



MIST AND STONE

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

MIST AND STONE

Bronwyn Green



Dedication

For my mom, who taught me four of the most powerful words in the English language
Once upon a time...

Chapter One

"Touch her, and I will geld you before you take your next breath." Rage filling her vision, Willow stepped in front of the young priestess at her side and blocked the advances of the man before them.

His thin lips peeled away from his teeth in a poor facsimile of a smile. "Mayhap, I will touch you instead."

As he reached for her breast, she drew her dagger from the sheath attached to her kirtle and pressed the blade against the man's groin. Unprepared for her bold move, he gasped and froze in place. She did not bother hiding her smile as she pushed the blade upwards bringing him to his toes.

Hooves clattered over the courtyard's stones and a rider dismounted, but she refused to look away from the man in front of her.

The rider moved beside her and locked a warm hand around her wrist.

She turned to glare at the second man. "Have you come to protect your brother in arms from my blade?"

Recognition hit her low in the gut as familiar eyes, blue as a bright autumn day, crinkled with poorly concealed amusement. Gareth.

A crooked smile quirked his lips as he ignored her question as well as her barb. "While I am tempted to allow you to make good on your threat, I do not think the King would appreciate you spilling the blood of one of his knights." He paused and eyed the man at the end of her dagger. "No matter how much he likely deserves it."

"Release me," she demanded. She refused to allow either man to think she was a helpless child.

In response, Gareth grabbed the other man's tunic and gently, but firmly, pulled her weapon from its intended target. "The priestess is none of your concern, Maleagant. You will give her a wide berth or Arthur will hear of this."

The other man narrowed his eyes, rage bright in the icy depths. "They are pagan whores." Yanking free of Gareth's grasp, he stumbled backwards. "God does not care for them. Why should Arthur?"

Willow shook with anger as he disappeared from view. She turned her scowl on the man who still held her wrist, caressing the underside with a callused thumb. A shiver worked down her spine as he continued to stroke the sensitive skin.

"Ever the protector of the weak, Sir Gareth the *Brave*," she scoffed as she shook her hair from her face, taking care not to reveal how his slightest touch affected her. Though she had taken pains to pretend otherwise, her childhood infatuation had never truly gone away. If anything, it was worse than ever. However, it was difficult to rectify the noble knight before her with the boy who had pushed her into mud puddles and put frogs in her hair.

Gangly, red-haired Gareth had become a knight to be envied. Gone were the knobby knees and clumsy feet of a boy. In his place stood a man, tall and broad shouldered. If the heavy mail covering his body was any indication, he was also thickly muscled—he would have to be to support the weight of the metal as if it were no more cumbersome than his tunic. His hair had darkened to a russet brown, and his voice had deepened, though it still held the rich accent of the Orkney Isles. Only his eyes remained unchanged and right now they bored into hers.

She attempted to tug her arm free of his grasp, but he held firm, pulling her closer until she needed to tilt her head to meet his gaze. The heat of his body surrounded her, chasing away the chill of the spring morning.

"You have made a fierce enemy in Malaegant," he growled.

She shrugged. "I do not fear him."

"You should." He tightened his grip on her wrist. Plucking her dagger from her fingers, he slipped it into his belt.

How dare he appropriate her weapon as though she was a child who could not be trusted to handle sharp objects? Her irritation deepened.

"You have humiliated him, and he will not soon forget it. If ever." Lifting her chin, he forced her to meet his gaze. "You must take heed, Willow—especially while you are at Camelot. He is a dangerous man."

She leaned closer and gently lifted his hair from his forehead, enjoying the sensation of his silky locks sliding through her fingers. Squinting, she peered intently at him as if searching for hidden secrets.

Frowning, he caught her wandering hand and pressed it to his chest. "What do you play at, woman?"

"I play at nothing. I am simply searching for hoof prints."

His brow furrowed and confusion spread across his features. "Hoof prints?"

She bit her lip, stifling the smile that threatened. "Your solicitous behaviour is so unlike your usual treatment of me, I can only assume your mount has kicked you in the head recently."

His firm lips twitched, but whether in amusement or annoyance, she was unable to tell. She fought the urge to smooth her fingertips across them.

He leant towards her, bringing his face so close she could feel the warm flutter of his breath upon her skin. Was he going to kiss her?

Holding her gaze, Gareth slowly raised her palm to his lips and brushed a kiss across the centre. Nervous excitement trembled through her middle as he raised his head slightly. "Have a care, Willow, lest I feel the need to remind you that Malaegant is not the only dangerous man nearby."

Her breath caught in her throat as he nipped the skin on the inside of her wrist, his eyes never leaving hers. Releasing both hands, he replaced her dagger in the sheath at her waist. Before she could respond, he turned and walked towards the castle.

Open-mouthed, Willow stared as Gareth walked away. For a moment, she thought she had seen desire in his eyes, mingled with the ever present exasperation, but that was ridiculous. He did not desire her. In his mind, she was likely still the troublesome little girl who had demanded to be a squire and train with the boys. This was probably his way of reminding her to be wary. However, she wished he would have chosen a way that did not leave her wondering what his mouth would feel like against hers.

Nimue, one of the acolytes nudged her. "Who was that?"

Willow smiled at the awe in the girl's voice. "Gareth of Orkney." When Nimue nodded at her to continue, she shrugged. "We grew up together. He is practically my brother." She chose to ignore the girl's snort of disbelief.

As the Lady of the Lake's foundling child, Willow had accompanied Morgayne to Camelot whenever she travelled to confer with King Arthur and Queen Gwenhwyfar. Both the king and queen had doted on Willow, allowing her to share her meals with their nephews and there she had met Gareth and his brothers. She had followed them everywhere wanting nothing more than to be part of their games. Once, in frustration, Gareth's brother Gwain had tied her to a tree, but Gareth had taken pity on her and released her after extracting the promise that she would pester them no more.

She had acquiesced, not because Gareth had asked, but because of the taunts she had heard that day. Gwain had called her a demon changling. He had told her Morgayne should have left her to die under the tree where she had been found. She had known others felt as he did. People had often made the sign against evil when she met their gaze – they still did. The difference was now she no longer cared.

Over the years she had accompanied Morgayne to court less and less, travelling from Avalon only when the Lady insisted – as she had today. She was not sure why Morgayne had required her presence this day – particularly since she had not been invited inside. She supposed it had to do with the unrest spreading through the countryside. As the followers of the One God grew, some clung to the Old Ways more fiercely than ever. Despite both Arthur's and Morgayne's insistence that there was room for both paths, violence increased throughout the kingdom. Churches were sacked and shrines were destroyed. Willow had no idea what any of this had to do with her, but she was here just the same watching Gareth walking away from her without a backward glance.

Gareth resisted the urge to look back at Willow. He had wanted her as long as he could remember, but as a priestess of Avalon, she was bound to the service of the Goddess and the laws of the Lady of the Lake. While Morgayne enjoyed her share of lovers, he got the impression that she preferred her priestesses to be as chaste as nuns.

He sighed. Perhaps it was simply the novelty of the forbidden. He wanted Willow for no other reason than she had been denied him. However, that didn't explain the sensation that poleaxed him when she had whirled to face him.

Her mane of golden blonde curls had bounced almost angrily across her back and her normally wide brown eyes were narrowed and full of fire. Splotches of pink stained her cheeks, giving colour to her pale, elfin features.

The drape of her deep green dress did nothing to conceal her full breasts and hips. His fingers still itched to gather the soft cloth in his hands and bare her to his gaze. It had been nigh impossible to keep from touching more than her delicate wrist. He rubbed his hand across his face in frustration, groaning at the scent of her skin clinging to him – spring flowers and fresh greens.

He sighed at the path his thoughts followed. She was a priestess, sworn to the Goddess, and he was a knight, sworn to Arthur and Britain. However, that reminder did not stop him from wanting to pull her full lower lip between his teeth and taste it. He pushed the thought from his head and focused on the matter at hand.

The King needed not only the report on the northern territories but an account of Malaegant's behaviour. Why Arthur had knighted the knave in the first place, Gareth would never know. Gareth had barely been able to contain the fury that had raced through him when he saw Malaegant reach for Willow's breast. It had taken every bit of restraint he possessed not to run the bastard through. He suspected she had experienced the same difficulty. He could not stop the smile that curved his lips at the sight of dainty little Willow holding the rotter at bay. Left to her own devices, she probably would have happily unmanned the fool, but he had not wanted her to suffer the consequences of that act.

Entering the great hall, Gareth sidestepped several servants to make his way to the throne room where he assumed Arthur would be holding council with the Lady of the Lake. They were deep in conversation when he entered, so he hung back in the entryway, waiting to be acknowledged.

Morgayne glanced at him briefly before turning back to Arthur. "You are the king," she snapped. "The land and her people are your responsibility. You should be the one to take part in the Great Marriage."

"I will not betray my queen by lying with another woman – even if it is for the good of the kingdom."

Realising this was a conversation he wanted no part of, Gareth attempted to back from the room.

Spotting his movement, Arthur pinned him with his gaze. "Wait, Gareth."

Morgayne leaned closer to the king. "It is not just another woman, it would be the Goddess incarnate. By bringing together Britain and the One God with the Goddess and the Old Ways, we may yet bring peace to our people."

Arthur sighed and for the first time, Gareth noticed how the years had taken their toll on his uncle. The battles of age and sovereignty lined his face and his once golden hair was shot through with silver. He looked...tired.

Guilt niggled at him. His parents had done much to plague Arthur's rule. For years, they had contrived and manipulated in a desperate attempt to place one of their own children on the throne of Britain. Neither he nor his brothers had ever complied with their parents' twisted schemes, though. Having been fostered under Arthur's care at Camelot, they were more loyal to the king than their own parents. He glanced at the man who had raised him.

"If I had a son..." Arthur's thought trailed off.

Gareth shifted, becoming more uncomfortable than ever.

The Lady of the Lake laid her hand over Arthur's. "You do have nephews."

His discomfort spiralled rapidly into unease. He needed to give his report and get out of there, before he somehow got assigned to taking part in a pagan festival. He cleared his throat. "Milord, I can return later to give you my findings on the northern territories."

"Do not be foolish, boy. We are almost done here."

He bristled, but kept quiet. He was not sure what annoyed him more—being referred to as boy or the appraising looks he received from Morgayne.

"You need to choose someone to stand in your stead," the woman said, never taking her eyes from Gareth.

Arthur followed the Lady's gaze. "What say you, Gareth? Will you act in my place?"

"You want me to take part in the ritual?"

"Aye."

He stifled a sigh. He had no interest in participating in a pagan rite. "I will help you find the best man to perform this duty, uncle."

Arthur nodded, but Morgayne frowned and turned from him to address the king. "Willow shall be the Goddess incarnate," she announced.

Gareth stiffened in shock. He had assumed the Lady herself would be fulfilling the role of Goddess. Arousal and anger roiled within him. The idea of some other man – any other man – lying with Willow twisted like a knife in his gut.

He could see her with her hair spread across his bed furs, her petal-soft skin glistening in the firelight. Stifling a groan, he could not help but wonder if her nipples would be the same rosy pink as her lips. His cock swelled as he imagined them pebbling against his tongue. The sound she made when he had kissed her palm had drawn his balls up tight. How would she sound when he tasted her sweet cunt? The idea of another man taking what should be his tightened his fists, and his true reason for being there forgotten, he blurted, “I will do it.”

Both Morgayne and Arthur stared at him with surprise, but the Lady’s eyes had a knowing sheen as if she had been waiting for him to volunteer.

“You will do what, lad?” the king asked, confusion evident in his voice.

He forced his discomfort away. “I will be the one to perform this ritual.”

Morgayne studied him closely and a heavy silence blanketed the room. “You have already made your choice. Offering the Goddess your service from a place of jealousy is unacceptable.”

“Morgayne,” the king chided.

“A worthy candidate must be found.”

Gareth forced himself not to growl. He was nearing thirty years of age and the woman still had the ability to make him feel like an errant child. He needed to thrash something or someone. After reporting on the state of the northern territories, he was heading straight for the practice yard.

Dismissing the arrogant woman, he turned to his uncle. “I have news from the north.”

* * * *

Arthur had been pleased to hear that the northern lords continued to pledge their allegiance to the crown and he was understandably disturbed by Maleagant’s behaviour. When the king sent his guards to bring the other man to the throne room, Gareth left for the practice yard, grabbing a sparring partner from the great hall on his way through.

So intent on reaching his destination and working off his frustration, he did not stop to see if Willow and the others still waited in the courtyard. In retrospect, he decided that was probably a good thing. If he had spoken with her again, he sincerely doubted he would be able to keep his hands off her delectable body.

Bending at the waist, he let his mail shirt and his under tunic slither to the ground as Bors, his sparring partner hefted a sword, testing its weight.

"What has upset your cart?" Bors grinned as he swiped at Gareth.

Straightening, he blocked the other man's attack and their weapons clanged noisily, echoing off the stone walls.

"I am not upset," he gritted, thrusting towards his opponent, trying to knock him off balance.

"Then you are saying I imagined you and Malaegant nearly coming to blows over the wench in the courtyard."

He scowled at his friend and blocked a well placed blow. "That wench in the courtyard, is Willow."

Bors faltered for a moment. "Willow? The Lady's foundling?"

Gareth did not miss the look of appreciation in his friend's eyes. "Aye," he gritted out. "The very same."

Grinning, the other man nodded towards the fence. "And now she watches you."

Gareth whipped around to find Willow and some of the other women leaning against the fence, staring into the practice area. Her eyes widened in fear and she clapped her hand over her mouth stifling a scream as Bors rushed him from behind. He had seen the advancement of the other man's shadow along the ground and was able to turn and block the attack in time.

He glanced at Willow where she watched the mock battle with a horrified expression on her face. If he had to hazard a guess, he would say she was worried about him. She gripped the fence post, holding to it as if it was all that was keeping her upright.

Bors used Gareth's distraction with the woman to knock him against the railing right next to her.

She gasped as he hit the rough wood. How in the name of God was he supposed to give her to another man. "Worried about me, priestess?"

A frown tugged at her full lips. "I was just thinking that not even the Lady of the Lake has enough magic to reattach your head if it gets chopped off."

He doubted the hag would even bother attempting to heal him. "It would never happen." He winked at her as he pushed off the fence. "I am too good."

Willow watched as he fainted to the left and leapt back into the fray. He was right—he was good. He was very good. She watched with barely concealed fascination as both men stopped the fight long enough to remove their tunics. Sweat coursed down the centre of Gareth's chest and over his sharply delineated stomach muscles. For a brief moment, she imagined tracing each line with the tip of her tongue. Her woman's flesh moistened and quivered at the thought of touching his sculpted body.

What was she thinking? Gareth was a childhood friend—she should not be imagining touching him in such a way. She should not be imagining what his mouth tasted like. She certainly should not be imagining dragging her lips over his chest and neck.

She gasped as he swung fiercely, blocking a deadly thrust from his opponent. She started to squeal and slapped her hand over her mouth. Gareth spared her a glance and grinned, his lips lifting crookedly.

"Be careful, you fool!"

His smile widened. "I knew you cared about me."

Taking advantage of the conversation, Bors swung viciously at Gareth. This time Willow could not squelch her fear. She screamed. Gareth seemed to anticipate the other man's move. Parrying, he disarmed Bors with a swift move. Gareth extended his hand to his fallen comrade and hoisted him up. They clapped each other's shoulders in the age old sign of male bonding over sheer stupidity.

Ridiculously, she found herself completely aroused by this display of male prowess and domination. Gareth stood there panting. Dust and sweat mixed on his skin and she fought the urge to reach out and trail her fingers through the mixture. Walking to a barrel of rain water, he filled a pitcher and dumped it over his head. Water ran in rivulets over his head and shoulders, sluicing over hard-planed muscles and silky looking chest hair. He bent at the waist and shook his head like a large, shaggy dog. Droplets spattered everywhere—mostly over her.

Willow drank in his wild beauty as he straightened and ambled towards her, a predatory gleam in his eyes. Her stomach fluttered in nervous anticipation as he drew closer. She clasped the fence in front of her, to keep from reaching out and touching him.

"I have come to claim my token."

She could not make sense of his words, she could only follow the movement of his firm lips and watch the light in his eyes. "Pardon me?"

"The victorious knight receives a kiss from his lady fair."

Her mouth dropped open, and Bors stood grinning at them. "'Tis true, milady. But I must confess, I let him win, knowing how much he was longing for your kiss."

Gareth tossed a wry glance over his shoulder towards his friend before turning back to her. "What say you, priestess? Will you give me your mouth?" he murmured.

Her heart pounded. Give him her mouth? She would give him her whole body if he wanted it. She tried to swallow, her mouth suddenly dry. "Since Sir Bors had the good grace to let you win, I suppose the least I could do is —"

He never let her finish. His lips dipped over hers and captured her mouth, in a hard, breathless kiss that swept her senses. He cupped her face in both hands before sliding his hands through her hair and drawing her closer.

Her lips parted on a sigh and his tongue slipped between her teeth, teasing and tasting. Unable to stop her response, she reached out to clasp his damp shoulders. The heat coming off his body surged through her along with his strangled groan. The small sound vibrated against her as desire tumbled through her middle.

His fingers stroked the nape of her neck and scalp, pressing gently as he delved deeper. Her nipples peaked against the fabric of her dress, insistent little buds that begged for his touch. She moved closer, only to feel the rough, planks of wood pressing into her aching breasts.

Slowly, he lifted his head, breaking the contact between their mouths. Her eyes fluttered open only to be caught by his brilliant blue gaze. Heavy lidded and watchful, his eyes seemed somewhat darker than they had earlier. He stroked her cheek with his thumb as a crooked smile lifted his lips.

Disappointment pierced her and she tried to keep herself from leaning into his touch. His kiss, his touch meant nothing—this was as much a game as any they had played as children.

The sound of a throat clearing pulled them apart and a flush spread across her cheeks. Her fingertips flew to her lips where she could still feel the heated caress of his mouth. Glancing to the right, she saw Nimue. “The Lady comes,” she murmured, glancing towards where the rest of their party waited for Morgayne’s return. “We return to Avalon. At once.”

Willow nodded and looked through her lashes at Gareth.

His hair hung in long wet, hanks and water droplets clung to his shoulders, glinting in the afternoon sun. The ridiculous urge to taste the water directly from his skin struck her, and she took a step back. He was dangerous to her ability to function. His muscles were tense as if he was ready to attack and he still wore the hungry expression he had before he had kissed her. Nodding at Nimue, she retreated further, trying to still her pounding heart.

“Willow, wait,” Gareth called.

She looked away, afraid he would see the naked desire on her face. He did not need to know how intensely he had affected her. It would only make things worse the next time they met. There were no rules against priestesses taking a lover...or lovers as was the case for the Lady herself, but Willow would not take Gareth. She had been half in love with him as a child. Now that she was grown, she refused to let him break her woman’s heart. And he would break it—of that, she was sure.

Turning her back on him, she walked towards the barn where several stable boys waited with their horses. She could feel Gareth’s eyes on her as she mounted and led Morgayne’s mare to the courtyard to wait. His frustration was almost palpable, but she shrugged it aside. He likely thought that kiss would lead to a quick tumble. It likely would have, had Nimue not made that timely interruption. No matter—Gareth was sure to find a willing maid before the day was out. Her stomach knotted at the thought of him with another woman. The kiss they shared would be forgotten. Willow touched her still tingling lips. By him, anyway.

As her party rode back to Avalon, Willow felt Morgayne’s gaze on her often. Had the Lady seen Gareth kiss her? Not that it mattered. He would soon find a wench to satisfy his desire, and she would return to the island of the Goddess where she belonged.

Chapter Two

The taste of Willow haunted Gareth for the rest of the day. He had fought Bors again and again, hoping to drive the desire from his body by the force of sheer exhaustion. Despite his tired, aching muscles and throbbing bruises, she continued to dominate his thoughts. Every flash of green, every strand of blonde hair had him looking for her.

Now he lay on his pallet in the dark of the great hall, trying to ignore the sound of Bors fucking one of the serving wenches several feet away. It did not work. The soft, wet sounds of their bodies moving together and the woman's guttural cries had him hard and aching. Well, that was not completely true. He had been hard and aching since he had kissed Willow.

He had cursed the fence that had stood between them, keeping him from feeling her supple body pressed against him. Closing his eyes, he remembered her timid response and the way her lips had trembled beneath his, and he knew he had been the first man to kiss her lush mouth. Frustration washed over him. Soon, her kisses—all of her sweet body—would belong to another man. A man he chose.

Sighing, Gareth glanced at Bors and the servant woman. He should just find a willing wench and be done with it, but he wanted Willow. Rolling over, he remembered the way her nipples had peaked so sharply against her dress from a simple kiss. He could not help but wonder if she would beg for more if he suckled them. He knew she would be responsive—her breathless sighs and clutching fingers had told him that much. Recalling her surprised gasp against his mouth as he had taken her lips, his shaft jerked against the confining fabric of his braes.

He wiped beaded sweat from his upper lip. He had not been this desperately aroused since he was an untried lad. Freeing his rigid cock, he grasped it at the root and slowly slid his hand up to the swollen head. Closing his eyes, he imagined her ripe lips stretched around his girth as he slowly worked his way in and out of her mouth. He wanted to lay her bare and explore every sweet, verdant curve of her body. Would she gasp and moan when he ploughed into her tight, wet passage? Fluid leaked from his cock at the thought of her snug

heat gloving him. He spread it with his thumb as he stroked downward, pumping into his hand and wishing he was buried in the warmth of her cunt.

Would her pussy taste as sweet as her mouth? He would make her come against his tongue as he lapped at her. He stroked his cock faster imagining her splayed out beneath him as she screamed his name while he fucked her into exhaustion. His balls drew up tight at the images in his head and he stifled a groan as his seed spilled hot and thick over his fingers.

Sighing, Gareth closed his eyes. He would never know the answers to any of his questions. Once he chose the man who would participate in the ritual, he would lose his chance to find out. Willow was slipping from his grasp before he had truly gotten hold of her.

He wiped his hand on the rushes in disgust. He was being a morose fool. She was the same as any other woman. What he needed was a warm body in his bed and then he could decide who would be the lucky sot that would sample Willow's charms.

* * * *

Morning found Gareth skirting the edge of the lake that sheltered the island of Avalon. Remnants of dreams flitted through his mind as elusive as the mist covering the water. Willow. They had all been about Willow. He could not get her out of his head. It made no sense. He would think himself bewitched, but he knew his reaction to her was not so easily explained. He had fancied her as a lad, and now it appeared his fancy increased to near obsession.

His mount paused to drink from the gently lapping water at the shoreline. As Gareth glanced around, a furtive movement near the base of a tree caught his attention. Dismounting, he gently parted the thick curtain of bright green leaves to find Willow herself seated near the trunk.

Her gaze narrowed slightly as he entered the leafy bower and sat next to her. "What do you want?" she asked.

A smile threatened. "I might have said the pleasure of your company, but I can see it is too late for that."

A faint blush crept over her cheeks. "I apologise. I come here sometimes...to think."

He glanced around. If he remembered correctly, this was the same tree she had been found under as a newborn—her namesake. “Are you unwell?”

“I am fine.” She smiled wanly, but it did not reach her eyes. “Last eve, Morgayne informed me that I have been given a new task. I am simply nervous.”

He mentally cringed at her words. He had been so concerned with his own reaction to the Lady’s pronouncement, he had not stopped to consider Willow’s. He was an ass.

“It is of no import. I am a priestess of the Goddess. If this is what I am called to do, I shall do it.” Her hand fluttered anxiously as she spoke.

Gently, he took her chilly fingers in his own. “As a child you were the most headstrong creature I had ever encountered. That has not changed.” He drank in the sight of her. “Except, you are no longer a child.”

Her lips quirked and he was rewarded with a hint of a smile. She tilted her head to the side. “I have missed spending time with you.”

She looked away as if she had revealed more than she had intended.

Gareth cupped her cheek, compelling her to face him. Her skin heated under his palm as a blush brightened her skin. He had meant to comfort her, but as soon as she met his gaze, all thought vanished. Her eyes darkened, appearing almost black as her gaze dropped briefly to his lips. Desire churned in his gut as her tongue moistened her lips. He had to taste her again.

Sliding his hand through the silk of her hair to cradle the base of her skull he urged her towards him. He brushed his lips across hers, coaxing her to open beneath him. She drew in a trembling breath and granted him access to the sweet warmth within. She tasted of honey and apples and something that was uniquely Willow.

Willow wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, so close he could feel her nipples hardening against his chest. He wanted nothing more than to bare her to his gaze and draw those tightening buds into his mouth.

Leaning against the tree, he pulled her onto his lap until she straddled his thighs. Slowly she lifted her head and looked down at him. Her hair hung in a golden blonde curtain around them and in the dim light he could just make out the shape of her kiss swollen mouth. Almost shyly, she met his lips again, tentatively slipping her tongue into his mouth,

flicking it against his while she tightened her fingers in his hair, her short nails abrading his scalp. The slight sting contrasted sharply with the softness of her lips and he wanted more.

His cock throbbed beneath her as she nestled her ass against his length. By all that was holy, he wanted inside her sweet body. Now. Gripping her full hips, he pulled her more snugly to his straining erection. Her breathless gasp drew his balls up tight as he ground against her warmth.

Sliding his hands from her hips, over the curve of her waist to brush his thumbs under the swell of her breasts, he kissed her deeper, harder. Her breath rasped into his mouth as he inched closer to his destination. Gently, he cupped a full breast, brushing his thumb across her already peaking nipple. A groan strangled in her throat as she arched into his touch.

He needed more. He needed to feel her bare skin beneath his lips, her legs around his waist, her slick channel gripping his cock. He needed all of her. Trailing kisses along the side of her neck, he inhaled her sweet scent as he worked the neckline of her gown over her shoulders, revealing her to his hungry gaze. His breath stalled in his throat as her full, pink-tipped breasts were bared. Engorged and tight, her nipples beckoned to him. He brushed the backs of his fingers across a distended peak, watching as her eyes fluttered closed and her teeth sank into her swollen lower lip.

"You are so very lovely," he murmured. He stroked her trembling flesh, drawing her nipples tighter.

"Please," she whispered.

"What would please you, my lady?"

Slowly, her eyes opened, pinning him with the depth of her desire. "More," she whimpered. "I want more."

Holding her gaze, he rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, watching as her lips parted and her breathing grew shallow. If he had ever seen a more beautiful sight than Willow's eyes glazed with desire and her skin flushed pink with arousal, he truly did not know what it was.

Unable to keep from tasting her a moment longer, he leant forward and drew her sweetly budded nipple into his mouth, loving the way she trembled. Her fingers convulsed in his hair as he sucked rhythmically at the crinkled flesh. Her head dropped back and she offered herself fully to his ministrations.

Using her hands, she guided his head from one nipple to the other, quietly moaning as she rocked against his cock. Her moisture seeped through the fabric of his braes, a tactile reminder of where he wanted to be. Desperate to touch her, to feel the proof of her hunger for him, he dragged the fabric of her skirt up her leg, baring her pale thigh. Caressing her tender flesh, he stroked the sensitive crease where thigh met groin. A shiver racked her body and he repeated the motion.

Twisting her fingers in his hair, she yanked his head back and kissed him, her tongue delving into his mouth and her free hand exploring his neck and chest. As if becoming more accustomed to touching and being touched, she grew more daring, taking liberties with his body. Opening her eyes, she flicked his nipple, watching his reaction as surely as he had watched hers. He admired her boldness, her responsiveness. She was a worthy partner, a desirable lover.

Spreading her legs wider, he traced the outer lips of her pussy, watching with satisfaction as she shuddered, her breath catching in her throat. He repeated the motion, wanting her to experience the same, sharp need that pierced him. It was going to be so good when he laid her back in the soft spring grass and fucked her until she came pulsing around him. With a slow purposeful motion he swept his finger through her folds, as her sweet juices bathed his skin. Her eyes widened and she stiffened in shock at the sensation. Spreading her legs further, she canted her hips towards him, silently begging for more.

He pushed her skirt higher, baring her glistening pussy to his gaze. Her cheeks flushed pink and she closed her eyes while he looked his fill. He wanted to spread her lips and slowly savour her, caressing her with his mouth and tongue as he drove her hunger higher. Judging from her embarrassed demeanour, he guessed she might balk at that. Instead, he focused on stroking her swollen folds and bringing her pleasure. Her body relaxed under his touch and she rhythmically pushed her hips towards him, meeting his caresses.

Slowly, he slipped a finger into her untried passage, nearly coming in his braes when she clenched around him. By the saints she was tight. With careful pressure, he moved in and out of her taut channel while she rocked against him, her ass sliding against his rock-hard cock.

“Gareth,” she breathed. “Please. More.”

As if he would deny her. He added a second finger to her grasping pussy and found her puffy clit with the pad of this thumb. He circled the throbbing flesh and continued to drive his fingers in and out of her needy body. Clutching his shoulders, she rode his hand, trying to take him deeper while her breasts bounced tantalisingly close.

She was close, he could hear it in the harsh rasp of her breath and the whimpering sighs that fell from her lips. He could feel it in the rhythmic clasp of her flesh around his. Snaking his free hand around her back, he urge her forward so he could capture a turgid nipple between his lips. If he could not have his cock buried balls deep inside her when she came then he needed to taste her, feel her flesh against his tongue.

Roughly, Gareth pulled her nipple between his lips and sucked hard before scraping his teeth across the engorged tip. A strangled cry escaped her as she bucked against his thrusting hand. Never had she imagined that a man's touch would bring so much pleasure. She tightened her fingers on his shoulders as he suckled in time with her driving hips, never letting up, almost as if he was as desperate to have her tumble her over the cliff of pleasure as she was to fall. Releasing one nipple, he seized the other, treating it to the same merciless handling.

Heat coalesced in her womb, spiralling inward into a pulsing knot that somehow managed to ache and feel dizzyingly wonderful at the same time. How was it possible? The man was a wizard. It was the only explanation.

All thought ceased as he thrust deeper into her greedy body and without warning, bit down on her tender nipple. Shudders shot through her and the knot in her womb unravelled with startling speed as release whipped through her body in a wash of colour and sensation. She had never felt anything like the rush of bliss that tore through her.

Panting, she slumped forward on Gareth's chest and tried to catch her breath. He pulled free of her body and wrapped an arm around her, gathering her closer. With his free hand, he stroked her hair, dropping gentle kisses on her face.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" he murmured against her ear.

She pulled him closer, smiling at the comforting thud of his heartbeat against her ear. Absently, she wondered if the ritual would bring her even half as much pleasure as Gareth had. His heart continued to thump reassuringly beneath her cheek as icy horror poured over

her at the thought of the Beltane rite. What had she just done? Morgayne had told her that she must remain pure until the ceremony. If she stayed here another moment with Gareth, she would fail the Lady and all of Avalon. If she had not already.

As if sensing her growing dread, he tightened his arms around her, but she pushed against his chest.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I have to go.” She tried to disengage herself from his embrace, but he held fast.

“What is wrong?”

She struggled to her feet. “I should not be here.” She gestured loosely at him. “With you.”

Her throat clogged with sudden tears. For once in her life, she wanted nothing to do with duty to the Goddess. She wanted only to be a woman and lie with this man in the shelter of tree and grass. Guilt scraped at her at the thought. She owed everything—her very life to the Lady. To Avalon. The gift she wanted to give to Gareth belonged to some nameless, faceless man who would fully initiate her to womanhood and complete the ritual.

Gareth watched her, as he rose to his feet. “Willow, please talk to me. What is the matter?”

Hurriedly, she straightened her gown, covering her breasts that ached for want of him. “I...I have to go.”

He moved to follow her, but she whispered the words that would call the mist in from the lake, hopelessly entangling him until she was gone. Damp and grey, the mist swirled towards her. She chanced a look back at Gareth before the haze engulfed him.

“Willow! Please wait,” he said as he started after her.

Her heart ached at what seemed to be pain in his eyes.

“I *will* find you, Willow,” he vowed.

The unmistakable sound of footsteps headed towards her. Closing her eyes she chanted the spell to summon the barge. Hopefully, it would reach her before Gareth did. If he touched her again, she would be lost.

The gentle swish of water hitting wood drew closer and she knew in a few moments she would be safe. She sighed. It was really too late for safety. She had gone and lost her heart to a knight under a willow tree. As the white-sailed barge floated into view, she

stepped onto the wooden planks and let the boatman ferry her to the island of Avalon. Away from Gareth.

How was she supposed to lie with another man when she had already given Gareth her heart? Her chest ached and tears burned her throat, but she swallowed past them. She had a duty to do, and she would do it even if it killed her.

* * * *

The morning of Beltane dawned cool and clear. Willow stretched in the chilly morning air, anxiety her constant companion as it had been since she had left Gareth standing on the shore. Though she had resigned herself to her fate, she could not muster anything other than dread for the coming rite.

Morgayne pushed aside the heavy curtain that covered the door of the sleeping chamber Willow shared with the other initiates and entered the room. The other young women had long since risen. Only Willow still laid in bed. Morgayne hesitated only briefly before sitting on the narrow pallet next to Willow's legs.

Leaning over her, the Lady smoothed her hair off her forehead, much as she had when Willow had been a child. Despite her unease at what was to come, she smiled at Morgayne – the only mother she had ever known.

"We have prepared a bath and a meal for you," she said as she continued to smooth her hair, her expression tender.

Willow nodded and sat up, untangling her feet from her bedding as Morgayne rose and walked to the door.

"Wait," Willow called, unable to contain her morbid curiosity an instant longer. "The ritual – do you know who I will be joining with?"

A tiny frown marred the older woman's smooth brow. "I do not know. Gareth was to choose for you."

"What?"

Morgayne paused as she ducked under the curtain and smiled reassuringly. "It does not matter. The man's identity will be a secret – as will yours. You are both there to represent the God and the Goddess."

Willow nodded her understanding as she attempted to keep a rein on her rioting emotions.

“We will be waiting for you in the temple,” Morgayne said as she exited the room.

Shock and anger warred for dominance as Willow tried to make sense of what the Lady had just said. Gareth was to choose the man she laid with? What had he been doing under the tree—deciding which of his friends she was best suited for? Her hands fisted in her bed sheets in impotent rage. To think she had been mourning because she could not give herself to him. As if he had truly wanted her in the first place.

The tears that had threatened for days finally loosed from their mooring and spilled hot and heavy over her cheeks. She was a fool. Only a fool would continue to desire him in the face of this discovery.

Woodenly, she readied herself for the ceremony, barely speaking to the others as they wove spring blossoms into her hair and readied her gown. Gareth’s betrayal weighed on her like a millstone, but she tried to keep up a semblance of good spirits for the other girls. In the future, they might be called for the same task and she did not want them to dread it as she did. Hopefully, they would never have their trust crushed under the heel of a callous, thoughtless man.

Her anger had not abated when she saw Gareth several hours later. Though they faced each other while they danced the maypole, she did her best to ignore him. Instead, she focused on the music wafting around them, on the pulse of the drumbeat thrumming through her body. Unfortunately, that only served to remind her of the throbbing release he had given her several days earlier.

Tamping down her body’s reaction to the memory of his hands on her, she looked upward and watched as the coloured ribbons wove a pattern around the stripped fir tree. The streamers plaited the hopes and dreams for the future of every person present. Her gaze strayed to the other dancers. Most of them were local villagers, the poorest of Arthur’s citizens hoping that the magic of Beltane would give them a bountiful harvest come autumn.

Willow wove her ribbon, under and over, smiling at the other dancers, but every time she passed Gareth, her smile faded. She did not miss the intensity in his eyes as they followed her. She could practically hear his confusion over her behaviour, but she was not

about to enlighten him. As soon as the dancers reversed the direction and unwound the ribbons she was going to get as far away from Gareth as humanly possible.

Gareth watched as Willow's eyes narrowed every time she passed him. He knew she had been upset when she had left him the other morning, but this was not sadness – this was anger. Extreme anger. He was unsure of what he had done to enrage her.

As soon as the music ended, she dropped her ribbon and darted away from the crowd, without bothering to glance his way. Her pale green dress flowed behind her as she walked, as if renewing the earth with a sweep of her skirt. He half expected to see violets and daffodils blooming in her wake.

Following her, he grabbed her arm and pulled her behind the side of the blacksmith's shed. "Why are you avoiding me?"

She tried to tug from his grasp, but he kept hold of her. Finally, she lifted her slitted eyes to his. "Take your hands off my body." Glancing pointedly at where he still held her, his thumb absently caressing the petal soft skin at the inside of her wrist, she jerked her arm again.

He lifted her hand and brought it to his mouth, brushing his lips across her palm. He did not miss her sharply indrawn breath or the shiver that worked through her body, and a thought occurred to him. "Are you angry with me because I brought you to your pleasure?"

Her lips parted as an incredulous expression crossed her face. It quickly turned to a scowl. "No, you fool. I am angry with you because *while* you were bringing me to my pleasure you were planning which of your scabby friends you were going to pass me off to."

Confusion swamped him. What was she on about?

"I know you have the task of choosing my partner for the ritual," she all but snarled. "Who will it be? One of your barbarian brothers? Or perhaps that swine Maleagant?"

The thought of Malaegant defiling Willow twisted his gut and he pulled her into his arms. "I would never allow him to touch you."

She stood stiffly in his arms, uncertainty colouring her lovely features. "But it was acceptable for you to touch me?" She frowned at him. "That is not the behaviour of a noble knight."

Before he could find his tongue, she railed on. "Perhaps you wanted to make sure I was worthy enough for the man you chose? Or was it simply that you wanted a taste of what would soon be given to another man?"

He lifted her chin, holding her firmly so she could not look away. He needed her to see the truth in his words. "Do you think I want to give you to someone else?" he bit out. "Do you think I want to allow someone else to take you?" He speared his fingers through her hair and tightened his hold on her. "To take what is mine?"

Her eyes widened.

He had no idea how he would accomplish it, but come the ritual tonight, he would be the one laying with her.

"No matter what happens this night, Willow, you belong to me."

Her eyes flashed darkly, and she shoved against his chest, her hands curled into fists. "I belong to no man. Least of all, *you*."

"You are wrong about that, sweet Willow. So wrong." He closed his mouth over hers cutting off any further protest she might have made. Her lips parted beneath his – whether to acquiesce to his kiss or yell at him, he was not sure but he delved inside to taste the honeyed sweetness that was Willow. Her hands fisted in his tunic and she stood woodenly in his embrace for a moment before finally melting into him. The press of her ripe, full breasts against his chest instantly hardened his cock. By the saints, he had been half hard since he had first seen her standing by the maypole.

Turning, he backed her against the building, pinning her between the sun-warmed timbers and his body. Arching into him, she drove her hands through his hair and pulled him closer. In spite of her angry words, she seemed to want him with as much desperation as he wanted her.

Slowly he raised his head to look into her deep, brown eyes – eyes that were rapidly filling with tears.

"How can you continue to make me desire you, knowing full well you will be casting me aside by the time the moon rises?"

The hurt in her gaze strangled his ardour and his hold on her loosened.

"I was wrong when I said it felt like we had never been parted. The Gareth I knew would never have used me in this manner."

Pushing against his chest, she freed herself from his embrace and disappeared into the throng of people crowding the marketplace, taking his heart with her.

Chapter Three

Willow ran through the crowds out to the hillside where the villagers had dragged brush and fallen trees from the forest to build the Beltane bonfire. Soon the flames would tower above her head while the dancers spun to the rhythm set by the drummers. Her stomach trembled with nervous anxiety as she dashed at the tears that still leaked from her eyes.

She was the worst kind of fool. She wanted to believe that his expression of regret as she'd pushed him away was genuine, but after everything that had passed between them, she doubted it. Despite her misgivings, she would rather perform the ritual with him than with a stranger. To know Gareth was responsible for choosing that stranger made her apprehension even worse.

Willing her fears to subside, Willow skirted the area that would hold the bonfire and ducked down to enter the stone cave tucked into the side of the hill. The opening was small and close to the ground, but the area opened up considerably once one was inside. Her stomach trembled in nervous expectation. This was where the ritual would take place. Morgayne, Nimue and some of the other priestesses were already inside readying the stone chamber.

The Lady glanced up sharply as she entered. "Willow, I did not expect to see you for some time, yet. Why aren't you enjoying the festival?"

She shrugged, unable to think of a suitable answer. "Do you need any help?" she asked ignoring the older woman's question.

Morgayne shook her head. "We are nearly finished here."

Willow looked around the interior of the cave. Tiny crystal formations peppered the walls, catching the light of the few fat candles that sat in the farthest reaches of the cavern. Holes in the ceiling of the cave let in a little sunlight, highlighting the dust motes that floated through the air.

Soft furs and richly appointed blankets, Willow suspected came from the castle, covered a huge pallet in the centre of the stone room. Apple blossoms were strewn about the cave, scenting the air and reminding her of the ritual to come. Her stomach flipped nervously.

Soon she'd be spreading her legs, offering her maidenhood to some unknown man. The act did not worry her as much as the fact that her partner would not be Gareth. She sighed. It seemed her foolishness knew no bounds as she continued to pine for him.

Nimue set a cloth bag on the bed and removed a rough-hewn wooden tray that she set on the floor next to the back wall of the cave. Removing the rest of the items from the bag, the young woman placed them on the tray – wine, bread, cheese, dried meat. Willow frowned. It seemed she and her partner would lack for nothing.

* * * *

Night had fallen hours ago and still the revellers danced around the fire outside the cave. The pulsing beat of the drums pounded through Willow's body as the musicians continued to play. Morgayne had spoken the ceremonial prayer over her and left the cave to bless her partner before he came to her.

Waiting for him to appear, Willow sat in the middle of the pallet, wiping her damp hands on the skirt of her dress. Before leaving, Morgayne had suggested Willow remove it, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to bare herself entirely. There would be time enough for that later.

The wine Morgayne had insisted she drink had heated her belly, making her feel warm and slightly dizzy. It tasted as if it had been mixed with an herbal tincture, but Willow could not identify the subtle flavours of the various plants. Whatever Morgayne had given her was likely meant as a relaxant.

Willow finished the goblet and poured more into her empty glass. Along with the calming qualities, the herbs seemed to enhance the residual desire that still shuttled through her body from Gareth's kiss. It seemed she only needed to think of him and her woman's flesh grew needy. Whenever he touched her, the moisture gathered as if preparing her body for him. Unfortunately, her foolish body would not get what it craved most. Pushing aside that thought, she drained the glass a second time.

She glanced around the cave. When the sun had set, the vast majority of the light had gone with it. The sputtering candles did little to light the area, serving instead to throw eerie

shadows around the cave. She hadn't even been able to make out Morgayne's face as she had left. Unless she recognised the man's voice, his identity truly would be a secret.

Shadows fell across the opening of the cave and the murmur of voices reached her, but any words or even the identities of the speakers were impossible to discern. Just as suddenly, the voices stopped and a tall, hooded figure crawled through the opening, before rising to his full height. From where she sat on the floor he seemed almost hulking. The fretfulness she had never really quelled, flooded back with a vengeance. She gripped the soft fabric of the bedding to still her trembling hands. Perhaps she should have had a third glass of Morgayne's wine.

Without speaking, the man unbuckled his sword belt. It was difficult to discern his action in the dim candlelight, but the unmistakable creak of leather and clank of metal were impossible to interpret as anything else. Bending, he laid the blade next to the pallet. She should have expected that Gareth would choose a knight for her partner. The knight in question removed his cloak in a flurry of fabric. Two of the three candles sputtered out with the resulting draft of air, plunging them into almost total darkness.

Willow's eyes widened as she strained to see. The lone light source flickered wildly, throwing huge dancing shadows around the room, but there still wasn't enough light to see his face. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry as her heart beat a panicked rhythm in her chest. The pallet sank underneath his weight as he knelt near her feet and she fought the urge to scramble away from him.

Who was he? She bit back the question as he moved closer.

"Shall I relight the candles?" she blurted as his knees bracketed her feet.

He didn't speak.

Her worry intensified. While she knew Gareth would not knowingly choose anyone who would harm her, she could not push the thought from her mind.

The man moved closer and slid his hands along her calves, up to her knees.

She caught her breath at his touch, her stomach tumbling wildly through her middle. She tried to remain calm, but her breath came faster and faster.

He cupped her cheek with work roughened hands and brushed his thumb across her lips. The gesture was oddly comforting, but still her unease remained. Gently, he pushed her shoulders back until she was laying on the pallet with his dark form hovering above her.

Dragging his fingertips along her neck, he bared her skin and dropped hot, open mouthed kisses over the sensitive flesh.

The nervous fluttering in her belly increased and she could not help wishing it was Gareth touching her instead of this man. It didn't matter though. She had a duty to perform and Gareth or no Gareth, she needed to do what the High Priestess of Avalon had chosen her to do. Her careful reasoning did nothing to bring her peace over the situation. The best course of action would be to have the business finished.

Sitting up suddenly, she knocked the man to the side. Despite the near darkness, she could sense his movement. He propped himself up on his elbow and waited while she stripped off her dress and dropped it to the floor. Reaching for the bottle of wine at the side of the bed, she blindly swallowed the liquid until barely any remained. She was going to need the help of the alcohol and whatever herbs Morgayne had added to it. Reclining next to him, she ignored the need to cover herself.

"Let us be done with this," she murmured, laying stiffly. "The night grows old."

A choked sound escaped him, but he gathered himself just as quickly. Resting his hand on her abdomen, he stroked her trembling stomach.

Absently, she wondered if he could feel the tremors. Perhaps if she imagined it was Gareth touching her, her fear would diminish somewhat. Despite her anger with him, she would still prefer to share this moment with him rather than anyone else.

The man's large hand slid upward and cupped her breast. Her nipple peaked immediately against his skin. Her breath stalled in her chest as he rubbed slow, sensuous circles over her aching flesh with the palm of his hand. The dizzying effect of the wine and his touch dampened her fear and discomfort.

She cried out in surprise as he twisted her nipple, pulling it slightly. Without warning, his hot, wet mouth closed over the other one and he suckled hard. Of its own volition, her hand lifted to the back of his head to tangle in his hair and press him closer to her aching nipple. His hair was tied back with a strip of leather. She released the tie, letting the long, thick strands fall across her skin. It was easier to imagine he was Gareth this way.

As she pressed him to her breast, he suckled harder still, scraping his teeth over the sensitised flesh. He continued to torment the other nipple and her passage flooded with

moisture. His touch felt almost as good as Gareth's had. Guilt pricked her consciousness at the thought of him and she tried to push him from her mind. He had made his choice.

The man nuzzled the side of her breast, his stubble roughened cheeks sending shivers through her body. His fingers left her nipple to travel down her stomach to her mound. Unable to stop herself, she squeezed her legs together as he drew closer to his destination. She couldn't imagine another man touching her there. Gently, he rubbed her thighs, as if attempting to coax them, all the while continuing to torment her breast and nipple.

Her cunt clenched with need and she slowly let her legs fall open. The sooner it was done with, the sooner she could leave, she told herself. At least she tried to tell herself that, however, his hands and mouth chased away her wine-soaked thoughts.

With a sure caress, he stroked along her desire dampened folds. Her body trembled beneath his hand as he repeated the motion. She closed her eyes, remembering the pleasure Gareth had brought her only a few days ago. Sudden tears burned her throat at the memory. She didn't want pleasure at this man's hands, she just wanted this encounter over with. Spreading her legs wider, she tried to urge him to lay between them.

"Finish it," she demanded, her duty to the Goddess all but forgotten.

She shut her eyes tightly as he moved between her thighs. As he settled there, she waited for the sharp sting of pain that would bring the ritual closer to its inevitable end. Instead of thrusting his shaft into her offered body, he scooted backward and draped her thighs over his shoulders.

Willow struggled to her elbows, trying in vain to see him. "What are you doing?"

Reaching upward, he pushed her to her back as she felt his warm breath bathe her mound. She attempted to roll to the side, but he locked a strong arm around her legs, holding her motionless. With his free hand, he parted her lips, baring her completely. The desire that refused to abate, increased and a rush of her juices coated her flesh. She wanted to blame the wine, but in her mind it was Gareth spreading her wide and that thought nearly made her beg for more.

The swipe of his tongue against her needy flesh shocked a strangled cry from her throat. Breathing hard, he licked her again, the flat of his tongue covering her. Heat pulsed and shimmered through her body as she revelled in the delicious warmth of his mouth on her cunt. She had never known such pleasure existed.

A callused finger slipped into her channel as he continued to taste her, licking and sucking at her flesh. He slipped a splayed hand under her bottom and fitted her more snugly to his mouth. She shuddered almost violently, silently begging for more. He added another finger to her slick passage and the cries she tried to hold back slipped past her lips with every move he made.

Imagining it was Gareth's head between her legs, Willow clenched her hands in his hair as he circled the swollen bit of flesh at the apex of her thighs. Flicking his tongue faster, he groaned as her hips rocked against his mouth. The sound vibrated along her limbs. Desperate for more of his wicked touch, she pumped her hips faster. It would have been impossible to stop the motion even if she had wanted to. His talented mouth and her memories of Gareth had combined to propel her needy body forward towards her rapidly approaching bliss.

Her womb quivered as he drove her pleasure higher. Every muscle in her body tightened as she rushed headlong into her peak. He sucked her clit between his lips, gently dragging his teeth across it, and she cried out as shudders racked her body. Jolts of breathless pleasure careened through her as he continued to lap at her moist flesh.

Stroking her sensitised skin, he waited while she slowly became aware of her surroundings again. As she lay limply on the pallet, he rose to his knees between her spread legs and removed the remainder of his clothing. She felt him bend slightly and then something hard and hot dragged along her cleft, to brush across her swollen clit. Her breath caught in her throat as he rubbed what felt like a huge shaft over her wet pussy.

Willow sat up slightly and reached out to touch him. Groping in the dim light, she explored his heavily muscled thighs and flat stomach before finally gripping his cock with both hands. Slowly she slid her hands up the incredibly thick shaft. As she drew closer to the bulbous head, his erection jerked in her hands and she heard the hiss of a sharp breath sucked between his tightly clenched teeth.

She wished she could see him. Almost. At least this way, she could still pretend it was Gareth she held in her hands. Gareth who'd had his face buried between her thighs, moments earlier. Gareth who would soon fuck her.

His hand covered hers around his shaft and he drew the head of his cock across her lips. She jerked in surprise at the sensation of the silky flesh against her mouth, but she

tentatively stuck her tongue out and tasted him. At his muffled groan, she did it again, this time taking the huge head into her mouth and swirling her tongue around it. The muffled groan became a strangled curse as she sucked slightly.

He quickly withdrew from her lips. Pushing her onto her back, he positioned his cock at her entrance. She tried not to hold her body tensely, as he prodded her opening but she couldn't help it. With soft caresses, he stroked her as if willing her to relax. It was impossible when she felt how rigidly he held himself above her.

Lifting her hips, she pushed against him. "Finish it," she whispered.

He hesitated, but in the faint light, she saw him nod once before he shoved forward, entering her in a single thrust.

Willow bit her lip at the stab of pain as she tried to acclimate herself to his bulk inside her.

Smoothing her hair off her face, he dropped gentle kisses over her cheeks and neck as he held himself perfectly still. The pain quickly subsided and a restlessness replaced it. She wiggled beneath him. Slowly, he began to rock back and forth, carefully pulling back and pushing forward, obviously taking care with her untried body.

She knew many men would not have been this considerate while taking her maidenhood. Gareth had obviously cared enough to choose someone who would treat her with kindness. Thinking of him while this other man was inside her filled her eyes with tears. Bittersweet pleasure spread through her body as the last remnants of pain vanished.

Thick and huge, he abraded her tender flesh, sending shivers of excited arousal coursing through her body. As he worked himself in and out of her body, hunger surpassed everything else and she began to move with him meeting him thrust for thrust. His speed increased and he fucked her harder, faster — his pelvic bone grinding into her clit. The friction was overwhelming and she knew the release she experienced earlier would be nothing compared to this.

Need snaked through her body as she clung to him. Reaching behind him, he urged her legs around his waist, changing the angle of contact. Ever tightening ropes of pleasure wrapped around her body as he plunged into her. Her pussy grasped at him, greedily trying to hold on to his cock and the need within her coiled tighter, threatening to snap with every stroke of his cock.

He slid his hands under her bottom, holding her more tightly to him as he ploughed into her. His thrusts became rougher as his control seemed to fray, but she didn't care. He felt too good. Her pebble hard nipples rubbed against his chest with every brutal thrust and she arched into him, desperate for more.

With his face buried in her hair, he bit down on the sensitive spot where shoulder meets neck and she cried out, rippling and pulsing around his shaft. The climax that had been building twisted through her womb and as his seed spilled hot and thick within her, she cried out Gareth's name.

Gareth stiffened in the hot, wet clasp of Willow's welcoming body, the aftershocks of her release still pulsing around his cock. He would swear he heard her call out his name. He was sure of it. Judging from the way she stilled in his arms, she realised what she had said.

"I apologise," she murmured, her voice small and barely audible. "I did not mean..." Her words faltered.

Warmth had flooded him at the sound of his name on her lips as she peaked. An irrational part of him had been jealous when she had responded to his touch, thinking him another man. He had feared he had misread her attraction to him, but he had not been mistaken. She did want him.

A commotion sounded outside the cave and the drums stuttered to a halt, but he was barely aware of anything besides the woman in his arms.

"Gareth!" a voice cried from outside. "Where are you? Arthur needs you."

What in the name of the Lord was so important Arthur saw fit to interrupt the Beltane celebration he had decreed?

Sighing, he leant forward to kiss Willow, the way he had wanted to since he entered the stone chamber. He had not dared before now for fear she would recognise him. He had planned on telling her the truth, but Bors had beaten him to it. As he moved to touch her lips, she turned away.

Beneath him, Willow quivered with anger. He did not need to see her face to know her full, lush lips were so firmly pressed together they had turned white. He had seen that expression on her face many times before and had often been the one to cause it. Tonight was no different.

Kicking him, she shoved at his chest. "You lied to me!"

Regretfully, he left the warmth of her body. "Willow, I—"

She hastily gathered her dress from the floor and yanked it over her head. "Do *not* speak to me."

"Please listen to me, Willow, I—"

"No."

"Gareth!" Bors bellowed again.

"I will be there in a moment," he snapped as he pulled on his clothes. He turned back to Willow.

She had lifted the only still burning candle and raised it towards his face—so she could see him more clearly, he suspected. "Why would you not tell me it was you?" she asked, her eyes shining in the dim light of the single flame.

"I could not. The ritual...the Lady swore me to secrecy."

She began to turn away, but he gripped her upper arms to keep her facing him. "She insisted that the ritual would be compromised if you knew the truth, so I agreed to her conditions."

She stared at him, her expression baleful, but she didn't attempt to break his hold on her.

"I was supposed to choose someone else to lie with you, but I could not."

"Of course not." She glanced down at her body and back to his face, pain evident in her eyes. "You could not allow someone to take what is yours."

His chest ached at the pain he had caused her. He was twelve kinds of a fool. "I *am* sorry I deceived you."

"Just go." The anger had faded from her tone. She sounded weary. "It does not matter anymore. The king has need of you. Go." Pushing past him, she exited the cave and stepped into the milling crowd.

Gareth followed behind her. The revellers had ceased their merrymaking and stood in clusters, nervously murmuring among themselves. Everything within him screamed to follow Willow, but his duty lay with king and country. He turned to Bors. "What happened?"

"Malaegant," his friend practically snarled. "He attacked the queen's party while she was riding with her ladies. He killed Ywain and some of the women."

"When did this happen?" Gareth demanded swallowing past the pain. He would grieve for the dead later, now he needed to find Malaegant and stop him.

"This afternoon. Gwenhwyfar and several others escaped, but they stayed hidden in the forest until Arthur sent out a search party. The queen said Malaegant had been muttering about finding the pagan whore. Arthur assumed he meant the Lady, so he sent me here to warn her and set you to guard her."

Ice ran through Gareth's veins. Malaegant didn't want Morgayne. He wanted Willow. His heart dropped like a stone as he whirled searching the crowd for her. The spot where she had stood only moments before was empty. "Find the Lady and stay by her side. Let no one near her until I return," he yelled to Bors. "I need to find Willow."

He continued to scan the crowd as he made his way to his horse. It was as if she had vanished. Where had she gone?

Avalon.

It was the only place that made any sense. It had been impossible to miss the desolation in her gaze when she'd turned from him. Returning to her home made the most sense. Gareth leapt on his horse and rode hard for the lake shore.

The moon was high in the sky, hopefully the light would call attention to her pale hair and dress in the inky darkness—as long as he saw her before Malaegant did. Worry tasted bitter in his mouth. He had warned her that the man would make a dangerous enemy, but after what had transpired between them tonight, he doubted the other man had even been a thought in her head.

Whether he knew it or not, Malaegant was already a dead man. He'd attacked the queen and killed a knight of the round table and the saints only knew how many ladies of the court. He would receive a trial, as was Arthur's way, but there would be no chance that he would leave Camelot alive.

Of course, if he harmed Willow, Malaegant would never see the next sunrise, let alone the walls of Camelot. Gareth's gut twisted in fear for her. If that bastard touched her... A flash of light coloured fabric disappeared into the forest that bordered the lake. She was here.

"Willow?" he called. "I know you are here. Please answer me."

“Go back to the bonfire.”

She sounded...defeated. He had done this to her – he had hurt her. Trying desperately to follow the sound of her voice, he skirted the tree line.

“You got what you wanted from me,” she continued. “I have nothing left to give you.”

“You’re in danger.”

She stepped out of the trees and looked at him. “Only from my own foolishness.”

Relief at finding her unharmed rushed through him and he quickly dismounted. He held up his hands when she took a step back. “Wait, Willow. I’m not going to harm you.”

She laughed, the sound bitter. “The damage has already been done. Go back to the castle. Go back to your life.”

She took another step back as if to fade into the trees. If she reached the lake and called the mist, he’d never find her again – unless she wanted to be found. He rather doubted that would be the case.

He followed her. Slowly. “Please just listen to me for a moment.”

She shook her head, her eyes full of tears. “Goodbye, Gareth.”

As she started to turn away, she screamed, terror in her voice. Arms grabbed her from behind and dragged her from his line of vision.

Heart in his throat, he followed the sounds of bodies crashing through the underbrush. Willow’s screams turned from frightened to angry as she fought her attacker. As he travelled deeper into the woods, he wished he would have had the foresight to bring a torch. Luckily, Willow continued to thrash making her progress easy to follow.

“Maleagant, release her!” he bellowed.

“This is none of your concern,” the other man responded.

The earth grew more damp as did the air. They must be very near the lake. All sounds of fighting stopped suddenly and his blood turned to ice. He pushed through the last of the skin tearing branches to find Malaegant standing at the water’s edge, his arm wrapped around Willow’s chest holding a dagger to her neck.

Chapter Four

Gareth's heart thudded painfully against his chest at the sight. Every instinct roared at him to attack, but he could not risk losing her to this madman. "Let her go. She has done nothing to you."

The man stared at him as if he was the crazed one. "She attempted to unman me."

"You were trying to hurt my friend," Willow choked out.

"Silence!" Malaegant slid the sharpened blade across her throat drawing a thin line of blood. Holding Gareth's gaze, he slid his hand down and squeezed Willow's breast viciously and nuzzled her neck. "She stinks of sweat and sex."

The man was about to die. Slowly. He edged towards them.

Willow's eyes were wide with fear as she watched him move closer. "Stay back, Gareth. He will kill you too."

Malaegant laughed. "The whore is right."

Gareth drew his blade. "Release her and fight me. If I lose, you get the wench. If you lose, she belongs to me." He said the last directly to Willow, hoping she understood what he was trying to express.

"Do you think me addled? I have the advantage. If you think I would give it up because of honour, you are a simple minded fool."

Willow's heart ached at the pain in Gareth's eyes. He was terrified for her and he clearly wanted to kill Malaegant. She was ready to do it herself. Bile rose in her throat at the sight of his grimy hand on her breast. He twisted her tender flesh and tears spilled over her cheeks. Thrusting her elbow backward, she tried to hit him in the stomach, hoping to loosen his hold on her. It only made him angrier.

He placed his lips against her ear. "I will split him from gut to gullet and then rut on you while his life drains into the ground." As he spoke, he pressed the blade more firmly against her neck and fresh blood dripped in warm rivulets, staining the neckline of her gown.

He was mad. Absolutely insane. She had no doubt that he meant what he said. If he could kill Gareth, he would do it. Resolve tightened her fists. She refused to let him get the chance. She would not lose Gareth – not if she could save him. Despite what had transpired between them, she recognised her feelings. Goddess help her, she was falling in love with him.

Closing her eyes, she ignored Malaegant's muttered threats and tried to open herself to the magic of Avalon. Feeling the creeping tendrils of power, she pulled them closer and spoke the words of the spell under her breath, calling the mist to aid her. Damp wisps of foggy air rose from the surface of the lake and began to move landward to twine about their ankles. She met Gareth's eyes and glanced down at the fog and back to his face again, hoping he would understand what she was trying to tell him. He nodded once as Malaegant twisted his head wildly from side to side.

"What witchery is this?" he demanded, tightening his already bruising hold on her.

Willow drew the mist up higher so it covered his face, hopefully blinding him to the fact that Gareth was moving towards them. As her captor glanced anxiously from side to side, the blade fell away slightly from her neck. Hoping to further distract him and possibly break free, she slammed her head backward into his face. Pain lanced through the back of her skull at the impact, but the blow was enough to throw him off balance. As he started to fall, she threw her weight to the side. His grip on her slackened and she was able to roll away, but the dagger still sliced open her shoulder.

"Willow!" Gareth called. "Where are you?"

"Here." She reached out and caught his arm as he moved forward.

Malaegant struggled to his feet and lurched towards Gareth, dagger raised. The mist continued to swirl around them, but it grew thinner as Willow was unable to expend the energy to keep the spell alive.

Keeping himself between her and her attacker, Gareth pulled her to her feet. "Go, Willow. Call the barge – get away from here!" He pushed her towards the water. "Go!"

Malaegant swung while Gareth's back was turned and Willow screamed. Gareth turned to block the attack, but it was too late. Malaegant's blade sank into her lover's shoulder. His sword fell from his slackened fingers as the other man withdrew his blade and moved in for

another strike. Gareth dropped to his knees and picked up his sword with the opposite hand and rolled to the side to avoid Maelgant's next blow.

The fog drifted around them in wisps not covering them entirely, but blocking her view. Willow edged closer. Gareth's directive to go still rang in her ears, but she refused to leave him. He glanced at her, anguish in his gaze. "Leave, Willow," he rasped, before turning back to his opponent.

Blood heavily stained the front of his tunic and ran freely down his arm. If the wound continued to bleed so fiercely, he would not need to worry about Malaegant finishing him off. She needed to bind the wound soon before he lost consciousness.

Malaegant circled him, brandishing his weapon. "Did you enjoy the whore? You should know, I plan to. I'll be planting my seed within her before your corpse has time to grow cold."

Gareth growled and flung himself at the bastard as cold shock washed over Willow. She hadn't considered the potential that she and Gareth could have created a child. A howl of pain pulled her attention back to the fight.

Malaegant clutched his stomach while blood spilled through his fingers. Lurching upright, he lunged at Gareth who easily dodged the blow and brought the pommel of his sword down on the back of the other man's head. His eyes rolled backward as he sank to his knees and fell face forward onto the damp earth. Gareth kicked his blade aside before pushing him to his back.

Willow glanced at Malaegant's wound as she darted around his prone form. She doubted he'd survive the night, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Dropping to her knees beside Gareth, she tore the fabric away from his body to assess his injury. His skin was clammy to the touch and appeared ashen in the moonlight that pierced the remaining mist. She needed to get him to Avalon immediately.

Hoof beats shook the ground and fear seized her. Did Malaegant have help? She recognised the colours of several of Arthur's knights. She recognised Bors and Gwain but the other two men were unfamiliar. Dismounting, they rushed to Gareth's side.

Gwain barked out orders for the other men to take both Gareth and Malaegant back to the castle, but Willow laid her hand on his arm. "No."

The knight scowled at her. "He is a knight of the round table. We will care for him."

Anger tightened her fists. She had almost forgotten what a pompous fool Gareth's brother was. She took a breath to calm herself before she spoke. "He's lost too much blood. He won't survive the trip to Camelot."

"Then what do you propose we do? Leave him here to die, instead?"

"Let me take him to Avalon."

Gwain opened his mouth, but Bors stopped him. "Look at him. She's right. Avalon is his best chance."

Ignoring the other men, she leaned over her lover and smoothed his hair off his face, willing him to open his eyes. "Gareth? Can you hear me?" Her voice broke and she swiped away the tears clouding her vision. "Gareth, please. I need you to open your eyes." She needed more than that—she needed him.

Slowly, his beautiful blue eyes fluttered open, but they were dulled by pain and blood loss. "Willow," he whispered. He tried to raise his hand to touch her face, but it fell limply to the side. "I love you." His eyes drifted shut and his breathing grew shallow.

Shock and joy filled her at his words, but at the moment, she could not afford the time to think about his confession. She looked at Gwain. "Please."

As though it pained him to do so, he nodded.

Short lived relief spread through her. She still needed to get him to the island in time to save him. Closing her eyes she chanted the spell to summon the barge. It seemed to take years before she heard the reassuring sound of water on wood. Praying harder than she ever had before, she directed the men to lay Gareth in the bottom of the barge and pleaded with the ferryman to hurry.

* * * *

Gareth pried his eyes open and then quickly shut them. Even the dim light of the room he was in was far too bright. Lying quietly, he tried to ascertain where he was. He recalled making love with Willow. His cock stirred at the memory of being buried in her lush body. He also remembered the metallic taste of fear in his mouth as he searched for her and the horror of finding her with Malaegant's blade to her neck. His eyes flew open.

"Willow!" he choked out, his voice sounding rusty as if he had not used it in years. He struggled to an upright position, pain tearing through his shoulder and chest. A glance at the area revealed fresh bandages and the scent of herbal salves drifted to him. Small, cool hands pressed him back to the mattress and he focused on Willow's face above him.

"Shh, I am here." She brushed his hair off his forehead, relief shining in her beautiful brown eyes. "I have been worried about you. I was afraid you would never wake."

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he noticed the deep purple smudges under her eyes and her pale, pinched features. She looked as though she hadn't slept in weeks.

"How long have you been caring for me?"

She shrugged. "I am not sure. Five days, I think. Maybe six."

As the cobwebs cleared his mind, he recalled more details. Willow calling the mist, the blood dripping down her neck... He pulled aside the neckline of her gown. Several angry red cuts marred her creamy skin and guilt tore at him. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm so sorry."

Her brow furrowed as she stared at him. "You saved me. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I do." He brushed the pad of his thumb along a wound. "This never should have happened. He never should have been allowed to touch you."

A small smile curved her lips. "He was mad. There is nothing to apologise for."

"Malaegant?" He feared the answer, but he had to know.

A frown marred her features. "Dead. He died before Bors and the others returned to Camelot." Quietly, she provided the details he couldn't recall. It sounded vaguely familiar as if it had happened to someone else and he had heard the tale over a cup of mead by the fire. With sudden, perfect clarity, he remembered the threat Malaegant had made against Willow.

"Did he...?" He could not bring himself to finish the question.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Truly."

Relief settled over him like a warm blanket. She leant forward and brushed her lips across his, just a gentle touch, but he wanted more. He twined his fingers through her hair and cupped the back of her head, pulling her closer. Her lips parted on a sigh, allowing him access to the sweetness within.

Finally, she raised her head and gazed into his eyes, and guilt assailed him yet again. "I do need to apologise to you. I should have told you the truth on Beltane."

She laid her fingers over his lips. "It is beyond us."

He covered her hand with his own, kissing her fingers before freeing his mouth to speak. "No. I should have told you—you deserve the truth."

"Promise me you will never lie to me again and it will be enough."

The warmth of her smile settled deep in his chest.

"I promise."

She lifted herself from the pallet, but he snaked an arm around her and drew her down to his side.

"You need to rest," she scolded.

"I need you more than I need to rest. Besides, Avalon's healing magic seems to be working miracles. I feel far better than I should after a wound like that."

He smoothed away the small frown lines on her brow that had appeared as he had spoken. Contentedly, he noticed that she relaxed slightly, curling into his embrace. He shifted until he lay on his side next to her, looking down into her beautiful face.

"I have another promise to make," he announced, holding her gaze.

"Oh?"

Gareth skimmed his hand up the swell of her hip and over the curve of her waist to rest on her ribcage, his thumb brushing under her full breast. Willow held herself as still as possible, willing herself to focus on his words.

Conviction filled his bright blue eyes. "I promise that we will never again make love in the dark."

She swallowed hard as the conviction in his gaze turned to desire.

Cupping her breast, he teased her hardening nipple through the fabric. The chafing of cloth against her sensitive skin sent shudders through her, and her woman's flesh clenched in need.

"I want to see every bit of your beautiful body laid out before me," he whispered, his voice rough with disuse and arousal. The husky sound stroked her from the inside and she shivered. He bent forward and latched onto the tight bud of her nipple through the bodice of her dress and sucked at it. The wet heat of his mouth combined with the rasp of damp fabric had her back bowing off the bed as she tried to get closer to the source of pleasure.

She drove her hands through his hair, holding him tightly to her. More than anything, she wanted to rip her dress from her body and the sheet from his so there would be nothing separating them.

Finally, he released her nipple and nuzzled the sensitive skin of her neck. "I want to see your dripping cunt as I spread you wide and taste you," he murmured against her throat.

She could barely pull in enough air to breathe. Moisture wept from her body at the memory of his mouth on her mound. She was wanton enough to admit to herself that she wanted him to do that again. Soon.

Following the line of her jaw, Gareth kissed a path to her trembling lips and delved inside. He took control of the kiss – took control of her body with the touch of his mouth and the sweep of his tongue. He had taken control of her heart, too. But that had happened long before he had ever kissed her. Slowly, he lifted his head and stared into her eyes. "Most of all, I want to watch your face while I'm thrusting inside your tight pussy. I want to watch you come for me."

A gasp strangled in her chest and she could not look away from the wicked promises in his eyes if she wanted to. Right now, she would give anything to have him inside her – thick and filling her completely.

He obviously had the same thought, because he was hiking her skirt upward, baring her thighs until he finally tugged the entire garment over her head. With whispered encouragement, he urged her to straddle him. His cock rested hot and heavy between her thighs, slick with her juices. Carefully, she guided him into her body, unaccustomed to the unfamiliar position.

Breathing heavily, he stroked her thighs and bottom, caressing every bit of skin he could reach. His cock throbbed within her, and she thought she would go mad if he didn't do something soon. Gently, he pulled her forward until they lay chest to chest, his staff still lodged deeply. Her hair spilled around him, cocooning them from the rest of the world.

Reaching out, he cupped her cheek, brushing his thumb across her lips, much as he had done the night in the cave. "You are the only treasure worth having. I love you, Willow."

Tears blurred her vision. "I love you," she whispered as they spilled down her cheeks.

A smile curved his lips and lit his eyes at her words. His hand slid around the back of her neck, urging her mouth to his. "Be my bride," he whispered against her lips. "Let me love you for the rest of our days."

Joy spread through her and she nodded, her heart too full to speak. He slid his hands over her back, caressing her as he took her mouth in a hungry kiss.

Lifting her head, she shifted on his cock. Her internal muscles gripped him as she gazed down at him with a mischievous grin she knew he would well recognise. Settling his hands on her hips, he groaned as she moved on him, taking him deeper.

"And I will love you, Sir Gareth the brave," she murmured. "The rest of our days."

About the Author

I live in Michigan with my wonderful husband, two amazing sons and five somewhat psychotic cats.

When not tormenting my characters, I can usually be found helping with reading, writing and art projects in my sons' classrooms as well as providing child care and tutoring for several daycare children.

Besides writing, I also enjoy reading, knitting, sewing, cross stitching, pottery, drawing, jewellery making – basically anything that helps me avoid cooking and cleaning.

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