



SAMHAIN publishing

Gothic Wolf

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Holiday eBook Freebie

Happy Christmas! ☺

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Jen closed the bedroom door with a small, definite click and turned to face the world of her childhood. Though it had been years since she'd stayed here, nothing much had changed.

Even the sheets, probably.

Sinking down on her old bed, she began to pull off her sweater. A flood of memories hit her of past Christmas Eves – she and Esther hanging stockings at the ends of their beds, falling asleep in a daze of exhausted excitement and unspecific good will. There had been a magic about Christmas then, a belief and a joy that vanished with childhood.

Jen tossed her sweater onto Esther's bed. Coming home for Christmas was a mixed blessing. Had she really thought Esther would be here too? No. In truth, her chief motivation had been to avoid another lonely Christmas in the house she'd shared with Richard. Last Christmas had been too close to his death to do more than wallow in the shock of loss; it had been necessary then but she was damned if she'd do it again. She'd learned to bear the grief, as something that would always be there. It shouldn't define who she was or what she did.

Jen threw her jeans on top of the sweater and unclipped her bra. As she bent to remove her knickers, something on the dressing table caught her eye. A wooden carving that certainly hadn't lived here when she had.

Padding naked across the carpet, Jen picked it up and examined it. It was rather beautiful – a wolf in motion. She could make out the powerful muscles, almost feel them rippling as she stroked its back with one finger.

She'd seen it before. Esther had given it to their father when she'd buggered off to Italy with the new man. Typically, Dad had stuck it in here out of the way.

Well, hadn't she done the same thing with Esther's beloved ring? Until tonight. Jen brought up her left hand and gazed at the antique lapis-lazuli ring that adorned her middle finger, outshining the plain gold wedding band next to it. She'd been astonished and secretly touched when Esther had given it to her. After all, they hadn't spoken for a year then, largely because Jen couldn't stand Kevin – the man Esther had planned to marry. Fortunately, Esther had dumped him for the mysterious Italian who'd swept her off to his own country. And when Jen had last seen her, the old light of fun had been back in her sister's eye.

Jen found herself smiling at the memory. The reflection in the mirror caught her attention and for a moment she stared at herself, the smile slowly dying on her lips, dulling in her brown, stricken eyes. From nowhere, grief assaulted her, so

suddenly that she had to rummage wildly for its source. Not for her tragically dead husband, not even for her disappearing youth or the laughter lines beginning their slow transformation into wrinkles. It was childhood she missed. It was her little sister she wanted.

Gasping, she clutched the wolf carving in both hands. Emotion crashed over her. Memory flooded her. A closeness that could never be repeated in adulthood; shared fun that had been so magical, especially at Christmas. Just for an instant, missing Esther overwhelmed her.

And even as she began to laugh at herself, to pull herself out of the pointless misery, she heard her sister.

Esther, gasping out in terrified agony, "Oh God, oh Jesus, oh *Jenny*...!"

Fear slammed into her. The old urge to protect rose up with a peculiar pain because she didn't see how she could help from here, or even how she could know, how she could hear her sister in her head. But logic had no place in this, only a desperate desire, a *need* to help. Without meaning to, she cried out, "Esther!"

The room rocked. Her own reflected image blurred and span in front of her. She felt herself falling back toward the bed. And when she stared down at her hands in new terror, the wooden wolf's blank eyes seemed to glow.

Abruptly, Jen stood in darkness. Icy wind swept across her naked skin. Tall, menacing trees surrounded her, below a surprisingly bright full moon. And only feet away, staring at her with hunger in its shining, amber eyes, stood the black shadow of a wolf.

"What the...?" Jen blinked. She squeezed her eyes shut hard, and when that didn't work, she tried shaking her head. But the darkness, the cold and the wolf stubbornly remained. In fact, her movement seemed to anger the wolf, who curled back his lips and snarled.

"Bad dog!" Jen scolded "Shoo!" She took a step forward, stamping her bare foot rather painfully as she did so.

As if from instinct, the wolf backed up a pace, but before Jen could congratulate herself, it snarled again. Its muscles bunched, ready to spring.

"Oh shit."

The ground crackled. Something – another animal? – snuffled, and the wolf's gaze flickered.

Run! Jen screamed at herself, but her frozen feet seemed rooted to the spot. She heard a strange whizzing sound. Something struck the tree behind the wolf. The animal whirled round and bolted into the wood.

Jen swallowed and turned her dazed head. A horse and rider waited in the shadow of the trees. The rider lowered his arms. He seemed to be holding something like a bow. Of the Robin Hood variety.

I'm dreaming, of course. But even for me, this is a weird one.

Still, if it was a dream, she didn't need to be frightened as the rider urged his horse forward and came to a halt in her patch of moonlight. She didn't need to be horrendously embarrassed by her bizarre and inexplicable nakedness. Although it was irritating that even in the dream she was freezing cold. She should have used the electric blanket.

The rider – a man in a dark cloak with a hat almost like a beret flopping jauntily down one side of his head, and a feather trailing fetchingly over his ear – began to smile. Or at least his teeth gleamed. Other things about his person glinted in the moonlight too: an ornate sword-hilt, surely, at his hip, something shorter above it...

"Well," he said, leaning forward to rest one wrist against the pommel of his saddle. "What sort of a wood-nymph are you?"

"A bloody freezing one," Jen retorted.

His grin widened. "Not surprised." His gaze swept over her and despite the numbness seeping into her bones, a spark of wicked heat whipped through her shivering body. If it was going to be one of *those* dreams, she'd let him look. After all, he had a deeply pleasant voice, and his profile looked firm and classical. And if he showed an ungallant tendency toward mockery, at least he was loosening his cloak and urging his horse forward another two paces so that he could drop it round her shoulders.

Jen seized it, hugging the soft warmth around her naked body. It felt like fur against her skin, suffused with the man's body-heat. The outside of the garment was fine, warm wool. Decidedly, this was a strange dream.

The man bent from the saddle, reaching for her.

Instinctively, Jen stepped back. "Oy! What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking you back to the castle," said the man, sounding faintly amused. "I presume you'd rather ride than walk, and I *did* find you."

"Castle? What castle?"

"The prince's," said the man dryly, as if humouring her. "You can climb up yourself, if you like. I promise not to molest you without permission."

Shit, it's a dream. He's got a good, wry smile and a glint in his eye. It might be fun. And if it isn't, I'm bound to wake up soon...

Squaring her shoulders, she moved toward him. Gravely, he offered her his booted foot as a step. But when she swung her leg up and reached for the saddle, her hands found a hard, muscular thigh covered in some soft, warm material, and she jerked back in embarrassment. The cloak slid off her shoulders. She made a grab for it. The horse snorted and danced and she fell over in an undignified heap.

The frosted earth was hard under her back, but it was laughter rather than injury that held her helpless. By the time she sat up, shoulders shaking, the man was there, again placing the cloak around her, this time fastening it with long, efficient fingers. For some reason, their touch at her neck caught the mirth in her throat and she gazed up at him.

Even in the dim light she could see that he was handsome. Good bones, dark, humorous eyes, firm chin dusted in late night shadow, sexy, sculpted lips...Her heart beat quickened. Something almost forgotten twisted in her stomach.

"It's a good dream," she whispered.

"What?" His hands paused on the intricate loops of the cloak, warm and exciting against her throat. A quizzical, lop-sided smile curved his lips and Jen knew an urge to kiss them.

Hell, it is a dream...!

But he was already rising, drawing her with him. "Are you hurt?"

"Only my dignity."

"Nonsense, you fall as gracefully as you stand up to wolves."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I've never done either of them in the scud before. Or at least not since I was a baby. Am I babbling?"

"Yes, but I like it."

Resting his hands on her waist, he lifted her easily into the saddle. Instinctively, she flung one leg over and steadied herself, and an instant later, the man pulled himself up behind her. His body touched her back, his thighs against hers, his crotch at her buttocks.

"So babble some more," he invited, gathering up the reins in one hand, while he held her round the waist with the other. Cold as she knew she was, Jen began to heat from the inside. It felt very strange, very...alluring. "Tell me your name, oh bloody freezing wood nymph."

A choke of laughter escaped her. "Jen."

"Short and sweet."

"Jennifer Jamieson, if you want the full version."

"You're English?" He sounded surprised.

"Mostly. Aren't you?"

"No, we still have mostly Italians in Costanzo. Where did Drago find you?"

"Drago?" Ah, that would be the source of the dream. After all, it had begun with her imagining Esther in some sort of trouble. Drago was the name of Esther's new lover, the Italian who'd swept her off to live with him. Piqued that she'd never actually met the man, Jen was clearly inventing a life and a friend for him in her subconscious. And fortunately, he spoke perfect English.

"The prince," said her rescuer dryly.

"Prince!" That was carrying it too far. She wanted the best for Esther, obviously, but where the hell did royalty fit into it?

"Didn't he tell you his name? Typical. How long did he leave you out there?"

"Er – I'd just arrived. I think," Jen mumbled.

"Did you have to be naked or was that your own idea?"

"Definitely *not* my idea." She began to laugh again. "Though now I think about it, I did take my own clothes off."

"Well, I'm glad it was I who found you. You shouldn't have gone so deep into the wood, though – the wolves are hungry and they've been known to attack at this time of year."

"I didn't seem to have a choice there either." She twisted her head round with a quick smile. "Thanks for scaring it off." No harm in manners, even in dreams.

Something glinted in his dark eyes. Trick of the moonlight perhaps. "My pleasure, believe me."

No, it was no trick. It seemed she had conjured herself a lusty man. His warm thighs stirred against hers. Against her buttocks, something grew and hardened.

Oh you minx, that's such a nice touch in an erotic dream...How erotic will it get? I wonder if I can control it?

As if he read her response in her eyes – or perhaps it was her suddenly uneven breath - his hand at her waist slid just a little lower. The tide of desire flooded her – literally, if the moisture trickling from her pussy was real. She felt the soft fabric of the cloak brushing back and forth across her too-sensitive nipples, adding to her delicious arousal. She let herself move with the horse, encouraging the rub of the cloak, and loved the added sensation of the saddle against her clitoris.

Her breath caught. This was wicked, this was – *good!*

His cheek touched hers, warm and rough. He said, "I think – I hope – it can be the first of many."

His breath teased her lips. She swallowed. "Many what?"

His lips quirked, mesmerizing her. "Pleasures."

She moved involuntarily, her hips twitching upward as if to meet his hand. At the same time, he pressed forward in the saddle, blatantly pressing his erection into her bottom. She was trapped in his arms. Between his cock and his hand was fire, crying out for attention, satisfaction.

And the beauty was, it was a dream, with no consequences.

Only was it a beauty? Would she not like to meet this man again? Know him better? In real life?

There are no men like this in real life...

How do you know? He's only been in your life – your dream! – for ten minutes.

He whispered, "You don't speak, but your eyes make such promises..."

The crook of his elbow brushed against her breast. The hand at the base of her tummy slid lower yet, over her pubic bone. There was only the cloak between her skin and his. One of his fingers trailed down, only just gliding over the front of her clitoris, sparking an intense pang of pleasure that shot through her entire body. It might almost have been by accident, except that her muffled gasp brought a wicked smile to his lips. But his hand didn't linger. Having lit the fire, he brought it back up over her stomach in a sweeping caress, coming to take the reins from his other hand.

She swallowed. "I didn't give them permission."

"Your eyes? They're very wanton."

"I'm not a wanton person," she protested, while every inch of her, inside and out, clamoured for his touch.

"I think you could be. You're no virgin either..."

"I'm thirty-six years old!"

"The best time to enjoy those fleshly delights."

"Is that an offer?" she challenged. To frighten him off, to make him say it, she didn't know which.

He smiled. "Oh yes."

Everything burned. His eyes had grown so intense she could no longer meet his gaze. Besides, her neck hurt. She straightened in the saddle, and was astonished all over again.

They'd emerged from the wood and were following a twisting, dark path, half-lit at strategic points by flaming torches, uphill to a fairy-tale castle. Behind it, snow-capped mountains reached up to the star-lit sky.

"There *is* a castle," she exclaimed.

He laughed softly. "Of course there is. It's warm and full of people celebrating Christmas Eve. But I'm sure, when I've claimed my prize officially, that we can find a quiet space..."

There were actually sentries, opening solid iron gates for them. The soldiers, in strange medieval costumes with swords and spears, called him "sir" and "Captain". They grinned lewdly at her and at each other. At the back of her mind, Jen wondered whether she should be offended – really, it was the oddest dream ever – but mostly, her mind was on her companion's previous words. On what she wanted him to say. On what she was almost afraid he would say. *Please don't let me wake up yet...*

"A quiet space? Why?" she asked breathlessly.

His hand moved up to circle her throat, his fingers warm, rough in texture, but gentle on her skin as they caressed up to her chin and held, turning her face up to his.

"So that I can unwrap you from my cloak and see your beautiful body in the light. Before I make love to you."

Fresh flame leapt through her body, engulfing her.

"In this quiet space of yours? You're talking a five minute quickie!"

His eyes laughed at the pique, not to say outrage, that she couldn't quite keep out of her voice. It was hard enough holding it steady.

"Yes, probably," he confessed. "And then..."

"And then?" she prompted.

His attention fixed on her lips and butterflies danced in her stomach. His fingers caressed up and down her throat, spreading delicious sensation as the horse continued to move under them. His erection rubbed against her buttocks. If this was a dream, could he not just reach under the cloak and push his finger inside her now? Surely at his first touch she'd come and come...

Or he could open those strange trousers of his – were they even trousers? – and simply lift her onto his cock. It happened in stories, after all – if you read the right kind of stories – so it could happen in her dream. *Oh yes, please.*

"Then...oh then, there is all night to pleasure you." His lips quirked, drew so close to hers that she could taste his breath – wine and spice and something fresh and exotic that belonged only to him. He whispered, "To pleasure us both. I'd miss a dozen masses to learn the promised joys of your body, my not-quite virginal, wanton nymph..."

His fingers slid up to hold her chin. His thumb brushed her trembling lips. She couldn't breathe. His mouth took hers slowly, taking time to caress her lips as his thumb slid free, and then fastening strongly, deepening the kiss with gradual,

absorbing passion. His tongue slid between her lips, twisting around her own and exploring. Moving with slow, sensual passion, his mouth turned hers over and over, stunning her, ravishing her, seducing her to the point that even if this had been real, she would have spread her legs for him instantly, anywhere.

She became aware that the movement beneath her had ceased, that the horse had come to a halt. But still the devastating kiss went on. His hand crept up over her breast and she moaned into his mouth.

His lips loosened, gradually, and through her daze of lust and pleasure, she saw that he was smiling. His dark eyes were hot, clouded, yet speckled with golden sparks of pure lust. Or perhaps it was the reflection of the flaring torches.

Her dazed heart jolted all over again. The horse stood before two wide open doors and light flooded out onto the man who had just kissed her. Handsome indeed – young still, perhaps younger than she, but with the weathered face of a man who spent his days outdoors, and the lines of care, or perhaps tragedy, around his eyes and mouth. It was a hard, even a tough face, and yet not an unkind one. Intelligence and humour lurked behind the desire in his eyes

Without warning he moved, sliding his leg over the saddle, sweeping her own with it. He jumped lightly to the ground, letting her drop gradually with him till her feet touched the stone flags in front of him. An instant longer he held her so, with her head flung back against his shoulder, his erection pressing into her hip, his sword bumping against her thigh. Then he turned her and, his arm loosely around her waist, swept her inside the castle.

They were in a big, open foyer. Hurried across it, Jen found her attention caught by a large painting of the Madonna and Child. It looked vaguely familiar and curiously beautiful in this setting. Apt for Christmas too.

There was noise and laughter coming from somewhere. Strange music, jolly, but definitely reminiscent of the Early Music Society she'd once belonged to. Men – servants? - in bright dragon tunics, threw open a set of ornate double doors and the noise blasted out.

Framed by the doors, it looked to Jen like another picture. A Renaissance banquet scene, descending into orgy. A group of scantily dresses players danced and acted out some semi-lewd song among the tables of lushly-dressed men and women in various stages of disarray.

The hall itself was beautiful. Tapestries and dazzling murals decorated the walls. Green leaves covered the floor like a carpet. Laurel branches wound around the walls and pillars and windows, arched across the ceiling and trailed downwards.

Thousands of candles lit the feast. There were huge dishes filled with the shapes of partially consumed animals – a pig's head, large fish-bones picked clean, something that looked like an entire swan less one wing and a beak.

It was decadent, frightening and weirdly exciting. Impulsively, Jen turned to her companion and found his eyes blazing. Flame licked through to her core.

"Mary, mother of God, you're beautiful," he breathed. "Come here."

His arm tightened, but before either of them could do more, someone shouted, "Arturo! Is that what Drago hid in the woods? Damnation, I wish it'd been my dare! What's underneath the cloak?"

Without taking his eyes off her, her companion called back, "Go to hell, Alessandro. Where is Drago?"

"God knows. He's like a cat on hot bricks. Bring her in, you lucky dog! Introduce us!"

"In a minute," was the response. Unexpectedly, he dragged her away from the doors, which were promptly closed again, and along a corridor. Here, he pushed open another, much smaller door which led through a small ante room back into the banqueting hall.

Kicking the corridor shut, he strode to the half-open door into the hall and shoved that closed that too. Then his breathing ragged, he leaned his back against it to face Jen.

"Come here," he said softly.

Her heart hammered. Was this his quiet place? Was she about to enjoy the promised five-minute quickie?

Oh please yes...

Slowly, as if she couldn't do anything else, she walked toward him. His eyes devoured her.

"Is that your name?" she asked shakily. "Arturo?"

"Arturo di Ripoli," he said, "Captain of the Army of Costanzo. Are you impressed?"

"I don't like war," she said perversely.

He reached for her. "Neither do I. And God knows I've seen enough."

With deft, deliberate fingers, he unfastened the cloak. Jen couldn't breathe. Slowly, he parted the cloak, exposing her breasts and the entire front of her body. In real life, she'd have died of shame. After all, she'd let herself go a bit, with no one to seduce, and at thirty-six, her body was no longer so slim, her breasts no longer so pert. Too much of her was too round. But he, Arturo, the Captain of Costanzo, her dream lover, stared at her as if she was a work of art.

And suddenly, she was all she wanted to be. Alluring, loving, beautiful. She reached out and took both his hands, closed the distance between them, and placed them on her shoulders. With one twitch under her palms, he got rid of the cloak.

"Later, I'll wrap you in it and love you again, so it holds your essence forever. For now, I can't wait."

With delicious sensuality, she drew his hands down from her shoulders and swept them over her breasts, where she held them to her. His throat jerked as he swallowed. His hands began to move under hers, kneading, caressing, gliding over her hard, adoring nipples again and again.

Jen uttered a moan and began to let her hands fall. As the candle-light winked on her rings, he spared them a quick glance before returning to her face, which could only have reflected the ecstasy his hands induced.

Then, an unexpected frown furrowed his brow. He looked again at her hand as she lifted it to his shoulder to draw him nearer. And he froze.

His hands fell away from her breasts. He caught her own hand and gazed down at her ring. Not Richard's wedding ring, but Esther's fifteenth century lapis-lazuli.

"Where did you get this?" Not the ravishing, low, almost hoarse voice she'd heard a moment ago, but short, commanding. Like the soldier he claimed to be.

"It's my sister's," Jen said, bewildered, almost shattered by this change. Was she not to have her five minutes even? "She gave it to me."

"Your sister?" he repeated urgently. "How did you get here? What's her name?"

The dream had gone downhill. She didn't like it half so well now, but it seemed she couldn't leave it. She didn't even want to.

"I don't know how I got here. I'm dreaming. And her name is Esther Conway, unless she got married and changed it."

His gaze came back to her. His eyes looked like swirling storms, churning her up because the lust was by no means dead, merely overlaid by shock. And something depressingly like rueful apology.

"My God," he said, "I nearly took the prince's sister-in-law on the ante room floor."

"You still can if you like." Later, she might hope that didn't come out as quite as desperate as she feared. For now, she didn't care.

"What, while your sister labours to give birth in the room above?"

It was a bucket of cold water. As if shaking it off, Jen threw back her head. "What?"

The truth was in his face. A combination of pride and hope and fear. Fear for Esther.

It couldn't be. Really, it couldn't. But this *felt* real. As real as eating dinner with her parents. As real as sitting on her old bed and undressing. As hearing Esther cry to her for help.

"Take me to Esther," she whispered. "Now."

A vast stone staircase, carved marble banister. A narrow passage lined with tapestries and paintings. Erratic light and shadows cast from sconces on the wall. Details she would never have thought of. She was a practical woman. Esther had always been the imaginative one. Esther...

Anxiety knotted her stomach. Beside her, strode Arturo, no longer touching her, and in spite of everything, she missed that. *Stupid, stupid*. What the hell was going on here?

A man prowled the passage in their direction. A gorgeous man with a short beard and furious dark eyes.

"Drago. Any news?"

Angrily, the man who must be her brother-in-law shook his head. Damn, but Esther had scored there. He was gorgeous. To die-for gorgeous.

He ground out. "They won't let me in. When this is over, I'll dismiss the lot of them. If I don't execute them."

His restless gaze flitted over Jen and briefly lightened. In fact, his eyes gleamed. "Good for you, Arturo."

"Yes, but she's not the gift you dared me to find, is she?"

Drago laughed. "God, no. Though I wish I'd thought of it. Who is she? Where did you discover her?"

"In the woods. Drago, look," he said urgently as the prince seemed inclined to pass on. Arturo seized her hand, lifting it to display the ring.

Drago glanced impatiently, and then his eyes widened. "What the...?"

"She's Esther's sister," Arturo said quietly.

The fierce brown eyes bored into hers without pity. It struck her that perhaps Esther wasn't so lucky after all.

"I need to see her," Jen insisted. "Where is she?"

"In there," said Drago, jerking his head at the nearest door. For the first time, Jen recognized the fear and misery in his stormy face. "She's been in labour for twelve hours..."

Jen pulled her hand free and strode determinedly to the door. "They won't let you in," Drago taunted. Perhaps it made him feel better.

"Oh yes they will," said Jen grimly. "In case no one mentioned it, I'm a midwife."

It was insufferably hot. A blazing fire in a large grate, and a room full of women. A huge bed on a dais, and in it, shoving off the covers someone kept trying to pull up, the pale, furious figure of her sister.

"Who are you?" one woman said sharply. "No one else is allowed in here till after the birth."

Several others rounded on her. With horror, Jen realized they were physically capable of manhandling her out the room. Raising her voice, she called, "Ask her! Ask Esther if she wants me."

The gasping figure on the bed let out a low moan as another contraction hit her. *Bad timing, Esther.*

But at least it took the women's attention off Jen, let her come closer to the bed. Through her agony, Esther was speaking, gasping out one word.

"Jenny!"

Jenny. She *had* called to her. In this world, whatever it was, of medieval medicine, no wonder she'd been terrified and in pain. Giving birth to her first child, who else would she cry for but Jenny, the only midwife she knew? And with enough force for her to hear across dreams and ages or whatever the hell this was...

Esther sat up, gasping, stretching blindly forward with her hand. Nothing could have kept Jen from her then. Forcing her way through the reluctantly parting women, she reached Esther and grasped her groping hand.

"Oh God. Oh Jenny it is you. How...? Am I dreaming?"

"That's my line."

"Jen, Jen, I'm so afraid," Esther whispered. Her finger nails dug into Jen's skin. "I don't even know if the baby's alive or dead...Oh God, it's coming again."

"Breathe. Come on, deep breaths and let me see."

It seemed no time at all until the baby's cry filled the room with joy. And Esther, tears running down her cheeks, held her tiny son to her breast.

"Someone tell the prince," she said shakily, and a plump woman wreathed in smiles waddled out of the room.

Since it was unbearably stuffy, Jen went across to the window, pulled back the shutters and let in some air. As she did so, music again assailed her ears – not

the jolly and lewd dancing songs she'd heard earlier, but sweet, soaring human voices, unaccompanied. Sacred music.

Bewildered, she gazed across the room at Esther, who raised her eyes from the baby and began to laugh. "It's midnight mass. It must be Christmas. Who'd have thought Drago's son would enter the world at such a holy time?"

The midwives tutted and exclaimed, while Jen poked her head out of the window to let the cold air blast her cheeks. The window looked on to a pleasant courtyard. The singing seemed to be drifting across from the building on the left. Even as she looked, a door burst open, the music grew louder and clearer and Drago stood in the doorway, confronting the plump woman.

Jen saw him stare at her. Then he turned away, fists clenched as if he was about to hit someone. Arturo stepped out beside him, hatless now, his black hair gleaming blue in the torchlight, and Drago seized him by the shoulders. Arturo held him for a moment, murmuring something in his ear. Over the prince's bent head, Arturo looked up at Jen's window, and her heart turned over. Like a teenager with a crush.

Hastily, she moved away from the window, back to Esther, who murmured, "Not exactly a virgin birth – but a miracle all the same. Coming here was supposed to make me barren."

Jen sank down on the bed. "Where is here, Esther?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

Jen gave her a twisted smile, waving one hand around the room to encompass the whole impossible situation. "Bring it on."

Esther drew in her breath. "This is the world, the dimension, if you like, of Margaret Marsden's book, *The Prince of Costanzo*."

So that's where she'd heard the name before... "Her lost novel?"

"I didn't know you paid any attention to my ramblings."

"I did. When they weren't to do with Kevin. Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I was a complete idiot about Kevin."

"And Drago...Drago makes you happy." It wasn't a question. The answer was already in Esther's face.

"Not like you and Richard," Esther admitted. "Less peaceful, but just as fun..." She broke off, picking up some inevitable change in Jen's expression. "Jenny?"

"Richard's dead," Jen said in a rush. "Hit by a drunk driver in the run up to last Christmas."

Esther's stricken gaze flew up from the feeding baby. "My God," she whispered. "Jenny..."

"Don't," Jen said quickly. "I know." There would be a time for facing the grief again, but she couldn't think of Richard here. Not when she could still feel Arturo's kiss tingling on her lips.

Esther closed her mouth. "How did you get here? Did the ring bring you all by itself?"

Jen gazed in bewilderment at the lapis-lazuli. "I don't know. I was in our old room at home – missing you, I suppose because it was Christmas Eve, and looking at my own reflection. Then I thought I heard you calling to me, terrified. And I wished so hard to be able to do something – and then I was in the wood out there. I thought I was dreaming."

Esther frowned, as if properly seeing her sister for the first time. "Jenny, have you got anything on under that cloak?"

"No," said Jen serenely. "I arrived in the scud, and he – Arturo - gave me this before I froze to death. Tell me about Arturo," she urged, as footsteps and voices sounded in the corridor outside.

"Arturo? He's Drago's greatest and loyalest friend. Always has been. He commands the armed forces and we both trust him with our lives. Literally. Jenny...?"

"Is he married?" Jen blurted.

Esther stared. "No. No one's ever held his attention long enough. Marriages are always political here and he avoids the complication."

The door burst open and Drago strode in, scattering women around him like a disturbed swarm of bees.

Jen stood up, but Esther caught the end of her cloak. "Jen, it doesn't last," she warned sadly. "You'll be sucked back to your own world. There's nothing to keep you here."

There's nothing to keep me there.

Appalled by the self-pity of that, Jen cast her sister a fleeting smile and made way for the proud father. At the door she turned and glanced back. It made a charming vignette: the child at his mother's breast, the father gazing down at him while his hand tangled in the mother's hair in love and gratitude.

Jen swallowed the lump in her throat and fled the room. How long did she have? A day? An hour? A few minutes? She'd done this thing for Esther, given her a little comfort in her hour of need, told her how to avoid infection, and now, now she wanted to grab at life's opportunity for herself, with both hands. For a day or an hour or however few minutes were left to her.

Arturo was *real*. And no one had ever moved her as he did. It didn't matter that it was pure lust – what else could it be in such a short acquaintance? Lust itself was an affirmation of life, and Jen suddenly wanted to *live*, not merely exist.

As she flew down the stone staircase, she could hear bells pealing – celebrating Christmas, perhaps, or the Prince's heir. Both, probably. Though oddly, the music and laughter had gone. She could hear occasional voices, but they were muted, distant.

Even the servants had gone from the great double doors of the banqueting hall. Jen paused outside them, her heart thundering. What would she say to him? What if he wasn't there? What if she was accosted by all those other randy, pissed blokes?

A choke, half-laughter, half impatience, caught in her throat. With unsteady hands, she pushed open one of the huge doors.

The room was silent. Half the lights had been extinguished or just burned out. Jugs and shining goblets and plates of leftover food remained on the tables, but the benches and chairs were empty.

Slowly, Jen walked across the rushes, touched the laurels wound around the pillar, leaned against it.

Why had she imagined he'd be here? He'd thought she was a gift from Drago in some bizarre game, and been ready to take his pleasure accordingly. It didn't mean he felt the powerful attraction she did. It didn't even mean he fancied her. There were better one-night stands available in this castle, she was sure.

A shadow moved, across at the ante-room door, stepped forward into the light, and Jen's heart leapt.

"Where's everyone gone?" she managed.

Arturo shrugged. He carried his powerful body with casual grace, forcing Jen to wonder how he made love with it, how he would feel in her arms, skin over skin, pushing inside her...

He said, "They went to mass and now the party's over. Till tomorrow night, obviously, when we'll have double celebrations. They tell me Esther is well."

Jen nodded. Arturo kept walking until he stood right in front of her. He was tall, his lean body invitingly hard. She began to tremble, to ache with the impossibility of asking for what she wanted.

Seize life, she told herself. *Live!*

Arturo said, "Tell me if I'm wrong, but...I don't need to apologise for this evening, do I?"

Dumbly, Jen shook her head. His eyes looked unnaturally dark, clouded by unfathomable storms that excited rather than frightened her.

He said, "I want to make love to you. I want it very badly."

She swallowed, letting the relief and gladness flood her. "So do I," she whispered.

Still he didn't touch her, but with enchanting, old-fashioned courtesy, he offered her his arm.

Arturo lived in two rooms at the back of the castle, close to but not part of his soldiers' barracks. They were a jumble of weapons and discarded clothes, a few beautiful velum-bound books among the disorder. In one window embrasure stood a carved wooden wolf in a style very similar to her father's.

"Drago made it," Arturo said, opening the door to the second room. Jen's heart beat and beat. Arturo waited for her. On trembling legs, she crossed the floor and entered his bedroom.

Though there had been no sign of a servant, a fire burned in the grate, casting warmth, flaring light and shadows across the room. Jen heard the clunk of his weapons as he removed his heavy sword belt and dropped it on the floor. Desperate to see him, to feel him, she was suddenly too afraid to look. Never in her life had she made love with a stranger. There had only ever been Richard.

The large bed on the raised dais took centre stage, occupying all her confused attention. Until he touched her.

Once again, she felt his fingers unfastening the cloak, and with wonder, she saw that he trembled too. Impulsively, she turned into his hand and kissed it.

His breath caught. Still fully dressed apart from the discarded belt, he drew the cloak from her shoulders slowly, exposing her completely. Her body burned, yet not from shame or fear, but from soaring arousal. His gaze lifted at last from her nakedness to her eyes. He raised one hand, closing it over her breast, and then, bending his head, he kissed her mouth.

The rhythm of his lips and his tongue matched the movement of his caressing hand.

Stranger or not, she wanted this with a strength that outweighed everything. Uttering a sound like a sob, she threw both arms around his neck and pressed into him, fighting for control of the kiss.

He wouldn't give it, though he seemed to enjoy the fight. Both hands on her bottom, he lifted her and she closed her legs around his waist. He strode with her to

the bed as if she weighed no more than Esther's baby, and laid her among the soft, cool pillows. They smelled of him: earth and spice and pure Arturo.

Lying between her legs, he began to kiss her right breast, teasing the nipple with his tongue before taking it fully into his mouth and sucking. It was fire. It was bliss. His hand palmed her other breast, teaching the nipple to beg for more.

Jen scrabbled at his back, trying to burrow beneath his complicated clothes to find his skin.

"Take them off," she begged. "Let me see you."

"There's no time. I have to have you now. Like this." His hand swept down over her thigh, sliding inward to find the hot, wet tenderness of her pussy. He groaned. "You're all I ever dreamed of. God, I could almost believe..." His hand thrust between their bodies, ripped at his clothing, and then, with a sigh, he relaxed on her once more. She felt the hard, hot head of his cock nudge her pussy, and from instinct thrust upward to find the pleasure she sought.

Arturo smiled, both hands in her hair, tangling, caressing. Watching her, he pushed his cock inside her, and when she moaned at the extraordinary feel of him, he pushed again.

She gasped out, "You must be huge. There's no room..."

"Yes there is. See?" He pushed again, finding the rare spot that gave exquisite pleasure.

"Oh God..."

He gave her no time to adjust, simply began to thrust in long, sure strokes. And when he saw how much she liked it, his rhythm grew quickly harder and faster. There was no way Jen could control her body. She didn't want to. She clung to him, writhing, surrendering to the galloping bliss as his fully clothed body brought her naked one toward wild completion. Nothing had ever been so sexy.

Only when he would have withdrawn at the last possible moment, did she hang onto him fiercely, squeezing his cock between her strong, vaginal muscles. "Stay!" she whispered. "Stay..." If there was a baby from this, she wanted it, hungrily. But even more than that she wanted Arturo inside her as he came.

And then she could neither think nor speak, only *feel* as orgasm tore her apart and he emptied his seed deep inside her.

It took a long time for the intensity to fade. At last, he eased his weight off her, though he kept his cock buried in her caressing warmth.

"That," he said breathlessly into her hair, "was the five minutes I meant to take in the ante room. I hope I didn't hurt you."

Enchanted by such care, Jen could only shake her head. He raised himself to look at her and, no doubt seeing her overt state of bliss, began to smile.

“Good. Because I’ve more for you.” He kissed her mouth with blatant sensuality.

“Will you take your clothes off this time?”

“Oh yes.”

They did it between them. Jen meant to hurry the process by helping, but in fact became distracted by the powerful muscles of his shoulders, a long scar on his hard, broad chest, the sinews of his forearms, and the way his skin rippled when he moved. While he removed his leggings, she kissed his golden back, following the flaring light cast from the fireplace. She caressed the undulating muscles, slid her hand downward and over his naked thigh to his long, thick cock.

Abruptly, he lay back in her arms and reached for her kiss. Then, he turned, pushing her back into the pillows and parting her thighs as he slid down her body.

“What are you doing?” she asked, almost afraid to hope.

“This,” said Arturo, and fastened his mouth to her lower lips.

Jen woke with joy in her heart. The memory of her long, wild night of love was with her instantly. She hadn’t believed you could fit so many orgasms into one night, even with a man as skilful and gorgeous as Arturo. The very memory stirred her again and she reached out for him.

And found air.

Opening her eyes she saw the pale light of day spill onto Esther’s old bed, onto her own single pillow.

The disappointment was like a grief, deep, paralysing.

Had all that really been a dream? Drago’s castle and Esther’s baby? And Arturo? Arturo who’d made her feel alive for the first time in over a year. Who’d seduced her so deliciously and made love to her over and over and over...

“Jen?” It was her mother, sticking her head in the bedroom door. “Merry Christmas, dear! Come down and we’ll open our presents before church.”

Trying to shake off her depression, her anger because it hadn’t been real, Jen forced a smile and climbed out of bed.

“Oops,” said her mother, hastily closing the door. “Forget your jammies again, dear?”

That brought a lop-sided smile to Jen’s lips. Still, she didn’t normally go to bed in the scud in midwinter. And she didn’t normally feel so achy between the legs. Or inside. She felt curiously raw. Almost as if...

As if she'd been fucking all night.

Catching her breath, she ran to the mirror and gazed at herself. Her lips looked red and swollen; there was a red blotch on one side of her neck where he'd bitten her delightfully in the dream...

"Not a dream!" she said fiercely. "Not!"

She'd simply come back, as Esther had warned her she would. She'd fallen asleep in Arturo's arms, his cock still warm inside her... Would he miss her when he woke? Would he say, "Damn that wasn't a bad night's fucking," and move on?

No one's ever held his attention...

So why should she? She was a lonely, needy widow and she'd just enjoyed a night of spectacular sex. Actually the best sex of her life. She had every reason to rejoice, and she mustn't, mustn't want more.

And yet...and yet there had been something about Arturo, something that clicked, something that made her want to know him more. Something she could have grown to love very easily.

"Crap. You had a great screw, a fabulous one-night stand. Get over it, Jen. You're not dead yet."

Finally dressed in the swinging wool skirt and loose cashmere sweater she'd brought for smartness, she brushed her hair out briskly, trying to concentrate on the reflection and not on intrusive memories from last night.

As she laid her brush down on the dressing table, something on the floor caught her eye. Bending down, she picked up the carved wolf that Esther had given their father. She'd been holding it when she fell into Esther's new world, must have dropped it. Arturo had one very similar.

"Drago made it," he'd said. He'd also said other things, later, amidst all the lovemaking. That Drago was a powerful sorcerer and that was how Esther was able to stay...

Slowly, she laid the wolf down on the dressing table but kept her hand on it. Perhaps if she wished hard enough, she'd go there again.

Perhaps it was only possible if Esther needed her.

She glanced at her other hand that still wore Esther's ring, and on impulse laid it over the wolf instead.

The world didn't rock or blur. Nothing happened at all. Except... Surely the wolf's eyes were blank wood, not painted amber?

Something like sparks seemed to shoot from them, causing Jen to fall back in sudden fear. But the wolf didn't explode or burst into flames. The shooting sparks became a stream of amber light, like energy pouring into the room, and as she stared

and stared, unable to move, the energy swirled and formed itself into the figure of a man.

Arturo, in black leggings and tunic, a sword and dagger clanking at his hips, gazed at her from blazing dark eyes.

“Well done, Drago,” he said softly. “It works.”

He opened his arms quite naturally. Jen fell into them and they closed about her like warm steel.

“Why are you here?” she whispered. “How? Will you have to go back? Will I? What...?”

“Sh-sh,” he soothed. “If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

Struck, though not sure she liked such a fatalistic approach, she stared up at him. He smiled. “Listen, it’s Christmas, the time of miracles. Your bells ring too.”

They did. It was time for church. And abruptly, Jen didn’t care about the future, only the astonishing, wonderful present. Happiness flooded her, because he was here, because she had a new chance, somehow, somewhere. Because she had *now*.

An armed-to-the-teeth Renaissance warrior and parents waiting to go to the local Christmas service. God, this would be fun. Joy spilled over, threatening laughter and tears.

Reaching up, she kissed Arturo’s firm, sexy mouth. “Arturo, would you like to go to church?”

His lips quirked in the humorous way she already adored. “I would love to go to church,” he said gravely, and once more offered her his arm.

Author Biography

Marie Treanor was born and bred in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she's back home and happily married with three young children.

Having grown bored with city life, her family lives in a picturesque village by the sea, where Marie is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy.

You can find out more about Marie's books on her website:

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