautiful daughters that will provide me with good lords and fine heirs.”

“Tis the truth. I am the first to bring you the first blessing,” Ulrich bragged. “Come, let us ride ahead and meet my Phillip. Surely Jaclyn will see your herald banners. She will meet us in the bailey.”

The two men spurred the Destriers. The huge mounts galloped into Carlisle Castle.

Once in the bailey Ulrich and Baldric dismounted. The groomsmen took the Destriers.

Ulrich and Baldric looked about for Jaclyn. They were surprised when they did not see her waiting for them.

“Perhaps she is nursing our little Phillip,” Ulrich excused.

“If the bairn does take after his sire, Phillip must need a great amount of nourishment,” Baldric laughed.

“He does take after his sire,” Ulrich guffawed. He took his father in law’s arm and together they walked the stairs to the Ladies Solar.

Ulrich was more surprised when he did not find Jaclyn or Phillip in the Ladies Solar. “This is most strange.”

“Come, we will find Joy. She always knows where my Jaclyn would be,” Baldric suggested.

✦ Payton Lee

At this time of day it was even difficult finding Joy. At dusk they had tracked Joy down.

“Where is Lady Jaclyn and Phillip,” Ulrich questioned.

“Isn’t she in the Ladies Solar?” Joy responded with surprise.

“That is the first place we were,” Baldric growled. “Tell us where Jaclyn is.”

“She and Ella must still be about,” Joy answered. “Ella took little Phillip so Jaclyn could tend to my wound.”

Ulrich noticed Odo and motioned for him to come over.

“You were wounded? How did this happen?” Baldric queried.

“I still don’t know. I felt a blow on my head, it went black, and then Jaclyn was tending to me,” Joy replied.

Odo approached.

“Find the maidservant Ella,” Ulrich commanded irritably. His sense of warning fired from an ember to a roaring flame. Something was not right.

Odo was on top of every function in Carlisle Castle and knew where Ella should be at this time of day. He walked quickly toward the buttery.

She was in the kitchens taking trays into the buttery. She was surprised to see Odo in the buttery and even more surprised when he approached.

“Have you seen our Lady Jaclyn?” Odo questioned nervously.

“I have not seen our lady since this morn before prayers,” Ella replied. She had been busy during the day and first thought of how unusual it was not to see her lady.

“It was told you took little Phillip for an airing after prayers this morn,” Odo repeated.

“Nae, I did nae such thing,” Ella countered. She was sensing something was amiss.

“It was said you and Lady Jaclyn found Joy on the floor this morn with an injury,” Odo informed.

“Lady Joy is injured? Is she alright?” Ella gasped. She suddenly understood that something was very wrong.

Odo’s face paled. His most dreaded fear had occurred. His Jaclyn was missing and most likely taken for ransom. Ransom?

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Yes, he had thought it unusual when Ulrich spoke to him earlier and asked him to check the private chest and account for Jaclyn's private purchase. Jaclyn had never taken one coin without personally accounting to him. Odo had not taken the time to account for coin in the private chambers yet. He would now before he returned to the Firedrake. His heart was caught in his throat. His beloved Lady Jaclyn must surely be in danger. Odo picked up his pace and nearly ran to the private chambers. The chest was left open and obviously without count he knew a sizeable amount had been taken. In the chest was also a crumpled parchment. Odo took the paper and noticed roughly scrawled writing. He forced himself to breath after he read the note. He knew it was more than Phillip taken. This was a plot to take both the wife and heir of the Firedrake, Lord of Cumberland. Odo immediately began to go down the mental list he had made of any in English and Scottish court that would do such a hideous thing.

In the meantime, Ulrich was becoming more and more frustrated and irritable. No one had seen his wife or son since this morning after she made the unusual visit to his private chambers. His well-honed instinct of imminent danger was at full alert. The evening meal was served, but he took no food.

Baldric took position as head of the meal, but was uneasy that no one could find his beloved Jaclyn or his new grandson.

Joy and Ella did not eat the meal either. Together they searched the entire castle.

Ulrich's heart stopped when he noticed Odo approach with a crushed parchment in hand. Ulrich saw the worry lines in Odo's face. He knew Odo would be bringing him very bad news.

"My Lord," Odo choked out. "Our Lady and child have been taken."

"Who? How?" Ulrich roared with such force the entire hall became silent.

Odo handed the paper to Ulrich. "I believe Phillip was taken as a ruse to lure our Lady. It would be the only way to get our Lady away from the castle without guard."

Ulrich read the note. His face contorted with rage. People would swear his eyes turned into golden fire. Without word he went to his chamber. His squire Drogo followed. In moments

Ulrich was in full armor and Drogo was scurrying to the stables to dress out Orion.

Siward was watching the exchange with Odo and Ulrich. He recognized the look of the Firedrake. When Ulrich stormed off, he went immediately to Odo. Once Odo had explained the note and the disappearance of Lady Jaclyn and Phillip, Siward motioned Coll and Hubert. The three loyal knights were waiting in full armor when Ulrich descended the steps of Carlisle Castle.

Ulrich did not even notice his devoted friends. He bellowed orders. First he called the castle guard to arms. Second he ordered kitchen maids to pack bundles of food. Third he ordered torches lit. The torches would be held by the castle guard on foot to search the woods in the dark. All orders were issued without Ulrich missing one step on his way to the bailey where he would find Orion waiting. Ulrich was in battle mode. At this moment he was the fearsome Firedrake.

Griffin soon learned the purpose of Ulrich's rage. Hurriedly he prepared to join Ulrich's entourage. He gave his beloved Judith a kiss with a promise to return quickly with her sister and new nephew.

Judith had grown in her year in training at Penrith Castle as Lady of the Manor. She understood the danger her sister was in and proved to be a woman her sister Jaclyn would be proud of. Judith took control of Carlisle Castle and prepared for evening vespers just as her sister had taught her. Judith would be the rock of the castle staff in Jaclyn's absence.

Baldric remained at Carlisle Castle to maintain a command control should this be a purpose of the Scots to make siege.

Baldric and Judith watched the warrior Firedrake and his small army march to the edge of the Forest and the beginning of Riever's trail. The torches cast an eerie silhouette upon the horizon.

"I worry for our Jaclyn," Baldric confessed.

"As do I," Judith agreed. "I can only believe my Griffin and Jaclyn's Firedrake will bring her home safely."

"Learn this lesson well, Judith," Baldric warned. "Even in these new times of our good King Edward and Queen Phillippa, there are those that would still put the fairer sex in great peril. Take no risks."

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

“Who would have believed in this new age a woman would be taken for political and economic gain,” Judith muttered softly. “Dear sister, I will pray for you.”

Jaclyn felt as though part of a heavy burden had been lifted when Meg placed her Phillip in her arms. He nursed hungrily. Jaclyn’s burden of engorgement was relieved.

“You would not harm my son?” Jaclyn asked softly.

“Nae, I am a mother. I have four children and another is growing within me. I could not harm a little innocent bairn,” Meg replied.

“I do not understand why you would take my child,” Jaclyn stated worriedly.

“Tis not the bairn the Laird would desire. Tis you!” Meg replied straightly. “May God forgive me! I would have no part of this if me mon’s life weren’t in danger.”

“His life?” Jaclyn questioned showing a bit of anger.

“Aye, the Laird would kill me mon if he would not obey his order. Tis hard for me mon,” Meg excused.

“Who is this Laird?” Jaclyn demanded too loudly.

“Meg!” a voice roared from behind a copse of trees. “Speak nothing of our affair.”

Meg immediately became silent and docile. She realized she had said too much. “The bairn is finished feeding. I’ve brought moss and clean swaddling. I’ll change him.”

“You are kind,” Jaclyn responded. “I want to hold my son. I would change him.”

“I understand,” Meg replied handing the moss and swaddling to Jaclyn. “Give me the soiled. There is a stream nearby and I will wash them. You will have some quiet and alone time with the bairn. I warn you, don’t try to run. Me mon is desperate enough to hurt the bairn if you try to run.”

The sudden anger cleared Jaclyn’s mind from the muddled fear. “I won’t.” She was aware that Meg’s man was near. He had palfreys. She knew she couldn’t get far and would endanger Phillip. Wisely she knew her best time for escape would be near the end of their trail when the captor would feel more relaxed. In the next few quiet moments she rocked Phillip and felt more at ease. Jaclyn sighed happily when Phillip fell asleep in her arms.

✦ Payton Lee

Meg returned with the clean wet swaddling.

“I must relieve myself,” Jaclyn requested.

“I’ll hold the bairn,” Meg offered.

Jaclyn handed the sleeping baby to Meg. She walked to a brush hedge and returned quickly.

Meg returned Phillip to Jaclyn.

Malise began making a camp for the night and Meg started preparing a small meal.

After the meal Jaclyn laid upon a rough woolen blanket Malise had laid out. With little Phillip still in her arms Jaclyn fell asleep instantly.

“Be careful of ye tongue,” Malise warned. The less Jaclyn knew of her fate the easier it would be for him to deliver her to the Laird Mercer.

“I dunna like this one bit,” Meg complained. “Tis wrong to take a fine upstanding lady away from her mon and threaten to harm her bairn.”

“Tis the only way I could nae taken her from Carlisle. Ye know the Laird would have me sliced in half quicker than a highland fog if I did not bring her,” Malise reminded.

“Ye should give up this life and live with me brother. Ye haven’t even glanced upon your children in four cycles of the moon. Ye come and go and your own flesh is growing up without ye,” Meg reprimanded.

“I’m trying to make me fortune and provide a better life for ye and our children,” Malise bit out.

“I don nae want yer fortune if it be won like this,” Meg countered. “I’d rather have a poor mon that I love beside me, than a rich thief stealing for a Laird and leaving me and the children all alone praying ye are not hanged.” Enough was said. Meg walked away from her husband. She picked up her blanket and spread it near the sleeping Jaclyn. Her mon would sleep alone again this night. She wanted Malise back at her side, especially with the new bairn she was carrying in her womb.

Malise was indeed having a change of heart because of this duty Mercer had commanded him. He knew Lady Jaclyn was well loved by the villains. He also had heard much about the Firedrake and was more afraid of the Laird of Cumberland more than his own Laird. Still he was not moved to release Lady Jaclyn.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♣

Perhaps once he delivered her to Mercer he would find the Firedrake's men and give information to Lady Jaclyn's true whereabouts. It was time he did give up this hope for wealth and power and enjoy the love of his family. He wanted to keep his neck attached to his head. Malise found it was hard to sleep with so much fear on his mind.

Meg fell sound asleep. She was tired especially with the fetus growing in its first trimester.

Jaclyn even slept well on the hard ground. She had been allowed to hold Phillip through the night and that brought her great comfort.

Chapter 20

Ulrich paced around the fire in the camp. His head was pounding and his heart was throbbing.

Siward dared approach the seething Lord of Cumberland and fiercest of King Edward's knights. "Come to eat."

The glowing coals of fury bore down upon the knight. "Do you think I can eat when my wife and child are taken? I know naught their fate?" His roar vibrated the trees.

Siward knew it was violent anger, but not towards him.

Ulrich was in a rage. The rage was inside. He was furious at his own failure. The traitors were still at large. He knew Carlisle Castle would be a prize. He did not take enough precaution to protect his wife and child. This was his entire fault! If anything happened to his Madonna and child he wondered if he could survive without her. He was beside himself in regret, pain, and fear. Ulrich in his life had never known fear. He did not like it at all. Once he had his Jaclyn returned to him he foreswore this would never happen again. He would seal the keep and only known servants would ever be allowed in the keep. He would see to it that a new building would be added to Carlisle Castle. Any guests would be escorted there after meals in the great hall. Guards would be posted day and night at the entrance to the keep. He would get Jaclyn back. He would not live if he couldn't.

"Please Firedrake," Siward pleaded. "Sup with us. We will catch the Rievers that did this." Siward immediately felt Ulrich tense. He wanted to run, but he wanted to serve his master.

Ulrich straightened. His self-loathing ended into rage. Quietly he replied, "It was not Rievers. It is the traitor Mercer."

Firedrake of Cumberland ♠

The inflection sent a chill down Siward spine, but he dared ask, "How can you be certain my liege? The note only wanted money."

"If it were only money, the thief could have the entire treasure chest of Carlisle. Do you recall Jaclyn received the only note for ransom? Once the villain had my Jaclyn there were no more requests for coin?" His temper short Ulrich roared angrily. "Think man!"

"Aye," Siward agreed with his lord and it was not only to save his hide. "Rievers taking a child makes no sense."

"It is the traitors to the crown. It is Mercer. I know it," Ulrich thundered. The camp looked up at the sound.

The Rievers had returned to forests only a few weeks prior. Arthur was worried when he was informed of the Firedrake's pennants were observed in the forest. He hoped the baseborn knight was with them in case he needed to talk to the Firedrake. He was worried the Firedrake was seeking out the Rievers. Arthur had been informed it was a full compliment of army even though some of the infantry and knights were broken into three sections. He feared ambush. Arthur sent out his men to watch. He received information on Firedrake's movements every day.

Firedrake had moved into the Riever's forest heart when Andrew came into Arthur's camp. He had been in the northern forest near the Scottish Border and was returning home when he came upon a camp of two women, a bairn, and the known Mercer freeman named Malise. He thought it a strange oddity that his Riever clan Laird should know. Entering camp he was told by his friend Mortimer that the Firedrake was about and Arthur had just learned that an unknown had taken the Lady Jaclyn and child.

Arthur was in foul spirits. He admired the Lady Jaclyn. She had been known to be kind, benevolent, and just. There were many a Riever she had healed in sickness and wounds without asking question. If anyone had dared harmed her or the bairn he would tear their hearts out with his own hands.

Andrew rushed into the wooden hovel Arthur used as a temporary base. "My Laird, I have news of the Lady Jaclyn and child," he rushed breathlessly.

Arthur raised a brow. "What nae ye of this?"

✦ Payton Lee

“I came upon an unusual troupe returning from a theft of a noble Scottish Laird,” Andrew enlightened. “Twas two women, a bairn, and the freeman, Malise Dunbar.”

“Who were the women?” Arthur demanded.

“I could not see the one as she was hooded with mantel,” Andrew explained. “I could not see the bairn. The other woman was near Malise’s age and serf in dress.”

“Malise must be using his wife in this scheme,” Arthur concluded. “Tis good for him that he take with him a gentle hand and no harm befall our Lady Jaclyn. Did ye see where they headed?”

“I cannot say for certain, but it twas toward the Scots border,” Andrew answered. “There is a small fief near.”

“Which fief?” Arthur questioned seriously.

“They were near the Gregory fief,” Andrew replied instantly.

Arthur rose quickly from the hovel. He called his men together in the camp circle. “Ye all nae that our Lady Jaclyn has been taken by a miscreant. Andrew has spotted our Lady and the demon spawn that has taken her. They are near the Gregory fief. I want one third to go to the fief, one third will come with me to the Firedrake, and the rest stay here to guard our camp lest this be a ballyhoo to trick us.”

The crowd mumbled loudly, “The Firedrake? Have ye gone mad, Arthur? He would cut us down without a thought!”

“I’ve met one of his baseborn knights. The new Laird of Cumberland would not be like that. We have also learned he is kind like his good wife,” Arthur corrected. “Count your lots by three and separate to the group.”

Once in thirds, Arthur issued the orders for the groups. The group he led marched to the camp of the Firedrake.

A sentry sounded the alarm when the Rievers group arrived at Firedrake’s camp.

Firedrake met the group as they stepped into the camp circle.

Arthur stared in surprise. Before him in the Firedrake herald was who he believed was the baseborn knight of the Firedrake. In an intake of air Arthur gasped, “It’s you!”

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

Ulrich smiled regardless of his worry for his wife and son. It was a surprise and shock to him even though he suspected the man he had met previously was indeed the Rievers' chief. He placed his hands on his slim hips. "I see we both played roles."

Arthur went to his knees and crossed his chest with his right arm in submission. "We believe we have news on the whereabouts of thy lady and bairn."

Ulrich choked and grabbed the kneeling chieftain. He pulled him up easily to full height. "Sweet Jesu! Tell me man!"

"My man has spotted an unusual group near the Gregory fief. We believe it is thy good wife."

"Break camp! Light the torches!" Ulrich commanded. "We march upon the hour toward Gregory fief." For a moment Ulrich allowed himself to hope. He took the moment to thank the chieftain. "I shall give you great reward if this be my Lady."

Arthur grinned. "I need not a farthing for this. We Rievers owe much to the Lady Jaclyn. She has always held our heart and loyalty. I've already sent my men to the fief. It is my hope ye would have the lady in your arms come next den eve."

Ulrich was touched by the graciousness of the Rievers and their chief. He said nothing, but grabbed Arthur's shoulder and squeezed it in gratitude.

For days it had been the same for Jaclyn. They stopped to feed little Phillip. Once accomplished Meg took her child. At night they would eat and sleep until the dawn and begin the journey once more. Jaclyn knew they were headed for the Scots border. She also noted that although they wove in and out of the Rievers forest, they did not stay in the forest long. It was as if her captor had in mind to avoid the Riever trail. She never saw her captor. He always led her horse and never turned back. He always wore a hood covering his head completely. It was a long hood and covered his hair and brow. Only a small portion of his face in shadow would be able to be seen even if someone met him face on. Her hood blocked any side view when he came behind her to remove her bindings to feed her son or eat at night. When time came to be rebound, it was Meg who did it.

“The Laird waits anon,” Malise barked viewing the Gregory manor. There were no banners or pennants, but guards were stationed about.

Jaclyn felt apprehensive. Was this the end of her journey? What fate awaited her? This fief was near the Scots border by only a league.

The guards moved to the sides of the manor as not to be seen as the horses approached.

Malise dismounted and pulled Jaclyn’s horse to the manor. With back still facing her, he ordered her to dismount, as was his usual custom.

Jaclyn obeyed.

Once she was on the firm ground he ordered her to enter the manor.

With bound hands she worked the handle and walked into the comfortable manor. The hall was well lit and a fire was burning brightly. The tables were being cleared and several serving maids glanced at Jaclyn, but quickly lowered their eyes. It was obvious to Jaclyn the manor had served at least a dozen men. What did this mean to her?

Meg followed Jaclyn into the manor. She released Jaclyn’s bounds and gently laid little Phillip in her arms.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Jaclyn appreciated cuddling her son.

Meg felt horrible being a part of all this. “My Lady, forgive me. I only did this to save me Mon’s neck.”

Jaclyn nodded. “I understand. I would do no less for my Firedrake.”

The response made Meg smile. “Thank you my lady for understanding.”

“What is next?” Jaclyn whispered worriedly.

“In the name of Jesu, I nae not,” Meg answered uneasily. She thought Mercer would be there. She saw some men, but did not see the Laird’s pennants or the Laird. It worried her more.

“There is still some food in the cauldron. I’ll get us some sustenance,” Meg volunteered. She walked briskly to the kitchens to retrieve some trenchers.

Jaclyn was left alone in the hall. It was frightening and eerie. Her heart beat faster. The unknown was always more

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fearful than the known. What would happen next? Who was this Laird? She decided to peek out a window and look for her hooded captor. She saw the captor's back. Then she saw the mounted Laird. The recognition was instant. It was Mercer! He spoke to her captor and rode back into wooded copse. What happened next was most strange. The captor ran toward the opposite copse and suddenly a small army under Mercer's pennant appeared making loud battle noises. Mercer himself brought his Destrier right to the doorway of the manor. Jaclyn quickly ran to the hearth and sat upon a chair. When the door was slammed against the wall in opening, she feigned surprise. "My Lord Mercer?"

"You are safe," Mercer cooed in triumph. "I received word that you had been taken by a miscreant. My men have found you."

"You heard quickly, my lord," Jaclyn commented. "It has only been a few den since I was taken."

"I have excellent heralds," Mercer replied calmly. He walked to Jaclyn and took her hand. "They did not harm you?"

Jaclyn fluttered her lashes. "Nae. The miscreants were careful to keep me for their Laird."

"What Laird?" Mercer questioned falsely. He wanted to find out if she suspected anything.

"I do not know," Jaclyn answered quickly. "The Laird's name was a guarded secret. Who would want me?"

"My men are chasing the miscreant. Hopefully we will learn this name," Mercer suggested sweetly.

He was too sweet. Jaclyn almost gagged. It is true the man or Meg never revealed the Laird's name, but she knew it had to be Mercer.

"You are safe with me. I will take you to Mercer Castle," Mercer drooled. "We will send word to your husband."

"I prefer escort to return to Carlisle," Jaclyn responded.

"My castle is closer. It will give you haven until the Firedrake can come for you," Mercer stated. It was his plan to lead the Firedrake to Mercer Castle. Then the Firedrake would be murdered. Jaclyn would be widowed and Mercer would take her immediately. It would also start the war with England. That was very important to him as well. He wanted the child David the Bruce removed from power and hoped the clan leaders would make him king.

Jaclyn arched a brow. “I insist my Lord Mercer that I be returned to Carlisle Castle.”

“My escort is limited. There is not enough protection for you. The Rievers could take you again,” Mercer excused. “Please accept my hospitality. We will send for your husband. You may rest there. My servants will be at your command.”

Jaclyn was filled with fear and dread. This was a charade for her benefit. She never had liked Mercer anymore than her father did. She certainly couldn’t trust him. Still, she had to think of her child and his safety. Phillip was the heir of Castle Carlisle and Cumberland. Surely Ulrich would be looking for her, but did he know where to look. Could it be that he was waiting for word from her captors? She had to believe Ulrich would find her. At least she could prolong the trip to Mercer Castle.

“Perhaps you are correct,” Jaclyn agreed. She was lying but buying time. “This trek has weakened me. We will stay the night? I must rest.”

“We should leave immediately for your protection,” Mercer persisted testily. He wanted Jaclyn safely behind his castle walls by the next day. He waited five seasons to possess Jaclyn and her inheritance. He would feel secure when she was completely in his possession.

“Of course you are correct kind lord,” Jaclyn concurred sweetly. “I just find that I am too weary. I am still in confinement and this trek was most difficult on my person. I fear I have started menses and I am bleeding most heavily.”

The lie worked. Mercer blushed profusely. “Your pardon my lady. I will give you rest this eve.”

“My lady maid was brought with me. May I go to her in the kitchens and ask her help?” Jaclyn requested hesitantly.

Mercer was embarrassed to his toes. “Go to your lady maid.”

Jaclyn pretended a slow gait even though she really wanted to run into the kitchens. She fooled Mercer well enough. At her pace he believed she was physically in need.

Finally entering the kitchen she found Meg busy finishing two trenchers loaded with meat and vegetables.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♦

“Meg, the Lord Mercer is here. He doesn’t know who you are. Don’t let him find out you are the wife of Malise,” Jaclyn whispered with warning.

Meg paled. “Where is Malise?”

Mercer sent him hiding in the copse. The Laird wants me to believe he has rescued me. I am purchasing time before he takes me as prisoner in his castle,” Jaclyn shared. “He wants me to believe he is my protector and has frightened your Malise away.”

Meg understood immediately. Jaclyn could tell by her eyes.

“I have told Mercer my menses have begun and I am bleeding heavily,” Jaclyn informed.

Meg watched Mercer enter the kitchens. He suddenly was fearful that Jaclyn might sneak away even though his guards were now stationed encircling the manor.

Meg played her part. “My Lady, you must rest. You bleed too heavily for your confinement. I will find a room for you to lie down and seek a cold bath for you,” Meg stated loudly taking Jaclyn’s arms to assist her to a wooden stool. Meg then whispered in her ear. “Lord Mercer just entered the kitchens to check on you.”

Jaclyn played her part. She appeared to begin swooning. Meg applied a cool cloth on Jaclyn’s head. Mercer left the kitchens.

“Meg, you must tell me of Mercer’s plan,” Jaclyn whispered. “Tell me all!”

“All I know is that me mon was to bring you here. The Laird planned to take you to Mercer Castle. I didn’t understand any of it,” Meg answered emotionally. “I only know me mon would die if he didn’t do what the Laird told him.”

“Are you certain your mon told you nothing else?”

“He did say the Laird fancied you,” Meg added. “But you are a married lady.”

The thought struck Jaclyn like a bolt. Mercer meant to kill Ulrich. He wanted Ulrich to come to Mercer. It would start a war and he would see to it the Firedrake would be killed. What could she do? How could she prevent this? The last thing King Edward wanted was another war with Scotland so soon. She ate her food

with Meg while her thoughts raced. She fed her son and realized she was indeed bone tired.

Meg sought a bed in the manor. She learned that the manor's lord had recently died. The servants stayed to care for the house and were about to send word to the Firedrake of Cumberland requesting a new lord.

"The servants are loyal to you my lady," Meg shared softly. "But they are no match for the Laird Mercer and his guard."

"I would not expect them to bear arms," Jaclyn stated quietly. "Perhaps they can get word to my Firedrake. They can warn him that Mercer intends to take me to kill him and start a war."

"How do you know this?" Meg gasped.

"I just do," Jaclyn sighed. "Tis the way of traitors. My life and Phillip's life would be spared to lay claim on Carlisle since Phillip is the heir. He means to start a war and put us in the middle of it."

"I despise these wars of men," Meg growled. "Tis the wives and children that suffer through them. The armies take all the food, kill the fathers, and leave us to starve all alone with our children."

Jaclyn stroked Meg's arm lovingly. "We will do all we can to prevent this."

"Sleep now my lady," Meg encouraged as she tucked the down quilt over Jaclyn. "We are all tired. I shall sleep on a pallet near your bed. The servant's are keeping watch for us."

During the night the first band of Rievers kept watch on the manor. They counted the guard to be thirty men. Apparently Mercer had not brought any knights. The Rievers band noted every movement of the guard and noted the Laird Mercer talking with Malise Dunbar at a guard campfire.

Malise ate a meal and then disappeared back into the wooded copse. He would not return to the Laird. It was several moments later that four Rievers surprised Malise. In an instant, Malise was bound and gagged.

Malise was terrified. He had obeyed Mercer to save his neck and suddenly he thought the Rievers would take it. Was there

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no end to this web of fear he created? Tears slowly seeped down his cheeks.

Jaclyn and Meg settled down to sleep when Mercer entered the manor bedchamber.

“We leave at first light,” Mercer oozed. “I pray that is all the rest you require? I must get you to haven, my lady.” He left the room sputtering. He had hoped he could join Jaclyn in her bed for the night. He lusted for her. He was furious to see servants in front of her door and that chambermaid in the room. “Soon my little Jaclyn. I shall have you soon.”

Chapter 21

Silently Arthur's second force arrived to unite with the first surrounding the manor. Ulrich's knights and army were close behind.

Ulrich kept his forces with Siward and Coll a half league behind. He did not want to warn the Mercer guard of any approaching force. Ulrich allowed Arthur's plan to be the choice.

Arthur's men were well acquainted with the woods and were more capable of a stealth attack than knights and armored guards clanging with sword and shield through a forest.

The plan was to have the Rievers remove Mercer's guard one by one silently.

Before the full dawn light, all but three guards had been taken. Those three were to close to the manor house.

If the situation were not so serious, Ulrich would have laughed when he saw Mercer's men being led away to the armed forces behind. The Rievers had bound the guards' hands, gagged them, and manacled each right leg with a long connected chain. The guard marched single file toward Coll's men.

One Riever approached Arthur and spoke to him quietly.

Arthur turned to Ulrich and smiled. He walked briskly to the Lord of Cumberland.

"Matthew informed me that servants just buried their lord and they are loyal to Cumberland. Our Lady Jaclyn is safe and sleeping with Meg, the wife of Malise Dunbar. The servants say that Meg is kind and cares for the Lady Jaclyn. They were surprised to learn that Meg was the wife of Malise. It seems Lady Jaclyn and Meg did not want Mercer to know that Meg is the wife of Dunbar," Arthur informed Ulrich. "We have Malise. He is being taken with the guard to your force."

Firedrake of Cumberland ✦

“My Jaclyn is safe then? My son?” Ulrich queried.

“They rest comfortably,” Arthur reassured. “Mercer sleeps in the lord’s chamber alone. This would be the time to attack.”

Ulrich agreed. He sent Griffin to bring up the forces.

Jaclyn woke to yelling and the thundering of hooves. Her heart sank in horror. Mercer had hidden his men. He wanted Ulrich to attack. Ulrich would be killed. She heard Mercer screaming for his guard.

“Where are the imbeciles?” Mercer roared to his master guardsman.

“They are gone,” Ralph replied in terror. He spotted the Rievers in the woods. “They are taken. Sweet Jesu! This is a trap!”

Mercer was horrified. His plan to kill Ulrich had turned around and now he would be killed. The war would not begin. It was still Cumberland land. He still had a way out. Lady Jaclyn would be his shield. Mercer ran to the bedchamber and opened the door after he pushed aside two serving maids.

Jaclyn was in the middle of dressing. She had put her shoes on, but had just placed her surcoat over her tunic.

Mercer growled like a cornered beast and grabbed her hand. He lunged for little Phillip, but Meg was there first.

Meg reached for Phillip in his makeshift cradle. She pulled little Phillip into her arms before Mercer could grab him.

Mercer snarled and pulled Jaclyn out the chamber and toward the door.

“Meg, take care of my Phillip!” Jaclyn cried. Mercer’s grip on her wrist was painful. “Return him to his sire!”

Waiting at the front door was a tall dark shadow in bright polished armor. Firedrakes crest sewn on the top tunic.

Mercer was terrified and shaking. He heard the Firedrake was a fearsome giant. Today he saw it with his own eyes. Were those red demon eyes staring at him through the slits of the helmet? Roughly he twisted Jaclyn until she was in front of him. He grabbed her hair with his left hand. Pulling a dirk from his surcoat he place the blade across Jaclyn’s throat with his right hand. “Let me pass, or the Lady Jaclyn dies.”

✦ Payton Lee

Ulrich was furious. He could tell Jaclyn was in pain. This beast was hurting his wife. With great restraint Ulrich addressed softly, "Your guard is taken. More than a hundred men at arms surround you. How far do you think you can get?"

"Bring me my Destrier!" Mercer demanded.

Ulrich waved his hand. Griffin brought up the Destrier.

Ulrich stated calmly. "The minute you mount your hand falls from my good wife's throat. At the instant, you are dead by my sword."

Mercer knew he was beaten. Even if he pulled Jaclyn to try to walk to Mercer Castle, an arrow would be in his back the moment he left the manor. Unsure of what to do he could only play it out. If he were to die, mayhap he would take the Lady Jaclyn with him. The dirk drew blood on Jaclyn's neck.

Ulrich was enraged. He knew the moment Mercer decided to take his wife's life. "Do not think it," Ulrich warned. "If you kill my good wife. I will have your throat. Then you will not die quickly by my hand, but slowly and painfully. I will take you to Tyburn myself. I will lay the hot irons on your body. I will break every bone in your body one at a time. You will feel fire and flame. I will cut your insides out, slowly and you will feel the burning pain. You will be hanged and reprieved. When awake, you will be drawn and quartered. You have my oath!"

"If I surrender?" Mercer questioned fearfully. "Would not my fate be the same?"

"Surrender and I merely take you to King Edward for judgment. You will be tried as a traitor and hung," Ulrich replied coolly. "Your fate is the same, but less painful."

Mercer knew he was defeated. There was no doubt in his mind that the Firedrake would make him suffer horribly. His only choice was surrender for a quicker death. All his arrogance and greed came to an end. He released Jaclyn.

Ulrich stepped forward as Jaclyn rushed to his arms.

Siward and Griffin immediately pushed past Ulrich and took Mercer by his arms. The knights were still filled with adrenalin and easily lifted Mercer off the floor as they carried him out of the manor great room. Each knight took an arm as they lifted the Laird Mercer and carried him out the door.

Firedrake of Cumberland ♣

Jaclyn forgot about the cut on her neck. She wound her arms around her Ulrich. She felt his strength surround her and she felt her safe haven.

Ulrich released his breath the moment Jaclyn was in his arms. For one brief moment he feared his good wife would be lost forever. He was relieved, thrilled, happy, elated, and furious.

Meg appeared in the doorframe holding Phillip. The little baby had slept through the drama.

Ulrich looked up and saw the woman holding his son.
“You are Meg? Wife of Malise Dunbar?”

Meg trembled and replied in a shaking voice, “Aye.”

Jaclyn felt her husband’s body become more rigid. She recognized the tightness of his voice. He was enraged. Jaclyn felt she must protect the woman who was forced into the abduction. Meg was a mother like she. “My Lord Firedrake...”

“Silence!” Ulrich roared with fury. “I will deal with you later, good wife.”

Jaclyn shook with fear. Ulrich was furious with her. In that instant she realized she couldn’t blame him and would accept his anger. She did not come to him with the ransom parchment. It is the duty of the knight, lord, and husband to protect all that is his including his wife and child. She insulted him when she did not trust him.

“I am informed by servants of this manor, a manor of Cumberland, that you befriended my good wife and son,” Ulrich stated rigidly. “Yet, I am informed it was you and your husband, Malise Dunbar, were the ones that abducted my good wife and son.”

Meg’s knees were shaking under her tunic. She could only think of what would happen to her children when she was hanged in Tyburn. “Aye.”

“Is that all you can say? Aye?” Ulrich roared.

Somewhere within her soul Meg found the courage to respond. “My guilt is evident. Twas only my duty to my husband that forced me into this sordid act. He is sire of my children. If we had not done what the Laird ordered. My children’s sire would have been killed.”

“And what is the result of this misdeed?” Ulrich said quietly but fearfully.

Meg choked back her tears. “It seems my children will be orphaned. I beg my Lord Firedrake, take their care for us.”

“Good wife,” Ulrich commanded. He reached into his tunic and pulled out a clean cloth. “Wipe your wounds and take care of our son.”

Jaclyn obeyed immediately. She took her son and cuddled him. Like Meg, she stood in fear of the Firedrake.

Ulrich waved his hand. “Bring in Malise Dunbar.”

Jaclyn took in a deep breath when she recognized the man, “It’s him!”

Ulrich turned his cold angry eyes on Jaclyn, “Who?”

“The man I told you about. He came into the kitchens and I felt uncomfortable under his eyes.”

“You have been to Carlisle Castle?” Ulrich demanded of his prisoner.

“Aye, the Laird Mercer sent me often these past seasons to watch all happenings at Carlisle Castle,” Dunbar answered quickly.

“Spying?” Ulrich said softly.

“Aye,” Dunbar replied.

“You and your good wife seem to know only one word,” Ulrich sneered.

“What is there to do but comply to our guilt,” Dunbar responded sadly. “As my Meg requested I beg mercy from the great Firedrake to care for our orphans.”

Ulrich folded his arms over his chest. His stance was fierce. “Why did you obey this Laird and his evil plan?”

Dunbar returned Ulrich’s stare. He boldly looked the Firedrake in his eyes. He recognized his own death and there was nothing to lose. “Would you demand less of your own serfs or freemen?”

“I would never require them to do something so dastardly,” Ulrich boomed in response.

“But there are some Lairds that are not honorable. Still they are Lairds and we must obey,” Malise answered. “We obey on cost of our lives.”

Meg walked to her husband’s side. She held his arm.

Firedrake of Cumberland ☙

Ulrich was impressed with the pair. Their answers were true and honest. A serf or freeman had no choice but to obey their masters. It was not their fault they had a selfish and greedy lord.

Jaclyn found her knees were knocking. She had never seen her husband like this. He was always soft and gentle with her and their people.

“Mercer will pay with his life,” Ulrich uttered contemptuously. His eyes never left Malise. Malise returned his stare. “The two of you need a new Lord. A Lord of honor.”

Malise lowered his eyes and then his head. He thought Firedrake meant the Lord God. He would miss his Meg and never see his children again. Why didn’t he listen to Meg? Why did he pursue the gold coin he knew he would never hold in his hands?

“Here me!” Ulrich declared. “Coll, stay and bring a priest. The priest will scribe my decree. As of this moment, Gregory Manor belongs to Malise Dunbar. He is no longer freeman, but servant to Cumberland. Malise Dunbar owes allegiance and rents to Cumberland. He shall take fealty, loyalty, and subscription oaths when the priest arrives. The old lord of Gregory has only recently deceased without heir. I as the Lord of Cumberland pass this manor as stated. It is my duty to give this manor a lord. Mercer and his lands will be returned to King Edward.”

Malise and Meg couldn’t believe their ears.

Ulrich smiled, “Send for your children. Perhaps you will do better under the hand of an Honorable King and Lord. This is now your home. Your children will be taken care of by your hands. Be assured Malise and Madam, that should I hear of any cheat or cruelty to those under your care, I will reign a vengeance upon your heads.”

Jaclyn smiled with pride. No one could be happier or prouder than the man who was her husband and Lord. Her smile was erased when Ulrich looked at her with anger.

“Come with me to the chamber, good wife. You will answer to me for your foolish behavior.”

Jaclyn waited until Ulrich came to her and took her elbow with his hand. He led her to the room that was the Lord’s chamber. Once in the room he slammed the door and bolted it.

Siward, Coll, and Griffin looked at each other.

“Will he beat her?” Griffin questioned.

“Who can tell what the fire breathing dragon will do when angry,” Coll replied.

“A wife should have shared this travail with her Lord Protector,” Siward said thoughtfully. “She did wrong not to trust her Firedrake.”

Ulrich released Jaclyn’s arm. Gently he reached for his sleeping son. His lips brushed the soft hair of Phillip’s head. “You have mistrusted me my good wife. You have embarrassed me in the minds of Carlisle Castle in your not telling me of this abduction and your lack of faith in my abilities as protector of the realm.”

Tears of repentance and fear rolled down Jaclyn’s cheeks. She was wrong. Everything she did was wrong and she realized it the moment she was taken. Jaclyn pressed the cloth against the cut on her neck. The cut no longer bleeding, but Jaclyn felt as if her own throat was choking.

Ulrich whispered, “Sweet Jesu thank you. My life and soul are safe.” He turned to Jaclyn. “I do not know which emotion is stronger, relief or anger.”

Jaclyn trembled and choked out, “Forgive me my Lord.”

Ulrich stared at Jaclyn. “You accept your wrong doing?”

“Aye.”

“You will accept your punishment?”

“Aye.”

“Good wife, have the Dunbars caused you to lose your tongue?”

“Aye.”

Ulrich turned to lay his sleeping son down on the lord’s bed. Jaclyn could not see the grin on his face. He decided his relief was greater than his anger, but he would not let Jaclyn off that easy for giving him the fright of his life. The stern face was set when he turned to face Jaclyn. “Confess your wrong doing to your Lord.”

Jaclyn bent her head. “I was foolish not to come to my husband and Lord Protector when I learned our son had been taken for ransom.”

“Have you an excuse for such ignorance?”

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“I have none. I reacted without thinking,” Jaclyn replied. “There is no excuse for such blundering. I should have believed and honored my Lord Protector and husband.”

“Are you ready for punishment?”

Jaclyn lowered her head further and nodded. “What is my Lord’s pleasure? Would you beat me?”

Ulrich fought the smile he wanted to give Jaclyn. He set his jaw and walked to a stool. Taking a seat he motioned to Jaclyn that she was to place her body across his knees.

Jaclyn walked slowly to her husband. She hesitated a moment but knelt on Ulrich’s side and bent her body over his knees.

Ulrich no longer had to hide his grin. His wife’s lovely little bottom was facing him. He glanced to his wife’s face. Her eyes were shut tightly. A frown created a grimace on her lovely lips. She was anticipating a true beating.

To Jaclyn’s surprise, Ulrich’s hand sensually lifted first her surcoat, then her tunic. It was not an angry hand, but a soft, gentle, and sensuous hand. Jaclyn was beginning to feel a tingling and want in her belly. Slowly her chemise was lifted to reveal her braes. What was Ulrich doing? This was pleasure not punishment. Then suddenly a hand came down hard upon her bottom with a smack and surge of heat. A scream she could not control erupted from her throat. Ulrich’s hand was powerful and warmed her buttocks instantly.

Upon her cry Ulrich turned Jaclyn over, cradled her in his arms, and kissed her passionately.

Their lips met, searched for each other’s lips, and fought the duel of passion with their tongues.

Jaclyn felt tears fall on her cheeks. Her Ulrich was weeping. She placed her hands on Ulrich’s cheeks separating their lips. “I take an oath my husband, Lord Firedrake, I will never shame you again.”

The tears flowed freely from Firedrake’s eyes. The Firedrake had changed to her loving Ulrich. “I could not survive such another fright again, my Madonna.”

“I love you, Firedrake of Cumberland.”