

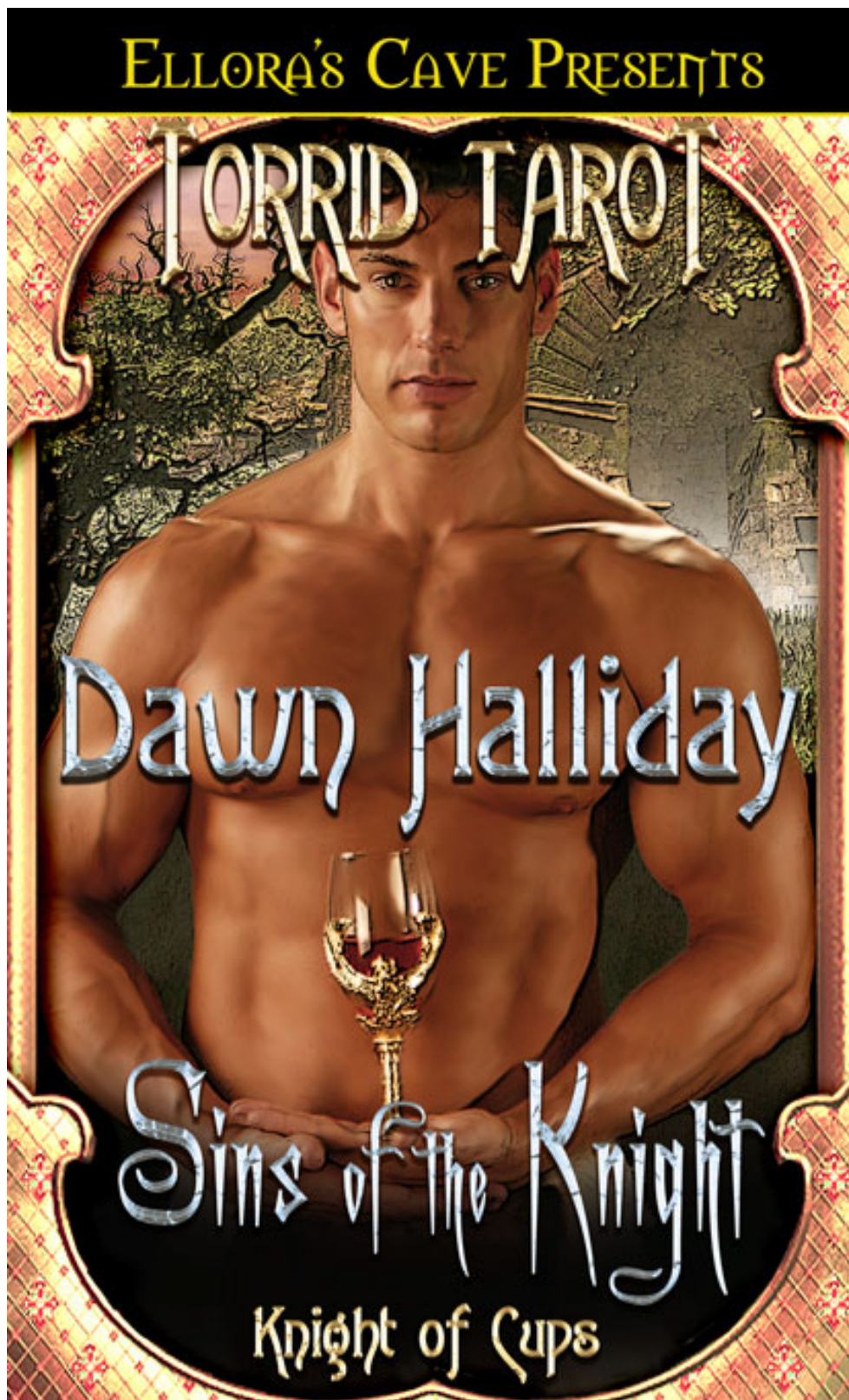
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

# TORRID TAROT

Dawn Halliday

Sins of the Knight

Knight of Cups



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Sins of the Knight

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# ***SINS OF THE KNIGHT***

**Dawn Halliday**

### *Knight of Cups*

The Knight of Cups card commonly depicts a knight carrying a golden goblet and mounted upon a white horse. The horse is prancing rather than galloping, which suggests that the knight is a messenger bearing news rather than a figure racing toward battle.

The Knight of Cups represents a person who is highly idealistic, charming and romantic. He is a complex and emotional individual, sensitive and visionary, attracted and attractive to women. The Knight of Cups follows his heart. However, at times he can be unrealistic and temperamental...and sometimes he tends to run from conflict rather than face it head-on.

## **Chapter One**

*England, 1204*

Change sizzled in Elena de Burgh's blood, making the hair at the nape of her neck rise on end. She dropped her embroidery on the floor, tucked her knees under her chin and stared into the fire. She'd had the same feeling three weeks ago, just before the men brought her husband home from the boar hunt on a stretcher.

Suddenly, the door to her chamber burst open and her maid, Margaret, rushed into the room.

"Lady," Margaret reeled to a halt on the rug beside Elena's chair, her freckled cheeks bright pink with exertion, "an entourage sent by King John has just arrived!"

Elena spoke slowly. "Is that so?"

"Yes, lady. I am to tell you that the king pays his respects. And..." The girl's small body shook with excitement. "He invites you to Winchester Castle, where he is holding court."

Releasing a controlled breath, Elena rose, shook out her gown and went to the window. Margaret came to stand beside her and side by side, they peered down. Afternoon sunlight slashed through the fog, sending an eerie glow across the bailey as riders crowded through the castle's open gates. The lead horseman held a streaming blue banner bearing an image of a red fish. Elena didn't recognize the insignia.

She should have known this was coming. King John was her cousin, and he wouldn't leave her to languish here at Loxburn Castle to be kidnapped or raped by one of the greedy marcher barons who lusted for her land. No, he would bring her to court and keep her under his watchful eye until he decided upon her next husband, the next master of Loxburn.

*Her next master.*

Elena shuddered. John would probably marry her to one of those greedy barons. Her neighbor, Ranulf of Lewes, was one such baron, and he had a stronger position than most. He was a favorite of her cousin, having brought him piles of riches from the Holy Land. Ranulf had gone to petition the king the very day Hugh died and Elena knew he would do whatever he could to win her and Loxburn. The king just might grant his request.

She laid her cheek against the rough wood of the windowsill. After ten years of misery, she had finally found the means to survive her husband. Now she'd have to start over.

Below, men and children clustered around the newcomers. These men's arrival signified the end of her short independence. Yet they could signify something else as

well. The answer her grandmother alluded to when Elena had visited last week. There might be a way to avoid marriage and still retain her lands. Grandmère said it could be so, and Grandmère was never wrong.

Elena rubbed her temples. The problem was, her grandmother's obscure advice was always open to interpretation. Grandmère had said the answer would be in the water.

The closest large body of water was a day's ride from here, near her grandmother's cottage on Bristol Channel. Was Elena supposed to go there? How? Must she convince these men to take her? And once she was there, what should she look for?

Glancing at Margaret, she saw her staring intently at the visitors, her nose pressed to the pane and lips parted in fascination. Elena let her hands fall to her sides and glanced out the window once again. The crowd gathered below parted and a magnificent white horse emerged from the mist, walking at a sedate pace. The rider, clearly the leader of the troop, sat tall, wearing a silver and blue mantle over his mail. Just inside the gate, he pulled on the reins and dismounted gracefully, unfolding a long, lean frame.

Elena's pulse quickened.

Stephen de Verre. She recognized him from the way he moved. The boorish mannerisms of her husband had always emphasized Stephen's inherent grace.

A smile tugged at the corners of Elena's lips as she gazed down at him. So Stephen de Verre's dream had come true—he was a knight. During the early days of her marriage, he was squire to her husband. The same age, she and Stephen had become friends and in subtle ways protected one another from Hugh's rages.

Knighthood had changed Stephen. He stood straighter, seemed taller and broader through the shoulders than he had six years ago. Men surrounded him, competing for his attention, but he looked up at the castle walls.

Elena gasped. The face of the youth she had once known had disappeared, replaced by a man who stole the breath from her lungs. Clutching the window frame, she stared down at him, unable to move, to inhale, certain that time itself had stopped. Everything around him faded away and there was only Stephen—the stark planes and angles of his face, pale skin and dark, piercing eyes. Somehow he honed in on the window where she stood and locked his gaze with hers.

Frozen moments ticked by until someone pulled him away, breaking their eye contact, and Elena's body roared to life. Her limbs shuddered, her nipples tightened against the wool of her bodice, her heart thumped against her ribs.

Stephen removed his helm and turned to speak to the man. The afternoon breeze ruffled through his golden-brown hair. An unexpected picture invaded Elena's mind—that soft hair tickling her overheated and sensitive flesh as his tongue swiped between her thighs.

Margaret finally spoke, her voice breathless. "Will we, lady? Will we go to court?"

The girl's words slammed the door shut on Elena's fantasy. Flexing her fingers, she realized she'd clutched the windowsill hard enough to lose the feeling in her hands.

Elena had never had such a reaction to a man before. She'd never thought of Stephen in a carnal way. He'd simply been Hugh's squire—young, handsome and trustworthy. A loyal friend but not someone who made her heart race. Not someone who made her think wicked thoughts.

"Yes. We will go to the king." Then, with Margaret's expectant look, she remembered her duty as the lady of this castle. Elena would be responsible for personally seeing to her guest's comfort, for making sure Sir Stephen had a good supper, a comfortable chamber and a warm bath.

She would see him naked. A shiver of anticipation rushed down Elena's spine.

*Stop it!*

Hugh was not a month in the grave and she was having lustful feelings toward a man she knew only as an old friend. It had to stop. She cleared her throat. "Tell the maids to prepare the royal chamber for the king's knight, and to have it ready the moment he finishes his supper. He will be weary from the long journey."

Margaret curtsied and disappeared. Elena turned to the window one last time. Stephen didn't look at her again, nor did he leave the bailey. Instead he remained to work alongside his men as they unloaded the horses and carts.

With one palm skimming over her belly and the other pressed against the cool glass, she watched Stephen kneel to examine his horse's hoof. He spoke to the stable boy briefly then rose, brushing off his hands. For the briefest of moments, his eyes met hers again, but then he tore his gaze away. Nodding at a cluster of men gathered nearby, he turned and strode toward the entrance of the great hall.

Elena stepped away from the window, adjusted her veil of mourning and prepared to greet him.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dining with Lady de Burgh and her castellan, Sir Stephen de Verre took the narrow tower stairs two at a time. By all rights he should be exhausted, for he had been riding hard the past two days. Yet he felt strangely alive. Energized. Seeing the lady after all this time had poured fire into his blood.

He reached the end of the passage, stopping short when the door to the chamber opened as if by magic.

Lady de Burgh stood before him. She had removed her veil and let down her raven black hair so it cascaded loose around her shoulders.

"Come inside, Sir Stephen."

He hadn't expected to see her in his room.

Before he could stop himself, his gaze raked down her body, taking in the rich velvet gown tied low on her hips with golden cord. Images flashed through his mind of his hands, mouth and cock stroking every one of her lush curves and valleys.

He nearly groaned. It was bad enough that he'd had to sit beside her in the hall as she presided over dinner. Watching her, smelling her. She smelled like roses muted by the earthy, musky scent of her femininity. The past years had made her beauty grow, but they had also left a hardness in her features that worried him.

Still he'd watched her. Hours went by, and each hour brought with it more vivid fantasies of Lady de Burgh. Beneath him. Above him. Her body bent over a chair while he fucked her from behind...

Unwanted, uninvited visions. Unable to expunge them from his mind, he'd sat, barely eaten and brushed away the men who approached him. The entire time, he'd been counting the minutes until he could be alone to douse the fire in his blood.

Finally, the interminable meal had ended and he'd sent his men, including his squire, to sleep in their shared quarters.

And now she was standing before him, her hair free and wild, watching him with intelligent violet eyes and wearing only a loosely belted kirtle.

Pasting a neutral look on his face, he straightened. Surely she didn't mean to seduce him. She was a virtuous lady whose husband had died a few weeks ago. She welcomed him to his chamber and to his bath as custom demanded, nothing more.

Above all, he couldn't forget who he was. His strict adherence to the chivalric code had never come into question. He wouldn't let that change.

Lady de Burgh gave him an enigmatic smile, so different from the ingenuous grins she'd given him when they were young, when she was still innocent and optimistic. Before Hugh de Burgh had beaten it out of her.

Stephen was forced to watch it all, a mere squire, unable to raise a hand against his liege lord but wanting nothing more than to rip those abusive arms from the older man's body. He had tried to distract de Burgh, and he supposed he had ended up taking many of the beatings meant for her. But it wasn't enough. Filled with disgust and anguish, he had enlisted the help of his family, who had offered lands in Wales as a concession for Stephen's defection, and finally left Loxburn. Since then, he had worked loyally in John's service. He'd never set eyes on de Burgh again.

Looking at Lady de Burgh now, with her pearly skin, cascading curls and dark-lashed eyes that bespoke sadness, something deep within him clenched. He would never forgive himself for leaving her with that barbarian.

"Will you come in?" she asked, gently persistent. "The servants have drawn a bath. I will assist you."

He bowed his head. "Yes, my lady."

The room was large, the walls covered with tapestries. A roaring fire chased away the autumn chill. Beside the fireplace, a half-open door led to an adjacent chamber. The bed, draped with embroidered curtains and trimmed in gilt, stood at the opposite end of the room. A steaming bath stood between the bed and the door, giving off the scent of lavender to mingle with the clean, earthy smell of fresh rushes.



The room was the finest in the castle, Stephen knew, its furnishings richer than the master's and mistress's chambers. This was the room Lord de Burgh reserved for the king and other visiting nobility.

Stephen stepped inside hesitantly, unsure why the lady would assign him such status.

Lady de Burgh moved away and bent to speak to a maidservant kneeling before the fire. Clearly dismissed, the girl flushed, rose, curtsied and brushed past him. Stephen clenched his fist to keep from grabbing the maid and demanding she stay. It would be rude and unchivalrous to contradict the word of his lady. Vaguely, Stephen heard the door thump shut, leaving him alone with her.

She turned, held out her hands and beckoned him closer. "I didn't want to say so amongst your men, but I am so pleased to see you again, Sir Stephen."

He clasped her hands in his own. "And I am pleased to see you, my lady." If Stephen's throat were not so dry, he might have laughed at the understatement. "Again, I am sorry for your loss. If I can do anything..."

He didn't finish the sentence, instead allowing the words to hang between them. Her grip tightened on his, her fingers cool, soft and small. The hands of a lady.

And she was a lady, despite the witch's blood that ran in her veins. Her grandfather, brother to the old king, had come from France and married a druid woman said to be an idolater. Elena carried the noble blood of kings mixed with the elemental blood of the pagans.

"There's no reason for pretense now we are alone," she murmured. "Neither you nor I will truly mourn his loss."

Stephen looked down at their linked hands, unsurprised by her candor. She had always been forthright. "Aye, lady. It is true."

He stroked his thumb along one of her delicate fingers, tempted to ask her how she'd survived for ten years with Hugh de Burgh. She was a strong woman—stronger than he'd ever be.

"Did he harm you?" he asked, then snapped his mouth shut, immediately regretting his impertinence. What a foolish question. Of course de Burgh had harmed her—Stephen could see it in her eyes.

She shrugged. "No, Sir Stephen. Not for a long time. He left me alone in the years after he returned from the Holy Land. He found more satisfaction from his whores than his wife."

Anger swirled in Stephen's gut. The man was a churl. To have deserted his intriguing, exotic wife in favor of a few bawdy wenches... Stephen pulled his hands away from hers and let his fingers curl at his sides. Men like Hugh de Burgh had no concept of chivalry, no understanding of honor. Those betrayals against the beautiful wife whose childhood he'd stolen made Stephen want to kill the man all over again.

Elena gave him a soft smile. "Don't pity me, Sir Stephen. I came to accept my lot without remorse. Three of his whores live here at Loxburn, and I haven't set them out. I would never do so, for they were saviors to me."

Indeed, there was no bitterness or animosity in her words. Stephen looked at her in awe and then gave her a rueful grin. "I cannot deny I have always felt protective of you, my lady. Forgive me."

Her violet eyes cast downward. "There is naught to forgive."

Already he missed her touch. He wanted to draw her lush body into his arms, to hold her, comfort her, make love to her...

He shook himself free of that thought. "It is good I have been gone so long. Otherwise I don't think..." *I could have kept my hands off you.*

"Is that why you went away?" she asked. "Because you felt you should have protected me from him?"

Stephen cleared his throat. "I'm just glad he's gone—glad I need not challenge him to defend your honor."

She laughed, a soft, smooth sound that slipped under his skin like a warm caress, stroked his balls and wrapped around his cock. He shuddered.

"If you were to defend the honor of every wife whose husband took a mistress, you'd be occupied every second of the day."

"I have no wish to defend every wife," he said. "Only you."

Again her eyes strayed away and she didn't speak, instead taking his hand and drawing him near the fire.

Silently, she turned to face him then knelt at his feet to remove his shoes.

Stephen stiffened at the gesture. This was inappropriate. He touched his fingers to the top of her head. "Please don't kneel."

She bowed her head, bringing to mind a sight he had once seen in the Holy Land of a dark-haired concubine at her master's feet. But the concubine had been naked except for a jeweled collar around her neck, and she had been sucking the bare toes of the man.

Stephen closed his eyes. The thought of Lady de Burgh's tongue swiping over his toes made heat crawl across his skin, made his cock twitch with anticipation.

"Let me kneel before you, Stephen. It gives me pleasure."

"I am your servant, my lady. I will do anything you ask of me." Even watch her bow at his feet when by all rights he should be bowing before her.

She was far, far above him. She was the king's cousin, about to be promised to another man. The king sent Stephen here to fetch her, to accompany her to court as her protector, not to fuck her. To touch her would be to betray his loyalty to the king.

There would be no way to hide his arousal when she undressed him. He would shame himself. His wayward body would scream his base urges and she would be appalled.

As her deft fingers worked the laces on his shoes, he tried to think of something else, something that would make him forget the vision of her pink folds spread wide before him, of feasting upon her until she was plump and red and glistening with lust. He tried not to dwell on the mewling sounds she might make or the flush of passion that would rise on her ivory cheeks.

She moved behind him, and with skilled precision untied his belt, which she placed on the table beside the bed. Stephen helped her to lift off his tunic, then untied his braies. Her fingertips skimmed over his buttocks as she worked them down. Was the movement deliberate? An invitation?

Of course it wasn't. Stephen clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

The braies and hose dropped to the planked floor. Still hidden behind his shirt, his cock bobbed free. As he stepped out of the leggings, he fought the mad urge to grasp himself, to press his shaft against his skin, to stroke it while she watched.

Still standing behind him, she reached down to clasp the bottom of his tunic. In one motion, she pulled his shirt over his head.

He stood naked, his raging, throbbing cock painfully thrust out.

*She is forbidden!*

Thankfully, she didn't move from behind him.

"You must be weary, Sir Stephen," she said. "I..." Her voice caught. "Please," she whispered. "The bath is ready."

## **Chapter Two**

Stephen de Verre had the most beautiful behind Elena had ever seen, smooth, tone and hollowed on either side beneath narrow hips. As she raised his tunic, it had taken all of her self-control not to lick one of those taut cheeks, to nip it with her teeth.

Appalled by her immoral thoughts, Elena stared at the floor, battling the tremors coursing through her. From the corner of her eye, she saw him climb gracefully into the wooden tub. He gave a low groan as he lowered his muscular body into the hot water.

Whatever had possessed her? His restrained, polite behavior showed that he had great pride in his position, that he took the Code of Chivalry and his duty to the king seriously. Revealing her depraved imaginings would shame him and all he stood for.

She would bathe him and then she would leave.

A stolen glance revealed Stephen's head tipped back against the padded edge of the bath. His eyes were closed and his chest rose and fell with regular, deep breaths. For a moment she wondered if he had fallen asleep, but then he cracked his eyes open and smiled at her.

"The water feels different," he murmured. "Smooth."

"It is a special mixture of herbs my grandmother created," she told him as she took the soap and ladle from the table and moved beside him, diligently keeping her gaze on the parts of him remaining above water. "She says it eases the strains of the day."

His eyes drifted shut once again, but the smile didn't fade. "Your grandmother is still alive?"

"Yes, and in good health."

"I remember her." He chuckled. "A clever woman."

"She is indeed." Elena scooped a ladleful of water. "Keep your eyes closed."

The water streamed over his head. Rivulets flowed past his jaw and down his chest. His small nipples hardened into glistening pearls.

With her lip caught between her teeth, Elena soaped her hands and slipped them into his hair.

It was just as she'd imagined, soft and silky. She sifted the strands between her fingers. This might be her only chance to touch him, ever. She would make the most of it.

For some unfathomable reason, she felt safe with him close. Safe from the king, safe from Ranulf of Lewes, safe from the other barons...even safe from the memory of her husband. She hadn't felt safe for many years, not since she was a child and her grandmother lived at Loxburn.

If only they could stay in this room forever. If only she never had to pass beyond its threshold, he would keep her safe.

She began to apply gentle pressure to his scalp, rubbing soap into every strand of hair. The more thorough she was, the longer she could stay near him. Gradually, she moved her hands to either side of Stephen's head, watching his face. His eyes were still closed, but he was clenching his teeth. Despite her grandmother's soothing bath oils and her own gentle ministrations, his body quivered with tension.

Leaning over the edge of the tub, she traced the shell of his ear with soapy fingertips. First one ear, then the other. As she slid her finger down the rim of the second ear, he raised his hand out of the water and captured her wrist.

"Elena."

His low voice wrapped around her like a blanket. All she wanted was to sink herself into it, into him, to let herself go.

He had never called her by her first name before.

She blinked, he dropped her hand and the moment was broken.

"I'm sorry, my lady."

Elena held her wrist before her, slowly turning it over. A pink band ringed her flesh where he had grasped her. Pearly beads of water dripped from her skin. A soapy stream trickled down her forearm.

*The answer is in the water.*

Beyond her extended arm, firelight glinted off the rippling surface. Submerged, warping in and out of focus in the undulating currents, Stephen's erect cock stood out from his body in blatant invitation.

Instantly, Elena's center flushed and tingled in response. She lowered her arm and gripped the rim of the tub.

What if...what if?

No! It couldn't have been what Grandmère meant! Becoming involved with Stephen would only lead to embarrassment and heartbreak, possibly worse. Certainly this knight couldn't be the key to her freedom. In the grand scheme of things, she must marry someone with land and power, and Stephen had neither.

*Impossible.*

"I just remembered —" Her voice was low, breathless. She wrenched her gaze to his face. Golden flames reflected off the deep blue of his eyes. She struggled to find some lie, some excuse. She had to leave before she did something she would regret forever. "I...I am needed in the kitchens. I am so sorry, Sir Stephen."

A long delay preceded his answer.

Oh God, she wanted him. She wanted to throw her clothes off, straddle him and ride him so hard and fast, water would splash over the edges of the tub. She wanted him to stand so she could lick the water from every inch of his rippled, masculine body. She wanted him to shove that long, hard cock inside her so deep that he branded

himself within her. She wanted him to make her cry and scream, not in misery, like Hugh had, but in rapture.

*Hugh.* His name brought her back to her senses. Her husband had died not a month past. She was a noble lady, a good Norman widow.

"Of course, my lady."

Perhaps instead she should send Stephen one of Hugh's whores.

The thought made her skin crawl and she immediately banned it. *Never!*

Sweat broke out across Elena's brow. She was burning. She had to get away from him.

"I will send up a servant—"

He waved his hand, flinging a droplet to her lip. Her tongue darted out to capture the bead of water. The essence of Stephen drifted across her tongue. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough.

"Please don't bother the servants on my account. I can manage by myself."

"Very well." Slowly, she rose and dragged herself across the room. Leaving him physically hurt her. It didn't make any sense, but it felt like she left part of herself behind.

At the door, she paused. "Good night, Sir Stephen."

His look was indecipherable. "Good night, my lady."

It seemed to take forever for her to escape from the room into the dark hallway beyond. Once the door was firmly shut, she slumped against it, letting out a ragged, sobbing breath.

She didn't know what had happened. She had never felt like that in a man's presence before. Never.

Even now, erotic images fluttered through her mind. She pictured herself bending over the lip of the tub, naked, her bare bottom tilted high. Stephen stood with his chest pressed to her back, his big hands on the cheeks of her behind, pumping his cock deep into her body. A contraction fluttered through her core and Elena sank to her knees.

"Stop," she whispered to herself. This was madness. She was no wanton harlot.

*Stop. Stop. Stop.*

She stumbled to her full height and brushed the wrinkles from her kirtle. Being so close to him after not having seen a male body in its full prime for years—she'd experienced a moment of weakness.

The past month had been so draining, what with Hugh's sudden death, his funeral and burial. And now she was summoned to court to learn her fate—a fate she knew she wouldn't like.

That explained it. She was overwrought.

A few feet down the hall, a chamber door was cracked open. Elena clasped the wooden plank at its edge and began to push it shut. The gentle sound of splashing water came from within and she remembered that this room adjoined Stephen's.

The tinkling noises reeled her in like a lure. If she went inside, she could peek at him one more time, take her fill of that finely sculpted body. She'd look, drink him into her memory, then be satisfied enough to spend her time deciphering Grandmère's puzzle rather than fantasizing about a man she could never have.

Elena tiptoed into the empty bedchamber. The door between the two chambers was open halfway. Gripping the edge, she peered around it.

Stephen was still in the bath, his back at a slight angle to her. From this perspective, Elena could see every detail of his long body sprawled in the water. Lazily, with his eyes closed, Stephen reached up to the table and felt around until his fingers collided with the soap. He took it in his hand then plunged it underwater, pressing his cock against his belly.

Elena stared, riveted.

Slowly, leisurely, he slid the soap down the underside of his cock, then lower, gently washing his balls. With his free hand, he grasped himself and jerked upward. Water slapped against the edges of the tub.

Clutching the side of the door, Elena felt her lips part. Her mouth went dry. She had never seen a man pleasure himself before. As she watched, his shaft grew darker underwater, now a deep plum color, a stark contrast to the paleness of his skin everywhere else.

The soap fell through his fingers and thudded to the bottom of the tub. Stephen gripped himself. Hand over hand, he pumped his fists from the base of his shaft to the head. The water rippled in concentric circles from his movements. He tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling with half-lidded eyes.

Elena had never seen anything so arousing. She imagined her own hands, mouth and sheath filled with that cock. She bunched the fabric of her dress at her waist. It would be so easy to pull it up, reach down and rub herself in the place that begged to be touched.

Every nerve in her body pricked with desire, confusion, excitement. She had never explored herself with her fingers, never had the desire. She left the barbaric, lustful thoughts to her husband, who came in, used her and then left. Hugh never made her feel like this. He never made her *want*.

Stephen's breath was ragged now. Each pull on his cock met with a harsh exhalation. Elena fisted the fabric of her kirtle tighter and watched a crimson flush spread from Stephen's neck to his ears and down his chest.

Still staring at the ceiling, he spoke, the word coming out as a half whisper, half groan. "Elena."

Elena bit back a whimper. He was thinking of her, fantasizing about her. He desired her, perhaps as much as she desired him.

Should she go to him? She wanted to go to him so badly, wanted to offer herself to him, wanted to ask him to take her in whatever way he pleased.

No.

No, she couldn't. It was a sin. It would be wrong, so wrong in so many ways. She was a virtuous widow. Within the month, she'd be betrothed to another man.

Stephen's muscles stood out in stark relief all over his body, rippling with exertion. Firelight made the sweat covering his chest and arms sparkle. With a final harsh grunt, Stephen released his seed into the water. Elena watched, fascinated, mad with lust, terrified, as the filmy cloud appeared.

All at once, Stephen slumped. "Elena," he said again, but this time her name sounded like a mournful whisper.

Elena fled.

She ran down the long hall, straight to her bedchamber on its opposite end. Flying inside, she slammed the door shut behind her. Margaret, who had been waiting for her in a chair beside the fire, rose in alarm.

"Is something wrong, my lady?"

Elena put one hand flat on the door to steady herself. "It is nothing, Margaret."

"Are you sure? I could summon—"

Elena rounded on her. "Summon no one, do you hear?"

Margaret's face crumpled. "Yes, my lady."

Elena immediately softened. She had given Margaret the esteemed position of lady's maid only a few months ago, and she sometimes forgot how young the girl was. Barely thirteen and quite softhearted. Elena had never lost her temper with her before.

"Shh...it is all right. Just comb out my hair, then you can sleep with your mother and sisters tonight," she said gently. Margaret usually slept on the pallet beside Elena's bed, but tonight she wanted to be alone.

Margaret curtsied and fetched the hairbrush. Thankfully, she kept silent as she undressed Elena and combed out her hair. After she left, Elena lay under the covers, shivering, staring at the top of her embroidered canopy.

She didn't understand what had just happened. Why had Stephen de Verre's presence affected her so strongly? All she knew was that she wanted him desperately.

And he wanted her too.

What did it mean? How could this happen so quickly, and with such force? He had just arrived at Loxburn this morning.

Magic. It was the only answer. But whose magic? Certainly not her own. Her magic came in the form of fickle premonitions and visions, nothing more.

Perhaps Stephen had cast some sort of enchantment over her, though that didn't seem likely. More likely he was as befuddled over the sparks that had flown between them as she was.



Stephen. Elena shuddered, remembering how the cords on his neck had tightened as he neared his completion. The bead of sweat sliding down his cheek...

How she wished she'd joined him in the bath. She would have been naked. He would have touched her. His big hands would completely engulf her breasts.

She pinched her nipples through her nightdress. How much better it would feel if he held them instead of her. He would be gentle with her, she knew – gentle yet firm. He would roll her nipples between his broad fingers...

He would teach her things she'd never dreamed of.

She pulled up the edge of her nightshift and cupped her mons. She'd wanted to do this while she'd watched him, but she'd been too panicked, too overwhelmed. Now, in the darkness of her chamber, it didn't seem nearly so daunting.

She thrust her hips upward, pressing her mound into her hand. The motion sent a thrill of pleasure ricocheting through her.

Spreading her legs, Elena burrowed her fingers between her folds. She was so hot down there. So hot and sensitive and slick. Stephen would feel this when he touched her.

Oh, and it felt so good. Why had she never thought of exploring herself before?

She circled her entrance with her fingertips and thought of Stephen's cock head nuzzling against her. What would it feel like when he pushed inside her the first time? Would he thrust hard or would he take it slowly, relishing every moment as she took him deeper and deeper into her body?

Slowly, she slipped a finger inside. Her sheath tightened around her. But Stephen was so much bigger. Would he hurt her? She pulled out and pushed two fingers in, tilting her hips so she could go deep, feeling how her body conformed.

Oh it was delicious. She thrust them again, imagining the bigger, harder, smoother shape of Stephen's sex replacing her fingers. She could accommodate him, she was sure of it. It might hurt, but only at first. Then she would feel only pleasure as he invaded her body over and over. As he hovered over her, she'd stroke his muscled chest, the curve of his bicep. He'd whisper her name through clenched teeth. *Elena. Elena. Elena.*

Gasping, Elena removed her fingers and brushed them over the sensitive tissue between the lips of her sex. "Oh...Lord," she murmured. Just above her channel was an area so swollen and so sensitive, she could hardly touch it. Instead she circled around it. Tension built within her body and between her legs. Everywhere she touched was so wet. She could feel the juices of her lust dripping down the cleft of her behind. The muscles in her legs and buttocks and stomach clenched involuntarily.

Now she imagined Stephen slamming into her. Sweat beaded on his temples, but his blue eyes were open, watching her, taking in her pleasure. Elena pinched her nipple hard with her free hand. Her fingers flicked across her sensitive bud. She cried out. And then everything released. Like the flooding of a dam, it swept over her in long waves of pleasure, relaxing her clenched muscles. The waves passed through her, each one smaller than the last.

When it was finally over, she lay still for a long while, stunned. It was the first time anything like that had happened to her body.

Something told her Stephen could not only make her feel this good, but much, much better.

## Chapter Three

Positioned beside him at the high table, Elena glanced at Sir Stephen from beneath her lashes. He ate slowly and cut his meat deliberately, a stern look on his angular face. If he sensed her watching him, he didn't show it.

He was so handsome. She remembered the intensity of his eyes when he had looked at her yesterday from the bailey, the set of his jaw as he'd brought himself to completion...

"Would you like more bread, Sir Stephen?" she asked, her tone polite but loud enough for him to hear over the general pandemonium of the men gathered to break their fasts in the great hall.

With an abrupt jerk of his head, he turned to her. For a long moment, he stared, his eyes filled with the blue heat she'd seen in them yesterday. A warm flush spread across her chest. But then his look cleared and his eyes flickered away from her face as he reached for the loaf she offered. "Thank you, my lady."

Trying not to squirm in her seat, she watched him tear off a piece of bread. How she wanted to reach out and place her hand on top of his. Just a touch would be enough to soothe her trembling nerves. But she couldn't.

She bowed her head and picked at the food in her trencher. His proximity made her feel warm and jittery. Unsettled. The closer she was to him, the harder it was to ignore her base desires. She had to occupy herself, to find a way to keep her distance.

But she didn't want to stay away. She remembered how big his hands were as they stroked over his shaft, how her own body had reacted to him. How it ached for him. She wanted him. Wanted his fingers stroking deep inside of her, her lips brushing over the silk of his cock...

"My lady?"

Elena dropped her eating knife with a clatter and looked up. Stephen was gazing at her with a guarded expression.

"Yes?"

"The king requested that I bring you to Winchester as soon as possible. How long do you think it will take you and your servants to prepare for the journey?"

She blew out a breath through pursed lips, forcing herself to think. It wouldn't be too difficult. Without Hugh to complicate every step of the way, she and her castellan, Sir Jared, had fallen into an easy routine.

She didn't look forward to her meeting with the king, but there was no reason to delay the inevitable. Shrugging, she said, "We shall leave tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow? Surely you will require more time to prepare your belongings, your servants—"

She tried to sound stern. "I manage this castle efficiently, Sir Stephen. I require little in the way of baggage or servants. I will prepare my people with time to spare."

"All right then, my lady," he said mildly. "As you wish. Tomorrow it is." He gave a small nod and returned to his food, once again leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Elena looked down at her men-at-arms mingling with his in the hall. The mood at Loxburn had lightened considerably in the past few weeks, and she couldn't blame her people for feeling more relief than sorrow at Hugh's death. Sir Stephen's men seemed to be as happy as hers, and it made for a hall filled with cheerfulness, even after the somber early mass in the chapel.

It seemed she and Stephen were the only ones excluded from the jovial atmosphere, though. She slid a glance at him. He was frowning down at his food as if in deep thought.

She didn't want things to become awkward between them. What she had witnessed last night had been a mistake. They could never have one another. She had a duty to the king—to her future husband. Her virtue had never failed her, and she wouldn't allow it to do so now.

She liked Sir Stephen. They had been friends once, after all, and they would be spending more time together. Taking a deep breath, she turned to him again. "How long will it take for us to travel to Winchester, Sir Stephen?"

"It took two full days for me to travel here. But the roads are bad this time of year. I expect it will take twice that time with your litter, wagons and baggage."

She shook her head. "No, I shall not require a litter. I'll ride beside you. Have you forgotten how I like to ride?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise, but he spoke mildly. "Of course, my lady. I do remember. Still, you will bring a baggage train and servants. They won't travel as quickly as you and I on horseback."

Elena imagined the two of them riding side by side to Winchester, the wind streaming through their hair. Laughing and free. It would be perfect—a dream.

One that would never happen. As always, she would be bogged down by the baggage of her station.

The smile slipped from her lips and she nodded in concession. "You are right, of course."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena spent the remainder of the morning preparing for their departure. After a brief luncheon alone in her solar, she called in Sir Jared and they discussed castle business throughout the afternoon. Other women might have thought this work mundane, but Elena thrived on it. Even Hugh had conceded she was the brains of

Loxburn while he was the brawn. Unfortunately, her next husband might not be so accommodating.

She trusted Sir Jared implicitly—he was an old man who had served her parents since before she was born. She knew that the keep would be in good hands while she was at Winchester. As their business wound to a close, Sir Jared tugged on his beard. “How long do you think you will be gone, my lady?”

She rested her hands on her desk and considered. “The king wants me at court while he chooses my next husband. I expect he feels I should wait out my mourning there and then remarry. Once that happens, my husband will likely determine when we will return.”

Sir Jared frowned. “Several months then?”

Melancholy tugged at Elena. She hated having to be gone from her home for so long, yet it was inevitable. “Yes.”

“Do you have any idea whom he will wish to align with you, my lady?”

She shook her head somberly. “I don’t know, but I imagine Ranulf of Lewes will petition relentlessly.” The old man’s face darkened as she continued. “The advantages of aligning with Ranulf will not be missed by John. It will assure him a good deal of control along the Welsh border.” Impulsively, she took Sir Jared’s hand and grasped tightly. “Please pray it will not come to pass, Sir Jared.”

He let his breath out in a hiss and squeezed her fingers in return. “I will pray for you, my lady. He wouldn’t be good for Loxburn.”

“No,” she whispered. A finger of dread slid down her spine as she remembered the horror she had witnessed the one time she’d made the mistake of visiting his keep. Elena crossed her arms over her chest, fighting a shudder. “He certainly would not.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ranulf of Lewes was getting nowhere with the king. As his steward, Ainsley, watched from an armchair, he paced restlessly from one end of the tiny room to the other. The king had given him the smallest bedchamber in the smallest tower of this godforsaken castle.

“Damn him. After all I did for him in the Holy Land. ‘I’ll consider it’, he says.” Ranulf scowled. “Patronizing bastard. To John, ‘consider’ means ‘when hell freezes over’.”

Ranulf shoved a mint leaf into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. He wanted Loxburn. He wanted Elena. He always had. And now with Hugh de Burgh’s death, he’d been given a second chance.

Yet King John had made it clear he had no intention of handing Loxburn and Elena to him. John was a cruel, conniving man who wouldn’t grant such a prize for nothing.

Elena was on her way here. A shiver of anticipation shook Ranulf's shoulders. It had been two years since he'd laid eyes on her. He had trembled with pleasure upon seeing her again, but the bitch had turned her nose up at him.

He'd make her pay. First she'd pay for her haughty snub, then she'd spend the rest of her life paying for murdering his mother and destroying his life.

But he needed her to be his first. Nothing was more important to him than mastering Elena de Burgh. Nothing. Not even Loxburn.

He knew that it wouldn't be long before John made the final decision on who would marry her and acquire her lands. John needed all the friends he could get, and Ranulf had connections in Wales, connections John needed. He was certainly the best candidate...and yet his greedy king seemed to want even more.

"Damn him!" Ranulf roared again. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ainsley swipe the back of his arm over a sweat-soaked brow.

Ranulf's stomach turned. He took great pride in his high standard of personal hygiene, and Ainsley was a slimy, greasy, sniveling excuse for a man. He spun on Ainsley. "Damn you, for that matter. You're dripping on the king's armchair, man. Disgusting. Why all the sweat?"

Ainsley smiled. Even in his anguished state, the curve of those thin lips broke through his revulsion and pleased Ranulf, for he knew it meant Ainsley had an idea. His ideas were generally clever and underhanded. Ainsley reminded him of a rat. Devious and shrewd, but small. Easy to destroy.

"It is because my mind is engaged in the greatest exercise of all, my lord – thought."

Ranulf sneered. "Thought is useless if it does not result in action."

Ainsley tapped his long, pale fingers on the arms of his chair. "I think perhaps you shall be quite pleased with this particular thought, my lord."

"Will it result in my marriage to Elena of Loxburn?"

"Oh most certainly, my lord."

Ranulf folded his arms across his chest. "Then by all means, spit it out, Ainsley. I'm tired of waiting."

He'd been waiting for years, after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stephen listened at the door for a long moment then pressed the flat of his hand against the smooth, worn wood. He hadn't needed to ask the servants where she was – he simply *knew*. She was just inside this room. He didn't know how, but he felt her there. When she was near, his senses flared. Through the thick planks of the door, he could hear the muted sounds of her breaths and smell her soft floral scent.

He couldn't comprehend what made him feel so strongly attracted to her, so connected to her. He raised his knuckles to the wood, but before he knocked, her voice sounded from inside.

"Come in."

Stephen took a surprised step backward. Had she sensed him in the same way he'd sensed her?

*Control.* Reining in his emotions, he took a deep breath and pushed the door open. She was sitting at a chair before a low table strewn with parchment, wearing a gown of fine dark serge that made her long, plaited hair glow with copper highlights. She raised her eyes to greet him. "Sir Stephen. I was just thinking about you."

Stephen's heart jumped in his chest. What had she been thinking? By the hooded look in her eyes, those thoughts hadn't been all that innocent.

Dare he hope she was having the same conflicted, powerful feelings he was?

"Were you?" he said slowly.

"Indeed." She blinked and looked down at the table. "I was, ah, hoping that the servants were assisting you and your men in whatever ways you needed."

*No.* No, of course she didn't share his feelings.

Unable to move, he simply stared at her. "Yes. They are."

"That's...good." Elena shifted in her chair. She had changed, somehow, since last night. She had seemed almost shy at breakfast and now color flooded her pale cheeks. What had brought about this change?

Abruptly, she rose from her seat. "Are you hungry? Can I get you something?"

Hungry? *God yes.*

"No thank you, my lady. In fact, I've just eaten. I'm here to thank you for your generosity to my men and me."

She waved her hand. "It is nothing."

Stephen bowed his head to prevent her from seeing the longing in his eyes. "Is there anything I can do for you, my lady?"

She took a step toward him. "Don't."

Another step forward, and her nearness almost broke his resolve not to touch her.

She spoke softly. He loved the sound of her voice, low for a woman, but sultry and smooth. "Please don't be so...formal. Can't we be friends? Like we once were?"

Unable to continue facing her without touching her, he turned away and strode to the window. Resting his palms on the sill, he looked out over the inner bailey. For a long moment he stared at the people going about their business below. Her gaze burned into his back.

When he had regained some semblance of control, he pushed back from the glass. "Of course we can be friends, my lady."

"Elena."

He forced a smile. "Of course. Elena."

"Good. Are you and your men prepared for tomorrow?"

"Yes. And your men seem to be ready as well. You run your keep seamlessly."

She gave him a genuine, warm look of pleasure. Clearly she took pride in her work here, as she should. "Thank you."

"And your women?"

"They are nearly ready as well."

He chuckled. "And I was worried you didn't allow yourself sufficient time."

She raised her hands and shrugged. "So here we are, with naught to do but be idle for the remainder of the afternoon."

*Idle pleasures...* As he watched awareness pass over her face, Stephen shifted his stance to alleviate the growing discomfort of his erection. God knew he craved those idle pleasures. But he wouldn't give in to them, for Elena's sake and for his own.

Her gaze inched downward, coming to rest beneath his belt. Her tongue swept across her upper lip like she was anticipating some delectable meal. Then, as if she realized what she was doing, she looked away, a crimson flush spreading over her cheeks.

Her actions ripped through his resolve, tearing it to shreds.

She did want him! Stephen had been so intent on fighting his own illicit thoughts about Lady de Burgh, he hadn't seen that she'd been struggling as well. She wanted him very badly indeed. But she was fighting it just as fervently as he was.

He took a step closer to her. As if pulled by a string, his hand rose to touch her arm. She stared down at his fingers on her sleeve, wide-eyed.

He could hardly get a word past the chokehold of emotion. "Elena, what's happening to us?"

With a little whimper, she launched herself into his arms, tilted her head up and pressed her lips against his.

Before he could think, Stephen wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. He dragged one hand down the side of her hip to her upper thigh. Her body was small but curved enticingly beneath her gown. He coaxed her lips open and when they parted, he teased his tongue inside.

She gasped and made a little noise that sounded like, "Oh!"

Stephen withdrew his tongue in surprise. Surely she had been kissed before? Brushing his lips against hers, he gathered her close and stepped forward until he'd pushed her back against the tapestry near the fireplace.

She kept her mouth closed and he didn't press her again. Instead he ran his lips down the soft, silky flesh of her jaw and stroked his hand down her slender neck, over her collarbone and over the tight bead of her nipple through the fabric of her gown. She buried her face in his neck, gasping.



His cock was so hard it hurt. Their clothing was in the way. Blood pounded in his ears, and he couldn't think beyond his all-encompassing need.

He would have her. He would make her his.

As he worked the ties of his undergarment with one hand, Stephen hiked up her skirts with the other, sliding the rough pad of his thumb over the supple flesh of her thigh. She moaned into his neck.

The braies fell to his knees. He moved his fingers higher on her thigh, stroking the damp skin between her legs. Gasping, she squirmed, but he ground his cock into her hip and pinned her against the wall.

He slid his fingers into the slick, hot flesh. She went rigid.

Stephen froze. She shook in his arms, trembled all over. She was terrified.

What the hell was he doing? Raping Lady de Burgh? She'd merely kissed him—a chaste, closed-mouth kiss like the gentlelady she was—and he'd pushed her against the wall and nearly thrust his cock inside her like a rutting animal.

Good God, he'd lost his mind. With a hiss of breath, he jerked his hand away and jumped back, leaving her slouched against the wall with a stunned expression on her face.

What had he done? He had pushed aside everything he stood for and given in to carnal lust. He yanked his braies up over his still painfully erect cock. She would never forgive him. He would never forgive himself. He covered his face with his hands, but his fingers were slick and smelled of her sex. The devil in him ordered him to lick his fingers. Instead he fisted his hands and dropped them rigidly to his sides.

"My lady," he rasped. She looked up at him with wide, shining eyes. Her shocked look flooded him with guilt. "Please forgive me."

He strode to the door and heaved it open. He couldn't get out of here quickly enough.

He stepped over the threshold. But then her voice came from behind him, low and sultry and edged with heat. "Stephen. Wait."

## Chapter Four

Elena pressed her back against the wall and watched Stephen turn to her, his fingers gripping the edge of the door so hard his knuckles had turned white.

Silence. Except for the harshness of his breath and her own gasping pants. She watched the emotions rage across his face but couldn't decipher them. Was he disgusted with her or with himself? She had behaved like a whore, throwing herself into his arms like that. But then, the things that he had done to her with his tongue and fingers...

Elena shuddered. Lord, she had never known a woman's body could experience such sensations.

But he wanted to leave her. Why was she forcing him to stay?

There was no point in being coy with him. Despite the sinful nature of her desires, she must be honest. To be anything else would insult him, and she had already insulted him enough.

"I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"No, my lady." He shut the door and leaned against it. Now they spoke from opposite sides of the room, as if the space would somehow buffer the desire still swirling between them.

"Yes. I shouldn't have behaved thus. It was...disrespectful."

His face darkened. "No."

Elena bowed her head and opened her palms flat against the tapestry, running her fingertips over the coarse material.

*Honesty.* He would probably turn his back on her forever, but she had to explain.

"It is my fault. I wanted you to touch me, Stephen. When you touch me, I feel...I feel *whole*. I have never felt anything so...so profound." A hot tear trailed down her face, and she brought her hand to her cheek, surprised. It had been a long time since she last shed tears. "It is evil, I know. It is wrong and wanton and sinful and I am...so...wretched." In truth, she was disgusted with herself, at her own weakness and vulnerability. But she couldn't help it—this man had stripped her to the core, leaving her bare and defenseless. Unable to look at him, she gazed at the window instead. "Forgive me."

In an instant, he was standing before her. "Elena..."

She melted in the furnace of his arms.

So strong. So powerful. He lifted her and carried her to the chair set before the fire, where he held her close, kissing the tears from her cheeks.

Understanding flowed between them, not with words but with actions as Elena sat on his lap and they explored one another in an unspoken, intimate conversation.

Stephen's lips, salty with her tears, touched hers gently. There was no need to speak. The expression on his face spoke more eloquently than words. *There can be nothing between us*, it said.

Elena stroked her palms down the hard planes of his chest, learning the contour of each masculine muscle. *If we were caught, the king could have you castrated. Even killed*, she communicated silently.

His fingers threaded through her braid, loosening it then sifting through the thick fall of her hair. *You are in mourning. Destined for another*.

She pressed her lips against the tender skin at the hollow of his throat, breathing deeply. *If we were exposed, the king could take Loxburn away from me forever*.

The hard ridge of Stephen's erection pressed against Elena's hip. *I have a sacred duty to the king, one that honor will never allow me to forsake*.

Finally, Elena spoke in a whisper. "These feelings I have for you...I don't understand them. They're powerful. Unnatural."

That shook him—she felt it in the sudden tension of the muscles cradling her.

In a low voice, he said, "I feel it too, *cariad*."

She had lived long enough on the borderlands of Wales to know *cariad* was an endearment, though she didn't know exactly what it meant. Stephen's mother, she remembered, was Welsh and his father English.

She snuggled closer into his body. "Whenever you're near, I feel this...an undeniable...craving."

Stephen spoke slowly. "It is natural for some men and women to have strong feelings for one another. But the feelings I have for you have always been strong. More powerful than most, I think. But," he tilted her chin up so she met his clear blue gaze with her own, "my feelings for you are pure and natural. I swear it."

She stared at him through glassy eyes. They wanted one another, with equal passion, equal need.

It couldn't be.

They were doomed.

Much later, Elena went downstairs to serve in her role as chatelaine. Stephen walked behind her, playing his role as chivalrous knight.

Elena knew that Stephen was as convinced as she was that nothing could come of this. It somehow soothed her that their forced separation challenged him as much as it did her, but they were equally strong. They could overcome this lethal attraction.

Through dinner, she laughed and joked with his men, then she, Stephen and Sir Jared gathered with some of her men-at-arms. Late into the night they reminisced about

old times at Loxburn. Stephen and Elena talked, laughed and drank wine. There were no lingering glances, fluttering touches, accidental brushes against one another. They played their assigned roles to perfection.

But once she was alone in her bedchamber, the brick fortress of Elena's resolve began to crumble.

She pressed her fingers against her eyes. Another night in her cold bed. She didn't know how she'd borne it for so long. It had seemed easy before Hugh's death. In fact, she considered it a blessing that he'd hardly come to her bed at all in the last few years.

Now her bed was a lonely, sterile place. She was almost glad to be leaving it tomorrow. At least the novelty of a new place to sleep might distract her from this devastating solitude.

Stephen's chamber was close—at the end of the wing. Just a short walk down the hall.

The servants were all abed. Nobody would see her if she went to him.

She knew she shouldn't—the risk was too great.

But she wanted to. Desperately.

Groaning softly, Elena curled her body into a ball and grasped her knees with her frigid hands.

If she wanted to experience the closeness they'd shared so briefly this afternoon, tonight was her only chance. Certainly they wouldn't be able to associate with one another once they arrived at Winchester Castle. That would be suicidal.

But if she went to him tonight, nobody would ever need know.

He was so warm. She remembered the heat of his chest as he held her. He was so sculpted, so hard. So protective of her.

Tonight was her last chance to experience the one thing she would likely never again have the chance to feel. Sexual pleasure. Fulfillment from a man's touch. A cock thrusting inside her because she wanted it there rather than because she must endure it as a wifely duty.

Stephen could give all of that to her, she knew, so easily. Everywhere he touched, fire ignited beneath her skin. And when he had touched her between her legs, she had nearly exploded.

Elena tossed the covers aside and slid out of bed. She hesitated over the rushlight beside her bed, but she didn't light it. Loxburn was her home. She could find her way in the dark.

Thankful the servants kept the hinges well oiled, she closed the door silently behind her and walked into the cold hall.

Slowly, using the wall as a guide and counting the doors, she moved down the passageway. Every breath she made echoed against the stone walls.

Stephen's door. Elena hesitated, her heart beating loudly in her ears.

She wanted this. Like nothing in her life, she wanted this one night with him. Slowly, she pushed the door open. It swung silently on its hinges.

The fire had burnt down to embers. He lay on the bed, a shadowy figure buried under the blankets. Closing the door softly behind her, Elena padded across the room. The floorboards chilled the soles of her feet, yet when she reached the side of the bed, she stood for a long moment, staring at him.

In sleep, he was like an angel, pale and perfect in the dimness, the half-moon curve of his thick, dark eyelashes resting against his cheek.

As quietly as she could, she climbed up on the bed and crawled under the covers. When he didn't wake, she pressed her body against his side.

He wore a tunic, but just as she'd imagined, he was warm beneath it.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, he shifted in his sleep and slipped his arm around her waist.

Maybe he wouldn't wake. Maybe she could just rest here for a few hours, watch him sleep and revel in his warmth and his touch. That would be enough—much more than she might have wished for a few days ago. Closing her eyes, she snuggled closer.

Suddenly, his body tensed and jerked away from her.

Elena's eyes snapped open. He blinked at her, a curious, confused expression on his face.

"Elena?"

Regret constricted her heart. She was putting him at risk, forcing him to betray his king...oh God.

"I'm sorry," she groaned. This was wrong, all wrong. Why couldn't she control herself? Why was she so weak? She began to crawl out of the bed. "I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have come. I couldn't stop myself."

Still shocked by her presence, Stephen tightened his arm around her waist. "Stay."

He pulled her close. Elena was cold, trembling, and all he wanted to do was warm her. Every moment with her was a gift. Despite all the ways they'd strayed in their touches and unspoken declarations, he couldn't regret what they had done.

"Stop apologizing." He pulled her closer against his chest. "I wanted you to come." He nearly laughed at the understatement. In the hours after sunset, he had paced this room, thinking about her, fighting the urge to slip into her room.

He'd dreamt about her. He was dreaming of holding her when he'd awakened, his cock rock-hard, to find her in his arms.

She stroked his arm, seemingly entranced by the slope of his bicep.

Stephen tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear. "I want you to stay."

Mourning what never could be was a waste. This might be folly, but it didn't matter. He couldn't fight it now. Not with her nearly naked, pressing her small body against him.

Fully awake, he reached behind her neck and pulled her closer.

If it was his only chance, he would make the most of this night. After a long, childless marriage with de Burgh, it was widely known that Elena was barren. It meant he could come inside her, something he had, until now, refused to do with any woman.

"I want to make love to you," he said against her lips, feeling her soft breaths whisper against his skin. "I want to learn every dip, curve and hollow of your body."

Reaching down, he snagged the bottom of her shift, slowly pulling it up over her calf, then her thigh, letting his callused fingertips run over her smooth skin. She lay very still, staring at him with trusting violet eyes.

"It's our only chance," she said.

Stephen ground his teeth. "I know."

She rose to pull her shift over her head. He did the same with his tunic. After tossing their clothes aside, they sat on the bed, naked, facing one another in the dim light.

He watched the rise and fall of her chest as she seemed to struggle to regulate her breath. "I'm afraid, Stephen."

"Why?"

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. "I don't know. I shouldn't be. I trust you. But..." She looked down at her hands. "I didn't really understand anything until today, when you kissed me and...and touched me."

"Did I hurt you?" he asked softly.

Unwavering, her gaze met his. "No."

"Did I do something you didn't want me to do?"

"No."

"Did it feel wrong?"

"No...it felt *right*." She gave a shaky laugh. "I think you have cast a spell over me."

He shook his head somberly. "No. There is no magic in me."

But could she be responsible for this? Had she cast a spell over *him*? He'd known her well enough to be witness to her unexpected visions, and it was well-known that her grandmother dabbled in witchcraft.

Yet he couldn't believe she was responsible for what was happening. If anything, she was more distraught over it than he was.

"What is it then, if it's not a spell?"

"It felt right because it was. Perhaps we were merely meant to be together."

Elena sucked in a breath. "Impossible."

Stephen brushed his fingertips over her soft lips.

"We cannot be together." A hard edge, the same edge he'd sensed in her expression earlier today when he'd watched her directing the servants, had taken over her voice.

"Why would fate provoke us?" she continued. "It isn't fair."

"No." The unfairness of it elicited a raging frustration within him. But he wouldn't think of that now.

Never taking her eyes from his face, she lay on her back. He hovered over her, devouring her naked body with his eyes. Her lips parted as she stared up at him.

"You are beautiful," he said, smoothing her riotous hair back from her face. He ran a finger across her wide mouth, perfect for kissing or for wrapping around his shaft.

*Later.*

To know her completely, to understand her body, how it felt, tasted, moved beneath him—those were the things that mattered most. He wanted to brand them into his memory.

He traced the dark slashes of her eyebrows with his fingertips. Bending down, he feathered kisses across her forehead. No part of her would remain untouched, no area unexplored.

"Stephen." A breath, a plea against his ear.

"Lie still." He moved the hair away from her face and swiped his fingers down her hairline. When he licked the shell of her ear, she squirmed, but he held her firm.

Her neck was long and pale, like a swan's. Arching her head back, she bared it for him.

For a long moment, Stephen stared at the display of skin so pale that even in the darkness, he could see the blue pulse threading through her jugular vein. In a clear message of trust, Elena offered herself.

He ran his big hands over the delicate skin, then followed with his lips, alternating between sucks and gentle bites down the smooth column and across her shoulders.

"Yes," she said, squeezing her eyes shut. "Make me remember you. Never let me forget."

Her thought was uncannily similar to his own. He paused, breathing heavily against her neck. The compulsion to take her in his arms and carry her away from this place nearly overwhelmed him. They'd ride somewhere safe, far from England and the duties that must keep them apart.

It was an impossible fantasy. Stephen had sworn an oath of fealty to the king and honor demanded he keep that oath. No matter what.

He traced her collarbone with his fingers, then his lips, tasting roses and cream.

"I can't get enough of you," he said. Moving lower, he licked the curved mound of her breast.

She gave a ragged sigh.

Straightening, he gazed at her face. Shadows darkened her skin as she raised her arms to stretch them overhead.

A look of wonder was etched on her face. "The way you touch me with your hands and mouth...it is so...so *decadent*." Her eyes glittered as they met his. She reached up to him and pressed her palm against his chest.

He slid his hands from her collarbone to her breasts, cupping them in his hands and weighing gently. Small and pert, they molded to his rounded palms. Smoothing his fingertips over her nipples, he watched with profound appreciation as they grew into hard pink buds. He bent to capture one of them between his lips.

Gasping in pleasure, she slipped her thigh between his legs, rubbing against his cock, making it throb with impatience. Ignoring his body's demand to claim her fast and hard, Stephen moved to the other breast and worked it with his mouth, kneading the flesh of both globes with his hands until the nipples puckered taut.

"You are so small," he whispered, trailing kisses down the underswell, stroking his hand over her belly. His hand looked massive against her tiny waist, and he realized it was her presence that filled a room, that made her seem regal and tall, not her physical size.

He swiped his tongue around the circle of her bellybutton, then lower, skirting the top of the triangle of hair that hid her womanhood.

She gasped, squirming away, and relief flooded through Stephen. Certain bodily pleasures were still new to her. When her body had gone rigid in the solar, it was because she had never experienced a man's fingers stroking her cunt, not because she didn't want them there.

Stephen moved back up to scrutinize her face.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Her expression was open and curious but tinged with fear. She searched his face with her eyes. "You won't hurt me."

He clenched his teeth. This woman had never been properly loved.

He placed a heavy hand on her thigh. "Open to me."

Tension hummed beneath her skin as if she were a frightened bird. But she stared him in the eye and nodded.

This was an altogether different side of the take-charge, confident lady he knew. The lady who ran her castle efficiently, who endured the abusive husband, ultimately using her own sharp intelligence to control their relationship.

Elena de Burgh was inexperienced. Frightened by the intensity of what she was feeling, frightened of what he could make her feel.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured. "There is nothing to fear from me."

In a way, that was a lie. They both had so much to fear. Yet he could not stop.

Spreading her legs wide, he moved down and eased himself between them. Her slit opened before him.



The breath caught in his throat. "Have you ever seen yourself as I am seeing you now?"

"No," came the throaty answer from above.

"You are open to me and shining pink."

As if she needed some contact with him, her foot stroked along the length of his hip.

He inhaled a deep breath through his nose. When he spoke, his voice was gruff. "You smell like woman, like desire. You smell like you want me."

"I do, Stephen. I want you."

His cock throbbed, its angry veins pulsing in demand.

Opening her wider with his thumbs, he swiped the tip of his tongue in a straight line from the top of her glistening slit downward. She bucked, but he held her firm. He trailed little kisses against the inside of her pale thigh. "Your cream tastes like heaven," he murmured. "I want to devour you. Drown in you."

Consumed by her heat and her smooth flavor, he slipped one finger deep into her sheath.

Her hips rose off the bed and she cried out, a thin sound filled with desperate need.

She grew hotter against his mouth as the blood rushed between her legs, plumping the slick lips of her cunt. Her channel throbbed around his finger, pulsing in time to her heart. The rasping sounds of her breaths grew louder above him. He circled his tongue around her hardening nub, coaxing it from its protective cowl.

Slowly, he drew his finger out of her and then, just as slowly, pushed two back in. She was so tight. He groaned against her slick flesh, thinking of replacing his fingers with his stiff cock, of her core clenching around him, drawing him out, bringing him to completion.

*Yes, Elena, yes,* he commanded in his mind. *Come for me.*

He thrust his fingers into her wet heat. Her hands threaded in his hair and pressed his mouth against her.

She grew tighter, hotter. Her taste surrounded him, enveloped him. Her body twisted and writhed, but he held her firmly with his free hand, grazing his fingertips over the taut bud of her nipple. Gently, he sucked her nub between his lips.

Her whimpering noises stopped, her body arched and froze. Her hands fell from his head. From his fingertips, Stephen felt her shudder. Deep pulses rolled down his fingers, up to his lips. Stephen closed his eyes and let her pleasure flow into him.

When it subsided, he kissed her gently one last time then moved back. Her plump lips glowed, now a deep, lush blood-red in color. Slowly, he withdrew his fingers, stroking softly up her slit before he crawled up her body, rubbing his cock against her silky skin all the way.

Her eyes were closed. A small smile curled the corners of her lips. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was asleep, dreaming pleasant dreams.

"I'm not finished yet," he said, his voice husky.

"Mmm." Her smile grew, but she didn't open her eyes.

Gently, Stephen rolled her onto her stomach.

What he saw on her back made him hiss in a breath. Slender lines crisscrossed from her shoulder blades down to the swell of her bottom.

Hugh's work.

A murderous rage flooded through him. With shaking fingers, he traced one of the lines. How could he have left her under that man's thumb? How could he have been so selfish, so cowardly?

For the second time, he regretted Hugh not being alive so he could kill him himself.

The scars ended just above the swell of her buttocks. She was trembling now, just a slight vibration of her body. Whether it was a reawakening fear or arousal, he didn't know.

He pressed his fingers into the flesh of her arse and brushed his lips against her rounded cheek, breathing in the musky scent of her lust. Sliding his hand down her cleft, he felt her, slick and hot, her arousal dribbling down the inside of her thigh.

His fingers skated back through her drenched folds to circle her tightly clenched hole, and the desire to claim her that way skittered down his spine and through his balls, making his cock jump.

He rubbed her gently, pushing the merest tip of his finger inside. She gasped.

No, not tonight. Tonight was for gentle pleasures. When she was completely comfortable, when she trusted him, when she knew without a doubt he would never hurt her like Hugh had hurt her. In a month or two, maybe...

Reality slammed into him like a punch in the gut. In a month she would be promised to someone else. Not him.

Never him.

Stephen couldn't stop the low growl that emerged from his throat.

"Stephen?"

He forcibly relaxed his fingers, which had clenched and dug into her flesh.

"I have to stop thinking of you with someone else," he bit out.

"There isn't anyone else. There never has been."

"But there will be."

"No."

With that simple word, spoken with complete confidence, he relaxed. The future didn't matter. The past didn't matter. For now, she was his. Completely.

He kissed the pink fingerprint on her bottom where he had gripped her so tightly. She wiggled into his lips, groaning softly. Smiling, he rubbed his thumb over the taut flesh, down to the soft crease where it met her thigh. His lips followed the path of his fingertips, reveling in the petal-like softness of her skin.

Her thighs were equally soft. He rubbed and explored them, moving lower to the backs of her knees, brushing them gently with his lips until she gasped.

Stephen loved the sounds she made. Her laugh reminded him of a bubbling stream. She was his water nymph, small, sinuous and smooth.

Easing his hand between her legs, he cupped her mons in his palm. Moaning, she ground wantonly against the heel of his hand, scorching him with the hot, wet folds of her sex.

Oh yes, she was ready.

He turned her over and pinned her arms at her sides. Her eyes glowed as she smiled up at him. It was the first time he'd seen her look truly happy.

Biting her lip, she drew her arms around him and opened her legs wide in blatant invitation.

Stephen held his cock at her entrance, his control so near to shattering that his legs shook. Slowly, he nudged inside, closely watching the expression on her face.

Her lips parted. She wiggled, trying to rush him along, to force him inside. With one final nudge, he sheathed himself to the hilt. Elena's breath released with a whoosh and her body arched up to greet him.

Finally she was wrapped around him, as tight and hot as a glove. He groaned. "You fit me perfectly."

Then he began to move. Slowly at first, so he could revel in her sheath gripping his cock. But then the world disappeared and there was only heat and friction and the clenching that took his breath away. She wrapped her legs around his hips, opening wide for him, pushing him deeper with her heels.

Staring down at her face, he thrust deep, until his pelvis ground against her. Her lips parted and her eyes squeezed shut. Suddenly, she stiffened. Her nails dug into his back and she cried out.

There it was again, that glorious pulsing. All around him. Stephen's jaw clenched as he pounded into her ruthlessly. Instantly, the pressure built in his balls, drawing them up tight against his body, but he grasped for a thread of control and held on desperately. He wanted to pleasure her. He wanted to make it last.

Elena wriggled beneath him, making little keening sounds. The fist of her sheath gripped him harder, viselike. He couldn't hold on, not for much longer. Sweat beaded on his temples. Elena's movements became more desperate. Her body undulated as the waves of her orgasm washed over her. Stephen rode the wave, unraveling the taut thread of his control. In the midst of it, his own dam broke. With pulses that made him shudder all the way to his toes, his cock shot his seed deep into her body.

With the last of the contractions, Stephen collapsed onto his forearms. Beneath him, Elena's arms slipped limply to her sides. Stephen smiled at her then brushed a kiss against her slightly parted lips. He loved how she was after she came. Relaxed and

limp, like a rag doll. Fearing he would squash her, he rolled to the side and pulled her against his chest.

“I won’t let you go,” he whispered. Every fiber in his body shouted that she was the one for him, the only one. Ever. The intensity of his reaction to her stunned him.

It also terrified him. Having her just this once had not sated him. Instead it made him ravenous for more.

## Chapter Five

Stephen claimed Elena again in the dark hour before dawn. She awoke to his hands unhurriedly sliding down from her breast to between her legs. Instantly, she was slippery for him. She kept her eyes closed, half in her dream but fully experiencing every sensation his fingers offered.

She dreamed about him. He was riding that magnificent white destrier in full mail, holding a large silver chalice on his lap.

As he approached her, he smiled and held out the chalice. "Water for you, my lady. You must be thirsty."

She *was* thirsty. Her mouth was so dry.

Stephen's lips brushed hers. "Mmm," she murmured, opening her mouth to his tongue but still not ready to be pulled from the dream.

She drank. The water slid down her throat like silk. Stephen's tongue probed her mouth, and it was like she shared the water with him, cool and smooth and flowing between them both.

Then his cock nudged her entrance. Her arousal made the way easy, and with one strong thrust, he glided all the way in.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips.

Stephen pumped in and out of her slowly, leisurely, the exquisite friction of his steely cock against her sensitive inner walls making every pore in her body cry out with pleasure.

Stephen dismounted from the destrier, took the chalice from her and tossed it aside. It shattered on a nearby rock, and with it came a short, jolting orgasm. She gasped as it ripped through her, and Stephen swept her off her feet and held her in his arms. Her arms reached up to clasp behind his neck, both in the dream and in reality.

"I'm taking you away from here," he said. "Somewhere you'll be safe."

"Yes," she whispered. She'd never felt more safe than with him inside her, holding her, possessing her.

"Ranulf of Lewes will never find you. You'll be mine. Only mine."

Elena knew she must be dreaming the words. Stephen knew nothing about the threat from Ranulf of Lewes.

She came fully awake as Stephen found his release, groaning with every pulse of his hot seed into her womb. Afterward, he tucked her into his side and within a few moments had fallen back to sleep, his breathing slow and steady.

Elena slipped out from his arms and crept back to her chamber, where she lay awake until an anxious Margaret bustled in to prepare her for the journey to Winchester.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ranulf bowed low before the king and stayed down until John told him to rise. When he finally raised his head, he struggled to stay calm. John looked as if he considered Ranulf's presence a joke. His wide, meaty lips fairly twitched with mirth.

"Come to beg for my cousin again, have you, Lewes?"

Ranulf's lips thinned. "I have not, Your Grace. I come to you with a proposition."

John's pale eyes lighted. "A proposition? I like propositions. Tell."

"Yes, my lord. As you know, the vast majority of my lands lie in southern Wales."

"Of course."

"In fact, my lands border yours at Glamorgan."

"Yes, yes." The king rubbed his hands together like the greedy bastard he was. "I might consider trading Elena for control of those holdings, plus all of hers, including Loxburn."

John's advisors snickered behind him.

Ranulf gritted his teeth. Though his blood was Saxon and Welsh, he'd learned to live with the Normans. He'd never truly become one of them, but he'd made his way in their world with more success than many of their own. Stupid Norman slime.

He twisted his lips into a false smile. "Of course I could not do that, Your Grace. But I have an even better proposition, I believe."

With a tired sigh, John shook his head, and Ranulf noticed for the first time that the hair emerging from the sides of his crown was streaked with gray. "What could you possibly offer me that you'd consider better than your combined fiefs along the marshlands?"

Ranulf took a bold step forward. Instantly, the men sitting beside John rose, their hands on their swords. Ranulf pretended to ignore them. Instead, he smiled and leaned closer to John. "Perhaps the key to Wales itself."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the third day of their journey, Elena watched Stephen ride ahead of her, sedate on his destrier, his posture straight. He never looked back.

Her depression grew as they neared Winchester. They were truly finished with one another. Her rational mind kept repeating the fact. Still, looking at him made her body clench with need, while at the same time her heart broke knowing that need could never be fulfilled. When they reached Winchester, he'd likely be sent off on another errand for the king and she would meet her betrothed.

A soft mist began to fall and Elena shivered, wrapping her cloak more tightly around her. The thought of never seeing Stephen again made her skin prickle and her body grow cold.

"Whoa!"

Jarred from her thoughts, Elena looked up. Stephen had halted just ahead of her and was talking to his squire, who'd noticed her inattention. Her palfrey sidestepped and moved alongside Stephen's horse.

Stern-faced, he looked down at her and bowed his head formally. His behavior pricked at her heart, though she knew he did it to show his deference before the men.

"The next village is close, my lady. We'll stop there," Stephen said in his low, melodious voice. "There is an inn."

"Why? It is not yet near dark."

Stephen raised his eyes to the sky. "Rain is coming."

Elena sighed heavily. Stephen nodded, and with a flick of his reins, moved ahead of her. This meant they wouldn't get to court until late tomorrow, perhaps even the day after, depending on how late they set off in the morning.

By the time they reached the village, the rain was coming down hard and Elena was chilled and soaked through. She waited under the eaves, shivering, as Stephen divested the inn of its present occupants to make room for their party. Margaret stood beside her. Clearly oblivious to her lady's dread, the girl's excitement grew by leaps and bounds as they closed the distance to Winchester.

The innkeeper's wife, a bony, tall woman, led them up to the largest chamber in the inn. Ducking beneath the low doorframe, the woman gestured them inside. The room was tiny by Elena's standards and reeked of body odor and stale smoke. Striding inside, she jerked open the little window and tried to fan some fresh air into the room.

"Will that be all, milady?" the innkeeper's wife inquired in heavily accented French.

Elena nearly groaned. She could not have a bath, for there was no space in this room for one. Whether the innkeeper even owned a bath was questionable.

She would be trapped in this hovel for the remainder of the afternoon and evening. Trapped with giddy little Margaret, who would do nothing but yammer on about Winchester Castle and how thrilling it would be to finally meet the queen.

None of this would be so bad if she wasn't filled with such immense yearning. Not to make love to Stephen, though she would sacrifice almost anything for one more night with him, but the longing to be near him, beside him, talking to him.

Elena forced a smile. "That will be all for now. Thank you."

The door shut behind the woman with a thud.

As expected, the afternoon was interminable. Elena picked at her embroidery, casting frequent longing glances at the window, while Margaret fluttered about, too excited to accomplish anything practical.

The rain came down steadily, at times gusting into the little room. Margaret asked numerous times to close the window, but Elena refused. For some illogical reason, she felt that if she closed the window, it would be closing her link to him. At times she had heard the sound of his voice on the street below, working or giving orders to his men. It might well be the only thing that kept her sane.

Finally, the innkeeper came up to deliver their dinner. After eating her fill of meat pasties, Margaret curled up on her pallet. The small space promptly began to resonate with her snores.

Elena lay in bed, tossing and turning on the lumpy bed, feeling boxed in and restless. Finally she rose quietly and padded to the window in bare feet.

The clouds had cleared, leaving a blanket of glittering stars in the night sky. But the window was so tiny, Elena could not fit much more than her arm through it. She turned away, tugged her cloak over her shoulders, slipped on her shoes and went downstairs. The inn was quiet, but one of her men-at-arms stood at the main entrance, his arms crossed over his chest. He turned to her in surprise as she approached and raised a bushy eyebrow at her.

"My lady, are you well?"

"Yes, Roderick. I just needed some air." She looked down the wide path, gutted with potholes, that marked the village's main road. Moonlight drifted across the mud puddles, giving the street a surreal, storybook quality. "I believe I shall go for a walk."

He bowed. "Yes, my lady. I'll accompany you."

She waved her hand. "No, no. It's quite all right, Roderick. I want to be by myself. You stay here. There's no danger in this village, is there?"

Roderick's thin lips pinched together. Elena knew he didn't approve of her walking alone, but he could do nothing to stop her. "None that we know, my lady."

"I'll not go far. I just need to breathe some clean air for a few moments." She smiled up at him and patted her thigh. "In any case, Roderick, there is no reason to worry. After all, I wouldn't leave my dagger back at Loxburn."

He gave a low laugh. Like all of her men-at-arms, he'd seen her skill with the dagger firsthand and knew she'd had hidden sheaths sewn into all her clothing. When Hugh was not in residence at Loxburn, she'd often practiced with her men. They all looked upon her skill with pride, for they'd all had a hand in developing it.

Glancing down at the fold of her kirtle where she'd had the hidden sheath sewn, he grinned. "Aye, my lady."

Elena stepped out onto the muddy road. The clucking noises of a hen came from nearby, and Elena saw it walking dazedly from behind the nearest house. "What are you doing up at this hour? You should be asleep," she whispered at it sternly.

The hen cocked its head at her, then turned and wandered away.

Elena walked down the muddy road, sidestepping potholes. Scattered cottages lined the street, all dark and silent in the dead of the night. A stone cathedral, by far the



most beautiful building in this poor village, stood at the street's end. She'd walk to the cathedral and back. Afterward, she might be able to sleep.

Tomorrow, she would meet with her cousin John for the first time in two years. Had he already chosen her future husband? What would he say to her?

She could only hope that Ranulf of Lewes wasn't still at court. His presence would make things more difficult. But if he had already come to some sort of agreement over her with John, Elena held little hope of dissuading her cousin from marrying her to the villain.

Skirting a puddle of water, Elena paused in her steps and tilted her face to the heavens. She took deep breaths, allowing the crisp spring air to cleanse her lungs.

"It is late, my lady. And you shouldn't be out here alone."

*Stephen.*

He stood close to her, close enough to touch. Heat resonated from him. His hands rested at his sides. Big hands, powerful hands. Hands that had touched her, stroked her to ecstasy a few nights before. Instantly, the parts of her body that he had brought to pleasure began to ache. Her nipples pressed against the wool of her gown. Her center grew tight and hot. If he touched it, his fingers would slide in her juices.

She glanced back at the inn. Roderick leaned against the wall, not exactly staring at them but not looking away either. She thrust away her body's need. She certainly could not take him here, on the muddy street with her man-at-arms looking on, surrounded by sleeping peasants.

"The chamber was stifling." She couldn't meet his eyes, so she stared at his broad chest. "I couldn't sleep."

He took hold of her arm, squeezing tightly. His dark brows drew together. "It is too dangerous."

The walls of her defenses built up faster than she could tear them down. She shrugged her arm away. "Who are you to tell me, Sir Stephen, what is too dangerous? You returned to my life six days ago and you think you know me? You don't know anything about me."

"But I do." His voice was low. It tripped along her backbone, lighting a thousand tiny fires under her skin. She shook them off.

"You do," she conceded. "Yet you do not know that I am capable of defending myself."

"Are you?"

She began walking toward the cathedral again, smiling at the reassuring bump of the hidden dagger against her thigh. "Indeed. Remember, I was my parents' only child. Before he died, my father liked to imagine I was a boy. He taught me all manner of self-defense. After you left Loxburn, I continued to hone my skills."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. It was necessary – some of Hugh's friends were quite debauched. At times they could be rather...ah...presumptuous in their advances."

Stephen stiffened beside her.

"I carry a dagger with me most of the time. It is a small thing, no longer than the length of my hand. But it is sharp – a lethal weapon should I choose it to be."

After a short silence, Stephen asked, "Have you ever had to use it?"

"No." She laughed softly. "Not in the lethal sense, in any case. Though I have threatened a drunken lout or two with it."

He swiped strong fingers down the back of her cloak, clearly referring to the scars. "If you are so confident with your weapon, why did you not defend yourself against Hugh?"

She glanced back toward the inn. They had rounded a bend in the road and the front of the ramshackle establishment was no longer visible. Turning to Stephen, she narrowed her eyes in challenge. "Why should I have defended myself against Hugh? What good would it have done? Though I am skilled, he was far more skilled than me. But more importantly, I was bound to him, to honor and obey. He was my husband."

Stephen's jaw tensed. "Would defending yourself be worse than what you had to endure?"

She snorted. "I did not endure much. Really. I know there are scars...but some wives suffer much worse. I've seen it. I learned to count my blessings, small as they were."

"Are you saying you did not want to kill him, to make him suffer for what he did to you?"

"At times, yes." She didn't want to elaborate. Worse than the beatings, far worse, was the fact that she had not provided Hugh with a child, the one thing she wanted most in the world.

Fortunately, Stephen let it go. He turned away, lowering his voice. "If I had seen him do that to you, I would have killed him myself."

"Would you?" She cocked an eyebrow at him. "He trained you. Did you consider yourself his better?"

"Not then, no. But I could defeat him now."

"Do you think so? Hugh was a powerful man."

He whipped his face back toward hers, a dangerous glint sparking in his eyes. She'd insulted his pride. Immediately, guilt washed through her. Why was she taunting him?

"Yes, I could," he said tightly.

That sobered her. She reached up to take his arm. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I did not mean to call your skill into question. Indeed, you are the strongest man I have ever known. I'm not being fair to you. In truth, I am..." Elena paused, struggling to rein in

her emotions. How could she tell him all that was happening, all her fears and impossible desires? "I was just thinking about my meeting with the king."

He drew her to a stop beside him then turned to her, his face dark. Still angry, but determined. "Elena, I'm going to ask the king for his blessing to marry you."

She gasped. Surely Stephen wasn't so naïve as to actually believe John might say yes?

"Stephen..."

"No. Stop." He took her hands in his. "I know the chances are slim to none. But you are mine. I can't imagine...I can't tolerate the thought of you with anyone else."

She should be appalled at this display of ownership over her. Instead, warmth seeped through her body. Nobody had ever desired her the way Stephen did. And it worked both ways. The mere thought of him with another woman made her blood run cold.

She wanted to be his. Wanted it with all her heart. But she was an heiress and cousin to the king. There was no way on earth he would allow a landless knight to marry her.

Looking up at Stephen, she bit her lip. "I'm hoping to sufficiently persuade John of my distress over Hugh's death that he'll allow me my mourning for two years at least. He would not force me to marry as long as I am in mourning."

Stephen frowned. "Why would you do that?"

She shrugged. "To prolong my freedom. Much can change in two years. Anything could happen."

"Elena." He gripped both her shoulders. "Listen to me. If we join together in our request to the king, perhaps he will understand our happiness depends on being together."

She inhaled a sharp breath. "Does it?"

"Yes! Mine does."

Elena squeezed her eyes shut. Did she feel the same way? Yes, she did. Lord, she was lost. She sank against his hard chest. "Stephen...Stephen. What will we do?"

Stroking her back over the wool of her cloak, he held her, heating her blood through the layers of material between them. "The king has always been greedy for land. Perhaps we could entice him."

She thought for a long moment, calculating. "I have four small keeps besides Loxburn. Each is being governed by a castellan appointed by Sir Jared." She pressed her face against his tunic. "I could give any of them up. All of them. All I want is Loxburn. And you."

She tightened her arms around him, feeling the shape of his rigid shaft press against her belly. Desire swept through her, raw, burning and irresistible.

"Stephen," she whispered. "I want you. Now."

He bent his head to kiss the top of hers, then scanned their surroundings. She could virtually hear the cogs of his brain turning, calculating where they might go.

"Come." Tugging on her hand, he turned toward one of the cottages.

"What about Roderick?"

"I told your man I would escort you. He knows you're safe with me." He pinned her with a gaze darkened by the night. "It'll be fast."

She let him tug her past a stone house, the largest in the village. He unlatched the side door of the barn behind it, another stone structure with a thatched roof.

The inside of the barn was wide and open, with high rafters, a cart parked at the far end and horse stalls near the door. Well-kept and clean, it smelled of fresh hay and leather.

He led her past the horses and toward the cart, but she pulled him to a stop.

Her voice sounded loud in the open space. A horse nickered from within a stall. "I want to see you." She took a deep breath, acutely apprehensive of her own brashness. Forcing herself to continue, she said, "I haven't had the chance...I might never have the chance again. Please."

Looking almost embarrassed, he gave her a crooked smile, his eyes crinkling at their edges. "All right."

Stephen moved to the cart, undoing the ties on his braies as he went. They fell to his ankles as he reached the back end of the cart. Elena stood frozen and watched him turn to face her.

He chuckled softly and hoisted himself up to sit on the cart's flat bed. "There isn't much time."

That was certainly the truth. Boldly, she stepped forward until his big thighs bracketed her body.

She rested her hands on them, and the muscles tensed beneath her touch. "Lift your tunic."

Dark blue eyes met hers, challenging. "Is that an order, Lady de Burgh?"

"Yes it is."

Smiling, he hitched the blue wool above his hips. "Ahh...it's cold out here."

There it was, the part of him that had been the source of such great pleasure to her. "It's so...big!" she exclaimed in surprise. She would have stepped back, but his thighs tightened around her middle.

Stephen gave a low chuckle. "You know how to boost a man's self-image, my lady."

"Can I...can I touch it?"

A low groan escaped him. "Please."

"Can I put my mouth on it? Like you put your mouth on me?" Though she knew she shouldn't feel ashamed about wanting to touch any part of his body after how close they'd been, she couldn't meet his eyes.

He took a ragged breath and pressed the rough pad of his thumb against her lips. "I've not been able to stop thinking about your beautiful lips wrapped around my cock."

Leaning forward, she touched him first, opening her hands and stroking her palms up and down the length of him. Before, she'd brushed her fingers over him briefly, but not in exploration. Now she reveled in the feel of him, the enticing, erotic fusion of soft and hard.

Lightly, she skimmed her fingertips down, tracing the ridge of the large vein running along the underside. She moved lower, cupping his sac and rolling it gently.

"Do you like that?"

He closed his eyes. "Yes."

"You will tell me to stop if I hurt you, won't you?"

He opened his eyes and studied her with a serious expression on his face. "You won't hurt me. Not unless you bite."

Elena widened her eyes. "I wouldn't do that."

"Then...keep doing what you're doing. Ah...that's it." He closed his eyes. One hand gently massaged his balls while she pumped the other over the thick length of him.

"That's good, *cariad*."

Elena watched, enthralled, as a pearly bead of liquid appeared on the tip. Tentatively, she leaned forward and touched her tongue to it.

"Yes. Suck it, Elena."

She swiped the flat of her tongue down the underside of his shaft. A muffled groan sounded from above, encouraging her to explore further.

Curling her fingers around the rigid length of his shaft, she knelt lower, licking the tops of his balls, breathing in his musky, earthy scent. "I want to lick you all over," she whispered.

"Yes." He leaned back to rest his forearms on the cart's wooden bed. "Do it."

The new position gave her better access to his sac. Emboldened by his words, she explored it with her mouth, sucking and nipping his most sensitive area. Moving lower, she licked the tight area at the base of his balls. A strangled sound came from above. She pulled away. "You don't like that?"

"Like? No, no, I love it. Don't stop." His thighs tightened around her waist even more.

She moved back to the head of his cock. Another pearly drop appeared there, dribbling down the side of his cock head. She licked it away, then opened wide to take him into her mouth.

"Yesss," he hissed.

She reveled in it. Making him so hard, making him beg for her mouth. Bringing him such pleasure. It made her whole body tight. With a sudden surety, Elena knew that if she reached down between her thighs and flicked her fingers against the nub he had teased, licked and finally sucked between his lips three nights ago, she would find her release.

But she didn't need it. She wanted to gain her own pleasure by pleasuring him tonight. Her own satisfaction paled in comparison. Years from now, she could draw on the heady feeling of power from this moment. She could remember him moaning her name, gasping beneath her touch, under her lips.

She slid up and down, squeezing with her mouth, licking with her tongue, stroking with her hands, emulating the long, deep thrusts he made when he moved inside her.

With only a twinge of surprise, she realized she loved this particular form of lovemaking. Once, she might have considered a man invading a woman's mouth in such a way obscene, but with Stephen, it was beautiful. He was solid and hard beneath her, strong and masculine, flowing beneath her lips, tongue and fingers.

And she could feel him flowing, could feel his seed boiling, rushing upward from his sac to the slit at the top of his cock. His hands suddenly tightened over her shoulders. "Don't stop," he ground out. But she was hardly moving. He was doing all the work, thrusting his cock deep into her mouth, touching her throat but retreating just before she started to choke.

"Oh...Christ." And then he pressed the back of her head down over his cock and she was locked into place, helpless, as his seed pumped into her mouth.

Moaning, she swallowed his creamy semen as it invaded her throat. She was consumed by lust, mad with it. When the contractions began to subside, she milked him again, prolonging his release, loving the feel of him dribbling helplessly into her mouth.

When at last it was over, his grip loosened. Then his big hands wrapped around her waist and hoisted her up onto his lap.

"Thank you," he whispered, nuzzling her ear, holding her close, surrounding her with his big, strong body. Once again she felt ensconced by him, protected and small.

"Did you like it?" she asked, gazing up at him. He looked amazed, humbled, overwhelmed.

He squeezed her tighter, nuzzling his face in her hair. "Yes."

Elena pressed her forehead against his chest, smiling. "I'm glad."

He shifted so she sat beside him on the edge of the wagon and whispered against her cheek. "Your turn."

"We should go back."

"Not yet. We still have a few moments."

"There's no time. Roderick will be worried."

"I'm not letting you go until you've come for me, Elena."

"But—" Her words were cut off as he clamped his mouth over hers and yanked up the hem of her kirtle. He held her firm, helpless. And though she knew Roderick would come looking for them soon, her legs opened, welcoming his invasion.

As soon as she spread her thighs, his fingers slid over her creamy center. His fingers tangled in her hair and his tongue curled with hers. Elena moaned, already feeling the mounting tension.

She wrapped her arms around Stephen and clung to him, feeling his heat and hard muscle through the wool of their clothing. Burying her face in his neck, she gasped as he parted her inner lips and dipped his fingers inside. His free arm slid down her back, pulling her closer.

A twig snapped outside.

Elena gasped and tried to jerk away. "Someone's coming!"

"Shh," Stephen murmured, holding her even more tightly against him. "There's time. Come for me, *cariad*."

He pressed his thumb to that oh-so-sensitive spot above her sheath and she squirmed.

"Let go, Elena."

"Someone's coming."

"You are," he murmured. He circled his thumb, pressing his fingers in deeper, curling them so they slid against a place that nearly made her jump out of her skin.

"Oh!" she breathed.

She heard shuffling noises from outside. A horse neighed close by.

But Stephen was thrusting into her, touching her, kissing her. Taking her higher and higher. Her whole body vibrated like the strings of a lute.

Shuddering, she ground her pelvis into his hand. Her head dropped back. And then he skimmed his thumb over that spot again. She clamped her legs shut, trapping him between her legs. Little tremors raced through her, down her legs. Her sheath rippled around his fingers. Stephen whispered words of encouragement in her ear.

The door to the barn creaked loudly.

Stephen slowly withdrew his fingers from her still-shuddering center. And drew away, pulling her skirt down.

He jumped down from the wagon bed. Elena looked up, her vision still fuzzy around the edges, as Roderick approached.

"My lady, are you all right?"

She smiled at the worry in his voice.

"Lady de Burgh was feeling faint, so I led her inside to sit for a moment," Stephen said. He turned to her, his brows drawn together in concern. "Are you feeling better, my lady?"

"Much," she murmured. "It was a temporary affliction, I think. In fact, I feel much relieved. Perhaps you will escort me back to the inn, Sir Stephen?"

He inclined his head respectfully. "Of course, my lady."

Roderick led the way back to the inn. Elena followed, side by side with Stephen, unable to wipe the smile from her face.

"I will petition the king for your hand," Stephen whispered in her ear.

"And I will offer him my lands as a concession," she murmured. A small bud of hope grew inside her. "Perhaps he will accept our proposal."

Yet she knew her cousin well. He was the greediest man in England and wary of anyone not in his social class.

"We must try."

"Yes," she said softly. Knowing hope shined in her eyes, she glanced up at him. "We must try."



## Chapter Six

Nine days later, they arrived at court soaked through, for the rain had returned that night and hadn't relented. Finally, Elena convinced Stephen that they must get to Winchester whether it was raining or not. It had taken two muddy, grueling days, but their party made it to Winchester safe, hale and wet to the bone.

Stephen, as she'd expected, promptly disappeared and to her dismay, Elena learned that the king had left Winchester a week ago to meet with a Welsh prince. She didn't know what to think when she learned that Ranulf of Lewes had gone with her cousin, but it worried her. Their party wasn't expected back for at least a fortnight.

Elena tried to occupy herself with becoming reacquainted with the king's children and his young queen. But her gregarious nature had suffered after having been trapped in a lonely, loveless marriage for so long, and she sat alone in the garden today, as she often did, contemplating her predicament.

What did it mean that Ranulf had gone with the king? Had he and John become close? Elena crushed a bit of thyme between her fingers, inhaling the sweet, sharp scent, and gazed over the garden. Leaves glistened in the bright sunlight, still wet from the recent rainfalls. She gazed up to the blue, cloud-speckled sky.

Surely John was shrewd enough to see through Ranulf. Surely he wouldn't force her into marriage with such a loathsome boor.

Her one consolation in the midst of her loneliness was that Stephen remained nearby, waiting for the king as she was. The small, clairvoyant part of her—her witch's blood—flared to life and told her he remained steadfast in his devotion, a fact which soothed her and at the same time made her worry for his safety. She prayed he did nothing rash.

The court dined together in the great hall, and she saw him there, among his men, every day. Last night, she'd fought not to meet his gaze, but it had inexorably drawn her in. The look of raw longing she'd seen in his blue eyes made her heart patter wildly, made the blood rush beneath her skin in a torrent. Her limbs trembled, her skin flushed. Her nipples brushed painfully against the wool of her kirtle. A heaviness had pooled in her womb and flooded her body with tingling lust.

Her primal feelings must be blatant to anyone who cared enough to look. And she couldn't risk Stephen like that. At all costs, she would keep her eyes on more mundane things at dinner tonight.

"Elena!"

Startled, Elena dropped the crushed thyme and turned to the source of the voice. A young girl approached, giving her a bright, dimpled smile. It was the king's daughter,

Joan. Born out of wedlock, Joan was a happy, beloved child hovering on the cusp of womanhood. If anyone at court had ever tried to shun the girl because of her parentage, the king had neatly squelched the sentiment. John demanded everyone treat her as his noble, trueborn daughter.

Surely a man who cared for his own child so deeply wouldn't offer his cousin to the wolves.

Smiling, Elena rose and dropped into a curtsy. "Good afternoon, Lady Joan."

"Do come inside with me, Elena." Joan grasped Elena's hand and towed her toward the castle, her slipper-clad feet skipping over the rough, graveled path. "We have had wonderful news! Papa is due back tomorrow. And the courier said he brings good tidings."

Elena's heart constricted in her chest. "That is excellent news indeed," she managed to choke out.

In its own way, it was very good news. At least this confusing state of purgatory would soon come to an end.

Elena dragged her reluctant legs after the girl and prayed she wasn't headed for a new kind of hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stephen paused at the threshold, but the king instantly spotted him and waved him inside his bedchamber. Moving forward, Stephen sank into a low bow before his liege lord.

"Up, up," John said. He was sitting on a high stool, wearing nothing but a rough, homespun tunic, his face covered with shaving lotion. A valet stood beside him, swiping a glistening blade at the edge of his beard.

"So why the eagerness to see me, Sir Stephen? I gather you've brought my cousin safely to court? Didn't encounter any damned cutthroats along the way, I hope?"

Stephen tensed. Thank God they hadn't, though he knew the king was having a hell of a time of keeping outlaws from robbing innocent travelers on England's roads. "No, Your Grace. We traveled safely. Lady de Burgh and her people are well."

"Good, good." John grinned widely, showing big yellow teeth. He waved the valet away and leaned forward in the stool. "Have you heard the word of my coup in Wales?"

"No, my lord."

"Well, thanks to some timely negotiation by Ranulf of Lewes, I have just come from signing the documents to marry my daughter Joan to Prince Llywelyn."

Stephen took a step back, unable to prevent his mouth from dropping open. A coup indeed. He had met the Prince of Wales once, and the man was formidable, destined for greatness. For John to align to him through marriage was an act of near genius. But how had it happened? Who was this Ranulf of Lewes?

"I am sending her to Wales as soon as can be arranged."

"An excellent match, Your Grace. This is great news for England."

John turned shrewd eyes upon him. "It is indeed." He sighed, a smile playing around his lips. "And though the benefits to me are vast and obvious, I cannot help but be pleased to have made such a match for my daughter. Now she will be a princess in her own right. And I must confess that I have taken a liking to the prince as well. He will be good to her."

Stephen nodded. John's affection for his illegitimate offspring was no secret to anyone.

"But you have come to ask me something." John motioned his valet to resume shaving him. "What could it be?"

Though his mouth suddenly felt dry, Stephen couldn't balk now. "I have been your loyal servant for many years, Your Grace. I served you in the Holy Land, then in France—"

The king pinned him with narrowed blue eyes. "I know who you are and I know every deed you've accomplished on my behalf. There is no need to waste my time by rehashing all of them. Get to the point, de Verre."

Stephen bowed his head in acquiescence. "I have come to ask for your permission to marry your cousin, Lady de Burgh."

For a moment, the room was silent. The razor scraped against John's skin. And then the king burst out in laughter. Stephen stared at the floor, forcing his fists not to clench as the king's mirth swirled around him, squeezed his chest and suffocated him.

John wrapped his arms around his belly. Recovering between chuckles, he said, "Do you realize how many lords have asked me for fair Elena's hand? How many of you greedy bastards desire her lands? And she is fair to look upon, isn't she? I daresay having her in your beds appeals as well."

Stephen met his liege's eyes, his cheeks burning.

"Eight." John's hands flew up into the air in a gesture of amazement. "Did you hear me? Eight! And the other seven had much more to offer than you, de Verre. You are lowborn, landless and penniless—far less worthy than any of the others."

"I have been loyal and faithful to you, my lord," Stephen ground out.

"That you have." The king shrugged. "But so have many others. What has that to do with anything?"

"I care naught for her lands," Stephen said stiffly.

"Right." John snorted. "Be that as it may, my answer to you is no."

"I will take good care of her," Stephen said. "I will prove to be a worthy husband."

John blew out a frustrated breath. "Surely you realize that there must be more to my decision than soothing my loyal knight's fancy for my alluring cousin?"

"I admire and respect her. Deeply." Stephen's face was on fire.

The king narrowed his eyes. "Admiration and respect mean nothing in a marriage. You lust after my cousin, don't you? Well then, go pound your frustrated cock into one of the castle wenches and you'll forget about my cousin by morning. In fact, despite what some might say to the contrary, I am generous. I shall send Isolde to you tonight." His tongue ran over his lips. "You'll enjoy her, I daresay. She's one of my favorites."

Stephen wasn't moved. "No thank you, Your Grace."

The king merely snorted. "We'll see."

"I am in...I am very fond of Elena, Your Grace. She feels the same."

"Elena?" John slid to his feet and took a step toward Stephen, tilting his head, his eyes glinting dangerously. "So you speak of her on a first-name basis, do you? Are you so well-acquainted with her? Have you been fucking my cousin, de Verre?"

Stephen straightened. He couldn't lie to his liege. Nor did he want to. If he couldn't have her, he was more than willing to face whatever price the king would have him pay for his sins.

Yet he didn't want Elena to suffer for what they'd done.

As he hesitated, the king raised a hand. "Wait. Don't speak." He took another step forward, and now he and Stephen were within arm's length of one another. "I don't want to hear it," he said under his breath. "I trusted you with my cousin's life and with her virtue. You know what must be done if I ever learned of such a breach of honor from you."

Stephen met the king's icy eyes unflinchingly.

John continued. "I don't want to know what happened between you and my cousin, de Verre, because I like you. I don't want to be forced to crush you." He took a backward step. "Now get out of my sight before you say something both you and I will regret."

\* \* \* \* \*

With a tankard of ale in his hand, a half-drunk Stephen slouched against the wall beside the fireplace. One was never alone at court. All he wanted was to beat the hell out of something, anything, but instead he was forced to be friendly with his men until they all lost consciousness.

This must be hell.

What he most wanted was to seek out Elena's bed, fuck her witless, then drag her from this place. But no, someone would see him, report him to the king, prove his betrayal.

*Elena. Elena. Elena.* His cock grew to half staff just from the whisper of her name reverberating in his skull. He could never have her again, and it was tearing him apart.

Suddenly, there was a hush in the room as all eyes turned to the door. Stephen looked up to see a tall blonde hesitating at the threshold.

"Oho!" cried one of the men in guttural English. "Looka what we have here. A pretty piece, ain't she?"

"Och, she be one o' the king's," said another, rising to stand protectively beside her. "Leave 'er be." He turned to the lady and spoke in soothing, courtly French. "Have you lost your way, miss?"

"No," she stated, her voice clear and confident. She gestured at Stephen. "I'm sent for Sir Stephen."

Stephen eyed her warily. Was this the wench the king had promised to send him? He didn't want a goddamned whore. He flung his tankard aside, heedless of the ale splashing over the rushes.

"No," he gritted.

Taking her time, the woman picked her way around the strewn men and pallets covering the floor. All eyes followed her sinuous curves as she moved toward Stephen.

When she stood over him, she said softly, "The king orders me to escort you to a private room. If I fail in my task, he says I am to be punished."

A sneer flattened his lips. Damn John to hell. The king knew Stephen would resist, but he also knew he wouldn't knowingly cause a woman to suffer.

Stephen released a sigh loud enough to be audible to everyone around him. He knew any one of these men would gladly trade places with him. If only he could send someone else.

It didn't matter. The king intended for him to forget about Elena by bedding this whore. It would not work—he wouldn't touch her.

"Very well." He rose on shaky legs, bowed and held out a gallant arm. "After you, *mademoiselle*."

She led him through so many turning corridors, Stephen lost his way. When he left her, he would have a hell of a time finding his way back to the men's quarters. In service of the king, he had spent many months at Winchester, but his activities were relegated to the public halls and the areas set aside for the king's knights.

She turned a final bend in the hallway and stopped before a planked door. Smiling over her shoulder at him, she pushed it open.

A cheerful fire warmed the room. Fresh rushes were strewn across the floor and thick tapestries hung from each of the four walls. The massive bed, covered with embroidered pillows draped with matching bed curtains, overwhelmed the space. This was an opulent room—clearly the king held this woman in favor.

Standing beside the fireplace, she turned to him and unbelted her kirtle. Stephen kept his eyes fixed on her face but couldn't help hearing the sound of the fabric as it slid down to puddle on the floor.

"What is your name?"

"Isolde, sir knight," she said, staring at him with soft brown eyes. In the periphery of his vision, he saw her bare shoulders and the top curve of her large breasts.

Ah yes. Isolde. He remembered.

"Put your clothes back on," he said gruffly.

A distressed look passed over her face. "The king says I am never to keep my clothes on in this room."

Good God. Stephen sucked in a breath. "Very well then. I will go." He turned to the door, but as he lifted the latch, the naked girl grabbed his sleeve.

"Please no, sir knight. The king said if I fail to thoroughly satisfy you, he will beat me until I bleed. Please, please stay."

The desperation showed clearly in her eyes. Her ruby-red, puckered nipple rubbed against his arm.

Bloody hell. If he could not have Elena, was he to remain celibate for the rest of his damned life?

Yes.

No! No, it was impossible. The days of celibacy since he had last had Elena had nearly driven him mad. But his fierce, painful desires weren't driven by lust for just any woman—they were driven by the need for Elena herself.

Raking a frustrated hand through his hair, Stephen acknowledged that he didn't want this woman. He only wanted one woman. And she was close—he could feel her. He was certain she slept in this wing of the castle.

He looked down into the girl's panicked brown eyes and spoke gently. "I'll tell the king you satisfied me better than any woman ever has. How's that?"

She relaxed minutely. "He says I must keep you here 'til morning."

Stephen pressed his temple with his fingers and sighed. "Very well."

She blinked and her eyes shone in the firelight. "Thank you."

"But I won't bed you, Isolde."

She smiled almost shyly. She had a fresh sense of innocence about her, not the hardness of most of the whores he had known. Perhaps that was why the king seemed so enamored with her. She slid a finger down his chest. He went rigid, fighting against the urge to swat her hand away.

"It is a woman, isn't it, Sir Stephen? I can ease the ache for you, if you'd only let me."

"No thank you." Despite her likely expertise at the art of satisfying men, he doubted she could ease his particular ache.

With a gentle smile, she threaded her fingers through his and led him to the edge of the bed. "She is lucky to have your affections."

No, he wanted to say, *she is cursed*.

"I shall endeavor not to seduce you, Sir Stephen," she said. "Tell me all about your fortunate lady and then I shall soothe you to sleep."

He allowed her to undress him down to his tunic, all the while watching her sinuous naked body. Taller than Elena, she had ruddy skin and blue eyes. Though her hair was blonde, it was long and curly like Elena's. Was it as thick? Stephen suppressed a sudden urge to run his fingers through it to compare.

Instead, he studied her breasts. They were much larger than Elena's, and so large that they seemed disproportionate to the rest of her. Elena's nipples were smaller, darker. He remembered rolling one of her taut buds between his fingers, then taking it into his mouth. Her taste sweeping over his tongue—sweet and sensual, musk and roses.

Drawing in a harsh breath, he looked lower. Isolde's legs were longer, larger than Elena's. The triangle of hair between them was light enough that he could see the pink lips through it.

It reminded him of Elena, red and glistening as he tasted the sweet dew between her legs, tickling the tight bundle of nerves just above.

Somewhere during his perusal of Isolde's body, his cock had flared to life. Now it was so tight, the veins wrapping around it squeezed and pulsed painfully.

Stephen closed his eyes.

"I can soothe your ache, sir knight," Isolde said again from somewhere below him as she knelt to remove his boots.

"No," he said between gritted teeth. "No, you can't."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena's eyes snapped open. Other than a silvery shaft of moonlight coming in through the window, the room was dark. Margaret snored softly from the pallet beside the bed.

Elena could feel Stephen everywhere, down to the marrow of her bones.

He was aroused, desperately so.

She clenched her legs together to fight the instant pang of wet heat between them.

Was this her witchcraft flaring to life? For weeks the visions and premonitions had left her alone. The last time her magic came alive was just before Stephen had ridden into the bailey at Loxburn. She had dared to assume that his proximity had coaxed it into dormancy.

Perhaps it wasn't magic. Perhaps it was merely a dream. A wicked, carnal dream.

Blood rushed to Stephen's cock. Behind closed eyes, Elena saw his fingers wrap around his long, thick shaft, stroking lightly to ease the near-pain of his arousal.

Elena rolled to her stomach, embracing the bed like a lover. Instead of the cool, impersonal sheets, she imagined his warm body beneath her.

Her nipples, so sensitive of late, pressed against the bed, as rigid as little berries. She crooked her elbow to run her fingers over the thin linen of her shift, over one of the taut nubs, and she inhaled a sharp breath.

Sliding one hand between her body and the bed, she tugged up her shift then cupped her mons. When she pressed her sex gently into her palm, a dart of pleasure shot through her core.

In her mind's eyes, Stephen stood still, his body rigid, his cock aflame with desire.

Desperation showed in the depths of his eyes. He wanted her, his cock needed her. It wanted to glide in and out of her sleek channel, to seek fulfillment within her depths.

Clenching her inner muscles, Elena thrust herself into her palm again and again. Each tilt of her hips ramped her pleasure upward until a sweet, constant tingling buzzed within her.

Stephen seemed to watch her. His need for her was so acute, he groaned aloud. "No..."

Flicking her thumb over her nipple, Elena let her fingertips brush over the hard, sensitive nub between the lips of her sex, and bit back a gasp.

She was so close. The wave was cresting deep within her, preparing to break. One more brush of her fingertips...

Beads of fluid appeared on Stephen's cock head, welling then dribbling down the side, covering his fingers. She wanted to taste it, lick it, feel it spurt inside her.

"Stephen," she whispered into her pillow. "*Stephen.*"

Margaret abruptly stopped snoring. Her blanket rustled as she turned over on her pallet.

Elena froze.

"*I can soothe your ache, sir knight.*" The voice, a sensual whisper, rippled through her mind – the voice of someone Elena did not know. She could see the speaker though, or aspects of her. The woman was light and large-boned. She brought to mind an image of sunshine, of a summer breeze.

She was kneeling before Stephen, naked, gazing up at his cock with eyes swimming with lust.

No!

Elena yanked her hand away from her body. The heat raging through her moments ago had congealed into an acrid lump in her stomach.

"My lady, are you all right?" Margaret's voice.

"Yes, Margaret. I'm all right. I was...I was just dreaming. Go back to sleep."

Fisting her hands in her quilt, Elena prayed it was true. It was a dream. Surely it was. It *had* to be.

If not, Stephen had just betrayed her with another woman.



\* \* \* \* \*

Early the following morning, Margaret chattered as she combed Elena's hair. Elena's mind drifted as it always did when she listened to Margaret's prattle, but her attention snapped to her maid when she heard Sir Stephen's name whispered in a conspiratorial voice.

"Alice saw him leaving from that whore's chamber this morning," the girl finished.

Before Elena knew what she was doing, she swiveled in her chair, and with a resounding *crack*, her hand whipped out and slapped Margaret hard across the face. Margaret gasped, cradling her reddening cheek in her palm, looking up at Elena with wide, surprised eyes.

"Don't you ever, *ever* gossip to me again – about Sir Stephen or anyone."

"I'm sorry, my lady," Margaret choked, blinking back tears.

This was one of the many reasons Elena came to court as infrequently as possible. The backbiting gossip drove her mad.

The pain in Margaret's eyes made Elena squeeze her own eyes shut. She set her hands on the girl's shoulders and spoke softly. "I should not have struck you, Margaret. Court life breeds terrible rumors. You must ignore them. I will not have you turn into a gossipmonger – your mama would never forgive me."

She could not let Margaret know the primary reason behind her violent outburst. The reason for the continuing rage blazing behind her gentle tone. Still, there was no excuse for taking it out on her young maid.

Margaret bit her lip. "Yes, my lady. I won't do it again."

She smiled. "Good girl. Now run along and fetch yourself some breakfast."

"Yes, my lady." With a tentative smile, Margaret curtsied and left the room.

Elena turned back to her table and braced her hands on its edge. Could it be true? Had Stephen slaked his lust on a whore?

And what did it matter? She had no claim on him. Yet jealousy curdled in her gut. Insane, angry jealousy.

She should not listen to gossip. Half the time it wasn't even true.

But last night, she had dreamt something similar. Was the blonde the same whore Margaret spoke of?

It hurt. The very idea that he'd go to a whore drove splinters into her raw, bleeding heart.

No, it couldn't be true.

If it was, she would kill him. She pressed her lips together until they were numb.

No, she would kill them both.

And what would she say to John? She was set to meet with him this morning. How could she petition to marry Stephen when she had reason to believe he'd bedded

someone else last night? How could she voluntarily marry another man who would betray her?

With shaking fingers, she finished her braid by herself. As she tied a ribbon over its end, someone knocked on the door.

"Lady de Burgh? It's me, Joan."

Elena blinked slowly, thrusting the wicked, blinding jealousy aside. "Come in, Lady Joan."

The girl flew in, straight into Elena's embrace.

"Oh Elena! I'm to leave tomorrow. Tomorrow!"

Elena wrapped her arms around the girl. She had been in a similar position long ago. She remembered the fear and uncertainty as if it were yesterday. Still, she knew for certain that Joan was to marry a much stronger, much better and much more formidable man than Hugh de Burgh.

She stroked Joan's back. "It will be all right, dearest." She tried to recall what would have made her feel better when she was in Joan's position, but she couldn't think of anything. The only thing Joan could do was meet her fate with her head held high.

"You will make your father proud," she murmured.

Joan sniffed and Elena pulled back, grasping both the girl's hands. "Have you ever seen Prince Llywelyn?"

"No," the girl whispered.

"He stayed at Loxburn for a month once, so I've spent some time with him. He's polite and gentlemanly – tall for a Welshman, and dark, with dark hair and piercing black eyes. He's quite clever as well."

"But Papa says the Welsh are dirty barbarians. How will I speak to him? Why would Papa do this to me, Elena?"

"Oh no, dearest, your betrothed is not a barbarian. Did you know he spent most of his childhood in England? He speaks French as well as any Norman and has spread many of our civilized ways deep into Wales." Elena shook her head. To explain to Joan what Llywelyn had accomplished so far in his lifetime would take hours. In any case, the girl would learn all about her new husband soon enough.

"Joan," she cupped the girl's chin to look into her light blue eyes, "the king shows how much he cares for you by making this match. Llywelyn is proud and fierce, a true warrior and a prince. It is said naught matters more to him than his love for his family. In that way, he is very much like your papa."

That seemed to soothe Joan. Her tears slowed, then abated. Elena knew there was no one the girl idolized more than John. She grasped Joan's hands and gave a reassuring squeeze.

Just then, Elena's eye caught movement in the open doorway. She looked over Joan's shoulder to see Stephen de Verre hovering on the threshold. Her hands tightened over Joan's until the girl turned and saw him too.

Stephen gazed at the floorboards, and Elena could see that the tips of his ears had reddened. He bowed to the king's daughter. "Forgive me for intruding, my lady. I shall return later."

"No!" Elena was surprised by her own outburst. "No," she said again, more softly. She gave Joan's hands one final squeeze and released them.

He raised one inquisitive eyebrow and glanced at Joan, who looked from Elena to Stephen. With a soft smile, Joan made her excuses and slipped past Stephen.

Fisting her hands at her sides, Elena rose from her chair.

Why had he come? Had he truly bedded a whore last night? After everything they'd planned? After everything she was prepared to sacrifice to be with him? The questions reverberated in her mind. *Why, why, why?*

He took a step inside, then turned, closed and bolted the door. That action by itself nearly shattered Elena's nerve. Should she demand he get out or leap into his arms?

For once in her life, she wished her magic would tell her what to do, give some kind of sign. But it didn't so much as whisper to her. Instead, it remained quiet, overwhelmed by the roar of blood through her veins.

"Elena —"

"Don't speak to me!"

Startled by her outburst, she clamped her mouth shut. Tears pricked behind her eyes, but she would not let them fall. Not for this.

In two long strides, he came to her, capturing her body inside the curve of his powerful arm, crushing her breasts against his solid chest. His sea-blue eyes glittered down at her.

Instantly, a flush bloomed between Elena's legs. Her blood coursed downward in a tingling rush, plumping the lips of her sex, causing the sensitive folds to engorge and flare with heat. Fisting his tunic in her hands, Elena fought against the sensations and stared up at him, knowing her eyes were narrow and accusing. "Why...how could you —"

But his lips descended over hers, stopping her in mid-sentence.

He'd been with the whore. She could smell the bitch—her syrupy-sweet perfume was all over him.

Elena hated him, *hated* him. She would kill him.

But, oh God, how she wanted him. How she'd missed his lips, his hard body, his cock pounding into her...driving her until she was out of control, making her scream.

She crushed her lips against him hard. She tasted blood. She hoped it was his.

*How could he?*

Without releasing her hold on his lips, she found the seam of his tunic, fisted her hands in it and yanked in opposite directions. His tunic tore, and, grimly satisfied by the ragged screech of ripping fabric, Elena's lips curled into a grimace.

He wasn't wearing a shirt underneath.

Of course he wasn't. Why bother to dress fully when you'd just come from a whore?

Elena crashed against the wall, knocking the breath from her lungs. She hadn't even realized he'd pushed her backward. Hooking one of her legs around his hip, she forced his body closer to hers. Stephen's hands fumbled between them, but her fingers had found the flaming hot skin beneath the tattered remains of his tunic. She raked her nails up his back, hard.

Groaning, he jerked her skirts up and clamped his big palms over her thighs. He lifted her clear up off the floor, spreading her legs and pressing her against the cold stones. The rigid length of him slid against the sodden, sensitive tissues between her thighs, and she cried out, a low sound of combined pleasure and anger, against his lips.

His body crushed hers against the wall and finally their lips separated.

"I hate you!" she sobbed.

With a feral snarl, he pushed her down, impaling her body with his cock. The angry words died in her throat. She gripped his shoulders and wrapped both legs around him as he pulled back and heaved inside her, slamming her body against the wall.

Elena dug her fingernails into his skin and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting not to scream at the unbearable mix of ecstasy and pain, the opposing emotions of love and anger. After two thrusts, a tidal wave of sensation crashed down over her and she dove into it, forgetting everything but the rush of tumbling, rolling pleasure.

Two more thrusts and Stephen joined her. Silent, clinging to one another, their bodies heaved as they rode the wave together.

When the contractions finally began to recede, Elena found her face crushed into the crook between Stephen's head and shoulder. He supported her weight over him, pressing his forehead into the wall, his fingers digging into the flesh of her thighs. As if he realized her discomfort, his fingers softened their grip and she slid down the length of his body.

His hands moved up until they wrapped around her waist, drawing her away from the wall and against his chest. Still, he did not look at her. His harsh breaths resonated around her, the only sound in the room.

Her witch's blood, or maybe it was merely her intuition, blazed, and Elena knew with certainty that this was not the behavior of a man who'd been well-pleasured by a whore last night. He might have been with a woman, but he hadn't bedded her.

Opening her palms, she stroked the welts on his shoulders. Slick blood covered her fingers.

"Thank you, *cariad*," Stephen whispered.

"Why are you thanking me? I thought you...you..."

"I didn't."

She pressed her forehead against the front of his shoulder. "I know."

"I only want you, Elena. No other woman. I...needed you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I hurt you."

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. "No."

Finally he pulled away. Through blurry eyes, she gazed up at him. His look was tender.

"The king..." He shook his head slightly, and she read the pain in his eyes as clear as if it had been words written in a book.

Her heart shattered.

The king had said no.

## Chapter Seven

"Cousin." John took both Elena's hands in his own. He looked older than when she had last seen him. Gray streaks ran through his hair, crinkles fanned from the corners of his eyes and deep creases etched the edges of his lips. "It has been a long time."

She nodded. "Two years, Your Grace."

"And I see your beauty hasn't diminished."

She gazed past him at the heavy tapestry on the wall. "Thank you, Your Grace."

John chuckled and she glanced at him again. His appetite for enormously expensive clothing hadn't changed. He wore a golden crown and the royal mantle of speckled ermine. His boots were of the finest quality leather and he carried a glittering, jewel-studded royal specter. Yet despite the nearly garish royal attire, something about him seemed gentler than when she'd last seen him. More thoughtful. She hoped this was a good sign.

"I haven't much time, Elena," he said. "As you've probably heard, we are sending Joan to her betrothed in Wales tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Grace. Thank you for seeing me."

"I did want to let you know, however, that I have chosen the next man you shall marry."

Though she knew she shouldn't be surprised, she was. Stepping forward, she swiped her tongue over her dry lips before she spoke. "Your Grace, I've come to beg your indulgence."

His blue eyes narrowed and the shrewd, hawkish look she remembered so well swept across his face. "Have you now?"

"I have done my duty—I married a man of your choosing when I was but sixteen years old. Please, I beg you, give me some say in the next."

His expression softened. "Hugh de Burgh...was he so very bad?"

Elena stiffened her spine. In an effort to hide the jumble of her thoughts, she dropped her gaze to the stone floor. "My husband is not yet two months in the grave. Please let us refrain from discussing him."

"Very well." John leaned back in his throne, resting one forearm negligently on the carved armrest. "Who then?"

"This man is kind, generous and honorable. He has served you faithfully for many years, Your Grace. I have watched him with his men and he inspires harmony and loyalty among them. They would do anything for him."

"Who is it?"

"He doesn't possess a great deal in the way of land or riches, but I can compensate you for your loss. I would offer all my holdings besides those of Loxburn—"

"Who, Elena?"

Terrified of her cousin's reaction, she choked out the words. "Sir Stephen de Verre, Your Grace."

The king's lips twitched. "Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I know you have already received him. He did not have much to offer, but I offer you my lands. Surely that's enough recompense—"

"No."

"Please, my lord—"

"I said no, Elena." The king's voice was almost gentle. "I'm sorry, but I cannot grant your fancy based on infatuation."

"It isn't an infatuation." The lashing certainty in her voice snapped through the hall like a whip.

"It would please me to grant your wish," John said on a sigh. "But unfortunately, the world does not turn on your shortsighted conception of love."

"You love your queen," Elena said stubbornly. Court gossip did have some value, she supposed.

"Fortunately, my desires and England's needs coincided on that matter. But in this, they do not. England would gain nothing from aligning you with de Verre."

"You would gain four keeps!" she exclaimed.

"Not enough."

In one last, desperate attempt, she offered the one thing that, until now, had always been most important to her. "Loxburn then. I offer you Loxburn as well."

It hurt her to say those words. But not as much as being separated from Stephen forever would hurt.

The king's face softened even more. "No, Elena. It is too late. I have already signed the documents. I've betrothed you to Ranulf of Lewes."

Oh God. *No*. Black spots swam in front of her eyes. She struggled to remain standing, to keep from sinking into a helpless, suppliant puddle on the floor.

The king waved his hand at the door and Ranulf sauntered in, clapping his hands, a subtle sneer turning the corners of his thin lips. "Bravo, my lady. What a display of affection. One can only hope that you will one day champion for me so passionately."

With swimming vision, she stared at his cruel face. Dark, cold eyes, a long, straight nose and a neatly trimmed beard. Some might consider Ranulf handsome, but he made her skin crawl. She knew the truth. He was despicable. Evil. When she visited his castle as a child, she'd hidden behind a barrel and watched him order a boy executed for stealing a chicken. "Such a dirty business," he'd told one of his minions, "or I'd do it myself." And then he'd simply watched as the man beheaded the boy.

The scent of mint wafted around him—Ranulf chewed on mint leaves day and night. For years she'd hated that smell because of its association to Ranulf of Lewes, and to her, its association to murder and death.

He stopped in front of her. His thin lips pressed together but tilted up at their edges in a victorious smile. Elena gulped in a mint-filled breath. Her stomach gurgled, threatening to release her breakfast.

Two years ago, he had come to Loxburn to visit Hugh. After a rowdy supper in the hall, he had bumped against her lewdly, grabbed her breast and twisted it until she had cried out in pain. To any casual observer, he was merely stumbling drunk. But she'd known he was sober—his movements had been calculated and deliberate. And the way he'd touched her was strangely possessive. At that moment, he'd had the same look in his eyes he did now—piercing, narrow, intent. It had disconcerted her so strongly that she had escaped to her chamber and pleaded a headache until Ranulf had safely returned to his own lands at Fordhaven.

She turned to the king, heedless of the raw desperation grating in her voice. "Please, cousin."

John held out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "It is settled, Elena. I pray for your happiness."

Clutching her stomach, Elena turned on her heel and fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stephen placed his palm flat on the door to Elena's bedchamber. A buzzing vibration ran from his fingertips through his arm. She was inside. Alone.

Two days had passed. In a daze, he had gone through the motions of his daily routine in rage, then pain and finally a desperate numbness.

The situation boiled down to one undeniable fact—he had sworn fealty to his king under God. No matter what, he had paid homage to his liege. He couldn't betray the king—to do so would be a betrayal of himself, of his soul, of everything he held holy.

Stephen would never stop loving Elena, but that love would have to remain the courtly, chivalrous love of a knight, not the carnal love they had so selfishly indulged in.

He raised his hand to knock, but just as she had at Loxburn, she called, "Come in," before his fist struck the wood. Pushing open the door, he found her standing in front of the fire, her hands clenched behind her back.

"Stephen."

"Elena." He balled his fists, hardly able to speak. "I have come to say goodbye."

"I know."

It was uncanny how she knew him so well, how well they knew one another.

"I'm leaving for my brother's manor in Wales today."



"And the king approves," she said flatly. Sadness clouded her violet eyes as she turned to him.

"He says I must return to court by midwinter, but yes. He...understands."

The door thudded shut behind him as he walked fully into the room. Suddenly, her scent assailed his senses. Musk and roses. He stopped short, still several feet from her.

"He has betrothed me to another."

"I know, my lady."

The formal title made her visibly cringe. He wished he could comfort her, hold her. But he couldn't.

*Courtly love. Honor. Chivalry.* The words ground through his mind. She deserved those things from him. The king expected those things from him. But he knew if he touched her, he would sacrifice everything just for the joy of feeling her flesh against his. He moved backward, distancing himself from her as far as possible without leaving the room.

"Stephen—" The edge of desperation in her voice made him cringe. "Please. Is there anything...?"

"No, my lady. Nothing."

Someone else would warm her bed. Never him. She was destined for another man.

There was nothing he could do.

The thought clenched his gut, enraged him, curled his fingers, made him want to punch a hole through the stone wall.

Her eyes shone. "I know. Truly I do. But I cannot help but think there must be something that can be done."

The woman standing across the room wanted him as much as he wanted her. She was as hopeless as he was.

None of that was any consolation. His teeth ground together so tightly, he thought he might break his jaw. "There is nothing, Elena."

For long moments, they stared across the room at one another. The pain in her eyes chipped at his resolve.

Unable to bear the distance between them any longer, Elena lunged toward him with a whimper, wrapped her arms around him and buried her face into his chest.

"How will I survive without you?" she cried.

As always, she felt safe in his arms. But it would be short-lived this time. He was leaving today, going away from Winchester, away from her.

She had to touch him one last time. Stroke him, feel his skin against hers. Starting at his shoulders, she ran her fingers over the rough wool of his unbelted tunic, across the smooth planes of his chest. Would she ever feel his hard, comforting warmth again? Would she ever taste him again?

Mindless with the need to do just that, she tugged up his shirt, bent down and pressed her tongue flat against the ridge of his stomach just above his bellybutton. Oh yes, his flavor. Pure male. Pure decadent, carnal promise.

Hands tightened on her shoulders as she dragged her tongue up his rippling body, savoring the salty, musky tang of him. Then she focused on his tiny male nipple. So flat, so small. She licked it too. Suckled it. And felt it constrict into a tiny bead beneath her tongue.

Above her, Stephen let out a low groan. His hands wrapped around her waist, picking her up as easily as if she were a sack of barley. Elena threw her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his tight buttocks. He carried her to the bed and tossed her on it.

Separated from him, she scooted backward, thrill and fear surging through her at the primal look on his face, at the passion he barely held in check.

The struggle showed clearly on his face. He wanted her. But he had made the decision to leave her, to never touch her again.

She pressed her lips together with determination. She wouldn't accept that. She needed his touch, needed it as desperately as the air she breathed.

Without breaking eye contact, she untied her belt and flung it across the room.

Stephen turned to watch it fly, then his gaze fastened on her, his eyes narrowed.

Her kirtle was already hiked up around her knees. She grasped the hem and pulled it, along with her shift, over her head. Now she was naked except for her stockings.

She could see the battle still raging ferociously within him. He glanced at the door, his face twisted with indecision.

"Elena..." He took a step closer. She could virtually see his thread of control quivering, it was pulled so taut. If it broke... A shiver tripped down her spine.

"You shouldn't do this..." he managed to say through tightly gritted teeth.

"No," she agreed. "I shouldn't." It was the truth. He hadn't latched the door. Anyone could walk in, anytime.

She let her legs fall open, exposing her sex.

Stephen froze. As still as a statue, he stared down at her.

Slowly, Elena slid her fingers down her belly, through the tight curls of her mound and into her hot slit, gasping when they passed over the engorged bundle of nerves.

He didn't move.

"I want you," she said, curving two of her fingers and pressing them inside. Her back arched. It was a tease, a little whisper of the sensation he could give her.

"Need you. Please, Stephen." As she pulled her sopping fingers away, she groaned, "Please."

And with a low, feral growl, he snapped.

Without taking his lust-clouded eyes from her sex, he tore his clothes off.

Spreading her legs wide, Elena thrust inside of herself, as far as they would go. Her channel quivered wildly over her fingers. It wasn't enough. She needed him to fill the void. Only him.

Harsh breaths resonated through the room. Hers or his? Both, perhaps. They seemed to mingle together and swirl about them, heaving in time with the deep drive of her fingers into her slippery core.

Stephen's hair was a halo of dark gold, sparkling in the firelight, framing his high cheekbones. His blue eyes were deep with what could only be described as thirst. Thirst for her.

With each item of clothing he flung away, Elena's pulse ratcheted upward. Her slick passage tightened and flooded and tremors shuddered from her channel down her legs and through her arms.

He was a perfect specimen of manhood with thick, strong arms, a narrow waist, a rippled abdomen and thighs that flexed with muscle as he moved toward her. His cock jutted up and out, oversized and much darker than the rest of him.

He crawled onto the bed like a big, tawny cat. A predator, and she was his prey.

And by God if that wasn't exactly what she wanted. To be devoured by him. Her heartbeat fluttered in her chest, as frantic as a rabbit clutched in the remorseless claws of a hawk.

"Stephen..." she whispered. Instinctively, she dug her heels into the bed, scooting her body away until it pressed against the headboard.

There was nowhere to go. But it didn't matter—she didn't want to go. She wanted him to catch her, to physically catch her and then hold her and keep her, to never let her go, no matter what.

He crept toward her. Elena knew his thoughts of honor and propriety had vanished with that final snap of his control. All that remained was this virile, single-minded, indomitable man who desired nothing but her and would do anything to have her no matter the cost.

For a fleeting moment, she yearned to ensnare this aspect of Stephen. Capture him into a box and release him in all his glorious power to John and Ranulf of Lewes. He would crush them both with his raw strength, his fierce determination.

Stephen caught her. He clasped her ankles and she cried out, her body shaking from toes to crown with the heady feeling his dominance gave her. He tugged her to a horizontal position, then pushed her thighs wide apart, buried his face between her legs and devoured.

A silent scream erupted from Elena's mouth. Her head rolled back and forth. *No! Yes!* It was too intense, too powerful. She wanted to crawl out of her overcharged, oversensitive skin. And Stephen, his big hands cupped around her behind, groaned into her sex, lapped up her cream and slid his tongue over the most sensitive parts of her body as his afternoon beard scraped against the throbbing lips.

Elena's fists clenched and unclenched the blanket beneath her. Every muscle in her body flamed into rigid awareness. Her back arched. Her arms and legs straightened, shuddering with tension. Oh God, she was close, so close to all-consuming release.

And then it stopped. Things came back into focus—Stephen's harsh breathing, her jagged gasps, his face looming over her, lips and jaw glistening with her juices. He bent down and kissed her, and she could taste herself, her own musk. In her way, she had marked him with herself, with her scent. And she was glad for it.

He spread openmouthed kisses all over her face and neck, and she could smell her sex everywhere, all over. It made her wild, frantic.

He sat up, grabbed her hips and flipped her so she was facedown on the bed.

Yes. This was how she wanted him. Over her. His arms bracketed her head, his big body sheltered her, pinning her beneath him. There was nothing safer or more right than this.

Her quim spasmed in time to her heartbeat. Staying still was impossible—she wiggled and bucked beneath him. A wicked blaze burned in her body, one that only he could douse. The need for his touch, for his cock, was so palpable it hurt.

As she trembled, fluttered and squirmed, her thighs slid together, their insides slick with cream. The room's cool air flowed freely over the sensitized scars on her back and her exposed behind. She shivered, arching her buttocks into the air, searching for Stephen's warming touch.

"Good." He rested his palms on her rounded cheeks. She nearly cried out again, just from that simple touch.

"Now spread your legs wide, *cariad*."

Pressing her cheek into the bed, she did, propping her bottom up high, exposing the cleft between her cheeks, her puckered hole and her sopping sex. He pulled her cheeks wider apart, giving him a clearer view of her most private parts. She gasped.

"Don't be shy."

If Elena could remember how to laugh, she might have at that moment. She was far, far beyond shyness.

He brushed his thumb down the cleft and circled it around her tight hole. She jerked and tensed in anticipation. He rested his thumb lightly against her, just enough to apply gentle pressure on the outside.

Elena squirmed, silently begging for him to do something, something to ease the ache that was driving her insane.

He moved his fingers lower down to her plump, pink folds. Using her juices, he painted small circles over the tender flesh of her inner lips until she angled her pelvis toward to him in silent demand.

He hovered over her, and she finally felt the rock-hard ridge of his shaft as he let it slip down her cleft until it found her sheath.

"Don't hold back. Please don't." She twisted below him, trying to line herself up with him, trying to coax him inside. "Please."

"I need this," he said in a harsh whisper in her ear. "I need you. All of you."

"Then take me." Nothing was more important than being filled by him, by his cock, by his seed. Than being the cup into which he would pour all of himself. "Take me," she groaned again. "Fuck me."

His cock found the notch of her sex, and in one smooth motion, he drove all the way in.

Every muscle in Elena's body went rigid. Bolts of energy streaked under her skin, starting at the clenching walls of her channel and fanning outward, igniting every nerve into a roaring flame. She let out a great, gasping, heaving sob as the flames consumed her, devouring all rational thought.

When awareness returned, she was shaking from her crown to the tips of her toes. The white-hot flames had dwindled to a tingling smolder in her blood, and Stephen's cock stroked her slick passage, now drenched with a fresh wash of her come. His chest was pressed to her back, their sweat making their bodies slide together.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

Was he saying it aloud or thinking it? Or had she imagined it? The words reverberated in her mind as his cock seemed to grow impossibly big within her and his body closed in around her, sheltering her ever more tightly.

"My *cariad*," he whispered, and she heard a desperate edge in his voice. "Mine."

"Yes." She pushed her arse into his belly, gasping at the resulting depth of his next thrust. "Yours."

He pushed her legs together and straddled her from behind. Impossibly, his cock seemed to reach farther than it ever had, its length caressing her womb so deeply she could feel him inside beyond her navel, and then every inch as he stroked to her outer lips. It was the most beautiful, stimulating, delicious sensation she'd ever experienced.

She pushed her arm beneath her, squeezing the flat of her hand between her body and the bed, and felt her stomach undulate as Stephen filled her with each long thrust.

He trembled all over, and inside her body, Elena felt the fount of semen gathering in his shaft and preparing to explode. She met each drive, and they became deeper, richer, more poignant and meaningful. She was brimming with him. He touched her everywhere. He would fill her. He would never let her go.

This was what she was meant for.

His cock stroked deep within her, and suddenly all was still and silent, suspended in time. All of her senses focused on the feel of him inside her, over her, between her legs. Then, with a harsh groan, he released himself inside her, flooding her with his seed. Hot and musky, it washed into her womb, released by his pulsing cock in wave after gushing wave as he shuddered all around her.

He lay over her afterward, half on the bed, half on top of her, his naked skin pressed against her body from top to bottom.

There was no longer any need for words, for pleas, for explanations or plans. Elena knew that nothing mattered now beyond the two of them. Their love, their need for one another, would overcome all obstacles. With him still inside her, she fell asleep, finally at peace.

She awoke much later. Night had descended and her chamber was dark. She reached out for Stephen, but her arms found only emptiness.

He was gone.

## Chapter Eight

Stephen had left her.

Days passed. A thick spring fog descended over Winchester castle, and Elena saw everything through dulled eyes. During their last encounter, she was so certain that Stephen would stay, that he would fight for her. But no. He valued his vow to the king over her love.

She couldn't hate him as much as she would have liked. She understood his sense of duty, and she respected the value he placed on his honor. If he didn't possess those traits, she wouldn't have given her heart to him to begin with.

But as much as she prized her own honor and virtue, she despised playing the martyr. And she hated that Stephen had forced her into this position. From the day he left, feelings of betrayal and loss flavored Elena's every moment. When Stephen had gone, he had taken her heart with him. She was left an empty shell, performing her courtly functions perfunctorily and with minimal interest.

Not only had Stephen abandoned her, but he had abandoned her to Ranulf of Lewes. Perhaps he hadn't cared for her as much as she'd thought. The way he'd looked at her, the way he'd touched her—perhaps it had all been mere carnal desire. She couldn't know for certain anymore. She had been so sure of his devotion, of his love. But his departure from Winchester called into question everything she believed.

Elena scarcely saw the king except at meals, and whenever she was in his proximity, he refused to meet her eyes. She wondered whether he ignored her out of guilt or whether her own weak behavior at their last meeting had disgusted him.

Her fear of Ranulf of Lewes slowly transformed into apathy. She didn't care what he planned to do with her—the minute Stephen left her, her own happiness seemed such a distant, impossible thing, it hardly mattered who John forced her to marry. There was no sense in mourning her impending marriage—there was naught to be done about it, after all.

Ultimately, from the moment Hugh had died, she had known this would happen—had known in her heart that Ranulf would be the one to win her. Stephen had been the fleeting joy in the midst of the raw truth of her existence. She had been rash and presumptuous to ever imagine it could have lasted.

The morning sun burned through the fog for the first time in many days and peeked through the slit of a window in her western-facing tower chamber. A rectangular shaft of light streamed across the rushes, bringing out their sweet fragrance. Normally the smell was pleasant and familiar to Elena, but today it was cloying. The odor wafted into her nostrils, down to her stomach, where it wrapped around her belly and squeezed.

She ran to the chamber pot and heaved up the bitter contents of her stomach. Margaret rushed to her side. "My lady! Oh my lady, are you all right?"

Elena bent over the pot, gulping giant breaths to recover.

*Oh. Good Lord.* It couldn't be. Could it?

She grasped her maid's wrist. "What day is it, Margaret?"

"Why, it's May Eve, but why –"

Elena didn't hear the rest of the girl's sentence. It wasn't even necessary to calculate. In her anxiety-ridden state, she hadn't been paying attention. But it was a fact – she was more than a fortnight late for her monthly courses.

She was never late.

She was with child.

Stephen's child.

Emotions slammed into her and she sat back hard on the planked floor. First came joy. She had always wanted a son or daughter of her own – had prayed for it every time Hugh had come to her bed. But this wasn't Hugh's baby – it was Stephen's. A true child of her heart. She couldn't have asked for a greater blessing.

All this time, Hugh had punished her for being barren – the stripes on her back were the result of his frustration at her inability to conceive. But it was he who was infertile, not her.

Despite herself, Elena smiled.

But what did this mean for her and Stephen? The king would punish Stephen for compromising her. She would be mocked as a wanton. They would both be marked as sinners, guilty against the laws of God and of their liege lord. The baby himself would be marked as a bastard – shunned for the immoral nature of his conception.

The smile slipped from her face.

Elena pressed a hand against her belly. Now her future mattered. She couldn't let the king, Ranulf of Lewes or anyone else hurt her or her baby.

Covering her face with her hands, she swallowed down a sob. Why had Stephen abandoned them? Why had he cared for his honor, for the king, more than her? Why had he put her in this wretched position?

*No.* She was no weakling, and she refused to wallow in self-pity. She dropped her hands to her sides and clenched them fiercely. Determination quickly replaced her apathy. She was a strong woman, a powerful woman. A woman of action.

She should not depend on a man to care for her. After all, she had survived ten years without true protection from a man – certainly she could continue to do so now.

And why did anyone have to know this child was Stephen's?

Slowly, like the pieces of a puzzle falling into place, a plan formed in her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*



"It is a summons from the king, my lord." Ainsley turned from the page at the door and thrust aside the bed curtain. "He says we are to come at once."

Ranulf stretched his limbs and groaned, sore from fucking the whole night through. He wondered idly how many times he had come. Four, five, six? He couldn't help it—he had been randy as hell ever since the ink had dried on the contract that legally made Elena de Burgh his.

The whores on either side of him tittered. He had no idea why—a summons from the king wasn't humorous, after all.

"Out of my way." He shoved the wench closest to Ainsley off the bed so that he could get past her. That shut her up nicely.

He'd gone too deep into his cups last night. Devil's breath, his head was splitting in two.

Clasping his skull between two hands to hold it together, he growled at Ainsley, "Clean me up then. Wouldn't want to make the king wait, now would we?"

Wisely keeping his mouth shut, Ainsley bathed the sex from him, shaved him, dressed him and refreshed his breath with mint leaves, then led him down to the great hall, where John held court this morning.

Ranulf straightened when he saw his bride-to-be, looking as tempting as ever with a little flush spread over her cheeks. His prick grew half hard all over again, just thinking of that sweet peach of a mouth encompassing him as he thrust himself deep down into her throat. God, it would feel so good to see that high and mighty bitch on her knees choking on his semen.

She stood beside the king's throne and didn't meet his gaze, instead casting her eyes to the stone floor, as humble and chaste as any virtuous widow.

Except he didn't believe she was virtuous. The way she had championed for that lowly knight—there was something beyond mere admiration between them. He knew it, and it made him furious. She belonged to *him*.

He bowed low to the king and gave the man all the tedious expected flattery. Then, cognizant of the courtiers' eyes on him, he bowed to his betrothed and wished her good health.

After the pleasantries were finally exchanged, the king got straight to the point. "There has been a revelation concerning your betrothal, Lewes. Should you wish to annul our contract upon hearing this news, I would find some other recompense for your assistance with the arrangement I made with Prince Llywelyn."

Ranulf couldn't suppress a snort. The king must truly be a fool to believe there was any revelation on earth that would make him change his mind about possessing Elena. He managed to control his disgust, instead raising an inquiring eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Indeed." The king nodded gravely. "It has come to light that Elena is with child by the late Lord de Burgh."

Ranulf flicked a glance at Elena, whose gaze remained firmly fixed on the flagstones. Her stomach was as flat as ever. Surely she wasn't too far along. He looked back at the king and shrugged. "It is of no import."

John leaned back in his throne, turning over his jeweled scepter in his hands. "Oh but it is, Lewes. You made it clear to me that your heart's desire was to possess Loxburn. But now this cannot be the case. Loxburn belongs to Hugh de Burgh's heir."

Ranulf swallowed a bark of laughter. "If the babe survives."

"He will live," Elena snapped. Ranulf's attention swung to her. Her eyes blazed at him like two glimmering purple gems.

"Is that so, my lady?"

"It is."

She seemed so utterly convinced, he almost believed her. As if she could foresee the future. Something niggled at him, some memory of eyes gazing at him with that exact look, but he shrugged it away.

He turned back to the king and the words came out before he could censor them. "Are you certain this is Hugh de Burgh's child and not some bastard? The man died two months ago. Surely she has had time to fuck anyone she pleases. Perhaps you should question that sniveling knight she pines for, Your Grace."

Silence.

Oh dear. That was quite a slip. Silence continued to reign in the room for a long, drawn-out moment. Ranulf waited for the explosion. When it came, he was ready.

He stood stone still as the king leapt from his throne and pressed his jeweled scepter against his throat.

"Do you question my cousin's virtue?" John spat.

Ranulf would have laughed if the king weren't crushing his windpipe. Virtue? How hypocritical. John himself had extensive carnal tastes. He thought of the king's favorite mistress, a girl named Isolde, with big, floppy breasts Ranulf had imagined burying his cock between on more than one occasion.

Exaggerating a choking effect, Ranulf glanced at Elena. Hatred burned in her violet eyes.

"No," he gasped. "No, my lord..." *Gasp* "No..." *Gasp* "question of the lady's virtue."

The pressure on his throat released so quickly, he stumbled forward.

"Apologize to Lady de Burgh," the king said, his voice steel. "Now."

Clutching his neck, Ranulf bowed toward Elena. "I was..." he bent over coughing, embellishing the effects of the king's attack, "wrong. Utterly wrong." Another cough.

She didn't say a word, only stared daggers at him. He imagined she'd try to claw him apart the first time he fucked her. How fun.

He went down on one knee and bowed his head, all the while laughing inside at the perverse hilarity of this entire scenario. "I humble myself before you, my lady. I was wrong to disparage your virtue. Of course, you are in mourning and would *never* disgrace your late husband in such an ungodly, sinful fashion. Forgive me."

She fumed. He imagined tendrils of smoke curling from her ears. Oh, how she despised him.

He rose and turned to the king. "Forgive me, Your Grace. My words were rash."

Keeping his head bowed, Ranulf raised his eyes. The king cocked his head in acknowledgement, but Ranulf saw a new glint in those blue eyes—a glint of distrust he didn't like. He released what he hoped sounded like a longsuffering sigh. "Well then. I shall raise Hugh's son as if he shared my own blood. I shall raise him to be the worthiest of masters of Loxburn. If it is a daughter, I shall raise her to be virtuous and honorable, and I shall join with you, Your Grace, to one day seek the worthiest man to be the husband of the heiress of Loxburn."

The king's eyes widened a fraction. "Does this mean you still wish to honor our contract?"

"Of course." Ranulf sighed again. "Loxburn is a great loss to me, of course. But I shall take consolation in the soft, lovely flesh of my beautiful new bride."

Elena shuddered and he hid his smile behind his hand as he feigned a cough. Oh yes. This was going to be fun.

Actually it was better news that he could have hoped for. Elena de Burgh wasn't barren, as was widely believed. He couldn't wait to impregnate her himself, to have a bevy of legitimate sons join his household of bastards.

And as for the babe she allegedly carried, well, it wasn't a problem. Babies were so very fragile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stephen rode alone. A cold drizzle fell over his shoulders in the waning afternoon light. The reins automatically guided his destrier in the northeasterly direction of his older brother's lands, but he scarcely noticed.

He had done the right thing, the strong thing. For honor and integrity, he had sacrificed a forbidden love and walked away from sin.

Why then did it feel so wrong?

In his heart, Stephen knew that despite his loyalty to the king, despite standing beside his liege during the war with France and the crusade, he had done nothing for the king compared to the feat Ranulf of Lewes had accomplished. Lewes had bound the king to a powerful Prince of Wales. That action surely earned him the prize of Elena and Loxburn.

That was what it boiled down to in the end. Stephen didn't deserve her.

In the increasing downpour, he pulled his cloak tighter. Since he had left Elena, warmth had escaped him. From his many experiences traveling on this road, he knew that the next town was no more than five miles away, but at the pace he was traveling it would be well after dark by the time he reached it. It didn't matter.

He had sacrificed Elena's happiness for his honor. But what was honor if it emptied his soul?

Suddenly, the silvery ears of his war-seasoned mount pricked forward. Listening intently, Stephen heard it too. Faint, far off in the distance, men shouted, and then came the unmistakable sound of clanking weapons. Swords clashing.

Battle.

Stephen spurred the destrier, who was more than willing to comply, eager to join the fray. Who could it be? Highwaymen, most likely.

The scene came into focus like the fog-tinged vision of a dream. It was late in the battle—only a few men still stood. A rich caravan with what appeared to be a gilded wagon in the center glistened in the downpour. Fallen men, their bodies spackled with mud and blood, littered the scene. Panicked horses, rearing against their tethers. Screams of pain. Bedraggled, unarmored men fighting from hacks rather than trained warhorses like his own. The enemy.

As with any man hardened by a lifetime of war, the transition from man to warrior happened seamlessly. With a hiss, his sword slid from his belt. As one, he and his mount threw themselves into the fight.

A stream of mud dribbled down a fallen man's chain mail. Though half-hidden in the mud, the shape of the man's jaw was familiar. Did this caravan belong to the king?

Gritting his teeth, Stephen spurred his horse and took the first robber by surprise, slicing off his arm before the man knew what hit him. The thief fell from his horse, screaming.

Men came at him from all sides. Stephen's senses flared, perceiving everything around him—smells of blood and mud and rain, screams and shouts, the sound of the horses' hooves, the clashing of weapons. Though not as well equipped as their prey, these thieves were competent. A club smacked his rib. Red pain edged his vision, but his finely tuned senses didn't fail him. As smooth and fluid as water streaming from a bottomless goblet, Stephen stabbed and sliced, dodged and parried.

He wanted to live. If he died today, he would never have the opportunity to see Elena again. Hold her. Make love to her. Make things right by her.

A warrior's blood filled Stephen's veins. He was a fighter. A soldier. A man of honor. Why hadn't he fought for her?

He was a damned fool.

A man came at him, shouting in rage. Face twisted with effort, he swung a mace at Stephen's helm. Deftly, Stephen ducked the blow and thrust his sword into the man's gut. As that one collapsed, screaming, another approached from behind.

"Elena!" Stephen shouted.

Almost magically, Stephen heard every hoofbeat of the horse whose rider was intent on killing him. Stephen's destrier sidestepped and veered, giving him the perfect angle to swing a deathblow to the man's neck.

And so it went.

Then, through the battle haze in his brain, Stephen heard a distant shout.

"Go! Fall back! Retreat!"

Hooves pounded as the few remaining criminals scattered to the four winds. Stephen chased one of them, but turned back when the man's horse disappeared into the brush. Better to stay close to the scene to help anyone who remained.

It was over. Silence, except the wild snorting noises his mount made. Clutching his aching ribs, Stephen turned in a circle, scanning the carnage. Everywhere around him, bodies lay in the mud. Horses shuffled, some streaked with the blood of their riders.

Surely the thieves hadn't killed everyone. Surely he couldn't be the only one still standing.

But he was. In growing panic, he searched the scene. Everything was still. How could it be?

Clenching his teeth against the pain in his side, he dismounted and tethered his horse. Only now did he notice the true richness of the convoy. Royal colors, the royal insignia painted on the wagon. These men had been the king's.

One by one, he searched the bodies, turning them in the mud. Unbelievably, all the men on the ground, even the fallen highwaymen, were dead. A sinister premonition shuddered down Stephen's spine. He had never been in a battle like this one. Always there were injured men. Survivors. But not here, not today.

He clenched his fists. Why had he survived and they all died?

Stephen turned away from the last victim, a young page he had seen often at court. Earlier, he had found two women. Anger twisted his gut into a knot.

Damned cutthroat thieves. He was sick to the marrow of his bones. Furious that men could be so cruel.

The king would be enraged.

The rain had finally abated, and now a thick, damp mist shrouded the scene.

Through the fog, the gilded wagon glimmered. What could it contain? Jewels? Gold? It must be a transport to the king's lands in Glamorgan, which wasn't far from here. Whatever it was, he was honor bound to return it before he went on his way. Further, he must alert the closest town of this massacre and ensure the fallen men returned home for Christian burials.

He walked toward the wagon but stopped short when he heard a scuffling sound inside.

Slowly, he drew aside the heavily oiled curtain that sheltered the contents of the wagon from the rain.

Beyond a pile of rich cushions, the king's daughter Joan cowered in the corner, shuddering visibly, staring up at him with pale blue eyes as round as saucers.

Good God. So focused on his loss of Elena, he had forgotten Joan traveled on the same road as he did. Her caravan had departed from Winchester two days before he had. On his own, he had traveled much faster and caught up with them.

He reached for her, but she shrieked, pressing her back against the wall. Stephen looked down. Blood dripped from his fingertips. The poor girl must think he was one of the thieves.

Snatching back his hand and wiping it surreptitiously on his tunic, he bowed. "My lady. It is I, Sir Stephen de Verre, from your father's court."

She wrapped her arms around her body, shaking her head.

"Remember, lass? I saw you in Lady de Burgh's chamber just a few days ago."

"I remember your eyes," she whispered. But she still didn't move. "Such deep, deep blue."

He tried to smile. "I remember your eyes too. Pale blue, like cornflowers."

Slowly, so she would know he meant her no harm, he climbed into the back of the wagon.

"They killed everyone, didn't they?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Targreth?"

This must be one of her ladies. He met her eyes. "Yes, lass. I'm sorry."

With a great, heaving sob, she flung her arms around him.

Taken aback, he held her, patting her back, mumbling in Welsh, the soothing language of his mother. When she had calmed a little, he reverted to the French he knew she would understand. "I'm taking you home, lass. Home to your papa. Home to the king."

Home to Elena. The clarity he'd experienced during the battle hadn't faded at its end. He'd never been more foolish than when he'd left her.

He loved Elena. He would fight for her. To the death, if necessary.

"We are going home," he murmured.

## Chapter Nine

A second summons from the king saw Ranulf striding down the corridor angrily. This time had been worse than the last—he was in the middle of a particularly pleasant interlude with one woman licking his balls while the other sucked his cock.

It was a pity the church condemned polygamy. Chuckling, he imagined what it would take to get ice bitch Elena to agree to such an arrangement.

She wouldn't be an ice bitch for long. He'd crack that brittle façade somehow.

He let the image carry him into the anteroom of the king's bedchamber where a page announced him to the king. When summoned forward, he quickly scanned the room, noting that Elena was nowhere in sight—in fact, only two of the king's closest advisors were present.

He bowed low before the king, who looked especially tired tonight, with dark bags beneath his eyes.

"You asked to see me, Your Grace?"

"I did, Lewes."

Ranulf frowned. He didn't like the hard edge in the king's voice or the stillness in his eyes.

"Can I offer you my assistance in any way, my liege?" he asked smoothly.

"Yes. You can." Imperiously, the king thrust out his arm. A written document was instantly placed into his outstretched hand.

Ranulf watched, schooling his face to be dispassionate.

John held up the document. Ranulf recognized it at once by the two seals at the bottom—the king's and his own. It was the contract betrothing him to Elena. John held it by its edges and slowly, deliberately, tore it in two.

*No!* Ranulf thought his eyes might pop from his head. It took every ounce of discipline he could muster to keep himself from launching at the king and pounding that smug, arrogant face into a pulp.

Instead he said, ever-so calmly, "Whatever are you doing, Your Grace?"

John answered, equally calm. "I don't like how you speak to my cousin. I don't like how you look at her."

Ranulf's lips froze, but he forced the words out. "I have the utmost respect for your cousin, Your Grace."

The king cocked his head, retaining that unnerving, emotionless expression on his face. "No matter. I have given this matter a great deal of thought. You must agree that without Loxburn, she is of little value to you—or to me, for that matter. I am indebted

to you for your service to me, Lewes. Surely I can offer you something superior to a pregnant widow."

Despite the protests roaring in his brain, Ranulf couldn't pass up an opportunity for advancement in the world. So he took the proffered chair and sat with the king to haggle over property and gold.

But his mind seethed. *No. No. No.* He would have Elena. His life's goal would be fulfilled. No portly, over-bred Norman would stop him, King of England or not. He would have her. He would take her. He would marry her.

Once he and the king had finished their negotiations, he headed toward his quarters with a determined stride. John could go to hell. Ranulf was taking Elena.

Tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

A scratch at the door woke Elena from a fitful sleep. Stephen had appeared in her dreams. He'd been fighting, covered in blood, and he'd shouted her name. Even now, the timbre of his call resonated through her, making the tiny hairs on her arms stand on end.

Margaret shifted on her pallet nearby.

She had been surrounded by the scattered pieces of the chalice Stephen had shattered against the rock in her previous dream. With a swipe of her arm, she had magically repaired it, then poured her soul, her strength, into it and sent it to him in a streaming blue ribbon across the miles separating them.

With great effort, Elena raised her hand to rub her eyes. Her limbs were spent—shaken and weak.

A woman's voice sounded beyond the door. "My lady!"

Elena struggled to sit up, her senses suddenly on high alert. Her room was as dark as pitch. Who on earth would wake her at this hour?

"My lady, please come quickly! It's the queen!"

The queen? Had she taken ill?

Or was this some kind of trick? Her nerves prickled. Her witch's blood sang with danger.

"My lady!" came the cry again.

Her heart in her throat, Elena found her heavy woolen robe and slung it over her shoulders, then slid her hand down the crack between her bed and the wall to find her dagger. She dropped it into a narrow pocket sewn in the inside seam. Just in case.

"My lady, who is that?" asked Margaret sleepily, finally roused by all the noise.

"Don't worry, Margaret. I'll see to it."

In the dark, Elena felt her way to the door. As soon as she unbolted it, someone from outside flung it open. Her legs still weak from the dream, Elena stumbled



backward, but as she fell, the man grabbed her arm and hauled her against his chest. His arms encircled her torso like steel bands, pressing her arms against her sides so she couldn't move.

Even if she could move, it would be hopeless. More dark shadows surrounded her. Big shadows. Men. The woman who had called to her was gone—Elena caught a fleeting glimpse of a skirt as she sprinted away down the hall.

Elena opened her mouth to scream, but one of the bulky figures shoved a wad of wool into her mouth.

Margaret cried out. "My lady?" But the men surrounded her too, and all Elena heard were the sounds of a muffled struggle.

She twisted out of the man's grasp and dove toward the door. But another shadow appeared there like an apparition and grabbed her shoulders.

Elena desperately looked for a way to escape, a way out. But there was nowhere to go. She was trapped.

Still, she was no goose of a woman. She'd never give in without a battle. She kicked and scratched, spitting against the gag. She elbowed a man in the gut, taking some pleasure in his groan of pain and subsequent gasps for air.

But she was no match for these men. She counted five of them—at least five, assigned to her alone. She could not see how many held Margaret.

One of the men wrenched her arms behind her back and bound them tightly so the rough ropes dug into the tender skin of her wrists.

Another man appeared in the doorway. Instantly the men holding her slackened their grips and she dodged from their arms.

But the man who stood in the threshold was faster than her. As she tried to sprint around him, he caught her by the waist and pushed her, hard. She went reeling backward, straight into the arms of one of the original captors.

Though she couldn't discern his features, the sickening mint smell washed over her. Ranulf of Lewes.

"This 'un's a wildcat, m'lord," one of the men said in English.

"Indeed," Ranulf said in his haughty way. He moved aside, gesturing politely at the door. "Well then, shall we?"

Elena screamed against the gag. She would not move. They would have to force her.

A man prodded her shoulder, but she cringed away, holding her ground.

With a hearty sigh, one of the men lifted her by her waist and slung her over his shoulder, clamping an arm of steel behind her thighs so she couldn't move.

As they filed out of her bedchamber, Ranulf leaned down to whisper into her ear. "You are mine, Elena. And I'm never going to let you forget it."

## Chapter Ten

A stream of morning light blazed over Elena's cheek. Tentatively, she cracked open her eyes. She lay on the bed of a wagon, on a bundle of furs that didn't do anything to keep her from feeling the jolt every time they hit a pothole or a bump. Every inch of Elena's body ached. Her movement was restricted to a few inches because her wrists were tied to a cleat on the side of the wagon.

She blinked at the morning sun. By its position, she determined they were headed north, most likely toward Ranulf's keep at Fordhaven.

She struggled to sit upright.

"She's awake!" a man called.

The wagon groaned to a halt. Clomping hooves signaled a horse's approach and she looked up to meet Ranulf's eyes.

He looked resplendent this morning, high on his sidestepping destrier, dressed in black and haloed by the sun.

Oh how she despised him.

"Good morning, my lady. It is a pleasant one, is it not?"

If Stephen were here, would he defend her? Would he kill Ranulf to free her from his clutches?

But he *wasn't* here, was he?

Blinking hard, Elena pressed her back against the side of the wagon. "Why have you taken me from Winchester?"

Ranulf's hand flew to his mouth in mock offense. "No 'my lord'? Now that is rather rude, Elena."

She narrowed her eyes. "You are not *my* lord, Ranulf."

Ranulf chuckled. "But I shall be, and very shortly."

"I ask you again, why have you taken me?"

"You haven't heard?" Ranulf rubbed his chin. "Now that is rather shocking. I thought he would have told you first. I imagine he would have enjoyed seeing your tears of gratitude."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, Elena, the king has ended our betrothal."

If she hadn't been trussed to a wagon, she would have sobbed with relief. Instead, she merely stared at him, dry-eyed and angry.

Ranulf stroked the black mane of his horse and smiled down at her. "But I think it is for the best, Elena darling. I really do. For who knows how long our good king would have made us wait? This way, we can be wedded—and bedded—within a matter of days."

"I will never allow you to bed me, Ranulf," she whispered. "Never."

The sound of his laughter tore along her nerves like a jagged claw. "Oh honestly, Elena. I was not aware you were so naïve. After all, it's really not a matter of 'allowing', is it? I will take. Whether you choose to give or not."

He spurred his horse and moved ahead, still laughing.

Elena watched him go, quelling her instinct to struggle against her bonds, to scream for help, to use any means to try to escape.

No, now wasn't the time. Her temper could make everything worse. Whatever happened, Ranulf must not discover the presence of her dagger.

There was no way she'd get away from this many men with just her legs and her tiny weapon. But she'd keep the blade close, and hidden.

She'd strike when he least expected it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dim light filtered through the closed window shutters, but Elena couldn't estimate the time—morning and afternoon blurred into long hours of solitude. The air in this tiny tower chamber reeked of mold. Lashed behind her, her bruised wrists ached, her fingers stiff from so many days bound in the same awkward position.

How long had it been? Her mind calculated sluggishly. Five, maybe six days by now. She thought the journey had taken three days, but she had been bound to the wagon the entire time, and it had rattled her mind so thoroughly, she couldn't remember exactly how long had passed since they arrived at the castle.

*Stephen.* Her heart cried out for him in a constant, mournful wail. But he wouldn't come to save her. He had left her, knowing she was destined for Ranulf of Lewes.

She would never forgive him for that. *Never.*

She clenched her jaw, hating her heart for its weakness. For now, she must rely on herself—she must save herself.

Sliding her elbow over the ridge of the dagger hilt, Elena's lip curled. It would happen. Soon.

But to use her weapon, her hands would have to be untied. And for Ranulf to untie her hands, he'd have to trust her not to do anything rash.

Perhaps it might happen today.

The lock scraped. Elena jerked her head up, expecting the friendly face of Mary, the maid who came in to bring her food and empty her chamber pot several times a day.

Mary seemed sympathetic but, as every other servant in this keep, lived in fear of her master and would do nothing to help Elena.

But it wasn't Mary. It was Elena's enemy.

Ranulf sauntered in, splendidly clad in a rich green tunic. Two of his men flanked him, their angry scowls firmly in place.

Elena struggled to rise and then, using her feet, pushed herself backward, as far away from him as the little pallet would allow.

"Good morning, my dear."

The small smile of victory on his face made her pulse flutter desperately, like a butterfly trying to escape the confines of her chest. Something was wrong. Something terrible was about to happen. And she only had one guess as to what it might be.

"Has the king come for me yet?" Elena already knew the answer to that question, but she asked anyway in a desperate attempt to buy time. Ranulf planned to touch her today—she saw it in the glint in his eyes. The mere thought of Ranulf's hands on her body made her want to scream.

Ranulf waved his hand in the air. "We've been over this, woman. Both you and I know he won't pursue you. Nor will that pious knight you seem to admire so much. You aren't valuable enough."

"I am the king's cousin!"

Ranulf lifted a shoulder. "So?"

"He will come for me," she said stubbornly. In truth, she had no idea whether he would come. What Ranulf said was true—her monetary value to John had decreased to almost nothing once she announced her pregnancy. But she shared the bond of blood with the king. Surely that meant something.

Ranulf smiled and held out his hand. "Come," he said gently. "The priest awaits. It is time for us to be married."

"No!" she shouted. And for the first time since the night of her capture, Elena lost control.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning after he returned to Winchester with Lady Joan, Stephen strode into the king's private chambers. The summons was no surprise, but he didn't know what to expect. He did know one thing—no matter what the king's reaction to the demise of his men and the rescue of his daughter, Stephen was determined to make his intentions in regards to Elena crystal clear.

The king faced away from him, staring out the arrow-slit window at a cloudless blue sky. Once past the threshold, Stephen dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "You called for me, Your Grace?"

John turned from the window, strode toward Stephen, clutched his shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Stephen's jaw dropped open at the sight of silvery tears streaking the king's face.

John pulled him into an embrace. "Thank you for saving her," he murmured. "Bastard or not, Joan is the daughter of my heart."

Awkwardly, Stephen patted the other man's shoulder. The display of fatherly affection constricted his heart. Would he ever have a child of his own to love?

It didn't matter. If he had Elena, it would be enough—more than enough.

"How is the lass?" The trip back to Winchester had been difficult. Nightmares had plagued the girl. Stephen had employed a woman to chaperone her, but Joan would have nothing to do with her. She panicked every time Stephen left her sight. She only left him when her old nursemaid had come to comfort her last night, and even then, she had been reluctant to let him go.

"She is well. Recovering from the ordeal." The king's lips twisted. "If Llywelyn still wants her, he'll have to come fetch her himself. And bring an army of Welshmen with him."

When it came to the thieves stalking the roads, a Welsh army would certainly fare better than a convoy of the king's. Stephen breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am glad to hear she is recovering. She is a good lass, Your Grace—she'll make a prince of Wales a fine wife, I daresay."

"Thank you." The king pulled back but still gripped Stephen's shoulders. "I shudder to think of what might have happened had you not come..."

"I only did what any man of honor would have done," Stephen said. Though he wasn't a man of honor, not for the betrayal against his king he was about to commit.

He looked into the king's eyes. They were light blue, like his daughter's, and at the moment, as earnest as he'd ever seen them.

"Your Grace, before we continue, I have something to tell you—"

The king raised his hand to stop him from saying more. "Anything," he said. "You may have whatever holding, whatever amount of gold that you desire. As long as you don't bankrupt me. Think on it carefully, for this is the only time I will make this offer."

Stephen's fists clenched and unclenched at his sides in a single, convulsive movement.

"Elena de Burgh."

The king didn't appear surprised. He released Stephen's shoulders and returned to the window, where he looked out at the clear morning sky, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This has naught to do with Loxburn or her lands, does it?"

"Not at all."

"If she had not a farthing to her name?"

"Then I would still want her."

"You love my cousin."

"I do, my lord."

"You would care for her, no matter what?"

"I would with all my heart. I know you have legally betrothed her to another, but—"

The king held up his hand to stop him. "No. I destroyed the betrothal documents. I didn't trust the man with Elena. She wasn't safe with Ranulf of Lewes. I sensed...a shadow of evil within him."

Stephen released a long breath of relief. Thank God.

"Do you think your decision might jeopardize your contract with Prince Llywelyn, my lord?"

"I doubt it. Lewes was instrumental in the beginning of the negotiations, but Llywelyn and I have an understanding. I think he trusts Lewes about as much as I do." His lips twisted. "No farther than I can throw him."

Stephen moved closer to the king. "You know I would never let Elena come to harm."

The king sighed. "I believe you."

Stephen tensed. The resignation in the king's tone was impossible to miss.

"I would give her to you if I could," John continued. "But she is gone."

"Gone? Where?" Stephen didn't understand. Why would she have returned to Loxburn?

"Ranulf of Lewes." The king's features hardened. "He took her from Winchester beneath my very nose."

"He...?"

"He kidnapped her."

"When?" Stephen bit out.

"Five days ago."

"Where are they?"

"I'd guess he took her to Fordhaven. It's the only keep he controls. It stands to the east of Glamorgan."

Primal fury threatened to cloud his reason. Stephen clenched his fists, fighting the sweeping, overpowering rage.

"I will find her, Your Grace."

The corner of John's mouth quirked upward. "Yes, Sir Stephen. I imagine you will."

"If I may take my leave—"

"Of course."

Instantly shifting into warrior mode, Stephen sprinted into action. Within the hour, he was headed away from Winchester, a small army of men at his back.

Only then did he realize it had been too easy. His men had awaited him in the bailey, armored and ready. His squire had already saddled his destrier, who stood at the gate, chomping at the bit.

It dawned on Stephen that if he hadn't arrived to take charge, the king would have led the army to rescue Elena himself.

Grimly, Stephen spurred his mount, leading the men toward Wales.

He wouldn't fail her this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

It all went by in a blur. Keeping her wrists bound, three men held a struggling Elena upright as the priest—a round man with bulging eyes—stuttered through the vows. Though the man seemed to have some sympathy for her plight, given the sword pointed at his throat, he had no choice but to bless the union.

By sundown, Elena was legally married to Ranulf of Lewes.

Ranulf himself had been the only calm person present, a beatific smile spread over his features as he promised to love and cherish her until death did they part.

She refused to acknowledge the priest or speak the vows. Instead she spat at the men who held her and only laughed bitterly when one of them threatened her with disembowelment. Ranulf wouldn't have her disemboweled. He wanted her to live, and to suffer.

When the priest pronounced them man and wife, a deadly calm settled over Elena.

She was married again, to another boor—this one far worse than the last.

With one last pitying look at her, the priest departed, leaving Elena with Ranulf and his men, more exhausted, drained and alone than she'd ever felt in her life. The scratches on her arms and chest burned and her limbs ached with bruises. A line of blood trickled down the back of her arm.

Ranulf finally came to within touching distance of her. He grabbed her chin between hard fingers and forced her to look into his dark, angry eyes. "You know what comes next, *wife*."

As much as her pride told her to spit in his face, instead she let her defeat show in her slumped shoulders and downcast eyes.

"Yes."

His voice was rough—with anger or passion, Elena couldn't tell. "Hugh was too weak to tame you. Sir Stephen is an imbecile. But I am neither weak nor stupid."

She didn't answer this time.

He moved close—too close. She smelled his minty breath as it washed over her face, and her stomach heaved.

"I can hardly wait," he whispered.

Elena swallowed down her nausea. Tears were easy enough to conjure, and she let them flow freely. *Yes*. Let him think her a weak, defeated female.

"There is naught I can do to stop you." She looked back up into his cruel eyes. "Husband."

He smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fury at his wife's stubborn behavior had nearly overcome Ranulf during the ceremony. It was almost impossible to allow his men to subdue Elena when all he wanted was to pummel her into submission. But Ainsley's hand on his arm reminded him to be calm, and he'd somehow maintained a peaceful façade and forged his way through it.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. All that truly mattered was that she was finally his.

The best part was that Ranulf had literally watched the fight drain out of Elena as the priest blessed their union. They were finally married under God. She knew as well as he did that nothing could tear that asunder—not even the king. Nothing but death could separate them now.

They dined beside one another at the high table, and for the first time since her capture, he agreed to loosen the bonds confining her wrists. Seemingly grateful for this new freedom, Elena ate with apparent gusto. She didn't meet his eyes or speak, but she sat beside him docilely, oozing what he would have liked to have imagined as a state of wary contentment. And as the hours passed and wine lightened the mood of the hall, her mood seemed to lighten as well.

She seemed to have accepted her fate.

Tossing back his tankard of wine, Ranulf slid a long glance at her. Tonight would end it all. The years of painful longing. Of torture. She was finally his. He wanted to sing it, shout it to the rafters.

He couldn't wait to fuck her, to complete the bond he had forged by marrying her. The bond he'd always intended to forge. His prick had been rigid with anticipation almost constantly since he'd called for the priest this morning, and now it was past midnight.

It was time.

Rising abruptly, he announced that he and his wife would now retire. Amidst cheers and catcalls, he nodded at one of his guards to follow them from the hall. Walking into his chamber, he turned in time to watch his man push her over the threshold and follow her inside, gripping her arm roughly.

She stood before him, as meek as a kitten. For once, she did not sneer with superiority nor strain and fight against the man who held her. Finally, Ranulf had the chance to look her over from head to toe. Could it be true? Had she actually resigned



herself to her fate? Ranulf couldn't help but be a little surprised—he hadn't expected this.

Yet perhaps he should have expected it. She understood her duty. After all, she had been a loyal, docile wife to Hugh, a brute of a man, for ten solid years.

She still wore the tattered garment she'd worn the night he'd abducted her from Winchester. Not appropriate attire for the lady of Fordhaven, certainly. A pang of something—certainly not guilt—flashed through him. He had striven to look his best today, and she looked like a serving wench. Perhaps he should have allowed her to bathe and dress in something more appropriate for their special day.

He snorted aloud, thinking of the raging madwoman his guards had carried downstairs. It would have been impossible to try to bathe her or to wrangle her into anything else. In any case, it was for the best. The woman didn't deserve fresh clothing until she'd proven herself.

Beyond the wrinkled, soiled clothing and tangled hair, Elena was still a beauty. Her hair coiled into a black mass, framing her pale, oval-shaped face perfectly. Her eyes were wide—such a rare, clear color—and surrounded by long, dark lashes. Dirt smudged over her brow, somehow accentuating the beauty of her eyes. The robe couldn't hide her feminine curves and rounded breasts—a little small for his tastes, but he'd touched them before, years ago at Loxburn, and had discovered them to be just the right size to twist in his palm. Her arms and face were covered with scratches, and a particularly nasty bruise bloomed over one of her cheekbones, the only color in her otherwise deathly pallid face. His cock twitched in eager anticipation. God, he'd waited so long for this one.

He licked his lips and glanced meaningfully at the bed. "Here we are, Lady Lewes."

She winced at the title but met his gaze, brave creature that she was. He'd always known she was no coward.

"Yes." Her voice was just above a whisper.

"I'll make you forget. You will abandon your thoughts of that knight and all those notions of courtly love and propriety." He sneered, thinking of that uppity prig. Curious about the man Elena thought so honorable, he'd watched him from a distance at Winchester. The man was so upright, he must keep a stick jammed up his tight arse. "The honorable Sir Stephen wouldn't want to sully his flesh by touching yours any more than absolutely necessary to spurt his load into you. He'd probably fuck you through a hole in the bed linens."

She lowered her head to stare mutely at the floor.

*Yes. The docile wife.* Ranulf liked this new side of her.

He took a step toward her. "But I won't fuck you through the bed sheet, wife. Oh no. You can look forward to all sorts of fleshly pleasures," *and pains*, "when I bed you."

He flicked his gaze from her to the bed. Understanding the order, the guard moved forward and grabbed Elena's arm, prepared to forcibly toss her on the bed and tie her to it, if necessary.

"No!" she cried, staring directly at Ranulf, her eyes wide with terror. "Please, Ranulf, please!"

He held up his hand and the guard froze. This was the first time she'd begged him for anything.

"Come now, Elena. You have been attempting to prolong the inevitable since we have arrived. But your struggle is over. It is finished. We are husband and wife."

"But it's not that, my lord."

His heart surged. She'd called him "my lord".

*Victory.*

"You have two choices, my lady," he said, fighting a smile. "You can lie on the bed of your own accord, or my man can hold you down. Either way, you know what is to happen next."

He watched her throat convulse as she swallowed. Someday—not tonight, for he intended to come in her cunt tonight—he would watch her throat move as she swallowed his seed.

She tossed a terrified glance at the guard. "Please, my lord husband. Please make him go."

"Why?"

"You are right—I cannot struggle anymore," she said meekly. "As the priest decreed, we are married. You are my husband. I must endure whatever you choose to make me suffer, so there is no point in fighting. I belong to you now. I am yours."

*Yes. Mine.* Another surge of triumph welled through him. She was a waif, tiny and helpless. If, later on, she changed her mind about this newfound complacency, he could easily subdue her. Ranulf crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh really? And you prefer to fuck in private?"

"I shall be...naked, my lord. It would be...it would be immodest."

Ranulf hesitated. The woman had a point. He'd often seen his men looking at her with lust in their eyes. Damn them. An image of his mother crossed his mind. His beautiful mother, so much like Elena.

Ranulf had never known the identity of his father for certain.

He'd skewer anyone who touched her.

And yet one of his men was touching her now.

"Release her!" he bellowed.

Instantly, the guard backed away.

He waved a hand at the man. Yes, it would be better if the guard wasn't present, if he didn't get any ideas about sinking his cock into his lovely wife. She was for Ranulf and for him alone, goddamnit.

"Go," he grunted. "Go back to the hall."

Eyebrows raised in surprise, the man asked, "You don't wish one of us to stand guard, my lord?"

Ranulf scoffed. Was the bastard implying that he couldn't handle Elena on his own? "No. Go away."

When the man disappeared down the hall, Ranulf kicked the door shut. "Is that better, my dear?"

Elena's eyes watered. "Thank you. Hugh, he..."

"He what?" Ranulf asked sharply.

"He was never so kind. Thank you, Ranulf. I never expected..."

The sound of her voice shimmied a caress down his prick and over his balls, ending with a little hair-raising tweak deep in his arse. He shuddered.

That voice. When he'd visited Loxburn to visit Hugh, her voice had made him tremble with longing. But she'd looked at him with such coldness, such disdain.

He never understood it. All he'd ever wanted was her.

"Take off your clothes."

"I am afraid," she whispered, taking a step backward. "Will you hurt me?"

"Of course not," he heard himself saying soothingly.

What in hell had provoked him to sound like that? Of course he would hurt her. He *wanted* to hurt her.

Didn't he?

Ranulf shook his head to release the thick fog that seemed to have permeated it. Too much wine, perhaps. "Strip," he mumbled.

"Why do you want me, Ranulf?" Her voice seemed to come from far away, and suddenly images of his mother flooded his head again. He felt like a little boy, like he had just after he'd lost her. Tears pricked his eyes.

The kirtle slipped off Elena's shoulders and pooled at the floor, leaving her naked, the bruises covering her body a stark contrast against her pale skin.

Had he made those bruises? But she deserved all of them, didn't she?

He hated Elena de Burgh, damn her. She had plagued him since her infancy. When he was a lad, his mother had taken him to Loxburn to celebrate her birth. Loxburn was a beautiful castle, a dream world, a fantasy. Everyone there had been so cheerful, so kind to him. It was much different than Fordhaven, where he lived in fear of Lord Lewes, who'd never really believed Ranulf was his son.

He blinked back the memory. "I've always wanted you," he muttered to Elena. "Always wanted Loxburn."

Life at Loxburn had been a dream. He and his mother had stayed for months. The pretty baby Elena with her snow-white skin and raven-colored hair had entranced him. He'd wanted to touch her all the time, to hold her, to stroke her soft skin.

He knew then that someday she'd be his.

"Why me?" Elena asked. "Why Loxburn?"

Because his mama died there. Because when he'd gone home to Fordhaven, his father had blamed him for her death, made him suffer for passing the ague to her.

But it was Elena who'd been sick first. Elena had given it to all of them.

She'd killed his mother, and for the rest of his life, Ranulf had borne the blame.

She was his now. His to punish. And for the years of torture she'd put him through, punish her he would.

As her neighbor, he'd seen her several times throughout her childhood, but he was a grown man by then and had kept his distance. Waiting ever-so patiently. Then he'd gone to the Holy Land and returned to find her married to Hugh de Burgh.

The first time he'd seen her married to that brute, he'd been devastated by her beauty. She'd grown more alluring than he could have possibly imagined. It had nearly broken him to see the object of his obsession taken by another man—a stranger from the north. And her cruel, icy behavior had enraged him.

Ranulf blinked, staring at the woman who'd brought him a lifetime of pain and misery, who stood before him meekly, her dark head bowed. Her breasts were rounded, the nipples taut, cherry red. She bunched the woolen fabric of her robe in her hands, fumbling. She was nervous. Good.

Ranulf's fingers went to the knot of his braies. "Bend over the bed," he growled. "Prop your arse high into the air so I can see it."

For a long moment, she stared at him, unblinking and unmoving. He dropped the ties and gazed back at her, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. But just as soon as he began to wonder whether she would force him to push her into position, she slowly walked to the edge of the bed, bent over and stuck her tight little buttocks upward. "Like this, my lord?"

"Exactly. Don't move."

The knot of his braies was being stubborn, damn it to hell. He drew his dagger and sliced it free, then kicked the clothes off and dropped his blade on top of the pile.

Turning back to Elena, he saw her fear. A trickle of sweat dripped in the hollow between her shoulder blades. A tremulous vibration shook her body from head to foot. Suddenly, he wanted to make it worse for her.

"I'm going to fuck you hard," he said. And perhaps in the process he'd cure her of her irritating condition. His wife wouldn't give birth to another man's child—not if he could help it.

Something like a strangled sob emerged from her throat, but she didn't try to cringe away. Instead, she pressed her face into the blankets.

"I'm going to hurt you."

She didn't move. He licked his hand and fisted his fingers around his shaft, pumping hard. His prick had waited a long time for this moment, and it was so hard, it was difficult for Ranulf to think straight. All he could think about was her arse pointed

at him, her little pink lips peeking out at him, soon to be wrapped around his prick. Satisfaction was so close, he could taste it.

By God, it tasted sweet.

"I'm going to make you suffer. Make you scream for mercy."

It was a little disappointing that she didn't try to run after that threat. He would have enjoyed playing a little game of cat and mouse. But that was for another day. Instead, she whimpered and clutched the bed tighter, her fingers clawing the blanket.

Grasping her hips, he yanked her against his groin. Ooh, that felt good. Her crack cradled his prick and her soft skin soothed the hot blood raging through it.

With a hoarse cry, Elena twisted in his grip.

Something swiped through the air, glinting silver, heading right for his heart.

He ducked away, but not fast enough. The dagger sank deep into the fleshy part of his shoulder.

Oh Jesus. The pain. It seared through him, hot, cold, he didn't know. The blood – it was hot. It hurt.

She yanked out the dagger and stabbed him again, this time lower.

He staggered backward, the golden dagger hilt jutting from his flesh, knowing his eyes were wide as he stared at her. His docile, sweet wife? The cooing babe he had once held in his arms?

*No. No. No.* The murderess of his mama. Now she'd kill him. What a damned bloody fool he'd been for believing her charade. She'd planned it all along.

He remembered her...yes. Her grandmother was a witch. After his dear mama passed, she had come to him, stared at him with those wicked purple eyes and cast a spell of evil upon him.

Now he knew Elena was the same. She had enchanted him when she was a babe and he'd succumbed to her spell again tonight.

Ranulf's back slammed into the wall. His knees buckled. Hot blood trickled down his chest. He sank to the cold stone floor.

The last thing he saw before his vision faded was her face. Dark purple eyes narrowed in hatred. Pink lips twisted with rage.

"Witch," he whispered.

She swung something at his head. And then everything went black.

## Chapter Eleven

The men had made camp hours ago, but Stephen couldn't sleep. He sat on a riverbank, tossing stones into the water. After all the rains, the stream ran high, sloshing over its lowest banks. The sound of the rushing water soothed Stephen, prevented him from doing something rash—like riding ahead to try to rescue Elena alone.

Leaving her with Ranulf of Lewes nearly killed him. The man could be hurting her. Raping her.

Gritting his teeth, Stephen stared hard at a swirling eddy at the edge of the river. There was nothing he could do. He didn't know Ranulf's castle. What use would it be to try to infiltrate it on his own? There was no way he could do it.

No, he had to wait for his army to rest. They had to do this the customary way. They had to lay siege to Ranulf's castle, and a proper siege could take months.

Overwhelmed with frustration, Stephen stared at the water, his patience as hard and brittle as a sheet of ice. If he moved, he would crack. He would do something foolish. Even now, tiny fissures formed along his resolve. Elena needed him. He had to save her.

A dry leaf crunched behind him. Stephen spun around, his hand on his sword hilt. But it was only Elena's man-at-arms, Roderick, who'd volunteered to join the force John had gathered to rescue her.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sir Stephen."

Stephen made a noncommittal noise in his throat and turned back to the water.

Roderick cleared his throat. "I...uh...I wanted to let you know that you have my loyalty, sir knight. I will stand behind you to do whatever it takes to avenge my lady."

"Thank you, Roderick."

"You have never been to Fordhaven?"

"No. Never."

Roderick knelt down to pick up a handful of pebbles and methodically began to toss them into the water.

"I have."

\* \* \* \* \*

The marriage celebration was still going full swing down in the great hall and the castle hallways were deserted. Elena tried door after door, but most led to empty chambers. Biting her lip, she began to descend the twisted stairway that led down to the bailey.

Stepping outside, she took a deep breath. It was a warm night, and for that she thanked God, for her scanty clothing would do little to protect her from a chill.

She turned, sidling down the edge of the wall, approaching one of the doors to the kitchens. The door swung open, and before Elena had a chance to move, a laughing woman carrying a bowl of bones stepped out.

The woman nearly ran Elena down. She reeled to a halt, dropping the pan with a clatter, bones tumbling every which way.

It was the woman who had brought her food every day, the kitchen maid who had been so kind. "Lady Lewes," she gasped. "What in heavens' name are you doing out here?"

There was no reason to lie. She could only pray the woman would help her. "I've escaped from your master." Elena glanced to her right and left. Nobody else was near, thank goodness. "Please help me, Mary."

Uncertainty crossed over Mary's face, then fear. "My lady, I cannot—"

"Please," Elena begged. "You know what he's done to me. He will kill me, Mary. Please. You know it's true."

Mary glanced warily around them then bit her lip. "Aye, my lady. I will help. There is an ancient, abandoned passageway that will take you far from the grounds. But we must hurry."

With only a cloak, a rushlight and a small bundle of food given to her by Mary, Elena escaped from Fordhaven. After several long days of walking, begging for shelter and groveling for scraps of food, she finally knocked on the door to her grandmother's cottage.

When the old woman opened the door, Elena merely grinned, so happy to see her she could hardly speak through the thick emotion in her throat.

"Elena. I knew you would come today."

She threw her arms around the old woman. As always, her grandmother's soft skin smelled of sugar and spices.

"Oh my dear," Grandmère cooed, bustling her into the main room of the small, pretty cottage. A smile spread across her features, but the edges of her eyes creased with concern. "Oh child, you are so gaunt. I have been so worried. My tarot cards said something was amiss."

*Her tarot cards?* Elena didn't know what those were. Grandmère had never mentioned cards before.

"I am fine, really." Despite her loss of weight and the shreds of her clothing, Elena was healthy. Free, for the first time in her life. In the days since she had escaped from Ranulf, she'd wondered if she had killed him. She doubted it. It wasn't a lethal wound and wouldn't have killed him unless it festered. They were still married.

A hollow remained in her heart—the void Stephen had created when he left her—but she would survive. Her babe would survive. She would hide among the peasants forever, if necessary. Eventually, she might go to court and beg the king to ask the archbishop for an annulment. But for now, this would be her home. The shores of Bristol Channel would not be such a bad place to raise her son.

Grandmère turned to Elena and gripped both her hands. “First you bathe and eat. Then we talk. There is so much to tell you. But for now, care for yourself...” She released one of Elena’s hands and pressed it gently over her belly. “And the babe.”

Nobody had ever understood her like her grandmother. Elena nodded, her eyes filling with tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena’s grandmother held a pile of cards lovingly in her gnarled, age-spotted hands. The cards were white on their tops but quite frayed and yellowed around their edges.

“You know that you have abilities,” Grandmère said. “I have always seen them in you. Divining the future is your strongest, no?”

“I can see things sometimes, Grandmère. Sometimes I see the immediate future, sometimes I see into men’s hearts. Sometimes I see with clarity, but those times are few and far between. Most of the time, there’s nothing. And sometimes,” she paused, remembering how certain she’d been that Stephen would stay with her, that he would fight for her, “what I see is wrong.”

“It is because you have avoided your talents rather than embracing them. These will be your guide.” Grandmère set the cards on the table and motioned Elena to sit across from her. “I haven’t shown these to you because you were not ready. You were so intent on being a good Norman wife. But you are ready now, aren’t you? Ready to embrace your destiny?”

Was she? Did she want to control this strange magic, or did she want it to stay as it was, coming and going with seemingly no rhyme or reason?

She couldn’t deny being a little afraid. The church condemned women who practiced magic such as this.

“Teach me,” she whispered.

Grandmère smiled. “These will help you focus when things aren’t so clear. Take them. Mix them up then set them on the table.”

Elena took the cards. They were warm and heavy in her hands. She turned them over and saw faded paintings on their faces—people, animals, symbols, numbers. She couldn’t make heads or tails of any of it.

“Now,” said her grandmother as Elena shuffled, “we will ask the cards a question and I will help you interpret their answer. You may use this simple method to help your own nature to more easily find answers to pressing questions.”

“But will they be as cryptic as the answers you always give me?”



"Sometimes. At other times, the signs will be crystal clear."

"Where did you find these cards, Grandmère?"

"Your grandfather brought the paper from France long ago. When he gave them to me, they were blank. I drew the images you see on them when I still lived at Loxburn, when you were a mere babe. The pictures came to me in a series of visions, and for a fortnight I drew and drew, learning the patterns and symbolism as I went. That was a difficult time at Loxburn. It was the summer Lady Lewes died. And your dear mother."

Elena fumbled the cards, nearly dropping them. "Lady Lewes?"

Her grandmother blinked. "Do you remember her?"

"No, but her son..." Elena drew a deep breath. "Tell me what happened, please."

The old woman placed her hand over Elena's, covering the cards. "She was a distant cousin of mine. She was a lovely lady, and her son was rambunctious and full of boyish vigor." She chuckled. "I remember how he made your father long for a son of his own."

*Ranulf?*

"He took a liking to you, Elena," Grandmère said. "Now that was an odd sight, seeing a growing boy handle a baby with such adoration. Yet something about him—" She shook herself as if to rid a disturbing thought from her mind. "Well, in any case, nearly everyone in the castle came down with a terrible ague that year. You and the boy were the first, and in caring for you, everyone else seemed to have caught it. You babes survived, but the adults weren't so lucky. Lady Lewes was the first to go, and your sweet *maman* followed not long after."

"Oh." Tears welled in Elena's eyes. She had never known her mother, but the pain Ranulf must have felt as a little boy—especially if his father was as harsh as Ranulf himself turned out to be. "What happened with the little boy?"

"I thought the sickness addled his brain, quite frankly," Grandmère said. "I came to cast an old healing charm upon him, but he flailed and kicked and screamed. He said I cast an evil spell on him, that he would kill me for my sinful pagan incantations." She shook her head. "Later, I realized it wasn't the sickness, but his mother's death that had addled him. I never saw the lad again."

"Oh Grandmère." All the fear drained out of Elena. It was almost impossible to think that evil man had once been an innocent, happy boy. One who had apparently adored her. "Ranulf of Lewes is the one...he was—is—my husband. He...kidnapped me...and married me...and tried to...to..." Elena took a deep, shaky breath.

"Oh dearest." Grandmère came around the table to hold her. Elena pressed her face against her soft shoulder.

"If his mama hadn't died, he would be a different person. I know he would. I *feel* it. He'd be honorable and good—"

"Perhaps, but it isn't your responsibility. You had naught to do with it."

"I know...I just—" She squeezed her grandmother tightly. "I just wish I could change things. If things had been different, he could have been a decent man. Instead, he's evil." She shuddered. "A monster."

"Ah Elena." Her grandmother stroked strands of hair off her forehead. "One thing we cannot change is the past."

"I know. But can we change the future, Grandmère?"

"Sometimes, child." She set her hand on the cards once again. "Are you ready?"

Biting her lower lip, Elena nodded. "Tell me what to do."

"Ask me a question about your future, Elena."

Elena paused, thinking of all the cryptic advice her grandmother had ever given her before Stephen had come to Loxburn. *The answer is in the water.*

Now she knew that ultimately, Stephen was that answer. Whether the water was the bath, or the water in the goblet she'd dreamed about, or whether it represented Stephen's stormy eyes or the man himself, she still didn't know. But he was certainly the answer. Stephen had given her love, if only for a short time, and he had given her this child, forever.

"Will my baby —"

Her grandmother raised a finger. "No, dear. We will read for the babe another day. For now, you."

"Will I ever find love again?"

"Pish!" The old woman narrowed her eyes. "Don't be daft. We hardly need the tarot cards for that. Of course you will find love. The moment your child is born, you will have found the most enduring love of your life."

She couldn't help but smile. "Will I find love...before the baby is born?"

Grandmère pursed her lips and focused on the cards. "Well, I suppose that will do."

Elena was silent as she watched the old woman place six cards facedown in the shape of a cross on the table. The cards were all vertical save the card which marked the center of the cross. That one was horizontal.

"There," said Grandmère. "Are you ready?"

Elena nodded.

Grandmère flipped the card at the bottom of the cross. It showed a wheel, its spokes pointing to symbols Elena had never seen and couldn't understand. Intricately drawn animals surrounded the wheel. Of them all, Elena recognized the red dragon at the top and a monkey at the base.

"This represents your past," Grandmère said. "Something important happened in your past that is affecting you now. Something...earth-shattering. Someone returned to you unexpectedly, and it threw both of you into confusion. You were unsure how to forge ahead."

Elena blinked. It was as clear as day. Of course Grandmère referred to Stephen.

She frowned down at the card. "But this person, unbeknownst to both of you at the time, has become part of your destiny." She looked up at Elena. "That rings true to you, doesn't it, my dear?"

"Yes."

The hazel eyes softened. "The baby's father?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't Hugh?"

"No, Grandmère."

"I thought not." Her grandmother blew out a harsh breath. "Good. I despised that wretch."

Elena smiled. "I know."

"It wasn't Ranulf of Lewes either, was it?"

"No, Grandmère."

Grandmère looked down at the cards once again, touching the one above the wheel. "This card represents your present. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The age-spotted fingers turned the card. "Ah."

The image was clear. "The Devil," Elena murmured, staring at the ghastly, horned creature sitting on a stool. Cowering beneath him stood a naked man and woman chained together.

"Does it mean the Devil is in my soul? Or that he is taunting me?"

Grandmère smiled. "Close. It means you are enduring a difficult cycle of events. You are now safe with me, yet you are still confused."

"I should feel safe," Elena said. "And I do—it's just that..."

"Something is missing, perhaps? But The Devil clouds your perception, makes it difficult for you to see the whole picture. In order to survive this adversity, you must be brave."

Elena exhaled a slow breath. "Does it mean I shall have trouble with the baby's birth? That something will go wrong?"

"Oh no, my dear. This card represents what you are experiencing at this moment, not what you will experience months from now." Grandmère tapped her chin. "This is a lesson for you, I should think." She pointed to the two chained figures. "Don't become enslaved by your anger or fears. Break free and you shall recover what was lost and begin again."

Elena nodded. "I think I understand."

Intuitively, she already understood this card's lesson. She must let go of her resentment at Stephen for leaving her. He had his reasons—and ultimately those

reasons were justified. She could never stop feeling pain from his abandonment, but she must let go of her anger, for her sake and her baby's.

She would teach her baby about his real father—not Hugh, but Stephen. The king's man, the man of chivalry and principle. The man who would sacrifice everything to honor a vow he'd made before God.

"It is better this way," Grandmère said softly. "It is best that you freed yourself from Lord Lewes rather than depend upon someone else to be your savior."

Elena furrowed her brow. "Why is that?"

"Because you are strong, my dear. Ultimately, you didn't need him, did you?"

It was true. She had escaped Ranulf on her own, without anyone's help, before he had truly harmed her. "No, I didn't."

"Then why resent him for not coming when you did not need him?"

"Well, it might have made things easier," she muttered stubbornly.

Grandmère laughed loudly. "When did you become so spoiled, Elena?"

Elena smiled. Her grandmother was right, after all.

Yes, she would let go of the anger and the resentment. If nothing else, she would be grateful for the time she had spent with Stephen and the amazing gift of life he had given her. Those feelings would sustain her.

Grandmère moved to the third card, leaving the horizontal card facedown and moving to the card at the top of the cross. "This begins the glimpse into your future. Are you ready, my dear?"

Elena licked her suddenly dry lips and nodded. "Yes, Grandmère. Show me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ranulf of Lewes' keep was located in the Welsh marshes bordering England. Considering its location, it was very poorly fortified. Perhaps Ranulf's strong ties with both the Welsh and the English had led him to be overconfident.

Stephen and Roderick came upon the castle in the dead of night. They'd tethered their horses a mile back, discarded most of their weapons and chain mail and covered the remaining distance on foot. Their small army was three days behind, but Stephen hoped he'd have his work done by the time they arrived.

They were several hundred yards from the gates of Fordhaven, in what appeared to be a pagan gathering area or place of worship—a circular clearing surrounded by trees, but now covered with weeds and grass. In the center, moonlight shone through the trees onto a circular stone altar covered with moss and vines.

They were searching for an old Roman system of drains Roderick had played in as a child. Apparently, the drains had been in disuse for hundreds of years but led directly into a secret room within one of the towers of the castle, not too far from the master's chambers.

Roderick had worked as a man-at-arms for Ranulf of Lewes until Ranulf had killed his brother. At that point, he'd taken his family and escaped Fordhaven. They'd wandered until they came to Loxburn, where upon hearing his story, Elena had taken them in. They had been happy at Loxburn ever since, and Elena had earned the man's undying loyalty.

"There it is." Frowning, Roderick motioned to a ragged cluster of rocks and recently upturned dirt just beyond the altar. "Now that's odd. I expected the grass to be grown over it. When I left this place, these drains had long since been forgotten."

Together they stood over the grate, a crisscrossed circle of metal bars flung open to reveal a stone ladder leading down into a dark hole.

"Someone has been here recently," Roderick whispered.

"Yes, but look." Stephen picked up a lump of recently turned grass. "It hadn't been used for sometime before that."

"Should we risk it, Sir Stephen?"

"Do we have any other way to get in?"

Roderick shook his head.

"Then let's go." Holding the rushlight in front of him, Stephen descended

The drains were old indeed, cracked in places, at times knee-deep in dirt and rocks. Tree roots hung down from the top. Other than the encroachment of nature, however, they were clear of too much grime and debris, and he and Roderick made quick progress through them until they encountered a second grate.

"There shouldn't be anyone in the room," Roderick whispered. "It's a storage room for the kitchens."

Roderick held back, holding the light while Stephen investigated. The room was dark, but the grate was partially covered with a crate of some sort.

It took nearly an hour of awkward heaving before Stephen and Roderick were able to lift the grate and emerge into the dark, silent storage room.

Brushing off their tunics, they opened the door that led to the tower stairs. Right into the face of a maid carrying a chamber pot.

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed, dropping the pot. Stephen caught it neatly.

"Good evening," he said softly. With a smile, he handed her the sloshing pot. "We're here to see Lord Lewes."

It was simpler than Stephen had predicted. He gave the chambermaid a small purse of gold and without question, she led them up to Lewes' door, happy to betray her master.

The door was made of thick planked logs and was solidly barred from the inside. Stephen placed his hand against it. He knew Elena could be in there, but he couldn't feel her as he had at Loxburn and at Winchester. Maybe he had completely severed the bond between them after all. Maybe it was too late.

He nodded at the chambermaid.

"M'lord," she called, "a message has just arrived from Winchester Castle."

After a long silence, a gruff voice came from the other side of the door. "Well, come in then."

The lock squealed as someone inside slid it free. Grinning, the girl opened the door for him. When Stephen stepped through, he saw a man lying on the big bed in the center of the room. This must be Lewes—his demeanor said he thought himself the master of this place. He was a big man with dark, curling hair and narrow, calculating eyes. Naked from the torso up, he looked relaxed, though his shoulder was wrapped with a large white bandage.

Stephen hoped that was Elena's work.

A naked woman lay beside Lewes. Not Elena, thank God. This woman was pink and busty, with pale brown hair and big eyes that sloped downward at their edges as if she were perpetually exhausted. Given her state of nudity, she likely was.

It appeared as though Lewes and the woman had been playing a game of chess in bed. Another man, a skinny, bookish type with stringy blond hair, stood beside a big armchair, his arms crossed over his chest in what appeared to be an attempt to look threatening.

Lewes looked from Stephen to Roderick and back again. "Why if it isn't Stephen de Verre. And Roderick, fancy seeing you again, you traitorous slime. You smuggled this bastard into my castle, didn't you?"

Despite the harshness of his words, Lewes didn't appear overly perturbed. Stephen stood stiffly, every sense honed, every nerve alert.

Lewes smiled. "Well then. Which one of you shall I play next?" He looked at his naked companion. "Sorry, my dear, but this game is nearly at its end."

No doubt of that, Stephen thought wryly.

"Where is Lady de Burgh?" he said aloud.

Lewes flashed him a dark glare. "Why should I tell you?"

Stephen's sword hissed as he unsheathed it. "Where is she?"

Lewes gestured at his bandage. "Surely you wouldn't attack an injured man."

Stephen stepped forward menacingly. He would do whatever it took.

"In any case," Lewes continued, giving him a one-shouldered shrug, "she is not Lady de Burgh. She is mine. Lady Lewes. My wife, legally wed to *me*. Ainsley, show him the marriage contract."

The pasty-faced man near the fire rifled through some papers on a nearby shelf, then stepped forward, holding out a document in a trembling hand. Stephen snatched it and scanned it quickly.

No. It had to be a fraud.

"I assure you, it is no fraud," Lewes said smoothly.

"Then why are you in bed with this woman and not Elena?"

"My wife has been indisposed."

The way the man called Elena his wife made Stephen shake with rage. This couldn't be happening.

As if he found the entire situation immensely boring, Lewes studied his nails. "She is with child, you know."

The statement slammed into Stephen's gut, but he held his ground.

Lewes glanced up at him, eyebrows raised. "Oh? Hadn't you heard? It seems Hugh de Burgh didn't have as sluggish a prick as we all thought."

Stephen did a quick mental calculation. If Elena had been telling the truth about Hugh's lack of interest in her for the last several months—and he had every reason to believe her—the baby had to be his.

Elena carried his child. And, with all those twisted, misplaced notions of honor and loyalty, he had left her alone. She was the only one who deserved his honor and loyalty.

Would she ever forgive him?

"Where is she?" he ground out.

Lewes sneered. "You have just infiltrated my keep. Why would I hand her to you? You must think me mad."

"Take me to her. Now."

"Now why would I take you to her?" Lewes threw up his hands in exasperation. "So you can proclaim your loyal, undying love? Come now, de Verre. There is nothing you can do. As much as you think you love her, you wouldn't steal another man's wife."

*Another man's widow, perhaps.* He was within striking distance of Lewes. It would be so easy to slit his throat...

"And you won't kill me either. You are too honorable to murder a defenseless man. I've an injured shoulder, a headache—"

*Honorable?* No. In the end, he wasn't so very honorable. Was he?

*Elena, Elena. What would you have me do?*

Lewes had hurt Elena. He had stolen her from Winchester, possibly raped her, possibly hurt her—no, *their*—babe.

Ranulf of Lewes deserved to die.

Stephen raised his sword and swung it with all his power at Lewes' neck.

At the same time, Lewes leapt from the bed with an almost unnatural speed and thrust a dagger at Stephen's gut. It pierced his tunic and dug into his side before Lewes yanked it loose.

The woman screamed. The skinny man by the fire yelled.

Stephen's blow missed completely, swinging wide. His side on fire with pain, he spun around to avoid a second dagger thrust. Lewes ducked low, retrieving a sword

from beneath the bed and swapping it to the hand that previously held the dagger. Now he held a sword in one hand and a dagger in the hand closest to his bandaged shoulder.

"Nothing will take Elena from me," Lewes sneered. "Nothing."

Stephen winced in pain, holding his oozing side with his free hand.

Lewes' sword swooped in low, but Stephen angled his weapon to block. The clang of clashing steel rang out through the room. Lewes thrust his dagger at Stephen's uninjured side. Stephen swiveled his body, dodging the blade, realizing that the dagger arm was indeed much weaker than the sword arm.

Blood plastered his tunic to his side. Stephen glanced toward the fire to see Roderick struggling with Lewes' comrade. Lewes held back, a smile playing about the edges of his lips.

*Too cocky*, Stephen thought, and lunged forward to thrust at Lewes' gut. The other man danced around the point of his sword and slipped behind him. Stephen spun around.

Lewes attacked full-on, his sword hissing through the air. Stephen dodged the first swipe, aimed at his head, with a duck. He jumped backward to avoid two slashing blows aimed for his torso. He parried a thrust aimed at his arm, then attacked, jabbing at Lewes' chest, backing the sneering man until his thighs bumped against the side of the bed. Lewes jumped on the bed, still moving backward, stepping on the legs of the whore. The woman screeched and scurried away, and Lewes lost his balance. The dagger slipped from his fingers, falling somewhere in the folds of the counterpane.

Stephen leapt up on the bed, intent on backing Lewes into the corner. Lewes jumped down on the other side. A table beside him crashed to the ground.

From his higher position, Stephen slashed at Lewes' neck, but he jerked his head backward and the tip of Stephen's blade scratched his jaw.

"Not good enough." In an abrupt movement, Lewes ducked to escape from the corner, swooping his sword low behind his back and catching Stephen off-guard. The sword cut through his tunic and slashed his stomach.

Stephen let out a hiss of breath against the pain.

Lewes' taunting voice seemed to bounce off the stone walls of the bedchamber. "Too bad you'll never see her pretty pink cunt. Too bad you'll never see the marks of the whip on her back—de Burgh's and mine."

*He raped Elena.*

It was the only way Lewes would have seen the scars on her back. Stephen would have been stupid not to have recognized the possibility, but hearing the confirmation of it made his blood roar with rage.

He was too late. He had failed her.



Through the red haze, his senses narrowed and focused. There were no other people—no crying woman or struggling men. There was no room, no castle, no world. There was only Ranulf of Lewes. And he had to die.

With a shout of fury, Stephen leapt off the bed and lunged forward. When Lewes dodged the blow, Stephen came at him again and again, until the other man anticipated and adjusted to his never-ending assault.

But Lewes was tiring. His free arm, the arm with the bandaged shoulder, hung limply by his side. His strokes seemed less strong, less certain in their aim.

Stephen made to lunge again, but just as Lewes raised his weapon to block, he changed the thrust to a slash aimed high. Completely misjudging the angle of the attack, Lewes' parry missed. Stephen's sword caught him in the neck, slicing him open.

Lewes went down, his throat gurgling, a fount of blood spurting from the gash in his neck.

Clutching the throbbing wound on his side, Stephen rounded on Lewes' male companion, who was being held by Roderick with his hands bound behind him.

"Where is she?" Stephen shouted above the continued screams of the woman. "Where is Elena?"

"Gone!" the man screamed. He stared at his fallen master, eyes wide and frightened. "Gone, gone, gone!"

Stephen pressed the bloody tip of his sword to the man's neck. "Where?"

"I don't know," the man sobbed. "She stabbed my lord in th-the shoulder and then es-escaped."

Stephen closed his eyes. She must've been the one to have disturbed the ancient passageway. Thank God.

"When?"

"Al-Almost a week ago." The man fell to his knees and crawled to his master. Turning away from the gruesome scene, Stephen felt new hope brewing in his soul. As clear as if she'd called to him herself, he knew where she was.

Bristol.

## Chapter Twelve

It felt wrong to wait. Elena wasn't a passive woman. She had taken the initiative and pursued Stephen, overcome her fear of the unknown and virtually commanded him to make love to her. When Ranulf of Lewes held her in his clutches, she had not waited to be rescued. She had freed herself, escaped from the castle and made her way to Bristol alone.

It felt odd to relinquish control. To be the passive one. To wait.

Elena stepped out into the bright sunlight. Leaning against the doorframe, she looked out over Bristol Channel. The water was a stunning, shimmering blue today. The color of Stephen's eyes.

She closed her own eyes, remembering the first image her grandmother had showed her of her future. The picture was of a seated woman holding her face in her hands as if in despair. Over her a group of swords loomed, all of them pointed toward her. Above the swords the number nine was printed.

"Nine swords," Grandmère had murmured.

"What does it mean?" Elena clenched her hands in her lap. Surely this was a bad omen.

"It means the end is in sight. You feel isolated. You mourn your separation from the one you love, but what you assume about that separation may not be entirely correct. You have suffered, but with patience and endurance you might find strength and new life."

Elena pressed one hand to her stomach. That was certainly true.

"And...it says something else to me. Look at the woman in the picture, my dear. See how her face is in her hands, how closed she is? You must take your hands away from your face—you have already looked within, now you must look without. If you do, you will see him again."

Elena's eyes snapped up to meet her grandmother's. "No."

"Yes."

It had been a struggle, but she endured every day since, fighting for patience.

And finally this morning, her grandmother had grinned, murmured something about visiting a sick friend, and then she had left, saying she'd come home in a week.

*A week!*

Smiling, Elena had watched her hobble down the path toward the village. Since then, her heart had pounded a steady rhythm of anticipation. Would he come today?

Hoof beats sounded, growing louder with each moment. No horse had come near Grandmère's cottage since she had arrived.

*Yes. Today.*

Still standing at the cottage door, she kept her eyes shut when he drew near. Those footfalls were his, steady, growing subtly louder with each step he took in her direction.

She squeezed her eyes even more tightly shut as his arms encircled her and pulled her against his chest. Strong, big arms, and his scent...musk and masculinity. He smelled like Stephen.

"Elena," he said into her hair.

His voice. Soft, but edged with strength. A sound that would be formidable to any enemy. But this was not her enemy – it was her lover.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"I knew," he said. "I feel the link between us, drawing us together. Do you feel it too?"

She blew out a breath. Could Stephen share the magic she and Grandmère possessed? "Yes, I feel it."

"It is growing stronger," he murmured. His fingers drew little circles near the base of her spine. "Look at me, Elena."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. It wasn't a dream. She reached up to press her fingers over the strong angles of his face and stared into his glassy eyes. "You're real."

He blinked hard. "I shouldn't have left you."

"You did what you thought was right."

Regret streamed through him – she could see it in his taut facial expression, the tension in the muscles pressed against her. His lips twisted. "It was wrong."

"You tried to salvage your honor, to make the right decision."

"I left you to the wolves." His voice was gruff with remorse.

"You did what you had to do."

"I put you in danger."

She cupped his jaw in her palms. "You didn't know, love."

He pulled back. "How can it be that you are not angry with me? Did he hurt you? You could have died –" His voice broke and he placed his hand flat against her belly. "The babe could have..."

Now Elena tensed. She hadn't known whether he'd been told of her pregnancy. Did he know it was his? Did he know how she'd lied to the king in that last vain attempt to free herself from the betrothal to Ranulf?

"But we are both safe," she said soothingly. "He tried to hurt me, but he didn't. He didn't, Stephen."

"Thank God." He touched his forehead to hers, keeping his hand pressed against her abdomen. "Why didn't you tell me, Elena?"

"I didn't know until a few days after you left."

"My child," he whispered.

He knew it was his. Of course he did.

His blue eyes widened in awe. "I never believed it would be possible. All this time I thought you were barren."

"Hugh was infertile, not I."

"Elena, Elena..." Stephen took her in his arms again, and for a long moment, they rocked together. When he drew back, his eyes shone with joy.

"All my dreams, all my desires are standing right here," he murmured.

"As are mine."

He buried his face in her hair. "I almost destroyed everything. I left you, first all those years ago with Hugh de Burgh and then with Ranulf of Lewes. I sinned against you. Twice."

"But you are here now."

His lips brushed over the shell of her ear. "I thought it would be honorable to submit, that leaving you would be an act of self-sacrifice. For king, country and honor. But I was selfish, Elena. I sacrificed you as well."

Something panged within Elena. This was the reason she had felt so bitter toward him for so long. His actions *had* been selfish. But the Devil card Grandmère had turned last week had already nudged her a long way down the path of forgiveness.

"Let us not think of the past, Stephen. Think of the here and now."

"My love for you never faltered."

She smiled, thinking of the card Grandmère had turned next—the left side of the cross. "I know."

It had been a queen sitting upon a throne, wearing a flowing cloak and golden crown over her raven-black hair. In one hand, she held a jeweled scepter.

Grandmère had laughed. "Yes. This is *ma petite fille*. Proud, generous, affectionate. An independent thinker, good with practical affairs." She snorted. "And fertile."

A blush had heated Elena's cheeks.

"This is one of the queens, Elena. Note the wand she carries. Someone's thoughts are filled with you. He thinks of you with passion."

It could be Ranulf. Elena had fervently prayed it wasn't.

Now she knew it wasn't.

Stephen's mouth descended on hers. When he pressed between her lips, she was not tentative as she'd been that first time at Loxburn. Instead, she opened for him, letting flow all the longing and desire that she had tried to squelch in the past weeks.

He pulled away. "Inside?" he asked breathlessly.

Unable to wipe the smile from her face, she tugged him inside, then shut and locked the door.

He took in the entire cottage in one sweeping look. "Your grandmother's house."

She nodded.

"Ah—" He shifted his stance, clearly uncomfortable. "Where is she?"

"Gone. She knew you were coming."

"Did she now?" Reaching out, he pulled her against his body. "Does she approve of me?"

Elena laughed, remembering how Grandmère had fingered the horizontal card in the center of the cross. "Now," she'd said, "do you want to see your future's potential?"

Elena had merely nodded, afraid, fascinated, tense with anticipation.

Grandmère flipped the card. The picture was a man on a white horse wearing a silver and blue mantle. It was exactly as Stephen had appeared the day he rode across the drawbridge at Loxburn, except on the card he held a silver chalice—the same chalice that had appeared in Elena's dream.

"Stephen," she had whispered.

"Who?"

"Sir Stephen de Verre. You drew his image on that card, Grandmère."

The old woman squinted down at the card. "Is it?"

"You knew him at Loxburn."

"Did I?" The old woman rubbed her chin between two fingers.

"He was Hugh's squire. He knew you from the early days of my marriage to Hugh, when you still lived with us."

Grandmère smiled. "I do think I remember that boy. You are right, dearest. I see the similarity, though I did not recognize it at the time."

"But your picture is not of Stephen as he was then. It is Stephen as he is now."

"Is that so?"

"You knew." Elena blinked away tears forming in her eyes. "You knew. All this time you knew."

Grandmère shook her head. "No. I didn't know, child. But perhaps something deep within me did."

Elena gripped the edge of the table with both hands. "Tell me what this means, Grandmère."

The old woman traced the lines of the horse. "This is a knight." She glanced up at Elena. "Your man is a knight now?"

"Yes," Elena whispered.

"Knights are harbingers of change. He brought you a message, no?"

"Yes. He summoned me to the king." But the change Stephen had brought to her life had been even more powerful than that.

"The Knight of Cups," Grandmère murmured. "On the downside, my dear, this one tends to try to run from conflict rather than face it head-on."

Elena laughed, but it was tinged with bitterness. "Yes."

Grandmère gave her a sharp look. "But there is so much more to him. He is gallant, gentle, courteous, sensitive, passionate. Ardent, but volatile. Self-sacrificing."

"Yes. That's him." Elena's fingers itched to touch the card. "That is Stephen."

"The answer to your question is yes, Elena," Grandmère had said. "This card tells me there is love on your horizon. There will be love for you before the babe is born."

But now he was here, and Elena touched the real man her grandmother had painted on the card. She tilted her head to look up into his face. "Yes. Grandmère approves of you."

They stared at one another. In that long gaze, something shifted. Elena wanted – no, *needed* – to see his "ardent but volatile" nature. Not only see, but feel, taste, touch...and she could see in the swirling blue depths of his eyes that he wanted it too, just as suddenly and intently as she did.

She untied her belt and allowed her kirtle to slip from her shoulders. Naked, she bent on one knee, feeling nerves flutter down her spine just as they had that day she'd knelt to remove his boots for his bath. But this time, she wasn't confused about what she wanted from him. She knew.

She bowed her head. "I cannot marry you. But will you take me as your mistress?"

He sank to his knees and took her hands in his own. "Nothing could stop us from being together now. Not the king, not –"

"I am married," she whispered. "Ranulf of Lewes –"

The crush of his lips against hers stopped her short. He kissed her brutally then pulled away just as abruptly, his lips glistening. "Ranulf of Lewes is dead."

"He is?"

"I went to Fordhaven."

Elena's hands dropped to her sides. She bowed her head. "You killed him?"

"Yes."

Silence stretched, thin and taut. Finally, Elena looked up, biting her lip. "Will you marry me, Stephen?"

She could scarcely breathe. The enormity of what she asked did not escape her. She asked him to betray his king, to sacrifice everything he had spent his life working to achieve.

"I will marry you."

She looked up at him in surprise. "It won't be easy," she whispered. "The king –"

"The king has already given his blessing."

"He...has? How could that be?"

Stephen smiled wryly. "That is a long story. For another time. For now..." His gaze swiped meaningfully over her body. His long fingers reached out to touch hers.

A warm breeze came in from the window, lifting her hair and caressing her skin. Elena looked down at herself. The wounds Ranulf and his men had inflicted upon her were nearly healed, and her nipples tightened into sensitive pebbles, their color a dark wine red, stark against the paleness of her skin.

"I want to taste you," Stephen murmured. "Every inch of your sweet skin, from top to bottom."

A deep shudder resonated through her body in response.

She let her fingertips play against his. It was the only place they touched, and it was electric – she was surprised she could not see the joyful dance of the link between them.

"I want to see your cock again," she said. "I want to feel it growing beneath my lips, under my fingertips."

"You will." His voice was low and edged with roughness. A hint of danger. Yes. *Ardent but volatile*. "You will see it again and again."

"And taste it," she murmured. "Taste your seed."

The bond sparked and hummed between them.

"And take it deep within you."

Thick and heavy, need mingled with their connection. Elena's emotions floated, but her body was grounded, aching to feel her knight's body, his hands, his cock.

In one flowing motion, he took her in his arms and gently set her on the bed. Rolling to her side, she watched him remove his boots. Then he rose and pulled off his tunic and shirt, revealing a white bandage wrapped around his torso.

Elena gasped "You're injured."

He shrugged. "It is nothing. A scratch on the belly and a stab to the side that didn't even pierce the muscle."

Hatred and bitterness flooded through her. She knew who was responsible for this.

"Ranulf."

"Yes. But it is healing." He must have seen the anger on her face, for he bent down to give her a gentle kiss. "Forget him. It is over."

"But what if he had killed you?"

"He didn't."

But if he had... A hundred images flooded through her mind, not of the pain she would have endured had Stephen been killed, but of all the ways she would have made Ranulf suffer for it.

But the images faded as Stephen dropped his braies and revealed his magnificent body. He stepped toward the bed until his cock was within licking distance, and she

remembered all those wicked things she had just promised to do to it. She swiped her tongue from base to head, then smiled up at him.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, *cariad*."

She nuzzled the smooth head of his cock. "What exactly does *cariad* mean, Stephen?"

"It means... 'love'."

"I love you too," she murmured, then opened her mouth to taste his silken, hard shaft.

And after she had sucked, licked, stroked and learned every bit of the rigid, pulsing surface of his cock, he pulled away to fulfill his own promise.

He tasted her, from soft tickles of her toes and thighs, to her slit, already slick and glistening with her juices. There, he explored her, inside and out, sucking with his mouth, thrusting and stroking with his fingers, making her shake, squirm and then finally moan with the most gratifying release she'd ever known.

"You are so sweet, *cariad*," he murmured. "I could come from just tasting you."

Then he continued upward, exploring her skin with reverence.

He teased her sensitive nipples until she was gasping and squirming again, and when his cock nuzzled the folds of her entrance, she was ready. "Elena," he said, gazing down on her with ocean-deep eyes. He brushed his lips over hers in a soft kiss. "My beautiful, fair Elena. My *cariad*. My wife."

Slowly, his cock tunneled into her welcoming body.

"I love you," Elena gasped.

He slid into her with gliding thrusts, and she came again in long, sweet waves, quivering with pleasure. After a few moments, Stephen followed, shouting his joy until the rafters shook with it.

Grandmère had never turned the last card in the cross, the one which showed the final outcome for Elena.

Elena hadn't wanted her to. It wasn't necessary—she already knew. It was this. Oneness with the man she loved so intently, it was as if the world didn't exist beyond what they shared together.

She lived her future now. With Stephen, her knight of cups.



## About the Author

Raised on a boat in the South Pacific and in the quiet rainforests of Hawaii, Dawn Halliday had plenty of time to develop her overzealous imagination. Between exploring deserted atolls, swimming in churning seas, and exploring lava tubes, Dawn started dreaming up stories of love and adventure before she could read them.

When she's not traveling to exotic lands (which she can always justify as "research"), Dawn lives with her True Love and three rambunctious children in Southern California. She writes passionate historical and contemporary romance, and loves every minute of it.

Dawn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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