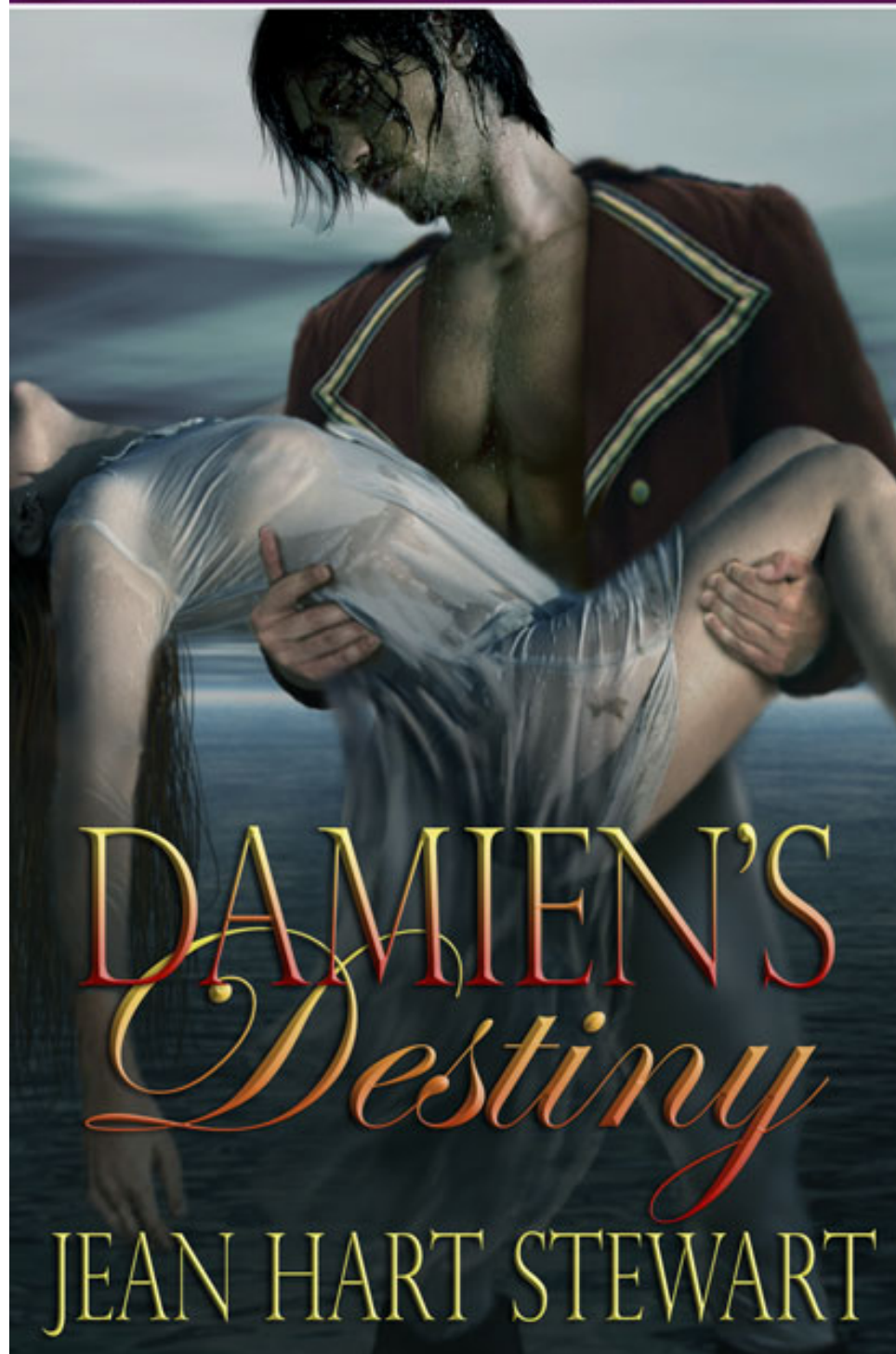


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Damien's Destiny

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# ***DAMIEN'S DESTINY***

**Jean Hart Stewart**

### *Dedication*

To fans, friends and family, and the happy confluence when all three are one.

Especially to Dianna Asmussen, who named this book, to my editing husband and my editor in chief, Helen.

### *Author Note*

Mage, synonyms from Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus:

Magician, charmer, conjurer, enchanter, magian, magus, necromancer, sorcerer, warlock, wizard.

## Chapter One

Damien, the Earl of Sinclair, had always known he was a mage. A wizard, an enchanter when he chose. He'd never harbored a doubt. His parents had laughed and recognized him as his father's true son when they found him chortling in his crib, rearranging colors from the spectrum in the air. He still found it relaxing to form the colors of light into beautiful patterns. He enjoyed his sorcerer's power, although he seldom resorted to magic. Never to black magic. He occasionally bewitched someone but only if necessary. Mostly his powers were not needed. A strong man in his own right, he relied heavily on himself. His father had been just as powerful. The blood of Merlin and the Lady of the Lake ran strongly through the veins of his ancestors and in him.

And he never forgot that with his powers came the deep-rooted obligation of responsibility. In no way would he ever use his powers just to prove himself, or to harm anyone. His abilities were a blessing, a gift and at times a curse. Sometimes he'd really rather not see the future.

At this moment his powers certainly didn't make a stone softer. Damien shifted a little, trying to find an easier location on the hard rock he'd chosen to lean against. He grinned at the thought of changing this huge boulder into a bale of cotton. No matter, he was sitting in the shade and positioned so he could watch the ocean. The sound and the pattern of the ever-surging waves always fascinated him. Gulls swayed and swooped close to the rocky shore seeking a little nourishment in the shallow water, hovering nearer to the surface than the few lapwings higher overhead. His stallion, Araby, munched on some tufts of dried beach grass sticking up through the scree. A dragonfly fluttered around his rump and Araby tried to flick it away with his tail. Damien sent the persistent fly a small command to switch to another location and as it fluttered away Araby settled down. His horse seemed contented but his own hay might be tastier. Damien looked toward the horizon, where the sea met the sky and a small boat completed the perfect view. A beautiful day and one likely to remain scorching hot.

Still, he'd better get Araby home to proper food and some true shade for them both.

Just as he started to rise he noticed a girl walk into his view from around the craggy prominence to the west. Her long skirts touched the sand as she hesitated at the shoreline where the white-crested waves were crashing after each other. She was coming far too close to the water and her slippers must be drenched.

Then she unexpectedly walked straight into the ocean.

Didn't the little fool realize this beautiful stretch of beach could be treacherous? Maybe not since she'd invaded on his private property. His very private property.

She marched as if on parade, her chin high. Her long skirts were soon soaked and doubtless dragging on her. He jumped to his feet to run toward her, shouting as he ran.

"Turn back, miss. Turn back at once. This water is treacherous."

She either didn't hear him over the roar of the ocean or chose not to. If she kept on she'd soon be in very deep water. Just as he reached the edge of the ocean a larger than usual wave swept her off her feet and she sank under. The top of her head surfaced for a moment and then disappeared. Damien gave one horrified bellow and then strode into the sea as fast as he could.

Damien took a few steps into the churning water and then started swimming. His powerful strokes soon propelled him to the spot where he thought she'd been swept under. Merlin's power, he couldn't see her at all. The water grew deeper as the tide came relentlessly in. He dived, searching frantically, coming up for air once and then diving again.

This time he spotted her, sinking slowly, her hair loose and floating around her like a silken cloak. Swimming underwater to her, he turned her on her back and surfaced. He also flipped onto his back, holding her to him in the classic way of rescuing someone from drowning. Perhaps he should just cast a spell and wish them both ashore? No, a spell involving transporting two bodies sometimes weakened both parties and this girl was already exhausted. He trod water holding her against his chest, thinking frantically how best to swim to shore and carry her at the same time. He could certainly use the backstroke and easily tow her but he feared the undercurrent might be too strong to make much headway in this restrictive position. She seemed to be barely breathing and he needed to get her to shore at once. His overhand crawl was more powerful and he realized quickly conveying her to safety could be of prime importance. Finally he flipped her over again and then grabbed handfuls of her long thick hair and tied them under his chin. For better security he gathered her skirts in his hands and knotted them around his waist. Now with her loosely but firmly secured to his back he breathed a prayer to Merlin and started swimming to shore.

She did not fight him. The fact she lay so limply against him allowed him to use his considerable swimming prowess and still fight the dreaded undertow. He reached the shore more quickly than he'd expected.

As soon as he found shallow water he stood and turned her body in his arms to carry her. Her damp hair clung around his neck and he tugged harder than he would have liked to work the long tresses free. She didn't seem to feel the sharp jerks but then she lay white and scarcely breathing. When Damien reached the beach he turned her on her stomach and pumped her back with a closed fist, forcing the water she'd swallowed to spew forth.

She still didn't move.

He patted her pale face.

"Can you hear me, my dear? I'm here to help you."

Her head lolled and she said nothing. Merciful Merlin but she looked young and innocent.

Poor child. He could feel the cold emanating from her almost lifeless body as he lifted her in his muscled arms and whistled to Araby, who obediently trotted to his master. Damien's wet coat would do little to warm the girl so he placed her face down in front of his saddle, leaving her uncovered to the sun. He vaulted onto his horse and began the climb up the steep bank to his home, holding her steady with one big hand. He tried to send his own heat through that connection but wasn't sure how much warmth penetrated her chilled body. Araby made his way home with little guidance from his master, which didn't surprise Damien. Araby was a prince among horses.

As they neared the mansion Damien smiled wryly at the thought of how his staff would be riddled with curiosity. It had been a long time since any female other than his servants and his sister was admitted to his sequestered house. This girl looked even younger than he'd expected when she strode with such determination into the water. She in no way tempted him beyond wanting to rescue her. He'd see she was warm and dry and then ask her a few necessary questions. After she'd given him some answers he'd induce sleep so she'd find a much needed rest.

When she awakened he'd want to know why she'd put her life in such mortal jeopardy.

She was just a child, for mercy's sake. What could have driven her so desperately to such an extreme act as actually trying to end her life? He was fairly certain she'd acted deliberately. She'd marched into the water like a soldier going to battle.

He vowed to help her somehow with whatever problems distressed her. She was much too young to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Damien carried her inert body into one of the seldom used guest rooms. Servants came rushing to help but he shook his head and kept on striding with the pallid child in his arms.

"Open the door to the blue room, Stephens. It's the closest."

His butler rushed to obey and Damien laid her gently on the big bed. Thank heavens for excellent servants. He couldn't remember when this room was last used but as Stephens turned back the quilt the sheets smelled sweet and fresh.

"Where is my sister, Stephens?"

"She's in the garden, my lord." Stephens looked almost as white as the girl. Doubtless he worried about dealing with a corpse.

"Find her and fetch her, please. I don't want anyone else here but Lady Debora."

As Stephens hurried off Damien stood looking at the girl for just a second, frowning at the violent way she shivered inside her sodden clothes. Well, he'd just have to get her out of them. He gently slid off her sodden slippers—of excellent quality but torn in

places by the rocky stones. Running his fingers over the deep scratches on the bottom of her feet, he automatically healed them. She must have walked a long way indeed for the slippers to be worn so thin.

He turned her onto her stomach and saw the buttons too wet to undo easily. Besides, he didn't want to wrench her arms trying to pull them out of the sopping dress. There was only one easy way for both of them. Shutting his eyes briefly, he wished her clothes from her body and beside the bed. As every stitch fell to the floor he moved to cover her with a blanket.

He stared for a second or two at her narrow waist and softly curved hips. Her breasts were small but sweetly rounded. She might be a trifle older than the twelve or thirteen he'd first estimated. He folded back the sheets, laying her nude body on the bed. Her unexpectedly beautiful body. He went to the closet to find some extra blankets.

She still shook and shivered as she began to thrash her wet head from side to side. Fetching a towel from the wardrobe he dried her hair and reached for a fresh pillow, then sat on the edge of the bed. He lightly fingered her hair, a dull golden shade and he suspected a glowing color when completely dry. She suddenly sat up, her deep blue eyes open and staring blankly.

"Don't let him find me. Please don't let him find me. He laughed and said I'd learn to like those horrible kisses. That ugly thing he stuck in me hurt so. He said he'd take me every night. I'd rather be dead. Don't let him find me!"

She tried to rise from the bed, in her delirium wanting only escape. Damien looked at her thoughtfully and then tucked her in again and added the two blankets on top. He also added a small quieting thought.

He sat for a while, thinking furiously. Could he be mistaken? Or could some villain have actually raped this child? There seemed little to mistake about her pitiful comments. May the fires of hell consume the bastard who would forcibly take any female's virginity, especially a youngster like this. Yet if she woke and saw him in his natural state his dark hair and virility might frighten her. His very youth might threaten this poor abused girl.

He'd adopt his Merlin persona, the one where he appeared as a bearded old man. Not the long beard though. He couldn't stand so much hair dragging at his chin. It would be enough to have a white beard clipped fairly short. Still he'd look much older when she next saw him.

Then he went to the door to await his sister. Seeing some maids standing in the hall and staring, Damien curtly dismissed them.

"Lady Debora will call you if she needs you."

He left the room even as he admitted his sister. Better Debby take over sitting with this innocent until she fully awakened.

A female would definitely be less alarming to this maltreated youngster when she opened her eyes.



\* \* \* \* \*

Debora Townsend sat appalled as she listened to the dreadful mutterings. Only once did she interrupt when she asked the girl her name. Her charge was not fully conscious but she answered Debby's soft question.

"Toria. That's what my parents always called me. They'd be so ashamed of me now. That monster calls me Victoria."

She gave one anguished sob. There was a short silence and then Toria thrashed herself against the bed, half-rising and then sinking back.

"I hate him, I hate him. I wish I'd had a knife. I could have stopped him."

And then later she muttered so low Debora strained to hear her. "He's going to take me and hurt me like that every night. He said he would. What can I do? I have no place to go."

Her cultured voice left Debby with no doubt she'd been raised a lady. A very young lady but still one well-bred.

She soothed the girl as best she could and going to the door, called for a servant to fetch her brother.

As soon as Damien appeared she turned to him, tears filling her eyes.

"She's not really resting, Damien. Can you help her a little more?"

"Yes, of course but I wanted you to hear her yourself. I don't want to be mistaken."

Damien nodded and went to the bedside. Soon Toria laid quietly, this time sound asleep.

Debby snorted. "Hard to mistake her pathetic comments. Her name is Toria. She prefers the shortened version to Victoria. Of course she's been sexually assaulted. We cannot send her to her home when she recovers."

Damien nodded his head. "I agree. But I wanted to be sure. It's such a horrid deed to suspect. Her name is a great help. I'll institute inquiries immediately. It's probably her guardian or relative who has abused her. And I have no intention of sending her back. I need to know more and especially the name of the brute who's responsible. I'd guess she's from somewhere fairly close to us, since she walked to the beach."

He wheeled and left the room. Young Toria would not be leaving until he discovered how much danger she was in and how to protect her. And who in hell's own blazes had been such a bastard as to rape this young child. This beautiful but young child.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toria slept for twenty-four hours while Debby helped keep watch over the girl. Slumber was a much needed respite for her mind and body and Damien saw that she had it.

Damien sat by her bedside as she awakened. An older Damien in his quasi-Merlin guise.

She sat straight up in bed and Damien moved quickly to adjust her pillows so she'd be more comfortable. He'd been right. Her hair fell around her face, the shade of newly mown wheat gleaming in the sunlight. Or of honey fresh from the hive. Debora had bathed her last night and now she smelled sweetly of Debby's floral soap plus her own distinctive scent. Like the beautiful flower she was.

He no longer appeared as the true Damien who'd rescued her. He seemed a much older man who he hoped would not frighten her. With a neatly clipped white beard, but otherwise looking as much as he could manage to match the pictures he'd seen of Merlin.

"Who are you, sir? And where am I?"

Her questioning eyes were candid, although her voice wavered.

Her peace of mind justified his small twisting of the truth.

"My grandson, who has now gone back to his own home, brought you here to Tregaron. You are perfectly safe here, my child. My name is Damien Townsend. I'm the Earl of Sinclair. I'm eminently respectable and want only to be of assistance. I think you're in a bit of trouble and I'd like to help if you'd let me."

She bristled. "I'm not a child. I'm fifteen."

Then her face crumpled as she evidently remembered what had sent her flying to the ocean.

She rallied her defenses, conquering her shaking and raising her chin. Damien mentally saluted her pride and fortitude.

"And the kind lady who took care of me? Was she the one who undressed me and has been sitting by my bedside?"

Damien again blessed her for framing the question so he could answer honestly.

"Certainly the Lady Debora has been with you a great deal. She is much concerned about your welfare."

Toria colored and lowered her lids before she looked up again with her blue, blue eyes. The color of the deepest summer sky. Although they shaded to a darker blue-purple when she fought distress, as she did now.

"I think I've been unconscious for some time. Tell me," she said, seeming to choke on the words. "Tell me, did I babble a lot of nonsense?"

Damien folded his hands in his lap as he considered how to answer her. Her anxiety bothered him but certainly he couldn't tell her she'd plainly revealed she'd been raped.

"Not really nonsense, I think. Just enough to know you fear someone. I'd guess it's your guardian and you do not want to be returned to him."

She reached one hand to him, then gasped and drew back.

"Oh no, please don't let him know where I am. I do fear him greatly."

Her voice shook even as her eyes pleaded with him.

Damien regarded her gravely. "I have little knowledge of the neighborhood but know there is only one single man anywhere nearby. I don't think you'd be so fearful of a man with a family. I believe your guardian is Baron Heath. Can you tell me how he came to be appointed your guardian? From all reports he's a most unsavory character."

Toria shuddered. "He is indeed. But when he and my father were young they were friends at Eton. My father appointed him as my guardian long ago, I think before Father knew how the baron turned out. If he'd realized I'm sure he would have changed his will."

"And your parents?"

Toria's extraordinary eyes clouded. "They were both killed three years ago in a carriage accident. I've lived at the baron's manor house ever since. At first he was very kind to me."

She blushed furiously and looked down, no longer meeting his gaze.

Damien shuttered his eyes. So the bastard kept her secluded at his estate, watching her grow into a delectable woman and biding his time. She'd doubtless been beautiful, even as a child. And then he pounced on her before she was fully an adult. Fifteen, she'd said? Her air of innocence made her seem younger, making Damien even more furious her purity was so violated.

He'd like to wrap his hands around the villain's neck. Before he choked him he'd make him pay a little for such a sin. Although no villain could ever pay for what this one had done.

"Get some more sleep, my dear. Do not worry. You'll not see him again. Trust me in this."

She looked at him, her eyes seeming to pierce through to his heart. Then she smiled and closed her eyes.

Damien sat watching her for a while, until he saw she'd fallen asleep again. Although Damien hadn't yet figured out what to do with the girl, he'd definitely protect her from the perverted baron.

Now he'd better consult again with Debby. And he wanted to find out much more about Baron Heath. Information should be found fairly easily, since he was already known as an unsavory character in the neighborhood.

Somebody would always talk about a man so disliked. He'd ask Jason to find out as much as he could. For reasons he didn't bother to analyze, he already suspected this beautiful girl was destined to be important to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jason, Damien's trusted secretary as well as estate manager and close friend, stood with his hands slightly twisting. Damien raised his brows at this uncharacteristic departure from his usually impassive exterior. Jason rarely showed undue emotion.

Jason helped Damien here at Tregaron, as well as managing Damien's other four estates almost single-handedly. Damien loved Tregaron too much to be apart from it for long. Since he'd found Jason to depend on he could keep his visits to the others at a minimum, although he did not neglect them.

"He's a monster, Damien. He's Oscar Wesley, Baron Heath. The worst kind of brute. The whisper in the village is he's taken girls to be servants at his home and they've never been seen again. Others of his servants report a collection of whips and canes in his rooms. They also describe hearing muffled screams from his latest chosen victim. How Miss Victoria has escaped his attentions until now is amazing. He's hated in the village. Most villagers are afraid to talk about him. Actually, I spent some of your gold today to get them talking. He is, however, her legal guardian until she's eighteen."

"And her full name?"

"Victoria Julia Carlisle. The Honorable Miss Carlisle. Her father was a viscount."

"Blazing hell," Damien muttered. "Then we must hide her for three years. I need to think about this. Thank you, Jason. You never disappoint me, my valued friend."

Jason turned back before he left the room.

"I should add his property is not adjacent to Tregaron but is one over to the west. There's a small village further west of his place. The piece of land you tried to buy once lies between your properties. The baron's holding is not extensive but it does run to a small cliff with an almost easy path to the ocean. The girl is an expert swimmer as well as rider. Her horse is named Minerva."

Damien again nodded his thanks. So Miss Victoria must have clambered down the cliff and walked a good five miles along the beach before she committed herself to die in the ocean. It must have been hard for her not to try to save herself if she was a good swimmer. Poor child. Yet how could she remain unaware of what went on in that manor house?

Perhaps she even suspected some of it but felt powerless. And then she might have been so naïve she'd not known anything beyond a vague disquiet of lurking evil. And perhaps Heath was smart enough to pursue his wicked activities when she went out riding or swimming, or late at night when she slept the sleep of an innocent. Jason reported her gone from the house as much as possible in the daytime. Toria must be important to the baron for her to spare her for as long as he had. Nor did Damien make the mistake of thinking the baron intended just a short conquest.

And the other girls were never seen again. This would definitely bear investigation.

For the first time Damien regretted his habit of isolation. He should have known all this sooner. He'd send word to the War Ministry immediately and find out what they knew about Heath.

But first, he must see Miss Victoria Carlisle safely hidden for three years.

Definitely his sister was the person to consult again.

\* \* \* \* \*

While Toria grew stronger Debby did her research and finally suggested a private girls' school well to the north of Damien's estate. Damien visited there the next day, still in his older-man disguise.

Damien found himself well-pleased with the headmistress, a Miss Carpenter, who received him graciously.

She inclined her head in an almost regal manner.

"We'd be pleased to accept your ward, my lord, as soon as we can. Unfortunately we have no openings at the present time."

Damien gave her his most alluring smile. Since Miss Carpenter was nearing the age he pretended to be, she'd responded more amiably than she might have to a younger man. Funny how being older made one seem less dangerous. Not really true but he didn't intend to pursue that thought.

Damien took his time answering. He wanted very much to persuade this woman to take Toria immediately. Debby insisted this school was the right place for her.

"Miss Victoria is only fifteen. I would want her to be here for three years, until she reaches her majority. I would visit her monthly and would look forward to seeing you both, Miss Carpenter. I would also want her to spend vacation time between terms here and am willing to pay generously for any added benefit. Victoria is a naïve young girl and one I've quite recently assumed as my responsibility. She will need extra protection and your special brand of shall we say, friendship? I'm prepared to make worth your while."

Damien's smile always charmed women no matter what age he assumed. Certainly Miss Carpenter stood no chance as she looked into compelling gray eyes. Eyes that were mesmerizing even when he wasn't trying to be impressive.

Damien smoothly continued, his voice flowing over her like the touch of finest silk.

"I would want her to have additional educational opportunities during your term breaks, when she must stay with you. I would like a companion, an irreproachable companion, to take her to educational places she's never before had the chance to visit. She is young and has been kept secluded for too long. London, certainly, with the museums and magnificent buildings. Perhaps London will be worth more than one visit. Perhaps Bath. Certainly the magnificent Lake District. While I'll leave the exact schedule to you, I expect to be kept informed at all times. I will, of course, finance whatever extra costs are incurred. Including an allowance for her personal spending."

Miss Carpenter caught her breath. "This is most irregular, my lord."

"But not impossible?"

Miss Carpenter positively stammered. "No, no, my lord. We can certainly fulfill your wishes. Under these unusual circumstances I'm certain we can find a place for Miss Victoria and educate her as you desire."

Damien smiled his most winning smile.

"Thank you, Miss Carpenter. She is important to me. As I say I shall visit monthly. The reports and the bills will come to me, of course. I will from time to time add suggestions to her curricula."

The look Miss Carpenter gave him was almost adoring.

"Certainly, my lord. Bring the girl to us as soon as you wish. We will make room for her and will look forward to your visits."

Damien bowed low and kissed her hand.

"I am in your debt, Miss Carpenter."

He had the grace to keep his smile well hidden, as he wheeled and walked to his carriage.

## Chapter Two

Damien made certain he visited Miss Carpenter's School for Young Ladies during the first week of every month. Each time he requested to walk with his ward and when he held out his arm Victoria put her hand hesitantly on it. At first he knew she could hardly bear to touch him and so he strove to appear his most courtly, older self. By the tenth month she seemed to welcome his visits and their walks and put her hand on his arm without hesitation.

She blossomed into more and more of a beauty, a long-legged girl who'd grown at least three inches in the last year. She was now rather tall for a female but definitely not too tall. Not in Damien's opinion. She greeted him without fear when he visited and told him little tales of her daily life. The feeling of security she felt by being sequestered with women allowed her to flower. As her feeling of safety with him increased she conversed more and more readily.

On her sixteenth birthday he brought her a small string of perfectly matched pearls. An expensive necklace but still one deemed acceptable by society. She probably had no idea of the cost and he was pleased to see her wear it at every visit and finger it lovingly.

He also resolved it neared time for his grandfather persona to disappear. Accordingly on the next visit he presented himself as Damien, the imposing and virile man. He wanted to give her plenty of time to become used to his actual presence before he brought her home to Tregaron.

He knew she'd be stunned when she heard the new Earl of Sinclair waited in the private parlor. She hurried to meet him.

She recoiled at the handsome young man before, a really rather magnificent man. He towered at least six inches taller than the old earl and so she must look up at him. Light eyes met hers squarely, eyes of an astonishing clarity. Eyes showing a penetrating intelligence. Dark brown hair, so deep a color as to be almost black. He wore his hair long, in an old-fashioned style with the abundant mass flowing over his immaculate collar for almost an inch. He mesmerized her with his vibrant magnificence and he frightened her. He was young, certainly not as old as she'd prefer.

Blatantly male and powerful. And therefore dangerous.

She began to shake and found she could not stop. Still she managed a curtsy and then rose as he gave her a hand to lift her. She flinched at his touch and he raised her and immediately stepped back.

Damien detested bullies who used their powers to control others. He would not use his magical abilities in any way with Toria. He'd known for some time he wanted her but he wanted a willing Toria, not a bewitched Toria.

"You are wondering about my grandfather, Miss Victoria. He still lives. But he is tired of his earl's duties and has gone to one of his more remote estates. He passed the title and the responsibilities to me."

Damien had decided before appearing in his own form he didn't want to kill off the old gent whose persona he might again find handy and so the planned explanation came easily to his tongue.

Toria accepted the lie easily enough, although Damien knew if she were more worldly she'd know what he just stated was almost impossible. An earl couldn't pass on his title that simply. Not without dying himself.

He concentrated on making Toria accept him as harmless. A little fib or so didn't matter. This girl was proving ever more important to him.

"My grandfather told me you usually walked together a short while and you told him of your activities during the last month. Would you consider a short walk with me? You do not know me yet, so we should be proper and stay within sight of a chaperone at all times. I see Miss Carpenter is on the patio. We could walk on the lawn just below if it pleases you."

Her hesitation this time seemed less marked.

"Yes, my lord." She took an obvious deep breath, stretching her gown over her chest so that Damien forced himself to avert his eyes. She was growing up so fast and so delectably. Damien heard her voice as if she were speaking under water and he jerked himself back to attention and out of his sexual near-haze.

"If you are like your grandfather, my lord, you want to hear how the last month has been for me."

Her voice showed a little more confidence in him and Damien rejoiced.

"You are correct," Damien said quietly. "And I will of course report to my grandfather. He has taken your education much to heart. I trust you are still enjoying yourself here?"

"Oh yes, my lord. Everyone is quite kind to me."

Expert at reading a person's hidden thoughts, Damien said nothing. He didn't usually intrude unless invited but Toria had something on her mind and he thought he'd better wait. She'd soon utter her concern.

"You must be the one Lord Sinclair mentioned. The grandson who rescued me from the ocean."

Damien hadn't expected this.

*But I should have. Certainly her teachers think she's brilliant. I don't want to frighten her but I can't lie to her on anything this important.*

"Yes. I was on the beach giving my horse a rest when I happened to spot you in the water. The undertow was particularly vicious that day. I put you on my horse and Araby carried us both to the house and I gave you over to the care of my sister."

All true. Just not the whole truth.



"Oh," Toria looked down at the grass. "And did I mention why I was foolish enough to swim in such conditions?"

Again, an easy question. "I assumed you didn't realize how powerful the undertow could be at that location."

Again the truth. The undertow at his portion of the beach sometimes ran unusually strong. Not that she would have cared at the time if she'd known. She'd probably have welcomed being swept away into the vastness of the ocean.

"Oh," she said again.

She paused awhile and then seemed to get herself under control.

"You can tell the older earl I'm still very happy here. I'm giving the younger girls swimming lessons."

She took his arm as they turned and walked back on the patio, while Miss Carpenter stayed within sight as he'd requested. They strolled slowly, Toria's hand the merest touch on his sleeve. Still she grew more at ease and soon answered his questions and laughed with him over some of the pranks of the younger students.

He could scarcely resist covering her small hand with his large one. Toria grew more adorable every time he saw her. He groaned inwardly.

She'd be firmly entrenched in his heart by the time she was eighteen. After all, she'd entered it from the moment he'd rescued her. His enchantment grew stronger with each visit. There were almost two more years before he could claim her. If she'd allow him to do so even then.

What in Merlin's magic had he done to himself?

He knew it would take all the patience he could summon to overcome her deeply rooted dread of any male. The intimacies he so craved from her might haunt her throughout any marriage she made. If indeed he could persuade her to marry him. It would take all his strength to make her forget her horrible experience with her thrice-damned guardian.

But not his mage's powers. He'd never use them with Toria.

A daunting task indeed.

When he was a child and experimenting he cast spells just for the pleasure of his power but his father took him aside for a little demonstration. Turning him into a small girl for a few minutes scared Damien almost out of his shoes. He quickly absorbed his father's message that one didn't casually use a rare gift without thought and consideration.

He wouldn't charm Toria, not the love destined just for him. But when she turned eighteen, he'd finally be free to seek revenge from the scum who had taken her innocence. Before then he couldn't take a chance of revealing her whereabouts, although he longed to wrap his hands around the bastard's neck. As he definitely planned to do as soon as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

On her seventeenth birthday Damien presented Toria with a riding habit fashioned of blue velvet in a shade slightly darker than her glorious eyes. Black frogs decorated the buttons down the front and he'd made allowances for her developing figure.

Her face lit up before it darkened.

"But my lord, I no longer have a horse."

"Damien," he corrected gently. "I know, Toria but when you are eighteen I plan to take you to my sister. There you will have plenty of chances to ride."

She raised her candid glance to his. Her eyes resembled a blue-purple pansy, the same color except her color shone beautifully clear and shining. At least in his besotted imagination.

"Haven't I told you Debora is quite looking forward to having your company? And please examine the skirt. It's not immediately apparent but I think you'll like the fact the material is cleverly split. You can ride on a regular saddle at our estate, which I think you might enjoy."

Again her expressive features lit. "I'll be happy to visit you and your sister for a short while although I must find an occupation. I mean to pay your grandfather back for the huge amount he must be spending on me. I have some money in a trust fund, I think but I don't know how to claim it."

It was far too early to tell her Damien knew and was already making plans to claim her inheritance for her.

"Don't fret, my dear. I badly need a secretary if you'd consent to assist me for a while. And then we'll see about your claim. My lawyer can do a little investigating. Do you like your new riding habit?"

She accepted the change of topic, although she looked dubious for a moment, probably about accepting more help.

"Oh, I love the color and the style," she said. "Will you please take it home to your sister to keep for me? I might have a hard time explaining the divided skirt to Miss Carpenter although I used to hike up my skirts and ride bareback all the time. When I was much younger, of course."

Again her face clouded and Damien merely said, "Did you really, now? How fortuitous you like to ride freely. Debby can't stand a sidesaddle and will be happy to keep your habit for you. The present is from both of us, of course."

"I'd like to keep the black combs though. I feel so childish with these stupid braids hanging down my back. Now I can at least pin them on top of my head. Please thank your sister for me."

He nodded and didn't mention he knew what she'd just confided about her riding as well as much more about her. He certainly didn't want to frighten her with awareness of his powers. Not at this early stage of their relationship. He'd rather see her

lovely hair hanging free. He didn't say that either. He simply admired her beauty in silence, his face and his demeanor showing no hint of his secret thoughts and wishes.

"My sister will be happy you liked the combs. I'm sure she'd like to send some others in different colors on my next visit."

Toria beamed and started to protest but then stopped. Evidently other combs were much desired. They'd be little trouble. He'd like to give her so much more but didn't dare.

Glad he'd cleared any possible objection to such an unusual present as the outfit, he turned the conversation to her recent studies, which now included mathematics. Damien had yet to tell her he wrote scientific papers. His latest research helped further the knowledge of how men could fly in an electric-motored plane. He'd exposed his calculations to no one as yet but they were well along and in actuality he needed someone to transcribe his mass of notes. He'd tell her when the time seemed right and hope she'd enjoy the work and not think him as just a dreamer.

Placing her small hand on his sleeve once again, he took the package from her and, tucking it easily under his other arm, started their strolling again.

At seventeen Toria was already a raving beauty. He almost dreaded how lovely she would be when she finally turned eighteen.

He would certainly be at her side on that day and take her to what she didn't yet realize would be her future home. And when he'd installed her safely there he'd see about the scum of a guardian. Although he wouldn't be surprised if Baron Heath soon discovered where Toria was, as Damien had no intention of keeping her presence at Tregaron a secret.

He definitely wanted to lure the bastard out of his hole.

\* \* \* \* \*

The school celebrated Toria's eighteenth birthday with a party and a huge cake. Damien thought every student must be in attendance. Evidently Toria had made good friends there and her goodbyes took a long time. Many of the younger students dashed tears from their eyes. Damien stood by watching with pride, surprised by the depth of the emotion, although he shouldn't be. Toria was so very lovable. Even the reserved Miss Carpenter seemed sorry to see her leave. He detected a genuine emotion there, not just the loss of income and he flashed her a smile that almost made the poor woman stutter in her goodbyes.

Damien waited patiently, until Victoria finally turned away. He'd already directed her bag to be put in his carriage. She brought few dresses with her, just the ones she'd worn on her last quarterly outing. Her braided hair was twined on top of her head and secured with the three jet combs he'd given her with her riding outfit. He suspected her lovely figure, now fully in bloom, rendered her uniforms and older clothes unwearable. She'd definitely developed a gorgeous bosom, something he both applauded and regretted. Her lush body made it harder for him to conceal his emotions. He already

longed to touch her every minute and those lovely swells above her narrow waist taxed his reserve.

Well, hell, and he was taking her to live with him? He must be insane.

He took her home to Tregaron.

He hid his delight as he escorted her into the mansion he loved, where Debora waited with open arms. Toria's awestruck reaction to Tregaron's beauty proved to be everything he'd hoped. She'd really seen little before, just the rooms she'd chosen to keep to. Tregaron had always been the estate he held closest to his heart. The four others were well enough but Tregaron was forever the property he treasured.

He reintroduced her to the most important of his staff, Jason, of course and his butler and major-domo, Stephens. This time as an honored guest, not a half-drowned waif. Then he let Debby take her upstairs to a lovely suite of rooms, where her new maid Missy drew her bath and then tucked her into a feather-downed bed.

Damien saw she was almost speechless with fatigue and new sensations. He was not displeased. She'd made no objection to her destination, although certainly Tregaron's impressive beauty must have almost overwhelmed her with its scope and the reality of the change in her life.

She appeared the next morning as he sat with his coffee and the morning paper.

As he jumped to his feet, he saw she looked freshly rested and completely adorable. Her hair was loosely tied behind her back with one of the many wide ribbons he'd left with Missy and she wore one of the dresses he'd sketched and had made for her. All in shades of blue and green that brought out the radiant color of her eyes.

"My lord," she began before he interrupted her.

"Toria, could you please abandon this detestable lordship business? You know me as Damien, my dear. You've known me now for some time. Please call me by my name. I'd be much obliged if you would."

She nodded and then sat at the table.

As she started to thank him for the clothes he interrupted her. "As I said, you can pay me later when you obtain your funds. For now it's Debby's and my pleasure to provide these dresses to tide you over."

She nodded again, seeming doubtful until she saw the food.

"Oh, this all looks so good. Carpenter School always provided plenty of food but not nearly this appealing."

Damien beamed. "Have whatever you want. Debora sees that we have an excellent cook. May I serve you?"

Toria shook her head. "Oh no, thank you. I want to take my time and think about all this bounty. I might sample it a little at a time."

Damien watched as she did just that, taking first some eggs and bacon, then some toast, then more eggs and finally a large serving of strawberries.

He poured coffee for her and sat back watching her enjoy her food. When she finally sighed and put her spoon and fork down he smiled. He loved to see a woman enjoy her food. So many picked at it, thinking such restraint showed their delicacy. He'd no use for false mannerisms. He'd always wondered if those hypocrites had food sent secretly to their rooms.

He stood and took the back of her chair, ready to assist her as she rose.

"Shall we go riding, my lady? Debby has kept your habit for you and unless I'm mistaken it's now in your room. And I have a mare you might like. She's presently named Dolly and I hope you'll love her. If you wish to change her name you may."

Toria jumped up, eager to try out her new mount.

"Oh, my lord Damien. How absolutely wonderful. Give me five minutes to change into my lovely new riding habit." She dimpled into a smile. "I noticed new riding boots exactly my size are in my closet. You and your sister are too generous by far."

After a surprisingly short time she skipped down the steps, her look of anticipation making her even more beautiful. Glowing with pleasure when the groom let Dolly out, she let out a delighted gasp. Toria approached the horse with wonder. The young mare, eager to be friends, nuzzled her nose into Toria's palm when she stroked her.

"She's perfect, my lord. How can I ever thank you?"

Damien beamed and helped her mount.

"No thanks are necessary, Toria. My stables are large but you should have your own horse while at Tregaron. I'm pleased you like her."

He didn't tell her he and Jason searched for weeks to find Dolly, a beautiful mare with just the right amount of spirit for a practiced rider.

Damien and Toria rode daily. Toria fell in love instantly with the mare. Nor did he ever tell her he'd bought Dolly especially for her. He simply luxuriated in her pleasure. Exuberant with her freedom and looking like an angel but one who could ride more like a demon, Toria and the black-coated Dolly made a striking pair. Dolly proved to be a well-behaved mare of sweet disposition and perfect manners and the two together were a beautiful sight.

"She's such a love." Toria sighed. "I once had a horse named Minerva who much resembled Dolly."

Damien didn't mention he already knew of Minerva and that Dolly's color was no accident. Yet he'd seen no way to purchase her old horse without raising suspicion, although he'd wanted to. Dolly would hopefully soon take Minerva's place in Toria's heart.

Damien quickly learned Toria could keep up with him in riding ability, although Dolly was not quite as fast as Araby. There was no need for a formal riding hat in the country and Toria usually wore her luxuriant hair simply tied with a ribbon. Damien liked it best when the ribbon loosened and her hair streamed behind her. The two explored the entire estate, with Toria content to stay with him on the property. Damien

believed in taking no chances until he'd disposed of the threat of Baron Heath, although he wanted her to be well acquainted with Tregaron and hopefully to love it as he did. Tregaron was close to the town of Deal to the east and its magnificent castle. He'd have to take her there one day. He doubted she'd ever seen anything in the vicinity except the baron's meager holdings. The castle was built in the time of Henry VIII and although now a magnificent old wreck, was well worth seeing. Damien loved his home and wanted Toria to know every little relevant detail.

Tregaron's vast interests were managed well by Jason and Damien together. Jason found his spot at Tregaron soon after attending Oxford with Damien. The fourth son of a marquis, Jason had been wasting his talents with no place to exercise his undoubted business expertise. Certainly he wasn't cut out to be a clergyman as younger sons often were destined to be. Damien recognized Jason needed a goal and Tregaron needed Jason and both men were delighted with the arrangement. Damien consulted with him almost daily and the two remained the closest of friends.

Tregaron was by far the largest estate in the area. Situated between Dover and Deal, it was near enough to the larger town to provide access and yet the grounds covered so extensive an area as to seem almost isolated. Tenant cottages rimmed the back of the property to give the main house even more privacy from its few neighbors. One of Damien's interests included breeding horses and so he maintained large expanses of grassy meadows, keeping the other crops outside the grazing lands. The house seemed situated in a verdant garden.

On one ride Toria asked him about his parents.

"My mother was killed instantly when a horse she was trying to break threw her. Of course my father was a mage but not even a mage can heal a broken neck. I was ten years old. My father celebrated my twenty-first birthday with me and then willed himself away. I know he'd only been waiting to join my mother. He still visits me and gives me advice when I need it."

Toria looked at him, obviously startled and not at all sure what he meant but didn't comment.

Damien was content she didn't ask more questions he might find difficult to answer. For now he delighted in showing her every inch of his land, although he made it clear she must never go near the borders without him.

"I'd like to have your word, Toria, that you won't ride at all without me."

She frowned for just a moment. She adored being able to ride again and especially on a regular saddle and now she looked a little belligerent.

"But I'm eighteen," she objected. "Surely an age to be permitted freedom."

"This is the one stipulation to your riding at all, my dear."

He spoke quietly but Toria looked startled and then agreed.

Damien didn't tell her he still felt she was in danger, although the widening of her eyes probably meant she suspected. He didn't want to tell her he doubted that now being of age would stop the baron, so he said nothing more. The voluminous folds of

the skirt on her riding habit were protective as far as her looking respectable but Damien didn't trust anyone but himself with her essential safety. He'd no doubt the baron would use any means possible to snatch Toria away, especially when he realized the beauty she'd become.

Yet Damien made no attempt to hide her.

He expected the baron would soon come calling. Well, hell, he hoped the baron would soon call.

He positively itched to have Lord Heath visit.

## **Chapter Three**

Damien suppressed a surge of triumph three days later when his butler announced Baron Heath.

"Show him into the front parlor, Stephens."

Stephens raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Stephens was an older man, most noticeable for his erect bearing and large ears. He strove mightily sometimes to preserve his sense of dignity as Tregaron's butler. Although essentially a kind man, none of the other servants dared infringe on his pride. He was utterly and always proper.

The front parlor had long been Damien's least favorite room at Tregaron. Somehow he'd never gotten around to trying to lighten the dark atmosphere. Today its gloom fitted his mood. Sometime he'd ask Toria to redecorate the room.

Damien waited, giving Stephens time to show the baron in and then added ten minutes. Finally he strode into the room.

Heath rose to his feet, extending his hand. Damien stared pointedly at him and then seated himself without shaking his hand. After a lengthy pause he motioned the baron to a seat on the other side of the room.

"You have something on your mind, baron?"

Baron Heath flushed at the insulting tone but answered in a barely controlled voice.

"I've come for my ward Victoria, Lord Sinclair. She's suddenly appeared on your estate, riding with you. I want her back where she belongs. I intend to marry her immediately. Where she's been for three years I don't know, although I suspect you do. I'm willing to forgive her for her involvement with you and marry her as her parents intended."

Damien fought down the rage threatening to erupt at the crude and lying words. Her parents would certainly not want her married to this boor. Nor would they have allowed him to harm Toria or her reputation if they'd truly known the villain.

He stood abruptly so the baron was almost forced to stand also.

"I don't think so, sirrah. I've already started proceedings to claim her inheritance for her, which she should have received when she turned eighteen. I'll expect an accounting of any missing money, incidentally. My man of affairs will call on yours tomorrow."

Heath nearly exploded. "What makes you think you can make such a demand? I'm her appointed guardian, not you, my haughty lord."

"I have a copy of her parents' last will and testament. Your guardianship expired the day of her eighteenth birthday. My sister and I now claim that right as close and



trusted friends of Victoria, the ones she prefers. You will never see her again unless I am at her side. And never at all if I have my way."

"You can't do this, my lord earl."

Heath looked like a man on the verge of a fit.

His voice rose in an almost shriek.

"I was chosen by her parents to care for her, damn you."

"They would not choose you now," Damien said quietly.

The baron looked to be on the very tip of apoplexy. Perhaps a good solution for all, Damien thought as he folded his strong fingers and waited, saying not a word while he stared the man down.

"I have more power than you dream, baron. Hinder me at your peril."

Damien strode to the door and called Stephens.

"The baron is leaving. Please assist him in any way you can, Stephens."

As the butler took a threatening step forward Heath evidently realized Damien's glower and stance showed how happy he'd be to assist if his butler had trouble. Heath realized he had no choice. Red-faced and fuming, he hurried to the door.

Damien watched him go.

*Well, hell. A stroke isn't a bad idea at all. If I weren't reluctant to kill even a bastard like this I'd help it along. Lucky for him I decided long ago not to murder anyone, even in extremity.*

Then he went to find Toria. He didn't believe in hell as an actual place but as a collective term for the omnipresent evil in the world. Although there should be punishment for such villains as the baron.

Even though she was already frightened he must make doubly sure she understood why she must never leave the house without him. Never. He didn't realize he looked more stern than she'd ever seen him.

In the meantime, he'd send another message to the War Ministry. He wanted to know if the investigation into white slave traffic was making any headway. His last message had told him the smuggling had subsided for a while and now seemed to be resuming.

And Damien harbored a very nasty feeling about Baron Heath.

\* \* \* \* \*

Damien knocked on Toria's bedroom door. He intended to ask her to join him for a pre-dinner talk, something they both enjoyed. Whiskey for him, white wine for her. Sometimes Debby joined them but not always. Debby could often be found riding in Jason's company inspecting the gardens that were her passion. Damien suddenly wondered if he should delve into Debby's feelings for Jason. Could she be falling for his long-time friend? If so, he'd wish them well but he doubted if Jason would agree. He might feel Debora to be above him in that he was essentially a worker on Damien's

estate, even though his own birth was noble. Or did another hindrance mar a relationship between the two?

A problem to leave for another day.

Toria came to the door, white and shaking. Damien responded instinctively, folding her in his arms and holding her shining head against his chest. She burrowed into him for one precious moment and then withdrew and stepped back. But not before he'd felt the frantic thudding of her heart. Even though she now held out both hands as if to ward him off, her instinctive reaction of acceptance set his spirits soaring.

He stepped back also, folding his arms across his chest.

"Now, my dear Toria, what has you so obviously frightened?"

He knew the answer but wanted her to talk of her fears.

She hugged herself tightly, wrapping her arms around her body in a vain attempt to stop her shaking.

"He was here," she whispered. "The baron was here. I was looking out the window and saw his horse. He had to be inside this house looking for me."

Damien's heart ached for his love. The love he was not even close to being allowed to claim.

"Yes, he was here, Toria. I sent him away. I've told you over and over you are safe with me. I will not let him near you. He is, however, why I don't want you to ride without me. Not ever. I don't trust him at all."

She raised huge darkened eyes to his face.

"You know," she whispered.

"I know he is a wicked man. One I'd not trust near anyone in my care. Not you, not Debby, nor one of my maids. He is evil, Toria. A truly evil man."

She relaxed just a little.

"My lord, you do understand. Thank you, thank you."

"I accept your thanks on one condition," he said. "That from now on you call me Damien, as I've often requested."

This was an intimacy she'd seemed reluctant to concede. As he stood unmoving before her, smiling but not touching her, she surrendered. With a smile that shattered his soul.

"Yes, Damien."

Damien glowed. He felt as if all the angels above suddenly blessed him. He took her hand and tucked it on his arm and after the first hesitation, she stayed at his side.

He patted her hand and then put his own over hers.

"Let's go find Debby and have dinner," Damien said in his low alluring baritone. He was experienced enough to put every enthralling nuance into the words he could summon. He was so damn tired of restraining himself. If he didn't move soon to make her his he felt he'd explode. All the longing and desire for her he'd suppressed for years

felt like a giant firecracker in his stomach. Or a crab clutching at his insides. A crab with big claws.

He groaned.

Once again he briefly considered putting a love spell on her but immediately rejected the thought as unworthy of him. But oh, so tempting. If he let himself bewitch her she'd be his in an instant. He sighed and took his hand away. Touching her even slightly was just too damned difficult.

She smiled again, briefly to be sure, but still she went with him, her small hand remaining on his arm. She didn't try to draw away.

He was winning but the slowness of his progress might turn him into a gibbering idiot.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were all together in the parlor after dinner. Damien's cook was excellent and Toria generally made her pleasure evident. Three years at a girl's school gave her a deep appreciation of the tarts and soufflés she'd learned to relish at Tregaron. She mentioned the unappetizing fare at school frequently but also the friends she'd made. She talked freely about her classes and her teachers. She never referred at all to the time before her school years. It was as if she'd had no life before first waking in the bedroom at Tregaron.

Damien worried about her eventually healing unless she acknowledged her distressed past but grew ever more reluctant to force the issue.

Suddenly Jason knocked on the open door and then entered. His eyes went first to Lady Debora and then immediately to Damien. Damien had noticed this more than once and wondered if his good friend loved his sister. Personally he'd delight in an alliance between the two of them, although Debbie treated Jason like another brother. Still, they were all close friends and Damien now invited Jason to be seated.

"Could we persuade you to make a fourth, Jason? These girls are winning all my matchsticks. They're both wicked players, I'm sorry to tell you."

Debby swatted her brother's arm. "You wretch, Damien. I know perfectly well if we were playing for guineas instead of matches it would be a different story."

Damien raised his eyebrows in a display of complete ignorance. "How can you doubt me, Debby? You know I never cheat."

She laughed. "I don't suppose it's cheating not to play at top form. Not quite, anyway."

Damien put down his cards as he caught Jason's serious expression.

"Do you want to go to my study, Jason? We missed you at dinner, incidentally."

As his good friend Jason had a permanent invitation to dine with them, although he rarely accepted.

Jason shook his head. "No, let's stay here. The Lady Debora will be interested in this news as well."

He took a chair and accepted coffee from the footman serving them.

So it did not concern Toria. Reassured, Damien waited.

"Raphael has been captured by natives in South Africa. The insurgent forces are holding him hostage. They seem to know he is your good friend."

Debora gasped and Damien shot to his feet.

"Have they informed the Duke of Essingdon?"

"Yes," Jason answered. "They sent the message to him first. If my information is correct the honorable Duke laughed as he crumpled the message and threw it on the floor."

Damien didn't have a doubt Jason was correct.

"Damn the Duke's unforgiving soul. Just because Rafe didn't turn out in his image he's rejected his only son once again."

Even in his distress, Damien didn't miss noticing Debora turn white, grasping at the arms of her chair. So Rafe was the way her heart turned. Damien stowed the thought away even as he felt pity for Jason.

Damien, Raphael and Jason had been inseparable during a good part of their lives. Meeting when youngsters at Eton, they'd banded to keep each other from the cruelty of some upper classmen—Damien, then Viscount Hunter, Marquis Chittenden, son of the Duke of Essingdon and the Hon. Jason Manning, son of Viscount Darton. Most of the bullies had learned picking on one of them brought the other two punching and fighting to protect their friend. Damien had been so enchanted to have staunch allies he'd forced himself to rely on them instead of his latent abilities. Only once had he slipped and used his mage's power.

The class bully had a much younger boy pinned against the wall. His fist was drawn back and Damien walked by. Without much thought he changed the bully into a squalling infant.

Damien looked at the young lad still cringing against the wall, his eyes huge and his fear changed into terror and awe but scarcely abated. Damien sighed and patted his skinny shoulder.

"He's having a fit of some kind, Willy but don't worry about it. It wouldn't do to mention this to anyone, just run. He'll recover but stay away from him. Don't let yourself be caught by this young tough again."

Willy turned away, obviously shaken to the core.

"Forget about this, Willy but call me if you need me."

He sealed the child's memory, knowing the incident would soon be forgotten. Then he looked up to see his father standing by. His handsome, loving father, with an unprecedented look of sternness clouding the face so similar to Damien's own.

"Would you tell me what you have in mind, son?" He nudged the screaming baby with the toe of his boot and it fell silent.

"Hello, sir. I meant to show him what being helpless felt like. I didn't intend to leave him that way."

His father's face cleared. "I suppose I could have checked your mind and found out but you know we never do so with a loved one. That's a fair enough reason, I'll grant you. Just as long as you remember the responsibility that goes with your power and always use it for good. I approve of answering such a provocation. This one's a despicable bully. Just bring him back quickly. It's easier to retransform someone if you do it soon."

His father disappeared and Damien changed the infant back to a silent and now terrified boy. He gave one look at Damien and then wheeled and ran. Doubtless thinking his mind was playing tricks on him but chastened and hopefully a bit more kind.

Damien sat down on the grass and put his head in his hands. A transformation, or any extreme use of his powers, usually left him exhausted.

He heard Rafe's voice and looked up to see Rafe and Jason staring at him.

"My God, Damien, is this what you meant when you told us you were a mage?"

*Well, hell.*

Damien essayed a tired, wry grin. "I take it you saw the whole thing. Yes, that's part of it. I did try to warn you."

Jason shook his head, still in apparent disbelief. "You did, Damien and you told us you had Merlin's blood in your veins. I distinctly heard you talking to your father but I couldn't see him. Your father was a mage too?"

"Almost all the males in my direct line are. My father's quite able to visit me when I need him. Please don't let this change things between us. I need friends as much as anyone."

Jase and Rafe lowered themselves to the grass beside him.

"It's hard to believe, Damien and maybe even harder to accept. Do you do this transformation thing often?"

Obviously his good friends were worried he'd change them into a toad if they angered him. They didn't want such thoughts but there they were. He suppressed his grin with a sigh. To continue in friendship they must understand and respect him for what he was.

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry you witnessed that. I am what I am. I will promise never to invade your privacy in any way, or to help you out of even a bad situation unless you call me in your mind and ask me to intervene. I hope my solemn vow reassures you enough to let us keep on being friends."

There was a few moments' silence and then Rafe and Jason looked at each other.

Rafe spoke first. "Good enough for me. I've never known you to break your word. Shall we all go to my room and tackle the latest Latin lesson? I purely hate Latin."

"We both know you do, Rafe." Jason grinned "This is about the hundredth time I've heard you say those very words. Or maybe it's one hundred and one."

Jason jumped to his feet and held out his hand to Damien.

"Hope you want to come too, Damien. You're better than either of us at Latin, blast your hide."

They marched away together, Damien with a song in his soul. His friends understood him better and were still his friends. May he always use Merlin's magic to their advantage.

And so the three had formed a lasting bond.

He had never exercised his power in front of them again. He hoped they'd buried the memory far in the back of their minds.

Damien, Rafe and Jase. The three had become much respected and little challenged at Eton and then at Oxford. Each of them had always known he could ask anything of the others.

Damien had been forever grateful he'd restrained his mage's magic during that time. He was never again tempted to turn the bullies to a helpless state just to teach them feeling helpless can hurt. He learned to use his fists in ways he'd not suspected he could, for one thing. Not only had he come to rely more on his own strength but such friends as Jason and Rafe were beyond compare. He didn't want to chance losing them. He would do anything for either of them.

## **Chapter Four**

Damien now concentrated completely on what Jason was saying.

"How did it happen, Jase? Where was Rafe when he was captured?"

Damien's voice was mild but his knuckles whitened as he grasped the arms of his chair. He didn't think it necessary to mention he'd just heard Rafe's voice in his head, asking for help from his friend.

"From what I can gather the African leader, Lobengula, captured him easily when Rafe went to him in peace. Rafe was actually trying to join Lobengula's group and help the natives fight against Cecil Rhodes. Rafe seems to often get into trouble taking the side of the underdog. I'd guess Lobengula has been tricked too many times to believe Rafe is sincerely on his side, although at least he didn't kill him. He seems to have treated him with little respect though. It's essential to rescue him."

Damien winced. Jason didn't want to tell the women in so many words Rafe was probably being tortured.

"How much ransom will it take?" Damien asked. He kept his voice quiet but Toria stared at his set face and shivered.

"A great deal, I'm afraid. Will you permit me to deliver the money for you? I know you can't go yourself."

Damien didn't answer for a while. The others waited, knowing he was debating what to do. As for Damien, his thoughts tumbled one over the other. He longed to go himself to save Rafe. Rafe must have gone to the British part of South Africa, probably Cape Colony and traveled inland to Mashonaland. Damien's skills, both medical and magical, might make the vital difference. But he couldn't leave Toria for the length of time it would surely take. The rescuer would have to go deep into South Africa, a hazardous journey and a long one. In no way could he possibly subject Toria to such a journey. The only choice he had was to stay away from her and keep her safe while Jason went in his place.

He firmed his jaw and finally spoke.

"We'd better plan, then. I think the quickest way is for you to sail directly from Dover."

Jason showed his relief he'd been chosen by a slight loosening of his shoulders.

Damien continued thinking out loud.

"My yacht is much too small for such a long trip. However, I'm friends with the captain of a larger yacht renting out for cruises through the Greek Islands. As I recall, his boat has berths for six. He'll be glad to accommodate me if he can. He happens to

feel in debt to me. We'll hope he's free. But I'll phone the harbor master and find out if he's there."

Jason knew better than to ask what the favor had been. To show such complete confidence in a busy man's cooperation meant the support had been significant. Probably something minor like rescuing a member of the captain's family, if he had to make a guess. And thank the angels Damien had possessed the money and foresight to install a phone in this remote location. He could check quickly. Around London phones were ever more evident but they were rare here on the outskirts of Dover.

Damien soon returned, a smile on his face. "We're in luck. Captain Hansen's *Sea Gull* is docking later today from his latest cruise. He'll phone us this afternoon. I imagine you can sail tomorrow."

As Jason interpreted Damien's statement, Captain Hansen would drop all his bookings to accommodate Damien. Of course. He'd better prepare to leave tomorrow as suggested.

Damien had marched over to his bookshelves and pulled down a sailing atlas.

"I think by way of the Suez Canal is best. We'll consult with the captain but I'm sure he'll agree. Better weather than rounding the Cape Town peninsula and shorter in the long run."

Jason nodded his agreement. "And a boat is much better than subjecting Rafe to constant transfers between trains and local carriages."

"Certainly the Canal should be safe. Now that the Convention of Constantinople has guaranteed right of passage to all ships you'll have no trouble."

Jason nodded.

Damien went on with his judicious planning.

"I'll go with you as far as Dover. I'd better see my banker to obtain the gold you need when you find Rafe, as well as giving the captain an advance sum. I doubt very much if Lobengula would appreciate my draft."

As a joke it fell pretty flat but Jason obligingly gave a half-grin.

He looked steadily at Damien, refusing to acknowledge Debora's distress. Distress Jase understood to be for Rafe, not his own departure.

"I'll go pack." Jason rose to his feet. "I assume you'll want to send medicines for whatever Rafe requires. And I'll bring fresh clothing for him. I'm sure he'll welcome those."

Damien nodded his approval.

"Ahead of me as usual, Jase. In the meantime I'll go see the Prime Minister as soon as possible. He might be able to see Rafe is transferred close to the port of Beira in Portuguese territory. To do so the P.M. will need to exert pressure on both Cecil Rhodes and the Portuguese. It's not far from Beira to the border of Mashonaland but he'll have to push the Portuguese to let you cross their land and urge Rhodes to convince Lobengula it's in his interest to ransom Rafe. The sooner you can pick him up the better.



If I can't arrange matters you might have to go into Mashonaland, perhaps another day's journey away. Still, I'll see what the P.M. can do. I'll wire you as soon as I have news."

In Damien's eyes Cecil Rhodes was a flawed man, even though a brilliant one. Rhodes' dedication to the advancement of the British Empire seemed to have obliterated any personal tolerance toward natives he might once have possessed. Damien found it hard to discern which most inspired Rhodes—his dream of England controlling all of Africa or his commitment to his own personal fortune. Diamond fields discovered in 1870 in South Africa had made him wealthy. He'd founded the De Beers Mining Company and still controlled it. Rhodes had reaped untold riches in South Africa but he'd lied to and tricked the African leaders such as Lobengula to do so. He'd furthered his dreams of wealth for himself even as he sought for an Africa under England's thumb. Now Rafe was paying because he'd wanted to assist the exploited Africans. Although the ruler Lobengula had originally felt sympathy for the British, Rhodes' dishonesty and deception not only changed the feeling of some British like Rafe but turned Lobengula into an enemy.

Rafe was doubtless in hostile and unforgiving hands. So far Damien's only vision of him showed Rafe tied to a post, his back bared. Damien shuddered and closed his mind to what he couldn't help.

What a damnable situation. He couldn't even estimate the time the yacht would take to reach Beira but it would be two weeks at a minimum. The Suez Canal was the only certain part of the trip. Ships were allowed through in convoys and two to three passages a day were always planned. The convoy's transit time generally required eleven to sixteen hours. The Convention of Constantinople had declared the canal a neutral zone just two years before. Now passage was almost guaranteed but the average speed through the canal was held to eight knots.

The *Sea Gull's* rate was far above eight knots. Captain Hansen had installed steam engines, which supplemented the sails, so the *Gull's* speed was much higher, certainly at least fifteen knots on calm waters. Perhaps even twenty. Yet the seas were always unreliable. Storms arrived sporadically even in this late summer season.

He'd better prepare for two trips, one with Jason to procure the gold and the other to see the Prime Minister in London the next day. Tomorrow morning he must go to Dover with Jason. So much money could not be procured without his personal presence at the bank.

He looked up to see Toria and Debora eyeing him. Both with a distinct air of waiting to pounce.

*Well, hell.* He sighed and then forced a smile.

"I know what you're thinking, ladies. You feel left out of all this. But I want to accompany Jason as far as Dover. I'll be back as soon as I can, certainly the same day and I'd like you both to promise to stay in the house 'til I return. I have a very nasty

suspicion our friend the baron would be glad to cause trouble if he knew you were alone. The safest thing is for you both to remain indoors."

Debora and Toria glared at him, both obviously reluctant to be so restricted.

He strode to his sister first, hugging her hard before releasing her.

"You know I must hurry to help Rafe. Please do this one thing for me, Debby."

At her nod he moved to Toria, understanding well her instinctive desire for freedom. She'd had so little in her young life. He hugged her also and felt her stiff body relax a little in his arms. The perfume in her hair, a scent of lemon soap with a touch of her refreshing fragrance made his senses leap. He was pretty good at identifying a perfume. A floral scent, a mixture with definitely a little lily-of-the-valley. He couldn't help but rejoice as she remained a moment quietly in his arms, although her pansy eyes questioned him. Even held lightly against his chest, he felt her heart quicken into a surprising flight. Somehow but he managed not to betray his awareness and his delight. Her bemused look made him clench his fists to keep from kissing her with a lover's passion even though his sister was watching.

"Please, Toria," he whispered. "I need to know you are safe while I'm gone."

When both girls nodded their reluctant agreement he wheeled, calling for Stephens.

"Send for my groom please. Araby and I will ride with Jason in the morning and I'll see his horse brought home rather than stabling it in Dover for what might be a long time."

He strode to his study. He needed to make additional preparations to ride to London to see Lord Salisbury. Just as soon as he returned from seeing Jason off, bearing the large amount of gold he planned to send with him. First he'd better make sure Jason understood how bad the situation in Africa was, though he imagined Jason had a very good idea.

He sent Stephens to request Jason to visit him and Jason appeared at the door of the study soon after, his brow wrinkled.

"I've been worried about you when I'm gone, Damien. You'll have a lot to contend with."

Damien grinned.

"And here I am worrying about you."

Damien smiled and motioned Jason to enter. Before Jason could take a step forward, Damien noticed Toria coming down the hall.

Instantly alert, he waited for her.

"Is there something I can do for you, Toria?"

She hesitated. "I merely wanted to ask you about this Lobengula you mentioned. I'm afraid I never heard of him."

Pleased with her curious and intelligent mind, he motioned her in with Jason.

"Just exactly what I'm planning to discuss with Jason. Would you like to join us?"

At her pleased nod he seated them both gravely and then went back to his desk, wondering how much to tell Toria. As much as she wanted to know, he decided.

"One thing I'd like to make clear, Toria. I don't want Debora to know everything I'm about to tell you. Use your own judgment but try not to distress her."

When Toria nodded he knew she understood the words he hadn't voiced.

"Lobengula is said to be an honorable man, an important African chieftain formerly well disposed to the British. He's reputedly tall, dignified and handsome. Cecil Rhodes took advantage of him and tricked him into signing a treaty allowing mining and other rights Lobengula would never have conceded if he'd realized the British intentions. Queen Victoria is delighted with the results, although she doesn't know the chicanery involved. Most of the British know only how important gold and diamonds can be. What concerns us here is that many of Lobengula's followers now hate the British and Rafe is in their hands."

Toria gasped while Jason nodded and added his thoughts.

"Africans have learned to distrust most Europeans. With good reason. French, German, Danish and Portuguese, all have exploited the Africans. Shamefully."

Toria looked at Damien, admiration shining in her lovely eyes.

"Thank you, Damien. And Jason. I knew none of this."

Damien's smile twisted a little. "No reason you should, Toria. My contacts in the government have helped in some respects, at least. A few people agree with me and more will as time goes on. Now, if you'll excuse us, my dear, I want to finalize plans with Jason. We must go into detail that would bore you but I want you to understand how serious Rafe's situation is."

Smiling and looking adorably bemused, she said good night.

Both men watched her go. To Damien she grew lovelier every day. Tonight she'd worn her hair tied to the side with a ribbon, the golden mass cascading over one shoulder.

Jason's glance showed the merest trace of pity.

"Are you making any progress with her, Damien?"

Damien's glance sharpened. "What are you implying, Jase?"

Jason held up his hands.

"Nothing to rile you, my friend. Any fool can see you've finally fallen in love, with a very skittish female. I know nothing else."

Damien relaxed. "You're right on both counts. I might be in over my head on this one."

Jason looked skeptical but they turned to make plans for the journey he was about to undertake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both Jason and Damien were up and mounted quite early.

Damien hoped to steal away without waking the girls but they both were standing at Tregaron's door, silent and solemn.

He aimed his best smile at them.

"No Friday faces, please, you two. I'll be back very shortly. Just take care of yourself and remember your promise to stay indoors today."

At the last minute he turned back and spoke to Toria. "One other thing. If you need me, Toria, summon me in your mind. I'll be available to your thoughts at all times."

She looked startled but only nodded.

He didn't add a scheme to safeguard her was all a part of his love for her. One she couldn't yet comprehend. If she required his help he would know instantly and deal with the problem. In fact he'd leave her more protected than she dreamed. He knew she didn't quite understand but his care would blanket her even though he was far from her.

He thought her not yet ready to know the depth of his love. He had yet to tell her his prophecies plainly showed them together for all time. She was an integral part of his destiny. He must somehow make her accept her future.

Certainly not an impossible task.

## Chapter Five

After Jason and Damien rode silently away both girls returned to bed for an hour, as it seemed too early for breakfast and facing the lonely day without the men. A few hours later a knock sounded on Tregaron's door. Toria came to the top of the stairs, wondering who was calling at such an early hour.

Stephens opened the door with caution, to find himself shoved aside by a large bully of a man, accompanied by a smirking Baron Heath.

"Call both your mistresses, old man. I want to speak with them."

When Stephens hesitated Heath punched the old man brutally in the stomach. Doubling over, Stephens clutched himself but made no move toward the stairs.

Heath snorted in amusement and set one foot on the steps just as Toria appeared.

The baron stepped back, watching her with gloating eyes as she came gracefully down the stairs. Her head held high, she bore little resemblance to the fifteen-year-old he'd abused. She wore a wrapper concealing her developed figure in folds but his eyes gleamed with lust. He'd watched her through binoculars and knew she'd turned into a beauty but seen up close this glowing girl surpassed the brief glimpses he'd had through his spying glasses.

He watched her, every lascivious thought plain on his triumphant face.

"Your protector won't help you now, Victoria. He's far away. By the time he returns you'll be installed in my home again where you belong."

Almost frozen with fright, Toria stood motionless. The scent of her own terror swamped her senses, making her more than a little ill. How could fear smell so strong? She was incapable of uttering a sound or moving a muscle. What could she do against the brute strength of two evil men?

Then she heard Damien's last words sounding in her mind and mentally called out to him. It seemed impossible but Damien would not have told her to try to reach him unless he had a plan.

Surely he would hear her. Damien could do anything.

*Damien, I need you now. He's about to make me go with him and then he'll force me once again. I won't be able to live if this happens.*

Her frantic words rang in her head even as she concentrated on not showing her fear. She'd stopped four steps up from the hallway, while all three of the men watched her. Heath in triumph, the bully with lust in his eyes equal to the baron's and Stephens still doubled over and in despair.

He could do little to save his master's ward. Even if he could move, the bully hovered there ready to pound him out of the way.

Heath chortled, an ugly sound of triumph.

"Come on down, Victoria. You won't like it if I have to come get you."

When she stood as if frozen, he grunted and started toward the stairs.

He stopped abruptly, almost as if he'd run into a brick wall. He could not set foot on the first stair. Toria hovered just out of reach and then quickly moved back up another few steps. She smiled with delight as she watched first Heath and then his henchman reach out for her. In vain. Damien had somehow protected her with a shield of safety no one could penetrate without her permission. How he'd done it she didn't know but she could feel his soothing touch on her senses even as she stood without moving.

As she halted out of their touch, the baron tried three times to breach the invisible barrier and then started cursing.

"So the bastard really does have magical powers. I've heard he rivaled the devil himself but I didn't believe it. Don't mistake me, Victoria. This little setback doesn't matter. I'll be back. I'll catch you when you're not protected by one of his demonic spells. He can't be omnipresent. I just have to figure out how to break his control. You're safe for the moment, my dear but not for long."

Stephens was still doubled over and Heath kicked out at him as he and his henchman stormed away. Only the toe of his boot caught Stephens in the stomach but the old man groaned and closed his eyes.

As soon as the front door slammed, Toria ran to the door and threw the bolt. Then she called for Debora and turned to Stephens. She caught the old man in her arms, feeling his heart flutter beneath her palms. She and Debora must keep him alive until Damien returned.

She'd not been overly startled when she'd felt the shield go up around her. It was almost as if a wall of heavy glass appeared in place, a thick and impenetrable barrier. She'd known Damien would somehow protect her. She'd long ago recognized Damien was superior to any other being she'd ever known. She was just beginning to know how superior.

But she recognized he'd dedicated his powers to keeping her safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

When a worried Damien returned that night he felt a little reassured when he crossed the threshold. His beloved women were safe. He'd felt deep danger at one time during the day but now his prescient senses reassured him. He found Toria and Debby seated at Stephens' bedside, coaxing him to eat a little chicken broth.

The three were talking, all in quiet tones.

"I'm not fit to be in the same room with you, my ladies," Stephens mourned. "The master charged me with your safety and I failed him."

Damien stepped through the doorway.

"Damien," breathed Toria, as Debby flew to his arms.

"Oh Damien, it was horrible. Stephens did his best but those bullies pounded him without mercy. Do help, Damien."

Damien's eyes raked Toria. She was safe, if shaken. The protective shield he'd placed around her had proved as effective as he hoped. He held out one hand to her and she came quickly to his side.

"Are you all right, Toria?" he asked softly. He kissed her cheek and she leaned into him. A surprise that he relished.

"Somebody better tell me the whole story. Not you, Stephens, your honor is not in question but your health is. Let me make you feel a little better and then the ladies can fill me in on the details."

Damien moved to the bedside and took Stephens' hand in his and within moments the old man fell asleep.

"There," Damien said with satisfaction. "He'll heal faster in sleep. There's nothing broken in his body. Now if you both would oblige me we'll go to my study and you can tell me what happened here today."

"Let me see to some food, Damien," Debora said. "You must have ridden hard to get back here by now. I'm sure you didn't take time to eat."

"I'll eat later," Damien said grimly. "For now I'll just have a glass of wine while you fill me in."

He listened in silence as Toria told him what happened. Debby had been in her room for most of the time, so couldn't contribute much to the story.

"You say the baron appeared an hour or two after I left?"

When they both nodded he vaulted to his feet and wheeled to look out the window at the dark night. There was a still a thin dash of silver nestling just above the horizon although Damien saw nothing but the black sky. But then his eyes were not focusing on the scenery.

"Which means someone in this house has been bribed to inform him of my movements."

"I never thought of that," Toria gasped.

"It's the unmistakable conclusion, my dear." His grim tone promised speedy retribution when he found the culprit. "Go get some sleep, both of you. I'm here and promise to keep you both safe."

He ate lightly and then went to his room. He must be ready to go to London tomorrow and see the Prime Minister. And he would be forced to leave Toria again. He'd find the traitor in his household first but then he must leave.

An almost insupportable thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

His last thought before sleeping a few hours was how to keep Toria safe while he posted hard to London. Even with luck in convincing the P.M., he couldn't be sure Lord Salisbury would send help to Rafe in time. Although Salisbury was known to be unusually sensitive to the African question, a decided plus for the current problem. Certainly the P.M. would not want the uproar resulting if word leaked out of a mistreated British citizen.

The serious question remaining was how to secure Toria's safety while he was gone. He much feared it would mean curtailing her freedom to ride and indeed, to set foot outside Tregaron until he returned. But how to keep Heath out if word leaked Damien had left again? Which it was sure to do, even if the newly hired gardener who betrayed them this time was far away.

He didn't look forward to telling Toria. For one thing, she might still be reticent with him but she adored their daily rides. Was it even partly she enjoyed sharing the time with him? Or was it just having freedom for a few hours?

Could he ask her to be housebound again? And with no guarantee of safety? He didn't think so. He'd have to come up with another solution.

\* \* \* \* \*

Damien asked Toria to meet him in his study. His valet was packing the few things he'd need, mostly a clean outfit for his audience with Salisbury when he reached London. He anticipated no trouble with an immediate admittance. This was one time he would gladly use the power he possessed as a mage. Even if it meant arranging matters so an appointment for Damien to see Lord Salisbury mysteriously appeared on the mighty lord's schedule. While Salisbury might be mystified, Damien could allay his suspicions as soon as he was received.

Now he must talk to Toria. She would definitely not approve of being left behind again. In fact, he no longer felt sure that was a good idea. He'd rather have her with him, even if her presence turned out to be his own private form of torture.

Toria appeared so quickly after he asked Stephens to request her presence in his study that he suspected she'd been waiting around the corner.

He smiled as she entered. Her walk was purposeful and it amused him. Did she intend to berate him then for his last absence? He would absolutely love it if she showed the spirit her stance suggested.

She spoke directly to the point.

"I intend to go with you, Damien. Otherwise you'll make me promise to stay indoors while you're gone. I won't do it. I would promise not to go outside the hotel if that's what you want. I just won't be left behind again."

Her demanding eyes flashed as she made her imperative request.



Damien was delighted. Before he had time to think he reacted. He took her beautiful face between his hands and kissed her rosy mouth. She jerked a little but did not draw away. Instead, to his besotted delight she tentatively kissed him back. She obviously knew nothing about kissing but still the clumsily returned pressure nearly made him lose control.

*Not here, not now. Not yet.*

She blushed a fiery red and tried to wrest herself away but he refused to let her go, stroking her hair and gentling her as one would a frightened child.

"Thank you, Toria, I treasure your wish to go with me. And I think I have a surprise for you."

He tucked her against his side. She snuggled against him, even as she muttered, "But I don't like a man to touch me, Damien."

Since she only burrowed further into him her words didn't stop his hands from attempting to calm her. He tried to raise her face to his but she held herself stiffly, refusing to meet his passion-filled eyes. Perhaps just as well if he didn't want to frighten her warm welcome body from him.

Her next words jolted him to his toes. Her head was still down as she shyly asked, "Did I offend you just now, my lord? Acting like the veriest wanton?"

Did this girl-woman have any idea the intensity of his desire? Of how very welcome her slight response was to him? Quite evidently not. He put a hand under her chin and this time forced her to look at him.

"You don't even know what the word wanton means, my dear. I don't want to hear you ever use it again. Not applied to yourself, at any rate. A kiss between good friends is permissible. Now, don't you even want to know my surprise?"

She thoughtfully examined his face.

"Oh," she said. "I guess you're right. We are very good friends. But that doesn't change the fact I still want to go with you."

She stepped back, setting her chin so stubbornly he almost laughed.

"And I want you to go, my dear. You and Debora both. I've decided I simply can't leave you two alone here for that long a time. Stephens suspects our traitor was a new gardener who's suddenly disappeared but there might be another servant the baron could tempt. We'll go by train and stay at the recently opened Savoy Hotel. Jason recommends it, even though it's quite new."

"You win too many arguments, my lord. I can't refute this one however." Her beaming face made the slight loss of time by not traveling alone well worth it.

"I like winning," Damien said silkily. "And my name is Damien. Don't tell me you've forgotten already."

This time she grinned. "No, Damien."

Her words were delivered with a look from under her heavy lashes that Damien would have called flirtatious in another girl. Cheered beyond measure, Damien beamed

down at her. The intense longing that was always with him subsided for just a moment, as he savored her pleasure in being allowed to go with him. Surely she was beginning to accept his love and would let him soon into her heart.

“I’ve already called for my coach to be ready within the hour. Go tell Debby both of you must pack as lightly as you can. We won’t be in London long. Now I must send a footman ahead to purchase three tickets on the late morning train.”

He set her from him, cheered tremendously by her reactions. Jason was on his way and now he must do his part, while keeping the women safe. This trip would be no problem since he’d have them with him. When they all returned he’d deal with the treacherous baron.

And may Merlin’s mercy keep Rafe alive until Jason could reach him.

## Chapter Six

As anticipated, once in London Damien easily made an appointment to see the Prime Minister the next day. Then he could do nothing but wait for the morning, so Damien reserved a prime table in the elegant dining room of the Savoy.

He insisted both women looked lovely even though they were not conventionally dressed for dinner. Each had packed only a fresh blouse and nightclothes in keeping with Damien's instructions. Although the ladies did not feel as stylish as they might like, neither Debora or Toria said a word of reproach.

Actually Toria thought Damien handsome enough to turn every eye his way. Who would notice the women at his side with anything but envy? Surely there never existed another such wonderfully striking man. Strong and tall, his dark hair was shining and his light scent of sandalwood creeping into her senses. She thought of how virile he looked and then blushed and closed her mind to such an unladylike thought.

She definitely didn't want to consider him as exuding masculinity. She just wanted him to be her good friend.

Still Toria looked at him with shining eyes, her joy at being allowed to come and her feeling of safety plain to see.

When Damien pulled out her chair she beamed up at him and he could hardly resist leaning over and kissing her fragrant hair. He frowned as he looked around the room. More than one male eyed them both, with admiration and a large touch of envy. He shut down his irritation. Her beauty naturally drew everyone who saw her, a fact he must learn to appreciate, not resent.

Debora had been unusually quiet the whole trip and during dinner was no exception. Damien knew she was consumed with worry for Rafe and he could do nothing yet to reassure her. He'd been granted no vision, at least none he wanted to share. He wasn't too surprised when she refused dessert and excused herself go to her room. Nor did he object.

He kissed her cheek and whispered so low no one at the surrounding tables could hear him.

"I'll do my best for Rafe tomorrow, my dear."

She gave him a brief semblance of a smile and turn to leave. Damien conscientiously started to excuse himself to Toria and go with her but Debby waved him off with an attempt at a smile.

"Stay with Toria, Damien. She loves dessert almost as much as you do."

He watched his sister go, powerless to do anything for her except send a slight sleep spell with her. Otherwise he knew she'd find little rest this night.

That he expected little relaxation himself didn't bother him.

He sat down again at the table and found Toria looking at him, her big eyes worried.

"I don't know your friend," she said, "but I know well he couldn't be in better hands than yours. I wish I could do something to help."

The sincerity in her simple words touched his already susceptible heart.

He reached his hand across the table and she took it, snuggling her small fingers into his like a baby bird finding its nest. When she did not withdraw, Damien drew a deep breath, turning her palm upward and lifting it to his lips.

"Thank you, there's nothing anyone can do right now. Maybe later."

He murmured low to her as she let her hand rest in his for a long moment. Not long enough for him but after a length of time that caused a woman at the neighboring table to cock her eyebrows, she withdrew her fingers.

He was greatly encouraged she didn't blush or seemed annoyed but looked at him with trust and a smile.

"Finish your ice cream, Toria," he said gently. "And then tell me what you'd like to do. Walk a bit, perhaps? It's late but this is a safe part of London."

Again her brilliant smile lit up the room.

"I'd love to walk just a little, Damien," she said, shoveling the last bit of ice cream into her mouth in a most unladylike fashion.

He grinned as he pulled back her chair.

"It's still warm enough we can go without extra wraps. We'll only walk a few blocks, as I don't intend to take any chances with your safety by going far from this area. But I think we both need to stretch our legs a bit."

As he escorted her from the dining room to the lobby he wondered what on heaven or earth he was doing. Walking alone on a dark and beautiful night, with the love of his life by his side. She might not know it but she was indeed in danger. And from the very man sworn to protect her.

When they'd gone a few blocks they reached a section of the pavement shadowed by tall buildings and relatively deserted, Toria suddenly turned to him.

"I must thank you properly, Damien. You've given my life new meaning. I feel safe with you as I never have before and I'm grateful."

He tried to shut down his emotions but found himself overcome by his love for her. He grabbed her in his arms, running his hands down her luscious body and molding her to him.

"You've made a mistake, Toria. I'll keep you safe from others but I'm not sure I can keep you safe from me."

He framed her beloved face in his hands, his voice low and husky.

She looked up at him with a very female smile.

"I'm not sure I want complete safety from you, Damien."

He groaned and swooped down, capturing her lips with his, exulting when he felt her instant and warm reaction as she tried to inch somehow closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, going with him even when he opened his lips and nudged hers slightly apart. She drew back quickly when his tongue invaded her softness and he withdrew. It was enough to know she was beginning to respond to him. At least for now. She still needed reassurance he'd not force her.

He ached from the pleasurable pain of the small taste he'd taken from the warm recesses of her mouth. Although he'd best go no further tonight. Well, hell, he could barely keep himself in control with even the little they'd done.

He raised his head, looking into her dazed eyes.

"You'll always be safe with me, my love, in any way that truly matters."

She backed away from him, just one step back although she was obviously shaken. Well content, he tucked her arm again in his and led her as they returned in silence to the hotel. They did not speak until he softly bade her sleep well and kissed her forehead as he left her at her room.

He was positive he'd someday win her body but it would not be an easy task. He wanted much more than just her body, even as he craved to possess her. He wanted her heart and her every thought. At least he'd made the barest beginning.

He groaned involuntarily. He'd manage little sleep tonight. Knowing she slept but one wall away, her beautiful body so close to him and so unreachable.

He refused to put a sleep spell on himself. He wasn't quite that weak. Although he certainly could use a little more self control where Toria was concerned.

\* \* \* \* \*

The interview with Lord Salisbury went well after Damien calmed his puzzlement.

"I don't remember you making this appointment, Sinclair. My secretary must be overworked. However, I'm glad to see you. Tell me what you want of me and then we'll discuss what I want of you."

Damien found himself unwilling to let Salisbury's secretary take the blame for his own machinations.

"When I called this morning I found one of your appointments had been cancelled and I asked I be inserted in his slot. Your man is extremely efficient and fortunately he agreed. I was simply lucky."

He didn't mention that Lord Blackwell's carriage just happened to break down the evening before on his way to London to keep his engagement. Blackwell was understandably upset at such a mysterious happening keeping him from London an extra day. He'd better stop on his way out and make sure Blackwell was on the schedule for the next day.

*Salisbury can be an engaging rascal when he wants*, Damien thought as the Prime Minister enthusiastically shook his hand.

"What I want is simple, my lord." Damien saw no use in small talk with a man as busy as Salisbury. "The only son of the Duke of Essingdon, Marquis Chittenden, is being held prisoner by Lobengula. I fear for him. I've sent someone to collect him but I'd like to make sure no one has to go too far into Mashonaland to retrieve him. I don't know what shape he'll be in but we will want to get him out as quickly as possible."

Lord Salisbury was not easily shocked but Damien could tell he found this news horrifying.

"And what is the Duke doing to rescue his son?"

Damien's smile was bitter. "Nothing, my lord, but I am. My man is on his way to the Cape even now. I'm just hoping to ease my friend's way once he arrives."

Lord Salisbury was still visibly shaken. "My god, man. His only son and Essingdon is doing nothing?"

"I am taking care of the matter, my lord. I would indeed appreciate your cooperation, however. I plan to send a yacht to Beira. Rafe is being held somewhere in the southeast of Mashonaland. I'd like Lobengula's men to transfer him to a spot opposite Portuguese Beira. There's a break in the mountains there and it's the nearest way to reach him. Rhodes will have to make Lobengula want to cooperate, although I'm going to send a large ransom to sweeten the pot for Lobengula."

Salisbury locked his fingers together and regarded Damien.

"I think there is much here I don't know. Fortunately our government's recent ultimatum to Portugal to cease activities and withdraw from that area should help."

Damien didn't change expression. He certainly couldn't tell the prime minister of England he'd seen the location clearly in his prophetic mind. Right now no one had complete control over the area, although as usual the British seemed to be coming out on top.

Lord Salisbury almost smiled.

"Nor perhaps do I not want to know all the details. However, the heir of Essingdon cannot be permitted to be treated as an ordinary hostage. I'll see to Lobengula transporting him as close as possible to the border of Mashonaland and that the Portuguese understand they must help. Does Cecil Rhodes know of this?"

Damien didn't want to delve into that question. Cecil Rhodes might very well not appreciate Rafe's interference.

"I'm not cognizant of Lord Rhodes' intelligence, my lord. I'm only concerned with my friend. A man I treasure. This is a serious matter. Please know Marquis Chittenden means a lot to me and I'd be more than grateful to you for your help."

Salisbury smiled. The smile of a predator who thought he'd won.

He was not at all averse to having this enigmatic earl in his debt.

Salisbury rose and held out his hand.

"You have my assurance, Sinclair. And I'd be obliged if you call in at the War Ministry before heading back to your estate. I understand there are interesting developments you might want to know about."

Damien merely nodded. Let Salisbury think he'd won a point. Damien had reasons of his own for checking in at the ministry.

He wanted to return soon to his women. Debora was taking Rafe's capture harder than he'd expected. Would she appreciate another day in London? Perhaps distraction would help just a little. So many interesting museums and sights and a brief holiday might benefit them all.

The more he thought about it the better he liked the idea. Perhaps Debby would retire early tonight too and he could find a way to further his raging desire for Toria. He craved her as he'd not dreamed a man could yearn for a woman. Not just her body but her smallest thought. At this point his objective seemed far away. He might definitely be a raving idiot by the time he won her.

Not that he doubted he would be the winner. She was definitely destined for him. If he only managed to survive the unconscious torment Toria heaped on him.

He'd call at the War Ministry and then tell the girls he'd decided to take another day of this unexpected vacation. Unless they seriously objected.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toria was ecstatic with the idea, Debora less so.

Damien spoke softly to his sister.

"Jason won't even be to the Suez Canal by now. He will send us a wireless message as soon as he can, probably while he's waiting for passage there. Then we won't hear from him again until he reaches Beira. We've set up a schedule, fearing too frequent messages might attract attention. There is no need to hurry home, my dear."

Debby gave him an agonized glance but didn't object to another day away from home.

Damien knew from keeping track of Toria's years at Miss Carpenter's School for young ladies she'd been twice to London. She'd seen the usual attractions, Westminster Abbey, Parliament, the British Museum, the royal residences. Still he thought they could go to the British Museum once again. Exhibits there were sure to have changed since she visited two years ago.

The Polynesian exhibit from the London Missionary Society was on loan and reportedly fascinating. The ladies would never have seen anything like these amazing objects, nor had he.

It proved an inspiration, as the strange objects of worship and daily life of Polynesia intrigued them all. Some of the carved wooden figures were wrapped in bark cloth, while others featured strange pearly shells. No one commented on the several statues

with shapes suggesting the male phallus—an impossibly large male phallus. Damien wondered if his charges even recognized the sexual prowess they portrayed.

He thought not and felt vastly relieved. Toria didn't need to be frightened any more. Seemingly she was not affected at all. She simply didn't recognize the rather lewd significance of some of the idols. He felt her not unduly haunted then by her one horrible experience. Although she was definitely tainted.

But then he'd always known she was an innocent at heart.

As he hoped, Debby left the dining room to retire early. Toria looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Oh please, Damien, can we walk again a little? I enjoyed it so last night."

To his delight she blushed a deep shade of rose as she evidently remembered exactly what they'd done on their walk.

She looked down at the table.

"I mean, London is so lovely at night. And the fresh air of the evening was delightful."

Damien's grin was one of a sexually aroused man, eager to repeat the previous night's experience. And go further if he could.

"The walk was indeed delightful, my dear. Why shouldn't we enjoy it just as much tonight?"

The restaurant suddenly seemed stifling, as he threw down some money on the table without even calling for the bill and took her elbow. From the way the waiter hurried over and then bowed in gratitude he'd left enough.

He was still smiling as they walked from the dining room to the lobby and then out into the cooler night air. London always seemed to have a slightly smoky smell but tonight the scent was less pronounced. Gas lights in the center of town kept the streets safe and the big Charing Cross Square was filled with pedestrians even at this time of evening. The air itself seemed charged. Every sound was a poignant reminder they were walking the streets of one of the biggest cities in the western world.

She'd taken off her hat as soon as they left the hotel and Damien loved her being unconventional enough to expose her silky hair. The scent of her lily-of-the-valley shampoo wafted to him and he closed his eyes for a moment. He suddenly couldn't abide the people and the bustle of this busy section. As they'd done the night before, he drew Toria with him and turned down a small side street toward the Thames.

His impatience almost ruined their rapport. He no sooner got Toria away from the main street than he stopped and brought her into his arms. At first she gasped and pushed at him and he held still. Then she sighed and surprisingly melted against him.

He lifted her chin with one strong hand.

"Toria, trust me in this. I want only to kiss you again. I will never hurt you, surely you know that."



She nodded and raised her eyes to his, trust and something else. A little anticipation? He claimed her lips once again, this time a deeper kiss, his tongue invading and stroking. A kiss that soon had him quivering like the veriest untried youth. Toria slowly responded, at first with hesitation and then letting her tongue play with his. Damien's whole body tightened and he knew he was not going to stay in control if he continued too far down this pleasurable path. He allowed his hands to hold her body closely, roaming a little and barely touching the sides of her beautiful breasts. Merciful Merlin but he longed to unclothe her on the spot and take her completely. His erection was so large he knew he was in for another sleepless night.

Using his considerable willpower he managed to stop himself. *Bloody hell but this was even more difficult than last night.* Then he pressed one last light kiss against her lips and stepped back.

She clutched at him to bring him closer again.

"Did I do something wrong, Damien? Why did you stop? I don't want you to stop."

*Merciful Merlin, she'd been placed on earth strictly to drive him stark mad.*

He held her for one last light hug and then turned her in his arms so she walked beside him. He took her hand and started them both back to the hotel. She was a temptress who would send him straight to Hades if he didn't resist her. She had no idea at all what just being beside her and touching her did to him.

He sighed.

"If you knew how I hated to stop you'd know you did everything just right, love. But I must see you back to safety. Our train leaves early in the morning."

That she didn't fully understand was apparent as her expressive eyes were both puzzled and regretful.

Damien's feelings churned within him. Joy at her further small step toward love with him and deep regret he must proceed so slowly. Yet it was far better she'd want him to do more than be frightened away from where he longed to eventually take her.

He saw her to her door and kissed her hand with studied gallantry. Although he allowed his lips linger longer than necessary for a polite goodnight. Then he headed out for a longer and brisker walk.

Although he recognized exercise couldn't solve his problems.

Especially the large physical one stretching his trousers to the limit.

*Well, hell.*

## **Chapter Seven**

Damien had left instructions for Stephens to send the carriage to meet every train from London after they'd been gone one day. So he was not surprised to be met promptly when the train pulled into the Dover station. Both Debby and Toria were entranced by the surrounding chalk cliffs, peering out the windows of the train as the tracks skirted the foot of the high white crags. Although they'd both seen them on the way north, they were seemingly just as enchanted to view them again.

When catching the train for London there'd not been enough time to stroll along the spit of the Promenade. This time he'd have his carriage wait and he'd walk them along the spit so they could see the beauty of the white cliffs and their majestic heights looming above the town.

He laughingly told them to take their noses from the small glass window. Informing them it was time to get off the train, with one lady on each arm, he signaled to his coachman to wait while he started them both toward the Promenade. A famed spit starting at the railway station, thrusting out into the ocean and providing a breathtaking view of the spectacular chalk cliffs soaring into the blue, blue sky. Another beach stretched directly under the cliffs but the Promenade was the famous walk because of its better perspective.

A sudden prophetic presentiment almost brought him to a halt. Something was very wrong. He started to turn back to the carriage but then decided not to alarm the ladies. Still, he didn't linger over the gorgeous view provided by the towering cliffs but listened to their appreciative comments with muted pleasure and then turned them back to his carriage.

He looked carefully at his driver, who greeted them respectfully and rushed to assist the ladies. The man showed no undue alarm but Damien was not reassured. If trouble did not dwell with them yet, then it was coming soon.

He settled the girls in and leaned back in one corner. He'd carefully placed Toria beside him, with Debora facing them. He closed his eyes and appeared to be dozing but he was far from relaxed. Every sensory feeling in his mage's mind told him disaster waited for them at Tregaron.

He placed his arm lightly across Toria's shoulders and tried to look nonchalant. She gave him a sharp look. He'd forgotten her dratted intelligence once again but now he merely smiled at her. He did not move his protective arm.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they turned into the long driveway leading to Tregaron, Damien's sense of foreboding strengthened.

Suddenly with his preternatural vision he could see a huge black shape blocking the driveway. Almost without thought he turned Toria in his arms and pressed her lips to his. He shifted so his broad shoulders blocked most of the window, hopefully enough to keep both girls from looking out. He deliberately protracted the kiss, trying to keep her attention focused on him until the carriage passed the ominous creature. The kiss certainly distracted him, while Debby stared at them in astonishment.

He kept Toria's head pressed against his shoulder and smiled at his sister.

"You must have realized how I've come to treasure Toria. I know this is rather public but I can think of little else when she's so near."

Once again he'd forgotten Toria's damned intelligence. At first she responded by sweetly returning his kiss as if nothing else mattered in this world. Then she drew away and looked up at him, her beautiful eyes narrowing.

"This isn't at all like you, Damien. What do you mean by suddenly providing such a display in front of Debora? And don't treat me like an idiot child easily distracted by a piece of candy or an entrancing kiss."

Damien's groan was heartfelt. His stupid tactics had not only alienated Toria, he'd failed to block Debora's vision as much as he'd hoped. She sat across from them both, staring out and putting both hands to her lips.

"Oh, angels above. What on earth is that?"

Damien shouted to the driver to take to the grass and keep going but as the carriage swung out Toria looked back through the opposite window and turned as white as Debora.

"Dolly? Is that Dolly lying there?"

"No, my love, it's not Dolly."

"How can you be sure, Damien?"

"I'm sure."

She accepted his statement and calmed a little. To Damien's pleasure she believed his reassurance. He'd already checked in his mind and knew Dolly was safe in the stable. Only one possibility remained. The bastardly Heath had brought Minerva onto Tregaron grounds and shot her. In his mind he clearly saw the hole just above her eyes. At least Heath had killed her instantly. Although probably one of his hired villains had done the deed, not the coward himself. But then he wouldn't want the horse to neigh in fright and pain.

The deed had been well planned and executed. Far enough from the house so the shot would give the killer time to circle around and escape. He imagined Stephens even now had servants combing the property.

He reached for Toria again but she shook him off with a sudden frantic strength that surprised him.

"Damien, I want to go back and see if we can help."

He forcibly put his arms around her but lightly so she'd not grow more frenzied.

"None of us can help now, love. It's Minerva and she's quite dead. Heath ordered her shot. I blame myself for not foreseeing the depths of his twisted mind. I should have purchased her from him long ago."

Toria stopped struggling and began to cry with deep shaking sobs that wrenched at Damien's heart. He held her in his arms, silently cursing himself. He felt obliged to tell her the truth. Nothing else would serve. His only consolation was she believed his every word.

Damien had not envisioned a mind as perverted as the baron's, although he should have. Oh, he should have.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as they reached the house Damien hugged both women briefly and then vaulted from the carriage and let the footman hand the ladies down.

Stephens met him at the door, his own face grave.

"I've already sent men with a large cart to get the horse, my lord. The man we sent to check says it's quite dead. Where do you want it buried, sir?"

"I think behind the stables. Miss Victoria will want to know where she is. That's Minerva, her horse when she was growing up."

"Ah. Now it makes a little sense. We're dealing with a vicious man, my lord."

Damien nodded his head, not commenting on the "we".

"I'm sending to London for hired guards. Please pick a good man and tell him to carry out my orders as soon as possible."

Stephens nodded too well trained to ask the question Damien knew lurked in his mind.

"I want the perimeters of Tregaron patrolled and well protected, day and night. Stephens. I do not want local men since the baron might hold one of their family hostage to aid his wicked plans. I want men he cannot control."

Damien saw his butler's eyes widen a little, before he bowed slightly and turned away.

"I can afford it, Stephens," he said dryly.

Stephens turned back, a slight flush on his face. "I heard the shot, my lord but could not tell at first the direction it came from. The murderer planned this well."

Damien agreed. He thought Heath a murderer as well, although some might not count shooting a horse as such a terrible deed. To him, taking any life was almost unforgivable.

As Stephens went off to do his bidding, Damien watched the girls walking slowly to their rooms. Toria sent him one agonized glance as she mounted the stairs but he said

nothing. Both she and Debora needed time alone right now. He'd do his best to console Toria later.

He thought the time fast approaching when he should make plain his love for her, even if earlier than he'd planned. She might not forgive the way he'd mauled her in the carriage unless he did.

Merlin's magic but he'd handled this whole day like a blabbering dunce.

Damien strode away. Catching up on estate matters might not be a bad idea while Toria got some rest. He'd see to her relaxation, of course. Although she would want to mourn Minerva alone, hopefully not feeling as guilty as he did.

Perhaps he'd learned one thing from the horrible episode. Or rather two things. One was he must try to put himself more into Heath's mind and see if he could fathom his wicked schemes. The other was not to attempt to trick Toria. Although he'd certainly enjoyed that mistimed kiss and relished her instinctive response to him. She returned his caresses more naturally every time he touched her. Kissing her could never be a true mistake.

If she'd not been so badly wounded by her past he would have followed up on their attraction for each other much sooner. And in a much more direct fashion that would bring pleasure to them both. He was experienced enough to know she enjoyed his caresses. Yet how far could he take her fascination without repelling her? Damn if it wasn't the most delicate problem he'd ever faced. One he was determined to solve as a man and not a mage. He would use no magic on Toria.

He opened the door to his study, relishing the familiar surroundings. He found a great deal of solace in its frankly masculine décor. Red leather chairs bracketed the fireplace and his large desk sat beneath the window. Gold drapes held back with heavy red cords allowed him to gaze at the grounds he loved.

Tregaron was a very old mansion and the main abode of the earls of Sinclair for several centuries. Originally a long, three-story house built of local whitish stone, it must have looked rather severe at first. Succeeding earls added two wings, one at each end. The result was a much more graceful mansion. The stocky center appeared rather ordinary but both wings boasted elegant tall windows that let in the light. Damien had placed a new kitchen in the current servant's wing so it was more accessible to the morning and dining rooms. Green lawns surrounded the manor with his mother's herb and flower garden in the back and his father's hunting preserve far to one side. The colonnaded entrance at the front accessed a white stone fountain whose constantly tumbling waters created a charming cascade. The grass beyond the fountain extended unimpeded to the edge of the cliffs. To both sides were well tended parks. Flowering bushes changed with the season's colors in front of the lush foliage. Damien loved every inch, every bush and tree. Tregaron was an integral part of his soul.

He'd known he couldn't stand the tedium of attendance at the House of Lords, although he enjoyed doing occasional tasks for the War Ministry. He belonged at Tregaron. Much later that night he shoved aside the last of his papers, sighed and

leaned back in his commodious chair. Something about the feel, even the smell of leather always comforted him. As it would any male. He wondered briefly if Toria felt the same solace in leather. Probably not but the thought brought a smile to his heart. She possessed a sensitive soul. She'd definitely fingered and liked the velvet of her riding habit.

He looked once again at the message on the wireless that waited for him. Thank heavens it was from Jason. They'd both learned the Morse code a long time ago and now could read the messages almost automatically. It was by far the quickest way to correspond over such a large distance.

The *Sea Gull* neared the Suez Canal. An extra message than the schedule they'd arranged but it cheered Damien to see it. Jason promised to wire Damien as soon as he managed to join the next scheduled convoy. With a sigh, Damien dropped the wireless transcript on his desk. Exchanging one problem for another seemed to be his usual mode nowadays.

He'd found a modicum of relief in the message, rejoicing for more than one reason Jason was indeed about to enter the Canal. Not only was his friend close to his objective but he would enjoy a much needed respite from the rigors of ocean sailing. The prescribed slow speed for convoys passing through the Canal left the crew and passengers with little to do but take pleasure in the passing scenery.

Damien slowly climbed the stairs. Surprisingly, he could see a light glimmering from under the door to Toria's room. Was she still then distraught?

Knocking on her door, he heard a rustle of skirts as she hurried to answer. She opened it, saw who it was and propelled herself straight into his arms. He tightened them around her soft curves, fighting down the desire that always swamped him when he touched her.

"Hush, love, don't take on so."

He kissed her hair and when she continued to cling to him slowly tipped her face up to his. Damien gave her every opportunity to move away but she did not hesitate as she pulled his lips down and kissed him with little sign of restraint. The kiss rocked him to his toes. It was the kiss of an innocent woman, to be sure but one eager to learn more. Much more. A woman with more passion in her than he'd even hoped and all the more enticing since she didn't realize how much she revealed. He was too experienced to fail to recognize the desire in her beautiful eyes. Did she know even their color mesmerized him, a shade combining blue and purple and bottomless as calm ocean waters?

Did she realize she was beginning to want him?

He let the kiss deepen and she continued to try to imitate his every motion. Her lips parted under his and he instantly inserted his tongue. She hesitated and then returned the gesture, although he didn't doubt such an intimate kiss was still not familiar to her.

Their tongues danced and swirled around each other and with a gasp she tried to move even closer. Damien freed himself enough to touch her breasts, feeling their

wondrous shape and the perfect way they filled his hand as he moved it from one to the other.

Toria could not believe how very weird and wonderful she felt. Beyond strange, as if she dwelt in another world from the one she'd always known. If she found the first part of his kiss intoxicating, when he opened his mouth over hers she found no words to describe the wondrous sensation overriding all her fears. She simply surrendered to Damien, loving his masterful touch, knowing she was being seduced by an expert. But one who would never hurt her.

She reveled in sensations she'd never imagined. She tilted her head slightly to better accommodate his hot mouth. Damien's touch and kiss filled her with desire, although she couldn't say what she so badly wanted. She only knew she yearned for him to take her to this other world his touch always promised. A world she both longed for and feared.

She comprehended only a little of what she sought. She felt as if she were tumbling in space and yet she knew herself to be anchored within his strong arms. She wanted to stay in those exciting arms forever, protected from all the injuries that might ever besiege her. Damien could conquer any evil. As long as his strength surrounded her with such devastating delirium she knew nothing could harm her.

She loosened her arms from the lock around his neck and let one hand roam under his coat, hoping what thrilled her would also please him. She fingered his chest under his sheer batiste shirt, marveling at how his muscles jerked and hardened. His entire form seemed so different from hers. His chest was flat and muscled but as she moved her fingers a little lower he groaned and caught her hand. He radiated warmth, his heat almost burning her palm.

"Toria, I love you touching me. I can't tell you how much it pleases me. But not in the hall. May I come into your bedroom?"

She nodded, suddenly cognizant a servant could appear at any time. As usual, Damien was thinking only of her. She took his hand, leading him in. As soon as they entered he wrapped one arm around her and walked her to the edge of her bed.

"Toria, will you permit me to lie down with you, for just a little while? I want only to give you pleasure."

She had no idea what he meant but she knew she didn't want him to leave. She felt safe with Damien and only with Damien. She'd been terrified so long. Anything to keep Damien with her suddenly became her dearest desire. She stared at him, saying nothing. She might not actually know what he meant but she knew she trusted him.

She saw his look, one of a deep emotion she couldn't begin to interpret. She knew he wanted something from her and wanted it with every fiber of his being. Blood pounded in her ears as she regarded the striking man in front of her. Tall, erect, handsome beyond belief and yet with a yearning in his eyes she couldn't comprehend. What could she possibly offer to begin to match this matchless man?

He spread his thumb softly over her lips and then kissed her with tender awe.

"We belong together, Toria. You'll come to accept that in time. May I show you a little of the love I feel for you?"

She looked into his eyes and saw only that emotion she did not understand. Nor did she understand herself. She only knew whatever Damien wanted, she did also.

She nodded even as he lifted her in his arms and laid her gently on the bed. Not only gently but with reverence, as if she were the most precious jewel in the world. He untied the ribbon in her hair and threw it aside, running his hands through the shining mass. She clung to him even as he lifted her skirts around her waist and proceeded to caress her in places she'd never known could be so pleasurable.

At first she tried to push his hand away but when his expert fingers delved in the thick curls between her legs she felt only a soaring delight. And as he unerringly found a spot she'd not even known existed, she almost bolted from his arms.

"Hush love," he whispered. "This is for you. Only for you. Let me give you pleasure."

He continued to caress this most sensitive spot and almost before she found strength to worry about such intimacy she felt her body begin to clench. Consumed by delightful waves rolling her body, she lay back and did nothing to stop this wonder. Soon she felt an ecstasy she'd never dreamed existed flood her entire being. She clutched him and held tight as he took her to a world she'd not imagined.

She writhed in his arms as the pleasure shook her and saw a look of satisfaction on his face even as she bit her lips to keep from screaming with this unknown bliss.

Damien held her until she quieted and then kissed her and rose from the bed. Soothing her hair from her forehead and not saying a word, he somehow made it plain he'd much rather stay than go.

Finally he spoke.

"Remember I want only delight for you, Toria. Always. Never pain. Thank you for trusting me in this."

She thought he walked rather stiffly from the room, which puzzled her. She was more relaxed than she could ever remember. She felt boneless, still washed with waves of astonishing satisfaction.

Why didn't he seem as relaxed? She definitely didn't understand Damien, even though the very thought of him could make her shiver in her slippers. He was a mystery to her in so many ways, including his ability to make her crave his expert kisses. A desire that seemed to be growing with every day.

She sighed and got under the covers, luxuriating in her new and delightful feelings. He was gone but the astonishing relaxation he'd evoked stayed with her. For now it was enough.

She drifted into a blissful sleep, dreaming of Damien's wonderful caresses.



For Damien, giving Toria pleasure had been the sweetest of torture. He had reveled in her innocent response but had never forgotten he dare not lose control of himself. He'd wanted to show her loving could be an unequaled delight and to do that he could think only of her.

Her very naïveté had made him feel like a conqueror, even as he'd trembled to keep from plowing himself into her as he'd so badly craved. Still he'd known in his heart this was too soon. He'd wanted to show her a little of the glory of passion, although he'd known this pleasure was but a partial path to his ultimate goal. One he'd prayed would make her more susceptible to loving him eventually with the ardor he craved.

His previous sexual activities were meaningless but for the fact he now knew well how to pleasure his love. Nothing mattered but Toria. Trembling from head to foot, he'd watched her beautiful face as she'd started to respond. When she'd begun to thrash her body from side to side he'd moved to hold her still with one big hand on her hip and then continued his expert assault. It took her longer than he'd thought he could endure but he'd steeled himself to wait and kept himself firmly on his self-imposed leash. He'd carefully never let his full-blown erection touch her, as he'd held himself a little to one side and dedicated his passion to bringing her the relief she didn't even know she sought.

When she'd finally crested Damien had thought it the most wonderful moment of his life, even though it might also be the most intrinsically painful.

He'd kissed her and left her while he still could walk away.

He'd made her joyful and brought her peace.

May Merlin always extend all his blessings to his only love.

## Chapter Eight

Jason found he enjoyed the passage through the Suez Canal. Very pleasurable to be in a convoy of ships with no rough waves buffeting the yacht. He'd telegraphed their arrival to Damien and now he welcomed the brief respite of the Canal. Damien wired in return that Jase would find matters in order when he reached Beira. They both felt obliged to couch everything in cryptic terms, since neither Lord Salisbury nor Cecil Rhodes would appreciate even the slightest cause for public speculation. Sending a wire required relays and they'd agreed to be circumspect. No use advertising why Jason traveled to South Africa.

Quite evidently Damien had managed to secure Lord Salisbury's cooperation. No wonder, Damien possessed powers no one could easily ignore. Now he must concentrate on how to cope with Rafe's condition when he finally reached him. He wished Damien had been able to come with him, even though there'd really never been a question of his leaving Toria and Debora alone for any stretch of time. Damien's powers could so easily be necessary to deal with the evil baron.

Doubtless Damien was fretting even more than Jason. Being here well might turn out to be heartbreaking but it must be better than sitting at home and wondering.

As soon as they left the canal the trip turned miserably uncomfortable. An unexpected gale buffeted the coast of Africa and the relatively small yacht rolled and lurched with the impact of the storm. When the *Sea Gull* finally docked at Beira Jason was worried and weary. To his surprise, an officer of Rhodes' army, a Captain Reeves, stood waiting for him and immediately requested permission to board.

Jason welcomed him with dignity but also with restraint. He'd no idea if Cecil Rhodes felt incensed or relieved to see someone appear to rescue Rafe. As it turned out, Rhodes was well cognizant a noble son of a prominent British family had been captured by rebel forces. The fact Rafe had gone into enemy territory on his own was never mentioned. Rhodes was evidently too clever to court enemies at home. The Portuguese must not want trouble and seemed to be cooperating.

The captain saluted smartly.

"What can we do to help, sir? I've been instructed to assist you in any way I can. We've succeeded in having your friend taken to the very border of Mashonaland but then we could not make Lobengula bring him further. Our Portuguese hosts are being quite helpful. But Lobengula demands a ransom, I fear, in order to let your friend cross the boundary."

Jason nodded. "Lord Sinclair expected that and I've come prepared. What I need are a few men to help me secure the Duke of Essingdon's son and transfer him to Lord

Sinclair's yacht. I have no idea of how mobile our friend will be after so long a time in Lobengula's hands."

Captain Reeves looked solemn. "I think he'll not be in good shape, sir. Lobengula's men are not known for treating a hostage with kindness. Would four men be of help? Plus myself, of course."

Jason smiled his first genuine smile in the long days since he'd left England.

"Immeasurably. Thank you. And I'd like to leave right away. With this small a ship I can't really take many of the crew without jeopardizing its safety so I'm very grateful for the addition of your men. If you'd send them to the dock I'll wire Lord Sinclair and then be ready to leave. I assume your men know the way better than I do?"

"Yes sir, as I do and I'll be with them. You can leave your crew on the ship so they'll be ready to sail as soon as we return with your friend."

A blessing Jason hadn't expected. He sometimes forgot the power Damien exercised. He really shouldn't. Damien was a commanding man in many ways.

"I'll fetch my men and come back. We should use horses as they are the faster method. I assume you ride, sir?"

"Of course," Jason answered with a smile. "Like most British country gentlemen."

Captain Reeves grinned. "We'll not be long, sir."

He saluted smartly, rode away and true to his word returned within the half hour with four mounted men and two extra horses.

"In case your friend isn't up to riding, sir, we've brought a litter as well."

With that dire reminder the little party set out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jason found himself not only unexpectedly saddle sore but increasingly apprehensive as the small group neared the border between Mashonaland and Mozambique. Rhodes' control over Mashonaland was not complete but the small party experienced no difficulty even as they approached the border. Portuguese guards had apparently been instructed to let them through and they had no trouble as they crossed from Beira to a slight pass in the mountainous border. There they were stopped by armed Africans, strong black men whose powerful build left no doubt of their ability to repel any challenge.

As the evident leader of the group stepped forward, so did Jason.

"You are here for what reason, white man?"

Jason stood still. There seemed no use wasting pleasantries with this formidable group.

"I am here to collect my good friend, Marquis Chittenden. I believe you have him in your custody?"

The impressive man so evidently a leader merely looked stoically at the small white group before him.

"His title means nothing to me. But I assume he is then valuable to you. As he is to us. Are you prepared to pay for his release?"

Jason could only admire his opponent's magnificent physique and bearing, as well as his command of the English language. Not at all what he'd expected. A fleeting thought he might understand why Rafe had tried, even though unsuccessfully, to aid this lost cause tempered his response. There was more here in the politics of South Africa than Jason could grasp. In fact, he'd made little effort up 'til now to understand. Inner workings of the opposing forces just hadn't interested him much, nor did he think many of his countrymen cared. Most were content with the fact Britannia was amassing gold, diamonds and land.

Jason grimaced. He'd never be so short-sighted again.

He faced the tall African squarely.

"Yes, we are prepared to pay. Not sight unseen, however. When you deliver the Marquis to us we will pay the ransom. I think you specified gold?"

The tall African almost grinned. At least it might be called a smile, hastily hidden.

"We will have to come to an understanding. One half now and the other half when we deliver your friend."

Jason could see no way out of this. If he paid over half and they didn't bring Rafe to him he'd be out a great deal of Damien's gold. But this stalwart opponent would never be satisfied with promises from a white man. Too many had proven empty as a puff of wind.

Jason put out his hand. "Shall we shake on this agreement, sir?"

He thought the African looked startled and then pleased.

"Yes, we will. Sir."

Jason recognized the "sir" for the concession it was and grasped the other's hand.

"Here is half of what I brought. Your chief never specified an amount, so we went by what we could find about past negotiations with your people. We brought what we thought you'd want in gold."

He held out one of the bags of coins, conscious that at any time the Africans could easily overwhelm his small group and take all the money. Somehow the thought didn't worry him.

Captain Reeves looked startled and uneasy but Jason motioned him to silence.

The African took the bag and hefted it but didn't try to check the amount. Then he turned to one of his men.

"Bring the prisoner to his friends."

Two of them immediately trotted off, as everyone waited.

Now Lobengula's man seemed to look uneasy but they all remained in silence until the two who'd left returned with a litter made of poles and barkcloth.

And a Rafe Jason almost didn't recognize.

Thin to the point of emaciation, slivers of gray wove through his draggled dark hair and lines of suffering were etched plainly on his face. A heavily bearded face, the silver-gray streaking showing even more plainly there than in his hair. His right arm lay crookedly at his side, burn marks crossed his forehead and his shirtless body showed many more burns and what looked to Jason to be the end of welts caused by a whip.

Rafe still managed a grin and held out his gaunt left hand.

Jason grasped it, hoping he didn't show his distress. His friend needed no negative emotions at a time like this.

"I knew you or Damien would come," Rafe said simply.

"Of course," Jason said, hoping he hadn't hurt Rafe when he shook his bony hand. "Let's start back."

Jason turned, handing the second bag of gold to Lobengula's representative.

"Here is the remainder of the gold," Jason said simply.

No "sir" this time. After seeing Rafe's pitiful state he found himself incapable of thanking the man for fulfilling his end of the bargain. The large African looked just a little shamed as he took the gold.

"I'm glad you claimed your friend," he said simply in his impeccable English. He turned away, motioning for his men to follow.

Jason waited and watched until they'd disappeared, although he and the others immediately backed well away from the boundary line and into safer territory. Then he drew a jar of ointment from his saddlebag and came back to Rafe.

"Damien sent this with me. I'm sure it will make you easier."

Rafe's eyes sparked with a little more life than before.

"I should have remembered how prescient he is."

"And a fantastic healer," Jason said simply. He began to spread the ointment over all the scarred tissue. Rafe sighed in relief, so evidently it was another of Damien's miracle concoctions.

The other men stood by in horrified silence.

After giving Rafe a minute Jason asked gently, "I'd like to do your back. Do you need help turning on your stomach, Rafe?"

"No, if I use my left arm I can do it."

Jason could hardly resist helping, as Rafe laboriously turned himself on his stomach and one of the men in the escort gasped aloud. Rafe had been repeatedly flogged and ugly whip marks crisscrossed over his once powerful body.

Jason found tears blurring his eyes as he applied the ointment as gently as he could and Rafe seemed to relax a little under the soothing salve.

"Do you want me to help you turn over again, Rafe?"

"Definitely yes this time. It's a little harder going this direction. Just give me a hand. My back already feels much better but I want to see and rejoice in every step as we leave this godforsaken spot of hell."

Jason took his good left hand and turned him again so he now lay on what must be excruciating and man-made injuries. Thanks to Damien he'd brought plenty of ointment, which was waiting on the ship. He swallowed his sudden rage at the atrocities heaped on Rafe and turned to Captain Reeves.

"Will you take one end of the litter on your saddle and I'll take the other? I think we'd best leave him on the litter they brought and not transfer him."

"I'd be honored, sir."

Together they suspended the African litter between their horses and began the journey to Beira at about half the speed they'd used to gallop in.

Jason worried about every jouncing step the horses took, even as they kept to a slow pace. About a half-hour along the road he looked down at Rafe's sleeping face. Evidently Damien had used more than one magical ingredient in making his salve. Much relieved, Jason settled down for the wearisome trip to *The Sea Gull*.

## Chapter Nine

Damien stared at the latest wireless message. It was all too easy to read between the lines of this one.

*I have Rafe on ship. Will proceed home immediately. Ointment proving essential.*

When the two girls asked him at dinner if he'd received any word he simply said yes, Rafe and Jason were in Beira and would soon be on their way home. Something about Damien's silence kept them both quiet and he soon excused himself and went to his library. He simply could not talk to anyone tonight.

He shut his eyes and tried to summon a definite vision of Rafe but couldn't do so. He should know better than try. His prophetic visions could never be commanded, only endured when they chose to appear. Sometimes they left him feeling as spineless as a dish of water, although not always. With his last vision some time ago he'd seen Rafe being marched away by two big Africans. Knowing the hatred of both blacks and whites he feared the worst. Trust Rafe to think as one man he could volunteer to help and solve an insoluble problem.

Damien sat at his desk, lowering his head in his hands. It was not like him to be morose but he seemed more powerless than he cared to be. Besides the problem of Rafe, Debora seemed to grow more listless every day. And Toria refused to meet his eyes. He'd known she'd found pleasure in his arms and perhaps he should have expected her to withdraw a little and into her fears again but still it hurt.

The feel of her soft skin and the heated kiss they'd shared haunted him like a hovering wraith, refusing to disappear and leave him in peace.

A knock suddenly sounded on this door. Damn, whatever household problem had arisen, why couldn't Stephens deal with it?

He strode impatiently to the door and opened it to find Toria.

A delectable Toria, her hair cascading down her back. Wrapped in a voluminous robe but still enchanting. No garment made could diminish the beauty of her face.

She simply stood there, her enormous eyes probing his. His heartbeat quickened as he took her hands and drew her in.

He looked at her in wonder for a moment and then took her lightly in his arms.

"What can I do for you, love?"

His gaze fell for just a moment to her bare toes. Pretty pink toes, as enchanting as the rest of her. He loved graceful feet on women. He groaned. Her gorgeous hair always affected him. Did she have to expose her enticing toes? And dig them into the plush carpet as if in distress?

Toria came into the room, one step at a time. She seemed deep in worry about something. Now what bothered his gorgeous love?

"I couldn't sleep, Damien. You were so unapproachable all day. As if I'd offended you. Did I give you an utter disgust of me last night? Being so forward, I mean?"

Damien was as surprised as he could remember. Merciful Merlin, here he'd spent the day trying to keep his hands off her and she thought he was acting distant.

He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. At any time she wanted, she could lift her face for his kiss. When she kept her eyes lowered he didn't move but spoke softly.

"I would like to kiss you every minute of every day, as well as all night. Does this tell you what you want to know?"

She raised her eyes and smiled just a portion of her glorious smile.

"Not really, Damien. I so much enjoyed your last kisses. I enjoyed everything we did last night. Why don't you kiss me now?"

He lowered his head and claimed her as his one true love. She might not yet understand but she belonged only to him. He let the kiss deepen until she nestled her body close to his and he found himself shaking once more with need. She responded eagerly to his kisses and for a moment he let his lips claim hers as he felt his ready erection surge against her. He moved his body a little and pressed into her so she could not mistake his arousal. His body fitted flush against hers and for the moment she didn't seem to care.

After a time both tortuously long and unbearably short he stepped back a little. It was time to make her aware of some of his feelings for her. He simply couldn't go on pretending he wanted only friendship.

"This is why I don't kiss you oftener, Toria. When I kiss you I want to claim you completely. When I gave you pleasure the last time I kissed you I loved your response but I'm afraid to do it again. If I did I might not be able to stop my body from making you mine. I want you very badly. All of you."

She stayed in his arms a moment, searching his face. He stayed still, knowing it was necessary she understand him and to realize he was a very masculine man. He looked back at her gravely, hoping the love in his eyes and in his heart would help her accept what must seem almost insupportable to her.

When she blushed a deep rose he knew she'd understood.

"You mean kissing me makes you want to do *that*?"

He didn't like the horror sounding in her voice, although he should have expected it.

"Yes, my dear, it does. I long to show you how physical love between a man and a woman can be the most pleasurable experience in the world. If there is lasting love between the two when they join bodies it's purely wonderful. For both of them."

She tried to back away but he held her to him.



"Toria, I love you. I would never hurt you. Ever. Someday you will accept this as fact. Then I'll give you pleasure you've never imagined."

She scooted from under his arms and backed away, tears in her beautiful eyes.

"I thought you were different. I don't want to ever 'join bodies' as you call it. It's horrid and it hurts and I can't believe you want to do it to me."

"Toria, listen to me. I vow on my very soul I will never hurt you."

He wasn't sure she heard him as she turned and rushed from the room.

With a deep sigh, he glanced down at his still tented trousers. He tried to distract himself and picked up the latest newspaper. The report read that Cecil Rhodes had hired a young adventurer, Frank Johnson, to invade Mashonaland for him. Johnson hired volunteers with a promise of three thousand acres of land for each and twenty-one acres of mining claims. On Rhodes' advice Johnson selected mostly sons of rich families, on the theory noble or wealthy families would be more likely to solicit British government support if their sons needed rescue. On 11 July, while Jason was nearing Africa to rescue Rafe, the small force of men crossed the river Tuli and invaded Lobengula's country. In no time at all the British flag would fly over Mashonaland, completing the violation of the treaty Lobengula had been tricked into signing.

Damien read the news with disgust but no real surprise.

He suddenly wondered if Johnson knew about Rafe before making his decision to recruit primarily sons of wealthy families. Perhaps he'd heard from Rhodes a rescue effort for one such son was underway and it started him thinking of a clever method to insure cooperation from the aristocracy. No way to know for sure but a definite possibility.

That news didn't do anything to improve a day ending even worse than it began.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toria fled Damien as if he were in truth her private demon. Men were all alike. And she had been so sure he was different. They all wanted to harm women. Even her beloved Damien.

She threw herself on her bed and let the tears flow. Almost unbidden, Damien's last words soon came winging into her frightened mind. He'd vowed on his soul never to injure her. He'd sworn his oath. How could he say that when his masculine body, his very masculine body, had betrayed his own desire? His thing had felt huge as he pressed himself against her.

His desire that would surely hurt her as much as the baron had.

How could he make the promise he had? Memories of her birthday three years before filed like a panorama behind her closed eyes. Images she'd tried again and again to erase but never with any success. The baron ripping off her clothes and then opening his trousers and immediately plunging his huge appendage into her. She remembered screaming with pain and how he'd smiled. That big stick probably had a name but she

didn't know it. Her mother died too early to have talked to her of such matters. Surely she would have warned her daughter of how vile men could be when she grew older. Her mother loved her. She wouldn't have let her only child remain in ignorant danger.

A sudden thought startled her into opening her eyes and sitting upright. Her parents had both been happy. She'd forgotten just how wonderfully happy her mother was. Her memories were all of a laughing mother who touched her father at any opportunity. Her father's glance was loving whenever he gazed at his wife or his daughter. Indeed, her father's warm glance at her mother much resembled Damien's fleeting looks at her.

Could she be wrong? Damien had been nothing but trustworthy. In so many situations and at so many times. No word or action ever showed him as other than a completely honorable man.

Even when he'd given her such pleasure, she'd known he was thinking only of her. Had it cost him to have her writhing in his arms and then let her loose? It might have. A new thought for her and a sobering one. She knew so little. And she felt ashamed.

She remembered how she'd felt fulfilled and glowing in a manner she'd never imagined and to an amazing extent. Had he found any satisfaction for himself? He'd been as always concentrating on her happiness and not his own. She just didn't know if he'd found any pleasure in the encounter but she thought perhaps not. In fact he'd seemed almost in pain as he left.

What would her mother have done?

She lay back on her pillows. Memories of the nights when she and Damien walked in London came back, although in truth the remembrance of his kisses never left her completely. She'd felt so protected and so warm. In fact, she'd been delightfully hot. When Damien was close to her, even as much as a foot away, the heat from his big body reached out to her. A pleasing heat, yet at sometimes as jolting as lightning in a summer storm. Such a commanding man in every respect, beautiful in body as well as in spirit.

A man of intrepid honor.

She let her thoughts dwell on that splendid body. Broad shoulders, sloping to a narrow waist. Long legs whose every stride showed their power. Imposing height, every controlled motion conveying his inherent strength. Dark and handsome as a storybook hero. A magnificent male.

Nothing of weakness marred his character, either. She pitied the man who ever tried to oppose him. And his eyes. So intent when he'd haughtily stared down the baron, soft and melting when he gazed into hers. Little flecks of light sometimes flashing blue in his clear gray eyes. Beautiful eyes and an altogether beautiful man.

She was beginning to think herself insane. How could she reject him so violently? Had she alienated him forever with her ridiculous fears?

With a sharp sigh, her shoulders slumped. Yet she couldn't have done differently. She couldn't stand the thought of anyone, even Damien, ever invading her body again. She loved his touch, true and she hated to think she might be forced to give up the

kisses and delicious warmth of his caresses. Her whole body seemed to tumble and float when he touched her so intimately. She'd never thought she could feel desire for any man but an unaccustomed quiver shook her body whenever he came near. She feared it was longing, a longing only Damien could ever assuage.

She would never know fulfillment. How could she? Going any further with any man, even Damien, would prove beyond her ability.

Her entire frame shuddered as her thoughts carried her back to the horror she could never forget. She'd tried and tried to put the baron and his violence behind her but still she knew he lurked out there, waiting to ravish her body again. And hurt her again. She'd tried to bury every hateful memory but they always lurked in the back of her mind.

She must stop such useless thinking and try to compose herself for sleep.

Still her thoughts churned. Could she be wrong? Would trusting Damien bring her pain or pleasure? Was she being fair to Damien? Surely she'd offended the one person in this world she didn't wish to harm. Who meant so much to her. So very much.

A part of her definitely wanted to let him show her the heaven his kisses pledged. His eyes promised her a paradise she knew she'd never find without Damien leading the way.

But heaven help her, how could she even think letting him show her more?

She tossed and turned on her bed, finding no answer. Why on earth couldn't she make up her mind?

Why couldn't she even understand herself?

## Chapter Ten

Damien knew that above all he must lessen Toria's fear of him. He forced a friendly brother attitude he was far from feeling. Of course he felt friendly but not exactly like a brother. After a day of seeing her eyes upon him whenever she thought he wasn't looking, he casually suggested an early ride the next morning.

Merciful Merlin, the chit had no idea how her luminous eyes revealed her thoughts. He knew she kept studying him but he refused to invade her mind to find out what those thoughts could be. After a slight hesitation, which he'd expected, she agreed. Which he'd also expected. She loved Dolly and the exercise too much to resist.

They set out in the direction of the boundary between Tregaron and the vacant land. Toria's eyes kept roving, never quite looking directly at him. Suddenly she straightened slightly as if she'd come to a decision. She urged Dolly ahead, then looked over her shoulder and laughed. A forced laugh but still a laugh.

Before he could determine what to say she called back.

"I'll race you, Damien. To the big tree up ahead."

Before he could stop her she set off, rapidly increasing Dolly's stride to a gallop.

"Come back, Toria," he shouted after her but she'd taken off. Damn it, they'd soon be past Tregaron property. As she flashed by the invisible border he saw one of the guards come out from the shade of a smaller tree and then step back when he saw Damien thunder by. Damien didn't think Toria had even seen the man and he too ignored him as he posted after Toria. At least the man did his job.

The large tree still loomed quite a way off and Damien and Araby were gaining. But to his dismay, they were now well into the territory of the vacant land. He'd certainly not meant her to go this far but then he wasn't sure he'd ever pointed out the non-visible boundary between the properties. He'd thought his being with her would be enough.

Merlin's magic but she looked magnificent. Tawny hair matching the color of the ripening wheat they'd just passed but much more vibrant. Glowing with golden streaks in the sunlight. Beautiful carriage and excellent control of her mare. Dolly's black coat formed an excellent contrast for the vivid coloring and vitality of his beautiful Toria.

But as soon as he caught up with her he'd clearly explain the limits and how far she could go even when he rode with her. Although he could sense no present danger, he didn't like her being off his own property.

They were nearing the tree and he flashed by her, reining in so he was only slightly ahead.

As they neared the tree and slowed, she laughed with delight. All the glories of the morning sun seemed concentrated on her glowing face and mischievous smile.

He grinned, suddenly pleased after all she'd proposed the race. He suspected she'd done so on purpose. Was she then regretful she'd fled from him two nights before? Did she want to reestablish their former rapport? The day seemed even sunnier as he halted both their horses.

She looked down at him, still laughing as he vaulted off Araby and lifted his arms to lift her down.

"Come down here, you madcap girl. At least we can sit in the shade for a moment."

He longed to press her body to his as she slid off Dolly but he resisted. Another surprise, for she looked almost disappointed when he abruptly let her go.

Then she ran her fingers through her loosened hair and shook her head.

"That dratted ribbon fell off again. And you must have cheated, my lord. I don't know how but I'm sure you did. I had a good head start, you know."

She grinned at him and he shook his finger at her.

"My girl, if anyone cheated it was you. You took off without the proper warning."

"Just words, Damien. I almost beat you and you know it."

He took her hand and started to help her sit under the leafy tree. She relaxed for a moment and then uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Oh look, Damien. Back there in the trees. A small shack. If it's on your land you should be ashamed. It's quite disreputable."

Dismay flooded through him at how far they'd raced but he spoke lightly.

"No, it's not my shame, you critical wench. Where we are right now is far past the border between Tregaron and the neighboring property. I don't know who owns the hut but the neglect is not mine."

"Can we go look at it? I dearly love mysteries. Does anybody use it at all? Maybe a secret meeting place for highway robbers?"

Damien laughed. "You're a romantic at heart, aren't you? I'm sure it's just an old shack with nothing in it. It's certainly dilapidated. I think we should go home now. It's only an abandoned hut."

Suddenly his prophetic senses took over. He saw himself jerking open the door of the shack, as if in a hurry. He didn't know how but this shack would come to be important. He thought of taking her home and coming back alone but her eager face made him hesitate. Surely one quick look inside couldn't be dangerous. And he didn't want to spoil her happy mood just when she seemed again receptive to him.

"Let's go, Madame Adventurer," as he took her hand and led her through the woods.

On closer inspection they found the hut rundown but not as dilapidated as distant appearances suggested. The side facing Tregaron property appeared to be the most

neglected. Someone had boarded the windows but even here the slats seemed a little newer than the shabby wood originally forming the shack. Why had he never investigated before? Mostly because of his concentration on Tregaron. There'd been much to do when he first inherited and his love for the place motivated most of his actions for years. His father had neglected his properties for too long after his wife died, although he'd never neglected Damien. He'd made sure he taught his son everything he knew about being a mage. But he'd had no other friends his first ten years. Probably why he loved Jason and Raphael so much.

He'd not pursued his place in the House of Lords because he loved being here and not in London. Tregaron had become his home and family.

Still he should have made an inspection of this area sooner. He'd forgotten about the hut but his not remembering might turn out to be a mistake. Perhaps even a significant mistake. The War Ministry had warned him they suspected smuggling of white slaves somewhere near Dover. Although this shack seemed too insignificant to merit attention. Certainly there was only one room and a small room at that. Still the slats were added since he'd last investigated this property some time ago.

His concern for Toria and Rafe must have distracted him. His anxieties and the lustful thoughts he fought constantly to subdue. Thoughts resurging as Toria ran a little ahead of him and he admired the view of her entrancing straight back and rounded derrière. She possessed a most graceful walk and the way her hips naturally undulated would rivet any male's attention. At least one with an ounce of virility. An endowment he suspected he possessed in abundance.

"Let's see if there's a door," Toria said, running around the hut and then stopping as she spotted what she sought.

"Oh look, Damien, there it is."

Once again she proved too quick for him. The door opened easily for her as she pushed against it and she wrinkled her nose with disappointment.

"Not even any furniture. Just a few boxes."

Damien followed her in, somehow knowing this whole scenario was destined to be important.

The boxes were piled, not against the wall but just slightly off the center on the small space comprising the floor. Dust plainly revealed the scuffling of recent footprints.

"I think we should leave, Toria. There's nothing here."

Toria looked at him, her blasted intelligence shining in her mesmerizing eyes. They now glared at him.

"I'm not ready to leave, Damien. Those boxes are newer than the shed's appearance would have you think."

Damien chuckled.

"I've underestimated you once again, my dear. You're clever as well as more reckless than I expected. I agree with you, although I feel a sense of danger in this place. May I escort you home and investigate all this in the future? I promise to keep you informed of anything I discover."

Her indignant glance told him how ridiculous she found his question.

"Damien, I can't believe you just mouthed such nonsense. Help me shift the boxes. There must be some reason they're piled in such an unlikely spot."

"Toria."

He groaned and she cast him a supremely irritated look. He shrugged and then moved to help her as she struggled with the boxes.

"You're a foolish girl as well," he muttered. "Here, let me do that last one. These are not heavy for me but they probably are for you."

He picked up the last box and they both stood staring at a trap door with a large ring attached. Damien looked at Toria's expectant eyes and considered how he could lure her away before they went any further. There was nothing he could think of that might work.

He tugged on the ring and shifted the door to one side. A musty smell immediately flooded the room. The scent of a space long covered, with the tangy odor of the ocean seeping through. A steep drop seemed to slope sharply to the right before curving out of sight. Steps were cut into the portion of the tunnel they could see. The soil here appeared not as uniformly chalk as at Dover and the tunnelers must have found a rocky obstacle and veered around it to reach the surface.

Without a lantern they could see no further. Damien immediately counted his blessings. He didn't want Toria to witness any more. Besides, he knew well where the tunnel would lead. The one large cove on the beach nearby, although not on his property, where a ship could land safely and secretly. Well protected by a few large rocks from any casually curious who might walk by.

Toria grabbed his sleeve. Even such a slight touch fired his blood but he merely raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Damien, I want to see where those steps lead. This is so exciting. Let's see where they go."

He already knew the answer to that. Since he had no intention of exposing her to such dangerous knowledge, he carefully lowered and shut the trap door.

"We will do nothing more today, Toria. We do not have a torch with us. We're not on Tregaron land, as your mad chase led us far beyond the boundaries. This is not our problem."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"And then whose is it, my lord earl?"

Damien was hard put not to chuckle at the indignation flaring from her beautiful eyes. He leaned over and lightly kissed her lips, despite his resolve not to touch her again until she'd had time to accept him.

To his surprise she didn't flinch as he'd expected. Indeed she briefly put her hands behind his neck before hastily stepping away. Trying not to show his pleasure, he turned to the stack of boxes.

"We'd better replace them exactly as they were, Toria."

He proceeded to do so swiftly as she stared at him.

"You memorized their order, didn't you, Damien?"

He answered lightly. "Not really memorizing. But I can picture where they were. Don't worry, I'll get it straight."

When he finished the stack looked as untouched as when they'd entered the hut. To her astonishment, he picked up an old piece of newspaper from the floor and flicked it around so their footprints didn't show near the boxes. Then he proceeded to one side of the room and lay down, heaving his powerful body around to disturb the dust in that area.

"Damien, what on earth are you doing?" she asked, eyeing him as if he'd gone suddenly mad.

He chuckled as he rose to his feet and took her hand to lead her to the door.

"My love, I want it to appear as if I'd flung you to the floor and had my way with you."

He kissed her nose and grinned as she gaped at him.

"You should see yourself, Toria. You'd think I'd sprouted horns and a scaly tail. If by any chance anyone has this hut under observation I want it to appear as if we entered for a purpose of our own. Better they believe we had another agenda to pursue in here, instead of just being curious."

When she blushed a deep rose he laughed.

"I would have found it quite enjoyable, I assure you. Now let's get out of here and go home."

He didn't add he suddenly found the still and stale air dangerous to them both. This hut loomed darkly in his mind but there was no need for her to know how prescient his visions could be. He wanted to see her safely home to Tregaron.

His initial delight when she'd consented to ride with him now nagged at him. Why did she have to be along when he realized the hut could be more important than he'd suspected? He'd have to somehow ensure she never came this way again.

They rode in silence until Damien knew they were near Tregaron property. This time the guard stepped out in full sight and Toria gasped.

"Is that one of the border guards? Were we that far away?"



Damien seized the opportunity. "Yes. Will you promise me not to go past our boundaries again, Toria? I want your word on this."

It took her a moment to respond. "I can see why you want me to promise. Will you give me one in return? If you go back to the hut, will you take me?"

Damien grinned. Little minx. He couldn't blame her. She felt the hut was her discovery, after all. Yet he couldn't give his pledge completely.

"Can we compromise here? No, just a little, Toria. Don't look such daggers at me. How about if I give you my word to tell you either before or immediately after I go. I might be forced to return sometime in the future without having time to inform you."

She faced him with an imperious air. Head high and not giving an inch she didn't have to.

"I think you're equivocating, Damien."

For a moment he forgot everything but how beautiful she appeared when she was angry. Well, maybe not angry but certainly indignant. Did she have any idea how that slight pout on her lips made kissing her irresistible? He seized her reins and halted both their horses. And then leaned over and kissed her again with restrained passion but still warmly enough to cause her to lift her hands to her flushed cheeks.

"That wasn't fair, Damien. We're discussing something important here."

"Of course we are, love. But do we have a bargain? Your word you'll not put yourself in danger and mine to inform you of my movements?"

She grinned and slapped his hands from her reins. "Agreed. But only because I think it's the best I can do. I didn't really intend to go there again without you anyway. Too spooky. Although I'm glad we're friends again."

Had the little vixen just tricked him? He grinned back and in perfect accord they rode leisurely to the stables.

The dreadful embarrassment of their disastrous night together had vanished.

## Chapter Eleven

As soon as he entered the house Stephens came rushing to him.

"My lord, you've received another wireless."

Damien raised his eyebrows in pretended astonishment. He'd long known Stephens' loyalty sometimes tempted him to exceed the limits of a butler's duty.

"And how would you know that, Stephens? I wasn't aware your duties required you to enter my study when I'm gone."

"I happened to pass in the hall and heard the machine clattering, my lord."

Not quite genuine indignation in his voice but Damien let the subject drop. He sometimes couldn't resist teasing his very proper butler. He never questioned his loyalty. Just his blasted curiosity. Damien flicked him an amused glance and hurried to his office. Grabbing at the message, he immediately went to find Debby and located her in the hall outside her bedroom.

"Jason and Rafe are nearing England, my dear. They're coming up the coast of Spain and are well past the Strait of Gibraltar. We'll be getting news soon from the captain or Jase."

Pleased by her genuine smile, he turned to Toria who'd just come up the stairs.

"This is the news we've all waited for."

Debby tugged on his sleeve.

"Does Jason say anything else, Damien?"

He shook his head, knowing she longed to know Rafe's condition.

"I'm sorry, Debby but no."

He didn't voice his knowledge they'd all know soon enough and the news would not be pleasing. If Rafe was in good condition Jason would have said at least that much. Damien would not have believed him if he had. Damien's main concern at this point was just how bad Rafe's condition would turn out to be.

In the meantime he'd better be making plans to bring Rafe to Tregaron where Damien's medical skills as well as his magic could do their best. Rafe certainly wouldn't be able to go to his own small house outside London. Of course they'd take the large carriage and plenty of pillows and blankets. He'd tell Stephens to make preparations.

He stopped short in the hallway. He clearly saw Rafe, wasted and injured, with one arm crooked in a peculiar manner. The man looked in worse shape than Damien expected after two weeks of rest and application of ointment on the ship. His face was haunted, with no trace of his endearing grin. In fact, as Damien watched, he lay in his

bunk and turned his head to the wall. Damien's heart dropped in his chest. Much more than physical healing was necessary here.

Pray Merlin he possessed the power to mend a damaged soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

Damien stood tapping the piece of paper from the wireless in his hand. They'd all clung to the house waiting for further news. When another wireless came instead of a phone call Damien knew Jason wanted their communication to be private.

"We are here and I need help. Rafe and I are at a small inn near where *The Gull* is docked. 'The Wicked Wench'. Rafe refuses to come to Tregaron with me."

Nothing else. Of course Damien must go to Dover and fetch Rafe. But what to do about Toria and Debby? Even with the extra guards he'd not feel they were protected against the evil surrounding them. Not only the baron, who doubtless would know if Damien left but the ominous little hut worried him. He'd wired the Secretary of State for War as soon as they made their discovery of the boxes in the shack and been told to leave it alone for now. The Secretary would put an extra watch on the place but didn't want smugglers to think anyone was interested.

Damien should stand by for further directives. Stand by as in being ready at all times.

Everything might go wrong if he left. And yet he must help Rafe. His head in his hands, he tried to reconcile his conflicting duties. His mind seemed a little sluggish but then being around Toria had long ago launched his brain into a permanent state of turmoil.

As a man of honor, he couldn't let his personal emotions overrule his duties.

But which duty came first? His duty as a man, as a patriot, or as a friend?

He was not normally indecisive. His path almost at once became clear. His country and his friend could survive without him. Toria might not. On this at least he had no true choice.

He went to tell the ladies to be ready to go with him. They would leave within the hour.

He came to Debora's room first and met a resistance he'd not expected.

She opened her door and didn't change expression when he explained Rafe was not well and they were going to fetch him. As soon as she and Toria could be ready.

"Did Jason or Rafe request I come with you?"

Damien blinked. "No but the subject wasn't mentioned. I'm asking you to go for your own safety. As I am Toria."

"Does Rafe know your plan to bring him home with you?"

He hedged a moment and could tell she sensed his slight hesitation.

"Does he want to come here, Damien?"

Merciful Merlin, she was as relentless in her questioning as a hammer pounding the anvil. Again he paused. He didn't know how to answer truthfully.

"Does he want to come, Damien? I know his pride. If he's less than one hundred percent himself he'd rather be alone. He certainly won't want me or Toria to see him. Maybe you but no one else."

He grunted in exasperation. "You know perfectly well I can't leave you here, Debora."

Cold eyes stared at him. He'd never seen his sister so sure of being right. Her attitude almost flustered him, as he debated what to do. She started to turn from him.

"Take Toria, then. I'm safe from the baron. Take Toria. I'm not going."

She marched to her room, back rigid and head stiffly proud as she shut the door behind her. Rather emphatically.

Damien groaned. He couldn't carry her screaming all the way to Dover. Well, he'd tell the guards to move closer to the house. If Debby were inclined to wander, which he doubted, they'd have orders to stop her by any means necessary. Although no way would he permit Toria to rebel and stay at home with Debora.

He firmed his jaw as he walked. He didn't feel like facing another belligerent woman.

Toria stood in her doorway even before he knocked.

"Don't look so forbidding, Damien. I'll be glad to go. I was just coming into the hall and heard you both. I'm not as skilled as Debby by any means but a woman's touch sometimes helps."

Once again she'd made him speechless. Would this wondrous girl never cease to surprise him?

"Thank you," he said simply. He turned to give the further orders necessary before they could leave. His heart lightened a little. At least Toria would be beside him.

Certainly he could protect her better from whatever danger was coming. Coming ever closer, he greatly feared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later he was not so pleased. He'd not counted at all on how her presence, warm and near him in the closed carriage, would affect his unruly body.

Toria finally looked at him curiously and touched his hand.

"Damien, are you uncomfortable? You seem to shift around a lot. Although I think your carriage is excessively well padded."

He shot her such a look of indignation she widened her eyes. For once he didn't care, he wouldn't even try to hide his annoyance.

"You should know by now being near you affects my too responsive body. I'm sorry if I offend you, Miss Innocence but that's the way it is. Now please sit on your own side of the seat and look out the window."

He turned his body away from her as much as he could but he could tell by her small "oh" that she'd spotted his erection. After all, one could hardly miss anything that large. He could influence his actions but not his reactions. Merlin help him but he wasn't really superhuman, much as he might wish to be. Even his powers didn't enable him to control his constant desire to grab her and press her every inch against him while kissing those luscious lips. He wasn't even sure right now he could limit himself to just a kiss, although maybe he could. He didn't care to put it to a test.

Maybe he could stop himself from following through for now but nothing would halt this tormenting craving for Toria save possessing her entirely.

Toria put a hand on his sleeve and he pushed it off.

"Please don't, Toria. I have nothing to say to you right now."

His tone was sharper than he'd ever used with her.

Her eyes startled, she withdrew to her corner. They did not speak again and passed the rest of the trip in silence. Damien tried not to notice her, although he knew her questioning eyes sometimes fixed on him.

The Wicked Wench proved to be a small but clean inn, one evidently patronized by the more particular captains or crews. When Damien's coach with its distinctive crest drew up, the proprietor rushed out, obviously primed to welcome them. Damien spotted Jason standing in the courtyard and from his expression, was quite glad to see them.

He didn't appear surprised to see Toria. Doubtless he'd known Damien couldn't leave her behind. Jason's eyes searched the carriage as Damien assisted Toria to descend, his face falling for just an instant when no one else followed.

"I'm glad to see you both. Come refresh yourself and then we'll talk."

The occupants of the small barroom were mostly male and again Damien bristled at the admiring glances when Toria entered. A low whistle sounded and Damien started forward, only to realize he couldn't come to fisticuffs with everyone who admired Toria's glowing beauty.

Damien ordered a whisky for himself and a glass of wine for Toria but Jason just shook his head.

"I've had several drinks while I waited for you. Rafe doesn't want anyone around and there's little else for me to do."

He looked an unspoken question at Damien who nodded.

"You can speak frankly in front of Toria. She cannot be kept in ignorance of the situation. I'd like to know more. Tell me anything you can about Rafe."

"He's in a lot of pain but won't admit it. I think something is quite wrong with his right arm but even that isn't as important as his state of mind. He doesn't want to see

anyone and only admits me for a short time. When he does let me in it's only to apply the ointment on his scars and he says almost nothing."

"I know about his arm," Damien said absently, ignoring the startled looks of his two companions. "I think I'd best go see him alone. Will you stay with Toria, Jason?"

"Of course, Damien. He's in the room to the right of the stairs."

Damien nodded absently, as if this information also didn't surprise him and leaving his whiskey barely touched, walked away.

Damien didn't know for sure what to do next. He'd have to let events unfold a little more. He opened the door and walked to Rafe's bedside.

"Hello, Rafe. Welcome home."

Rafe turned from the wall, a look of surprise on his sober face. Damien stood motionless and saying nothing more, until Rafe flashed an unsteady smile.

"Hello, Damien. I guess I should have expected you."

"You certainly should have, my friend. I'm not ready to give up on you, even if you do appear to be taking a coward's way out."

Shock registered briefly and then an indignation Damien rejoiced to see. He was doubly glad he'd come. There was much hope for a man with still enough pride to feel offended.

Rafe's bitterness slashed out. "I assume your money paid for my release. I doubt if my father would have given up such a sum."

"The money means nothing, Rafe. You know I'll never miss it."

As he saw a brief pain register on Rafe's face he realized he'd just confirmed the Duke's lack of interest in the fate of his only son. No way to undo it now. Damn Essingdon for a hardheaded bastard. Still unable to accept a son who was an artist instead of a rigid replica of himself. Rafe was much more of course, he'd grown to be an unusually compassionate and fine man. One who felt the pains and miseries of the lowest of mankind.

"I'm taking you to Tregaron, Rafe. I've got chalks and watercolors waiting for you. We'll have to send for your other supplies when you're ready for them. I simply didn't know enough about oil paints to purchase them for you."

"Damn you, Damien. I won't go. I won't be manipulated like a child."

Rafe's voice was cold and determined. He tried to hitch himself up in bed and grimaced in pain as his arm refused to obey him. Damien leaned over and yanked him to a sitting position.

"Now we can fight like men. You're not an invalid and I refuse to treat you as one. Tell me what you plan instead of a few weeks with me? Staying in this room perhaps, or somehow getting back to your London flat?"

Rafe glared at him. "Damien, leave me alone. You know nothing of why I'm not fit for any human society. Although admittedly with your powers you might suspect what's been wreaked upon my body, you can know nothing of the desolation of my soul. Leave it be, Damien, let me go to hell in my own way."

Rafe again turned his face to the wall, although he didn't slump over again.

"I do more than suspect, my friend. I know well what you've endured. Have you forgotten I'm a mage? Let's deal with your arm first. What did those devils do to it?"

Rafe turned around, unable to resist the dominance of Damien's formidable power. With a deep sigh, he revealed what he'd never disclosed before. Damien knew full well the additional torture it meant for Rafe to talk about his experience but felt it essential to his eventual healing. He exerted his power to force the man to talk. The healing of his body Damien could help along but the mental healing must come from within Rafe.

But he could loosen the gates a little. Rafe harbored too much pain bottled up in him for one man to endure.

The words came in a rush.

"It wasn't the beatings, Damien. I could bear those. It was before, after they'd warned me and before they came in with the whips. They always gave me a specified time in which to confess I was a spy. Generally an hour. A hellish hour. Sometimes after they arrived they dragged out the horror by fingering the whips and giving me one more chance. Dreading the coming flogging was worse than the flogging. That waiting turned me into a shuddering sort of coward. Then the beatings followed, generally with the largest of the whips. At one of them, one big new jailer added to the torture. Right at the end he twisted my arm behind my back before letting me fall to the dirt. I've had no use of it since. I'll never paint again."

Although he made not another sound, tears were seeping down his cheeks. He dashed them off with the back of his good hand.

"Double damn you, Damien. I meant to never tell anyone any of this. No one should have to find out how fiendish men can be. More than I'd ever suspected."

Damien spoke quietly, ruthlessly thrusting aside his anguish for his friend's suffering.

"Hold out your arm, Rafe. Let me have a good look at it."

Rafe did so and Damien smiled with relief.

"Nothing's broken. I feared I would have to break and reset the bones. I'll start on it now. It might take a while but I promise I can cure it. You'll have to wear a sling for a while."

Rafe stared to him with just a glimmer of hope and held his arm away from his body as well as he could. Damien concentrated on the crooked angle of the arm, his healing powers easing the rigid muscles. Rafe almost automatically tried to flex his muscles and felt a little motion creep back. He looked up with a flicker of faith as

Damien took a pillowcase and ripped it, using one half as support and the other torn into strips to secure the sling.

"There, that will do for now. I can do much better when we have you home. We'll work on it every day."

Rafe sank back on his pillows, shaking his head.

"I don't want to go, Damien."

"We'll talk again tomorrow. Now get some true rest."

He walked out, leaving a suddenly sleepy Rafe and went back to Toria and Jason.

Damien drew up a chair and sat down. His whiskey was still on the table and he took a big swallow.

"Well, I can cure his body. His mind is another matter."

"Did you get him to talk at all?" Jason asked. "Yes, of course you did. I won't ask what he said. If he wanted me to know anything he's had plenty of chance to tell me."

Damien and Toria both picked up the slight hurt in Jason's voice and Toria put her hand over his. Damien envied his friend, although her touch was light.

"He didn't want to tell me, Jase. I forced him. You did all one mortal could do by bringing him here. You're a true friend and he knows it. Don't forget, without you fetching him he'd have had no chance at all."

Damien finished his whiskey.

"We'll see what he says tomorrow. I think he'll go."

He looked at Toria, his eyes softening as they always did when she came within his view.

"It's still very early. I can do no more for Rafe tonight. Shall we all walk along the harbor for a while? I can certainly use some exercise. Carriage rides always leave me stiff and restless. Perhaps we could walk along the beach."

Toria's eagerness pleased him. "Is it true one can see Calais from here?"

"Very true but the day has to be perfectly clear. It's a distinct possibility, so let's go see. Want to come, Jase?"

Jason shook his head. "I don't want to leave Rafe. Sometimes he has nightmares and I try to wake him, even though I know he needs his sleep."

Damien could have told him Rafe would probably not wake for a while but didn't. He wanted to be alone with Toria, even if having her near his always surging body proved its own kind of torture. Nodding his head, he took Toria's hand and led her from the inn. He started to put his palm at the small of her back to guide her and then let his arm drop. He knew well he shouldn't touch her. Being so near to her all day nearly wrecked his composure. He'd better not forget for an instant what the feel of her did to him. He hardened his features, dropped her hand and motioned her ahead.

She looked puzzled as he stiffened his stance but headed toward the beach under the majestic cliffs of Dover.



Toria understood an instant later why Damien appeared almost frozen in place. After all, he'd tried to explain to her before how her presence affected him.

They walked in almost total silence for a while, although Damien once commented he was sorry the low clouds near the coast of France spoiled the view for her.

Toria didn't even respond. When she took time to reflect his behavior didn't baffle her as it once would have. He'd made himself perfectly plain on the ride to Dover.

She knew he wouldn't touch her unless she asked him. Knew he was exerting rigid control so he would not lay a finger on her.

Did she want to feel his touch? To feel her blood surge again with his incredible kisses? Surely nobody could kiss as well as Damien. Did she want him to bring her pleasure again with his expert hands? Hands that could take her to heaven in a shorter time than she'd known possible. But then she'd never imagined such pleasure existed.

Definitely she wanted his kisses and his skill with pleasuring her body. Still she now suspected he'd paid a price for giving her this taste of rapture. It definitely wasn't fair to ask him to kiss and caress her unless she was prepared to go further.

They walked a long time, the sand more prevalent here than home at Tregaron, where so many small rocks dotted the beach. They paced briskly until the sun started to drift lower in the sky and Damien suggested they return to the inn. The walk had stretched their carriage-bound muscles but done little for their spirits.

Still perturbed, Toria said quietly she'd go to her room and walked toward the stairs. She knew Damien's eyes followed her movements as always but he said nothing beyond a terse good night.

She closed the door and sat in a surprisingly comfortable armchair, watching as night inched its way over the Dover sky. The colors of sunset faded, although in truth there'd been little color this night, just a slight reflection showing in the cresting waves. Still night came slowly until it was gradually a true dark. Her window was open and she could again smell the salty tang of the ocean. She'd become quite fond of the deep water smell at Tregaron, although here by the harbor it seemed different and stronger. A variation of the usual scent of the sea made the air not quite so enticing. Probably the usual odors of a bustling town plus the harbor itself, instead of the pure freshness of Tregaron. Or was it the ringing of the harbor bells and the sounds of the sailors occasionally shouting to each other that made her restive? In any case, Dover was definitely not Tregaron.

She loved Tregaron. And she suspected she loved Damien.

As she knew he loved her.

The next thought followed inexorably. Why should she let her ridiculous emotions keep them apart? She'd accepted long ago Damien possessed almost supernatural powers. He probably already knew or suspected what had driven her that long ago day when she'd walked into the waters off Tregaron beach.

If she went to him, as she thought she must, she felt obligated he knew the truth about the baron before she invited him to kiss her. If she hoped for any future with him she must begin by trusting him with the incident she'd never discussed with anyone. She tried to settle her emotions as she waited for him to come to his room. She schooled herself to think only of Damien and the astonishing fact she loved him. Surely she loved him enough she could show him she cared. No other thoughts should enter her mind.

## Chapter Twelve

Toria loosened her hair and brushed it with the customary hundred strokes. She donned her night rail and robe and curled up barefoot in her chair. It seemed to her she remained there for hours. Had he gone striding off for another march along the beach? She knew he'd shortened his pace to accommodate her. Maybe he'd wanted more vigorous exercise. He drank little but had he changed his habits and gone to the barroom?

She immediately let herself dream about his gorgeous body, tall and spare but muscled in all the right places. Power personified in one large, attractive package. How would he look if he stripped himself of his shirt? And his pants? No, she wouldn't think of what might lie below his trim waist. She forced her thoughts back to his face, the strong features that haunted her dreams. Tonight she intended to run her fingers through his shock of dark hair and learn its feel. Surely it would be crisp and silky as it clung to her hand.

She finally heard his footsteps in the hall and held her breath until he shut his door. She tied the sash of her night rail a little tighter and waited for what estimated at about five minutes. She wanted him relaxed but pray God, not completely undressed. Although he'd hardly answer the door nude.

Immediately images of a naked powerful body flitted through her head, Damien's body. A strong masculine body capable of hurting hers. Hurting her terribly. She resolutely shoved her fears aside and padded to the next room and knocked on his door. She loved Damien and she wanted his kisses. And his innate strength thrilled her whenever she thought of his broad shoulders and muscled fitness. She'd seen his body rippling as they rode across the Tregaron property and sweat making his shirt cling to him. Every movement held a sleek type of grace. His masculinity fascinated her even as she feared it. She wanted him to bring her bliss again and her heart vowed to do whatever necessary to give him equal pleasure.

He answered the knock, belting a dressing robe around him and looking stunned when he saw her.

"Toria! What can I do for you? It must be important for you to come to my door at this hour."

He'd given her the opening she wanted.

"I think it very important. May I come in?"

His face didn't change. "I don't think it wise, Toria."

She smiled the smile she knew he loved, hoping it would soften him. "Please, Damien."

He looked a little less grim. "You know I can refuse you nothing, my dear. Come in. But only for a short while."

He closed the door and then walked to the window across the large room, looking out through the dark glass. The room was redolent of Damien's unique scent, a mixture of spice, bay rum and the man himself. She inhaled deeply to take in his aroma, loving the knowledge she was in his bedroom and close to his stunning body. The body now stiffened in resistance against her.

"What is it you want, Toria?"

His voice and his posture were unnaturally rigid. Toria thought that a good sign. Certainly better than angry or indifferent. She swallowed and forced herself to say the words she'd determined to say.

"I want you to hold me in your arms and kiss me, Damien."

He didn't turn around, just stood staring out at the night. "You know I can't kiss you, Toria. If that's all you came for you'd better return to your own room."

Suddenly she wanted desperately to convince him. She did love him and she knew he loved her. Only her ridiculous fears kept them apart. She crossed to him and pulled on his sleeve.

"Please, Damien."

He slowly turned to face her, studying her face as if it held the secrets of the universe.

"You make my life a living hell when you say something like this. You'll hate me if I refuse and if I accept you might hate me even more."

"Please, Damien. I've been shut away from emotion too long. If you'll only do what I ask you'll help me erase the demons that haunt me. But it's only fair you know first what those demons are."

She swallowed several times, her eyes on the floor and then looked up at him. No longer did he seem the frozen statue who'd answered the door. Warmth and love shone in his eyes and something else she was afraid might be pity.

"I know the baron haunts your memories, my dear. You don't have to go into detail. Is he what you want me to help you forget?"

She shuddered and kept her eyes on his. "I want you to know, Damien. Heath raped me. I'm not a virgin."

Against her will a few tears escaped from her eyes.

His strong arms reached out and grabbed her to him, as he rocked her body against him as one would a beloved child.

"Toria, Toria, don't distress yourself so. I've always known that. My mage's powers told me that and much more. If we're confessing, I truly am a mage. I'm a wizard and an enchanter. I have powers that could make most people dread me. Can you accept me as a mage? Some people might find that harder to understand than your despicable guardian's abuse of you. It was abuse, you know. The shame is all his."

Toria stood within his arms and now laid her head sweetly on his chest. Just being there was enough for the moment. She ran her hands over his body, loving the feel of the muscles that rippled as she explored his torso from his powerful shoulders down to his waist. He wore nothing but trousers beneath his robe so she snuggled closer to his enveloping heat. His words didn't surprise her. She'd suspected he knew about that ugly night but honor demanded she make sure. She would not mislead him. And she'd long realized and accepted his being a mage. He possessed great power but not for himself. He used his impressive strength mostly for others. She did not fear his abilities.

She sighed with a relief that made him smile as he drew her closer.

"Do you think anything matters to me except you and the wonderful girl you are? Did you ever consider how even the bad things in one's life help shape a person and that strength often comes through surviving the most difficult events? I love you Toria, not in spite of your worst experiences but partly because of them."

She nestled against him for a moment, putting both her palms against his bare chest and loving the sound and feel of his thudding heart. He was so very warm and his heat reached out, surrounding and soothing her. How could she not adore this wonderful man? She'd once thought it impossible she'd ever fall in love. She'd never dreamed a man's arms could bring peaceful joy as well as a thrilling excitement. She feared going further into the unknown world of passion but knew she wanted to experience again the pleasure he'd given her. She wouldn't think beyond this moment.

After all, Damien had promised he'd never hurt her.

"Don't you want me, Damien? I want to kiss you."

He groaned as he leaned a little from her.

"If you check my body you'll see how much I want you. I always want you. I think of you, I catch a glimpse of you, I have only to breathe and I want you. That's definitely not the problem."

He lowered his face to hers, capturing her lips in a blazing kiss that left them both gasping.

"Toria, I think I'll always yearn to kiss you. In this world and beyond. Which I believe we will share together."

He lightly held her shoulders and turned her toward the bed behind them.

"Are you really ready for me, Toria? May I take you to my bed where I've always dreamed of your being?"

Incapable of speech, she nodded. His gray eyes smoldered as he gazed down at her with all the love in his heart and led her to his bed.

His kiss raged with such desire she stiffened for an instant and he instantly lessened the pressure on her lips. She knew he was being patient with her, as he kissed her repeatedly, his lips gentle and only becoming more carnal as she tentatively began to return his caresses. As the longing gathered in his eyes and on his lips, she opened her mouth and welcomed him in. He wasn't slow to avail himself of her acceptance,

swooping his tongue to taste every crevice. In spite of her fear she imitated his motions, her own tongue rubbing his. She soon found the sweet remembered heat beginning to build. As her own desire increased her fear lessened and she gasped again, this time with mounting pleasure. She threaded her fingers into his dark hair and clutched him to her. He loosened her hold and grinned, then moved his kisses to her neck and throat and she shifted impatiently trying to reach his lips with her own. She moved her tentative caresses to his body. Her fingers were not as well shaped and long fingered as his but she did her best, loving the feel of his muscled chest and squirming against him. His spicy masculine odor was mixed with another scent she didn't recognize, although she suspected it was simply desire. His and hers, as she wriggled against him to try to bring her body even closer. A dampness between her legs surprised her, although she remembered that dimly from when he'd brought her such pleasure.

"Be patient, Toria," he chuckled. "You deserve to be kissed on every inch."

She felt his scalding heat as he caressed her flesh, warming her long frozen senses. His mouth moved over her breasts, sucking her rigid nipples through her night rail. She'd thrown off her robe before she started toward the bed but her rail was thin and no barrier at all as he expertly roused her emotions. She felt the heat beginning to build throughout her body and welcomed it. This was what she wanted. To be part of Damien.

She jerked a little when he pushed her nightgown upward, bunching it around her waist and she grabbed the cloth to try to pull it back down. Soon she loosened her hold on the material, not caring where her gown was as long as he didn't halt his clever fingers. As his hands moved between her legs she automatically parted them and forgot everything but her building passion.

He found the little nubbin of flesh between her legs he'd found before and worked it carefully, first with his clever hands. He stopped once and reaching down substituted his lips for his fingers and she nearly came off the bed.

He moved his mouth back to hers and kissed her again, soothing her surprise before returning his hand to her most sensitive spot. He was an expert, she vaguely realized, using skilled fingers, stoking the fires beginning to consume her. As her passion mounted, she squirmed against him, trying to hurry the fulfillment she knew he offered so freely.

"I love you, Toria, now and forever."

His whisper reached through the cloud of longing he'd aroused and she tried to answer him but found she couldn't. She was feeling too much, all of it as surprising as it was wonderful.

She teetered on the edge of the delight she'd found before. Just then he raised his body from hers and lowered his trousers, exposing for the first time his large and threatening erection.

She glanced away swiftly, back to his face. She shut her eyes for a moment, trying to rebuild the suddenly lessened magic. She held up her arms, wanting Damien and

telling herself how much she loved him. As she tried to clutch him to her she found she couldn't move. To her horror, Damien's handsome face had disappeared.

Suddenly, the loving features above her changed completely, metamorphosing into the much-feared face of Baron Heath. Filled with lust and cruelty as he held her still with his ham-like hands and plunged into her virgin body with no preparation. Damien's beloved features vanished and only the hated visage of the baron remained, looming over her like an incubus from hell.

She screamed in terror, trying frantically to throw the monster in her mind off her suddenly rigid body. She screamed and screamed.

Damien tried to hold her steady and soothe her. An utterly horrified Damien, unable to help his love when she most needed him. She was still screaming when a knock sounded on the door.

"Damien, are you all right in there?"

Damien rose from the bed, looking down at her and showing only pity on his face.

And regret. A regret he did not try to mitigate as he looked down on her. Curled into a sobbing bundle of remorse.

He hated lying to a friend but he would have to.

"I'm fine, Jason. Toria fell asleep in the chair waiting to talk to me and woke up with a nightmare when I came in. Go back to bed. I'll take care of her. If anyone asks tell them everything is fine."

There was a silence and then footsteps faded as Jason went back to his room.

Toria rolled over on her stomach, once more in the present and sobbing bitterly. Knowing it was Damien with her and always had been. Knowing she had spoiled everything. She'd wrecked her one chance with the man she loved.

How could she have ever committed such a horrible offense against Damien?

To them both? She'd ruined it all, everything he wanted and she knew he wanted.

How could she have done this horrible thing?

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Damien cringed at her scream even as it clanged in his head.

Where had it all gone so wrong? At the very beginning perhaps, when he'd known full well he shouldn't let her in. His furiously racing mind went over what had happened, trying to think what else he could have done.

He never should have let her inside his room. Yet, how could he have done differently? He certainly could never resist those big pleading eyes and her obvious distress. No, that was not the answer. In no way could he abandon her to her anguish.

Still, he should not have let her enter.

She'd wanted him. He knew this as surely as he knew he loved her and always would. Before he'd tried to enter her he'd known she felt true desire. Could he ever stir that desire again and even deeper? Enough to help overcome her fears and terror? To drive every memory of the baron from her mind?

He longed, not for the first time, to rout the baron out of his miserable lair and trounce him thoroughly before he killed him. He wasn't sure such a deed would do anything but satisfy his desire for revenge. It wasn't the way to win Toria. Now he wasn't at all certain he'd ever truly possess her.

For the first time he forced himself to face the real possibility she might never be able to forget the horror of the assault still haunting her. Unless he could reach beyond her memories and somehow help her, he faced a desolate future indeed. There was no prospect for him except loneliness unless he figured out how to conquer her fear.

Right now he didn't have the smallest idea.

He sat until dawn, going over what had happened and regretting he'd opened his door to her earlier. At least he didn't have to worry about an erection for this one night. A grim thought, but that piercing scream had instantly returned his body to normal.

Was it time for him to bewitch her and teach her enough about the lasting love he felt for her that she might begin to forget? She was filled with passion, if he could only tap it. Yet he didn't want her by magic. He'd made that decision over and over. He wanted her heart as well as her body. Well, hell, he craved her every thought. And he wanted her to be the strong person she'd be when she conquered her fears.

He just didn't know how he'd win her. He'd always known she was his destiny but unless she accepted him of her own accord he might never find the future he'd envisioned with her.

He, who'd spent his whole life convinced he needed no help from anyone, suddenly didn't know what to do to help himself. And no one could give him an answer. No one at all could help him.



He was definitely not as self-sufficient as he'd always arrogantly assumed. A most lowering thought for any mage.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Toria came down to breakfast in the morning Jason looked at her swollen eyes and pale face but said nothing. Whatever happened, it had been much more than a nightmare. Then Damien appeared, looking as if he hadn't slept at all.

Jason swallowed his questions as he drank his coffee. He'd like to offer his help to them both. He'd just embarrass Toria and he knew Damien considered himself entirely sufficient to handle any situation. Damien would never believe Jason thought his attitude a mistake. Any mortal man, even a powerful mage, could benefit from aid from true friends on occasion. Did Damien even know how to ask for help from his friends?

He looked at Damien, covering his concern as best he could.

"Shall I assist Rafe in getting ready to go? I assume you talked him into visiting Tregaron after all."

Damien's grim face never altered. He didn't even look at Toria but instead rose from his full breakfast plate.

"Yes. I'm going to hire a horse to ride. It will be more comfortable if there are only two of you besides Rafe in the carriage, as he'll need to lie down most of the way on one of the seats. Toria can sit by you. If you'd both pack I'll be back and see you off."

Toria had not looked up from her plate but she did so now, her eyes filled with sorrow. Then she looked down again. Tears glistened on her lashes and she also barely touched her food. That something dreadful had happened between Damien and Toria couldn't be more apparent. Whatever made Toria scream last night had not been at all usual. Still friends didn't grill friends and Jason excused himself to go see what he could do to help Rafe.

Damien paid the innkeeper and asked about a horse for hire. On hearing they had two available and although neither horse appealed to him, he rented the one who seemed stronger. A brute of a horse with probably little finesse in carrying a rider. The distance wasn't far but he was afraid to try the smaller, more appealing mount. He was too big for an undersized horse. Assuring the innkeeper he'd send a groom back with the horse he went to the front of The Wicked Wench. He couldn't summon even a grim smile at the thought he'd like his own beloved wench to be much more wicked. He hadn't the faintest idea how to corrupt her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jason sat in the carriage on the way home to Tregaron, thinking with almost amusement it had to be the most silent ride he'd ever endured. Rafe refused any help and climbed into the carriage with white lips and a courage Jason thought stupid, even if admirable. Rafe sat rigidly for a while and then succumbed, leaning back against the

pillows on his seat and turning his face away. He'd barely acknowledged his introduction to Toria. He seemed indifferent to any explanation of her presence, so Jason said nothing else.

Toria sat in silence, looking out the window the entire trip. Damien rode ahead of them on the rented horse one could hardly call a stallion. Still he managed to keep in front of the carriage and when the gates of Tregaron were sighted galloped on ahead.

An eager Debora awaited them. She came forward quickly and then stood to one side as Rafe climbed laboriously down, nodded to her without speaking and went into the house. As Stephens held the door open and welcomed him, Rafe nodded again.

"Good to see you, Stephens. Which is my room?"

There was no inflection in his tone and he shook off assistance and somehow managed to ascend the steps. Neither the footman who directed him nor his friends offered to help him again.

Debora's stricken face told Jason everything he needed to know. He composed his features, gave her a brotherly kiss and stood back to watch Toria give Damien one anguished glance, greet Stephens and then follow Rafe up the stairs.

Jason's heart shattered at the look on Debora's face, although he'd long suspected where her interest lay. Still knowing for sure meant more pain than he'd expected. There was no reason now to delude himself. He managed a crooked grin at Damien. He must give serious thought to his future.

"I might as well disappear too, Damien. I think there will be little conversation this night."

Damien's look betrayed his understanding, although he grinned back at one of the two friends he loved. They couldn't both have Debora but by Merlin he'd see Rafe came to his senses before he'd let him approach his sister.

What an unholy mess, with everyone in the household miserably unhappy. Although how he could improve matters he didn't yet see.

He watched Jason also disappear upstairs and then walked slowly to his study. His main sanctuary if he couldn't roam the grounds of Tregaron. After the journey home on that miserable beast, he had little appetite for riding right now. He'd best tell Stephens to arrange to return the poor brute before he himself disappeared for the evening. Oh yes and he'd have a small supper sent up to everyone else. He didn't feel like eating anything at all.

He picked up the papers he'd left on his desk and looked with disinterest at his latest calculations. Would Toria ever want to help him again, or had she decided against even that little contact with him? It pleased him just to have her in the room even though it was painful. Walking to the window, he looked out on his beloved Tregaron, knowing without Toria as its mistress it would never fill his soul. His mind, perhaps and part of his heart, but that was not enough.

## Chapter Fourteen

Toria kept mostly to her rooms for the next three days. Debora only appeared at meals, sitting silently through most of them. Rafe walked for hours, each day a little longer and then he too disappeared upstairs. Damien worked on his arm whenever he could catch him coming or going but Rafe said nothing except a curt thank-you. Jason alone seemed normal. Or almost normal. Damien understood the sadness in his eyes but unless Jase wanted to talk about it, he could say nothing.

The house almost rang with silence.

On the fourth day Jason came to him when Damien sat at his desk going over some ledgers.

"I've decided to make the rounds of your other estates, Damien. I want to assure myself everything is in shape before I leave England. I don't know where I'm going but I'll be traveling for a while. First I must make certain you're in good hands."

This was a Jason Damien did not often see. His normally humorous persona had disappeared and a tall, slender man with a shock of blond hair and serious hazel eyes stood in his place. One who was determined even though regretful.

Damien did not argue with what he knew Jason had firmly decided. Nor could he blame him. It must be strictly hell to see the woman he loved pining for another man. At least Toria hadn't fallen in love with somebody else, although daily his doubts grew about the possibility of her loving him. And of his finding happiness with her at his side.

"Where will you go, Jason?"

Jason's eyes cleared a bit when he realized Damien would not try to change his mind.

He sat down in a big armchair and shook his head.

"I'd tell you if I knew, Damien. Wherever my fancy takes me, I guess."

"Can I help in any way, my good friend?"

Jason rose and paced in front of the desk, stopping in front of it and facing Damien.

"Not really, Damien. I know you'd like to, even as I wish I could help you. We both have to work out our own destinies, I guess. I intend to interrogate the head stewards at each of your estates and will let you know the best one to bring here. I have two in mind already."

"No one can take over as my friend, Jase. You know that. When will you leave?"

Jason voice was determined. "Tomorrow, Damien. Please tell the others after I go. I don't want anyone but you to know until then. Like anyone else, I hate goodbyes."

Damien nodded. Although he'd halfway suspected something of the sort, he'd never expected Jason to leave so soon.

His world was shattering around him.

Damned if he'd let it all go with a protest.

He shook Jason's hand firmly and watched him walk away. He wouldn't stand by for this drooping by everyone he loved. He'd had enough of the stillness in this house.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Jason appeared at breakfast he was his usual self. Joking a little, teasing both girls and eating his food in a leisurely manner.

After they'd both gone to their rooms he turned to Damien.

"I'm only taking two bags with me. I want to travel as lightly as possible and I'll leave directly from Castle Oaks."

At the mention of his estate the furthest from Tregaron Damien realized his good friend was actually leaving. For the first time the truth sank in, bringing a dreadful sense of wrenching loss.

Jason shoved himself to his feet and faced Damien.

"You know I thank you more than words can express. Take care of the women for me and try to shake Rafe out of the pit of self-pity he's sunk into. I think it will take drastic measures but you can manage."

He clasped Damien's shoulders.

"I promise I'll be in touch from time to time. And I'll send word of your best choice for my replacement."

He turned and strode out. Damien had clasped both his hands and then let them go and stood in silence. There was nothing he could say. In fact at the moment he was incapable of speech without howling.

But by Merlin he'd take Jason's advice about Rafe. And deal with the others at the same time. He'd had more than enough of the silence draping Tregaron like a shroud. He was losing Jason. By Merlin he'd lose no more friends.

He went to the door and waved Jason off and then called Stephens.

"Please inform Lady Debora, Miss Victoria and Lord Chittenden I shall expect them in my study exactly one half hour from now. Tell them it's my order, not my request."

Stephen's eyes widened at his master's stern tone and words and scurried off to carry out Damien's orders.

Damien knew the girls would come. He wasn't sure about Rafe but would use his mage's power if necessary. He preferred to have him come on his own, however, as using mental force sometimes left the recipient a little dazed. He thought Rafe would come, if only out of curiosity.

When all three presented themselves each seemed resentful. Of course. Doubtless he'd been a little preemptory. Of them all Rafe seemed the most interested. Debora and Toria looked mutinous. Damien invited each one to sit down as soon as he entered but said nothing until the assemblage was complete.

Damien didn't bother to stand. He sat at his desk, his hands steepled. There was no doubt in anyone's mind of his determination.

Rafe spoke up first.

"The naughty children have been summoned to be scolded, no doubt."

Damien knew it would take a lot to crack that shell of indifference and cynicism.

He fixed his cold eyes on each of them in turn.

"Exactly, Raphael. All of you. I'll start with Victoria."

Damien saw her start at the formal use of her name.

"I am tired of living in a home that should be filled with love and laughter, only to encounter an iciness in each of you I find repelling. Toria, you've been walking around like a frightened rabbit. I don't intend to pounce on you and eat you. I think you once found me polite and you will find me so again if you care to reciprocate. I do not find it well-mannered of you to spend the day in your room.

"I will say the same to you, Debora. Each of you seems to think you are the only one in the world with problems and has withdrawn into yourself in a rude and unacceptable manner. I expect pleasant and considerate behavior of my guests and I will endeavor to return the courtesy. Much as you try my patience, I am still friends to both of you, as well as your host.

"Raphael, the same applies to you, only in spades. Your conduct is inexcusable. You have a god-given talent you are neglecting, when all the painting materials you need are at hand. Your arm is healed, yet you communicate with no one. You are pleasant to no one. You think only of yourself and always with pity.

"I have lost patience with the three of you."

There was a moment's stunned silence. Toria and Debby looked at him in amazement, while Rafe flared.

"Have you then invaded my room? How do you know I'm not painting there?"

Damien found the anger a very good sign. Anything but the indifference he'd feared.

"I haven't invaded your room and I don't know. Even if you are, it's hardly furthering your talent. Tregaron abounds in beautiful vistas. Have you even thought about tackling something bigger than a bookend? Oh and Jason has left us, perhaps forever."

Rafe looked incredulous, then stood and stalked out of the room. White with anger and as riled as Damien could have wished.

Debora's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry, Damien. You're right. Self-pity is a horrible emotion. And I'm so sorry to hear about Jase."

She too turned and left and he looked at Toria. How would she react to his unprecedented sternness?

She flung her head up and looked him in the eye.

"Will you go riding with me, my lord?"

"When?" he asked bluntly.

"As soon as I can change clothes."

Damien looked at her beloved features, her eyes a trifle defiant but once again the Toria he loved. Not the silent creature who'd haunted his house for days. She'd come to some decision on her own during the sequestered days in her room. This was more change than his reproach could effect. He didn't know what she was thinking but at least a portion of the girl he adored had returned.

"I'd be delighted, my dear. As long as you can remember my name."

She smiled just a little and left to don her riding habit.

Damien sat back in his chair.

Perhaps he'd achieved something. He'd have to wait and see how much. And he'd done what he felt he had to do. It was worth whatever enmity he aroused if he'd somehow helped these people he loved. He'd lost Jason, at least for now. He wanted to keep these three safe and sheltered in the arms of his love but wasn't sure he could. He must have their permission in order to help them at all.

He'd never expected his confidence could be so shaken. Not in his mage's abilities but in his own as a man. Toria had led him to the realization he wanted only willing cooperation from those dear to him.

Forcing love would be meaningless.

He went to don his own riding outfit and hurried back down the stairs.

Toria was waiting and he held the door open for her. He almost feared to say a word as they walked quickly to the stables, where the grooms quickly mounted them.

"I don't think I should stay out too long, Damien."

They rode out of the stable yard as he agreed, since he knew she hadn't been getting much exercise lately and might tire easily.

He couldn't think of a safe topic to introduce, so remained silent. Finally she spoke.

"Is Jason gone for long?"

He certainly didn't intend to discuss Jason's reason for leaving.

"I think so, Toria."

He changed the conversation to news he'd just received from London.

"Wyoming has been admitted as the forty-fourth state in the United States of America. They insisted on retaining women's suffrage as a condition for joining. I find politics in the United States almost as fascinating as they are in Great Britain."

Definitely an interesting topic to Toria.

"How famous, Damien. Do you think women will ever get the vote here?"

He chuckled. "Anxious to vote, Toria? Yes, women will be recognized as the intelligent creatures they are someday. But not yet. They will have a lot of battles to fight here first. Some of our more far-seeing politicians must help them."

Toria sighed. "It seems so unfair, Damien."

He smiled at her indignant tone. "The world sometimes is, Toria. It truly is."

They spoke little after that, which was perhaps as well. There were very few topics of conversation he felt safe to introduce once they left politics.

He thought of the gorgeous fall weather but such a commonplace conversation would sound inane. Colored leaves of russet and gold were already falling at the edges of the lawn at Tregaron. Asters and chrysanthemums bloomed in the flower beds bordering the grass and honking geese heading south flew over their heads. Autumn as usual was filled with glory.

Did Toria even notice how lovely his home now appeared? Her life had indeed been unfair in many respects but he didn't intend to walk into the sand bog of voicing anything personal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rafe joined him for breakfast the next morning, spoke almost pleasantly but ate little. In a very short while Damien spotted him headed for one of his walks but this time he carried his painting kit. Damien turned from the window, as pleased as he could remember since the debacle with Toria. Well, the fact of Toria riding with him was just as welcome but they hadn't ridden for long. Now she'd opened the door he hoped to do better today.

Debora and Toria came in the room almost together and both smiled but talked little. Were they still wary of him? Did they think he was going to start ranting at them again?

He invited them both to go riding and Toria accepted. Debby pleaded an overdue consultation with the housekeeper. At least she was no longer isolating herself. Rafe stayed out longer painting that day and came in finally flushed and pleased. He went up to his room but Damien saw him look around as if seeking someone and wondered if it was possibly Debora.

The third day Rafe came in with a painting under his arm. They all were having a glass of wine in the library and Rafe turned the picture around to show them all, obviously pleased with his work. He'd depicted the view from the cliffs in the exquisite and far-ranging colors of the sea, the rather calm waves extending to the horizon with a small boat far out on the waters. Colors changed from blue to aqua to a deep blue-purple and sea gulls hovered near the shore. Certainly a serene scene and yet

something about the picture was unsettling. With a single ominous-looking wave in the middle of the water he'd created the illusion of danger.

"Rafe, that's wonderful," Debora exclaimed. "You've captured both the majesty and yet the feeling the ocean is not always so calm. I don't know how you did so much with so little."

Rafe looked inordinately pleased. "And I don't know how you know so exactly what I'm trying to portray. Thank you, Debora."

As Damien and Toria added their congratulations Damien felt his heart literally swell in his chest. His family, these three dear people, were again his friends. And Rafe had started on the way back to being the painter he was meant to be.

They passed a normal dinner hour, the men talking mostly politics and the girls intercepting now and then with a question or a comment. Damien knew Rafe read the morning papers as assiduously as himself. The one subject they didn't discuss was Africa. Since Cecil Rhodes had been recently elected as Prime Minister of Cape Colony it should have been a natural topic of conversation but Damien wasn't about to introduce that subject. He knew Rafe's mind was starting to heal but didn't trust any topic that even touched on the torture the man had endured.

A week went by pleasantly and uneventfully. Damien and Toria lengthened their ride each day. One morning Toria blushed, was silent for a moment and then broached the subject of helping Damien again with his notes. He tried not to show too much delight as he accepted. It would still be hell for him to have her so near but that was something he must become accustomed to. Anything seemed better than distant silence. Their rides were no longer mostly wordless and she was gradually starting to converse with more ease.

Matters between them seemed more natural than they'd been before Jason left, although still far from the closeness they'd once known. A closeness his heart craved. His mind told him to leave the situation alone. He didn't want to take any chances. Damien still felt no assurance he'd eventually win Toria. His confidence in his powers remained badly shaken.

Yet there was no one more powerful than himself to turn to. He greatly feared he might not be enough.



## Chapter Fifteen

The next day Rafe fidgeted at breakfast, turning his fork in his hand. Looking down at his scrambled eggs he asked Debora if she'd like to go with him today on his painting trek.

"I've a picture in my mind of a beautiful girl leaning against the huge fallen tree near the coast."

Debby looked startled, pleased and then practically stuttered in her haste to accept.

Damien grinned.

"Just in time, Rafe, I was going to ask the new steward to clear that tree as soon as he arrives."

He hadn't told them Jason had phoned with his recommendation for a new steward and a firm goodbye. He'd promised to keep in touch but was vague about his plans. Damien doubly ached for Jase's pain, not only for his friend but because he missed him so much.

Debora looked up, alert to his hidden meaning.

"You've heard from Jason."

"Yes," Damien answered. "I don't know when we will all see him again."

Silence greeted this pronouncement. But then there was really nothing to say. They all loved Jason and probably didn't understand why he'd left. For him Debora's type of affection would never be enough. Although Damien couldn't betray his friend he noticed Toria's beautiful eyes looking at him with sympathy.

Once again he admonished himself for not giving her enough credit for her empathy. Her heart was big, even though it didn't include him in the way he craved.

He said nothing more. He saw no reason to dwell on the fact Jason was already on his journey to wherever he'd decided to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rafe looked at Debby and dipped one brush into his paints. Then with an impatient shrug he dropped his palette and strode over to pose her exactly the way he wanted. He'd positioned her sitting on the grass, leaning against the trunk of the huge fallen tree. An open book lay beside her but her eyes looked out at the distant, calm sea. If you studied the background closely, you could see a few small sailboats on the horizon. They were so far as to easily glide out of sight.

He wanted to express beauty in a perfect setting, seemingly at peace. He was striving to show beauty and contentment, as well as a hidden yearning to be free of

something. It wasn't necessary to know what she desired, just the yearning. He stood close to her, looking at her critically as he analyzed how to come closer to expressing what he meant.

She was quite beautiful. Her features were never difficult to portray. They were classic, the face that of an Italian Madonna. Dark hair and gray eyes just like Damien's. But it wasn't those perfect features he wanted to put on his sketch pad. Thousands of artists had painted women as lovely. He wanted to show the warmth and kindness, the solicitude that made her so uniquely Debora. And a little of the unfulfilled tension he could feel in her.

He started to change the angle of her shoulders and found himself standing mesmerized, looking into clear eyes that showed such trust and faith in him he dropped his hands.

"Debby, don't look at me like that."

She reached up and lightly touched his cheek.

"Like what, Rafe?"

He swallowed the impulse to kiss her half-parted lips.

"Like I'm some kind of god. I'm not, Debora."

Huge gray eyes, warm with a passion he couldn't bring himself to believe, gazed at him.

"You are to me, Rafe."

Suddenly the body he'd thought extinguished of all passion surged to life and he found himself trembling with a desire he'd never expected to feel again. He had no right to kiss her. He was a shell of a man, with nothing to offer a wonderful girl like Debby. No certain future, nothing but what he now realized was a long-unacknowledged love.

Her gaze didn't waver and he suddenly had no more resistance than a boiled leaf of lettuce. Less, probably.

He groaned and lowered his lips to hers. Her hands crept around his neck and she seemed to flow into his arms and his kiss.

He kissed her for a very long time. When he stopped he looked at her in amazement and then buried his head against her hair.

"Debby, be very careful. I have nothing but a pittance from the money my grandmother left me. I'm scarred physically and mentally. I'm no one you should permit to touch you."

He lifted his face as her smile warmed his cold soul. Her obvious delight broke through the lingering haze of his dreadful time in Africa and he felt wisps of his horrid memories begin to float away.

"You're someone I've always wanted so much to touch, Rafe. No matter what nightmares haunt you, I long to help you handle them. As to any outer scars, how can you even think they matter?"

He kissed her once again, deeply and long and then turned back to his paints. Reluctance to stop was evident in his face and his body. Even though he didn't realize Damien's attentions had reduced his outward scars so they were barely obvious.

He felt a little tug on his sleeve and found Debby's big eyes fixed on him in appeal.

"I've waited so long for you to kiss me, Rafe. Can I please have one more?"

He wheeled around and grabbed her to him and kissed her with an emotion he'd never before allowed himself. Then he lifted her in his arms and set her forcibly aside.

"I have a few matters to take care of before I have the right to do more, Debby. Believe me, I'd like to kiss you again and again and then go much further."

He shook his head as she moved toward him.

"We'd better start back to the house, Debby."

As they walked Debby stole her hand into his free one and he wrapped his fingers around hers.

Rafe looked down at their joined hands in wonder. He'd so much time to make up for. Time when he could have been courting Debora instead of wandering the globe. He had no doubt she shared his sympathy for the downtrodden. Her heart was big and all-encompassing. The next crusade he went on he'd want her at his side.

For the first time the idea of becoming a Duke appealed to him. He could give Debby everything she deserved and she'd be steadfast in helping him perform duties he'd always considered onerous. And he'd have money to fund some of his more worthy projects.

It was time to visit his father. A more unpleasant task he couldn't imagine but his father should know he hoped to marry. Whether he'd even listen would be up to the man. Not that his opinion would matter to Rafe. He intended to woo Debora with all his strength and resolution.

To his surprise he realized he had quite a bit of both.

He stopped and drew her eager body to his. She seemed to melt into him and once again they kissed for a long, hot time, his hands roving over her supple body. He finally raised his head and taking her hand again, led her home without saying another word.

He must settle a few things before actually proposing.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days crept by for Damien. Toria's continued reserve made the hours drag. He constantly longed to compel her to talk to him, to confess her fears and accept his help. He found he didn't have the heart to force her in any way. He must wait. Surely she would come to him soon.

He kept busy by training Edwards, the new head steward and found him intelligent and capable. He had more time than he'd expected to have with Jason gone and went back to his mathematical calculations. He'd proven to himself man could fly, he just had

to put it all down in logical form and understandable equations. He knew for certain the day of a machine lifting off into the air wouldn't be far away.

Toria helped him tremendously in his work. Not her fault if he sometimes lost himself in staring at her bronze head bent over his notes, her bright hair shining as she chewed at her pencil. He daily fought the battle not to attempt to kiss her again. The momentary relief and pleasure would only lead to more misery for them both. He knew she was as unhappy as he and as bewildered about how to terminate their unspoken estrangement. Although he knew in his heart how he longed to end their separation, he was afraid to do what his body urged him. Grab her in his arms, kiss her senseless and never let her go.

He feared to touch her. He couldn't imagine her responding with anything but horror. He still had no idea how he'd ever overcome her involuntary revulsion to a man's touch. Again and again he fought the urge to charm her with his mage's powers so she knew nothing but joy from his embrace. Again and again he convinced himself he didn't want her without true desire for him and no thoughts of anyone else in the world. Bewitchment of Toria would belittle the depth of his feeling for their relationship.

And daily he grew more discouraged that his dream of impassioned and heartfelt love was possible.

At least he thought Debora was more happy than she'd been before he'd read a lecture to them all.

The next morning he thought he'd been wrong once again as Rafe came downstairs, dressed for travel and definitely not for painting.

"You're leaving us, Rafe?" he asked quietly.

Rafe's smile brightened the room. "Just for a while. Debora is such an excellent subject I want my oils. I can't do her justice with gouache and watercolors. Her color and her beautiful skin glow and I'm not catching it. I'm going to London and collect my gear. I also need to check on the couple who have been taking care of my townhouse for me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He strode to Debora and lifted her chin in his hand. He was fit again, strong and healthy from his hours outside, walking miles when he wasn't painting.

"Debby," he said simply. "Please miss me."

His voice was soft but with a deep sincerity making his words as good as a declaration of intent.

"You know I will, Rafe. Every minute."

Debby looked a little tearful but she smiled at Rafe.

He stood over her for a moment, then turned away. No one could miss the longing on his face to kiss her goodbye but he turned back to Damien.

"I also intend to call on my father. I want him to know I'm fit to take on his duties when they descend to me, as they inevitably must unless he disinherits me entirely. I

also owe it to him to let him know I'm alive. I imagine he'll refuse to see me but it has to be done. He doesn't deserve much from me but I feel I must make this one attempt. Since he's never legally disowned me I fear I'll someday be a duke. Although he still might do so and I'd be free of inheriting the title. Either way I can now cope."

A true and perfectly expressed statement of the facts.

Damien raised his eyebrows. Rafe might hate the life of a duke but he'd do it well. He'd do it even better with a loving wife. Damien's private thoughts were if the duke once saw Rafe's dignified bearing the old curmudgeon might deeply regret the separation he'd forced on both of them. Rafe's ordeal had hardened him into an impressive man.

Damien checked Rafe's physical health often and knew his body was well again. Scarred but strong. He'd not wanted to invade Rafe's mind but didn't need to. Rafe was healing mentally also. Love for Debby would finish the cure and Damien thought this might be happening sooner than he'd hoped.

Rafe now talked openly of his feelings as he'd never done before. Africa had indeed changed him. Through almost unbearable suffering and near-death he'd somehow survived and become the man he was meant to be.

Two of his loved ones were finding their way to happiness. It was a chastening thought they'd done most of the journey on their own.

He really hadn't done a damn thing to help.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rafe dressed in his recently purchased London attire as he prepared to visit his father. His flat didn't appeal to him as it once had, although he was glad of the chance to pack his painting equipment. Debora and Tregaron were where he wanted to be. As he automatically checked to make sure he looked as respectable as he could, he didn't realize what an impressive picture he made.

Brown curls newly trimmed but still left long enough in the back to cover his pristine white collar. A navy blue jacket and fawn-colored trousers. All new and proper for the gentleman he was. He'd be bombarded with enough criticism without looking like a down-at-the-heels artist. Although he couldn't bring himself to the discomfort of a tight cravat and so left his shirt open. His skin was bronzed from the African sun and no sign of his injuries marred his appearance. While he was well-used to his father's criticism and caustic comments he didn't wish to encourage them.

He'd simply present himself for a few minutes of the sarcasm he expected and then leave. He'd have done his duty. He had no idea he looked every inch a nobleman, one a little more casually dressed than some stiff member of Parliament, but still a most handsome man. An impressive man, whose inner strength plainly showed in his bearing. More than one female eyed him longingly as he strode along the streets of London toward his father's mansion on Grosvenor Square.

Rafe was too busy preparing himself mentally for another rejection to even notice.

When Stubbs, the Duke's long-time butler opened the door the man gasped. With much more pleasure than Rafe had expected.

"My lord," Stubbs gasped. "It's good indeed to see you. You're looking well, my lord."

Rafe reached out and took the startled butler's hand. "Thank you Stubbs. I'm glad to be here and able to shake hands with you. Is my father at home? I'd like you to take my card to him."

Left unspoken was the knowledge that by sending in his card as the Marquis Chittenden he announced his presence but left a meeting entirely up to his father.

Stubbs took the card at once and came back just as quickly.

"Your father is pleased to admit you, my lord," Stubbs stated. He tried to mask his satisfaction but didn't quite manage. Well, at least one person was glad to see him. But then Stubbs had long tried to make life more bearable for the young Rafe.

Rafe walked with determination into the parlor where his father awaited.

The duke was seated in a large armchair facing the entrance. He did not ask Rafe to sit. Rather he stared at him from under bushy eyebrows now streaked with gray, as was his still thick thatch of hair.

"Well, you feel fit enough to call on me, at any rate. I must say you're looking better than I expected."

*And you did nothing at all to help me feel better.*

"Yes sir, I wanted to show you I am strong and well. I thought you might be interested but perhaps not. I also have a small bit of news to impart."

The thick eyebrows raised. "Don't be impertinent, boy. Are you still determined to refuse your place as a lord of the realm? Do you intend to keep on with your nonsensical painting?"

Rafe clamped down on the temper his parent aroused in him so effortlessly. He would no longer let such an out-of-date and unfeeling tyrant affect him.

"Yes sir, I do."

"And you're with Lord Sinclair, I believe? Living off his bounty and doing nothing worthwhile."

Rafe smiled. "What I do doesn't really concern you, does it, sir? I wanted to tell you only I'm well and that I intend to marry quite soon. I thought I should inform you before you read about it in the papers."

The Duke of Essingdon said nothing for a while, merely stared at his son, so like him in appearance, so different in everything else.

"Humphhh." Essingdon snorted. "I suppose to that sister of Sinclair's. Pretty but not up to your mark as the son of a duke. She's never entered society and taken the place she was born to. With your rank you could aspire to a daughter of the highest

lord in the land. I'm surprised you bothered to let me know. You knew I'd say you could do much better."

Rafe had never been asked to sit, so he started to turn away without answering. Then he turned back.

"Sir, I have tried to show my respect by informing you of my plans. However if you say one more word against Lady Debora I will walk out of here and never have any contact with you again."

"Hush, boy," roared the Duke. "I can easily disinherit you, you know."

"Then do so," Rafe answered. "Goodbye, sir."

He wheeled again to go but not before he'd seen his father put out one hand. "Rafe, don't leave just yet." He harrumphed and then continued gruffly. "I must say that's the proper way you should feel about your wife-to-be."

Rafe turned back on his heel. His father, making the closest thing to an apology? By far the strongest peace overture he'd ever made. Rafe looked sharply at the old man. He'd learned a lot about deciphering hidden emotions when he was trying to find a weak spot in his African jailers. Reading another's secret thoughts had sometimes been essential. Sometimes the toughest of them harbored a compassion they were ashamed to show.

His father definitely had a glint of appeal lurking deep in his eyes. The Duke was who he was, he would never apologize or show a smidgeon of affection for his only son. But he was not as adamantly opposed to his son as Rafe had thought. Once he gave up his hopeless quest to turn Rafe into a replica of himself they might reach some kind of accommodation with each other.

An accommodation closer than Rafe had ever dreamed possible.

Not much, to be sure, but perhaps they could learn to treat each other with civility.

"Would you like me to bring Debby to meet you once we are married, sir? I hope to make that quite soon."

The look of relief that flitted briefly on the old Duke's face was quite revealing, although he only gave a terse nod of acceptance.

The crafty old fox. Rafe grinned. He suspected his father had gotten exactly what he wanted. A total surprise since he hadn't thought the Duke would ever want anything from his son at all. He doubtless knew everything there was to know about both Debora and the horrible time in Africa. His resources for information were impressive. Talk about a spider marking time in his web.

What had changed his mind, even a little? Was he possibly impressed his son had not only survived his tortuous time but possibly changed for the better from it? Could he even feel a smidgeon of pride for Rafe?

More pleased than he'd expected, Rafe bade his father a polite goodbye and left to go home to Debora. And the new life awaiting him.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Toria well knew she'd made an almost irreparable blunder when she'd so thoroughly rejected Damien. And in such a disgusting fashion. At the time she'd felt powerless to do anything else but that fact now brought little consolation. She could still shut her eyes and the horrid face of Baron Heath leered down at her. Even though her heart knew Damien was nothing like the baron, her stupid reaction to his trying to enter her body had taken control of her mind and body.

She longed to throw herself in his arms and beg Damien to forgive her. She knew he would for he was generous with everyone. But what if she recoiled once again? That could easily mean the final end of his love for her and she was afraid to take the chance, much as she longed for the warmth and strength of his embrace.

He was so dratted polite. Holding doors and chairs for her, scrupulously showing her every attention she could want except for his touch. His whole bearing toward her had changed. He was always a courteous man but now he looked at her with a remote glance and stern features. She was not used to this Damien and she didn't like it one bit.

She just didn't know what to do to force herself past this barrier. She was well aware it was up to her.

Their rides were helping, as daily they conversed on wider subjects. Toria loved to get him talking about politics and he said enough for her to realize he had inner access to government secrets and was trusted by the powers of the War Ministry.

She daily felt closer to him and her regrets strengthened until she thought of little else. Still she didn't trust herself not to throw herself at him and kiss him as she longed to do. He was such a handsome and appealing man. As beautiful as any man could possibly be. A warm sun blazed down on them as Damien checked her saddle. He'd left off his jacket, his powerful body rippling under his linen shirt. His thick hair, always a little longer than the current style, seemed to dare her to run her fingers through it again.

She turned to him as he was mounting Araby.

"Damien, I have a request to make. Will you take me someplace private and teach me how to defend myself? I'd feel so much safer if you did."

He vaulted on the horse without saying a word and sat looking at her. She bristled a little. She hadn't thought it so ridiculous a request.

Finally he answered.

"No, I won't. I think it's basically a good idea however. I think it's such a good idea that when we come back from our ride we'll go to the parlor and I'll teach you some tricks. And I'll ask Debora to join us. I'm ashamed you had to ask me. I should have



taught both of you long ago. My ridiculous sense of wanting to do everything by myself, I'd guess."

Puzzled, she mounted and followed him from the stable yard, pleased and disappointed at the same time. She'd been secretly hoping he'd have to touch her for the first time since her self-induced debacle. She'd hoped to be alone in some glade giving them privacy. Then she understood. He didn't want to be alone with her. He didn't want to touch her and she couldn't blame him.

But at least he'd teach her what she desperately wanted to know. She never intended to be a helpless victim again.

\* \* \* \* \*

After coming to the house from a ride when neither of them said much more, Damien told Stephens to ask Debora to join them in the parlor. Damien and Toria were still in their riding clothes for the simple reason he had given her no time to change. He wanted this new torture to be soon over.

The lesson wasn't as difficult for him as he'd feared. While Toria's eyes shone her pleasure, so did Debora's. May Merlin forgive him for thinking he could take care of everybody all the time. Surely the height of conceit on his part.

He suddenly wanted them both to know every trick he could teach.

When Debora entered she was surprised to see them both grinning.

"Come in, Debby. Toria wants me to show her how to defend herself. I want you to learn too."

Debby laughed, her first hearty laugh in a long while. Although she seemed almost lighthearted since Rafe made his interesting farewell speech.

"What a wonderful idea, Toria. I love it."

Damien grinned. He was enjoying the lesson more than he'd expected.

"The first thing to remember if you wish to hurt someone is don't tuck your thumb in your fist. It might feel natural for you to do so but you might injure your thumb and you also diminish your force. Then I want to show you how to put the most strength behind your punch. I'll show you both much more but we'll start with this. Throw your weight from your arm muscles and not your fist."

He pulled a couple of pillows off one of the sofas and made them practice until he was satisfied. When he saw them both rubbing their upper arms he laughed.

"I want you both to practice with pillows. You'll soon get the feel of when you're using the proper method. I want it to be almost automatic to throw your weight behind every punch.

"Now I'll go on to a more important lesson. What to do if a man attempts to rape you."

Both girls stared at him.

"Besides beating him with both fists?" Toria asked.

Her big-eyed innocence made him long to crush her to him. Thank Merlin he'd asked Debora to join this lesson.

He couldn't help beaming at her. Blessed Merlin but she was basically untainted in spite of the baron. If Debora hadn't been present he'd doubtless have moved to take her in his arms and kiss her doubts away.

"There's a lot you can do. You must forget everything except the fact you're confronting a monster and attack him directly in his groin. Kick him, hit him with your knee, use your fists."

Debora flushed and Toria looked incredulous.

"You mean hit him right where his thing is?"

Damien gave a bark of laughter. She definitely tested his sanity but it was almost worth it.

"There's another name besides 'thing'. Many people call it a rod but the actual name is penis, Toria and it's by far the most sensitive spot in any male's anatomy. If you hit him, hard, with your knee or your fist, he will definitely crumple and fall to the ground. The pain is excruciating for any man."

She beamed. Damien had to smile. She looked positively bloodthirsty.

"Needless to say I won't be demonstrating this part of the lesson."

She rushed up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Oh, I do thank you, Damien. I wish I'd known all of this sooner."

She rushed out of the room, grabbing a pillow to her as she went and Damien stood looking after her.

*I wish you had too, my love. If I'd known you I like to think I'd have taught you and then your spirit would have never been blighted.*

He called out as she reached the doorway. "Toria, you might try practicing with your left arm also. You don't want to wear your poor right arm out."

She wheeled around, gave him an indignant look and then left. Evidently she didn't think this a teasing matter.

His grin grew wider. She certainly didn't seem at all crushed now. At least she'd liked his teaching.

And she'd kissed him. Of her own accord.

\* \* \* \* \*

Damien was growing increasingly worried. His mage's prescience told him the baron was about to make another attempt to snatch and defile his beloved. He reviewed every security measure he'd taken and could see no way to improve what he'd done. Guards policed every inch of the Tregaron boundaries. He was with Toria every moment he could be and still keep his sanity. They rode together, ate together, did

everything but sleep together. Although he wanted nothing more than to add that last activity to his list of how he protected her, he contented himself with the fact her bedroom was adjacent to his and he could hear the slightest commotion.

Torture and comfort at the same time.

She'd lost most of her embarrassment and reserve when near him, although he often caught her looking at him with an expression he couldn't decipher. Time and again he fought off the old temptation to bewitch her long enough to get her in his bed. If he could only once show her the ecstasy they could find together, he was sure he could then lift the spell and she'd still be his. Either his pride or his innate desire of wanting her to come to him on her own always held him back.

He had to be the biggest idiot on the face of the earth.

In the meantime, he fretted and watched over her as much as he could without alarming her. He knew where she was every minute of the day, whether she was in the house, the garden or the stables. Still he worried.

Toria always insisted upon grooming Dolly herself. She spent more time than necessary brushing and combing the beautiful mare. Damien found both solace and pleasure in this act showing she so much enjoyed his present to her. He found even more pleasure watching her ride Dolly. Toria in her bright blue riding habit, her burnished hair caught back loosely and flowing down her back and mounted on the gleaming black mare was a beautiful sight. He loved it when the ribbon fell off, as it often did.

This morning he waited until she'd gone to the stables and then he went to his study to catch up on the latest report from the ministry. It had just been delivered by messenger, a fact alarming in itself. He read it with growing concern. Smuggling of goods into England was to be expected, as the activity brought riches to the people of the coast. What he didn't like was the information the outgoing cargo seemed to be white slaves.

He studied the report for a long while, as his frown grew deeper. The Minister still requested him to stay away from the hut in the nearby woods until he received notice. If the government Revenuers suspected activity there, they evidently wanted no help.

He didn't like any of this. Not one bit.

He steeped his hands and sat back in his chair, waiting for the sounds of Toria speaking to Stephens as she re-entered the house. He hadn't heard her yet. Of course she probably would come in through the kitchen since it was closer to the stables.

Should he go down there and wait? She should be back by now, shouldn't she?

## Chapter Seventeen

Toria leaned her forehead against Dolly's smooth flank. She'd done her usual thorough job of grooming the mare. It was one of the more satisfactory parts of her day. She liked being alone except for Timmy, the young stable boy and could dream about Damien as much as she wished. Not that dreaming about him was strange. He was seldom out of her thoughts. She wondered once again how she could approach him and ask him to make love to her again. She desired him more every day. His courtesy, his gentleness toward her and all those he cared and felt responsible for. She'd loved him for a very long time. She'd also known it for some time. If only she could be sure the hateful baron would stay out of her subconscious she'd go to him this instant.

"Timmy, I'm through now. You can lead Dolly back to her stall."

She stood and then stopped. Two burly and rather poorly dressed men appeared in front of her, the bigger one holding a very frightened Timmy with both arms twisted behind his back.

"Is this the little sod you're calling, miss? Won't we do instead?"

The largest one's bright red hair was matted and dirty, as he guffawed and cuffed the boy.

The smaller one actually looked to be the meaner of the two.

"Let me hold him, Red. I can stop his trying to run away."

Red shook his head. "Naw, you're too rough. I keep telling you we need him to carry the message to his master his doxy has gone riding with us."

Toria gasped. "Don't be silly, I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, yes you are, Miss Pretty. We'll let this lad go right after you get on that fine horse of yours and promise you'll come with us."

She opened her mouth but got only a small scream out before the smaller one stepped forward and flung his arm around her neck, choking off any sound she might make and almost her breathing.

He looked down at her white face and laughed. "I hope the boss passes you around after he's through with you. You're a purty piece. Now listen, girl. I've got this knife, see?"

He waved a vicious-looking curved blade in front of her.

"No, I'm not going to carve you up. That's not my orders. But I will use it on your horse's hind legs. We've been watching you and you seem right fond of her. Do you know what hamstringing a horse does to it?"

He saw her pale and he loosened his hold enough for her to speak.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I thought you might. They suffer terrible pain and can never walk again. That is if I don't slip and cut so deep your Dolly bleeds to death."

Both watched with grim satisfaction as she grew even whiter.

"Where do you want me to go?"

Red chortled. "Why, to see the baron, of course. He's waiting for you at the hut. Now I'll throw you on your horse. We hear you're a good rider. You can ride bareback. Or do you want me to cripple Dolly?"

Toria looked as if she might faint and the man holding her set her free. He quickly put a bridle and reins on Dolly and then tossed Toria up on Dolly's back.

Red let go of Timmy and then took some rope out of his pocket and tied the boy loosely to the door of the stall.

"After you work your way loose go find your sod of a master. Tell him if he wants to come after his lady-love we'll be waiting for him."

"You didn't tie him very tight, Red."

"Naw, I wasn't supposed to, Tom. Just enough to give us a head start. The earl will be right after us, as he's supposed to."

In despair, Toria nearly started to weep and then stopped herself. They were using her as a decoy for Damien. She'd promised Damien never to leave the property. But if she didn't go willingly they'd hamstring Dolly and then carry her forcibly away. She really had no choice, although her heart ached at her broken promise. Surely Damien with his generous soul would forgive her. She settled down to trying to think how she should best conduct herself once she faced the baron. She'd known before they told her he was the one she'd find waiting.

Nor was she surprised when they headed west and confirmed they were on the way to the hut.

She nearly lost her composure when they passed the slaughtered guard at the Tregaron boundary. She shut her eyes but not before she'd seen the gashed and bloody throat.

As they cantered past the border she made one resolve. The baron could rape her again, as long as he spared Damien.

Damien was a powerful man, a mage, but he might hesitate to use his powers if he thought her in danger. She'd better concentrate on what she could do to protect Damien, just in case he refused to protect himself in trying to save her. He was such a wonderful man, always thinking of others. She mustn't let anything happen to him because of his desire to protect the whole world.

And in helping Damien she'd soon show the baron she was no longer the cringing victim she'd once been.

She threw back her head. She and Damien together could certainly conquer the evil baron. Somehow, some way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just as Damien rose from his chair to go seek Toria, Stephens burst into the room. Not at all the usual thing from his staid butler and Damien's senses immediately alerted him to a deeper state of alarm. Something had happened to Toria.

He forced himself to stand still behind his desk.

"Stephens, what is it? I know it's bad, so tell me quickly."

"I'm not sure, my lord but Timmy the stable boy is here in a rare state, shaking and trembling. He won't talk to anyone but you."

"Show him in, Stephens." Damien's voice was controlled and steady but his very insides were in turmoil. Toria was in serious trouble. Damnation, why hadn't he gone to the stables with her?

Because she not only needed, but almost demanded, some privacy. His love had grown from a shrinking and violated girl to an independent woman who set her own limits as to whom she admitted to her inner space. While he applauded her growth, he faulted himself for whatever had happened to her. He should have been more vigilant, knowing the baron would never give up in his demented quest.

He had no doubt she was in dire need of help.

Well, she'd have his every bit of his help as soon as he could gather his scattered senses. And as soon as he found out exactly what the trouble was.

A very distraught Timmy rushed in and practically threw himself at Damien. He barely stopped in front of Damien, shaking with the effort to get himself under control. In spite of himself, Damien felt intrigued at his display of emotion. This was a very shy lad who scarcely raised his eyes when his employer came to the stables, although he'd always been prompt and efficient in carrying out Damien's requests. But then Damien had long known Toria had captured the devotion of his entire staff.

He gently took Timmy by the shoulders and forced him to sit.

"Stephens, bring us a glass of water. And some cake."

"Cake, my lord?"

"Yes, cake and hurry. This boy is dangerously near going into shock. I'm afraid to give him wine so something sweet will have to do."

He turned to Timmy. "Let's have it, Timmy. I know Miss Toria is in danger."

Timmy told the story in a quavering voice.

"They wanted me to come tell you, milord. They forced Miss Toria to mount Dolly."

"And just how did they force her, Timmy?"

The deadly intent in his suddenly very quiet voice would have terrified anyone, let alone someone as apprehensive as Timmy. Timmy didn't understand his master was fighting for control in order to refrain from smashing his fist into a wall.

"Milord, please don't be mad at Miss Toria. She couldn't do nothin' else, milord. They threatened to hamstring Dolly. They took her away, both of them laughing the whole time. They called each other 'Tom' and 'Red'."

Damien felt a wave of anger blacker than any he'd before experienced. He'd been in many dangerous situations but nothing ever enraged him like the news Toria had been coerced to leave Tregaron by such a dastardly method. He'd known it would take a lot for Toria to break her word to him and this confirmation darkened his face and tightened his fists.

Timmy shrank back in his chair, so terrified Damien forced himself to a semblance of sanity.

"I could never be angry with Miss Toria, Timmy. Certainly not over something like this when she was doing her best."

He strode over to the doorway. "I'll have Araby saddled at once. You deserve my gratitude, Timmy. Sit here for awhile and eat your cake. Thank you so much for your defense of Miss Toria. You're a brave, faithful lad."

He strode off to put on his riding boots and then hurried to the stables. He didn't even ask if Timmy knew where she'd been taken. He knew only too well. He realized Toria was a decoy to lure him but there was no alternative to going immediately to try to rescue her.

The stable master had Araby saddled and ready and Damien hastily mounted. He barely heard Simmons' apologies that he'd been exercising a new horse in the training corral when the villains slipped in.

"Which direction did they head, Simmons?"

"Toward the vacant land, milord. I came back to the stables after exercising that new mare in time to see Miss Toria and two mean-looking men ride off in a hurry. I should have tried to stop them, milord. I didn't think fast enough."

Damien didn't have time to console the man, just nodded and vaulted onto Araby. This was so obviously a trap, one they made sure he'd walk into. His mage's mind told him they were in the hut and he wouldn't be far behind. Still he had to shutter his mind from thinking of what they could be doing to her in the short time they'd be alone with her.

The sight of the slaughtered guard added to his fury but again he turned his mind to concentrating on Toria.

He considered and then discarded the idea of appearing as the old earl, or even as another character except himself when he entered the hut. Perhaps being a weak old man would disconcert Heath. He decided it just wouldn't do, since the baron looked forward to subduing Toria and forcing Damien to watch. He might take his frustration out on Toria if Damien himself did not appear. He could read the baron's evil mind enough to be fairly sure of that.

He only prayed Heath would wait for him before touching her. Surely she was safe until he arrived. What happened then would be up to him.

He had not the slightest doubt it was the baron waiting for him. The part of him able to look into the future when necessary had shown Heath looking triumphant. But nothing else. He couldn't see Toria. He didn't often try to use his mage's inheritance by foreseeing, feeling it diminished his own power as a man. And now when he wanted immediate knowledge his prescience wasn't working.

For some reason he couldn't picture what was happening to Toria. His normal powers must be muddled by his deep love for her. And his gut-wrenching, soul-shaking fear for the girl he loved.

\* \* \* \* \*

He nearly lost control when he walked into the hut. As he'd ridden up, the sight of a saddleless Dolly tied to a tree angered him. But seeing Toria, held cruelly on both arms by two thugs, nearly broke his constraint.

Tom and Red, Timmy had said. They were certainly easy to identify. Red's matted hair was a shade of red-orange and he seemed the bigger and more dangerous of the two. Although he discerned a more disturbing meanness in Tom. He didn't acknowledge Toria by more than one glance but the glimpse of terror in her eyes was enough to force him to use all his control to keep from snarling like a wolf and launching himself at Heath. He had a real problem here. Attacking the thugs would leave Heath free to wreak damage and vice-versa. He'd better slow down and think instead of letting passion take over his mind.

Toria needed him to be rational. She did seem not to be overwhelmed by the situation. In spite of the fear in her eyes, she held herself proudly, even though he knew how she must detest the touch of such repulsive individuals.

He turned to face Heath, seeing just the sneer of triumph his vision had shown him he would see.

"We can make a bargain here, Heath. Hand Toria over to me and I'll convince the government not to go after you for illegal smuggling. Or the more serious charge of participating in the white slave traffic emanating from this coast. We have firm evidence you're involved."

Damien had not been told this but he was suddenly certain it was true. He closed his eyes for a minute against his vision of young girls, innocently serving as maids in Heath's household. Held against their will, beaten and raped and then shipped out from the cove. The cove at the far end of the tunnel leading from this hut.

He really might have done better if the Ministry had told him how deeply involved the baron was. No matter, he'd known Heath to be a villain of the worse sort. He checked his senses and realized government agents were even now moving in. Although they were still several miles away. They would not be in time to help him and his love.

Heath laughed at his words. "Since I plan to leave the country your puny revelations don't mean a thing. Although you're a more diligent bastard than I



expected. I might keep you alive a little longer so you can see what happens. Just enough to give you a glimpse of what your doxy will soon experience. None of which you'll like."

Damien said nothing. He realized it didn't matter if he'd known or not known beforehand. He knew now. He was most definitely on his own. Actually the way he preferred to be.

He assessed his options.

His mage's powers were useless as long as Toria was on the opposite side of the room. If he directed his magic at the baron it gave the two others time to react and harm Toria. If he froze the two villains into icy statues he worried about what Heath could be doing while he worked his spells. Heath might very well do something dreadful to her. Immobilizing two big men took a little time, even for him.

He permitted them to bind his hands behind him, knowing even the idea was ridiculous. No bond existed he couldn't break if he so wished. Toria looked so horrified he tried to send messages of reassurance to her mind and to his surprise, she seemed to relax a little. She must be more receptive to his thoughts than he'd expected.

Toria threw back her head and smiled at the baron.

"You'll never win against Damien, you know. It's just a question of time until he takes care of you all."

"Quiet, you bitch. I'd have you here and now if I weren't pressed to reach the beach. If by chance we have to wait there I'll plow you again and again until the ship pulls in. Then I'll kill your lover after he suffers the agony of watching me plunder your lovely body while my men hold him. You're grown even more luscious than you were, Toria. Yes and if I don't have time on the beach, you and I will board the ship and I'll do whatever I want with you."

As Toria blanched, Heath grinned.

"Yes, you do well to fear me. I'd kill this bastard right now except I want him to suffer a lot more before I dispatch him on his way to whatever hell awaits such sanctimonious whoresons."

Damien heard all this with repressed delight. Heath was so wrapped up in his evil plans Damien had only to let the scenario play out a little before he moved in and scotched them all.

Again he sent consoling messages to Toria's mind and again she aimed a little smile toward him. Damned if he'd ever expected to find any woman who might possibly be capable of responding to his mental communication. But then he'd known all along she was his destiny.

He was beginning to hope she realized what that meant.

Heath suddenly moved, crossing to Toria and stroking her breast. She reacted just as quickly, spitting in his face, even though both her arms were held tightly by Tom and Red.

Damien stood by, his jaws clenched and his face white as Heath backhanded her across one cheek. He wasn't ready to show them he'd untied the knots in the rope around his hands as soon as Tom had tied them.

Heath snarled.

"Bitch. You'll soon pay twice over for daring to anger me. Did you know I positively enjoy whipping women? They thrash around so enticingly. Even the thought of striping your white body arouses me. Get them both in the tunnel, boys. Tom, you go first and then our fine and powerless gentleman will follow. Then Red and I'll put Toria next before me. I don't trust either of these two an inch. When we get to the cove you can turn her over to me. Tom and Red, you can hold the earl back while I plow her the first of many times. Then I'll kill him. Take the torch, Tom and don't let it go out. I've got one of these new kind of lights they call flashlights but it isn't at all reliable. Let's go."

The other two hastened to do his bidding, although both ruffians were licking their lips at the thought of watching Toria's rape after they emerged from the tunnel. Damien knew it would be touch and go whether one of them tried to hold him back or knifed him so they'd be free to join in the fun.

He'd have to make his move while in the tunnel, even though Heath had been smart enough to keep them all separated.

Although he didn't know yet what that move would be.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

A defiant Toria and a frantically thinking Damien were shoved into the tunnel, the bigger of the thugs between him and his love. He could easily freeze one of them but what would be happening to Toria in the time it would take him to turn around and immobilize the other? A knockout blow to her chin? And Heath still would be last, right behind his beloved girl. He was so proud of her, as she marched over to the entrance to the tunnel and waited with seeming unconcern as first Tom, with the torch, lowered himself and then Red shoved Damien in. They all followed in the order Heath had proclaimed.

Damien felt an instant's panic as the walls of the tunnel closed around him. There was no room to maneuver at all. The tunnel walls touched him on each side, limiting any movement he chose to make.

The dank air of the tunnel was sickening. The damp walls reeked of mold and he could feel no ventilation stirring. Surrounded this closely by aged dirt he could not catch the slightest whiff of the ocean. Perhaps as they moved along it would improve. He was tempted to force a little breeze to blow but didn't want to raise questions in anyone's mind.

He'd unleash his power when he was sure he'd win. Although it concerned him he couldn't feel his power coursing in his blood and body as he usually did. Suddenly he realized he'd never before felt this lack, this emptiness. He almost panicked at the thought his power might have deserted him. He didn't know quite what to make of this feeling. Surely it was temporary and his power would surge back when he needed it.

More worried than he'd ever been in his life, Damien struggled to control his alarm. What could he and Toria do if his power didn't return? Was there any way he knew to restore his innate mage's abilities? What in the name of Merlin's magic was going on here?

He suddenly wondered if Merlin had ever lost his magic. Perhaps when Arthur's fate turned out so far from Merlin's wish for him? No, his father had once explained Merlin had known from the beginning what was to be Arthur's destiny and had sorrowfully watched it unfold. Fate could never be denied. Although Arthur and Merlin's destiny eventually included a legacy of being wise and noble men whose names would live through the ages.

For no one ever could and no mage would, interfere with destiny. If Toria was to be his fate, he'd manage somehow to save her.

He suddenly sent a mental plea to his father, begging for help in a situation where he knew himself to be completely lost. For the first time in his life, he was adrift and bewildered. He needed help beyond his own suddenly feeble powers.

A feeling new to him and utterly bewildering.

Unexpectedly the scent of the ocean wafted to Damien. They would be at the cove quickly. He must make a move soon.

His panic suddenly lessened, as he heard and felt his father's soothing presence in his mind.

*Be patient, Damien.*

He closed his eyes and waited.

Suddenly and beyond any expectation, Rafe's distinctive and deep voice reverberated through the tunnel with startling ferocity. Surely the most welcome sound he'd ever heard.

"Well, you mangy scum, I've got a knife at your back. I presume you're the baron. But I won't kill a man in such a cowardly manner. Turn around, you bastard. Turn around and face me and see I'm ready to stab you to death at the slightest provocation. I won't use the knife if you cooperate. Now direct your scruffy men to free my friends."

Quite definitely Rafe had returned from London.

With a roar of frustration Heath wheeled around and literally threw himself at Rafe. He either didn't believe Rafe had a knife or discounted it in his rage and he launched himself at this unexpected enemy. Rafe's outheld knife caught him directly below the heart and the baron collapsed with a roar that soon changed into a horrible gurgle.

Rafe's voice again filled the cave.

"Damien, I think I've killed him. I didn't mean to do that unless I had to."

Flooding his entire being, Damien felt his mage's abilities return in a great rush that invigorated his entire system. He felt stronger than ever before in his life.

"Don't worry, Rafe. You didn't kill him. I did. I added power when he propelled himself toward you."

"Well, it doesn't matter to me which one of us did it. I'm glad he's gone."

Damien laughed.

Red had tried to turn to help his master but Toria immediately stopped him with a crushing blow with her knee into his groin. She followed it with a punch in the same area. Damien noticed she carefully fisted her hand properly before she did so. Red crumpled to the ground in the throes of an anguish he well deserved.

Tom tried to move to help his mates but Damien, his power flowing in a bright stream, froze him to the spot.

The three villains lay on the floor, Red writhing in agony and clutching his vital parts. Heath was dead. Tom was immobilized until Damien chose to set him free. His villain's eyes darted nervously but otherwise he couldn't move. Damien decided to think about when to free him. If at all. It was very tempting to dispatch them all to whatever hell Heath had just entered.

Yes, he'd see to Toria and then decide.

"My love, are you all right?"

Her cheerful voice lifted his soul.

"I'm fine, Damien. I knew you'd fix things."

He grimaced. "You did your part, love. Actually it wasn't me. Rafe is the hero. Rafe, I can't thank you enough. You saved both our lives, as well as keeping Toria from a torture no woman should ever endure."

Rafe's voice bounced off the tunnel's encompassing walls.

"He's dead, Damien. He cannot harm us any longer. Shall I try to drag his body out?"

Damien laughed, his joy and relief as apparent as his gratitude.

"Leave the body there and go wait for the government agents who are on their way. Let them clean up the mess. Red will certainly hang, unless I intercede and allow him to be deported. Tom can't move right now and I have yet to decide what to do about him. But you must go and tell the government men what happened. None of the villains is any danger at all, thanks to you, my very good friend. We could have done nothing without you."

With those words of acknowledgement for the help he'd received he heard his father's voice plainly in his mind. Perhaps for the last time, although he hoped not. Although he knew if his father felt his son was finally ready to be on his own, it might indeed be the last.

*Acknowledging one always has need for others is most important, my son. You knew about the importance of love from your mother and me. Now you've learned the importance of mutual help. Goodbye my son. For a while. You've discovered the last thing we wanted you to know.*

Damien heaved a big sigh of relieved gratitude. Indeed, he felt a different and better person as he acknowledged no one is sufficient unto himself. Not even a mage. He subdued his inner feelings, although he meant to examine them later. Then he spoke to Rafe.

"One more favor, Rafe. Will you go tether Araby to your horse so you can bring him down to the cove on the beach? I think we'll be needing him soon. You might first lead Dolly to the boundaries of Tregaron and turn her loose. She'll find her way home from there. Just give her a slap on her rump."

Rafe turned away to this new task and Damien considered the problem of how to reach Toria. He wanted her here beside him but the huddling form of Red took up most of the space in the tunnel.

He grinned and then put a spell on Red which could not be broken for twelve hours. That would certainly give the government agents time to retrieve Heath's body. Now they could collect Red's as well. If Red had crimes beside this latest episode he'd not intervene to save him. He'd seen the unholy lust in the man's eyes as he looked at Toria, determined to plunder her as soon as he had the chance. Yes, he'd let the

government deal with Red. He simply couldn't trust himself not to blast him to perdition.

Before he made another move he must get Toria by his side.

His power now flowing brightly through his veins, he wished her over Red's body and beside him.

Smiling at her astonished face as she stood beside him, he leaned over and kissed her softly.

"Good to see you, my love. You were wonderful. I must remember not to make you angry."

She looked both amazed and delighted.

"I flew, didn't I? I actually flew."

He knew this was the time to make sure she understood exactly what he was.

"Well, almost but not quite. You know I'm a mage. That conveys a lot of power with it. I can sometimes move objects just by thinking about them. I want you to understand me. I'm a true mage, as my father was before me. I can even change my shape when I choose."

She thought for a moment and then his amazing girl laughed. "You were the old earl as well as the present one, weren't you?"

Relieved, he still felt compelled to make sure she understood.

"I can also read people's minds. With those I love I have never, nor will I ever, invade unless at their request. I have never used that power on you. But yes and I can work a magic spell or two."

She looked at him in silence for a moment, while he literally held his breath. They'd come so far in their journey toward each other but she must accept him as he was or they could go no further.

Toria reached up and patted his face, suddenly looking more serious than he liked.

"Can you forgive me for breaking my word to you, Damien?"

"I knew you were forced, love. None of that matters."

"And what you just told me doesn't matter, Damien. Your abilities are even more than I suspected but I don't care how much or how little power you have. You're uniquely you. And it's you I want, if you still want me."

Obsessed with the urge to make their way out of the tunnel so he could kiss her properly, he turned to Tom. The man was as motionless as if he'd been cast in stone but his eyes were wild and frantically afraid.

"You're lucky, Tom. Suddenly I don't want you around and I really don't like killing people. I also don't want your body in the way. I'm going to free you from this spell and if you have a brain in your head you'll run out this tunnel as fast as the weasel you are. Now go."

Tom was only too glad to leave this frightening pair. The minute Damien freed his muscles he dropped the torch and wheeled and scurried out of the tunnel. The air from the ocean came wafting in and Damien realized they were very near the end where the tunnel emptied onto the beach. Taking a deep breath of the fresh, tangy air, he waited just a moment to give Tom time to run as far from the cove as he could. Damien wondered if he should have let him go but then grinned as he thought of the government men on the march to this location. Doubtless some had been dispatched to the hut and some to the cove. He didn't think Tom would get very far.

The torch had gone out when it fell to the dirt and Damien considered relighting it. Starting a fire was so elemental for a mage. But Tom's departure had let a slim sliver of light into the tunnel and Damien didn't bother. Taking Toria's hand, Damien led her to the almost hidden entrance on the sand.

He didn't have much time before either the government men or Rafe showed up. He checked in his mind to see where they all were and then turned to his love. He intended to spend every minute convincing her they belonged together. He knew well he must continue his patience with her but he hoped to induce her to give him another chance to win her love. Although love for her tended to tie his tongue, certainly he could be persuasive enough to hope she'd eventually accept him as her destiny. He'd wait whatever time she wanted to claim her body, although right now he was shuddering with almost uncontrollable desire for this wonderful girl.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Toria trembled from head to foot when they exited the cave. She'd never felt such desire before, she thought, although she'd longed for Damien's kisses. This hot ardency was entirely different, burning her senses and lighting her body. She couldn't wait to put her hands all over him and to embrace this wonderful man. An irresistible compulsion urged her on, a craving she didn't understand but didn't try to resist.

She wanted him. All of him.

She looked around and saw a sandy spot to the side of the exit. She didn't even check to see if anyone else was on the beach. She threw herself at him, clutching his hair and forcing his lips down to hers.

"Damien, I want something, I'm not sure what but it's so strong. Compelling. I want your body joined with mine. I know you can satisfy this craving. It's funny but I can barely keep from tearing off your clothes."

While he stood motionless with a stunned look on his face, she stripped off her jacket and placed it on the sandy spot.

"Now you, Damien, take off your coat too. Spread it below mine. Lay down a kind of bed so we can make love with each other. Here. Now."

She would have smiled at his astonishment were it not that the urgency of her desire made her run her hands under his coat, helping him shrug it off while she delighted in the feel of his muscled chest and back. His powerful shuddering pleased her enormously.

Damien reacted quickly, folding her jacket to make a pillow for her head and then spreading his coat so he could position her hips. Sand in the area he knew he'd soon be invading would be uncomfortable but his own need made his hands shake. He knew well the urgency she was experiencing and thanked all the powers in the heavens. Their escape from near death had left her with a driving desire to reaffirm life in the most elemental way.

He could feel his erection surging to full force, larger than he'd ever known before. He'd desired her for such a long time and spent so many nights fighting the demand to take her and show her she was his for all of time. He cautioned himself to slow down and not frighten her again but the pressure building in his body made it even more difficult than usual.

Toria seemed to have her own ideas. She practically accosted him. Well, hell, she did accost him, her slender fingers going immediately to the buttons of his trousers. He realized dimly she'd stepped out of her drawers while he was positioning his coat for her comfort.



She caressed his arousal through the thin material of his pants and then tugged at them.

"Pull these stupid things down, Damien. How can we join bodies when you're still clothed?"

If he could, he'd have collapsed from surprise and delight but she already was tugging his hand to urge him down to the makeshift bed. While he fought the longing to take her on the spot where she stood, she hastily lay down and held out her arms to him.

He dimly realized she was almost as crazed as he. He knew in the back of his mind what frenzy possessed them both. Often after extreme danger, one is filled with gratitude for escaping overwhelming odds and suffused with an almost uncontrollable desire to affirm being alive. A zest and an urgent need for life to reassert itself. The same compulsion seized them both. He was on fire as well as too thankful for the chance to prove to his love for her to attempt to try to slow her.

He sank quickly to his knees, straddling her body and leaning down to kiss her seeking lips. He plunged his tongue in immediately, seeking out the sweet crevices of her mouth as she opened to give him easier access. Their dueling tongues stroked each other with equal ardor. He imitated the mating action, as their passion blazed even hotter.

He kissed and sucked her nipples through the material of the dress he longed to rip from her but instead shoved it up around her waist. He wished his trousers off him and didn't even notice as they fell to the sand.

Toria slipped her hands under his shirt and gasped as she felt his muscles ripple and strain against her hands. He felt so blatantly male, so alive and responsive as she caressed his chest with her mouth and her hands and moved down his body, lingering just a few seconds over his navel and then traveling even lower.

As her fingers enclosed his erection Damien jerked as if she'd hit him with a whip. Reaching for her wandering fingers he tried for her sake to hesitate. He hoped he wasn't crushing her with his weight but she didn't seem to care.

"Toria, we're already going much faster than we should. You can't be ready for me yet, although by every hell if you touch me again I'll probably explode in your hand."

She responded by looping her hands behind his neck and arching her body fully against his. With the smile of a born siren she whispered, "Please go faster, Damien. I want to feel I'm truly yours."

To his utter delight when he reached down to the curls of her mound he found her as moist as he could wish. With a groan and unspoken prayer to try to go slowly he positioned his heavy erection between her legs. He tried to probe gently but she grabbed his hips to force him in, lifting her hips to take him fully inside. When she pushed against him he gave up the fight he wasn't at all interested in winning and plunged deep into her welcoming warmth. His body screaming for release, he tried to control himself to make this rapture last. Once, twice, four times he thrust into her, so

deeply he felt he was touching her womb. To his delight he felt her respond eagerly to every plunge. They crested together on the fifth stroke, the quickest and most ecstatic climax Damien had ever experienced. And she went soaring with him.

She cried out his name with joy and triumph and he shouted his release. He lay limply on her, marveling at the sure knowledge she'd found pleasure too. And he knew she realized every wonderful moment that it was he, Damien, filling her so completely and with so much love. She'd never doubted his presence as her lover.

He tried to move but she held her to him.

"Don't move just yet, Damien. I love your being in me like this. By your Merlin, if I'd known you'd bring me such pleasure I wouldn't have waited so long to insist you give me another chance."

He kissed her sweetly and with infinite gratitude. "Even I didn't know it could be like this, my dearest love. Although I think you had to come to me on your own to make it so wonderful. I've never experienced such pleasure. Thank you, Toria."

She looked at him in wonder. "Damien, your-your *rod* is growing again inside me. Does that mean we can do it again?"

He pulled out of her and stood. A little ruefully and certainly with regret but he managed.

"It most certainly does, my dear love but not now. Much as I'd enjoy taking you again here and now. Rafe will be here soon with Araby and so will the government men. But I promise I'll come to you tonight and every night thereafter. Then I'll show you how much more pleasure is possible when you mate with your true love."

She beamed at him as he took her hand and raised her to stand beside him. She jumped to her feet with the smile of a fulfilled woman. She reached over for her drawers and as he admired her grace he noticed her legs running with moisture. His seed and her own juices. That might make for an uncomfortable ride home for her.

He grinned at her. "I didn't think to bring a towel. Here love, let me help with this little problem."

He summoned a small warm wind and directed it to her legs, smiling into her questioning eyes as she felt the breeze gently dry her. She laughed out loud when the breeze moved and next dried the damp spots over her breasts where he'd sucked her so frantically.

She laughed. "Damien, is there anything you can't do? I must say loving a mage is a fine thing."

He stopped still and stared at her. "Do you realize you just said you loved me?"

"Well, of course I do. Realize I said it and that I love you. I'm not a lackwit, you know."

He hugged her to him hard but briefly. She'd just presented him with two wondrous gifts. Her passion and her love. What more could any man want?

"Come on, my intelligent bride-to-be. Let's make ourselves look as respectable as we can."

He donned his trousers and they tidied themselves just as Rafe rode up with Araby on a lead behind him.

"I'm glad you didn't come any quicker, Rafe," Damien said dryly. "Toria and I had a few things to discuss."

"I don't doubt you a bit," Rafe said with a laugh. "Did I give you enough time to finish your – ah – discussion?"

Damien took a mock swipe at him and turned to go.

Rafe stopped him. "Er, Damien, that boat out there is coming in fast. Is it supposed to?"

Damien peered at the rapidly approaching ship. "No, not yet. The government men are coming soon. I'll stop the boat for about ten minutes as they will definitely want to interview these gentlemen."

"Smugglers?"

"Of the worst kind," Damien answered in as grim a voice as his companions had ever heard from him. "They bring in contraband goods, some drugs and take out young girls destined to be sex slaves."

"My god," Rafe whispered. "But you still want them to land."

"Definitely," Damien answered. "I want the government to have them right and tight. I'd better stall them for now 'til the agents arrive."

He stood staring out to sea, saying nothing and a small storm immediately whipped up between the ship and the shore.

"That will hold them off just long enough. Let's go home."

He swung onto Araby and then unexpectedly jumped off and started taking the saddle off.

"I want to hold Toria in front of me. The edge of the saddle might rub against her."

He laid the saddle on the sand. "I'll send a groom back for it, later. Now let's go home."

He vaulted onto Araby's bare back as Rafe grinned wisely and handed Toria up to him. Damien clutched her closely against his body. It might be more comfortable for her to ride this way, although it would be hell for him to have his erection pushing against her the entire ride. Hopefully she'd feel the frustration also.

She turned and kissed him sweetly.

"Yes, let's go home, Damien."

Damien had one more thing to ask Rafe. He didn't want Toria to see that horribly slashed throat again.

"Did someone find the guard, Rafe?"

"Oh yes and I blew his warning whistle. The adjacent guard was almost there as it was. When his friend missed his rendezvous point he'd already started out to see what happened. The poor devil's been taken away."

"Of course I'll see to his burial and to his family. No man deserves a death like that."

They all started out for Tregaron. For his beloved home.

With deep gratitude in his heart that the cause for all Toria's fears was eliminated once and for all.

Toria tried to lean back against Damien and he shifted forward so their bodies were even closer. Not the most comfortable position for him as he'd known but he'd do much more than suffer a little discomfort in order to feel her lithe body against his. His burgeoning erection poked against her and she laughed.

She reached back to try to stroke him but he slapped her hand away.

"Behave yourself, my love," he whispered in a growl. "It's hard enough for me without you making it worse."

She jiggled against him once and he gasped.

"It seems to me you're already hard, my lord," she chuckled.

As he parted her hair and pressed a kiss on her neck he thought the time had come to ask her the question haunting him. He knew he could invade her mind and discover the truth but he had no temptation to do so. He wanted to hear her explanation in her own words.

"Toria, can you tell me what made you change so radically in the hut? You went from being a scared mouse and turned into an avenging angel. And one who was ready for my love. Was it prompted by the fact I killed the baron? Which I'm not at all sorry for, incidentally. If I'm supposed to feel remorse I just don't. Although I hope it wasn't merely that."

Toria rode silently for a moment. Her musical voice was low when she answered.

"Well, killing him did help me feel more free but I'd already changed. I'd been changing for quite a while. For days, in fact, Damien. I just couldn't find the courage to tell you. But when they bound your hands I suddenly realized the baron was nothing but a cowardly bully and not worth my letting him influence me in any way. I myself gave undeserved power to him by allowing him to frighten me. I knew I could never be true to myself as long as I granted him that power. When I thought about how he'd needed to hire two men to bring me to him as a decoy for you I was simply furious. I knew once and for all I'd never let him manipulate me again. What a miserable excuse for a man! But I recognized it was up to me to refuse to allow his horrible presence in my mind. Does that make sense, Damien?"

His arms tightened around her.

"Yes, my darling, it does. You're exactly right. Some people don't deserve to have any influence over us at all. We give them too much dominance when we even let bad thoughts about them into our minds."

They rode in silence for a while, with Toria snuggling as close as she could to the man she loved.

He finally whispered in her ear. "Shall we have a double wedding, Toria? I'd guess Rafe has proposed to Debora by now or will as soon as we return."

"Yes, oh yes, Damien. Although I suppose it will take three weeks for the banns to be called." She spoke with such regret Damien smiled. "That's such a long time to wait, Damien."

Her disappointed tone delighted Damien.

Damien threw back his head and laughed so loudly Rafe turned to look at them with a grin on his face.

"We can be married in three days, not three weeks, my love. Certainly I can arrange for a special license for both Rafe and me."

Her sigh of relief told him how much she liked the idea.

"How stupid of me. Of course you can. The poor archbishop can never resist your mage's powers. You're so wonderful, Damien."

His voice rumbled softly in her ear.

"And I warn you I'm not going to put off loving you until the actual ceremony, which is meaningless to me. Although for the sake of your reputation as Lady Sinclair the rites must be observed. I'll not wait three days, though, to enjoy your body again. You'll be in my bed tonight, as you will every night for the rest of our lives."

She gave another relieved sigh as she tried to edge closer.

"Every night. Just what I hoped you'd say. You have so much to teach me."

This time the sigh was slight and edged with anticipation.

"It will be a distinct pleasure, my dearest love."

He whispered more words of love in her ear and then pushed himself a little away from her. They were getting closer to Tregaron and he could hardly dismount with an erection such as he sported. He doubted if Debora had never seen such an arousal, although Rafe would educate her three nights from now. In the meantime, he must concentrate on not disgracing himself in the eyes of his sister and the servants.

He used all his powers of concentration to make himself at least presentable.

But tonight. Oh yes tonight, he'd show her again and again. If they went to bed early, which certainly they were entitled to do after such a hard day, there would be many hours between dusk and dawn. With an eager Toria he could achieve another miracle or two.

Although the truest magic was their love. Certainly no greater miracle existed than for them to have discovered their true destiny with each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found her waiting for him when he knocked softly on her door that night. She wore only a diaphanous night rail. He briefly wondered where she'd gotten such a scrap of see-through material. Her rosy nipples and her woman's curls were clearly visible.

Had she sent to Dover for it? Not that it mattered where she'd found that bit of gauze, he'd have it off her in a flash. But he loved the thought that she'd purchased such a signal of her amorous intentions.

He shut the door behind him and kissed first her lips and then her peaked breasts.

"My love," he whispered. "My forever and only love."

He longed to plunge his body into hers, although another part of him wanted to take time to savor their passion.

He started to strip the gown from her and then hesitated.

Halted by one of his prescient visions, he nearly laughed aloud.

Should he tell her about the twins? A boy and a girl?

He plainly saw them both, the boy with dark hair and the girl with blonde curls. Conceived on the beach and already implanted firmly in her womb. He felt quite ridiculously pleased with himself. Just one time and he'd impregnated her.

And what a lovely vision the twins made. No, he'd wait a month or so before telling Toria. It was too soon to mention. She believed in his visions but he didn't want to distract her tonight. He wanted her to concentrate solely on him for a little longer. Perhaps he was more selfish than he'd suspected. Although he thought she'd welcome the news. Still sometime they must start considering appropriate names for the soon-to-be born mage and enchantress. Gareth maybe for the name of the boy? After one of King Arthur's favorite knights? They'd definitely have to consult.

Two babes were about to be born with power their parents must teach them to use wisely. For just a moment he groaned. The twins would be a delight even as they drove their fond mama and papa insane with their mischief.

And then came another flash of prescience and he lowered his forehead against her fragrant hair so she couldn't see his face. Just two years later another set of twins? Dear Merlin, four babies in three years—although he didn't yet foresee the sex of the last two.

Certainly too much information to give Toria right now. He did pause his amorous assault and asked in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"You do want children, don't you my love?"

"Of course. Lots. Now don't waste time with stupid questions, Damien."

He grinned as he thought what busy parents they'd be. Exceptionally devoted parents and their love for each other was so strong it would grow more intense and even larger, more than enough to encompass each child as it arrived. But that all lay in their delightful future. Tonight, a wonderful tonight, was here and now. He turned his

lips and his skilled hands to the pleasure awaiting them both. This night and all the nights to come.

She moaned on a breath of anticipation and sensuously lifted her gown over her head and let it drop to the floor. She wriggled her nude body against him like a born siren. He held her off for a moment to admire her naked beauty. She was almost too perfectly formed to be real and his arousal grew even harder. He wondered hazily how he'd take the time to undress and speedily wished his own clothes from him.

Toria looked at his naked and very male form, grinning at his speedy disrobing. She sighed with voluptuous appreciation as she ran her hands over his powerful, trembling body.

He almost backed her against the wall and took her there but managed to control himself enough to lead her to the bed.

They were both as impatient as if they'd never enjoyed each other. This time he knew would be different from the last and even more meaningful. Their first time in a bed where he could show her the passion they'd revel in through the years.

His Toria was magic.

The truest magic of all and he was one fortunate mage. Not so much in his abilities as in the love of this wonderful woman.

Although he must definitely teach her to slow down a little. Well, maybe eventually. As they began their ascent to ecstasy he knew tonight's speed didn't matter. They had years and years to teach each other every mode of passion and every conceivable pace.

He set about showing her this soaring night was special. The first night of their forever.

He relished the joy bubbling within him, an elation he'd never savored so strongly. Surely another sign of the magic of their love. Then he forgot everything but Toria as her eager fingers again found his ready body.

## About the Author

Jean was born in Ohio but has lived most of her life in southern California. Her insatiable love of reading started at age seven, when her widowed mother accepted a teaching job. For many of her formative years, Jean was housebound in the afternoons until her mother returned from work. She happily spent untold hours reading everything and anything. This joy of reading has influenced her whole life, and is still one of her chief pleasures. Writing is equally enjoyable, and now takes top place in her favorite activities.

Her journalism degree was used only infrequently until recently. Marriage, two children and two grandchildren took priority. After some twenty years of being a real estate broker and having her own firm, Jean returned to her always beloved writing. Through the years she and her husband have enjoyed collecting art and minerals. Her husband now is of great assistance as an enthusiastic editor and a valuable critic.

She's a dedicated member of RWA and has won several awards in national contests. The Druid series is presently her main focus of literary interest, although she's also written four other historical romances. Romance has proven most satisfying to write, since her hero and heroine always manage to struggle through to a happy ending. Sometimes a secondary character takes over though and demands his own book!

And then we literally have another story!

Jean welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.cerridwenpress.com](http://www.cerridwenpress.com).

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